The 'Good' and 'Bad' Refugees? Imagined Refugeehood(s) in the Media Coverage of the Migration Crisis

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Abstract. This text is an attempt to analyze a particular, normative aspect of the media narrative about refugees during the recent migration crisis in Europe. It looks at the substantive semantic distance between the 'good' or 'real' refugees presented in some media outlets and the definition of a refugee under international law. This difference is later explained by a particular kind of exposure to the events of the refugee crisis – a 'mediated experience', and by the existence of a normative 'refugee archetype'. I look at images representing refugees through the lenses of John B. Thompson's (1995) concept of opposition between lived and mediated experience – the figures of 'bad' and 'good' refugees are seen as belonging to the order of mediated experience, therefore, as argued by Thomson, impersonal and dispersed in time and space. Finally, I refer to the Malkki's (1996) concept of a refugee as a 'universal humanitarian subject' – an apolitical and de-historicized figure, reduced to the role of aid beneficiary which serves me to explain the ambiguity of representations of refugees and their dependence on political interests.

Keywords: *media narrative, migration crisis in Europe, refugees' crisis*

With the refugee crisis rapidly unfolding in Europe, forced migration became a regular topic in the public debates across the continent. Immediately after first reports about the deaths of migrant trying to reach Europe – with the Lampedusa shipwreck in 2013 that took 360 lives[1] as definitely not the first such disaster but surely first of this scale that was reported all over the world – it became a heavily political issue. In the subsequent months and years the public got used to the reports on drowned migrants, overcrowded camps and people stuck in bus or train stations, stranded along the Balkan route. As the scale of this exodus increased and finding acceptable political solutions seemed more and more difficult, questions started emerging as to who the refugees are and why they flee to Europe, as

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[1] BBC News, *Lampedusa boat tragedy: Migrants 'raped and tortured'*, 8 November 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24866338, accessed: 21.06.2016.

well as to the legitimacy of their protection claims[2].

While not trying to answer the said question of legitimacy, this paper looks into the notion of the refugee as appearing in the press and social media. It does not aim to provide an analysis of the whole media discourse on refugees and the refugee crisis but concentrates on particular narratives where the attributes of a 'good' or 'genuine' refugee that one should possess in order to 'deserve' protection are expressed. The existing distance between the 'good' refugees presented in some media outlets from the definition of a refugee under international law is later analyzed in the context of exposure to the events of the refugee crisis – a 'mediated experience' and by the existence of a normative 'refugee archetype'.

The „good" and „bad" refugees in the media

In an article published in September 2015 by *The Independent*, the author Emily Cousens argued, as the title of her text reads, that 'we need to stop pretending that women and children are the only refugees who matter'[3]. She referred to the particularities of how both genders and the children are presented in various media reports concerning the migration crisis. She pointed, for example, to the common use of phrases indicating the number of women and children among the casualties used to stress the innocence and vulnerability of those who died, as well as to different ways of presenting men, women and children in photographs. She argued that there is a prevalence of images of passivity when women are presented and activity, often in the form of aggression in the case of men who are repeatedly portrayed as dangerous, barbaric collective. Cousens also makes an interesting observation with regard

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[2] For example:LeCain, B., 'Un million de réfugiés ont traversé la Méditerranée en 2015', *Le Figaro*, 31 Decembre 2015, http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/12/30/01003-20151230ARTFIG00161-un-million-de-refugies-ont-traverse-la-mediterranee-en-2015.php, accesse d : 25.06.2016 ; Rhodan, M., 'Are the Syrian Refugees All 'Young, Strong Men'?, *Time*, 20 November 2015, http://time.com/4122186/syrian-refugees-donald-trump-young-men/,accessed: 5.06.2016.

[3] E. Cousens, 'We need to stop telling ourselves that women and children are the only refugees who matter', *The Independent*, 9 September 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/we-need-to-stop-telling-ourselves-that-women-and-children-are-the-only-refugees-who-matter-10493332.html,accessed:12.06.2016.

to children. She refers to the photograph of a dead Syrian boy[4]that made the headlines in early September 2015 as the 'the refugee photo' – one that changed the narrative of the crisis. Indeed, within 24 hours the photo was published in the media around the world causing a shock to the public, an increase in donations for humanitarian assistance to refugees and statements from politicians, for example from the British Prime Minister David Cameron who pledged to take in 20,000 refugees from Syria over the next five years[5,6].

According to Cousens, in the UK, the image of the boy and the and subsequent pledge resonated with the memory of an event from the past – a rescue operation from the WWII known as *Kindertransport*. Just months before the war broke out, Great Britain had accepted around 10 000 Jewish children from Nazi Germany and occupied territories. This memory and its symbolic connection to the present situation might have, in Cousens opinion, further consolidated the idea that its primarily children whose lives are worth saving. Compassion limited to women and children and invisibility of male as victims may lead to their symbolic (and often unconscious) dehumanization.

A 'gendered' narrative is not the only aspect characterizing the public reception of the phenomenon of refugeehood. Observation of posts and comments in the social media allows to distinguish at least several other attributes of a 'good' or 'genuine' refugee. Such attributed included the material situation of individuals (for example, the possession of smartphones), the fact of travelling alone or with family members (men travelling alone were accused of cowardice, desertion and leaving their women and children behind). Equally often being a genuine refugee was associated with a particular nationality (for example, Pakistani origin is seen as an excluding circumstance

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[4]The picture of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi (initially reported as AylanKurdi), a boy who drowned along with his mother and brother while crossing from Turkey to the Greek island of Kos was taken by a Turkish photojournalist NilüferDemir on September 2, 2015 r.

[5] Henley, J., 'Britons rally to help people fleeing war and terror in Middle East', *The Guardian*., 3 September 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/03/britons-rally-to-help-people-fleeing-war-and-terror-in-middle-east, accessed: 12.06.2016.

[6]Dathan, M., 'AylanKurdi: David Cameron says he felt 'deeply moved' by images of dead Syrian boy but gives no details of plans to take in more refugees', *The Independent*, 3 September 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/aylan-kurdi-david-cameron-says-he-felt-deeply-moved-by-images-of-dead-syrian-boy-but-gives-no-10484641.html, accessed: 12.06.2016

making one a bogus asylum seekers while Syrian origin was accepted as legitimizing the protection claim)[7].

Individuals who do not possess the attributes of a 'good' or 'genuine' refugee are not only seen as undeserving protection but oftentimes it is also implied that they intend to abuse the system of social welfare. An article published by *National Review* firstsuggests that the arriving migrants are mostly men (thus having little legitimacy as asylum seekers) and that, even if admitted to Europe, they would rather benefit from social assistance than become economically independent:

> 'A full 70 percent of all refugees arriving in Europe are males unaccompanied by their families. When war reaches towns and villages, families flee in their entirety; they don't simply shed young males from their midst'
>
> (...)
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> Clearly, many of the refugees and migrants seek out Europe because of its welfare. Even if Qatar or Saudi Arabia allowed them in, few Syrian refugees would be prepared to take the manual-labor jobs now performed by Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis in those countries, all the more so when they can get an apartment, food, and health care in Europe without having to work'[8].

This narrative can be problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is incompatible with a legal definition of refugee and sets an alternative standard that is based on a imaginary refugee 'ideal'. While it is necessary to note that the legal definition can also be contested, the ideal used to define who deserves protection is more dangerous as it has no objectively measured point of reference. It can be thus easily used by political figures to exacerbate the already very emotional debate on immigration. Furthermore, it is also limited in the capacity to reflect the actual situation of migrants and the ways it evolves. For example, according to the UNHCR statistics, while in June 2015 men accounted for 74% of those who crossed the Mediterranean to Greece or Italy, they have accounted for just 47% this year so far[9]. The reasons for this 'gender shift' may be the fact that men who made the initial step last year are now attempting to bring their

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[7] H. Murdock, 'Social Media Rife With Myths About European Refugee Crisis', *Voice of America*, 9 May 2016, http://m.voanews.com/a/social-media-rife-myths-european-refugee-crisis/3322203.html, dostęp: 13.06.2016.

[8] Rubin, M., Social Welfare Is Killing Refugees, *National Review*, 7 March 2016, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/432409/syrian-refugees-many-male-migrants-seeking-welfare-benefits, accesses: 02.07.2016.

[9]UNHCR, *Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean*, http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php, accessed: 30.06.2016.

families to join them and other ways (such as legal family reunification) are unavailable[10]. It is therefore misleading to see recent mass migration to Europe as migration of young men. Moreover, the ideal of a refugee as primarily female or minor it at odds with what is known about the character of modern conflicts. Modern wars are total humanitarian situations as opposed to the 19th and early 20th century wars waged on battlefields between the armies of nation-states. Already in the 1990s, about 20 civil wars were occurring during each year, which was 10 times more that in 19th century[11]. As a result of the increased number and average duration of domestic wars, poor distinction between armies and civilian populations, use of weapon of mass destruction and activities of non-state actors engaged in wars the number of civilian casualties (both men and women) is on the rise[12]. While the vulnerability of women and children is often at centre of media attention, there is a tendency to neglect the fact that wars increasingly ethnicised, become humanitarian situations which affect entire populations.

The definition of refugee in the international law

The most important act of international law is the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees adopted in Geneva (hereinafter: the 1951 Refugee Convention). It defines a refugee as a person who:

> 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it'[13].

The process of finding solutions to the problem of forcibly displaced populations began under the League of Nations in the early 1920s. However, it was the Second World War II followed by a need to respond to the mass displacement in Europe

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[10]The Financial Times, 'Women and children refugee numbers crossing into Europe surge', January 2016, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/dff3b5ea-bf99-11e5-9fdb-87b8d15baec2.html#axzz4DHyfUL9l, access: 01.06.2016.
[11]Hironaka, A., 2005*, Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass.
[12]Leitenberg, M., 2006, Death in Wars and Conflicts in the 20 th Century , 3rd ed., Occasional Paper 29 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Peace Studies Program).
[13] UN General Assembly, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, Article 1.A.2.

and the establishment of the United Nations system that eventually led to the adoption of the Convention[14].

The legal act sets obligations on the side of states-signatories towards refugees and basic principles for providing protection that were later reiterated in European and national laws. One of the crucial provisions – the *non-refoulement* principle prohibits the return or expulsion of asylum seekers to territories where their life and freedom may be threatened. The signatories are also bound by the obligation to ensure that refugees have access to work, education, health and welfare system, freedom of movement and access to justice whereas refugees are required to conform to their laws and regulations[15].

As mentioned above, the law refers to particular grounds for persecution that the individuals must flee from to be called refugees. Most importantly, this legal framework does not limit the eligibility to apply for asylum to any gender, country of origin or material status as the defining feature of a refugee is the fact the he or she flees persecution. Whereas women in some instances can be seen as a 'particular social group' and be offered protection due to the gender-based persecutions in their countries of origin, the legal refugee definition does not foresee a gender paradigm in granting protection. In other words, gender itself does not make an asylum claim more legitimate.

It is interesting how in the narratives described above this is of limited importance; the imagined 'refugee ideal' contradicts the background legal definition. The substantive semantic distance between the 'good' or 'real' refugees presented in some media outlets from the definition of a refugee under international law can be explained by the fact of a particular kind of exposure to the events of the refugee crisis – a 'mediated experience', and by the existence of normative 'refugee archetype'.

Lived vs. mediated experience

An average viewer or reader experiences the recent refugee crisis through what John B. Thompson's (1995) calls a 'mediated experience'. In his theory,

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[14] UNHCR, *The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of refugees and its 1967 protocol*, September 2011, http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html, accessed: 26.06.2016
[15] Ibid.

'mediated experience' is opposed to 'lived experience' which he describes as 'immediate, continuous and, to some extent, pre-reflexive'[16]. The mediated experience, on the contrary, is made available indirectly through the media and based on indirect quasi-interactions. According to Thompson, the events that one accesses through the media are mostly distant (both in time and space) from the reality of every-day lives. Due to this distance, there is very little if no influence that the viewer or reader can have on the course of the events; at the same time those events do not have immediate implications for the viewer's life. However, as Thompson says, between the events that are experienced through the media and the everyday life there can exist causal relations. However, as repeatedly mediated, those relations are extremely stretched and dispersed, and as such – imperceptible. Furthermore, the mediated experience of realty is always recontextualised as it is lived in a different environment than the reality itself. This lead to permanent clash of contexts and confrontation of different worlds.

The refugee crisis is, without a doubt, a real experience for some Europeans who came in direct contact with refugees as volunteers, aid workers, states officials or journalists. The 'lived experience' of the refugee crisis are personal stories: the individual impact of the experience of displacement. They are revealed by refugees and migrants to, for example employees of aid-providing agencies or ethnographers during their field research or. This experience is unique for an individual and may concentrate around such aspects as: losses of different types – economic and material goods, social networks, political and legal rights or around the problem of one owns agency in the context of displacement: strategies and plans and their collision with existing obstacles and barriers.

Instead, the strongly contradictory figures of 'bad' and 'good' refugees as presented in the media belong to the order of mediated experience. The majority of the recipients in Europe do not get a chance to engage in a conversations with the people arriving in thousands in several European countries over the past years. The attributes of 'good refugees' – female, poor, helpless and possessing a particular nationality are taken for granted and rarely accompanied with information on the context. One of such examples would be the changing migration pattern that make men and women migrate separately in different times. Another example of such missing information that alters the meaning of presented images is related to the use

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[16] Thompson, J.B., 1995, The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media, Polity Press: Cambridge-Oxford, p. 227.

of smartphones by refugees. It concerns the common use of smartphones by many refugees not only for communication with relatives and friends, but also as a source of navigation during their perilous journeys. In fact, their meaning changes from a fashionable commodity to the basic survival tool[17].

While in principle it is possible for the media to provide information about refugees in a way that includes their own perspectives and explanation of their actions (for example, through registered interviews), it may not be common. The reason for that can be time constraints or lack of interest but it can also be caused by a much deeper problem of silencing the refugee voices who are seen as first and foremost the subjects of potential political action or intervention. In addition to that, the universal image (archetype) of refugee may be so strongly embedded in individual and collective consciousness that it becomes difficult to accept any counterevidence, any story that challenges whom we are used to see as refugee.

The refugee archetype

I find Liisa Malkki's concept of refugee as 'universal humanitarian subject' very useful to understand how a universal image of a 'good refugee' was created during the European refugee crisis. Malkki described this concept in an 1996 article 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization'based on her fieldwork in the 1980s and early 1990s among Hutu refugees in the Great Lakes region of Africa[18]. She studied social imagination of refugees and the refugee status among the administrators of humanitarian aid. She found out that while the legal claim to refugee status by the Hutu was fully acknowledged by these administrators, there existed more elaborate normative definitions of 'refugee' that lived 'in the shadow of the law'[19]. Refugee were expected to behave in a certain way (for example: not to have a high standard of living) and to display characteristics that would justify the provision of aid,

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[17]An example of such usage could be a mobile application 'Asylum in Serbia' created by a Belgrade-based NGO during the crisis on the so-called 'Western Balkan route' in 2015 or 'InfoAid' designed by a groupd of Hungarian volunteers. These applications provided refugees with the information on nearby reception centres, border crossings, laws and regulation in the country and end emergency numbers. See: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.dvuckovic.asylumseeker&hl=pl. https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.migrationaid.infoaid&hl=en.
[18]Malkki, L., 1996, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Aug., 1996), pp. 377-404.
[19] Ibid, p. 378.

some of them being: poverty and passivity.

Malkii argues that the most important aspects of social imagination of refugee are dehumanization and *dehistoricization.* Refugees are dehumanized when presented as a devoid of agency, speechless 'sea of humanity' where individuals remain anonymous or sentimentalized (as the figures of refugee mothers with children). Dehumanization is reinforced is by visual representation and photographic testimony of the media focused on showing tragedy, but also by humanitarian agencies which, in the visual materials for their fundraising campaigns show passivity and victimhood. Dehistoricization of refugees, in turn, occurs when they are presented in a way that does not take into account the temporal and geopolitical characteristics that make one humanitarian crisis different from another; as if the refugees from Rwanda, Bosnia, Iraq and now – Syria were all the same by the very fact of having fled their homes. In dehistoricising narrative refugee's historical agency and political memory are neglected. Both processes serve, in Malkki's opinion, the humanitarian agenda by legitimizing the need for humanitarian operations and the existence of aid organizations.

In the context of Europe's refugee crisis dehumanisation and dehistoricisation served, in my opinion, a different purpose – the one of legitimization of the efforts to keep refugees out of Europe. Although in Europe, as in context where Malkii conducted her research, there exist many organisations that provide humanitarian services to refugees and may need to present the needs of their beneficiaries to potential sponsors in a way that evokes compassion, the dominant factor (and the main political problem) concerned not so much the question of aid to refugees but their very existence on the European soil. Thus, the use of a (dehumanized and dehistoricisised) 'good refugee' ideal served first and foremost to legitimize the policies of the 'fortress Europe'. Through the acceptance of this ideal, detached from both the legal definition and the lived experience of those forcibly displaced, is a means to say that the newcomers who fail to conform to it cannot stay.

Conclusions

The aim of the analysis presented in this text was to look at the particular type of normatively loaded representations of refugees in the mass media discourse of the refugee crisis in Europe. The term 'refugee' is a multidimensional discursive figure that is composed of at least two basic elements: the legal

definition and the 'refugee archetype' – a universal set of normative characteristics (such as poverty, passivity or helplessness, gender-related behaviour patterns) rooted in past geographical and historical contexts. I suggest that, as these elements can vary and change proportions in a given discourse, their deliberate use may have an impact on responses of the public to the problem of forced migration. The use of the 'refugee archetype' instead of the legal definition to define who deserves protection is dangerous as it has no objectively measured point of reference. It can be thus easily used by political figures to exacerbate the already very emotional debate on immigration when they play the 'migration card'. Furthermore, seeing refugees as 'universal humanitarian subjects' (or the embodiments of the 'refugee archetype') has a poor analytical usefulness and a limited capacity to reflect the actual situation of refugees and the changing character of forced migration. Attributes and characteristic of today's imagined archetypal refugees tend to reflect the past reality and be resistant to changes making it difficult to accept any evidence, any story proving that refugee population from today may be different those form the past.

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