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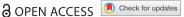
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What a Difference Context Makes: Comparing Communication Strategies of Migration NGOs in Two Neighboring Countries

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ABSTRACT

This research study compared non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the area of migration in two neighboring countries – Bulgaria and Turkey. Utilizing in-depth interviews with 39 NGO professionals in both countries, the analysis identified critical differences in public opinion dynamics, organizational structures and interdependencies, and government relationships. Further analysis unveiled how the local socio-economic and political context had impacted NGO communication strategies as well as the specific communication channels, public engagement activities, and social media campaigns in each country. Implications for communication scholarship during times of increasing migration flows and globalization are discussed.

Introduction

With global migration numbers continuing to rise and additional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the successful integration of refugees and migrants in any society depends mainly on dominant public discourse. Such discourse at both the level of political actors as well as the general public is significantly influenced by " the development and implementation of … planned strategic communication campaigns with the main goal of achieving significant and sustained positive behavioral change on an issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organization" (Fessman 2016, 16). The leading civil society organizations that aim to achieve such change are non-profit organizations whose mission is to advocate for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants to change dominant attitudes and behaviors towards these vulnerable groups (Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann 2017). These organizations are essential players in civil society and, under the umbrella of refugee communications, their purpose is to not only raise awareness of the migration issue, but also shift dominant narratives in order to create more favorable public opinion and ultimately increase the level of acceptance of such groups in the host society (Eberl et al. 2018). While the advocacy efforts that

non-profit organizations engage in may differ from country to country and from one target group to another, their ultimate goals rooted in the founding principles of humanitarian organizations remain the same.

This study is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's general theory of fields as a theoretical framework to study civil society, which is "governed by their own "rules of the game" and offering their own particular economy of exchange and reward" (Benson 1999, 464). Bourdieu (1993) regarded modern societies as social spaces, made up of "a plurality of specialized and semi-autonomous social fields" (Swartz 1997, 121), some of which are "fields of journalism, politics, social science, religion, or cultural production" (Driessens 2013, 559). Kurt Lewin is often credited with introducing field theory to the communications field, adapting it from gestalt psychology and conventional topology to social sciences, to uncover both individual and group behavior – especially concerning change (Burnes 2007; Burnes and Cooke 2013), as well as to understand how "social groupings were formed, motivated and maintained" (Burnes and Cooke 2013, 409).

When looking at institutional fields, the focus of this study, the field of civil society, could be considered a mezzo level entity grounded in the larger societal context. As suggested by Benson (1999), focusing on "the mezzo-level of the "field" offers both a theoretical and empirical bridge between the traditionally separated macro-"societal" level models of the news media, such as political economy, hegemony, cultural and technological theories, and micro-"organizational" approaches" (463). According to Bourdieu (1986), economic and social capital are critical to understanding the functions of a field, where economic capital is "institutionalized in the form of property rights" (242) and social capital consists of a network of "institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, 286). Organizational fields are essential to study as they help position organizations, consequently establishing a shared culture, allowing them to situate themselves in terms of others, the past, and the norms in the field (Benson 1999; Martin 2003; Meyer and Rowan 1977). An analysis of civil society organizations working for and with refugees can unveil the underlying economic and social capital dimensions for the field of civil society – both in Turkey and Bulgaria.

In addition to understanding the field dynamics in these countries, the second goal of this research is to determine how civil society organizations working in the area of migration in two different cultural contexts differ in their communication strategies. By focusing on Turkey, which has the largest Syrian refugee population in the world and borders Syria, and Bulgaria, an EU border nation with a minimal number of migrants as well as Turkey's neighbor, the study answers the call by Mattelart (2019) to give more attention to the role of media in migration studies and informs scholarship on how the different political and economic environment impacts the communication strategies of the non-profit sector. In addition to identifying divergent communication strategies, the study also demonstrates the role of public opinion dynamics and relationships with the state in each country.

Country Context

Turkey

With the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, political unrest engulfed Syria, leading to a civil war that caused millions of Syrian citizens to leave their country. Turkey ended up

receiving the highest number of Syrian citizens, with official United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees numbers showing over 3.6 million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey (UNHCR n.d.). This high number has put an economic and social strain on the country and has resulted in negotiations with the European Union for increased support for Syrians. Consequently, the European Commission has allocated a 3-billion Euro support package for Syrian refugees in Turkey in the first apex and later signed a second deal for an extra 3 billion euro, totaling 6 billion. The EU funds are transferred to Turkey through civil society partnerships to support the most disadvantaged refugee populations for their overall wellbeing through direct cash transfers, education and vocational training programs, and satisfaction of basic needs such as health, sanitation, and food. The projects financed by the EU have enabled more than half a million Syrian children to access education and empower the legislature to support vocational training and provide emergency clinics for refugees (Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association 2020).

One of the challenges for Syrian refugees has been their extended lack of legal status in Turkey. Although a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Turkey maintains the geographical limitation, only receiving asylum applications from citizens of European countries. Thus, Turkey only allows resettlement to a third country as a solution for refugees from other countries. As this was creating a legal dead-end for millions of Syrians, the "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" was passed in April 2013, and the Temporary Protection (TP) regulation for Syrians to provide them international protection was adopted in October 2014 (UNHCR n.d.). Three years later, in January 2016, Turkey adopted the "Regulation on work permits of refugees under Temporary Protection," providing Syrians the right to apply for work permits and employment (IGAM 2019).

The presence of Syrian refugees, their living conditions, rights, and privileges have become issues of debate in Turkey and a focal point in the media and many academic studies. As most of the refugees live in urban areas and not inside refugee camps (Icduygu 2015; Kirisci 2014), negative attitudes and even open animosity towards them among the Turkish population have surfaced, with 72.6% of individuals living in urban communities bolster the idea that "emigrants should just be protected in the camps" (Erdogan 2014, 35). While these negative perspectives concern Syrian refugees' unemployment, education, and training requirements (Ozden 2013), issues such as religion and race are at the root of such negative perceptions (Kirisci 2014). The legislative uncertainties around the status of Syrian refugees have also fed the negative attitudes and bias against them in Turkey. Syrians' temporary protection visitor status (*Misafir*) and the administration's emphasis on this temporary status have also complicated matters, as it is grounded in the notion of hospitality and not on rights per se, embittering negative attitudes towards them (Ozden 2013).

Bulgaria

As a former communist country, Bulgaria experienced a significant emigration during the post-1989 period, with some estimating that nearly 2.5 million Bulgarians currently reside in other nations (Institute of European Studies 2019). Historically, the country has had little experience with irregular migration and was not prepared for the flow of migrants in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war. During the summer of 2013 and

spring of 2014, the Western Balkan route became the preferred land route into the European Union for asylum seekers from Syria and beyond. The numbers of registered asylum applications rose from 890 in 2011–11,081 in 2014 and 20,391 in 2015 (Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees 2020). The route from Turkey through Bulgaria is much less traveled than the route through Greece, partly due to the difficulty of the geographic terrain and partly due to Bulgaria's reputation for its strict response to the refugee crisis and unfavorable treatment at the border with Turkey (CIA Factbook 2020).

As a signatory of the Dublin Regulations, Bulgaria has been primarily regarded as an EU border state that experienced the highest levels of migration during the 2015–1016 period, similar to other European countries. Current statistics of the Bulgarian State Agency of Refugees show that the number of migrants is relatively low, and the vast majority of refugees who apply for asylum in Bulgaria continue to seek permanent residence in Western Europe. At the height of the refugee crisis, about 20,000 applications for international protection were submitted per year. That number dropped to 200 in 2020 (Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees 2020). The top five countries of origin during the 1991–2019 period were Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and the fifth category being "stateless."

For those who establish residency and want to integrate within the country, multiple challenges remain, including institutional barriers, populist discourse, and negative public opinion (Krasteva 2019). Even though more than 90% of Bulgarians have never met a refugee in person, public opinion has become more negative over time (UNHCR n.d). The increasing fear and hostility toward refugees have primarily been attributed to the far-right political rhetoric and slanted media coverage, often portraying refugees as a physical and ontological threat and describing them as illegal (Dimitrova, Ozdora-Aksak, and Connolly-Ahern 2018; Nancheva 2016). Two private TV channels, in particular, are known for their usage of racist and xenophobic rhetoric, such as describing asylum seekers as "Talibans," "jihadists," or "terrorists." Despite the lower numbers of people seeking asylum in Bulgaria, there are trends toward increasing negativity in political rhetoric and public opinion – this is what Krasteva (2019) labels the Bulgarian "migration paradox." One of the few actors who can openly advocate for refugees and migrants in the country are non-profit organizations in the humanitarian sector.

Humanitarian Organizations and Global Migration

Since the end of World War II, humanitarian organizations have played a critical role in advocacy both at national and international levels (Ihlen, Figenschou, and Larsen 2015). The primary purpose of organizations such as CARE or UNHCR, to name a few, is to articulate and represent the interests of refugees and other disadvantaged groups. These types of NGOs have become critical players during the Syrian refugee crisis (UNHCR n.d.). Today, they are not only a sought-after media source, but have become essential newsmakers whose voices shape the narrative in the migration debate (Ihlen, Figenschou, and Larsen 2015; Powers 2018). Two recent changes in the global communication environment have played an especially significant role in how NGO communicators do their job. The first is the change in the practice of journalism when it comes to the coverage of humanitarian crises and global migration (Powers 2018).

As Powers (2018) argues, non-governmental organizations increasingly have become key actors in producing their own media content. While NGOs have always served as important news sources for journalists, they have started producing and distributing much more media content themselves in recent years. Suppose we conceptualize NGOs and journalism as two independent but interacting institutional fields, as Powers (2018) does. In that case, we can argue that these two fields have to rely on each other when it comes to the issue of global migration. NGOs provide access and background information to journalists who cover the issues; on the other hand, NGOs depend on traditional media to increase the visibility of migration topics. Such symbiotic relationships allow humanitarian organizations to influence the narrative directly as on-the-record news sources, but also indirectly through engaging in behind-the-scenes advocacy.

The second change that NGO communicators have faced in recent years is the increased use of digital technologies at the global level. By and large, digital technologies undermine the power of traditional media and enhance the ability of non-profit organizations to engage in direct communication with a large segment of the global audience (Chon and Park 2019; Powers 2018). In a way, digital media today allow NGOs to circumvent traditional media channels and facilitate more direct contact with target audiences. Thus, the spread of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have enabled new ways for citizen engagement through awareness building and public mobilization (Sangar and Meyer 2018).

The influence of NGO communicators has been well documented across Western Europe. Ihlen and colleagues (2015), for example, conducted ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews in Norway to analyze the challenges that different political actors face when adapting their communication strategies for traditional media. They found that NGOs could influence dominant media discourse by sharing their framing expertise, exhibiting strong journalistic instincts, and relying on in-depth understanding of newsworthiness principles and media routines. Combining content analysis with an examination of NGO documents, Powers (2014) identified four main factors lead to divergent publicity NGO strategies. These include types of funding, government relationships, organizational dynamics, and desired impacts of each NGO. Some NGOs tend to focus on quality press and target political elites, while others rely on general news media for fundraising or educational purposes. Based on extant research in the NGO field, this study investigates the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the main differences in government relationships and public opinion dynamics facing NGOs working with refugees and migrants in Bulgaria and Turkey?

Research Question 2: How do these contextual differences affect the communication strategies utilized by migration NGOs in each country?

Research Method

This research utilized interview methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the opinions, feelings, and attitudes of NGO representatives in Bulgaria and Turkey. Interviews are a preferred data collection method for understanding individual perspectives

and personal experiences, values, and needs (Patton 1987). Capturing the experiences of NGO professionals working with refugees and migrants allowed us to gather a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. As Creswell (2007) notes, semi-structured interviews enable gathering holistic explanations reflecting the opinions of respondents and can answer "how" and "why" questions.

The target organizations in this research included large international non-profits and smaller local organizations. We started with a list of NGOs in each country and relied on snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. This resulted in a total of 22 interviews with Turkish NGOs and 17 interviews with Bulgarian NGOs. A larger number of organizations from Turkey is not surprising, considering the larger numbers of refugees in the country.

The lead researchers conducted the interviews. The Turkish organizations were located in Ankara or Istanbul. The Turkish interviews took place between September and October 2019 and were done face-to-face, except for three interviews. Interview length ranged from half an hour to more than two hours, with an average interview of 70 min. A similar approach was utilized in the Bulgarian case. However, interviews had to be conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit unexpectedly in spring 2020. Following the same protocol, interviews with the Bulgarian NGOs were conducted between late March and early May 2020. The average length of the Bulgarian interviews was 60 min.

As Cater (2011) observed, conventional face-to-face interviews have become more challenging to conduct for various reasons, including geographic distances, mobility boundaries of researchers, and time and financial constraints. The Internet, however, has been utilized successfully as an alternative to face-to-face interviews (Hooley, Wellens, and Marriott 2012). Videoconferencing, text-based chat rooms, and instant messaging, for example, have been used to facilitate online interviews (Stewart and Williams 2005; Stieger and Göritz 2006). Through online interviews, researchers can access participants worldwide, including hard-to-reach populations (Mann and Stewart 2000). Despite concerns about losing non-verbal information, researchers have documented that conducting interviews via Zoom or Skype software has allowed equal authenticity to face-to-face interviews (Stieger and Göritz 2006).

The interviews in both countries were conducted in English unless the interviewee preferred to use the local language, which happened in a few cases. Saturation was achieved relatively quickly since we were working with a very specific population. During the interviews, the two co-PIs alternated between asking the questions and note-taking. An online document was utilized to share the notes where both researchers could go back and highlight specific parts of the text while working to identify main themes. The researchers read and discussed the narratives several times to uncover patterns in the data, utilizing the constant comparative technique (Creswell 2007).

Findings and Discussion

Field theory places an emphasis on interaction and change; it unveils how the encompassing field constrains individual actors and how, in turn, individual actors affect the field as no field is autonomous and can only be fully understood within its professional habitus. As Benson (1999) underlines, field analyses "provide an analytical framework that bridges

macro-societal and micro-organizational approaches" (479). To understand the role of macro-level context, our first research question focused on government relationships and public opinion dynamics facing NGOs in Bulgaria and Turkey. Findings related to each of these areas are discussed below and are also summarized in Table 1.

Government Relationships

The interviews suggested that Bulgarian NGOs have more leeway and can "push" a bit further than their Turkish counterparts when it comes to government relations. Bulgarian authorities are required by law to follow EU regulations, which leads to a different dynamic relative to the Turkish context. The EU procedures also lead to the existences of more legal aid organizations that focus on the legal rights of refugees in Bulgaria relative to Turkish NGOs, which are more service-based. In contrast, the government in Turkey remains quite hands-on and controls direct access to camps for NGO personnel. In both countries, international organizations have more sway relative to domestic ones, and in reality these organizations can be "bolder" in their approach and activities in Bulgaria.

An interesting example that illustrates the more collaborative approach between NGOs and government officials in Bulgaria is the establishment of a Working Group for Integration, coordinated through the local UNHCR office. The purpose of this group is to offer internal coordination between agencies and ensure division of tasks in order to avoid duplication of services, which may be easier to implement in a smaller country with fewer migrants and fewer NGOs. Another difference is more specialization among the Bulgarian NGOs.

In the overall NGO scene, non-profits operating in Bulgaria seem to have achieved better streamlining of initiatives and carved a niche for their activities. The situation is more competitive in Turkey, which could be related to the scale of the refugee issue, with significantly higher numbers of refugees and organizations working in this area than in Bulgaria, and the amount of EU funds coming into the country. In general, the Turkish NGO scene tends to be more territorial because of the existence of more ongoing projects and higher budgets. Organizations are trying to claim ownership and be more critical of each other, especially the larger international organizations.

There are concerns about bureaucracy, logistical and legal hoops that NGOs need to jump through in both countries. Bulgarian NGO representatives note challenges with "huge bureaucracy" in the state and having to fight at many different levels for the rights of refugees. This is especially applicable to organizations focused on legal rights when they feel they have to "fight the whole system." Even when goodwill is present, there are slow, protracted processes, especially regarding asylum cases in Bulgaria. In Turkey, concerns about bureaucracy and logistical issues are heightened, especially regarding state agencies and getting project approvals. Almost all organizations mention the importance of having positive relationships with the government to successfully implement their projects. Some international NGOs appear even more vulnerable, facing challenges getting or renewing their work permits in Turkey.

Public Opinion Dynamics

Being an NGO that works on behalf of refugees and migrants is quite a challenge in both countries. Interviewees note the existence of hidden racism and stereotypes against

Table 1. Summary of Main Differences between Migration NGOs.

Characteristic	Country	
	Bulgaria	Turkey
Scope of NGO work	Smaller field with low number of refugees and asylum seekers from a range of countries Many NGOs seems to be narrowly specialized – for example, working with women, children, stateless individuals Stronger focus on legal assistance; individual stories emphasized	High number of refugees/ temporary visitors, predominantly from Syria More service-based organizations and more professionalization of NGO field in general. Growth of NGO industry with focus on grant writing and deliverables; Metrics emphasized
General Approach	Focus on rights Individualization Seen as a potential opportunity by NGOs	Focus on hospitality narrative Collective group Perceived as a problem that needs to be solved
Existing government relationships	EU member; NGOs work with respective government agencies and attend regular joint meetings	Non-EU member but recepient of large EU funds; Hands-on approach of local government and more direct controls, e.g. access to camps for NGO personnel
Level of collaboration between NGOs	Relatively high level of collaboration among NGOs; trying to avoid overlap	Some collaboration, joint projects and sub-contracting; stronger competition among main players
Dominant public opinion	Refugees are relatively unknown/ faceless; Negative attitudes with public split in half with concerns about different culture, security threat and economic drain; vast majority (90%+) have never interacted with a refugee/ migrant Fear of NGOs as foreign agents/ Sorosodis; some physical attacks	Shifting in response to dominant political rhetoric; starting with "they are our brothers and sisters" but getting more negative over time, with concerns about taking away resources for the local population Lack of understanding of NGO work from family members and acquaintances
Communications staff	Very few NGOs have designated communications staff	Most NGOs have a separate communications office or at least one communications/ public information officer
Traditional media	Utilized strategically by both large and small NGOs; media invited to staged events	Utilized strategically especially by the larger NGOs; existing relationships with local media; journalists invited to different events and given special access to beneficiaries
New media	Different social media channels used regularly WhatsApp used to communicate with the migrants directly	Different social media channels used regularly Stronger focus on Twitter for information dissemination about events to the general public
Target publics	General public "Conflicted middle" Refugees/ migrants as target audience for specific initiatives (e.g. COVID-19 info hubs)	General public Also targeting donors such as EU – ECHO project coordinators Refugees/ migrants as target audience for specific initiatives (e.g. employment red card)
Events and partnerships	Engaging with local university students as well as local catering businesses	Engaging with municipalities, celebrities, music festivals Seminars, presentations
Innovative communication initiatives	Innovative use of new technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) as part of photo exhibit	Organizing trips with journalists for direct contact with refugee populations (e.g. bussing to vocational center)
Representative examples	Human Libraries Project Diversity Is Tasty	Refugee Women's Choir SADA Women's Center

refugees among the public at large. Organizations and their employees often face social stigma – but for different reasons. In Turkey, some express skepticism and mention receiving critical comments that refugees are taking away "limited resources" while local citizens' needs are unmet. While this sentiment also exists in Bulgaria, it is coupled with a Central/Eastern European prejudice against NGOs, often being labeled

"foreign agents" or "Western" liberal propaganda vessels. Several respondents mentioned widespread "hysteria" against "Sorosoid" NGOs. A Bulgarian participant observed:

> We face many challenges similar to those from Central and Eastern Europe – showing us as foreign agents doing things against national interest.

The different political and economic contexts in Turkey and Bulgaria reflect distinct public opinion dynamics in each country. Bulgaria is primarily perceived as an EU transit country and as a border nation for the EU. Most Bulgarian NGO representatives commented on the particular dynamics stemming from being an EU nation, albeit the poorest in the Union. This has made Bulgaria less attractive to migrants who see it as a transit country to more wealthy, Western European destinations. In contrast, Turkey is perceived as a temporary home by most Syrians who have chosen to settle there as opposed to pursuing other destinations. This "transit county" versus "temporary home" dichotomy has created different types of challenges. One Bulgarian NGO representative lamented:

> So many people can live happily in Bulgaria – not just see it as a transition country. When they move, they start from zero. People don't know if they will stay or leave so our efforts are wasted.

Dominant political rhetoric presents another significant challenge in both countries. In Bulgaria, there is an increasingly hostile political rhetoric due to right-wing parties whose views are not that prevalent but whose politicians are "particularly loud" and tend to label the refugees "terrorists" or "jihadists." In Turkey, the ruling right-wing party takes a different approach towards Syrians due to common religion and Muslim brotherhood, shared history, and Syria-as-our-neighbor perception. However, the status of refugees in Turkey is volatile, and their future is heavily dependent on AK party politics, specifically Erdoğan's rhetoric about how to approach refugees, which may change without warning, as evident in the last elections when the rhetoric of sending refugees back to Syria became part of the party's political messaging. As a result, Syrians can never be sure whether their presence in Turkey will be supported in the future. Their "temporary protection" status, in conjunction with the uncertainty for the future, make the work of NGOs even more challenging since "temporary visitors" may lack sufficient motivation to learn the local language or integrate into Turkish society. One Turkish respondent commented:

> In the beginning it wasn't this way, there were volunteers, people were collecting money to help refugees – but political factors realized that this is a very good opportunity to be anti anything. And the first thing that started to be used was the media. And larger and more respected media even started using this negative rhetoric – they will wipe us out – anti immigration rhetoric. Nobody is calling these people refugees anymore – they are de facto called migrants regardless of their refugee status.

NGOs are also working against different cultural stereotypes. These public perceptions have existed for a long time, and just like any stereotype, are very difficult to change. In the Bulgarian case, the lack of prior knowledge or experience with migration makes the general public more of a blank slate. This opens the door for programs and events aimed at introducing migrants to the general public. A good example is the *Human Libraries* project, where refugees share their experiences openly, and other similar events highlight

meeting cultures "at the crossroads" such as potlucks, sharing food as a "bridge" between cultures in order to break existing stereotypes. Organizations in Bulgaria often try to highlight the cultural identity and present a *human face* to the abstract notion of a refugee, thus raising awareness of their plight and personal journeys. This stands in contrast to the Turkish context, where the historical stereotype of the Syrian neighbor has been long-lasting. In a way, one might argue that there may be more prejudice in Turkey, although prejudice against the "foreign culture" certainly exists in both countries.

Communication Strategies

Communications Staff

The first notable difference in communications work is that the vast majority of organizations in Bulgaria do not have designated communications officers. While they agree communications are essential, they cannot afford to hire a media or PR specialist, which means communications work is often relegated to an employee whose primary responsibilities are in other areas. In Turkey, due to the scale of the refugee issue and larger NGO budgets, most organizations we interviewed have at least one dedicated communications expert, if not a department, and several can hire interns or outside agencies to assist with communications work. The full-time communications personnel in Turkey have excellent credentials and in-depth understanding of media operations. Many communication staffers were former journalists who had transferred to PR or organizational communication areas. They also had more developed communication plans within the NGOs. Despite the different capacities and resources, both countries' NGOs see the critical importance of communications and utilize both traditional and "new" media in their work.

Traditional Media Use

All interviewees, regardless of country, agree that traditional media "*has a role to play*" and discuss how they develop communication strategies and engage with local journalists on a regular basis. Most interviewees also believe that journalists could do more on the topic of migration. As one Bulgarian respondent put it, local media has a responsibility since "the public needs to be more informed," adding that this is especially critical when "heavy" or hard-to-understand topics such as gender-based violence, statelessness, or detention are being discussed.

One of the emergent themes in the Bulgarian context is that there is no "one size fits all" approach in utilizing traditional media channels. Interviewees emphasized the importance of first identifying a *specific target group*, which leads to selecting particular topics (e.g. cooking) and specific media channels (e.g. national radio). Another emphasis in the Bulgarian context is putting a *human face* on the migrant population, historically a "blank slate." Arguably, that presents Bulgarian NGOs with more options to choose from in communicating about migrant groups.

One of the main issues regarding media relations in Turkey concerns media freedom. NGO representatives note that although they might have good relations with journalists, media institutions cannot always reflect NGO perspectives as there is intense government

pressure to frame issues in specific ways. The media is as free as the government allows, and authorities seem afraid of the negative consequences of refugee-related news, especially during elections. One NGO representative complained about not being able to use mass media effectively:

> We would like to talk about the rights of these people, such as the jobs created for Syrian refugees, need for quotas, issues such as sustainability and harmonization; but we can't. Turkish media is not at that level yet.

Several respondents in both countries commented that there is a need to stop treating the public "as a whole" and acknowledge different segments within the general population when it comes to communication. Focusing on the target public that may be most susceptible to your message is seen as key. There was research about the so-called "Conflicted Middle" – a segment of the population that tries to stay informed, relies on data, and is susceptible to changing their views over time. The advice is not to "waste resources" to reach hardliners who are unlikely to change their attitudes towards refugees and migrants, as the following quote from a Bulgarian NGO professional illustrates:

> You have to work with people who are already interested – otherwise you are talking to a wall!

An exciting communication example from Bulgaria utilizing a human-interest approach is the *Diversity Is Tasty* media campaign. Initiated by a grassroots organization, it focuses on culinary diversity. Strategically, the NGO developed the culinary section on their website and contributed photos and news releases about live cooking events to Bulgarian newspapers and broadcast media. This was well received by the public at large and showed how migrants could enrich local culture. The successful campaign has led to the establishment of a catering business and hiring foreign-owned restaurants and personnel for various catering events.

NGO professionals in both countries emphasized the need to understand the media's role and think *strategically* about which communication channels work best in specific cases. Several respondents also underscored the need to inform their media campaigns with communication theory and research. As one Bulgarian respondent noted, rather than using an ad hoc approach, try to develop "*a communication strategy that is based on theory and combined with what works in practice.*"

New Media Use

The use of social media in the non-profit sector has been well documented (e.g. Guo and Saxton 2018; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012), showing that online channels may be critical for nonprofits, "particularly those with the missions of service delivery and policy advocacy" (Lam and Nie 2019, 111). Not surprisingly, our respondents were keen on utilizing new media channels in their work.

Social media are perceived as offering an alternative and "*amplifying the voice*" of NGOs. NGO professionals who express skepticism about traditional media tend to be more likely to adopt social media channels in their publicity campaigns and develop innovative ideas. For example, a Bulgarian NGO produced a series of testimonial

videos on YouTube to give a human face to a stateless person and explain what stateless-ness is. Social media, in general, is perceived as an effective tool to counter negative stereotypes within the host countries. Social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Insta-gram, and YouTube heighten issue visibility online. Posts often highlight project accom-plishments, reports, and latest research findings, or information on special events such as conferences or project launches. NGOs also share and retweet each other's activities or reports to enhance the publicity of partner initiatives. Another common feature of social media posts is commemorating special days such as World Refugee Day, Women's Day, or Children's Day. Here is an example of tweet from a Turkish NGO:

> To celebrate #WomensDay, women refugees from our SADA Women Empowerment and Solidarity Center in Turkey flew balloons up into the sky with their children to symbolize women's solidarity and peace. How are you celebrating today? @euinturkey

Social media channels are particularly effective in reaching the younger generation in both countries since they tend to be more open to listening, engaging, and even collabor-ating. For example, podcasts and Facebook Live streams are produced by several Bulgar-ian NGOs targeting youth. In 2018, one NGO organized a public reading of *Sea Prayer,* an award-winning book about the refugee crisis by Khaled Hosseini, which was broadcast live on their Facebook page. The NGO invited their organizational partners to share this content, which confirmed that Facebook is an appropriate channel for expanding their audience and partnerships. Additionally, online audio and video guides were posted on YouTube in several languages, including Arabic, Russian, English, and Bulgarian.

There is effective online media use in Turkey as well, but it seems to be more informa-tional, often announcing an upcoming event or posting statistics and reports. One of the major fears in Turkey is making enemies on social media, especially considering the sen-sitivity of the refugee issue, so many international organizations refrain from going into sensitive topics or even using the Arabic language. This leads us to conclude that com-munication efforts target the general public in Turkey or donor communities with more informational pieces that are unlikely to become controversial.

Bulgarian NGOs seem to have the flexibility to be more innovative when it comes to social media. Turkish NGOs tend to use online technologies and social media primarily for information purposes in a one-way communication mode, while in Bulgaria, social media is used more frequently to create engagement. A few innovative projects involve using Augmented Reality (AR) technology for an interactive photo exhibit fea-turing refugees residing in Bulgaria. The communication expert explained that the goal was to "humanize" those individuals and to show the public success stories among the migrant community.

Events and Partnerships

Many NGOs organized different events, often with local partners, to generate publicity in each country. The examples demonstrate a strong awareness of newsworthiness and the ability to think from a media perspective about what would appeal to a general audience. Events such as sports competitions, movie releases, and *Diary of Refugees* show a human-interest angle that appeals to the general public in both countries. In Turkey, some NGOs tried to gain visibility around refugees by creating a *RefugeeWwomen Choir,* which took

the stage during the closing concert of the Istanbul Jazz Festival and has made their album. Another includes a performance of the *African Women's Dance Group* on World Refugee Day. Several NGO representatives commented that such events might change attitudes since they provide an opportunity for cross-cultural learning without intimidation by utilizing appropriate venues and formats where the local public can choose to engage and learn more about the "foreigner" as a human being. An example from Bulgaria involves the famous *Night of Museums* event. Refugees are invited to interact directly with the visitors of the exhibition. These examples show that NGO professionals are thinking strategically about the impact of their work and often emphasize *intercultural exchange* to overcome prejudices and misconceptions about refugees.

In addition to co-sponsoring public events, NGOs also establish different partnerships and engage publics in their projects. In Bulgaria, a joint program with university students led to the production of podcast series. The effort to involve university students in media work is exemplified by Firaz's story, which got shared on many media channels. Under the auspices of UNHCR Bulgaria, the students also provided the raw footage to Bulgarian National Television to produce their own story about the boy. Another example is a collaborative effort with Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), one of the most independent media outlets in the country, for a new program dedicated to refugees. The program, nominated for a journalism award, is titled *Homeland Abroad* and features a series of stories about asylum seekers.

University students are also offered internships at NGOs in both countries. These include the Bulgarian Red Cross, Caritas, the Bulgarian Council of Women Refugees, and Turkish NGOs such as UNHCR and UN Women. Participants note that such opportunities are beneficial to all parties as they give the students practical experience in communications work while at the same time providing NGOs with expertise in using current digital media tools.

NGO professionals also express a desire to involve migrants in their projects and highlight their talents. One way to achieve this is by featuring positive stories about people who have integrated successfully. Examples of integration-focused human-interest stories and various co-creation activities involving refugees exist in both countries. As one interviewee recommends, "*look at the strengths people already have and involve them into planning and programming*" in order to empower them.

COVID-19

Innovative use of online technologies was also reported during the COVID-19 pandemic. Special Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups were established for Corona-related information sharing. Strategically, information was provided in multiple languages, including Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Bulgarian. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, information was made available in six languages targeting different migrant groups.

Despite the negative political connotations of using the Arabic language in Turkey, some smaller NGOs are not afraid of communicating with refugee populations in their own language. A grassroots organization focused on gender and gender-based violence, for instance, has established a phone support line in four languages, providing hard-to-access populations with timely information that might help them. Some

NGOs, especially smaller ones, make effective use of social media and online applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram to provide real-time support to individuals in need.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to uncover how the broader environment has affected the communication strategies used by migration NGOs in two bordering nations. Although there might be contextual differences between the difference organizations, all NGOs examined here rely on media for their publicity and advocacy work, utilizing both traditional and online media channels to create positive attitudes and promote solidarity with refugees and migrants. However, the different political and socio-cultural contexts have resulted in different types of media strategies, communication content, and focal points in the neighboring countries of Bulgaria and Turkey.

In line with Powers (2018) conceptualization of NGOs and journalism as two independent but interacting institutional fields, this research investigated the behavior of migration-focused civil society organizations in two neighboring countries, Turkey and Bulgaria. Utilizing field theory as a research framework allowed us to better understand both the individual responses from communications staff members and the organizational behavior at the mezzo level since the characteristics of an entity are impacted by the relations in the field as a whole and also their "position vis-à-vis others" (Martin 2003).

Focusing on civil society organizations in two bordering countries revealed how the unique economic and political environment can both facilitate or limit certain actions when it comes to reaching the migrant target publics. Although the communication strategies of NGOs in both nations were certainly shaped by past decisions, the analysis shows that the main issue has to do with navigating the dynamics they find themselves in now, especially their interdependencies, with government institutions and shifting public opinion attitudes.

When it comes to specific communication strategies, Bulgarian NGOs in our study tended to emphasize the human face of refugees and migrants and prioritize public engagement. In contrast, Turkish NGOs tended to be more engaged in information provision and cautious about multi-lingual content. This comparative finding seems to complicate some of the common knowledge about the determinants of NGO communication. Humanizing, for instance, is often seen as an effect of market competition among NGOs, but the Bulgarian case is characterized by less competition than the Turkish one. By contrast, resources (e.g. communications staff or larger budgets) are often seen as predictors of innovation and public engagement. However, the better-resourced Turkish organizations seem to counter this claim by being more focused on one-way information and avoiding "pushing the limits." The increased resources almost seem to work against them as their autonomy seems to be more limited due to government interdependencies. The Bulgarian case is consistent with Emery and Trist's (1965) organizational research that showed more structure is present when the environment is "clustered," as in the case of a niche market, which tends to push organizations to diversify when developing strategies, especially when organizations belong to a similar sector.

Another way of unpacking these differences might be to consider how political dynamics create different opportunities and constraints for NGOs that border the EU

or a nation with a large number of refugees. Bulgarian NGOs can use EU law and are required to follow EU guidelines when developing migration programs, while Turkish NGOs seem more likely to experience legal and government control as a constraint or source of uncertainty. Although there might be many factors shaping communication strategies for organizations, including the professionalism of the communications staff, the legal and political dynamics seem especially salient in these two cases. In contrast, the impact of public opinion appears to highlight more similarities than differences in each country where rising anti-immigrant sentiments make the work of NGOs increasingly more challenging.

This study answers the call by Mattelart (2019) to give more attention to the role of communication and media in migration research and further adds to existing scholarship by focusing on a non-Western context. Future research can build on our findings and examine the effectiveness of the NGO communication strategies by focusing on the general public as well as the migrant population in each host country, discussing both the elasticity of borders as well as the inherent interdisciplinarity of this type of research. Another avenue for future research would be to track how the communication strategies of non-profit organizations have evolved in response to shifting field characteristics within each nation.

Lastly, it is important for both scholars and practitioners to keep in mind that NGO work is often constrained by a number of interdependent forces that affect their activities and behaviors in an interactive manner. As field theory posits, the interaction between larger political and socio-cultural forces, in addition to organizational interdependencies and individual actors, significantly impact observed outcomes, in this case the communication strategies developed and employed by civil society organizations. While our in-depth analysis captures field operations within a particular time frame, the study acknowledges that migration NGO dynamics evolve over time and that there might be more contextual differences between NGOs within the same country. Such nuances should be further examined in future research on civil society, migration and communication.

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