

TWO SIDES NOW: ACCOUNTS AND REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH AND THE MAKING OF A FILM

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This article reflects on research and a film that investigated media coverage of the 2015 refugee crisis by public broadcasters in Hungary and Serbia. The results were presented in a short socially engaging documentary. It consists of a coalescence of short clips from evening news reports which summarize the findings through conclusion-style narration. The documentary depicts the striking contrast in the representation of refugees and migrants in the public media of the two countries. Although the documentary focused specifically on public broadcasters, an additional aim of the project was to show how these both reflect and influence the attitude of general public opinion toward refugees. The findings are reflected through four segments in the film: 1) the discrepancies in the representation of the gravity of the situation; 2) the selective analyses of the situation by the media—namely, the focus on the security threat in Hungary on the one hand, and humanitarian and human security in Serbia on the other; 3) the justification of government policies and; 4) boasting about the merits and achievements of these policies. These four sections illustrate that in both Hungary and Serbia, the refugee crisis was processed and exploited employing the same methods and for the same purpose: essentially, the crisis was used to demonstrate the efficiency of the state's response to the supposed ordeal it was facing. However, although the method was the same, the arguments differed: Hungarian state media presented “illegal immigrants” as a threat to Hungarian and European culture. In this narrative, Hungary—i.e. the government—presented itself as the gatekeeper of Europe. Serbian public media, on the other hand, chose to focus on the human tragedy of the “refugees” and to highlight the generosity of Belgrade's humanitarian efforts to relieve them in their plight. Following this logic, the Serbian government could claim to be more European than Europeans themselves.

Introduction and Background

Over the course of summer 2015, the number of refugees and migrants entering Europe through the Balkans increased considerably. Each of the countries located on this migration route experienced this increase, and Serbia and Hungary were no exceptions. The number of refugees entering Serbia quadrupled within just a few months: in May 2015, Serbia registered 9.034 asylum seekers. Three months later, in August, 37.195 people were registered (UNHCR, 2015). Although practically all of these migrants only transited through the country and there were never more than ten thousand refugees in Serbia at any given moment, the increasing flow of people was quite visible in Belgrade.¹ The neighborhoods located around train and bus station were full of large families carrying backpacks. Hundreds of people were sleeping in surrounding parks, trying to get rest before the next phase of the journey. Soon this became a hot topic not just in Belgrade, but in the entire country: numerous civic associations were hastily set up to provide help to the refugees, dozens of initiatives were organized to collect clothes, hygiene items and food, while through the media one could follow major developments in the country and the region day by day. By the end of August 2015, what had been dubbed “Europe’s biggest migration crisis since WWII” was an incessant and ever-present topic that had for the moment monopolized public discourse in the country, generating a rather surprising level of solidarity among ordinary citizens with the fate of the refugees. The overall tone of this discourse was that the refugees had not chosen to migrate to Europe but were forced into fleeing by a brutal conflict in which they were innocent victims, and “we,” the citizens of Serbia, have a duty to help them on their journey to a better and safer life in Western Europe. Far from being seen as a threat, the migrants were largely portrayed as harmless and even helpless victims. Quite frequently, the Serbian state broadcaster, Radio Television of Serbia (hereinafter RTS), would feature in the news a story of some generous individual who had offered help to the refugees, either by giving away some of his or her precious belongings, or by hosting entire refugee families. But beyond these cases of exceptional generosity that were immediately highlighted by the media, the general attitude toward the refugees was predominantly positive and benevolent. An example of this is the case of “Refugee Aid Miksalište”, a civic organization set up in the beginning of 2015 to provide help to the migrants. This ad-hoc initiative was originally intended to bring together and mobilize members of the local community in Belgrade to gather humanitarian aid. Spurred on by RTS, which publicized its initiatives, Miksalište became extremely successful in gathering and distributing clothes, food and other items. By August 2015, this ad-hoc civic initiative transformed into a permanent welcoming point for refugees, with its own sanitary facilities, kitchen, distribution and even a cultural center which organized numerous workshops and activities. In the eyes of the public Miksalište in a way became the symbol of solidarity with the refugees in Belgrade.

Over the same period, Hungary experienced a very similar process regarding the refugee crisis but with an altogether different outcome. In 2015, the number of first-time asylum seekers in Hungary was 174.000, which was four times more than in the previous year. This made Hungary a country with the second-highest number of

¹ As of October 19, there are 6300 refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Serbia (UNHCR, 2016).

applications received in the EU-28 (Eurostat, 2016).² This unprecedented flow of people triggered controversial political reactions from the Hungarian government. In May, the government launched a “National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism,” which was a questionnaire sent to all citizens above the age of 18. It portrayed refugees as “illegal economic immigrants” who were encouraged by the EU to leave their countries and head toward Europe “to benefit from the European economic and welfare system”. Those citizens willing to participate in the decision-making were asked to mail back the questionnaire by July 31. At the same time, the government initiated a billboard campaign as well that was addressed to the migrants and displayed slogans such as “If you come to Hungary you have to respect our laws” or “If you come to Hungary you cannot take our jobs”—all in Hungarian. Meanwhile, asylum seekers who were willing to continue their routes to Germany crowded transit zones, refugee camps, railway stations, parks and borders. They were labelled as “threatening,” “violent” and even described as a harmful horde of people by the public media broadcaster’s M1 channel,³ which is one of the core recourses of our research. At the end of August refugees crowded the Budapest Keleti Railway Station—which was eventually designated a “transit zone”—because the government blocked international railway traffic in order to register every single person who entered the country. However, refugees refused to be registered in Hungary, as their final destination in the EU was either Austria or Germany. Shortly after these events, the government announced the closure of the Serbian-Hungarian border by building a 175 kilometer-long, 4 meter-high “security fence”. The fence was ready by September and with the amendment of Hungarian criminal law, illegal crossing of the fence/border became a violation of the law, and therefore a criminal act. Despite hostile political messages, civil society engaged in helping the refugees all over Hungary. Among many NGOs, MigSzol (Migrant Solidarity Group) and Menedék (Hungarian Association for Migrants) were the most active participants of the crisis: they mobilized people and collected and delivered supplies for migrants in need.

But despite the many initiatives coming from Hungarian civil society, the differences in the official attitude toward the migrants were quite startling. The discrepancy between the Serbian and Hungarian discourse was most obvious regarding the border fence, already under construction. For weeks, the Serbian and Hungarian government had been feuding, through their respective public broadcasters, over the fence and its legitimacy. The Hungarian side claimed that it was the only way to stem the tide of refugees. As a result, Hungary had taken upon itself to defend the continent from the unwelcome foreigners, since countries on the Balkan route, Serbia especially, were not doing their duty and were simply letting, or worse, encouraging people to pass through. In this scenario, Hungary appeared as the country that was bearing the brunt of the refugee crisis. The Serbian State media, on the other hand, was accusing Hungary of rash decisions and selfishness. It acted unilaterally and avoided cooperating with its neighbors to find a common and humane solution to the crisis. That was the overall tone of bilateral relations between Serbia and Hungary, as presented through the public broadcasters, when the academic semester began in September 2015.

² It is important to highlight the fact that the vast majority of the registered asylum seekers continued their journey toward Western Europe. Therefore, just as Serbia, Hungary is mainly a transit country.

³ M1 is one of the channels owned and operated by Magyar Televízió, the Hungarian public broadcasting company.

One of the courses offered at Central European University at the time was “External and Internal Determinants of Recent Global Migration in Europe”. The course had been specifically designed in response to developments that had taken place over the summer. It appeared to be the perfect opportunity to take a step back and critically analyze the dominant discourses that had been whipped up and repeated countless times by public broadcasters in both Serbia and Hungary. The three of us were particularly interested in deconstructing the prevalent perceptions of the migration crisis, and analyzing in what specific ways these perceptions differed in the two countries. But rather than looking into these questions in a usual term paper, we were given the opportunity to choose a more innovative medium. That is when we decided to make a short amateur documentary that would present the striking contrast in the interpretation of the Hungarian and Serbian public broadcasters. After sifting through numerous Hungarian and Serbian news reports, we decided to ask the following research question: for what purposes did Serbia and Hungary politicize the migration crisis through public broadcasters?

Methodology and Mapping the Outline

Analysis of multimedia content is an emerging method in journalism, activism, social media and academia. Justification for such comes from the digital era, which is an unavoidable characteristic of our times in almost any contemporary discourse analyses. Furthermore, Uwe Flick, in his *Introduction to Qualitative Research* (1998) states that qualitative research uses film to tell us about the social construction of reality. In the analysis of the video footage in this research we followed the general instructions on how to conduct such non-normative action correctly. The guide most followed naturally was that described by Denzin (2004) which includes the steps of: ‘Looking and Feeling’, or regarding videos as a whole, developing a research question out of the feeling, trying to impose microstructural analyses, and in the end finding patterns.

The pattern in media reporting videos in our hands was shocking, as it seemed to justify the theory of the influence of media on the general atmosphere within a society. Our initial research stimulus concerned the differences in the general feeling about the migration crisis in Serbia and Hungary. And then, after carefully watching, mapping and categorizing dozens of hours of video footage, we were back to the same spot: mixed feelings and an almost bipolar satiety with information.

Hence, the outline we came up with to summarize our findings in the patterns very clearly showed how every political action is there for different goals, namely those of: campaign-building, economic gain, even nation-building, and all for power-building and control. It was necessary to take on an objective and a macro perspective on media reporting to see these dots connect into a clear line.

We posited that to achieve these goals, information is easily shaped and reshaped through widespread state media until it fits the desired perspective. The story is given a dimension necessary for the people or the masses to accept the truth that the state envisions in its long-term agendas.

Despite both sides ultimately turning to populism for political sustainability and other goals previously enlisted, we decided to emphasize that working for one's goals doesn't have to be entirely bad. There are innately good ways of achieving political goals, and bad ones. It very much seemed to still be a choice. However, this leads us only to another deadlock: The eternally human and hence academic question of who is to make this choice. Is it the people? (Barham, 2010) As there is a certain limit to one's academic analysis capacities, and definitely limits to a short documentary style, this was left as a rhetoric puzzle for the viewers, satisfying a popular trait in activist documentary film-making in the meantime.

Storyline (Un)covers

In order to answer our research question, we went through all the news reports covering the migration crisis of M1 and RTS respectively, from June to August 2015. Very quickly it became obvious how contrastingly different the approach of the two broadcasters was, and that they were both in line with the official stance of their respective states. Following this initial assessment, the news reports were then categorized in main groups, in accordance with the topic of each particular report. As such, a storyline simply emerged, composed of 4 main segments: 1) the discrepancies in the representation of the gravity of the situation; 2) the selective analyses of the situation by the media—namely, the focus on the security threat in Hungary on the one hand, and the humanitarian and human ordeal in Serbia on the other; 3) the justification of government policies and; 4) the boasting about the merits and achievements of these policies. These segments also represent strong arguments leading viewers through the investigative stream of the storyline, much like an academic paper, but in images.

Gravity of Discrepancies

The first segment represents the first and foremost discrepancy between the Serbian and Hungarian media reports, which is the presentation of the gravity of the migration crisis. The phenomenon was labelled internationally as a “migration crisis” early on. However, this is an ambiguous term from a macro perspective and leaves much space for reshaping. In the micro perspective, everyone molds it in a certain way to justify their arguments.

The Hungarian national media mostly presented the crisis as an almost evil threat to the state by focusing on security issues and emphasizing incidents at the borders. Words often used in reporting were: “illegal,” “aggressive,” “violators,” “disobeying” and so on. Clips of dissatisfied citizens and tourists were included often, showing how the migrants were bad for Hungary and its economy.

On the other hand, the Serbian media emphasized the humanitarian side of the story, showing refugees in Serbia talking about their reasons for fleeing their country of origin and their fears. A very mild tone in the voice of the narrators is present, with emphasis on words such as: “war,” “hunger,” “security,” “children” and “shelter”.

Selective Analyses

In line with the previous segment, the second aspect goes more in-depth by representing how the media on the two sides had selected certain segments of their representation of the crisis to put the country's agenda in focus. For Hungarian media, it was the worry of Hungary of implications that the situation would have on the security of the nation, and how the government is ready to protect the nation. This is shown through constant reporting on the plans and progress of building the fence at the Hungarian borders and taking a stand as a protector of Europe. However, the Serbian public broadcaster focused on how Serbia is reacting and calling for the international community to help the country in its humanitarian efforts for the refugees. Emphasis is still always put on the needs of refugees and how the authorities are trying the help, but risk being overwhelmed by what may turn into a "humanitarian catastrophe". At no point are the refugees designated as those responsible for such a situation. Rather, RTS often accused Hungary as the culprit, claiming that the building of the fence makes any common solution impossible, and only aggravates the humanitarian situation.

Justification

All of these actions on both sides were often justified through media such that "the other" is also to blame. Hungary over-emphasized the so-called "European goal" of its policies on immigrants, as to protect the continent, while the Serbian media put an emphasis on how it is almost alone in this fight to find a humane solution to the crisis and how the Hungarian government is acting on its own without consulting regionally for a common policy and goal. Throughout the analysis of this segment of the research findings, it was noticeable that the media were finding scapegoats⁴ for their positions in their very neighbors.

Merits

As the summer was fading, and the crisis was becoming a steady news topic, the media and the governments directly started boasting about the correctness of their behavior. The Hungarian media was showing the ability of the state to handle this crisis, while the Serbian side was gloating with wonderful words from refugees themselves about the hospitality of Serbia and its citizens.

For this segment, it was also decided to include two messages for the conclusion of the video from the very websites of the two governments. The first is a video produced by the far-right mayor of the Hungarian town of Ásotthalom, located on the Serbian border. The high-production, almost action blockbuster-like video shows the measures taken by the mayor to protect the border. The second one is the video of Serbian Minister Vulin gloating about Serbia's high standards in human rights, which he even concludes to be higher than those of the European Union.

⁴ A theory within psychology about the possibility of developing prejudice and/or blaming a certain group to vent one's own anger (Gross, 2010).

The above-illustrated contrasts in the media representation of the 2015 refugee crisis in Serbia and Hungary are presented in our short documentary which is available by clicking on the link below: <https://vimeo.com/151491698>

Conclusions and Call for Action

This short documentary attempted to illustrate that in both Hungary and Serbia, the migration crisis of summer 2015 was equally politicized by public broadcasters, but in different ways. In Hungary, the crisis was mainly presented as a security and economic threat, and even as a threat to Hungarian and European identity. Framing the problem in this way enabled the Hungarian government to display the efficiency with which it was tackling these threats. The centerpiece of this effort to stem the tide of migrants was the border fence. Through the public broadcaster, the Hungarian government claimed that it was not just defending the country, but the entire continent, from the flood of migrants. Through state media, Hungary was presented as the gates that protect European (read Christian) civilization and identity from the migrant (read Muslim) “flood”.

In Serbia, the issue was framed in an altogether different, but equally politicized manner. Serbian public media focused on the human tragedy of the refugees and highlighted the generosity of Belgrade’s humanitarian efforts to relieve their plight. The Serbian discourse essentialized *the migrant* just as much as the Hungarian discourse. But rather than being the alien, the non-European or the terrorist (Szalai & Göbl, 2015), Serbian media portrayed the migrant as a helpless victim, the passive subject of our benevolence. Such a portrayal in turn enabled the government to present itself as the humane caretaker that looks after the ordinary man, even if he is not a citizen of the country. Oddly enough, we found that, just like Hungary, Serbia too used the migration crisis to display its European-ness. Public officials claimed that the policies adopted by the State were sure proof of its adherence to European and universal values of humanity, tolerance and human rights. What’s more, the Serbian authorities claimed to be more European than Europeans themselves, and to illustrate this, RTS frequently referred to the selfishness and indifference of the Hungarian attitude. This proved to be quite a successful strategy for the Serbian government, which was indeed praised for its handling of the crisis (“Za EP Srbija Pozitivan Igrač,” 2016).⁵

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More than a year has passed since the events we studied in our short documentary; what have been the major developments since that period? In particular, did the predominant discourse of the Hungarian and Serbian public broadcasters change in the meantime?

⁵ A report recently published by the European Parliament stated that, in spite of a poorly developed asylum system, Serbia is a positive player in the migration crisis.

In September 2015, right after the period of time we dealt with in our short documentary, the development of a migrant quota system was suggested by some of the member states of the European Union. The system would have distributed asylum seekers among countries according to the member states' size, population and economic situation. It originally aimed to relocate 160.000 refugees from Italy and Greece to other EU countries in the name of solidarity and sharing responsibility; however, a year later, in September 2016, Hungary, along with Slovakia, refused the implementation of the plan ("EU Stands by Unsolved Migrant Quotas", 2016).

Meanwhile in Hungary, the quota system gained enormous political attention at the domestic level as well. Once again, the government launched a huge billboard campaign, calling on its citizens to participate in a referendum where they could vote against the mandatory quota that concerns Hungary. The question was the following: "Do you want the European Union to be able to mandate the obligatory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens into Hungary even without the approval of the National Assembly?" ("Hungary votes on EU," 2016) M1 and the whole of the Hungarian public service media was used by the government during the campaign period to advertise the referendum. It was held on October 2, 2016, and participation was 41.32 per cent. This means that the poll was actually invalid, because participation was below the required 50 percent threshold. However, a striking 98 percent of those who voted chose to answer no to the proposed question. Without mentioning the invalidity of the referendum, the ruling party, Fidesz, celebrated the outcome of the referendum as a major victory. The government is attempting to strengthen its position in Hungary by raising (false) awareness of the threat that migration potentially means to Europe and to the Hungarian nation. We might conclude that the Hungarian political attitude toward refugees has not changed in a year, nor has the state-funded public broadcaster's discourses. In its discourse Hungary is using fairly Eurosceptic rhetorical elements, while in Serbia this is not echoed. However, Serbia has also started to reconsider its position towards the refugees.

In the summer of 2016, border controls became even stricter in all of Serbia's neighboring countries, not just Hungary. Faced with the prospect of becoming a kind of "cul de sac," a country where migrants and refugees would "pile up" without being able to continue their journey toward Western Europe, the Serbian attitude all of a sudden became much less noble. Officials stated on numerous occasions that they will not allow Serbia to become a "parking lot" for migrants ("Vulin: Srbija Neće Biti," 2016). Slowly, the issue of "security" started to creep into the public discourse. *The migrant* was no longer just the helpless victim but an "illegal trespasser" ("Vulin: Smanjuje se broj," 2016). Several thousand policemen and soldiers were sent to monitor the southern borders with Bulgaria and Macedonia in order to prevent such "undocumented migrants"—a term that only recently made its appearance in public statements—from entering the country. The authorities also began to make distinctions between "justified" and "unjustified" migrants, and to allude to their supposed violent and disrespectful character. This new attitude was best illustrated by the words of the former Serbian prime minister himself. During a joint press conference in Belgrade with his Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vucic made the following statement: "Today we have more problems (with migrants). At the (Serbian-Hungarian) border 81 percent of people are from Afghanistan, they are economic migrants, and these are people who first started to make trouble. They fight among themselves, and for the first time we caught them stealing from two commercial establishments. There is a different atmosphere compared to the one we had at the beginning of the crisis" ("Ne

možemo biti glupi' Orban nudi," 2016). The Minister of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, who is in charge of managing the migration crisis, even suggested building a fence on the country's southern border.

But despite this new element in the discourse, Serbian officials simultaneously try to maintain the image of a benevolent State, especially in the eyes of the West. During a visit to New York in late September 2016, Aleksandar Vucic assured that Serbia is treating migrants well and that it is showing a "humane face" ("Vučić: Nema političke cene koju," 2016). Most recently, the government went so far as to send 50 tons of humanitarian aid to Aleppo, in a display of solidarity with the people of Syria ("Avion sa humanitarnom pomoći," 2016). In essence, a kind of split in the discourse is taking place: on the one hand, Serbia still wishes to display its generosity, but at the same time the migration crisis is increasingly securitized. It remains to be seen whether this contradictory stance will last.

The main indications for our research here lie in the idea that it is the right time to repeat it and keep the topic alive in international academia. The reactions of our peers to the films, as well as the conversations it ignites with its perspectives, along with never-ending developments, set a sure justification for a higher-production remake of the film, as well as the production of a higher quality sequel that would continue and increase the outreach of the message among peoples.

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