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Long-form Journalism Funding. Theoretical Frames and the Perspective of Media Literacy as Asset. Case Study: Legal Structures of Award-winning Newsrooms in Romania in 2023 and 2024

Loredana BERTIȘAN-POP¹ 

Abstract. Financial challenges are not, as literature shows, new lenses when it comes to media. Media landscape has experienced many struggles over the years and while it is diverse and pluralistic in Romania, funding perspectives are still limited. This article aims to understand the legal architecture and financial framework upon which Romanian newsrooms operate and, in particular, if there is or not a discrepancy between award-winning media outlets and high-reach media outlets. Using theoretical frameworks such as the media enterprise concept, journalism as public good, media literacy, and areas of concern for journalism industry as identified in the specialized literature, we conduct a comparative case study of the Superscrieri Award winners (2023, 2024) and the most accessed media outlets as Digital News Report indicates (2023, 2024). Observations show that while non-profit organizations (associations and foundations) are the most dominant among award-winning media outlets, commercial for-profit organizations (SRLs and SAs) are prevalent among readerships. There is hardly any crossover between the two categories, with Libertatea (2023, 2024) and HotNews (2024) being on both lists. Operational and taxation differences highlight the structural vulnerabilities; while NGOs are tax exempt, they are dependent on donors

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and grants; commercial enterprises are linked to market dependence, being subjects to different taxation. This preliminary study shows that the choice of legal form has an impact on the possibility of producing awarded long format journalistic productions, being linked to operational potential as well as editorial identity.

Key words: long format journalism, legal media entities, media enterprise, media literacy.

In 2009, Howard Tumber and Barbie Zelizer raised an important warning, stating that journalism would enter a phase dominated by financial volatility, and revenues would decrease drastically (Tumber & Zelizer, 2009). Global financial crisis and Facebook's growing popularity were seen as two main challenges, and the journalistic formats started to shift from a more diverse palette per media outlet to mostly shorter pieces (Lassila-Merisalo, 2014), dominated by news often produced with user generated content or soft genres such as listicles or “how to” articles. The concept of “online traffic” started to be one of the key elements to achieve to call oneself a successful media outlet (Hendrickx & Opgenhaffen, 2024). Moreover, in 2016, Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill introduced “shareability” in the news values rank, a tool used to understand if a piece of information is or not a newsworthy material.

Although nowadays there is a tendency to believe that only in recent history the public has been reluctant to pay for information, the situation was underlined as early as 1922 by Walter Lippman in a fragment that we reproduce *ad litteram* (Lippmann *apud* Picard, 2016): “Nobody thinks for a moment that he should pay for his newspaper. He will pay a nominal price when it suits him, he will stop paying whenever it suits him, he will switch to another newspaper when it suits him. It is not a business simply because the product is regularly sold below cost. The citizen will pay for his telephone, for his train journeys, for his car, for his entertainment. But he does not regularly pay for his news. He will pay indirectly for other people's

advertisements, because that payment, being hidden in the price of the goods, is part of an invisible medium that he does not effectively understand. The public pays for press, but only when the payment is hidden”.

In 2024, the landscape is not much different. Long format journalism, either narrative pieces or investigative work, while necessary for a better understanding of public interest issues, combining text with multimedia content (Duffy, 2022), is expensive to produce and only few manage to get the funding in order to be able to document a story for a longer timeframe. What can be done? In a paper that aimed to identify research directions and agendas that should be considered in this regard by 2028 in the context of media in Europe, two researchers noted that “the two main sources of media financing, namely direct payment and advertising, are declining because there are many more options for the public, and the press must think about new business models”, giving as an example “premium content, sponsorships, conferences, education, e-commerce” (Artero & Sánchez-Tabernero, 2018, p. 60).

A look back

Nevertheless, the financial crises, although now under spotlight, are not new in the journalism industry as mentioned above. This opinion is shared by Victor Pikard, a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication from University of Pennsylvania, who has dedicated his career to studying this niche and who says that the fundamental mistake is that “journalism has relied far too much on advertising, without having a commercial logic of the business model, of a media enterprise” (Bill, 2024). In a report published in 2019 by the Media Commission of the Stigler Center for the Study of the Economy and the State, signed by seven university professors, is noted that “digital platforms pose serious threats to media enterprises and the sustainability of the industry in general” (Rolnik et al, 2019). The same report identifies four areas of deep concern for the journalism industry. We present them below, considering them useful as starting point in any debate about strategies to change the trend.

The first key point identified is the decimation, the suppression of local media, a business model for the journalism industry that in the past (for decades) allowed the production of responsible journalism, with an emphasis on the niche of investigative journalism. Distribution and the channels through which it is made is the second point of concern, because there has been a rapid shift from the idea of information transmitted through traditional channels to algorithms that are controlled by digital platforms that today hold the power and “act as a gatekeeper for news around the globe” (Rolnik et al, 2019). This phenomenon will be exacerbated by the development of chatbots equipped with artificial intelligence.

The third point continues the previous statement, talking about the “opacity regarding the algorithms that control the distribution of news to the public” (Rolnik et al, 2019), matched with the fact that there are no transparently published reports on how exactly works the news consumption through their ecosystem. The last point highlighted in the cited report refers to the fact that digital gatekeepers “do not have strong enough economic and legal incentives” to force them to act and prioritize quality content, “thus limiting malicious information and the phenomenon of fake news”.

Therefore, where we are starting from and what are the potential sustainable methods in order not to kill an industry that produces goods that can be called hybrid, because they both hold commercial and a symbolic power (De Maeyer, 2020), of interest at the societal level?

During massive global crises (economic, medical, war) part of society looks to journalism with hope for salvation, but “society rarely reflects on the fact that to maintain a healthy journalistic system we need infrastructure and public policies” (Pickard, 2020, p. 165). Pickard also talks about the status quo of documented issues that are key to the society and “a desperate need for quality journalism” (Pickard, 2020, p. 165). He draws a grim conclusion but also reaches out to the concept of quality in the journalistic process.

A look back in time takes us to 1968, when John Merrill published a book in which he analyzed the best newspapers in the world, and conceived five indicators for a quality newspaper (Vehkoo, 2010). Firstly, according to Merrill, independence is the first characteristic that generates quality. This independence is linked to financial stability, which then generates integrity.

Through integrity, good writing and well-edited final productions are generated as an effect of good observation of the world. The second indicator is that the materials produced show a very good knowledge and interpretation of events, situations and society in general, the materials being devoid of cheap sensationalism or cosmeticizing, but also having nuances regarding the opinions of those who write the materials (a.n. probably here we are talking mainly about editorial as a genre). Quality is also given by the fact that the media product (the newspaper in Merrill's analysis, but we tend to extrapolate) emphasizes categories such as politics, international relations, the economy, the social and cultural framework, education and, finally, science. There can be no quality journalistic product if the editorial staff, at management level, is not always concerned with developing the journalists who compose it. The fifth characteristic of a quality journalistic product is the fact that its mission is to educate the public. Merrill sees in the finality of the media product the very important idea that in addition to the raw facts, it must also provide interpretations, launch ideas that the audience can adopt or counteract, but that give them something to think about. All in all, for media sustainability there is a need of recalibrating the concept of media enterprise.

Media outlets as media enterprise

Researches have shown that media outlets have to function also as a media enterprise, defined as “systematically organized economic entities, which deal with the grouping of editorial content (informational and/or entertainment-related) generated internally or externally, the transfer of content to a storage medium and the distribution of content to receivers, directly or indirectly” (B.W. Wirtz apud Meza, 2020, p.40). The deep crisis existing for about two decades, directly linked to technological evolution and its complex effects, on levels from “breaking the monopoly of large trusts, to mutations in the preferences and consumption habits of the public” (Nistor, 2021), had an impact on what type of journalism funding may exist in order to make it sustainable.

Journalism funding can have, traditionally, four basic revenue categories (Young & Hermida, 2024): revenue from the commercial-advertising area, whether it is advertisements or content packaged as advertising, philanthropic revenue or revenue from the state budget subsidies, revenue from the public payments (through various forms of transfer, from subscriptions to crowdfunding) or revenue from offering services such as merchandize products (when various personalized products with the logo or elements of the media brand are sold) or event-type products (such as conferences or workshops). To understand and map how digital world can be tackled by multiple industries, researchers concluded four concrete frameworks that can be used to better understand organizational status quo, through the lenses of digital transformation: compartmentalized adaptation, holistic co-evolution, technology impact and systemic shift (Hanelt, Bohnsack, Marz, &

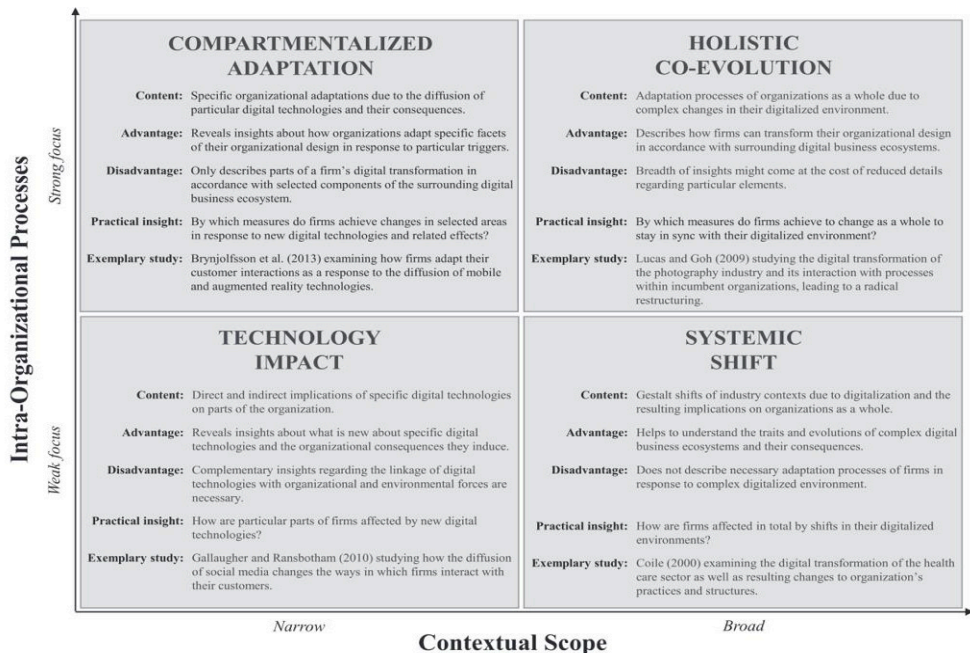


Fig. 1: Intra-organizational Processes as shown by Hanelt, Bohnsack, Marz & Antunes Marante, 2021.

Antunes Marante, 2021). Each of these elements is explained with advantages and disadvantages and case studies from specialized literature, as shown in the figure above, this being an useful framework for understanding how to adapt a media enterprise in the context of technological continuous challenges, now multiplied with artificial intelligence and metaverse perspectives.

Media literacy – a solution for better funding?

Although the phenomenon has not been explored in depth, some works show that media literacy of citizens is a need for the sustainability of business models in journalism carried out in new media.

The traditional definition of media literacy says that this is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms” (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993 apud Hobbs & Frost, 2003). The need for an audience to understand how to choose their information, how to compare it, how to analyze it is one of democratic essence, because citizens need to participate actively in society (Livingstone, 2004).

As shown in studies conducted by the Council of Europe, media literacy skills are related to the idea of sustainability of business models in journalism because as long as the public is informed more and more often online, they will need to know how to make the choice between quality journalism and what is perhaps more popular in the online feed for other reasons (Chapman & Oermann, 2019).

Media literacy has proved to be effective in the battle with disinformation, more recently in the Covid oriented themes and narratives that were or were not successful in reaching audiences, depending on the level of their media literacy (McDougall, Edwards, & Fowler-Watt, 2021). Therefore, there is preliminary evidence that media literacy concludes in better media choices made by the public.

Case study: legal structures of award-winning newsrooms in Romania in 2023 and 2024

We aim to understand what are the choices of legal entities under which newsrooms operate in Romania, to create a map of the functioning of this ecosystem.

For this study's purpose, we work with the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant forms of legal organization in which award-winning and high-visibility Romanian online newsrooms operate?

RQ2: What are the operational and taxation differences for each of the pre-identified forms?

For this case study, we chose a two-step comparative approach. First, we systematized the newsrooms awarded at the Friends for Friends galas in May 2023 (awarding 2022 and 2023 productions) and May 2024 (awarding 2023 and 2024 productions). The Friends for Friends Foundation is the most well-known organization in Romania that awards long-format journalistic productions. Annually, the "Superscrieri Gala" receives submissions on pre-given themes, for a series of categories. The jury is composed of journalists from various media and civil society. The awards gala usually takes place in May.

Subsequently, for a comparison we selected the online media outlets that stood out in the Digital News Report studies 2023 and 2024, being accessed more than three days per week by the audience.

For each data set, we identified the legal form under which they operate and conducted a descriptive short case study on the framework and legal criteria for the operation and taxation of the entities identified.

Systematization of the newsrooms legal entities shows the following data.

At “Superscrieri Gala”, in 2023 and 2024, non-profit legal entities are dominant in both years (associations and foundations), followed by commercial, for-profit entities (SRLs and SAs), freelancers and one public entity per year. Extensive data set may be found below, as annex.

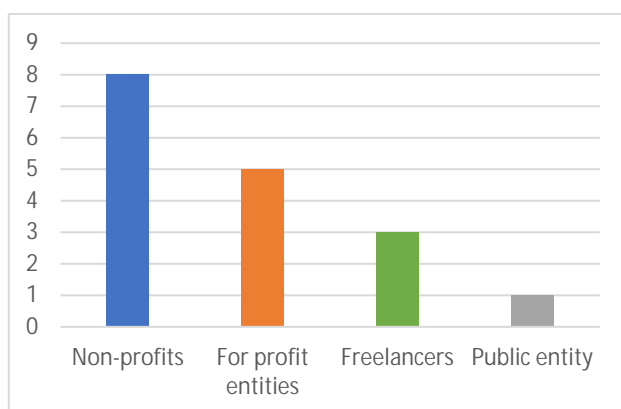


Fig. 2: Types of entities of the newsrooms awarded in 2023.

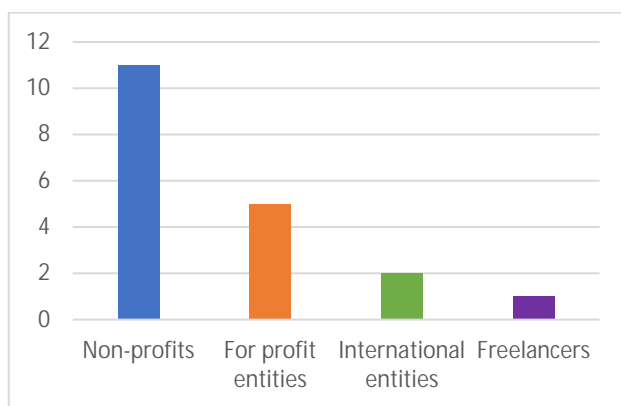


Fig. 3: Types of entities of the newsrooms awarded in 2024.

According to Digital News Report data, in 2023 and 2024, all the legal entities for the most accessed newsrooms are commercial, for-profit entities, excepting one public institution per year, the numbers being the same, even if the ranking is different – 11 SRL entities, 3 SA entities, 1 public entity. Extensive data set may be found below, as annex.

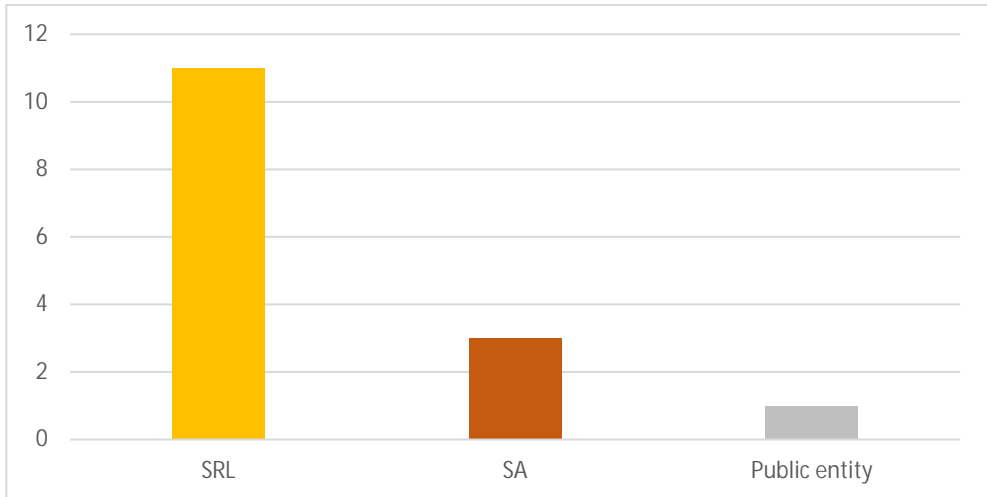


Fig. 4: Types of entities of the newsrooms included in Digital News Report, both in 2023 and 2024.

When cross-referencing the sets of data, we see that in 2023 only one media outlet, “Libertatea”, was both an award winning one and one of the most consumed online media brands. In 2024, we have two such media outlets, “Libertatea” and “Hotnews”. Both media outlets function under a for profit legal entity, a SRL.

While a map of the specific content broadcast by popular media outlets among the public according to Digital News Report is a limitation, being difficult to create for capacity reasons, among those awarded in the two mentioned years, topics related to corruption dominated (12), followed by topics related to abuse and social categories such as the elderly, women, mothers, students or the church (8) and public policies on education, health and army (5). All of them imply multiple human and financial resources, in order to document them.

Operational and taxation differences

Operational and taxation differences between two main legal entities in the media landscape provide further insight into the opportunity and constraint areas facing Romanian newsrooms.

Non-profit entities (NGOs) identified are association or foundation as form, both having non-pecuniary mission. Their activity is governed by the Ordinance nr. 26 from 30 January 2000 regarding associations and foundations, with judicial oversight for the initial procedures. To open an association the initial board must have at least three persons. No specific requirements for initial patrimonial assets, but a bank account is mandatory. To open a foundation at least one person is required for the initial board. The foundation's initial patrimonial assets must include goods in kind or in cash, the total value of which must be at least 10 times the minimum gross basic salary per country, on the date of establishment of the foundation.

For profit entities identified are SRLs (limited liability company) or SAs (joint stock company), both being governed by Law nr. 31 from 16 November 1990 regarding commercial entities. To open such an entity the registration process is handled by National Trade Register Office, but with judicial oversight. A SRL can be established by the act of will of a single person.

The number of partners cannot exceed 50, the share capital cannot be less than 100.000 RON (Romanian currency) and is divided into equal shares, which cannot be less than 5.000 RON. In the case of contributions in kind, these may represent a maximum of 60% of the share capital. The SA is established through public subscription, and the share capital of the joint-stock company cannot be less than 90.000 lei. The number of shareholders in the joint-stock company cannot be less than two.

NGOs are subjects of non-taxable income because they function by sponsorship or donations. For SRLs and SAs in 2023 was a single tax rate, namely 1%, but from 2024 there were two tax rates, namely 1% for micro-enterprises that generate income not exceeding 60.000 euros, and that do not carry out a list of activities such as HORECA, software and more (media not

being a category) and 3% for micro-enterprises that generate income over 60.000 euros and up to 500. 000 euros; or carry out activities, main or secondary, corresponding to a list of CAEN codes (media not being a category).

VAT taxation applies to both non-profits (if they carry out economic activities) and profits. Both are subject to the disclosure of the beneficial owner, in accordance with Law No. 129 from 11 July 2019, on preventing and combating money laundering and terrorist financing.

Discussion

Our comparative results show a gap between award recognition for journalistic productions and general readership. While newsrooms that function by NGOs legal entities dominate the landscape of winning publications, the most-read online media outlets as Digital News Report study shows are functioning as for-profit commercial entities. We must note that this is a preliminary study, with limited data. For a better understanding of the implications, in-depth interviews with stakeholders are needed, as well as a thorough analysis of financial data and revenue sources, compared to the content produced.

This study suggests that in Romanian media landscape, productions under the professional spotlight (being judged by a panel that consists of well-respected journalists and civil society members) are the ones financed structurally on non-profit models, through grants, donations or crowdfunding, while mass-consumed journalism remains tied to commercial corporate models, mostly sustained by advertising.

There is a limited overlap across data sets, that shows both professional spotlight and broad audience trust or reach, of only two media outlets.

Operationally and financially, legal entities distinctions also explain these dynamics. NGOs are exempt from taxes on non-profit incomes and are structurally mission-driven and able to dedicate time to long formats, being at the same time vulnerable when it comes to financial sustainability on long term, because of reliance on external funding cycles. Commercial entities, by

definition, witness increased dependence on advertising and market forces, focusing less on long format productions, that require dedicated funds and a longer amount of time.

Together, these findings speak about a general trend: sources most committed to long format or investigative reporting are often not mass-visible, while mass-visible sources do not produce long format content that reaches professional spotlight. Media literacy can be indeed a strategy that can act as a bridging asset, equipping the public with recognizing journalistic formats that require a different type of attention or funding while documenting them.

Conclusions

Our paper shows that the Romanian media system continues to witness structural contradictions. High-award-winning journalism is primarily produced within non-profit frameworks, while mass-consumed journalism continues to come from for-profit entities. The gap represents perfectly how informational paradox plays out in nowadays consumption habits: long format journalism that achieves high normative quality production and is professionally awarded is not necessarily the most consumed content by audiences.

From the digital transformation perspective, results show that Romanian online reading of news favors media outlets that legally exist as commercial models (SRLs and SAs), under which advertising and audience numbers force sustainability. However, NGOs preserve investigative and long-form productions. This existence is typical of the evolution of the journalism industry into the concept of media enterprises, where legal and financial structuring becomes a determining factor in editorial fingerprint.

The operational and taxation structures discussion further explains the pattern. Non-profit entities are not subject to tax on income, but face restrictions when it comes to reliance on sponsorships, donations, and grant cycles. Profit-oriented companies face taxation, but enhance reliance on the market, which threatens editorial independence by the need of “sharability”

as factor, previously defined by authors Harcup and O'Neill. Only two media outlets, Libertatea and Hotnews, managed to cut the discrepancy between recognition and reach, proving that professional as well as popular legitimacy is sporadic, but not excluded.

Finally, media literacy's function becomes a necessity, that might realign public trust and even subsidies and encourage more selective consumption of media outlets. We highlight once again that this is a preliminary study, with limited data.

Overall, the study suggests that the choice of legal form as entity has an impact in Romanian newsrooms both in terms of editorial identity and operational capacity. Closing the systemic gap between professional recognition and mass consumption requires more than legal and economic reforms, but a change of culture and public policies, making media literacy a tool through which citizens value journalism on something other than commodity logics.

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Annex. Data set.**2023 - “Superscrieri Gala” Awards data (civic influencers not included)**

Award	Newsroom	Legal entity form
Grand prize	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
Jury award	Decat o Revista	Media Dor NGO
Public award	Teleleu & Libertatea	Teleleu: freelancer; no further data Libertatea: Ringier Romania SRL
Newsroom of the year	Libertatea	Ringier Romania SRL
Editor of the year	Panorama.ro	ZYX Publishing Group SRL
Best use of digital	Gen stiri	Forum Apulum (NGO)
Feature/long form	Iscoada	Iscoada Association (NGO)
Honors award	Decat o Revista	Media Dor NGO
Special award Animal Welfare	TVR Cluj	SRTv – public entity
Journalistic debut #1	Context.ro	Asociatia Jurnalistilor de Investigatie Context (NGO)
Journalistic debut #2	Diez.md	Republic of Moldova Entity
Journalistic debut #3	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community
Audio/podcast #1	Decat o Revista	Media Dor NGO
Audio/podcast #2	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
Audio/podcast #3	Europa FM	Europe Development International-R S.A
Opinion #1	Teleleu & Libertatea	Teleleu: freelancer; no further data Libertatea: Ringier Romania SRL
Opinion #2	Libertatea	Ringier Romania SRL
Opinion #3	Panorama.ro	ZYX Publishing Group SRL
Local media #1	Info-Sud-Est & ex aequo The Pressure	Asociatia Info Sud Est (NGO) The Pressure: no information
Local media #2	Reporter de Iasi	SC Reporteris SRL
Local media #3	Iasul Nostru	No information

Award	Newsroom	Legal entity form
Feature #1	Scena9	Fundatia9 NGO
Feature #2	Decat o Revista	Media Dor NGO
Feature #3	Decat o Revista	Media Dor NGO
TV&video journalism #1	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
TV&video journalism #2	Recorder & ex aequo Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
TV&video journalism #3	Panorama.ro	ZYX Publishing Group SRL
Investigation #1	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
Investigation #2	Ziarul de Garda & ex aequo cusens.md	Republic of Moldova entities
Investigation #3	Rise Project	Asociatia Rise Project (NGO)
Photojournalism #1	Ioanamoldovan.com	Freelancer; no further data
Photojournalism #2	Bloomberg news (freelancer)	Freelancer; no further data
Photojournalism #3	Teleleu & Libertatea	Teleleu: freelancer; no further data Libertatea: Ringier Romania SRL
News photojournalism	Libertatea	Ringier Romania SRL

2024 “Superscrieri Gala” Awards data (civic influencers not included)

Award	Newsroom	Legal entity form
Grand prize	Buletin de Bucuresti	Funky Citizens (NGO)
Jury award	Scoala 9	Fundatia9 NGO
Public award	Centrul de Investigatii Media & Buletin de Bucuresti	Asociația Centrul de Investigatii Media (NGO) Funky Citizens (NGO)
Newsroom of the year	Gen stiri	Forum Apulum (NGO)
Editor of the year	Context.ro	Asociatia Jurnalistilor de Investigatie Context (NGO)

Award	Newsroom	Legal entity form
Best use of digital	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
Feature/long form	Scena 9	Fundatia9 NGO
Honors award	Vice Romania	Part of Vice Digital Publishing Unclear Romanian Entity
Special award Animal Welfare	Press One	Fundatia Press One (NGO)
Journalistic debut #1	Hotnews	MediaBit Software SRL
Journalistic debut #2	Context.ro	Asociatia Jurnalistilor de Investigatie Context (NGO)
Journalistic debut #3	Info Sud-Est	Asociatia Info Sud Est (NGO)
Audio/podcast #1	War street Journal	Asociatia Memoria Culturii (NGO)
Audio/podcast #2	Muzeul Abandonului	Not related to journalistic content
Audio/podcast #3	Europa FM	Europe Development International-R S.A
Opinion #1	Libertatea	Ringier Romania SRL
Opinion #2	Buletin de Bucuresti	Funky Citizens (NGO)
Opinion #3	Films in Frame	Not disclosed
Local media #1	Info-Sud-Est & Context	Asociatia Info Sud Est (NGO) Asociatia Jurnalistilor de Investigatie Context (NGO)
Local media #2	Buletin de Bucuresti	Funky Citizens (NGO)
Local media #3	Bihoreanul	Bihor Media SRL
Feature #1	Oameni si Kilometri	Republic of Moldova entity
Feature #2	Hotnews	MediaBit Software SRL
Feature #3	Europa Libera Romania	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, RFE/RL
TV&video journalism #1	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)

Award	Newsroom	Legal entity form
TV&video journalism #2	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
TV&video journalism #3	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
Investigation #1	Centrul de Investigatii media & Buletin de Bucuresti	Asociația Centrul de Investiții Media (NGO) Funky Citizens (NGO)
Investigation #2	Recorder	Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
Investigation #3	Rise Project & Recorder	Asociatia Rise Project (NGO) Asociatia Recorder Community (NGO)
Photography of the year #1	Centrul de Fotografie Documentara	Asociatia Centrul de Fotografie Documentara (NGO)
Photography of the year #2	Liberation (freelancer)	Freelancer
Photography of the year #3	Inquam Photos	SC Inquam Photos SRL

Digital News Report data – online usage, more than three times/week

2023	Legal entity form	2024	Legal entity form
ProTV news online	PRO TV SRL	ProTV news online	PRO TV SRL
Digi24 online	Campus Media TV SRL	Digi24 online	Campus Media TV SRL
Stiripesurse.ro	SC European Business Environment SRL	Libertatea online	Ringier Romania SRL
Libertatea online	Ringier Romania SRL	Adevarul online	SC Adevarul Holding SRL
Ziare.com	Moara de Foc Imobili SA	Stiripesurse.ro	SC European Business Environment SRL

2023	Legal entity form	2024	Legal entity form
Adevarul online	SC Adevarul Holding SRL	Romania TV online	RTV Properties Management SRL
Mediafax	Titluri Quality SRL	Ziare.com	Moara de Foc Imobili SA
Romania TV online	RTV Properties Management SRL	Hotnews	MediaBit Software SRL
Antena 1 online	SC TV Antena Group SA	Antena 1 online	SC TV Antena Group SA
Yahoo News	Not related to direct production of journalistic content – News Agregator	Mediafax	Titluri Quality SRL
Hotnews	MediaBit Software SRL	Click online	SC Adevarul Holding SRL
Evenimentul zilei	SC Editura Evenimentul si Capital SRL	Yahoo news	Not related to direct production of journalistic content – News Agregator
Antena 3 CNN online	SC TV Antena Group SA	Ziarul Financiar online	SC Mediamex Investment SRL
Radio Romania online	SRTv public institution	Antena 3 online	SC TV Antena Group SA
Click online	SC Adevarul Holding SRL	Can Can	Gandul Media Network SRL
Ziarul Financiar online	SC Mediamex Investment SRL	Radio Romania online	SRTv public institution

Media Representation of Female Politicians in Russia, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova

Mirela GANDRAMAN¹

Abstract. This study examines the media representation of female politicians in Russia, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova, synthesizing the theoretical, legal, ethical frameworks relevant for journalistic work, complemented by the resume of empirical findings of a broader study. It explores how gendered narratives persist within post-communist media systems despite formal commitments to equality. The theoretical section traces the evolution of women's political roles from communism to modern democracies, presenting the influence of framing and gender bias in political communication. The legal and ethical analysis compares national media laws, codes of conduct, and international standards, evaluating each country's adherence to principles of fairness, proportionality, and non-discrimination. The empirical research performed through content analysis of over 150 media articles assessed the degree of compliance with the nationally relevant ethical and legal norms. The findings reveal distinct national patterns: Russian outlets frequently emphasize appearance and intrude into private lives; Moldovan publications often fail to maintain proportionality; Romanian media demonstrate higher compliance yet face challenges related to balance and transparency. The study concludes that, while progress toward ethical journalism and gender-sensitive reporting is evident, systemic inequalities and uneven law enforcement continue to shape the portrayal of women in politics across Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Media representation; Female politicians; Gender bias in media; Political communication; Comparative analysis; Russia; Eastern Europe; Media legislation, Media Ethics

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1. Introduction

During communism, media portrayed women as equals, because of the communist ideology that promotes gender equality. This portrayal was heavily controlled by the State to align with the ideological goals of gender equality in the socialist system. In post-communist times, however, the media landscape differs and the Western influence brought about new representations, although traditional and stereotypical views persisted.

In Russia, the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet period saw newspapers shifting from state-controlled and centralized driven portrayals to more varied and independent representations of gender roles, though stereotypes continued to dominate (Tartakovskaya, 2012, pg. 128-146). In Romania, despite efforts by European institutions to promote gender equality, media continues to reflect gender stereotypes, with limited support for female politicians both from their parties and the public (Râpeanu, 2014, pg. 943-949). With the end of the communist period and the transition to the modern-day democracies in these countries, a considerable amount of changes had been made in the field of gender and the image of women politicians in the media. Women in this period were presented equally because of the ideological goal of communism. However, while the post-communist era has seen more variation, media representations still seem, in most cases, to use traditional stereotypes, even if efforts were made to promote gender equality. The framework of the framing theory helps demonstrate how the media is used and abused to influence public perception of female politicians, usually by reinforcing existing social stereotypes regarding their status.

A study issued in 2021 by Bălăbuță and Tufiş presents that Romania has a low level of political representation both at the national and at European standards (Bălăbuță & Tufiş, 2021). This is influenced by the patriarchal values that still exist within political parties. While women are proportionately represented in Parliament, their representation is low in local elections. Only 5.4% of mayors in 2020 were women. The study also highlights that women hold only 20% of seats in Parliament, despite comprising 47% of the population; this is due to limited opportunities for women to occupy eligible positions (Bălăbuță & Tufiş, 2021, p. 2-6).

In Russia, there are several issues related to the representation of women in general in the political sphere. The Russian Constitution guarantees equal rights regardless of gender, but it doesn't mandate specific quotas or measures to ensure women's representation in government. According to the Russian Constitution article 19, 19.1, 19.2, 19.3, the Constitution grants the right for every citizen to participate in the political life regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion and language. To go further on, one must analyze the role of women in society during previous times that influenced how women are perceived in the social, economic, and political life nowadays.

According to the report *State Discrimination Against Women in Russia* from 1995, various gender stereotypes were promoted during the Soviet Union, such as the traditional values of woman being the caretaker in the family and being less active in the political sphere. The Soviet government's stance on women's work fluctuated, but state policies and societal expectations always prioritized motherhood as a woman's key duty (Women's Rights Project & Human Rights Watch/Helsinki Organization, 1995, p. 3). This was made clear in 1981 when the Communist Party declared the need to strengthen traditional motherhood for the good of the state. This focus on a woman's "biological destiny" as a mother impacted her legal rights and hindered progress towards gender equality. Soviet women faced a double burden: working outside the home while holding primary responsibility for childcare and housework.

In Republic of Moldova, there are no recent studies and available studies related to political representation or media representation of female politicians. This study is aiming to provide more insights on the female politician coverage in this particular country.

2. Media Law Pertaining to the Representation of Politicians

To set the key indicators for the further empirical study of the paper, the research explores how legislation in **Moldova, Romania, and Russia** shapes media portrayal of political figures, particularly focusing on equality, fairness, and gender representation.

2.1 Media Law & Representation of Politicians in Republic of Moldova

In Moldova, the Constitution guarantees equality before the law regardless of nationality, sex, or political opinion (Art.16.1). The Electoral Code No. 325/2022 mandates that at least 40% of parliamentary and local council seats be held by either gender, setting a legal precedent for gender balance. Media activity is regulated by the Penal Code No. 985/2002, which penalizes extortion, defamation, and the dissemination of false or damaging information. The Audiovisual Code No. 174/2018 introduces provisions for fairness, impartiality, and gender equality in media, forbidding sexist language and hate speech. Violations are sanctioned by the Audiovisual Council, which can impose fines and suspensions.

However, the enforcement of these principles remains uneven. This issue has been reflected in cases such as *Manole v. Republic of Moldova* (ECHR, 2009), where the European Court of Human Rights found that state interference in the public broadcaster undermined pluralism and media independence. This precedent demonstrates how Moldova's formal legal framework is often not matched by institutional autonomy, a factor that affects how female politicians are represented in practice.

2.2 Media Law & Representation of Politicians in Romania

In Romania, the main legislative framework governing the representation of politicians is the Audiovisual Law No. 504/2002, which enforces the principles of accuracy, impartiality, and political pluralism. The National Audiovisual Council (CNA) monitors compliance, ensuring that broadcasts respect human dignity and avoid incitement to hatred or discrimination. The law guarantees equal airtime for political parties during election campaigns and prohibits paid political advertising outside election periods. Complementary regulations include the Civil Code No. 287/2009, which protects a person's image (Art.74), and the Criminal Code No. 286/2009, which punishes defamation and extortion through the press.

Additionally, the Law No. 115/2015 ensures gender representation on electoral lists and prohibits discriminatory or hate-based messages during political campaigns.

These legal protections have been tested in practice through cases such as *Cumpăna and Mazăre v. Romania* (ECtHR, 2004), where the Court emphasized that while the media act as a public watchdog, freedom of expression must not violate the dignity or reputation of others. The ruling highlighted the importance of proportionality when reporting on political figures — a principle directly relevant to the portrayal of female politicians, who are often subjected to personal rather than professional scrutiny.

2.3 Media Law & Representation of Politicians in Russia

In Russia, the Federal Law on Mass Media No. 2124/1991 formally guarantees the right to free expression and access to information, but extensive oversight by Roskomnadzor restricts editorial freedom. Additional provisions, such as the Law on Electoral Rights No. 67/2002 and the Criminal Code No. 63/1996 (Art.137), regulate election coverage and protect private life, though their application is often selective. European jurisprudence illustrates how these principles fail in practice. In *Ibragimova v. Russia* (ECtHR, 2021), the Court found violations of Article 10 (freedom of expression) due to disproportionate state interference in journalistic work. Similarly, *Mariya Alekhina and Others v. Russia* (ECtHR, 2018) - the case concerning the members of Pussy Riot—demonstrated systemic constraints on political and artistic expression, particularly affecting women critical of state institutions. These examples underline how Russian legislation prioritizes state control over fair and balanced media representation.

2.4 International Context and Case Law in Practice

At the international level, the European Convention on Human Rights remains the central legal instrument guiding responsible journalism. Article 10 protects freedom of expression, Article 8 safeguards private life and dignity, and Article 6 ensures fairness and due process. The practical

application of these principles through ECHR case law—such as *Cumpănă and Mazăre v. Romania*, *Manole v. Moldova*, and *Ibragimova v. Russia*—illustrates how European legal standards function as corrective mechanisms when national frameworks fail to uphold democratic and gender-equal media representation.

Main findings across these three countries are: Romania aligns most closely with EU media standards, offering structured mechanisms for complaints and enforcement through the CNA. Moldova demonstrates progress toward gender equality and fair representation but struggles with implementation and enforcement due to limited institutional capacity. Russia maintains a restrictive and state-controlled media system, which limits the free and fair representation of politicians, particularly women. While all three countries have legal frameworks addressing privacy, defamation, and discrimination, gender balance in political media coverage remains weakly protected in practice.

While perhaps Moldova and Romania have adopted progressive legal frameworks, their enforcement remains inconsistent. In contrast, Russia's legal environment prioritizes state interests over freedom of expression. Overall, the findings underscore the need for stronger legal enforcement mechanisms, better protection of female politicians against biased representation, and harmonization with international media law standards.

3. Media Ethics Pertaining to the Representation of Female Politicians

Ethical journalism plays a decisive role in influencing public perception and voter behavior, as media representation can either reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes. The paper examines the self-regulatory nature of media ethics, analyzing the evolution of media accountability systems after the fall of communism. Using a comparative approach, it assesses how each country manages complaint procedures, self-regulation, and professional conduct through ethical codes and press councils. The analysis centers on three key elements: the actors involved in enforcing

ethics, the mechanisms for addressing ethical breaches, and the effectiveness of these systems in preventing discrimination and providing balanced reporting.

Moldova's ethical standards are primarily guided by the Code of Ethics for Journalists, which promotes accuracy, plurality of opinions, good faith, and respect for privacy. Journalists are expected to report truthfully, fairly, and impartially, without bias or sensationalism. Romania's ethical framework is governed by the Ethical Code for Journalists (Codul Deontologic al Jurnalistului), adopted by the Convention of Media Organizations in 2010. It covers principles of accuracy (Art.5), separation of facts and opinions (Art.8), privacy (Art.9), and non-discrimination (Art.13). Journalists are obliged to respect human dignity, avoid defamatory language, and ensure transparency in their reporting.

Russia's ethical landscape is shaped by limited self-regulation and extensive state oversight. Ethical journalism is formally guided by the Code of Professional Ethics of Russian Journalists, emphasizing accuracy, impartiality, and the presumption of innocence. However, implementation is weak due to centralized media control. Overall, while there is visible improvement in ethical media conduct across these post-communist states, significant work remains to ensure that coverage of female politicians is balanced, fair, and free of gender bias.

4. Methodology

The empirical research consists of a qualitative textual analysis examining the linguistic coverage of media representation of female politicians. The main goal is to find the extent to which media publications in Romania, Russia, and the Republic of Moldova adhere to ethical and legal frameworks when reporting on female politicians. Specifically, it analyzes whether these outlets respect non-discrimination, privacy and accuracy as core principles, as well as whether they present balanced points of view or use defamatory language.

The study also seeks to answer the following key questions:

- How has the political representation of female politicians evolved in state institutions such as the Parliament of Romania, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, and the State Duma of Russia over time?
- To what extent do media publications in these three countries follow ethical and legal reporting standards in their coverage of female politicians?
- Do media outlets in these countries comply with national laws and codes as well as international legal frameworks, including the ECHR Articles 8, 10, and 6?

4.1 Data Collection

To identify the most relevant female politicians, the study used as criteria:

- The number of laws, projects, and legislative initiatives proposed by each deputy;
- Whether the politician has run for presidential elections or served as a minister;
- Their visibility in media and parliamentary activity.

The data was collected manually from official government websites: duma.gov.ru, cdep.ro, alegeri.md, and parlament.md. After collection, the data were cleaned and processed in Excel, resulting in 19 datasets covering parliamentary compositions from 2000 to 2024.

4.2 Data sample collection for Russia

The research samples are online news articles selected from Russian Federation online news publications such as Vetsti and Lenta. These outlets were selected based on their popularity and local media consumption, which is presented by official reports published by Statista in 2023. Another online publication selected is Meduza project. This particular outlet is flagged by

Russian Federation because of the spread of “defamatory news” and by including this media outlet in the research, the researcher wants to identify the manner in which censured or blocked media outlets in Russian Federation portray female politicians, as well as whether they follow legal and ethical guidelines. The articles were collected manually based on the relevancy feature that news websites provide. A total of 60 articles were collected, dating from 2001 until 2024 and the article titles were translated to English.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis is performed by using the two analysis grids that include the indicators identified from the previous chapters. One analysis grid will be used to assess compliance with media law requirements, and another analysis grid will be used to assess compliance with media ethics standards. Beyond descriptive indicators, such as the title, article link, politician name, date of publication, the analysis grid developed to study journalists' compliance with media law includes research indicators to assess the compliance with domestic laws such as the Code of Offence of Russian Federation, Law 87/2017 on defamatory news, Law 67/2006. The indicators focus on illegal dissemination of information regarding the private life of the politician mentioned, discrimination based on sex, religion, political beliefs, underrepresentation during election and be protected from defamation during election, or other criteria mentioned in the table.

Table 1: *Media representation of female politicians in Russia, legislation*

The Deontological Code of Journalists in Russia																
Publication	Article link	Politician Name	Article title	Date	Art. 3 the journalist respects accuracy and fairness in reporting			Art. 5 Awareness and Duties: oppose from extremism and the infringement of civil rights based on sex, race, language, religion, political views, and social or national origin.			Art. 5 (2) the journalist adheres to the principal of innocent until proven guilty in the article			Art. 5(4) Interference in private life		
					Respected	Not Respected	Comments	Respected	Not Respected	Comments	Respected	Not Respected	Comments	Respected	Not Respected	Comments

The second analysis grid, designed to assess the ethical aspect of media representation of female politicians in Russia, derived from the clauses related to representation of politician from the Ethical Code of Conduct for Journalists in Russian Federation, a total 4 indicators. The

indicators, included in the analysis grid, are ethical representation adhering to fairness and accuracy in reporting, awareness and impartiality to extremist language and statements, the presumption of innocence and intrusion into privacy. To assess journalist's compliance with media ethics regarding media representation of female politicians in Russia, the following indicators were analyzed: Art. 3 the journalist respects accuracy and fairness in reporting, Art.5 Awareness and Duties (limits), Art. 5 (2) the journalist adheres to the principle of innocent until proven guilty, Art. 5(4) Interference in private life.

Table 2: Media representation of female politicians in Russia, ethics

					Russian Federation Code of Offence No. 195-Fz/ 2001			Law No. 87-FZ/ 2017 Defamatory News			Law 67/2006 the right to access the media						
Publication	Link	Politician Name	Article Title (translated)	Date	Art.137 Illegal dissemination of information about the private life of a person, constituting his personal or family life, without consent			Art. 18.5 Clause 12: Prohibit the dissemination of news that defames individuals based on gender, age, race, nationality, language, religion, profession, place of residence, or political beliefs.			Art. 18.4 Legitimate Interest of publishing the information			Express their views, and have the right to be protected from defamation during elections			
					Respected	Not respected	comment	Respected	Not respected	comment	Legitimate	Non-legitimate	Comment	Respected	Not respected	comment	Does not apply

4.3 Data samples collection for Moldova

The research samples are online news articles; they were taken from local online publications such as Agora.md, Ziarul de Gradă, Newsmaker. These outlets were selected based on the relevancy feature in the dashboard when searching for the name of the politician, and the most relevant results were selected. The articles were collected manually based on the relevancy feature that news websites provide. A total of 63 articles were collected, dating from 2001 until 2024 and the article titles were translated to English.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis is performed by using the two analysis grids that include the indicators identified from the previous chapters. One analysis grid will be used to assess compliance with media law requirements, and another analysis grid will be used to assess compliance with media ethics standards. Beyond descriptive indicators, such as the title, article link, politician name, and date of publication, the analysis grid developed to study journalists' compliance with media law includes research

indicators to assess compliance with domestic laws. The indicators used to analyze the good practice of media law in Moldova are found in the Audiovisual Code art.11, matters of taking certain photos, for instance, in private or public surroundings. Art.11 discrimination based on gender, religion, political beliefs, or race. Art.10 objectivity and accountable transmission of information. Art. 11 Intrusion into privacy. Art. 7 balanced opinions and reflections of politicians, in our case, and international laws adhering to ECHR art.10; art.8; art.6.

**Table 3: Media representation of female politicians
in Republic of Moldova, legislation**

Art. 11 the surroundings of the photo or video taken			Art.10 Discrimination based on gender, religion or race (photo)			Art. 10 complete, objective, and accountable transmission of information (photo)			Art. 11 Intrusion into personal life (photo)			Art. 7 truthful, balanced reflection of political conditions			Art. 10 accuracy and preservation of professional and personal dignity			Freedom of expression art.10			Right to a fair trial process art.6 ECHR			Right to a fair trial process art.6 ECHR, "innocent until proven guilty according to law"			Art.8 ECHR right to privacy, which is essential in a democratic society to safeguard the rights and freedoms of others		
Public space	Private space	Does not affect rights of others to access	Consent	Request	Not requested	Consent	Request	Not requested	Example	Request	Not requested	Consent	Balanced	Not balanced	Example	Request	Not requested	Example	Yes	No	Observations and example	Request	Not requested	Not applicable	Observations and example	Request	Not requested	Not applicable	Observations and example

The second analysis grid, designed to assess the ethical aspect of media representation of female politicians in Moldova, derived from the clauses related to representation of politicians from the Ethical Code of Conduct for Journalists in Republic of Moldova, in total 7 indicators were included related to ethical representation adhering to fairness and accuracy in reporting, awareness and impartiality to extremist language and statements, the principal of innocence, and intrusion into privacy. The following indicators are analysed in the research grid Art. 2 the journalist respects accuracy in reporting, Art.2.9 The journalist follows plurality of opinions, Art. 2.22 The journalist expresses his opinion honestly and ethically, without deliberately misrepresenting facts or data, Art. 2.24 The journalist ensures a balance between society's right to receive information of public interest and the media's right that does not present opinions that shock, offend or disturb someone, Art. 3.1 The journalist respects the right to private life and the dignity of the people mentioned, Art. 3.6 The journalist respects the privacy of the person and asks for permission to photograph/film them, unless they are in a public place Art. 3.10.

Table 4: Media representation of female politicians in Republic of Moldova, ethics

Publication	Article link	Politician Name	Article title	Date	Art. 2 the journalist respects accuracy and fairness in reporting			Art.2.8 The journalist follows plurality of opinions			2.22 The journalist expresses his opinion honestly and ethically, without deliberately misrepresenting facts or data.			2.24 the journalist ensures a balance between society's right to receive information of public interest and the media's right that does not present opinions that shock, offend or disturb someone.			3.1 The journalist respects the right to private life and dignity of people mentioned			3.6 The journalist respects the privacy of the person and asks for permission to photograph like them, unless they are in a public place.			3.10 The journalist respects the presumption of innocence and considers that any person is innocent until a final proven guilty by the court		
					Respected	Not respected	Comments	Respected	Not respected	Comments	Respected	Not respected	Comments	Respected	Not respected	Comments	Respected	Not respected	Comments	Respected	Not respected	Comments	Respected	Not respected	Comments

4.4 Data sample collection Romania

The research samples are online news articles; they were taken from local online publications such as Digi24, Antena 1, Mediafax. These outlets were selected based on their relevance assessed by website search, which is identified in a report issued in 2023 by Reuters, related to press in Romania and other countries. The articles were collected manually based on the relevancy feature that news websites provide. A total of 42 articles were collected, dating from 2001 until 2024 and the article titles were translated to English. The quantitative and qualitative analysis is performed by using the two analysis grids that include the indicators identified from the previous chapters.

One analysis grid will be used to assess compliance with media law requirements, and another analysis grid will be used to assess compliance with media ethics standards. Beyond descriptive indicators, such as the title, article link, politician name, date of publication, the analysis grid developed to study journalists' compliance with media law includes research indicators to assess compliance with domestic laws, such as Civil code nr. 287/2009 art. 74, and art. 8, art. 10, art. 6 form ECHR The indicators focus on illegal dissemination of information regarding the private life of the politician mentioned, discrimination based on sex, religion, political beliefs, underrepresentation, and other criteria mentioned in the table. art.74 from Civil Code nr.287/2009 regarding privacy. Other indicators are assessed from Audiovisual Code art. 74, art. 30 covering respect to privacy and

[illegible]

Table 6: Media representation of female politicians in Romania, legislation

[illegible]

After collecting the data regarding political representation of female politicians in parliament, the following graphics were obtained using data visualization tools such as Tableau Public and Visme.

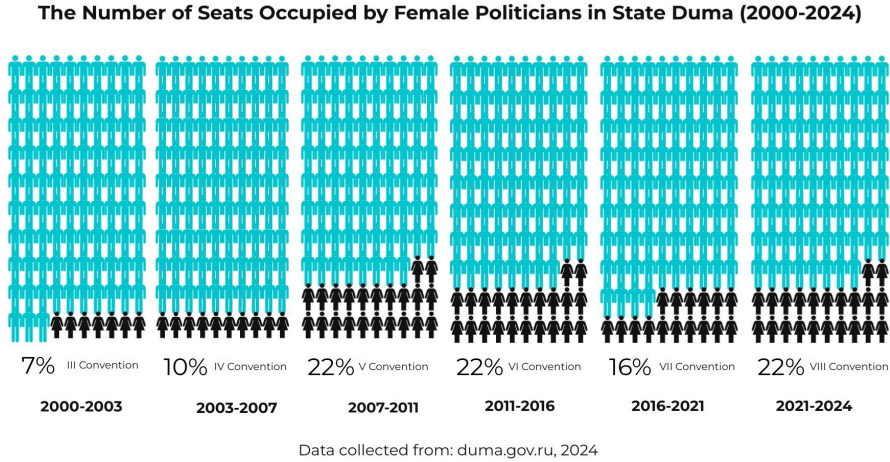


Figure 1: The number of seats occupied by female politicians in State Duma (2000-2024)

According to Figure 1, there has been a general increase in female representation from 2000 to 2024, with significant increases in the periods of 2007-2011 and 2021-2024. The percentage of women dropped slightly during the 2016-2021 period before rising again in the 2021-2024 period.

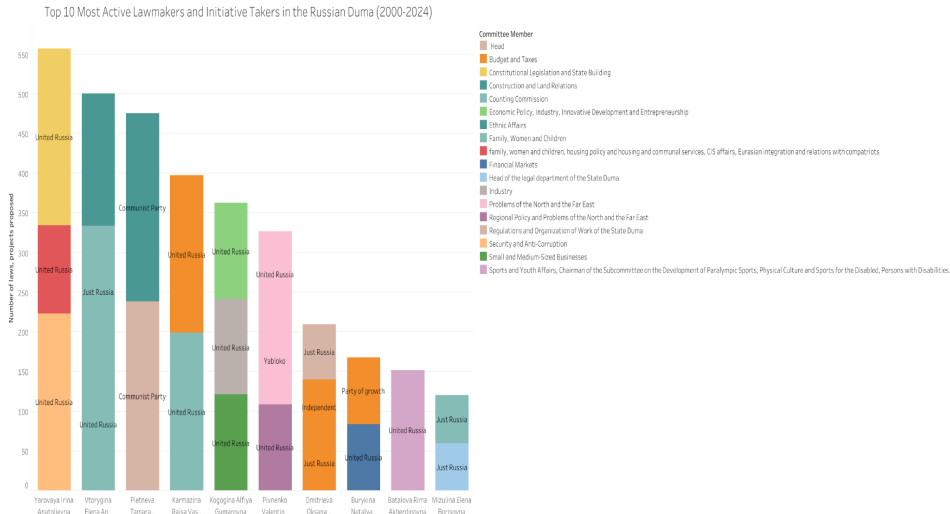
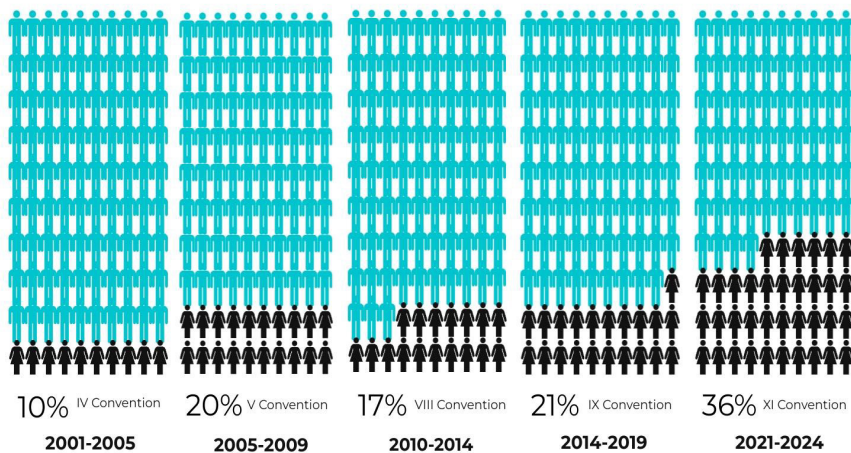


Figure 2: Top 10 Most Active Lawmakers and Initiative Takers in the Russian Duma (2000-2024)

The second graphic illustrates the most active female initiators of legislative proposals from 2000-2024. Irina Yarovaya from United Russia tops the list, having proposed over 550 laws and projects, predominantly within the Budget and Taxes committee. Following her, Elena Vtorygina and Alfiya Kogogina, also from United Russia, along with Tamara Pletneva from the Communist Party, show significant legislative activity in diverse committees such as Constitutional Legislation and State Building, and Construction and Land Relations. The lawmakers come from a mix of parties, including United Russia, Just Russia, the Communist Party, Yabloko, and the Party of Growth. By analyzing the top 10 most active politicians, we can get precise insights on how the media in Russia presents female politicians.

Further, we will look into political representation of women in Moldova, as mentioned in the media law chapter, several legislative reforms were implemented, such as the adoption of the Electoral Code that enforces political representation of women both in local councils as well as in The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova.

The Number of Seats Occupied by Female Politicians in The Parliament of The Republic of Moldova (2001-2024)



Data collected from: parlament.md, 2024

Figure 3: The number of seats occupied by female politicians in the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova from 2001 to 2024

In the infographic presented, we can see a significant increase in the period from 2001 to 2005, women held only 10% of the seats, indicating limited female participation. This number doubled to 20% during the 2005 to 2009 convention, showcasing improvement. However, there was a slight decline to 17% in the 2010 to 2014 period. The representation increased again to 21% between 2014 and 2019, marking a progressive trend. The most remarkable rise occurred in the 2021 to 2024 period, where women occupied 36% of the parliamentary seats, reflecting a significant move towards gender equality, and can be seen as a potential result of having a female president in the Republic of Moldova.

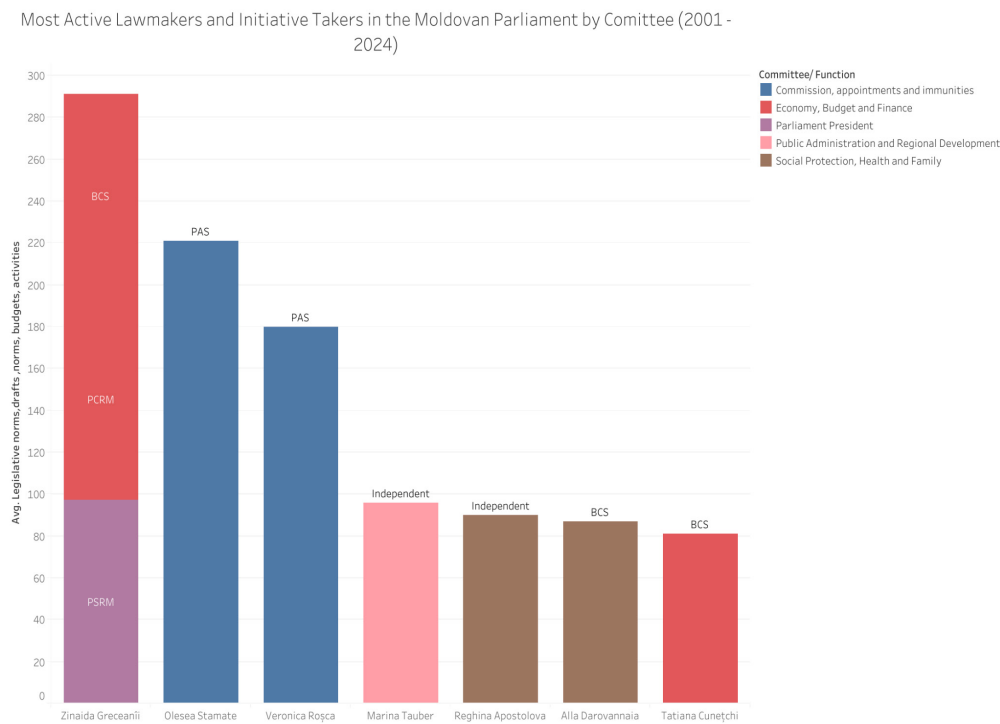
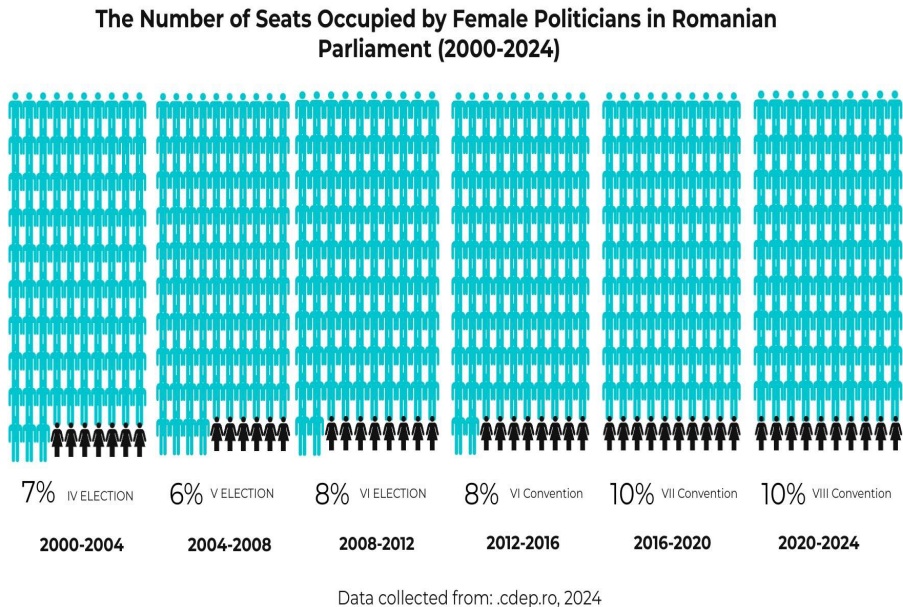


Figure 4: Most active lawmakers and initiative takers in the Moldovan Parliament from 2001 to 2024

According to the bar chart fig.4, the most active female deputy is Zinaida Greceanii of the BCS/PCRM parties, leading with nearly 300 activities, followed by Olesea Stamate and Veronica Rosca from the PAS party, with over 200 and 180 activities, respectively, primarily in the Commission on appointments and immunities. Marina Tauber (BCS) and Reghina Apostolova (PCRM) also show significant legislative involvement. By analysing the top 10 most active politicians, we can get precise insights into how the media in the Republic of Moldova presents female politicians.

The next graphic covers the representation of females in the Parliament of Romania, and the female deputies elected in the parliament throughout 2000-2024. Which has the least female deputies elected.



Made with VISME

Figure 5: The number of seats occupied by Female deputies from 2000-2024 in the Romanian Parliament.

From 2000 to 2004, women held 7% of the seats, which slightly decreased to 6% in the 2004-2008 period. There was an improvement in the 2008-2012 period, with female representation rising to 8%, a level maintained

through the 2012-2016 period. The most significant increase occurred from 2016 to 2020, with women occupying 10% of the seats, a figure that remained steady through the 2020-2024 period.

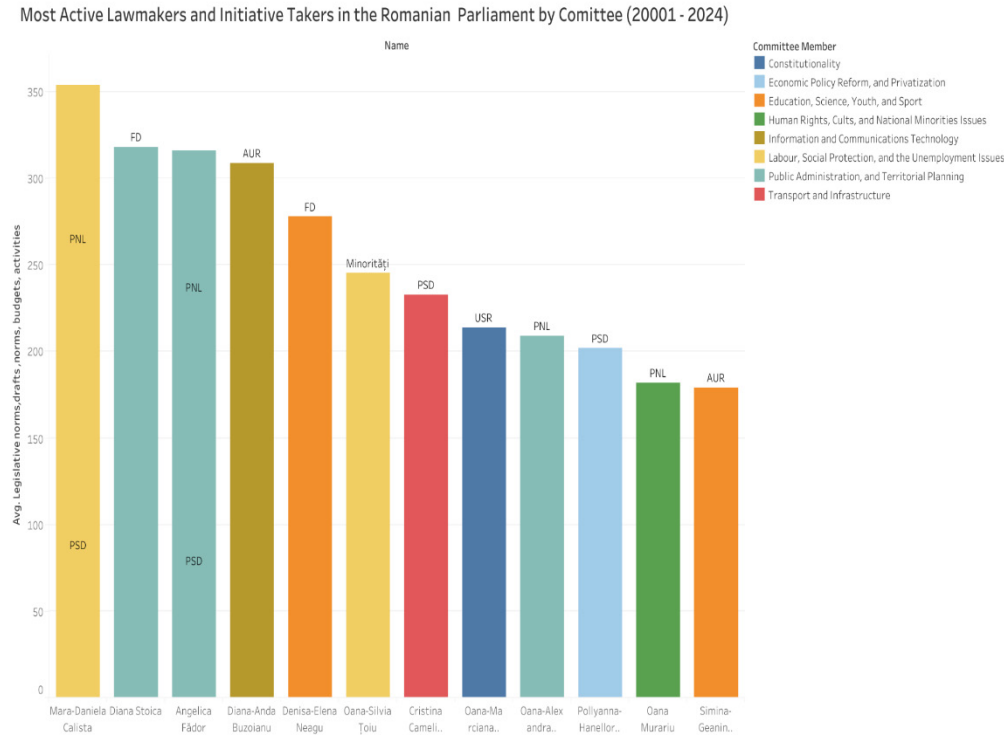


Figure 6: Most active lawmakers and Initiative in the Romanian Parliament 2001-2024.

The next bar chart highlights the most active lawmakers and initiative takers in the Romanian Parliament from 2000 to 2024. Mara Daniel (PNL) leads with nearly 350 activities in the Health and Family committee, followed closely by Diana Stoica (FD) with around 320 activities in the Public Administration and Territorial Planning committee. Other top performers include Angelica Fădor (PNL) and Diana-Anda Cosma (AUR), each with around 300 activities in their respective committees. The list is rounded out by Cristina-Camelia Socoleanu (PSD), Oana-Marciana Ozmen (USR), Oana-Alexandra Hănală (PNL), and Pollyanna Mărgineanu (PSD), and others.

It is important to mention that politicians such as Irina Khakamada – Russia, Irina Vlah, Violeta Ivanov - Republic of Moldova, and Ana Birchall were included in the analysis due to their previous roles held such as minister, or their candidacy in presidential elections.

5. Research results:

5.1 Findings related to Media law regarding the Representation of Female Politicians in Russia

Several breaches and non-compliances were found in the representation of female politicians pertaining to media law and ethics. In Russian online publications, 34 breaches were found regarding privacy, defamation, and non-legitimacy of the topic. Article 14 to article 17 from the online publication Vesti, followed by article 25, 33, 36, 42, 43 by Lenta.ru breach art. 137, art.10 of the Russian Federation Code of Administrative Offences nr.195/2001, Law. 87/2017 art. 10.5 regarding defamation and art. 10.4 regarding the legitimate aim of publishing the information. The legitimate aim was identified by balancing the three-part test are in accordance with the law, pursue a legitimate aim if for example are newsworthy, and are necessary in a democratic society.

Most Common Breaches of Media Law in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Russia

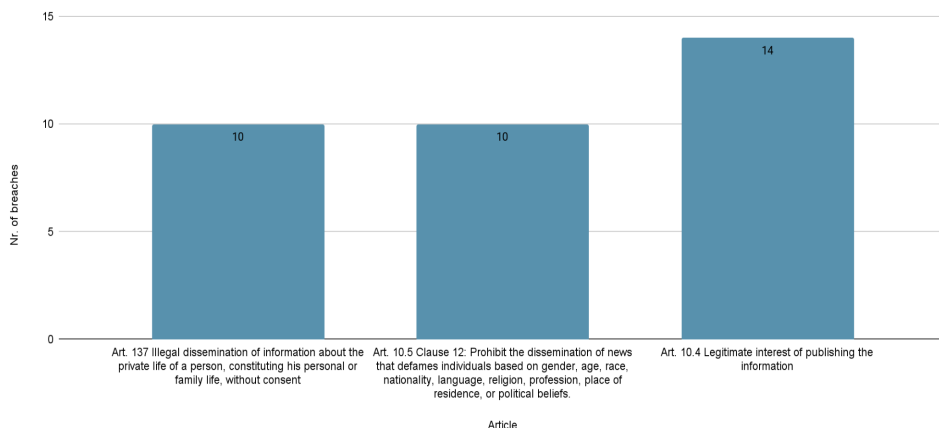


Figure 7: *Most Common Breaches of Media Law in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Russia.*

The most common breaches were found for the politicians Khakamada Irina, Mizulina Elena, and Yarovaya Irina. In some cases, the breaches were related to interference in private life without a legitimate aim. Articles related to Khakamada Irina were found non-legitimate, applying the three-part test relating to her appearance or family affairs, which were not of public interest.

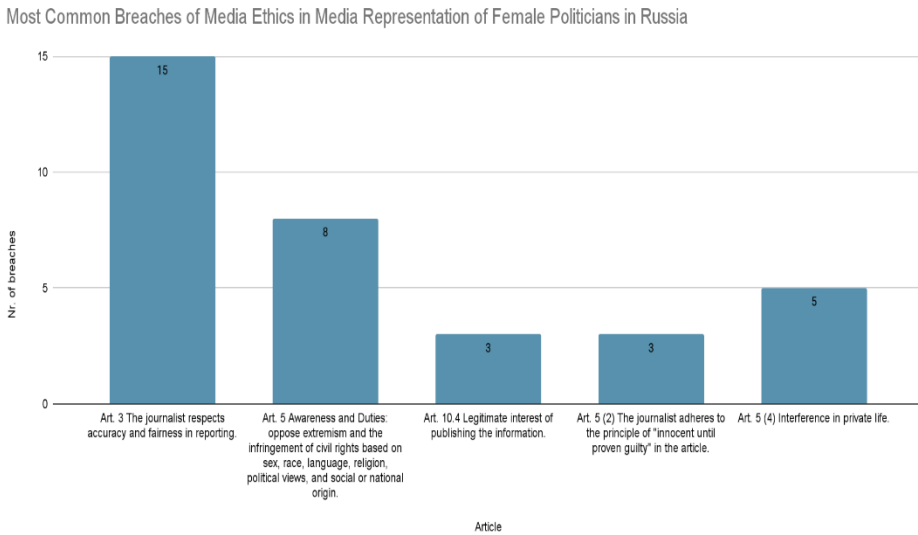


Figure 8: *Most Common Breaches of Media Ethics in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Russia.*

A total of 31 breaches were found in correlation with media ethics regarding impartiality and fairness in reporting, usage of extremist and non-filtered language by journalists in the articles, and interference in private life. All the publications have breached ethical aspects. Vesti.ru for articles 1 and 2 has breached art.3 by being non-impartial and not providing an official response from the public person mentioned in the articles, as well as defamatory language. In Article 7, Vesti breaches indicator 1 regarding accuracy and fairness in reporting, by not including the official statements from the Polish official. The articles that breached ethical aspects were related to Yarovaya Irina, Oksana Dimitreeva, Khakamada Irina Mutsonova.

In Moldova, 46 breaches were found regarding privacy, objectivity, and balanced opinion reflection, morality and ECHR article's 10, 6 and 8. Six articles did not comply with ECHR 3-part test to assess proportionality, and had infringements regarding article 10, 8 and 6 of ECHR. These include politicians such as Marina Tauber, Violeta Ivanov, and Irina Vlah. The press interfered with their right to privacy, freedom of expression, and right to a fair trial.

Most Common Breaches of Media Law in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Moldova

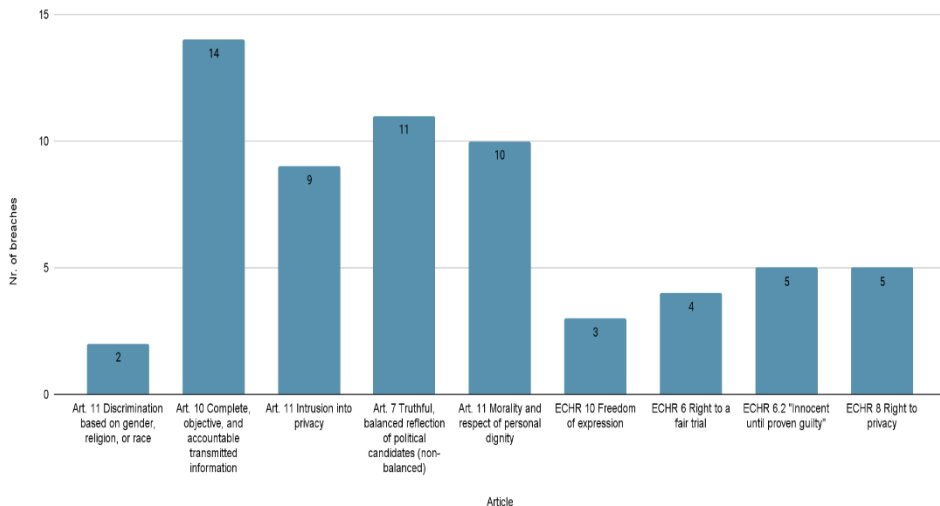


Figure 9: *Most Common Breaches of Media Law in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Moldova.*

Agora.md and Ziarul de Gardă, interfered with their rights and freedom of this politicians by publishing private information regarding Ivanov's photo is in a private setting, at her daughter's wedding with her husband and her other daughter. The following picture is not of public interest; other breaches include information about her wardrobe or material items that she owns, while it is of public interest for deputies to declare their source of income, their personal belongings are not of public interest. For Zinaida Greceanii, multiple articles concentrated on her legal issues and professional roles while maintaining a respectful tone and avoiding personal intrusions. Olesea Stamati's professional

actions and decisions were discussed without bias, respecting her privacy. Veronica Rosca received balanced coverage that focused on her legislative actions and professional background. Regihina Apostolova's detailed accounts of legal and political challenges were reported while maintaining her professional dignity. Overall, the analyzed articles from various sources maintained journalistic integrity, respecting the privacy and dignity of the female politicians and pertained to respect of the legislation in Republic of Moldova, and ECHR convention. The journalists in Moldova practiced a accountable and non-discriminatory reporting, but also breached some of the articles regarding to right to privacy of individuals, some of which were justified by the proportionality principle.

All publications adhere to good media ethical practices, however, there were occasional lapses where private details were shared by journalists without consent, particularly in articles involving personal items or family matters applying to Vlah and Ivanov. Only 10 breaches were found regarding to plurality of opinion.

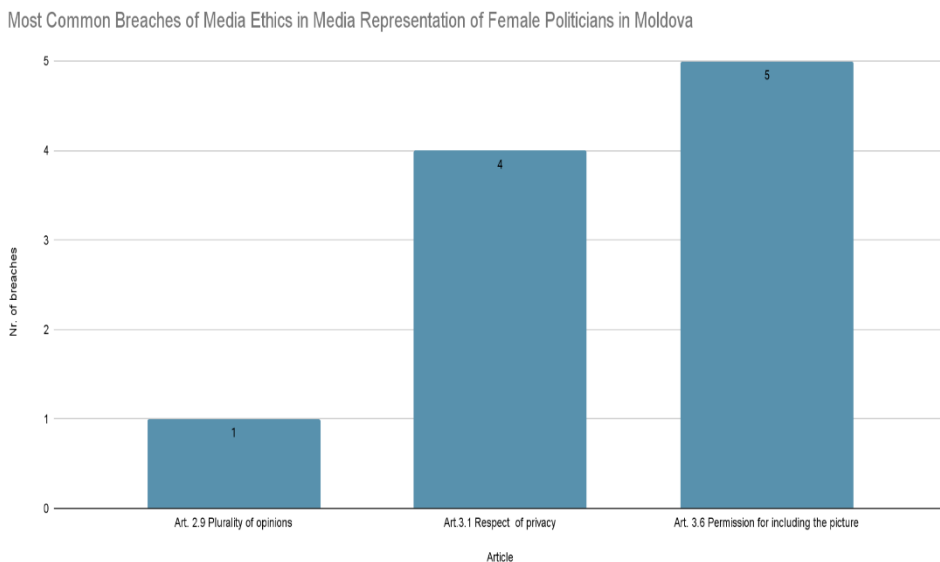


Figure 10: *Most Common Breaches of Media Ethics in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Moldova.*

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE POLITICIANS ...

Most Common Breaches of Media Law in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Moldova

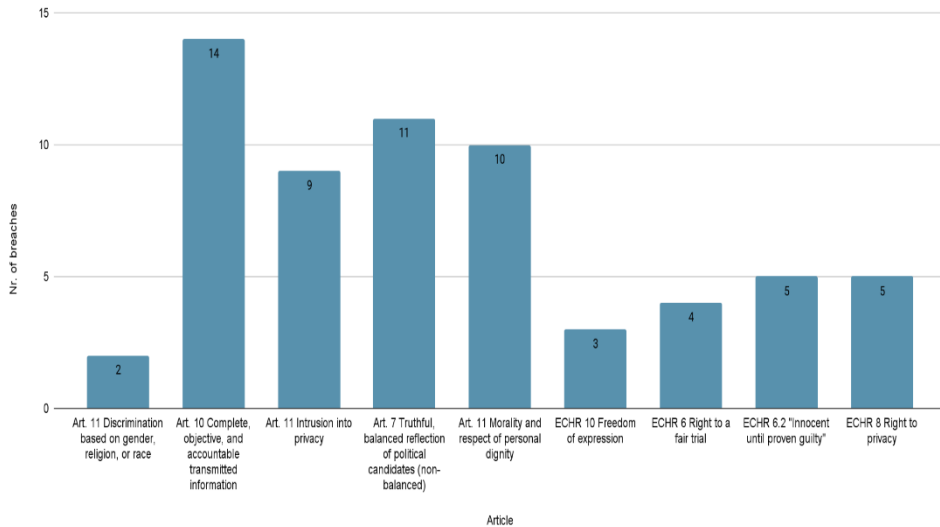


Figure 11: *Most Common Breaches of Media Law in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Romania.*

In Romania 22 breaches were found regarding privacy, objectivity, and balanced opinion reflection, morality and ECHR article's 10, 6 and 8. Seven articles did not comply with ECHR 3-part test to assess proportionality, and had infringements regarding article 10, 8 and 6 of ECHR, all related to Ana Birchall.

MediaFax adheres to ethical journalism standards and respects relevant legislation in its coverage of female politicians. The outlet's articles respect the privacy of individuals, avoiding defamatory statements and use factual accuracy. MediaFax balances public interest with individual rights by focusing on professional roles and legislative matters. The articles maintain good faith, impartiality, and balance, providing multiple perspectives on political and legislative issues. For example, the article "Ana Birchall, interviewed at DNA" features involvement in an investigation while maintaining her privacy and presumption of innocence. The article reports on her role as a witness, supported by statements and context from legal proceedings, without implying guilt or making defamatory statements.

Digi24.ro also respects relevant legislation in its representation of female politicians. Provides privacy, honour, and reputation of individuals. Digi24.ro's articles are factually accurate and presented in good faith, focusing on the professional actions and public statements of politicians. While maintaining a commitment to freedom of expression, Digi24.ro balances this with the right to privacy, providing a fair and impartial view of political events and legislative initiatives. For example, articles covering Mara-Daniela Calista respect her privacy and her professional role and legislative work.

Antena 1 also respects Birchall's privacy. It presents her statements regarding the GRECO report in a professional context, avoiding personal attacks or defamatory remarks. The article presents her views factually and in good faith.

The publications in Romania adhere to good media ethical practices; however, there were occasional lapses where private details were shared by journalists without consent, particularly in articles involving accuracy and transparency, unnecessary intrusion into privacy, and separation of opinions from facts. The publication that breached mostly this indicator was MediaFax, in total 9 indicators related to media ethics pretraining female politicians were breached.

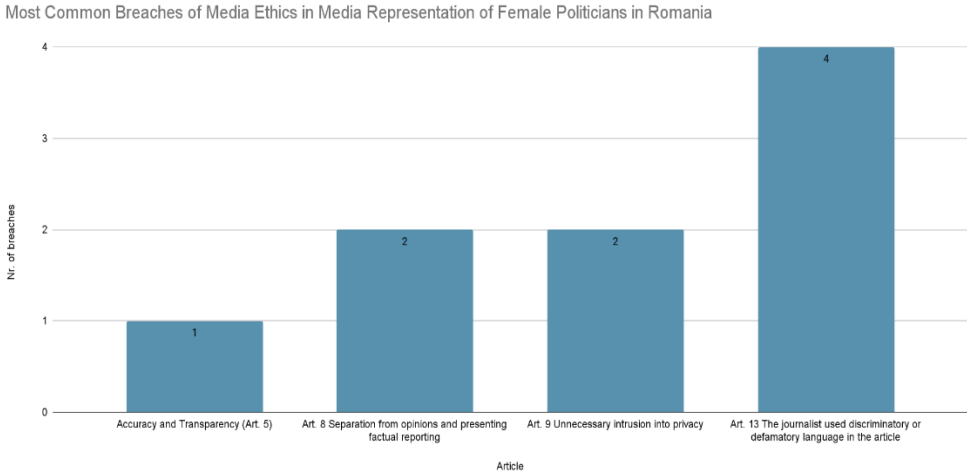


Figure 12: *Most Common Breaches of Media Ethics in Media Representation of Female Politicians in Romania.*

For instance, MediaFax's focuses on the coverage of Mara-Daniela Calista's legislative work without intruding into personal details, and a article about Ana Birchall's fortune provides accurate information based on public declarations. Digi24 discusses declared wealth without personal intrusion, and Antena 1's article maintains Birchall's privacy and provides accurate, contextual information about her comments on the GRECO report. These outlets also avoid defamatory statements and strive for impartiality and balance, as seen in MediaFax's coverage of the INSCOP survey on women in leadership.

6. Conclusions and the need for better legislative and ethical media frameworks in Russia, Moldova, and Romania

Female representation in the State Duma has generally increased from 2000 to 2024, with remarkable spikes during 2007-2011 and 2021-2024. The most active female politicians come from diverse parties and have significantly contributed to legislative initiatives. When it comes to media law compliance, there were multiple breaches related to privacy, defamation, and the legitimacy of published information, particularly concerning female politicians like Irina Khakamada and Elena Mizulina. Ethical breaches were frequent, involving issues of impartiality, fairness, and use of extremist language. "extremist media" such as Meduza Project proved to follow strongly the indicators pretraining media law and media ethics. To create a better environment and path for the progress of media ethics and law, pertaining a more balanced representation of female politicians, Roskomnadzor can elaborate an audiovisual code to regulate the media, and initiate collaborations with international media regulations organizations such as UNESCO, and respect international legal framework protecting the rights of broadcasting organizations such as the Rome Convention and the Brussels Satellite Convention. Female participation in the Parliament has seen significant growth, especially from 2021 to 2024, where representation reached 36%. This increase is potentially influenced by having a female president. In the Republic of Moldova, while most publications follow ethical standards, there were occasional lapses in respecting privacy, especially involving personal

items or family matters. Several breaches were noted concerning privacy and balanced opinion reflection. Media outlets occasionally infringed on the ECHR articles 10, 6, and 8. As a good practice recommended, the audiovisual council can monitor and create stronger media law frameworks regarding the regulation of online publication and promote periodical ethical training for journalists, reminding them about the necessity to comply with ECHR standards.

The representation of women in the Romanian Parliament has increased modestly over the years, with the most significant rise from 2016 onwards. When it comes to media representation of female politicians in Romania, fewer breaches were found compared to Russia and Moldova. The problem can be that less news is covered about female politicians, most violations involved privacy and objectivity, particularly in articles about Ana Birchall. The Romanian state can issue more laws related to media regulations and good practices referring to online media, to regulate and control fake news, hate speech, and disinformation while balancing free speech and privacy concerns.

The research analyzed only 9 publications, limiting the possibility to get a comprehensive insight into how all media coverage aspects of female politicians in Russia, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania. Another limitation that the research faced is using a qualitative approach; different researchers have different objectives in interpreting the data. Another limitation that the author encountered is language barriers related to translating the article accurately into English. Further on, the direction of the research can be improved by using a multi-method approach through conducting interviews with journalists, media analysts, and female politicians to gain more information from primary sources and views about media representation of politicians in the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Russia. This can give more insights from first sources and offer more explanations on why some legislative and ethical standards are breached in reporting and media coverage of female politicians.

The analysis can also delve into analyzing big data, such as collecting social media posts from various news publications to see how different media outlets report on female politicians. This can involve sentiment

analysis to identify tone coverage, topic modeling to identify prevalent themes, and network analysis to understand the spread and influence of information. Additionally, machine learning algorithms can be used to detect patterns and biases in reporting, helping to uncover how media coverage can shape public opinion.

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From Hostility to Inclusivity for Migrants in Eastern Europe: Digital Literacy Against Online Hate Speech

Triantafyllos GKARAGKANIS¹ 

Abstract. Since the official launch of online social networks in the 1990s, the number of users and offered services has risen progressively, affecting societies and daily life. In some cases, these online platforms have been a breeding ground for radical groups to share their point of view on migrants, leading to incidents of disinformation. On that note, the current research paper aims to examine the digital literacy rates in Bulgaria and Romania, the two EU Member States in Eastern Europe that recently entered the Schengen Area, and monitor the shift of public opinion towards migrants in recent years. Eventually, the paper demonstrates how the ability to track and report misleading information on migrant stories and integration policies in digital platforms can be a significant factor in reducing the spread of hate speech across different social groups. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, namely investigating national reports on digital and media literacy, and tracking down the changes in public perception, this study sheds light on the initiatives implemented in those countries to combat hate speech and discrimination against migrants. Additionally, through the finding analysis, the paper concludes with key remarks on how policy recommendations can be formed based on decisions on regional and transnational levels.

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Ultimately, the study results can be the basis for future research on the correlation between education level and media interpretation.

Keywords: Bulgaria, digital literacy, disinformation, European Union, hate speech, integration, media literacy, Romania

Introduction

Modern societies are characterized by multicultural and multilingual populations, paving the way for diverse communities where cultural differences in beliefs, norms, and values can be bridged with intergroup dialogue and inclusive policy mechanisms. Central and local authorities provide evidence-based examples of permanent residence incentives, such as the right to nationality, labor market mobility, and access to education and health facilities (Walsh, 2021: 297-319). These initiatives can raise the chances of family reunification. That leads to a prosperous life for individuals who face critical obstacles in their countries of origin, such as conflict-torn areas or financial instability. Nevertheless, there is another element that should be taken into consideration when evaluating migrant integration strategy on a national level: anti-discrimination. Discriminatory practices can be traced in various occasions of the social sphere ranging from the workplace to politics, creating a mixture of uncertainty for those individuals who were forced to flee their country. Moreover, such behavior might also be reinforced by adopting hate speech and stereotypes which can disorientate public opinion and breed xenophobic attitudes (Hangartner & Spirig, 2024: 480–486).

The extensive use of digital platforms to share personal opinions can affect societal beliefs differently. Anonymity plays a significant role in this regard, as it camouflages social media users who hide behind their identities. Eventually, individuals spread their messages with the clear aim of producing harmful narratives. This might involve undermining migrants and accusing them of disturbing cultural homogeneity (Anderson, 2013). The abundance of misleading information has provoked civil society organizations (CSOs) and certain authorities to launch informative campaigns

and raise awareness about online hate speech, with the direct intention of protecting the integrity of marginalized groups, such as migrants. However, effective navigation of digital information can also be achieved with the correct tools acquired during primary and secondary education, as well as in later stages of adult life. Digital literacy has been discussed in recent years by academia and policymakers, especially in countries where migration flows have increased dramatically (Vanek, 2017).

This research paper investigates the relationship between digital literacy and public opinion shifts towards migrants in Eastern EU Member States, specifically Bulgaria and Romania. It also examines how targeted initiatives, including media literacy campaigns, can foster long-lasting changes in behaviors described with a discriminatory lens and hate speech. Referring to reports and literature from academia and CSOs is a productive means to associate two vital issues in modern societies: disinformation and stereotypes against migrants. By mentioning migrant stories that present a part of the actual incidents or misinterpreting the events that took place, this study demonstrates the key elements that can assist in building more human-centered societies in the globalized environment and abandon practices that cultivate prejudices towards social groups that are in a vulnerable state.

Literature Review

The rise of online social networks has transformed the public sphere enormously. Contemporary societies depend on receiving and sharing information via digital platforms, while extended exposure to a screen is proven to have mental health implications unless restricted, mainly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other related disorders in adults and children (Schürmann & Margraf, 2018: 102–112). The most concerning remarks stem from the findings on the mental development of Generation Alpha, meaning the individuals being born from 2012 onwards, where emotional outbursts and endurance to prolonged time on information being received traditionally may cause them profound discomfort (Šramová et al. 2023: 132-154). Critical areas in digital literacy and hate speech can be understood thoroughly thanks to mentioning these developments in psychology.

The media consumption habits have altered significantly over the last few decades. Older age groups have been greatly influenced, too. In their case, the potential gradual shrinking of the social circle, due to busy schedules or retirement, affects their well-being. Although it can benefit them mentally, they might also experience depression or anger expression depending on their economic background. On top of that, the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic caused the general population to direct its attention to a series of applications to be informed about daily news and receive content based on their preferences (Ramos, 2022: 1-8). Although several communication channels have been praised for their inspiring, informative, and highly educational content, others prioritize sensational material to attract viewers and claim their content originality. Nevertheless, they neglect their major influence on numerous subscribers, especially young people. The latter can prove a difficult puzzle if parents, teaching staff, and campaigners are not actively involved in those efforts.

The extended use of online social networks has caused the surge of radical groups. More specifically, they operate unconventionally since they organize and launch their activities on digital platforms. This development not only complicates the monitoring of such incidents due to the shield of their leaders from direct accountability but also attracts the interest of younger individuals who envision themselves as important gear in those groups. Their willingness to spread hateful messages and proceed in demeaning actions protects the frontrunners from exposing themselves to potential arrest for organized crime. At the same time, more youngsters follow in the footsteps of their peers. Moreover, it should be noted that such groups are supported by individuals who systematically read misleading publications or online tabloid press. Eventually, this practice is provoked by statements made by public figures (e.g., content creators, media personalities, and politicians) whose intention might not be to ignite this type of action, but they should bear in mind their impact on viewers and readers. The lack of effective monitoring services aiming to preserve civil order leads to the spread of messages from radical groups, constituting a threat to public safety (Assimakopoulos et al. 2017).

The deliberate spread of misleading information has generated numerous cases of hatred towards specific social groups based on sexual orientation, origin, or religious beliefs. The principal characteristic of such practices is the use of discriminatory verbal patterns and demeaning phrases to express discomfort regarding their presence and activities. This occurs because they are portrayed as the scapegoats to explain the lack of opportunities in vital life elements, particularly employment opportunities, the rise of the permanent citizen-to-migrant ratio, and organized crime. It is essential to mention that hate speech is not limited to verbal patterns; it often operationalizes metaphorical terms, non-verbal gestures, and symbols (Ziccardi, 2020). These varied forms of expression reveal the inherent complexity of clearly defining hate speech, which can be settled by defining the research objectives.

Since 2014, academic interest in hate speech has gradually grown, highlighting the significance of online social networks and the omnipresence of such incidents on several digital platforms. Despite the commitment and imposed regulations by owners and dedicated agencies, there is no clear indication that this tendency will slow down in the upcoming years. Online hate speech towards migrants has also attracted the interest of social scientists who started calibrating frameworks around 2015 to assess the shifts in public opinion towards them. This timing indicates that certain characteristics of migrants are framed to provoke negative perceptions and reinforce stereotypes. Additionally, suppressed or marginalized groups tend to find shelter in communities that claim to dominate other minor groups to manifest their suffering and soothe their pain. The latter can be a result of personal upbringing or a lack of social structures to address mental issues (Barberet & Rodriguez-Spahia, 2018: 93-102). These insights reaffirm the importance of digital and media literacy to identify and respond to divisive narratives in online social networks and media outlets.

From a political standpoint, governments and political parties often deploy campaigns during elections to gather as many voters as possible who value securitization and are drawn into xenophobic populism. The spread of migration-related news that is not cross-checked or is purely based on manipulated images and sensational tabloid sources, can lead to the detriment of democratic and humanitarian processes and values. Eventually, discourse

is shaped in a way that does not allow online media viewers and readers to discern reliable sources. Therefore, they regularly opt for informative material that reaffirms their core beliefs. Meanwhile, the role of migrants in modern societies is undervalued due to their portrayal as a national security threat or economic burden. Therefore, media researchers and social scientists have reiterated the fact that journalists should cover migration-related news with professionalism and avoid sensationalism into the public sphere, due to their influence on large audiences (Carboni, 2019: 153-166). Furthermore, while technical measures for migration can have a limited capacity to address these biases, disinformation narratives are utilized to alter general attitudes and disorientate public opinion from key policy developments.

The current social environment in the European Union (EU) does not differ from the trends that describe the surge of online hate speech across the globe with multiple implications for migrants. Several scholars have referred to the underlying theme of digital illiteracy with major concerns expressed for younger generations (Vissenberg et al. 2023: 2-5). Since they are asked to be the driving force in online social networks that follow malicious practices against migrants and other social groups, this situation is alarming. Therefore, this research paper prioritizes the relationship between digital literacy and online hate speech and identifies the key role of media literacy in addressing disinformation campaigns on migrants. Since the EU is dedicated to tackle this issue, it is necessary to assess public and private initiatives operating in Bulgaria and Romania, the two EU Member States that joined the Schengen Area in 2024.

The academic research on anti-migrant campaigns has also delved into the political parties adopting such practices, including the spread of hateful messages. In particular, several scholars have reiterated the necessity of political solutions to manage migration flows, mainly through bilateral and multilateral policy dialogue with the countries of origin (Sharland & Ilhan, 2023: 11-18). At the same time, it is widely discussed that social contributions from immigrants are not shared on digital platforms, whereas criminal activities and malicious practices substantially cover online social networks and media outlets. The recent conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have also demonstrated the multifaceted aspect of migration as a social phenomenon.

The country of origin and proximity – geographical and cultural – play a vital role in integration policy development and implementation in the short and long term.

As previously stated, the Schengen Area Entry of Bulgaria and Romania creates a new reality for migrant populations. From a geographical point of view, the two countries merge the EU Corridor between Greece and Hungary, which in the past had generated free movement issues among the legally present citizens in the territory of EU Member States. However, managing disinformation narratives distributed by public figures and politicians affects the online social networks and media landscape. Therefore, implementing anti-discrimination legislation is considered a valuable tool for victims to seek mental support in the strongest equality bodies across Europe. Since Bulgaria and Romania joined the Schengen Area and the EU Elections occurred in June 2024, tracking incidents of hate speech against migrants and evaluating efforts of digital and media literacy campaigns can assist in interpreting potential shifts in public opinion.

Conceptualization & Operationalization

Concerning extraction and evaluation, online social network users are asked to perform these mechanics more frequently compared to the past due to the multitude of sources. Because of this newly formed reality that includes immediate access to online information within a few seconds, specific skills are crucial to managing the abundance of data. On the one hand, digital literacy involves the capacity to understand, generate, and distribute digital content securely and ethically. Thus, we shall consider technical and cognitive abilities (Sirlin et al. 2021). On the other hand, media literacy should be distinguished from digital literacy, since it refers to online information interpretation, including identifying biases and disseminating content responsibly (Potter, 2013: 417–435).

Hate speech can be highly controversial due to its applicability to various aspects of the social sphere. In recent years, the tracked incidents of hate speech have increased online, where users or groups of users opt for

harassing and threatening individuals because of their ethnicity, gender, religion, and other cultural or personal traits (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Williams et al., 2020). Eventually, this poses a threat to democracy and human rights and deteriorates the lives of migrants who face obstacles during the integration process, as they are not fully accepted into society or given equal opportunities.

In the contemporary era, strong competition prevails in various aspects of social life, from employment to civic participation. This observance creates a lot of stress for most individuals, leading to the urge to act and feel superior to the rest of the 'competitors'. Individuals aspire to gain control over many situations that could elevate them to a better social life status, thinking that with this achievement all personal issues can be resolved. Thus, online social network users tend to promote the supposedly 'healthy' aspect of their lives ignoring the apparent difficulties that all individuals face. This creates a tantrum for most users who want to perform similarly. During that process, individuals tend to operationalize every means to undermine and outshine their 'competitors'. Hence, it is usual to witness actions filled with discrimination (Hatano, 2023: 127–156). More specifically, human and other legal rights are neglected due to the purposeful distinction made in policy or received behavior from society. Under these circumstances, migrants are expected to be among the major social groups to face discriminatory actions, which immensely affects their integration process as they experience hardships and equal access to all services in the destination country might be hindered due to the outrage of public opinion (Esses et al. 2017: 78–123). Individual and collective statements are formed based on false or fabricated information regarding immigrants. That can lead to social unrest that requires targeted strategies at national and regional strategies to reverse this trend.

A multidisciplinary approach is required to respond to the research themes associated with social changes and potential shifts in public opinion. Although that might seem challenging, especially in the interpretation of phenomena that progress dynamically, there are research tools that can be utilized to respond effectively and precisely to the existing research gaps and build on previously conducted research material. In this context, social scientists have developed a wide pool of indicators to measure trends and developments concerning policy design and implementation. Although the term was first

used to describe financial trends, statistics on social issues can shed light on the current research study since the interpretation of migrant-related topics covers different scientific fields, from economics to education policy. On that note, indicators are used to address matters associated with combating exclusion and tracking socioeconomic changes too. On some occasions, the operationalization of multiple indicators can lead to the formulation of a composite indicator, a single index intended to recognize alterations in many scientific fields and provide a clearer image to the public (van der Maesen & Walker: 2005, 8-24).

As for the present research study, two principal concepts are explored, digital literacy and hate speech along with migrant integration, constituting a solid case for the indicators to manage data acquired from various reports on national and transnational levels. For instance, a comparative analysis of data acquired from Eurostat and national agencies of Bulgaria and Romania is crucial to locate data management and interpretation gaps and provide a nuanced perspective on the research subject. This process can also include results addressed by academic institutes or civil society organizations (CSOs) with a research-based focus on social policy. Moreover, conducting interpretive analysis on quantitative and qualitative data is a significant tool to simplify and highlight unobservable data in the first place. Additionally, the inclusion of domestic politics in this research study brings the multiple applicability of this topic to the spotlight since it covers an important part of the electoral campaigns and manifestos too.

Having referred to the study-related concepts, hypotheses are essential for an in-depth analysis of the reasons and incidents concerning migrants in Bulgaria and Romania. Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the current research subject, the inclusion of an extensive literature review facilitates this step to be performed with precision and respect to academic integrity. On the one hand, it is considered that the increasing number of online hate speech targeting migrants is strongly connected to the below-average digital literacy rates in Eastern Europe, and more specifically in Eastern EU Member States. Based on recent studies, countries with low digital literacy rates will experience more incidents due to the lack of critical engagement among online users.

On the other hand, the promotion of digital literacy initiatives to combat hate speech has had an observable impact on public opinion and eventually attitudes towards migrants in this region. Proactive measures to address this social phenomenon can decrease harmful narratives on online social networks and monitor any minor incidents more sufficiently and with direct action. Consequently, raising awareness and cutting down on discriminatory practices can be feasible.

Methodology

Once the first and most significant step in the research process, which is the identification of key concepts, is finalized, it is necessary to describe the methods planned for operationalization. In this context, specific procedures are performed to track and analyze data strongly connected to the topic. This eventually paves the way for proceeding with in-depth data analysis on information gathered through different tools ranging from graphs to tables. Therefore, researchers opt for quantitative or qualitative data analysis depending on the research question and objective to cover potential gaps in academic output. Moreover, it is common in various scientific fields to operationalize a mixed-methods approach to grasp every detail that has not been observed in former research projects, especially in social sciences.

The European Union has prioritized the promotion of digital literacy frameworks on national and regional levels to raise awareness of the required skills to gather and assess information in the workplace and daily life efficiently and promptly (Vuorikari et al. 2016). As previously stated, disinformation plays a key role in attracting the interest of online social network users to target migrants and treat them as scapegoats due to economic scarcity and cultural differences. On that note, data extraction and evaluation from Eurostat can shed light on the digital literacy context in Bulgaria and Romania. More specifically, thanks to comparative analysis based on quantitative data, the research can build on the gap in recent years covering policy-related developments in those two EU Member States and potentially identify reasons for their ranking. This shall include any particularities tracked

in the wider region of Eastern Europe so that authorities can act accordingly and improve the overall digital literacy rate. With the inclusion of data from the official EU database, the development of specific evidence-based policy recommendations can be tailored to the national contexts of Bulgaria and Romania and close the gap in certain aspects with the rest of the EU Member States.

Data extracted from Eurostat also complement the research study by referring to national reports conducted by academic institutes and CSOs. The aim is to further enrich research output based on developments in national and local communities and recognize possible traces of impairment in intergroup dynamics. This shall cover any incidents of hate speech or discriminatory practices towards migrants with specific ethnic origins and cultural traits and spot differences based on religion, beliefs, and values. Hence, in Bulgaria, the sociological study conducted by the Red Cross will be mentioned to track the age groups that hold a more favorable stance towards asylum seekers and migrants, as well as spot its correlation with the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Anderson, 2013). In the case of Romania, an institutional research study completed by Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca will be explored to delve into Romanians’ public perception towards migrants, existing integration policies, and public sector initiatives to deter individuals from operating in a discriminatory way to other ethnic groups (European Website on Integration: 2021). Both research studies were published a couple of years ago (2021-2022). At the same time, the inclusion of migration-related indicators to measure social behavior and integration mechanisms (Migrant Integration Policy Index: 2020) can provide a solid foundation to proceed with qualitative analysis based on the insertion of related data (e.g., discrimination).

The design and implementation of national strategies and support for related initiatives is another key component in the efforts of national authorities to improve the necessary skills to address disinformation and reduce the cases of hate speech in online social networks. Those strategies can be productive thanks to the involvement of national experts and the participation of research centers that follow ethical principles and adhere to integrity rules (Krasavina: 2022 & 2023). Moreover, the responsible authorities

are required to draw their attention to crucial aspects of digital literacy, among others critical thinking and the ability to share cross-checked information. Since the European Union has been facing constant crises in the past fifteen years ranging from financial instability to clashes in its neighboring countries, the role of Eastern EU Member States is vital for the continuation of its strategic objectives. Hence, bilateral partnerships between the two countries, namely Bulgaria and Romania, should also be inserted in the current research study to examine the short-term progress and evaluate the potential benefits of this type of cooperation (Center for Independent Journalism: 2023). Additionally, mentioning similar strategic partnerships among countries in Eastern Europe and beyond can be a compass for conducting comparative analysis more thoroughly.

The selection of quantitative analysis through graph and table analysis from Eurostat is the first step that covers the digital literacy context followed by the findings on hate speech from research institutes and CSOs. Then, the qualitative analysis is launched to compare the identified trends with the rest of the EU and propose evidence-based recommendations to endorse the attempts for a more inclusive society where mutual respect among different social groups can be feasible and migrants will not face threats or social undermining.

Findings and Data Analysis

As stated before, digital illiteracy remains a major issue for the EU collectively. The main reason is the looming vulnerability to hybrid threats, especially in online social networks, where individuals turn into subordinates of personalities with a clear intention to disturb social stability. The absence of concrete measures to address this challenge can lead to radical shifts in public attitudes towards vulnerable groups, including migrants, who have decided to relocate temporarily to a new country in search of better labor opportunities and higher quality of life. Drawing data from the EU official database, Eurostat, this research study can shed light on the current trends of digital literacy within the last five years.

The EU has a median rate of 55.56% of citizens with basic or above basic digital skills, while at the same time, sixteen Member States have exceeded this mark in the latest measurements. As for the situation in Bulgaria and Romania, the national rates fall short compared to the rest of the EU Member States. This observance is alarming because not only are the two lowest-ranked countries, with (35.52%) and (27.73%) respectively, but also the third lowest-ranked country, Poland, surpasses them with almost or more than 10% (44.30%). Digital literacy is crucial both for employment purposes and for avoiding disinformation narratives related to the economy and society. Such disparities demonstrate the need for immediate actions from the EU in close collaboration with the national authorities to raise digital literacy awareness and fortify public opinion on cases of instrumentalization of vague and misleading information. This might also indicate that low levels of digital literacy can create an irreversible dynamic between metropolitan and rural areas, where digital literacy rates are critically low. Therefore, this type of digital divide should be prevented as the marginalization of social groups can cause social instability and incidents of discrimination among them while affecting intergroup relations.

EU Member States	Digital Literacy (2021)	Digital Literacy (2023)
Finland	79.18	81.99
EU-27	53.92	55.56
Poland	42.93	44.30
Bulgaria	31.18	35.52
Romania	27.82	27.73

Source: Eurostat, 2024

The low digital literacy rate in Eastern EU Member States can be explained by referring to data associated with closely related aspects of the socioeconomic policy. More specifically, the root causes can be traced to access to digital infrastructure, education initiatives, and training programs, as well as potential linguistic or cultural barriers. It is indicative that in surveys conducted by research institutes within the last couple of years, 40%

of Romanian respondents were susceptible to conspiracies and disinformation narratives. Eventually, the low digital literacy rates coupled with the increasing use of online social networks by younger generations create a concerning mixture for social cohesion. Additionally, targeted policy interventions connected with internet speed should be accompanied by initiatives to safeguard susceptible to disinformation groups from false narratives, especially knowledge and experience sharing with high-ranked experts from Member States, such as Finland and the Netherlands. Thanks to digital inclusion initiatives along with interventions from top to bottom administration-wise (municipalities, counties, national authorities) citizens can build skills, mainly critical thinking and awareness, to counter misleading narratives leading to a decline in hate speech towards vulnerable groups in Eastern Europe.

Hate speech incidents and discriminatory practices prevail in modern societies due to the extension of the financial gap among social groups and the lack of equal access to employment opportunities and integration programs for vulnerable groups. On that note, the research study should delve into the current trends of public perception towards migrants, either moving from their country of origin in search of a higher quality of life or due to conflict-torn areas. Eventually, this subsection aims to analyze the correlation between online hate speech and ethnic and cultural traits, that affect attitudes towards these specific social groups in Bulgaria and Romania.

Beginning with the data extracted from the study conducted by the Bulgarian Red Cross (European Website on Integration: 2022), it is evident that there has been a change in public perception towards refugees in recent years. More specifically, 62% of respondents mentioned that they do not hold any type of negative stance while a substantial majority (71%) are in favor of their integration into the society. Nevertheless, there are still challenges in fostering acceptance and tolerance towards them by a significant number of respondents (37%), indicating that despite not reporting any personal issues with them, stereotypical imagery is common and spread more easily through online social networks compared to objective coverage from journalists and migration policy experts. Similarities between Bulgaria and Romania are prominent in hate speech and perception towards migrants, but it is essential to specify the observed particularities in the second case. Romanians believe

that 13% of the total population consists of immigrants, whereas the true percentage lies at 3.5%. This difference might be a result of low digital literacy along with the stance of national news agencies, which do not refer to quantitative data frequently. Despite the positive economic impact of immigrants with diverse backgrounds, respondents claim that certain integration policies (e.g., housing) require a different approach from the national and regional authorities. Hence, further measures from municipalities and countries in Romania should be implemented and deter practices of exclusion or neglect. Moreover, the anti-discrimination policy frameworks in both countries are viewed as favorable for migrants, with victims being able to seek support from equality bodies, but they are under-resourced compared to other EU Member States.

These findings demonstrate the complex nature of hate speech towards migrants. High digital illiteracy coupled with fluctuating public opinion can function as a solid ground for individuals targeting vulnerable social groups online. Intending to reverse this trend, it is essential to analyze data from Eurostat on individuals encountering degrading online messages. Although there is no specific indicator that measures messages aiming to harm individuals based on their migrant or refugee status, it is possible to interpret results from cases related to hostile behaviors online due to ethnic identity. First, the median ratio for the EU Member States stands at 0.53, whereas in Bulgaria and Romania, the ratio is 0.44 and 0.47 respectively.

The lower ratio can be explained by the low digital literacy rankings among the EU Member States along with the positive image of neighboring countries, such as Moldova and Ukraine, and the historical ties with different civilizations too. However, with higher digital literacy comes greater responsibility. Countries with high digital literacy might also present a higher ratio of encountering hostile messages, such as the Netherlands (0.70). Ultimately, digital education and awareness campaigns might also play a pivotal role in this because there are also EU Member States with high digital literacy, with lower than the EU median ratio (Finland – 0.51).

EU Member States	Degrading Online Messages (X)	Degrading Online Messages Based on Ethnic Origin (Y)	Ratio (Y/X)
Netherlands	48.40	34.00	0.70
EU-27	33.50	17.86	0.53
Finland	46.33	23.86	0.51
Romania	20.81	9.78	0.47
Bulgaria	23.83	10.54	0.44

Source: Eurostat, 2024

Both EU Member States have designed national strategic plans to digitize education and raise digital literacy in younger generations. Their focal point is the implementation of specific policies to endorse cross-cultural education and counter incidents of disinformation through intergroup dialogue and community-driven initiatives. Although this type of framework can be a solid foundation for the fulfillment of the aims mentioned in the national strategic plans, special reference to the allocation and monitoring of EU and national funding is deemed necessary. Utilizing this approach, can ensure the targeted and timely execution of the objectives for a higher digital literacy and eventually reduce the cases of false narratives that affect public perception towards migrants. At the same time, bilateral partnerships between the two EU Member States can be traced in several schemes, such as the Bulgarian-Romanian Digital Media Observatory which aims to tackle disinformation and foster cooperation on journalistic integrity. Similar collaboration schemes will be proven essential as the recent Schengen Area entry calibrates a new mentality in the public discourse about the role of migrant integration into societies.

Conclusions

Public opinion towards migrants differentiates over time, with online hate speech incidents becoming a prime example of discrimination in multiple countries worldwide, and Europe specifically. Access to information has

reached unprecedented levels, requiring a particular skill set to manage this amount of data productively and adhere to guidelines for data protection. Therefore, the ability to manage and compare content from multiple sources online can foster a more inclusive and effective integration of migrants since related stories are interpreted differently. Along with other tools provided by several digital platforms and online social networks, users can report any incidents of degrading behavior or cases of misleading and false narratives regarding vulnerable groups or personal cases. Thanks to this, they can protect their integrity in online environments and interact with the community without fear of encountering behaviors that can harm their mental state or encourage violence against them and their social group. The contribution from relevant authorities and civil society in terms of funding and strategic planning can effectively support the initiatives to inform the public on ways to combat hate speech incidents and endorse activities for equitable integration policies.

Eastern Europe is considered a key region for the EU, with Bulgaria and Romania recently entering the Schengen Area. However, the ongoing conflicts in the neighboring regions affect public discourse with disinformation narratives and cyber incidents becoming a common phenomenon that requires immediate actions from civil protection forces and informative campaigns on media literacy. The two EU Member States can build on lessons-learned practices on national and international levels to implement their strategic plans constructively and update them depending on cutting-edge knowledge on contemporary topics, mainly the role of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion through falsified information. Both countries have established partnerships between academic institutions and the public sector which can pave the way for raising awareness regarding digital literacy without causing social instability or hatred towards certain social groups. Furthermore, close collaboration with international organizations and other neighboring countries (EU Member States, Western Balkans) can fortify efforts to handle such incidents in the short-term future and form strategic schemes to formulate a secure long-term future on social issues leading to inclusive multicultural societies in the EU.

Future Research

Sociopolitical developments immensely affect the decisions made on institutional and national levels and the public opinion towards burning topics in our contemporary era, ranging from fiscal policy to integration schemes. It has been almost four years since the first proposals by the European Commission regarding the design and implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (September 2020). The approval of the European Parliament for changes in regulations to manage migration as a phenomenon constitutes a substantial case study to be examined both from a policy perspective and a social acceptance standpoint. Among the research areas that could be further explored is the short and mid-term impact of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum on the online discourse along with the multitude and frequency of cases of xenophobia and discrimination individuals – and specifically immigrants – face daily. On that note, tracking the evolution of digital literacy skills among EU citizens can become a catalyst for the interpretation of related data. This research approach may lead to crafting of a new context for targeted partnerships to address online hate speech towards migrants and other vulnerable groups and eventually create the conditions for inclusive societies across the EU Member States and beyond.

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Framing Srebrenica: A Comparative Analysis of Dutch, Turkish, and Russian Media Narratives

Framing Srebrenica: Dutch, Turkish, and Russian Media

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Abstract. This study explores how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian media frame the Srebrenica genocide and how these narratives reflect each country's cultural, historical, and political contexts. Drawing on framing theory and qualitative content analysis, the research investigates articles published between 2015 and 2020 in *Algemeen Dagblad* (Netherlands), *Hürriyet* (Turkey), and *Izvestia* (Russia). The objective is threefold: to identify framing techniques, examine the role of national identity and collective memory, and analyze the influence of political context on media narratives. Articles were selected during key moments - the 20th and 25th anniversaries of the genocide and the 2017 ICTY verdict - and coded using Semetko and Valkenburg's framing categories. The findings reveal distinct patterns: Dutch media emphasizes national accountability, Turkish media highlights Muslim solidarity and calls for justice, while Russian media often downplays or reframes the genocide within geopolitical narratives. These

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differences underscore how national interests and political alliances shape journalistic framing, ultimately influencing public memory and perceptions of historical responsibility.

Keywords: comparative analysis; media framing; narratives; genocide coverage; national identity; political context

Introduction

The Bosnian War (1992–1995) was a conflict that emerged from the breakup of Yugoslavia, involving Bosnia and Herzegovina's desire for independence. Ethnic tensions among Bosniaks (Muslims), Croats (Catholics), and Serbs (Orthodox Christians) escalated into violent clashes. The war was marked by ethnic cleansing and genocide, particularly against Bosniaks (*Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992–1995 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, n.d.). As part of the conflict, in 1993, the United Nations declared Srebrenica a "safe area" to protect civilians. However, in July 1995, Bosnian-Serb forces overran the town, and over 8.000 Bosniak boys and men were massacred within a week (United Nations, n.d.).

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of historical events. Media framing is a method used by news organizations to structure and present a story in a way that influences audience perception and interpretation of key issues (Media-Studies.com, 2023). This framing shapes narratives by highlighting particular values, emotions, or perspectives, often reflecting underlying cultural, historical, and political influences.

For this study, framing theory will be used to examine how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers reported on the Srebrenica genocide's aftermath from 2015 to 2017 and in 2020. This paper analyzes the coverage in the most popular newspapers from these countries: *Algemeen Dagblad* from the Netherlands, *Hürriyet* from Turkey, and *Izvestia* from Russia. Two articles per year will be selected from each publication, resulting in a total of 18 articles for analysis.

In exploring the newspapers, the focus will be on investigating the underlying cultural, historical, and political factors that influence that shape these narratives. This is because the media coverage of Srebrenica varied significantly across different countries. Dutch journalist Bart Rijs, who reported from Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war, explains that he heavily relied on news reports from other cities for his coverage (Diskurs, 2021).

Russia, Turkey, and the Netherlands were chosen for analysis due to their distinct historical perspectives and political contexts surrounding the Srebrenica genocide, which significantly shape their media narratives. Russia was selected for analysis due to its political and historical ties in the Balkans, particularly its alliance with Serbia, which has influenced its perspective on and denial of the Srebrenica genocide (BBC News, 2015). Turkey emphasizes the genocide as a key issue for the Muslim community, focusing on solidarity and justice for victims, which reflects its historical connections to Bosnia. The Netherlands critically examines the role of the Dutch UN Battalion, Dutchbat, whose failure to protect civilians in the UN-designated "safe area" remains a pivotal part of the country's collective memory and national discourse, raising questions of accountability and consequences (Meester et al., 2020, p. 1). Together, these countries offer diverse narratives that enrich the understanding of media coverage surrounding the Srebrenica tragedy.

The decision to study the Srebrenica genocide is based on its significant impact on international relations and the need to understand how different media narratives shape public perceptions of historical events. By examining how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers report on the genocide, this research aims to reveal how each country's media influences the understanding of collective memory and national identity.

This study emphasizes the importance of accurate reporting in raising awareness of historical injustices and encourages a deeper understanding of their effects on today's society. By exploring these narratives, the research highlights the role of media in shaping discussions about important historical events like Srebrenica.

Literature review

In an age where media plays a crucial role in informing public discourse, the framing of conflicts can significantly influence societal understanding and memory of historical events. As de Vreese (2005, p. 51) notes, “framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue,” making it essential for examining how conflicts are reported and understood. This concept is particularly relevant when analyzing media narratives of ethnic conflicts and genocides, which are often shaped by opposing frames, such as ‘ethnic war’ versus ‘genocide’ (Hammond, 2018).

De Vreese (2005) emphasizes the dynamic nature of framing, which functions through two processes: frame-building, referring to how frames are shaped within newsrooms, and frame-setting, which involves the interaction between these frames and audience perceptions. Entman’s (1993) model emphasizes how frames “define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies,” underscoring their central role in shaping narratives and influencing responses to conflict (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53).

While framing theory outlines how media constructs narratives, the processes of frame-building and setting are deeply influenced by the journalistic norms and constraints within conflict reporting. Aldridge and Evetts (2003) and Santos (2009) explain that traditional journalism expects reporters to show both sides of a story and keep their emotions separate from the events they cover. However, war journalists face unique challenges, including restricted access to conflict zones and the emotional toll of covering violence. For example, limited media presence during the Rwandan genocide meant fewer Western journalists could report on the atrocities, highlighting how geography and international interest shape coverage (Knight, 2023). In contrast, the Bosnian War saw more accessible media coverage due to its European location, although journalists were barred from areas like Srebrenica following its fall, leaving significant gaps in reporting.

The framing of the Bosnian War offers a clear example of how media narratives evolve. Early Western coverage often framed the conflict as an ‘ethnic war,’ portraying it as a result of deep-rooted hatreds and downplaying the role of targeted aggression. As Hammond (2018) explains, this framing

suggested the conflict was intractable, calling for minimal intervention. However, journalists like Allan Little (2001) reframed the violence, emphasizing its genocidal aspects, particularly the targeted aggression by Serbian forces against Bosnian Muslims (Hammond, 2018, p. 3). Hammond (2018) argues that this shift in framing, reinforced by media outlets like *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Times*, played a crucial role in prompting greater international intervention and legal accountability through the ICTY.

Frames serve broader functions within journalism, shaping how events are reported and understood. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identify generic frames such as conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, morality, and economic consequences (de Vreese, 2005, p. 56). Among these, responsibility and morality are particularly relevant for analyzing portrayals of the Srebrenica genocide, where media narratives often center on accountability and ethical judgment. Hammond's (2018) analysis of Western coverage during the Bosnian War underscores the profound impact of the 'genocide' frame, which carried significant moral and legal weight, influencing political responses and calls for justice.

By using framing theory, this study will analyze how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers constructed narratives surrounding the Srebrenica genocide. The framework outlined by de Vreese (2005) provides a lens for understanding how frames, such as attribution of responsibility and morality, might differ between these countries based on their unique historical, political, and cultural contexts. Comparing the framing across media outlets in these nations will uncover how the genocide is portrayed in ways that reflect national interests, geopolitical alliances, and broader societal narratives.

Research Design

This chapter presents the objectives and research questions of the study, which focuses on how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers frame the Srebrenica genocide. The study investigates how each country's media reflects and amplify specific narratives about the genocide, examining the impact of cultural, historical, and political factors on media coverage.

The main aim is to explore how these newspapers have framed the aftermath of the Srebrenica genocide from 2015 onwards focusing on the cultural, historical, and political narratives present in media reports. By analyzing the period after 2015, the research explores how national identity and collective memory are reflected in media narratives, uncovering the ways historical events are presented and interpreted differently in each country's media landscape. The study aims to provide insights into how these narratives shape public understanding and contribute to interpretations of responsibility and accountability regarding the Srebrenica genocide.

Objectives and Research Questions

Objective 1: identifying framing techniques

Previous research on media framing suggests that the way events are reported can shape public understanding by emphasizing specific aspects while downplaying others (Chong & Druckman, 2007). This objective aims to identify and compare the framing techniques reflected in Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers' coverage of the Srebrenica genocide. Drawing on Kellner's (1995) framing theory, the study will examine how narratives within the media content shape discourse around the event. Specifically, it will analyze the use of language, tone, and the assignment of blame, investigating how these elements manifest framing techniques in the news coverage.

Additionally, the concept of "conflict framing" is crucial, as it reveals how journalists' choices reflect national ideologies and historical context (Hammond, 2018). Framing, however, is not always a deliberate process. As de Vreese (2005, p. 52) explains,

Frame-building refers to the factors that influence the structural qualities of news frames. Factors internal to journalism determine how journalists and news organizations frame issues (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The frame-building process takes place in a continuous interaction between journalists and elites (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978) and social movements (e.g., Cooper, 2002; Snow & Benford, 1992). The outcomes of the frame-building process are the frames manifest in the text.

This emphasizes that frames can emerge naturally due to journalistic norms and external influences.

By examining how newspapers from different countries frame the same historical event, the study will reveal how media can either promote or mitigate narratives of moral responsibility, blame, and victimhood, thus influencing collective memory.

Research Question (RQ1):

How do Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers frame the Srebrenica genocide?

Objective 2: exploring the role of national identity in framing the Srebrenica genocide

National identity plays a crucial role in shaping how countries remember historical events. As Keskin (2021) suggests, the media's coverage of Srebrenica is influenced by national memory, which often reflects a country's political priorities and cultural narratives. This objective aims to explore how national identity and collective memory shape media coverage of the Srebrenica genocide in Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers. Dutch media, for example, initially focused on the safety of Dutch peacekeepers, reflecting a national identity that prioritized internal responsibility over addressing the broader tragedy (Keskin, 2021). On the other hand, Turkish media, with its cultural and religious ties to Bosniaks, framed the genocide as a humanitarian crisis impacting fellow Muslims. Russian media, influenced by political alliances with Serbia, often downplayed the genocide, reflecting national interests and political strategies (Keskin, 2021).

This objective will help reveal how national identity and collective memory shape the portrayal of the Srebrenica genocide in these countries and provide insights into how cultural and political factors influence media narratives.

Research Question (RQ2):

How do national identity and collective memory shape the news frames employed in Dutch, Turkish, and Russian coverage of the Srebrenica genocide?

Objective 3: analyzing the influence of political context on media coverage

Political context is another key factor that influences media framing. As Hume (1997) argued, 'journalism of attachment compromises objectivity by ignoring the historical and political contexts of violence,' which is particularly evident in the case of the Srebrenica genocide (Gilboa, 2006, p.598). The relationship between the media and political power can shape how historical events are remembered and reported. In the case of the Srebrenica genocide, political interests in each country have affected the narrative presented by the media. For example, Russia's political alliance with Serbia led to its media downplaying the genocide, and its vote against recognizing it as genocide at the UN in 2015 further reflects this stance (Keskin, 2021). Similarly, the Turkish media's portrayal of the genocide was influenced by the country's historical and religious ties to Bosniaks, while Dutch media coverage often focused on the responsibilities of Dutch peacekeepers, framing the event in the context of national guilt and moral responsibility.

By examining the political context in which media outlets operate, this objective will explore how the political priorities and alliances of each country shape media narratives and the collective memory of the Srebrenica genocide.

Research Question (RQ3):

How do political context and national identity shape the news frames used in Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspaper coverage of the Srebrenica genocide?

Data collection and Methodology

This research examines how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers frame the Srebrenica genocide. The genocide, which led to the deaths of over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys in July 1995 (United Nations, n.d.), remains one of the darkest chapters of modern European history (*Borrell and Varhelyi: Srebrenica Genocide Is One of the Darkest Moments in Modern European History*. -

Free Online Library, n.d.). Despite its significance, the genocide is still omitted from some history curricula, particularly in Republika Srpska, where the political narrative denies its occurrence and textbooks avoid mentioning it (Synovitz & Obradovic, 2019). Efforts to integrate the genocide into broader educational systems have faced challenges, including resistance from educators and inadequate resources (DetektorBa, 2024). This gap in education underscores the need to analyze how the genocide is represented in public discourse, especially in the media, which plays a key role in shaping collective memory and national identity (*National Identity: Formation & Media Themes* / Vaia, n.d.).

This study aims to address these gaps by examining how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers frame the genocide. By focusing on these nations' most widely read newspapers, the research highlights the dominant narratives that inform public understanding of the Srebrenica genocide.

Data collection

The Netherlands has a unique and direct connection to the Srebrenica genocide. As the United Nations-designated "safe area" was under the protection of the Dutch UN Battalion, Dutchbat, its failure to prevent the massacre remains a critical part of the country's collective memory and national discourse (Meester et al., 2020, p. 1). This is reflected in the ongoing struggles of Dutch Bosnians, former Dutchbat soldiers, and political leaders to come to terms with the consequences of these events. Furthermore, the genocide's recognition by international courts underscores its historical significance, making the Dutch perspective crucial to understanding how national accountability is framed in public discourse (ibid., 2020, p. 2).

Turkey's inclusion in this study is due to its unique role as a historical ally and a contemporary advocate for justice for Bosniak victims of the Srebrenica genocide. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has publicly reiterated Turkey's unwavering support, stating, "We will always stand by our Bosnian brothers in their search for justice. The Srebrenica Genocide will never be forgotten," during memorial events marking the genocide's 25th anniversary

(*Turkey Stands by Bosnia in Fight for Justice for Srebrenica Genocide*, 2020). Additionally, Turkey's evolving foreign policy, marked by its mediation efforts in the Balkans and increased regional influence, further highlights its strategic and cultural ties to Bosnia. Turkish initiatives, such as conflict mediation and regional stabilization, have reflected its solidarity with the Bosniak Muslim community while showcasing its growing geopolitical clout (Hussein, 2022; Yaqeen Institute, 2024).

Russia's involvement in Srebrenica denial is rooted in its political alliance with Serbia, which has shaped its stance on the massacre. In 2015, Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution that would have labeled the Srebrenica massacre as genocide, citing political motivations and an anti-Serb bias in the wording of the resolution (BBC News, 2015). This action was part of a broader effort by Russian-backed Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik to reject international recognition of the genocide and to strengthen ties between Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Russia. Media in both Serbia and Republika Srpska, influenced by this alliance, have propagated denial and revisionist narratives about the event, reflecting a rejection of Western values and a preference for Russian support in the region (Turčalo, 2024).

For this study, articles will be collected from two widely read online quality newspapers from each country: the Netherlands, Turkey, and Russia. "Widely read" is determined based on circulation and web traffic, while "quality newspaper" is defined as "a newspaper that deals seriously with issues and has a high standard of editing and comment" (Quality Newspaper Noun, n.d.).

In the Netherlands, the selected newspaper is *Algemeen Dagblad* (AD), with 347,000 (Dutch Newspapers – What Do the Dutch Read?, 2024). For Turkey, the chosen outlets are *Hürriyet*, with 212,000 readers (*Hürriyet*, n.d.). According to Reuters Institute et al. (2017), these are the most widely read printed and online newspapers in Turkey. In Russia, *Izvestia* (431,000) is selected based on their significant circulation and readership (Russia, n.d.).

Instead of collecting articles from every year, the focus will be on key years that correspond to significant events. These events are the ICTY verdicts (notably the 2017 conviction of Ratko Mladić) and the 20th and 25th anniversaries of the Srebrenica genocide (2015 and 2020).

In the final Trial Judgement of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Trial Chamber I convicted Ratko Mladić, former Commander of the Main Staff of the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS) of genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of the laws or customs of war. (McCloskey et al., n.d.)

To ensure a manageable dataset while capturing key shifts in media framing, two articles per year from each quality newspaper will be selected. As noted by Fraser et al. (2021), focusing on specific timeframes allows researchers to narrow their analysis to significant moments, thus capturing essential changes without overwhelming the study with excessive data. This approach ensures the study concentrates on pivotal moments in the history of the Srebrenica genocide. The selected articles will be retrieved using keywords like "Srebrenica genocide," "Srebrenica massacre," and "Bosnian genocide." This approach will allow the study to focus on important shifts in media framing without the need to cover every single year.

Table 1: Summary of Data Collection

Country	Newspapers	Circulation	Key Years	Total Articles	Keywords for Search
Netherlands	Algemeen Dagblad (AD)	347.000	2015 (20th Anniversary), 2017 (ICTY Verdict), 2020 (25th Anniversary)	2 per year	"Srebrenica genocide", "Srebrenica massacre", "Bosnian genocide"
Turkey	Hürriyet	212.000	2015 (20th Anniversary), 2017 (ICTY Verdict), 2020 (25th Anniversary)	2 per year	"Srebrenica genocide", "Srebrenica massacre", "Bosnian genocide"
Russia	Izvestia	431.000	2015 (20th Anniversary), 2017 (ICTY Verdict), 2020 (25th Anniversary)	2 per year	"Srebrenica genocide", "Srebrenica massacre", "Bosnian genocide"

Analysis Method

The analysis of the collected articles will employ qualitative content analysis, focusing specifically on the framing of the Srebrenica genocide in Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers. This approach will allow for an in-depth understanding of how media outlets in these countries represent the genocide and its key events. The analysis will be guided by second-level agenda-setting theory (Melkote, 2009), which suggests that media not only influences the public on what to think about, but how to think about the issues presented. Additionally, the study will focus on framing strategies identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which help examine how media outlets construct the narrative around significant events like the Srebrenica genocide.

Categorization and Coding

The analysis will categorize the content into three types of sentences, following Melkote's framework. First, based on Hayakawa's (1972) classification, the sentences were categorized according to their type: report, inference, or judgment (Melkote, 2009, p. 552).

Reports are factual statements that can be verified or disproven. A sentence was coded as a report if, according to Hayakawa's definition, it could be confirmed or refuted. For example, "A chief United Nations weapons inspector demanded today that Iraq start destroying all its Al Samoud 2 missiles" is a report, as it presents a verifiable fact (ibid, 2009, p. 552).

Inferences, on the other hand, are statements that draw conclusions or interpretations from known facts. According to Hayakawa (1972), an inference is a statement about the unknown, made based on the known. An example would be: "Going to war without allied backing or United Nations sanction could isolate Mr. Blair at home," as it suggests a potential consequence derived from existing knowledge (Melkote, 2009, p. 552).

Judgments are statements that express approval or disapproval of actions or actors. In this study, sentences that contained strong adverbs, adjectives, or verbs, or those that clearly reflected the writer's feelings toward a

subject, were categorized as judgments. This type of sentence is often characterized by the emotional tone or evaluative language it contains. For example, "The UN's failure to intervene during the massacre was an utter betrayal of its mission and international obligations," reflects a strong disapproval and a subjective evaluation of the event.

As Melkote (2009) notes, examining sentence types offers "a unique way to examine news coverage by looking at the structure of the newspaper's language" (p. 551). Each article will also be assessed for tone, categorized as positive, negative, or neutral. A sentence was coded as favorable if it conveyed a positive meaning toward the attitude object (AO) or would likely cause the reader to form a positive opinion about it. Conversely, a sentence was coded as unfavorable if it conveyed a negative meaning toward the AO or would probably lead the reader to form a negative opinion. Neutral sentences, as expected, would neither elicit strong positive nor negative opinions.

Additionally, the analysis will focus on framing strategies identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), such as attribution of responsibility, human interest, and morality, to identify how these frames shape the portrayal of the Srebrenica genocide (p. 100). The attribution of responsibility frame examines whether the story suggests that some level of government or specific individuals are responsible for the issue. Key questions here include whether the story implies a governmental responsibility for alleviating or solving the problem, or if it attributes blame to a group of individuals, such as the Serb forces or the UN, for causing the issue (*ibid.*, 2000, p. 100). It will also explore whether the story conveys a sense of urgency surrounding the problem.

The human interest frame focuses on providing a "human face" to the issue (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 100). This frame will be explored by identifying whether the story uses personal vignettes or emotional language to generate feelings of outrage, empathy, sympathy, or compassion toward the victims of the genocide. It will also examine if visual elements are included to evoke similar emotional responses, and how the personal lives of the actors are featured within the narrative.

The morality frame interprets the events through a moral or ethical lens, often bringing up themes related to justice, morality, or religious tenets (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 100). It will be assessed whether the story

includes moral messages, references to religious elements, or prescriptive advice about how people should behave in response to the events. This frame will help analyze the ethical dimension of media coverage and how it influences public perception of the Srebrenica genocide.

By analyzing these frames and their associated factors, the study will uncover patterns in how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian newspapers depict the Srebrenica genocide and its surrounding issues, highlighting the diverse ways in which the media frames responsibility, victimization, and morality.

Tool for Analysis

To collect the articles for this study, a manual selection approach was used instead of automated scraping tools like Octoparse. The selection focused on the most widely read and relevant articles from the years analyzed. The primary search term used was "*Srebrenica genocide*", and when necessary, additional related terms were employed to ensure a representative sample. This method ensured that the study was based on widely circulated and influential media sources.

Comparative Analysis of Media Framing in *Algemeen Dagblad*, *Hürriyet*, and *Izvestia*

This section examines how *Algemeen Dagblad* (Netherlands), *Hürriyet* (Turkey), and *Izvestia* (Russia) frame the Srebrenica genocide using five framing categories—Attribution of Responsibility, Human Interest, Conflict, Morality, and Economic Consequences—as well as Hayakawa's classification of language. This combined approach allows for a more in-depth understanding of how facts, implications, and judgments are communicated within each article. The analysis highlights key differences in reporting based on national perspectives.

Attribution of Responsibility

Algemeen Dagblad emphasizes Dutch accountability, citing the UN peacekeepers' failure to protect Bosnian Muslims. It references court rulings that hold the Netherlands partially responsible for some deaths. Example:

"The Dutch Supreme Court ruled that the Netherlands bears partial responsibility for the deaths of 300 men handed over to Bosnian Serb forces." This factual statement represents a report as per Hayakawa's classification.

Hürriyet focuses on justice for Bosniaks but does not extensively discuss Dutch responsibility. Instead, it quotes UN officials stressing global accountability. Example: *"UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reiterated the importance of acknowledging the genocide to prevent future atrocities."* This is an inference, as it suggests a broader conclusion based on past events.

Izvestia downplays Serbian responsibility, instead framing the genocide as part of a geopolitical struggle, stating that *"Western narratives ignore crimes committed by Bosnian forces."* This reflects a judgment, as it expresses an evaluative stance on media portrayals.

Human Interest

Algemeen Dagblad includes survivor testimonies, such as a woman who lost her family: *"I never saw them again after the soldiers took them away."* This emotional account serves as a report, as it presents a firsthand statement without interpretation.

Hürriyet highlights Turkish solidarity, stating: *"The pain of Srebrenica is our pain. We will never forget our Bosnian brothers."* This judgment reflects an emotive and collective stance on the tragedy.

Izvestia provides limited victim narratives, focusing instead on Serbian grievances, mentioning *"Serbian civilians ignored by the West suffer from continued misrepresentation."* This inference shifts the framing away from Bosniak victims and toward an alternative political narrative.

Conflict

Algemeen Dagblad discusses Serbian genocide denial, quoting leaders calling it a *"myth perpetuated by the West."* This quote represents a report, as it directly presents a claim made by a public figure.

Hürriyet stresses European integration and historical recognition as vital for peace. Example: *"European leaders must ensure that past atrocities are recognized as part of the continent's history to prevent future violence."* This is an inference, as it draws a conclusion from historical events.

Izvestia claims the genocide narrative serves a political agenda against Serbia, arguing that "*labeling it genocide dismisses the war's complexity.*" This judgment conveys skepticism toward the established historical consensus.

Morality

Algemeen Dagblad and *Hürriyet* strongly condemn the genocide, with Dutch officials emphasizing that "*Srebrenica must never happen again.*" This statement serves as both a judgment (moral evaluation) and a report (direct quote from officials).

Turkish leaders call for "*ensuring accountability.*" This judgment aligns with Turkey's advocacy for justice.

Izvestia, however, questions whether the term "genocide" is politically motivated. Example: "*The events of Srebrenica remain a subject of historical debate.*" This is an inference, suggesting ambiguity about established facts.

Economic Consequences

Economic aspects are minimally discussed. *Hürriyet* briefly mentions Bosnia's post-war struggles, stating: "*Bosnia continues to face economic hardship as it rebuilds from the war.*" This is a report, as it presents a verifiable fact.

Meanwhile, *Algemeen Dagblad* and *Izvestia* focus primarily on political discourse, avoiding economic analysis altogether.

Summary Table of Media Framing

Framing Category	Algemeen Dagblad	Hürriyet	Izvestia
Attribution of Responsibility	Emphasizes Dutch accountability, UN failure (<i>report</i>)	Highlights justice for Bosniaks, global accountability (<i>inference</i>)	Downplays Serbian responsibility, geopolitical framing (<i>judgment</i>)
Human Interest	Survivor testimonies, personal trauma (<i>report</i>)	Turkish solidarity, shared pain (<i>judgment</i>)	Limited victim narratives, Serbian grievances (<i>inference</i>)

Framing Category	Algemeen Dagblad	Hürriyet	Izvestia
Conflict	Highlights genocide denial, historical tensions (<i>report</i>)	Advocates European integration and recognition (<i>inference</i>)	Frames genocide narrative as Western political agenda (<i>judgment</i>)
Morality	Strong condemnation, justice emphasis (<i>judgment, report</i>)	Ensuring accountability (<i>judgment</i>)	Questions genocide term, political skepticism (<i>inference</i>)
Economic Consequences	Minimal discussion, focus on political discourse	Brief mention of Bosnia's post-war struggles (<i>report</i>)	No economic focus, political discussion instead

This analysis shows how different national perspectives shape media framing of the Srebrenica genocide. *Algemeen Dagblad* emphasizes Dutch accountability, *Hürriyet* highlights justice for Bosniaks, and *Izvestia* challenges the genocide classification by focusing on Serbian grievances. These framing differences reflect broader political and historical narratives, influencing public perception and collective memory. By integrating Hayakawa's classification of report, inference, and judgment, this analysis offers a clearer perspective on how language constructs historical narratives in the media.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore how Dutch, Turkish, and Russian media frame the Srebrenica genocide and what underlying factors shape these narratives. The results reveal that national political contexts, historical relationships, and international alignments significantly impact how media outlets construct their reports.

Algemeen Dagblad aligns with the Netherlands' introspective stance, acknowledging its role and emphasizing responsibility. *Hürriyet* frames the genocide as a historical injustice, reinforcing Turkey's diplomatic and

cultural solidarity with Bosnia. Meanwhile, *Izvestia* presents a revisionist perspective, portraying Serbia as a victim of Western political narratives.

These findings demonstrate the broader implications of media framing in shaping historical memory and public discourse. The differences in how each newspaper presents the events reflect not only political biases but also deeper ideological and cultural perspectives. Recognizing these framing strategies is essential in understanding how media shape historical consciousness and influence contemporary international relations.

Future research could expand this analysis by incorporating additional media sources, public reactions, or interviews with journalists to further examine the interplay between politics, media narratives, and historical truth.

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