

THE MEDIA AS A SECURITIZING AGENT? THE FRAMING OF CORRUPTION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The article analyzes the extent to which Romanian media outlets employ the securitization framework to represent discourses on corruption. Securitization theory was initially devised by theorists of the Copenhagen school and it quickly spread among academic security studies researchers. Media scholars aimed to compare securitization with framing theories, arguing that while ontologically different, framing something as an issue of security has the effect of reinforcing feelings of fear and aggression towards that object. The article analyzes around 2000 media articles from the Romanian press and concludes that corruption is treated as a security problem only in official discourse, while the media prefers a moral framing of the phenomenon.*

Keywords: *corruption; securitization; framing; Romania*

1. INTRODUCTION

The international struggle against corruption has gained significant momentum and taken on new shapes in the past decade. Corruption was not seen as an impediment to geopolitics during the Cold War. This allowed international donors to pour aid unto friendly but highly corrupt regimes. However, the collapse of the Soviet bloc sharpened the focus on good governance and made it a conditionality for international aid.

Over the past five years, Romania has been cited as an example of how a successful anti-corruption campaign can be waged. Yet policies need to be “sold” to the people as, otherwise, they can soon find themselves in a quagmire. The representation of corruption in media, especially during a period of intense anti-corruption efforts is crucial to this effort. The emergence of large-scale street protests, both in the wake of the Colectiv disastrous club fire which killed 64 people in the autumn of 2015 in Bucharest and against prison pardons in early 2017 shows that a large number of Romanians perceive anti-corruption as a legitimate endeavor. Media representation of corruption cases helped spread the message and created an image of a wide-spread phenomenon. Alternatively, in order to de-legitimize it, the anti-corruption offensive was framed as being the work of sinister forces.

The paper looks into whether the media acts as an agent for transmitting securitizing speech. It initially presents the concepts of framing and

securitization and discusses the role of the media in the securitization process. Then, through an empirical analysis of 2400 news items, the article argues that while political decision-makers employ the frame of security to describe corruption, this is not taken up by the general media.

The securitization framework has slowly gained momentum in international security studies, benefitting from the advance of constructivism and critical theory. A concept popularized by the Copenhagen School, securitization has been applied to analyze a series of discursive actions by political elites, who attempt and many times succeed to take a problem out of the space of normal politics and to treat it as an exceptional issue.

In its empirical analysis, the article tests the hypothesis that the media takes up securitizing speech uttered by political decision-makers. It relies on two sets of articles collected from the Romanian media during the summer and the autumn of 2015. The data was gathered within the space of a research project carried out by the National Intelligence Studies Institute on the perception of risk to national security. While in the first set of articles (summer of 2015), the keywords according to which the search was done were “risk”, “threat” and “national security”, the collection of the second dataset involved a search according to the term “corruption”. The article finds that the association of corruption with risk and threat is only done by the media when politicians take the lead, while otherwise

corruption is framed as a moral problem or as an administrative deficiency.

2. FRAMING - THE CASE OF ROMANIAN CORRUPTION

D.H. Waever (2007) selects, in a review article, several definitions of the concept of framing. Firstly, he quotes Tankard *et al.* (1991, *apud* Waever, 2007), who argue that a frame is a

central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration (Entman 1993, *apud* D.H. Waever, 2007:52),

who claims that

to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described McCombs (1997, *apud* D.H. Waever, 2007:37)

and for whom

framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed (Waever, 2007:142).

Moreover, according to others who have contributed to the topic, frames can be defined as “abstractions that work to organize or structure message meaning” (*Mass Communication Theory*, n.d.) while in Lecheler and de Vreese’s view (2012, *apud* Waever, 2007:144), they have a selective function since they “stress certain aspects of reality and push others into the background—it has a selective function” as well as suggest some “atributes, judgments, and decisions”.

Shanto Iyengar’s distinction between thematic and episodic framing is useful to understand how corruption is being addressed in international and Romanian media. According to Iyengar,

the episodic frame depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances of specific events- a homeless person, an unemployed worker

while

the thematic news frame, in contrast, places public issues in some general or abstract context. Reports on reductions in government welfare expenditure,

changes in the nature of employment opportunities, the social grievances of groups [...] are examples of thematic coverage (Iyengar, 1993:369).

Further, the author distinguishes between causal and treatment attributions of responsibilities:

causal responsibility focuses on the origin of the issue or problem, whereas treatment responsibility focuses on who or what has the power to alleviate or to forestall the alleviation of the issue (Iyengar, 1993:369).

Relying on this work, Starke *et al.* (forthcoming) show how episodic and thematic framing affect the attribution of causal and treatment responsibility regarding blame assignation for corruption.

Framing research has been applied to the issue of corruption by Roxana Bratu and Iveta Kazoka (2016), who have identified several “narratives of evil”. In their work, conducted for the FP7- funded ANTICORRP project, they argue that corruption is associated with the idea of a dark and damp place such as a swamp, a sea, an ocean or the den of an animal. Moreover, sometimes, corruption is seen as a maleficent creature such as “viruses, flourishing plants” and multi-headed hydra, “worms, lurking animals, beings with tentacles”, who sits in “nests”. Corruption can also be framed as a disease, sometimes leprosy or even cancer, a gangrene or an infection. According to research done on Romanian media, tabloid and quality newspapers framed corruption differently. While general daily newspapers (whose reporting also tends to be highly politicized), showed in great detail the political ramifications of a case, tabloids only focused on the spectacular features such as arrests and politicians being carried away in handcuffs. Moreover, the daily newspapers avoided small-time corruption cases, as they could not be connected to any political actor (Dimulescu and Milewski, 2016).

Within the framework of the same project, Ioana Avădani (2016) argues that the Romanian media landscape is, according to Halin and Mancini’s categorization, a polarized pluralistic (alternatively known as Mediteranean) one. It is characterized by high political parallelism (media outlets are associated with politicians and put forward the views of their employers) and a low level of enforcement and internalization of professional standards. According to Avădani, the political polarization of the media became apparent during the troubled two terms in office of President

Traian Băsescu and this led to the decrease of public trust in the profession. Corruption thus became a battle ground between political factions, each media outlet employing it to accuse the other rather than condemn the phenomenon. Furthermore, according to her analysis

in terms of weight, the news piece surpassed other journalistic types of reporting. [...] as a general feature, corruption is represented by the media as a series of separate cases and less as a mechanism involving the collusion of several actors (Avădani, 2016).

3. SECURITIZATION - A CONTESTED CONCEPT

The concept of securitization emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s in academic debates on the meaning of security. Starting with the work of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, the idea that security is not an objective state has come to gain ground in academic political science and security studies. Alongside with the advance of constructivism and the decline of realism in international relations, security studies have moved from understanding threats as something objective and external to the referent object to defining security as intersubjectively constructed through a speech or other performative acts.

The initial emergence of the concept of securitization can be traced to Ole Waever's 1995 chapter in which he articulates his definition of securitization. According to Waever (1995:50) security is a "speech act" through which the state defines something as belonging to a separate realm, the realm of security and grants itself the right to use exceptional means to solve that problem.

Waever's definitions can be characterized by two important limitations which have been later subject to significant criticism in the literature. Firstly, it is elitist in the sense that it grants power to act only to elites entrusted with real power and symbolic capital – that is, people who occupy crucial positions in the state and are seen the representatives of official authority. Secondly, it sees security only as a speech act and excludes other forms of performative practices. Finally, it does not inquire into whether the speech act has been received or accepted by the target audience, allowing any speech act by an elite to be termed securitization.

A further development of the securitization framework was carried out through the publication of the volume *Security: A new framework for*

analysis, where Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (2011[1998]) discussed the idea of a speech act as a "securitizing move", rather than as securitization itself. This definition comes to accept the possibility that it is not only the definition of the problem of security that matters, but the acceptance of it as such by the target audience (Stritzel, 2007). In their later work, the three authors argue that a successful securitization depends to a great extent on the facilitating conditions of the act: whether it is done according to the proper grammar, whether it is done by the right person and whether real events are occurring which can provide a basis for the construction of threat (Buzan *et al.*, 2011:56).

The central idea of securitization theory is that a certain speech act takes a problem outside the sphere of what can be defined as normal politics and permits the use of exceptional means for its solution. These involve the repressive apparatus of the state, including militarized police, extensive involvement of several law enforcement agencies, surveillance by intelligence service or even non-state security providers such as vigilante groups. Moreover, once a problem is successfully „securitized”, the normal guarantees of liberal democratic politics can be reduced, suspended or even eliminated. Thus, after the 9/11 attacks, international terrorism was seen as such a serious threat, that "war" had to be declared on it, leading to the uncritical acceptance of wide-scale military action by the political opposition or by the press (Gadarian, 2010:470). Even before the Arab Spring, the immigration issue had become heavily securitized in many Western nations, as it was discussed in the terms of a need to defend identity or jobs or even physical security from criminal immigrants.

4. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The article analyzes how corruption is framed in the Romanian media by employing two datasets of articles collected in 2015 through two research projects carried out by National Intelligence Studies Institute/ "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy of Romania was part of. Relying on the theoretical framework presented above, two opposite models of the media can be conceived. Firstly, it can be an agent in the process of securitization, taking up and further disseminating securitizing moves (speech acts) uttered by political decision-makers. Alternatively, it can represent a watchdog which focuses on

political power holders as subjects of investigation and condemns their behavior. In the first situation, one can expect that corruption is framed in a thematic way, as a general phenomenon and that treatment responsibility is assigned to national security institutions. Alternatively, the media-as-watchdog model expects considerably more episodic framing of corruption and the assignment of causal and treatment responsibility to personal morality. We test the media-as-securitizing agent model by formulating two hypotheses: H1: *Media outlets in Romania frame corruption thematically (focus on process, causes and policies to combat it)*. H2: *Media outlets in Romania assign treatment responsibility for corruption to state institutions*.

Data was collected from Romanian online media outlets within the course of two research projects carried out by the National Intelligence Institute. Data collection involved automated programs and the search for keywords among collected articles. Websites dedicated to news, as well as the websites of print-based journals and websites of TV stations with a presence on air, or citizen-journalism websites (Romaniacurata.ro) were used. The first set of articles was collected based on keywords such as “risks/threats” to national security while the second relied on “corruption” as a keyword. A total of 454 articles including the term national security risk/threat were included in the first dataset. Out of these, only about 35 referred in any way to corruption. Conversely, all articles in the second batch featured the word corruption, as this was the key selector. Two thousand media items were collected through automated machine-collection in early September 2015.

In order to analyze the data, a coding scheme was designed and applied. This included the following categories: whether the article contained the reporting of a case, an event or a policy (this scheme was inspired by Iyengar’s distinction between thematic and episodic framing) or was an editorial (to be able to trace the paper’s own voice); whether it involved a politician or another professional category such as police officer, doctor, judge, lawyer or civil servant; whether it mentioned a particular high-profile politician and whether it contained a particular narrative.

5. RESULTS

Less than 10% of the articles included in the first dataset featured the term corruption, and the vast majority of them referred to the release of the 2015 Strategy for National Defense and its

associated guide. A few of them covered corruption cases leading to arrests or house searches. One analysis by Vladimir Socor linked corruption with Russia and argued that Romania must stop being vulnerable to Russian expansionism by combatting corruption.

The first dataset included news that covered three particular events, which led the press to make an association between corruption and security. Firstly, the adoption of the National Security Strategy (Strategy for National Defense – 2015-2019 - SNAP 2015) in the summer of 2015 generated a higher number of articles linking corruption to security. The document distinguishes three possible ways in which Romania’s national security can be imperiled. Threats are “possible external forces or plans that can affect national security”, while risks are “probabilities for the occurrence of events that can affect national security”. Finally, vulnerabilities are “systemic deficiencies” which can be exploited and lead to the manifestation of events that impact national security (SNAP 2015). The Strategy for national defense labels corruption as a vulnerability, which is also taken up by the press reporting on the event.

Further, the strategy was expanded through a guide, which establishes how national security institutions will act in order to reach the desired objectives. The guide sees corruption as a threat to the implementation of values such as the rule of law, good governance, a strong economy, sustainable development and the promotion of Romania’s policies in the European Union and NATO (SNAP Guide). Press coverage of the event takes up the language of the Guide and addressed corruption as a vulnerability.

Finally, several public appearances by the Director of the Romanian Intelligence Service, Eduard Hellvig, led to other associations between corruption and national security. In one of them, he argued for a clearer legal framework on the retention of communication data, showing that the Service is highly involved in combating threats such as corruption, organized crime or tax evasion, as well as cyberwarfare. Another featured a visit to Bucharest by then-FBI director James Comey, and a common press statement made by Hellvig and Comey. It mentioned the threat of corruption as one which the two institutions are combatting together. Further, yet another public connection between corruption and security was made in the press when the Romanian Intelligence Service launched its 2015-2020 intelligence strategy, which also featured corruption as a threat. Finally, the involvement of the Romanian Intelligence

Service in the anti-corruption struggle, as well as remarks made by one of its generals prompted the National Union of Judges to require a parliamentary investigation on the way the security service is involved in combating corruption among magistrates.

Inspired by Iyengar’s distinction, the first analysis performed on the second dataset dissociated between cases, policies and editorials. Case-focused articles are individual-level occurrences such as reports of persons being arrested or indicted or politicians being summoned for questioning. Alternatively, articles referring to policies were those announcing a new strategy or speech on policy development. Finally, editorials were opinion pieces (written in the journalists’ own voice) which described, explained or attempted to propose solutions for the problem of corruption. Out of the 2000 articles, only 1600 were coded, due to the repetition of some items.

Table 1: Type of events featured in articles about corruption

Type	Number	% of total
Case	1604	87.51
Policy	148	8.07
Editorial	81	4.42

The set of articles that mentioned a corruption case were disaggregated according to the professional category of the person mentioned in the article. This provided a useful indicator to show what type of corruption the media focuses upon. It also allowed to see whether corruption is seen as a threat to security or, alternatively, a threat to governance by those involved in the process of governing.

Table 2: Professional categories of those mentioned in relation to corruption cases

Professional category	Number of articles	% of total
Politician	942	58.88
Civil servant	104	6.50
Foreign	127	7.94
Officer	132	8.25
Police officer	91	5.69
Prosecutor and civil servant (mentioned together)	37	2.31

Private	36	2.25
Many (more than two people with an identifiable profession – no specific focus on any person)	38	2.38
Judge	47	2.94
Lawyer	15	0.94
Detainee	3	0.19
Professor	21	1.31
Sport	2	0.13
Business	3	0.19
Private/Civil Servant	1	0.06
Trade Union	1	0.06
Total coded	1600	

The results above allow for the rejection of hypothesis 1. The vast majority of the coverage concerned cases of corrupt officials summoned for questioning, being put under investigation or indicted for corruption charges. In most of those cases, only the fact that the person was summoned for questioning or arrested was reported. These officials were primordially politicians, but some of them were also civil servants, prosecutors, professors, judges or lawyers. Some cases reflected corruption among police officers or other state institutions relating to law enforcement (the taxation authority). Other articles chronicled anti-corruption protests in neighboring Moldova, which, in autumn 2015, led to the resignation of the government.

Three cases of prominent politicians were covered in great detail by the press during the period of reference. Firstly, then prime-minister Victor Ponta was the focus of the press twice, on the occasion of his first appearance before anti-corruption prosecutors and of the indictment which eventually led to his removal from office, in the wake of the post-Colectiv protests. The second most covered case was the arrest of the mayor of Bucharest, Sorin Oprescu, who was also eventually removed from office. The third case covered by the press was that of former anti-organized crime head prosecutor, Alina Bica, who was indicted for fraud in the case of property restitution. Coverage was also given to the case of former education minister, Ecaterina Andronescu, accused of mismanagement

of the acquisition of Microsoft software licenses and to former Constitutional Court judge Toni Grebla. Concerning international news, the FIFA corruption case and the Moldovan protests were also given some coverage. Finally, the appointment of a new US ambassador (Hans Klemm) and his statements in support of the rule of law were duly reflected in the press.

The data also leads to the rejection of the second hypothesis. Very few articles involve and appeal to public institutions and these referred mostly to the National Anti-Corruption Directorate, without mentioning other state institutions. Some of the articles collected engaged in an analysis of the roots of corruption or in the condemnation of the phenomenon. Two major trends in opinion-oriented articles could be discerned: some articles condemned the corrupt while others criticized the anti-corruption fight in terms of being a foreign imposition. Thus, “anti-corruption” articles focus on demanding the expansion of investigations to find out who exactly gives bribes (Tolo.ro, 8.09.2015) or on supporting civic activism (Româniacurată.ro, 13.09.2015) or on condemning the low morality of those who engage in acts of corruption. In this narrative, corruption was associated to a moral evil and its practitioners to “fallen” individuals who behave contrary to the duties of their office or to regular decency (Gazetadenavodari.ro, 9.9.2015). NAD prosecutors were presented as positive actors, a form of moral individuals helping “sanitize” corrupt places, especially county-level institutions.

Articles critical of the current Romanian offensive against corruption tended to present it as an outcome of the work of sinister forces and to move the focus away from actual events to other aspects of the political debate. Thus, according to journalist Ion Cristoiu (a virulent critic of the anti-corruption effort), it took the arrest of Sorin Oprescu to determine President Klaus Iohannis to “work in the weekend”. The main topic of articles against anti-corruption is a supposed well-designed plot by the National Anti-Corruption Directorate to eliminate from politics some “inconvenient politicians”, while entertaining the population. According to one article, the NAD has already prepared the autumn session of the “circus” while in another, the NAD is compared to Stalinist prosecutors who have already decided who will win the 2016 mayoral elections. Moreover, the anti-corruption offensive is sometimes presented as orchestrated by “sinister powers”, especially the American Embassy or European Commission.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The article rejects the model of the media as an agent of securitization by showing that significant differences in the framing of corruption can be observed according to the person or institution issuing the message. The largest part of the media coverage of corruption focuses on cases and individuals being questioned or charged by prosecutors. This reflects not only the media’s choice of to simply reporting, but also, probably, the public’s appetite for seeing particular high-ranking individuals being charged. The vast majority of these are powerful people, who are permanently in the news and hold important position either in politics or in the judicial system. Other reports focused on simply relaying press communiques issued by the National Anti-Corruption Directorate about leaders of local authorities or simple citizens being placed under investigation.

The media chose to treat corruption as more of a moral evil, concentrating on the breach of public and moral duty which corrupt people commit. Journalists penning editorials chose to question themselves rather “how come there are so many corrupt people?” rather than “what causes corruption?”. Alternatively, those opposing the anti-corruption struggle treated it as a form of conspiracy of sinister forces, which aim to discredit particular politicians through the weakening of procedural guarantees (granting importance to those who report cases of corruption). Prosecutors are presented as “master-puppeteers” who plan who to eliminate some politicians while leaving docile ones in place. Foreign influence on the anti-corruption struggle is also reported by the press, in some cases positively, while in others it is associated with a form of colonialism. This rhetorical move is aimed at bringing up narratives of foreign domination and exploitation, either by the Ottoman Empire or by Soviet Russia and to compare the European Union’s anti-corruption mechanisms with these. Securitizing frames were employed only by institutions associated with national security. The Supreme Council of National Defense “securitized” corruption through the issuance of the National Strategy for Defense and the director of the Romanian Intelligence Service claimed that corruption must be combatted due to its effects on security. Moreover, a reputed analyst linked corruption with the resurgent Russian threat. Media outlets did not make any critical commentary on the way national security officials

framed corruption, but did not adopt their discourse either. Rather they focused on the simple reporting of facts or events, or on government decisions undertaking some policy.

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