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Abstract for Roundtable Discussion by .Antonija Petričušić

**The Alteration of Discourse Towards Refugees' and Migrants' Flow in Croatia:
From Solidarity, Over Security and To Effective Security or Flexible Solidarity?**

In mid-September 2015 refugees' and migrants' flow reached the Croatian Eastern borders, after Hungary had closed its border crossings with Serbia, forcing the travellers to look for a new path towards Western Europe. Hungary's borders with Serbia were serving since 2013 as an entry point for Syrian, Iraqi and Afgan refugees, as well as Pakistani, Kosovar and other economic migrants who, as a rule, reached the European soil in Greece and who consequently tried to make their way towards Western Europe via so called the Western Balkans route (through the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia into Hungary or Croatia).

FROM SOLIDARITY ...

Initially, Croatia's authorities said the country was ready to process several thousand people, however in following several months Croatia turned into a new frontline in Europe's migration crisis. The migration flow was manageable firstly because migrants were not overwhelmingly interested in applying for asylum in Croatia but rather attempted to reach wealthier states in Western Europe, chiefly Germany. Secondly, the humanitarian corridor, set up in a short time, efficiently provided a secure and successful path several hundred thousand people because authorities provided adequate assistance. Croatian officials organized transport of the migrants by buses and trains to the Northern borders with Slovenia. Though migrants were offered a refugee in detention centres in Slavonski Brod and Zagreb, they rarely showed interest in staying in the reception centres until their asylum status was resolved. The official stake of the coalitional liberal government of that time was it would help migrants in their trek onward to more affluent European countries. The first stage of the crisis bore predominantly a humanitarian character and was assessed by international human rights organizations (UNHCR primarily) as an adequate humane, and rights-respecting response. Initially, in September 2015, liberal government headed by Prime Minister Zoran Milanović ruled out putting up a fence at Croatian borders. Milanović stated that "Fences which are being erected will not stop anyone and they are only sending a terrible and dangerous message."¹

¹ Milanovic: Fences which are being erected won't stop anyone and they are only sending a terrible and dangerous message, 16.09.2015, <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/milanovic-fences-which-are-being-erected-won-t-stop-anyone-and-they-are-only-sending-a-terrible-and-dangerous-message/17684>.

... OVER EMPHASIZING SECURITY...

Security discourse with respect to refugees' and migrants' flow was initiated by the President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, a conservative politician elected in December 2014, who cohabitated for almost a year with the liberal government of former PM Milanović. Her political discourse on refugees' and migrants' flow was predominantly emphasizing securitization. The factor behind the policy disagreement between the two highest political functions can be explained by Presidents former involvement in NATO, where she held a position as NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy. However, her opposing discourse on migration flow was likely introduced in order to discredit the government in the eve of the Parliamentary elections that were due in November 2015. The President, for example, argued in October 2015 a border fence could be considered in order to stop the influx of refugees and migrants. Her stance towards further migration flow was justified with a high unemployment rate and security aspects, and she in addition argued that a high number of people of different belief and views could also constitute a security threat to the country with a prevalent Catholic identity.² The President furthermore advocated the army should be deployed to manage the crisis, opposing a position of the government of that time that held the police was sufficient in management of border crossings and migrants' fingerprinting.

After it became apparent that the EU's migration strategy was facing collapse, following an influx of more than 1 million migrants to the EU, in early March 2016 European leaders had closed the Western Balkans refugee route. Croatia, as a Member State, applied the decision.

In order to reduce the incentives for migrants to come, but at the same to boost the security of those fleeing their countries with human traffickers and smuggles in the Mediterranean, the EU Member States had started to envisage a number of measures back in September 2015. Stabilising the situation in Member States, ensuring strong external EU borders and implementing the EU-Turkey agreement on migration management became new foci of the EU migration policy. Croatia, like other countries along the Western Balkans route, was asked to abandon "wave-through" approach and to restore orderly management of borders. As the EU Member State, the country was furthermore asked to insist on the application of EU rules on asylum.

... TO COMMITTING TO AN EFFECTIVE SECURITY OR A FLEXIBLE SOLIDARITY?

The President Grabar-Kitarović sidelined with the countries of East Central Europe (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia) that are gathered in the Visegrád Group and who oppose quotas of refugee relocation between EU countries. Those countries came out with a policy alternative to the mandatory EU relocation scheme and argue that each Member States should decide on "specific forms of contribution taking into account their experience and potential" and that "any distribution mechanism should be voluntary."³ However, the concept was openly criticized by the Commissioner Avramopoulos who argued that "[t]he term solidarity does not need interpretation. Can you imagine a flexible, or selective marriage? It doesn't work, and the same applies with solidarity. This is the moment for Member States to prove what they really mean when it when they talk about solidarity. Solidarity and responsibility are not only moral values, but they are the legal principles

² Hina, Grabar-Kitarovic: Europe must urgently give clear answers to migrants, 17.04.2016, <https://eblnews.com/news/croatia/grabar-kitarovic-europe-must-urgently-give-clear-answers-migrants-18079>.

³ Joint Statement of the Heads of Governments of the V4 Countries, 16.09.2016, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the-160919>.

binding all member states. These terms are explicitly stated in the founding principles in the union.”⁴

The third political discourse on migration flow in Croatia, along those lines of effective security and flexible solidarity, was the one backed by the former Croatian Foreign and European Affairs Minister Miro Kovač, who was heading the ministry in a short-term government of the Prime Minister Tihomir Orešković, and by the new Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who was elected in September 2016. PM Plenković, a former MEP and the vice-chair of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, who in the meantime became a leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), is advocating importance for the security and stability of Europe and supporting the European standards and policy on migration management. In this way, the Croatian sovereignty in migration matters are being sidelined to EU asylum and migration rules and norms. Protection of the human rights of the refugees and migrants, in such a discourse, is being delegated primarily to Brussels. Though it softens the securitization of the refugee and migration crisis, such an approach diminishes true human solidarity and confirms that a ruling political option has a pivotal role in shaping a policy response to humanitarian crisis.

⁴ “The term ‘flexible solidarity’ for migration is still not defined, Minister Carmelo Abela says”, Independent, 08.11.2016., <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2016-11-08/local-news/The-term-flexible-solidarity-for-migration-is-still-not-defined-Minister-Carmelo-Abela-says-6736166322>.