Media Framing of the Refugee Crisis at the Periphery of Europe

Ana Milojević
University of Belgrade (Republic of Serbia)
Kristina Milić
University of Belgrade (Republic of Serbia)

The recent European refugee crisis, which began in 2015, has generated academic interest in how media portray and frame migrations and refugees, specifically in their influence on how "We" perceive and accept "Them" in "Our" societies. However, research primarily focuses on EU member states and destination/receiving countries. Therefore, our study examines media framing of the refugee crisis in Serbia between 2015 and 2016. Building on frames previously identified in the Western context, we pre-defined three frames: viewing the refugee crisis as a problem for the political system, society, or refugees. These frames were coded as external/internal based on whether the media text discussed the crisis outside/ inside Serbia. Our deductive analysis shows that framing differs from destination countries, with a minimal emphasis on social problems in Serbia. Political issues and challenges faced by refugees were dominant but externalized, showing a slight decline over time compared to the social problem frame, which followed real events. Furthermore, our inductive thematic analysis reveals a new way of framing refugees as a problem for the free movement of our citizens. It also reveals a meta-frame of "Us" (in Serbia) as acting in a humanitarian manner amid hard circumstances created by "Them" (Western politicians) who are not handling the crisis in line with the EU values.

Keywords: *refugee crisis, framing analysis, media, Serbia.*

The media representation of the migrations, migrants and refugees has been an important area of academic inquiry. It gained momentum with the emergence of the pan-European crisis caused by the abrupt incoming of the refugees from the Middle East in 2015. Media play a prominent role in

the process of defining large-scale social problems and influence how the public perceives reality (Gitlin, 1980). Therefore, media actively participated in the construction of refugees' arrival as a "crisis" with different circumstances for different societies with "further consequences on attitudes, sentiments, and even behaviours towards refugees" (Nerghes and Lee, 2019, p. 276).

Although the media representation, media framing, media visual framing, of the refugees/migrants around 2015-2017 crisis, has been already addressed by research (Corbu *et al.*, 2017; Fengler *et al.*, 2022; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Heidenreich *et al.*, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2018;), we "still lack a comprehensive overview of national media discourses and their dynamics throughout the years 2015 and 2016" to echo still relevant argument raised by Heidenreich *et al.* (2019, p. 172). Namely, as Triandafyllidou, (2018) have stressed, media and political debates as (re-)produced in media are nationally and regionally contextualized in relation to the positioning of each country as a frontline or a final destination, as directly or peripherally involved. So far, most of our knowledge about media coverage of the refugee crisis is related to the EU member states and destination/receiving countries, while much less is known about transit countries with their specific contextual characteristics, such as Serbia.

Positioned on the refugee route to the desired destination countries in EU, Serbia is one of the Western Balkan countries with the second highest number of refugees crossing its border (after Greece) with 596,000 arrivals from 2015 to 2016 (Lilyanova, 2016, p. 3). Besides that, Serbia as EU candidate state was "tasked with securing the EU's external borders", since "the issue of migration was increasingly securitised within the EU, and external response was formulated to limit migration", as Webb explains (2022, p. 1364). This makes a unique position in the refugee crisis that is reflected in the media reporting.

Therefore, in this paper we examine the media framing of the refuge crisis in Serbia 2015-2016 with the aim to deepen our understanding of how the position of the country (transit and EU border state) reflects on the mainstream media portrayal of the crisis. Following Entman's (1993) classic conception of the media frame we analyse how media in Serbia define the crisis as a problem. For that purpose, we first conduct deductive framing analysis starting with three pre-defined frames of crisis as a problem for the political system, society, or refugees. To capture how media framing is related to specific position of Serbia we have considered every frame as external/internal if the media text discusses the crisis as problem for political system, society, or refugees outside/inside of Serbia. Additionally, we have conducted inductive thematic analysis of the dominant frames to uncover how much these themes correspond to national political priorities and create country specific framing.

Our analysis shows that the position of the country is reflected in dynamic interplay between three frames with the progress of the crisis. Framing of refugees as a problem for external political systems and focus on the crisis as a problem for refugees outside Serbia prevails. The only dominantly internal frame —problem for society— suffice more as migrants cannot exit Serbia and continue towards their desired host countries. Inductive thematic analysis reveals how overall framing of the crisis by the media in Serbia has created a "meta-frame"

of "Us" versus "Them", where Them are western countries that were "supposed" to manage the crisis better and show "humanitarian and accepting" face to the world like "Us", rather than "politicized and rejecting" face. Within this meta-framing refugees remain objectivized, while their problems are externalized and attributed to western politics, international political actors, foreign police and security forces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MEDIA FRAMING

This research is rooted in the framing theory. Framing is the process of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicated text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). As Kovář (2020, pp. 5-6) neatly explains "framing traditionally refers to a three-staged process: the construction of information by elites, the application of frames by the media and impact of frames on opinion". In other words, framing as a process involves re-negotiations between actors that have the power to 'define' certain issues for other members of society. When a certain definition is endorsed by media that reflects on how we structure social realty. Therefore, frames can influence how an individual understands, evaluates, and relates to an issue. That function of frames realizes through reasoning devices such as lexical choices, images, symbols, metaphors, which facilitate certain interpretations over others (Gamson, 1995). They activate thoughts, feelings, and concepts and evoke a latent message in audience. At the level of society frames may impact how public opinion and policies are formed, or as Ramasubramanian and Miles (2018, p. 4490) put it "media frames have agenda-setting power to shape public discourse on social issues by promoting specific interpretations and opinions of public policies by cueing in particular considerations". Therefore, media employ certain frames when covering migrations, creating an interpretational lens for relating to the migrants at the individual and societal level.

RECURRING FRAMES IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF (I)MIGRATION

Framing theory has been frequently applied for examining media portrayal of refugees, (i)migrants and (i)migration, providing us with rather vast findings about different countries, media outlets and time periods. Although it is hard to make comparisons and generalize findings from this body of research, some patterns of framing, key narratives or 'master frames' have been identified. With acknowledging risk of oversimplification Urbániková and Tkaczyk (2020, p. 582) distinguish a few recurrent framing patterns: framing of migration as a problem or a burden on host societies, security frame, humanitarian frame, and framing of migration in relation to crime in which refugees and migrants can

be perpetuators and victims. Kovář (2020, p. 566) finds four 'master-frames': a human-interest frame, a cultural-threat frame, a security-threat frame, and an economic frame in review of literature about immigration framing in Western Europe. Heidenreich *et al.*, (2019, p. i173) underline that "frequently found frames in migration coverage are the 'Economy' frame (e.g. migrant workers' impact on the job market), the 'Welfare' frame (i.e. migrants' impact on the welfare system), crime and security-related perspectives and an emphasis on political and legal processes".

Despite slightly different labelling between these authors, some reoccurring framing is clearly recognizable and generalizable from existing research, with keeping in mind that these frames are also sensitive to the specific contexts.

Therefore, migration is framed as a burden on host societies in several respects. First, as an economic burden, situating (i)mmigration issue within a narrative of labour market conditions or fiscal costs. The economic frame emphasizes the costs of supporting refugees in abstract or concrete terms, referring to fiscal burdens of housing, policing, education, healthcare, and social benefits (Caviedes, 2015; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Kovář, 2020). Also, it stresses the impact of immigrants on the labour market, for example by highlighting that settling of immigrants would result in job losses for natives and wage depression, or to use Kovář's words (2020, p. 576), "immigrants are viewed as threatening prosperity, increasing unemployment and constituting competition, rather than as being complementary to the native populace and offering an economic contribution".

Second, frequently identified 'burden' frame highlights security risks and threats related to migration (Caviedes, 2015; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Kovář, 2020; Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020). The media stories evoking the security-threat frame are usually related to terrorism, organized and other forms of crime, especially in certain zones, endangering physical security of native population (Caviedes, 2015; Kovář, 2020). Rovers *et al.* (2020, p. 256) use "feared intruder frame" for the media texts centred on the "notion of premeditated criminality perpetrated by the refugees (i.e., they are portrayed as terrorist travellers, criminals and potential rapists), as well as refugees who become violent due to traumas or cultural differences". Therefore, either labelled as "feared intruder" or "security" this frame describes refugees as the cause of unrest and insecurity due to the violent criminal acts they commit.

Third, immigration is framed repeatedly as a threat to national identity and culture (Quinsaat, 2014; Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018). In this frame the (i)migrants are portrayed as unassimilable, unable to shed off their old ways and embrace host culture, because the cultures of their origin are perceived as diametrically opposed to host culture. Media call up to a wide ''cultural gap'' between Us and Them, who are shaped by different worldviews - beliefs, norms, and values (Quinsaat, 2014, p. 590). Ramasubramanian and Miles (2018, p. 4495) refer to this as the "border frame" constitutive of "space, national borders, ethnicity, religious identity, and language" and characterized by "a focus on physical spaces in relation to cultural and political identities and institutions".

However, besides 'cultural bordering' the border framing is also connected to flow of refugees across national borders, and questions of placement which complicates

political relations between countries and regions (Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018). Ramasubramanian and Miles (2018, p. 4496) differentiate institutional from border frame to emphasize the political dynamics and policy implications of the Syrian refugee crisis. Urbániková and Tkaczyk's (2020) identified it in 49% of articles of the Czech broadsheet newspapers in the second half of 2015 a "burden frame". This frame portrayed refugees "as a problem to be solved by the state and the EU institutions" and described the migration to Europe "as a part of a political and public administration agenda" (Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020, p. 586).

On the other hand, migration is also frequently depicted as humanitarian crisis, while refugees and migrants are portrayed as victims (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020; Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018). News stories that evoke the humanitarian/victim frame show the suffering of individuals on the run, the unfortunate fate of individuals, tragic personal stories, and report on humanitarian aid (Urbániková and Tkaczy, 2020, p. 586). This frame positions refugees as helpless and prioritizes immediate help, noting strategies and organizational efforts that either improve or worsen the conditions of those in need (Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018, p. 4497).

Overall, as several scholars summarize (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Kovář, 2020), portrayal of refugees is ambivalent and in between framing of immigrants as innocent victims that should be helped and intruders that pose economic, security or cultural threat to the host countries and domestic people, who should be defended from dangerous invaders.

Media Framing of Migration in Different Countries

However, previous research also suggests that prevalence of media frames (burden/threat and humanitarian/victim frames) depends on the spatial proximity of refugees (transit countries, countries with low number of refugees and migrants, host countries), temporal and disruptive characteristics of events (such as the long lasting and massive incoming of refugees beginning in 2015, with many examples of peaks such as Hungary erecting a physical barrier along its border with Serbia in July 2015) and specific socio-political context in the country, region or local community.

Caviedes (2015) comparison of migration coverage in France, UK and Italy (2009-2012), showed that the economic and the securitization frame were dominant across countries, but debates over immigration varied in intensity and issue salience between countries, such "that they may each sustain their own particular critical narratives" (Caviedes, 2015, p. 912). One of the first larger scale comparative studies that focused on the 2015 migration crisis, and examined newspaper coverage in Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the UK, came to similar conclusions as Caviedes (2015). According to the authors of this study, Moore, Berry, and Garcia-Blanco (2018, p. 89), news coverage in all five countries focused on several themes: immigration figures/levels, search and rescue/aid, political responses/policy and humanitarian issues, but the frequency of these themes across countries varied to "the extent to which themes resonated with national political priorities".

Heidenreich *et al*. (2019) focused on the dynamics of the media framing of the refugee crisis in Hungary, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Spain. Using a topic modelling approach, this group of authors found several important trends. First, that "peaks in coverage or in particular frames coincided with real-world developments" (Heidenreich *et al*., 2019, p. i179). Second, that geography is relevant indicator of systematic differences in media coverage: "in countries that were closer to the Balkan route (Hungary and Germany), the height of the 'refugee crisis' between August and September 2015 was framed as a border issue", while in countries that were farther away other frames were more salient (Heidenreich *et al*., 2019, p. i180). Also, in receiving countries (Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom) framing was more diverse and economy frame was more salient then in other countries. Third, they have noted some country specificities, for example Spain's focus on European Union policy and domination of human-interest frame in Sweden, which they connected with journalistic traditions in these countries. Fifth, they reveal dynamics in particular frames, for example, "the human interest and humanitarian aid frames tended to be more important in the beginning of news cycles but were less relevant at the 'crisis' peak" (Heidenreich *et al*., 2019, p. i180).

Kovář (2020, pp. 565-566) rightfully underlined that most of the previous research "focused exclusively on Western European countries and left Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) aside" and asked whether the "European-wide security-based framing of immigration" also prevailed in Czechia and Slovakia. He investigated the occurrence of the economic and security frames in the media coverage on immigration over the extended course of the crisis and found domination of security framing contrary to findings in Western Europe. Therefore, he underlined that transfer of findings from Western to Central and Eastern Europe is problematic and pointed to further research needs: more research on CEECs, and on relationship between country type and frame prevalence (Kovář, 2020, p. 581). Namely, Kovář (2020, p. 581), relates his findings with fact that the "West European countries were the main target countries for immigrants, while CEECs were transit and non-target countries during the crisis" and suggest to scholars to continue research in this direction.

Findings from Romania, as EU member state but not refugee destination country, show how media take up critical stance towards EU and politicize the crisis. Namely Corbu *et al*. (2017), have used generic frames for their analysis (responsibility; conflict; morality; economic consequences; human interest), and determined responsibility frame as dominant and mainly connected with EU. As they further explain, through specific framing processes, the journalists were casting blame and identifying the suitable actors for solving the crisis, mainly by putting EU in spotlight (Corbu *et al*., 2017, p. 13). Furthermore, the conflict framing, stemming from differences of opinions within the EU on how the crisis should be managed was second most prevalent in Romania.

Previous analyses of the media coverage during the refugee crisis in Serbia mainly focused on the visual representation of refugees. Krstić (2022, p. 87) research that included print and online media from 2015 to 2020 demonstrated

that refugees are visually depicted in two dominant frames —the frame of victimization and the frame of threat "as a faceless group without any identity, as passive people who do nothing, except for waiting for something to happen regarding their status". An analysis of the representation of refugees on television and in newspaper photos during 2016 and 2017 by Kleut and Drašković (2017) showed that the media send contradictory messages since the photographs and articles call for compassion in the context of a humanitarian crisis that requires a humane response, but at the same time the visual messages emphasize differences in relation to society as a whole, i.e., the difference between "us" and "them" as refugees.

Research Design and Research Questions

However, from this literature review it seems that we know the least about media framing of migration in the transit and non-EU countries. Therefore, we conduct content analysis of the media coverage of the refugee crisis 2015/16 in Serbia to find out which media frames recurring in the western European context prevail in one of the Southeastern European countries, in the process of negotiations to join EU, and positioned on the main refugee route in 2015-2016. We have pre-defined three frames to correspond with recurring frames in western countries.

First frame "refugees as political problem" was aligned with the previous general finding about the politicization of the crisis (Krzyżanowski *et al*., 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2018) and frames used in previous research: "national refugee policy" and "EU refugee policy" (Heidenreich *et al*., 2019), "burden frame" (Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020) and "institutional frame" (Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018).

Second frame in our analysis "refugees as problem for society" included three most frequent frames according to the literature review: economic burden frame (Caviedes, 2015; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Kovář, 2020), security threat frame (Caviedes, 2015; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Kovář, 2020; Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020; Rovers *et al*., 2020), and national identity threat frame (Quinsaat, 2014; Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018).

We have defined the third frame "problems for refugees" in connection with human-interest reporting and rather common portrayal of refugees as victims or humanitarian/victim frame (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020; Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018).

Therefore, we pose the first research question (RQ1): Is the refugee crisis predominantly framed as political problem, societal problem, or problem for refugees in the media in Serbia?

From the initial reading of the small sample of media texts, we expected media framing to be highly politicized and focused on the contestation of how Europe dealt with crisis on the level of individual states and supranational political entities. Therefore, we have decided to delineate every frame we find in media coverage as external or internal. If the texts discussed refugee crisis in another country or as international issue, we have considered this as appearance

of external frame. By adding this external/internal dimension to framing we had a twofold aim. We wanted to capture interplay between external/internal framing within each frame and temporal dynamics of framing with evolvement of crisis. Therefore, we pose two more research questions:

- RQ2: Is the refugee crisis predominantly framed as external or internal political problem, societal problem, or problem for refugees in the media in Serbia?
- RQ3: Is there a temporal variation in the framing as the refugee crisis progressed?

We conduct additional inductive thematic analysis to find particular themes that feature prominently within each frame. Main aim of this qualitative analysis is to uncover how much these themes correspond to national political priorities and create country specific framing (Caviedes, 2015; Moore *et al.*, 2018; Corbu *et al.*, 2017; Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020).

Overall, we have designed this research with several goals. First to contribute to the literature on migration framing by adding knowledge about media framing in under-researched context —transit countries. Employing elsewhere found frames gives this research some comparative relevance, with novelty in adding external/internal dimension to framing. We believe that this dimension provides new insights into the country specific framing and advances our knowledge about politicizing the refugee crisis by blaming external political actors. Finally with inductive thematic analysis we want to contribute to identifying new ways of framing, previously not found in the EU and western context.

METHOD

In this study we take up a mixed-method approach. First, we apply classic quantitative content analysis to investigate which media frames were prevalent in coverage of the refugee crisis 2015-2016 in Serbia. Second, we conduct qualitative inductive thematic analysis to identify which themes feature prominently within each frame.

Our quantitative analytical instrument consists of three frames defined based on literature review (crisis as a "political problem", "societal problem" or "problem for refugees"). We identify frames based on the presence of specific reasoning or framing devices (only manifest ones). Framing devices can be keywords, quotations, catch phrases, specific choices of language, metaphors, etc. (Alonso and Porto, 2020, p. 57), while reasoning devices include causal attributions, consequences and appeals to principles (Quinsaat, 2014).

Therefore, we have considered discussions about political aspects of closing borders or political agreements, calls for formulation of new policies, strategies, or political actions, as emergence of the "political problem" frame, also if media comment how crisis causes problems for different political actors. "Problem for society" frame was coded if media texts referred to refugees as: threat to the security of society or local communities (crime stories involving refugees,

concerns about terrorism, risk of spreading diseases and similar); challenge for national/cultural identity (mention of their different lifestyle, religion, social norms, language, food, misunderstandings, oddness, impoliteness etc.); burden to the economic, welfare or health system (mentioning how much each day they stay in Serbia costs, how much money goes for their accommodation, food, healthcare, that they are burden to taxpayer money which could be spent better, etc.). The frame "problem for refugees" was identified if media text took the perspective of refugees and their problems such as exposure to violence, inhumane treatment by police, and exploitation by people involved in the transportation of refugees, and any other hardship they faced.

Based on appearance of framing devices (at least three), frame was coded as present or absent. Additionally, each frame was coded as external or internal. For example, when the political problem frame was identified it was coded as internal if the media text discussed problems for Serbian political system, government, political parties, and other political actors. It was coded as external if the text discussed political problems in other countries, or for the international relations but not involving Serbia. The same principle was applied for the other two frames. Besides frames, each text was coded for other characteristics (date of publication, headline, media, media type, news sources, and positive/negative tone).

A team of nine student-coders coded the texts after establishing reliability on the intercoder reliability test over a sub-sample of around 10% of the total number of coded texts per coder. For coding frames Cohen's kappa scores varied from 0.461 to 1.0. Despite the fact that Cohen's kappa is sensitive to non-changing variables (Mouter and Noordegraaf, 2012), the average value of the reliability test was around 0.79. Although there is no consensus on the standard minimum value of the reliability test, Riffe *et al*. (2005) claims that an intercoder coefficient greater than 0.667 is appropriate for studies dealing with new concepts and social issues.

The inductive thematic analysis was done by the authors of the article, through careful reading and re-reading of previously coded frames, and recognizing patterns that carry important description of the frame.

Sample of the media texts (N=1604) was created using the database of the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, which includes all the texts published in print and online media, and transcripts of TV shows in which one of the keywords appears: "migrants", "refugees", "immigrants", "refugee crisis" and "migrant crisis". Then, content published in 10 media outlets was included in the analysis (see Table 1). The media outlets were selected to be representative of the media system of Serbia. To achieve that, we have applied three criteria: audience orientation (popular/elite), political leaning (pro-government/neutral/critical of government), and publishing platforms (print, online, and television).

Table 1. The sample of media included in the analysis

	Audience	Platforms	Political learning
Politika	Elite	Print & Online	Pro-government
Danas	Elite	Print & Online	Critical of government
Večernje Novosti	Popular	Print & Online	Pro-government
Blic	Popular	Print & Online	Pro-government
Kurir	Popular	Print & Online	Pro-government
Informer	Popular	Print & Online	Pro-government
RTS	Elite	Television & Online	Neutral
Prva televizija	Popular	Television	Neutral
Pink	Popular	Television	Pro-government
N1	Elite	Television & Online	Critical of government

Source: Own elaboration.

Using systematic sampling we have analysed media content published in 10 outlets every day during a total of six months: the second half of 2015 (September and December) and 2016 (February, May, August, and November).

THE POSITION OF SERBIA IN THE REFUGEE CRISIS

According to UNHCR data, the European refugee crisis reached its peak from mid-2015 to the end of 2016 when about 1.2 million refugees, mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, applied for asylum in the European Union. At the socio-political level, the leading EU countries responded to the drastic increase of refugees in a short period of time in two ways. One response was labelled as "the keep-them-out syndrome" (Nougayrède, 2015), and it implied strengthening the internal and external borders of the EU to cut off ingress of refugees. The second reaction was aimed at prevention of human smuggling.

Because of this political response of the EU countries Serbia faced numerous challenges on the political and social level. Geopolitically positioned between the Middle East and Central and Western Europe, Serbia was at the centre of the refugee route, which was known as the "Balkan route". After September 15, 2015, when Hungary closed its borders to the refugees, Serbia found itself in a difficult situation and faced with a challenge to respond to the needs and demands of an increasing number of refugees that were slowed down on

their way through Serbia (Sicurella, 2018). Serbia responded in a humanitarian manner and accepted all refugees on their way to Western Europe, confirms the report of the Commissariat for Refugees (2017). According to Beriša and Rakić (2016, p. 41), Serbia handled the refugee crisis in contrast to the neighbouring and surrounding countries that "put state territory and borders before the safety of people, in this case refugees, and before the respect for their human rights". Similarly, from Pavlović (2016, p. 60) perspective Serbia appeared "as the true promoter of the European values of open borders and compassion that the Europeans themselves are letting down, and even giving moral lessons to the EU". As Pupavac and Pupavac (2015) explained, Serbia was not obliged to accept certain quota of refugees which allowed for "open door" national politics that lead to retrieving some of Serbia's lost international reputation. Umek *et al.* (2018) think that such politics and humanitarian treatment of refugees has brought good international 'publicity' to Serbia and strengthened its political position in negotiations with the EU.

International reputation and international relations of Serbia have been burdened with attribution of responsibility for the wars between ex-Yugoslav countries, conflicts leading to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and unresolved Kosovo issue. Inside the country, consequences of these wars, bombing, and international sanctions against Serbia, have been used as basis for creating political narratives about Serbia's subordination to international centres of power. Villains in this discourse are the "western powers" and international organizations such as NATO, EU, that interfere in Serbian internal politics and make politicians perform against the best interest of Serbia (Janković, 2015). This discourse of "conspiracy of foreign powers" has been present in the public since the nineties (Branković, 1998), and reinforced repeatedly throughout past three decades. In the context of this study, we wanted to see if media evoked this discourse of "malicious western international actors" in framing of the refugee crisis and reinforce the political narrative about 'bad' external versus 'good' internal management of crisis, in which Serbia appears as "true promoter of European values" (Pavlovic, 2016).

RESULTS

Prevailing Frames in the Media Coverage in Serbia

The three pre-defined frames appeared in 56 percent of the sampled media content (N= 1604). The least prevalent was framing of the refugee crisis as problem for society (16%), while problem for refugees (43%) and refugees as political problem (41%) had higher and almost equal occurrence. External framing (67%) was dominant overall and with political problem (32%) and problem for refugees' frames (30%). Only refugees as problem for society appeared more as internal frame (11%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of frames in the media coverage in Serbia (in real numbers and percent of total number n=889)

Media frame	2015		2016		Total		Total
	Internal	External	Internal	External	Internal	External	
Problem for political system	36 (4%)	163 (18%)	43 (5%)	119 (13%)	**79 (9%)**	**282 (32%)**	361 (41%)
Problem for society	33 (4%)	29 (3%)	66 (7%)	13 (2%)	**99 (11%)**	**42 (5%)**	141 (16%)
Problem for refugees	56 (6%)	183 (21%)	61 (7%)	85 (9%)	**117 (13%)**	**268 (30%)**	387 (43%)
					189 (33%)	**592 (67%)**	**889 (100%)**

Source: Own elaboration.

## Temporal Variation of the Media Framing with Progress of Crisis

The distribution of the frames by month shows that the media attention declined over time, and that a most significant drop was evident in May 2016 (see Chart 1). Since parliamentary and local elections were held on 24th April 2016, refugee crisis was sidelined on the media agenda in May by questions of parliamentary coalitions and constitution of the government, which was appointed after a long period of inter-party negotiations on August 11th. In the beginning of the observed period problem for refugees was in primary focus of media while afterwards political problem framing of crisis dominated with exception of May. Because migrations were not part of political parties' election programs, in that month problem for refugees frame prevailed. Furthermore, distribution between frames became more even over time.

Chart 1. The distribution of frames over time
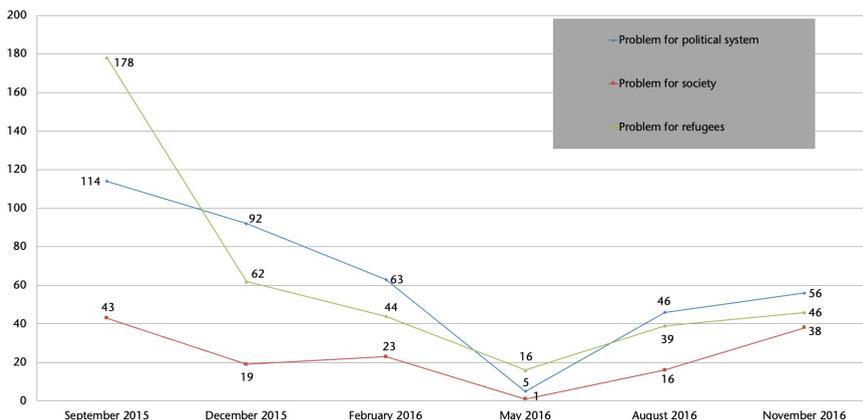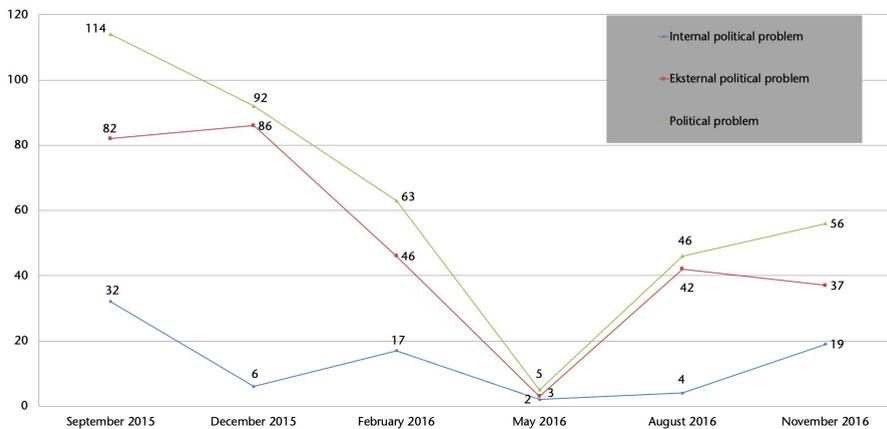

Source: Own elaboration.

The external-internal interplay of media framing shifted, probably reflecting dynamics of the events, but the crisis was treated dominantly as an external problem, and only in last observed month the internal framing exceeded the external, as the Chart 2 shows.

Chart 2. The distribution of internal-external framing over time
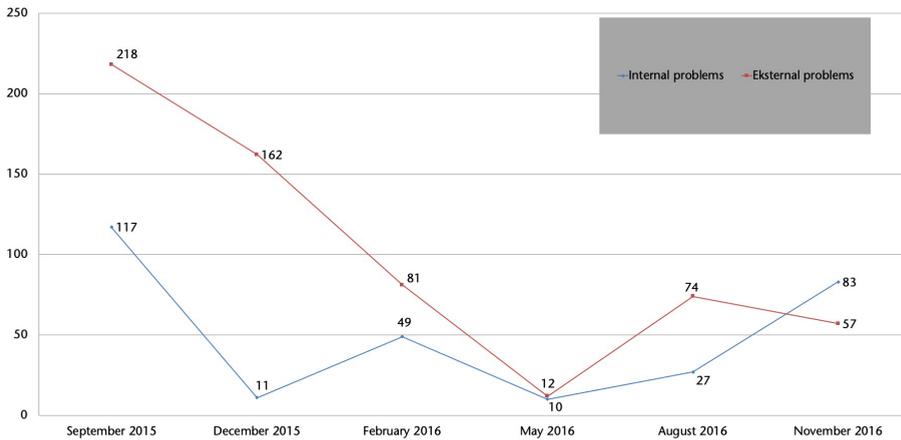
Source: Own elaboration.

Chart 3. The distribution of internal-external political problem framing over time
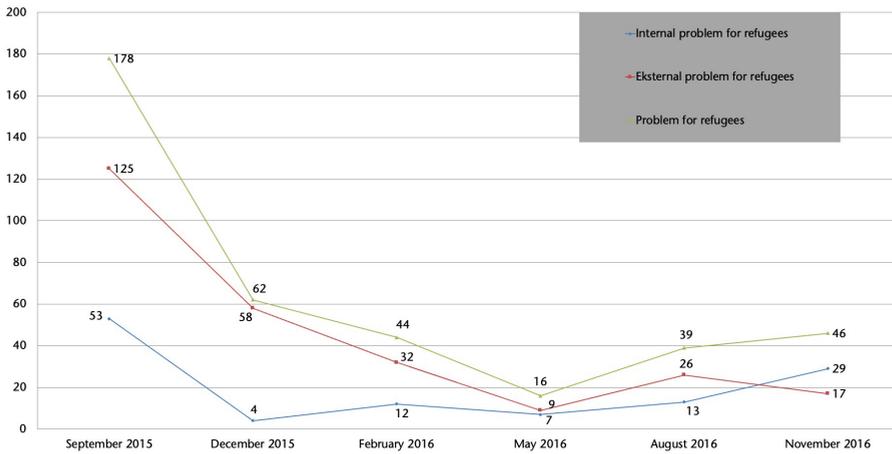

Source: Own elaboration.

The focus on the refugee crisis as a political problem declined as crisis progressed, but the media treated crisis more as political issue of international actors and other countries all the time. The media attention shifted in-between external and internal political problems, and only towards November 2016 the number

of stories with focus on internal political problems were closing to the number of stories with focus on external (see Chart 3). Similar dynamics is evident with framing of the crisis as problem for refuges, with only difference that in late 2016 the internal framing exceeded the external (see Chart 4).

Chart 4. The distribution of internal-external problem for refugees framing over time

Source: Own elaboration.

Chart 5. The distribution of internal-external problem for society framing over time
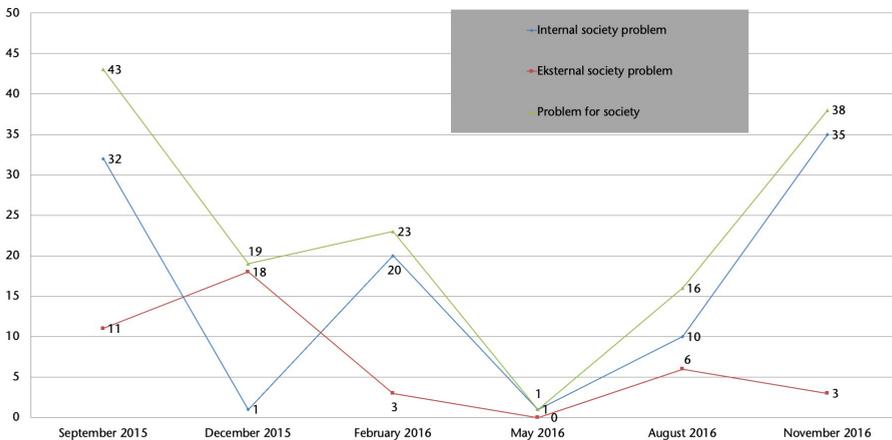
Source: Own elaboration.

Framing of the refugee crisis as a problem for society was most dynamic and sensitive to events (Chart 5). Generally, media discussed the crisis as security, economic or cultural problem more for Serbian then outside societies. This was most evident in September 2015 when the fence was erected on the border with Hungary and significantly slowed down the passing through the Balkan route, which has taken 2-3 before the fence (Beznec *et al.*, 2016). Second peak was in February 2016 with the closing of the Balkan route which has "provoked an increasing number of people getting stuck in Serbia for longer periods...Some of them had in fact been deported back from Slovenia to Croatia, and from there to Serbia. On the other hand, migrants from countries which were now excluded from the official route were still arriving in Serbia via Bulgaria, but were blocked from continuing onward" (Beznec *et al.*, 2016, p. 49). Then media coverage of the crisis dropped in May, and after that focus on problems for Serbian society continued to grow, along with the prolonged stay of refugees in the country, which has reached 1-2 years according to APC/CZA policy brief (2018).

Inductive Thematic Analysis of the Frames

Crisis as a Political Problem

Within the media framing of the crisis as internal problem for the political system, we have identified the theme *political system of Serbia as a victim of supranational politics*. This theme was present during the entire period in texts that were assessing the decisions of the EU and member countries, which directly or indirectly affected Serbia. In these texts the discourse of "victims of foreign powers" was evoked by political leaders who blamed the escalation of crisis in Serbia on the lack of political consensus among EU member states on how to deal with refugees. One illustration is the statement of the head of Serbian diplomacy, Ivica Dačić about the engagement of the Austrian police at the Serbian-Hungarian border: "We cannot allow Serbia and our established politics to be, in some way, a victim of the absence of a unique European politics" (Večernje Novosti, 13/08/2016). These and similar words reinforced the existing discourse of the 'good versus bad guys' in the relations of Serbia with foreign centres of powers and allowed Serbian politicians to present internal management of crisis as good compared to the bad external solutions.

Within the external political problem frame two themes were enduring along the timeline: *the crisis as (terminal) EU problem* and *holding external political actors responsible for the crisis*. The crisis was framed as a political issue that transcends national borders and threatens the existence and functioning of the EU, institutions, and agreements. The words of the Minister for Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs: "This is a crisis that will determine the future EU (…) This is the beginning or the end of the European Union" (Danas, 07/09/2015), highlight this theme.

Criticism of international actors due to their bad political moves and the absence of a solution to the refugee crisis was expressed during the tightening of relationships between the EU, Turkey, and the countries of Eastern Europe due to the agreement on quotas and the acceptance of refugees. The initiators of this frame were the high-ranking politicians, such as the President of Serbia

with statements such as: "There were difficult words between the Eastern and the Western European countries because of the problem with refugees. Western Europe blames the Eastern Europe for not acting in solidarity, which will bear responsibility" (RTS, 02/04/2016). The theme *border closure* was present when the Balkan route closed and a political response to the decision of the Hungarian government was necessary.

These themes worked well together, because blaming the situation in Serbia on incompetent external politics and calling the European Commission and international institutions to take adequate action regarding the refugee crisis, implies shifting responsibility to external political actors. This has created opportunity for Serbian politicians to claim that 'their hands are tied' and that they are doing the best they can in given circumstances, much better than EU, from which they have always been expected to 'take lessons from'.

Crisis as a Problem for Society

Within the problem for society internal framing, theme of security, economic, and identity problems appeared. The *fear for the safety of 'our citizens'* due to the growing numbers of refugees is evoked mainly in media coverage of physical attacks on citizens by refugees. For example, the daily newspaper Kurir reported on an incident when Serbian boys were attacked while trying to help an immigrant:

> Boy S.S. from Subotica was cut on the head by an immigrant while trying to help him find accommodation together with his brother D.S (Kurir, 24/08/2016).

A massive influx of refugees during the initial analysed period resulted in thematizing the crisis as *a threat to the economic system.* This theme had several manifestations, discussing the refugees as a reason for spending taxpayers' money, the arrival of a workforce that will take the jobs of Serbian citizens, and similar. All were considered as a potential cause of the economic crisis. For example, in the daily newspaper Blic, a very precise figure of Serbia's daily expenses is shown to estimate how much Serbia suffered because of the transit of refugees:

> Of course, Serbia suffers financially as well. Since migrants have started passing through our country, one day costs us around 20,000 euros (Blic, 19/09/2015).

Also, within this frame a theme of national identity was opened. In this theme refugees are depicted as a threat to national culture and language and the demographic structure of Serbian society. One example is the reporting on the national TV Pink where the interviewee stated that building permanent centres is actually an EU plan for the settlement of people of a different culture in Serbia who represent a huge risk:

> This is actually the first step in the establishment of permanent centres where the EU's plan is to settle those 400,000 people of a completely different culture, different language, different customs, and of course, worst of all, Serbia simply cannot accept it, because there is a huge risk (Pink, 01/09/2015).

We have also identified a theme that we have not came across in the literature review. Especially in the first observed period, the refugee crisis was thematized as a *problem for the free movement of the Serbian citizens*. Media texts were discussing the violation of the free movement of citizens due to the influx of refugees, for example by usurping locations in cities or violating the freedom of citizens to cross border crossings. It can be illustrated with a text that conveys the words of the Minister of Defense, who contrasts the rights of refugees with the rights of citizens of Serbia:

> They have the right to move around our country for 72 hours, but they do not have the right to block the border, traffic, nor to change the daily life and restrict the movement of our citizens —Vulin said (Kurir, 13/11/2015).

While the framing of the crisis as a problem for external societies is positioned around the *fear of terrorism*, and related to several well-known terrorist attacks that took place before the crisis in some European countries that were attributed to terrorists from the Middle East. This was further connected with the information from the security services that there are ISIL members among the refugees labelled as "sleeper terrorists" (Radišić, Pejić and Bekto, 2015). In these texts the words of foreign statesmen justifying radical measures against refugees were conveyed. For example, the daily newspaper Informer reported the statements of the president of the Czech Republic regarding the closing of the country's' borders:

> Miloš Zeman said that migrants "bring the danger of contagion of terrorism and excessive settlement" (Informer, 01/09/2015).

Crisis as a Problem for Refugees

The refugee crisis covered from the perspective of refugees thematized refugees as victims of smugglers, in internal and external scope, throughout the analysed period. The refugees were portrayed as victims of human smugglers, human traffickers, or robbers and thieves, whom they have encountered on the refugee route. Those texts contained testimonies of refugees, like this one:

> I think we were already close to Serbia when some armed men waited for us on the road. They stripped me and knocked me to the ground (Blic, 13/09/2015).

Furthermore, within the external problems for refugees' frame, *refugees as victims of violent police treatment* theme was identified. It appeared in texts that described the treatment of refugees by foreign police and executive authorities, especially during their attempts to cross borders and during arrests for human smuggling. This theme was also related to border closures and the introduction of other measures to slow down entering of refugees in EU. This was reflected in words of one refugee:

> We are running away from war, and in Europe we are greeted by policemen with batons and soldiers with dogs (Informer, 17/09/2015).

In addition, during the winter 2015 refugees were portrayed as *victims of the inhumane life conditions*. Internally, in Serbia, primarily as victims of weather conditions during their stay outdoors. While media were reporting about the *risk of disease* externally, which also implied problems with the spread of infection due to inhumane living conditions on the road and overcrowding of the reception centres in other countries.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Findings of this research complement to conclusion of Heidenreich *et al.* (2019) that geography, or rather distance of the country from the Balkan route, is relevant indicator of systematic differences in media coverage, as well as to Kovář's (2020) skepticism about transfer of research findings from Western to Central and Eastern Europe. Geographical position of Serbia, as the main transit country on the Balkan route, is related to the country specific media framing of the refugee crisis. Namely, border issue that Heidenreich *et al.* (2019) found prevalent in the countries that were close to the Balkan route, was identified in Serbia as a part of the political problem frame, but without significant presence. Also, security and economic frames that were prevalent in Western societies, we have considered as a part of the problem for society frame, which had the least appearance. Therefore, our research adds Southeastern Europe next to Central and Eastern Europe in the Kovář's (2020) argument.

In Serbia framing of the refugee crisis as political problem was prevalent when the distribution of frames is observed over time. In total numbers, framing of the crisis from the perspective of refugees occurred a bit more. However, problem for refugees' frame was highest in September 2015 when the publishing of the heartbreaking picture of Alan Kurdi has evoked empathy in the public and media coverage worldwide, and according to our data in Serbia alike. After September the problem for refugees' frame was in slow decline and mostly lower than political problem frame, until November 2016. The problem for society, as the least prevalent in all its variations, peaked with fence on the border with Hungary and closing of the Balkan route, because these events raised concerns that refugees might stay in Serbia, for longer or for good. Such temporal dynamics of framing in Serbia, underlines previous observation of Heidenreich *et al.* (2019, p. i179), that "peaks in coverage or in particular frames coincide with real-world developments".

The occurrence of examined frames in Serbia is in line with previous general conclusions about the politicization of the crisis by the media in Europe and Western countries (Fengler *et al.*, 2022; Krzyżanowski *et al.*, 2018). But it is more aligned to findings in Check Republic, where refugees and migrants were framed mainly as a "burden on the state and EU institutions", and "less often as victims of a humanitarian crisis and a security threat" (Urbániková and Tkaczyk, 2020, p. 591). Also, prevalence of political problem frame in Serbia is like the responsibility and conflict framing which was dominant in Romania and directly related to the EU politics (Corbu *et al.*, 2017). However, as Moore *et al.* (2018) pointed out, appearance of certain themes is usually coherent with national political priorities.

In that respect, unique position of Serbia, as the EU candidate state and non-target country for refugees, with recent history of complicated relations with EU and NATO, was reflected in specific political framing of the crisis. As our qualitative thematic analysis of frames shows, political actors in Serbia have exploited this unique position, and existing narratives about 'Serbian politics as victim of external political forces', to create a meta-frame of Us (Serbian politicians) as good, humanitarian, competent, acting the best possible in hard circumstances created by Them (EU and western politicians) who are not handling the crisis in line with the values they are usually so proud of. In this meta framing, They were constructed as those betraying the EU values, although they have much more resources than Us, who are finally seen for who we are —true protectors of EU values.

This meta-frame of casting blame on EU and member states and externalizing accountability for the crisis from the internal political domain, was complemented with framing of the crisis as problem for refugees. Although this way of framing puts refugees in primary focus and raises compassion for their situation, in Serbia this frame appeared in 70 percent as external. Media reported about various hardship refuges faced outside Serbia. Therefore, it created an interplay with political problem framing, additionally emphasizing the distinction between humane internal solutions versus bad and radical moves of external actors. Such findings also highlight that adding external-internal dimension for frames was vas a valuable part of our research design. It allowed us to identify nuances that would be otherwise missed as well as opportunity to portray unique way of media framing of the refugee crisis in Serbia.

Finally, inductive qualitative analysis also proved to be fruitful as we have identified a theme in internal social problem frame that we have not found in the literature —refugees as a *problem for the free movement of our citizens*. Therefore, besides adding to the literature about media framing of migrations, this finding once more underlines conclusions of other scholars that despite commonalities that can be noted across countries media framing is always to a certain degree "domesticated" to repeat word used by Fengler *et al*. (2022).

Ana Milojević is an assistant professor at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science, Department of Journalism and Communication, and the head of the Master program in Communication Science. Previously she was Marie Sklodowska Curie postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Bergen, Department of Information Science and Media Studies. Her research interests include transformations of news work due to audience datafication, journalistic roles and role performance in different contexts, post-communist media reconfigurations, media framing of protests and migrations in a polarized media system.

Kristina Milić is a teaching assistant at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science, Department of Journalism and Communication, and a PhD student at the Media and Culture doctoral studies. Her PhD research is focused on the changes of populist political communication in pre-elections periods in volatile political system. She has

experience with qualitative and quantitative methods and was involved in several national and international comparative research projects, applying framing and content analysis.

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