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Who is considered "foreign"

Ethnic stereotypes in press releases across Europe

By Olga Eisele and Tobias Heidenreich

How do political elites talk about immigrants and refugees? Tobias Heidenreich and Olga Eisele examined almost 100,000 press releases from governments in four countries and from the EU itself. Their finding: There are big differences in who is associated with "high threat" or "low status". But this can have major consequences for the individual groups and for the public opinion.

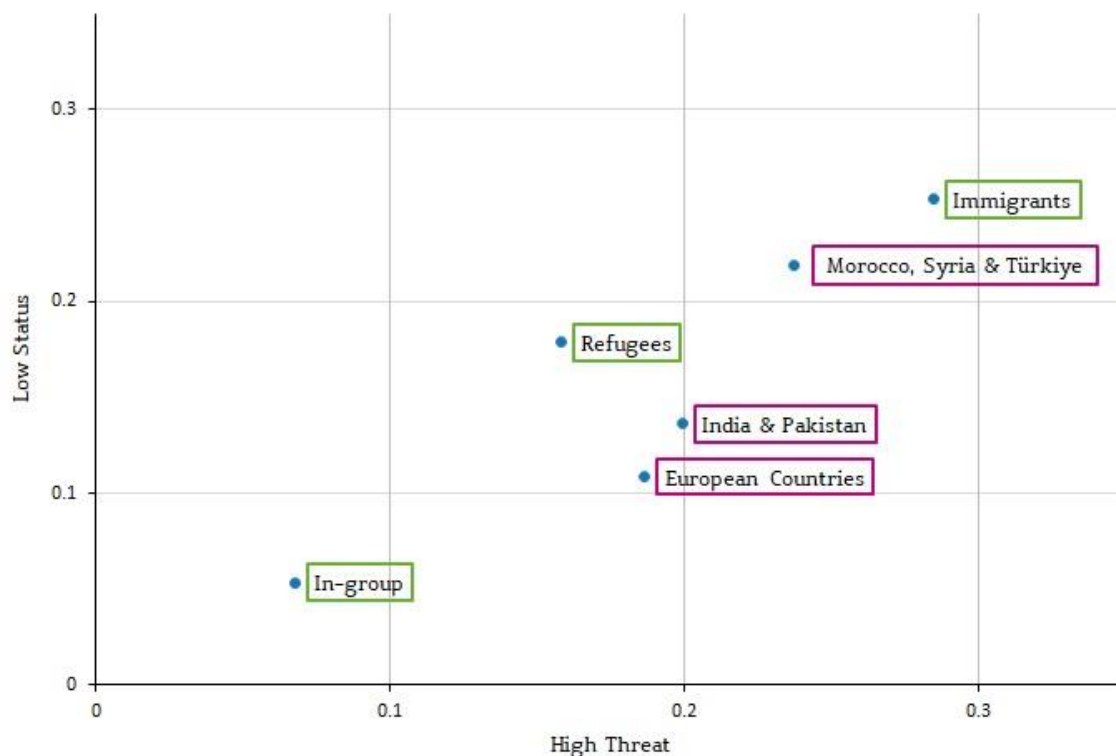
Migration has always been a divisive issue in Europe and for the European Union (EU) in particular, not least since the increase of migration movements in 2015. Migration flows from one EU country to another were heavily debated in the course of the EU's Eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007, but also migration from other parts of the world into the EU has shaped public discourse and the cultural, political, and economic developments of the EU and its members. This ranges from "Gastarbeiter" migration in the 1960s and 70s to different phases of EU enlargement, with discourses focusing, among others, on the opening of labor markets for Eastern European citizens after the Eastern Enlargement (2004 to 2011), to increased and debated migration movements after 2015. Most recently, the war in Ukraine forces people to flee and seek refuge in other European countries.

The Schengen agreement is one of the most acknowledged and appreciated advantages established within the EU, allowing citizens to not only roam freely between countries but also reside and work there. The creation of such a borderless space within the EU, however, sets a strong emphasis on the EU's external borders, separating "Fortress Europe" from the rest of the world. Securing these external borders has long been a burden, the sharing of which is also heatedly debated among member states. Yet, the borderless Schengen area itself rests on a fragile fundament as member states can unilaterally close borders, especially in times of crisis, and thereby effectively limit free movement. This is crucial also given the rise of nationalist forces across the EU who exploit migration as a political issue for their exclusionary agenda, invoking security concerns and negative stereotypes of immigrants as criminals or terrorists. These actors are also found to drive public discourse and communication by other political elites. As politicians are often seen as trusted sources, disseminating true information on complex political issues, this can be seen as at least problematic. With declining trust in the news media and the increased use of social media giving unedited access to a public audience, negative migration sentiment may dominate and perpetuate negative attitudes toward immigrants. In addition, political elites, especially those with important functions and mandates, play an essential role in the process of news production. They are often regarded as newsworthy by default and shape topics of public debate through their communication strategies. Research shows a close interdependence of the agenda of political actors and the news media, which, in turn, influences what and how we think about political issues. Not surprisingly, research has repeatedly shown that different factors, like the news visibility of migrants, influence attitudes toward immigrants. It is,

therefore, important to survey communication by political elites since such contents have a decisive influence on public opinion.

Focusing on press releases of the national governments of four European countries as well as the EU level, we shine a light on the depiction of ethnic groups to uncover how executives might contribute to a hostile climate towards different migrant groups in the public sphere. While the topic is connected to a multitude of issues, we focus on the stereotypical portrayal as operationalized by Anne C. Kroon and her coauthors by means of the two dimensions of “low status” and “high threat”, covering two key aspects as detected by the literature. We investigate nearly 100,000 press releases from the EU, as well as the national governments (including respective ministries) of Austria, Germany, Ireland, and the UK from 2012 until the end of 2020. To estimate the two dimensions and eventually measure the intensity of stereotypical depiction, we use word embedding models to calculate the semantic distance between words used to describe a migrant group and various words associated with “low status”, referring, for example, to aspects like poverty, or unemployment, and “high threat”, focusing on security-related facets like crime or violence. The groups in our analysis are explicitly mentioned ethnic groups, which make up a large part of the foreign-born population in each EU country, and unnamed groups of migrants. In the first figure we show how the relationship between the different groups and the two dimensions is represented on average, across the different countries or the EU level and the period examined. For the sake of clarity, we summarize individual groups.

Figure 1: Attributions to ethnic groups



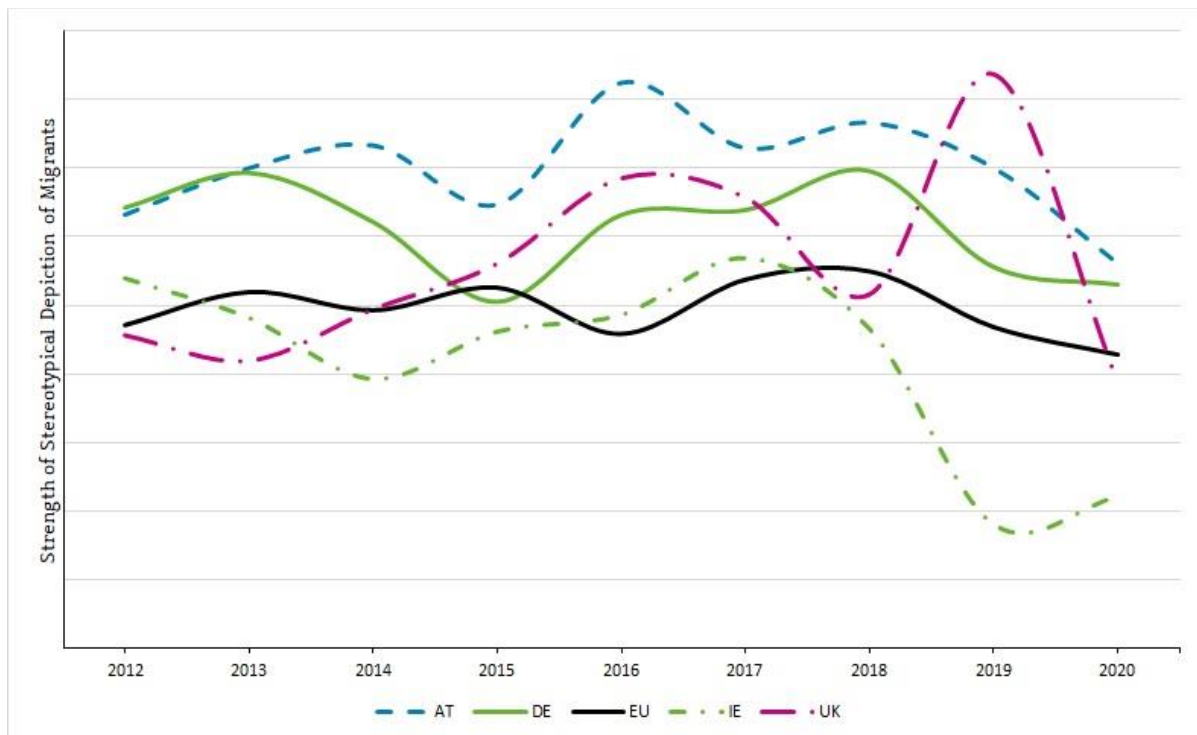
As a baseline, figure 1 includes an “Ingroup”, meaning the label for the native-born population. Clearly, this group is associated the least with low status and high threat. As for the other groups, some are distinctly more depicted as stereotypical than others. Citizens from other European countries are not as much associated with a low status as other groups, but nevertheless, score similarly on the “high threat” dimension compared to India & Pakistan, or the “Refugees” category. The data shows that this is due to Eastern European countries such as Poland or Serbia and that for this group the dimension “high threat” is associated more with crime than with terrorism.

Furthermore interesting is the difference between the group of Indians and Pakistanis as opposed to Moroccans, Syrians, and Turks. While both groups are depicted similarly considering the “high threat” dimension, the latter is distinctly more associated with “low status”. Indians and Pakistanis are addressed more favorably in the UK which might be related to historical bands and the fact that immigration from both countries to the UK has a long tradition. In contrast, the stereotypical portrayal of the other group (Moroccans, Syrians, and Turks) is mainly driven by Austrian press releases contextualizing them in a setting of particularly low societal status.

Lastly, the findings demonstrate an important difference: Refugees are depicted less stereotypically compared to immigrants as broadly conceived. Although the difference concerning the “low status” scale is not large, the group of “refugees” is depicted as not nearly as dangerous as the group of “immigrants”. In fact, this group is distinctly more associated with threat than any other named or unnamed group. While this might be based on the conceptual difference that refugees flee from severe consequences of, for example, a war in their home countries, overarching terms like “immigrants” don't imply contextualization. Even more, this label might be seen as dehumanizing, neither associated with emigration rationales nor ethnic contexts and thus, apparently, more commonly used in connection to stereotypes.

The second figure shows the changes over time. We examine the dynamics of the stereotyped portrayal of ethnic groups in press releases, only considering the unnamed migrant groups and combining the two dimensions. We pay attention to terms like “immigrants” or “foreigners” but not to words explicitly related to ethnic groups. This allows us to best compare numbers across countries and levels. The following figure shows that although patterns deviate, interesting dynamics can be picked up.

Figure 2: Stereotypical depiction of migrants in press releases in Europe over time



First, in all communication efforts – except on the EU level – there has been a rise in the stereotypical portrayal of migrants after 2015. Mirroring heated public discourses following increased refugee movements, it seems that government officials did not refrain from depicting immigrants in the context of low social status and security concerns.

For the UK, a distinct peak can be observed in 2016, coinciding with the Brexit referendum. Given that migration has been a hot topic in the conflict between the two camps either favoring the UK to leave the EU, or to remain part of it, the government – in the hand of the Conservatives since 2010 – might have taken part in lobbying for more restrictive policies to “win back control over the borders”, depicting migrants unfavorably. The peak, however, comes around 2019 – a year that saw renewed debate over Brexit, the borders between Ireland and Northern Ireland and the status of EU immigrants.

Press releases from Austria, moreover, are most stereotypical in regard to migrants across almost the entire time. This reflects longstanding nationalist trends with a strong far-right, part of the government between 2017 and 2019, a period with even higher levels of stereotypical language.

As a silver lining, the trend shows that the language employed has become less stereotypical recently, especially in Ireland, but also, to a lesser extent, in the other countries and on the EU level. The EU press releases, lastly, appear to be relatively stable

when it comes to depicting migrants. Comparing the slopes shows that EU officials are pretty consistent and comparably less prejudicial in their communication strategy.

This short analysis of language patterns in press releases demonstrates the importance of surveying elite communication about migration. Tracing opinions on migration helps to understand public demarcation lines when it comes to defining in- and outgroups – who is perceived as one of “us” and who is not – with possibly significant impact on different ethnic groups and how they are perceived.

The EU's multilevel system is composed of a group of countries that have decided to dedicate themselves to a joint peace project. Our analysis suggests that different representations of migrant groups are not only related to different perceptions of individual (ethnic) groups, but possibly also to political interests in individual countries. Common positions are threatened by national interests, which can already be recognized in linguistic patterns.

Not surprisingly, migrants from outside the EU are more likely to be perceived as a threat, but forced migration, for example in the case of refugees, is seen as less of a threat. With regard to the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is therefore to be expected that negative stereotypes will be offset to some extent by motives of deservingness and empathy: This migration movement is quite obviously not voluntary.

Another interesting pattern revealed in our results concerns the use of stereotypes in official EU language. Institutions host all of the EU's different nationalities, and the EU has quite explicit policies regarding, for example, diversity or discrimination. It also functions as an umbrella for its 27 members, often acting on the lowest common denominator. The result that the EU's communication is overall less prejudiced might, therefore, not be surprising, but still, a positive indication that the EU might offer somewhat of a buffer towards growing nationalism in Europe.

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