Press Freedom and Reporting on Corruption: Evidence from the Machine Learning for Peace Project

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The Challenge

The policy community has a general sense that corruption is worst in places where there is least freedom to detect it and hold the corrupt accountable. This is especially true of the press. In a well-functioning democracy, the press has both the capacity and incentives to report on government corruption and thereby serve as a key safeguard against it. Yet when press freedom is low, journalists are unlikely to be willing and able to do so.

To date, researchers have had little rigorous evidence on the relationship between press reporting on corruption and the extent of press freedom. The Machine Learning for Peace (MLP) project's unique corpus of news from high-quality domestic media outlets across 62 developing countries and advanced machine learning text processing provides a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between changes in press freedom and levels of reporting on corruption. In this report, we process tens of millions of articles to conduct a monthly analysis of how the domestic media's coverage of corruption changes in response to restrictions on press freedom across countries.

Our key findings are:
- Legal changes made to intimidate the press do not correlate with significant decreases in the volume of press coverage regarding government corruption in the short term.
- In contrast, changes to a country's media regulatory framework, including alterations to the governing bodies that oversee the media, are more directly correlated with near-term declines in corruption coverage.
- Looking at the small sample of relevant cases in our data, regulatory changes seem to be enacted after periods of increased media attention on government corruption. This is suggestive evidence that regimes employ regulatory changes (rather than legal changes) as a tactic to quickly discourage rising levels of reporting on corruption.

These findings suggest that policymakers interested in supporting journalists and independent media in non-democracies should focus more attention on regulatory changes. While a great deal of development policy has focused on combating restrictive legal changes—whether they bear on press freedom, NGOs, or civic space more broadly—these formal legal restrictions are often used for different reasons (e.g., to provide a broader structure for repression through, for instance, classifying a new crime as Tanzania's 2015 Cybercrimes 2015 Act did to punish dissent online) than other forms of repression, and required support from the legislative branch. In contrast, for undemocratic regimes facing rapid increases in media attention to government corruption, regulatory changes may provide a faster means of curtailing press freedom relative to legal changes. For the study of these dynamics, our approach points to the utility of computational, big-data approaches to learning about civic space.

Our Approach

MLP collects and classifies newspaper articles from high-quality international and local sources from 2012-2024 across 62 countries. A fine-tuned large language model classifies more than 110 million articles into civic space events, including articles related to corruption. This allows us to produce monthly measures of the salience of corruption in civic spaces across many countries. For a broader discussion of MLP's approach, see our recent report *High Frequency Tracking of Civic Space Utilizing Domestic News Scraping* and *Large Language Model Classification*. See our earlier report on *High Frequency Evidence on Corruption: New Data from the MLP Project* for a discussion of this data and its advantages over traditional, annual corruption indices.

To complement our original corruption data, we analyze significant fluctuations in press freedom. Among our sample of countries, we use statistical methods to identify the unusually largest annual declines in the RSF Press Freedom Index, an annual ranking of countries compiled and published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). This analysis yields 46 significant reductions. For each instance, we conducted qualitative research to determine whether these declines were caused by legal or regulatory changes, subsequently pinpointing the specific month these changes were enacted. As a result, we identified 15 countries with drops in media freedom that are directly attributed to legal changes and 4 countries with drops directly attributed to regulatory changes. Finally, we examine how reporting on corruption changes in the months surrounding these restrictive changes.

Results
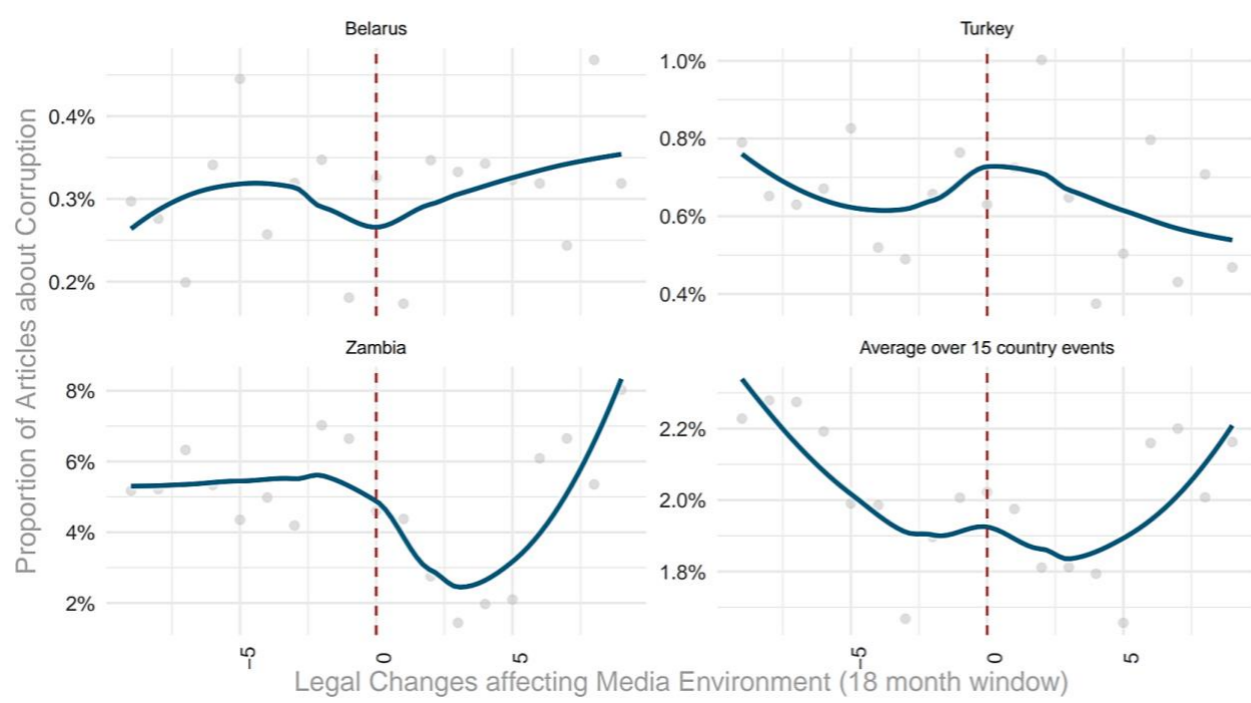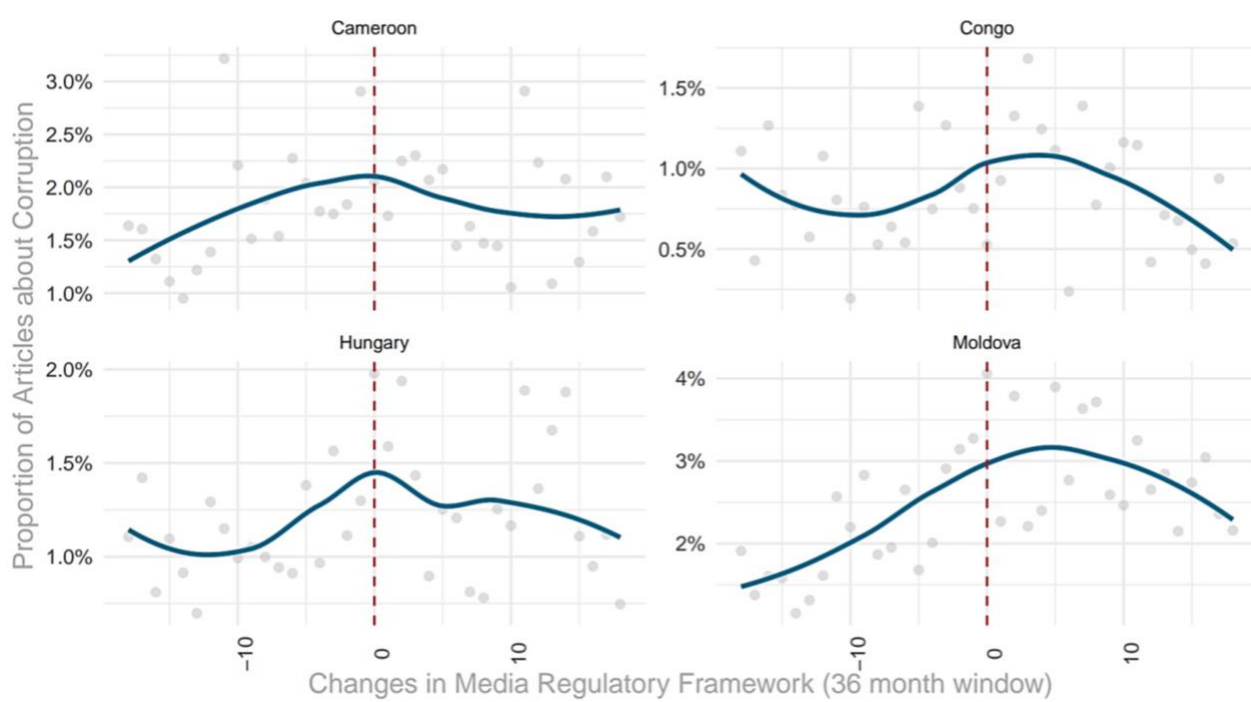
Figure 1 visualizes the frequency of reporting on government corruption changes in the 18 months before and after major restrictive legal changes. The first three panels showcase specific countries with high-profile legal changes for illustrative purposes. The final panel provides an average across all 15 countries that experienced substantial regulatory changes. Unexpectedly, we observe no clear pattern in how reporting changes around the passage of restrictive laws.

coverage strategies to comply in advance. Alternatively, direct regulatory changes appear to have immediate and pronounced effects on media outlet behavior. This may be because they require less coordination across branches of government and can be deployed quickly in response to corruption scandals or the rising salience of government corruption as a political issue. Supporting this explanation, for the four countries in our sample, regulatory changes are made at moments when the subject of corruption is receiving an increasing share of overall media attention.

Policy Implications
Our findings have a number of policy implications.

First, while broad efforts to support democracy and erode authoritarianism have had limited effectiveness, more targeted support to journalists and media in closed and closing settings to report on corruption could help reduce corruption. Our research demonstrates that even in the face of severe restrictions, significant reporting on government corruption persists. Such an approach is ethically fraught—raising questions about the mechanisms for participant selection, for instance— but it might offer a more focused (and evaluable) approach to holding backsliding governments accountable.

Figure 2 visualizes how the frequency of reporting on government corruption changes in the 18 months before and after major restrictive regulatory changes. In contrast to the response to legal changes, restrictive regulatory changes are associated with a consistent decline in the amount of attention given to government corruption in the press.

Second, our findings also underscore the importance of exploring non-journalistic efforts (e.g., civil society organizations working on transparency and anti-corruption efforts) to detect corruption in repressive settings. Recent advancements in computational techniques, such as analyzing anomalies in trade data and government contracting, have shown promise in identifying corruption. While these methods are more advanced in developed countries, the increasing availability of high-frequency trade statistics and open budgeting make it entirely possible to detect egregious corruption without directly endangering journalists. The policy challenge in such cases is to both deploy the computational tools and disseminate the results in ways that promote good governance and accountability, and strengthen civil society, even in backsliding and authoritarian settings.

Third, our findings suggest the importance of focusing on restrictive media regulatory frameworks, which can have a more immediate and pronounced impact on corruption reporting than formal legal changes targeting the press. While formal legal changes often attract significant attention from development practitioners and media watchdogs, the less visible nature of regulatory frameworks may lead to their underestimation.

In Cameroon, the Prime Minister appointed a new head of the National Communications Council (CNC), emphasizing the importance of "sanity, national unity, and the fight against fake news."[i] In DR Congo, the High Council for Broadcasting and Communication (CSAC) implemented restrictive policies as part of an overarching media regulation scheme.[ii] In Hungary, the President appointed a new head of the National Media and Communications Authority (NMHH).[iii] In Moldova, the restructuring of the Audiovisual Council (AC) on Media brought three parliamentary appointees, two from civil society, one from the presidency, and one governmental representative.[iv]

These findings suggest an interesting dynamic. While broad legal changes may pose significant, long-term threats to independent journalism, we do not see a direct impact on the amount of attention the media gives to government corruption. This may be because legal changes often take significant time to write and pass through the legislature, and media outlets can adjust their

Acknowledgements

[i] https://freedomhouse.org/country/cameroon/freedom-world/2022
[ii] https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/freehou/2016/en/114914
[iii] https://hungarytoday.hu/president-appoints-andras-koltay-head-media-authority-nmhh/
[iv] https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2022