ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exposure to television and support for restrictive immigration policies in the midst of the immigration crisis: A cross-national comparison

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Abstract

Objective: This study explored associations between television exposure and public support for restrictive immigration policies in Europe, distinguishing general television exposure from exposure to television news. We explored explanations of generalized social distrust and perceived ethnic threat and, moreover, acknowledged cross-national variation in asylum applicants.

Methods: We applied multi-level regression analyses using the European Social Survey (2014–2015), covering 19 countries ($n = 29.161$).

Results: General television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies related positively, whereas exposure to television news related negatively to these policy preferences. Furthermore, both generalized social distrust and perceived ethnic threat mediated the links between both forms of exposure and these preferences. An increase in the number of asylum applicants strengthened the positive relationship between general television exposure and these policy preferences.

Conclusions: This study provides new insights into the role of individual *and* national factors for support for restrictive immigration policies from a contemporary and cross-national perspective.

KEYWORDS
asylum inflow, cross-national comparison, news exposure, support for restrictive immigration policies, television exposure

The number of immigrants arriving in Europe sharply increased between 2013 and 2015. Whilst 431.090 individuals applied for asylum in the European Union in 2013, this number increased to 1.332.825 in 2015 (Eurostat 2015). Since then, these numbers gradually decreased. For the EU and its member states, it has become a permanent challenge how to cope with migration (Kosho 2016). Media messages covering this trend have spoken about Europe's migration crisis or even a tsunami. In these media messages, concerns are expressed regarding the (perceived) competition, conflict, and tension immigrants cause and their supposed negative influence on public finances (Héricourt and Spielvogel 2014; Schneider 2008). These growing concerns expressed in television programs are likely to affect individuals' support for restrictive immigration policies. Research on these preferences concerning specifically restrictive immigration policies is still scarce, especially research embedded in the recent immigration "crisis" (Finseraas, Jakobsson, and Kotsadam 2011; Héricourt and Spielvogel 2014).

Whereas previous studies have explored several determinants of attitudes toward immigration, a growing body of research focuses on media exposure or television exposure in specific (see for an overview, Eberl et al. 2018; Meltzer et al. 2017). Watching television remains an important leisure activity: The daily time spent watching television from 2009 to 2014 by European citizens increased to an average of 221 min a day. Therefore, it is likely that most Europeans are exposed to messages concerning immigration on television. Actually, media are the most important source of information about such topics (Meltzer et al. 2017) and tend to highlight controversial and conflictual aspects of immigration (Thorbjørnsrud 2015). Content analyses of newspapers and television broadcasts in Europe illustrate that there were merely few reports that acknowledged possible benefits of asylum seekers and migrants for their new country of residence (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2015). Van der van der Linden and Jacobs (2017, p. 2831) found that intergroup threats present a stable ingredient of television news, at least in Flanders before the immigration crisis. Moreover, a recent study of 17 European countries showed how migration media coverage is twofold. On the one hand, the "emotional coverage of human loss through iconic image of human suffering" (p. 8) is shown, but on the other hand, the "hard realities of massive movements of populations that have the potential to disrupt the living conditions, security and welfare of host communities" (EUROMED Migration IV 2017). Unsurprisingly, there is recent evidence that (news) media coverage is important in explaining anti-immigrant attitudes (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009; McLaren, Boomgaarden, and Vliegenthart 2017; Schlueter and Davidov 2013; see for an overview: Meltzer et al. 2017, 2020). Eberl et al. 2018) propose that explicit comparative studies are, however, needed. We build on this body of knowledge but instead focus on citizens' support for restrictive immigration policies.

We set out to contribute some innovations to this field. First, individuals' exposure to television as related to support for restrictive immigration policies has not been addressed yet; hence, constituting a lacuna in a field where systematic comparative studies are quite scarce (Eberl et al. 2018. Moreover, we will consider and test possible differential cultivation effects (Gerbner et al. 1986), following Potter and Chang (2014). We will explore the effects of general television exposure versus (genre-specific) exposure to television news, just like recently proposed by Jacobs and Hooghe (2019) as related to anti-immigrant sentiments.

Second, we innovate upon previous research by introducing two mediators for the association between television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies, in line with Jacobs, Hooghe, and de Vroome (2017) who did so for anti-migration sentiments. Based on the "mean world syndrome" proposed in cultivation theory, television exposure is likely to increase generalized social distrust, which in turn can affect support for restrictive immigration policies (Shah 1998). Previous research also uses ethnic competition theory to explain negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities in general (Pryce 2018; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002). Competitive conditions communicated in the media can affect majorities' perception of threat and encourage unfavorable attitudes toward ethnic minorities (Jacobs, Hooghe, and de Vroome 2017; Vergeer, Lubbers, and Scheepers 2000). That is why we explore the mediating role of both generalized social distrust and perceived ethnic threat.

Third, arguing from ethnic competition theory, previous studies have often taken into account contextual factors, like (changes in) immigration rates, when analyzing attitudes toward immigration (Boateng,

Chenane, and Pryce 2020). In these national contexts, particularly in the midst of the migration crisis, media attention paid to asylum seekers may vary widely (Caviedes 2015). We improve upon these previous studies by accounting for the (recent changes in the) number of asylum applicants and explore how such conditions possibly moderate the association between television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies in Europe.

With these contributions, this study improves upon previous work by studying support for restrictive immigration policies using data from 19 European countries collected via the European Social Survey (ESS) during the rise of the number of immigrants (in 2014/2015). A multilevel framework is applied to test hypotheses on several individual and cross-level characteristics. As a result, we offer insights into contemporary public views on restrictive immigration policies and their relationship with television exposure, measured when immigration in Europe was on the rise.

We aim to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do relationships between general television exposure and exposure to television news with support for restrictive immigration policies vary significantly across European countries?

2. To what extent are the relations between both general television exposure as well as exposure to television news and support for restrictive immigration policies mediated by generalized social distrust and perceived ethnic threat?

3. To what extent are the relations between television exposure and exposure to television news with support for restrictive immigration policies moderated by (changes in) asylum applicants' inflows?

THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES

Based upon previous theoretical insights, derived from cultivation theory and framing theory, and empirical results from studies on related immigration issues, hypotheses are formulated to be tested rigorously.

Television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies

In line with cultivation theory and framing theory, several studies have related media messages to attitudes toward migration (Atwell Seate and Mastro 2015; Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2013; Graf, Linhartova, and Sczesny 2020). Underlining this conclusion, Thorbjørnsrud (2015) argues from a framing perspective that the way media frames an important topic, such as immigration, affects public opinion. By selecting particular wordings and problem definitions, media can lead television viewers in the same direction of this frame. Moreover, the way television viewers make sense of a social issue can subsequently shape their support for particular policies (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2002). Since migration issues have wide-ranging social and political implications, these issues have received constant media attention since the 1970s as stated by Héricourt and Spielvogel (2014). Members of ethnic minority groups are associated with more threatening media content than majority group members. Therefore, scholars have long suggested that media exposure can potentially "cultivate fears" and thus shape attitudes about minority group members (Atwell Seate and Mastro 2015; Kosho 2016). Héricourt and Spielvogel (2014) suggest that editorial choices tend to focus on a more sensationalist approach, and in doing so, generate more anxiety. Esses, Medianu, and Lawson (2013) argue accordingly that media often portray immigrants as "enemies at the gate." Such portrayals catch the attention and warn the public about possible threats, and in doing so, affect their attitudes toward these immigrants. Finseraas, Jakobsson, and Kotsadam (2011) argue that media are more likely to affect public opinion when issues are "concrete" rather than "abstract." We propose that recent immigration is a rather concrete phenomenon that concerns many individuals. So our first hypothesis poses:

Hypothesis 1a: The longer individuals are exposed to television, the higher their support for restrictive immigration policies.

We propose that this hypothesis holds, also after controlling for the "usual suspects" related to exclusionist stances, such as education, sex, and age (Héricourt and Spielvogel 2014).

Mediators of general television exposure

The mean world syndrome argues that television exposure affects people's worldviews (Gerbner et al. 1986). Television exposure increases the correspondence of individuals' views with "television reality" rather than with the "real world facts" (Gerbner and Gross 1976). As Uslaner (1998) argues, due to television exposure, people start believing the real world to be as "mean" as the "television world," inducing individuals' social distrust. Previous findings indeed suggest that adjusted worldviews, related to television exposure, increase generalized social distrust (Shah 1998; Shrum 2009). So, being exposed to negative television messages is expected to increase generalized social distrust. Moreover, we suppose that when individuals distrust their in-group members, to whom they would evolutionary attach identity and trust due to similar social or ethnic backgrounds (Brewer 1999), they are even more likely to distrust out-group immigrants with whom they do not share similar backgrounds (Herreros and Criado 2009). Sides and Citrin (2007) and Rustenbach (2010) show that social distrust produces stronger anti-immigrant attitudes. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1b: The longer individuals are exposed to television, the more they support restrictive immigration policies, which is partially mediated by generalized distrust.

This study also applies ethnic competition theory to derive explanations for the supposed relationship between television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies. This theory suggests that conflicts between social groups, driven by competition over scarce resources or conflicting values, induce antagonistic inter-group attitudes (Scheepers, Gijsberts and Coenders 2002). Schlueter and Davidov (2013) have shown that the more people are exposed to reports giving negative information on immigrants, the more readily this negative information will come to their minds, and perceived threat will thus increase. Consistently, we propose that inter-group competition, which can be spread by exposure to media messages, increases the perceived ethnic threat of out-groups, which in turn mediates negative associations with the out-group (Van Klingeren et al. 2014). This results in the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1c: The longer individuals are exposed to television, the more they support restrictive immigration policies, which is partially mediated by perceiving ethnic threat.

Genre-specific versus general television exposure

Cultivation theory thus argues that general television exposure affects individuals' attitudes (Gerbner et al. 1986). It is hereby suggested that there is one "overall" cultivation effect, as television offers "a coherent set of images and messages" (Gerbner et al. 1986, p. 19). Previous studies, however, have illustrated that exposure to television should be qualified. Indeed, Potter and Chang (1990) find that genre-specific exposure predicts cultivation outcomes better than general exposure. Other research also argues that exposure could be distinguished into genre-specific exposure, that is, exposure to "news and information" programs (Vergeer, Lubbers and Scheepers 2000; Cohen and Weimann 2000; Jacobs and Hooghe 2019; Potter and Chang 2014).

Moreover, previous studies have shown that particularly news programs tend to include not only advocates of restrictive asylum laws and migrants portrayed as a threat but also representations of migrants as legitimate refugees and innocent victims who deserve humanitarian protection (Schemer 2014). So, the news does not only emphasize the predominant law-and-order idiom but can also emphasize humanitarian aspects, describing immigrants as victims of an unfair system (Benson 2013; Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015). We, therefore, suppose that news programs may sketch a fairly balanced image

of immigration that can hamper having restrictive immigration policy preferences. As a result, the consequences of television news exposure for support for restrictive immigration policies may differ from the general trend suggested by general television exposure. Indeed, experimental research (Lecheler et al. 2015) shows that negative frames in the press do illicit negative attitudes toward immigration (cf., Jacobs and van der Linden 2018), but positive frames, and particularly frames that allow viewers to take the perspective of immigrants (Vescio et al. 2003) can illicit positive attitudes toward immigration. Furthermore, Jacobs, Hooghe, and de Vroome (2017) show that the more people watch television news, the less anti-immigrant sentiments they have. To test whether the aforementioned relation is also present for support for restrictive immigration policies in the midst of the immigration crisis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2a: The longer individuals are exposed to news programs on television, the lower their support for restrictive immigration policies.

Mediators of exposure to television news

Although a direct effect of television news exposure on support for restrictive immigration policies seems plausible, there are reasons to suspect this relationship is also mediated. Studies on political communication (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006) show that exposure to news media may have virtuous rather than vicious effects, suggesting that exposure to television news has positive outcomes. Norris (1996) actually provides evidence that people who are more exposed to television news are more knowledgeable and show higher levels of political and civic engagement. We know from previous research that both types of engagement appear to be strongly related to general social trust (Pichler and Wallace 2007), which in turn decreases negative attitudes toward immigrants (Rustenbach 2010). The following hypothesis is therefore posed:

Hypothesis 2b: The longer individuals are exposed to news programs on television, the less they support restrictive immigration policies, which is partially mediated by having less generalized distrust.

Moreover, there is also evidence to consider another mediator for the relationship proposed in hypothesis 2a. Previous research shows that people who are exposed to public service rather than to commercial television perceive ethnic minorities less as a threat (Jacobs, Meeusen, and d'Haenens 2016). In line with the previously proposed hypothesis 2a, we indeed expect that television news also depicts immigrants and refugees in terms of humanitarian aspects, describing them as victims of an unfair system, instead of purely as a threat (Benson 2013; Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015). As a result, people's exposure to television news showing a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the immigration issue should decrease perceptions of ethnic threats. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 2c: The longer individuals are exposed to news programs on television, the less they support restrictive immigration policies, which is partially mediated by perceiving less ethnic threat.

Country-level moderators: Asylum applicants' inflow and support for restrictive immigration policies

Blalock (1967), that is, the founder of ethnic competition theory, distinguishes between actual versus perceived competition. Supposedly, a large number of people competing for the same scarce resources is a cause of actual competition. We argue, consistent with ethnic competition theory, that a higher number of asylum applicants or a sudden growth in the number of asylum applicants rather than immigrants in
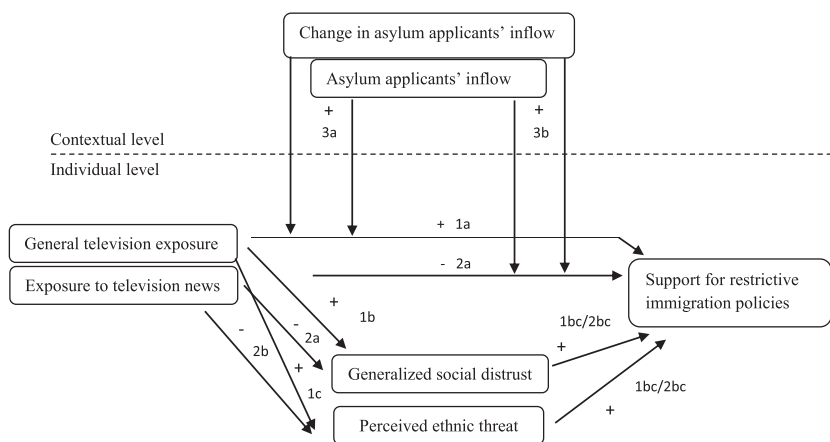
FIGURE 1   Integrated theoretical framework

general (Boateng, Chenane, and Pryce 2020) increases competition for scarce resources between the dominant group and ethnic out-groups (Olzak 1992).

Meuleman and Davidov (2009) accordingly argue that if economic or demographic conditions suddenly deteriorate, people's attitudes toward immigration become less favorable: People are likely to be overwhelmed or even shocked by these sudden changes, which induce unfavorable attitudes toward immigration. Whether such changes in immigration moderate the impact of television exposure on support for restrictive policies has not yet been tested more rigorously. Therefore, we suppose that as changes in the number of asylum applicants' inflow are likely to be portrayed in the media when the number of asylum applicants increases considerably—as they did in Europe from 2014 onward—the relationship between television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies will change as well. We propose that when the numbers of asylum applicants are higher and/or increase, the positive relationship between general exposure to television and support for restrictive immigration policies (see hypothesis 1a) will increase due to more media attention for immigrants as 'enemies at the gate" (Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2013). In such pressing circumstances of higher and/or increasing immigration, humanitarian aspects of asylum issues in media messages may simultaneously come under pressure, blurring the fairly balanced image of immigration on television news (see hypothesis 2a), diminishing the negative relationship between exposure to television news and support for immigration policies (Jacobs, Hooghe, and de Vroome 2017).

Hypothesis 3a: The larger the (changes in the) increase in asylum applicants' inflow, the stronger the positive relationship between general television exposure with support for restrictive immigration policies

Hypothesis 3b: The larger the (changes in the) increase in asylum applicants' inflow, the weaker the negative relationship between exposure to television news with support for restrictive immigration policies.

The supposed relationships are displayed visually in Figure 1.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data

In order to test these hypotheses, we used both individual and contextual data. Individual-level data were derived from the ESS Round 7, which was conducted in 2014/2015 (European Social Survey 2015).
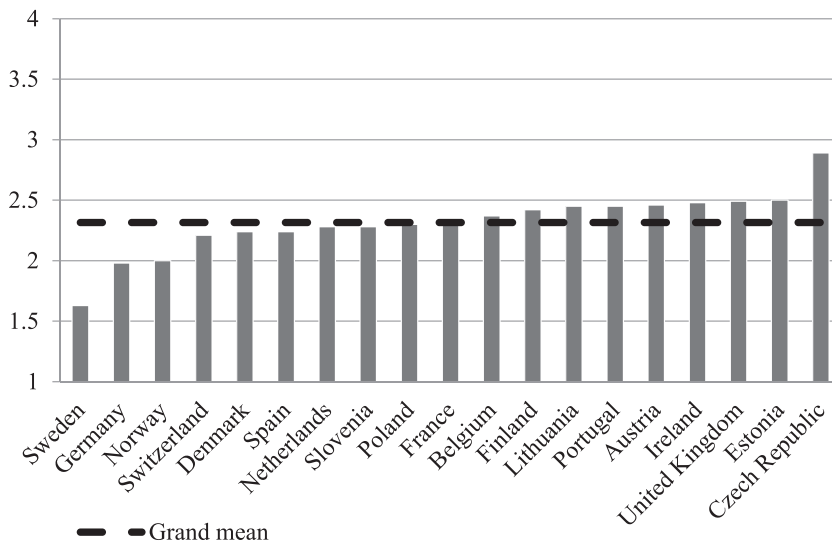
FIGURE 2 Support for restrictive immigration policies by country, measured on a scale from 1 to 4 where a higher score indicates more support for restrictive immigration policies ($N = 29.161$)

Respondents were randomly drawn from the population of individuals within each country. Data were collected by means of an hour-long face-to-face interview. Individuals included in the survey were older than 15 years old, residing in private households, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, language, or legal status. The original data set contained information on 29.859 individuals across 19 countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Contextual data on asylum applicants and the population number of each country were retrieved from Eurostat (2015). Descriptive information on the individual-level variables can be found in Table A1 of the Appendix; descriptive information on the country-level variables can be found in Table A2 of the Appendix.

Measurement of individual-level variables

Our study puts support for restrictive immigration policies central and improves upon previous studies by including multiple items to analyze this theoretical construct. In order to measure *support for restrictive immigration policies*, we used three items: "To what extent do you think [country] should allow (a) people of the same race or ethnic group as most [country]'s people to come and live here?; (b) people of a different race or ethnic group from most [country] people to come and live here?; and (c) people from the poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?' The response categories ranged from (1) "*allow many to come and live here*" to (4) "*allow none.*" The mean of the scores on the three items was taken to measure the support for restrictive immigration policies, resulting in a scale ranging from 1 to 4. A higher score indicated more support for restrictive immigration policies. The Cronbach's alpha of these three items was 0.88, indicating a reliable scale. The scale appeared to be reliable in all countries, as the lowest Cronbach's alpha was 0.59 (Austria), and the highest Cronbach's alpha was 0.94 (Spain). Unfortunately, these data do not allow to make further, possibly relevant, distinctions between different categories of immigrants such as a distinction between economic migrants seeking to improve their standard of living versus asylum seekers seeking a safe haven.

Figure 2 shows that there are great cross-national differences in support of restrictive immigration policies. Table A2 in the Appendix illustrates these differences, with support of restrictive immigration

policies ranging from 1.63 in Sweden to 2.89 in the Czech Republic. In doing so, this table suggests that of the countries included in this study, the population of Sweden is least supportive toward restrictive immigration policies, whereas the Czech Republic is most supportive of such policies.

General television exposure was measured by asking the question: "On an average weekday, how much time, in total, do you spend watching television?" The answer categories ranged from (0) "*no time at all*" to (7) "*more than 3 h.*" For each ordinal variable included in the analyses, we checked its linear association with support for restrictive immigration policies. In a multivariate regression analysis, the subtest of dummy variables showed no substantial improvement in explained variance, compared to inclusion as interval variables. Therefore, we considered these variables to show linear relations.

Exposure to television news was measured by asking: "On an average weekday, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programs about politics and current affairs?" The answer categories ranged from (0) "*no time at all*" to (7) "*more than 3 h.*" Individuals who stated they did not watch any television were included in the category "*no time at all.*" Both measurements of television exposure have been used in previous cross-national studies (Schmitt-Beck and Wolsing 2010).

In order to measure *generalized social distrust*, the following questions were asked: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?"; "Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?"; and "Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?" The answer categories ranged from 0 ("*you cannot be too careful*", "*most people try to take advantage of me,*" and "*people mostly look out for themselves*") to 10 ("*most people can be trusted,*" "*most people try to be fair,*" and "*people mostly try to be helpful*"). A scale was constructed by calculating the mean resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 10. These three questions were derived from the Rosenberg Trust Scale, which was shown to be valid and reliable for ESS countries (Reeskens and Hooghe 2008). Indeed, the results of the factor analyses pointed toward one dimension behind these three items (lowest factor loading = 0.65) with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76.

The scale of *perceived ethnic threat* included three questions, in line with previous studies (Scheepers, Gijsberts and Coenders, 2002): "Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries?"; 'Would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?"; and "Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?" The answer categories ranged from 0 ("*bad for the economy,*" "*cultural life undermined,*" and "*worse place to live*") to 10 ("*good for the economy,*" "*cultural life enriched*" and "*better place to live*") and were reversed, so a higher score meant people perceived more ethnic threat. A scale was constructed by calculating the mean resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 10. Principal factor analyses suggested there is only one dimension behind these three items measuring perceived ethnic threat (lowest factor loading = 0.76). These items constructed a reliable scale with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85.

In the analyses, we controlled for several factors, which in previous studies were associated with attitudes toward immigration (such as Boateng, Chenane, and Pryce 2020; Pryce 2018): *age* (in years), *sex* (0 = male, 1 = female), *educational level, marital status, religiosity, economic strain*, and *urbanization*. The highest level of education completed was assessed with categories ranging from (less than) lower secondary to higher tertiary. These categories were coded into three categories: (less than) lower secondary, upper secondary, and vocational or tertiary education. We distinguished the following categories for marital status: (1) "married or in a registered civil union," (2) "separated or divorced," (3) "widowed/civil partner died," and (4) "none of these." The last category was the reference category in the analyses. Religiosity was measured using "Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?" Answer categories ranged from (1) "*never*" to (7) "*every day.*" The economic strain was assessed by the question: "Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?" The answer categories ranged from (1) "*living comfortably on present income*" to (4) "*finding it very difficult on present income.*" The last control variable was assessed by asking: "Which phrase on this card best describes the area where you live?" The answer categories ranged from (1) "*big city*" to (5) "*farm or home in the countryside.*"

After removing respondents with a missing value on support for restrictive immigration policies (3.7 percent), general television exposure (0.2 percent), exposure to television news (0.2 percent), generalized social distrust (0.9 percent), and perceived ethnic threat (5.8 percent), 29.859 respondents remained. A total of 2.3 percent of the remaining respondents had a missing value on one of the control variables. These respondents were also deleted, resulting in 29.161 respondents.

Measurement of country-level variables

On the country level, we distinguished both *the asylum applicants' inflow* and *the change in asylum applicants' inflow*. We consider asylum applicants to be a subset of the total size of the immigration number that was considered by Boateng, Chenane, and Pryce (2020), however, for which they found no evidence that it was related to perceptions of immigrants. The relative asylum applicants' inflow was constructed by first dividing the number of asylum applicants by the total population in each country. This was done for either 2014 or 2015, depending on when the interviews took place in the country. In multiple countries, interviews were held in both 2014 and 2015. We constructed the asylum applicants' inflow of the year in which most respondents were interviewed. In order to measure the change in asylum applicants' inflow, we subtracted the relative asylum applicants' inflow of 2013 from the relative asylum applicants' inflow in 2014. We did the same for measuring the change in asylum applicants' inflow between 2014 and 2015. Both the asylum applicants' inflow and the change in asylum applicants' inflow were multiplied by 1,000 in order to ease interpretation. The asylum applicants' inflow was highest in Austria (10.28) and lowest in Portugal (0.09). The change in asylum applicants' inflow was also highest in Austria (6.98) and lowest in the United Kingdom (0.03). Both asylum applicants' variables were mean-centered.

Analytical design

In order to test the hypotheses, random intercept multi-level regression analyses (Snijders and Bosker 1999) are conducted using SPSS, as the data have a hierarchical structure: Individuals are nested within countries. An empty model shows an intra-class correlation of 0.11 (0.06/(0.06 + 0.53)), indicating that 11 percent of the variance in support for restrictive immigration policies is attributed to differences between countries and 89 percent to differences within countries.

In Model 1, we included general television exposure, exposure to television news, and the individual-level control variables in order to estimate television exposure effects in addition to the effects of the control variables (hypotheses 1a and 2a). We added generalized social distrust in Model 2 and perceived ethnic threat in Model 3 to test the mediation hypotheses (hypotheses 1b and c and 2b and c). Multilevel structural equation modeling in Mplus was executed to test these proposed indirect effects. In Model 4, asylum applicants' inflow and change herein are added. In Models 5 and 6, we added the cross-level moderators with general television exposure and exposure to television news respectively (hypotheses 3a and b).

RESULTS

Individual-level hypotheses

The results of Model 1 in Table 1 indicate that general television exposure is positively related to support for restrictive immigration policies. More general television exposure appears to increase support for restrictive immigration policies. Hypothesis 1a is therefore supported. Model 1 also shows that exposure to television news is negatively related to support for restrictive immigration policies, supporting hypothesis 2a. The parameter suggests that exposure to television news decreases support for restrictive

TABLE 1 Multi-level linear regression models for support for restrictive immigration policies: Individual-level determinants (derived from the hypotheses) and control variables ($n = 29.161$, $N = 19$)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Individual level						
General television exposure	0.040***	0.002	0.037***	0.002	0.016***	0.002
Exposure to television news	−0.034***	0.004	−0.032***	0.004	−0.010**	0.003
Generalized social distrust			0.079***	0.003		
Perceived ethnic threat					0.214***	0.002
Age	0.004***	0.000	0.004***	0.000	0.002***	0.000
Sex (0 = male, 1 = female)	−0.037***	0.008	−0.029***	0.008	−0.044***	0.007
Educational level	−0.172***	0.006	−0.150***	0.006	−0.051***	0.005
Marital status (reference = none of these)						
Married or registered civil union	0.041***	0.011	0.041***	0.011	0.040***	0.009
Separated or divorced	0.022	0.016	0.009	0.016	0.004	0.013
Widowed or civil partner died	0.075**	0.023	0.070**	0.023	0.062***	0.019
Religiosity	−0.007*	0.003	−0.003	0.003	0.004*	0.003
Economic strain	0.092***	0.006	0.063***	0.006	0.029***	0.005
Urbanization	−0.037***	0.004	−0.037***	0.003	−0.004	0.003
Intercept	2.322***	0.056	1.965***	0.055	1.200***	0.041
Variance individual level	0.409***	0.004	0.475***	0.004	0.326**	0.003
Variance country level						
Intercept	0.047**	0.015	0.043**	0.014	0.022	0.007
−2 log likelihood	62,076.419		61,120.107		50,177.847	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

immigration policies. Both television exposure effects persist over and above the effects of control variables.

Model 2 in Table 1 shows that generalized social distrust is positively related to support for restrictive immigration policies. The more generalized social distrust individuals experience, the more they support restrictive immigration policies. The direct effect of general television exposure is reduced somewhat when generalized social distrust is included in the model. Multilevel structural equation modeling shows that there is a significant positive indirect effect of general television exposure via generalized social distrust on support for restrictive immigration policies ($B = 0.004$, $p = 0.010$). Hypothesis 1b is therefore accepted. For exposure to television news, we also see a small decrease when generalized social distrust is added in Model 2. The indirect effect of exposure to television news via generalized social distrust is significant regarding support for restrictive immigration policies ($B = –0.003$, $p = 0.041$), which supports hypothesis 2b. So, where more general television exposure seems to increase generalized social distrust, the latter is decreased by exposure to television news.

In Model 3 in Table 1, perceived ethnic threat positively relates to support for restrictive immigration policies. Again, multilevel structural equation modeling indicates a significant positive indirect effect of general television exposure via perceived ethnic threat on support for restrictive immigration policies ($B = 0.036$, $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis 1c is therefore supported: Perceived ethnic threat mediates the relation between general television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies. The indirect effect

TABLE 2 Multi-level linear regression models for support for restrictive immigration policies: Individual level determinants, control variables and contextual level determinants ($n = 29.161$, $N = 19$)

	Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Individual level						
General television exposure	0.016***	0.002	0.016***	0.003	0.015***	0.002
Exposure to television news	−0.010**	0.003	−0.010**	0.003	−0.008	0.006
Generalized social distrust	0.012***	0.002	0.012***	0.002	0.013***	0.002
Perceived ethnic threat	0.212***	0.002	0.212***	0.002	0.212***	0.002
Age	0.002***	0.000	0.002***	0.000	0.002***	0.000
Sex (0 = male, 1 = female)	−0.042***	0.007	−0.042***	0.007	−0.043***	0.007
Educational level	−0.049***	0.005	−0.049***	0.005	−0.048***	0.005
Marital status (reference = none of these)						
Married or registered civil union	0.040***	0.009	0.039***	0.009	0.040***	0.009
Separated or divorced	0.002	0.013	0.000	0.013	0.003	0.013
Widowed or civil partner died	0.061**	0.019	0.060**	0.019	0.060**	0.019
Religiosity	0.005*	0.003	0.004*	0.003	0.005~	0.003
Economic strain	0.025***	0.005	0.025***	0.005	0.024***	0.005
Urbanization	−0.005	0.003	−0.005	0.003	−0.005	0.003
Country level						
Asylum applicants' inflow	−0.078**	0.023	−0.063*	0.025	−0.081**	0.027
x general television exposure			−0.004	0.002		
x exposure to television news					0.002	0.005
Change in asylum applicants' inflow	0.097*	0.039	0.061	0.042	0.116*	0.045
x general television exposure			0.009*	0.004		
x exposure to television news					−0.012	0.009
Intercept	1.160***	0.036	1.161	0.036	1.159***	0.038
Variance individual level	0.326***	0.003	0.325	0.003	0.325***	0.003
Variance country level						
Intercept	0.013**	0.004	0.014	0.005	0.017***	0.006
−2 log likelihood	50,135.843		50,113.540		50,060.030	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.00$.

of exposure to television news via perceived ethnic threat on support for restrictive immigration policies is also significant ($B = -0.032$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived ethnic threat, therefore, mediates the negative relation between exposure to television news and support for restrictive immigration policies, which supports hypothesis 2c.

Country-level hypotheses

Table 2 presents the results of our cross-level moderations. The results of Model 5 show that the positive effect of general television exposure on support for restrictive immigration policies does not significantly differ from the inflow of asylum applicants. Model 5 also shows that the *change* in asylum applicants' inflow

strengthens the positive effect of general television exposure significantly ($B = 0.009$), which is in line with H3a. We therefore partly confirm H3a. In Model 6, we find no significant cross-level interaction effects, thereby refuting the expectations formulated in H3b.

Additional analyses using Cook's distance are executed in order to test for the robustness of the results. Austria and the Czech Republic are considered to be outliers as their Cook's distance value is higher than 4/N (Bollen and Jackman 1985). All results appear to be robust when Austria and the Czech Republic, separately, are excluded.

DISCUSSION

In this research, we explored to what extent individuals' television exposure affects support for restrictive immigration policies. By analyzing 19 countries, amid the migration crisis, multiple research questions have been addressed. This has allowed us to improve our understanding of support for restrictive immigration policies, both from a contemporary and cross-national perspective.

The first research question addressed the relationship between both general television exposure and exposure to television news with support for restrictive immigration policies in the European Union, previously scarcely researched (Eberl et al. 2018). We hypothesized that general television exposure induces support for restrictive immigration policies. Our results support this expectation. However, genre-specific exposure to television news decreases support for restrictive immigration policies. This result suggests that news programs offer a more balanced view of reality and include multiple frames on immigration issues (Benson 2013; Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015). So, the effects of general television exposure and exposure to television news on support for restrictive immigration policies are in opposite directions. We can thus amend the "overall" cultivation effect as supposed by cultural indicators theory (Gerbner et al. 1986). These insights add to previous studies in which this overarching theory was also refined, like in Cohen and Weimann (2000) and Scharrer and Blackburn (2018).

In the second research question, we explored to what extent the associations between both general television exposure as well as exposure to television news and support for restrictive immigration policies are mediated by both generalized social distrust (Sides and Citrin 2007) and perceived ethnic threat (Schlueter and Davidov 2013). Our findings confirm that generalized social distrust and perceived ethnic threat are mediators for both forms of exposure. These findings add new theoretical insights as social distrust and perceived ethnic threat are thus not only fed by demographic factors (Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002) but moreover by television exposure.

The third research question introduced the country-level context to explore whether the direct associations between television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies are moderated by particular contextual circumstances. We found that the *change* in asylum applicants' inflow does indeed strengthen the positive relationship of general television exposure with support for restrictive immigration policies. This innovative finding may be considered a previously undiscovered systematic comparative pattern, called for by Eberl et al. (2018). As a side note, we also found empirical evidence that corroborates a proposition by Olzak (1992), who argues that changing levels of competition, in this case changing levels in the asylum applicants' inflow, affect people's attitude toward immigration policies rather than a static high level of competition. We found that the inflow of asylum applicants related negatively to support for restrictive immigration policies, which can be interpreted with intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). However, we find no evidence that the negative relationship between exposure to television news and support for restrictive immigration policies varies significantly with (changes in) asylum applications inflow. This finding suggests that exposure to television news does not, as opposed to general television exposure, make citizens susceptible to (changes in) these circumstances of increased immigration, possibly because news programs tend to deliver a balanced understanding of such issues.

To improve our understanding of varying cultivation effects, as suggested by this study, future studies could distinguish between exposure to several media contents, such as entertainment programs. These

distinctions may show differential relationships of exposure to types of content (genres and platforms) on television and support for restrictive immigration policies (Potter and Chang 1990, 2014).

Previous studies conclude that news coverage about immigration increases public concern about immigration (McLaren, Boomgaarden, and Vliegenthart 2017). Results from our study find cultivation effects due to television exposure, which transcend to support for immigration policies. These results make the need for systematic cross-country institutional and message system analysis, as initially proposed by Gerbner et al. (1986) and recently required by Eberl et al. (2018), pressing. To further elaborate on cultural indicators theory, we recommend future studies to include which media content individuals are exposed to on a cross-national scale, acknowledging not just television as the media source. Future research can build upon previous studies that performed content analyses of multiple media sources in a number of countries (such as Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2015; Caviedes 2015; Kim et al. 2011; Meltzer et al. 2020).

Finally, as this study uses cross-sectional data, the direction of causality between television exposure and policy preferences cannot be determined. Although we have formulated hypotheses based on existing theories that support the notion that television exposure affects policy preferences (related to immigration in this case), the use of panel data in the future can test this assumed directionality. Moreover, such panel data could also test thoroughly whether and to what extent television exposure is predetermined by well-considered selective behavioral and/or political preferences (Bryant and Miron 2004), which make exposure to sources that expectedly align with, rather than challenge, their pre-existing beliefs more likely. As yet, Garrett (2009) showed that Americans tend to search exposure to media content that is consistent with their own views, however, without avoiding other media content. Gil de Zúñiga, Correa, and Valenzuela (2012) also showed the effects of media exposure on attitudes toward immigrants in the United States, over and beyond political preferences. Panel data would inform this debate in the case of European countries further.

In this study, we have contributed to contemporary insights on the association between television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies, a field in which cross-national comparative research has been quite scarce (Eberl et al. 2018). To improve our understanding of this relation, we took both general television exposure and exposure to television news into account, as a specific qualification to the original cultivation theory. Results indicate that general television exposure increases support for restrictive immigration policies, whereas exposure to television news decreases such support, which refines the cultivation perspective that assumes an "overall" cultivation effect. Moreover, our study shows that a change in the number of asylum applicants strengthens the positive impact of general television exposure on support for restrictive immigration policies. Progress is made by using recent data including a large scope of different countries, collected in the rise of the immigration crisis. These data have enabled us to explore cross-national variations in the association between television exposure and support for restrictive immigration policies.

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