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**The good, the bad and the Eastern European – refugees and the Communist past**

*A comparative study between Bulgaria and Croatia*

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Abstract

The current paper comparatively examines the societal responses to the refugee crisis in Bulgaria and Croatia. The aim is to assess whether the Bulgarian and the Croatian societies are predominantly accepting or unaccepting of refugees and to examine the factors which contribute towards these attitudes. More specifically, by comparing the two, the authors test which political and historical differences of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia pre-1989 result in different attitudes towards refugees. Moreover, the study would examine whether the narratives of ‘otherness’ are similar between people who were born and lived during the Communist rule and those, who were born post-1989. The comparative perspective allows for a broader view of the issue while also resulting in the discernment of country-specific idiosyncrasies. Methodologically, the analysis relies on semi-structured interviews conducted in Bulgaria and Croatia and on a review of secondary sources. It is important to note that the presented research is part of a pilot study and therefore its findings are preliminary.

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## **Introduction and background**

The refugee crisis is one of the most difficult challenges that the countries in the European Union face today. More than a million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe in 2015, with 302,335 people reaching Europe by sea since the start of 2016, according to the UNHCR<sup>1</sup>. Research shows that the majority of asylum seekers, if granted an asylum and after a number of years usually do not return to their home countries, often destroyed for decades. In this context and having in mind the needs for integrational policies across Europe, it is important to examine the attitudes of European societies towards asylum seekers and migrants.

The current analysis focuses on two Eastern European countries, namely Bulgaria and Croatia, and attempts to explain the differences in their attitudes towards asylum seekers despite the array of structural similarities between the two.

The current paper will proceed as follows: the first section will provide background information. The second part will briefly review the existing literature on the subject and provide the theoretical and methodological framework of the analysis. The third section will outline the results from the study. Finally, the conclusion will provide a preliminary answer to the research question.

## **Background**

Taking the comparative context with a grain of salt and without wanting to distill more similarities than there are, Bulgaria and Croatia are similar in many respects. Both Bulgaria and Croatia were under the control of a Communist regime which subsequently collapsed and was followed by a transition period towards democracy and market economy. Currently, both countries are members of the EU and NATO. Geographically, Bulgaria and Croatia are both small Balkan countries located at the external border of the EU and outside of the Schengen area. Demographically, both Bulgaria and Croatia have small (7.1 million people in Bulgaria, 4.1 – in Croatia)<sup>2</sup>, relatively ethnically homogeneous populations. In Bulgaria, as of 2011, the ethnic Bulgarians are 84.4%<sup>3</sup> and in Croatia the Croats amount to 90.4%<sup>4</sup>. Economically, Bulgaria and Croatia rely mostly on the service sector and the GDP of both amounts to approximately \$49 billion for 2015. Clearly, in all of these areas many differences can be identified as well, including that Croatia, as opposed to Bulgaria, was part of Yugoslavia in the past. Therefore, the primary goal of the comparison above is not to claim that the two countries are identical but to establish that the similarities between them are compelling enough to justify

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2016). Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean. Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank (2015). Total population. Available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>

<sup>3</sup> National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria (2011). Population Census 2011. Available at: [http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/PDOCS2/Census2011final\\_en.pdf](http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/PDOCS2/Census2011final_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2001). Population by ethnicity. Census 2001. Available at: [http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/Census2001/Popis/H01\\_02\\_02/H01\\_02\\_02.html](http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/Census2001/Popis/H01_02_02/H01_02_02.html)

investigation into the non-negligible difference in the attitude of their citizens towards asylum seekers.

In a poll, conducted by the Bulgarian sociological agency Alpha Research<sup>5</sup> in September 2015, 63% of Bulgarians consider the refugees a threat to the Bulgarian people and while 11% want Bulgaria to close its borders altogether. In another survey by Sova Harris polling agency from February 2016, “nearly 47% of people believe that the EU should not help refugees seeking asylum on its territory” as opposed to 28% who believe the opposite<sup>6</sup>. Around 78% of Bulgarians perceive refugees as a burden to the economy and only around 3% believe that refugees could promote the development of our economy in Bulgaria. According to 60% of Bulgarians refugees pose a threat to the national security of Bulgaria compared to 15% who believe the opposite to be true. For nearly 51% having a refugee for a co-worker or neighbour is unacceptable as oppose to 23% who would not mind it.

The most recent data in Croatia is from 2013. In Eastern Croatia, a study<sup>7</sup>, conducted in September 2013 concluded that only 35.2% of the people agree that asylum seekers represent a burden for the taxpayers while 27.1% disagree. However, only 24.9% agree that asylum seekers pose a security threat to the local communities while 34.3% disagree with this statement. 29.3% disagree that the culture of asylum seekers should not interfere with the Croatian culture while 34.8% agree. In all of these questions, a large proportion of the respondents (between 35% and 40%) are neutral in their opinion. Another study, conducted by the Centre for Peace Studies in 2013, concluded that percentage of xenophobia towards a general category of asylum seekers can reach up to 37%<sup>8</sup>.

The data shows that even though in both countries negative attitudes towards asylum seekers exist, they are stronger in Bulgaria in comparison to Croatia and the difference is not trivial. The central research question of this article can therefore be formulated in the following way:

Which factors contribute towards the difference in the attitude of Bulgarian and Croatian citizens towards asylum seekers?

This question represents an interesting analytical puzzle that has not been fully addressed in the academic literature.

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<sup>5</sup> Dnevnik (2015). Alpha Research: For 63% of Bulgarians refugees are a threat. Available at: [http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2015/09/28/2617609\\_alfa\\_risurch\\_za\\_63\\_ot\\_bulgarite\\_bejancite\\_sa\\_opasnost/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2015/09/28/2617609_alfa_risurch_za_63_ot_bulgarite_bejancite_sa_opasnost/)

<sup>6</sup> Lyubomir Kyuchukov (2016). Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Bulgarian Society and Politics: Fears But No Hatred. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/12570.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Gregurović, M., Kuti, S., & Župarić-Iljić, D. (2016). Attitudes towards Immigrant Workers and Asylum Seekers in Eastern Croatia: Dimensions, Determinants and Differences. *Migracijske i etničke teme*, (1), 91-122.

<sup>8</sup> Centar za mirovne studije. (2013). Istraživački izvještaj - Zastupljenost i indikatori diskriminacijskih i ksenofobičnih stavova u Republici Hrvatskoj. Available at: [http://cms.hr/system/article\\_document/doc/40/Istrazivacki\\_izvjestaj\\_KNJIZNI\\_BLOK.pdf](http://cms.hr/system/article_document/doc/40/Istrazivacki_izvjestaj_KNJIZNI_BLOK.pdf)

## Theory and methodology

Several conjectures have been put forward with regard to the factors which contribute to intolerance in Eastern Europe.

Nils Muiznieks proposes that as freedom of expression is one of the undeniable and most valued achievements in Eastern Europe since the fall of Communism, sanctioning hate speech and xenophobic discourse is very rare in the region.<sup>9</sup> This reluctance to place limits on free speech “normalises” xenophobic sentiments and is also exploited by the political elites, which occasionally engage in hate speech themselves.

Another approach to the problem of intolerance in Central and Eastern Europe is the idea that societies in this region have been isolated for many years by the Iron Curtain and, in addition, view themselves as culturally homogeneous.<sup>10</sup> In this context, nationalistic and xenophobic backlash against the increasing number of (increasingly diverse) immigrants, including refugees, is to be expected. The fact that Croatia was part of a federation might play a role in mitigating this effect.

Ivan Krastev noted in an article that “[w]e were promised tourists, not refugees”<sup>11</sup>. This alludes to the idea that societies in Eastern Europe had certain expectations for economic prosperity from the transition to democracy and market economy after 1989 (and from their membership in the European Union) that were not necessarily fulfilled. Society, therefore, might perceive itself as a victim of transition and, by extension, might lack compassion for others. The negative attitude towards refugees might stem from disillusionment and frustration, combined with economic insecurity that the refugee crisis might potentially exacerbate.

Hockenos argues that “EU newcomers are ‘illiberal democracies’, systems that have all the trapping of constitutional states but lack the liberal political culture to make them function as healthy democracies”<sup>12</sup>. By extension, these political systems lack the tools to integrate and protect the rights of both existing minorities and refugees. The doubt in the abilities of the state to tackle this problem might be a factor in determining the negative attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Finally, an important factor to consider is that Croatia, unlike Bulgaria, has experienced a war in the very recent past. Therefore, many Croats have first-hand experience with refugees and this might allow for a stronger sense of empathy with the asylum seekers who come to Europe today.

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<sup>9</sup> Muiznieks, N. (2002). Private and Public Prejudice: A Response to András Kovács. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 69(1), 195-199.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace, C. (2002). Opening and closing borders: migration and mobility in East-Central Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(4), 603-625.

<sup>11</sup> Krastev, I. (2015). Eastern Europe’s Compassion Deficit. *The New York Times*. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?_r=0)

<sup>12</sup> Hockenos, P. (2010). Central Europe's Right-Wing Populism The EU's neoliberal economic reforms have undermined public faith in democratic politics. *NATION*, 290(20)

The discussed above is not an exhaustive list of factors that might influence the attitudes towards refugees. However, these hypotheses were selected due to their potential explanatory value specifically in the context of the comparison between Bulgaria and Croatia.

In order to probe the conjectures, 10 semi-structured interviews were performed in each country with people with varies political views who have the potential to influence the direction of the discourse in the two countries. These included political activists, journalists, sociologists, political scientists, leading experts from non-governmental organisation and public officials. Choosing people with a certain amount of public visibility and influence, who are part of the conversation about the refugee crisis in each country, potentially gives a sense not only of the current situation (which can also be described through the sociological studies, cited above) but also about the direction in which the public discourse will advance. For each country, 5 of the interviewees were born before 1989 and five were born in 1989 or after, which allowed for a comparison between these two age groups as well.

## Results

The following section will discuss the results from the interviews in addition to some secondary sources with relation to the aforementioned conjectures.

Regarding the treatment of hate speech, the situation in Bulgaria and Croatia is similar. Although there are clear regulations against it<sup>13 14</sup>, cases of hate speech are rarely sanctioned in both countries. The Croatian Helsinki Board<sup>15</sup> and other NGOs<sup>16</sup> state that hate speech is highly present in Croatia. An overwhelming majority of the interviewees in both countries agreed that hate speech is much proliferated but there are no adequate sanctions. However, while in Croatia, hate speech is more likely to be used in an informal or semi-formal setting, in Bulgaria it is part of the public debate. The interviewees repeatedly states that this has been “normalised” by the society, the politicians and the media. According to the report of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee “[i]n 2015, nationalist parties of neototalitarian type (both in government and in opposition) became the main sources of incitement of hate, discrimination and violence against Roma people, Muslims and refugees”.<sup>17</sup> The reluctance of placing limits on freedom of

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<sup>13</sup> Erceg, T. (2004). Rasna netrpeljivost i "govor mržnje"; Međunarodni i hrvatski standardi i praksa, available at: [http://ombudsman.hr/dodaci/036\\_izvjestajgovormrznje.pdf](http://ombudsman.hr/dodaci/036_izvjestajgovormrznje.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Art. 162, Bulgarian Penal Code

<sup>15</sup> Croatian Helsinki Comittee (2013). Izjava br.2/2013: o govoru mržnje i netoleranciji u Hrvatskoj., available at: <http://www.hho.hr/izjava-br-32013-o-govoru-mrznje-i-netoleranciji-u-hrvatskoj/>

<sup>16</sup> Hoffman, D. (2016). Izveštaj o pradenju govora mržnje, diskriminatornog, stereotipizirajudeg i zapaljivog govora u informativnim medijima u veljači 2016., available at: [http://gong.hr/media/uploads/2016\\_02.pdf](http://gong.hr/media/uploads/2016_02.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (2016). Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2015. p. 44, available at: [http://www.bghelsinki.org/media/uploads/annual\\_reports/annual\\_bhc\\_report\\_2015\\_issn-2367-6930\\_bg.pdf](http://www.bghelsinki.org/media/uploads/annual_reports/annual_bhc_report_2015_issn-2367-6930_bg.pdf)

assembly has also made institutions reluctant to ban extremist organisations with racist views<sup>18</sup>.

In the communist period Bulgaria and Croatia experienced a different degree of “closedness”. While the Bulgarian communist regime strictly controlled both emigration and immigration, Croats had fewer restrictions. Yugoslavia was an example of a regime *lite*, allowing for its borders to be open, and its inhabitants to travel outside of the state and communicate with the foreigners within the state. What is more, Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic federal state, constituted of six socialist republics, which were to an extent allowed to keep and develop their own cultures and languages under the common socialist Yugoslavian denominator<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, the Yugoslavian culture is perceived as a multicultural one and this narrative has mostly continued to exist in Croatia. At the same time, the mobility of Bulgarian citizens and their contacts with foreigners were restricted even within the country itself. Paradoxically, although most Bulgarian interviewees think that the Bulgarian society is also multicultural, most also said that to not conform to subjective societal norms, to be “different”, is not tolerated and it is even feared sometimes. At the same time, all interviewees both in Croatia and Bulgaria stressed the importance of cultural exchange for the improvement of tolerance, both pre and post 89.

The argument about the disillusionment with the European Union appears to be questionable in both Bulgaria and Croatia. Interviewees in Bulgaria believe that the refugees are expensive while also making the point that ineffective spending and inability to provide refugees with the opportunity to work might be a key reason for it. At the same time, the idea that there needs to be a common EU solution to the crisis while at the same time both Bulgaria and Croatia are financially assisted by the EU in handling the refugee flows is almost universal.

In Bulgaria, there are certainly examples of successful integration of minorities while there is also persistent doubt in the ability of the state to integrate the Roma minority in particular. At the same time, this fear does not necessarily translate to the refugee crisis as most interviewees underline the fear of extremism (however justified) and not the fear of non-integration. The influence of the media in framing the debate is also often mentioned as the negative cases receive much more coverage. This creates additional fear and doubt in the ability of the Bulgarian state to handle the situation. These fears appear to not be so prominent in Croatia. Croatian minorities are relatively well integrated, although tensions with the Serbs still persist. However, the interviewees did not translate these challenges to the refugees. At the same time, the fear from extremism was not explicitly stated.

Finally, the personal experience with refugees appears to be an important factor in determining the attitudes towards refugees. Most Bulgarian respondents believe that

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<sup>18</sup> Muiznieks, N. (2002). op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Jović, D. (2009). *Yugoslavia: a state that withered away*. Purdue University Press.

not many Bulgarians personally know a refugee, even if they themselves have had sporadic encounters. By contrast, the war in Croatia in 1991 – 1995 has touched the life of practically every citizen. Apart from the immense relative number of deceased and missing people (total of 13.500 within the total population of 4 million people), the war produced a large number of inland and foreign refugees who were forced to flee their homes during the organised ethnic cleansing. The population of mostly women and children was leaving the war areas, leading to a number of 550.000 inland and 150.000 refugees who fled to other countries.<sup>20</sup> Therefore even though many Bulgarians also believe that refugees (as opposed to migrants) should be helped, Croatian people are much more likely to personally relate to the experience of refugees.

No significant dividing lines were found in the answers of the people who were born before and after 1989 in both Bulgaria and Croatia.

## **Conclusion**

The specificities of the Communist past and the differences in the followed transitional experience of Bulgaria and Croatia could, at least partly, explain the differences in the attitude towards refugees. From the analysis above it can be concluded that hate speech is prominent and not sanctioned in both countries (as freedom of speech is so highly valued after overcoming censorship) but while in Croatia it is contained to the private sphere, this is not the case in Bulgaria. Moreover, Bulgaria more closed off during the Communist period resulted in a society that is less accepting of “otherness” and by extension, refugees. While Bulgarians experience media-fuelled fears that extremists pose as refugees, the recent war experience of the Croats citizens allows them to better relate to the struggles of refugees and be more sympathetic. There is support for a common EU solution to the refugee crisis in both countries.

The conclusions stated above are a result of a pilot study and are, therefore, preliminary.

The current paper focused specifically on Bulgaria and Croatia, additional research is needed if the findings are to be generalised beyond these countries. Additional limitations to the performed research include the relatively small scale of the study, as well as the lack of current data on the attitudes towards refugees in Croatia after 2013. Therefore, further examination of the proposed hypotheses is needed in order to determine which the factors contribute towards the different attitudes towards refugees Bulgaria and Croatia.

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<sup>20</sup> Hrvatska enciklopedija (1999). Domovinski rat. in *Hrvatska enciklopedija.*, available at: <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=15884>