HUNGARY

How the Shock of the New Became a Polarising, Fearful and Toxic Story

« Balázs Weyer

The current migration crisis is a new experience for the Hungarian public and the media. Before the summer of 2015, the Hungarian media neglected the issue; migration did not figure in people’s minds and it rarely took prominence on the news agenda. I became aware of this when attending a workshop on migration and the media in Paris some years ago, organised by the Ethical Journalism Network, the Global Editors Network and the International Organisation of Migration. I was left wondering how much of the discussion is relevant to Hungary.
ABOUT EUROMED MIGRATION IV AND THE STUDY

“How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?”

This is a Chapter of the Study “How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration?” carried out and prepared by the Ethical Journalism Network and commissioned in the framework of EUROMED Migration IV (EMM4, 2016-2019). The objective of this project, financed by the European Union and implemented by ICMPD, is to support EU Member States and ENI Southern Partner Countries in establishing a comprehensive, constructive and operational dialogue and co-operation framework, with a particular focus on reinforcing instruments and capacities to develop and implement evidence-based and coherent migration and international protection policies. In order to achieve this objective, EMM 4 builds upon the results of the first three phases of the project (2004-2015) and tailors its activities around two pillars: the first pillar facilitates effective North-South and South-South regional dialogues and co-operation in the four main fields of migration and international protection-related matters (legal migration; irregular migration; migration and development; international protection and asylum). The second pillar focuses on capacity-building by applying a new outcome-oriented approach that includes sub-regional activities, tailor-made national training programmes and targeted technical assistance packages for committed partners. Both pillars are supported by a horizontal and cross-cutting thread aimed at accumulating evidence-based knowledge and establishing effective communication in order to contribute to a more balanced narrative on migration.

Find the entire study at www.icmpd.org/EMM4_migration_narrative

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I had the feeling that although we have never faced migration, the issues brought up at that meeting which were of concern to colleagues from countries used to dealing with migration, figured also in the way Hungarian media has reported on its own minority Roma community -- everyday ethnic discrimination, unconscious mixing of poverty issues with matters of race, political partisanship, and a profound lack of a common language to address issues of "the other", as well as an absence of reliable and widely accepted facts and narratives.

Thus, on the one hand the Hungarian media was inexperienced when it came to reporting migration, but on the other hand it had rich experience of the editorial challenges. Soon after this workshop the Editor’s Forum Hungary and the Center of Independent Journalism organised one of their regular conferences on migration, preparing special ethical guidelines for reporting. At the time, not many were interested. When migration became the hottest topic on the news agenda just a few years later, Hungarian reporters and media were largely unprepared and it was too late for reporters to refer to any guidelines or conference papers.

To judge the nature and quality of the Hungarian media’s efforts to report on migration is difficult as the circumstances were extreme: hundreds of thousands of people came rushing through the country in a month; there was a mix of extremes -- signs of panic and at the same time empathy within society; and deepening partisanship fuelled by government rhetoric and propaganda.

Just a year before the crisis, a survey of Hungarians’ political priorities found that just 3% of those surveyed considered immigration a serious issue. Also in 2014, a study by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, an NGO specialised in refugee issues, stated that “migration is hardly, if at all, reported by the media. Migrants are practically invisible for the public. Overloaded editors hardly, if at all, reported by the media. Migrants are practically invisible for the public. Overloaded editors

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Clearly the media was unprepared. Migration had previously been a minority issue; the playground of some NGOs and despite a number of conferences, workshops, and the publishing of media guidelines, that was the baseline for journalism when the migration story exploded on the media scene a year later.

At the heart of the public confusion since 2015 lies a new word, intentionally made up for propaganda purposes: ‘migráns’. This word has not existed before.

In previous decades, Hungary’s limited experience with refugees related to ethnic Hungarians from Romania and Serbia at times of conflicts, wars and deprivation. During the different waves of wars in the Balkans, it meant Serbians, Bosnians, and then, Kosovars. But these waves of limited migration did not cause much in the way of social disruption. The media traditionally used the Hungarian equivalents of ‘refugee’, or ‘asylum seeker’, to describe the people coming to the country.

All that has dramatically changed. As a recent study states, ‘One of the clearest edicts concerned the word “refugee,” which has all but disappeared from coverage of the crisis. There are words in Hungarian for refugee (“menekült”) and asylum seeker (“menedekkerő”), and previous refugee crisis were also discussed using the word “bevandorlo,” which translates roughly as “incomer.” Instead, a foreign-sounding imposition from Latin was deployed: “migráns.”

This brand new, made-up word, was used by government officials and media under government direction or influence replacing every other term. Journalists at state media were reportedly told to use the word every time they address the issue. ‘Migráns’ sounds foreign and sounds ugly, while ‘menekült’ (refugee) has soft, empathetic connotations.

Also, the term ‘economic immigrant’ was coined to put an emphasis on the job security issue, rather than the humanitarian, asylum seeker approach that sees migrants as people escaping from war zones. From that point, the choice of words used made a clear distinction: those using ‘migráns’ clearly shared the governments’ anti-migrant rhetoric. This led to a situation where using any of the older terms became a political statement even if it wasn’t meant to.

As a result, unbiased reporting became almost impossible. No words were left untouched by this war of rhetoric. No matter which words a journalist picked to describe the people at the borders and in the pop-up camps, it surely meant something else, something more than intended. However, ‘migráns’ clearly took over subconsciously even in the everyday speak of the country.
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The total lack of a common approach, the chaos of terminology and the lack of experience created a situation, where within a year, the number of people who considered migration a serious potential threat, or a potential source of terrorism and job insecurity, increased from 3% to 76% and 82%.

It may appear that reporting on migration itself was the major media story of the past two years, but that is not entirely true. In fact, the story became more about the government’s policy and its anti-migrant rhetoric. The migration crisis itself lasted hardly a month, but the topic remained at the top of the news lists for more than a year. This focus on government policy started earlier, with the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015.

The prime minister put it at the top of his list after attending the free-speech-march on 11 January 2015 in Paris following the Charlie Hebdo attacks. On the day of the march he spoke out on public media about migration and terrorism, not protection of free speech. From that point on it became his number one issue. The state media and the ever-growing number of government-backed private media followed suit. Many argue that this was an intended scapegoating strategy. “Fidesz tried stirring a debate around the death penalty, and then experimented with a narrative about defending the ‘little man,’ but neither stuck. Then they switched to migration and that started to resonate”, says Csaba Toth, analyst with Republikon Institute, a liberal think-thank, in a recent report.

Migration was certainly on top of the media agenda during the physical presence of hundreds of thousands of migrants at border control points with Serbia (and later on their main exit point, on the border with Austria) and in central Budapest, at Keleti railway station. These were the days of breaking news hysteria when sober, fact-based reporting was almost impossible because of the lack of facts – there was no data, no official reaction, and no spokespeople available on either the government or the police side, and nobody, of course, to speak on behalf of migrants.

Many media narratives were hysterical, with judgments of the crisis based on their general approval or disapproval of the government’s policies. Most coverage was emotional – on one side, fuelling public fears, where the general image of migrants was the one of aggressive, shouting, uncontrollable horde of young man, on the other side, there was a different viewpoint – flaying the government’s supposedly inhuman, cynical scapegoating, with images of small children...
playing in the miserable conditions of the pop-up refugee camps, crying mothers and handsome young men with flawless English, talking smoothly and with sophistication.

Of these two emotional approaches, the former proved to be the more effective, as four of the five national TV stations (three state owned, one private but under strong government influence) and the national public radio’s news channel followed official rhetoric in unison. These are the main sources of information in most of rural Hungary.

A content analysis published in journal Médiakutató showed that media outlets close to the government intensified their reporting on migration months before the influx of migrants reached Hungary, creating an apocalyptic atmosphere. The same analysis shows that in the months prior to the crisis government leaders dominated media coverage, with more than 50% of all quotes used coming from them; NGOs and experts had a less than 10% share. There were only two recorded cases where actual migrants got a chance to speak, although this changed later, when migrants became more accessible during the peak of the crisis.

The statistics on the choice of photographs used by the media is also telling: 31% pictured a government politician, 11% a member of police or border patrol, and 22% migrants. Most of the latter pictured migrants either in groups or from behind, or in positions which emphasise links to criminality – lying on the floor, handcuffed or with blurred faces. (Editors and reporters working with state TV reportedly were told not to use pictures of children or any sort that could trigger sympathy for migrants.)

Most of the people of Hungary had no personal experience of the crisis, as migrants crossed the country from Szeged in South East through Budapest and towards Vienna in the North West. Large numbers of migrants were only visible in Budapest and two border villages, Rőszke and Hegyeshalom.

Since no refugees or migrants were physically visible elsewhere, everyone in other parts of the country relied on television and radio reports for information – and much of what they learned was terrifying. Studies later pointed out that those who had personal experience with migrants during the peak of the crisis were less concerned about migration than those who followed it through the media.

There is also some evidence suggesting that the results of the referendum on whether or not to accept European Union settlement quotas held a year later, where citizens who lived near the scenes of the crisis voted more in favour of the plan from the EU which was strongly opposed by the Hungarian government. Certainly, there were many news outlets, mainly in the digital, non-legacy media field, who tried hard to dig deeper than report only on the emotional and superficial drama of migration. Some went as far as Greece to follow refugees along their route. One of the most prominent examples was that of a reporter of Index who went undercover. He mixed with the migrant crowd, registered with officials using a fake Kyrgyz passport, was taken to refugee camps and followed migrants through the country.

(He was later formally convicted of forgery and of using a fake identity in official proceedings in the first instance, although the court acknowledged that going undercover is not illegal and served the public good in the respective case – and the sentence was accordingly light, a reprimand. Still, the reporter appealed against the judgement.)

NGOs and spontaneous civil movements also gained a lot of media attention as the crisis triggered the biggest ever grassroots civil initiative to help migrants along their route. But soon, coverage and general narratives of the crisis were dominated by the government’s actions to close the borders with Serbia.
and to build a fence along 170 km of the Hungarian-Serbian border. After this was done, the influx of refugees stopped and coverage of migrants fell away to be replaced by a story dominated by the government’s policies towards migration and their disagreements with some of Hungary’s neighbours and the European Union.

Migration is still in the news, but it’s more about the government than the migrants themselves. The announcement of the ‘quota referendum’ led to a campaign that appeared to be about everything but the issue of migration itself. The government claimed that the European Union has no right to force its member states to take in any migrants (the EU proposed to establish mandatory quotas to help in relocating 120,000 refugees from front-line states such as Greece and Italy. It called for Hungary to resettle 1,294 people.) The government also argued that Hungary needs to have control over its own culture and laws.

The intensity of the government campaign was unprecedented. The towns and countryside were filled with advertising hoardings to the extent that during the last few weeks of the campaign it was almost impossible to find empty slots even for commercial advertising campaigns.

Those who opposed the government campaigned for a boycott of the referendum. Much of the media coverage focused on the disagreement between the European Commission and the Hungarian government and the referendum’s legal irrelevance in tackling the issue.

Changes in the approach of other European governments and the rise of anti-migration groups were seen as the triumph for the Hungarian government. In the end the referendum witnessed a low 43% turnout, which was not enough to make it binding, but of those who voted 98% were in favour of the government. (In fact, the result has changed little either in the government’s or the opposition’s policies.)

Although migration has been on top of the agenda since 2015, most news outlets still fail to provide access to the deeper analysis, background and context.

This atmosphere of crisis has lasted since the migration story broke and has been reinforced by the quota referendum campaign. It is not clear if this crisis will ease in the near future, but that will need to happen if journalists are to get their profession back on track.

Much of the media coverage focused on the disagreement between the European Commission and the Hungarian government. Unbiased reporting was almost impossible; whatever was said was seen as taking a stand, whether that was intended or not.
There are a few exceptions: particularly Index, one of the few independent outlets with significant audience and which invested in improving its reporting from the Middle East, sending reporters to Iraq and Syria, as well as to Turkish and Greek refugee camps.

In summary, with a few notable exceptions, the media showed little competence in covering migration and the shock of the crisis did not provide enough time to catch-up with the skills. The strident political reaction pushed editorial coverage to the extremes, where taking a stand against or on the side of migrants became the mainstay of everyday politics. All of these circumstances provided for reporting that put emotion before facts in an extremely partisan atmosphere – pro-government talk was dismissed as inhuman and cynical, while all other approaches were stigmatised as soft and migrant-friendly (and probably financed from abroad). Unbiased reporting was almost impossible; whatever was said was seen as taking a stand, whether that was intended or not.

Emerging from this media crisis is not easy. Although there have been a small number of workshops and trainings in the past few years on reporting migration, the interest and turnout has been very limited, with migration not considered an attractive or interesting issue. At the same time morale among journalists remains low as a result of financial and political difficulties experienced within media and a high number of journalists struggling with intense workload pressure; regrettably many have little confidence in the future of their profession. Professional associations and trade unions are either non-existent or have limited resources with which to change the situation.

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