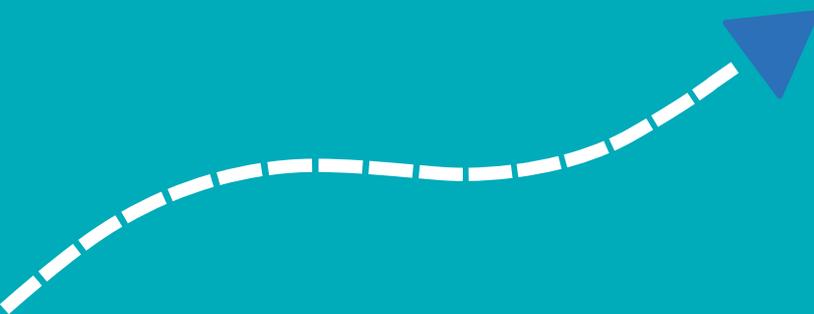


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**JAGATUD
TEEKONNAD**



13. MIGRATION AND PUBLIC OPINION

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Did you know that sometimes immigration can affect societies even if they have no immigrants? Through public opinion, of course. As you know, in a democratic society, public opinion has a significant impact on which migration or integration policies are pursued. But how does public opinion develop? How does it change over time? And what role does the media play?

Public opinion is the collective opinion of members of society on a specific topic and is measured by various types of public opinion polls. Public opinion is never a common opinion shared across society, but rather the sum of the views of different people. Therefore, it is always diverse and divided in one way or another.

When talking about the formation of public opinion, it is important to understand it as a multi-layered phenomenon. Let's say that public opinion is like a nesting doll, the inner layer of which is core values, the middle layer is attitudes and the outer layer is opinions. Core values are relatively unchanged or change marginally over time. There are many different classifications of values and we will not delve into these. But let's have some examples: a person is either more open to change or considers it a negative phenomenon, how much importance does one attribute to social status and dominance over others, the personal need for achievement, stability, and security or the opportunity to set goals or create something on your own. No core value in itself makes a person feel positive or negative towards migration. However, these core values can be activated in different ways. More on that below.

The middle layer of the nesting doll could be called attitudes or mindset. Attitudes are also shaped by one's social environment, such as the attitudes of the people around us or the experiences we have, such as contacts with migrants or migration.

Consequently, it is possible to change attitudes, but to what extent, varies from person to person. People can be divided into **four groups** in terms of their attitudes towards migration:

- One relatively small group is made up of people who have a clearly positive attitude towards this issue: in their view, migration is more of a socially enriching or necessary phenomenon, or at least it does not deprive anyone of anything important.
- The second also relatively small group is made up of people who have a fundamentally negative attitude towards migration: in their understanding, migration is undesirable, or even dangerous.
- The third and larger group contains information seekers: they do not have a very clear attitude towards migration, so they can in principle be persuaded in both directions, but above all, they want to make an informed decision.
- The fourth and largest group consists of doubters, who also do not have a clear attitude, but are more difficult to persuade because they are not looking for information.

We now reach the outer layer of our nesting doll – public opinion. In addition to people's individual core values and attitudes, public opinion is influenced by everything that happens around us every

day: what events take place, what aspects of migration is the media focusing on (and how much is migration covered), what messages we send on the subject and so on. Therefore, public opinion is also much more volatile than core values or attitudes and can change in days, especially at the expense of the group of information seekers and doubters.

Public opinion usually also concerns some specific issues and is not an abstract positive or negative feeling. For example, in a public opinion poll, people may be asked whether Estonia should allow more labour migration than it currently does. Public opinion research has shown that a large proportion of people do not have an established opinion on any given issue and can therefore change their minds. In some situations, this question may also be answered negatively by someone who would otherwise have a positive attitude towards migration (for example, because unemployment in the country has risen sharply), but it is not impossible that someone who does not consider migration a good thing thinks that labour migration is necessary for some professions given the current situation. The unchanged core values do not provide a single answer either, as different messages and topics [activate](#) different core values.

Trends in migration attitudes in Europe

Both public opinion and attitudes are most often measured through surveys (although sometimes through experiments or more in-depth interviews). And, of course, the answer depends significantly on the question. As a result, surveys can sometimes yield results that seem contradictory at first glance. For example, [surveys](#) show that Europeans were much more sceptical than Americans about admitting new immigrants. However, answers to the questions of whether immigrants (already in the country) are seen more positively or negatively showed a much more positive attitude. It is also worth noting that attitudes towards immigrants in Europe have generally become more [positive](#) in recent decades. There are a few countries, such as Austria, Hungary, Czechia and Italy, where this attitude has for various reasons moved in the opposite direction, but in all other countries, including Estonia, the number of those who are more positive about migration has increased slightly. How to explain this? The 2010s cannot be considered an idyllic time in the field of migration – Europe was hit by the Mediterranean migration crisis, anti-immigration movements appeared in many places and Brexit was greatly influenced by opposition to Eastern European immigration.

In general, it is possible to point out three reasons why people's attitudes towards migration have become more positive. The first cause and the one that is the slowest to take effect is related to demographic development. Current younger generations are much more positive about immigration than their predecessors because they are simply more accustomed to diversifying societies.

However, the number of young people in the population has decreased and this change alone doesn't explain everything. Attitudes have also become more positive in older age groups. This can in part be explained by the increase in intercultural contacts, but also in part by more well-considered migration and integration policies.

The third and perhaps most paradoxical reason is the emergence of anti-immigration parties. Namely, research shows that while on average 10–20% of the population is very receptive to the messages of radical right-wing parties and their attitudes towards migration have become strongly negative, there are far more people who have become convinced opponents of such movements and therefore tend to see migration in a more positive light.

Migration coverage on (social) media

But let's look at the more volatile surface layer of public opinion. How does the media influence public opinion on migration? For example, the tone of articles on migration in the media has been studied and it has been concluded that migration is more often portrayed [negatively](#).

In addition to the professional press, which has the task of verifying allegations and reflecting the views of the various parties, there is an increasing amount of non-journalistic media content, both completely positive and non-critical, as well as negative and intimidating. Such content is especially common on social media. If you often see negative migration posts on social media, it is either due to which posters or groups you have selected yourself, or the algorithm suggests material similar to what you've viewed before. By the way, many social media algorithms are structured so that they [recommend](#), above all, content that has caused strong reactions in people. And the strongest and most memorable emotions are negative.

However, if we look at professional journalism, negatively charged news tends to be predominant here as well, especially during the so-called [European migration crisis](#). So why all these negative stories? The reason lies in the content production logic of the press. The most important tool of a journalist is newsworthiness. This is the threshold that determines what is written about and which stories go unreported. Stories that are current, extraordinary, concern prominent people, contain conflict, have a great impact on society or whose events take place close to the reader are considered newsworthy. Therefore, migration is often talked about sensationally, through conflicts, or in an attempt to emphasise the great impact of migration on society. And it is often easier to do this by using a negative tone.

Negative media content is often more prevalent in commercial channels than in public service media. It also illustrates the potential impact of media ownership on content: privately owned channels are mostly aimed at making a profit for the owner, and therefore more emphasis is placed on sensationalism, which attracts the attention of consumers as well as advertisers.

To what extent does the media influence public opinion?

But to what extent can the tonality, sensationalism or scandals of the articles influence whether we think of migration positively or negatively? Studies of the impact of the media show that the deeper core values of a person generally cannot be affected by the media. However, the media can influence how much we think about migration, what we think about more specifically in relation to migration and also shape public opinion on some individual issues.

How much we think about migration is greatly influenced by the media, above all through their power of agenda setting. Editorial choices also influence what we think of when we think of migration: that is, which events are discussed by the wider public and which don't receive much attention.

It is possible to examine migration in very different contexts or [frames](#), in order to tell very different stories. If migration is constantly framed in economic terms – immigrants are seen first and foremost as a workforce and migration is linked to economic competitiveness, tax revenues and entrepreneurship – then people will also start to think about migration primarily from an economic perspective.

If migration is first and foremost framed through individual stories – each migrant has his/her own story, hopes, dreams, virtues and shortcomings, then society also accepts migrants more as a diverse group of individuals that aren't generalised. However, if migration is framed as a force of nature, for example – refugee masses flowing across borders, flooding asylum centres and creating problems that governments must address, then the social image also reflects migration as an anonymous mass that invades with the inevitable power of nature.

Of course, the media doesn't affect all of us in the same way: those who have an unwavering positive attitude towards migration will, in most cases, not change their disposition. And media coverage alone does not change the mindset of a person who has a negative attitude towards migration. The press may also raise issues that change their views on a particular issue (recall the earlier example of allowing labour migration), but in most cases, this does not affect attitudes. Instead, people with strong convictions find some other explanations for the media coverage that doesn't match their attitude: for example, that the media distorts reality for some reason.

However, the media can shape the opinions of people who do not have a strong position on migration issues, at least for a short time. Especially if they don't have direct contact with migrants or migration. For example, if we constantly hear that migration is the engine of economic growth, a person who doesn't have a very strong opinion about migration will associate it with something positive. At least until a different record is played. However, when migration is considered from day-to-day as a potential foreign threat, the hesitant attitude towards migration becomes cautious, to put it mildly.

Thus, a person who has a firm opinion or direct contact with migration doesn't generally re-evaluate his/her position simply because of the media content. But people are different, both in their attitudes and the level of its elaboration. And more important than the average opinion or how many people someone manages to convince is to have sufficient high-quality, varied and balanced information about migration. This will help avoid a situation where migration becomes a sensational one-frame issue. However, varied and balanced information also ensures that steadfast proponents, opponents and doubters of migration find a point of reference from which to have a meaningful dialogue.

Discussion points

- Analyse the coverage of migration in a media outlet. To do this, you can select an online news outlet (or a social media channel) of interest and search with the keyword "migration" etc. How many negative and positive articles do you find during the set period? (There are also certainly stories with a neutral tone.) How has migration been framed in these stories?
- Discuss, either based on the media coverage above or an article on migration, how these stories could affect public opinion. Whose opinions could be affected by such content and under what conditions? Does it only affect public opinion or also attitudes on migration or even core values?
- Find a public opinion poll on migration and discuss what factors may have influenced the results – for example, what was the role of the societal attitudes or deeper cultural experiences, what was the role of the background events of the time, media coverage, people's direct experiences or the wording of the question?

Further reading

A brief overview of various international opinion polls on migration can be found on the Migration Data Portal: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/public-opinion-migration>.

In the EU, including Estonia, attitudes towards migration are regularly monitored through Eurobarometer surveys. See the results here: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home>.

In Estonia, public opinion polls on migration are occasionally commissioned by various organisations, but unfortunately, these are not conveniently in one place. One of the regularly occurring surveys that partly covers migration is the *Survey of Public Opinion on Internal Security* organised by the Ministry of the Interior (see the subsection "Settlement of People from Other Countries in Estonia"). The latest research reports can be found in the list of studies and analyses commissioned by the Ministry: <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/media/247/download>.



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