

## IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE

### Image of Immigrants in Media: Thought-provoking Effects

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## IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE

Image of Immigrants in Media: Thought-provoking Effects

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## FINAL REPORT

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## **ABSTRACT**

### ***English***

The topic of migration has become particularly contentious in national as well as international debates. Media have a discernable impact on overall societal attitudes towards this phenomenon. Polls show time and again that immigration is one of the main issues occupying people's minds. IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE (*Images of Immigrants in the Media: Thought-provoking*) examines the dynamic interplay between media representations of immigrants and refugees on the one hand, and the governmental and societal (re)actions to these on the other hand. Largely focusing on Belgium and Sweden, our interdisciplinary research attempts to unravel the determinants of people's preferences regarding migration policy, expectations towards immigrants, and economic, humanitarian and cultural concerns about immigration's effect on the life of the majority population. Whilst immigrants and refugees remain voiceless and highly underrepresented in the legacy media, IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE allows their voices to be heard.

### ***Dutch***

Migratie is en blijft een controversieel topic in zowel nationale als internationale debatten. Media hebben een waarneembare invloed op de maatschappelijke houding ten opzichte van migratie en het vluchtelingendebat. Peilingen laten keer op keer zien dat immigratie een van de belangrijkste problemen is die mensen bezighouden. IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE (*Images of Immigrants in the Media: Thought-provoking*) onderzoekt het dynamische samenspel tussen mediarepresentaties van immigranten en vluchtelingen enerzijds en de overheids- en maatschappelijke acties en reacties hierop anderzijds. Ons interdisciplinair onderzoek richt zich voornamelijk op België en Zweden en probeert de determinanten te achterhalen van de voorkeuren van mensen met betrekking tot migratiebeleid, evenals de verwachtingen ten aanzien van immigranten en de economische, humanitaire en culturele bekommernissen over het effect van immigratie op het leven van de meerderheid van de bevolking. Terwijl de stem van immigranten en vluchtelingen nauwelijks gehoord wordt in de media, geeft IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE hen in dit onderzoek wel een stem.

### ***French***

Le thème de la migration est devenu particulièrement controversé dans les débats nationaux et internationaux. Les médias ont un impact perceptible sur les attitudes générales de la société à l'égard de ce phénomène. Les sondages montrent à maintes reprises que l'immigration est l'un des principaux problèmes qui préoccupent les gens. IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE (*Images of Immigrants in the Media: Thought-provocation*) examine l'interaction dynamique entre les représentations médiatiques des immigrants et des réfugiés, d'une part, et les actions et réactions gouvernementales et sociétales à cet égard, d'autre part. Se concentrant principalement sur la Belgique et la Suède, nos recherches interdisciplinaires tentent de découvrir les déterminants des préférences des gens en matière de politique migratoire, les attentes envers les immigrants et les préoccupations économiques, humanitaires et culturelles concernant les effets de l'immigration sur la vie de la population majoritaire. Alors que les immigrants et les réfugiés restent sans voix et très sous-représentés dans les médias traditionnels, IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE permet à leurs voix de se faire entendre.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Governments, news media and public opinion in Europe are increasingly preoccupied with refugees seeking access to Western Europe. Public opinion is divided and mainly negative as well as often un- or misinformed, and integration policies can often not respond to the needs (see e.g., MIPEX, 2015). IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE investigates the dynamic interplay between media representations of the current non-EU immigrant situation with a specific emphasis on the refugee situation on the one hand, and the governmental and societal actions and reactions on the other hand.

It was IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE's ultimate goal to inventory the multiple public, policy and media voices heard in Belgium on the refugee issue, while learning from practices abroad (mainly focusing on Sweden as world's best practice regarding migration and integration policy). Another project goal was to formulate policy recommendations towards a more encouraging integration policy, while lowering anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment. Therefore IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE combines four complementary multi-stakeholder group perspectives: 1) analysis of news media content, journalistic roles and news culture; 2) analysis of societal actions and reactions of the general public; 3) analysis of push and pull factors in migration from a refugee perspective; and 4) policy analysis with recommendations towards policy makers, journalists, and media producers.

To study the interplay and the potential pivotal role of media in this refugee situation, IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE compared the news media representations of non-EU immigrants with a particular emphasis on refugees in Belgium (both Dutch- and French speaking) and in Sweden. By their news selection, gatekeeping and (re)presentation of the situation and the individuals involved, news media can choose to either connect people or to sharpen differences by stressing 'otherness'. The framing and reconstruction of everyday reality can shape public opinion in terms of evaluation of the present situation and the necessity of action, appropriate policy initiatives and solutions. IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE analyzed both audiovisual and online news media; both verbal and visual content. In addition, qualitative in-depth interviews with journalists served as a reflective feedback loop complementing the findings of the content analysis. Next to these interviews, we added comparisons with available cross-country data on the professional culture of journalism from the Worlds of Journalism project being influential in the media framing of immigrants with a focus on refugees.

To assess the public opinion on non-EU immigrants and refugees, the IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE team conducted surveys among a representative sample of majority adults (aged 18-65) as well as adolescents (aged 15-18) in the regions under study. To investigate potential links between the news media content and public opinion on the refugee situation, an experimental research design was set up. News stories typical for the various news frames on refugees, based on the content analysis results (e.g., De Cock et al., 2018; Joris et al., 2018), were transformed into experimental material containing the six dominant news frames as well as a control condition, so as to test the potential effects of different framing on the public' mental pictures.

Next to the content analysis and the public opinion survey, IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE collected data among refugees in Belgium to inductively construct their views on Belgium and Europe, and to explore their motivations for choosing this country as destination to settle permanently or provisionally towards a new future. We also focused on the role of mobile devices and online social networks. Based on the proportionate number of first-time applicants for international protection in the EU (Eurostat, 2018a), we interviewed refugees coming from the following countries of origin: Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq

(i.e., the three largest groups of refugees since the summer of 2015). Given the societal context of the study, urgent issues related to religion received significant attention, including questions of perceived Islamophobia and the potential of faith-based group identities.

A cross-country policy analysis based on available data with an emphasis on the countries under study sheds extra light on the different approaches, successes and failures in the local refugee and non-EU immigration approach, reflections in media content and public opinion as part of the multi-dimensional approach of the topic (media studies, anthropology, sociology/demography, and policy studies).

### **Focus on Belgium and comparison with Sweden**

The strong increase in applications for international protection in Belgium since 2015 requires looking at good practices and long-term approaches. While population figures are rather comparable (approximately 9.9 million Swedes versus 11 million Belgians), Belgium and Sweden greatly differ in terms of migration policy and integration indicators (e.g., MIPEX, 2015). IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE's focus on Belgium and Sweden does not seek to extrapolate generalizations. By showing significant differences between these two European countries of similar population size, the study signals the potential magnitude of differences within Europe. Both countries are also faced with a different reality when it comes to the actual number of incoming refugees and immigrants. For Belgium, this meant an increase in 2015 of 178% compared to 2014 (38,990 applications), for Sweden a rise of 108% (156,110 applications). Both countries also differ as to their public opinion. Sweden (62%) is one of the EU28 countries in which a clear majority of inhabitants have positive feelings about non-EU immigrants (European Commission, 2018). In contrast, the Belgian population (43%) is less positive towards non-EU immigrants. Furthermore, Sweden is the European country par excellence, with a generous welcoming policy, a long history of tolerance and openness, and the highest score on the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). The 2015 MIPEX is a tool created to cover eight policy areas based on 167 policy indicators which map out a migrant's trajectory towards full citizenship in all European Union countries as well as several others. We will use the scores from both countries in this study to compare government policy with individual attitudes towards refugees. These policies cover labour market mobility, family reunion, education, health, political participation, permanent residence, access to nationality, and anti-discrimination. With its 78 percent score Sweden is at the top of the MIPEX list, which compares 38 countries. Belgium ranks seventh with a 67 percent score. These migration and integration policies often remain key obstacles for immigrants and refugees keen to participate in economic, social as well as democratic life. The EU migrant integration indicators (Eurostat, 2018b) also clearly show that Sweden does considerably better than Belgium in most respect. For example, policy in Sweden results into higher activity rates among immigrants (i.e. non-EU citizens by birth) (Sweden: 77.0%; Belgium: 60.3%) and fewer immigrants at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Sweden: 40.8%; Belgium: 52.6%). Sweden's policy with respect to media depictions and public opinion building are essential input for Belgian policy makers as well as media makers, helping them do what is possible and/or needed to guarantee equal access and opportunities to the refugees (e.g., in terms of targeted employment, education and health support). Ultimately higher public trust levels should be gained and media workers should be inspired to produce less biased news.

### **IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE's research team**

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## **2. IMAGES OF IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN WESTERN EUROPE**

Europe has always been a continent of migration. However, the numbers of refugees who entered the EU reached an all-time high in 2015 and 2016 and have remained elevated ever since. In 2015 the European Union received more than 1.3 million applications for international protection—which was more than double the amount of the previous year (Eurostat, 2018a). In 2016 more than 1.2 million applicants for international protection entered the EU. In 2017 the number of applications (705,705) started to decline.

The current refugee issue has turned on its head our complacent view of migration owing to the sheer numbers of people fleeing across the Mediterranean Sea or through Southeast Europe, seeking shelter in EU member states. Most immigrants entering Europe from the South are political refugees fleeing war or persecution in their home countries. The top three origins of applicants are countries in an ongoing state of civil war, i.e. Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Eurostat, 2018a). In addition, most 'economic migrants' come from parts of Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe in search of a better life (Park, 2015). Most applicants are male: 72% in 2015; 68% in 2016; and 67% in 2017 (Eurostat, 2018a).

Given the dual nature of this migration wave, the European Union and its citizens have been of two minds over the issue, depending on the moment in time and the country (e.g., its absorption capacity and its government's political hue). Many countries in (Western) Europe have been hesitant or unwilling to take refugees in and to provide them with protection, employment, education and/or permanent residence. Moreover, the overlapping grey areas in the categorization of migrants made it even more difficult for policy makers in the EU member states to take a clear stance with regard to refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a refugee is "any person forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence" (UNHCR, 2018).

European governments, news media makers as well as public opinion have been increasingly preoccupied with immigrants and refugees seeking access to Europe. Highly interconnected with political agendas and audience perceptions, media depictions affect the public perceptions of immigrants as well as integration and migration policies (e.g., Entman, 1993; Orgad, 2012). Public opinion is divided – if not (rather) negative – and often uninformed or misinformed, while policies and politicians seem ineffectual when not downright hostile. Since 2015 Europeans have been struggling with the question regarding the number and origin of immigrants we are willing to welcome in their welfare states. Recent studies have shown that the public opinion regarding immigrants and refugees



is rather negative (e.g., De Coninck et al., 2018). This could be, among others, due to the representation of immigrants and refugees in news media.

Undoubtedly, migration is a complex matter: perceptions of it are fraught with emotions, and it involves both national and international rules (d’Haenens & Joris, 2019). Therefore, no simple solutions are present. The actors in this complex interplay are not only the immigrants and refugees, governments and NGOs, but also people smugglers. Hence, solutions need to be creative and multifaceted. The social, political, economic and cultural contexts are so diverse across Europe, as are the nature and magnitude of immigration, that no one-size-fits-all analysis can possibly grasp such a complex issue at the level of the continent. Although progress has been made since the peak in applications for international protection in 2015, the fault lines within Europe have so far not permitted any revision of the Dublin Regulation, which was never meant to cope with these enormous numbers of immigrants.

Analyzing the image of immigrants and refugees is essential to untangle the nexus of perceptions and attitudes towards ‘the other’ and ‘alterity’ in general. By combining a study of representation in the media and among the population (including the voice of the refugees), complemented with a study with journalists, IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE provides a set of facts in order to better understand how immigration can shape public opinion, politics and policy. Such understanding is relevant to know how political tensions surrounding the refugee issue develop and how it puts national or European identities and cultures at risk.

### **Qualitative and quantitative news media content analysis**

The first part of our interdisciplinary project consisted of content analyses, examining the cross-cultural differences between Belgium and Sweden. We analyzed Belgian and Swedish **newspapers as well as television news coverage** in both countries.

**Newspapers.** Based on the content analysis of 1,832 news articles published in six newspapers over 11 periods based on major events, IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE identified the most important themes in Belgium and Sweden between 2015 and 2017 regarding the refugee situation. The study was divided into 11 periods spanning between 21 March 2015 and 4 July 2017. Period 1 runs from 21 March to 4 April 2015. The idea here was to look at a period predating the summer of 2015 (i.e. the start of the refugee situation under study). Period 2 runs from 24 August to 20 September 2015, which encompasses the appearance of refugee camps in Brussels’ Maximilian Park, the drowning of Alan Kurdi, and German chancellor Angela Merkel’s “Wir schaffen das”. Period 3 was the week in which European leaders reached an agreement on the settlement of refugees in the various EU member states (i.e. 21-27 September 2015). Period 4 runs from 7 October to 6 November 2015 (the start of the resettlement in other EU member states of refugees having entered the EU through Greece and Italy). The fifth period revolves around the Cologne incident (1-7 January 2016), in which many women were sexually assaulted during the German city’s New Year’s Eve celebrations. In the news media, this incident was linked by officials to immigrants and refugees. In period 6 (17-23 March 2016) a controversial agreement was struck between the EU and Turkey, under which Turkey would prevent immigrants and refugees from entering the EU in exchange for the cash needed to shelter them in Turkish camps combined with more comfortable visa rules for Turkish citizens. The seventh period is that of the

Olympic Games (5-22 August 2016), with a refugee team entering the competition. Period 8 includes the Hungarian referendum (2-9 October 2016), which asked the following question: *“Do you want the European Union to be entitled to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of Parliament?”*, resulting in a rejection by the voters. Period 9 (17-30 October 2016) is that of the compulsory dismantlement of the refugee camp in Calais, France. Period 10 (7-13 March 2017) corresponds to the adoption by the Hungarian Parliament of a law making it possible to detain asylum seekers upon arrival. Period 11 runs from 28 June to 4 July 2017, when Italy considered closing its ports to NGO ships (more information: De Cock et al, 2018; 2019).

The results of our content analysis of newspapers show that as far as the refugee situation is concerned, any comparison of Belgian news coverage with foreign press coverage needs to distinguish between Belgium’s two news media landscapes. When significant differences between Sweden and Belgium emerge, they often interact with regional differences within Belgian representations of the refugee issue. The hypothesis that the Swedish press would stress more the positive sides of the political dimension of welcoming refugees was rejected owing to a high degree of attention to positive news in the French-language items in Belgium, which is not so much the case in the Flemish press. More proof of a split approach in Belgium can be found in the confirmation of hypothesis that the Belgian press would make more frequent mentions of religion than does its Swedish counterpart. In the Flemish corpus of the content analysis mentions of the immigrants’ Islamic background are more common. In addition, the correlation between Islam and threat-related news items was significant in the Flemish and Swedish newspapers, but not in the French-language corpus. Similarly, immigration levels were expected to be mentioned more often in the Belgian press. Again, this was confirmed only as a result of the French-language news coverage. Our study shows that cultural value patterns and variations in journalistic values as demonstrated by the Worlds of Journalism research do result in a different approach as reflected in newspaper items on refugees. A higher tolerance score among French-language journalists as compared to their Flemish colleagues is echoed by a more tolerant representation in the French-language newspapers.

The hypothesis expecting more attention to female refugees in the Swedish newspapers than in the Belgian ones is confirmed. Since Swedish journalists seem more willing to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, we hypothesized that they would dwell less on ‘threats’. This is also confirmed by our data. Furthermore, mentions of the refugees’ educational and occupational background did not significantly differ between the Swedish and the Belgian news stories.

Our data clearly confirm the lack of voice given to the immigrants and refugees in the news coverage. As was hypothesized, individual immigrants spark more positive reactions, but individualized portrayal is scarce in the items studied. Use of positive themes and avoidance of negative themes go together with more individualization, confirming the person-positivity hypothesis. This hypothesis particularly holds true in Sweden, although the Swedish newspapers mainly portray migrants as a collectivity along the same line as the Belgian newspapers.

Other actors, especially politicians, are quoted and paraphrased much more frequently in the newspapers under study. This confirms the findings of previous research on refugee coverage (e.g., Philo et al., 2013). While the primary focus on either positive or negative themes might vary depending on the particular time frame and situation, this lack of voice appears to be consistent and warrants

more attention from news media professionals in order to improve minority empowerment and foster news diversity.

**Television news.** Within the project of IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE, we also sampled television news from the refugee crisis during the eleven periods between 2015-2017 (see above). We collected and quantitatively analyzed a sample of 1,682 evening TV news items stemming from Sweden (SVT as public service channel and TV4 as commercial channel) and Belgium (the Dutch-speaking part Flanders: VRT (public service channel) and VTM (commercial channel); and the French-speaking part: RTBF La Une (public) and RTL-TVI (commercial channel). Within Belgium, the comparison between the main public service channel and the main commercial channel revealed some small (not significant) differences (e.g., fewer but longer news items on public service channel, and more focus on emotions on the commercial channel), but mainly similarities (more information: e.g., Mistiaen, 2019).

Furthermore, we focused on two elements of constructive journalism (solutions and progress) and we have looked at them especially in relation to time periods and collectivization/individualization of news. The data shows differences between the appearance of constructive journalism elements in Belgium and Sweden. There is probably not one clean-cut explanation for these differences. The situation of the refugee crisis was different in Sweden and Belgium, and that must be taken into the consideration of how constructive journalism was emphasized in the news reporting. We identified that the constructive journalism elements vary between the different time periods. However, we can also see how the patterns of constructive journalism are similar in the two countries under study. It is obvious that there is more emphasis on solutions or progresses in the news items if the refugee situation has been reported from a collective view. This pattern will consist even if the data is divided into the two countries. Journalists seem to look for collective solutions instead of solutions for individuals, which is understandable from a general interest point of view.

### **Journalistic roles and news cultures**

The second part of the IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE project focused on journalistic roles and news cultures. We developed a **quantitative as well as a qualitative assessment of Belgian and Swedish journalism cultures**, focusing especially on refugee reporting.

**Quantitative analysis of existing databases.** IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE explored the interrelationships between data on policy, public opinion, cultural values and journalistic cultures in an effort to integrate databases that were hitherto only studied separately. We mainly focused on the journalistic cultures in Belgium and Sweden. The databases used are the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), the World Values Survey (WVS), and the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS). Trying to identify regional clusters showing some convergence in interventionist journalism culture promoting tolerance in various contexts of public opinion and policy, only reveals more signs of multidimensional diversity as the clusters of countries vary in shape and size depending on the variables under consideration (see e.g., Mertens et al., 2019). Unexpectedly, countries where journalism culture substantially promotes tolerance tend to display less emancipative values and migrant friendly policies.

The main conclusion is that, contrary to what we expected, countries with a higher focus on promoting tolerance in journalism cultures have less emancipative values and migrant-friendly policies. Promoting tolerance is a value in countries where journalistic culture is interventionist, and hence opposed to the values in policy (as measured by MIPEX) and society (as measured by the WVS). Our results indicate that journalists in countries without a clear migrant integration policy seem to consider it as their explicit task to counterbalance the main policy line set out in their home country when it comes to immigration and openness.

Interventionism can also be viewed as a will to actively promote some civic values among the public opinion. This refers to the 'opinion guide' role that journalists take on when political or social issues are being strongly debated. During the 2015 migration crisis certain media outlets adopted a welcoming tone towards refugees and tried to counter negative perceptions and stereotypes. Recent research shows that this is far from clear: the UNHCR report on press coverage of the refugee crisis in Europe shows that in many countries refugees have been presented in a negative light, primarily as a problem, and not as a resource that could benefit the receiving country (e.g., Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015).

Moving on to the results of our cluster analyses, Sweden typifies countries with both a tolerance-oriented journalism culture and strongly tolerance-oriented policies and public opinion. However, Sweden has a journalistic workforce that does not adhere to interventionist ideals (more information: Mertens et al., 2019).

***Qualitative analysis of journalists' perceptions on refugee coverage.*** Furthermore, we explored and compared journalists' self-reported strategies while covering the refugee situation in three different cultural contexts. We conducted 30 in-depth interviews with experienced journalists: 10 in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, 10 in the French speaking part of Belgium, and 10 in Sweden. The interviews were coded accordingly to qualitative traditions (open coding, axial coding and selective coding).

Our findings revolve around three central clusters. First, we focused on the different objectives of the journalists. Second, we addressed the distance and position of the journalists in their reporting. Third, we concentrated on the difficulties encountered by the reporters: we distinguish between the political and social sensitivity of the topic, the tense relationship with NGOs and the government, as well as the language barrier. Overall, the findings confirm our earlier content analysis study. Our analysis of the data proves that Flemish journalists are particularly different from the Swedish journalists, because critical and educative role perceptions tend to be weaker in Flanders than in French-speaking Belgium and certainly far from being as strong as in Sweden. Particularly Flemish journalists feel the pressure of right-wing politics, while French-speaking Belgian journalists and Swedish journalists often have opinions closer to those of human rights activists. In summary, journalism finds itself in a twisted position when it comes to the reporting of refugees caught between left-wing and right-wing opinions in politics and public opinion.

### **Public opinion surveys**

Furthermore, IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE explored the ways refugees are being received by the general populations as well as the perceptions of the people surrounding the resettlement of Syrians in Belgium and

Sweden. We compared the attitudes of the public as well as the determinants (i.e., individual-level opinions and macro-level social and economic factors) that may be shaping these attitudes. The literature on surveys of attitudes towards migrants and refugees tends to demonstrate that individual-level variables are the most important factors explaining negative or positive reception of refugees. In particular, age, occupation, education, and income levels are important. In general, the younger, more educated, and more professional respondents tend to be more accepting.

For contextualization purposes we brought together selected evidence of opposing sentiments regarding the notion of accepting large numbers of refugees in a variety of countries as reported through polling results as well as motives behind this hesitancy or unwillingness to share one's country with immigrants or refugees. In a 2015 global survey on immigration attitudes conducted by Gallup for the International Organization for Migration, 52% of respondents across Europe stated that the number of immigrants should be reduced in their countries (Esipova et al., 2015). Eurobarometer results (EB 85, fieldwork May 2016) show that immigration is the main concern at the European level according to 48% of Europeans, followed by terrorism and the economic situation (European Commission, 2016). This indicates a rapid change in public perception, as immigration was only ranked fourth on the concern list in 2014. In the EU28 countries a majority of respondents (58%) have a negative feeling about immigration of people from outside the EU. Several studies reveal an increase in negative attitudes toward refugees in EU countries. While such attitudes may have been relatively favorable at the start of the crisis, they grew more negative with increased numbers, demands for increased resources to assist the refugees, and increased perceived economic and cultural threats.

To explore associations between individuals' news media consumption and trust, and public opinion on immigrants and refugees in Belgium and Sweden, we fielded an online survey to adults aged 18 to 65 in Belgium and Sweden. The survey was fielded for three weeks in September and October of 2017, at which point a sample size of 3,000 respondents (1,500 per country) was reached. We cooperated with iVOX, a Belgium-based survey organization with a strong presence in Belgium and Sweden, to gather these data. The response rate was about 35%, and the data were weighted by gender and age to ensure representativity for these characteristics within each country. The survey was distributed via the survey agency's own tool, and in the official language of the country or region (either Dutch, French, or Swedish) that respondents resided in. Translations of the survey were carried out by professional translators, ensuring that the terminology used in the questions is considered 'everyday language' by the respondents.

IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE has outlined the association between news media consumption and trust, and public opinion on immigrants and refugees in Belgium and Sweden. News media consumption and trust were identified as two important elements that influence public opinion, while the subjective importance of the migration theme and direct intergroup contact were expected to have a mediating effect. Our findings point to a larger influence of media consumption on public opinion in Belgium than in Sweden, while the reverse is found for media trust. The importance of the migration theme is only marginally related to attitudes but having direct contact with people with a migration background is proven to affect both attitudes in a positive way in both Belgium and Sweden (more findings, see e.g., De Coninck, 2019; De Coninck et al., 2018; 2019; 2020).

### **The effects of frames on these attitudes**

In a survey experiment among the general public between 18 and 65-year-olds in Flanders (Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) ( $N = 1,400$ ), we analyzed the possible effects of a set of commonly used and peripheral, atypical news frames on individuals' opinions and attitudes on refugees.

An overall direct effect on attitudes towards refugees in the same direction as suggested by the frame was not found. Only two of the statements or questions of the survey experiment proved to be significantly differently received across the framing conditions. A possible explanation for this result might be related to the continued year after year exposure of the participants to mostly negative news coverage on refugees. News consumption is only one factor in the complex attitude formation process, but repeated exposure to negative framing of refugees on the long term are difficult to counter by other frames offered in a short-term experiment as this study. This survey experiment was performed almost three years after the peak of the refugee crisis (summer 2018 versus autumn 2015), which might have influenced the results, since framing effects are less likely to happen on established or long-term topics (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Joris, d'Haenens & Van Gorp, 2019).

In addition, when exposed to a more positively framed story contradicting the viewpoint one is usually exposed to in the media, our results show this has a negative impact on readers' willingness to adopt this atypical frame. Readers fail to believe the story presenting clear economic and cultural benefits of migration and attribute a lower level of credibility to the story. Seen from that angle, non-dominant frames seem to hinder the public's reception of non-mainstream points of view on the refugee issue. This can only be countered by holding an intensive plea for a sustained more diverse news menu and offer of a variety of news angles in investigative journalism pieces, offering other takes and viewpoints than the dominant ones, in an effort to avoid a media-driven spiral of silence feeding a negative public sentiment, irrespective of socio-demographics. Future research therefore must continue to perform long-term content analyses including frame-shift studies combining public opinion and media effects measurement.

Moreover, we found no evidence that individual-level moderators 'awareness of the refugee issue' and 'level of education' moderated the frame effect. These results are in contrast to previous research (e.g., Igartua & Cheng, 2009) that found that individual's level of knowledge and awareness moderate the framing effect, as people who are motivated or have the ability to process the message are less affected by framing. The already long lasting attention for the topic in the news might play a role in this matter, resulting in a dimming of otherwise crucial characteristics.

In summary, positively framed news stories (which is unusual in a context where, for many years, the dominant news framing is rather negative) tends to meet resistance as audiences find these unusually positive news stories less credible. However, this finding does not mean that positive news framing is useless, but rather that a better balance between positive and negative news framing would leave people more open to nuanced opinions (more information: Joris & De Cock, 2019).

### **Mapping refugees' experiences and prospective views on well-being**

One of IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE's aims was to give voice to refugees and asylum seekers (as they often remain voiceless), by reflecting on representations of migration together with those supposedly being

represented. In total, 44 refugees participated in the research, coming from Syria ( $n = 24$ ), Afghanistan ( $n = 11$ ) or Iraq ( $n = 9$ ) and have been living in Belgium since 2015: 31 men and 13 women, age ranging from 17 to 60.

The study combined focus group interviews with individual ethnographic interviews. The focus group interviews consisted of three parts: 1) explaining the research project; 2) participants' experiences (e.g., migration journeys, life in Belgium and the role of media in their everyday lives now and before); 3) participants' views on the role of media in processes of migration and integration (e.g., stereotypes and prejudices). Two participatory visual methods, photo elicitation and photovoice, inspired these collective interviews in order to allow for more bottom-up perspectives and alternative, non-verbal, output. These visual methods also allow participants and researchers to produce stories together.

Photo elicitation is a form of interview that uses images to elicit thoughts, feelings, and ways of talking that are more difficult to address through talk-based interviews with participants. It has been argued that visual methods provide participants with power and choice because they can choose what to capture, and how they express their experiences and talk about them. Participants were asked to categorize and interpret widely used photos from major press and photo agencies that accompanied articles in major national and international newspapers, and that represent key themes in press coverage of the refugee situation. Participants were asked to categorize 29 photos on a continuum that ranged from negative to positive media coverage (*What do you think of this photo? What story or message does this photo contain? Do you think it is a rather 'good' or a rather 'bad' story or message? Why so?*) and to discuss this continuum.

Photovoice is a participatory visual method by which participants can recognize and represent their community in order to improve their situation. Participants were asked to select one of the photos (of the photo elicitation exercise) which they found most striking. In addition they were invited to identify with at least one person in the photo and give them a 'voice' by making use of text balloons (*If the character(s) on the photo could speak to the photographer about this photo, what would they say?*) and through messaging with postcards (*If the character(s) on the photo could speak to the Belgian people about this photo, what would they say?*). The messages were addressed to the photographer (or journalist) and to the Belgian population.

If we leave aside the hostile representations and portrayals of refugees as cultural, economic or security threats, refugees are mainly portrayed as victims. The use of these news frames hinders refugees being seen as actors with agency in new societies, and only grants them legitimacy with proof of suffering. It also leads to feelings of inferiority regarding members of the host society. Refugees and asylum seekers dislike being portrayed as threats, but also as victims, even though proving their suffering as victims is key to their being recognized as legitimate refugees. They regret not being portrayed and recognized enough as reflexive agents with skills, ambitions and dreams of their own. In order for them to feel more legitimate, and thus recognized as reflexive agents, more realistic media representations are recommended. Participants expressed the hope for a shift from pity and victimization to empathy and recognition (more information: Smets, Mazzocchi, Gerstman & Mostmans, 2019).

The study shows that reflecting on representations with immigrants and refugees is a valuable and necessary exercise that touches on issues fundamental to their perceived well-being. Raising awareness among media makers, policy makers and public opinion regarding the impact of those

representations for immigrants and refugees, and considering potential alternatives to current representations (e.g., counter-frames) thus remains essential.

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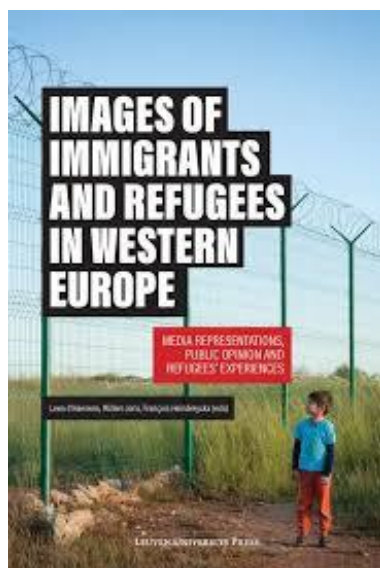
### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In an effort to increasingly give voice to refugees in news media: **construct a database** of refugee organizations and civil society actors that operate as a facilitating actor/go-between to bring refugees into contact with journalists and vice versa in a confident and safe framework without putting refugees at risk (important precondition!).
2. **Stimulate news media** to set up a strategy regarding the **monitoring of online comments on news items/articles** by their readers on refugee news online: anti-polarization actions.
3. **Encourage news media to hire former refugees** with journalistic aspirations and talent or former experience in their country of origin (as part of a larger increasing **diversity of the newsroom**).
4. **Support constructive journalism initiatives**: stimulating stories on how we all have the ability to improve society as a whole instead of focusing on doom scenarios: solution journalism and progress reporting.
5. **Support “More than words” initiatives**: rising awareness of the hurtful aspects of negative stereotyping and pictures (follow-up research and counter framing, cfr “paint another picture of refugees” & our art contest).
6. **Support translation initiatives** in cooperation with social interpreters and translators and citizens (cf. development of an online app/social media tool to increase integration of refugees and to build a bridge towards media reporters: cf. link with recommendation 1).
7. a. **Develop** a practical hands-on **brochure on how to report in a responsible way on refugees** (**guidelines** to develop in cooperation and co-design with journalist associations, e.g., VVJ in Flanders) (see as an example: guidelines on responsible reporting on suicide).  
  
b. **Appoint a refugee reporting expert per newsroom** who operates as a point of reference for everyone on the working floor reporting on refugees and migration.
8. **Monitor trends**: follow-up monitoring of news reporting on refugees and migrants as sentiments may fluctuate throughout time: reference countries at point X in time may change their discourse and framing: how can news media be indicators of societal change?

9. **Stimulate diversity on screen:** (indirect) contact with immigrants/refugees stimulates positive attitudes.
10. **Avoid threat framing of newcomers:** feelings of threat are associated with negative attitudes.
11. **Rethink terminology:** focus less on categorizations (immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, transmigrants, ...) but when used, they should be correct.
12. **Stimulate language competencies:** general population thinks that those who speak official languages most deserve to settle.
13. **Stimulate awareness and reflection among media producers and broader audiences** regarding possible effects and harms of media representations for the populations involved.
14. **Stimulate media producers to consider a diversity of voices and frames** when making stories and visuals about migration (including information campaigns).
15. In communication towards migrants: **emphasize humanity and solidarity**, de-emphasize particularity, and avoid registers of pity.
16. **Support initiatives that allow migrants to produce and circulate their own stories**, including e.g. media trainings and workshops for different target groups.

## 4. DISSEMINATION AND VALORISATION

### 4.1. IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE BOOK



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More information: <https://lup.be/products/119590>

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#### 4.3. OTHER DISSEMINATION AND VALORISATION

De Cock, R., Joris, W., d'Haenens, L. with De Cock, R. (curator) *Vlucht in je verbeelding, vluchteling in beeld.* (Exhibition). Venue: Jubilee Room, KU Leuven, 24 Jun 2019.

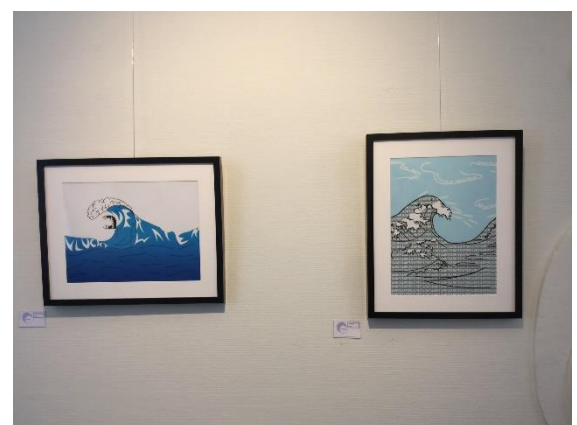
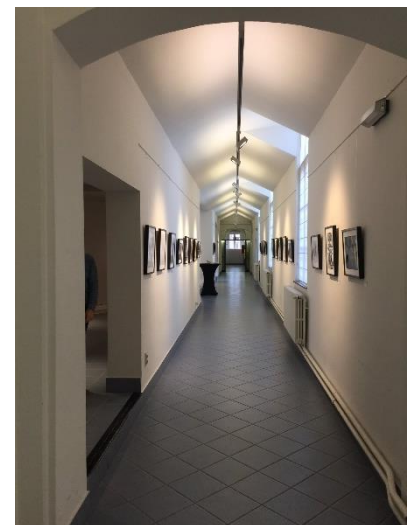






Winner: Pina Geyskens – Op reis ...

De Cock, R., Joris, W., d'Haenens, L. with De Cock, R. (curator) *Vlucht in je verbeelding, vluchteling in beeld.* (Exhibition). Venue: KADOC, Leuven, 8 November 2019 – 31 January 2020.



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