The recent evolution of social media networks has brought to the attention of researchers in the field of security studies new resources and methods for understanding international dynamics, as well as new media actors such as the military forces. Today, the Romanian Armed Forces have their own official Facebook pages through which they produce and promote media content, mainly visual, which reaches a significant number of individuals. Thus, the visual representations that are disseminated in the online environment and, especially on the military social networks, become important sources of knowledge and interpretation of reality, true spaces in which policies are born.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore how the “responsibility to protect” is visually constructed in the photos published by the Romanian Armed Forces on own Facebook pages. To accomplish this objective, photographs illustrating interactions between Romanian soldiers and Afghan children during the Resolute Support Mission were collected. The method used for the analysis of these photographs is visual social semiotics, a recent approach in the study of security issues, which brings to light the meanings hidden in the various modes of representation.

**Keywords:** visual construction; responsibility to protect; (de)legitimation of war; visual securitisation; Resolute Support Mission;

*In this paper, the concept of “responsibility to protect” refers to the feelings of civic and moral responsibility of individuals and states to protect those in suffering. Not to be confused with the principle of “responsibility to protect”, also known as R2P, adopted by the UN in 2005. According to this principle, states affirm their obligation to protect the population from crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, or genocide and accept a collective responsibility to help each other to fulfil this commitment (A.N.).*
INTRODUCTION

For a long time, a significant part of security studies’ theorists considered that the actions of states can be explained only by rational means, that is, by understanding the distribution of power in the international system and the factors that influence political decisions. Other researchers argued that the actions of states can be explained by analysing the reasons and visions that prevail within them. This debate along with the evolution of the media and the emergence of social platforms have amplified the need to understand how individuals perceive reality. Hence, new methods of analysing international events have emerged, whereby previously ignored resources, such as images or films, are treated as valid empirical sources.

Currently, all events presented in the media are accompanied by images, meaning that all people with access to the media receive information through visual language (Weber, 2008, pp. 137-153), which can influence how individuals perceive reality. “Photographic images must be engaged ethically as well as socio-politically because they are implicated in history and they often work to suppress the very conditions that produce them. Often framed within dominant forms of circulation and meaning, such images generally work to legitimate particular forms of recognition and meaning marked by disturbing forms of diversion and evasion” (Giroux, 2004, pp. 790-791). Thus, in the study of politics, a new approach emerged, namely, the aesthetic approach, which assumes that “there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than ignoring or seeking to narrow this gap, as mimetic approaches do, aesthetic insight recognizes that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics” (Bleiker, 2001, p. 510). Thus, the most important forms of knowledge of the political world come from sources that examine how visual representations contribute to political processes because their relevance comes from the way people perceive and construct the reality in which they live.
The analysis of the visual representations that are spread through the media highlights that, in the process of communication, the media uses various framing techniques that have the power to influence public opinion. For example, “the photographic (de-)legitimation of war would lead to a veritable vocabulary of visual topoi – images that recur time and time again in relation to different wars and in different guises: individual soldiers, tired, muddy, bandaged perhaps, but smiling courageously, a cigarette in their mouths; or soldiers protecting women and children; or images of the enemy’s cruelty – emaciated prisoners behind barbed wire, mothers holding dead or wounded children, summary executions. Photography has also been used to de-legitimate wars, all through the same topoi – photographs of victims, for instance – but victims of <our> action” (Leeuwen & Jaworski, 2003, p. 256). Thus, in the reporting of military conflicts, two types of journalism emerged, war journalism and peace journalism, with conflict-related frames often focusing on events and political leaders, rather than soldiers and victims. Although they use different means, the two types of frames are complementary and have the same goal, to promote the end of the war.

Over time, many social researchers have analysed how the traditional media presents military conflicts and leads to (de)legitimising them (DiMaggio, 2008; Entman, 2004; Gowing, 1994; Maltby, 2013; Robinson, 2002, 2005). However, with the emergence of social networks in the last two decades, the boundaries between propaganda and information transparency have dissipated. Today, social media plays a central role in disseminating reports of conflicts or military interventions, especially as it is used by political leaders, ordinary people, rebel groups, activists or representatives of the military. Nevertheless, the role of social media in the perpetuation of war imaginary is insufficiently explored by social scientists. This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by analysing the visual construction of the “responsibility to protect” in the photos published by the Romanian Armed Forces on its Facebook pages. Thus, photographs that illustrate the interactions of the Romanian military with Afghan children during Resolute Support Mission – more precisely, between 2015 and 2019 – were collected. Although the mentioned mission is not a combat one, the case of Afghanistan continues to be representative for observing the effects of war.
and the process of post-conflict reconstruction. Moreover, even though peace negotiations in Afghanistan are ongoing, Western military forces are not immune to threats, as observed in September 2019, when the Green Village complex was bombed by Taliban forces.

For the interpretation of the collected photos, the visual social semiotics method will be used, whose purpose is to formulate hypotheses and obtain answers by understanding and associating the messages and meanings hidden in the elements of the photos as well as in how the images are captured.

Although the images illustrating war and military operations, transmitted through traditional media channels, have been intensely analysed by researchers in the field of international relations, the same cannot be said about the images that are promoted by the armed forces on their social platforms. Hence, this paper aims to fill this gap by examining how the images promoted by the Romanian Armed Forces on Facebook contribute to the visual construction of the “responsibility to protect”, emphasising the securitising power of the photos. The first part of this paper exposes the media’s role in the governments’ decision to initiate military interventions and in (de)legitimising military conflicts. In the next section are identified both the vulnerable victims of military action – children, and how the visual discourse built around them promotes the narrative of liberation. The third part describes the methodology used in this paper. The last section analyses the interactions between the Romanian military and the Afghan children, highlighting the visual construction of the “responsibility to protect” using the visual semiotics.

**VISUAL SECURITISATION AND (DE)LEGITIMATION OF MILITARY CONFLICTS**

The fall of the Iron Curtain marked an important turn in the political and media world because, during the 1990s, the media turned its attention to reporting on humanitarian crises, which led to military interventions in states such as Somalia, Rwanda, or Yugoslavia, a phenomenon known as the “CNN effect”. The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, and the outbreak of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan marked a second turning point in international politics, with the United States of America as the defender of democracy and the liberator of the oppressed. Thus, it can be seen that the visual
representations of military conflicts acquire a securitising dimension, with an important role in decisions to (de)legitimise war. Moreover, images can be used in the armed forces psychological operations, as persuasive means, to gain the support of the civilian population and intimidate the enemy.

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a new era in international dynamics, and the international community showed high interest both in the humanitarian crises caused by inter-ethnic conflicts and in the growing influence of the media. With the spread of images portraying victims of ethnic violence, more and more states decided to intervene militarily in countries such as Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, a phenomenon known as the “CNN effect”. These interventions are significant, as they represent an important evolution in the way peace operations have been carried out so far: “earlier Cold War UN peacekeeping operations were normally non-coercive in nature and involved the supervision of consenting parties and the reaffirmation of territorial borders and sovereignty. Intervention in northern Iraq and Somalia, however, appeared to represent the development of a norm of forcible humanitarian intervention in which state sovereignty could be violated in order to preserve and to protect basic human rights” (Robinson, 2002, p. 8). These new developments have led to many debates regarding the loss of control over foreign policy decisions in favour of the media. But decision-makers soon realised that the potential of the media to encourage such interventions must be exploited.

A new turning point in international relations was marked by the September 11 terrorist attacks, when a new type of threat to Western states emerged. As expected, the new events had major consequences (Robinson, 2005) for the media and, implicitly, for the “CNN effect”. Thus, the declaration of “war on terror” turned humanitarian crises into a secondary concern for the political decision-makers in the USA, with the media becoming an important factor in gaining support for the intervention in Iraq. In this context, humanitarian narratives became a means of justifying and legitimising the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Last but not least, the “CNN effect” was affected by political actors’ attempts to influence the information disseminated in the media and the way it was used to justify war. Thus, the discourses that followed 9/11 focused on promoting antithetical frameworks such as...
The Visual Construction of the Responsibility to Protect on the Romanian Armed Forces Social Media Sites

The good-evil, civilised-barbarian, through which the progressive character of Western society was contrasted with the violence and refusal to evolve of the Eastern world.

Although visual representations have long been used in the narratives of the liberation and defence of the weakest, the recognition of images as acts of securitisation has emerged more recently, with the introduction of the concept of “visual securitisation”. Starting in the ‘80s, the concept of security area of application began to transform, so that, in addition to ensuring the security of the state, the focus of decision-makers has also shifted to the security of individuals and the community. However, the process by which political actors turn a certain event into a security issue and then adopt policies to solve it is called securitisation (Wæver, 1995). For a long time, researchers in the field of international relations and security studies considered that securitisation is a discursive practice, which communicates the existence of certain threats and the need to eliminate them, so that other elements of communication such as language, non-verbal or images were ignored. However, with the emergence of social networks and, implicitly, with the large flow of visual representations circulating in the media today, there was a need to analyse how images contribute to security processes, thus emerging the concept of visual securitisation (Hansen, 2011, pp. 51-47). Visual securitisation can be therefore analysed using four components: the image itself, the immediate intertextual context, the extended political discourse, and the texts that give meaning to the image, thus noting that the meaning of the images is not fixed, but often depends on the text that accompanies them. An example of visual securitisation was highlighted by Time magazine in 2010, by publishing the image of a young Afghan woman with her nose and ears cut off, along with the text: “What happens if we leave Afghanistan” (Heck, Schlag, 2013, p. 903). In addition to exposing the physical violence, this image is representative of the process of visual securitisation because it communicates an “if-then” idea, which conveys to the receiver that it is their responsibility to protect those who are suffering.

However, the images are not used only by governments to gather the necessary support for military intervention, but they are used in the armed forces psychological operations conducted during the war, as persuasive means to gain the support of the local population.
and intimidate the enemy. Analysing the persuasive leaflets disseminated by NATO in Afghanistan, Sarah Maltby and Helen Thornham note that the main message communicated through these leaflets is built around the concept of responsibility. Moreover, they illustrate biological bodies, because the bodies reflect political events and transmit stories that can be reproduced in the mind of the receiver. For example, one of the leaflets depicts an old man holding a child in his arms, along with the message “Afghans are the country’s greatest treasure… Help keep them safe!”. Thus, the two bodies highlight the age’s vulnerability and contribute to the evocation of feelings of civic responsibility and protection of the helpless. The significance of biological bodies becomes even more important as images are devoid of political messages: “this has dual significance. As a persuasive discourse, it utilises the body as mechanism of disassociation with the wider political context. It disembodies the political <threat> and embodies the private one. Moreover, these bodies become metaphors for a particular understanding of Afghanistan and a supposed <capturing> of lived reality of life in Afghanistan” (Maltby & Thornham, 2012, pp. 33-46).

THE VISUAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD IN THE NARRATIVES OF LIBERATION

With the end of the Cold War, the role of the United States of America and its allies as defenders of the world against communism disappeared, being replaced by the idea that Western states are constrained to save children from hunger and violence. Due to the fact that the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were marked by humanitarian crises and military interventions, the media quickly turned its focus on the children. Generally, the governments involved in various wars have sought to reduce the spread of images depicting material and physical damages, especially if they portray children’s suffering so that most visual narratives involving children are about rescuing and protecting them. There is, however, an alternative narrative about children and war, so that sometimes children are presented as soldiers capable of killing, which suggests that in the visual discourse about the impact of war on children two types of extreme frames are used, which highlight either the suffering of children or their ability to become violent.
The fall of the Iron Curtain marked the end of a bipolar world, divided between “the good ones” and “the bad ones” so that the vacuum of empathy created by the disappearance of figures fighting for democracy was filled by innocent victims of suffering – children. An important reason why politicians, the media, and ordinary people are attracted to stories about children is that they are not just simple stories about children in a particular space. “Children are a synecdoche for a country’s future, for the political and social well-being of a culture. Stories about children are sentimental. They employ the same emotional hooks that <tearjerker> movies do. Stories about children goad adults into a response. The image of an endangered child is the perfect <grabber>. It is so powerful that it short-circuits reasoned thought”. (Moeller, 2002, p. 39). Thus, images depicting children have become a valuable product, as they are used to capture the public’s attention and influence their perceptions, to obtain donations, or to evoke a moral obligation.

In reporting war stories, Western states have tried to reduce the spread of images illustrating the suffering and consequences of military conflict, believing that they can adversely affect the viewer, especially if children appear in photographs. Through this way of reporting the news, around the child’s figure, an almost universal discourse of vulnerability, innocence, and the need for protection from adults was constructed. For this reason, the process of framing war photographs, in which children appear, contributes to shaping and promoting the narrative of liberation because “adult society compromises the innocence of childhood, so children must be separated from the harsh reality of the adult world and protected from social dangers”. (Boyden, 1997, p. 188). In other words, being the representatives of innocence and spontaneity, children are much closer to nature than to the cultural values of society, existing in the tense space between the need of adults to prepare them for social life and their regret that they must initiate them. Thus, in this whole transition process from childhood to adulthood, children lose their closeness to nature, becoming symbols of progress.

In her study regarding the visual language of war photos published by the British press, which illustrate children in Iraq in the context of the country’s invasion in 2003, Karen Wells identified two main types of visual narratives (Wells, 2007, pp. 55-71) used in the process
of framing children. The first concerns the liberation of children from the brutal society in which they live, even though there were doubts about the legitimacy of the war in Iraq. The second narrative is correlated with the innocence of children and their depiction as separated from their own families, thus becoming visual *topoi* for the justification of military interventions. In the images that convey the narrative of liberation, children are portrayed as innocent and friendly, and the actions in which they are involved highlight the gentle nature of the Western occupation. For example, in one of the photos is visible an Iraqi boy looking through the binoculars of a British soldier, an action that at a symbolic level can be interpreted as a look into a better future, due to the intervention of military troops. Moreover, in these photos, the children are smiling, while the soldiers’ gaze contributes to the construction of the protective parent’s image, despite the presence of the military uniform and weapons. Thus, because the represented children seem unaffected by the consequences of the war, the war becomes a necessary evil, even more so, it is presented aesthetically. The second visual narrative highlights the loneliness of Iraqi children, making them symbols of abandonment so that “*the child’s injury becomes a consequence of neglect rather than attacks*” (Ib., p. 66). By removing the family and adults from the photos, the soldiers and implicitly the image receivers are placed in the role of the absent caregivers. Thus, this category of images conveys the idea that if children are not saved, they will remain at the mercy of fate.

Although discourses about the liberation and innocence of children predominate in war discourses, they are not always presented as innocent victims of military conflicts, but can also become soldiers capable of killing. Child soldiers are often characterised by the media as “*barbarians*”, “*monsters*”, “*killing machines*”, fully aware of their actions. Moreover, it is assumed that once involved in the vicious circle of war, their violent actions will continue even after the end of the conflict, as children remain permanently traumatised. However, the evolution from victim to the perpetrator is never linear or complete. Instead, “*children’s experiences indicate that they are constantly oscillating between committing acts of violence and becoming victims of the violence of others*” (Denov, 2012, p. 288). By promoting the image of child soldiers, the media tries to convey the horrors by which childhood was diverted from the natural course.
Moreover, these photographs highlight the deviance from Western civilised society, and the figure of the child soldier reinforces the idea of the civilised world’s moral superiority. Therefore, in the visual construction of children’s status in war, the media uses two extreme frames, either by presenting them either as innocent victims or as ruthless soldiers, often ignoring the fact that the reality of children oscillates between the two extremes.

The end of the Cold War created a vacuum of empathy, which, on the background of ethnic wars and humanitarian crises, was quickly filled by the image of children as victims of hunger and suffering. In the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which marked the beginning of the 21st century, two main narratives have been identified about children’s connection with war, so that they have been portrayed either as innocent victims of war or as symbols of liberation and hope in a better future. In opposition to these images, there is the portrait of the child-soldier, who becomes the symbol of deviance from childhood innocence, although more often than not, children are at the same time perpetrators of violence and victims of terror and suffering.

**METHODOLOGY**

Although not yet formally included in NATO at the time, since 2002 Romania participated in the *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)* and *Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)* missions deployed in Afghanistan. The mentioned missions ended in December 2014 and were replaced by *Resolute Support Mission*, which continues today as a training and support mission for Afghan troops. The activities conducted by the Romanian military in Afghanistan, including those within the *Resolute Support Mission*, are made known to the general public through the Facebook pages of the Romanian Ministry of National Defence. Given the objective of this paper, namely to examine how the “responsibility to protect” is visually constructed on the armed forces social networks, photographs that illustrate the interactions between Romanian soldiers and Afghan children were collected. These photographs will be analysed using the visual social semiotics method.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks produced a major change in the Western states’ foreign policy practices, by outlining Islamist terrorism as the most important threat to the security of the United States of America...
and its allies. By invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the USA initiated the war in Afghanistan. Thus, two concurrent operations were conducted, *Enduring Freedom (OEF)*, in which the USA and Great Britain attacked the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces, and the *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)*, a NATO security mission. Although not yet officially included in NATO at the time, Romania participated in both missions starting in 2002. Among the responsibilities of the Romanian soldiers were: “*basic missions of education and training of Afghan military forces – ANA Training Mission, which intensified in 2008 by the deployment of the first Romanian military garrison; assisting specialised brigades and involving military police subunits, special-forces, and air detachments to ensure the security of Kabul International Airport. Also, Romanian soldiers were operating mainly in the province of Zabul, a mountainous area in southern Afghanistan, where they had the mission to ensure the security of the A1 highway, which connects the city of Kandahar with Kabul and Pakistan*” (Scarlat, 2015). However, OEF and ISAF ended in December 2014 and were replaced by the *Resolute Support Mission*, which is a training, guidance, and support mission of the *Afghan National Security and Defence Forces (ANDSF)* continuing today.

Currently, individuals in Western states live the experience of military interventions indirectly, through the narratives promoted by various media channels. But in today’s digitalised world, the number of actors producing media content is constantly growing, so state and non-state actors have been forced to adapt to new trends in communication and use social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. Among the new media actors that promote their activities on these social networks are the military forces from several states, including Romania (Crilley, 2016, pp. 51-67). Thus, military social networks are populated by impressive war-related content, mostly visual, that can provide meaningful information about how decision-makers use their power in today’s digital world. Moreover, being very popular and appreciated by the civil public opinion, the content on these pages reaches an impressive audience that has the opportunity to interact with the information published through the *like, share* or *comment* features. By using the new social platforms and through the information transparency they demonstrate, the military forces seek
to strengthen the individuals’ trust in state institutions, especially in the armed forces.

To be in line with NATO’s strategy regarding information transparency and public relations, in 2012, the Romanian Ministry of National Defence (MApN) created an official Facebook page through which it distributes online images and videos illustrating the activities conducted by the Romanian military forces around the world. Thus, several official Facebook pages are corresponding to the various Romanian armed forces services, such as the Land Forces (2012), the Air Force (2013), the Naval Forces (2015), or even the Television and Film Centre of the Ministry of National Defence, which has a Facebook page since 2013. As previously mentioned, the purpose of this paper is to examine how the “responsibility to protect” is visually constructed in the photos published by the Romanian military on the mentioned Facebook pages. To achieve this goal, we collected 140 photos illustrating the interactions of the Romanian military with Afghan children, published on the pages mentioned above, during the period 2015-2019, namely the year in which the Resolute Support Mission began and the year in which the data collection process ended.

The method used for the interpretation of the collected photos is visual social semiotics, which “involves describing semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication), and how statements about images and actions made with them can be interpreted” (Jewitt, Oyama, 2001). However, semiotic resources are not means of communication formally accepted in all cultural contexts, so their interpretation may differ depending on the individual beliefs of the researcher. The visual semiotics method brings to the fore three types of meanings of visual representations: representational, interactive, and compositional.

Representational meaning refers to the significance attributed to the elements illustrated in the image. As in the case of language where there are verbs that show the action, in the case of photographs these verbs are called vectors. Thus, two patterns that define how the participants interact with each other can be observed. When there is a vector that expresses a dynamic relationship through which participants are connected and illustrated as performing a certain type of action, the photos fall into the narrative pattern. If this
vector is absent, the photographs are characterised by the conceptual pattern, which includes symbolic and analytical structures, with the help of which the represented elements are defined and analysed.

The interactive meaning refers to the symbolic relationship established between the represented participants and the viewers of the images, a relationship that influences the attitudes of the latter. In this case, there are three important elements for understanding the interactive meaning: the contact (refers to the direction in which the portrayed people look), the distance (is the symbolic distance between the represented and the viewers, meaning the distance from which the images were captured), and the perspective or point of view (the angle from which the photograph was captured, which defines the viewer’s involvement and identification with what is represented).

The compositional meaning of the image helps to establish the relationships between those who look at the photos. Moreover, in this case, there are three important resources in interpreting the photos: the value of the information (which comes from the way the elements in the photo are placed within it), framing (indicates whether the items are connected and belong to the same identity), and the modality (the authenticity of the photo in the representation of reality).

THE VISUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE “RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT” ON THE SOCIAL MEDIA SITES OF THE ROMANIAN ARMED FORCES

Representational Meaning

From a representational point of view, the images that illustrate the Romanian soldiers’ interactions with Afghan children fall into both narrative patterns, because the Romanian soldiers are constantly involved in an action, and conceptual patterns, because children are the symbol of a new beginning. As it can be seen in the photos exposed below, they are part of peace journalism because the images bring to the fore the humanitarian aspect of the intervention in Afghanistan. Secondly, in very few cases, children are accompanied by an adult, so the Romanian soldier is presented as responsible for defending the weakest. Thirdly, by presenting the Romanian soldiers – the security providers alongside the Afghan children – the security consumers, the securitisation power of the images is brought to the public’s attention.
The photos illustrating Romanian soldiers with Afghan children highlight two semiotic resources, very different in symbolism because they are at the extremes of war activities. As it can be seen in the photos, the Romanian soldiers are presented in narrative patterns, meaning that they are always in action, participating in various missions during which they interact with the civilian population in the area. But the most meaningful semiotic resources from the collected photos are the Afghan children. They are more often than not presented in conceptual patterns because they are the participants on whom the action is made as well as the symbols of the future of the nation. Thus, from a representational point of view, by joining the two patterns of social semiotics, these photographs contribute to the construction of an aesthetic image of military operations.

As it can be seen, the images published by the Romanian armed forces on Facebook are part of peace journalism, highlighting the peaceful nature of the Resolute Support Mission. In most of the photos, the Afghan children are presented as curious and smiling in the presence of Romanian soldiers, who offer them food and school supplies. The photographs that bring to the public’s attention the friendly relationship between the military and the children convey the fact that they were not physically affected by the military conflict, thus becoming the symbol of the progress of the Afghan society and culture. However, although these representations contribute to the visual construction of a peaceful operation, by associating with the military, the children go through a process of symbolic militarisation, becoming causes through which the Western states have legitimised their intervention in Afghanistan. Moreover, because they are represented
in peace frames, the Afghan children, who symbolise the innocence and the future of the Afghan nation, are used for gaining public support for these interventions. Thus, this type of image provokes the audience’s emotional response, often being used by military forces around the world to motivate humanitarian interventions.

In most of the collected photos, the Afghan children are not accompanied by any adults, leaving the impression that they are orphans or abandoned. Being separated from their own family and, implicitly, from their society, Afghan children become a symbol of the destruction caused by the war. However, when children are accompanied by soldiers, the latter becomes a substitute for the absent parent. This process of visual framing outlines the idea that military operations are the only means by which children can be saved, the alternative being total abandonment. In other words, Romanian soldiers receive the role of protectors of the weakest, while the viewers of the images feel empathetic and responsible towards these children. Thus, the photos promoted by the Romanian Armed Forces can be included in a universal discourse on the responsibility to protect children around the world from acts of violence carried out by adults. Through this type of visual language, images convey that children’s suffering is caused more by their parents and the society in which they were born than by the actions of soldiers, the images thus becoming arguments that support the narrative of liberation.

Unlike the textual language, in the process of securitisation, images can have a much greater impact on the receiver, because visual representations provoke an emotional response characterised by compassion and the desire to offer a better life to those children. Also, at a symbolic level, the visual representations of Afghan children convey the idea that soldiers contribute to the preservation and sustainability of Afghan identity and cultural values.

The third important element identified for the analysis of the representational meaning of the images refers to their securitising power, through which the need to defend the weakest is brought to the attention of the audience. Moreover, these photos illustrate both actors present in the securitisation process, the security providers – the Romanian soldiers and the security consumers – the Afghan children. Unlike the textual language, in the process of securitisation, images can have a much greater impact on the receiver, because visual representations provoke an emotional response characterised by compassion and the desire to offer a better life to those children. Also, at a symbolic level, the visual representations of Afghan children convey the idea that soldiers contribute to the preservation and sustainability of Afghan identity and cultural values.
From a representational point of view, it can be stated that both the narrative and the conceptual patterns are visible in the analysed photos, because they illustrate two very different types of participants – Romanian soldiers and Afghan children. Moreover, these visual representations can be included in peace journalism, because they present the friendly character of the Romanian military, which contributes to constructing an aesthetic image of military operations. In addition, the collected images evoke in the audience a sense of responsibility to protect those in need, thus supporting the narrative of liberation.

**Interactive Meaning**

The interactive meaning of the visual semiotics brings to the fore the process of “othering” by which Afghan children become means used to legitimise military interventions. In the analysed photos, the Afghan children rarely look at the person who captures the image and, implicitly, at its receiver, the photos thus offering the audience the possibility to formulate own ideas regarding the represented elements. Moreover, the distance from which the photos were captured is a social and public one, hence highlighting that the symbolic relationship between children and viewers can be framed in the “us”- “them” discourse. This visual narrative is completed by the high angle from which the photos were captured, the children being thus represented as defenceless.

From an interactive point of view, it can be said that Afghan children are slightly involved in the symbolic relationship with the viewers because they look more often at the soldiers with whom they have contact than at the person taking the pictures. Through this way of distant representation, two types of cultural identities are highlighted, contributing to the consolidation of the Western discourse “us” and “the others”, in which the “other” is presented as belonging to an inferior world. Thus, Afghan children are not only the symbol of innocence and the victims of wars between “us” and “them”, but can become political means by which wars and military operations are legitimised. Also, the framing of children as happy at the sight of soldiers along with the lack of a symbolic interaction between children and viewers creates an imaginary border, which separates the reality of children in a military theatre from the comfortable reality of the public.
Moreover, it gives the impression that the war and its consequences have left the innocence of children unscathed.

In most of the collected images, Afghan children’s gaze is directed towards the Romanian soldiers who give them food rather than towards the viewers. However, there are some exceptions when these children are aware that a person is photographing them and both the children and the soldiers adopt specific photo postures. However, the gaze’s absence towards the viewer indicates that a symbolic relationship is not established between the represented and the interactive participants. But the absence of a symbolic relationship is meaningful because these photographs allow the audience to formulate their own interpretations of what is represented. Moreover, the lack of symbolic interaction contributes to deepening the division between “us” and “them”, because Afghan children belong to a very different cultural identity and are part of an environment with which the audience in Western states does not identify. One of the exceptions is photo no. 1, in which an Afghan child makes a hand gesture that signals to the viewer that everything is fine and the situation is under control. This indicates a direct symbolic connection between the Afghan child and the receiver and contributes to presenting an aesthetic image of military operations.

The second element of the interactive meaning reinforces the linguistic and visual narratives regarding the antithesis between “us” and “them” because the distance between the represented and the interactive participants is a social and public one, barely personal or intimate. The far symbolic distance is consistent with the absence
of a symbolic visual interaction between Afghan children and the audience, thus shaping two distant worlds, both geographically and culturally. Thus, through the lack of identification with the represented participants, the children’s suffering becomes something abstract, and the public is emotionally protected from the consequences of military interventions. For these reasons, the photographs highlight the image of soldiers as defenders of the weakest, rather than the reality of the military conflict experienced by children in Afghanistan.

As can be seen in photos no. 3 and no. 4, the angle from which the photos are taken is often high, which contributes to the visual construction of children as defenceless. This positioning evokes the viewer’s feelings of compassion, contributing to supporting the idea that the presence of military forces is the only chance for these children to have a better life. However, considering the absence of images that illustrate the physical and material damages caused by war, the public tends to ignore post-war reality while the problems of children living in a war-torn country remain unresolved. In other words, the absence of visual representations illustrating the war’s consequences contributes to the construction of an aesthetic image of war and military interventions.

**Compositional Meaning**

The compositional meaning of visual semiotics strengthens the process of the visual construction of the “responsibility to protect” by highlighting the connection between those who need protection and those who have the power to provide it. As it can be seen from the displayed photos, the Romanian soldiers are often located on the right side of the photo, thus indicating that they are the new elements present in the familiar space of Afghan children. As for the framing process, in most photos, soldiers and children are connected through their arms or eyes and less through their bodies. Considering the modality of the image, the background in which the Afghan children are illustrated is a detailed one, indicating that the represented participants are connected to the space where the photos were captured and, moreover, they accurately present the reality.

The position of the represented participants in the photograph reveals information regarding the degree of their belonging to the environment in which the photo was captured. It is visible, therefore,
that Romanian soldiers are often on the right side of the images, which indicates that they are the new elements that invade the Afghan space. Instead, Afghan children are positioned on the left side of the photo, thus conveying the idea that they are the stable inhabitants of the country, the symbols of the Afghan nationhood. The photo below shows a Romanian soldier, on the right side of the image, establishing a friendship with an Afghan child positioned on the left. Thus, Afghan children are the representatives of the mother nation, while Romanian soldiers are its invaders. An important feature of this photo is that the image was captured from a low angle, so that militarised masculinity is not presented as superior, but protective, like a parent. Even if Romanian soldiers are considered the invading elements of the Afghan space, the protective image towards the children outlines the idea that the future of the country is defended against any threat.

According to the visual semiotics, framing refers to the degree of connectivity established between the represented participants, thus, by its absence, the identity of a group is highlighted, while its presence emphasises the differences between the participants’ individuality. In the presented case, the framing process is done through the context and the discrepancy and discontinuity of colours rather than through the free space between those represented. Although, as mentioned earlier, there is a physical interaction between soldiers and children, which conveys a friendly connection between the two, the colour differences between children’s clothes and the military uniform are clear.
in all images. Thus, through the way they are dressed and the body language they adopt, it is visible to anyone that the children’s identity is closely linked to the space in which the images were captured. In contrast, although the military uniform helps the soldier integrate into the Afghan landscape, the presence of weapons and the curiosity with which children look at them indicate that they are foreigners. Although soldiers and children are culturally and visually disconnected, they essentially carry the same symbolism, of change and hope for a more peaceful future.

The third dimension of the compositional meaning refers to the modality of the image, namely the degree of accuracy in illustrating reality, which consolidates the pattern identified so far regarding the connection of children with the homeland. Thus, it is not surprising that the background in which children are presented is visible, as much as a photo allows, thus contributing to the visual construction of children as particular elements, connected to the time and space in which the photos were captured. Moreover, due to the high modality of the photo, the extreme poverty in which Afghan children live is brought to the attention of public opinion. Therefore, these images trigger, again, the viewers’ compassion, emotions used to gain public support for war and military operations. However, by emphasising the precarious living of Afghan children, their friendliness towards the soldiers who offer them things they have not had access to before can be explained. In other words, the high modality of the photo offers the viewer the chance to grasp the distant reality of children in Afghanistan, while the feelings of compassion evoked by these images help the governments to motivate military interventions.

The three meanings of the visual semiotics method bring to the public’s attention the subtle messages and meanings transmitted by visual representations. Although sometimes produced unconsciously, certain types of frames and framing processes can influence public perceptions about military interventions. Thus, the images with Afghan children collected for this paper provide a visual perspective on the narrative of liberation and the “responsibility to protect”, discourses heavily publicised after 9/11 to gain popular support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
CONCLUSIONS

The increasing interest in the way in which the media presents political events has contributed to the development of a new sub-field in security studies, namely visual security. Thus, it was observed that the visual can fulfil 3 important roles in relation to security (Guillaume et al., 2018): the visual as a modality of representing security, the visual as a security practice, and the visual as a research method. Visuality as a modality of representing security highlights the role of images as acts of communication, through which security practices are constructed and communicated. Thus, the images promoted by one of the most important security institutions – the armed forces, become sources of knowledge through which an aesthetic image on military interventions is constructed. Secondly, visuality as a security practice refers to the operability of visual practices through which social and political norms are relevant. For example, the presence of the Romanian soldiers and the military uniform brings to the public’s attention information about how individuals are socialised in the armed forces as well as about the practices adopted by the Romanian armed forces during military missions, so that security standards become visible. Last but not least, visuality as a research method highlights the fact that topics in the field of international relations and security studies can be analysed with the help of visual resources.

This paper brings to the fore the aesthetic methods and visual representations as forms of knowledge of the political world because, being a border between what is visible and what is invisible, aesthetics contributes to determining the place and political stakes as forms of experience (Ranciere, Zizek, 2004, p. 13). Therefore, aesthetics acquires political value when individuals construct a reality different from the one known and presented. However, the impact of aesthetic sources refers not only to the processes of interpretation of visual representations, but also to the emotions they evoke in viewers and which can generate social and political changes or, as noted above, legitimise war decisions.

By using a visual perspective alongside the fact that the sources of the images are the social media pages of the Romanian Armed Forces, this research brings to the fore the role of the military as a media producer, but also the relationship between media coverage and militarisation, which contributes to the dissipation of borders.
between soldiers and civilians. The photos analysed in this study fall into peace journalism, because they highlight the friendly nature of the Romanian armed forces, thus conveying the idea that military operations are under control and children are not physically affected by the consequences of the war. By applying the visual semiotics, it can be seen that the images with Afghan children published by the Romanian Armed Forces are part of a complex and almost universal process of the visual construction of the “responsibility to protect”. First of all, the image of the child comprises multiple meanings, so the child figure symbolises innocence and purity, but also the sustainability of Afghan culture and hope for a better future. Secondly, the framing process contributes to the construction of the Romanian soldier as a defender of the powerless, as their only hope in a post-conflict reality that children must face. Also, the absence of images illustrating physical suffering and material destruction contributes to the aestheticization of conflicts and military interventions. Thus, this paper can be included in the extensive literature on how the media constructs the narrative of liberation and contributes to the (de) legitimation of war.

Although the visual approach in the study of international and security issues brings to the attention of researchers aspects ignored so far, it also has some limitations. Perhaps the most important of them refer to the results obtained using the visual semiotics method. Unlike the results obtained by applying a quantitative method, in which the results are representative for a significant mass of the population, in this case, the results are representative for a widespread phenomenon in society, a process known as “theoretical generalisation” (Luker, 2008). Moreover, due to the reduced dimension, the images emphasise the processes of visual construction identified on the military social media sites, rather than the real truth behind them. Moreover, the interpretations offered to semiotic resources are dependent on the cultural factor and the perception of those who construct them.

The role the traditional media plays in promoting the imaginary of war is not a new research topic. However, with the emergence of social networks and the diversification of media actors, the interest of researchers in the field of security regarding the impact that images can have on the way security policies are formulated has increased.
on how military values are spread in society through social networks. Another research topic could refer to the role of social media sites in the recruitment processes of military institutions. Last but not least, the researchers in the field of international relations and security studies could focus on comparative analyses between the contents and images published on the social media platforms by various military forces around the world.

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