THE REFUGEE PROBLEM – A REAL OR SOCIALLY-CONSTRUCTED THREAT? THE SECURITISATION OF REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The problem: While the refugee crisis of 2015/2016 presented a serious challenge for the European Union and some of EU-member states in particular, Bulgaria somehow remained almost intact by the main refugee flow. That is why the low levels of illegal migration towards Bulgaria, especially in comparison to other countries, are in contradiction with Bulgarian society's predominantly negative response towards refugees (as evidenced by a number of public opinion polling surveys and protests against refugee centers and resettlement of migrants).

Main thesis: This article is an attempt at reconsidering the dimensions of the refugee problem in Bulgaria and the image of migrants as a real or socially-constructed threat. The author seeks an answer to the question of whether the disproportionally strong negative reaction towards refugees could be explained by their securitisation – a process in which regular political issues are transformed into matters of security and existential threat.

Method: In order to determine whether the refugee problem is securitised in the Bulgarian context, the author has used the analytical framework developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde. Within this framework the four elements of securitisation are studied in the context of the migration crisis and the Bulgarian society. These elements are: existential threat, the referent object (object or ideal threatened by the existential threat), securitising actor: an entity that makes the securitising move/statement, and the audience.

Conclusions: The analysis gives us grounds to assert that considering the specifics of the Bulgarian society, the refugee problem is securitised and constructed as an existential threat.

Key words: refugees, securitisation, refugee crisis, Bulgarian society

Introduction

The European refugee crisis of 2015 is one of the most serious challenges to the European demography, culture and economy since the end of the Second World War [1]. While for a number of years, the burden of the refugee flow was borne mainly by the developing countries, Europe started to feel the consequences of the growing number of refugees only in 2014 [2]. The crisis reached its peak in 2015 when according to Frontex, 1.8 million migrants, mostly from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia arrived at the European Union's (EU) external borders to seek asylum (an increase of 544% compared to 2014) [3]. According to the data provided by Eurostat, more than 2.5 million asylum applications were filed only in the EU countries in the 2015-2016 period, with Germany and Sweden being the most desirable destinations [4].

Migrants arrived in Europe via several main routes, with the Eastern Mediterranean Route and its continuation - the Western Balkan Route being the busiest. Regardless of its key location and the fact that the shortest route from Turkey to Western and Central Europe runs across it, Bulgaria remains off the major refugee flows. While the country registers an increase of the same quantitative indicators characterising the crisis in Europe (sudden increase of the number of illegal entries and the number of the asylum applications) the migration pressure on Bulgaria is weaker compared to Greece and the countries from the Western Balkans [5]. During the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, at least 30 000 migrants entered Bulgaria, which is approximately 3% of the total number for all the EU member

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states and is significantly smaller than the number of migrants who entered Greece, namely 821 000 people [6]. The number of the asylum applications filed in Bulgaria in 2015 and 2016 comprises only 1.5% of the number for all the EU member states and since the peak of the crisis, the number of the filed applications is progressively declining. According to the State Agency for Refugees, in 2015 the number of the asylum-seekers in Bulgaria is 20 391, in 2016 it decreased to 19 418, it was only 3700 in 2017 and remained at approximately 2 000 in the following years until 2020 [7, 8].

Considering the weaker intensity of the migration pressure on Bulgaria, what we observe is a contradiction with the predominantly negative response of the Bulgarian society towards refugees. This attitude is evidenced by opinion polling surveys and protests against refugee centers and refugee resettlement in Bulgaria [9]. According to a national representative survey conducted in 2016 by the sociological agency Sova Harris, the Bulgarian society is burdened with different types of fears related to refugees. According to the survey, 47% of Bulgarians believe that the EU should not support refugees seeking asylum on its territory. The two most common arguments were that refugees would put a pressure on the Bulgarian economy (acc. 78% of the respondents) and that the refugees would pose a threat to the national security (acc. 60% of the respondents) [5]. Other opinion polling surveys conducted in 2020 show that the majority of the Bulgarian people (87.9%) are not adequately informed on the refugee topic, while 76.8% state that they have never met a refugee [10].

Negative attitude has also been demonstrated in a number of protests against the reception and resettlement of refugees in Bulgaria. Starting in the early days of the migrant crisis in 2013, when the residents of the village of Telish protested against the conversion of former military barracks into refugee centers, the indignation continued also in the following years even when the number of migrants was very low [11, 12, 13, 14, 15]. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), even if municipalities estimate that refugee resettlement will be beneficial, they prefer not to announce it publicly [9].

From the above, it is evident that the anti-immigrant attitude does not result from any objective reasons, such as negative experience with immigrants or a growing number of refugees. This gives us reasons to assume that such a negative attitude results from other factors and processes taking place in the society. We have grounds to ask the question whether migrants are a real or a socially-constructed threat. The main goal of this article is an attempt at reconsidering the image of the migrant as a threat and finding if the disproportional strong negative reaction towards refugees could be explained by their securitisation – a process in which regular political issues are transformed into matters of security and existential threat.

Materials and Methods

The securitisation concept developed by Barry Buzan and his colleagues at the Copenhagen School of International Relations, is part of the growing field of security studies. In their book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde look at securitisation as a process in which issues are taken "beyond politics" and constituted as extreme security issues and matters of existential threat. This new aspect of security also provides new means for threats theorizing. Prior to the work of Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, threats were considered mainly as a real and objective state of the security environment of the threatened object [16]. In the new framework of analysis, threats are examined most of all as a subjective product, a language act and a linguistic phenomenon. Thus security problems and threats have lost their objective nature and the actors who are able to include and frame an issue as a threat into the public conversation, turns it into a problem of security. Due to this, the theory of securitisation raises the issue about the

socially-constructed threat which is the perfect tool in the hands of political actors [17]. According to the prominent sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, securitisation is becoming a favorite trick of political elites, who tend to attach the idea of security to everyday life problems, hence adding to them a decisive importance with the intention of gaining political returns [18].

In order to determine whether the refugee problem is securitised in the Bulgarian context and whether it is an objective or socially-constructed threat, the author used the framework for analysis as developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap De Wilde, and examined the four elements of securitisation. These elements are: existential threat, the referent object (object or ideal threatened by the existential threat), securitising actor: an entity that makes the securitising move/statement, and the audience [16].

Existential Threat and its Referent Objects

For the purposes of this article, we have examined the threats (and their referent objects), relevant to the context of the migration crisis and its impact on the Bulgarian society: 1) socio-cultural threat, 2) economic threat, 3) threat to the internal order and stability (criminal acts and terrorism).

1. Socio-cultural threat. The referent object of security in the socio-cultural sector is the collective identity, including elements, such as religion, national identity and cultural traditions. Under certain conditions, this collective identity is threatened by mass migration of people of different culture, religion and lifestyle. In Bulgaria similarly to most Eastern European countries, are observed negative demographic trends and depopulation of the rural areas. The demographic crisis in the country, understood as a disruption of the natural human reproduction and resulting in regressive changes in the population structural characteristics, is widely discussed as a serious problem. Some analysts reach even further speaking of the problem as a "demographic catastrophe". Due to these trends, the uncontrolled flow of refugees of a different ethnical, religious and cultural belonging could breed fears for the ethnical and religious balance in the country. More and more often opinions are heard warning of Bulgarians being "melted down" or forcibly displaced by migrants [1, 19].

2. Economic threat. Taking into consideration the high poverty rate in the country (according to the National Statistical Institute in 2019 22.6% of the population were below the poverty line), Bulgarians have grounds to consider the migrants as a financial burden on the economy and as competitors for the limited resources of the welfare state [7]. In Bulgaria, the economic burden of the refugee crisis can be mainly associated with: 1) accommodation costs, maintenance and processing of the refugee applications; 2) ensuring the security of the borders. Regarding the former, although there are no precise estimates, there are data confirming that significant resources are needed for the refugees' reception, accommodation, daily maintenance, medical care and ensuring public order and safety in the centres [7, 6]. Regarding the latter, referring to the borders security, the most costly initiatives are building a fence to control refugees along the Bulgarian – Turkish border (160 million BGN not including the repair costs) and providing for additional human resources - physical security, secondment of police officers and military staff from inside the country to the borders. Regardless of the fact that our country is not under a high migration pressure, a great amount of money has been spend due to the expectation of a large-scale migration flow. Despite the discontent with the economic burden imposed by refugees due to the predominating socio-cultural threat, the Bulgarian society also remains skeptical towards the EU funding for dealing with the refugee problem. The EU financial support is raising concerns about long-term commitments possibly undertaken by the government and doubts that Bulgaria might be turned into a "depot" for migrants [7].

3. Threat to the internal order and stability (criminal acts and terrorism). During the European refugee crisis of 2015, the dichotomy of the refugee's image as a threat but also as a victim can be also found in the terrorism and crime discourse. On one hand, the assumption that migrants are directly associated with terrorism and crime has its reasonable explanation - Europe's bitter experience with marginalised and radicalised immigrant communities, the Islamic fundamentalism established in the countries of origin, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and last but not least, the terrorist attacks associated with refugees in Paris, Brussels and a number of German cities [20,21]. Given the nature of terrorism and its enormous psychological impact of fear and terror onto the society, it is no surprise that notwithstanding the low risk for the individual citizen, terrorist attacks have been seen as major source of scaremongering [22]. On the other hand, the United Nations and human rights organisations are defending the position of the migrants as victims of terrorism and crime. UNHCR, Bulgaria have reminded that "refugees do not create terrorism, but terrorism and war create refugees." In 2019, they also pointed out that for the past 5 years, no cases of violence committed by refugees in Bulgaria had been registered while more than 10 cases of violence against refugees took place during the same period of time [23].

Securitising Actor

Another key element is the securitisation actor - these are politicians, lobbyists, bureaucrats, governments, the media and media figures drawing the public attention towards the threat. Therefore, in order to determine the securitisation of the refugee problem in Bulgaria, we need to analyze the message conveyed by the main relevant securitisation actors, i.e. politicians and the media.

Political discourse. In Bulgaria, the political discourse on refugees remains relatively homogeneous, with no obvious differentiation of ideas and opinions between the main political forces. The debate "for and against" refugees and the "pros and cons of migration", taking place to varying degrees in Western Europe, never found its place on the Bulgarian political scene for the entire period of the refugee crisis. The political discourse presents migrants almost entirely from a single perspective - as a problem for which a solution should be sought. However, differences are observed between the foreign and domestic policy rhetoric of the Bulgarian government. The ruling political party GERB is not openly opposing the refugee policy of Germany and some other countries demonstrating a more liberal attitude towards refugees (Bulgaria has even voted in favor of and helped adopt the EU's migrant relocation scheme). In the context of their domestic policy, however, the government emphasizes on border security and solving the migrant problem. A key feature of the Bulgarian political discourse is that refugee-hostile rhetoric is used not only by the far-right political parties (where such messages are expected), but also by the other major political parties. An abnormality observed in the 2016 presidential election campaign is that the Bulgarian Socialist Party was unmistakably using the refugee issues in a negative context, framing migrants as a threat, even though according to their left-wing political ideology they should be showing more solidarity with vulnerable people. While most of the leading political parties are more moderate, and the far-right parties are openly hostile towards migrants, all the main political forces consider the refugees as a problem and a threat [9, 24]. Political discussions revolve around measures to defend citizens against the refugee threat - an effective fence along the border with Turkey, a stricter border control, security guards in the refugee centers and pressure on the EU for revision of the Dublin Regulation in order to eliminate the possibility of returning migrants to Bulgaria [4].

Media discourse. The media coverage of the refugee crisis in Bulgaria features several key characteristics [24, 25]. First, when it comes to refugees, the Bulgarian TV journalism lacks conceptual and analytical presentation of the problem. The focus is mainly on the

subject initiating the crisis – the refugees and their mass migration as well as on the measures and resources needed to control the incoming flow of people. Few are the reports and the analytical programs which offer a conceptual presentation of the refugee problem, i.e. a discussion of the causes and consequences of the refugee crisis and its place in the overall European context. In other words, the media with the widest audience focuses on information provoking fears and omits information that may cause empathy towards refugees, such as conflicts in the migrant's countries of origin, poor living conditions in refugee camps and the dangers of the journey to Europe.

Second, the media image of refugees as presented by the leading televisions, goes through several main stages, which presents the problem one-sidedly and prevents the audience from perceiving its complexity. The stages encompass personal stories and the image of the victim, the fear of Bulgarians living close to the border, the religious opposition, Brussel's controversial policy, and last but not least the filter of the US-EU-Turkey-Russia geostrategic orbit, terrorism and the Islamic State, as well as the business of the traffickers. To be noted is the imbalance between the stages – very few present the refugees as victims and many more focus on their image as a threat [25].

Third, mainstream media are no longer playing a leading role in shaping the public opinion and have been displaced by the social networks such as Facebook and the citizen journalism. In this environment predominating is the user-generated content which however has not been moderated and where hatred speech has found a fertile soil and a lasting presence. In the comments and on the social networks, refugees are most often demonised, presented as a threat and the discussions is dominated by fear and frustration [26].

Fourth, while the ethical standards of the traditional media do not allow them to take sides and use the speech of hatred, they are the ones giving the stage to politicians protected by immunity who often use hostile, fear-inciting, populist speech with regard to refugees. Common practices used by political figures to help incite fear of migrants in the society are, for example, comments on the refugee crisis in a very general context, linked with a discussion on terrorism; merging the terms "refugee" and "immigrant"; the use of demonising and dehumanising names with regard to refugees (such as "aliens", "invaders", "criminals") [24].

Audience

One of the most important steps in the process of securitisation is its perception and confirmation by the audience. For the purpose of this analysis, the audience is the Bulgarian society. The study of the securitisation messages showed a predominant positioning of the refugees and migrants as a security problem and more particularly as a national security, socio-cultural and economic threat. In the context of election campaigns in particular, some analysts assume that the refugee issue and its securitisation were used for political gains. Focusing on the securitised issue in order to distract the public attention is not a new phenomenon. Zygmunt Bauman presents securitisation as an "illusionist trick" used to shift the public anxiety from problems which governments are unable (or unwilling) to solve to problems which governments can solve enthusiastically in front of everyone's eyes. Examples belonging to the first group of problems are the availability of quality jobs, social stability, effective protection against social degradation, and protection of the human dignity. Examples for problems belonging to the second group are the fight against terrorism and repelling foreigners from the state borders. According to Bauman, most prone to the effect of this political practice is that part of society which is particularly strongly worried about a possible loss of its social status and the unclear future prospects, the lack of public recognition and self-esteem. This part of the society is the one which is most longing for a compensation for their loss of personal status and dignity [18]. In this sense, the economic

and political instability resulting from the so-called Transition period, makes the Bulgarian society particularly prone to the "illusionist trick" described by Bauman. The dynamic and controversial changes, as well as the large-scale and long-lasting crises of the last decades, have left a large part of the Bulgarians with a feeling of being the "losers" of the Transition period [27, 28]. In such cases, according to Bauman, the feeling of anxiety is not "false", made up or instilled by the politicians and the media machine. Rather, the actual existential anxiety related to loss of status, loss of future prospects and dignity has been successfully transferred (with the help of the political rhetoric and media resources) and disguised as anxiety from the threatening foreigner [18].

Conclusion

In conclusion, in Bulgaria the refugee crisis and refugees in particular are seen as an existential threat to highly precious goods such as the Bulgarian cultural and national identity, the ethnic and religious balance in the country, the financial system and the welfare state, as well as the national and personal security. The securitising actors (politicians and the media) predominantly draw the public attention towards the image of refugees as a threat, positioning them as a security problem. Finally, the audience in the face of the Bulgarian society is particularly receptive to this securitised message and sensitive to the image of the threatening foreigner. In this context, immigration, not as a whole, but when it comes to migrants coming from the Middle East and Africa in particular, can be presented as a socially-constructed existential threat and a subject of securitisation. We have grounds to assert that securitisation of the migrant problem is a potential reason for the disproportionately strong negative reaction of the Bulgarian society to refugees. Whether securitisation of the refugee problem has been exploited by the Bulgarian political elites, will be the subject of a future research.

Declaration of conflict of interests: There are no conflicts of interests to be declared.

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