

## GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE COVERAGE OF THE MIGRATION CRISIS IN THE MEDIA OF BALKAN COUNTRIES

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**Abstract:** Under current conditions, the place of the Balkan region in the European geopolitical space is determined by several key factors, including political, economic, social, cultural, and religious ones. The media play an important role in the process of integration of the region into the European Union and contribute to the formation of the public sphere, but they also contribute to the traditional aspiration of the Balkan states to separatism. The region of South-Eastern Europe is unique, since upon its example all the stages of democratic transition can be shown, starting from the first democratic reforms in the 1990s to the accession to the European Union. However, the Balkan media demonstrate their own position in the coverage of the migration crisis. In the article, geopolitical, ethnic and religious factors affecting the development of the Balkan Peninsula and the media of the region have been considered.

**Keywords:** Balkan Peninsula, media, geopolitics, balkanization, integration, migration crisis.

### INTRODUCTION

Currently, the place of the Balkan region in the European geopolitical space is determined by several key factors, which are distinguished by the media:

1. The role of the region in the geopolitical plans of major influential powers.
2. Unresolved nature of ethnic and religious conflicts.
3. Intensification of the activities of radical Islamists, strengthening their position in the Balkans.

Currently, the South-Eastern European region is a subject of numerous research and media studies. Countries of the region share the similar historical development, totalitarian past and gradual transition to political systems based on democratic principles. For more than twenty years, Balkan countries showed almost all the stages of democratic transition, starting from the first reforms that were carried out at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s ending with the integration into the common European space, the main condition of which is the accession to the European Union (EU). The national media, their gradual transformation and further operation as a democratic institution play an important role at all stages of democratic transition. This was a guarantee of the effectiveness of the reforms conducted. However, during the so-called transition, significant differences were observed in the way the countries passed through it. For example, Central Europe completed the accession to the European Union and integrated into the European political,

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economic and cultural space earlier and chose the Western development path. On the contrary, in the countries of South-Eastern Europe, the democratization process went slower, it was more difficult for these countries to integrate into the political and economic space of the EU (Irion, & Jusic, 2013). Certainly, this is due to the increased instability of the region, military and political conflicts that have taken place in recent decades. In addition, the level of development of these countries' economies was another deterrent to the accession to the EU. The consolidation of ethnic groups and their intrastate integration were a prerequisite of the democratic transition, but the media did not actively promote this process, focusing its efforts on covering the political agenda and corruption-related problems.

Based on the work of Hallin and Mancini (Hallin, & Mancini, 2012), we can conclude that the Balkan model of media system functioning can be correlated with the Mediterranean model of polarized pluralism, which includes media systems of Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. It is well known that the Mediterranean model appeared in the states, which have embarked on the democratization path in the 1970s after a long period of dictatorship (Greece, Spain, and Portugal) and are characterized by political heterogeneity and related conflicts on ideological grounds (Spain and Portugal) (Hallin, & Mancini, 2012). According to the mentioned criteria, the model may include the countries of South-Eastern Europe, which entered on the democratization path twenty years later – in the 1990s. An important feature of this model is the fact that in the past the national media were addressed to the elites, first of all, and have not been in strong demand in society. For this reason, the public interest was determined artificially, by those political elites that set the manner of the state and society development.

In the context of the democratic transition, media systems of South-Eastern European countries have undergone a major transformation. The political approach, which determined the development of the national media before the transition started, after the first democratic reforms, turned out to be a market-based one. The formally political approach was based on the public interest; however, the public interest was determined solely by the ruling party. The dominance of the market-based approach was a prerequisite for the spontaneous emergence of the competitive media market (Votmer, 2013). The reforms conducted have also opened the borders for foreign capital inflows, new media systems were created exclusively with the participation of foreign investment and by using Western practices borrowed and adapted. The fall of totalitarian regimes and the assumption of power by democratically oriented political forces have led to the formation of a new media segment, so-called “free press”, which actually was a hybrid of Western formats and national traditions. The market-based approach marked a new period in the development of states and national media. The public interest depended on the audience needs. In this regard, audio-visually broadcast entertainment formats became dominant. They formed a new public sphere of the region.

### **The role of the geopolitical factor in the formation of the public sphere of the Balkan region**

Forming the public sphere, the media creates the media reality, which is not always identical with the objective reality. The media often just imitate the fulfillment of social and political functions, which, in turn, makes adjustments to their definition as the “fourth power”. The political functions of the media should be understood those objectives that the media achieve by the perception of the social environment as a political system (Burkart, 2000). These objectives includes the formation of the public sphere and guaranteeing pluralism of opinions of all representatives of the civil society, while the expression of political opinions should conform both to the conceptual and symbolic code of the media and to its mediation role. Currently, fundamental human rights, religious and political issues are the main areas of the media influence. However, not the fact, but its interpretation becomes primary in many cases. “Today the power of the media is expressed in the fact that they can establish and control a kind of censorship” (Nikonov, 2013).

Instead of effecting control over the government, the media tend to become powerful political and economic entities. Globalization of the economy and the information environment has led to a sharp increase in free access to a wide range of information. In addition, such phenomena as sharp polarization, issue-related subjectivity and biased approach used in the media sphere are also observed. “On the one hand, a similar picture can be considered as a sign of loss of social functions and social responsibility of the media, on the other hand, as a manifestation of the media power, which lies in their ability to create a new informational reality” (Danilova *et al.*, 2015).

Today the functions of the media and the effectiveness of media messages significantly differ in countries with traditional and transitive democracy. In particular, these differences are particularly evident in the Balkan countries due to a number of factors. As a rule, geopolitical, cultural and religious factors determine the place of the region in the common European space and dictate the laws, upon which the Balkan states develop.

In recent years, several events marked the beginning of a new stage of the national and state disintegration in the region. The decision of the International Court of Justice (July, 2010) stating that the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo does not violate the international law, was perceived with much concern by the territories compactly inhabited by Kosovo and Bosnian Serbs. In recent decades, the world community has witnessed a series of armed conflicts, which took place in the form of a chain reaction that affected Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Croatia, Kosovo and Macedonia. Although the EU and the USA promised not to allow the violation of the borders, Kosovo seceded from Serbia and Montenegro. As a result, the Hungarians living in the Serbian region Vojvodina started to insist

on the ethnic and territorial autonomy. Both in the past and today the disintegration in the South-Eastern Europe was the result of the extreme policy based on the principle of separatism. All this gives us reason to characterize the Balkan region as an integral part of the global arc of instability stretching across the territories of Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central and South-East Asia.

Due to the fact that in South-Eastern Europe very diverse ethnic groups live on a quite compact area, in some countries hybrid societies with complex structural relationships are historically established. The Balkans remain a region, in which the probability of social fragmentation on ethnic or religious grounds is extremely high. This fact gives reason to remember such concepts as “balkanization” and “Balkan mentality”. The geopolitical term “balkanization” was introduced in wide circulation by the Berlin Congress; the term defined a specific political process of division and fragmentation of the peoples and states of the Balkan Peninsula as a result of the geopolitical arrangements of the “great powers” in solving the so-called “Eastern issue”. Today this term defines a specific geopolitical disintegration, which takes place on the Balkan Peninsula. It is believed that every nation and state in the Balkans have their counterparts:

1. Albania – Kosovo.
2. Bulgaria – Macedonia.
3. Greece – Republic of Cyprus.
4. Romania – Moldova.
5. Serbia – Serbian Republic.
6. Turkey – Northern Cyprus (Zagorov, 2006).

The process of disintegration in the Balkans is undoubtedly connected with such destructive phenomena as the displacement of boundaries, seizure and detachment of territories, armed ethnic clashes and ethnic wars. The Balkan region is traditionally associated with a number of negative events of past and present times; for this reason, the term “balkanization” includes some negative phenomena that are now perceived by the world community as typical for Balkan peoples, such as chauvinism, ethnic nationalism, separatism, religious fundamentalism, reliance on foreign patronage. Today the “balkanization” can also be regarded as a very extreme form of multiculturalism.

As for the Balkan cultural identity, it is necessary to make a clarification to the process of “balkanization”. Ethnic nationalism and separatism, as well as all ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, are determined by religion to a greater or lesser extent. All Balkan peoples perceive the ethnic identity as a religious identity, *i.e.* they do not fix the differences between the ethnic group and religion. In the Balkans, the religion determines belonging to a particular ethnic group.

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In 1992, a group of specialists of the North Atlantic Assembly divided the Balkan countries into three regional blocks:

1. “Catholic block” – Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary;
2. “Orthodox block” – Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Romania.
3. “Balkan-Oriental block” – Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Turkey (Zagorov, 2006).

This division based on ethnic and religious grounds caused a lot of debates and controversy in the media circles of the South-Eastern European countries. The growing strategic importance of the region against the background of large-scale problems in the sphere of security of Europe and of the world in general forms the position of major powers in relation to the Balkan countries.

The current international situation also contributes to the fragmentation of the region. The Balkan media express concern about the fact that the Balkans will be a point of significant contention in the area of interests of the major powers once again. In their opinion, the most significant threats include “oil” and “gas” wars between the USA, the EU and Russia over the oil and gas transit from the Caspian Sea region to the Western countries, which, if necessary, should be run through the Balkan Peninsula. The media consider the problems with migrants and expansion of Muslim enclaves in Bosnia, Macedonia and Bulgaria as another major challenge for the Balkan region. Recently, there has been another disturbing trend – deslavanization of the region.

### **Migration flows in the Balkans: coverage in the Western European and Balkan media**

In the past two years, a migration issue has become the most relevant in the socio-political and media discourse. Coverage of the migration crisis, transit and integration of refugees from the Middle East has revealed the key contradictions in the positions of the Western European and Balkan media and provoked a serious public response on a European scale.

The traditions of the coverage of migrants transit in the Balkan media formed under the influence of historical features of the region’s development. Analyzing the history of the Balkan countries in the twentieth century, several so-called migration flows can be distinguished:

1. Up to 1980s: after the liberation from the Ottoman occupation of the Balkan countries the flow of Turks and Muslims went to the territory of modern Turkey, the Greeks (who became refugees as a result of the civil war of 1950s) returned to Greece, the Macedonian and Thracian Bulgarians have arrived in Bulgaria, the Armenians survived in the genocide of the early twentieth century also settled in Bulgaria. Migration flows of this period were characterised by a reunion of people upon common religion and common nationality, as well as peaceful and voluntary reunification;

2. 1984-1989: so-called “reviving process” in the Balkans, which was actually a policy of forced assimilation of the Muslim population. This policy implied the replacement of Turkish names by the Slavic ones, restrictions on the use of the Turkish language and other restrictions in the religious sphere were introduced. This led to a new wave of migration on a religious principle, which, however, was forced in nature, because the assimilation policy forced the Muslim population to seek refuge in Muslim countries. In fact, this process was rather painful for almost all Balkan countries, as it has led to an increase in terrorist threats;
3. The 1990s coincided with the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia. During this period, the world community witnessed the ethnic cleansing upon ethno-religious grounds. Multi-ethnic cities virtually disappeared in the region; people tend to be grouped upon their ethnic and religious identity, Serbian refugees from Croatia returned to Serbia, the Croats returned to Croatia, the Bosnians were grouped mainly in Sarajevo. However, in the 1990s the first mass flow of refugees went to Western Europe, which marked the beginning of a new tradition in the Balkans, where the ethnic and religious affiliation has given way to the economic factor;
4. The last but one migration flow is associated with the war in Kosovo (1999), when the Kosovo Albanians went to the territory of Macedonia, which, in turn, has created a potential danger of the armed conflict on the territory of Macedonia. The conflict has been resolved with the participation of the Western powers and Kosovo was granted a status of the independent state. It should be noted that some of the Balkan countries (e.g. Bulgaria) refused to accept Kosovo refugees at that time, but made every effort to help resolve the conflict on the territory of Macedonia (Vasilev, 2016).

The above-mentioned migration waves have the following common features: representatives of the Balkan countries migrated in the Balkan Peninsula as a result of the influence of the ethno-religious factor. The economic/labor migration has been connected with the accession of the countries to the European Union, but, at the same time, it is not “wave” in nature.

Today the migration crisis has affected almost all European countries, but the Balkans traditionally play a special role in this process, since they took the brunt of the refugee transit. In this context, the media could act as a factor contributing to the integration within the region. However, this has not happened and the situation concerning the freedom of the Balkan media is characterized as rather complicated. The media are controlled either by the state or business leaders. The mechanism of the media development is usually similar in all Balkan countries. The companies that have received major capital gains with the help of the ruling elites in the times of privatization are currently engaged in the major financial investment in the

leading media, which, in turn, avoid the stinging criticism of governments and support business leaders. Thus, there is a kind of a vicious circle restricting the freedom of the media. The lawsuit against the Macedonian TV channel “A1-Act”, which stood for the opposition, or fines imposed on Montenegrin newspapers for criticizing the government can be the examples of such restriction. “In Kosovo, journalists and their families are threatened for publishing critical articles towards the ruling elites, in Serbia there is much concern about the transparency of media ownership. In recent years, WAZ-Mediengruppe left the region, as it could not withstand destructive competition, when regional economic entities try to exert pressure on the political elites by means of the media” (Georgieva *et al.*, 2015).

As for these features, it is quite interesting to trace the formation of the position of the Balkan media in the coverage of the migration crisis. In this context it seems appropriate to compare the media’s position on the migration flows based on the ethno-religious identity within the Balkan Peninsula and their position on today’s migration crisis associated with the Syrian refugees.

It should be noted that covering the problems of migration within the Balkan region, the local media have traditionally supported “insiders” (for example, the Orthodox Christians support the Orthodox Christians, the Muslims support the Muslims). In addition, the media is gradually forming a special point of view, which is that liberal Western Europe is opposed to the Balkan countries, because they do not know the actual state of things. Balkan societies know what is actually happening in the region, but they cannot convey their views and come to a consensus with the European public. This forces the Balkan region to play the role of a European dissident. In fact, this situation is largely repeated now. “From the point of view of the European public, similar models of coverage of the migration crisis are defined as manipulative. Thus, we do not consider the European media environment as common and in this context it can be described as conflict-ridden” (Puiu *et al.*, 2015).

At the conference “Media and Refugees” Dr. Vasilev and other media researchers have identified the main features of the coverage of the migration crisis in the Balkans by the local media. Initially, in 2014, in major national media (especially on public TV channels), the coverage of this topic was permeated with sympathy for the refugees. However, this trend was quite short-term, because it did not meet the public support. Such topics as the reluctance of refugees to stay in the Balkan region, the internal problems of the Balkan countries, mass protests of the local population, criticism on the part of “multicultural” Western Europe gradually became the key ones in the media. Thus, the Balkan Peninsula turned out to be opposed to its Western “liberal” neighbors. The researchers got interested in the fact that currently this position of the overwhelming number of the Balkan media dominates and coincides with the attitude of society, which is much more concerned about the internal problems of the region and the exacerbation of these problems due to the rapid migrant influx (Vasilev, 2016).



Studies have shown that some key reasons influenced the formation of the public attitude towards the Syrian refugees. These are the reluctance of refugees to stay and live in the Balkans (which makes indigenous people deeply worry about their status of “transit countries”), the political and economic weakness of Balkan countries, distrust of the liberal West, the lack of funds for the settlement of the migration crisis, a difficult demographic situation, a high level of public pessimism and, therefore, the crisis of the idea of multiculturalism. While Western leaders recognized the collapse of the European multiculturalism model and currently seek to pursue a policy of the integration of refugees, in the Balkans it is not possible due to the above-mentioned reasons. Besides, suffice it to recall a failed attempt to integrate the Gipsy population both in Western Europe and in the Balkans. The failed attempt to integrate the Gypsies in the socio-political context of the European countries became a key fact explaining the reason, upon which migrants are not accepted today (Nowosad, 2014; Vasilev, 2016).

The comparison of the positions of the Western European and Balkan media in the coverage of the migration crisis on the Balkan Peninsula is of particular interest. As noted by Dr. Vasilev, for the most part of representatives of the Western media the Balkans are a place where the police use violence against refugees, citizens persecute them, while the local population is almost poorer than the refugees. At the same time, the Balkan media report of the internal problems of the region, the absence of financial resources for providing assistance to refugees, a threat of Islamic terrorism, deslavanization of the region as a whole. These key points demonstrate a serious conflict, which currently exists between the Western European and Balkan media. Moreover, these media make similar mistakes. While the Balkan media overly focus on the threat of Islamic terrorism, thereby representing the refugees as a monolithic threatening community and provoking social distrust and selfishness, the Western media do the same, representing the population of the Balkan region as an aggressive monolithic community. According to media researchers, the reason is that the Western European popular press is tolerant towards refugees, but this tolerance cannot be referred to the “deprived” Balkan countries. The European media consider the Balkan population as members of the privileged European majority; therefore, they can be actively instructed and deeply criticized. At the same time, members of the Balkan community feel like a voiceless minority and their self-esteem is rapidly decreased (Vassilev, 2016).

## **CONCLUSION**

In the coverage of the migration crisis, the Western European and Balkan media follow a similar strategy, offering the audience a limited number of facts and countless comments on this issue. This feature is due to both the pursuit of ratings and the desire to please a wide audience sharing its mood. The so-called “social



networking effect” has led to a serious deficiency of the balanced and factually accurate journalistic materials; the European media do not actually show the desire to cover inconvenient facts and events. Despite different positions of the Western and Eastern European media in covering the migration crisis, both of them often make major mistakes in the process of their journalistic activities.

The current formation of the common cultural space on the Balkan Peninsula is a guarantee of the future sustainable development of the region. As of today, a political, economic and social image of the region is generally negative, so the formation of the concept of a common cultural space would allow to reverse the negative perception of the region and create a new positive image of the Balkan Peninsula. The media and, above all, on-line media can play an important role in the development of the regional cultural space, on the one hand, and in the formation of a positive image of the region, on the other hand. It is currently obvious that any attempt to integrate a large number of refugees or migrants in the territory of the Balkan Peninsula is a losing game. Such attempt must be preceded by the major strengthening and development of key social institutions, including the media. The media and on-line media could play a key role in solving the problem of perception of ethnically and religiously “alien” aspects in the Balkans. It is impossible to move towards the integration without breaking the stereotypes of the past. Both the integration of migrants and the integration of the Balkans into the European space should be taken into account. Due to the lack of the political will and economic resources that could contribute to the institutional advancement of the Balkan countries, the formation of a new Balkan and European identity would be a partial solution to the problems of the perception and integration of minorities. The European media should play a key role in this process.

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