



DOI: 10.2478/genst-2025-0004

**THE VISIBILITY OF UKRAINIAN WOMEN REFUGEES
IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC SPHERE.
REPRESENTATIONS AND MODES OF ENGAGEMENT¹**

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***Abstract:** The article examines media representations of Ukrainian women refugees in the Romanian public sphere, focusing on their discursive construction from the perspective of audience engagement. Relying on a theoretical framework centred on performative media discourse and the discursive construction of representations, the article explores a heterogeneous corpus comprised of televised news stories, broadcast at different times during the Russo-Ukrainian war. It identifies two modes of engagement, related to various coexisting ways of mediating a relationship of proximity-distance between us (the public) and them (the refugees). The study makes a contribution to (1) the analysis of the (dis)empowerment of women refugees in media discourse in correlation to different ways of exercising individual agency; (2) existing research on the media representation of social actors (and in particular of migrants/refugees) in connection to research on audience engagement through public discourse.*

***Keywords:** media representations, modes of engagement, performative discourse, public sphere, Ukrainian woman refugees*

1. Introduction

In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war women have become a symbol of resilience, whether they endure life in a besieged country (where men under 60 years of age are drafted to the front lines) or take on the status of refugees. Ongoing research about the media

¹ This article belongs to the special section titled “Women’s Migration from Central and Eastern Europe: Discursive, Sociocultural and Historical Perspectives,” edited by Irina Diana Mădroane and Ruxandra Trandafoiu, this issue (*Gender Studies*, 24(1), 2025).

representation of Ukrainian refugees points to the misrepresentation of women refugees (gender-linguistic bias, see Zawadzka-Paluckta, 2023, p. 106), among other aspects. Moreover, certain trends identified in the extensive literature on the media representation of women refugees are also found in the case of Ukrainian women refugees – for example, the construction of a “depersonalized,” abstract, vulnerable and dependent profile (Rothenberger & Schmitt, 2024), which does not exclude instances of agency.

Starting from these premises, the present article examines the media representation of Ukrainian women refugees in the Romanian public sphere, Romania being one of the destination countries that have shown solidarity in supporting Ukrainian refugees and where a significant number of refugees have either transited the country or begun a new life. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: What are the recurrent representations of women refugees in TV news and online media discourse? How are they articulated from the perspective of modes of audience engagement?

The relevance of these questions stems first from the fact that, before the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the Romanian media have debated intensely the problem of labour migration, in particular that of Romanian economic migrants in the European Union. Thus, after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, labour out-migration from Romania has developed specific patterns regarding the migration actors (social category, age, gender, educational capital, region of origin, destination country), the type of migration (from seasonal to permanent) or remitting practices. In media and discourse studies, research has focused on the dynamics of public discourse on Romanian labour migration, by looking into how this process has been configured over time as a public agenda topic and public problem (Beciu et al., 2018); in a broader context, Trandafoiu (2022) approaches migration policies in Eastern Europe “as they are shaped by current public debates about how migration should be managed, how it is experienced and what it means for the national imaginary” (Trandafoiu, 2022, p. 13). The media construction of migration actors in the transnational social field (Beciu et al., 2017) in relation to “mobility practices sustained by affect and emotion” (Mădroane & Baya, 2022, p. 20), the reframing of migration as a vector for assessing the country’s image/reputation (Dolea, 2018), the perception of migration actors by non-migrants (Beciu, 2018), socio-media practices for engaging the audience in relation to the social impact of migration (Mădroane & Cârlan, 2024; Mădroane, 2018) or the analysis of positionings toward the diaspora in the public sphere (Ciocea & Cârlan, 2018) are some of the research themes explored within the *media-migration-public space* nexus. These studies also demonstrate an understanding of labour migration in relation to the

identity construction of women as actors of migration in a transnational social field of power relations, where the woman migrant is often the victim of discrimination or of a traumatizing journey. Through an “affective-compassionate rhetoric” (Beciu et al., 2018, p. 12), the Romanian media have tackled women’s migration especially in terms of “the difficult working conditions or the abuse faced by women in unqualified jobs (especially agriculture and farming), often in illegal conditions, or by women who do not even get to work, becoming victims of delinquents or traffickers” (Beciu et al., 2018, p. 12). As the social categories of migrants diversified, including those of women, the media would refer – albeit not so prominently – to “successful” women in the country of destination, those who managed to establish themselves in competitive environments. The media thus legitimized a contrasting space of symbolic power: a visible majority (vulnerable women) – a collective actor situated in the media within a logic of “trivializing suffering” – versus an entrepreneurial category, including individual stories of women who had achieved social and economic success in their destination country.

On the other hand, in the “networked ecology” (Broersma, 2019, p. 94) where mainstream media compete with a number of other actors (*e.g.*, alternative media) and new types of information and debate dispositives, some of them associated with new media genres (*e.g.*, podcasts), the practices of mediating women migrants are diversifying, hence the importance, as noted by Mădroane and Cârlan (2024) in a recent study, of investigating “the ways in which mediation dispositives such as podcasts publicize feminist causes, allowing disempowered women to be heard as citizens (here in the context of intra-EU migration of low-skilled labor)” (2024, p. 1417).

Before 2015, the landmark year of the so-called “crisis” of refugees coming from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, no social imaginary about refugees as social actors had been articulated in the Romanian public sphere, the representations of Romanians who had migrated to work in other European countries being prevalent. As Marinescu and Balica (2018, p. 1050) point out in their study regarding the Romanian media coverage of violence involving refugees, “between 2015 and 2016, the Romanian media became interested in the issue of refugees.” Against the backdrop of this international crisis, Romania, as an EU member state, would eventually accept to receive 6,200 refugees between 2016-2017 as part of a common European policy (Racheru, 2016). This policy was based on a mechanism of “mandatory quotas” for each member state. Beyond the concerns that arose about the administration of automated migrant relocation processes (in Romania, but also in other countries such as Poland, Hungary, Slovakia

and the Czech Republic), this situation generated an alarmist public discourse, with the media warning of the “wave” of refugees that could be heading toward Romania. These warnings were all the more dramatic as the press and television channels constantly broadcast news about incidents in Hungary² or Germany (clashes between the police and far-right organizations). Various public statements highlighted the multiple dimensions of the crisis, from humanitarian to financial and security issues. Decision-makers (the president of the country, the domestic affairs minister) were hesitant about applying the European mechanism for relocating migrants to EU countries, from rejection, initially, to reticent but more moderate positions, especially after the mechanism in question had been approved at European level in the Justice and Home Affairs Council (“Background brief,” 20 July 2015). It is possible that the warnings and concerns expressed in various forms in the Romanian public sphere influenced public opinion, which sociologists characterized as “conservative” and “cautious.”³ Thus, according to expert data, when asked, “Do you agree with the presence of refugees in Romania?,” 54% answered “No” (citing cultural differences, fears of social conflict/violence, economic consequences), while 46% expressed agreement (“Raport de Cercetare. Percepția Românilor despre criza refugiaților” [“Report on Romanians’ perception of the refugee crisis”], *The Pro Democracy Association*, 2016). Once the relocation mechanism was put into practice, it became clear that Romania was not a major transit country for migrants to Western Europe and public debates on the refugee issue subsided, since the topic was no longer of immediate relevance to the media. Miscoiu (2023) emphasizes in this respect that “[n]ot being a member of the Schengen Area and being on the periphery rather than at the centre of the Southeast-Northwest migration routes, Romania was not of interest to refugees as a transit country, and even less as a destination country.” (n. p., available online, trans. into English).

The refugee theme returned to the public agenda in 2022, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. As soon as the war broke out, there was massive social and political mobilization, with different mechanisms put in place to support Ukrainian refugees – at the decision-making level (public policies), at the civil society level (countless projects by NGOs), and at the individual level (Romanians who offered their support in one form or another). In

² One of the most controversial measures at the time was taken by Hungary, which built razor-wire fences along its borders and then closed the Keleti Railway Station in Budapest, in order to prevent migrants from transiting through the country toward other European destinations.

³ The sociologist Darie Cristea, about the “INSCOP Barometer – The Truth About Romania,” September 10-15, 2015: “Public opinion in Romania is conservative and cautious. This is a common position among Eastern European EU member states, some of which are even more radical than Romania.” (INSCOP Research, September 2015, “Criza imigranților” [“The immigrants’ crisis”], available online).

addition to the humanitarian implications of the crisis, the geopolitical implications were equally important, given that Romania shares a 500 km border with Ukraine. Unlike the refugee context of 2015, the 2022 one was perceived by Romanian society in very concrete terms, due to the geographical proximity of the war, but also to the common history (both countries have a communist past, including a collective memory of the former Soviet Union policies). It must be said, however, that the media visibility of Ukrainian refugees, ample during the first months of war, has gradually diminished, media attention shifting to political-diplomatic actions and military operations.

Starting from the contexts briefly presented above, there is solid ground for a study on the media visibility of Ukrainian women migrants in a country where, on the one hand, a social imaginary about the situation of refugees had not been fully articulated yet and, on the other, there has been a consensual solidarity relationship with the Ukrainians' drama since the very beginning. From this perspective, the article is concerned with (1) the extent to which the media representations of women refugees and the corresponding modes of audience engagement reproduce a *top-down* approach to the problem of refugees, viewed as something under the authorities'/ various organizations' control (e.g., NGOs), possibly in correlation with the refugees' ways of acting, or, on the contrary, (2) the media discourse mediates an "active attitude" (Boltanski, 2004, p. 23), a position that shows "in words, but also by the way in which the emotion is expressed, how he [the spectator] will act when he can (or how he would act if he could)" (Boltanski, 2004, p. 47) regarding a problem that concerns each of us. "Modes of audience engagement" in this article fall within the approach sketched out above, referring to the capacity of public discourse to orient the public toward different types of action in relation to (women) refugees (see also Chouliaraki, 2006; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). The analysis will highlight the practices through which media "can open the way to the deployment of a form of public speech which avoids *the ban on the that's how it is*" (Boltanski, 2004, p. 79). Along these lines, the study will discuss how the representations of Ukrainian women migrants contribute to the articulation in media discourse of certain principles of generality (morality, emotions, values), the public (us) being constitutive thereof. On this basis, in this study I aim to extend the existing literature on the media representation of social actors (and in particular of migrants) in correlation with the literature on audience engagement through public discourse. More broadly, this research yields valuable empirical and interpretation insights into the construction of media discourse about migrants and refugees in a turbulent social and political context, at a transnational scale.

In the first part of the study, I will present the theoretical and methodological framework and in the second part the main findings, with a focus on the patterns of media discourse representations of Ukrainian women refugees. They will be further interpreted from the perspective of their potential to engage the public and, accordingly, of performative media discourse production.

2. Theoretical contexts of research

The current study formulates a theoretical framework that incorporates performative media discourse in relation to the discursive construction of representations as a way of engaging the audience. I situate this analysis within a semio-discursive and critical analysis of media discourse, laying emphasis on the current literature on performative media discourse, specifically on research that looks into performativity from the perspective of how audience engagement is mediated. This literature is linked with conceptual and methodological approaches to the discursive representation of social actors. Discourse is approached in its interrelated double dimension, socio-semiotic and pragmatic. First, as a way of representing the world (actors, events, material worlds), discourse reveals the socially shared conditions of using language (Fairclough, 2003). In this regard, Joye (2010, p. 590) points out the fact that “discourses create representations of the world that reflect as well as actively construct reality by ascribing meanings to our world, identities and social relations.” Second, as a way of constructing a relationship with the interlocutor/the audience, discourse is “part of the action” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 26) in relation to a particular style of the locutor. Van Leeuwen also emphasizes that “texts should be studied as representations as well as interactions (strategic or otherwise)” (2008, p. 4). Through this twofold dimension of discourse (representations, relationships with the interlocutor/the audience), one can analyse the (re)production and negotiation of subject positions by social actors, that is, “the identities and roles, the sets of labels and categories that allow people to be recognized as members as a discourse community” (Angermuller, 2018, p. 416).

The construction of representations *and* of the relationship with the interlocutor in a public situation (*e.g.* the media public sphere) brings into relief the *performative character* of discourse, that is the possible effect of discourse on the public (*e.g.* ways of engaging the public in relation to a reality the public can identify with and on which they can potentially act). In this respect, seminal studies approach media discourse as performative discourse. Correlating

the theory of speech acts (Austin) with field theory (Bourdieu), Broersma (2010) stresses that the performative power of media discourse entails (i) the representation of reality as “real” and “authentic” in relation to (ii) the symbolic condition of discourse production (types of context, the locutor’s status, etc.): “An article is a convincing representation when it successfully establishes a feeling of truthfulness. By doing so it transforms an interpretation into truth – into a reality on which the public can act” (Broersma, 2010, p. 17). To Broersma, the performative character of discourse resides especially in the form and style in which news is articulated “because they embody the social code connecting journalists and their public” (p. 20), legitimating thus the construction of reality as real and authentic. Similarly, starting from Austin’s and Searle’s approaches, Dayan (2006, 2015) interprets the performative dimension of media discourse in relation to its “pertinent” articulation for the public, that is, a series of particularities that situate the event within an interpretive construct (description, evaluation) that the public may appropriate within a visibility regime; or, as he points out, the public becomes thus able to distinguish an event from other possible events. According to Dayan (2009, 2015), the media interpretation of an event produces, on most occasions, a particular regime of visibility – “monstration,” *i.e.* the event is “shown” (“the activity of *showing*, the practices through which television calls for, organizes, and manages collective attention” – cf. 2009, p. 20) to the public by the journalist, based on strategically selected features (as opposed to “what can be seen” (*l’être vu*) and what appears (to us) (*l’apparaître*) as a reality that needs to be discovered, without it being necessarily part of any recurrent social conventions or part of a “collective performance.” From this point of view, media representations are “monstrations,” “have the status of actions,” that is why “we must ask ourselves not only what it [a representation] describes, but also what purposes it serves, what it enables one to do” (Dayan, 2015, n. p., available online, trans. into English).

The conditions on which media discourse institutes a mode of action for the public have been analysed by Luc Boltanski (2004) in foundational research on the mediation of distant suffering. He examines the conditions of possibility for commitment⁴ “as a response to the shocking spectacle of distant suffering” (2004, p. xv) through the lens of a typology of topics (socially instituted argumentation, emotion and visibility regimes) in which “speech about suffering can be formulated in a way which enables us to join together a description of the person suffering and the concern of someone informed of this suffering” (2004, p. xv). The

⁴ What is referred to here as “mode of engagement.”

potential of speech to depict reality and, at the same time, to mobilize the other (*e.g.* the spectator) in one way or another, by placing them in a situation of commitment, depends, however, on the configuration of the public sphere (various practices of favouring impartial communication in public debates): “Conveying suffering in a public sphere takes a different form because the public sphere constitutes itself against a communitarian sphere” (Boltanski, 2004, p. 32). Boltanski therefore advances a systematic approach to discursive practices (as related to particular topics and, thus, to forms of public speech) that could create in the spectator a disposition for acting toward distant suffering.

This analytical framework will subsequently inspire a critical approach in media discourse analysis (Chouliaraki, 2006; Orgad, 2012), built on the ways in which the media representation of vulnerable actors (those who suffer) orients or not the public, as a moral actor, to a potential form of commitment to the suffering of those vulnerable (Chouliaraki & Blaagaard, 2013). In this approach, “the representational power” (Chouliaraki & Blaagaard, 2013) of media discourse (in its various genres and socio-technical affordances) is also a performative one: thus, in the construction of representations (*e.g.*, about suffering) are mobilized semiotic resources (language, images) that evoke a collective imaginary regarding “us” and “the others” – values and norms that mediate a reflexive and emotional relationship between the sufferer and the spectator (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 7, p. 12). A current research concern is examining to what extent the collective imaginary mobilized by media discourse is rooted in symbolic power relations between “us” and “them” (Joye, 2010) and what discursive conditions invest media discourse with the potential “to shape a cosmopolitan sensibility” (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 7). As such, this study shows how, through the discursive articulation of representations about women refugees, a collective imaginary regarding the relationship between “us” (the public) and “them” (the refugees) is reproduced, being enacted as an established social discourse, namely the discourse of integration of refugees through their own forces and with the support of the state. This discourse is incorporated into the construction of representations of Ukrainian refugees, resulting in two modes of audience engagement that will be discussed in depth in the next sections. The discourse of integration legitimizes the prevalent visibility regime of women refugees. According to Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), “regimes of visibility, in other words, are key spaces of moralisation that produce and regulate the public dispositions by which we collectively take responsibility for the plight of distant others” (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017, p. 1172).

Before discussing the discursive construction of these modes of engagement, a clarification is necessary. First, the distinction between the two modes of audience engagement is an analytical one, intended to highlight the conditions of production of media (television) discourse as performative discourse. Therefore, through the modes of engagement identified below, I do not situate the analysis in a linear approach to the process of text production-reception (a certain linguistic and aesthetic construction of television news that deterministically engages the audience), but in a socially situated, contextual and relational approach. Secondly, the televised mediation of certain modes of audience engagement is also related to the ways in which televisions reproduce shared expectations, practices and symbolic contexts in relation to audiences and, correspondingly, to the practices of media consumption and appropriation by audiences. In this regard, Frosh (2011a) emphasizes the importance of the audience's routine exposure to certain "distinct narrative frameworks" (p. 391) cultivated by television "as means for creating and maintaining connectivity" (p. 384) so that "'distant' moral relations to others can also be built cumulatively across many particular news stories and programs, in a background framework of televisual non-reciprocity, civil inattention, and the generalization of individuals" (p. 392).⁵ Similarly, Denis (2006, p. 9, trans. into English) highlights "the definitively situated aspect of any performative action. Performativity is always related to a specific world that it actively helps to institute or maintain."

3. Method and analytical tools

Methodologically, this study employs elements from semio-pragmatics and critical discourse analysis in order to look at the media representation of Ukrainian women refugees as a discursive mechanism for public speech and engagement.

The concepts of "discursive/media representation" and "engagement" are thus operationalized at the mezzo level of analysis, while the concept of "dispositive" at the macro level (Lochard, 2006; Larroche, 2019), so as to demonstrate that media representations and their potential to engage publics cannot be separated from the strategic structuring by the media of a frame of interaction with the public and the mediated (news) actors.

⁵ Therefore, the analysis of the discursive construction of representations as a way of engaging the audience may be elaborated by considering the sociocultural processes of reception (see in this respect Scott, 2014).

Media *representations* are approached from the perspective of certain particularities of social actors (social actors' modes of acting and interacting) and events (see Fairclough, 2003). In this paper, the focus will be on the media representation of social actors, here Ukrainian women refugees. Fairclough (2003) approaches representations in relation to the construction of discourse ("representation is clearly a discursual matter") and "as part of social practices – representations of the material world, of other social practices, reflexive self-representations of the practice in question" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 26). In critical discourse analysis, social actor representations are analysed from the perspective of specific modalities of power relations production (*e.g.*, inclusion, exclusion) and, in this respect, well-established linguistic and discursive categories are introduced. Wodak (2010, p. 63), for instance, distinguishes between (1) referential or nomination strategies "by which one constructs and represents social actors" through "membership categorization devices," (2) predication strategies through which social actors acquire "negative and positive traits in the linguistic form of implicit or explicit predicates," (3) argumentation strategies and (4) perspectivation, the last category identifying the speakers' viewpoints. Van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 28-45) discusses representations (of social actors) in relation to representations of social practices on the basis of which social actors may be legitimized or delegitimized, excluded or included, conferred roles (role allocation – *e.g.*, activation, passivation), portrayed in particular ways (*e.g.*, through generic or specific references, personalization or impersonalization), or hierarchized (through classification, association, dissociation and differentiation from other actors). Correspondingly, the representation of social actions "can be activated, represented dynamically, or deactivated, represented statically, as though they were entities or qualities rather than dynamic processes" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 63). Chouliaraki (2006) speaks generically about the representation of a scene (of suffering) "within a specific space-time" (p. 85), the construal of which orients the public toward a certain positioning in relation to the events/scene that is unfolding from the perspective of an action's "proximity/distance or urgency/finality" (p. 85). As coextensive to the category of "representation," Chouliaraki introduces the category of "orientation." It has to do with the agency of the actors presented in the mediated scene, starting from which "the spectators themselves are invited to relate to the suffering" (2008, p. 85). "Orientation" is thus a conventional category used by the author to underline the potential of media discourse (and in particular of representations via the agency of actors) to steer the spectator to a mode of engagement toward the reality of the "other" (otherwise, in critical discourse analysis, agency is a currently used category in the analysis of social actor representation).

The concept of “engagement” (and, correspondingly, “mode of engagement”) is used in order to identify the ways in which the media representations of Ukrainian women refugees mediate a moral responsibility for the public, imagined as “us,” as a generalizing, regulatory principle of guiding action in the interest of the common good. The mediation of such responsibility may also emerge from the discursive attribution of responsibility (*e.g.*, moral, political, collective, individual) to third parties (institutions, organizations, politicians, communities, groups, etc.) in the process of representing Ukrainian women refugees (the present case).

The potential for engagement lying in televised mediation cannot be dissociated from the media dispositive, that is from the strategic organization of the TV show through the imbrication of various recurrent and heterogeneous semiotic conditions of production (visual, verbal, scenic, participant roles, etc.). Within semio-pragmatic approaches (Charaudeau, 2011), the media dispositive is the expression of the communication project of a media actor in relation to a situation of communication (genre, technological support) and a contract of communication (the predefined framework of the media, its regular features, which are based on the media communication project, see Charaudeau, 2011). The dispositive institutes a frame of interaction between media and the public, as well as a mode of knowledge and visibility of the event/theme; it has, therefore, a certain goal. In the methodological framework, the analysis of representations of Ukrainian women refugees is linked with the dispositive of news. In this respect, within the dispositive, the focus is on the positioning of the journalist/media regarding the situation of refugees, namely if the journalist assumes a point of view and how. In discourse, representation and the journalist’s positioning are interconnected and they can both be examined in terms of the type of responsibility that is activated, including as a result of (inter)actions undertaken together with other actors. Below is a synthesis of the methodological framework, generically presented. The analysis and presentation of findings will focus on patterns identified in the corpus (therefore, some categories included in the table below are not mentioned in the discussion of findings).⁶

Macro-Strategies	Discursive and linguistic means of realization
Media dispositive	▪ Situation of communication (including the genre and its conventions, <i>i.e.</i> news story, reportage)

⁶ For a first version of this analytical framework, see Beciu (forthcoming).

	▪ Communication contract
Media regimes of engagement	▪ Responsibility (mediation of values, emotions, ways of action, distance from - proximity to the situation, triggering ways of action) Through strategies of: - representation - media positioning (evaluations, claims, including the attribution of responsibility to actors)
<i>Representations</i>	▪ Modes of designation of the actors/events/processes ▪ “Role allocation” – activation, passivation of roles; agency ▪ Evaluations / Discursive qualifications of actors ▪ Nomination / Categorization (metaphors, nominal and adjectival phrases) ▪ The construction of space–time axes
<i>Positioning toward audiences:</i> the media/journalist explicit strategy of assuming a point of view	▪ Claims and evaluations – linguistic means: - indexicals - strategies of enunciation that mediate modes of engagement: e.g., individual obligations, collective obligations, necessity and call to action, recommendations, moral assessments, warnings, confessions, interpellations, opinions, value judgments ▪ Arguments of authority: quotation forms, polyphony - the strategic mobilization of “voices” ▪ Specific elements of language triggering emotions, values, a symbolic and institutional order

The exploratory corpus is heterogeneous, being comprised of televised news broadcast during different periods/contexts of the war, with a focus on the first months (February-April 2022) and on moments that mark one year, respectively two years since the war broke out

(February 2023, February 2024). The corpus was gathered from the YouTube channels of the media actors included in the study. I selected news stories that specifically referred to Ukrainian refugee women and focused on their situation. The selection consists of 24 news stories broadcast by *Euronews Romania* (a broadcast commercial channel specialized in news and socio-political commentary 24/24, with a focus on European themes and values, launched recently, in 2022, as a result of a partnership between the *Euronews* network and the National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest)⁷ and *Pro TV* (a commercial television launched in 1995, which has built over time the brand of “undisputed audience leader in Romania”⁸ with a programming grid centred on news, entertainment and social reportage). The length of each broadcast ranges between 2 and 4.5 minutes. On *Euronews Romania*, the theme of Ukrainian refugees was covered extensively as a public agenda theme (comparatively to other media actors), a criterion that played a role in the decision-making related to the corpus. A video reportage produced by *Recorder* was also included in the corpus (April 2022, 19.54 minutes). *Recorder* is an online platform that stands out in the Romanian media landscape through the journalism of investigation it practices, as an “independent journalistic project” based on “a transparent way of financing, ensured by a mixture of income from advertising contracts (but with entities that do not affect editorial policy) and from the readership community” (Baya, 2025, p. 12).

4. Findings. The media visibility of Ukrainian women refugees: Representations, positionings and modes of engagement

The three dispositives of televised news in the corpus are relatively similar, even though, as noted in the previous section, the media actors (TV channels) have different identities. As a tendency, the news stories take the form of mini-reportages and reproduce the communication contract (Charaudeau, 2011) specific to this genre: the narrative of a woman refugee’s journey

⁷ The mission statement of *Euronews Romania* specifies that “*Euronews Romania* shapes its agenda around our country’s European identity. Our news station in Romania promotes, at the national level, the strong European values of its parent station, *Euronews*.” (*Euronews Romania*, n. d., “Despre Euronews România” [“About Euronews Romania”], available online)

⁸ The mission statement of *ProTV* specifies that “[l]aunched on 1 December, 1995, *ProTV* is the commercial television channel that is the undisputed audience leader in Romania, known for its innovations, successful local productions, internationally acclaimed news programs and beloved celebrities.” (*Pro TV*, n. d., “Despre noi” [“About us”], available online).

(alone or most often accompanied by a family member) from the events that catalysed her departure, in order to flee the war, to the moment of the news report and her circumstances at that time. The structure of the news story consists of a first sequence evoking the dramatic context that a woman refugee (the subject of the reportage) finds herself in, through relevant images that contrast her stable life before the war (job, family, city) with the tragedy of war (bombings, ruins, victims, refugees as migratory flows – “the images of despair,” *Euronews Romania*, 21 February 2023); next comes the woman refugee’s testimony regarding the circumstances in which she left Ukraine and, in particular, her new life in the country of destination; finally, an off-voice enunciates the significance of the story, as part of a mostly positive resolution (the refugee found stability in a Romanian city, overcoming the war drama), which may be sometimes uncertain (the case of Ukrainian women who decided to return to Ukraine and “step back into the unknown, in a country that is daily under attack,” *Euronews Romania*, 21 February 2023) or, often, promising (the narrator’s voice enunciates indirectly the woman refugee’s hopeful thoughts). In some news stories, in-between the refugee’s testimony sequence and the final sequence is inserted a sequence of expert discourse: specialists are called upon, usually guest speakers at workshops, to talk about the trends in refugee numbers in Romania and other countries, the measures that were being taken or should be considered, etc.

On *Euronews Romania*, the stories about Ukrainian women refugees – and refugees in general – were relatively constantly covered in the news one or two years after the war broke out. This is consistent with the TV channel’s profile, the news narrative dispositive being part of the communication contract for informational shows specific to this channel. Similarly, on *Pro TV*, the main informational show – the *Pro TV* news bulletin, which has become iconic in Romania – is conceived primarily as a chain of narrative sequences centred upon a character who stands out through her resilience or who has achieved notable success in a field.

4.1. Constructions of representations and agency

The coexistence of multiple space-time axes in articulating the representations of women refugees (idealized past – disruptive past – resilient present/future; space of safety – the dangerous trajectory of becoming a refugee – the ongoing, difficult process of rebuilding a space of safety) is a recurrent feature of media discourse, which also functions as a kind of “phatic connectivity” (Frosh, 2011a, p. 392):

Far from the war that ravaged their country, two Ukrainian women, a mother and daughter, found refuge in the tranquillity of the Danube Delta. Ludmila is 38 years old and, until two months ago, she led a beautiful and peaceful life in a small town near Odessa. Like many Ukrainians, she fled the country with her daughter Victoria... (*Euronews Romania*, 22 April 2022)

Victoria, a 34-year-old woman driven away from Odessa by the war, moved a few days ago [to the village of Rachiș]. In Ukraine, she had a horse-riding centre, and she brought her animals to Rachiș... 'We are very well here, we were afraid, we feared for the horses and decided to leave.' (*Pro TV*, 23 March 2022)

The individualized representations (the woman refugee's first name, age and the city of provenance, to which are added the occupation, first name, city of provenance of the other family member) appear together with generic representations ("this woman," "Ukrainian women," "two young people from Kyiv," "a woman refugee from Odessa," "a group of women refugees," "women with children," "mothers"), which make reference to places, gender, family status and belonging to a country of origin. At the heart of the news narrative is the story of a woman refugee, framed within the broader narrative about Ukrainian refugees, which explains why the two different types of representation are used. Usually, it is young women, often with children, who gain visibility.

These representational patterns are specific to enunciations that institute different discursive forms of agency. As I will demonstrate in what follows, the women refugees' agency is discursively constructed through (1) the sequencing in the dispositive (typical for the linear sequencing of a narrative, from a disruptive situation to a resolution) and (2) the media construction of voices (the narrator's voice, the woman refugee's voice indirectly or freely reported by the narrator, the woman refugee's voice reported directly), which highlight the symbolic struggles taken on by women refugees in relation to various types of constraints.

Thus, the first type of discursively constructed agency is the woman refugee's agency in relation to constraints embedded in the refugee status, generically, as well as in the refugee's particular situation once she has arrived in Romania. In this respect, a series of news stories refer to the women refugees' determination to overcome their personal drama, find a job and rebuild their everyday life. The trauma of leaving Ukraine is invoked especially by the narrator's voice (also by assuming the woman refugee's voice) while the woman refugee usually refers to the new context in which she lives temporarily and to the perspective it opens up, as she manages to find, eventually, a personal and professional balance:

For Katarina, the world changed on the first day of the war. For two weeks, she tried to survive the bombings, in the shelter of her house basement, together with her son. She realized that the danger was too great and fled to save herself (narrator's voice). "Your life comes to a halt the moment you cross the border. That's when you realize that everything you had up to that point is gone" (refugee's voice) [...] For over a year, she's been managing a bookstore in Bucharest, but she's also gone back to her job as a photographer (narrator's voice). (*Euronews Romania*, 6 July 2023)

In some news stories, the woman refugee recounts both the dramatic moments she went through when the war broke out and her journey of adapting to her new life, with the narrator's voice emphasizing what is being recounted, by indirectly taking on the voice of the refugee:

Alexandra Jihareva also changed her life. She settled in Braşov with her five-year-old daughter. Whenever she remembers the beginning of the war, she is overcome with tears (the narrator's voice). I just put on a tracksuit and left. I took two dolls for my child. That's all. [...] I had to buy a new musical instrument and learn the language because I really wanted to continue my work (the refugee's voice). (*Euronews Romania*, 23 February 2024)

In some news stories, the woman refugee is constrained by a specific family situation (for example, a young mother with a small child, a sick mother, a husband on the front line). She is not involved in a particular type of action, but she stands out through a form of self-reflection, coping with a still uncertain context: "It is very difficult to know what the future will bring. But for now, I feel safe here in Braşov, Romania. We receive a lot of help, for which I am very grateful. I would like to stay here." (*Euronews Romania*, 10 February 2023)

In the examples above, agency reveals the intention to act (the refugees' strong motivations) and the ability to act (as a trend, in the news analysed, the woman refugee found a job, being motivated to act in her new circumstances).

The second form of agency refers to the refugees' ability to act individually to overcome the barriers imposed by their refugee status, but also to identify ways of acting within and for the Ukrainian refugee community. Refugees are represented as creating opportunities for action at community and, implicitly, institutional level. Through their testimonies (and sometimes those of Romanian collaborators/volunteers), the image that starts taking contour is that of dynamic, active persons, even though they are marked by the painful experience of war:

Alexandra is 28 years old, and she is a teacher. She left her country one day after the war in Ukraine broke out, together with her husband and their little boy, Oreste. Despite the challenges and language barrier,

she managed to open a kindergarten in Constanța specifically for Ukrainian children. Her journey was not easy and involved more than half a year of travelling, preparing documents, and struggles to find funding. (*Euronews Romania*, 11 December 2023)

Last year, a group of refugees with experience in education mobilized in Constanța to help Ukrainian children continue their education. Among them was Lussy, who, with tears in her eyes, recalled the difficult times she had gone through [...]. A translator by profession, she started her life over. She works for an association that helps Ukrainians integrate. She teaches English to adults and children and facilitates communication between refugees and Romanians. (*Euronews Romania*, 23 February 2023)

These women refugees' capacity for action is shaped in their interactions with those who are deprived (at least temporarily) of the capacity for action. In some of these news stories, the voices of Ukrainian refugees engaged in humanitarian action for the Ukrainian refugee community coexist with the voices of refugees who are assigned both the status of patient and agent, respectively, those who accept the tragedy they are going through but struggle to find opportunities in Romania. The woman refugee embraces this dual status, establishing a symbolic power relationship between herself, as a refugee, and the actors involved in one way or another in refugee support actions (including the journalist interviewing her):

I apologize, I don't speak Romanian well, my name is Nina, I am from Ukraine, from Odessa (the refugee's voice) [...] Last fall, she arrived in Brașov with her husband, and now they are both studying Romanian intensively. Starting next week, she will also be employed as an accountant at a company in the city. (the narrator's voice) I am ashamed that after a year I don't speak Romanian well enough, but I hope that through this intensive course I will learn better. (the refugee's voice) (*Euronews Romania*, 14 November 2023)

Some of the testimonies of women refugees who run humanitarian programs are characterized by generic representations, for example, refugees in a situation of extreme vulnerability:

I cried and begged for help [at the town hall] because most of them were women with children, most of them had never been across the border, somewhere in Europe, and they were devastated and shocked, many women don't know English well enough... (*Euronews Romania*, 14 November 2023)

Similarly, in the video reportage "How women refugees from Ukraine are rebuilding their lives" (*Recorder*, 2022), the generic representations of refugees (vulnerable groups, groups

that have found solutions) are associated with the agency of women who initiate support actions for others, overcoming institutional constraints. For example, Irina, a Romanian volunteer, has set up a program with other women to help refugee mothers from Ukraine find accommodation (“Mothers for Mothers”). Irina talks about the difficulties she has encountered, but especially about solutions, the narrative focusing on the solutions that she and her team have identified in emergency situations, under maximum pressure. As a mode of engagement, it invites the public to identify with Irina. Against the backdrop of her confession, Irina is presented as managing in real time specific situations, always under pressure (she is shown speaking on the phone looking for immediate solutions, other volunteers provide her with data about the refugees about to arrive, etc.); visually, generic individual representations (a mother with one or several children) alternate with images in which groups of women refugees, in an extremely precarious situation, dependent on humanitarian aid, await a solution to their individual case (generic collective representations). As Frosh (2011b) notes, certain structures of the broadcast video reportage results in “a kind of pseudo-witnessing through the deployment of a host of discursive and representational techniques that imply liveness, immediacy, and co-presence” (Frosh, 2011b, p. 52). The narrative present tense structures the *Recorder* reportage, projecting the audience/viewer as a “witness” to the seemingly direct experience of an *ongoing* humanitarian project, in which the valued committed presence of the volunteer as a subject position potentially exerts moral pressure on us not to limit ourselves to simply observing the situation of suffering. Another example (from *Recorder*) is that of Anastasia, a refugee who coordinates a complex program through which refugee children can continue their studies in Romania. Anastasia acquires a humanitarian and, at the same time, civic voice, self-assumed, as she describes the steps she took to obtain space in a school in Bucharest for several classes of Ukrainian children:

School is my form of resistance. Because, honestly, I don’t want all our children to go to school all over Europe. I don’t want them to pretend to go to school, I want them to return to Ukraine. I want us to raise competitive Ukrainians. (*Recorder*, 2022)

Her story is accompanied by images of mothers taking their children to their first day of school – generic representations of women refugees, respectively, groups rejoicing a moment of normality that they can finally experience.

Unlike the *Euronews Romania* and *Pro TV* news stories, there is no narrator's voice in the *Recorder* reportage. The sequences are prefaced by written, impersonal statements referring to statistical data (e.g., the number of Ukrainian refugees in Romania) – a meta-discourse that, in the discursive configuration of the reportage, makes the transition from the particular case described in the documentary to the public issue of Ukrainian refugees.

4.2. Media positionings and modes of engagement

In the news stories analysed, the television channels/journalists' positioning toward the subject (women refugees) and toward the public results primarily from the discursive construction of the narrator's empathetic voice (strongly emotional language), which identifies with the refugee's voice (while also including images evocative of the woman refugee's situation, usually generic images of the flow of refugees crossing the border, and of the destruction caused by the bombing of Ukrainian cities):

Although a year has passed, the images of despair of thousands of children, mothers and elderly people with tears in their eyes fleeing from the bombs are still vivid in everyone's memory [...] the story [of Veronica] that she is living at such a young age is difficult to hear. (*Euronews Romania*, 21 February 2023)

In other news stories, the identification of the narrator with the refugee's voice co-exists with discursive practices of objectification of the events: thus, the narrator's voice depicts the refugee's condition through descriptions or reported speech, discursively constructing the given reality of the refugees' world which "we," as witnesses, cannot avoid: "The mothers have red eyes from crying and are worried about those left behind" (*Pro TV*, 7 March 2022); "Far from home, a few women are learning their first words in Romanian [...] the teachers, who also fled Ukraine, say they can forget about the war for a few moments." (*Pro TV*, 6 April 2022). Some media positionings are articulated through other mechanisms than the narrator's voice, but these are not prevalent. For example, in some news stories, once the case of a refugee has been presented, the broader issue of Ukrainian refugees is introduced: "The integration of Ukrainians into the community is one of the challenges facing Romanian society" (*Euronews Romania*, 6 July 2023); "Ukrainian refugees who want to settle here could be the solution for aging and depopulated Romanian villages, some mayors believe." (*Pro TV*, 23 March 2022).

The construction of media positionings (especially through observations and indirect reporting of the refugee's voice) as well as representations (women refugees' confessions about how they try to rebuild their life and the corresponding forms of agency) mediate, as a trend, an ongoing reality, the public being situated in a regime of engagement with the issue of Ukrainian women refugees.

The first mode of engagement (in news discourse) is affective and solidarity oriented, with the audience as "empathetic observer" to the discourse of the woman refugee's suffering and the solutions she has found in the country of destination (alone or, more often, with the support of an organization). In terms of the narrative construction of the news, the specific situation of the woman refugee seems to have reached a point of resolution, so that responsibility, as a discursive resource for interpretation, is attributed to the women refugees' actions (their capacity for resilience) in conjunction with those of public or non-public actors, without conferring a potentially active role to the audience. The audience is assigned the position of a witness to the woman refugee's dramatic journey, a situation to which an outcome is or is about to be foreshadowed (even if it may only be partial or temporary).

The second mode of engagement (the *Recorder* video reportage) is discursively more active for the audience, more oriented to their assuming moral responsibility for potential action. Discursively, the audience is assigned the position of "witness to the direct experience," both to the involvement of Ukrainian refugees in volunteer work or in the launch of institutional projects for the refugee community, as well as in the work under pressure of Romanian volunteers/associations. The audience becomes thus a witness to a reality that requires action/ to the articulation of action as part of the structuring of a field of solidarity efforts: initiatives and projects underway, under pressure, urgency and significant personal involvement. Thus, it highlights projects dedicated to helping refugees, initiated by Romanian volunteers and how they unfold, in concrete terms, depending on the situation and the degree of urgency. This angle of visibility of women refugees, through the lens of the volunteers' individual mobilization, has the potential to orient the audience toward an active form of engagement (the volunteers' action could be transferred to each of us). Responsibility is attributed to the audience in a more explicit manner, formally speaking, mainly through the discursive construction of agency and also through discursive categories such as the topics, the time axis, the camera which sometimes address the viewer directly through visual focalization on Irina, the Romanian volunteer, who looks directly at "us," etc. Both categories of representations (and modes of engagement) reveal

the media empowerment of women refugees but in relation to different ways of exercising individual agency.

Most of the news items in the corpus represent the women refugees in a context of integration in Romania and adaptation to a new life (having the capacity, as agents, to resist the trauma caused by war and the refugee condition), but the role of the Romanian state and society is essential in this process, a fact constantly emphasized by the women refugees (hence, a specific subject position that incorporates both agency and symbolic power). The news mediates a relationship of empathetic proximity to the women refugees' situation (the emotional description of their journey that began in the bombed cities of Ukraine, supported by the refugees' voices), but in a mode of engagement where responsibility is discursively attributed to the state, humanitarian aid structures and women refugees. Even the news headlines emphasize, as a discursive effect, the context of institutional integration: "Romania, a second home for refugees from Ukraine: I am grateful to the Romanian people" (*Euronews Romania*, 13 November 2023); "Constanța, home for Ukrainian refugees: 'Romania is a wonderful place, it has given us safety'" (*Euronews Romania*, 11 December 2023); "Ukrainian women who have stayed in our country are already beginning to integrate into the labour market" (*Pro TV*, 11 March 2022).

The video reportage *Recorder* does not entirely reproduce the above trend. The reportage thus mediates the moral responsibility assumed by women refugees from Ukraine (the case of refugees carrying out humanitarian and social projects for their co-nationals) as well as a collective moral responsibility (the case of the Romanian volunteer who manages a support project for Ukrainian refugees in the first hours/days after their arrival in Romania).

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this article, I have addressed the media representations of Ukrainian women refugees and the modes of engagement they establish in relation to the public. I have situated the analysis along the lines of performative media discourse studies and, from this perspective, I have proposed a discussion of the discursive construction of representations as a way of engaging the audience by mediating a moral responsibility, including in the form of their potential involvement to actively support women refugees.

First, the research shows that the news stories about women refugees, articulated as mini-narratives, mediate a moral responsibility, but they do not configure a potentially active

role for the public. This mode of engagement can be understood through the lens of a particular media narrative and discursive pattern. In the first stage of media construction, the woman refugee's suffering is narrated through emotionally charged statements and images. In the second stage, her current situation is narrated, in which she, through her own efforts and with the help of decision-makers or non-governmental actors, has found a way to integrate into a new daily/professional life. The representations thus highlight the women refugees' journey from the dramatic moment of fleeing a besieged city to the moment of relative stability in which they have found a home, a job, etc. In most of the news stories analysed, the first part anticipates a mode of public engagement with the issue through emotional identification with the refugee's suffering, while the second part, which is more extensive in terms of time and more complex in terms of its multimodal construction, lays emphasis on the refugees' current situation, in the course of being clarified. The news items mostly reproduce a top-down view of Ukrainian refugees, in which responsibility is associated with the actions of decision-makers/humanitarian organizations/volunteers and with the refugees' actions, and only secondarily with the public's actions. This finding resonates with previous research on the "deliberate positivity" encountered in representations of refugees (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 290). It highlights the fact that, once progress is made toward resolving a crisis, the audience may believe that "active support is no longer necessary" and, thus, may position themselves as observers "at a distance" (see also Chouliaraki, 2006)⁹.

Second, a more active form of engagement is configured for the public in the *Recorder* reportage, which brings to the fore the figure of a Romanian volunteer who sets up a support program for refugee mothers (in whose place any of us could be). Here another discourse pattern is noticeable, with the camera following the volunteer in real time, while she attempts to manage extreme situations. She is thus presented in an ongoing context of urgency. The frantic pace at which the volunteer is filmed is interrupted for a few seconds by brief explanations or confessions to the camera and to us, the viewers. Thus, the construction of the news story puts moral pressure on us, as witnesses to the volunteer's social engagement, to act in more or less similar ways.

⁹ Some of the *Euronews Romanian* news stories in the corpus were also subtitled in Ukrainian, from which it can be deduced that they were also conceived as a possible resource for Ukrainian refugees in Romania. I discuss the mode of engagement mediated by these news stories in relation to Romanian audiences only. However, in relation to Ukrainian refugees as a potentially distinct audience, these news stories could mediate a different mode of engagement, e.g., action-oriented, etc.

The representations of women refugees in media discourse (news, reportage) reproduce an entrenched social discourse, that of integration (of refugees) via institutional and societal support, the latter being a generic instance mobilized through the women refugees' voices. Within the discourse of integration, multiple discursive figures of women refugees are configured, as well as relationships of proximity-distance and forms of agency, which confer on women refugees the status of both agents and subjects of symbolic power relations. Therefore, the women refugees' (dis)empowerment in the circumstances of individual and collective trauma reveal shared subject positions in the production of media representations (women as social actors in the process of integration in the destination country). In terms of individualized representations and, correspondingly, of valued subject positions (see Angermüller, 2018), what holds prominence is the figures of women refugees who have succeeded in or are in the process of configuring a new identity path in the destination country, refugees who have not only managed to integrate in one form or another, but who are also involved in helping other refugees. Individualized representations of refugees coexist with generic collective representations (groups of women crossing the border, groups of women engaged in a specific integration activity, *e.g.*, Romanian language courses, etc.), the latter being incorporated into the dispositive of the news centred on the story of a particular woman refugee.

Not least, it should be emphasized that some news stories, relevant to the mode of engagement which does not confer an active role to the public, specify, at the end of the narrative, that the woman refugee's story they have covered is also the story of other women refugees. As Frosh (2011a, p. 391) stresses, "this transient individual of television can be understood as both particular and general," and, even if in these news stories the audience is not potentially oriented toward a more salient disposition to act, they are instead warned about the scale of the phenomenon and the fact that it is a matter of public interest that concerns us all. In other words, the discursive effect of this mode of engagement relies on various coexisting ways of mediating a relationship of proximity-distance between "us" and the others based on a principle of generality.

Future research may expand the analysis of representations of Ukrainian women refugees, taking into account certain dynamics in the configuration of the public sphere in a political-media culture, and in the formation or transformation of public visibility patterns and their correlation with moral engagement and reception practices.

Acknowledgment

The author is grateful to the peer-reviewers and special section editors for their pertinent and enriching comments.

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