

# IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE

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

**DURATION**  
15/12/2016 - 15/03/2019

**BUDGET**  
596.849 €

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Governments, news media and public opinion in Europe are increasingly preoccupied with refugees seeking access to Western Europe. Public opinion is split (if not negative) and generally un- or misinformed (amalgamation across 'groups' being one of the problems), and integration policies cannot respond to the needs (see cross-country MIPEX results). This project aims to investigate 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 (re)actions on the other.

The IM<sup>2</sup>MEDIATE project combines four complementary multi-stakeholder group perspectives:

1. Analysis of news media content and journalism culture
2. Study of societal reactions of the general public
3. Study of push/pull factors in migration from a refugee perspective
4. Policy analysis into national governmental (re)actions

It is the project's ultimate goal to inventory the multiple public, policy and media voices heard in Belgium on this crucial issue, while learning from practices abroad (with a focus on Sweden), and to formulate recommendations towards a more encouraging integration policy, while lowering anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment.

1. To study the interplay and the potential pivotal role of media in this complex societal challenge, we compare the news media representations of non-EU immigrants with a particular emphasis on refugees (content analyses) in Belgium (both Dutch- and French speaking) and in Sweden as potential highly influential drivers in the public opinion-formation process regarding immigrants and refugees. 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 precise 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. The news media under study will include audiovisual and online media; both verbal and visual content. In addition, qualitative in-depth interviews with journalists will serve as a reflective feedback loop complementing the content analysis results. Comparisons with available data on the professional culture of journalism being influential in the media framing of immigrants with a focus on refugees will be added.

2. To assess the public opinion on non-EU immigrants and refugees, our project will conduct a survey among a representative sample of majority adults (age 18-65, accurately reflecting the Belgian population as to gender, SES and education) as well as adolescents (15-18) in the regions under study. To investigate potential links between the content of news media and public opinion on the refugee situation in particular, an experimental research design will be set up. News stories typical for the various news frames on refugees, based on the content analysis results, will be transformed into experimental material containing counter-frames, so as to test the potential effects of different framing on the public' mental pictures.



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3. Next to the content analysis and the public opinion survey, our team will collect data among refugees in Belgium to inductively construct their (possibly manifold) views on Belgium and Europe, and to explore their motivations for choosing this country as (intermediate) destination to settle permanently or provisionally towards a new future. The role of mobile devices and online social networks will be looked at in particular. Based on the proportionate number of first time asylum applicants in the EU (Eurostat), we will focus on interviewees coming from the following countries of origin: Syria (29% of total number), Afghanistan (14%), and Iraq (10%) (3 largest groups of refugees). Given the societal context of the study, urgent issues related to religion will receive significant attention. This includes questions of perceived Islamophobia and the potential of faith-based group identities. Furthermore, social network analysis will be conducted on the relevant (as shown in the interviews) social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter so as to map refugee media journeys and sketch the broader configurations of the networks they take part in as well as the networks' functions in (re)building social capital.

4. A cross-country policy analysis based on available data with an emphasis on the countries under study will shed 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).

Research findings will be discussed in our follow-up committee as well as in our large network of key stakeholders of schools, youth workers and NGO's. Participant feedback will be used in the formulation of the final study recommendations. Datasets and research evidence will be made accessible on our project's website. Research findings will be shared in a special issue of Communications: the European Journal of Communication Research, in a book published with Leuven University Press, and in a mobile exhibition displaying photographs and posters with research findings, touring public places, such as schools and hospitals.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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## LINKS

<http://soc.kuleuven.be/fsw/im2mediate>