

Migration, Religious Identity and Nationalist Contestations: A Case Study on Romanian's Media Populistic Treatment of Europe's Migrant Crisis

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(Disclaimer: In the present form, the article is just a synthesis of certain partial research results on the theme. The applied research, the examples, the general background and the literature review will be offered in the presentation)

In 2015 the arrival in Europe of over one million refugees and immigrants from war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan took the center stage in public debate, as the authorities and the public became aware of a phenomenon that they previously encountered only indirectly, mostly by media reports. The media was quick to call this phenomenon “migration (refugee) crisis”, but beyond that, its responses to this arrival differed significantly, although, overall, the media played a crucial role in framing the public's perceptions on the issue.

The refugee crisis developing in Europe was covered extensively by the Romanian media since its early beginnings, but the announcement in 2015 of a plan to build a large mosque in the capital Bucharest added a new, religious dimension to previously overwhelmingly impartial media coverage of the migration phenomenon. While firstly unrelated, the two developments became strongly intermingled in public and media discourse since Romania became a destination/transit country for migrants, and have the potential, my research will argue, to harm the perception of the historical Muslim community living in Romania and its plans to have a more active religious and community life in the country.

Three years ago, the plan to build a large mosque in the north of the Romanian capital, with funds provided by the Turkish authorities, on a parcel of land offered by the Romanian government, attracted huge media and public attention, but the negative reactions – varying from invoking a Muslim threat to placing pig carcasses on the prospective place of the mosque – were limited to populist and extreme right milieus.

The subject received extensive media coverage, but both the mainstream and the tabloid press avoided taking parts in the controversy, maintaining an impartial,

although sometimes slightly sensationalistic tone, when describing the nationalist responses to the mosque plan.

However, the situation drastically changed, my research shows, since Romania started to receive immigrants, although in small numbers, in 2016, as the mainstream media began echoing the nationalist grievances in the case of the mosque, by bringing them to describe the migration challenge. More specifically, my research shows how the mainstream Romanian press begun exploiting these nationalist grievances, by bringing into spotlight the presumed religious identity of the migrants, for its own commercial purposes.

For proving that, the paper is proposing a content-based analysis of a selection of 50 articles appeared in the Romanian media in the last 6 years. The analysis will primarily focus on the way the religious identity of the migrants is reflected in the Romanian press and how this feature helps build a stigmatizing stereotype of the Muslims living in Romania, not necessary of the Muslim immigrants.

Moreover, the research will examine how this portrayal offered now by the mainstream media is added to the nationalist grievances formulated by the far right milieus in the case of the mosque, linking strongly these two developments, and thus creating a combined discourse against an acutely perceived phenomenon of “Muslim invasion”.

While adapted to the present context, this kind of discourse, as I will show in the future stages of my research, bears a close resemblance to a centuries old discourse on Muslims from the time of the Ottoman Empire, and can be used to justify new politics of exclusion or encourage fresh derailments to the radical right, as witnessed in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Methodology

The research will bring into focus a content-based analysis of media coverage of immigration in Romania as reflected by 50 articles that appeared on their internet editions of both mainstream and right-wing press in Romania between 2012 and 2018, as the vast majority of Romanian newspapers and magazines gave up their print editions. The identification and selection of articles did not result primarily after analyzing a selected number of representative newspapers in a time range, as most of the reports and article dedicated to media coverage of immigration did, but by Google searching on key concepts as “immigrants”, “refugees”, “Romania” and “Muslims”.

The reason for this methodological decision is twofold: first, a certain number of online editions of mainstream newspapers (such as “Evenimentul Zilei”, “Adevărul”) in Romania operate as open platforms, meaning that they host even in the same day news, stories and opinions that radically diverge – so you could not extract a predominant view of migration –, and second that, by using this method, you can easily spot when and how certain news are picked up and distributed by other media outlets and which are the content creators and which are only the distributors of information. For analyzing the media coverage, the research will adapt a comprehensive framework of seven key questions about reporting designed by (Berry Berry, M. et al, 2015) and used by (Chouliaraki, L. et al, 2017), such “Who are the key sources in coverage?”, “What is the prevalence of different themes in coverage?” or “What solutions to the migration crisis are present in coverage?”, that could easily be used for presenting the key findings and empirical results of the research.

Current Romanian context, global refugee challenge

Under the so-called “mandatory quotas of refugees”, to which Romania opposed – together with Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – the country should have hosted over 4,000 refugees from Africa and Middle East by the summer of 2017. Still, by July 2017, under this scheme, now abandoned, Romania had received only 710 people “in need of international protection”, while for 2018 and 2019, the same quotas asked Romania to receive 109 refugees, mostly from Syria. Back in 2017, the country witnessed the biggest surge in the number of asylum requests (almost 5.000), since Romania ratified the Geneva Convention, from which it granted refugee status to 849 persons.

In March 2016, the first 15 refugees arrived on the Romanian soil, with a plane from Athens, and were transferred to the town of Galati, where they were met with a protest by a group of angry locals. Their arrival was already preceded by a growing media coverage of the issue, and were soon followed by numerous articles and news dedicated to a Muslim “invasion” of Romania.

The refugee or the immigration crisis, as was dubbed the Romanian press, mirroring the European media, was covered by its early beginnings, but two events, as I will argue, shaped the way it evolved till today.

Media coverage of refugees: playing on nationalist's fears on a sensationalistic note

Before 2015, the immigration crisis was known to Romanians by news and articles having as primary sources news agencies and international newspapers - documenting the plight of the people that fled the war-ravaged countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The stories were often written on an impartial tone, to present the statistics of wars, or on a compassionate one, used to describe the refugee's stories and the efforts to help those who fled the war zones – the only exceptions being the news and articles covering terrorism and its described relations with the Islamic world.

In addition, in the last years, the Romanians became acquainted with another type of media coverage of immigration – one that targeted the Romanian immigrants abroad, and especially in the UK - as could be documented in the sensationalist manner the British tabloids (especially Daily Mail) presented the lifting of the work restrictions for Romanians and Bulgarians on the British market on 1st January 2014. Moreover, according to a UN report, Romania is the second country in the world, after Syria, in terms of lost population because of migration. According to the UN, in the last 10 years, 3 million Romanians have settled abroad, more recently in countries like England, Austria and Belgium.

On June 2015, the announcement of the plan to build “the biggest mosque in Europe” the north of the Romanian capital, with funds provided by the Turkish authorities, on a parcel of land offered by the Romanian government, was extensively covered both in mainstream and right-wing media and was from the beginning marked with controversy that lasted till the plans were finally abandoned at the end of spring this year. While the mainstream press maintained an impartial tone, offering articles that detailed the whereabouts of the mosque, its fundings, and its role for the Muslim community – under slightly sensationalistic titles, with the word “mosque” written with capitals, or put as placed in expression as “mega-mosque” – the right wing was quickly describing the announcement as the attack of Islam on Romanian values and as a threat to Romanian national identity. The radical ideas were later to be taken by some grassroots initiatives opposing the construction of the mosque, and started to appear in warning articles making for the time the connection between building a mosque and the prospective coming of Muslim refugees and immigrants in Romania. For the radical right wing organization “Noua Dreaptă” (“New Right”), who called for a referendum on the plan of the government, the mosque will attract Muslim refugees in Romania,

and by that, the perils of Islamic proselytism. These ideas circulated in several articles in 2015 and created that background that the news that the first refugees entered on the Romanian soil in 2016.

Even if in the summer of 2017 the Turkish ambassador in Bucharest declared that his country is not insisting to build the mosque (a plan finally abandoned in 2018), because it could harm the bilateral relations with Romania, the mentioning of the plan to built the mosque in articles related to immigration from war-thorn countries such as Syria and Irak remained a constant in the articles that appeared since then on right-wing media platforms.

Against this background, the arrival of the first refugees in Romania was quickly followed by a surge of articles fueling the nationalistic fears, by tagging refugees by religion. The references to “Muslim immigrants/refugees” were abundant in both mainstream and right-wing press in 2016 and 2017 – sometimes accompanied by the mentioning of a prospective “Muslim invasion” (right-wing platforms) while not forgetting to highlight the imposed decision from EU for Romania to accept the controversial refugee relocation quotas. The most numerous direct references to the religion of the refugees were present in the headlines and the leads (first sentences) of the media stories describing immigration to Romania, - with cases when the reference to religion in the headline was the only one in the whole article. Sometimes, mainstream newspapers and even right wings platforms combined a sensationalistic headline (“Muslim immigrants invade Romania”) with a content taken from news agencies – in order to attract audiences. In this way, people will open the link, attracted by the title, but still receive the relevant information offered by a trusted media source. It is important to mention that some media chose not to make a direct reference to immigrants’ religious affiliation – Islam – but instead to offer a “geography lesson”, stating the immigrants' nations of origin and thus avoiding a more sensationalistic tone.

A new level of media sensationalism can be observed in articles (fewer) that, on the contrary, fail to present the full story (any differences) beside migrants’ arrivals, while opting to distort the reality and present them as an endless tide of people, eager to take jobs from the locals and threaten the native values and culture.

Sources used in media coverage of immigration

While some reports highlighted how media covering immigration “falls into propaganda traps laid by politicians” (Ethical Journalism Network, 2015) or followed

a political or religious agenda (in Poland's case, as documented in (Krotofil, O. and Motak, D., 2018) and in Schmiedel, U. and Smith, G., 2018)), the Romanian coverage of refugee crisis mainly stuck to information provided by the relevant authorities in the field (Frontex, UNHCR, Eurostat), news agencies and international newspapers, - while the influence of political figures and their opinions on the issue remained marginal. An exception can be considered the declarations – widely distributed by the right wing media – made by an ex official from the Romanian Intelligence Service (that asked rhetorically if Romania is prepared to receive 500.000 Muslims), or the invoking of the conservative American site Breitbart as a source of a declaration of Romanian authorities related to a new refugee route that could be opened crossing the Black Sea.

Themes of the media coverage of immigration

Like in most countries, the media coverage of migration in Romania was heavily dominated by three main themes: the numbers of refugees/ migrants; the plight of these refugees; and the efforts to offer assistance and to integrate them.

The first theme was also the only theme that appeared constantly throughout all the articles reviewed, often in connection with a negative coverage and a talk of a Muslim “invasion”, while the second theme took the center stage only in moments of great public emotion, such as the tragic death of the young Alan Kurdi on a beach in Turkey.

The plight of the refugees had previously occupied an important role in media coverage of refugee crisis in Romania before 2015, when stories about people fleeing war zones and poverty – presented extensively in international media and were translated and presented by the Romanian press. It is important to note that a positive coverage of the refugees existed throughout the whole time frame analyzed, mostly in isolated efforts of media actors as *Vice* – but they could not counterbalance the mostly negative and polarized coverage. A hope that such positive coverage will gain ground is given by the intensification of the efforts, or at least, of the plans, to offer refugees a better life in Romania, by increasing their financial help and access to education.

The third theme came more into focus more beginning with 2018, with some solutions proposed by the authorities to better treat and integrate the migrants presented in media coverage.

The Romanian officials announced the construction of 36 mobile camps by 2020, providing accommodation and feeding facilities to manage any uncontrolled

population movements. More important, as asylum centers all over the country are full, the authorities announced plans to help the refugees with the rent for a longer period. That is, to pay 50% of the monthly rent for one year, instead of six months as it is today. In addition, The Ministry of Internal Affairs wants to double the amount of time for refugees receiving cash, from 6 months to one year – in the context in which that migrants receive only 540 Romanian lei (less than 120 euros) per month once they have been granted the refugee status.

Vocabulary

Despite the debate in the European media concerning the proper use of terms “migrant” (someone who moves freely from one country to another, most often because of economic reasons) and “refugees”/“asylum-seekers” (someone forced to move because of persecutions, wars, etc.), the Romanian press seems unaware of these distinctions, and continue to use these terms interchangeably till present.

Playing the nationalists’ card? – A short preliminary conclusion

While certainly playing on nationalistic fears – the mixed coverage of refugee crisis in Romania – displaying in most cases a sensationalistic tone (even limited to the headline of articles or news) combined to a quite impartial informative content - cannot be assimilated to a hate speech as documented in the case of media coverage of the crisis in other east-European countries. The reason has to do mainly because some of the main nationalist grievances concerning immigration – migrants as threats to economic security (stealing the jobs), cultural values (converting to Islam) and national security (potential terrorists) are only marginal to Romanian media discourse concerning immigration crisis. Indeed, the isolated protests that accompanied the arrival of the first refugees were organized by people thinking of refugees both as threats to economic and national securities, but such opinions didn’t become mainstream or were not reflected in the media coverage of the refugee crisis. Instead, the media presented some declarations (both from migrants, but also from important political figures like the Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz), that can fuel a nationalistic response, or generate hostility, such as Romania is not liked by the migrants because it is “poor”.

Another example of playing the nationalist and populist card was the extensive coverage in the Romanian press of a declaration made by philanthropist and billionaire

George Soros in a text published by Project Syndicate, where he states that "the EU must accept at least one million refugees each year in the near future". While firstly known in Romania for his educational and philanthropical activities, Soros was later seen as a scapegoat for some and accused of staging several political events (protests, left activism) in nowadays Romania.

On a more ironical note, one may note that now, when reporting about the refugees crisis and when the Romania became a host/transit country for refugees, the Romanian media follows the same basic patterns of a much detested English tabloids coverage of the Romanian immigration in UK – one that the same Romanian press condemned and described as populist and nationalist.

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