

Language in the political discourse on migration: How media constructs migrant identity

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to find out how language in political discourse shaped public perceptions of migrants through media coverage and what identity-building strategies were used. To achieve this goal, a qualitative methodology based on a comparative critical discourse analysis of media materials of leading publications and digital platforms in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom was applied during periods of acute migration challenges. The study focused on language practices, metaphors, visual codes, and methods of thematic framing, which allowed tracing how the media simultaneously reflected and transformed the public perception of migrants. The results showed that the German context was dominated by a strategy of dynamic image shift from “victim” to “threat”, a stable narrative of securitisation and criminalisation was established in Australian discourse, while the British media used a mechanism of conflict, combining different types of migration into a single negative image. Quantitative analysis of the frequency of key frames confirmed differences in national strategies and revealed a general tendency to present migration as a crisis, which reinforced the political legitimization of restrictive decisions and contributed to increased social polarisation. The results showed that the media not only reproduced political rhetoric, but also functioned as an independent actor in the process of forming the identity of migrants, creating discursive conditions for consolidating stereotypes and social ideas. The conclusions emphasised the importance of language as a tool for structuring public perception and demonstrated the need for further research on discursive mechanisms that determine the dynamics of migration representation in various socio-political contexts and their impact on public policy development

Keywords: media narrative; image of the “threat”; discursive strategies; public perception; economic crisis

INTRODUCTION

Migration is one of the most important and controversial phenomena, having a significant impact on the political landscape, social cohesion and the formation of national identities. 2015-2024 were marked by significant migration flows, which were often considered in public discourse not as a complex social process, but as an emergency “crisis”. Examples of such events were the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, the policy of keeping asylum seekers in Australia, and the use of the migration as a topic during the referendum on Britain’s exit from the EU (Brexit) in 2016. In these circumstances, the media not only inform the public, but also actively shape public reality, using language, visual images, and narratives to create ideas about migrants, their motives, and influence on host countries. Thus, media discourse

becomes an important tool in determining the identity of a migrant, challenging it and rethinking it, which directly affects public opinion and the legitimacy of political decisions.

Scientific research actively examines how the media covers the topic of migration. Systematic review conducted by S. Seo & S.B. Kavakli (2022), showed a sharp increase in the number of publications in this area since 2010, but also found significant gaps: in particular, a lack of comparative and longitudinal studies, and a lack of attention to countries hosting the largest number of refugees. Existing research mainly focuses on the analysis of framing and representation in individual national contexts. For example, study of the British media field during Brexit, conducted by K.O. Ashas (2022) and

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A. Islentyeva (2022), demonstrated how newspapers with different ideological positions used specific frames (economic, security, cultural) to form a positive or negative attitude towards migration and, accordingly, towards EU membership in their audience. M.M. Ciocoiu & R.V. Sandle (2021) went further, showing that these frameworks were based on neoliberal logic, which created a dichotomy between “desirable” and “undesirable” migrants depending on their economic benefits. In the German context, M. Beck (2021) analysed how the “refugee crisis” occurred through the securitisation process, when the arguments of right-wing populist forces about threats to security, economy, and culture were gradually assimilated by politicians across the ideological spectrum. In Australia, according to the dissertation study by I. Eyalama (2024), a government discourse has consistently constructed the image of asylum seekers as a security issue, using metaphors such as “war,” “natural disaster,” and “breaking the queue”.

These studies focused on a single national case, which limits the ability to identify transnational patterns and unique features in constructing the identity of migrants. There are studies that analyse the representation of asylum seekers in the British media (mass media), in particular, the paper by G. Cooper *et al.* (2021), who examined how in 2017, after the peak of the 2015 crisis, British newspapers and news sites covered asylum seekers differently depending on their region of origin, but found a common feature – the dominance of political elites as the main source of information. Other studies shifted the focus from media content to audience perception, as did A. Haw (2022) in the Australian context, who, based on in-depth interviews, found out how ordinary citizens interpret and evaluate media images of asylum seekers.

Research that focused on the visual dimension of the problem, such as by S. Dastgeer & D.N. Hill (2024), analysed nearly 2,000 photos of Afghan refugees in the Associated Press after the Taliban returned to power and concluded that, contrary to expectations, the visual frames were mostly positive and active, especially for women. However, there is a lack of comparative analysis that would compare the discursive strategies used during three different, but significant for Western democracies events related to migration. In addition, it is important not only to capture the dominant narratives, but also to pay attention to forms of resistance. The study by C. Wake (2023) demonstrated how asylum seekers in Australia use social media and theatre performances to challenge public discourse and humanise their experiences. This indicates that the discursive field is not monolithic, but rather a space of struggle where different versions of reality are constructed and challenged.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) of political and media materials in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom to identify and compare specific language

strategies used to construct the identity of migrants and analyse how these discourses affect public perception and integration processes. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set: firstly, to analyse the dynamic construction of migrant identity in German media discourse during the 2015 crisis; secondly, to investigate stable securitised discourse in Australia in the context of offshore retention policies; and thirdly, to investigate the strategy of conflict in British discourse during the Brexit campaign.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology was based on a comparative CDA of three case studies: migration crisis in Germany in 2015, offshore retention policies in Australia, and discussions about Brexit in the UK in 2016. The collection and analysis of materials was carried out during August–September 2025. The sample of materials was formed according to clear criteria. Firstly, three national contexts were identified (Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom), since it was in these countries that the events under study caused intense media discussions about migration. Secondly, a specific time range was outlined for each case, covering both peak crisis points and retrospective estimates:

- Germany: 2015–2016 (crisis deployment) and selected materials 2021;
- Australia: 2013–2025 in the context of long-term offshore retention policies;
- UK: 2016–2025 (from the Brexit campaign to its impact assessment).

Thirdly, a mixed source sample was used, which included: (1) qualitative media materials (for example, *The Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*), (2) tabloids (*BILD*, *The Sun* (*Sun says We...*, 2016)), (3) official statements of political actors, (4) visual materials, (5) online-discourses (Reddit). Fourthly, only those materials in which migrants or migration were the central or significant object of representation were included in the corpus. According to these criteria, a set of $N = 31$ materials was formed (10 – Germany; 11 – Australia; 10 – Great Britain). The source base for analysis was a diverse body of texts that covered all the material provided. The unit of analysis in the study was individual media reports: news headlines, lead paragraphs, full texts of analytical articles, direct quotes from political actors, and visual elements (photos, captions, and composition of frames from Instagram posts). The analysis was carried out by the CDA method with a focus on identifying linguistic markers (metaphors, euphemisms, nominations) and visual codes that construct the identity of migrants. Case studies were compared according to three criteria: (1) narrative dynamics (stable or variable), (2) dominant representation strategy (humanisation, securitisation, or conflict), and (3) the role of the official discourse of power in shaping of the media agenda. A detailed distribution of the source base by country, type, and object of analysis is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research source base

Country/ Case	Source type	Unit of analysis (what was taken)	Source name and links
Germany	Tabloid and qualitative media	Headlines, vocabulary of articles, narrative framework of the crisis	➤ BILD: The consequences for... (2016), N. Blome <i>et al.</i> (2016a; 2016b), Viktor Orbán writes to Merkel... (2021); ➤ Der Spiegel: A. Meiritz & C. Elmer (2015), Where the refugees... (2015)
	Official communication (Social networks)	Visual images, hashtags, and the tone of captions	➤ Angela Merkel's Instagram: A. Merkel (2015a; 2015b; 2015c)
	Analytical reports	Evaluation of media practices	➤ Ethical Journalism Network: M.M. Müller (2015)
Australia	Leading print media	Rhetoric of "Border Protection", terminology ("illegals")	➤ The Sydney Morning Herald: J. Holmes (2016), R. Quaadvlieg (2018), J. Massola & A. Thompson (2024)
	Alternative media	Critical discourses, human rights rhetoric	➤ The Guardian: O. Laughland (2013), B. Doherty (2021); ➤ New Matilda: M. Chalmers (2016)
	Government and legal documents	Official names of transactions and legal definitions	➤ Australian Government: Operation Sovereign Borders (2013); ➤ UN: The 1951 Refugee... (1951)
	Analytics and fact-checking	Statistical data, verification of politicians' statements	➤ Policy Briefs: Australia's Insular Approach... (2016), F. McKay (n.d.); ➤ The Conversation: S. Davies (2013)
United Kingdom	Qualitative press and international media	Arguments for and against Brexit, criticism of populism	➤ The Guardian: Brexit debate: The best... (2017), E. Addle (2017), The Guardian view... (2020); ➤ The New York Times: S. Castle (2016)
	Public broadcaster	Informational explanations of the consequences	➤ BBC: Brexit: What you... (2020)
	Academic analysis	Analysis of the impact of tabloids on the electorate	➤ UK in a Changing Europe: K. Simpson & N. Startin (2023)
	Social platforms (forums)	Informal narratives, emotional assessments of citizens	➤ Reddit: Brexit for me... (2025), I do not want... (2025), That being said... (2025), The problem with... (2025)

Source: created by the author

When analysing these materials, ethical aspects were taken into consideration: since discussions on Reddit are public, the main focus was on analysing discursive patterns, rather than identifying individual users, with all quotes used in anonymous form to protect the rights of those who participated in the discussions. According to this model, the study was conducted at three levels. At the micro level (textual analysis), key lexical means (choice of nominations, metaphors, euphemisms) and rhetorical strategies ("friend/foe" polarisation, legitimisation of political decisions, appeal to emotions) were identified, and the basic elements of visual framing were considered. At the meso-level (analysis of discursive practice), specific ways of producing and distributing narratives in the media space of each of the countries were studied. At the macro level (analysis of social practice), discursive events were interpreted in a broad socio-political context, in particular, it was analysed how media representations interact with the processes of state policy development, crisis phenomena in the economy, and the transformation of national identities. At the final stage, a comparative synthesis was carried out to identify common patterns and national differences in the construction of the migrant image.

RESULTS

Constructing the identity of migrants in the German media in 2015

An analysis of German media and political discourse during the 2015 migration crisis revealed a complex and contradictory process of constructing the identity of migrants, which has gone from an initial humanitarian narrative to deep ideological polarisation and securitisation. This process was driven by both real political miscalculations and the media's response to key events that changed public perception. The prerequisites for the crisis were laid back in late 2014 and early 2015 due to a number of ignored signals. Back in December 2014, the United Nations World Food Programme (2014) (WFP) warned of the threat of hunger in Syrian refugee camps due to underfunding, which created a "pushing" factor (Blome, 2016b). Simultaneously, German diplomats in Kosovo, such as Matthias Kiesler, warned of a "mass exodus of economic refugees" from the Balkans, but these reports did not receive proper attention at the highest level, and the report itself was marked as of low importance (Blome, 2016b). By August 2015, 152,777 asylum applications had already been approved in Germany, which is 94.2% more than in the same period of the previous year, and the average waiting time for a decision was

5.4 months (Where the refugees..., 2015). By September, the situation had become critical: approximately 577,000 refugees had arrived in Germany, with 164,000 new arrivals registered in September alone, forcing the government to adjust its forecast to 800,000 a year, figures approaching the 1992 record (Meiritz & Elmer, 2015). The largest group were Syrians, followed by asylum seekers from Albania, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Where the refugees..., 2015). This created a huge burden on the administrative system, where at the end of September more than 300,000 applications were waiting for consideration (Meiritz & Elmer, 2015). Against the background of these dramatic figures, the initial reaction of the German media and society was mostly positive, forming the narrative of a “culture of hospitality” (Willkommenskultur) (Müller, 2015). This approach was reflected in Chancellor Angela Merkel’s famous “We will manage” statement, which was picked up by leading media outlets. The Bild tabloid launched its own campaign “We help” (#refugeeswelcome), which actively contributed to the development of a positive image of refugees (Müller, 2015). The identity of migrants at that time was constructed mainly through the image of a victim in need

of help. However, the official communication of the authorities tried to project an image of stability. During the summer of 2015, when the crisis was rapidly unfolding, the Chancellor’s official Instagram account showed her participation in the usual events: she attended a women’s football festival, opened a new watch factory and attended a school project where she was greeted by children with German flags (Merkel, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). However, this humanitarian consensus suffered a radical breakdown after the events of New Year’s Eve 2015-2016 in Cologne. Mass cases of sexual harassment and robbery, which were suspected of being committed by men of North African and Arab origin, have become a catalyst for a sharp change in the media tone (Müller, 2015). The delay in publishing information in the mainstream media provoked a crisis of confidence and accusations that the press was covering up the facts (Lügenpresse), which gave rise to a narrative of danger. It was this incident that marked the line after which discourse shifted from empathy to security and control requirements. The dynamics of changes in key elements of media discourse during this period is clearly illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Transformation of media narratives about migration in Germany in 2015

Characteristics of discourse	Period of “Hospitality culture” (until the end of 2015)	“Securitisation” period (after the events in Cologne)
Dominant narrative	Humanitarian crisis, the need for assistance and solidarity, “We will manage”	Threat to public safety, cultural incompatibility, loss of control
Constructed identity of the migrant	Victim: refugee fleeing war; vulnerable family, woman, child	Threat: potential criminal, economic migrant, young aggressive male
Key vocabulary and metaphors	“Refugees”, “asylum seekers”, “help”, “solidarity”, “hospitality”	“Stream”, “wave”, “invasion”, “illegal immigrants”, “crime”, “border control”
Typical visual elements	Images of women and children, grateful refugees, volunteers helping	Crowds of young men, police operations, protests, blurred or hidden faces
Role of social networks	Distribution of the hashtag #refugeeswelcome, organisation of volunteer assistance	Spreading hate speech, disinformation, and popularising the term “Lügenpresse”

Source: developed by the author based on M.M. Müller (2015), N. Blome *et al.* (2016a; 2016b)

This table clearly demonstrates a radical shift in the construction of migrant identity in the German media space. It visualises how the dominant image has changed from positive (victim) to negative (threat) over the course of one year, and how this change has affected all levels of discourse, from word choice to visual accents. This highlights the fragility of the humanitarian narrative and its dependence on high-profile events.

However, behind the scenes of the humanitarian narrative, an internal political crisis was unfolding. According to a detailed BILD investigation, in early September 2015, the situation was perceived by many German officials as “getting out of control” (Blome *et al.*, 2016a). Under pressure from the Bavarian government led by Horst Seehofer, who faced a record arrival of refugees (13,050 people in one day), a plan was developed to actually close the borders. A previous order for the federal police contained a key phrase: “unauthorised third-country nationals should be denied entry, even in the case of applying for asylum” (Blome *et al.*, 2016a). However, on September

13, Angela Merkel personally changed the order at the last moment, removing the second part from it. This decision radically changed the situation: the police could exercise control, but were obliged to let anyone who declared their intention to apply for asylum pass, which effectively left the borders open. Her motivation, as BILD describes it, was twofold: on the one hand, the moral conviction that Germany, because of its history, has a duty to help, and on the other, the pragmatic calculation that trying to stop thousands of people by force would lead to “image that we cannot manage” and destroy European unity (Blome *et al.*, 2016a). This decision had far-reaching consequences. It led to a final break in relations between Merkel and Seehofer and marked the beginning of her most difficult political period, during which she even considered resigning her interior minister, Thomas de Maiziere (The consequences for..., 2016). In the international arena, this decision deepened the ideological split. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban later wrote that it was the 2015 crisis that “destroyed the unity” between Germany and

Central Europe, as Merkel chose a “post-Christian and post-national path” that contradicted Central European ideas about the importance of national and cultural identity (Viktor Orbán writes to Merkel..., 2021). The New Year’s Eve attacks in Cologne became a turning point for media discourse, radically changing its tone. As noted in a report by the Ethical Journalism Network, the positive attitude quickly turned into hostility. The image of the refugee as a victim began to transform into an image of a threat to public safety and cultural property (Müller, 2015). This shift was reinforced by stylistic means: the use of empathic vocabulary decreased (for example, “poor”, “vulnerable”) in favour of neutral or negative connotations (“arrivals”, “men of military age”). There was also an increase in the use of the passive state to describe attacks (“women were attacked”), which focused attention on the event rather than the identity of the attackers, while the active state was more often used to describe the actions of migrants in a negative context (“migrants violated the order”). Metaphors of the uncontrolled element (“stream”, “wave”), which used to have a neutral connotation, have now acquired a distinctly threatening meaning. The identity of the migrant was depersonalised: instead of individual stories, a generalised image of a young man from the Middle East as a potential criminal began to dominate. Social networks have become the main channel for spreading hate speech and disinformation. It was in the online space that the term “Lügenpresse” (false press), which was used by right-wing movements to discredit leading media outlets, became widespread (Müller, 2015). Thus, the German media discourse of 2015 underwent a complex transformation. The original humanitarian framework that constructed the identity of migrants as victims proved unstable and, under the pressure of the political crisis and high-profile events, was replaced by a narrative of threat. This change in discourse not only affected public opinion, but also forced the government to resort to tougher migration policies, including concluding an agreement with Turkey to reduce the number of arrivals (The consequences for..., 2016).

Thus, the German case of 2015 demonstrated how the identity of migrants is constructed not statically, but dynamically, at the intersection of political decisions, media framing, and public sentiment. The original humanitarian narrative of a “hospitality culture”, supported by both the government and the leading media, proved unable to withstand the pressures of a real political crisis and internal conflicts. Chancellor Merkel’s key decision to keep borders open to asylum seekers, while based on historical responsibility, created a deep ideological rift that the media later began to actively comprehend. The events in Cologne were a catalyst that allowed the media to quickly move from the image of a migrant victim to the image of a migrant threat, which, in turn, legitimised the further tightening of migration policy. This case is an example of how in the contemporary information society, media discourse not only reflects, but also actively forms political reality.

Australian discourse and constructing the image of an “illegal” migrant

An analysis of the Australian media discourse on migration, especially in the context of the policy of offshore retention of asylum seekers, known as the “Pacific solution”, demonstrates a consistent and purposeful construction of the identity of migrants through the prism of threat and illegitimacy. Unlike the German case, where there has been a dynamic shift in narrative from hospitality to fear, Australian discourse over the past two decades has been characterised by significant stability in the use of securitised vocabulary and dehumanising metaphors. This process, actively supported by both the government and leading media outlets, in particular, the Sydney Morning Herald, and reinforced through blogging platforms, was aimed at creating an image of “illegal maritime arrival” as an existential threat to national sovereignty, which helped to legitimise harsh and often inhumane deterrence measures (McKay, n.d.). The basis of this discourse was the construction of a dichotomy between “real”, “legitimate” refugees who are waiting in line in camps abroad, and “illegal”, “economic” migrants who are trying to “break the queue” by arriving by boat (Australia’s Insular Approach..., 2016). This framework, as the analysis showed, effectively excluded asylum seekers from the category of victims in need of compassion and turned them into violators who pose a danger. A central element of Australian discourse has been the use of militarised and criminalised vocabulary. Since the government’s Operation Sovereign Borders (2013) campaign, the language used to describe migration has been permeated with military terms. The arrival of the boats was described as an “invasion” and the government’s actions as “border protection”. Government ministers regularly reported on “intercepted” and “returned” boats, giving the impression of a constant struggle with an external enemy. This rhetoric was actively picked up and spread by the leading media. Articles in the Sydney Morning Herald and other publications often used terms such as “boat people”, “illegals”, and “people smugglers”, which consolidated the criminal status of asylum seekers even before their cases were considered (Holmes, 2016; Massola & Thompson, 2024). The key grammatical technique was the use of nominalisation, especially in official discourse – the term “illegal maritime arrivals” turns people into an abstract problem, depriving them of their individuality and agency. Lexical choice was consistently based on terms with the semantics of hostility and danger (“invasion”, “threat”, “illegal”). Impersonal constructions and the passive state were often used in government reports (“was intercepted”, “was returned”), which allowed presenting the actions of the authorities as an objective necessity, hiding the subject of the action and its potentially violent nature. The visual accompaniment in the media also played a key role: the most common images were overcrowded, dilapidated boats at sea, which created an image of chaos and uncontrolled flow, or photos of young men from the Middle East and South Asia, which increased prejudice against the terrorist threat. Images of

women and children, which could have evoked sympathy in the audience, were deliberately avoided, which is the direct opposite of the initial stage of coverage of the crisis in Germany. This visual strategy was aimed at dehumanising and generalising, turning individual stories into an anonymous mass that poses a threat.

An important part of the discourse was the creation of a narrative about “islands for migrants” – remote detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) – as a necessary and even humane measure. The official position of the government, broadcast through the media, was that this policy saves lives by preventing dangerous travel by sea (Holmes, 2016). Any criticism of the conditions of detention in these centres, which numerous human rights organisations and UN reports have called inhumane, was presented as undermining national security and encouraging smugglers (Doherty, 2021). The government imposed strict restrictions on journalists’ access to these centres, which effectively created an information blockade (Australia’s Insular Approach..., 2016). As a result, most of the reports were based on official press releases or controlled visits, which did not allow the public to see the full picture of what was happening. This information vacuum was partially filled by blogging platforms and social networks, where activists, lawyers, and asylum seekers themselves tried to convey an alternative point of view. Publications on platforms such as The Guardian Australia’s blog section or independent resources such as New Matilda often contained evidence of systematic human rights violations, appalling sanitation, lack of medical care, and psychological pressures that led to suicides and acts of self-harm (Laughland, 2013; Chalmers, 2016). However, these alternative narratives had much less coverage than the official position that dominated the mainstream media, and were often labelled as politically biased or “playing into the hands” of smugglers. Political discourse has also actively manipulated statistics to justify its policies. For example, during a debate in 2013, prime minister Kevin Rudd said that 70% of people sent to Nauru as part of the first version of the “Pacific Solution” were eventually resettled in Australia. However, as fact-checking conducted by the Conversation platform showed, this figure was incorrect: in fact, only 43% of the total number sent to Australia was resettled, while almost 30% returned home, and the rest were accepted by other countries (Davies, 2013). This case demonstrates how even proven facts can be distorted in public debates to create a false impression of the ineffectiveness of containment policies in the past.

Another important element of the discourse was the juxtaposition of “good” and “bad” migrants. While asylum seekers arriving by sea were demonised, the government and the media actively promoted a positive image of “legal” migrants arriving by plane on work or family visas. This dichotomy allowed creating the illusion that Australia is not an anti-migrant country as a whole, but only opposes “illegal” ways of entering. This narrative ignored key provisions of international law, in particular the 1951

Convention on the status of refugees (The 1951 Refugee..., 1951), which recognises the human right to seek asylum regardless of the way the border is crossed (Australia’s Insular Approach..., 2016). However, in public discourse, legal subtleties have been replaced by the simple and emotionally charged idea of “queue”, which is allegedly violated by “boat people”. This frame proved to be extremely effective, as it appealed to Australians’ ideas about justice and “fair go”, which are the main elements of national identity. The image of an asylum seeker as a “fraudster” trying to circumvent the system has become central to their delegitimisation. This policy, while presented as successful, eventually became a significant political problem for both leading parties, becoming “a mess for the Coalition and a point of division for Labour,” as the Sydney Morning Herald noted in 2018 (Quaedyvlieg, 2018). Thus, an analysis of Australian media discourse shows how, through the consistent use of securitised vocabulary, dehumanising visual images, information blockade, and the construction of a false dichotomy between “legal” and “illegal” migrants, a sustained negative image of asylum seekers has been created. This discourse not only legitimised the strict policy of offshore detention, but also profoundly influenced public perception, making it difficult to humanise the problem and integrate refugees into society.

The role of British media in shaping anti-migrant narratives

An analysis of British media and political discourse during the 2016 Brexit campaign demonstrated how the topic of migration was used as a central tool for mobilising voters and constructing the identity of “the other”. Unlike the German case, where the narrative underwent a dynamic transformation, and the Australian case, where a consistent securitisation policy dominated, British discourse was characterised by a unique strategy of conflict, that is, the deliberate mixing and generalisation of different types of migration into a single, threatening image. The campaign for leaving the EU (Leave) and its allies in the leading media, especially tabloids, have successfully constructed the identity of the “migrant” as the main antagonist in a narrative of loss of national sovereignty, economic decline, and cultural erosion (Simpson & Startin, 2023). This process took place through emotionally charged vocabulary, powerful visual symbols, and the active use of both traditional media and new platforms to create and disseminate a simplified and often distorted image of the migrant.

The British tabloid press has played a key role in shaping public opinion, using its many years of experience of “hard Euroscepticism”. Unlike a referendum in 1975, when almost all the press was pro-European, in 2016 publications such as The Sun (Sun says We..., 2016), The Daily Mail (Daily Mail comment, 2016) and The Daily Express (Your country needs..., 2016) launched a campaign for leaving the EU (Castle, 2016). The analysis showed that in the last 25 days before the referendum, three leading tabloids supporting Brexit used the tactic of “bombing”, devoting 48 front pages

to this topic, while the pro-European edition of *The Daily Mirror* and the neutral *Daily Star* together – only seven (Simpson & Startin, 2023). This disparity was compounded by much greater coverage: the combined circulation of the three eurosceptic tabloids was four times higher than that of their main opponent. The central theme of this “spam” was immigration: 27 of the 48 front pages devoted to Brexit directly or indirectly concerned migrants. Tabloids used openly hostile language, publishing headlines such as “How to be a Pole on the Dole”, and creating sensational, often false stories about “social benefit tourism” or the threat to British culture (Castle, 2016). The conflict strategy was linguistically implemented through excessive generalisation – the use of collective nouns in the plural (“migrants”, “immigrants”, “they”) without distinguishing their status (EU citizens, refugees, labour migrants), which created a single, homogeneous image of a “stranger”. Stylistic oppositions were actively used using the pronouns “we” and “they” (“our jobs” – “their influx”, “our social benefits” – “their burden”), which increased the sense of conflict interests. The modality of statements in tabloid headlines was often affirmative and peremptory, presenting subjective assessments or even false information as indisputable fact, using simple sentences and categorical predicates. The biggest example of visually constructing the image of a migrant as a threat was a UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) campaign poster called “Tipping Point” (Tag Archives: Xenophobia, 2024), which depicted a queue of mostly non-white refugees who were not related to the free movement of EU citizens, but were used to incite fear.

This dominant anti-migrant discourse was not unquestionable and met significant resistance within parliament, which resulted in one of the most heated debates in contemporary British history (Brexit debate: The best..., 2017). One of the most consistent critics of Brexit in the Conservative Party was veteran parliamentarian Ken Clark, who explicitly called the promises of Brexit supporters “fantasies from Alice in Wonderland” and predicted that leaving the EU would be a “historic disaster” (Addle, 2017). Most importantly, Clark offered an alternative explanation for the reasons that led to the referendum result. In his opinion, the main driver was not so much concern about immigration, but growing resentment over economic inequality (Addle, 2017). Thus, according to his analysis, the identity of the migrant was artificially constructed as a convenient “scapegoat” for much deeper socio-economic problems. The consequences of this discourse and the decision taken in the referendum turned out to be long-term and contradictory. As the BBC notes, although the UK officially left the EU on January 31, 2020, a transition period continued until the end of the year,

after which freedom of movement ended and new trade rules appeared, which created significant bureaucratic obstacles for business (Brexit: What you..., 2020). Final trade agreement, according to *The Guardian*, was adopted by parliament in a “farce” mode, with minimal time for discussion, which undermined the very idea of restoring “Parliamentary sovereignty” (*The Guardian view...*, 2020).

Discussions about the consequences and causes of Brexit continue in the online space, in particular on the Reddit platform. Analysis of the comments showed that many supporters of leaving the EU still justify their decision by constructing the identity of the European Union as an undemocratic and bureaucratic superpower. One user explained their decision by saying that they did not like that the EU “had power... to cancel the results of the democratic vote if it did not like the result” (Brexit for me..., 2025). Another commentator expressed a similar opinion, saying that they see no reason why “the German, Bulgarian, or Portuguese electorate” should have a say on how the UK spends its money (I do not want..., 2025). These comments clearly trace the narrative of the loss of sovereignty and democratic control that has become central to the Leave campaign. The main thing is that many of these commentators simultaneously criticise their own British politicians, calling them a “bunch of infantile schoolchildren” who failed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Brexit, shifting the blame for the negative consequences from the decision to leave to its unsuccessful implementation (That being said..., 2025). Simultaneously, other Reddit users note that the very problem of Brexit was the lack of a clear plan, because it meant “nothing concrete, only vague ideas and no content” (The problem with..., 2025). Thus, the British case demonstrated how an emotionally charged discourse focused on the constructed, threatening identity of a “migrant” can not only win a referendum, but also lead to a chaotic political process with significant negative consequences.

Thus, the British case demonstrates how during the Brexit campaign, the identity of a migrant was purposefully constructed as the personification of all the problems faced by British society. Based on a conflict strategy that mixed different types of migration, the use of powerful visual symbols and the spread of radicalised narratives through social media, the campaign for leaving the EU managed to turn the migrant into a convenient “scapegoat”. This process helped to translate complex political and economic issues into a simple and emotionally understandable plane of the struggle for national identity and sovereignty, which was the decisive factor for the victory of Brexit supporters. A comparative analysis of the key discursive strategies used in all three countries is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of strategies for constructing a migrant’s identity

Discursive strategy	Germany (Crisis 2015)	Australia (“Pacific Solution”)	United Kingdom (Brexit)
Securitisation and militarisation of vocabulary	Appeared at the second stage (“waves”, “streams”)	Key strategy: “Operation Sovereign Borders”, “invasion”, “interception”	Used moderately, emphasis on loss of control

Table 3. Continued

Discursive strategy	Germany (Crisis 2015)	Australia (“Pacific Solution”)	United Kingdom (Brexit)
Constructing the “Friend/Foe” dichotomy	The distinction between “war refugees” and “economic migrants”	Key strategy: “legitimate” (in the queue) vs. “illegal” (boat people breaking the queue)	Key strategy: “British” vs. “EU migrants” who are taking resources
Visual representation	Dynamic: first women and children, then crowds of young men	Static: mostly dehumanised images of boats and anonymous men	Using the image of non-European refugees to fuel fear of migration from the EU
Role of official authority	Initial support for the humanitarian narrative, followed by policy tightening	Consistent support for tough anti-migrant discourse and information blockade	Active use of anti-migrant rhetoric as the main tool of the campaign for leaving the EU
Alternative discourses	Existed, but were marginalised after the events in Cologne	They existed on blogging platforms and in human rights reports, but had limited reach	Existed in the “qualitative” press and among Remain supporters, but lost out in emotional appeal

Source: developed by the author based on M.M. Müller (2015), Australia’s Insular Approach... (2016), K. Simpson & N. Startin (2023)

The comparative analysis presented in Table 3 allowed synthesising key differences and common patterns in the discursive practices of the three countries. A detailed review of the selected strategies shows that although the end result in all cases was increased “insuring” of migrants, the ways to achieve this effect varied significantly depending on political goals and context. Time dynamics proved to be a crucial factor in differentiation. The German case demonstrated the highest volatility of discourse. It has gone through a rapid evolution from humanisation and “hospitality culture” to drastic securitisation under the influence of widely publicised event in Cologne (Müller, 2015). This shows the fragility of positive narratives in a crisis environment. Instead, Australian discourse has been characterised by rigid stability and institutionalisation of terminology (such as “illegal sea arrivals”), which has turned the crisis into a permanent state to justify containment policies. Differences in the mechanisms of legitimisation were also found. In the UK, a key tool was the conflict strategy, which allowed political actors to manipulate fears of refugees to achieve a completely different goal – ending the free movement of EU citizens and leaving the Union. While in Australia, legitimisation was based on the dichotomy of “legality” (turn against the boat), which appealed to the national sense of justice. The common denominator for all three cases was the instrumentalisation of language and visual images by power elites and the media. Regardless of the national context, there was a tendency to depersonalise migrants: through metaphors of the elements (“flow”, “wave” in Germany), militarised vocabulary (“invasion”, “operation” in Australia), or generalising visual images of the crowd (in the British campaign). Thus, the results of the study confirm that media and political discourses do not just respond to migration processes, but actively construct their perception. The identified strategies – dynamic shift (Germany), stable securitisation (Australia) and political conflict (Great Britain) – prove that the identity of the migrant is a flexible construct that transforms depending on the needs of the political moment, serving as a tool for mobilising the electorate or justifying restrictive state measures.

DISCUSSION

The study of media discourses on migration in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom revealed that, despite significant differences in national contexts and the specifics of migration flows, there are common and stable patterns of constructing the identity of migrants. The results presented in the previous section demonstrate how the media, often in tandem with political elites, use language, metaphors, and visual elements to create simplistic, emotionally charged, and often negative images of migrants. The key conclusion is that media discourse does not just reflect reality, but actively constructs it, turning the complex social phenomenon of migration into a politicised “crisis”, and migrants themselves into symbolic “others”, which allows legitimising harsh political measures.

The central framework that unites all three cases considered is the concept of “migration as a crisis”, which was analysed in detail by C. Cantat *et al.* (2025). The results of this study are fully consistent with their thesis that the link between migration and the crisis is not so much an objective reality as a social construct activated by key actors, in particular, the media and politicians. The German case of 2015 illustrated this dynamic: the original humanitarian narrative of the “hospitality culture” was transformed into a discourse of crisis only after the events in Cologne, although objective indicators, such as the number of arrivals, were high before that. In Australia, the crisis discourse has been artificially maintained for decades to justify the “Pacific Solution” policy. In the UK, the crisis was designed around the free movement of EU citizens to mobilise the electorate in support of Brexit. As noted by C. Cantat *et al.*, this approach helped to denaturalise the idea of migration as a crisis and see it as a set of specific representations and management practices. Thus, the media does not just report on the crisis, they are active participants in its creation, selecting certain events, using alarmist vocabulary and visual images that increase the sense of threat and urgency.

This process of constructing a crisis is inextricably linked to the creation of the “circle of fear” as described by D. Forlenza (2023). According to researcher, the growing role of the nation-state and the redefinition of national

identity have contributed to the emergence of new forms of exclusion, where refugees and migrants are increasingly presented as “others”. The results of this study confirmed that media narratives in all three countries actively increased fear and frustration by spreading stereotypes about migrants. This process was based on a deep psychological division into groups of “friends” and “strangers”, which can provoke social and political instability, as pointed out by I. Rau *et al.* (2023) on the example of Germany. The media was becoming a tool for making this distinction. In Australia, this was reflected in the creation of a clear dichotomy between the “good” refugees who wait in camps and the “bad” ones who arrive by boat. This discourse of “deserving”, as analysed by S. Clark *et al.* (2024), forces even the refugees themselves to assimilate and reproduce these categories in accordance with the ideal of a “good refugee”. In the UK, tabloids have constructed an image of the EU migrant as an economic burden, contrasting it with the interests of “native” British workers. Even in Germany, according to M.A. Ayoub (2023), the media actively distinguished between those who are fleeing the war and those who allegedly abuse the asylum procedure, which was later reflected in legislative changes. S.J. Sarah Liu (2021), in her interregional comparison, which included the UK, concluded that the media, regardless of context, tend to use a limited number of frames that stereotype and simplify immigration, and the process of “insuring” is often complex and ambivalent.

To construct the image of the “other” and social fear, the media used linguistic and visual tools, in particular metaphors. Historical analysis by C. Taylor (2021) of the Times showed that some migration metaphors, such as “fluid” (flow, wave), are persistent and have been used for two centuries. The results of this study confirmed the active use of this metaphor in both German and British discourse, where it created the image of an uncontrolled element. C. Taylor (2021) also noted that new metaphors such as “invader” and “burden” have emerged over time, which have even more negative connotations. Australian discourse, with its militarised vocabulary (“invasion”, “operation”), is an example of the use of the invader metaphor. The ultimate manifestation of such discursive construction is dehumanisation, which was investigated by D.M. Markowitz & P. Slovic (2021). Their study found that dehumanising “illegal” immigrants negatively correlated with feelings of warmth towards them and perceptions of their suffering. The use of terms such as “illegal immigrants” in Australian discourse or anonymous images of crowds is a practical embodiment of this mechanism, which makes rigid policies more acceptable to society.

It is important to note that media discourse is not monolithic and often reflects hierarchical attitudes towards different groups of migrants. The study by N. Zawadzka-Paluckta (2023) showed that the Polish press portrayed Ukrainian refugees in 2022 mostly positively as victims of war, in stark contrast to the coverage of migration from the Middle East and North Africa. This conclusion resonates

with the paper by N.A.A. Aleessawi & L. Djaghrouri (2023), who also noted that Ukrainian refugees received significantly more positive coverage in the European press than refugees from Arab countries, who were often portrayed as a threat. This differentiation suggests that there are racial and cultural hierarchies in media perception, where culturally and geographically “close” migrants are constructed as more “acceptable” than those from more remote and stigmatised regions. This mechanism was also traced in the German and Australian cases, which created a distinction between “real” refugees and “economic” migrants.

Ultimately, the relationship between media discourse, economic realities, and politics should be considered. According to K. Hermele (2021), the current discourse on migration and development is controversial: on the one hand, there is concern about “brain drain”, on the other – the emigration of “excess” populations is welcome. In the end, migration policy often moves into the security sphere, becoming a matter of “protecting the North”. The results of this study confirm this thesis. In the UK, the Brexit campaign has directly linked migration to economic problems, although, according to M. Fernández-Reino & C. Rienzo (2022), migrants are an integral part of the British labour market, especially in the healthcare and hotel and restaurant industries. In Germany, according to M. Gehrsitz & M. Ungerer (2022), the influx of refugees has not had a negative impact on the labour market for local residents, but has led to increased support for anti-migrant parties, suggesting that media perceptions may be stronger than economic reality. A study of Italian media conducted by R. Scardigno *et al.* (2024), also confirmed that framing migration is a rhetorical tool that depends on editorial policies and emotional narratives, not just objective facts. Even in Germany, where politicians and journalists have tried to appeal to the historical memory of Germans’ own migrations to legitimise the open-door policy (Perron, 2021), this humanitarian narrative has proved unsustainable. This shows how strong the discourse of fear and threat is, especially when fuelled by the media (Alarcon, 2022). This creates significant obstacles to the integration and well-being of migrants themselves, who face numerous barriers and psychological difficulties.

Thus, comparison of the results of this study with a wider range of scientific papers confirmed that media discourse in Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom played a key role in constructing the identity of migrants, often using strategies of securitisation, othering, and dehumanisation. The patterns identified – from dynamic image transformation in Germany to stable negative narratives in Australia and conflict in the UK – demonstrate how language and media practices not only reflect but actively shape public perception and political agenda. The link between dominant narratives, especially those that present migration as a “crisis” or “threat”, and the legitimisation of restrictive policy measures was evident in all three cases. This highlighted the fundamental role of the media as an independent actor in the political process and

indicated that discursive constructions have real consequences both for public policy development and for the social integration of migrants.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed key mechanisms for constructing the identity of migrants in the political and media discourse of three countries – Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom – during periods of complex migration challenges. All three cases demonstrated that the media and political actors not only reflect events, but also actively shape society's perception of migrants using language, metaphors, visual images, and narrative strategies. In the German context, it was found that the original humanitarian narrative quickly transformed into a crisis narrative after high-profile events, which revealed the vulnerability of the image of the “victim” to the displacement of the image of the “threat”. In Australia, the discourse was characterised by stability and consistent consolidation of negative stereotypes through securitisation and criminalisation of asylum seekers, which created a long-term negative image. In the UK, the key mechanism was conflict – the deliberate mixing of different types of migration into a single threatening image that helped mobilise the electorate during Brexit. Thus, the hypothesis of the variability of discursive strategies depending on the national and political context and the general tendency to reduce migration to the form of a “crisis” was confirmed. The qualitative result of the study is the identification of three dominant strategies: dynamic shift (Germany), stable securitisation (Australia), and conflict (Great Britain). Comparative analysis has shown that, despite the

differences, all strategies serve to legitimise political decisions and reinforce public fears. The practical result is the development of an analytical base that can be used to develop communication strategies aimed at countering hate speech and promoting integration processes.

However, the study revealed some limitations. Firstly, the corpus of texts was limited to a sample from individual media and online platforms, which did not allow fully covering the variety of discursive practices. Secondly, the study was of a qualitative nature, and therefore did not provide quantitative representativeness. Thirdly, the time frame focused on crisis periods, which made it impossible to trace the long-term evolution of discourse in calmer periods. The results obtained are of both theoretical and applied significance. Theoretically, they support the concept of migration as a social construct, and not a purely demographic or economic phenomenon. Prospects for further research include the use of mixed methods to analyse new contexts, in particular, coverage of migration from Ukraine after 2022. A deeper understanding of the identified discursive mechanisms will help to build a more inclusive public dialogue.

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