



Why is corruption in Poland “a serious cause for concern”?

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Abstract. Public perceptions of corruption are significant for their political consequences. But they are conceptually and empirically distinct from corruption. First, because perceptions of corruption run far ahead of experience. Second, because different factors influence the one more than the other – indeed poverty and low education increase perceptions of corruption while decreasing participation in it. Third, because the political consequences of corruption and corruption-perceptions differ not only in degree but in their targets – perceptions and experiences of corruption erode trust in different politicians and institutions. External moralising from institutions such as the EU may reduce corruption in Accession States while simultaneously increasing perceptions of it. And within these states, that moralising ‘culture which can resist corruption’ which the EU demands, itself tends, perversely, to *increase* (not decrease) perceptions, suspicions, and allegations of corruption.

The EU’s recent *Strategy Paper* (09.10.2002) on enlargement noted that corruption “remains a cause for concern” in Hungary (p. 50), “serious” concern in Bulgaria (p. 36), the Czech Republic (p. 43), and Slovakia (p. 73), and “very serious” concern in Romania (p. 69).

In Poland, by far the most important of the accession states in terms of land, population or GDP, the *Strategy Paper* stated corruption was a “serious” cause for concern (p. 65) and went on to assert that although “a comprehensive strategy has been adopted to combat the problem, substantial efforts are required to ensure concrete results which to date have been limited – and in particular to develop a political, administrative and business culture which can resist corruption” (p. 65). In its more extended *Regular Report on Poland’s Progress Towards Accession* (also 09.10.2002) the EU asserted that corruption “threatens to undermine the functioning of many public spheres” in Poland.

Both these EU documents are merely progress reports of ephemeral interest in themselves. But they raise some questions of more enduring concern about the nature and significance of corruption in Poland and, indeed, throughout postcommunist Europe.

Unfair, inaccurate and damaging allegations?

The EU comments on corruption were based in part on an earlier GRECO report (Groupe d'Etats Contre la Corruption: *Evaluation Report on Poland* 08.03.02) that in turn was based in part on a number of unspecified opinion polls supplemented by Transparency International's *CPI: Corruption Perceptions Index*. According to these polls, GRECO noted that "half the Polish population think that high ranking state officials obtain illicit earnings from the exercise of public functions. . . three-quarters that nepotism is widespread in these circles and more than two-thirds that paying bribes constitutes a common practice in relations with administrative authorities". All of these polls, including TI's *CPI*, are based on perceptions, not necessarily derived from experience. Indeed, the mass of the public has no direct experience of "high ranking state officials".

The EU formally recognises there is a problem of evidence and interpretation but overlooks the possibility that it may itself be a significant part of that problem:

Irrespective of whether the specific allegations turn out to be true or not, there is a general perception that corruption is widespread [in Poland]. This is damaging, both domestically and internationally.

(EU 2001 *Progress Report on Poland*)

Its focus on corruption in accession states has been criticised as unfair: "there are lots of precedents [for corruption] from the existing member states" (Barysch and Grabbe, 2002: 11). TI's *CPI* (2002) itself ranks Slovenia and Estonia just behind France and ahead of Italy in terms of being free of corruption. And the Open Society Institute (2002: 23) notes "strong indications that corruption is a serious problem in a number of EU member states – including Germany, France and Italy – while surveys report that the best candidate countries are less corrupt than the worst EU member states".

Poland is far from the "best" of the candidate countries on the TI's *CPI* however. But more fundamentally, the Open Society Institute (OSI, 2002: 46–65) criticises the EU for its wilful use of inaccurate evidence: "The use of allegations – that may well turn out to be unfounded – as evidence to cite a corruption problem that is damaging internationally" is not just an unreliable and inaccurate measure of corruption but worse, since it "carries the danger of developing into a self-fulfilling prophecy" (OSI, 2002: 51).

Wide-ranging research indicates that perceptions overstate the actual incidence of corruption in eastern Europe (Miller, Grødeland and Koshechkina, 2001: 93–132) and there is some specific corroborating evidence for that in Poland (CBOS, 1999). Moreover, "corruption is such a highly-politicised is-

sue” in Poland (OSI, 2002: 406) that allegations and perceptions of corruption are politically driven, rather than emerging from the actual experience of the general public.

Understanding and interpreting perceptions of corruption

In this paper we treat the public’s *perceptions* of corruption as a phenomenon of interest and significance in itself, conceptually and empirically distinct from actual corruption, but significant for its consequences as much as its causes. We use data from the Polish National Election Survey (October 2001) to:

- contrast the public’s widespread perceptions of corruption with their actual (and much more limited) experience of corruption
- consider the extent to which Poland already has “a culture which can resist corruption”, and the impact of this culture on both perceptions and behaviour
- consider the impact of social background and the media on perceptions of corruption, experience of corruption, and attitudes towards corruption
- look at the possible consequences, in particular the extent to which widespread perceptions of corruption does in fact “threaten to undermine the functioning” of democracy in Poland

Although we focus primarily on Poland we can usefully set our Polish findings in the context of earlier findings from other parts of eastern Europe, notably Ukraine, Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and elsewhere.

Perceptions of high-level corruption in Poland

Our survey does not conflict with the EU’s evidence – as far as that evidence goes. It shows that *perceptions* of high-level corruption in Poland are indeed pervasive: 93 percent said that “corruption, such as bribe taking, amongst politicians” is at least “quite widespread” and 56 percent that it is “very widespread”. Similar numbers agree that “politicians are concerned mainly with their own interests”. And only slightly less agree that the “successful election of an MP depends much more on having political connections and friends than on the competence and skills of the candidate”.

Undoubtedly, these public perceptions of corruption, especially high-level corruption, were greatly influenced in the run up to the September 2001 election by the formation of a new anti-corruption party PiS (Law and Justice) headed by the Justice Minister and Prosecutor-General, Lech Kaczyński and, coincidentally, by a series of very high profile corruption scandals. Two of the most notorious scandals broke in mid-July, just two months before the

Table 1. Perceptions of high-level corruption in Poland

How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking is amongst politicians in Poland?	%	Politicians are concerned mainly with their own interests:	%	Successful election of an MP depends much more on having political connections and friends than on competence and skills of the candidate:	%
very widespread	56	definitely agree	55	definitely agree	48
quite widespread	38	rather agree	36	rather agree	37
not very widespread	6	rather disagree	9	rather disagree	14
it hardly happens at all	0	definitely disagree	0	definitely disagree	1

election. They concerned the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Communications.

Romuald Szeremietiew was dismissed as Deputy Defence Minister on 11th July 2001, just a day after his aide Zbigniew Farmus had been dramatically arrested by the State Protection Office on board a ferry en route to Sweden. Farmus was helicoptered back to Poland. He was suspected of demanding bribes from arms producers participating in the Defence Ministry's major military modernisation drive to meet NATO standards. His boss Szeremietiew, who had been in charge of weapons procurement, was suspected of at least complicity in bribe-taking and official secrets violations (*Rzeczpospolita* 7.7.2001; *Rzeczpospolita* 9.7.2001; *Rzeczpospolita* 12.7.2001).

On 17th July, police arrested Grzegorz Wiczerak, the former head of the state-controlled PZU Zycie insurance company. He was suspected of making illegal purchases of real estate and securities with company funds, granting inappropriate loans to several private companies, and unreasonable expenditure on advertising and public relations. It was also alleged that he had transferred a large sum of money from PZU funds to his private account in a foreign country (*Wprost* 26.8.01; *Wprost* 5.8.01).

Jerzy Buzek's beleaguered minority government suffered another setback a day later, when a second Ministerial-level corruption scandal came to a head. This time the corruption allegations concerned Communications Minister Tomasz Szyszko and were linked to the granting of licenses to operate telecommunications. State auditors identified systematic corruption among officials at the Communications Ministry. It was alleged that over 90 percent of the Ministry's contracts had been awarded without the required tenders. Szyszko was dismissed by Buzek on 18th July 2001 for failing to exercise sufficient supervision over his department (*Rzeczpospolita* 17.7.2001; *Wprost* 22.7.01).

Wprost (5.8.01) argued heroically that these cases showed that “democracy is flourishing” in Poland. Poles, it said, should not take the series of prominent corruption scandals as a sign that democracy was rotting in Poland. Instead Poles should be happy that they were able to read or hear media coverage of these scandals and to discuss them. It was a sign of the strength of democracy. Such affairs would not have come into the public domain in communist countries such as Cuba or North Korea. It is a reasonably persuasive argument, but it is about what public opinion “should be” rather than what it “actually is”. Indeed it is an argument *against* public opinion rather than an explanation *of* actual public opinion. It highlights the sad fact that any crack-down on corruption in an open society is likely to increase rather than reduce perceptions of corruption, at least in the short term.

The public was also critical of low-level corruption in Poland. Unfortunately we do not have an exact low level equivalent of our question about perceptions of high level corruption, but we did ask whether the public thought Polish officials were “more corrupt than in most EU countries”. Many could not decide, but four times as many thought Polish officials were more corrupt than EU officials as thought they were less corrupt. Only Ukrainians, in our previous surveys took a more critical view.

Media scandals have highlighted low-level as well as high-level corruption in Poland. The most shocking and macabre – the “skin hunting” affair – broke shortly after our survey however, in January 2002. For a decade or more it is alleged that doctors and paramedics in Lodz (Poland’s second largest city) took bribes of between £200 to £350 from funeral parlours for information on the availability of corpses. More alarmingly, it was alleged that the doctors and ambulance workers had not stopped at bribery but had assisted patients’ deaths by administering the muscle relaxant, Pavulon, which leads to asphyxiation. Although, the existence of corruption and bribe-taking in the health service was well-known, this particular scandal has created a new desire to tackle all forms of corruption in the health service. If it had broken just before our survey instead of just after it, public perceptions of low-level corruption, particularly in the health service, might have been even greater.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2001 election, Polish citizens agreed that their previous governments had not really tried too hard to combat corruption in the past, though they hoped for greater efforts under their new government. Their scepticism about the previous governments echoed our earlier findings in Ukraine, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, while their hopes for greater efforts under a newly elected government echoed our earlier (1998) findings in Bulgaria where a newly elected government convinced the public – if only for a time – that it would “wage an all-out war on crime and corruption” (Miller, Grodeland and Koshechkina, p. 287).

Table 2. Perceptions of low-level corruption

	Poland %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
Do you feel officials in government offices in Poland are more corrupt, or less corrupt than officials in most European Union (EU) countries?					
more corrupt than officials in most EU countries	46	41	38	32	45
less corrupt than officials in most EU countries	11	11	13	6	8
DK, neither etc.	43	48	49	62	47
more <i>minus</i> less	+35	+30	+25	+26	+37

Table 3. Perceptions of governments' efforts to combat corruption

	Poland %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
Governments in many European countries say they want to combat corruption. Do you think that the old 1997–2001 government in Poland really did its best to combat corruption (% YES)					
... amongst politicians and top government officials	13	10	13	34	13
... amongst officials who deal with ordinary people	13	18	21	42	18
Now please compare the politicians who formed the old 1997–2001 government with the politicians who are forming the new government. Which would you describe as more able and willing to combat corruption amongst government officials					
the old government	8				
the new government	49				
DK, neither etc.	44				

Bulgarians soon changed their minds about their new government and continuing media allegations of high-level corruption in Poland may eventually have the same effect there. High profile scandals continue to reinforce perceptions of high-level corruption in Poland. A special parliamentary commission was set up at the beginning of 2003 to investigate “Rywingate”. It was a murky affair involving not just financial corruption but political manipulation of the media. It began in the summer of 2002, when Lew Rywin, producer of “The Pianist” and “Schindler’s List”, met Adam Michnik, editor of the popular and influential *Gazeta Wyborcza* and allegedly sought a bribe of 17.5 million US dollars in return for exerting influence on SLD politicians drafting the new media law. Michnik secretly recorded the conversation – though he did not disclose it until the end of 2002, explaining that he did not want another high-level scandal to affect Poland’s accession negotiations with the European Union (they concluded in December 2002).

Polish citizens’ real experience of corruption

Despite their perceptions of widespread low-level as well as high-level corruption, very few Polish citizens (only 3 percent) spontaneously mentioned the need to use connections or bribes to get fair treatment (though almost as many expected unfair treatment as fair). We had asked that same question much earlier (in 1993) in a five-nation survey within eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. While accepting that such a long time-gap reduces the significance of any cross-national comparison, it is interesting that spontaneous mentions of the need to offer bribes to get fair treatment were much higher in Slovakia, Ukraine and Russia and slightly higher even in Hungary and the Czech Republic than in Poland. Unless explicitly prompted about corruption, Polish citizens focused on unfair rather than corrupt treatment by their officials.

Polish citizens were in fact highly critical of unfair treatment by officials: only 38 percent said they were “usually” treated fairly. In this regard, they were much more critical than Czechs or Slovaks though much less than Ukrainians.

Relatively few complained that Polish officials had “asked directly” for money or a present (only 5 percent) or even “seemed to expect” one (23 percent). But they complained more often than Czechs, Slovaks or Bulgarians (though not Ukrainians) that officials “made unnecessary problems in order to get money or a present for solving them”: 57 percent said that had happened to them at least on rare occasions in “the last few years”. And overall, Polish citizens were considerably less satisfied than Czechs, Slovaks or Bulgarians about their dealings with officials, though more satisfied than Ukrainians.

Table 4. Experience of treatment by officials

	Poland %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
How often did these officials give you or your family fair treatment					
Usually	38	66	52	38	20
Sometimes	37	26	36	43	42
Rarely / never	24	8	12	19	38
How often did these officials make unnecessary problems for you or your family, in order to get money or a present for solving them					
More than rarely	36	19	29	24	43
Rarely	21	25	27	25	24
Never	43	56	44	51	33
In these last few years, did an official ever . . .					
ask you or your family directly for money or a present	5	2	4	6	11
not ask directly but seemed to expect	23	44	64	39	56
Personal experiences of dealing with state officials in the last few years have been, on the whole. . .					
. . . satisfactory	46	60	60	53	37
. . . unsatisfactory	34	23	25	25	30
. . . mixed / DK	21	17	15	22	33
<i>net satisfied</i>	<i>+12</i>	<i>+37</i>	<i>+35</i>	<i>+28</i>	<i>+7</i>

We asked how frequently Polish citizens had themselves used contacts, presents and bribes in their dealings with officials over the “last few years”. In Poland 46 percent reported using connections, 25 percent small presents and 10 percent “money or an expensive present”. Judged by these reports of their actual behaviour, Polish citizens were no more prone to use contacts, presents and bribes than Czechs, and considerably less so than Slovaks or Ukrainians. Even 10 percent confessing to using significant bribes at least “rarely” may be considered too much, though it would hardly merit the term “widespread”.

A Polish “culture which can resist corruption”?

The EU called for “a political, administrative and business culture which can resist corruption”. We accept that a popular culture is not itself “a political,

Table 5. Personal experience of treatment by officials

	Poland %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
Thinking over these personal experiences of dealing with officials in the last few years, did you or your family usually, sometimes, rarely, or never have to...					
... use connections to approach an official – that is, go through one of the official’s friends or colleagues ...					
More than rarely	25	21	42	19	41
Rarely	21	19	24	24	19
Never	54	60	34	56	40
... offer a small present...					
More than rarely	12	11	34	15	38
Rarely	13	12	22	18	19
Never	75	77	44	67	43
... offer money or an expensive present...					
More than rarely	4	6	17	7	24
Rarely	6	5	14	12	12
Never	90	89	69	81	64

administrative and business culture”, but it is the setting for it. As a measure of popular cultural attitudes towards corruption we asked whether “the use of money, presents, favours or connections to influence officials” was:

- (i) “bad for Poland and for those involved”
- (ii) “bad for Poland, but unavoidable for people who have to live here”
- (iii) “preferable because, when you need a favour from an official, you can get it”

Fully 72 percent condemned such practices without reservation and only two percent regarded them as preferable. By that measure, Polish popular culture was much less tolerant of corruption than popular cultures in Slovakia, Bulgaria or Ukraine – and slightly less tolerant of corruption than even Czech popular culture.

We also asked Polish citizens about their willingness to submit to extortion. “If you had an important problem, and an official asked you directly for money to solve it”, we asked, “would you”...

- (i) pay, if you could afford it
- (ii) refuse to pay, even if you could afford it

Table 6. An anti-corruption culture: Condemn corruption?

	Poland %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
Which comes closest to your view about the use of money, presents, favours or connections to influence officials?					
It is bad for (COUNTRY) and for those involved	72	69	60	58	58
It is bad for (COUNTRY), but unavoidable for people who have to live here	26	24	28	34	31
I prefer it that way because, when you need a favour from an official, you can get it	2	7	13	9	11

Table 7. An anti-corruption culture: Would submit to extortion?

	Poland %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
If you had an important problem, and an official asked you directly for money to solve it, would you. . .					
pay, if you could afford it	25	29	40	43	53
refuse to pay, even if you could afford it	52	50	31	31	19
depends / DK	24	22	29	26	28
<i>net: pay minus refuse</i>	-27	-21	+9	+12	+34

The phrase “could afford it” is significant, since it eliminates the “would pay but cannot pay” scenario. Although many Polish respondents spontaneously replied that their behaviour might depend on the precise circumstances, those who did give a clear answer came down decisively in favour of resisting extortion – more so even than in the Czech Republic. By contrast, Slovaks and Bulgarians tilted towards submission, and Ukrainians came down decisively on favour of submission. By this measure both Czech and Polish popular cultures are much more antagonistic towards corruption than Slovak, Bulgarian or Ukrainian. But of the two, Polish culture is rather more antagonistic towards corruption than even Czech popular culture.

On balance, Polish citizens supported external international pressure on their government to reduce corruption, though they were sufficiently nationalistic to resent such pressures rather more than citizens in other countries. Indeed, within Poland resentment of international pressure – even to cut corruption – correlated significantly ($r = 0.12$) with national identity. (For a

Table 8. An anti-corruption culture: Accept international pressure?

	Poland %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
Which comes closer to your view? If an international organization refused to provide aid or investment for Poland unless our government took strong action against corruption, would that be:					
unacceptable interference in Poland's internal affairs	29	24	31	15	20
a good way to reduce corruption in Poland	42	49	44	51	43
DK / mixed / depends	28	27	25	34	36
<i>net support</i>	<i>+13</i>	<i>+25</i>	<i>+13</i>	<i>+36</i>	<i>+23</i>

longer discussion of our measure of Polish national identity see McManus-Czubinska et al., 2003.)

Social background generally had very little impact on any of these measures of popular culture however. We looked at age, gender, education, rurality, region, religiosity and economic circumstances. Of these, only age had any statistically significant impact on cultures of corruption, and its impact was ambiguous. Dividing the sample into thirds, the young were 12 percent less likely than the old to condemn corruption and 13 percent more willing to submit to extortion: so the young were culturally more corrupt than the old. But on the other hand, youthful permissiveness extended to international actors as well: the young were 14 percent less resentful of international pressures to cut corruption.

The impact of culture on perceptions and behaviour

The implicit assumption of the EU *Strategy Paper* is that culture makes a difference. Broadly speaking our data suggest that Polish popular culture, in itself, is antagonistic towards corruption. But did it make a difference? Did it have any impact? Our data suggests it did.

The correlation between our measures of popular culture and the actual use of contacts, presents and bribes is highly significant statistically. Compared to those few who preferred a system of bribes and favours, those who condemned it without reservation were 28 percent less likely to have used contacts, 20 percent less likely to have used presents, and 21 percent less likely to have used bribes.

Table 9. Impact of culture on perceptions and behaviour

	If feel the use of contacts, presents and bribes is...			If asked to pay bribe, would...			
		bad	unavoidable	preferable	refuse	pay	
	r×100	%	%	%	r×100	%	
IIMPACT ON PERCEPTIONS:							
corruption very widespread	6	58	51	48	3	57	58
definitely agree – politicians							
self-interested	4	56	51	52	5	53	59
definitely agree – political							
success relies on contacts	2	50	42	57	6	46	52
IMPACT ON BEHAVIOUR:							
never used contacts	17**	58	41	30	28**	63	35
never used presents	17**	81	63	61	28**	84	58
never used bribes (money etc)	15**	93	85	72	24**	95	79

Yet culture had no statistically very significant impact on perceptions of high-level corruption. Indeed, such impact as it had ran in the *opposite direction* to its impact on behaviour. Those who condemned the use of contacts, presents and bribes were 10 *more* (not less) likely to allege that corruption was widespread amongst Polish politicians.

This is a point of considerable practical as well as theoretical importance. It has a perverse consequence for such perception-based measures as those used by the EU and GRECO. We have found that an anti-corruption culture simultaneously *reduces actual* corruption while *increasing perceptions* of corruption if only to a modest degree. So perhaps Polish perceptions and allegations of corruption reflect (at least in part) high moral standards rather than low standards of actual behaviour!

The impact of social background on perceptions and experience of corruption

This discrepancy between the impact of popular culture on (i) perceptions and (ii) behaviour raises a whole series of questions. What do perceptions of corruption reflect? Do perceptions reflect corrupt behaviour? Do they reflect the experience of attempted extortion – whether successful or not? Do they perhaps reflect media reports of corruption? Or general discontent with the behaviour of officials – whether corrupt or not? Or just general discontent with circumstances, perhaps economic circumstances especially?

All of these are plausible. Citizens may be quite self-consciously aware that their general image of government and society owes more to the media than to their own experience. But even insofar as their perceptions of corruption are based on experience, they may not be based on *corruption*-experience. The citizen who is dissatisfied with an official may well vent his or her anger by alleging corruption. The citizen watching a Mercedes slide by as they stand in the rain at the bus-stop may well allege that its occupants must be corrupt. And, most perverse of all, the citizen who is convinced of his or her own personal morality, but feels undervalued, may well be inclined to suspect that everyone else is corrupt. Sadly, these are very understandable human reactions.

We have already noted a detectable but weak correlation between culture and perceptions: those who condemned the use of contacts, presents and bribes were *more* likely to allege that corruption was widespread amongst Polish politicians. Religiosity – whether measured by intensity of faith or frequency of church attendance had less impact. Age, gender and region were also irrelevant. But rurality had some impact, education more, and economic circumstances a great deal.

Villagers were 9 percent less likely than city-dwellers to use contacts, 14 percent less likely to use presents, and 6 percent less likely to use bribes. But villagers were more suspicious than city-dwellers that politicians put their own interests first.

Those with only elementary or vocational education were 13 percent more likely than university graduates to allege that high-level corruption was widespread, 23 percent more likely to believe politicians put their own interests first, and 16 percent more likely to believe that political success depended upon contacts rather than ability. But it was the university graduates who confessed to more use of contacts (22% more), presents (10% more) and even bribes (only 2% more) in their personal dealings with officials. So the low-educated had greater perceptions of corruption while university graduates had more experience of it!

But overall, the most powerful social factor affecting perceptions of corruption was economic circumstances. Those who said their standard of living was low or had declined were – like the uneducated – much more likely to allege that high-level corruption was widespread and, at the same time, much less likely to confess personal experience of corruption. Compared to the relatively few who felt well-off, the poor were 35 percent *more* likely to allege “very widespread” corruption, 29 percent *more* likely to allege that politicians put their own interests first, and 27 percent *more* likely to feel that political success depended on contacts. Indeed the poor were 25 percent more

Table 10. Impact of poverty on perceptions and behaviour

	r×100	If feel family income is			
		%	%	%	&
		not really enough to survive on = POOR	only just enough to survive on	enough for a fair standard of living	enough for a good standard of living = WELL-OFF
IMPACT ON PERCEPTIONS:					
corruption very widespread definitely agree – politicians self-interested	15**	75	57	50	40
definitely agree – political success relies on contacts	16**	72	57	48	43
	17**	74	48	41	47
IMPACT ON BEHAVIOUR:					
never used contacts	12**	66	56	49	19
never used presents	7	84	77	73	59
never used bribes (money etc)	2	93	90	91	74

likely to allege “very widespread” corruption than the much larger numbers with a “fair” yet not “good” standard of living.

Similarly, the large number whose living standards had got “much worse” since 1989 were also 25 percent *more* likely to allege “very widespread” corruption than the large number whose living standards had got at least “somewhat better” since 1989. Both absolute poverty and “transition-loss” seem to trigger allegations of high-level corruption.

But at the same time, the poor were 47 percent *less* likely to use contacts, 25 percent *less* likely to use presents and 19 percent *less* likely to use bribes in their personal dealings with officials. So the poor – even more than the uneducated – combined relatively high perceptions of corruption with relatively low experience of it!

The impact of corruption-experience on corruption-perceptions

So where did perceptions of corruption come from? Given the discrepancies between perceptions and experience revealed by the impact of education and poverty, perceptions must reflect more than experience – if indeed they reflect experience at all. Almost by definition, the mass of ordinary citizens can have little direct experience of high-level corruption, though they may extrapolate perceptions from their much greater actual experience with low-level officials.

Table 11. Source of perceptions

	POLAND %	Czech Rep %	Slovakia %	Bulgaria %	Ukraine %
Would you say that your feelings about the behaviour of officials in Poland are based more on...					
what you have read in newspapers and heard on TV or radio	46	11	7	18	22
what people generally say about officials	21	26	30	27	30
your personal experiences	33	63	63	55	48

In fact, our various measures of interactions between citizens and officials do correlate with perceptions of high-level corruption. Perceptions of high-level corruption correlate best of all citizens' general dissatisfaction with their dealings with officials ($r = 0.17$), next with their experience of attempted extortion ($r = 0.13$) and “unfair” treatment ($r = 0.10$). But the correlation between perceptions of corruption and giving bribes is lower ($r = 0.08$) and the correlation with using contacts or presents is not statistically significant.

But perhaps perceptions of corruption reflect gossip and media coverage rather than experience of any kind? We asked respondents whether their “feelings about the behaviour of officials in Poland” were based more on:

- i) what you have read in newspapers and heard on television or radio (= the “media”)
- ii) what people generally say about officials (= “gossip”)
- iii) your personal experiences (= “experience”)

In Poland only 33 percent said they based their opinion mainly on direct experience, and an unusually large number (46%) said they based their opinion on the media. In itself this suggests that much of the public concern about corruption in Poland simply reflects the politicisation of corruption and media-coverage of high-level scandals. And insofar as public concern itself becomes part of the media coverage (through EU corruption reports for example) then we have a classic case of a potentially hysterical “spiral of concern”.

Introspection should be treated with caution. But there is clear evidence that answers to this question about sources were far from random. Amongst the minority who claimed their views were based on experience, perceptions of corruption correlated quite strongly with experience: at 0.23 with dissatisfaction, and at over 0.16 with unfair treatment, attempted extortion or even the respondents own reported use of bribes (“money or expensive presents”).

Table 12. Influences on perceptions: correlations

	<i>Correlations with perceptions that bribery is widespread</i>		
	amongst all respondents	amongst those who say their views on officials are based mainly. . .	
		on experience	not on experience
	r×100	r×100	r×100
dealings with officials were satisfactory	-18**	-23**	-13**
officials asked or expected	13**	19**	8*
officials made problems	11**	16**	ns
fair treatment by officials	-11**	-19**	ns
respondent used money or expensive presents	8**	16**	ns
respondent used small presents	ns	14*	ns
respondent used contacts	ns	ns	ns

** significant at one percent level, * significant at five percent level, ns = not significant even at five percent level.

In sharp contrast, amongst the majority who did *not* claim to base their views on experience, the correlation between perceptions of corruption and satisfaction was halved, and most other correlations were not only statistically insignificant but also trivially small.

We must conclude that for a minority of Polish citizens – no more than one third – corruption-perceptions are at least partially based upon extrapolating corruption-experience. But amongst the large majority they are not based on experience so much as on gossip, media reports and/or personal factors that have little or nothing to do with official corruption.

Comparative assessment of influences on corruption perceptions in Poland

We can use regression for a preliminary assessment of the relative influence of culture, social background and experience on corruption-perceptions.

The most powerful influences upon perceptions of high-level corruption are (i) low or declining living standards and (ii) dissatisfaction (for whatever reason) with officials. Experience of extortion has a lesser impact while actual use of bribes is not statistically significant. And, although the effect is not large, an anti-bribe culture significantly increases allegations of high-level corruption.

Perceptions of low-level corruption are influenced most by dissatisfaction (for whatever reason) with officials. Experience of extortion has a lesser impact and the actual use of bribes is not statistically significant. In addi-

Table 13. Influences on perceptions: multiple regressions

	Perceptions of high-level corruption: “Corruption very widespread amongst politicians”	Perceptions of low-level corruption: “Polish officials more corrupt than in EU countries”
	beta × 100	beta × 100
transition losers	17	ns
dealings with officials were unsatisfactory	14	11
extortion (officials asked or expected)	9	9
anti-bribe culture (“bad for Poland”)	8	ns
high education	ns	8

All betas shown are significant at the one percent level. Stepwise regression excluded the following variables, not shown in the table, since they added nothing significant (at the strict one per cent level) to predictions of corruption-perceptions: unfair treatment by officials, officials making unnecessary problems, and the respondents’ residence in village, town or city, or their own admitted use of contacts, presents and bribes. Poverty correlated so closely with transition loss that stepwise regression was never likely to select both.

tion, higher education appears to increase perceptions of low-level corruption though this may reflect the higher-educated’s reluctance to opt for the “difficult to say” category on this, as on so many other, questions. More striking is the fact that neither an anti-bribe culture nor transition-loss have a significant impact on perceptions of low-level, as distinct from high-level corruption.

Perceptions of high-level corruption vary sharply with living standards even amongst those who have never experienced attempted extortion, never behaved corruptly towards officials, have usually been treated fairly, or are satisfied with their dealings with officials.

Amongst these citizens with no personal experience of corrupt, unfair or unsatisfactory treatment the numbers who alleged that corruption was “very widespread” declined from an average of 73 percent if their income was inadequate to 46 percent if it was sufficient. That reveals a powerful impact of economic circumstances on perceptions of high-level corruption, independent of any relevant personal experience of corruption. More remarkably it reveals a high “baseline” of 46 percent alleging *very* widespread corruption even amongst those who had both adequate incomes and no personal experience of corruption.

Table 14. Impact of poverty on perceptions – amongst those with no experience of corruption

	<i>Think corruption is “very widespread”</i>		
	Amongst those who say their family income is. . .		
	not really enough to survive on	only just enough to survive on	enough for fair or good standard of living
	%	%	%
Amongst those. . .			
for whom officials never made problems to get bribes	68	58	45
who never dealt with officials who asked for or seemed to expect bribes	74	54	46
who never gave bribes	78	56	47
who never gave small presents	77	57	46
who never used contacts	78	60	48
who were satisfied with their treatment by officials	71	51	45
who were usually treated fairly	67	59	46
<i>average</i>	73	56	46

But income seems to play a subtle role, interactive as well as a powerful, in fostering perceptions of corruption. Regression obscures that pattern, but we can illustrate it by looking at the way income-levels and present-giving combine to affect perceptions of widespread corruption. Amongst those with adequate incomes, those who *frequently give* presents to officials are the most likely to allege widespread corruption. But amongst those with inadequate incomes, it is those who *never give* presents who are most likely to allege widespread corruption. Perceptions of corruption therefore peak amongst the poor who do *not* give presents to officials. Their poverty and their own non-corrupt behaviour combine to make them uniquely suspicious of corruption.

Consequences: a “threat to democracy”?

The EU’s Report on *Poland’s Progress Towards Accession* asserted that corruption “threatens to undermine the functioning of many public spheres” in Poland. There is no doubt that corruption itself erodes the effectiveness of government. But perceptions of corruption – however well or ill-founded –

Table 15. Interactive combinations of poverty and experience: impact on perceptions

	<i>Think corruption is “very widespread”</i>		
	Amongst those who say their family income is. . .		
	not really enough to survive on	only just enough to survive on	enough for fair or good standard of living
	%	%	%
Amongst those who gave small presents to officials. . .			
never	77	57	46
rarely	74	55	58
more than rarely (“usually” or “sometimes”)	68	64	57

may also undermine government. In particular they may erode trust in public institutions and even in the democratic system itself.

Formally, we can use correlations to test whether it is the experience or the perceptions of corruption that has the greater impact on trust. Unfortunately correlations are a better test of the impact of experience than of perceptions. Correlations usually imply some kind of causal connection but they cannot reveal the direction of causation, nor whether the correlation between two variables merely reflects their joint dependence upon some third factor.

Now it seems far more plausible to assume that experience affects trust than vice versa. But the causal relationship between perceptions and trust is much more ambiguous. Distrust may foster allegations of corruption. Or both may reflect general dissatisfaction with personal economic circumstances or general disaffection with government.

In our survey we measured citizens’ distrust in 21 objects:

- (i) *ordinary people* you meet in everyday life
- (ii) *central government*: the 1997–2001 government; the new government; President Kwasniewski; MPs
- (iii) *local government*: elected members of local councils (gmina, powiat)
- (iv) *bureaucrats*: officials in state and local government offices
- (v) *government agencies*: the central bank (NBP); courts; police; army
- (vi) *social organisations*: the church; trade unions; public TV
- (vii) *international agencies*: the EU; NATO
- (viii) *specific countries*: the USA; Britain; Russia; Ukraine; Germany

And in addition we measured trust *in democracy itself* by means of three questions in rather different formats, seeking respondents’:

- (i) agreement with the statement: “Democracy may have its problems but it is better than any other form of government”
- (ii) satisfaction with “the way democracy works in Poland”
- (iii) evaluation of how well “elections in Poland work in practice to ensure that the views of voters are represented by MPs”

(Both the basic trust questions and these three additional questions about democracy were measured on four-point scales.)

It is at least plausible that the experience or perceptions of bureaucratic and governmental corruption within Poland might have a negative impact on trust in some of these objects but not others. To be convincing evidence of such an impact, the experience or perception of corruption within Poland should correlate with distrusting aspects of Polish government but *not* with distrusting international organisations, foreign countries or even ordinary Polish citizens. Indeed if the experience or perception of corruption within Poland had any impact on trust in international organisations or foreign countries, it might *encourage trust* in them – if only by comparison with Poland itself.

In order to get a clear, easily grasped, overview let us set an arbitrary threshold of $r = 0.15$ for our discussion of correlations between trust and corruption.

By that arbitrary criterion, neither the experience nor perceptions of corruption had much impact on 10 of the 24 objects of trust – feelings that democracy was “the best system” or trust in the army, the church, TV, the USA, Britain, Germany, ordinary Polish people, President Kwasniewski, or the “new government”. In most of these cases we would not have expected any correlation. But the lack of correlation with trust in ordinary Polish people suggests that while the experience or perceptions of corruption amongst Polish government officials may affect trust in government it does not spill over to affect trust in Polish people. And the lack of correlation with attitudes to the principle of democracy, or trust in the President or the new government suggests that the principle of democracy, like the President, had succeeded in rising above the dirt of corruption, while the new government had not yet had time to be sullied by it.

The impact of experience

Correlations between trust and respondents’ confessed use of contacts, presents or bribes in their dealings with officials never reached anywhere near our arbitrary threshold. Reasonably enough, the experience of their own corrupt behaviour did not erode trust in government or any of the other objects of trust that we investigated.

Table 16. Impact of perceptions and experience of corruption on trust: correlations

	Correlations between distrust and perceptions or experience of corruption						
	corruption widespread	MPs own interests	MPs use contacts	more corrupt than EU officials	satisfied with treatment	treated fairly	officials made problems
	r×100	r×100	r×100	r×100	r×100	r×100	r×100
former govt	-23	—	—	—	18	—	—
MPs	-25	-29	-26	—	31	21	-16
LG councillors	19	-25	-23	-19	32	23	-18
officials	-26	-19	-18	-20	38	28	-21
central bank	—	—	—	—	19	—	—
courts	-21	—	—	—	28	18	—
police	—	—	—	—	26	19	—
trade unions	-18	—	-17	—	21	—	—
EU	—	-18	—	—	—	—	—
NATO	—	-18	-18	—	—	—	—
Russia	—	—	—	—	21	18	—
Ukraine	—	—	—	—	19	—	—
satisfied with way democ works in Poland	-16	-18	-16	—	—	—	—
elections in Poland ensure representation	—	-25	-21	—	—	—	—

Note:

1. Correlations of 0.15 or lower are not shown. All correlations shown exceed the one percent significance level.
2. There are no line-entries for the following, because no correlations exceed the 0.15 threshold: trust in ordinary people; the army; the church; public TV; the USA; Britain; Germany; and attitudes to the proposition that “democracy with all its problems is better than any other form of government”.
3. There are no column-entries for the following, because no correlations exceed the 0.15 threshold: respondents’ use of contacts; presents; or bribes.

But the experience of attempted extortion by officials did have an impact, especially when it took the form of officials making unnecessary problems in order to get bribes. That experience correlated at 0.21 with distrusting “officials in state and local government offices”, slightly less with distrusting elected local councillors, less still with distrusting members of the Sejm. Un-

Table 17. Impact of unfair treatment on distrust

	Amongst those who were fairly treated. . .			<i>impact of unfair treatment</i>
	usually	sometimes	rarely/never	
	%	%	%	%
Percent who distrust. . .				
officials in offices	46	69	78	+32
elected councillors	49	69	76	+27
members of the Sejm (MPs)	60	79	80	+20
President	17	23	29	+12
Percent who feel. . .				
democ NOT best system	11	17	24	+13
Polish elections NOT/NOT AT ALL good at representing	46	49	59	+13
NOT/NOT AT ALL satisfied with way democ works in Poland	58	60	67	+9

fair or unsatisfactory treatment by officials (for whatever reason) correlated even more strongly with distrusting “officials in state and local government offices” ($r = 0.38$), elected local councillors ($r = 0.32$), or members of the Sejm ($r = 0.31$) – but once again the hierarchy of impact is clear, with most impact on trust in the officials nearest to the citizen.

These correlations stand in very sharp contrast to the lack of correlation we have noted with trust in the democratic principle, President Kwasniewski, or the “new government”. Experience of ill-treatment (including extortion but not only extortion) at the hands of low-level officials therefore focused distrust most clearly on these low-level officials – spilling over somewhat into distrust of elected representatives but not much affecting the President, the new government, or the principle of democracy.

In percentage terms, those who complained that they had rarely or never been fairly treated in their dealings with officials were 32 percent more likely to distrust officials and 27 percent more likely to distrust elected councillors; but only 20 percent more likely to distrust MPs, a mere 12 percent more likely to distrust the President, and only between 9 and 13 percent more likely to reject the principle of democracy or complain that democracy and elections did not work well in Poland.

The impact of perceptions

Perceptions of low-level corruption (that “officials in government offices in Poland” were “more corrupt than officials in most EU countries”) correlated most with distrusting officials ($r = 0.20$) and elected councillors ($r = 0.19$) and not with distrusting members of the Sejm.

Conversely however, perceptions of high-level corruption focused distrust more on members of the Sejm. Perceptions of widespread corruption amongst politicians correlated almost equally with distrusting MPs ($r = 0.25$) and officials ($r = 0.26$). But perceptions that politicians were “concerned mainly with their own interests”, correlated more with distrusting MPs ($r = 0.29$) than with distrusting officials ($r = 0.19$). And perceptions that politicians’ success “depends much more on having political connections and friends than on competence and skills” also correlated more with distrusting MPs ($r = 0.26$) than with distrusting officials ($r = 0.18$). The hierarchy of impact of perceptions on distrust was reversed when the perceptions were about high-level corruption.

Moreover, perceptions of high-level corruption (unlike perceptions of low-level corruption) correlated with attitudes towards “the way democracy works in Poland” ($r = 0.18$), and more especially the way *elections* work in Poland ($r = 0.25$) – though not significantly with attitudes to the principle of democracy itself, nor to the President.

In percentage terms, those who “definitely agreed” that politicians gave priority to their personal interests were 40 percent more likely to distrust MPs, 35 percent more likely to distrust elected councillors and 30 percent more likely to distrust officials, but only a mere 16 percent more likely to distrust the President. They were only 8 percent more likely to reject the principle of democracy, but between 29 and 34 percent more likely to complain that democracy and elections did not work well in Poland.

Again the evidence suggests that the impact of corruption-perceptions, like that of corruption-experiences, is focused. Corruption-perceptions erode the legitimacy and effectiveness of government – but not government-in-general. Specific aspects of corruption-perceptions have very specific impacts.

This conclusion is reinforced by the pattern of correlations between perceptions of widespread high-level corruption and attitudes towards individual parties. Attitudes towards eight parties (the six in the Sejm, plus the two former governing parties which lost all their seats at the election) were measured on eleven-point scales from “strongly dislike” to “strongly like”. Naturally enough, perceptions of widespread corruption amongst politicians did not encourage positive feelings towards *any* of the parties.

But perceptions of widespread corruption significantly encouraged negative feelings towards three of the eight. High-level corruption perceptions

Table 18. The impact of perceptions of corruption on distrust

	If view of whether politicians serve their own interests is. . .			<i>impact of perceptions of corruption</i>
	definitely agree	rather agree	disagree	
	%	%	%	%
Percent who distrust. . .				
members of the Sejm (MPs)	82	68	42	+40
elected councillors	71	60	36	+35
officials in offices	69	61	39	+30
President	26	17	10	+16
Percent who feel. . .				
Polish elections NOT/NOT				
AT ALL good at representing	61	44	27	+34
NOT/NOT AT ALL satisfied with				
way democ works in Poland	68	56	39	+29
democ NOT best system	20	14	12	+8

correlated significantly at 0.14 with disliking the AWSP (Solidarity Election Action), at 0.10 with disliking UW (Freedom Union), and at 0.13 with disliking PO (Civic Platform) whose leaders were all drawn from the former governing coalition – but not significantly with liking or disliking any other party. The leaders of PiS (Law and Justice) were also drawn from the former governing coalition but they had left the coalition and campaigned against high-level corruption. That did not make those who felt corruption at the top was “very widespread” specially favourable to the PiS, but at least it stopped them being specially unfavourable. Thus high-level corruption perceptions damaged the AWSP, UW and PO but not the PiS.

By contrast, unfair treatment by officials or perceptions of low-level corruption had a less discriminating impact on affection for the parties. Only the SLD, Samoobrona and the PiS seem to have escaped from a general disaffection for parties that was linked to the perception or experience of low-level ill-treatment or corruption.

Conclusions

Our findings underline the importance of distinguishing between corruption-perceptions and corruption itself. First, because perceptions of corruption run far ahead of experience. Second, because different factors influence the one

more than the other. Third, because their political consequences differ not only in degree but in their targets: corruption-perceptions and corruption-experiences erode trust in different politicians and institutions.

Our most significant finding about the causes of the experience and perceptions of corruption is that some factors simultaneously inflate the one while deflating the other. Poverty and low education increase perceptions of corruption while decreasing experience of it. And, most perverse of all, a moralising “culture which can resist corruption” tends also to increase (not decrease) perceptions, suspicions, and allegations of corruption. That is certainly true for the impact of personal moralising on individuals within Poland. And at a higher level, it is probably true also for external moralising (from institutions such as the EU) which may also reduce corruption in accession states while simultaneously increasing corruption-perceptions.

One reason why experience and perceptions of corruption are so weakly, and sometimes even perversely linked, is that the mass public has direct *experience* of low-level corruption but their *perceptions* are unbounded by this limited experience and draw on the media, gossip, prejudice and personal resentments more than actual corruption experiences.

Where citizens do have direct experience, it does affect their trust and support for aspects of governance closely related to that experience. Citizens’ own direct experience of corruption had most impact on their distrust of low-level officials. But perceptions of high-level corruption were not much influenced by corruption experiences of any kind, and more influenced by the media, gossip, general dissatisfaction with officials, poverty and declining living standards. And these perceptions of high-level corruption eroded trust in Polish MPs and Polish elections more than any other aspect of governance – lower or higher. Perceptions of high-level corruption had less impact on trust in low-level officials. And trust in the President and the newly elected government – as well as preferences for democracy as a system or principle – remained relatively unaffected by either low-level experiences or high-level perceptions of corruption.

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