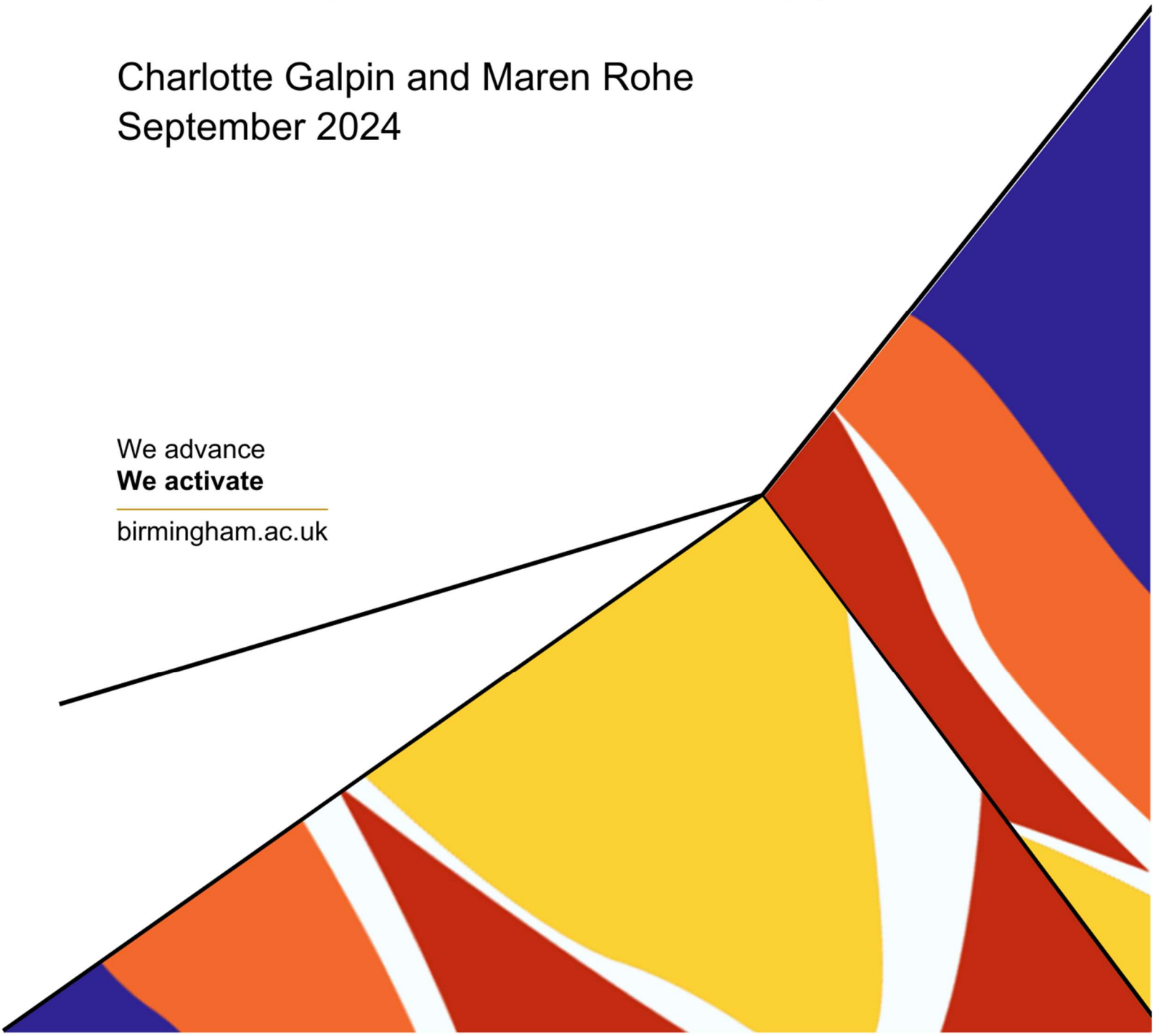# UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Representing Central and East European migrants in the media - history and stereotypes

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Summary

EU freedom of movement ended with Brexit, but EU citizens living in the UK have continued to feel insecure about their rights, with Brexit impacting negatively on feelings of belonging in the UK. Polish and German migrants are two of the largest groups of EU-born residents in the UK, with their countries typically seen as belonging to two different parts of Europe, despite their interconnected histories. Our research shows that media representations of Polish and German migrants use stereotypes that reproduce historical ideas of 'western' and 'eastern' Europe structured by economic, cultural and racialised hierarchies. We find that media representation impacts on migrants' sense of belonging in the UK as well as their engagement with politics. We recommend ways in which journalists, editors and media regulators can improve coverage of Europe's East. Such changes would indirectly improve the experiences of migrants' living in the UK and improve public knowledge of the history and politics of post-socialist countries.

Recommendations for journalists, editors, and media regulators

1. Avoid use of common tropes that categorise migrants into hierarchies, for example, associating middle-class professions or 'integrated' migrants with Germans and other people from 'Western Europe' on the one hand, and low-skilled or manual work, or not speaking English, with Polish or Central Eastern European people on the other. Prevent broad associations between criminality and people from Romania, or between Nazism, fascism or racism with Germans or 'Eastern Europeans'. Binaries that imagine a conflict between 'British people' and 'the migrant other', such as contrasts between the 'British taxpayer' and 'Eastern European migrant or 'benefit recipient', should also be avoided – British people also receive benefits and migrants also pay tax.

2. Take care not to use language that implies that citizens of European countries are always white or to only feature Black/Brown Europeans in negative stories. When reporting about Black/Brown Europeans, consider whether it necessary to the story to reference where they were born or their parents' cultural background, or whether it simply serves to reveal their racial background.

3. Use precise terms relevant for the story:
   a. 'Eastern European' should usually be avoided, while Central and Eastern Europe, Central and Southeastern Europe, or Europe's East are better. If the story relates to EU enlargement, specify EU-15, or A8/A10 states, or name the specific countries being discussed
   b. Use East Germany when referring to the German Democratic Republic, West Germany when referring to the West German state prior to reunification, and eastern/western Germany to refer to current German regions

4. Reflect on possible stereotypes that might be reproduced when referencing history in relation to different countries, for example:

a. Is present-day Germany primarily understood with reference to the Nazi period or the Second World War?

b. Is the far-right primarily explained with reference to communism, post-communist transition, or reunification, and therefore exclusively with 'the east'?

c. Is the communist or state socialist experience used to explain support for EU freedom of movement and/or opposition to Muslim migration, in a way that attributes both these things to 'the East'?

d. Is Britain portrayed as a country free of racism or xenophobia? Is 'Western Europe' portrayed as unaffected by far-right parties or movements?

5. Highlight connections between developments in the UK and countries of origin, e.g. similarities in economic developments, political and cultural movements, etc. This allows easier access to such stories for readers, enhances their understanding of interconnectedness, promotes belonging in the UK, and avoids Othering the countries of origin.

6. Consider silenced histories, for example, do stories commemorating the fall of Communism imply it started and ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall? Consider commemorating not just anniversary of fall of the Berlin Wall, but Poland's Solidarity movement, the Velvet Revolution, etc.

7. Consult with migrant groups and work with academics and other specialists on the region when reporting on events related to countries and nationals of those countries. Give migrants a voice by quoting them and their interpretation of the issue, rather than reporting about them.

8. Provide training/professional development for journalistic/editorial staff focused on reporting about migration or international/European/post-socialist history.

9. Develop stronger links with counter-part news outlets in countries of origin and/or major news outlets in Europe, to facilitate sharing of stories, information and sources.

10. More broadly, to address discriminatory and negative portrayals of migrant groups, Clause 12 of the IPSO Editors' Code of Practice should be amended to cover not only individuals but also discriminatory remarks towards minority groups, following recommendations by charities such as the Media Diversity Institute[1].

Introduction

The UK ended freedom of movement for EU citizens with Brexit, yet as of 2021 there were 4 million EU-born residents in the UK[2]. Research has shown that EU citizens continue to feel insecure about their rights, even when they hold Settled Status, with Brexit impacting negatively on their sense of belonging in the UK[3]. Media coverage can have a significant impact on belonging, undermining relations with non-migrant populations and leading to racism and discrimination[4]. When reporting on Central and Eastern European (CEE), and particularly Polish, people living in the UK, newspapers

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[1] Jempson, Mike (2021)
[2] Cuibus (2023)
[3] Sigona et al. (2022), p. 9
[4] Migrant Voice (2014)

draw heavily on a what Ivan Kalmar calls 'Eastern Europeanism'[5]. Stereotypes of 'Eastern Europeans' often portray them as 'white but not quite', meaning that they benefit from some privileges of whiteness but are nevertheless positioned as 'inferior'[6]. There has however been relatively limited attention to the role of historical memory in shaping media representations of migrants. Memory is important for shaping national identity and cultural hierarchies, as it positions some as 'historically rooted' in the country, and others as outsiders[7].

Post-socialist memory is the focus of our research project Post-Socialist Britain? Memory, Representation and Political Identity amongst German, Polish and Ukrainian Immigrants in the UK, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The purpose of the project is to explore how post-socialist memory shapes the experience of migration in the UK. Post-socialism also interacts with postcolonialism, particularly through the continued existence of 'three worlds ideology' that divided the world rhetorically into First (Capitalist West), Second (Communist East), and Third (Non-Aligned South) worlds. The 'Second World' was seen to occupy a space in-between the 'developed' and 'developing world'.[8]

We report findings from our study of UK press coverage of Polish and German migrants and histories. People born in Poland and Germany constitute the two largest European migrant groups in the UK other than Ireland[9]. These are two countries typically seen as belonging to two different parts of Europe: Poland to the East, and Germany to the West. This is despite their interconnected histories: Poland was once divided between the Prussian, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, while contemporary Germany includes the former states of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that belonged to the 'Eastern Bloc' during the Cold War. Few studies have compared representations of migrants from 'western' and 'eastern' Europe which, we argue, would make the hierarchies and stereotypes associated with different migrant groups more explicit.

In this report, we demonstrate that media representations of Polish and German migrants use stereotypes that reproduce historical ideas of 'western' and 'eastern' Europe structured by economic, cultural and racialised hierarchies. News coverage of Polish and German politics also typically imagines far-right and right-wing populist movements as a problem of the 'east', a consequence of failed post-communist transition. In doing this, Britain and 'western' Europe are implied to be free of racism and xenophobia. This implication not only erases the experiences of migrants and Black and Brown British & European citizens[10], but it also leaves the problem of racist and xenophobic parties and movements in western European countries unaddressed. Our interviews with Polish and German migrants in the UK show how media representation impacts not only on their sense of belonging, but in some cases also their interest in and engagement with politics more broadly. We set out recommendations for journalists, editors and news organisations that could be implemented to improve the representation of CEE migrants and the region and, indirectly, improve the experiences of migrants living in the UK.

[5] Kalmar (2022).
[6] See e.g. Kalmar (2022); Drzewiecka et al (2014).
[7] Bertossi et al. (2021)
[8] Chari and Verdery (2009)
[9] Vargas-Silva & Rienzo (2022)
[10] Benson and Lewis (2019)

The sample

We analysed online articles from four major British newspapers: guardian.co.uk, telegraph.co.uk, mailonline.co.uk, and express.co.uk. We built two separate corpuses of articles. Firstly, we collected articles relating to Polish and German migrants between 2014 and 2019 at key moments when migration was relevant, particularly European Parliament elections and the EU referendum. We collected all articles using the key words migra* OR immigra* OR "freedom of movement" OR "free movement" OR citizen* and then selected a sub-sample of articles focused on Polish and German migration to the UK. Secondly, we collected articles on historical memory using the key words histor* and "memor* and Poland and Germany and/or their demonyms for all of 2019. 2019 was a particularly relevant year for this analysis due to the 30-year anniversary of the transition of 1989 and the 80-year anniversary of the German invasion of Poland in 1939. We focused our research on articles that brought contemporary politics into connection with World War II, the socialist period or the post-socialist transition. We took a narrative approach to the analysis, meaning that we were interested in the stories that were told about German and Polish migration and history. The goal here was not to produce a quantitative overview of how the press covers these topics, but to reveal meanings through in-depth textual analysis. We also include findings from in-depth narrative interviews with 22 German and 18 Polish migrants in the UK. The interviews focused on participants' understanding of historical memory in their country of origin and in the UK, their experiences of migration and their political identity and behaviour.

Detailed findings

How are Polish and German migrants characterised?

Our migration sample of news articles shows that Polish migrants are typically portrayed as low-skilled or manual workers, a drain on the welfare state, and as an ethnic minority group that is not well integrated. Germans are represented as high-skilled 'professionals', a net benefit to the UK economy, and white. Both groups are nevertheless largely divorced from personal and collective histories and migration stories and instead discussed in terms of their relative contribution to Britain as migrants. Through binary classifications and stereotypes about 'Western' and 'Eastern' European migrant workers, Polish and German migrants are implicitly placed in different positions in the UK's class, racial and cultural hierarchies.

We find Polish migrants tend to be grouped together with other CEE migrants and portrayed primarily as low-skilled, manual workers. This is particularly the case in the right-wing tabloid press. For example, the headline of a Daily Mail article 'will your nanny, cleaner or builder have to leave the UK?' [11] presents manual jobs as typical of (Eastern) European workers in Britain, while the framing as 'your' worker implies British ownership over CEE migrants. In other articles, we find Polish migrants in similarly manual jobs such as shop workers, factory workers, and waitresses.

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[11] MailOnline (2016a)

This characterisation of Polish migrants creates a binary between 'UK taxpayers' and the 'Eastern European migrant', as it is often accompanied, particularly in the tabloids, by the idea that the latter are taking advantage of the UK welfare state. For example, the Express reported that EU workers, mostly those from Poland, were sending child benefits back to their families, meaning that 'British taxpayers are spending millions to raise children in foreign countries'[12]. These stories are printed despite the Government's own data that show EEA migrants' net contribution to the UK economy[13]. Polish and other CEE migrants are therefore situated in a low position in the economic hierarchy in the UK labour market.

German migrants, however, do not appear in a significant way in media narratives except in the period immediately surrounding the referendum. Here, Germans feature in more positive articles about the 'EU citizens' in the UK who face a loss of status after Brexit. In such articles, Germans are almost all characterized as working in highly-skilled 'professions' such as financial services, medicine, higher education, and management[14], meaning that they are characterised as wealthy, middle-class and/or highly educated and an overall benefit to the UK economy. News articles do not differentiate between migrants from western or eastern Germany, serving as another indicator of the way in which migrants are dislocated from their personal and collective stories. Instead, the narrative of 'EU citizens' serves the primary argument that migrants should be viewed in instrumental terms: the loss of 'highly skilled' Germans is interpreted as a major risk to the UK economy.

Alongside an economic hierarchy, news articles also construct cultural and racial hierarchies. Polish migrants are often portrayed as an ethnic minority. Tabloids describe Polish communities in British towns as 'Little Poland'[15] or characterise Poles as struggling to integrate or speaking poor English[16]. This hierarchy is also visible in more 'sympathetic' articles that report on hate crimes experienced by Poles, as well as Jewish people, Muslims and other people of colour, in the wake of the EU referendum. The Guardian, for example, reports that following racist incidents at a mosque and at a Polish community centre, Prime Minister David Cameron declared that the government 'would not tolerate intolerance'[17]. Similarly, a Telegraph article by columnist Toby Young (who has elsewhere written about his support for what he refers to as 'progressive eugenics'[18]) about an attack on a Polish cultural centre states that

> The thought that anyone could have been "inspired" by the referendum result to vandalise the Polish Cultural Centre fills me with disgust. I hesitate to say "shame", because I still don't think the Vote Leave campaign was guilty of racism or xenophobia.[19]

Here, it is the columnist's concern that his pro-Brexit agitation could be "misinterpreted" as being

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[12] Express Online (2014a)
[13] Vargas-Silva et al. (2022)
[14] The Guardian (2016a); MailOnline (2016b)
[15] Express Online (2016)
[16] MailOnline (2016c), MailOnline (2014a); MailOnline, (2014b)
[17] The Guardian (2016b)
[18] Belam (2018)
[19] The Telegraph (2016)

racist or anti-migrant that is at the heart of the story, rather than the Polish community targeted by the hate crime. Moreover, it denies the well-established xenophobic nature of Brexit discourse and amongst Leave supporters[20]. The condemnation of hate crimes against Poles at the same time as a denial of agency to the survivors also suggests an attempt to construct post-referendum racism as an anomaly in a fundamentally tolerant Britain, a view at odds with the everyday experiences of British people of colour[21].

In contrast, German migrants are implicitly imagined as white. The only negative story of a German migrant in the UK is one that appears in several tabloid articles reporting the case of an 'incompetent' NHS doctor who caused the death of a patient when he injected the wrong medicine. The description of him as a 'Nigerian-born German citizen'[22] informs readers that he is not 'really' German, his appearance in the news as negligent and criminal stands in contrast to typical perceptions of Germans as highly skilled, and, implicitly, Western European, erasing the very existence and lived experience of ethnic minority Germans. This implicit status is made explicit through several articles reporting Nigel Farage's own statement that British people would prefer to live next door to Germans than Romanians, the latter apparently demonstrating a 'high level of criminality'[23].

While CEE workers are characterised as manual workers, we nevertheless encounter positive stereotypes about the English working-class in several tabloid articles about the "Essex girl" Christine North. She was born in Germany to a German mother but, despite living in Britain since she was a child, cannot obtain a British passport because her father, formerly a British soldier stationed in Germany, is not named on her birth certificate. The upholding of these legal rules is lambasted by the Express as 'ludicrous'[24] because, they say, she has lived in Britain for 25 years, has an English husband who is a car mechanic, is a mum of two, and runs a cake-making business. Her position as a white working-class woman in a stereotypical English family with traditional gender roles guarantees her cultural status as authentically British.

How is German and Polish history represented?

Similarly to the characterisation of migrants, the representation of Polish and German history also constructs stereotypes and binary oppositions, particularly between 'Western' and 'Eastern' Europe, Britain and 'Europe', and 'Europe' and 'Islam'. While German migrants are not subject to a significant amount of media attention, German history is prominent in the UK press.

Many stories about Germany construct the idea of a country continually associated with Nazism. Many articles focus on far-right movements, parties and far-right violence that are used to tell a story of a country that has not adequately dealt with the Nazi past. These stories, typically found in

[20] Richards et al. (2023)
[21] Benson & Lewis (2019)
[22] MailOnline (2014c)
[23] Carlin (2014)
[24] Express Online (2014b)

the Eurosceptic press, draw on stereotypes of Germany as the UK's military enemy or authoritarian threat[25]. For example, the killing of the pro-immigration CDU politician Walter Lübcke that is reported as raising questions about whether Germany 'has failed to take seriously a rising threat from right-wing extremists'[26], while articles call on Germans to 'resist the new wave of far-right fanatics'[27]. Through such articles, contemporary Germany is presented as being on the precipice of a new dark period in its history.

However, by conceptualising the far-right as a problem of 'eastern Germany' and a result of the end of communism, journalists portray eastern Germany as part of the post-communist 'eastern Europe' while constructing Britain, and 'western' Europe as free of racism and xenophobia. Although some of the far-right incidents mentioned took place in western Germany, such as the killing of Walter Lübcke, far-right violence and the success of the far-right party the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is generally narrated as a problem of eastern Germany resulting from 'failures' of reunification, particularly through its economic impact. Following the result of the Thuringia state election which saw successes for the AfD under regional leader Björn Höcke, the Mail reports that the state

> is in the former East Germany where far-right extremism has flourished in recent years and where the far left is also strong […] Many East Germans still feel disadvantaged nearly 30 years since the Berlin Wall came down and the West's traditional parties never had deep roots there.[28]

Here, the presence of far-right groups are attributed to the 'east' as a consequence of reunification. The problem here is that such narratives erase the existence of western German far-right movements, such as the strong success of the AfD in parts of western Germany and its original western German leadership.

Similarly, the rise of populist right in Poland and in other parts of CEE is explained through the failures of post-communist transition. The Telegraph, for example, contrasts the democratic 'success' of the Baltic States which it says 'sought to emulate the West: its values, attitudes, institutions, and practices', whereas others 'are now governed by conspiracy-minded regimes who define themselves by their determination to resist conforming to Western ideas'[29]. The populist right and associated democratic backsliding is, therefore, explained by a 'failed' transition to the Western model. In turn, Britain and 'Western' Europe are characterised as free of racism or far-right movements through the use of racist stereotypes about Muslim migration. For example, the Telegraph places the antisemitic attacks in Chemnitz in the context of the Central and Eastern European far-right where there is 'an old and all too familiar anti-Semitism which is behind the rise – driven by populism and the indigenous far-Right'[30] in contrast to antisemitism in 'Western democracies' that is explained by the 'influx of Muslim migrants'. Antisemitism in the West is therefore something 'imported' through migration.

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[25] See e.g. Galpin (2024)

[26] Pleasance et al. (2019)

[27] O'Callaghan (2019)

[28] Stickings, T. (2019)

[29] Foxall (2019)

[30] Huggler (2019)

The state socialist or post-socialist experience is also used to explain support or opposition to different types of migration. EU freedom of movement is presented as important to post-socialist states because of their history, but not to the UK. For example, the Telegraph describes the possibility of east-west migration as 'an important freedom also granted by the fall of communism'[31]. The Daily Express also explains former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's support not only for EU free movement but also support for refugees because she 'grew up in the communist bloc of East Germany, which was cut off from the rest of the world for decades'[32].

In contrast, emigration from east to west and non-EU immigration are linked in a way to explain support for the populist right in the "East" and opposition to refugees, while occluding 'Western Europe's role in the economic inequalities created by post-socialist transition. The Mail states that 'East Germans' 'have watched a brain drain as their best and brightest are lured away to enjoy prosperity in the West while living standards in the East fall further behind' [33]. The Guardian maintains that the populist right in small towns has partly developed because they have 'suffered as young people have upped sticks and left', at the same time that 'barriers have sprung up again' as 'barbed wire fences keep out refugees'[34]. Here, the Guardian portrays the new border controls as a return of communist-era thinking rather than typical of postcolonial Britain and Europe as ways to keep out migrants of colour.

Patterns of emigration are therefore used to explain opposition to the settlement of (Muslim) refugees in those regions. For example, political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, writing for The Guardian, describe a 'demographic panic' in CEE, stating that 'anxiety about immigration is fomented by a fear that supposedly unassimilable foreigners will enter the country, dilute national identity and weaken national cohesion'[35]. The Telegraph also states that 'The East has benefitted from the opening up of borders to its own people to move to more affluent parts of Europe, but that doesn't mean for a second that many in those countries are keen to see themselves replaced by migrants'[36]. Racism and opposition to (Muslim) migration is portrayed here as a specifically CEE, post-socialist phenomenon, while at the same time leaving what is essentially the great replacement theory, articulated by far-right groups across Europe and the US, including Germany and Austria[37], unnamed and unchallenged. The post-socialist condition of CEE is therefore used to explain and even justify a racist conspiracy theory that has currency across Europe.

What impact do these media narratives have on Polish and German migrants?

Our interviews suggest participants are aware of the negative stereotypes about migrants being promoted by the UK press and that this affects their sense of belonging in the UK, their engagement with politics, and can even lead to hate crimes. German participants were aware of negative media

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[31] Huggler & Wallace (2019)
[32] Nicholson (2019)
[33] Hardman (2019)
[34] The Guardian (2019)
[35] Krastev & Holmes (2019)
[36] Spence (2019)
[37] Goetz (2021)

tropes about Germany which affect their perceptions of Britain and British people. One participant describes a double bind for Germans: if they complain about a negative headline in a tabloid newspaper, they are then confronted with a further stereotype that they 'can't take a joke'. They state that they refuse to buy the Daily Mail and find it sad and disappointing to hear such tropes from the media, opinion-makers and politicians (Interview 12, DE). Others noticed a difference at the time of the referendum, which made them feel more like outsiders. One German participant notes that previously 'we were quite happy, you know, just being part of this community' but more recent negative discourse arose due to Brexit: 'I certainly know that other people have had different experiences in terms of how they're seen in the community and who they are, which they didn't have a few years ago' (Interview 4, DE). One Polish-German participant attributed the anti-migrant sentiment and national stereotyping to a perceived lack of foreign news in the UK press, observing that 'I think that's partly because if you look at the news, Germany has a much larger share of foreign news than the UK' (Interview 6, DE).

The participants' observations are supported by published research[38]. The latter participant highlights the potentially damaging impact of the lack of press attention to other countries on hate crimes:

> I feel that people have absolutely no idea what is in Poland. You might even have difficulty memorizing Poland on the map if you omit the country labels. I don't think people here know very much […] I was racially turned on in the London Underground, that I should go home. Since the referendum, I shall say, we have been attacked five times, once physically and four times verbally, and each time it had something to do with Brexit perceptions' (Interview 6, DE).

One German participant appears disillusioned with the press, seeing a political agenda behind coverage uphold economic hierarchies by shifting the blame for economic problems to migrants:

> So, it's almost like hate-mongering […] Why that is, who that serves, I don't know. If you believe some people, it's so that the people you should be against as low-income earners are the upper classes here. And instead of denouncing them, how can it be that my minimum wage, that I can't live on it, they just look for someone else, the foreigners or them or them or them. (Interview 13, DE).

Some of our German participants noted that Polish and other CEE migrants are faced with more negative media stereotypes, but that they get along well as 'neighbours' and share a mutual experience of migration (Interview 1, DE). However, media stereotypes are also reproduced by participants themselves. One German participant contrasted themselves with 'eastern Europeans' and refugees and observed that 'as a German you are also Western European and I think that people are not like that anyway' (Interview 2, DE). Another participant attributes anti-German sentiment to the 'uneducated classes', as the English 'actually appreciate Germany and admire it a little for the strong economy and so on' (Interview 7, DE). A Polish participant differentiates themselves from other Polish migrants, arguing that they

> arrived in far too great numbers; these people form a fairly large group, which can sometimes be seen and heard very clearly. Much less visible are those Poles who have assimilated, bought homes here, work hard, and so on and so forth. There are many

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[38] See e.g. Galpin & Trenz (2019)

of us, but we just don't catch the eye, the Daily Mail doesn't write about us (Interview 5, PL).

Several of our participants describe a strategy of reading news across languages and countries to counteract their lack of trust in UK media. One German participant expresses distrust in the BBC, which they believe 'is only broadcasting what is actually allowed by the Government'. The participant describes a 'three-step process' of reading UK, German, and then French news to ensure they have a wide range of information/views, stating their opinion that the current political moment 'looks a lot like it did back then under fascism when Hitler came to power, information limitation, propaganda etc.' (Interview 18, DE). Here we see that the participant's collective memory of the Nazi past shapes their approach to news consumption in the UK.

Polish participants also described a similar approach to 'observe how the narratives compare and develop over time' (Interview 15) or to gain broader perspectives and context (Interview 16). Another Polish participant also expresses their distrust of the media that 'really presents their narrative, no one presents what happened'. The participant states that they have become 'indifferent' to politics since emigrating to the UK because 'I'm Polish, but I'm not really British. So I can't vote here, and because I don't participate in everyday life in Poland' (Interview 18). The final example demonstrates how media narratives can impact not only on a general sense of belonging but also on political citizenship more broadly.

Conclusion

Overall, our findings show that Polish and German migrants are portrayed very differently in the UK press. While German migrants are typically portrayed as white, highly skilled and a benefit to the UK economy, Polish migrants are characterized as low-skilled workers, poorly integrated and culturally different, and a drain on the economy. Both groups of migrants, however, are discussed instrumentally in terms of their relative benefit to Britain rather than as individuals or groups with their own personal, collective, human stories, experiences, and memories. Polish and German politics are represented in more similar ways, seen through a post-socialist lens. The success of far-right parties and instances of far-right violence are attributed to the post-socialist experience or post-communist transition. The latter is also used to explain opposition to Muslim refugees. In turn, Britain and 'western' Europe are imagined as free of racism, xenophobia or far-right movements, making it difficult to address the drivers of support for the far-right and to improve migrant experiences of xenophobia and racial discrimination across the continent as a whole. As described above, we recommend a series of measures journalists, editors, and news organisations can undertake that would improve the media representation of Central and Eastern European migrants and history/politics and, with it, the experiences of migrants more broadly.

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