SOCIOLOGY

The Image of the Refugee: Real and Imagined
(Based on Examples from the Bulgarian and the British Media)

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Abstract: The paper aims at analyzing the image of refugees based on a corpus of more than 500 articles published in two Bulgarian and two British newspapers over a period of two months in 2013 and one month in 2017. Using CDA as the main method of analysis, the study traces out the similarities and differences of presentation in the verbal (use of terminology, direct speech, first person singular accounts) and non-verbal components (pictures) used in the analysed articles and concludes that the image of refugees presented in the British media is more objective and comprehensive than the one in the Bulgarian media.

Keywords: *media discourse, objectivity, refugees, CDA.*

I. Introduction. The topic of refugees as part of the broader discourse on migration can be viewed as an issue of Us and Them dichotomy and in this respect the image of the refugee can be associated with the image of the cultural/ religious Other. Being part of the Other group and bearing in mind the fact that refugees usually look for both shelter and financial support, refugees, similar to all those Others who come from outside into "our" ordered world constitute a moral panic [cf. 1] and are attributed the features of public devils or deviants, the criminals whose only goal is the disruption of everything considered positive and own. Therefore, psychologically, locals endow the image of refugees with negative qualities in order to maintain the better image of the in-group, thereby to foster positive self-esteem.

This idea is further taken up and enhanced by the media which distribute images that although related to living people can sometimes be considered imaginary mostly because of lack of personal contact, first person singular accounts of what has really happened or biased presentation [2, p. 14]. It is easy to make people believe in something they have no real experience of and it is even easier based on that lack of experience to make them believe that something is bad and dangerous and detrimental to society, especially if "the threat" is presented as so different to what is considered traditional and own that it is taken as foreign and totally incompatible. All of the characteristics mentioned so far are usually associated with the image of refugees who have turned out to be one of the most pressing issues recently.

The topic is of significance both for Bulgaria which is one of the outer borders of the EU, thereby a possible point of entry, as well as for the UK, the country which is one of the final destinations of those seeking refuge. The different roles attributed to the two countries by refugees themselves, trigger some differences in perspective as well: Bulgaria, although having several refugee camps and being involved in the refugees' relocation scheme, is mostly viewed as a transit country, as a gateway to western Europe. The UK, on the other hand, is mostly perceived as "the land of milk and honey" for refugees due to its economic development and good social welfare programme.

However, despite the presence of international organizations, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Red Cross that operate through their representatives both in Bulgaria and the UK, thus assuring common policy towards refugees, the experience both countries have with immigration is different mostly due to British imperial history and Bulgaria's geographic location. The former has been and still is a pull factor for people from the former British Empire and most currently for immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, the latter has been a transit area for people from Asia and Africa into Europe.

The political situation in both countries in 2017 has been tense. Bulgaria underwent a change of president, the resignation of the second Borisov cabinet, the appointment of a temporary cabinet by the newly elected president, and in April 2017 the reelection of the third Borisov cabinet. One of the main political events that shook the UK has been the decision that the country should leave the EU and the British Prime Minister's Article 50 deadline for Brexit. In addition, the continuing war in Syria hyped up with accounts of use of chemical weapons by Bashar Assad as well as the latest referendum held in Turkey and the constant threats voiced by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that should the EU fail to comply with Turkey's demands they will release the refugees held at their border, all jointly make the topic of refugees an important and a challenging one to analyse.

II. Review of the findings on the topic. There have been a multitude of studies on the presentation of refugees and asylum seekers in the media. The analyses differ in their methods, e.g. corpus analysis [3], social categorization [4], content analysis [5], qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis [6], among others, as well as their corpora: some focus on British newspapers, others on Scottish, still others on Australian. All research, however, is unanimous that presentation of asylum seekers and refugees in the media is primarily negative with the tabloid press being more poignant in their publications on the topic. The refugees and asylum seekers are part of the group that has jointly been described as causing "moral panic" [1] simply because they are considered different and strange. As it was

observed in the research conducted up to this point the press very frequently tends to use the terms 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', 'migrant' and 'immigrant' interchangeably thus creating a generalized image of all incomers to a country and suggesting to their readers that they be viewed as "unwanted aliens" [5, p. 21] which in a way creates an imagined reality as a big part of the readers do not have experience with refugees but through their linguistic choices "newspapers make and communicate sociopolitical choices." [3, p. 14] and provoke respective actions which might be oppressive or marginalizing [4, p. 1].

III. Aims. The aim of the analysis is to study the way media in Bulgaria and the UK depict refugees and based on their comparison and contrast to try to assess their degree of objectivity as well as the comprehensiveness of portrayal. Subsequently, this will help determine the realistic vs. unrealistic perception readers receive of refugees.

Another aim of the study is to assess the changes in presentation of refugees that have occurred in the two periods of the study.

IV. Corpus and Methods of Analysis. The corpus for current analysis is comprised of 593 articles in total covering two different time periods: October 1 – November 30, 2013 and March 23 – April 23, 2017. The articles comprising the corpus are excerpted from two Bulgarian newspapers (*Dnevnik* and *Standart*) and two British newspapers (*The Independent* and *The Guardian*) which are part of the serious press in the two countries. The number of articles from 2013 is 348, while the number of articles from 2017 is 245.

The difference in the number of publications can be accounted for with the fact that the first period, although longer, is closer to the beginning of the refugee crisis, while the latter period marks the current state of affairs where the total number of refugees is significantly higher than that in 2013: based on UNHCR Global Trends for 2013 [7], the number of refugees at the time was 16.7 million [8, p. 3].

The study conducted both synchronically and diachronically provides an interesting feedback on the changing ways of media presentation. To do this both the verbal and the non-verbal presentations on the topic have been analysed with focus on terminology, descriptors, topics discussed as well as picture materials. To this goal CDA, perceived as an integrated approach to the analysis of text as well as the method that studies the ideologies conducted through text especially when analyzing topics such as presentations of racism [cf. 9, 10] and multi-modal analysis for it "extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music and sound". [11, p. 120; 12] have been applied as main methods of analysis.

V. Main findings. Many of the studies preceding this one as already mentioned focus on the use of terminology and the way media tend to use terms like 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', 'migrants' and 'immigrants' interchangeably. Looking at the corpus of articles from 2017 we notice the predominant use of the term 'refugee/refugees' in both the Bulgarian and the British media followed by 'migrant/migrants' and 'asylum seekers'. There is only one

exception to this trend, i.e. *The Guardian* used 'asylum seekers' more often than 'migrants' in the analysed corpus. While the use of 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' can somehow be justified as their distinction is somewhat confusing [cf. 2, p. 14] mostly due to the fact that both terms denote people who flee their country for refuge or safety, or from fear of persecution, the use of 'migrant' as their synonym cannot be considered appropriate as the lexeme lacks the idea of coercion of some kind which is of significance for the understanding of the essence of the terms.

The use of 'immigrant' in the corpus from 2017 is limited which marks a positive trend in comparison with the use of the same term in 2013. Still, although at a much smaller scale the term is sometimes used to refer to refugees. In the Bulgarian corpus from 2017 the term 'immigrant' and 'illegal immigrant' appear only 11 times in total mostly in statistical data discussing the number of people who have tried to enter the country illegally. The use of the collocation 'illegal immigrants' to refer to refugees is noticed only twice in the translated versions of articles from international news agencies, which marks a step towards objective and true presentation.

In addition, the Bulgarian corpus from 2017 lacks references to nationalistic slogans using descriptors, such as those observed in the corpus of Bulgarian articles from 2013, e.g. 'the aliens', 'non-human', 'vermin', 'parasites', 'some kind of pest', a 'pet' or 'animal' used in the diminutive, 'cannibals', 'scum', among others used at the time to stir panic and provoke negative feelings towards refugees. The only reference to nationalist discourse encountered in the publications from 2017 is the use of 'aliens' in a banner prepared by members of the nationalist parties in the capital of Bulgaria. Another difference observed in the Bulgarian corpus from 2017 is that the term 'refugees' is no longer so closely attached to the ethnonym 'Syrian' as was the case in 2013 when the bigger part of the refugees coming to Bulgaria were from that part of the world.

The corpus from 2017 features a wider array of ethnonyms and toponyms denoting the background of the people who have been forced to leave their countries of origin as well as the places they have travelled to: e.g. refugees are presented as coming from Syria (Aleppo, Fua, Damascus, Madaya, etc.), Afghanistan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Iraq (Mosul), Somalia and Sudan, while the countries they travel to are Greece, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria, Serbia, Macedonia, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Lesbos, Poland. These references, however, are quite sporadic and mostly occurring only once which is insignificant repetition to create a memorable image in the minds of the readers.

The corpus of British articles in contrast, uses the references to the source or target areas are usually associated with personal stories which is a major difference between the publications in the Bulgarian and the British media on the topic: a characteristic which has also been noted by Finney [2, p. 14]. Bulgarian articles tend to be more focused on the legislative part of solving the problem rather than on the personal stories of refugees. Most of the personal accounts are articles published by international news agencies the only exception is marked by an article on a Syrian fami-

ly in the town of Elin Pelin who were eventually chased away by the locals instigated by the local representatives of the nationalist party.

The British articles in contrast tend to focus not only on the legal arrangements which are actually but a small part of the publications but mostly on events happening in the refugee camps all over the world as well as on many personal stories. Thus, in addition to the refugee source areas, British articles focus also on a phenomenon called "climate refugees" coming from low-lying Pacific islands, such as Mousuni, who are mostly sheltered in Australia. There are also accounts of the camps in Papua New Guinea as well as references to Canada and the USA as target zones for refugees. In this respect it can be argued that the coverage that British articles provide on the issue is more comprehensive than that of the Bulgarian media. The reason can be proximity as well as relevance of what gets published. Regardless the reason, the truth is that Bulgarian readers receive somewhat limited information compared to the British readership. This fact has also been confirmed by a study conducted by Petrov who also states that Bulgarian media lacks in more thorough investigative journalism into the reasons that have led to the issue and thus the accounts on the problem come out more superficial [cf. 13].

In addition to the general narratives and analyses on the existing camps and the life there, British articles also provide interviews with refugees who have managed to settle in their host countries and who have managed to build up their lives there, such as the Watford midfielder Valon Behrami and Emilio Aldecoa – a left winger, who had signed for Wolverhampton Wanderers, among others, which contributes further to the development of a more comprehensive image of the refugee. In addition to providing a more "balanced coverage", the resort and publication of such personal stories "show [their readers] that many refugees and asylum seekers are capable and committed professionals." [2, p. 14]. This in its own turn contributes to the positive presentation of these people and can therefore foster exhibition of tolerance and understanding [cf. 14, p. 22; 6, p. 102].

The non-verbal elements in the articles can also contribute to the feeling of empathy to these people. The Bulgarian corpus from both 2013 and 2017 is more scarce in terms of visuals used. Still the trend is for increased number of pictures employed in the publications from 2017. The general idea when there are refugees in sight is to present them en masse thus creating a generalized image of people who are somewhat darker in complexion, dressed poorly and predominantly male. The majority of the pictures featuring refugees in the Bulgarian media discourse are taken from a distance which also creates the allusion of impartiality on behalf of the photographer and the general presentation [cf. 12, p. 148]. An exception to this trend is observed in the pictures accompanying the above mentioned article about the Syrian refugee family in Elin Pelin published in the Bulgarian *Dnevnik* on March 23, 2017. The publication, however, is taken from Reuters. It should also be mentioned that the pictures used in *Dnevnik* are more in number than those used in *Standart* in support of their articles. However,

the majority of the pictures which portray refugees are taken by Reuters and some other news agencies.

The British newspapers use more pictures to support their publications. The strategies used when taking the pictures are also more diverse than those employed by the analysed Bulgarian newspapers, featuring close shots suggesting intimacy, long shots or birds eye view especially of camps for a better idea of the span of the camps the squalor plainly seen in many of them. The British publications also feature a lot more pictures whose focus is on single individuals so that the reader can get a more detailed information on how a refugee looks. The various strategies employed in the pictures contribute to the more comprehensive and real image of refugees.

VI. Conclusion. Looking at the publications in the Bulgarian and the British media from 2013 and 2017 one cannot but notice the more restricted image of refugees that the Bulgarian media depicts. This can be attributed to the different values that govern media publications in the two countries: being in closer proximity to Turkey and Greece, Bulgarian media naturally focus on the events occurring in the area as well as on the refugees trying to enter Bulgaria through these two countries or on the problems countries from Central and Eastern Europe generally encounter.

Despite the variety of ethnonyms used to present the country of origin of the refugees the predominant use of toponyms such as Syria, Afghanistan and Libya creates the impression that refugees come from these countries only. Thus Bulgarian readers are left with the impression that there is only one type of refugees, while the UK media being more global in its scope covers and presents the image of economic as well as climate refugees from Africa and other parts of Asia and Oceania as well. In this respect the image presented by the British media is more comprehensive and telling of the great scope of the refugee crisis. The idea of a common world-wide problem is further suggested by the variety of target areas presented by the British media – not only countries in Europe, but also such in Asia, Australia, and North America.

The publications in the British media also tend to be more personal and intimate as they do not only feature accounts and personal stories of refugees as well but they also close and front shots of individual refugees in addition to the more general images of refugee camps. Thus the verbal and the non-verbal elements employed by the British media create a more realistic and comprehensive image of refugees with all their differences and intricacies.

There are some positive trends observed in the 2017 corpus of analysed articles that should also be mentioned: although the terms 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'migrant' are still used interchangeably by both the Bulgarian and the British media, in contrast to the 2013 corpus, the publications lack the use of collocations such as 'illegal immigrants' or 'aliens' used to refer to refugees. In addition, the idea of the threat that refugees pose which was highlighted in the 2013 corpus is no longer stressed on in 2017 – a fact which talks of a more tolerant presentation of refugees.

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Образ беженца: реальное и воображаемое (на материале болгарских и британских медийных текстов)
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Аннотация. Настоящая статья анализирует образ беженца на материале корпуса, состоящего из свыше 500 статей опубликованных в двух болгарских и двух британских газетах в течении двух месяцев 2013 года и одного месяца 2017 года. При помощи критического анализа дискурса как основного метода анализа, исследование выявляет сходства и различия между вербальным (терминология, прямая речь, рассказ от первого лица) и невербальным (изображения) компонентами, использованными в анализированных статьях. Анализ приводит к выводу, что образ беженцев в британских медиях является более объективным и полным, чем в болгарских.

Ключевые слова: медийный диксурс, объективность, беженцы, критический анализ дискурса.