



ASK THE EXPERT
POLICY BRIEF

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**Public opinion on migrants: The effect of
information and disinformation about EU policies**

INTEGRATION





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The **Ask the Expert Policy Briefs** are **highly informative tools** proposed in the framework of the ReSOMA project. They tap into the **most recent academic research** on the 9 topics covered by ReSOMA and map it out in a way that is **accessible to a non-academic audience**. By doing so, the briefs introduce the **policy-relevant research** conducted by researchers with different approaches and perspectives on the same topic.

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Ask the Expert Policy Brief

Public opinion on migrants: The effect of information and disinformation about EU policies

By Zeynep Kaşlı

There is a tremendous increase in fake news on migration, particularly through online and social media in Europe and across the world. But what effect does this have on public opinion? As summarized in our [first brief](#), recent studies uncover that the negative public attitudes are related to extensive media coverage, while the effect of media coverage on public opinion vary across medium and scale (local versus national media). Social experiments draw attention to different individual factors in shaping what we observe as "public opinion," ranging from one's empathy level, already existing partisanship to geographical proximity to newcomers.

This brief is a summary of our interview with two key experts in migration governance and public opinion in Europe: [Dr. Leila Hadj Abdou](#), Teaching and Research Fellow at Migration Policy Center in European University Institute; and [Dr. Lenka Dražanová](#), Research Associate at the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM) project.

In the light of recent developments in this field and their own research, we asked Dr. Leila Hadj Abdou and Dr. Lenka Dražanová to comment specifically on the factors that drive changes in public opinion, including media framing and dis/information, and on what issues need further research and feedback from different stakeholders.



What is driving changes in public opinion about EU migration policy?

Dražanová and Hadj-Abdou both stress that we need to be cautious when talking about shift in public opinion. They recall studies that show how the majority of the people form their opinions quite early in their life and how changing established views is more unusual than expected. Dražanová stresses that what we perceive as change in public opinion is not so much about people changing their opinion, but it is more about the issue becoming more salient for them. In other words, one may already hold an opinion, but it is not activated unless it is talked about as a problem. In the case of migration policies, even though some people might be against immigration to begin with, it may not be an important issue that determines their voting choices until it becomes a key matter in the public debate.

Hadj-Abdou also draws attention to the literature on political parties and political cleavages. She reminds that political cleavages also change over time. Globalization and its effects on societies, changes in the structure of political systems based on people's grievances, lived experiences or perceptions of injustice, are factors driving what appears as change in public opinion. Both scholars agree that, regardless of the number of newcomers, the increased **salience of an issue** drives the public discourse and motivates people not necessarily to change opinion but to reinforce it based on their pre-existing values and worldviews.

What is the relationship between framings/public imaginaries on immigration and policy preferences of people and politicians?

As shown in the 2018 [report](#) of Dražanová and her colleague Dr. James Dennison on public attitudes on migration in the Euro-Mediterranean region, positive and negative media frames certainly affect people's views on migration. More interestingly, their research demonstrates that regardless of the content, the sheer frequency of migration-related news has a negative impact. This is the case also for elites and policy actors, as Hadj-Abdou underlines. She mentions that understanding of complex phenomena is often based upon what social psychology scholarship calls cognitive biases, such as the "availability bias". Availability bias, the human tendency to judge an event based on the examples of the event retrieved from one's memory or constructed anew, does not only apply to common people but also to politicians and other elites, including researchers and key stakeholders. In fact, even though they have more professional skills in forming decisions and often have better access to information on the topic, this does not make them immune to public debates in their environment. To the contrary, their societal position as elites may lead to overconfidence about their knowledge and makes it potentially even harder for them to question their established beliefs and views.

Hadj-Abdou underlines that while values stay the same, how you target and activate these values can make the difference. In this sense, framing affects how



you perceive an issue and plays an important role in the way the same value could be translated into a given policy preference. She refers to research conducted in the US by Merolla and others on the framing of immigrants and policies affecting them. This research shows that people are more likely to positively perceive a regularization policy if it is framed as an “earned citizenship” for migrants who work hard and pay taxes. The reverse is true, if the same policy is instead framed as an “amnesty.” She also stresses that communications through visual campaigns matters: this is why it is necessary to avoid images related to migration that recall chaos, but instead opt for ones that convey stability and order.

What are the impacts of information vs. disinformation (fake news) on EU migration policies on public opinion and vice versa?

Both scholars emphasize that disinformation can lead to anxiety or skeptical attitudes. As Dražanová underlines, disinformation is quite widespread and it starts from how people tend to overestimate the number of migrants coming in every year, in some countries by almost three times. In this regard, Hadj-Abdou also recalls studies showing that if you provide the real numbers, people become less skeptical about migration.

They both agree that the key question is not whether we need to provide more information (real numbers), but which type of information is needed and to address what issues. Dražanová points at what she calls a common mistake among public actors and advocacy groups, that is, starting the dialogue through a framing that is

familiar and acceptable to the public actors and advocacy groups themselves. For a successful and open dialogue, it is essential to think what the other sides' values are, not our own. Hadj-Abdou's example of Brexit debates support this point. According to her, the anti-Brexit camp's emphasis on economic factors did not matter much to the pro-Brexit public who were more concerned with other issues, such as free movement, migration and identity. Therefore, both scholars underline that often the problem is more about the framing of existing information rather than complete disinformation.

What are the major issues on this topic that need further research for more sustainable and effective policies in this field? What issues require further feedback from national or local stakeholders, namely policy actors, NGOs and practitioners?

- Further comparative research, including beyond European examples, to better understand the effects of national-level macro factors, such as political regime and economic state of the country etc, and especially on topics such as the effects of education on people's attitudes towards migration.
- Research within Europe must focus more on the Eastern European cases, such as Poland and Hungary as we know very little about the public opinion and the issue framings that drive public opinion in those regions.
- Feedback from the national and local stakeholders on the kind of communication strategies they apply, as such what works best for them, whether they avoid opposite views, confront or



how do they frame migration-related topics and whether they have some recipes that works well for different types of constituencies.

In sum, our experts repeatedly highlighted the need to consider the negative effects of issue salience on people's grievances and perceptions of injustice and changes in public opinion on migrants and migration policies. In this sense, disinformation most often does not mean lack of information. To the contrary, they even observe overflow of information in many respects, and call for a reconsideration of which type of information is necessary and what the purpose of providing that information is. They also stress that what appears as fake news nowadays is more related to *how* the available information is framed and presented. Issue framing is not only a matter of news coverage on migration policies and its potential effects on the articulation of grievances in the form of anti-immigrant policies. Even more, issue framing must be a key consideration for NGOs and policy actors who would like their claims and policy proposals to be welcomed and accepted by those with opposing values and opinions. This requires more awareness and mindfulness about the limitations of one's own issue frames, which are informed by their established world views.

ReSOMA

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ReSOMA - Research Social Platform on Migration and Asylum

is a project funded under the Horizon 2020 Programme that aims at creating a platform for regular collaboration and exchange between Europe's well-developed networks of migration researchers, stakeholders and practitioners to foster evidence-based policymaking. Being a Coordination and Support Action (CSA), ReSOMA is meant to communicate directly with policy makers by providing ready-to-use evidence on policy, policy perceptions and policy options on migration, asylum and integration gathered among researchers, stakeholders and practitioners.

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