

Published: 22 June 2018

Country: Hungary

By Eline Jeanne



One afternoon last May, Mamoudou Gassama [scaled four floors up an apartment building](#) in Paris to save a young boy dangling from a balcony. Captured on video, the incident quickly got international media attention and as a response to the heroic event, French president Emmanuel Macron granted [Gassama, an undocumented migrant from Mali](#), offering a residency in France and internship with the Paris fire service.

International headlines applauded Gassama, who has been dubbed “Spiderman” because of his climbing manoeuvres. [The Independent](#) called him a “national hero”, [Sky News](#) praised the “daring rescue”, which the

[Huffington Post](#)

described as “heroic” and the

[Myanmar Times](#)

as an “extraordinary act of bravery”. But there was a significant absence of praise for Gassama in Hungary. The Hungarian media largely ignored Gassama’s migrant background, as it did not fit the usual media narrative about migrants. Moreover, there were several reports negatively describing the hero.

The Media Diversity Institute (MDI) talked to Dr. Anna Szilagyi, expert in media, communications and politics, about this case and how it exemplifies the Hungarian media’s coverage of migrant issues. Dr. Szilagyi makes a point of describing the media in question as “propaganda media” meaning they support the government policies, narratives and actions a priori and unconditionally, therefore they are included in the Hungarian government’s propagandist machine. Of course, there are journalists of the local independent and opposition press who don’t belong to the group of “propaganda media”.

She says that in order to analyse this specific event such as the coverage of Gassama’s act, it is necessary to step back and look at how the Hungarian media uses the term ‘migrant’.

“In Hungarian language, the term ‘migrant’ was a technical term until 2015, utilized mainly by scholars and experts

*.
It was not an expression that everyday people would widely use
and it had no negative connotations. In 2015, however, in response to the European implications of the refugee and migration crisis,
the Hungarian government has launched a gigantic campaign against different individuals,
,
groups, and institutions, including
refugees, asylum seekers
,
and immigrants, whom the*

local propaganda

generally

identifies as

‘migrants’

.

A

s a result of this, t

he meaning of the term ‘

migrant

’ has fundamentally transformed

in the Hungarian context.

From a technical term, it went to a slur, a stigma, an insult

, frequently used today in public and private dis

cussions.

”

The term migrant has many negative connotations in Hungary, and a negative migrant media frame is often used. This means that any article that relates to a migrant topic is automatically framed in a negative way, even when it is not intended to. Dr. Szilagyi explains: *“In Hungary, the government controls much of the media, both state and private press. At the same time, you still have, especially in the online sector, some critical, independent or opposition outlets. The latter portray the refugee and migration crisis independently of the official government line. At the same time, we can still see that it is almost impossible to resist the government’s framing efforts in the current Hungarian context. For instance, the term ‘ migrant’ is the dominant reference that has been used basically by the whole media. Due to the government’s propaganda campaign, the term ‘ migrant’ evokes very negative frames today in the Hungarian society’s thinking. So when an independent or an opposition outlet uses this term, then basically without wanting to, they may still reinforce the government ideology because of the power of framing .”*

It seems that any media outlet in Hungary is caught in the government’s negative framing around immigrants and refugees. Even when attempting to report in a positive manner, simply using the term ‘migrant’ has such strong connotations that it makes it close to impossible.

The importance of terminology has been a well-researched topic in regards to the Hungarian media. The Centre for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) [published a report](#) looking at the coverage of the refugee ‘crisis’ in both Hungary and Austria, and highlighted the power of terminology: “The Hungarian government systematically replaced terms that trigger positive

feelings or sympathy – such as ‘refugee’ – in its communications with legally neutral or even negative terms that were more likely to alienate the audience from refugees and increase their association with ‘otherness’ (e.g. ‘migrant’, ‘entrants’, ‘trespassers’). This use of terminology affected public and media discourses.” It is clear that the use of the term ‘migrant’ is a conscious one in Hungary, especially by government-backed media. The term holds a lot of negative connotations. Discussing the term ‘migrant’ in [a post on her blog Talk Decoded](#)

, Dr. Szilagyi says: “

It reduces the refugee women, men, and children to one single, impersonal, and repulsively represented status

.”

Having established the media practices of the Hungarian media when it comes to covering issues related to immigration, let’s once again focus on the ‘Spiderman’ case. It is clear that the heroic event did not fit the general media frame used in Hungary of immigrants being ‘bad people’, and so reporting on the case posed to be problematic for some Hungarian media outlets.

There were two main ways the media reported the story. Firstly, there was the tactic of leaving out Gassama’s nationality and immigration status, and [referring to him simply as a man](#) . This is how

[Origo](#)

, a pro-government outlet, handled the story.

[The news portal of the Hungarian state television Híradó](#)

did include Gassama’s name and nationality, but did not mention that he was in France as an undocumented migrant. The object here is clear; by not mentioning Gassama’s immigrant status, this positive news story will not counteract the prominent negative media frame surrounding immigrants in Hungary. Media outlet

[888.hu took another approach](#)

; an overtly negative and degrading one. Their piece alluded to Gassama’s climbing skills originating from his ‘fence-climbing’ experience, and also compared him to a monkey.

Dr. Szilagyi elaborated on this problematic style of reporting: “Activating white supremacist topoi, the article uses dehumanizing language in the context of the person who saved the child. Arguing that he “put a monkey to shame”, the piece intends to mock, humiliate, and degrade in racist terms the person in particular and ‘migrants’ in general.”

A positive news story about a migrant has no place in the Hungarian media, and this is clearly shown in the case of Gassama and his bravery. With negative media frames and word connotations so deeply ingrained in the Hungarian media, it is hard to imagine this will change anytime soon. The current government has immense control over the media and their anti-migrant rhetoric still very much active, as can be seen through [the new ‘Stop Soros’ law](#). The media is bound to follow suit for the foreseeable future.

“I don’t expect this campaign to end soon. Considering the current geopolitical developments and trends, migration will continue to be a key and crucial global issue. This also means that populist parties across the world will keep this topic as the central core of their agendas. It is also important to stress that in populist rhetoric, the issue of migration is used to popularize and legitimize political programs in general. In the Hungarian case, for instance, the anti-migrant stance is an overarching theme that enables the government to shape effectively domestic politics, undermining the remaining institutions, procedures, and practices of democracy and pluralism in the country,” concludes Dr. Szilagyi in an interview for MDI.