



**FENOMÉN 2021:  
Pandémia covidu-19 a médiá**

Anna Sámelová – Mária Stanková – Ján Hacek (Eds.)



**VYDAVATELSTVO**  
Univerzita Komenského  
v Bratislave

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## From “Us“ to “Them“? Short-term Migrants and Commuters as a Casestudy of Widening of the Imagination in the Topic of Migration

Pavína Meľuchová – Peter Ivanič

### **Abstrakt:**

Zámerom príspevku s názvom „*Od ‚my‘ k ‚oni‘? Pendleri ako prípadová štúdia rozšírenia predstavivosti v téme migrácie*“ je poukázať na to, ako pandémie COVID-19 ovplyvnila predstavivosť médií a verejnosti (nielen) v téme migrácie. Zatiaľ čo z dát vyplýva, že sa mediálne pole stredovýchodnej Európy dlhodobo sústreďuje na mobilitu ľudí primárne z krajín globálneho Juhu, pre náš región relevantnejší aspekt – pracovná migrácia – zostáva v úzadí. S COVIDom-19 sme však mohli v médiách i v časti verejnosti pozorovať určitý posun vo vnímaní tejto tematiky. Tzv. pendleri zo Slovenska si mohli na jar 2020 uvedomiť, ako ľahko sa dostali zo skupiny *my* do skupiny *oni* a médiá túto perspektívu migrácie reflektovali v oveľa vyššej miere. V príspevku na konkrétnom príklade ukážeme, akým spôsobom je možné na fenomén pendlerov zareagovať a na akých teoretických konceptoch možno tému uchopiť, aby pokrývanie témy migrácie ako celku mohlo byť presnejšie, relevantnejšie a vyváženejšie.

**Kľúčové slová:** migrácia, médiá, pendleri, globálna imaginácia, globálna žurnalistika

### **Abstract:**

Our paper named “*From ‘us’ to ‘them’? Short-term migrants and commuters as a case study of widening of the imagination in the topic of migration*” demonstrates how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced imagination of the media and the public in the topic of migration. While data show that media in the CEE are dominantly focused on the mobility of people from the Global South countries, an aspect relevant for our region – labour migration – is traditionally not covered sufficiently. However, we could examine the perception shift due to COVID-19. Short term migrants and/or commuters from Slovakia could experience how easy it was to move from ingroup “*we*” to outgroup “*they*”. At the same time we could see that the media reflected this perspective of migration much more frequently than before. In the last section we describe concrete examples of coverage of this phenomenon, and explain the concept which enabled us to grasp the topic to make migration coverage more accurate, relevant and balanced.

**Keywords:** migration, media, commuters, global imagination, global journalism

## Introduction: COVID-19 as a turning point for more balanced coverage of migration?

Migration is undoubtedly a relevant phenomenon in current globalised societies, what is reflected in the amount of its media coverage, too. However, many could oppose that migration had actually always been here, we (as journalists) just did not recognize this angle in the stories. We could not see the wood for the trees.

Humans have been exploring new places from the very beginning of history of mankind, starting our journey in our native lands in Africa and slowly spreading all over the planet<sup>1</sup>. Much later migration was, according to many global political economists<sup>2</sup>, a crucial condition for Western Europe to succeed as an economic center. In what way? Role of Western Europe region in world trade was relatively insignificant for a very long time. While struggling with the lack of once luxury goods from China, India, or Oceania (such as cotton, silk, spice, tea, sugar, porcelain etc.), migration into (and exploitation of) other regions was essential for this part of Europe to obtain those exotic and mass consumption goods and, more importantly, to succeed economically later.

Aside from others, these observations explain why we can so often meet with the statement that migration is as old as humankind's history. Knowing that, it should not come as a surprise that such an old, omni- and everpresent phenomenon consists of plenty of variations, perspectives and angles.

Unfortunately, migration is mostly (especially after 2015, when the so-called European migration crisis began) perceived much more narrowly, as a movement of people from lower-income countries to rich ones<sup>3</sup>, especially to Europe or North America. This picture is misleading for several reasons.

Firstly, UNHCR reported that during 2019, 73 % of forcibly displaced people went to its neighboring countries rather than choosing more distant/rich destinations<sup>4</sup>. And even though Europe and USA were still very attractive regions for moving in, the fastest rate of increase of migration stock took place in Western Asia and Northern Africa, especially in Gulf states<sup>5</sup> (particularly if we exclude countries influenced by Syrian civil war – Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, i.e. hosting millions of forced migrants,

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<sup>1</sup> KING, Russel: *Atlas of Human Migration*. A Firefly Book : Marshall Editions, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See a summary chapter written by Robert O'Brien and Marc Williams: (Chapter 3) Forging a World Economy: 1400 – 1800. In O'BRIEN, Robert – WILLIAMS, Marc: *Global Political Economy: Evolution and Dynamics*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 40 – 62.

<sup>3</sup> GIAMPAOLO, Mattia – IANNI, Aurora: *Rural-Urban Migration in Africa*. Faces of Migration, Focsiv, 2021, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR: *Global Trends. Forced displacement in 2019*. [online]. Available at: <<https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>>. [quoted on 2021-04-15].

<sup>5</sup> 50 % increase in migrants stock in Europe in comparison to 150 % increase in Western Asia and North Africa, with cases such as Qatar where the increase was more than 500 % (Qatar being a small country means it does not influence the average for the region very strongly). Data taken from: UNITED NATIONS: *Population Division. International Migrant Stock 2020*. [online]. Available at: <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>>. [quoted on 2021-04-13].

in contrast to Gulf states dominantly hosting labour migrants). What is more, people also choose to migrate voluntarily<sup>6</sup> and for a plethora of reasons (better study/workplace/environment vision, romantic relationship/family members, etc.), while parallel change of residence may, but does not have to take place.

Labour migration in combination with no change of place of living is called “*commuting*”. As the data show and as COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered, this type of migration is a substantial one in Slovakia as well as in Central-Eastern Europe region. According to Eurostat it relates to 6,1 % of Slovak workforce, the highest share in the EU<sup>7</sup>. This number covers daily commuters as well as, for example, live-in care workers in Austria.

Before COVID-19, commuting and perspective of short-term migrants was a relatively negligible topic for the Slovak media. If and how this has changed with COVID-19 and what opportunities it can bring to the media scene, stays in the focus of this research paper.

Why is it relevant to focus on this area of research? It is more than crucial for the media to understand migration in its complexity. Thanks to a sufficient comprehension of migration with its different perspectives, the media can more efficiently fulfill their role as essential agents for reflecting reality (and constructing it at the same time) more fairly and in a more balanced way. Consequently, the audience is allowed to consume a more reality-based media content about migration that can strengthen democratic principles and build bridges between majority and migrating minority, as we will argue below.

Additionally, far too little attention has been paid to media coverage of labour migration in the academic field. Therefore, the aim of our analysis is to broaden current knowledge in the field of media and migration by answering these research questions:

**RQ1: What role does commuting play in the Slovak migration context?**

**RQ2: To what extent is commuting reflected by the Slovak media?**

**RQ3: If present, what are possible strategies for the media to cope with imbalanced media content?**

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<sup>6</sup> However, distinction between forced and voluntary migration is often tricky, since the motivations of people to move can be - and often are - mixed. One can be at the same time leaving homeland because he or she is running away from discrimination or even persecution, and at the same time he or she might be running for better life economically. Not to speak about the condition of chronic extreme poverty, which, even though is not considered to be the reason behind forced migration by international law, you could hardly see that as purely voluntary decision. Leaving a country because of inability to find a proper job or because of environmental challenges can be also life-threatening, although in a more indirect way. FREIDINGEROVÁ, Tereza et al: *Ludia medzi riadkami*. Bratislava : Človek v ohrození n.o., Svet medzi riadkami, 2020, p. 64 – 65.

<sup>7</sup> EUROSTAT: *Statistics on commuting patterns at regional level*. p. 9. [online]. Available at: <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/50943.pdf>>. [quoted on 2021-04-12].



The remaining part of the paper proceeds as follows: the second chapter begins by laying out the theoretical dimensions of the research and it deals with theory of framing and agenda setting, while the concept of global imagination is explained. Chapter Three gives a brief overview of the current literature in the research area. The fourth chapter is concerned with the methodology used for this study. The fifth section presents the findings of the research, focusing on the three research questions. It is followed by chapter Six that gives possible steps that can be taken to achieve more balanced media discourse. The seventh chapter discusses the limitations of the research and summarizes the whole paper.

### Frames and interpretations: why do we think about migration the way we do?

In the Slovak public, migration (and integration) is considered to be a rather controversial topic. Data from Eurobarometer have shown that Slovak inhabitants and their V4 neighbours share a negative attitude towards immigrants. This trend is rather stable what contrasts with growing acceptance of immigrants in Western Europe<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, the number of foreigners<sup>9</sup> and incoming refugees<sup>10</sup> is negligible in this region. According to Pospěch and Jurečková, those findings confirm the contact hypothesis which stems from the assumption that less direct contact with immigrants correlates with more negative attitudes towards them<sup>11</sup>.

Why do some people consider migration as an important topic and why do they do so, in either a positive, neutral or negative way? This issue cannot be explained perfectly by one single theory, but in this chapter, we will introduce two media theories that partially explain the mechanism.

According to (1) agenda-setting theory, the media can influence **what people think about**. The public can perceive certain issues as more important than the others based on selection of topics and angles that the media decide to cover. Consequently, it influences criteria we use to make decisions (for example in elections).

According to (2) framing theory, the media are able to affect **the way people think** about those salient topics. Through selection of only some aspects of reality, the media **offer explanations of the phenomenon**s and they take part in the process of

<sup>8</sup> PEOPLE IN NEED: *Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection in V4 Countries (Updated Report)*. Prague : People in Need, 2019, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> The number of foreigners with residence permits in Slovakia in December 2020 was 150 012, representing 2,75 % of the Slovak population. It is the fourth lowest share of foreigners in the EU. INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION: *Migration in Slovakia*. [online]. Available at: <<https://www.iom.int/migration/migration-in-slovakia.html>> [quoted on 2021-04-03].

<sup>10</sup> MINV.SK: *Štatistický prehľad legálnej a nelegálnej migrácie v Slovenskej republike*. p. 14-17. [online]. 2020 (updated on 26. 04. 2021). Available at: <[https://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/policia/hranicna\\_a\\_cudzinecka\\_policia/rocenky/rok\\_2020/2020-rocenka-UHCP-SK\\_revid.pdf](https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocenky/rok_2020/2020-rocenka-UHCP-SK_revid.pdf)> [quoted on 2021-04-15].

<sup>11</sup> POSPĚCH, Pavel – JUREČKOVÁ Adéla et al: *Exposed: Media coverage of migration in Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia. Comparative report*. Prague : People in Need, 2019, p. 3.

constructing the way of how the interpretations in our minds will look like<sup>12</sup>. The reader should bear in mind that the media are not the only agents that influence what and how we think. Most media theorists agree that media are not the almighty game-changers that can change our decisions. However, especially when previously unknown or underreported topics are being covered and our minds do not have previous and deep-rooted beliefs about them, the media are able to affect us to a greater extent<sup>13</sup>. From a certain point of view, migration after 2015 can be considered as an previously unexperienced phenomenon. The complexity of the world increases and what happens in one of its parts has several direct and indirect consequences in other parts of the planet. Consequently, migration after 2015 can be perceived as unique – not in the amount of people on the move, but rather in circumstances standing behind. The media therefore have had a unique position in forming the public opinion.

To form this assumption in a more balanced way, the media should have a deeper understanding of migration and other global challenges. Having this competence is interconnected with the concept of global imagination. As we have described it in one of our research papers, "(...) *to have a global imagination, a person must be able to pull away from the situation and own context and think from an alternative point of view, especially when covering culturally and/or geographically distant contexts.*"<sup>14</sup> According to Shani Orgad, global imagination allows us firstly to be aware of diverse, interconnected and interrelated social, political, economic, ecological, cultural, and other contexts and power structures. Secondly, it enables us to understand how unknown parts of the stories and relations interact and influence each other<sup>15</sup>.

Concepts of agenda-setting, framing and global imagination can influence how much and in what ways we think about migration. Do we perceive labour migration as a relevant type of migration? Do we perceive commuting as labour migration? Do commuters perceive themselves as migrants? These questions are directly connected with aforementioned theoretical concepts. Throughout this paper, the term *commuting* will be understood as a part of labour migration. Some authors refer to the commuting as a type of labour mobility rather than migration since no change of residence takes part<sup>16</sup>. However, other authors recommend to refer to commuters as

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<sup>12</sup> HURTÍKOVÁ, Hana: Mediální framing: teoretické a metodologické vymezení v procesu politické komunikace. In *Mediální studia (Media studies)*. 2017, 11(2), p. 153 – 154; ENTMAN, Robert: Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. In *Journal of Communication*. 1993, 43(4), p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> ENTMAN, Robert: Media framing biases and political power: Explaining slant in news of Campaign 2008. In *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 2010, 11(4), p. 391.

<sup>14</sup> IVANIČ, Peter: Community in Media Seen through Global Outlook. In SÁMELOVÁ, Anna et al. (eds): *FENOMÉN 2020: Komunita v mediálnom priestore*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2020, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> ORGAD, Shani: *Media representations and the Global Imagination*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> GREŇČIKOVÁ, Adriana et al: The features of labor emigration from the Slovak Republic. In *Business: Theory and Practice*. 2019, p. 272.

labour migrants. For example Bahna and Sekulová point out that most of the academic literature discusses commuting care workers only in terms of care and family. Hence, incorporation of the conditions on the labour market and framing them as labour migrants is missing<sup>17</sup>. We agree with this statement and we further argue that incorporation of commuters into migration media discourse has a potential to sensitize the public toward migrants in general and the so-called “*economic*” migrants in particular.

### Literature review: How the media cover migration

There is no argumentation about the fact that after 2015, migration has become a topic of paramount importance for the media. What we would like to discuss in this chapter is how migration is typically framed by the media in Europe, particularly in Central Eastern Europe and in Slovakia and on the other hand, which aspects are missing in its coverage.

A considerable amount of research papers has been published on this topic. These studies find that migrants are portrayed in Europe rather negatively. They are often portrayed as objects, administrative burden, challenge for the police, as problems, more like causes of the so-called migration crisis and not its consequence<sup>18</sup>. Additionally, migration is framed as a political issue in the first place. Background and individual stories of migrants are rather missing in the coverage in general and politicians play a pivotal role in this topic<sup>19</sup>. In the same vein, several studies indicate that Eastern and Central European media cover migrants in a substantially more negative way than their Western colleagues. Eastern and Central European media published twice as many articles on problems with migrants than Western media during selected months of the years 2015 – 2018. The opposite pattern can be found about how the Eastern and Western media cover the migrant’s current situation and finding help for them<sup>20</sup>.

However, such studies remain narrow in focus dealing primarily with refugees and migrants coming from non-European countries. A search of the literature revealed

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<sup>17</sup> BAHNA, Miloslav – SEKULOVÁ, Martina: *Crossborder Care: Lessons from Central Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019 – cited from PAVELKOVÁ, Lenka: Péče, migrace a střední Evropa. In UHDE, Zuzana – EZZEDDINE, Petra: *Transnational Migration: Borders, Gender and Global Justice Challenges*. In *Gender and Research*, 2019, 20(1), p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> TKACZYK, Michal et al: *Analýza mediálního pokrytí uprchlické krize (výzkumná zpráva)*. Brno : Masarykova univerzita, 2015. [online]. Available at: <<https://www.hatefree.cz/blo/analzy/1304-analyza-mediálního-pokrytí-uprchlické-krize>>. [quoted on 2021-04-17].

<sup>19</sup> FENGLER, Susanne – KREUTLER, Marcus: *Migration coverage in Europe’s media. A comparative analysis of coverage in 17 countries*. p. 33. [online]. Available at: <<https://www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de/wissenschaftsportal/informationsseiten-zu-studien/studien-2020/stimme-migranten-laute-politik-gespaltene-medien/>>. [quoted on 2021-04-10].

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34 – 35.

few studies which would investigate media coverage of labour emigration and immigration in any systematic way. In an international comparative research about media coverage of migration that we conducted in 2019, Slovakia stands out as the only country where the media reflect labour migration to a certain extent. In the interviews with journalists, labour migration emerged as one of the relevant types of migration. Participants of the research interviews (Slovak journalists from different media outlets) referred to themselves as migrants from the Eastern Slovakia or they spontaneously mentioned labour immigration as a needed step to fill the gap in Slovak labour market. The authors of this international study highlight the differences among three analysed countries, by pointing out that “(...) *In Slovakia, the issue of the labour market and migration-related economics was also strongly present. In Estonia, this issue was much more marginal (...), and in the Czech Republic, notably, the issue was all but absent.*”<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, the quantitative data were also quite supportive for the inclusion of labour migration in the media discourse. When it comes to the analysis of frequently used frames in the selected online and print media content during 4 months (May – August 2018), the frame of “*the situation on labour market*” was the second most occurring frame. Closer inspection of the data suggests that with the exclusion of online media outlets, the frame of the labour market has been the most frequently used frame during the analyzed period<sup>22</sup>.

Among the nationalities that could be identified in the media content, the most dominant ones were people of non-European countries who were strongly linked to the 2015 migration crisis (Syrians, Afghanis), and people from countries such as Ukraine and Serbia who are strongly linked to the labour immigration<sup>23</sup>.

Additionally, Slovak journalists seemed to have a deeper understanding of migration and they had been experienced in this topic even before the beginning of the crisis in Europe<sup>24</sup>. These results suggest that in Slovakia, there could be a more open space for reflection of other types of migration apart from the “*migration crisis 2015*” prism. In other words, there has already been some reflection of labour immigrants in Slovakia and there might be potential to cover other types of migration, too.

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<sup>21</sup> POSPĚCH, Pavel – JUREČKOVÁ Adéla et al: *Exposed: Media coverage of migration in Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia. Comparative report.* Prague : People in Need, 2019, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> CHALUPKOVÁ, Pavlína – HORNÁČKOVÁ, Eliška et al: *Analýza mediálneho pokrývania migrácie slovenskými médiami. Výskumná správa.* Bratislava : Človek v ohrození n.o., 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; POSPĚCH, Pavel – JUREČKOVÁ Adéla et al: *Exposed: Media coverage of migration in Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia. Comparative report.* Prague : People in Need, 2019, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> CHALUPKOVÁ, Pavlína – HORNÁČKOVÁ, Eliška et al: *Analýza mediálneho pokrývania migrácie slovenskými médiami. Výskumná správa.* Bratislava : Človek v ohrození n.o., 2019.

## Methodology: description and frequency analysis

First, we will describe different types of migration and discuss their relevance in the Slovak context, using different data to support our arguments. By doing so, we will answer our first research question: (1) What role does commuting play in the Slovak migration context?

Second, we will focus on (2) the role of commuters in the Slovak media discourse. By doing so, we are rooted in the traditional research area of media and migration, but in a quite unusual way. In Pogliano's sociological paper, she mentions three ways of how researchers cope with this topic: a) focus is primarily given to media as a push factor for emigration, b) via analysis of media constructions of migrants in the host country, c) covering transnational communities and thus supporting integration<sup>25</sup>.

Our approach is primarily inspired by point b), although we will conduct this part of our research from the opposite point of view – commuters from Slovakia will be researched from the perspective of how much the media in their country of origin refer to them absolutely as well as relatively. We will conduct a frequency analysis to analyze the coverage of different types of migration in the Slovak media discourse with data being gathered via the media monitoring programme Newton Media. To compare the reflection of migrants before and after the outbreak of COVID-19, we analyzed the period from March 2018 to September 2020.

Third, we will address the question of (3) possible solutions to balance the (potentially) imbalanced media discourse. Several steps can be taken to achieve more balance in the media content. We will base this part of research on the description of personal experience that the authors of this paper have thanks to the media initiative World between the Lines which since 2015 helps future and current journalists to widen their imagination in global challenges<sup>26</sup>.

A case study approach was used to allow a deeper understanding of imbalances in the mainstream media discourse in one media-and-migration context rather than coping with different media-and-migration contexts with the risk of oversimplification. Such research would also fill the gap in the media and migration research and is therefore very needed, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct such analysis. What is more, Slovakia is a unique case when it comes to commuting and therefore it is an ideal case to analyse its reflection in the media.

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<sup>25</sup> POGLIANO, Andrea: Media, Migration, and Sociology. A Critical Review. In *Sociologica, Italian journal of sociology*, 2017, 1/2017, p. 1 – 2.

<sup>26</sup> SVET MEDZI RIADKAMI. [online]. Available at: <[www.svetmedziriadkami.sk](http://www.svetmedziriadkami.sk)>. [quoted on 2021-04-03].

## Case study: Slovakia and its migration

In this chapter, we attempt to show the relevance of different types of migration in Slovakia. As the report of the International Organization for Migration demonstrates, Slovak labour market is rapidly changing and it is thirsty for a new labour force. CEE countries experience some of the most dramatic population changes – fertility rates fall, and numbers of elderly people as well as life expectancy rise. This means that public spending on healthcare and pensions are expected to increase and social protection systems will inevitably come under pressure. In spite of these data, the report concludes that “*many countries in the subregion are reluctant to embrace immigration as one part of the longer-term solution to impending demographic crises.*”<sup>27</sup>

### *Labour immigration vs emigration in Slovakia*

As we have examined in chapter Three, labour immigration is to some extent reflected by the Slovak media. Slovakia stands out in comparison to the Czech and Estonian media scene in this issue, as our comparative analysis has suggested<sup>28</sup>. However, the data suggest that the overall coverage is still mostly focused on the migration from the Global South. Therefore, to be able to cover any topic in an unbiased and balanced way, it is necessary to clarify which kind of migration is the most relevant and accordingly, which one should be paid the most attention to.

Several lines of evidence suggest that labour immigration is of paramount importance for Slovakia. When it comes to labour immigration, Ukrainians, Serb and Vietnamese people are the top 3 non-EU nationals living in Slovakia (EU nationals in Slovakia comprise of approximately 60 thousands people, while there is 90 thousands of non-EU nationals in Slovakia<sup>29</sup>). When commenting on the significant lack of workforce in Slovak economy, Številová and Kaba argue: “*immigration to Slovakia is (...) significantly economically (labour) motivated*”<sup>30</sup>. To put it into context, there is an increasing number of foreigners since Slovakia entered the EU in 2004<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION: *World migration report 2020*, p. 92. [online]. IOM 2019. Available at: <[https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr\\_2020.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf)> [quoted on 2021-04-03].

<sup>28</sup> POSPĚCH, Pavel – JUREČKOVÁ Adéla et al: *Exposed: Media coverage of migration in Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia. Comparative report*. Prague : People in Need, 2019, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> MINV.SK: *Štatistický prehľad legálnej a nelegálnej migrácie v Slovenskej republike*. p. 8. [online]. 2020 (updated on 26.4.2021). Available at: <[https://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/policia/hranicna\\_a\\_cudzinecka\\_policia/rocenky/rok\\_2020/2020-rocenka-UHCP-SK\\_revid.pdf](https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocenky/rok_2020/2020-rocenka-UHCP-SK_revid.pdf)>. [quoted on 2021-04-15].

<sup>30</sup> ŠTEVULOVÁ, Zuzana – KABA, Daniel: *Monitoring report on Agenda 2030 implementation and migration management in Slovakia (2015 – 2019)*. Ambrela – Platform for Development Organisations, 2021, p. 4 – 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid; INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION: *Migration in Slovakia*. [online]. Available at: <<https://www.iom.sk/en/migration/migration-in-slovakia.html>>. [quoted on 2021-04-03].

However, in relation to the amount of population, the number of incoming foreigners is rather negligible and those foreigners are mostly economic/labour migrants<sup>32</sup> from Ukraine or Serbia, not from the Middle East or African countries.

The same cannot be concluded about labour/economic emigration. As the IOM has established, “(...) for most South-Eastern and Eastern European<sup>33</sup> countries, emigration rather than immigration has been the key feature over recent years and decades, with fairly low levels of immigration compared with other subregions of Europe.”<sup>34</sup> Since 1999, emigration has been increasing constantly in Slovakia. Since 2016, we can observe more stabilised numbers and the emigration has been decreasing. In spite of this, the emigration rate in Slovakia remains still high<sup>35</sup>.

To sum it up, labour migration is an integral part of the international migration. Besides that, there are cases when spatial movement is done without a change of residence. Grenčíková and colleagues describe this type of migration as spatial (intraregional or interregional) commuting<sup>36</sup>. Is this type of migration relevant for Slovakia? The data of Eurostat suggest that Slovakia has the highest share (6,1%) of short-term migrants in the EU<sup>37</sup>. Addressing the first research question, Slovakia stands out as an emigration country and as a “country of commuters” in the international context. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their importance for Slovakia as a region has been uncovered, on what we will elaborate further in the next subchapter.

### *Commuters in Slovakia during COVID-19*

According to an interview that we conducted with a sociologist Michal Vašečka in the summer of 2020 (after the first wave of COVID-19 pandemics), commuters in Slovakia can be seen as follows: those who are living in neighbouring countries close to the borders and work in Slovakia (for example Slovak citizens living in Kittsee or Rajka and working in Bratislava) are no more understood as belonging to the “core of the society” by “ordinary” Slovaks. According to the general perception, these commuters have better living standards and they opportunistically abuse the Slovak economy when needed.

<sup>32</sup> Labour migration can be seen as a subset of economic migration, although some authors distinguish among these two “migrations” according to the motives: while labour migration is solely connected to the vision of a better job, economic migrants desire for better living conditions in general (not only those linked to the workplace). Cited from GREŇČIKOVÁ, Adriana et al: The features of labor emigration from the Slovak Republic. In *Business: Theory and Practice*, 2019, p. 272.

<sup>33</sup> IOM counts Slovakia among Eastern European countries.

<sup>34</sup> INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION: *World migration report 2020*. p. 92. [online]. Available at: <[https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr\\_2020.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf)> [quoted on 2021-04-03].

<sup>35</sup> PŘÍVARA, Andrej: Labour market efficiency and emigration in Slovakia and EU neighbouring countries. In *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 2020, p. 5, 7.

<sup>36</sup> GREŇČIKOVÁ, Adriana et al: The features of labor emigration from the Slovak Republic. In *Business: Theory and Practice*, 2019, p. 272.

<sup>37</sup> EUROSTAT: *Statistics on commuting patterns at regional level*. p. 9. [online]. Available at: <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/50943.pdf>>. [quoted on 2021-04-12].

On the other hand, predominantly non-judgmental perceptions could have been observed when it comes to people with a residence in Slovakia and commuting in other states (for example live-in care workers commuting in short-term cyclical rotas ranging from 2 to 4 weeks). This has changed dramatically with the COVID-19 pandemics and even commuters “*belonging to the core of the society*” were stigmatised as a threat. “*For the first time, ethnic Slovaks had to face challenges that a lot of minorities have to face regularly.*”<sup>38</sup>

Undoubtedly, commuting represents a higher risk of worsening the epidemiological situation in a place of living. However, the way in which commuters were stigmatised from the government and people in their surroundings, e.g. neighbours, brought unprecedented circumstances in the perception of short-term migrants. Vašečka explains that people in Slovakia were largely disciplined (towards anti epidemic measures) during the first wave, and commuters were seen as those trying to “*break the rules of the game*”. The statements of the governments of P. Pellegrini and I. Matovič have further driven the public opinion to extreme positions<sup>39</sup>.

That is why migration and inequality are two highly interconnected topics. Particularly women are vulnerable and they should not be left out of the discourse. A recent study by Leiblfinger and his colleagues has suggested that COVID-19 shed more light on imbalanced power relations via commuting Slovak and Romanian live-in carers in Austria. The authors have argued that dependencies and inequalities were present even before the COVID-19 crisis. It has been established that commuters from CEE are more willing to accept lacking decent labour conditions since they often experienced unemployment and precarious and underpaid working conditions in their country of origin.

For example, borders between work and the private sphere of commuting live-in care workers are often blurred. Additionally, covid-related measures on transnational care arrangements deepened these inequalities substantially and interests of Slovak and Romanian commuters were subordinated to care recipients, recruitment agencies and sending and receiving countries. For instance, during the COVID-19, the rotas were extended (in some cases up to 3 months), because commuters faced lacking possibilities to travel home<sup>40</sup> and the extension was also communicated as a duty towards care recipients in a time of crisis by agencies. Leiblfinger and colleagues argue that care commuters had limited bargaining power and they identified those situations as representations of power imbalances<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> VAŠEČKA, Michal: Phone interview done by the authors of this research paper in 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> It is worth to mention, that in the Slovak context, possibilities to come back at home were linked to the necessity of undergoing isolation in state quarantine facilities which were associated with many controversies, Travelling was less problematic as it usually involved just one border crossing (in contrast to workers from Romania).

<sup>41</sup> LEIBLFINGER, Michael et al: Confronted with COVID-19: Migrant live-in care during the pandemic. In *Global Social Policy*, 2021, p. 1, 3 – 4, 12.



In the same vein, care workers and commuting was one of the main topics of the 15th international Karl Polanyi conference taking part in April 2021. Social anthropologist Petra Ezzedine and sociologist Zuzana Uhde presented their findings on how commuters from Slovakia and Czech Republic have to face unequal treatment in the Western countries. They have also stressed the paradox of borders – although they are open (with the exception of COVID-19), they still allow to push down wages for those care workers who can be easily labeled as inhabitants of lower-income countries and hence willing to accept lacking decent working conditions. Therefore, one of their conclusions was that the cross-border care labour market in Central Europe in fact creates a legal scheme of nationality-based structural inequalities and exclusion. Both researchers also pointed out that during COVID-19, Czech and Slovak commuting care workers were lacking adequate information about the pandemic and they were in a need of safety and sanitary equipment due to their self employed status and informal character of their work in private households<sup>42</sup>.

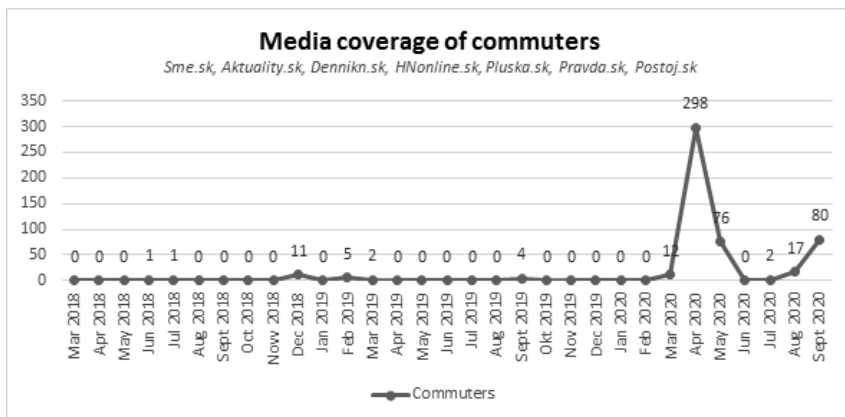
We have mentioned some authors that tried to describe and analyze the situation of Slovak commuters. Findings of these authors suggest that commuters in Central Eastern Europe are a group of people facing several inequalities and with COVID-19, these struggles have intensified even more. What is more, the data suggest that labour migration is more relevant for Slovakia than migration from the Global South. Particularly labour emigration is its most important part. How do the Slovak media reflect the struggles of these short-term migrants?

### *Reflection of commuters by the Slovak media*

When it comes to labour migration, we have mentioned above that this type of migration is reflected by the Slovak media and it is connected with labour immigrants from Ukraine or Serbia that fill the gap of lacking labour force in some sectors of the Slovak economy. However, as data suggest, the public is overwhelmed with migration media content mainly connected to the Global South – which we understand as an imbalance in the media discourse, since the migration from the Global South is practically irrelevant in this context. Turning now to the coverage of commuters, the basic frequency analysis of the term “commuters” (“pendleri” in Slovak) was used to analyse their reflection by the media. It is apparent from the data in Figure 1 that COVID-19 is a turning point in the coverage of commuters. Before March 2020, a negligible amount of media articles was connected to commuting. There is no doubt that substantially increased coverage in April 2020 correlates with restriction measurements for commuters and these events led to increased attention paid by the media.

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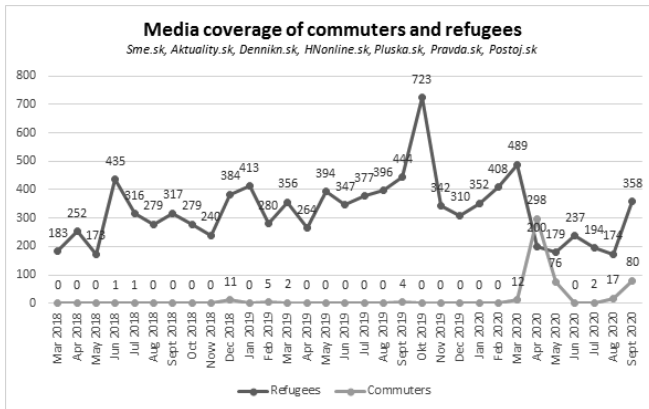
<sup>42</sup> EZZEDDINE, Petra – UHDE, Zuzana: *Care Corridors: Dual Bordering Process of Care Migration in Central Europe*. Presentation at the 15th international Karl Polanyi Conference: The Role of the State in the post-COVID 21st Century. [online]. April 2021.



**Figure 1:** Coverage of commuters in 7 online media outlets (frequency analysis, absolute numbers)  
Source: authors. Data: Newton Media

April 2020 is an important month for other reasons, too. To put these data in context, we conducted the frequency analysis of the term “refugees” (“utečenci” in Slovak) during the same time period. By doing so, we tried to compare both, coverage of migration from the Global South as well as of labour emigration. Figure 2 consists of both terms, and we might say it is quite revealing. Before April 2020, the media covered the Global South migration issues exclusively. This sheds more light on how imbalanced the media discourse is as the numbers of non-EU nationals coming from Global South which we have discussed in subchapter 5.1. were negligible also during the analysed time period.

Has COVID-19 contributed to certain change? Closer inspection of the data shows that April 2020 was the only month when the selected Slovak media focused more on the labour migration than on the migration from the Global South. During the months that followed, the media has again covered the Global South migration issues almost exclusively – in spite of the increased relevance of commuters and their difficulties during COVID-19.

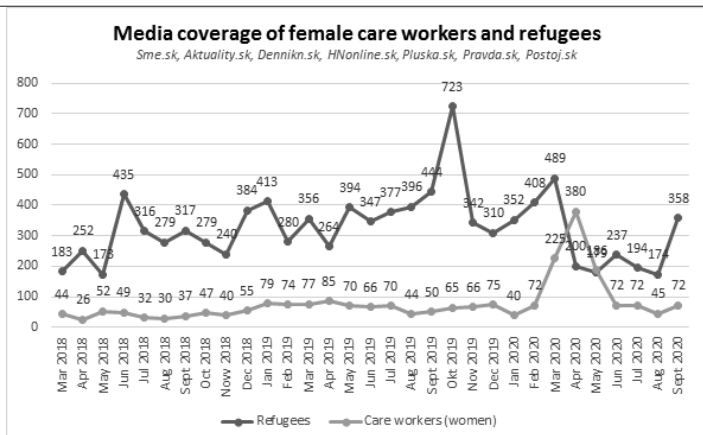


**Figure 2:** Coverage of commuters and refugees in 7 online media outlets (frequency analysis, absolute numbers)

Source: authors. Data: Newton Media

We attempted to show on Figure 2 the imbalances of migration media discourse. Objections can be raised to the fact that the selected term “commuter” is not reasonable to analyze since it has only entered Slovak media discourse during COVID-19. However, we are convinced that exactly this fact is the point of the whole issue. We argue that the media as well as public discourse is supposed to be balanced and reflective to the most relevant issues as much as possible. Therefore, issues related to commuting should have been discussed much earlier than at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. And the term missing from the discussion is thus a symptom of the issue.

However, we attempted to eliminate that by analysing the term “female care workers”, too (“opatrovateľky” in Slovak). The results shown in Figure 3 indicate that the media cover female care workers more frequently in comparison to commuters (they are also commuters, note). Nevertheless, the imbalance within the migration discourse is still present. Once we compare results to the coverage of refugees, the representation of female care workers becomes rather negligible. Similarly to commuters, they “won” over refugees only in April 2020. In May 2020, they received a similar extent of coverage as before.



**Figure 3:** Coverage of female care workers and refugees in 7 online media outlets (frequency analysis, absolute numbers)  
 Source: authors. Data: Newton Media

Together these results provide important insights into Slovak media migration discourse. We tried to analyze it while using frequency analysis of the terms “*refugees*” (representing migration from the Global South) and “*commuters*” and “*female care workers*” (referring to labour emigration). As argued above, we have identified imbalances in coverage of migration in Slovakia since the discourse is strongly focused on only one type of migration. The one which might be considered less relevant, if we compare it with more than 23 thousands of commuting female care workers<sup>43</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a turning point to some extent: commuters are more vocal suddenly and the travel restrictions have highlighted the importance of commuters for both, sending as well as receiving countries.

### How to cover migration in a more balanced way?

Media balance and bias are complex concepts whose explanation is beyond the scope of this paper. However, balanced media content is strongly interconnected with the relevance<sup>44</sup>, what leads us to pointing out that labour (e)migration is substantially underreported. Hence, in this chapter we will discuss possible solutions to the current

<sup>43</sup> SLOVAK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES: *Slovenské opatrovatelky v Rakúsku*. [online]. Available at: <[https://www.sav.sk/index.php?doc=services-news&source\\_no=20&news\\_no=8040](https://www.sav.sk/index.php?doc=services-news&source_no=20&news_no=8040)>. [quoted on 2021-04-17]. According to some other sources, it could be even 30 thousands, especially if we include male care workers. SUDOR, Karol: *Bojuje za naše opatrovatelky v Rakúsku: Zarábajú málo a v čase korony nemajú nárok na odškodnenie*. [online]. In *www.dennikn.sk*. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/1854266/bojuje-za-nase-opatrovatelky-v-rakusku-zarabaju-malo-a-v-case-korony-nemaju-narok-na-odsodnenie/>>. [quoted on 2021-04-17].

<sup>44</sup> STARKEY, Guy: *Balance and bias in journalism: representation, regulation and democracy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 17 – 19.

situation. First of all, our simple analysis does not cover the framing of commuters. Therefore we do not know exactly whether the media refer to commuters or care workers as migrants. Be it one way or another, we suggest that widening of global imagination is a necessary condition to cover migration in a more balanced way. How can the media widen their global imagination?

Migration is one of the many global challenges we face in a globalised world. And as such we do not perceive it as neither positive nor negative. Rather, we take migration as a socioeconomic phenomenon that passes across national borders, due to what these borders become less relevant from a discourse perspective. And that is why we argue that the global outlook should be adopted to offer more accurate picture of the reality.

Because of the globalized world, we are in much closer contact with peoples and countries in its other parts. We believe global journalism methodology could be an answer to coverage of migration and other global challenges. As we noted in one of our research papers, it broadens the boundaries of our understanding of the reality and moves it to a new level (not meant as a higher or lower level, just different). The universal dichotomy of a domestic versus foreign outlooks is contested and relations-based global outlook is adopted<sup>45</sup>.

Objections can be made that Slovak commuting is a domestic topic for the Slovak media and foreign one once French media would report about Slovak commuters. Undoubtedly, these are two relevant points of view. What we have suggested is that a brighter picture would be given once a global outlook is applied.

Increasing number of commuters (not only) in Slovakia has been connected to the world by open borders and/or cooperation within the EU and other neighbouring countries. The interconnections can be also seen between commuters in the EU and other migrants in different places of living, even far from Europe, including countries of Global South. One definition of migration says that it is a “*reaction of humanity on unequal distribution of resources, services and opportunities*”<sup>46</sup>

A journalist with a global outlook would therefore refer to commuters as migrants while looking at their motivation to migrate (which is generally the above mentioned lack of “*resources, services and opportunities*” in their country of origin). Once putting the motivations in the context, we can observe that they are very often similar to motivations of (rather negatively perceived) “*economic immigrants*” and migrants in general. Details of individual stories are different, but the context and circumstances are often similar with migrants in the other parts of the world.

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<sup>45</sup> IVANIČ, Peter: Community in Media Seen through Global Outlook. In SÁMELOVÁ, Anna et al. (eds): *FENOMÉN 2020: Komunita v mediálnom priestore*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2020, p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> JENÍČEK, Vladimír – FOLTÝN, Jaroslav: Globální problémy světa v ekonomických souvislostech. Praha: C. H. Běc, 2010. Cited from: GREŇKOVÁ, Adriana et al. The features of labor emigration from the Slovak Republic. In *Business: Theory and Practice*, 2019, p. 272.

Are there any benefits of reporting about commuters from the global perspective? More balanced and unbiased reporting stemming from such coverage can lead to more accurate understanding of the reality – by journalists as well as the public. This result is of paramount importance (not only) in CEE countries. The CEE region is mostly a post-communist one and media researchers understand the decrease of media bias as an indicator of successful democratic transition. On the other hand, the negative consequences of media bias are very well known: ideologic as well as affective polarisation of society, political choices based on slanted perceiving of reality and threatening of democracy in general<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, the public would have increased access to unslanted information that could firstly, strengthen democracy and secondly, it could tackle polarisation and build bridges across social cleavages that often stem from misunderstanding of migration and other complex phenomena.

### *World between the lines: solutions & suggestions*

How should we, being journalists and researchers at the same time, react to aforementioned characteristics of the coverage of migration in Slovak media? Let it be? Or follow our scientific curiosity accompanied with the urge to open and analyse issues relevant for the public? Especially if we tend to agree with the hypothesis that more complex coverage on so-called controversial issues may lead to lower levels of polarisation in society? We opted for the latter.

Thanks to financial support of the European Union project we coordinate in Slovakia<sup>48</sup>, we were able to take several paths to test our assumption in practice. All those paths had, in final, led us to writing this paper, even though their results, effects and efficiency are just preliminary and would require much further scrutiny. At the moment they could serve as the examples of good practice, and a possible starting point for further analysis.

What have we done? At first we have, in cooperation with newsroom of *Hospodárske noviny*, Slovak broadsheet<sup>49</sup> and one of major newsportal<sup>50</sup> in Slovakia, produced series of 15 stories published in weeks between 27th of April and 25th of May<sup>51</sup>, both in print and online. Series consisting of analytical articles, studio and written interviews, and reportages in the field, got significant reach outperforming the website average content in general, and content on migration in particular.

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<sup>47</sup> CASTRO-HERRERO, Laia et al.: Parties, Ideology, and News Media in Central-Eastern and Western Europe. In *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures*, 2016, 30(3), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> “I am European: Migration Stories & Facts for the 21st Century” (CSO-LA/2019/410-270-MONDO).

<sup>49</sup> Broadsheet *Hospodárske noviny* is third largest national daily in Slovakia, with daily sales slightly above 9500 issues on average (data taken from the Office for verification of circulation of printed media. ABC SR: Archív výsledkov. [online]. Available at: <<http://www.abcsr.sk/aktualne-vysledky/archiv-vysledkov/>>. [quoted on 2021-04-15].)

<sup>50</sup> Newportal is eight largest newportal in Slovakia, with around two millions of real users (data taken from the Association of Internet Advertising. IAB SLOVAKIA: Dáta IABmonitor online. [online]. Available at: <<https://monitor.iabslovakia.sk/>>. [quoted on 2021-04-15].)

<sup>51</sup> List of stories published: <[bit.ly/list-of-stories-labour-migration-hn](http://bit.ly/list-of-stories-labour-migration-hn)>.

To put it into perspective of our previous analysis – see Figure 1 – we can observe that our content covered more than 13 percent share of commuters coverage in researched media in May 2020 (10 of 76; 13.15 % – number is cleaned of stories published in print, which were not part of our frequency analysis). This share was higher than the share of the whole newportal among researched ones which was only 5.17 percent in terms of page views. It suggested there was a space and opportunity to widen the coverage of migration from this angle relevant for our society.

Another attempt to open the issue in the public were two podcasts at newportal *Tyzden.sk* published on 15th of June<sup>52</sup> and 27th of July<sup>53</sup> 2020. It was published as one of the episodes of “*Migračný kompas*” (Migratory Compass), a series of podcasts related to migration and integration prepared by non-governmental organisation Human Rights League.

In the first podcast, we have introduced findings of our comparative analysis of migration coverage in Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovakia and put it into the context with COVID-19 pandemic. In the latter of two podcasts we spoke with sociologist Lýdia Marošiová, who has with our support prepared an analysis on how young people in Slovakia perceive migration – and whether they imagine their friends or relatives commuting or even permanently migrating, as migrants. Although we did not include *Tyzden.sk* into our frequency analysis, we can still see that in June 0 and in July 2 media outputs covering commuters were published in researched media (see Figure 1). It suggests that even a small contribution can make a difference.

We decided to follow this pattern, and continued to support journalists and creation of media or media-related outputs covering this underreported perspective of movements of people around the planet. We have financially and expertly supported a series of stories on labour and mixed migration published in *Hospodárske noviny* between July 2020 and January 2021. We have also prepared an explanatory video on global migration from the point of view of Slovak citizens<sup>54</sup>. And we have also financially supported a nonprofit *Bratislava Policy Institute* which has prepared a small project covering Slovak commuters, aiming to shed more light on the stories of commuters who are an important part of our society. Project and its outcome – series of videos and social media campaign – was not realised, yet, so we cannot measure any effect, yet.

<sup>52</sup> IVANIČ, Peter – CHALUPKOVÁ, Pavína: .migračný kompas: Ľudia medzi riadkami. Rola médií v migračnej téme. [online]. In *www.tyzden.sk*. Available at: <<https://www.tyzden.sk/spolocnost/65599/migracny-kompas-ludia-medzi-riadkami-rola-medii-v-migracnej-teme/>> [quoted on 2021-04-15].

<sup>53</sup> IVANIČ, Peter – MAROŠIOVÁ, Lýdia: .migračný kompas: Ako mladí ľudia vnímajú migráciu? [online]. In *www.tyzden.sk*. Available at: <<https://www.tyzden.sk/spolocnost/66550/migracny-kompas-ako-mladi-ludia-vnimaju-migraciju/?ref=kat>> [quoted on 2021-04-15].

<sup>54</sup> LUPPOVÁ, Stanka – ČERNÁK, Blažej: Stand-up komička Nasi o migrácii (múdre video HN & Svet medzi riadkami). [online]. In *www.youtube.com*. Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0n48ECSNh4&t=110s&ab\\_channel=SvetMedziRiadkami](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0n48ECSNh4&t=110s&ab_channel=SvetMedziRiadkami)> [quoted on 2021-04-15].

## Summary

The main goal of this paper was to determine if and how the media migration discourse in Slovakia changed after the outbreak of the COVID-19. We have analysed the media discourse by describing the most relevant migration types in this region, by analysing the extent of coverage of commuters in the media and finally, by discussing strategies on how to balance the imbalanced media discourse in this topic.

The findings of our analysis suggest that before COVID-19, migration was almost exclusively associated with the refugees and migrants from Middle East or African countries. The perspective of short-term migrants was rather (if analysing the term “*female care workers*”) or completely (if analysing the term “*commuters*”) missing in the analysed Slovak media before the pandemic.

After the difficulties commuters had to face during the COVID-19, the media started to pay attention to these migrants. However, the migration from the Global South countries has dominated even during COVID-19 in the analysed media content. As we have discussed above, emigration and commuting are the most relevant types of migration in Slovakia and therefore, the Slovak migration discourse is substantially imbalanced.

We have further argued that a balanced media coverage is of paramount importance because of its potential to strengthen democracy via informed decision-making of the citizens as well as to build bridges across the majority and migrating minority. How? We are convinced that incorporation of commuters into migration-media discourse could sensitize the public toward migrants in general and the so-called “*economic*” migrants in particular.

Once the migration discourse in the media is more balanced, the global imagination of the public brings a potential to widen and understand that the motivations of commuters and other (economic) migrants are similar in many ways, independent of the country of their origin. We have further argued that these goals can be achieved by the adoption of the global journalism methodology.

In addition, we suggest that there are several possibilities of how to improve the current situation and we have taken several steps to do it: we have supported different organisations and media houses financially to cover the fates of commuters during COVID-19 and we have also contributed to the media discourse by our own media content while focusing on commuters. Last but not least, we have organized different workshops in order to widen the global imagination of journalists in the topic of migration.

To sum it up, giving a voice to commuters is the first important step to balance the media discourse in this field. We believe that the public sensitized towards migrants in general would be a natural outcome of this process. Since the study was limited to



quantitative and descriptive methods, it was not possible to assess the framing in the media discourse. Therefore it remains unknown if the Slovak media framed commuters as migrants before or even after the COVID-19 outbreak.

In spite of its limitations, our research paper offers valuable insights into the understanding of different types of migration in the migration-and-media context in Slovakia. Natural progression of this work is to analyse the media discourse with qualitative methods while focusing on framing or speakers in the media content or interviews with journalists about migration.

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