



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



QUALITY NEWSPAPERS VS. POPULISM

SHAPING PRO-IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES IN FIVE EU MEMBER STATES

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the current debate about immigration, far-right populism and the future of the EU is centred on the increasingly complex relationships between media and political attitudes. Political attitudes including the norms and values held by the public are to some extent shaped by news media. The content and use of media contribute to the consolidation and perpetuation of attitudes and behaviours. At the same time, pre-existing attitudes of citizens influence their choice of media. What the public considers to be important is strongly influenced by the issues highlighted by the news media. We also know that the framing of issues plays a role in shaping attitudes. Normative attitudes can be transformed through media, but equally important is the reinforcement of already existing attitudes in society.

Research on populism is mostly about the sources and development of negative attitudes towards Europe, immigration or the “elites”. By contrast, this policy paper focuses on news media that presumably strengthen pro-immigration attitudes among the European public which are typically connected with pro-European attitudes. We show that quality newspapers constitute a “media membrane” which is often impervious to the demonizing rhetoric and alarmist narratives of far-right populists. For precisely this reason, the free press has come under attack from governments controlled by populist leaders.

Against the backdrop of large and growing differences within the EU with regard to civil liberties, the policy paper aims to identify, compare and contrast media discourses on refugee and immigration policies across a range of EU Member States. These discourses have to be understood in the context of specific national histories and imaginaries. All Member States are part of what has been described by EU officials as a “continent of immigration”. This doesn't necessarily imply that individual countries are willing to accept this reality, that they perceive themselves as immigration countries or that they formulate and execute adequate policies regulating the flow of migrants and accommodating their needs in light of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and its ideals: the universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity, among others.



The analysis focuses not on the empirical reality of migration in selected Member States, but, first, on how individual countries have historically debated immigration and emigration, how immigrants were labelled and categorized in the past, and what assumptions were made about their needs, values and political attitudes. Second, we ask how quality newspapers have shaped the political communication about migration and the migration policies of the EU. Note that our analysis only looks at the public rhetoric of national pro-immigration positions and how this rhetoric relates to European norms and values. The basic assumption is that media both reflect and shape attitudes towards immigration which are in turn predictors of attitudes towards the European Union.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Our search for pro-immigration arguments in European quality newspapers testifies to the massive rise of “value talk” in the context of the refugee crisis in 2015 and afterwards. As a result of the crisis, values have been activated and are more fiercely invoked today than before the crisis. None of the newspapers of our sample argues in favour of immigration exclusively from a utilitarian perspective, even though demographic trends and labour shortages play a role in media discourses both in Germany and in Poland, to name just these two countries.

However, the overt invocation of values has also led to serious conflicts both within and between EU Member States over their meanings and implications. Quality newspapers identify and interpret European values, even when they do not refer explicitly to them. They are crucially important value agents as well as stages for public controversy. The critical role of some of the newspapers covered by our research consists in insistently reminding European politicians and policymakers of the normative promises Europe rests on.

References to European values are strong in countries where those values resonate with national values such as, for example, “dignity” in Poland and Germany, or “solidarity” in France. Newspapers are translators between national and European normative vocabularies. Also, they are indispensable sites and sources of self-reflection for national publics coming to terms with the reality of their own societies. Throughout the EU, they reflect and shape the transition from a de-politicized consensus for or against immigration to a more polarized public debate. At the same time, they are a moderating force in national debates. All the newspapers analysed by us are adamant against the project of imposing ethnic and cultural “super-homogeneity” (Michał Buchowski) on European societies.

In spite of their diversity, quality newspapers in Europe are a bulwark against far-right populism, Islamophobia and radical anti-immigration attitudes. Even if the European Charter of Fundamental Rights or, for example, Article 67 of the Lisbon Treaty is rarely invoked explicitly, quality newspapers defend the spirit of the Treaties and the Charter, both against the governments of Member States and against individual EU policies.

Public opinion as reflected and shaped by quality newspapers varies across EU Member States. Variation arises from fundamentally different attitudes towards the benefits and the morality of admitting immigrants and refugees. However, our analysis also shows that not even the most conservative papers are strictly against any kind of immigration or against the core values of the EU. Hungary is the only exception.

All EU Member States have in common that at least at some point in their history they were open to immigrants and home of national minorities, even if today some of them are critical of immigration and culturally more homogeneous than in the past (Poland, Hungary). Others have been immigration countries for a long time without, however, acknowledging this fact (France, Germany). Sweden is one of the few countries where openness to immigration is itself a traditional value.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. DEFEND PRESS FREEDOM

Since quality newspapers and other media are a crucial factor in shaping attitudes towards immigration and hence to the EU itself, their freedom must be protected by all means. The EU should continue and intensify its efforts to protect European core values in all member countries. Hungary should not get away with its systematic assault on press freedom. The independence of the judiciary, academic freedom and press freedom are closely intertwined, which makes legal action all the more necessary. The very future of the EU depends on the existence of a free press.

2. PROMOTE AND PROTECT INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

The EU should expand financial support to independent journalism in Member States where media freedom and media pluralism are threatened. For example, the EU should strengthen projects such as Journalismfund.eu aimed at promoting independent investigative journalism in Europe. When the governments of countries make it difficult for domestic or foreign journalists to do their work, the EU should double down on its efforts in supporting professional journalists interested in cross-border investigations and research on the nexus between migration policy and European affairs.

3. SUPPORT NGOS AND CITIZEN INITIATIVES

Apart from legal action, the EU should continue to fund and closely collaborate with NGOs and citizen initiatives which act to protect civil rights including press freedom in the spirit of European norms and values. It is of crucial importance to strengthen the support for groups such as Reporters Without Borders and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF). We also recommend developing new ways of supporting local opinion-formers in illiberal democracies.

4. LAUNCH EU INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

The EU should launch massive information campaigns in Member States whose governments violate European norms and values. These campaigns, to be organized together with domestic NGOs and citizen initiatives, should highlight the positive sides of the EU, including its core values. It is crucial that such information campaigns avoid any paternalistic tone. The message to be conveyed is that we Europeans belong together and that "being European" is constituted by fundamental EU norms and values.

5. REJECT CALLS FOR A DIFFERENTIATED EUROPEAN ASYLUM SYSTEM

The press coverage of migration issues mirrors the fact that, on average, Europeans are more accepting of immigrants today than 15 or 20 years ago. Also, the acceptance of immigrants is higher in places with a high percentage of immigrants and their descendants than in places with few immigrants. Since in these places migration seems to generate its own acceptance, the EU should reject calls for a differentiated European asylum system and insist instead on common rules and standards in accordance with EU law and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

6. MOVE THE CONVERSATION TO ISSUES OTHER THAN IMMIGRATION

Migration is often a salient issue in places where people don't have everyday experiences with migrants. We recommend that instead of migration, political conversations involving the EU and its citizens should focus on issues such as housing, welfare, employment and crime that affect daily lives. Where appropriate, the conversation should move away from migration which is often invoked by far-right populists as the bogeyman responsible for a whole host of social ills.



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WEBSITE	https://novamigra.eu/
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FURTHER READING	NoVAMIGRA Report on the normative content, genesis, historical background and implementation of the EU Charter and Executive Summary NoVAMIGRA General Value Landscape Matrix: Methodology and Key Findings NoVAMIGRA Summary report on value agents in public and civil society institutions NoVAMIGRA Talking of Values: Understanding the Normative Discourse of EU Migration Policy on (Value-Based) EU Policies on Migration

All NoVAMIGRA readings are publicly accessible at (under CC-BY-NC license):
https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00070614