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# REPORTING ON REFUGEES IN ONLINE ALTERNATIVE AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN ROMANIA

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## ABSTRACT

*At its peak in 2015, the refugee crisis made the front page of mainstream media all over Europe, dividing opinions regarding its causes, ways of managing the crisis and possible outcomes. Reporting ranged from framing the issue as a source of intra-EU disagreement to the potential security threats it posed or the humanitarian aspects of the crisis. While a number of studies deal with how European media reported on refugees, most focus solely on mainstream media channels. The current research aims to bring alternative media into the discussion, by proposing a comparative analysis of how the most popular online news platform in Romania, Adevarul, and one of the country's first online independent journalistic projects, Casa Jurnalistului, covered the refugee crisis. The content analysis of articles (N=169) published in September 2015 focuses on the media frames used by the two and on how these frames are enacted via use of primary and secondary sources, choice of journalistic genre and visual support for the text. The findings point to the fact that the mainstream news portal often adopted uncritically the frames proposed by official sources or by international media and news agencies, while the alternative media project grounded its frames on eyewitness accounts and on-the-scene reporting. Therefore, the two work well in complementing one another, but taken separately only offer a limited perspective on the crisis.*

Keywords: alternative media ▪ refugee crisis ▪ media framing ▪ Romanian media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Around one million people arrived as migrants and refugees in the EU throughout the year 2015, leading to “a record number of 1.82 million detections of illegal border crossings reported by EU Member States” (Frontex, 2016, para. 1), which is more than six times higher than the previous record set in 2014. All over Europe, what Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, called an “unprecedented refugee

and migrant crisis” reached a main position on public agendas (McGreal, 2015). The refugee crisis divided opinions among Europeans in association with its causes, the best way to manage it and its possible outcomes. European media both mirrored and fuelled these opinions. While there have been a number of studies that deal with how mainstream media in Europe framed the refugee crisis (see among others Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017) or how Romanian media in particular have approached the topic (see Corbu et al., 2017; Durach et al., 2017), few have addressed alternative media as well. This study aims to fill this gap by analysing articles published on the topic of refugees during September 2015, i.e. the peak of the crisis, on *Adevarul*, the most widely read online news platform in Romania (see SATI, 2019), and *Casa Jurnalistului*, one of the first investigative independent journalistic projects in the country’s online media. More specifically, the study tries to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What were the media frames used to present the refugee crisis by *Adevarul*, Romania’s most read mainstream news portal, compared to those used by *Casa Jurnalistului*, one of the first alternative journalism websites?

RQ2: How were the media frames enacted through the choice of journalistic genre, use of primary and secondary sources, and visual support for the text?

Researching how the refugee crisis was covered in Romanian media – both mainstream and alternative – is relevant, because the country functioned as a stopover on the route of refugees further in Europe, having a transition and placement centre for refugees established by the UNHCR in Timisoara, near the Serbian and Hungarian borders. Hence, the media in Romania were significantly preoccupied with the topic, analysing it from several angles, particularly at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015. In what follows, I will review a selection of reports and academic studies on how the media reported on refugees during the 2015 crisis and after it. For a better understanding of the local media context, I will then provide an overview of the main challenges affecting Romanian media at the moment, and assess the increasing appeal of alternative media. The theoretical setting of my research – media framing theory – will then be discussed as a viable tool for assessing how mainstream and alternative media reported on refugees, together with the methodology used in my study. The research findings show that *Adevarul* was more inclined to present refugees as a source of intra-EU disagreement, economic or logistical problems, and as a threat to security, whereas *Casa jurnalistului* focused extensively on the humanitarian aspects of the crisis. Moreover, the journalistic practices of the two outlets differed significantly: most *Adevarul* articles were not based on reporting on-the-scene, but on statements from public officials and institutions or on secondary sources such as news agencies or other media channels, whereas all articles posted on *Casa Jurnalistului* were based on fieldwork.

## 2. THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPEAN MEDIA

A study on how the media covered the issue in 8 European countries (the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Serbia and the UK) showed that although stark differences were observed between Eastern and Western member states and between receiving and non-receiving countries, “overall, new arrivals were seen as outsiders and different to Europeans: either as vulnerable outsiders or as dangerous outsiders” (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 5). The study also observed that there was a noticeable change in the tone of reporting from the summer of 2015, when many countries framed the arrival of migrants and refugees in sympathetic terms, to the autumn of the same year, when they were presented in more and more suspicious or even hostile terms. The report identified three different stages that describe the general attitude towards migrants and refugees in the European media throughout 2015: the first was one of “careful tolerance” (July) following the mass drownings from the Mediterranean that happened in the spring and the decision of the Hungarian government to build a physical barrier along its Serbian border (announced on 13 July); the second was one of “ecstatic humanitarianism” (September) after the extensive mediatisation of 3-year old Aylan Kurdi’s death by drowning in the Mediterranean, when the arrivals were mostly framed in positive terms; finally, late autumn marked the appearance of the “fear and securitisation” stage (November), after the series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris, with detailed negative consequences of the crisis explained in the media and almost no voice granted to migrants or refugees (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

In the particular case of Romania, the analysis of media coverage shows somewhat different results. A study on how the refugee crisis was framed in online media, covering four mainstream media outlets between April 2015 and February 2016, identified accountability as the dominating frame, while conflict, morality, economic consequences and human interest functioned as secondary frames (Corbu et al., 2017). In other words, Romanian journalists were mostly interested in establishing who is responsible for the crisis and for finding solutions in dealing with it, both at the national and EU level. The analysis found little variation in terms of framing the issue throughout the scrutinized mainstream media outlets, which were selected for being the top four news websites in terms of unique visitors.

Responsibility was also established as the dominant frame in another study on how mainstream media portrayed the refugee crisis, covering articles on the topic published in September 2015 in two leading news portals and two leading news agencies in Romania. The authors of the study explained this finding in association with the “blaming games” theory, which can serve as driving mechanism for journalistic practice: “media is often inclined to frame sensitive topics in terms of ‘finding the guilty ones’ or ‘scapegoating’, even in the case of events with profound humanistic implications” (Durach et al., 2017).

The manner in which European media reported on refugees was linked by several

researchers with the larger context of current journalistic practice. For example, an international report covering how migration and the refugee crisis was reflected in media from 14 countries showed that journalists often do not succeed in offering an in-depth image of the situation and are prone to falling into propaganda traps laid by politicians. While acknowledging that news stories on this topic do sometimes adopt a balanced and well-informed perspective, in many cases reporting is characterized by (i) missed opportunities – with, for example, journalists failing to foresee the magnitude of the crisis before it began, although sufficient signs were available, (ii) reproducing hate-speech statements of high-profile politicians, (iii) falling standards in reporting on the crisis, mostly due to poor editorial resources, and (iv) an inclination toward sensationalism, with little attention to relevant details such as the difference between “migrants”, “refugees” and “asylum-seekers” (White, 2015).

A report commissioned by the UNHCR on how the refugee and migrant crisis was covered also shows significant differences throughout the EU. Journalists in Germany and Sweden tend to make more use of the word “refugee” or “asylum-seeker”, whereas the media in UK, Italy and Spain uses the word “migrant” or “immigrant” more frequently. Differences can be found as well in terms of approaches to the topic and the overall positive/negative tone of the article. “Right-wing media” in the UK, for example, undertook unprecedented campaigns against migration, whereas Italian and Swedish media favoured more the humanitarian aspects of the refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2015). Also, Italian and Spanish media focused more on proposing solutions for the crisis, as opposed to Sweden and Germany where more attention was granted to presenting facts. One of the common themes throughout the studied countries was Euro-scepticism: “the European Union’s response to the crisis was widely seen as inadequate, yet it was still defined as the key institution responsible for solving the crisis” (UNHCR, 2015, p. 10). The interchangeable and arbitrary use of terms like “refugees”, “migrants” and “illegal migrants” was documented in journalistic reports on the topic from several other Central European countries as well (see Datalyrics, 2019).

The connection between the quality of reporting and how the refugee crisis was framed represented the subject of a study on how media from both sides of the Mediterranean covered the topic of migration. The report looked at 17 countries and highlighted issues connected to the economic and political vulnerability of media institutions. Conclusions stated that:

Everywhere the study paints a picture of journalists and journalism under pressure: of under-resourced media unable to provide the time and money needed to tell the story in context; of poorly trained journalists uninformed about the complex nature of the migration narrative; of newsrooms vulnerable to pressure and manipulation by voices of hate, whether from political elites or social networks (ICMPD, 2016, p. 2).

Reporting on migration as an indicator of wider trends in journalism practice has been of interest in a number of scholarly articles. For example, a research on Austrian media during the refugee crisis, with a focus on how frames might change over time and differ between quality and tabloid media, showed that journalists tend to use predictable, stereotyped narratives in their assessment of the issue, without going very much in depth of the issue. Stories tend to focus on security issues, economical aspects and, to a lesser extent, the humanitarian angle (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). This might be associated with a well-established tendency of focusing on “bad news”, i.e. associating migrants with criminal or terrorist activity, or with the availability of relevant sources in documenting articles. Since refugees did not function at the time as a permanent topic on the agenda, journalists might not have a well-developed network of sources and/or might not be willing to devote the required time and energy to respect the rule of thumb that reporters have to talk to people who are directly involved (Gemi et al., 2012). This led to a journalistic practice identifiable across Central Europe between 2015 and 2018 to depict refugees as “depersonalized, passive and sometimes vulnerable objects”, and while their voices are not completely absent, they are not used to present a “meaningful perspective” (Datalyrics, 2019, p. 5).

### 3. MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN ROMANIA

Plummeting credibility has been an important issue affecting Romanian mainstream media in the past years, frequently associated with the increasing politicization of media institutions and the ensuing censorship or self-censorship practiced in newsrooms. Media channels are frequently used as propaganda tools, with opaque or visibly corrupt funding mechanism, and several media owners are undergoing criminal investigation for corruption, while the authorities are constantly pressuring journalists to reveal their sources and try to silence any criticism of the system (RSF, 2019). Similar conclusions can be found in the latest Freedom House report on Romania (2019), noting that despite the media environment being “relatively free and pluralistic”, there a few “key media outlets” controlled by “businessmen with political interests” (para. 1), promoting distorted coverage according to their owners’ priorities. Journalists are subjected to political and economic pressures, and several of them were physically abused by police during the August 2018 protests, a case also denounced in the annual report on freedom of expression by Romania’s media watchdog, ActiveWatch (2019). The report also acknowledged that the then-ruling Social-Democrat Party invested “massively and consistently” in journalists who contribute to transferring items from the party agenda to the public agenda, while at the same time accusing opposition media of spreading “propaganda”. Moreover, the credibility of the journalistic profession was seriously undermined in the past few years by journalists entering into politics or living off unofficial wages paid by political parties, and by the infiltration of intelligence agents inside newsrooms, as officially recognized by the Romanian Intelligence Service in 2017 (ActiveWatch, 2019).

In economic terms, the Romanian media market has registered some growth in the past two years, noticeable in ad-spending on all platforms with the exception of print media, i.e. 7% in 2017 and 10% in 2018 (Media Fact Book, 2019), but despite this, the financial prospects of the profession are not optimistic. Two of the largest TV groups – ProTV and Digi24 – have closed their local stations in 2018 and 2019, and local newsrooms everywhere are struggling. This leads to lay-offs, an increased personnel turnover and with many journalists leaving the profession to opt for officially joining political parties or unofficially getting paid for supporting a particular political organization. At the same time, vlogging continues to be a growing niche, particularly in the area of entertainment – a trend whose ascension signals the audiences’ search for alternative sources of information (Activewatch, 2019).

The shrinking of media businesses has been documented as a worldwide trend in the past few years, its initial cause being linked to the arrival of (mostly free) online media and the fact that online advertising rates have not yet succeeded in reaching offline rates in many countries. The impact was mostly visible in newsrooms, which started to receive less financing. As Lugmayr and Dal Zotto (2016) observe, media institutions gained more incentives to become “audience production plants” along with the shift onto the Internet. This is translated into targeting quantity not quality: “news needs to be sensational, spectacular and easy to understand, and not necessarily well-researched and balanced” (p. 83). In other words, producing economically profitable and high quality journalistic content is far more difficult in the Internet era than it was on print markets and “the more traditional print markets are substituted by online markets, the less likely mass media will be able to fulfil its functions in a democratic society” (p. 95).

What does this mean for professional journalists? Less revenues, job insecurity and a constant pressure to enhance their traditional skills and gain new ones, in line with the demands of the convergence era. The “Super Journalist” should not only possess high-quality writing, editing and networking skills, as well as be able to cover more areas and generally work more for less money than before, but also learn technical skills, such as coding for example (Lugmayr & Dal Zotto, 2016). The pressure to provide a large amount of work in a short amount of time may lead to “shortcuts” in writing articles, such as reproducing news stories from news agencies or other media channels, with minimal intervention on the original text, using “ready-made” photographs, videos or infographics, and generally spending less time documenting on a subject or pondering on its signification from several perspectives.

The declining credibility of mainstream media is associated with a general “crisis of confidence” faced by political parties and official institutions, and under these circumstances, independent journalistic projects coming from the alternative media tend to gain more ground (Reuters Institute, 2019).

The alternative media scene is relatively new in Romania as its beginning can be traced back to 2012. As in the case of other countries in the region, it represents a varied range of independent projects, many of which serve antithetic purposes, overall

being a “culturally unstable phenomenon” (see Macek et al., 2017) which, according to Paul Radu, founder of the investigative journalism platform *RISE Project*, emerged as a response to the crisis and economic pressures confronting mainstream media, in an attempt to offer lacking balanced information and quality investigations (Leduc, 2014). Another alternative journalism project has been established in 2012 on a similar concept – *Casa Jurnalistului*, founded by three journalists who quit their jobs in mainstream media in order to work on producing independent and objective news stories in an experimental space (Leduc, 2014). A few other alternative publications have been established in the 2010s, exploring narrative journalism in extended feature and profile stories or reportages predominantly on social topics (*Decât o revistă, Teleleu, or Inclusiv*), and doing video-journalism and documentaries based on investigations mostly associated with corruption (*Recorder.ro*).

In addition to the projects mentioned above, which could be mostly characterized by their attempt to “challenge hegemonic media and its representations”, according to the fourfold schema of theoretical perspectives on alternative media provided by Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008), the Romanian alternative media scene consists of a wide array of other online independent projects – from websites that foster religious communities, such as *Doxologia.ro, Ortodoxtv.ro, Resursecrestine.ro* or *Crestintotal.ro*, to radical news portals that claim to uncover conspiracies and are often bordering fake news, such as *Activenews.ro, Alternativenews.ro, Cocoon.ro, Fluidrul.ro*, and many more.

What is the common ground of all these online journalistic projects which are so different in terms of purpose, newsgathering practices and newsroom structures? The “enduring characteristics” of an otherwise vaguely defined term such as “alternative media” are seen by Susan Forde (2015) as “resonating with the unrepresented; working outside established societal power structures; being overwhelmingly dedicated to the role of journalism in society; and existing primarily at the margins of the mediascape, as something of an ‘endangered species’” (p. 293). Alternative journalism has also been defined via its participatory, non-professionalized and non-commercial practices and “a rejection and critique of many of the established practices of mainstream journalism”, thus “working to different news values, covering different stories, giving access to a different cast of news actors and sources” (Harcup, 2013, p. 13). Such definitions explain why alternative media remains a fairly marginal trend in terms of audiences reached and can clarify why *Casa Jurnalistului* was the only alternative journalism project that covered extensively the refugee crisis from 2015 by sending on-the-scene reporters.

Mainstream and alternative media, however, do not necessarily stand on oppositional grounds, but might complement each other in the eyes of their audiences. A study conducted by Macek et al. (2017) on young audiences from the Czech Republic, Estonia and Greece, shows that mistrust in mainstream media might be positively correlated with trust in alternative media, but this affirmation depends on the

context, since the two types of media show at times symbiotic practices and tendencies and, hence, cannot be situated in a simple antinomial binary relation.

*Casa Jurnalistului* can be seen as practising a type of alternative journalism that “is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices” (Atton, 2003, p. 267). The undermining of established mainstream journalism rules is in line with Tony Harcup’s notion of “oppositional reporting”, an undertaking by which alternative media aims to give a symbolic reaction to mainstream media by providing “reporting that draws on some of the most valued areas of journalistic practice but incorporates [...] a critique of mainstream discourse” (2013, p. 14). The implicit opposition included in alternative reporting can be identified in the use of primary and secondary sources that go beyond the conventions of mainstream media, giving voice to the “voiceless”, questioning, evaluating, commenting and discovering the important information that mainstream media fails to find. Thus, alternative journalism fills the gap left behind by “the closures and staff cuts suffered by much mainstream journalism”, while at the same time delivering “reporting ‘with attitude’”, including implicit or explicit critique of dominant viewpoints in society, based on arguments and evidence (Harcup, 2013, p. 14).

#### 4. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current research consists in the content analysis of 147 articles published on the *Adevarul* platform and 22 articles published on *Casa Jurnalistului*, between 1 and 15 September 2015, i.e. during a period seen as the peak of the refugee crisis, with a focus on uncovering the media frames used in presenting the topic under scrutiny. The limited period chosen for this study is motivated by the short amount of time and space dedicated by *Casa Jurnalistului* to the topic, which can be explained by financial constraints associated with the newsgathering process, which tend to be typical to alternative media. For consistency reasons, I analysed articles published on *Adevarul* in the same timeframe as the ones published by on-the-scene reporters from *Casa Jurnalistului*. Financial constraints and different newsgathering processes also serve as explanation for the imbalance in the number of articles published in the same period of time.

In the case of *Adevarul*, all articles containing the key-words “refugee” or “refugees” (“refugiat” and “refugiați” in Romanian) and identified by the website’s own search engine were included in the analysis, except articles that do not refer to the 2015 refugee crisis, but to other events that included refugees (e.g. Second World War), and articles that were published on the blog platform hosted by *Adevarul*, which are the focus of a separate study (see Baya, 2018). In the case of *Casa Jurnalistului*, all articles published in a subdomain dedicated to the topic were included in the analysis. As announced in the About section of this subdomain, “Refugiați călătorind spre Europa” [Refugees traveling to Europe] is a collective journalistic project in which

three members of *Casa Jurnalistului* travel together with refugees on their route to Europe.

The research framework included an analysis of indicators associated with the newsgathering process, with a focus on what primary sources were used (official sources, “independent”/non-institutional sources, refugees), which secondary sources were used (news agencies, other media channels), what was the genre of the article (news, interview, investigation, feature article/reportage, comment/editorial), what visuals supported the text (photograph, video, infographic) and what their source was (on-the-scene reporter, news agency, other media channel, provided by the source), and finally, what the dominating media frame used in the article was.

Primary sources were those interviewed directly by the newsroom who authored the analysed article, whereas secondary sources were those quoted via other media outlets or news agencies. The category of official sources included all documents or persons “authorized” to provide information to the media, such as press releases, statements or TV appearances from press representatives, PR or Communication Departments, politicians, recognized specialists and professional analysts of the topic under scrutiny etc. The category of “independent” or non-institutional sources contained participants to events that became news, eyewitnesses or other types of stakeholders that are not part of the “routine sources” used by the mainstream media. I established a separate category for “refugees” functioning as sources, in order to assess the extent to which these primary stakeholders were allowed to have a voice as part of the media coverage of the refugee crisis.

For the assessment of journalistic genres, I used the established definitions functioning in the profession: (i) articles identified as news contained texts between 200 and 700 words presenting data selected along the lines of news values principles, written in an informative and (at first sight) neutral manner, (ii) interviews were structured conversations with relevant sources, (iii) investigations consisted of the original research conducted by one or more journalists in order to uncover hidden (and potentially controversial) truths by consulting several sources, (iv) comments/editorials were articles in which the author supports a particular opinion with arguments, and (v) feature/reportage articles were identified as those that rendered more than just informative details connected to the topic, focusing on the subjective rendering of aspects such as atmosphere or character description and using storytelling techniques in order to help the reader visualize the setting of the events (see e.g. Randall, 2016; Harcup, 2015).

Media framing or news framing is a method by which information is selected and organized, thus granting salience to some aspects of reality over others and inducing audiences to “filter [their] perceptions of the world in particular ways” (Kuypers, 2010, p. 300). For this reason, looking at news gathering processes such as collecting text and visual data from selected sources and using a particular journalistic genre to structure the information in a particular way is highly relevant in establishing the frame used in portraying refugees. My research starts from the assumption that

framing is the process whereby communicators, i.e. journalists, “act – consciously or not – to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more noticeable than others” (Kuypers, 2010, p. 300).

My analysis focuses on deconstructing the frames used in presenting the refugee crisis, observing how the information is sourced, organized and portrayed as important, starting from the assumption that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

This study is based on an understanding of media framing from a mixed methods perspective. It combines (i) a quantitative approach in the collection of data using relevant keywords over a predetermined period of time, and counting the frequency with which particular journalistic genres, sources, visuals and frames were used, with (ii) a qualitative analysis of article content in order to establish dominant frames and how they are enacted following the previously mentioned indicators. The small data set under scrutiny allowed me to detect frames as they result from news-gathering routines and assess the extent to which, in the case of mainstream media, “journalists convey information about issues and events from the perspective of values held by political and economical elites” (D’Angelo, 2002, p. 876), whereas in the case of alternative media, they practice “oppositional reporting” (Harcup, 2013). This qualitative approach to identifying frames has obvious limitations connected to the relevance of such a small sample and to an unavoidable bias in the analysis. However, as opposed to an exclusively quantitative approach concerned with “what” and “how much”, it allows a more thorough focus on “how” and “why”, on the context of journalistic practice and the cues by which frames are enacted, facilitating a move “from a more descriptive notion of framing research to a fully critical and interpretative endeavour” (Kuypers, 2010, p. 308).

The articles used in the current study were acquired and processed manually, with minimal computer-assistance and were not classified according to predefined categories. Instead, my undertaking was inductive, as at first I chose to read and analyse them carefully in order to identify dominant approaches to structuring information and use of sources. Though there were articles in which I identified two or more overlapping frames, I selected the dominant one, i.e. the aspects of the information which were presented as most salient. The inductive method of research allowed me to use issue-specific frames, instead of adopting generic frames employed in other studies (see Corbu, 2017; Durach, 2017), thus avoiding a simplifying or reductionist perspective, and establishing the significant topics highlighted by the media in the particular case of the refugee crisis. The guiding principles in classifying the frames, were the presence of “identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics”, the assumption that they are derived from a certain approach to journalistic practice, and are clearly distinguishable from other frames (Linström & Marais, 2012).

Taking into consideration how the authors chose to define problems associated with the refugee crisis, how they diagnosed its causes and potential outcome, and what moral judgments or remedies they proposed (if any), as they were reflected in the headlines, subheadings, leads and/or photo captions, as well as choice of sources and genre, I established six recurring frames and analysed their frequency:

- (i) The security frame was identified in articles which focused on problems associated with refugee-related criminal activities, border control or terrorism, as well as presenting refugees as a threat to national health. Texts included here relayed information about illegal border passing on the route of refugees from Greece to Northern Europe, ships filled with “immigrants” captured in the Mediterranean, the temporary border closing between Germany and Austria, the Hungarian prime-minister’s or other politicians’ statements regarding the “threats” posed by the influx of refugees, statements from the Ministry of Health regarding possible diseases that would be brought by refugees (particularly polio), the uncovering of a network responsible with smuggling refugees, the potential connections between terrorist activities of ISIS and uncontrolled migration to Europe etc.
- (ii) The intra-EU Solidarity frame was operationalized via official statements supporting the need for cooperation in dealing with the refugee crisis. Using official sources such as the President, the Prime Minister or politicians from the governing party and/or opposition, articles included under this frame stressed the need for a pro-EU approach in Romanian foreign policy.
- (iii) The intra-EU disagreement frame highlighted the different opinions of member states in association with how the crisis should be approached, particularly in relation to the refugee quotas. The official sources such as the Prime Minister or politicians from the governing party were quoted denouncing the EU’s “double standard” when asking Romania for solidarity in accepting refugees but denying its right to enter the Schengen group of countries, politicians from different countries were cited expressing different views regarding the “fairness” of quotas, etc.
- (iv) The economic/logistical difficulties frame was detected in articles that reported on the complications associated with managing the high influx of refugees on the short term (temporary accommodation in Romania and asylum procedures, transportation between borders, administrative problems etc.) or long term (social and economic mechanisms for integration in the host society).
- (v) The cultural/religious differences frame was identified in articles that made explicit reference to the religion of refugees or to their socio-cultural habits that might be different from those of the host country, in an implied critical manner. Such articles alluded to violent events such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks, suggesting a connection between the religion of refugees and an increase in terrorist violence in Europe, or cited the leader of the National

Hungarian Council from Transylvania saying the refugees are a threat to “our [cultural] identity”.

- (vi) The humanitarian frame highlighted the life-threatening difficulties faced by refugees on their route to Europe and within the continent, with a focus on vulnerable groups (women, children, elderly and disabled persons), portraying their life on the road, in improvised camps, with no access to sanitary or medical facilities, food etc., showing implied empathy or compassion. As opposed to the other frames, in the case of this one more “independent”/non-institutional sources were used (demonstrators in Paris, Timisoara or Cluj showing support for refugees, eyewitnesses living in the Romanian or Hungarian villages where refugees stopped on their route etc.), in addition to official ones, and voice was granted to refugees telling their stories.

## 5. FINDINGS

News was the prevalent genre used in reporting on refugees in *Adevarul*, with 79.6% of the analysed articles falling under this category. Investigations made up 6.8% of the corpus of articles, though most of them did not imply on-the-scene data collection, but journalists consulting several secondary sources: decisions or debates at EU level analysed overtime, background statements from different politicians or institutions regarding Romania’s adherence to the refugee quota policy, what several international news channels or agencies write in connection to refugees etc. Only 4.8% of the articles were interviews and an equal percentage fell under the feature/reportage genre. An even smaller number (4.1%) were comments or editorials, possibly because *Adevarul* partly “externalized” the writing of opinion articles to the blogging platform it hosts (which is the focus of a different study – see Baya, 2018).

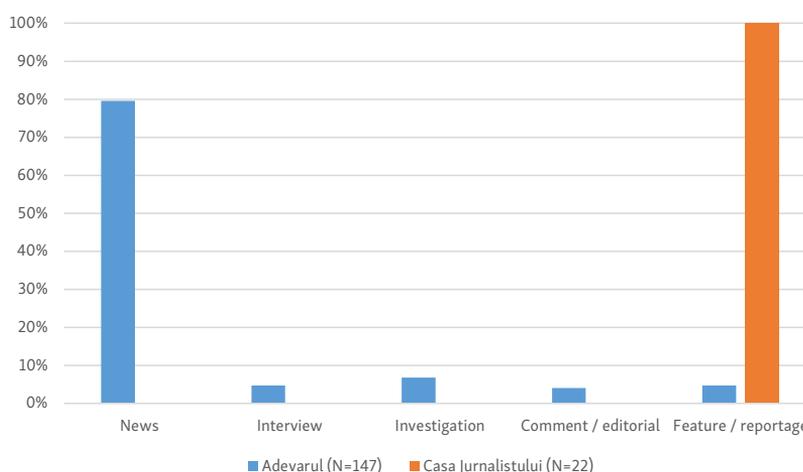


Figure 1: Choice of Journalistic Genre in Reporting on Refugees

The fact that news was the prevalent genre in reporting on refugees in *Adevarul* (see Figure 1) should be associated with the fact that 51% of the articles used public officials or public institutions as primary sources and 42.1% (see Figure 2 and 3) did not have any primary sources at all, meaning they represented articles translated from international media or reproduced with minimal intervention from news agencies. Only 2.1% of the articles on *Adevarul* used refugees as primary sources and 1.4% used both public officials and refugees. An additional 3.5% used “independent” or non-institutional sources, such as the organizers of a public meeting by the Syrian community in Timisoara, participants at the meeting or ordinary citizens who show solidarity with refugees in some sort of public statement. As far as the source of visuals used to support the text is concerned (see Figures 4 and 5), only 22.5% of them are from a reporter who is on-the-scene, the rest being reproduced from other media channels, news agencies, archives or directly from sources, with minimal effort from the part of the *Adevarul* newsroom.

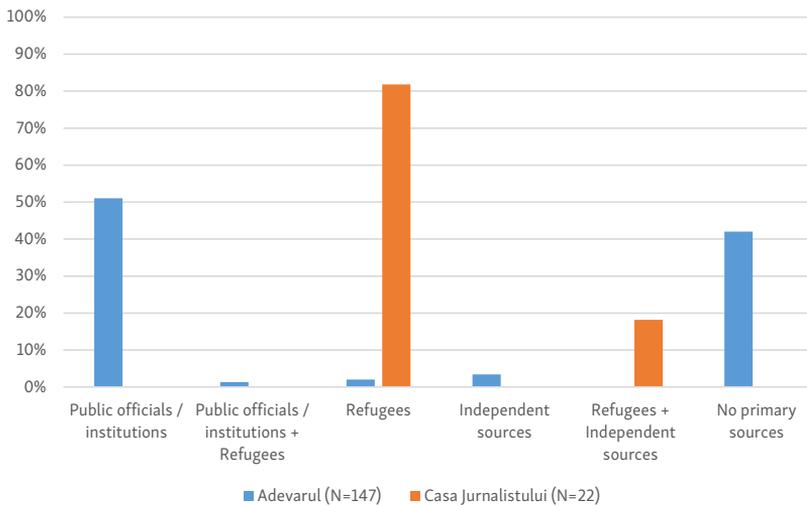


Figure 2: Use of Primary Sources

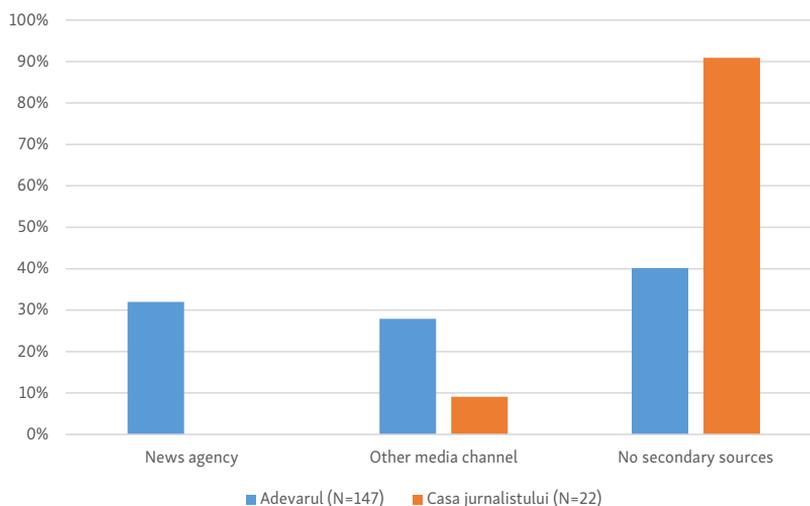


Figure 3: Use of Secondary Sources

In comparison, *Casa Jurnalistului* uses refugees as primary sources in 81.8% of the analysed articles, and both refugees and “independent”/non-institutional sources (e.g. volunteers from the Red Cross or UNHCR, the owner of a café where refugees stop in Athens etc.) in 18.2%, while all photographs and videos that complement the text are authored by on-the-scene reporters. A small number of articles on *Casa Jurnalistului* make reference to news from the international media highlighting particular events connected to refugees, but not by reproducing their content – as in the case of *Adevarul* – but just by adding a link to them, inviting the reader to check the primary source herself.

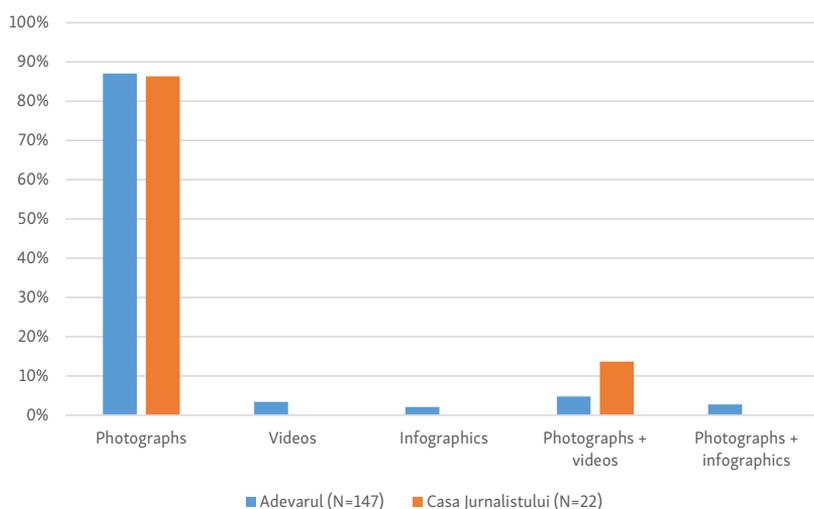


Figure 4: Use of Visuals

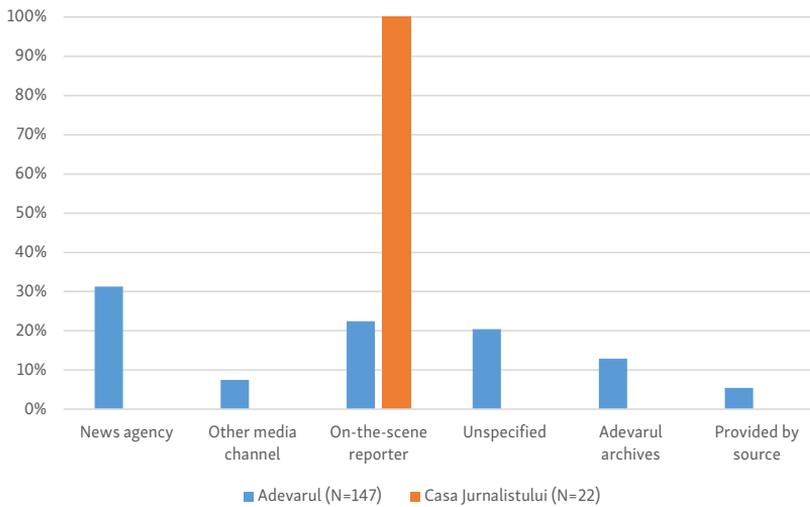


Figure 5: Source of Visuals

The four dominant media frames (see Figure 6) I identified in the case of the *Adevarul* articles are present in relatively balanced percentages: economic/logistical difficulties (23.1%), humanitarian (23.1%), intra-EU disagreement (22.5%) and threat to security (21.8%). In comparison, the dominant media frame present in the articles on *Casa Jurnalistului* was the humanitarian one, grounded on the journalists’ observations during time spent together with refugees on their illicit route from the coast of Greece to a safe camp in Germany. In a smaller number of articles here I identified the economic/logistical difficulties frame, but seen from the point of view of refugees, not of the host country officials, as in the case of *Adevarul*.

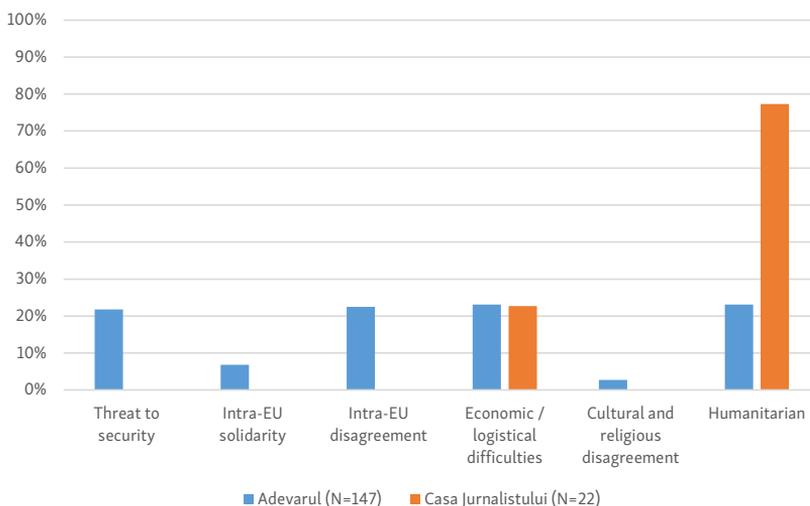


Figure 6: Dominant Frames

The articles posted on *Casa Jurnalistului* subscribe in general terms to the journalistic norms of feature or reportage writing, focusing on first-person reporting and eyewitness accounts, but most of them go beyond the theoretical rules of the genre, borrowing from journal writing or, for example, dropping headlines. The writing style focuses on rendering the atmosphere and the state of mind of the refugees, by reproducing visual details connected to their whereabouts (train/bus stations, cafés, improvised camps, interminable queues at border control) and fragments of conversation, thus allowing the reader to become immersed into the realities faced by refugees who travel across Europe. The reproduced conversations do not have the formal structure of an interview, but the reporters rather try to put themselves in the shoes of refugees. For example, at one point a reporter confesses trying to answer the following question from a refugee: “What country would you go to if you were in our place?”

Reporters from *Casa Jurnalistului* go together with the refugees through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria and Germany, walking on-foot for tens of kilometres, across roads, fields or train tracks, sleeping on the ground in train stations or in improvised camps, hitch-hiking or going on buses driven by smugglers. They cross the border illegally and experience first-hand the refugees’ exhaustion and desperation, or reproduce in short fragments of conversations their enthusiasm when thinking at the “better future” envisaged in their new European life. Most articles are based on observation and on talking to refugees, whom however are solely presented under their first name and sometimes mentioning their profession and/or a short physical description. Details about their lives are presented briefly, in a story-like manner: why they escaped Syria or Afghanistan, where they plan to travel in Northern Europe and what they expect to find there. On the whole, the articles on *Casa Jurnalistului* are more homogenous in terms of writing style, use of sources and visuals, in comparison to the ones on *Adevarul*.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study undertook a comparative analysis between media frames used in reporting on refugees on two Romanian online media channels. While the mainstream media outlet *Adevarul* features a significantly larger amount of articles on refugees than the alternative media project *Casa Jurnalistului*, the former grants less space for documenting several aspects of the story by interviewing refugees directly (as primary stakeholders) and hence for consolidating well-documented frames.

On the one hand, most articles published by *Adevarul* fall under the “news” category and use public officials as primary sources, or partially/entirely reproduce news texts and visuals from international media or news agencies. This translates in a tendency to adopt the media frames and interpretations imposed by national or supranational official institutions. The small number of non-official sources used reconfirms that the editorial decisions made by journalists under pressure have little

to do with quality reporting and make them prone to manipulation from politicians, whose proposed frames mainstream media often adopts uncritically – a conclusion which is in line with other studies on recent journalistic practices (see among others ICMPD, 2016; Lugmayr & Dal Zotto, 2016). The dominant media frames identified in *Adevarul* by my research were the economic/logistical difficulties in managing the influx of refugees, the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, the intra-EU disagreements on the topic and the potential security threats posed by the crisis – all in a relatively balanced percentage. This is partially in line with what other studies on frames used in portraying refugees in Romanian mainstream media showed (Corbu et al., 2017; Durach et al., 2017), namely that the humanitarian aspects of the story are not the main focus in the case of most articles. However, my study revealed a more balanced distribution of frames, which might be a result of the fact that both Corbu et al. (2017) and Durach et al. (2017) used generic frames, whereas I found the inductive method of establishing frames to be more fertile in establishing connections with a particular type of journalistic practice. Results concerning the use of sources and visual support for articles confirm trends noticeable in other mainstream European media in terms of willingness to spend time/resources for properly documenting the story and fairly representing all stakeholders: refugees are rarely cited directly and usually referred to via statements by public institutions or politicians (see e.g. Gemi et al. 2012; Datalyrics, 2019).

On the other hand, *Casa Jurnalistului* did not use official sources at all, publishing articles that fall under the “feature/reportage” genre, based mostly on refugees as primary sources and, to a smaller extent, on some “independent”/non-institutional sources. Articles from international media are used as secondary sources in some cases, though not summarized or translated, as in the case of *Adevarul*, but mentioned in a link, so as to stimulate readers to do their own research. The dominant media frame in *Casa Jurnalistului* is the humanitarian one, enacted by the use of refugee statements and profiles, and by photographs or videos recorded by reporters on the scene. The fact that public officials or institutions are completely absent from the articles on *Casa Jurnalistului* confirms the alternative journalism project’s attempt to fill the gap left behind by mainstream media, to provide “a different cast of voices”, making sure “the unspoken” is being said (Harcup, 2013, p. 67). Thus, *Casa Jurnalistului* offers the insights into the lives of refugees that mainstream media fails to deliver, representing the marginal voices and unconventional type of reporting that is typical for alternative journalism projects (see e.g. Atton, 2003; Harcup, 2013; Forde, 2015).

To conclude, the mainstream media website analysed here fails to offer audiences a complete picture of the events by covering all stakeholders in a balanced way. At the same time, the humanitarian media frame, which tends to be underrepresented in mainstream media, is at the centre of the feature articles published by *Casa Jurnalistului*, thus allowing the reader to complete the factual, mostly impersonal data from outlets such as *Adevarul* with accounts of the refugees’ side of the story. Therefore,

the alternative media project serves well in complementing reports on refugees from mainstream media, but would probably be insufficient on its own to give a fully balanced view on the size and implications of the crisis.

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