

Final Report: Migration Reporting in Germany

German Media

**Erich Brost Institut
for International
Journalism:**

Merle van Berkum

Juliane Niepert

Susanne Fengler

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1. Control Sheet

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2. List of Participants

Participant No.	Participant Organisation Name	Country
1 (Coordinator)	University of Goettingen (UGOE)	Germany
2	Bocconi University (UB)	Italy
3	University of St. Andrews (USTAN)	Great Britain
4	Institute for Population and Human Studies (IPHS)	Bulgaria
5	Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (IPI)	Croatia
6	Max Planck Society (MPG)/Population Europe	Germany
7	Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)	IGO, Sweden
8	THE CIVICS Innovation Hub (CIVICS)	Germany



3. Objectives

The European Union's promise of prosperity and security is based on the principle of "unity in diversity" and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms, rights and democratic participation of its citizens. The vast majority of EU citizens share these values. At the same time, democracies are in crisis. Populist parties are fuelling fears and spreading the narrative that migration leads to a loss of identity. There is no doubt that migration always raises the question of identity and belonging. How do we organize integration and participation in such a way that cohesion is created despite diverse identities? The project "Identities - Migration - Democracy" (We-ID) is therefore concerned with the transformation of individual and collective identities, social and territorial cohesion and democracy under the conditions of demographic change, particularly with regard to migration and growing population diversity. We-ID follows an innovative research path by a) analysing the impact of migration on identities, belonging, cohesion and democracy, taking into account both the impact on host communities and the changes in the identities of migrants and their descendants, and b) elaborating the interrelationship between identities, cohesion, resilience and democracy. In addition to quantitative data analysis, we will use qualitative methods at the local level (e.g. pilot study in a border region, content analysis, case studies) to look for factors that strengthen resilient democratic communities. By consistently pursuing a transdisciplinary approach within our Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab (We-PARL) throughout the project, we will create a platform for mutual learning between different stakeholders from the European to the local level, while at the same time contributing to evidence-based and thoroughly discussed policy recommendations. In addition, based on our findings, we will develop materials such as toolboxes that can be used by practitioners and local actors (We-SCOUTS).

In detail, We-ID pursues the following objectives:

- Objective 1:** Revise and evaluate the relevant conceptual issues concerning identities, belonging and cohesion, and establish their relationship with resilience and democracy, with a particular emphasis on migration.
- Objective 2:** Map trends and patterns of identities, belonging and cohesion together with their drivers, including geographic differences, gender, age and education, as well as immigrant status and employment.
- Objective 3:** Investigate how the social identities and political participation of immigrants and their descendants differ across European countries, what factors influence identity and participation of immigrants, and what assumptions can be made for the future.
- Objective 4:** Extending objectives 2 and 3 through a regional pilot study in a Bulgarian border region. To analyse, how migration flows affect both the migrant communities themselves and their identities, and the communities exposed to new and large-scale immigration.
- Objective 5:** Development of an inclusive concept for resilient democratic communities (ReDeCos), through the identification (five case studies) of local factors that hinder or strengthen belonging.



- Objective 6:** In addition, development of a Civic Competences Toolbox (CCT) for local actors (We-SCOUTS) equipped with civic skills and competences to support local communities, moderate conflicts and controversies and create spaces for participation.
- Objective 7:** Establish the We-PARL - Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab - transdisciplinary platform, the tool which supports all thematic research areas foreseen in the project.
- Objective 8:** To disseminate We-ID findings, drawing on the outcomes and findings from the We-PARL, communicating them to a broader audience.
- Objective 9:** The project will identify factors at both national and local level that hinder social and political participation and at the same time develop policy recommendations on how to achieve equality and mitigate discrimination against women, LGBTIQ+ and ethnic minorities.



4. Introduction

Migration is a persistent and defining demographic phenomenon in Germany: In 2020, more than a quarter of the population (26.7%) had a migration background. Between 2011 and 2020, approximately 14.6 million people immigrated to Germany from abroad.

Asylum figures have fluctuated in recent years: After a peak of 745,545 applications in 2015/2016, the number of applications initially declined until the war in Ukraine caused a surge, after which applications rose again to 351,915 at the end of 2022 and in 2023. In 2025 (up to July), 86,916 initial and subsequent applications were registered – fewer overall than in the previous year.

The data show that migration remains a structurally significant and dynamic issue for Germany – demographically, politically, socially, and in the media. It forms the basis for understanding current debates about integration and media portrayals of migration.

The analysis presented here is part of the research project “We-ID – Identities – Migration – Democracy,” based at the University of Göttingen and funded by the EU. The project explores the connection between identity, belonging, cohesion, and democracy in the context of ongoing migration, aiming to develop a concept for resilient democratic communities. While the preceding content analysis demonstrated how migration is portrayed in German media, the focus groups allowed researchers to investigate how these portrayals are actually received in migrant communities, particularly in the context of transnational media consumption.

Against this background, the final report in this context aims to highlight how representations of migration in German media correspond to the perception of the Turkish and Russian diaspora in Germany and what role diaspora and exile media play (or can play) for social cohesion.

To analyze the role of the media in migration reporting from different perspectives, it is important to consider individual aspects separately. Against this background, the final report is structured around the following research questions:

U1: How is migration portrayed in German media along the political spectrum, from left to right?

U2: How do experts from the Turkish and Russian diaspora describe this migration reporting?

U3: From the perspective of the experts interviewed, what significance do diaspora and exile media have for social orientation and belonging, especially in the context of migration?

4.1. Migration between 2015/16 and 2025: Impact on Politics, Society and Integration Policy

The highest immigration levels of 2015/16 had political and social consequences for Germany. Firstly, it changed the public debate on migration, shifted party-political priorities, contributed to greater polarization, and favored the rise of right-wing populist parties, which were able to sharpen their profile through positions critical of migration.

Koch, Biehler, Knapp, and Kipp (2023) examined political developments in Germany following the 'wave of immigration' in 2015/16 in their study. According to the study, successful integration is achieved primarily through a coordinated interplay of key policy areas such as the labor market,



housing, and education, as well as through transparent political communication and the involvement of civil society actors. At the same time, the refugee policy of the German government under Angela Merkel, which is often positively assessed internationally, remains highly controversial domestically.

Recent analyses (see, for example, Frymark 2024) illustrate that Germany has again experienced a high influx of refugees since 2023, which has exacerbated social tensions in some areas. This development also weakened public trust in the federal government under Olaf Scholz and contributed to the development of a more restrictive asylum policy.

The issue played a key role in the 2025 federal election campaign. This was most recently evident in the measures to limit immigration implemented by the federal government under Friedrich Merz, which took office in spring 2025. The CDU/CSU pursued a significantly more restrictive approach, while the SPD and the Green Party emphasized integration-oriented and European-coordinated approaches. The AfD advocated a radically isolationist position, which highly emotionalized the discourse and revealed a deep societal divide, while demographic and economic arguments—such as migration as a contribution to stabilizing the labor market and social security systems—received little attention.

Overall, migration remains a central political issue due to recurring refugee movements and demographic developments, and it continues to attract media attention (Berlin Institute 2025).

4.2. Migration in German Media

Migration is a recurring focus of political, public, and media discourse. Media coverage, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping public perception and opinion formation.

Studies show that media coverage during the 2015 refugee crisis was initially predominantly humanitarian in nature, but subsequently shifted increasingly towards security, economic and socio-political risks – coinciding with a growing polarization of public opinion (Heidenreich et al., 2019).

Furthermore, content analyses show that migrants and refugees are frequently underrepresented in media coverage and, when they are addressed, predominantly appear in problem-oriented contexts, such as in connection with crime, terrorism, or social tensions (Eberl et al., 2018; Maurer et al., 2018). Although quality media offer nuanced portrayals, refugees are often depicted abstractly, while political actors and institutions dominate the media discourse (Maurer et al., 2018).

Polarization is particularly evident in the reporting of right-wing media. Analyses of the right-wing weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit*, for example, show that migration is primarily portrayed there as a threat to national identity, culture, and security. This portrayal is often linked to a problematic depiction of Islam (Nordheim et al., 2019). Above all, since 2015, migration has become a central theme in right-wing media discourse (Czymara & Bauer, 2023).

A different picture emerges from studies on the reporting of left-wing media outlets such as the *taz*. These studies reveal a greater diversity of actors and political discourses, particularly in 2015 (Blokker et al., 2023). Furthermore, other research indicates that common media economic logics and practices favor discriminatory portrayals of migrants, thus opening up new spaces for right-wing actors to disseminate racist and discriminatory narratives.

Overall, the research shows that the topic of migration in German media is primarily shaped by political events, social discourse and editorial guidelines.



4.3. Development and Status of Ethnomedia

Ethnic media, meaning media offerings from migrant-language backgrounds in Germany, have established themselves in the media landscape since the early 2000s, but remain a comparatively small and fragmented field of research. Earlier works, such as that by Weber-Menges (2005), document the strong growth and increasing differentiation of ethnic media in Germany. Over the years, the range of offerings has expanded not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

Research now focuses more on the question of whether ethnic media support integrative processes or contribute to segregation. Some scholars attribute a form of digital isolation to ethnic media, creating parallel worlds and potentially leading to segregation (Weiß & Trebbe, 2001). For example, some studies suggest that almost all Turkish ethnic media report little and mostly negatively about Germany, thus being less conducive to the integration process (see, for example, Ates 2002; Müller 2005; Greger & Otto 2000; Becker & Behnisch, 2000). Other studies, however, show that transcultural media use primarily facilitates orientation and a sense of belonging (Hepp et al., 2011).

The research thus does not arrive at a clear answer, but rather shows that diaspora media can have both integrative and segregating effects. Which effect predominates depends on several factors, such as the type of media, the generation, individual usage patterns, and the respective user groups (Karim & Al-Rawi, 2018).

5. Methods

This study employs a combined methodology approach, linking two distinct methods to investigate a broader research topic in order to generate complementary results and gain deeper insights. In this study, content analysis and focus group analysis were combined. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of media discourses and relevant phenomena. The integration of the methods was achieved through methodological triangulation or a mixed-methods design (for comparison, see, for example, Loosen et al., 2012; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009).

In the course of the study, the two methods were employed with different, yet complementary, focuses. First, content analysis enabled the systematic recording of key themes and patterns in migration reporting in Germany. The results provided an overview of dominant narratives, framings, and temporal developments in the reporting. Building on these findings, qualitative focus groups were conducted to facilitate deeper reflection and contextualization of the patterns identified in the content analysis, particularly with regard to the role of ethnic media. This allowed perceptions, evaluations, and individual perspectives to be revealed that could not be captured by quantitative analyses alone. Simultaneously, this created a space in which the results could be critically examined, recontextualized, and previously unanticipated aspects identified.

Detailed descriptions of the implementation and evaluation of the content analysis and the focus groups can be found in the respective individual reports on which this work is based (see the report on the content analysis and the report on the focus groups). The methods were integrated twofold: firstly, at the level of the interview guide design, by presenting the focus groups with concrete results from the content analysis, and secondly, at the interpretive level, by systematically relating both data levels to each other in the subsequent discussion section.



5.1. Content Analysis

The first step of the study involved a content analysis, partly based on existing datasets from the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism and supplemented by original research. Two existing datasets were used: a study from a project funded by the Otto Brenner Foundation (2015–2018) and a study from the "AMAZE" project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office (2023–2024). In addition, original content analyses of articles from taz (2020–2024) and Junge Freiheit (2020–2025) were conducted for this study. The sample comprises a total of 600 articles from the print and online editions of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, taz, and Junge Freiheit. A maximum of 100 articles per publication were selected using random sampling. Article selection was based on a systematic keyword search using Boolean operators to ensure that the articles dealt substantially with migration.

The coding was based on the codebook developed by Fengler et al. (2020) and revised for the "AMAZE" project, with minor adjustments for the German context. In addition to topics, actors, and geographical references, the evaluative tone of the reporting (positive, neutral, negative) was also analyzed.

5.2. Focus Groups

Building on the results of the content analysis, two focus groups were conducted in November 2025. Each focus group consisted of five participants with a Turkish or Russian diaspora background, most of whom work in journalism, publishing, or academia in the field of diaspora, exile, or migration media. The group size was deliberately kept small to allow for an intensive and in-depth exchange; no claim to representativeness is made.

The focus groups were conducted online via Zoom, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The Russian focus group was held in English, the Turkish one in German. All participants were fully informed in advance, participated voluntarily, and remained anonymous. The discussions followed a semi-structured guide, which served as a flexible framework.

6. Results

The following results are presented in summary form. Detailed empirical findings are presented in the content analysis report and the focus group report, where they can be explored in greater depth.

6.1. Results Content Analysis

The content of migration reporting in leading German media outlets is similar. Migration is predominantly viewed from a national perspective, while international or European contexts—such as the asylum and migration policies of other EU member states—play only a minor role in the reporting. At the same time, a political approach to the topic dominates: migration appears primarily as the subject of political negotiation processes and security policy debates. This structure is also reflected in the selection of actors, as political and state voices clearly predominate, while migrants or refugees themselves are rarely visible as speaking subjects.

Looking at the tone of the reporting, an ambivalent picture emerges. While the Süddeutsche Zeitung, in particular, frequently adopted neutral to moderately positive portrayals and a stronger integration of humanitarian aspects in 2015/2016, subsequent years' reporting exhibits a broader spectrum of opinions, increasingly including voices critical of migration. At the same time, leading media outlets repeatedly frame migration as a societal risk, for example, by emphasizing crime and security and

economic policy challenges. Migration thus remains a prominent topic, but is increasingly discussed in a problem-oriented and negative context.

The supplementary analysis of so-called "alternative media," or media with a more pronounced political stance, illustrates the polarization of the German media landscape. Junge Freiheit almost consistently frames migration as a threat and a political problem, closely linking the topic to crime, cultural difference, security policy issues, and economic challenges. Accordingly, its reporting predominantly paints a negative picture of migration.

The taz, on the other hand, takes a significantly more nuanced approach. While migration is also strongly framed politically here, human rights, social, and critical perspectives are more frequently integrated. In the taz, negative framing refers primarily to political reactions, institutional failures, and structural inequalities, and not to migration itself.

6.2. Results Focus Groups Analysis

The analysis of the focus groups reveals a distinctly differentiated media consumption pattern within the Russian group, particularly with regard to exile and diaspora media. Exile media primarily target an audience within Russia but are generally more independent of state censorship. Diaspora media, on the other hand, often have existed for several generations, are post-Soviet in character, and are hardly consumed by the focus group participants.

The goal of exile media outlets to continue reaching people in Russia despite censorship and information isolation also shapes their choice of topics, which are predominantly strongly Russia-centric. Issues such as migration, for example to Germany, are rarely addressed – firstly, because they have limited relevance for Russian readers, and secondly, because the focus is often on visa issues, labor market situations, and bureaucratic hurdles. For example, Friedrich Merz's "cityscape statement" was not reported, as the Russian diaspora in particular did not feel addressed by it. As one participant explained: „I think this Merz comment it mostly goes to this racist narrative, which, [...] doesn't really reflect on Russian society”.

Furthermore, the reporting of exile media after 2022 is heavily influenced by debates about victim status, Russia's responsibility, differing anti-war positions, and conflicts between different groups, such as political refugees, labor migrants, or different generations of post-Soviet migrants.

Even in Russian propaganda media, the topic of migration, particularly the migration of Tajiks, is rarely discussed from diverse perspectives, despite being a major social issue in Russia itself. This lack of diversity in reporting also means that discrimination and state measures against migrants – especially Tajiks – are hardly ever addressed in the media.

The participants' perception of German migration reporting is ambivalent. Migration is portrayed as an exceptional phenomenon rather than as the norm, „[Germany] is such a multicultural society, but now and still, migration is covered as a kind of phenomenon”, a participant says. The national perspective predominates in the presentation. Positive portrayals are often limited to individual success stories, which is perceived as simplistic and not diverse enough.

The focus group on the Turkish diaspora also highlights a highly fragmented media landscape, shaped by different generations of migrants, political positions, ethnic affiliations, and social backgrounds. Initially, the questions posed to the focus groups also aimed at how ethnic media report on migration. However, as the discussion progressed, the participants' focus shifted significantly to the structure, function, and use of diaspora media themselves. This aligns with previous research showing that



Turkish ethnic media report comparatively little about Germany, meaning that migration to Germany plays only a minor role in their reporting.

Migration reporting in Turkish pro-government media is highly politicized and follows the respective government agenda. This is particularly evident in the case of Syrian refugees, whose portrayal shifted from initially positive integration narratives (2011–2015) to increasingly hostile and security-related frames, especially in the run-up to political elections. One participant reported that “when many Syrians arrived around 2015, my impression was that Syrian refugees were discussed in a very positive way [...] and that this then changed very quickly.” Migration is increasingly constructed as an economic, cultural, or security threat.

The group perceives German media coverage of migration as undifferentiated and repetitive. Migrants are usually portrayed either as a problem or as a supposed “success story,” while diverse everyday realities and migrant perspectives remain underrepresented. German media often only react to provocative statements, such as Chancellor Friedrich Merz’s “cityscape” comment. Some participants report that media coverage of migration, due to recurring narratives, evokes hardly any emotional response: “[It] doesn’t trigger anything in me anymore when I read it like that.” Others, however, report anger and frustration, especially given the historical continuities. This structure and style of reporting is perceived by the participants as an expression of a dominant societal majority position that has been a constant feature of migration reporting since the 1970s.

7. Discussion of the Results

Overall, migration appears to be a topic that often lacks depth and a diverse, complex presentation. In media outlets such as SZ, Welt, and FAZ, migration is predominantly discussed in the context of current political debates. Mere news value alone does not seem to be sufficient for the topic to be considered relevant; almost always, an additional political “hook” is needed, which often lies in political decisions, security policy, or pointed statements by political actors. This observation coincides with the findings from the focus groups, especially the Turkish group, in which migration is also perceived as a topic with limited media relevance – both in German media and in diaspora and exile media.

The content analysis shows that a shift is taking place in the media discourse. While the humanitarian aspects of the refugee crisis were still being discussed in 2015/2016, these are increasingly taking a back seat. Instead, political and, above all, security policy aspects are gaining in importance. This development—particularly in the SZ, WELT, and FAZ—can be described as a process of politicization and securitization.

The increasingly negative tone of reporting can be interpreted as an indication of growing social polarization and a political shift to the right. At the same time, reporting reflects a shift in social attitudes, with migration increasingly perceived less as normal and more as a permanent source of conflict.

The content analysis shows that taz plays a special role in this media field. In its reporting on migration, taz attempts to introduce new and diverse perspectives and to integrate migrant voices more strongly. Migration is treated not merely as a phenomenon or political problem, but as a social reality. At the same time, the reporting is guided by current news values and the current political situation, so that even this left-wing medium often uses political hooks.

The situation is different at *Junge Freiheit*, where the topic of migration is consistently embedded in the media outlet's agenda and is always viewed as a problem, regardless of the political situation. These are problems that arise for economic, security, or social reasons. Overall, the analysis shows that the topic of migration is framed differently across the political spectrum.

In discussions with the two focus groups, it became clear that the basic patterns of migration reporting are not only found in Germany, but also in media discourse within Russia and Turkey. In these countries, too, migration, for example of Syrians to Turkey or Tajiks to Russia, is framed in a problem-oriented and political manner. Migration is usually viewed from a national perspective and primarily portrayed as a danger and a risk, almost regardless of the country in which it is reported.

The focus groups also make it clear that migration remains a central issue and social constant across generations (especially in the Turkish focus group, from guest workers to the present day), but that its complexity is only reflected to a limited extent in the media. The perception of individual political statements, such as Chancellor Merz's "cityscape statement," varies.

While it was perceived in the Turkish focus group as part of a familiar, historically grown problematization of migration and evoked strong emotional reactions, it hardly played a role in the Russian focus group. There, the participants did not feel addressed, which points to both different positions within the German migration debate and differing experiences of visibility, racialization, and belonging.

The evaluation of the focus groups also made it clear that diaspora and exile media often play an orienting and identity-forming role. They manage to address experiences and topics that are rarely covered in established media and can help with integration. These may be simple topics arising from the everyday lives of migrant groups, such as guidance or problems relating to visa issuance, labor market situations, and bureaucratic hurdles. On the other hand, migrant groups often feel that they are not adequately represented in the mainstream German media, which increases the importance of ethnic media. At the same time, there is criticism that individual media outlets or actors present themselves as the only trustworthy voices and use this position to reinforce polarization across community boundaries.

8. Conclusion

In summary, it is evident that migration is predominantly portrayed in the German media in a political and conflictual manner, while humanitarian and everyday perspectives are increasingly taking a back seat. Depending on the political spectrum, migration is framed differently, but it remains predominantly a phenomenon and is rarely treated as a social norm.

The focus groups illustrate that diaspora and exile media play an important role in providing orientation and, in some cases, shaping identity, especially where quality media do not adequately reflect the realities of migrants. A significant limitation of the study is that content analysis and qualitative focus groups do not build on each other sequentially, but rather shed light on different aspects of migration reporting.



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