

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF VOICELESS MIGRANTS: MISINFORMATION, FRAMING AND INEQUALITIES IN CROATIAN NEWS PORTALS

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The rapid increase in the number of migrant workers in Croatia, mainly from India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Bangladesh, has led to significant media attention, affecting public perceptions of migration and labour (Butković *et al.*, 2022). However, this topic remains underexplored, raising concerns about stereotyping and misinformation that reinforce inequalities (Blanco-Herrero *et al.*, 2024; Nieminen, 2024). Based on the concept of representation (Hall, 1997), this study examines how three Croatian news portals with the largest number of real users, according to Gemius (*i.e.* Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr, and Vecernji.hr), represent migrant labour and whether their narratives contribute to misrepresentation and misinformation about migrants. The findings of the quantitative content analysis of 132 articles published in 2025, supplemented by a close qualitative analysis of selected articles, point to repetitive frames, recurring thematic structures, and an underrepresentation of migrants as sources. Special attention is given to how migrant labour is portrayed through editorial practices. Overall, the study shows that Croatian news media portals predominantly exacerbate misrepresentation and misinformation about migrants, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities.

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According to Eurostat, the number of work permits for migrant workers in Croatia has increased by 300% since 2018 (Eurostat, 2024). Most permits were issued for citizens of Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Philippines. Such an increase has attracted the attention of media outlets and brought the topic of work permits and migrant workers into the spotlight.

The power of the media lies in the ways they favour certain discourses and construct particular forms of reality (Street, 2003). Hence, the role of the media is not only to represent specific issues or social groups, but also to construct the public view on so many issues promoted by media outlets. In this sense, media also participate in the construction of reality. As one of their primary responsibilities is to inform the public, their obligation is also to educate, provide a platform for political discourse, and perform their traditional role as watchdogs, as explained by McNair (2003). At the same time, they influence public opinion by providing mostly information that attracts public interest, but also by shaping the way audiences perceive a particular story—the subject of reporting (Entman, 1989).

Media representations of a specific topic can misinform and even disinform public opinion through selective framing or strategically inaccurate portrayals, thereby reinforcing social divisions and perpetuating misperceptions about migrants (Blanco-Herrero *et al.*, 2024; Nieminen, 2024). In this paper, we distinguish between misinformation and disinformation, and identify how these categories appear in journalistic practices. We define misinformation as false or inaccurate information that is shared without clear intent to deceive, and disinformation as false information that is created or disseminated with the intent to mislead or manipulate public understanding. Misrepresentation is used as an overarching term that includes misinformation, disinformation, and unverified falsehood, as well as distortive representational practices such as framing, sensationalism, and selective reporting. Framing, sensationalism, and selective reporting are analytically distinct from factual falsehoods, but they can produce effects similar to misinformation by creating misleading impressions or omitting context that is necessary for accurate understanding. Where evidence of deliberate manipulation (*e.g.*, fabricated sources, repeated coordinated narratives tied to identifiable actors) is present, we treat the instance as disinformation; where inaccurate or incomplete reporting appears to result from error, omissions, or routine editorial choices without clear evidence of intent, we treat it as misinformation. Selective reporting and sensationalistic

narratives can contribute to misinformation and disinformation, while structural inequalities such as labour market dependence on foreign workers, employment conditions, and shifting immigration policies can influence the framing of migration-related news (de Haas, 2024; Nieminen, 2024; Gondwe *et al.*, 2025).

McAuliffe *et al.* (2017) introduced three main reasons why it is important for the media to represent migrants and migration accurately:

[First,] media coverage may be a barometer for political and public attitudes toward migration, and in turn shape these attitudes. Second, media coverage is likely to influence the perceptions of migrants themselves in society, and thirdly given global access to numerous media, that media coverage may also influence the decision-making of migrants considering whether to move to particular destination countries. (McAuliffe *et al.*, 2017, p. 278)

Although the topic of migrant workers has a long history, research on their media representations remains rare compared to the broader literature on migrants and media. Extensive work exists on the use of narratives in reporting on migrants (see Boswell *et al.*, 2021). Benson (2013), in his review of migration and media scholarship, synthesised three dominant frames: threat (jobs, public order, fiscal/national cohesion), victim (global economy, humanitarianism, racism/xenophobia), and hero (good worker, cultural diversity, integration) (Boswell *et al.*, 2021). Benson also noted that the humanitarian and threat frames recur across many studies, often appearing as the most prominent interpretive lenses in coverage of migration. Our research contributes to this literature by showing that, in the context of migrant workers, Croatian news coverage is dominated not by threat or humanitarian narratives but by an economic–functional framing that represents migrants mostly voiceless, anonymous, and reduced to labour power. This extends existing research by identifying a distinct pattern of structured dehumanisation that is not captured by the classic triad of the threat, the victim and the hero.

Analysing 132 online articles on migrants published in 2025 in three major Croatian portals (Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr and Vecernji.hr), the present study demonstrates how selective reporting and source exclusion contribute to misrepresentation and, in some cases, to misinformation or less frequently to disinformation that obscure migrants'

lived realities (Nieminen, 2024; Gondwe *et al.*, 2025). We conceptualise misinformation and disinformation as phenomena that can be produced or amplified by structural inequalities in news production: when migrants are excluded as sources and editorial routines favour sensational or economy-framed angles, coverage can reproduce distorted public understandings, even without clear malicious intent. This “voiceless” condition therefore helps explain how misrepresentation and disinformation-like effects emerge from unequal media practices (Hall, 1997; Benson, 2013; Nieminen, 2024).

This study shows how misleading narratives and selective reporting can shape misperceptions about migrants, stressing the need for audiences to critically engage with news, question bias, and verify sources (Higdon & Butler, 2023). It also supports media-literacy initiatives that help identify misinformation and disinformation, recognise framing, and assess the socio-political context of migration reporting (Frau-Meigs, 2022; Kir Elitaş, 2024).

1. Theoretical Framework

The representation of migrants in the media is not a neutral act, but a discursive process shaped by cultural, political, and economic contexts. As Stuart Hall (1997) theorises, representation is a constitutive practice that produces meaning through language, imagery and institutional routines; media therefore do not simply reflect social reality but actively (re)construct it. By selecting, magnifying, or excluding people, events, and topics, media outlets help shape which realities gain public salience and which remain marginal (Hall, 1997; Bleich *et al.*, 2015, pp. 862-863).

Across European media, coverage of migrants often repeats narrow frames, portraying them as social problems, demographic burdens, or passive labour (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022; Kir Elitaş, 2024). Such practices simplify and distort discourse, frequently relying on exaggeration and fear-based or instrumental portrayals (de Haas, 2024). More specifically, disinformation exploits structural inequalities in news production by deepening social divisions when narratives amplify existing anxieties. We distinguish three related but separate phenomena addressed throughout the paper: framing, misinformation, and disinformation. Framing denotes editorial and rhetorical choices (selection, emphasis, omission) that shape interpretation; misinformation denotes inaccurate or false information circulated without clear

intent to deceive; disinformation denotes false information produced or spread with the intent to mislead. These categories can overlap empirically: framing and sensationalism are not necessarily factual falsehoods but can create misleading impressions or partial truths that function like misinformation by omitting context or corrective voices. Where there is credible evidence of deliberate fabrication or coordinated deception, we classify the instance as disinformation; where inaccuracies appear to result from error, omission, or routine editorial constraints without evidence of intent, we classify them as misinformation. Because intent is often difficult to infer from single articles, we use the category of “unverified falsehood” for claims that cannot be corroborated. This approach follows established frameworks for information disorder and the science of fake news (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Lazer *et al.*, 2018).

When considered together, representation as a formative practice (Hall, 1997), the vulnerability of migration discourses to misrepresentation (de Haas, 2024), and the role of structural inequalities in enabling misrepresentation (Nieminen, 2024), provide a framework for understanding how media narratives can effectively render migrant workers “voiceless.” This framework emphasises not only whether migrants appear in headlines, but also which voices are included, how much narrative autonomy they receive, and how editorial and political framings shape newsworthiness (Frau-Meigs & Corbu, 2024; Chouliaraki *et al.*, 2017). Reporting that departs from professional standards can lead to unintended misinformation. Inequalities manifest in selective framing and repeated exclusion: migrants are often “spoken about” rather than “spoken with,” limiting narrative agency and reinforcing marginalisation (Gebauer & Sommer, 2024; Solanki, 2024). Empirical research shows that absent migrant voices coincide with discriminatory practices, such as hate speech and stereotyping, especially where social inequalities exist, reinforcing distorted portrayals (Ekman, 2019; Blanco-Herrero *et al.*, 2024).

At the European level, one of the most comprehensive studies, covering 17 countries, analysed media responses to the 2015 refugee crisis (Kreutler *et al.*, 2022). Mancini *et al.* (2019) examined immigration coverage in Belgium, Germany, the UK, and Italy before and after the Lampedusa shipwreck, while Hari and Ahmed (2023) studied portrayals of temporary foreign workers in Canada through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of front-page coverage. Most research relies on content analysis or CDA, but insights from editors and journalists

remain vital. Interviews with senior journalists show that migration news is usually covered only when “sensational” events occur, most often negative (Gemi *et al.*, 2011).

Country-level analyses likewise indicate that reporting on foreign workers in Croatia tends to emphasise economic and demographic metrics (labour shortages, permit counts, sectoral demand) while giving limited space to migrants’ own perspectives, life stories, or working conditions (Butković *et al.*, 2022). However, most studies and research in Croatia have focused on the representation of migrants, immigrants and asylum seekers in general (Takahashi *et al.*, 2018; Slijepčević & Fligić, 2018; Bagarić & Mandić, 2019; Bezić & Petrović, 2019; Volarević & Has, 2019; Delić & Begić, 2021; Popović *et al.*, 2022a; Popović *et al.*, 2022b; Dabo 2024). Migrants may appear frequently as objects of discourse but remain underrepresented as subjects with a voice, which constitutes a form of symbolic inequality in the media environment (Solanki, 2024; Blanco-Herrero *et al.*, 2024). This silencing has unequal impacts. Research on news literacy and framing shows that racialized, sensational, or delegitimizing portrayals of “fake” or scandalised news disproportionately affect vulnerable groups (van der Meer & Hameleers, 2021; Higdon & Butler, 2023). Studies on disinformation and inequality indicate that misleading narratives exploit existing social divisions; when coverage favours official, political, or economic voices over migrants’ testimonies, it reinforces structural marginalisation (de Haas, 2024; Nieminen, 2024). The convergence of selective representation, exclusionary discourse, and restricted narrative agency explains why migrant workers often appear “voiceless”. Distorted information environments and routine editorial practices limit journalism and media literacy efforts to challenge stereotypes (Frau-Meigs, 2022). In Croatia, the prioritisation of national economic or political framings over migrants’ lived experiences risks reinforcing structural inequalities (Butković *et al.*, 2022; de Haas, 2024).

Based upon the literature, our study was guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How are migrant workers represented in the content of Croatian online media?

RQ2: What “frames” are used by newsrooms while reporting on migrants?

RQ3: What types of misinformation can be identified while reporting on migrant workers?

2. Methodology

We used a convergent mixed-methods design combining a quantitative content analysis and a closer qualitative analysis of selected articles.

Content analysis is a systematic and quantitative technique for describing the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952). This method has been widely used in media studies from many perspectives; its main criterion is to draw valid inferences from texts based on a set of procedures (Weber, 1990). The corpus comprises all articles meeting our inclusion criteria and published between 1 January 2025 and 19 July 2025 on three Croatian news portals with the highest Gemius audience rankings: 24sata.hr, Jutarnji.hr, and Vecernji.hr. We analysed a total of 132 online articles from these outlets. The population was defined by keyword searches (“migrant = *migrant*”; “migrant worker = *migrant radnik*”; “foreign worker = *strani radnik*”) applied to all articles published within the selected timespan on the three portals. In addition, we used inclusion/exclusion rules to ensure that only articles substantively addressing migrant workers in the Croatian context were saved and analysed; the ones in which the keywords appeared incidentally (e.g., in unrelated international news, sports, or entertainment content) were excluded. All three outlets are privately owned and operate online editions parallel to their print newspapers (24sata.hr–*24sata*; Jutarnji.hr–*Jutarnji list*; Vecernji.hr–*Večernji list*). As for quantitative procedures, the unit of analysis was the single article. Three coders coded the full corpus (n=132) using a 50-item coding sheet; 18 variables were selected as focal measures for this study. To assess reliability, all articles were double-coded for key variables. Regarding operational definitions and coding rules, for the information-disorder variables we distinguish framing (editorial selection, emphasis, omission), misinformation (inaccurate factual claims without clear evidence of intent), disinformation (false claims with credible evidence of deliberate fabrication or coordinated deception), and unverified falsehood (claims that could not be corroborated and for which intent could not be inferred). In addition, the coders recorded frequencies and distributions for article type, article tone, headline tone, presence and type of migrant quotes, main topic, stereotypes, examples of misinformation, sources of information, quantity and types of quotes from migrants,

reporting style, representation of labour rights, working conditions and structural problems, emotionally charged language, visual presentation of migrants, and coverage of privacy-related issues.

For the qualitative analysis, we purposively selected articles to represent typical and extreme cases identified in the quantitative stage for close reading and thematic analysis (n=24). The qualitative analysis examined narrative structure, source positioning, rhetorical devices, and visual framing to complement and contextualise the quantitative patterns. In the Results section, the insights from the qualitative analysis are integrated into the findings from the quantitative content analysis, to develop further certain analyses and provide relevant illustrations, and are also the focus of a specific subsection dedicated to article headlines.

3. Results

The analysis of article types across the selected portals suggests that news reports are the most prevalent format in the coverage of migrant workers (Table 1). On 24sata.hr, news items account for 59.4% of the content, while their share is slightly lower on Jutarnji.hr (52.3%) and Vecernji.hr (48.2%). The second most frequent format consists of feature articles/reports, which are particularly prominent on Vecernji.hr (42.9%) and Jutarnji.hr (47.7%), but appear less often on 24sata.hr (37.5%). Commentaries and opinion columns on the topic of migrant workers are found exclusively on Vecernji.hr (7.1%) and are absent from both Jutarnji.hr and 24sata.hr. (An “Other/Mixed” category was recorded to capture short notices and aggregated items.)

Table 1. Corpus Overview (January–July 2025)

Type of article	Jutarnji.hr (%)	Vecernji.hr (%)	24sata.hr (%)
News reports	52.3	48.2	59.4
Feature articles/ reports	47.7	42.9	37.5
Commentaries/ opinion columns	0	7.1	0
Other/Mixed	0.0	1.8	3.1

The findings indicate that migrant workers are predominantly represented in Croatian online media through informative genres (namely news items and feature articles/reports), whereas explicitly interpretative and analytical formats (such as commentaries and opinion columns) remain marginal. Although feature articles and reports often provide more detail and context, they are largely descriptive in nature and rarely advance explicit interpretation, critique, or analytical argumentation. This pattern points to the predominance of fact-oriented, descriptive reporting, with relatively limited engagement in broader social analysis or interpretative framing of issues concerning migrant workers. In this respect, 24sata.hr most strongly emphasises news as the dominant format, while Vecernji.hr partially diverges from this trend by incorporating a comparatively larger share of commentaries and opinion columns.

3.1. Tone of Coverage

Besides, the content analysis shows that a neutral tone dominates across the articles of the portals, with 65.9% on Jutarnji.hr, 58.9% on Vecernji.hr, and 53.8% on 24sata.hr. (tone categories for articles are defined as Neutral, Positive, Negative, and Other/Mixed). Jutarnji.hr emphasises neutrality most strongly, producing a largely descriptive representation. Vecernji.hr combines neutrality (58.9%) with a stronger positive orientation (19.6%) and 8.3% of negative coverage. Jutarnji.hr shows 11.4% positive and 6.8% negative coverage. By contrast, 24sata.hr relies more on both positive (23.5%) and negative (21.2%) narratives, creating a more polarized portrayal of migrant workers.

These quantitative findings become more evident when examined alongside illustrative headlines. While the dominance of neutral reporting is reflected in straightforward, descriptive titles such as “Most foreign workers in Croatia are overqualified for the jobs they do” (24sata.hr, 11.6.25), the more polarised framing on 24sata.hr can be seen in sensationalist examples like “A man from Split beat five foreigners in McDonald’s because his delivery was late: ‘You destroyed the country!’” (24sata.hr, 20.2.25). Such comparisons illustrate how editorial choices regarding tone, whether neutral, positive, or negative, directly shape the visibility and interpretation of migrant workers in public discourse. Overall, these findings suggest that although reporting on migrant workers is predominantly neutral, tone remains a useful indicator of editorial policy and framing; differences in tone reveal

how outlets implicitly guide readers toward particular interpretations of migrant workers and the issues surrounding them.

3.2. *Tone of Headlines*

Headlines are a crucial element of an article, highlighting editorial choices and shaping readers' perceptions. As such, they deserve a specific attention. The findings show notable differences among the analysed portals in headline construction. For clarity, we coded headlines for *tone* (Informative; Neutral; Sensationalist; Other/Mixed) and separately also coded them for *framing* (e.g., threat, victim, hero) so that tone (stylistic/evaluative stance) and framing (interpretive lens) are treated as distinct variables. Informative headlines present essential facts with minimal evaluative language; neutral headlines use factual wording without clear positive/negative valence; sensationalist headlines use dramatisation, emotive language, or attention-grabbing devices; and other/mixed headlines use ambiguous or mixed signals that combine evaluative and neutral elements.

Portal-level distributions are as follows. Vecernji.hr most often uses an informative tone: 53.6% of its headlines are informative, 25.0% are neutral, 21.4% are sensationalist, and 0.0% fall into Other/Mixed. Jutarnji.hr displays a stronger tendency toward dramatisation, with 40.9% sensationalist headlines, 31.8% informative headlines, 27.3% neutral headlines, and 0.0% Other/Mixed. 24sata.hr records the highest share of informative headlines (65.6%), alongside 25.0% neutral, 9.4% sensationalist, and 0.0% Other/Mixed.

Across the full corpus (all portals combined), 49.2% of headlines are informative, 26.5% are sensationalist, 23.5% are neutral, and 0.8% are other/mixed, indicating that while informative headlines predominate, sensationalist headlines remain a notable editorial strategy.

Several examples illustrate these tendencies. These examples are selected to illustrate typical headline strategies rather than as outlier cases: "Sarita from Nepal found a new home in Zagorje: Everything has worked out for me, I would like to stay in Croatia forever" (Vecernji.hr, 26.3.25) (Informative/positive framing); "Results of the first survey on foreign workers in Croatia published: Here's how satisfied they are" (Jutarnji.hr, 14.1.25) (Neutral/informative); "A man from Split beat five foreigners in McDonald's because his delivery was late: 'You destroyed the country!'" (24sata.hr, 20.2.25) (Sensationalist/threat framing).

Together, these results indicate that while the primary function of headlines in the corpus is to inform, editorial choices produce variation in emotional engagement and attention seeking. This variation matters because tone (stylistic choices) interacts with framing (interpretive lenses) to influence how readers interpret the salience and valence of migration related issues.

3.3. Presence of Migrants' Voices in Headlines

The voices of migrant workers are hard to find in Croatian online media outlets. At the aggregate level, headlines containing a migrant's statement account for only 12.9% of all analysed cases, whereas 87.1% exclude them (Table 2).

Table 2. Presence of migrants' statements in headlines across Croatian online news portals (N = 132)

	Jutarnji.hr (%)	Vecernji.hr (%)	24sata.hr (%)
With migrants' statements	11.4	12.5	15.6
Without migrants' statements	88.6	87.5	84.4
Total	100	100	100

These results show that migrants are rarely given their voice in the headlines. Editorial practice typically frames headlines without migrants' perspectives, limiting their presence in the most visible part of the coverage. The following examples illustrate cases in which migrants' voices are included and suggest a more inclusive editorial approach:

“Sarita from Nepal found a new home in Zagorje: ‘Everything fell into place, I would like to stay in Croatia forever’” (Vecernji.hr, 26.3.25)
 “Filipino man in Zagreb admits: I can live on my salary, but I save and spend carefully” (Vecernji.hr, 20.5.25)
 “Mohammad (30): I came here to work and survive. Croats, why are you beating and robbing me?” (Jutarnji.hr, 19.5.25)

“I work 12 hours a day, six days a week. I pay 350 euro for a room, 500 for the scooter and fuel, plus there are Wolt fees, taxes... Do you know how much I have left at the end?” (Jutarnji.hr, 17.7.25)

“Nepali woman in Croatia: Doctors are refusing to help me, and I need care. It’s impossible to find a doctor” (24sata.hr, 1.6.25)

“Gabriel made his dreams come true in Zagreb: ‘I live in the center, the food is cheap, but I don’t understand some of your young people. They want to fight with me...’” (Jutarnji.hr, 11.7.25)

Although 24sata.hr shows a somewhat higher inclusion of migrant statements in headlines, the difference compared to the other portals is marginal, and the overall share remains low. This reinforces the broader tendency to marginalise migrants’ voices within media discourse. Headlines most often reflect the interpretations of journalists or institutions rather than those of the individuals being reported on.

3.4. Qualitative Analysis of Headlines: Narrative Patterns and Representations

Headlines play a crucial role in shaping first impressions and interpretations of news stories, especially when they summarize complex realities into short but impactful statements that guide audience perception before an article is read.

When applied to coverage of migrant workers, our qualitative analysis of headlines identified three dominant analytical dimensions: (1) framing, how migrants are cast (for example, as a threat, a victim, or a resource); (2) agency and voice, who is allowed to speak, whose perspectives are foregrounded or silenced; and (3) lexical and narrative choices, the specific words, metaphors, and story structures that shape interpretation and emotional response.

3.4.1. Framing of Migrants

Croatian news media frequently frame migrants as social problems, burdens, or passive figures rather than active contributors. Headlines such as “Came to work in Croatia, ended up humiliated:

160 foreign workers attacked in seven months” (Vecernji.hr, 8.4.25) and “A man from Split beat five foreigners in McDonald’s because his delivery was late: ‘You destroyed the country!’” (24sata.hr, 20.2.25) present migrants either as victims of violence or as figures associated with social tension.

Other headlines emphasise migrants as a demographic or economic concern, portraying them as potential threats to social stability, as in “Selak Raspudić: ‘Soon we will have half a million foreign workers. Ghettos will be created!’” (24sata.hr 13.2.25) and “By 2050, there will be two million foreigners in Croatia and only a little more Croats.” (Vecernji.hr, 19.3.25). Labour shortages are highlighted in “These professions are now the most in demand in Croatia” (Vecernji.hr, 20.3.25) and “Zadar lacks foreign workers; the tourist season will suffer” (Vecernji.hr, 16.6.25).

Positive representations remain rare. The few relevant examples have already been mentioned previously, such as the headlines “Foreign workers came to stay—they are not tourists or a passing phenomenon” (Vecernji.hr, 9.4.25) and “Sarita from Nepal found a new home in Zagorje: Everything has fallen into place for me” (Vecernji.hr, 26.3.25), that portray migrants as contributors or individuals seeking stability.

3.4.2. Agency and Voice

Migrants are often framed as passive, with their experiences being mediated through the voices of employers or authorities, or through sensationalist reporting. For example, “Brač strongman crammed 30 Bangladeshi workers into one room: ‘They’re tiny, and the beds are from IKEA, they’re good’” (Jutarnji.hr, 9.2.25) and “Foreign worker gives birth alone on Korčula, leaves baby in basket near house: ‘Baby is in hospital’” (24sata.hr, 2.7.25) highlight situations where migrants are acted upon rather than presented as active agents.

When migrants’ voices appear, they primarily focus on survival, hardship, or financial struggles: “Filipino man reveals whether he can live on his salary in Croatia: It’s important to save” (Vecernji.hr, 20.5.25), “Nepalese man recounts his experience working in Croatia: ‘I have no money anymore’” (Vecernji.hr, 25.6.25), and “‘I work 12 hours a day, six days a week, I pay 350 euros for a room, 500 for a scooter and fuel... Do you know how much I end up with?’” (Jutarnji.hr, 17.7.25).

Headlines rarely cover broader narratives of integration, identity, or social participation. Even positive stories remain relatively rare, as in “Gabriel made his dreams come true in Zagreb: ‘I live in the centre, the food is cheap, but I don’t understand some of your young people. They want to fight with me...’” (Jutarnji.hr, 11.7.25).

3.4.3. Lexical and Narrative Choices

Headlines often dramatise migration, emphasising crisis, disruption, or moral panic. Terms like “ghettos will be created” and “total chaos in tourism” frame migrants as a societal threat. Sensationalist elements appear in reports of violence or neglect, as in “Ordered food, then attacked delivery men and took their money: He hit one, dragged him and knocked him to the ground, Zagreb police responded” (Vecernji.hr, 9.2.25) and “Zagreb: They physically attacked a foreign worker and stole his money” (24sata.hr, 14.4.25). Quantitative frames also contribute to the depersonalisation of migrants, emphasising numbers over individuals, as in “Croatia has issued 206,000 work permits to foreigners, here are the citizens with the most permits” (Vecernji.hr, 11.1.25) and “More than half of the foreign workers will bring their families. With low salaries, they will move to the outskirts and ghettoization is certain, just like in the West” (Vecernji.hr, 26.1.25).

Such lexical and numerical emphases, combined with selective narratives, reinforce migrants as threats, victims, or labour resources rather than autonomous actors. Overall, Croatian media tend to limit migrants’ narrative agency, framing them in terms of victimhood, social conflict, or economic utility, while marginalising their voices. Exceptions exist, but the dominant pattern contributes to symbolic inequalities by portraying migrants as passive, dangerous, or socially disturbing.

3.5. What about concern for the lives and struggles of migrants?

Croatian media coverage of migrant primarily emphasises the economic and labour-related dimensions of the migrant experience. Employment and working conditions emerge as by far the most dominant theme across all three portals. At the aggregate level, employment and working conditions constitute the dominant theme in 33.3% of all analysed articles, confirming the centrality of labour-related framing in

Croatian online media coverage. “We don’t care about your personal life and problems”, the media portals seem to be saying to migrants.

Violence against migrant workers (e.g., exploitation, unsafe working conditions like physical violence against migrants while they are working) is notable on 24sata.hr (15.6%) and Jutarnji.hr (9.1%), but less on Vecernji.hr (3.6%). Coverage of personal documents, work permits, housing, and living conditions is sporadic (2.3-5.3%). Personal life stories are extremely rare (2.3-5.4% per portal, 3% overall). Themes of discrimination, racism, and social inclusion are marginal, accounting for only 1.5-2.3% of content. Notably, 24sata.hr reports more on workplace safety (6.3%) and crimes by migrants against Croatian citizens (6.3%), topics nearly absent on the other portals. These thematic patterns demonstrate how outlets prioritise certain issues, illustrating the role of framing in drawing attention to selected aspects of the reality “in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

3.6. From Economic Necessity to the Threat to Society

Media coverage of migrant workers in the analysed portals frequently moves between three analytically distinct emphases: (a) economic necessity (migrants as essential labour), (b) victimisation and exploitation (migrants as victims of poor working conditions or trafficking), and (c) societal threat (migrants framed as a social, cultural, or security problem). These emphases are not mutually exclusive and often co-occur within single articles; our coding therefore records multiple frames per article when applicable.

The economic frame dominates the corpus. Vecernji.hr uses an economic-necessity frame in 44.6% of articles, Jutarnji.hr in 43.2%, and 24sata.hr in 25.0%. Overall, 39.4% of all articles present migrants as essential to the economy, underscoring their instrumentalisation. A labour-centred narrative is further evidenced by the finding that 72.5% of articles address labour rights, working conditions, or structural issues, while 27.5% do not; this pattern indicates that migrants are primarily framed and portrayed as economic actors, often with limited attention to their lived experiences or voices.

Victimisation is a highly significant frame. It appears most strongly on Jutarnji.hr (31.8%) and 24sata.hr (28.1%), with a somewhat lower

share on Vecernji.hr (21.4%). Overall, 26.5% of articles depict migrants as victims of violence, exploitation, or unsafe working conditions. This pattern both acknowledges the structural vulnerabilities of migrant workers (*e.g.*, exposure to workplace abuse, unsafe living or working conditions, unequal power relations between migrants, employers and institutions) and reflects a tendency toward emotionally charged reporting in some items. An illustrative headline is: “Came to work in Croatia, ended up humiliated: 160 foreign workers attacked in seven months” (Vecernji.hr, 8.4.2025), which exemplifies the victim frame by emphasising hardship and vulnerability.

The societal-threat frame appears in 19.6% of Vecernji.hr articles, 13.6% of Jutarnji.hr articles, and 21.9% of 24sata.hr articles. Taken together, threat framing accounts for 18.2% of all coverage. Threat frames typically link migrants to crime, conflict, or risks to social order and are highly salient because of their emotive and mobilising potential. Representative headlines include “The well-established business of Zagreb’s bullies: They ordered food through an app, then beat and robbed foreign workers” (Jutarnji.hr, 9.2.2025) and “Five foreign nationals found with counterfeit drivers’ licences” (24sata.hr, 16.3.2025), which associate migrants with criminal or threatening contexts. Coverage also sometimes highlights accidents or misfortunes that blur the line between victimisation and sensationalism, for example “Egyptian man lost his balance, fell from a height of two meters and was seriously injured” (Vecernji.hr, 20.5.2025).

Positive, dignity-centred framing is comparatively rare. Vecernji.hr applies a dignity/equality frame in 12.5% of articles, Jutarnji.hr in 4.5%, and 24sata.hr in 21.9% (the most positive share among the portals); overall, only 12.1% of articles present migrants as equal and dignified members of the community. This imbalance suggests that Croatian online media more often position migrants as economic resources or societal problems rather than as full social actors whose cultural and civic contributions are recognised. It contributes to a public discourse that emphasises migrants’ economic utility or their problematic status while underrepresenting their full social and human complexity.

Because articles frequently combine emphases (for example, portraying migrants as both workers and victims), percentages for frames may sum to more than 100% across the corpus. Our coding records each frame present in an article so that co-occurrence is visible in the analysis. Treating economic necessity, victimisation, and threat as separate but co-occurring emphases clarifies how editorial strategies may repro-

duce or challenge structural inequalities: economic frames can normalise labour dependence while obscuring rights violations; victimisation frames can generate sympathy but also depoliticise structural causes by focusing on individual suffering; threat frames can mobilise exclusionary sentiment and legitimise restrictive policies.

3.7. Disinformation as Incident Rather Than Practice

At the aggregate level, only 3% of articles include demonstrable disinformation, while 3.8% could not be classified. This indicates that most coverage of migrants in Croatian online portals avoids deliberate manipulative techniques. Still, even a small number of distorted articles can contribute to a misleading information environment. A broader category of misleading content and confirmed misinformation, defines as inaccurate or false claims presented without evidence of intent to mislead or misinform, including exaggeration, selective presentation or uncontextualized claims, appears in a slightly higher percentage of articles (up to 7%). Overall, the analysis suggests that Croatian online media rarely engage in overt factual distortion or outright falsification of data. However, there is a clear tendency in the newsrooms to shape narratives through selective framing and emphasis (*e.g.*, migrants as victims or economic necessity), which can influence how audiences interpret information about migrants.

On Vecernji.hr, the identified disinformation cases fall entirely within the category of misleading context (100% of this small subset), suggesting that while the information itself may not be factually wrong, its presentation can alter meaning or create a negative impression. It is important to emphasise that these cases represent only a minor fraction of all content.

At Jutarnji.hr, the few identified disinformation examples consist mainly of inaccurate statistical claims and sensationalism, each accounting for around 50% of the portal's disinformation content, while misleading context and other forms appear only marginally. At 24sata.hr, misleading context is the most frequent type (40%), whereas inaccurate statistics, sensationalism, and other forms each account for 20%. When aggregating all three portals, misleading context remains the most frequent category (40%), followed by inaccurate statistics, sensationalism, and other types (each around 20%). However, these figures are calculated from a very small subset of articles containing disinform-

mation, which explains the uniform distributions and underscores that these percentages should not be generalised to overall media coverage.

3.8. Dominance of Official Sources

Reporting on migrant workers favours institutional perspectives, especially government and ministries, while migrants' own voices remain marginal. Government and ministries are the most cited sources, representing 41.2% of references. Experts and scholars account for 13.7%, employers 8.4%, migrant workers 8.4%, and citizens 5.3%. Other sources include the Croatian Chamber of Economy (2.3%), citizen associations (0.8%), Eurostat and HRZZ (1.5%), other media (3.8%), and unspecified sources (2.3%). "Other" sources make up 8.4%, reflecting reliance on informal or non-traditional actors.

These findings show that migrant reporting favours institutional perspectives, especially government and ministries, while migrants' own voices remain marginal. The pattern indicates a predominantly top-down approach, in which institutions and employers shape the narrative, and first-hand migrant perspectives are rarely highlighted.

3.9. Migrant Workers' Voices in Articles

The data clearly demonstrate that the presence of direct quotes or statements from migrant workers is very limited across all analysed portals. In aggregate, only 14.4% of all analysed articles include statements and, even more occasionally, direct quotes from migrants, while in 85.6% of cases migrants remain silent objects of reporting. This finding reinforces the patterns observed in the analysis of sources: migrants are most often represented through institutional, political, or expert voices, while their own perspectives rarely enter the public discourse. Such a pattern creates a power asymmetry in media narratives, as migrants are passive voices, often written about, but seldom allowed to participate actively in discussions concerning their own lives and experiences.

When migrants are quoted, their voices are most frequently linked to living conditions in Croatia (52.6% of all quotes). This suggests that migrants are primarily represented through the lens of adaptation to life in a new environment. The second most frequent category concerns work and employment conditions (36.8%), which confirms that their experiences are largely reduced to their labour role, emphasising the

functional dimension of migration. The least represented category is family or personal circumstances (only 10.5%), meaning that the private dimension of migrants' lives—their emotional ties, sense of belonging, or personal experiences—remains almost invisible. As a result, migrants could be perceived by the audience primarily as functional workers and adapters, rather than as human beings with their identity. Their voices remain instrumentalized, since the quotes selected tend to reinforce narratives about labour and integration, while private and personal dimensions are marginalised.

3.10. Visual Portrayals of Migrants

Visual representations are a central component of how migrants are made visible or invisible in the public sphere. This subsection examines the prevalence, context, and valence of images used in articles about migrant and links visual patterns to the textual frames identified elsewhere in the analysis.

Migrants are portrayed mainly neutrally (47.1%) or positively (51.5%), with negative portrayals being rare (1.5%). Most visuals show work settings, jobs, tools, factories or construction (82.5%), while private contexts are almost absent (4.8%), with only a few visuals showing groups (6.3%) or portraying individuals (3.2%). Vecernji.hr and 24sata.hr favour positive imagery, while Jutarnji.hr remains neutral. Vecernji.hr portrays migrants as workers in nearly 89% of visuals, Jutarnji.hr in 81.5% (with more individual portraits, 7.4%), while 24sata.hr shows fewer work images (66.7%) but more groups (11.1%) and varied contexts. Overall, migrants are visually framed as labourers, rarely as private individuals or family members. This mirrors textual reporting, reducing migrants to “labour power” with few attempts at humanisation.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Media representation of migrant workers matters for three inter-related reasons. First, media are a primary source of public knowledge about social groups. The way media select and frame issues shapes what audiences know, which issues become salient, and how migrants are perceived in everyday life. The public therefore does not simply receive neutral facts: editorial choices about what to report, which

voices to include, and which contexts to show influence public understanding and civic debate.

Second, migrants themselves often have limited access to the media ecosystem that reports on them; language barriers, precarious employment, and weak institutional channels reduce their ability to monitor, contest, or correct representations. This asymmetry means that misrepresentations can persist unchallenged and that migrants' own perspectives and grievances remain insufficiently heard in public discourse.

Third, the routines and incentives of news production, including a focus on conflict, novelty, and economic angles, interact with existing social inequalities to produce systematic representational effects. When coverage privileges economic utility, highlights victimhood without structural analysis, or amplifies threat narratives, it can normalise exclusionary policies, obscure labour rights violations, and depoliticise structural causes of precarity. For example, alarmist phrases such as "ghettos will be created" or "total chaos in tourism" function as threat frames that can legitimise restrictive responses even when they are not supported by evidence.

Taken together, these three points show what is at stake: representation affects public knowledge, migrants' capacity to be heard, and the policy environment that governs their lives. Our findings show that Croatian online portals do not frequently engage in explicit disinformation, yet they do contribute to a broader landscape of misrepresentation and misinformation that shapes public understanding of migrants. While confirmed misinformation appears only in a limited share of articles, selective emphasis, lack of context, and unverified claims are more common and cumulatively reinforce a distorted picture of migrants as primarily an economic resource. These representational practices, though not always factually false, nonetheless create misleading impressions that obscure structural inequalities, marginalise migrants' voices, and normalise their depersonalisation. Taken together, the predominance of economic frames, the frequent depiction of migrants as victims, and the presence of threat narratives alongside scarce dignity-centred portrayals indicate a media ecology that tends to instrumentalise migrants or render them problematic rather than recognise them fully as social actors with rights and voices. In this context, the media does not simply reflect existing inequalities but actively participates in reproducing them.

In relation to RQ1 and RQ2, our research suggests that migrants are most frequently portrayed through the lens of economic function, primarily in the context of work and labour rights. While working conditions are discussed, migrants themselves are rarely cited, and the reporting style, though largely informative, tends to exclude their personal perspectives. In this sense, migrants remain *voiceless*. Of particular significance is the near-complete absence of migrants' own voices in the analysed articles. Only a small proportion of articles (14.4%) include direct statements from migrants, and when these do appear, they predominantly concern working conditions and life in Croatia, while personal and family-related themes remain marginalised. This approach portrays migrants as a collective, rather than as individuals with unique experiences and identities. This is also evident in the fact that more than four fifths of visual portrayals place migrants in a work environment, while private and family settings are virtually absent. Thus, visual representation also underscores their role as workers rather than as social actors with personal and family identities. A similar trend is evident in naming practices. In most articles (88.8%), migrants remain anonymous, with no mention of full names or surnames. This depersonalization further homogenises them and distances them from readers, limiting processes of recognition and identification.

In relation to RQ2, we have also presented evidence that nearly three quarters of the articles directly address issues of working conditions and legal frameworks. Such a focus on the labour dimension creates the impression that migrants are primarily a workforce necessary for the domestic economy. At the same time, their broader social roles and individual life stories are pushed into the background. This trend is heavily influenced by official sources and their institutional perspectives, with a strong focus on the economy, administration, policy, and societal implications.

In relation to RQ3, we can identify a new misinformation frame concerning migrant workers. Migrant workers are simultaneously reduced to an economic resource and a labour force, with their personal perspectives, names, and life stories almost absent. In this way, the media do not primarily contribute to demonisation, but rather reproduce a form of structured dehumanisation, whereby migrants are framed as a functional collective stripped of individual characteristics.

Future research should build on these findings by combining quantitative mapping with qualitative close reading to trace how textual and visual frames interact in shaping public understandings of migrant

labour. Further work is also needed to examine journalists' attitudes toward migrants and the professional norms that guide sourcing, selection, and framing decisions. Our results can serve as a baseline for more complex studies of newsroom practices, including how editors and reporters negotiate the principles of reporting and the challenges of sourcing migrant voices. Besides, the rapid development and increased use of social media have fostered a "widespread recognition of migrants' exposure to deceptive online information from unofficial sources" (Siegel *et al.*, 2024, as cited in Bandiera & Rojas, 2025, p. 2; see also, *e.g.*, Dekker *et al.*, 2018). Hence the role of social media in portraying migrants requires significant attention, as these platforms are becoming predominant information channels in contemporary societies. On top of that, new misinformation and disinformation challenges arise with the development of AI tools and applications that could be used to produce misleading representations of migrants.

Our research also has implications for practice. It raises the issue of skills and competencies required for reporting on migrants. Newsrooms should be encouraged to include migrants' voices, report on structural labour issues rather than episodic incidents, and avoid uncorroborated alarmist language. Recommendations for special training and journalism education programmes could help improve overall reporting practices concerning migrants. Besides, we would like to emphasise the importance of digital literacy and critical thinking skills in understanding and evaluating media representations of migrant labour (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022; Frau-Meigs & Corbu, 2024). Media literacy and digital literacy programmes for the public are also needed to help audiences understand the entire process of news gathering and to more easily comprehend how migrant voices are framed in the media. Policy actors and civil society organisations can use the findings of this study to design media literacy interventions, advocate for better sourcing practices, and encourage platforms to amplify migrants' perspectives.

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Newspaper Headlines from the Corpus

24sata.hr

"Most foreign workers in Croatia are overqualified for the jobs they do" (24sata.hr, 11.6.25) – "Većina stranih radnika u Hrvatskoj prekvalificirana je za posao koji rade". <https://www.24sata.hr/kvaka24/vecina-stranih-radnika-u-hrvatskoj-prekvalificirana-je-za-posao-koji-rade-1055671>

"A man from Split beat five foreigners in McDonald's because his delivery was late: 'You destroyed the country!'" (24sata.hr, 20.2.25) – "Splićanin prebio pet stranaca u McDonald'su jer mu je kasnila dostava: 'Uništili ste državu!'". <https://www.24sata.hr/news/splicanin-prebio-pet-stranaca-u-mcdonald-su-jer-mu-je-kasnila-dostava-unistili-ste-drzavu-1034312>

"Nepali woman in Croatia: Doctors are refusing to help me, and I need care. It's impossible to find a doctor" (24sata.hr, 1.6.25) – "Nepalka u Hrvatskoj: Doktori me odbijaju, a trebam pomoć! Nemoguće je pronaći liječnika". <https://www.24sata.hr/news/nepalka-u-hrvatskoj-doktori-me-odbijaju-a-trebam-pomoc-nemoguće-je-pronaci-liječnika-1054998>

"Selak Raspudić: 'Soon we will have half a million foreign workers. Ghettos will be created!'" (24sata.hr 13.2.25) – "Selak Raspudić: 'Uskoro ćemo imati pola milijuna stranih radnika. Stvarat će se geta!'". <https://www.24sata.hr/news/selak-raspudic-uskoro-cemo-imati-pola-milijuna-stranih-radnika-stvarat-ce-se-geta-1032912>

"Foreign worker gives birth alone on Korčula, leaves baby in basket near house: 'Baby is in hospital'" (24sata.hr, 2.7.25) – "Strana radnica sama se porodila na Korčuli pa dijete ostavila kraj kuće u košari: 'Beba je u bolnici'". <https://www.24sata.hr/news/strana-radnica-sama-se-porodila-na-korculi-pa-dijete-ostavila-kraj-kuce-u-kosari-beba-je-u-bolnici-1060791>

"Zagreb: They physically attacked a foreign worker and stole his money" (24sata.hr, 14.4.25) – "Zagreb: Fizički napali stranog radnika i ukrali mu novac". <https://www.24sata.hr/news/zagreb-fizicki-napali-stranog-radnika-i-ukrali-mu-novac-1045176>

"Five foreign nationals found with counterfeit drivers' licences" (24sata.hr, 16.3.2025) – "Kod petorice stranih državljana našli krivotvorene vozačke". <http://24sata.hr/news/kod-petorice-stranih-drzavljana-nasli-krivotvorene-vozacke-1038922>

Jutarnji.hr

"Results of the first survey on foreign workers in Croatia published: Here's how satisfied they are" (Jutarnji.hr, 14.1.25) – "Objavljeni rezultati prvog istraživanja o stranim radnicima u Hrvatskoj: Evo koliko su zadovoljni". <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/objavljeni-rezultati-prvog-istrazivanja-o-stranim-radnicima-u-hrvatskoj-evo-koliko-su-zadovoljni-15542733>

"Mohammad (30): I came here to work and survive. Croats, why are you beating and robbing me?" (Jutarnji.hr, 19.5.25) – "Mohammad (30): 'Došao sam ovdje raditi

- i pokušati preživjeti. Hrvati, zašto me tučete i pljačkate?"". <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/zagreb/mohammad-30-dosao-sam-ovdje-raditi-i-pokusati-prezivjeti-hrvati-zasto-me-tucete-i-pljackate-15585849>
- "I work 12 hours a day, six days a week. I pay 350 euro for a room, 500 for the scooter and fuel, plus there are Wolt fees, taxes... Do you know how much I have left at the end?" (Jutarnji.hr, 17.7.25) – "Radim 12 sati dnevno, šest dana tjedno, sobu plaćam 350 eura, skuter i gorivo 500, a tu su Wolt, porezi... Znete li koliko mi na kraju ostane?". <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/zagreb/radim-16-sati-dnevno-cest-sati-tjedno-sobu-placam-350-eura-skuter-i-gorivo-500-a-tu-su-wolt-porezi-znete-li-koliko-mi-na-kraju-ostane-15604590>
- "Gabriel made his dreams come true in Zagreb: 'I live in the center, the food is cheap, but I don't understand some of your young people. They want to fight with me...'" (Jutarnji.hr, 11.7.25) – "Gabriel je u Zagrebu ostvario snove: 'Živim u centru, hrana je jeftina, ali ne razumijem neke vaše mlade. Žele se tući sa mnom...'" <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/zagreb/gabriel-je-u-zagrebu-ostvario-snove-zivim-u-centru-hrana-je-jeftina-ali-ne-razumijem-vase-mlade-zasto-se-zele-tuci-sa-mnom-15602591>
- "Brač strongman crammed 30 Bangladeshi workers into one room: 'They're tiny, and the beds are from IKEA, they're good'" (Jutarnji.hr, 9.2.25) – "Brački moćnik potrpao 30 radnika iz Bangladeša u jednu sobu: 'Malešni su, a kreveti su iz IKEA-e, dobri su'". <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/bracki-mocnik-potrpao-30-radnika-iz-bangladesa-u-jednu-sobu-malesni-su-a-kreveti-su-iz-ikea-e-dobri-su-15551325>
- "The well-established business of Zagreb's bullies: They ordered food through an app, then beat and robbed foreign workers" (Jutarnji.hr, 9.2.2025) – "Uhodan 'biznis' nasilnika iz Zagreba: Naručivali hranu putem aplikacije, potom tukli i pljačkali strane radnike". <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/crna-kronika/uhodan-biznis-nasilnika-iz-zagreba-narucivali-hranu-putem-aplikacije-potom-tukli-i-pljackali-strane-radnike-15551359>

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- "Sarita from Nepal found a new home in Zagorje: 'Everything fell into place, I would like to stay in Croatia forever'" (Večernji.hr, 26.3.25) – "Nepalka Sarita pronašla novi dom u Zagorju: 'Sve mi se posložilo, željela bih zauvijek ostati u Hrvatskoj'". <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/nepalka-sarita-nasla-novi-dom-u-zagorju-sve-mi-se-poslozilo-zeljela-bi-zauvijek-ostati-u-hrvatskoj-1848719>
- "Filipino man in Zagreb admits: I can live on my salary, but I save and spend carefully" (Večernji.hr, 20.5.25) – "Filipinac u Zagrebu priznao: Od svoje plaće mogu živjeti, ali štedim i pametno trošim". <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/filipinac-u-zagrebu-priznao-od-svoje-place-mogu-zivjeti-uspijevam-stedjeti-i-pametno-trosim-1862844>
- "Came to work in Croatia, ended up humiliated: 160 foreign workers attacked in seven months" (Večernji.hr, 8.4.25) – "Došli raditi u Hrvatsku, završili poniženi: U sedam mjeseci napadnuto 160 stranih radnika". <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/dosli-raditi-u-hrvatsku-završili-ponizeni-u-sedam-mjeseci-napadnuto-160-stranih-radnika-1851763>
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“Nepalese man recounts his experience working in Croatia: ‘I have no money anymore’” (Večernji.hr, 25.6.25) – “Nepalac ispričao svoje iskustvo rada u Hrvatskoj: ‘Više uopće nemam novca’”. <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/za-pet-mjeseci-baustele-nepalcu-platio-900-eura-od-1996-otvorio-11-firmi-1871775>

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