

LESSONS FROM POLITICAL REPORTING ON TURKISH AND SYRIAN MUSLIMS

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The German media has been grappling with how to portray Muslims since large numbers of Turkish *gastarbeiter* — or guest workers — provided crucial labor for the country's growing economy in the 1960s.

Today, reflecting policies of tolerance adopted after World War II, German politicians and others bend over backwards not to appear in the media as anti-Turkish or anti-Muslim. The press largely accommodates them by espousing tolerance, too. But the media still critically examines Turkish and Muslim-related issues, especially regarding immigration and refugee policies. Usually, that coverage focuses on binary political debates about whether ethnic Turks and Muslims should assimilate — i.e. become German — or integrate — i.e. retain their customs but participate in society.

Today, that divide provides the template for the German media's treatment of Muslims in other coverage. Now, however, the arrival of large amounts of Syrian refugees into Germany has given rise to new challenges to that journalistic template. Asylum requests to Germany in 2014 increased 75 percent compared to last year, the largest increase since 1993, when a surge of refugees fled the former Yugoslavia. Around 17,000 of the nearly 100,000 requests came from people fleeing the Syrian Civil War, according to the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

The influx of Syrian refugees fueled concurrent healthy debates among Germans and Turks about the place of Islam in the country.

The press often cites institutions like the German-Islam Conference, a platform for dialogue between Muslims and the government, that espouse tolerance.

Alternatively, others have devoted considerable efforts to arguing that Muslims don't belong in Germany. Bundesbank Chairman and politician Thilo Sarrazin and Neukölln Mayor Heinz Buschkowsky recently published bestselling books criticizing Muslims who fail to integrate and adopt German industriousness, for example.

There is also a third side in this dynamic, of course: the Turks themselves.

Der Spiegel journalist Ozelm Gezer — a Turkish guest worker's daughter who grew up in Hamburg — has written suffering prejudice due to their ethnicity despite trying to integrate and assimilate. (See her November 2013 article "Turkified": Why I Can Never Be a Proper German.")

German journalists' coverage of Syrian refugees often echoes the assimilation-versus-integration debate applied in their coverage of Turks.

This approach has some merit. Guest workers and refugees are technically both temporary, a great hook for human-interest stories about the plight of Syrian refugees.

Süddeutsche Zeitung covered hunger strikes among Syrian refugees, for example. Editor Roland Preuss rattled off the questions he sought to answer in the story: "What's life like for Syrian asylum seekers? What problems do they face? What's the political discussion about the resettlement program? What did they experience in Syria?"

Political journalists face a challenge using the assimilation-versus-integration approach for Syrian refugee stories, however. The Turkish community is rooted in Germany and has evolved over time. Discussions of their place in society have also evolved,

including low points like the so-called Döner Murders in the 2000s, when Neo-Nazi killed a handful of ethnic Turks. The German attitude toward Syrian refugees, on the other hand, is still forming.

Proposals to encourage Syrians to assimilate into German society raise objections from those who believe refugees should eventually return home. Conversations about integrating them include the economic and social costs of abetting their assimilation as well as concerns about whether they have ties to terrorism, discussions that are legitimate but nonetheless give racists a chance to whip up resentment.

Covering debates about how Syrian refugees should respect local laws and customs forces the press to walk a line between presenting honest concerns about the refugees and anti-Muslim xenophobia voiced by radical, often fringe members of society who often speak on the same topics alongside a general message of hate.

For the political press, that coverage originates in holding leaders responsible for setting the tone in debates about refugees. Their watchdog role appears to be working.

“Politicians tend to harshly criticize the rhetoric of Islamic terrorists, by calling them no less than terrorists,” said Der Spiegel political writer Melanie Amann. “But they always stress that you must differentiate between Islamists and Muslims.” The question facing journalists like Amann and Preuss is how vigorously they should pursue inquiries into the negative perceptions among Germans of Syrian refugees.

Often, the German press resists covering xenophobes, journalists and experts. Many said they were inclined to ignore the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the neo-fascist National Democratic Party, or NPD, for example. They don’t believe they must cover hate speech to enlighten readers, a philosophical stance that’s common in the developed world where journalistic standards are coherent.

But the press is nonetheless dragged into political debates where representing hate speech can’t be avoided, like last summer when anti-immigrant protests erupted in Hellersdorf, a Berlin suburb. Or when mainstream lawmakers sought to ban the NPD, prompting the need for reporters to ask hateful NPD leaders for a response.

In those cases, mainstream media — even major tabloids like Bild Zeitung — often advocate for tolerance and diversity.

“When one guy in Bild Zeitung wrote a comment about how he didn’t like Islam, he was slammed one day later by the editor in chief, who printed a flaming comment about how Islam is a peaceful religion and Islamism is political terrorism,” said Amann. “The same day they also published an opinion piece from a Turkish born politician, Özcan Mutlu, also defending Islam.” Other voices are also cropping up.

Funkaus Europa, a radio program of the public West German Broadcasting Cologne, reports on the political and economic causes and effects of the Syrian refugees.

The program is well known throughout North Germany, including Berlin, as particularly insightful on foreigner-related issues. Like other German media, it frames its discussions in terms of assimilation and integration. But its reports on the details of that debate account for non-German perspectives, too, including describing the bureaucratic hurdles refugees face in seeking asylum.

News Director Luigi La Grotta said Funkaus Europa’s trenchant coverage reflects the diversity of its staff. Around 60 percent of the program’s employees are foreign-born.

"We want to give an international viewpoint, a multiethnic viewpoint to the news, working with journalist with immigration background gives authenticity to the news," said La Grotta. "We want to be a model of a multiethnic society that does not exist yet in Germany."

Bulgarian journalists are grappling with the same questions as their German counterparts. But the Bulgarian media climate is far different and should concern Europeans.

Turks have lived in Bulgaria since the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans five centuries ago. Relations between the two groups have often been strained, reflecting a nationalistic ideology among Bulgarians who resent the heirs of their former colonizers. Still, most Bulgarians and Turks said relations between the ethnicities were now copacetic, though Turks are largely self-segregated in southern and eastern Bulgaria.

Unsurprisingly, few Turks work in the Bulgarian press. Bulgarian National Television has Turkish-language programming, but its anchors translate the news from Bulgarian. They don't cater to Turkish viewers. There are no Turkish-language newspapers, either. Ethnic Turks in Bulgaria have only Zaman, an Istanbul-based newspaper with a Sofia bureau. Accordingly, the Bulgarian media largely ignores the country's Turkish minority except to cover scandals related to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, or MRF, an ethnic Turkish political party that has been a minority partner in recent government coalitions.

Examining that coverage and Bulgarian news about Syrian refugees reveals a web of connections that includes questionable media activity as well as racism against Muslims.

In the early summer of 2013, riots erupted in Bulgaria following news that a then-32-year-old MRF lawmaker, Delyan Peevski, would lead the powerful State Agency for National Security even though he had no experience in espionage or counterintelligence. Many alleged that it was obvious how he secured his position. His mother is co-owner of the New Bulgarian Media Group, one of the few media conglomerates in the country and the owner of major newspapers, a popular television station and other media.

This background provides context for the Bulgarian media's coverage of Syrian refugees. In a reverse of how German journalists' approach to Turkish guest workers has framed their coverage of Syrian refugees with an emphasis on politicians' pleas for tolerance, most Bulgarian media outlets have reengineered the Bulgarian population's traditional antipathy for Turks to exploit concerns about Syrian refugees for the gain of politicians.

Around 13,000 Syrians and other refugees entered Bulgaria last year — a 1200 percent increase compared to the previous year. The country was totally unprepared, housing them in ramshackle military bases until EU aid arrived to improve their conditions.

The Syrian refugees created a crisis in the late summer and early fall that many Bulgarian politicians attempted to use as a diversion from the public disturbances still simmering throughout the country.

At the height of the refugee crisis, Ataka parliamentarian Magdalena Tosheva, who is editor of the far-right political party's eponymous newspaper and a host on its Alpha TV channel, began referring to Syrians as "cannibals," "primates," "Islamic fundamentalists," and other epithets on her show and as a guest on other networks. Her newspaper ran headlines like "Muslim 'refugees' — the new threat to Bulgaria." (See Al Jazeera's November 2013 article "Refugees in Bulgaria face death threats.") "She's crazy," said Zornitza Stoilova, a writer with Kapital, one of the few respected newspapers in Bulgaria that unfortunately reaches a small minority of readers. "They have her on TV all the time. You can rarely see an actual refugee in the studio who says 'Here I am with my family. I'm not scary.'"

Bulgarian newspapers also extensively covered anti-refugees demonstrations in the village of Rosovo, where a few Syrian refugee families were settled.

“The villagers said ‘We are very proud because we are a pure ethnic village,’ which means these people have the belief that in the Bulgarian nation there are only ethnic Bulgarians,” said Stoilova, who has written sympathetically about the plight of Syrian refugees à la Funkaus Europa. “It is not their fault because Bulgarian history books don’t say Bulgaria is multinational and has always been.”

Freelance journalist Krassimir Yankov added that he suspected someone had fomented the Rosovo demonstrations. He travelled to the village after the hubbub had died down and found nobody willing to take strongly criticize a handful foreigners — including a dentist — living on the outskirts of town.

The one-sided nature of Bulgarian coverage of Syrian refugee issues raises questions about the media that include EU funding.

Many journalists and other experts told us that the publications owned by the New Bulgarian Media Group — including 24 Hours, one of Bulgaria’s biggest tabloids — and other outlets often quote hate speech uncritically to boost ratings and aid political parties. It might seem counterintuitive that media moguls connected to the MRF — an ethnic Turkish party — would provide a platform for hate speech against Muslims. But sources said giving Ataka a venue also strengthened the MRF’s appeal to its voters. After all, Turks have few other options if they want to express themselves politically.

The concerning aspect of this dynamic is that Bulgarian authorities are legally supposed to prosecute hate speech. Yet, to the consternation of responsible journalists and others, not one has been convicted of propagating hate speech in a Bulgarian court. Bulgaria has also flouted decisions by the European Court of Human Rights that have found that the country insufficiently discourages hate speech.

“In Bulgaria, hate speech is a fact in the media,” said Mila Mancheva, a specialist in minorities at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, a respected Sofia think tank. “It takes place in the media and it is not protected. There’s a lack of follow through in the prosecutions but on paper anti-discrimination laws are on par with the EU.”

Meanwhile, the Bulgarian media outlets that often feature hate speech profit from revenues from advertisements funded by EU programs, including transportation projects that require public notices and awareness campaigns under EU laws, said experts. The EU transfers those funds to the Bulgarian government, whose leaders then give them to the newspapers and other media outlets. Often, sources said, those disbursements of EU advertising revenues are part of a quid pro quo between officials, media groups and others in the Byzantine maneuvers within the Bulgarian government.

A draft proposal for a research project obtained from the Centre for the Study of Democracy describes the dynamic: “The proposed project aims to contribute to a shift in the regulatory environment of the Bulgarian media in order to ensure greater media pluralism and limit the opportunities to use media as a tool for state capture. This goal will be achieved by (1) collecting evidence about media ownership concentration that could serve as cause for action by EU competition authorities (2) gathering evidence and demonstrating how public (including EU funds) and corporate funding of media are used to trade in influence; (3) formulate policy options to reduce media concentration and increase media pluralism, and (4) raise awareness about the ‘modus operandi’ through which media content is manipulated for private or political interests, and the impact of such practices on the democratic processes, especially local and parliamentary elections.”

Mancheva and others felt EU pressure to force Bulgarian authorities to prosecute hate speech and appropriate EU funds properly would be enormously effective in at least curbing discrimination against Muslims in the media.

Journalists, meanwhile, said curbing discrimination that helps racist and pro--Turkish politicians benefit on election day would give media outlets more space for real journalism. One way to achieve that goal would be to include more Turkish journalists and other Muslims in newsrooms, of course.

The time seems ripe that for that change. Stoilova cited Open Society Foundation statistics that said 60 percent of Bulgarian citizens thought politicians cynically used hate speech to gain votes, suggesting that hate speech sways only a minority of voters in the ballot box. The Bulgarian public, in other words, wants media coverage that includes positive representations of diversity.

"People are hungry for positive stories," said Stoilova. "When we write a positive story, it's the most popular thing on our website."