TO COME OR NOT TO COME: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE ROMANIAN MASS MEDIA

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Title: "To Come Or Not To Come: A Content Analysis Of The Refugee Crisis In The Romanian Mass Media"

Abstract: This paper sets out to examine the media discourse regarding the issue of immigration in the context of the refugee crisis in the European Union. To this purpose, the paper content analyzed 94 articles published by three types of media outlets (a news agency – Mediafax, a daily newspaper – Gândul, and a tabloid newspaper – Libertatea) between 2011 and 2017. The data thus collected were coded using a coding scheme and then subjected to statistical analyses carried out along two lines: (1) to identify the central themes and specific topics present in the Romanian media discourse on immigration, and (2) to understand the differences regarding the attitudes towards the situation of immigrants in terms of the media sources where the article was published. Following the analyses, the paper found out that the main themes used to frame discursively the issue of immigration were "refugee crisis", "immigration as a solution", and "immigration as a problem", each of these having their own thematic ramifications. Moreover, the analysis pointed out significant differences existing in the media rhetoric towards the immigrants: while the news agency developed a neutral-informative and fact-based discourse, the tabloid produced a discourse based on alarmist and panicking messages as well as sensational headlines regarding the supposed threat posed by the immigrants in Romania.

Keywords: *migration; media discourse; immigration management; Middle East; Syria;*

Introduction: Migration and Media Discourse

In the last three decades, since the demise of state socialism and the beginning of the democratic transition in Romania, migration has been a major topic of interest for state authorities, the media, and social scientists.[1] Migration arguably became *the* main topic of debate and regulation after Romania's accession to the European Union on January 1, 2007. After this date, which opened the legal gates to migration, the country has witnessed the leaving of between 150,000 and 300,000 Romanians each year. According to official data provided by the European Statistical Office (Eurostat), over two million people emigrated from Romania between 2008 and 2017, which constitutes a demographic loss of over ten percent of the country's population (Eurostat, 2020).

Given the large number of Romanians leaving the country especially to work in Western Europe (Italy, Spain, Germany, Great Britain, and Austria being the main countries of destination – Croitoru, 2015; Sandu, 2010), the main focus of research conducted within the social sciences fell on Romanians' emigration (Bleabu, 2004; Horvath and Anghel, 2009). Later on, sociologists started to become interested in another facet of the migration process, namely the return migration (Vlase, 2013; Croitoru, 2019).

Immigration in Romania has been much less addressed in this literature, although Romania is increasingly shifting from being a country of emigration to becoming a country of immigration. According to a recent report, "the proportion of immigrants living in Romania has increased four times during the period between 2005 and 2017, from approximately 0.5 to 2 percent of the population" (Coşciug et al, 2019, p. 4). Currently, in Romania there are officially around 380.000 immigrants, two-thirds of which have gained Romanian citizenship while the other third are non-Romanian citizens who have legal residency in the country (Coşciug et al, 2019, p. 4).

Almost absent from political debate and media representations in Romania, the topic of immigration has stormed into the public agenda in the context of the European refugee crisis (2014–2019). This consisted of the wave of migration triggered in the aftermath of the so-called "Arab Spring" and its repression in the Middle East and North African countries (Fargues and Fandrich, 2012).

In the Romanian social sciences, the media discourse on the issue of immigration was approached in a series of papers. Marinescu and Balica (2018) examined how online media represented the immigrants arriving in the European Union and Romania in particular, in the context of the refugee crisis. They found that journalists covered in their news stories the cases of illegal border crossing (which was framed as posing a threat to national security) at the expense of interpersonal crimes involving refugees such as murders, rapes, and other forms of violence enacted on vulnerable categories (women, children, the elderly).

In another study, Corbu, Buturoiu, and Durach (2017) analyzed a large collection of online news articles (N = 1,493) that were interpreted in the light of frame theory. They found that most articles referring to the refugee crisis were framed in terms of "responsibility". The second most prominently used was the "conflict frame", while less frequent were employed the frames of "morality", "economic consequences", and "human interest". More recently, in another large-scale study, Vincze, Meza, and Balaban (2020) examined over six thousand online news articles (N = 6,183) published by a range of Romanian media outlets covering the European migrant crisis. Similar to what previous studies have found, this paper discovered that the issue of immigration was framed in the Romanian media discourse as "context victimization" and "humanitarianism" on the one hand, and as "social problem", "national costs", and "danger/criminality" on the other hand.

Methodology: Content Analysis of Press Materials

Against this theoretical background, this study sets out to examine how mass media constructs a discursive representation of immigrants/refugees in Romania. Of main concern for this paper is to map the Romanian media discourse on the topic of immigration in the context of the European migrant crisis in terms of the main themes covered in the press materials. It is by charting these discursive themes that we can construct an overall picture of how the mass media represent the immigration process in Romania and characterize the immigrants/refugees. Moreover, we are interested to find out if there are significant differences in terms of the type of newspaper in the way these media outlets relate to the migrants.

In terms of method, this paper resorts to a quantitative content analysis of media discourse. Drawing on this research method, in this paper we will analyze press articles published by the Romanian mass media. These news articles, feature reports, and media analyses will be treated as "social documents", that is to say, documents that embody discursive representations over the social world (Agabrian, 2006). More specifically, content analysis is defined by Krippendorf (2004) as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 18).

In the light of this definition, in this study we set forth to draw a series of conclusions regarding the social, cultural, and political context of Romanian society inferred from a content analysis of media texts. More specifically, the texts subjected to content analysis will be newspaper materials published in the Romanian mass media covering the European migrant crisis, while the context will consist of the way in which the Romanian society relates to the issue of immigration.

In the social sciences, research methodology is divided between *qualitative* and *quantitative* approaches (Chelcea, 2001; Rotariu and Iluț, 2006; Rotariu, 2016). Qualitative research employs methods such as the interview for making sense of the structures of meaning people confer upon the social world (Iluț, 1997). In contrast, quantitative research resorts to methods such as surveys and opinion polls to gather large data for the purpose of statistical analyses. In this paper, we employ a *quantitative content analysis* of the media discourse produced by Romanian newspapers on the issue of immigration.

Through the use of quantitative means of gathering data followed by resorting to statistical techniques of analyzing the empirical materials, this paper aims to uncover some of the discursive patterns that structure the mass media representation of migrants/refugees in Romania. For the purpose of data collection, a coding scheme was developed. The coding scheme consists of seven dimensions, each of them including subsequent sub-dimensions. The structure of the research instrument is detailed below.

Table 1. The structure of the coding scheme

#	Dimension/sub-dimension
1	Formal aspects
1.1	Source of the article (the newspaper's name)
1.2	Publication date
1.3	Authorship (anonymous or identifiable author)
2	Immigrants/refugees' profile
2.1	How social actors are described: migrants or refugees
2.2	How are these characterized: violent or peaceful, educated or illiterate, possible to be integrated or not
2.3	Ethnic identity: is the migrants' ethnic origin mentioned in press reports?
2.4	Religious identity: do press reports mention that the migrants are Muslim?
2.5	Terrorist threat: is there an association made between being an Arab, a Muslim, and a terrorist?
3	Causes (objective factors) attributed to migration
3.1	Economic, political, or humanitarian (war, genocide) causes
4	Motivations (subjective factors) attributed to immigrants/refugees
4.1	Economic, political, or humanitarian reasons
5	Article type according to the nature of the message
5.1	Informative and neutral (fact-based) or alarmist (panic-raising)
6	Values expressed by the article
6.1	Solidarity and humanitarianism vs. pragmatic national interest
7	Fake news
7.1	The article contains fake news or not

Regarding the data sources, the content analysis focuses on examining a collection of press articles published in three news outlets: a) a press agency – *Mediafax* – mediafax.ro, b) a "quality" daily newspaper – *Gândul* – gandul.info, and c) a tabloid – *Libertatea* – libertatea.ro. These three sources were selected based on a series of criteria: first, each of them reaches a high audience in terms of print volume and sales, which means that these media outlets are active actors in shaping the public opinion in Romania. Secondly, each of these sources has an online archive that allows searching the entire collection of news stories published in the past. And thirdly, selecting three different types of media outlets enables us to make relevant comparisons between them and to determine if there are significant differences in how various actors from the Romanian mass media system represent the issue of immigration.

The data collection process was conducted in 2018. This temporal detail is important with regards to the typology constructed for the three media sources, since after this year Libertatea underwent a major shift in its editorial policy from a tabloid based on gossip and scandal to assuming the identity of a professional journalistic outlet.

Given that the issue of immigration was a major topic of media discourse,

especially after the migrant crisis in the European Union became salient, it is impossible to analyze all these materials. Instead, we will employ a sampling strategy through which only the most relevant part of these press articles covering the issue of immigration by the Romanian mass media will be examined.

In this regard, three sampling criteria were used to select the appropriate materials included in this analysis: a) timeframe: relevant articles identified in the online archives of the three news outlets published between 2011 and 2017, from the beginning of the "Arab Spring" and the conflict in Syria up until the flow of migration from the Middle East diminished; b) keywords: within this timeframe (2011–2017), articles were selected based on interrogating the online archives with keywords such as "refugees", "immigrants", "migrant crisis", "Syria", "Iraq", and "Afghanistan", among other similar terms; c) thematic dossiers: since we discovered that many press articles are already clustered by the news agencies in "dossiers" on the topic of immigration, the materials found in such groupings were also selected for analysis.

Findings

The findings reported in this paper are presented along two main lines: first, we highlight the central themes that underpin the media discourse on the European migrant crisis and then proceed with examining the type of message conveyed by each of the three news outlets included in this analysis.

Central themes

Overall, in the three sources included in this study *(Mediafax, Gândul,* and *Libertatea),* a total of 94 press materials that covered the issue of migration between 2015 and 2018 were identified. Each of these materials was subjected to a coding procedure according to the coding scheme that was presented in the previous section (Table 1). After coding each press article, we were able to identify the central themes that structure the Romanian media discourse on immigration. Table 2 details the statistical overview of these central themes.

Table 2. Central themes and specific topics identified in the media articles on immigration

Central theme	Topic	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Refugee/ migrant crisis	Political management	17	18.1
	Refugee quotas	12	12.8
	Crossing routes	2	2.1
	Refugees' drama	16	17.0
	The end of the European Union	2	2.1
	Statistical reports	3	3.2
	Total	**52**	**55.3**
Immigration as a solution (positive aspects of immigration)	Immigrants as labor force	3	3.2
	Social integration of immigrants	7	7.4
	Total	**10**	**10.6**
Immigration as a problem (negative aspects of immigration)	The threat posed by immigrants	14	14.9
	Rejection of immigrants	7	7.4
	Smuggling of immigrants	11	11.7
	Total	**32**	**34.0**
Total		**94**	**100**

The analysis of the Romanian media discourse on the issue of immigration identified three central themes: (1) Refugee/migrant crisis, (2) Immigration as a solution, and (3) Immigration as a problem. Each of these central themes includes a series of specific topics. In this regard, the central theme labeled as "Refugee/ migrant crisis" – in which the largest number of press materials included in the sample were categorized (52 articles representing 55.3% of the total collection of media materials) – comprises six topics, as follows:

(1.1) *Political management* of the migrant crisis, which includes all the press materials that referred to how the European Union and its member-states handled the situation generated by the wave of migration (17 articles representing 18.1%);

(1.2) *Refugee quotas,* which gathers those articles reporting on the number of immigrants each EU member-state had to accept (12 articles representing 12.8%);

(1.3) *Crossing routes,* a category consisting of the articles that wrote about the paths followed by immigrants/refugees as they were crossing the borders of national states in their way to the countries from Western Europe (especially Germany, the main country of destination for most migrants/refugees coming from the Middle East) (2 articles representing 2.1%);

(1.4) *Refugees' drama,* which included those press articles that depicted the suffering endured by immigrants/refugees as a consequence of the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (16 articles representing 17.0%);

(1.5) *The end of the European Union,* a theme that grouped all articles that speculated on the demise of the European Union caused by the "migrants' invasion" and the poor political management of this migrant crisis (2 articles representing 2.1%);

(1.6) *Statistical reports,* which included the media materials that presented statistical data referring to the number of immigrants who have requested political asylum in the EU member-states in general and in Romania in particular, most of these data being taken from the European Statistical Office (Eurostat) (3 articles representing 3.2%).

The second theme identified in the media discourse is "Immigration as a solution" and refers to the positive aspects brought about by the influx of migrants in the country. This second central theme is comprised of the following topics:

(2.1) *Immigrants as labor force,* which includes those articles that reported on the increasing number of migrants who come to Romania driven by strictly economic motivations and depicted these migrants as potential contributors to the country's workforce and economic production (3 articles representing 3.2%);

(2.2) *The social integration of immigrants,* which includes the press materials focused on highlighting the cases of successful integration of immigrants in the Romanian society, as well as the activity of the refugee centers established in various cities from Romania to facilitate their social and cultural integration (7 articles representing 7.4%).

The third central theme consists of "Immigration as a problem" and refers to the negative aspects and problematic consequences entailed by the inflow of migrants in Romania. This theme includes three topics, as follows:
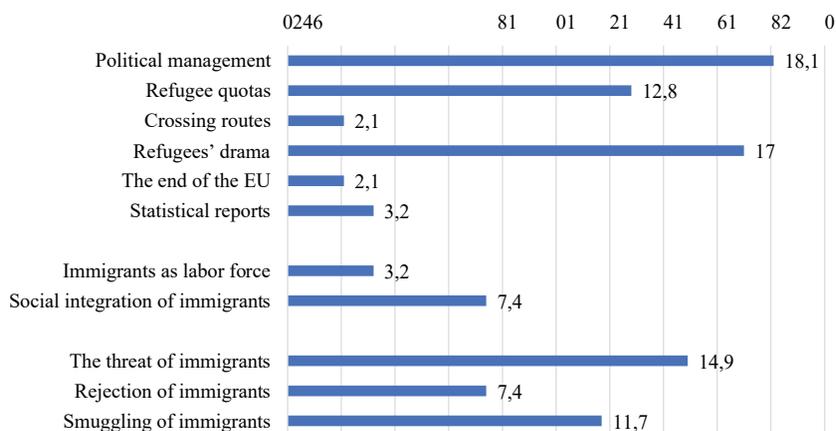
(3.1) *The threat posed by immigrants,* which gathers the press articles focused on pointing out the criminal activities enacted by immigrants in the European Union countries, including Romania (14 articles representing 14.9%);

(3.2) *Rejection of immigrants,* which includes the news stories reporting on the hostile reaction of the host communities in relation to the coming groups of immigrants/refugees (7 articles representing 7.4%);

(3.3) *Smuggling of immigrants,* which refers to the articles that presented the networks of smugglers and human trafficking operating in crossing illegal migrants over the Romanian borders. In these articles, Romanian citizens were the main protagonists in acting as migrant smugglers (11 articles representing 11.7%).

These statistical findings are presented graphically in Figure 1. This highlights that "Political management of migrant crisis" by the European Union included the most press materials (18.1%). Together with the topics on the "Refugee quotas" (12.8%) with which the political management of the migrant crisis is closely linked, these two issues represent a consistent 30.9 percent of the total collection of materials analyzed in this study.

Figure 1. The topics discussed in the media reports on immigration (%)

Second in this ranking is the topic labeled as "Refugees' drama" (17.0%). For instance, an article published by Gândul in 2016 points out "the dramatic truth of the refugee crisis". The press material shows that since the beginning of the war (March 15, 2011), four million Syrians have fled their country, while another 7.6 million have abandoned their households and now live in impoverished conditions. The news story is full of "apocalyptic images with migrants who run for their lives to find shelter in the heart of Europe" and which depict "only a small part of the Syrian drama" (Dinu and Ion, 2015). Another article, published by *Libertatea* in 2017, tells the life story of a refugee who "has lost everything in Syria, but has found his soul in Romania" (Sasu, 2017). Mohamad Zatari, a Syrian artist who is a refugee in Romania, shares his experiences and points out that in order to survive, one needs "to fool death by sneaking through bombs, hunger, and chemical weapons". At the same time, he reveals the consequences of war, which has left behind "orphan kids who are wrecked for life". Within these materials, immigrants are depicted using a vocabulary of terms such as "victims", "suffering", "poor", "hungry", "desperate", receivers of "inhumane treatment" from the state authorities with which they interacted as refugees.

Another topic salient in the media discourse was the one promoting the idea of a "threat posed by immigrants". These articles describe the criminal activities done by immigrants, who are depicted as rappers and criminals, aggressive and barbaric. For instance, an article published by *Libertatea* in 2018 about an Italian girl who was raped and murdered by two immigrants quotes the far-right prime-minister Matteo Salvini, who referred to the perpetrators as "worms" (Dobrescu, 2018). The Romanian media also covered the case of a Syrian refugee, 32 years of age, who was the main suspect of a murder in Bucharest. In 2018, the Syrian refugee killed his Romanian wife and then he burned the house where they were living. The news story from Libertatea mentioned that "the Syrian has been in the past investigated for rape" (Vlad, 2018).

This topic is closely connected with the one referring to the "Rejection of

immigrants" by local populations. These became panicked at the news that immigrants will be brought to their communities and have opposed their arrival. An example of such a material is the one published by *Gândul* in 2016, which reports on the locals' reaction from Tășnad (a small town from the region of Maramureș) when they found out that immigrants are about to arrive in their community. "We are willing to resort to violence", threatened the enraged locals, terrified that after the immigrants are brought in, their safety will be compromised: "We do not want to be like in the other countries, to be afraid to leave our children to go alone to school or be afraid to leave our wives unattended outside the home" (Macarie, 2016).

Just as furious were the local people from Ardud (another small town from Maramureș), who declared in an article published by *Gândul* in 2016 that "if needed, we will use force to prevent the housing of 100 refugees in a town building". The quote reproduced below describes the hostility expressed by the local community, in the voice of one of the protesters:

"First of all, you have to help your neighbor and if you see your neighbor that he does not have the necessities of life, that he cannot live safely, then how can you abandon your neighbor and turn your attention to a foreigner who is from another culture, from another tradition, from another religion and who clearly has an intolerant attitude toward everything that your European civilization and your religion, your faith and culture means" (Andrei, 2016a).

Another example of press material of this sort is the one published by *Libertatea* in 2018, which reported on "The March Against the Colonization of Romania" with foreign population organized by 12 associations, including the far-right movement known as the "New Right" *(Noua Dreaptă)* (Niculescu, 2018).

The Nature of Message

Another dimension of this analysis consisted of identifying the attitude expressed in the collection of press articles. To this purpose, each article was coded as belonging to one of the following three categories:

(1) *Neutral-informative and fact-based reports,* which includes those press materials that presented the situation of migrants/refugees using objective language and without making explicit value-judgments (e.g., good/bad assessments). A prime example of this type of neutral, informative, and factual reports are the materials that conveyed statistical information on the issue of migration taken from the European Statistical Office (Eurostat).

(2) *Alarmist reports,* which comprised of fearmongering news stories and journalistic materials meant to inspire panic within the public. This was pursued by associating the immigrants/refugees with various social problems such as violence, terrorism, rapes, etc. For instance, an article published by *Gândul* in 2017 alarmed its readers by stating that "the Muslim population of Europe could triple by 2050" (Bănilă, 2017). Another article, published by the same newspaper, named the refugee crisis among the factors that have "brought the European Union to the brink of di-

saster" and "on the verge of dissolution" (Andrei, 2016b). Yet another article proclaimed that the refugee crisis has produced a "medieval New Europe" (Andrei and Vidu, 2016).

(3) *Empathic reports,* which include the materials presenting the suffering of refugees in tragic terms and by doing this, urged readers to identify with their drama. An article published by *Libertatea* in 2016 ("From Aleppo to Buzău, Fighting Poverty! The Children of the War in Syria Hardly Survive in Romania") presents the difficult situation of the refugee children that came to Romania (Mitu, 2016). The press article tells the story of a Romanian woman married to a Syrian man, who gave her four children. After the outbreak of the war, they run away from Aleppo, where she says to have "seen Hell on earth". At present, the mother and her four children live at the mercy of their neighbors, while the Syrian father and husband remained in a refugee camp in Turkey because he does not possess Romanian citizenship.

Table 3. Media discourse on immigration in terms of the nature of the message conveyed

The nature of the message	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Neutral-informative (fact-based)	31	31.6
Alarmist and fearmongering	40	40.8
Empathic and emotional	27	27.6
Total	**98**	**100**

Table 3 shows that most articles examined in this study are alarmist and fearmongering (40.8%). The general message conveyed through these media reports was meant to produce panic and to frighten the readers regarding immigration and the arrival of refugees. Since there were three articles that have been categorized as containing more than a single attitude toward immigrants, the total number of codes in 98 (as opposed to the 94 press materials included in this analysis).

The messages comprising of neutral, informative, and fact-based reports (e.g., statistics) constitute the second category (31.6%). In contrast, the messages encouraging the public to identify emotionally with the drama experienced by immigrants and the suffering of refugees were the least frequent, although they summed up 27.6 percent of the total collection of articles.

Based on this distribution, it can be stated that the Romanian media discourse on the issue of immigration is diverse and includes multiple types of messages ranging from the neutral, informative, and fact-based reports, through emphatic materials, all the way to alarmist and fearmongering news stories.

Table 4. The type of media discourse on immigration in terms of the media outlet

		The source of the article			
		Gândul	Libertatea	Mediafax	Total
Neutral-informative (fact-based)	N	9	6	16	31
	%	29.0%	19.4%	51.6%	100%
Alarmist and fearmongering	N	11	17	12	40
	%	27.5%	42.5%	30.0%	100%
Empathic and emotional	N	6	7	14	27
	%	22.2%	25.9%	51.9%	100%
Total	N	26	30	42	98
	%	26.5%	30.6%	42.9%	100%

Table 4 reveals that the majority of press materials coded as "neutral-informative (fact-based) reports" were published by the news agency *Mediafax* (16 of the 31 such articles, representing 51.6%). Significantly fewer press articles of this sort have been published by the other two media outlets: while nine of them appeared in *Gândul* (29.0%), only six materials communicating factual, informative knowledge on the issue of immigration were published by *Libertatea* (19.4%). These results point out the fact that the news agency *Mediafax,* as expected, has published the largest percentage of neutral, informative, and fact-based reports. On the other hand, the tabloid *Libertatea*, renowned for its bombastic headlines and sensational news, has published the lowest number of such informative materials.

Regarding the alarmist news stories, the ranking is inverted in comparison to the previous one. Here, the tabloid *Libertatea* has published the largest number of press articles that included alarmist content concerning immigrants (17 of the 40 fearmongering articles, representing 42.5%). Unexpectedly from a press agency, *Mediafax* has published twelve such news stories, which represent a rather consistent proportion of 30.0 percent. In contrast, the daily newspaper *Gândul* published the least fearmongering and alarmist news stories on immigration (11 articles, representing 27.5%). While the rather large number of alarmist materials published by the news agency constitutes a surprising finding, in the case of the daily newspaper and the tabloid the results conform to our expectation. What this analysis has shown is that the tabloid newspapers such as *Libertatea* are much more inclined to publish alarmist news, featuring sensationalist headlines and explosive contents, on migrants/refugees and the issue of immigration, in their strive to reach a higher audience from a frightened public.

Conclusions

This paper examined the news discourse produced by the Romanian media regarding the issue of immigration in the context of the refugee crisis triggered by the wars and conflicts in the Middle East. The Romanian media discourse is characterized by diversity, in terms of both the central themes developed in the news reports focused on immigrants/refugees and of the mass media's attitudes towards the latter.

Following the quantitative content analysis conducted on a sample of 94 press articles published by a news agency *(Mediafax),* a daily newspaper *(Gândul),* and a tabloid *(Libertatea),* it was found that the most important theme discussed by the Romanian media with regards to the issue of immigration was the "refugee crisis". Within this broad theme, most news reports were centered on the "political management" of the crisis at the level of the European Union, with a special focus on the "refugee quotas" established for each of the EU's member-states.

At the same time, the news also reported on the refugees' drama and depicted their suffering caused by war and shortages, such as personal life stories of refugees that have personified the humanitarian crisis. Nevertheless, there were also news stories that induced fear and panic among the public by publishing press reports in which the refugees were depicted as violent barbarians and criminal offenders that constitute a real danger to the Romanian nation, European societies, and Western civilization.

The comparative analysis of the press materials according to their source of provenance has revealed significant differences between the three news outlets. As expected, the news agency *(Mediafax)* has published the largest number of informative, neutral, and fact-based reports on immigrants. At the opposite end, the tabloid *(Libertatea)* has published the largest number of alarmist news stories as breaking news with bombastic headlines that inseminated panic among the readership concerning the incoming threat of immigrants. In between these two extreme positions, the daily newspaper *(Gândul)* was the most balanced regarding the ratio of factual-informative and alarmist news stories.

In conclusion, the media discourse on immigrants/refugees is as diverse as the population it writes about. Even though there have been published news materials that brought huge prejudices to immigrants/refugees by portraying them as (potential) terrorists and Oriental barbarians threatening to destroy the European civilization, such reports were somewhat counterbalanced by other reports that have shed light on the humanitarian tragedy experienced by millions of unfortunate people.

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