THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIATIZATION: GOVERNANCE LEGITIMACY IN THE WAKE OF BULGARIAN PROTESTS IN 2020 AND 2021[1]

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Abstract. Although there is ample literature on discursive aspects of legitimation invoked by different actors aiming to justify particular policies or activities, few studies examine the role of the media and the ensuing (de)legitimation of the processes of governance. This article seeks to redress that gap by providing an empirical account of the discursive aspects of (de)legitimation by the media at the time of societal turbulence. Focusing on Bulgaria, the author traces the ways by which the media attempted to (de)legitimize the governance processes in the wake of public discontent in 2020. Combining critical discourse analysis and constructivist grounded theory, the article elaborates on three de-legitimation narratives – violated democracy, crisis and left-behindness – and (de)legitimation strategies and the lexical choices that formed the basis for such (de)legitimation. The findings suggest that these narratives contribute to the activation of the feelings of hopelessness, and the imaginary of "common" Bulgarians that are at the mercy of "the others" or some external forces from which it is impossible to break free.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, legitimation strategies, de-legitimation, Bulgaria, governance, mediatization

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the fact that the media has increased its significance for politics has been widely discussed by both political scientists and media scholars.[3] With minor differences in the descriptions of relations between media and politics, the current literature stresses that media have become an unavoidable component of political and social life. As media have become the most important source of political information for the broad public, the relations between political actors and media have intensified in a way that not only does the media need politics for news, but also the political actors need media to reach their citizens.[4] This interpenetration of media into all spheres of social life has substantially changed the way how politics is done.[5] Indeed, the increased efforts of public communication on the part of governance actors reflect that media are attributed a vital role in the processes of governance as such. Concretely, scholars have emphasized that the media function as a forum which allows the actors to legitimize themselves and their activities in the public sphere.[6] Timothy E. Cook and Maarten A. Hajer have taken this further when they conceptualize media as being a political institution while arguing that

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[3]   W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman, eds., *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Timothy E. Cook, *Governing with the News, Second Edition: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jesper Strömbäck, "Mediatization and Perceptions of the Media's Political Influence, " *Journalism Studies* 12, no. 4 (August 2011): 423–39; Maarten A. Hajer, *Authoritative Governance: Policy Making in the Age of Mediatization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Frank Esser, "Mediatization as a Challenge: Media Logic Versus Political Logic," in *Democracy in the Age of Globalization and Mediatization*, eds. Hanspeter Kriesi, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Esser, Jörg Matthes, Marc Bühlmann, Daniel Bochsler (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 155–76.

[4]   Hajer, *Authoritative Governance*.

[5]   Daniel Kübler and Hanspeter Kriesi, "How Globalisation and Mediatisation Challenge Our Democracies," *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 3 (2017): 231–45.

[6]   Mark Bovens, "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework," *European Law Journal* 13, no. 4 (July 2007): 447–68; Martino Maggetti, "The Media Accountability of Independent Regulatory Agencies," *European Political Science Review* 4, no. 3 (November 2012): 385–408; Gergana Dimova, *Democracy Beyond Elections: Government Accountability in the Media Age* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

> "the divide between news-making and policy-making becomes blurred and news-making practices become a key form of external and internal meaning production."[7]

An implication from this literature is that the media provides a communicative framework through which politics is represented and presents itself to the public. This is particularly interesting, especially when the scholarship on discursive legitimacy is considered. To be clear on the use of the term legitimacy, the author refers to the definition proposed by Benno Netelenbos that conceives political legitimacy as "subjective normative agreement with objective politics."[8] Under this perspective, legitimacy is a relational property determined by the beliefs and perceptions of individuals about politics. These beliefs and perceptions are the outcomes of social processes wherein individuals are constantly exposed to legitimation and de-legitimation that they might find appealing depending on their own norms and values arising out of the complexity of social reality and their life experience.[9] In this way, understood as a communicative act, legitimation is about imposing one's interpretation of reality on others whilst cultivating a positive picture of oneself to (re)gain authority. There exists ample literature on these discursive aspects of legitimation invoked by different actors aiming to justify policy or activity, cultivate their legitimacy in the public sphere or, on the contrary, question the actions or positions of one's opponents.[10] By contrast, research on the role of the media and the

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[7]   Cook, *Governing with the News*; Hajer, *Authoritative Governance*, 39.

[8]   Benno Netelenbos, *Political Legitimacy beyond Weber: An Analytical Framework* (London: Palgrave Macmilan, 2016), 4.

[9]   Netelenbos, *Political Legitimacy beyond Weber*; Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, "The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organizations: Introduction and Framework," *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 4 (1 December 2019): 581–606, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-018-9330-7.

[10] Luisa Martín Rojo and Teun A. van Dijk, ""There Was a Problem, and It Was Solved!": Legitimating the Expulsion of 'illegal' Migrants in Spanish Parliamentary Discourse," *Discourse & Society* 8, no. 4 (1997): 523–66; Theo Van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak, "Legitimizing Immigration Control: A Discourse-Historical Analysis," *Discourse Studies* 1, no. 1 (1 February 1999): 83–118; Eero Vaara, "Struggles over Legitimacy in the Eurozone Crisis: Discursive Legitimation Strategies and Their Ideological Underpinnings," *Discourse & Society* 25, no. 4 (1 July 2014): 500–518; Vaia Doudaki and Angeliki Boubouka, *Discourses of Legitimation in the News: The Case of the Economic Crisis in Greece* (London:

ensuing (de)legitimation of the whole process of governance remains relatively scant. Indeed, there exist a few studies that examine the micro-mechanism at play that contributes to the (de)legitimation of governance.

This article aims to redress that gap by providing an empirical account of the discursive aspects of de-legitimation in and by media at the time of societal and political turbulence. By doing so, it sheds light on the discursive dynamics of legitimation struggles through the prism of media. Although important on its own, such analysis allows integrating insights from discursive legitimation in critical discourse studies with governance mediatization in governance studies.[11] Taking the Bulgarian unhinged political situation as my empirical focus, the author traces the ways by which the media attempted to (de)legitimize the governance processes in the wake of public discontent in 2020. By drawing on previous works on discursive legitimation, the focus lies on two levels of analysis. First, the variety of discursive legitimation strategies and their presence are examined. Second, lexical choices and their configuration that together form legitimation strategies are explored. This is done by analyzing the media discussions about the problems of governance in the wake of the protests in 2020. At one level, this discussion focused on whether the prime minister, his government and the chief prosecutor should resign or not, while at another level, that is of interest of this article, the debate focused on the sustainability of the ways the politics was done especially in relation to democratic principles which most of the society formally endorse. Bulgaria is particularly

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Routledge, 2019); Sandra Simonsen, "Discursive Legitimation Strategies: The Evolving Legitimation of War in Israeli Public Diplomacy," *Discourse & Society* 30, no. 5 (1 September 2019): 503–20; Sten Hansson and Ruth Page, "Legitimation in Government Social Media Communication: The Case of the Brexit Department," *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4 April 2022, 1–18.

[11] Rojo and van Dijk, "There Was a Problem, and It Was Solved!;" Van Leeuwen and Wodak, "Legitimizing Immigration Control;" Theo Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication," *Discourse & Communication* 1, no. 1 (1 February 2007): 91–112; Vaara, "Struggles over Legitimacy in the Eurozone Crisis;" Hajer, *Authoritative Governance*; B. Guy Peters, "Information and Governing: Cybernetic Models of Governance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Governance*, ed. David Levi-Faur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 113–28; Thomas Schillemans and Jon Pierre, eds., *Media and Governance: Exploring the Role of News Media in Complex Systems of Governance* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2019).

interesting for the analysis of legitimation struggles and strategies because of two reasons. First, it has long been perceived as a troubled democracy oscillating between democratic progression and regression.[12] Second, Bulgaria finds itself in a deep socio-political crisis that lasts for the past years. More particularly, in October 2024, Bulgarian citizens casted their votes in the parliamentary elections for the seventh times in three years. The origins of the long-lasting deadlock over the formation of a government and the connected socio-political crisis can be traced back to the outbreak of the protests in July 2020. This study of de-legitimation of governance processes in and by media at a times of Bulgarian turbulences of 2020-2021 can therefore add to our understanding of democratic backsliding that the Central- and South-eastern Europe faces and help us to comprehend discursive aspects of governance (il)legitimacy more generally.

This article proceeds in four sections. In the next section, building on research on the role of the media in governance and discursive legitimation, the author outlines a critical discursive perspective on governance legitimacy in the context of mediatization. The third section presents relevant background information for the case study. This is followed by an introduction to the methodology and empirical material used. The fifth section presents the findings. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of these findings that add to the understanding of governance de-legitimation through the prism of media and discusses the implication for potential future studies.

Critical Discursive Perspective on Governance Legitimacy Through the Prism of Mediatization

The concept of legitimacy has attracted the extensive attention of social scientists who have aimed to understand and interpret the socio-political reality arising from power relations. As noted elsewhere, political power and legitimacy are permanently at risk of being challenged by political

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[12] James Dawson and Seán Hanley, "The Fading Mirage of the 'Liberal Consensus,'" *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 20–34; Ivan Krastev, "Liberalism's Failure to Deliver," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 35–38.

opponents, public institutions, or society at large.[13] To maintain the position of holding power, authority or legitimacy, the actors have to constantly engage in legitimation.[14] From a discourse analytic perspective, legitimation refers to communicative acts by which the speaker seeks to justify his actions in terms of the rights and duties associated with his role or position. By focusing especially on the linguistics analysis of the texts and talks, critical discourse researchers have elucidated the importance of discursive practices and distinguished several legitimation strategies.[15] In their view, the main objective of legitimation is to create a sense that some course of action or decision is right and just within the given legal, political or moral order.[16] Put more broadly, by engaging in legitimation, the actors seek to provide explanations on "why we should do this?" or "why should we do this in this way?" and by specifying "why should this not be done (in this way)?" the actors aim to question the validity and legitimation, hence facilitating de-legitimation.[17]

Most of the works on legitimation perceive news media to act as one of the main fields where the political actors present themselves, their activities, policies, and where the legitimation struggles between various actors take place. They conceive them to be a major forum of the public sphere in which the major legitimation arguments are juxtaposed and mediated.[18] However, as Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen

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[13] Rojo and van Dijk, "There Was a Problem, and It Was Solved!;"

[14] Achim Hurrelmann, Steffen Schneider, and Jens Steffek, *Legitimacy in an Age of Global Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[15] Rojo and van Dijk, "There Was a Problem, and It Was Solved!;" Van Leeuwen and Wodak, "Legitimizing Immigration Control;" Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication."

[16] Teun Van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: SAGE, 2000).

[17] Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication," 93; Maria Rieder and Hendrik Theine, ""Piketty Is a Genius, but…:" An Analysis of Journalistic Delegitimation of Thomas Piketty"s Economic Policy Proposals," *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, no. 3 (27 May 2019): 248–63.

[18] Sebastian Haunss and Steffen G. Schneider, "The Discursive Legitimation of Political Regimes: A Network Perspective," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2013; Achim Hurrelmann, Anna Gora, and Andrea Wagner, "The Legitimation of the European Union in the News Media: Three Treaty Reform Debates," *Journal of European Public Policy* 20, no. 4 (April 2013): 515–34; Steffen Schneider, Frank Nullmeier, and Achim Hurrelmann, "Exploring the Communicative Dimension of Legitimacy: Text Analytical Approaches,"

pointed out, media function hardly as a site for the utterances to exist but rather "as specific machineries that produce, reproduce and transform social phenomena."[19] This aligns with what media and political science scholars have accentuated with respect to the changed nature of relations between media, politics and society. They point to the trend of moving away from a functionally differentiated order in which media played the role of "reporters" informing about what happened in politics or "mediators" neutrally transmitting political communication while stressing increasing importance of media and their spill-over effects on political and societal processes.[20]

Mediatization, as most of the literature refers to this trend, denotes a dynamic process whereby the media have increased their influence on both general and more systemic levels of social and political life. Media have always been part of politics, yet the new mediatized environment is characterized by the fact that news media is a system composed of a multiplicity of competing actors with their own goals and preferences.[21] There is an intricate network of influence in place, implying that, in a way, the media represents multiple voices in society. Regarding the role of media themselves, there is a prevailing agreement in the literature that media can function as watchdogs, gatekeepers, public representatives, advocates of people or marketplace of ideas.[22] At the same time, some

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[19] in *Legitimacy in an Age of Global Politics*, ed. Achim Hurrelmann, Steffen Schneider, and Jens Steffek (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Vaara, "Struggles over Legitimacy in the Eurozone Crisis."

[19] Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen, "Bringing Discourse Theory into Media Studies: The Applicability of Discourse Theoretical Analysis (DTA) for the Study of Media Practises and Discourses," *Journal of Language and Politics* 6, no. 2 (21 December 2007): 274.

[20] Hajer, *Authoritative Governance*; Kübler and Kriesi, "How Globalisation and Mediatisation Challenge Our Democracies;" F. Esser and J. Strömbäck, *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[21] Kübler and Kriesi, "How Globalisation and Mediatisation Challenge Our Democracies."

[22] Clifford G. Christians, Theodore L. Glasser, Denis McQuail, Kaarle Nordenstreng, and Robert A. White, *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*, 1st ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Dimova, *Democracy Beyond Elections*; Hanspeter Kriesi, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Esser, Jörg Matthes, Marc Bühlmann, Daniel Bochsler, *Democracy in the Age of Globalization and Mediatization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

scholars argue that media could be understood as institutions independent of other social and political actors in a way that they exert an influence over a social sphere through the constant intrusion of media logic into the fields where other rules have guided and influenced the actions of actors.[23] In addition, by theorizing media as institutions, the authors imply that media not only influence the actors, but may also constitute the identities and affective ties, as well as the conceptions of reality, norms and values of a given societal group.[24]

In the context of legitimation, Sebastian Haunss and Steffen G. Schneider assert that news media may fulfil a double role.[25] On the one hand, they serve as an important platform through which the actors present, justify and legitimate themselves or their activities for the public. On the other hand, they are important participants to legitimation themselves because they cherry-pick what to cover, whose voice would be heard, and, importantly, how it would be covered. Vaia Doudaki and Angeliki Boubouka similarly emphasize this dual role when they underline the media's importance in both constructing social phenomena and mediating the public debate over the social issue and its dimensions. By claiming that the media, whose cultural products, such as the news, hardly offer a neutral account of events but rather (re-)defining and (re-)shaping it while simultaneously serving "as a carrier of dense cultural and ideological symbols reflecting popular belief and the power dynamics of societies," they suggest that media may be considered both fields and active agents of legitimation.[26]

In spite of these advances, works focusing on how the media contributes to governance (il)legitimacy have been scarce and marginal in the broader context of mediatization. Assuming the role media play in the political

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[23] Cook, *Governing with the News*; Esser and Strömbäck, *Mediatization of Politics*; Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*; Strömbäck, "Mediatization and Perceptions of the Media's Political Influence."

[24] Johan P. Olsen, "The Institutional Basis of Democratic Accountability," *West European Politics* 36, no. 3 (1 May 2013): 447–73.

[25] Haunss and Schneider, "The Discursive Legitimation of Political Regimes."

[26] Vaia Doudaki, "Discourses of Legitimation in the News: The Case of the Cypriot Bailout," in *Cyprus and Its Conflicts: Representations, Materialities, and Cultures*, eds. Vaia Doudaki and Nico Carpentier (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 143.

sphere, the question of how it portrays political reality is especially important. Thus, in addition to focusing on the specific case of Bulgaria, this article aims to contribute to this stream of research by examining the discursive dynamic of the struggles over governance (il)legitimacy in and by media.

Bulgaria as a Case Study

This study takes the Bulgarian unhinged political situation of 2020-2021 as its empirical focus. The popular unrest of 2020-2021 did not unleash out of the blue. Tensions in society had been growing for some time especially due to the alleged intertwined relations between political, business and media elites, and the judiciary, for which the term *zadkulisie* or *behind-the-scenes* is adopted in Bulgaria.[27] What nevertheless led to the immediate eruption of the large-scale protests in July 2020 was a series of scandals that highlighted the problems of corruption and the fragile rule of law. Starting with the proclamation of entrepreneur Vasil Bozhkov about the necessity to bribe the officials to be able to do serious business, continuing with the leaked records and photographs of what seemed to be Boyko Borisov misconducting his post of Prime Minister, but the confluence of events intensified when Hristo Ivanov raised a public alarm about the employees of National Security for Protection (NSO) securing the private property of both the former MP and honorary chairman of the Movements for Rights and Freedoms, Ahmed Dogan, and media mogul Delyan Peevski. In reaction to this, president Rumen Radev asked the chief of NSO to review the decisions to protect both Dogan and Peevski. A few days later, the Prosecution's office raided the Bulgarian Presidency and detained two advisors of the President. Immediately after the raids became public, thousands gathered in front of the Presidency in support of the president, who came out to the protestors, thanked them for their support while calling for a redoubled effort to rid the country of what he called the mafia. Consequently, large-scale protests erupted around the country, lasting for almost one year.

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[27] ` Maria Spirova, "Bulgaria: Political Developments and Data in 2020," *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook* 60, no. 1 (December 2021): 49–57.

Although this protest movement did not bring about any substantial change in the country's politics, it managed to unite the Bulgarians along the common antipathy towards the way the country is governed despite different socio-economic orientations or age. Consequently, the outcry pointed to the deeper structural problems that the country faces. Having said that and conceiving media's role in orienting society's conception of reality, value, norms and thinking patterns, it is for this reason that looking at the media debate about Bulgarian governance seems valuable, as it can help us better understand the empirical organization of governance illegitimacy in general and in Bulgaria in particular.

Research Design and Methodology

This analysis focuses on how the media texts legitimized governance in Bulgaria in the aftermath of the protests in 2020. The text corpus was created based on the search for the terms "Мафия" (mafia), "корупция" (corruption) within the scope of nine months after the protest began, that is between July 9, 2020, when the largescale popular unrest erupted, and April 16, 2021, when the four-year term of the GERB government terminated and the protests ended. This yielded a database of 1,291 newspaper articles. The material was not collected in a genre-specific way thus including news-reporting and opinion or editorial items. To get an accurate corpus, the data was manually cleaned to exclude any reprints and duplications. The final set included 833 newspaper articles.

The articles were taken from six major Bulgarian news media outlets: *168 Chasa*, *24 Chasa*, *Dnevnik*, *Kapital*, *OFF News*, and *Focus News.* These different media outlets were broadly divided into three main categories, based on the type of their content – (1) hybrid newspapers, (2) quality newspapers, and (3) news agency – and three main categories based on their attitudes towards the political authorities – (1) rather positive, (2) negative, (3) N/A. When it comes to the categorization based on the news type, the first category comprises the so-called hybrid newspapers that combine both tabloid and quality newspaper content.[28]

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[28]   Lada Trifonova Price, "The Post-Communist 'Hybrid' Tabloid: Between the Serious and the 'Yellow,'" in *Global Tabloid. Culture and Technology*, eds. Martin Conboy and Scott Eldridge II (London: Routledge, 2021), 137–52.

The two outlets that were assigned to this category are *24 Chasa* and its sister, *168 Chasa.* The second category concerns the so-called quality newspapers offering analytical content, and a balanced point of view with a lot of analysis and investigation directed at highly educated readers. *Kapital*, *Dnevnik*, and *OFF News* were categorized as such. Finally, the last category involves the news agency that, rather than creating its own content, monitors other media and collects the news from them. *Focus News* was included in this category.

The categorization based on the news' attitudes towards the authorities was indicative and performed based on the comparative in-depth study of Bulgarian media as part of the large project *Mediator 2: Bridge between ethical journalism and society* implemented by the Association of European Journalists-Bulgaria and/or the European Press Roundup project and/or Wikipedia page of each outlet.[29] The news outlets that were categorized as negative due to their critical stance towards the then political authorities, Prime Minister Borisov and GERB particularly, are *Dnevnik, Kapital* and *OFF News.* On the contrary, two sister news outlets, *24 Chasa* and *168 Chasa,* were categorized as providing a rather positive picture of the prime minister, and GERB. The last news outlet, *FocusNews,* was not part of any of the studies, and its Wikipedia page does not contain any information regarding its political orientation, hence the use of the notion of N/A in the table.

The selected newspaper articles that constitute the corpus were analyzed through several rounds of close reading and coding, integrating the NVivo coding software. The first step involved close reading of all the corpus texts with the scope of mapping the patterns of meaning, with the particular aim to shed light on what formed the ground for governance (de)legitimation. The research findings point to three narratives that were enacted in the media debates: (1) violated democracy, (2) crisis, (3) left-behindness. Besides identifying discourses of (de)legitimation, the author established the discourse-conceptual connections related to the identified discourses.[30] In the second step, the author investigated how

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[29] Print Media Report, "За проекта" [The Project] https://printmediareport.aej-bulga ria.org/about/; euro|topics, "European press roundup," https://www.eurotopics.net/ en/149270/european-press-roundup.

[30] Michał Krzyżanowski, "Brexit and the Imaginary of 'Crisis:' A Discourse-Conceptual Analysis of European News Media," *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, no. 4 (8 August 2019): 465–90.

the identified ideas related to, added to, and facilitated the governance (de)legitimation at large in the media debate. Building on Theo Van Leeuwen, Eero Vaara, and Vaia Doudaki and Angeliki Boubouka, the author explored what strategies were used for legitimation and de-legitimation.[31] Notwithstanding the assumed interconnectedness of legitimation and de-legitimation and the intensification of the former during the times of turbulence, the analysis revealed the omnipresence of governance de-legitimation in the media texts. The following section provides a detailed description of each of the narratives, complemented by the analysis of how it was used for legitimation and de-legitimation. Any direct or indirect quotations originally in Bulgarian were translated to English by the author and are referenced in brackets by the name of the media and by the date and month of publication (*e.g., 24 Chasa*, 07/08).[32]

Research Findings: (De)legitimation Narratives

The analysis revealed that, when it comes to frequency, three narratives dominated – democracy and, in particular, its violation –, crisis, and a sense of left-behindness. These three were central and formed a common background for the whole debate surrounding governance (il)legitimacy. Table 2 specifies the number of total occurrences, *i.e.*, all appearances across all the articles, and the number of unique occurrences in articles, *i.e.*, more than one occurrence in the article was counted as one of the three narratives. The Table shows that the notion of *violated democracy* was the most frequent, followed by the crisis narrative and left-behindness.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of occurrences of each of these narratives in an individual news outlet compared to the total number of articles in that outlet.[33] What the figure shows is that regardless of the news media type or its socio-political orientation, they all extensively

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[31] Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication;" Vaara, "Struggles over Legitimacy in the Eurozone Crisis;" Doudaki and Boubouka, *Discourses of Legitimation in the News*.

[32] It should be noted that such translations are not unproblematic because many of the nuances are unavoidably lost.

[33] In case that there were more occurrences of one narrative within one article, it was counted as one occurrence.

enacted the narrative of violated democracy. This is interesting especially in the two cases of *24 Chasa* and *168 Chasa* which had generally been providing rather positive pictures of political elites, with GERB representatives in the foreground. To be more explicit, the information agency *Focus News* has the largest share of this narrative, with 69% of the articles employing the *violated democracy* narrative, followed by the online quality newspaper *OFF News* with 63%. The observation that the violated democracy narrative was amongst the most recurrent in the corpus might indicate to the idea of Bulgarian democratic governance being distorted or under a threat of being distorted was omnipresent in media debates without a great difference across the type of the media.

A closer look at the Figure, however, reveals that the two hybrid newspapers – *24 Chasa* and *168 Chasa* – while relying largely on the narrative of violated democracy, made similar use of the other two narratives of crisis and left-behindness. This comes perhaps not as a big surprise given the format of these two outlets, which focus on providing rather sensational news that would attract a wide audience. What is somewhat more surprising is that *Kapital* built on the crisis narrative to a great extent too. One possible answer to the question of why such a quality newspaper invokes the notion of crisis can be found in the fact that Bulgaria, during the examined period, as other countries across the globe, was dealing with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, a detailed look into what kind of crisis *Kapital* was referring reveals that the crisis narrative activated by this outlet heavily builds on hyperbolic rhetoric with a vaguely defined meaning of what kind of crisis Bulgaria is dealing with. I hold that this might be tightly connected to Ruth Wodak's and Andreas Musolff's assertions about the great tendency of contemporary media, regardless of their type or main focus, for sensationalism with the aim of catching the readers' attention.[34]

Now that we have examined which narratives were the most frequent in the corpus together with their distribution across the analyzed news media outlets, it is time to provide more qualitative analysis of these. I

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[34] Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE, 2015); Andreas Musolff, *Political Metaphor Analysis: Discourse and Scenarios* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

follow Marco Caracciolo's understanding of narratives as being evaluative of reality.[35] Narratives operate in a two-way direction: they need some experiential input so that they can evoke the imaginary, but they also produce some output as they can affect our experiential background, and by doing so they can restructure our beliefs and values. In order to get a better understanding of governance legitimation and de-legitimation, it is, thus, necessary to look into what narratively form ground of such processes, since this can provide us with information on underlying cultural or societal norms and values, and hence on societal fabrics on what is perceived as legitimate.

Violated Democracy

The analysis revealed that across all media articles democracy and its violation was central and formed a common background for the whole debate surrounding governance legitimacy. It constituted a crucial discourse-conceptual element, and it provided a basis for both legitimation and de-legitimation. In both cases it formed a solid ground for the cosmological argumentation that implied inevitability. Such notion of inevitability was often characterized by deontic modality in terms of a clear necessity for action or non-action because that is the "only choice", as illustrated in Example 1.

> Example 1
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> "The systemic defects of the governance model in our country and of the relations between the state and society can only be solved with a deep reform that empowers citizens and imposes mechanisms for transparency and real administrative responsibility." (*24 Chasa*, 18/10)

From Figure 2, it is visible that the construction of the concept of democracy runs along five main dimensions: the rule of law, civil rights and freedom, separation of powers, popular sovereignty, and free and fair elections. Each of those dimensions comprised several other ideas, of which it is important

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[35] Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

to mention above all: the freedom of media, political independence of the judiciary and public prosecutor's office, accountability, responsibility, and transparency of politics. As shown in the Figure, none of these dimensions work in isolation, but rather, they intersect and mutually reinforce the conceptualization of democracy in media debate.

The first idea of the rule of law was the widest of all deployed in the analyzed corpus. It was either very explicit through the utilization of the terms rule of law or, alternatively, state of law, or implicitly referred to through the emphasis on the problems of impunity, corruption and related political unfairness and inequality. The explicit deployment of the term rule of law was, in most cases, linked to the broader debate on the fundamental principles of the European Union and how these are threatened or should be strengthened. In these cases, the EU, its institutions and representatives served as primary reference points for the (de)legitimation strategies of authorization. It is emphasizing that the role played by the EU as a whole has not been straightforward, especially when zooming at the way(s) that the debates on the state of the rule of law in Bulgaria and the member states in general have been portrayed. On the one hand, the European Commission's rule of law report and the European Parliament resolution on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Bulgaria were, in some cases, used as evidence that the governance processes are distorted as they "found obvious problems lasting for years for Bulgarians" (*24 Chasa*, 01/10) and "state that the problems of the rule of law and media freedom that have been pointed out for years continue to exist or are even worsening" (*Dnevnik*, 30/09). On the other hand, they were also presented as "positive, objective" (*Dnevnik*, 30/09), considering the progress and achieved results and hence serving legitimation purposes. Noteworthy are also recurrent references to "unclear definitions of the powers of the chief prosecutor" (*24 Chasa*, 18/10), who has, as a consequence, almost "unlimited power" (*Dnevnik*, 09/09).

The second idea, which the author referred to as civil rights and freedoms, evolved primarily around the accentuated importance of freedom of expression, the associated freedom of media, the right to protest, and the protection from discrimination on any grounds as essential to a well-functioning democracy. Amongst the most emphasized was the substantially undermined freedom of media grounded in the non-

existing transparency in media ownership, utilization of state advertisements to keep smaller media under political control, and exerted pressure on journalists "through threats, harassment lawsuits and political or administrative constraints" (*Dnevnik*, 30/09). This was not surprisingly used solely for governance de-legitimation as it pointed to the inefficient, malfunctioning, or even non-existent structures and processes that would guarantee both media autonomy as well as journalists' political independence. In this case, de-legitimation was again based heavily on the authorization on the part of international organizations such as the EU, Transparency International, or the international media such as Financial Times, Deutsche Welle, *etc*.

The third, separation of powers, was heavily built on the necessity of the judiciary and public prosecutor's office to be politically independent. The fact that the judiciary is exposed to great pressure from both the political and intertwined economic elites was prevalently emphasized in the analyzed texts. These assertions were strengthened again by the authorization from the international organizations or experts within them, while rational argumentation supplemented by factual evidence or examples was rather absent. At the same time, two countervailing tendencies were to be observed. On the one hand, the prosecution and prosecutor's office were presented as working independently, but under an "unprecedented political-partisan pressure from the President of the Republic of Bulgaria and political formations serving him" (*168 Chasa*, 10/07) and serving as a victim of the battles between various political entities that attempt "to place the prosecutor's office in a situation of political dependence" (*24 Chasa*, 02/10). On the other hand, this institution was simultaneously portrayed as one of the least independent, having close ties with the political elites and influential businessmen on which it is heavily dependent.

Connected to the preceding and closely tied to the following, the fourth idea of popular sovereignty drew on the premise that citizens are the fundamental source of political legitimacy. For this to be achieved, the accountability and responsibility of political actors as well as transparency of political processes were presented as indispensable. Drawing primarily on the strategies of factual rationalization, authorization, and moralization, the former served especially legitimation aims. It is noteworthy that the

notion of accountability evolved primarily around the idea that the political elites are obliged to inform the public, explain or justify their actions and decisions, and are ready to resign in case of serious misconduct. Obviously, legitimation through the accentuation of accountability was most often interdiscursive in nature. It is important to add that despite the relatively high frequency of references to the unwillingness of Prime Minister Borisov and Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev to be held accountable, which undoubtedly suggests de-legitimation, when looking at the political realm as a whole, including local politics, public administration, the judiciary *etc.*, the overall picture is exactly the opposite, pointing to the legitimation of governance based on the democratic standard of accountability. The latter, the notion of transparency, has in most cases, been used for de-legitimation purposes. Specifically, the texts pointed to the various unclear, shady and questionable activities, processes or exchanges within politics while often relating these transactions to the influence of oligarchs "who behind the scenes pull the strings of the state and use it for their own purposes" (*Dnevnik*, 31/07). As implied in the excerpt, the concept of transparency departed from the term *behind-the-scenes* that has been adopted in the public debate for depicting the alleged intertwined relations between the political, business, media elites and the judiciary.[36]

The last idea of free and fair elections departed from the pragmatic conception of democracy that reduces citizen's involvement to electoral participation. While free and fair elections were presented as the fundamental basis of functioning democracy, they themselves were not assumed as a guarantee of the democratic-ness of the country. On the one hand, the election results were granted significant weight when the need to respect them was frequently repeated. This was often complemented by the instrumental arguments, statistical evidence and quantification showing the relative long-term popularity of the governing party (GERB), the decreasing support for the second largest party (BSP), and the weak potential of oppositional parties to form a (coalition) government after the elections. The framing also involved mythopoietic and consequentialist argumentation claiming that although it is important to take into

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[36]   Spirova, "Bulgaria."

account public discontent and respect the voice of the people, it is just as important to uphold the electoral results – one of the key principles of democracy – and not to make significant political changes that could throw the country into great chaos and subsequent instability anytime the people feel outraged. On the other hand, what was accentuated a number of times was the way in which the elections may be manipulated through vote buying and other forms of dependencies, including the threat of losing a job or bankruptcy of one's own business.

Omnipresent Crisis

The second most frequently occurring discourse was the one evoking crisis. This is perhaps not a big surprise given that the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had passed, leaving behind huge negative effects on the whole country, and the second wave was expected to come only in autumn. Interestingly, the notion of crisis was not entangled solely with COVID-19 and the associated health crisis, but rather transcended to other allegedly presented problems that Bulgaria was facing.

     Figure 3, which summarizes the core crisis elements in all the analyzed articles, presents the semantic field of the notion of crisis along with the key crisis-related frames employed in the media articles. As the Figure suggests, the crisis narrative runs along five main dimensions: political, economic, health, social, and normative. Each of these dimensions further comprised several other frames, including parliamentary and institutional crises, financial crisis, demographic and corruption crisis, crisis of morality, trustworthiness, and democracy.

     It is important to emphasize the ambiguous character of what the crisis entails. For instance, the realization of the political framework of the crisis was mainly grounded in two presuppositions. First, the government and its members were viewed as violating legislative rules and behaving illegally, and the sole solution to this was supposed to be government resignation and new elections. Second, the oppositional parties, politicians, and the president were presented as disregarding democratic principles, polarizing society and hence disrupting the country's political stability. What exactly the political crisis meant remained unspecified and unclear, yet the urgency of the situation was frequently accentuated: "all the

signs of a deep political crisis are present," "Bulgaria faces an acute political crisis" (*Kapital*, 17/07), "it is indispensable to find the way out of the political crisis" (*Kapital*, 21/07). The same ambiguity applied to the economic crisis that drew on the future projections of a "bad economic situation awaits us" (*Dnevnik*, 13/07), or "the crisis that is about to come will be greater than that of 2008-2009 and greater than the Great Depression" (*168 Chasa*, 12/08). The only thing that was clear enough was that everything would get worse, and nobody could predict how bad it would be. Such conceptualizations were vague enough to be difficult for the general audience to grasp and simultaneously concrete enough to create a sense that the country is facing serious problems and difficulties.

As illustrated in Example 2, the crises were presented as being closely intertwined with one triggering the other while being simultaneously overlapped with another one. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated health crises generated socioeconomic problems and difficulties that accumulated to the degree that economic crisis emerged. Most notably, these events were further suggested to either cause or fuel the existing vaguely defined political crisis.

> Example 2
>
> "The overlapping health and economic crises combined with low trust in governing are likely to lead to a political crisis before the parliamentary crisis. The political crisis could continue even after the election, considering the expected distribution of seats in the National Assembly. At worst, this could make crisis management unfeasible." (*Dnevnik*, 03/08)

Noteworthy is that the health crisis was not the one that suddenly put the country into severe troubles, but it was projected as yet another one that adds to the existing crisis circularity in which the country finds itself. Eventually, the boundaries between the particular crisis and its aftermath became blurred. While one crisis might seem to be "over" by some sort of solutions and measures, the other one would be only about to consequently emerge. This closely relates to what Bob Jessop pointed out – that crises are "objectively overdetermined and subjectively indetermined."[37] This subjective indeterminacy has opened the crisis to strategic use as

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[37]   Bob Jessop, "Crisis Construal in the North Atlantic Financial Crisis and the Eurozone Crisis," *Competition & Change* 19, no. 2 (1 April 2015): 95–112, 97.

part of the top-down process of imposing or (re-)shaping the meaning with the aim of changing the social reality.[38] Instead of emerging merely as a discursive construct that allows the creation of new ways of engaging with the past and the present while enabling articulation of a possible future that challenges traditional ideas, crisis was frequently presented as an undisputed given that must be solved.[39] To be sure, such deployment of crisis as a given is certainly far from being completely new. Political actors have used the notion of crisis for their strategical motives for some time, conjuring the crisis from nowhere, exaggerating the depth of an actual crisis or, on the contrary, downplaying or disclaiming its critical importance.[40] The shift in operationalization or, to use the words of Michał Krzyżanowski, discursive shift, however, entails making real the imaginary – the socially constructed perceptions of crisis.[41] These imaginaries or perceptions of uncertainty, threat and urgency were strategically created and mobilized in order to pre-legitimize ideological positions or policy choices, legitimize one's past actions or delegitimize oppositional politicians, their ideological positions or the existing political order (Example 3).[42]

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[38]   Krzyżanowski, "Brexit and the Imaginary of 'Crisis.'"

[39]   Gustavo Cardoso and Pedro Jacobetty, "Surfing the Crisis: Cultures of Belonging and Networked Social Change," in *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis*, eds. Manuel Castells, Joao Caraca, and Gustavo Cardoso, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[40]   Jessop, "Crisis Construal;" Michał Krzyżanowski and Natalia Krzyżanowska, "Narrating the 'New Normal' or Pre-Legitimising Media Control? COVID-19 and the Discursive Shifts in the Far-Right Imaginary of 'Crisis' as a Normalisation Strategy," *Discourse & Society* 33, no. 6 (1 November 2022): 805–18.

[41]   Michał Krzyżanowski, "Normalization and the Discursive Construction of 'New' Norms and 'New' Normality: Discourse in the Paradoxes of Populism and Neoliberalism," *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (7 August 2020): 431–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/1035033 0.2020.1766193.

[42]   Verena Brinks and Oliver Ibert, "From Corona Virus to Corona Crisis: The Value of An Analytical and Geographical Understanding of Crisis," *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 111, no. 3 (2020): 275–87; Michał Krzyżanowski and Natalia Krzyżanowska, "Narrating the 'New Normal' or Pre-Legitimising Media Control? COVID-19 and the Discursive Shifts in the Far-right Imaginary of 'Crisis' as a Normalisation Strategy," *Discourse & Society* 33, no. 6 (2022): 805-818, https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221095420.

Example 3

"The rulers are not offering a national plan to get out of this crisis. They are offering piecemeal measures. This is not the way to lead Bulgaria out of the crisis. They don't have a strategic view. A visionary plan with a long-term view is needed." (*OFFNews*, 31/07)

This pre-legitimizing, legitimizing, and de-legitimizing character of the use of crisis was further reinforced by the urgency to intervene immediately: "now is the moment when the choice is made between crisis and catastrophe" (*Kapital*, 26/10). Such messages did not lay out specific propositions for change but spelt out the unavoidable necessity for crisis response. They, thereby, contributed to the facilitation of legitimizing path-dependencies to the more encompassing and pressing discursive actions.[43]

Eventually, this added to the culture of constant effort to find the culprits or blame someone for the existing problems and crises: "Boyko Borisov and his clan eat our country" (*Dnevnik* 16/09), and "GERB inherited problems from the children of communists" (*OFFNews* 08/10). This crisis discourse further added to the enactment of a sense of insecurity and fear, as illustrated in Example 4:

Example 4

"The overlapping health and economic crisis combined with a low trust in governing are likely to lead to a political crisis before the parliamentary crisis. The political crisis could continue even after the election, considering the expected distribution of seats in the National Assembly. At worst, this could make crisis management infeasible." (*Dnevnik*, 03/08)

Left-behindness

The last recurring theme related to governance (il)legitimacy in the corpus was the notion of left-behindness. In particular, this served especially de-legitimation since, in most instances, it suggested that governance is illegitimate because it is unable to rescue Bulgaria from its perpetual backwardness. This was, to a great extent, dominated by comparisons of

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[43] Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication."

what made Bulgaria worse than other countries. It included overt references to Western countries and the European Union as the major ontological and ideological frame. Looking more closely at these comparisons, Bulgaria was portrayed in the texts as having "the lowest average salary in the European Union" (*OFFNews* 01/10), being "the poorest and most corrupt country in the European Union" (*24 Chasa*, 15/07) and, ultimately, as "lagging behind" (*168 Chasa*, 19/07) and being a "periphery of Europe" (*24 Chasa*, 19/07).

Figure 4 summarizes the semantic elements that add to the conceptualization of the feeling of left-behindness. As shown in the Figure, the concept of left-behindness departs from three main ideas: economic backwardness, institutional backwardness, and socio-political backwardness. Each of those ideas further comprises several other frames, namely poverty, low standards of living, slow or no modernization, high levels of criminality, widespread corruption, no democratic opposition, high levels of children illiteracy and low levels of morality.

The left-behindness narrative was substantially dominated by the economic framings coupled with frequent references to feelings of embitterment and hopelessness.[44] A closer look at the discursive node around the economic backwardness reveals that this idea was recurrently related to the grinding poverty that afflicts both personified Bulgaria, which "is getting poorer every year" (*24 Chasa*, 13/08) and is "the poorest … in Europe" (*FocusNews*, 02/12), as well as Bulgarian citizens who are and get poorer at the expense of the wealthy oligarchs.

Important highlighting is the cleavage made between the citizens who are attributed "the Bulgarianness" and the oligarchs, mafia or "oligarchic-mafia circles" who are deprived of such a quality despite holding the Bulgarian nationality. Noteworthy is that the elites are considered as being either part of these oligarchic-mafia circles or closely tied and heavily dependent upon them and, as a result, are often associated with them. Such a delimitation adds to the widespread

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[44] Matthias Hannemann, Sebastian Henn, and Susann Schäfer, "Regions, Emotions and Left-Behindness: A Phase Model for Understanding the Emergence of Regional Embitterment," *Regional Studies* 58, no. 6 (2024): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/0034340 4.2023.2218886.

feeling of the great distance of people from the elites because of both political neglect and socio-economic exclusion. In addition to being portrayed as distant from ordinary people, the elites and oligarchs were often presented as a threat to people's lives, contributing to a loss of socio-economic status. The people were thus often put into the center of attention – as the righteous ones of Bulgaria whose wellbeing should be the first priority of governance. This construction of a homogenous and national people or imagined community, to use the concept of Benedict Anderson, facilitates the activation of the "us" *versus* "them" dichotomy and contributes to the socio-political antagonism.[45]

What we labelled as institutional backwardness refers to both formal and informal institutional settings that together constitute the backbone of social, economic and political relations.[46] Here, obviously, two dimensions are to be distinguished. The first comprises written laws, policies and regulations enforced by official authorities, while the second includes socially shared norms and codes of conduct, morals, habits, and values. Worth noting is that neither of these exists absolutely independently of the other as they, in many ways, intersect. Such interrelations can be well illustrated by widely accentuated problems of criminality and corruption. In the text, these were mostly linked to the inefficient formal institutions that are unable to prevent such pernicious misbehaviors. If one builds on Douglass C. North's definition of informal institutions, corruption and crime can be considered examples as they provide an informal "rule of the game" that influences people's behavior.[47] Eventually, Bulgaria was portrayed as being behind in both directions – lacking a strong legal framework that would tackle the problems of corruption and crime and not having firmly embedded norms, habits or values that would naturally eliminate such practices. It is noteworthy that both corruption and crime were systematically reified in representation by news media. In particular, corruption often appeared as an autonomous entity that led its own life, causing difficulties for Bulgaria.

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[45] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

[46] Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[47] Ibid.

Closely related to the previous, socio-political backwardness draws upon the three major frames: morality, demographic decrease, and illiteracy. The former occurred, in most cases, in relation to the low levels of social standards for honest, right or good behavior in politics. Such a "lack of morality in the way the country is governed" (*Dnevnik*, 02/09) by a "morally failed government" (*24 Chasa*, 09/10) led by the prime minister who "has no morals" and is a "moral disgrace for Bulgaria" (*FocusNews*, 201/09) are presented as fueling the dissatisfaction and anger of citizens. Interestingly, the young generation of Bulgarians was especially accentuated in its immense determination to "fight for a new morality in politics" (*FocusNews*, 15/07). Young Bulgarians were also frequently mentioned as "leaving the country due to the lack of perspective" (*OFFNews*, 04/08). More particularly, the problem of the so-called *brain drain* phenomenon was implied in a number of instances. This great outflow of Bulgarians makes progress in a whole range of sectors unfeasible, causing substantial damage to Bulgaria and its potential for its breakout of the spiral of backwardness. Connected to that is the many-times mentioned rising illiteracy of children in certain groups of Bulgarians that, linked with the brain drain phenomenon, distances the country further from the knowledge economies of Western Europe.

Important mentioning are the assumed causes of such a behindness that, in most cases, were attributed to the difficult past: the communist regime and the troublesome transition to democracy and market economy. What was, in a number of instances, underlined was that the country has not undergone real democratization due to the lack of lustration of the nomenclature cadres of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the State Security. As a consequence, the Bulgarian political scene is portrayed as being, to a great extent, tainted by the presence of the representatives of the former regime "who today disguise themselves as liberals and limit us to think freely" (*OFFNews*, 03/07). The second aspect closely related to the insufficient breaking of the ties with the previous regime, which was frequently mentioned, was the interconnectedness of business, organized crime, and politics created in the turbulent 1990s. This was either related to the general continuation of such dependence or clientelist practices, or to the more specific references to the concrete actors involved in these. To give some examples, the DPS (Movement for Rights and

Freedoms) and its honorary president Ahmed Dogan are often presented as "one of the most significant sources of corruption in Bulgaria" (*OFFNews*, 15/07) that substantially contributed to the embeddedness of such a practice in politics. In relation to Boyko Borisov, his dubious activities of the 1990s were emphasized as they have "carried over to the management of the state" (*FocusNews*, 16/07). A similar accentuation of the professional past was made with reference to Rumen Radev, who is portrayed as a "usual Bulgarian politician of the transition" (*168 Chasa*, 10/07). Last but not least, it is important to mention the recurring emphasis on the fact that BSP is, though renamed, the successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

Conclusion

The central aim of this article was to explore the narrative explanations on "why we should do this?" or "why should we do this in this way?" with respect to Bulgarian governance, understood broadly as the process of steering economy and society. By doing so, the article explored in-depth the key argumentative frames that are constructed for or against making governance legitimate. The main finding emerging from the analysis is the recurrence of the apparent hopelessness of the socio-political situation in which Bulgaria finds itself in the public space. This manifested itself in two ways. First, regardless of the socio-political orientation and news media type, Bulgarian mainstream news media recognized a far-reaching, negative and critical impacts of the way country is governed within an array of dimensions. In this analysis, the author identified three main narratives, namely (1) violated democracy, (2) crisis, and (3) left-behindness, which grounded governance de-legitimation and offered the audience the frames through which the complicated political situation could be understood. Second, the analyzed discursive representations showed a strong tendency to externalize the responsibility for the state of the affairs in which the country found itself. More precisely, the results of my media analysis point to the imaginary of *common* Bulgarians that are at the mercy of some external forces from which it is nearly impossible to break free. This external agency is attributed to either someone outside

the state boundaries, *i.e.* other states, international institutions or their representatives, or the actors inside the state who are deprived of *Bulgarianness* and portrayed as the Others. Concretely, this means that news media facilitate the creation of an imagined community that holds no responsibility for the way the country is governed and the resulting socio-political and socio-economic situation in which the country finds itself.

Besides identifying the recurrent narratives, the author looked at key argumentative frames, which allowed to construct specific semantic fields of the central concepts tied with these narratives and unveil the underlying ideas attached to them. As the analysis indicates, the semantic dimensions attached to the concept of democracy were pertained to how the EU refers to or use them, pointing to the normative power the European Union has over its member. In the case of crisis imaginary, the identified discursive frames were built on the past-to-future connections. Importantly, the projections of future scenarios were linked to fear rather than hope of what is expected to happen, which gave rise to the imaginary made of uncertainty or threat, opening the crisis narrative to strategic use. Finally, the imaginary of Bulgaria lacking behind resided in the frequent, albeit implicit, comparisons of Bulgaria with other EU's member states, pointing out especially to the features in which the country is worse off. Another important aspect of the construction of such an imaginary was in facilitating the path-dependency projections. This means that the media texts drew on the idea that just as Bulgaria was backward on many levels in the past, it is backward now and is deemed to remain so. Considering these findings, the author believes it is essential to think about the presence of Orientalist discourses and narratives in societal thinking patterns.

To sum up, the results of this analysis show that the bad governance narrative is firmly engrained in media discourse. This was manifested in the corpus by the prevalence of de-legitimation that created the affordances for the configuration of the societal narrative of bad governance. Although one could expect that the news media, that have had a long-term tendency to portray the GERB government rather positively, would legitimize the way the country is governed, the results of the media analysis revealed the prevalence of governance de-legitimation regardless of the news' socio-political orientation. This means that the bad governance narrative

does not involve enforcing restrictive imaginaries about the current governmental structures but transcend it, encompassing everything political from the government, members of the parliament including the opposition, the Presidency, the judiciary and the political parties and political actors in general. Importantly, such de-legitimation was facilitated by overt references to democracy as central ontological frame. More precisely, Bulgarian governance was frequently compared to and contrasted with the democratic principles that, eventually, served as a fulcrum of de-legitimation. Assuming that (de)legitimation is deemed to be valid in so far as it is related to more general beliefs and worldviews, an important implication stemming from this is that democracy and its underlying principles form a crucial part in society's conviction about how things ought to be.

The findings remain subject to certain limitations. Because the study focused on the discussion in Bulgarian news media, it cannot make any generalization about the discursive patterns and strategies in the whole region. In this sense, it would be interesting to conduct a comparative study to explore whether there exists any common pattern in the region that could help us to understand the democratic backsliding phenomenon more generally. Furthermore, focusing merely on textual analysis, this study makes no claims about whether (de)legitimation in and by media succeeded in achieving resonance and hence influenced the actors in any way. In this way, for instance, audience reception analysis would be useful for discovering the resonance. It would further be interesting to look at the role of social media or other platforms in (de)legitimation, as their role in shaping the public attitudes has become more significant.

Acknowledgments

Table 1

Composition of the corpus of media articles

News outlet	News type	Attitude towards the authorities	Number of articles
Dnevnik	Quality newspaper	Negative	224
Kapital	Quality newspaper	Negative	104
OFF News	Quality newspaper	Negative	172
Focus News	News agency	N/A	163
24 Chasa	Hybrid newspaper	Rather positive	131
168 Chasa	Hybrid newspaper	Rather positive	39
Total			833

Source: author's own elaboration.

Table 2

Narrative frequency in the corpus

	Number of total occurrences	Number of unique occurrences in articles
Violated Democracy	1,222	452
Crisis	178	123
Left-Behindness	136	100

Source: author's own elaboration.
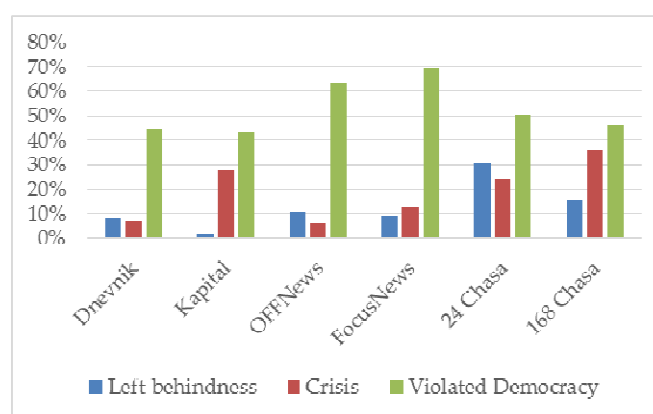
Figure 1. Occurrences of narratives within news outlets
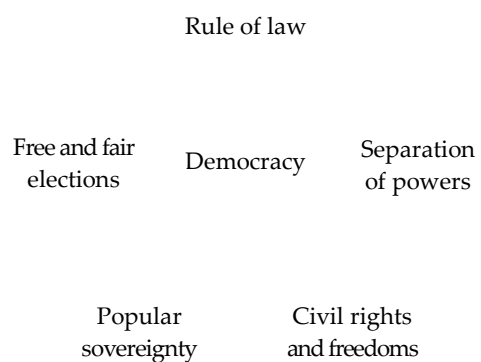(*Source*: author's own elaboration)

Rule of law

Free and fair
elections   Democracy   Separation
of powers

Popular   Civil rights
sovereignty   and freedoms

Figure 2. Semantic field of the concept of democracy in the analyzed media discourse
(*Source*: author's own elaboration)

Political

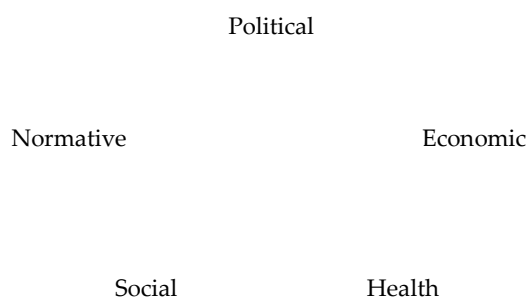Normative   Economic

Social   Health

Figure 3. Semantic field of the notion of crisis in the analyzed media discourse
(*Source*: author's own elaboration)

Economic
backwardness

Left-behindness

Institutional   Socio-political
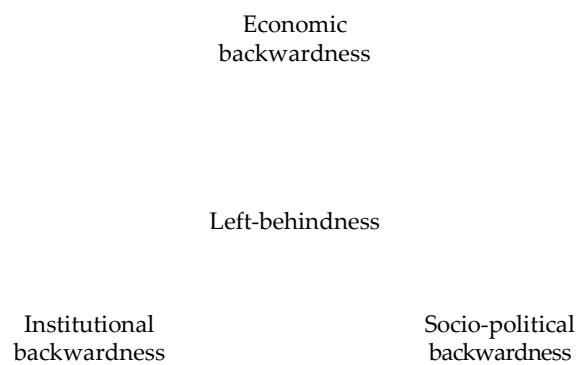backwardness   backwardness

Figure 4. Semantic field of the concept of left-behindness in the analyzed media discourse
(*Source*: author's own elaboration)