

2016/MARCH

# COMMENTARY



Migrant crisis in Macedonia  
through the media lenses

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**M**acedonia was not spared at all when it comes to the handling of the migrant crisis, especially among the international media. Due to the magnitude of the events the international media was rightly interested in this issue, especially in the light of how it had unfolded in Hungary during the summer of 2015, with the closing of the border with Serbia and the violent clashes between the police and migrants. Shortly after the crisis at the Hungarian-Serbian border, the migrant route altered and focused on Croatia. As such it created once again scenes of closed borders and accusatory behavior between Croat-Serbian state officials which reminded many of the war period of the 90s. It did not take long for Croatia to shut down completely incoming traffic of Serbian vehicles at one of its border posts.

Macedonia, for its part, was not prepared for what was to follow, at least not in the pub-

lic relations context. Shocking images of Macedonian police chasing migrants and firing teargas at people who had illegally crossed the border were streamed internationally on channels like Al-Jazeera one day, and heart-warming images of a Macedonian female soldier providing bottles of water the next day. Foreign correspondents who were covering the migrant crisis had problems getting the Macedonian side of the story for weeks, as there was hardly anyone providing real-time information regarding the hectic scenes in Gevgelija, for example. While the Greek authorities, both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Interior Ministry, were communicating their message from early on as events in Macedonia, had developed, that was not the case in Macedonia.

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In Macedonia, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party realized (though after some delay) that visual images count for a lot in managing such a complex security issue and even contracted a US firm to handle its PR in respect of the migrant crisis. The effects of this are not yet clear and if the migrant crisis is a state related question, as it obviously is, the question arises as to why a political party would order the services of a PR firm in respect of it? Also better late than never, the country's Foreign Minister, Nikola Poposki, stepped into the optics-endeavor and tried explaining Macedonia's side of handling the migrant crisis to international media such as the BBC, CNN and others. It has to be recognised however that this step was taken only after much delay, Bad management of public relations is a systemic barrier in

Macedonian affairs, especially among the Macedonian security sector institutions, which has been a prolonged feature over many years.

Not being an EU member state, Macedonia had the "luxury" of choosing its manner of handling of the migrant crisis. The options however were limited, either an "Orban-like approach", with harsh measures and hard-hitting rhetoric, or a "Merkel-centric policy" essentially reflecting a more relaxed but coordinated policy towards the migrants. The Macedonian authorities decided to follow a course somewhere between these approaches. They initiated a large-scale response by its security institutions (police and armed forces), declaring a crisis situation. Additionally Macedonia's President Gjorgje Ivanov did not spare words to describe the EU's struggle and ineffectiveness in finding a common answer to the migrant crisis, and the problems this creates along the so-called Balkan route. With

diplomatic gloves off, he accused Brussels of a lack of financial support for Macedonia's state security institutions. With such a tone he basically voiced and reflected the concerns of the countries along the Balkan route, plus the V4 group and Austria. This conflicted clearly with the German and Greek positions and two blocks of countries were thus established with very different agendas. On the other hand for several months the number of migrants being let from Greece into Macedonia was coordinated with authorities from the rest of the Balkan route through setting daily quotas and limiting the profile of eligible migrants who were allowed to continue their journey onwards.

The coverage of the migrant crisis in the domestic media was and still is disappointing. It mirrors to large extent the media problem that Macedonia is facing. Many of the stories were translated from the international media such as the Associated Press, Rus-

sia Today. BBC or the regional B92, N1 etc. Macedonian journalists rarely covered the migrant crisis in depth or from the scene of events.

While the human dimension of the migrant crisis cannot be ignored, media reporting of how state authorities deal with the crisis has a substantial role to play in the image of the country in question. For many months images and news of Macedonia and the migrant crisis were trending on social media, as well as traditional media. With proactive public relations management instead of a delayed reactive one, Macedonia would not suffered from such a serious image problem which it tried to repair, belatedly, using quick fix solutions.



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