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Framing the Refugee Crisis in Online Media: A Romanian Perspective

Abstract

The European Union (EU) is under severe pressure, due to the multiple crises it has to manage. Among them, the refugee crisis is remarkable, since it is shaking both the individual member states and the EU as a whole. The media coverage of the refugee crisis is important because the media still are the main source of information concerning distant issues (the refugee crisis included), and as such it facilitates people's access to social reality. Using the perspective of agenda-setting and the conceptual background of framing theory, we aim to (1) identify the most prominent frames online media employ with reference to the refugee crisis, and (2) reveal the tone of voice online media use when portraying issues related to this crisis. To achieve these two goals, we content analyzed 1493 online news articles, published between April 15, 2015 and February 29, 2016.

Main findings show that online media outlets mainly refer to the refugee crisis in terms of responsibility and conflict, in this order of prominence. At the same time, online media portals prefer using a reasonably balanced viewpoint when portraying the refugees, and a slightly negative one in terms of attitudes towards the European Union.

Keywords: online media coverage, generic frames, tone of voice, EU refugee crisis

Introduction

Issues related to refugees and the refugee crisis have been highly debated in many European Union countries over recent years (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2016; Boomgaard & Vliegthart, 2009). One explanation refers to the implications of the increasing waves of refugees who found shelter in the EU, leading to the refugee crisis, often portrayed as the second most important crisis at the EU level, after the financial crisis from 2008. The most severe implications include the continuous degradation of positive public attitudes towards refugees (i.e., the positive attitudes of compassion, solidarity, and empathy have quickly turned into aversion, disruption, and apathy); the widespread feelings of insecurity associat-

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ed with the refugee crisis; and, as a consequence, the rise of populist, xenophobic and Eurosceptic parties across the EU. The media have an important role to play in this dynamic.

Previous research studies show that the media are people's main means of information, especially with reference to topics to which people do not have direct access (Strömbäck et al., 2011). The media function as a "window" to the world, in the sense that they offer the order of priority of real-life events, the objects, the associated attributes, and their interpretation as well. Therefore, by offering people the most important topics of discussion and the main frames of interpreting those topics, the media also function as a "guide". First, they attract people's attention, second, they provide a certain direction towards that topic, and, then, they cultivate people's opinions and attitudes about that specific topic. It is against the background of these well documented roles of the media that our research unfolds.

The aim of the present article is twofold: (1) to explore the online media framing, and (2) to determine the tone of voice used with reference to the European refugee crisis. We start from the existing literature which shows that the media coverage of EU-related topics, and the tone of voice used by the media to cover issues referring to the EU largely influence public perceptions and attitudes towards the refugees and the refugee crisis. We calibrated this study on the basis of the third-level agenda-setting theory and framing theory. Its focus is to reveal the way online media frame the refugee crisis (i.e., which are the main attributes online media associate to the crisis), and the way online media cover the crisis in terms of attitudes towards the refugees and attitudes towards the EU. This theoretical setting allowed us to identify some important characteristics of the online media coverage of the refugee crisis which could further explain changes in people's attitudes towards the crisis.

1. Media coverage of the European refugee crisis

Both theoretical and empirical studies so far suggest that the media play an important role in modern and complex societies, mainly due to the fact that the citizens are dependent on the information provided by the media (Machill, Beiler, & Fischer, 2006, p. 173). The media can either "lead or follow public opinion" (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017, p. 968), meaning that there is a permanent renegotiation of roles among the entities (i.e., the media, the policymakers, and the public) involved in the process of public opinion formation. However, the role of the media not only as a source of information, but also as a source of interpretation of events cannot be neglected (also see Milioni, Spyridou, & Vadratsikas, 2015).

The media coverage of EU-related topics has been recurrently studied from various points of view, such as the visibility of EU-related news stories (de Vreese, 2001; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006), or the type of news coverage (de Vreese, 2007; Norris, 2000; Schuck & de Vreese, 2012). Such studies suggest two relevant connections: (i) the greater the visibility of EU-related topics in the media, the higher people's knowledge about the EU; (ii) the more negative the tone of the news about the EU, the more negative the public evaluations of the EU (see also Menéndez Alarcón, 2010).

Studies on European migration topics emphasize the fact that the media coverage (i.e., media framing and media's tone of voice) "can influence public opinion, promote various interpretations of the immigration system [...], or cue specific considerations, including legitimacy, 'need', and security" (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017, p. 968). In other words, the way in which migrants and refugees issues are described, categorized and represented has a great importance,

especially when it is done by news media “whose ‘cultural authority’ is premised upon speaking truth to power and representing the world of events to us” (Berry et al., 2016, p. 13). The media coverage and interpretation of topics related to refugees actively contribute to people’s understanding of events – what the events are about, and how people should further relate to them (for an overview of social representations of refugees and the refugee crisis in the media, see Bleich, Bloemraad, & de Graauw, 2015; Horsti, 2008; Licata & Klein, 2002; Mengistu & Avraham, 2015). As Strömbäck et al. (2011, p. 161) show, “what the media cover and how they cover it thus become highly important”. According to results from studies on agenda-setting, framing and priming, the media can have a strong influence over what topics people consider important (i.e., the first-level agenda-setting or the order of priorities of events), and how people evaluate and perceive issues, actors and events (i.e., the second and third-level agenda-setting) (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012). Indeed, the media provide the information which citizens use to understand the world and find their place within it (Berry et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it is important to mention that not only the presence and visibility of the topic make a difference, but also the tone of news coverage: “evaluative media content is an important parameter for assessing the nature of public debates, because evaluative media content provides important cues for citizens’ perception of the EU” (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006, p. 483). According to Berry et al. (2016), research developed in many EU countries confirms that refugees are more likely to be referred to in a negative manner, as a problem, rather than as a benefit to host countries. The negative evaluations of the refugees in the media often lead to negative evaluations from the public (Menéndez Alarcón, 2010).

Nevertheless, there are occasions when the media can have a positive impact on public attitudes and policy. Positive references to refugees in the media are often associated with less concern about immigration among people (Berry et al., 2016; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). In other words, the media coverage of sensitive topics (such as the refugee crisis) might explain the shifts in public opinions and attitudes, and might give some clues about the emergence and development of decisions and behaviors at a societal level (e.g., “unexpected” voting results or the rise of populist, xenophobic and Eurosceptic parties).

2. Third-level agenda-setting and framing

Some of the most recent studies referring to media and communication effects identify a new theoretical approach, namely the third-level agenda-setting or the network agenda model (Guo, 2012; Guo & McCombs, 2016). According to this rather new model of influence, the media are responsible for offering people the topics of discussion (i.e., the objects), their attributes and their interpretation, as well as the way topics are associated with each other: “the news not only tells us what to think and how to think, but also determines how we associate different messages to conceptualize social reality” (Guo, 2016, p. 3). The hypothesis behind this new model of influence is that “the salience of media networks of objects and attributes influences the salience of the networks of these elements among the public” (Guo, 2016, p. 5). In other words, the third-level agenda-setting model suggests that media’s influence might not be limited only to offering people topics of discussion, the order of priorities (first-level agenda-setting), and a direction of interpreting events (second-level agenda-setting). This new model suggests that media’s influence goes further, shaping or reshaping people’s cognitive network.

The main aspect that characterizes the third-level agenda model is that the representations in “people’s heads” are based on images following a network-like structure; unlike the other two ramifications of the agenda-setting theory, the network agenda model states that the media influence not only the objects and their associated attributes, but also the relationship between the objects themselves. In other words, the network agenda model has deep implications, suggesting that the media play an important role in configuring the way people think and how they think about certain events (Guo, 2014). The implications of the theory have been empirically tested and there is sufficient ground to argue in favor of a third-level of agenda-setting effects. Studies emphasize the idea that the more prominent the simultaneous association between certain objects and attributes in the media, the more likely the public perceive them as strongly linked together (Meraz, 2016; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014).

In what regards the framing theory, researchers tend to agree with each other that the media offer, through framing an event or an issue, a certain direction of understanding, in the sense that they might change the way people might understand that specific event or issue (de Vreese, Boomgaarden, & Semetko, 2011; Lee, McLeod, & Shah, 2008; Matthes, 2008). Starting from the classic definition of frames and framing proposed by Entman (1993), the media have the ability to select some aspects from the reality and make them salient in a communication context. Therefore, by emphasizing some aspects and ignoring others, the media guide people’s perceptions on a specific topic. Following the same line, other classic views suggest that media frames are “a set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3).

In real-life media contexts, there is a high probability that media frames differ in terms of typology. Therefore, the exposure to different media frames could cause different effects. Theoretical studies show a rather clear distinction between generic and issue-specific news frames and their effects on audiences (Carter, 2013; de Vreese, 2005, 2012; de Vreese et al., 2011; Iyengar, 1990). On the one hand, the generic news frames might go beyond thematic constraints, being used for an entire set of topics. On the other hand, the issue-specific news frames are suited for individual or particular situations and events (de Vreese, 2005).

The generic approach to media frames enables generalizations and conclusions that “transcend thematic limitations and can be identified in relation to different topics, some even over time and in different cultural contexts” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54). Specifically, generic news frames facilitate the comparisons among similar topics and, thus, contribute to the creation of associative networks among connected theories. In this context, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five types of generic news frames: (1) responsibility frame; (2) conflict frame; (3) morality frame; (4) economic consequences frame; (5) human interest frame (for details regarding the types of questions used in order to identify each of these frames, see the Appendix).

Theoretical studies prove the existence of two main ways of identifying news frames, irrespective of their typology. The deductive approach refers to “the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In other words, by using such an approach, researchers try to find out if certain pre-defined ideas are recognizable in a news story. This type of news frame identification is considerably safer than the inductive one. The latter “refrains from analyzing news stories with a priori defined news frames in mind” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53).

Empirical studies so far underline the idea that these five generic frames are widely used by the media with reference to a wide variety of topics (Asker Guenduez, Schedler, & Ciocan,

2016; de Vreese et al., 2006; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, due to the rather few studies on the media coverage of European migration and because of the novelty of the issue, both the way media frame the refugee crisis, and the tone of voice used in portraying the refugees and the EU are still subject to examination. Therefore, this research paper aims to investigate the online media coverage of the refugee crisis (i.e., the most prominent frames used by the media and the tone of voice used for covering issues related to the crisis), in an attempt to understand the emergence and development of public attitudes towards the refugee crisis.

Specifically, this research paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How was the refugee crisis framed in Romanian online media?

RQ2. Were the most prominent topics about the refugee crisis framed similarly or differently in the Romanian online news?

RQ3. What was the tone of voice used in Romanian online news regarding the European refugee crisis?

RQ4. Was the tone of voice of the most prominent topics about the refugee crisis similar or different from the rest of the news, in terms of attitudes towards the refugees and attitudes towards the EU?

3. Methodology

Method

This study proceeded from a content analysis of the online news concerning the refugee crisis in the period April 15, 2015 – February, 29, 2016. The online media outlets were chosen based on the number of unique visitors during this time period (reported by SATI, the Romanian media audience measurement agency): two news portals, hotnews.ro and ziare.com, and two online newspapers, adevarul.ro and gandul.info. TV news sites were not considered for this study. Only news concerning the refugee crisis were content analyzed. Archives of the news outlets and 21 keywords covering the semantic field of the refugee crisis (such as refugee, migrant, quotas, asylum, etc.) were used to identify all relevant pieces of news for the topic. A total number of 1493 news stories were coded: hotnews.ro (n=376), ziare.com (n=367), adevarul.ro (n=436), and gandul.info (n=314). Coding was performed manually by four native speakers, graduates of a College of Social Studies in Romania. The intercoder reliability tested on a subsample of 30 articles yielded satisfactory results for both frames (.76) and tone of voice (.88).

Framing measures

To assess the extent to which a frame appeared in a news story we used an adapted scale from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). Thus, five generic frames were measured, using 18 questions to which the coder had to answer with “yes” (1) or “no” (0). The answers were afterwards grouped into scales for the five generic frames typically used in news analysis: responsibility, conflict, morality, economic consequences, human interest (for full scales, see Appendix). We used Cronbach’s alphas (according to Kuder-Richardson 20 method for dichotomous data) to measure the internal consistency of the five scales. Thus, alpha values were: responsibility .822 (5 items), conflict .753 (4 items), morality .811 (3 items), economic con-

sequences .834 (3 items), human interest .821 (3 items). We computed composite variables for each scale, by averaging the unweight scores for all items of each scale. Thus, the maximum value for a frame (1) would mean that the specific frame is present in the news story in all its aspects, while the minimum (0), the frame is totally absent from the news story.

Tone of voice measures

The tone of voice of the news stories was measured on an ordinal scale of -1 to 1 (negative, neutral, positive), assessing both the tone of voice regarding the refugees and the European Union in this context.

4. Findings

Generally speaking, the refugee crisis was covered in the Romanian online media from a responsibility point of view, that is the subjects covered were discussed in terms of who is (or should be) accountable for solving the crisis, finding solutions, or focusing on findings solutions, both at the national level and at the European level. All four media outlets covered the topic in a similar manner; only small differences in frame prominence were registered (Table 1).

Table 1. Intensity of frames by media outlet for news stories about the refugee crisis.

Media outlet		Responsibility frame	Conflict frame	Morality frame	Economic consequences frame	Human interest frame
www.hotnews.ro	Mean	.45	.20	.11	.12	.17
	N	376	376	376	376	376
	Std. Deviation	.37	.29	.26	.28	.31
www.ziare.com	Mean	.41	.21	.17	.16	.21
	N	367	367	367	367	367
	Std. Deviation	.38	.29	.31	.32	.36
www.adevarul.ro	Mean	.40	.23	.13	.14	.14
	N	436	436	436	436	436
	Std. Deviation	.36	.31	.29	.29	.29
www.gandul.info	Mean	.40	.24	.08	.16	.13
	N	314	314	314	314	314
	Std. Deviation	.37	.33	.23	.32	.28
Total	Mean	.41	.22	.12	.14	.16
	N	1493	1493	1493	1493	1493
	Std. Deviation	.37	.30	.28	.30	.31

The second most visible frame was conflict, emphasizing difference of opinions either within the European Union, or at the country level, disagreements among the European member states or among representatives of parties or countries. Human interest ranked third, es-

pecially due to the “episodic” framing of various moments of the crisis, stories that brought into the spotlight incidents at sea or individual stories of refugees or journalists covering the crisis. Even though there were many economic implications of the refugee crisis, the economic consequences frame was not very prominent in online news. This could be due to the lack of appeal of economic matters to the public in general, which makes journalists in general reluctant to discuss too many economic issues in news.

Generally, the same kind of framing of the refugee crisis was used in the subset of news stories which specifically referred to the European Union. In terms of responsibility, this could mean that journalists emphasized the need to take responsibility, action, and blame not only when the European decisions and actions were discussed, but also for individual countries, stories, or particular topics related to the crisis (Table 2).

Table 2. Intensity of frames by media outlet for news stories about the refugee crisis referring to the EU.

Media outlet		Responsibility frame	Conflict frame	Morality frame	Economic consequences frame	Human interest frame
www.hotnews.ro	Mean	.45	.20	.10	.15	.11
	N	119	119	119	119	119
	Std. Deviation	.36	.32	.25	.32	.26
www.ziare.com	Mean	.39	.17	.18	.18	.18
	N	116	116	116	116	116
	Std. Deviation	.38	.29	.34	.34	.35
www.adevarul.ro	Mean	.41	.23	.11	.14	.11
	N	174	174	174	174	174
	Std. Deviation	.38	.31	.26	.28	.27
www.gandul.info	Mean	.44	.27	.09	.11	.11
	N	92	92	92	92	92
	Std. Deviation	.37	.36	.26	.27	0.27
Total	Mean	.42	.22	.12	.15	.13
	N	501	501	501	501	501
	Std. Deviation	.37	.32	.28	.30	.29

The only differences between all news and EU related news were a small increase in the economic consequences frame in the EU related stories, and a slight decrease in the intensity of the human interest frame. However, these differences were almost negligible.

The news stories made prominent several topics (from an agenda building perspective), among which the most visible were the decisions taken in the member states (55.9% of the news stories), political asylum (34.8% of the news stories), and solidarity at the EU level (30.7% of the news stories). These three topics were covered generally in the same manner as all other news stories, that is, largely framed from a responsibility point of view, followed by a conflict framing and a human interest one. However, there were some significant differences in terms of the intensity of these frames for the topics of political asylum and solidarity.

For the general topic of the political asylum, news that covered this particular topic were significantly ($t(988)=1.953$, $p<.05$) more conflict oriented ($M=.24$, $SD=.32$) than news stories that did not ($M=.21$, $SD=.29$). As far as solidarity is concerned, the responsibility frame was more intense in the news stories covering the topic ($M=.46$, $SD=.36$) than in the rest of the news ($M=.39$, $SD=.37$), the difference being statistically significant ($t(1491)=3.441$, $p<.01$). At the same time, there were differences in the economic consequences framing intensity ($M=.17$, $SD=.32$ vs. $M=.13$, $SD=.29$ respectively), the difference being statistically significant ($t(801)=2.027$, $p<.05$) in the sense that the news stories discussing the problem of solidarity at the level of the European Union were more focused on the economic dimension than the rest of the stories. However, responsibility largely remains the dominant frame of all topics related to the refugee crisis, followed by the conflict frame, regardless of the subjects covered by the news or of the media outlet.

As far as the tone of voice is concerned, the overall tone of the news covering the refugee crisis was generally balanced, with a mean close to zero ($M=-.02$, $SD=.74$), whereas the tone of the subsample of news in which the European Union was specifically mentioned was slightly negative ($M=-.14$, $SD=.74$). (Table 3)

Table 3. Tone of voice of news regarding the refugee crisis (attitudes towards the refugees vs. attitudes towards the EU).

Media outlet		Attitude towards refugees	Attitude towards the EU
www.hotnews.ro	Mean	-.03	-.07
	N	376	119
	Std. Deviation	.74	.73
www.ziare.com	Mean	.04	-.09
	N	367	116
	Std. Deviation	.74	.74
www.adevarul.ro	Mean	-.04	-.24
	N	436	174
	Std. Deviation	.73	.74
www.gandul.info	Mean	-.04	-.10
	N	314	92
	Std. Deviation	.77	.74
Total	Mean	-.02	-.14
	N	1493	501
	Std. Deviation	.74	.74

As in the case of frames, the tone of voice does not differ much from one media outlet to the other. The one clear difference reflects the fact that the website of the newspaper Adevărul was more negative towards the EU than the rest of the media outlets.

As far as the three most prominent topics are concerned, the decisions taken in the EU member states were covered generally in the same manner as the rest of the news, whereas there was an important difference in the way journalists covered the topic of solidarity within the EU, if compared to the rest of the news stories, from the point of view of attitudes towards

the refugees ($t(872)=13.911, p<.01$). The news stories that dealt with the topic of solidarity showed a positive attitude towards the refugees in general ($M=.36, SD=.70$), while in the rest of the news the tone of voice regarding the refugees was negative ($M=-.19, SD=.70$). This is probably due to the feelings of empathy, solidarity, human understanding of the human drama of the refugees, as opposed to judging the consequences, social movements or country difficulties raised by the crisis. The attitude towards the EU is equally different in the stories covering subjects related to solidarity: the EU is framed in a slightly positive way in these news stories ($M=.04$), and negatively in the rest of the news ($M=-.29, SD=.68$), the difference being statistically significant ($t(499)=5.161, p<.01$). The general attitudes towards the refugees and the EU were similar in the news covering political asylum, compared with the rest of the news.

5. Discussion

Increased contestation over numerous EU-related issues reshaped the manner in which this supranational political entity is perceived by the general public. In recent years, the EU was exposed in the media and by the media as being flawed and vulnerable to crises. The waves of refugees in need of asylum that hit EU territory as of 2015 prompted vivid national and European debates over the opportunity of EU member states to act together to solve the crisis. The aim of our research was to investigate how the refugee crisis is framed in the online media in Romania, and to determine the tone of voice prevalent in the online news articles. In line with findings in the literature, we argue that the particular way in which EU-related issues are framed influences the public perception of those issues. Furthermore, the media coverage of any topic of European relevance can have a spillover effect, by cultivating the public's opinions on the EU as a whole.

Findings indicate that the online media outlets we analyzed framed the refugee crisis mainly in terms of accountability. Out of the five general frames (responsibility; conflict; morality; economic consequences; human interest), the responsibility frame was prevalent across all sources. Through specific framing processes, the journalists enforced the argument that the most significant issues related to this complex topic were casting blame, and identifying the suitable actors for solving the crisis. Furthermore, the responsibility frame ranked first in the subset of news that made reference to the European Union. The need to address EU's accountability as a global actor, to share responsibility, and to take action were present both in news discussing European decisions, and in news which focused on individual countries, stories, or particular topics.

Unsurprisingly, conflict came second in terms of visibility in the news. This frame emphasized difference of opinions within the EU. This finding reflects the reality of the refugee crisis; for many months, addressing the crisis was stalled by disagreements among the European member states or among representatives of parties or countries over who is to blame, what measures need to be taken, and who should (or should not) share responsibility. There was a significant amount of online media coverage on the opportunity and justification of enforcing mandatory quotas of refugees for all member states. It was to be expected that such lasting dissensions would make the conflict frame more visible than others.

Despite the fact that the refugee crisis is not only a question of foreign policy and security, but also a heart-breaking human tragedy, it is rather surprising that journalists did not make

the human interest frame more visible. Ranking third, this frame reflects emotional moments in the timeline of the crisis, such as at-sea accidents, or individual stories of refugees fleeing from the destruction of their countries. Despite the newsworthy potential of human interest stories, our data suggests that journalists favored a broader interpretation of the crisis, focusing on macro phenomena instead of depicting singular life stories or tragedies. This does not imply the trivialization of human loss; instead, it suggests the overall circumstances that made this tragedy possible.

Journalists were least preoccupied with the economic consequences and the moral aspects. In what the economic consequences frame is concerned, its relative low visibility could be explained by the public's lack of interest in the arid economy-related topics. Nevertheless, there was small increase in the economic consequences frame in the EU related stories, probably due to the controversy surrounding the mandatory quotas. Arguments in favor of, or against the quotas revolved around the costs of caring and integrating the refugees in the European societies, thus making the economic consequences of the crisis more concrete for the audience. The morality frame ranked last for both news stories about the refugee crisis in general, and the news stories that relate explicitly to the EU. This result suggests that the online media coverage does not associate accountability for the crisis with moral judgments; the appeal to the European values (especially solidarity) is not salient, despite the fact that official statements in Brussels often pleaded for acting based on this shared system of values and beliefs. The news stories we analyzed failed to depict the topic in these terms.

It is worth mentioning that no significant differences between online media outlets could be found. All four websites covered the topic in a similar manner, and only small differences in frame prominence were registered. This homogeneity of the online media coverage across news sources could potentially increase the effects of framing for the audience, by enforcing the perception of a shared view of the crisis in the Romanian public sphere.

We were interested in the prominence of the topics identified in the news stories. The fact that the most visible topic were the decisions taken in the member states illustrates the urgency of the refugee crisis, which prompted member states to take action, instead of gradually building consensus towards shared solutions. The topics of political asylum and solidarity at the EU level were also prominent in the news stories. Based on this top-three ranking of topics, it can be argued that the refugee crisis was mainly understood as an urgent issue in need of swift decisions, and as a question of giving or denying political asylum to the refugees. Furthermore, the crisis introduced the citizens to a dilemma: should all member states act united, based on the principle of solidarity? Favoring solidarity or individual interest during the refugee crisis could create a precedent for crisis response at EU-level for many years to come.

The aforementioned topics were covered generally in the same manner as all other news stories, favoring the responsibility frame, followed by conflict and human interest. Nevertheless, the intensity of these frames varied in the case of two topics: political asylum and solidarity. More specifically, news that covered the former tended to be more conflict oriented, suggesting that this issue prompted more diverging point of views than other topics. The responsibility frame and the economic consequences frame were of greater intensity in news addressing the question of solidarity than the rest of the news, which could in turn lead to the perception that member states who refuse cooperation in solving the crisis are actually avoiding their responsibility to do so.

The online media coverage of the refugee crisis is generally characterized by a balanced tone of voice, with the notable exception of the sub-sample referring to the EU, where the

tone tends to be slightly negative, suggesting that EU's image has not been left unharmed during the crisis. In this respect, *Adevărul* is the news outlet with the most negative tone of voice towards the EU. Besides this exception, no other significant differences between news sources could be found, suggesting a unified voice of the Romanian online media on this particular topic.

When comparing attitudes towards the refugees and attitudes towards the EU, differences are visible according to the topic in question. In general, the news stories focusing on solidarity tended to show positive attitudes towards the refugees, in contrast with the rest of the news, which manifested negativity towards them. Furthermore, the attitudes towards the EU are more positive when solidarity is addressed. We can conclude that, albeit the refugee crisis was not framed in terms of human interest, the online media coverage does have, at times, a humane approach, focusing on solidarity, shared values, empathy and understanding for the personal drama of the refugees. This is the only approach that allowed positive attitudes towards the EU and towards the refugees. The online media coverage that evaluated "hard" aspects, such as consequences, social movements or national difficulties raised by the crisis was prone to rather negative attitudes.

6. Conclusions

The refugee crisis is one of the most recent examples of public contestation over EU-related issues. The amplitude and urgency of the refugee waves made the crisis an issue of concern for all member states, irrespective of their role in handling the crisis. In what the Romanian online media are concerned, findings suggest that the refugee crisis was mainly framed in terms of accountability. Journalists were deeply concerned with identifying the actors responsible for the refugee crisis, and also with casting blame, identifying solutions, and emphasizing conflict. Other meaningful aspects of the crisis, such as morality, economic consequences, and human interest were secondary. The emphasis on responsibility and conflict is associated with negative attitudes towards the EU and the refugees. Since the particular framing of an issue influences public opinion towards that issue, we expect the EU to suffer losses in terms of image in Romania, as well as in other member states.

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Appendix

Frames coding questions

Attribution of responsibility

Does the story suggest that the government structures (national or supranational) have the power to solve the problems?

Does the story suggest that some level of the government sector / political decision makers (national or the EU) is responsible?

Does the story suggest finding rapid/immediate solutions to a problem?

Does the story suggest that the problem requires rapid / urgent actions?

Does the story suggest that individuals (or groups or society) are responsible for a problem?

Conflict frame

Does the story suggest conflicts / disagreement between parties/ groups / individuals / decision makers / countries?

Does the story refer to winners and losers?

Does the story reflect that one party / individual / decision maker / country reproach another?

Does the story refer to two sides of the problem?

Morality frame

Does the story contain any moral message?

Does the story refer to God or religious values?

Does the story refer to behavioral / social norms that should be adopted or that are acceptable / unacceptable?

Economic consequences frame

Does the story refer to financial losses or gains on the short or long term (for anyone)?

Does the story mention costs or expenses involved?

Does the story mention economic consequences of adopting / not adopting some measures?

Human interest frame

Does the story provide a “human face”, an individual example for the problem (refugees, citizens of EU member states, etc.)?

Does the story refer to ordinary people’s reaction to events?

Does the story offer a human face of the subject, by appealing to adjectives that suggest suffering, hardship, humility, empathy, etc.?