

**MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS IN BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA: HOW THE NARRATIVE SHAPES THE PERCEPTION OF
MIXED MIGRATION**

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Abstract: The migrant crisis in Europe, which has been ongoing since 2015, has not passed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). It is estimated that between the beginning of 2018 and the beginning of 2025, more than 150,000 irregular migrants have passed through BiH on their way to European Union (EU) countries as their final destination. BiH has been faced with an increased influx of migrants or mixed migration flows, which has brought a variety of challenges and problems. The relevant institutions were not sufficiently prepared to respond to this crisis, and political actors imposed not only crisis communication, carried by the media, but also a sense of (de)stabilization and (in)security through a securitization approach. The question is whether the concept of securitization has prevailed in the media space, whether these issues have caused problems at the domestic level, and to what extent has it influenced the general perception of citizens about this phenomenon in Bosnia and Herzegovina? The aim of this paper is to analyze the statements of BiH political actors on mixed migration flows in BiH in the period from 01.07.2020 to 30.06.2021, the year in which the largest number of migrants resided in BiH, and the research included an analysis of 20 BiH media and their 1,065 publications.

Keywords: migrant crisis, irregular migrations, Bosnia and Herzegovina, political actors, media.

INTRODUCTION

The migration crisis in the Western Balkans reached its peak in 2015/2016, during which Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) did not record a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers and migrants. However, the situation began to change in early 2018, when migrants started arriving in greater numbers and staying for extended periods on BiH territory, using it as a stop along their journey toward a better and higher-quality life in one of the European Union countries. The main route primarily led these individuals from Greece through Albania,

then from Montenegro into BiH, while from spring 2018 onward there was also an increase in arrivals from Serbia.

Between early 2018 and the end of 2020, the BiH Service for Foreigners' Affairs registered and processed 69,705 migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, and Bangladesh (Buzar 2023). Due to its complex political structure, BiH faced several challenges in responding to this mixed migration situation and the continuous arrival of people on the move—from humanitarian and health-related issues, to challenges of providing adequate accommodation and protection to everyone in need, as well as managing crisis communication among numerous government representatives that helped create a negative narrative about this population in Bosnian media.

Since 2018, no topic appears to have been as prominent in the Bosnian media as mixed migration. The way the issue was covered varied not only between media outlets but also according to the political context in BiH—not just at the level of the two entities, but even between cantons within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). Media coverage ranged from initially empathetic reporting that called for understanding, compassion, and assistance to people enduring the most difficult period of their lives, to sensationalist headlines and content that was negative, stigmatizing, politically charged, and portrayed migrants as a threat to the citizens of this country.

This trend is not an isolated case but fits into a broader pattern of media representations of migration across Europe, where migrants and refugees are often depicted through narratives of “crisis,” “threat,” or “invasion” (Chouliaraki, Zaborowski, 2017). Such discourses contribute to the creation of social panic and the legitimization of restrictive border control policies (Ibrahim, Howarth, 2018). The media play a key role in shaping public opinion and policy responses to migration, with discursive frames ranging from humanitarian and empathetic to criminalizing and xenophobic (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, Moore, 2016).

In the context of BiH, the fragmented political structure adds further complexity, with local and entity-level authorities often sending contradictory messages, while migration policy remains insufficiently coordinated. At the same time, media narratives become a tool of political instrumentalization, where migration is used to mobilize support or divert attention from other social and political issues. Accordingly, studying migration narratives in Bosnian

media is not merely an analysis of media content but also offers insights into the broader socio-political context.

The primary aim of this research is to deepen understanding of the negative narrative about people on the move—migrants—present in Bosnian media, starting from the assumption that this narrative is primarily driven by statements from government officials. Based on this, the following working hypothesis has been formulated:

The media in Bosnia and Herzegovina portray the behavior of migrants residing on BiH territory negatively, with statements from politicians and representatives of state institutions providing these reports with a pronounced political and security dimension.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis to determine the extent of media interest in reporting on migration and the evaluative framing of such reports—whether negative, neutral, or positive. A comparative method was also used to contrast media narratives between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska entities, alongside a descriptive method that allows the analysis of migration as a phenomenon from security, political, social, combined, and empathetic perspectives.

The study covered twenty of the most prominent Bosnian media outlets over the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021. Data collection was conducted through a professional press clipping agency that systematically monitored media content across Bosnia and Herzegovina using predefined keywords: *mixed migration*, *migrants*, *people on the move*, *migration crisis*, and *Bosnia and Herzegovina*. The basic unit of analysis was an individual media report. A total of 1,065 reports disseminated via the official channels of these outlets were collected and analyzed, resulting in an average of approximately 88.75 reports per month, or nearly 2.9 reports per day. The sample encompassed three types of media formats to ensure comprehensive coverage: *Television broadcasts*, *Print media*, *Online news portals*.

The twenty media outlets were selected based on the following criteria:

- Reach and viewership/circulation: The most widely viewed television stations, most circulated newspapers, and most visited online portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Geographic and political representation: Media outlets from both entities (Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska) to enable comparative analysis across BiH's complex political structure
- Media type diversity: Inclusion of television, print, and online formats to capture different modes of journalistic reporting and audience engagement
- Editorial diversity: The sample encompassed media with varying editorial orientations to capture the full spectrum of migration discourse

All analyzed content was in the local language(s) of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian). The press clipping agency conducted systematic monitoring and initial categorization of all media reports containing the specified keywords. The researcher then performed detailed content analysis following a structured coding framework developed specifically for this study. Each media report was analyzed and coded according to the following dimensions:

- Tone of reporting: Negative, neutral, positive
- Primary thematic frame: Security threat, political issue, humanitarian crisis, social challenge, combined perspective, or empathetic approach
- Primary sources cited: Government officials (entity-level, cantonal, municipal), police/security agencies, NGOs and international organizations, migrants themselves, local residents, or unnamed sources
- Presence and level of political statements: Whether the report included statements from politicians or government representatives, and at which administrative level (state, entity, canton, municipality)
- Type of content: News report, interview, talk show segment, opinion piece, or investigative feature.

To ensure analytical rigor, the coding framework was tested on a pilot sample before full implementation. The researcher maintained detailed coding notes and regularly reviewed coded material to ensure consistency in the application of criteria throughout the 12-month period. The use of clearly defined operational categories and the systematic approach facilitated by the press clipping agency's initial monitoring enhanced the reliability of data collection and analysis.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term “crisis” (Greek: *krisis*) denotes a turning point or a temporary difficult state in natural, social, and intellectual processes (Filipović, 1989, p. 182). In ancient Greece, the word *krisis* meant decision or judgment. In the contemporary context, the term includes discernment, the ability to make judgments and decisions, and even the resolution of conflicts (Krummenacher, 1981; cited in Osmanagić Bedenik, 2010, p. 103). Holsti (1990, p. 75) defines crisis as a serious threat to important values with a limited time for making decisions.

A simple model of the crisis lifecycle consists of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases (Coombs, 2012). Scalcona (cited in Jugo, 2017, p. 14) emphasizes that every crisis is, in fact, an information crisis, underscoring that failure to control information is equivalent to failure in crisis management. This confirms the inseparable connection between crisis management and crisis communication, as well as the need for specific rules and strategies of communication during crises.

Sellnow and Seeger (2013, p. 14) define crisis communication as a continuous process of shared meaning-making among groups, communities, individuals, and organizations in order to prepare for, limit, and respond to risk and potential harm. Kešetović and Korajlić (2008, p. 147) highlight the fundamental principles of effective crisis management: confronting reality, acting swiftly and decisively, prioritizing the protection of people above all else, ensuring leadership presence at the scene, and maintaining open communication.

Migration, as a global and historically constant phenomenon, frequently generates different types of crises—from humanitarian to security crises. Strahija (2017) states that migration entails the movement of people from one place to another with the intention of temporary or permanent settlement, which can be distinguished by voluntariness, legality, and geographical scope (national or international). Friganović (1989, cited in Stević and Car, 2017) describes it as an individual or collective phenomenon driven by the initiatives and aspirations of individuals, families, or larger communities. Šerić (2020) emphasizes that migration is an integral part of the globalization process, which implies interconnectedness and interdependence in all aspects of social life.

Migration processes are not merely demographic or economic phenomena but also highly political issues. Buzar and Bašić (2024) highlight that migration is driven by complex “push–pull” factors, where wars and conflicts represent strong “push” elements that almost invariably cause forced migration. Such forced movements of populations generate numerous political,

social, and security implications for countries of origin, transit, and destination alike. In this way, migration becomes a potential source of crises—humanitarian, due to the need for protection and assistance, and security-related, due to the perception of threat within host societies.

In the more recent context, the migration wave that peaked after 2010 is linked to prolonged armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as the consequences of the Arab Spring. These forced migrants are joined by people from Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and other crisis regions. The response of European Union member states, politicians, the media, and public opinion can be metaphorically described as a new specter haunting Europe—the specter of migrants (Bobić & Janković, 2017).

Bauman (2009, p. 139) warns of the deeper social background of such reactions, observing that a specter is haunting the planet: the specter of xenophobia. Old and new, never extinguished and freshly thawed tribal suspicions and animosities have mingled with an entirely new anxiety for security, condensed from the uncertainty and unpredictability of fluid modern existence.

These large-scale mixed migration movements—including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, victims of smuggling and human trafficking, and other vulnerable groups—are often labeled by EU institutions and the public as a “migration crisis” (IOM, 2016). However, numerous studies warn that this concept is socially constructed through political and media discourse that frames migration as a security problem (Korać-Sanderson, 2017; Bobić & Šantić, 2018). This phenomenon is particularly elaborated in securitization theory, which argues that political actors represent certain social phenomena as existential threats that justify extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) show that European media often construct narratives about migrants within frames of threat, invasion, or crisis, fostering xenophobic attitudes and legitimizing restrictive border control policies. Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore (2016) find that media reporting in several European countries focuses on negative aspects of migration such as crime and cultural differences, while humanitarian perspectives are marginalized. Shulman (2019) further warns that such narratives are closely linked to the rise of populist politics that instrumentalize fear of migration to mobilize political support.

In this context, analyzing migration as a cause or source of crises—both humanitarian and security-related—requires an integrated approach that recognizes its multidimensional nature. On the one hand, it is necessary to ensure humanitarian protection and respect for migrants’

rights, while on the other, it is essential to critically analyze the ways in which political actors and the media shape the perception of migration as a threat that calls for strict security policies and the social mobilization of fear.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the observed period, the analysis covered content broadcast in the main news programs of the most-watched television stations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: BHRT, FTV, RTRS, BNTV, Hayat, N1, O Kanal, Nova BH, ATV, and Al Jazeera Balkans. The study also included publications in the most prominent daily newspapers and news portals (Dnevni avaz, Oslobođenje, Večernji list, Dnevni list, Glas Srpske, Klix.ba, Rtrs.tv, Faktor.ba, Fokus.ba, Hayat.ba).

Additionally, the analysis encompassed the most-watched current affairs talk shows, including *Telering*, *Intervju* (RTRS), *1 na 1* (ATV), and *Odgovorite ljudima* (FTV).

The topic of mixed migration along the Balkan Route was a daily fixture in Bosnian media coverage. An analysis of a total of 1,065 media reports over a 12-month period reveals an average of approximately 88.75 reports per month, or nearly 2.9 reports per day.

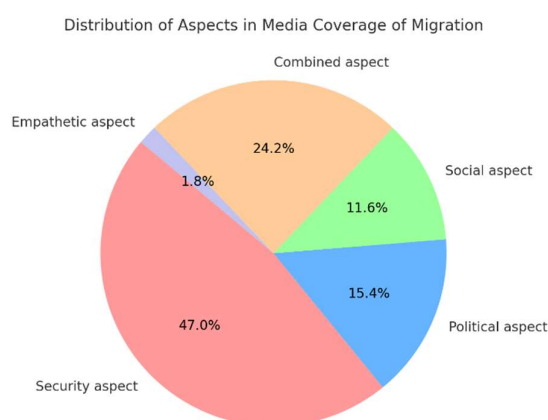
The prevailing tone of media items was negative and stigmatizing (88% of reports), with migrants frequently portrayed as a threat to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (45%). Journalistic style was often sensational, aiming to provoke fear.

The reports analyzed addressed multiple dimensions:

- **Social aspect:** Information about the situation of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers along the Balkan Route; rights to healthcare; accommodation in temporary reception centers and informal locations; violent pushbacks at the Croatian border; human rights protection; and the inclusion of migrant children in the Bosnian education system.
- **Security aspect:** Representations of migrants as a threat to local communities, with emphasis on violations of the law, causing material damage, physical clashes with local residents, and risks to public health.
- **Political aspect:** Particularly pronounced narratives about political disagreements between the two entities in BiH, including the refusal of politicians from Republika Srpska to allow the establishment of reception centers on RS territory, and tensions related to the Lipa camp in the Federation of BiH.

- **Coordination and management:** Emphasis on the need for a coordinated approach among institutions, strengthening domestic management of migration rather than relying on international organizations, the development of legal frameworks, and cooperation with neighboring countries.
- **Empathy and humanitarian approach:** Only a small number of reports were entirely positive, empathetic, and focused on conveying warm, human-interest stories.

The analyzed reports often contained more than one of these aspects.



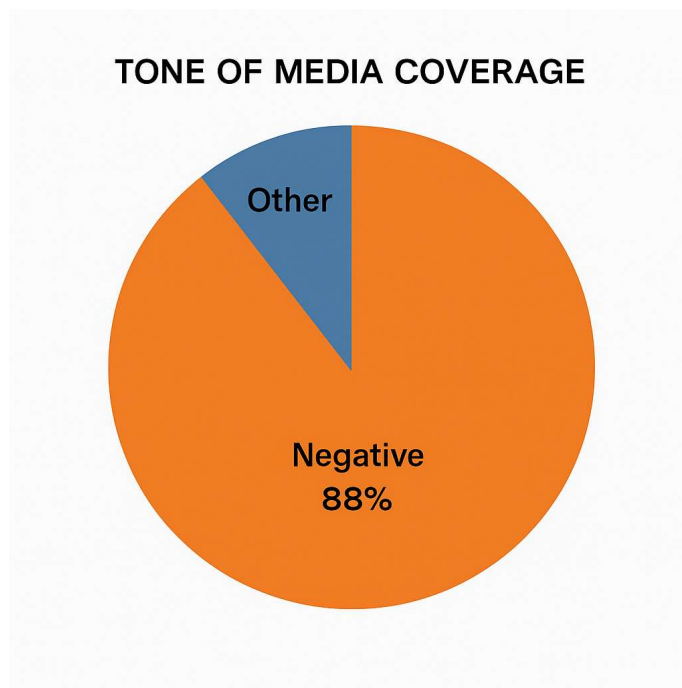
Picture 1: Distribution of Aspects in Media Coverage of Migration. Created by authors.

The results obtained confirm the initial research hypothesis:

Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina portray the behavior of migrants negatively, relying predominantly on statements from politicians and institutional representatives, thereby framing the coverage within political and security narratives.

During the period analyzed, media reports from the selected outlets predominantly carried negative and stigmatizing content (88%). Leading political figures from the Republika Srpska entity were consistent in their refusal to allow the Armed Forces of BiH to be deployed for border control along the boundary with Serbia. In a statement for ATV, Milorad Dodik, a member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, declared that regardless of the preferences expressed by officials from the Federation of BiH, migrants would not be stationed in Republika Srpska (Grahovac, 2020).

There are numerous examples of subjective, unfounded, and even overtly emotional media reporting on the migrant crisis, with the primary aim of inciting panic, insecurity, and hostility toward migrants.



Picture 2: Tone of media coverage. Created by authors.

Selected Examples of Negative and Stigmatizing Media Reports:

- Mirko Bucalo, originally from the village of Donji Tiškovci, emphasizes in a publication by the SRNA agency that migrants in this village are making life a living hell for the local population.
“They break in, burglarize, set houses on fire, and attack people. My house was also targeted, broken into, and occupied,” Bucalo states (RTRS, 2020), who visits the village from Serbia during the summer.
- The O Kanal reported that citizens of Zenica live in fear due to increasingly frequent attacks by migrants.
“Citizens of Zenica are living in fear. Shootings, physical assaults by migrants, and robberies have become a daily occurrence in this city. Several incidents have been recorded in just the past seven days” (Salković, 2020).

- Euroblic, in one of its reports, states that it is devastating to see that in a country with so many police agencies and ministries responsible for security, people in Krajina must organize themselves to protect their property from migrants (Euroblic, 2020: 2).
- Oslobodenje published a report on riots among migrants accommodated in the Lipa camp under the headline “*State of War in Krajina*” (Bender, 2020).
- The narrative portraying migrants as a security threat was further reinforced by Dnevni Avaz with a publication titled “*Illegal Migrants Have Become a Security Problem in BiH*” (Halimić, 2020: 9).
- In a publication from Glas Srpske dated November 4, 2020, it was claimed that jihadists are entering BiH alongside migrants, thereby contributing to the creation and spread of panic.

Examples of Media Reports Examined Through a Security Lens:

- Some officials have exploited conflicts among migrants, as well as attacks on the local population, to sow panic by claiming that the situation is out of control. “*The Republic of Srpska has long warned about the escalation of the migrant crisis. Things have already slipped out of control. Therefore, we will protect the territory of the Republic of Srpska,*” stated Željka Cvijanović (Iveljić, 2020).
- Nezavisne novine, in a report dated January 16, 2021, asserted that the migrant crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina threatens the visa-free regime with the European Union for BiH citizens.
- In an interview on the program ‘1 na 1’ broadcast on ATV on January 21, 2021, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of BiH, Zoran Tegeltija, claimed that migrants primarily represent a security problem and that the Republika Srpska does not want migrant camps within its territory.

Examples of Media Reports Viewed Through a Political Aspect:

- Following the decision by the authorities of Una-Sana Canton (USK) to ban the arrival of migrants into the canton’s territory, and subsequent criticisms directed at the EU, the UN, and the BiH authorities regarding their handling of this issue, numerous migrants waited for days at the inter-entity boundary near Bosanska Otoka. Media reported on

migrants being stranded in "no man's land." An ATV report noted that while an increasing number of USK citizens are emigrating, the number of migrants choosing to remain in the canton is rising, insinuating that BiH may become a country populated by migrants (Sekerez, 2021).

- In the ATV central news broadcast on August 26, 2020, it was claimed that migrants are buying Serbian land in Bosanska Bojna from Serbs who will not be returning (ATV, 2020), while Glas Srpske published a statement from the President of the Committee for the Protection of Serbian Rights in the Federation of BiH asserting that the authorities of this entity do not protect Serbs from migrants (Glas Srpske, 2020: 2).

Examples of Media Reports Examined Through a Social Aspect:

- The migrant population housed in the Lipa camp expressed dissatisfaction with the authorities' treatment of them through protests, primarily due to inadequate living conditions in the camp (Hrustanović, 2021). During a visit to the camp, the Minister of Security, Selmo Cikotić, stated that Lipa would be equipped for a more permanent migrant stay.

"Tomorrow, we will request from the Presidency of BiH a decision to engage the Armed Forces of BiH in the engineering development of the Lipa camp, so that this camp can be quickly prepared for a quality and longer-term stay of migrants," Cikotić declared (Be., 2021).

- In the FTV political program 'Odgovorite ljudima' aired on November 23, 2020, officials from the police and security sector attempted to calm the panic that prevailed in the Sarajevo Canton (KS) and claimed that the security situation was under control. The Minister of Internal Affairs of KS, Ismir Jusko, urged citizens to trust the police, who are capable of ensuring their safety.

Examples of Media Reports Examined Through a Combined Aspect:

- While most media outlets positively reported on the signing of the readmission agreement between BiH and Pakistan, claiming that it would reduce the number of

migrants in BiH, Dnevni Avaz focused on statements from officials of the political party SBB BiH who argued that this agreement would remain a dead letter on paper.

- Despite criticism of Croatia in European media regarding alleged pushbacks of migrants towards BiH and the inhumane treatment by Croatian police, in an interview with Bosnian media, Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gordan Grlić Radman stated that BiH must demonstrate full capacity to manage the migrant crisis, as this is an important condition for obtaining EU candidate status (Halimić, 2021).

Examples of Media Reports Examined Through an Empathetic Aspect:

- Hayat TV reported on migrants stranded in the “no man’s land” between the two entities, emphasizing that the only assistance they receive comes from the Red Cross.
- In a report by the news agency FENA, the Minister of Security, Selmo Cikotić, attempted to reassure the public by stating that the issue of illegal migrants is not the greatest security threat: *“The security of Bosnia and Herzegovina is burdened by migrations and the coronavirus pandemic, but there is a whole range of other security threats that, in the long term, pose a greater security risk to BiH”* (FENA, 2020).

Significant reductions in migrant movements have been observed along the Western Balkans route, which has correspondingly impacted the decreased number of arrivals, transit, and stays of migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Competent authorities in BiH have successfully addressed numerous challenges posed by the migration crisis, resulting in more efficient migration management and improved coordination among various levels of government within the country. However, media interest in migration issues in BiH was reignited in April 2023 following reports that migrants were arriving at the Lipa Camp near Bihać. Concurrently, anti-immigrant groups from the Krajina region expressed concerns that Lipa would become a detention center for migrants, and that Krajina would once again become a focal point for the readmission of migrants unwanted by Europe.

In accordance with the Readmission Agreement, BiH authorities accepted migrants who were determined to have entered the territory of the Republic of Croatia illegally from BiH and accommodated these migrants at Lipa. At that time, the Prime Minister of the Una-Sana Canton (USK), Mustafa Ružnić, addressed an open letter to relevant state authorities urging urgent

measures to halt these processes. Ružnić accused the authorities of secretly opening a Detention Center within the Temporary Reception Center at Lipa, described as a form of custody facility where, according to information he considers deliberately concealed by the authorities, migrants restricted in their movement and under supervision would be placed. This situation highlights the category and composition of migrants being directed from the West to USK. Ružnić stated in an interview with N1, published under the headline “Ružnić: The Most Dangerous Groups of Migrants Are Arriving in USK, the Situation Is Critical,” *“Have you considered what types of attacks the citizens of this part of BiH might face, and whether, given the new circumstances, terrorist attacks could occur? We are aware that the most dangerous groups of migrants have recently been ‘flowing’ into USK, and whereas previously the influx of migrants was attributed to negligence and lack of care by state institutions, we can now say that state institutions are systematically and purposefully directing them to this part of BiH.”*

The situation required calming by Johann Sattler, Head of the EU Delegation to BiH, who, after meeting with USK authorities, stated that no detention center would be established, but only a facility for the temporary holding of migrants with a capacity of 12 places, for a maximum of 72 hours, after which migrants would be transferred to the Immigration Center in East Sarajevo.

Although it was later established that the published information was neither accurate nor verified, this case once again demonstrated how migrants continue to be stigmatized and portrayed solely as a security risk and threat.

CONCLUSION

Mixed migration represents a complex and challenging phenomenon faced by the European Union, including the Western Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Alongside the phenomenon of migration itself, there exists a problematic perception of migrants as a security and social threat. In numerous European countries, including BiH, the media often report on migrants and asylum seekers negatively, which further fuels misinformation and prejudice among the public.

In BiH, migrants residing in the country on their way to EU member states face predominantly negative narratives, particularly those originating from officials of state and entity-level institutions. After initially empathetic reporting, the media gradually shifted toward

stigmatizing and sensationalist coverage. Themes related to the security aspects of migration dominate, and the migration crisis is portrayed as a situation that has spiraled out of control and as a threat to the daily lives of citizens and the visa-free regime.

The political dimension of the migration crisis in BiH is further complicated by the refusal of the Republika Srpska entity to open migrant camps on its territory, as well as the shifting of responsibility onto the Una-Sana Canton. This complex political dynamic further polarizes society and hampers a unified and effective state response.

Media reporting is often sensationalist, while negative rhetoric is amplified by digital and social media, which rapidly spread such content and encourage hostile commentary. The dominant negative tone of coverage focuses on deviant behavior among migrants and the state's weaknesses in managing the migration crisis. Official rhetoric is frequently stigmatizing, discriminatory, and anti-migrant.

Migration has, unfortunately, often been exploited for political purposes in BiH—as a tool for internal disputes between entities and cantons, and as a means for gaining political points through crisis communication. Such an approach diminishes the humanitarian aspect of migration and increases social tensions.

Recommendations

- Efforts should be made to strengthen social cohesion through organizing workshops and dialogues among government representatives, media, international organizations, and NGOs involved in the migration response.
- The media should adopt an ethical approach to reporting on migrants, avoid sensationalism, and strive for objective and balanced portrayals of the situation.
- Officials should exercise responsible and inclusive rhetoric that does not contribute to stigmatization.
- Coordinated political and security measures between entities and cantons should be developed to effectively respond to migration challenges while respecting migrants' human rights.

In conclusion, the hypothesis of this study is confirmed: media reporting and political rhetoric in Bosnia and Herzegovina significantly contribute to the stigmatization of mixed migration, posing an obstacle to a constructive societal response to this phenomenon.

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