

Being Sold down the River.  
An Investigation of Conflicting Environmental Narratives  
in Present-day Southeast Europe

**Abstract:** Over the next few years, more than 3000 hydroelectric plants will progressively invade the Balkan peninsula, with eight dams on the Albanian stretch of the Vjosa River alone and 23 so-called ‘small’ hydropower plants on its tributaries.

This wave of dam building across Southeast Europe has already received much of its funding from large multilateral development banks such as the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC).

These infrastructural projects have called into play two antagonistic groupings: on the one hand, local governments supported by international funding organizations, who claim that the projects will boost the economy and provide the country with international visibility. On the other, international environmental non-governmental organizations, together with the local populations of the designated areas, who are well aware that the dams will submerge not only their homes but also the agricultural land from which they gain their livelihood. Those who oppose the ‘dam tsunami’ feel that the government, thanks to the funds being provided by multilateral development banks, is working against their best interests, they are literally and metaphorically ‘being sold down the river’.

By applying van Leeuwen’s sociosemantic inventory and a detailed transitivity analysis to press releases published by the opposing factions, the aim of this paper is to outline the way in which the construal of represented participants’ identities can enable us to access their underlying value systems and to assess which cultural, ideological and political factors have influenced agency, causality and responsibility.

**Keywords:** *transitivity, Systemic Functional Grammar, evaluative language, multimodality*

## 1. Introduction

To those of us whose interests do not lie in the field of contemporary geopolitics, the Balkan peninsula may well bring to mind only images of the violent warfare that characterized the region throughout the 1990s, or the oft-published statistical data regarding illegal immigration routes into the European Union in the early 2000s.

Better known today as ‘Southeast Europe’ (SEE), instability and vulnerability are still foundational traits of this topographical area.

In itself the regional denomination SEE is porous, stretching and shrinking to include more or fewer countries, depending on the institutional body with whom the Balkan states interact: the World Bank, for example, only incorporates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia within SEE, whereas the World Health Organisation also includes Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova, but excludes Kosovo.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the uncertainty regarding geographical confines, the peninsula’s latent vulnerability also stems from the fact that Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia are all EU candidate countries, with Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as potential candidates. The status of ‘candidate country’ and to a greater extent ‘potential candidate country’ clearly entails a need to fulfil expectations and measure up to standards set by others; in this case the political, economic, administrative and institutional accession criteria and the legislative *acquis communautaire* established by the European Commission.

The rather subservient condition of the South East European states is further enhanced by their having signed the Energy Community Treaty, whose mission is to create an integrated, pan-European energy market. Besides being ‘candidates’ they thus also become ‘Contracting Parties committed to implementing key EU energy law’.<sup>2</sup> Again, the term ‘contracting parties’ points to a condition of acquiescence, the need to comply with terms and agreements established elsewhere, by others.

Both the implementation of pre-accession instruments and the Energy Community framework grant the European Union and other international organizations a considerable amount of leverage over the SEE states, whose driving aim is to access EU membership within the briefest possible delay, and hence to comply with all the norms that govern political, social and economic integration. Consequently, a number of powerful multilateral development banks and international agencies such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Development Association, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, have been actively involved in monitoring economic development in the area for over twenty years.

The energy sector is just one of the areas in which the influence of the World Bank and other agencies with gate-keeping duties over investments and loans is heavily felt, especially due to the focus

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, “South-eastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN)”, <http://www.euro.who.int/en/about-us/networks/south-eastern-europe-health-network-seehn>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Energy Community, “Creating an Integrated and Sustainable Pan-European Energy Market” (2018), <https://www.energy-community.org/>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

on renewable energy sources underlined by the Energy Community Treaty and the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement – signed and ratified by all SEE countries.

And it is precisely in the field of renewable energy sources, specifically hydropower, that a little-known environmental battle is currently raging throughout the Balkan peninsula.

Known as ‘the Blue Heart of Europe’, the peninsula boasts some of the longest and wildest rivers in Europe where endemic flora and fauna still live in pristine conditions, and riverine agriculture and livestock farming are “economically significant, both in terms of value added and employment”,<sup>3</sup> yet in recent years a ‘hydropower tsunami’ (phrase initially coined by Ulrich Eichelmann, CEO of the Riverwatch NGO) has hit the region with large scale dams and small scale hydropower stations being built along the main rivers and their tributaries.

The two parties to the environmental conflict, on the one hand the funding bodies, the World Bank group and other multilateral development organisations, upheld by local governments and regional press apparatuses, on the other a consortium of environmental NGOs, who have launched the ‘Save the Blue Heart of Europe’ campaign, together with the local inhabitants whose river-based livelihoods are being compromised, each tell very different stories. And, as is often the case in mediated public conflict where credibility subsumes truth, the precise impact of the economic intervention by international bodies and the number of hydropower projects being financed is difficult to gauge.

In this paper, by means of a small corpus made up of two press releases issued by the conflicting parties, I investigate the manner in which the two opposing factions articulate their rival ‘discourses’, granting the term its widest possible acceptance namely: “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events”.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Corpus and Methodology

The online corpus materials centre on two recent events in the current environmental conflict involving multilateral development organizations and a consortium of international NGOs. The first is the announcement in May 2018 by the World Bank that it will be providing an additional 12 million Euro loan for a ‘Dam Safety Project’ to Albania, to top up the original credit of 30 million Euros (2008) and the first loan of 15.5 million Euros (2011). The fact that this additional loan is being granted specifically to Albania has considerable relevance for the NGOs because, despite the fact that the

<sup>3</sup> OECD, “Competitiveness in South East Europe: A Policy Outlook 2018”, *Competitiveness and Private Sector Development* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Vivien Burr, *An Introduction to Social Constructionism* (London: Routledge, 1995), 48.

Vjosa, Mat and Drin rivers flowing through the country are considered the most uncontaminated in Europe and SEE, Albania is the country with the highest number of currently planned or potential hydropower plants, approximately 500 of the 3000 to be built or renovated throughout the Balkans in the next three years.<sup>5</sup>

The second ‘landmark’ event to have occurred in recent months concerns the publication by Bankwatch, an NGO network with 17 member groups spread across central and eastern Europe, of an in-depth report on the financing of hydropower in SEE.<sup>6</sup> The report is particularly incriminatory in that it reveals that the World Bank and other multilateral development agencies are not merely, as they claim, providing loans for the safety and rehabilitation of existing dams, but are effectively investing in the construction of new hydropower plants of which at least 37 projects in protected areas or internationally recognised areas of high biodiversity value.<sup>7</sup>

We are therefore in the presence of two substantially different accounts, both of which claim to be acting in the best interests of the South East European countries and yet present contradictory facts. On the one hand, an international funding institution, whose mission is to “reduce poverty and build shared prosperity in developing countries”,<sup>8</sup> but whose dynamic thrust towards progress and development may neglect environmental issues; on the other, an international consortium of conservationist NGOs, whose desire to preserve the riverine *status quo* may not contemplate the need for integration within European frameworks.

The aim of this paper is clearly not to dispute the reported facts *per se*, but rather to analyze the corpus and investigate the linguistic and representational devices adopted to identify social actors, outline their agentive scope and align readers with one or other of the accounts. The small contrastive corpus is therefore made up of the World Bank press release announcing its decision to grant Albania a

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank, “Additional Financing to Energy Community of South East Europe APL Program APL 5 for Albania Dam Safety (P166469)”, Report no. PAD2749 (2018), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/426051527478225166/pdf/Albania-Dam-Safety-PP-05082018.pdf>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>6</sup> CEE Bankwatch Network, “Who We Are”, (2018), <https://bankwatch.org/about/who-we-are>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>7</sup> CEE Bankwatch Network, “Financing for Hydropower in Protected Areas of South East Europe”, Report (2018), <https://balkanrivers.net/sites/default/files/Financing-hydropower-southeast-Europe-web-fin.pdf>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>8</sup> The World Bank, “Who We Are”, (2018), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/who-we-are>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

second loan<sup>9</sup> and the Bankwatch network press release heralding its whistle-blowing *Financing Hydropower* report.<sup>10</sup>

In keeping with the view that media texts do not simply reflect reality, but rather construct diverse versions of it, mirroring the social positions and interests of their producers in an “enactment, reproduction and legitimization of power and domination”,<sup>11</sup> analysis needs to bring to the fore the manner in which “ideological saturation”<sup>12</sup> is naturalized in these texts to the point of becoming invisible.

Within the broad confines of Critical Discourse Analysis, which sees linguistic phenomena as socially determined with naturally ensuing social effects, and “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts”,<sup>13</sup> I focus on the manner in which participants’ identities, actions and relations are delineated in the texts keeping in mind that the expressive value of words is a central concern in this study because of the focus on persuasive communication upheld by the two parties and by media discourse as a whole.

I employ van Leeuwen’s analytical framework or “sociosemantic inventory” to outline the way in which the construal of represented participants’ identities in the media accounts can enable us to access the underlying value systems embodied by the two factions.<sup>14</sup> Though agency can in part be encapsulated by the definitional terms employed to construe identity, I will also carry out a transitivity analysis on the corpus texts in order to identify the agentive positions (who the participants are), processes (what is being done), and circumstances (when, where, and how an action occurred).

Transitivity is a semantic concept belonging to the ideational meta-function of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and allows us to reveal who plays an important role in a given clause and who undergoes the effects of that action alongside generalisable notions of Agent and Patient. The grammar

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank, “World Bank Supports Safety of Hydroelectric Dams in Albania and Enhanced Connectivity in Regional Power Market”, Press release (2018), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/05/25/world-bank-supports-safety-of-hydroelectric-dams-in-albania-and-enhanced-connectivity-in-regional-power-market>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>10</sup> CEE Bankwatch Network, “International banks fuelling a hydropower tsunami that’s decimating pristine Balkan rivers – study”, Press release (2018), [https://bankwatch.org/press\\_release/international-banks-fuelling-a-hydropower-tsunami-that-s-decimating-pristine-balkan-rivers-study](https://bankwatch.org/press_release/international-banks-fuelling-a-hydropower-tsunami-that-s-decimating-pristine-balkan-rivers-study), last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Teun A. van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis”, in Deborah Schiffrin et al., eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 354.

<sup>12</sup> Gunter Kress, “Representational Resources and the Production of Subjectivity: Questions for the Theoretical Development of Critical Discourse Analysis in a Multicultural Society”, in Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 268.

<sup>13</sup> van Dijk, “Text and Context of Parliamentary Debates”, in Paul Bayley, ed., *Crosscultural Perspective on Parliamentary Discourse* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 352.

<sup>14</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2008), 23.

of the clause “construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types”,<sup>15</sup> and such processes can be listed as follows: material processes (doing), mental processes (knowing, liking, sensing), relational processes (being, possessing), existential processes (happening, existing), behavioural processes (behaving) and verbal processes (saying). Transitivity, then, focuses on the clauses in the text: “asking who are the actors, who are the acted upon, and what processes are involved in that action”.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, because the online articles possess characteristic expository layouts among their compositional features, a simplified multimodal analysis inspired by Kress and van Leeuwen’s tripartite framework is also employed.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Definitional issues

Before beginning the analysis proper, it may be useful to rapidly delineate the object of study. Press releases are short texts which organizations and institutions publish on their corporate websites or issue to members of the news media in order to divulge what they consider to be newsworthy information. Press releases have therefore “always occupied a special place in the theory and practice of public relations”.<sup>18</sup> As both the content matter and the author of the press release are internal to the organization, such documents inevitably have a vested interest in presenting the institution in a positive light. It is by mixing the informative and the promotional that “they invariably focus exclusively on positive aspects and incorporate persuasive and sometimes even promotional elements”.<sup>19</sup> The interdiscursive nature of press releases also “has a bearing on the news media discourse whose features release writers borrow to construct their own identity and role on the web”.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of genre, broadly considered to be “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes”,<sup>21</sup> press releases fall within the category of

<sup>15</sup> Michael A. K. Halliday and Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Third Edition (London: Routledge, 2004), 106.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Matheson, *Media Discourses: Analysing Media Texts* (Maidenhead, Open U.P., 2005), 66.

<sup>17</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Paola Catenaccio, “Press Releases as a Hybrid Genre: Addressing the Informative/Promotional Conundrum”, *Pragmatics*, 18.1 (March 2008), 9-32.

<sup>19</sup> Vijay Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse: A Genre-Based View* (London: Continuum, 2004), 90.

<sup>20</sup> Girolamo Tessuto, “Newsworthy or Market-oriented? Analysing the Genre of Web-mediated Tourism Press Releases for Rhetorical Move Structure and Communicative Purpose(s)”, in Maurizio Gotti et al., eds., *Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being: Representing the Voices of Tourism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017), 175.

<sup>21</sup> John M. Swales, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1990), 58.

institutional communication, a “hybrid genre” in which the need to inform and promote coexists with the canonical space (and time) constraints inherent to the text type.<sup>22</sup>

When the press release serves to divulge the partial contents of a longer document or study produced by the issuing body, as in the two cases under investigation, then it shares an intertextual part to whole relationship with the original text, and the issues/topics selected to be represented have necessarily been granted precedence over a considerable amount of other information which has been excluded on the basis of a “system of constraints and extra-linguistic, social motives for selecting or rejecting linguistic elements or discursive patterns in the construction of a discourse”.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2 The World Bank press release

#### 3.2.1 Visual analysis of layout and headline sequence

Due to its globalized power and breadth of influence, the World Bank can be considered “a primary definer”<sup>24</sup> in a “hierarchy of credibility”<sup>25</sup> in which the media “tends faithfully and impartially, to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society’s institutional order”.<sup>26</sup> By carrying out a multimodal analysis of the press release, it soon becomes apparent that the weight of credibility wielded by the multilateral development bank hinges on both visual impact and informational content.

The online article follows the canonical expository layout of World Bank press releases, and the visual effect produced reflects the rigor and order suited to serious institutional documents with low modality markers in terms of “colour saturation”, “differentiation” and “modulation”.<sup>27</sup> The page is overall white with black print and only the title at the top of the page is set within a light grey rectangle. This rectangle forms the top of a ‘T-shape’ which then leads down into the centrally-positioned body of the text. Such positioning serves to enhance the apparent rigour of the text as “in contemporary Western society, squares and rectangles are the elements of the mechanical, technological order, of the world of human construction”.<sup>28</sup> It can indeed be posited that the layout of

<sup>22</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 128.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher N. Candlin and Yon Maley, “Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity in the Discourse of Alternative Dispute Resolution”, in Britt-Louise Gunnarsson et al., eds., *The Construction of Professional Discourse* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), 203.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Palgrave, 1978), 58.

<sup>25</sup> Howard S. Becker, “Whose Side Are We on”, *Social Problems*, 14.3 (January 1967), 239-247.

<sup>26</sup> Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, “Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar of Colour”, *Visual Communication*, 1.3 (October 2002), 343-368, 347.

<sup>28</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 55.

these press releases partakes in a metonymic relationship with the content, the visual form reflecting and bolstering the rigour of the written content.

The article and headline share the same font, with the title being about 4 sizes bigger but not in bold. The nouns, verbs, and adjectives in the title all begin with capital letters, only the prepositions and conjunction are in small letters. This enables the ‘natural’ capitalization of the terms World Bank to be spread from agent to process and onto circumstances in a balanced manner, without attributing more importance to the ‘doer’ than to the ‘done’ or the ‘done to’. No hierarchical order is visually imposed and this clearly suits the political/communicative intent of an organization whose mission statement outlines “sustainable solutions ... and shared prosperity”.<sup>29</sup>

The only part of the text which differs in font, and which is also in bold, is the place/time identifier, in this case “Washington, May 25, 2018”, placed at the beginning of the top paragraph. This is common practice in press releases, and doubtless serves to underline the fact that these articles can be published by different member countries; it also marks, however, the ubiquitous world presence of the multilateral development organisation.

The idea of balance and order is further enhanced by paragraph length and subdivision. The text is subdivided into five short paragraphs with the first two counting five lines, the following two four, and the last one three. This provides an impression of progressive ‘tapering off’ and visually reflects the idea, in content terms, that the bulk of the information is in the initial part of the article slowly winding down towards the conclusion. Thus, the visual weight of the paragraphs would appear to reflect the compositional structure of the text and echo the information load and priority, as Partington *et al.* state: “evaluation can also be expressed by the particular positioning or ordering of “blocks” of language in certain places in a text”.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2.2 Lexical analysis of headline and paragraphs

A rapid perusal of online World Bank press release headlines reveals that they are consistently long and unwieldy. Of the 60 headlines examined for mere comparative purposes, 47 contained more than 10 words and none fewer than 5.

The heading of the press release under examination reads: “World Bank Supports Safety of Hydroelectric Dams in Albania and Enhanced Connectivity in Regional Power Market”, it contains 16 words and conveys an impression of considerable lexical density.

<sup>29</sup> The World Bank, “Who We Are”.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Partington, et al., *Patterns and Meanings in Discourse: Theory and Practice in Corpus-assisted Discourse Studies* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013), 57.



The headline presents the World Bank as actor with the verb ‘supports’ indicating a material process; both of these elements, however, deserve further comment: the World Bank is clearly an institution governed and regulated by sentient beings who can and should be held responsible for their actions and decisions. By suppressing the human element and placing a monolithic, impersonal body in agentive position, one eliminates any possibility of interacting, questioning or attributing responsibility to those who make up the organisation. The material process ‘support’ is then a further example of abstraction: at first sight it evokes positive connotations in that those who ‘support’ contribute to an endeavour by showing solidarity in physical, material or empathetic terms and, customarily, the term found in object position clarifies the kind of support that is required and provided. However, in this context ‘to support’ merely refers to a financial loan transaction which is beneficial to *both* contracting parties and therefore ultimately devoid of any form of generosity or empathy. As Machin and Mayr state: “When we find such abstractions at the level of social action we have to ask why and what is being concealed”.<sup>31</sup>

Pursuing the examination of the headline, what is supported by the World Bank is “the safety of hydroelectric dams and enhanced connectivity in regional power market”. Here the two processes of ‘making safe’ and ‘enhancing’ have been transformed into nominalizations thus further contributing to the lexical density and ‘fuzziness’ of the headline. Indeed, by transforming processes into products through nominalizations we create “stable entities that progressively enter common usage”,<sup>32</sup> and in fact ‘Dam Safety’ is the expression systematically coined in all official documents and media output when describing the World Bank’s hydropower interventions in SEE, irrespective of what such ‘safety’ operations truly entail. As for the term ‘connectivity’, again the connotations point to alliance and solidarity, thus obfuscating the cooperative but also highly competitive processes which underlie energy distribution in a regional market economy.

A further linguistic strategy for representing social action is within a circumstance, such as within a prepositional phrase or a subordinate clause. Circumstances serve to background certain actions and foreground others. In the World Bank press release headline the main clause is accompanied by two locative prepositional clauses: “in Albania” and “in Regional Power Market” which, through the ‘remove effect’ of the preposition, are backgrounded in order to allow the positive ‘supporting’ and ‘enhancing’ actions of the World Bank to shine through.

A word for word analysis of the five paragraphs which make up the press release is beyond the scope of the present paper. So, I will focus my analysis on illustrating how the lexical abstraction which characterizes participants, processes and goals, the use of presuppositional assumptions and the

<sup>31</sup> David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (London: Sage, 2012), 115-116.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

massive use of nominalization, all serve to render the World Bank's actions vague, indefinite and non-threatening, an ideal strategy if one wishes to forward conflictual objectives in a covert manner.

The first paragraph of the press release opens with the only apparently 'sentient' actor present throughout the text: "The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors". The ostensible 'human' presence is, however, distanced by a two-step removal procedure: the directors belong to an (inanimate) board which in turn belongs to an (inanimate) entity. One can therefore posit that the use of this phrase rather than just 'World Bank' merely serves to lend hierarchical weight and importance to the ensuing process and can be classified as an occurrence of "functional honorifics ... terms that suggest a degree of seniority or a role that requires a degree of respect",<sup>33</sup> again the capitalization serves to visually drive the point home. The process which follows is expressed by the verb 'approve', which stands as a mixture between a material, mental and verbal process. As an indicator of a verbal process, approve can also be categorized as "a metapositional assertive verb".<sup>34</sup>

Such classificatory indeterminacy is a characteristic of transitivity analysis and as Halliday and Matthiessen point out: "the human condition is such that no singularly, determinate construction of experience would enable us to survive. We have to be able to see things in indeterminate ways: now this, now that, partly one thing, partly the other – the transitivity system is a paradigm example, and that lies at the core of the experiential component of grammar".<sup>35</sup>

The goal of 'approve' is "Euro 12 million of additional financing for Dam Safety Project". The positive financial actions of the World Bank, emphasized by the term 'additional', are clearly stated, yet once more the beneficiary is expressed as a stable entity as opposed to a dynamic process (one simply has to consider the difference in terms of attributable responsibility had the press release stated 'to make dams safe'). It can be said that this introductory sentence of the introductory paragraph serves principally to place the World Bank in a positive light both in terms of hierarchical relevance and generous financial contribution while remaining extremely vague as to the precise terms of the actor, process and beneficiary.

Throughout the rest of this first paragraph the subject position is taken over by 'the project' followed by the material process verbs 'enhance', 'improve', and once more 'enhance'; in turn, these process verbs are all preceded by the commissive modal 'will'. As a generic, impersonalised term 'the project' suppresses the nature/number/characteristics of the stakeholders, thus, as the Bankwatch NGO network claims, hiding the fact that individuals or companies operating outside legal boundaries could

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>34</sup> Caldas-Coulthard, "On Reporting Reporting: The Representation of Speech in Factual and Factional Narratives", in M. Coulthard, ed., *Advances in Written Text Analysis* (London: Routledge 1994), 304.

<sup>35</sup> Halliday and Matthiessen, *Construing Experience Through Meaning: A Language-based Approach to Cognition* (London: Cassell, 1999), 549.

also be involved. By substituting the sentient agentive element with a generic ‘project’, the World Bank’s endeavour also acquires connotations of stability, certainty and immutability, far-removed from any form of human vagary. The process verbs ‘enhance’ (employed twice) and ‘improve’ both have strong positive value yet remain vague and nowhere in the paragraph are we told how such actions will be carried out or indeed what they will entail. Halliday describes such material process verbs as of the “creative type” in that they “bring about actions rather than actually do them”.<sup>36</sup> The commissive modal ‘will’ which precedes the three process verbs, embodies the certainty of a promise and the subsequent combination of promise + positive value verb (enhance, improve) prevents readers from questioning how such actions will come about or indeed, how an insentient project can in fact take any action at all.

Finally, in terms of goals, of what will be improved and enhanced, we find: “the support to safeguarding the hydroelectric dams”, “the operational efficiency”, and “the stability of the power supply”: once more the systematic substitution of products for processes further increases the sense of vagueness as to which operations the World Bank loan is effectively going to finance. By removing the material process verbs (supporting, stabilizing, making efficient) and substituting them with nominalisations, the author of the press release is able to achieve several effects. In fact, as previously mentioned, any sense of responsibility and agency for the actions is removed making it seem as though events simply occur; the sense of lexical density causes us to lose sight of significant details; and, despite the commissive ‘will’, which should entail the fulfilment of a time-bound promise, we also lose sight of any sense of imminence.

The second paragraph of the World Bank press release builds on a key introductory statement: “The Drin Cascade plant represents an important asset for the country”. In terms of the environmental conflict which sets the World Bank and other multilateral agencies in opposition to the NGO consortium, this statement stands as the crux of contention: clearly hydropower plants are assets for those in favour, liabilities for those against. In this case the World Bank succeeds in transmitting and imposing its personal views through a generalized assumption. Such discursive techniques enable text producers, especially those in authoritative positions with high epistemic stance, to establish and circumscribe the realms of known and shared knowledge. Here one cannot but to wonder: an asset for whom? For the local inhabitants whose lands are flooded to allow for dam construction or for the national and supranational organizations investing in SEE hydropower projects?

From the point of view of transitivity, the verb ‘represents’ brings together the carrier “the Drin Cascade” and its attribute “an important asset” in an intensive attributive relational process, thus defining one in terms of the other within the context of what Fairclough classifies as a “value

<sup>36</sup> Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, First Edition (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), 103-104.

assumption”.<sup>37</sup> Assumptions create “a relation between a text and what has been said or written or thought elsewhere, with the ‘elsewhere’ left vague”,<sup>38</sup> and are a particularly insidious tool in a conflictual situation as they possess “the capacity to shape to some significant degree the nature and content of this ‘common ground’, which makes implicitness and assumptions an important issue with respect to ideology”.<sup>39</sup> The prepositional clause “for the country” which closes the assumption clearly serves to place emphasis on the fact that the benefits of the asset all accrue to Albania, disregarding the fact that investment banks always receive returns on their loans.

In the remainder of the second paragraph the “three power plants in the Drin River Cascade” become the agent in the material process “generate” and, in goal position, a number of figures are reeled off regarding stable annual energy supply and revenue. In this case contention lies in the information itself rather than in the discursive structure as in recent years lack of rain has caused severe droughts throughout the Balkans, causing hydropower energy output and financial yields to be far from stable.<sup>40</sup>

Once more, in the third paragraph, we have a carrier and an attribute linked by a relational process verb: “Safe and reliable operation of the HPPs on the Drin Cascade is not only a safety concern but also a potential revenue management source for the Government”. Once again, the dynamic process of rendering the hydropower plants safe and reliable has been transformed into a static nominalization which serves to remove any form of human agency or responsibility. Furthermore, shifting from the ideational to the textual metafunction, it should be noted that the nominal phrase “Safe and reliable operation of the HPPs on the Drin Cascade” occupies the initial ‘given’ position thus narrowing and channelling our vision towards the new information which follows. The theme/rheme relationship is further enhanced by the use of ‘not only’ which reinforces the theme (safety) and whets our appetite for the new information: the potential gain for the Albanian government.

In the remaining lines of the third paragraph “the project” stands once more as the actor followed by the process verb “aims at”, in turn followed by the gerunds “improving”, “extending” and “increasing” (again referring to the generic safety of dams). Besides what has already been said in the preceding paragraphs about the linguistically strategic advantages of using an insentient actor, in this case the choice of process verb (“aims at”) appears particularly interesting, indeterminacy in process type classification being a much-discussed topic in transitivity analysis, with Halliday and Matthiessen themselves claiming that “systemic terms are not Aristotelian categories. Rather they are fuzzy

<sup>37</sup> Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>40</sup> Maja Zuvela, “West Balkans’ Energy Bills Surge as Drought Curbs Hydropower Output”, *Reuters* (30 August 2017), <https://www.reuters.com/article/balkans-power/west-balkans-energy-bills-surge-as-drought-curbs-hydropower-output-idUSL8N1LG2BH>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

categories; they can be thought of as representing fuzzy sets rather than ‘crisp’ ones”.<sup>41</sup> Rather than a material process verb which would express ‘doing or happening’, the prepositional verb ‘aim at’ would appear to express a desiderative mental process on a par with ‘wishes’ or ‘wants’, thus further weakening the agentive scope of the insentient actor. The choice of the preposition ‘at’ as opposed to ‘to’ also subtly shifts the action from an intention, ‘aim to’, to a more generic plan or hope ‘aim at’, thus once more confirming the general indeterminacy of the World Bank project.

One last interesting aspect of this paragraph is the repeated use of terms deriving from the root form ‘safe’: in the short four lines that make up the paragraph we find ‘safe’ used once, ‘safety’ twice and ‘safeguard’ once, as Peter Teo explains, overlexicalisation occurs when “a surfeit of repetitious, quasi-synonymous terms is woven into the fabric of news discourse, giving rise to a sense of overcompleteness”,<sup>42</sup> this then produces an effect of over-persuasion in the reader and is often evidence that something is controversial or of ideological contention.

In the penultimate paragraph of the press release, we are told that “The existing project has achieved significant results, so far”. Once more the combination of insentient actor, material process verb and generic goal allows the World Bank to remain vague about its actions and outcomes: the adjective ‘significant’ lacks quantitative and qualitative precision as does the noun ‘results’, hence readers are left wondering what in fact has been achieved. The temporal clause ‘so far’ situated at the end of the sentence is of particular interest as it functions as a presuppositional trigger for the underlying assumption that such results will continue to be achieved and consequently entices readers to place their faith in the future endeavours of the multilateral development institution. The remaining lines of the fourth paragraph contain a number of agentless passive structures: “All dams have been equipped with various instruments”, “A risk assessment plan has been adopted”, “the dams’ spillway capacity has been completed”. Here, the omission of the agent not only accrues the sense of indeterminacy, it also fuels one of the controversies in the conflict between the multilateral development agencies and the environmental NGOs, who claim that companies not qualified to carry out specific technical tasks are often involved in local hydropower projects with the result that operational outcomes are shoddy and endemic local corruption is rife.

In the short final paragraph of the World Bank press release, the topic moves away from the project goals and back to the additional financing to be provided by the multilateral institution mentioned in the opening paragraph. We read that “the additional financing will provide financial support for the completion of dam rehabilitation”: throughout the press release we have repeatedly witnessed insentient actors (the World Bank, the project, the Drin Cascade) carrying out material or relational

<sup>41</sup> Halliday and Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 174.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Teo, “Racism in the News: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reporting in Two Australian Newspapers”, *Discourse and Society*, 11.1 (January 2000), 7-49.

processes and, apart from a mention of the ‘Board of Executive Directors’ more in the interest of epistemic stance than actual agency, there has been a progressive move away from any form of human participation, and consequently responsibility or liability. Indeed, in this closing sentence of the press release, it is now the ‘additional financing’ which, in a wholly tautological manner, will provide financial support for the project.

The repeated use of impersonal, insentient agents, the lack of concrete process verbs to describe material actions, and the transformation of processes into products through extensive nominalisation, all contribute to granting the World Bank press release an air of abstraction and vagueness in which tangible aims and objectives slip out of reach. Neither in the brief press release nor in the original World Bank document upon which it is based, is any mention made of alternative sustainable energy sources less dependent on climatic variations and less contentious in terms of human and environmental impact.

Furthermore, although the additional 12 million Euro loan serves ostensibly to guarantee and enhance the safety conditions of existing dams and smaller hydropower plants, the question as to whether such structures *should* in fact be maintained and enhanced is clearly never raised, nor is the fact that the supranational institution is currently party to an environmental battle raging across the peninsula. Finally, the fact that besides safety, the project will also enhance ‘dam performance and availability’ appears to leave room for the claim advanced by the Bankwatch NGO consortium that multilateral development institutions may be investing in the construction of new hydropower plants in Albania and across South East Europe rather than merely supporting those which already exist.

### 3.3 The Bankwatch press release

#### 3.3.1 Definitional issues

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Bankwatch is a grassroots environmental organization, based in Prague, which counts 17 member groups spread out across central and eastern Europe. In their mission statement, they declare that their vision is to foster “an environmentally, socially and economically just world, built on solidarity, participation and respect for ecological limits”.<sup>43</sup> To make such a vision viable Bankwatch’s main endeavour is “to prevent the environmentally and socially harmful impacts of international development finance and to promote alternative solutions and public participation”.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> CEE Bankwatch Network, “Our Vision” (2018), <https://bankwatch.org/about/vision>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

In 2015, Bankwatch published a first whistle-blowing study which identified the international financing behind the ‘dam tsunami’ progressively invading SEE; the short press release under investigation presents a 2018 follow-up study in which the responsibilities of multilateral, commercial and local financing apparatuses are more clearly defined.

### 3.3.2 Visual analysis of layout and headline sequence

In much the same way as the World Bank, Bankwatch press releases also appear to follow an expository format with the logo located in the top left hand corner of the webpage, the headline of the article situated below in bold black letters but without any form of capitalization apart from the first letter, there is then a brief paragraph which summarizes the key points of the article, followed by a photograph, which occupies approximately a third of the overall length of the press release. Below the photograph, the text is subdivided into brief paragraphs which vary in length and hence do not present the ‘tapering off’ effect that we previously observed in the World Bank text. The last two or three paragraphs at the bottom of the page are invariably statements issued by partner members of the NGO network, which serve to endorse the content matter of the press release.

The general impression is not one of order and institutional rigour as was the case with the World Bank document, but rather that of a lot of information crammed onto the page. Such visual density is due to the left-alignment of the text dictated by the need to leave room on the right of the page for a large ‘sign in’ box which enables readers to receive regular updates from the NGO consortium and emphasizes the grassroots nature of the organisation. The lack of alignment between the length of the headline, the width of the photograph, and the non-justified paragraphs that follow further increases the idea of density.

From a visual point of view, the most striking feature of the Bankwatch press releases from 2017 onwards, is the presence of the large uncaptioned photographs under the introductory paragraph.<sup>45</sup> Each photo either echoes the one that fronts the study to which the press release refers (as in this specific case), or visually comments the general content of the article.

Turning now to the press release under investigation in which Bankwatch announces the publication of its second whistle-blowing survey, the selected photograph is the same as the one on the front cover of the study being presented. However, whereas in the study the image is identified by its caption “construction of the Medna Sana hydropower plant, Bosnia-Herzegovina”, in the press release it is captionless. This suggests that it has been selected for its universal value and ability to represent

<sup>45</sup> CEE Bankwatch Network, “Archives for Press Release” (2018), [https://bankwatch.org/press\\_release](https://bankwatch.org/press_release), last accessed 28 November 2018.

‘the issue at hand’ and to visually compliment the lexical information contained in the article. Further research in fact reveals that the Medna plant on the Sana river in Bosnia-Herzegovina is being built within the confines of a listed National Park and will severely compromise local fauna, flora and riverine agricultural activities.<sup>46</sup> The photograph has therefore been selected for its high representational value in the current environmental conflict.

From a denotational point of view, the photograph presents what initially appears to be a glaring white gash cutting through a vibrant green surround. Closer examination reveals that the ‘gash’ is in fact the bare rock of an elongated building site which rises on both sides of a small narrowly-contained rivulet; the green contour is the luxuriant woodland that covers the hills stretching into the distance.

The photograph stands as a “naturalistic, unmediated, uncoded representation”,<sup>47</sup> and thus calls attention to the image content (product) as opposed to the manner in which it was produced (process). There is a slight difference between the modality value of the top and bottom half of the image: the slight haze that covers the distant hills located at the top of the photograph lowers the modality value and locates the hills in the realm of the ‘what might/could be’ as opposed to the ‘what is’ represented by the glaring white gash situated in the bottom half of the photo.

The lack of vectors connecting participants in “unfolding actions and events”<sup>48</sup> means that the photograph, on the basis of Kress and van Leeuwen’s taxonomy, may be classified as a conceptual image which represents events in terms of their “generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence” and does not engage participants in any form of action.<sup>49</sup> The fact that the photograph was taken in broad daylight, probably noon, and is devoid of shadows gives it high modality value; such “extreme lighting”<sup>50</sup> also classifies it as a “symbolic suggestive process” once again reinforcing the idea of a generalized essence.

In terms of centre and margins, the green-covered hills which occupy the left hand, right hand and top margins force interactive viewers to concentrate on the centre: the hydropower building site. The lack of vectors pointing to dynamic action, the lack of human presence (the site could have been portrayed teeming with workers), the glaring staticity of the two contrasting colours, all remove action or process value and serve to present the image as a timeless product. The high naturalistic modality stands as a stark representation of the truth: “whoever controls modality can control which version of reality will be selected out as the valid version in that semiotic process”.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Environmental Justice Atlas, “Hydro Power Plant Medna on Sana River, BiH” (2015), <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/hydro-power-plant-medna-on-the-sana-river>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Hodge and Kress, *Social Semiotics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 147.



The image is viewed from an objective standpoint with a disregard for any imposed point of view, merely inviting viewers to observe what has been done to the environment. Furthermore, as will be illustrated in the next section, it can be said to stand in an “ancrage”<sup>52</sup> relationship with the headline, which “remote-controls” the reader towards a pre-determined interpretation.

### 3.3.3 Lexical analysis of headline and paragraphs

Turning now to the content of the headline sequence, we read “International banks fuelling a hydropower tsunami that’s decimating pristine Balkan rivers”. The title is followed by the term ‘study’ a common practice in Bankwatch press releases to indicate that the press release refers to a more extensive document.

As with the World Bank press release, the actor in the headline is an insentient monolithic entity thus generically lumping together all the multilateral development bodies involved in financing hydropower in SEE. In this case one might posit that the all-encompassing label has been deliberately chosen to point to their impalpable, ubiquitous nature. The material process verb ‘fuelling’ is significant from the point of view of both tense and meaning. The use of the present continuous, with suppression of the auxiliary in line with headline reduction conventions, conveys dynamic thrust to the material process and patently points to the fact that it is ongoing. In semantic terms, the verb to fuel can mean either “to supply or power with fuel” or “to cause a situation or conflict to become more intense”.<sup>53</sup> As regards the attribution of blame, the difference in meaning is significant as in the first case it would mean that Bankwatch holds the International banks entirely responsible for the environmental devastation, in the second, that the root cause of the hydropower tsunami lies elsewhere (unspecified) and is only being compounded by the actions of international banks. The expression ‘hydropower tsunami’ which stands as goal of the material process is an expression systematically employed by the opponents of dam-building in the Balkans (the first recorded use would appear to be in November 2017).<sup>54</sup> Here interest lies in the oppositional nature of the metaphorical source and target domains when applied to hydropower: in the source domain, hydropower causes rivers to be constrained and channelled and thereby tamed, in the target domain, a tsunami is a wild manifestation of unleashed waves, thus the opponents of hydropower are shrewdly projecting the violence of a tidal

<sup>52</sup> Roland Barthes, “Rhétorique de l’image”, *Communications*, 4 (1964), 40-51.

<sup>53</sup> “Fuel”, *Lexico powered by Oxford*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fuel>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Euronatur Stiftung, “Hydropower Tsunami on Balkans” (28 November 2017), <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/campaigns-and-initiatives/save-the-blue-heart-of-europe/save-the-blue-heart-of-europe-news/detail/news/hydropower-tsunami-on-balkans/>, last accessed 28 November 2018.

manifestation onto a process which, though contextually devastating for the environment, is in itself relatively non-aggressive.<sup>55</sup>

In the relative clause that follows, the goal of the previous action (hydropower tsunami) becomes the actor of the material process verb which follows (decimate), thus enabling the metaphor to work across both main and relative clause. Finally, the adjective ‘pristine’ serves to provide positive evaluation of the rivers and serves to render the idea of ‘decimation’ more harrowing.

The short summary paragraph located directly under the headline states: “Multilateral development banks have supported no fewer than 82 hydropower projects across southeast Europe, including in protected areas, according to a study by CEE Bankwatch Network”.

The strategic position of the paragraph, sandwiched between the headline and the photograph requires that it summarize the full content of the press release as many readers will doubtless not go beyond.

Whereas in the headline actor position was occupied by ‘International banks’, in the summary paragraph blame is attributed more specifically to the category of ‘Multilateral development banks’ of which the World Bank is a key player.

The material process verb ‘support’ is here employed without any positive semantic connotations, merely to denote a condemnable financial transaction; the use of the present perfect tense points to a completed action now ascertained and verified.

In goal position, we find “no fewer than 82 hydropower projects”: as always when conducting a critical analysis of text, the analyst must question why certain discursive choices are made and others discarded; in this case the comparative ‘more than’ would appear to elicit a more immediate impact than the lengthier ‘no fewer than’. Closer examination, however, reveals that the latter expression possesses strong presuppositional value and triggers readers to intuit that the number of projects financed by the multilateral development bodies is doubtless far higher.

Three circumstances then serve to complete the single sentence which makes up the initial summarizing paragraph: the first “across Southeast Europe” serves to delineate Extent, and allows the NGOs to draw attention to the magnitude of the phenomenon; the second “including in protected areas” through the circumstance of Addition expands upon the previous concept to underline the ubiquitous spread of the multilateral banks’ actions; the third, through a circumstance of Angle introduced by ‘according to’, attributes the study to the Bankwatch Network. The positioning of the viewpoint or angle circumstance in final position, rather than at the beginning of such a lengthy sentence, is significant as it leads readers to consider the information provided as objective fact rather than as attributable to a subjective source.

<sup>55</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 12.

In the first paragraph of the press release proper, located under the photograph, the actor is ‘the study’ followed by the behavioural process verb ‘finds’. Without reiterating what has previously been stated when investigating the World Bank press release, it is clear that, here too, an insentient agent allows for the shirking of attributable responsibility. The indeterminacy of the behavioural process verb ‘find’, a combination of the material and the mental, enables the Bankwatch network to refer to the results of the study without providing any details concerning research tools, figures or methods.

The paragraphs which follow progressively list the names of the multilateral development banks and commercial banks responsible for financing hydropower projects throughout SEE: the amount of money invested by each institution and the number of plants located in protected areas is carefully recorded and the press release appears to follow a sort of naming, blaming and shaming pattern.

Compared to the lexical density of the World Bank press release, ascribable to the extensive use of nominalizations, the Bankwatch document is linear in terms of syntactic structure with a systematically dichotomic actor/process attribution: on the one hand ‘the study’ which ‘finds’, on the other ‘the banks’ that ‘invest’ and ‘support’.

As previously mentioned, a characterizing feature of Bankwatch press releases is the presence in the closing section of quoted statements by key players in the partner organizations and co-authors of the document. In terms of the actors, in this case sayers, this textual device allows them to be both individualised in terms of the name and surname provided, and functionalised through the use of honorifics (Executive Director, Co-author, Policy Officer...). Thus, compared to the unattributable generic nature of the World Bank press release, the environmental advocates take full responsibility for their words and actions. As regards the verbal process, the verbs employed alternate between the “neutrally structuring” verb ‘say’, and the “transcript verb” ‘add’, thus illustrating that the environmental advocates share a common viewpoint and bolster each other’s statements.<sup>56</sup>

In terms of content, the quotations are highly evaluative with a neat balance between the condemnatory lexis employed for the actions of the multilateral agencies (unacceptable, threatening, reckless) and that employed to describe the endangered environment throughout SEE (sensitive, pristine, unique).

The fact that these personal testimonies are located in the final part of the Bankwatch press release serves to remove any sense of abstraction which may have been caused by the repeated use of generic actors ‘the study’, ‘the document’ throughout the text, and to firmly establish that the NGOs belonging to the Bankwatch network personally endorse the accusations that have been levied against the commercial and multilateral development banks throughout the document.

<sup>56</sup> Caldas-Coulthard, “On Reporting Reporting”, 304.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Whereas dramatic environmental events such as earthquakes, droughts and other ‘natural’ catastrophes are usually granted ample media coverage, longer-term processes of progressive environmental deterioration or invisible hazards, especially when caused by human action, often progress silently and covertly until little can be done to salvage the situation. This is what is currently happening across the Balkan Peninsula, where massive investment loans for the development of hydropower plants are being granted by multilateral development institutions, specifically the World Bank Group and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Local governments, eager to gain European member status and other economic benefits, gratefully accept external financial intervention, turning a blind eye to the havoc being wreaked by the progressive subjugation of the last wild rivers of the continent at the expense of endemic flora and fauna, and the livelihoods of the riverine populations.

The detailed analysis that has been carried out on the press releases issued by the two groupings in this environmental conflict has attempted to bring to the fore the discursive tactics employed to forward their divergent objectives. The World Bank by means of substantial lexical density, intangible process verbs and other evasive devices appears to barely acknowledge the conflict at hand, the NGO network, conversely, arouses a form of emotional and cultural resonance based on the deep-rooted values we attribute to nature through “symbolic and ‘profane’ scenes of the environment as under threat”,<sup>57</sup> and openly names and shames those responsible for the hydropower devastation.

Although local inhabitants, spurred on by the NGOs, have become more involved in the protest movement over the last few years, national governments, enticed by the possibility of European accession and attracted to the constant flow of international loans, are turning a blind eye to the environmental predicament and literally selling their countries down the river.

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<sup>57</sup> Simon Cottle, *Mediatized Conflict: Understanding Media and Conflicts in the Contemporary World* (Maidenhead: Open U.P., 2006) 131-132.