



C.A.R.E.
Connection and Awareness
through Refugees' Experiences



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Arms
Minds
Souls

**Interviews with Ukrainian
Refugees in Romania**





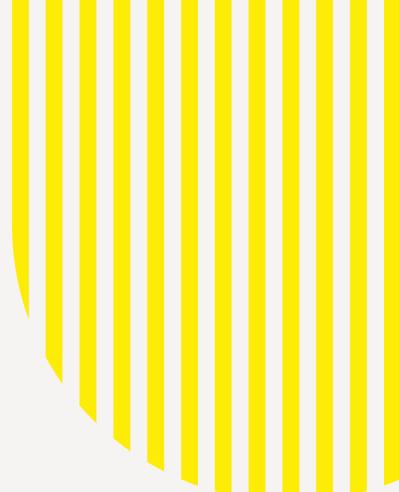
“We are not prepared for **trauma**, we are prepared for stability. **We do not think we will become refugees.**”



Pablo Zapata

UNHCR Representative in Romania
Interview with UVT team

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What is

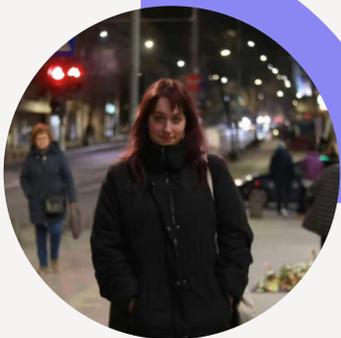
C.A.R.E.?

Our project, **C.A.R.E.: Connection and Awareness through Refugees' Experiences**, was developed by students from the Faculty of Letters, History, Philosophy and Theology, with guidance from two members of the **Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies (CISG)**, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Irina Diana Mădroane and Assist. Prof. Dr. Loredana Bercuci. C.A.R.E. has two major components through which we want to combat fake news and narratives about Ukrainian refugees in local communities in Timisoara, as well as to encourage social cohesion. One of our main goals is to amplify the voices of Ukrainian refugees settled in Timisoara and in Romania through a campaign that does not speak for them but with them, combining elements of media literacy and genuine life experience, generating a change in public opinion. C.A.R.E is a project which encourages empathy, integrity and unity.

Between **30 September 2024** and **24 January 2025**, this project was initiated in partnership with American Councils for International Education and EdVenture Partners, and it then continued within the **Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies** and the Faculty of Letters of the West University of Timișoara.

*The image on the front cover is a copy of painting lent to us by UUR-Timiș. The painting was created by Ukrainian children as part of a workshop aimed at supporting refugees.

Meet the **TEAM**



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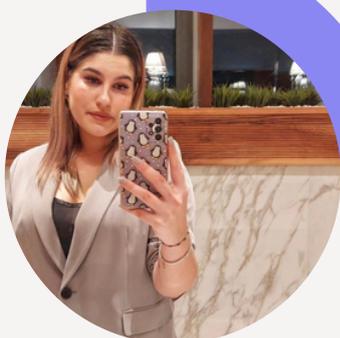
Meet the **TEAM**



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Andreea Faur



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Meet the **TEAM**



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Loredana Bercuci**



Introduction

The C.A.R.E. project had two main objectives: to create media literacy teaching materials and to combat fake news about Ukrainian refugees in Romania by fostering empathy and solidarity through art and life stories. The current brochure presents the results of our analysis of the interviews our team conducted with Ukrainian refugees between October and December 2024. In the life stories that took shape in the interviews, we identified several overarching themes: fake news and myths about Ukrainian refugees, the decision to leave, journey, war, memories of home, challenges, and community.

Our team conducted a total of seven interviews, of which two had the purpose of contextualizing our research with the help of practitioners and researchers in the field of international aid (Pablo Zapata, UNHCR Representative in Romania) and mis/disinformation (Ruxandra Trandafiu, Edge Hill University). Both interviewees highlighted the importance of listening to refugees' life stories as a means of understanding and fostering empathy, and both remarked on the damaging effect of mis/disinformation on refugee communities.

The participants in the five research interviews were Ukrainian refugees in Timișoara, Romania. We gave the participants the option to remain anonymous, so two of the names were replaced with pseudonyms. The other three interviewees are: Evghenia Jane Rozbytska, the president of the NGO Faina UA, which organizes events for the Ukrainian refugee community in Timișoara; Iryna Ihnatieva, from the "Save the Children" Association; Zlata Bogach, a student at the West University of Timișoara. We also included the testimony of a Ukrainian refugee who participated in one of the events we organized to promote the project.

Our research is exploratory due to constraints related to resources (time, number of respondents) and our project objectives. The interviewees were recruited from the local community (university students, members of the Ukrainian community in Timișoara) by using the so-called snowballing technique, with new respondents being introduced to us by those we had already recruited.

Introduction

The interviews were AI-transcribed using Rev and then corrected manually by our team. We did not intervene in the transcripts to change any linguistic particularities that appeared in the recordings. The transcripts were manually inter-coded by two student teams of two coders each. The qualitative analysis found seven overarching themes in the refugee interviews. In the following pages salient quotes from the interviews have been grouped by theme.

About mis/disinformation

"You seem to assume that media disinforms, but that's not the role of media. **The media is there to inform**, and I think that to a great degree it does. I'm not saying that there aren't media outlets who disinform, this can be an issue of resources, how well researched the story is. [...] The media is a very important turntable between various stakeholders in the communication system."

"I always think that a lot of negative things can be solved through education. **We can educate ourselves, we can help others educate themselves, or we can start conversations** that eventually lead to better resolution, better initiatives, better life, and so on. So I think just talking about things is important."

"The experiences of refugees are cut off from the public domain and particularly from the decision makers. I think, if that happens, you have **people who are voiceless and are invisible** and therefore you're opening the field to a whole load of **representations that don't accurately represent**, and I'm not saying they're always malicious in intent, but can cause harm."

Ruxandra Trandafoiu
Edge Hill University
Interview with UVT team



“Yes, this **artistic dimension** has a **terrible reality** at its roots, but people can create **beautiful art**, can create **beautiful narratives out of terrible experiences**. And I think sometimes these **stories are easier to translate, to read and understand**, and they create exactly what I was talking about, **empathy and understanding** the other person's experiences and position.”



Ruxandra Trandafoiu
Edge Hill University
Interview with UVT team



Interview Themes

Fake news and myths about Ukrainian refugees in Romania

“Another group of narratives was about ‘they don't want to go to our jobs.’ Of course, if I was doctor in my country, I would not come ... to go to clean houses because it would be not about the war migration then, it'll be about economic migration. ... The same for Ukrainian kids. They don't want to be integrated. They don't want to go to Romanian schools and kindergartens.” (Jane)

“Another block of narrative [is] about the Ukraine in general, like ‘Ukraine is a part of Russia.’ It was historically Russian. It's a small country. ‘Why not you give your territories to Russia and it'll be okay.’” (Jane)

“Pot să vă dau, de exemplu **alocația, 3.700**, asta e cea mai nasoală. A doua, că **statul român ne întreține din impozitele românilor**, ceea ce-i incorect. Eu aș spune acuma că e invers, fiindcă noi plătim impozitele fix așa ca și românii, noi nu putem să profităm în viitor de ele. Eu și cei ce acum plătesc impozitele; eu plătesc pentru statul român și pentru poporul român. Nu plătesc pentru mine, că în viitor eu nu pot nici de pensie, nici de medicină să profit așa cât aș vrea. În al doilea rând, că **majoritatea au venit cu mașinile scumpe și noi suntem foarte bogați**. Oamenii, unii au muncit zi și noapte ca să-și ia o mașină și în rest, ucrainenii, foarte mulți lucrează. Majoritatea lucrează foarte mult și au lucrat foarte mult în Ucraina pentru că să aibă o viață mai bună. Alta ar fi că **noi nu lucrăm, stăm acasă, noi suntem leneși**. Aud permanent și cu asta mă confrunt. Oameni buni, eu lucrez câte 14 ore și știu că dacă eu vreau o viață mai bună înseamnă că lucrez mai mult pentru asta.” (Iryna)

“Și aceste fake-uri formează un șir de, cum să spun, pretenții, și ce au față de ucrainenii și ei au... cel mai rău e când aud ‘**Să vă bombardeze mai tare, să ajungeți încă mai rău, să vă-ntoarceți toți acasă că nu avem nevoie de voi!**’ Tu nu știi ce o să fie mâine cu țara ta și îmi pare rău când oamenii nu înțeleg chestia asta.” (Iryna)

Fake news and myths about Ukrainian refugees in Romania

“In general it hurts because **our car or our clothes, they can't mirror our point of view and how we feel inside**. For example, I can have a lot of clothes, brand clothes and I can look beautiful, good. And I also can have really big, rich car and I live in really fashion apartment. But it doesn't mean that I am okay. Of course, we have a lot of problems and not only me, a lot of Ukrainians because of what happens with us, with each of us, and it hurts ... it doesn't mean ... that we stole your resources. So, how to say, it's very superficial. It's superficial because for example, some Romanians look at Ukrainian super rich cars and think, “Oh no, they're just chilling, they're here like a guest and we shouldn't spend our resources, time and money for poor Ukrainians.” It's so unfair. In the same time, other people can really steal the resources within not political ways. So it's just one ... one part of picture. It's a little, really little detail. It's not all the picture. So yes, but it's life.” (Zlata)

“The cars and some things, these have some price, but does not show that we are rich.... **So ... the car, the money and some other stuff ... they're not indicators that we don't need some help** and we are just here to steal the resources. It's not about it.” (Lev)

“So what the Russia propaganda is doing, they are **finding local pain points and then they're starting to ping there many times** with something that can be reaction. So the narratives were like, **'you are paying a lot of attention to Ukrainian kids and adults and you totally forgot about your vulnerable categories and kids.'** Then, 'those refugees are not so poor. Why you want to help them? They came with the cars and they don't look like... like homeless guys.' And with this narrative you understand that you have to work with the general understanding of people.” (Jane)

Decision to leave

“It wasn't comfortable for us and we didn't want to sit in that cold apartment. And my parents made a decision to move out from Ukraine to Romania. They choose this country because it's not far away because, for example, if we need to take some clothes or we need to go back in Ukraine and make some documents, we can make it. And Timișoara is so pretty, so comfortable and so lovely city, which a little bit reminds me, not a little bit, it reminds me about my city where I was born. So my parents ... chose this city and they moved out the first; me and my sister, we were ... there in Ukraine. [...] So I came here. It had like two stages. The first one I was really depressed because I had some problems with my study and it was online and I didn't want to do anything with my study because I didn't have energy to, I was so depressed, let's call it like that. I was so depressed because I dunno, what can I do here? I didn't have my habits, my routine with which I can just distract. And it was so difficult. I felt really pressured. And after, in that period, I made a decision to study in a Romanian university **So I decided just keep going.** And of course if I don't like it ... or even if I will fail, I always can go back to Ukraine. And I thought it's something like a challenge and I accept it like ‘why not? Let's try, let's just try and start, and after I can make the decision.’ **And here I am.**” (Zlata)

“**It was a very difficult decision, because when the war started, we faced this panic.** And we, all the time we read the news and we understood that the soldiers, they are coming closer to our city, like closer and closer and [...] at that time there was not a necessary reason to leave the city. But what we saw, we saw that people from occupied regions they are coming to our city so we understood if the soldiers will come to Dnipro, we will not just have enough time to leave because it will be too much people, it would be everything will be blocked so, when we... when I discussed it with my parents, with my family, we decided that me and my sister have to move, we have to leave the city, because just for some time like, no, for, for two weeks like, for one month, maximum. So just to wait until it's going to be calm down a bit. So in my plans we didn't plan to leave for a long time.” (Eliza)

“It's the worst thing actually that can happen. You'll never be able to feel full empathy without the experience. The worst is not the experience of migration. The worst is why you're migrating **The advice is to speak with people.** Because speaking with people you always will find something that will find reaction in you, and that will be more understandable.” (Jane)

Journey

“The first option was to go to Poland and there were some friends who told me that we can come and also in Timisoara another ... my friends from another city, they told me ‘You can come to Timisoara [...]. We will take care of you for a few months.’ So... but it was quite, it was a quite interesting story because [...] what we did: we took an evacuation train and the evacuation train from my city it go, it went to the Lviv. Lviv It's the biggest city in (...) in the West part and it's very close to the border with Poland like (...). So what we did: we took the train and we came and the train goes 12 hours. So because at that moment it was quite dangerous to move because [...] in my city, it was not very dangerous. But when we came we cross this, the Kyiv, it was very dangerous to go through the city. So what happened? [...] In the middle of the night, they stopped the train and they told us we are not going to go anymore, we're not going to go further, like and we were shocked and we asked why and they told us because it's too many people, it's too much. **Too [many] people need help.**” (Eliza)

“**I remember it was one o'clock at night [...]** and they told us like **now you have to decide.** [...] Me and my sister we started thinking what we have to do. [...] We really had a very big wish to come back, to come back home, to come back to Dnipro. We didn't want to go further [...] but we start again calling our families, we start asking what we have to do and we decided that now we have to go on, we have to move at least for some time so I guess I am very lucky, me and my sister, because at that city where we stopped, I had a friend, and I called her, and she told me ‘You can stay here for a few days to breathe a bit and to get the final decision.’ [...] We still were at the train station and I saw three thousand people, and all that three thousand people catch new trains, and all of them were moving to Lviv. So what I understood, I understood that in Lviv it's too [many] people, [...] horrible things happen there. So what we understood that we have to stop.” (Eliza)

“It was quite not clear for me. So we discussed with my husband before what we will do if the war started, if the worst scenario will be. And we decided previously for us that we will leave because we were living in Odesa and it's very close to the border and we had some savings. And also he's IT specialist, so he doesn't need to be linked to some exact space. So at six, Sasha called me ... and I had a list of things, theoretically what to pack ... we just packed something according to the season. **Took our kid, took our cat, go to the car and at eight o'clock in the morning we were actually leaving.** My husband told me when we were exiting the flat and it was a flat... **say goodbye as forever but hopefully we'll come back. But of course we didn't.** So yeah.” (Jane)

War

"It was winter holidays in school so I didn't wake up at seven o'clock. I usually start the day [with] the news from Telegram, it's very popular in our country. I wanted to write to my friends to ask how is the day, what happened new that week. **And my friends and some news channels started to write that war started.**

Yeah, it was very interesting information. Not like interesting. It was very sad. It's take me a little bit of depression. **But I cannot say that I was surprised or I was stressed or I was depressed. I didn't plan that it'll be so serious and so large. I thought it'll finish maybe some month, maybe some weeks, like two month maximum.** I said because for first days we didn't understand the situation that happened until the line of front because, how to say, we live it far away from the place where the action was. I received [many] calls from my parents, neighbors, maybe some friends [...]. And they said: 'Oh the, war started, be careful, do something to prepare for next month. At least you must be prepared.' But I can say that in the first week the situation really changed. So if we resume all that I spoken to you, maybe we can say that in the first day I didn't realize all the problems and all the conflict of situation. I just realized that it happened and for sure maybe we don't have much of chances." (Lev)

"Yes, as all of Ukrainians ... it was the same, kind of five, six o'clock in the morning when they start bombing. **It was like everybody [was] calling everyone to say that the war started.** I received a call from my friend and they successfully left in the evening because her husband was removed to Sophia. And she called me and she told 'they start the war' and we were living in a glass windows building on the 13th floor with full panoramic view on the sea ... in conditions of raid alarm you have to move to basement. **And I just imagined how I will force my one year and 10 months kid to move to basement.**" (Jane)

"At first my family moved out from Ukraine, because we had some information ... that the light and electricity and also batteries, they will not work for a long time during winter. So it'll be scheduled for example in the morning, three hours we have them, next three hours we don't have them." (Zlata)

War

“The war started in 2014. My husband is originally from area was occupied in 2015. And all his relatives, actually his father, his brother and brother's family moved to Kyiv. They were living together with us. They were living trauma of being refugees inside the country. They were living the trauma of losing their house. They also didn't know if they will come back or not. They had a lot of hope that soon they will come back or something. And we didn't completely understand them until we faced it by ourselves. It's the one example. And .. now they didn't want to move. They are in Kyiv and they told us, no, we don't want to move again. We'll be in Kyiv. We already adjusted to the new home. We don't want to move again. And even if it's blackouts, bombing, raid alarms and all this amazing bouquet of being civilian in the war.” (Jane)

“În orice moment, cum arată viața, tu poți să te trezești fără nimic. Contează oamenii care trec prin viața noastră. Ce lăsăm noi în urmă? Ce lăsăm noi în sufletele lor? Ce lăsăm noi în viețile lor? Durere și greutate, care și așa o ducem? Sau putem să punem braț la braț, să ne ușurăm viața? Să fim mai deschiși, să fim mai toleranți. Mulți, prin toleranță, ascund toate lucrurile, chiar și rele, dar toleranța constă anume să ai un bun cuvânt, un bun mesaj, să aduci ceva bun. Întotdeauna trebuie să ne gândim ce rămâne după noi. [...] Ne-a învățat războiul să fim atenți și că pe oamenii pe care îi avem alături, ei nu sunt permanent cu noi și noi nu știm cât timp sunt ei alături de noi.” (Iryna)

“40 km from Russians, the dolphinarium is working, oceanarium is working, zoo is working, public transport working, restaurants working, café is working, theatre is working. Theatres now went underground [...] so you go to “subteran” [Romanian word used] and you see a theatre performance, this is how life.. And the atmosphere is not nice, the war is felt very much, the faces of people show this pain, people are very.. they look very tough, but at the same time they are very stubborn, they keep resisting, they say, ‘we will not give up, this is our land, this is our city, you will not drive us away’, like... And I’m very proud, I’m very proud of my country, of Ukrainians, of all the people who resist, who have the courage.” (Olena)

Memories of home

“I have lived here since, I think, December, 2022. And I was living with my sister and I studied in Ukrainian University and we lived in apartment. I have a cat which stayed in Ukraine unfortunately. And it was the simple day of a student. I wake up, I prepare for classes; we had them online on Zoom ... if (raid) alarm didn't interrupt us. And of course, if it was alarm, we go to the basement after and when we need to go to the basement and go back in the apartment, it was pretty difficult ... after that I didn't have any wish to continue to study because it was so tiring. After study, I did my homework, I played with my sister in video games or we had walks through the city. And we spent a lot of time with our group of friends. **So it was pretty ... no, it wasn't too calm and too good because of the war, of course.** And my day here is I think more interesting because there are more goals which I want to achieve.” (Zlata)

“În Ucraina am observat, oamenii care sunt mai în vârstă, așa, sunt foarte... Nu vezi zâmbetul pe fața lor. Sunt toți stresați, sunt toți așa, parcă nori negri permanent. Dar după aceea mă gândesc, ei au trecut prin Primul și Al Doilea Război Mondial, când a fost foametea. Pe urmă, Uniunea Sovietică, a căzut Uniunea Sovietică, în '90. **Nu au fost timpuri când ei au fost, cumva, când au putut să respire, să aibă posibilitate.** Noi nu mai reușim să construim iarăși, să zidim iarăși. Dar, de-o parte, înțeleg că lucrurile acestea ne influențează în două moduri. Ori noi ne înrăutățim și îi urâm pe toți ori inima noastră este mai moale și noi suntem mai deschiși, că știm cum e să fie rău, știm cum e să ai durere și atunci, alegerea noastră e cum influențăm noi pe lumea asta.” (Iryna)

“And people who stay in Kharkiv, **they resist... they resist** no matter the bombings, almost every day. So I went home this autumn, I stayed at home in November, in December, I stayed with my family, and I think that **Ukraine is really unbreakable country**, no matter what [...] so you go out in the centre and all these lights, all these beautiful decorations, all this atmosphere, without the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree is only in the underground, in the metro, for security reasons, so that children don't stay long, you know, outside [...] We also have three underground schools in Kharkiv [...] So **the city is adapting, the city is resisting, the city is trying to survive**, and I will say that people in my city, they are really, really tough.” (Olena)

Challenges

“I have a lot of misunderstandings. For example, with my neighbours (roommates) with which I live now, we have some habits which we get from where we were raised. I really like fresh air. And for me sleeping with my window closed is a problem. For them, it's not a problem. And we have a lot of problems like that. I can't explain to them my point of view. Or even if I try to explain it, they don't speak English. And even if I do that, they cannot understand me because it's not grammatically correct or something like that. Also, if I need to read papers, documents or talk with the administrators it's also a little bit stressful for me because I need to correctly explain to them what I want, and after understand what they are telling me. I don't have enough vocabulary in English and Romanian language to understand every detail. So I can just skip something and after I find out that: ‘Oh, I could do that more quickly, more simple, more easy. But I didn't hear the information.’ So now I have what I have and I'm like, ‘oh no, here we go again.’ Only this one, like a language barrier.” (Zlata)

“Maybe most of the time when I speak with some Romanians or people who live there, I of course have some non-understandable situation because of our different culture or different tradition. I cannot say this with discovering and explain this tradition maybe about cartoons, like music, films, books, literature, anything they don't understand. And it's hard to make language jokes because language changes them. And if we translate the joke, the joke will die ... And some phrases ... idioms. Idioms [are] very difficult.” (Lev)

“When I first arrived we had an unpleasant encounter. [...] So the first challenge was to think before acting upon something. When I just crossed the border, it was in Moldova, a man came to me and said: ‘Oh girls, are you refugees? I have a car, do you need help?’ And I said: ‘No I'm a Moldavian,’ I just left. You know, it was like when you're going somewhere, but you don't know where you're going. When I saw the volunteers in special uniforms, the police, only then I stopped and understood that these people are to be trusted. It was very difficult because, I didn't know why I'm going...” (Eliza)

Community

“Almost all the cultural projects that we were doing were always related to people and their stories. We made documentary film about stories of people. We brought the theatre play on stage along with the stories of people. We are sharing the stories of people. When we create this safe space of kids that are doing something, Romanian and Ukrainian kids together, we’re sharing their stories. And the documentary film is the story.

So watching the news, it's very important always to remember that under this each news is a personal story. And when you see the damaged house, in this damaged house someone was living yesterday and today. **And this sharing stories in the safe space of cultural projects make people see each other, make people become closer with each other.” (Jane)**

“I feel totally supported, especially at the beginning. I remember these first weeks and months we were in this awful situation, in this shock, what is happening to everybody. But we were surrounded with so many things that local people were giving. And of course Timișoara with this local support center, it was something amazing. **A lot of people, a lot of help, a lot of support.** Everything was solved. And I think that also this heritage and history of Timișoara being an international city, being used to the topic of immigrants in general, being a city of revolution, being a city of freedom, being a city of students, that also makes this solidarity even more powerful.” **(Jane)**

“**I have, I think, friendly relationships with the Romanians** because they're so polite, they're so friendly and funny at the same time and they're so ... sensitive. I don't know how to say it.” **(Zlata)**

“Today people are here, tomorrow they're leaving. So it's always changing. You never know... **We became a huge family in this strange world.** Not because we chose it, but because it happened.” **(Jane)**

Conclusion

“I’m very interested in **history** because, as my teacher of history once said, we need to study it in order to make decisions, to understand our mistakes from the past and to try to fix them now, because **we only have time now**: we don't have **tomorrow**, we don't have **yesterday**, we only have **here and now**.” (Lev)

Acknowledgements

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Heartfelt thanks to the Ukrainian refugees who were generous enough to share with us an experience that was often traumatic to them, and who also became part of our community.

Website ● <https://carecampaign-sure.eu>

Instagram ● @carecampaign2024

Facebook ● CARE: Connection and Awareness
through Refugees' Experiences

