



Policy Brief

Muslims in Germany:

Media portrayal and everyday experiences

Executive Summary

Although the second generation of Muslim immigrants born in Germany is much better integrated than the first generation, the political and media debates are increasingly confined to the 'failed integration of Muslims'. While people used to generalise about 'foreigners' and 'their integration problems' in the past, designations based on an immigrant's national origin (e.g. 'Turks', 'Italians' or 'Moroccans') were more common until just a few years ago. The deficiency-oriented integration debate has revolved around the Muslim population group, i.e. immigrants from Islamically oriented countries, in the last few years. By using religious terms and ascriptions in the integration discourse, a very heterogeneous group of people with a migration background has been reduced to a single characteristic – 'being Muslim' and thus to their (in some cases, only assumed) religious affiliation. The media is intensifying this trend: they treat Islam mainly as a security issue with a view to Islamist terrorism and constantly portray specific integration problems of individuals as representative for the whole group of "Muslims".

How do members of the native and migrant populations assess this negative media image? To what extent are there differences in perception between the various groups? And what are the repercussions of the negative media image on everyday coexistence and inter-ethnic contact?

The Policy Brief reveals the large gap that exists between the portrayal of Muslims in the media perceived by the population and the day-to-day experiences and feelings about coexistence of Muslim immigrants and native population. The basis of the analysis is the SVR's 2012 Integration Barometer, a representative survey of more than 9,200 people with and without a migration background. If asked how 'Turks', 'Africans', 'Arabs', 'Eastern Europeans' and 'Muslims' are depicted in the media, both sides of the immigration society are surprisingly consistent in their opinion: the picture the media paints of these groups is much too negative. People take a particularly critical view of how Muslims are portrayed: around 71 per cent of respondents without a migration background feel that how Muslims are represented in the media tends to be or is too negative. In contrast, the portrayal of other groups is seen as less problematic: only approximately 63 per cent felt that the image of 'Turks' and 'Eastern Europeans' was too negative, around 66 per cent for 'Africans'. Among Muslims themselves,



sensitivity to the image of Muslims portrayed in the media is much more pronounced. More than 82 per cent of interviewees with a migration background and Islamic religious affiliation found media representation of Muslims too negative. This is in no way merely an expression of concern for their 'own group'. The immigrants with a Turkish, Eastern European or African migration background also viewed Muslims as the group most affected by negative reporting. The respondents found reporting on the group from their own country to be much less negative.

However, coexistence between the native population and Muslim immigrants in everyday immigration society doesn't appear nearly as bad as described in the media 'Islam integration discourse'. There is a considerable discrepancy between the reactions to the media portrayals and personal experiences in ethnically diverse communities. Particularly the Muslim immigrants who were interviewed for the Integration Barometer appreciate the coexistence of the native and migrant population: 58.1 per cent experience this coexistence as untroubled; fewer than 30 per cent perceive disruptions. In addition, there has been evidence of a positive trend for several years: Apart from dispiriting sentiment during the 'Sarrazin debate', an increasing percentage of interviewees feel that coexistence is largely untroubled in both the Muslim immigrant population as well as in the native German population.

The findings illustrate that the immigration society in Germany still takes a sober, optimistic view of the day-to-day integration. Even though more recent studies on group-specific xenophobia and religious tolerance toward Muslims have found a relatively high degree of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiment, these attitudes have not been reflected in day-to-day coexistence. No evidence has (yet) been found that the negatively charged public debates have a lasting effect on the coexistence between Muslims and the native population in everyday integration. However, a persistently negative media image can strengthen existing prejudices or cause biases to form among people who are more or less indifferent to Islam. This can then also strain the daily interactions between immigrants and the native population.

The problem is not so much that the media reports on negative issues, there is above all a lack of 'good news': Media reports about Muslims are often in-depth and factually accurate but they lack sufficient balance. Measures to improve the media-related integration climate must prioritise increasing the number of articles about Muslims in their regular day-to-day lives outside of the problem contexts. This would also make it possible to better meet the needs of media users in the diverse immigration society, in the sense of 'customer orientation'. After all, the native and migrant populations both expect a balanced media image and less negative subtext in reporting on Muslims and Islam. To reach this goal, media producers should, on the



one hand, continue the processes of intercultural openness already underway by increasing, for example, the percentage of journalists with a migration background and introduce mechanisms for quality assurance of media content. On the other hand, politicians and actors in civil society can be involved by creating occasions for positive reporting.