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## THE METAPHORICAL PORTRAYAL OF MIGRANTS IN THE COMMENTS SECTIONS OF SERBIAN ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES

Online news comments have become an important part of digital public discourse and a convenient platform for voicing opinions on contentious social issues such as migration. Couching our study in the framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CHARTERIS-BLACK 2004; MUSOLFF 2016), in this paper we aim to: 1) identify metaphors used in the readers' comments on news articles to depict migrants and the migration process; 2) explore the role of metaphor in sustaining ideologies and conveying negative evaluations of migration and migrants. The analysis is based on metaphors found in a dataset comprising 1,235 readers' comments on 32 news articles published in various Serbian online news media reporting on six critical migrant-related events which occurred in Vojvodina, the northernmost part of Serbia, in the period of June to October 2023. Our findings show that in an attempt to communicate their fear for the safety of the local population, commenters resort to metaphors which structure migration as an *INVASION* and a *NATURAL DISASTER*, and migrants as *DANGEROUS HUMAN BEINGS*, *ANIMALS*, and *OBJECTS*. All the groups of metaphors serve to demonize and dehumanize this entire social group and cast migrants and migration as a threat to society. Such extremely disparaging characterizations of the Other appear to be instrumental in guiding the general public's perception of migrants and in creating and perpetuating the *Us vs. Them* dichotomy.

*Keywords:* migrants, dehumanizing metaphors, news articles, online news comments, othering, Serbian

### 1. Introduction

Despite the closing of the so-called Balkan corridor in 2016, Serbia has since witnessed a steady increase in migrant arrivals. The situation particularly worsened in 2022, when more than 120,000 new migrants and refugees entered Serbia, which was the highest number since 2016.<sup>2</sup> The adoption of the stricter border measures by the EU countries neighbouring Serbia, particularly Hungary and Croatia, which had so far usually implied the policy of pushing migrants back into Serbia, a chronic lack of accommodation in Ser-

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<sup>2</sup> See: [https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-update-december-2022#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20authorities%20reported%20129%2C679,%25\)%20and%20India%20\(4%25\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-update-december-2022#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20authorities%20reported%20129%2C679,%25)%20and%20India%20(4%25))

bian migrant centers, and a rather long time required for processing asylum applications all led to the flourishing of migrant smuggling activities on the Serbian borders. Different criminal groups of migrants, frequently helped by the local police officers and taxi drivers,<sup>3</sup> started to control not only border areas but also migrant reception facilities, in an attempt to profit from helping migrants to illegally enter the EU. This particularly refers to Vojvodina, the northernmost part of Serbia, and the cities close to the Hungarian border such as Subotica, where a number of violent incidents among migrant smuggling groups, including armed clashes, were reported and documented in 2022 and 2023. The incidents once again brought the issue of migration into sharp focus in Serbian media, attested *inter alia* by the number of readers' comments on news articles featuring this topic.

In this paper we investigate metaphors related to migration and migrants found in the readers' comments left on news articles published in a number of Serbian online news media reporting on migrant-related events which occurred in Serbia in the second part of 2023. While apparently communicating their fear for the safety of the local population, news article readers, as will be displayed, resort to hateful and abusive language rife with negative migration metaphors, i.e., metaphors which are used to vilify migrants and present this entire social group as a threat to Serbia as the host country.

## 2. Readers' comments as a type of authentic discourse

Hoping that readers' comments would aid democracy, since they are a form of citizens' participation in public debates (JUAREZ MIRO 2022: 858) and a way in which public opinion is formed, many newspapers have opened comments sections allowing the confrontation of different opinions and diverse viewpoints among their readers. Today, being one of the forms of user-generated content, online news comments have become part and parcel of news articles, originally designed to spur an online debate on a certain topic, which may develop when a number of users post comments on the same news item and reference others' comments (NAAB and KÜCHLER 2023: 441). This makes comments "a form of polylogue", i.e., "a form of online communication with multiple levels of dialogue and different levels of participation" (CAVASSO and TABOADA 2021: 5). Such type of online involvement in public discussions encourages sharing diverse views and thoughts as readers come from different backgrounds, cultures, and have different ideological profiles. Online commenting thus "reflect the mental models that readers as members of society and discursive communities create as a reaction to the discourse they have been exposed to" (ĐORĐEVIĆ 2020: 4).

The popularity of this form of communication may be attributed primarily to digital affordances of the internet, which foster interactivity, give users considerable freedom to express their opinions and concerns, and provide evidence from their personal experience about certain matters. The interactive nature of such communication can lead to voicing multiple opinions, including those that would potentially be blocked in traditional media, and such engagement of the general public may have a significant informative role. In addition, audience feedback is a helpful sign showing whether and how certain event reported in news articles resonates with the public. However, the online news comments section frequently becomes a space for venting harsh critical voices and

3 See: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/09/04/albanian-supplied-aks-fuel-violence-on-refugee-route-through-serbia/>

in the case of controversial topics such as migration, a place where extremely uncivil, hateful and xenophobic language is used since, more often than not, comments tend not to be moderated and curated, especially in Serbian media. Hence they may be regarded as authentic, unmediated type of genuine discourse, a real emotional response to a news article, and in that sense probably the best source of original and direct discursive practices.

A lack of restraint when communicating online may be related to “the anonymity of computer-mediated interactions that technically occur in the absence of physical bodies and faces” (YULIAWATI, SUGANDA et al. 2023: 2), which enables users to exercise verbal aggression in general terms or more specifically, aggression to other users, with little risk of their identity being disclosed. Since commenters thus feel less accountable for the impact of their utterances, it is claimed that online forums and news comments sections become spaces for “the discursive construction of the ‘Other’” (CATALANO and FIELDER 2018: 241).

### 3. Literature review

Migration has attested to be a hotly-debated topic and a fertile ground for research “due to its rich potential for polemical and emotional language as well as its socio-political and historical significance” (MUSOLFF 2011: 7). Many studies using mass media texts – news reports, feature articles, political speeches, online comments sections – as sources of data have researched the metaphorical underpinnings of migration discourse. According to these studies, there are a number of typical, mainly negative, figurative characterizations used in discourses across a range of linguistic and socio-political contexts which highlight the general view on migrants as dangerous and threatening. Migrants and migration are thus conceptualized as: DANGEROUS WATER/NATURAL DISASTER (CATALANO and FIELDER 2018; CHARTERIS-BLACK 2006; EL REFAIE 2001; MARTIN and FOZDAR 2022; SANTA ANA 2002); INVASION/WAR (GONÇALVES 2023; HART 2011; NEAGU and COLIPĂ-CIOBANU 2014; REIF 2023); PARASITE (MUSOLFF 2015, 2016); ANIMAL (GONÇALVES 2023; MUJAGIĆ and BERBEROVIĆ 2019; SANTA ANA 1999); WALL/CONTAINER (ĐUROVIĆ and SILAŠKI 2019; SILAŠKI and ĐUROVIĆ 2019); EPIDEMIC/ILLNESS (MUSOLFF 2011; REIF 2023); WEIGHT/BURDEN (CATALANO and FIELDER 2018). The host country is described as a CONTAINER, a HOME, a FORTRESS (CHARTERIS-BLACK 2006; MUSOLFF 2016; SILAŠKI and ĐUROVIĆ 2019) that is in danger from the out-group (migrants) against which the country should defend. In order to create positive representation of the receiving country discourse producers, according to the data, use metaphorical othering of migrants, which helps to create ideological bias, stir emotions, and shape attitudes.

Many of the above studies explored migration metaphors in readers’ comments sections and online forums. Musolff (2015) compared the use of dehumanizing metaphors in British debates about immigration, i.e., the portrayal of migrants as PARASITES, across three genres: online discussion forums, blogs, and mainstream newspapers. The ‘metaphor scenario’ analytical tool (MUSOLFF 2006) enabled the author to delineate four main scenarios which account for many metaphors already documented in the studies of other scholars who researched the role of metaphor in migrant discourse: the SPACE-CONTAINER; the MOVEMENT; the ACTION; and the EFFECT scenarios, whose one of the sub-scenarios is SCROUNGE in which migrants are characterized as PARASITES. Mu-

solff argues that whoever is using the PARASITE metaphor, irrespective of the genre examined, is aware of its strongly insulting effect and its previous deployment in historical racist discourses, which supports the view about the deliberate character of this metaphor. Mujagić (2018) investigated the rhetorical and ideological power of metaphors in Bosnian-Herzegovinian online readers' comments on the European migrant crisis. The structuring of migration as DANGEROUS WATERS and INVASION and migrants as ANIMALS may serve, the author believes, as an argumentation for introducing restrictive migration measures. Reif (2023) analyzed migration metaphors in online reader comments section of British mainstream and tabloid newspapers, particularly focusing on mixing the two source domains (e.g., ANIMAL and INVASION) to conceptualize the same target, whose aim is to achieve a dramatic effect through the exaggeration of the dimension of migration. This in turn emphasizes readers' emotional orientation, i.e., their negative stance towards this social group.

What all the above studies have in common is that they bear witness to "how metaphor is employed persuasively to provide cognitive frames for perspectives on social issues" (CHARTERIS-BLACK 2006: 565), and how migrant and migration representations through metaphors contribute to the processes of marginalization, discrimination and dehumanization.

It is therefore evident that, being an important part of public discourse, whose most distinctive characteristic is "the presence of evaluative language" (CAVASSO and TABOADA 2021: 6), online news comments have become a rich resource for exploring different discursive means such as, among others, metaphors. Since readers' comments section often turns into "a platform of derogatory and pejorative language" (ĐORĐEVIĆ 2020: 1), metaphor may appear as one of the strategies used to unfavourably represent a particular social group or policy, and affect public opinion in turn.

Therefore, in this paper, by focusing on six critical migrant-related events which occurred in the Subotica area in the period of June to October 2023, we aim to:

1. identify metaphors used in readers' comments on news articles to depict migrants and the process of migration;
2. explore the role of metaphor in sustaining ideologies and conveying negative evaluations of migration and migrants.

With these ends in view, we rely on the main tenets of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) (CHARTERIS-BLACK 2004; MUSOLFF 2016), which holds that the main role of metaphor is not only to make complex concepts more intelligible but also to reveal the intentions of language users beyond what is said and what is not said. According to CMA, the choice of a specific metaphor is ideological since by changing the metaphor we use, we may change the way that we think and feel about a particular aspect of social or political reality. The main goal of this approach to metaphor analysis is "to make explicit political and ideological motivations that would, otherwise, be implicit or concealed" (CHARTERIS-BLACK 2004: 29). By choosing what aspects of a concept they will emphasize by means of metaphor, in the process of conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another, discourse producers more or less consciously reveal their value judgments. Also, since CMA aims to understand the ideological role of metaphor in a specific discourse context, metaphors in this study are regarded as "a discursive, dynamic tool of

assimilating any target topic to a more familiar set of concepts in order to redirect and reshape its understanding” by the respective addressee, where what is ‘familiar’ is heavily dependent on the sociocultural context (MUSOLFF 2016: 91).

#### 4. Data and method

The data used for the analysis consist of 1,235 readers’ comments left on a total of 32 news articles reporting on six critical migrant-related events which occurred in Vojvodina in the period of June to October 2023. These articles were published on several Serbian online news portals (*N1*, *Nova S*, *021*, *Direktno*, *Gradsubotica.co*, *Mondo*, *Subotica.com*, *B92*) as well as online versions of three daily newspapers (*Danas*, *Srpski telegraf*, *Kurir*). The average number of comments left below the individual news articles depicting the six events was 205. The overview of the data is provided in Table 1.

MIGRANT-RELATED EVENT - description	No. of news articles	No. of comments	No. of words
1. Armed clashes between migrants in the forest of Makova Sedmica near the city of Subotica (17 Jun 2023), three migrants injured	7	174	3,847
2. Armed clashes between migrants in the forest of Makova Sedmica near the city of Subotica (26 Jun 2023), no data about casualties	6	170	6,393
3. The police operation of arresting irregular migrants near the city of Subotica (1 Aug 2023)	2	223	4,715
4. Armed clashes between migrants near the Lidl supermarket in the city of Subotica (8 Sep 2023), one migrant killed	5	286	8,853
5. Armed clashes between migrants in Hajdukovo, a suburban part of the city of Subotica (11 Sep 2023), one migrant killed, three migrants injured	4	116	2,971
6. Armed clashes between migrants near the town of Horgoš (27 Oct 2023), three migrants killed, one injured	8	266	7,299
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>1,235</b>	<b>34,078</b>

**Table 1.** Overview of the data

The data were collected in the period when the topic of migration started to win media attention again, particularly following reports of the intense activity of migrant smuggling groups, the formation of their communities in the forest near the city of Subotica, and the stories of witnesses about increasingly frequent exchanges of gunfire between the alleged Afghan, Moroccan, and Syrian gangs. Although there had already been a number of violent incidents involving migrants in Serbia in 2022, the situation near the Serbian-Hungarian border escalated particularly between mid and late 2023.<sup>4</sup> This gained special attention of the media, also evident in the number of comments accompanying news articles on the topic, in which commenters expressed their fear for the safety of the

4 See: <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/95214/incidenti-na-severu-srbije-sve-cesci-oruzani-sukobi-izmedu-grupa-krijumcara-migranata/vest>

local population. The material for our analysis is therefore based on the readers' comments on six prominent migrant-related news articles starting with the article describing the June 17, 2023 incident, in which the exchange of gunfire between migrants turned into an armed clash leaving three migrants injured, and ending with the October 27, 2023 article reporting on the incident in which at least three people died.

The readers' comments were carefully read by both authors and then manually analyzed to determine the metaphors used to depict MIGRANTS or the process of MIGRATION. The method used for metaphor identification was a procedure loosely based on the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), as we recognize that a discourse-oriented approach to the analysis of metaphors should be more liberal when establishing the presence of metaphoricity, especially compared to the rather rigid and, for our analysis, perhaps not entirely suitable dictionary-based word-by-word analyses suggested by the MIP. The process therefore employed a somewhat adapted MIP procedure which did not presuppose consulting the dictionaries for each lexical unit, but rather entailed focusing on words, phrases and even longer stretches of text metaphorically used in the specific context in an authentic data set. This is in line with a discourse-oriented approach to metaphor analysis (SEMINO 2008) which posits that "metaphoricity depends on the evolving discourse context, and that we can only understand metaphor in discourse by examining how it works in the flow of talk (or text)" (CAMERON, MASLEN et al. 2009: 71). It should be emphasized that identifying metaphors in anonymous readers' comments can be challenging, as it is often difficult to determine whether the author intended to use the language metaphorically or literally. This is exemplified by the term „džihad ratnici“ (*jihad warriors*) in our data, where it is hard to establish, in the absence of solid evidence that reveals the anonymous author's viewpoint, whether the expression is used metaphorically or whether a non-figurative interpretation is equally possible. That is why the interpretation of such terms should be taken with caution.

The metaphors identified using this method were then classified according to whether they depict the process of MIGRATION or the MIGRANTS themselves (as target domains), after which they were grouped according to the source domains.

It should be noted that the goal of the paper is not to offer a corpus-based analysis of metaphors, nor is it to establish absolute or relative frequencies of metaphorical expressions or metaphor density in the set of data. Our main focus is on the qualitative analysis of metaphors to structure a complex social phenomenon – MIGRATION. We also aim to look into the ways in which the identified metaphors were used for shaping ideologies, and the evaluative stances they convey regarding migrants and migration.

## 5. Findings and discussion

The analysis shows that the two target concepts, the process of MIGRATION and the MIGRANTS themselves, are both characterized in the readers' comments in multiple ways, all of them negatively evaluated. MIGRATION is found to be metaphorically structured as: an INVASION and a NATURAL DISASTER, both metaphors interrelated with the HOST COUNTRY IS A CONTAINER, whereas MIGRANTS are dehumanized and categorized as a group of DANGEROUS HUMAN BEINGS; bestialized and viewed as ANIMALS; and commodified and conceptualized as OBJECTS.

### 5.1. MIGRATION in online readers' comments

Metaphors “privilege one understanding of reality over others”, at the same time having “the effect of marginalising or excluding alternative conceptualisations” (CHILTON 1996: 154). With that in mind, by viewing or framing a certain concept via metaphor, not only do we want to select some aspects of reality and make them more salient in such context, but we also provide an evaluation of the given concept and recommend particular solutions. In readers' news comments in Serbian, the process of mass migration is cast as an *INVASION*, with migrants being portrayed as *INVADERS* and *OCCUPIERS* who are going to conquer and colonize the territory of Serbia (examples 1–4). Characterizing *MIGRATION* as *INVASION*, *OCCUPATION*, *COLONIZATION* and relying on the connotations these concepts carry (such as coercion, domination, violence) suggests that this social process is viewed as threatening, unwelcome, and detrimental to the host country.

(1) Uskoro pa kreće okupacija samo gde pobeci, mogu se kladiti kad krenu da rokaju i zauzimaju suboticu/palic ni vojaka ni policija neće reagovati<sup>5</sup>

[The occupation is about to start soon, but where to escape to, I can bet that when they start shooting and taking over Subotica/Palić neither the soldiers nor the police will react]

(2) Koja je razlika između tih kolonista iz šume i ovih ispred Lidla?

[What's the difference between the colonists from the forest and these in front of Lidl?]

(3) Evo ih, nadiru sa istoka Srbije svaki dan.

[Here they are, advancing from the east of Serbia every day.]

(4) Teraj to iz zemlje i diži zid svuda po granici dok nije kasno. Ovo je početak okupacije Evrope a mi smo prvi na udaru!

[Shovel it all out of the country and raise a wall all along the border before it's too late. This is the beginning of the occupation of Europe and we are the first to be attacked!]

Viewing arrivals of migrants as an *INVASION* and an act of aggression helps to invoke panic state of affairs among the readers (KHOSRAVINIK 2010: 22), which in turn opens the door to legitimizing a defence of 'our own' space. Namely, such a portrayal of *MIGRATION* is complementary with the *HOST COUNTRY IS A CONTAINER* metaphor, which reinforces the argument that migration presents a constant external danger that threatens to rupture the container ('our' state) and take control of its inside, where invasion and occupation are primarily associated with a forceful and illegal seizure of other country's territory. In addition to fear and anxiety, the depiction of *MIGRATION* as *INVASION* should also conjure up the feeling of anger. Hence expulsion and deportation of migrants and the construction of walls (example 4) emerge as seemingly justified solutions born out of the intertwinement of the *INVASION* and *CONTAINER* metaphors, which underlines the perceived belief among the commenters that migrants do not belong to 'our' space and do not have the right to reside in it.

The process of *MIGRATION* is also characterized as a *NATURAL DISASTER*, when migrants, by being likened to an immense mass of water, become dehumanized and de-

<sup>5</sup> All the spelling errors and the missing diacritics in the examples were kept as is.

personalized.

(5) Migranti preplavili Sombor.

[Migrants flooded Sombor.]

(6) Sve pohapsiti i vratiti u tunguziju iz koje su dosli, da nam ne bi nicali favele kao sto nicu u zemljama koje su vec primile izbeglice u vise talasa.

[Arrest them all and send them back to tunguzija from which they came, so that we don't end up with favelas sprouting up like they do in countries that have already received refugees in several waves.]

(7) Severna granica Srbije je pod konstantnim pritiskom mudžahedina.

[The northern border of Serbia is under constant pressure of Mujahideen.]

The depiction of migrants as those who *flooded* ('preplaviti') cities in *waves* ('talasi') (examples 5 and 6), combined with the conceptualization of 'our' space as a bounded space of limited capacity (CONTAINER) exposed to collapse in the event of large-scale migration (examples 5–7), suggests the devastation the force of nature brings to the land and property, alongside the inability to control it. The structuring of MIGRATION as unstoppable accentuates its destructive character for not only the national security, but individual lives as well (via the image of flood which may lead to drowning). In addition, the conceptualization of MIGRANTS as a singular, unidentified quantity, as waves that keep coming, serves to obscure their individuality and the quality of being human in general (similar to characterizing them as ANIMALS and OBJECTS which will be discussed later in the text). The threat, fear and danger posed by mass migration are also communicated as the pressure which mounts inside the container (Serbia's northern border) that could lead to the breaking point (example 7). Like in the above INVASION metaphor, the image of Serbia as an endangered CONTAINER gives credence to the beliefs that the borders of the country should be sealed because "the container might implode due to an overwhelming inflow from the outside and culture clashes from the inside" (REIF 2023: 56).

## 5.2. MIGRANTS in online readers' comments

The discourse of readers' comments pertaining to migrants is also linked with the narratives of fear for the safety of local population and the threat that migrants can pose to the country's national security. When these notions are discursively set in this way, it is in line with the expectations that those representations which foreground the images of migrants as DANGEROUS HUMAN BEINGS will be deployed. This, in turn, enables "messages of threat to be conveyed without having to explicitly spell out the nature of that threat" (MARTIN and FOZDAR 2022: 56). Our data reveal that migrants are collectively perceived as dangerous and hostile, lexically rendered as: 'džihad ratnici' (*jihad warriors*), 'teroristi' (*terrorists*), 'kriminalci' (*criminals*), 'banda' (*gang*), 'divljaci' (*savages*).

(8) Kome još nije jasno da to nisu nikakve ekonomske izbeglice već džihad ratnici sa zadatkom?

[Who still doesn't understand that these are not economic refugees, but jihad warriors with a mission?]

(9) naoružane horde islamista i džihadista!!!???

[armed hordes of Islamists and jihadists!!!???]



- (10) Dokle će više naoružani ilegalni migranti lutati ovom zemljom kao banda i ugrožavati naše građane!  
 [How much longer will armed illegal migrants roam around this country like a gang and jeopardize our citizens!]  
 (11) Bataljoni stranaca koji su ILEGALNO usli u Srbiju  
 [Battalions of foreigners who entered Serbia ILLEGALLY]  
 (12) Jesu li to ekonomski migranti ili teroristi na zadatku?  
 [Are these economic migrants or terrorists on a mission?]  
 (13) Dzunglasi ti odaju po zemlji  
 [The jungle people are walking across your country]  
 (14) horde pećinskih ljudi  
 [hordes of cavemen]

Constructing migrants as WARRIORS and TERRORISTS evokes the WAR knowledge structure whom casts migrants as ENEMIES against which Serbia as the host country should defend to restore the order and the wholeness of its territory, i.e., our Self. In such a frame, where a fear for the country's national security merges with a fear for one's own life, demonizing migrants and viewing them as WARRIORS, TERRORISTS, CRIMINALS, serves as a conceptual lens for making sense of this social group. Claiming that all the migrants are illegal (examples 10 and 11), therefore criminals, and, via the MIGRANTS ARE MEMBERS OF THE TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS metaphor, equating them with terrorists (as evidenced in examples 8 and 9), migration, terrorism, and crime are equally qualified as dangerous social problems. Such depiction of migrants helps in turn to provide a warrant for any anti-migrant activity or policy as something the host country is entitled to. In the vitriolic language of readers' comments in Serbian, migrants are also structured as subhuman in the MIGRANTS ARE SAVAGES metaphor. By alluding that dangerous people and animals inhabit jungles, migrants are rendered as 'džunglaši' (*jungle men* [example 13]). In this way, the whole social group is racialized as barbarous, primitive and uncivilized, with a presence of animalistic overtones. On the other hand, this implies viewing 'us' as human, superior and civilized. Other metaphorical expressions subsumed under the MIGRANTS ARE SAVAGES metaphor, such as *savage nations/savages* ('divlji narodi'/'divljaci'), *hordes of cavemen* ('horde pećinskih ljudi' [example 14]), also underline the narratives of threat and fear of dangerous aliens, in the latter case amplified by the lexeme *horde* which can equally relate to a large group of people or animals.

Commenters also resort to another frequently deployed portrayal of migrants, that of ANIMALS. Perceiving migrants as TERRORISTS, CRIMINALS, SAVAGES appears to activate concepts which are also associated with a lack of civility and humanness, akin to the ANIMAL concept. Animalizing and bestializing migrants serves to "reduce the addressee's empathy for them" (MUJAGIĆ and BERBEROVIĆ 2019: 24) since "[e]xclusion of and aggression against a particular social group can be carried out with less moral restraint if this group is depicted as non-human, inferior, and potentially harmful" (REIF 2023: 72). Migrants are thus viewed as *cattle* ('stoka') (example 16), *vermin* ('gamad') (example 19), *ants* ('mravi') that *swarmed* ('razmileli se') across our borders (examples 15 and 18), all these expressions being culturally-assigned negative characterizations.

(15) ...mogu da zamislim koliko ih se razmirelo po Evropi samo preko naših granica.

[... I can imagine how many of them swarmed Europe just by means of crossing our borders.]

(16) ma tu stoku potrpati u stocne kamione odvesti do granica i istovariti pa neka beže u EU

[just load that cattle into livestock trucks, take them to the border and unload them, so let them run to the EU]

(17) Sad, kada sam sve ovo napisao pre par godina, kada je pocela naježda migranata...

[Now, when I wrote all this a few years ago, when the infestation of migrants began...]

(18) A migranata ko' mrava.

[And migrants swarmed like ants.]

(19) 'Namnozila se gamad... Vreme je za ozbiljnu deratizaciju Subotice'

[Vermin have multiplied... It's time for a serious disinfestation of Subotica]

The conceptualization of migrants as beings that lack higher cognitive functions and civility has its roots in the GREAT CHAIN OF BEING metaphor model (LAKOFF and TURNER 1989) and the hierarchical organization according to which humans as endowed with higher-order attributes are placed above "lower" beings, animals, characterized by their instinctual behaviour. Such portrayal of migrants serves to create a further demarcation between 'us' and 'them': by not being humans or by "being of less worth than 'a proper human'" (MUSOLFF 2021: 246), migrants do not deserve to have the same rights or even to share the same space with 'us'. Dehumanizing MIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor helps to debase this social group and view it as less valuable than in-group, which consequently may warrant inhumane treatment, instantiated in an extremely offensive way as *the unloading of cattle from livestock trucks* (example 16), or a *disinfestation of vermin* (example 19) suggestive of perceiving migrants as disease-carrying rodents.

Finally, utterly problematic in terms of the message it conveys is the commenters' use of the Serbian demonstrative third person singular neutral pronoun 'to' (*it, that*). With such characterization migrants become objectified, commodified and deprived of their human qualities. By the use of this linguistic means, other people are distanced from and degraded in one of the most insulting manners.

(20) Teraj to u avion i izbacuj.

[Shovel it into a plane and throw it all out.]

(21) cistite to tamo, sta treba jos da se desi??

[Clean it up over there, what else needs to happen??]

(22) Sve to treba natovariti i vratiti nazad

[It all needs to be loaded and sent back]

(23) Sve ih spakovati pa kod Soroša u dvorište istresti.

[Pack them all up and dump them in Soros's yard.]

(24) Pod hitno pokrenuti veliku ekološku akciju "očistimo subotičke šume"

[A major ecological campaign "Let's clean up the Subotica forests" should urgently be launched]

Dehumanizing MIGRANTS ARE OBJECTS metaphor has a strong affective impact and foregrounds a total lack of empathy for migrants viewed as inanimate entities. They thus clearly become the 'Other' who jeopardize 'our' space by entering it in rising numbers and occupying it, which then serves to legitimize any action against 'them', lexically rendered as 'terati' (*shovel*), 'čistiti' (*clean up*), 'spakovati' (*pack*), 'natovariti' (*load*), 'istresti' (*dump*), all the lexemes describing the actions that clearly pertain to physical objects. Not only are migrants stripped of their humanity in any aspect possible but even their usefulness as an object is totally denied in that they are all categorized as disposable waste (examples 21, 23 and 24).

The analysis reveals that according to the metaphors the users in Serbia employ in their online comments on migration, this social issue is perceived as: an increasing threat to the country's security, a physical danger, and an extreme challenge for national identity. Mentally categorizing migrants as INVADERS, NATURAL DISASTER, TERRORISTS, SAVAGES, ANIMALS, OBJECTS is shown to be highly ideological and helps to reinforce a broader narrative of "otherization" (GONÇALVES 2023: 4) and further fuel sharp divisions between 'us' and 'them'; 'security/protection' and 'danger/threat'; 'civility' and 'incivility'. These extremely disparaging characterizations of migrants by means of dehumanizing and depersonalized metaphors appear to be instrumental in guiding the general public's perception of this social group as "something" we need to get rid of. Each of the identified metaphors in our data via its distinct framing of the migration issue proves to be salient for not only sharing more oppressive and xenophobic ideologies, but also for offering frameworks in which various, often highly morally questionable, actions and regulatory proposals can be legitimized. It may also be noted that alongside the metaphors frequently featuring in migrant discourse and amply researched in the relevant literature as the means of re-producing negative representations of migration and migrants, such as NATURAL DISASTER, DANGEROUS BEINGS, ANIMALS, certain discursive metaphors have become even more stigmatizing in terms of the values they impart. This particularly refers to the use of the Serbian third person singular neutral pronoun 'to' (*it/this*) and the verbs with which *it* collocates, together creating the utterly degrading OBJECT metaphor.

In general, although at first glance all metaphors used here in online commenting appear unrelated in terms of the source domains employed, they become connected through their profiling of migration as something dangerous and undesirable. Even more disconcerting is that such representation of migration appears to rest on "relatively fixed lexical and syntactic forms" in different linguistic and sociopolitical settings, which may indicate that it has become the usual, "the natural' way" (EL REFAIE 2001: 352) of depicting this social issue, i.e., of 'normalizing' and perpetuating oppressive ideologies.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study we analyzed metaphors in the comments posted on migrant-related news articles in Serbian that generated an extremely abusive rhetoric reflecting the readers' negative stance on migration viewing it as a problem for the host nation. The analysis has corroborated the presence of already established negative conceptualizations of migration and migrants across different language and socio-political contexts, which contributes to further stigmatization of this social group and broadening the divide between 'us' and 'them'. The construction of otherness by means of metaphor remains the

dominant practice in migration discourse and a fertile ground for perpetuating more or less overt discrimination against the out-group. Future research efforts should focus on identifying novel linguistic metaphors and their ideological load, which would add to a more comprehensive portrayal of this social issue.

Overall, our study reaffirms that metaphors remain a powerful tool for dehumanizing social groups and discursively constructing migration as negatively valued. It adds to the growing body of work on metaphorical representation of migration explored here in one specific genre of digital public discourse. The study, therefore, may be viewed as an attempt to restate the need for disclosing dangerous ideologies in migration discourse in order to build more tolerant physical and digital spaces.

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## METAFORIČKI PRIKAZ MIGRANATA U KOMENTARIMA NA ONLAJN VESTI NA SRPSKOM JEZIKU

### *Rezime*

Pod teorijskim okriljem kritičke analize metafora rad ima za cilj da identifikuje metafore u komentarima čitalaca na onlajn vesti o migrantima u Srbiji i istraži ulogu metafore u kreiranju i podsticanju negativnih vrednosnih određenja. Analiza se zasniva na materijalu od 1,235 komentara čitalaca na 32 vesti objavljene u onlajn medijima na srpskom jeziku o oružanim sukobima između migranatskih grupa, koji su se u drugoj polovini 2023. godine dogodili u okolini Subotice. Rezultati analize ukazuju da čitaoci, rukovođeni strahom za bezbednost lokalne zajednice, u svojim komentarima pribegavaju dehumanizujućim metaforama koje migrante i proces migracije karakterišu kao INVAZIJU i PRIRODNU KATASTROFU, a migrante kao RATNIKE, OKUPATORE, TERORISTE, DIVLJAKE, ŽIVOTINJE i PREDMETE, što ima za ishod stigmatizaciju cele te društvene grupe. Poimanje migracije kao pretnje i nepoželjne društvene pojave pokazuje se kao podesan okvir za održavanje narativa o drugosti i kao pogodna podloga za legitimizaciju problematičnih mera i politika.

*Ključne reči:* migranti, dehumanizujuće metafore, novinski članci, komentari čitalaca, drugost, srpski