

SECURITIZATION (AND DE-SECURITIZATION) OF THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS: CROATIA IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to analyse the refugee crisis in South-East Europe in 2015/2016 in the context of the securitization theory which was defined by prominent representatives of the Copenhagen school of security studies: Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap De Wilde. The analysis will focus on the Republic of Croatia and its immediate surroundings, and will look into relevant parameters in order to determine whether the securitization of this phenomenon was successful. The securitization of the recent refugee crisis can be observed at micro and macro levels. At the macro level, the analysis will tackle the EU response as well as shortcomings in the common EU migration and asylum policy and the disagreement of member states with methods for solving this crisis. At the micro level, the influence of the refugee crisis can be viewed from two perspectives: from the perspective of different domestic actors which are using the refugee crisis as a tool for political mobilisation, and from the perspective of the influence on interstate relations. However, we can observe actors inclined towards securitization and those inclined towards de-securitization at both levels.*

Key words: *European refugee crisis, Croatia, South-eastern Europe, securitization theory, de-securitization*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the refugee crisis in South-East Europe during the second half of 2015 and at the beginning of 2016, with a special emphasis on the points which influenced the opening of the so-called Western Balkan route (or just the Balkan route), which stretches from Turkey, Greece, through Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia, towards Slovenia and further to Austria, Germany and other Western and Northern European

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countries. The scope of the analysis will be multi-level and will encompass a micro- as well as a macro-level analysis: the national level analysis (the Republic of Croatia), the regional level (the Western Balkans/Balkans) and broader European surroundings since relevant European institutions were supposed to play a crucial role in the management of the refugee crisis.

The refugee crisis of 2015/2016 presented one of the major recent challenges faced by the EU as a political, economic and security entity, and it produced some significant consequences in terms of political stability, adhering to common values, as well as in terms of defining appropriate responses to the immediate challenge of the growing number of people wishing to enter the EU, to name just a few. This crisis also presented a serious test for the EU laws relevant in the area of border control/management and freedom of movement (Schengen Agreement incorporated into the Amsterdam Treaty of 1999) as well as in the area of asylum and migration issues. Several EU member states (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and Sweden) have introduced border controls of different character and for different reasons, not only due to the refugee crisis (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016).¹ A lot of criticism has been directed at the way the EU (and some member states) acted throughout the crisis, and it is still not known whether the EU-Turkey deal will work. Some international human rights bodies and organizations (Council of Europe, 2016;² Amnesty International, 2016)³ are expressing serious doubts about the nature of this deal, questioning its validity in terms of international law and respect for human rights of refugees.

In that particular period, at all three levels (or two levels if we assume that the micro-level encompasses both the national and the regional level), one could observe factors and actors inclined towards the securitization of the refugee crisis, and those that inclined towards a more humanitarian approach, insisting on the view that the huge increase in the number of people wishing to enter the EU is a result of forced migration caused by conflicts in the Middle East and instabilities in other parts of the world, and not a consequence of the so-called economic migration.

Due to the centrality of “speech acts” in securitization theory, the language used was of crucial importance in shaping attitudes of relevant

¹ *The Future of Schengen*, European Council on Foreign Relations. Accessible at: http://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/schengen_flash_scorecard (15. 7. 2016).

² *The situation of refugees and migrants under the EU-Turkey Agreement of 18 March 2016*. Accessible at: <http://semanticpace.net/tools/pdf.aspx?doc=aHR0cDovL2Fzc2VtYmx5LmNvZS5pbmQvbnVncveG1sL1hSZWYvWDJLURXLWV4dHluYXNwP2ZpbGVpZD0yMjYxMiZsYW5nPUVO&xsl=aHR0cDovL3NlbWFudGljcGFjZS5uZXQvWHNsdc9QZGYvWFJlZi1XRc1BVC1YTUuyUERGLnhzbA=-&xslparams=ZmlsZWlkPTlyNjE5> (15. 7. 2016).

³ *No safe refugee: asylum-seekers and refugees denied effective protection in Turkey*. Accessible at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/3825/2016/en/> (15. 7. 2016).

publics at the national, regional and European level. Additional dimensions or favourable conditions for the increased securitization of the migration⁴ into Europe can be found in broader circumstances which indicated a growing threat of terrorism (terrorist attacks in France and Belgium), (sex) crimes against women committed by migrants (attacks on women in some German cities), economic hardships in some EU member states as well as concerns for societal security. In the analysis of public discourse, at least in the Croatian public media, actors inclined towards de-securitization predominantly used the term “refugee”, while proponents of a more securitized, state-centric approach predominantly used the term “migrant” or “economic migrant”, although these terms are not completely synonymous with each other.

The intention of the authors is to examine whether the refugee crisis was securitized at the EU level, at the national level of the Republic of Croatia and at the regional level. Additionally, we claim that in several instances (e.g. Hungary), the language of threat associated with immigration led to a successful securitization and consequently to the introduction of some extraordinary measures (in terms of legislation, the use of the military, the scope of police authorities, ways of border management, etc.) aimed at neutralizing the immediate threat to the security of the state and its citizens.

What the refugee crisis also revealed at all three levels is the growing ideological clash between the political left and the political right across Europe, while some more pragmatic political orientations, embodied in the politics of Angela Merkel, went beyond the classical security-humanitarian needs dichotomy, to encompass economic-social considerations more effectively. This left-right clash and different meanings attached to the nature of the growing number of refugees were used as a source of political mobilisation, and attitudes towards migrations became one of the central features of political programs in domestic and international political campaigns (attitudes of the Visegrad group; presidential elections in Austria; local elections in France; the UK referendum on the EU membership-BREXIT; parliamentary elections in Croatia etc.). Starting from the research questions and the aims of the analysis, author set the hypothesis that the issue of migrations in Croatia is currently not presented as the security threat due to the fact that it is still a transit country and not the final destination for larger number of migrants.

⁴ Here, the term migration is understood as “The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification.” IOM, *Glossary on Migration, International Migration Law Series No. 25, 2011*. Accessible at: <http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#Asylum-Seeker> (10. 5. 2016).

Theoretical framework – theory of securitization

The nexus between security and migrations (whether voluntary or non-voluntary; regular or irregular) gained a lot of importance in the final phase of the 20th century (Huysmans and Squire, 2009: 169). In the previous period of the development of security studies throughout the second half of the 20th century, migration received little attention and had not been debated within the scope of traditional security, dominated by the military dimension. Prior to the end of the Cold War, during the 1980s, the scope of security studies started to expand, both vertically and horizontally (Buzan, 1991). The vertical expansion meant that besides the national state, the attention started to shift towards some other levels, such as individual and international (also regional and global). The horizontal expansion meant that the military dimension of security had to be coupled with the societal, economic, environmental and political dimension. This development was primarily associated with and attributed to authors such as Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde and Ole Wæver, representatives of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). In their pioneer writings, during the 1980s and 1990s, they contributed significantly to important shifts within the notion of security, asking principal questions about entities in the need of protection (referent objects) and possible sources of threat (Balzacq, 2011). Although the state remained the central level and the most important referent object of security, it ceased to be the only referent worth analysing. By understanding that the state itself can represent a source of threat to its own citizens shifted the focus to the security of individuals, and to dimensions such as societal and political. Another important concept which was developed within the Copenhagen school of security studies is the concept of securitization – which, resting upon social constructivism, explains how and under what circumstances a certain issue becomes a security issue, then requiring extraordinary measures by different entities. This brief description of theoretical developments within the (sub)discipline of security studies, serves to indicate how the general security agenda is being broadened, which then translates into domestic and international political arenas, policy-making processes and finally strategic documents and security practices.

Therefore, the analysis in this article will develop around the concept of securitization, and will focus on indicators, mainly speech acts, referring to the securitization of the refugee crisis at the level of the EU, South-eastern Europe and Croatia as well as indicators which point to the de-securitization of this issue. The authors of securitization theory themselves do not represent the view that the process of securitization is the right solution for overcoming challenges generated by different social phenomena and processes

(in this case migrations). They suggest quite the opposite – de-securitization, as a process of managing a certain situation or a process within standard administrative and political procedures.

Throughout the text, the authors will use terms such as “refugee”⁵ and “refugee crisis”, since refugees are frequently categorized as a sub-group within the broader term “migrants”, as persons who are forced to leave their country of origin in fear for their lives due to a war, and since their choice was not a consequence of a voluntary decision, they are categorized as non-voluntary migrants (Park, 2015).

Push-factors for migration in the current refugee crisis

Migration has always been present in the world and the movement of people was treated differently depending on the type of migration. In the past, there were some desirable and projected, but also uncontrolled and less desirable migrations, which mostly contained a security dimension. Basically, the current refugee crisis is a consequence of global processes, and it did not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with the phenomenon of migration. For more than two decades the world has been facing numerous challenges and problems caused by the growing number of terrorist attacks worldwide (mostly outside Western countries), which are causing an increasing number of civilian deaths.⁶ The response of democratic countries to the terrorist threat quickly gained global support, which marked the creation of a broad front line in the fight against terrorism. After the terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001 many countries gave direct or indirect support to US plans and actions for the destruction of terrorist centres. Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq followed soon after through the engagement of enormous military forces of the USA and the allied countries.

After the initial success, the military actions did not lead to the disappearance of the terrorist threat and failed to bring stability to these countries. On

⁵ Under the UN Convention a refugee is a person who: “owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” Article 1 of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Resolution 2198 (XXI), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, p. 16. Accessible at: <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf> (10. 6. 2016).

⁶ “In 2014 the total number of deaths from terrorism increased by 80 per cent when compared to the prior year. This is the largest yearly increase in the last 15 years. Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been over a nine-fold increase in the number of deaths from terrorism, rising from 3,329 in 2000 to 32,685 in 2014.” Global Terrorism Index 2015 – Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism, Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015. Accessible at: <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf> (15. 5. 2016).

the contrary, instability spilled over into surrounding countries. It is not just that terrorists were not defeated and destroyed, but they gained additional strength by adapting their organization and activities to the changing circumstances.⁷ The destabilization of a series of states with Muslim majorities mostly in Northern Africa and in the Middle East led to some major changes in 2011 which are usually labelled as the “Arab Spring”. The aim of actors which inspired these changes was not limited to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes from Libya to Syria, but it also included the creation of liberal democratic systems. However, the “Arab Spring” did not result in the establishment of a democratic order, but in a perennial destabilization of these countries in which terrorist organizations and radical Islamist movements won a significant operational space for action and for spreading their influence. The situation in Syria is particularly problematic since the authoritarian regime was not overthrown, and consequently a bloody civil war has been going on since 2011. This sequence of events initiated a huge wave of refugees directed towards European countries. Unable to bring about democratic ideals to their countries, and being in fear for their lives, many citizens of destabilized countries are trying to migrate to Europe. And although European states have a several decade long experience in receiving refugees, the growing number of refugees and new routes of their movement have pointed out to the inability of many European countries to face this challenge properly.

The securitization of migration (especially the irregular one) is becoming increasingly present in different parts of the world. Refugee crises are an inevitable consequence of numerous conflicts and wars which are characteristic of the contemporary world. The increased movement of people from underdeveloped to developed countries represents a very complex social phenomenon which includes political, economic, environmental, ethnic, religious and other elements. Especially irregular migrations are increasingly becoming associated with activities of organized criminal groups, which have taken the control over human trafficking. Years of neglect regarding this problem contributed significantly to the recent escalation of the refugee crisis in Europe. What is especially worrying is that in a number of countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, the refugee crisis has stimulated some legislative measures which point out to framing migration as an almost exclusively security issue (in terms of traditionally conceived national security), while humanitarian and social components are increasingly neglected. Nevertheless, there is still a significant part of the public in European countries which advocates the need to shape a comprehensive integration policy for refugees, for which the general public must be

⁷ Accessible at: <http://www.terrorism-research.com/future/> (15. 5. 2016).

sensitized, in order to avoid negative phenomena which we have witnessed in some European countries in recent years (for example radicalization of migrant populations).

The current refugee crisis pointed out not only to weaknesses in the functioning of the EU, but also to different political and economic interests of some member states. Political interests can primarily be seen in the rise of conservative and right wing political options, while economic interests are seen in the need of some EU countries for a qualified and educated workforce which will make their economies (as generators of social rights and benefits) more competitive. Such a utilitarian approach should not be the dominant one, since education or profession of the refugee cannot be the decisive factor in the application of the right to international protection.

A long-term integration policy at the national level should not be a one-way, but a diversified process involving (at least) the triangle “state – host nation/local population – refugees”, with the central role of the education system. At the European level, it is already evident that the legal dimension of the European asylum system has to be re-evaluated, especially in terms of the Dublin Regulation and the concept of a temporary protection mechanism which was not applied on the Balkan route or throughout the refugee crisis in general (Mitrović, 2016). In order to make the integration as efficient as possible, the position of refugees on the labour market is particularly important. In this sense, the question of their integration should be placed in the category of development issues, while a comprehensive and efficient integration presents a strong obstacle to the radicalization of society, which is already happening in some European countries.

Refugee Crisis in Europe – different roles for different countries

In recent years not so many issues have stirred up public debates in most European countries the way the refugee crisis has. This issue was particularly emphasized in the countries situated on the route which stretches from Turkey, across the Balkans, through Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and Austria to Germany. Most of these countries, except for Germany and Austria, were only transit countries, and not final destinations for most of the refugees. The refugee crisis of 2015/2016 spurred many political and scientific debates at national and international levels. These debates were aimed at giving answers to many open issues, such as: What are the root causes of such a massive refugee crisis? Why were the states on the “Balkan route” generally ill-prepared for this crisis? Why were some states inclined to the securitization of this issue, while others were not? Is it possible to make a clear distinction between humanitarian and security aspects of the refugee crisis, and what is the role of the media and public discourse in the EU regarding this issue?

This paper will not explore all of these questions, but it will particularly examine the research question which is focused on the role of the Republic of Croatia and its response to the refugee crisis. The authors will try to answer the following question: Which (internal and external) factors affected the humanitarian instead of the security approach to the refugee crisis in the Republic of Croatia? Our starting point is that, considering the election campaign, the social-democratic coalition then in power chose the humanitarian approach for two reasons: in terms of the domestic political situation, the government wanted to improve its rating within the liberal part of the electorate prior to parliamentary elections, while in terms of its foreign policy it tried to get the support from Germany in strengthening its foreign political position.

The media played an important role in presenting the government's advocacy of the humanitarian approach towards the refugee crisis, but also in presenting the opposite efforts of the securitization of this issue advocated by the Croatian president and one part of the opposition. Therefore, the media were under high pressure from the opposed political options and their pragmatic interests since politicians viewed them as an important tool in the process of either securitization or de-securitization (here understood as the prevention of securitization). The best example of how the media can easily help to bring about the securitization of the refugee crisis is Hungary (Simonovits and Bernat, 2016).⁸

On the other hand, in Croatia, the recent refugee crisis was primarily perceived as a humanitarian issue, although there were some very strong tendencies towards securitization. The question here is whether the securitization process would have been more successful if Croatia had been expected to receive and give protection to a larger number of refugees within its borders. While the Croatian government and supporting services (Croatian Police, National Protection and Rescue Directorate, Red Cross, NGOs etc.) were tasked with enabling a safe and humane transit through its territory, not a lot of efforts were directed towards attracting some refugees to seek protection in Croatia. According to the EU relocation and resettlement scheme, some 1,600 people who need international protection should be transferred from Italy and Greece to Croatia within the next two years (starting from July 2016).⁹ This relocation and resettlement scheme is one of the

⁸ See also: *The Attitude of Hungarians to the Refugee Crisis, Hungarian spectrum – reflections on politics, economics and culture*. Accessible at: <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2015/10/08/the-attitude-of-hungarians-to-the-refugee-crisis/> (10. 6. 2016).

⁹ See: *Relocation and Resettlement – State of Play, European Commission*. Accessible at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/20160412/factsheet_relocation_resettlement_en.pdf (20. 5. 2016).

first steps towards a more sustainable Common European Asylum System,¹⁰ which proved to be highly problematic in such an extraordinary situation under the Dublin Regulation rules.

Most discussions during the refugee crisis were focused on the analysis of its possible consequences and how to effectively prevent future crises of this kind. Even before the situation escalated in the second half of 2015, the refugee pressure was felt in Europe, mostly in its Western, more developed countries. The “Arab spring” and its consequences have prompted EU institutions (functioning under the Lisbon Treaty)¹¹ to reconsider their migration policy, by creating partnerships with non-EU countries under the Dialogue for migration, mobility and security with the Southern Mediterranean countries (Carrera, den Hertog and Parkin, 2012). However, due to inconsistencies in the EU migration and asylum policy (Papagianni, 2014), its member states reacted very differently to this challenge and consequently shaped different policies and measures. Some of them, which were designated as final destinations for refugees, building on their previous experiences, patiently received and provided care for the people in need (mainly Germany, Austria and Scandinavian countries).¹² Others, mainly those which were on the transit route, provided safe corridors through their territory (Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia). And finally, the third group of the countries were those which, by building technical obstacles, employing military staff at their borders and changing their regulations and legislations, securitized this issue or were willing to securitize it (Slovenia, Hungary and the other three countries within the Visegrad group).¹³ When put into the context of international law, what one could observe here is a clash between the sovereign right of every state to control its borders, and their humanitarian obligation to provide help to people escaping from their war-torn societies.

¹⁰ *Towards a Reform of the Common European Asylum System and Enhancing Legal Avenues to Europe, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, 6 April 2016. Accessible at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160406/towards_a_reform_of_the_common_european_asylum_system_and_enhancing_legal_avenues_to_europe_-_20160406_en.pdf (20. 5. 2016).*

¹¹ *The Treaty of Lisbon. Accessible at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12007L%2FTXT> (10. 5. 2016).*

¹² *For precise figures regarding asylum in the EU, see: EUROSTAT Statistics Explained - Asylum Statistics, March 2016. Accessible at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/extensions/EurostatPDFGenerator/getfile.php?file=161.53.122.69_1467279494_85.pdf (10. 6. 2016).*

¹³ *For the opinion of the Visegrad group (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) see: Joint Declaration of the Ministers of the Interior, Visegrad Group, Slovenia, Serbia and Macedonia Ministerial Meeting, 19 January 2016, Prague. Accessible at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-declaration-of/> (10. 5. 2016).*

Some features of the Balkan route

According to UN figures, in 2015 the number of international migrants reached 244 million, which accounted for a 41% increase compared to 2000 (International migration report, 2015: 1). Such trends have prompted a more frequent consideration of migration from the perspective of security studies. At the beginning of the 21st century these migratory movements were increasingly contextualized within the notion of contemporary security challenges, along with other non-military security challenges, such as terrorism, organized crime, human trafficking, drug trafficking, etc. When it comes to recent developments regarding the migration into Europe, migratory movements shifted towards the territory of South-eastern European countries since the Mediterranean route turned out to be extremely deadly.¹⁴ This shift had implications for the Republic of Croatia which is located on the route of migration flows consisting primarily of migrants originating from unstable and war-affected areas in the Middle East, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The specific position of Croatia, as an EU member state, stems from the fact that it is still not a part of the Schengen zone, while its neighbours are either both EU and Schengen members (Slovenia and Hungary) or neither members of the EU nor of Schengen (Serbia).

It is estimated that during 2015 around 764,000 people passed through the countries on the “Balkan route” (FRONTEX, 2015). After Hungary finished the construction of the wired fence on its border with Serbia in September 2015, the migration flow was directed towards Croatian borders. Statistics show that in the period between September 2015 and March 2016, 658,968 people were transferred through the territory of the Republic of Croatia. The data on the number of asylum seekers and those granted asylum vary from one country to another, while during the last ten years only 176 applications for international protection were approved in Croatia (MUP, 2016). Between January and the end of March 2016 the number of applications for international protection in Croatia reached 379 (MUP, 2016). Having a very poor experience in accepting and integrating migrants into its society, Croatian institutions and the general public were faced with this larger international phenomenon ill-prepared for a long-term admittance of larger migrant groups. Since almost all of those people wanted to get into the Schengen zone and further to Austria, Germany or northern European countries, which largely provided care for migrants, Croatian authorities handled the situation by employing their resources for a short-term care and

¹⁴ *The Mediterranean Sea is frequently characterized as the deadliest route for migrants and refugees. Accessible at: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/8/55e06a5b6/crossings-mediterranean-sea-exceed-300000-including-200000-greece.html> (10. 6. 2016).*

transport of people to its border with Slovenia. The general public, non-governmental institutions, local authorities and other actors were very involved in providing assistance to the authorities, and were predominantly satisfied with the fact that the basic humanitarian needs of migrants were met on the ground. Thus, the authors of this paper argue that the process of securitizing migration in Croatia would have been successful if circumstances had been slightly different, for example: if a larger number of people had applied for asylum in Croatia, if Western European countries had closed their borders or if there had been some major incidents involving migrants.

Croatia and the region in the refugee crisis

In Croatia, a broad spectrum of actors has been included into the debate surrounding the refugee crisis. Currently, since the Balkan route was closed in March 2016 after the EU-Turkey agreement was accomplished and the EU relocation and resettlement plan started to be implemented, the debate shifted towards the development of capacities and the creation of integration policy of migrant populations. Since the EU-Turkey agreement is regarded as rather unstable, the debate is increasingly being directed towards designing appropriate responses to the possible re-opening of the Balkan route. Therefore, it is important to explore the regional context of the refugee crisis and how Croatia regulated its cooperation and relations with other countries on the route. These relations were not unproblematic, especially regarding Croatia's direct neighbours - Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia. Under the terms of the EU resettlement scheme, the first four migrants from Eritrea, currently situated in Italy, were transferred to Croatia (Zagreb) on July 1 where they applied for asylum. At the same time,¹⁵ Croatian authorities, functioning in that period as a technical government, decided for the first time since the first refugees came to Croatian borders to build a wired fence on one border-crossing with Serbia. The border between Croatia and Serbia was closed for five hours in the night between 29th and 30th June, without any announcements and explanations. The fence (on the bridge) was apparently built a precaution measure in case of any illegal attempts to cross the border. This clearly signifies the change of the prevailing (humanitarian) approach which was dominant at the beginning and at the peak of the refugee crisis, and possibly presents one of the steps towards securitization (although some important steps within the securitization model were left out).

The whole period of the refugee crisis, especially its most intensive part from September 2015 to March 2016, was also a period of heightened political debates in Croatia. After the election campaign in which the refugee

¹⁵ On 29–30 June 2016.

crisis was highly instrumentalized and presented one of its central points, the results of the parliamentary elections were very tight, and both the right (led by the Croatia Democratic Union – HDZ) and the left (led by the Social Democratic Party-SDP) coalition started separate long and exhausting negotiations with the third strongest political platform (MOST – the coalition of independent lists). The new HDZ-MOST government was formed in January 2016,¹⁶ but it proved to be quite unstable and un-functional, and consequently, in June 2016 the decision on dissolving the Parliament was reached. New parliamentary elections were held in September 2016. This political environment is extremely important in analysing the stance towards a possible re-opening of the Balkan route, and there was a big possibility that this issue would be in focus of the election campaign (as it is also on the agenda in many European countries). However, although the possibility of the re-opening of the Balkans route was very often debated by experts in the public media, economic, wider ideological and security issues dominated the election campaign, without specific reflections on the nature of the migration and its influence on the national security of the Republic of Croatia. Therefore, political actors in the last election campaign did not make any securitization moves towards the issue of migrations.

One of the central questions within the debate on the refugee crisis was what would have happened if Croatia really had had to give permanent residence to a larger number of refugees and if it possessed enough capacities to receive and integrate a new population. There was a consensus that these capacities were insufficient and that they had to be created, and moreover that Croatia had to build on its previous experiences in receiving a huge number of refugees and providing for its own IDPs during the 1990s. Issues such as political participation, access to the labour market and education system, as well as security aspects (in terms of a possible radicalization of the refugee population in the absence of an adequate integration policy) are of utmost importance within this debate. The EU quota system and the arrival of the first groups of migrants will be the first real test for the Croatian public regarding their integration into the society. In that sense, a series of coordinated steps will have to be taken – the first of them being the process of shaping a general integration policy. Although it possesses some laws regulating the status of non-nationals (Law on Foreigners, Law on Asylum, Croatian Citizenship Act), and some other documents regarding the immigration issues (Migration Policy of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2013-2015;¹⁷ Action Plan for the Removal of Obstacles to the Exercise of

¹⁶ <http://www.sabor.hr/predstavljajanje-vlade-rh-2016> (10. 5. 2016).

¹⁷ The translation of the document accessible at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54c0c5084.html> (20. 6. 2016).

Particular Rights in the Area of the Integration of Foreigners 2013–2015¹⁸), the current Croatian integration policy is regarded as inefficient (IMIN, 2016).

Nevertheless, countries on the Balkan route were primarily perceived just as transit countries, and not as countries which could present final destinations for refugees. For a number of reasons, refugees were reluctant towards the idea of seeking asylum in any of the countries on the route (except Hungary), even under the EU quota system, as it proved to be the case with Croatia.

Indicators of securitization and de-securitization in Croatia – the role of the speech act and the importance of discourse

Public debates in Croatia were clearly profiled around two discourses – one that advocated the humanitarian approach and free transit of refugees through the country in the context of the on-going humanitarian disaster, and the other one which advocated stopping the wave of refugees by closing borders and implementing stronger border control mechanisms (including the engagement of the military, with no clear explanation of their role), emphasizing at the same time “security implications” for the national security of the Republic of Croatia.

The first, humanitarian approach was advocated by the then Social Democratic government of Zoran Milanović. The second approach, which was prone to the securitization of the refugee crisis, was advocated by the centre-right and right-wing political parties, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). At the beginning of the crisis Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović supported the second approach, and already in her early statements clashed not only with the Government’s approach, but also with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. The following statement of President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović stirred up the domestic, but also echoed in the German public: “Mrs. Merkel, who invited refugees, has now pulled the handbrake and said that Germany cannot accept all of these economic migrants. Mrs. Merkel did that without being aware that so many cars had gathered along the way, and that pulling the break at this moment has caused the chaos on the road, and now she has to solve it”.¹⁹ This statement was widely criticized by politicians and ordinary citizens. Former Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor responded, trying to repair what she

¹⁸ For the analysis of the integration of non-nationals in Croatia see: Kuti, Simona, *Integration Policies – Country Report for Croatia*, INTERACT RR 2014/13, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole (FI): European University Institute, 2014. Accessible at: <http://languageforwork.ecml.at/Portals/48/HtmlTagFiles/c0ea48e3-e7c2-46f0-b79b-29cbdfdbfb06.pdf> (20. 6. 2016).

¹⁹ <http://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/kolinda-merkel-409544.html> (10. 6. 2016).

perceived as the damage done, by saying: "I apologize to Chancellor Angela Merkel who helped us a lot in the final stages of Croatian negotiations with the EU".²⁰

While the Croatian Government allowed and organized a safe transfer of refugees through the Croatian territory, it was constantly under attack of the opposition parties supported by the President, which claimed that Croatia was embarrassing itself in the whole situation which cannot be handled without the involvement of the army. President's special adviser for the refugee crisis, Andrija Hebrang (HDZ) used the situation in the context of the pre-election campaign, by saying that the situation on the ground was worse than during the Homeland war in Croatia, due to the inability of Milanović's Government to act appropriately: "They had three months to build reception centres. Not a square meter was built and now we are a disgrace of the whole European Union. It is them who are to be blamed for this shame".²¹ This attitude was supported by the President who declared that "we must stop the influx; we have to get EU guarantees about what will happen with these people who have already arrived to Croatia and with those who want to pass through the country. (...) At this point we cannot absorb the additional number of migrants, before we have resolved the issue of their transfer elsewhere. I definitely think that we cannot accept more people".²² At the same time, the president argued that the engagement of the army on the border is inevitable. Prime Minister Milanović refused to consider sending troops to the border and announced that he would seriously address the issue before the European Council.²³ On the eve of the refugee crisis, the PM had already announced that Croatia would apply the humanitarian approach, by saying: "We're not dealing with bags of cabbage – it's about people – people who are desperate, fleeing from their difficult situations, taking the risk and you can't greet them with batons".²⁴ He also emphasized that Croatia was willing to help according to its capacities, which were modest. When the refugee crisis reached its peak, the Prime Minister remained consistent in advocating the humanitarian approach to the refugee crisis, stressing the key role of Germany in its resolving: "What gives me hope is the fact that Germany is most affected by the crisis and it will find a solution,

²⁰ <http://www.24sata.hr/news/kolinda-ipak-povukla-rucnu-merkel-je-moja-draga-kolegica-439320> (10. 6. 2016).

²¹ <http://www.naslovi.net/2015-09-19/slobodna-evropa/vlast-i-opozicija-suprotno-o-izbjeglickoj-krizi/16387519> (10. 6. 2016).

²² <http://www.naslovi.net/2015-09-19/slobodna-evropa/vlast-i-opozicija-suprotno-o-izbjeglickoj-krizi/16387519> (10. 6. 2016).

²³ <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/izbjeglicka-kriza-balkan-hrvatska/27257241.html> (28. 06. 2016).

²⁴ <http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/milanovic-o-izbjeglickoj-krizi-to-su-ljudi-nisu-vrece-kupusa-nemozete-ih-docekati-pendrecima/837764.aspx> (28. 06. 2016).

but this comes with a great cost not only in money, but also in a new round of negotiations with the government in Athens”.²⁵ After the parliamentary elections in Croatia in late 2015, the HDZ and the MOST formed a government led by Tihomir Orešković – as a non-partisan prime minister. Although the refugee crisis had subsided by then, after the closure of the Greek-Macedonian border discussions on this issue continued. They were brought into the Croatian parliament within the discussion about legislative measures that would enable sending the military to the border if necessary due to the refugee crisis. In this debate, the opposition accused the Government that by amending the State Border Protection Act and the Defence Act, by which the army could provide support in the protection of the state border, it also enables the abuse by the army. A sharp reaction among the parliamentary majority was sparked by Nenad Stazić’s statement (SDP) that the “proposed laws can be interpreted as a preparation for a coup d’état”.²⁶ Despite the disapproval of the opposition, the ruling majority in the Croatian parliament adopted amendments to the above-mentioned laws, thus creating preconditions for an easier securitization of this issue in the future.

Conclusion

Croatian experience in the refugee crisis has shown that this issue was very conducive to politicization and a possible securitization. The views of politicians in Croatia regarding this issue depended primarily on the prevailing attitude of their electoral base. Thus, the left-wing government advocated a humanitarian approach to the refugee crisis, while the centre-right government tried to securitize the issue, only in the legislative sphere for the time being. Such views on the refugee crisis are also present in some other European countries where left political options generally advocate a humanitarian approach, while right political options advocated the securitization of the issue. The exception is German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who, though belonging to the centre-right, advocates the humanitarian approach.

The reason for this can be found in the German approach which includes economic and social aspects, whereby the refugee crisis has to some extent been used to “import” a new workforce. The economic potency and the need for the new workforce significantly influenced the attitude of some countries to the refugee crisis. It is hard to expect from certain countries, whose own citizens are migrating for economic reasons (almost all East-European countries), to receive and integrate refugees. Therefore, with the

²⁵ <http://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/hrvatska/clanak/id/288382/milanovic-za-bbc-o-izbjegličkoj-krizi-merkel-ce-morati-ponovno-razgovarati-s-grckom-vladom> (28. 06. 2016).

²⁶ <http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/oporba-protiv-izmjena-zakona-o-obrani-i-nadzoru-granica-tenkovi-nemaju-sto-raditi-na-ulicama/881404.aspx> (28. 06. 2016).

support of the majority of the public, their policies end up in the securitization of this issue.

The refugee crisis of 2015/2016 is a “hot” research issue. The knowledge and the experience obtained so far have to be translated into public policies of individual countries and of the European Union. In the absence of systematic research, it will be difficult to deal with consequences of this crisis, which are present within individual states, but also in relations between these states. It is possible to remove the physical wired fences that have not been removed yet, but it is very uncertain when it will be possible to remove the invisible fence between states and their citizens which are visible in growing ethnic distances in many relations between European nations. All of this can contribute to the growing nationalism and xenophobia which were already experienced in Europe in the twentieth century in the worst possible way during the two world wars and a number of local ones.

On the Balkan route, the refugee crisis underlined the complexity of relations between countries in this part of Europe. Due to the fact that these countries are in a different status in relation to the major European organizations, the EU and the NATO, it was hard to devise a common approach and take coordinated measures in relation to the refugee crisis. Each country has developed its own approach towards this problem, especially taking into account its national interests. Some countries, such as Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia, took into account wider interests, especially those advocated by Germany. Due to the humanitarian approach advocated by Germany, which was the desired destination of a vast majority of refugees, Serbia and Croatia have accepted the humanitarian approach as well. This approach was favourable for the governing political elites which have thus strengthened support of their own electorate. In Serbia, the ruling political option at the time of the refugee crisis, won the early elections in May 2016. In Croatia, the ruling political option at the time of the refugee crisis did not form a government after the 2015 parliamentary elections, but nevertheless it achieved a good result. The experience of this refugee crisis is important in the process of designing national policies, but also the European policy towards migration. It can be expected that the experience and lessons learnt will influence the creation of more effective and humane responses to future refugee crises which are very likely to happen again.

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