



Securitisation Or Humanitarianism: Understanding The Serbian Response To The 2015 Refugee Crisis

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Abstract

The 2015 Refugee Crisis hit Europe when refugees from the conflicted regions of West Asia and Africa fled to many European countries. During the crisis, Serbia acted as a key host country for the refugees in Europe. Serbia mainly acted as a transit country along the Western Balkans land route. Overall, the Serbian response to this major crisis was positive, providing the refugees with shelter and humanitarian aid. Yet a closer examination of the response reveals a more complex picture, fuelled by securitisation of the crisis as well as underlying political motives. The paper examines the multifaceted nature of the Serbian response, focusing on the intersections of humanitarian efforts, societal perceptions, and political and media discourse of the crisis. It uses securitisation theory as a theoretical framework to analyse the Serbian response. The paper thus contributes to literature surrounding refugee studies, securitization theory and European geopolitics, through this nuanced study of the Serbian response.

Keywords: 2015 Refugee Crisis, Serbia, Securitisation theory, Transit country, Western Balkans

1. Introduction

The 2015 Refugee Crisis happened when over a million refugees fled to Europe (UNHCR, 2015). It quickly became a significant humanitarian crisis. The crisis was a result of numerous civil wars and ethnic conflicts across Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and Eritrea (Peters *et al.*, 2023). The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram in Nigeria further accelerated the crisis. Serbia was one of the countries at the forefront to have received the refugees along the Western Balkans route (Šabić, 2017). It mainly acted as a transit state for the refugees. Serbia responded to the crisis zealously, setting up centres for the refugees and providing humanitarian aid. But the country faced its own unique set of challenges with regards to security in the context of the crisis. Media narratives and public perception of the refugees also varied, reflecting an

interplay of sympathising with the refugees or seeing them as a threat to national security. The far-right network also emerged during this time in the country, as it had done in other parts of Europe (Lažetić, 2018).

The paper aims to examine the Serbian response to the 2015 Refugee Crisis that overall changed the European geopolitical landscape. The examination is mainly through analysing the intersection of political discourse, humanitarian aid, media narratives and public perception of the refugees in the country. By applying the securitization theory, it is checked whether the response inclines towards securitization, humanitarianism or an intersection of both. The Serbian response is studied in the light of internal political dynamics, regional tensions and the country's motives to join the EU. The study thus aims to show how small states must navigate humanitarian commitments, geopolitical tensions and internal security threats in the face of international crises.

The research has been designed keeping in mind the following objectives:

1. To explore the role of Serbia as a transit state along the Western Balkans route during the 2015 Refugee Crisis
2. To assess the media portrayal and public perception of the crisis in Serbia
3. To assess the emergence of the far-right network in Serbia in light of the crisis
4. To determine whether the Serbian response to the crisis was inclined towards securitization of the refugee crisis or towards humanitarianism

2. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative and analytical approach. It relies on secondary data from various academic literature and three primary studies: a report on the public perception of the refugee crisis in Serbia conducted by UNDP (2017), research by Umek *et al.* on the Preševo camp and Perovic's analysis of newspaper headlines in the Serbian media during the crisis. A theoretical framework of securitisation theory in international relations has been used to further substantiate the arguments.

3. Securitisation theory

According to securitisation theory, national security policy is designated by politicians, decision makers and other 'securitising actors' who have the capacity in terms of social and institutional power to take the issue beyond politics, through speech acts. That means that certain issues, known as the referent object, are considered as 'security threats' to the state when they are termed as 'dangerous', 'threatening' etc. by such securitising actors. For instance, with reference to the Global War on Terror, a person who is an Arab would be viewed with suspicion that they might be a terrorist. There are mainly two kinds of actors that influence securitisation in a state. Securitising actors have institutional power to influence and take action against the concerned security threats. They may include politicians, police, border guards and immigration officers. The other kind refers to functional actors that help frame narratives about the threatening nature of the issue at hand. This group may include the media, academia, think tanks and the public. The theory had its origins

during the Cold War when there was a debate between the narrow concept of security (concerned with the state) and the wider concept (concerned with the individual). For an issue to become securitised, it is essential that the audience agrees to accept it as a security threat and supports measures that are taken against it. Otherwise, the securitisation of the issue has failed. (Eroukhmanoff, 2017)

Securitisation of migration is a critical issue that gained the attention of western political agendas since the 9/11 attacks. The wider concept of security that emerged during the Cold War again then resurfaced, considering security threats to be non-military by nature as well and that cross-border migration could increase cases of terrorism, drugs and human trafficking. The relationship between the emergence of far-right groups in Europe and the securitisation of migration remains unclear, but such groups vehemently support the securitisation of migration. (Lazaridis & Wadia, 2015)

4. Serbia and the 2015 Refugee Crisis

The refugee crisis that erupted in Europe in the beginning of the year 2015, caused major upheaval amongst the European countries. The Western Balkans route, comprising Türkiye, Greece, FYR Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary, was a prominent route used by the refugees during the crisis (Mitrovic, 2015). Serbia mainly acted as a transit state for the refugees, as they aimed to reach the richer Western European nations. According to the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Serbia, over a million refugees seeking asylum in Europe entered the country since the crisis began (D. Umek *et al.*, 2019). It faced a surge in the number of refugees in July 2015, when the Hungarian government decided to shut down its border with Serbia and construct a fence along the border. As a result, Serbia saw thousands of refugees in the parks neighbouring the bus and train stations of Belgrade, the state's capital (Milan, 2020).

Serbia responded to the situation promptly. Several centres were opened by the local authorities, with warehouses providing shelter, food, clothing and information (Milan, 2020). An elaborate network consisting of asylum centres (meant for those seeking asylum in Serbia), reception centres and transit centres (meant to receive the refugees and cater to their needs in an emergency) was established (D. Umek *et al.*, 2019). The Serbian government set up an inter-Ministerial Working Group for Mixed Migration Flows (Mitrovic, 2015). There was widespread cooperation amongst the local authorities, NGOs and the government. With an increasing number of refugees, many more centres were set up in the border towns of Miratovac, Sid, Kanjiza and Subotica. Before the crisis, only five permanent asylum centres with a total capacity of 810 beds had been there, but by 2018 the number reached to around 6000 (including both temporary and permanent centres) (Petrović and Bukvić, 2019). By the first week of November 2015, nineteen such transit centres providing humanitarian aid had been set up. The Balkan corridor was limited to Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan nationals as of late November 2015. This, combined with the hospitality and humanitarian aid received by the refugees in Serbia, made many refugees who were not able to prove such citizenship enter Serbia through human smugglers. When the Western Balkans route got shut down in early March 2016, Belgrade again became a critical refuge point for a new wave of refugees, populating stations as well as warehouses. Although the other countries in this route – Hungary, Croatia and FYR Macedonia – closed their borders at that time, Serbia did not take such initiative (D. Umek *et al.*, 2019).

4.1 Case Study: Refugee Camp in Preševo

In a primary study conducted by Umek *et al.*, a one stop centre in Preševo, sheltering the refugees, was taken into consideration. Preševo is a town in southern Serbia bordering Kosovo and FYR Macedonia. The town has about 13,000 residents with roughly 90% of the population being ethnically Albanian and the rest being Serbian and Roma. The camp became the first source of humanitarian assistance for the refugees entering Serbia from the south. First built as a transit centre to receive the huge number of refugee arrivals per day, it gradually transitioned into a place for permanent shelter. When the researchers initially arrived at the centre, it was going through renovation to accommodate more refugees and enhance its existing features. During their second visit, around three months later, it contained a greater number of beds and other visible improvements. A shopping area and a kindergarten were too developed. The setting up of the centre with elaborate facilities had been done with the financial support from the EU. In fact, the collaboration between the Serbian authorities and the EU and other agencies (like UNICEF, UNHCR) was quite visible in the centre as it displayed the flags/names of such organisations. However, the camp was ‘closed’, meaning the refugees were allowed to leave only with an accompanying guard and special permit. This highlights the subtle tension between securitisation and humanitarianism in the country. Also, Umek *et al.* note that the setting up of the centre in Preševo has a domestic geopolitical implication: it has enabled the central Serbian authorities to have a greater control on the Albanian rich town of Preševo which also borders Kosovo, a country where Albanians form the largest ethnic group. Preševo was a key area of conflict during the Kosovo crisis (1998-1999) that happened between Serbia and Kosovo. Apart from that the authors also note how the Serbian response in Preševo is linked with Serbia’s bigger motivation to be a reliable partner to the EU. (D. Umek *et al.*, 2019)

5. The Emergence of the Far-right in Serbia during the 2015 Refugee Crisis

Prior to the 2015 Refugee Crisis, the arrival of Serbian refugees from the war-inflicted areas of Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia created strong nationalist sentiments and developed seeds for the creation of the far-right in the country. This led to the creation of the Serbian Radical Party and other far-right parties in the 1990s. The economic crisis that followed in Yugoslavia because of the war was taken advantage of by the radical nationalists where they built narratives such as Yugoslav identities were ‘false’, and the only identity that was valid was that of a true Serbian. (Lažetić, 2018)

When Serbia started receiving refugees from the Middle East, the connection between the existing far-right parties in Serbia and other European far-right parties intensified, especially by the winter of 2017. Russia has also taken advantage of the refugee crisis in Serbia, and has attempted to make the Western Balkan countries ditch the EU and accept Russian leadership. In that way the crisis has paved the way for Serbia to transform into a ‘conference room’ composed of European and Russian far right activists. The Serbian far-right activists have been highly critical of the approach of the government towards the 2015 refugee crisis, emphasising on how the government should prioritise the Serbian people over the refugees. The same was said by a representative of Zavetnici, a far-right political party in Serbia. (Lažetić, 2018)

A protest against immigration was organised in Belgrade in 2016 by far-right political organisations like Naši, Serbian Radical Party and Obraz. Rima Darius, a Syrian native and a member of the European Solidarity Front for Syria (ESFS), joined the protest. ESFS is an international organisation that vouches to support Syrians in their war for independence from terrorism. Rima Darius was of the view that the European nations should not receive the Syrian refugees as that is detrimental to the future of Syria. The protest was banned by the government but again happened a week later. (Lažetić, 2018)

In Serbia it has been observed that certain far-right parties were not initially active in anti-immigration related issues but have been increasingly using it, including the 2015 Refugee Crisis, as a tool to ensure their relevance. The 2015 Refugee Crisis also positioned Serbia as a hotspot for other European far-right actors with British far-right leaders like James Dawson and Nick Griffin taking refuge in the country in 2017. Thus, the crisis enabled the far-right leaders to have a stronger influence on the public, increasing strained relations between Serbia and the EU. (Lažetić, 2018)

6. Discourse: Media Narratives, Political Leaders and the Public

6.1 Media Narratives

The media played an important role in shaping the discourse surrounding the refugees in Serbia, much like in any other part of the world. In the beginning of the crisis, the media printed narratives regarding the crisis that closely aligned with feelings of empathy, sympathy, compassion and curiosity towards the refugees. This could be attributed to the Serbs' own experience of civil war and bloodshed earlier. For instance, a picture of a Serbian policeman holding a Syrian refugee boy affectionately was shown in the newspapers. The Serbian daily newspapers that printed news regarding the refugees were: Danas, Politika, Kurir, Blic, Informer and Večernje Novosti. 'Migrant' was the dominant word used by most newspapers, while very few of them used the word 'refugee'. The reporting in the printed media related to the refugees peaked in mid-2015, and it decreased eventually afterwards. (Kešetović, 2018)

The tone of the media, however, shifted to a negative side as the crisis unfolded. Xenophobia and Islamophobia were often reflected in the headlines used in the papers: "More refugees: Migrants will soon Islamize Serbia!", "Infected migrants escaped from quarantine: Does tuberculosis threaten Serbia" etc. (Perovic, 2016). The media, along with that, drew attention to EU policies, how the crisis affected the Balkan region, critique of the way neighbours like Croatia and Hungary dealt with the situation ignoring the migrants, and the views exhibited by UNHCR (Kešetović, 2018). Such stories capitalised on cultural conflict and security threat to present a negative rhetoric.

Interestingly, the refugee crisis was also used as a tool by the media to divert the public's attention from other crucial socio-political events that were not in the good eyes of the ruling party. Despite the presence of the negative rhetoric surrounding the refugees in the media, the overall picture of the refugees flooding Serbia happened to be balanced - the picture represented by the ruling party. (Kešetović, 2018)

6.2 Political Leaders and Other Authorities

The then Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić supported the entry of the refugees into Serbia. In fact, he mentioned how Serbia had behaved ‘more European’ towards the refugees than a few other European states through their humanitarian efforts (Pavlović, 2016). Vučić even went on to emphasise that the Serbian efforts were not for any political benefits, unlike some other European states (Pavlović, 2016). This positioned Serbia’s efforts to project itself as a humanitarian leader during the crisis. The authorities complied with the wishes of the government. Pictures of a policeman holding a Syrian boy affectionately also flooded the newspapers (Kešetović, 2018).

There were political actors that were against Serbia’s humanitarian response to the crisis. As mentioned in the previous section, the crisis led to an emergence of the new far-right in Serbia that had strong connections with other European far-right groups. Although the local Serbian far-right groups were not initially against the refugees entering Serbia, the resistance grew as the crisis intensified. This was also done to ensure their own relevance in Serbian society. Protests were organised by the local far-right groups on the streets of Belgrade against the refugees. (Lažetić, 2018)

As the crisis intensified, PM Vučić’s tone also shifted. He emphasised on how Serbia would not become a ‘parking spot’ for the refugees and that Serbia would ensure police patrolling to control the flow of the refugees, and would not allow refugees without proper documentation (Al Jazeera, 2016). Thus, elements of securitisation of migration could be seen in the Serbian response as well. Critics argue that this was also an attempt to align with the pressure exerted by the far-right groups.

6.3 Public Perception

The public perception of the 2015 Refugee Crisis in Serbia happens to be mixed. A study conducted by UNDP (2017), funded by the EU, shows that at least initially there was a positive attitude amongst the Serbs towards the refugees, especially towards the ones from Syria. This is largely because of their own experience with civil wars and bloodshed, particularly after the disintegration of Yugoslavia (UNDP, 2017). It has been observed that most of the public opinion regarding the refugees has been shaped by the media (Kešetović, 2018).

The same study by UNDP (2017) found that there was a gradual shift towards a negative attitude towards the refugees. The main factor responsible for the negative attitude happened to be cultural and religious differences, making stereotypes related to the refugees prevail. Some of the interviewees expressed fear upon seeing them and said they would run on seeing them. Towns like Šid and Pirot even wanted the asylum centres to be shifted away elsewhere. The fear was also because of the negativity spread by the international, national and local media. Places like Tutin, Sjenica and Preševo had a higher tolerance towards the refugees than other places like Belgrade and Pirot. This was partly due to some degree of cultural closeness with the people of the Middle East. Also, the study found out that the public was more influenced by sensational and negative news about the refugees than some positive news like organising a sports tournament with them.

Overall, the public maintained openness towards the refugees, wanting to learn more about them. But the increase in negative perception cannot be ignored either. (UNDP, 2017)

7. Critical Analysis of the Serbian Response

This section builds upon the facts and information mentioned in the previous sections. For detailed references, the relevant discussions in the previous sections can be referred to.

The 2015 Refugee Crisis affected Serbia with the arrival of over a million refugees (D. Umek *et al.*, 2019). Although Serbia primarily served as a transit country located on the Western Balkans route, several thousands of refugees were left stranded in the country upon the closure of the Western Balkans route and the construction of the wall along the Serbia-Hungary border. This created intense pressure on Belgrade. With a weak economy, conflicts with neighbouring countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania), negative population growth rate and low living standards, the refugee crisis put additional strain on Serbia's existing challenges (Petrović and Bukvic, 2019).

Serbia responded to the crisis quite promptly. The setting up of hospitality and asylum centres and providing shelter at empty warehouses along with adequate aid proved its prompt response. Serbia, unlike most countries along the Balkans route, also did not close its borders, at least not for those having documents and applying for asylum. The then Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić's statement that it was not interested in accruing any political benefits through that response further reaffirmed Serbia's helping attitude towards the refugees. Furthermore, the refugees, at least initially, gained sympathy from the Serbian public because of their own experience with war. This seemed to magnify their humanitarian response. The one-stop-centre in Preševo is a prime example that showcases Serbia's efforts during the crisis. Set up with the assistance of the EU, the availability of beds, shopping centres and a kindergarten ensured the comfort of the refugees during their stay in the Preševo centre. Besides, the use of the word 'migrant' by most printed media indicates a neutral tone towards the refugees and reflects an attempt to avoid politicising the situation. Such instances clearly point towards sincere humanitarianism displayed by Serbia during the crisis, despite the presence of internal challenges (as mentioned in the previous paragraph). Serbia's motive was not only to manage refugees' influx, but to also provide a sense of dignity to the refugees; exemplified by a widely circulated picture of a Serbian policeman gently holding a refugee boy. While this can be simply seen as media portrayal and an attempt to improve its image, it can be argued that Serbia wanted to be seen as a promoter of humanitarian values during the crisis, which in itself is telling. Actions like increasing the number of asylum centres and keeping its borders open when its neighbours were closing theirs further reinforce this.

From the securitisation perspective, however, it is apparent that securitising actors tried to frame the refugee crisis as a security threat. The refugee crisis led to the rise of the far-right in Serbia and intensified its relations with other far-right networks in Europe. These securitising actors (far right political parties such as Naši, Serbian Radical Party and Obraz) organised protests against immigration during the crisis. The involvement of an ESFS (European Solidarity Front for Syria) member, Rima Darius, in the protest reflects the degree to which parties outside Serbia got involved in the protests. They also pointed out how the government must prioritise the Serbian public over the refugees. Although they lacked the institutional power required to

securitise the issue, they did have the social power to influence public opinion through protests and speech acts. Even Prime Minister Vučić's tone shifted as the crisis intensified and he declared police patrolling to control the refugees' flow. Thus the securitisation of the crisis grew with time, with actors having the capacity to act on institutional level favouring the same. Functional actors like the media and the public also contributed to the securitisation of the crisis through their opinions and narratives. Certain newspapers carried headlines that seemed to emphasise how the refugees threatened Serbian society because of religious differences. Similarly, the Serbian public, although having a positive attitude towards the refugees at least initially, too had their own reservations because of the differences in religion and culture. Certain towns like Šid and Pirot even wanted their asylum centres to be shifted elsewhere, meaning they saw the refugees as a threat to their security and overall well-being. The very fact that sensationalist and negative news regarding the refugees affected the Serbian public more than the positive news shows how, in general, the public reacts to the securitisation of an issue quickly. Moreover, the one-stop-centre in Preševo required that the refugees could leave the centre only with a guard and through special permit, highlighting the action of securitisation through actors like guards. As Umek *et al.* (2019) point out, the Preševo one-stop-centre also served as a way to control the Albanians-dominated town that borders Kosovo. This, although not explicitly pointing at the securitisation of refugees, does point to using refugees as a tool to address other security threats. Thus, the one-stop-centre became a 'symbol of contradictions' in the context of the crisis.

As Pavlović (2016) points out, the Serbian response to the 2015 refugee crisis does have motives within the broader geopolitical context. In fact, Serbia was hoping that Brussels would proceed to open its first EU accession talks in December 2015, as the latter recognised its response to the crisis (Šabić, 2017). Thus, the Serbian response to the 2015 refugee crisis shows a subtle interplay between humanitarianism and securitisation. While, undoubtedly, the refugees became a source of threat and a tool for bigger political motives in Serbia, the response also reflected a willingness to look after the refugees and sympathise with them – especially after the Serbs' own experience with wars and displacement.

8. Conclusion

The Serbian response to the 2015 Refugee Crisis was a juxtaposition of elements of humanitarianism and securitisation. Serbia showed an open response towards the refugees mostly, with open borders while many of its neighbours closed theirs, an elaborate network of asylum centres and a somewhat positive narrative in the media. While undoubtedly the humanitarian response was not completely free from broader geopolitical motives, the inclination towards a humanitarian approach cannot be disregarded. The broader geopolitical motives included hopes of accelerating the country's EU accession process, exerting greater control over Preševo – a town vulnerable due to its border with Kosovo and projecting an alignment with 'European' values. This reflects two things: how humanitarian approaches by states mostly carry underlying political motives and how small states must navigate complex situations to achieve their broader geopolitical objectives. The Serbian response was not devoid of the securitisation aspect, especially in the latter stage. The protests by the far-right Serbian parties, the portrayal of the refugees as dangerous in the Serbian media and the fear of the public highlight this aspect. The fear arose mainly due to a difference in the cultural and

religious fronts. The Serbian government also increasingly became wary of the refugees in the latter years, allowing only those to enter who possessed proper documentation. This showcases the securitisation of migration in Serbia, much like in other parts of Europe during that time. Thus, the response shows a duality: humanitarianism influenced by, to some degree, certain strategic objectives and securitisation influenced by social anxieties and internal political dynamics. The Serbian response shows the broader challenge of navigating international crises in politically sensitive areas. The challenge is particularly prominent for small states like Serbia which must rely on major powers for political and economic stability.

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