



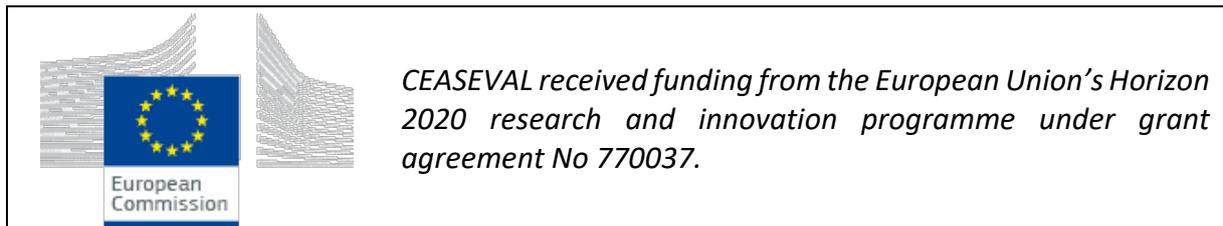
# **Hyperpoliticisation of asylum and responsibility: The Bulgarian case: from polarisation to hegemonisation**

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## Hyperpoliticisation of asylum and responsibility: The Bulgarian case: from polarisation to hegemonisation

### Abstract

*This analysis serves a two-fold purpose: theoretical and empirical. Its theoretical part reconstructs the concept of politicisation and develops it. The empirical part examines its applicability to the Bulgarian case analysing three types of discourses: political, media, intellectual. The text is structured in three parts. The first part elaborates the theoretical foundation of the analysis, building upon Wilde's notion of politicisation and extending it in three directions: from politicisation to hyperpoliticisation; from polarisation to hegemonisation; and the refugee crisis - from a classical one to a post-democratic one. The second part analyses the mental maps of Bulgarian citizens via national and European public opinion polls. The third part examines the political and media debates on responsibility during three episodes of contention: May-November 2015 during the EU quota debates; the Bulgarian presidential campaign in the autumn of 2016, with its high salience of refugee policies; and the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU during the first half of 2018.*

*The study demonstrated a convergence of the following trends: mainstreaming of populist emphasis on refugee issues; weakening and marginalization of alternative voices (no big influential party defends liberal positions); adoption by the governmental majority the opposition refusal of readmission of refugees and de-responsabilisation on common European refugee policy. All these trends develop in a situation of significant decrease of migration flows. Extreme politicisation of migration crisis in a situation of decrease of migration pressure is defined as a post-democratic migration crisis – a new concept forged by the author which main characteristics are: the detachment from the reality, as well as the transition from a classic ad hoc crisis to a situation of permanent migration crisis. The interference of these trends demonstrates the transition from polarization to mainstreaming and hegemonisation of anti-relocation, anti-responsibility discourse which culminated in de-responsabilisation and de-Europeanisation of asylum policy in which government and opposition, left-wing, right-wing, and far-right converge.*

**Keywords:** politicisation, responsibility, European asylum policy, refugee crisis, post-democratic crisis, Bulgaria, Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

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## 1. Introduction

This analysis serves a two-fold purpose: theoretical and empirical. Its theoretical part reconstructs the concept of politicisation as introduced by Wilde (2011, 2016), examines its applicability to the Bulgarian case and the new EU trends, and elaborates it. The empirical part aims to answer research questions formulated in the research design of WP5: What does it mean to be responsible? Who is responsible? To whom are they responsible? To what extent and how has responsibility vis-à-vis refugees in Europe become an issue of politicisation in Bulgaria? Who is considered to be responsible within the EU: national or EU political elites and institutions? What triggered these debates? And to what extent has the politicisation of these issues led to policy change? The Bulgarian case considers these issues in the context of the shifting relations between politics and policies.

**Figure 1:** Changing relations between refugee politics and asylum policies during and after the refugee crisis

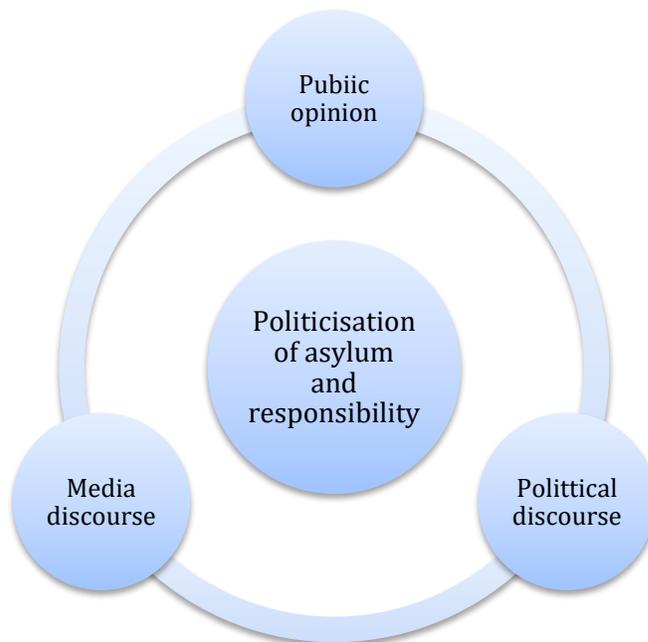


Source: author's elaboration

If before the migration crisis populist discourses did not significantly influence asylum and integration policies, during/after the migration crisis populist politics started to undermine the very possibility of a common European asylum policy and national and local integration policies.

The answers to our research questions will be sought via analysing three types of discourses and representations: public opinion, media discourse, and political discourse.

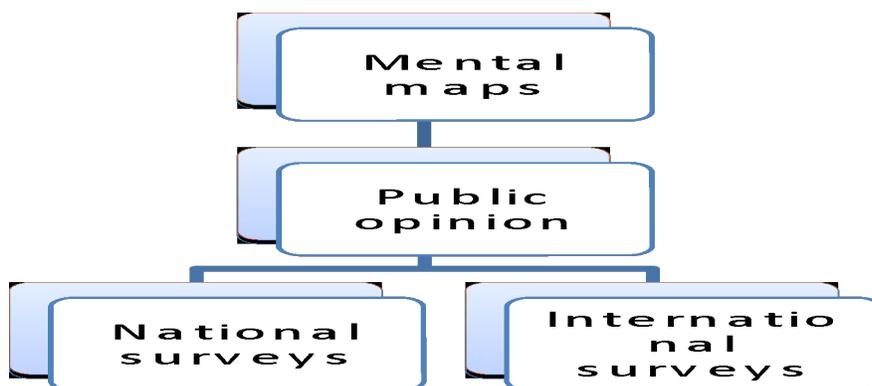
**Figure 2:** The three types of discourses for the analysis of politicisation



Source: author's elaboration

The mental maps of the public, which influence electoral attitudes, susceptibilities to certain types of political rhetoric, and interest in refugee politics, will be analysed through national and EU public opinion polls.

**Figure 3:** The sources for the analysis of mental maps



Source: author's elaboration

Political discourse represents a natural cornerstone in the study of politicisation. I will analyse two of its instances: parliamentary debates, and the latest presidential campaign in Bulgaria, coinciding with the peak of the 2016 refugee crisis.

**Figure 4:** The sources for the analysis of the political discourse



The media discourse will focus on two newspapers: *24 Chasa* is the most popular newspaper in Bulgaria, whereas *Dnevnik* is the electronic media most interested in the refugee crisis. The selected media are owned by different media groups and accessed by users with a different profile. At the same time, both are popular and trusted by their visitors.

- *Dnevnik* is an online media, the most prestigious analytical e-journal with a liberal, centre-right profile. There is no public data about the number of its unique visitors. According to Reuters Institute<sup>1</sup>, the trust in *Dnevnik* is 6.10 on a scale from 1 to 10. It is also the media which is particularly interested in migration/refugees issues.
- *24 Chasa (24 Hours)* is the most popular newspaper available in both paper and online forms. According to data provided by the publishers themselves, the unique monthly visitors amount to 1,029,659<sup>2</sup>. According to Reuters Institute<sup>3</sup>, trust in *24 Chasa* is 6.33 on a scale from 1 to 10. This ranks it first after the websites of the public national radio and television and the two leading private TV channels.

A significant characteristic of media analysis is the dual nature of media discourse: it serves most frequently as a platform of political discourse. The more informative the publications, the more minimised is the interference of the media with the contents of the political discourse or the information flow.

The empirical part highlights three crucial 'episodes of contention.' The first is the same for all case studies: May-Fall 2015, discussions of the relocation quotas. The second is the 2016 presidential campaign, which exhibited a vivid salience of responsibility for asylum policy and the proposals for quotas. The Bulgarian case also adds a specific third episode, related to the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/interactive/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.24chasa.bg/Media/2017/04/25/69ace641-48b8-4f1c-a9f4-c897e5a3d090.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/interactive/>

between January and June 2018. It is relevant to our study for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, it was Bulgaria's first presidency, given that Bulgaria is a new member state, and therefore it carried along high political expectations and the reinforcement of EU policies as a key issue in the Bulgarian national political debate. Secondly, it was towards the end of the presidency that Bulgaria concluded its political turnabout in refugee policies and responsibility, which is the focus of this paper: from a pro-EU policy of shared responsibility to a definite rejection of responsibility to take refugees back.

These three 'episodes of contention' will be examined through the prism of a mixture of discourses. The culmination of politicisation and the turnabout in refugee policies and responsibility at the end of the EU presidency will be analysed via the parliamentary debates on 13 July and 20 July 2018 regarding the report on the activities and results of the presidency.

The period from June to November 2015 will be examined from the two angles of media and political discourse. We have done an extensive media monitoring, comprising 421 articles in two newspapers. The emblematic messages of the political discourse will be analysed via two parliamentary declarations issued by two coalitions that were part of the opposition at the time: the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) coalition, and the United Patriots. This first episode will delineate two asymmetric clusters of discourses: a humanitarian one and a securitarian one. Their political authors are still distinct entities: a left-wing and a far-right party, respectively. During this early period, we will see the incipient trends of an emphasis on securitisation, responsabilisation of Europe for the crisis, and the convergence of the stances of left-wing and far-right political actors.

These trends will mature with the mainstreaming of anti-refugee rhetoric during the presidential campaign only a year later, in 2016. The politicisation of refugee policies will be examined through the candidates' agendas, interviews, slogans, and messages. Campaigns are a time when the political class takes an acute interest in the public opinion (which sublimates as the public vote), so this paper will examine also public surveys, Bulgarian and European alike, which will compare and contrast the mental maps of Bulgarian citizens.

The text has been structured in three parts. The first part elaborates the theoretical foundation of the analysis, building upon Wilde's notion of politicisation and extending it in three directions: from politicisation to hyperpoliticisation; from polarisation to hegemonisation; and the refugee crisis - from a classical one to a post-democratic one.

The second part analyses the mental maps of Bulgarian citizens via national and European public opinion polls.

The third, and largest, part examines the political and media debates on responsibility during the three episodes of contention: May-November 2015 during the EU quota debates; the Bulgarian presidential campaign in the autumn of 2016, with its high salience of refugee policies; and the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU during the first half of 2018.

## 2. From polarisation of opinions to mainstreaming and hegemonisation of populist discourses on asylum during the post-democratic migration crisis

The aim of this theoretical introduction is to reflect on the conceptual framework of politicisation and to elaborate it in a critical and constructive way in order to adapt it to the particularities of the current migration and asylum politics in Europe and especially in Bulgaria.

'From the perspective of politicisation, it is not the formal constitutional model of delegation and accountability that is interesting. Rather, it is the mental map citizens and their representatives have in mind when considering the working of representative democracy' (Wilde 2011: 570). This insightful theoretical position provides the Bulgarian case with two relevant ideas:

- The dominating role of politics over policies, because it is in politics that mental maps are formed, which will later create a favourable environment for the implementation of certain policies and the marginalisation of others.
- The complex alchemy of constructing the politicians' and citizens' mental maps is not a focal point in this study, but it will be relevant during the analysis of 'public resonance,' defined as the prerequisite of a public interested in a particular political debate and as a mechanism through which 'more and more people become involved in politics' (Wilde 2011: 568).

Politicisation refers to 1) an increase in salience and 2) polarisation, an increasing diversity of opinions on specific societal topics—in our case, the refugee crisis (Wilde, 2011: 561). This paper corroborates politicisation and relativises the validity of polarisation in the Bulgarian case, critically and constructively elaborating Wilde's notion in both directions.

*From salience to hyperpoliticisation of migration.* Salience results from societal actors like political parties, mass and social media, etc. paying more attention to a specific issue. The more an issue is discussed, the more politicised it becomes. We forge another concept: **hyperpoliticisation**. It has been inspired by Gilles Lipovetsky's notion of hypermodernity: Everywhere our societies are swept away by the escalation of ever greater, ever faster, ever more extreme processes in all spheres of social and individual life (Lipovetsky 2004). Like hypermodernity, which intensifies modernity to an extreme, hyperpoliticisation intensifies politicisation:

- An increasing number of political actors transforming the migration/refugee crisis into a core topic in their political rhetoric.
- An extreme intensification of the affectivity of debates by increasingly linking migration/asylum politics to politics of identity, sovereignty and bordering.
- Transforming refugee policy from one of many public policies into a cornerstone policy, dominating key political events such as elections and having a tangible impact on the policy of shared responsibility.

*From polarisation of opinions to hegemonisation of populism.* This paper relativises the sphere of validity of polarisation. Polarisation has been defined (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, in Wilde, 2011: 567) as diversity of

opinions: An issue can only become politicised when there are at least two different opinions on the subject. Thus the more the opinion of involved parties diverges and crystallises into opposing groups, the stronger this polarisation of opinion contributes to increasing politicisation. The thesis of this paper is the opposite: Anna Krasteva conceptualises it as *mainstreaming and hegemonisation of populism of all colours* (Krasteva 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, forthcoming), which dominates politics and policies, the political discourse of most parties, and the majority of media:

- Mainstreaming of populism, of the transformation of the populist (mis)uses of the migration crisis from more marginal, far-right discourse to an increasingly generalised discourse of the mainstream parties, both right-wing and left-wing.
- Marginalisation of alternative discourses which oppose the mainstreaming of populism and try to link migration to human rights and human safety.

*From 'classic' refugee crises to post-democratic migration crises.* The third pillar of the theoretical framework of this analysis is the new notion of *post-democratic crises*, conceptualised by Anna Krasteva, and the idea of the refugee crisis as its emblematic embodiment (Krasteva forthcoming). The 2015 refugee crisis is a 'classic' one: a sudden and enormous increase in refugee flows vs. deficient institutional capacity and readiness for its management as well as the absence of political consensus about the key principles of migration governance. Contrast this with a post-democratic crisis. A significant characteristic of the post-democratic crisis is its growing dissociation from ontological reality: the political crisis over migration is reaching white-hot peaks today despite the substantial decline of migration flows. The post-democratic crisis is liquefied: it depends less and less on external manifestations and determinants, and more and more on the voluntaristic strategies of mega leaders. The post-democratic crisis is theorised in the analytical triangle of post-democracy – post-truth – mega leadership. The systemic affinity between crises and leadership is taking on new forms, conceptualised in the paradox 'If crises did not exist, post-democratic leaders would have invented them' (Krasteva 2017a, 2017b). This radically new stage marks the rise of leaders whose political charisma and power are manifested, not in the resolution of crises, but in the creation of new crises and conflicts as well as in the transformation of the crises from ad hoc to permanent (Krasteva forthcoming).

### **3. Mental maps: intercultural solidarity vs. fortress Bulgaria**

Mental maps—the cartography of public attitudes—are a key factor in each campaign that aims to transform them into an electoral potential. We can analyse the mental map of public attitudes towards refugees on the eve of the 2016 presidential election by examining the data from a poll conducted by the Alpha Research agency. A valuable aspect of the poll is the comparison of the data to attitudes from a decade earlier (2006).

The first prominent feature is the entrance of migration issues into the public awareness in two ways: one, it made its first appearance on the list of menaces; two, it soared to their Top 3, ranking second with 60% of the people worrying about the refugee influx (after international terrorism, with 64%, and before international organised crime, with 45%).

A key point for our study are the assessments of the Bulgarian government's activities regarding asylum. The most prominent attitude was that of rebordering: 43.1% of Bulgarians wanted 'the government to have a firmer policy towards refugees.' This isolationist attitude forms the greatest cluster, twice as large as the next one. Consequently, it was what presidential candidates would aim for during their campaign. The next part of this analysis will show that this electoral potential would be targeted by both far-right nationalist candidates and left-wing ones. The second group of attitudes was critical of the government's policies without giving explicit reasons—liberal or restrictive—for its criticism: 22.3% diagnosed that 'there's no refugee policy; the government is swinging between extremes.' About one fifth (19.5%) of Bulgarians exhibited a liberal attitude; they believed that 'the government has to let in particular quotas and put in more efforts for integration.' 15.1% sounded like the hard core electorate of the parties in power; they thought that 'the government has done its best given the present situation' (Alpha Research 2016).

The analysis of the mental map of attitudes towards refugees delineates two poles of asymmetric political impact:

- One pole stood for liberal attitudes for intercultural openness and responsibility of the government for integration. The idea that quotas must be honoured demonstrates that there existed public attitudes for supporting a policy of responsibility sharing. These attitudes formed a minority, being held by twenty percent of all Bulgarians.
- The other pole supported a firm policy towards refugees, which translates into the language of politics as a policy of fortress Europe and fortress Bulgaria. This restrictive attitude opposes responsibility sharing. It was held by twice as many Bulgarians as the liberal intercultural solidarity.

The comparative analysis of the Bulgarian public opinion about migration vs. the average opinion across EU (which also includes Bulgaria) demonstrates the specifics of the Bulgarian case more clearly. Bulgarians are considerably more sensitive than Europeans when it comes to migration; 62% assessed it as one of the major issues in EU vs. 45% of all EU citizens. There are also significant differences in the attitudes towards migration outside of EU: 77% of Bulgarians opposed it vs. 56% of Europeans. Bulgarians who were positive about migration were twice as few as Europeans as a whole: 15% vs. 37%. Bulgaria occupied one of the last positions—along with Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia and Latvia—in terms of portion of the population open to accepting migrants from outside EU (Общественото мнение в ЕС. България 2016).

These data seem paradoxical, given that Bulgaria has one of the lowest percentages of migrants per capita (2%), was never a major destination of the refugee flow in 2015 and 2016, and has been a transit country since the beginning of the crisis. In politics, the perceptions that form electoral attitudes are relevant political realities, which create expectations of particular policies and make other policies less viable. What this implies for our analysis is that the mental maps of most Bulgarians do not favour policies of responsibility for the asylum and integration of refugees.

#### 4. Redefining responsibility in times of crisis: political and public debates

Bulgarian political discourse will be analysed in three key temporalities: the 2015 episode of contention on relocation quotas, common for the entire study; the 2016 presidential election campaign; and the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU (January-June 2018), including the proposed amendment of the Dublin Regulation.

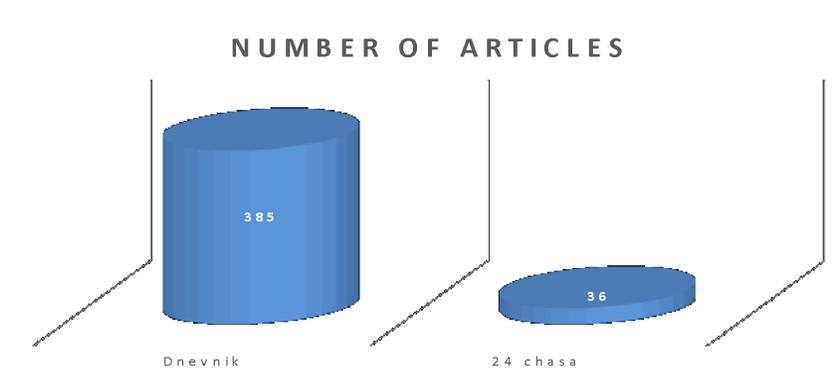
##### 4.1. First episode of contention: quotas and (un)willingness for responsibility (May-November 2015)

We analyse the first episode of contention via two corpora: the media and the parliamentary discourses.

###### 4.1.1. The media discourse: how to inform society about refugee policies and taking responsibility in a situation of a migration crisis

The media monitoring over the period *May-November 2015* includes the two e-media – Dnevnik and 24Chassa. In May-November 2015, Dnevnik published **385** articles. Over the same period, 24 Chasa published **36** articles, or more than ten times fewer than Dnevnik.

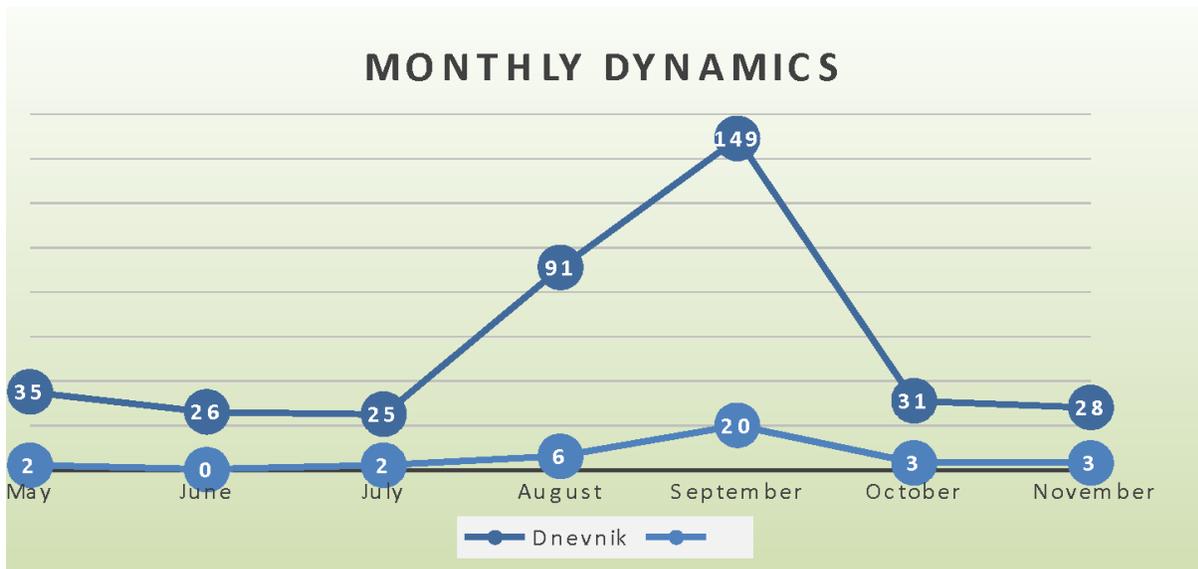
**Figure 5:** Number of articles in Dnevnik and 24 Chasa in May-November 2015



Source: author's elaboration

Despite the considerable differences in the numbers, the monthly dynamics show that there was a peak in the number of publications discussing migration/refugee issues during the the crisis with the Balkan Route. For both Dnevnik and 24 Chasa, the greatest number of articles appeared in August and September, as illustrated by the graphic.

**Figure 6:** Monthly dynamics of the number of articles in Dnevnik and 24 Chasa in May-November 2015



Source: author's elaboration

Both medias publish mostly informative materials. These serve a key function of media communication: to inform the general public about the development of the refugee crisis as well as the crisis management policies in Bulgaria, various member states and the European Union as a whole. The solid corpus of articles in Dnevnik illustrates both the salience and the polarisation of asylum policy and responsibility. The voice of the media is more explicit in analytical articles, which are more numerous in Dnevnik, since it targets a more aware audience; this will be analysed below.

The *salience* of the refugee crisis and the responsibility for its management has a definite quantitative expression in Dnevnik: over the seven months from May to November 2015, the online edition published 385 articles, which amounts to 55 per month, 14 per week, or almost two per day. Dnevnik covered all important events related to the crisis and the responsibilities for its resolution in Bulgaria, in other member states, and in Brussels. This exceptional information intensity illustrates two key aspects of political and media discourses:

- The explicit placement of refugee policies at the centre of the EU agenda. The politicisation of this debate will be examined in the next part of the paper.
- The media responsibility of this analytic and liberal-oriented newspaper to present regular, complex, multifaceted information, allowing its readers to form informed opinions and make informed political choices.

Quotas and responsibilities make up the clusters of issues that are object to intense *politicisation*. The relocation emerges towards the end of the monitored period. Politicisation takes the shape of acute *polarisation*. It is rather indicative that Dnevnik's media policy is extremely sensitive to polarisation and reflects it in both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. The diachronic perspective can be seen in the transition of various countries from one stance to its opposite; for instance, at the start of the analysed period, Finland confirmed its readiness for refugee quotas, whereas towards its end, 'Finland throws rocks

at migrants' (Dnevnik, 25 Sept 2015). The synchronic perspective of polarisation—the clash of various political actors at a particular time—will be scrutinised later. Dnevnik made an effort not to disguise polarisation but to present it in a balanced manner, e.g. by alternating securitarian and solidary articles in equal measure. Thus, on 12 Sept 2015, Dnevnik informed us that 'over one thousand migrants have been apprehended for entering Bulgaria over the past ten days' but also that on the occasion of the European Day of Solidarity with Refugees, a rally took place in Sofia under the slogan of 'People aren't illegal—xenophobia is' (Dnevnik, 12 Sept 2015). Another example of this balanced publishing policy is from October 2015. One article sounded uplifting and optimistic: 'Today, the European Commission will relocate the first group of refugees from Italy according to the quota system. D. Avramopoulos, the EU Commissary of Migration, said that this is a historic day for Europe. We witness a great example of European solidarity both with those who need asylum and between the member states themselves' (Dnevnik, 10 Oct 2015). Another article had a more pessimistic, down-to-earth tonality: 'Disunited Europe brings Balkan leaders together today because of refugees' (Dnevnik, 21 Oct 2015).

Unlike Dnevnik, 24 Chasa did not aim for a systematic balance but offered bombastic headings in the vein of 'fake news': '4 million refugees will leave Turkey for Europe' (24 Chasa, 30 Sept 2015); 'Bulgaria should expect 2 million refugees in the next 15 years' (24 Chasa, 11 Sept 2015). Both of these statements are taken not from editorials but from interviews with politicians—one international, one Bulgarian—but they express the editorial policy of the newspaper for a more affective discourse, which reinforces fears and negative attitudes.

*Responsibility* was articulated in two questions: *Who?* and *What?* Their answers were also strongly politicised and polarised.

*What?* is a key question for responsibility during the management of any crisis: what should be prioritised. The answers may be differentiated in two major clusters.

- The larger cluster has to do with quotas as an EU policy for responsibility sharing. Its political translations—'quotas have to apply to all EU member states, because the problem affects EU as a whole' (24 Chasa, 10 Sept 2015)—was formulated in Bulgaria by the Minister of the Interior R. Bachvarova. A similar statement was made by the Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Kuneva, one of the most pro-EU figures in the Bulgarian political elite: 'Accepting a quota of refugees is an expression of solidarity' (Dnevnik, 11 Sept 2015).
- Managing the reasons for a crisis is more important than managing its consequences. This cluster is often critical of quota policies and calls for decreasing the number of refugees rather than relocating them through quotas. According to the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 'the relocation quotas won't solve anything. We must discuss how not to stimulate refugee flows to Europe' (Dnevnik, 16 Sept 2015).

*Who* is responsible is the question that stirs the political and media discourse the most. Its strongly polarised answers disperse in several directions:

- EU as a collective entity. This is expressed in politics as shared, common efforts and the equal treatment of the problems in all member states. We find such a mix of messages in a statement by Tsetska Tsacheva, the Chair of the Bulgarian National Assembly, in Germany:

'Ms. Tsacheva called for European solidarity towards the refugee problem and urged the European Union to treat both sea and land borders equally' (Dnevnik, 6 May 2015).

- The national government and institutions. Paradoxically, this thesis had two opposite authors. It was stated by representatives of the government such as R. Bachvarova, Minister of the Interior: 'EU quotas must be mandatory. Bulgaria will meet its commitments' (Dnevnik, 22 Sept 2018). Of course, it sounded even more explicitly in the critical discourse of the opposition, which attacked the ruling parties about their inability to contain the crisis.
- Brussels rather than the national governments. The opposite stance—that Bulgaria should take no responsibility—had many more proponents. Already at this stage, the answers to the *Who* question delineated a trend that will be scrutinised during the next episodes of contention: the mainstreaming of de-responsibilisation. Paradoxically, we find criticisms of the EU quota policies and a demand for a special absolving statute for Bulgaria in the statements of two MEPs from opposing political parties: Iliana Yotova from BSP and Svetoslav Malinov from the Reformist Bloc (24 Chasa, 31 May 2015).
- Not just EU but the global community. Hungary suggested world quotas: 'All major players should take part in solving the refugee problems. It's not fair if Europe bears this burden alone' (Dnevnik, 30 Sept 2015). Perhaps in order to mitigate the clash with the European Commission, Orban proposed 'global quotas.'

The polarisation of Bulgarian political discourses can be arranged around several poles.

One pole is *European and liberal*. One of its staunch proponents was Rosen Plevneliev, the then Bulgarian President. He justified his stance with three groups of arguments: value-based ones: 'With every bit of fence, Europe stands divided against itself' (Dnevnik, 8 Oct 2015); political ones: Plevneliev called for shared responsibility, 'for unified and common European measures for solving the crisis' (Dnevnik, 16 Oct 2015); 'Europe is strong when it's united. The Bulgarian people is strong when it's united. We're Bulgarians but we're also Europeans. We're building our worthy place in the family of the European peoples, as Levski urged us' (24 Chasa, 6 Sept 2015); humanitarian ones: 'refugees are people like us. They're mothers and fathers, engineers and teachers. They're human beings in need. They flee the horrors of war and the terror machine of the Islamic State' (24 Chasa, 6 Sept 2015).

The opposite pole of active polarisation of the political discourse is *anti-quotas, anti-refugees, anti-Brussels*. Its most prominent proponent has been Volen Siderov, leader of the party bearing the emblematic name of Ataka (Attack). His stance revolved around two centres: hyperpoliticisation and confrontation. Hyperpoliticisation consisted of placing the highest possible priority on the refugee crisis; for Ataka, it was 'the issue of issues,' the indubitable centre of its political agenda: 'All other issues presently discussed in the plenary are secondary. This is Ataka's issue of issues. It must be solved quickly and with plenty of public vigour' (25 Sept 2015, Dnevnik). Confrontation with the ruling parties focused on their inability to take responsibility and took two political expressions: a suggested vote of no confidence because of the 'uncontrollable and illegal invasion of migrants into Bulgaria' (21 Oct 2015) and an appeal for early elections because of 'the government's inability to deal with the refugee crisis' (25 Sept 2018). Paradoxically—and this paradox will recur in the other sections of this paper—the second proponent of the anti-refugee and anti-EU rhetoric came from the opposite end of the political stage: from the Bulgarian

Socialist Party. On 11 Sept 2015, Dnevnik noted that BSP and the United Patriots were both against the EU quota policy.

*Polarisation between enemies, polarisation between partners.* Highly politicised topics naturally give rise to polarisation between the ruling parties and the opposition, between mainstream and extremist parties. Such polarisation was also caused by a humanitarian tragedy: the death of an illegal immigrant near the town of Sredets, shot by a police officer. Then two parties voiced their strong disapproval of the ruling parties. The ruling parties were represented by R. Bachvarova, Minister of the Interior, who in this case expressed the position of complete institutional irresponsibility: 'There will be no resignations in the Ministry of the Interior. This has been a "tragical accident"' (Dnevnik, 16 Oct 2015). The opposite humanitarian position was expressed by the Movement of Rights and Freedoms in its declaration: 'Shooting people dead kills not only refugees but also the idea of a humane, democratic and free Europe' (Dnevnik, 16 Oct 2015). The Movement for Citizens party from the Reformist Bloc also called for an emergency meeting of the Parliamentary Commission on Public Order and Security (Dnevnik, 16 Oct 2015).

Polarisation within the ruling parties is less expected and more interesting. An instance of such polarisation occurred inside Boyko Borisov's government during the analysed period. Even more curiously, the stances of the ministers were reversed: Minister of the Interior R. Bachvarova systematically accepted the responsibility for quotas, whereas Minister of External Affairs D. Mitov criticised them vehemently: 'The quota principle seems absurd' (Dnevnik, 22 Oct 2015), 'The relocation quotas will solve nothing' (Dnevnik, 16 Sept 2015). Mitov's criticisms of EU policies varied from explicit confrontation ('EU must not maintain the uncontrolled influx of people,' Dnevnik, 16 Sept 2015) to irony: 'In Europe nowadays, if you're given asylum, you get to stay, and if you're not, you stay anyway' (Dnevnik, 20 Oct 2015).

Interestingly, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov took a stance in the middle between his ministers' occasionally polarised discourses: 'The refugee quotas are no solution, they only fuel the nationalists. EU should pay Turkey to keep refugees closer to their homelands' (Dnevnik, 15 Oct 2015). A possible explanation of this 'pluralism' is that it served to reinforce the image of the Prime Minister as a mediator who does not take extremist stances but looks for solutions—such as the proposed policy of externalising the refugee management and transferring the responsibility from EU to Turkey.

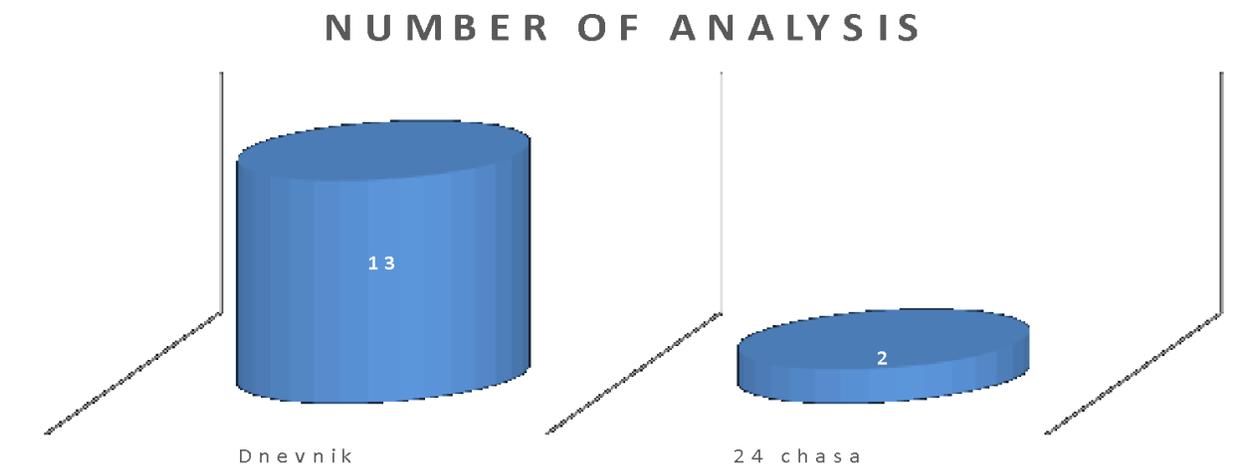
*Religionisation of politicisation* is a key feature of the Bulgarian public debate. We can observe the politicisation of religion and the religionisation of politics in all post-communist countries. A characteristic of Bulgarian nationalism is its close connection with Orthodox Christianity (Krasteva 2015). The Holy Synod announced its opposition to the intake of any more refugees in Bulgaria (22 Sept 2015, Dnevnik). The religionisation of politicisation vividly illustrates the dual nature of polarisation. The leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church assumed one of the extreme political stances on responsibility towards migrants—the refusal to take such responsibility. The other aspect of this polarisation is its presence within the church itself: Rafail-Rosen Stefanov, an abbot, qualified the stance of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as anti-Christian and asked pointed questions about its responsibility (26 Sept 2015, Dnevnik).

The media actively covered the increasing *European polarisation* between the EC and the Visegrád Four. Out of their numerous articles, I will quote only one. On 22 Sept 2015, Dnevnik published two items, representing the view of both poles: 'The Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Latvia rejected the quotas again' vs. 'An EC infringement procedure against the countries that do not register migrants.'

#### 4.1.2. The intellectuals' debate: polarisation or consensus

Dnevnik provided a larger platform for analytical articles—13 throughout the monitored period, as opposed to only two in 24 Chasa.

**Figure 7:** Number of analytical articles in Dnevnik and 24 chasa in May-November 2015



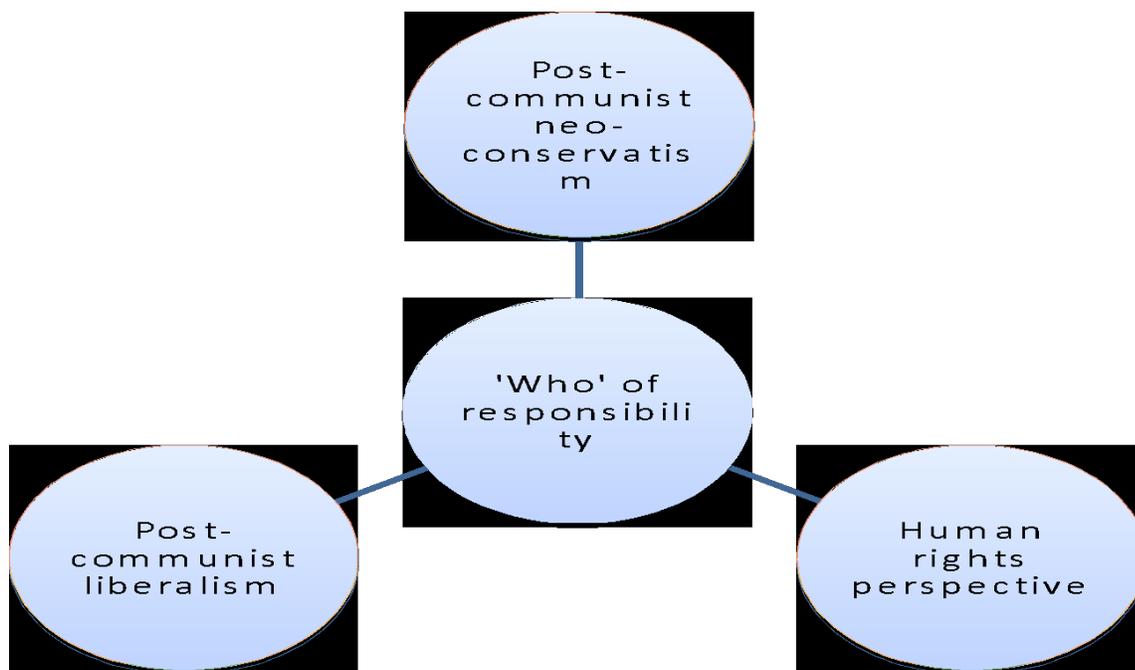
Source: author's elaboration

These articles, though few in number, are interesting for two reasons: 1) they introduced a new type of discourse: intellectual one, which is more independent, less interlinked with political centres of power; 2) they were more analytical, offering more substantial and intriguing argumentation. It is worth noting that most of their authors are public intellectuals, with a wide access to electronic media, so the proposed ideas had a greater audience than the boutique readership of analytical media and longer texts. Expectedly, the articles commented not so much on specific policies such as quotas but on the more general political issues of responsibility, solidarity, the interplay between EU and national refugee policies.

The corpus of analytical articles may be summarised by two relatively opposing characteristics: strong polarisation and asymmetrically large clusters. The liberal cluster was significantly larger, which stems both from Dnevnik's editorial policy and the circle of its contributors.

The issue of responsibility was the most polarising. We can distribute its analyses into three clusters: post-communist neo-conservatism, post-communist liberalism, and the human rights perspective.

**Figure 8:** The three poles of the intellectual debate on responsibility



Source: author's elaboration

#### 4.1.2.1. Post-communist conservatism

Momchil Doychev vehemently criticised the EU lack of responsibility in an article provocatively entitled, 'If we're lacking in sympathy, the West is lacking in political common sense': 'What have Western Europeans done to help those people while they were still in their home countries? What have they done to stop Assad and the Islamic State? Why did they effectively leave only the US to fight world terrorism? During the US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, left liberals blamed the States for interfering abroad by military and undemocratic means. When the US doesn't intervene now, they're to blame again—this time because they aren't intervening! Besides offering sympathy and humanitarian aid, what has the EU done for the security of those people and, indeed, for its own security?'<sup>4</sup> Doychev is an associate professor in political science, who identifies himself as an anti-liberal and is typical of the post-communist neo-conservatism. The pathos, affectivity, the message about the EU (ir)responsibility are intimately related to the far-right discourse. What distances the author from the latter is his ardent defence of the responsible stance of the US: most far-right formations in Bulgaria have an affinity for Russia and their criticisms of EU do not contain praise for the US. EU irresponsibility is presented as complete: the failure to address the reasons for the crisis, the inefficiency to integrate Muslims in Europe, the inability of 'leftist liberals' to take responsibility for the security and destiny of Western civilisation: 'What did leftist liberals' multiculturalism and political correctness bring to their own countries, where it's already meaningless to talk about integration of the huge Muslim "minorities," which have in fact become majorities in various

<sup>4</sup> Doychev, Momchil. 'If we're lacking in sympathy, the West is lacking in political common sense.' In: Dnevnik, 14 Sept 2015.

[https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/09/14/2607939\\_ako\\_na\\_nas\\_ni\\_lipsva\\_suchuvstvie\\_na\\_zapada\\_mu\\_lipsva/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/09/14/2607939_ako_na_nas_ni_lipsva_suchuvstvie_na_zapada_mu_lipsva/)

European regions and cities? Leftist liberals cannot grasp the simple fact that it's one thing to flee war and dictatorship, and quite another to flee to the West and claim its welfare, without contributing to its existence. This "refugee" wave is the end result of the suicidal political correctness of our civilisation.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.1.2.2. Human rights perspective

The human rights perspective on responsibility was formulated most clearly by Teodora Dimova: 'Here's the real question and the real issue: Why does Western Europe treat them as hospitably and tolerantly as it did Bulgarians when they fled across the barbed wire, while we're inhospitable, intolerant, hostile and afraid now? Why are we so different from the normal European peoples? That is the real question and the real issue.'<sup>6</sup> Dimova posed the question about responsibility as a moral imperative in two complementary perspectives: a normative and a European one. Responsibility about hospitality towards refugees sounds like a media version of Kant's high ideal about universal hospitality. The second perspective—in a utopian rather than an analytic manner—puts Europe on the pedestal of having taken full responsibility for hospitality towards refugees, unlike Bulgaria.

#### 4.1.2.3. Post-communist liberalism

The liberal pole was represented by its major intellectual speakers in Bulgarian public space. They formulate two main messages: the lack of solidarity in Eastern Europe and in Bulgaria specifically is due to the specific historical heritage – lack of democratic experience in managing diversity and rising xenophobic and racist attitudes in populist and securitarian time; the need of common European policy and shared responsibility with concrete proposals for policy measures. Ivan Krastev assumed a more analytic position and reflected on the reasons for lack of sympathy for the refugees and for solidarity in Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup> Ivaylo Dichev was more critical, openly attacking the racism of Bulgarian attitudes on rejecting refugees.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Smilov combined criticism of 'the hybrid war against reason' with suggestions about specific policy measures for sharing responsibility and a common EU and international policy: 'Civilisations perish when they lose their sense of proportion and begin overreacting. When they start mistaking metaphors for realities. Europe has enormous resources—financial and military—therefore the crises that can endanger it are the ones it has engendered itself. Such as a military hysteria against a vaguely defined enemy. And the solutions to the present crisis aren't even that controversial: tightened security, including coordination between the services of the EU states and of their NATO partners; a coordinated common control over the external borders with a clear policy for registering all immigrants; a common regulation about the admission and accommodation of refugees; distinguishing between economic migrants and refugees and repatriating the former.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Dimova, T. 'The barbed wire.' In: Dnevnik, 15 Sept 2015.  
[https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/09/15/2610397\\_bodlivata\\_tel/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/09/15/2610397_bodlivata_tel/)

<sup>7</sup> Krastev, I. 'The deficit of sympathy in Eastern Europe.' In: Dnevnik, 9 Sept 2015.  
[https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/09/09/2606538\\_deficitut\\_na\\_suchuvstvie\\_na\\_iztochna\\_evropa/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/09/09/2606538_deficitut_na_suchuvstvie_na_iztochna_evropa/)

<sup>8</sup> Dichev, I. 'The racism of small peoples like ours.' In: Dnevnik, 7 Oct 2015.  
[https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/10/07/2623801\\_rasizmut\\_na\\_malki\\_narodi\\_kato\\_bulgarskiia/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/10/07/2623801_rasizmut_na_malki_narodi_kato_bulgarskiia/)

<sup>9</sup> Smilov, D. 'The hybrid war against reason.' In: Dnevnik, 21 Nov 2015.  
[https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/11/21/2654219\\_hibridnata\\_voina\\_sreshtu\\_razuma/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/11/21/2654219_hibridnata_voina_sreshtu_razuma/)

24 Chasa was more laconic in its analyses, providing only two during the monitored period. One reflected on the growing chasm between the proud national memory, proving the capacity of Bulgarian society to take exceptional responsibility, such as the salvation of Bulgarian Jews during World War Two, and its contemporary reluctance and inability to take responsibility for refugees: 'Are we truly the Evil Force of Europe, no longer known as the country that saved its Jews (not all of them, unfortunately) but as the country that turned back the Syrians who were fleeing war?' (24 Chasa, 28 Aug 2015). The other article listed socio-economic reasons to justify the refusal to take humanitarian and political responsibility for refugees: 'Bulgaria is a poor state with limited resources. And the desire to burden Bulgaria with such an onerous responsibility demonstrates one thing: the desire of certain EU leaders to shirk the refugee crisis, to impose an obviously ineffectual solution on member states, which, being at the periphery of the continent, should act as Europe's sanitary zone, a dampening buffer for the crisis' (24 Chasa, 8 Sept 2015).

#### **4.1.3. Parliamentary discourse in 2015: timid humanitarianisation vs. vehement securitisation**

The parliamentary discourse in 2015 was marked by two political declarations. From the perspective of politicisation, it is interesting to note that they were made by two different sides of the political stage: the first declaration, from 4 Sept 2015, came from the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and the second, from 11 Sept 2015, from the Patriotic Front. Thus we heard the left-wing and the far-right version of the new challenges facing the refugee policies. Characteristically, the ruling party GERB, a right-wing member of the European People's Party, did not make a parliamentary declaration to explicitly state its position.

##### *4.1.3.1. The socialist perspective: humanitarianisation vs. securitisation*

The refugee situation was defined as 'a crisis that demands historic solutions.' It was considered from the dual perspective of humanitarianisation and securitisation: 'On the one hand, the human drama of hundreds of thousands who have left their homelands and taken the risk to travel for hundreds of kilometres. On the other, the challenge facing EU countries that have been entered by thousands of people, who place an extra burden on their social systems and carry all security risks defined in various conventions and strategies.' The humanitarian perspective was laconically presented in the above excerpt; the securitarian one dominated the entire declaration: 'Our borders are subjected to pressure. There are transition networks and channels acting in Bulgaria too. Hundreds of foreigners with no papers turn up in the capital. Bulgarians get involved in a criminal international human trafficking, with dozens of casualties, the kind of trafficking that severely smears the reputation of our country. We are threatened with the return of several thousands of refugees, who were first registered in Bulgaria.'

The declaration came with a clear performative ambition to shape public attitudes and mental maps in the direction of securitisation: 'Social systems have been additionally burdened. And we can imagine the response of Bulgarians in those settlements where new refugee accommodation centres are about to be opened.' This performative ambition bore real fruit, as the population in various Bulgarian cities and towns treated even tiny groups of refugees, as few as one or two families, with manifest hostility.

The securitisation of the refugee policy included strong criticisms of EU institutions and policies: 'lack of coordination between the individual EU services and bodies; absence of a unified and comprehensive strategy for the EU states.' The criticisms were even stronger with respect to the deficient preparation, commitment and efficiency of Bulgarian institutions: 'The President is silent. The leadership of the National

Assembly did not respond to BSP's proposal for an emergency meeting in August. The government has been absorbed in election events.'

Paradoxically for a left-wing, opposition party, the proposed political decisions were entirely along the lines of securitisation as well as concentration of power and a 'strong hand' approach: 'the Prime Minister should personally take over the coordination of all issues related to refugees, internal and external alike; we demand more decisive measures for countering and containing illegal trafficking; the President should summon the Consultative Council on National Security.'

#### *4.1.3.2. The nationalists' perspective: de-responsibilisation from European asylum policy*

The declaration featured the highly affective tone and provocative rhetoric characteristic of far-right populist parties. It contained a fierce indictment of EU policies and institutions, embodied by Jean-Claude Juncker: 'The Patriotic Front sharply objects against the intended mandatory relocation quotas for illegal immigrants proposed by EC President Jean-Claude Juncker. The notion of mandatory relocation quotas contradicts and violates the national sovereignty of each EU member state to determine and decide whom it shall admit and give residence to on its own territory.'

The refugee phenomenon was defined strictly within the securitarian spectrum through three types of threats: 'the obvious menace of hundreds of thousands of young men invading the European continent. The menace is economic, demographic and especially cultural, because these immigrants carry other traditions, mores, values; these people do not want to integrate into the local communities, which have offered them their hospitality.' The affective discourse concentrated around two poles: fierce criticism and sarcasm. The latter permeated the acerbic interpretation of the relocation quotas as a violation of the refugees' rights to choose rich countries, ergo not to stay in Bulgaria: 'The absurd and unjustified notion of mandatory relocation quotas will explicitly discriminate against the citizens of North Africa and the Middle East who are seeking asylum and welfare. Due to the considerably different economic standards of the EU member states, immigrants will be put at a distinct disadvantage if they are forced to settle in Turnu Măgurele or Batanovtsi, rather than Paris or Berlin.'

The political proposal of the nationalist coalition was a definitive rejection of the quota policy: 'The Patriotic Front demands that the Bulgarian government unequivocally and explicitly reject the proposed mandatory relocation quotas; the Patriotic Front does not accept the notion that anyone who wishes to resettle to an EU member state has the right to do so. We do not subscribe to the idea that anyone who wishes for welfare, a free home and free healthcare, has the right to get them at the expense of taxpayers.'

I will summarise the parliamentary discourse in 2015 in three directions:

- Firstly, the refugee policy was politicised through the mobilisation of the opposition. Both BSP and the patriotic coalition were opposition parties in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Bulgarian Parliament.
- Secondly, there was no polarisation, because the predominant securitisation of the refugee policy came from opposite ends of the political stage: more timid and moderate in BSP's case (at least for the time being; later on, BSP would embrace

nationalist rhetoric more enthusiastically); extreme, uncompromising and fierce in the nationalist interpretation.

- Thirdly, de-responsibilisation from the EU policies for managing the refugee crisis.

#### **4.2. Second episode of contention. The 2016 presidential campaign: Mainstreaming of the anti-refugee and anti-European migration policy discourse**

The second case study for the Bulgarian research is the **presidential election in 2016**. It was selected for four reasons:

- The salience of the migration/refugee issues in the election campaign.
- The abundance of political discourses in a variety of forms: speeches, interviews, debates among candidates, slogans, images, etc.
- The electoral impact of the refugee issues, with a nationalist candidate coming third with a high result and an impressive increase of 1700% of the vote for Krasimir Karakachanov between 2011 and 2016.
- The transition from a far-right extremist discourse against refugees to the mainstreaming of the anti-immigrant and anti-Brussels discourse.

##### *4.2.1. The refugee issue in the nationalist offer: thematic clusters and electoral impact*

The 2016 presidential elections featured the political debut of a new nationalist formation: the United Patriots coalition, comprising the political parties Ataka, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), and National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria. Their presidential candidate pair also represented two parties: Krasimir Karakachanov from IMRO and Yavor Notev from Ataka. The refugee issues took centre stage in the nationalist campaign. The voluminous discourse can be grouped into several clusters.

The first one was *Bulgaria's national interest*, which was presented as incompatible with the migrant influx: 'We have absolutely no interest and must not allow Bulgaria to be flooded by illegal migrants.'<sup>10</sup> In order to streamline the connection between the two elements of the message—national interest vs. immigration, the latter was portrayed as illegal. As a rule, nationalists avoid using the word 'refugees,' so as to distance themselves from humanitarian politics, and emphasize 'illegal migration,' so as to bring in the securitarian aspect.

The second major cluster was the *definitive de-responsibilisation and de-Europeanisation*, rejecting the notion that Bulgaria should participate in common EU policies: 'We cannot allow Bulgaria to fall victim to the irresponsible European politics of certain large countries'<sup>11</sup>; 'We've witnessed the fact that the EU leaders pursue an absolutely mistaken policy, which let Europe be flooded by over 2 million illegal

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<sup>10</sup> 'Karakachanov and Notev introduced "Bulgaria above All"', 28 Sept 2016.

<http://www.nbox.bg/politics/item/36755-karakachanov-i-notev-predstaviha-balgariya-nad-vsichko.html>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

immigrants, all of them part of the Muslim religion, which has nothing to do with the cultural character of Europe's Christian identity.'<sup>12</sup>

The third cluster conflated security policies with identity politics in the extremely negative and affective language of *alarming the population about the danger of radical Islam*: “In the autumn of 2012, we signalled society about the menace to the constitutional order in Bulgaria, about the emergence of radical Islam, whose followers do not want to obey our laws. Then, we were called by any number of names; now—with fundamentalism rising across Europe—we’ve been proven right,” said Krasimir Karakachanov and Yavor Notev, candidates for president and vice-president.’<sup>13</sup> This cluster is vital for nationalists, since it emphasises the continuity of their politics. They claim the original authorship over the anti-immigrant topic: it predates both the presidential campaign and the developments in Europe and Bulgaria. ‘We’ve been in the town of Pazardzhik since 2012, when the trial against the 13 imams began: Muslim preachers accused of instigating religious hatred and antidemocratic ideology. We’ve been here during all the hearings ....’<sup>14</sup>

What was the electoral impact of the hyperpoliticisation and prioritisation of the migration/refugee issue in the nationalist political strategy? It was significant: it has mobilised about half a million voters for the past decade. It is particularly impressive if we compare the vote for K. Karakachanov, who rose from the modest 33,236 votes in 2006 to the impressive 573,016 votes in 2016.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.novini.bg/news/380700-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%B5-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B5-%D0%B6%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

**Table 1:** Nationalist vote in the presidential elections of the last decade 2006, 2011, 2016

Candidate	Party	First round		Second round	
		Votes	%	Votes	%
<b>2006</b>					
<b>Volen Siderov</b>	Ataka	597,175	21.45%	649,387	24.05%
<b>2011</b>					
<b>Volen Siderov</b>	Ataka	122,466	3.64%		
<b>Krasimir Karakachanov</b>	IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement	33,236	0.99%		
Total		155,702	4.63%		
<b>2016</b>					
<b>Krasimir Karakachanov</b>	United Patriots	573,016	14.97%		

Source: author's elaboration on the base of electoral results

Another comparison—between Karakachanov 2016 and Siderov 2006—casts a different light on the diachronic dynamics of the nationalist vote. The two elections are separated by a decade, but their results are strikingly similar: the difference between Karakachanov 2016 (573,016) and Siderov 2006 (597,175) is a mere 20,000 votes.<sup>15</sup> Siderov's results during the first round were higher; they became even more so during the second round in 2006, when Siderov had 649,387 votes, i.e. 76,371 more than Karakachanov's result in 2016. This second diachronic perspective overturns the conclusions of the first one: the nationalist vote in presidential elections over the past decade has not been an arrow but a wave; it does not form an ever-ascending trend but has its ebbs and flows.

There is indeed a cardinal difference in the nationalist results during the 2006 and 2016 presidential elections, yet it is not about the number of votes but about the impact of the nationalist rhetoric and messages on the campaign as a whole.

#### 4.2.2. *The explosion of classical cleavages*

<sup>15</sup> In the 2006 presidential elections, there were two more nationalist pairs: Petar Beron and Stela Bankova, proposed by an Initiative Committed, gained 21,812 votes, or 0.78%; Grigor Velez and Yordan Mutafchiev from Complete Bulgaria had 19,857 votes, or 0.71%.

‘My preferences naturally lie with Marine Le Pen,’ said an MP from BSP.<sup>16</sup> Two messages from this brief quotation are vital for my analysis: the political proximity of the left-wing Bulgarian MP with the French far-right, and the ‘naturalness’ of this paradox. The MP, Ivo Hristov, became one<sup>17</sup> via a flight from the television screen to the parliamentary seat exactly because of his systematic and abundant anti-EU, anti-globalist, anti-elitist rhetoric. This example is symptomatic of the turnabout of the situation since the beginning of the democratic transition: then, the major parties, including BSP, outsourced the nationalist discourse; nowadays, they co-opt and ‘reward’ nationalist and populist voices.

I choose to begin with the above quotation, because it characterises the trend that I will analyse in this section: the hegemonisation of the nationalist discourse. If one has to define the *differentia specifica* of the 2016 presidential election, it was the domination of nationalist rhetoric. Two phenomena contributed to this unique result: the multiplication and diversification of nationalist speakers outside of the nationalist party spectrum; the forceful penetration of nationalist rhetoric, especially in the leftist spectrum. The refugee issue was a permanent element in the rhetoric of Rumen Radev, an independent candidate who was elected with the support of BSP. Candidate for Vice-president Iliana Yotova, a member of BSP, demonstrated the same spirit: ‘Bulgaria has no sovereignty when it comes to migration. My heavy-hearted prediction is that Schengen Europe will isolate itself. It will become closed, whether by fences or by more police. Unfortunately, the most burdensome issue will have to be solved here, in the border states.’<sup>18</sup>

The refugee issue played a key role in Rumen Radev’s presidential platform. This conclusion stems from two groups of observations: discursive and political. Radev discussed the issue much more exhaustively and frequently than GERB’s candidate Tsetska Tsacheva, who dwelt on it mostly when it was explicitly brought up: e.g. in a television debate between the two major contenders. Then, already at the start of his mandate, Rumen Radev transformed his securitarian approach to refugees into policies, putting pressure on the caretaker government appointed by him to repeal the regulation on the integration of refugees adopted by GERB in the summer of 2016. Radev and Yotova’s key messages can be grouped as follows:

- Refugees are not a humanitarian but a securitarian issue. They are described as ‘young migrants with no families’: ‘Young migrants with no families have been entering our country. During my tour around Sofia, I’ve seen locations where people are afraid to go after dark because of the migrants’ presence.’<sup>19</sup> ‘We need more urgent measures for extraditing foreigners.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The beginning of May 2017.

<sup>17</sup> During the parliamentary elections on 26 March 2017.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.blitz.bg/politika/kandidatt-za-vitseprezident-iliyana-yotova-stranata-ni-nyama-suveren-potnoshenie-na-migratsiya\\_news456718.html](http://www.blitz.bg/politika/kandidatt-za-vitseprezident-iliyana-yotova-stranata-ni-nyama-suveren-potnoshenie-na-migratsiya_news456718.html)

<sup>19</sup> <https://trud.bg/%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%80%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%B2-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BB%D1%8A%D0%BA-%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BC/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=832314>

- Refugees threaten a change in the ethnic and religious composition of the Bulgarian people. ‘Our children leave for Europe, the ruling parties replace them with refugees.’<sup>21</sup>
- Anti-EU rhetoric. EU was presented as a conspirator against Bulgaria’s interests: ‘We must know if there is a scenario for the lasting settlement of refugees, for funding additional refugee camps with EU money. Can our demographic situation be solved by importing foreigners?’<sup>22</sup> Bulgaria in turn was painted as someone who cannot protect her position in front of the Brussels big brother: ‘Currently, our position is to wait for EU, and while we’re waiting, we see borders close to the west and north, while refugees keep going in and out of our territory. It will get increasingly harder for them to go out, but they’re coming in at a constant rate.’<sup>23</sup>

The 2016 presidential campaign vividly demonstrated the explosion of the classical cleavages of left vs. right and the strong convergence of the left with the far-right in terms of anti-immigrant and anti-European rhetoric. The same explosion has taken place all across EU, but the Bulgarian version has its peculiarities. The major one: that Bulgarian left-wing parties do not uphold solidarity but rather scoop up securitarian rhetoric.

#### **4.3. Third episode of contention. Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU: From European agenda to polarisation to radical de-responsibilisation and de-Europeanisation**

Bulgaria began its Presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2018 with an explicit pro-European agenda and ended it with a similarly explicit rejection of European solidarity and shared responsibility. Its strategic EU priority during this period—the first presidency of a new member state—concerned the EU integration of the Western Balkans as a common European responsibility. The de-responsibilisation from common EU policies concerned the refugee policy. The present paper does not aim to examine the entire process; it will focus on the responsibility about the refugee policy. I will base my analysis on two parliamentary minutes from the end of the presidency: on 13 July 2018, the Bulgarian parliament—including Prime Minister Boyko Borisov—discussed a *Report on the Participation of the Republic of Bulgaria in the EU Decision-Making Process during the Bulgarian Presidency of EU*; on 20 July 2018, it passed a resolution following query No 854-05-41 from 20 June 2018 by MP Kornelia Ninova to Prime Minister Borisov regarding the governmental policy on the issues of migration in Bulgaria and Europe.

We must note that it is a rare phenomenon for two dramatic transitions to take place during a parliamentary session (or even two related sessions): from party confrontation to mainstreaming, and from a policy of EU responsibility to a policy of de-responsibilisation from refugee policies. We will analyse those emblematic transitions by structuring the debate of the two related parliamentary sessions into five

<sup>21</sup> <http://bulpress.info/%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%80%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B2-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.cross.bg/bezhantzi-radev-rymen-1521379.html#.WH9f7lN97cs>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

parts: pro-EU stance of dialogue and building bridges for sharing responsibility; intense confrontation; political ignorance; outsourcing of responsibility; rejection of the common EU asylum policy.

*Building bridges as a prerequisite for a common policy and shared responsibility.* This was the leading thesis in Prime Minister Borisov's statement from 13 July 2018: 'The issues of migration and protection of the external borders of EU remain problematic and form the focus of the EU political debates. Using the experience from our relations with Turkey and our other neighbours, we managed to unite our European partners around continuing the dialogue with Turkey. That was the purpose of the meeting in Varna, which restored the dialogue between the EU institutions and Turkey and reasserted the commitment to provide an additional 3 billion Euro by the EU Mechanism to the refugees in Turkey. The European Council confirmed that Turkey remains a key partner of EU and will continue their collaboration in the field of migration and others' (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 6). The thesis of refugee policies as a shared European responsibility and a common policy was also presented by Dzhema Grozdanova from GERB, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Bulgarian National Assembly: 'Completing the reforms in the area of asylum policy has no alternative, and finding a compromise solution is key. The only way to protect the external borders is for the European Union to stay united on this issue and consider the need to support those member states that form the first line ....' (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 13). Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev added a financial argument about the mutual benefit from the connection between Bulgarian and European migration policies: 'the significantly increased funds for Instruments for Migration and Security have grown from 17.5 billion to 62 billion' (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 27).

*Asylum policy as a source of new and old divisions and a strong inter-party confrontation.* The refugee/migration policy was introduced by BSP leader Kornelia Ninova with a cascade of considerations, three of which are particularly relevant for our study.

The first consideration defined migration, not as a subject of shared responsibility and common policy, but as a new demarcation line: 'unfortunately, during and after Bulgaria's presidency, Europe has become more separated than ever. Not only were old differences reinforced but new faults opened, and some of these concerned key questions for the future of EU and Bulgaria, such as migration ....' (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 8). 'The position of the Visegrád Four has long become clear: raising walls between us rather than seeking an all-European unity and harmony. This is the kind of impasse, lack of leadership and of solutions to this problem, that Europe is facing now. Where does Bulgaria stand?' (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 23).

The second axis of confrontation explosively mixed criticisms of the inefficiency of the Bulgarian presidency and the failure to revise the Dublin Regulation: 'In the document that we have adopted—defence, security and migration, and more precisely: reaching an agreement by the Bulgarian Presidency and adopting a revised Dublin Regulation on Migration. No results on this issue. On the contrary: aggravation of the problems and conflicts! Why did you make no progress on revising the Dublin Regulation? Moreover, what made you say, "We have failed to properly protect the European external borders and let through 60 thousands emigrants into Europe"? Instead of demanding changes in the Dublin Regulation and rejecting the return of these emigrants to Bulgaria stipulated by this Dublin Regulation....'(National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 9). The rejection of shared responsibility, of

readmitting the refugees registered in Bulgaria, would become a major leitmotif of the analysed parliamentary debate and a key element in the political turnabout.

The third group of considerations presented vehement criticisms of the interpretation of the migrant integration policy as ‘a source of workforce for the Bulgarian economy and as a positive factor for the demographic crisis in Bulgaria.’ This positive and pro-European stance had been elaborated in a strategy adopted by the ruling party GERB. During the parliamentary debate, it was attacked so fiercely by the leader of BSP that the Prime Minister felt compelled to plead that it only concerned Ukrainians, Belarusians, Moldovans, Bessarabian Bulgarians, Macedonians and Serbs, who were needed by businesses. From labour integration, the debate leaped into the field of identity politics with a quotation by Orbán—K. Ninova’s most respected authority, paradoxical as this may sound for a socialist leader: ‘Orbán and the Visegrád Four as a whole: “migrants threaten the identity of the peoples on the Old Continent”’ (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 7).

The nationalists introduced another axis into the debate: the asymmetric responsibility of Bulgarian politicians to their home country and to EU, with a definitive domination of the former. Volen Siderov, the leader of Ataka, defined political responsibility and a common stance as ‘care for the country’: ‘No foreigner loves Bulgaria more than we do. Therefore, let us assume the care for our country; where Bulgaria is concerned, let us be united; and when we have to face the external world, let us say: we forget all our internal strife and stand together in order to ensure a common victory ....’ (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 17-18). Transferred to refugee policies, this thesis escalated into a criticism of EU: ‘For the first time, the Bulgarian government stated Bulgaria’s interest and said that this interest is above the rest, above our partnership. We showed that we do not want to be a buffer and periphery of Europe. We showed it clearly, stated it resolutely.’ (National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 16).

Bulgarian politics and institutions have one peculiarity which is hard to explain to EU institutions: *political ignorance*, the lack of knowledge and understanding of fundamental terms and policies by politicians. Here is an illustration from the parliamentary debate: ‘If we must deliberate here on the actual problem, I will say that it lies not with the illegal but with the legal migration, because with the documents we ratified when we entered the European Union, the Geneva Convention and all the rest, for everyone who comes to our border, to any official checkpoint and requests asylum, we are obliged to grant asylum. And as soon as they get this document, they become ours—“ours” in quotation marks, because if they aren’t admitted to Germany, Austria, and so on, they have nowhere to go.’ (Boyko Borisov, National Assembly minutes, 13 July 2018: 35). Bulgaria ratified the Geneva Convention in 1993, not during its accession to EU in 2007, there is no document that binds any country to grant asylum to anyone who seeks it, and there is no country that implements such a policy .... How the absence of key knowledge about certain policies reflects on the allocation of responsibilities in the implementation of these policies is a question beyond the ambitions of the present study.

*Outsourcing of responsibility.* During his intense confrontation with the socialist leader’s anti-immigration attacks, the Prime Minister changed his stance. It gradually transformed from building bridges for a more unified EU policy to their deconstruction; during the second parliamentary session, B. Borisov proudly announced that the Italian Prime Minister had asked him to readmit some refugees but he had resolutely refused. The dynamics of the parliamentary situation suggested another political option, which Borisov—a long-standing politician—employed masterfully: outsourcing the responsibility for the turnabout in the

government's policies. BSP had submitted a proposal for a resolution by the National Assembly, and Borisov decided that the ruling party GERB would support it. The resolution consisted of three points, of which the first one is central to our study: 'The National Assembly binds the Council of Ministers **not** to ratify any bilateral agreements for migrants' readmission.' Thus, the responsibility for the government's repudiation of EU solidarity was transferred to the Parliament.

*Consensus on de-responsibilisation.* The Resolution of the Bulgarian Parliament from 20 July 2018 was signed by Kornelia Ninova, leader of the BSP, and the chairpersons of all parliamentary groups:

1. It obliges the Council of Ministers not to sign bilateral agreements on the readmission of migrants.
2. It obliges the Council of Ministers to submit to the National Assembly a position for a common EU decision on migration issues.
3. By 30 September 2018, the Council of Ministers shall submit to the National Assembly proposals to Bulgaria for the reform of the so-called Dublin Admission System for Refugees, and in particular to Regulation (EC) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013.

177 MP voted and all 177 supported the Resolution.

The Resolution represents a remarkable consensus on the de-responsibilisation and de-Europeanisation of Bulgarian refugee politics at the end of our first Council Presidency ever.

## **5. Conclusions**

The issues of responsibility vis a vis refugees and the question who is responsible have been highly politicized in the Bulgarian political discourse. Three difference case studies – the debates during 2015 (May-November) on quota, responsibility, European and Bulgarian asylum policy; the presidential campaign in 2016 and the end of the first Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of European Union – have demonstrated the interest of numerous political actors and parties, both in government and opposition, the abundance of narratives and the high level of affection. I conceptualize this mix as hyperpoliticization.

The polarization has a variety of expressions – between humanitarian and securitarian argumentation, among pro- and anti-quota politicians. The polarization has 'logical' political forms – between government and opposition, but also paradoxical forms such as strong divergence of opinion on quota and responsibility among ministers of the same government.

The study demonstrated a convergence of the following trends: an increasing number of political actors – not only the nationalists, but also the left wing Bulgarian socialist party, as well as the independent and supported by the BSP candidate for president - placed the migration crisis in the centre of their political discourse and strategy. This trend is significant because it happens in a post-migration crisis situation, which means that the reasons are political – transforming the fears into electoral capital and transforming management of migration and integration into symbolic politics of Othering. Another trend is the weakening and marginalization of alternative voices – no big influential party defends liberal positions. The extreme intensification of affectivity of debates has been illustrated by the parliamentary debates where the arguments of the PM have been defeated by the extremely aggressive anti-European attack of the

leader of the BSP and the voted unanimously Resolution for refusal of readmission of refugees and de-responsabilisation on common European refugee policy.

All these trends develop in a situation of significant decrease of migration flows. Extreme politicisation of migration crisis in a situation of decrease of migration pressure is defined as a post-democratic migration crisis, which main characteristics are: the detachment from the reality, as well as the transition from a classic ad hoc crisis to a situation of permanent migration crisis. The interference of these trends demonstrates the transition from polarization to mainstreaming and hegemonisation of anti-relocation, anti-responsibility discourse which culminated in de-responsabilisation and de-Europeanisation of asylum policy in which government and opposition, left-wing, right-wing, and far-right converge.

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