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Article

Migrants as “Objects of Care”: Immigration Coverage in Russian Media During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

For over 20 years, Russia has been within the top five most attractive countries for immigrants. Before the pandemic, the federal policies that stimulated the immigration of cheap workforce contradicted the public perception and the media coverage of immigrants as problematic communities. Unlike labor immigrants, the EU refugees from the Middle East were depicted as a challenge for the disunited and inhospitable EU, and re-settlers from Donbass were portrayed highly sympathetically. These differences remain virtually unstudied. We explore the coverage of immigrants and refugees in Russia during the Covid-19 pandemic to see whether, under its impact, the coverage was equal and humanistic rather than different and politically induced. Based on content analysis of 12 Russian federal and regional textual media and four TV channels in 2020, we show that the differences described above have persisted and even intensified during the pandemic, supported by pro-state media, with only marginal counterbalancing from oppositional news outlets. The discourse about labor immigrants pragmatically focused on immigration-related problems for businesses and the state, channeling the authorities' position on immigrants as “objects of proper care,” while the EU refugees were depicted as “objects of improper treatment.” In both discourses, immigrants were equally deprived of their subjectivity. In general, the immigration-related issues were not a major focus, especially for regional media, and the pandemic has not led to the re-humanization of immigration coverage.

Keywords

Central Asia; Covid-19; European Union; migration; migration crisis; migration coverage; Russia

Issue

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1. Introduction

For over 25 years, Russia has been among the top five most attractive countries for immigrants (UN, 2019). Over two-thirds of the newcomers were labor immigrants who mostly came from the post-Soviet area and China. The three largest exodus zones included Belarus/Moldova/Ukraine, Caucasian states, and Central Asia. After the major inflow of the early 2000s, from 2008 to 2019, with the economic recession and political crises, including those in the Crimea and Donbass, immigration

slowed down. 2020 and 2021 have seen a rapid drop in official immigration statistics, with 5.58 million registered immigrants, as of August 2021, and 7.8 million in 2020, compared to 14.9 million in 2019 (Tarasenko, 2021). Thus, the pandemic has created conditions for a re-assessment of relations between Russia and its immigrant populace.

Before the pandemic, the Russian federal policies stimulated immigration of a cheap workforce, i.e., by the abolition of entrance visas and programs of cultural adaptation. This contradicted the public perception

and the media coverage of immigrants as a public threat and their communities as hotbeds of crime and diseases (Bodrunova et al., 2017). Labor immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia did not have a voice in public media (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020) or on social networking platforms (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, & Blekanov, 2016) as they did not belong to the mainstream socially-mediated publics.

Such coverage was strikingly different from that of refugees. Even before the early 2022 crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border, EU refugees had often been on Russian news, mostly television, their coverage linked to the discussion of the EU’s weakness and disunity. Additionally, reporting on refugees focused on people escaping Donbass in 2014–2015, whose resettlement was covered via personalized stories, with sympathy directed toward the Russian-speaking Donbass population.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed reporting on immigrants and refugees, but it remains unclear to what extent and how exactly. Here, one may form two opposite sets of expectations. First, the crisis might have opened perspectives for the humanization of immigration-related discourses, as immigrant communities in cramped dwellings with reduced medical care have been truly vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2. Second is the opposite perspective of further objectivation, dehumanization, and political abuse that might intensify due to growing social, political, and international tensions, including dropping living standards and increasing distrust in government. Thus, it is important to see whether Covid-19 has recently dominated immigration coverage and whether the media of various types and political standings differed in their coverage, given the polarized state of the Russian media market. Moreover, it would be important to know whether the division between the two groups of immigrants (labor migrants and refugees) persisted during the pandemic and whether those discourses were politicized rather than humanized.

To partly address these questions, we look at the immigration coverage in the Russian media within the whole year of 2020. With the help of Integrum, the largest database of Russian-language media texts, and web scraping, we have collected 2,548 coverage items from newspapers, online media, TV websites, and social media accounts. The dataset was coded for eight variables on publication metadata and content. To these datasets, descriptive statistics and interpretive reading were applied.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on media and immigration before Covid-19, while Section 3 summarizes the pandemic-related changes. Section 4 sets the research questions, and Section 5 describes our methods, including data collection, the codebook, and data analysis. Section 6 provides the results. We conclude by discussing them against the previous state of migration coverage in Russia and establishing a wider political perspective for its current assessment.

2. Coverage of Immigration Before the Pandemic: Russia and Beyond

2.1. Immigration Coverage, Autocratic Politics, and Media Bias

Immigration coverage across the globe has been affected by structural media biases such as negativism, political parallelism, territorial disparities, and dependence on elite discourses on immigration. The World Migration Report (Allen et al., 2018, Chapter 8) stated, “[e]ven in countries with high levels of media freedom, the news often reflects the language and topics that governments and other powerful groups prefer” (Allen et al., 2018, pp. 2–3). The report also highlighted high levels of similarly negative coverage in more and less developed countries, including dehumanizing metaphors and narration practices that divide host and immigrant communities. It also emphasized that local press may bring on less generalization (subject to national context) and that portraying immigrants as either victims or a threat may depend on an outlet’s political bias. Our own earlier study showed that on Twitter in the 2010s, left-liberal German media and liberal-oppositional Russian media were the main carriers of neutral discourse that opposed the nationalistic/anti-immigrant one (Bodrunova et al., 2019). Thus, for Russia, we expect a difference in the coverage by state-affiliated and liberal-oppositional media. However, due to the lack of previous research, we cannot formulate more precise expectations.

Additionally, in democracies, political populism and immigrants’ dehumanization are causally related (Esses et al., 2013). In the climate of uncertainty on the costs and benefits of accepting immigrants, populist politicians radicalize anti-immigrant talk to their advantage, and the resulting public discourse becomes stereotyped and defensive. However, in more autocratic regimes, in the absence of sound political competition, the linkage between state-induced discourses, media coverage, and public perceptions of immigrants may be very different. Moreover, as individuals, people with authoritarian attitudes are more likely to participate in blatant dehumanization (Kteily et al., 2015). In countries with autocratic trends, the state and radical communities, not marginal politicians, are expected to promote anti-immigrant views. The counterbalancing pro-immigrant discourses may simultaneously be rejected by the population and oppressed by the state, which may de-stimulate objective and human rights-oriented coverage due to the double risks. Besides this, “[d]ehumanizing language is closely connected to...political climate or economic stability” (Haslam, 2006; Warnock & McCann, 2019, p. 50). In countries such as Russia, where stability is declared by the authorities as a key goal of macro-economic development, the immigrant populace may be seen as either fostering or threatening stability, making the coverage depend upon the state’s position on immigration that emphasizes the immigrants’ roles in the national

economy without featuring them as a vulnerable social group. Moreover, dehumanization tends to increase during crises (Weiner, 2012), which may also be true across cultures. Summing up, we may expect that the immigration coverage in Russia depends on the state discourse and has complications in fostering the human rights perspective, while the necessity of the human rights approach has been emphasized by two UNESCO studies of immigration reporting during the pandemic (Fengler & Lengauer, 2021; Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020).

2.2. Immigration to Russia in the 21st Century

As stated above, Russia has been a major immigration attractor, predominantly from the post-Soviet space, with the migrant populace hovering around 8% from 1990 to 2015. A large immigrant flow from 1995 to 2005 was the heritage of the *perestroika* period of the 1980s; “Russia’s contemporary migration issues have been strongly influenced by the USSR’s policies on migration and their subsequent semi-abolition” (Bodrunova et al., 2017, p. 3246). Additionally, two military campaigns in Chechnya and the Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan fostered Caucasian immigration, mostly to Moscow, St. Petersburg, and South Russia, resulting in tensions with the local communities. Later, the relatively prosperous 2000s triggered a wave of labor immigration, mostly from Ukraine, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Bessudnov, 2016). The growing number of re-settlers led to violent clashes between locals and immigrants, including those in Kondopoga (2006) and Moscow (2010 and 2013), which spurred hatred on social media (Bodrunova et al., 2019) but were covered predominantly in a news-like style, without meaningful public discussion.

Since 2016, the inflow of post-Soviet immigrants has gradually been diminishing, mostly due to the natural exhaustion of ethnic Russians’ resettlement, re-orientation of younger generations toward the USA and the EU, and fluctuations in exchange rates of the Russian currency. Russia ceased to be an acceptable host country for many Ukrainians after 2014. Thus, for Russia, the pandemic only spurred the existing trend: From 2020 to 2021, the number of registered immigrants nearly halved, with the share of Central Asian labor immigrants rising to 75% (WCIOM, 2021).

The dropping levels of immigration have become more of a problem for Russia, as the country relies on a cheap workforce. Most citizens of the post-Soviet countries (except for the Baltic states and Georgia) are granted a visa-free entrance to Russia for anything from 60 days to an indefinite time. However, the Moscow and St. Petersburg authorities, the cities with the highest numbers of re-settlers, have continuously accentuated the criminality of immigrant communities and publicly argued for the introduction of visas for the post-Soviet labor immigrants (Hutchins & Tolz, 2015). Contradictions between the federal-level welcome of immigrants, on

the one hand, and their poor settlement conditions, lack of adaptation, the rising hostility in host communities, and disempowering treatment by local authorities and security forces, on the other hand, have created grounds for unfair and disempowering coverage of immigrants in Russian media.

2.3. Public Attitudes to Immigrants

With the growth of the planet-wide migration flows, hostility to migrants has also been rising (Inglehart et al., 2018). In Russia, xenophobia towards labor migrants, which was rather high throughout the 2000s, declined slightly after 2014 and rose again since 2017. From 2017 to 2019, under economic stagnation, the share of those supporting limitations on labor immigration increased from 58% to 72%. However, “not all immigrants are equally unwelcome” (Bessudnov, 2016, p. 567). The largest immigrant groups, namely Caucasians and Central Asians, evoke the highest levels of hostility (Bodrunova et al., 2017; Skrebtsova, 2015) compared to those from Ukraine/Belarus/Moldova.

Negative public stereotyping of the post-Soviet re-settlers includes issues of legality, security, public health, and communication (Skrebtsova, 2015). Awkward campaigns of immigrants’ adaptation by local governments often added to stereotyping, negativism, and even blatant dehumanization, such as the 2012 “guide of conduct” for immigrants that portrayed them as instruments of manual labor and the locals as people (Mavliev, 2012). Populist politicians and radicalistic groups have been active, even if only marginally influential, in constantly deploying anti-immigrant rhetoric in the 2000s and 2010s. In 2020, the polls conducted before the parliamentary elections detected that immigrants’ taking people’s jobs was a serious concern for Russians, which surprisingly went unnoticed by national and regional media.

Social media studies complemented polling by showing that, since the late 2000s, the Russian-speaking Internet has experienced a rise in hostile discourse (Salimovsky & Ermakova, 2011). However, we have shown that hostility towards various ethnic groups on social media content varied highly, both by region and by social networking platform (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Maksimov, 2016; Bodrunova et al., 2017). In particular, bloggers from southern regions of Russia demonstrated higher hostility to incomers of Caucasian origin and depicted life there as full of micro-conflicts between Russians and multiple other ethnicities of the region. Tensions in certain Russian regions evident from social media content, though, did not concern the national media if not for the aforementioned violent clashes. Our studies (Bodrunova et al., 2017; Smoliarova et al., 2017) have revealed an institutional vacuum in protecting migrants’ interests in the online discourse.

2.4. Media Coverage of Immigration to Russia Before Covid-19: Regional Disparities, Xenophobia, and Politicization

The very state of the Russian media system has been a factor affecting immigration coverage. The politically relevant media segments, namely public affairs textual media and television, are split into two distinct clusters: state-owned/state-affiliated media and private media. The former includes all national public affairs TV channels such as Pervy Kanal (The First Channel or Channel One), Rossiya 1 (Russia 1), and other channels of the state-owned audiovisual corporation VGTRK, Gazprom-affiliated NTV, and Channel 5, as well as several major radio stations, the national daily *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (*The Russian Gazette*), a myriad of regional and local newspapers published by local municipalities, and a range of online media that affect agendas conveyed via major news aggregators such as Yandex and Mail.ru in a noticeable way. The private media include national entertainment channels such as STS or TNT, business media such as the RBC or Kommersant multichannel holdings, regional and local newspapers and journals of personal stance (rarely politicized, depending on the relations of their owners with the local administrations), as well as multiple online media of both non-political and liberal-oppositional stance (mostly recognized as foreign agents by 2022). There is also a growing sector of media published by industrial corporations in the Russian regions, rising as a de-facto definer of agendas, workplaces for journalists, and self-censorship practices.

Thus, the decisive features of the Russian media system are the significant share of state ownership in national and local media (especially television) and paradigmatic polarization along value lines, including “liberal-cosmopolitan/pro-Western vs. patriotic/post-soviet” attitudes (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2015). The left–right polarization of the Western media is substituted by the pro-/anti-westernization cleavage, which implies differences in the use of sources, standards, and reporting styles; mechanisms of public accountability, and the levels of, and reasons for, self-censorship, etc. Moreover, while one part of the media system aligns with the interpretations offered by the state authorities, the other, even if they follow the principles of autonomy and balance when questioning the discourse suggested by the authorities, is labeled oppositional and criticized for having a politicized lens. In such a polar climate, issue coverage gets easily instrumentalized and politicized. Online, the value cleavage translates into platform-wide echo chambers even despite the omnipresence of media with opposing political positions. Thus, according to our results, Twitter has been home to hostile nationalist discourse (Bodrunova et al., 2017, 2019), while Facebook was more of a liberal echo chamber in which hate speech and ethnic prejudices were less frequently spread. In this respect, the most popular Russian social network VKontakte (InContact), with over 46 million daily

users (47% of daily Internet users in Russia), comes closest to representing the ethnic attitudes at large; this is why we chose the VKontakte accounts of TV channels for our sampling on TV.

The recent Russian media coverage of immigration, especially illegal labor immigration, has been criticized by researchers for several reasons.

First, Hutchins and Tolz (2015) found that TV content on migration follows state policies. However, the problem was that the policy itself, “waver[ing] between protectionist and liberal *laissez faire* approaches” (Malakhov, 2014, p. 1062), had not been resolute enough on the public status of immigrants, fluctuating between seeing them as workforce and a problem to tackle. This led to TV reporting on ethnic tensions being hesitant to choose a slant in reporting that led to immigrants being depicted as neutral statistical units. Other aspects of politicization included subjecting the immigration coverage to election cycles, growing pressures upon human rights watchers who had no chance to counterbalance the official talk, and discursive reproduction of official rhetoric of analytical reports, civil servants, and governmental press releases on both the regional (Nam et al., 2017, pp. 170–171) and federal level. Thus, the problematization of immigration is also “statist,” made from the state’s viewpoint rather than that of citizens or citizen groups.

Second, traditional media have been largely criticized for reinforcing ethnic stereotypes. By the mid-2010s, the dominant media narrative had, similar to the authorities’ discourse, intertwined immigration with concerns about security, legality, and public health (Ruguet & Usmanalieva, 2021). For years, the habitual elements of the negative coverage of labor immigrants have been gender, culture, and class stereotypization; the limited choice of contexts in which they are portrayed; and, in particular, depersonalization (Ablazhey, 2012; Ivleva & Tavrovsky, 2019). Depersonalization and objectivation of immigrants in media is a universal problem (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020); in Russia, though, it is not counterbalanced in public communication. In their media representation, “migrants are not self-standing social actors but an unanimated mass, a flow, a workforce reservoir” (Yakimova, 2020, p. 29). Like in other countries with a significant immigrant populace, the metaphors of “inflow/outflow,” “working hands,” unarticulated “dark mass,” and “migration boom/explosion” are widely employed (Dyatlov, 2009, p. 150; Skrebtsova, 2007, p. 116) turning immigrants into “de-facto invisibles, with neither faces nor voices” (Varganova, 2015, p. 89). The human dimension of labor immigration was rarely found in media content, and no strong pro-migrant discourse similar to that of the left-liberal European press was present to oppose dehumanization. A narrow stream of human rights publications in liberal-oppositional and activist outlets such as *Novaya Gazeta* (*The New Gazette*), *Mediazona* (*Mediazone*, coming from “media” and “detention area”), or *Meduza* (published

in Latvia; all three assigned the foreign agent status by 2022), was not resonant enough for the general public. Immigration appeared in media nearly exclusively in relation to law enforcement and the application of legislation (Nam et al., 2017, p. 166). Interestingly, the concept of “our country” within this discourse has, vice versa, been “humanized” since Russia has been depicted as a benefactor, a patron, and even a “nursing mother” (Yakimova, 2015).

Third, negativity in media content was not constrained by editorial guidelines. Unlike in, e.g., Germany, Russian media lacked guidelines on disclosing criminals’ ethnicity, which some media have been doing since the 1990s (Malashenko, 2011), contributing to the formation and exploitation of the images of dangerous *kavkaztsy* (Caucasians) and “Chechen terrorists.” Until recently, the media coverage of the authorities’ immigration-related statements openly accentuated immigrants as problematic, including the illegality of their stay, non-native command of Russian, and non-Christianity (Komarova, 2019). The social roles ascribed to immigrants were often “invaders” (linked to ousting ethnic Russians from the labor market and seizure of the Russian cities), “enemies” (“an army” that “advances”), “provocateurs” (organizers of fights and riots), “criminals,” while rarely “victims” and—extremely rarely—“professionals” (Yakimova, 2020), despite the high number of immigrants from Central Asia having a higher education. Malashenko (2011) highlighted the role of mediatized popular culture, from films to TV shows, in fostering the post-Soviet immigrants’ image as both “evil doers” and “our smaller brothers” (as animals are usually referred to). However, the city folklore, usually highly responsive to social tensions and, since the Soviet times, full of *anekdoty* (short humorous stories) on ethnicities like Chukchi or Armenians, has not created significant text corpora on Central Asians or Caucasians, which might signify that public wariness towards them is more media-induced than genuine.

Fourth, significant disparities exist in the volumes of coverage by federal and regional/local media (Varganova, 2015, pp. 82–83). This may be linked to the politicization of the immigration-related agenda on the federal level and local authorities’ unwillingness to support coverage of “problematic” communities in the municipal press, but this connection is still unproven by research. According to the local press, Russian industrial regions are interested in having a highly-qualified workforce. However, the immigrants as a group are represented nearly as negatively as in the federal press. In parallel to it, though, individual immigrants are described as unpretentious and being in demand.

2.5. Coverage of Refugees: The EU Migration Crisis and the Donbass Re-Settlers

As the European Journalism Observatory study showed (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020), the word “refugee” is

mostly used in Russian media to describe the so-called “European refugee crisis,” and sometimes to mark those fleeing the Ukrainian conflict zone. As Gabdulhakov (2016) states, before its direct involvement in the armed conflict in Syria, Russian media portrayed Syrian refugees in Europe as tragic victims of external intervention in the internal affairs of Syria and the greater Middle East. It linked the refugee inflow to the consequences of failed policies of the USA and NATO. As soon as Russia joined the Syrian conflict, though, the Russian state-affiliated television, including RT, was deployed to influence opinions in Europe by spotlighting the inflow of Syrian refugees as Europe’s political failure. The MENA refugees were depicted as threatening, alien, barbarian, illegal, and terrorists. Moreover, even the humanitarian perspective was used to highlight the EU’s weakness: In depicting the refugees as war victims, the EU’s failure to help them was a core moment. The refugees were unwanted in the EU—but they were the EU’s responsibility (Moen-Larsen, 2020). This also “domesticated” the refugee crisis by latently comparing the “inferior” (disunited and incapable) EU to the “superior” Russian state, which cared for, e.g., Central Asian immigrants to Russia. Thus, the instrumentalization of the coverage made it fluctuate between victimizing immigrants within an unfair system (Thorbjørnsrud, 2015) and securitization (depicting them as a threat to regional security) by political, not humanitarian, or journalistic logic.

In the textual media, the pro-state/liberal-oppositional cleavage had specific contours. Newspapers of both camps portrayed the refugee crisis as dangerous for the political and social stability of the EU and mostly an external issue for Russia. They all focused on refugees as a source of crime, a potential threat to European economies, Europe’s unwillingness to accommodate them, the illegality of their border crossing, and their struggle for survival. However, a “blaming gap” between the pro-state and oppositional narratives was seen: *Novaya Gazeta* depicted the refugees as saving their lives while inevitably becoming a problem for host communities, whereas *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* saw them as seekers of benefits who used the war as an excuse to improve their living standards. We expect these differences to remain in the Covid-affected discourse of textual media.

Immigration from the Donbass unrecognized republics after 2014 was another yet significantly smaller focus for media, despite the number of people displaced to Russia reaching over 800,000 by UN estimates. During the wave of resettlement from Donbass, no sharp rise in anti-immigrant attitudes was detected (Bessudnov, 2016). Unlike in Central Asia and Caucasus cases, the TV talk was highly compassionate, accentuating the traditional Russian hospitality and injustices caused by the Ukrainian regime. The Donbass refugees had a victimized image of Russian-speaking compatriots oppressed in Ukraine because of their Russian origin and language, being a toy in Ukrainian, European, and American political games.

This depiction has sharply contrasted with the dehumanized portrayal of the labor immigrants and the threatening rhetoric on the EU migration crisis. In 2014, it was the Donbass conflict that broke through to the local media of small towns (Anisimov & Tumanov, 2017).

3. The Advent of Covid-19: Media and Immigrants During the Pandemic

3.1. Immigration to Russia and Immigrants in 2020

In Russia, the pandemic was, from its very start, catastrophic for foreign workers (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2021, p. 1). The data shows that it was primarily job losses that “squeezed out” the labor immigrants from Russia (WCIOM, 2021), causing the remittance flows dry up. According to several studies, 40 to 45% (estimates by Dmitry Poletaev in WCIOM, 2021) or up to 54% (estimates by Varshaver, 2020, p. 135) of immigrants lost their jobs or were sent to compulsory “vacations,” Russians being notably less endangered (10% to 25% or up to 32%, by the same respective sources). Sixty-nine percent of Central Asian labor immigrants in Russia felt a drop in their families’ living standards (International Organization of Migration, 2021); the drop was so sharp that 57% could not pay for housing, and 38% had no money for food (estimates by Sergey Ryazantsev in WCIOM, 2021).

Nonetheless, negative expectations that the immigrants’ compact dwelling would foster the spread of Covid-19 and the levels of crime would rapidly rise never came true (Ivanova et al., 2020, p. 79), even if the immigrants’ access to medical care was severely complicated by the absence of insurance, their illegal status, and lack of financial aid (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2021). The immigrant communities became large-scale networks of mutual assistance, which did not permit others to die from starvation, as immigrants were largely unsupported by both the exodus and host state authorities in the early months of the pandemic. Thus, in April 2020, 91% of Tajik respondents were not helped at all; in 2021, 43% stated they received help from their compatriots, employers, or NGOs but not from the authorities (WCIOM, 2021). The immigrants also faced longer working hours, growing numbers of police checks, and closure of dormitories for quarantine. The governmental intervention was more juridical: Immigrants’ working licenses were automatically prolonged, and newcomers could get jobs without them.

3.2. Coverage of Immigrants in the First Phase of the Pandemic

So far, there is only scarce evidence on how immigration coverage has intertwined with reporting of Covid-19, and how it reflected the state policing and the immigrants’ social and economic vulnerability. The existing works have detected a rising anti-immigrant information flow that, since as early as mid-April 2020, spilled over

from nationalist blogs to federal-level media such as the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (*The Komsomol Truth*, where Komsomol is an abbreviation from “Communist Union of Youth”) or “patriotic” *Zvezda* (*The Star*, historically linked to the red star, a USSR symbol; Abashin, 2020). The rise of negative expectations, including those stated above, has made the Russian media “insinuate that jobless and desperate migrants would be forced to steal, sell drugs, or even consider joining the Islamic State” (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2021, p. 1). According to the Ferghana news agency, once the Covid-19 virus started to spread in Russia, online media featured sensationalistic and misleading headlines.

The “blaming gap” seems to have spread to Russian re-settlers. Thus, *Novaya Gazeta* became nearly the only source to present pro-migrant narratives openly and regularly raise awareness of the immigrants’ suffering. At the same time, the state-owned *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* described immigration mostly as an economic necessity in complicated circumstances of closed borders (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2021, p. 6). However, whether the media, in general, supported the hostile discourse, largely ignored the immigrant communities, or developed a more humanistic tone remains unanswered.

This is why the focus of our article is twofold. First, we assess whether and to what extent the coverage of migration was linked to Covid-19 in various types of media. Second, we examine whether the pandemic opened the opportunity to re-humanize the coverage. However, based on the pre-pandemic coverage, we expect to still find a major split between the pragmatic discourse on labor immigration and the coverage of the EU refugees, but with levels of negativity and the slants chosen by various media being unclear.

We have chosen to focus on traditional media, especially newspapers and TV, as they stand at the political core of the media systems even after the recent rise of online-only and social media. The latter have been eliminated from our research for this article as, due to the non-editorial nature of the data and its potentially much greater volume, they demand very different, preferably automated methods of textual analysis. This would make the results incomparable with those presented in this article.

4. Research questions

Considering everything described above, we have formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: Is coverage of immigration linked to covering Covid-19, and to what extent?

RQ2: Do media of varying type, reach, and political position cover immigrants and Covid-19 differently?

RQ3: Are there differences in how Russian and European immigration is portrayed during the

pandemic? Does the politically-induced difference still stay?

RQ4: Are immigrants objectivated, or have they been re-humanized due to the impact of Covid-19 as a universal threat to all social groups?

We have not stated any strict hypotheses here, as our research is more of exploratory nature; nonetheless, we did form expectations via preliminary reading, which shaped the methods we chose.

5. Methodology

5.1. Data Collection and the Datasets

To tackle the RQs, we had to have a dataset that would comprise federal and regional media of three types (newspapers, TV channels, and news portals/agencies) and various political positioning. We selected Moscow as the federal center and three other regions (St. Petersburg as a major attractor city, Stavropol Krai bordering the Caucasus, and Amur Oblast close to the Chinese border and the pandemic epicenter) to cover both federal and regional agendas. Then, for Moscow, we selected 18 federal-level media based on their type, market share, political standing, history of immigration coverage, and the “Medialogia” media citation ranking service. For the three other regions, we chose four local outlets per region, as four outlets were exhaustive in terms of consumption share. To collect the data for textual and online media, we used Integrum, a database of the Russian media texts. We searched for items using the keywords “migrant*,” “im/migration,” “refugee*.” For TV, we scraped the channel websites and their VKontakte accounts.

Of 18 Moscow-based media, six brought insignificant results (only several items each), and thus they were excluded from our sample to avoid distortions in the data. Among them was, e.g., an ultra-right newspaper *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*) which we expected would focus on immigrants, but it was not the case. For the regions, only one news outlet remained, which tells of significant gaps in regional migration coverage. The final dataset included 16 media, from which we collected 2,548 coverage items, including 446 from five newspapers, 1,709 from seven online media, and 393 from four TV channels. The dataset included pro-establishment, liberal-oppositional, and neutral/mixed media (see Supplementary File for the full description). For RQ1 and RQ4, we formed a sub-dataset of the publications entirely focusing on migration, not just mentioning immigrants (1,410 publications of 2,548, or 55.3%).

5.2. The Codebook and Coding

In our codebook, we partly followed the logic of the European Journalism Observatory project (Fengler

& Kreutler, 2020), which, i.a., saw the immigrants’ destination country as a proxy for discourse orientation and the presence/absence of direct/indirect quotes by immigrants as indicating their empowerment/dehumanization.

The items were coded for technical data (title, date), item metadata (media, type, reach, bias), and content variables. The latter included: the presence of Covid-19 reporting (central, mention, absent), immigration/immigrants as a central topic (yes/no), immigrants’ destination area (Russia, Europe, other), and immigrants’ speech (direct, indirect, absent). Direct quotes of pro-migration NGO representatives were coded as indirect speech. Eight coders were employed, and Kappa testing was performed for each content variable, with results ranging from 0.68 to 1 per pair of coders.

5.3. Data Analysis

Our main data analysis methods were descriptive statistics (including correlation analysis with the Spearman’s rho) and interpretive reading of media texts. We consider them appropriate for an exploratory study. We did not employ semi-quantification and strictly separated the quantitative and qualitative parts of our research. We indirectly employed the comparative perspective: Thus, we never strictly compared national/local media, newspapers/TV, or pro-state/oppositional media due to volume inequality of the respective datasets (and weighting could further distort the results), but have made some cautious conclusions on these differences from the descriptive statistics.

6. Results

6.1. Research Question 1

In our data, the immigration coverage was only partly put into the Covid-19 context. For print papers, it was true for roughly 44% of publications (see Figure 1). With the exceptions of TV Dozhd and RBC, only one of five TV reports and one of four texts in online media referred to Covid-19. The proportions only slightly increase even if we consider only the publications that directly focus on migration (45.5%, 33%, and 30.2%, respectively). This shows a surprisingly low impact of the pandemic upon the immigration coverage, given the omnipresence of the Covid-19 context in 2020. The differences between newspapers and TV may be explained by the respective Russian and European focus (see Section 6.3).

The aforementioned absence of immigration coverage in regional media was further aggravated by how the immigrants were covered. In a significant share of publications (57.2% for newspapers, 46.6% for online media, and 21.4% for TV), they were just mentioned or listed along with other vulnerable or dangerous social groups.

We identified only five topics in which immigration was covered in relation to Covid-19:

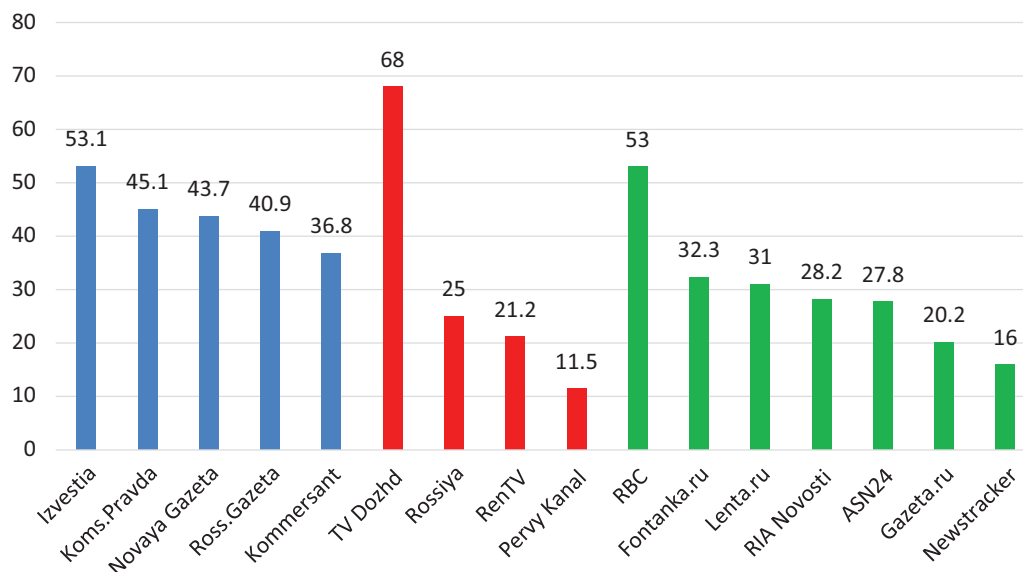


Figure 1. Percentages of publications on immigration that also discuss Covid-19. Notes: Blue = newspapers; red = TV channels; green = news portals and news agencies; Koms.Pravda = *Komsomolskaya Pravda*; Ross.Gazeta = *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

- 1) Shortage of immigrant workforce in construction, agriculture, and service industries; statistics and opinions of elites on the effects of immigration upon the labor market (41.7%);
- 2) Regulation of stay of foreign citizens, including immigrant workers (21.5%);
- 3) Crime rates among migrants: officials’ and experts’ predictions on their rise and data by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (19%);
- 4) Support measures for labor immigrants, including addressing representative offices of donor countries, diasporas, and grassroots immigrants’ associations (16.1%);
- 5) Immigrants’ problems with leaving Russia (15.8%).

The frequent themes portrayed immigration as an issue of concern for the state, while less popular topics conveyed more sympathy for immigrants. The bulk of the immigration coverage was never linked to the humanitarian issues of survival and job losses. Labor immigrants were discussed as workforce and objects of pragmatic care by the state, which needed to both resolve immigration-related problems in the Russian economy and be alert for any potential rise in crime. Mostly, migrants were covered in relation to statements by major politicians or crime statistics. Representatives of several immigration-related NGOs gave expert interviews to legacy media; however, their position was more of a mediator between the immigrants, the state, and broader audiences than an immigrants’ protector and empowerer. Thus, even President of the Federation of Migrants of Russia Vadim Kozhenov explained the immigrants’ logic during the pandemic as a conventional economic logic, with no reference to the rapidly growing pressures:

[There is], say, a waitress who does not want to go to agricultural work. On one hand, because it’s harder. But first of all, because she is not ready to leave the metropolis for a town or village. She just got out of there. That is, among the immigrants, there is a large stratum of people who come here with an eye on staying. They like the convenient infrastructure; they want to live here, to become citizens. (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 16, 2020)

Thus, immigration coverage was only partly linked to the Covid-19 context. However, the latter still provided chances for a paternalistic discourse, mainly in the state-affiliated media, with generalizations and the focus on describing the support measures rather than explaining the structural factors behind the immigrants’ sharp decline in living standards.

6.2. Research Question 2

The immigration coverage did not follow any clear pattern regarding its volume in various media. For example, Moscow-based RenTV published ten times more reports mentioning migrants than Pervy Kanal. However, we clearly see that liberal-oppositional media interlinked Covid-19 and immigration much more tightly than the pro-state media (see Figure 2), which demands further research.

For newspapers, Spearman’s correlations show that Covid-19 is linked slightly more to coverage of immigrants into Russia (0,138**). However, no further pattern was discovered: The volume of attention to Covid-19 was linked neither to reach nor to the political stance of the papers. Figure 1 hints that regional media outlets (*Fontanka*, *ASN24*, and *Newstracker*) avoided putting

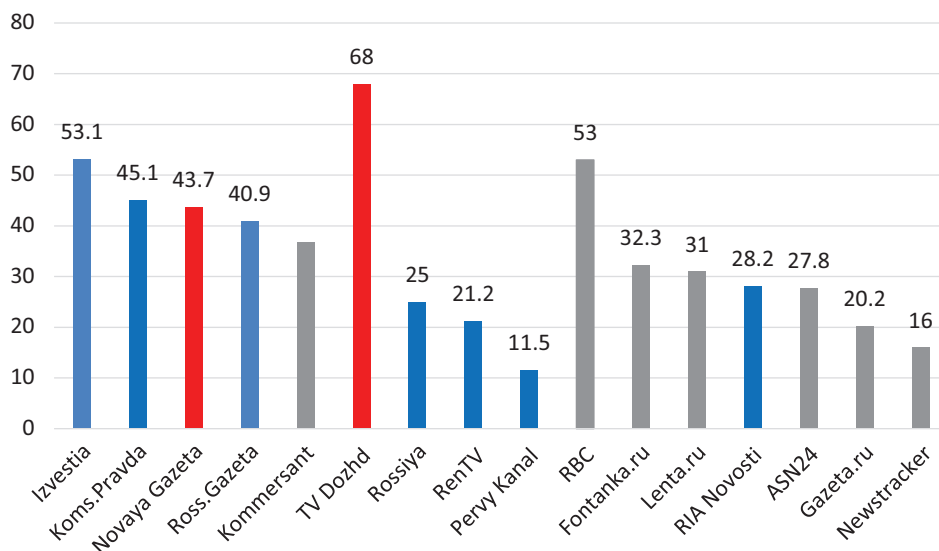


Figure 2. Percentages of publications on immigration that also discuss Covid-19. Notes: Blue = pro-state media; red = liberal-oppositional media; grey = neutral/independent/undecided; Koms.Pravda = *Komsomolskaya Pravda*; Ross.Gazeta = *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

their immigration coverage in the Covid-19 context, but the data is too scarce for firm conclusions.

On TV, though, the volume of Covid-19 reporting within the coverage of immigration differed depending on the particular channel (0.170**), with TV Dozhd having significantly more (0.269**) and RenTV significantly less (0.116*) Covid-related coverage than others, despite its overall huge amount of news on immigration. For TV channels, covering how immigrants struggled with the Covid-19 depended upon political standing (0.165**).

The difference between newspapers and TV was significant for all the content variables, including immigration destinations (Russia/EU) and providing a voice to re-settlers. Online media have been shown to focus the most on migration as the main topic (0.364**) but the least on Covid-19.

The volume of migration coverage in regional media was much smaller than in federal media, focused on labor immigrants, almost entirely criminal, and often not linked to the pandemic. Only *Fontanka* of St. Petersburg wrote several times about the spread of the disease among migrants. The low number of publications in regional media has not allowed for proper checking of the federal vs. regional dimension of the immigration coverage; however, the critically small amount of data is a finding too. As regional media were focusing nearly completely on immigration into Russia (see Figure 3), they have the potential to become arenas of substantial public discussion on immigration in the post-Covid times.

6.3. Research Question 3

During the pandemic, the coverage of European issues only slightly diminished and, by 2021, regained its habitual volumes. Comparing the number of publications on

immigration into Russia and Europe, we have defined four media clusters (see Figure 3): pro-state outlets, neutral business/online dailies, liberal-oppositional media, and regional media. Pro-state media were generally more likely to dedicate their time and space to the EU migrants, while three other clusters were clearly more interested in domestic immigration. The pattern of the liberal-oppositional media repeats in the regional media and is also true for RBC and *Kommersant*, which have shifted from oppositional to a more neutral tone after 2014. Expectedly, media from the regions that encountered the largest migration inflows focused more on them than on European refugees, dedicating most of their coverage to local immigration issues. However, the repeated pattern in business, oppositional, and regional media shows that pro-state media’s attention to covering the European migration might have been caused by factors external to the real-world agendas in immigration vs. Covid-19.

Figure 3 shows that liberal-oppositional media dealt with Russian immigrants, while many pro-state media covered Europe as intensely as the situation at home, which contradicts the logic of seeing oppositional outlets as “foreign agents” and pro-state media as patriotic. The oppositional media focused on local immigrants and their problems (e.g., TV Dozhd 0.162**), while state-affiliated new outlets continued to construct the discourse of the European migration (e.g., RenTV – 0.172**) as a sign of the EU’s weakness when faced with new barbarians.

Overall, the division between covering immigrants in Russia and Europe has persisted. The “default” immigrants into Russia have been Central Asian workers. The coverage of European immigration continued to focus on the EU migration crisis nearly exclusively.

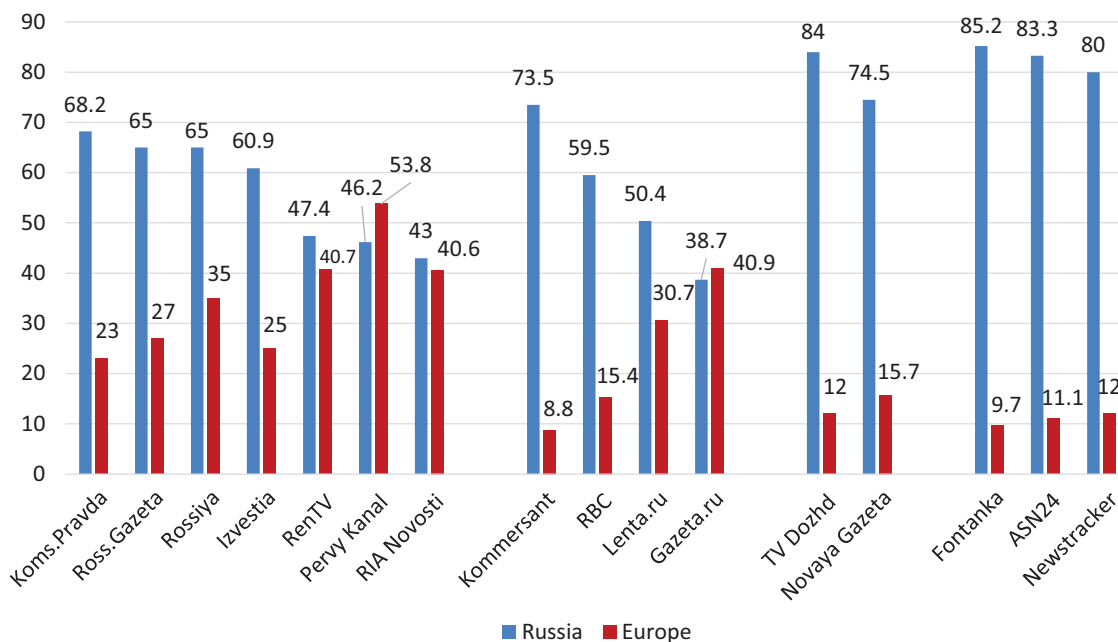


Figure 3. Percentages of publications dedicated to immigrants into Russia and Europe. Notes: The four groups (left to right) = pro-state outlets, neutral business/online dailies, liberal-oppositional media, and regional media; Koms.Pravda = *Komsomolskaya Pravda*; Ross.Gazeta = *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

Contrary to our expectations, Russian media did not link the danger of “refugees rushing to Europe” (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, March 14, 2020) to the potential spread of Covid-19. Instead, they went on with the narrative of “the clash of civilizations”; thus, our results are consistent with the previous research and demonstrate that even the pandemic could not make the coverage humanitarian.

However, we have noticed a change in the tone towards the refugees. Instead of being portrayed as victims, they were often depicted negatively, more as uncivilized tribes. News about the migration crisis illustrated how the EU in general and its individual states failed to protect their borders from the hostile masses of re-settlers, and therefore their citizens were forced to defend themselves on their own: “Bulgarians are proud to say about Dinko: ‘He alone did what the whole European Union could not. He has cleared the border of Bulgaria of migrants’” (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 15, 2020).

This tone sharply contradicted the heated compassionate discourse on the conflict on the Polish-Belarusian border in early 2022. This difference signals the high level of instrumentalization of the coverage of the EU migration crisis.

6.4. Research Question 4

Objectivation of immigrants, as our data show, was high. As stated above, in many publications, immigrants were only mentioned as either disadvantaged or problematic, predominantly in the plural. They were presented as passive objects of Russian migration policies and labor market regulation. If the migration policy changed in favor

of labor migrants, the media put them into the position of recipients of benevolence of the Russian government: “Migrants were given a wide amnesty because of the coronavirus” (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 20, 2020).

Out of 446 publications in the five newspapers, 26 quoted some representatives of migrants, mostly NGOs; only 11 contained direct quotes. Most publications with quotes covered the stories of Central Asian labor migrants stranded in the Russian capital’s airports after the borders were closed. As for TV, the voices of migrants into Russia were heard almost exclusively on the oppositional channels, *Novaya Gazeta* and TV Dozhd (see Figure 4). In 2020, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Pervy Kanal*, *Rossiya* channels (*Rossiya1+Rossiya24*), and *RenTV* did not publish one single direct quote by an immigrant. Neither neutral business outlets such as *Kommersant* nor *RBC* did so; of regional media, *Fontanka* published one quote. As for the EU refugees, their direct and indirect quotes were found in only seven publications of 435 that discussed them.

Both pro-state and oppositional media quoted labor migrants while covering their problems leaving Russia. However, the titles in the pro-state media framed them more as objects of state care rather than subjects of will. Their discourse used “ethnicization” framing, employing, i.a., famous quotes, anecdotes, or movie titles, thus equating the Covid-19 risks to habitual ethnic practices: “The Gypsy camp leaves: How migrants are sent home from Kinel” (*Izvestia*, August 25, 2020, the first part of the headline comes from the title of a Soviet movie *The Gypsy Camp Leaves for the Skies* depicting the 19th-century Roma stereotypically traditionally, even if compassionately).

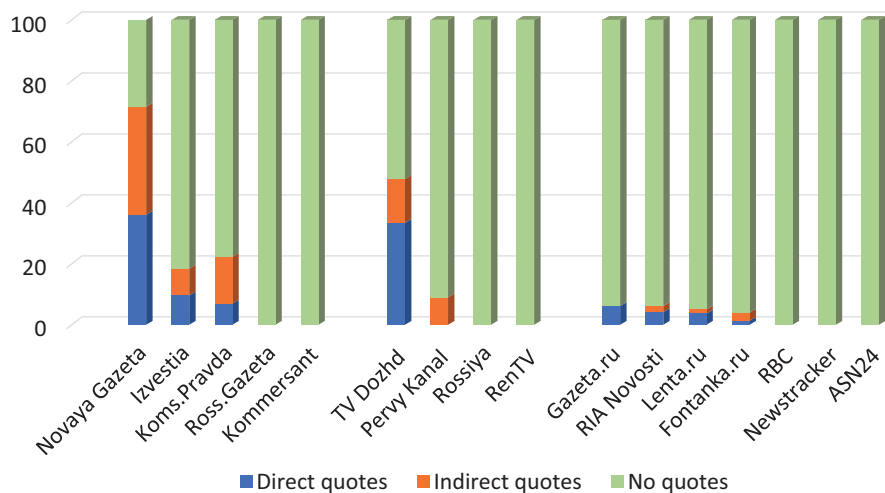


Figure 4. Percentages of publications focusing on, and giving voice to, immigrants into Russia. Notes: Three groups of media, left to right—newspapers, TV channels, online media; Koms.Pravda = *Komsomolskaya Pravda*; Ross.Gazeta = *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

While giving voice to immigrants in a compassionate way, *Izvestia* depicted them more like an outgroup community being helped: “I used to work on the fields in Volgograd, Zhallie shared her account....After people had started to get sick, there was no more work” (*Izvestia*, August 25, 2020).

Novaya Gazeta covered a similar story, also drawing clear lines between the immigrants and the authorities while more advocating from the position of immigrants: “We were told the borders would be closed on September 20” (*Novaya Gazeta*, September 9, 2020).

The correlations have shown that Covid-19 contributed to the dehumanization of immigrants in the press: If the probability of finding Covid-19 in a text grew, that of finding immigrants’ speech diminished (-0.217^{**}), regardless of the paper type. On TV, though, it was the other way round: Covid-19 coverage would slightly foster (in)direct speech by immigrants (0.267^{**}). Strongly dependent on particular TV channels (0.368^{**}), the probability of direct speech was higher for TV Dozhd (0.589^{**}) and lower for RenTV (0.309^{**}).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the Russian discourse on immigration during the pandemic period. Its pre-existing negative features mostly remained; in general, the pandemic has not led to the humanization of migration coverage. Federal state-affiliated TV covered immigrants during the pandemic significantly less and in a more depersonalized manner than the liberal-oppositional outlets or neutral newspapers. Only the State Duma elections in September 2020 spurred the TV to talk about immigration. The overall picture that partly corresponds to our expectations looks like “less stereotyping, but even more depersonalization.” However, media type and especially values-based political positioning crucially

mattered for how much Covid-19 was covered within the immigration coverage, for focusing upon domestic immigration, and for giving voice to re-settlers.

The expectations of state dependence on the labor immigration coverage and complications of fostering the human rights perspective have mostly been supported, with the marginal exception of the oppositional press. In particular, covering internal immigrants in a de-personalized manner, as statistical units at best, went in line with the style of official reporting on crime and social spending. As objects of governmental “care,” immigrants were dehumanized, especially by the official *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and, to a lesser extent, by the federal TV channels. The absence of Caucasian or Chinese immigration in both federal and media agendas was also striking, and regional outlets did not even contain sufficient data for research. This demonstrates the ongoing disinterest of both federal and local media in the life of each 12th person in the country. The pandemic has not provided for addressing the problems of the migrant population; moreover, it moved migration as an issue to the agenda backyard. In an attempt to counterbalance the state discourse, the oppositional news outlets often over-emphasized personalized narratives of individual immigrants while taking a neutral tone when speaking of the refugees politically supported by the state. None of the sides systemically conducted a thorough economic analysis or took a universal humanitarian perspective. Taken together, this deprives the Russian coverage of immigration of the necessary analytical depth, which is especially needed during crises such as the pandemic.

Our research complements earlier studies of immigrants’ speech in media (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020) by showing that giving voice to immigrants might not always be positive. In more autocratic contexts, the provision of direct speech to immigrants may, in some cases, work as a cooptation/policy support strategy when the

“us/them” division is constructed as a “helpers/helped” dichotomy. During crises, such “compassionate cooptation” may become a disempowerment tool.

The discursive split in the coverage of labor immigrants and the EU refugees has clearly remained. Labor migration in Russia and the Russian migration policy attracted the largest proportion of media attention, followed by the “migration crisis” in Europe. The changes in both discourses were superficial. The immigrants into Russia were further “fixed” as cogs in the Russian economic machinery, while the EU refugees were portrayed mostly negatively, which seems to be less the case before the pandemic (with a U-turn in early 2022, during the Polish–Belarusian border crisis). In both cases, immigrants’ real-world troubles were not the major focus of Russian reporting. Thus, our research also questions how a human-centric approach to reporting on immigrants, especially refugees, may be guaranteed in non-democratic public spheres that instrumentalize and politicize the coverage of social issues. In fact, as in the case of Donbass refugees, it is morally hard to reproach pro-state media for constructing compassion towards them; however, the legitimacy of using compassion as a political tool in reporting should become a matter of concern for human rights watchdogs. We have also shown a difference between pro-state media, on the one hand, and business, oppositional, and regional outlets, on the other, providing evidence of politically-induced agendas still being present in the coverage of immigration, even in times of major world crises.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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