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Media representations of nuclear threats during the Russian invasion of Ukraine*

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: This article continues the scholarly tradition of uncovering the rhetorical practices that influence audiences' perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours towards nuclear actors and issues and examines how the Romanian mass media reports on nuclear threats against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: This article conducts a detailed examination of how media coverage of nuclear-related topics influences public perceptions, generating a feeling of urgency and potentially leading to mass panic and hysteria. The study employed a quantitative methodology, conducting content analysis on a selection of 190 online news articles from the primary Romanian press agencies (Mediafax and Agerpress) published between February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2023. Employing an inductive

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approach, our analysis was guided by frames identified during the examination of the sample material.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: Nuclear threats and other related issues were frequently reported in the media in the post-World War 2 period. Given the history of media coverage of this topic, it is perhaps not surprising that a return to reporting nuclear threats has dominated the media discourse since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The results of our study reveal two main frames used to report issues related to nuclear threats during the war in Ukraine: a historical reference frame and a forward-looking frame.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: This study introduces a fresh research direction for potential investigations into the origins and progression of nuclear threats as a unique area of focus in the analysis of Eastern European media reporting during times of conflict.

KEYWORDS:

nuclear threats, media coverage, framing nuclear issues,
war in Ukraine, Romanian mass media

INTRODUCTION

The media is considered a vital source of information about politics and inter-state conflicts; it has significant influence over audiences' perceptions, opinions and behaviour through its power to appraise what stories and events are more important than others (Vladisavljević, 2015). The media interest in covering nuclear threats and other related issues is cyclical and is well-documented in the extremely rich literature on the topic published before 1989. Historically, media coverage of nuclear-related topics falls under two main categories: the first presents nuclear issues associated with the production of electricity for various industries and households; the second relates to the production of nuclear weapons for potential nuclear attacks. After the end of the cold war, media interest in the use of nuclear weapons became rather episodic, with articles focusing mostly on the threat posed by the nuclear programs of states such as Iran or North Korea (Dai & Hyun, 2010; Hatzir et al., 2021). The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 triggered a surge of media

attention on nuclear threats. This served as a stark reminder of this ever-present danger, reigniting public anxieties about the possibility of nuclear war.

This study follows the line of research established by Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman. Their work examined how communication shapes audiences' views and behaviours regarding nuclear powers and nuclear issues (Taylor & Kinsella, 2007). This article specifically analyses how Romanian media covered nuclear threats during the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Similarly to other research (e.g., de Vreese, 2005), this article uses an inductive approach. This means that instead of starting from predetermined frames, the analysis identifies frames of meaning that are present in the media coverage.

The Ukrainian War started on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched an extensive invasion of Ukraine. This invasion followed continuous tensions between Russia and Ukraine after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing conflict around the border city of Donbass that started in 2014 (Dijkstra et al., 2022). Since the start of the Russian invasion, one in four Ukrainians have been displaced. In 2022, four million people fled from Ukraine into neighbouring European countries (Stepanova, 2022; Javanbakht, 2022), and on 9 June 2023 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees acknowledged that 8,255,288 refugees from Ukraine were scattered across Europe (UNHCR, 2023).

Our analysis of the media's role in reporting the war in Ukraine began with two key assumptions. First, we aligned ourselves with Galtung and Ruge's (1965) thesis, which suggests war journalism leans on technical military language and prioritizes war's immediate visible effects, such as casualties and destruction. Second, inspired by Garcia-Perdomo et al. (2022), we anticipated that during conflict mass media might favour elite sources and present a simplified narrative that lacks historical context or critical analysis.

The media's coverage of the war in Ukraine has been marked by a constant undercurrent of nuclear tension. This focus was evident from the very outset. Just three days into the conflict, on February 27th, 2022, President Putin heightened global anxieties by placing Russia's nuclear deterrent forces on high alert (Horovitz & Wachs, 2022).

The media plays a powerful role in shaping public opinion, especially on charged topics like nuclear threats. These threats inherently

evoke fear of mass destruction, loss of life, and a disregard for humanity's future. This article delves into media coverage of nuclear threats during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It examines how media discourse can influence public perception, potentially leading to a sense of urgency, panic, or even mass hysteria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Taylor & Kinsella (2007), there are four main approaches to exploring the relationship between nuclear weapons and communication:

1. **The Dramatic Tradition:** This approach, influenced by Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman, examines how communication shapes audience perceptions and behaviours regarding nuclear actors and issues.
2. **Modernist Critical Theory:** Stemming from the Frankfurt School, this tradition focuses on citizen participation and deliberation in nuclear policy and news coverage. Here, scholars analyse how power structures influence public understanding of nuclear issues.
3. **Argumentation Theory and Analysis:** This approach investigates how nuclear discourse impacts public comprehension and discussion of nuclear topics. Scholars associated with this tradition analyse arguments and rhetoric surrounding nuclear weapons.
4. **Semiotics, Post-Structuralism, and Dialogic Analysis:** This combined approach focuses on the practical aspects of nuclear communication and how audiences interpret its meaning. These scholars are interested in "decoding" the truth within nuclear communication, considering the power dynamics and potential biases within the language used.

This article aligns itself with the "dramatic tradition" outlined by Taylor & Kinsella (2007), which delves into how communication shapes audience perspectives on nuclear actors and issues. By analysing Romanian media coverage of nuclear threats during the Ukraine invasion, we aim to uncover the rhetorical practices that have influenced public attitudes, opinions, and actions regarding this critical issue.

In this context, this study utilizes media framing theory as its primary analytical tool (Atanesyan, 2020; Roman, Wanta & Buniak, 2017). This theory explores how information is presented in a way that highlights certain aspects and downplays others, ultimately influencing how audiences understand the given issue. Essentially, media frames act like lenses that shape public opinion, guiding it in specific directions (Chong & Druckman, 2007). According to Entman (1993, p. 52), framing means

to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

Frames influence which events are reported and how; they are defined as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). In the news media context, a frame entails the “journalistic intentions, news values, discursive structures, and content formats” that are reflected and projected textually and visually in a news story (D’Angelo, 2002, p. 881). News frames have been categorized according to various typologies, the most prominent of which is issue-specific frames, which deal with particular subjects or matters; there are also generic frames, which “transcend thematic limitations and can be identified in relation to different topics, some even over time and in different cultural frames” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54).

The present study expands our understanding of media coverage during the Ukraine war. While prior studies have identified frames focusing on the political situation in Ukraine and international tensions (Lichtenstein et al., 2019), this analysis delves deeper. We explore media coverage within the unique national context of Romania, aiming to identify new generic frames used by Romanian media to understand the conflict.

There is a significant research gap regarding Eastern European media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war. While numerous studies have analysed media portrayals in the United States (Alzahrani et al., 2018; Fengler et al., 2020; Lichtenstein et al., 2019; Ojala, Pantti & Kangas, 2017; Roman, Wanta & Buniak, 2017; Tsygankov, 2016),

the perspectives of Eastern European media outlets remain unexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how the war is covered within this unique regional context. In fact, the number of scholarly articles dedicated to media coverage of the war in Ukraine is extremely limited. While initial research on media coverage of the Ukraine war has begun to emerge (Pedro-Carañana, 2022; Chernov, 2023; Udris et al., 2023; Papanikos, 2022), there is a need for more in-depth analysis, particularly regarding under-explored regions. Existing studies have primarily focused on framing in the war's early stages, journalists' source selection, and coverage variations across different countries. This study contributes by offering a deeper examination of media coverage within a specific Eastern European context, analysing how Romanian media has framed the conflict throughout its development, not just the initial months. In addition, with the exception of a few overarching geopolitical analyses (Horovitz & Wachs, 2022; Yüksel, 2023), nuclear threats have not been the focus of any academic studies related to the war in Ukraine. Therefore, we consider that an exploration of the media frames used to present nuclear threats in the context of the Ukrainian war is a topic of interest that will enrich the scholarly literature on media coverage during wartime.

METHODOLOGY

Similarly to existing studies that explore media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war using content analysis and framing theory (Vrba, 2022), this study is the result of quantitative content analysis carried out on a sample of 190 online news articles published by the main Romanian press agencies (Mediafax and Agerpress) between 24 February 2022 and 24 February 2023. Our empirical inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: *What are the main nuclear-related issues reported by Romanian media since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (between February 2022 and February 2023)?*
- RQ2: *What is the frequency, editorial style (approach and arguments used by journalists) and tone of the articles on nuclear threats linked to the war in Ukraine in Romanian mass-media?*

The unit of analysis was online news articles. The Mediafax and Agerpress websites were used to retrieve all articles published between February 2022 and February 2023. Search terms like 'Nuclear threat' and 'Atomic threat' were used to retrieve articles about nuclear-related issues during the war in Ukraine. Only published articles having the nuclear issue as the main topic were selected and included in our analysis. Articles that only tangentially mentioned this topic were excluded. From the total sample of articles selected for this study, two thirds (66.3%) were published by Agerpress and only one third (33.7%) by Mediafax.

We developed a coding book consisting of 39 questions. Due to the novelty of the theme, we did not have a model to start from for the coding book. To identify the categories included in the coding book, we reviewed the articles included in the sample and created a set of open codes that were refined during the analysis process. The final version of the open codes formed the basis of the coding book. We pretested the coding book on a sample of 30 articles and made any necessary adjustments. The final coding book included both ordinal and nominal variables.

The coding scheme analysed the following aspects of the articles:

- Sources: Who is cited? Individuals, institutions, or documents?
- COVID-19 Connection: Is there any mention of a link between the pandemic and the war?
- Nuclear Events: Which specific nuclear event(s) are referenced? (e.g., historical events, specific weapons)
- Actors: Which countries and individuals are involved in the discussion of nuclear threats?
- Framing: How is the nuclear issue presented? (e.g., threat level, potential consequences)
- Context: To what current event(s) is the nuclear issue connected?
- Consequences: How are the potential impacts of a nuclear attack described?
- Humanity's Future: What portrayal of humanity's future is given in relation to nuclear threats?
- Arguments: What arguments are used to frame the nuclear issue?

Journalist Tone: Is the reporting style negative, positive, or neutral?

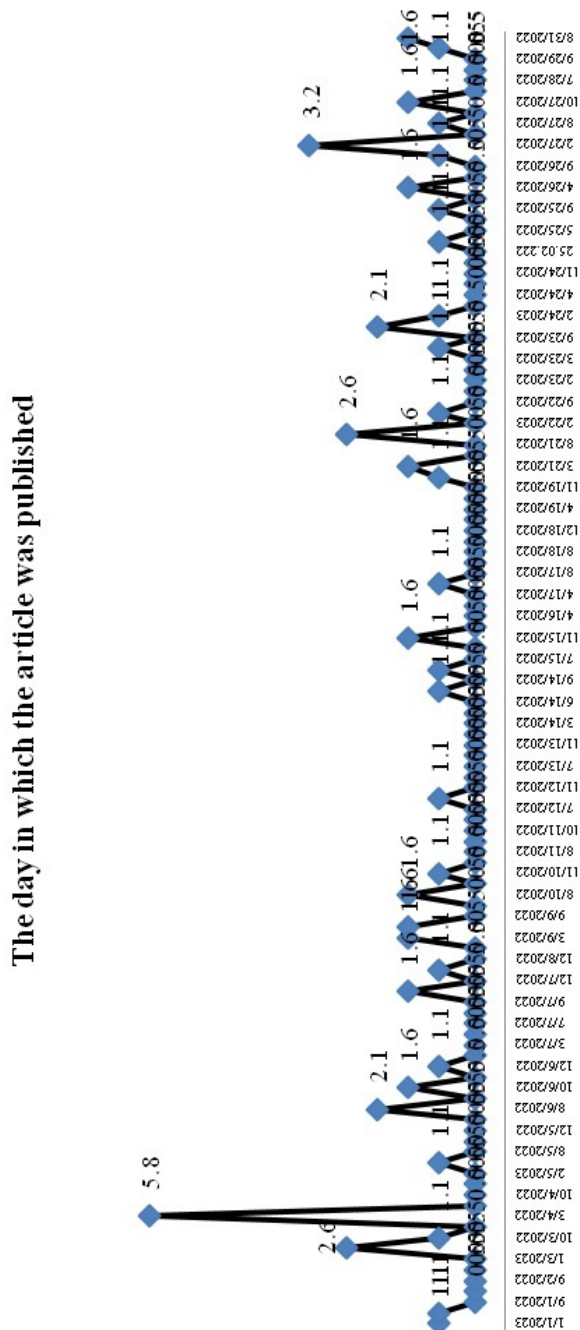
We used a set of quantitative methods in the analysis (frequencies, crosstabs and correlations) of the data set, and we further employed a series of yes/no questions to categorize the articles:

- Imagery: Does the article include photos?
- Origin: Was the article published by a Romanian source?
- Historical Context: Does the article discuss the history of nuclear threats?
- Triggering Events: Is the mention of nuclear threats linked to a current event? (e.g., fighting near a nuclear power plant).
- Specific types of nuclear threats: Is the article about dirty bombs? Is it about an explosion at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant? Is it about the launch of nuclear warheads? Is it about radioactivity? Is it about nuclear winter?
- Consequences: Does the article describe the potential consequences of a nuclear attack?
- Countermeasures: Does the article explore any potential ways to prevent or mitigate a nuclear attack?
- Humanity's Future: Does the article address the future of humanity in a post-nuclear attack scenario?
- Argument Tone: Do the arguments presented in the article lean more towards a rational or an emotional approach?

THE RESULTS

Throughout the examined timeframe, the number of articles published each day varied, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The dynamics of the publication of articles related to nuclear threats



The days with the greatest quantity of published articles occurred when military operations took place near or at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (as observed in March 2022 or July 2022), or when leaders from international and/or regional institutions and organizations, as well as the parties engaged in the conflict, explicitly discussed the potential for a nuclear attack or the utilization of nuclear weapons (such as from August to September 2022).

All articles included one or more photos, drawings, or videos. Of the media included in articles, 80.7% were war photos, 14.1% were videos, 4.8% were drawings and only 0.4% were graphics.

Only a small percentage of articles (3.2%) mentioned no source of information; the vast majority (96.8%) indicated the source. Regarding the type of source indicated in the articles, the vast majority (95.2%) used a foreign source, and only a few (4.8%) were based on information from Romanian sources. The most important external agencies mentioned as a source in the analysed articles were the France Press Agency (11.03%), Reuters (7.7%), and EFE (3.7%).

In the articles analysed, frequent quotations from individuals (42.8%), followed by documents and institutions (20.5%) and persons and institutions (18.4%) were used to support the story. Quotations from institutions alone (3.2%) and those from official documents (4.2%) were the least used in the articles included in the sample.

Most people interviewed and featured in the analysed articles were Russians (27%); others were from Ukraine (17.9%), the USA (13.8%), the European Union (9.7%), and Romania (4.3%). Presidents of countries were the most cited in the sample (28.5%), followed by prime ministers (7.6%), defence ministers (6%) and foreign ministers (5.8%). Ambassadors (4.8%), experts in geostrategic affairs or/and military actions (4.5%), directors of (national and international) atomic agencies (3.8%) and experts in physics and atomic energy (3.5%) were also mentioned in the articles included in our sample. In addition, the institutions referred to most often were from Ukraine (19.4%) and the USA (17.2%). Institutions from Russia (11.7%) and the European Union (7.8%) were placed third in the hierarchy of institutions mentioned in relation to nuclear threats, with most documents cited being issued by world organizations (24.7%), Russia (20.6%), the USA (16.5%) and Ukraine (11.3%).

Only 2.6% of the articles within the total sample referred to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the same articles (2.6%) drawing connections between the pandemic and nuclear-related matters. These connections were highlighted in articles discussing various topics, including the conflict in Ukraine (1 article), the emergence of a multipolar world (1 article), the historical relations between the Soviet Union and the United States pre-1980 (1 article), the new solar cycle (1 article), and the joint US-South Korea military exercises from 2020 to 2021 and North Korea's reaction (1 article).

In our analysis, two-thirds of the articles examined (67.4%) connected nuclear threats and associated topics (such as the use of dirty bombs, an explosion at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the launching of nuclear warheads, radioactivity, and nuclear winter) to multiple countries and individuals, exceeding two in each case. In 11.6% of the articles analysed, nuclear threats were exclusively linked to a specific number of countries (more than two), with the same articles (11.6%) associating atomic threats with only two countries: Russia (27%) and Ukraine (23.4%). Noteworthy proportions of the article sample (22.7%) also referenced the USA (14%) and the European Union (8.7%) in connection with potential nuclear threats. The individuals most frequently mentioned in relation to nuclear-related issues were Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation (14.2%), and Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine (8.1%). Other individuals cited in the sample included Rafael Grossi, the Director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (4.7%), Dmitri Medvedev, the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia (4.5%), and Joe Biden, the President of the USA (4.2%).

The history of nuclear threats was discussed in 36% of the articles included in our sample, with clear references to the development of nuclear weapons in North Korea and/or Iran (27.8%), followed by the Cold War (22.7 %) and the Chernobyl accident (17.5%). The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War (9.3%), the Cuban missile crisis (8.2%) and the Second World War (72%) were events mentioned in the media coverage of nuclear threats. Nonetheless, 97.6% of the articles examined nuclear-related topics in the context of a current event. The most frequently mentioned event (41.3% of the articles) concerning nuclear threats was the war in Ukraine, followed at a considerable margin by discussions

on unorthodox military tactics and strategies (including those in Ukraine) (19.7%), the potential for accidents and/or the shutdown of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (14.3%), and the nuclear weapons programs in Iran and/or North Korea (9.6%).

Around two-thirds of the articles (64.7%) discussed the consequences of a nuclear attack/explosion. The consequences of a possible nuclear attack that were mentioned in the analysed articles were related to the war in Ukraine (46.6%) and people's health and the state of the global economy (34.5%). In addition, 64.7% of articles made recommendations and referred to actions that could reduce the effects of a potential nuclear attack. These measures are primarily directed towards geopolitical interventions (14.7%) and the prevention of nuclear attacks utilizing conventional weapons (14.7%); subsequent actions focusing on monitoring human health following a potential nuclear attack (13.2%) and addressing a combination of various adverse effects (medical, environmental, economic, etc.) also received an equal share of mentions (12.5%). Additionally, potential effects of a nuclear attack on societal aspects (11.8%), environmental conditions (8.8%), and economic repercussions (6.6%) were discussed as strategies to counteract a potential future nuclear attack.

Merely 27.9% of all articles addressed the prospects for humanity after a nuclear attack or nuclear war. Within these discussions, the future of humanity following such events was portrayed negatively in 90.6% of the articles, with only 9.4% adopting a slightly positive or hopeful perspective on the subject.

When addressing the nuclear issue, the predominant arguments utilized military and geopolitical terminology (36.3%), with references to changes in the world's geopolitical landscape also featuring prominently (33.8%). Other argumentative approaches employed in discussing this topic included social aspects, encompassing individuals and/or social groups impacted by a potential nuclear attack (13.6%), followed by economic arguments affecting the broader economy or specific sectors such as agriculture and industry (13.2%).

In over half of the articles examined (56.3%), journalists adopted a neutral tone when presenting the main topics, whereas a negative tone was employed in 38.9% of the articles. The majority of articles relied on rational arguments to address nuclear-related topics (66.3%), with only 33.7% of articles incorporating an emotional tone in their writing.

Table 1. The interdependence between journalistic style and media coverage of nuclear threats and atomic history

	The article talks about the nuclear problem in the past	The nuclear issue is related to an ongoing event	The ongoing event which nuclear issue linked is the war in Ukraine	The article talks about the consequences of a nuclear attack	The article talks about counteractions to the nuclear problem	The article talks about the future of humanity after a nuclear attack is presented in a negative manner	The journalist's tone is negative	The dominant argument in the article is rational
Pearson Correlation	-,083	-,380(**)		,233(**)	,228(**)	-,022	,141	-,046
Sig. (2-tailed)								
N	,259 189	,000 185		,001 189	,002 189	,000 189	,054 189	,530 189
Pearson Correlation		-,043		-,054	,053	-,044	,005	-,048
Sig. (2-tailed)								
N		,557 186		,458 190	,472 190	,543 190	,951 190	,514 190
Pearson Correlation				,109	,101	,286(**)	,163(**)	-,142
Sig. (2-tailed)								
N				,138 186	,169 186	,171 186	,026 186	,053 186

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

a Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.

As shown in Table 1, the values of the correlation coefficients are positive between the variable that indicates that the event to which the nuclear issue is linked is the war in Ukraine, on the one hand, and the variables that indicate that *'the article presents consequences of a nuclear attack'*, *'the article presents actions to counteract the nuclear problem'*, *'the article presents the future of humanity after a nuclear attack'* and *'the use of a negative tone by the journalist in discussing nuclear issues in the article'*. Positive values of the correlation coefficient indicate a direct dependency relationship between the variables. However, the scenario changes when considering the variable linking the ongoing event of the war in Ukraine with the nuclear issue, and the variable representing the predominant use of rational arguments in the article. The negative correlation coefficient value between these two variables suggests an inverse relationship. Consequently, it can be inferred that the utilization of emotional arguments by journalists may directly correlate with coverage of the connection between the nuclear issue and the war in Ukraine within a given article.

Our analysis, detailed in Table 2, found very weak relationships between several key variables. Articles directly mentioning the link between the nuclear issue and the war in Ukraine showed almost no connection to articles that discuss the consequences of nuclear attacks, the future of humanity after such an event, the journalist's tone (negative or positive), or the use of primarily rational arguments. Similarly, there was very little correlation between articles that portray the future of humanity following a nuclear attack negatively and those that discuss the consequences of such an attack, potential actions to address the nuclear threat, or the connection between the nuclear issue and the war in Ukraine.

Media representations of nuclear threats during the Russian invasion

Table 2. The interdependence between media coverage of nuclear issues pertaining to the war in Ukraine and the variables exploring the aftermath of a nuclear attack and journalistic style

		The article talks about the consequences of a nuclear attack	The article talks about counteracting the nuclear problem	The nuclear issue is related to the war in Ukraine	The article talks about the future of humanity after a nuclear attack	The future of humanity after a nuclear attack is presented in a negative manner	The journalist's tone is negative	The dominant arguments in the article are rational
The article talks about the consequences of a nuclear attack/	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	,298(**) ,000 190	-,054 ,458 190	-,317(**) ,000 190	,088 ,529 53	,254(**) ,000 190	-,184(*) ,011 190	
The article talks about actions to counteract the nuclear problem	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N		,053 ,472 190	,523(**) ,000 190	-,034 ,809 53	,374(**) ,000 190	-,197(**) ,007 190	
The nuclear issue is related to the war in Ukraine	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N			-,044 ,543 190	-,064 ,649 53	,005 ,951 190	-,048 ,514 190	
The article talks about the future of humanity after a nuclear attack	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N				(a) ,53	,467(**) ,000 190	-,302(**) ,000 190	
The future of humanity after a nuclear attack is presented in a negative manner	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N					,375(**) ,006 53	-,238 ,086 53	
The journalist's tone is negative	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N						-,674(**) ,000 190	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

a. Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.

DISCUSSION

Our examination of the media's role in covering the war in Ukraine began with a premise in line with Galtung and Ruge's theory (1965), which suggests that war journalism often employs technical military

terminology that is difficult to comprehend and tends to highlight the visible consequences of conflict, such as human casualties, violence, and destruction. As expected, our research findings supported this assumption. In the articles analysed, journalists frequently used technical military jargon when discussing possible nuclear attacks and threats from various nuclear-capable nations. The media narrative also dwelled on the loss of human life, the potential collapse of civilization, and the broader environmental repercussions. Key nuclear-related topics highlighted by the media between February 2022 and February 2023 included discussions on nuclear attacks and their societal impact, threats related to Russia, nuclear stockpiles and weaponry, and the possibility of incidents involving the Ukrainian nuclear facility at Chernobyl.

Nevertheless, media coverage of nuclear threats and potential attacks lacks depth. Our analysis revealed that media coverage fails to adequately illustrate the true ramifications of a nuclear attack, instead displaying a superficial concern for civilian welfare. The journalistic focus was predominantly on exploring various scenarios, dissecting the political ramifications, and examining the international and global impacts of a potential nuclear strike. Furthermore, our study highlights journalists' efforts to personalize these narratives by associating potential nuclear threats with specific political figures. While the articles examined in our research portrayed nuclear threats as a clash of statements between Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin, the broader global implications of this conflict were often overlooked. This observation aligns with Garcia-Perdomo, Harlow, and Brown (2022), who argue that mainstream media tend to rely on elite sources and present a shallow narrative devoid of critical historical context. However, our findings diverge from Garcia-Perdomo, Harlow, and Brown's (2022) conclusions, as the media coverage of nuclear threats did not exhibit a direct causal link to historical or contextual assessments.

Romanian news coverage of potential nuclear threats surged between February 2022 and 2023 (post-Ukraine war), with 190 articles on the topic published by major press agencies (Mediafax and Agerpress) in this period alone. However, the reporting style was generally neutral, focusing on presenting the issues and potential consequences without sensationalizing. Romanian journalists aimed for a balanced approach using verified sources and representing all sides involved. Despite increased coverage, there was a lack of emphasis on public

preparedness for a potential nuclear attack. Stories focused on informing the public but did not attempt to educate or prepare them for such a scenario. Additionally, there was no mention of potential solutions to the Ukraine conflict or ways to prevent a nuclear attack. While the intent seemed to be serious and informative, the analysis suggests a sensationalist undertone in the focus of these stories.

Unlike previous research that relied on pre-determined frames/themes, our analysis used an inductive approach to uncover new framing patterns within the data. Inspired by similar studies (Ojala & Pantti, 2017; Lichtenstein et al., 2019) and grounded in Goffman's (1986) frame analysis, we identified two key frames used to report nuclear threats:

- **Historical Reference Frame:** This frame emphasizes the historical and political context surrounding the nuclear threat discussed in this article. Articles in this category explored potential responses and counteractions, often using emotional arguments with a strong focus on the horrific consequences of the potential use of a nuclear weapon.

Forward-Looking Frame: This frame prioritizes the potential consequences of a nuclear attack and the future of humanity. Journalists here primarily used a mix of a negative journalistic tone and rational arguments often intended to evoke fear.

CONCLUSION

This article explores Romanian media coverage of nuclear threats during the Russian invasion of Ukraine (February 2022 to February 2023). The article reveals that there is a lack of studies exploring media coverage of nuclear threats in an Eastern European context and signposts a new niche research topic that could be further developed by scholars in subsequent studies. In addition, this article puts forward two new frames identified in the media coverage of nuclear threats during the Ukrainian conflict, adding to the list of frames identified by previous studies (e.g., Ojala & Pantti, 2017; Lichtenstein et al., 2019).

However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this study. Firstly, the sample size of analysed articles was relatively small. Additionally, the focus was solely on articles published by press

agencies, which may not capture the full range of media coverage. Finally, the study specifically examined nuclear threats, excluding other relevant topics like nuclear deterrence and arsenal reduction.

Future research should expand the scope of our project by analysing other nuclear-related issues and taking a comparative perspective when exploring media coverage of nuclear threats during the war in Ukraine.

Beyond the inherent limitations and shortcomings of this study, due largely to the innovative nature of the topic analysed, we believe that our study opens the way to possible future inquiries regarding the emergence and development of new topics of interest in the study of Eastern European media coverage during wartime.

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