
SQUINTING LIKE A STATE: NARRATIVES OF CORRUPTION, INFORMAL PRACTICES, AND LEGACIES OF SOCIETAL DISTRUST ON THE BULGARIAN BLACK SEA COAST

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Abstract: This article explores narratives of corruption, informal practices, and historical patterns of societal distrust emerging from the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Marked by the legacies of the fraught privatization process after socialism and under pressure from continuing urban and tourism growth, the contemporary Bulgarian coastline sees both frequent concerns with transparency and a plethora of informal practices.

Taking an anthropological and critical geography perspective on corruption – rather than an economic one – I trace how concerns with corruption and informal practices permeate across societal narratives and governance practices and impact the complex interlinkages between them. To do so, I draw on interview and archival materials collected during two fieldwork studies I conducted in Bulgaria during 2017 – 2018 and 2023. Based on this research, I show that environmental meaning is often intertwined with perceptions and practices of informality on the Bulgarian coastline, complicating the blurred lines between them further.

Keywords: Corruption, informality, societal distrust, Bulgaria Black Sea, coastal communities, environmental meaning

Introduction: Corruption, informality, and squinting like a state

“Talking about corruption,” Ivan Krastev once wrote, “is the way post-communist public talks about politics, economy, about past and future” (2004: 43). This was certainly my impression when I first began conducting fieldwork on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast in 2017. To tell the truth, I never raised the subject of corruption with interlocutors deliberately myself: my project intended a wider comparison of environmental and societal transformations experienced by communities on the Bulgarian coastline and on the UK East Coast in Yorkshire, and as such it was not explicitly targeted to address what I then saw as a deeply economic issue. Yet

interlocutors in Bulgaria kept bringing up the topic in our conversations about the coastline. In some of their narratives, corruption was the assumed societal mode to such an extent that, after relating a concrete example from her experience, one interlocutor remarked to me in the form of a friendly advice, “You’re still young; you’re only just going to start feeling these kinds of slaps to the face” (Evgenia¹, 2017, my translation). It was almost as if, in her view, waking up to the reality of corruption in Bulgaria was a rite of passage.

The reality of corruption and the narratives surrounding it, however, are exceedingly complex. Critical scholarship has long since established the limitations of “measuring” or even identifying corruption, especially when a blanket vision of the nature of corruption is applied across different socio-cultural contexts (Ledeneva et al. 2017). Moreover, scholars have shown it to be a phenomenon deeply interwoven with the fabric of social change across different geographical contexts, resulting in robust critical geographies and anthropological investigations of the phenomenon (Doshi and Ranganathan 2019, Krastev 2004, Pardo 2016, Prato 2013, Steenberg 2021, Torsello 2011, 2012). These studies have produced a dynamic commentary on the complex nature of corruption and the informal practices identified as part of it. Critics have observed, for instance, how it becomes politicized only in concrete circumstances, with practices deemed as corrupt not always coinciding with ones that would be considered illegal or even immoral in the context (Doshi and Ranganathan 2019, Pardo 2016, Steenberg 2021, Torsello and Venard 2016). Indeed, critical geographers have shown that in contexts when the state’s formal treatment of people and landscapes is not unequivocally positive (Greenberg 2021, Scott 1998), informal practices can derive directly from distrust in formal institutions, functioning as a form of social relations and thus providing communities with a much-needed oppositional power (Bluwstein 2019, Luleva 2021, Prato 2013, Steenberg 2016, Torsello 2011, 2012). The very narratives of corruption, as Krastev (2004) has argued, can serve as the expression of how legitimacy and (dis)trust are worked through in the public. His analysis has been echoed in recent scholarship, which has highlighted the importance of informal practices as a form of meaning-making, particularly in the context of “space and representations of space” (Doshi and Ranganathan 2019: 453, Kim 2020).

Most anthropological and geographical studies on informality and the social functioning of corruption tend to trace these practices on the community level – that is, either in the absence of, or despite, the state (see Steenberg 2016, 2021, Polese 2023, Doshi and Ranganathan 2019). These arguments follow economic anthropologist Kevin Hart’s original postulation of the concept of “informality”, which relies on the absence of formal regulation or other kind of organization (Hart 1973). Recent scholarship, however, has also highlighted that levels of ambiguity and thus informality can exist in governance practices as well (Haid 2017, McFarlane 2012). Urban planning research, especially, has illustrated how governance can deliberate-

¹ All interlocutors’ given names used in this article are pseudonyms.

ly institutionalize informal practices, show flexibility in interpreting the boundaries of formal regulations, or even mean that institutions “turn a blind eye to certain activities that are not tolerated in other settings” as part of its *modus operandi* (Haid 2017: 290, Roy 2005). Based on these and similar observations, some scholars have gone so far as to argue that “informality and governance are intimately related” (Polese 2023: 327) since all forms of governance are deeply impacted by social, economic, and cultural factors (Kim 2020, Polese 2023).

This article meditates on the fluid spaces between informal practices, narratives of corruption, and patterns of societal distrust on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Rather than focusing simply on the community level, I trace these nuances across governance practices and societal responses. As such, the article’s title is a nod to James Scott’s *Seeing like a State* (1998). Scott defined the practice of legibility performed by the state – the administrative transformation of unruly “natural” objects and social subjects into standardized, easily interpretable and processable, points of data – as one of the core functions of the modern governance machine. Both society and environment, he showed, were “thoroughly [...] refashioned by state maps of legibility” (1998: 3). Scott (*ibid.*: 7) was careful to outline the problematic as well as pragmatic aspects of this practice, noting especially the danger of reductionist designs for both social organization and natural environments. At the same time, he also remarked that many societal practices do not inherently lend themselves to being standardized and/or quantified (Scott 1998). As a result, Scott argued, the formalized project of legibility “was parasitic on informal processes that, alone, [the state] could not create or maintain” (*ibid.*: 6). Distinguishing the spaces of fluidity that necessitate informal practices from outright abuses of power depending on legal ambiguity is a difficult task. My article deals with these complexities and comments also on the resulting societal distrust, as well as on the interlinkages between these dynamics.

In support of my observations, I draw on narratives pertaining to corruption and informal practices emerging from two different fieldwork studies I conducted in Bulgaria over the last seven years. The first set of interviews were taken in the fall and winter of 2017 – 2018 for my doctoral research, which investigated social and environmental transformations on two European coastlines (the other one being the Yorkshire East Coast in the UK) and was funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie innovative training network ENHANCE (2015 – 2020). The second stretch of fieldwork includes interviews I conducted in 2023 as part of the ongoing Horizon Europe project EmpowerUs (2022 – 2025), as well as archival work done with the support of a postdoctoral fellowship in September 2023 at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, funded by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education’s National Scientific Programme “Development and Recognition of Bulgarian Studies Abroad.”

Throughout my fieldwork, I found myself grappling with the conceptual and emotional uncertainties related to corruption not only as a scholarly observer but also as a recipient: a child of the postsocialist transition, my own motivation in pur-

suing the subject was partly to make sense of the sinking sensation of losing landscapes significant to me personally since childhood, or what Glenn Albrecht and his co-authors have called “solastalgia”: “the pain or distress caused by the loss of [...] environment” (Albrecht et al. 2007: 96). Drawing also on these observations, my conclusions from this article hence relate not only to scholarship on corruption, informal practices, and societal distrust, but also to studies on environmental meaning, especially those emerging from the field of environmental humanities and its analysis on the humanistic aspects of environmental change (White 1990, Rose et al. 2012, Heise et al. 2017). In addressing environmental meaning, these studies focus on “the underlying cultural and philosophical frameworks that are entangled with the ways in which diverse human cultures have made themselves at home in a more than human world” (Rose et al. 2012: 2) – or, in other words, they question how human communities relate to their material surroundings through emotive, social, and physical practices. As I write about environmental meaning in this article, therefore, I refer to the ways in which the community imbues the coastline, its physical landscape, and the practices it enables, with significance.

Indeed, environmental meaning is also central to how I define what I mean by the term “coastal community.” Following Ounanian et al. (2021), I pay attention not only to social groups directly inhabiting a specific strip of land within the coastal area, but also view the coastal community as consisting of policy actors and actors concerned with the coast by granting it significance of their own. In this way, the coastal community is defined by what Ounanian et al. (2021: 2) have termed “communities of meaning and communities of participation” – the collection of people whose social, imaginative, and political practices are closely connected to the coast. Over the course of my fieldwork in 2017 – 2018 and 2023 I spoke with members across that widely defined community: from fishermen and local inhabitants and entrepreneurs through environmental activists and NGO members to various policy actors at the local, regional, and national level. This wide scope provides a more varied perspective on the issues of informality, corruption, and meaning I discuss throughout the article.

Writing about corruption can often be fraught. What I seek to do here, however, is not to present an accounting of which environmental governance practices on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast are corrupt and which are not, but rather to observe how the difficulty of distinguishing between corruption, informal practices, and the legacies of societal distrust in this context is further complicated by the forms of environmental meaning imbued in the coastline’s landscapes.

Over the following three sections, the article explores each of these aspects – narratives of corruption, informal practices, and the legacies of societal distrust – in some more depth. In the section immediately following this one, I focus on the controversies surrounding the management and mapping of coastal dunes in the state cadastre, showing how the state’s failure to render the dunes legible results in prevailing narratives of corruption. The subsequent section, conversely, investigates the perspective of environmental governance experts employing informal practices

motivated by the desire to preserve the coastal environment. Finally, in the section entitled “Histories of informality and legacies of (dis)trust,” I discuss how these seemingly opposing perspectives share a fraught history in which the distinctions between private and public are blurred, and the true difference between corrupt or merely informal practices relates to issues of trust pertaining especially to whether communities feel directly involved in either shaping the development of the coastal environment or in benefiting from it. In each case, therefore, I show that environmental meaning is part of the discourses or practices making sense of informality and corruption – either because coastal nature has come to represent the desired transparency or because its change symbolizes societal transformations and problems.

*Narratives of corruption on the Bulgarian coast:
Where the wild dunes are*

As defined by Transparency International, corruption – or “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” – certainly has been observed to exist in Bulgaria (Transparency International, n.d.). As part of its 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the organization listed Bulgaria as one of nine “countries to watch,” pointing out that it has been “one of the lowest CPI performers in Western Europe and the EU for more than a decade” (Transparency International, 2023). For decades, concerns with corruption have been particularly pressing on the coastline. In part, accusations of corruption follow on from the nontransparent and highly contested process of privatization in the country, and especially its implementation on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. The many flaws of this process, especially in its early stages, have been extensively documented by various observers (see Giordano and Kostova 2002, Holleran 2017, Koulov 1996). On a broad scale, the transition to capitalism resulted in “cataclysmic economic changes” that concentrated wealth in the hands of a small minority of newly wealthy businessmen and politicians while bringing nearly three-fourths of the population below the poverty line by the early 2000s (Vassilev 2003). Writing about the postsocialist land reforms and their consequences in the early 1990s, Giordano and Kostova (2002: 89) observed that the process had produced “a critical divide between legality and legitimacy, because the new legal framework is constantly circumvented via social practices that agents deem more appropriate to their circumstances.” This rupture between legality and legitimacy resulted in a widespread atmosphere and a prevailing culture of distrust (Giordano and Kostova 2002, Luleva 2021).

On the coast, these dynamics often concerned the privatization of large swathes of land and of the existing tourism resorts. Identified as the natural fit for restructuring for the purposes of capitalist profit early on during the transition period, many of the socialist era coastal resorts were privatized piecemeal, often through processes featuring many ambiguities (Koulov 1996). In the case of the Sunny Beach re-

sort, for example, the resort's privatization, managed by a liquidation commission, occurred with minimal publicity and transparency, leading to accusations that the commission had been engaged in speculation and had manipulated the procedures to prevent external competition (Koulov 1996). In effect, most private individuals were excluded from the procedures and thus ultimately also locked out from the profits. This occurred through a toxic cocktail of bureaucratic complications, non-transparent procedures, and political upheaval (Miller and Petranov 2000). In the 1996 – 1997 mass privatization process, Bulgarian citizens were given the opportunity to purchase state-issued coupon books („бoнoви книжки“), which they could invest into acquiring shares of public companies, either individually or through the moderation of a privatization cooperative. Yet the sale of coupon books coincided with the financial crisis, discouraging many ordinary citizens from participating (Miller and Petranov 2000). Those who did acquire coupon books and attempted to invest them, moreover, often faced forbiddingly high administrative hurdles. Members of one cooperative involved in the privatization of Sunny Beach, for example, could only convert their coupon books into shares by showing up in person at the local post office where the coupon book had been issued, complicating the cooperative's management of thousands of shares (Gerdzhikov 1996). Similarly, the cooperative itself was required to submit an original or a notarized copy of its legal registration for each acquisition, between 10 and 100 times daily (Gerdzhikov 1998). Such experiences left many with the impression that the privatization processes were severely biased against the participation of citizens.

Thus, the ambiguity and opacity that marked the privatization years resulted in concerns with economic inequality and therefore also corruption. Subsequently, these concerns have been consistently strengthened by the lucrative nature of the tourist industry on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast and the increasingly speculative nature of the property market surrounding its development over the succeeding decades. From the early 1990s through the 2000s, investment on the coastline from US and EU developmental funds, Spanish tourist operators, foreign and Bulgarian nationals purchasing second homes or investment properties resulted in a substantial growth (Anderson et al. 2012, Holleran 2017), as well as in the fundamental reshaping of the coastline and its environment (Antonova and van Dam 2022). As of 2019, the tourism industry's contribution to the national GDP was valued at 11,5 percent (Stoyanova-Bozhkova 2020) and was projected to rapidly gain an even larger share. While the pandemic left an impact, and 2022 figures rated tourism's share of the GDP at “only” 6,5 percent (Ministry of Tourism 2023), the industry remains an important source of income in the country and especially on the coast, which has in turn driven much of its growth over the previous decades.

Both the industry's early promise and a series of development policies led by the EU, the US, and the World Bank resulted in a flood of direct investments made by both foreign and Bulgarian nationals into second homes and rental properties on the coastline (Anderson et al. 2012, Holleran 2017). Although the returns on coastal properties have grown increasingly perilous in recent years due to the resulting

oversupply, further growth is still being driven by the urban development of the coastal cities Burgas and Varna (Ivanov 2023). In the view of many locals, moreover, the above-mentioned dynamics have been underwritten by money laundering. One interlocutor told me, for instance, that the status of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast as a money laundromat was “well known”:

Bulgaria likely is, and was, a good means for laundering unclean money – money linked to drugs, to prostitution, to weapons – from Georgians, Ukrainians, Russians – and what we have here is not a real market development but instead a competition between stretches of coastal areas on the Black and Mediterranean Seas where you can easily launder money (Anonymous, 2018, my translation).

In a similar vein, Bulgarian anthropologist Evgenia Krasteva-Blagoeva has reported on a well-spread conspiracy theory among locals on the southern coastline that the growing group of Russian property owners were actually Russian state officers (e.g. from KGB) on a colonizing mission or else money launderers who made their wealth from the military, from close ties to the state, or through corrupt businesses (Krasteva-Blagoeva 2020). Expanding the lens beyond Russians, the interlocutors I spoke to on the coastline in 2023 identified corruption as a major principle of the economic and social order. Damian, for instance, told me that the prevalent policy on the shoreline, including its development, was all a particular type of “business”: “If it’s not related to profit, they don’t recognize it, *they can’t read it*. Do you understand what I’m trying to say? That’s how strong the corruption is” (2023, my translation and emphasis). His insistence that only one type of business was visible or legible (as his own phrasing “they can’t read it” implied) interested me. It suggested to me that the prevalent narratives of corruption pertained at least partly to concerns with the coastline’s “legibility” to the public if not to the state.

To further illustrate this perception, in this section I will focus on the controversies surrounding the governance of coastal sand dunes. The threat to dune formations from the ever-expanding coastal development has been among the most contested issues along the Bulgarian Black Sea coastline in recent decades. Since no baseline data is available for the distribution of dunes prior to the construction of the first tourism resorts in the 1950s, the assumptions about the exact extent of changes to the dune habitats over the entire coastline cannot be certain. Nevertheless, what *is* certain is that a significant decline in the habitat exists and that it can be largely attributed to the development of the coastline for tourism, as captured for example by a study conducted on the Sunny Beach area that showed the dune coverage decreasing by over 50 percent from 1960 – 1970 to 2005, while the urban and tourism infrastructure coverage simultaneously had increased by more than 800 percent (Stancheva et al. 2011).

In 2008, Bulgaria’s Black Sea Coast Development Law (“Закон за устройство на черноморското крайбрежие” usually referred to with its Bulgarian acronym,

ZUCHK) declared coastal sand dunes regardless of their type (mobile, immobile/vegetated, or forested) as public property that cannot be declared private (ZUCHK, 2008: Article 6, (4), 4). ZUCHK also stipulates stringent regimes of protection for all dune formations, regardless of whether they are located within a protected area or not – and regardless of whether the property was privately owned prior to the law’s adoption or not (ZUCHK, 2008, Article 17a, 24a). When I spoke to responsible government experts in 2017, they assured me that after ZUCHK’s entry into force, construction on dunes no longer occurred under any circumstances (Interview, 2017). Yet other interlocutors expressed doubts about the law’s implementation. Environmental advocate Andrei, for instance, told me that “when you look at it, you can’t distinguish either zone A or zone B [as per ZUCHK], it’s all built over” (2017, my translation). In 2017, several interlocutors shared concrete instances they had witnessed dunes being leveled down and beaches overconstructed; and both before and since then, the media and non-governmental organizations publicly reported on planned or ongoing construction in dune habitats (Bivol 2012, Capital News 2015, Dimitrov 2023).

Many of these instances have originated from legal ambiguity pertaining to the cadastral maps. The formal protection that ZUCHK provides for all types of dunes depends on the official cartography showing where the dunes are. Yet in 2020, a large study conducted by the independent organization “Green Laws” reported that large percentages of the dunes along the coastline were not in fact reflected in Bulgaria’s cadastral maps as the law required (Avramov 2020, Goranova 2020). Those that were recorded did not always retain their designation. In some cases, areas previously recognized as dunes and thus as exclusive state property lost their status, allowing potential plans for construction to go ahead. In the spring of 2023, for example, nongovernmental (NGO) experts alerted that the dunes located behind a popular camping beach on the southern coastline had been recategorized as agricultural land, based on a new cartographic assessment reversing their previous categorization as dunes – with only a two months’ difference (but marking a change in government)² between the two cartographic surveys (Goranova, 2023, Mediapool 2023, Dimitrov 2023).

Scott (1998: 36) dubbed the cadastre “[t]he crowning artifact of [the state’s] mighty simplification” of land and especially landholdings. As such, the purpose of the cadastral map in modern statecraft must be to reduce the complex social practices of landscape to easily legible entities (Scott 1998). A difficult to read cadastral map belies precisely this function. A cadastral map on which the status of dunes is constantly updated and contested serves only those who profit from ambiguity, as environmental activist Georgi noted in our conversation:

So, out of 4,500 acres of dunes in Bulgaria, 3,500 acres of dunes have come into private hands in mysterious ways [...] this pilfering of state property hap-

² A government change occurred on 2 August 2022 after a vote of no confidence against the elected government resulted in a new caretaker government coming into power.

pened with the involvement of all those governments that were in place, and everyone was involved in this. Because this can't happen just like that on state property. [...] It happens with documents, with alterations, with the cadastre [...] everyone was involved (Georgi, 2017, my translation).

Georgi's certainty that state actors had been involved in the recategorization of dunes, in contrast to Scott's postulations, casts the state cadastre as an entity that imposes illegibility on the landscape. Rather than *seeing*, as per the title of Scott's book, interlocutors like Georgi thus perceived the state to be *squinting* – either deliberately or because, as he observed, it had “totally abdicated from its duty and responsibilities” (2017). Set against the context of the wider transition on the coastline, the narrative framework of talking about corruption therefore afforded the community members I spoke to the opportunity “to question land and resource dispossession by elites” (Doshi and Ranganathan 2019: 436). Talking about corruption, hence, served to identify and question the perceived “state myopia”. By commenting on the cadastre, on specific procedures, or processes, interlocutors pushed not only for transparency but also for the state to perform its duty of making the coastline *legible*.

Although in this instance I have chosen to illustrate these dynamics through the example of the dunes, over the course of my fieldwork between 2017 and 2023 I also heard similar accounts of various other coastal features – beaches, protected areas, wetlands – being redefined through legal procedures. Common in these different stories was the attention that interlocutors placed on the landscape and its change. Much in the way that Dorondel and Șerban have previously argued that the environment can underpin “the imagination and social aspirations” of economically disadvantaged communities (Dorondel and Șerban 2020: 128), interlocutors' attention to the coastline's transformation underpinned a wider societal critique. Thereby, the coastal environment – and the demands to define it and make it legible – serve as a site of narrative protest or resistance. In other words, interlocutors' narratives about corruption were influenced by their experiences of the ambiguous transition and land reform processes; but, at the same time, they were impacted by meanings imbued in the coastal landscape itself, that is, the coastline and nature coming to represent a utopic vision of society that speakers did not perceive being reflected in how the space was managed.

*The unbearable efficiency of informality:
Informal practices in environmental governance*

Throughout my fieldwork, I also observed instances in which environmental governance on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast necessitated informal practices that blurred the lines between legible state procedures and private initiative. Steenberg (2016) has made the point that informality, despite its negative framing in the dom-

inant state-centrist perspective, not only often defines the daily experiences of communities but also frequently becomes their preferred practice. Examples from urban planning scholarship, meanwhile, have shown that at times informal practices can become a necessary part of management (Haid 2017, Roy 2005). The interviews I conducted with government experts in Bulgaria during both the 2017 – 2018 and 2023 fieldwork suggested that in some cases informality can become the preferred choice for institutions, too.

In the accounts I heard, the necessity for employing informal practices often arose from an insufficiency seen in formal means, especially resource scarcity. In line with patterns evident across Europe (Kati et al. 2014, McCauley 2008), environmental management is often underresourced in comparison with other departments. This pattern can certainly be observed in Bulgaria. In both my fieldwork studies conducted in 2017 – 2018 and in 2023, the theme of limited financial and human resources frequently recurred in conversations with experts from institutions tasked with environmental management. For example, when I met with Kaloyan in 2018, he asked if I could drive him and a colleague from the coastal town where they lived (and where I was staying) to their office in another, smaller coastal town. Despite being government employees, they did not have a budget allowance for fuel for their daily commute, so during the winter months – when the public transport between coastal towns was limited – they ordinarily hitchhiked or asked friends to drive them to and from work. In 2023, these kinds of problems persisted – particularly because, during the spring period when I was conducting interviews, a regular government had not yet been put in place following the most recent round of elections, and thus state budgets were in a temporary limbo. Nevertheless, I consistently heard from interlocutors that the budgetary limitations had impacted the availability of trained specialists consistently for a long time. One government expert, for instance, explained that on-the-ground personnel of the Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW) were “very few people, especially at the coast,” forcing these few people to be “like flying Dutchmen, running back and forth” between too long a list of cases and tasks, including control, monitoring, and data collection (Kalin, 2023, my translation). He indicated that the compensation the Ministry could offer was in no way sufficient to consistently recruit or retain qualified staff.

A direct result of these limited resources was the scarcity of environmental data available to the government on a range of parameters. In 2017, Deyan told me that the government had only even begun collecting data on the coast in 2012 – before that, he admitted, “we had no people working there” (Deyan, 2017, my translation). As a result, in contrast to Scott’s theory of rendering the landscape “legible,” the government at times scrambled for the means to obtain the quantities of data that would enable extensive precautionary planning or to provide monitoring data required by policies undertaken as part of its inter- and supranational obligations.

Often, the solution to these challenges has been collaboration with nongovernmental actors, especially environmental NGOs – occurring through both formal and informal means. When the upcoming legislation for Natura 2000 as part of

Bulgaria's accession negotiations required detailed descriptions for significant wetland and bird protection areas, for example, the necessary scientific information and plans came from data provided by NGOs rather than government-generated data: all 164 areas, NGO expert Stoyan told me, had been submitted to the European Commission precisely as NGOs defined them – “the Minister just added his signature” (Stoyan, 2023, my translation). In this example, as in many cases of contemporary environmental projects, the collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental organizations was formally established – that is, both legally and financially defined (Association of Parks in Bulgaria, 2020).

At other times, informal practices became one possible solution to which individuals working in both governmental and civic institutions resorted in order to get the actual tasks of environmental management done. As an example, interlocutors recounted how experts from the Bulgarian Society for the Preservation of Birds (BSPB) would voluntarily supply data on different bird species to experts working at the MOEW – not only regardless of the lack of any official agreements between the two institutions, but indeed also regardless of an ongoing legal suit between them (Deyan, government expert, 2017). Similarly, Deyan told me, various state institutions including the Regional Inspectorates for the Environment and the MOEW relied on the help from NGOs, including the BSPB and even the hunters' associations, to conduct the yearly monitoring of birds (the midwinter count): “we all get together, decide who goes where, help each other with transport, share data among ourselves [...] But the truth is that this kind of good work only exists at the expert level” (Deyan, 2017, my translation). These kinds of collaboration, he highlighted, were entirely informal: they had not been negotiated on paper between the government departments and the NGOs represented by the individual experts involved. Indeed, in some cases these midwinter counts were collaboratively executed by experts representing institutions and organizations simultaneously involved in legal actions against each other (Deyan, 2017). Despite this, however, the collaborations were vital for the government's ability to fulfill its international obligations. Without the data the MOEW received from NGOs, Deyan told me in 2017, its formal reports to the EU would have remained incomplete and Bulgaria would have failed on its obligations towards the European Commission.

In speaking to various interlocutors representing public institutions during both fieldwork studies, hence, I observed that “good governance” sometimes meant blurring the lines between formal and informal practices. These observations align directly with anthropological studies of informality across various geographies, which have shown how informal practices and interpersonal relationships can become part of governance through the intersection of private and public networks (Haid 2017, Kim 2020, Torsello and Venard 2016). As the examples I have outlined above illustrate, however, institutions do not only adopt informality as the byproduct of their employees' social networks; instead, the informal practices in question can at times also represent good or efficient management choices under difficult circumstances. This role of informal practices complicates the perceptions of corruption on the Bul-

garian Black Sea shore from an anthropological perspective. It necessitates a closer reevaluation of the nuances of not only the governance issue or the social process, but also of the intersections between the two.

Histories of informality and legacies of societal (dis)trust

These nuances are further complicated by the ways in which public policy and private interest have historically intersected in each context where narratives of corruption emerge. As Torsello has pointed out, the distinction between public and private interests that underpins most definitions of corruption rests heavily on Western perceptions of the state and its functioning – perceptions that do not always apply in different contexts (Torsello 2011). Torsello’s reservation certainly applies to Bulgaria and its coastline. In its modern history, the functioning of the Bulgarian formal economy has at times been closely tied with the country’s social fabric. This was evident during the early 1900s, for example, in how agricultural credit functioned through the Bulgarian Agricultural Bank (later the Bulgarian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank, or BACB), then the prevalent financial actor in the country. A publicly owned legal entity, the bank was founded on the basis of multiple villages and towns’ capital (Madrow 1938). As one of its predominant activities, the BACB offered credits to various small-scale ventures – including ones on the coast, like the Burgas fishing cooperative (Bulgarian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank 1942). In most cases, these credits were given out by agents embedded in the local community whose personal knowledge of the potential loan takers played a role in their decision to disburse the funds (Madrow 1938: 563). Pre-socialist governments, in turn, heavily supported and indeed often formally guaranteed such cooperative credits, thus effectively embedding social capital into government policy – a practice that economic historian Rumén Avramov has defined as the “corruption of the national entrepreneurial mentality” (Avramov 2007: 167, my translation). Thus, informal practices relying on social capital underpinned national financial policies in the early 1900s; and Avramov’s phrase suggests that these practices could be criticized as being corrupt. Yet the historical links between morality, social connection, and governance in the Bulgarian context, when read through anthropological or critical geography perspectives on corruption, could also be seen to challenge Avramov’s conclusion. The BACB’s credit-lending practices illustrate a case in which public policy and private networks were not only *not* delineated from each other, but instead worked in tandem.

The links between public and private became revalorized and, at the same time, further blurred during socialism – even as the regime upended previous policies by creating new, state-controlled cooperatives, in many cases through forced participation (Migevev 1995, Theesfeld and Boevsky 2005). As ethnographers of socialism have shown, the period between 1944 and 1989 transformed private perspectives into political stances and frequently saw public decisions come to be made through private deliberation, for example, in instances of nepotism in public hires, reciprocal

favors determining bureaucratic decisions, or other forms of mutual dependencies shaping formal decisions (Luleva 2021). Both politics and the working life, in general, came to depend on social capital and relationships of trust (Petrova 2010). This culture of informality also came to characterize the tourist industry, which gained significance with the construction of the first coastal resorts during the 1950s. Practices of trust became the industry's driving forces, often taking precedence over institutional pathways of decision-making (Luleva 2021). Luleva's ethnographic work illustrates how elements of this reliance on trust and informality have endured into the contemporary context; along with others (Giordano and Kostova 2002) she has suggested the possibility that these informal patterns have been so deeply embedded into the social fabric as to influence Bulgaria's overarching economic and political transformations (Luleva 2021).

In my fieldwork, I often felt that this culture of distrust functioned as a narrative pattern that members of the coastal community I spoke to resorted to, as well. In both interviews and passive observations, I consistently had the impression that many speakers on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast are sensitive to historical developments and dependencies, including and perhaps especially when these pertained to corruption. When expressing views about either corruption or unsuccessful governance processes on the shore, interlocutors often cited the uneven transition to democracy – an often-repeated phrase I heard was “dependencies going 30 years back” – in their diagnosis (Interviews, 2023). I also heard from different interlocutors, both in 2017 – 2018 and in 2023, that constructing a civil society was still taking its time in Bulgaria or even “Bulgarians simply aren't ready for democracy” (Andrei, 2023). At first glance, these comments align with Krastev's point (2004) that narratives of corruption serve a broad-sweeping function as commentary on politics and society. Yet at a deeper investigation, comments like Andrei's also point to a way in which the culture of distrust also serves as a powerful metanarrative. Speaking of both corruption and the lack of social trust allowed interlocutors to diagnose and address perceived maladies relating to the coastline's development. It afforded them a way to supply the legibility they felt was missing in many of the processes occurring on the coast.

Unsurprisingly, interlocutors also frequently shared this sense of distrust themselves, mainly when speaking of public institutions. In 2023, for example, local small business owner Anelia recounted a popular anecdote of the “mean aunty in the administration who tells you off” as one that well represented her own experience (2023, my translation). Accordingly, she shared a pronounced distrust in formal institutions: “the interactions you've had with any institutions bring you the feeling that if you have a problem, they should be the very last instance to go to, and that if you can find a better way to solve it, I think you'd better not bother. They'll cost you time and nerves” (Anelia, 2023, my translation). By contrast, she thought, NGOs and volunteer organizations “filled that gap in trust in something larger than yourself, which you think will do the work and as a matter of fact will do the work not because they are paid but because it's their cause, it's their meaning” (2023, my

translation). Anelia's account hence suggests that what distinguishes NGO actors from institutional ones is the presence of a "cause" and "meaning" – in her view, both necessary prerequisites for societal trust. Implied in her account was the conclusion that care for the environment was the "cause" and "meaning" that she would have liked to see brought to the fore.

What her account also hints at, therefore, is the symbolic role of the environment and care for it as a reason why certain actors may come to think more positively of informal practices over formal ones in the Bulgarian context. The early 1900s financial policy in support of small-scale ventures had not only blurred the lines between public and private interest, but also enabled an economic model in which communities were directly involved in the management of natural resources and were able to utilize their earnings as a way of supporting social and environmental, rather than simply financial, sustainability. This direct participation in the coastline's development largely ended with the socialist forced collectivization and later with the privatization process after socialism. In this way, the transitions first to socialism and later to capitalism in the Bulgarian context were not only a source of cultural and economic rupture (Giordano and Kostova 2002, Luleva 2021), but also served to distance local communities from direct participation in environmental management – either in real terms, as in the privatization process described earlier, or in terms of how individual interlocutors related to the process, as in Anelia's account.

Conclusion: Legacies of informality and environmental meaning

Given these interlinkages between public and private in the recent history of Bulgaria's Black Sea coastline, perhaps it is not surprising that informality, corruption, and societal distrust likewise can prove difficult to pick apart in the context. While economic injustice and deliberate opacity certainly do exist in Bulgaria, laying the focus on anthropological observations of societal and institutional practices – rather than on economic misdemeanor – reveals more complex facets of the discussion than the ones that international agencies, global and national media, or indeed many societal actors in Bulgaria ordinarily present. In the anecdotes I have recounted above, corruption and informality take on several distinct roles: as social processes, metaphors, or metanarratives; as institutional dynamics or even strategies of governance; and perhaps most importantly, as multilayered facets of the relationship between the public and private realms.

These findings largely reflect recent anthropological and critical geography scholarship on corruption, especially in terms of its challenge to the moralistic treatments of corruption (Doshi and Ranganathan 2019, Prato 2013, Steenberg 2021, Torsello and Venard 2016). In particular, some of the narratives of corruption I have presented in this article, like those pertaining to the cadastral maps of dunes, can be seen to function as a form of protest and deliberate resistance to perceived economic and environmental injustice. These observations directly speak to scholarship that

has shown that corruption discourses function as a way of questioning resource and land dispossession (Doshi and Ranganathan 2019) or even relating to space and its changes (Kim 2020). Given the rapid transformation of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast over the last three decades, the resistive aspect of the narratives about dunes also attains an additional significance: responding to shifting forms of meaning and morality with respect to the environment (Antonova and van Dam 2022, Torsello and Venard 2016), including symbolism of key issues like transparency or access to governance.

At the same time, reviewing these narratives in concert with representations of informality at the institutional level opens new perspectives on this discussion. Accounts from different government experts related in this article suggest that informality can at times coexist with good governance – as urban landscape scholarship has also argued (Haid 2017, McFarlane 2012). The examples I have recounted show that government agents resort to informality for more reasons than personal gain, and sometimes do so in order to uphold their private commitment to environmental priorities despite the limited resources available to them. Given that this moralistic justification for informality is further motivated and supported by personal networks – as in the case of government and NGO experts working together in private capacity to deliver public commitments – these observations raise important questions about the ways in which the societal and institutional level *do* and even *should* impact each other.

Finally, at least in the context of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, perceived legacies like the culture of distrust and the way that the environment comes to symbolize (in)transparency or access or lack of participation in governance processes complicate these interdependencies further. Against the backdrop of public and private intermingling, one way in which interlocutors seem to recognize *corruption* – in the sense of a *moral* institutional failing – pertains to the coastline's legibility, and thus to environmental meaning. In other words, corruption narratives not only respond to interlocutors' sense of dispossession or environmental injustice, but also emerge specifically from cases in which individual speakers feel precluded from the development of the coastal environment. Since the environment has played host to communities' visions and hopes for the future in the Bulgarian context (Antonova and van Dam 2022, Dorondel and Șerban 2020), the sense of being unable to shape it has equally had a powerful impact. Environmental loss thus strongly motivates societal distrust.

These findings are relevant beyond just the Bulgarian or the wider postsocialist context. As recent scholarship has also shown – and indeed as Bulgaria's decades-old standing as an EU member state in itself confirms, – narratives of corruption can emerge just as robustly in established Western liberal capitalist societies (Doshi and Ranganathan 2019). The false dichotomy between public and private spheres that motivates classic definitions of corruption may be based on Western concepts of the functioning of the state (Torsello 2011), but it does not necessarily *apply* uniformly to all Western contexts. Instead, the interplay of formal and in-

formal practices, its iteration on the governance level, and its reflection in societal discourse revisited in this article could well suggest alternate interpretations for other contexts, as well. Similarly, and perhaps even more significantly, the way that environmental meaning motivates community actors to feel more distanced from governance processes or helps them frame their frustrations with issues of transparency has wide implications. As rapid environmental transformations become a shared experience across the world, the role that environmental meaning plays in motivating societal distrust may yet grow stronger. It is an interdependency that has already been shown to underpin significant political shifts elsewhere, including in contemporary contexts (Antonova 2023). Understanding how societal and institutional actors interact and how environmental sentiments inform these interactions may well make the difference between the state *seeing* and *squinting*.

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