



Weaponized Words: Metaphorical Neologisms in Disinformation and Hate Speech

Kimete Canaj¹

Jörg Meier²

Blerim Canaj³

¹University "Fehmi Agani", Gjakova, Kosovo

²Pädagogische Hochschule Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

³University of Business and Technology University "Fehmi Agani",
Gjakova, Kosovo; Pädagogische Hochschule Innsbruck,
University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

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Abstract

This study examines the psycholinguistic and political role of metaphorical neologisms in Albanian written media, focusing on the recurrent use of "mafia" constructions such as mafia energjetike (energy mafia), mafia e kancerit (cancer mafia), mafia e plehrave/mbeturinave (waste mafia), and mafia e ndërtimit (construction mafia) (VoxKosova 2024). Based on a corpus of 60 media documents from Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, analyzed through qualitative coding and frequency analysis in Taguette, the study combines linguistic, psycholinguistic, and political communication approaches to investigate framing strategies and voice attribution among journalists, political actors, activists, and institutions. The findings demonstrate that these neologistic metaphors function as cognitive shortcuts and instruments of symbolic manipulation, framing complex socio-political issues as conspiratorial and morally charged threats. Journalists employ them to dramatize systemic failures, populist political actors instrumentalize them to mobilize fear, distrust, and public outrage, while activists amplify them to reinforce antagonistic narratives. The analysis further demonstrates that such neologisms operate not only as linguistic innovations but also as frames of populist persuasion, amplifying emotional resonance and polarizing public discourse (Canaj et al.2025). By mapping their frequency and contextual voices, the study highlights how metaphor-driven hate speech in Albanian media contributes to the normalization of antagonistic rhetoric, undermining democratic dialogue and weakening democratic resilience (Tokrri R. et al. 2026). The research underscores the need for critical literacy and media awareness, as the psycholinguistic power of metaphor in hate speech can destabilize public trust, undermine epistemic security, and entrench populist manipulation (Wodak 2002, Wodak 2015). By situating Albanian media discourse within broader debates on language, cognition, populism, and political communication in the Balkan countries, the study offers new insights into how neologisms function as tools of discursive control and ideological persuasion.

Keywords: Neologisms, Metaphorical discourse, hate speech, political communication, cognitive metaphors, discourse analysis, manipulative language, epistemic security

1. Introduction

Metaphors are not merely ornamental features of language but cognitive structures that shape how societies interpret political, social, and cultural reality. Within cognitive linguistics, metaphors are understood as conceptual frameworks through which abstract phenomena become intelligible by being mapped onto familiar experiential domains. Expressions such as "*time is money*" or "*argument is war*" demonstrate that metaphor does not simply describe reality; it structures perception, interpretation, and social action (Wodak 2015). Consequently, metaphorical language functions not only as a communicative device but also as a mechanism of ideological construction capable of influencing collective consciousness and political behavior (Musolff 2016). Musolff's analysis shows how *war* metaphors, despite their fuzzy boundaries, evoke historically entrenched frames of conflict and threat, while *family* metaphors reveal power dynamics between nations through scenario-based relations (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Our research on *mafia* metaphors (*mafia energjetike*, *mafia e kancerit*, ...) similarly activates frames of fear and corruption, but focuses on systemic exploitation rather than historical or familiar entrenchment. These studies demonstrate how metaphorical language anchors political discourse in narratives of threat, hierarchy, and moral decay, shaping public consciousness and trust in institutions.

In contemporary Balkan media discourse, this dynamic is increasingly visible through the emergence of metaphorical neologisms centered on the term "*mafia*". The expressions function as discursive shortcuts that criminalize structural problems, dramatize institutional crises, and transform complex socio-economic realities into emotionally charged narratives of conspiracy and betrayal. Their persuasive force lies in their ability to evoke symbolic associations with organized crime. The proliferation of such metaphorical neologisms reflects broader transformations in populist communication and media framing within transitional democracies. Rather than encouraging analytical engagement with institutional and structural challenges, these metaphors personalize systemic problems and reinforce antagonistic binaries between "*corrupt elites*" and "*the people*." In this sense, metaphorical neologisms function simultaneously as linguistic innovations, psycholinguistic triggers, and political instruments of persuasion. Their increasing normalization within public discourse contributes to polarization, delegitimization of institutions, and erosion of democratic dialogue.

It investigates the role and function of "*mafia*" neologisms within Albanian-language written media discourse between 2022 and 2026. Drawing on a corpus of sixty media texts from Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, the research combines qualitative content analysis with quantitative frequency analysis in order to examine patterns of metaphorical framing, voice attribution, and psycholinguistic impact. Using Taguette for systematic coding, the study analyzes how journalists, political actors, and activists deploy metaphorical neologisms to mobilize distrust, dramatize crises, and shape public perception.

The theoretical framework integrates cognitive metaphor theory, sociolinguistic theories of neologism formation, and approaches from political communication and psycholinguistics. The study particularly draws upon the work of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), who argue that metaphors structure thought and social action, as well as the sociolinguistic contributions of Haugen (1950) concerning linguistic innovation and semantic transformation. By situating Albanian media discourse within broader debates on populism, hate speech, and epistemic security, this research seeks to demonstrate how metaphorical neologisms become mechanisms of ideological persuasion and emotional mobilization within contemporary Balkan societies (Tokrri R. et.al. 2026).

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed methodological approach combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative frequency analysis to investigate the emergence, circulation, and persuasive function of metaphorical neologisms in Albanian-language media discourse. The research focuses specifically on neologistic constructions built around the term "*mafia*," which has increasingly become a discursive instrument in populist rhetoric, antagonistic framing, and metaphor-driven hate speech. By integrating

linguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives, the study examines both the structural dimensions of metaphor formation and the cognitive-emotional mechanisms through which such expressions shape public perception and political interpretation.

The corpus consists written media texts and the dataset includes newspaper articles, online news portals, opinion essays, and political commentary. Selection criteria required explicit references to the metaphorical neologisms *mafia energjetike* (energy mafia), *mafia e kancerit* (cancer mafia), *mafia e plehrave/mbeturinave* (waste mafia), and *mafia e ndërtimit* (construction mafia). These terms were selected because they represent emergent metaphorical constructions that frame socio-political issues through criminal imagery, transforming structural crises into emotionally charged narratives of conspiracy, corruption, and institutional failure.

All documents were imported into Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis software platform used for systematic coding and thematic categorization. Each occurrence of the target neologisms was coded according to three principal analytical dimensions:

1. **Frequency** – the number of occurrences within individual documents and across the broader corpus;
2. **Frame** – the dominant interpretive schema associated with the metaphor, including corruption, environmental degradation, public health threat, institutional abuse, or urban exploitation;
3. **Voice Attribution** – identification of the discursive actor deploying the metaphor, including journalists, political actors, activists, public institutions, and civil society representatives.

The analytical framework was structured into three interconnected layers. First, the linguistic analysis identified metaphorical structures, semantic innovation, collocations, and syntactic patterns surrounding “mafia” constructions. Particular attention was devoted to the ways in which criminal terminology was transferred into non-criminal socio-political domains, thereby generating new semantic associations and expanding the persuasive scope of the metaphor.

Second, the psycholinguistic analysis explored the cognitive and emotional dimensions of metaphorical framing. Drawing on the cognitive theory of metaphor developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003), the study examined how these neologisms activate schemas associated with fear, disgust, moral outrage, and conspiracy. The analysis focused on how metaphorical constructions simplify complex structural problems into personalized and emotionally resonant threats, thereby bypassing rational deliberation and reinforcing antagonistic interpretations of political reality.

Third, the framing and voice analysis categorized metaphors into thematic clusters related to energy, health, environment, and construction. This stage further examined how different actors strategically deployed metaphorical language to accuse opponents, mobilize audiences, dramatize crises, or manipulate public opinion. Particular emphasis was placed on populist political discourse, where “mafia” metaphors functioned as rhetorical shortcuts for polarizing debate and delegitimizing institutions.

The study relies exclusively on publicly accessible media texts, thereby ensuring methodological transparency and minimizing ethical risks associated with data collection. References to hate speech were retained only where analytically necessary, and all interpretations were framed within a critical academic context in order to avoid reproducing or legitimizing harmful discourse. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The corpus of sixty documents, while sufficient for qualitative interpretation, does not capture the full range of metaphorical innovation within Albanian-language media ecosystems. The concentration on four specific neologisms also excludes other potentially significant metaphorical constructions that may contribute to populist framing. Furthermore, the psycholinguistic interpretations remain inferential, grounded in established theoretical literature rather than experimental audience testing, which limits the generalizability of claims concerning cognitive reception and emotional impact.

Despite these limitations, the integration of frequency analysis with qualitative framing analysis demonstrates that “mafia” metaphors are not isolated linguistic anomalies but systematic discursive devices embedded within Balkan media and political communication. They function simultaneously as linguistic innovations, psycholinguistic triggers, and political instruments that shape collective

consciousness, reinforce antagonistic rhetoric, and contribute to the normalization of polarized discourse across the region. The methodological framework draws upon cognitive linguistics, particularly the metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), political metaphors of Musolff (2016), as well as sociolinguistic theories of neologism formation and borrowing developed by Haugen (1950).

3. Literature Review

This research examines metaphorical neologisms as instruments of political persuasion, focusing on different “mafia” expressions. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory, framing theory, critical metaphor analysis, and critical discourse analysis, the research argues that these expressions do not simply describe public problems; they actively construct political reality. The proliferation of “mafia” neologisms in Albanian-language public discourse represents a significant transformation in the relationship between language, political communication, and collective cognition. Expressions such as *mafia energjetike* (energy mafia), *mafia e plehrave* (waste mafia), *mafia e ndërtimit* (construction mafia), and *mafia e kancerit* (cancer mafia) are not merely rhetorical exaggerations; rather, they constitute systematic metaphorical constructions through which complex socio-political problems are reframed as conspiratorial and criminal threats. These neologisms function as discursive instruments that simplify structural crises into emotionally accessible narratives of corruption, betrayal, and elite manipulation. In this respect, the metaphorical use of “mafia” reflects a broader populist communicative strategy grounded in antagonistic framing and moral polarization.

The ideological function of neologism formation within Albanian political discourse is not historically unprecedented. Çabej (2023) demonstrates that political elites in Albania have historically introduced neologisms as mechanisms of symbolic control and ideological framing, using linguistic innovation to shape political consciousness and legitimize particular interpretations of reality. Such findings support the argument that new lexical formations are never ideologically neutral; rather, they serve as instruments through which political actors construct authority, mobilize audiences, and regulate public interpretation.

This persuasive dimension of metaphorical language is further supported by Ibraimi’s (2023) analysis of Albanian and Macedonian legal discourse, which shows that metaphors operate as culturally embedded mechanisms of persuasion, interpretation, and behavioral regulation. By invoking familiar symbolic frames associated with morality, danger, and criminality, metaphors acquire normative force and shape how individuals perceive legitimacy and authority. Within contemporary media discourse, however, this mechanism extends beyond legal communication and becomes appropriated for populist mobilization. “Mafia” metaphors no longer merely describe institutional dysfunction; they criminalize entire sectors of governance and transform structural complexity into emotionally charged narratives of conspiracy.

The role of media in amplifying such metaphorical constructions has also been documented in studies of Albanian journalism and online communication. Londo (2023) argues that Albanian media increasingly relies on propagandistic and hate-oriented discourse characterized by emotionally saturated metaphorical language designed to stigmatize opponents and intensify public outrage. Similarly, Luarasi (2023) demonstrates that metaphorical and neologistic language within Albanian online media frequently contributes to the reproduction of sexism, antagonism, and hate speech, illustrating the manipulative potential of figurative framing in digital communication environments. Together, these studies confirm that metaphorical neologisms function not only as stylistic devices but also as mechanisms of discursive power capable of shaping collective attitudes and emotional responses. As Fairclough (2001) argues in critical language studies, language is both a form of social practice and an instrument of power, a perspective that directly informs authors in this research by demonstrating how “mafia” neologisms in Albanian media discourse operate psycholinguistically to shape perception, influence emotional response, and normalize antagonistic political action through strategically weaponized language.

This research aligns with Charteris-Black’s Critical Metaphor Analysis by demonstrating that while “mafia” metaphors operate cognitively as mechanisms shaping perception and emotional

interpretation, their strategic use in Albanian media discourse is equally conditioned by ideological, cultural, and historical contexts that transform metaphorical neologisms into instruments of populist persuasion and discursive control (Charteris-Black 2004, 2011).

The regional manifestations of these constructions reveal important variations in thematic emphasis while preserving a shared populist logic. In Kosovo, the expression "*mafia energjetike*" has become closely associated with debates surrounding energy monopolies, corruption scandals, and institutional inefficiency. Its repeated circulation within media and political discourse transforms highly technical economic and regulatory issues into narratives of organized criminal theft. The metaphor thereby functions as a cognitive shortcut, enabling audiences to interpret systemic dysfunction through the emotionally familiar schema of criminal conspiracy.

In Albania, metaphorical constructions such as "*mafia e plehrave*" and "*mafia e ndërtimit*" dominate environmental and urban debates. These expressions frame ecological degradation, pollution, waste mismanagement, and abusive urban development as deliberate acts of collusion between political elites and private economic actors. By portraying environmental destruction as the product of "*mafia*" networks, the discourse intensifies civic outrage and positions environmental crises within a moral framework of betrayal and corruption. Such framing strategies contribute to the personalization of structural problems, transforming complex governance failures into emotionally compelling accusations directed at identifiable enemies.

In North Macedonia, Albanian-language media have adopted analogous metaphorical constructions, demonstrating the cross-border diffusion of antagonistic framing strategies across the Balkan region. Here, "*mafia e kancerit*" neologisms operate within a broader populist discursive environment characterized by the criminalization of elites and the dramatization of social crises. The regional circulation of these metaphors illustrates how neologisms travel linguistically and culturally, reinforcing shared anxieties concerning corruption, governance, and institutional legitimacy throughout the Western Balkans.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003) argue, metaphors structure thought and action by mapping abstract realities onto familiar experiential domains. Within Albanian media discourse, "*mafia*" metaphors simplify structural and institutional problems into personalized threats, thereby making them cognitively accessible and emotionally resonant. Ibraimi (2023) further demonstrates that metaphors in Albanian and Macedonian legal and political discourse are fundamentally society-centered, regulating behavior through culturally recognizable symbolic frames. Within media discourse, however, this regulatory mechanism is transformed into a tool of populist persuasion. Metaphorical neologisms become forms of "discursive weaponry" that polarize debate, delegitimize institutions, and normalize antagonistic rhetoric within everyday communication. The cumulative consequence is the erosion of democratic dialogue and epistemic security, as emotionally charged metaphorical constructions weaken public trust in institutions, expertise, and rational deliberation.

Ultimately, the rise of "*mafia*" neologisms in Albanian discourse reflects a broader transformation in contemporary political communication, where metaphorical language increasingly functions as an instrument of ideological persuasion and emotional mobilization. Their persistence across Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia demonstrates that metaphor-driven populist rhetoric has become deeply embedded within the communicative culture of the region, shaping not only political narratives but also the cognitive frameworks through which citizens interpret social reality.

The analysis of sixty Albanian-language media texts demonstrates that "*mafia*" neologisms have evolved into systematic instruments of populist framing rather than isolated linguistic innovations. Expressions such as "*mafia energjetike*", "*mafia e plehrave*", "*mafia e ndërtimit*", and "*mafia e kancerit*" function as metaphorical constructions that criminalize social, environmental, health, and institutional problems by reframing them as conspiratorial threats. Their repeated use across Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia reveals a regionalized discursive pattern in which complex structural crises are simplified into emotionally charged narratives of corruption, betrayal, and elite collusion.

The frequency analysis identifies clear thematic concentrations. In Kosovo, "*mafia energjetike*" dominates public discourse surrounding monopolies and institutional corruption in the energy sector, while in Albania "*mafia e plehrave*" and "*mafia e ndërtimit*" are strongly associated with environmental

degradation and urban abuse. In North Macedonia, Albanian-language media reproduces similar metaphorical constructions such “*mafia e kancerit*”, confirming the cross-border diffusion of Balkan populist rhetoric. The study further demonstrates that the persuasive force of these neologisms depends on their psycholinguistic function. Journalists deploy them to dramatize investigative reporting, populist political actors use them to mobilize anger and distrust toward institutions, and activists employ them to intensify moral outrage in environmental and health debates. In line with the cognitive metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson, these constructions activate emotional schemas of fear, thereby bypassing rational deliberation and embedding antagonistic rhetoric into collective consciousness.

The findings confirm that metaphorical neologisms in Albanian media discourse function simultaneously as linguistic innovations, psycholinguistic triggers, and political instruments of persuasion. Their normalization within public communication contributes to polarization, weakens democratic dialogue, and reinforces epistemic insecurity by delegitimizing institutions and amplifying populist narratives throughout the Balkan region see Tab.1.

Table 1: “Mafia” neologisms in Albanian media discourse

Country	Dominant Neologism(s)	Thematic Frame	Populist Function	Scholarly Support
Kosovo	<i>Mafia energjetike</i>	Corruption in energy monopolies	Reinforces distrust in institutions; dramatizes systemic corruption	Ibraimi (2023). metaphors regulate social/economic behavior
Albania	<i>Mafia e plehrave/mbeturinave; Mafia e ndërtimit</i>	Environmental degradation; urban corruption	Mobilizes outrage; simplifies ecological/infrastructural crises into criminal conspiracies	Londo (2023). media propaganda and hate speech; Çabej (2023). neologisms as ideological framing
Albania/North Macedonia	<i>Mafia e kancerit</i>	Health threat	Exploits fear and disgust; dramatizes public health failures	Luarasi (2023). metaphorical language in hate speech
North Macedonia	Adoption of Albanian “mafia” neologisms in local discourse	Political corruption; elite betrayal	Aligns with Balkan populist rhetoric; criminalizes elites; dramatizes social decay	Ibraimi (2023). metaphors in Albanian/Macedonian law and politics

The “mafia” metaphor works as a cognitive shortcut that turns complex public issues into emotionally charged narratives of organized crime, making them easier to understand but also easier to manipulate. Used by populist actors, these neologisms simplify reality, polarize debate, mobilize anger, and normalize antagonistic rhetoric that weakens democratic dialogue.

4. Discussion - Neologisms and Metaphors as Weaponized Words

The emergence of “mafia” neologisms in Albanian-language media discourse illustrates how metaphorical language can evolve into a form of discursive weaponry. Unlike conventional lexical innovation, these constructions operate through symbolic criminalization, transforming institutional failures and structural crises into emotionally saturated narratives of conspiracy, corruption, and betrayal. Expressions such as “*mafia energjetike*”, “*mafia e plehrave*”, “*mafia e ndërtimit*”, and “*mafia e kancerit*” do not merely label socio-political phenomena; they actively frame reality through the semantic logic of organized crime.

From a linguistic perspective, such neologisms represent semantic extensions that derive persuasive power from familiar cultural and symbolic associations. As Canaj (2021) argues in her comparative study of phraseologies and metaphors, metaphorical transference enables familiar

cultural imagery to shape interpretation and establish conceptual equivalence within discourse. Similarly, Meier and Schuppener (2022) emphasizes that metaphors and frames possess a reality-constituting dimension because they actively construct social understanding rather than simply reflecting it. Within Albanian media discourse, “mafia” metaphors operate precisely in this way: they construct political reality through emotionally charged symbolic associations that embed antagonistic interpretations into collective consciousness. The persuasive function of these neologisms becomes particularly evident in their psycholinguistic impact. By invoking schemas associated with organized crime and betrayal, “mafia” metaphors to and intensify emotional polarization. Journalists employ them to dramatize investigative reporting and institutional crises; populist political actors use them strategically to mobilize anti-elite sentiment; while activists adopt them to amplify moral outrage in environmental and healthcare debates. The repeated circulation of these constructions normalizes antagonistic rhetoric and contributes to the erosion of trust in institutions, expertise, and democratic dialogue. This dynamic raises broader concerns regarding epistemic security and democratic resilience. When metaphorical neologisms dominate public communication, structural problems become increasingly interpreted through conspiratorial and emotionally simplified narratives rather than evidence-based analysis. The result is an epistemic environment in which emotionally persuasive language can outweigh rational deliberation. Within this context, universities possess a critical civilisational role. As A. Pielke Jr. (2012) argues, universities historically functioned as “honest brokers” grounded in epistemic virtues such as openness, reflexivity, and accountability (Canaj 2024). If academic institutions fail to critically engage with manipulative metaphorical discourse, they risk leaving public debate vulnerable to populist exploitation and ideological polarization.

Ultimately, the proliferation of “mafia” neologisms in Balkan media demonstrates that metaphorical language is not politically neutral. These constructions function as weaponized linguistic forms that shape perception, mobilize emotion, and redefine the boundaries of democratic discourse. Their normalization within Albanian-language media reflects a broader transformation in political communication, where emotionally charged metaphors increasingly operate as instruments of symbolic power capable of influencing public consciousness and destabilizing epistemic trust.

The frequency analysis reveals distinct regional patterns that reflect local political anxieties while simultaneously illustrating the emergence of a broader Balkan populist discourse. In Kosovo, “mafia energjetike” dominates media coverage, reflecting widespread frustration with energy monopolies, economic instability, and institutional corruption. Headlines such as “Mafia energjetike po shkatërron ekonominë”(Kosova info 22.05.2025) frame energy corruption as a form of organized criminal exploitation and intensify public distrust toward governing institutions (Ibraimi, 2023). In Albania, “mafia e plehrave” and “mafia e ndërtimit” are particularly prominent within environmental and urban debates, where ecological degradation and uncontrolled construction are portrayed as deliberate acts of elite collusion. Media references to the “mafia e plehrave” dramatize failures in waste management and mobilize civic outrage against environmental corruption (Londo, 2023), while the expression “mafia e ndërtimit” frames urban abuse and unlawful construction as betrayals orchestrated by political and economic elites (Çabej, 2023). Meanwhile, Albanian-language media in North Macedonia reproduces similar metaphorical constructions, demonstrating the cross-border diffusion of antagonistic framing strategies throughout the region. The recurrence of these metaphors across national contexts confirms that “mafia” neologisms are not accidental rhetorical expressions but systematic discursive devices embedded within Balkan political communication.

The findings further indicate that these neologisms derive their persuasive power from their psycholinguistic function. Journalists employ them to dramatize investigative reporting and intensify perceptions of systemic crisis; populist political actors use them strategically to mobilize anger, distrust, and anti-elite sentiment; and activists adopt them to amplify moral outrage, particularly in environmental and health-related debates (Leets 2001). This distribution of voices demonstrates that metaphorical neologisms function as instruments of symbolic persuasion, shaping public perception primarily through emotional activation rather than rational deliberation. Research on Albanian online media additionally demonstrates that metaphorical hate speech is frequently used to perpetuate manipulation, sexism, and antagonistic discourse, confirming the broader ideological function of

figurative language in digital political communication (Luarasi, 2023). Kövecses (2005) argues that metaphors are culturally embedded cognitive structures that shape how societies conceptualize emotions, social realities, and political experiences, making them central to understanding the persuasive power and the authors' further examination of "*mafia*" neologisms in Albanian media discourse.

The findings also resonate with the sociolinguistic theories of Haugen (1950), how new lexical constructions emerge in response to changing socio-political conditions, as well as with the research of Ibraimi, who demonstrates that metaphors in Albanian and Macedonian discourse regulate social behavior through culturally familiar symbolic frames. Canaj et al. (2025) argues, metaphor, frame, and discourse analyses converge in emphasizing the reality-constituting power of language, demonstrating how metaphors and frames actively construct social perception rather than merely describe reality. In the context of Albanian media discourse, *mafia* neologisms function precisely in this way: they shape public understanding of corruption, environmental crises, and institutional failure by embedding antagonistic and emotionally charged interpretations into collective consciousness. As Meier and Schuppener (2022) presents public and academic debates in German-speaking societies increasingly focus on the concept of *Heimat* as a central element of cultural identity, belonging, and social development. The discourse particularly examines the linguistic and political-ideological use of the term within right-wing populism, highlighting how emotional and identity-based narratives are strategically manipulated, especially through online media and digital communication.

The broader implications of this study extend beyond linguistics into the domains of democratic culture and epistemic security. The normalization of "*mafia*" metaphors contributes to the erosion of institutional trust by framing governance failures as intentional conspiracies rather than structural or administrative problems. Such framing intensifies polarization, weakens democratic dialogue, and reinforces populist narratives that thrive on emotional antagonism and distrust. The regional spread of these neologisms further demonstrates how metaphorical framing can circulate across linguistic and political boundaries, producing a shared Balkan discourse of suspicion and anti-elite mobilization. Ultimately, the study confirms that metaphorical neologisms are not merely stylistic features of media language; they are powerful instruments of ideological persuasion capable of shaping public consciousness, influencing political behavior, and redefining the epistemic foundations of democratic communication.

Concrete media examples see Tab. 3 show that "*mafia*" neologisms in Albanian discourse function persuasively and antagonistically by turning structural crises into emotional narratives of corruption, betrayal, and anti-elite anger. Research on Albanian online media confirms that metaphorical framing can intensify manipulation, polarization, hate speech, and collective distrust. (Luarasi, 2023).

5. Results

The analysis of sixty Albanian-language media documents from Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia demonstrates that "*mafia*" neologisms have become systematic discursive instruments within Balkan media and political communication rather than isolated rhetorical expressions. The findings reveal clear frequency patterns that correspond closely to dominant socio-political anxieties within each national context. In Kosovo, "*mafia energjetike*" emerges as the most frequent metaphorical construction, reflecting persistent public frustration with energy monopolies, corruption scandals, and institutional inefficiency. In Albania, "*mafia e plehrave*" and "*mafia e ndërtimit*" dominate environmental and urban discourse, framing ecological degradation, waste mismanagement, and construction abuses as manifestations of organized criminal collusion between political elites and private actors. By contrast, "*mafia e kancerit*" appears less frequently across the corpus; however, its symbolic intensity makes it particularly significant, as it extends the semantic field of criminality into healthcare and public suffering, thereby dramatizing institutional failure in emotionally powerful ways see Tab.2.

Across all cases, the analysis confirms that these metaphorical neologisms operate through a consistent framing logic: they criminalize structural and institutional problems by transforming them

into conspiratorial narratives of betrayal and exploitation. Complex socio-economic realities are reduced to cognitively accessible stories of organized crime, thereby simplifying ambiguity and reinforcing moral polarization. The metaphorical invocation of “mafia” functions as a symbolic shortcut through which audiences interpret corruption, environmental crises, or public health failures not as systemic governance problems but as deliberate acts orchestrated by hidden networks of power. Such framing intensifies emotional engagement while simultaneously narrowing the space for rational and evidence-based deliberation.

The study further demonstrates that the persuasive effectiveness of these metaphors depends significantly on the actors who deploy them; see Tab. 4. Journalists frequently employ “mafia” neologisms to dramatize investigative reporting and amplify perceptions of systemic crisis. Populist political actors use them strategically to mobilize anger and anti-elite sentiment, presenting themselves as defenders of “the people” against allegedly corrupt institutional structures. Activists, particularly in environmental and healthcare debates, adopt these metaphors to intensify moral outrage and increase public visibility for their causes. This distribution of voices confirms that “mafia” metaphors are not neutral linguistic innovations but highly strategic rhetorical instruments designed to shape public perception, legitimize antagonistic narratives, and mobilize emotional responses.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the findings strongly support the argument that metaphorical language functions as a cognitive mechanism rather than merely a stylistic device.

A further significant finding concerns the regional diffusion of these metaphorical constructions. The adoption of similar ‘mafia’ neologisms in Albanian-language media in North Macedonia illustrates how these discursive patterns transcend national boundaries, becoming embedded within a broader Balkan communicative repertoire (see Table 2). This cross-border circulation reveals how populist framing strategies travel linguistically and culturally, adapting to local contexts while preserving their emotional and ideological function. The regionalization of “mafia” metaphors therefore reflects shared anxieties concerning corruption, governance, and institutional legitimacy throughout the Western Balkans.

Table 2: Frequency of “mafia” neologisms in 60 documents

Neologism	Kosovo	Albania	North Macedonia	Total Mentions
Mafia energjetike	18	7	5	30
Mafia e plehrave	4	12	3	19
Mafia e ndërtimit	3	15	2	20
Mafia e kancerit	2	6	3	11

Table 3: Frames constructed by neologisms

Neologism	Frame Type	Example Headline
Mafia energjetike	Corruption/Exploitation	“Mafia energjetike po shkatërron ekonominë””Bajrami: <i>Mafia energjetike</i> po e kërcënon ekonominë – kërkohet auditiv dhe hetim urgjent” (Kosova info 22.05.2025).)”Bajrami: Kosova po importon gjysmën e energjisë – <i>mafia energjetike</i> lulëzon në kurriz të qytetarëve” (Kosova info 20.06.2025)
Mafia e plehrave	Environmental Crisis	“ <i>Mafia e plehrave</i> po helmon qytetet” Mirëqenia e qytetarëve s’është prioritet i qeverisë”, Xhida: Importi i mbetjeve vepron në interes të <i>mafias së plehrave</i> .(24.08.2024 (albeu.com)
Mafia e ndërtimit	Urban Corruption	“ <i>Mafia e ndërtimit</i> po shkatërron Tiranën”, “ <i>Mafia e ndërtimit</i> ”, 26 vdekje në 10 muaj në vendin e punës – Krasniqi fajëson shtetin” (KlanKosova 20.10.2025)
Mafia e kancerit	Health Crisis	„ <i>Mafia e kancerit</i> po vret qytetarët” “ <i>Mafia e kanceroze</i> mbrohet nga autoritetet, 2 muaj pas zbardhjes së rastit nuk ka asnjë përgjegjësi për askënd. JO me mosveprimin dhe mosinteresimin me të cilin i qaset rastit, i lejon <i>mafies së kancerit</i> të vazhdojë me parregullsitë”, akuzojnë nga VMRO-DPMNE.”) (6 11, 2023 populli.mk) OBRM-PDUKM: <i>Mafia e kancerit</i> po pasurohet, qeveria dhe prokuroria nuk duan ta zgjidhin çështjen e Onkologjisë(Telegrafi 18.11.2023)

Table 4: Voice distribution

Voice Type	Function of Neologism	Example
Journalists	Dramatization	Investigative reports using “mafia” metaphors
Politicians	Mobilization	Populist speeches framing elites as “mafia”
Activists	Amplification	Environmental campaigns using “mafia e plehrave”

Metaphor-driven antagonistic rhetoric extends beyond media discourse by exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities, dramatizing crises, and weakening epistemic security, the public capacity to distinguish evidence-based knowledge from manipulation, which is essential for democratic resilience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Entman, 1993). In this context, universities must act as epistemic guardians by promoting transparency, reflexivity, and accountability, since failure to confront manipulative populist discourse risks eroding public trust in science, journalism, institutions, and democratic dialogue (Popper, 1959; Pielke, 2012).

5.1 Weaponized metaphors and epistemic insecurity

The findings of this study demonstrate that metaphorical neologisms constructed around the term “mafia” function as powerful instruments of political persuasion and epistemic destabilization in Albanian-language media discourse. Expressions such as *mafia energjetike*, *mafia e plehrave*, *mafia e ndërtimit*, and *mafia e kancerit* do not operate merely as rhetorical exaggerations; rather, they reframe complex structural crises as narratives of organized crime, corruption, betrayal, and hidden power.

By transforming institutional failures into morally charged accusations, these metaphors simplify socio-political complexity and activate emotional responses such as fear, anger, distrust, and outrage. Their persuasive force lies in their ability to provide audiences with an accessible interpretive frame in which citizens appear as victims and political or economic elites are represented as corrupt perpetrators (Boeynaems et al. 2017). In this way, “mafia” neologisms contribute to the polarization of public discourse and the delegitimization of institutions.

Across the full dataset of 80 mentions, Albania accounts for the largest share with 40 mentions (50%), followed by Kosovo with 27 mentions (33.75%) and North Macedonia with 13 mentions (16.25%). In Kosovo, the discourse is dominated by “*mafia energjetike*,” which represents 66.7% of all Kosovo mentions, indicating that energy corruption is the central metaphorical frame. In Albania, “*mafia e ndërtimit*” and “*mafia e plehrave*” together represent 67.5% of national mentions, while North Macedonia shows a more limited but diverse reproduction of the same antagonistic metaphorical patterns across energy, waste, construction, and health (see Table 2). From a theoretical perspective, these findings confirm the relevance of conceptual metaphor theory, critical metaphor analysis, framing theory, and critical discourse analysis. The “mafia” metaphor condenses complex policy failures into emotionally resonant narratives of criminality, making populist messages more persuasive in environments of distrust and political uncertainty.

The study also highlights the broader implications of metaphor-driven discourse for epistemic security and democratic resilience. Epistemic security depends on the capacity of societies to distinguish evidence-based knowledge from manipulative narratives. When emotionally charged metaphors dominate public debate, factual complexity is often displaced by suspicion, moral accusation, and antagonistic simplification. As a result, public trust in institutions, expertise, journalism, and democratic dialogue becomes increasingly fragile. Universities and scientific institutions therefore have a crucial role in strengthening epistemic resilience. Their responsibility extends beyond knowledge production to the critical examination of manipulative rhetorical practices that shape public perception. By promoting transparency, reflexivity, accountability, and critical media literacy, academic institutions can help counter the cognitive and emotional effects of weaponized language.

6. Conclusion

Metaphorical neologisms built around the term “*mafia*” are not peripheral linguistic phenomena, but significant instruments in contemporary struggles over knowledge, legitimacy, and political authority. Expressions such as “*mafia energjetike*”, “*mafia e plehrave*”, “*mafia e ndërtimit*”, and “*mafia e kancerit*” transform complex institutional and structural problems into emotionally charged narratives of corruption, criminality, betrayal, and hidden power. By doing so, they exploit epistemic vulnerabilities, intensify political polarization, and undermine the conditions necessary for democratic dialogue. The empirical findings confirm that these metaphors circulate unevenly across the region. Overall, the findings suggest that Kosovo’s “*mafia*” neologisms are mainly organized around energy-related corruption, while Albania shows a broader and more intensive metaphorical framing of construction, waste management, and health-related scandals, with North Macedonia reflecting a weaker but regionally connected circulation of the same discourse.

Beyond their numerical distribution, these neologisms reveal how emotionally weaponized language can shape public perception and weaken epistemic security. Epistemic security emerges here not only as a philosophical concern, but also as a psychological and political imperative (Gibbs 1992). Without institutions capable of sustaining trust through transparency, humility, accountability, and critical engagement, both science and democracy become increasingly fragile.

Future research should expand the corpus to include broadcast media, social media platforms, and comparative cases beyond the Western Balkans. Experimental psycholinguistic methods could further measure how audiences respond to metaphorical framing, while longitudinal studies would clarify how political neologisms evolve over time and adapt to changing political conditions. These findings also carry policy implications, particularly for media literacy and educational initiatives designed to strengthen critical resistance to manipulative rhetorical practices. Reinforcing epistemic security through such interventions remains essential for safeguarding democratic resilience in increasingly polarized media environments.

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