

## **The Negative Effects of Securitizing Immigration: the Case of Bulgarian Migrants to the EU**

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### **Abstract**

The 2004 Eastern enlargement saw an ever hardening attitude against immigrants, mainly due to the securitization of international migration. The case of Bulgarian migrants in the European Union gives an example of the risks in considering all immigrants a threat to public security. The article seeks to explore the unintended effects of securitizing migration in the EU and suggests possible ways to reduce its negative effects.

The East-West migration following the end of the Cold War changed the attitudes towards immigrants in the European Union. The 2004 Eastern enlargement saw an ever hardening attitude against the newcomers<sup>1</sup>, mainly due to the securitization of international migration. Although triggered partly by global developments and common threats like terrorism, this process could lead to unintended effects on both the EU and the origin countries if measures are not taken to reduce its negative effects.

The worsened EU citizens' perceptions of migrants create an unstable environment jeopardizing the integrity of the European societies. They facilitate anti-immigrant parties in their campaigns and are severely damaging the image of the emigrant states. The case of Bulgarian migrants in the EU, identified as major crime perpetrators, signals the risks in considering all immigrants a threat to public security.

### ***Securitizing Immigration in the EU***

The end of the Cold War has opened political space for focusing on security threats that do not emanate from sovereign states but from non-state actors, involving issues such as organized crime, smuggling of goods, weapons, drugs etc. Of these, international migration has served as the most convenient reference point for unspecific fears. Very often immigration has been seen as a risk to the internal public order, i.e. a threat to citizens' security.

The concepts of securitization of immigration in the EU are linked to the wider definition of security after 1989, two of the most prominent proponents of which are Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan<sup>2</sup>. They argue that security is about survival in the face of an existential threat to the referent object, whether it is a state or a non-state actor. Wæver maintains that security is a speech act; an issue becomes a matter of security when it is presented as such, not necessarily because in reality it exists as such. Therefore the elites

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<sup>1</sup> *Out with the New*, The Economist, 9 Dec, 2004

<sup>2</sup> O. Wæver and B. Buzan represent the Copenhagen school introducing the securitization approach to security studies. See also Wæver, Ole, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup, and Pierre Lemaitre with David Carlton et al (1993): *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*. London: Pinter Publishers

play a critical role in turning an issue into a security problem, i.e., securitizing it, because it also enables them to claim the right over how to handle it<sup>3</sup>.

The process of securitization itself means to present an issue as urgent and existential, as so important that it should not be exposed to the normal haggling of politics but should be dealt with decisively by top leaders prior to other issues. Furthermore, the securitization of migration could not be reduced to simply discursive practices. Although they play an essential role in the process of ‘threat-fabrication’, they are necessarily reinforced by non-discursive practices by security professionals (statistics and communications by police and customs authorities) which link migration with crime and terrorism. The threat becomes physical and urgent, which allows the use of weapons deployed by the police to fight crime: increased controls, surveillance, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Securitizing immigration in the EU has gained force with the processes of globalization and enhanced integration. Initially, the Community was conceived with the argument that unified, the West European countries will better guarantee the security of their citizens. The emergence of new security threats however posed a risk to the weakening of the mechanisms for protection in the Union. One implication of the common market was the elimination of border checks between the member states which also facilitated the movement of illegal migrants within the EU.

Immigration has become an integral part of the social rhetoric of right-wing politicians in the member states throughout the 90s who blame immigrants for taking jobs without having to give concrete evidence, not least because the effects of immigration are exceedingly hard to establish empirically with a sufficient degree of certainty<sup>5</sup>. Immigration, both legal and illegal has precipitated political crises in the Netherlands, France, Austria and Denmark where politicians staking on the anti-immigrant campaigns received the support of large portions of the population. The demographic and economic changes in Europe at the start of the new century – ageing of population and shortage of work force in spite of high unemployment – however proved the inconsistency of such policy because it has been asserted that the EU internal market needed immigrant workers to sustain growth. At the same time, as a result of the 9/11 events, immigration has been given a different connotation, again negative but related with crime and terrorism.

### ***Immigration, Crime and Public Perception***

The presumption that immigrants are **responsible for domestic crime** became almost automatic in the EU countries in 2002 – the year when the right-wing parties gained an unprecedented number of votes warning against a major threat to the Western democratic values. After the deportation of 1300 illegal immigrants from Eastern Europe and North Africa in February 2002 the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi stated that “citizens’ security is a priority for the government” and “the task of the government is to fight against organized crime”<sup>6</sup>. In Spain the Interior Minister Mariano Rajoy blamed the large

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<sup>3</sup> Ibryamova, N., ‘Migration from Central and Eastern Europe and Societal Security in the European Union, The Jean Monnet Chair, University of Miami, Florida, August 2002

<sup>4</sup> Aradau Cl., Migration: The Spiral of (In)Security, E-journal, ISSN 1505-1161. March 2001. <http://venus.ci.uw.edu.pl/~rubikon/forum/claudia1.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Faist, T., ‘The Migration-Security Nexus. International Migration and Security Before and after 9/11’

<sup>6</sup> *Italy Departs 1300 Immigrants*, The Guardian, 20 Feb., 2002

“floating populations” of immigrants for the rise of crime and the Socialist Leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero called on the government to infiltrate immigrant communities to ferret out terrorists and gangs<sup>7</sup>.

In addition to the anti-immigrant slogans, the public opinion within the EU is influenced by long-existing **stereotypes** of a region or nation in Europe. The Balkans for instance has always been considered a troubled region, often referred to by writers as “the heart of darkness”<sup>8</sup>. Next to historical events like the burst of the First World War and the Yugoslav conflicts, this has led to the development of a constantly negative perception of the states on the peninsula.

Another case that illustrates the potential danger of combining anti-immigrant policy with existing stereotypes, is the 2002 anti-immigrant march, organized by the Italian Northern League party: demonstrators carrying banners “Immigrants=Criminals” marched in support of a 16-year-old girl who alleged that her relatives were killed by “Albanians or some sorts of Slavs” but later confessed to have committed the murders herself. Movement and demonstrations of this kind could have a particularly negative effect on citizens’ perceptions in addition to jeopardizing social stability and public order.

The **media** also plays an important role in creating and provoking anti-immigrant feelings. Their overwhelming presence in the daily life and influence on public opinion makes an article or a documentary showing the way of life of immigrants or their involvement in criminal activities determinant to the vote in the immigration debate.

This is not to say that threats to security in immigration countries are without any real-world foundation. However, low-level threats usually gain out-of-proportion significance.

There are two different phenomena – first are the migrants who breach the legal conditions of stay and work, and second, those who migrate to commit acts of violence utilizing the same channels of globalization. Conflating the two is to invite confusion, and discriminating between them is crucial to making fair immigration and law-enforcement policies aimed to prevent the real threat coming from organized crime and terrorism.

### ***The Case of Bulgarian Immigrants in the EU***

Bulgaria’s emigration to the EU is being influenced by all three factors mentioned above. The result is the bad reputation of a country exporting criminals to the EU, fueled by anti-immigrant campaigns and massive deportations from the accepting countries<sup>9</sup>. There is also an increased risk for infringing upon the human rights and jeopardizing the lives of the immigrants themselves, e.g. during police raids and protesting marches.

Indeed, organized crime is a serious problem within Bulgaria, but studies show that it is small in scope compared to other European countries and usually infiltrates into other organized criminal groups active on the continent (e.g. the ones connected with the

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<sup>7</sup> *Crime and Politics*, Business Week Online, March 18, 2002

<sup>8</sup> Glenn M., “The Road to Bosnia and Kosovo: The Role of the Great Powers in the Balkans”, [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1422&fuseaction=topics.publications&doc\\_id=18764&group\\_id=7427](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1422&fuseaction=topics.publications&doc_id=18764&group_id=7427)

<sup>9</sup> Data of the National Border Police show that in 2001 a total of 3770 Bulgarian citizens were deported from the USA and the EU, in 2002 the number has increased to 6184 and in 2003 they were 7310. From April 2001 to September 2002 Germany deported 1866 Bulgarians, the Netherlands – 1270, Belgium – 1254. The deportations became a common practice in that period with groups of migrants arriving every month and each of the arrivals largely covered by the Bulgarian media.

Russian Mafia). The problem comes from a difficulty distinguishing migrants from criminals and the attempt to identify all migrants from Bulgaria as potential criminals.

Since 1989 Bulgarian emigration has gone through three different periods. The borders opening following the end of the communist regime resulted in an emigration wave towards the US and Canada with the EU countries used mostly as transit points. The second phase (1995-2002) is characterized with the introduction of visa regime for Bulgarians traveling to EU members states. Currently, Bulgarian citizens can reside up to three months in the EU and are not allowed to work without a permit. A survey of the Bulgarian National Statistics Institute shows that fifteen years after the first massive emigration to the USA immediately after the democratic changes, 1/5 of Bulgarian migrants still to prefer the USA as a country of their permanent settlement. The EU countries, on the other hand, are usually the final destination of seasonal workers who practice their job (in most of the cases illegally) within the timeframe of the visa-free period. A brief overview of the second and third stages will explain the origin of the current status of the Bulgarian migrants in the Union from an EU home security perspective.

Despite the fact that the number of Bulgarian citizens, seeking asylum in the EU in the 90s is relatively small compared to the refugees from former Yugoslavia (109 707 Bulgarian applications against 746 624 of Yugoslav applications for the 1990-1999 period), the increased number of Bulgarian asylum seekers after the collapse of the communist regime was among the major reasons to include the country in the Schengen visa list in 1995. The introduction of the EU visa regime however has had the opposite effect, opening doors for an intensified illegal trafficking of people and helping organized crime involved in smuggling channels to flourish<sup>10</sup>.

In 2002, one year after the re-opening of the European “door” for Bulgarian citizens, Bulgaria was close to being sent back to the Schengen list by EU members like the Netherlands, whose right-wing politicians publicly referred to Bulgarian immigrants as “gangsters, killers and Mafiosi”<sup>11</sup>. The Bulgarian community in the Netherlands is among the smallest ones (2000 persons reside legally and about 5000 illegally), yet in 2002 the six national newspapers dedicated about 93 articles to the Bulgarian illegal immigrants named the *major crime perpetrators*. In fact, the main types of crime which Bulgarian citizens were accused of were violations of immigration laws and life in “conditions under the living standards”. Only 10 Bulgarians were sentenced for serious crimes.

The case of the murder of a Bulgarian criminal controlling the major Bulgarian contraband channels in December 2003 is worth pondering. The murder, committed in the center of Amsterdam, has shocked the Dutch nation, yet it was committed by a Dutch citizen. This case proves that it is crucial to make a clear distinction between illegal immigrants who breach the immigration laws to work illegally, and those involved in the international organized crime which has become extremely mobile and adaptive to changes and currently represents a significant part of the migration flows on the continent.

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<sup>10</sup> “In Bulgaria, experts estimate that some USD 30-50 million circulate in the illicit emigration market, which comprises the issuing of false and authentic visas as well as the transportation “fees.”, Smuggling in Southeast Europe, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2002

<sup>11</sup> Emil Ratelband quoted in *The Messages of 2003: Trud’s Guests*, Trud daily, Dec. 31, 2003

Such a distinction, however, is difficult to make if societies are not inclined to change attitudes towards immigrants or a political will for accepting and integrating immigrants does not exist. It is not surprising that these events take place in a period when right-wing politicians create anti-immigrant feelings persisting even after they lose public support. An interesting fact is that the EU member countries with the largest Bulgarian immigrant communities (Greece – 200 000 Bulgarian immigrants, of which 50 000 illegal, Italy – 60 000 immigrants, of which 37 000 illegal and Spain – 80 000 immigrants<sup>12</sup>) are generally more tolerant to Bulgarian migrants. On the other hand - Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and France, where right-wing politicians receive more support, are usually a fertile soil for spreading anti-Bulgarian feelings.

### ***Conclusion***

At the end of 20th century, right-wing politicians have succeeded in creating the “immigrant-enemy” but the opposite process – restoring the image and facilitating the integration of immigrants through changing perceptions – will take much longer and will depend on EU’s and Bulgaria’s migration policies.

Enhancing European border security is only one of the measures that need to be taken. Another step is popularizing enlargement by member states because one of the difficulties in identifying Bulgarian immigrants among other immigrants from the Balkans is due to the lack of information among European citizens on the current situation and progress in Bulgaria. Recent trends showing the return of highly qualified Bulgarian migrants to their home country as well as data pointing to the lack of interest among Bulgarians to work in the EU after the accession, are hardly reaching EU citizens.

Bulgaria, on the other hand, is preparing for a full membership in the EU in 2007 which requires even harder work to prevent exporting crime and strengthen border control together with informing Bulgarian citizens of their rights and obligations when residing on the territory of the EU member states.

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<sup>12</sup> These numbers are reported by Bulgarian media and foreign agencies. There is no official Bulgarian statistics of Bulgarian citizens residing in the EU.