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## Public Opinion on Migration and the Role of the Media in the Context of the “European Refugee Crisis”

*Saara Koikkalainen, Niko Pyrhönen, and Östen Wahlbeck*

### Abstract

This chapter focuses on the relationship between public opinion on migration and its media coverage. Migration as a topic was politicized and mediatized during the “European refugee crisis” and its media coverage changed over time and varied across European countries with different geopolitical situations, ongoing societal debates, economic challenges, asylum policies, as well as distinct histories as countries receiving migrants and refugees. Different explanatory models, including individual characteristics, cultural factors and the impact of media and politics, have been proposed to explain public attitudes towards migrants. The public tends to overestimate migrant numbers and to base their opinion on what they imagine the dominant type of migration to be. Media portrayals of migrants either as a burden or as a resource or framing stories with a security threat or a humanitarian angle has an impact on attitudes and shaping public understanding of this phenomenon. Understanding the local context is important, as the shares of migrants living in each region and city vary considerably. Providing correct statistical information, stressing the diversity of current migration patterns in Europe and taking part in media and public discussions are ways in which to impact public attitudes at the local level.

Keywords: migration, media, public opinion, Eurobarometer

### 16.1 Introduction

In the year 2015, the European media, politicians and the public experienced a “European refugee crisis” as the rise in the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers arriving via the Mediterranean peaked at more than one million. The “crisis” was a continuation of long-term development, but at that time many different groups of people found themselves in Turkey, from where they continued towards Europe in a seemingly “homogeneous flow of refugees” (Crawley et al. 2016). Triandafyllidou (2018, p. 200) sees the situation as one with multiple “crises”: not only was there an unprecedented volume and pace of refugee and migrant arrivals to Europe and the reactions to this by the EU and its different member states, but also a positive crisis of solidarity and a dramatic rise in “asylum panic”.

In terms of numbers, the increasing amounts of people arriving in Europe across the Mediterranean had already been a state of emergency for a number of years, but the situation only became a “crisis” once the issue became politicised and mediatized in the destination countries (Colombo 2018). In the aftermath of the situation, the question of managing the flows of asylum seekers and integrating those granted with permission to stay, has become an important policy issue at all levels of governance in Europe (e.g. Glorius 2018). The crisis coincided with a rise of populist politics in many EU member states (e.g. Boswell 2019) and highlighted the policy discrepancies among the member states, which were tempted to try to direct the new arrivals elsewhere, rather than negotiating a joint European approach towards the reception and fair distribution of asylum seekers in the EU. As Crawley and Skleparis (2018) note, during the crisis the different categories into which the individuals arriving in Europe were put

became deeply politicised as the image of the “deserving refugee” (fleeing the Syrian war) was contrasted with that of the “opportunistic economic migrant” (taking advantage of the situation to get to Europe) (see also Holmes and Castañeda 2016).

Even though the “crisis” can be characterised as unprecedented and historical, humanitarian migration is not the only current migration phenomenon in Europe. The map of European migration (King 2002) nowadays comprises a diverse mix of different patterns, some of which are formed through recent political and economic events, while others are the product of older migration trends. Important intra-European migration streams include East-West migration from the “new” to the “old” EU member states and migration between certain neighbouring countries within the EU. In addition to asylum and irregular migration, there is also labour migration towards the EU from outside the continent (e.g. from China) and from other European countries, such as Albania and Ukraine, for example (King and Okólski 2019). According to Eurostat (2019), there were 21.6 million citizens of non-EU countries living within the EU in 2017. In addition, there were 19.6 million intra-European migrants with the citizenship of another EU member state. In absolute terms, the largest numbers of non-nationals were found in Germany (9.2 million persons, top nationalities Turkey, Poland, Syria), the United Kingdom (6.1 million, Poland, India, Ireland), Italy (5.0 million, Romania, Albania, Morocco), France (4.6 million, according to separate Census data from 2011 [Eurostat 2014] mainly from Portugal, Algeria, Morocco) and Spain (4.4 million, Romania, Morocco, United Kingdom) (Eurostat 2019).

Even though the realities of population movements across national borders in Europe are much more diverse than merely the arrival of asylum seekers from refugee-sending countries, often this image dominates public discussions and media stories and has a major impact on the public view on migration. Several studies have shown that the public tends to overestimate the number of migrants, leading to more restrictive preferences on migration policy (Sides and Citrin 2007; Consterdine 2018). Some groups of *de facto* migrants, such as intra-European or highly skilled migrants, may not even necessarily be perceived as “migrants” at all. The context that frames immigration concerns leads the public to associate different types of immigrants with different threats (e.g. Hellwig and Sinno 2017). For example, migrants who are perceived as people in need of protection are far more welcome than migrants who are perceived as economic migrants (e.g. Blinder 2015). Blinder (2015) argues that public opinion on immigration and immigrants tend to measure attitudes to what he has called “imagined immigration”, which is related to, but distinct from what actual immigration to a particular country is really like. He concludes that the public’s attitudes are influenced by what the public imagines the dominant type of migration to be and whether they perceive such migrants to pose a burden or an opportunity for their country (see also Consterdine 2018, p. 8).

The “European refugee crisis”, and the heated media debates surrounding the situation, highlighted the importance of understanding the relationship between public attitudes and media narratives related to migration in different European countries. Research indicates that there is considerable variation in how migration and its consequences are perceived, both depending on the social context, the period, the type of migration and the type of immigrants. Opinion polls like the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey (ESS) have found significant differences among European countries concerning public opinion towards migration and the trajectories along which public opinion develops over time. In addition, significant differences also exist between regions and cities. The concentration of the foreign-born population in capital regions and metropolitan areas is a global trend (OECD 2018, p. 46). In Europe, this is visible especially in the United Kingdom and Belgium, where the regional disparities in the distribution of migrants are the greatest. Whereas foreign-born residents represent only around 5% of the population in North East England, their share is around 40% in the Greater London area. In Belgium, the lowest share of foreign-born (~5%) is found from West Flanders, while in Brussels the share is nearly 45% of the population (OECD 2018, p. 47).

This chapter focuses on the relationship between public opinion on migration and its media coverage. We present state-of-the-art research findings on this topic and discuss this complex relationship in the context of the 2015 “refugee crisis”. While the extent to which integration efforts have been successful

in each country may also play a role in how migration as a phenomenon is understood, it is beyond the scope of this article to assess that. Based on recent research and studies based on, for example the ESS data, we first present insights concerning public opinion on migration and then highlight the role of media in responding to the “crisis”. Because the latest ESS opinion poll was conducted in 2014 (Wave 7), we will also use data from the Eurobarometer to trace possible changes in public attitudes in response to the crisis and its mediatization, with a particular focus on a selection of European countries that were impacted by the situation in different ways.

## 16.2 Insights on Public Opinion on Migration

Generally, research shows that public opinions on migration depend on how migration and its consequences are understood and perceived. The extensive literature on public attitudes and immigration has focused on different explanatory models and premises, including individual characteristics, cultural factors and the impact of media and politics. This research can be divided, broadly speaking, into two bodies that sometimes produce contradictory results. One emphasises rational and economic explanations, and the other underlines the importance of social identity and culture (Consterdine 2018, p. 6). At the individual level, it has been found that greater social distance from immigrants increases opposition to immigration, as do also the greater perceived size of the immigrant population and symbolic or economic threat that the individual attributes to immigrants. Other known factors that increase racism and prejudice towards immigrants are the feeling of deprivation of one’s own group in comparison with immigrants and having strong nationalist sentiments and conservative attitudes (Heath et al. 2020, p. 478). A connection between attitudes on migration and different contextual variables has also been found. For example, in periods of economic recession attitudes towards immigration tend to be more negative compared to periods when there is a larger need for labour (e.g. Kessler and Freeman 2005; Kuntz et al. 2017). Furthermore, attitudes to immigration also depend on the social and economic characteristics of the respondents. Surveys tend to find support for the so-called contact hypothesis (Allport 1954), according to which higher levels of education and social contacts with immigrants correlate with a positive attitude towards immigration (e.g. Kessler and Freeman 2005; Markaki and Longhi 2013).

Birgit Glorius (2018) examined the development of public opinion towards asylum seekers, refugee integration, and burden sharing in a number of European countries, i.e. Germany, Finland (significant reception countries), Italy, Greece, Spain (entry gate countries), Hungary and Bulgaria (new EU member countries) and Turkey (gateway country to EU). Her analysis was largely based on the cross-national European Social Survey (ESS) and the Eurobarometer (Glorius 2018, p. 6). She identified certain country clusters that are related to politicisation patterns and evaluated whether the attitudes towards refugees and their reception are linked to parallel changes in other topics. Glorius (2018) finds that the framing of immigration, especially asylum migration, varies between countries and respondents and concludes that perception on migration varies in relation to individual factors, such as education level, age and wealth. Yet there is also variation at the societal level which is related to the level of diversity and the economic and political stability of a given country as well as low levels of interpersonal and institutional trust (Glorius 2018, pp. 10–11).

Based on a survey of 18.000 eligible voters in 15 European countries, Bansak et al. (2016) examined public attitudes towards asylum seekers. They conclude that across the surveyed countries and irrespective of respondent age, education level, income or political ideology, those asylum seekers who are perceived to have higher employability, have more consistent asylum testimonies and severe vulnerabilities, and are Christian, receive the greatest public support. They note that asylum seekers are thus evaluated based on their potential economic contributions and humanitarian concerns about the deservingness of their claims and that there is also an anti-Muslim bias. Based on the same data, Bansak et al. (2017) further note that while only a minority in each country is willing to accept more asylum seekers to one’s own country, a majority is in favour of a European level system, where the asylum seekers would be proportionally allocated to EU member states. These results suggest that citizens do

care about the fairness of the responsibility-sharing mechanism, rather than only focus on the consequences of such European agreements on national asylum policies. In their review study, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) covered approximately 100 studies related to immigration attitudes from more than two dozen countries and spanning over 20 years. According to their analysis of this accumulated knowledge on the topic, attitudes on immigration are mostly driven by “symbolic concerns about the nation as a whole”, rather than self-interest in the form of calculations on the impact of immigration on one’s own economic situation (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014, p. 227).

Based on this evidence, it is clear that the connection between public opinion and various socio-economic factors and variables is not direct. Moreover, it is important to note that the cumulative evidence does not pertain to public opinion on *actual* migration. Rather, the key issue in public opinion studies is the *perception* of migration. For example, analysis of opinion polls in the context of the “European refugee crisis” showed that a change in public opinions did not happen as a direct consequence of an increase in the number of arrivals. In fact, many of the countries with the most negative opinions received relatively few migrants (cf. Consterdine 2018; Glorius 2018). Opinion polls like the ESS show surprisingly large cross-country differences in the levels of anti-migrant attitudes in European countries. The level of support of migration was included in the ESS questions in 2002 and 2014 when the respondents were asked to evaluate whether their country turns into a better or a worse place as a result of migration. Even though migration increased in a number of countries since 2002, the perceptions did not change significantly and tended to mostly change towards a slightly more positive perception. However, there is a split largely between northern and western Europe on the one hand and southern and eastern Europe on the other hand, with more negative views in the latter. As for the reasons of these perceptions, the intensity of contact to migrants as well as the economic situation of the country is usually noted by the respondents in the ESS (ESS 2016; Messing and Ságvári (2018). These differences in public opinion among the member states of the EU clearly constitute a challenge for the attempts to develop common EU policies on migration. However, there are also indications that there is a possibility to overcome these differences at the European level. As already mentioned, research has found that a majority support a fair system of responsibility-sharing concerning asylum seekers (Bansak et al. 2017). The Eurobarometer polls, described later in this chapter, also show that there exists relatively steady support for common European migration policies.

The ESS results in 2014 also show that public attitudes towards immigration vary with respect to the subjective perception of migrants’ characteristics. Results show a clear hierarchy of acceptance regarding the ethnicity and economic/cultural background of migrants. People who are perceived to be “from the same race or ethnic group” are preferred most, while people from poorer countries outside Europe are generally found to be less welcome (ESS 2016). It has also been shown that group relative deprivation, the feeling that one’s group is unfairly deprived in comparison to relevant out-groups (such as migrants), is linked to a perceived threat of immigration both at the individual and country levels (Meuleman et al. 2020). Further, an analysis of the willingness of the ESS2014 respondents to accept culturally distinct groups of migrants to their communities reveals three classes of individual attitudes: restrictive, selective and open. The proportions of individuals belonging to these classes vary across European countries, so the local context does matter significantly (Heath and Richards 2020). Researchers who have analysed the cross-country differences in the ESS have argued that the general “social health” of a society translates into a feeling of safety and stability, which allows acceptance of and solidarity with migrants (Messing and Ságvári 2018, p. 24).

Conversely, migrants may also serve as a target to express all kinds of fears regarding one’s own livelihood. Thus, the (real or perceived) effects of immigration such as a competition for social services or resources in times of neoliberalisation may cause xenophobic reactions to migrants (Glorius 2018, pp. 9–10, see also Meuleman et al. 2020). There is also evidence in the ESS of an increased polarisation within societies comparing the results of 2002 and 2014. Particularly striking is the fact that an increased proportion of European publics felt that no migrants should be allowed to come from poorer countries outside Europe, while at the same time there was also an increase in the proportion of those who felt that many such migrants should be allowed entry (ESS 2016). The increase in polarisation was



most pronounced in many Western European countries that experienced large increases in migration since 2002, such as Austria, Finland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK, but also some Eastern European countries with rather low immigration levels (Poland, Slovenia). Furthermore, the age and education of the respondents played a key role: the older and low educated displayed the most critical views towards immigration, while the younger and highly educated were more favourable to immigration (ESS 2016, see also Heath and Richards 2020; Duffy 2014).

As these results from opinion polls suggest, opinions are shaped by how migration is perceived. These opinions may change over time and are not necessarily connected to actual changes in the number of migrants living in or arriving in one's country. The perception of immigration is related to how the political issues and public debates on migration are framed, and research indicates that this framing varies considerably between different countries (e.g. Freeman et al. 2013). Based on an analysis of the ESS data, Heath and colleagues (2020, p. 479) conclude that there are "[...] several different sorts of European publics, depending on each country's history of immigration and emigration, as well as on the nature of the integration policies which governments have pursued, the normative signals which these provide, the political context and the strength of far-right parties". Finally, in her analysis of the state-of-the-art research on public attitudes, media and political discourse towards asylum seekers and refugees, Consterdine (2018, p. 7) concludes that there are a number of issues of which there is a relative consensus within this heterogeneous research field. First, the perception of migrants and the overestimation of migrant stocks and flows, including the speed of ethnic change resulting from incoming migrants, determine individual attitudes towards immigration. Second, there is evidence to support contact theory: there is a positive correlation between immigrant contact and permissiveness towards immigration. Thirdly, there is an overwhelming consensus that the level of education attainment shapes attitudes towards immigration, i.e. those with higher education tend to see this phenomenon more favourably. Fourthly, even though many public opinion surveys do not differentiate between migrant types or origin countries, there is evidence to show that public attitudes are differentiated depending on the type of migrant both in terms of ethnicity and nationality as well as the reason of migration.

### 16.3 Media Reports on the "European Refugee Crisis"

In the context of the "European refugee crisis", it has been pointed out that the discourse changed over time from an initial humanitarian and emphatic framing towards a hostile or suspicious framing (Consterdine 2018; European Commission 2017). This change is also found in local media reports, although research has found a large regional and country variation in the media coverage of the crisis in 2015 (Berry et al. 2015; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017; Triandafyllidou 2018). Triandafyllidou (2018) has outlined how the "crisis" developed through specific events that were widely reported in media. The pattern of mediatization and politicisation of the "crisis" was highly ideologically charged, and the labelling of the developments as a "crisis" was itself part of this ideological pattern (Krzyzanowski et al. 2018). Analysis of media narratives on both sides of the Mediterranean found that the tone of narration across countries shifted over time from emphatic solidarity and goodwill to migrants fleeing war zones towards negative stereotyping with a focus on threat, terrorism and crime (European Commission 2017). In an overview of the literature on the role of the media, Consterdine (2018, pp. 13–14) finds "that the media's framing of the refugee crisis – often through securitisation or threat themes – is highly significant in forming public attitudes including inducing a sense of panic".

There are a number of interesting studies that highlight the role of the media and focus on the complex relationship between migration and public opinion in different European countries. For example, Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) conducted a cross-national study, which analysed major newspapers in eight European countries, and included also two major Arabic-language newspapers. Their report, which was prepared for the Council of Europe, argues that the European press played a "central role in framing refugee arrivals in 2015 as a crisis for Europe—new arrivals were seen as outsiders and

different from Europeans” (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017, p. 3). Secondly, the authors found significant differences among countries, especially between the west and the east of Europe, and between media in receiving and non-receiving countries. There was also a change over time, with sympathetic and empathetic frames in the early stages of the crisis gradually being replaced with suspicion and even hostility. Furthermore, the study found that refugees and migrants had limited agency and no voice in the press, and the media paid little attention to the context of the refugee plight, for example, or on the situation in the refugee’s countries of origin.

The UNHCR commissioned a report on media coverage in Spain, Italy, Germany, the UK and Sweden already at an early stage of the crisis (Berry et al. 2015). The initial observation was that the term “refugee” was used far more frequently in Germany and Sweden, while the other countries predominantly discussed the crisis in terms of arrival of “migrants”. There was also a wide difference in the themes covered by the media reports in different countries. For example, the study found that humanitarian themes were more common in the Italian press than in the British, German or Spanish press. The Swedish press was the most positive towards refugees, in contrast to the studied British media, which was found to be the most negative and polarised (Berry et al. 2015, p. 1). Corbu et al. (2017) analysed Romanian online news articles during the crisis with 21 keywords. They demonstrate that online media mainly referred to the crisis in terms of accountability, and more specifically firstly responsibility and secondly conflict. Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) used computer-assisted analysis to identify the dominant frames of the 2015 crisis in six Austrian newspapers. Their finding was that in addition to the focus on the administrative aspects of coping with the arrivals, the established narratives of security threat and economisation were the most prominent, while less attention was paid on humanitarianism frames or providing background information on the refugees’ situation. During the most intense phases of the crisis, the framing patterns of tabloid and quality media became highly similar, thus confirming the predominance of stereotyped interpretations of refugee and asylum issues in both media types (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017).

Even though the link between media and public opinion is a complex and multifaceted one, there is clear evidence in the literature that when the media portrays migrants as a security threat or a problem, it fosters negative public attitudes towards immigrants. News media and social media are natural sources of information about migration and migrants for many people, who do not necessarily encounter migrants in their everyday lives. Stories, images, narratives and media coverage provides raw materials from which people generate their own ideas and thoughts about who immigrants are and what they do (Allen et al. 2019, p. 51). Thus, the media has the power to correct or reinforce individual misperceptions and stereotypes about migrants and refugees (Ruhs et al. 2019, p. 6). Journalists and newspapers can, therefore, influence the public by producing their own discourses or reshaping the existing ones on a given topic. For example, the use of metaphors linked with water, an elemental force that is difficult to contain, or portraying migrants as of an out-of-control mass or potential invaders, generates a negative frame and a threatening context for the topic of migration (Baker and McEnergy 2005).

The media presentations of the “crisis” changed over time and varied across European countries that all had different geopolitical situations, ongoing societal debates, economic challenges, asylum policies, as well as distinct histories as countries receiving migrants and refugees from abroad. Under conditions such as those present during the “refugee crisis”, the politicization of a topic like migration is time and space specific, and hence there are differences in how the politicians, media and the public reacted to the situation in the various EU member states (Consterdine 2018, p. 4). The following section will utilise data from the Eurobarometer polls to outline some examples of these differences.

#### 16.4 Data on Public Opinion: The Eurobarometer

In this chapter, the Eurobarometer is used as the key indicator of public opinion on migration in Europe. It is an opinion poll coordinated by the European Commission, which has been conducted in EU member states since the 1970s. The opinion poll is based on standardised interviews that largely focus on

opinions towards European institutions and EU policies. The interviews are conducted two times a year, each time with a new sample. The Eurobarometer has in recent years included questions that ask about feelings for immigration and the measures that should be taken in relation to immigration, which makes it possible to use the Eurobarometer data to reflect changes in public opinion during the refugee crisis of 2015. Thus, we now highlight a number of findings from the Eurobarometer covering this period (11/2014–3/2018). Regardless of the year of the study, a clear result of the Eurobarometer is that the respondents have a more positive feeling about intra-EU migration among the member states, than immigration into the EU from third countries (cf. Kessler and Freeman 2005). On average, the positive response for intra-EU migration has also increased from 2015 to 2017. While about two thirds of the respondents in EU member states are positive about immigration within the EU, only one third is equally positive about immigration from outside the EU (cf. Glorius 2018).

The Eurobarometer (11/2014–3/2018) has also included questions related to migration policies, whether one's country should help refugees, one's perception on irregular migration to the EU, and an assessment of European policy developments on migration. Regarding the response to the question "Our country should help refugees", the data reveals that a majority in Europe feel a sense of national responsibility to help refugees. Yet, the Eurobarometer shows a clear difference between member states in the percentage of respondents that agree with that claim. In the northern and western parts of the EU, an overwhelming majority agrees, while only a minority does so in some countries in eastern and southern Europe (cf. Simonovits and Bernát 2016). Still, on average, the response to this issue is rather stable and does not differ very much between 2015 and 2017 (Glorius 2018, p. 20).

Even stronger than the opinion that refugees should be helped is the opinion that additional measures need to be taken to fight illegal migration to Europe. Almost 90% of all respondents in both 2015 and 2017 share this opinion, and among them, around two thirds see the responsibility at the EU level or both EU and national levels, while around 20% see this more as a national issue (Glorius 2018, p. 21). However, the opinion concerning a common European policy on migration is not quite as positive. The support ranges from 39 to 86% in different countries, but, as illustrated in Fig. 16.1, which shows the changes in selected European countries, there are only minor, mostly single-digit changes within the countries between 11/2014 and 03/2018 (European Commission 2018). Notwithstanding the stable public opinion on common European migration policy during this period, Eurobarometer points to several rapid, country-specific shifts in public opinion concerning the relative importance of immigration on domestic and European political agenda. Considering that some of the major shifts in public opinion are to opposite directions and may coincide with changes in how national media covers the "crisis", it is important to briefly examine them here. Because presenting the data from each of the participating EU28 countries would not be feasible, we selected six member states in different parts of Europe, east and west, north and south. In addition, the figures are also shown for EU28. Each state was impacted by the situation in different ways; Italy (IT) as a country of first-arrival, Hungary (HU) as a transit country and four northern states—Germany (DE), Finland (FI), Sweden (SE) and the United Kingdom (UK)—as countries embodying divergent histories as asylum seeker destinations.



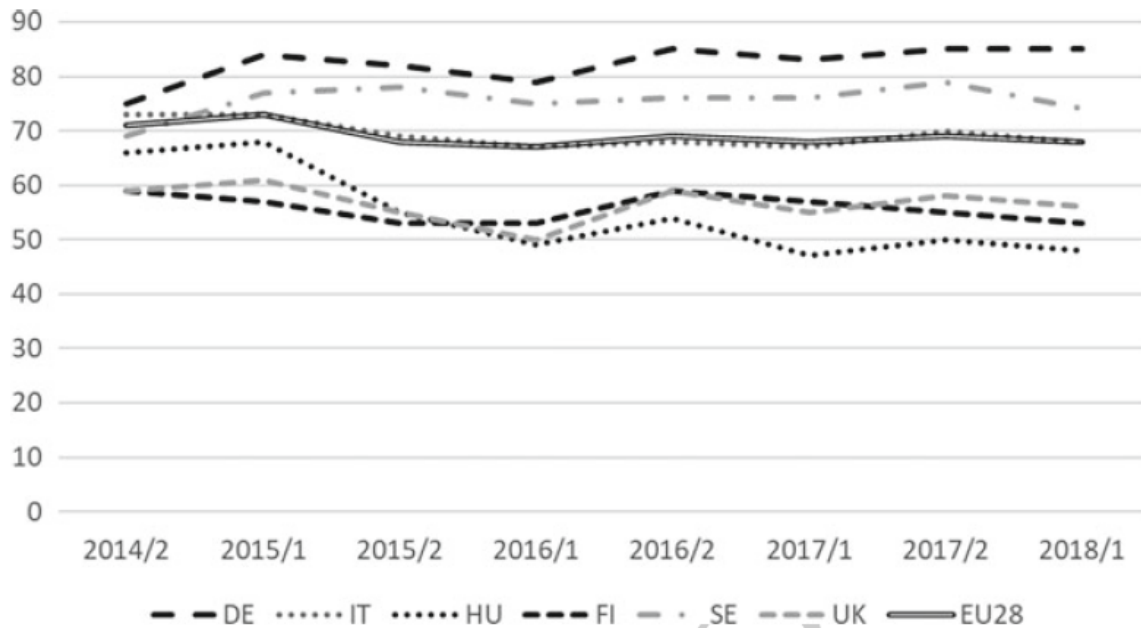
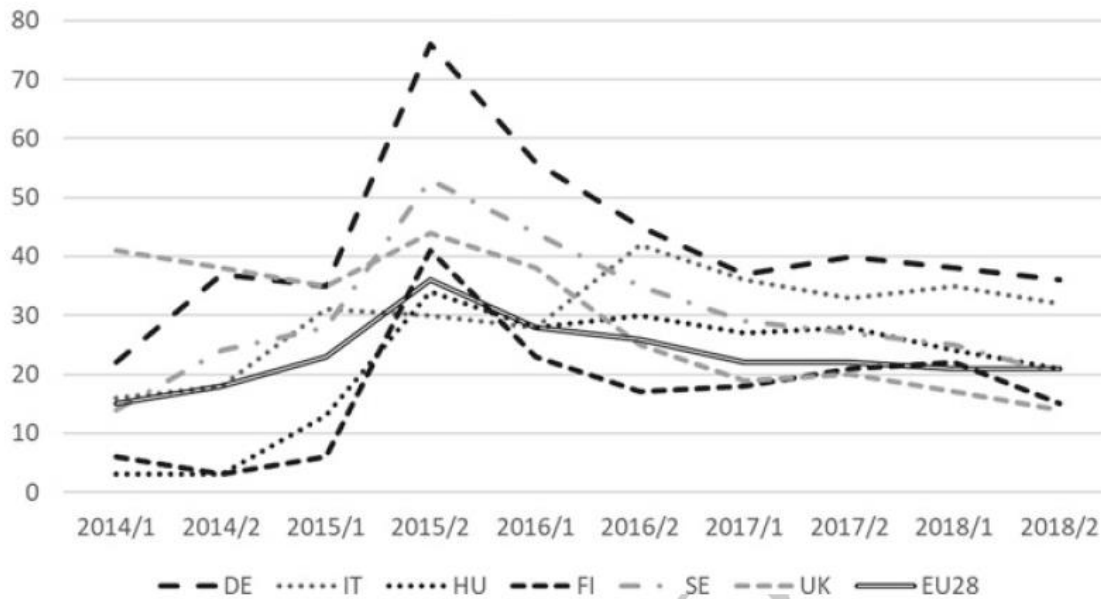


Fig. 16.1 The support (percent) for a common European policy on migration

During the period of observation (11/2015–3/2018), more than one in four (28.9%) of the Eurobarometer respondents in the six-country sample considered immigration a key national concern, a figure slightly higher than the average value in all member states (23.4%). Unlike the support for common EU refugee policy, this concern significantly fluctuated both within individual member states and in EU28. Particularly the second half of the year 2015 – the early stages of what was to be dubbed as “the refugee crisis” – can be identified as distinct, simultaneous peaks in the national concern for immigration (Fig. 16.2). Even so, three countries—Finland, Germany, and Italy—are clearly set apart from the rest of the states by the steepness of the increase (Fig. 16.2). In comparison to the “pre-crisis” levels, when immigration was mentioned as one of the two most important national concern by 6% (FI), 35% (DE), and 31% (IT) of the respondents, in May 2015 the November Eurobarometer reported frequencies of 41, 76, and 30%, respectively. The 41% point change in German public opinion is the greatest measured in absolute terms, partly brought about by the fact that Germany, together with Austria and Sweden, bore the brunt of the emergency as refugees’ final destination country (Triandafyllidou 2018, p. 214). The change, however, can also be linked to at least two specific cases of extensive broadcast media coverage. Both the closure of the Hungarian-Serbian border (on 15 September 2015) and the role adopted by Chancellor Angela Merkel (especially since August 2015) as the vocal protagonist of “the culture of welcome” took place between the May and November 2015 Eurobarometers, contributing to a prolonged sense of acute crisis among the German population (Triandafyllidou 2018, pp. 209–211).



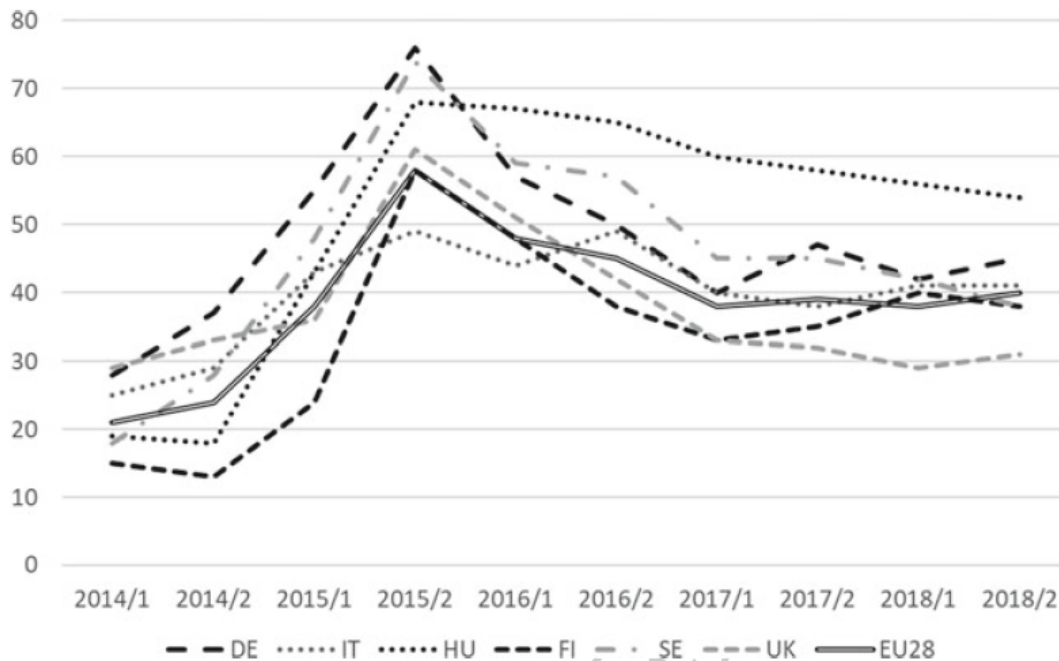
**Fig. 16.2** The frequency (percent) of immigration mentioned as one of the two most important national concerns

In relative terms, the Finnish case of a 35% point shift in public opinion between the two measurements marks a nearly sevenfold increase in the proportion of the population regarding immigration as a key national challenge. Unlike Germany, Finland had received only very few asylum seekers (some 3000 annually) before 2015, the summer of which saw a tenfold increase in this figure (MIGRI 2019). Moreover, the right-wing populist Finns Party had entered the coalition government in May. The party took an active role in politicising the issue of common European asylum policy in national media, making use of the increased saliency of “the immigration question” to the end of forcing Finland to abstain from the crucial vote in the European Council in September (e.g. Wahlbeck 2019). The worry that abstaining may damage “the Finnish reputation in the EU” was covered in all major news outlets for several months between the May and November 2015 Eurobarometer polls (Pyrhönen and Wahlbeck 2018).

The single percentage point change in the Italian public opinion marks a case that is in stark contrast not only with the drastic shift in Finland and Germany but also with regard to the other member states. Indeed, Italy was the only country where the importance of immigration as national concern was declining during this time, albeit very slightly. Unlike most other member states, Italy had received steadily increasing numbers of refugee vessels across the Mediterranean already for several years before 2015, particularly in 2014. Over 800 people drowning in a shipwreck 18 April 2015 brought about particularly intensive national and international media coverage during late April and early May 2015 (Triandafyllidou 2018, p. 214). Against this background of asylum seeking in Italy, the summer between the two consecutive Eurobarometer polls of 2015 (EB83 and EB84), did not manifest itself as particularly different from before, neither in the Italian media reporting nor in the light of number of refugees, both of which remained relatively steady in comparison to the year 2014 (Castelli Gattinara 2017, pp. 323–324).

In comparison to immigration as a national concern, this concern becomes significantly more accentuated within the EU-domain (Fig. 16.3). During the five-year period of observation, 38.8% of all Eurobarometer respondents (42.3% in the six-country sample) mention immigration as one of the two most important EU issues. As the concern for immigration is as much as 15% points higher in the EU-domain than on the national level, it appears that citizens in member states tend to place more hopes and demands on the EU than on their national governments for “resolving the crisis”. In most member

states, the public opinion of immigration as an important EU issue follows a similar temporal pattern of politicisation to immigration as a national concern, most commonly peaking in the second half of the year 2015. After the peak, however, public opinion develops along different trajectories in several of the examined member states. In the following, we will briefly examine the Italian and Hungarian developments in public opinion with regard to the changes in the national level of mediatization.



**Fig. 16.3** The frequency (percent) of immigration mentioned as one of the two most important EU issues

Of the countries studied here, immigration was least commonly mentioned as an important EU issue in Italy, peaking at 49% of the Eurobarometer respondents in November 2015 and 2016. The second peak marks a clear departure from the European pattern. Italy is the only country where the importance of immigration as an EU issue increases among the population during the year 2016, and also the only one where the frequency of this perception peaks after 2015. This can be partially attributed to at least two co-occurring narratives in the national media. Firstly, since the early 2015, the Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi started making appeals to the public where he repeatedly vowed to make refugee crisis one of the key issues on the EU agenda, increasingly demanding “total political solution for the crisis” after the 18 April 2015 shipwreck (Colombo 2018, pp. 7, 14). Secondly, while these appeals were widely covered in the national media, the second peak in Italian public opinion only took place after the “Balkan route” was closed in late 2015. As crossing the central Mediterranean became the asylum seekers’ main route to Europe, the number of casualties close to Italy rose drastically, which was also reflected in the coverage of the national media (Krzyżanowski et al. 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017). The outlier case in the development of public opinion after 2015 can be found in Hungary. The perception of immigration as an important EU issue starts in Hungary as one of the lowest among the member states (19% in the May 2015 Eurobarometer). However, the frequency of this perception among the Hungarian respondents at the end of the timeframe (the November 2018 Eurobarometer) is almost 10% points higher (54%) than in Germany, the country with the second-highest figure (45%). This trajectory of Hungarian public opinion starts diverging from the rest of member states from 2016 onwards, when the importance of immigration as an EU issue generally declines, comparatively at a very slow rate.

In order to address this exceptional development, it is important to note that at the end of the timeframe (November 2018 Eurobarometer), the Hungarian support for a common European refugee policy was the lowest among the countries studied. It is hard to explain these two developments solely on the basis

of the mediatization of the “refugee crisis”. However, taking into account how negatively the EU’s attempts to tackle the crisis were portrayed in the Hungarian media open a more lucid explanatory avenue. Hungarian media outlets – for years largely curtailed by the prime minister Victor Orbán’s right-wing populist, antiimmigration party, Fidesz (Schlippak and Treib 2017, p. 358) – painted a thwarted image of the “refugee crisis” as a scourge generated by the EU’s failed migration and refugee policy (Triandafyllidou 2018, p. 203; Stern 2016, p. 7). The compound narrative effectively suggested that as the problem is created by the EU, Hungary could avoid the worst calamities by staying clear from any joint EU-level policy measures in the field of migration.

## 16.5 Conclusion

The research presented in this chapter shows that public perceptions related to migrants and refugees are impacted by many factors and are time and place dependent. In her analysis based on Eurobarometer data Glorius (2018, pp. 10–11) concludes that hostile or xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants tend to develop in societies where the residents have only few experiences with migrants, where economic and social security systems are unstable and where the levels of interpersonal and institutional trust are low. She concludes that even though migration is perceived as an important issue for the national and European policy level, issues internal to the political situations of the countries in question, such as unemployment and the economic situation and its impact on one’s personal life, are perceived as even more important (Glorius 2018, pp. 18–19). There is a sharp contrast between the attitudes towards immigrants arriving from within the EU and from outside of Europe. While intra-European mobility is considered mostly positively with more than half of respondents across EU member states seeing such migrants in a positive light, the feelings towards migrants from outside Europe are more polarised and mostly negative. Namely, at the EU average, only around one third of respondents express a positive feeling towards immigration from outside the EU (Glorius 2018, pp. 18–19).

It is also necessary to examine immigration in the regional and local context, as the shares of migrants living in each city or municipality vary considerably also within European countries. Thus, the economic and socio-economic characteristics of a particular area play an important role both in the public perception of migration and in the integration possibilities available for migrants via the local labour market, for example. In addition, research has shown that integration outcomes are often different for EU and non-EU foreign-born individuals. Thus, when implementing integration strategies at the grass-root level, the policies should be tailored to the profile of the local migrant community and the specific challenges that the foreign-born population faces. For instance, in regions with high unemployment levels, the perceived competition for jobs between migrants and native-born may contribute to higher levels of anti-migration attitudes, and therefore also make it more difficult for migrants to integrate (OECD 2018, pp. 63–71).

In her analysis of research literature focusing on media and immigration, Consterdine (2018, pp. 12–13) finds a number of consistencies. *Firstly*, the media’s framing of immigration – often through securitisation or threat frames – is highly significant in forming public attitudes. If the chosen frame is securitisation or threat, it may increase anxiety among the public and lead to further politicisation of the issue. *Secondly*, research overwhelmingly finds that migrants are often presented in a negative manner and as a problem (see also Berry et al. 2015; Esses et al. 2013). *Thirdly*, while media reporting tends to conflate all types of migrants, political actors do make distinctions between “genuine” political asylum seekers and so-called bogus economic refugees. *Finally*, the migrants’ voices are rarely heard in the press, while political elites dominate the press coverage and influence the language used. Further, she finds that the empirical studies of media and migration consistently note that the media tends to conflate the terms economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers without making attempt to separate these categories (Consterdine 2018, p. 15).

In recent years, there has been a desire for more evidence-based policy-making in the field of migration and integration policies in many countries. This has been regarded as a way to find solutions to “managing migration” in a way that would also appeal to the public. Yet, in the era of “post-truth politics” the debates related to migration have been especially prone to voices calling into question the role of “experts”, whose opinions are seen to differ from those of the “people”. Ruhs et al. (2019, pp. 2–3) stress that there are many reasons why research data and facts may play a relatively minor role in public debates and policy-making on migration and integration. They suggest that a triangular relationship exists between research, public debates, and policies. The media frames migration-related stories in a particular way, but members of the public also influence the media as consumers, who are free to choose the kind of content they are interested in reading and sharing via social media. Debates in policy circles can stimulate media to focus on particular issues, which, in turn, generates further public discussions and may also impact the selection of topics in migration research (Ruhs et al. 2019; Allen et al. 2019; see also Scholten 2018).

The relationship between the media and public opinion is not straight forward, but it is clear that the mainstream media in each European country plays a major role in setting the agenda for discussion on migration by framing stories in a particular way and selecting the kinds of topics that are considered newsworthy. Allen et al. (2019, p. 52) conclude that media coverage on migration influences public opinion and perception in at least two ways: *first*, negative coverage is associated with negative attitudes towards migrants and *second*, the content produced and shared can shape public understanding of what immigration is and who immigrants are. Thus, as it clearly has an impact on public perception on migration related topics, portraying a balanced view would be of public interest. For policymakers, it is also important to understand the local context, so as to evaluate what measures can reduce the potential mistrust felt towards migrants and increase trust and co-operation. When the public view on migration is examined at the sub-national level, findings suggest that the economic conditions of the native-born residents are highly relevant for their attitudes towards migrants, even more so than the actual economic contribution made by the migrants in the region. In addition, regions with a higher concentration of migrants tend to have more positive views on migration, suggesting the development of a “diversity culture” that builds over time and shows that diversity can be an enriching contribution to the area (OECD 2018, p. 72).

How a balanced view could be promoted remains a challenge as any emerging news story can start dominating and framing also future discussions on migration. Good examples of this in recent years are the reporting of the death of the 3-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi on a beach in Turkey in September 2015 (e.g. *The Guardian* 2015; *Frankfurter Allgemeine* 2015) and the alleged sexual assaults of women by groups of foreign men during the 2016 New Year’s Eve celebrations in Germany (e.g. *The Guardian* 2016; *Frankfurter Allgemeine* 2016). While the former generated a wave of sympathy for those risking their lives to reach safety in Europe, the latter portrayed those arriving as a threat to autochthonous Europeans. Of course, altering dominant news-framing practices remains a notoriously elusive endeavour for any researchers, experts and policy makers aspiring to participate in public debate. However, by providing correct statistical information, stressing the diversity of migration patterns in contemporary Europe and taking part in media and public discussions on migration, it is possible to paint a picture of migration that escapes the negative, black-and-white imagery, and instead captures the shades of grey for the public to consider.



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