VICTIM OR VILLAIN? A CDA OF MEDIA COVERAGE ON MIGRANTS IN B&H

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical discourse analysis of recent media coverage of migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on articles from Oslobođenje, Al Jazeera Balkans, and Klix.ba published between February and July 2025. Using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the study explores how migration is framed within discourses of security, crime, and geopolitics. Findings reveal a dominant narrative that constructs migrants as threats, frequently associating them with international intelligence operations, organized crime, and violence. Such representations are particularly prominent in coverage related to the Blažuj migrant camp and the Ilidža municipality, where local communities and state institutions are depicted as overwhelmed and vulnerable. The paper argues that these media discourses contribute to the securitization and politicization of migration, heightening social anxieties and legitimizing exclusionary and restrictive policies. The study concludes by calling for more responsible and nuanced media portrayals that acknowledge the complexities of migration and affirm the human dignity of migrants.

KEYWORDS: *Illegal immigration, media discourse, security, migration policy, xenophobia, EU, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

ŽRTVA ILI NEGATIVAC? KRITIČKA ANALIZA MEDIJSKOG IZVJEŠTAVANJA O MIGRANTIMA U BIH

SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad nudi kritičku analizu diskursa savremenog medijskog izvještavanja o migracijama u Bosni i Hercegovini, fokusirajući se na članke iz Oslobođenja, Al Jazeere Balkans i Klix.ba objavljene između februara i jula 2025. godine. Koristeći okvir Kritičke analize diskursa Normana Ferklafa, istraživanje razmatra na koji način se migracije oblikuju u diskursima bezbjednosti, kriminala i geopolitike. Nalazi ukazuju na dominantni narativ koji migrante predstavlja kao prijetnju, često ih povezujući sa međunarodnim obavještajnim operacijama, organizovanim kriminalom i nasiljem. Takvi prikazi naročito dolaze do izražaja u izvještavanju o migrantskom kampu Blažuj i opštini Ilidža, gdje se lokalne zajednice i državne institucije predstavljaju

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kao preopterećene i ranjive. Rad tvrdi da ovakvi medijski diskursi doprinose bezbjednosnoj i političkoj instrumentalizaciji migracija, pojačavaju društvene strahove i legitimišu isključive i restriktivne politike. U zaključku se poziva na odgovornije i nijansiranije medijsko izvještavanje koje bi priznalo složenost migracija i afirmisalo ljudsko dostojanstvo migranata.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *ilegalne migracije, medijski diskurs, bezbjednost, migraciona politika, ksenofobija, EU, Bosna i Hercegovina*

FRAMING ILLEGAL MIGRATION: SECURITY THREATS, PUBLIC OPINION, AND BORDER POLITICS

In today's interconnected world, illegal immigration has become a major security concern, linked to the growing integration of economies, societies, and technologies. While migration is primarily driven by economic and social factors—people seeking better lives or safety—it is increasingly framed as a security threat, especially regionally. Shahin Malik notes that although migration doesn't fit traditional security models, it has become a pressing security issue (Hough, Malik et al., 2012). This shift is evident in the 2015 migrant crisis, which deeply impacted the EU and Western Balkans, transforming migration from a humanitarian issue into a securitized topic, fueling policy debates and public anxiety.

Illegal migration is often associated with illicit activities like human trafficking and smuggling, but it should be understood through a broader lens that considers complex social, political, and economic factors; many migrants flee conflict, deprivation, or persecution, yet restrictive policies and the lack of legal avenues force them into irregular statuses, a process of "illegalization" rooted in political decisions aimed at controlling borders and maintaining sovereignty (Schuster, 2011). Globalization has further eroded nation-state sovereignty, complicating efforts to manage migration effectively, making immigration control one of the last bastions of national sovereignty, leading governments to adopt increasingly coercive measures to "reborder" and restrict mobility (Opeskin, 2012; Schain, 2009). The establishment of agencies like Frontex exemplifies this securitized approach, which often blurs the public and legal distinction between refugees and economic migrants, fueling restrictive policies and heightening public fear.

Migration has become a security issue tied to cultural and political fears, often fueled by xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe. The 2015 migrant crisis showed this clearly, with Germany welcoming refugees while countries like Hungary built border fences, highlighting how migration is a hot political topic connected to identity and safety (Zrinjski, 2016).

CONSTRUCTING "THE MIGRANT": IDEOLOGY AND LANGUAGE IN MIGRATION TEXTS

Media discourse significantly influences how migration is perceived, often portraying migrants as security and economic threats while neglecting their personal stories and human experiences. This reflects constructivist ideas that emphasize the power of language and media in shaping social realities, identities, and political agendas (Fairclough, 1995). These narratives can deepen public polarization and justify harsh government actions like border closures, deportations, and increased xenophobia.

Georgikopoulou and Fouskas (2025) highlight how media portray migrants as threats, reinforcing fears and xenophobia through narratives that depict them as dangerous "Others" and justify restrictive policies. Kalfeli et al. (2022) note that dominant discourse emphasizes border control and security, often ignoring migrants' voices and rights, portraying them as faceless crowds behind fences, which strips away their agency. Similar patterns are evident in Bosnian media, where securitization and marginalization shape perceptions, hindering empathy and understanding. Baker (2005) contrasts UNHCR's supportive, victim-free portrayal of refugees with newspapers' focus on national concerns, which often depict refugees as victims, threats, or nuisances, using dehumanizing metaphors that fuel moral panic. Despite some recent sensitivity, negative stereotypes persist, influencing public attitudes and policies. In Bosnia, media narratives often mirror broader European trends by framing migrants as threats linked to crime, economic issues, and ethnic tensions, fostering an "us vs. them" mentality that deepens social exclusion.

This paper analyzes how media language and institutional discourses construct migration primarily as a security issue, shaping public perceptions and justifying restrictive policies. By examining linguistic patterns and framing, it reveals how migration becomes intertwined with security narratives, reinforcing social divisions in a connected, globalized world. Given that migration is often framed as a securitized and politicized issue, it is crucial to examine how language shapes public perception. Media discourse frequently constructs migrants as "Others," emphasizing ethnic and national differences that promote racialization and dehumanization. This framing sustains security narratives by portraying migrants as threats rather than individuals with agency. Using Fairclough's (1995) 3D model, we can analyze not only linguistic features but also the broader socio-political processes shaping discourse. Such analysis reveals how language reinforces social divisions, legitimizes restrictive policies, and marginalizes migrants.

FAIRCLOUGH'S 3D MODEL IN PRACTICE

To deepen the analysis of how migration is constructed in media discourse, this paper employs Norman Fairclough's 3D model of critical discourse analysis. Fairclough's framework offers a comprehensive approach by examining discourse on three interconnected levels: A: Textual analysis (micro-level), which focuses on language features such as vocabulary, grammatical structures, modality, and overall textual organization to uncover underlying discursive patterns; B: Discursive practice (meso-level), which explores the processes of text production, circulation, and consumption, including source selection, framing strategies, and audience engagement; C: Social practice (macro-level), which contextualizes discourse within the wider social, political, and ideological frameworks that influence media narratives. A total of 15 news articles were analyzed, evenly distributed across three prominent media outlets. *Oslobođenje* was chosen for being the oldest and most established daily newspaper in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). *Klix.ba* was selected as a leading online news platform with a wide digital audience. *Al Jazeera Balkans* was included for its strong international presence and regional editorial focus. All the articles, published in 2025, directly address migration-related events in B&H. The corpus comprises approximately 3,330 words and was selected based on relevance, recency, and focus on migration, conflict, or security issues to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic.

MICRO FRAMING, MASSIVE IMPACT: THE LINGUISTIC OTHERING OF MIGRANTS

Language has a powerful influence on how society perceives migration. Media reports often use specific words, phrases, and framing that highlight migrants as "other," emphasizing their differences based on ethnicity or nationality, which fosters racialization and dehumanization. This linguistic approach tends to portray migrants as active agents only when causing trouble, while casting governments and authorities as the ones in control and solving problems. Analyzing language patterns shows how they reinforce exclusion, justify security measures, and deepen divisions by portraying migrants as threats rather than individuals. The following table shows some of the most prominent examples of linguistic tools used in the analyzed articles for these purposes.

Key Linguistic Features	Examples	Explanation
Ethnic and Racial Descriptors	*muškarac afroazijskog porijekla* (a man of Afro-Asian origin), *pet migranata afroazijskog porijekla* (five migrants of Afro-Asian origin), *državljanin Pakistana* (a Pakistani citizen), *državljani Afganistana* (Afghan citizens), *pet Afganistanaca i jedan Pakistanac* (five Afghans and one Pakistani), *državljani koji potiču iz Afganistana, Pakistana, Bangladeša i Egipta* (citizens who originate from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Egypt), *državljani Nepala, Bangladeša i Turske* (Nepal, Bangladesh and Turkey citizens)	Racializing and categorizing migrants by ethnicity/nationality, emphasizing foreignness and reinforcing "otherness," ethnic profiling, and social division
Metaphorical Language	*udar migrantskog talasa* (migrant wave blast), *sigurnosno interesantni migranti* (security-interesting migrants)	Migrants framed as security threats
Violence-Framing Terms	*ubica* (killer), *pucnjava* (shooting), *incident*, *haotična situacija* (chaotic situation), *sigurnosni rizik* (security risk), *krijumčarenje* (smuggling), *organizovane kriminalne grupe* (organized criminal groups), *najneorganizovaniji kamp* (most disorganized camp), *pod opsadom* (under siege), *oružani incident* (armed incident), *3–4 rafala* (3–4 bursts of gunfire), *nekoliko hitaca iz pištolja* (several gun shots), *ubistvo* (murder), *pucnjava* (shooting), *sigurnosni rizik* (security risk), *oružani incident* (armed incident), *istraga* (investigation)	Framing migrants as violent threats to fuel fear, justify harsh responses, and reinforce state control through security discourse
Objectivization	*slati migrante u BiH* (to send migrants to BiH), *smješteni pod nadzor, propraćeni u imigracioni centar i po hitnom postupku deportovani* (placed under supervision, escorted to immigration center, and deported urgently)	Objectifying migrants as problems to be managed (e.g., *smjestiti* – to place)

Institutional Positioning Through Language	*nadležne institucije preduzimaju sve mjere u cilju rasvjetljavanja i dokumentovanja ovog teškog krivičnog djela* (the competent institutions are taking all measures to shed light on and document this serious criminal offense,) *Služba za poslove sa strancima će... nastaviti s provođenjem aktivnosti kontrole i nadzora* (The Service for Foreigners Affairs will continue intensified control and monitoring activities), *policija traga za ubicom* (the police are looking for the murderer), *Koordinaciono tijelo za migracije, Ministarstvo sigurnosti i svi ostali nadležni moraju na ozbiljan način razmotriti cijelu situaciju i donijeti konačnu odluku koja će biti u interesu svih građana Bosne i Hercegovine* (The Coordination Body for Migratio, the Ministry of Security and all competent institutions must consider the entire situation in a serious manner and adopt the final decision that will be in the interest of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Positioning the state and its institutions as authoritative, framing migrants through a criminal justice and security lens; normalizing exclusionary and control measures; portraying authorities as active protectors, while depicting migrants as passive or threatening
Public Involvement and Eyewitness Accounts	*poziva građane da prijave nezakonite objekte* (calling citizens to report illegal buildings), *kako su nam javili čitatelji* (as readers reported to us), *kazao je jedan od čitalaca* (said one of the readers)	Embedding surveillance and suspicion in daily life by involving citizens
Quantification and Magnitude	*prokrijumčarila 300 migranata* (smuggled 300 migrants), *uhapšeno je 18 osoba* (18 people were arrested)	Highlighting mass migration and crime to justify urgent state action
Objectification and Us-vs-Them Framing	*britanska vlada planira dogovore sa državama poput Srbije, Kosova, Sjeverne Makedonije i Bosne i Hercegovine kako bi tamo smjestila migrante kojima je odbijen azil* (The British government plans to make agreements with Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina for these countries to accommodate migrants previously denied asylum)	Objectifying migrants as outsiders to foster division and control; portraying them as pawns to be managed to fuel local anxieties
Economic and Political Contextualization	*sigurnosni i reputacioni rizici* (security and reputational risks), *zadržati dobru reputaciju* (maintain a good reputation), *potencijalni ruski špijuni među migrantima na Zapadnom Balkanu* (potential Russian spies among migrants in the Western Balkans), *veliki broj migranata je ugrozio određene evropske vrijednosti* (a great number of migrants endangered certain European values), *migrantska kriza utiče na sve sfere života, preko ekonomije, demografije, pa do kulture* (the migrant crisis affects all spheres of life, from economics to demography to culture), *osjetljivost teme u kontekstu turističke sezone* (the sensitivity of the topic in the context of the tourist season), *migranti zloupotrebljavaju sistem* (migrants abuse the system)	Framing migration through geopolitical and economic threats to security, reputation, and values, legitimizing exclusion and reinforcing state control to protect stability

At the micro level, migration reporting consistently portrays migrants as racialized and dehumanized "others," using ethnic and national markers to emphasize their foreignness and social distance. This "othering" divides communities and positions migrants as inherently different and socially excluded. Passive voice often obscures agency, depicting

migrants as objects of investigation, deportation, or tragedy rather than as autonomous individuals. When active voice appears, it usually highlights negative behaviors such as violence or disruption, reinforcing fear and justifying control measures. Active constructions dominate when describing authorities, highlighting the state as proactive and capable. This agency gap reinforces a binary between a competent state and disorderly migrants, normalizing restrictive policies. The vocabulary used further deepens this framing. Words such as *ubica* (killer), *pucnjava* (shooting), *sigurnosni rizik* (security risk), and *kriminalne grupe* (criminal groups) create a discursive link between migration, violence, and insecurity. Migrants are not discussed as individuals with stories or motivations but are instead framed as elements of criminal or chaotic events. Geopolitical references position migrants as unwanted burdens and passive objects of international negotiations. This kind of framing reduces people to administrative problems to be moved, stored, or managed, heightening their objectification and reinforcing an "us vs. them" logic. Metaphors used covertly tie migration to national security and sovereignty concerns. The discourse emphasizes economic concerns, especially regarding tourism, framing migration as a threat to B&H's reputation and visitor appeal, highlighting security and reputational risks during the tourist season. This positions migration as not only a social and political issue but also an economic one, implying migrants harm the country's image. Eyewitness and citizen accounts add immediacy but are filtered through institutional narratives, with migrants rarely given a voice or subjectivity; instead, they are depicted as statistics, risks, or sources of disorder to justify stricter controls.

The pattern is clear: migrants are presented as passive when being controlled or expelled, and active only when causing problems. State institutions, on the other hand, are cast as efficient and protective actors through active constructions that highlight their interventions and enforcement efforts. This language not only dehumanizes migrants but also legitimizes securitized, exclusionary approaches while obscuring the complexity and humanity behind migration.

MESO-LEVEL DYNAMICS OF AUTHORITY: HOW MEDIA AMPLIFIES OFFICIAL SECURITY NARRATIVES ON MIGRATION

From a Faircloughian perspective, the meso level focuses on how institutions and discursive practices influence the construction of texts. In the context of migration reporting, this entails analyzing how media organizations engage with political and security institutions to produce dominant narratives.

The articles under analysis explicitly reference official statements from government authorities, security agencies such as SIPA and the Foreigners' Service, and political figures including Nermin Muzur, the mayor of Ilidža. Migration is predominantly framed through a security lens, establishing an authoritative discourse centered on crime and security threats. This framing is reinforced by specialized terminology, such as *sigurnosna procjena* (security assessment) and *krijumčarenje* (smuggling), which reflects an institutional perspective that privileges law enforcement and security concerns over humanitarian considerations. The discourse is deeply intertwined with geopolitical conflicts and international power plays, as it frequently references countries like the UK, Serbia, Kosovo, and Russia, along with political leaders such as Keir Starmer and Aleksandar Vučić. Media

stories often highlight negotiations between the UK and Balkan countries to "place" rejected asylum seekers, painting migration as a tool in broader political games rather than focusing solely on human stories. This framing tends to see migrants as pawns caught in these international struggles, emphasizing security risks and political agendas over the individual experiences and rights of the migrants themselves. The analyzed articles promote securitized narratives depicting migrants as threats to security and the economy, especially during tourist seasons. Migration is framed as a "sensitive topic" linked to public safety and economic concerns, justifying restrictive measures like camp closures and border relocations. This reinforces the view of migrants as threats to local stability rather than individuals in need. These articles reveal that the media's gatekeeping role significantly limits migrant voices, marginalizing humanitarian perspectives and reinforcing a one-dimensional view of migrants as threats. This exclusion sustains social marginalization and supports coercive state actions, such as border closures and camp demolitions. Repeated exposure to securitized narratives across various media platforms creates a feedback loop that deepens public fear and polarization.

At the meso level, the media ecosystem aligns closely with institutional and state security agendas, framing migration as a matter of criminality, geopolitical struggle, and economic danger, which commodifies migrants and legitimizes restrictive policies, reinforcing an "us vs. them" dichotomy that influences public perception and policy decisions.

CRISIS TALK AND MACRO POWER: MEDIA FRAMING MIGRATION

The way that B&H's migration is covered by the media at the macro level reflects larger sociopolitical dynamics that are influenced by geopolitical agendas and crisis narratives. Fairclough's third dimension of discourse analysis frames migration as a political emergency that threatens public safety, economic stability, and national sovereignty rather than as a humanitarian issue. B&H is depicted as a buffer zone within global border politics, stuck between EU externalization plans and relocation negotiations with countries like the UK. By framing these changes as external impositions, B&H's image as a weak and dependent state is strengthened and migrants are seen as "illegal" outsiders and geopolitical puppets. Media texts frame migrants not through individualized narratives but through association with destabilizing external forces. This discursive linkage to espionage, organized crime, institutional collapse, and EU external border policies elevates migration to a matter of national survival. As seen in earlier levels of analysis, articles describe Ilidža as "under siege," camps as "chaotic" or "out of control," and migrants as either "violent," "unidentified," or "linked to Russian spies." These word choices are not incidental. They signal a broader ideological function: to transform migration into a crisis that justifies emergency measures and normalizes the curtailment of rights.

Phrases like "Ilidža under siege" and "security-interesting individuals" are used in the media to depict migrants as threats or invaders by using tropes of war and surveillance. While bureaucratic euphemisms like "accommodation centers" sanitize coercive spatial control, terms like "bodies in trunks" conjure fear by conjuring up images of horror. Phrases such as "reputational risks" reinforce the notion that the presence of migrants jeopardizes the country's image by reducing them to public relations liabilities. The media use overlexicalization ("chaos", "clash", "illegal", "threat"), euphemisms ("relocation"), and si-

lencing of subjects to intensify fear and justify policy responses. Given that media imagery visibly encodes exclusion, monitoring, and control, it is essential to the construction of discursive narratives surrounding migration. In contrast to people with agency, migrants are portrayed in the most commonly used imagery as nameless masses in need of containment -migrants behind gates, overcrowded camps, and police interventions. The near-complete lack of portraits or individualized imagery eradicates empathy, while wide frames and aerial vistas highlight dehumanization and detachment. By portraying migrants as dangers to order, these visual metaphors support verbal tactics that support oppressive governmental responses. The stark disparity in whose voices are featured in media texts exacerbates this. The narrative space is dominated by locals, public servants, and security forces, who use authority, emotion, and law enforcement frames to shape conversation. In contrast, migrants are almost entirely silent; they are discussed, measured, and regulated, but they are rarely given the opportunity to share their personal stories. The ideological purpose of macro-level discourse is maintained by this representational imbalance: to mainstream crisis management, justify discriminatory actions, and keep alternative, humanizing interpretations of migration from being widely accepted.

CONCLUSION

Migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina is constructed as a multilayered crisis rather than a humanitarian issue, shaped by macro-level ideologies, institutional discourse practices, and micro-level linguistic patterns. Although migration results from global inequalities, war, and the pursuit of safety, media narratives focus on security and control. The European Union's contradictory stance, as both a gatekeeper and a proponent of inclusion, contributes to fragmented responses. Results indicate that early 2025 Bosnian media coverage politicizes and securitizes migrants by depicting migrants as dangers and locals as victims and the state as overburdened. A sense of crisis is reinforced by visual metaphors such as "Ilidža under siege" and images of police interventions. This dehumanization eliminates migrant voices from public discourse and defends discriminatory policies.

Although this paper merely looks at a few media sources and a specific point in time, future studies may compare media in the Balkans or monitor how media narratives change as geopolitics change. Studies on audience response might also shed light on how this kind of speech affects public opinion. Primarily, integrating migrant viewpoints (via interviews, social media, or migrant-led platforms) could subvert prevailing narratives and humanize migration beyond its present portrayal as a danger.

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