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Whitewashing State Capture: Discursive Legitimization of Large Construction Projects in the Western Balkans*

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Abstract: Through the use of language, government institutions and officials in elective democracies try to present particular instances of abuse of power and public resources as legitimate and enable similar practices in the future. This article aims to identify and reveal the strategies used within the Western Balkans' official discourses to legitimize particular cases of suspected state capture and assess their outcomes. The empirical study of six prominent cases of suspected state capture in the construction industry in the period from 2010 to 2020 indicates that a single legitimization strategy is used region-wide, and this article contributes to better understanding it. To assess the strategy outcomes, an original analytic model is proposed. The findings suggest that the deployment of the strategy to legitimize the suspected cases of state capture encourages potential captors in the region to consider engaging in similar practices in the future.

Keywords: discursive institutionalism, discursive strategy, legitimization, state capture, Western Balkans

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Introduction

State capture – the abuse of power, public funds and assets by rent-seeking leadership of ruling political parties – is spread across policy sectors in the Western Balkan countries and exerted through formal and informal means of control. The control presupposes the seizure of government institutions through party employment and appointments, as well as the existence of patron-client networks connecting party elites with selected economic and other actors who depend on scarce public resources, financial or in-kind.¹ Exclusive by design, state capture creates and increases social inequalities and undermines the principle of the rule of law, compelling the captors to seek legitimacy for their actions in order to prevent or appease social tensions and preserve own privileged positions.²

To explore the ways of legitimizing particular acts of suspected state capture in the Western Balkans, I focus on “communicative action” of the high officials, the language they employ to represent prominent government-sponsored projects in the lucrative industry of construction.³ While building of public infrastructure and urban development are vital for economic growth, construction industry is considered to be among the most corrupt at the global level.⁴ It is to no surprise, then, that large construction endeavours – such as Skopje 2014 in North Macedonia or Brujo Ozone City in Bosnia and Herzegovina – have been laden with controversies, as critical reports point at irregularities indicative of abuse of power for private gain. Governments in the region could disregard these voices of dissent, considering the rise of autocratic tendencies and the countries’ plummeting rankings on media freedom indices.⁵ Yet, the obviousness of the costly structures obliges them to seek consent from the domestic public. And seek consent they do, as high representatives of central and local governments engage in legitimization of the projects and, from the position of power, in stirring the public debate away from critical scrutiny.

In considering this phenomenon, I depart from the understanding that social reality is constituted through discourses. By discourses, I understand the systems for the production of meaning created through language and acts and reinforced by institutions. The way in which language and acts are used to represent practices and policies of today creates possibilities for consideration of certain practices and policies in the future.⁶ Although I believe that the motives driving any agency to originate from particular socially-constructed and internalized systems for the production of meaning, such as the discourse on nationalism or the discourse on profit maybe, I also believe that the actors use the language strategically, to further their own, perceived agendas.⁷ With this in mind, the use

1 Bieber 2020, 110–111; Cvejić 2016, 11, 44–45.

2 Cvejić 2016, 11, 67; Zeldich 2006, 329.

3 Habermas 1990, 23.

4 World Bank Group 2019; Kenny 2007; Hardoon and Heinrich 2011, 15.

5 Bieber 2020; Reporters Without Borders 2021.

6 Nojman 2009, 23, 118; Parsons 2017, 75–91; Schmidt 2011, 76–95.

7 Galimberti 2018, 137, 338; Subotić 2016, 611; Hay 2002, 259; Hay 2006, 65; Schmidt 2011, 76–95.

of terms “discursive strategy” and “legitimization strategy” in this article refers to such purposeful use of the language.

Many actors contribute to public debate, but it is the official discourse – the verbal and non-verbal language (acts) of government institutions and officials – that holds a privileged position in establishing social norms.⁸ The official discourse, as any other, is comprised of representations – the constructions of subjects and objects through language and acts.⁹ Within a country’s official discourse, a single subject/object can have more than one representation, produced by various groups within the government institutions and by various officials.¹⁰ For instance, a justice minister may advocate for a strategy to fight corruption, by which she represents it as intolerable within an official discourse; at the same time, her government’s administration or the judiciary, also parts of the country’s official discourse, can continue to encourage corruptive practices, by which they represent corruption as instrumental for smooth business operations. Although two or more representations of an object or subject may exist simultaneously in official discourse, through their interaction, a dominant representation will be crystalized.¹¹

In this article, I distinguish between three representations of the government-sponsored construction projects that raised suspicions of state capture, produced within the official discourses of the Western Balkan countries. The first are the representations constructed by various governments’ institutions involved in planning and implementing the construction projects – through their material, legal and administrative acts. The material acts, among others, can include plans and construction of buildings, roads and squares, which can signify preference for modernity or tradition, lack of concern for the environment, etc. Legal acts, such as laws on urban planning, can tell how lawmakers envisage the future of societies. Finally, administrative acts, such as issuing construction permits, can communicate adherence to operating principles, such as the principle of legality. The second are the representations constructed through legitimization strategies – verbal and non-verbal acts of the high-ranking officials in the region. Through the interaction of these two, the third, dominant representations of projects are crystalized within the official discourses.

The purpose of this article is twofold: to identify and unpack the discursive strategies that the high officials deploy to legitimize the construction projects – represent them as consistent with prevalent social values, and to assess the strategies’ outcomes.¹² To this end, I pose a two-part research question: (1) What discursive strategies do high-level officials in the region use to legitimize the prominent government-sponsored construction projects

8 Hansen 2013, 21,57; Milliken 1999, 229.

9 Nojman 2009, 29.

10 *Ibid.*, 75.

11 Nojman 2009.

12 The definition of legitimacy as consistency with prevalent social values builds on Suchman 1995, 574.

suspected of state capture in the period 2010–2020? and (2) What are the outcomes of the legitimization strategies? To learn about the outcomes, I ask two sub-questions: (a) How have the representations constructed through the legitimization strategies and the ones constructed through material, legal and administrative acts interacted to produce the dominant representations within the official discourses in the region? and (b) Have the strategies been successful, that is, have their claims about the projects' legitimacy prevailed in the official discourses' dominant representations? This article focuses on how representations are constructed and not on how they are perceived by public. Therefore, the success of the strategies is assessed based on whether their claims communicating the projects' legitimacy have prevailed within the dominant representations of the projects in the official discourses.

Through an analysis of empirical data, I found that, across the Western Balkans, high-level officials of central and local governments use the same "Whitewashing Strategy" to legitimize the construction projects that raised suspicions of state capture. Through the analysis of the strategy's outcomes, I found that its deployment reinforced the claims of the previously dominant representation of the construction projects – the one that the government institutions had produced through the material, legal and administrative acts and that had existed before the strategy was deployed. Also, the strategy was partly successful since it managed to weaken one-half of the claims of the previously dominant representation that communicated illegitimacy of the construction projects. Considering such outcomes, the implication of the strategy deployment is the encouragement of potential captors to consider engaging in similar future projects.

This article seeks to make a methodological contribution to studying legitimization strategies – a model is proposed by which to assess their outcomes: a) the interaction of representations constructed through a legitimization strategy with other representations, and its reflection on the dominant representation within a discourse and b) the success of the strategies. Considering that the extant literature on the justification of state capture focuses on the discourses undermining democratic institutions,¹³ defending privatization,¹⁴ practices of the elites,¹⁵ and the ones used by experts to explain economic policies,¹⁶ this article's contribution is also in unpacking a strategy for the legitimization of suspected cases of state capture used in the Western Balkans.

The article is structured as follows. The first section briefly outlines the features of state capture relevant to the research question. The second part presents the analytical framework, including the original contribution of this article – a model to assess the outcomes of legitimization strategies. The third part is the empirical study of six prominent construction projects across the region, indicating why they raised suspicions of state capture

13 Krasteva and Vladislavljević 2017, 384–385; Mungiu-Pippidi, van Meurs and Gligorov 2007, 24.

14 Nenovsky and Borisova 2015, 122.

15 Džihic, Pudar Draško, Turčalo, Beshku and Cerovac 2018, 8.

16 Fitzgerald and O'Rourke 2016, 278–279.

and interpreting the linguistic means used to legitimize them. In the fourth part, the findings are synthesised, the answers to the research question proposed and policy implications discussed. The conclusion summarizes the argument and suggests further directions of research.

State Capture

State capture can be defined as “violation of good governance rules (which is also abuse of power) in the process of drafting, adoption and enforcement of the rules themselves, including the judiciary rules,” which, in the long-term ensures “systemic privilege for captors.”¹⁷ Dimensions of state capture include business, institutional, political and black market, while the captors can include big corporations, government officials, other states, mafia, etc., or, as most common in the Western Balkans, political parties.¹⁸ Ineffective anti-corruption policies, low integrity of public officials, lack of neutral attitude, and bias towards particular private interest represent the institutional enablers of state capture. Its major environmental enablers include a high level of corruption in administration and judiciary, and the lack of media independence.¹⁹ As the presence of these enablers is typical for hybrid and autocratic regimes, state capture is usually linked to illiberal democracies, but consolidated democracies are not immune to it either.²⁰

Fuelling state capture in the Western Balkans is a recent rise of an influx of corrosive capital, which exploits and expands the existing governance gaps.²¹ Corrosive capital is colloquially linked to investments in infrastructure and urban development coming from China, the United Arab Emirates, Russia or Turkey, though it may also originate from developed democracies or domestic actors. Unlike the use of loans, grants and equities effectuated through the European Union or the World Bank mechanisms, social, environmental and institutional standards do not condition the entry of the corrosive capital. The regional practice of corrosive capital is marked by personal ties of investors with political party leaders, and its mechanisms include special concessions through tax breaks, lack of public procurement, lack of consultations with citizens and experts and opaque negotiating and implementation processes.²² Also, public-private partnerships (PPPs), long-term business arrangements between governments and investors and a frequent form of involvement of foreign, including corrosive capital in government-sponsored construction projects, usually lack transparency and mechanisms for competition protection, carrying a high risk of becoming mechanisms of state capture.²³ Aside from these, the mechanisms

17 Stoyanov, Gerganov and Yalamov 2019, 31.

18 Pavlović 2021, 1.

19 Stoyanov, Gerganov and Yalamov 2019, 37–38.

20 Hertel-Fernandez 2019; van Biezen and Kopecký 2014; Whiteley 2011.

21 Prelec 2020, 171.

22 Holzner and Schwarzhappel 2018, 16; Uka 2019.

23 Transparentnost Srbija 2017, 4.

relevant to this article's question may include other practices of discretionary decision-making, e.g., in tendering procedures, in the engagement of consultants and contractors, in issuing of permits, etc., as well as rule-tailoring.²⁴

Analytical Framework

Selection of Cases

The construction industry is among the most attractive for state capture.²⁵ The projects of urban and infrastructure development are complicated, extra-ordinary activities involving the use of public funds and the participation of governments both as regulators and as clients or (co-)owners of construction companies. When carried out without transparency, they offer manifold opportunities for circumvention of rules for private interest. Six cases of suspected state capture in the construction industry, one in each of the Western Balkan countries, were selected for empirical research. The cases are government-sponsored projects, which were the topics of fierce public debates from 2010 to 2020 and arose suspicions of state capture by media, civil society, investigative portals and researchers of corruption. They include: Tirana National Stadium (Albania),²⁶ Buroj Ozone City (Bosnia and Herzegovina),²⁷ the Patriotic Highway (Kosovo),²⁸ Bar – Boljare highway (Montenegro),²⁹ the Skopje 2014 project (North Macedonia)³⁰ and Belgrade Waterfront (Serbia).³¹ The details of the cases are presented in the empirical part of this article.

Identification of Representations and The Method of Analysis of Legitimization Strategies

To address the research question, I discern between three representations of the government-sponsored construction projects. Representations A are constructed by government institutions involved in planning and implementation of the construction projects through their material, legal and administrative acts. These acts are made known to the public through sheer existence and can be observed by simple insight or learned of via

24 Grzymala-Busse 2008, 645, 662; Sohail and Cavill 2006; Vurmo 2020; Zuniga 2020.

25 Morell 2018.

26 Possible state capture implied e.g. by Causaj 2019 and Liko 2019.

27 Possible state capture implied e.g. by Zolj-Baljenović 2020, Citizen Association "Eko Akcija" (in N1 BiH 2016), Aljazeera 2017, Sarajevo Times 2015.

28 Possible state capture implied e.g. by BalkanInsight/BIRN 2017, Osservatorio Balkani e Caucaso Transeuropa 2011, Balkanist 2014.

29 Possible state capture implied e.g. by MANS 2018, BalkanInsight/BIRN 2021, Glas Amerike 2014.

30 Possible state capture implied e.g. by Transparency International Macedonia, Jovanovska 2019, Kosovo 2.0. 2019.

31 Possible state capture implied e.g. by Insajder 2016a and 2016b, Transparentnost Srbija 2017.

media reports. Even when learned of via media, the acts remain parts of official, not media discourse, if one can distinguish information on the acts from their interpretation provided by the media outlet. For example, via media we learn about an institution's refusal to disclose information, which is an act of the official discourse, regardless of how this situation is interpreted, which would be media discourse. Same as verbal claims, the claims made by governments' material, legal and administrative acts are subject to interpretations. For example, a *lex specialis* favouring one particular investor of a project such as port can be interpreted as a claim of preferential treatment, together with other claims communicated by the government institutions during the project planning and implementation, Representation A of the port project is constructed. Representations B are constructed through legitimization strategies. In the port example, if a finance minister portrays the port as an endeavour bringing new jobs and tourists, a claim of economic benefit is communicated as part of Representation B. Through the interaction of the claims that comprise Representations A and B, Representation C is crystalized as dominant within an official discourse. However, prior to deployment of a legitimization strategy, the representation of a project produced through the government's material, legal and administrative acts had existed as the project's sole and dominant representation in the official discourse.

To identify Representations A and B and the individual claims comprised, I interpreted the empirical data presented in the next part of this article. They include data from primary sources – the utterances of high officials about the government-sponsored projects, and secondary sources – reports of investigative portals, media, researchers and civil society organizations. To identify the claims of the Representations A, constructed through governments' material, legal and administrative acts, I interpreted the acts and translated them to verbal language, relying on the empirical data for information about the projects and insight into their political and social contexts. For example, by learning about the Trnovo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) local government's plans to construct the Buroj Ozone City complex, and about the secrecy regarding the contract with the Gulf investors, I singled out two claims of Representation A of the project: that a large tourist resort is planned on Bjelašnica mountain and that the local government is reluctant to disclose the financial and legal details of the deal.

The claims of Representations B, constructed through the legitimization strategy, were identified through the interpretation of a set of texts selected as typical utterances of the highest representatives of central and local governments related to the construction projects. The texts were studied in original languages, except for the texts in Albanian, where English translations were used. To interpret the texts and identify the claims which produced Representations B, I used the method of interpretation designed by Wodak and Meyer that focuses on the use of linguistic devices.³² According to this method, actors introduce concepts, stakeholders and events in debate using membership categorization devices, metaphors and verbs and nouns that denote action. To define their qualities, they

32 Wodak and Meyer 2016, 33.

use stereotypical attributions, explicit adjectives, adverbs, comparisons, allusions and presuppositions. Justification is achieved through the use of reasonable argumentation or topoi, quasi-argumentative shortcuts referencing to commonplaces or typical motives.

Assessing the Outcomes of Legitimization Strategies: Model Proposal

To analyse the outcomes of a strategy, I propose a model to answer: (1) How is the deployment of a strategy reflected on the dominant representation within a discourse? and (2) Has the legitimization strategy been successful?

To find out how the deployment of a strategy is reflected on the dominant representation within a discourse, that is, how through the interaction of two representations a dominant one is produced, I start by identifying two simultaneously existing representations and individual claims of which they are comprised by analysing empirical data. In the first step, I identify the claims of Representation A, conveyed by the material, legislative and administrative acts (Claims A) and the claims conveyed by the legitimization strategy, Representation B (Claims B). To reveal the way in which they interacted to produce the claims of the dominant representation, Representation C (Claims C), each Claim A pertaining to a particular issue (Claim A1, A2, etc.) is considered in relation to Claims B that refer to that same issue (Claims B1, B2, etc.), and their interaction is deliberated. As the claims interact, they either reinforce each other (when compatible), weaken each other (when contradicting) or not affect each other (when unrelated). For example, if Claim A1 that a costly bridge is being built is coupled with Claim B1 that the bridge will facilitate trade between two regions, the claims complement and reinforce each other. If Claim B1 states that the bridge is cheap and not costly, the claims A1 and B1 are contradictory and weaken each other because only one can be true. If Claim B1 states that another bridge is also being constructed, A1 and B1 do not affect each other as they are unrelated. Through the interplay of the claims pertaining to the same issues, the claims of Representation C are crystalized, as claims of a dominant representation of a particular subject/object (e.g., a construction project). It is important to note that the claims of Representation B (a strategy) cannot weaken the claims of Representation A by simply ignoring them because the claims of Representation A will continue to exist in a discourse as long as they are being produced (e.g., through the material, legal and administrative acts). This step shows how the content of the claims of the legitimization strategy is reflected on the content of the claims of the new dominant representation – which is the first outcome of a legitimization strategy.

Representation A – Material, legal and administrative acts (Claims A)	Representation B – Legitimization strategies (Claims B)	Outcome 1
		Interaction of Claims A and Claims B → Representation C – Dominant representation of a discourse
Unrelated		No interaction
Complementary		Claims B reinforce Claims A
Contradictory		Claims B weaken Claims A
Representation B ignores Claims A		Claims A unaffected, remain in Representation C

Table 1: Outcome 1 – Dominant representation

The second outcome concerns the success of a legitimization strategy. To assess it, a researcher should answer whether the claims from a legitimization strategy representing subjects/objects as legitimate have managed to prevail in the dominant representation of the subject/object. Building on Mark Suchman, I define legitimacy as consistency with prevalent social values.³³ Accordingly, a subject/object is represented as legitimate if the claims that construct its representation are consistent with socially prevalent values, e.g., an infrastructure project promoted by a minister as useful for pollution reduction, is represented as legitimate, because such claim is consistent with the importance of health. Through the interaction of claims about the legitimacy of a subject/object produced by a legitimization strategy with the claims about legitimacy produced by another representation (e.g., through the material, legal and administrative acts) the legitimacy of that subject/object will be established within the dominant representation.

To find out whether a particular claim represents a subject/object as legitimate or not, I propose that the standard of legitimacy be based on Schwartz’s value scale, most widely used in social psychology.³⁴ The Schwartz’s scale covers 58 values, and as the analysis of the empirical material will show, the most relevant to this article’s question are: the values of power, such as wealth (money) and of social recognition (respect and approval by others), the values of achievement (hard work, success and capability), of universalism (equality), social justice (correcting injustice), beauty and peace and the values of tradition (respect for tradition). Countries as cultural entities tend to converge around values at the global level, and the inter-country consensus around the values relevant for this article is categorized as “moderate to substantial”, except for equality, where consensus is “low”.³⁵ The rating of values based on the inter-county consensus is used for this article since it allows for assessing the success of a legitimization strategy at the regional level.³⁶

33 Suchman 1995, 574.

34 Fischer and Schwartz 2011, 1131.

35 *Ibid.*

36 At the same time, Fischer and Schwartz (2011) show that within-country consensus on values is lower, which is why country-level assessments of legitimization strategies should be based on country-level data on value orientations.

Since a claim can either be consistent with a value or not, and since the inter-country consensus around values can either be “low” or “moderate/substantial”, the claims can represent a subject/object in three different ways: as legitimate (when claims that represent subjects/objects are consistent with the values around which the inter-country consensus is either moderate/substantial or low), somewhat illegitimate (if claims represent subjects/objects as inconsistent with the values around which the consensus is low) and illegitimate (if claims represent subjects/objects as inconsistent with values around which the consensus is moderate/substantial).

	Values with low inter-country consensus	Values with moderate/substantial inter-country consensus
Claims are consistent with values	The claims represent subject/object as legitimate	
Claims are not consistent with values	The claims represent subject/object as somewhat illegitimate	The claims represent subject/object as illegitimate

Table 2: Classification of claims about legitimacy

For example, if a government’s claim communicates the lack of accountability for abuse of public funds, it is inconsistent with the value of social justice, and such a claim represents a project as illegitimate. If a claim communicates preferential treatment of an investor, such claim represents a project as somewhat illegitimate at the regional level because the inter-country consensus around the value of equality is low.

In the final step, I assess how the interaction of the claims about legitimacy is reflected on the dominant representation, Representation C, and with it conclude about the success of a legitimization strategy. To do that, it should be established whether the claims communicating legitimacy within Representation B (legitimization strategy) have managed to weaken the claims communicating illegitimacy (if any) of the previously dominant Representation A. For example, has the high official’s claim about economic advantages of the Belgrade Waterfront (which represents the project as legitimate – consistent with the values of wealth and achievement) managed to weaken the claim of preferential treatment of its investor (which represents the project as somewhat illegitimate – contradictory to the value of equality), which was also produced within the government discourse, through the act of enacting of the *lex specialis*? Since the claims about legitimacy can either complement or contradict each other, their interaction will crystalize the claims about legitimacy within the dominant representation of discourse. Claims A that represent a subject/object as illegitimate/somewhat illegitimate will be weakened if contradicted by Claims B (legitimization strategy) that represent the subjects/objects as legitimate. On the other hand, if a legitimization strategy is poorly designed, its claims can represent the subjects/objects as illegitimate or somewhat illegitimate too, in which case they will complement and reinforce Claims A communicating illegitimacy of the subject/object. Through their interaction, a strategy’s claims about legitimacy will either weaken or reinforce the claims of the

previously dominant representation (material, legal and administrative acts). Similar to outcome 1, a strategy cannot weaken the claims of Representation A that represent the subject/object as illegitimate by simply ignoring them because the claims of Representation A will continue to exist unaffected in the dominant representation as long as they are being produced (e.g., through the material, legal and administrative acts).

Representation A – Material, legal and administrative acts (Claims A about subject's/object's consistency with values)	Representation B – Legitimization strategies (Claims B about subject's/object's consistency with values)	Outcome 2 of the Strategy (per claim)
		Interaction of claims A and Claims B about subject's/object's consistency with values → Representation C – Dominant representation of discourse
Illegitimate/ Somewhat illegitimate	Legitimate	A claim of illegitimacy is weakened by strategy
	Illegitimate/ Somewhat illegitimate	A claim of illegitimacy is reinforced by strategy
	Claims are ignored	A claim of illegitimacy is unaffected by strategy, it remains in Representation C as long as it is being produced

Table 3: Outcome 2 of the strategy

In conclusion, a legitimization strategy can be (a) successful, when all claims representing the subject/object in Representation A as illegitimate are weakened, (b) partly successful, when at least half of the claims representing the subject/object in Representation A as illegitimate are weakened, and (c) unsuccessful, when all or the majority of claims representing the subject/object in Representation A as illegitimate are reinforced or unaffected by a poorly designed legitimization strategy.

Some caveats are due: the model I propose looks at the ways in which subject/objects are constructed and represented in discourses, not at the ways in which these representations are socially perceived, which will be related to manifold factors not considered by this model. Also, as representations are constantly negotiated, the model will best be used to assess the outcomes of a legitimization strategy within a chosen timeframe.

Legitimization Strategies in Practice: Six Cases from the Western Balkans

This section features the material, legislative and administrative acts related to the cases of suspected state capture in the construction industry in the Western Balkans and the typical utterances of the high governments' officials related to these cases, as well as the analysis of the linguistic devices used.

Albania: Tirana National Stadium

The Tirana National Stadium complex consists of a 22,300-seat open-air arena and adjacent to it, a 100-meter tower, the tallest building in Albania and home to a hotel and a business centre.³⁷ The complex was built on the spot of the old national stadium and was officially opened in 2019. Researchers of corruption consider the stadium project and the way in which it was procured to be among the most outstanding cases of abuse of public assets in the country.³⁸ In charge of procurement was a PPP established for this purpose – Red and Black Sports Centre (QSKZ) – which allowed for the application of the Law on Public Procurement to be avoided, while the status of the protected monument of culture for the old stadium was cancelled. In 2016, the QSKZ called a bid for an investor stipulating that the investor was to secure a development permit, which Rezarta Causaj argues was put forward to discourage foreign competitors.³⁹ A single bidder applied, a local construction company AlbStar, in cooperation with an architectural studio alleged to have had private connections to Prime Minister Rama, and won the bid based on a preliminary design, presented in place of full documentation.⁴⁰ The cost of the enterprise has never been officially presented, but the unofficial estimates started at 25 million euro, to mount to 60 million euro.⁴¹ Many details remain unknown due to the non-transparency throughout the project and no records indicate that any irregularities have been investigated or prosecuted.

Since the first mentions of the project, the high officials portrayed the enterprise with a set of simplistic messages. In 2012, the stadium was introduced as a *jewel*, by the then Prime Minister Berisha in 2012:

This government meeting has a very important agenda (...) the new stadium in Tirana, in the context of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Albanian state, the independence of Albania. This stadium will be a real jewel, for the Albanian sport and for all Albanian citizens.⁴²

In this early description of the stadium the Prime Minister linked the decision to build the stadium to the motive of duty to pay respect to statehood and he hinted at an unspecified benefit to general public in the future. Edi Rama, as the new Prime Minister, elaborated this benefit in his 2016 statement:

Tirana will gain a completely, completely renewed urban area, with four public spaces that do not exist today. The stadium, from a mediaeval business

37 Stadium Database 2020.

38 Causaj 2019; Liko 2019.

39 Causaj 2019.

40 Liko 2019, 7.

41 Stadium Database 2020.

42 Keshilli i Ministrave 2011.

center, will be turned into a public and private center (...) It is not only the right scheme, but other stadiums in the country should be built in the same way.⁴³

Putting the stadium in the context of other urban improvements and using the fallacy of novelty, which implies that something is good because it is new, while comparing the stadium to the currently existing public spaces, much less advanced in design, he characterized the enterprise of the government as ground-breaking for Tirana's future. He emphasized the positive categorization with rhetoric figures of repetition and the antithesis of modern and mediaeval, introducing in the debate the possibility of repeating the public infrastructure investment model in the future, elsewhere in Albania.

The official storyline by the time of the project completion was epitomized by the Tirana mayor, Erion Veliaj in 2019:

I want to thank all those who have contributed to this jewel coming to Tirana, but also to those who were cynical and sceptical in the beginning. What was preservable of the old facade of the stadium, has been preserved. But what was rotten and had to be done from scratch, has been done from scratch. (...) This is a point of interest not only for playing football, but also for gastronomy, tourism, for the fantastic, stylish hotel.⁴⁴

Using the jewel metaphor, he reconfirmed the positive characterization of the enterprise. To imply that the project enjoys vast support, he thanked "all those who contributed". Appealing to empathy, he retorted to a logical fallacy to dismiss criticism: with the strawman argument he pointed at unspecified enemies, the cynics and sceptics, implying that the government had to overcome hardships in the course of building the stadium.⁴⁵ To additionally justify government sponsorship, he invoked the motive of utility, stating that the stadium will serve both for sports and for tourism.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Buroj Ozone City

After the initial enthusiasm, investments from the Gulf in Bosnia and Herzegovina are in steep decline, as the construction projects gravely lag behind schedule or have come to a complete stall.⁴⁶ One such project is Buroj Ozone City, which was to be the biggest investment from the Gulf ever. In 2015, Buroj Ozone was announced as a greenfield development in Trnovo municipality on the Bjelašnica mountain. It was envisaged as a complex for 40,000 people, with 300 private villas and several luxury hotels, ski-park, bicycle trail, hospital, shopping mall and a ski-lift connecting it to the slopes. The project

43 Top Channel 2016.

44 Radio Televizioni Shqiptar 2019.

45 Stojadinović 2014, 10.

46 Bizlife 2019; CIN 2020; Deutsche Welle 2020.

was estimated at 2.3 billion euro, equalling 15% of the country's BDP at the time and was to be completed by 2020.⁴⁷ However, only 17 million euro were invested so far.⁴⁸ The lack of accountability and transparency have marked the course of this project since its onset: based on the contract signed in 2015 with the municipality, that was kept secret for a while, Buroj International Group was granted the right to build on the land and the municipality was entitled to 30% of the profit, although it remained unknown whether the investor had provided any guarantees whatsoever.⁴⁹ At the same time, the Federal Ministry of Environment and Tourism received no request to issue the required permits for Buroj City.⁵⁰ Since the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone in 2016, only several houses have been erected to date. The municipality claims to have fulfilled its obligations, while the investor blames the bureaucracy for the delays and points at the "lack of support" at levels other than the local one.⁵¹ The project has come to a halt and neither the investor nor the municipality officials are willing to offer any information about its future.⁵² There are no reports to suggest that possible irregularities have been investigated or prosecuted.

Supported by the highest officials at all the levels of authority, the mayor of Trnovo, Ibro Berilo, spearheaded the efforts to legitimize the project until 2017, when he stopped talking about it. Before that, in 2015, he touted the project's benefits:

At least 10,000 people will find jobs in the Buroj Ozone. What we agreed so far is also aimed at strengthening the economy of this country, as only local companies and local materials will be engaged in this project.⁵³

As a local politician, Berilo signalled a protective attitude towards his electorate by promising work to local businesses. The announcement of 10,000 new jobs in a community of less than 2,000 conveys the promise of an exorbitant growth. To underline it, he referenced to mythical imagery. Explaining how the investor decided to build the complex in Trnovo within the same interview, he brought up the motive of paradise, telling a story of him spending a month in Bosnia and Herzegovina looking for a possible place for a tourist resort: "...on the 30th day they came to Trnovo. They stopped, looked, took a breath and said – this is Jannah."⁵⁴

47 Brunwasser 2016.

48 AlJazeera 2017.

49 Sarajevo Times 2015; Klix.ba 2017; EKapija 2017.

50 N1 BiH 2016.

51 AlJazeera 2017.

52 Zolj-Balenović 2020.

53 Ljubas 2015.

54 *Ibid.*

In a later interview he scaled up the economic argument, addressing the Sarajevo Canton:

I guarantee that Sarajevo Canton will have more tourists in two years than Dubrovnik. We get 30 percent of the profits (...) they suggested 30 percent. (...) I was surprised because this is not small money, we estimate that the Municipality of Trnovo will collect between 500 and 600 million KM in ten years (...) Trnovo has become the center of events in the world, whole Europe writes about Trnovo. More is being written about Trnovo now in America and Switzerland than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but that doesn't bother me.⁵⁵

Berilo restated that the project is an unexpected opportunity for Trnovo. To underscore this, he used the fallacy of numeric evidence, presupposing that an act is justified if enough numbers are presented. He claimed that the project had already made Trnovo visible globally, labelling the criticism embodied in the lack of domestic media interest as malicious.

Kosovo: The Patriotic Highway

The 102-kilometer, four-lane long Patriotic Highway connects Prishtina to the border with Albania, where it joins the highway to Tirana and Durres. It was the most expensive infrastructure project of all times in Kosovo, costing 25% of the country's budget at the time of construction. Although the price of the Kosovo part of the highway was projected at 400 million euros, the final amount paid to the consortium that built it was 838 million euro, while the overall cost was estimated at over one billion. According to analysts, its per-km price was 40-50% higher than the comparable EU averages.⁵⁶ The missing funds were secured from other infrastructure and urban development projects, such as smaller routes, schools and hospitals, and the consortium building the highway received more funds from the Kosovo government than any ministry, in the period from 2011 to 2013.⁵⁷ The contract was awarded to Bechtel ENKA, an American – Turkish consortium, following a call for tenders that BIRN claims was tailored for this joint venture and after lobbying by the then United States Ambassador to Kosovo, who went on to take a top-level job in Bechtel. The contract with the consortium was signed in 2010, despite the concerns from the International Civilian Representative, International Monetary Fund, EU diplomats and the World Bank. The consortium is believed to have yielded hundreds of millions of dollars in profit, in part also due to tax breaks awarded by the Kosovo government. BIRN reporters collected documents proving the unjustified increase of prices, indicating corruption and malpractice.⁵⁸ An indictment was filed against the then Minister of Trans-

55 Klix.ba 2015.

56 Capussela 2014.

57 Likmeta *et al.* 2014.

58 Balkan Insight/BIRN, 2014; Capussela 2011; Lewis 2014.

port, Post and Telecommunications, Fatmir Limaj and his associates for manipulating tender procedures and corruption, but they were acquitted in 2017.⁵⁹

Amidst the controversies, at the opening ceremony of the Patriotic Highway in 2013, the then Prime Minister Hasim Thaçi stated:

This motorway has been a national dream and is now a national reality (...) This highway was finished in a short three-year period, but it belongs to a longer journey that started in Prizren 135 years ago. (...) We bow our heads in respect to the martyrs of the Kosovo Liberation Army, remembering all those who sacrificed for Kosovo's freedom.⁶⁰

The motives of the national dream coming true and martyrs that sacrificed for freedom semantically associate the highway with Kosovo's independence and thus link it with the values of achievement and respect for national tradition. Thaçi also focused on the practical use of the highway and the economic benefits, and by emphasizing the "noble historical significance", he rebuffed the criticism that it cost the citizens other important projects:

The highway (...) will save time, lower the costs and enable faster access to public services. (...) I believe that when dealing with projects of such dimensions and noble historical significance, it should be done well or not at all!⁶¹

Montenegro: The Bar–Boljare Highway

In 2006, the Government of Montenegro decided to build a highway to connect the port of Bar with the border with Serbia, as a 165-kilometre section of the Adriatic – Ionian Highway, and in 2014, the contract for the construction works was granted to the consortium of the Chinese Road and Bridge Corporation and China Communications Construction Company.⁶² The project is financed by the Chinese Exim Bank 687 million euro loan, while the remaining 120 million euro were to be secured by the Government. The loan is estimated to have increased Montenegro's public debt to 83% in 2018, and the IMF warned that Montenegro will not be able to afford any new loans to complete the ambitious project.⁶³ At the same time, The Chinese consortium was exempted from VAT, from paying social benefits for its employees and from customs duties.⁶⁴ In spite of the prevailing public consent as to the need to build the highway, the project has been heavily criticized for corruption, government incompetence, environmental damage and for the lack

59 Balkan Insight 2017.

60 The Prime Minister Office 2013.

61 *Ibid.*

62 Vijesti 2013.

63 Xinhua 2018; Reuters 2018.

64 Redžić 2014.

of transparency, as documents related to it have been declared state secrets.⁶⁵ No records indicate that any of the irregularities were investigated or prosecuted.

In 2014, the then Prime Minister of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović introduced the project:

The highway is the first road of that profile in Montenegrin history. This project is important for improving the tourist and business accessibility of Montenegro, (...) We are aware of the risks, including fiscal (...) However, that cannot be an excuse for not doing anything, nor for transferring the burden of responsibility for making such important decisions to the citizens or to future generations.⁶⁶

By defining the project as a positive historical precedent, Đukanović predicated it as a matter of national interest. To justify it from a rational perspective, he used the motive of tourism development. He addressed the fiscal risks, pronounced by the critics, using the false binary fallacy – suggesting that a choice must be made between the risks and non-conforming to an ethical duty towards the future generations. To justify the project, the then Prime Minister Duško Marković used the topos of numbers:

We see that the degree of completion of works on the entire route of the highway is almost 90 percent, that the level of earthworks is over 90 percent (...) works on tunnels have been performed at over 95 percent, (...) water supply installation completed at between 60 and 70 percent and that the works on the realization of annexes 3, 4 and 5 (...) are progressing very well.⁶⁷

He brushed off the fiscal concerns: “There is no talk of debt slavery, the highway is a road to Western values, to economic independence”⁶⁸ he said, steering the conversation away from public debt to values and adding to the diversion by reiterating the motive of economic benefit.

North Macedonia: Skopje 2014

Skopje 2014 consisted of a large number of urban development projects: the renovation of facades, erection of statues, construction of squares, a triumphal arc, bridges and many other structures. At the onset, its cost was estimated at 80 million euros, to mount to more than 648 million euros – all financed from the country’s budget.⁶⁹ Manifold abuses were implied by the critics,⁷⁰ Transparency Macedonia unravelled a scheme indicating abuse

65 MANS 2018; BalkanInsight/BIRN 2021; Glas Amerike 2014.

66 Glas Amerike 2014.

67 Vijesti 2020.

68 *Ibid.*

69 BIRN/Prizma 2018.

70 Vangeli 2011; Blazhevski 2019; Kosovo 2.0 2019.

of legislative power and dubious public procurements and the wiretapped conversations released in 2015 directly implied violations of law.⁷¹ A Special Public Prosecution opened a preliminary investigation in 2016, and the Public Prosecution for Organized Crime and Corruption opened an investigation in 2018 about the construction of a bridge. However, by the Fall of 2020, there are no records that anyone has been held accountable for the alleged abuses.⁷²

Faced with the growing criticism, the then Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski tried to undermine its significance during an address in 2015:

Some were against it and protested fiercely, the others were in favor (...). Luckily for this project, it has more supporters than opponents. (...) An excellent project (...) connected to our long-negated identity and history, to embellishing the capital, making it attractive to tourists, for stimulating the private sector even at the time of the biggest global crises, to providing the offices for government institutions instead of paying rents (...).⁷³

He indirectly addressed the objections to the aesthetics by mentioning the city embellishments, as well as the objections to the high costs, by invoking the economic motives – the benefit to the private sector and the future development of tourism. However, his pivotal argument remained the motive of the previously negated identity and national pride:

These monuments (...) will hold the head of the Macedonian nation up high in the future, as throughout the past they kept the head of the Macedonian nation up high with their deeds (...) those characters whom the best part of us identifies with.⁷⁴

Serbia: Belgrade Waterfront

Belgrade Waterfront has been envisaged to cover Belgrade's riverbank area of 177 hectares with hotels, luxury condominiums, squares, business buildings and a glass tower, the future tallest building in Europe.⁷⁵ The cost of the project was estimated at 3.5 billion euros, and promises were made that it would create 200,000 new jobs.⁷⁶ Although a tender procedure was announced, the investor was selected through a direct deal: based on an agreement between the Republic of Serbia and the United Arab Emirates, a PPP was established in 2013 with the Abu Dhabi-based Eagle Hills, cancelling the application of anti-corruption mechanisms guaranteed by the Law on Public-Private Partnerships

71 Transparency International Macedonia 2018.

72 Kosovo 2.0 2019; Blazhevski 2019; Управа за финансиска полиција 2018.

73 А1он 2015.

74 *Ibid.*

75 Belgrade Waterfront 2021; SEECult 2015.

76 Istinomer 2020; SEECult 2015.

and Concessions. The Republic of Serbia was to provide and clear the land for construction and the infrastructure, while the UAE partner was to secure financing. However, the contract establishing the PPP stipulated that the investor would secure only 300 million euro, out of the projected 3.5 billion.⁷⁷ Amendments to urban planning documents were adopted in 2014 to accommodate the interests of the project, and a *lex specialis* was urgently passed in 2015, establishing public interest of Belgrade Waterfront and facilitating expropriation of land and the procedures of obtaining the necessary permits.⁷⁸ The construction of Belgrade Waterfront proceeds in a non-transparent manner and none of the alleged irregularities have been investigated or prosecuted to date.⁷⁹

Presenting the project in 2014, then Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić, said:

We are becoming not only a regional center, but one of the most important European centers (...). Tourism, finance, industry ... A lot is changing. It is about a huge amount of money that should get in, and that is why I mostly laugh at the nonsense talks about some tenders for three billion dollars or euros.⁸⁰

The perspective of Belgrade becoming a regional centre puts forward the motive of national grandeur. The motive of economic gain was used to predicate the project as good and desirable, while the mockery of critics serves to rebuff criticism.

In 2016, the then Belgrade Mayor, Siniša Mali, discussed the project and used the topos of change, which served to both predicate the project as important for Belgrade's development and retort to criticism:

Decades ago, there was talk of activating the Sava Promenade and the Sava Amphitheater, and no one ever managed to do anything because there were no investors. People see change today (...) in 2013, there was criticism that these were empty dreams and people wondered if that would happen at all. Now, when you walk along the promenade, you see the construction of several facilities.⁸¹

In his Instagram post from August 2020, Vučić reinforced the storyline of the imminent progress and the public benefits to be brought about by the project. By linking the project with the Republic of Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, he anchored it in the motives of the national glory and unity:

77 Transparency Serbia 2018, 21–40; Insajder 2016a, 2016b.

78 Transparency Serbia 2018, 42–85.

79 *Ibid.*, 42.

80 Politika 2014.

81 Politika 2016.

Today, we hosted the leadership of the Republic of Srpska and showed everything we are proud of. I am especially proud of the @belgradewaterfront project of these fantastic, magnificent buildings (...) of everything we changed in Belgrade. From landfills, garbage dumps, the worst place, to gather the worst, we have made one of the most beautiful places in Europe and the world. (...). The tower behind me will be the tallest building in Europe. Proud of Serbia, proud of our friendship and brotherhood with Srpska.⁸²

Using multiple words with negative meaning to depict the previous condition of the site of construction, he also employed the topos of change, suggesting that the severely ruined state made the revitalization of the Belgrade riverbank an urgency.

The Findings

The Whitewashing Strategy

The empirical material suggests that in all the cases, the target group of the Western Balkan high officials' communication about the construction projects was the domestic audience, at the same time pointing at three other congruencies. First, to introduce the construction projects in the debate and attribute values to them, the high officials predominantly used the same linguistic devices: explicit adjectives (excellent, fantastic, important, noble), metaphors (jewel, Jannah, long journey), antitheses (mediaeval vs. modern, garbage dumb vs. one of the most beautiful places in Europe) and membership categorization devices (regional centre, one of the most important European centres, centre of world events).

Second, through the use of similar arguments and quasi-argumentative shortcuts, they sought to represent the construction projects as consistent with similar values. The arguments used point at the consistence of the projects with the values listed in Schwartz's scale. The value of wealth and achievement was implied through the use of motives of utility (claims that the Tirana stadium will serve for both sports and tourism, that Buroj Ozone will employ local businesses, that the Patriotic and the Bar – Boljare highways will attract tourists, as will Buroj Ozone, Skopje 2014, and Belgrade Waterfront), the motive of new employment (Buroj – Ozone will create 10,000 new jobs, Belgrade Waterfront will create 200,000, and Skopje 2014 employed private sector companies at the time of crises) and the motive of efficiency (the Patriotic and the Bar – Boljare highways will shorten travel time). The value of respect for national tradition was communicated through motives of duty to pay respect to statehood (Tirana stadium), a national dream coming true (the Patriotic highway), national interest (Bar – Boljare highway), long-negated national identity (Skopje 2014) and the motive of national grandeur and unity (Belgrade Waterfront). Although nationalistic motives were not used in the Buroj – Ozone case, the motive of paradise garden was used, associating the project with the value of respect for tra-

82 Novosti Online 2020.

dition. The values of social recognition and beauty were signalled by the use of the motive of urban development (new public spaces and completely renewed urban area in Tirana, the embellishment of Skopje) and prestige (the tallest tower in Europe). Quasi-argumentative devices were also used to represent the projects as consistent with values, such as anecdotal evidence, signifying the values of hard work and achievement (scepticism about the feasibility of the Belgrade Waterfront is refuted by pointing to a busy construction site); the fallacy of novelty, implying the values of success and capability (by suggesting that the demolition of the old Tirana stadium, a monument of culture, is justified because it brings progress), and the topos of numeric evidence (swamping with numbers), which was used to put in perspective the economic benefits from the construction projects, again implying the project's consistency with the value of wealth.

Third, they rarely addressed allegations of illegal practices and accountability but rather chose to ignore them, either by not engaging with the allegations at all or through a pretended engagement. Sometimes, they used the tactics of red herring – instead of responding to concerns about their informal practices, they reiterated the talking points explaining why the projects were undertaken and how they will benefit public interest (e.g. Đukanović in 2014, Gruevski in 2015, or Mali in 2016). Similarly, a tactic was to laconically dismiss the objections either through superficial comments, as Marković refuted the fears of debt slavery by saying that there is “no talk about that” and as Gruevski relativized the objections by saying “some were against (...) some were in favour”; or through negative qualification of critics, as Veliaj spoke of “cynics and sceptics” and Berilo “forgave” the malicious commentators; or through mockery, as Vučić laughed at “nonsense talks of tenders”.

The congruence of the strategies in view of their target groups, the linguistic devices used to introduce and qualify the construction projects, the values invoked to justify them, and the tactics used to respond to criticism – points at the single discursive strategy used region-wide to legitimize government-sponsored construction projects suspected of state capture, which I labelled the Whitewashing Strategy.

The Outcomes of the Whitewashing Strategy

Outcome 1: Dominant Representation of the Construction Projects

To discuss the outcomes of the Whitewashing Strategy, I set apart three representations of the government-sponsored construction projects in the Western Balkans.

Representations A are conveyed by governments' material, legislative and administrative acts. Their claims include: (A1) large-size, expensive engineering structures are being planned/constructed (A2) the government is sponsoring the new structures through legislation and facilitation of administrative procedures and only selectively discloses the financial and legal details of the deals, and (A3) unaccountability and impunity for the

irregularities in the course of the projects are likely, as indications of foul play are not investigated/not prosecuted.

Representations B are conveyed by claims of the Whitewashing Strategy: (B1) the engineering structures will bring substantial benefits: increase revenues from tourism, create new jobs and modernize the communities/cities/countries, make our nation more glorious or proud, embellish our community/city/country, improve its international image and bring it closer to the world and (B2) the importance of the benefits requires speeding up of procedures. The strategy does not make references to Representation A's claim of the likelihood of unaccountability and impunity for irregularities, as the allegations and questions about the irregular practices are ignored.

Representation C, the dominant representation in the official discourse in the region, is produced through the interaction of claims from Representation A (material, legal and administrative acts) and Representation B (the Whitewashing Strategy). The claims of the dominant representation, Representations C, produced through the interaction of Claims A and B are: (C1) large-size engineering structures are planned/constructed that bring economic and national progress, embellishment of communities and international reputation, (C2) hasty and non-transparent legislative and administrative procedures that may favour certain investors are imperative to speed up/complete the important projects and (C3) unaccountability and impunity for irregularities are likely.

In conclusion, the first outcome of the Whitewashing strategy is that it enriched the content of the previously dominant representation and reinforced its claims, producing the new dominant representation (Representation C).

Outcome 2: The Success of the Strategy

To assess whether the strategy's claims of the projects' legitimacy prevailed in the official discourses' dominant representations of the construction projects, their interaction was assessed using the proposed model.

Two claims of the governments' material, legal and administrative acts, Representation A, convey that the projects are not consistent with the prevalent social values. Namely, Claim A2 – that the government is sponsoring the new structures through legislation and facilitation of administrative procedures and only selectively discloses the financial and legal details of the deals – implies that the projects may involve rule-tailoring, favouritism and non-transparency and represents them as somewhat illegitimate, as they contradict the value of equality, around which the consensus is low, according to Schwartz's scale. Claim A3 – that impunity and lack of accountability are likely – represents the projects as illegitimate, as it contradicts the value of correcting injustice, around which the consensus is moderate/substantial. Prior to deployment of the Whitewashing Strategy, the dominant representation was based solely on Claims A, representing the construction projects as illegitimate.

The deployment of the Whitewashing Strategy communicates the projects' consistency with values. Claim B1 introduces the perspectives of economic benefit, of impending national glory, of embellishing the communities and countries, increasing their international reputation and moving them closer to the world, thus representing the projects as consistent with the values of wealth, achievement, protection of national tradition, social recognition and beauty and, therefore, as legitimate (the consensus around all these values is moderate/substantial). Claim B2, that the importance of the benefits requires speeding up of procedures, makes the reference to all the values that the projects were linked to by Claim B1, and additionally emphasizes the values of achievement, thus also representing the projects as legitimate. Lastly, the Strategy ignores Representation A's claim of the lack of accountability and impunity for irregularities.

Through the interaction of Claims A and B pertaining to legitimacy, the dominant representation about the projects' legitimacy is crystallised. Claim C1 – that large-size engineering structures are planned/constructed that bring economic and national progress, embellishment of communities and international reputation – represents the projects as legitimate, consistent with the values of money, achievement, protection of national tradition, social recognition and beauty. In Claim C2 – which communicates that hasty, non-transparent, or otherwise less-than-regular legal and administrative procedures implying favouritism are imperative to speed up projects – the value of equality, around which the consensus is low, is juxtaposed to a number of values – money, achievement, protection of national tradition, social recognition and beauty – around which the consensus is moderate/substantial. Therefore, in C2 the projects are also represented as legitimate. Claim C3 – that impunity and unaccountability for abuse of power and public assets are likely – continues to exist in the dominant representation since Claim A3 was not addressed by the Strategy; it directly counters the value of social justice and represents the projects as illegitimate. While claims C1 and C2 were constructed through the interaction of Claims A and Claims B, Claim C3, about impunity, is plainly transferred from Representation A, since it was ignored by the Strategy (Representation B).

Representation A – Material, legal and administrative acts	Representation B – Whitewashing Strategy	Representation C – Dominant representation of a discourse	Outcome 2 of the Strategy
Claim A2: projects are somewhat illegitimate, inconsistent with the value of equality (low consensus)	Claims B1-B2: projects are legitimate, consistent with the values of money, achievement, protection of national tradition, social recognition and beauty	Claim C1-C2: projects are at the same time somewhat illegitimate and legitimate	The previously dominant representation of projects as somewhat illegitimate is weakened by the Strategy
Claim A3: projects are illegitimate, inconsistent with the value of social justice (moderate/substantial consensus)	Claims of impunity and unaccountability for irregularities are ignored	Claim C3: projects are illegitimate	The previously dominant representation of subject/object as illegitimate is unaffected by the Strategy

Table 4: *Outcome 2 of the Whitewashing Strategy – success in legitimization*

Therefore, the second outcome of the Whitewashing Strategy is that it managed to weaken one of the two claims of the previously dominant representation, which was produced by governments' material legal and administrative acts and represented the construction projects as illegitimate. However, the claim about unaccountability and impunity for irregularities related to the projects, conveyed by the governments' lack of investigation or prosecution of irregularities, was ignored and thus unaffected by the Strategy, and as result, remained part of the new dominant representation. In conclusion, since it weakened half of the claims that represented the construction projects as illegitimate prior to its deployment, the Strategy was partly successful.

Discussion

The congruence of the legitimization strategies reflects similar socio-economic circumstances of the individual countries. The broad use of economy-related motives may be interpreted as a strategic response to what polls identify as key concerns region-wide – low living standard and unemployment.⁸³ The frequent use of nationalistic motives follows the regional trend of the rise of populism,⁸⁴ while the dismissive stance towards criticism resonates with the region's authoritarian legacy.⁸⁵

Building on the pre-existing claims of the governments' material, legal and administrative acts, the Strategy has provided a framework for their interpretation – it offered additional information, short of explanation for unaccountability and impunity (Outcome 1). Its partial success in legitimizing the government-sponsored construction projects (Outcome 2) may have implications on potential captors' consideration of policies and practices of state capture since the official discourse holds a privileged position in establishing social norms. As a result of the Strategy's deployment, the projects have at the same time been represented as legitimate and illegitimate by the new dominant representations in the official discourses, thus weakening one of the two claims that conveyed the projects' illegitimacy within the previously dominant representations produced through material, legal and administrative acts. As such, the new, post-strategy representations convey additional encouragement for potential captors to consider engaging in the practices of state capture, when compared to the encouragement provided before the Strategy by the formerly dominant representation. This is because the claims of the new dominant representation construe the projects as both legitimate and illegitimate, while the claims of the formerly dominant representation construed them exclusively as illegitimate/somewhat illegitimate. The additional encouragement is conveyed primarily through the non-verbal claim of unaccountability for abuse of power and funds related to the construction projects, communicated by the absence of investigation or prosecution of the alleged irregularities, which was left unaddressed by the legitimization strategy. The other two claims of

83 Regional Cooperation Council 2021; International Republic Institute 2020.

84 Andelić 2020, 68.

85 Cupać 2020.

the new dominant representation encourage such considerations, too, since, as a result of the Strategy, they portray the projects as consistent with social values of money, achievement, protection of national tradition, social recognition and beauty.

Conclusion

The article considered discursive strategies of high government officials in each of the Western Balkan countries aimed at legitimization of prominent cases of suspected state capture in the construction industry. The analysis of empirical material has indicated that the same strategy is used region-wide, relying predominantly on economic and nationalistic motives and on eschewing engagement with criticism. Using the proposed analytical model, the article offered an insight into how by producing new claims about the previously undertaken governments' material, legal and administrative acts, the high officials' communicative action helped shape new, dominant representations of the construction projects in the official discourses. The model also enabled the assessment of the Strategy's success to legitimize the projects within the dominant representation of the official discourse. Even as partially successful, the Strategy may encourage potential captors to consider engaging in abuse of power and public resources in the future. Such implications suggest that intensive and routine participation of high officials in the discursive legitimization of government-sponsored projects marked by irregularities could be considered as another institutional enabler of state capture.⁸⁶

By proposing a model to analyse the interaction of representations within a single discourse and the success of strategic action to justify policies and practices, this article attempted to make a methodological contribution to the literature on discursive strategies of legitimisation. By identifying and interpreting the strategy to legitimise suspected instances of state capture in the Western Balkans, it also makes an analytical contribution to the literature on state capture. Its findings are externally valid in that they may be transferred to regions with similar environmental enablers of state capture, such as corrosive capital or the lack of independent media and in that the model can be applied to analyse any legitimisation strategy. This article focused on the internal dynamics of discursive practices and the role of strategic action in shaping the dominant representation while responding to the pre-existing material, legal and administrative acts. However, it would be interesting to learn how the dominant representation that reflects the legitimisation strategy is perceived among target groups. Further research could also examine the interplay of the dominant official representations of suspected cases of state capture with the representations constructed by different discursive actors, such as media or civil society.

86 Stoyanov, Gerganov and Yalamov 2019.

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