

GERMANY AND BULGARIA

A CASE STUDY ON HOW MIGRANT COMMUNITIES ARE SERVED OR UNDERSERVED IN THE NATIONAL MEDIA.

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INTRODUCTION

In this report journalists Louise Osborne and Jacob Resneck – based in Germany and Bulgaria, respectively – set out to present a case study of how well the domestic media in each country performs on covering migrants, asylum seekers and other new arrivals to the country.

Jacob Resneck visited Berlin, Germany in June; Louise Osborne visited Sofia, Bulgaria in October.

Due to time and resource considerations the study was limited to each country's capital cities and therefore does not wholly reflect the media landscape but rather the two country's largest cities and political capitals.

Over the course of our research we interviewed media professionals, advocate groups working on migrant and media issues and – whenever possible – migrants themselves. This report does not represent an empirical media survey or study but rather is based on conclusions we have drawn from our limited research and our knowledge as media professionals.

GERMANY AND BULGARIA: 'JABLOKI UND APFELSINEN'

Equating Germany – the EU's heartland and economic engine of more than 82 million - and Bulgaria – one of the EU's poorest member states on the periphery of the EU with a declining population of less than 7.5 million - would be, as is said in English, *comparing apples and oranges*.

Likewise, the media landscape of Germany is incredibly diverse and complicated compared to many other EU member states. Germany is a federal republic and since unification in 1990 the federal state as a whole has adopted a great degree of "cultural sovereignty" for federal republics to run their public broadcasting outlets.

Conversely, Bulgaria's media is much more centralized around the capital Sofia. This is leftover from the Communist era in which communist East Germany also had a highly centralized media landscape where public affairs were closely monitored by the ruling party and the state.

BERLIN: A LOCAL REPORTER'S PERSPECTIVE

In Germany, our survey was limited to Berlin. Despite being the political capital under unification, the city continues to struggle economically compared to the industrial and financial centres of Munich and Frankfurt. Still, Berlin hosts an increasing number of economic migrants and political refugees, many of whom are attracted by the relatively low cost of housing and long-established immigrant communities from Eastern Europe, Turkey and the Middle East.

For more perspective we spoke with beat reporter Brigitte Schmiemann, a 58-year-old reporter for *Berliner Morgenpost* (circulation ~120,000), who has been covering city issues since 1985.

"The refugee subject has come up more and more -- the problem is to find space for them," she said.

A hot topic is finding welcome centres for refugees in Berlin's city centre; neighbours often react with alacrity at the prospect of so many poor migrants being housed in their community.

"When local residents hear that a refugee house will be built - you get trouble," she said.

Schmiemann says she strives to include migrant voices in her newspaper reporting, but she is often confronted with challenges. Interviewing migrants themselves especially when there is a language barrier is difficult, especially as she is on short deadlines (1-2 stories per day) and cost issues because her newspaper cannot afford to provide interpreters for migrants who cannot speak German or English.

Often she uses refugee advocates for interpretation, but this can be problematic as she senses the interpreters aren't always translating honestly.

"My impression was that volunteer translators are coaching immigrants on what to say," she said.

Asked on her personal feelings about migrants in Germany, she says her personal feeling is that Germany isn't being overrun.

"There's a perception that there are a lot of refugees, but official figures suggest it's not that many for a country the size of Germany," she said. "It's a difficult subject because people want better circumstances. But if we were in a poor country, we, too, would want to go someplace else."

WHAT THE ADVOCATES SAY

This view was similar to an advocate we met at a small-scale demonstration in a Berlin suburb for greater migrant rights. Joachim Rueffer, a coordinator with BBZ, an advocacy group for migrants, says the common refrain among critics of immigration is that Germany cannot 'save' the world by absorbing the world's war refugees or people escaping poverty.

"We see different variations on that subject," he said. "You have to argue about what the situation is actually in the Mediterranean and what Germany can actually do."

Rueffer argues that Germany as a country can do a lot more than it already is without impacting people's quality of life.

Rueffer says he believes there's a healthy amount of reporting on the situation in Germany's quality (i.e. non-tabloid) press. Rather the problem, in his view, is populist populations pandering to people's fears and little incentive for political parties to campaign on refugees' behalf.

"Politicians can't win votes by siding with poor immigrants," Rueffer observes.

Not everyone we spoke to was so generous about the performance of German media.

Ferda Ataman, a former journalist and coordinator with Mediendienst Integration, a watchdog group that advocates greater diversity in reporting, says the German media tries to be liberal in its reporting but is actually quite narrow in its scope.

"If you watch or read German media, migrants are mostly seen and spoken about if it's about integration or migration issues, not spoken to," says Ataman.

She says that ethnic minorities, including ethnic Turks, of which Germany has more than three million, are underserved in reporting and under included in vox pops, interviews taken when a man/woman on the street is needed.

"There's no sensitivity for balance in race and gender," she said.

She says German media doesn't track diversity in its newsrooms and this is reflected in the attitude of reporting.

"What I see as a problem in the reporting is that firstly, as journalists, you refer to a 'we' who have to integrate 'them'," Ataman says. "They exclude a lot of social topics that are important because they don't 'see' it."

Ataman – who has a Turkish background – says that when Turkey revamped its military conscription laws for young males, the rule change affected hundreds of thousands of German-born Turks who continue to hold Turkish citizenship. Yet, the story was largely unreported in Germany, despite the effect on many men's lives.

Her organization takes an active role as a pressure group. When media rehash old stereotypes that are patently untrue, she says they call them to account.

"If they report that third generation immigrants don't speak German or something like that we'll send a letter," she says.

Ataman and her colleagues urge more racially sensitive reporting to track diversity in newsrooms. But Germany's legacy of Nazism makes keeping records on race problematic.

"We talk about racism but we don't talk about races - of course we have good reason for that; it's very German," she said.

She says they try to take a soft approach with media organizations to help them understand issues rather than be adversarial. "We want them to see us as their partners and not their enemies," she said.

TURNING THE DEBATE ON ITS HEAD

We spoke with Daniel Gerlach, publisher of Zenith, a German magazine specializing on issues east of Europe. He says the challenge is bringing minority issues to the masses through the tabloid press and private TV and radio channels.

"German media is very much market share driven. I tried to submit press proposals for refugee issues but people don't want to see that," he said. "The images of refugees are always the same – but you could look at it from a different angle. I didn't want to tell the story of refugees going back and follow them to Europe, I wanted to do a show about prejudice."

In an attempt to bring a fresh take on these issues, Gerlach worked with German public broadcaster ZDF as a consultant to produce *Auf der Flucht*, a reality TV-format show in which a group of ordinary Germans would travel to the slums and refugee camps, in which many of Germany's migrants originate.

"They were normal Germans – one was an ex-neo Nazi, another was a former soldier from the German army and then there was a science fiction author," Gerlach recalled. "They were people from different backgrounds who had different opinions and who had appeared in public with their opinions."

The show was highly controversial. It was loosely based on an Australian television programme called "Go Back Where You Come From" and aired in 2013 in the run up to German elections.

The group travelled to Italian slums outside Rome, met with human traffickers in Tunisia and visited a migrant detention centre in Greece.

"It was broadcast last August and won a national TV award, but it was highly controversial, 40,000 people signed a petition to stop the show," Gerlach said.

Gerlach says he is glad the programme was well-received but thinks it would have been better if it had aired on a private channel to reach a mass audience.

"I think what we should have done, is not to do it on ZDF but one of the private TV channels," he said. "We wanted to reach a different public that usually is not confronted by these images and in a way it was a systematic mistake."

Zenith has been covering these types of issues since 1999 but Gerlach says the quality media in Germany is now catching up, finding there are good, compelling stories that audiences are able to relate to.

"The most important thing is to tell the German readership that the people that attempt illegal immigration are not just poor souls with no education," Gerlach said. "We found that many of these people are very entrepreneurial and decide to really make something out of their lives."

That's something many Germans can identify with and it helps to foster a more inclusive spirit that shows migrants not just as a problem but as a part of a greater community.

MEANWHILE IN BULGARIA

Immigration and refugees have become a major issue in the Europe Union's poorest country, as it struggles to cope with an increase in the numbers - many fleeing the Syrian civil war - making their way across the border from neighbouring Turkey.

The number of people that applied for asylum in Bulgaria rocketed from 1,387 in 2012 to 7,144 in 2013 - by far the biggest figure recorded in statistics dating back more than 10 years to 1993.

The influx has seen a huge backlash from the Bulgarian people and a rising hostility that has had a big impact on the media, which partly feeds off the public attitude while also fuelling it.

Although Bulgaria's media landscape is reported to be "free and unregulated", journalists we spoke to said the media landscape was heavily influenced by key political players, some of whom own a proportion of the 14 nationally-circulated newspapers.

As a result of the political influence, the majority of the journalists with whom we spoke did not want to be directly identified. Their concerns were highlighted by figures published in the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders. The report said that freedom of the press in Bulgaria had dropped from 87th place worldwide in 2013, with the report citing promises of reform having "come to nothing" and the internet having "ceased to be a safe place for freelance journalists" to 100th out of 180 in 2014

Speaking to migrants in Bulgaria themselves is difficult. Many have lived their entire lives under authoritarian governments where there is little concept of civil society and media is often a propaganda arm of powerful interests. Language is also a barrier, with the Bulgarian authorities unable to provide an interpreter.

Barzan, a 25-year-old Syrian refugee from the predominately Kurdish city of Qamishli in Syria, fled to Bulgaria in this spring where he lived in freezing conditions inside the Voenna Rampa refugee camp in Sofia. He's since immigrated to Germany.

"Everyone here is scared of the Bulgarian media," he said from outside the gate as journalists were barred from entering.

"They think it's like the Syrian media where everything is government-controlled."

Migrants don't know who to complain to when assistance they receive is substandard, as they fear they will be deported back to their own country where they face arrest – or worse.

"They are afraid that if they criticize the situation," he continued, "then they will get kicked out. They want to speak to foreign media because they want things from the outside."

Bulgarian journalists reporting in the country said a major change in reporting occurred from September 2013, starting with a protest against refugees hoping to send their children to a small village school.

Sources agreed to be interviewed on the condition that they not provide their full names.

"Villagers were refusing to let the children in and making racist statements," said Boryana, a freelance reporter based in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. "They were saying that the refugee children wouldn't understand what was being studied and were full of disease."

National newspapers covered the event reporting on statements from the residents, but failing to cover the perspective of the refugees, according to several journalists, who criticized the right-wing, tabloid media particularly for its coverage of the protest.

"The role of journalists is to educate, even if it goes against the common perception," said Boryana. "The media here isn't fulfilling its role."

BULGARIAN JOURNALISTS: WE CAN DO BETTER

It's a point of view that was shared by several Bulgarian journalists, who felt that the mass media in the eastern European country is strongly biased.

"The tabloids always look for scary stories to scare the readers," said Zornitsa, a newspaper reporter working for a daily newspaper in Sofia. "There were ridiculous stories saying there were terrorists among the Syrian refugees, and that they have HIV."

There are also examples of stories that do not focus on refugees or immigrants, but their status is brought into the article despite dubious relevance.

Zornitsa related an anecdote about a young female crime victim, who was nearly killed by her assailant. The woman was reported to have been attacked by a "migrant". The reporting sparked protests and a series of hate crimes perpetrated against anyone who might even look like a foreigner, including an attack on a member of Bulgaria's Muslim minority.

According to journalists we surveyed, the attitude toward immigrants has also sparked a trend of extremist right-wing advocates being invited onto television shows in a bid to provide "balanced reporting".

"They claim that this is the view of certain Bulgarians, and that if they don't show them it doesn't mean they don't exist," said Zornitsa. However, she and others have criticised the move, adding: "We are not helping society by spreading hate speech. I think the practical reason is because they [television producers] are looking for a scandal and want people to fight because that's how they get ratings."

Zornitsa blamed the Bulgarian population's perception on refugees and immigrants on the poor preparation of the government - which has struggled to deal with the increasing numbers of refugees crossing into the EU-border country.

BULGARIA'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

The Bulgarian authorities have attempted to deal with the issue by building a highly controversial fence to keep out illegal immigrants, a move that has been criticized by human rights' organizations including Human Rights' Watch, and by dispatching further border patrol, some of whom have been accused of brutality against those trying to cross the border.

Situated on the edge of the European Union, Bulgaria is the gateway into the EU. But almost a quarter of the 7.5 million population live below the poverty line, according to 2011 figures from the World Bank and the organization's statistics put gross national income per capita in Bulgaria at \$7,030 in 2013 compared with Germany's \$46,100.

Still, director of the Ovcha Kupel refugee camp on the outskirts of Sofia, Christo Dimitrov praised Bulgarian reporting on issues involving refugees and immigrants and said he felt the media was balanced. He said there were two types of media in Bulgaria - those that took a positive attitude toward the situation and another that was more negative.

"I would say we have good journalists and they respect themselves and work well," he said.

Still, freelance reporter Pancho said the main role of the media in Bulgaria is to push the authorities "to do something good".

"A few journalists, maybe five or six, wrote articles or made movies about refugees - positive article and movies," he said.

"And some people on TV did an investigation into corruption with trafficking into Bulgaria."

However, he added that once Bulgaria "started to do good things for these people then they will start doing things for the Bulgarian people".

CONCLUSION

The media landscape between the two countries is very different. Bulgaria is highly centralized and – in the words of many who work in it – lacks meaningful plurality in reporting migrant issues. Germany is a much bigger country and much more complex.

But despite Germany's greater wealth there is still room for improvement, moving away from an 'us' versus 'them' mentality that portrays migrants simply as people with a problem that needs to be 'solved' by authorities.

From our time spent in Berlin and Sofia, we make the following recommendations from our case study:

- Newly arrived migrants and longstanding communities need to be seen as part of the community, not just an issue or problem to be covered
- Migrant communities in both countries are growing and this should be viewed as a growth market for media companies that should capitalize on an expanding audience or readership.
- Journalists must strive to reach out to migrant communities to enhance their perspective on daily reporting and not just think of these groups when they are reporting on problems like crime, education, religious taboos, integration, etc.

The media landscape was actually more progressive than we'd first anticipated. The journalists we approached appeared to have given these issues a lot of thought and were self-conscious about taboos and stereotypes in their reporting. We feel this exchange not only helped improve our understanding as professional journalists but opened dialogue with our subjects and helped them engage in conversations that they were eager to have but often did not have the opportunity.