# Us Versus Them and the Role of the Media

## The Influence of Media on Attitudes Toward Migration in Europe

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*For Max Wedin*

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**Study I:** Theorin, N., & Strömbäck, J. (2020). Some media matter more than others: Investigating media effects on attitudes toward and perceptions of immigration in Sweden, *International Migration Review*, *54*(4), 1238–1264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319893292

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**Study III:** Theorin, N. (2021). Different effects on different immigrant groups: Testing the media's role in triggering perceptions of economic, cultural, and security threats from Immigration. *Under review*

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**Study V:** Theorin, N. (2021). How news frames affect immigration attitudes: Perceptions and emotions as underpinning mechanisms? In J. Strömbäck, C. E. Meltzer, J-M. Eberl, C. Schemer, & H. Boomgaarden (Eds.), *Media and public attitudes toward migration in Europe. A comparative approach* (pp. 190–208). Routledge

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## Swedish summary

Under det senaste decenniet har migration blivit en av de mest framträdande och politiserade frågorna i många europeiska länder – framförallt i samband med, och efter, den så kallade flyktingkrisen år 2015. Frågan förefaller ha befäst en central position i valkampanjer, politiska debatter och på mediernas dagordningar runt om i Europa. Samtidigt finns det stora skillnader både *inom* och *mellan* länder när det gäller människors attityder till migration. Följaktligen är det viktigt att förstå hur människors attityder till migration formas. I det här sammanhanget spelar sannolikt medier en mycket central roll: Medier utgör den främsta informationskällan om politik för de flesta människor och genom att välja ut, förenkla och betona vissa aspekter hjälper medier allmänheten att få förståelse för (ofta komplexa) samhällsfrågor, vilket i sin tur påverkar människors åsikter kring dessa frågor.

Trots detta är kunskapen om när och hur medier påverkar människors attityder till, och perceptioner av migration, bristfällig. Centralt i sammanhanget är att det råder brist på forskning om mediernas effekter på olika typer av migration, trots att studier från migrationslitteraturen visar att människor exempelvis tenderar att vara mer negativt inställda till flyktinginvandring än till arbetskraftsinvandring och till invandring från delar av världen som upplevs vara mer olika värdlandet vad gäller kultur, religion och etnicitet.

Ett annan begränsning är att de allra flesta studierna inom forskningsfältet är baserade på resultat från ett enskilt (ofta västeuropeiskt) land. Samtidigt vet vi att kontextuella faktorer tenderar att påverka medieeffekter såväl som människors attityder till, och perceptioner av, invandring. Därav finns det ett behov av studier som är baserade på data från flera olika länder som skiljer sig åt vad gäller kontextuella faktorer.

Vidare finns det ytterligare tre centrala forskningsluckor som alla är angelägna att täppa igen: Till att börja med tenderar tidigare forskning att enbart fokusera på effekter av medier på attityder och perceptioner. Det finns dock sannolikt ett ömsesidigt samband mellan

människors attityder och vilka medier de väljer att använda, vilket är viktigt att undersöka empiriskt. För det andra saknas det kunskap om konsekvenserna av att ta del av alternativa medier, trots att dessa typer av medier – framför allt invandringskritiska alternativa medier – har blivit allt mer populära. För det tredje råder det brist på medieforskning om vilken roll som kognition och känslor spelar för att påverkar människors attityder till migration: även om forskning visar att människors attityder tenderar av styras av en kognitiv och en affektiv/känslobaserad komponent.

Mot den bakgrunden syftar den här avhandlingen till att undersöka när och hur medier påverkar människors attityder till, och perceptioner av, migration. För att undersöka detta kombineras medieeffektsteorier med teorier från migrationslitteraturen. Empiriskt bygger avhandlingen på data från en panelundersökning genomförd i Sverige mellan år 2014–2016, en panelundersökning genomförd år 2017–2018 med respondenter i Polen, Spanien, Storbritannien, Sverige, Tyskland och Ungern, samt ett experiment genomfört i Polen, Rumänien, Spanien, Storbritannien, Sverige, Tyskland och Ungern år 2019.

Avhandlingens huvudsakliga resultat är att: (a) Effekterna av medieanvändning på attityder och perceptioner beror i hög grad på var invandringen kommer ifrån, (b) Effekterna varierar mellan olika medietyper, och alternativa medier förefaller ha en större effekt på attityder till invandring än vad traditionella medier har, (c) Förhållandet mellan medieanvändning och attityder tenderar att vara ömsesidigt, (d) Perceptioner om invandringens påverkan såväl som känslor gentemot invandrare kan fungera som medierande variabler som förklarar *varför* människor påverkas av mediegestaltningar om invandring. Känslor förefaller dock spela större roll än perceptioner, och (e) Medier påverkar inte alltid den allmänna opinionen, och det finns stor variation mellan olika länder när det gäller medieeffekter på människors attityder till, och perceptioner av, migration.

# Introductory chapter

## Introduction

Migration has become one of the most salient and politicized issues in Europe over the last decade, and even more so during and after the sharp rise in immigration 2015 (Demker & Odmalm, 2021; Hutter & Kriesi, 2021; Lecheler et al., 2019). The issue appears to have consolidated a central position in political debates (Green et al., 2019), and on media agendas across European countries (Eberl et al., 2019). There are, however, sharp national differences between European countries – with respect to both public attitudes toward migration and perceptions of migration (Heath & Richards, 2019a). Studies investigating such cross-national differences have contributed with valuable insights into the contextual sources of attitudes toward migration, but the focus of these studies has mainly been on contextual "real-world factors", such as national economic conditions, the amount of immigration, and recent immigration inflows (Bohman, 2014; Heath & Richards, 2019a; Heath et al., 2019; Meuleman et al., 2019). However, public attitudes toward migration are most likely not only a result of such real-world factors. As noted by Walter Lippmann (1922, p. 16) in his classic work *Public Opinion*, people's attitudes are partly grounded in their knowledge of reality, but also in "pictures made by himself or given to him": pictures that do not necessarily correspond with reality.

Lippmann argued that people's attitudes and perceptions are not based solely on reality, since "the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance." Consequently, a citizen is learning to "see with his mind vast proportions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach" (p. 18). Based on this, Lippmann claimed that public opinion researchers must begin "by recognizing the

triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action" (p. 11).

Arguably, the mental pictures – and thus the need to recognize the triangular relationship – play an especially large role when it comes to complex and multi-dimensional migration-related issues: even official data sources struggle to capture seemingly straightforward facts about migration, such as the number of people immigrating to a country (Blinder, 2015).

There is also evidence suggesting that the pictures inside people's heads matter even more than reality when it comes to migration-related issues. For example, a recent study shows evidence suggesting that the *perceived* size of immigration is a stronger predictor of attitudes toward immigration than the *actual* size of migration (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019). Another example is that although perceived threats from immigration were a strong predictor of voting "Leave" in the UK Brexit referendum, people who lived in regions with lower proportions of immigrants were especially likely to vote "Leave" (Macdougall et al., 2020).

The news media play a key role in the process of constructing pictures inside our heads. By selecting, simplifying, and emphasizing certain aspects of reality, the news media help people piece together understandings of societal issues, which in turn influence the degree of public concern, and public opinion, regarding these issues (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Lecheler et al., 2019; Sheafer, 2007). It is thus not surprising that, alongside the migration literature, communication scholars in recent years have paid increasing attention to the role of the media in shaping public attitudes towards, and perceptions of, migration. A key finding within this research field is that the media, by linking immigration to problems and threats, might stimulate more negative perceptions of, and attitudes towards, immigrants and immigration, whereas positive content is likely to lead to more positive attitudes and

perceptions (Eberl et al., 2018; Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Jacobs & van der Linden, 2018). There are also indications that different media types can lead to different consequences, due to different content characteristics (Eberl et al., 2018; Jacobs et al., 2016). Specifically, there is some research suggesting that the use of commercial TV news, tabloids, and the conservative media is associated with more negative migration attitudes than public service TV news, broadsheets, and the liberal media (Eberl et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2016; Štětka et al., 2020; Strömbäck & Theorin, 2018).

Despite the existing research, our knowledge of when and how the media affect people's attitudes towards, and perceptions of, migration is however still limited. Most importantly, there is a lack of integration of key concepts and findings from the migration literature into the media effects literature (Lecheler et al., 2019). For instance, studies show that people are generally more negative toward refugee immigration than labor migration (Blinder, 2015), and toward migration from regions that are perceived to be more remote due to differences from the host country regarding culture, ethnicity, and religion (Ford, 2011; Hagendoorn, 1995). Despite this, there is limited research on the effects of the media on attitudes towards, and perceptions of, different types of migration. Most studies have instead focused on attitudes towards immigration from a specific country, or towards a specific kind of immigration. Moreover, the vast majority of media studies have focused on immigration from outside Europe, and less attention has been paid to migration – including emigration – within Europe. Distinguishing between different types of migration is however essential, since attitudes – and thus the media effects – are likely to vary.

Furthermore, whereas the migration literature has acknowledged several contextual factors, it is still unclear how the context might impact media effects on migration attitudes. The vast majority of studies are based on findings from one (often Western European) country (Eberl et al., 2018). At the same time, the surrounding conditions are likely to impact media

effects (Lecheler et al., 2019; Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019), and people's perceptions of ethnic threats, emotional reactions toward outgroups, and migration attitudes (Bohman, 2014; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Cottrell et al., 2010; Heath et al., 2019). In order to avoid premature generalizations and ethnocentrism (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Dogan & Pelassy, 1984), cross-national comparative studies are required.

Apart from integrating key findings and theories from the migration literature, there is also a need to address aspects that are more directly linked to media effects research, and that have not been investigated in the context of migration. First, the focus in research has been exclusively on the *effects* of the media on perceptions and attitudes (but see Schemer, 2012a for an exception), however, the relationship might, in line with the reinforcing spirals model (Slater, 2015), be reciprocal. Second, despite the fact that there has been an upsurge in so-called "alternative media" – especially right-wing and anti-immigration alternative media (Benkler et al., 2018; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018; Newman et al., 2018) – the effects of using such outlets are still unclear. Third, it is unclear *why* the media might influence migration attitudes. Research suggests that attitudes tend to be guided by both a cognitive component and an affective component (Eagly et al., 1994; Haddock, & Zanna, 1998), but there are few studies – and no cross-national studies – that examine the role of cognition *and* affect when studying how the media influences immigration attitudes.

To address the above research gaps, the purpose of this dissertation is to investigate when and how media influence public attitudes toward migration and perceptions of migration across European countries. It should be noted here that I use the phrase "*when* and *how* the media influence…" – and not "*whether* or *if* the media influences…"– since we already know from research that the media *can* influence migration attitudes and perceptions (Eberl et al., 2018). Our knowledge about how the media may affect migration attitudes and

perceptions, and how it might vary between different contexts, is substantially more limited, however.

## Setting the scene: A cross-national perspective with a most different systems design

Seven countries that differ in several aspects have been selected to investigate when and how the media influences public attitudes toward migration and perceptions of migration across European countries: Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. Four of these aspects – aspects that are likely to be crucial for media effects in the context of migration – are presented in Table 1 and discussed below. Here, it should be noted that I do not claim to provide a discussion of *all* aspects that might be relevant. The purpose of this section is rather to illustrate, with some specific examples, that the countries differ in several ways, and that the project is therefore based on a most different systems design within the confines of Europe.

**Table 1. The national contexts**[1]

| | Migration flows | Political landscape | Immigration attitudes | News media coverage on migration |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Germany** | Net migration: 5.6<br>Born abroad: 15.7%<br>Top countries of origin: Poland, Turkey, Russia | Anti-immigration party support: 12.6%<br>Integration policy score: 58/100 | Middle position among 24 European countries | Salient: About 25% of the media coverage<br>Negative rather than positive coverage |
| **Hungary** | Net migration: 0.6<br>Born abroad: 5.3%<br>Top countries of origin: Romania, Ukraine, Serbia | Anti-immigration party support: 68.4%<br>Integration policy score: 43/100 | Second most negative attitudes among 24 countries. Substantial increase in negative attitudes | Highly salient: About 50% of the media coverage<br>Highly negative coverage |
| **Poland** | Net migration: -0.7<br>Born abroad: 1.7%<br>Top countries of origin: Ukraine, Belarus, Germany | Anti-immigration party support: 43.6%<br>Integration policy score: 40/100 | Middle position among 24 European countries. However, increase in negative attitudes | Relatively little coverage: About 10%<br>Generally negative coverage but depends on the ideology of the outlet |
| **Romania** | Net migration: -3.2<br>Born abroad: 2.4%<br>Top countries of origin: Moldavia, Italy, Spain | Anti-immigration party support: No data<br>Integration policy score: 49/100 | Relatively positive. Yet, increase in negative attitudes | Relatively little coverage: About 5%<br>Slightly negative coverage. Focus on *emigration* |
| **Spain** | Net migration: 0.9<br>Born abroad: 13.1%<br>Top countries of origin: Morocco, Romania, Ecuador | Anti-immigration party support: 15.1%<br>Integration policy score: 60/100 | Middle position among 24 European countries | Relatively little coverage: About 5%<br>Comparatively less negative but depends on ideology of outlet |
| **Sweden** | Net migration: 3.8<br>Born abroad: 20%<br>Top countries of origin: Syria, Finland, Iraq | Anti-immigration party support: 17.5%<br>Integration policy score: 86/100 | Second most positive attitudes among 24 countries | Salient: About 20% of the coverage<br>Negative rather than positive coverage |
| **The UK** | Net migration: 3.2<br>Born abroad: 14.1%<br>Top countries of origin: India, Poland, Pakistan | Anti-immigration party support: -<br>Integration policy score: 56/100 | Middle position among European countries | Salient: About 20%<br>Negative rather than positive coverage, but depends on media type |

[1] Most of the information presented in Table 1 is from different data sources. In order to ensure that the information and statistics is comparable, the same data source (for each aspect) has been used for all countries. There is however one exception: *Immigration attitudes* is based on the European Social Survey (ESS) 2016/2017 (Heath & Richards, 2019b) in all countries except Romania, because Romania was not included in the ESS survey. The information about Romania is therefore based on McNeil & Karstens (2018) and Voicu et al. (2013) instead. It should also be noted that the information in Table 1 focuses on the years in which the data used in this dissertation project was collected. Sources for the rest of the information in Table 1: *Net migration*: Macrotrends (refers to 2019), *Born abroad* and *Top countries of origin*: United Nations Population Division (refers to 2019), *Anti-immigration party support*: Politico (refers to the last general election before 2020), *Integration policy score*: MIPEX, (refers to 2019), *Media coverage on migration*: Eberl et al. (2019) (refers to the beginning of 2017, and the time period between 2013–2017), and McNeil & Karstens (2018) (refers to 2017).

**Migration flows**

Table 1 firstly illustrates that the countries differ in terms of their migration flows. This is important to take into account since research shows that patterns of migration flows, size of migration, increase in relative size of immigration, and origin of immigration tend to influence people's attitudes and perceptions of migration (Blinder, 2015; Ford, 2011; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019; Ienciu & Ienciu, 2015; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010; Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2019). These factors might consequently also condition the influence of media. In terms of migration flows, Germany, Sweden, and the UK are so called "immigrant receiving countries" with positive net migration (Macrotrends, 2019). In other words, the number of immigrants is larger than the number of emigrants. In these countries, a relatively large part of the population (about 14-20%) was born abroad (United Nations Population Division, 2019). However, the countries differ in terms of where the immigration comes from. In Germany, the top country of origin is Poland followed by Turkey and Russia. In Sweden, the largest immigrant group is from Syria, followed by Finland and Iraq. In the UK, the top countries of origin are India and Poland, followed by Pakistan (United Nations Population Division, 2019).

Spain also hosts relatively many immigrants – about 13% of the population are immigrants (United Nations Population Division, 2019), however, net migration is closer to zero than in Germany, Sweden, and the UK, meaning that the number of immigrants is not much more than the number of emigrants in Spain (Macrotrends, 2019). The largest immigrant group in Spain is from Morocco, followed by Romania and Ecuador (United Nations Population Division, 2019).

Hungary, like Spain, has a net migration that is relatively close to zero (Macrotrends, 2019), but only about 5% of the Hungarian population was born abroad (United Nations Population Division, 2019). It should however be noted that immigration to Hungary – as well

as to Germany and Sweden – increased sharply in 2015 (Eberl et al., 2019; Hinger et al., 2019). The largest immigrant group in Hungary is from Moldavia, followed by Ukraine and Serbia (United Nations Population Division, 2019).

Poland and Romania, finally, host the smallest proportion of immigrants: about 2% of the population (United Nations Population Division, 2019). The number of emigrants is also larger than the number of immigrants in both countries, and it can also be noted that Romania is one of the European countries with the largest negative net-migration (Macrotrends, 2019). In Poland, the largest immigrant group is from Ukraine, followed by Belarus and Germany. In Romania, finally, the top country of origin is Moldavia, followed by Italy and Spain.

**Political landscape**

Table 1 shows that the countries differ regarding electoral support for anti-immigration parties, which is relevant since there is evidence suggesting that individuals who are socialized in a context where the radical right is relatively strong are likely to be more negative toward immigration (Green et al., 2019; Heath et al., 2019). In Hungary, the anti-immigration party Fidesz is the ruling party, and received 49.3% of the votes in the 2018 election. The second largest party – Jobbik – is also a radical right party, and received 19.1% of the votes in the same election.

The political landscape in Poland is also characterized by strong influence from the nationalist radical right. The Law and Justice Party (LJP) is the ruling party, and their electoral support increased in the 2019 general election. The party grew from receiving 37.6% of the votes in 2015, to receiving 43.6% in 2019 (Politico, 2021).

Although not as large and influential as in Hungary and Poland, and not part of the governments, anti-immigration parties are also relatively popular in Germany and Sweden. Specifically, Alternative for Germany received 12.6% of votes in the German election in

2017, and the Sweden Democrats received 17.5 of the votes in the 2018 Swedish election (Politico, 2021).

Relatively new anti-immigration parties received substantial electoral support in the last elections in Spain and Romania. In Spain, Vox entered parliament in 2019 after receiving 15.1% of the votes, and in Romania, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians – a radical right party that was founded in 2019 – received 9.1% of the votes in the election in 2020. It should, however, be noted that there was no major support for radical right parties in Romania when the data for this project was collected.[2]

There is no major support for the radical right in the UK, which can most probably be explained by the "winner takes all" election system, and the dominance of the Conservative and the Labour parties. It can however be noted that, despite this, the populist right wing party UKIP received 1.8% of the votes in the 2017 election (Politico, 2021).

Table 1 also shows that the seven countries differ in terms of immigrant integration, which is important since evidence suggests that attitudes toward immigration are more positive in countries where policies are more supportive of immigration (Heath et al., 2019; McLaren & Paterson, 2019). Before discussing how the countries differ regarding this aspect, however, it should be noted that the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) has been used as the indicator of immigrant integration. The index is based on numerous integration indicators, such as labor market mobility, education, and anti-discrimination. As shown in Table 1, Poland and Hungary score lowest, suggesting that they have the least favorable integration conditions. On a scale ranging from 0 (critically unfavorable integration conditions) to 100 (favorable integration conditions), Poland scores 40 and Hungary score 43. Romania follows with a score of 49, the UK (score: 56), Germany (score: 58), and Spain

[2] The data was collected between November 2014-September 2019.

(score: 60). Sweden has the highest MIPEX score – 86 – and according to the MIPEX is one of the "Top 10 countries" in the world regarding integration conditions.

**Immigration attitudes**

As Table 1 shows, there is also a great variation between the countries when it comes to public immigration attitudes. Evidence from the European Social Survey 2016/2017 shows that attitudes toward immigration were most positive in Sweden (the second most positive among the 24 countries that were measured), and most negative in Hungary (the second most negative), whereas Germany, Poland, Spain, and the UK were placed somewhere in between Sweden and Hungary (Heath & Richards, 2019b). Attitudes in Romania were not measured in the ESS 2016/2017, but there is other evidence indicating that although anti-immigration attitudes appear to have increased in Romania in recent years, they are still relatively positive compared to many other European countries (McNeil & Karstens, 2018; Voicu et al., 2013).

It is important to consider these variations in immigration attitudes since the media might be more influential when it converges with people's current attitudes and perceptions (Druckman et al., 2012). For instance, negative media coverage might be more effective in influencing attitudes among people in Hungary than in Sweden, as public opinion is considerably more negative in Hungary than in Sweden.

**News media coverage of migration**

Last but not least, Table 1 demonstrates that the countries differ regarding the salience of migration in the media and the tone of the media coverage. It should be noted that although there is a growing body of literature regarding how the media cover migration in Europe, the discussion in this section (and the information about media coverage in Table 1) is

exclusively based on evidence from Eberl et al. (2019) and McNeil and Karstens (2018), because these studies include all seven countries, which facilitates comparison.

Eberl et al. (2019) shows that migration issues receive media attention across all seven countries, although the news media coverage generally peaked during the migration crisis 2015, which was about two years before the data collection for the cross-national part of this project started. In 2017, however, (when data collection by Eberl and colleagues ended), migration was still a salient topic. This was especially the case in Hungary (about 50% of the total news coverage), but also in Germany (about 25%), Sweden (about 20%), and the UK (about 20%). In Romania and in Spain, on the other hand, the news media paid comparatively little attention to migration issues (about 5% of the total coverage) (Eberl et al., 2019).

Eberl et al. (2019) suggest that at the beginning of 2017 the news media coverage was clearly most negative in Poland, followed by Romania and Sweden, and then Germany, Hungary, and the UK. Spain had the least negative coverage, although the tone in general was also slightly more negative than positive (Eberl et al., 2019).

To give a somewhat more comprehensive picture of the tone of the media coverage, I will move away from the snapshot from 2017, and briefly discuss the media coverage of migration between 2013-2017. Starting with Germany, Eberl et al. (2019) show that the coverage was negative rather than positive during 2013-2017. From a comparative perspective, however, the media coverage in Germany often appears to be less negative than in many of the other countries (Eberl et al., 2019).

In Hungary, the coverage was relatively neutral in 2013 and at the beginning of 2014, but thereafter became highly negative. During the 2015 migration crisis, the media discourse – dominated by pro-government outlets – focused on legitimizing Hungary's decision to close the country's borders (Eberl et al., 2019).

In Poland, the coverage has generally been negative rather than positive since 2013 (Eberl et al., 2019). It should, however, be noted that research suggests that whereas conservative-leaning journalists in Poland tend to take a broadly negative stance on migration issues, liberal journalists generally tend to cover migration from a more humanitarian perspective (McNeil & Karstens, 2018).

In Romania the coverage has been slightly negative – although never the most negative of the countries – since 2013. It is noteworthy that evidence from Eberl et al. (2019) suggests that the coverage was the least negative of all countries at the beginning of the 2015 migration crisis, which probably is related to the fact that Romania was not affected by the crisis to any great extent: the number of refugees arriving in Romania was very low even during this period (Corbu et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2019). It should also be noted that the media in Romania tends to focus on emigration rather than immigration, by reporting about demographic challenges due to emigration, for instance (McNeil & Karstens, 2018). This seems logical since Romania has the most negative net-migration in Europe.

Spain had the least negative media coverage of migration between 2013-2017 (Eberl et al., 2019), and research suggests that there is relatively little xenophobic content in the Spanish media (Eberl et al., 2019; van Dijk, 2005). There is also research, however, suggesting that the framing of migration strongly depends on the ideology of the news outlet (Eberl et al., 2019).

In Sweden, the media coverage was negative rather than positive from 2013, and evidence from Eberl et al. (2019) shows that from summer 2015 to summer 2016, Sweden appeared to have the most negative media coverage among the seven countries (Eberl et al., 2019). At the same time, the media coverage of intra-European migration was substantially more positive in Sweden than in many of the other countries (Eberl et al., 2019).

In the UK, finally, media coverage has been negative rather than positive since 2013. Attitudes have been relatively stable in recent years, and as opposed to many of the other countries, there was no peak in negative coverage due to the 2015 migration crisis (Eberl et al., 2019). Research also shows that there are major differences between different media types in the UK regarding how they cover migration, and that tabloids in particular are characterized by a negative tone (e.g., Berry et al., 2015; Eberl et al., 2019).

## Theoretical framework: Combining media effect theories and intergroup relations theories to understand the media's role in shaping migration attitudes and perceptions

To recap, the aim of this dissertation is to investigate when and how media influence public attitudes toward migration, and perceptions of migration, across Europe. Toward this end, it is not only crucial to include countries with different characteristics in the analyses, but also to integrate theories and research from the intergroup relations literature into the media effects research. I will now turn to a discussion about central theories, concepts, and findings from the intergroup relations literature, which serve as important tools for understanding media effects on attitudes towards, and perceptions of, migration in this dissertation.

### Central intergroup relation theories: A brief overview

Intergroup threat theory (ITT) is a very prominent theory within the migration literature, suggesting that opposition toward migration is grounded in different types of threat perceptions. It is a social psychological theory in the sense that it focuses on *perceptions* of threat, rather than actual threats (Stephan et al., 2009). According to ITT, an intergroup threat is experienced when members of an in-group (e.g., people belonging to the majority of the dominant ethnic group in a country) believe that an out-group (e.g., immigrants) is likely to

cause them harm (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2009). Perceiving threats even when none exist might be a less costly error than *not* perceiving threats when they in fact *do* exist, and so according to ITT people are generally predisposed to perceive threats from outgroups (Stephan et al., 2009).

ITT distinguishes between perceived symbolic threats and perceived realistic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2009). The concept of symbolic threats stems from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory claims that people's sense of who they are is based on their self-perceived group membership. People search for coherence, and long to belong to a social group. In order to enhance or uphold a positive social identity, people also tend to evaluate their own in-group – and the in-group characteristics – more favorably compared to relevant out-groups. In line with this, opposition toward immigration can be explained by perceived threats to in-group characteristics, such as threats to cultural traditions, norms, values, religion and ethnicity (Stephan et al., 2009; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The concept of realistic threats, in turn, is based on realistic group conflict theory. This theory suggests that perceived competition for access to recourses – such as economic recourses, the labor market, and physical wellbeing – leads to prejudice and opposition toward outgroups (Sherif et al., 1961; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2009; Zárate et al., 2004).

A large body of literature supports ITT, and perceived threats have been established as the strongest predictor of negative attitudes toward outgroups and immigration (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Hjerm & Nagayoshi, 2011). Notably, the symbolic and realistic threat-explanations are frequently described as competing, and some scholars have argued that opposition to immigration stems more from perceptions of symbolic threats than from realistic threats (e.g., Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014; Sides & Citrin, 2007). Perceived realistic

threats have also been found to reduce support for immigration (Harell et al., 2012; Valentino et al., 2017), however, and economic threats might affect different groups of people in distinct ways (Pecoraro & Ruedin, 2016). The relative importance of perceived symbolic and realistic threats might also vary across countries, due to factors such as different economic conditions and the discourse about migration (Bohman, 2014; Heath & Richards, 2019a; Van Hootegem & Meuleman, 2019). It is thus important to account for both symbolic and realistic threats when investigating media effects on attitudes towards, and perceptions of, migration.

Another reason it is crucial to account for different types of threats, and to distinguish between them, is that different threat perceptions might have different behavioral consequences, and thus different societal implications (Cottrell & Nueberg, 2005; Cottrell et al., 2010; Johnston & Glasford, 2014; Van Hootegem & Meuleman, 2019, Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012;). For instance, some evidence suggests that symbolic threat perceptions are the strongest predictor of voting for radical right parties (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). Research also suggests that perceived economic threat is likely to lead to a tendency to aggression, whereas perceived cultural threats are likely to cause avoidance, and perceived threats to security are likely to lead to a tendency to flee (Cottrell & Nueberg, 2005; Cottrell et al., 2010; Johnston & Glasford, 2014). In light of this, it is important to investigate the potential role of media outlets in affecting different types of threat perceptions. At present, there is a lack of research about this. To the best of my knowledge, the only study that investigates media effects on different types of threat perceptions is an experimental study from Belgium that focuses on TV news coverage about North African immigrants (van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017).

It is not only crucial to distinguish between different types of *perceived threats*, but also between different types of *migration*, because people are generally more hostile toward some migrant groups than others. Research on ethnic hierarchies shows that public attitudes are

generally less positive toward migration from regions that are perceived to be more remote due to differences from the host country in dimensions such as culture, ethnicity and religion (Ford, 2011; Hagendoorn, 1995). In line with ITT, this has been explained by a general perception that immigration from more remote regions poses a greater (symbolic and realistic) threat to the host society, compared to immigration from more similar regions (Dustmann & Preston, 2007; Ford, 2011). Research from several European countries supports the idea of ethnic hierarchies, showing that people tend to hold the most positive perceptions and attitudes toward immigration from other European countries, and that immigration from Africa and the Middle East attracts the highest opposition (Ford, 2011; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015; Hagendoorn, 1995; Meltzer et al., 2018; Valentino et al., 2017).

It reasonable to expect that the media might play a role in maintaining and strengthening such ethnic hierarchies, as content analyses show that immigrant groups which, in general, attract more opposition, are more salient and negatively framed in the media (Bleich et al., 2015; Jacobs, 2017). Research (e.g., Druckman et al., 2012) also suggests that negative attitudes are likely to be more easily triggered when it comes to immigration from regions towards which people hold more negative attitudes from the start.

**Media effects in the context of migration: What we know and what we do *not* know**

Many studies since research into media effects began have identified effects on people's cognitions, emotions, attitudes, and behavior (Potter, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Following Potter, I define a (mass) media effect as *"a change in an outcome within a person or social entity that is due to mass media influence following exposure to a mass media message or series of messages"* (Potter 2011, pp. 903). This is a relatively broad definition that allows for many different aspects and contributes to the puzzle of media effects in different ways. I will now turn to a discussion of how the different aspects of the media

effects that Potter's definition taps into have been addressed – and not addressed – in the literature on migration.

Starting with the first term in Potter's definition – *change* – scholars have found that negative media content might both alter, and trigger and reinforce, more negative migration attitudes and perceptions of migration, whereas positive coverage tends to have more positive effects[3] (Brader et al., 2008; Igartua et al., 2011; Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012). However, as mentioned above, there is limited knowledge about whether the media might lead to different types of change toward different types of migration (by, for example, comparing the effects of emigration vs. immigration, and European immigration vs. non-European immigration). This one-dimensional approach to the dependent variable – migration – is problematic, however, since people tend to hold different attitudes toward different types of migration, as mentioned, and since the media tends to cover different types of migration in different ways.

Another issue related to the "change" term is that the focus of previous studies has been exclusively on the effects on the media, whereas it is still unclear whether there might be reciprocal effects between people's media use and their migration attitudes (but see Schemer, 2012a for an exception). Communication scholars have argued that people's media choices might reflect their attitudes – and arguably increasingly so in contemporary media environments characterized by a greater abundance of available media outlets than ever before (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2008). It thus seems crucial to disentangle the potential reciprocal effects between media exposure and migration attitudes.

The second key term in Potter's definition of media effects – *outcome* – taps into the type of effect: are there, for instance, effects on perceptions of the impact of migration, emotions toward migrants, or attitudes toward migration? These different types of effects

[3] Yet, it should be noted that the focus has been on shifts in magnitude (e.g., an individual develops more negative perceptions of the impact immigration after being exposed to media content that frames immigration in a negative way) rather than weight (e.g., the perception remains the same but it has been strengthened as a result of the media message).

have all been investigated in the migration literature. Research suggests that people tend to develop more negative attitudes toward migration, perceptions of migration and emotions toward migrants when they are exposed to news messages – or news frames – with a negative tone, and to frames that link migration to (cultural, economic, and security) threats. On the other hand, news coverage with a positive tone, and frames linking migration to benefits rather than threats, tend to have more positive effects on perceptions, emotions and attitudes (Brader et al., 2008; Eberl et al., 2018; Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012; Lecheler et al., 2015; Jacobs & van der Linden, 2018). In addition to this, there is evidence that increased coverage of migration might influence behavior – by increasing anti-immigrant party support (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Damstra et al., 2019).

As in media effects research in general (Shrum, 2009), scholars have primarily focused on the relationship between the independent variable (e.g., the media content) and the dependent variable (e.g., attitudes), whereas less attention has been paid to the processes that might explain these relationships, and the relationship between different outcome variables. At the same time, research also suggests that attitudes tend to be guided by both a cognitive component and an affective component (Eagly et al., 1994; Haddock, & Zanna, 1998), which makes it crucial to investigate the *mediating* role of perceptions and emotions if the aim is to understand *how* and *why* people's attitudes toward migration might be affected by opposing ways of presenting the issue.

Another issue that relates to the outcome element is that the measures of attitudes and perceptions have sometimes been conflated, for instance by basing measures of attitudes on items tapping perceptions and policy preferences (Arendt, 2010; Beyer & Matthes, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). It is important to differentiate between these outcomes, however, both since the effects might vary and since attitudes and perceptions are conceptually distinct. Attitudes are about predispositions "expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some

degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1), whereas perceptions pertain to knowledge, and can be more or less correct (Wyer & Albarracín, 2005). There is also, as mentioned, a need to study perceptions in more detail, and above all by investigating how the media might influence different *types of perceived threats* of immigration (e.g., perceptions related to economic, cultural, and security threats).

The third element in Potter's definition – *within a person or a social entity* – addresses the issue of *level* of the media effect (Potter, 2011). In other words, does the effect occur at the individual microlevel (e.g., how individuals respond to different media frames on migration), or on the aggregate macrolevel (e.g., how the tone of news coverage on migration influences aggregate public opinion about migration). The literature includes microlevel experiments focusing on the effects of different types of news stories (e.g., Igartua et al., 2011; Lecheler et al., 2015), as well as macrolevel panel studies focusing on change in aggregate public opinion (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; McLaren et al., 2017). Although the literature covers both microlevel and macrolevel effect studies, there is a lack of studies comparing effects between different types of "social entities" such as comparisons of effects between different countries, yet, such comparisons are key, since they can show how generalizable (or context-dependent) the effects are (Boomgaarden & Song, 2019; Dogan & Pelassy 1984; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2018).

The next element is the *mass media*, which can be defined as "organizations that use technological channels to distribute messages for the purpose of attracting an increasingly large audience" (Potter, 2011, p. 905). Media effect studies can thus focus on the influence of traditional news media, as well as the influence of social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram, and alternative media outlets such as Samhällsnytt. Effects research in the context of migration has, however, focused mainly on traditional news media outlets. Some research here shows that the use of commercial TV news, tabloids, and the conservative media are

related to more negative attitudes and perceptions than the use of public service TV news, broadsheets and liberal media (Eberl et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2016; Štětka et al., 2020). Scholars tend to focus on media content to explain these findings. More specifically, the literature suggests that the fact some media (e.g., commercial media compared to public service media) are related to more negative attitudes and perceptions is due to stronger tendencies to focus on conflict, crime, and the negative aspects of migration. Against the background that the content is expected to drive media effects, it thus appears highly important to investigate the effects of using right-wing alternative media, characterized by anti-immigration content (Atkinson & Berg, 2012; Holt, 2016a; Holt, 2016b; Mayerhöffer, 2021). Another reason that makes it crucial to study the effects of such media is that there has been an upsurge in alternative media outlets (Benkler et al., 2018; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018; Newman et al., 2018). It should be clarified that "alternative media" refers to media that seeks to challenge hegemonic or dominant perspectives, and media that are guided by political agendas rather than journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality. Typically, alternative media are also characterized by anti-system and anti-elite sentiments, and a key message is often that the traditional media conceals or distorts information (Benkler et al., 2018; Mayerhöffer, 2021; Nygaard, 2019). As clear as this definition of alternative media might appear, it should however be noted that there are substantial differences between the different alternative media, and it is not always completely obvious which media should be considered "alternative". For example, the left-wing alternative media investigated in this dissertation (ETC) is "less alternative" and closer to the traditional media outlets in terms of objectivity, and a lesser degree of anti-system sentiment compared to the right-wing alternative media investigated (Avpixlat).

Potter states that *influence* can show up as a long-term gradual change or as an effect during exposure or shortly after. Although where the line should be drawn between long-term

and short-term effects can be discussed (see Shehata et al., 2021), it should be noted that the literature on migration includes experiments where clear short-term effects have been found (e.g., respondents immediately becoming more negative about immigration from Morocco when exposed to news stories that portray Moroccans as a threat to the national security), and longitudinal studies that have observed more long term effects (e.g., respondents who state in panel studies that they use a specific type of media gradually developing more negative perceptions of migration**)** (e.g., Czymara & Dochow, 2018; Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Igartua et al., 2011; Meltzer et al., 2020). Here, it should be noted that experimental approaches and longitudinal approaches not only differ in terms of whether the focus is on short-term or more long-term effects, but also whether the influence stems from exposure to specific news media content (which is the case in experimental studies), or people's news media use (which is the case in longitudinal survey studies). As mentioned, scholars tend to argue that the different effects of different news media use can be explained by differences in content. Importantly, however, the effects of news media use may sometimes be due less to specific media content, and more to the *form* of the media presentation (McLeod & Reeves, 1980; Perse & Lambe, 2017; Potter, 2011). For example, visuals, audio, and choice of location might play a role (McLeod & Reeves, 1980). It is also possible that identification with the media outlet used and opportunities to interact with other people when using the outlet can also stimulate media effects. These two methodological approaches can thus be considered to contribute to the puzzle of media effects in different ways.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that although effects have been identified in both experimental studies and in longitudinal studies, both these approaches tend to focus on (a) the effects of positive vs. negative media frames, and (b) the effects of issue specific frames, above all frames focusing on the economic, cultural, and security implications of migration (see Eberl at al., 2018 for an overview). There are, however, other important framing aspects

– such as the influence of episodic versus thematic frames – that have not been investigated. Table 2 summarizes how the different aspects of media effects have been addressed within research into migration, and shows the key issues that have not yet been addressed.

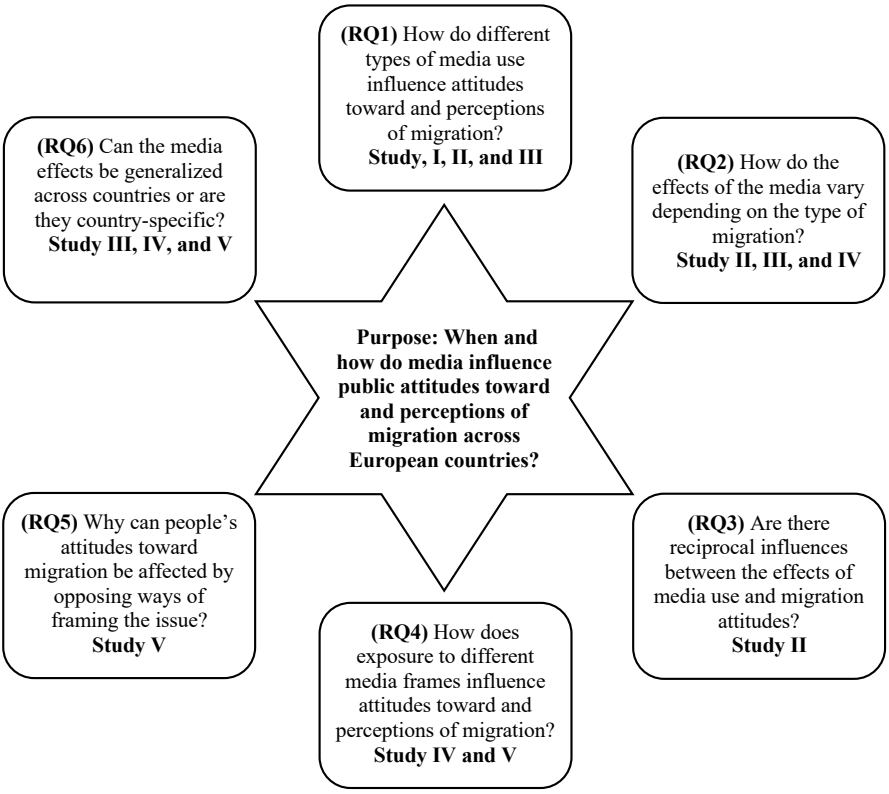
**Table 2. Different aspects of media effects in the context of migration**

| Different aspects of media effects | Previous research | Issues that have not yet been addressed |
|---|---|---|
| **Change:** Does the effect, e.g., show up as an alteration, trigger or reinforcement? | News media might alter, as well as trigger and reinforce, attitudes toward and perceptions of migration. | Limited knowledge about whether the media might lead to different types of change toward different types of migration.<br><br>Few studies identifying whether there are reciprocal effects between media use and attitudes. |
| **Outcome:** Effects on what? E.g., perceptions, emotions, attitudes or behavior? | Effects have been found on perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and behavior. | Focus on the effects of the independent variable and the dependent variable, while we know less about processes that may explain effects, and the relation between different outcome variables.<br><br>We do not know whether and how the media might influence different types of perceived threats of migration, and the effects on attitudes vs. perceptions. |
| **Within a person or a social entity:** Does the effect occur at the microlevel, the macrolevel, or both? | Effects observed in microlevel experiments, and in macrolevel panel studies. | It is unclear how the national context interacts with media. |
| **Mass media:** Which type of media generate effects? | Effects of several traditional news media outlets have been studied. | We do not know how alternative media use influence attitudes and perceptions. |
| **Influence:** Short-term or long-term effects? Influence due to media content or other factors? | Short-term effects found in experiments, and more long-term effects found in longitudinal studies.<br><br>Although experimental studies have investigated effects of news media content and longitudinal studies have investigated effects of news media use, both approaches tend to refer to content-explanations. | Focus on short-term and more long-term influence of positive vs. negative content, and effects of issue specific frames. The effects of other central framing aspects – such as the influence of episodic versus thematic frames – is unclear.<br><br>While the focus in previous research has been on content-explanations, identified effects of media use might also be due to, e.g., form of media presentation and identification. |

## Research questions

In light of the background above, this dissertation is guided by six research questions that address different aspects of the overall purpose of the dissertation: (RQ1) How do different types of media use influence attitudes toward and perceptions of migration? (RQ2) How do the effects of the media vary depending on the type of migration? (RQ3) Are there reciprocal influences between effects of media use and migration attitudes? (RQ4) How does exposure to different media frames influence attitudes toward and perceptions of migration? (RQ5) Why can people's attitudes toward migration be affected by opposing ways of framing the issue? (RQ6) Can the media effects be generalized across countries or are they country-specific? Figure 1 illustrates which research question(s) are addressed by each study. Exactly how the different studies relate to the research questions is further discussed in the section "Summary and contribution of studies".

**Figure 1. Purpose and research questions addressed in the different studies**




## Methods

A mixed method approach – combining two panel surveys and a survey experiment – has been employed to investigate when and how the media influences public attitudes toward migration and perceptions of migration across European countries. All three empirical data collections were carried out within the framework of two different research projects. One of the panel studies was conducted in Sweden by Jesper Strömbäck and administrated by the opinion polling company Novus. The other panel survey and the survey experiment were conducted within a Horizon 2020 research project of which my PhD scholarship was part between 2017–2019: *Role of European Mobility and its Impacts in Narratives, Debates and*

*EU Reforms* (REMINDER). Table 3 provides an overview of the method used for the analyses in the different studies of this dissertation.

**Table 3. Method used in the different studies**

| Three-wave panel survey conducted in Sweden, 2014-2016 | Two-wave cross-national panel survey, 2017-2018 | Cross-national survey experiment, 2019 |
|---|---|---|
| Study I | | |
| Study II | | |
| | Study III | |
| | | Study IV |
| | | Study V |

**Three wave panel survey conducted in Sweden, 2014-2016**

The first two studies are based on a three-wave panel survey, where respondents were asked about their media use and their attitudes toward and perceptions of immigration. The panel survey was conducted in Sweden between November 2014-November 2016, and 2,254 respondents participated in all three panel-waves. The respondents were recruited through stratified probability sampling from a database consisting of approximately 35,000 individuals from Novus's pool of survey participants. Participants in Novus's pool are recruited randomly, through phone interviews, text messages, and mail. For more details, see Strömbäck and Theorin (2018).

The principal benefit from panel surveys is that, by interviewing the same individuals over time, they provide greater causal leverage than cross-sectional surveys and enable analyses of individual-level changes (Finkel, 2007; Hillygus & Snell, 2018). The data used for the first two studies in this dissertation thus provides opportunities to test the effects of media use. That said, the method also had weaknesses in the first two studies. Most importantly in light of the aim of this dissertation, the fact that the survey is a single country study is a

shortcoming. This shortcoming is, however, compensated by the fact that the second panel survey and the survey experiment were conducted in several different countries.

**Two wave cross-national panel survey, 2017-2018**

The third study builds on a two-wave panel study, with similar questions about media use and attitudes towards, and perceptions of, migration, as in the first study, but with respondents in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. The fieldwork was conducted by Kantar TNS between December-January 2017/2018 (Wave 1) and October-November 2018 (Wave 2)[4], and participants were recruited via online panels in the respective countries. To increase the representativeness of the sample, respondents were classified by socio-demographic characteristics into quotas set by age, gender and region. In total, 7,367 completed both panel waves (about 1,000 per country). It should be noted that respondents in Romania were excluded from the analyses in the third study due to indications of substantial difficulties with recruiting participants and a more skewed sample.

Although this panel survey complements the panel survey that the two first studies build on – by including respondents from different countries with different characteristics – it does, of course, also have limitations. Importantly, a challenge related to the cross-national approach of this survey is that outlet-specific measures of media use are difficult to standardize and compare across countries, since the media outlets and their content differ (Boomgaarden & Song, 2019). It should also be noted that the one-year lag between the waves in both panel surveys risks underestimations of media effects, since there might have been more short-term media effects that occurred between the panel waves. A survey experiment – which provides the opportunity to test short-term effects of specific media

[4] One additional panel wave was conducted between "Wave 1" and "Wave 2", but data from that wave is not included in this dissertation since media use was not measured in that wave.

content, and to expose respondents to the same experimental stimulus – is also used in this dissertation to address these challenges.

**Cross-national survey experiment, 2019**

Finally, the two last studies are based on a survey experiment in which respondents were randomly assigned different news articles, and then answered questions about migration-related attitudes and perceptions. The same experiment was conducted in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. The participants were recruited from online panels and conducted by IMPACT in collaboration with Dynata, between September 5 and 24, 2019. Quota definitions in each country were based on gender and age to ensure accurate estimations of the populations. In total, 8,457 respondents participated (about 1,200 per country).

In survey experiments, an experimental intervention is integrated into a survey, and this experimental approach has become increasingly common as it combines the strengths of experiments and surveys (Krupnikov & Findley, 2018). The experimental component allows the random assignment of participants to different stimuli, which ensures that any difference between the experimental groups is due to the experimental treatment and not to any other factors (Krupnikov & Findley, 2018; Schaffer & Spilker, 2019). The survey component also allows scholars to incorporate these experimental interventions into surveys that are more representative than laboratory experiments usually are. Survey experiments thus offer both the opportunity to retain some control over an experiment, and the greater generalizability of a survey (Krupnikov & Findley, 2018). Exposing respondents to the same experimental stimulus across countries means that the problem that media effects are difficult to compare across countries (e.g., due to differences between media outlets) can be avoided.

Survey experiments are, however, not without limitations. First, the increased *internal* validity due to the random assignment and ability to control the experimental environment, is partly at the expense of the *external* validity. Exposing people to a fictional news article that they did not even choose to read does not of course reflect people's media use in the real world. The fictional news article might also mimic real media content – and thus be perceived as credible – more in some countries than in others. To minimize these "external validity-problems", the fictional articles were edited by a colleague at JMG who has worked as a journalist and editor (thank you again Per Alm!) to ensure that they resembled real news articles. Pilot studies were conducted in Spain, Sweden, and the UK before the experiment to test whether the stimulus material was perceived as credible across countries. Despite this, one key issue related to the external validity still remains: the fact that respondents could not choose which article they wanted to read. As Bennett and Iyengar (2008) state: "Actual exposure to political messages in the real world is no longer analogous to random assignment. As we have noted, news and public affairs information can easily be avoided by choice…Accordingly, it is important that experimental researchers use designs that combine manipulation with self-selection of exposure" (p. 724). I believe that this is a valid point, and I urge future studies to include such self-selection conditions in experiments. However, I believe that the advantages of the random assignment (e.g., avoiding the risk that differences in attitudes are due to people selecting media in line with their predispositions, rather than media effects) outweigh the disadvantages in this research project, as the "forced exposure" in the survey experiment is complemented by the panel surveys that account for a respondent's media use.

### Ethics

All answers in the panel surveys and in the survey experiment were anonymized. For the sake of transparency, the cross-national data sets are also available at the Austrian Social Science Data Archive (Meltzer et al., 2020b; Theorin et al., 2020), with minor changes due to GDPR. It should be noted that participants were debriefed after they had completed the survey experiment. More specifically, respondents received the following information: "…We'd also like to inform you that the news article you read about migration was fictional. The purpose of this element in the survey is to investigate how exposure to different types of news about migration might influence peoples' attitudes toward mobility and migration."

## Summary and contribution of the studies

### Study I. Some media matter more than others: Effects on attitudes toward and perceptions of immigration in Sweden

The first study in this dissertation is based on the three-wave panel survey conducted in Sweden, and investigates the effects of several different media types on 1) attitudes toward different types of immigration, 2) attitudes toward immigration from different regions, and 3) perceptions of the impact of immigration.[5] This study addresses RQ1: How do different types of media use influence attitudes towards, and perceptions of, migration?

The main finding of the article is that there are relatively few and weak effects of using traditional news media, but more substantial effects from using anti-immigration right-wing alternative media and pro-immigration left-wing alternative media. The results suggest that the use of right-wing alternative media stimulates more negative attitudes and perceptions of

[5] The study is co-authored with Jesper Strömbäck. I performed the data analyses in the article, whereas Jesper and I worked together on the theory, presentation of the results, and the discussion.

immigration, whereas left-wing alternative media lead to more positive attitudes and perceptions.

The study contributes to research on media effects in the context of migration in several ways. First, it is one of the few studies that investigates the effects of using several different media types – and to the best of my knowledge the *only* study investigating the effects of using alternative media. Second, it highlights the need to distinguish between attitudes and perceptions, and it is the first article that investigates effects on both concepts. Third, the article is based on a broader range of indicators of attitudes toward immigration, and thus measures immigration attitudes more comprehensively than many other studies within the field. Fourth, in contrast to many other studies, it relies on panel data instead of cross-sectional data, which provides opportunities to move beyond *correlations* and investigate *effects* (Finkel, 2007; Hillygus & Snell, 2018).

**Study II. Maintainers of ethnic hierarchies? Investigating the relationship between media use and attitudes toward perceived remote versus perceived close immigration**

Study II is based on the same panel survey as Study I and it investigates the effect of media use on attitudes towards immigration from regions that are generally perceived to be remote (Africa + the Middle East), versus close (other Nordic countries + other European countries). This study therefore also addresses RQ1, asking how different types of media use influence attitudes toward, and perceptions of, migration? In contrast to Study I, however, the focus is exclusively on attitudes, and the effects on immigration from different regions are compared. Study II also addresses RQ2: How do the effects of the media vary depending on the type of migration? This study also taps into RQ3 by investigating reciprocal influences between media use and attitudes toward immigration.

Again, the results suggest that the effects of using traditional media are weak, whereas the use of alternative media stimulate stronger effects. The findings indicate that the use of right-wing alternative media leads to more negative attitudes toward perceived remote immigration, but on the other hand stimulate more *positive* attitudes toward perceived close immigration.[6] The results also show that the use of right-wing alternative media and attitudes influenced each other mutually. The study contributes to research and complements the first study in two ways: first, by showing that there are likely different – and even opposing – effects of media use depending on where the immigration is from; and second, by showing that the relationships between the use of specific media and attitudes toward perceived remote and perceived close immigration are likely to be reciprocal. The study also complements the first study methodologically, by estimating fixed effects models instead of lagged OLS regression analyses in order to investigate effects of media use. This is beneficial since fixed effects models – by accounting for unobserved heterogeneity (Dilliplane et al., 2013; Finkel, 2007; Kruikemeier & Shehata, 2017) – are more powerful than OLS when it comes to investigating "one-way" effects.

**Study III. Different effects on different immigrant groups: Testing the media's role in triggering perceptions of economic, cultural, and security threats from immigration**

Study III builds on the cross-national two-wave panel data, and investigates (a) how media use influences different perceptions of threat from immigration from different regions in the world, and (b) whether potential effects are robust across countries. RQ1 and RQ2 are thus also addressed in this study. In contrast to Study II, however, this study focuses on (economic, cultural, and security) perceptions instead of attitudes. This cross-national study also

[6] Note that the use of left-wing alternative media was not investigated in this article.

addresses RQ6, asking if the media effects can be generalized across countries or if they are country-specific.

In line with the findings of Study II, the results suggest that media use on the aggregate level is more likely to trigger threat perceptions about non-European immigration (the Middle East + Africa) than threat perceptions about European immigration (Eastern Europe + Western Europe). The findings also indicate that media use not only stimulates different *degrees* of perceived threats about European vs. non-European immigration, but also different *types* of threats. Media use especially increased perceived cultural threats about non-European immigration, whereas the only negative effect that was found with respect to European immigration was a negative effect on economic perceptions.

Furthermore, this study suggests that there are clear cross-national differences, in terms of how likely media use is to trigger specific perceptions of immigration, the direction of the effects (positive vs. negative/threat perceptions), and what type of perceptions are affected (i.e., economic, cultural, and security perceptions). The results also show that the same media type can have different, and even opposite, effects in different countries.

This study contributes to research by highlighting the importance of differentiating between immigration from different regions, different types of perceptions, and conducting cross-national research. The study also provides a more complete understanding of the effects of media use on perceptions of immigration by analyzing the effects of four different media types on three different types of perceptions about immigration from non-European and European regions.

**Study IV. Does news frame affect free movement attitudes? A comparative analysis**

The fourth study of the dissertation is based on the cross-national survey experiment, and investigates how news frames affect attitudes toward the free movement of EU citizens, and

whether education moderates framing effects.[7] A fictional news article was manipulated by varying the valence of the frame (positive vs. negative), the type of frame (episodic vs. thematic), and the type of intra-EU migration (emigration vs. immigration). The study taps into three of the research questions: RQ2 – How do the effects of the media vary depending on the type of migration? (by testing effects of coverage on immigration and emigration), RQ4 – How does exposure to different media frames influence attitudes toward and perceptions of migration? (by comparing the effects of differently framed news articles), and RQ6 – Can the media effects be generalized across countries or are they country-specific? (by comparing effects in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the UK).

The main conclusion of the study is that the framing effects were few, weak, and not robust across countries. The study adds empirical nuances to the research field, focusing on how the media influences migration and EU-related attitudes, by showing that news framing does not always influence opinions. The study also adds nuances to research on "negativity bias" – that is, that people are more susceptible to negative than positive information, and that the effects of negative information are consequently greater (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997; Shehata et al., 2021; Walter, 2019). The findings of this study challenge this line of research by showing that the negatively framed articles did *not* stimulate stronger effects than the positively framed articles.

[7] The article is co-authored with colleagues from the REMINDER project. I had the main responsibility for the design of the experiment, as well as most parts of this article, however, I worked closely with Christine Meltzer during all stages of the process, and she contributed greatly to the design as well as data analysis, and the text of the article. It should also be noted that the third co-author – Sebastian Galyga – designed the stimulus material (i.e., the fictional articles). Finally, all co-authors contributed greatly to the study during project meetings and the revision process.

**Study V. How news frames affect immigration attitudes: Perceptions and emotions as underpinning mechanisms?**

The final study of the dissertation is also based on the cross-national survey experiment, although it focuses on respondents who read the articles about immigration, and thus excluded respondents who read the articles about *emigration*. It should also be noted that respondents in Romania were excluded from the analyses because the book that the study is included in focused on the other six countries.

Study V seeks to understand *why* different news frames affect attitudes toward immigration across countries, focusing on the mediating role of perceptions and emotions in this process. It is linked to RQ4 – How does exposure to different media frames influence attitudes toward and perceptions of migration? – RQ5 – Why can people's attitudes toward migration be affected by opposing ways of framing the issue? – and, RQ6 – Can the media effects be generalized across countries or are they country-specific?

The findings show that at the aggregate level, the positive frames decreased negative emotions, and in turn were related to more positive attitudes. The negative frames decreased *positive* emotions, which was linked to more negative attitudes. The negative thematic frame led to more negative perceptions, which in turn was linked to more negative attitudes. These findings suggest that both perceptions and emotions can function as mediators that explain framing effects on attitudes toward immigration, however, more effects were found on attitudes via emotions than via perceptions, suggesting that emotions seem to be a more important mediator than perceptions. It should, however, be noted that the results once again show that the effects are country-specific rather than universal. No framing effects were found in Hungary, Spain, or Sweden, suggesting that the effects found at the aggregate level were mainly driven by respondents in Germany, Poland, and the UK.

It should finally be noted that, in contrast to Study IV, some support was found for the negativity bias thesis in this study. Specifically, the results show that there were more, and slightly stronger, effects from the negative articles than from the positive articles. These seemingly conflicting findings between Study IV and this study will be discussed further in the section "Discussion and implications of the findings".

## Reflections and limitations of the studies

Although the five studies in this dissertation address important research questions and reach interesting results, they are of course not without weaknesses. These weaknesses are not only relevant for this dissertation, but also tap into more general issues for communication research and social science research more broadly. It is therefore my hope that this section will be useful for scholars who conduct research into media effects, media and migration and for scholars within other research fields. I will discuss the following five issues: 1) *asymmetry in operationalizations,* 2) *empirically distinguishing between concepts which are closely linked,* 3) *negligence in the use of key concepts,* 4) *focusing on news media while neglecting other media types and interpersonal communication,* and 5) *relying on media use exclusively in panel studies.*

Starting with the first issue – *asymmetry in operationalizations* – it is problematic because the findings of any study might be a consequence of inconsistency in terms of how variables are measured. An example related to this dissertation is that traditional media use was measured in the first two studies of this dissertation by asking respondents how often they had used a specific outlet in the *previous week*. The use of alternative media, in contrast, was measured by asking respondents how often they visited some news sites *in general*. While I do not believe that this contributed to the larger effects found due to alternative media

than traditional media to any great extent (I believe that difference in content is a much more crucial explanation), it cannot be ruled out that it had some influence on the results.

Another example of asymmetry in operationalizations is that in Study I the measures of attitudes distinguish attitudes toward different types of immigration, while no such distinction was made when it comes to the measures of perceptions. It might be, for instance, that the perceptions primarily tap into the type of immigration that is on respondents' minds (for instance more salient immigrant groups). However, it should be noted that the asymmetric measures do not appear to have resulted in any major problems, since the effects of attitudes and perceptions do not differ much in the study.

A third and final example relating to the asymmetry issue is that while the independent variable in the experiment (e.g., the fictional articles) focuses exclusively on *intra-EU* immigration, the dependent variable in the final study of this dissertation is general immigration attitudes.[8] It cannot be ruled out that this may have affected the results. For instance, it is reasonable to expect that this mis-match might have resulted in an underestimation of media effects in this paper, especially since Study III suggests that the media seems to be more powerful in influencing people when it comes to non-European immigration. In light of this, future research should strive for symmetrical measures to avoid the risk that results are affected by inconsistent operationalizations.

The second issue – *empirically distinguishing between concepts which are closely linked* – relates to the distinction between perceptions, emotions, and attitudes that I make in this dissertation. I followed previous communication and social psychological research suggesting that attitudes are guided by both a cognitive component (perceptions) and an affective component (emotions) (Asp, 1986 Eagly et al., 1994; Haddock & Zanna, 1998).

[8] The measure of attitudes toward immigration is an index that was created based on the following items: (a) The proportion of immigrants in [country] is too high (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), (b) Too many immigrants harm [country] (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), (c) Do you think that, overall, immigration is more positive or more negative for [country]? (0 = very negative, 10 = very positive).

While perceptions are related to assessments of how things *are* (i.e., perceptions of the attitude object), emotions tap into *feelings* or *affects* in relation to the attitude object, and attitudes are the overall degree of favorability or lack of favorability toward an attitude object, and closely related to how things *should* be (Ajzen, 2005; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). As clear as this theoretical distinction may appear, it should be acknowledged that the distinction – and the relationships between perceptions, emotions, and attitudes – is also a simplification. Since the concepts are closely linked to each other and mutually influential, a distinction at the empirical level can perhaps appear artificial, and too far away from the complex reality (Asp, 1986. For instance, it is reasonable to assume that people's responses to a statement such as "It happens too often that immigrants have customs and traditions that do not fit into Swedish society" (an item used to measure perceptions in Study I), are based on assessments of how things are/the implication of immigration, and affects in relation to immigrant groups.

Although an empirical division between three of the key concepts in the dissertation is not completely unproblematic, I have still chosen to disentangle the concepts as much as possible. The main reasons for this decision are that: 1) the media might have different effects on perceptions, emotions, and attitudes, which makes it crucial to distinguish between the concepts, 2) I aimed to investigate the role of perceptions and emotions in explaining the effects of news frames on immigration attitudes, and 3) within social science, simplifications of reality are often necessary in order to be able to answer research questions. This is also the case in the current dissertation.

Turning to the third issue – *negligence in the use of key concepts* – it is related to one of the most commonly used concepts in the second study: reinforcement. Strictly speaking, reinforcement effects refer to effects that are manifested in *weight* (Potter, 2011; Shehata et al., 2021). Put differently, a reinforcement effect occurs when people become more *certain* about their beliefs due to exposure to belief-congruent communication (Shehata et al., 2021).

However, researchers have claimed to observe reinforcement effects when observing shifts in magnitude (e.g., Igartua et al., 2011). This is also the case in the second study of the current dissertation. I investigate shifts in *magnitude* by examining whether specific media use stimulates *more* negative or positive immigration attitudes. I am thus self-critical when it comes to the use of the reinforcement concept, and I encourage researchers to be more careful about the use of key concepts. This is crucial in order to avoid misunderstandings about what is actually being investigated.

Moving on to the fourth issue – *focusing on news media while neglecting other media types and interpersonal communication* – it relates to the fact that this dissertation is centered around traditional news media and alternative media, whereas other media types that might also influence people's attitudes and perceptions are not accounted for. Central in this context is that social media has become an increasingly important source of political information and is therefore likely to be important for opinion formation. Audiences for traditional media outlets are declining: although it should be noted that people often access media content from traditional news outlets *via* social media (Heidenreich et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2017; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018). Some people also prefer entertainment media over news media (Shehata et al., 2015), and the potential power of such media in affecting people's attitudes should not be underestimated (Aitaki, 2018; Carpini, 2012). People's opinions and perceptions are not only a result of the content in different media genres, but also depend on people's social networks and interpersonal communication (Huckfeldt 2009; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). Investigating the effect of social media, entertainment media, and interpersonal communication are important tasks for future research.

The final issue – *relying exclusively on media use in panel studies* – applies to Study I, Study II, and Study III. All these studies draw on panel data with measures of media use, but these measures are not linked to content data. The fact that each respondent's exposure to

different types of messages about migration has not been approximated and incorporated in the analyses (which is done in linkage analyses), does of course limit the potential to understand exactly which content characteristics are likely to have effects – or not have effects. While the fact that the first two studies suggest that there are weaker and fewer effects from using traditional media than alternative media might be due to stronger frames in the alternative outlets, another possible explanation is that the respondents who only used traditional media were exposed to substantially less coverage about immigration.

Moreover, whereas it is probable that the different effects of different media use can be explained by differences in the content and salience of immigration-related issues, there might, as mentioned, also be other factors that matter. For instance, it might be that many people who use alternative media have stronger feelings of attachment and connection to these media than people generally have to traditional media outlets (e.g., the ideology-driven content of alternative media that might be in line with the world view of the audience). That might in turn result in alternative media having a greater effect. Another potential explanation for the more substantial effects of alternative media is that such media often link to other sites with more extreme content, and if users read the content on the linked sites it might of course also contribute to shaping their opinions. In light of this, a task for further research is to explore how great a role the content, per se, plays versus other factors in shaping immigration attitudes and perceptions – and in shaping attitudes and perceptions more generally.

## Discussion and implications of the findings

Almost 100 years ago, Lippmann (1922) argued that people's attitudes are not exclusively based on reality, but also on the pictures in their heads. Because of this, he stated that the analyst of public opinion must begin "by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture

working itself out upon the scene of action" (p. 11). This dissertation has followed Lippmann's advice by accounting for the interaction between national context (i.e., "the scene(s) of action") and media (which are key actors in forming the "human picture of the scene of action", by selecting, simplifying, and emphasizing certain aspects of reality), in shaping public attitudes and perceptions of migration ("the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action"). The findings of the dissertation suggest that the media can influence people's attitudes and perceptions, which supports Lippmann's claim that the pictures in people's heads play a central role in understanding the formation of public opinion. However, it also shows that media effects vary depending on type of migration, media type, prior migration attitudes, and between countries.

By combining media effect theories with intergroup relationship theories – and by using panel data and experimental data from seven European countries – this dissertation research suggests that: 1) media use is more powerful in triggering negative attitudes and perceptions about perceived remote immigration than perceived close immigration, 2) alternative media appear to have more substantial effects on attitudes toward immigration than traditional media, 3) media use and immigration attitudes influence each other mutually, and 4) the media do not always influence people's attitudes and perceptions, and the effects are country-specific rather than universal.

Some aspects of these findings – and their implications – should be discussed more thoroughly. In the remaining part of this section, I will therefore discuss the following questions: a) What are the implications of the finding that media effects vary depending on where the immigration is from? b) Do the more substantial effects of alternative media mean that these types of outlets are more important than traditional media? c) Which factors might explain the cross-national variations, and what are the implications of the variation in media effects? d) How can the relatively stable attitudes, and the generally quite weak media effects,

be explained? e) What are the implications of the findings from a societal and democratic perspective?

**What are the implications of the finding that media effects vary depending on where the immigration is coming from?**

The finding that the effects of media use on attitudes and perception depend on where the migration is from is supported by Study II and Study III. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that the main findings from the experimental studies also depend on which type of migration is being investigated. First, it can be noted that fewer effects were found in Study IV than in all the other studies in this thesis. This might be because the focus of Study IV is on attitudes toward free movement instead of attitudes toward immigration. As stated in the article: "European integration and sentiments of connections with other Europeans might make the public more resistant toward media coverage about free movement within the EU compared to media coverage about migration from other regions" (p. 15). It is thus reasonable to expect that more effects – especially from the negatively framed articles focusing on immigration – would be detected if effects on broader immigration attitudes were investigated, and if the fictional news article was also manipulated by varying the group cue (e.g., European immigration vs. non-European immigration).

The asymmetry between Study IV and Study V in terms of support for the "negativity bias thesis" might also be understood in light of the finding that there are different effects with respect to different types of migration. Study IV showed that the negatively framed articles did not have stronger effects on attitudes toward free movement than the positively framed articles. One possible explanation for this is that migration-related issues are more often negatively framed than positively framed. In line with research on habituation (Potter, 2012) people might therefore have become more accustomed to negative frames, which in

turn may decrease the effect on attitudes. The findings of Study V do, in contrast, suggest that there were more and stronger effects from the negative articles on attitudes toward immigration. This suggests that although the results of Study IV indicate that habituation *can* trump negativity bias, this is not always the case. I believe that these seemingly conflicting findings can be at least partly explained by the fact that the focus of Study IV is on attitudes toward free movement for people within Europe, whereas the focus of Study V is on attitudes toward immigration. As mentioned, research on ethnic hierarchies suggests that immigration from more remote regions generally is perceived to pose a greater symbolic and realistic threat to the host society, than immigration from more similar regions (Dustmann & Preston, 2007; Ford, 2011). It might therefore have been easier to stimulate negative attitudes when the focus was on general immigration attitudes than attitudes toward free movement attitudes within the EU.

The fact that the findings of this dissertation clearly suggest that negative attitudes and perceptions tend to be easier to trigger when it comes to immigration that is perceived to be more remote than immigration that is perceived to originate more closely is crucial from a theoretical point of view. It highlights the relevance of continuing to integrate key findings and theories from the migration literature into the communication literature. Only by acknowledging the complexity of migration – and by making use of the migration literature – can scholars provide more in-depth insights into media effects in the context of migration.

**Do the more substantial effects of alternative media mean that these types of outlets are more important than traditional media?**

The first two studies in this dissertation show that using alternative media has more substantial effects than using traditional media. Moreover, in Study II, reciprocal relationships were found between alternative media use and attitudes toward immigration. In Study III, in

contrast, relatively few effects were found compared to the first two studies, and I believe that the absence of alternative media in Study III is a key explanation for this.

In light of this, one might ask whether the greater effects of using alternative media outlets imply that such outlets are more important than the traditional media in shaping immigration attitudes and perceptions, however, I do not believe it is that simple. Although the influence of using traditional media appears to be more modest, it is important to remember that the reach of traditional media is still much greater than the reach of alternative media (as shown in Study I). The fact that effects of using traditional media at the specific time of measurement were small does not mean that the traditional media in general has a weak effect. Instead, it is reasonable to assume that earlier exposure to media content in traditional media might have contributed to shaping the stable attitudes and perceptions that many respondents held during the time periods when the panel surveys were conducted. Moreover, although the findings suggest that the effects sizes of using traditional media in general are quite small, these effects can become very important over time. Although the roles played by traditional and alternative media in shaping immigration attitudes differ, both media types are therefore central in this process.

**Which factors explain the cross-national variations, and what are the implications of the great variation in media effects?**

The fact that this dissertation shows that the media effects vary greatly between countries is important, as it highlights the key role that context can play in understanding how, when, and why the media influence public opinion. In fact, the findings indicate that context is more powerful than individual-level factors. For instance, Study IV shows that educational level did not moderate the effects of the media in the vast majority of the cases, whereas media effects varied between countries in all three cross-national studies included in this dissertation.

Interestingly, there sometimes seem to be greater differences in media effects between countries that are quite similar in several respects than between countries that differ more from each other. For example, when comparing all the significant media effects identified in the three cross-national studies it can be noted that six negative media effects were found in Germany (four effects in Study III and two in Study V) and no positive media effects, whereas one positive media effect was found in Sweden (in Study III) and no negative effects. This indicates that Germany is closer to, for instance, Hungary than Sweden in terms of media effects in the context of migration (two negative effects were found in Hungary, in Study III), despite the fact that Germany and Sweden are more alike in factors such as migration flows, political landscape, economic conditions, media landscape, and media coverage of migration. In light of these findings, it is difficult at this stage to even speculate on which factors that explain most of the cross-national variation. That said, it is possible that the relatively many negative effects that were observed in Germany in the cross-national studies, compared to the lack of negative effects found in Sweden, may partly be due to differences in immigration attitudes. Research suggests that Swedish attitudes towards immigration were the second most positive among 24 European countries, whereas Germans attitudes were located in the middle among the countries (see Table 1). Since the attitudes were less positive in Germany, Germans might be more likely to develop more negative attitudes than Swedes as a consequence of negative media coverage. That would be in line with research suggesting that the media might be more powerful when media coverage is more in line with people's current attitudes (Druckman et al., 2012).

The findings suggesting that the influence of media depends to a high degree on the context highlights the need to develop a theoretical framework that can function as a tool for analyzing how contextual factors condition media effects. As argued in Study III, qualitative in-depth contextual-focused studies (Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019) could be a suitable starting

point for theory building. The qualitative approach could in a second step be complemented by a quantitative study that estimates multilevel models (which would require a larger number of countries than in this dissertation) to test the role of different contextual factors (Lecheler et al., 2019). Another way forward might be to apply a most similar systems design (instead of a most different systems design). Ideally, these approaches could be combined in the same research project to gain both an in-depth understanding that can provide a solid foundation for theory building about contextual media effects, and opportunities to test the generalizability of such theories. Given the modest attention paid to the interplay between the media and social context in the media-effects literature (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), that type of project would make a very important contribution to the field.

**How can the relatively stable attitudes, and the generally quite weak media effects, be explained?**

Another finding of this dissertation that should be discussed is that respondent attitudes and perceptions toward immigration were relatively stable over time, and the effects of media use were quite few and weak – despite the fact that the longitudinal data was collected in the midst of the so-called refugee crisis (the data used for Study I and Study II), and right after the crisis (Study III). For readers in Sweden, it might appear especially surprising that public opinion did not change more – and that the media effects were not greater – during 2014-2016 (which is the focus of the first two studies). This period was characterized by a sharp rise in refugee immigration, followed by increasingly restrictive refugee policies (Migrationsverket, 2017; Regeringskansliet, 2016a). It would be reasonable to expect that such a development would lead to substantial shifts in public opinion. The results from the Swedish SOM institute show that, during the same time period, an increasing number of Swedish citizens believed that implementing more restrictive refugee policies was desirable (Demker, 2017). The fact

that this dissertation has not exclusively focused on refugee immigration is most probably a central explanation for these (seemingly) conflicting results.

A probable explanation for why there were not greater changes in public opinion – despite dramatic changes in migration flows and migration policies – is that many people already had strong opinions about the highly salient migration issue, which made public opinion more resistant to change (Zaller, 1992). Although people's attitudes tend to be strongly influenced by the signals from political elites (Zaller, 1992), the increasingly restrictive refugee policies that were implemented in Sweden were initially presented as a temporary "breathing space" for refugee reception (Regeringskansliet, 2016b; Strömbäck & Theorin, 2018), which may be seen as a somewhat vague and unclear signal. The effects on public opinion might thus have been more extensive if the new policies, for instance, had been presented as permanent solutions to economic and cultural problems associated with immigration. Only later did the majority of the political parties start to argue that Sweden needs more restrictive policies on a permanent basis.

It is also conceivable that there may have been clearer changes in public opinion – and larger media effects – after the panel studies on which this dissertation is based, because the political landscape has changed substantially in many of the countries since year 2018. In Hungary and Poland, press freedom has decreased and the radical right governments appear to have consolidated their hegemony over the media landscapes (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). There has also been an upsurge of radical right parties in some of the countries: in 2019, the Law and Justice Party in Poland increased its electoral support by 6%, in Spain the radical right party Vox entered parliament, and in Romania a new radical right party, Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, was founded (Politico, 2021). The migration policies in Sweden have continued to move in a more restrictive direction. For instance, the Swedish government – and the majority of the parties in parliament – have recently proposed that temporary

residence permits should be the main rule instead of permanent residence permits, and that skills in Swedish should be a requirement for permanent residence permits (Regeringskansliet, 2021). Furthermore, the Moderate party, as well as the Christian Democrats and the Liberal party, have opened the door for more far-reaching cooperation with the Sweden Democrats, which is a radical-right and anti-immigration party. To investigate whether these developments have influenced public opinion and the media effects is a task for future research.

**What are the implications of the findings from a societal and democratic perspective?**

The fact that the findings show that the media can influence perceptions and attitudes toward migration (although this is not always the case) has great relevance for people working in media organizations. Although there is no requirement for the media to consider the effects that their reporting might have, they should at least be aware of the fact that negative coverage might trigger more negative perceptions and attitudes – especially when it comes to immigration that is perceived to be more remote – whereas positive coverage can lead to more positive perceptions and attitudes. Previous research has also shown that negative and threatening news coverage on immigration and immigrants can have other important societal implications. It might increase support for more restrictive immigration policies (Costello & Hodson, 2011), support for deportation (Dalsklev & Kunst, 2015), function as a trigger of stereotypes and prejudice (Schemer, 2012b), undermine social cohesion (Grobet, 2014) and contribute to the dehumanization of immigrants, which in turn can lead to justifications of exclusion and the unfair treatment of immigrants (Esses, 2008; Esses et al., 2013).

The fact that the media has a tendency to focus on negative aspects more than positive aspects, and often links migration to threats (Eberl et al., 2018; Eberl et al., 2019), risks meaning that people receive substantially more information about the potential disadvantages

of immigration compared to the potential benefits of immigration. More balanced and multifaceted reporting would, on the other hand, improve the conditions allowing people to form independent and well-informed opinions on migration issues, which is a journalistic ideal from a democratic perspective (Strömbäck, 2005). The ideal of well-informed citizens is particularly important when it comes to highly politicized issues, such as migration-related issues.

The findings of this project also have implications for policy makers. Since negative attitudes and perceptions of threat might lead to destructive intergroup relations (Stephan et al., 2009) and undermine social cohesion (Grobet, 2014), politicians with preferences for avoiding tensions between immigrants and the majority population might, for instance, influence the media coverage by communicating information about the positive implications of migration.

From a theoretical perspective, the fact that the results suggest that some media outlets and media frames stimulate more negative attitudes and perceptions, whereas other outlets and frames have the opposite effects, is important. This is a specific example showing that media can affect attitudes and perceptions even on salient issues such as migration. This can be considered desirable from a democratic normative viewpoint, as it suggests that people are open to reconsidering their views. As Chong and Druckman (2007) state "If debate cannot introduce new considerations in people's minds, but can only serve to remind them of their existing values, then persuasion through the exchange of information is impossible…Stable attitudes can reflect sophisticated reasoning or dogmatism and inflexibility. Hence, both excessive instability and excessive stability of public opinion can be liabilities in a democracy" (p. 120). In light of this, the fact that this dissertation shows that the media can influence migration-related attitudes and perceptions – but that this is not always the case, and when it happens the effects are often small – can be seen as an indication that public opinion

is located somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, ranging from (undesirable) extensive instability to (undesirable) extensive stability. Chong and Druckman argue that such a middle position is ideal: "A citizenry that has informed opinions but is tolerant of alternative perspectives and amenable to change in the face of a compelling argument" (p.121). It might, however, be problematic if attitudes and perceptions over time develop in opposite directions among different groups of people, depending on what type of media they are using. Such a development is likely to increase tensions between different groups, and lead to difficulties in forming immigration policies that are seen as legitimate by the public.

## Conclusion

Public opinion serves as the foundation of political outcomes in democracies, since it predicts people's policy attitudes, and since politicians tend to respond to public opinion (Blinder & Jeannet, 2018; Druckman & Leeper, 2012). This is also the case when it comes to migration-related issues: politicians in immigrant-receiving countries often react to perceived public pressure for more restrictive immigration policies (Blinder & Jeannet, 2018), and immigration was a key concern for citizens who voted "Leave" in the Brexit referendum (Prosser et al., 2016). Public opinion of immigration might also influence intergroup relations and behavior (Cottrell et al., 2010; Johnston & Glasford, 2014; Stephan et al., 2009), and threat perceptions of immigration are a strong predictor of votes for radical right parties (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012).

In light of this, it is highly relevant to understand how attitudes toward migration and perceptions of migration are formed. Importantly, there is evidence indicating that the pictures inside people's heads matter more than real world factors when it comes to migration-related issues. A specific example is that the *perceived* size of immigration is a stronger predictor of attitudes toward immigration than the *actual* size of immigration (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov,

2019). As the central source of information – and by selecting, simplifying, and emphasizing certain aspects of societal issue – the media plays a central role in the process of constructing such perceptions and pictures inside our heads (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Lecheler et al., 2019; Sheafer, 2007). It is thus crucial to examine the role of the media in shaping attitudes toward and perceptions of migration.

This dissertation has provided in-depth knowledge about when and how the media influences attitudes toward migration and perceptions of migration in several ways. The main findings of this dissertation are that: (a) The effects of media use on attitudes and perceptions depend on where the migration is coming from, (b) The effects vary between media types, and alternative media appear to have more substantial effects on attitudes toward immigration than traditional media, (c) The relationships between media use and attitudes are likely to be reciprocal, (d) Emotions and perceptions can function as mediators that explain framing effects on attitudes toward immigration, but emotions seem to be a more important mediator than perceptions, and last but not least, (e) Media do not always move public opinion on migration, and the effects are country-specific rather than universal.

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