

## **“Assassination Campaigns”: Corruption Scandals and News Media Instrumentalization**

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This article offers a different view of media scandals than the one that is prevalent in the West. In many countries (and partially also in the West), corruption scandals respond mainly to a logic of instrumentalization: They come to light and occupy the front pages of newspapers and privileged slots on television news because they are occasions and tools to attack political and business competitors following the logic of what John Thompson calls the “politics of trust.” With findings from a series of studies on media corruption, the article explores how instrumentalization drives the coverage of corruption cases in new and transitional democracies.

*Keywords: news media scandal, instrumentalization, politics of trust*

### **News Media Instrumentalization**

Based on the findings of a project called ANTICORRP (2016; Anticorruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption) funded by the European Union,<sup>2</sup> this article proposes a view of the coverage of corruption scandals that differs from the dominant view in the so-called liberal model of journalism. I demonstrate that scandals often respond to a logic of instrumentalization—in a context of what John Thompson (2000) defines as “politics of trust”—a concept discussed later in the article. I also highlight the social and political conditions that foster the instrumentalization of corruption scandals.

If it were possible to summarize the enormous number of essays and textbooks on the mission of professional journalism, such a summary would need to focus on three main objectives: securing economic independence, informing citizens, and controlling power holders (McQuail, 1992). These objectives are representative of the so-called liberal model of journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) or the Anglo-American model of journalism (Chalaby, 1996). This model is applied across many Western democracies, albeit with some remarkable differences among them. The liberal model also represents a sort of ideal hegemonic model of reference for professionals and scholars worldwide. In a recent collection,

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van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albaek (2017) insist that “journalists from Hong Kong to the United Arab Emirates pay lip service to the Anglo-American ideals of professional journalism and say that they see themselves as objectively reporting watchdogs of the government” (p. 189). Economic independence, fair news circulation, and watchdog functions have been ascribed different levels of importance over time, and these factors work differently in different countries. However, they represent the essence of professional journalism as it is defined in most communication scholarship as well as in training experiences, textbooks, and liberal political thought.

A Western bias is embodied in this description of what journalism is or ought to be. In the introduction to their volume *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, James Curran and Mjung-Jin Park (2000) write that most interpretations of the media and journalism are derived from a “tiny handful of circulating countries” (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 3). Most texts on media and journalism are written by Western scholars focusing essentially on Western realities encompassing similar or quite similar social, political, and cultural features and structures (Curran & Park, 2000; Lee, 2015; Zielonka, 2015). These realities cannot represent the enormous variety of conditions currently observed worldwide; nevertheless, “It has become routine for universalistic observations about the media to be advanced in English language books on the basis of evidence derived from a tiny handful of countries” (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 3).

Indeed, beyond the borders of what is usually intended by the term *Western world*—that is, Western Europe, North America, and a few other countries such as Australia and New Zealand—professional journalism appears to be something very different from rooted and diffused hegemonic views, particularly in its everyday practice. Moreover, in many parts of the world, even in the West, a gap emerges between everyday practice and idealized theory. Indeed, van Dalen and colleagues (2017) ask, “Do journalists’ ideals inform their practice or is there a gap between what they say they want to and what they actually do?” (p. 189).

This gap is even more dramatic when one looks beyond the borders of Western liberal democracies, and particularly to transitional democracies (Votmer, 2013). Frequently, the ideals of liberal or Anglo-American journalism are transplanted into contexts that are completely different from those within which they were developed. On the exportation of the liberal model of journalism to Latin America, Silvio Waisbord (2000a) writes that “the transplanting of Western media models, however, was similar to fitting square pegs into round holes” (p. 50). In another contribution, Waisbord (2000b) notes that no factor that has facilitated the development of American journalism is present in Latin America.

Thus, looking beyond the tiny handful of countries (i.e., Western Europe and North America), the everyday practice of journalism does not respond to descriptions and assumptions that liberal thought entrusts to journalism; rather, it responds to a logic of instrumentalization that involves “the control of the media by outside actors, parties, politicians, social groups or movements or economic actors seeking political influence who use them to intervene in the world of politics (and business)” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 37). This instrumentalization logic—which, by the way, exists in some measure even in Western countries—implies that, although news media companies are not profitable enterprises, their owners are well aware that the exercise of influence over decision makers (which is often why they own the media) requires economic resources that they are willing to invest into media ownership. The diffusion of news

and control over power holders is exercised in an unfair manner, mainly in response to the particular interests of media owners and not to general interests.

The idea of instrumentalization is similar to what many authors have written about professional journalism in countries around the world. In observing media and politics in Central and Eastern Europe, Alina Mungiu Pippidi (2008) writes of

a situation in which the media has not succeeded in becoming autonomous to manifest a will of its own and to exercise its main function, notably of informing people, but has persisted in an intermediate state, whereas various groups, not just the government use it for other purposes. (p. 91)

This definition reflects the proposed idea of instrumentalization in making explicit reference to a lack of fair news circulation while depicting the news media as dependent on external powers.

The idea of media colonization was first advanced by Thomas Meyer (2002) and then reformulated by Peter Bajomi Lazar (2014). Their views do not differ significantly from Mungiu Pippidi's definition. Bajomi Lazar discusses the relationships between media and politics in Central and Eastern Europe and develops the notion of "media capture" into the "party colonization of the media" (p. 23), which refers more specifically to the capacity for political parties to "extract resources" from the media to channel these resources toward party supporters as a reward.

While observing countries other than Central and Eastern European ones, Duncan McCargo (2012) writes of "partisan polyvalence." He studies the media and politics of Far East Asia and finds that the diffusion of news through the print press and television responds to a combination of different and often contrasting interests, such as business and political interests. The ideal, liberal image of the fair circulation of news and the other romantic image of the news as an uninterested watchdog seem out of place in such countries. A similar view of news media activity is implied in Colin Sparks' (2000) definition of "political capital," through which he describes the relationship between media and politics in post-Soviet countries. Similar to McCargo, Sparks emphasizes how these countries present a combination of different interests that direct news media activities, thus implying the presence of dramatic pressures rooted in business, politics, and the media.

Another area of the world that appears to present a similar situation is Latin America. In attempting to offer a unitary view of the media systems in Latin America, Manuel Alejandro Guerrero (2014) proposes a "captured liberal model of journalism" as from the title of its contribution, underlying the predominance of commercial media corporations. Because of contextual conditions that are deeply affected by the diffused culture of clientelism, corporations are unable to exert any important and autonomous control over power holders or to fairly circulate news despite the competitive logic driving them.

In the next section, I will try to highlight how instrumentalization applies to the coverage of corruption scandals, providing some evidence from recently conducted studies.

### **News Media Instrumentalization and Coverage of Corruption Scandals**

In much of the world, news coverage of scandals—and particularly of corruption scandals—aligns with what has been described thus far as media instrumentalization. This approach contrasts dramatically with the role of the news media according to liberal political thought: In reporting on scandals and illegal behaviors, the news media's role is to curb corruption. "A free press is bad news for corruption," Brunetti and Weder (2003) claim in the title of their article. This Western view of media scandals is reflected in Sigurd Allern and Ester Pollack's (2012) research in four Nordic countries:

In news journalism, material concerning political scandals is a competitive resource. While reports on political scandals in different media formats are goods in the public marketplace, they also represent symbolic capital that will boost a media business's reputation and self-image as a guardian of public life. Revealing and launching a political scandal is viewed both as a journalistic scoop and as a strategic, market-related investment in terms of reputation and interest among the general public. If the scandal leads to the departure of a government minister or of another powerful figure, then it offers proof of the news organization's power and effectiveness, and the reports will often go on to receive a media award nomination. (p. 19)

Other authors support a similar view: For Thompson (2000), media scandals serve as an opportunity to boost newspaper circulation, while the disclosure of unethical and illegal behaviors is central to the development of professional journalism and the invention of the modern concept of news. Robert Entman (2012) particularly insists on the need to "calibrate" attention to scandals while avoiding the promotion of exaggerated scoop attitudes and ensuring fair coverage.

Allern and Pollack rightly interpret media scandals as a resource in a competitive media market. However, as noted earlier, this is not possible to observe in many countries where the economic resources and legitimation that may be derived from a scoop (e.g., a scoop related to a corruption scandal) are not considered a major aim of professional journalism. Rather, other interests and goals appear to drive reporting activity. It is this type of coverage of corruption scandals that I consider in this article.

As noted earlier, many non-West world regions apply the logic of instrumentalization. The investigation and disclosure of corruption cases responds to the particular interests of media owners and their political allies, thus confirming the narrow relations between the news media and other social powers (economic, political, etc.), as evidenced in expressions such as "political capital," "partisan polyvalence," and "media capture." Obviously many cases of instrumentalization of corruption scandals exist in the West as well. In the collection edited by Allern and Pollack (2012), Jenssen and Fladmoe (2012) discuss Nordic cases of instrumentalization. Coverage of corruption in the French media is frequently directed by partisan aims. For example, Gaulliste minister Pasqua is particularly attacked by the center-left *Le Monde*, whereas the rightist *Le Figaro* focuses particularly on scandals involving the leftist Guerini (ANTICORRP, 2016).<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that a large part of the French press is owned by industrial or financial conglomerates that rarely use the news media for their own interests.

the United States, the 2012 Benghazi scandal was used to undermine the 2016 presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton.

### ***Corruption Cases in Seven Countries***

The findings from the European Union-funded project ANTICORRP (2016), and the "Media and Corruption" work package in particular, confirm the proposed interpretation. This study investigated the coverage of corruption cases in seven countries: France, Hungary, the United Kingdom, Italy, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia. These countries represent Western European democracies (France, Italy, United Kingdom) and Central and Eastern European ones (Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia).<sup>4</sup>

Four newspapers of different political affiliations (rightist/conservative and leftist/liberal papers) and genres (elite and tabloid papers)<sup>5</sup> were analyzed in each country for the period 2004–13. The following newspapers were analyzed:

Italy: *La Repubblica, Il Corriere della Sera, Il Sole 24 ore, Il Giornale*

Hungary: *HVG, Origo, MNO, Nepszava*

Slovakia: *Hospodarske Noviny, Novy Cas, Pravda, Sme*

Romania: *Ziarul Financiar, Libertatea, Jurnalul National, Romania Libera*

France: *Le Monde, Le Figaro, Les Echos, Ouest France*

United Kingdom: *The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Sun, The Times*

Latvia: *Diena, NRA, Latvijas Avize, Dienas Bizness*

The selection of newspapers was aimed to capture the overall nature of the national press system: For instance, the more international character of the British press was reflected in the selection of two papers with important international circulation (*The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*), and the papers selected for Italy reflect the absence of a tabloid press in the country. Moreover the choice of the corpus was influenced by the availability of sources.<sup>6</sup>

In this study, corruption was defined as an "umbrella concept" (Varraich 2014), including unfair behaviors such as bribery, kickback, embezzlement, collusion, clientelism, familism, and nepotism. Some of these behaviors are not strictly illegal, but they represent the cultural ground where corruption takes root. We considered all cases that included the seven words listed above. They could involve political figures and other figures and could be uncovered by the judiciary and by journalists.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These countries are where the research teams participating in the project were based.

<sup>5</sup> We did not consider the distinction between local and national press mostly because it was difficult to access local papers.

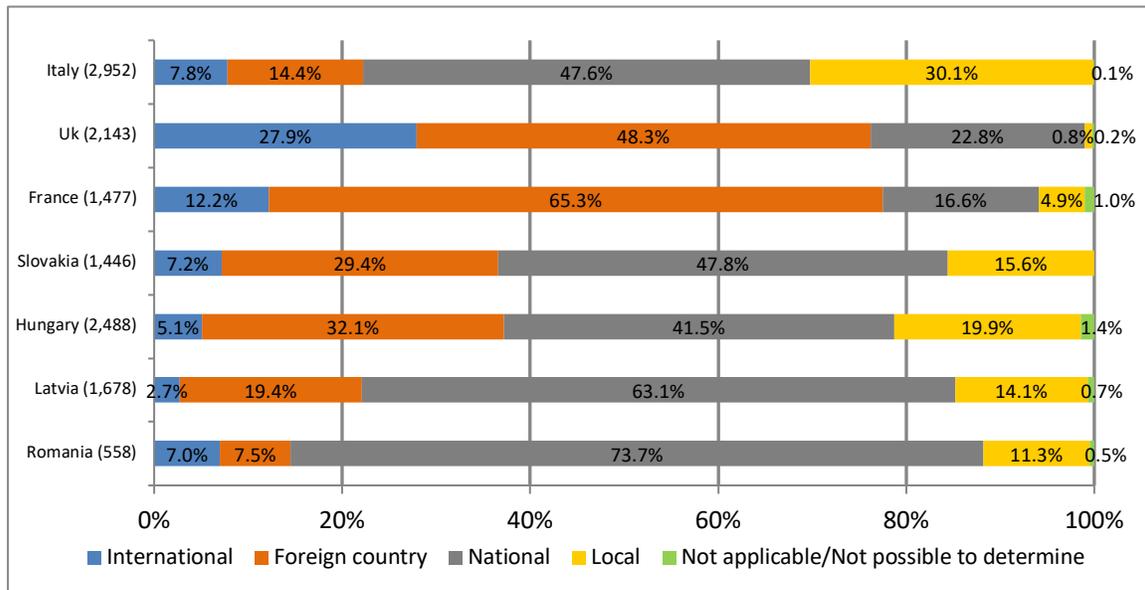
<sup>6</sup> For instance, in France, we did not analyze *La Canard Enchaîné*, which covers scandals at large, because of the difficulty in retrieving all the issues that were supposed to be investigated.

<sup>7</sup> Initially all the selected articles (183,941) were analyzed through computerized content analysis, and then a sample of these articles (12,742 articles) was analyzed by trained coders.

Two of the researched countries are established Western democracies (France and the United Kingdom). In these countries, despite some major differences, the so-called Western model of journalism is in operation. Four countries (Hungary, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia) are part of the "third wave" of democratization (Huntington, 1993) and can be called "new democracies." They are Central Eastern European countries that arrived at this stage since the fall of the Soviet Union. As the title of a well-known book states, they seem to be still fighting to "find the right place on the map" (Jakubowicz & Sukosd, 2008) of democracy. Indeed, their institutions undergo continuous and often contradictory changes, as observed in much of the literature on transitology (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Despite a long democratic tradition in the Italian political system, several scholars (Almagisti, Lanzalaco, & Verzichelli, 2014) stress its "transitional" character. Since the "bribery city" scandal of 1992–93, Italy remains in a long period of transition after the disappearance of all political parties of the so-called first Republic, replaced by a "second Republic" following those events. The country features many of the conditions that characterize transitional democracies: extreme political and institutional volatility with new parties continuously appearing on the scene, only to disappear after short time. The institutional apparatus, too, experiences frequent changes, and only recently was a new electoral law approved after a long and harsh period of debate. Institutional and political changes have been so frequent that, to emphasize the current period of uncertainty, political scientists talk of a "third Republic" (Calise, 2006). Therefore, it seems reasonable to define Italy as a democracy in transition, even if not in the sense intended in the transitology literature, which stresses the shift from a dictatorship to democracy.

In the new and transitional democracies examined here, media instrumentalization seems to be the norm—at least more so than in Western Europe—and the coverage of corruption scandals is often an important part of this instrumentalization tendency. Indeed, the already mentioned findings reveal a striking difference between the representation of corruption in what we define as established Western democracies (France and the United Kingdom) and in new and transitional ones (Central and Eastern European countries and Italy). In established Western democracies, newspaper coverage of corruption tends to focus on cases occurring in international and foreign arenas (see Figure 1), highlighting the involvement of foreign politicians and officials while national corruption seems to be less important. On the contrary, newspaper coverage of corruption scandals in the new and transitional democracies focuses almost completely on internal cases of corruption that primarily involve local politicians and officials. In all the investigated countries, most of the articles dealing with corruption scandals derive from reporting on judicial activities (47%), and only 5.4% of them are the product of investigative journalism.



**Figure 1. Arena of focus by country (%) for newspaper coverage of corruption scandals.**

Various interpretations of this different approach to the coverage of corruption scandals can be proposed. First, new and transitional democracies are more corrupt than other countries based on well-known data from Transparency<sup>8</sup> International (although these data measure levels of perception and not the real existence of corruption—a behavior that is almost impossible to measure). The 2016 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index ranks the United Kingdom as number 10 in the index of less corrupt countries, France as number 23, Latvia as number 44, Slovakia as number 54, Hungary as number 57, Romania as number 57, and Italy as number 60. New democracies are generally considered more corrupt than established democracies for a number of reasons (Treisman, 2000). Moreover, the newspapers of established democracies that were examined for this study enjoy much broader international circulation (i.e., *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, and *Le Monde*) and therefore focus much more than other newspapers on the international arena and foreign countries.

Two completely different representations of corruption emerge from these data: In new and transitional democracies of Central Eastern Europe and in Italy, corruption is a matter that is strictly related to domestic politics and public administration; the established democracies of France and the United Kingdom do not seem to be touched by this "plague" (as corruption is often characterized; Bratu & Kazoka, 2018).

Other parts of the ANTICORRP (2016) project complete the picture emerging from the computerized and human-assisted content analysis. They find dubious sources of most of the coverage of corruption that tends to derive from "interested" leaks and from unidentified sources (often secret service agents). This evidence points to an overlap between the work of reporters and external interests in

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.transparency.it/corruption-perceptions-index/>

generating the circulation of corruption news in response to particularistic and often hidden interests (Stetka & Ornebring, 2013). Investigative journalists, too, act on leaks that are part of a logic of instrumentalization.

The blurred origins and the subsequent developments of corruption scandals do not allow us to understand clearly how the scandal erupts and who starts it. Each of the involved figures, including the judiciary, has its own burden of particularistic interests. Even if the corruption scandal comes to light because of fair judiciary investigations, instrumentalization occurs in the way journalists cover and exacerbate the scandal. The West is not immune from these practices, but they tend to be used much more in new and transitional democracies.

Particularly in the case studies section of the ANTICORRP project, attention is devoted to specific journalistic practices, such as that of "kompromat," which originally referred to the production and diffusion of news in Russia by often anonymous sources to destroy the reputations of political or entrepreneurial figures (Koltsova, 2006; Ledeneva, 2006). Alena Ledeneva (2006) explains: "The word Kompromat has no direct equivalent in English. Its literal translation—compromising material—refers to discrete information that can be collected, stored, traded or used strategically across all domains: political, electoral, legal, professional, judicial, media or business." (p. 58)

True or false corruption stories seem to fit particularly well with kompromat practices (Ledeneva, 2006). The ANTICORRP report on media and corruption stresses that this practice is now common across many countries of Central and Eastern Europe; it often occurs together with the similar practice of blackmail, in which news from undefined sources is circulated to damage the reputation of public figures.

Many studies on other regions of the world discuss similar and even more dramatic situations, where reporters are subjects of economic, judiciary, and even physical threats because of corruption stories (Milojevic & Krstic, 2018; Rely & Bustamante, 2014; Ristow, 2010).

### ***The Politics of Trust***

What Thompson (2000) writes in his book *Political Scandal* may serve as another explanation for the observed differences. In referring essentially to established Western democracies, Thompson suggests that

the growing prevalence of political scandals has less to do with a general decline in the moral standards of political leaders than with the changing ways in which and the extent to which the activities of leaders are disclosed and scrutinized in the public domain. (p. 107)

Thompson suggests that the increased visibility of political leaders relies almost exclusively on the news media; thus, he introduces the notion of the "politics of trust" to capture the notion that with the weakening of ideological ties between citizens and party organizations and with the increasing personalization of political life that he observes in the Western world, "people become more concerned with the characters of individuals" (p. 112) and with their reputations. Scandals become a sort of

"credibility test," and, indeed in many cases, they are used to undermine and destroy the reputations of political competitors.

The politics of trust may serve as another explanation for the observed differences in the coverage of corruption scandals in new/transitional and established democracies. Conditions that seem to determine the politics of trust appear to be more important in new and transitional democracies than they are in established democracies, such as those of Western Europe. Indeed, Thompson's idea of the politics of trust refers to the situation he observed in Western countries. The thesis I want to put forth in this article is that in new and transitional democracies there exist specific conditions that enhance the politics of trust and therefore news media instrumentalization.

In new and transitional democracies, corruption coverage is mostly designed to destroy the reputations of potential competitors, because ideological links that typically connect citizens to political organizations are weak—weaker than such links are in Western countries. Party structures are also weak, volatile, and personalized. In such a situation, the news media serves as the main channel for reaching citizens. Moreover, state institutions are "under construction" and subject to various pressures that imply the presence of conflicts among leaders and vested interests.

#### **Which Contextual Factors Foster News Media Instrumentalization and the Politics of Trust?**

Several conditions can foster the politics of trust in new and transitional democracies. First, instrumental coverage of corruption scandals can be observed mainly in countries where the news media is not a profitable enterprise and is therefore easily swayed by external interests. Such conditions are observed in many countries around the world, particularly in the Central and Eastern European countries analyzed in the ANTICORRP project. The recent retreat of foreign investors in this region denotes the presence of an ambiguous and relatively poor competitive market. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many publishing industries of Western Europe invested in these countries; however, after several years, they found that profits were not as high as expected, and pressures from governments and political and business actors were so prevalent that it was often preferable to retreat and sell their local enterprises to vested interests that had spurred their retreat. In an article published in *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vaclav Stetka (2012) offers a detailed list of foreign investors who initially purchased papers in Central and Eastern European countries and who later sold to "local oligarchs." Stetka concludes by referring to the words of foreign investor Bodo Hombach, chief executive officer of the German WAZ Media Group, who made such a retreat: "Oligarchs in the Balkans are buying newspapers and magazines ever more often to exert political influence and not to win money" (p. 441).

The Italian case serves as another example of a similar situation. In Italy, the coverage of corruption cases is often instrumentally oriented depending in large part on a well-established habit that Italian scholars define as "impure publishing" (Mancini, 2015). Because of their low circulation, Italian newspapers are not able to generate profits and therefore have been purchased by enterprises and businesspeople with interests outside the field of print press. These owners use the newspapers to promote their own interests, and this practice has become so widespread that it significantly shapes the

country's media system. The coverage of corruption cases is largely dependent on this overlap between business interests and news media and on a long tradition of political parallelism. As observed in Italy, political affiliations and media market competition combine in a blurred manner: "In Italy, *la Repubblica*, a traditional leftist newspaper, reflects the large amount of attention paid to corruption affairs involving Silvio Berlusconi (rightist leader) (in particular, the Ruby affair), whose media conglomerate is a competitor of the *la Repubblica* group" (Mancini, Mazzoni, Cornia, & Marchetti, 2017, p. 83).

Low revenues are not always the cause of an instrumental use of the media. For instance, the "captured liberal model of journalism" observed in Latin America, which involves high levels of instrumentalization, appears to work despite the high revenues of many media corporations, such as Televisa and Rede Globo. As discussed below, other conditions determine the instrumentalization of these profitable media in this part of the world as well as their methods of covering corruption scandals.

### ***A High Level of Instability***

The instability of state institutions is another cause of media instrumentalization. What political scientists call the "politicization of the state" (Grzymala-Busse, 2003) refers to a situation that is common in new and transitional democracies in which many state institutions are not yet defined and undergo frequent and often contrasting changes of an institutional and legal nature. For countries that transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one, a new legal apparatus that differs from the previous one must almost always be established, and its elaboration and approval take a long time. At the same time, state institutions often are subject to different and contrasting pressures (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Political and economic groups in turn try to shape these new institutions and their legal apparatuses depending on the particular interests of the groups. Such a scenario occurred in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe before they joined the European Union because they needed to establish a new legal apparatus to access the union. Several laws were quickly changed (and often contradicted) after a few years or months. The news media served as an exemplary arena for such battles.<sup>9</sup> Belakova and Tarlea (2013) note: "Media legislation in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania has undergone many, often contradictory, changes since 1989. In particular, the broadcasting laws and public service media legislation in Slovakia have suffered from high volatility" (p. 5).

In other words, in these countries, it is possible to observe a high level of instability through which different actors adapt or try to adapt new institutions to their interests. The news media serves as part of this attempt, and coverage of corruption scandals has become an important instrument for imposing pressure on decision makers. The 1996 Tocsik case in Hungary illustrates this situation well (see Hajdu, Pápay, & Tóth, 2016): Marta Tocsik was in charge of the privatization of several Hungarian state properties following the fall of the previous ownership regime, and she had to establish a new legal framework of rules for allotting different portions of previous state property. These rules involved using a large volume of economic resources and facing several pressures. Based on undisclosed sources, Tocsik was accused of accepting bribes to favor close political allies in the distribution of state properties. The

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<sup>9</sup> On this point, see reports of the Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe project (<https://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk/>). See the "Media Legislation Report" in particular.

case, which was started by a Hungarian weekly after undisclosed leaks, lasted several years and resulted in contrasting judiciary decisions. The authors of the study reported that the "Tocsik case was closely followed by the media and was used as a political tool to gain political capital" (Hajdu et al., 2016, p. 4). A stage of institutional and legal transition was in some ways passed through a corruption scandal.

### ***Political and Electoral Volatility***

Political volatility is another cause of the instrumentalization of corruption scandals. Under the general label of political volatility, different aspects of social and political systems can be considered that affect the coverage of corruption scandals. First, political volatility can refer to the instability of political parties. In many countries, especially in transitional democracies, political institutions are weak and not well established. Moreover, these institutions are volatile, with new parties suddenly established before an election campaign and disappearing after the vote.<sup>10</sup> Such a scenario is clearly reflected in the instability of governments that undergo frequent changes as parties appear and disappear and change names and compositions. Data from the Parliaments and Governments Database (Döring & Manow, 2018) clearly show that new and transitional democracies (with the exception of Hungary) are marked by a higher level of political fluctuation (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979) and fragmentation. In these countries, there are many parties, and governments change often. The United Kingdom exhibits the best performance in terms of both fragmentation levels and fluctuation (stable political institutions and low level of fragmentation), while Hungary and France occupy a position between the United Kingdom and other Eastern and Central European countries. Hungary presents less severe fluctuations than the other new democracies investigated in this article—probably because of the stability of the Fidesz Party and the previous government ruled by the Hungarian Socialist Party. In the countries presenting higher levels of fragmentation and fluctuation, the number of corruption scandals involving home politicians acting within a national or local arena is much higher than in the other analyzed countries. In these countries, news media instrumentalization plays a major role in the coverage of corruption.

Fluidity in the overall party system structure can imply harsh struggles, uncertainties about rules, and frequent changes in government personnel and in party structures that may push print press owners and journalists to focus on the reputation of political actors. This condition is reflected in the instability of governments, with high levels of government turnover in new and transitional democracies. Indeed, Romania, Latvia, Italy, and, to some extent, Hungary experienced a greater number of governments in the period 1990–2016 and therefore higher levels of institutional volatility; in contrast, the United Kingdom was the most stable country (see Table 1). There are two exceptions: Hungary shows more political stability than other new democracies, and France presents a high level of government turnover, which is affected by the fact that, under the main position of the president of the republic, governments are frequently replaced while their compositions remain nearly unchanged (see Table 1). Under the presidency of Francois Hollande, Manuel Valls formed three quite similar governments.

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<sup>10</sup> A representative case is the Slovenian parliamentary election of July 14, 2014, which was won by the party of Miro Cerar established in June of the same year. Similar cases can be observed for Bulgaria, with Simeon Borisov and Bojko Borisov establishing their own parties, which were in place for a few years.

**Table 1. Frequency of Government Turnover  
Between 1990 and 2016 in the Seven Investigated Countries**

Country	Number of governments	Average duration (months)	Turnover index <sup>a</sup>
France	19	16.6	73.1
Hungary	11	28.2	42.3
Italy	19	16.7	73.1
Latvia	24	13.0	92.3
Romania	22	14.0	84.6
Slovakia	17	19.1	65.4
United Kingdom	9	37.9	34.6

*Note.* Government turnover means that new cabinets are defined for (1) any change in the set of parties holding cabinet membership, (2) any change in the identity of the prime minister, (3) any general election, and (4) any substantively meaningful resignation.

<sup>a</sup> Turnover index is calculated as  $G / Y \times 100$ , where G represents the number of government turnovers, and Y denotes the number of years. Thus, the index measures the number of government turnovers occurring every 100 years.

*Source.* Our elaboration of data is drawn from Döring and Manow (2018).

Higher government turnover may imply frequent changes in the legislative apparatus as well as in the personnel composition and therefore uncertainty about the frameworks of formal and informal rules. Within this situation of turmoil, personal attacks (so-called assassination campaigns) are more frequent and more successful because of the overall volatility of the political structures.

Government turnover (and political volatility) often is directly determined by corruption scandals. In Romania, the president of the republic, Traian Basescu, was suspended twice from his office because of corruption and other accusations by the press. In both cases, a referendum was called. In Slovakia, the political elections of 2012 were deeply affected by the well-known "Gorilla" corruption scandal involving politicians, businesspeople, and secret service officers that was widely covered in the press. The case started just before the election with the Web publication of transcripts of conversations among high-ranking officials. In Italy, the Silvio Berlusconi cases confirm how corruption scandals may affect political life and its stability.<sup>11</sup>

Because of the overall observed trends of political volatility, high levels of electoral volatility also occur, with citizens moving easily from one party to another and from one candidate to another. There is a weak identification with the existing party structures, and it is subject to frequent variations. In the introduction of his book on political volatility in Central and Eastern European countries, Sergiu Gherghina (2015) writes that "unfriendly environments combined with ideological confusion and weak programmatic identities among competitors of the first post-communist elections led to a situation in which voters could hardly be expected to develop identification with and loyalty to particular parties" (p. 2).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Berlusconi is currently prevented from holding public office because he was convicted for corruption and fiscal fraud.

In several sections of his work, Gherghina quotes the analyses of other scholars and stresses how levels of electoral volatility are much higher in Central and Eastern European countries than they are in the rest of Europe. This finding is confirmed with data indicating much higher levels of electoral volatility in new and transitional democracies than in established democracies. France and the United Kingdom are the most stable in terms of voting behaviors (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Pedersen Index of Net Electoral Volatility (Average Value)  
for the Seven Countries Under Investigation**

Country	Reference period	National average	Number of election periods
France	1993–2012	17.6	5
Hungary	1994–2010	27.6	5
Italy	1992–2013	21.1	7
Latvia	1995–2011	39.2	6
Romania	1992–2008	29.7	5
Slovakia	1992–2010	34.8	5
United Kingdom	1992–2010	7.0	5

*Note.* Electoral volatility (Pedersen index) denotes the net change in voting behaviors within an electoral party system from one election to another (Bartolini, 1986; Pedersen, 1979; see also <https://whogoverns.eu/party-systems/electoral-volatility/>). According to Pedersen, it determines "to what extent party strength is being reallocated from one election to the next between losing and winning parties" (p. 6). According to this perspective, volatility serves as a good indicator of the stability (or instability) of a national party system. Scholars (Bértoa et al., 2016) have recently faced problems related to how much net volatility can be considered a precise statistical tool for analyzing changes in party systems of Eastern and Central European countries because of the large number of splits and mergers occurring between parties in the region.

*Source.* Our elaborations of data drawn from <http://www.ruthdassonneville.com> and Dassonneville and Hooge (2011).

A higher level of electoral volatility may drive toward personalization of politics and therefore the overall condition of the politics of trust. The volatility of party organizations and the weakness of the ideological and cultural links with citizens may foster the role of single figures of politicians and the role of news media as the main occasion of political socialization. New party organizations often are established within a short period of time by politicians or businesspeople or by others who, for various reasons, decide to enter the political arena<sup>12</sup> without any strong political and ideological background and without rooted organizations. They are, therefore, more exposed to personal attacks through the news media on different matters, including corruption.

<sup>12</sup> Entrepreneurs have often entered the political arena in Central and Eastern European countries. Former Czech finance minister Andrej Babis was an entrepreneur for several years and spent much of his life abroad before deciding to become a politician and establish his own political party (ANO 2011). Simeon Borisov was king of Bulgaria from 1943 to 1946 and then left the country to go into business; he returned to Bulgaria in 2001 to establish his own party, NDSV, and he acted as prime minister for a short period.

The politics of trust aligns with these conditions because the coverage of actual or supposed corruption scandals, initiated by either partisan news media or even partisan and interested judiciary structures, serves as an effective instrument for undermining the reputations of actual or potential political and business competitors who are not supported by established and well-known organizations. They are not based on a grounded ideological and cultural framework but instead on personal appeals to citizens that are mostly delivered through news media, with every leak of potentially illegal or unfair behavior serving as an opportunity to attack.

These specific aspects of the political system are consistent with a general political culture that is inclined toward particularism rather than universalism, with clientelism prevailing over rational legal authority (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Even when legal apparatuses exist, they often garner little respect, which is a matter of particularistic interpretation and application. Informality is widespread despite the high levels of assumed formality that are almost always contradicted by everyday behaviors. Professional journalism is also affected by an absence or weakness of universal rules because everyday behaviors often contradict professional and ethical codes (which have not been established at all in many countries). Feeling a sense of inclusion in a profession defined by common rules, attitudes, and behaviors is weak because consensus on universal and shared principles is limited (Ornebring, 2012; Waisbord, 2017).

Marina Kurkchiyan (2009) makes an interesting point in an investigation of the "legal culture" in Russia. Her report on the transplant of two Russian media regulation bodies similar to the British Press Complaints Committee notes that the attempt dramatically failed because of important differences in the legal cultures of the two countries: Russia's legal culture is determined by the fact that "the moral structure of the society has disintegrated and has atomized down to the level of personal values as opposed to an agreed communal space" (p. 359). Russian legal culture essentially relies on informality despite high observed levels of formality. Kurkchiyan writes of a "two-sided nature of law" (p. 355), which is a culture that fosters control over people while determining everyday attempts to escape such control. One can expect that within this particularistic culture, even the coverage of corruption scandals does not respond to the defense of common interests or the disclosure of illegal behavior. Rather, it takes place within the practice of kompromat, which Alena Ledeneva (2006) notes is based on the almost complete absence of a shared framework of rules.

Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) describe clientelism as a defining feature of the relationship between media and politics in Latin America and in parts of Southern Europe. Mireya Marquez-Ramirez and Manuel Alejandro Guerrero (2014) add that

clientelism reduces the effectiveness and efficacy of the regulation, creates conditions that allow for undue interference of the media groups in politics and, as we will see later on also plays a part in undermining the development of professional reporting practices. (p. 11)

As already noted, Latin American media corporations are often profitable enterprises and therefore do not need external economic support; nevertheless, they remain part of a broader political culture that is

deeply affected by processes of clientelism and particularism that foster specific networks of influence and shared interests. Within such a culture, "newspapers are generally conceived as political enterprises rather than as simply commercial ventures" (Waisbord, 2000a, p. 51). The coverage of corruption scandals is also strongly affected by partisanship and instrumentalization despite the recent development of investigative journalism (Waisbord, 2000a).

### Conclusion

This article discusses contrasting approaches to newspaper coverage of corruption scandals. In particular, I offer evidence from a study on the coverage of corruption scandals in new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, in two established democracies (France and the United Kingdom), and in a democracy that, since 1994, has been undergoing a long period of transition (Italy). Two contrasting representations of corruption scandals emerge from the analysis of the print press. In established democracies, the coverage of corruption essentially focuses on international cases of corruption and corruption in foreign countries. In Italy and in new democracies, corruption is presented as a major problem of national politics and public administration.

These diverse representations are likely determined by different levels of corruption, and scholars and various observers, including Transparency International, have reached a widespread consensus that new and transitional democracies (this article focuses on Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, and Italy) are more corrupt than established democracies (Mungiu Pippidi, 2015; Treisman, 2000). This explains the extensive coverage of national corruption cases in these nations. In contrast, French and UK newspapers devote more attention to corruption abroad and to international corruption. I propose an additional but not conflicting view: In new and transitional democracies, media scandals—in particular, media corruption scandals—serve as instruments of political and business struggle that attract news media attention and shape perceptions of corruption scandals. In fact, news media does not operate according to the logic of a market-driven system because media corporations respond to a combination of often-contradictory objectives, and the generation of profits is not the principle objective. The news media also does not respond to rooted assumptions of liberal thought, in which the news media is entrusted with responsibilities for the fair circulation of news and exerts detached control over power holders.

Instead, in new and transitional democracies, media scandals serve as occasions to attack and destroy the reputations of competitors in situations characterized by weak and volatile party organizations that leave space for processes of political personalization. The definition of assassination campaigns indicates that, within a situation of political turbulence and volatility, the coverage of scandals responds to the particularistic goals of media owners, their affiliates, and political actors and serves as an instrument for attacking the reputations of potential competitors rather than as a "custodian of conscience" (Ettema & Glasser, 1998).

As Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) note, "The press always takes on the form and the coloration of the social and political structures within which they operate" (p. 1). Media scandals are strictly dependent on the surrounding contexts, and in many countries, they serve as instruments of

particular interests rather than as competitive tools for providing effective news circulation and professional legitimation and exerting universal control over power holders.

The intention here is not to claim that news media in established, Western democracies are immune from instrumentalization, that corruption scandals do not exist in these countries, or that scandals emerge because journalists perform better investigative journalism in these countries. Corruption scandals often derive from interested leaks in established, Western democracies as well. But if we apply the suggestion by Giovanni Sartori (1991)—“the one who knows only one country knows none” (p. 245)—and look comparatively at new/transitional democracies and established ones, important differences come to light. These differences confirm that, outside the West, corruption scandals respond to a logic that is quite different from the one fostering the coverage of corruption in the “tiny handful” of countries. They respond mainly to a logic of instrumentalization deriving from contextual conditions of political instability, weakness of social and political organizations, and diffusion of clientelistic links. The liberal assumption of scandals as a competitive resource within the media market is less compelling than the use of corruption coverage as a means to harm the reputation of possible political competitors, therefore representing an occasion and a tool for political struggle. Applying the term *assassination campaign* to the coverage of corruption cases is certainly brutal, but it may offer a convincing picture of the emerging differences.

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