



ROMANIAN ACADEMY
School of Advanced Studies of the Romanian Academy
Doctoral School of Sociology and Legal Sciences

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

**ROMANIAN POLICE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS**

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Problem definition, importance of the topic at national and international level

In this thesis, I investigated how the Romanian Police and its employees, the police officers, were represented in Romanian online media during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I approached the research through the lens of media framing theory, using both quantitative content analysis of the articles published on www.digi24.ro website during the period of anti-Covid restrictions in our country, and narrative analysis of how three significant cases from this period were covered on www.digi24.ro and www.realitatea.net websites.

The way in which journalists deal with issues relating to police and police officers has often aroused the interest of researchers at international as well as national level. Police decision-makers are also often interested in media discussions about the actions of the police or police officers and how these discussions are conducted (what is discussed, but more importantly how).

As topics related to the police and police officers are often in the media spotlight, the relationship between the police and the media is complex, with the police being both the source of news and the subject of it. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has further complicated matters, with stories about this institution taking on new dimensions, as the police have been the main state force that has been enforced practical restrictions on the population. Thus, the visibility of the police was even higher, and ordinary citizens were confronted with encounters with representatives of this institution much more often, and their activity came under the media spotlight even more often.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been spreading at a particularly rapid pace and has triggered reactions from all countries around the world in an attempt to limit the effects of this initially unknown disease on their own citizens. As a result, measures have been imposed to manage the health crisis, involving often severe restrictions on population mobility and social interactions.

The police, an institution with an essential role in maintaining public order and law enforcement, was put in the position of amplifying this role during the pandemic, being responsible for imposing the measures established by the authorities for social distancing, as well as movement restrictions. Similar to other law enforcement agencies around the world, the Romanian Police had to adapt quickly to new challenges, while trying to maintain public confidence and law enforcement efficiency.

On the other hand, the role of the media in shaping public opinion about law enforcement institutions in general, and the police in particular, is of paramount importance. Moreover, during the pandemic, the role of the media has been amplified, often being the main link for the population with the external world, especially during periods of severe restrictions – during the state of emergency or during periods of quarantine of certain localities. In this sense, media framing is an essential concept for understanding how the media presents and influences public perceptions of the police.

Aim of the research

The aim of my thesis is to investigate how the Romanian Police institution and its employees were represented in the Romanian online media during the Covid-19 pandemic. The fundamental question underlying this research is: How was the police represented in the mass media during the pandemic?

Research objectives

To answer this question, the thesis aims to fulfill the following general objectives:

- O1. Identify the media framing used by online journalists in presenting news about the police and police officers.
- O2. Determine the main themes (topics) covered during the Covid-19 pandemic in online news stories associated with the involvement of the police or its representatives.
- O3. Verify the persistence/succession of the frames throughout the entire period (March 16, 2020 – March 8, 2022).

Research hypotheses

Corresponding with the research questions, respectively with the objectives of this analytical approach, the hypotheses from which I initiated the whole research approach are the following:

- H1. Online media in Romania predominantly used episodic frames in representing the Romanian Police during the pandemic.
- H2. The conflict frame was the most frequently used frame in presenting online news about police and police officers during the pandemic.
- H3. Pandemic-specific topics (enforcement of anti-Covid restrictions) were predominant in journalists' discourse about the police and police officers, as opposed to topics referring to regular police activities.

H4. Major police-related events (positive or negative) have led to significant changes in how the police is portrayed in the media.

Research methodology

For carrying out the research, which is the central element of my thesis, I used a mixed methodology, exploiting the study of social documents both from a quantitative (quantitative content analysis) and qualitative (narrative analysis) perspective, in order to achieve the research objectives and to verify the hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the endeavour.

While quantitative content analysis allowed me to identify and quantify the media framing used by online media based on established typologies, narrative analysis provided a systematic but detailed insight into the representation of the police in the pandemic context, highlighting the central elements of the "stories" submitted to the public by online journalists.

Research limits and further research directions

The scientific research that I conducted for elaborating the thesis also has some methodological limits that I mentioned in the introductory part of the thesis. In short, they are related to 1. the period for which I conducted the analysis (the study focuses exclusively on the period of enforcement the anti-Covid restrictions in our country); 2. the focus on online media (the analysis is limited to Romanian online media, excluding other forms of mass media); 3. the focus on the Romanian space (I conducted the analysis exclusively on the basis of articles published only on Romanian websites about the Romanian Police).

Given the methodological limitations identified, future scientific research could 1. extend the study period to the beginning of the pandemic, before the state of emergency had been declared, as well as at its end, after the end of the state of alert; 2. analyze other forms of mass media (television, radio, social media); 3. compare the media representation of police forces in several states.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

The central concepts of the thesis are the Covid-19 pandemic, the Romanian Police and media framing. Studying the media coverage of the police during the pandemic period required a delimitation in time and space of the pandemic, a definition of the concept of police and its contextualization, with a focus on the Romanian Police, as well as a definition of media framing and the representation of the police in the media.

The theoretical perspective from which I approach the research topic is the theory of media framing, established by Robert Entman in a widely-circulated work (Entman, 1993). It explains how the media select and portray certain aspects of reality, thus guiding the audience to interpret them in a certain way, based on certain predominant attributes. Media frames are cognitive structures that help individuals understand and interpret the incoming information they receive, simplifying complex issues.

Entman (1993, p. 52) also identifies four main functions of media frames: problem definition (identifying and explaining the central issue being discussed), diagnosis of causes (attributing responsibility for the problems that have been identified), moral judgment (evaluating the problems and the actors involved), and treatment suggestion (offering solutions and recommendations for solving the problems).

In my thesis, I use media framing theory to analyze how the Romanian online media represented the Romanian Police and its actions during the pandemic. This involves identifying and analyzing the frames used in articles published on news television websites in order to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions.

I do this on the basis of three typologies of media frames established in the specialized literature: 1. according to the nature and content of the frames – generic (predefined) and emergent (issue-specific) (de Vreese, 2005); 2. from the perspective of attribution of responsibility – episodic and thematic (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987); 3. classification of generalist frames into attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences and morality (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Brief description of the chapters

The introduction provides a general overview of the research problem, the aim and objectives of the study, the research hypotheses, the innovative elements brought by the thesis, as well as an overview of the conceptual and theoretical framework and underlines the research approach and the methodology used. It also exposes the limits of the research and further research directions.

The first chapter is dedicated to the conceptual framework of the thesis, which first defines and delimits the Covid-19 pandemic at the international level, then addresses the measures imposed in Romania during the states of emergency and alert and their impact on Romanian society.

The next section of this chapter is dedicated to defining the police and explaining the role of the police in society, especially in the context of the pandemic, with a focus on the

Romanian Police. It also examines the responsibilities and challenges of policing during this period and how these influenced the relationship between the police and the public.

This section covers both the legal framework that regulates the activity of the Romanian Police and that delimits the place of this institution among the law enforcement and public safety forces in our country, as well as the changes in duties that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the literature review on this topic, I identified studies on the role of the police in society in general and during the Covid-19 pandemic in particular, as well as studies that sought to capture the challenges faced by police forces during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The penultimate section of the theoretical chapter starts by presenting the theory of media framing, offering several widely used definitions of framing and media frames, and then presenting three established typologies of media frames in the literature, which I use further in the applied part of the thesis.

I then identified, by consulting international studies, the media frames used by journalists to present the actions of the police and police officers.

Finally, the issue of police representation in the media in previous internationally conducted research and during the Covid-19 pandemic, is addressed.

The second chapter is dedicated to describing the research design, detailing the method used (the study of social documents) and highlighting the mixed quantitative-qualitative approach (quantitative content analysis and narrative analysis) to achieve the objectives fixed at the beginning. The procedures used for data collection, the research instruments, as well as the techniques for analyzing and interpreting the information obtained are described. In addition, due attention is given to ethical aspects in research, as well as methodological difficulties and ways identified to overcome them.

Quantitative content analysis, which I applied to articles published in the online media during the Covid-19 pandemic, was the main technique I used in conducting the research which is the basis for my thesis.

The selection criteria for items published online targeted the source (Romanian news websites, ranked among the top sources of information and among most trusted by Romanians), the time period (the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, delimited by the beginning of the state of emergency and the end of the state of alert), as well as the characters depicted (Romanian Police or police officers).

Applying these criteria, without using sampling procedures, the result was a corpus of items subject to analysis that included 1201 articles published on the www.digi24.ro website between March 16, 2020 and December 31, 2021, tagged with the words police or policeman/ police officer, which had as protagonists the Romanian Police or representatives of this institution.

For data collection, I designed a content coding scheme, which includes the following dimensions: identification of the article, the characters involved, the action of the police/police officer, sanctioning citizens, acts of challenging police officers' authority, aggressions against the police officers, police officers' misbehaviour, accusations made by the police unions, equipment, police officers' demands for rights, human resources policy, media framing.

After coding the information from the selected articles, I obtained an electronic database with 42 variables representing the indicators included in the analysis grid and 1201 cases corresponding to the 1201 articles identified.

I then processed the data obtained after completing the electronic database through quantitative procedures, using the SPSS Statistics software, performing frequency analyses, contingency tables, as well as tests of association between variables.

Finally, I interpreted the results in accordance with the specific objectives assumed at the beginning of the quantitative content analysis process, derived from the general objectives of the thesis, aiming to obtain answers to the following research questions:

1. What main topics were covered by journalists in articles featuring the police or police officers during the pandemic?
2. Which frames were predominantly used in describing events involving the police, in terms of attribution of responsibility (thematic/episodic frames)?
3. What were the frames used in describing the events involving the police during this period, according to the typology of generalist frames (attribution of responsibility, conflict, morality, human interest, economic consequences)?

After having identified, based on quantitative content analysis, the events that received particular attention from digi24.ro journalists between March 16, 2020 and December 31, 2021, I chose three of them to be addressed using narrative analysis.

The three events retained for the narrative analysis were the death of the "interloper" leader Emi Pian (August 4, 2020), the hostage-taking in Onești, which resulted in the victims death (March 1, 2021), and the restraint of a man by police officers, followed by his death, which took place in Pitești (April 16, 2021).

I kept the same conditions of article selection that I used in the quantitative content analysis, identifying the events with the widest coverage on www.digi24.ro during the pandemic, and then I searched the archive of www.realitatea.net website for articles related to the same events, analyzing 209 articles in total (87 from digi24.ro and 122 from realitatea.net).

In order to identify the structural elements of the "story", I have developed a narrative analysis scheme, which I applied to all three events. It contains the following main elements: the topic discussed and the general context, the course of action in chronological order, highlighting the main moments, the characters involved, the conflict, the themes and messages transmitted, the media frames identified, reflections on the impact of the events and the way they were presented in the media (conclusions of the case), similarities and differences in the coverage of the event on the two websites.

I interpreted the results in accordance with the specific objectives for the narrative analysis, which emerged from the general objectives, while trying, at the same time, to identify the constitutive elements of the story for each case and then reconstruct it in the form of a narration.

The main question that initiated the narrative analysis process was: "How was the police portrayed in these three events on the websites associated with news televisions?". Further, the following secondary questions emerged:

1. Were there certain patterns (frames) that the two websites associated with the news channels Digi 24 and Realitatea TV promoted, regarding the police and its representatives (police officers), in the case of the 3 events? Did these events mark a change in the discourse towards the police and police officers or are the frames/patterns the same ones used in the coverage of police involvement in less mediatized situations?
2. Were these patterns (frames) different in the context of each event analyzed or were they the same?
3. Were the same stereotypes about police and police officers promoted by both TV websites or were they different?

The chapter on research design continues with the ethical issues involved in carrying out my thesis, which I briefly outline below.

Since the method used to achieve the goal of investigating how the online media represented the Romanian Police when the anti-Covid restrictions were in force in our country was the study of social documents, a non-reactive method, I did not face any

problems related to the interaction between the researcher and police officers, nor to the respect of confidentiality or anonymity.

On the other hand, the selection of sources and material to be analyzed could have raised some ethical considerations. Therefore, in order to avoid distorting the social reality under study and to make the analysis as balanced as possible, I extracted the necessary information from those websites that were placed on leading positions in the top of Romanians' online information sources and in the top of trust granted by the public, and I used objective selection criteria (such as the time period and the characters involved) for the selection of the articles to be analyzed.

The main ethical dilemma that I realized and revealed from the very beginning is that, being at the same time a researcher with the object of study the police (scientific truth) and a police officer (loyalty to the institution I work for), a conflict of interest between these values could have arisen. In order to overcome this issue, to ensure axiological neutrality and to limit subjectivism, solutions were identified together with the thesis supervisor and the tutoring committee, who are researchers with extensive experience in the field under study. The research project and the final thesis plan were also discussed with the supervisor and the tutoring committee, in order to meet the standards of academic research.

Another ethical aspect involved in the elaboration of the thesis is the compliance with copyright and intellectual property rights, so in all cases where I used ideas or wording of other authors, I have indicated the source according to the standards and rules in force regarding citation in scientific works.

In the last section of the chapter, I have presented the methodological difficulties raised by conducting the practical part of the thesis, as well as the solutions identified to overcome them.

Since I carried out the research as part of my doctoral thesis, I could not benefit from the input of other coders in the process of applying the quantitative analysis grid, but in order to minimize subjectivity, I permanently benefited from the qualified opinion of the thesis supervisor and the tutoring committee, both in establishing the indicators included in the grid and during the data entry into the database.

Also, taking into account the time budget allocated to the research "field", I selected for the quantitative content analysis the articles involving the police or police officers published only on www.digi24.ro website between March 16, 2020 and December 31, 2021, and for the narrative analysis only three of the intensely covered events on www.digi24.ro and www.realitatea.net websites. These difficulties may be overcome by conducting further

research, which could extend the analyzed time period and multiply the sites to extract information.

The third chapter is built around the results of the quantitative content analysis of items about the police or police officers published on www.digi24.ro during the Covid-19 pandemic, with sections covering the sources used by journalists to document the articles, the tone of the articles, the characters illustrated, the role and actions of police officers, the evaluation of the police officers' actions, as well as the sanctioning of citizens, aggressions against police officers, police officers' misbehaviour or their abuses, the sanctioning of the police officers, requests made by the police officers and accusations made by the police unions, as well as the human resources management and special measures to support police activity during the pandemic. The final section of the chapter is dedicated to the media framing in terms of the three typologies outlined in the theoretical chapter of the thesis.

Frequency of articles : on average, 2 articles per day or 56 articles per month with police involvement were published.

Topics of the articles : the main topics were investigating crimes or suspicious deaths (46.8%), intervening at ongoing events (36.6%) and releasing preventive messages or messages of public interest (24.1%).

25.9% of the articles involving the police covered Covid-19 pandemic specific topics: checking public compliance with restrictions, including penalizing citizens who did not respect them (16.3%); enforcing anti-Covid measures (5.4%), releasing public interest messages or preventive messages on the topic of Covid-19 (8.5%).

Sources of articles : the main sources of information for journalists were official police releases (34.1%) and news agencies (30.1%); witnesses, victims or perpetrators played a small role in informing online news.

General tone of the articles : was predominantly neutral (86% of articles); 10.2% of articles were critical, and 1.7% were laudatory.

Geographical distribution : most often there were references to actions that took place in Bucharest (26.8%); actions taking place in Constanța (4.9%), Bacău (3.2%) and Timiș (3.1%) counties were reported at a great distance; 12.1% of the articles covered actions that took place in several counties, and 8.4% did not specify the place of the events.

Illustrated characters : the most frequently were mentioned the police officers as direct participants in the actions (78.9%), the police as an institution (41.5%), but also its

sub-units (41.5%) ; 27.6% of the articles mentioned the county police inspectorates, and 13.1% the General Directorate of Bucharest Police.

The role of police officers : police officers were most often referred to as those who intervened in ongoing events (in 49.1% of the articles) and those who investigated the reported cases (47.9%); the role of public communicator is emphasized in 26.3% of the articles, the role of perpetrator in 7.5% and the role of victim of a crime in 6.1%; only in 10 articles police officers are referred to as persons infected with the new coronavirus.

Specific to the pandemic, the action of the police was to check the compliance with the anti-Covid restrictions (including penalizing those who did not comply) in 16.3% of the articles, and to enforce compliance with the restrictions in 5.4%.

Evaluation of police actions : explicit or implicit evaluations of the fairness of police actions were present in only 16% of the articles, mostly made by the persons interviewed or quoted.

Errors attributed to police/police officers : they were grouped into mistakes in the pandemic context, mistakes in interventions, mistakes in road traffic, lack of knowledge or failure to follow the procedures, accusations of corruption or collusion with lawbreakers, lack of experience, too lenient sanctions for police officers who have committed mistakes, errors in communication.

Police abuse : approximately equal number of articles concern police abuse when intervening at ongoing events and checking compliance with anti-Covid restrictions (13 articles, respectively 10).

Sanctioning citizens : in 2/3 of the articles in which the police officer intervened at an event in progress or investigated a violation of the law, the action also resulted in the sanctioning of citizens; 28.9% of the articles referring to sanctions indicated fines given to citizens; 22.4% of the articles showed that the sanctions were given for violation of anti-Covid restrictions.

Challenging the police authority : 37 materials discuss acts of defiance, challenging or ignoring police officers' authority; 15 of these refer to acts that took place in the context of police officers' actions to enforce or verify compliance with anti-Covid restrictions.

Aggressions against police officers : 91 articles (8% of the total) report cases of aggression against police officers, most of them from the category of assault and battery.

Police officers' misconduct : 139 articles out of the total number of articles analyzed (11.6% of the total) talk about inappropriate behaviour or misconduct by police officers, including even crimes committed by them; most of these articles, 37, talk about aggressive,

even violent behaviour towards citizens; 19 articles show that police officers themselves did not comply with anti-Covid measures.

Sanctioning police officers : 85% of the articles showing police officers' misconduct also discuss the sanctions applied to police officers to punish such behaviours, primarily of a criminal nature, but also of a disciplinary nature.

Human resources management in the Romanian Police : this topic was addressed in 22 articles, with mentions of staff shortages and ways to reduce them, different types of recruitment procedures, the establishment of new police units (School Safety and Animal Protection) and retirements.

Special measures adopted in the pandemic context : only 12 articles out of the total number of those analyzed talk about special measures adopted during the pandemic to strengthen the capacity of the Romanian Police to cope with the tasks assigned to enforce and verify the citizens' compliance with the restrictions decided by the authorities in order to limit the spread of the new coronavirus; these measures involved supporting the police activity by the Local Police, the athletes from the Dinamo Club and by the Romanian Army, but also the training of police dogs to detect people infected with Covid-19.

Media framing : articles frequently use episodic frames (found in 93.7% of all articles) in presenting news about the police, much more often than thematic frames (in 16.1% of articles); in 9.7% of these materials both episodic and thematic frames were found.

In all 1201 articles studied, I was able to recognize predefined (generic) frames specific to a professional field, although there were numerous punctual events in which the police or police officers were involved, and the situations covered by the online media were very diverse, suitable for an emergent (issue-specific) framing.

The most common generalist frame found in articles in which the police or its representatives played a role is that of attribution of responsibility (99.2%), followed at a distance by the frame of economic consequences, found in 38.4% of the articles. The conflict frame appears in 19.4% of the articles, the human interest frame in 15.8%, and the morality frame in 3.6% of the total items analyzed.

The fourth chapter presents the results of the narrative analysis, discussing three cases that were intensely mediatized during the pandemic and that strongly influenced the public's perception of the Romanian Police. The main moments of the action, the characters involved and their roles, the topics identified, as well as the main frames used in the description of these events and the similarities and differences in the coverage of each case

on two different websites (www.digi24.ro and www.realitatea.net) are highlighted. At the end of the chapter, similarities and differences in the coverage of the three events are identified.

The comparative analysis of the media coverage of the three cases highlights how different types of situations involving the police have been covered by the online media, while reflecting different aspects of the relationship between police and society.

These three events have sparked extensive public debates about police practices, training and accountability. The image of the police reflected on the two websites in these three situations is mixed, bringing both positive and negative aspects to the public's attention. However, the predominant criticisms, although transmitted in a neutral manner, without implying value judgments from the journalists, reflected mainly the negative elements of the involvement of the police or of the representatives of this institution from the perspective of the cited sources or the commentators of the events.

The Emi Pian case. The event that took place on the morning of August 4, 2020 and its aftermath represented a significant moment in the confrontation between the police and the "interlope" clans in Romania, as well as in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, by the involvement of the police in enforcing anti-Covid restrictions to a large-scale event (the funerals was held over several days, with a very large number of participants and the risk of violence).

The portrayal of the police and police officers in these events is controversial, with some articles presenting the police forces as efficient and swift in arresting suspects, while other articles report possible negligence, suggesting that the murder of Florin Mototolea could have been prevented.

There were also articles suggesting possible police complicity in crimes committed by criminal groups (interlope clans), as well as links between some police officers and these groups, revelations that damaged the general image of the police and police officers.

The journalists point out that the police played an active role in managing the situation during the funerals of Emi Pian, additional forces were mobilized to prevent possible incidents that could have occurred between members of the rival groups, and additional security measures were taken, including blocking certain streets or checking people present at the funeral. The articles also show that the police applied sanctions for not respecting the anti-Covid restrictions during these events, but they have been criticized for the fact that the measures taken to limit the spread of Covid-19 were not as strict, and the

sanctions applied were not as harsh as for the rest of the population, probably due to the fear of altering public safety.

Realitatea.net and digi24.ro have reported on the death and funeral of Emi Pian, their news being different in some respects, but similar in others.

Coverage of Emi Pian's death: Realitatea.net focused on Emi Pian's connection to the Duduianu clan and the fact that he was killed in a "mafia style"; digi24.ro mentioned more details about where and how the armed attack took place, but without focusing on Emi Pian's clan affiliation.

Coverage of Emi Pian's funeral: Realitatea.net emphasized the large number of participants and the presence of controversial individuals; digi24.ro highlighted the fact that the police managed to maintain order during the ceremony, even if they had to use force at times.

Police actions: both sites presented statements by officials, but gave different attention to the topic. Realitatea.net focused more on how the police failed to enforce anti-Covid measures at Emi Pian's funerals and highlighted critical statements by some politicians; digi24.ro emphasized more on the fact that the police acted promptly and efficiently to maintain order during the funerals and gave details about the number of law enforcement officers mobilized at the event, as well as the sanctions applied.

Both sites also gave details about the criminal prosecution of the people involved in the death of Emi Pian. Realitatea.net gave more space to information about the suspects and the charges against them; digi24.ro emphasized more that the investigation is continuing and that the police are trying to identify all those involved in this case.

The Pitești case. The event, which took place on April 16, 2021 in Pitești, where police intervention to limit the effects of a fire resulted in the death of a man, attracted media attention, with comparisons being made with international cases (George Floyd) in which the behavior of law enforcement was abusive, using excessive force.

The journalists of the two websites do not themselves make the connection between the case from Pitești and the Black Lives Matters phenomenon, but cite other media sources where debates on this topic have been intense. Although the event is treated as an isolated incident, questions are being raised about institutional practices, the training of police officers to act in such problematic situations, and respect for human rights.

The articles on digi24.ro and realitatea.net cover the event in detail, as well as the stages of the investigation, such as the result of the forensic report and its conclusions, the

detention and arrest of the police officers, the suspension/termination of their service, their placement under house arrest, the detention of one of the gendarmes.

The articles analyzed underline the human tragedy and the responsibility of those involved in handling of the event (police officers and gendarmes), with officials requesting a swift investigation into the circumstances. The legal consequences of this situation are emphasized, highlighting the fact that a criminal case was opened for abusive behavior and manslaughter, and that the police officers under investigation have had their employment relationships altered as a result of the incident.

The position of the police unions is also brought to the public's attention, which appeals to the poor professional training of the police officers, but at the same time, criticizes the way the case was presented in the media.

This case is treated especially in the light of the fact that the death of a man occurred as a result of the direct action of the police officers, and the cited officials emphasized that such events are tragic and have a negative effect on public opinion and citizens' trust in public safety institutions – the police and the gendarmerie. They emphasized in particular the need to ensure justice and punish those responsible for what happened as a result of the ongoing criminal trial.

There were also wider discussions about the fact that the police institution is facing some systemic problems that need to be addressed and which have been dealt with every time tragedies have occurred, but which have not been responsibly addressed by decision-makers after these events have died down. These discussions concern the professional training of police officers, the way police officers are recruited, the outdated techniques and procedures that police officers apply in interventions, as well as the legislation governing police activity, which is not adequate to the needs of today's society.

What is striking in the presentation of the event is the use of the phrase "harrowing scenes" by both sites, as well as "mission tragically ended"/ "tragedy".

The differences in the coverage of the event between the two sites stem from the diversity of the sources cited: *digi24.ro* mainly cited official sources, press releases or representatives of the institutions involved in investigating the case, confining itself to presenting the facts; *realitatea.net* extends its sources to opinions from witnesses, representatives of police unions and specialists in tactical training.

Both sites refer to the comparisons made in the public space between the case that occurred in Pitești and the case of the African-American George Floyd, both killed following the brutal intervention of the police, both of them being in an advanced state of alcohol

intoxication (in the case of the man in Pitești, the blood alcohol level indicated by the forensic report was over 2 per thousand).

The Onești hostage-taking case. The event, which resulted in the death of the kidnapped victims, on March 1, 2021, generated wide discussions covered by the media about the systemic problems of the police institution and the need for reform in this area, but it also brought to attention the root causes of social problems.

The articles about this case provided an overview of the event, including statements by officials and witnesses, provided information about the circumstances of the incident, initial reactions and conclusions of the internal investigation, as well as the stages of the ongoing criminal investigation.

The discussions focused on the professional training of police officers, recruitment, techniques and procedures used by police officers in interventions, as well as on the legislation governing police activity, which should be adapted to the needs of today's society.

In the analyzed articles, the emphasis was on the fact that the police bear great responsibility for the tragic outcome, along with the perpetrator of the murders, highlighting the aspect of punishing those guilty of mismanaging the crisis situation.

The journalists of the two websites report that the Romanian Police leadership has assumed responsibility for the wrong intervention, recognizing the need for an internal investigation, and that the Home Affairs Minister has taken an active role in managing the subsequent situation, being also responsible for announcing the measures taken after the end of the investigation. In his statements, he emphasized the need to analyze the dysfunctions in the national public order and security system and promised measures to improve it, stressing the need for continuous and systematic training of police officers, the lack of personnel, but also the need to take measures when irregularities are found.

Another aspect addressed in the articles was the reaction of Gheorghe Moroșan, including extreme actions such as hostage-taking and murder, which show the level of despair and frustration that some people can reach when they feel wronged and ignored by authorities, raising questions about the effectiveness and accessibility of legal means to obtain justice.

The involvement of Gheorghe Moroșan's wife and daughter in violent events (forced execution, hostage-taking) highlights how family factors can play a role in tense situations. On the other hand, the event emphasizes the tragedy of the two workers and the impact on their families, underlining the dramatic consequences of social conflicts, as such events may

have significant consequences not only for the individuals directly involved and their close relatives, but also for the community as a whole.

The first articles on both websites dedicated to this event talk about the fact that a hostage situation is underway in an apartment in Onești municipality and that the police are on the scene, trying to resolve the situation. These articles are based on official police releases and do not mention alternative sources. Their tone is neutral, showing that the police are on duty, carrying out their attributions and trying to rescue people in distress.

Towards the end of the kidnapping of the two workers, when the negotiations seemed to be never-ending and the police officers did not intervene in force, the articles started to become critical towards the police officers who seemed not to take the situation seriously, even unprepared and unable to intervene, including witness statements in this regard.

After Gheorghe Moroșan's knife attack on his victims, the criticism of the police and the police officers who intervened became harsher and harsher, and the voices expressing it diversified: opinions of the journalists, witnesses, family members of those involved in the events and their lawyer, political leaders.

A separate layer of articles deals with the internal police investigation and the results of this investigation, which highlights the flaws in the intervention. In addition to the official data from the preliminary and final reports, the comments also targeted structural problems of the police institution, such as police training, poor hierarchical communication or human resources policy.

Both realitatea.net and digi24.ro brought to attention the need to review police procedures and policies, in order to improve the way in which crisis situations of this type are managed and to avoid such tragic consequences in the future.

Both sites emphasize the emotional impact of the Onești case, both on the victims and their families, and on the wider community, highlighting the human drama and tragic consequences.

Realitatea.net journalists provide more extensive details about the incident, including statements from witnesses and victims' families, which bring a more personal perspective on the police intervention; digi24.ro focuses more on the procedural and tactical perspective of the course of action, using mainly press releases and public statements by decision-makers.

While both sites highlight the criticism of the police and emphasize the need to improve institutional practices, as well as to sanction those who are guilty of the outcome of what happened in Onești, they offer different perspectives: digi24.ro analyzes in more detail

the actions of the police and the decisions taken during the crisis; Realitatea.net focuses more on the consequences of these actions and the public perception of the event.

Therefore, the narrative analysis shows that all three cases analyzed in this chapter reflect the challenges faced by the police in varied and complex contexts, as well as the impact on public perception of how the institution and its representatives act, especially in the context of tense situations.

In constructing the discourse of the journalists of the two websites on these problematic situations, it is possible to distinguish both the episodic character, by highlighting specific elements of the stages of the action and of the participants in the events, and thematic elements from the sphere of systemic problems faced by the police institution, which need to be the subject to internal reforms, managed by policy makers.

If the presentation of the characters highlights the human interest of the journalists for the tragedies of the victims and their families, as well as the conflict in situations requiring police intervention, the broader context emphasizes the responsibility of the police institution towards the citizens they serve to ensure their safety and the morality of the actions taken, the responsibility for sanctioning abuses or errors when they occur, but also to remedy the systemic problems.

Conclusions

The last chapter summarizes the main **conclusions** of the research and provides **recommendations** for practitioners and researchers. It also highlights the implications of the findings for the relationship between the police and the media, as well as for the public's trust in the police institution.

Thus, the first conclusion is that, in line with previous studies, in the news coverage about the police and police officers during the pandemic, the episodic framing was predominant, through which single, disparate events are presented, to the detriment of the thematic framing: in 93.7% of the analyzed articles I found episodic frames, in 16.1% thematic frames, and in 9.7% both types of frames (H1 is confirmed).

The most frequently used frame in the analyzed articles is attribution of responsibility (99.2%), followed at a great distance by economic consequences, found in 38.4% of the articles, the conflict frame being encountered in only 19.4% of the items (H2 is denied).

Only a quarter (25.9%) of all articles in which the police played a role covered topics specific to the Covid-19 pandemic: enforcing anti-Covid measures, checking whether the population was complying with the restrictions, including sanctioning those who were not,

transmitting information of public interest or preventive messages on the topic of Covid-19, helping people in need in a pandemic context, infection of police officers with SARS-CoV-2, violation of anti-Covid norms by police officers themselves, etc. (H3 is denied).

In the context of the major events analyzed involving the police and police officers, I found a succession of predominantly neutral framing at early stages, followed by negative framing, which highlighted conflicts and tensions between the police and the public. I also found that the image of some of the police representatives to were referred to positively or at most neutrally in the articles from the beginning of the events, had deteriorated towards the end of the cases (H4 is confirmed).

The first section dedicated to recommendations addresses future research directions. Thus, future studies could extend the period of analysis to include the early phase of the pandemic, as well as post-pandemic developments, and could also look at other forms of media communication, such as television, radio, print and social media.

An international comparative study would also provide a global perspective on the media representation of the police in different countries during the pandemic.

The practical recommendations concern the police institution itself or some of its units and relate to the monitoring and analysis of online articles, police communication with the media, as well as the professional training of police officers.

The first such recommendation involves carrying out, within the Romanian Police, of an analytical process, similar to the one I carried out to develop my thesis, but with the major advantage of a larger number of people who can do this work.

Applying the grid designed for quantitative content analysis (or a simplified version of it) to all the articles in which there are references to the police or police officers, published online on the news websites that the communication and public relations police units already monitor on a daily basis, would allow 1. to offer an radiograph of the image of the Romanian Police at a given moment; 2. to compare how certain police actions are framed on different websites; 3. to periodically identify trends regarding the media framing of police actions, as well as events that represented important moments in the mediatization of the police; 4. to formulate concrete measures regarding the post factum intervention of the police, which would contribute to the improvement of the communication process of the Romanian Police and its representatives in the context of events with a high emotional impact on the public.

The second recommendation, which is linked to the previous one, is to develop a communication strategy in order to promote a balanced representation of the police in the

media, both in times of crisis, such as the pandemic, and in everyday situations, thus aiming to manage public perceptions of the role, responsibilities and activities of the institution.

Taking into account two of the conclusions drawn from my research, namely that online journalists document the articles they write from official police sources, and that it is not only important what is shared with the press, but also when, it is essential that the communication specialists of the Romanian Police, together with the institution's management, identify in advance those events likely to attract media and public attention, especially those with negative connotations on the police, and inform the media as soon as possible, in a correct manner and with all the relevant details.

The insufficient professional training of police officers, together with the shortage of personnel registered in the Romanian Police units, has been a frequently debated topic in articles throughout the period under analysis. Thus, the last recommendation concerns the aspect of professional training, both within the educational institutions that train future police officers (Police Academy and police officer schools), as well as on-the-job training, through professional convocations and specialization courses.

I propose, first of all, specialized professional training for the two main categories of police officers who are responsible for representing the institution – police spokespersons and mid- and high-level managers – in the field of communication with the media. This should cover the essential elements that should be offered to journalists on behalf of the institution, as well as the moment when they should be provided to the media.

Secondly, the recommendation is aimed at the professional training of police officers who constantly interact with citizens, whose mistakes, abuses or misconduct are usually reported in the media and which are often based on a lack of knowledge of the procedure to be followed in certain situations.

Personal contributions

My thesis brings some new elements to the research on police representation in the media, especially in the pandemic context. While most existing national and international studies focus on police representation in the media in general or in some specific contexts, my thesis covers the period of the Covid-19 pandemic in detail.

Moreover, the focus on Romanian online media, bringing the Romanian specificity to the forefront, is an innovative component, as there is an extremely low number of scientific works that have addressed the representation of the Romanian Police in the media.

Finally, approaching the representation of this institution from the theoretical perspective of media framing in a pandemic context is the most important contribution that my thesis brings. It thus contributes to enriching the academic literature by investigating how the pandemic has influenced the frames used by the media to represent the police, providing new insights into the relationship between the representation of law enforcement institutions and a public health crisis.

Moreover, considering that the central character is the police institution, I appreciate that both the Romanian Police's top-level managers, as well as the communication and public relations units of the Romanian Police, may benefit from the results of this research, which can be the basis for promoting a balanced representation of the police in the media.

Last but not least, the work is also accessible to the general public interested in the subject, relating three important aspects of contemporary society: the online mass media, one of the fundamental institutions of the state – the Romanian Police, and the pandemic period, which has profoundly affected every aspect of previously known life.

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