POLITICAL ANGLES IN THE ROMANIAN ONLINE MEDIA ABOUT THE REFUGEES' CRISIS AND ISLAM. TRAIAN BĂSESCU CASE

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Abstract
The public perception in Romania regarding the Syrian refugees has dramatically changed within a few months in the sense of rejecting the idea of receiving immigrants on Romanian territory. In August 2015 the polls indicated that Romanians were in favour of accepting the immigrants, while in September 2015 more than half of the respondents declared they were against receiving refugees.
What kind of narrative was used by the Romanian politicians to cover the "refugee/migrant crisis"? This study tried to establish the ways in which social media have been changing Romanian perception related to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. In this research, we have monitored discourses of xenophobia and poisonings that occurred in the Romanian social media.
A few Romanian politicians have aggravated the immigrant related debate via their personal social media accounts. The former Romanian President, Traian Băsescu, was one of them. As the EU public debates on whether the refugees' quotas should be mandatory or volunteer have scaled up, the people's perception was altered immediately after the discourse about rejecting the refugees has intensified in the online environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The refugees' influx from the North of Africa or the Far East, the refugees' wave from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan, which came across the European territory, constitute a test both for the European Union institutions, as well as for its Member States.

The question concerning what is the future of the European Union is valid today more than ever. Journalists and pundits do believe that "today's European Union is a fuzzy, unclear, goal-lacking structure undermined by the policy mistakes, bad economic reasoning and state-centered decision-making that more often than not has simply disregarded public consultation" (Bărgăoanu and Negrea-Busuioc 2014).

The EU states seemed to act dysfunctional in their response to the migrants' wave when it came to the public administration and the justice system. The security of the EU borders, the legislation on providing asylum, refugee resettlement, temporary protection, and the social service package for the refugees have been tackled in a non-unitary and hectic manner by the member states. The values that set the EU base – solidarity and responsibility – appeared to be shadowed by the speech on "the Islamic terrorism threat". The European politicians have displayed incoherence and confusion, while the European citizens were watching on TV or on social media images of a dead child on a beach, street violence among the immigrants who reached Europe, refugees who were throwing away food and water offered by the Red Cross, aggressed women who seemed to be victims of the Muslim immigrants.

The internet and the social networks were flooded by pictures meant to reflect how much the refugees who arrived in Western capital cities resembled the jihadist militants. (Andreea 2015). What seemed to be the immigrants' refusal to receive Red Cross packages because the Christian cross was displayed on them was in fact the outcry of some people who had spent hours under the rain at the border between Greece and Macedonia (Il Post 2015).

While everyone was waiting for the EU leaders to take some decisions, the populist parties and the nationalist leaders speculated these confusions: did the immigrants leave because of social reasons or were they really refugees from the Syria and Iraq wars? Can they be used for working in medium/highly qualified positions or do they plan to live in Europe based on social assistance? Is the European project solid or are we witnessing the end of

Schengen space, the collapse of Dublin Regulation (Mouzourakis 2014) and, inevitably, the end of the EU concept?

While the civil war in Syria has been going on for five years, the autocrat regime of Bashar Al-Asaad was contested by the laic opposition, but also by moderate and radical religious movements (Chican and Peterliceanu 2013, 113-129) and at least half of the 22 million inhabitants' population has migrated. By the end of 2014, an estimated 7.6 million people were internally displaced and 3.7 million Syrians had fled the country since the conflict began (Ostrand 2015, 255-279). Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have left their country through Turkey with many staying there. Many Syrians died trying to escape either the army – loyal to the Bashar Al-Asaad regime –, or the terrorist Islamic radical organizations. Millions of Syrian refugees live in difficult conditions in the refugee camps in the vicinity of Syria: in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon (Orhan 2014).

Only 350.000 refugees have crossed the EU borders between January and August 2015, versus 280.000 in 2014. In total, the EU states have received 625.000 asylum requests in 2014 and the estimation for asylum requests for 2015 was of 950.000 (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2015). The European Union, with its 550 million inhabitants, was stuck in the discussion related to the one million refugees' wave. The degree of protection provided by the EU states was "modest in relation to that provided by neighbouring countries to Syria" (Ostrand 2015). And the controversy in the European Council escalated when it reached the point of setting the criteria for distributing and resettlement the wave of 120.000 refugees that came last in 2015 and was the most publicized in the social media and traditional media.

The refugees' influx towards Europe intensified when the migrants' socio-economic situation deteriorated in their origin countries, once the UN World Food Program reduced the food assistance. Facing hunger and the despair that the Bashar al-Assad regime cannot be dismissed, the refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon or the Northern African countries chose to cross the sea towards Europe and abandoned the idea that they might soon get back home.

2. THE REACTION OF THE EASTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPEAN POLITICIANS TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS

My hypothesis is that the reports of the journalists who joined the refugees on their way through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary or Croatia were distorted by certain politicians who used rumours, hoaxes and clichés on social media to give the feeling that "Muslim terrorists are infiltrated among the migrants". These politicians' exaggerations inflamed their target audience, who then distributed the image of a "Muslim migration Exodus assaulting the Christian Europe" (Bogdan, 2015; Coja 2015; Meritocratia.ro 2015; Politeia 2015). The impression that the Syrian Muslims were assaulting Europe stimulated some political actors who felt they had to "protect the Europeans' life and security", as well as the "threatened" Christian values (Karnitschnig 2015; Antic 2015; Zaimov 2015).

Certain Eastern and Central European politicians claimed it was an "organized Muslim invasion" (Kassam 2015; Mass 2015; Nimmo 2015; Țene 2015). In the online collective imaginary, the humanitarian drama began to be taken over by the "Muslim terrorist threat" (Lupescu 2015; Ilie 2015). While EU postponed taking decisions, the humanitarian drama moved from the Mediterranean Sea to the European roads going towards Austria, Germany and Sweden: from the 3 year old infant, Aylan Kurdi, who drowned in the Aegean Sea (Withnall 2015) to trafficking refugees, who died suffocated on highways, in frigorific trucks – the best known case being the one at the border of Austria with Hungary, where 71 people died (Associated Press 2015; Matharu 2015).

The refugee crisis fuelled the nationalist and Eurosceptic speech. Under the pretext of the Muslim terror peril, nationalist politicians in Slovakia, Hungary or Poland declared that "they will only accept Christian Syrians and will not tolerate non-white refugees on their territory within the EU immigrant's' relocation system" (Dinu 2015). Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, set the tone by saying that "the refugees' invasion is threatening the Christian roots of Europe" (Gheorghe 2015) and that "we, the Christians, can become a minority on our own continent" (Dumitru 2015).

The European Union states were divided. On one side, the countries who set the basis of the European Union, Germany and France, claimed they will protect the fundamental European values and demanded solidarity to the others. The states at the EU border, Greece and Italy, requested help in

managing the hundreds of thousands of refugees. The ability to record and trace them from the point of entering the EU space was weakened by the lack of solidarity among the member states. Their tracking should have been followed by the equitable distribution of the refugees into the other EU member states. The Central and Eastern European states reflected a poorer integration level and a lack of assimilation of the communitarian values – despite the fact that they were accepted in the EU particularly from political reasons, not mainly from economic reasons.

The mechanism of taking decisions (Dublin Regulation) for handling the crisis could not work. The European Union reacted late and the member states were not solidary. The Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs, enforcing the decision of the Romanian President, rejected the imposed refugees' quotas and announced that Romania was ready to accept only 1.785 immigrants (Bechir 2015). Thus, the Romanian state expressed its lack of ability to track, monitor and assist the refugees. Subsequently, the member states were forced to host more immigrants (our country should have hosted 4.837) and Romania gave a negative vote at the European Council reunions related to the quotas.

Romania positioned itself closer to the Eurosceptic side in the immigrants' issue by its vote at the European Council. Romania voted like the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban, who raised barb wire walls in front of the refugees; like the Slovakian nationalist prime minister, Robert Fico; and like the Czech Republic, Eurosceptic ever since the period in which Vaclav Klauss was President. Klaus Iohannis, the President of Romania, wanted to send the signal that our country was solidary with the member states, that it respects the treaties, but that the economic and administrative reasons pushes it to demand voluntary quotas, not mandatory ones. Hence, Romania voted along with the Visegrad Group of states (Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia – except for Poland, which voted in favour of the plan to additionally relocate 120.000 refugees) that did not want refugees at all on their national territories.

In this context, the nationalist leaders spotted an opportunity. This applied to the former President of Romania, Traian Băsescu: before he asserted that the Roma people cannot be integrated in Romania, therefore it would be desirable not to receive other refugees on top, Robert Fico, the prime minister of Slovakia, was the first to declare something similar, insisting that "if we are not able to integrate our own Roma citizens, how could we integrate people with a totally different lifestyle and religion?" (Nistor 2015).

Traian Băsescu developed the xenophobic topics in his political discourse after he ended his second presidential mandate, copying the Slovakian prime minister's anti-Roma speech. Băsescu tackled populist topics of religious nature during the 2009 presidential elections (Momoc 2012) and has repeatedly expressed his support for the Romanian Orthodox Church (Marinescu 2010, 126). After he joined the race for the national Parliament with the Popular Movement Party, Băsescu transformed the refugees issue into an electoral subject.

In less than a month, from August until September, the Romanians' opinion related to accepting refugees had shifted completely. As the traditional and online media transmitted information about the migrants' journey through Europe, the general trend leaned towards rejecting the refugees. Sever Voinescu (2015) wrote in the magazine Dilema veche that "Europe should not be blamed for Syria and there's a hidden agenda behind the fact that the immigrants' wave was directed towards Europe", while Teodor Baconschi (2015) claimed that "Islam is irreconcilable with democracy and Islamophobia is legitimate."

At the end of August 2015, 65% of the Romanians were in total or partial agreement that Romania should receive a certain number of immigrants, as per an IRES survey conducted between August 28th-31st. 58% believed that the refugees should have the right to choose the country where they want to build their new life (IRES August 2015). A few weeks later, at the middle of September, Romanians' opinion had radically shifted. According to an INSCOP survey (in September 2015), 56.2% of the Romanians stated that Romania should not receive refugees and 82% declared that Romania should set its refugees' quota by itself. In December, after the Paris attacks, the public opinion was completely changed: 75.6% of the Romanians considered that Romania should not receive refugees (INSCOP December 2015). It is very likely that this shift was produced by the panic conveyed through the populist politicians' speech, such as Traian Basescu.

3. TRAIAN BĂSESCU AND THE ONLINE SPEECH ABOUT THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Ever since the 2004 local and presidential elections, the politician Traian Băsescu used an electoral speech that split the Romanian politicians

into corrupted ones and anti-corruption ones, assuming the position of the one that contests the oligarchic system (Teodorescu and Sultănescu 2006, 400).

He won elections applying a discourse strategy by which he constantly divided the political actors into good and bad ones, polarizing the political scene into one occupied by the people's friends and enemies. In 2007, when he was suspended by the Parliament and had to go through his first Referendum for dismissal, Băsescu identified the enemy into the oligarchs and the 322 parliamentarians who suspended him (Momoc, 2012).

During the 2009 presidential elections, the "people's enemies" were the media moguls. The President organized together with the presidential elections a Referendum in which he demanded the reduction of the number of parliamentarians, promoting the message "You are the true majority! They won't escape what they're afraid of!" (Momoc 2011).

In 2010, in order to justify the economic measure of cutting the state employees' salaries by 25%, Traian Băsescu built the opposition between "the fat state employee and the thin private worker" (Popescu 2013). In 2012 he was again suspended, and this time he claimed that the ones who wanted his dismissal were the organizers of an attack against the rule of law, while his supporters were the defenders of "the democracy flame" (Leca 2012).

One year after his second mandate finished, experiencing a low popularity level and leading a party that barely reaches the electoral threshold, Traian Băsescu tried to use the same discourse strategy: pro-refugees versus anti-Muslim terrorists.

I have monitored and analysed the Facebook posts of Traian Băsescu, the leader of the Popular Movement Party. I have conducted a quantitative analysis, studying the content of his Facebook page during the period of August-December 2015, in order to reveal that Băsescu's strategy was, once again, to polarize "the good ones" versus "the bad ones".

3.1. Research method

The qualitative method of content analysis, as explained by Mucchielli (2002, 38-48), implies the following: Encoding, Categorization and Data interpretation. Encoding aims to extract the essential of the testimony posted on the Facebook page by using the post key-words. The key-words or expressions that summarize the phrases of interest must be very accurate and true to the post testimony. By simply reading the key-words, an uninformed reader should be able to reconstitute the post testimony without having to

read it. For Encoding, the questions we use are "What subject do we have here? What is this about?".

The answers to these questions become key-words or summarizing expressions. The Categorization is illustrated by transposing the key-words into concepts. A category is a word that abstractly defines a cultural, social or psychological phenomenon as it is perceived in a data corpus. The category leads to theoretic concepts, which establish the relationships between the categories. The key-word "refugee" is a code. The expression "refugee crisis", for the same extract is a category. The first expression is extracted from a post on Traian Băsescu's Facebook page. The second expression is richer, more evocative, and stronger.

Data interpretation refers to the author's attitude - favourable or unfavourable - regarding the theme he is debating ("refugee crisis") and also to the attitude - negative or positive - that he has related to the key-words he is using. When the topic or the actors/characters have been criticized, ironized or offended, the attitude was categorized as negative. Whenever the post was related to personal achievements or the team, the attitude was categorized as positive.

3.2. Research results

In August 2015, Traian Băsescu posted 3 times. Topics: field visit - 1 time; the 2005 kidnapped journalists in Iraq - 2 times. Key-words: celebration - 1 time; Alba - 1 time; Mohammad Munaf - 2 times, Omar Haysamm - 2 times, terrorism - 1 time, conviction - 1 time, security - 1 time. Attitude: positive - 2 times, negative - 1 time.

On September 4th 2015, Băsescu wrote on his Facebook account: "The Romanian Constitution, Art. 3, Align. 4: No foreign populations can be relocated or colonized on the territory of the Romanian state. Never in the 10 years in which I attended had the European Council's summits a state abdicated from its own Constitution". Băsescu made 10 posts in September, one covering the topic of respecting the Romanian Constitution. He also posted about the Popular Movement Party - 3 times, health system - 1 time, education - 1 time, closing the borders - 1 time, Antena 3 TV journalist, Mihai Gâdea - 1 time, justice - 1 time, street meeting - 1 time. Key-words: Popular Movement Party - 4 times, Romanian Constitution - 3 times, foreign populations - 1 time, health - 1 time, President Klaus Iohannis - 1 time, Schengen - 1 time, education - 1 time, Europeans - 1 time, borders - 1 time,

security - 1 time, Mihai Gâdea - 1 time, corruption - 1 time, human rights - 1 time, street meeting - 1 time. His attitude in the 10 posts was: negative - 7 times, positive - 1 time, neutral - 2 times.

The online speech of the Popular Movement Party' President overlapped the one he gave in the traditional media. As a guest of B1 TV on September 1st 2015, Băsescu declared that: "Romania is a Christian country. Receiving (the immigrants) does not mean ensuring their accommodation. You have to give them the right to manifest their culture, we have to build mosques and schools in their own language. We are not able to integrate the Roma people for so many years, so how could we integrate the refugees? We are talking about Shiites and Sunni". Using the same tone of voice, on September 11th on B1 TV: "These ones are talking through bombs. They put bombs around their waist and detonate themselves in subway stations. We couldn't even integrate the Roma people. How would we integrate the Muslims, of whom you don't even know which are Shiites, which are Sunni. We even quarrel with the Hungarian people, but these ones bomb themselves. We don't do that. Conflicts might also occur between the Muslims. What Muslims hate most are the Christians. If there's someone that both Shiites and Sunni want to die, those are the Christians".

In October there were 27 posts on Traian Băsescu's page on the following topics: political rendezvous - 8 times, Social Democratic Party - 2 times, Victor Ponta - 2 times, Mihai Gâdea - 2 times, Popular Movement - 2 times, refugee crisis - 1 time, call-out to vote - 1 time, participation at the "Speak Freely" show - 1 time, technical problems - 1 time, B1 TV show - 1 time, European Popular Party's Congress - 1 time, meeting voters from the diaspora - 1 time, leaving towards Bucharest - 1 time, investigation about the victims of the 1989 Revolution - 1 time, the 2005 kidnapping of the journalists in Iraq - 1 time, the tragedy from Colectiv club - 1 time.

His attitude was an attack one: negative - 10 times, neutral - 15 times, positive - 2 times. Key-words: migrant/migrants/migration - 9 times, the Moldavian Republic - 7 times, Social Democratic Party - 4 times, Victor Ponta - 4 times, lie - 3 times, EU - 3 times, Schengen - 3 times, Mihai Gâdea - 2 times, European Council - 1 time, European Popular Party - 1 time, wounded – 1 time, Iraq - 1 time.

On November 14th 2015, Traian Băsescu made a categorical statement on Facebook about rejecting the refugees' quotas: "Dear Romanian State, I am begging you, no matter how hard the European bureaucrats would push you, and I am very familiar with their demagogy, do not accept Muslim refugees'

quotas. The zero quotas are the right solution. We have to be solidary with the EU states when it comes to intelligent measures, but we cannot accept unrealistic solutions. If we want a realistic solution, then closing the EU borders and expelling the migrants is the right solution".

During that entire month, he posted 28 times. Topics: assigning the new prime minister - 3 times, Romanian Public Television - 2 times, the new prime minister of the Romanian Government - 2 times, attending a TV show - 2 times, interview taken by Dan Andronic, Evenimentul Zilei journalist - 2 times, migration - 1 time, closing the clubs - 1 time, terrorism - 1 time, Victor Ponta's resignation - 1 time, the political class reform - 1 time, call-out to the President - 1 time, the legislative initiatives of the Popular Movement Party - 1 time, the HotNews journalists, Tapalagă and Pantazi - 1 time, the members of the former Democrat Liberal Party - 1 time, meeting the technocrat prime minister, Dacian Cioloş - 1 time, Victor Ponta - 1 time, showing up at an online television - 1 time, Romania joining the Euro Zone - 1 time, publishing the security dossier - 1 time, Internal Affairs Minister - 1 time, Saint Andrew - 1 time, Romania's National Day - 1 time. His attitude was: negative - 12 times, positive - 6 times, neutral - 10 times.

In December there were 20 posts on Traian Băsescu's Facebook page. Topics: Christmas - 2 times, Romania's National Day - 1 time, cancelling the President's reception on the National Day - 1 time, the Presidential Commission report on analyzing the health policies in Romania - 1 time, Romania's new government - 1 time, attending a TV show - 1 time, delegating prime minister Cioloş to be present at the European Council instead of President Iohannis - 1 time, dismissing Petre Tobă for plagiarism - 1 time, reducing fiscality - 1 time, corruption - 1 time, the national conference for constituting the Youth Organization of the Popular Movement - 1 time, the start of the construction of the anti-missile shield in Deveselu - 1 time, being invited by the Polish Republic's President to a Warsaw debate - 1 time, special pensions for mayors - 1 time, the Warsaw conference "Sovereignty, Solidarity, Security" - 1 time, "the Islamist immigrants' quotas" - 1 time, the speech of the former prime minister of Australia - 1 time, the macro-economic situation - 1 time, New Year - 1 time.

On December 23th 2015, Băsescu posted the following: "For you, Brussels people, I am sending season's greetings! For us, THE ROMANIANS, MERRY CHRISTMAS! To not offend the Islamists crowding in the heart of Europe, the Brussels politicians decided not to say or write "Merry Christmas", but "SEASON'S GREETINGS". We're short of replacing Santa

Claus with Freezing Claus [„Moş Gerilă” was the tolerated name for Santa Claus in communism]. Does that sound familiar? Moreover, regarding the Islamists' quota issue we can already hear the sound of Berlin's fist hitting the table, using most often the artificial arm: the European Commission. Do you remember the story of the fist hitting the table, only not in Berlin, but in Moscow?" Attitude was: negative - 10 times, positive - 8 times, neutral - 2 times.

Although the topics about the refugee crisis or the mandatory quotas were not the main ones among Băsescu's Facebook posts, the former President's general attitude was a negative one, attacking the EU institutions, as well as the European and local leaders supporting the refugees' acceptance.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The refugee crisis, "the terrorist Muslims" and "the Islamist peril" became the preferred topics of certain political leaders in Central and Eastern Europe as of August-December 2015. In Romania's case, the public opinion has deeply changed after the media reports about the so-called "refugees' march" towards the Western Europe's countries intensified: within a couple of weeks it shifted from supporting the idea of receiving refugees, to rejecting the acceptance of immigrants in Romania. During this period, the traditional mass-media in Romania covered the speech of the European leaders (Robert Fico, Viktor Orban) who identified the Syrian refugee crisis with a threat against the European continent security and the Christian values. In Romania's case, the former President Traian Basescu was the one who spread this type of speech in the traditional and social media.

Traian Basescu, Romania's ex-President used the polarization strategy once again: he portrayed the politicians in Brussels who encouraged the acceptance and relocation of the refugees in the EU member states as naive, reckless and being supporters of "the Muslim terrorist peril". One the other hand, he described the politicians who "defend the Christian Europe of Islamist threat" as being the responsible ones.

Although it is difficult to quantify the extent in which the anti-immigrants discourse of Traian Basescu or other nationalist leaders, such as Bogdan Diaconu (United Romania Party), has influenced the public opinion,

the Romanians' change of attitude in just two weeks regarding the acceptance of refugees on the national territory is obvious.

Even if is hard to prove a (direct or indirect) connection between the people's attitude shift and Traian Basescu's posts, the users' comments on the politician's page support his anti-refugees position. Furthermore, a future research should analyse the comments on the online news sites during that specific period, as my hypothesis is that the dominant attitude of the users who commented on immigrant related articles was to reject the refugees' wave.

However, this time for Traian Basescu the polarization discourse strategy did not return the expected results. The Romanian parties (the Popular Movement Party and the United Romania Party, which should be studied in a future research) that invoked xenophobic topics like the Islamist danger, Muslim immigrants, terrorism and defending the Christian Europe did not gain percentages in the polls: In 2014 the Popular Movement Party scored 6.2% at the Euro-parliamentarian elections and Elena Udrea, who ran on its behalf at the presidential elections, gathered only 5.2% of the first ballot votes.

According to an INSCOP survey from March 2016 regarding the vote intention for the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Popular Movement Party would only gather 5% of the votes (INSCOP March 2016). Traian Băsescu's political project does not seem to be helped by his apocalyptical anti-immigrants messages, even if the public opinion became increasingly sensitive to this topic.

On the other hand, the observers of this phenomenon (Napoleoni 2014, 24, 90) noticed that the xenophobic or anti-Islamic speech present in the European mass-media, the messages about excluding the refugees based on religious criteria, doubled by the high-tech propaganda and the seductive mythology about the Jihad Holy War provided the young Muslims – marginalized in Western Europe – a strong motivation to enrol in organizations like ISIS or Al Qaeda in the Levant.

Belonging to EU does not only stand for having access to wealth and European funds, but also to assimilate communitarian principles and values. One of these communitarian values is solidarity. The principle of communitarian solidarity means that the EU states and citizens should act solidary for the equitable allocation both of the benefits, as well as of the issues resulting from having the quality of being a member of the European Union.

And the crisis for which Europe, its citizens, politicians, states and institutions did not yet have a solidary response is the Syrian refugee crisis.

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