EX-YUGOSLAVIAN IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN SLOVENIA: BETWEEN BALKANIZATION AND VICTIMIZATION

Andreja VEZOVNIK[I]

ABSTRACT

Ex-Yugoslavian Immigrant Workers in Slovenia: Between Balkanization and Victimization
This article explores how the identity of immigrant workers (mostly ex-Yugoslavians) in Slovenia is constructed in the Slovenian print media. The article focuses on the interplay of the two main discourses on immigrant workers – Balkanist discourse and victimization discourse. The analysis shows how Balkanist discourse still constructs the immigrant as the other but avoids explicitly negative connotations by framing immigrant workers' identity within a discourse of victimization. The article explains how this interplay of discourses serves to normalize the immigrant worker in order to make him acceptable to the majoritarian Slovenian society. The article closes by exploring the victimization discourse as a process of desubjectivizing of the immigrant workers and argues that aspects of the victimization discourse reaffirm the long-standing power relations between Western Europe and the Balkans.
KEY WORDS: immigration, Balkanism, victimization

IZVLEČEK

Migrantski delavci iz bivših jugoslovanskih republik v Sloveniji: med balkanizacijo in viktimizacijo
Prispevek osvetljuje, kako se v slovenskem tisku konstruira identiteta migrantskih delavcev iz bivših jugoslovanskih republik. S pomočjo kritične analize diskurza prispevek pokaže soobstoj dveh diskurzov o migrantskih delavcih - balkanizacijskega in viktimizacijskega. Četudi se mediji skušajo ogniti stereotipizacijam in eksplicitnim oblikam sovražnega govora, se pri reprezentaciji migrantskih delavcev poslužujejo implicitnih diskurzivnih strategij s katerimi vzdržujejo dana družbena razmerja moči. Članek pokaže, da se delavčeva identiteta uokvirja skozi balkanizacijski in viktimizacijski diskurz. Prispevek pokaže, kako se igra balkanizacijskega in viktimizacijskega diskurza steka v proces normaliziranja, tako da migrantski delavec ni več predstavljen kot grožnja večinski populaciji, temveč kot od nje odvisna žrtev. Članek se zaključi z razpravo o viktimizaciji kot procesu politične desubjektivacije migrantskega delavca ter poudari utrjevanje razmerij moči med zahodno Evropo in Balkanom.
KLJUČNE BESEDE: imigracija, balkanizacija, viktimizacija

[I] Dr. Andreja Vezovnik, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Kardeljeva pl. 5, SI-1000 Lju bljana, andreja.vezovnik@fdv.uni-lj.si.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1965, Slovenia has been a destination for economic immigration, mostly for workers from ex-Yugoslavian republics.[1] Until 1991, immigrants from other ex-Yugoslavian republics were legally treated as co-citizens, but after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the introduction of the Slovenian Employment of Aliens Act in 1992 significantly decreased their rights and benefits. However, immigration rates have remained high. In 2009, 87,433 work permits were issued for immigrants from ex-Yugoslavian republics, and 44,301 for low-skilled construction workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (Beznec 2009: 22). This trend lasted until the economic crisis in 2009 when the immigration rate began to decrease, and the major construction companies in Slovenia started to collapse (Beznec 2009).

Many of the collapsed companies, the largest of which were Vegrad and SCT, fell into debt, leaving hundreds of immigrant workers without jobs, salaries, work and residence permits, social security, or housing. This situation soon began receiving media attention. In particular, what traditionally counts as the left-wing press in Slovenia published numerous feature stories and articles on immigrant workers in 2009. The centerpiece of such media coverage was the construction of the immigrant worker as a helpless victim, with the aim to sensitize the Slovenian public to the unjust treatment of immigrant workers in Slovenia.

This article presents a critical analysis of media discourses on immigrant workers published in the Slovenian print media from 2009 to 2012. The analysis focuses on the media that most clearly attempted to point out violations of immigrant workers' rights. This move seems an important step away from the xenophobic arguments that until recently defined the Slovenian media landscape.[2] However, I will show that this discourse becomes problematic when it portrays workers only as helpless victims. In addition, this attempt to democratize discourses on immigrants works only in interplay with what Todorova (2009) defines as Balkanist discourse, revealing strategies of othering in representations of immigrant workers. Therefore, this article uncovers discursive strategies that help maintain the domination of the social majority over a social minority. Most of the analytical focus is normally put on a critique of more explicit forms of othering (e.g., xenophobia, hate speech); therefore, this analysis concentrates on media coverage grounded in and perceived as descended from the ideals of democracy and respect for human rights.

As mentioned, this paper explores the interplay of two discourses. First, I will investigate Balkanist discourse or Balkanism, as Todorova (2009) would put it, a discourse that stereotypically creates an image of the Balkans accordingly to Western European conceptions of the Balkan region. I will explore how Balkanist discourse still constructs immigrant workers as the other in Slovenian society. Secondly, I will critically address victimization discourse and how it operates as a desubjectivizing mechanism that reduces immigrant workers to helpless victims dependent upon humanitarian help while simultaneously depriving them of potential political subjectivity. All the presented aims will be addressed empirically through a qualitative approach of textual analysis, mostly from the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

I adopt an approach in line with CDA and consider discourse to be mostly an empirical phenomenon. In this sense, one or several discourses represent only one of the possible objects within society, positioning as the others economics, law, and various institutions (Foucault 1971, Fairclough 1992).

---

1 From 1971 to 1975, 24% of immigrants to Slovenia came from Bosnia and Herzegovina; from 1976 to 1981 this figure rose to 46% (Mežnarić 1982).

2 Previous research on media representations of ex-Yugoslavians, especially Bosnians, found xenophobic discourses in reporting on Bosnian war refugees (Doupona Horvat et al., 1998).

One usually deals with many different articulations of the concrete discourses on a certain topic, for instance, nationalist, democratic, Balkanist, and victimization discourses. Drawing on certain authors working with CDA—Fairclough, Reisigl and Wodak, and Richardson—I illustrate the relationship between socio-cultural practices and media texts or discourses and show how media discourses reproduce and legitimize power relations (Fairclough 1992). To analyze the textual level of discourse, I focus on how vocabulary, grammar, and discursive strategies (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) contribute to the linguistic realization of the Balkanist and victimization discourses and on how these discourses create the collective identity position of the desubjectivized other for immigrant workers.

I present a discourse analysis of 117 articles published in the Slovenian press. These include articles published in sections such as national news, society and business, and Saturday special editions, most frequently as feature stories. I selected print media that have significant public relevancy due to their visibility, high readership, and long tradition. I analyzed the print and online articles of two leading Slovenian print media organizations, in particular their readership, production, and number of online news readers (Vobič 2012: 10): *Delo* (63 articles), *Dnevnik* (34 articles), and the critical political weekly magazine *Mladina* (20 articles). *Delo*, *Dnevnik*, and *Mladina* seek to promote democracy, human rights, and sometimes Europeanization – which, to the Slovenian public, characterize the left-wing press. Notions of democracy and human rights are frequently taken as self-evident and unproblematic, so I look at various media perspectives on them as well.

I analyzed texts published from January 1, 2009, when feature stories on immigrant workers first appeared in Slovenian media, to February 28, 2012, when the collection of empirical data was completed. The texts analyzed were collected from press clippings and from the results of searches in online newspaper archives using the keywords "migrant," "immigrant," "immigration," "immigrant worker(s)," "SCT," "Vegrad,"[3] and "IWW" (Invisible Workers of the World).[4] The following sections include the statements most representative of the discourses explored.

OTHERING IMMIGRANT WORKERS

After Slovenia gained independence in 1991, democracy and human rights were established as fundamental values, manifested mainly in the idea that the new Slovenia should distance itself from the so-called "barbaric ethos of the Balkans." Todorova (2009: 3) believes that Europe[5] had already constructed the Balkans as its other at the beginning of the twentieth century. Consequently, the Balkans were no longer seen only as a geographical region but became synonymous with tribal, backwards, primitive, and barbarian; in short, the Balkans became the other Europe. In opposition to the Balkans, Europe symbolized cleanliness, order, self-control, strength of character, law, justice, and efficient administration – i.e. a culturally higher stage of development which enables decent human behavior (Todorova 2009: 119). Also, in transitional Slovenia, Europe was seen as a democratic ideal, an ethnic synergy of civilized nations, an exemplar of stable democracy, and a defender of human rights. Notions of democracy, human rights, and Europe became the leading ideas of the Slovenian transition and its main points of distinction from the so-called Balkan ethos (Bakić-Hyden 1995). Patterson Hyden (2003: 110, 114) states that, since 1991, many Slovenians have not regarded their country as Balkan but as belonging to Europe and have affirmed an identity grounded in traditions understood to be Western, not Balkan. Slovenia thus returned to its European origins and positioned itself as separate from the Balkans.

---

3 SCT and Vegrad are two major construction companies and the most publicly discussed.
4 In Slovenian, these keywords are *migrant, immigrant, imigracija, priseljenec, delavec migrant, SCT, Vegrad, IWW,* and *nevidni delavci sveta.*
5 When referring to Europe I have in mind western European countries.

The position of economic immigrants from ex-Yugoslavia has to be understood within this framework. Mežnarić (1982) shows that social distance between Slovenians and Bosnian immigrants existed even during Yugoslavian times. After 1991, this social distance was reinforced by the differentiation of citizenship and legitimated through labor laws and policies regulating economic migration. Its persistence is also shown in the Islamophobic[6] arguments against building a mosque in Ljubljana presented in Slovenian media and society since the 1970s (Bobnič and Vezovnik 2013).

The largest and most vulnerable immigrant group is temporary and circular migrants, who are mostly young, low-skilled men from BiH. Due to continual othering, the problem of immigrant workers has social, economic, and legal dimensions.[7] Legal measures introduced after 1992 place immigrants in an unequal position relative to Slovenian workers and citizens. Legal barriers are complemented by employers' crafty strategies, such as moving workers between firms to prolong the process of obtaining work permits, changing their legal status, and otherwise manipulating the process to make the workers completely dependent on their employers. The legal inferiority of immigrant workers leads to (1) unpaid and underpaid overtime hours;[8] (2) harassment and extortion; (3) unpaid leave, meals, and sick leave; (4) denial of the right to an annual bonus; and (5) shifting the costs of work visas, equipment, and training onto the immigrant worker. The economic and legal factors are accompanied by social segregation. The workers' low quality of life stems from poor nutrition, long working hours, poverty, and poor living conditions in separate housing. These circumstances lead to the complete detachment of immigrant workers from mainstream society. Workers have to live in special housing, sometimes made from shipping containers. Housing is segregated, overpriced, overcrowded, and inadequate in terms of space and living conditions. Workers cannot choose among alternatives on the housing market because their lives are completely governed by the construction companies for which they work (Mozetič 2009).

BALKANIST DISCOURSE

Numerous critical analyses of media discourses have shown how representations of ex-Yugoslavians since the 1990s have been grounded in Balkanist discourse (Doupona Horvat et al. 2001, Kuzmanić 1999, Vezovnik 2009). Todorova (2009: 3) states that long ago, the Balkans "had become a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian." Similarly, in the post-Yugoslavian Slovenian press, the most frequent signifiers for ex-Yugoslavians were tribalism, backwardness, primitiveness, barbarism, unreliability, misogyny, a propensity for intrigue, insincerity, opportunism, laziness, superstition, inefficiency, incompetent bureaucracy, cruelty, boorishness, instability, and unpredictability.

Although in recent years the discourse on the Balkan other in the Slovenian media has aimed to become more inclusive and democratic, Balkanist discourse still persists as an important element in the construction of the immigrant worker's subjectivity. First, texts reproduce Balkanist discourse by reducing immigrant workers to the qualities of backwardness and primitiveness, demonstrated by a lack of cultural, economic, and technological development. Example 1 shows how education and the cultivation of intellectual skills, typically attributed to the Western tradition of reason which prompted Western cultural development, are contrasted with a lack of education and the performance of manual labor, which in turn lead to backwardness.

---

6   Islamophobia is relevant because the majority of Bosnian workers come from Cazin, which is a homogeneous Muslim region in Bosnia (Hromandžić 2009).

7   I summarize the problems reported in material posted by the organization IWW (Invisible Workers of the World), which defends workers' rights, http://njetwork.org/Izhodisca-in-zahteve-IWW-Nevidni (17 August 2014).

8   Most immigrant workers are employed in the construction sector; they work 200 to 240 hours per month, and their average monthly salary is €500 (Beznec 2009: 23).

(1) "Jasmin didn't go to high school. In his farmer family with eight children, there simply was no money for these things. /.../ "Golden hands," he says /.../ "You won't believe me. I have only eight years of primary school and these hands." (Čepin Čander 2009)

Plumwood (1993: 82) shows that, in Western culture, intellectuality is more valued than manual labor. The state of being uneducated is ascribed to pre-modernity and a lack of development, while education is ascribed to progress. Example 1 demonstrates that the scarcity of financial resources in large, traditional families limits educational possibilities. The worker's manuality, illustrated by the metaphor of "golden hands," represents not only his salvation but also his originary curse. The worker's backwardness, therefore, is highlighted by his lack of intellectuality and education. In the last sentence, the word "only" indicates that Jasmin himself knows that he lacks education, thereby lending an additional negative connotation to manuality. Another aspect of Balkanism perceived as congruent with manuality and a lack of education arises in this article – traditionalism. It emerges mainly in descriptions of traditional, gendered division of labor. Women are constructed as the primary caregivers linked to the private domain, while men are the financial providers.

(2) "He needs to provide for his wife, two kids, and himself. Jasmin's wife stays at home. She works the garden, takes care of the cow, the children, and the house." (Čepin Čander 2009)

However, what seems to be most constitutive of the workers' subjectivity is the persistence of their otherness after moving to supposedly developed and modern Slovenian society. In example 3, the aspect of tribalism is emphasized. A journalist describes her difficulties in getting workers to talk to her. She finally finds a worker named Senad willing to take her to a group of workers whom she wanted to interview. The group trusts the journalist only once she claims to have ethnic Balkan origins.[9]

(3) "He [Senad] briefly explained to them who I was and what I was interested in, but all of them started to nod. I looked at Senad, and he gave them the sign they could trust me. Instantly, they changed their attitude. /.../ In order to gain their sympathy, I told them that my mother is not Slovenian, that she comes from Macedonia. A smile pictured on their faces, and one of them patted me on my shoulder: 'Why didn't you tell us you are one of us?!'" (Korelc 2010)

This differentiation of us vs. them presumes the workers' distance from the Slovenian people and society. Describing the workers as distrustful of and closed toward Slovenians obscures the real problem. The roles of legal and social discrimination in the integration of workers into mainstream society and institutions are pushed into the semantic background, while the real cause of the workers' detachment from Slovenians is construed as their will.

More broadly, the problem of immigrant workers is linked to the question of the workers' non-assimilation. They are represented as unable to speak Slovenian and desirous of remaining segregated within their own circles, creating the impression of a tribal organization among them. Workers are described as closely connected with their families, while the community of immigrant co-workers seems to be organized along kinship lines.

Backwardness, primitiveness, and traditionalism are made explicit in order to position immigrant workers as contradictory to elements of the majoritarian society. To explain this positioning of the other, I follow Todorova (2009: 17) in referencing Douglas, who shows that objects or ideas that confuse or contradict cherished classifications provoke hostile behavior that condemns them. Douglas calls these confusing or contradictory elements ambiguous, anomalous, and indefinable, "uncomfortable facts, which refuse to be fitted in, we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb these established assumptions" (in Todorova 2009: 17). In addition to constructing workers themselves as contradictory elements, their practices and the objects to which they relate are also portrayed as out of place.

---

9 She claims that her mother is Macedonian, so the presupposed similarity in ethnic origin is weak, as the workers are mainly Bosnians, Kosovars, and Serbs. However, in Slovenia, the distinction among these groups does not seem to be important, and they often all fall under the signifier "Balkan" or "immigrant."

(4) "Most of them [immigrant workers during a protest] were still wearing weathered, torn tennis shoes that most of us would probably not wear even while painting walls." (Aleksič 2010)

In example 4, we face what Fairclough (1995: 5–6) calls an implicit presupposition, which is a linguistic strategy that reveals what is taken as normal, granted, or common sense. In this context, the torn tennis shoes contradict the codes of the majoritarian society (a Slovenian would never wear shoes in such bad condition) and help to construct the worker as different.

Similarly, the descriptions of workers' housing in examples 5 and 6 focus mostly on objects that are out of place or in unusual locations.

(5) "In the hall, there is a sink and an electric stove with two burners by the trash bin, from which garbage is spilling, and by it, a table with three chairs." (Gole 2010)

(6) "We eat in our beds, because we did not have a dining table." /.../ (Korelc 2010)

Examples 5 and 6 describe a sink and a stove placed in a hall instead of the kitchen, garbage falling out of the trash bin instead of contained within it, immigrants eating in bed instead of at the table, and the dining table placed next to the garbage instead of away from it.

That the workers are the source of dirt and pollution is emphasized in example 7.

(7) "Marko, for instance, likes nature. He likes to spend Sundays puffing cigarette smoke on a bench in the town park." (Grah 2012)

Garbage outside the bin and smoking in natural areas allude to air and environmental pollution, making the workers symbolic of disturbing, polluting, and dirty elements unwanted in an ethnically clean environment. This view sees workers as pollution, as Douglas would put it – workers appear as different precisely because their culture and practices contradict Slovenian codes. Example 8 confirms this prejudice against workers as dirtiness.

(8) "Mujo takes out the trash /.../ he says, 'Let people see that we are not filthy.'" (Gole 2010)

This quotation contains an implicit presupposition (Fairclough 1995: 5–6) that Slovenians think that workers (or Balkan immigrants in general) are actually dirty. In order to prove the contrary, Mujo takes care of the trash.

Eating, disposing of trash, and sleeping in the same place remove the workers' subjectivity from the realm of the humanity and instead evoke the animal. Example 9 shows how out-of-place objects and practices are representative of the irrationality of the workers' behavior.

(9) "For the 108 workers that are sleeping on one floor, there are ten showers, five toilets and pissoirs. For the bed, the workers pay 75 euro /.../ For this amount, workers can sleep in 12-square-meter rooms with three beds, a closet, TV, one cabinet, one chair, and one electric stove." (Gole 2010)

Despite the poor living conditions, the workers are still willing to stay and even pay for their accommodations. The lack of an effort to improve the living conditions creates the impression that immigrant workers are willing to live and work in such conditions because it somehow is part of their original Balkan subjectivity. Their irrational orientation to suffering is often questioned by journalists—"Is it worth it? Why are they still doing it?"—and therefore contrasted with Slovenian (Western) rationality.

Such irrational behavior then is rationalized by exploring the workers' life opportunities. In example 1, the original economic and socio-cultural environment determines the worker's destiny. Immigrants are seen as destined for migration, bread-winning, and manual labor. The factors determining their lives lie in essentialist determinants loaded with signifiers of Balkanism – a lack of education, large traditional families, traditional gender roles, ruralness, and irrationality.

VICTIMIZATION DISCOURSE

Although these characteristics easily fit into the Balkanist discourse, Balkanism is only one facet of the picture. After clearly grounding immigrant workers in Balkanism, the analyzed texts aim to make readers sensitive to and evoke their pity for immigrant workers. In terms of framing, media stories on

immigrant workers often depict individual and biographical narrations, rather than structural terms and conditions. Framing a story as an individual case implies assigning responsibility at the individual level, instead of understanding the problem of migration in structural and social terms (Iyengar 1991). Therefore, the focus moves from immigration as a primarily political matter to immigration as a private matter. This framing device is supplemented by the use of what Langer (1998) calls the rhetoric of human interest stories, which usually appear in the tabloid genre.

One basic feature of human interest stories is the attempt to make the reader empathize with the feelings of the group represented. In the case of immigrant workers, this attempt usually takes place through the narration of their life stories. "The emphasis in such stories is regularly narrated through a focus on relatively well-defined 'characters' and often inflected through some reference to 'personal tragedy'" (Langer 1998: 35). Such rhetoric involves readers by constantly referencing people's everyday lives, regardless of their ethnic or class affiliation. The narrations seem to be constructed out of repeated references to the ordinary; the world of daily life is the baseline from which events gain newsworthiness by exceeding (Langer 1998: 30). Everyday life is a common and fundamental feature of human existence, and involving the audience at this level seems to offer a permanent foundation on which to construct meaning. In a story framed around individual workers, the reader connects and sympathizes with them.

The following example shows how the rhetoric of human interest stories works:

(10) "I survive with the help of the Red Cross and social assistance. I've been in Slovenia for thirty-three years; I served in the army in Škofja Loka. I lived my whole life here. I tore food away from my mouth so I could send money to Bosnia to my wife and children; now I can't even do this. I can't talk about this because my heart hurts so bad that I'll start to cry." (Gole 2010)

Example 10 presents a worker's personal narration introduced to make the reader more sympathetic to the problems of immigrant workers. The message receives additional credibility through reported speech which describes the impact of the situation on the worker's feelings: "I can't talk about this because my heart hurts so bad that I'll start to cry." Fairclough (1995: 117) and Richardson (2007: 105) believe that using first-person narration makes a stronger impact on the reader, who is left with the impression that the statement is important or dramatic. What seems to be constitutive for the immigrant worker is being reduced to survival mechanisms in order to fulfill the role of breadwinner. Although not all readers experience poverty, the report of the worker's personal narration aims to provide the reader with some common points of identification – trying to survive while working hard and taking care of one's family. This identification is also achieved by the use of metaphors, or conceptual instruments that relate otherwise unclear or remote concepts in ways readily understood. Metaphors help readers grasp an external, difficult notion of society, such as poverty, by its relation to a familiar part of life. Therefore, metaphors can be a means for politicians or the media to gain social control (Otto Santa 1999: 195). In example 10, the metaphor "tearing food away from the mouth" implies making great sacrifices, while a "hurting heart" signifies severe emotional pain.

To align the identification of the Slovenian reader with that of the worker, the worker is constructed on the basis of his ethnic affiliation. He is portrayed as almost Slovenian, nearly "one of us." Example 11 shows how the attempt to include the immigrant in the Slovenian imagined community (Anderson 1991) works at the level of language.

(11) "This is not his first time in Slovenia, he proudly said. He served in the army here in the late 1980s and then as a "professional" in the early 1990s, when he and his compatriots built the new wing of the National Gallery." (Čepin Čander 2009)

Both examples 10 and 11 show the immigrant workers' attempts to include themselves in the majoritarian society by saying that they served the Yugoslav National Army in Slovenia and have lived in Slovenia for decades. This inclusion distances the workers from their Balkan origins. The worker becomes the victim not only of past events (he left his life back home in order to work in Slovenia) but also of a foreign nation for which he has sacrificed his entire life.

The position of victimization is not only claimed by the workers themselves but also reproduced by media texts which reframe it in moral terms.

(12) "They left the best of their years here, and now they are treated like this." (STA, K. 2011)

Here, the workers are constructed as pure and innocent victims subordinated to the cruel forces of the social reality imposed on them by a foreign nation.

This operationalization of moralism and sacrifice is supplemented by drawing the immigrant worker into the imagined Slovenian community. In order to extract the image of immigrant workers from the Balkanist discourse, the media texts attribute to them images and practices traditionally perceived as Slovenian.

(13) "The room has space for beds, a table, a fridge, and a closet. Around the table in the room, three SCT workers are gathered. On the table, they have a pot of goulash and polenta,[10] four of the cheapest Mercator beers, juice, and some bread." (Gole 2011)

This description of the workers' residence resembles the image of a pre-modern Slovenian peasant family gathered around a pot of goulash. Furthermore, the workers drinking beer from the main Slovenian supermarket chain Mercator evokes Slovenian working-class habits. Describing the workers as practicing the same rituals as Slovenians serves as a strong point of identification for the Slovenian readers. The boundaries between us and the other are blurred as the immigrant worker becomes the carrier of traditional signifiers of Slovenian character.

These signifiers also play an important role in the media's construction of immigrant workers as passive, diligent victims, willing to accept their destiny, holding in their frustration without externalizing the conflict with their oppressors. Their masochistic introjection is demonstrated in the following two examples.

(14) "The patience of the strikers, who did not create a single incident during the strike, is … turning into despair." (Strgar 2010)

(15) "Most of them simply bear with it and do their job." (Čepin Čander 2009)

In example 14, the workers' resignation takes the form of humility and conflict avoidance. For example, the statement that the striking workers "did not create incidents" points out their passivity and conveys the implicit presupposition (Fairclough 1995: 106) that the only expected reactions of immigrant workers to rights violations are creating incidents and fighting back. Example 15 describes the workers' delusionary coping mechanisms and suggests that workers simply "bear with" the problem. They internalize the problem and do not actively seek to solve it. The workers remain helplessly affected by the situation in which they find themselves.

The workers' passivity is counterpoised against the overwhelming power of the unfortunate situation they face.

(16) "The stooping drudge Patrik … can only patiently wait." (Aleksič 2010)

In this example, the powerlessness of Patrik's body posture is illustrated by the adjective "stooping." Passivity, not action, is the only option presented; Patrik can only "patiently wait" for his destiny to change.

In the construction of immigrants as passive victims, workers' personal narrations are complemented by the views of labor and union representatives and Red Cross and social workers. The following example is a quotation from a Slovenian social worker.

(17) "'The workers coming to us are decrepit. They do not have anybody to borrow money from. They express intense distress and regret that they have to ask the municipality for help because they worked hard for years and years,' says Mrs. Verbič, who was really touched by the stories of the poor workers at Vegrad." (STA, K. 2011)

In this case, Verbič's direct speech operates so that the reader identifies with her feelings, rather than with the workers' socially distant situation. The workers are constructed as innocent, docile victims.

---

10 A Slovenian traditional dish that is usually inexpensive.

They are described as very tired and "decrepit" but still remain "very polite and mild-mannered." One again finds the implicit presupposition that the expected behavior is the opposite of politeness. Workers even "regret they have to ask the municipality for help" because their goal is to work for and earn money, not to ask for humanitarian help. This construction of the worker as a humble, docile victim is indeed a call for the reader's empathy. Unlike in Balkanist discourse, the worker is no longer feared as an illegitimate, phantasmal job stealer or chaser of easy money but becomes legitimized as a helpless victim seeking pity. By now it should be clear that, for immigrant workers, the position of delusionary victim is the core of their subjectivity.

DISCUSSION

Although aspects of Balkanism persist in the analyzed texts, the worker as a helpless victim does not seem to fit into what Todorova (2009) defines as Balkanist discourse. According to her analysis, the Balkan man is not a victim but, rather, proud, misogynistic, masculine, barbaric, primitive, aggressive and patriarchal (Todorova 2009). Therefore, the signifier "Balkan man" carries a negative connotation of everything that a westernized man should not be. However, to explore these phenomena, it is necessary to consider the broader socio-political context of the transitional period. At the start, Slovenia became quickly involved in the process of Europeanization. The transition slowly created leftist discourses that promoted respect for human rights and European democracy while trying to narrow the space for the socialism and xenophobic views of other ex-Yugoslavs. Therefore, the victimization discourse actually marks an attempt by left-wing discourses to step away from the Balkanist framework and introduce the image of the victim in order to legitimize the presence of immigrant workers in Slovenia.[11] This attempted normalization of the Balkan entailed increasing public sensitivity to the problem. The victimization discourse, therefore, worked within the framework of counter-Balkanist discourse and strategies of including the other in order to advance the normalization process. Normalization (Watney 1997) would allow mass media representations of the workers' Balkan[12] identity only in strictly codified forms that did not threaten the general public and media users but instead protected them from potential destabilization. Within the media repertoire of strictly delimited and defined images which mobilize such notions as decency, human nature, and normality, immigrant workers were construed not as something horrifying and threatening but as helpless victims lacking the political power to destabilize the majority community. In the cases if victimization presented, readers are called upon to sympathize with and pity the immigrant worker, who is depicted as a docile and harmless victim. The victimization discourse tries to open a space of identification for Slovenians and immigrant workers by creating an inclusive imagined community of we who are helpers and they who are victims, along with evoking the reader's empathy and pity for these helpless victims. Creating the subject position of victim for immigrant workers marks an attempt to legitimize their presence in Slovenian society. In opposition to the Balkanist discourse, workers are no longer portrayed as threatening national integrity but as harmless, helpless, and in need. The victimized subjectivity becomes normalized and therefore acceptable to the Slovenian majority.

Although this analysis focuses on the Slovenian case, such humanitarianism has a wider European discursive frame. The victimization of immigrants has recurred in Western European discourses since the war in Bosnia during the 1990s and persists in recently explored discourses (Ticktin 2006). Ticktin (2006: 34) points out that such humanitarianism adopts the moral imperative of compassion but can

---

11 Victimization is not restricted to immigrant workers, but is also applied to other similar social minorities such as the Erased (Vezovnik 2013) and asylum seekers (Lipovec Čebron 2009).

12 Sometimes we could be more specific and refer to Bosnian or/and Muslim identity.

have discriminatory and violent consequences in the absence of guiding political principles and prac-tices. In her opinion, such moralism blurs boundaries between legal, political and ethical-moral orders.

This criticism leads to the question: What are the negative effects of victimization evoking the reader's compassion, sympathy, and therefore humanitarianism? The main concern is that the basic operation performed by the analyzed rhetoric is to move the problem of immigrant labor from the po-litical level to the personal, moral-ethical, and private level. As shown in this analysis, the victimization discourse focuses on the individual tragedies of the workers and never discursively represents them as potentially active political subjects. Considering that workers have been politically active in the IWW since 2009, the individualized framing of stories neglects an important segment of the workers' sub-jectivity. When political actions are involved—for instance, strikes—the texts tend to not represent workers as political actors. This act of media non-representation of workers' political subjectivity leads to a process of desubjectivization on the level of discourse. In this sense, what was once defended—for instance, human rights—loses its political aspect and becomes a defense of humanitarian rights. The victimization discourse that relies on the assumed universality of democracy and human rights, there-fore, is not political but, rather, humanitarian. The absence of a political element in the discourses ana-lyzed is evident mostly in the failure to constitute the workers as political subjects who could directly or indirectly enter into an antagonistic relationship with the hegemonic regime. Instead, the workers are represented as victims of social, economic, and cultural determinants. Therefore, their right to live and work in Slovenia "appeared more and more as the rights of the victims, the rights of those that were un-able to enact any rights or even any claim in their name, so that eventually their rights had to be upheld by others … in the name of a new right to 'humanitarian interference'—which ultimately boiled down to the right to invasion" (Rancière 2004: 297).

The problem with the humanitarian perspective of the victimization discourse is that it can under-stand human life only in the sense of what Agamben calls *bare life*, or *zoe* (Agamben 1998). Agamben suggests that humanitarianism cannot grasp the polis, or what qualifies as social and political life. To Agamben, this conceptualization of workers matches the notion of radically desubjectivized human beings living in the "limit zone:" "Precisely because they were lacking almost all the rights and expecta-tions that we customarily attribute to human existence, and yet were still biologically alive, they came to be situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which they were no longer anything but bare life" (Agamben 1998: 159). Being represented as the "living dead" (also evident in vivid descriptions of the workers' living, health, and body conditions) and reduced to an existential level means being deprived of any political agency. This pseudo-democratic representation of immi-grant workers is therefore in solidarity with the forces of Balkanist discourse against which it claims to fight. Thus, what was first intended to be a counter-hegemonic representation of othering ultimately becomes a form of governmentality over a population reproducing the established power relations that Todorova claimed were typical of Balkanist discourse: Western Europe over the Balkan periphery.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have focused on discourses of immigrant workers from ex-Yugoslavian republics working for Slovenian construction companies. The discourses analyzed appeared in the Slovenian print media from 2009 to 2012. I explored the interplay of the Balkanist and victimization discourses that dominate representations of the identity of immigrant workers. The construction of the immigrant worker as a positive, victimized figure who at the same time personifies negative Balkanist features seems aporic and contradictory. Especially if we perceive immigrants in the context of Balkanist dis-course, this construction of the victimized hero seems a puzzling novelty. I have therefore advanced two explanations.

The first explanation speculates that attempts were made to naturalize immigrants by freeing them from xenophobic constructions. The ideas of human rights and democracy emerged in left-wing media discourses as valid democratic alternatives to Balkanist, xenophobic, right-wing discourses, making naturalization a more democratic way to represent the other. However, the elimination of explicit xenophobia and hate speech did not result in a more democratic construction of the other's subjectivity. Ultimately, the succeeding construction of immigrant workers descended from the first. The core of this second construction is the image of the immigrant worker as victim. This process of discursive desubjectivization and victimization connotatively suggests that the notion of immigrant workers undergoing a process of naturalization in Slovenian society allows them to be represented only in ways that do not disturb the homogeneous society. In short, immigrant workers are legitimate victims but not valid political subjects or public agents.

Therefore, the process of victimization again presumes the existing power relations and does not permit the construction of an active subjectivity for immigrant workers. It makes them dependent on humanitarianism and emotional investments of pity from the ethnically homogeneous us. Victimization pushes the problem into the domain of the private and prohibits the subject from positioning the problems of migration, poverty, and precariousness in structural and political terms. As this move deeply reproduces the already established relations of power—Europe over the Balkans—the victimization discourse remains deeply rooted in the ground in which it originated – in Balkanism.

REFERENCES

Agamben, Giorgio (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Anderson, Benedict (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso.

Bakić-Hayden, Milica (1995). Nesting Orientalism: The case of former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54/4, 917–931.

Beznec, Barbara (2009). Migracije in lateralni prostori državljanstva. Časopis *za kritiko znanosti* 37/238, 13–28.

Bobnič, Robert and Vezovnik, Andreja (2013). Diskurz o islamu ali dispozitiv izjav in objekta: primer islamskega versko-kulturnega centra. *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 40/251, 34–53.

Doupona Horvat, Marjeta, Verschueren, Jef and Žagar Ž., Igor (2001). *Retorika begunske politike v Sloveniji: pragmatika legitimizacije*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute.

Fairclough, Norman (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fairclough, Norman (1995). *Media Discourse*. London: Arnold.

Foucault, Michel (1971). *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Hromandžić, Hajrudin (2009). Delavske migracije iz Cazinske krajine. Časopis *za kritiko znanosti* 37/238, 96–100.

Iyengar, Shanto (1991). *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Kuzmanić, Tonči (1999). *Slovenski rasizem,* šovinizem *in seksizem*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute.

Langer, John (1998). *Tabloid Television. Popular Journalism and the "Other News"*. London: Routledge.

Lipovec Čebron, Uršula (2009). Od kulture nezaupanja do selektivnega sočutja: prosilci in prosilke za mednarodno zaščito v slovenskem zdravstvenem sistemu. Časopis *za kritiko znanosti* 37/235–236, 190–203.

Mozetič, Polona (2009). Kako su radnički domovi prošli kroz tranziciju?. Od socialnovarstvenih institucij do institucij migracijske politike. Časopis *za kritiko znanosti* 37/238, 77–92.

Otto Santa, Anna (1999). Like an Animal I Was Treated: Anti-Immigration Metaphor in US Public Discourse. *Discourse Society* 10/2, 191–224.

Patterson Hyden, Patrick (2003). On the edge of reason: The Boundaries of Balkanism in Slovenian, Austrian, and Italian discourse. *Slavic Review* 62/1, 110–141.

Plumwood, Val (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London, New York: Routledge.

Rancière, Jacques (2004). Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man? *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103/2–3, 297–310.

Reisigl, Martin and Wodak, Ruth (2001). *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*. London: Routledge.

Richardson, E. John (2007). *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach From Critical Discourse Analysis.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ticktin, Miriam (2006). Where ethics and politics meet: The violence of humanitarianism in France. *American Ethnologist* 33/1, 33–49.

Todorova, Maria (2009). Imagining the Balkans. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vezovnik, Andreja (2009). *Diskurz*. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za družbene vede.

Vezovnik, Andreja (2013). Representational Discourses on the Erased of Slovenia: From Human Rights to Humanitarian Victimization. *Journal of Language and Politics* 13/ 4, 606–625.

Vobič, Igor (2012). *Global Trends of Online Journalism in Slovenian Print Media* - PhD diss. Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences.

Watney, Simon (1997). Moral Panics. *The Media Studies Reader* (ed. Tim O' Sullivan, Yvonne Jewkes). London: Arnold, 124–133.

NEWSPAPER SOURCES

Aleksič, Jure (2010). Naj jedo potico! *Mladina,* 19. 3., http://www.mladina.si/50007/ naj-jedo-potico/ (8. 9. 2014).

Čepin Čander, Maja (2009). Prej sem razmišljal kako priti v Slovenijo, danes razmišljam, kako bi pobegnil. *Dnevnik*, 31. 1., http://www.dnevnik.si/objektiv/vec-vsebin/1042240985 (8. 9. 2014).

Gole, Nejc (2010). Ko je človek vreden manj kot pes. *Delo,* 23. 9., http://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/ ko-je-clovek-vreden-manj-kot-pes.html   (8. 9. 2014).

Gole, Nejc (2011). Samski dom: za sobo kar 600 evrov. *Delo,* 22. 2., http://www.delo.si/gospodarstvo/ samski-dom-za-sobo-kar-600-evrov.html (8. 9. 2014).

Grah, Matija (2012). Delavci na začasnem delu pri mačehi Sloveniji. *Delo-Panorama*. 10. 2., http://www. delo.si/arhiv/tiskano/10.02.2012/Delo (8. 9. 2014).

Korelc, Sonja (2010). Ve se, kdo ukazuje in kdo uboga. *Delo-Mag*, 12. 4. (tiskana izdaja)

STA, K. (2011), Protest delavcev SCT. *Dnevnik*, 9. 2.http://www.dnevnik.si/poslovni- dnevnik/poslovni/ novice/1042423082 (8. 9. 2014).

Strgar, Zlatka (2010). Vegradovi delavci jezni tudi na Pahorja. *Dnevnik*, 6. 10., http://www.dnevnik.si/ clanek/1042393220 (8. 9. 2014).