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MICRO-SECURITIZATION TO MICRO-MOBILIZATION: INTERNET USER-GENERATED FRAMING OF SLOVAKS' REFUSAL TO FIGHT IN A NATO OPERATION

Objectives: A controversy has been sparked in Slovakia when in January, 2015, more than twelve-thousand military reservists sent letters to official authorities with a refusal to fight in the case of mobilization. The officials were astonished, as in past nine years they have received only 58 letters of such refusal. The influx of reservists' letters was a result of an online campaign against Slovakia's involvement in potential NATO military operation in Ukraine. This study demonstrates that using of micro-securitization type of frames in online campaign represents a potential for achieving a successful micro-mobilization towards a specific political behavior. Furthermore, this study shows how important information, which contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon, is revealed in the user-generated discussions in the aftermath of the controversy. Thus, analyses of the online content contribute to academic understanding of the contemporary forms of political communication.

Methodology: Specifically, this study employs mixed-methods approach by combining qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative content analysis to explore the mentioned user-generated discussions.

Results: The analyses performed in this study illuminated certain aspects of the case that were not discussed by Slovak analysts and pundits. In the case of Slovak reservists, an important factor that played a role is cultural congruence of the micro-securitization frames.

Conclusions: Beyond just looking at the specific case, this study connects the concept of online micro-mobilization to micro-securitization. Such connection can be applicable for other cases. Furthermore, this study outlines a process of transcending a macro-security issue into a micro-security concern. Similar processes deserve further theoretical and empirical attention. Hence, this article has implications for future studies and building of communication theory.

Keywords: Slovak political communication, micro-securitization, user-generated content, discourse analysis, content analysis.

Introduction

A controversy has been sparked in Slovakia when in January 2015 more than twelve-thousand military reservists sent letters to official authorities with a refusal to fight in a case of mobilization [1]. The officials were astonished, as in past nine years they have received only 58 letters of such refusal. The exponential influx of reservists' letters was a result of an online campaign against Slovakia's involvement in the potential NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) military operation in Ukraine. Slovakia has been a member of NATO since 2004.

The Slovak reservists' refusal to fight is not a mere overreaction to hypothetical involvement in a suppositious war, as some pundits tried to dismiss it. The online campaign is a successful new media effort that accomplished a micro-mobilization [2] through the use of discursive micro-securitization [3] of an individual's involvement in an armed conflict. Within this theoretical understanding, the online message reached the result as it framed the possible conscripts as referent objects of securitization [3; 4].

This case is symptomatic of specific frames of interpretation that are congruent with a broader Slovak political culture; particularly the lack of confidence in alliances. Slovak political discourse frequently employs historical examples of disloyal alliance arrangements of the past: Such as negative experiences of 1938 when allied nations refused to aid Czechs and Slovaks against the aggression of Nazi Germany, and experiences of 1968 when the country's actual allies of Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia. Thus, a considerable part of Slovak political spectrum, as well as a considerable part of the public, tends to prefer neutrality of the country [5]. This tendency created a platform of cultural congruence with the online appeal to reservists, which thus was capable of achieving the micro-mobilization effect.

In order to illuminate this process, a two-phased study was conducted. The inquiry looked at user-generated online comments on the topic. First, a discourse analysis was implemented to determine frames of interpretation of the situation. Second, content analysis was employed to compare the levels of support for particular frames of

interpretation. Finally, the findings are discussed to facilitate better understanding of the case, as well as to contribute to the development of communication theory. Specifically, communication theory is enriched by (a) drawing links between micro-securitization and micro-mobilization, and (b) process of macro-to-micro-securitization. Hence, political communication theory-building is possible through analyzing of a contemporary controversy that reflects culturally-rooted memories of Slovakia's military alliance history.

1. Micro-securitization Leading to Micro-mobilization

During December 2014, Slovak alternative online media outlets, such as Hlavne Spravy portal, and numerous bloggers published an appeal to Slovak men who fall under the category of reservists/conscripts to refuse to fight if drafted during a mobilization. Slovakia has only partially switched to professional army, and thus large part of country's military planning counts on possibility of draft in the case of necessity. Majority of the male population has been enrolled in basic training and is considered reservists. The appeal, which was circulating on the Slovak online platforms, cited the requirement that obliges Slovakia to contribute to NATO operations. The appeal reasoned that such requirement would impact the reservists if the ongoing conflict in Ukraine escalated to the point that NATO would get involved. The appeal cited credible sources, including the Slovak Prime Minister at the time, Robert Fico, who publicly proposed that the option of NATO intervention in Ukraine exists. Furthermore, the appeal included detailed instructions on what the men need to do in order to refuse this military service. According to the Slovak laws, refusal of this obligation is only acceptable if a deep conviction is cited as the reason. For instance, devotion to pacifism and nonviolence or religion-related diktats could be cited as such conviction. Thus, the conscripts must write a letter to pertinent authorities, detailing their convictions, which limit their ability to enroll in military service if draft requires it. Also, the appeal provided information on the deadlines for such letter, which is the end of the month January for every calendar year that a man wants to be excluded from the list of conscripts.

Besides the online alternative news sources and bloggers, many regular users of social media contributed to circulation of this appeal by sharing it with their contacts. Hence, the appeal became a type of alternative media/grass-roots online campaign with specific political behavior outcome as a goal.

The exact information on the number of men who indeed sent refusal-to-fight letters to the authorities was not provided, but the Slovak governmental sources admitted that it was more than twelve thousand. As mentioned in the introductory part of the paper, such exponentially increased number of refusals was very surprising for Slovak authorities, as in the previous nine years only an overall sum of 58 refusals has been received. Therefore, it can be concluded that the online campaign was quite successful. A similar success in achieving an offline political behavior as a result of an online campaign can be referred to as micro-mobilization [2].

Scholars warn about exaggeratedly attributing impactful large-scale political behaviors to online campaigns [6], such as the overly-enthusiastic claims that the online activities directly led to revolutions in the Middle East during the "Arab Spring" period [7; 8]. However, scholars have demonstrated that a more realistic success of online campaigns is in cases of a specific issue and a specific response that is framed by the campaign as necessary – this type of initiative was labeled as micro-mobilization [2].

It is crucial to address which of the specific aspects of the online campaign targeting Slovak reservists were instrumental for the success of the micro-mobilization. The analyses conducted in this study demonstrate that the mechanism, which played a crucial role in convincing reservists to perform the behavior of refusal to fight are various forms of micro-securitization. The term micro-securitization was introduced by Buzan and Waever to describe the level of security, for which the referent object is an individual [3]. In their typology, macro-securitization is the communicative process of asserting a threat to existence of a larger civilization, such as "the West." Securitization is a communicative process asserting a security threat to an existence of a nation or state as the referent object. Micro-securitization is a communicative process of asserting a security threat to existence of an individual. For each of the levels, there are various possible types of security, which are determined by various types of identity aspects of the referent object, including but not limited to physical existence, sovereignty, political identity, cultural identity etc. [9].

Slovak pundits and analysts speculated that the motivations of the Slovak reservists who refused to fight were ether a tendency towards pacifism or perhaps a mere lack of valor to serve in combat. Pacifism, as the motivation to refuse to fight, reflects on political security of an individual. Lack of valor reflects on physical security of an individual. These proposed motivations represent a specific micro-securitization category of frames.

As the first step of this research project, it is paramount to empirically document the interpretations of Slovak reservists' decision. Therefore, the internet user-generated content on the issue should be examined. The term user-generated content corresponds to a plethora of content that is authored by internet users and published online, while the creation and publishing tends to be primarily an individual effort, which is outside of professional obligations or

routines [10; 11]. Such content includes online comments, memes, videos, and other types of material. Particularly, as the campaign to influence Slovak reservists took place entirely online, the interpretations of the event that circulated on online platforms provide a very valuable source for documenting the public understanding of the process. Hence, the following research question was proposed to examine the online discourse;

Research Question 1 (RQ1): *What kinds of frames appear in the online user-generated discourse on the issue of Slovak reservists' refusal to fight?*

Research Method I.: Discourse Analysis

3.1 Method

In order to inform the RQ1, discourse analysis of the user-generated comments on the topic was conducted. The selected content was analyzed using the faming model as the lens. Entman offered a definition of framing that suitably serves empirical analyses by outlining main frame elements: definition of a problem, causal attributions, moral evaluations, and remedy recommendations [12; 13]. These elements provide the characteristics, which are useful for categorization of empirical content [14].

For the purposes of this analysis, a sampling frame of comments from various online platforms was collected. Initially, 11 different online discussion platforms, which engaged with the pertinent topic, were located. Then all comments from the relevant threads were included in the sampling frame. Overall, the sampling frame included 3,636 online user-generated comments. From this sampling frame, a random sample of 200 comments was selected for discourse analysis.

1.2.   Findings: (I) Micro-securitization (Pacifism vs. Lack of Valor)

Two distinctive categories of overall frames of interpreting the reservists' refusal to fight emerged from the analysis. The first category is descried in this study as (1) micro-securitization frames. This specific type of framing of the events focuses on reservists as individuals and their specific security concerns, which are considered explanatory of their decision to refuse the potential draft. The frame that defended conscripts' decision within this frame category saw *pacifism* as the main motivation. Pacifism is a political identity. Thus, the decision to refuse to fight was a protection of one's own political identity. In turn, political identity is a form of security concern according to Buzan and colleagues [9]. Because the referent object of this securitization is an individual – this is an example of micro-securitization [3].

The particular frame of this category that criticizes the decision of conscripts to refuse to fight can be described as *lack of valor*. This frame also alludes to a dimension of micro-security as the referent object is again the individual. The difference is that the physical safety of an individual is the type of security in this case.

3.3 Findings: (II) Macro-to-micro-securitization

Another category of frames sees the issue as a matter of larger security concern that is displayed in the individual behavior. Thus, this type of category is labeled as macro-to-micro-securitization. The frame that defends conscripts' decision is characterized by favorable view of Russia, pro-Russian tendencies in Ukraine, and separatist tendencies in Ukraine. At the same time, NATO is perceived negatively within this frame. Proponents of this frame vindicate the decision of reservists as correct in the sense of aligning with Russia. Thus, this frame is referred to as *alignment with Russia*. In the context of larger global tension, this frame of interpretation exemplifies a process of macro-securitization issue on the level of individual decision. Ultimately, an individual is taking sides in a conflict of global dimensions. Thus, the label macro-to-micro fits. Naturally, some user-generated comments also fit this category of frames, just from the other angle. These comments rejected the decision of reservists as a normatively wrong political decision because it represents disloyalty to NATO as a military alliance. This viewpoint is labeled *alignment with NATO*. It is another macro-to-micro-securitization frame.

These findings are very valuable, granted that Slovak analysts were presenting the issue only applying category of frames that are compatible with the micro-securitization, but not with macro-to-micro-securitization category. Furthermore, additional triangulation study was done to cross-validate the findings of discourse analysis. The following research question (RQ2) was proposed to assess the level of support that the various frames of interpretation were receiving on platforms of user-generated content;

Research Question 2 (RQ2): *Did a significant difference occur in level of support for any of the frames of interpretation in the online user-generated discourse on Slovak reservists' refusal to fight?*

Research Method II.: Content Analysis

4.1 Method

The sampling frame, which was initially utilized for the discourse analysis, was also utilized for the content analysis. In this case, 170 user-generated comments were randomly selected from the sampling frame of 3,636. Coder 1 coded all 170 comments. Coder 2 coded a subsample of 45 comments from the 170 sample. Based on this overlap, the

intercoder reliability was calculated showing the value of 0.95 for Cohen's kappa, which suggests a very reliable coding process. Coders assigned 98 comments to coding categories. The remaining comments were irrelevant to the matter of identifying Slovak reservists' reasons for refusing to fight, thus also irrelevant for the study.

The independent variable was the *type of frame in interpretation of reservists' decision to refuse to fight*. The values of this variable were determined by the findings of the previous discourse analysis: (1) pacifism, (2) lack of valor, (3) alignment with Russia, and (4) alignment with NATO (see Table1). The categories were considered mutually exclusive. Thus the coders assigned each comment to only one of the categories. The notes from the previous discourse analysis were used to serve as guidelines for coding decisions.

The dependent variable was the *level of support*. Each of the platforms of the user-generated comments allowed for other users to show agreement with a comment by giving it some token of support. This token is equivalent to "likes" on English language platforms such as Facebook. These tokens of support were applied to operationalization of the dependent variable. Hence, a number of tokens of support was used to measure the ratio level of support for each user-generated comment in the sample.

4.2 Results

RQ2 inquired whether a significant difference occurred in level of support for any of the frames of interpretation in the user-generated discourse on the issue of reservists' refusal to fight. As the results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) demonstrate, there was not a significant difference. The difference was insignificant for main effects, micro-securitization in comparison to macro-to-micro-securitization, $F(1, 98) = 0.32$, $p > 0.05$, and positive evaluation of conscripts in comparison to negative evaluation of conscripts, $F(1, 98) = 2.46$, $p > 0.05$.   Interaction effects are insignificant as well, $F(1, 98) = 0.25$, $p > 0.05$. This means that level of support for either of the four possible frames of interpretation and moral evaluation is approximately equivalent.

The implications of these findings, although insignificant in statistical sense, are very significant in the sense of illuminating the case and further building of communication theory, on which is elaborated in the following section.

Discussion

The internet can serve as a venue of a successful campaign with a political micro-mobilization as its main goal. In the specific case of Slovak reservists' refusal to fight, micro-securitization of the target issue appeared to serve as a key mechanism in accomplishing the goal of micro-mobilization. Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde [9] and Watson [4] emphasized that an effective framing of an issue as a matter of security gives a tremendous persuasive leverage to the communicator.

Table 1

Frames of Interpretation and Moral Evaluation of Conscripts' Refusal to Fight

	Micro-Securitization	Macro-to-Micro-Securitization	ANOVA Results
Positive Evaluation of the Conscripts' Refusal to Fight	(1) *Pacifism* x = 16.73 (SD = 49.9) n = 30	(3) *Alignment with Russia* (evaluated positively) x = 24.20 (SD = 47.84) n = 46	Micro-securitization in comparison to macro-to-micro-securitization: F(1, 98) = 0.32 p > 0.05
Negative Evaluation of the Conscripts' Refusal to Fight	(2) *Lack of Valor* x = 2.17 (SD = 1.17) n = 6	(4) Alignment with Russia (evaluated negatively with proposal of *Alignment with NATO*) x = 5.81 (SD = 7.94) n = 16	Positive evaluation of conscripts in comparison to negative evaluation of conscripts: F(1, 98) = 2.46 p > 0.05 Interaction effects: F(1, 98) = 0.25 p > 0.05
	x = level of support	(sum) N = 98	*All results are insignificant

Securitization has been discussed as a specific type of frame by communication scholars, for example in the works by Vultee [15], Watson [4], and Vultee, Lukacovic, and Stouffer [16]. Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde [9] asserted that not every "securitizing move" (which is an attempt to securitize an issue) is necessarily effective. Some issues are more prone to be securitized than others. The likelihood of effective securitization is determined by a particular

sociopolitical culture. Using the language of Entman's framing model; a successful securitization frame must be culturally congruent with the environment within which it operates [13].

As the quantitative portion of this study demonstrated, there was not a significant difference in the level of support for either of the four possible frames of interpretation of Slovaks' decision to refuse to fight. This finding is very important as it shows that comparable number of online public supports one of the four possible ways of understanding the reservists' decision; (1) They did it because their political belief is pacifism. (2) They did it because they lack valor to fight. (3) They did it because they align with Russia instead of NATO – and they are morally right. (4) They did it because they align with Russian instead of NATO – and they are morally wrong. Each alternative deserves analytical attention, as each receives a considerable following among a part of the members of public online. Hence, the analysis did not detect a significantly larger number of supporters flocking to either of the four frames.

The frame that proposes that reservists were motivated by a lack of valor, hence micro-securitization of personal safety took place, is easily understood as connected to perception of one's own physical security, which is not culturally-particular. Pacifism and understanding of decision as reflection of macro-security (Russia versus NATO) issue are two frames that require a specific type of cultural congruence to be effective in an effort of micro-mobilization. Arguably each of these two frames of interpretation is congruent with Slovak sociopolitical culture, and therefore the micro-mobilization was successful when either of the two mechanisms was activated.

One such cultural feature, which feeds both tendencies towards pacifism and lack of alignment with NATO, is distrust to alliances. An important event in collective memory of Slovak people is the "Munich betrayal" – the term that is used to reference Munich Agreement of 1938 [17]. While Czechoslovakia was in a military alliance with the United Kingdom and France, the allies signed the agreement, which enabled Adolf Hitler's territorial demands on Czechoslovakia. One interpretation of this event leads to lesson that Western military alliances are not trustworthy. Such important event that impacts collective sociopolitical memory of many Slovaks is congruent for both frames of pacifism and in some cases alignment with Russia.

It is also important to acknowledge that the alignment with Russia is based on a romanticized idea of Russia as the upholder of Slavic culture as envisioned by 19th century Slovak philosophers. Furthermore, Russia can be viewed as the pathway to counter "the treacherous West" [18]. This view still resonates with many people in the country, as reflected in the somewhat equivalent level of support for alignment with Russia as the level of disdain for Russia among Slovaks who contributed on the topic online, as results of this study show.

Another relevant historical event for the Slovak sociopolitical culture is the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 [17]. In this case, the country was invaded by its own allies, including the Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and East Germany. This is yet another traumatic collective memory that confirms the notion that military alliances are not to be trusted in general, regardless of whether it is Western or Eastern allies. While NATO alignment frame finds specific support in this event, so does political view of pacifism. Hence, pacifist positions that prefer overall neutrality of the country are strongly reinforced with the general distrust of military pacts.

2.   Conclusion

Micro-securitization type of framing within an online campaign represents a prospect for achieving successful micro-mobilization towards a specific political behavior. In the case of Slovak reservists, an important factor that played a role is the cultural congruence of the micro-securitization frames. The analyses performed in this study illuminated certain aspects of the case that were not discussed by Slovak analysts and pundits. Beyond just looking at the specific case, this study connects the concept of online micro-mobilization to micro-securitization. Such connection can be applicable for other cases. Furthermore, this study proposes a process of transcending a macro-security issue to micro-security concern. Similar process deserves further theoretical and empirical attention. Crucial insights of the case were revealed via the discourse and content analyses of online user-generated content. Hence, this paper has implications for future studies and theory-building in the fields of political communication and new media communication.

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