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Media Securitisation of the Migration Process on the So-Called Balkan Route: A Case Study of Serbia and North Macedonia

SUMMARY

Using the example of the Balkan Route, the paper aims to show how the migrant issue in regional relations has taken an important place in national and regional security strategies and how it has been securitised by the media in the Western Balkans. The theoretical viewpoint is presented through an examination of the media's role in identifying and securitising contemporary security challenges, using migration as a case point. The empirical viewpoint is presented through a case study of the so-called Balkan Route, in which the authors examine the role of the media in the process of securitisation of contemporary migrant flows as a cross-border security challenge and threat. The case study of the Balkan migrant route shows the role of the media in the process of securitisation of migrant flows, as well as the verbal or political securitisation of migration as a real security phenomenon. Did the media contribute to alleviating the migrant crisis, or did they exacerbate its severity? The research concludes that the media have positioned themselves as an

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instrument in the hands of interest groups, and the journalistic profession has failed to maintain its integrity or to influence the creation and implementation of policies in which people and their well-being come first as the primary European values. In that context, the leading research question is as follows: What is the purpose of media securitisation of the migrant crisis, and how much does such a phenomenon reposition the social place of the media sector from the perspective of current challenges, risks, and threats? The main hypothesis of the paper is as follows: The empirical example of the Balkan Route shows that media securitisation of the migrant crisis represents an ongoing instrumentalisation of media outlets for political interests, particularly in weak institutional states and populist decision-making frameworks. Based on the main hypothesis, there are two specific ones: First, using the media sector as a securitising mechanism endangers the media and journalism as a profession. Second, the examples of Serbia and North Macedonia demonstrate inverse tendencies within the phenomenon of populism, whereby the continued weakening of public institutions is accompanied by the strengthening of the media sector.

Keywords: migration, Serbia, North Macedonia, media, securitisation.

Medijska sekuritizacija procesa migracije na takozvanoj Balkanskoj ruti: Studija slučaja – Srbija i Severna Makedonija

SAŽETAK

Cilj rada je da se, koristeći primer Balkanske rute, pokaže kako je migrantsko pitanje u regionalnim odnosima zauzelo važno mesto u nacionalnim i regionalnim bezbednosnim strategijama i kako se ovo pitanje sekuritizuje od strane medija na Zapadnom Balkanu. Teorijsko gledište je u procesu objašnjavanja uloge medija u oblasti identifikacije i sekuritizacije savremenih bezbednosnih izazova, u ovom slučaju na primeru migracija. Empirijsko gledište je kroz studiju slučaja o takozvanoj Balkanskoj ruti, gde autori otvoreno postavljaju pitanje o ulozi medija u procesu sekuritizacije savremenih migrantskih tokova, kao prekograničnog bezbednosnog izazova i pretnje. Studija slučaja Balkanske migrantske rute pokazuje ulogu medija u procesu sekuritizacije migrantskih tokova, kao i verbalnu, odnosno političku, sekuritizaciju migracija kao stvarnog bezbednosnog fenomena. Da li su mediji doprineli smirivanju migrantske krize ili su podstakli migrantsku krizu i njene razmere? Zaključak istraživanja je da su se mediji pozicionirali samo kao instrument u rukama interesnih grupa, a novinarska profesija nije održala svoj integritet niti uticala na kreiranje i sprovođenje politika u kojima su ljudi i njihova dobrobit na prvom mestu, kao primarne evropske vrednosti. U tom kontekstu, primarno istraživačko pitanje bi bilo: Koja je svrha medijske sekuritizacije migrantske krize i koliko takav fenomen repozicionira društveno mesto medijskog sektora iz

perspektive aktuelnih izazova, rizika i pretnji. Glavna hipoteza rada bi bila: Medijska sekuritizacija migrantske krize na empirijskom primeru balkanske rute predstavlja primer kontinuirane instrumentalizacije medijskih kuća u političke interese, posebno u slabim institucionalnim državama i populističkim okvirima donošenja odluka. Na osnovu glavne, postoje dve specifične hipoteze: Korišćenje medijskog sektora kao mehanizma sekuritizacije ugrožava medijsku i novinarsku profesiju po definiciji; Primeri Srbije i Severne Makedonije pokazali su obrnute tendencije unutar fenomena populizma, gde nastavak slabljenja javnih institucija prati jačanje uticaja medijskog sektora.

Ključne reči: migracije, Srbija, Severna Makedonija, mediji, sekuritizacija.

Introduction

The refugee and migrant crisis, which has been ongoing for more than ten years on the so-called Balkan Route in Serbia and North Macedonia, has contributed to an increasing number of vulnerable people left stranded in a legal vacuum throughout the Balkans. Serbia and North Macedonia have become a “sink” for a large number of refugees and migrants whom no one wants to accept. As stated in an Amnesty International report, the situation was further aggravated by the fact that refugees and migrants were turned back or deported at every border, denied access to asylum, and forced to travel to the European Union by a route that was neither safe nor legal. Consequently, refugees and migrants were exposed to violence, became victims of human trafficking, were used as tools by organised crime, and were often forced to bribe local customs officials and police officers to secure the possibility of potential continuation of the journey to Western Europe (Al Jazeera 2015). An interesting assessment by Amnesty International is that the growing number of refugee migrations along the Balkan Route is a consequence of the broader failure of the European Union’s migration policy, over which Serbia and North Macedonia have no control whatsoever (Al Jazeera 2015). In essence, Serbia and North Macedonia could contribute more to ensuring respect for the rights of migrants and refugees. However, it is impossible to separate this fact from the increasing pressure generated by refugee and migrant flows towards the European Union and the failed EU migration system. It is, in fact, evident that an increasing number of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants are becoming trapped in the Balkan no-man’s land, which further complicates the position and increases the pressure on both Serbia and North Macedonia. In this context, both Balkan states signed the Agreement on Cooperation in the Area of Fight against Human Trafficking in 2019 (Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Republike Severne Makedonije o saradnji u oblasti borbe protiv trgovine

ljudima 2021). It is important to note that in 2015, when the migrant crisis was at its peak, more than one million people passed through the so-called Balkan Route, travelling from Greece through North Macedonia, Kosovo*, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the countries of Western Europe, primarily Germany (Anđelković 2020).

Geographically, the Balkan Route covers the land route from Turkey through Greece and Bulgaria to the north and west, including North Macedonia, Serbia, and Croatia in the main direction. Alternatively, auxiliary routes also include other European countries; however, the most common destination for migrants is Western and Northern Europe (Petrović and Bukvić 2017, 83).

In the statistical context, it is important to note that migration to EU countries from outside Europe has changed significantly in recent years. The numbers have been constantly increasing over the past decade. From 2008 to 2010, an average of 250,000 migrants entered the EU annually. In 2011 and 2012, the figures were over 300,000 annually. However, in 2013, they amounted to around 430,000, and in 2014, to as many as 630,000 (Petrović and Bukvić 2017, 84). The record years were 2015 and 2016, when the number of migrants entering the European Union reached around 1,250,000 to 1,350,000 annually (The Ohio State University 2024).

Essentially, the migrant crisis has greatly contributed to the change in the security mosaic in the Balkans, especially in Serbia and North Macedonia. The Balkan countries are dominantly used for migrant transit (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2023, 166). The multi-year intensive waves of migrants who tried to transit through Serbia and North Macedonia in various ways contributed to the revision of the national security strategies and plans of these two countries in order to provide a threefold response: first, to ensure the safety of the local population and the citizens of Serbia and North Macedonia who, due to various mass media narratives and sensationalist reporting, did not have a clear picture of what and who migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are and what separates and unites these three groups; second, to ensure the safety of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees temporarily located in the territories of Serbia and North Macedonia or transiting through them; and third, to ensure the sustainability of the regional security mosaic in terms of the instrumentalisation of this security problem by various regional organised crime groups and individuals.

From the media's point of view, it appears that its role in addressing the aforementioned security challenges is largely marginalised because media coverage of the so-called Balkan Route, as well as of the problem of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the territory of Serbia and North Macedonia, was primarily sensationalist, focusing on the tragedies

faced by migrants, but also political, instrumentalising threats and difficulties on the so-called Balkan migrant route for the purpose of internal political discourse.

The paper is structured into four leading chapters. The first chapter focuses on the linkage between the concept of securitisation and the role of the media as a tool of instrumentalisation within the securitisation processes. This is important for a profound understanding of the essence of the paper. The second and third chapters focus on the case study states, including the flows along the Balkan Route and the European Union's contribution. The fourth chapter focuses on the media securitisation role of the so-called Balkan Route and the negative implications that the securitisation process has brought about. From a methodological perspective, the main scientific goal of the work is to provide a scientific explanation as a "higher scientific goal that leads to scientific knowledge about the relationships, causalities, and regularities of a certain phenomenon or process" (Arežina 2021). In this case study, the causality between the created media and political perception of the migration process, based on the securitisation of the issue and the ways and methods through which the countries in question manage the challenges of the Balkan Route, as well as the resulting social perception, is explained. By using basic synthetic methods such as synthesis (connecting the concept of securitisation with the role of the media and the case study), concretisation (using a specific politically defined and geographically determined case study), generalisation, and induction (placing migration as a general security problem on the political agendas of the Western Balkans), as well as through the analysis of existing research, the authors will attempt to achieve the aforementioned scientific result.

Media, Securitisation and Migrations: Between Objectivity and Populism

As part of the Copenhagen School of security studies, securitisation theory states that security is constructed as a domain of action through communicative acts performed by significant actors within a political system and is especially effective at the nation-state level. The main argument of securitisation theory is that security is an (illocutionary) speech act and that, solely by uttering "security", something is being done (Taureck 2006). "It is by labelling something a security issue that it becomes one" (Taureck 2006, 3).

Regarding migration, Lutovac explains that these movements include irregular/illegal migratory movements of different categories of people: refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, victims of human

trafficking, smuggled migrants, and other vulnerable categories of people, including women, children, and unaccompanied minors. Among the most numerous groups involved in the migration crisis, which escalated during 2015, were refugees from war-torn areas, people from countries with non-democratic regimes where they were persecuted, the poor, whose motive was to preserve their bare existence, and economic migrants in search of a better life (Lutovac 2016). The purpose of such a comprehensive definition of migration lies in the explanation of the “manoeuvring space” that media outlets have in the process of the securitisation of certain topics in this paper related to the Balkan migrant route.

In fact, through political discourse, media coverage, and public opinion, these forced migrations have been socially construed as a security crisis (Bobić and Šantić 2019). As explained by Alimpić et al., it appears that the media are spreading the message that it is acceptable for people who have fled their countries of origin to receive different treatment from European institutions, EU member states, and the social environment in which they arrive. Then, through generalisation, we notice a tendency to portray refugees from Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa as using the wave of refugees to reach Europe’s most developed countries, as well as posing a threat to the security of the European population (Alimpić et al., n.a.). Based on the available data, there are contrasting approaches to the perception of migration, particularly on the European side. The first perspective is dedicated to the complete media and political securitisation of the issue, with the Western Balkans route being presented as a key border line for the preservation of the European security mosaic. The second perspective is formed around the former German chancellor’s decision to welcome a wide range of migrants and asylum seekers to German territory through a comprehensive set of measures for their individual and professional inclusion and social integration. In fact, there is a gap between the dominant perceptions created by media outlets and the relevant and rational perceptions constructed by the former German government during the case study period.

Regarding the Western Balkans, this gap between the image created by the political elite and media outlets and the realistic intentions of the migrants is noticeable. While political and media platforms were strict and constant in the process of securitising the Balkan Route, migrants were just looking for alternatives to reach the borders of the states that constituted their final destinations. The massive increase in population movements via the Balkan Route has accordingly strained the reception capacities and the asylum procedural systems of the countries involved. This has also put into question their policies, border controls, and diplomatic relations, in some cases resulting in heavy-handed responses by security forces.

Political decisions made by one country often reflect on all other countries along the route (Bobić and Janković 2017, 224-225). Although Serbia and North Macedonia were challenged by security issues on their borders, media and political securitisation focused exclusively and dominantly on the persons marked as migrants, which has created long-standing animosities and negative perceptions among domestic populations. As Ana Krasteva explains, the Western Balkans is characterised by a complex jigsaw of security and sovereignty issues and intensive refugee and migration flows from, to, and within the region in a situation of post-conflict reconstruction. These circumstances were negatively instrumentalised by political representatives and media outlets along the Western Balkans migrant route.

The media perception and the created discourse on migrants and the Western Balkans migrant route led to the following thesis: "Risk associated with migration and mobility refers not only to national security but also to 'the fabric of the nation' in cultural, social, and economic contexts" (Milivojević 2019, 6). However, based on the available data, most migrants were not at all interested in asylum status on the Western Balkans route, nor in Serbia or North Macedonia, and the previously mentioned thesis has been built on the social perceptions of migrants.

A valuable example of the media securitisation of the migration issue in the Western Balkans is that "when Serbia's minister of interior visited one of the migrant camps on the border with Hungary in July 2022, many national media outlets published an image of him standing alongside policemen and security officers and overlooking dozens of kneeling migrants with arms behind their heads. The image was to show political decisiveness and the results of the joint security action aimed at minimising criminal acts committed by illegal migrants in the country. Instead, the image triggered a public reaction when many non-governmental organisations, public intellectuals, and migration experts condemned the minister's treatment of migrants as inhumane" (Krstić 2024). On the other side, "it must be noted that some authors have questioned the appropriateness of the term 'transit countries' by emphasising how the politicised nature of the term relates to a broader securitisation discourse on migration (İçduygu & Yüксеker 2012) and arguing that it artificially contributes to a linear narrative of origin-transit-destination, thereby masking the much more complex configuration of contemporary migration patterns" (Collyer & de Haas 2012). Additionally, "remarkably, before June 2015, asylum and migration-related issues had never been on the agenda of top politicians and political parties in Serbia, because until then very few migrants actually applied for asylum" (Bobić and Janković 2017). In the Serbia and North Macedonia case, there is valuable practical

evidence that demonstrates the media and politically led process of migrant securitisation, from the lack of this issue in political agendas in the pre-period through the use of special rhetoric mechanisms such as the concept of transit countries to the public appearance of decision-makers, followed by images in which migrants are dominantly presented as a challenge to national security. Although there is a guarantee in the numerous national laws' provisions which state that "a refugee may be expelled only on the grounds of compelling reasons of national security or public order", and which note that such "provisions represent an important legacy of contemporary civilisation and democratic decision-making processes", the process of managing the Western Balkans Route, including the role of media representations on the issue, leads us to the opposite conclusion (Bataveljić and Božić 2024, 124).

Objectivity regarding the border security challenges associated with the migrant issue at the peak of the Western Balkans migrant route has been replaced by populist media outlets and political rhetoric, which, in the long term, has brought about three outcomes: Local societies have lost the opportunity to develop a meaningful understanding about migrations; extremely negative perceptions regarding the criminal and terrorist origins of migrants were widely entrenched within societies; and the media sector has additionally been instrumentalised as a securitising mechanism in the hands of political actors, while populist content has blurred the picture of the real security issues, thus opening space for the securitisation of everything which could bring political points that could yield political gain.

The Balkan Route - A Long-Standing Challenge for Serbia and North Macedonia

As Nikolić and Maksimović explain, the Western Balkans has been a popular route for migrants for years, but mainly as a transit corridor. The Western Balkans represents a quick passage through the region on the way to EU countries such as Germany, Italy, and France. Further, they note that these refugees come from countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria and that the vast majority of migrants, i.e., over 95%, are men whose most common professions or occupations in the country of origin are skilled manual workers, service or sales workers, artisans, auxiliary workers, and technicians (Nikolić and Maksimović 2024, 78). In such a context, from the perspective of securitisation, it is very difficult to create a clear perception about the domestic/national security threat, except in the context of border management due to the massive waves of migrants. Respectively, since border management was relatively effective, followed by joint deployments of police officers from Western

Balkan states, including EU countries through Frontex, the regional media sector has positioned itself as a generator of indoctrination in the context of the securitisation of migrant issues.

Despite the *de facto* closure of the Balkan Route at the beginning of March 2016, a constant flow of refugees and migrants to the Republic of Serbia continues, mainly from North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with strong support from cross-border smuggling and human trafficking networks. Data show that since 2015, more than one and a half million refugees and migrants have passed through Serbia, of which between a third and a quarter were children. During 2020, the number of refugees and migrants present in Serbia at any given time was around 7,000, and around 6,000 were housed in reception, transit, and asylum centres (UNICEF n.d.).

An increase in the number of migrants was also observed in North Macedonia. According to data from North Macedonia's Ministry of the Interior, in 2022, the number of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees increased by 7% compared to 2021. Thus, in the first nine months of 2022, 35,000 migrants and asylum seekers were registered (Јакимова 2022). Media reports state that migrants are constantly entering the territory of North Macedonia, with the explanation that until 2016 they did so by train or on foot, while currently organised criminal groups transport them by trucks and vans. After the official closure of the Balkan Route, the highest number of illegal crossings was recorded in 2020, when 2,700 migrants were discovered at illegal crossings and around 100 smugglers were arrested (Јакимова 2022).

At the same time, the coordinator of the Serbian reception centre, near the border with North Macedonia, Slobodan Savović, states that between 100 and 400 migrants arrive every day and that this is a new trend coming from Syria and Afghanistan. In fact, the issue of a renewed wave of migration through the Balkan Route has also caused anxiety in the European Union at a time when EU member states are hosting millions of refugees from Ukraine, while at the same time they are facing a serious economic and financial crisis caused by the war in Ukraine (Јакимова 2022).

The fact that migration is an increasingly serious security challenge for both Serbia and North Macedonia is evidenced by the strategic documents of these two countries in the security field. To explain the security challenges in the context of migrant routes and the case of Serbia and North Macedonia, we have to conceptualise the security challenge as an increased asymmetric form of warfare (Münkler 2002), as well as the increased role of more sophisticated and brutal non-state actors (terrorist networks) that have made the security challenges more complex and the security risks less calculable and predictable. In such a context, in the

National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, it is stated that “the increasingly restrictive stance of the European Union member states on the reception of migrants increases the chances that the region will become one of the reception zones, whereby the Republic of Serbia would find itself in a situation of taking care of a large number of migrants that exceeds its economic and organisational capacities, and that illegal migration of people from the Middle East and North and Sub-Saharan Africa, in conjunction with organised crime, represents a security risk in the region” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia 2019, 5). That migration is a serious security issue for the Republic of Serbia is evidenced by the fact that illegal migration, together with separatist aspirations, ethnic and religious extremism, the covert action of a foreign factor, and organised crime, is included in the key risks and threats to security in its National Security Strategy (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia 2019, 6). Specifically, when it comes to illegal migration, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia states that “illegal migrants who cross the territory of the Republic of Serbia on their way to the European Union can have multiple unfavourable impacts on the security situation, given the possibility of religious radicalisation, increased tensions among the migrant population, their mutual conflict, and the negative reactions of the local population”. In addition, security risks are represented by the uncontrolled entry of migrants, the possibility of concealing their identity, criminal activity in the form of illegal transport of migrants, and the closing of the borders of neighbouring countries for certain categories of migrants (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia 2019, 7).

When it comes to North Macedonia, the Defence Strategy of that country states “that the influx and transit of migrants and radical extremists and returnees from the battlefields in countries in the Middle East (Iraq and Syria), South Asia (Afghanistan), and North Africa (Libya) affect the regional security when it comes to Southeast Europe” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of North Macedonia 2020, 4). More specifically, when it comes to North Macedonia, the country’s Defence Strategy states that illegal migration, which was originally the result of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, has been identified as the primary threat to the country’s national security, along with other threats such as economic and political problems; organised crime; activities of foreign intelligence services; radical and violent extremism; terrorism; cybercrime; natural disasters; as well as environmental degradation (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of North Macedonia 2020, 5-6).

The fact that the Balkan Route remains relevant is also evidenced by an agreement signed by the heads of the police of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Austria on the joint registration of refugees at the

Greek-Macedonian border, whereby these five countries will jointly organise the transport of migrants to Austria. Transit through the Balkan Route will only be possible for refugees from war-torn countries (APC - Asylum Protection Centre 2023).

The Role of the European Union in Regulating the Balkan Route

Migrant policy is one of the most important issues and the biggest security challenge the EU has been facing over the last ten years. Despite the coronavirus pandemic and the start of the conflict in Ukraine, the issue of migration remained high on the agenda of European policymakers. That was confirmed by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who pointed out that migration is a European challenge and that it is necessary to achieve a European response that would ensure the strengthening of the external borders of the European Union, a faster and more dignified return of migrants to their countries of origin or transit, the improvement of voluntary solidarity, the addressing of the root causes of migration from third countries, and the securing and establishment of safe and legal routes to Europe (Ljevo 2023).

The Balkan Route was one of the main migratory routes in Europe, which reflected the influx of migrants to the Eastern Mediterranean Route. After the record number of migrants in the EU in 2015, the number of irregular migrants who chose this route had been constantly declining for several years and only began to rise again in 2019. In 2022, 145,600 irregular border crossings were registered on the Balkan Route, i.e., 136% more than in 2021 (Frontex n.d.). That is the highest number of crossings on this route since 2015 and represents about half of all reported irregular crossings in 2022. Citizens of Syria, Afghanistan, and Turkey made up the largest group detected during irregular crossings. However, unlike previous migrant waves, other nationalities were also detected this time, such as Tunisians, Indians, and Burundians (Frontex n.d.). The majority of illegal border crossings can be attributed to migrants who have been staying in the Western Balkans region for some time and have repeatedly tried to reach their target country in the EU. As in previous years, these migrants continued to use illegal border crossings with Greece and Bulgaria through the Balkan Route and to leave the Balkan region via the common northern borders of Hungary, Romania, Croatia, or Serbia (Frontex n.d.).

Regarding this, it is important to highlight that the ministers of interior affairs of the EU member states have signed a statement on increasing financial and material support for effective deportations from the Balkans. In this document, accessed by Statewatch and the Heinrich Böll

Stiftung, it is revealed that the interior ministers of the EU member states in Vienna on February 21-22, 2022, had signed a secret joint statement, Joint Declaration "Regional Return Mechanism, Return Partnerships" (JCP 2022), stating the commitment of the EU and Schengen countries to increase financial and material support for deportations from the Balkans, thus increasing the role of the region as a buffer zone for migration (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2023). In that way, the signatories of this document expressed their determination to intensify cooperation in demand-orientated and targeted support in the field of return, especially from the Western Balkans to third countries. This would ensure rapid coordination of needs and possible assistance in return (Frontex n.d.). This document also calls for flexible return partnerships among the Western Balkan partners, EU partners, and Switzerland on thematic areas of importance for return, such as the exchange of best practices and communication with specific countries of origin and transit. In this context, it is important to emphasise that the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, visited Serbia with the head of the European border agency Frontex, Hans Leijten, to strengthen the partnership between the European Union and the Serbian authorities in the field of migration and border management. On that occasion, the commissioner thanked Serbia for harmonising the country's visa policy with EU policy and said that European Integrated Border Management (EIPM) can only function well with its partners (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2023). In that context, on June 25, 2024, the European Union signed an agreement with Serbia to strengthen cooperation in migration issues and border management. The essential part of the agreement in the context of EU migration management is Frontex's authorisation to carry out joint operations and deploy the European Border and Coast Guard standing corps anywhere in Serbia's territory, including on its borders with neighbouring non-EU countries (EU 2024).

At the same time, the European Commission launched a pilot project with Bulgaria on preventing irregular arrivals, strengthening border and migration management, and a multidisciplinary approach to strengthening border control, including the installation of cameras, patrol vehicles, and observation posts (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2023). In the letter obtained by Statewatch, it is stated that the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, promised EUR 600 million, which would be made available to provide significant support to member states for border control and technological equipment, and that the key goal in spending that money should be the border section along the Bulgaria-Turkey border (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2023).

In fact, the essence of the problem is that many people (refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers) come to the European Union via the so-called Balkan Route, and the allocation of EU funds for this purpose is not sufficient in practice. The number of migrants arriving in the European Union through this route has been increasing, especially in the period after the COVID-19 pandemic. There are several reasons for this. Each year in late summer, a certain increase in migration is noticeable. People set out on their journey before the cold winter weather makes it difficult or impossible to cross the already dangerous Mediterranean Sea (Danas 2022). Currently, an unusually large number of people are entering the European Union without passports, according to Jean Asselborn, Luxembourg's Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is also in charge of migration. In this context, the European Union requires that countries along the so-called Balkan Route, particularly Serbia and North Macedonia, fully coordinate their visa policies with those of EU member states. Brussels justifies this position on the grounds that a large number of migrants arrive on European Union territory through countries in the Western Balkans that are in the process of European integration and enjoy a visa-free regime with EU member states. For that reason, citizens of third countries who intend to immigrate to European Union countries use the Balkan Route, and the countries on that route serve as transit stations to reach their desired destinations more easily and efficiently. The importance of this issue is also highlighted in the European Commission's reports on Serbia and North Macedonia.

Serbia

The European Union is the largest donor of funds for migration management in Serbia. The recently signed Administrative Arrangement on the establishment of cooperation between the European Commission and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Serbia within the European Migration Network represents a tangible result of good cooperation and of Serbia's successful advancement in this important process (Ministry for European Integration 2023). It is an arrangement that culminates in Serbia's inclusion in the European Network for Migrants, which entails a full exchange of information and access to all databases. On that occasion, the Serbian minister for European integration recalled that Serbia has continued to fulfil its obligations in the integration process concerning the challenges posed by the migrant crisis and the opening of the Western Balkan route, particularly by harmonising its visa regime. Serbia has introduced visas for citizens of six countries in four months (Ministry for European Integration 2023). In the report of the European

Commission for the year 2022, Serbia is praised for its good cooperation with the European Union on the issue of irregular migration, which testifies to the fact that Serbia works and cooperates with the European Union in a dedicated and coordinated manner on the issue of the migrant crisis (Euroactiv 2023).

North Macedonia

When it comes to North Macedonia, it is also important to point out that this country's cooperation with the European Union in coordinating and managing the migrant crisis is crucial in both financial and technical terms. On October 26, 2022, the European Union and North Macedonia signed an agreement on operational cooperation in border management with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) (European Commission 2022). Frontex already has around 300 officers in the region, including those participating in joint operations at the European Union's external borders with Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia in accordance with current status agreements. To ensure the implementation of the status agreement, the operational plan is agreed upon directly between Frontex and the authorities of North Macedonia. It will enable Frontex to assist North Macedonia with border management, conduct joint operations, and deploy personnel both at the border with the EU and at the borders of neighbouring partners from the Western Balkans. This will help solve the problem of increasing irregular migration and cross-border crime (European Commission 2022).

The Role of the Media on the Balkan Route

Media discourse plays a key role not only in the spread of potentially biased ideologies but also in the (re)construction of knowledge and attitudes within the collective consciousness (Lazović n.a., 135). The role of media discourse is crucial in spreading ideologies potentially based on prejudices, as well as in shaping and changing people's attitudes and knowledge (van Dijk 2003). One of the most significant ways in which the media shape public opinion is through agenda-setting. It is the process by which the media decide which topics and issues to cover and how to present them to the public, thereby significantly influencing the opinions of media consumers. On the political side, critics of the liberal approach to the refugee crisis received attention across the media spectrum, not just from conservative media outlets. Politicians and activists advocating for solidarity with refugees had to explain that these were terrorist incidents and that refugees are like all other people; there are good and bad

individuals among them (Subotić and Mitrevska, 2025, 104). Considering the use of digital media and social networks in the context of migration perceptions, it is evident that political discourse can travel effortlessly across state borders in the Western Balkans. It is difficult to limit one's audience to a single state or ethnic group (Tomić 2017, 9). Regarding the media, Jevtović and Bajić (2018) studied the content of the front pages of daily newspapers in Serbia during 2015 and 2016. They found examples of a dichotomy between sensationalist and xenophobic discourse, on the one hand, and humanitarian discourse, on the other (Lazović n.a., 137).

Migrants and refugees are often at the very bottom of society, being marginalised by those in power and the media. They also come to countries that already have their own problems. Numerous migrants and refugees, particularly refugees, are settled in the suburbs of large metropolises that already have many problems. In such an environment, they are forced to take their place, learn a new language, seek employment, and deal with discrimination, the trauma of that experience and the place they came from. When it comes to the image created by the media about migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, it is important to point out that the media often talks about this group of people, but rarely do journalists ask them anything, according to journalist and publicist Ismail Einashe (Zorić 2019). "In media reports, the voice of migrants is always missing. When they appear in the media, it is often in a very negative context. That has consequences for societies across Europe", says Einashe. In general, stereotypes play an important role in the discursive construction of in-groups and out-groups. They are, therefore, used strategically by the media and politicians for the discursive construction of the "Other" (Milićević 2025, 90). In media reports, migrants were completely displaced, not only physically during their movement but also mentally. Their voice was completely absent, and most of the reports were very negative and Islamophobic, creating a toxic situation both in the media and in society. In fact, the political situation was influenced by media coverage and further escalated as a result. Examples of this can be found in Great Britain and Italy. In Great Britain, during the 2016 referendum, when the country's citizens voted to leave the EU—the so-called Brexit—the party that advocated for this referendum to be held, the British Independence Party of Nigel Farage, who today leads the Brexit Party, used the so-called migrant crisis of 2015 as an enormous political issue to attract people to vote for their position in the referendum. They used the image of refugees who crossed the Balkans in 2015 and reached the border with Slovakia, standing in a crowd, faceless. That image does not seem out of place in the context of our post-World War II history. However, they used a 2015 image and called it "a watershed moment". Another example is Italy, where a

large number of people come from Africa, i.e., Libya. Thus, Italy's local population had to face the problem of so-called unwanted residents, as most of the European countries refused to do so at the European level. When Angela Merkel opened Germany's borders in 2015, other European nations did not follow suit. In Italy today, the right-wing Matteo Salvini, like his British colleagues, uses the issue of borders and lifeboats to gain support for his political agenda, and he is doing so with great success. Therefore, the media plays a big role in that. In fact, while politicians lead, the media follows them. When you listen to a radio programme, watch a TV show or read a newspaper, you often do not get the whole picture; the media does not provide the complete context. Refugee and migrant communities are often talked about, but never included. They can rarely be heard. They are the subjects of public discussion in the media, but they are not participants. The reason is that when you look at the media – who edits it and who reports, not only when it comes to refugees and migrants but also when we discuss issues of gender or ethnic origin – there are noticeable gaps in media presentation. That applies to Europe as a whole (Zorić 2019). In fact, the media sector, not only on the so-called Balkan Route but also throughout Europe, has served as a mechanism for framing contemporary migrant flows. It has securitised this problem in a distorted way in which migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, as subjects of this security phenomenon, have become the subject of daily political and media discussions. At the same time, the real challenges associated with migrant flows and the problems these citizens face on the ground are ignored, including the challenges faced by the local population due to high levels of migrant flows.

Comments and assumptions, vaguely separated from facts and interpretations, are a frequent media product, and even the mere experience of reading is enough to establish the difference between the media image of people in migration and the media image of the migrant crisis (Mišeljić 2021). Media coverage of the migrant crisis is still more than visible, but primarily negative, manipulative, and sensationalist, which greatly affects not only the process of regulating and managing the migrant crisis, but also the security infrastructure, given the potential for animosity that the media can create and strengthen between the local population and migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers themselves. Religious and racial intolerance, as well as xenophobia and Islamophobia, have found a new form of action in the context of the migrant crisis. The Report on the Migrant Crisis - Between Manipulation and Ethics cites a survey in which more than 58% of respondents believe that as the number of migrants in the country increases, the crime rate also increases, and slightly more than a third see migrants as a threat to Serbian culture,

customs, and values. More than 40% of the respondents also believe that refugees coming to Serbia are actually fighters of ISIS and other terrorist organisations. The authors of the same report warn of the overwhelming number of positive reactions to news about the mistreatment of migrants by the Croatian police and comments such as “That is the real police” and “That is how it should be” (Mišeljić 2021). The media must therefore improve its reporting on people with a migrant background and the diversity of their customs and lifestyles (Deutsche Welle 2007). The previous statement was made by the former German interior minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who also added that the labour market is the best instrument of integration. “We need a flexible labour law here. We have debates in this regard, not only when it comes to people with a migrant background. We need a social system that encourages people to get a job. The discussion about it is not over yet” (Deutsche Welle 2007). Schäuble likely intended to refocus the perception of migrants, thus shifting this issue away from the security agenda and placing it instead within the state’s internal affairs, with a focus on integration through re-socialisation in the final destination societies and states. The labour market, according to Schäuble, should be a mechanism for the previously mentioned process of re-socialisation and “vertically” structured integration.

In fact, the essence of the problem lies in the basic motives of modern media corporations, from radio stations and classic television stations through modern internet portals and websites to media content on social networks, which are today used as the main instrument for news to reach readers as quickly as possible. The main problem is that the crucial motive in modern media systems is profit, i.e., how to become financially sustainable, increase revenue, and, thereby, improve your business in a financial rather than a professional or journalistic context. We are witnessing a huge amount of fake and unverified news and information available daily in all corners of the world, from the most developed to the poorest, where the Internet is still not a tool freely used by all citizens of a country. At the same time, the process of creating unverified, false, and biased news was driven by the political and business elite, who entered the system of indirect or direct financing of the media to achieve their personal, political, and professional interests. In fact, the modern media system has become an instrument that is financially framed and thereby financially determined.

As such, it has lost its fundamental role not only for migrants but also for reporting on contemporary migrant waves, primarily those that have flooded the European continent in the past decade and are still ongoing. In fact, media reports did not contribute to the relaxation of social frameworks in the process of dealing with migrant waves that had an all-

pervasive impact. Moreover, they had a negative impact by creating a mostly negative image of these waves and presenting migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee groups as a direct security risk to the lives of citizens on the European continent (Kabata and Jacobs, 2023). The opportunity to point out that this is a security challenge in a humanitarian context has been missed. The media also misrepresented the economic perspectives that exist primarily among young migrants, thus undermining the European Union's opportunity to strengthen its role as a "bastion" in respecting basic human and civil rights. At the same time, in addition to the migrant crisis as a security challenge, it is being allowed, mainly with the support of the media and the media system, to create new security challenges that lead to radicalisation, exclusivity, and the superiority of one race over others or one nation over another. Instead of simplifying, this further complicates the security situation on the European continent as a consequence of satisfying narrow political, business, and elite interests.

Conclusion

There is a triple challenge considering the so-called Balkan Route, which also passes through Serbia and North Macedonia. First, there is a problem connected with a broader European challenge and the wider political and security context. Second, it is a humanitarian challenge primarily faced by direct participants in the migration process, i.e., refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. Third, it is a regional challenge in the Western Balkans and a local challenge for the citizens of Serbia and North Macedonia, as they are most often indirectly threatened by it. Multiple factors have contributed to the fact that the European continent, the European Union, and countries like Serbia and North Macedonia place the migrant issue at the top of their security agenda. First, there is the European Union's lack of readiness to deal systematically with massive migrant waves. Instead, there were individual responses and measures by the European Union member countries, which advocated for a unified European policy. However, in practice, they implemented national migration policies largely determined by the internal political situation.

Second, there is a hybrid relationship between the European Union and countries on the so-called Balkan Route, which are not full members of the European Union, such as Serbia and North Macedonia. The European Union has provided strong support to these countries in dealing with migrant challenges, both financially and technically, but has not provided clear guidelines for a long-term solution. Thus, Serbia and North Macedonia have found themselves in a middle ground between a single European policy on the migrant crisis, the national migrant policies of the

European Union member states, and their own national policies and the pressures of the local and domestic population. In fact, all this time, the migrant issue has lacked a comprehensive, continuous, and coordinated response that would offer a long-term solution.

In this space, the media are only tools in the hands of interest groups. The media did not provide an answer to ordinary citizens as to why the migrant crisis occurred or about the different groups of migrants, from asylum seekers and war refugees to political and economic migrants. The media did not provide an adequate expert explanation to ordinary citizens about the potential dangers and consequences for the local population due to the existence of immense migrant waves on the so-called Balkan migrant route. It served as an instrument in the hands of political elites for mutual accusations and political calculations both at the European and Western Balkan levels. What was missing was a joint supranational and national response that would ensure dual security for migrants and the local population. The media system has been covering the migrant crisis in the current circumstances, as well as over the last decade, as a "silent" reporter on the ground who sees everything but does not say anything in an informative sense, thus playing its role.

In this context, the media sector should never have been placed in the role of a leading public policymaker, since that is a duty of public institutions. The media should have played a public educational role through objective information and relevant, well-based, and impartial thematic frameworks about the contemporary migration process overall, thus contributing to public discussion and critical thought about the potential benefits and risks that the migration issue brings internationally, regionally, and locally in Serbian and North Macedonian societies. Journalism as a profession must regain its well-known but long-faded shine. Along with other political decision-makers, it influences the creation, preparation, and implementation of 21st-century policies, in which people and their well-being come first as primary European values. Today, all the challenges in the context of the migrant crisis are still relevant. The migrant issue is still unresolved, while the animosities between the local population, on the one hand, and migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, on the other, are increasingly pronounced, radical, extreme, and dangerous. The migrant issue is not only a security challenge but also a tangible threat, and the media continues to contribute greatly to it.

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