

International Conflicts News Coverage in Romanian Press

Andra Seceleanu

“Andrei Saguna” University of Constanta, Constanta, Romania

The paper aims to analyze the way in which international news is rather shaped by journalists and mass-media per se and affected by national level factors than by real world events or the activities of political actors. There is a lack of empirical theories and studies regarding external news. This study's purpose is to fill in this void, at least partly, by means of comparative analysis of international conflicts news coverage in Romanian press. International news coverage plays an important role in building a foreign country's image and translating foreign cultures in their countries of origin. Mass-media should have a significant influence on external news perception, given the fact that the national audience is usually distant towards international events and relies upon national media coverage. As the majority of mass-media are still focused on national audience, these will accentuate the conflicts perspective with the risk of answering national stereotypes. Numerous empirical studies show that the conflict perspective is dominant, with an accent on “domestic” news and strong accent on elite political actors. This leads to external news “decontextualization”. It claims that during crises and times of conflict, the journalists have moved the emphasis on citizens and individual actors, increasing the international events news coverage with soft news. Approximate 1,000 articles regarding the Ukraine, Turkey, and Catalonia conflicts were analyzed during research and the results showed that the attention given by the mass-media had been strongly influenced by national policies.

Keywords: international news, Romanian press, conflicts

Introduction

The communication has always accompanied international relations. James N. Danziger (1994) estimated that we cannot imagine the existence of international political society outside of communication. Globalization has also had consequences on communication flows, one of the important milestones in which they are developing being mass-media, and, more recently, social networks.

Given that more and more countries are now seeking to exploit international journalism for foreign policy purposes, this paper assesses the new role of mass-media that can, according to Cohen, take on

the role of observer of foreign news policy, the role of a participant in the foreign policy process (together with political decision-makers) and the role of catalyst for foreign news. This latter role may perhaps be the most important for the press whose agenda setting will also influence the public's agenda. (Wanta et al., 2004, p. 367)

The spreading of false news is already part of the information actions of the hybrid wars (see Ukraine) refined after 2013. The new propaganda model involves the use of a large number of traditional mass-media, fake news sites, and the use of social networks to generate fervent controlled debates. The rapidity and

Andra Seceleanu, PhD, habilitated, Professor, Socio Human Studies and Research Center, “Andrei Saguna” University of Constanta, Constanta, Romania.

continuity of information serving strategic objectives are very important and also non-engagement with objective reality. Sometimes, the news contains a kernel of truth but distort reality. Often, however, what is transmitted is pure fiction, fake photos, and staged events.

The lack of coagulation of a European public space, the treatment of foreign news in the soft-news register, with the application of national stereotypes, creates the possibility of easily influencing the citizens. Moreover, the fact that the mass-media perpetuate in the presentation of a national image; they failed to create an “international public sphere” (Böhme-Dürr, 2000, p. 46; Hafez, 2005, pp. 40-41, as cited in Fengler, 2018). In Europe, the construction (or lack of) a “European public sphere” has been largely analyzed and discussed by scholars (Beciu, 2001; Bârgăoanu, 2011).

International reports play an essential role in “building the image of a foreign country and tracing foreign cultures in their countries of origin” (Gross & Kopper, 2011, p. 129). Hafez (2002, p. 24) described external news as a “mediation system for journalistic information, during which information and news go beyond state borders”. The mass-media should have a significant influence on the perception of foreign news, taking into account that the national public is usually distant from international events and is based on the national media coverage, which cannot be in contrast to its own experience (Hafez, 2002, p. 12).

The current developments in the field of international journalism (Gross & Kopper, 2011, p. 42) have mainly affected the Central and Eastern European countries. Taking into account the vulnerability of the press in Romania as a result of the economic crisis, doubled also by digitization and the change of the media consumption models, the news rooms of the Romanian press are very limited in terms of international coverage.

As the vast majority of mass-media are still focused on the national audience, they will emphasize the perspective of the conflict (Herbert, 2001, p. 45), with the risk of responding to national stereotypes. Numerous empirical studies on national coverage show that the conflict perspective dominates, focusing on “domestic” news and a strong emphasis on elite political actors (Hafez, 2002, pp. 60-64), which leads to “de-contextualization” of external news (Hafez, 2002, p. 65). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO’s) study on the external image (Sreberny-Mohammadi, Nordenstreng, Stevenson, & Ugboajah, 1985) shows, obviously, that international correspondents are positively influenced by the geographic proximity of the country from which they are to transmit. Kamps (1998) developed a pattern to distinguish “central news”, “neighbor news”, and “peripheral news”.

The pattern of news cycling, which predicts a constant loss of media attention for a subject after reaching an initial coverage peak, was also applied to foreign correspondents. Kampf and Liebes (2013) claimed that in conflict and crisis situations, journalists have shifted the emphasis on individual citizens and actors, increasing coverage of international events by soft news.

Research Questions and Methodology

In order to analyze the way in which the Romanian press treats external information, I chose three major conflicts, which had increased significance in the foreign policy and the reconfiguration of the public space, but which also had significance for Romania. I chose two Romanian newspapers *România Liberă* and *Adevărul*, and analyzed the materials that appeared during the conflict and after the conflict.

I have selected Ukraine and Turkey as these conflicts have had an impact on security, stability, and cooperation in the Black Sea region. The region is very sensitive and extremely important from a geopolitical

point of view due to very varied factors: inter-ethnic conflicts, significant natural resources, strategic energy transport corridors, specific access, navigation regulations, etc.

“Hard” or “soft” security issues outline a volatile, insecure, and unstable situation in the Black Sea region. Potential or ongoing military conflicts between countries in the region are the main threats to stability and security, as the notion of neighborhood is the most disputed concept among states in the region. Open conflicts, even if temporarily “frozen” regardless of ethnic, religious, or border-related causes, are the main problem in the region.

The last conflict is Catalonia, selected due the similitude with internal conflict.

Conflict in Ukraine

After decades in which the international media paid little attention to political and economic developments in Ukraine, European decision-makers and public were surprised on 21 November 2013 by the Yanukovich government’s decision to abandon the planned trade agreement with the European Union, thus slowing the European integration of the country. Soon the “Euromaidan” phenomenon occurred, meaning mass protests that began in Kiev, and which turned into a fatal confrontation in January 2014 between citizens and state security forces. On 22 February 2014, President Yanukovich was dismissed, and in the following days, pro-Russian forces occupied strategic points on the Crimean Peninsula. Following Vladimir Putin’s signing of the integration of the Crimean Peninsula into Russia, the EU and the US imposed sanctions on Russia. The crisis remained on the international agenda, and an armed conflict that would benefit from Russian support began between the Ukrainian government troops and the pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine. On July 17, a flight from Malaysia Airlines MH17 was shot down over the separatist territory, causing 298 deaths aboard. Several rounds of talks in Minsk, Belarus were unsuccessful in signing an effective ceasefire agreement (BBC, 2014; Euronews, 2015; Reuters, 2014).

Conflict in Turkey

The conflict in Turkey refers to the situation at Incirlik base used by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies of Turkey to launch air strikes on the Islamic State grouping in neighboring Syria. Ankara has been angry because of Washington’s Syrian policy of supporting Kurdish Syrian militias, which it considers the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) branch fighting in Turkey, an organization that both the Turks and the Americans consider terrorist. Moreover, following the failed coup d’état, the Incirlik airbase was closed and the power was cut off. Local authorities have no longer allowed access to the Adana base.

Conflict in Catalonia

The conflict in Catalonia was selected due to the similarities with the situation in Romania regarding the Transylvania region. On Sunday, 1.10.2017, Catalonia held a referendum to declare independence. As such, the Spanish government banned the holding of the referendum on independence convoked by the Catalans and passed to concrete measures for the defense of the constitutional order, which included the defense of this order by the force bodies, in particular, the “Guardia Civil”, the equivalent of the Gendarmerie in Romania, as well and the National Police. The recourse to force to prevent the election has resulted in several hundred wounded, 844 as secessionists claim, but the figures have to be regarded with reserve as long as their policy is to victimize and denounce the repression of the Spanish government which they already denounce as a “franchist”. Nor did it result if the wounded were hospitalized or suffered serious injuries, so it is unclear what the definition of “wounded” is in the sense of the Barcelona Department of Health, controlled by secessionists.

Only two people would be seriously injured, including a 70-year-old man who had a heart attack and a person with eye injury. At the same time, 33 representatives of the law enforcement were injured.

In view of this aspect, I have dealt with the following questions:

RQ 1: Is the way of dealing with the conflict related to geographical proximity?

RQ 2: Is the way of dealing with the conflict influenced by national policies?

RQ 3: Is the way of dealing with the conflict influenced by media agenda?

Analysis of Results

Conflict in Ukraina

Although in Romania, the country formerly under the influence of the Soviet Union, the fear of Russian aggression should have appeared very explicitly, but the number of articles published in the two newspapers was very small. Only 29 materials were identified during the analyzed period. The very low coverage in Romania can be explained on the one hand, by the lack of foreign correspondents and the lack of resources to cover international news; on the other hand, because external news is predominantly covered on TV.

Table 1

Topic Areas for Main Topics, Additional Topics, and All Topics Combined

Addressed topics	Main topic	Additional topics	Combined topics
Politics	16	12	15
Street opinions	3	5	5
Economy	4	10	5
Mass-media	0		
Daily life	3		3
History/Ethnicity/Culture	1	2	1
Strategic involvements	2		
Other	0		

Generally, almost 50% of the articles analyzed were published in the general news section of the newspapers, and more than 25% of the articles were related to the use of opinion articles. In general, most articles have been published during the referendum in eastern Ukraine. The articles in the economy section were published in a period of conflict, which could be explained by the economic importance of the area. Romanian newspapers had at least one image element in each article. Overall, 18.1% of the articles were published during the conflict-increasing period and 38.5% during the Crimean referendum, but only 24.0% in the eastern Ukraine referendum and 19.4% during the elections, making the cycles of attention clearly visible, with a peak at the time of the Crimean referendum.

However, the neighbors news “pattern” seems only partially applicable to explain patterns of coverage in the conflict in Ukraine; instead, political and economic factors seem to have a considerable impact on the media. The coverage of the conflict in Ukraine differs from the general reporting patterns, but I found evidence, as the literature suggests, that coverage has focused on soft news, and the analyzed articles showed a high percentage of non-elite actors, as well as attention for “street” events. Our results can be interpreted as proof of the lack of a “European public sphere”, as long as EU actors/EU institutions have received less attention in the newspapers.

Table 2

Focus on Political Topic Areas as Main Topics, Additional Topics, and All Topics Combined

Political topic area	Main topic	Additional topic	Combined
International politics	5	3	6
Ukrainian politics	4	1	1
Russian politics	2	1	1
Politics country of newspaper	2	2	4
EU politics	1	1	2
Politics USA	1	1	0
Politics other countries	0	0	0
NATO politics	1	3	1

International and Russian politics are the topics that have been addressed mainly because of Vladimir Putin's dominant position. An EU policy actor was mentioned in only one article.

Conflict in Turkey

The conflict in Turkey has been poorly covered, and only 49 articles have been published, of which 57% during the conflict period. Again, foreign correspondents were absent, most of the articles being of opinion and having an international media source. This also allowed the emergence and growth of news on the move of the nuclear arsenal in Romania, which was widely debated on TV. The news was taken over only in two articles in the written press. In this situation, the Russian press has also been an influential factor in dealing with news.

Table 3

Topic Areas for Main Topics, Additional Topics, and All Topics Combined

Addressed topics	Main topic	Additional topics	Combined topics
Politics	16	19	21
Street opinions	1	1	2
Economy	6	10	14
Mass-media	0	2	1
Daily life	1	2	3
History/Ethnicity/Culture	0	1	1
Strategic involvements	25	14	7

The vast majority of the addressed topics were related to strategic and political implications, with the other topics almost unaddressed.

Table 4

Focus on Political Topic Areas as Main Topics, Additional Topics, and All Topics Combined

Political topic area	Main topic	Additional topic	Combined
International politics	4	5	3
Turkish politics	3	2	3
Russian politics	1	2	2
USA politics	1	2	5
EU politics	3	2	2
NATO politics	1	2	0
Romanian politics	3	4	6

In these cases, the most important debate was in TV and social media and we have a very clear case at fake news. The moving of NATO base in Romania was announced, and the news was quickly spread and discussed in TV shows.

Foreign news is a very complex product because it interferes with the political context of Romania, with the way journalists refer to the external environment as well as to the relations changeable) existing between the country of origin and the foreign countries

Conflict in Catalonia

Until May 2018, 427 articles on the Catalan crisis were published, of which 63 articles (14.75%) during the independence referendum, the rest being post-event subjects. The special interest given to the subject is due to the similarities with the tensions in Transylvania, as a matter of fact 17.56% of the articles directly referred to this issue. Another reason is related to the large number of Romanians working in Spain who were directly affected by the state of insecurity and the economic problems inherent to the crisis. Even though there were no foreign correspondents at this event and no resources were allocated to cover international news, it was possible to access local information sources, even if they were not official sources.

Journalists and news sources are strategic actors and, as such, their behavior is essential. From the point of view of journalists, news sources serve different purposes. Journalists need news sources that (a) can provide easily accessible and high-value information; (b) are available, reliable, and authoritative; (c) reduce uncertainty and provide verification of articles; (d) offer various views; (e) help analyze and interpret events and processes; (f) grant legitimacy to news; and (g) serve as a point of identification and can be expressed in ways that fit the environment (Manning, 2001; Reich, 2009; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978).

According to Reich (2009), sources tend to have the advantage in the news discovery phase, while journalists tend to have an advantage in the public information phase. This suggests that sources could have a greater influence on the media agenda, while journalists have a greater influence on the mass-media. Since most articles are opinion articles, we can speak of a predominantly interpretative journalistic style. When journalistic style is more interpretative, journalists have even more influence on news. As Patterson (2000) mentioned: “The interpretative style gives more power to journalists, allowing them to have more control over the message” (p. 250). The way in which journalistic style can be interpretative is another indicator of media coverage, i.e., the way in which the media content is changed by its needs, requirements, and logic, rather than those of social and political institutions and actors (Brants & Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Patterson, 1993).

Table 5

Topic Areas for Main Topics, Additional Topics, and All Topics Combined

Addressed topics	Main topic	Additional topic	Combined topics
Politics	81	98	158
Street opinions	61	60	98
Economy	58	71	48
Mass-media	3	10	15
Daily life	61	51	29
History/Ethnicity/Culture	58	41	41
Strategic involvements	45	56	18
Other	60	40	20

The way in which media content plays a role in the social construction of significance, with emphasis on heroes built by the press—positive or negative—on language strategies, making mediocrity a star, tolerance of assimilation capacity, functions specific to the new public space at the intersection of the journalistic field, the political field, and the cultural field, understood in a broad sense, represented another subject of analysis.

At a certain time, the entire analysis was focused at Carles Puigdemont, presented like a heroes—both way positive and negative, and skipped the meaning of the conflict. Analyses of the conflict in a soft news register are the way of address to a large audience and are related with tabloidization phenomena at the Romanian press.

In general, almost 60% of the analyzed articles were published in the general news sections of newspapers. Since many of the articles have been published after the conflict, they do not respect cycles of attention, which leads to increased attention to the subject mainly due to national policies and direct interest of citizens.

Another aspect that led to a new peak moment of attention was the news on the Romanian citizenship of Carles Puigdemont's wife.

The neighbors news "pattern" (Kamps) seems to be applicable only if we extrapolate the meaning in the sense of approaching the Romanian community in Spain, estimated to be the largest.

Table 6

Focus on Political Topic Areas as Main Topics, Additional Topics, and All Topics Combined

Political topic area	Main topic	Additional topic	Combined
International politics	16	18	20
Spanish politics	10	12	16
Russian politics	3	2	5
Romanian politics	31	35	86
EU politics	12	11	16
Politics other countries	9	20	15

What is interesting is that in this case the propaganda device of Russia, managed to throw in the Romanian media issues that have grown internally conflicting about the appointment of Transylvania as an autonomous region.

Conclusions

There were clear differences in the treatment of the three international conflicts selected in the Romanian press in terms of the magnitude of their approach. In all cases, the economic situation of the Romanian media has made its mark in the sense that foreign correspondents have not been used but sometimes local but not official sources have been preferred as foreign media sources.

This is why most articles have used interpretive rather than descriptive style, which has led to greater media control over the message being transmitted. In the case of the conflict in Turkey, this has led to the emergence of fake news.

In the case of the conflict in Ukraine and Turkey, the pattern of cycling news but not of the neighborhood was respected, in the sense that these countries are much closer to Romania and the amplitude should have been much higher taking into account the fears of the population related to the possibility of escalating military conflicts at the border.

The growing interest in the crisis in Catalonia demonstrates that the Romanian press is oriented towards the national audience and responds to national stereotypes. In dealing with the event, the conflict perspective dominated, focusing on “domestic” news and with a strong focus on elite political actors (Hafez, 2002, pp. 60-64), which led to the “de-contextualization” of external news (Hafez, 2002, p. 65).

The media should have a significant influence on the perception of foreign news, taking into account that the national public is usually distant from international events and counts on the national media coverage, which cannot be in contrast with its own experience (Hafez, 2002, p. 12).

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