British Media Representations of EU Migrants Before and After the EU Referendum

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Abstract

One of the most topical issues in British media and political discourses both before and after the 2016 EU referendum was European migration to the UK, which caused concern about mass migration and the potential loss of national sovereignty. This paper analyses discursive representations of EU migrants in the British press between 2013 and 2018. The corpus-assisted analysis traces the linguistic devices employed in the press in reference to European migrants and migration within the EU in the pre-referendum (2013–2015) and post-referendum periods (2016–2018), with a focus on the different patterns employed by the left- and right-wing newspapers. The analysis also aims to uncover discursive differences in terms of how Europeans are represented compared with the British. The data represent two specialised news corpora, each containing 500 editorials, opinion pieces and news reports from five mainstream British newspapers. The study combines corpus-assisted analysis with discourse-analytical methods to investigate ideological bias in the British press.

Key words: *Brexit, British press, EU migrants, ideological bias, national identity*

1. Introduction

The relationship between the UK and the European Union (EU) and the question of migration within Europe are two issues that have attracted a great deal of attention in Britain throughout the past 30 years (cf. Hardt-Mautner,1995; Charteris-Black, 2006; Koller et al., 2019). In 2015, the then Prime Minister and Conservative Party leader, David Cameron (2010–2016), made an election promise to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. On 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU – a decision that has been described as one of the most important and most disastrous policy decisions in the history of contemporary Britain. In this regard, Saunders (2016, p. 318) asserts: 'Cameron has presided over the biggest policy failure by a British government since the 1930s. The referendum has destroyed his premiership and set off an earthquake beneath British politics'. As of 2023, the UK is the only country to have left the EU. The negotiation of the terms of departure and the future of UK-EU relations took approximately five years and caused much controversy in British political, media, and public discourses. The original

withdrawal date was postponed three times; it was not until 31 January 2020 that both the EU and UK parliaments ratified the withdrawal agreement. Parnell (2022) rightly sums up: 'the withdrawal process proved lengthy, complex and turbulent', and what's more, 'the effects of Brexit rage on and will continue for years to come'. In addition to much controversy in public discourses, a long and complex process of negotiations with the EU and withdrawal from the EU, as well as economic consequences for the UK, Brexit has been (discursively) constructed as a crisis – a phenomenon that can be seen, for instance, in the EU referendum campaigns (Bennett, 2019). Zappettini & Krzyżanowski (2019, p. 381) interpret 'Brexit as a "critical juncture" in which different historical and contingent discursive nexuses and trajectories have been at play'. For further discussion of Brexit as a social and political crisis, see also Zappettini & Krzyżanowski (2021).

This paper's major focus is the media representation of European migrants and migration within the EU in the pre-referendum (2013–2015) and post-referendum periods (2016–2018), with a particular focus on the discursive patterns employed by left- and right-wing mainstream British newspapers. The data employed in this analysis represent two specialised news corpora, each containing 500 articles from five British national newspapers (see Section 3). In terms of methodology, the study combines corpus-assisted analysis with discourse-analytical methods to investigate ideological bias in the British press. This paper aims to contribute to the ever-growing wealth of research on migration discourse (van Dijk, 1991; Musolff, 2015; Taylor, 2018) in general, and the British press (Baker et al., 2008; Hart, 2010; Islentyeva 2020; Taylor, 2014, 2021, 2022) and Brexit (Charteris-Black, 2019; Koller et al. 2019; Islentyeva 2019; Parnell 2022, 2023; Zappettini, 2019) in particular. As such, this study complements the papers in this special issue by providing some insights into the discursive constructions of EU migrant in the British press in times of crisis, namely the political upheaval of Brexit in the UK.

In what follows, Section 2 provides a historical overview of UK-EU relations, elaborating on the term reluctant European; it also discusses the importance of the economic benefits the UK enjoyed as a result of its pre-Brexit relations with Europe and explores popular concerns regarding migration within the EU. Section 3 introduces the corpora that have been analysed in this study and highlights the advantages of employing a mixed-method approach. Section 4 provides the results of a comparative corpus-based analysis and discusses them within the context of Brexit. Section 5 summarises the major findings of the study, offers some suggestions for future research trajectories, especially in the current era of new crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Finally, some implications beyond the realm of academia are briefly discussed in order to make the research valuable for the general public.

2. Background: The EU, European Migration, EU Referendum and Brexit

Britain initially declined the offer to become a member of the EU and was neither involved in the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, nor its subsequent iteration, the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 (Jones, 2017, p. 13). It was not until 1973 that Britain finally joined the EEC, the predecessor to the EU, following two unsuccessful

applications in 1961 and 1967, which were vetoed by the French President Charles de Gaulle.

The lack of British involvement in the EU until the 1970s contributed to the creation of the label reluctant European, which has frequently been used to describe the UK. Britain has also earned this label due to the British not being fully committed to the European project. However, Jones (2017, p. 126) argues that this label does not consider a British vision for the EU, which is mostly oriented towards the Common Market. Islentyeva & Dunkel's (2022) study of ten prime ministers' (PMs) speeches given at the annual Conservative Party Conference from 1945 to 2020 traces the representation of UK-EU relations and identifies systematic evidence of the fundamental importance of economic benefits afforded the UK by its membership of the EU. The most frequent and concrete examples of membership benefits were common economic policies and access to the Common Market, as cited by British Conservative PMs. For other member states, both economic and political integration were considered to be of importance. The Treaty on European Union, signed at Maastricht in 1992, gave more powers to the EU institutions, especially the European Parliament, and transformed the European Community into the European Union, with the new name reflecting the evolution from an economic to a political union. A new stage in the process of European integration was announced, which initiated the eventual introduction of a single currency, as well as common foreign and security policies (Jones, 2017, p. 31). This treaty eventually caused tensions between those states that sought deeper integration and other that were keen to retain a greater degree of national control; for example, Britain, Denmark and Sweden opted out of joining the euro (Jones, 2017, p. 58).

Another major concern for Britain and other wealthier member states has been migration. Free movement of people is one of the four freedoms of the EU, along with free movement of goods, services and capital, which naturally applies to all of its member states. The EU's expansion to the south in the 1980s (when Greece, Spain and Portugal joined) heralded 'concerns about economic migrants – people leaving poorer countries in search of jobs in the wealthier member states' (Jones, 2017, p. 19; emphasis added). 2004 saw the most significant expansion of the EU in its history in terms of both territory and population. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and two Mediterranean island states (Cyprus and Malta) joined the EU in 2004 (Jones, 2017, p. 25). Transitional restrictions were imposed for five years until 2011, due to concerns about migration from these countries to the "older" EU states (EU15). Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 as part of Eastern enlargement. The UK and some other EU states likewise imposed employment restrictions on Romanian and Bulgarian workers, which were not lifted until 2014. The Pre-Referendum Corpus features articles that focus on the lifting of these restrictions for Bulgarians and Romanians in January 2014.

The enlargement of the EU and the increased mobility of its citizens within its territory made European migration to the UK one of the most hotly debated issues in Britain. Immigration was also one of the key issues in the 2005 general election campaigns of the political right (Charteris-Black, 2006). The 2010 and 2015 election campaigns of both the Conservative and Labour parties were centred on (European) migration, as well as asylum policies in relation to the increased number of asylum seekers in 2015 caused primarily by interrelated

wars in Syria, Libya, and Iraq (cf. Krzyżanowski, 2020). Issues regarding national sovereignty, freedom of movement, immigration and border control (Saunders, 2016, p. 320) became so acute that the then prime minister David Cameron (2010–2016) made an election promise to hold an EU membership referendum. Although Cameron officially represented the Remain campaign, his rhetoric, which was built on the myth of British exceptionalism, clashed with the prospect of the UK's continued membership of the EU 'due to contrasting values, and along with his Eurosceptic credentials, ultimately left a weak foundation for the Remain campaign in 2016' (Bolt, 2022) – see also Wodak (2016) and Islentyeva & Dunkel (2022).

The referendum was conducted on 23 June 2016. Approximately 72.2 per cent of the eligible electorate (33.5 million British citizens) voted, with 51.9 per cent opting to leave the EU (EU Referendum Results 2016). Cameron subsequently resigned, to be succeeded by Theresa May (2016–2019), who triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty in March 2017, giving the UK and the EU two years to agree on an exit deal. After twice postponing the deadline after failing to reach an agreement, Theresa May also resigned in 2019. She was replaced by Boris Johnson, who had campaigned for "Leave" and considered the vote in favour of Brexit an "independence day" for Britain. The deadline was extended once again, and both the EU and UK parliaments ratified the withdrawal agreement on 31 January 2020, launching a transition period that ended on 31 December 2020.

3. Methodological Framework: Data and a Mixed-Method Approach

Two comparable news corpora comprise the data used for this study: the Pre-Referendum Corpus contains 500 articles published between 2013 and 2015, while the Post-Referendum Corpus is comprised of 500 articles from 2016–2018. The first corpus is representative of the media's attitude towards European migration prior to the EU membership referendum, at a time when Brexit was not yet being extensively discussed. In fact, the word Brexit itself occurs just twice in this corpus. The second corpus provides insight into the discussion of migration within Europe starting from 1 January 2016, UK-EU negotiations following the referendum and Brexit. Both corpora contain different types of articles, including editorials, opinion pieces and news reports. In the Pre-Referendum Corpus, news reports comprise 70 per cent of the data, while the rest consists of editorials and opinion pieces. In the Post-Referendum Corpus, the division into text types is more balanced: around 50 per cent of the data is comprised of news reports, while the other 50 per cent is divided evenly between editorials and opinion pieces. Tables 1 and 2 provide metadata for the Pre-Referendum and Post-Referendum Corpora, respectively. For a more detailed discussion of the corpora in question, refer to Islentyeva (2020, p. 40–44).

In terms of methodology, the study combines corpus-linguistic and discourse analytical methods. There are also a growing number of studies and publications (Baker, 2006; Partington et at., 2013; Taylor & Marchi, 2018) that successfully combine these two methods in different ways. Corpus-linguistic methods are employed in order to trace any recurrent linguistic patterns in both

news corpora that cannot be identified via the close reading of a limited number of selected articles.

Time period	1 January 2013– 31 December 2015
Corpus size	335,906 tokens 500 articles (evenly distributed between five newspapers)
Newspapers	Left-wing subcorpus: *The Guardian & The Observer, The Daily Mirror*
	Right-wing subcorpus: *The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mail, The Sun*
Major themes	EU migration, illegal immigration, asylum policies
Types of articles	Editorials (15%), opinion pieces (15%), news reports (70%)
Newspaper sections	UK news, European and EU news, politics, immigration & asylum, business & finance

Table 1. Metadata for the Pre-Referendum Corpus (2013–2015)

Time period	1 January 2016– 31 December 2018
Corpus size	386,393 tokens 500 articles (evenly distributed between five newspapers)
Newspapers	Left-wing subcorpus: *The Guardian & The Observer, The Daily Mirror*
	Right-wing subcorpus: *The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mail, The Sun*
Major themes	EU migration and Brexit, illegal immigration, asylum policies
Types of articles	Editorials (25%), opinion pieces (25%), news reports (50%)
Newspaper sections	UK news, European and EU news, politics, EU referendum, immigration & asylum, business & finance

Table 2. Metadata for the Post-Referendum Corpus (2016–2018)

A discourse analysis in turn provides insight into various levels of media discourses, primarily employing analyses of semantic domains and metaphorical patterns. The discourse-analytical method is complemented by a

profound knowledge of the current social and political climate. In the case of this particular study, an understanding of the current socio-political situation in the UK regarding Europe, migration within the EU, the historical development of UK–EU relationship and Brexit are all essential (see Section 2). Finally, the key goal of this study is to reveal ideological biases rooted in the political stance of the given newspapers and the discourses (re)produced by them.

The major focus of this study is the (micro)diachronic change in use of the lemma *migrant* and its collocates in differently politically-oriented newspapers. In order to trace this shift, a distinctive collexeme analysis (Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004) is applied to the direct left-hand collocates of the lemma *migrant*, using the R-package *Collostructions* (Flach, 2017). Distinctive collexeme analysis was designed to investigate 'pairs of semantically similar grammatical constructions and the lexemes that occur in them' (Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004, p. 97). In the case of our analysis, collocations such *EU migrants* or *skilled migrants* are regarded as constructions, and distinctive collexeme analysis is applied to the lists of collocates extracted from the two corpora under investigation. The collocate *EU* has been identified as the most frequent collocate of the lemma *migrant* in both corpora. This analysis is especially insightful as it shows which words exhibit a stronger preference for the lemma *migrant* in the post-referendum period as opposed to the pre-referendum period, which is in its turn indicative of (micro)diachronic changes in the use of this term and the broader discourses constructed around it. As a next step, the identified collocates are investigated via a concordance analysis in the Post-Referendum Corpus; particular attention is paid to the collocates that are indicative of left- and right-wing ideologies. The collocates are divided into relevant semantic groups. Finally, a collexeme analysis is applied to the direct right-hand collocates of the pair *British* and *EU* in order to demonstrate how the press constructs British identity within the context of European migration to the UK (cf. Islentyeva & Abdel Kafi, 2021).

4. Corpus-based Analysis: Findings and Discussion

The term RASIM, which stands for refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants, was initially introduced by Baker (2007) and later analysed in a number of corpus-based studies (Baker et al., 2008; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Taylor, 2014; Islentyeva, 2018, 2020). The identities of RASIM are primarily constructed by those who possess direct access to and control over the media, such as editors, journalists, presidents and prime ministers, other politicians, and public figures who are frequently given a voice and platform in the media (van Dijk, 1991; Baker, 2006). The studies conducted by van Dijk (1991), Baker & McEnery (2005), Hart (2010) and Musolff (2015) have analysed the discursive representations of RASIM in the British media. The present study focuses on the use of the term *migrant(s)* in the British press, as this term has been identified as the one that occurs most frequently out of all of the RASIM terms in the corpora analysed in this study.

Table 3 provides the raw and normalised frequencies per 10,000 tokens of the lemma MIGRANT in five sections of the two corpora under investigation. The key aim of the analysis is to trace (micro)diachronic changes to the discursive representation of migrants before and after the EU membership

referendum. The word *migrant(s)* occurs 1,214 times in the Pre-Referendum Corpus and 1,106 times in the Post-Referendum Corpus. Its use is thus significantly more frequent in the pre-referendum period ($\chi 2$= 29.44, df = 1, p<0.00001). There are also quantitative differences in terms of how the term *migrant(s)* is used by the left-wing press in the pre-referendum period compared to in the post-referendum period. Both *The Guardian* and *The Mirror* use it markedly less frequently; the quantitative disparity might be explained by the tendency of the left-wing press to shift the focus of attention away from migrants by using other unrelated terms, such as *nationals, citizens* and *workers*. A similar quantitative discrepancy is seen in the use of the word *migrant(s)* by *The Sun*. However, there are no marked changes in the frequency of this word in *The Mail* and *The Telegraph;* its use is still high in the post-referendum period.

Corpus	Subcorpus	Raw frequencies	Normalised frequencies
Pre-Referendum Corpus (2013−2015)	*The Guardian + The Observer*	286	38.63
	The Mirror	172	28.67
	The Mail	341	38.2
	The Telegraph	267	33.42
	The Sun	148	45.22
Post-Referendum Corpus (2016−2018)	*The Guardian + The Observer*	187	20.61
	The Mirror	129	18.52
	The Mail	303	36.44
	The Telegraph	280	40.59
	The Sun	207	29.96

Table 3. Raw and normalised frequencies of the lemma MIGRANT

4.1 Distinctive Collexeme Analysis

A comparative analysis of the typical collocates of the term *migrant* provides better insight into the differences and similarities in terms of how migrants are represented before and after the referendum. Tables 4 and 5 provide the results of a distinctive collexeme analysis (Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004) applied to the list of direct left-hand collexemes/collocates of the word *migrant(s)*. This analysis identifies which collocates exhibit a stronger preference for *migrant(s)* in the Post-Referendum Corpus (Table 4) as opposed to the Pre-Referendum Corpus (Table 5). Both tables contain information on observed and expected frequencies, collostructional strength and statistical significance. Collostructional strength is measured using the log-likelihood test (Oakes, 1998, p. 42). In terms of statistical significance, *** is significant at p < 0.001, ** is significant at p <0.01, and * is significant at p<0.05. The last column of the tables indicates whether a collocate is shared by both corpora.

The migrants' legality of status and their qualifications appear to be the two most significant features identifying migrants, as indicated by the most typical direct collocates of *migrant(s)* in the post-referendum period (Table 4). Adjectives such as *illegal (74), legal (6),* and *unauthorised (6)* belong to the semantic domain the legality of status. The domain qualification is represented by a set of adjectives ranging from *low-skilled* (16) and *lower-skilled* (3) to *skilled* (17) and *high-skilled* (14); *medium-skilled* (1) and *unskilled* (5) were also identified as collocates of *migrant(s)* in the post-referendum period, but they are among the less salient collocates and as such are not listed in Table 4. Significantly, the collocates with more negative prosody, *illegal* and *low-skilled,* are the most salient collocates of *migrant(s)* in the post-referendum period.

Collocate	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Collostructional strength	Significance	Collocate shared by the Pre-Referendum Corpus
low-skilled	16	9.5	11.18	***	Yes
economic	24	15.8	10.07	**	Yes
skilled	17	10.5	9.61	**	Yes
illegal	74	59.4	8.67	**	Yes
legal	6	3.2	7.75	**	No
unauthorised	6	3.2	7.75	**	No
young	5	2.6	6.46	*	No
high-skilled	4	2.1	5.16	*	No
EEA	3	1.6	3.87	*	No
lower-skilled	3	1.6	3.87	*	No

Table 4. MIGRANT Left-hand collocates attracted to MIGRANT in the Post-Referendum Corpus (2016–2018)

Collocate	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Collostructional strength	Significance	Collocate shared by the Post-Referendum Corpus
European	41	25.6	19.21	***	Yes
Romanian	8	3.8	12	***	No
Bulgarian	15	15.8	10.07	**	Yes
cheap	10	5.2	9.58	**	Yes
new	21	13.3	9.06	**	Yes
Union	6	2.8	8.98	**	No
temporary	5	2.4	7.48	**	No
Roma	5	2.4	7.48	**	No
foreign	5	2.4	7.48	**	No
legitimate	4	1.9	5.98	*	No

Table 5. Left-hand collocates attracted to MIGRANT in the Pre-Referendum Corpus (2013–2015)

The relevance of the domains legality of status and qualifications for the post-referendum period becomes even more evident when we take a further look at the most salient collocates of *migrant(s)* in the pre-referendum period (Table 5). The legal domain is represented by just one collocate, *legitimate (4),* while the domain of qualifications is absent from the list of most salient collocates. In the Pre-Referendum Corpus, the most typical collocates of *migrant(s)* include *European* (41), *new* (21), *Bulgarian* (15), *Romanian* (8), *Roma* (5) and *Union* (6). Most of the expanded concordances containing these collocates describe individuals coming from Eastern Europe; the adjective *European* (41) co-occurs with the adjective *Eastern* 15 times. The adjective *new* (21) is likewise used as a description of migrants who come to the UK from the Eastern European countries that joined the EU from 2004 onwards. As discussed in Section 2, 2004 saw the largest expansion of the EU in its history in terms of both territory and population: ten *new* countries joined the EU that year. Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU as part of the so-called "Eastern enlargement" in 2007. The enlargement of the EU and the increased movement of Eastern Europeans within Europe are two phenomena that have been widely discussed within British political and media discourses over the years. 2014 saw the termination of employment restrictions for Romanian and Bulgarian workers in the UK; so much of the focus in the British press in 2013 and 2014 was on individuals coming from Bulgaria and Romania. The Pre-Referendum Corpus contains articles that discuss the lifting of work restrictions for Bulgarians and Romanians, which explains the high frequency of collocates like *Bulgarian, Romanian* and *Roma* (see Table 5):

(1) David Cameron is facing a rebellion from inside the government over plans to allow *an unlimited number of Romanian and Bulgarian* migrants to move to Britain from next year. (*The Telegraph,* news report, 1 December 2013; emphasis added)

(2) *Thousands of Bulgarians and Romanians* 'plan to flood UK in 2014' as employment restrictions relax. (*The Mail*, news report; 27 January 2013 emphasis added)

Example (1) contains the collocations *Romanian and Bulgarian migrants* in the context of the removal of employment restrictions. A concordance analysis has identified the same discursive patterns of quantification and the application of WATER/LIQUID metaphors in reference to the terms *Romanians* and *Bulgarians*, as shown in Example (2). Eastern Europeans travelling from these countries were represented by the right-wing press as undesirable jobseekers coming to the UK in unlimited numbers (cf. Islentyeva, 2018, 2020, pp. 69–71).

4.2 Discursive patterns in relation to EU migrants in the right-wing press

This section provides a deeper contextual analysis of the collocation *EU migrant(s); EU* has been identified as the most frequent collocate of *migrant(s)* in both of the corpora under investigation. In the Post-Referendum Corpus, the collocation *EU migrant(s)* occurs more frequently in the right-wing subcorpus (120 matches), which includes 19 occurrences in *The Sun,* 59 matches in *The*

Mail, and 42 matches in *The Telegraph*. There were 23 occurrences in *The Mirror* and 38 matches in *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

The Sun, The Mail, and *The Telegraph* do not construct EU migrants exclusively as a threat to British society or as a burden on the social and economic systems of the UK (Islentyeva 2018; 2020, p. 71–74); instead, the right-wing newspapers focus their attention on migrants' job qualifications. Similar to the most salient collocates of *migrants* (see Table 4), the collocation *EU migrants* also co-occurs with adjectives such as *unskilled, low(er)-skilled, skilled* and *high-skilled*. Importantly, most of adjectives employed by the right-wing press describe EU migrants as *unskilled* and *low-skilled*. Table 6 provides a KWIC concordance containing the collocation *unskilled/low-skilled EU migrants* extracted from the Post-Referendum Corpus. Only two examples containing the collocations *unskilled/low-skilled EU migrants* have been identified in the left-wing press – one of these examples is an indirect quotation of the Tory Brexit Secretary:

> (3) It will be 'years and years' before Britain shuts the door on *low-skilled EU migrants*, the *Tory Brexit Secretary* has said. (*The Mirror,* news report, 21 February 2017; emphasis added)

It is worth highlighting that the right-wing press also appears to acknowledge that European migration is a source of skilled, professional labour that has the potential to positively contribute to the British economy. Nevertheless, both right-wing tabloids, *The Sun* and *The Mail*, draw a clear line between the positive effects of *skilled workers* and *unskilled/low-skilled migrants*, therefore deliberately constructing two distinct groups, with the latter represented in a negative light and as highly undesirable, as seen in Table 5 and Examples (4) and (5):

> (4) It is not racist to argue that we need a system of immigration controls that *reduces the number of unskilled EU migrants* coming to this country while *keeping many skilled workers*. (*The Mail,* editorial, 2 December 2016; emphasis added)
>
> (5) The best news is that we still have *a steady flow of skilled EU workers* arriving to a certain job offer. That's exactly what we should aim for. Brexit doesn't mean we will not need to *import the brightest and best* the world can offer us. (*The Sun,* editorial, 1 December 2017; emphasis added)

Example (5) from *The Sun* is particularly insightful for a deeper analysis: it seems to acknowledge the benefits brought by skilled EU workers, yet manages to employ two dehumanising metaphors, describing arrivals as *a steady flow* and using the expression *import the brightest and the best*, which implies that the human beings in question are goods to be imported. Taylor's (2021) diachronic study of metaphors of migration shows that WATER/LIQUID and OBJECT metaphors have been identified as the most persistent in the British press throughout the 200-year time period, although water metaphors have been more favourable in the past. In the *Times* data analysed by Taylor, conventionalised forms of LIQUID metaphors could be identified from 1850 onwards: they collocated with *settlers, emigrants, migrants, immigrants, refugee*s, and *asylum seekers* (but not *colonists*!); while the number of lexicalisations increased over time. Although long-standing, this metaphor still appears to be creative and highly productive (Taylor 2021).

A range of quantification techniques employed in reference to EU migrants was likewise identified in the right-wing subcorpus of the Post-Referendum corpus, including the common strategy of quantifying migrants in terms of water metaphors (*surge, flow, influx)* (cf. Baker, 2006; Baker, et al. 2008; Charteris-Black, 2006; Taylor, 2021, 2022). As Table 6 illustrates, the examples from *The Sun, The Mail* and *The Telegraph* imply the idea that the level of migration to the UK of low-skilled individuals is high (*tens of thousands of*) and should be reduced: Britain *does not need* more low-skilled EU migrants; campaigners want to *see sharp falls* in the number of low-skilled EU migrants. Furthermore, the right-wing press demands that the government take more comprehensive and stricter control of the British immigration system, which is evidenced by recurrent patterns such as *take back control of our borders/immigration policy/ migration from the EU/over our laws* (Islentyeva & Abdel Kafi, 2021, p. 86–87).

When it comes to migrants' qualifications, another phenomenon that is particularly striking is that the adjectives with more positive semantics, *skilled* and *high-skilled*, co-occur more frequently with the word *worker(s)* (65 matches) than with *migrant(s)* (14 matches). Readers of the texts from which these examples are extracted might become primed (cf. Hoey, 2005) by these constant textual exposures and begin to associate the word *workers* with the adjective *skilled*, and likewise associate the term *migrants* with *unskilled* and *low-skilled*. Furthermore, another striking finding is that EU nationals with lower-level qualifications are portrayed in an extremely negative light in the right-wing tabloids. They are often referred to as *cheap foreign labour* – another dehumanising technique – and described as *low-skilled job-hunters* who steal job opportunities from British workers. Refer to Islentyeva (2018; 2020, p. 71–74) for further discussion of the pattern *migrants as a threat (to British workers):*

(6) Leave supporters believed the rules allowed bosses to hire *cheaper foreign labour* and *denied opportunities to British jobseekers.* (*The Mail*, news report, 6 March 2017; emphasis added)

1 *<The Sun>* renewed calls for a permit system to ensure	**low-skilled EU migrants**	**can only come to the UK** if they **have a job**
2 *<The Telegraph>*	**Low-skilled EU migrants**	**will only be allowed to work** in the UK for two years before being sent home under Brexit plans to curb migration after 2019.
3 *<The Telegraph>* Tens of thousands of	**low-skilled EU migrants**	**will continue to come** to UK under White Paper plan
4 *<The Telegraph>* Tens of thousands of	**low-skilled EU migrants**	**will continue to come** to the UK for at least five years after Brexit
5 *<The Mail>* Britain **does not need more**	**low-skilled EU migrants**	as there is no evidence they are leaving the country.

6 *<The Mail>* The measures would also disappoint campaigners who **want to see sharp falls** in the number of	**low-skilled EU migrants**	
7 *<The Sun>* The fall in numbers will be largely accounted for by	**unskilled EU migrants**	of whom around 70,000 a year **arrive without a job offer.**
8*<The Mail>* It is not racist to argue that we need **a system of immigration controls that reduces the number of**	**unskilled EU migrants**	coming to this country while keeping many skilled workers.
9*<The Mail>* The measures would also disappoint campaigners who want to **see sharp falls in the number of**	**low-skilled EU migrants**	

Table 6. KWIC concordance containing the collocation *unskilled/low-skilled EU migrants* from the right-wing subcorpus of the Post-Referendum Corpus

4.3 Discursive patterns in relation to EU migrants in the left-wing press

As the comparative qualitative analysis provided in Table 3 has identified, the left-wing press employs the word *migrant(s)* significantly less frequently in the post-referendum period compared to the pre-referendum period. This qualitative discrepancy between the two periods might be explained by the fact that the left-wing press seeks to use other terms in its description of these individuals (see Table 7). This trend has become more pronounced in the left-wing press after the EU referendum, perhaps due to an awareness of the mostly negative semantics the term *migrant(s)* has acquired.

Table 7 provides the raw and standardised frequencies of the ten most frequent nouns occurring directly after *EU* in the left- and right-wing subcorpora of the Post-Referendum Corpus. The corpus was searched for lemmas. The results show that the terms *citizens* (132) and *nationals* (82) are the two most salient terms applied in reference to Europeans in the left-wing press. In contrast, the right-wing press employs the collocation *EU migrants (120)* more frequently than the collocations *EU citizens* (103) or *nationals* (62), which can be characterised as more neutral nouns used to refer to people. In both subcorpora, *EU* also frequently collocates with the words *worker(s)* and *employee(s),* which provides further illustration of the significance of migrants' qualifications in terms of how they are described during the post-referendum period. The results of a distinctive collexeme analysis likewise demonstrate that the collocates *citizen(s)* (132), *national(s)* (82), and *employee(s)* are most strongly attracted to *EU* in the left-wing subcorpus (Table 8), while the collocates *migrant(s)* and *worker(s)* are more salient collocates in the right-wing subcorpus of the Post-Referendum Corpus (Table 9). The collostructional strength was measured using the log-likelihood test (Oakes, 1998).

Collocation	Left-Wing Subcorpus		Right-Wing Subcorpus	
	Raw frequency	Standardised frequency per 10,000 tokens	Raw frequency	Standardised frequency per 10,000 tokens
CITIZEN	132	**7.98**	103	4.66
NATIONAL	82	**4.84**	62	2.8
MIGRANT	61	3.69	120	**5.43**
REFERENDUM	47	2.84	45	2.03
MIGRATION	34	2.06	36	1.62
WORKER	22	1.33	40	1.81
COUNTRY	20	1.21	14	0.63
LEADER	19	1.15	16	0.72
MEMBER	13	0.79	10	0.45
IMMIGRATION	12	0.73	19	0.86

Table 7. Most frequent noun collocates of *EU* in the Post-Referendum Corpus

Collocate	*Observed frequency*	*Expected frequency*	*Collostructional strength*	*Significance*	*Collocate shared by the Pre-Referendum Corpus*
WITHDRAWAL	9	4.3	13.23	***	No
CITIZEN	132	113.1	7.49	**	Yes
NATIONAL	82	69.8	4.66	*	Yes
EMPLOYEE	3	1.4	4.39	*	No
SUMMIT	3	1.4	4.39	*	No

Table 8. Right-hand collocates attracted to *EU* in the left-wing subcorpus of the Post-Referendum Corpus

Collocate	*Observed frequency*	*Expected frequency*	*Collostructional strength*	*Significance*	*Collocate shared by the Post-Referendum Corpus*
MIGRANT	120	93.9	18.04	****	Yes
TARIFF	5	2.6	6.69	*	No
DEMAND	4	2.1	5.27	*	No
CUSTOM	4	2.1	5.27	*	No
WORKER	40	32.2	4.26	*	Yes

Table 9. Right-hand collocates attracted to *EU* in the right-wing subcorpus of the Post-Referendum Corpus

As Table 7 shows, the collocation *EU migrant(s)* was identified 61 times in the left-wing press, with 38 matches in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* and 25 occurrences in *The Mirror*. A closer look at the concordances containing this collocation will provide us with some insight into the patterns used by the left-wing press in its representation of EU nationals.

In contrast to the patterns identified in the right-wing press (e.g. *non-active, job-seeking, unemployed EU migrants* – cf. Islentyeva, 2020, p. 67), the left-

wing press emphasises that Europeans living in or coming to the UK are usually employed. EU migrants are frequently described as industrious and capable of accomplishing any and all kinds of jobs ranging from the highly-skilled to low-skilled and unskilled.

> (7) EU migrants come to Britain each year *with a job* already lined up. (*The Mirror*, news report, 24 June 2016; emphasis added)

> (8) The report points out 22% of EU migrants are *in professional jobs*, 22% in *skilled occupations* and 56% *doing unskilled jobs*. (*The Guardian,* news report,10 February 2017; emphasis added)

The left-wing press emphasises the positive economic impact of EU migration by stressing that EU migrants pay more in taxes than they claim in benefits. This stands in stark contrast to the pattern *migrants as a burden*, which was identified in the right-wing press in the context of migrants allegedly claiming more in benefits than they pay in taxes.

> (9) Meanwhile the *EU migrants kept paying 6 times more tax* and national insurance *than they claimed in benefits.* (*The Mirror,* opinion piece, Fleet Street Fox, 25 August 2017; emphasis added)

> (10) On average, *EU migrants pay in 30% more via tax* than they take through benefits and public services. (*The Guardian,* opinion piece, Chi Onwura, 23 February 2017; emphasis added)

Furthermore, Europeans are portrayed not only as hard workers who bring profit to the UK; they are also depicted as vital to the functioning of the British economy. Further emphasis is placed on the idea that EU migrants are also willing to accomplish work that most British citizens would not be prepared to undertake themselves:

> (11) *Farmers* warn that they *need EU migrants* to harvest their crops. Employers have already condemned the leaked plan […] but also deprive them of people they need, who often *do jobs native-born Brits won't do.* (*The Guardian*, opinion piece, 6 September 2017; emphasis added)

> (12) [A] reas such as hospitality and social care, which *rely heavily on EU migrants* […] (*The Guardian*, news report, 19 November 2018; emphasis added)

The Guardian is also critical with regard to the government's plans to curb EU migrants' freedom of movement; the restriction of freedom of movement is portrayed as posing a threat to Britain itself:

> (13) The *government's nasty, foolish programme* to put EU migrants off coming to Britain will make *this country less attractive* even to those born and raised here. (*The Guardian*, opinion piece, 6 September 2017; emphasis added)

4.4 Distinctive collocates attracted to *EU* versus *British*

Tables 10 and 11 provide the results of a distinctive collexeme analysis, listing the five most salient right-hand collocates that are attracted to the terms *British*

and *EU,* respectively. This analysis demonstrates how British national identity is constructed in relation to European migrants. The results provided in Table 11 confirm the findings discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3: Europeans are referred to as *EU migrants, EU nationals* and *EU citizens.*

The most salient collocates of *British* can be divided into three semantic fields: references to humans/people *(people, public),* the economy *(economy)* and identity *(values).* The most salient collocate of *British* is *people* (84), which also happens to be among the keywords that are frequently employed in populist discourses. The collocation occurs 48 times in the right-wing newspapers, especially in the context of discussing the *will, wish, verdict*, or *decision* of the British people. In most cases, it is a reference to the Brexit referendum and its outcome. When it comes to the collocate *British economy*, the discursive patterns produced in the left versus right-wing newspapers represent two extremes. The right-wing press argues that the British economy will benefit from the withdrawal and a halt to immigration:

> (14) *Ending free movement* in a measured way is exactly what the low-productivity *British economy needs*. [...] London house-building [...] have become *damagingly over-dependent on EU labour*. (*The Telegraph,* opinion piece, 31 January 2018; emphasis added)

As discussed in Examples (9)–(13), the left-wing press emphasises the contributions made by EU migrants to the British economy. The collocation *British economy* (13) occurs in the left-wing press primarily in the context of Brexit having a negative economic impact for Britain:

> (15) There is no question *migrants* are *net contributors* to the *British economy*. (*The Mirror,* editorial, 18 June 2016; emphasis added)

> (16) Leave Means Leave are clearly *intent on crippling the British economy* and *wrecking public services* by keeping *essential workers* out of the UK. *(The Guardian,* news report, 9 April 2017; emphasis added)

The analysis of the British press presented here is also in line with Zappettini (2019) findings, who analysed two websites of the official 'leave' and 'remain' campaigns of the EU referendum and found that economics (trade) and immigration acted as the key discursive elements employed to (de)legitimise Brexit. For example, the Britain Stronger in Europe (BSE) campaign highlighted the positive effects of EU membership by focusing on trade and jobs, while simultaneously warning about negative consequences for citizens and households in case of Brexit.

Collocate	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Collostructional strength	Significance	Collocate shared
people	84	25.8	208.55	*****	No
government	22	6.8	52.58	*****	No
values	19	5.8	45.33	*****	No
public	17	5.2	40.51	*****	No
economy	13	4.0	30.91	*****	No

Table 10. Right-hand collocates attracted to *British* versus *EU* in the Post-Referendum Corpus

Collocate	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	Collostructional strength	Significance	Collocate shared
migrants	175	93.9	119.90	*****	Yes
referendum	92	63.7	69.95	*****	No
nationals	141	105.3	54.49	*****	Yes
migration	70	48.5	52.78	*****	No
citizens	229	184.2	47.58	*****	Yes

Table 11. Right-hand collocates attracted to *EU* versus *British* in the Post-Referendum Corpus

5. Summary of Findings, Conclusion and Outlook

This corpus-based study has identified (micro)diachronic changes in the discursive representation of European migrants before and after the EU membership referendum by comparing the linguistic devices employed by the British press in the pre- and post-referendum periods: 2013–2015 and 2016–2018, respectively. The analysis has also focused on the patterns employed by differently politically-oriented mainstream British newspapers.

Out of all of the RASIM terms in the corpora analysed in this study, the word *migrant(s)* has been identified as the most frequently occurring term used to describe individuals coming to the UK from abroad. In both periods, *EU* has been identified as the most salient collocate of *migrant(s),* which indicates that EU migration has continued to be the main focus of attention even after the referendum. However, the overall frequency of the word *migrant(s)* is lower in the post-referendum period due to the word's substantially reduced use by the left-wing press. The analysis of the most frequent noun collocates of *EU* has shown that the collocations *EU citizens* (132) and *EU nationals* (82) were more frequent than *EU migrants* (61) in the left-wing subcorpus of the Post-Referendum Corpus. Additionally, Europeans coming to the UK are referred to as *EU workers* and *EU employees* (cf. Tables 7 and 8).

A distinctive collexeme analysis identified two salient features that appear to be the most relevant for representing migrants in the post-referendum period compared to in the pre-referendum period. These are the domains legality of status and qualifications. The adjectives with more negative prosody, *illegal* and *low-skilled*, are the most salient collocates of the word *migrant(s)* (cf. Table 4). The collocation *illegal migrant(s)* (74 occurrences) was found exclusively in the right-wing subcorpus of the Post-Referendum Corpus. Interestingly, none of the European countries were singled out in the post-referendum period as opposed to the pre-referendum period with Bulgarians and Romanians being the focus of attention (cf. Table 5).

In the post-referendum period, the right-wing press continues to employ a set of negative characteristics in reference to migrants, such as unemployment and the exploitation of the British welfare system (Islentyeva, 2018; Islentyeva, 2020, p. 71–74). In the post-referendum period, what appears to be new and insightful is that the patterns *migrants as a threat* and *migrants as a burden* are employed primarily in reference to *unskilled/low-skilled migrants* in the right-wing subcorpus. *The Sun* and *The Mail* draw a line between the positive effects of *skilled workers* versus *unskilled* and *low-skilled migrants*. The collocates *skilled workers* and *unskilled migrants* might lead to forced priming: readers might become primed by these constant textual exposures and

associate the word *workers* with the adjective *skilled*, and likewise associate *migrants* with *unskilled/low-skilled*. Nonetheless, by employing the collocation (*high*)-*skilled workers* in reference to Europeans, the right-wing press thus acknowledges European migration as a source of professional labour that has the potential to contribute to the British economy.

The patterns identified in the right-wing press clearly correlate with the considerable importance of the economic benefits for the UK in the context of the UK-EU relationship, which were discussed in Section 2. The findings are also in line with Parnell's (2023) discussion of a neoliberal construction of *the acceptable EU migrant* (cf. Bennett, 2018). Her analysis of UK Government documents likewise showcases that EU citizens living in the UK are often positioned as contributors to the British economy, but not as fully-fledged members of the public. Similarly, Taylor's (2021) diachronic analysis of conventionalised metaphorical framings of emigration and immigration in the UK-based *Times* newspaper from 1800 to 2018 has identified the pattern *migrants as an economic resource* as the dominant frame. Also identified was the fact that the evaluation is determined by the speaker's perception of their control of this resource.

The left-wing press seeks to employ alternative, unrelated terms in its description of European migrants, using either neutral or positive terms to describe them. *The Guardian, The Observer* and *The Daily Mirror* stress the fact that Europeans are gainfully employed and describe them as skilled, hard-working and industrious. Particular emphasis is placed on the socio-economic benefits of European migration to the UK, which also correlates with the pattern *migrants as an economic resource,* discussed in reference to *skilled migrants* in the right-wing press.

To conclude, this study has contributed to the global understanding of migration discourses in times of crisis by demonstrating how adaptable the British press can be to the changing socio-political context of Brexit. The decision to leave the EU has been referred to as one of the most important and most disastrous policy decisions made by the government since the 1930s (cf. Saunders, 2016). The comparative corpus-based analysis featured in this paper has shown how in times of crisis, the right-wing press has opted to shift its focus in terms of its representation of Europeans, by starting to focus on their qualifications and their ability to contribute to the British economy. The mixed-method approach of corpus-linguistic and discourse-analytical methods has identified the salient discursive patterns employed by the differently politically-orientated newspapers under investigation in order to remain adaptable to the changing socio-political climate.

This paper has contributed to the ever-growing wealth of research on migration discourse in general and the British press and Brexit in particular. Future studies might trace the discursive tendencies identified here in political and other institutional discourses (cf. Islentyeva & Dunkel, 2022; Parnell, 2022, 2023; Zappettini 2019; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski 2021), as well as analyse how British media discourses regarding Europe and migration have changed in the current era of new crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Finally, in terms of implications beyond the realm of academia, it is essential that the general public be made aware of the ever-changing discursive patterns that help differently politically-orientated media outlets construct the identities of different groups and thus promote their competing ideologies.

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