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COMMUNICATION RELATIONS ON TWITTER DURING THE MIGRANT “CRISIS” IN SLOVENIA

Rok Smrdelj¹

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ABSTRACT

Communication Relations on Twitter During the Migrant “Crisis” in Slovenia

The article explores communication relations on Twitter during the 2015–2016 migrant “crisis” in Slovenia. By integrating social network analysis with critical discourse studies, the author finds that the “left-wing” political network had the most members. In contrast, the “right-wing” political network was notably more influential and active. The political elite, mass media, journalists, and public figures are among the most influential users. A vast majority of posts feature discriminatory discourse focused on security understandings of migration. The research is important because it provides one of the few and relatively comprehensive insights into the online digital discussion on migration in Slovenia.

KEYWORDS: migrant “crisis”, Twitter, social network analysis, critical discourse studies, “right-wing” actors

IZVLEČEK

Komunikacijska razmerja na Twitterju v obdobju migrantske »krize« v Sloveniji

Avtor v članku proučuje komunikacijska razmerja na Twitterju v obdobju migrantske »krize« 2015–2016 v Sloveniji. Izhajajoč iz analize socialnih omrežij in kritičnih študijev diskurza ugotavlja, da ima omrežje, ki predstavlja »levo« politično opcijo, največ članov, »desno« politično omrežje pa je bilo najvplivnejše in najdejavnije. Med najvplivnejšimi uporabniki omrežja so politična elita, množični mediji, novinarji in javno znane osebe. Večina objav vsebuje diskriminatorni diskurz s poudarkom na varnostnem razumevanju migracij. Raziskava je pomembna zato, ker gre za enega redkih in razmeroma celovitih vpogledov v digitalno spletno migracijsko razpravo v Sloveniji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: migrantska »kriza«, Twitter, analiza socialnih omrežij, kritični študiji diskurza, »desno« usmerjeni akterji

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MIGRATIONS IN ONLINE MEDIA

“Migration in the media” and “media in migration” are two distinct research subfields within the broader field of media and migration studies (Wood & King, 2001; Smets et al., 2019). While the first subfield delves into media representations of migrants in mass and social media, the second subfield investigates the role of new media technologies in the migration process. Research in the “migration in the media” subfield predominantly reveals that contemporary media portray migrants as “others,” “criminals,” and “undesirables” (Wood & King, 2001; Consterdine, 2018; Eberl et al., 2018). On the other hand, findings from the “media in migration” subfield underscore the dual role of new media technologies, such as smartphones, in migration. They provide migrants with travel information but also track their whereabouts, movements, and interactions with others, thereby rendering them vulnerable to government surveillance (Zavratnik & Cukut Krilić, 2020).

“Migration in the media” studies reveal that mass and social media significantly shape citizens’ perspectives on migration issues, as the majority of European citizens lack direct contact with migrants and rely on media-mediated content as their primary source of information (Consterdine, 2018; Eberl et al., 2018). To illustrate, Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt (2016, p. 9) stated that had the media not reported on the 2015–2016 migrant “crisis,” most of the population would have remained unaware of the migrants’ arrival in Slovenia. Such observation underscores the importance of examining migration through the analysis of media content. It also indicates that media discourse, although not entirely detached from political discourse, strongly influences attitudes toward marginalized groups (Jalušič, 2001: 14) such as migrants.

The “migration in the media” subfield can be further subdivided based on the media studied: online or offline. While studies of migration in offline media are abundant, studies addressing migration in online media—including both mass and social media—are scarcer (Eberl et al., 2018; Smrdelj, 2021).

MIGRANT “CRISIS” ON TWITTER IN SLOVENIA

Situated in the “migration in online media” subfield, our study delves into the communication relations on Twitter during the 2015–2016 migrant “crisis”¹ in Slovenia. The phrase migrant “crisis” is a widely established media and political label for the enormous number of migrants arriving in Europe during the second half of 2015 and the beginning of 2016. A majority of these migrants originated from Syria,

1 We use the term “crisis” in quotation marks to distinguish our perspective from the media’s and political depiction of the unprecedented number of migrants arriving in Europe as a “crisis.” Situations deemed social crises are not necessarily genuine crises in all instances. Instead, they can be framed and constructed as such by both the media and political elites (Vezovnik, 2018; Smrdelj & Vogrinc, 2020).

Afghanistan, Iraq, and their neighboring countries (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016; Eurostat, 2019). War, poverty, and political upheaval triggered significant migration from these regions (Kogovšek Šalamon & Bajt, 2016). With Hungary closing its borders on October 17, 2015, Slovenia became a transit country for all migrants aiming for Germany or other northern or western European countries. After the closure of the Hungarian border, the so-called "Balkan route" was realigned, shifting from the trajectory of Serbia-Hungary-Austria-Germany to that of Serbia-Croatia-Slovenia-Austria (Malešič, 2017, p. 953).

Our article uses the term "migrant" to encompass all individuals who crossed borders to arrive in Europe during the migrant "crisis," irrespective of the reasons for leaving their home country. We follow the International Organization for Migration's definition of "migrant" as anyone who "moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons" (IOM, 2019). Given the expansive nature of the IOM definition, "migrant" can be aptly applied to numerous categories of individuals who reached Slovenia during the "crisis," whether they were merely transiting Slovenia or actively seeking asylum in the country.

Our study focuses on the Twitter debate between September and December 2015. This timeframe marks when most migrants arrived in Slovenia (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016), and migration was most prominently highlighted in both mass and social media (Srnčič, 2021). By choosing Twitter as our analysis medium, we aim to bridge the existing research gap in studying online media within the "migration in the media" subfield. Twitter is important to study since it is more open to the public than Facebook (posts are accessible to unregistered users) and is used mostly for political discussions rather than social dynamics (Verweij, 2012, p. 682). Moreover, Twitter plays an important role in disseminating information during social crises (Bruns et al., 2012). Last but not least, Twitter, along with Facebook, was the first source of information during the tumultuous events related to the migrant "crisis" (Lecheler et al., 2019).

To understand who directed the Twitter debate unfolding during the migrant "crisis" in Slovenia, we will first review the studies on "migration in the media" on Twitter. We will define the importance of our study in this subfield. Then, the focus will shift to network theory, which provides categories for analyzing the communication dynamics between social media users. To explore migration discourses in the Twitter debate, we will supplement network theory with assumptions for studying migration discourse in the media. After the theoretical part, we will outline our research questions, describe the sample, and detail our data collection and analysis methodologies. After presenting the results, we will discuss the study's main insights.

MIGRATIONS ON TWITTER: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Twitter migration studies typically draw from network theory, operationalizing it in several ways: analyzing vast numbers of posts in different national languages (e.g., Gualda & Rebollo, 2016; Siapera et al., 2018); focusing on the meaning of specific hashtags in the discussion (Avraamidou et al., 2021; Barisione et al., 2019); conducting a qualitative analysis of a smaller sample of posts (Kreis, 2017); examining individual user profiles of representatives of parliamentary politics (Bennett, 2016); or addressing specific viral events, such as the death of the boy Alan Kurdi (e.g., Bozdağ & Smets, 2017).

Twitter migration studies reveal that humanitarian and security discourses predominantly shape the debates on the platform. As such, Twitter migration discourses mirror those typically present in the mass media (Consterdine, 2018; Eberl et al., 2018; Smrdelj, 2021). The most influential Twitter users include representatives from parliamentary politics, the mass media, and established NGO actors with online and offline influence (Ferra & Nguyen, 2017; Siapera et al., 2018). The activities of anti-immigrant movements that spread hateful and discriminatory attitudes on Twitter are very present (Avraamidou et al., 2021). Studies also indicate that most users have a “right-wing”² political orientation (Bennett, 2016; Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Avraamidou et al., 2021).

Our research stands out due to its unique approach to examining the migration debate in Slovenia, particularly through its expansive sample of tweets. We focus on the entire discussion and do not limit ourselves to specific user profiles or topics. Studies investigating migration discourse on Twitter target major world languages (e.g., English, French) and overlook smaller countries such as Slovenia (e.g., Gualda & Rebollo, 2016; Kreis, 2017; Siapera et al., 2018). A distinguishing methodological innovation of our study is its emphasis on the retweet network as a starting point for examining communication dynamics. Although several Twitter migration studies visualize the communication relations network (e.g., Siapera et al., 2018; Avraamidou et al., 2021), none focus directly on retweets. Instead, they use other data to create the network (e.g., hashtags, mentions, replies).

2 Much like the term “crisis,” we enclose the terms “right” and “left” in quotation marks. This is because we do not employ them as definitive analytical concepts; their meanings can shift depending on the socio-historical context, as detailed in the Discussion section of this article. Instead, our use of these two terms relies on self-identification. If a party or medium identifies as “right-wing” or is publicly perceived as such, we tentatively label it in that manner.

NETWORK THEORY

Within network theory (Himmelboim, 2017; Schroeder, 2018; Hansen et al., 2020), we focus on three concepts: the network, central users, and network communities (Jesenšek et al., 2021). In the following sections, we will introduce each of these concepts.

Network

A network epitomizes the intricate web of connections among social media users. Unlike traditional communication, which follows a linear path from sender to receiver, online interactions are bidirectional. Social media participants function both as senders and receivers of content. This dual role leads to the emergence of complex communication interactions that can be visualized graphically as a network of “nodes” (users) and “edges” (relations between users). Various forms of social media communication, such as liking posts, retweeting, following users, mentioning users, commenting on posts, etc.), can represent these “edges” (Lindgren, 2017).

Central Users and Influence

Central users are distinguished from other social media users due to their distinct activity or influence (e.g., Xie & Luo, 2019; Jesenšek et al., 2021). For our study, we focused on those central users notable for their influence.³ Nonetheless, defining and quantifying influence is not straightforward. To accomplish our research objective, we utilized a simple definition of influence as a particular user’s ability to influence others’ opinions on a specific topic (see Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Al-Rawi, 2019). Accordingly, we measured Twitter influence through retweets, viewing them as markers of endorsement and engagement with a user or their content (Metaxas et al., 2021). The rationale is straightforward: the more a user or their tweet is retweeted, the greater its visibility and influence is over the direction of discussion on a particular topic. Thus, we categorize “most influential users” as those who are frequently retweeted, while “most influential tweets” are individual posts that garner significant retweets (e.g., Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Al-Rawi, 2019; Jesenšek et al., 2021).

3 For space reasons, we do not focus on users who stand out for their activity in the Twitter migration debate.

Network Communities: Network Fragmentation, Polarization and Pluralization

According to existing studies, social media can encourage the exchange of opinions between users with different ideological backgrounds (e.g., Bakshy et al., 2015; Guess et al., 2017; Arlt et al., 2019) or cause fragmented and polarized communities consisting of ideologically homogeneous users who communicate mainly with each other (e.g., Doğu, 2017; Dylko et al., 2017; Jesenšek et al., 2021). Based on these communication dynamics, the three most prevalent communication patterns in social media are “network fragmentation,” “network polarization,” and “network pluralization” (Jesenšek et al., 2021).

“Network fragmentation” denotes distinct user communities inside a particular network (Lindgren, 2017; Jesenšek et al., 2021). Typically, these communities are characterized by members sharing similar beliefs, leading them to communicate frequently amongst themselves. In contrast, they seldom engage with users from other communities with different opinions (Pariser, 2011). Hence, information sources aligning ideologically with the beliefs of these communities predominate in the debate (Barisione et al., 2019). Scholars use various terms (filter bubbles, echo chambers) to emphasize the uniformity of opinions and worldviews within these network communities and the close communication relations among their members (Pariser, 2011; Rasmussen, 2016). The visualization of the network, characterized by fragmentation into several communities, resembles a crowd in a public square divided into smaller, separate groups of people engaged in conversation (Barisione et al., 2019). When these individual “clusters” become apparent in graphical representation, it signifies the network’s fragmentation and the existence of distinct communities (Rasmussen, 2016; Bruns & Highfield, 2018).

The term “network polarization” denotes pronounced opposing views on a specific topic among particular communities (Doğu, 2017; Dylko et al., 2017). To ascertain whether a fragmented network is also polarized, we must analyze the discourse within its communities to discover if they hold similar or opposing opinions on a particular topic (Barisione et al., 2019).

Moreover, “network pluralization” refers to the circulation of diverse viewpoints amongst ideologically heterogeneous users who are not “closed” into ideologically homogeneous communities. Consequently, “network pluralization” is depicted graphically as conversations among ideologically different users who are not clustered into individual communities but are dispersed throughout the network (Garrett et al., 2011; Arlt et al., 2019).

MIGRATION DISCOURSES IN THE LIGHT OF THE MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF THE “CRISIS”

Drawing from existing studies (see Consterdine, 2018; Eberl et al., 2018; Smets et al., 2019; Smrdelj, 2021), we can determine some general features of the migration discourse⁴ in light of the media’s construction of the “crisis.” The most important feature is the depiction of as “others” in relation to the “dominant” society, i.e., the citizens of the recipient countries. The construction of migrants’ “otherness” is predicated on their unfavorable and stereotypical portrayal and serves to justify their rejection and non-acceptance in the host countries.

The security and criminalization discourse are the two most prevalent types of negative, stereotypical portrayals of migrants in the media. Within the security discourse, migrants are portrayed as cultural and physical threats to their host countries. The criminalization discourse depicts migrants as criminals for illegally crossing the border or their alleged involvement in crimes, such as theft, public disturbances, and selling drugs (Smrdelj, 2021). The security discourse, complemented by the rhetoric of exceptional circumstances, the criminalization discourse, and the construction of an impending threat and risk, creates the “securitization of migration,” which is the predominant way of understanding migration in the contemporary world (Malešič, 2017; Vezovnik, 2018).

While negative and stereotypical depictions of migrants dominate contemporary media (Smrdelj, 2021), some studies, such as by Šarić & Felberg (2019), highlight media attempts to overcome these negative stereotypes. They reflect on the phenomenon of migration beyond racist and discriminatory assumptions about their arrival, embracing what is termed anti-discrimination discourses. A prime example of such positive discourse is the humanitarian approach, which often paints migrants as victims of war, deserving of support rather than being framed as cultural or physical threats. However, even though humanitarian discourse is considered an example of positive treatment of migrants, it may also be stereotyped and perpetuate power relations. It can portray migrants as helpless and mute victims who are discussed by others, be it journalists, politicians, police, or NGO representatives (Smrdelj & Vogrinc, 2020).

4 As we will explain in the methodology section, we follow Fairclough (1992, pp. 63–64), who defines discourse as a form of social practice. This refers not only to the forms of action of individuals, but also to the forms of representations. Therefore, we perceive discourse as an assortment of representation modalities pertaining to a particular topic, focusing on the portrayal of social power relations dynamics within a given text.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the theoretical foundation outlined above, our study poses the primary research question (RQ 1): Who dominated the Slovenian migrant “crisis” Twitter debate, and in what manner? To comprehensively address this, we have formulated the subsequent sub-questions:

- SQ 1.1: Is it possible to identify communities in the retweet network? How extensive are these communities in terms of the number of users and communication relations among them? What communication patterns emerge at the level of visualization of identified communities?

If we discover distinct communities in the retweet network, we will also answer the following questions for each community:

- SQ 1.2: Who are the most influential users?
- SQ 1.3: Which sources of information predominate?
- SQ 1.4: Which migratory discourses prevail?

The sample on which we built the retweet network consists of 3,103 users who generated 35,543 tweets (of which 13,189 were retweets) between September 1 and December 31, 2015. This was the period when the number of migrants arriving in Slovenia reached its peak, and public debates were most intense. We obtained the data on April 25, 2021, using the Twitter API via Academic Research Access, a collaboration undertaken with Uroš Godnov, PhD, from the Institute for Data Quality (Slovenian: Inštitut za kakovost podatkov, d.o.o.). All Slovenian posts with at least one of the following hashtags and/or words or root words were included in the sample: “#begunci”, “#migranti”, “#begunskakriza”, “#migrantskakriza”, “#illegalnimigranti”, “#ilegalci”, “#prebežniki”, “#ŽičnaOgraja”, “begun-”, “migra-”, “prebežni-”, “ilegal-”, in “azil”.

To construct and analyze the retweet network, we utilized social network analysis (SNA). This method enabled us to determine which users were actively engaging in the network and with whom they forged communication relations (Himmelboim, 2017; Hansen et al., 2020). Our approach to creating and analyzing the retweet network was guided by the methodologies set forth by Jesenšek et al. (2021) and Al-Rawi (2019). A more comprehensive description of the SNA methodology, accompanied by the results of our analysis, is described in the subsequent section.

We adopted a methodological amalgamation of SNA and critical discourse studies (CDS) (Krzyżanowski & Machin, 2017). CDS provides a well-established interdisciplinary perspective for studying public discourses. Central to CDS is investigating how language legitimizes unequal social relations between “dominant” and “minority” society. In our particular case, we examine the social relations between the “dominant” society—the citizens of the host countries—and the “minority”

society—the migrants. Our discourse analysis is primarily concerned with how language both establishes and legitimizes these social relationships and, conversely, how it attempts to expose and deconstruct them. Our understanding of CDS closely resonates with Fairclough’s dialectical-relational approach (1992). He postulated that media texts do not only reflect or represent social relations and entities but also simultaneously construct and constitute them (Fairclough, 1992, p. 3). Therefore, power relations are invariably interwoven within a particular discourse, such as humanitarian discourse. These discourses often legitimize hierarchies through ideological mechanisms, and the CDS seeks to reveal these mechanisms (Srnđelj & Pajnik, 2022).

In conducting the discourse analysis, we closely examined the tweets to discern their framing of the acceptance or rejection of migrants based on prevailing migration discourses in light of the media construction of the “crisis” presented above.

The combination of quantitative (SNA) and qualitative (CDS) methodological approaches grants us a holistic understanding of the characteristics of the retweet network and the communities within it.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

Visualization of the Retweet Network

We constructed the retweet network based on the “from-to” principle. Here, “from” denotes the user who posted the original tweet, while “to” signifies the user who retweeted it. In this network, the “nodes” represent users, and the “edges” correspond to retweets.

Using R, we selected all users involved in the retweeting process, encompassing both the original authors whose posts were retweeted and those who actively retweeted posts by other users. We obtained 2,051 users and 13,189 retweets. Each retweet is considered an “edge.” Thus, our network comprises 13,189 “edges.” Upon importing these data into Gephi,⁵ we determined 8,449 “unique edges” (Hansen et al., 2020) between users. To clarify, a “unique edge” signifies a singular connection between two users, irrespective of the frequency of retweets between them. For example, if User A retweeted User B’s post five times, this translates to five retweets, or five “edges.” However, in terms of “unique edges,” this interaction is singular, so it counts as only one “unique edge.” Therefore, the figure “13,189” quantifies the number of “edges” corresponding to the sum of all retweets. At the same time, “8,449” denotes the number of “unique edges,” which served as the foundation for our network visualization in Gephi.

5 Luka Jesensek helped us visualize the retweet network and identify communities using the Louvain algorithm in Gephi.

Having discerned the “unique edges,” we used the Louvain algorithm⁶ to ascertain the possibility of identifying communities within the retweet network. This algorithm identified forty-six communities. However, a majority of these communities were deemed insignificant due to their minuscule size (e.g., just two). Therefore, our focus narrowed to the six largest communities, encompassing 92% of all users. The attributes of each of these communities within the retweet network are delineated below in Table 1.

Communities	Number of retweets	Number of “unique edges”	Number of users
Community 1	3,372	2,315	769 (38 %)
Community 2	6,292	3,493	484 (24 %)
Community 3	1,194	937	254 (12 %)
Community 4	720	440	152 (7 %)
Community 5	711	524	126 (6 %)
Community 6	591	460	99 (5 %)
Communities 7–46	309	280	167 (8 %)
Total	13,189	8,449	2,051

Table 1: Communities in the retweet network (source: own analysis).

We determined the size of each community based on the number of users, as presented in the last column of Table 1). In Table 2, the second column shows the number of retweets generated by users in a given community, while the third column summarizes the number of “unique edges.” The penultimate row of Table 1 summarizes the attributes of the remaining forty communities.

Comparing the characteristics of the six largest communities, it is evident that a larger user base within a community typically corresponds to an increased number of retweets. The exceptions are the first and the second largest communities. The second community has 285 fewer users than the first, but its users generated nearly twice as many retweets as the first community’s users. In addition, the users of the second community generated the most retweets.

Finally, we visualized the retweet network of the six largest communities in the Gephi (Figure 1). The retweet network has 1,884 edges (users) and 8,169 nodes (“unique edges”).

⁶ The Louvain algorithm developed by Blondel et al. (2008) is based on the discovery of common communication relations among network users. Users who frequently interact are categorized within the same community. Users belonging to a particular community also communicate with users from different communities, but communication among members of the same community occurs more frequently.

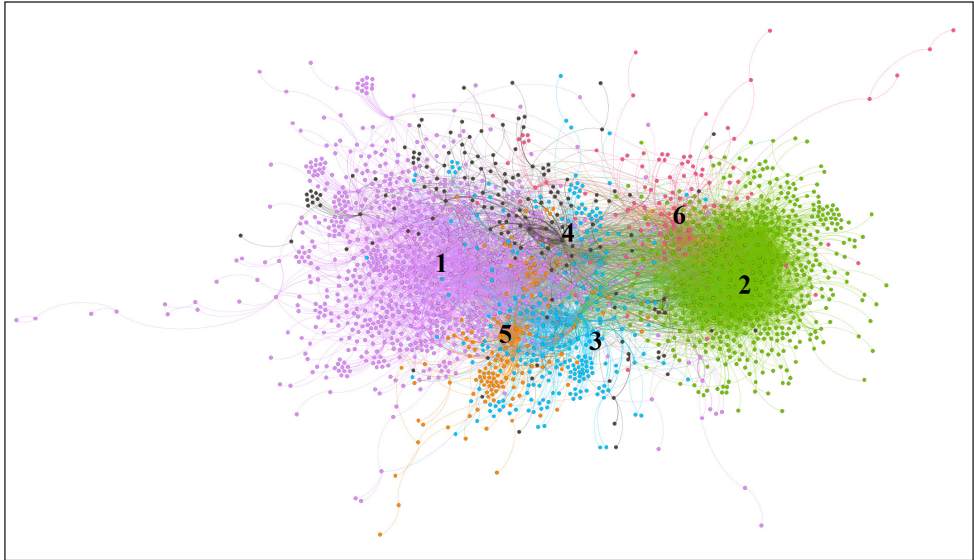


Figure 1: Visualization of the network of the six largest communities (source: own analysis).

Figure 1 visualizes distinct communities, each designated with a unique number and color: Community 1 is purple, Community 2 is green, Community 3 is blue, Community 4 is black, Community 5 is orange, and Community 6 is pink. Users who communicate more frequently are clustered, whereas those with fewer interactions are spaced farther apart.

Figure 1 illustrates fragmentation into individual communities. Communities 1 and 2 are particularly evident, situated at opposite ends of the network, with Community 1 on the left and Community 2 on the right. The network visualization also reveals that the users of these two communities do not communicate with one another, as evidenced by the absence of purple in the green-dominated area of Community 2 and vice versa. However, Community 2, the most isolated from the other communities, clearly exemplifies network fragmentation. It is depicted as a dense cluster of green “nodes,” much denser than other communities’ “nodes.” In addition, users from other communities are not seen in the cluster of green “nodes,” unlike in Community 1, where other-colored nodes can be found among the purple “nodes.” This visual representation indicates that Community 2 members predominantly interact with each other and rarely branch out to converse with members from other communities (the closest to them are users from Community 6, pink color). Despite its isolation, Community 2 generated the highest number of retweets.

On the other hand, users from different communities often communicate with those from other communities, leading to what we can term “network pluralization.” Figure 1 illustrates how the colors of Communities 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 intertwined in some locations. For instance, blue “nodes” (representing Community 3) appear in regions dominated by orange “nodes” (from Community 5) and black “nodes” (from Community 4).

Individual Communities' Characteristics in the Retweet Network

Network visualization enables us to assess user communication patterns. As previously mentioned, we can observe both network fragmentation and pluralization simultaneously. To provide insight into the interactions within each community, we identified the ten most influential users, the dominant sources of information regarding “migrant” crisis events, and the prevalent discourses of the most retweeted tweets (Table 2).

The most influential users are those whose tweets received the most “unique edges,” meaning they received the most retweets from distinct users. These users are listed in the third row of Table 2. We named each community based on the top ten most influential users identified within that community. In the fourth row of Table 2, the dominant information sources were selected based on the five most retweeted links and hashtags within each community. For instance, if “delo.si” ranked among the top five most-retweeted links of a community, we concluded that *Delo* newspaper’s content was the most popular within that community. The final row of Table 2 lists each community’s dominant discourses based on discourse analysis of the five most-retweeted tweets. We separately analyzed each of the top five most-retweeted tweets and, through this analysis, assessed the prevailing discourse shaping the migration debate in that community.⁷

Community 1 consists of numerous public figures who form a “left-wing” network that critiques migrants’ stereotypical portrayal. Notably, this community lacks representatives from the parliamentary political “left.” Community 2 is emblematic of the SDP, the largest “right-wing” opposition party at the time. Prominent figures from this party, such as SDP leader Janez Janša and MPs Vinko Gorenak and Žan Mahnič, are key members. Community 3 refers to the network of the television station POP TV. The majority of its members were journalists from the station during that period, including Tjaša Slokar, Irena Joveva, Jure Tepina, Anže Božič, and Nika Kunaver. Community 4 consists of anonymous users. Determining the real identities behind these profiles is challenging, suggesting they might represent a “fake public” or perhaps just “ordinary” citizens. Community 5 is dominated by users connected with the then-ruling party MCP, such as the then-Prime Minister Miro Cerar and the *Večer* newspaper. Key figures from the newspaper include its former editor, Katja Šeruga, and journalists Urška Mlinarič, Vojislav Bercko, and Aleš Kocjan. Community 6 includes users related to the NSi party, such as Žiga Turk and Federico V. Potočnik.

Representatives of both the parliamentary political elite and the mass media are present in every community, except for Community 4, where neither politicians nor mass media representatives are present. The prominence of politicians as influential

7 Due to space constraints and the complexity of the data, we do not list the most retweeted links, hashtags, and tweets for each community. Instead, we have provided a summarized overview of the results in Table 2. The data underlying the analysis are summarized in more detail in the author’s doctoral dissertation (Smrdelj, 2022).

	Community 1	Community 2	Community 3	Community 4	Community 5	Community 6
Network name	Users representing a “left-wing” political network	Slovenian Democratic Party (SDP)	POP TV television station	Publicly unknown users	Modern Centre Party (MCP) and Večer newspaper	New Slovenia – Christian Democrats party (NSI)
The most influential users	@matjassec (101) @Delo (100) @STA_novice (92) @SafetAlibeg (74) @ZerjavicDelo (64) @FrancikEk (54) @petrasovdat (53) @Pizama (49) @borutmekina (47) @Meli__SI (45)	@Nova24TV (121) @RevijaReporter (119) @JjansasSDS (117) @JozeBiscak (104) @strankaSDS (101) @DamiirCrnec (93) @dVinkoGorenak (84) @BojanPozar (78) @ZanMahnic (71) @krtmen (66)	@24ur_com (151) @policia_si (91) @SiolNEWS (70) @srdjan_c (42) @TjasasIokar (41) @Jloveva (38) @juretepinia (37) @AnzeBozic (34) @Nikakunaver (32) @Zurnal_24 (31)	@skyslovenia (43) @Centrifuzija (28) @MatjazIazbar (28) @brane_si (22) @RSustar (19) @slovenistan (17) @cashkee (17) @zaslovenij02 (15) @Dr_Edectic (14) @stavenskoverhski1 (11)	@mIadaRS (137) @vecer (77) @UrskamIinaric (36) @Slovenskavojska (36) @VojislavBercko (35) @KatjasSeruga (26) @MiroCerar (25) @EKvSloveniji (20) @StrankaSMC (13) @a_kocjan (13)	@Domovina_je (65) @ZigaTurk (43) @AntonTomazic (40) @FVProtocnik (39) @Bcestnik (30) @steinbuch (24) @NovaSlovenija (21) @RadioOgnjisce (19) @Andr3jal (17) @MladaSlovenija (15)
Dominant information sources	Delo, STA, Finance, Radio Študent	Reporter, Nova24TV, Demokracija	24ur.com, siol.net, Delo, RTV Slovenija, Epiilog	Reporter, Delo	Večer, Delo	Domovina, Reporter, RTV Slovenija
Dominant migration discourses	Attempts to overcome negative stereotypes, anti-discrimination discourses	Security discourse, reinforcement of negative stereotypes about migrants	Positive and negative discourses about migrants	Positive and negative discourses about migrants	Positive and negative discourses about migrants	Security discourse, reinforcement of negative stereotypes about migrants

Table 2: Characteristics of the six largest retweet network communities (source: own analysis).

users is especially noticeable in Communities 2, 5, and 6. Community 3 has the highest concentration of media-affiliated users, predominantly from the network of the television station POP TV.

From the discursive analysis of the most retweeted tweets, we find that different discourses about migrants prevail in each community. This network fragmentation, most evident in Figure 1 for Communities 1 and 2, also manifests in the dominant discourses of both communities, leading us to describe their dynamics as polarized. While the most retweeted tweets in Community 1 are characterized by efforts to counter negative stereotypes about migrants, the most retweeted tweets in Community 2 are characterized by a discriminatory discourse.

Community 2, representing the SDP party network, generated the most retweets. However, it remains notably isolated from other communities. Visually, it is closest to Community 6, representing the NSi Party network. Both Community 2 and Community 6 predominantly feature retweets related to security discourse. In contrast, Communities 3, 4, and 5 display varied discourses, suggesting the presence of ideologically heterogeneous users.

In all six communities, Slovenian mass media are the predominant sources of information, with foreign sources not being retweeted at all. There are no “alternative” sources of information, such as websites of NGOs focusing on migrants. Regarding political orientation, “right-wing” media (the weekly *Reporter*, the television station Nova24TV, the weekly *Demokracija*, the online portal *Domovina*) predominate, mainly in Communities 2 and 6. “Left-wing” media, such as the weekly *Mladina*, do not feature prominently in retweets. In terms of ownership, the landscape is dominated by private commercial media, while non-commercial outlets, such as RTV Slovenia and Radio Študent, are less presented. The latter occurs only in Community 1.

DISCUSSION

In our study, we sought to discern who dominated the Slovenian migrant “crisis” Twitter debate and how they did so. We discovered six major communities, encompassing 92% of all users in our sample. Community 1 is populated largely by public figures from a “left-wing” network that criticizes the stereotypical portrayal of migrants. Community 2 is representative of the SDP, the largest “right-wing” opposition party at the time. Community 3 is associated with the television station POP TV. Community 4 consists of publicly unknown users. Community 5 predominantly comprises users associated with the then-ruling MCP party and the *Večer* newspaper. Community 6 consists of users aligned with the NSi party. Community 2 is distinct; it generates the most retweets, and its users are the most isolated compared to other communities (RQ 1).

From the network visualization of the six largest communities, we discovered the coexistence of “network fragmentation” (most clearly exemplified in the case of Community 2), “network polarization” (most distinctive between Communities 1 and 2), and “network pluralization” (present across Community 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 where ideologically different users communicate with each other) (SQ 1.1). The most influential users are representatives of the parliamentary political elite, such as MPs, party leaders, and the prime minister, as well as figures from the mass media, such as journalists, editors, and media institutions (SQ 1.2). Slovenian mass media are dominant sources of information regarding “migrant” crisis events (SQ 1.3). While there are efforts to counter negative and stereotypical portrayals of migrants, a discriminatory discourse emphasizing a security-centric perspective on migration proves more pervasive in Twitter debates (SQ 1.4).

Our study offers one of the few comprehensive insights into the online digital discussion on migration in Slovenia. While the Slovenian migration discourse on Twitter mirrors those in other European contexts in terms of dominant users and narratives (e.g., Ferra & Nguyen, 2017; Siapera et al., 2018), our research distinctively underscores how “right-wing” political networks instrumentalize the migration debate. Conversely, representatives of the “left-wing” parliamentary political elite, such as the then United Left party,⁸ as well as NGOs, scholars, and other representatives of the “weak public,” are not among the most influential users. Although some studies demonstrate the appropriation of the online digital environment by the “right-wing” political network (e.g., Bennett, 2016; Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Avraamidou et al., 2021), its dominance is markedly pronounced in our findings. This is primarily due to the notable absence of the aforementioned social groups.

The dominance of the “right-wing” political network, coupled with the diminished presence of the parliamentary “left” and other social groups offering “alternative” interpretations of the migrant situation beyond “party” lines (e.g., NGOs) (Luthar, 2017), can be attributed to structural shifts in parliamentary politics over recent decades. The “right-wing” political agenda is normalizing and becoming the center of legitimate public debate in parliamentary politics, concurrently sidelining the “left-wing” perspective. This shift becomes evident when we consider that what was once deemed “social democratic” discourse a few decades ago—advocacy for public health care, public education, labor rights, and fundamental human rights—is now labeled as “radical,” “socialist,” or “communist,” particularly by “right-wing” protagonists. The merging of social democratic discourse with the neoliberal “right-wing” agenda and the symbolic appropriation of “left-wing” narratives by “right-wing” entities both accelerate the mainstream acceptance of the “right-wing” agenda and the sidelining of “left-wing” agenda (Dolar, 2021). Consequently, the “right-wing” and neoliberal agenda becomes dominant in parliamentary politics, while the “left-wing”

8 Although the MCP party identifies as “center-left,” we do not consider it a typical “left-wing” party, given its pursuit of the neoliberal agenda during its tenure in government.

agenda finds itself more aligned with civil society, particularly within the non-governmental sector.

The marginalization of “left-wing” parliamentary politics is mirrored in the Twitter migrant debate, with “left-wing” politicians and NGOs absent from the ranks of the most influential users. Instead, public figures from Community 1 have assumed a “symbolic” stance representing the “left” political perspective. This underscores how the migration debate on Twitter is emblematic of a broader structural shift in parliamentary politics, one which negatively impacts public discourse by largely confining the debate to the perspectives of the “right-wing” actors.

The prominence of right-wing actors can, in part, be attributed to the inherent media logic of Twitter, which is characterized by the brevity of tweets. As postings are limited in character count, this type of communication does not facilitate an argumentative and comprehensive discussion of a particular topic. Instead, it becomes a fertile ground for the dissemination of anti-immigrant views, which can be conveyed succinctly, a feature typically associated with the “right-wing” political stance and the “right-wing” oriented media (Pušnik, 2017). Representatives of the “right-wing” political network adeptly harness Twitter’s media logic to further their political goals. In contrast, other social groups, such as NGOs, do not participate in the discussion as Twitter’s media logic does not afford them an equitable opportunity to communicate their perspectives. By narrowing the debate to the positions and views on migration held by a “right-wing” political network, Twitter’s media logic has negative consequences for the contemporary online public sphere (Fuchs, 2021).

Consequently, the dominance of “right-wing” actors coincides with the dominance of a discriminatory discourse centered on the security viewpoint of migration. Bigo (2005) notes that globally exposed events such as the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States contributed to the general understanding of migration as a security issue. This indicates that the “right-wing” political stance in Slovenia has simply adopted the “global” and well-established biased perspective on migration.

Mass media representatives, including journalists, editors, and media institutions, also stand out in the retweet network. Mass media’s dominance among the most influential users and major information sources suggests its “older” logic has adeptly harnessed social media’s “newer” logic to disseminate its content. This suggests that “older” mass media remain the key agenda-setters on Twitter.

While interpreting the results of our studies, some limitations must be acknowledged. In some communities, the relationship between shared media content and community members is evident (e.g., in Community 2, representing the SDP party, the predominance of “right-wing” media content is anticipated). However, in some other communities, the rationale behind specific retweeting patterns remains elusive (e.g., why users associated with the *Večer* newspaper and those representing the Slovenian government are clustered in the same community). In such cases, where the connection between users and media content is not immediately apparent, we need more quantitative and qualitative data for a robust retweet network

analysis. Thus, delving deeper into communication patterns within specific communities and examining interactions between users across different communities is an essential next stage in the research process.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we examined communication dynamics on Twitter during the 2015–2016 migrant “crisis” in Slovenia. By merging social network analysis and critical discourse studies, we discerned that while the “left-wing” political network boasted the largest membership, the “right-wing” political network was the most influential and active, as its members generated the most posts. Notably, the political elite, mass media, journalists, and public figures emerged as the most influential users. Slovenian mass media stood out as a predominant source of information regarding the migrant “crisis” events. The vast majority of posts feature discriminatory discourse, leaning heavily toward security-centric interpretations of migration. The significance of our study lies in its provision of a nuanced, in-depth exploration of the online discourse surrounding migration in Slovenia, an area previously under-researched.

Following the onset of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak and the subsequent change in government in March 2020, Twitter activity in Slovenia increased significantly (Evkoski et al., 2021). Given this shift, future investigations could pivot toward more contemporary topics, such as Ukrainian refugees in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, to examine potential changes in debate structure relative to the migrant “crisis” discourse in Slovenia. Moreover, the next research step should be to supplement the social network analysis by conducting interviews and focus groups to investigate why representatives of the parliamentary political “left” and NGOs are not more organized participants in the Twitter discussion.

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POVZETEK

KOMUNIKACIJSKA RAZMERJA NA TWITTERJU V OBDOBJU MIGRANTSKE »KRIZE« V SLOVENIJI

Rok Smrdelj

Avtor v članku proučuje komunikacijska razmerja na Twitterju v obdobju migrantske »krize« 2015–2016 v Sloveniji. Izhajajoč iz metod za analizo socialnih omrežij, ki jih dopolnjuje s kritičnimi študiji diskurza, ugotavlja, da v omrežju poobjav oz. retvitov obstaja šest večjih skupnosti. Skupnost 1 sestavljajo različne javne osebe, za katere je mogoče reči, da predstavljajo »levo« usmerjeno omrežje, ki je kritično do negativnega in enoznačnega opisovanja migrantov. Skupnost 2 je omrežje stranke SDS. Skupnost 3 se nanaša na omrežje televizijske hiše POP TV, Skupnost 4 pa zajema javnosti neznane uporabnike. V Skupnosti 5 prevladujejo uporabniki, povezani s takratno vladno stranko SMC in dnevnikom Večer. V Skupnosti 6 pa najdemo uporabnike, povezane s politično stranko NSi. Analiza je pokazala, da je »levo« politično omrežje najštevilčnejše, vendar pa je »desno« politično omrežje najvplivnejše in najdejavnije, saj so njegovi člani objavili največ retvitov.

Med najvplivnejšimi uporabniki prevladujejo predstavniki parlamentarne politične elite, kot so poslanci, predsedniki političnih strank in predsednik vlade, ter množičnih medijev, kot so novinarji, uredniki in medijske institucije. Prevladujoči viri informiranja o dogajanju v povezavi z migrantsko »krizo« so slovenski množični mediji. Čeprav se v nekaterih skupnostih pojavljajo poskusi vzpostavitve protidiskriminatornega migracijskega diskurza, pa je v splošnem bolj viralen diskriminatorni diskurz s poudarkom na varnostnem razumevanju migracij.

Raziskava je eden redkih razmeroma celovitih vpogledov v digitalno spletno razpravo na temo migracij v Sloveniji. Čeprav se slovenska razprava o migracijah na Twitterju v splošnem ne razlikuje od podobnih razprav v drugih nacionalnih okoljih v Evropi, pa je posebnost raziskave v tem, da za analizo omrežja retvitov zelo jasno pokaže, da migracijsko razpravo instrumentalizirajo uporabniki, povezani z »desnim« političnim omrežjem, predstavniki »levo« parlamentarne politične elite (na primer takratna stranka Združena levica) pa niso med najvplivnejšimi uporabniki. Prav tako umanjajo NVO, strokovnjaki in drugi predstavniki »šibke javnosti«. Avtor navedeno ugotovitev tematizira v kontekstu širših strukturnih premikov na področju parlamentarne politike, kjer smo v zadnjih nekaj desetletjih priča vse večji normalizaciji »desne« in marginalizaciji »levo« politične agende. Pomemben »strukturni« pogoj za prevlado »desnice« je tudi medijska logika Twitterja. Zaradi kratkosti objav Twitter ne omogoča argumentirane in izčrpne razprave na posamezno temo. Namesto tega je ugoden teren za širjenje protipriseljenskih diskriminatornih stališč, ki so v splošnem značilna za »desno« politično opcijo in »desno« usmerjene medije, ta forma pa ni primerna za kompleksno in argumentirano razpravo, ki bi jo lahko zagotovile v razpravi manjkajoče družbene skupine.

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