
ARTÍCULOS / ARTICLES

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRING THE MIGRATION OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS INTO FOCUS THROUGH MEDIA COVERAGE

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Abstract: In recent years, the interest in media representations of migrants and the media as a space for participation has increased within the field of migration studies. Yet, most scholars' attention is focused on immigrants and the media in destination countries, while less attention is paid to origin countries and emigrants' representation. Taking advantage of the increased attention paid to migrants and migration during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, we investigated the media representations of Romanian migrants in agriculture who work in other European countries and interpreted how their voices could be heard through media accounts. Through content analysis, we investigated a sample of 297 articles published between 1st April and 31st May 2020 on the websites of the six most visible Romanian media outlets.

This study contributes to the existing knowledge on media representations of Romanian migrants by documenting a series of tendencies, including an event-oriented approach, oversimplified representations of migration, massification and schematisation of migrant representations, and the high sensitivity to reports from destination countries' media on Romanian migrants.

Our analysis reveals that the approach taken to reporting on migration during the COVID-19 pandemic, at least during its first phase, highly depended on the existing, institutionalised modes of media reporting on migration.

Keywords: intra-European migration; Romania; origin-country media; migrant representations in the media; migrants' voices; content analysis.

LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19 COMO OPORTUNIDAD PARA PONER DE RELIEVE LA MIGRACIÓN DE LOS TRABAJADORES AGRÍCOLAS A TRAVÉS DE LA COBERTURA MEDIÁTICA

Resumen: En los últimos años, el interés por las representaciones mediáticas de los emigrantes y los medios de comunicación como espacio de participación ha aumentado dentro del campo de los estudios migratorios. Sin embargo, la mayor parte de la atención de los estudiosos se centra en los inmigrantes y los medios de comunicación en los países de destino, mientras que se presta menos atención a los países de origen y a la representación de los emigrantes. Aprovechando la mayor atención prestada a los emigrantes y a la migración durante la primera fase de la pandemia del COVID-19, investigamos las representaciones mediáticas de los emigrantes rumanos en la agricultura que trabajan en otros países europeos e interpretamos cómo sus voces podían ser escuchadas a través de los relatos mediáticos. Mediante un análisis de contenido, investigamos una muestra de 297 artículos publicados entre el 1 de abril y el 31 de mayo de 2020 en los sitios web de los seis medios de comunicación rumanos más visibles.

Este estudio contribuye al conocimiento existente sobre las representaciones mediáticas de los migrantes rumanos al documentar una serie de tendencias, incluyendo un enfoque orientado a los acontecimientos, representaciones excesivamente simplificadas de la migración, masificación y esquematización de las representaciones de los migrantes, y la alta sensibilidad a los informes de los medios de comunicación de los países de destino sobre los migrantes rumanos.

Nuestro análisis revela que el enfoque adoptado para informar sobre la migración durante la pandemia del COVID-19, al menos durante su primera fase, dependió en gran medida de los modos existentes e institucionalizados de informar sobre la migración en los medios de comunicación.

Palabras clave: migración intraeuropea; Rumanía; medios de comunicación del país de origen; representaciones de los migrantes en los medios de comunicación; voces de los migrantes; análisis de contenido.

INTRODUCTION

From 16th March to 15th May 2020, in reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic, for the first time during the post-communist history of the country, Romanian authorities issued a state of emergency, enforcing a strict lockdown. Schools, universities, cinemas, theatres, shopping centres, department stores, supermarkets, bars, and restaurants were all closed and employers were encouraged to move their activities online. Ordinary citizens were only allowed to leave their houses with a signed declaration, specifying their need to go out, as selected from a restricted list provided by the authorities. The values of fines for non-compliance with the new rules changed during the period of the state of emergency, but at their highest point, reached 20,000 lei (approx. 4,000 euros). These were later declared unconstitutional as they were huge compared to the average net salary in Romania at the time (3,182 lei per month, i.e., approx. 640 euros). Data published by the media suggest that around 300,000 fines were awarded from the issue of the emergency state to the beginning of May, with a total value of around 120 million euros (StirileProTv, 2020).

The first case of infection with SARS-CoV-2 was registered on 16th February, and for weeks following that, the press published official releases on how further cases had arisen in the country, including details of citizens having travelled abroad. COVID-19 was associated, as in many other countries (see Guadagno, 2020), with internationally mobile humans.

Romania has an estimated population of 3-5 million individuals living abroad (Dospinescu and Russo, 2018, 7). It is no surprise that, soon after the onset of the pandemic, migrants came to be the focus of attention, with citizens fearing their potential return or visits home. Such worries were fed by regular reports on the daily numbers of people crossing the border to enter the country, as well as requests by high-ranking officials for migrants to suspend their usual travel plans to Romania. Furthermore, analyses from academia linked the SARS-CoV-2 spread within the country to migration (e.g. Hâncean, Matjaz, and Lerner 2020), opening new topics for public debate. The perception of migrants as a social threat and agents spreading the virus, as was highly promoted by the Romanian media (Anghel, 2020), rapidly became the dominant narrative in the public space.

In this context of confusion, fear, and restrictions, at the beginning of April 2020, a gathering—on a single day—of about 1,800 individuals at the airport of Cluj Napoca, all waiting to be chartered to Germany to work in agriculture, sparked a true public scandal. Pictures of the crowd not respecting the ‘pandemic’ rules instantly went viral. The flights from Cluj were just the first of a series of organised departures of agricultural workers, which were allowed by the Romanian authorities during the state of emergency. For Romanian media, the incident proved to be just the beginning of a series of reports that would follow about Romanian agricultural workers in Europe.

We utilised these reports to investigate the representations of Romanian agricultural workers abroad in the mainstream Romanian media, and the way the media became (or failed to become) a platform for migrants to participate in the public space. To that end, we investigated 297 articles published between 1st April and 31st May 2020 on the six most visited websites of Romanian media outlets. Through content analysis, we examine the topics that Romanian media approached concerning this migration, the way mobile Romanian agricultural workers were presented, and the actors who the Romanian press gave voice during this period.

The remainder of this article is structured in five sections as follows. The first section established the context for this research and sets out how Romania is a particularly relevant space of international migration for agricultural work. The following section presents the main directions of our analysis, discusses the literature on migrant representations, and highlights the lack of studies analysing their representations in the media of origin countries. The study’s methodology is then introduced in the third section of the paper. Following this, we present the results of the study for our three points of interest: the topics approached, ways of presenting agricultural workers, and actors to who the media gave a voice. The final section of the article discusses the results of our work.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A RARE MOMENT OF VISIBILITY FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

In April 2020, the departure of seasonal workers heading abroad to pick up agricultural work took on uncommon visibility in the Romanian public space, though at that time, the trend of such migration already had a history spanning decades. This first

developed as a form of post-communist migration linked to transformations of the labour force structure in Western European agriculture to replace rural native populations with foreign workers (Rye and Scott, 2018). The Romanian workforce came to be utilized across Europe through public or private, formal or informal recruitment depending on the particularities of the agricultural sector of the country in question, the country's system for handling immigration, and the phase of Romania's accession to the European Union (EU) (see Șerban, Molinero-Gerbeau and Deliu, 2020, for the case of Spain). Nowadays, Spain, Italy, Germany, and the UK all take on large contingents of Romanians in their harvesting fields every year. Overall estimation of the number of Romanians working in agriculture around Europe every year is difficult, but the large proportion of working-age individuals among Romanian migrants (estimated at 2.65 million) and the high emigration rate of working-age unskilled individuals (about 20%) (Dospinescu and Russo, 2018, p. 17) suggest it would be a steady, high figure.

In spring 2020, the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented and highly restrictive rules for international travel. Most of the destinations of Romanian agricultural workers (Italy, Spain, the UK, Germany) experienced huge increases in the number of COVID-19 cases, and Romanian authorities gradually blocked the traveling routes to these countries from March 2020. The timing overlapped with the beginning of the agricultural season for crops (*e.g.* strawberries, asparagus) that destination countries heavily relied on migrant workers to harvest. This combination of factors led to dire circumstances in Europe: the crops were ready for harvesting (and that could not be delayed) but the seasonal workers were stuck in their origin countries. The situation, defined as a crisis, had two possible solutions: inspiring the native, unemployed population to pick up this work (as was attempted in the UK; Barbulescu and Vargas-Silva, 2020) or utilizing irregular migrants already in the country (as was attempted in Italy, Spain, and Portugal; Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021) to work in agriculture. Yet, neither of these quickly improvised solutions worked out, and under pressure from producers, the mobile agricultural seasonal workers, defined together with other categories as 'essential workers', under exceptional provisions, were allowed to travel within the EU (Communication from the Commission Guidelines concerning the free movement of workers during the COVID-19

outbreak 2020/C 102 I/03). Romania sanctioned legal measures to allow the international travel of 'seasonal workers' on 4th April (Military Ordinance no. 7 from 2020), and soon after, travel from the country surged.

As international travel was strictly controlled in Spring 2020, these departures needed to be arranged by authorities (in origin and destination countries) who normally played no role in this migration. Seasonal workers' recruitment, departures from origin countries, and arrivals in destination countries suddenly became highly visible. The public saw how these migrants were allowed to travel during the pandemic. They were (more) exposed to the risk of infection with SARS-CoV-2, which implicitly transformed them into agents potentially contributing to the spread of the virus between countries. As a result, there was increased interest in their living and working conditions and compliance with the rules associated with anti-pandemic spread.

MIGRANT REPRESENTATIONS AND VOICES IN THE MEDIA

In their introductory article to a special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Bleich, Bloemraad, and de Graauw (2015) noted the lack of analysis of media production by scholars in the fields of migration and minorities, stressing the need to develop this field of inquiry. The article poses two simple questions: what do we learn, as migration and minorities scholars, from media research, and how can these analyses be developed? The authors' answers, particularly to the first question, conceptualised the media as a fundamental source of information on migrants and minorities, both constructing/conveying representations of them and acting as a space of participation for migrants (p. 859).

Most literature investigating representations of migration/migrants in the media are linked to destination countries. In this case, the groups whose representations are investigated are immigrants or minorities, defined by ethnic/national (*e.g.* Mai (2005) on Albanians in Italy) or other cultural criteria (*e.g.* religion in Bleich et al. (2015) on Muslims in the UK), concerning their legal status or rights (*e.g.* Beckers and Van Aelst (2019) on immigrants in the Netherlands), or a combination of two or more of these criteria (*e.g.* Barry and Yilmaz (2019) on Muslim Albanians in Australia). The media producing the representations are in a destination country, or

most recently, two or more destination countries may be compared (*e.g.* Bloemraad, de Graauw, and Hamlin (2015) published a comparative analysis of representations in the Canadian and US media).

Methodologically, as Bennett, Wal, Lipiński, Fabiszak and Krzyżanowski (2013) observed in their work on third-country nationals' representations in the European media, most studies use content (quantitative or qualitative) and discourse-analytical methods (p. 249). From different interpretative perspectives, simple counts related to the visibility of a group; coding the topic of the story and the tone of articles (Bleich, et al., 2015) are the main instruments used to unpick representations.

Most of the existent research, across different destination countries, stresses the negative representation of migrants (with violence and criminality being the main themes), which is often associated with victimisation of the group/s or their objectification or presentation as passive (Bennett et al., 2013; Gemi, Ulasiuk and Triandafyllidou, 2013; Triandafyllidou, 2013; Sciortino and Colombo, 2004, among others). The analyses that have investigated the media as a space of participation conveyed the same negative picture, with the rare quotation of migrants' words and an overrepresentation of "authority figures" (Bennett et al., 2013, p. 251) or "powerful actors with high status and legitimacy" (Gemi et al., 2013, p. 269).

If representations of immigrants in the media of destination countries have garnered steady attention during recent decades, the same cannot be said for representations of emigrants in the media of origin countries. As Beciu, Mădroane, Ciocea and Cârlan (2017) point out analyses on this topic are scarce and approach the migrant group from diverse stances (*e.g.* emigrants in the work of del-Teso-Craviotto (2019) on Spain; labour migrants in the work of Bauder and Gilbert (2009) on Guatemala; returnees in the work of O'Leary and Negra (2016) on Ireland; diaspora/transnational migrants in the work of Chatterji (2007) on India and that of Beciu (2012) and Mădroane (2016) on Romania), adding, in some instances, other lines of ethnical or cultural differentiation (*e.g.* Breazu and Eriksson (2020) and Breazu and Machin (2018) on Romanian citizens of Roma ethnicity in the Romanian media).

Even though at the international level, the number of studies from an origin country perspective seems to be rather low (at least of those published

in English and well-established journals) and scattered across disciplines, growing literature reflects on emigrants, emigration, and the diaspora representation in the mainstream Romanian media. Peer-reviewed articles on these topics started to be published around 2010, soon after Romania acceded to the EU (2007), an event that 'institutionalised' the topic of migration in the Romanian press (Beciu, 2012). The group whose representations are investigated is approached as a whole, in terms of 'emigration' (Matei, 2011), but also predominantly as the 'diaspora' and 'transnational communities' (Beciu, 2012; Beciu, 2013; Beciu, Mădroane, Ciocea and Cârlan, 2017; Balica and Marinescu, 2018; Mădroane, 2016), which are mainly understood to have formed from post-1989 migration. Rarely do the analyses define subgroups from the general category (see Breazu and Machin (2018) and Breazu and Eriksson (2020) on Romanian Roma migration).

The thematical analyses converge towards a representation of Romanian migrants in the Romanian media that privileges reports on violence and crime as major topics (Matei, 2011; Balica and Marinescu, 2018; Beciu, 2012). These are counterbalanced with reports on daily life abroad, and rarely, success stories (Beciu, 2012). Such continuous content is broken only from time to time when special events related to migration erupt in the media (Beciu, 2012; Beciu et al., 2017; Matei, 2011). The Romanian media seem to convey "an impersonal world, that says very little about the diasporic player", who is mainly ethnically identified as Romanian (Beciu, 2012, p. 60).

When considering the media as a space of public participation, Beciu (2012, pp. 62–64) registered weak attempts to convey migrants' voices, with polarised stories: the successful integration versus the community abandoned by authorities. Media accounts seem to have been dominated by representatives of public institutions or authorities (Balica and Marinescu, 2018), taking over press releases rather than commenting (Beciu, 2012). As well as this, accounts from the international (*i.e.* destination) press are frequently imported (Beciu, 2012; Breazu and Eriksson, 2020; Breazu and Machin, 2018).

METHODS AND DATA

To investigate the representations of Romanian agricultural workers, we chose to analyse articles published by online media. The selection of websites was

based on data provided by the Romanian Audit Bureau of Circulations (BRAT), the Romanian member of International Federation of Audit Bureaux of Certification, from its Study of Circulations and Internet Traffic (SATI). The data related to internet traffic in January 2021 to 202 Romanian websites for different media outlets. The BRAT classifies the monitored websites according to their coverage (national or local) and their content (general news, news and analyses, entertainment, etc.). Starting from this classification, we selected 43 websites with national coverage that provide *general news* and *news and analyses*. All websites were ranked according to their number of unique visitors. We selected the first six websites (Table 1) for an in-depth analysis. The selection included: the websites of two TV stations (Digi24 and StirileProtv), two national newspapers (Adevărul and Libertatea), one news agency (Mediafax), and one news website (Hotnews), thus allowing for possible diversity in their accounts base on the type of media outlet.

TABLE 1
WEBSITES SELECTED FOR ANALYSIS

Website	Unique visitors (January 2021)	Media outlet
www.digi24.ro	11,498,615	TV station
www.adevarul.ro	7,914,194	Newspaper
www.libertatea.ro	7,570,175	Newspaper
www.stirileprotv.ro	6,973,979	TV station
www.hotnews.ro	5,721,151	News website
www.mediafax.ro	5,361,059	News Agency

Source: Authors own calculations on BRAT, SATI, interrogation page: <https://www.brat.ro/sati/rezultate/type/site/page/1/c/all>, (accessed 04/April/2021)

To identify the articles to investigate, we adopted a search strategy based on keywords, utilising advanced features of the Google search engine and the search functions of the websites' archives. Keywords were selected based on the previous results of our work on media representations of Romanian migrants during pre- and mid-pandemic times. Specifically, we selected 37 articles related to Romanians' migration for agriculture, which were published on the platform www.adevarul.ro during the COVID-19 pandemic, and identified the most frequent words using NVivo11. This preliminary analysis revealed two word families being used with a considerably higher frequency than the rest: one associated with 'work' ('a munci', in Romanian) and the other associated with 'Romania' ('România', in Romanian). We chose to combine two keywords, 'workers' and 'Romanian', as these were

present in every article in our preliminary analysis. As we extracted the sample used here based on keywords related to Romanian migration abroad, in general, but unrelated to the specific topic of migration for agriculture, the danger of circular searches was minimised.

The project's timeframe was decided based on the findings of previous works which documented a rather event-related approach to Romanians' migration in Romanian press (Beciu, 2012; Beciu et al., 2017; Matei, 2011) and on our preliminary analysis. The 37 articles initially analysed were published between 4th April and 12th May 2020. We inferred that the topic of migration for agriculture first sparked increased coverage by the Romanian media at the beginning of April 2020, when the first charters allowed to transfer temporary Romanian workers left for abroad. Allowing for a margin of individual variation in the speeds of reaction of different media outlets, we selected 1st April 2020 as the beginning of our project time-frame and 31st May 2020 as its end date.

Google advanced searches and scanning in the archives of the six selected websites using the keywords 'Romanian workers' identified 379 articles in April–May 2020. After saving using the NCapture extension of the NVivo programme, these were checked to exclude duplicates. Both authors skim-read the remaining 327 items for their content and proposed an individual list of articles to be excluded as thematically non-relevant. These articles were discussed one-by-one and dropped from the final analysis only with the agreement of both authors. Though this strategy was time-consuming, the advantage was minimising the subjectivity associated with a single instance of decision (see Bleich et al. (2015) on this). Table 2 reproduces the steps of the process and quantifies the content of the evolving database. In total, 297 articles were kept and further analysed using the software NVivo11.

The 297 articles were mainly, but not exclusively related to agriculture. Two other topics arose: departures for work in the care sector (mainly to Austria) and the working and living conditions in the meat-processing industry (mainly in Germany). As our preliminary read-throughs of the articles suggested their contents were heavily connected, we decided to keep them all in the analysis, but coded the type of migration according to the economic sector at the destination. In this article's analyses, that differentiation remains the main element framing our comparisons.

TABLE 2
SEARCH RESULTS AND DATABASE CLEANING

Website	Articles identified	Duplicates	Articles not thematically relevant	Articles kept for final analysis
www.digi24.ro	91	26	8	57
www.adevarul.ro	50	0	4	46
www.libertatea.ro	102	2	6	94
www.stirileprotv.ro	25	2	1	22
www.hotnews.ro	38	7	4	27
www.mediafax.ro	73	16	6	51
Total	379	53	29	297

Source: Authors own calculations

To ensure a lack of disparity in the coding process, each author first coded 30 articles that we randomly extracted from the total pool of articles. The initial coding scheme (including as categories: centrality of the theme 'migration' within the article (1); characteristics of migrants referred to in the text (2); article's topic (3); tone of the article (4); type of article (5); type of migration according to the economic sector at the destination (6); types of voices (7)) was mainly created deductively, based primarily on literature on media representations of immigrants/emigrants, and developed inductively while coding the first 30 articles. For all articles, we also registered the calendar week of publication (8), the source website (9), and the country of destination (10). The two authors' results for coding the first 30 articles were merged and each (initial or added) code was discussed. The resulting coding scheme, covering the 10 thematic areas, was used as the basis for starting a split, individual coding process (each author coded half of the articles, randomly extracted from the cleaned database). A common document, available online and continuously updated, allowed both authors to inform each other of newly added codes. A list of difficulties in attributing codes to individual articles was also created. The two sets of articles coded by each author in NVivo were merged and any doubts discussed, with those articles coded only when the two authors agreed. The merged database was once again checked in NVivo using the matrix coding function of the programme, to improve the coding's homogeneity.

THE SPILLOVER EFFECT OF MIGRATION FOR AGRICULTURE, THE DOMINANCE OF EVENTS, AND THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

When coded according to the economic sector of work at the destination, most of the 297 articles

concerned agriculture (51%), while others covered care work (10%) and the meat-processing industry (11%). Some of the articles (21%) referred to migration during the period of interest but used unspecific language (*e.g.* Romanians' departures abroad). The remaining 22 articles approached two types of migration at once (*e.g.* agriculture and care work or agriculture and meat processing). We decided to analyse these together, as they all seemed part of the same media approach to migration, to which migration for agriculture belongs. Together, through comparison, they enriched our understanding of the way representations of migration for agriculture individualizes in media accounts. We argue that the articles related to care work and meat processing were inserted into a narrative mainly shaped by migration for agriculture.

Our series started on 2nd April, with an article announcing the decision made by German authorities to allow foreign seasonal agricultural workers to enter the country, under special conditions. The article made a clear connection with Romanian workers, citing German sources stating that Romanians were expected in great numbers. A modest number of articles were then published until 9th April when the media, under scrutiny here, published 15 articles in a single day on the departure of Romanian workers to Germany from Cluj airport to work in asparagus fields. The next day, the number of articles increased to 20. This inaugurated a phase of media reports dominated by articles about departures, abiding/not abiding with the rules implemented during the pandemic, and questioning the fairness of allowing agricultural workers to travel abroad under the special circumstances of a strict lockdown. The focus of stories on agriculture slowly moved from Romanians' departures to their working and living conditions, protests related to these, and institutional interventions. Most of the

articles concentrated on only one country of destination: Germany.

Care work abroad appeared for the first time in our series on 8th April. The article discussed a special type of mobility to Austria, involving mainly women alternating short stays to work abroad with short stays home in Romania, organised in a kind of international shift pattern. It reported on the Romanian carers stuck in Austria and the efforts of different entities involved in this migration to organise their return and new departures. During the following weeks, the topic continued to receive coverage but remained marginal in terms of the focus of the media. The story came to the fore only later in April, with the organisation of new departures from Romania through a special train corridor. The articles on this story mainly took the form of (short) news and mainly mirrored the topics approached in the case of departures for agriculture. Moreover, of the total number of articles on care work abroad, about one-quarter, commonly reported on/discussed migration for agriculture. The topic of care migrants continually related to only one country (Austria) and was approached predominantly concerning departures/returns.

Coverage on Romanians working in the meat-processing industry abroad appeared relatively late in our series, at the end of April (starting from 28th April). The articles reported mainly on infections with the SARS-CoV-2 virus in connection with the living and working conditions of Romanians working mostly in Germany. A debate about the living and working conditions of Romanian agricultural workers in Germany was already developed in the media and it naturally integrated into that. If in the case of care workers in Austria, the main connection to migration for agriculture was departures and organising these, in the case of reports about the meat-processing industry, the connection came from the common country of destination (Germany) and was supported by representatives of Romanian authorities, who frequently discussed the topics together. As in the case of care workers, about one-quarter of the articles on Romanian workers in the meat-processing industry also approached migration for agriculture.

As evidence that migration for agriculture was the main thematic driver of the period, none of the articles dealt with both migration for care work and migration to work in the meat-processing industry.

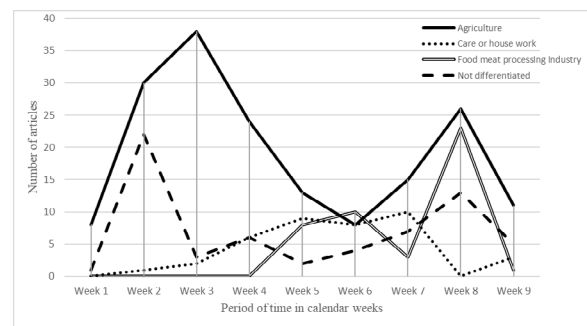
Figure 1 presents the distribution of articles according to the economic sector at the destination during

our period of analysis, split into calendar weeks. It clearly shows the dominance of migration for agriculture over the entire period.

The spillover effect of migration for agriculture becomes clearer when analysing the category of articles we labelled as 'not differentiated', which collates those articles discussing the events of the period but using general terms (e.g. Romanians leaving the country). In this category, Figure 1 shows a common variance in time for the number of articles related to migration for agriculture, suggesting that, for the Romanian media, migration for agriculture was the trigger for the period.

This is also indicated by the analysis of another category of codes, dividing the articles by the centrality of migration to their story (codes: migration central to article; migration embedded in another discussion; migration as the pretext). Migration was central to a high proportion of the articles (87%) and the remaining articles were divided unequally among the three categories of migration based on the economic sector: migration for agriculture seemed to provoke the most connections outside of migration, but in the cases of care and the meat-processing industry, the numbers were very low (1 and 0, respectively).

FIGURE 1
ARTICLES ACCORDING TO THE MIGRANT ECONOMIC SECTOR AND WEEK OF PUBLICATION

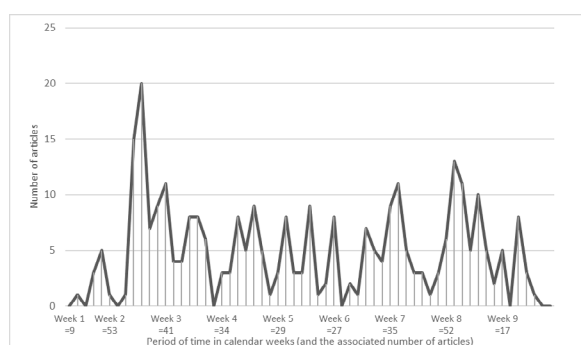


Source: Authors' own calculations

While migration to agriculture is central and incorporates other topics in its main narrative, the corpus of articles seems to be also event-driven (see Figure 1). For agriculture, the two peaks in the number of articles were related to the departures to Germany at the beginning of the period, then to the visit of the Romanian labour ministry to Germany and the concomitant announcement of changes in the German labour legislation. For care work, there was only one

peak related to organising departures of Romanian workers by train to Austria, while for Romanian workers in the meat processing industry, the distribution showed only one prominent peak, connected to the visit of Romanian officials to Germany and resulting changes in German legislation (mainly affecting the meat-processing industry).

FIGURE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF ARTICLES ACCORDING TO THE DAY
OF PUBLICATION



Source: Authors' own calculations

Our analysis of the number of articles published weekly confirms that the two events associated with migration to agriculture are 'the events' of the period: almost half of the articles were published during three calendar weeks, two of which 6–19th April (weeks 2 and 3 in Figure 1) spanned the departures of agricultural workers to Germany, and the third (18–24th May) of which was connected to the visit of the Romanian labour ministry to Germany and resulting announcements related to changes in German labour legislation. Even at the level of the days, our data confirm a tendency to relate migration to events: one-third of the articles were published in only seven days, related to the same two 'big' events previously identified, and adding a new one: a hearing of the Romanian ministries of labour and foreign affairs in parliament on the topic of departures to Germany. This suggests a combined approach: event-related and (probably) news-dominated (see also Figure 2, outlining the smaller peaks corresponding to news/events with smaller impacts).

The prominence of migration for agriculture seems also to be linked to the coverage of the topic by foreign media, especially in Germany. Articles about this type of migration (versus those for other economic sectors) contained the greatest amount of material taken from the international press (27%), more than

double when compared to the other two types of migration. This suggests that the Romanian media are sensitive to the topics covered in the media of destination countries concerning Romanians' migration, a tendency already outlined by previous studies (Beciu et al., 2017; Breazu and Eriksson, 2020; Breazu and Machin, 2018).

Our results indicate not only that the Romanian media is sensitive to international media accounts but also that it is highly influenced by institutional responses to events (in this case, related to migration). The proportion of articles that included press releases was high, varying from 12% with migration for agriculture to 42% with the meat-processing industry, thus confirming the results of previous studies (Balica and Marinescu, 2018). If we consider the content taken from the international press and institutional press releases, in combination, the picture does not indicate a highly active body of journalists writing about migration: the percentages of articles 'spurred on' from outside varied between one-third (in the case of care work) to more than half in the case of the meat-processing industry (with migration for agriculture in between, at 40%).

Our analysis of the articles by media outlet showed that the newspaper *Libertatea* published almost one-third of the articles. As expected, the two newspapers included in the sample published more opinion articles, but they were similar to the other media outlets from the point of view of the priority they gave to different types of migration (with the order of migration for agriculture, meat-processing industry, and care work observed for all). All of the websites repeatedly published articles on the three topics, and they all participated in the first 'spike' (weeks 2–3, Figure 1), but the interest of some outlets diminished towards the end of the period, and the second, smaller 'spike' (week 8, Figure 1) reflected rather unequal contribution from the websites.

FRAMING MIGRATION FOR AGRICULTURE BETWEEN THREATS AND RIGHTS

Our thematical analysis of the articles pointed to five big topics (present in at least one-third of the articles) that stayed at the fore of journalists' attention (see Table 3). The migration of Romanian workers was mainly covered by focusing on departures abroad and pandemic-related topics (i.e. respecting or not respecting the new rules, cases of infection with SARS-CoV-2, or death caused by the infection). Institutions from origin or destination countries become a focus

and their interventions (or lack of) were intensely scrutinised and promptly reproduced and commented on by the press. Connected with the pandemic, the living and working conditions in destination countries and workers' rights also came to the attention of the Romanian media.

The main topics we identified support, in our interpretation, the idea that the pandemic played a fundamental role in bringing to light migration that had otherwise been scarcely visible (Guadagno, 2020; Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021), thus contributing to starting an open debate about the rights of migrants.

At the same time, Table 3 shows a 'present time'-oriented approach: the first, most important topics were directly connected with what happened during the first wave of the pandemic and bore a low potential to spur analysis of the phenomenon behind 'the moment'. In our opinion, the only topic from the list in Table 3 that can be interpreted as signalling a search to understand/explain migration was the concern with the pull factors of migration. Largely though, the priorities of the moment were more important, much emphasis in the articles placed on how Romanian workers are indispensable to the western economies of the continent, and less on the structural factors generating this migration.

The same topics dominated in the particular case of migration for agriculture. Based on the long list of topics coded (results not shown here), the articles describing the migration of agricultural workers were more concerned with issues related to the conditions under which this migration develops (e.g. the terms 'exploitation' and 'exploited' appeared 12 times in 8 articles and the term 'slaves' appeared 22 times in 14 articles) and the reaction of workers to these conditions (e.g. protests of agricultural workers in Germany). More so than in the rest of articles, those related

to migration for agriculture emphasised the idea of international (EU countries) competition for Romanian workers and the need for intervention at an EU level. In the case of this migration, there was a slight tendency to connect the phenomenon not only to pull factors but also to push ones, thus providing a more complex picture of migration, linked to both the origin and destination areas.

The development of the topics over time confirms the highly event-driven approach of the Romanian media, with substantial fluctuation over time and a shift of focus from topics related to the origin to topics related to the destination (see Figure 3). Departures, even if they continued, were of less interest to the press once the authorities provide an organised frame for them. Living and working conditions gained slowly, but constantly, importance among the topics. The interest in institutional reactions and responses increased, which suggests a progressive politicisation of the issue, linked to the working and living conditions of workers and their rights. The concern about the pandemic—i.e. its associated rules and impacts on individuals' health—seemed to decrease over time, supporting the idea of the pandemic as a moment that brought certain topics to the public attention, but suggesting that the trends established during the first phase of the pandemic were not necessarily durable.

The sequence of the topics related to agriculture (see Figure 4) reveals similar patterns and points to the leading role of migration for agriculture in setting the debate about the conditions provided for workers at the destination. Surprisingly, the Romanian media relatively quickly abandoned the topic of departures, even though these were substantial in number over the whole period, and they also abandoned the thematic area around the pandemic. The departures lost their sensational/novelty character as a system of rules regulating the de-

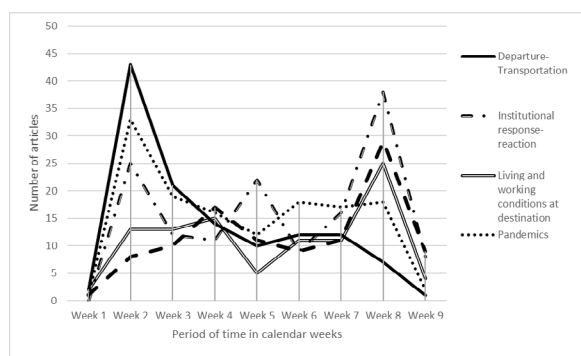
TABLE 3
MAIN TOPICS APPROACHED BY ROMANIAN MEDIA

Topic	Total sample	Migration to agriculture
Institutional response-reaction	47%	40%
Pandemic	46%	38%
Departure-Transportation	41%	40%
Workers' rights	35%	42%
Living and working conditions at destination	33%	41%
Pull factors (destination)	23%	35%

Note: Non-exclusive codification of the topic of the article; List of topics hierarchized after the first column

Source: Authors' own elaboration; n=297 articles in total sample; n=172 articles on migration to agriculture;

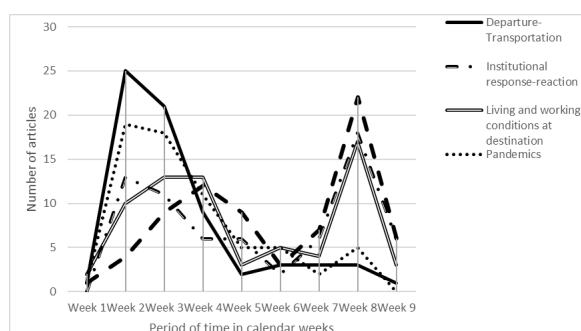
FIGURE 3
TOPICS DEVELOPED OVER THE STUDY PERIOD (ALL ARTICLES)



Source: Authors' own calculations

partures of groups during the state of emergency was implemented. The relatively slow rise of the number of infections with SARS-CoV-2 in Romania during the first phase of the pandemic was probably a factor in decreasing the media's interest in the pandemic. Moreover, the end of the state of emergency (week 7 in Figures 3 and 4) probably affected the media's interest in both topics. On the one hand, it reduced the restrictions on traveling, making departures less visible, and on the other hand, it was a clear sign from the authorities that the first wave of the pandemic was successfully outrun. Both factors probably contributed to shifting the topics to the margin of the media's interest.

FIGURE 4
TOPICS DEVELOPED OVER THE STUDY PERIOD (ARTICLES RELATED TO MIGRATION TO AGRICULTURE)



Source: Authors' own calculations

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS ABROAD: A MASS OF IMPERSONAL ACTORS

Most of the articles (78%) were blind to the individuals who were migrating. They approached mi-

grants as an impersonal mass, designated with words such as: 'Romanians', 'seasonals' ('sezonieri', in Romanian), 'Romanian seasonals', 'seasonal workers', 'citizens', 'people', 'persons', 'workers', 'Romanian workers', 'travellers', 'crowd', 'women', 'men', 'caretakers', 'strawberry pickers' ('căpșunari', in Romanian), 'daily workers' ('zilieri', in Romanian), 'Romanian daily workers', 'emigrants', and 'fruit pickers'. Our findings confirm readily identified patterns of migration representation in the media (Beciu, 2012; Matei, 2011), suggesting that at least the first phase of the pandemic did not bring about a substantial change in the way the media approached Romanian migration.

Migrants' depersonalisation was pronounced, as seen in the high proportion of articles that referred to migrants as a group, which limited the feelings of empathy that a reader could manifest for migrants (Breazu and Machin, 2018). The longstanding term 'căpșunari' (strawberry pickers)—used for the first time to refer to Romanian agricultural workers in Huelva, Spain, with a strong pejorative sense—was extensively used in this period, deprecating the image of workers leaving Romania during the first phase of the pandemic.

Individual migrants were referred to in 22% of the articles. In some cases, the same article referred to more than one individual, but this multiplying effect was countered by the process of taking up news or analyses from the international media or other Romanian media outlets, thus reducing the number of 'real' individuals whose profiles were described (see Box 1).

BOX 1: PROCESS OF TAKING UP STORIES AND THE LOW PROFILE OF INDIVIDUAL MIGRANTS

In one of its articles about Romanians working in German agriculture, published on 12th April, the news agency Mediafax referred to two individuals migrating to Germany: "Among the 60 Romanian workers that flew were 22-year-old Dănuț and his girlfriend 18-year-old Mihaela" (Mediafax, 2020). This account was taken up by two newspapers, *Adevărul* (Deacu, 2020) and *Libertatea* (Dudescu, 2020), and included in their articles published that same day.

When individuals were mentioned, the characteristic most frequently noted was their gender (84% of the articles specifying individual migrants referred to their gender), followed by their place of residence in

the origin area (36%) and their age (33%). References to their marital status, children, and occupational status/occupation/profession were rare. The descriptions were brief, contained few elements (see Box 1), and were generally linked to quotations of migrants' words.

References to individuals varied between the three types of migration based on the economic sector. Articles about migration for agriculture and care work were the most populated with individuals (about one-quarter of the articles that referred to each of these migrations included descriptions of individual migrants). Migrants working in the meat-processing industry, meanwhile, were the least known through the media accounts (only 9% of articles mentioned individual migrants). The explanation for this probably lies in the ease of direct access to migrants for agriculture and care work, as both were approached from the angle of departures, in contrast to migration in the meat-processing industry, which was described only from the perspective of the destination. From this point of view, it seems that the capacity of new technologies to make distant realities accessible (Gemi et al., 2013) has been overestimated, at least in the case of the Romanian media.

Migrants for agriculture had more diverse profiles than other types of migrants, but the presentation of individuals according to a schema remained characteristic. To determine what kind of individual Romanian readers 'saw', through accessing the online media, as likely to migrate to work in agriculture, we listed every agricultural worker mentioned in the articles and noted their characteristics. Just over one-fifth of the articles mentioned at least one individual migrant (38 articles), and some of them made references to more than one migrant (up to a maximum of six). The total pool of profiles included 81 individuals. However, as mentioned above, this was not the number of real individuals. The event-oriented approach of the media and the practice of taking up stories from elsewhere meant that some individuals appeared in more than one article (see Box 1 for an example).

As expected, the gender, age, and place of residence in Romania were the most mentioned characteristics. Men prevailed (60% of the profiles), but the ages and places of residence were both highly varied. The ages of the referred-to individuals varied between 18 and 57 (the mean age was 35), suggesting a diversity of Romanian migrants for agriculture from this point of view. The migrants' places of residence covered all regions of Romania, with more frequent cases from

Moldova and Transylvania, which are both regions with high rates of international migration (Sandu, 2010). The country of destination could be identified in most of the cases (80 out of 81), with most migrants travelling to Germany (78% of the profiles). The remaining destinations were the UK, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, and Italy. Though there were quite a few destinations, only migrants to the UK and the Netherlands appeared in more than one article. These data confirm that there was an overwhelming focus on migration to Germany for agriculture. Many of those migrants could be linked to a pattern of repeated migration: in almost 30% of cases, at least one previous sojourn for work abroad was mentioned, usually in the same place. However, as already noted, the press accounts on migrants were mostly schematic. If we tried to add another element beyond their age, gender, place of residence, and destination, the number of cases reduced drastically: only in 14 cases did we have a reference to the occupation of the individuals migrating abroad, in 14 we had a reference to whether or not they had children, and in 15 we learned their marital status. This points to an oversimplified, schematic representation of migrant agricultural workers, consistent with the general representation of emigrants in Romanian media (see Beciu 2012; Matei 2011). In only a few cases did the media present stories of individuals with real lives where the reader could recognise himself in the subject, helping him to understand more about migrants in agriculture.

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS ABROAD: THE VOICES OF THE UNKNOWN

The media is not only an important source of information about migration; at the same time, it acts as a space of participation for migrants (Bleich et al., 2015; Bloemraad et al., 2015). Linked to this direction of research, we investigated the extent to which the period was a moment offering migrants a chance to express themselves. We analysed the voices of migrants in connection to other types of voices, single or multiple, located at the origin or destination.

Our data suggest that, over the two months, the media often gave a voice to different actors. In our sample, 85% of the articles referred to at least one actor. In many cases (more than 30%), the voices of different types of actors were combined in the same media account of migration, suggesting a rather complex approach to the issue. Though the majority of the voices came from Romania (59% of articles included at least one 'local' voice), the media also added in the

voices of actors from outside the country (24% of the articles involved at least a voice from the destination country), and to a lesser extent, promoted voices at the supranational level (e.g. Romanian members of the EU Parliament).

The actors present in the media accounts were diverse, but three categories dominated the space: (1) governmental and political voices, (2) migrants, and (3) employers and recruiting agencies. Though none of the forms of migration under focus were linked to a migration programme, and though Romanian public officials constantly stressed the free will of individuals when deciding to migrate, the media gave disproportionately large space to governmental and political voices, irrespectively of their location (origin or destination; about 70% of articles included at least one voice from this category).

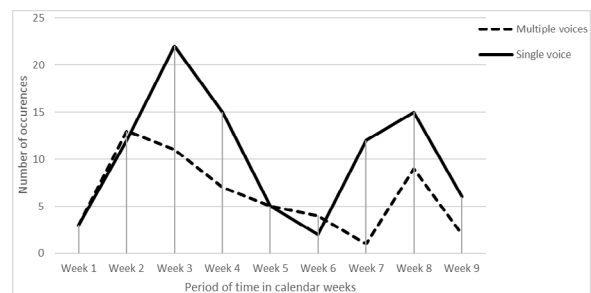
The profile of migration for agriculture mostly reproduced these patterns, but with a few exceptions. The first one related to the locations of actors whose voices were present in the media: with agriculture, there was a more pronounced presence of actors from destination countries than origins. This transnationalisation of the topic probably related to the high visibility of agricultural migrants in the destination countries during the pandemic and the media approaches in destination countries (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021).

The second distinction came from the types of actors whose voices were given prominence, with a higher presence of employers, recruiters, and migrants.

When we consider time, the voices in the media accounts seemed to be intimately linked to the event-based approach. Events tended to increase the number of articles giving voice to different actors in combination, but this tendency was not very clear across our entire sample. We propose that a longer time interval is needed to properly evaluate this type of effect. The pattern, however, appeared more clearly in the case of migration for agriculture (see Figure 5). This points, in our interpretation, to a higher investment of effort on the part of journalists to their work once a topic came into the focus of the media through there having been a related event.

The pattern of interchange of the most important voices over time was largely similar to migration for agriculture (see Figure 6) and that of the whole sample (not shown here). This suggests a development over time that gradually excluded the direct partici-

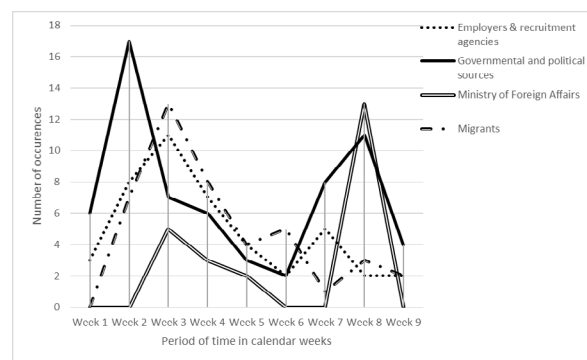
FIGURE 5
SINGLE VERSUS MULTIPLE VOICES IN ARTICLES RELATED TO MIGRATION TO AGRICULTURE OVER TIME



Source: Authors' own calculations

pants in migration (migrants and employers/recruiters) to create the space for institutions and their representatives to participate. In our interpretation, this reproduces a gradual process of politicisation of the issue and a return to the usual patterns of constructing migration by giving little space to migrant voices. The presence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a prominent voice probably related to a certain type of framing of Romanian migration based on the country's image, as previously outlined (see Beciu et al., 2017), and also to the shift of focus from departures (origin country) to working and living conditions (destination country).

FIGURE 6
TYPES OF VOICES IN ARTICLES RELATED TO MIGRATION TO AGRICULTURE OVER TIME



Source: Authors' own calculations

DISCUSSION

Our analysis utilised the focus that the pandemic placed on migrants during its first phase, in their double position: as essential workers in economic sectors that could not be stopped from continuing their pre-pandemic modes of activity (in destination countries),

or as feared agents contributing through their international travel to the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus. In this article, we approached media representations of migration/migrants for a specific group: Romanian agricultural workers involved in seasonal departures (mainly) to European countries.

Our strategy to identify media articles related to agricultural workers used a well-established methodological tool (keyword searches) and led us to a body of articles that reported not only on agricultural workers but also on care workers and those in the meat-processing industry abroad. This pointed to the more general category of contract workers. Doubtlessly, a series of contextual factors favoured this mixture of news content (e.g. restrictions on travel abroad and overlapping destination countries). Beyond this, the strong interlink of the articles indicated a more general idea that ‘natural’ categories of migration from an origin-country perspective might differ from those from a destination-country perspective. In this particular case, the economic sector of employment at the destination faded away as a criterion of differentiation in face of the limited duration of stay at the destination implied by the contracted nature of migration. Moreover, our analysis pointed to a considerable number of articles free of references to any specific category of migration *per se*, using highly un-specific language to denote migrants and migration. This might be linked to the lack of interest of journalists in specialising in topics related to migration (see Gemi et al., 2013 on this). However, we believe this tendency might be also related to a perspective specific to origin countries where the stress is placed on the departure abroad of individuals belonging to the same nation. This ‘belonging’ takes the lead in the identification of migrants, rather than characteristics related to factors relevant for the destination (in this regard, the labelling of migrants first as ‘Romanians’—as discussed by previous studies, e.g. Beciu (2012)—is in our interpretation, another argument).

In general, our study confirmed tendencies already identified to characterise the media representations of Romanian migrants: an event-oriented approach, oversimplified representation of migration, massification and schematisation of migrant representations, a sizeable presence of public authorities in accounts of migration, and high sensitivity to the reports of destination countries’ media on Romanian migrants. Except for the last, these also seem to characterise immigrants’ representations in the media of destination countries. In our interpretation, this points to

the dominance of contemporary media practices irrespective of the topic addressed.

Our analysis suggests that the approach to reporting on migration during the COVID-19 pandemic, at least during its first phase, highly depended on the media’s readily institutionalised ways of reporting on migration. The readers of the Romanian press did not gain a profound understanding of the complex mechanisms behind the movements of contract or agricultural workers, or deep knowledge of the profiles of the individuals involved in this migration. The reader was not invited to empathise with these people or recognise himself among them.

Even though the voices of migrants were heard, this mainly happened while events emerged with the potential to be sensational, and they were mainly heard while migrants were in the origin country. Their voices were soon drowned out by the more powerful voices of institutions, thus re-establishing the status quo in reporting about migration. Moreover, we believe that more qualitative/discourse-oriented analyses will further reveal the oversimplified conveyance of migrants’ words compared to the messages of other voices.

Though the role of media cannot be denied in bringing to light the migration of agricultural and other contract workers and triggering reactions from authorities, the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic probably failed, in our opinion, to bring about a durable change in the way the Romanian media reports this migration.

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