

Conference Report  
**Political Discourse on the Migrant Crisis**  
**in the EU and Western Balkan States**  
(7 September 2016)

**Executive Summary:**

The objective of the public conference was to provide a forum for discussion of the very emotional topic of the "migrant crisis". The audience, academics, volunteers and representatives from NGOs who are working for and with refugees, had the possibility to discuss the issues related to the migrant problem, share their experiences and exchange ideas. More than 30 external participants from ministries, civil society organisations, other universities and private individuals registered for the conference. The very engaged and interested audience was keen to get an insight of the developments in relation of the "migrant crisis" in other countries and how NGOs reacted to the challenges.

The outcome of the conference is that participants learned from each other. While academics provided the background information and analyses of the discourse on migration, were the NGO's representatives able to give information on their experiences on the ground and what their main difficulties currently are. Furthermore, it was clarified that academic institutions are able to provide useful service for NGOs, but the link between academia and NGOs needs to be strengthened by providing and dissemination information from academia to civil society organisations.

A policy paper with some recommendations will be drafted on the basis of this report and will be made available to the NGOs.

A follow-up of the academic discussion on the topic of the national discourse on the migrant issue will take place at the Political Science Association Conference in Glasgow in April 2017. Some of the papers presented at the conference will be published in a book with the title "The Migrant Crisis: European Perspectives and National Discourses", editors are Melani Barlai, Brite Fähnrich, Christina Griessler and Markus Rhomberg; LIT Verlag; Berlin/Münster/Zürich/ forthcoming in spring 2017. A half-day workshop with Hungarian and Austrian NGOs is being considered to be organised for late spring 2017.

**Funding:**

The conference was financed from various sources. The ERSTE Foundation financed the participation of Alexandra Davidovska (Macedonia), Ivan Lalic (Serbia), Drago Župarić-Iljić

(Croatia), Nenad Koprivica (Montenegro), Lura Pollozhani (Macedonia) and partly of Umut Korkut (Turkey-UK). The speakers from Austria (Oliver Gruber, Anna Faustmann) and lunch and coffee breaks were covered by the Österreichisches Kulturforum Budapest, while Andrassy University funded the participation of Birte Fähnrich, Gregg Bucken-Knapp and partly Umut Korkut from sources of the National Excellence Programme. In addition to foreign guests also local researchers (Endre Sík, ELTE/Tárki/HAS, Christina Griessler and Melani Barlai, both AUB/netPol) and NGOs (Migszol, Migration Aid, Artemisszió, CEU helps) participated in the exchange of experience. We thank all organisations for the financial support of the conference!

### **Content:**

The conference brought together experts and civil society organisations to analyse the impact of the „refugee crisis” on the political discourse of the countries within the EU and the „Balkan Route”-countries. Furthermore, NGOs from the Western Balkan countries and Hungary spoke about their experiences with the increased numbers of refugees and how they address the related problems. The final part of the conference looked at the collaboration between academic institutions and NGOs in supporting and providing assistance for refugees and for people, who are providing assistance to the refugees.

The first panel of the conference was focusing on the perspective of countries on the migration route. The panellists analysed and compared the migrant/refugee-discourse in two countries of the Western Balkans, Montenegro and Macedonia, in the new EU-Member and former Western Balkan state, Croatia and Hungary, which is most affected by the increase of refugees and migrants.

Nenad Koprivica (CEDEM Centre for Democracy and Human Rights) discussed the case study of Montenegro, however clarifying that Montenegro is not yet directly affected by the migrant problem. He underlined that in Montenegro the refugee crisis is not recognised as a political issue, but, as a “crisis of the democracy in the EU”. It affected the EU-level, the regional level and the national level. Montenegro, as other countries in the region, is too weak to efficiently control and protect their borders and would struggle with providing health and other social services. However, the countries of the Western Balkan region are encouraged to comply with the EU-standards. Two dominant visions of how to deal with the issue dominate the discourse in the regions: First, the „Merkel-vision” with no upper limits for accepting asylum seekers and on the opposite the „Orbán-vision”, which foresees a closure of all borders. Koprivica argues that a regional approach is needed, because the current refugee issue affects the Enlargement-Process as well. Actually, Koprivica

claims, that it is not a refugee crisis, but a policy crisis of the EU and argues that a better and adequate asylum system needs to be prepared.

Lura Pollozhani (University of Graz/Macedonia) presented her key findings of the study: *The media discourse on migrants/refugees in Macedonia*, which was jointly conducted with Dane Taleski. From the beginning of the crisis, the second half of 2014, Macedonia was a transit country. The migrant issue was not presented in the media, as at the same time the Macedonian state crisis occurred, which dominated the news. The media was very much polarised, whereby the main stream media predicted the government in a positive light. The refugees came to attention only in 2014, when accidents on the train tracks occurred and due to protests, which demanded for protection of the refugees. Finally, the issue became more publicly known due to the closing of the borders. The media was divided on the issue of the refugees. The state media did not address it at all, but other media tried to get facts about what was going on in Macedonia. The Albanian media was very critical of the reception centres and emphatic reaction at the plight of the refugees by the public. According to Pollozhani the Albanian media was less polarised than the Macedonian media, which tried to give the impression that the government was competent and in control of the situation. The media confused terminology and was very inconsistent in their reports on the issue. Pollozhani concluded that the Macedonian media is “polarised between pro EU and blaming the EU” and there are no reflected reports in the media about the refugee crisis.

Drago Župarić-Iljić (Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, Zagreb) presented the changes of political discourse in relation to the migrant situation in Croatia. Based on his research data, which focused on the humanitarian discourse in Croatia in summer 2015, he presented a more mixed picture of the state as an actor in the migration crisis. By criticising the crisis management he stressed, however, that the state “has accepted the status as a transit state and accepted the quota regulation as well”.

In summer 2015 the discourse of the Social Democratic Prime Minister Milanović was based on the idea of a humanitarian crisis, whereby the government wanted to differentiate itself from the neighbouring countries and did not fortify the borders with wires. Although Milanović in mid-September still argued that the Croats are Christians and should therefore show solidarity, the Croatian president opted for sending the army to the border at the end of September 2015. And importantly, Croatia was hoping that the refugees would not stay in Croatia. The press response on the migrant issue, depends on the regional, political orientation and the time of publication. As the people did not have much contact with the refugees, the media provided the most important information on the situation. Due to the post-conflict experience and the 2014 flooding experience,

people were at the beginning of the „crisis” more empathetic towards the refugees, but over time the opinion changed from positive to negative. The change of government from the Social Democratic Party to the more national conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) impacted on the political discourse, which focused on the regulation of migration by the EU, increase of criminalisation and militarisation. „Humanitarian opportunism” and a lack of integration and misinterpretation of integration policy was revealed in the political discourse. It turned into an anti-EU discourse. The Croatian media is divided between one position, which defines Croatia as a transit country and the other position, which perceives Croatia as a non-transit state and puts the emphasis on the security issue – assumed Župarić-Iljić.

All of the three presenters pointed out that in the media as well as in the public of their countries the terms migrants and refugees are used interchangeable.

The last presenter of the panel, Enre Sík (ELTE University/Tárki/Hungarian Academy of Sciences), analysed the effects of the state driven discourse on the refugee problem in Hungary, which was based on his latest study. The migrant discourse constructed by the Hungarian government is negatively primed towards refugees. He compared the level of xenophobia and xenophilia before and during the government’s anti-immigration campaign. He underlined that “the level of xenophobia in April 2015 jumped immediately to a very high level. This was followed by a period (between July and October) showing a decrease in both xenophobia and xenophilia, and then by a sharp increase in xenophobia and the disappearance of xenophilia: in January 2016 the level of xenophobia reached an all-time high, and xenophilia practically disappeared.” In 2015 the government imitated a national consultation on immigration and terrorism to make sure that the people understood the situation as the government does, claims Sík. A huge billboard campaign accompanied the national consultation, which addressed the refugees in Hungarian and asked them not to take jobs from Hungarians or to respect the Hungarian laws. The effect of the campaign was actually directed towards the Hungarian people to make them aware what they should fear, argues Sík. The „Migrant-Quota” referendum in October 2016 was preceded by a two-step campaign of a poster-campaigned roll-out over the entire country. The referendum’s aim was to impact on the people’s emotion and not on the cognition.

The second panel focused on the recipient countries of refugees and how discourse changed through the last years. The cases studies were Austria, Sweden, Germany and the UK.

The first speaker on the panel, Oliver Gruber (University of Vienna), addressed the issue from an Austrian perspective. During the cold war era, Austria had functioned as “bridgehead country”

between East and West, a role that policy makers initially wanted to revive also in last year's refugee crisis. Since the fall of the Iron curtain, two main episodes of refugee immigration had shaped Austrian asylum discourse: The first was during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, where Austria became an immigrant country and in the 2000s when refugees started to arrive from countries like Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan. During that period, the discourse on asylum in Austria was influenced by three major lines: Firstly, partisan politics between a pro-immigrant left and a restrictive right; secondly the federalist power struggle between Länder and Bund in relation of providing accommodation; and finally the sometimes conflictive relation between government and non-governmental actors. The prelude to last year's political conflict on asylum emerged in spring and summer 2015, when the refugee centre Traiskirchen in Lower Austria was overcrowded and the government had to initiate emergency measures to force the federal executives to provide sufficient accommodation. At the height of the refugee influx in September 2015, the widespread "Refugee Welcome" response in Austrian civic society was supported by the Prime Minister Werner Faymann and the government policy coincided with the German policy and its tendency was of solidarity. However, members of the conservative coalition partner soon changed the discourse to indicate that the situation is no longer under control. "Structural building measures", i.e. a fence were erected at the Southern border of Austria, which was legitimated due to the lack of control. The shutdown of the Balkan route for refugees, the introduction of an asylum cap and the parliamentary discussion of emergency legislation followed in the months thereafter. Gruber agrees with the idea that the refugee crisis is actually a policy crisis and that in Austria it was amplified by the political stalemate of the coalition government, the dispute over competencies between the state and the federal units and the crisis of solidarity between people. Hence, he concludes that there is "not a refugee crisis, it is a crisis of the refugee policy, a crisis of federalisms and a crisis of solidarity between people not states".

Gregg Bucken-Knapp (University Gothenburg, Sweden), the second speaker on the panel, presented in his talk *The dynamics of the Swedish response to the migration crisis* the shifts in the Swedish migration policy from 2014 to 2016. "From open your hearts" to "Sweden has done more than any other EU country", which encompasses public opinion and stricter regulation changes regarding the residency, the family reunification of the migrants and refugees, their medical tests and in general the ID checks on the borders.

In 2015 approx. 1000 asylum applications per week were received in August 2015, a month later the number of applications had risen to 6000 per week. The first approach of the government was to be more generous, but over time it turn to become a more restricted. In 2014 the conservative Prime Minister Reinfeldt stated that Sweden has to take the refugees in, but that there won't be any

expenditures to assist the people. The Social Democratic rhetoric was different, which stated that there is money and we will help. The Swedish discourse was constructed in a way to uphold the image of Sweden as a humanitarian state, providing human assistance, but which has its limits. The government promotes this image by making the broader public aware that it had already resettled a huge number of refugees in the country. SAP argues that the refugees already in the country need to be provided with jobs before more migrants are accepted into the country. It gets away with this restrictive policy by referring to solidarity. The media in Sweden is not questioning the response by the Social Democrats. The discourse is framed by the issues of solidarity and limited resources, claims Bucken-Knapp.

The German case study was presented by Birte Fährnich. She gave an overview of the figures and the legal framework in Germany and looked at the migration history, which included the migration of Germans from USSR or the GDR, the Gastarbeiter-Agreement to accept workers for a limited period of stay in Germany, the acceptance of war refugees from Yugoslavia and the initiative to attract high-skilled workers to Germany. From 2010 to 2015 there was a dramatic increase of asylum applications and the last year approximately 2 million applied for asylum. During the height to the crisis Merkel suspended the Dublin Agreement, an EU-law, to let people directly to Germany without applying at the first EU-country they enter for asylum. The discourse on the migrant crisis in Germany was analysed by looking at talk shows on German TV. What was prominently discussed is the issue of capacity and the sexual assaults on the New Year celebrations in Cologne.

Umut Korkut puts the issue of the refugee crisis in the British in the context of Brexit. He starts with arguing that deliberation is important approach to bring people together creating a better understanding for each other`s problems. UK politicians should have engaged with the publics on migration and EU integration and not left these issues for the populists to dominate the discourse. The UK in 2004 opened their labour market to the new EU-member states. The direction and the form of migration has changed from a positive approach to attracting workers to the blaming of EU-migrants for domestic problems. The anti-EU discourse during the Brexit campaign was dominated by non-experts, states Korkut. Although, not being member of the Schengen Agreement these anti-experts blamed the increase of migrants to the “open border” policies of the EU. EU-migrants were also made responsible for problems in the HNS, although these problems have their roots in the conservative party`s policies. Problems with immigration emerged from 2003 onwards, issues of security, terrorist threat, illegal labour market and even democratic threat were linked up with migration. The outcome Brexit referendum and the British discourse on migration and EU shows that the refugee crisis will have an impact on the future of the European integration and a prospect accession of Turkey to the EU. The UK migrant discourse was dominated by non-

experts and the government was not able to take control of it.

The speakers of the third panel were members of NGOs and civil society organisation, who are working with and for refugees in Hungary, Serbia and Macedonia. The panellists talked about their activities and experiences with the migrant situation.

Migszol (Migration Solidarity Group of Hungary) was represented by two volunteers<sup>1</sup>, who clarified that Migszol is not an official NGO, but a solidarity group. Migszol does not receive any financial support by any government or governmental organisation. Cooperation is a main feature of Migszol, which wants to bring migrants and other people, regardless of their nationality, religion and background together. Because it is built on solidarity and cooperation, Migszol helps to integrate refugees and gives practical advice in all-day-life questions. Nevertheless there are some challenges for Migszol, which are the repression and discrimination by the state. This makes the work for integration and cooperation difficult. To overcome these challenges, they see the need to bring the discourse about migration and the so-called migration crisis to the civil society. Hence, for example they organise panel discussions and workshops. They also try to take initiatives against the government referendum in October 2016.

Rozi Gombas presented another Hungarian organisation, Migration Aid Hungary, which was one of the first organisations, which have engaged to assist refugees in Hungary. The organisation was founded in September 2015, at the beginning of the “migrant crisis”, when the situation at Keleti station was dramatic. They filled the gap between refugees and the Hungarian state, because they helped the thousands of refugees who were stranded at Keleti station. The Hungarian government had decided not to help and because of this decision, Migration Aid Hungary jumped in to do job of the government. For example they ensured that medical care was provided. The main challenges of Migration Aid came from the government and government institution, even experienced violence from the Hungarian police. Furthermore, they were faced with negative response from the Hungarian society. So, one can see that the problems of Migration Aid Hungary lies in the missing humanitarian migration policy of the Hungarian government. In this context the work of Migration Aid Hungary is remarkable, especially because they are not professionals and their resources in Hungary are limited.

Aleksandra Davidovska (NGO Legis/Macedonia), presented her organisation and the experiences she gained during the refugees response on the Western Balkan Route. NGO Legis is as an official

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<sup>1</sup> Felix and Salome did not provide their full names during the conference.

NGO in Macedonia, which has a humanitarian background and aims to alleviate human suffering and inform the society and the state about the situation of refugees in Macedonia. NGO Legis was founded in 2009, before the so-called “migration crisis” emerged. With the increase of refugees in Macedonia NGO Legis provided assistance, mainly in food and non-food aid packages, medical services, legal support and unofficial camp management and cross-border coordination, but faced with the problem of being constantly under pressure of authorities when helping refugees. In the first year, mainly private citizens and volunteers were working with NGO Legis. The Macedonian population was unaware of what was going on, because they did not see any refugees, due to the fact that the migrant routes did not pass through big cities. Davidovska explained that NGO Legis had to try and reach the refugees on the overland routes, which was not always easy. The main challenge according to NGO Legis is the lack of information, coordination and lack of interest by the state. The media does not cover all information about the problems, which migrants have on their way through Macedonia. Therefore Legis will not just help refugees; they also want to raise awareness for refugees in society and to put pressure on the responsible institutions. With this approach they were successful in the past, when the Macedonian government amended the law on Asylum and Temporary protection in 2015. Nevertheless, with the closure of the Balkan Route this amendment was annulled and the current legislation from, April 2016, does not allow access to asylum to refugees and migrants entering from the surrounding countries and the refugees already in the country are in legal limbo and without freedom of movement for seven months now. NGO Legis, beside providing support and assistance in the official camps, is addressing the situation of the undocumented refugees and migrants using the irregular migration channels facilitated by smugglers and traffickers, providing humanitarian aid and protection and referral services.

Refugee Aid Miksaliste is a Serbian NGO, located in Belgrade. Director Ivan Lalic argues that the Serbian state did nothing for the refugees. There are volunteers from all over the world coming to work for Refugee Aid Miksaliste. About 700 to 800 refugees come to the centre in Belgrade and they stay for some days, now people tend to stay longer. Refugee Aid Miksaliste works mainly with volunteers, but it receives financial help from the Norwegian embassy in Belgrade. They see themselves as a cultural organisation and they work in the area of integration and information/education. Refugee Aid Miksaliste tries to help integrating migrants through cultural exchange and discussion rounds. They also want to raise awareness in society. They use media to spread information, especially against populist ideas, which are also their main challenge. Until now they have initiated five round tables and one exhibition.



The final panel tried to link up academia with the Civil Society organisation and discussed the demand for further education and training of volunteers, who due to the increase of refugees spontaneously assisted NGOs and other organisations during the refugee/migrant situation. Academic institutions have reacted to this demand of practical training course in the field, not only for volunteers, but also for civil service personal, who are exposed to in times emotionally tense situations.

The Department Migration and Globalization at the Danube University Krems, Austria (DUK) has an expertise on intercultural integration and has now developed a new course for Migration and Integration Management. Cross-cultural integration is seen as a win-win-situation for societies and aims to provide expertise to deal with issues emerging from the influx of refugees. Anna Faustmann from DUK the explained that the Department provides education and training for people working for public institutions, NGOs, religious communities, police service, health service and for people with a general interest in the migration topic and cross-cultural integration. Furthermore, the Department facilitates a dialogue in the frame of the Forum for Migration and Integration, it consults on migrant issues and conducts research. Faustmann argues that a professionalization of social work with refugees is needed, because people working with refugees have a social responsibility.

CEU helps is a project, which was initiated by the CEU student Constanze Jeitler, as a reaction to the refugee's crisis in summer 2015 in Budapest. Although, it was a first response project, CEU helps has now up to 800 people being connected to the organisation online. CEU is active as well in providing the Syrian refugees with scholarships, offering up to 50 academic courses in relation to migration and refugee issues and has initiated an Open Learning Initiative (OLive). CEU is also engaged in the ALEPPO project, which aims to rebuild Aleppo. On the doctorate level students conduct research on the migrant/refugee issue.

Melani Barlai (netPOL/AUB) introduces the new version of Vokskabine, an Online Voting Advice Application, which will address issues of migration in its online questionnaire. The questionnaire, which will be sent to all Hungarian political parties with the request to answer the questions, have been compiled by a group of students during a Summer School in 2016. Students participating in the summer school, which took place from 28 August until 4 September 2016, learned about the refugee crisis from various perspective. Barlai worked with the students intensively for 1.5 days, were working groups were formed to address different aspects of the current situations. These questions will be the basis for the new online Vokskabine questionnaire. The aim of the project is to advice users of Vokskabine, which positions the parties have on certain aspects of the refugee issue. The tool is used for civic education and provides interested audience with some answers to some of the urgent questions on migration, we are currently facing in Hungary.

Diana Szántó from Artemisszio gave a brief history of the institution, which was established in the 1990s to conduct projects on intercultural issues. The Artemisszio has different target groups, as it works with schools, different groups of adults, thereby attempting to bring people from various backgrounds together. Artemisszio's aims is raising of awareness and creating a positive image of different cultures in Hungary. However, recently, the mood has changed and people are now attacking Artemisszio for their work. Awareness-raising has become more difficult, but there are people getting in contact to educate themselves and to inform themselves about the referendum campaign. People working with the refugees, who are working in public institutions or in civil society organisations turn to Artemisszio for help to cope with the stress, the impact of prejudice and the prevailing anti-solidarity in society.

People, who wish to help refugees out humanity and because they perceive it as a normal and logical thing to do, are criminalised. This creates stress, because people are in the dilemma, that they feel the moral need to help, but are penalised by the state, whose actual task is to assist the refugees, but rejected to do so.

Report by Julia Peters / Christina Griessler / Melani Barlai



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