

Media as Scare-mongering

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The celebrations of the European Union enlargement on May 1, 2004 were marked by speeches calling for unity and to affirm the creation of a new larger community. “Strangers were barbaroi to the Greek ear,” Nobel prize-winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney recited from his poem “Beacons at Bealtaine” on the day. The poem drew on the idea of a common voice in the new Europe to “let the heirs of all who could not speak the language, whose ba-babbling was unclear, come with their gift of tongues past each frontier.”[1]

But this idyllic picture of a fraternal European community is more easily expressed in poems and celebrations than in practice. Behind it, Europe is the theatre of an incessant clash of identities, nationalisms, languages and the occasional bent of isolationism. Fear of Heaney’s unknown *barbaroi* has become the favourite headline in the media throughout Europe over the past year. It intensified as the EU enlargement day drew closer. The discourse in the European mainstream media on the enlargement has been tarred by this inflation of fear towards the migration that enlargement would bring.

Scaremongers

The leaders in this scare-mongering campaign were the British mainstream media who focused on the potential for a massive migration of labour from the East. Certain parts of the UK media went as far as they could to promote the worst case scenario, and even engaged themselves in a hilarious game of guessing the numbers of migrants who would invade England. The tabloid *Sun*[2] wrote that “tens of thousands” Easterners will flock into Albion. The *Sunday Times*[3] predicted 100,000 new arrivals. The *Daily Express*[4] was the most aggressive with an estimate of 1.6 million people headed for Britain. In total, the three publications sell an average of 5.6 million copies, according to the latest data from the local Audit Bureau of Circulation.[5]

In all these stories, the factor that triggered the most fear is the arrival of the Roma minority, which was said to form a large chunk of the expected wave of immigrants. The spark for these anti-migration reports in the media was created by a series of research papers written by various anti-immigration think tanks such as Migration Watch, which in January published a paper describing the poverty in south-eastern Europe. Its ultimate aim seems to be to convince the British government that it should not grant freedom of movement to people coming from the new EU member states. However, none of these countries was analysed in the respective paper.

British media followed the lead and sensationalised the story, probably to improve sales and to exploit the story in advance of the much-celebrated accession. Correspondents in the Eastern and Central Europe were mobilised for the new anti-migration war. In a matter of days, the focus shifted from “immigrants” to “hungry Roma” craving benefits in the West.

“Special” investigative reports featuring Slovak Roma awaiting the opening of borders to go to Liverpool and “get a nine-room house” became common in the British papers.[6] The climax was reached by the *Daily Express* newspaper, which came up with the fantastic number of 1.6 million gypsies poised to invade Britain. In fact, the total Roma population across the Visegrad countries, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary is equivalent to this number.

Along with Denmark, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden, the UK decided to offer the right to work to citizens from the new EU countries. It was part of the “managed migration” policy of the British government, aimed at fulfilling the country’s need for various very low-paid jobs, such as hotel cleaning and catering services, according to the widely-quoted by the British media the UK Home Secretary David Blunkett.

The Rational Voices

One of the few voices in favour of a more relaxed post-EU accession migration policy is Heaven Crawley who published a series of well-documented, sustained research-based articles in the past year.[7]

Crawley noted in an article published in *The Observer*[8] last year that a Home Affairs Select Committee report on the removal of failed asylum seekers was “widely reported not because it concluded that asylum seekers deserve to be treated humanely or for saying that the process of removing those who have no right to stay is more complex than many people think, but because of its claim that the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK, if allowed to continue unchecked, means that there is an ‘inevitable’ danger of social unrest.”[9]

Crawley reported, “the government could do much to set the record straight and reassure people about the extent of the problem,” which is to remind them that the UK is 34th in the world in terms of the relative number of refugees it

supports. “What’s more, the political space in which to discuss these issues is becoming increasingly limited because the public perceives the problems to be overwhelming and the solutions simple,” Crawley wrote in an editorial published last year by *The Guardian*.^[10] “This perception has only been exacerbated by the failure of the government to engage the public and the media in an informed debate about the underlying causes of forced migration.”^[11]

In an article published some days before the EU accession, Crawley said that a question central to understanding the impact of the enlargement is related to the scale of migration. “How many people will come? The honest answer is that no one knows,” she wrote.^[12] Based on previous experience and “robust research studies,” it can be expected that the scale of migration will be “much smaller than predicted by the tabloids.”

Crawley explained that the previous EU enlargements, such as Spain and Portugal, did not bring high migration. Moreover, the UK is a “difficult place to have a high quality of life” given the high costs of housing and services. This aspect, along with tough tests for access to welfare and public service provisions, will discourage many immigrants, she noted.

The Guardian was actually one of the few media that approached the migration with more acumen and common sense. Reporting from Usti nad Labem, the Czech town where locals built in 1999 a wall to separate their homes from some of the town’s 5,000 Roma community, *The Guardian*’s Luke Harding told the story of Roma Josef Lacko who, despite racism of the locals, doesn’t plan to immigrate. “I don’t even speak perfect Czech. How would I manage to speak English?” Lacko was quoted as saying.^[13]

Harding supported his story with a Czech governmental study, which revealed that 82.3 per cent of the Czech population would not want to work abroad. Most of the 1.6 per cent of those poised to leave said that they would go to neighbouring Germany.^[14]

Importing Scare

But the good reporting of some British media remained unheard in the accession countries, where the media chose to mirror in their pages and on their screens the migration hysteria instilled by those British newspapers caught up in the scare-mongering.

Despite its neutral, mainly accurate reporting, the official Czech News Agency (CTK) also fell into the trap of this hyperbole. In a well-researched story published a week before the accession, CTK’s writers could not refrain from reporting on an “exodus” of Roma from Slovakia to the European Union.^[15]

Headlines such as: “Poles head to Britain for work, buses are packed with people,”^[16] “Roma are heading to the union. For work.”^[17] or: “Penniless Czech Roma fill up London asylum centres”^[18] have become common in the regional media. Most of these stories were based on anecdotes or rare cases of impoverished Roma heading to the West for work or social benefits.

But what is more symptomatic for the media in most of the Central and Eastern European countries is the so-called “CNN syndrome,” a tendency of the local media outlets in these countries to look at the western media to choose the topic or tone of a story. If CNN or any other large international media outlet covers a topic, it means it is important enough for us—this seems to be a guiding philosophy for local editors in the region.

“The whole [migration] scare is nonsense,” Jan Jarab, the Czech government’s human rights commissioner said to *The Guardian*. “The problem is the Czech media have picked up what is in the *Sun*— that the Roma will come over in large numbers. The effect is to encourage more people to go. The media is now creating reality rather than describing it.”^[19]

This trend was evident a few years ago as well. In 2000, the tobacco producer Philip Morris issued an activity report stating that the Czech government should thank the cigarette maker, as smokers’ shorter life spans as a result of smoking help counterbalance medical expenses.^[20] Initially, the story was published in the corners of some local Czech media. But after international media realised what a PR disaster the Philip Morris report was and jumped on the story, only then did the Czech newspapers understand the relevance of the scandal.

The same scenario repeats itself with many other stories in the media in many East and Central European post-socialist countries. This practice stems from the problems that media in the region have been facing lately, such as scarce resources for reporting and poor standards of journalism.

In the case of the migration story sparked by the EU enlargement, the inspiration again was the foreign media, specifically led by the UK media, which took the most aggressive, possibly even a racist stance towards migration. The local media in Central and Eastern Europe simply imported the sensationalist products of the British press.

The Czech tabloid *Blesk*, [21] run by the Swiss publisher Ringier, wrote in January: “Roma families from Eastern Europe, mainly from Poland and Slovakia, can’t wait for May 1. On that day, when their countries enter the European Union, they plan to leave in mass for the UK. One hundred thousand impoverished people are preparing to emigrate there, according to the British daily *The Sun*.” [22]

Confirming the CNN syndrome, a popular Slovak tabloid *Nový Čas*, also owned by Swiss Ringier, was ecstatic to report in its April 17 edition that even CNN is covering the Roma issue. Under the headline “Even CNN is interested in our Roma,” the newspaper actually reported on CNN’s report on the poor living conditions of Roma in Slovakia and their intention to flood the EU. [23]

More Common Sense

In conclusion, the media in Central and Eastern Europe failed in most cases to offer balanced stories on the migration topic, instead preferring anecdotal reporting and simplistic clips from Western media to solid background on the history of Roma communities or robust surveys on migration trends. [24] In Romania for example, a country where a majority of the nation wants to deny Roma the right to travel abroad because they are said to tarnish the country’s image, [25] the local media, like its international peers, covered extensively for several weeks in September-October 2003 the arranged marriage of two Roma children, 13 year-old Ana Maria Cioaba and 15 year-old Mihai Biritu. Reports contained international condemnation from politicians such as the Baroness Emma Nicholson regarding the infringement of the children’s rights, but it would not devote a single sentence to describe the roots of the tradition to marry children in Roma communities. [26]

Despite some exceptional cases of good, neutral reporting, [27] mass media in the new member States in Central Europe—and candidate countries in Eastern Europe—suffer from provincialism and a lack of professionalism particularly in the coverage of migration issues. EU enlargement was a real test in this respect, and most of the mainstream media failed by trivialising an important and urgent issue. There are already numerous examples of how such irresponsible coverage could ultimately have serious repercussions against minorities, mainly Roma.

Greater responsibility of news editors, more resources for editorial teams to enable in-depth reporting on this issue, and increased independence in building an editorial agenda, including a more critical reading of the Western press, would help the media in these countries fulfil their task to serve the public by truly explaining an issue instead of splashing panic-making maps of “invasions” on their cover pages.

In the end, regarding the migration issue, “one of the most beautiful successes of the EU remains the mobility of goods and people,” as Alberto Alesina and Francesco Giavazzi recently wrote. “Without that, what kind of union would the EU represent?” [28]

It is one of the angles that many media, both Western and Eastern, have failed to approach.

Footnotes

[1] Seamus Heaney, “Beacons at Bealtaine”, 2004, see:

http://www.eu2004.ie/templates/news.asp?sNavlocator=66&list_id=641.

[2] Markedly conservative and anti-EU tabloid.

[3] Preeminent Sunday newspaper.

[4] Right-wing daily tabloid.

[5] *The Sunday Times*, 18 January 2004; *Sun*, 19 Jan 2004, *Daily Express*, 20 January 2004. (See, Arun Kundnani, “The media war against migrants: a new front,” published on the website of the Institute of Race Relations, 21 January 2004, <http://www.irr.org.uk/2004/january/ha000008.html>.)

[6] Idem.

[7] Heaven Crawley is the director of the Migration and Equalities Program at the UK-based Institute for Public Policy Research, one of the country’s progressive think tanks. She published articles in: *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, *BBC News Online*, *Irish World*, *AllAfrica.com*, *Medical News Today*, *British Medical Journal*, *Operation Black Vote*, *Red Pepper*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Black Britain* and *Reuters*.

[8] Broadsheet Sunday newspaper with a liberal/social-democratic orientation.

[9] Heaven Crawley, “Tackling the Causes of Asylum”, *The Observer*, 11 May 2003, at:

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/asylum/story/0,1084,953285,00.html>.

[10] Broadsheet daily newspaper with leftist orientation.

[11] Heaven Crawley, “Conflicts of Interest”, *The Guardian*, 13 May 2003, at:

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/comment/0,11026,955095,00.html>.



[12] Heaven Crawley, “Exodus to the EU is Untrue”, *The Guardian*, 28 April 2004, at: <http://society.guardian.co.uk/societyguardian/story/0,7843,1204386,00.html>.

[13] Luke Harding, ‘I don’t even speak perfect Czech. How would I manage English?’ *The Guardian*, 23 February 2004.

[14] Idem.

[15] See CTK’s story in the Czech business daily *Hospodarske Noviny*, 23 April 23 2004.

[16] See *Czech daily Hospodarske Noviny*, 6 May 2004.

[17] See *Czech daily Hospodarske Noviny*, 5 May 2004.

[18] See Czech daily *Mlada Fronta Dnes*, 21 May 2004. *Mlada Fronta Dnes* is the second largest daily newspaper in the Czech Republic in terms of circulation, a hybrid between a broadsheet and a tabloid.

[19] Quoted from Luke Harding, ‘I don’t even speak perfect Czech. How would I manage English?’ *The Guardian*, 23 February 2004.

[20] The study is available at: <http://www.mindfully.org/Industry/Philip-Morris-Czech-Study.htm>, last accessed 5 July 2004.

[21] Sensationalist tabloid newspaper, currently the top daily in the Czech Republic.

[22] See *Blesk*, 20 January 2004.

[23] See *Novy Čas*, 17 April 2004

[24] A simple search on the Internet would provide an interested journalist with a rich quiver of surveys. For example, in February 2004, the Dublin-based European Foundation for the Improvement in Living and Working Conditions and the European Commission released a study estimating that migration will be of about one percent of the aggregated population of the new member states over the next five years. One third of potential migrants are high-qualified people, the study stated. In a separate research published in 2003 by University College London, the estimated number of migrants to Britain is likely to be between 5,000 and 13,000 per year, of which Roma would make up an unspecified percentage.

[25] See Gallup polls in Romania at: <http://www.gallup.ro>.

[26] “During the 500 years in which Roma were enslaved in Romania, young Roma girls were frequently raped by their owners or the sons of their owners. After this, the girls and the “half-breed” children they often bore were rejected by both the Roma and the non-Roma communities. The Roma found that marrying their daughters off while they were still very young was a good solution, as once married and no longer virgin, the girls were no longer ‘clean’ enough to rape. In fact, the same tradition of child marriage was practiced in the past in very poor Romanian villages, where the young girls were also targets for rape by the estate owners.

An explosion of extremist nationalism accompanied the creation of the Romanian state, following the liberation of Roma from slavery in Romania in 1856. In the following century came the Holocaust, during which hundred of thousands of Roma were killed in the name of racial purity, and then communism and its aggressive forced assimilation. In order to survive through decades of persecution, and to preserve their identity despite policies of forced assimilation, the Roma isolated themselves and clung to their traditions, the harmful along with the useful. I offer this background information, and believe that the media should have included it in their reportage, not as an excuse or justification for the violation of children’s rights, but in order to help the public fully understand the situation. I do not suggest that an abusive tradition be respected, but merely that the history and suffering that led to this tradition be acknowledged, in the process of looking for ways to eliminate the abuse of human rights.”

(From “A Problem Brewing: Media Coverage of Roma in Romania,” by Valeriu Nicolae, deputy director of the European Roma Information Office in Brussels; see also: <http://www.romanetwork.org>.)

[27] I would mention the Czech public radio *Cesky Rozhlas* and the Czech section of the BBC among the media outlets that managed to take a critical stance towards the sensationalism of the British media and that put their resources into elaborated and clean reporting during the months preceding the EU enlargement.

[28] Alberto Alesina et Francesco Giavazzi, “L’avenir de l’Europe passe par l’essor de l’immigration,” *Le Monde Economie*, 1 June 2004.