The language of media framing: The case of North Macedonia’s Ex-Prime Minister

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Abstract

After failing to come and begin his two-year prison sentence, N. Macedonia’s ex-Prime Minister, in a simple Facebook post, said he was fleeing to Hungary. This was how a media outburst began in November 2018 – an outburst that is still omnipresent in the Macedonian media. This paper approaches the media discourse on this event through content analysis: texts from what are considered to be some of the most popular web portals in North Macedonia will be analysed in order to identify specific linguistic patterns, distinctive vocabulary, metaphors and comparisons, jargons, and contrasting techniques that convey different messages to the people reading them. While some web-portals tried to justify his flight portraying him as the victim, others presented him as a vicious villain. Different web-portals framed the story of the ex-PM’s escape in different ways and the general public was left confused on what the truth, the objective truth, really was. What is particularly striking in these framing instances is the employed language – using a very particular vocabulary such as the words and phrases ‘honorary’, ‘public lynch’, ‘pardoned criminal’ etc. as well as catchy titles, these news sites tried to tell their version of the truth. This study will demonstrate how these interpretations of the truth influence the media and accordingly the public discourse on the flight of N. Macedonia’s ex-PM.

**Keywords**: media framing, language, truth(s), North Macedonia

### Introduction and Background

November 2018 marked the beginning of one of the largest media outbursts in the history of modern North Macedonia – The ex-Prime Minister had fled the country and everyone was intrigued as to what had actually happened. Soon after the initial shock, different media outlets started spinning the story to fit their agenda, thus creating their own version of the objective truth. Portraying the events prior, during and after the said fleeing in a completely different manner and using different vocabulary to describe the events and the people involved helped media outlets frame the story and influence the opinions of the people who read the said media.

The media outlets considered to be pro-government such as *A1on* and *Telma* tended to portray the ex-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski as a criminal who is to be extradited immediately, while the anti-government media such as *Kurir* and *Sitel* represented him as a victim who had to run away in order to save his life. Different versions of the truth were shown to the public, and the people were generally left confused as to what has actually happened and who is to blame. Gruevski was portrayed as a victim by one side of the web-portals, and as a vicious criminal who escaped justice, by the other.

For this purpose, different devices such as hedges and boosters can be used in the text, alongside some very particular vocabulary. This would ultimately make the text more believable for the public, which then reflects on the voting decisions people make. It is also important to note that many articles on the ex-PM fleeing are still posted at the time of writing and the case is yet to be closed. This study examines the relationship between media framing and the way online media portray the exact same news events, creating their own version of the truth. In order to examine this relationship, six articles from different time periods will be analyzed: three articles posted by the pro-government web-portals and three articles from the anti-government portals. The paper will first present the context of the political events and the key concepts that ground its theory and methodology. The subsequent analysis of pro- and contra-governmental news articles will investigate these concepts on the basis of the selected articles to show the different portrayals of the event in the media.

#### Political Context

Understanding the framing instances and the need for such framing is impossible without understanding the political context for said events. Nikola Gruevski, the central person in the media frames, was the leader of the rather nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO – DPMNE). After ruling from 2006 to 2017, the government of VMRO – DPMNE led by Nikola Gruevski, lost the elections in May of 2017. After 11 years of conservative rule amid a deep political crisis sparked by a big scandal in 2015 (RFERL 2018), Gruevski was ousted in the wake of a major political crisis and Zoran Zaev and his party took power and established a new Macedonian government.

Following the elections, an investigation was conducted to pursue alleged illegalities under the past government. The former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski was put on trial for three different cases. Gruevski, who served as a Prime Minister from 2006 to 2016, was eventually sentenced in May 2018 to two years in prison for unlawfully influencing Interior Ministry officials over the purchase of a luxury vehicle valued at 600,000 euro (RFERL 2018). This prison sentence set a number of events in motion: Gruevski’s appeal was rejected by the court, and a few days later, instead of starting his jail time, Gruevski fled to Hungary seeking political asylum. The once-ruling VMRO-DPMNE party’s ex-leader, in a simple Facebook post, said he has fled to Hungary, for he felt threatened and thought his life would be at risk in the Macedonian prisons. This caused a media outburst as different news outlets tried to find out how the ex-Prime Minister got away. Different theories were set in motion but the truth is yet to be discovered. This political saga is the central element of the frames that are discussed in this paper.

#### Key Concepts

Defining the key concepts and comprehending the general notions is crucial for understanding the set frames, the language employed in them and their influence.

Media framing is, generally speaking, omnipresent. The way information is transferred to its recipients comes through various forms of communication, all of which is framed to meet the goals of the providing source. Media framing is closely related to news and transfer of information. Most if not all of the information that is being presented to the public in the media is framed to meet the goals of the providing source (Cissel 2012: 71).

Such framing is a tool used by the media and the politicians to make salient points that would direct their readers to a desired frame of mind (Cissel 2012: 71). Within the realm of political communication, framing has to be defined and operationalized on the basis of this social constructivism. Mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events (Tuchman 1978: 9). According to Neuman et al. (1992), the frames give the story a ‘spin,’ taking into account their organizational and modality constraints, professional judgments, and certain judgments about the audience (cf. Cissel 2012: 72).

The second concept under review is news spinning. It is hidden within writings and promotes a person, situation or product in either a positive or negative light. Hogenboom (2017, par. 2) even suggests that said spinning and lying can often be done by “telling the truth” – using misleading, truthful facts can also spin a story in order to fit a certain agenda. Misleading by “telling the truth” is so pervasive in daily life that a new term has recently been employed by psychologists to describe it: paltering. According to Hogenboom (2017), paltering is often used in political debates and public speeches. Paltering, defined as acting insincerely or misleadingly, is a technique used when stating something that may not be completely false (Harrington 2009: 39). Though not the same as lying, Harrington stresses that particular palters are as wrongful as a lie in the same or similar circumstances, and often their consequences are as severe (Harrington 2009: 40).

Hogenboom (2017) claims that it is very difficult to spot a misleading “fact” especially when one reads or hears something that sounds true. An example she gives to illustrate paltering is the UK’s Labour Party campaign. Their video that was used to promote lowering the voting age said “You’re 16. Now you can get married, join the Army, work full-time.” The BBC’s reality check team discovered that these facts do not tell the whole truth. In fact, they discovered that “You can only join the Army aged 16 or 17 with your parents’ permission. At that age, you also need your parents’ permission to get married unless you do so in Scotland. Since 2013, 16 and 17-year-olds cannot work full-time in England but can do so in the other three home nations with some restrictions.

Regardless if they employ paltering or not, at their base, frames provide the public with schemas for interpreting certain events. Entman (1993: 52) offered a more detailed explanation of how the media provides audiences with such schemas for interpreting events. For him, essential factors are selection and salience: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” (Entman 1993: 52). The framing and presentation of events and news in the mass media can thus systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand these events (cf. Price, Tewksbury, & Powers 1995: 4).

The purpose of framing is to highlight and select. This is used to construct arguments around problems, judgment and/or solution (Entman 1993: 53). As we have stated earlier, the language of the frames in the media is very interesting to look into. As the Critical Media Review points out

What kind of language is used in the frames is important when discussing frames – adjectives such as ‘left’ or ‘hard left’ being used to describe Jeremy Cobryn is a good example. For example in a recent RTE report on Israel/Palestine it was stated that Israelis were ‘brutally murdered’ while Palestinians were ‘killed’. Likewise Palestinian attacks on military targets are usually termed ‘terrorist attacks’ while Israeli attacks on civilian targets are not. (Critical Media Review, 2015)

The particular way an event is described influences our opinion on it. It takes as little as a “stronger” adjective or a hedge in order to change the entire meaning of a given sentence.

Hedges can be classified into approximators and shields in the field of pragmatics. Approximators can change peoples’ perception on topics of conversations and the original meaning of discourse structure according to the communicative context (Tang 2013: 155).

### Methodology

This paper’s sole methodological focus will be on manual content analysis. Content analysis is a method of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages (Cole 1988: 54). Researchers regard a content analysis as a flexible method for analyzing text data (Cavanagh 1997: 8).

Using this approach, headlines and texts from some of the aforementioned web portals in North Macedonia will be analyzed to identify specific linguistic patterns, distinctive vocabulary, metaphors and comparisons, contrasting techniques and use of hedges and boosters.

The chosen media texts analysed in this study and paper are considered to be pro-government and anti-government, accordingly.

For the purposes of this study, three articles from each “side” will be analyzed. The articles are chosen in the following manner:

1. One article published immediately after the ex-PM’s fleeing.
2. One article published at least a month after the said event
3. One recent article (published between June and September 2019)

Choosing just one text in each of the aforementioned categories proved to be one of the main challenges for this study. The chosen articles will then be manually analysed in order to examine the language that is used in order to frame the ex-Prime Minister’s fleeing and what happened prior and after that.

The research is qualitative for it is an exploratory research conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the underlying features of the language employed to construct media frames and frame and spin the truth, thus creating multiple truths.

Due to the limited scope of this small-scale research and paper, interviews and other audio materials will not be considered. The focus will be on textual content on online news portals only. Although only online news portals and their texts will be analysed, we can expect that at least some of the results found in this study would apply to information found in the traditional mass media as well.

### Analysis and Results

One can easily say that the wide variety of online media texts reporting on the fleeing of North Macedonia’s ex-PM can indeed be analysed on a much wider scale than it is here, since there is a large number of online news on the topic and it can be analysed on several levels such as the influence it has on people’s opinions and/or their voting decisions. However, this study focuses on the portrayal of the event in the selected media.

#### Analysis of Anti-Government Texts

Following are the chosen excerpts from some of the anti-government, i.e. pro-VMRO DPMNE, texts from online portals[[1]](#footnote-1). The first one is ‘The pardoned/abolished Zaev has ordered his media hounds to stay in front of Gruevski’s house.’ (*Focus*, November 12, 2019).

1. Единствениот политичар аболициран за тежок криминал, Зоран Заев нарачал медиумите да бидат повикани пред домот на пратеникот и почесен Претседател на ВМРО ДПМНЕ, Никола Груевски за да кулминира хајката врз него, обвини вечерва ВМРО-ДПМНЕ.

Медиумските загари на аболицираниот Заев имаат зелено светло за линч на секој што не се согласува со неговата капитулантска и антимакедонска политика. Ваква злоупотреба на институциите и медиумите не е видена во ниту една европска држава. Ваквиот јавен линч е најдобар доказ дека предметот е политички монтиран со една единствена цел, а тоа е отстранување на Никола Груевски од јавниот живот и заплашување на сите кои би помислиле да се спротистават на криминалниот картел

[The politician *pardoned for a grave crime*, Zoran Zaev, has *ordered* the media to be *summoned* in front of the home of the MP and *honorary* VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski, as the ultimate culmination in the *hike against him*, accused VMRO-DPMNE yesterday.

The pardoned Zaev’s *media hounds* have been given a green light to *lynch* anyone who disagrees with his *capitulation and anti-Macedonian politics*. Such *abuse of institutions and the media* has not been seen in any other European country. This *public lynch* is the best proof that *this entire notion is fabricated* with one single goal: to remove Nikola Gruevski from the public life and intimidate all who would even consider opposing *the criminal cartel*.]

This excerpt shows a very clever juxtaposition: Gruevski is portrayed as an “honorary leader” while Zoran Zaev, the current PM is someone “pardoned for a grave crime” earlier on. This conveys the message that Zaev should not be trusted and that Gruevski is indeed a victim.

The second article is titled ‘Mickovski: Gruevski is a victim of a political persecution’ (*Sitel*, November 17, 2018).

1. Во однос на бегството на Груевски, Мицкоски посочи на својот последен фејсбук статус во кој вели дека Груевски и други поранешни и сегашни функционери на ВМРО-ДПМНЕ се жртви на политички прогон

[Regarding the fleeing of Gruevski, Mickoski has pointed to his last Facebook post in which he says that *Gruevski and other, both former and current party members, are victims of political persecution*.]

Similar to the previous excerpt, this one as well states that Gruevski is a “victim of political persecution” – someone people should feel sorry for.

The third selected article is ‘The court has decided not to accept the request of the racketeering-fond government in Macedonia.’ (*Sitel*, June 27, 2019)

1. Денеска е спроведена стандардна процедура на институциите во Унгарија откако криминалната и рекетарска влада во Македонија поднесе барање за екстрадиција.

[Today, the standard procedure of the institutions in Hungary has been implemented after the *criminal and racketeering-fond government* in Macedonia filed a request for extradition.]

In a similar manner, the government in charge, led by Zoran Zaev, is said to be “criminal and racketeering-fond”

By analysing the chosen excerpts, it was found that anti-government i.e. pro-VMRO DPMNE texts mainly focus on framing the event in a way that made the public compassionate by calling Gruevski “a victim”. The chosen nouns and adjectives reflect the media’s attitude towards the issue. The ex-PM Gruevski is portrayed as “a victim” alongside “other both former and current party members” – victim of the “criminal cartel” i.e. a “criminal and prone-to-racketeering government”.

#### Analysis of Pro-Government Texts

The findings of the analysis of the pro-government, i.e. anti-VMRO DPMNE texts are just as intriguing.

Following are the chosen excerpts from the selected pro-government texts on online portals *Telma* and *Focus*. The first asks the question ‘How did Gruevski end up in Orban‘s warm embrace?’ (*DW*, November 13, 2018)

1. Поранешниот македонски премиер и шефот на унгарската влада долги години негуваа блиски односи. Бегството на Груевски најверојатно било организирано од Орбан, а можно е да соработувале и српските власти.

[The former Macedonian prime minister and the Hungarian government chief *kept close* for many years. Gruevski's escape was *probably* organized by Orban, and *it is possible* that the Serbian authorities cooperated as well.]

Stating that the ex PM and Hungary’s current PM have been friends for years implies that Gruevski had allies in Hungary and that might be the reason why he fled there. The use of hedges in this excerpt has helped the author maintain a distance from the statement.

The second article announces: ‘Gruevski spotted in Budapest.’ (Belovski 2018, December 12, *Telma*)

1. Опуштена атмосфера и непознати соговорници за македонската и унгарската јавност. По еден месец бегство и азил, Груевски го покажа лицето и излезе на виделина. Унгарските медиуми го пречекаа на излезот од ресторан во Будимпешта, обидувајќи се да поразговараат со него.

[In quite a *casual and relaxing atmosphere*, *in the company of people* who are still unknown, Gruevski has finally shown his face to the public and has gone out in plain sight. The Hungarian reporters met him at the *exit of a restaurant* in Budapest, trying to talk to him.]

Portraying the life of someone under trial as “relaxing and casual” is probably done in order to show the public that Gruevski, instead of going to prison, is now enjoying his time in Hungary.

The third article has the headline ‘A chair in a prison cell is what is waiting for the criminal Gruevski.’ (*Focus*, June 29, 2019)

1. Осудениот криминалец Никола Груевски, очигледно незадоволен од учинокот на Христијан Мицкоски, се јави повторно, заедно се ставени во одбрана на криминалот. Правдата и одговорноста се нивните најголеми кошмари, се наведува во соопштението на СДСМ.

[The criminal Nikola Gruevski, apparently dissatisfied with the performance of Hristijan Mickoski, has appeared again. Justice and responsibility *are their biggest nightmares*, the SDSM report states.]

This last excerpt puts emphasis on justice and responsibility, stating that they are VMRO’s “biggest nightmare”. This is probably meant to further show how VMRO’s members avoid taking responsibility.

The framing done by the pro-government media is an effort to persuade the public that the pursuit of Gruevski is not politically motivated and that he is indeed a criminal who deserves to be put in prison. One can also notice that many hedges are used in the excerpts discussed, such as “apparently” (6). These are also meant to create certain fuzziness.

The way these portals refer to the life Gruevski now has in Hungary is also noteworthy: in order to portray his enjoyment in Hungary they describe his outings there as quite “casual and relaxing“, conveying the message that instead of being in jail, this criminal is enjoying life in Hungary.

### Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis of the chosen media texts from different web-portals, this study concludes that the Macedonian media has indeed, to some extent, framed the truth about the flight of the ex-PM. Distinctive vocabulary choices such as the juxtaposing portrayal of Gruevski as the “victim” and Zaev as the “pardoned criminal” and hedges such as “apparently” (example 6) and “probably” (example 4) were employed in order to convey different messages to the general public. The truth is manipulated and as a result, few new, biased truths are created: On one end, the convicted ex-PM is presented as a victim that fled in order to save his life, and on the other, he is depicted as a dangerous criminal that is enjoying his life in Hungary instead of serving his jail time.

This paper shows yet again the power of language in the media and how journalists can cleverly use the language in order to manipulate the truth and frame the events in a certain way, thus framing the opinion of the general public reading the said texts.

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1. All Macedonian examples are translated into English by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)