Jan Kovář: Debating Immigrants and Refugees in Central Europe. Politicising and Framing Newcomer

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In this ambitious, comprehensive, and meticulously researched book, Jan Kovář explores the politicization and framing of one of the last decade's most polarizing and widely debated socio-political issues: migration. He focuses on two Central European countries – Czechia and Slovakia – and their distinct arenas of media and political debates. Through this complex comparative research design, Kovář aims to tackle several shortcomings of previous studies on the politicization and framing of immigrants, such as their dominant focus on Western Europe, lack of a cross-national comparative perspective, and tendency to favor the analysis of media discourse over that of its political counterpart (pp. 11–13). His book successfully achieves these aims and also does much more: it offers a nuanced and multilayered understanding of the politicization and framing processes of migration in two countries located in a region whose hostile approach to migrants and refugees during the so-called mid-2010s European migration crisis has attracted the interest of many migration scholars. What is more, it also reopened the discussion about the construction of the European East-West divide.

The book is well-structured and easy to navigate, even if it is sometimes difficult to read due to the high density of its arguments and the author's ambition to contribute to multiple academic debates. In the introduction, Kovář gradually introduces the reader to politicization and framing in the context of migration, justifies his research design, and sets the course for his analysis. He then dedicates the entire second chapter to contextualizing his research by offering detailed insights into the migration contexts of Czechia and Slovakia, presenting an informative overview of the historical development of their migration policies and migration trends, as well as outlining the main trends in the public perception of migration. The third chapter is devoted to a theoretical and methodological exposition of the study's main conceptual tools, namely politicization and framing. Relying on the approach of de Wilde et al. (2016), the author defines politicization simply as *"making previously non-political matters political"* across three interrelated yet still independent dimensions: a) issue salience, b) expansion of actors and audiences, and c) polarization of opinions and views (p. 46). He defines framing by drawing on communication studies and particularly on Entman (1993: 52), presenting it as a process of selecting *"some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text [...] to promote a particular problem definition, causal*

interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 49). The chapter concludes by discussing the distinct applications of both concepts in the media and political arenas.

The empirical findings are presented in four successive analytical chapters (Chapters 4–7), with separate chapters for the media and the political arenas. For each arena, Kovář first offers a descriptive analysis highlighting the main trends in the studied period. He then delves deeper into the analysis and looks for an explanation of the observed trends by introducing other variables and performing more advanced forms of analysis. All the analytical chapters are concluded with helpful summaries of the main findings that help offset the density of the argumentation and make it easier for the reader to systematize the presented findings. Kovář concludes the book by highlighting his most important findings and contextualizing them in the relevant scholarship on politicization and framing of immigrants, making an effort to extend his findings to the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe.

My reading of the book has been inevitably informed by my own long-term scholarly interest in the issue of migration in the context of Central Europe, my disciplinary background in cultural sociology and qualitative research methods, as well as my close professional and personal ties to both of the countries under study. From this specific position, I would like to praise several aspects of the book, but also raise some critical remarks.

CZECHIA AND SLOVAKIA: DIFFERENT OR ALIKE?

First of all, I would like to commend Kovář's ambitious research design, which, in my opinion, not only does justice to his research questions but also generates truly comprehensive research findings. Comparative studies on migration within the Central European region are relatively rare, and comparisons between Czechia and Slovakia are even rarer (but for some exceptions: SEE BARTOSZEWICZ – EIBL – EL GHAMARI 2022; CSANYI – KUCHARČÍK 2023; KLUKNAVSKÁ – BERNHARD – BOOMGARTEN 2021; TABOSA 2020; WALLACE 2002). This likely reflects the legacy of Czechoslovakia and the lingering perception of a social, political, and economic closeness between the two countries. However, as Kovář rightly points out in the introduction, there are also important differences that set Czechia and Slovakia apart when it comes

to their immigration contexts. Slovakia, for instance, has an external Schengen border, yet it is still primarily a transit country, whereas Czechia is an established immigrant destination with a notably larger population of residents with a migratory background but also more restrictive immigration policies (pp. 24–27).

Kovář managed to elucidate some of the important differences that characterize the debates on migration in Czech and Slovak media and political arenas. His findings document that, at least in the studied period, the media and political debates on migration in Czechia were not only more politicized but also more securitized and culturalized than those in Slovakia, where economic and humanitarian frames were slightly more present. The book postulates that this difference might be caused by the higher ethnic homogeneity of Czechia, its Eurosceptic orientation, as well as the fact that, unlike Slovakia, Czechia is a net immigration country (pp. 215–216; 219). While I recognize the merit of these structural explanations, I nonetheless find this finding surprising, considering the lasting presence of strong ethnonationalist sentiments in the Slovak political discourse that underlie the approach to not only migration but also national minorities and ethnic diversity as such (CHUDŽÍKOVÁ 2011; NEDELSKY 2009). Future comparative research on the topic (both quantitative and qualitative) should thus consider not only the explanatory potential of the factors outlined by Kovář but also the distinct conceptions of nationalism and national identities prevailing in the two countries and their strength.

DEBATES ON MIGRATION ACROSS THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE

Although the author's research design does not enable direct comparisons of the data collected in Czechia and Slovakia with data collected in old immigrant destinations in Western Europe, he, on several occasions, refers to existing studies from Western Europe to contextualize his findings and highlight the most notable differences and similarities pertaining to the politicization and framing of immigrants in Central and Western Europe. Such a contextualization allows him to maintain that even though the increased politicization of migration between 2015 and 2016 had not been unique to Czechia and Slovakia (or the Central European region at large), it nonetheless represented an important breaking point for both countries by turning migration into a salient socio-political issue for them

for the first time in their modern histories (p. 213). He also shows that the five dominant frames that have been found to frame migration debates in Western Europe – the security, cultural, economic, administrative, and humanitarian frames – are also widely present in the Czech and Slovak contexts. Nevertheless, the salience of the distinct frames appears to be different in Czechia and Slovakia than in Western European contexts, as in the two countries, the negative security and cultural frames are used more frequently, the positive humanitarian frame less commonly, and the economic frame less commonly and in a more negative manner (p. 217).

In the framing part of his analysis, Kovář might have nonetheless missed the opportunity to speak to the discursive construction of the East-West divide around the issue of migration more directly. In the conclusion, he briefly mentions that he inductively identified other context-specific frames, such as "migration as a responsibility of the West," none of which, however, passed his arbitrarily set threshold of relevance and were thus not included in the study (p. 216). I consider this omission a huge pity because I believe that the inclusion of context-specific frames, even if less salient, would help to further elucidate the specific features of immigrant framing and the overall migration discourse in Czechia and Slovakia without any threat to the research findings' cross-regional comparative potential. Both my own research and that of others indicate that the tendencies of Czech and Slovak political representatives and societies at large to embrace "colonial exceptionalism" (HERZA 2020), distance themselves from their contribution to the global inequalities and political instabilities leading to migration, and shift the responsibility for migration to the "West" together represent key elements of their migration discourse and sustain the geopolitical imaginary of the "East-West" divide (KAZHARSKI 2018; MOKRÁ – RAPOŠ BOŽIČ, FORTHCOMING; RAPOŠ BOŽIČ – KLVAŇOVÁ – JAWORSKY 2023). It would therefore undoubtedly be interesting to learn more about how this specific frame, and potentially also other context-specific frames, feature in Czech and Slovak media and political debates.

THE STRIKING ABSENCE OF DIVERSE
VOICES IN MEDIA DEBATES

An important aspect of Kovář's analysis concerns the comparison of the politicization and framing of immigrants in the media and the political arenas. He justifies his focus on the media by emphasizing their importance as the main source of information about migration for citizens, particularly in the context of Central Europe, where first-hand experiences with immigrants are still limited. The author also highlights the capacity of media to serve as *"the main channel of communication between the political actors and the public sphere"* (p. 15). He then justifies his focus on parliamentary debates by highlighting their deliberative function, presenting them as *"a tool for position-taking for individual parliamentarians and their parties"* as well as *"a tool for communication between politicians, parties, and citizens"* (p. 17). The inclusion of both arenas, with their distinct features as well as convergencies, thus definitely adds to the robustness of the book. For each arena, the research is approached with a slightly different methodology, as is explained in detail in the third chapter (pp. 53–64). Kovář highlights the most important differences as he discusses his findings from the political arena in chapters 6 and 7, and then again, in a more concise manner, in the conclusion. It is demonstrated that although the politicization and framing of migration seem to follow roughly similar patterns in both arenas, particularly when it comes to the rapid increase in the salience of the topic between 2015 and 2016 and the relative prominence of the security frame in both arenas, there are also important differences.

What I found particularly interesting is the difference in the actor expansion dimension of politicization. While Kovář finds that the political arena saw an increase in the diversity of actors discussing migration between 2015 and 2016, the opposite was true for the media arena, where the diversity of actors decreased in this period. In other words, between 2015 and 2016, it was mostly political actors who talked about migration in the media, and the voices of other actors, such as civil society representatives, employers or employer organizations, citizens, or, importantly, the immigrants themselves, had been marginalized (pp. 69–75). Given the importance of media in the formation of public opinion on migration (BOOMGAARDEN – VLIEGENTHART, 2009; EBERL ET AL. 2018; SCHEMER 2012), this is indeed a striking finding.

Much of this complements the findings from our recent qualitative research on public attitudes toward migration that reveals the extent to which Czech residents make sense of migration by relying on the topical, often sensational, and highly securitized coverage of migration in the mainstream media that gives rise to the cultural repertoire of "migration as invasion" (JAWORSKY ET AL. 2023). More specifically, this finding helps to contextualize the striking absence of other cultural repertoires produced by the media that would allow Czech residents to associate migration with more mundane topics, such as immigrants' civic engagement, labor relations, or everyday life. Even though, in line with Kovář's theoretical approach, the decrease in the diversity of actors in the media arena de facto signals a decreased politicization of migration along this dimension, the implications of this decrease for the formation of the public attitudes toward immigrants can be considered paramount.

THE SO-CALLED CRISIS AND ITS MANY MIGRANT OTHERS

Finally, as might not be immediately obvious from the book's title, the comparative aspects of Kovář's research design do not stop with his focus on the two distinct national contexts and the two arenas but also include the dimension of time. His research covers a period of five years, spanning from October 2013 to October 2017. As he makes it explicit in the book's introduction, he was primarily interested in capturing the effects of the so-called European refugee crisis on the politicization and framing of immigrants in Central Europe, understanding the "crisis" as an *"ideal laboratory for investigating the debates about immigrants"* (p. 18). His decision to include a longer comparative timeframe has thus been informed by his analytical intention to capture the trends before and after the escalation of the "crisis" in 2015 and 2016. This strategy serves Kovář well, as it allows him to convincingly show that in both national contexts and their respective media and political arenas, migration gradually went from being practically a non-issue at the beginning of the studied period to being a highly salient issue in 2015 and 2016, only to lose salience again in 2017. While this finding might not be surprising given the attention migration received between 2015 and 2016 across the entire Europe, it clearly shows how the "crisis" represented a breaking point in both countries and largely drove the politicization of migration.

While I consider this finding valuable, it is here that I have the biggest reservations concerning Kovář's presentation of his findings. It seems to me that in several places in the book – and particularly in the conclusion – he reifies the narrative of "crisis" and fails to engage with it critically, or acknowledge its socially constructed character and its dependence on the very same debates in the media and political arena that he analyzes. Indeed, migration scholars from different fields have repeatedly warned against unreflective reproductions of the narrative of "crisis" in connection to the increased number of migrants and refugees heading to Europe in the mid-2010's by bringing attention to its inherently securitizing and racializing character (BELLO 2022; COLLYER – KING 2016; DINES – MONTANA – VACCHELLI 2018; JAWORSKY – RAPOŠ BOŽIČ 2023; JUNUZI 2019). Although Kovář makes some attempts to situate the "crisis" by elucidating the main events that led to the increased media portrayal of migration in 2015 and 2016 and the eventual discursive proliferation of the label "European migration/refugee crisis" (pp. 18–24), given the prominence the "crisis" receives in his research, I found the extent of his critical engagement with this highly-loaded term unsatisfying. For instance, in the conclusion Kovář states that *"the crisis had a measurable association with the salience of individual frames and changed the salience of individual framing perspectives of immigrants,"* concluding that the *"crisis therefore had a significant effect regarding the negative securitization and culturalization of immigrants and their presentation in governance and managerialist terms in both countries"* (p. 218). In my opinion, this and other similar formulations make the "crisis" appear as an objective condition and an independent variable rather than an inherent product of the very securitizing and culturalizing discourse Kovář describes. The book would thus greatly benefit from a more critical engagement with the narrative of "crisis" as well as from a more explicit acknowledgment of its embeddedness in the analyzed discourse.

If the book lacks reflexivity in the use of the term "refugee crisis," the opposite is true with respect to other migration labels and categories. I highly appreciate Kovář's attempt to nuance the understanding of the framing practices in relation to different categories of immigrants. As he himself observes, it is an unfortunate habit in migration research to study the portrayal and representation of immigrants as an overarching single category. To address this shortcoming, he explores the variation of framing practices in both arenas depending on the immigrants' a) legal status

(refugees/asylum seekers, irregular immigrants, or labor migrants), b) religious background (a Muslim background or other religious backgrounds), and c) region of origin (the Middle East and North Africa [MENA], [non-EU] Eastern Europe, or Southeast Asia). He finds striking differences in the framing patterns of different categories of immigrants. For instance, an explicit mention of the immigrants being from the MENA region is found to be associated with a more frequent use of the negative security, cultural, and administrative frames, whereas a mention of their being from (non-EU) Eastern Europe is associated with an increase of both the positive and negative economic frame and the positive humanitarian frame (p. 222). Similar patterns can be observed with respect to immigrants' religious backgrounds, as Muslim immigrants are more often portrayed through the negative security, cultural, administrative, or humanitarian frame, while immigrants with other religious backgrounds are more likely to be portrayed through a positive humanitarian frame (pp. 222–223). The use of the label "irregular immigrant" was found to be associated with across-the-board negative framing, whereas the label "economic migrant" was associated with both positive and negative economic framing, and the label "asylum seeker" was associated with a positive humanitarian framing in both arenas but also with negative security, cultural, and economic framing in the media arena (p. 223).

Kovář's nuanced findings thus reveal clear patterns of Othering that are present in the Czech and Slovak media and political discourse on migration and that locate irregular immigrants from the MENA region with a Muslim religious background at the bottom of the national "hierarchies of Otherness" (RAPOŠ BOŽIČ – SYNEK RÉTIOVÁ – KLVAŇOVÁ 2023). They also dovetail with our recent qualitative research on the construction of the boundaries of grievability in the Slovak political discourse on migration that reveal stark differences in the discursive portrayals of immigrants from the MENA region and Ukraine and, consequently, an unequal recognition of the grievability of their lives (MOKRÁ – RAPOŠ BOŽIČ, FORTHCOMING). I can thus only reiterate Kovář's call for a future consideration of different categorization and labeling practices in research on immigrant framing, which also speaks to a recent reflexive turn in migration research (DAHINDEN – FISCHER – MENET 2020).

To conclude, I believe that Kovář's Debating Immigrants and Refugees in Central Europe makes a valuable contribution to scholarly debates on politicization and framing of immigrants in general and in the regional context of Central Europe in particular. The book should be of interest to migration scholars from political science, sociology, and other related disciplines.

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