

The Fight Against Corruption in Romania: Struggles to Adhere to the Rule of Law and the (De) Legitimization of the ACA

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Abstract

Romania's desire to establish an efficient anti-corruption agency (ACA) dates back to its zeal for European Union (EU) membership. The former Prime Minister of Romania, Adrian Năstase (Social Democratic Party), played an important role in establishing the anti-corruption agency (ACA), specifically in the context of the country's EU accession. In a comprehensive sense, Romania's legislative and administrative framework for fighting corruption is well established. In this thesis, we will look at the actors involved in delegitimizing the ACA's success, primarily the political opposition and the media, as well as the actors who have helped legitimize the ACA's efficacy. Furthermore, the political divisiveness between the political opposition and the ACA has caused multi-level conflict within the Romanian government and will provide us with answers to a variety of questions concerning the delegitimization and legitimization of the ACA. Has the political opposition played a role in the negative impacts of the ACA by tarnishing the National Anticorruption Directorate's (DNA) credibility? Does the political opposition foment limiting the role of effectiveness in the ACA by raising doubts about the agency's political motivations?

Introduction

Romania's desire to establish an efficient anti-corruption agency (ACA) dates back to its zeal for European Union (EU) membership. The former Prime Minister of Romania, Adrian Năstase (Social Democratic Party), played an important role in establishing the anti-corruption agency (ACA), specifically in the context of the country's EU accession. The EU's demands focused on three main institutional areas: meeting European political standards, introducing economic reforms, and deciding whether the country has its own ability to assume a commitment to EU membership.¹ Due to the provisions set under the Treaty of Accession, Romania would risk a one-year delay in entering the EU if it did not satisfy the benchmarks of the treaty. The establishment of an anti-corruption agency was a significant step forward for Romania due to the high levels of corruption and insatiability within the country.² The ACA would work as an ad hoc body to warrant the possibility of EU membership. Furthermore, although the EU was very stern in its offer of accession, Romania was accepted by the supranational institution in 2007 due to its compliance with accountability and transparency in the fight against corruption. As a member state of the EU, Romania had to adhere to specific rules, one of which is the

¹: Geoffrey Pridham, "The Scope and Limitations of Political Conditionality: Romania's Accession to the European Union," *Comparative European Politics* 5, no. 4 (2007): 347-76.

²: Tom Gallagher, *Romania and the European Union: How the Weak Vanquished the Strong*, Manchester University Press, 2009.

cooperation and verification mechanism (CVM). The purpose of CVM is to monitor Romania's anti-corruption efforts. Furthermore, the ACA had received criticism from political elites and the media regarding its performance of failing to meet the demands of accountability and transparency in the judicial processes. Daniel Morar and Laura Kovesi were two key players in the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) used by the political elites to demonstrate delegitimization in the DNA. For instance, the head of the DNA, Daniel Morar, received criticism for hiring young people with no experience and enabling prosecutors to underperform; these actions undermined the effectiveness of the ACA.³ The chief prosecutor of the DNA, Laura Kovesi, became extremely politicized due to her conviction of numerous politicians, which consequently caused divisiveness within the political cleavage.⁴ As a result, the DNA's political opposition turned to their judicial allies to obtain their desire to limit the ACA's role in effectively continuing the fight against corruption. Furthermore, an indication of politicization in the ACA had been corroborated when Kovesi was removed as chief prosecutor in 2018. According to recent reports, the fight against corruption in 2021 has continued under the same auspices as in previous years, with a continuous commitment to Europeanization and modernization of institutions while impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, on the basis of political ramifications, the former president of the chamber deputies and the former leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), Liviu Nicolae Dragnea, was sentenced to prison in 2019 with a three-and-a-half-year sentence. Correspondingly, the DNA forwarded another criminal file in May 2021 to the Bucharest Tribunal, in which Mr. Nicolae-Liviu is accused of committing more crimes by exploiting his position of power to get unlawful benefits.⁵ The political actors in support of the DNA believe the ACA's ability to capture corruption and the imprisonment of Dragnea is a result of good governance. On the other hand, the political opposition against the DNA would believe the ACA's objective is to ensure an attack on the political elite, thus, Dragnea's imprisonment is merely a sign of widespread corruption.

In a comprehensive sense, Romania's legislative and administrative framework for fighting corruption is well established. In this thesis, we will look at the actors involved in delegitimizing the ACA's success, primarily the political opposition and the media, as well as the actors who have helped legitimize the ACA's efficacy. Furthermore, the political divisiveness between the political opposition and the ACA has caused multi-level conflict within the Romanian government and will provide us with answers to a variety of questions concerning the delegitimization and legitimization of the ACA. Has the political opposition played a role in the negative impacts of the ACA by tarnishing the DNA's credibility? Does the political opposition foment limiting the role of effectiveness in the ACA by raising doubts about the agency's political motivations?

³. Gallagher, *Romania and the European Union*.

⁴. "A Romanian Politician to Become the First European Public Prosecutor," *Warsaw Institute*, September 25, 2019.
<https://warsawinstitute.org/romanian-woman-become-first-european-public-prosecutor/>.

⁵. Simona Pirtea and Mădălin Enache, "Anti-Corruption 2022," *Anti-Corruption 2022 - Romania | Global Practice Guides | Chambers and Partners*, accessed June 2, 2022.
<https://practiceguides.chambers.com/practice-guides/anti-corruption-2022/romania/trends-and-developments>.

This paper will proceed in four stages. First, the study sets the advanced analysis in a theoretical context, by defining the history of the ACA, the rule of law, Europeanization, and media framing. The methodologies and variables used in our theoretical analysis are identified in the second section of our research. Third, we describe our empirical findings, assessing the significance posed by delegitimized claims while taking diverse framing tactics into account. Finally, in our conclusion, we will synthesize and describe how our findings contributed to the research question(s) discussed formerly in the paper.

History of the ACA and the Rule of Law

In the last two decades, Romania's politics has been centred around anti-corruption. A number of studies show that the hindrance of corruption comes from undermining good governance and the rule of law.⁶ The ACA was concocted in 2002 to revise good governance and raise public awareness to combat corruption. Even in the absence of a tradition of the rule of law and democracy, the fight against corruption can be successful if there is a political will to do so.⁷ In fact, in 2004, right-wing political actors' entire electoral campaign was centred around the issue of corruption.⁸ Furthermore, to steadfast the rule of law and help with the legitimization of good governance, the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA), previously known as the National Corruption Prosecutor's Office (PNA), was created in the ACA.⁹ The DNA focuses on prosecuting, investigating, and preventing high-level corruption offenses, graft, patronage, bribery, and embezzlement. It is a separate legal body from other judicial branches; the DNA investigates cases that fall under these certain categories: officials (members of parliament, senators, secretaries, etc.), legal practitioners, finance members and financial controllers, military and police officers, and the head of local and central public authority. Furthermore, the rhetoric encircling the ACA had become a metanarrative, an apparatus, and has led to a prevailing frame in grassroots protests by Romanian society. The societal impact has been one of many odious outcomes of Romania's widespread corruption. People were expressing their dissatisfaction with the absence of societal stability and have indicated "that is why we are lagging behind Europe."¹⁰ The ACA in 2002 cleared the way for Romania to adapt a success story of Europeanization following the demise of communism under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu.¹¹ Due to their transition from communism to capitalism, there was a shift from Eastern European political influence to a Western/EU political ascendancy. Sequentially, there

⁶. Mihaiela Ristei, "The Politics of Corruption: Political Will and the Rule of Law in Post-Communist Romania," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 26, no. 3 (2010): 341-62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523279.2010.496324>.

⁷. Ristei, "Politics of Corruption."

⁸. Tamás Kiss and István Gergő Székely, "Populism on the Semi-Periphery: Some Considerations for Understanding the Anti-Corruption Discourse in Romania," *Problems of Post-Communism* 69, no. 6 (2021): 514-27, doi: 10.1080/10758216.2020.1869907.

⁹. Steven Sampson, "11 Corruption and anti-corruption in Southeast Europe," Working paper, Lund University (2008).

¹⁰. Alan T. Belasen and Roxana Toma, eds., *Confronting Corruption in Business: Trusted Leadership, Civic Engagement* (Routledge, 2015).

¹¹. Martin Mendelski, "15 Years of Anti-Corruption in Romania: Augmentation, Aberration and Acceleration," *European Politics & Society* 22, no. 2 (2021): 237–58.

was a wide international consensus to apply economic and political pressure to a country analogous to Romania due to the prevalence of corruption and the need for aggressive anti-corruption legislation.¹² The CVM is a safeguard clause (provision in a contract) instituted by the European Commission, acting as a gatekeeper to provide a solution to corruption by monitoring transparency and accountability, which has consecutively applied international constraints to political agendas.¹³ To assist Romania's shortcomings, this transitional measure is assessed every six months by monitoring the amelioration of the fight against corruption, judicial reform, and respect for the rule of law. Thus, political parties had limited policy options aside from observing the policy commitments associated with EU accession, while attempting to avoid destroying their own popularity.¹⁴ The EU Commission's interim report in 2013 showed that the several recommendations given to Romania and its compliance with the CVM in judicial reform, integrity, and the fight against corruption were generally positive.¹⁵

Framing Literature

In recent decades, those who are erudite in corruption studies understand that corruption control doctrine has changed.¹⁶ The first change is that instead of using the words *corruption control*, most people now use the term *anti-corruption* to cover any operations aimed at combating the problem and/or opportunity structure.¹⁷ Anti-corruption rhetoric is a complex arena with dichotomized solutions. On one side, there is rhetoric around populists that take corruption as iniquitous or a sin.¹⁸ On the other hand, we have rhetoric from the Western agenda believing that anti-corruption agencies can assist in social, economic, and institutional purposes of transition.¹⁹ International organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, and the European Union, in the 1990s have set a precedent for adopting guiding principles and conventions. They set laws and procedures to fight corruption in government and to criminalize bribery of public officials, etc.²⁰ Subsequently, the research on the leadership of the ACA and its political opposition is an important channel to assess the understanding and evaluating the idiosyncrasies of incongruous political cleavage.

Different powerholders or power aspirants might frame a crisis in a multiplicity of ways, affecting public perception. Between 2008 and 2012, Romanian populists in power changed the

¹². Roxana Bratu, Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, and Maya Stoyanova, "Through the Lens of Social Constructionism: The Development of Innovative Anti-Corruption Policies and Practices in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, 2000–2015," *Slavonic and East European Review* 95, no. 1 (2017): 117-50.

¹³. Bratu, Sotiropoulos, and Stoyanova, "Lens of Social Constructionism."

¹⁴. Bratu, Sotiropoulos, and Stoyanova, "Lens of Social Constructionism."

¹⁵. Adrian Miroiu and Șerban Cerkez, *Competitia politica in Romania*, (Iași, 2013).

¹⁶. Luís Sousa, "Anti-Corruption Agencies: Between Empowerment and Irrelevance," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 53, no. 1 (2010): 5–22.

¹⁷. Sousa, "Anti-Corruption Agencies."

¹⁸. B. De Speville, "Why do Anti-corruption Agencies Fail?" *UN Global Program Against Corruption (GPAC), UNCICP, Implementation Tools, the Development of an Anti-corruption Tool Kit: Inputs for a United National Expert Group Meeting* (not officially edited), (Vienna: UN, 2000).

¹⁹. L. De Sousa, "Corruption: assessing ethical standards in political life through control policies," Unpublished PhD thesis (European University Institute, 2002).

²⁰. Sousa, "Anti-Corruption Agencies."

political system by questioning both the past-communist institutional structure and the recognized parliamentary parties.²¹ Their demur was driven by populists' proclivity for direct democracy, their opposition to other political parties or institutions that intercede representation, and their use of referendums to emphasize popular legitimacy and aid agenda setting were the key drivers of this dilemma.^{22 23} Populism is an ideology that believes society is ultimately divided into two congruent and argumentative groups, "the pure people" and the "corrupt elite" and that politics ought to be a proclamation of the people's general will.²⁴ Along with those powerholders comes the media's technique in disseminating news. It is a critical strategy in framing and configuring public perception. Furthermore, accurately defining the elements of framing is imperative in understanding the influence media has on conveying the news. Hence, the public perception of institutions or political concerns can be represented in an array of different ways. The political opposition aims to delegitimize the ACA by using media frames to achieve their own political objectives and engagement.²⁵ The DNA has been heavily criticized in the Romanian media.

An example is Sebastian Ghita, a former United Romania Party (far-right wing) politician and now owner of the RTV station, who has produced allegations about the DNA's head prosecutor, Laura Kovesi. He remarked she plagiarized her thesis and mentioned there were leaked tapes involving an engagement between her deputy and Ghita contending they are foreign agents.²⁶ The goal here was for the opposition to portray the DNA as corrupt and use it as a political tool to delegitimize any of her prosecutions by presuming they are "anti-democratic."²⁷ Mainstream media can play an important role in shaping public judgment by appealing to emotions through rhetoric, whether intentionally or not. The theory of agenda-setting has been widely commonly exhibited that the media has an impact on public opinion.²⁸ Depending on how the topic is phrased, Europeans' impressions of the European

²¹. Pepijn Van Eeden, "Discover, Instrumentalize, Monopolize: Fidesz's Three-Step Blueprint for a Populist Take-over of Referendum," *East-European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 3 (2019): 705–32, doi:10.1177/0888325418800548.

²². Dragoş Dragoman and Camil Ungureanu, "The Faces of Populism in Post-Communist Romania," *In Populism in Europe: From Symptom to Alternative*, no. 1 (2017): 65–67.

²³. Dragoş Dragoman, "'Save Romania' Union and the Persistent Populism in Romania," *Problems of Post-Communism* 68, no. 4 (2021), 303-14.

²⁴. Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15-31.

²⁵. Alain-G. Gagnon, Marta Montagut, and Carlota M. Moragas-Fernández, "Discourses, Actors and Citizens in the Communicative Construction of Conflicts: The Catalan Case," *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019): 161–69.

²⁶. Brett Daniel, "Romania's Protests: A Response to a Three-Pronged Assault on Anti-Corruption Measures," *EUROPP*, March 17, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/02/romaniyas-protests-a-response-to-a-three-pronged-assault-on-anti-corruption-measures/>.

²⁷. Daniel, "Romania's Protests."

²⁸. Maxwell E. McCombs, *Estableciendo la agenda: el impacto de los medios en la opinión pública y en el conocimiento*, translation by Óscar Fontrodona, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

Union and various EU-related concerns can be impacted in a variety of different ways.²⁹ Comparably, the achievements of the DNA from political leaders can be predisposed to diverse methods.³⁰

Holli A. Semetko and Patti M. Valkenburg's media frame analysis will help to elucidate the legitimization and delegitimization of the ACA. Semetko and Valkenburg investigate "episodic" and "thematic" news sources to explain five main media frames. First is the conflict frame, which emphasizes conflict between persons, groups, or institutions to acquire the audience's interest.³¹ Second is the human-interest frame, it gives an event, topic, or problem a human face or an emotive viewpoint in its portrayal.³² Third is the economic consequence frame, which reports an occurrence, problem, or issue in terms of the economic effects it will have on an individual, institution, country, region, or group.³³ Fourth is the mortality frame, it places the problem, issue, or event in the context of religious doctrine or moral perceptions.³⁴ Lastly is the responsibility frame, which presents an issue or problem to a degree that it assigns responsibility for its cause or solution to either an individual, a group, or the government.³⁵ The goal of these frames is to amplify the salience of certain parts of a "perceived reality" to promote a particular issue, causal interpretation, and moral judgment.³⁶ These frames are utilized to help the audience limit the available political alternatives, by easing them to find, perceive, recognize, and name the surge of information.³⁷

According to Entman, a frame is to select some characteristics of a "perceived reality" to make them more prominent in a communicative text, in order to promote a specific issue, moral judgment, casual interpretation, definition, or treatment proposal for the item described.³⁸ This will lead to news organizations relying on the presence or absence of particular keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped imagery, and sources of information and sentences that give a "thematically reinforcing cluster of facts" or judgments in their reporting.³⁹ The ACA in Romania has been effective hitherto, but for institutional change to occur, the people of Romania must be persuaded to support the necessary policies. Otherwise, the political elite risk falling into a "quagmire."⁴⁰

²⁹. Willem E. Saris, "Public Opinion About the EU Can Easily Be Swayed in Different Directions," *Acta Politica* 32, no. 4 (1997): 406-35.

³⁰. Saris, "Public Opinion About the EU."

³¹. Holli A. Semetko and Patti M. Valkenburg, "Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News," *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 2 (2000): 93.

³². Semetko and Valkenburg, "Framing European Politics."

³³. Semetko and Valkenburg, "Framing European Politics."

³⁴. Semetko and Valkenburg, "Framing European Politics."

³⁵. Semetko and Valkenburg, "Framing European Politics."

³⁶. Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>

³⁷. Erving Goffman, "Frame Analysis and Communication," *Sage Journals* 4, no. 4 (1977): 485-92.

³⁸. Goffman, "Frame Analysis and Communication."

³⁹. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification."

⁴⁰. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification."

Evidence suggests that post-accession “backtracking in Romania” was caused by the states’ vulnerabilities linked to powerful players.⁴¹ The media’s portrayal of corruption cases aided in the propagation of the message and generated the impression of a widespread problem.⁴² Thus, the advancing of anti-corruption efforts is frequently interpreted as a means of weakening opposition and ensuring allies’ loyalty, rather than an indication of systematic or structural change. In the summer of 2008, disagreements over the choice of Daniel Morar as Romania’s anti-corruption chief prosecutor erupted into political warfare between the president’s camp and the opposition.⁴³ Political turmoil encompassing resignations or nominations of important figures in the anti-corruption fight from justice ministers to prosecutor generals, have proved the “fight against corruption remains defined by politics.”⁴⁴ The top-down dynamic of Europeanization favours incumbents, particularly in countries with “clientelist practises” and “patronages systems,” incumbents have selectively used the EU enacting anti-corruption regulations to limit political opponents’ access to power resources.⁴⁵ Although, Romania’s institutional inertia and national policy preferences deterred Romania from adapting EU’s mixed hard and soft laws.⁴⁶ Soft laws are occasionally merely transient; such as communications, non-legislative resolutions, and suggestions, national and EU-level actors can choose to convert them into legitimate hard law.

The achievements of the Romanian anti-corruption agency (ACA) and the political elites’ relentless efforts to delegitimize this institution are examined in this study. It investigates the legitimacy of political elites and their endogenous and exogenous influence in trying to debilitate the ACA. Furthermore, our study examines how the media’s framing and rhetoric work against undermining the fight against corruption and the effectiveness of the ACA. These allegations of delegitimization are critical in determining the anti-corruption agency future and efficacy in Romania.

In order to examine the vast applicability of media frames in a transnational comparative context. We will use news sources from Nine O Clock, EuroNews, AGRESPRES (Romanian National News Agency), right-wing news, left-wing news, news discourse with no political connection, and current news impacting COVID-19 and the response from the Romanian Government. Moreover, our analysis will determine the level of delegitimization in claims directed to the ACA from political and non-political actors. Our media frame analysis consisted of 39 claims from various news sources providing an appropriate overview of the distinct political cleavage between the ACA and the political opposition in Romania. Rather than exaggerating the varying degrees of legitimacy, the purpose of this paper is to vindicate the differences in de-legitimizing and legitimizing media frames as they appear in domestic and international publications.

⁴¹. Börzel, Tanja and Yasemin Pamuk. “Pathologies of Europeanization. Fighting Corruption in the Southern Caucasus.” *West European Politics* 35, no. 1 (2012): 79-97.

⁴². Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification.”

⁴³. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification.”

⁴⁴. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification.”

⁴⁵. Cosmina Tanasoiu and Mihaela Racovita, “Post-accession (Anti-) Corruption Record in Romania and Bulgaria,” *L’Europe en Formation* 2 (2012): 243-63.

⁴⁶. Tanasoiu and Racovita, “Post-accession (Anti-) Corruption Record.”

Methodology

We used frame analysis and political analysis to better understand the rhetoric used by the political opposition in government and the media concerning the ACA. Our methodology will reckon on two frameworks that are used simultaneously: Semetko and Valkenburg's framing typology and Koopmans and Statham's political claim analysis. The framing effect is defined as one in which significant qualities of a communication, whether its organization, content selection, or thematic structure render thoughts applicable, resulting in their activation and use in assessments.⁴⁷ Furthermore, popular perceptions of political issues or institutions have been found to be shaped by framing. Political claims, alternately, contemplates the scope of demonstrators and protests by conceptualizing claims as requests, criticisms, demonstrations, decisions, and other types of political intervention carried out by actors.^{48 49} Political claim analysis' objective is to track the shifting alliances and oppositions amongst players that form in the dynamic course of a political dispute.⁵⁰ A claim embodies an expansive action that can be interpreted in a negative or positive evaluation, a demand, or a statement that encompasses both a demand and evaluation.⁵¹ Political claim analysis can be used to investigate the empirical use of frames by actors. Journalists and other speakers (for instance, non-political actors, international and domestic politicians, and representatives of institutions) identified in the newspaper articles further the political assertions in our analysis. The claims provided are made by political actors in Romania or the EU to expand on the fight against corruption and the legitimization or delegitimization of the ACA.

We will concentrate on evaluative claims (both negative and positive) and proclamations that attempt to legitimize or delegitimize the topic in question. Subsequently, we have ascertained 39 claims and coded them by classifying and identifying them according to the nine main variables. The variables are provided below with Table 1 providing supporting examples for these claims.

- *Article type* – The variable identifies that the source is a newspaper. In respect of this research, we focused our claims on newspaper sources due to their reliability and they incorporate how the media frames the DNA.
- *News source* – This variable identifies which news outlet it is from. The news sources are BBC Monitoring Europe, Bucharest Daily Blog, AGRESPRES, The Romanian Journal, Nine O'clock News Online, NF News, and News Europe.
- *Claimant* – This variable indicates the author of the claim. Our codebook distinguishes between the Romanian domestic actors and the national news media in addressing the ACA, the European Union, and EU membership.

⁴⁷. Holli A. Semetko and Patti M. Valkenburg, "Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News," *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 2 (2000): 93.

⁴⁸ Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "Political Claims Analysis: Integrating Protest Event and Political Discourse Approaches," *Mobilization* 4, no. 1 (1999): 1-31.

⁴⁹. Philip Leifeld and Sebastian Haunss, "A Comparison Between Political Claims Analysis and Discourse Network Analysis: The Case of Software Patents in the European Union," *MPI Collective Goods Preprint*, no. 2010/21 (2010).

⁵⁰. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "Political Claims Analysis: Integrating Protest Event and Political Discourse Approaches," *Mobilization* 4, no. 1 (1999): 1-31.

⁵¹. Koopmans and Statham, "Political Claims Analysis."

- *Addressee* – This variable indicates to whom the actor is directing the message. Our codebook classifies international actors, such as the EU, international political actors, and non-governmental actors internationally and domestically.
- *Object* – This refers to underlying narratives described in this claim. These claims can be a positive or negative countenance within this claim. We distinguish between claims about the ACA, COVID-19-related corruption, the judiciary, the anti-corruption legislation, anti-government protests, collective action of Romanian citizens, populism, the EU membership, intelligent services, and democracy.
- *Evaluation* – This variable exemplifies the manner of the object evaluation whether it is neutral, positive, or negative.
- *Legitimization* – This variable captures the challenge of whether the claim is legitimized or delegitimized. It includes legitimizing the DNA, delegitimizing the DNA, and neutral claims of both legitimization and delegitimization of the DNA.
- *Demand* – This variable is embraced through a wide range of demands. They may ask for an urge to fight against corruption, an appeal to judicial processes, a preference regarding the status quo, or engage in discourse about international governments and the EU.
- *Justification* – This variable relates to the reason impacting the evaluation of legitimization or delegitimization. These justifications can be aimed toward legality, pragmatism, and the current climate with COVID-19. These factors all impact sovereignty nationalism and the engagement of EU membership.

Table 1. Examples from media statements and coding.

Claims	Coding
<p><i>While serving as Romania’s youngest-ever Chief Prosecutor, Kovesi’s tenure was marked by significant concerns emerging about the DNA’s actions, which allegedly involved apparent abuses of power and politically motivated convictions, as well as acts of intimidation, coercion, and an apparent collusion with the Romanian Intelligence Service – methods that would have been all-to-familiar to Ceausescu’s feared secret police, the Securitate.</i></p>	<p>Claimant: EU- General Addressee: Kovesi Object: ACA-General Evaluation: Negative Legitimation: No Explicit De-legitimation Demand: No Demand Justification: Effectiveness</p>
<p><i>In his turn, the DNA prosecutor asked the court to apply maximum and enforceable sentences, claiming that “the gentle attitude of the court of first instance is inexplicable.” The investigator added that the social order was “altered” by corruption, and people were burned, “and we’re not talking about two, we’re talking about a cemetery.”</i></p>	<p>Claimant: ACA Actor Addressee: Judiciary (CSM)/Prosecutors and Judges Object: Collective Case Evaluation: Negative Legitimation: De-legitimation Demand: Criminal Charges Justification: Ethical Justification</p>

<p><i>At the same time, according to the DNA, the involvement of citizens and civil society in the fight against corruption remains essential.</i></p>	<p>Claimant: ACA Prosecutors Addressee: ACA Actor Object: Citizen's Fight Against Corruption Evaluation: Negative Legitimation: Effort to Legitimize Demand: Continue to Fight Against Corruption Justification: Effectiveness</p>
<p><i>The DNA is still investigating but no longer with the vigour it had under Kovesi. The annual Cooperation Verification Mechanism (CVM) reports issued by the European Commission on Romania's process in fighting corruption reflect this. The 2018 report, issued after Kovesi's dismissal, concluded that "developments had reversed or called into question the irreversibility of progress" in Romania.</i></p>	<p>Claimant: Journalist Addressee: Kovesi Object: Leadership of the ACA Evaluation: No explicit Evaluation Legitimation: No Explicit Legitimation Demand: No Demands Justification: Effectiveness</p>
<p><i>Corruption is a problem across almost all the former socialist space and Romania, too, was notoriously corrupt until the DNA's aggressive pursuit of justice made it a dangerous activity to engage in.</i></p>	<p>Claimant: Journalist Addressee: DNA Object: ACA-General Evaluation: Positive Evaluation Legitimation: Attempt to Legitimize Demand: Continue Fight Against Corruption Justification: Effectiveness</p>
<p><i>The PNL is not a festival of democracy, but a festival of criminals. We call on the DNA and other investigative bodies to come out of numbness, to self-notify and investigate the possible acts of corruption committed by Florin Citu. Citu has a criminal record, is a former prisoner, and his conduct does not seem to have changed much since then.</i></p>	<p>Claimant: Critics Addressee: ACA Prosecutors Object: ACA-General Evaluation: Negative Evaluation Legitimation: N/A Demand: Continue Fight Against Corruption Justification: Effectiveness</p>

Claim Analysis

Anti-corruption agencies have been adopted as important pillars of many countries' national anti-corruption frameworks since their implementation in Asia in the 1950s.⁵² They have become more widespread in Europe since the 1990s, frequently with the support of international organizations and funders. Despite their increasing popularity and prominence, Romania is evidence that the impact of the ACA is mixed, with its multiple valuations of their political cleavage and its divisive nature in its national politics. We must now determine whether the political opposition undermining the ACA's legitimacy has influenced the effectiveness of the fight against corruption in Romania. As mentioned earlier, the political opposition has the desire to limit the ACA's role in effectiveness as a consequence of conflict-ridden politics. The issues of corruption and anti-corruption have been dominated and manipulated by the Romanian government, this will be examined, and the paper will analyse the legitimization and delegitimization of the ACA and its political rhetoric. We conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis to evaluate the empirical relevance of the political actors involved in undermining the ACA. Moreover, this section will observe the data findings from the news articles and associate them with the methodology. To address particular questions, certain variables were recoded to a wide-ranging claim.

In total, we detected 39 claims (17.9% were from Romanian media journalists, 40.6% were from ACA prosecutors and actors, 7.7% were made from the EU, 9.5% were made from the opposition, 2.6% from the prime minister, not specified general were 8.9%). We discovered that in the sample 87.2% were evaluative claims. Of the claims, 30.8% were positive while 56.4% were negative. As far as claims expressed to legitimize or delegitimize the object, 12.8% of the claims delegitimized the object in question while 17.9% attempted to legitimize it. Table 2 shows the percentages given for each specific evaluative claim. The 87.2% represents the evaluative claims while the 100% shows the total for how each claim evaluated ACA.

As previously noted, several variables have been recoded to compose better wide-ranging claims. With the 39 claims, there were 12 groups discussed, and the objects addressed were consolidated into new variables restricting it to six categories. Table 3 will show the recoded variables, the claimants, and the demands they are asking for. The categories for the demands include the fight against corruption which is 20.5%, 7.7 % of the claims are representing the efforts from the judiciary, the ACA in general is 41%, the demands for DNA to investigate are 5.1%, the criminal charges are 12.8%, and the claim that have no demands but are evaluated is 12.9%.

We looked at the speaker of each claim presented. We recoded the claimants into a new variable, to narrow the evaluation to a broad range of speakers. The sample size consisted of 12 claims, and we have established a smaller number of claimants who are more particular in our research, we have divided them into six groups with a percentage total of 100%.

When assessing our findings, we focused on six categories throughout the process. The following sections will discuss the findings of this study and how they are relevant to understanding the consequence of the DNA's auspicious agency in Romania. Thus, it's critical

⁵². Jennifer Schöberlein, "Anti-corruption Agencies in Europe," *Transparency International Anti-Corruption Helpdesk* (2020).

to comprehend the impact of these allegations, particularly the delegitimization argumentations, which jeopardize the ACA's success. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand who is delegitimizing and negatively evaluating the ACA as well as prove what has been mentioned before, the influence they have on limiting the role of the agency.

General Claims	<i>Table 2. General Analysis of Evaluative Claims.</i>			
	Claimants	Percentage	Evaluation	
	Percentage			
	Romanian Journalists	17.9%	Negative Evaluation	33.3%
	ACA Prosecutors	40.6%	Negative Evaluation	27.3%
	EU	16.7%	No Explicit Evaluation	16.6%
	Opposition	9.5%	Negative Evaluation	9.1%
PM	2.6%	No Explicit Evaluation	4.6%	
Not Specified General	8.9%	Positive Evaluation	9.1%	
Total:	100%	Total:	100%	

Recorded Claims	<i>Table 3. Recorded Claims and the Demands.</i>			
	Claimants	Percentage	Demands	Percentage
	ACA/ or Prosecutors	41%	Fight Against Corruption	20.5%
	Romanian Journalists	17.9%	ACA	41%
	EU	16.7%	Judiciary Efforts/Actions	7.7%
	Opposition	9.5%	Demands for DNA to investigate	5.1%
	PM	6%	Criminal Charges	13%
Not Specified General	8.9%	Covid Related Corruption	12.7%	
Total:	100%	Total:	100%	

The Condemnation of the ACA

In our analysis, we found that 33.3% of negative evaluations came from Romanian media journalists. Since the fall of communism, Romania's mass media system has undergone a massive expansion of freedom, which consequently emanated influence, manipulations, and

failed attempts to control it.⁵³ Some scholars correctly contend that the media whether intentionally or unintentionally is “captured” by previous governments or by “vested interests networked with politics.”⁵⁴ Romania is a state with significant levels of corruption that is unable to keep tabs on its political parties in order to establish a “medium level of authority as a modern policymaking agent.”⁵⁵ Therefore, the coverage of corruption in Romania can be swayed because it is politically inspired against political opponents and we can argue it creates corrupt journalism because it is “revealing bona fide wrongdoing.”⁵⁶ The ACA’s poor image raises questions about the DNA and its connection with the political elites. In our evaluation, 89.7% of Romanian politicians demanded the DNA to investigate COVID-related corruption, “the DNA investigation is welcomed, said Vlad Voiculescu.”⁵⁷

He was the health minister at the time when the Romanian government placed an order on the vaccines. In quick succession, the media tried to condemn the effectiveness of the DNA with their statement implying the “investigation is unlikely to have an effect.”⁵⁸ From the claims, 28.6% of negative evaluations dealing with COVID-related corruption came from Romanian media journalists. The pandemic circumstance invigorates corruption, there is a substantial peril that the money will not be invested in the right causes, such as hospital endowment, protective equipment, specialized equipment, products, and medicines but instead end up in the wrong hands.⁵⁹ The DNA also supports the idea that if the fight against corruption emanates without transparency, then the COVID-19 epidemic can risk being embezzled.

In regard to the negative evaluations coming from the media instigating an attack on the DNA, our analysis has shown that 33.3% of the claims targeted around Laura Kovesi are from Romanian media journalists. She was known to be robust in the ACA due to having the most carried out arrests and convictions of “any of its counterpart agencies across the EU.”⁶⁰ The media interpreted her actions and delegitimized her tenure by stating she engages in

⁵³. Ioana Coman and Peter Gross, “Uncommonly Common or Truly Exceptional? An Alternative to the Political System–Based Explanation of the Romanian Mass Media,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 457-79.

⁵⁴. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “How Media and Politics Shape Each Other in the New Europe,” *Finding the Right Place on the Map. Central and Eastern European Media Change in a Global Perspective*, edited by Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sukösd. (Bristol, UK: Intellect Press, 2008).

⁵⁵. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi “A Case Study in Political Clientelism. Romania’s Policy-Making Mayhem,” Unpublished Paper (2010), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1686617>.

⁵⁶. Coman and Gross, “Commonly Uncommon and Truly Exceptional?”

⁵⁷. Robert James, “Romania Investigates Alleged Corruption in the Purchase of Anticovid Vaccines,” *Blaze Trends*. January 7, 2022. <https://blazetrends.com/romania-investigates-alleged-corruption-in-the-purchase-of-anticovid-vaccines/>.

⁵⁸. James, “Romania Investigates Alleged Corruption.”

⁵⁹. “International Anti-Corruption Day. Iohannis: Romania Needs Clear, Predictable, Just Laws, for Functional Institutions. DNA: The Pandemic Context Fuels Corruption,” *Nine O’ Clock*, December 9, 2021. <https://www.nineoclock.ro/2021/12/09/president-iohannis-on-the-international-anti-corruption-day-romania-needs-clear-predictable-just-laws-for-functional-institutions-to-be-able-to-work-at-full-capacity-to-sanction-law-breaches/>.

⁶⁰. “Transporters’ Association Demands Authorities an Investigation on Liability Insurance Market,” *AGERPRES*, October 19, 2021.

“politically motivated convictions” and apparent “abuses of power.”⁶¹ Indicating her accomplishments are “grounded on a far different picture” than what the ACA acknowledges her success to be.⁶² Although, under Kovesi’s leadership, the DNA investigated a number of current and past ministers, as well as other high-ranking officials, and she was praised for making a notable difference in Romania’s fight against corruption.⁶³ In 2017, the DNA prosecuted 997 defendants, including three ministers, a former parliament speaker, and six members of parliament.⁶⁴ Within the same year, a number of cases finished by DNA prosecutors climbed by 16.5% to almost 3,800.⁶⁵ Kovesi became a symbol of the fight against corruption. The DNA chief, despite this, came into dispute with the leaders of the then-ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD), who attempted to discredit her and remove her from office. They were eventually successful in reprimanding her in 2018 despite massive protests and international criticism. Furthermore, even if the current DNA lacks the same diligence as when Kovesi was chief prosecutor, the EU recognizes the ACA’s efforts to carry out the same convictions and freezes as the DNA did previously. As a result, the current chief prosecutor Crin Bologa was elected to the International Association of Anti-Corruption Authorities (IAACA). He is highly praised and has been acknowledged for the DNA’s achievement and effectiveness in the fight against corruption.⁶⁶

The media’s 33.3% negative evaluation reports depicted the DNA as being prejudiced against politicians when corruption cases surface. Liviu Dragnea, a politician who was a driving force behind the PSD’s contentious judicial reforms, which had rebuked the sufficiency of the judiciary and generated huge protests in Romania, was sentenced to prison for corruption in 2019.⁶⁷ It also legitimizes the ACA’s capacity to assist in the fight against corruption requiring the judiciary to increase its efforts for criminal charges. This is shown when the DNA complied with the commitment to fight corruption and answered 13% of demands to investigate criminal charges. Subsequently, it resulted in arresting Dragnea, a high-ranking politician, despite his position, and held him accountable for the criminal actions he had perpetrated. The demand to continue to fight corruption is 20.5% and the demand for DNA to be investigated is 5.1%, which were fulfilled with the imprisonment of Dragnea. Consequently, the validity of an institution’s work is reflected in the public perception. In this case, the PSD suffered significant losses in the European election which signals the effective ability of the ACA to control the fight against corruption. The problem of politicization within the DNA is embedded with prominent levels of

⁶¹. *AGERPRES*, “Transporters’ Association Demands.”

⁶². *AGERPRES*, “Transporters’ Association Demands.”

⁶³. Clare Nuttal, “Bucharest Blog: Romania’s Anti-Corruption Struggle Still Inspiring Its Neighbours,” *bne IntelliNews*, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://bne.eu/bucharest-blog-romania-s-anti-corruption-struggle-still-inspiring-its-neighbours-221086/?source=blogs>.

⁶⁴. Nuttal, “Bucharest Blog: Romania’s Anti-Corruption Struggle.”

⁶⁵. Nuttal, “Bucharest Blog: Romania’s Anti-Corruption Struggle.”

⁶⁶. “DNA Head Elected to Governing Body of International Anti-Corruption Association with over 140 Member States,” *AGERPRES*, January 6, 2022.

⁶⁷. “Romania Corruption: PSD Chief Liviu Dragnea Jailed,” *BBC News*, May 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48421430>.

clientelism. Surprisingly, the media contributed 42.9% of positive claims in contrast to the negative ones. These positive claims, however, do not praise Romania's DNA or government for fighting corruption but have praised the leader of Moldova for fighting corruption like Romania. To summarize, the media has no favourable comments or positive claims about the ACA.

In order to undermine an institution's credibility, recalcitrant political leaders always try to delegitimize it. The media can use its contacts with political elites to stage the DNA's lack of legitimacy, distorting how Romanian citizens see the DNA's failure. It is critical to examine these accusations of delegitimization because they have the potential to influence public perceptions of the anti-corruption agency's future and efficacy in Romania. It is also critical to comprehend how the media's framing of the delegitimization of the DNA influences public perceptions and plays on their credulity. When an institution succeeds in providing a service, it is unavoidable that it will become the topic of conjecture. The DNA has been positioned by politicians and the media to be continuously questioned on whether the agency is politically motivated. We can determine from empirical evidence within our data that 33.3% of claims directed from the Romanian Media have been negatively evaluated and the opposition has contributed 9.1% to the negative claims against the ACA. Thus, almost half of the negative claims come from the media and opposition trying to disparage the DNA's efforts and exert pressure to influence specific narratives demonstrating a substantial bias to delegitimize the ACA. The clientelist nature rooted within the political opposition poses a nature of political parallelism. It refers to the character links between political actors and the media and more generally, the extent to which media reflects political divisions.⁶⁸

Peculiarly, the ACA prosecutors and actors adjudge for 42.85% of the negative claims, followed by Romanian politicians with 28.57%, the EU with 4.76%, and the media with 23.81%. The negative claims from the ACA prosecutors and actors came from the neoteric rise of COVID-19 concomitant corruption.

The DNA stated the "pandemic fuels corruption" but "the involvement of citizens and civil society in the fight against corruption remains essential."⁶⁹ In our analysis, the ACA actors and prosecutors talked about staff shortages as the object within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crin Bologa implied that "staff shortages are a big problem in the DNA."⁷⁰ In order to further examine the fight against corruption and the judiciary, we removed the COVID-19-related objects to narrow the focus on analysing the positive and negative claims. It resulted in 35.7% coming from the media, 28.6% coming from the ACA actors and prosecutors and 28.6% are Romanian politicians. In sum, the media and politicians boosted the continuous weaponization of the ACA's credibility by insinuating conjectures about the DNA's 'politically motivated convictions.'

⁶⁸. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶⁹. "International Anti-Corruption Day. Iohannis: Romania Needs Clear, Predictable, Just Laws, for Functional Institutions. DNA: The Pandemic Context Fuels Corruption," *Nine O'Clock*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.nineoclock.ro/2021/12/09/president-iohannis-on-the-international-anti-corruption-day-romania-needs-clear-predictable-just-laws-for-functional-institutions-to-be-able-to-work-at-full-capacity-to-sanction-law-breaches/>.

⁷⁰. *Nine O'Clock*, "International Anti-Corruption Day."

Conclusion

Our analysis was committed to demonstrating the delegitimization of the ACA from political opposition or the media can create a negative impact on the image of the agency. Clearly, from the empirical evidence given we can now determine the ACA has been effective in reducing Romania's level of corruption. Consequently, the political opposition still played a role in undermining the success of the ACA due to the influence of the media in delegitimizing the agency. Moreover, since the 2015 anti-corruption reforms, there has been a trend of establishing political control over the judiciary, which reflects the government's desire to utilise the fight against corruption as a political communication.⁷¹ The input and output results of the institution guarantee its validity. Romania is still accountable for sustaining Pareto optimal outcomes, despite its shortcomings. The country would have not joined the EU if it had not complied with accountability and transparency, given its post-communist nature. Since joining the EU, the supranational institution has always been in support of the ACA and annually monitoring their progress through the CVM.

Head prosecutor Laura Kovesi faced high levels of scrutiny over her aggressive fight against corruption due to the media's influence on public perception. Moreover, the political elite involvement in delegitimizing the agency and removing her as head prosecutor in 2018 was purely based on party political dissidence. Many examples from newspaper articles and scholars have pointed towards Romania's complex political landscape. In general, our analysis indicated that objects related to the ACA's efforts in the fight against corruption were more frequently delegitimized by the political opposition and Romanian journalists. However, the political opposition was more persistent in undermining the ACA by removing Kovesi who was a key figure in the fight against corruption. In Romania, politics and the media have more than a symbiotic relationship in which they rely on political parallelism to achieve their objective of discrediting the DNA.⁷² The political actors within both institutions have similar values in which they use "the same practices and behaviours" to achieve their own objectives.⁷³

The media and politicians' pantomime gave rise to the DNA's injurious image, which progressively created a problem regarding the ACA's credibility. As a result, the argument about how political elite weaponization delegitimized the agency and damaged the DNA's reputation. The way politicians and the media portray the DNA has put it in a position where it is commonly questioned about its political motivations and effectiveness in the fight against corruption. Although the DNA has been successful in improving corruption measures within Romania, there still needs work to be done on the ability to control the divisive nature of the country's political cleavage.

⁷¹. Roxana Bratu, Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, and Maya Stoyanova, "Through the Lens of Social Constructionism: The Development of Innovative Anti-Corruption Policies and Practices in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, 2000–2015," *Slavonic and East European Review* 95, no. 1 (2017): 117-50.

⁷². Peter Gross, "(Happily) Living in Sin: Media and Politics in Romania," *Southeastern Europe* 39, no. 1 (2015): 12-34, doi: 10.1163/18763332-03901002.

⁷³. Gross, "(Happily) Living in Sin."

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