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## Combating Corruption in Croatia: From Expert Perceptions to Policy-Oriented Action Strategies and Back\*

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In this paper a comparative analysis of various perceptions of corruption in Croatia is presented. The investigation is based on the research results obtained within the FP6 project "Crime as Culture", started in 2006, which focused on the perception of corruption in seven European countries. The grounded theory method was used to organize and interpret data collected in interviews with experts from six target groups. The aim of this paper is to provide some policy-oriented insights based on a synthesis of the project findings. The paper is divided into four sections focusing on the major dimensions of combat against corruption: (1) research on corruption, (2) sanctioning corruption, (3) corruption prevention, and (4) increasing anti-corruption awareness. As our analyses suggest, the social embeddedness of corruption in Croatia is well reflected in the dominant expert perceptions of corruption. The observed heterogeneity and fragmentariness of the existing (and often competing) perceptions of corruption found in this study are potential obstacles to a systematic, well-coordinated, and efficacious anti-corruption strategy.

**Key words:** corruption, perception of corruption, experts' opinions, social embeddedness of corruption, Croatia

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## Introduction

The research on corruption has had some history in Croatia (Budak, 2006), especially since 1990 when the post-communist transition started. It suggests that there is a widespread public belief that corruption can be found almost everywhere in the society – from the top, to the bottom. Fragmentary research data and anecdotal evidence also suggest that the tolerance towards petty or low-level corruption (“favour for favour”, “service for service”, the habit of handing out small gifts to public servants, etc.) is much higher than towards high-level corruption, which has recently been tackled by the State Office for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime (Kufirin et al., 2008).

The FP6 project “Crime as Culture”, focused on the perception of corruption in seven European countries (including Croatia), started in 2006. It has been coordinated by a Consortium of several research institutions and consists of three distinct phases. In the first, research methodology was developed and applied to materials related to two chosen cases of corruption (a low-level and a high-level corruption case) in each of the participating countries. The method used was the grounded theory approach that focused on discovering various patterns of corruption perception within expert elites. In Croatia, the two cases analyzed were: (a) financial issues associated with the last presidential campaign and (b) alleged corruption in the city of Zagreb homes for the elderly (Štulhofer et al., 2007).

In the second phase, the same methodological approach was used to interview the representatives of six major expert groups (police, economy, legal system, politics, the media, and the civic sector). Selection of interviewees was based on two principal criteria: (a) a high position within the institutional hierarchy and (b) some professional experience with corruption-related issues.

The interviews covered a range of topics, such as: personal definition of corruption, assessment of corruption in Croatia and of the new anti-corruption strategy launched in 2006, the role of the EU and NGOs in combating corruption in Croatia, the treatment of corruption in the media, assessment of the public perception of corruption, the role of cultural/political heritage in the dynamics of corruption, and the dynamics of corruption prevention in the interviewee’s working environment. The research material, collected during the March-May 2006 period, was coded and analyzed to discover the existing patterns of understanding corruption within the target expert groups.

Comparisons between the target groups were carried out on the basis of the following categories: (a) definition of corruption; (b) seriousness of

corruption in Croatia; (c) main *loci* of corruption; (d) dynamics of corruption; (e) roots/causes of corruption; (f) consequences of corruption; (g) public perception of corruption; (h) corruption and trust in institutions; (i) the role of the media; (j) the role of NGOs; (k) measures for combating the corruption; (l) the role of the EU; and (m) internal anti-corruption mechanisms. This second project phase resulted in empirical verification of the six ideal types of understanding corruption among Croatian experts: the Public Relations Model, characterized by simplified, often populist and one-dimensional definitions of corruption, the Expert Model, that entails complex and comprehensive assessment of corruption, the Nuisance Model, characterized by the lack of clear definition and anti-corruption ambitions, the Human Rights Model, which offers a comprehensive approach to fighting corruption, the Pragmatic Model, based on comprehensive legal-political definitions and political constraints in fighting corruption, and, finally, the Ignoring Model (Štulhofer et al., 2007).

According to the analysis (Kufirin et al., 2008), the understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate corruption in Croatia seems to be rather high among the interviewed experts. Different mechanisms and generators were clearly described, most notably political clientelism and state capture (Hellman, Jones and Kaufmann, 2000), deeply rooted socio-cultural norms (local, kinship or politically-based social networks and the system of traditional obligations), and insufficiently professionalized and underpaid public administration.

In this paper, which presents the final project phase, we outline some policy-oriented insights based on a synthesis of the earlier project activities and the round table discussions with a group of experts.<sup>1</sup> After a brief methodological section, the analytical part of the paper is divided into four sections, each focusing on one of the major dimensions in combating corruption, which has become a crucial point in Croatian accession to the EU: (1) research on corruption, (2) sanctioning corruption, (3) preventing corruption, and (4) increasing anti-corruption awareness. This brief analysis should not be mistaken for a set of policy recommendations. Our ambitions were much more modest and limited by the empirical data at our disposal. The aim was to provide some coherent and evidence-based material for a focused and realistic discussion on the major anti-corruption activities that should be carried out in Croatia in the next 12 to 18 months.

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<sup>1</sup> The round table discussion session was held on 6 May 2008 at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. The authors would like to thank all the participants for their invaluable input and support.

## 1. Methodology

In the interviews with the representatives of expert groups carried out in the second project phase, combating corruption figured as the prominent issue. Experts were asked to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the second national anti-corruption strategy and its likely effects, comment on the mechanisms for fighting corruption in their professional environment, evaluate the role of various actors involved in combating corruption, and suggest appropriate anti-corruption activities and measures.

In the analysis of the interview transcripts, various codes attached to particular statements concerning the fight against corruption were pooled in a family of "fight against corruption" codes. For the purpose of this paper, all the citations connected to any of the codes in this family have been extracted and re-examined in the search for proposed activities and measures. The procedure has resulted in almost 150 expert citations referring to various measures or activities. However, the list was very redundant: similar measures and activities were proposed in most interviews. Identical proposals and issues were often stated at various levels of generality or at different points during the interview. The observed redundancy was reduced through joining similar proposals under the same, more general heading. The reduction of the list was done independently by two researchers, and resulted in practically identical lists containing, approximately, a dozen items. Further analysis has suggested that additional generalization would be possible by distinguishing between the following general groups of activities:

- (1) Research on corruption
- (2) Prosecuting and penalizing corruption
- (3) Prevention of corruption
- (4) Strengthening anti-corruption awareness.

During the brainstorming round table with experts (May 2008), the digested list of activities (expanded with typical measures; cf. Appendix) was discussed and the relevance, contextual strengths and weaknesses, and costs and benefits of the proposed activities assessed in a free flowing exchange of ideas. Unlike in the interviews, where it was only implicitly present, the issue of general political will for fighting corruption was strongly emphasized in the round table discussion. All the discussants agreed that political will constitutes the crucial prerequisite for efficient combat of corruption. It was suggested that even the already existing measures could considerably curb corruption if supported by genuine political motivation. Most discussants expressed deep disbelief in the existence of readiness to fight corruption among members of the ruling political elite.

## **2. Research on Corruption**

Research on corruption is an essential element of an efficient anti-corruption strategy. However, since corrupt practices occur in the “grey area” of social behaviour – which makes measuring the real extent of corruption impossible – the research on corruption is often illustrative and indicative at best. The indirect approach to measuring corruption (via its perception) prevails and, although it remains open to criticism, it is usually assumed that perception of corruption is an approximate indicator of the real level of corruption (Lambsdorff, 1999). Such an indirect approach remains less valid for assessing corruption at any particular point in time than for analyzing the dynamics of corruption over time. Hence the importance of longitudinal research studies.

### **2.1. Assessing the Perception of Corruption**

So far, Croatia has been included in a number of research studies on the perception of corruption, both at local and international levels. Corrupt behaviour among civil servants was assessed in 1995 as part of the World Value Survey, in 1996 (the Croatian Social Capital Study), in 1999 (the European Value Study), and again in 2003, as part of the South East European Social Survey (Štulhofer, 2004; Kufirin et al., 2008). The results pointed to an increase in perception of corruption among civil servants. Yet, in 2006, Croatia was participating for the first time in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), which included a couple of relevant questions. The new and still unpublished results suggested a slight decrease in perception of corruption.

Although the aforementioned studies provide interesting data, they do not constitute systematic monitoring. What comes closest to it are two annual international studies conducted by Transparency International (the *Corruption Perceptions Index /CPI/* and the *Global Corruption Barometer /the Barometer/*). CPI is a composite index based on expert assessments and the Barometer is a public-opinion survey. Croatian CPI for the year 2007 (4.1) indicated improvement.<sup>2</sup> It is the best Croatian score since the beginning of this survey in 1999, when the corresponding value was 2.7. Again, this put an end to the negative trend which lasted from 2001. Both the ISSP and CPI scores may reflect a recent more active and successful role of the State Attorney’s Office for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK) and the increased media interest in the coverage of

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<sup>2</sup> CPI score ranges from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates a highly corrupt society and 10 a corruption-free society.

corruption cases. Notably, the latest available Barometer data suggest that the judiciary, health care system, private-sector business, political parties and the Parliament/legislature are perceived as the most corrupt sectors/institutions of the Croatian society (Transparency International – Croatia, 2007).

## **2.2. Conceptualizing the Term**

In order successfully to investigate and explain corrupt practices and their societal perceptions, one needs to be aware of certain conceptual specificities of the term *corruption*. It is important to go beyond the strictly legal definition and compare it with more informal, socially connoted everyday meanings. While there are some practices and acts most ordinary people would agree on in naming corruption, such as bribery, paying for legally available service, extortion, etc., there may be some cases of (legally) punishable acts that people do not consider corruption, or *vice versa*. These may include various forms of conflict of interest that are traditionally absent from collective consciousness (lack of understanding) or some practices that citizens do not perceive as corrupt, since they are habitual (legitimized by tradition). Although no relevant systematic data exist in Croatia, there seems to be a substantial difference in understanding – and the willingness to justify – high- vs. low-level corruption, as shown in Romania (Uslaner, 2008). None of these important and culture-dependent nuances are covered by the present research. A better understanding of the cultural impact on the conceptualization of corruption remains, therefore, a crucial task.

## **2.3. Cultural vs. Rational Tolerance of Corruption**

A differential tolerance of corruption among citizens is associated with specific social constraints on committing corruption. It would be wrong to ascribe the differential treatment of corruption solely to monitoring and sanctioning capacities. As Moreno argued, “corruption has a cultural side, and most societies have a certain degree of corruption permissiveness, with some of them being, on average, more likely to justify corrupt practices than others” (Moreno, 2002: 496). It is highly likely that some corrupt practices in Croatia are culturally acceptable due to certain traditional (informal) norms and regulations. For example, it can be often heard that the gift-giving practice does not constitute bribery, but simply expresses gratitude (which might pave the way for a future exchange of favours). Yet, it is important to differentiate between the social acceptance or willingness to tolerate some forms of corruption and a rational decision to do so because it seems to be either the easiest or most beneficial option. In that respect,

not all corruption tolerance is culture-specific. Actually, a large part may be the result of a cost-benefit strategy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, corruption can breed tolerance, which allows for the persistence of corruption.

Although it is probably true that corruption can never be completely eradicated, it is important to take into consideration both habitual and cost-benefit sources of tolerance toward corrupt acts in combating corruption. Unfortunately, the existing body of research does not offer any systematic insight into the socio-cultural roots of corruption and its tolerance in Croatia. No empirical data is available on a more rational (i.e. less norm-oriented), cost-benefit rationale for tolerating corruption, either. This emphasizes the importance of designing and initiating qualitative studies focused on the everyday phenomenology of corruption.

#### **2.4. Evaluation of Anti-Corruption Activities and Measures**

In order to improve existing and future anti-corruption activities and measures, high-quality research evaluation is needed. Successful public policies are usually based on the analysis of preceding attempts. Up to now, the Croatian Government has adopted two National anti-corruption programmes (in 2002 and 2006). Unfortunately, no evaluation was carried out following the introduction of these programmes and related action plans (2006). This could suggest that the main aim was window-dressing or appeasing the EU, which has repeatedly insisted that curbing corruption is one of the central prerequisites for Croatian accession.

In May of 2008, newspapers reported that the Minister of Justice had announced the finalization of the new Anti-corruption Strategy. The document should contain the first systematic analysis – though not an empirical evaluation – of the former National Programme. It was also announced that the corresponding Action Plan, which will be annually revised and updated, will strictly monitor the implementation progress.

Significantly, it was also suggested that the new Strategy would pay special attention to the measures aimed at combating high-level corruption. As Nieuwbeerta, De Geest and Siegers (2003: 140) emphasize, “there are several arguments for the view that street-level corruption is different in nature, requires different anti-corruption strategies, and is less harmful to the economic system than high-level corruption”. However, it is also a fact that the renewed EU pressure focused on high-level corruption, rather than its street-level forms. The new strategy emphasis on high-level corruption

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<sup>3</sup> As in the situation where citizens can not legally obtain certain services to which they are entitled.



was not met by more detailed and stringent regulation of conflict of interest and public servants' property cards.

Traditionally, newly introduced public policies in Croatia are not considered as social experiments. This is a serious and systematic flaw in the process of policy development and implementation, which needs to be corrected. All new policies need to be regularly evaluated and, if needed, retracted or revised according to evidence. In the light of the suboptimal effects of previous anti-corruption strategies, such an approach is a necessity – particularly in the context of combating corruption.

### **3. Prosecuting and Penalizing Corruption**

While curbing corruption remains the required condition for Croatia's EU membership, the actual struggle against corruption still lacks a clear strategy and systematic approach. It is often suggested that serious anti-corruption activities are impossible without far-reaching institutional reforms and thorough de-politicization. For, as the argument goes, as long as the heads of hospital departments and universities or members of the supervisory boards of large companies are appointed on the basis of their political allegiances, any serious attempt at curbing high-level corruption is largely doomed.

One of the interesting, but predictable, differences between low- and high-level corruption is that the former – even though present in the media as often as the high-level corruption cases – are more likely to be prosecuted. Apart from the fact that it is less likely that it will be permitted to prosecute high-level corruption, there is an overall problem with finding evidence sufficient for prosecution and, eventually, for penalization. Among other things, this calls into question both the appropriateness of the legal framework and the judicial expertise and impartiality.

Although it is probably true that the number of reported corruptive acts in Croatia, as well as internationally, remains insignificant in comparison to the real extent of corruption (Kregar, 2003), an increase in the number of prosecuted corruptive acts and strict sanctioning are among central characteristics of an efficient anti-corruption policy.

Data presented in Table 1 confirm an increase in the number of reported cases during the 2002–2006 period. However, the indictment and conviction ratios – reflecting, to a certain degree, prosecutorial and judiciary efficacy – were higher at the beginning of the period than at its end. As for strict sanctioning, in 2006 only 11% of 328 convicted persons were actually imprisoned and most of them up to 30 days. (Others were only fined.)

**Table 1. Criminal Offences against Official Duty**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Reported cases</i>	<i>Indictments</i>	<i>Indictment ratio (% of reported cases)</i>	<i>Convictions</i>	<i>Conviction ratio (% of indictments)</i>
2002	1314	588	44,75	265	20,17
2003	1774	633	35,68	340	19,17
2004	1871	705	37,68	330	17,64
2005	1557	649	41,68	267	17,15
2006	1873	776	41,43	328	17,51

Source: Statistical Yearbook 2007 of the Central Bureau of Statistics, Zagreb

A vicious circle may be at work here. If reporting corruptive acts is mainly left to citizens, as it usually the case, a possible explanation of the slow increase in reported cases could be the consequence of the widespread scepticism regarding the quality and impartiality of prosecutorial and judiciary work. In a situation where only a fraction of cases results in (minor) sanctions, usually after a number of years, citizens' sense of justice and the importance of whistle-blowing may be weakened by the rising feeling of futility. This, in combination with fear – the media has reported about a number of cases in which the persons accused of corruptive activity were not prosecuted, but those who reported them were dismissed from their posts or even physically attacked – could account for the small number of reported cases of corruption. Only recently has a new amendment to the Bill on State Officials provided some legal protection to whistle-blowers.<sup>4</sup>

It is often forgotten that legal sanctioning of corruption represents only one, though probably the most notable, form of penalizing corrupt behaviour. Although it seems culture-specific, moral sanctioning of corruption may be an important additional deterrent. In countries with low tolerance toward corruption, professional and public ostracism of individuals involved in corrupt activities help to keep the rewards from corruption low and the costs high. The questions of whether, and how, such moral sanctioning of corruption could be strategically developed (in a country with rather high levels of tolerance toward corruption) remains open, but it seems likely that a campaign that would re-frame this moral imperative as an issue of national pride would require substantial de-politicization and

<sup>4</sup> The Bill ensures the whistle-blower is legally protected if sufficient evidence against the accused is found. If not, the former could be fired and even legally prosecuted.

high levels of trust in the government and in state institutions. This seems highly improbable in a country where no high-positioned civil servant has ever resigned after he/she had been confronted with allegations of corruption. This problem is exacerbated by the existing state capture tendencies, which remain officially unquestioned in spite of frequent proclamations of the “political will to combat corruption”.

This formalism was reflected in the recently amended Bill on the Prevention of Conflict of Interest in the Execution of Public Duties. Amendments were introduced to extend the list of public servants who would be under the jurisdiction of the Bill, and to specify their obligations. Two major flaws remained. Firstly, members of various political parties will continue to constitute over 50% of the Parliamentary Committee on Conflict of Interest, the main monitoring body. Secondly, the sanctions prescribed by the Bill for norm violation are either unclear or marginal.

#### **4. Prevention of Corruption**

Corruption prevention is the core element of any comprehensive anti-corruption strategy. In this brief section we focus on the activities and measures aimed at preventing corruption that were suggested in interviews with experts from the six target groups, carried out during the second project phase and/or discussed at the recently organized round table (cf. Introduction). Behind the activities mentioned, there was a general assumption of an existing political will to curb corruption. Clearly, the success of any anti-corruption strategy is determined, initially at least, by the decision-makers’ support and commitment.

A simple classification of anti-corruption activities should distinguish between: (a) activities that make corruption more difficult or costly, and (b) activities that diminish rewards and returns from corrupt acts. The first category includes activities such as simplification of the legal framework (for example, overly complex procedures of public procurement), improving decision-making transparency – especially if economic transactions are involved or implied – increasing legal sanctions for corruption, and citizens’ education. All these activities can have a direct and immediate effect on both low- and high-level corruption.

The second category describes activities that improve the availability and quality of public services (e-administration, etc.), as well as decentralization and professionalization of decision-making, better professional education, competitive (meritocratic) employment in public administration, and eradication of various state capture opportunities through systematic liberalization and de-politicization (Hellman, Jones and Kaufmann, 2000).

At least in regard to low-level corruption, reducing the necessity for corruption decreases its utility.

Both types of activities would be best applied in combination, starting from the areas where the contact between citizens and state administration is the most intensive. By effectively signalling that corruption is no longer tolerated, such an approach could, in turn, provide an impetus for the aforementioned moral sanctioning of corruption.

#### **4.1. Obstacles**

Attempts at corruption prevention are often confronted with different obstacles, from inefficient or corrupt judiciary to undermining political networks. In general, the less developed the democracy, particularly in regard to civil liberties, the more obstacles to preventing corruption. If a journalist publishes an article exposing a case of corruption and subsequently loses his/her job, this has no beneficial effect on corruption prevention, but it does make the problem of corruption “visible”. But if journalists are prevented from publishing a story – by being threatened with termination of their contracts – the problem may not be “visible” at all. Other types of obstacle are informal networks of power, which provide excellent conditions for “invisible” corruption. Such groups, especially if unchecked, can easily arrange various deals far from the public eye and sheltered from official investigations. A system of mutual obligations usually ensures the longevity of such corruption-prone networks.

Overcoming the obstacles is most often a gradual process based on citizens’ education, strengthening of civil society, improving democratic institutions and procedures, and increasing information flow. In that sense, corruption prevention can be a slow process that depends both on the more general democratic progress and the results of the more specific anti-corruption activities.

### **5. Anti-Corruption Awareness**

There is a general understanding that increasing anti-corruption awareness (ACA) is an essential element of any effective anti-corruption strategy (Uslaner, 2008). However, it is not always clear what is meant by ACA – for example, whether it encompasses a deeper understanding of the social ills of corruption or just a general moral condemnation of corruption – and what measures could be efficiently used to strengthen it. During our interviews and discussions with experts, it was often suggested that the evolution of ACA is a long-term process dependent on many factors. Central among them seem to be the functionality of the legal system,

the quality and persistency of media reporting on corruption, the existing political culture, the level of development of civil society, and the general educational level.

Turning to ACA-beneficial activities, the success in prosecuting individuals involved in corruption scandals seems particularly important. Disclosure of high-level corruption cases and the display of readiness to prosecute and penalize individuals, especially officials, play a significant role in raising ACA. Since such legal cases can take years to finalize, immediate steps – such as the introduction of better control mechanisms in the state institutions where corruption has been found – would be necessary to send the message that corruption will not be tolerated. In addition, resignation of supervising officials should be made mandatory in order to make anti-corruption vigilance a personal responsibility.

Media coverage of the above described activities is crucial. The activities undertaken after a corruption scandal has erupted need to be presented in detail and carefully scrutinized. Only the systematic and critical coverage of corruption (and the state response) could increase ACA. Obviously, this task requires skilled journalists, socially responsible editors, and, generally, “clean” media. In several interviews with experts, the media in Croatia were implied to be part of the clientelist networks.

Anti-corruption awareness is closely related to corruption prevention. In that respect, most prevention activities will have an effect on ACA, although with different reach. Too often the prevention and ACA are equated with educating the public about what corruption is and why is it bad for the society. Although the importance of understanding the scope and forms of corruption can hardly be overstated, educational campaigns require palpable changes in the corruption-related incentive structure. Without a publicly recognizable process of lowering the rewards and increasing the costs of corruption already set in motion, informing people about the ills of corruption will only contribute to rising cynicism.

In the Croatian context, when it comes to politicians and entrepreneurs, the ACA context depends on the reforms that tackle the mechanisms of state capture. This could prove difficult, since links to political power have become essential business tools for some companies. A good example is the recent physical attack (ominous baseball bats were used by the attackers) on a newly appointed CEO in the huge and largely monopolistic holding company of the city of Zagreb, who reported to the State Attorney’s Office for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK) a number of irregularities that took place in the company before his appointment. Interestingly, the city mayor and his deputy, who publicly expressed their

support for the attacked official, failed to mention the alleged corruption activities at the city company as a possible reason for the attack.

Another important question regarding ACA is related to the low- vs. high-level corruption distinction. Should the strengthening of ACA include both equally? Or do we need to focus ACA primarily on the latter form? Although it could be argued that, historically, the two types of corruption probably evolved in parallel in the region, mutually reinforcing each other, the rationality behind the low-level corruption (inefficient public administration, non-transparent and non-competitive employment procedures etc.) clearly differs from the one associated with high-level corruption (greed, political power acquisition). Also, low- and high-level corruption implies rather different social costs.

Although the question remains open – to our knowledge, there is no consensus regarding this issue – we believe that to insist on absolute ACA, characterized by moral abhorrence of any type of corruption, would be neither feasible, nor useful. The useful approach, in our view, would be to foster ACA primarily focused on the high-level corruption, which would provide much needed public pressure on the decision-makers. An additional argument takes into consideration an asymmetric relationship between low- and high-level corruption. While changes in the dynamics of low-level corruption may not affect the dynamics of high-level corruption, the spillover effect is often found in the reverse case (Uslaner, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

If ACA is conceptualized as suggested, systematic education on what constitutes corruption should be carried out on a large scale. The notion and scope of the conflict of interest is poorly understood among Croatian citizens, this being partly related to traditional emphasis on kinship and loyalty to the local community. A narrow interpretation of the conflict of interest at all levels equates this type of corruption to either illegal transfer of money or valuables (bribes), or political favours (getting a better job, etc.). Improving understanding and recognition of corruption in the cases where no money or immediate privileges are involved would emphasize and broaden the individual responsibility of politicians and administrators. This would, in turn, increase public pressure on individuals in charge who have refused to resign after serious misconduct has been discovered in their institutions.

If anti-corruption awareness is understood as a pattern of behaviour – characterized by the readiness to reject and report any kind of corrupt

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<sup>5</sup> “Whenever corruption shapes people's evaluation of their state or their society, it is high-level corruption. The misdeeds of ordinary professionals don't matter” (Uslaner, 2008: 133).

activity – rather than a moral disposition, one of the main obstacles to strengthening ACA is the widespread perception of powerlessness. This dominant socio-cultural characteristic of post-communist societies has been highlighted in a number of research studies (Mishler and Rose, 1997; Fuchs and Klingemann, 2002; Paldan and Svendsen, 2001). Lack of trust in institutions and weak civic ties helps to explain why many individuals who are confronted with corruption they do not condone are unwilling to report it. As reporting criminal activity involves a certain level of personal risk and considerable time expenditure, perceiving such engagement as useless would minimize its occurrence, no matter how strong the personal anti-corruption convictions.

## **6. Back to Perception(s)**

The findings of the two empirical phases of this project (2006–2007; Štulhofer et al., 2007; Kufrin et al., 2008) suggest three main dimensions of expert perceptions of the phenomenology of corruption in Croatia. The first was the frequently encountered disbelief in the existence of genuine political will to fight corruption. Governmental campaigns and proclamations, as well as national strategies, were often dismissed as window-dressing intended for the EU decision-makers. In addition, anti-corruption activities and efforts were frequently perceived as misguided, i.e., focused on the low-level corruption and ignoring or carefully avoiding political corruption.<sup>6</sup> Representatives of the media and civil society were most vocal in expressing this viewpoint. As expected, the most consistent confidence in the national anti-corruption strategy was observed among the representatives of the police and the legal system.

The second dimension was the perception of cultural generators of corruption. In most expert groups we found numerous references to the socio-cultural history of corruption. It was pointed out that corruption in Croatia – i.e. its local “language” (cf. Shore and Haller, 2005) – can not be properly understood without taking into account the cultural legacy of the former socialist regime: persistence of traditional nepotism, loyalty to the local community, reliance of personal networks and mutual obligations, etc. The transitional context of the 1990s, characterized by the 1991–1995 armed conflict, rapid privatization, increasing inequality, and the authoritarian political clientelism, was mentioned even more frequently. Both periods

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<sup>6</sup> A good example was the recent discussion at the National Board for Monitoring of the Programme of Curbing Corruption, held on 29 June 2008, where several journalist accused the government of sabotaging anti-corruption efforts – either directly or indirectly – through influencing or pressuring the media (Majdandžić, 2008).

were seen by experts as crucial for moulding specific cultural habits and structural factors that reproduce corruption on different societal levels.

The third characteristic was the *hyperopic (mis)perception of corruption* (HMC), which was indicated in our interviews when discussing internal mechanisms for fighting corruption (in-house anti-corruption activity). The phrase, as we recently suggested (Kufrin et al., 2008), denotes a phenomenon where actors are critical of corruption in other sectors or groups, but tend to ignore or mislabel corrupt acts within their own institution or social group. There are several possible explanations for HMC. It is possible that such a dual approach to corruption represents a cultural habit developed under the past circumstances and social practices. Alternatively, it could be based on inadequate understanding of what constitutes corruption, especially in regard to conflict of interest and the abuse of public office.<sup>7</sup> Another possibility is that HMC is the consequence of a strategic action of protecting one's reputation – and the reputation of one's institution – by covering up the corrupt behaviour of one's close associates. (The prevalence of such strategy would depend on the costs of corruption, which are closely related with the efficiency of legal protection against corrupt acts.) Unfortunately, the data collected in our study proved insufficient for pinpointing the cause(s) of HMC. What seems clear, though, is that the social embeddedness of corruption in Croatia includes a differential perception, and, most probably, evaluation of corruption, which is dependent on social proximity with the implied actors. It should be noted that HMC was least present in the media and civil society expert groups.

These three overarching characteristics of expert perceptions of corruption should not be confused with the six models outlined earlier (Štulhofer et al., 2007). Those are more complex entities that are, at least partially, group-specific. It is important to note that the observed heterogeneity and fragmentariness of the models could be an obstacle, particularly for an efficient coordination of the fight against corruption. The Expert and the Pragmatic Model were found to be predominant in defining corruption and discussions regarding efficient anti-corruption activities. An alternative approach to conceptualizing corruption (the Human Rights Model) was spe-

<sup>7</sup> There is abundant evidence in the media reports that many public servants, government officials, and members of the Parliament have incomplete understanding of the notion of conflict of interest or abuse of power. This is usually displayed in the discussions over personal responsibility related to institutional mismanagement, as in the recent case of unlawful forced confinement to a psychiatric institution, to which the wife of an influential media mogul was subjected, allegedly atupon his request (Škaričić and Babić, 2008).



cific to civil society and, to a certain extent, to the media target group. As already mentioned, in most target groups it was the Ignoring Model that characterized experts' understanding of the importance of internal mechanisms of control and prevention of corruption.

In general, the most critical target group, NGO representatives, was marginalized in the majority of other experts' discourses, particularly in regard to the role civil society plays in fighting corruption. Partially, such treatment is associated with the legacy of socialism and its politically motivated distrust toward non-governmental associations and civic engagement. However, an additional reason seems to be the annoyance (palpable in governmental institutions) over constant criticism coming from civil society, which is often perceived as not based on evidence, as well as being self-promoting. Such accusations can, of course, serve as a perfect alibi for doing nothing to prevent and/or curb corruption. In this sense, the reality of the economic and social costs of fighting corruption may be tactically inflated and used as an argument against any systematic and committed approach to combating corruption.

Although the discussions about corruption as a social problem have been part of Croatian public life since the mid-1990s, initiated primarily by the media and civil society, its political significance and, consequently, policy ramifications have been markedly strengthened since 2000, mostly due to the EU conditions and expectations expressed in negotiations over the accession process. Thus, the EU role in the anti-corruption discourse and activities in Croatia can hardly be overemphasized. Its perception, however, among the interviewed experts seemed vague and ambiguous. On the one hand, the pressure to adopt new political and professional norms and standards of conduct, together with legal and institutional reforms related to the accession process, were often stressed as positive influences. Socio-cultural "resilience", on the other hand, or the perceived ability to continue with "business as usual" in spite of being closely monitored by the EU, was sometimes expressed in the belief that the success – or, for that matter, failure – of anti-corruption efforts is entirely an internal issue, associated primarily with the moral and professional quality of governance. This moderate to minor anti-corruption role of the EU, according to most experts who participated in our study, seems to be in line with a rather sceptical public view of the benefits of joining the EU. In June 2008, the Standard Eurobarometer 69 survey revealed that only 30% of Croatian citizens believe that Croatian membership in the EU would be "a good thing". In 30 countries included in the survey, only Latvia had a lower proportion of Euro-optimists (European Commission, 2008).

## Conclusion

In this paper we further analyzed qualitative material collected during the 2006–2007 period. Based on interviews with experts from the six target groups and the subsequent round table discussion, we outlined policy-oriented suggestions and their social context. We argued that the social embeddedness of expert suggestions needs to be understood in terms of the dominant pattern of corruption perception. The observed heterogeneity and fragmentariness of the existing, and competing, patterns of corruption perception are a potential obstacle to coordinated and efficient anti-corruption activities – especially if a widespread disbelief in the existence of political will to combat corruption and the *hyperopic (mis)perception of corruption* are taken into account.

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**APPENDIX – The List of Anti-Corruption Activities Suggested by Interviewed Experts**

<p>(A) Strengthening Anti-Corruption Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clear and convincing demonstration of the determination (i.e. political will) to fight corruption;</li><li>• Systematic public presentation of the efficient identification and prosecution of major corruption cases;</li><li>• Focusing on high-level corruption;</li><li>• Comprehensive and systematic anti-corruption education of citizens (including information on citizens' rights, procedures for reporting corruption, legal protection for whistle-blowers, etc) aimed at increasing public sensitivity (and intolerance) to corruption;</li><li>• Re-framing the fight against corruption as the national imperative and a matter of national pride;</li><li>• Strengthening the role of the media through the promotion and nurturing of investigative journalism and protection of journalists' freedom of reporting and independence from the ownership structure;</li><li>• Focusing on corruption during election campaigns (NGOs, political parties, the media).</li></ul>
<p>(B) Prevention of Corruption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increasing the efficiency and transparency of public services;</li><li>• Selective increase of salaries in certain public services;</li><li>• Allowing for private competitors in the public service sector;</li><li>• Strengthening financial control (property cards for officials, eliminating cash payments, systematic internal control and revision, requisition of unlawfully acquired property, etc.);</li><li>• Strengthening the position and influence of the civil sector.</li></ul>
<p>(C) Prosecuting and Penalizing Corruption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The need for legislative changes, including simplification of regulation, higher penalties for corrupt acts, and more comprehensive laws on the financing of political parties and election campaigns;</li><li>• Improving the quality of the judiciary (increasing efficacy and quality control, improving the process of selecting judges, etc.);</li><li>• Implementing the positive experiences of the EU.</li></ul>
<p>(D) Research on Corruption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The need for an independent institution responsible for systematic research on corruption;</li><li>• Evidence-based surveillance of the public perception and understanding of corruption;</li><li>• Empirical evaluation of anti-corruption policy (activities and measures associated with the National Strategy).</li></ul>

## **Suzbijanje korupcije u Hrvatskoj: od stručnih percepcija do javnopolitički usmjerenoga djelovanja i natrag**

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U radu se predstavlja komparativna analiza različitih percepcija korupcije u Hrvatskoj. Rad se temelji na interpretaciji istraživačkih rezultata prikupljenih u okviru FP6 projekta »Crime as Culture«, započetog 2006. godine i posvećenog analizi percepcije korupcije u sedam europskih zemalja. Za organizaciju i interpretaciju podataka dobivenih u intervjuima sa stručnjacima iz šest područja korištena je metodologija utemeljene teorije. Svrha rada jest određivanje nekih javnopolitičkih uvida utemeljenih na sintezi nalaza projekta. Rad je podijeljen u četiri cjeline koje opisuju temeljne dimenzije borbe protiv korupcije: (1) istraživanje korupcije, (2) sankcioniranje korupcije, (3) prevencija korupcije i (4) podizanje svijesti o korupciji. Kao što analize pokazuju, društvena uklopljenost korupcije u Hrvatskoj dobro se odražava u dominantnim stručnim percepcijama korupcije. U studiji primijećene heterogenost i fragmentarnost postojećih (i često konkurirajućih) percepcija korupcije moguće su prepreke za sustavnu, dobro usklađenu i uspješnu strategiju borbe protiv korupcije.

**Ključne riječi:** korupcija, percepcija korupcije, mišljenja stručnjaka, društvena uklopljenost korupcije, Hrvatska