

Original Article

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Othering and Representation of Foreign Workers in Croatian Online Media in 2024 and 2025*

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Summary

This study examines the representation of foreign workers in Croatian online media during peak coverage periods in 2024 and 2025. Using quantitative content analysis of 269 headlines and 210 articles across ideologically diverse outlets, the research explores frames, naming practices, the presence of different voices and sentiments towards foreign workers, and the media engagement with migrant-related disinformation. The findings reveal that foreign workers were predominantly contextualized through conflict, victimhood, and social tension, accompanied by a strong dominance of negatively toned headlines. Institutional actors dominated coverage, while foreign workers' voices remained comparatively marginal. References to disinformation narratives were rare, which raises questions about the choice of professional media whether to report on disinformation or not, and the potential effects of such coverage. The study demonstrates how journalistic "critical choices" may contribute to symbolic othering of foreign workers in a society undergoing rapid demographic and labor market transformation.

Keywords: Foreign Workers, Migrants, Croatia, Othering, Media Coverage

Introduction

In recent years, Croatia has undergone a profound transformation in its migration dynamics. After decades of being primarily characterized as a country of emigration (Čačić-Kumpes *et al.*, 2024), Croatia has recorded sustained positive migration

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balances since 2022, driven largely by a rapid expansion of labor immigration. Persistent labor shortages, demographic decline and liberalization of the labor market have resulted in a growing and increasingly diverse population of foreign workers originating from the countries of former Yugoslavia and South and Southeast Asia. Consequently, their presence has emerged as a salient political and social issue, situated in a broader international context marked by the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment.

A substantial body of research indicates that migrants are frequently constructed as symbolic outsiders and collective threats, particularly through the discourses of right-wing populist actors in Europe and the USA (e.g., Lazaridis *et al.*, 2016). Populists tend to promote narratives of migration-related insecurity, cultural loss, and national decline. At the level of media coverage, promotion of such narratives is closely linked to framing practices. Building on Entman's (1991) conceptualization of frames as the product of journalists' "critical choices", multiple studies have shown how naming, repetition, emphasis, and omission render some interpretations of migration more salient than others. Comparative research in the United States and Europe consistently demonstrates the dominance of threat-based narratives that frame immigrants as security, economic, and cultural risks, alongside episodic humanitarian portrayals (e.g., Bakamo Public Report, 2019; Béland, 2020).

Croatian research has largely mirrored these international patterns. Analyses of news reporting during and after the 2015–2016 European refugee crisis reveal oscillations between humanitarian and securitizing frames, persistent sensationalism, and a marginal presence of migrants' perspectives (e.g., Čepo *et al.*, 2020; Popović *et al.*, 2022). More recent studies suggest that the public's evaluation of migrants, with the raising number of labor immigrants, has become increasingly negative (e.g., Mrakovčić *et al.*, 2025). Although labor migrants differ from forced migrants (e.g., refugees) in terms of legal status and migration drivers, media representations and consequent public perception of both groups are often shaped by the process of "othering" (e.g., Lazaridis *et al.*, 2016). Labor migrants are frequently framed through their economic usefulness and contribution to society, yet this does not preclude their construction as socially and culturally distinct outsiders. Moreover, analyses of migrant-related discourses and frames commonly reflect tensions between representations associated with refugees and those linked to economic migrants. For this reason, we situate this study within the broader scholarship on migrant representation.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the representation of foreign workers in Croatian online media in 2024 and 2025. Using content analysis of articles and headlines published across ideologically diverse outlets, the study maps dominant frames, naming practices, sentiment towards foreign workers, the pre-

sence of different voices, as well as the extent to which media coverage addressed migrant-related disinformation. The overarching goal of the study is to assess how journalistic and editorial choices contribute to the portrayal and the process of othering foreign workers in a society characterized by rapid demographic transformation.

The article first reviews the relevant literature on othering, anti-immigrant framing, and the representation of migrants in the media, followed by an overview of migration trends, public attitudes, and media coverage of foreign workers in Croatia. It then presents the research design and findings of the content analysis before discussing the results and their implications for understanding the media construction of foreign workers as symbolic ‘others’.

Othering and Anti-Immigrant Framing in Contemporary Democracies

Across many contemporary democracies, *migrants*, *asylum seekers*, *refugees*, and *immigrants* have increasingly become objects of political and symbolic “othering”, a process through which social groups are constructed as fundamentally different, inferior, or threatening (Lazaridis *et al.*, 2016; Osuna, 2024). This development has intensified with the rise of populism and the far right parties, movements and candidates across Europe and in the USA, that frame immigration as a societal danger related to insecurity, cultural loss, and national decline (e.g., Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Bonikowski, 2017; Camus and Lebourg, 2017; Faulkner *et al.*, 2021; Mudde, 2019; Ruzza, 2009; Wirz *et al.*, 2018). The far right in Cas Mudde’s (2019) conceptualization refers to actors on the right who are anti-system, that is, fundamentally opposed to liberal democracy. Within the far right, he makes a distinction between the “extreme right” and the “radical right” (2019, pp. 7–8). The extreme right rejects the core principles of democracy, including popular sovereignty and majority rule, whereas the radical right accepts democratic procedures but challenges key elements of liberal democracy, such as minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of powers. While both oppose the liberal democratic consensus, the extreme right is revolutionary in orientation, whereas the radical right is reformist. Consequently, populism is primarily associated with the radical right, while the extreme right is, according to Mudde, by definition not populist. According to some authors (e.g., Grbeša and Šalaj, 2018) not all right-wing populism is necessarily radical; nevertheless, it typically identifies migrants as the “dangerous others” who represent an existential threat to “the people”.

Scholars describe such adversarial framing of immigrants as part of a broader “politics of fear” in which migration is cast as a collective menace requiring political responses (Lazaridis *et al.*, 2016; Wodak, 2015). Ruzza (2009) argues that European radical right parties construe migration through a “politics of the enemy” lens that pits supposedly homogeneous “European people” against culturally and

religiously marked outsiders. In the American context, Béland's (2020) analysis of the US president Donald Trump's rhetoric conceptualizes these strategies as part of a "politics of insecurity".

Digital environments have amplified these patterns. Ganesh (2018) argues that the anti-immigration rhetoric has become central to online hate cultures, with narratives of "pure" national communities endangered by allegedly violent migrants mobilizing right-wing digital audiences across Europe and the United States (see also Culloty and Suiter, 2021; Ekman, 2019; Törnberg and Wahlström, 2018). The Bakamo Public's report conducted in 2017/2018 on more than forty-five million social media posts and comments about migrants in 28 EU member states identifies five dominant narratives: security, identity and customs, humanitarianism, demography and economy. The *security narrative* frames migration primarily as a risk, linking it to terrorism and criminality. The *identity and customs narrative* focuses on the cultural consequences of migration, including religious differences and challenges to national identity. The *humanitarianism narrative* centers on migrants' vulnerability, humanitarian crises, and the moral responsibilities of European states toward refugees. The *demographics narrative* emphasizes migrants' potential contributions to ageing societies, labor shortages, and pension systems. Finally, the *economy narrative* depicts migration as a financial burden for the country. Across the European Union security and identity frames were found to dominate, often overshadowing humanitarian and demographic perspectives, and generating a mainly skeptical or hostile discursive climate (Bakamo Public Report, 2019). In the report, the populist right is identified as the key agent of manipulative narratives about migrants across countries. Despite some regional differences, the report concludes that the strategy is to subvert "humanitarianism through the security and identity narrative" and to "utilize disinformation to maintain outrage and fear" (*ibid.*, p. 22). *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (Tumber and Waisbord, 2021) likewise conceptualizes anti-immigration disinformation as a transnational phenomenon closely connected to right-wing actors and digital media environments. The European Digital Media Observatory, which regularly reports about immigration related disinformation narratives in EU countries, notes that these commonly include "hoaxes and disinformation linking migrants with crimes they did not commit, dehumanization and disinformation falsely associating migrants with privileges and access to benefits".¹

However, disinformation narratives about immigrants, immanent to the contemporary "disinformation order" (Bennett and Livingston, 2018) do not necessarily rely on outright falsehoods and are not exclusive to the social media universe.

¹ See www.edmo.eu

Taylor (2023) demonstrates how lexical choices and naming practices in the British press operate as subtle and yet powerful vehicles of anti-immigrant disinformation. One overt form of disinformation, according to Taylor (2023), is the use of delegitimising labels, such as “illegal asylum seeker” which constructs illegality where none exists and is often paired with the binary opposition of “genuine refugees” versus “economic migrants”, which presupposes some kind of deception. Goodman *et al.* (2017) similarly examine how the UK media shifted between terms “Mediterranean migrant crisis”, “Calais migrant crisis”, “Europe’s migrant crisis” and “refugee crisis” to construct meanings about migrants. Likewise, Egres (2018) demonstrates how politicians in Hungary strategically substitute “refugee” with “economic migrant” to activate threat perceptions. Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) showed that journalists in the UK frequently attach refugees and asylum seekers to negatively charged collocates such as “illegal”, “bogus”, “flood”, and “sneak”, activating metaphors of invasion and criminality, while quantification metaphors (“flooding”, “pouring”) and water imagery reinforce threat narratives. Numerous other studies have documented the use of metaphors from the world of animals and natural disasters to dehumanize migrants (e.g., De Ruiter, 2024; Gonçalves, 2024).

These studies show that wording practices operate as central framing devices that may regulate inclusion and exclusion of certain groups. A large number of studies on the role of the media in shaping attitudes toward migrants draw precisely on *framing theory* since it explains how media and audiences jointly construct meanings related to social and political events through selective presentation and interpretation. Entman (1991) conceptualizes frames as operating at two levels: firstly, as “internalized guides” that shape how individuals interpret issues; and secondly, as features of news, produced through journalists’ choices of language, images, and emphasis. At the textual level, framing involves what Entman (1991) calls “critical choices” that render some interpretations more salient than others while marginalizing the alternatives.

Across Europe and the United States, research converges on a stable repertoire of *migration frames*. Benson (2013), who examined the framing of migrants in the US media, systematizes ten frames clustered into three groups: victim frames (humanitarian suffering, racism/xenophobia, global inequality), hero frames (cultural diversity, integration, “good worker”) and threat frames (job competition, public order/crime, fiscal burden and national cohesion). European studies confirm similar patterns. Literature reviews and country analyses highlight the dominance of security, economic burden, and cultural threat frames, alongside episodic humanitarian portrayals (Eberl *et al.*, 2018; Hoffmann and Hameleers, 2024; Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020; Verleyen and Beckers, 2023). Studies have also shown that the framing of migrants is strongly shaped by visual cues (e.g., Parrott *et al.*, 2019) and

by the presence or absence of migrants' own voices. For example, analyses of the Belgian press demonstrate that when migrants themselves are quoted, coverage becomes significantly less negative, illustrating how voice and terminology alter the interpretive tone (Verleyen and Beckers, 2023).

The key frames through which migrants are represented have significant effects on public opinion. Eberl *et al.*'s (2018) extensive literature review of European media portrayals of migrants and their consequences suggests that persistent exposure to negative or threat-oriented coverage increases anti-immigrant attitudes, activates stereotypes, heightens perceptions of group threat, and can ultimately influence voting behavior. Victim frames sometimes evoke compassion, but their attitudinal effects remain inconsistent. Eberl *et al.* (2018) positions media discourse as the central driver of public perceptions of migration.

Migrants and Foreign Workers in Croatia

For most of the twentieth century and well into the first decades of the twenty-first, Croatia was predominantly characterized as an emigration country (Čačić-Kumpes *et al.*, 2024). Economic instability, war-related displacement, and the EU accession in 2013 significantly intensified outward mobility, particularly among younger and working-age populations. This long-standing pattern of emigration shifted decisively in 2022. For the first time in decades, Croatia recorded a positive migration balance. The trend not only continued but strengthened in the following years, with 2023 producing a positive balance of 30,178. In 2024, Croatia again recorded a strongly positive migration balance, resulting in a net gain of 31,394 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2025, p. 2). This demographic turnaround is closely linked to the rapid expansion of labor immigration. In 2021, Croatian authorities issued 81,995 residence and work permits (Ministry of the Interior, 2022). This number rose to 206,529 permits in 2024. Although the total number of permits decreased in 2025 to 170,723 permits, this decline was not the result of reduced interest among foreign workers, but rather of stricter legal provisions introduced through amendments to the Law on Foreigners in early 2025 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, 133/20; 114/22; 151/22; 40/25).

The issue of immigration and public attitudes toward migrants in Croatia became salient even before the recent expansion of the labor market, particularly following the European "migrant/refugee crisis" of 2015–2016. During that period, more than 650,000 forcibly displaced people reportedly passed through Croatia along the so-called Balkan route, while only several hundred applied for and obtained asylum in the country (EMN, 2019). This situation coincided with the historically strongest electoral performance of populist political actors in Croatian parliamentary elections (Grbeša and Šalaj, 2018).

In recent years, forced migration in Croatia has been overwhelmingly replaced by labor migration. According to Eurostat (2025, p. 2), Croatia ranks first in the European Union by the share of first residence permits issued for employment purposes: in 2024, as many as 95.3% of all first residence permits in Croatia were issued for work. In 2021, the three most represented groups among newly issued work permits were citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo. By 2024, citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina still ranked first, followed by Nepalese nationals, while Serbia moved to third place; India and the Philippines ranked fourth and fifth (Ministry of the Interior, 2021–2025). The driver of this transformation lies in the interaction between demographic decline, labor shortages, and a profound regulatory shift. Until 1 January 2021, Croatia relied on a quota-based system in which the government annually determined the maximum number of foreign workers who could be employed in particular sectors and occupations. In 2021, the new Law on Foreigners (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, 133/20; 114/22; 151/22; 40/25) abolished quotas and introduced a labor market test as a condition for hiring foreign workers, igniting rapid diversification of the migrant population. Contemporary labor immigration to Croatia is increasingly composed of workers from geographically distant and culturally diverse societies, who are predominantly employed in low-paid and low-status occupations (Perkov, 2025). Despite this structural shift, Croatia has not developed a comprehensive migration or integration policy, while at the same time integration has become a crucial political and policy issue. As Heckmann and Bosswick (2007) argue, integration refers to the process through which migrants are included in the institutions and social structures of the receiving society. The Ombudswoman's Report for 2024 documents a substantial increase in complaints from foreign workers, including unpaid or underpaid wages, illegal overtime, denial of rest periods, etc. Workers also complained of harassment and discrimination based on their racial or ethnic origin (Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia, 2025, p. 63). In recent years, several physical attacks against foreign workers were reported, prompting the Minister of the Interior to issue strong condemnations and declare a zero tolerance policy for violence and xenophobia (Ministry of the Interior, 2024b).

Despite these challenges, a survey conducted among 400 foreign workers from Asia and Africa (Balabanić *et al.*, 2025a) indicates that most of the respondents evaluate their life and work in Croatia positively. In terms of overall life satisfaction, 40% reported being very satisfied, 27% positioned themselves as neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, while 26.5% stated that they were not satisfied at all. Nearly one third of the respondents reported intending to remain in Croatia for up to five years, while 19.5% expressed intentions to settle permanently, suggesting that for many, migration is perceived as a medium-term rather than long-term life project (*ibid.*, p. 12). Similar findings emerge from a study by Brajković and Krstić (2025)

who established that Asian workers in Croatia have generally positive attitudes towards Croats and a strong preference for integration as a strategy of adaptation. The study also shows that distrust towards Croats is more strongly associated with feelings of social invisibility, lack of recognition, and status insecurity than with direct experiences of physical or verbal violence.

Public Attitudes Towards Migrants

The other aspect of integration is acceptance by the host population. Studies examining Croatian public attitudes toward different types of migrants, especially anti-immigrant sentiment among Croatian citizens, generally focus on two migration waves that have marked the past decade: the European refugee crisis of 2015–2016 and the opening of the Croatian labor market in the early 2020s.

Across studies, a consistent pattern emerges in which anti-immigrant attitudes in Croatia are driven primarily by cultural and identity-based threat perceptions rather than by concerns about labor-market competition, which has nevertheless been increasing in recent years. Survey research among youth and adults alike shows that ethnocentrism, exclusive conceptions of nationhood, authoritarian values, and right-wing political orientation are the strongest predictors of hostility toward migrants (Löw *et al.*, 2022; Vuksan-Ćusa, 2018; Trošt and Marinšek, 2022). Evidence obtained by Međimurec *et al.* (2024) further suggests that Croatian public opinion is internally differentiated, combining a stable minority of strongly anti-immigrant respondents with a larger ambivalent middle and signs of gradual softening over time. On the other hand, the analysis conducted by Mrakovčić *et al.* (2025) after the 2015 crisis and in 2024, during the recent wave of labor immigration, indicates that security and cultural frames have intensified among younger, highly politicized groups, particularly when reinforced by media and political discourse. The results indicate an increase in negative attitudes toward migrants in 2024 compared to 2019, with foreign workers increasingly described as “undesirable settlers”. Similarly, Čačić-Kumpes *et al.* (2024) compare the two major waves of Croatian research on immigration before and after the 2015–2016 refugee crisis and again between 2020 and 2024. The authors show that during the refugee crisis Croatian attitudes were more positive, largely because Croatia functioned as a corridor country and because public empathy was shaped by their own memories of displacement during the 1990s Homeland War. In contrast, the later wave records significantly more negative attitudes, particularly regarding cultural threat, alongside growing nationalist and right-wing populist discourse. The shift is explained by sustained settlement, rising visibility of foreign workers, politicization of migration, and media narratives framing migrants in terms of threat and differences.

Two nationwide surveys conducted by the Institute for Migration Research in 2024 and 2025 also document a rise in negative sentiment towards foreign work-

ers. Complete dissatisfaction with the presence of foreign workers increased from 16.5% in 2024 to 20.63% in 2025, while partial dissatisfaction reached 42.16%, whereas only a small minority expressed satisfaction. Among dissatisfied respondents, fear of crime remained the most frequently cited concern (69.8%), but economic and labor-related anxieties gained prominence, including fears of reduced employment opportunities (51.7%) and downward pressure on wages and labor standards (47.7%) (Balabanić *et al.*, 2025b).

Taken together, these studies converge on findings that attitudes towards migrants are shaped by post-socialist nation-building legacies, politicized threat narratives, and ideological predispositions. Moreover, all studies imply that public attitudes toward migrants in Croatia, like elsewhere, are significantly shaped by media coverage of the issue.

Migrants in Croatian Media

Analyses of migration reporting in Croatia consistently show that news coverage is structured around a small number of dominant frames, above all securitization, victimhood or humanitarian concerns, and economic concerns, with strong dependence on official sources and a generally low presence of migrant voices. The Car *et al.* (2019) analysis of Croatian newspaper reporting during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis shows that media narratives oscillated between humanitarian frames and threat frames. Crucially, the authors stress that lexical choices such as *refugee* versus *migrant* carried strong narrative values. Popović *et al.* (2022) identify persistent patterns in migrant-related reporting, including sensationalism, conflict-based framing, heavy reliance on official sources, and only conveniently and rarely present “humanitarian” reporting. Čepo *et al.* (2020) analyzed Croatian newspaper coverage of refugees and migrants in two periods, in 2015–2016 and 2018. During the first period, the narrative focused on depicting two groups, the “deserving refugee” and the (economic) migrant, while in the later period, reporting increasingly shifted towards dangerous “unknown migrant” (p. 490). More recent research of the Institute for Migration Research, the Croatian Catholic University, and Media Net (Institut za istraživanje migracija, 2024) demonstrates that negative evaluations continue to outweigh neutral or integrative portrayals of migrants in headline-driven reporting. In most of the analyzed reports, migrants are portrayed as “perpetrators of criminal acts”, “labour force” or contextualized as a threat or problem in political debates. Only rarely are migrants represented as victims. A slightly different perspective is offered by Holy and Geiger Zeman (2025) who detected an emerging shift toward personalized storytelling in the liberal media outlets from 2023, while conservative media continue to highlight security narratives and illegality, confirming ideological polarization in framing.

Overall, the available research on the representation of migrants in Croatia corroborates recurring patterns identified in other national contexts. Croatian media coverage has predominantly framed migrants as a cultural and economic threat, while humanitarian framing, far more salient during the European refugee crisis, has become comparatively marginal.

Research Design

The goal of this study is to examine the media coverage of foreign workers in Croatian online media outlets. The research focuses on 2024 and 2025 when the topic of foreign workers has become particularly salient in Croatian media.

The term *foreign workers* has become entrenched in Croatian legislation and public discourse, including the media, and is therefore used in this study for analytical purposes. However, the very choice of the word *foreign*, which journalists have largely and uncritically adopted from policymakers, carries implications of othering, establishing a symbolic distinction between *domestic* and *foreign* people. Alternative naming practices used elsewhere include, for instance, “temporary migrant workers” in Canada (Hari, 2018), “guest workers”, famously *Gastarbeiter* in Germany (Herbert, 2001), and, most commonly, labor migrants or migrant workers across many countries.

The analysis aims to answer two questions: 1) How did Croatian online media cover foreign workers in the peak periods of 2024 and 2025? and 2) Did Croatian online media critically address disinformation narratives related to foreign workers in this period? Using content analysis, we analyzed articles about foreign workers published in the major Croatian news outlets in the designated period, including articles from the online editions of the major newspapers (*Vecernji.hr*, *Jutarnji.hr*, *24sata.hr*) as well as two native online news portals (*Dnevno.hr* and *Index.hr*). This selection represents a mix of ideologically diverse outlets, with *Jutarnji.hr* and *Index.hr* being on the liberal spectrum, *Vecernji.hr* leaning conservative, *Dnevno.hr* firmly positioned on the right and *24sata.hr* being a centrist tabloid (Grbeša and Volarević, 2021; Vozab and Peruško, 2021). The Croatian media landscape is generally characterized by commercialization, tabloidization, declining professional standards (Grbeša and Volarević, 2021), and relatively low levels of public trust in the media (Peruško, 2024).

The articles were retrieved using the TakeLab Retriever platform (Dukić *et al.*, 2024). The keyword *foreign workers* (strani radnici) and its linguistic variants were used to retrieve the articles. The analytical corpus was defined by identifying peaks in media coverage of foreign workers in 2024 and 2025. The first peak was in January 2024 when most of the coverage pertained to disinformation circulated on social media falsely claiming that “dark-skinned foreign workers” harassed young girls in

Zagreb's main square during the New Year's Eve celebration. In addition, official statistics for 2023 were published, revealing a record number of residence and work permits issued to foreign workers, which was also intensively covered. The second peak was in August 2024 when the media reported on the tourist season, labor shortages, attacks against foreign workers and the debate surrounding amendments to the Law on Foreigners (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, 133/20; 114/22; 151/22; 40/25). The third peak was in January 2025 when the coverage was largely driven by the publication of the first large-scale study on the quality of life of foreign workers in Croatia (Balabanić *et al.*, 2025a). The fourth peak was in August 2025, when reporting was predominantly linked to seasonal labor demand, working conditions, and incidents involving foreign workers. The final corpus was constructed using a population of articles pertaining to foreign workers in January and August 2024 and 2025. Focusing on peak periods allows us to examine media representations under conditions of heightened visibility, when framing dynamics are most likely to become more pronounced and observable. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of media representation in high-salience contexts rather than as a comprehensive account of routine media coverage.

After applying the relevance criteria and excluding articles in which foreign workers were only mentioned peripherally, 269 articles were retained for analysis (125 from January 2024, 77 from August 2024, 23 from January 2025 and 44 from August 2025). However, 59 articles were behind a paywall – 6 articles from 24sata.hr, 18 articles from Večernji.hr and 35 articles from Jutarnji.hr. In Croatia, paid access to online news remains exceptionally low, with only around 6% of news consumers subscribing to online media (Newman *et al.*, 2025, p. 11). Since most audiences primarily consume freely accessible news content, we decided to include only free-access articles in the analysis and all the headlines which are easily accessible to non-paying audiences. However, we acknowledge that excluding paywalled full-length texts results in an uneven distribution of articles across outlets, particularly in the case of Jutarnji.hr, which limits the robustness of outlet-level comparisons based on full-length articles. Accordingly, comparisons between outlets are interpreted with caution and are supported by the more balanced headline dataset.

The final corpus includes 269 headlines and 210 full articles – 4 from Jutarnji.hr, 47 from Vecernji.hr, 88 from Index.hr, 36 from 24sata.hr, and 35 articles from Dnevno.hr. Headlines and full-length articles were linked through their original news items. Headlines were, in addition, coded and analyzed as separate units of analysis.

Coding Categories

The code book consists of five sections. The first section captures the technical characteristics of the articles, including the media outlet in which the article was

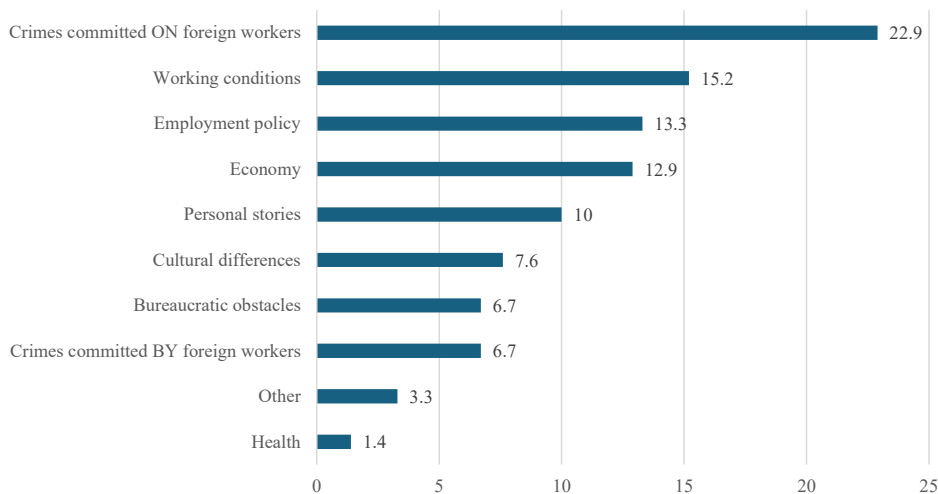
published, the peak period, and the genre of the article. The second section focuses on the overall topic of the article including: working conditions, employment policy, economic issues, crimes involving foreign workers (either as perpetrators or victims), cultural differences, bureaucratic obstacles (such as working permits, health-related topics) and personal stories. The third section of the code book examines whose perspectives were included in the articles, including the voices of foreign workers, employers, institutional actors (e.g., police or government representatives), political actors, and representatives of NGOs, unions, or local residents. The fourth section encompasses categories designed to capture the dominant frames and narratives in reporting on foreign workers, both in headlines and articles. The first part of this section addresses the overall tone, sentiment towards foreign workers and labels used for foreign workers in the article headlines. Headlines are also examined for the presence of terms that evoke fear of foreign workers, as well as for the use of language suggesting massiveness. The second part examines whether foreign workers were portrayed as threats, victims or a competition to domicile workers in the articles. Articles are also coded for the presence of references to harsh living or working conditions of foreign workers, mention of their cultural, religious, or ethnic background, and finally, mention of hostility or any form of resistance from the domestic population. The final section of the code book assesses whether articles mention disinformation narratives or fact-checked (debunked) claims related to foreign workers, or specific ethnic groups, including cases in which the media explicitly identified certain allegations or circulating stories as false, misleading, or unsubstantiated. An intercoder reliability test was conducted on a randomly selected subset of 50 articles, with reliability across coding categories ranging from 0.84 to 1. Perfect agreement ($\kappa = 1.00$) was achieved only for a limited number of factual categories characterized by unambiguous coding decisions, whereas more interpretive categories, such as fear-evoking language and sentiment, yielded lower but still very high levels of agreement.

Findings and Discussion

Main Topics in the Media Coverage of Foreign Workers

Examination of the main topics reveals that foreign workers were primarily featured as victims of physical attacks, robberies, or other crimes. Such incidents constitute the primary focus in almost 23% of the analyzed articles (Figure 1).

For example, an article titled “In Zagreb, a Nepalese man was approached over a cigarette and then brutally attacked: ‘His colleagues from work are horrified’” (24sata.hr, 4-1-2024) adopts a crime-reporting style to describe an assault on a foreign worker. While the headline and opening sentences emphasize the brutality of the attack, the article later states that the man was in fact not injured. The discre-

Figure 1. The Main Topic of the Article (%)

Source: Authors' own work

pancy between the dramatic framing and the limited factual content illustrates the sensationalist logic behind reporting. Moreover, headlines that report on violence against migrants often present such incidents as recurring events while offering little structural or social context. For example, “The ‘hunt’ for foreign workers continues: Two taxi drivers attacked, as many as seven people assaulted them!” (Jutarnji.hr, 19-8-2024) or “Foreign delivery workers attacked again in Zagreb, one hospitalized: police reveal details: this is already the fourth time” (Jutarnji.hr, 3-8-2025). Such reporting persistently situates foreign workers within a negative, violence-related frame, creating an impression of systematic social hostility toward migrants. In addition, animal-related metaphors such as “hunt” dehumanize foreign workers.

The next single most prevalent topic is the working conditions (15.20%), followed by employment policy (13.30%) and economy (12.90%). Working conditions are mainly covering accommodation, wages, and violation of labor rights, e.g., “Scenes from Zagreb: Entrepreneur squeezed 32 foreign workers into a state-owned apartment; neighbors are angry” (24sata.hr, 26-1-2024). Dissatisfaction or concern of local residents, as in this example, was mentioned in 42.38% of the articles. Moreover, references to harsh living conditions or difficult working environments were present in 45.71% of the corpus. This suggests that both social tension and precarious conditions constitute recurring background elements of the media coverage in the analyzed corpus, even when they are not the central focus of re-

porting. Economic issues primarily concern macroeconomic conditions such as labor shortages, productivity, and growth, whereas employment policy focuses more explicitly on regulatory frameworks, state interventions, and labor-market governance.

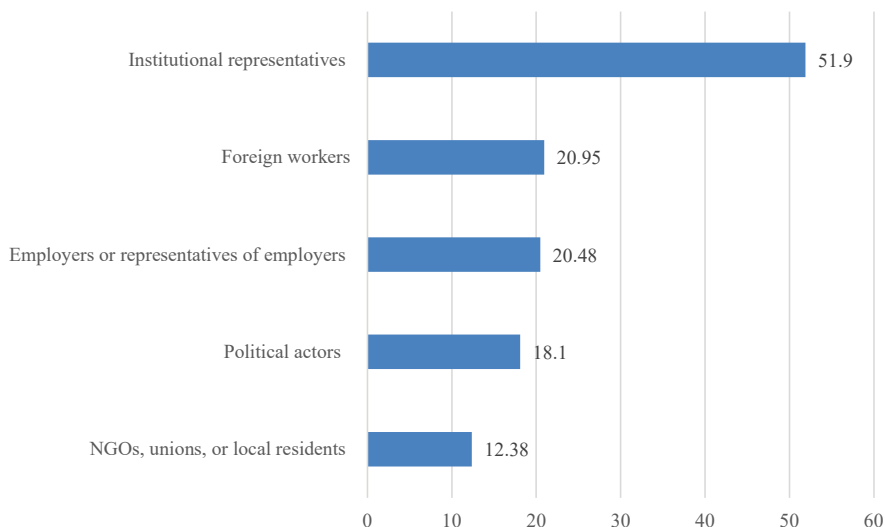
Personal stories accounted for 10% of the analyzed corpus. Interestingly, the editorial framing of articles in this category, which could in principle contribute to more positive public sentiment towards foreign workers, was often sensationalistic and may therefore have had the opposite effect in shaping perceptions of foreign workers. For instance, the headline of an otherwise personal and positive article about a Nepali woman, “Nepali woman Rina takes TikTok by storm: ‘We’re not stealing jobs from Croatians – I don’t know why they think that’” (Index.hr, 18-1-2024), implicitly evokes a conflict frame and represents foreign workers as a threat. A similar example is an article titled “Amin came to Croatia from Egypt to work – and then discovered the real truth about wages and accommodation” (Dnevno.hr, 30-1-2024). Although Amin describes earning a good salary and having excellent accommodation in Croatia, the click-bait headline is intentionally misleading, hinting at poor living and working arrangements of foreign workers.

Overall, this analysis of the main topics indicates that foreign workers are primarily made visible in situations of crime and conflict during identified peak periods, rather than as routine participants in everyday economic and social life. Moreover, the frequent use of short, event-driven, and often sensationalist news formats as the most represented format in the corpus (n=123) contributes to the normalization of foreign workers’ exposure to harm, framing such incidents as routine rather than exceptional or socially alarming.

Voices Shaping Narratives About Foreign Workers

Institutional voices appeared in almost 52% of the articles (Figure 2). These were most often government officials framing the presence of foreign workers as an economic necessity, frequently emphasizing labor shortages and economic growth. An illustrative example is a statement made by the President of the Croatian Parliament, Gordan Jandroković: “We must send a clear message that without foreign workers there can be no economic growth and development” (Večernji.hr, 27-8-2024). The voices of foreign workers, quoted or paraphrased, were present in 20.95% of the articles, mostly in relation to the attacks against them or discussions of working conditions. This disbalance in voice presence contributes to a discursive environment in which narratives about foreign workers are shaped primarily *about* them rather than *with* them.

The voices of employers were present as frequently as the voices of workers, while the voices of politicians and parties appeared in about 18% of the analyzed

Figure 2. Presence of Different Voices in the Article (%)

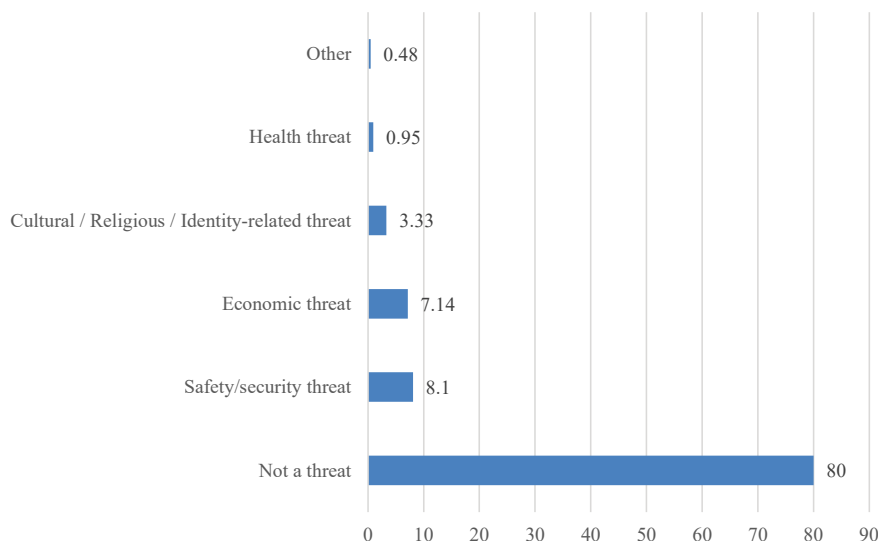
Source: Authors' own work

articles. Right-wing politicians were mainly featured as the sources behind disinformation narratives or as the critics of the influx of foreign workers (“DP spreads hysteria that migrants groped girls. Police deny the claims”, Index.hr, 4-01-2024). In contrast, actors from the political left were primarily criticizing working conditions of both domestic and foreign workers and existing migration policies (“Peović calls for the return of quotas for foreign workers: ‘What is being imported is slaves, not workers’”, Index.hr, 25-01-2024).

Dominant Framing of Foreign Workers

Foreign workers were portrayed as a threat in 19.05% of the analyzed articles. A more detailed analysis of threat typologies shows that foreign workers were most frequently constructed as a security or safety threat, accounting for 8% of the corpus (Figure 3).

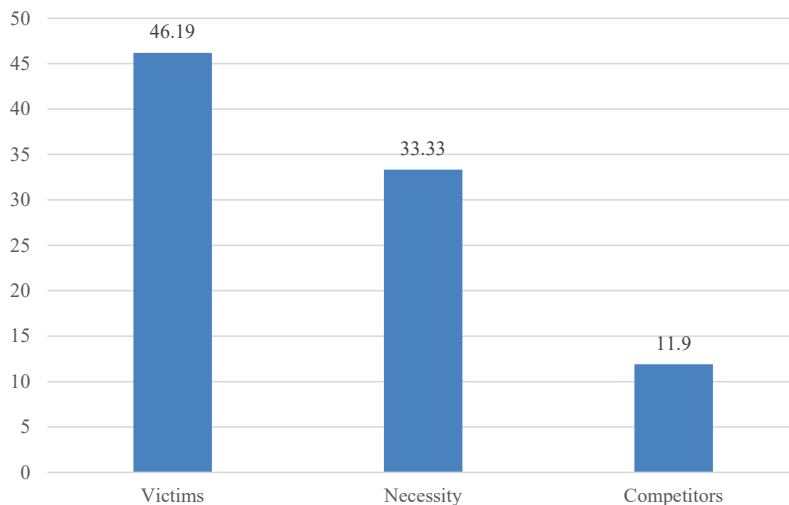
This framing was particularly prominent in coverage related to the disinformation surrounding the New Year’s Eve incident in Zagreb in 2024: “Claims are spreading that foreigners molested girls at the New Year’s Eve celebration. Police: No reports have been filed” (Index.hr, 3-1-2024). Beyond security-related framing, foreign workers were also depicted as an economic threat in 7.14% of the articles. Interestingly, contrary to findings on the attitudes of the Croatian public toward

Figure 3. Threat Frame (%)

Source: Authors' own work

migrants, where anti-immigrant sentiment primarily revolves around cultural and identity-based threat perceptions, this study shows that explicit references to foreign workers as such a threat were relatively rare during examined high-salience periods. At the same time, the cultural, religious, racial, or ethnic background of foreign workers was mentioned in 51.9% of the analyzed articles. The frequent emphasis on these attributes suggests that media coverage in the selected periods highlighted cultural differences, thereby reinforcing symbolic othering in public discourse. A clear example is a statement made by the Croatian President Zoran Milanović that the media quickly gave headline status, in which he explicitly referenced the skin color of foreign workers: “Milanović: We will have to do the jobs we thought we could leave to those who are slightly darker-skinned” (Index.hr, 14-8-2024). In addition, the phrase “the jobs we thought we could leave” implicitly suggests that certain types of work are not sufficiently dignified for Croatians and that they are therefore expected to be performed by those presumed to be ‘less worthy’.

Figure 4 indicates that the victim frame was present in almost half of the analyzed articles (46%). In 33% of the articles, foreign workers were portrayed as a necessity (equivalent to the “demographics narrative” in Bakamo Public Report, 2019), while in 11.9% they were framed as a labor-market competition.

Figure 4. Victim, Necessity and Competition Frames (%)

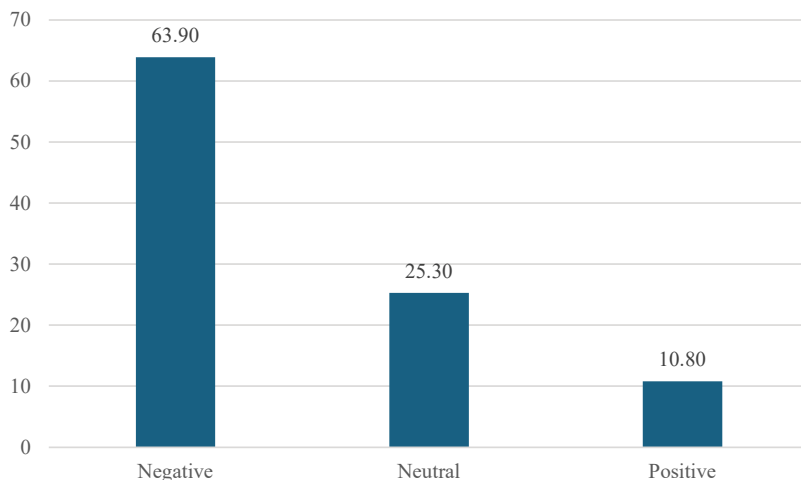
Source: Authors' own work

Reporting that portrayed foreign workers as victims was most often, but not exclusively, linked to coverage of attacks against delivery workers and taxi drivers. Occasionally the victim frame was extended to categories of humanitarian suffering and racism, such as “Racism is hatred born of ignorance – a hatred in which there is no understanding, and no reason either...” (24sata.hr, 8-12-2024). A chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between a media outlet and the use of the victim frame ($\chi^2(4) = 15.93$, $p = .003$), with a moderate effect size (Cramér's $V = .275$). Post-hoc analysis indicates that Večernji.hr and Jutarnji.hr employ the victim frame more frequently than expected, while Dnevno.hr is underrepresented in this category.

Portrayals of foreign workers as a necessity were predominantly articulated by government officials, who emphasized labor shortages and economic dependence on foreign labor. No statistically significant association was found between a media outlet and the use of the necessity frame ($\chi^2(4) = 2.64$, $p = .619$). Moreover, the chi-square test did not reveal a statistically significant association between a media outlet and the use of the competitors frame ($\chi^2(4) = 9.14$, $p = .058$), although a trend toward the higher use of this frame on Dnevno.hr was observed.

Power of the Headline

The analysis shows that the overall tone of headlines was predominantly negative, accounting for almost 64% of the 269 analyzed headlines (Figure 5). Approximate-

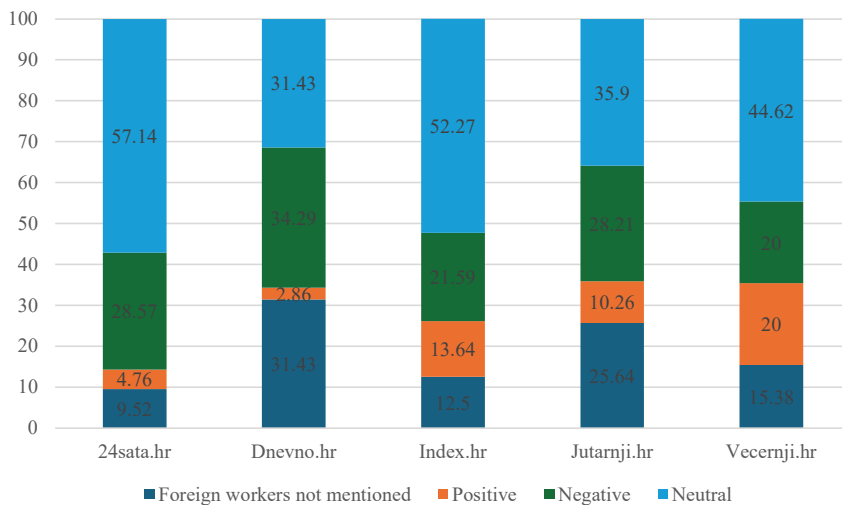
Figure 5. Overall Tone of the Headlines (%)

Source: Authors' own work

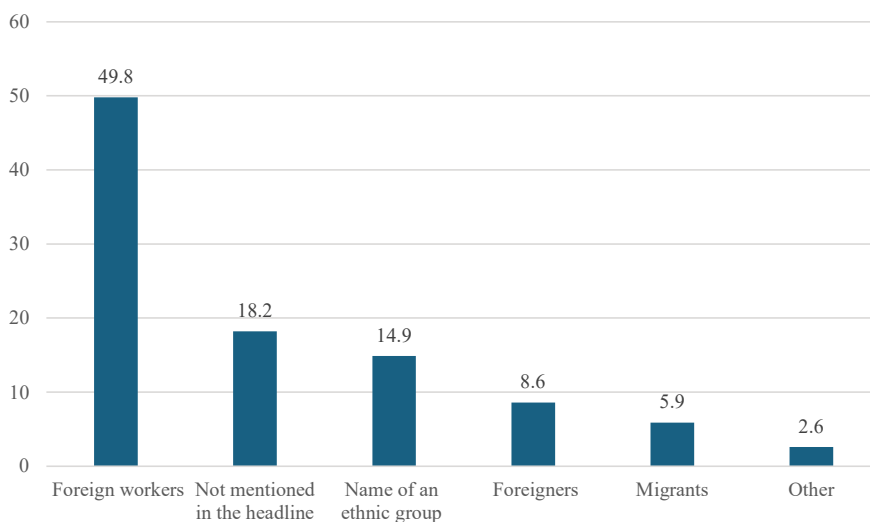
ly 25% of the headlines were neutral, while about 11% conveyed a positive tone. This distribution suggests a strong tendency toward negative headline framing, which may shape readers' initial interpretations of news content before engaging with the full article.

In 24.9% of headlines foreign workers were portrayed negatively, while only 11.9% of headlines conveyed a positive sentiment toward them. In 46.1% of the analyzed headlines the sentiment towards foreign workers was neutral, and in 17% they were not mentioned in the headline. This pattern highlights the role of headlines as powerful framing devices (Dor, 2003) that contribute to the normalization of representation of foreign workers as problematic. A statistically significant association between media outlet and headline sentiment towards foreign workers was found ($\chi^2(12) = 23.61$, $p = .023$), with a small-to-moderate effect size (Cramér's $V = .17$). Post-hoc analysis indicates that Večernji.hr is overrepresented in positive headline sentiment, while Dnevno.hr shows a significant overrepresentation of headlines in which foreign workers were not mentioned (Figure 6).

Figure 7 illustrates the terminology used in headlines to refer to foreign workers and reveals a clear hierarchy in naming practices. In half of the analyzed headlines (49.80%), *foreign workers* are explicitly labelled using this institutionally promoted term.

Figure 6. Sentiment Towards Foreign Workers in Headlines Across Media Outlets (%)

Source: Authors' own work

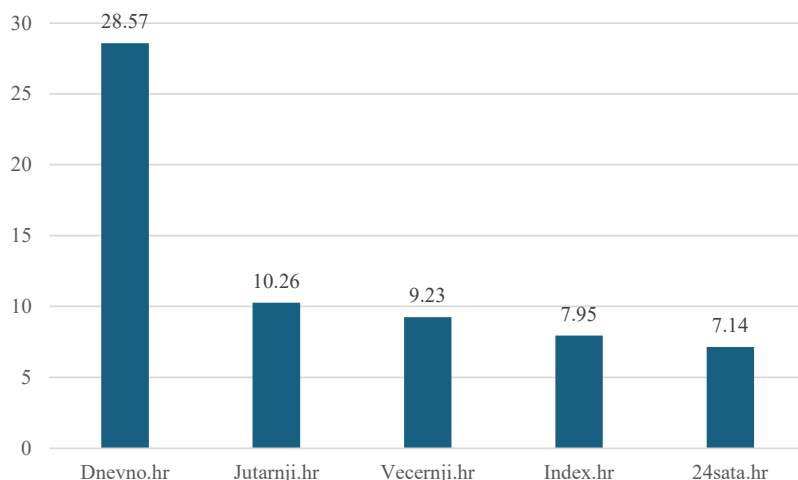
Figure 7. Labels Used for Foreign Workers in Headlines (%)

Source: Authors' own work

In 14.90% of headlines, foreign workers are identified by the name of a specific ethnic group (e.g. Nepalese, Filipinos, Indians), which foregrounds ethnic origin and potentially reinforces processes of ethnicization. In some cases, headlines used more general terms such as “foreigners” (8.6%) or “migrants” (5.9%), while 2.6% employed other, often chauvinist and racially charged labels that refer to the skin color, such as “black” (*crni*, Vecernji.hr, 26-8-2024), “dark” (*škuri*, 24sata.hr, 25-1-2024), “a little darker” (*malo tamniji*, Index.hr, 14-8-2024). In 18.20% of the headlines, foreign workers were not mentioned at all, despite being central to the article’s content. This suggests that while headlines most often rely on an official naming, they also sporadically ethnicize foreign workers, or render them invisible at the headline level.

Additionally, we analyzed if headlines during the analyzed peak periods encouraged fear of foreign workers. The results revealed that this was the case in 11.2% of the headlines. For instance, “In broad daylight in Zagreb, foreign workers and young Croats clashed: Dramatic footage is spreading” (Dnevno.hr, 20-8-2024). A chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between a media outlet and the use of fear in headlines ($\chi^2(4) = 12.6$, $p = .014$), with a small-to-moderate effect size (Cramér’s $V = .216$). Post-hoc analysis indicates that Dnevno.hr is significantly overrepresented in headlines employing fear, while no other outlet shows a statistically significant deviation from expected frequencies (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Presence of Fear in Headlines Within Outlets (%)



Source: Authors’ own work

We also looked for the words in the headlines that imply massiveness (e.g., numbers, words such as *massive*, *wave*, *invasion*, *occupation*, *flood*). This type of terminology was used in 10% of the analyzed headlines. For instance: “Sovereignist: 400,000 Croats have been driven out, and 200,000 foreign workers have been brought in” (Index.hr, 24-1-2024). Another example at the same time implies massiveness and encourages fear of foreign workers: “500,000 foreign workers will live in Croatia by 2030? ‘This cannot be stopped’” (Index.hr, 26-1-2024).

Reporting Disinformation Narratives

Lastly, the analysis examined whether articles explicitly mentioned disinformation narratives or fact-checked (debunked) claims related to foreign workers, migrants, or specific ethnic groups. The results show that such references were present in 7.14% of the analyzed articles. This was primarily linked to high-profile cases of disinformation, most notably the false claims surrounding the New Year’s Eve “incident”. Another case was when a carnival dummy depicting an Indian man, referred to as “Škuribando Furešić” (“Dark Foreigner”), was hanged and burned as part of a local carnival ritual. Organizers claimed the dummy symbolized a fictional perpetrator linked to a debunked abduction rumor, although police confirmed that no crime had occurred and denied any connection to migrants.² Another bizarre case refers to a hoax about animal eating, which European Digital Media Observatory recognized as one of the common migrant-related disinformation: “An association claimed that full freezers of cat meat were found belonging to Nepalis; police revealed that they were lying” (Jutarnji.hr, 9-8-2024). These are examples of disinformation that may drive threat-based framing of migrants. Even when professional media explicitly debunk these claims, their repeated circulation through headlines and news coverage may potentially contribute to the agenda-setting effect that reinforces associations between foreign workers and danger (Wardle, 2018). However, this interpretation should be treated with caution. Although one of the selected peak periods in this study was driven by the spread of migrant-related disinformation, the analysis identified few explicit references to debunked claims in the corpus. One possible explanation is a limited media interest in debunking such content, while another is that awareness of the potential amplification effects may discourage media outlets from reporting on migrant-related disinformation altogether. Given the design of this study, it is not possible to empirically confirm either explanation; rather, these remain plausible interpretations and point to an avenue for future research.

² Index.hr (24-01-2024) Kod Rijeke objesili i spalili lutku Indijca. <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/kod-rijeka-objesili-i-spalili-lutku-indijca/2532226.aspx>

Discussion

The findings corroborate recurring patterns discussed in previous sections of this study, suggesting that media representations of migrants are frequently structured around threat, victimhood, and conflict frames, while migrants' own voices remain comparatively marginalized (Benson, 2013; Eberl *et al.*, 2018; Hoffmann and Hammeleers, 2024; Verleyen and Beckers, 2023).

In selected Croatian media outlets, during the selected peak periods in 2024 and 2025, labor migrants were predominantly constructed through problem-centered framing, victimhood and conflict. Although in this study victim framing appears twice as frequently as explicit threat framing, it does not necessarily function in a humanizing way. Instead, when combined with the overwhelming dominance of negatively toned headlines and the frequent articulation of local residents' concerns, such portrayals contribute to a discursive environment in which foreign workers are symbolically associated with social tension and insecurity. The headline analysis is particularly telling, given their framing power, with nearly two-thirds conveying negative emotions toward foreign workers markedly exceeding positive representation.

Consistent with earlier studies (Car *et al.*, 2019; Popović *et al.*, 2022), institutional actors dominate the narrative, while the voices of foreign workers are much less represented. This limits opportunities for more personalized or integrative storytelling. A comparison of outlets revealed that the right-wing Dnevno.hr stands out for its fear-inducing headlines and negative sentiment towards foreign workers.

Finally, regarding the second research question, which examines the presence of debunked disinformation narratives about foreign workers in selected Croatian online media, the study identified a relatively small number of articles addressing such claims. This finding may be explained either by a limited media interest in critically engaging with disinformation narratives or by an awareness among media outlets that reporting on such claims may inadvertently amplify them. Given the predominantly tabloid and sensationalist character of the Croatian media landscape, the former explanation may appear more plausible; however, the present study does not allow for a conclusive interpretation, and this issue remains a subject for future research.

Conclusion

This study examined how Croatian online media represented foreign workers during peak periods of coverage in 2024 and 2025 and assessed the extent to which reporting engaged with migrant-related disinformation. The findings demonstrate that in this period foreign workers were predominantly visible through the frames

of conflict, victimhood and social tension, accompanied by a strong dominance of negatively toned headlines. Although the victim frame was more frequent than the explicit threat frame, its repeated coupling with violence-related reporting, expressions of local residents' concerns, and sensationalism place foreign workers in the context of insecurity and social disruption. In line with the framing theory, these patterns illustrate how routine journalistic "critical choices" may shape interpretations through which audiences construct meanings related to foreign workers. Lexical practices play an important role in these processes. Headlines occasionally relied on ethnic labelling, racial descriptors and metaphors that dehumanize or collectivize migrants, while journalists largely adopted the institutional term "foreign workers" without reflection on its othering implications. Such choices, along with emotionally charged headlines, intensify negative framing and foreground differences rather than everyday social participation. Institutional actors dominated coverage, whereas the voices of workers remained comparatively less represented. The analysis also revealed important differences between outlets: the right-wing Dnevno.hr stood out for fear-evoking headlines, while Večernji.hr was comparatively more likely to positively feature foreign workers in the headlines. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that othering is produced not only through explicitly negative or threat-based portrayals, but also through routine journalistic practices such as selective visibility, emphasis on difference, and reliance on institutional narratives. By situating foreign workers within frames of conflict, victimhood, and cultural distinction, media coverage may contribute to the normalization of anti-immigrant sentiment and reinforce perceptions of foreign workers as socially and symbolically 'others'.

Finally, the findings indicate a context-specific and limited presence of references to migrant-related disinformation in the analyzed reports. While one of the selected peak periods was driven by the circulation of false claims, explicit references to debunked disinformation were rare in the corpus. This finding points to the need for further research into when and how professional media address migrant-related disinformation, and how media potentially contribute to either the amplification or the debunking of lies and false narratives.

In a society undergoing rapid demographic and labor market transformation, media coverage is likely to matter for public attitudes toward foreign workers and for broader debates about integration. By repeatedly associating foreign workers with violence, disorder, and social tension, while marginalizing migrants' personal stories and everyday experiences, news coverage may reinforce precisely those cultural and security anxieties that surveys have identified as the most important for Croatian citizens. Consequently, this underscores the need for more reflexive journalistic practices and greater sensitivity to the framing power of language and style in reporting about migrants.

This study has several methodological limitations. Firstly, the analysis focuses exclusively on selected peak periods (January and August 2024 and 2025), shaped by events such as attacks, policy debates, and disinformation. Such choice of corpus may overrepresent problem-oriented and sensationalist reporting, while underestimating routine coverage during less visible periods. Secondly, the study examines only a limited number of online news portals, and it does not analyze how content related to foreign workers is circulated, reframed, or amplified on social media. Thirdly, the exclusion of paywalled articles resulted in an uneven distribution of full-length articles across outlets, which limits the robustness of outlet-level comparisons. This is particularly relevant for outlets with a very small number of accessible articles, and findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. Fourthly, the research was not designed to measure the role of professional media in spreading disinformation that were previously not debunked, which gives only limited perspective on the role of media in covering and sharing migrant-related disinformation narratives. Finally, the study examines media content but does not measure audience reception, limiting the conclusions about the actual impact of the coverage on foreign workers.

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KONSTRUIRANJE 'DRUGIH' I REPREZENTACIJA STRANIH RADNIKA U HRVATSKIM ONLINE MEDIJIMA 2024. I 2025.

Sažetak

Rad analizira reprezentaciju stranih radnika u hrvatskim *online* medijima u razdobljima pojačane medijske vidljivosti 2024. i 2025. godine. Koristeći kvantitativnu analizu sadržaja, rad analizira 269 naslova i 210 članaka objav-

ljenih u medijima različitog ideološkog spektra. Cilj rada je utvrditi dominantne okvire izvještavanja, načine imenovanja, zastupljenost različitih izvora izjava i sentiment prema stranim radnicima, kao i izvještavanje o dezinformacijama o migrantima. Rezultati pokazuju da se u analiziranim medijima strani radnici najčešće prikazuju u kontekstu sukoba, viktimizacije i društvene napetosti, uz snažnu prisutnost negativno intoniranih naslova. Institucionalni akteri dominiraju u člancima, dok su izjave samih radnika slabije zastupljene. Referiranje na dezinformacije relativno je rijetko, što otvara pitanje izbora profesionalnih medija hoće li izvještavati o dezinformacijama ili ne, kao i o učincima tog izvještavanja. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na važnost novinarskih "kritičkih izbora" u procesu simboličkog konstruiranja 'drugih' u društvu obilježenom snažnom demografskom i tržišnom transformacijom.

Ključne riječi: strani radnici, migranti, Hrvatska, konstruiranje 'drugih', medijsko izvještavanje

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