



# Conflict Representations: Analyzing the Polarization of Men's and Women's Images in Romanian Media Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to analyze according to what criteria the image of woman is reflected in the news regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war in the Romanian mass media using content analysis, critical discourse analysis and imagology as research methods. The starting point of our research is the compilation of a representative corpus of 750 news texts published in 2022, from which we will analyze those containing keywords referring to the female gender in the title in order to highlight the approach used in the media discourse to frame the image of women during military conflicts. In our analysis we will consider three main directions: (1) a representation of the image of the woman using the thematic classification and the concepts of front line, respectively homefront, (2) a polarization of the image of the woman compared to the image of the man, and (3) a panorama of the way in which the two belligerent states of Ukraine and Russia are reflected in the Romanian press from an ethnic and a gender outlook.

**Keywords:** women, Russian-Ukrainian conflict, image, polarization, Critical Discourse Analysis

**Citation suggestion:** Bâlc, Denisa-Maria and Iulia-Maria Ticărau. "Conflict Representations: Analyzing the Polarization of Men's and Women's Images in Romanian Media Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian War." *Transilvania*, no. 9 (2024): 77-83.  
<https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2024.09.08>.

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### Preliminaries

Military conflicts have a major impact locally and also globally through the economic, political and social changes they cause. Since 24 February 2022, with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia's troops, society has entered a phase of uncertainty and fear, fueled by the media, which is an important factor in the generation and distribution of information. While men are active pillars of the military conflict, women, less represented in the media discourse, also experience decisive impacts of the conflicts, as Lindsey German suggests:

"War is a brutal and forceful factor in bringing about social change. Wars have been and are a major source of danger and dislocation, which impacts disproportionately on women. But they can also mark a breakdown of traditional values and allow women more freedom, ushering in changes in their lives."<sup>1</sup>

All these aspects of the representation of the conflict and its effect on the population are also reflected

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1. Lindsey German, *How a Century of War Changed the Lives of Women* (London: PlutoPress, 2013), 201.

in the Romanian journalistic media, but the aim of this article is to focus in particular on the various images of women generated by the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in relation to the male-centric imaginary.

The aim of this study is to analyze the way in which women are described in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, problematizing the differences in participant representation in terms of ethnicity and gender. By comparing the political, military and social discourse, we focus on the images of women and men presented in the media discourse in order to identify a hegemonic relationship at the news level, and in order to emphasize that, regardless of the social status (being politicians, entrepreneurs, campaigners, activists, volunteers even refugees establishing new lives for themselves and their children), women are not “passive” in military conflicts. As research methods we use thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis and imagology. Through the thematic analysis, we sought to highlight the types of news about women in the corpus compiled to determine the predominant female image by referring to the role played in the war. Simultaneously with this approach, we used critical discourse analysis, more precisely, Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive theory applied at the macro textual level, with an emphasis on how social dominance and inequality are promulgated through discourse. This research is also sustained by imagology, which is used to analyze linguistically constructed images only. We apply them to a corpus of 750 news items published between 24 February 2022 and 31 December 2022 in Romania’s mainstream channels: hotnews.ro, stirileprotv.ro, libertatea.ro, stiripesurse.ro, romaniatv.net and digi24.ro. They are classified by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism as the most accessed by Romanians since the beginning of the conflict.<sup>2</sup> An advanced search based on relevance and keywords was used to select the news texts that covered women. From the corpus of 750 news items collected, we found 76 news items containing keywords in the title referring to the female gender.

Thematically, we assigned the 76 news items into four categories: political, military, social and various news, with these four being the only categories found in the corpus analyzed. According to John Hartley, the first three categories fall into the class of hard news, which “are characterized by conflict and violence”<sup>3</sup>, and the last one represents category belongs to the category of soft news, referred to in the critical literature as world news. Political news items (n=9) includes information about women in domestic and foreign policy, such as Maia Sandu, Diana Șoșoacă, Simona Cojocaru, Giorgia Meloni, Irina Vereșciuk, Emine Džaparova and Maria Zaharova, based on their statements on the conflict situation in Ukraine. Military news (n=20) focuses on three main areas: women’s direct participation on the battlefield, the representation of women as victims of war, and women’s testimonies and statements on the military conflict. The third category, the most numerous, is social news (n=25), covering topics such as migration, volunteering, sexual assault, livelihoods and motherhood. The last category is based on a heterogeneous perspective on celebrities that indirectly influences how conflict is perceived by civilians.

### **I. Images of women in relation to the notion of the front**

Analysing the image of women in the four thematic categories presented above, we can extend the classification into two major classes, home front women and front line women, according to the theory set out by Susan R. Grayzel in the book *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War*, and based on the criterion of women’s direct or indirect participation in the conflict. The home front falls into the soft news category, being the most representative in the corpus analyzed, while the front line is included in the hard news category, being less represented. “The term home front began to be used in English during World War I, intensifying the use of the war front structure as intrinsically masculine and the term home front as exclusively feminine.”<sup>4</sup> This “idea of separate fronts helped to maintain the status quo of gender identities and enabled the reinterpretation of popular assumption about the appropriate roles of men and women during the war without threatening the social order”<sup>5</sup>, but nowadays this distinction is realized through classification is changed by the active presence of women on both sides, changing the stereotypical view that women have mainly a passive role in military conflicts. The two classes mentioned above can

2. See <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/romania>.

3. John Hartley, *Discursul știrilor*, translated by Monica Mitarcă (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 47.

4. Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 11.

5. *Ibid.*, 11.



in turn be divided into several subcategories<sup>6</sup> in the news analyzed as summarized here for what we call *Images of women in the corpus*: **Home front women**: Activist/ Voices of change; Leadership role; Victim; Flesh and blood (mother/ daughter/ wife); Business owner; Humanitarian; Sexualized woman; **Front line women**: Combatant; Military nurse; Victim; Sexualized woman.

Thus, the *front line* women are reflected in the four representations: **combatant, military nurse, victim**, and **sexualized woman**. The first one presents women on the battlefield, in news stories such as "The Ukrainian army now has 38,000 women / How many of them are fighting on the front line against the Russian soldiers"<sup>7</sup> (*hotnews.ro*) or "Almost 40,000 women have joined the Ukrainian Army. How many are fighting on the front line" (*stirileprotv.ro*), or women in senior positions in the army, "Men called up for conscription in Dagestan refuse to go to war and argue with a female recruiting officer: *You go and fight!*" (*libertatea.ro*). The second representation outlines a woman directly involved in the war by providing medical aid to the wounded, an image perpetuated over time by the virtues she embodies: "Paramedic Yulia Paievska, liberated from the hands of the Russian forces" (*libertatea.ro*), and the third and most frequent representation is that of the victim, murdered, mutilated and imprisoned, with women whose testimonies, through the intensity of the emotions conveyed, are intended to condemn the war: "Daria Kurdel, Ukrainian sports dance champion, was killed in the Russian bombing of the town of Krivoi Rog" (*libertatea.ro*), "Oksana, a Ukrainian nurse who lost her legs in an explosion, honoured by Volodimir Zelenski. *God let me live for my children*" (*libertatea.ro*), "A woman was a captive in the hell of Azovstal, passed through the hands of the Russians, and now she has given birth to a baby girl" (*stiripesurse.ro*). The last category is represented by women seen as a sexual object, which reinforces the gendered stereotype since women on the front are represented through references to their looks and not skills: "A drop of beauty in a sea of blood – Ukrainian female soldiers are all the rage on the internet" (*stiripesurse.ro*). The coverage presents women combatants on the front as few (not radically challenging the gendered distinction), as nurses caring for soldiers (reinforcing the caring role of women) and as victims (easy targets). Editors represent women this way in order to strengthen the social norms and keep the social order regarding the gendered barriers. The power relations between the social classes represented at the level of the news in the analyzed corpus can also be highlighted through the CDA categories, which "focuses on studying the ways in which power, abuse and inequality are instituted, reproduced and legitimized through discourse, in sociopolitical contexts," through the use, in this study, especially of passive constructions, of participial adjectives and directive acts that emphasize the superiority of the male over the female in military conflicts: *was killed, liberated, You go and fight!*

The second category, the *home front* women, more numerous than the *front line* women, can also be divided into several subcategories. The first subcategory is the **activist woman, or the voice of change**, campaigning for an end to the war, political equity and support for Ukraine: "EXCLUSIVE. The author of the novel 'The Tattooist of Auschwitz' talks about the war in Ukraine: *It makes me angry that history repeats itself and we allow one man to do so much harm*" (*libertatea.ro*). The image of the **leader and opinion-maker woman** also appears: "Zaharova asks Romania to publicly admit sending arms to Kiev: "From now on it's clear what 'humanitarian' aid means" (*libertatea.ro*), at the antipode to that of a psychological and physical **victim** of sexual aggression caused by forced migration and the presence of Russian soldiers in Ukraine: "Father Agaton Oprișan, accused of sexually assaulting a Ukrainian woman, defends himself: he touched her *only as a father*" (*stirileprotv.ro*), "Three Russian soldiers who raped a mother and her daughter in Ukraine, beaten with chairs by their own comrades and superiors" (*stirileprotv.ro*). It is also representative the image of the woman as a **mother**, which we analyzed through the classification made by Mihai S. Rusu in the study "Fascist Femininities: Models of Womanhood in the Romanian National Legionary State": *birth-giving motherhood, nurturing motherhood, nourishing motherhood* and *social motherhood*.

Applied to the articles identified in the Romanian media reporting on the Russian-Ukrainian war, it can be seen that the image of the woman as a mother falls only into the category of *social motherhood*, which "covers those messages encouraging women to extend their maternal instinct beyond the socio-biological microcosm of the family to exert their mothering care over the vulnerable categories

6. These subcategories were labeled by the authors in the process of thematic analysis.

7. News' titles were translated from Romanian into English by the authors.

of the wider society.”<sup>8</sup> This subcategory is represented in news stories such as “All mothers in Russia hate Putin. A few days after saying this, a woman found out that her son died in Ukraine” (digi24.ro). The other categories are not in our corpus, but there is another category which is not mentioned in Mihai S. Rusu’s classification, namely *a cry for help motherhood*: “A mother in Russia saw her son, a soldier captured by the Ukrainian army, on TV: Which door should I knock on to take my child home?” (libertatea.ro). This category also includes the daughter, often associated with the image of the victim, and the wife, presented as a moral and emotional support for the family.

The news reports presenting the image of **women entrepreneurs** adapting to the new social conditions following migration by opening small businesses, especially in the service sector, are also suggestive at the corpus level: “Housewives from Ukraine started small businesses with traditional food in Romania. Let’s see what is the price of the food” (*stirileprotv.ro*) or that of the **humanitarian** who offers support and counselling to refugees, paying even with her own life: “Psychologist from Ukraine who offers free therapy to autistic refugee children: How can I help other people if I just sit and cry?” (*libertatea.ro*). The same category encompasses the women who gives financial support to migrants in material need: “Fuego’s ex-girlfriend, now a PNL sub-prefect, donates her salary to Ukrainian refugees” (*stiripesurse.ro*), as well as a **sexual object**, valorized by emphasizing provocative or ironized physical beauty, an image meant to contrast with the horrors of war: “Russian girls run out of Botox as a result of war” (*stiripesurse.ro*).

## II. The woman-man relation

Regarding the woman-man relationship, the news reports under discussion highlight that “women are constituted, variously, as mirrors to male war-making (a kind of civic cheerleader) or as a collective ‘other’, embodying the softer values and virtues out of place within, and subversive of, *realpolitik*,”<sup>9</sup> a stereotype that persists to this day in both the media discourse and the literary discourse to which Jean Bethke Elshtain refers. This stereotype influences public perception of the roles played by women and men in war, highlighting the fact that women are vulnerable and substantially emotionally affected by the conflict. Comparing the images of the two genders represented in the media, the image of the male gender is thematically categorized in the 76 news stories identified with women-related keywords as follows:

*Images of men in the corpus according to the thematic category of the news*

Thematic category	Categories	Sub-categories
Political news	Politician	Presidents, Romanian politicians, Foreign politicians
Military news	Soldier	Ukrainian soldiers Russian soldiers
Social news	Flesh and blood	Father, Son ,Husband, Other relatives
	Sexual aggressors	Russian aggressor, Ukrainian aggressor, Romanian aggressor
	Civilian	Possible war recruit, Philanthropist, Business owner

The political news shows the image of the politician represented by heads of state, ministers, prime ministers and other categories related to the political world. Most news stories are about Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin, presented in opposition.<sup>10</sup> Zelensky is portrayed as a symbol of empathy to the people through his active presence on the frontline, his messages of encouragement to the Ukrainian people and his calls for an end to the war: “President Zelenski is also on the battlefield, fighting together with his country’s military and unwilling to surrender to the dreaded Russian enemy.” (“The

8. Mihai S. Rusu, “Fascist Femininities: Models of Womanhood in the Romanian National Legionary State,” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, no. 42 (2020): 25.

9. Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Reflections on War and Political Discourse: Realism, Just War, and Feminism in a Nuclear Age,” *Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (1985): 42.

10. Our data confirm the representations that dominate other outlets. See: Richard Wood, *Psychoanalytic Reflections on Vladimir Putin. The Cost of Malignant Leadership* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022); Geoffrey Robertson, *The Trial of Vladimir Putin* (Biteback Publishing, 2024); Andrew L. Urban, Chris McLeod, *Zelensky: The Unlikely Ukrainian Hero Who Defied Putin and United the World* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2022); Lisa Rogak, Daisy Gibbons, *Volodymyr Zelensky – In His Own Words* (New York: Pegasus Book, 2022).



wife of Ukraine's vice-president has gone to war. Her gesture made world headlines!" – romaniatv.net). Compared to the Ukrainian president, Vladimir Putin is described in the women-related reporting as a tyrant, a ruthless leader and a possible enemy for other countries not directly involved in the war. For example, in "Giorgia Meloni, the elected head of the future Italian government, said on Friday that Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian regions` has no legal or political value` and would show that Vladimir Putin `threatens` European security [...]" ("Giorgia Meloni: Putin once again demonstrates his neo-imperialist vision of the Soviet character threatening Europe's security" – *digi24.ro*). Regarding military news, one can observe a polarization of the image of the soldier, dichotomously presented depending on nationality. Thus, the image of Russian soldiers is the same as that of ruthless invaders who kill in cold blood: "Child executed by Russian soldiers in front of his mother. They pretended to let them go and even waved at them. Then they opened fire" (*digi24.ro*), or who are victims of revenge: "Back on the case of the grandmother with the poisoned cakes for the Russian soldiers. Ukraine's secret service confirms other cases" (*romaniatv.net*). In contrast, the Ukrainian soldiers are portrayed as defenders who are willing to sacrifice for the people: "His wife, on the other hand, who went to Portugal with their young child, keeps asking him: `Maybe you could come somehow?` To which he replies: `How could I come? Even if all the borders were open, I couldn't go because I wouldn't be able to look the boys who are fighting, my comrades, in the eye`" ("Life in Kyiv after six months of war. A young woman's testimony: `Every time I leave the house carrying three essential things`" – *digi24.ro*). The social theme can be divided into news about the image of the man in the family environment, the aggressor and civilians. The *flesh and blood* category includes news about fathers, husbands, sons and close relatives directly affected by the war through family dramas suffered by both Russians and Ukrainians. Although the image of motherhood is frequently associated in the media discourse with emotion, this is also seen in news stories that also focus on fatherhood: "Liza's father, Artem Dmytriev, remained silent, tears falling down his face." ("`Evil cannot win: Killed by a Russian missile, Liza was buried in the town of Vinnytsia`" – *stirileprotv.ro*). The image of the son focuses on three aspects: victim, moral support and means of propaganda, while the image of the husband is doubled by that of the politician or soldier. The sex offender is mentioned in a number of news reports, with representatives from multiple camps: Russian, Ukrainian and even Romanian aggressors. In all three cases, the victims are Ukrainian women, abused both in their own country and in the countries to which they migrated: "Father Agaton Oprișan, accused of sexually assaulting a Ukrainian woman, defends himself: he touched her `only as a father`" (*stirileprotv.ro*), "Castrated men, raped women and abused children: How Russian soldiers terrorize Ukrainians. `This is just the tip of the iceberg`" (*digi24.ro*).

Last but not least, civilians are presented as future conscripts who refuse to go to war, "Men called up for conscription in Dagestan refuse to go to war and argue with a female recruiting officer: `You go and fight!`" (*libertatea.ro*), philanthropists, "Who is Princess Diana's ex-boyfriend who now helps rescue Ukrainian refugees" (*stirileprotv.ro*) and entrepreneurs. Comparing the image of women and men in the Romanian media, one can see that "the news is a reflection, in short, of our gendered society, and thus naturally frames men and women within the boundaries of societal gender stereotypes."<sup>11</sup> These stereotypes are shaped in particular by the *aggressor* (male) – *victim* (female) polarization in the two perspectives, military and social. From the military perspective, there is a predominance of the *strong* - *weak* opposition, and many news reports present women as victims of war and exploitation, as opposed to men, who are predominantly associated with the brave combat. From a social perspective, the same hegemonic relationship is maintained, highlighted by the image of women as sexual objects as opposed to men as abusers. This is also noted by Ginette Verstraete, who says that "Stereotypical gender arrangements and the binary images of men and women that they sustain - men are supposed to be strong, rational, and to operate in the public sphere while women are seen as weak, emotional and ideally suited for the private sphere - enable subjects to order their many complex interrelations along recognizable terms, often to the advantage of men."<sup>12</sup> However, the image of women in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict breaks down these stereotypes at times through their active presence in the war and on the political stage, where they show courage and determination, and the image of man is also represented in opposition to all stereotypes, often indulging in aggressive acts, being irrational and abusers.

11. Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, *Gendered news: media coverage and electoral politics in Canada* (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2013), 110.

12. Ginette Verstraete, "Gender," in *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Character*, ed. Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007), 329.

### III. The image of the two warring groups from an ethnic perspective

Extending the polarization to the ethnic category level, we comparatively analyzed the way in which the image of Ukrainian and Russian women and the image of Ukrainian and Russian men is reflected.

“The nationality represented (the *spected*) is silhouetted in the perspectival context of the representing text or discourse (the *spectant*). For that reason, imagologists will have particular interest in the dynamics between those images which characterize the Other (*hetero-images*) and those which characterize one’s own, domestic identity (*self-images* or *auto-images*). Both *spected* and *spectant* are usually categorized in national terms, but in both cases the scholar will be wary of seeing in this appellation a straightforward reflection of empirical real-world collectives.”<sup>13</sup>

Based on this statement, we shall analyze the way *the spected* is reflected in the Russian-Ukrainian *spectant*, focusing on *hetero-images*, presented from the perspective of Romanian journalists, **in what we call *Ethnic hetero-images: comparative analysis: Ukrainian women:*** politician; soldier; victim; military nurse; war prisoner; patriot; grieving mother; young frightened civil; struggling for life; entrepreneur; sexual abused women; sexual worker; volunteer; public figure; immigrant worker; sexualized women; **Russian women:** victim; pacifist/ protestors against the war; mother (grieving mother, pacifist mother, and indoctrinator); public figure; frivolous women; **Ukrainian men:** soldier; sexual abuser; **Russian men:** politician; soldier; victim; sexual abuser; aggressor; traitor.

Thus, we noticed that in the selected news items there are predominantly images of Ukrainian women as opposed to Russian men. On the other hand, Russian women and Ukrainian men are poorly represented in this sample. Another point that catches one’s attention is that Russian women, contrary to expectations, are largely presented as pacifists or protesters against Putin’s invasive policies.<sup>14</sup> The pacifist image of the Russian mother is complemented by the grieving mother and a single case of a mother indoctrinating her own child in support of Russian policy: “In Russia, a mother cut her son’s hair in the shape of the letter Z, the symbol of Putin’s offensive in Ukraine” (*libertatea.ro*). In contrast to Russian women, Russian men appear as ruthless soldiers, aggressors, abusers and deserters, rarely as victims, which suggests that they support the military conflict, unlike women who condemn it. Most news reports present images of Ukrainian women, mainly as victims and refugees, but also as patriots through female military fighters and other social groups who, by various means, fight against the conflict.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Ukrainian men are mentioned in very few news items in the analyzed corpus, generally presented as soldiers and are not singled out.

#### Concluding remarks

On the basis of the previous classifications, through a critical analysis of Romanian media discourse we can see that the image of women as an active presence in the conflict is still poorly reflected in the media, and the focus is on social aspects, tangential to the conflict. Thus, the content analysis conducted highlights the fact that there is more *soft* news than *hard* news, minimizing the role of women in the war. Gender stereotypes persist, and this is highlighted in the comparative analysis between the image of men and women, which reinforces the fragile-strong polarization. The news analyzed shows that in the Romanian media discourse journalists are pro-Ukrainian, focusing on providing aid to refugees, the way Ukrainian women have integrated into Romanian society, and condemning the atrocities committed against women and the Ukrainian people. From the point of view of the hegemonic and ethnic relationship, there is a presence of the superiority of Ukrainians over Russians and of men over women in the media discourse of the selected corpus.

In conclusion, we have analyzed in this article the way in which the image of women is represented in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict along three axes. The first axis is based on women’s direct or indirect

13. Joep Leerssen, „Imagology: history and method”, în *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Character*, ed. Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi, 2007), 42.

14. For a better understanding of news value of unexpectedness, see M. Bednarek and H. Caple, *The discourse of news values: How news organizations create ‘newsworthiness’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

15. For a broader perspective on the importance of communication in social crises, see Samuel Bălc, *Perspective ale comunicării în contextul crizelor sociale [Perspectives of communication in the context of social crises]*, Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință, Editions IARSIC, France, 2016.



participation in the conflict, as classified by Susan R. Grayzel. The second axis followed the polarization women – men, which highlighted the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, which are also found in the third line of research, at the ethnic level, where the two conflicting groups, Ukrainians and Russians, were analyzed. Regarding the way in which the image of women is reflected in the media discourse of the mainstream sources analyzed, we believe that this overview illustrates the hegemonic relationship existing at the level of society, which needs to be re-evaluated. It is well known that mainstream press (not radical or alternative) is always reinforcing the society's norms, however the newness of this article consists in highlighting this aspect through linguistic strategies of labelling, taking agency away from women, invoking stereotypes (mother, nurse) rather than breaking them but also by highlighting the fact that the image of women is mainly presented as external pawns of the military conflict.

**Acknowledgement:** This work was funded by the EU's NextGenerationEU instrument through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania - Pillar III-C9-I8, managed by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, within the project entitled *The coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Polish, Romanian and English-language media: A comparative critical discourse study with recommendations for journalism training (CORECON)*, contract no. 760244/28.12.2023, code CF 25/27.07.2023.

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