

Article

## Between Conflict and Solidarity: Pandemic Media Coverage of Romanian Intra-EU Labour Migrants

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### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic affected Romanian intra-EU labour migrants in a particular way and challenged the established themes associated with and the social roles assigned to them in news discourses. During the first wave of the pandemic, Covid-19 hotspots were reported abroad in Romanian migrant communities, the most notorious example being at the Tönnies factory in Germany. The pandemic brought to prominence the precarious working conditions of labour migrants employed in agriculture and especially in the food industry. Wider discussions, conflicts, and solidarity actions were generated around this topic. In the present study, we identify the main themes and topics present in the Romanian media coverage of Romanian labour migrants, as well as the way foreign, particularly German, media perspectives were integrated into and domesticated in the Romanian coverage. Findings show that both the Romanian and German media used, to a certain extent, the media coverage of this exceptional pandemic situation to invite reflection on the general social costs of migration and on the responsibility of political actors in the migrants' country of origin, in their country of destination, and at the level of EU institutions. However, the perspective of the migrants was underrepresented in the media coverage.

### Keywords

diaspora; international news flow; intra-EU migration; labour migration; news representations

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic affected Romanian labour migrants in a particular way. A significant number returned home at the beginning of March 2020 from foreign countries, especially from Italy, where they faced a dramatic health crisis and sudden unemployment. The Romanian government was thus put under pressure to find solutions to prevent the spread of the virus in the returning migrants' home country. Furthermore, in search of new job opportunities, they travelled during the lockdown to work in the agriculture and food industries in other countries, where Covid-19 hotspots were reported in Romanian communities. In May 2020, the

European Parliament adopted a resolution on European protection of cross-border and seasonal workers in the context of the Covid-19 crisis (European Parliament Resolution of 19 June 2020, 2020).

On 17 June 2020, disturbing news caused concern in Germany and abroad. The largest Covid-19 hotspot in Europe at that time was discovered at the Tönnies slaughterhouse, in North Rhine-Westphalia, where most workers are migrants. The international media, the German media, and the media in the workers' countries of origin, including Romania, focused heavily on this story. The growing cases of infections in the countries of destination represented the context in which media attention focused on the situation of the foreign workers. Although

poor working conditions in the meat-processing industry were nothing new, the pandemic sparked wider discussions, conflicts, and solidarity actions.

Before the pandemic, Romanian and foreign media coverage of Romanian labour migration focused primarily on issues related to the freedom of movement for workers, specifically in the contexts of Romania's joining the EU and of Brexit. Romanians abroad also tended to appear in foreign news published in Romania as witnesses of extraordinary events such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters, as criminals, or, to a lesser extent, as local celebrities, as was the case with Romanians running for a mandate in local or national institutions abroad (Mogoş et al., 2021). At the same time, in the domestic political arena, the diaspora gradually acquired a positive role as a social actor, featuring in public discourses as voters for parties representing pro-European values and even playing a decisive role in elections (Kolumban, 2020.) The pandemic not only posed new challenges but also added new thematic dimensions to news coverage of Romanians abroad, particularly concerning labour migration.

In the EU, Romania has one of the highest rates of intra-EU migration, a complex and dynamic phenomenon. The most common destinations are Western European countries such as Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and the UK (Anghel et al., 2016). Among new member states, Romania and Poland are the countries of origin of the largest intra-EU migrant groups (OECD, 2018). Some Romanians are circular migrants, working temporary or seasonal jobs in other countries, whereas others have decided to permanently leave their country. Labour migration has a large economic, political, cultural, and social impact on the whole of Romanian society (Balaban & Huţuleac, 2021; Vasile, 2014). Moreover, domestic media discussions of this phenomenon contribute to both the construction of labour migrants as social agents and the justification of policy measures (Mădroane, 2016). Understanding the media coverage of labour migration, especially during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, is therefore central to comprehending the wider media and political discourses surrounding labour migration, with implications beyond the discursive construction of labour migration, including the representation of domestic, foreign, and EU actors and institutions in the news.

Considering migration as a transnational field (Levitt & Schiller, 2004), the present research aims to identify the main dimensions along which the topic of Romanian intra-EU labour migration was reflected in Covid-19 pandemic news coverage in Romania, the migrants' country of origin. Germany was one of the preferred destinations for Romanian workers in the period between March and July 2020, and several events that received wide coverage in the Romanian media took place in Germany and were covered with reference to German media. The most notorious event was the above-mentioned Covid-19 outbreak at the Tönnies meat factory. The international

media, the German media, and the media in the workers' countries of origin, including Romania, covered this story. The high number of infections represented the context in which media in the countries of destination focused on the situation of the foreign workers. Although poor working conditions in the meat-processing industry were nothing new, the pandemic sparked wider discussions, conflicts, and solidarity actions related to this issue. In our research, we focused on how the perspectives of German media were integrated into domestic Romanian coverage. Thus, we aim to contribute to the research on labour migration in times of crisis by concentrating on how news media covered a transnational phenomenon and acted as an agent of international news flow.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In today's world, migration is a complex issue that affects different levels of society in both the home and destination countries of migrants. Research on the motives underlying migration within the EU has revealed a diverse mix of economic, family-related, social, cultural, and educational factors (Man & Verwiebe, 2010). Even though Romanians were already migrating to Western Europe before the fall of communism in 1989 (Diminescu, 2009; Şerban & Voicu, 2010), the largest outflow of migrants has occurred over the last three decades, as barriers to intra-EU migration were gradually removed for Romanian citizens. This "migration within Europe" is systematically supported, both directly and indirectly, by legislation, economic agents, and existing networks of migrants. EU programmes based on the principle of freedom of movement and the recognition of foreign qualifications have contributed to the migration of the labour force between EU member states (Verwiebe et al., 2014). However, there is no single "prototypical" intra-EU migrant (Castro-Martín & Cortina, 2015). The current migration situation cannot be described by the traditional long-term migration model (Eisenstadt, 1953), and Romanian intra-EU migration can, in many cases, be better described as a "back-and-forth" circular pattern (Marcu, 2011). Although previous research highlighted the benefits of circular migration, especially for the economy, there are also downsides (Eberl et al., 2018). Seasonal workers are often confronted with access inequalities, poor working conditions, and pay gaps between migrants and non-migrants (Faist, 2008).

Most Romanians who have decided to work abroad were influenced by factors such as unemployment, unsuitable jobs, lack of money, housing problems, the desire to offer a better life to their families, the belief that work is more appreciated abroad than at home, and social imitation. Push factors for the economic migration of Romanians moving to other EU countries are both internal and external and include the following: the poor business environment; the lack of public policy measures supporting the employment of graduates and lower efficiency or improper implementation of such existing

measures; the lack of coherence between employment policy and wages; low living standards (Vasile, 2014, p. 741); and the desire for better work opportunities, better income, and a better life for families left at home. Driven to countries such as Italy and Spain by a high demand for low-skilled labour force, Romanians took jobs in unpleasant conditions on the unregulated market (Balaban & Huțuleac, 2021; Bleauhu, 2007). Most Romanian migrants in Italy and Spain work in agriculture and the construction industry (Hanganu et al., 2014; Ricci, 2015). The Romanians working abroad in these sectors are often confronted with the downsides of circular migration. Pull factors include existing migration networks (Mara, 2012), bilateral agreements (e.g., between Italy and Romania), and labour recruitment agencies (Ban, 2012).

The media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion about immigration in Europe (Eberl et al., 2018). Levitt and Schiller (2004), studying migration as a transnational social issue, have noted that media coverage involves several actors with different agendas, from both the sending and receiving countries of labour migrants. This conceptualization enables us to analyse the connection between the country of origin and the country of destination (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Furthermore, as Meltzer et al. (2017) stress, the media can shape public debates on migration issues. Studying the media coverage of immigrants is thus important given the effect of media coverage on citizen perceptions and attitudes towards the immigrants. Even if there are differences in how different migrant groups are framed by the media, coverage in receiving countries is often negative and conflict centred. In addition, intra-EU migrants are often underrepresented in the media of the country of destination (Eberl et al., 2018).

In the last decade, the Romanian media has focused on Romanian intra-EU migrants from different perspectives, framing labour and circular migration as a public issue. Media coverage has proved to be important because it encouraged public actions (Beciu et al., 2017). Moreover, local and regional authorities developed special programmes and communicated them to the public with the help of the media, aiming not only to deal with the negative effects of labour migration but also to strengthen the relationship between migrants and their home country (Balaban & Huțuleac, 2021).

Mădroane (2016) analysed the media construction of the remitting practices of circular migration and its multiple challenges for Romanian society as an indicator of the migrant–non-migrant relationship. Remittances played a central role in the domestic media coverage of Romanian intra-EU migrants (Mădroane, 2016). Besides their financial component, remittances also possess social, cultural, and political dimensions (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011), and lead to ties and power relations in transnational social fields. Romanian labour migrants were portrayed by the Romanian media in terms of solidarity, social recognition, and heroism. They were called

saviours of the economy, and remittances were seen as a “survival strategy against the backdrop of austerity, unemployment and the absence of institutional support” (Mădroane, 2016, p. 236). In the context of an incapacitated Romanian state remittances not only play a significant role for the wealth of migrants’ families left at home but also contribute to regional economic development (Ciocea & Cârlan, 2012).

The Romanian media instrumentalised migration for various purposes (Beciu et al., 2017). In recent years, both traditional and digital media outlets have addressed the “new diaspora” in the context of election campaigns in which Romanian political parties targeted Romanian intra-EU migrants, highlighting the idea that they can contribute to a change in society by disseminating ideas, values, and practices that they encountered in countries with strong democratic traditions (Dolea, 2018; Gherghina & Soare, 2020; Voicu & Comșa, 2014).

Media coverage instrumentalized labour migrants concerning their impact on the economy, the development of policy initiatives, the impact on the family life of the migrants, the impact on Romania’s image as a country, political representation, and the civic engagement of the migrants. Except for the costs of family separation, the public dimension of remittances was overall positive before the pandemic (Mădroane, 2016). The pre-pandemic domestic discourse on Romanian migrants describes them in positive terms. In the new context of the Covid-19 pandemic, our research focused on how the media portrayed Romanian intra-EU migrants and sought to answer the following research question:

RQ1: What were the predominant themes and voices that defined the Romanian media coverage of Romanian intra-EU labour migration in the context of the outbreak of the pandemic?

Migration is considered a transnational social field, a “set of multiple interlocking networks of social relations” (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 1009), where local, national, transnational, and global structures intersect. Intra-EU migrants can be integrated into their host country but still have a certain attachment to their native country. In this context, the media plays an important role in problematizing transnational experiences (Beciu et al., 2017). This theoretical perspective allows a broader understanding of how media discourses, in both the country of origin and destination, are articulated in a transnational perspective. Thus, “media discourses activate modes of engagement at a distance and provide resources for the articulation of cultural and political belonging to various communities (national, local and diasporic), fashioning themselves as sites of symbolic power” (Beciu et al., 2017, p. 258). Hence, analysing media representations of Romanian labour migrants involves looking at a transnational social actor present in both the domestic space and abroad. This poses challenges concerning sources and angles of coverage for media institutions

and correspondents, who, especially in times of crisis, like the pandemic, only have mediated access to the migrants' world, and need to domesticate (Clausen, 2004) foreign media voices and representations to cover a partly domestic social actor. In this context, voices represented in the media coverage are important because social actors who get a voice can influence how events are interpreted (Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019). However, refugees' and migrants' voices are barely represented in media coverage (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

Previous research highlighted the role of media in shaping public debates about immigration (Burscher et al., 2015; Chauzy & Appave, 2014). Recent studies focusing on the framing of migrants in the news unveiled diverse perspectives, from innocent victims claiming solidarity to conflictual actors posing a threat to culture and security (Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019). In general, associating immigrants with crime is a common practice (Jacobs et al., 2018).

Romanians as intra-EU immigrants are not frequently covered in Western news media (Eberl et al., 2018). The extended media coverage of Romanians' access to the UK labour market in 2014 not only is the exception but also provides an example of how media coverage works in transnational social fields. Romanians and Bulgarians were negatively depicted as a threat to the economy and welfare system, especially by tabloid media (Balch & Balabanova, 2016). The prominent media frames emphasized in the British tabloids were the economic frame, the social benefits frame, and the employment frame. On the other hand, other media frames, such as the educational frame related to Romanian students in the UK, the EU-policy frame related to the freedom of movement, and the cultural frame related to immigrants' integration, were present in the quality media (Cheregi, 2015; Eberl et al., 2018; Helbling, 2014).

The media tends to portray migrants collectively, as a social group, a single entity, separated from others (Baker et al., 2013). This is problematic in the case of the Romanian diaspora as well, as it is a very heterogeneous group in terms of motivations, social status, immigration status, education level, job security, and social security. Considering migration as a transnational social field and having in mind the Covid-19 hotspots in Germany with Romanian labour migrants involved, we posed the following research question:

RQ2: How were foreign media perspectives integrated into Romanian news coverage of pandemic labour migration?

### 3. Methodology

Our methodology combines quantitative and qualitative content analysis, aiming to identify the predominant themes and discursive patterns of the media coverage. We analysed articles published from 1 March to 30 July 2020, the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic

in Europe, by the leading Romanian online news outlets, selected based on audience ratings by the Romanian Audit Bureau of Circulations (<https://www.brat.ro/sati>): *Stirile Pro TV* (<https://stirileprotv.ro>), *Libertatea* (<https://www.libertatea.ro>), *Adevarul* (<https://adevarul.ro>), *Digi24* (<https://www.digi24.ro>), and *Antena 3* (<https://www.antena3.ro>). These sites include news portals of the leading daily papers as well as the news sites of television stations, reflecting the structure of the Romanian public sphere, where televisions are a predominant news source and are engaged in cross-platform distribution, operating major news portals. The sample ( $n = 201$ ) contains articles that included the Romanian terms for "pandemic," "coronavirus," and "Covid-19" combined with the Romanian terms for "working abroad," "seasonal workers," and "diaspora."

Our coding scheme was defined during an initial round of inductive coding, which resulted in the following topics: "cases of Covid-19 infection," "return to Romania," "travel abroad for work," "lack of workforce abroad," "domestic economic impact," "working conditions," "safety regulations," and "conflict." We then coded the whole sample for the presence of these topics, using multiple coding, as each article could touch upon several of these. Second, after identifying the frequencies of these topics, in line with previous research (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017), we also grouped them using principal component analysis, interpreting the resulting factors as the main themes of the coverage. The distribution of these topics was also explored along the dimension of "geographic coverage," operationalized by coding the target country of labour migration, including the EU and its institutions as a separate value along with the target states.

We also identified and coded the presence of the "voices" of the following: migrants, Romanian officials, foreign officials, employers, intermediaries, multiple voices represented by Romanian and foreign officials, and others, such as foreign journalists. We also coded for "collectivization," that is, whether migrants were referred to as individuals or as a collective.

To answer our second research question, we identified the sources cited by the articles and grouped them by their geographic origins, using a combination of manual coding and computer-assisted named-entity recognition, and analysed the co-occurrences of source groups with the topics coded during the content analysis. After these quantitative steps, we selected all articles in the Romanian sample that reported on events that occurred in Germany ( $n = 40$ ), the most frequently mentioned country in the articles analysed. Where it was possible, we identified the possible sources referred to in the text and accessed the original articles. We then compared Romanian news reports with sources referenced to identify discursive patterns of domestication.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. First Research Question

The present analysis covers the first five months of the Covid-19 pandemic. This period is characterized by a prevalence of news stories about the pandemic. Among them, the topic of Romanian intra-EU migrants achieved prominence due to several events that generated dramatic scenes and images. The media presented large crowds gathered at the western Romanian state border to enter the country and lines of cars with migrants directed to special quarantine places destined mainly for those who were returning from Italy and Spain. Due to the pandemic, many Romanian labour migrants were left without housing since it was in many cases linked to their employment contracts. Starting in April 2020, outgoing seasonal workers came into the media's focus. Although at that time travelling restrictions were already in place, Romania had decreed a state of emergency, and a strict lockdown had been implemented; seasonal workers who received special permission to travel to host countries such as Germany gathered in large numbers at the international airport in Cluj-Napoca. Given the increased media interest in migrants during this first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, we can consider Romanian labour migrants and the pandemic as an important chapter for the domestic media, a chapter similar in terms of media attention to others, such as the economic and financial crisis of 2009–2011 (Mădroane, 2016) or the involvement of the diaspora in electoral campaigns for general elections, but especially presidential elections.

The most prominent topic identified during the coding process was that of pandemic-related safety regulations, which was present in 59.5% of the analysed articles. Under this category, we coded references to measures that were in force and applied to Romanians travelling abroad or coming back to Romania during the analysis. This topic was followed by concerns about the poor and unsafe working conditions of Romanian migrants abroad (50.7%). Cases of Covid-19 infections among Romanian migrants working abroad, including in hotspots, were present in 41% of the articles we analysed. During the period of the analysis, the media presented, on the one hand, Romanian labour migrants travelling abroad despite the lockdown (31.7%), and, on the other hand, labour migrants returning to Romania (25.9%). The motivation for workforce movement was also highlighted by the media, focusing on both the lack of workforce abroad (25%) and the domestic economic impact (22.4%), the pull and push factors that contributed to labour migration. Conflict was identified in 16.9% of the articles. Conflicts can occur, for example, between local Romanian communities and migrants returning home and between local communities or local authorities in the country of destination and the migrants.

Travelling abroad for work (31.7%) was primarily discussed by focusing on the special conditions created

by the Romanian government together with other public institutions from different Western European countries such as Germany and Austria. Travelling restrictions under pandemic conditions challenged the freedom of travel throughout Europe. In the case of the Romanian media and public discourses, this intersected with several locally specific frames. On the one hand, the agreements between Romania and foreign governments to allow seasonal labourers to travel to alleviate labour shortages were sometimes cast in terms of “selling” or “exporting” citizens. The issue of the responsibility of the government was cast both as a causal responsibility, with government incompetence causing scenes like the ones at the Cluj airport, where large crowds gathered without respecting the safety measures in effect, and as a solution responsibility, that is, the government is an actor responsible for solving the issue.

The reasons for travelling and working abroad during the challenging first months of the pandemic were explained by the lack of workforce abroad in 25% of the articles. The target countries needed seasonal migrants, especially in agriculture and the care service sector. In addition, the domestic economic impact of labour migration was highlighted in 22.4% of the articles, mostly focusing on families left at home that relied on financial support from working migrants.

The working conditions and working rights of seasonal labourers were widely discussed throughout Europe, including at the level of the European Parliament. The domestic discussion in Romania partly reflected the international debate, taking over articles from the German media on working conditions and on protests of German labour unions and NGOs trying to improve those conditions. Concerning working conditions, migrant labourers generally appeared as victims of abuse and neglect, but also as beneficiaries of transnational solidarity. In terms of the domestic economic impact of migration, readers were reminded both of the economic impact of the money traditionally sent home by the diaspora, as well as of the human cost of migration, for example, the impact on children left behind. At the same time, especially in domestic political discussions, the workers were also recurrently assigned causal responsibility, for example, for not reading their contracts.

The predominant voices present in the media coverage of Romanian intra-EU migrants were those of Romanian officials (39.5%), multiple voices represented by Romanian and foreign officials (26.7%), those of foreign officials (5.3%), foreign employers (2.4%), representatives of intermediary agencies (0.5%), and others, such as foreign journalists (13.1%). The analysis highlighted that Romanian media paid special attention to foreign journalists. This is not new: The image of the country abroad and news of Romanians abroad are recurrent themes in the Romanian news media, but, in the context of the pandemic, these topics gained particular prominence as a primary filter for the coverage. The voices of Romanian migrants were represented in only 18% of the

articles. Routes to having a voice for the migrant workers were the traditional ones: Other newsmakers with specific media management practices, like NGOs, might give them a voice. We have also noted some new routes, including diaspora media, as the diaspora has local news outlets that until now were not covered by the national media. Social media could also provide a platform for giving a voice to migrants; the media turns to such sources primarily in conflict situations. Also, we have noted that migrant voices were strongly mediated by the Western media, being primarily cited via foreign news sources.

These results are in line with the tendencies noted in the literature on the media coverage of migration in general (Baker et al., 2013; Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019). Thus, Romanian labour migrants during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic were presented mostly as a collective, and they tended not to possess a voice in the media. This was the most evident along the topic of return migration, where voicelessness was prominent. Moreover, the idea of incoming crowds posing dangers to public health was reiterated a few weeks after the pandemic's outbreak in the media coverage. In the early days of the pandemic, migrants were portrayed as agents who came home, bringing the dangerous virus into their local communities. This marked a major shift in the discourse in the Romanian media, which until this time had tended to present the positive role of the diaspora in the domestic social and political arena. The topic of returning to Romania was one of the issues with the strongest emotional overtones, both in the appeals made by authorities and the president for the diaspora not to return home for Easter, as well as in the recurrent suggestion that by returning home they were exposing themselves

as well as their families and the public to health risks. This argument sometimes degenerated into outright scapegoating. This theme also intersects with the securitization discourse we are familiar with from the so-called refugee crisis (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Vincze et al., 2021.)

Table 1 presents the weight given to migrant voices and the prominence of the discursive practice of collectivization along with the various topics.

Three major themes were identified using factorial analysis with principal component extraction. This type of data analysis was used in line with previous research (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). The purpose of performing this type of analysis is to identify the frequencies of dominant frames. The following factors resulted after using Oblimin rotation: (a) migration motivation (lack of workforce abroad, travel abroad, and domestic economic impact), (b) conflict (working conditions and conflict), and (c) working conditions (working conditions and safety regulations). These three factors explained 32.15%, 19.99%, and 18.99% of the variance, respectively. Factor loading is presented in Table 2.

We analysed the prevalence of the Western European destination countries in the media coverage in relation to certain topics. The EU and major European institutions such as the European Commission and the European Parliament were also taken into account in the analysis. Some of the identified topics were significantly associated with particular countries, such as the lack of workforce abroad ( $\chi^2(11) = 37.67, p < 0.001, \Phi = 0.428$ ), which was mostly discussed in the broader EU context and in relation to the UK, Germany, and Italy; returning to Romania ( $\chi^2(11) = 26.07, p = 0.006, \Phi = 0.357$ );

**Table 1.** The weight of migrant voices and collectivization along with the various topics (percentages of total articles coded with each topic).

Topics	Migrant voices	Collectivization
Conflict	26.47%	79.41%
Domestic economic impact	22.22%	86.67%
Infection	14.46%	78.31%
Lack of workforce abroad	19.61%	86.27%
Return to Romania	11.54%	82.69%
Safety regulations	20%	77.50%
Travel abroad	20%	86.15%
Working conditions	23.53%	75.49%

**Table 2.** Factor loading for topics based on principal component extraction with Oblimin rotations.

Factor/Topic	Migration motivation	Conflict	Working conditions
Lack of workforce abroad	0.818		
Travel abroad	0.823		
Domestic economic impact	0.746		
Working conditions		0.49	0.901
Safety regulations			0.457
Conflict		0.871	

Note: Loading <0.45 is suppressed.

travelling abroad during the pandemic ( $\chi^2(11) = 35.88$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\Phi = 0.418$ ); and the domestic economic impact ( $\chi^2(11) = 21.66$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ,  $\Phi = 0.325$ ). These issues were mostly discussed in the broader EU context and in relation to Germany and Austria. The issue of working conditions ( $\chi^2(11) = 27.97$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\Phi = 0.369$ ) was mostly covered in the case of labour migrants working in Germany, and the need for EU intervention was emphasized. Topics such as reported cases of Covid-19 among Romanian migrants working abroad ( $\chi^2(11) = 16.05$ ,  $p = 0.140$ ,  $\Phi = 0.140$ ), safety regulations ( $\chi^2(11) = 12.32$ ,  $p = 0.340$ ,  $\Phi = 0.245$ ), and conflicts ( $\chi^2(11) = 11.78$ ,  $p = 0.381$ ,  $\Phi = 0.240$ ) were not significantly associated with a particular country of immigration.

#### 4.2. Second Research Question

During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (from 1 March to 30 July 2020), the Romanian media often referred to and relied on foreign media sources when reporting on issues related to Romanian intra-EU migrants. Most of the articles that were based on foreign sources were related to Covid-19 infections and the emergence of epidemiological hotspots ( $n = 19$ ), the issue of poor working conditions abroad ( $n = 22$ ), and safety regulations ( $n = 22$ ). The most prevalent source was the German media, followed by the UK media. These findings are primarily associated with the preferred destinations of labour migrants during this period. Table 3 shows in detail the association of topics with international media sources.

In the early months of the pandemic, most Romanian media outlets had a small number of foreign correspondents, and, if they had any, travel restrictions were applied to them. Therefore, most of the analysed articles that referred to the situation of Romanian labour migrants working abroad relied on foreign media. On closer inspection, we found that the news about Romanians in Germany, the country most often mentioned in the media coverage of intra-EU Romanian migrants, was based on various sources, including news agencies such as Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA), the websites of television news channels such as Euronews (<https://www.euronews.com>), news portals such as Deutsche Welle, online editions of weekly magazines such as Der Spiegel, business newspapers such as the Financial Times, and even online editions of the German tabloid Bild. Regional media outlets were also men-

tioned. Thus, regarding the Tönnies slaughterhouse case in North Rhine-Westphalia, the regional publication *Westfälischer Anzeiger* and the news portal *Ruhr 24* were quoted in the Romanian media. The diaspora newspaper *Ziarulromanesc* was also quoted.

The topic of working conditions in the meat-processing industry was extensively covered in the regional press from North Rhine-Westphalia. The events unfolding at the Tönnies factory, and the following political decisions were the subject of a series of articles published from 8 May to 29 July 2021, providing a chronology starting with the first cases, to the establishment of quarantine for employees, and then to putting the whole region in quarantine. The Tönnies hotspot was an extremely important moment because it brought to the forefront of public opinion the inappropriate working conditions in Germany's meat-processing industry, which mainly employed immigrants, a large part of them coming from Romania. According to the chronology presented by German regional media, the problem was exposed in the media, NGOs protested and demanded better conditions for the employees, and political actors were forced to act at the federal level. The federal minister of labour intervened with a legislative proposal. According to the regional media, the cause of the problems was that "the current system makes workers, mostly from Romania and Bulgaria, dependent on subcontractors. Occupational health and safety, minimum wages and minimum standards for housing are often circumvented" (Guboff et al., 2021, July 29 update). Working conditions are poor and the workers face "high pressure at work not to make any mistakes. If mistakes were made during the shift, one would have to reckon with insults" (Guboff et al., 2021, July 28 update). The cited German media reports highlighted the idea that the strong pressure put on ensuring low consumer prices for meat and meat products was one of the main reasons that led to the problems in this industry. The reasons workers accept these conditions have to do with the domestic economic impact. The economic support given to those left at home in Romania is rarely discussed in the German press.

In the German media, we also find the major themes identified in the Romanian coverage: safety measures, working conditions, and Covid-19 cases. The media coverage from Germany that was cited in the Romanian media focused in particular on meat-industry workers and seasonal workers in agriculture. The massive

**Table 3.** Co-occurrence of topics with foreign media sources.

Source type	Conflict	Domestic economic impact	Infection	Lack of workforce abroad	Return to Romania	Safety regulations	Travel abroad	Working conditions
British media	0	1	4	7	0	6	6	4
German media	5	2	13	2	2	11	3	13
Other foreign media	1	5	2	6	2	5	5	5

quarantine of 7,000 employees at the Tönnies factory in Gütersloh, most of them from Eastern Europe, including Romanians, due to a Covid-19 outbreak, which led to the quarantine of the Gütersloh and Warendorf regions, was reported in both national presses. Articles in *Der Spiegel*, *Bild*, and the regional *Westfälischer Anzeiger* were taken over by the Romanian media.

These media reports were used by the Romanian outlets to cite the voices of local authorities, sometimes matching them with Romanian ones, primarily that of the Romanian ambassador to Germany or the Romanian foreign ministry. The voices cited tended to be securitizing ones, talking about the health risk posed by labour migrants and cases of breaching quarantine. Reports of conflicts between migrant and local communities, brought about by the news of infections among the former, also regularly appeared in the Romanian media, in line with the long-time preoccupation of the Romanian media with the image of the country abroad. This preoccupation was also reflected in the fact that a German businessman's suggestion that it was the sociable culture of Romanians that caused the spread of the virus among them was extensively reported.

The German media was also used as a filter to report on news from other regions of Europe as well. One of the go-to sources of Romanian media reporting on pandemic labour migration was the *Deutsche Welle* news portal, and we will examine a piece titled "No hands to harvest strawberries in the Spanish coronavirus lockdown" (2020) to illustrate the discursive strategies used to integrate foreign sources and perspectives into Romanian coverage of pandemic labour migration. The article, published in the business section of the *Deutsche Welle* website, was taken over by Digi24, in its foreign news section, with the title "Another European country cries after Romanian workers. 'It is a dramatic situation'" ("Încă o țară din Europa plânge," 2020). The Romanian outlet's primary domestication strategy involved shifting the focus to Romanian workers in the title, while the "hands" referred to in the original include all migrants working in Spain, and the piece opens with an image captioned "African workers in Spain for harvesting strawberries." Even though both outlets use a Getty Images photograph to illustrate the article, the African worker is replaced in the Romanian piece by a generic image of strawberries. This discursive move, verbal and visual, is indicative of a wider representational strategy: The connections of the plight of Romanian migrants with those of non-EU ones are not present at all in our corpus of texts and are absent from this piece as well. Both pieces end by describing the steps the Spanish government is taking to amend the situation, but the target of government action changes in the process of transfer from one news report to another in the Romanian article: In the Romanian case, the focus is on finding a way for "permitting the entry of the workforce from abroad," whereas the *Deutsche Welle* piece ends with the hope expressed by a local voice that the situation, so difficult for the local economy, might be the

beginning of changes in the structure and working conditions offered by the economy.

Even though the calls for changes in the structure of the economy and shopping habits based on a cheap migrant workforce did not make it into the Romanian media, the plight of migrant workers reflected in the news from abroad did, even though often in the securitizing contexts of health risks or violent conflicts with locals. At the same time, reports in the German media about the working conditions of migrants constituted a new topic for Romanian media, which did not have a tradition of reporting on the everyday living and working conditions of the diaspora. When reporting on this topic, voices of NGOs and labour union representatives also made it into the news, adding new elements to the traditional set of actors and voices covered in foreign news.

## 5. Conclusions

During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (from 1 March to 30 July 2020), Romanian migrants were in the spotlight of the domestic media. Especially in the first month after the pandemic's onset in March 2020, media coverage underwent a narrative shift. Thus, migrants, who in the domestic discursive arena had acquired a positive social role, either in terms of value preferences or economic impact, suddenly became a danger to public health by bringing home the virus to their loved ones. As opposed to the media coverage during the economic crisis, when, except for the negative consequences for the families left at home, Romanian circular migrants were portrayed in a positive manner (Mădroane, 2016), in the context of the pandemic, our study showed the presence of strong negative overtones. In the following months of the pandemic (April–July 2020), migrants were portrayed as beneficiaries of special conditions, who were able to travel to other countries despite the lockdown, while their fellow compatriots could only leave their homes with a written statement certifying well-founded reasons.

The main themes of the coverage were the motivations for migrating, conflict, and working conditions, which mark both continuities with and changes from the previous coverage. Conflict is of course a time-honoured news value, and safety regulations as well as conflict around the perceived health risks, with their securitization component, also constitute a continuity with other migration discourses, like those of the refugee crisis.

At the same time, the pandemic brought to prominence the issue of the precarious working conditions of labour migrants working in agriculture and especially in the food industry. These have been thematized in the pandemic context not only by the media in Romania, but also in other countries, especially in Germany. Thus, both the Romanian and German media used, to a certain extent, the media coverage of an exceptional situation, the Covid-19 pandemic, to invite reflection on the general social costs of migration and on the responsibilities



of political actors in the country of origin, the destination country, and at the level of EU institutions. Prominent examples in this sense are the missions of Romanian officials in Germany and the European Parliament resolution of 19 June 2020 on European protection of cross-border and seasonal workers in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

Some aspects of the media coverage of migrants were not significantly changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Not having a voice means not having the opportunity to set the narrative. The Romanian news media turned to foreign sources for covering Romanian labour migrants, a domestic social actor, and in doing so the voice of the migrants continued to be underrepresented in the media coverage, mediated by foreign actors.

While these results are partly descriptive and exploratory, the findings of our study should provide a useful starting point for further research exploring the media coverage of intra-EU migrants and the logics of representation shaping their media coverage. This will need to be explored both longitudinally, to see whether the tendencies of coverage identified here will be maintained and constitute long-term changes brought about by the pandemic, and comparatively by analysing comparable corpora and exploring the changes in international news flows and topical sensibilities between other source and target countries.

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