

# The Western Balkan Migration Route and the Online Media Coverage of the Citizens' Protests

by Dragana Kovačević Bielicki

*This paper is focused on the online media coverage of the organized anti-migrant protests in three transit countries along the Western Balkan migration route: Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter BH), in the period between the beginning of 2015 and end of 2019. The aim of this small-scale research was to first map and consequently explain the online media coverage of the perceivably anti-migrant protests in the selected area, starting from the beginning of the so-called migrant crisis. The research shows a predominantly negative, alarmist portrayal of the migrants characterized by both overt and covert racist and Orientalizing modes of presentation.*

**Key words:** migration, Western Balkan Route, online media, protests, alarmist discourse, racism

## Introduction: Western Balkan Migration Route

Armed conflicts in Syria and several other countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia have led to the largest forced movements of people since the end of the Second World War. In 2015 and 2016, an unprecedented number of refugees and asylum seekers arrived in Europe. This has resulted in an abundance of pro- and anti-migration discourses and practices in all spheres of private and public life in countries along the migration routes. Faced with these challenges, the European countries are considered to have closed the major routes to Europe in the winter of 2016, and the number of arrivals was reduced. Yet, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), almost 124 000 people arrived in the year 2019, for example.<sup>1</sup> The status of many migrants in Europe remains precarious. People have been stuck in the transit countries living in awful conditions, while many have tried to move on further North and West and risked their health and lives in the process.

The transit countries along the Western Balkan route, a prominent part of what Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, labels as the Eastern Mediterranean route have also experienced new developments in 2018 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> As of this period, the situation has been particularly alarming in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) and along its border with Croatia, the border of the European Union. Media and the civil society organizations regularly report about the inhumane conditions that the migrants live in and the brutal treatment they receive from the border police.

The continuous presence of migrants has resulted in a range of reactions among

the local population, anywhere from rising anti-migration sentiments to active support and care for the migrants' plight. This article focuses on how some of the media available online in the region cover the citizens' protests organized along the Western Balkan migration route in the period between 2015 and present. The countries in focus are the three largest transit countries along the Western Balkan migration route: Serbia, Croatia, and BH. The protests are examined through their coverage in the local, national and regional online press of these three countries, available in the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language (BCS). The article presents the preliminary results of my own ongoing research on this topic, which seeks to explain what actors, experiences and discourses fuel the negative reactions to migrants and migration. Protests are one of the most visible practices used to express rejection of a social phenomenon and also a practice that tends to attract media attention. By means of media reports, these practices of rejection and discourses surrounding them are further reproduced. Thus, they can strongly resonate in the society and affect general attitudes.

### Research parameters

Serbia and Croatia are two of the Western Balkan countries that have been prominently featured as transit countries along the Balkan route since in 2015. Migrants would reach Serbia and attempt to move on to Hungary as the next stop. After Hungary notoriously approved a construction of a barrier along its border with Serbia (June 2015), the dominant migrant route had to be redirected toward borders with Croatia and further on. At this point in time, it was important to include BH in the case study as a currently highly relevant transit country. In the first years of the crisis" BH was not widely seen as one of the desirable stops along the route for most migrants. However, since 2018, due to the constant redirection of migrants arriving in the Balkans, BH experienced an unprecedented scale of migrant movement through its territory. This resulted in recent widespread media coverage of the migrants' movement and treatment.

The main questions I posed in my research were the following: How have the organized protests been framed through different discursive modes employed in the coverage? What dominant discourses emerge, which ideologies are in the background? In this context, discourse is understood as a cluster of socially constituted and constitutive practices in their sociohistorical contexts.<sup>3</sup>

As a first step, I mapped the media coverage of the anti-migrant protests in the three included countries by searching for results online with the Google search engine using the relevant search parameters in the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language (combination of words *migranti protesti* and *migranti prosvjedi*). As the hits predominantly showed the reports on most recent protests against migrants in different Bosnian towns, mainly Bihać, I conducted an additional search with the words *Srbija* and *Hrvatska* (Serbia and Croatia) added to the original combination

of words. In this way the coverage of some of the protests organized in these two countries was revealed as well. I limited the research to the first twenty pages of Google search hits, after first making sure to go through enough sites to get to the point where articles relevant to my criteria selection disappeared. I ran the final search with the words *migranti prosvjedi* (plus *Srbija* or *Hrvatska*) on 25 November 2019. On 05 December 2019 I ran the final search with the words *migranti prosvjedi* (+ *Srbija* or *Hrvatska*). The research needs to be focused, yet admittedly, when limited in this way it captures at best a specific moment in time. The media and internet are constantly changing and adding content. I ended up with the corpus of 43 relevant articles in total, published in different media, for example pro-government national media such as Croatian Radio TV and Politika (Serbia), reputable independent sources such as Oslobođenje and Al Jazeera Balkans, sensationalist tabloid newspapers, extreme right-wing outlets and other sources. Out of the 43 articles, only two covered protests organized in Serbia, five articles covered the protests that took place in Croatia and the remaining majority of 36 articles covered the protests organized in BH. This is not at all surprising considering the point in time when the search was conducted. Those 36 articles on protests in BH were not only published by the media based in BH, but also by the Serbian, Croatian and regional media.

Using the selected material, I further intend to analyze multimodal discourse, including both the text itself and the visual representations that the media in question chose to accompany the text (pictures and videos), in their interaction with each other and their sociocultural context. The research intentions are in line with multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), whose main focus is how these means of representation legitimize or conceal power, reveal or subvert social boundaries: "...within a given socio-cultural domain, the same meanings can often be expressed in different semiotic modes".<sup>4</sup>

### **Serbia: False News and Denial**

In the case of Serbia, the only two articles that entered the final selection based on the established research criteria covered the same protest and directly contradicted one another. According to both sources, the protest was caused by an incident where the migrants allegedly assaulted and attempted to rape a local 12-year-old girl near the town of Sombor. The first article, published by a tabloid newspaper Alo on 1 July 2017 was directly and alarmingly entitled "Migrants attempted to rape a girl (12)?"<sup>5</sup>. Despite the question mark included in the title, in the remainder of the text there was zero indication that the incident that provoked the protests might not have happened. It is in fact claimed as a fact. The introduction of the text reads "Furious townspeople blocked the road after the migrants attacked a 12-year-old girl and groped her". A regional cable news channel N1, available throughout former Yugoslavia, published an authored article on the same topic

four days later, entitled “Protests because of migrants and an event that did not happen”<sup>6</sup>. There are no references to the Alo article, but the article reports that it has been established by the Sombor police that the incident did not take place and the migrants did not attack a girl, who is reported to be thirteen in this source. The author points out that the local people continue to protest and the media continue to report despite this denial. While both articles illustrate the issue at hand with a photo (Alo) or video (N1) capturing the same gathered citizens, N1 article includes in the text other perspectives and opinions than solely those of the protesters. For example, it quotes what an Afghani refugee identified by his first name said about the fear that migrants feel after having been attacked verbally and physically by the locals. Another included quote comes from an official of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia and explicitly calls out the sensationalist approach of the media as partially responsible for much misinformation being spread.

### **Bosnia–Herzegovina: Who Are the Protests Against?**

The preliminary analysis of the 36 articles covering the protests held in different locations in BH shows that the style of reporting can be placed into two rough categories at first: a) Protests are framed directly as anti–migrant in nature, and b) protests are framed as directed against national or international institutions and other official actors who do not help enough. In only a few isolated cases are the two identified categories overlapping and the protests are simultaneously framed as directed against migrants and the institutions.



Figure 1. Photo by Oslobođenje©. Citizens protesting in Bihac.

The framing of the protests as directed against the migrants themselves clearly dominates the online coverage. In this, the dominant style of reporting is alarmist, evoking tropes of fear, danger and violence to a different degree and in a different manner. It is clearly suggested that the local people are afraid of migrants because they are seen as dangerous, aggressive, and destroy their property, threaten people, and present health hazards et cetera. A minority of articles among those that frame protests as anti-migrant does not explicitly engage in discourses that suggest the migrants are a threat, but they still present the local people as being opposed to their presence. Among the majority of articles that do evoke alarmist language, many are written as a whole in a style that echoes and confirms protesters' beliefs that the migrants are a danger, threat, and invaders. The rest report on the alarmist discourse that the participants of the protests engage in, by quoting them or giving space for expressing such beliefs in another way, while the rest of the article remains written in a more neutral and factual journalist fashion. Nevertheless, even in these more balanced articles, often the titles themselves, the first thing that catches the eye of the reader, are written in an alarmist manner, suggesting migrants are a threat and danger.

In the smaller category of articles that clearly and explicitly frame the protests as not directed against migrants, but against institutions that do not do enough to help accommodate them, it seems common to explicitly quote an official person or participant who says that the protests are not directed against migrants. Some of the examples are in the following two quotes:

“No one is protesting against the migrants in their town, but we are looking for a solution to their and our situation.”<sup>7</sup>

“We have nothing against those poor people...”<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2. Photo by Oslobođenje©. Migrants in Bihac.

## Croatia: Nationalism and Alarmism

The alarmist discourse about the migrants dominates in the Croatian media as well. Further on, and if this sample of material is a good indicator, this discourse is not challenged or balanced as it occasionally is in the case of Serbia and Bosnia. This is confirmed by the fact that alarmist discourse also dominates the Croatian media coverage of the protests in BH, not only the ones on their own territory. Out of the five articles from Croatia that cover the protests in Croatia, only one partially frames the protests as directed against the inadequate response of the institutions, while the other four directly and only present the protests as directed against migrants and the danger they present. Three out of these four articles are written in an extremely alarmist style. To illustrate, a long headline of one of these articles states “The entire protest was at a loss of words when Goranka revealed: Migrants intercepted me in the forest and prevented me from moving further”<sup>9</sup>. The article was originally published on 29 June 2019 by a weekly portal *dnevno.hr*, known for propagating nationalist ideology and conspiracy theories. Goranka is individualized here and identified by her first name, while her testimony about being harassed by the migrants is given the main space in the article. An official webpage of one of the Roman Catholic Church’s administrative districts, *župa Svetog Ante Komin*, a part of The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Split–Makarska, also features an alarmist post of a video and text where they directly label “illegal migrants” who destroy the property of Croatians.<sup>10</sup> One of the quotes reads: “either we will control the state, or we will give it away to others”. (ibid). In this and all other articles in the Croatian sample this trope of exclusionary nationalism is much more evoked and more immediately visible than in the articles in Serbia and BH. While nationalism and ingroup/outgroup division are present and most often implicit in the other two countries, in Croatia the photographs of the protests show an abundance of Croatian flags and other national symbols. The theme of Croatia, our country that we Croatians should keep for ourselves, is very explicitly invoked.

## Conclusions

While the variety of articles and the nuanced messages they convey cannot be fully represented in a short text, there are some observable trends in reporting about the selected topic that seem to dominate the online space, most often what I label as alarmist discourse: texts and visual messages directly or indirectly suggesting that migrants are a threat and danger. Another road that some of the sources take, according to this sample, is to engage in a more neutral, factual style of reporting, which still can in some ways maintain the clear us/them division and contains visual and other types of suggestions aiming at racialization and othering of the people on the move. This is done either by the accompanying visuals or by quoting individual people who label the migrants in some non-favorable way. In this sample, it is most rarely the case that the migrants’ own voices are included

and that they are asked how they experience the protests. The accompanying photo and video material often clearly present immediately racialized and gendered migrants as opposed to the local people or officials who are either photographed as individuals, or shown gathered, but diverse in age, gender and appearance. The space and individual voice are usually given to the officials of the town or other institutions, or to the “ordinary” participants of the protests. Those people are often individualized and named, while migrants are most often textually and visually presented as a dangerous mass, or even chess figures that are moved, placed and displaced, transferred and told where they can and cannot be. In this way, the underlying message of some, but not all of the seemingly objective articles can also be subtly racist, exclusionary and Orientalizing. A small minority of articles goes directly and consciously against anti-migration discourses. Nevertheless, a clear us-them division and othering of migrants as foreign to “our area” is detectable in some of these articles as well. All in all, the safety and protection of both local people and migrants is a dominating topic, with the safety and endangerment of “our” local people being given priority and higher importance, as they are “us”.

Us-them divisions are omnipresent in the coverage, most commonly but not only through the division into citizens and migrants. Other prominent divisions include institutions versus people, our country versus international and European institutions, our city versus the government in the capital, peaceful protesters versus aggressive migrants, perpetrators vs victims and other.

To conclude, it is crucial to keep posing the question who and what these protests are claimed to be against and at the same to problematize this issue by raising awareness that media portrayal does not necessarily reflect how the protests participants themselves frame these actions and their own reasons for participating. Some of the people who participate clearly insist they protest against the way their own government and the European institutions are handling the issue, not against the people on the move themselves. This framing was only somewhat present in the media material analyzed here, but confirmed by anthropologist Azra Hromadžić who did her fieldwork in Bihać. She writes: “I was repeatedly told that the main target of the protest was not *migranti* but the Bosnian government in Sarajevo which is ‘doing nothing’ for *Bišćani* who deal with the crisis daily.”<sup>11</sup> Bišćani, or the citizens of Bihać, one of the towns that figured prominently in the selected coverage, thus do not see the protests in BH in the same way that the media frame them.

### **About the author**

Dragana Kovačević Bielicki is a social researcher with an interdisciplinary background in the philosophy of politics, social anthropology and discourse studies. Her main research interests are forced migration, nationalism and belonging in discourse. Dragana originates from former Yugoslavia (Croatia and Serbia) but has lived in Norway since 2009. She is employed as a Senior Research Adviser at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Bergen, as well as a returning lecturer in Peace and Conflict Studies at the International Summer School, University of Oslo. She received a PhD in Migration, Nationalism and Culture Studies in 2016 from the University of Oslo, Faculty of Humanities. In addition, she holds MA degrees from Central European University (Nationalism Studies) and the University of Belgrade (Philosophy). A monograph based on her doctoral research was published in 2017 with the title *Born in Yugoslavia– Raised in Norway: Former Child Refugees and Belonging* (Oslo, Novus Press, 2017). She has held guest research fellowships at the University of Sarajevo, University of Rijeka, University of Graz and University of Pannonia.



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