

# **Fighting Corruption Through Unbundling Individuals' Corruption Perception**

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**This Dissertation is dedicated  
To my parents, my twin siblings,  
And to my entire family.**

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Sincerely,

Aram Simonyan

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The dissertation's general topic and its relevance

Corruption is a complex phenomenon that has existed throughout the centuries all over the globe (Schneider and Buehn, 2007). Historically, corruption has been a challenge in all continents, including Europe. Corruption is still a salient topic in the Central and Eastern European post-communist countries, from Russia and Ukraine to Bulgaria, from Georgia and Armenia to Hungary (Wallace and Latcheva, 2006; Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014; Fazekas and Tóth, 2016; Plaček, Půček and Ochrana, 2018). Additionally, though to a different extent, corruption is occurring in the economic powers, including Western European nations such as England, France, and Germany (Evans, 2003; Heilbrunn, 2005; Moran, 2005; von Maravic, 2007). Therefore, this dissertation's data and examples lean toward geographical areas representing Europe, namely post-communist East-European countries, Germany, and Switzerland.

Nevertheless, the notion of corruption was underresearched until the end of the 20th century. On October 1, 1996, the World Bank's President James Wolfensohn urged the Bank Group to confront the "Cancer of Corruption", calling on policymakers and the scientific community to further study anti-corruption mechanisms (Wolfensohn, 1995). Indeed, corruption, like cancer, metastasises in the country and society if it remains untreated, changing its demeanour and manifesting differently in various settings and contexts. Transparency International has alarmed that, despite promised efforts, 124 countries out of 180 score below 50 on the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. Hence, it remains pivotal for corruption researchers to explain what corruption is in a given national or local context, then consequently define, measure, and suggest approaches to curing one of the most hazardous diseases of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Corruption is one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences; thus, searching for one all-encompassing definition is unavailing. Corruption is manifesting in various forms (petit or grand), types (bribery, embezzlement, extortion, nepotism, patronage), levels of impact (local, national, international), and sectors (public, private, business), and is thus too nuanced to be specified under one generic definition. Therefore, there have been extensive

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<sup>1</sup> 0 means highly corrupt and 100 uncorrupt

debates and discussions regarding how the phenomenon can be properly conceptualised (Gardiner, 2002; Kurer, 2005; Harrison, 2007).

Ardigó and Hough (2018) eloquently demonstrate that the same case under scrutiny can be interpreted in strikingly different ways depending on how corruption is defined. To analyse and establish whether the actions under scrutiny committed by a bishop who stepped down from his office can be classified as corrupt or not, the paper reaches out to political science, law, anthropology, and economics disciplines. This highlights the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach when researching corruption. Moreover, they explain that each academic discipline holds a critical puzzle piece to the overall picture of corruption. Ultimately, their study invites more disciplines, such as history and international relations, to contribute from their standpoint to the definition of corruption.

However, the primary purpose of an anti-corruption agenda is not coming up with a perfect definition but instead fighting it; therefore, umbrella definitions of corruption are essential as stepping stones for corruption researchers to outline the borders and context of the notion of corruption. In fact, the conceptual definition of corruption originates in Nye's (1967, p. 419) statement that corruption is a

"behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique), pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence. This includes such behaviour as bribery (use of rewards to pervert the judgment of a person in a position of trust); nepotism (bestowal of patronage by reason of ascriptive relationship rather than merit); and misappropriation (illegal appropriation of public resources for private-regarding uses)".

Anti-corruption agencies, NGOs, and scholars modified and simplified the definition of corruption to measure the phenomenon more accurately. Nevertheless, these attempts have also not been united about the best methodology to measure corruption. On the one hand, qualitative researchers emphasise the necessity to penetrate the essence and qualitative factors of corruption to tackle it efficiently since general aggregated indexes cannot provide comparative power for various countries (Johnston, 2008, 2014; Ang, 2020). On the other hand, quantitative studies pursued measuring corruption through procurement data (Dávid-Barrett and Fazekas, 2020), satellite data (Andries *et al.*, 2019), and big data (Hlatshwayo *et al.*, 2018). Depending on the research objectives both qualitative and quantitative measurements of corruption have been widely used by corruption researchers. However,

perception-based measurement is perhaps the most commonly used among corruption researchers, predominantly due to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

Transparency International defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" and offers scholars a yearly Corruption Perception Index gathered from around 180 countries (Transparency International, 2016). However, it has been argued that measuring corruption based on perception is far from perfect since it does not include actual cases, proven incidents, or prosecutions. Similarly, conceivably the most famous corruption perception index – CPI, is also not perfect for measuring all types of corruption because of its conceptual and methodological pitfalls (Knack, 2007; Rohwer, 2009; Budsaratragoon and Jitmaneeroj, 2020). One of the evident downsides of the CPI includes assigning one index for the whole country which does not take into consideration the corruption difference between sectors and institutions, metropolitan cities and small towns within the state.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations of a perception-based methodology, and CPI specifically, it remains the most common approach in researching corruption. Consequently, it is paramount to comprehend deeper the perception-based measurement of corruption in the academic discourse; a research gap that this dissertation attempts to fill. Namely, the first paper of this dissertation argues for distancing from "black or white" thinking when it comes to measuring corruption through perception indexes and instead investigating the factors underlying the corruption perception among individuals (see chapter 1.3 Relationship of the papers).

Additionally, corruption scholarship has been bifurcated into two competitive streams exploring its "greasing" or "sanding" effects. The proponents of the greasing effects predominantly highlight corruption's benefits as a means of navigating the red tape of hurdles, speeding up bureaucratic procedures, and finding short-term beneficial solutions (Leff, 1964; Huntington, 1968; Dreher and Gassebner, 2013). However, in the long term, corruption's sanding effects on political, social, and economic structures remain indisputable (Bardhan, 1997; Méon and Sekkat, 2005; Köbis, 2015), and the destructive consequences of corruption on economic and state institutions are more intuitive and displayed. For example, in his ground-breaking article, Mauro (1995) demonstrates the negative effects of corruption on economic growth and investments, which was later confirmed by other corruption scholars (Mo, 2001). At the same time, corruption continues to flourish as one of our time's most pernicious societal challenges (Della Porta and Vanucci, 1997; Köbis, 2015). Therefore,

this cumulative dissertation is, *au fond*, based on the underlying argument that corruption is detrimental to state development (such as social, economic, and political) on both the macro and micro levels and seeks to elucidate the interdisciplinary approaches to scrutinising and analysing corruption depending on the research context.

To tackle corruption more effectively, social scientists have determined various causes of corruption. Although the direction of causality of the variables is hard to claim unilaterally, some antecedents have been widely acknowledged. For example, historical legacy, economic development, and perennial democratic institutions are claimed to be related to the corruption level in the country (Treismann, 2000). Additionally, contexts with a persistent hierarchical structure (Lambsdorff, 2005), an uncompetitive economic environment (Ades and di Tella, 1999), poor salaries (van Rijckeghem and Weder, 2001), and a lack of press freedom (Treismann, 2007) are associated with a higher corruption level in a given country. Notwithstanding the abundance of research on corruption antecedents, there is a gap in determining corruption's socioenvironmental and psychological antecedents (Lambsdorff, 1999; Spain, Harms and Lebreton, 2014; Köbis *et al.*, 2015). This is another gap this dissertation attempts to fill (see chapter 1.3 Relationship of the papers).

Since corruption is context specific when it comes to combatting its origins, one size does not fit all either. Depending on the country, setting, corruption form and sector, a top-down or bottom-up approach might be preferential for tackling corruption nationally. Cracking down on corruption through top-down approaches, including establishing and nurturing functional anti-corruption agencies, implies genuine will from the government (de Sousa, 2010; Smilov, 2010). In the case of bottom-up strategies, more emphasis lies on bringing awareness about corruption to the population and raising awareness about the outstanding challenges of corruption (Themudo, 2013; Verdenicci and Hough, 2015). The second paper of this dissertation focuses on the case of Armenia as a success story to examine the factors and mechanisms associated with corruption fighting strategies and its decreased level shortly after the 2018 revolution.

One focal point of this dissertation is to emphasise the monumental role of individuals' perception that corruption research relies upon and the necessity to research corruption in interdisciplinary manner. Furthermore, this dissertation highlights the interconnected elements of defining, measuring, and fighting corruption as a consecutive circle. Additionally, it highlights that the umbrella term corruption can be interpreted differently based on the context, thus requiring a more profound research approach on the social, psychological,

politico-economic, and institutional antecedents of the phenomenon to tackle it efficiently (Lambsdorff, 1999; Köbis et al., 2015; Melgar, Rossi, and Smith, 2010). Based on this critical gap, the first paper aims at moving away from the all-or-nothing approach often incorporated into corruption perception indexes and identifying factors forming the perception among individuals based on a quantitative assessment of individual-level data. The second paper utilises the perceived corruption level in a country as a keystone for promoting democracy and public trust in the state. Finally, the last paper examines the personal and socioenvironmental antecedents of corrupt behaviour and proposes managerial and policy implications for controlling it.

The remainder of the introduction first depicts an overview of the three dissertation papers. Then, a summary of the content papers follows, including a paragraph highlighting the contribution of each co-author to the article (when applicable). The subsequent section presents the relationship between the papers concerning their research content. The final section of the introduction illustrates how the dissertation fills in the existing gaps in the corruption literature and indicates the overall added value of this dissertation for corruption research.

## 1.2 Introduction of the chapters

### 1.2.1 First chapter

In the first chapter/paper of this dissertation, I build upon the existing literature pertaining to the comprehension and measurement of corruption, arguing for the necessity of investigating the factors related to an individual's corruption perception. To identify the factors associated with an individual's corruption perception, the chapter takes the case of Armenia. After the Velvet Revolution in 2018, corruption perceptions improved swiftly in the country. However, during the data collection timeframe, the corruption level in Armenia was still high. Since research focusing on the formation of individuals' corruption perception is scarce, the paper attempts to identify the factors that individuals contemplate when assessing the corruption level in their country (Olken, 2009; Ko and Samajdar, 2010; Melgar, Rossi and Smith, 2010; Sööt and Rootalu, 2012).

To respond to the research questions, the chapter first utilises the institutional theory of trust (Hetherington, 1998), which argues that the government's actions and performance play a crucial role in public trust. In addition, previous research demonstrates a positive link between trust in institutions and an individual's overall perception of the country, i.e., its economic growth (Knack and Keefer, 1997; Zak and Knack, 2001), development (Fukuyama, 1995), democratic stability and democracy (Inglehart, 1999). Building upon this existing literature, the paper empirically argues that those who have more trust in public institutions will perceive less corruption in the country. In this relationship, the individual's overall perception of the country is a keystone linking the trust toward institutions and corruption perception.

Second, the paper reaches out to the sociotropic hypothesis of economic perception, which argues that individuals' perception of the economy can be associated with the government's political judgements and actions (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979, 1981). Building upon recent literature, the chapter demonstrates that citizens with a better perception of the economy perceive less corruption in the country. Moreover, in this relationship, the individuals' overall perception of the country is a keystone linking the trust toward institutions and corruption perception.

For this chapter which is a peer-reviewed article, I was the sole contributor. Earlier versions were presented at the Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan and at IOS Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg. The paper is under review in the peer-reviewed academic journal "Problems of Post-Communism".

## 1.2.2 Second chapter

The second chapter/paper of this dissertation focuses on the relationship between trust, corruption perception, and democracy building. Corruption was a pervasive problem in the former USSR prior to its dissolution. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Eastern and Central European post-communist countries inherited various forms of corruption that hampered post-break-up economic growth. Similarly, low levels of public trust were a legacy of the USSR in post-communist countries. The paper seeks to pinpoint the critical role of public trust in fighting corruption and democracy building. Three Eastern European post-communist countries, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine, that went through colour revolutions comprise noteworthy cases for studying the relationship.

High corruption was arguably the root cause of Armenians demonstrating against their government in 2018. By contrasting the notable improvement of corruption perception in Armenia before and after the Velvet Revolution, the paper argues that public trust is critical for democracy building and curbing corruption. Moreover, the paper differentiates between two types of public trust toward the government that evolved after the regime change. Namely, the first wave of trust was generated by public expectations and promises provided by the newly established government. The second wave of trust was based on the actual performance of the new government.

Immediately after a revolution, trust toward the government is based predominantly on expectations and promises. In this interim period, the populace celebrates the common victory and hopes for improvement. As a result, public trust increases compared with the pre-revolution period. In the second stage after a revolution, however, public trust becomes contingent upon the actual performance of the government and remains high or increases only if the inhabitants' expectations are met. The perceived and actual socioeconomic conditions, along with perceptions of corruption, can be underlying factors that affect trust

in institutions. The article studies data in the timeframe shortly before and after the revolution in Armenia and highlights similarities with other post-communist countries such as Georgia and Ukraine that went through recent revolutions.

This is a co-authored paper with Professor David Schultz initiated during my Fulbright year at the University of Michigan. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the ASN World Convention at the University of Columbia, New York, USA and the International Scientific Educational Centre at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. As a lead author of the paper and an Armenian-speaking person, I contributed significantly to the first draft of the paper and guided it through the publication process. Professor Schultz has made a vital contribution to all parts of the manuscript. The paper was accepted at the Central European Journal of Public Policy.

### 1.2.3 Third chapter

The third paper focuses examining the personal characteristics and institutional factors that facilitate condoning corruption in an organisational setting. Indeed, socioenvironmental and psychological factors are crucial yet understudied factors when researching antecedents of corrupt behaviour (Lambsdorff, 1999; Spain, Harms and Lebreton, 2014; Köbis *et al.*, 2015). Hence, this paper draws upon trait theory, social learning theory, and neutralisation theory to understand how these factors influence an individual's propensity to disregard corruption.

First, the paper demonstrates that people scoring high on Machiavellianism scale are more prone to condone corruption<sup>2</sup>. This is in line with previous literature demonstrating Machiavellians' deviant behaviour in various settings (Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe and Smith, 2002) which are defined as being untrustworthy, self-serving, dodgy, cunning, specious and kin to deceit and guile (Christie and Geis, 1970). In addition, Machiavellians possess an insidious and calculating nature, allowing them to skillfully navigate social situations to their advantage (Jones and Paulhus, 2014). Applying neutralisation theory (Sykes and Matza, 1957), our findings indicate that neutralisation mediates Machiavellians' behaviour to condone corrupt behaviour.

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<sup>2</sup> The term Machiavellian originates from Niccolo Machiavelli's "The Prince and Discourses on Livy"

Second, the article utilises the social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) to study the link between on-the-job experience (Ashforth and Fried, 1988) and condoning corrupt behaviour. The findings indicate that people who frequently experience corrupt behaviour in their workplace are more prone to dismiss it. Moreover, neutralisation helps elucidate this connection between on-the-job experience and condoning corruption. Thus, the paper suggests that social learning processes facilitate the acquisition and internalisation of neutralisation strategies, enabling professionals to preserve their sense of morality and goodwill despite engaging in corruption. In this situation, neutralisation allows the person to maintain a morally upright persona by following the unwritten social norms and disregarding unpleasant feelings about their corrupt behaviour (Cromwell and Thurman, 2003; Dorminey *et al.*, 2012).

This is a co-authored paper with Prof. Dr. Christian Hauser and Prof. Dr. Arndt Werner. An earlier version of this paper was also presented at the University of Kiel. As part of my dissertation, I had a significant contribution in drafting the methodology and theoretical sections of the paper. Prof. Dr. Hauser strongly contributed to the theoretical part, and Prof. Dr. Werner to the methodological part of the manuscript. The article is published in "Business and Society".

### 1.3 Relationship of the chapters

Meanwhile, the previous section portrays the overall structure and outline of the dissertation; the current passage will highlight the relationship between the dissertation articles. Apparently, corruption is the focal point of each of the three dissertation papers. Moreover, each article explains corruption as a social phenomenon measured and scrutinised on an individual level, exploring corruption through perception metrics and quantitative measurement. Further, the papers are centred around the define, measure, and fight corruption circle. Finally, the three papers explore corruption through a setting-based and interdisciplinary approach. The points mentioned above evince the common thread and the goal of the dissertation (more information in chapter 1.1, The dissertation's general topic and its relevance).

## 1.4 How the dissertation fills previous gaps in research

This section highlights the research gaps the dissertation aims to fill. Firstly, they are addressed in the content of the papers mentioned in the previous section (see chapter 1.3 relationship of the papers). In addition, the dissertation highlights and demonstrates the necessity to scrutinise corruption from an interdisciplinary perspective to gather all the required mosaic parts to fight it better (see chapter 1.1, The dissertation's general topic and its relevance).

Saliently, this dissertation attempts to elucidate the factors affecting and influencing corruption perceptions among individuals. Responding to this substantial research question allows for improving the accuracy of corruption measurements in perception indexes. Thus, the research findings contribute to prior debates on the validity of corruption perception indexes (Charron, 2014). This contribution to the literature on corruption is vital since gathering accurate and reliable data on corruption remains a Sisyphean task due to its clandestine nature.

Also, by focusing on the issue of corruption in Armenia shortly before and after the “Velvet Revolution”, this dissertation illuminates a possible approach to navigating the paths and linkage to democratisation and public trust building in post-communist countries that went through recent colour revolutions. Needless to say, corruption research focusing on this region needs an overhaul.

Another essential thesis this dissertation advances is that the character and environment of an individual can play a crucial role in their decision to commit or abstain from corruption. Prior research on individual-level corruption has overlooked the vital influence of personal characteristics. Furthermore, based on trait theory, this dissertation posits that people with personality traits from the dark triad, namely Machiavellianism, are more inclined toward condoning corruption. This is a crucial argument for comprehending why some people in the same position behave clean and ethical while others can abuse their entrusted power for unethical and personal use.

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## First Chapter

### **Interrelation between Institutional trust, Satisfaction of Economy, and Corruption Perception**

#### **Original publication**

Simonyan, A. (2023). Interrelation between Institutional Trust, Satisfaction of Economy, and Corruption Perception. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 1-9.

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## Second Chapter

### **Democracy building and the link between public trust and corruption perception. Comparative analysis before and after the Armenian velvet revolution in 2018**

#### **Original publication**

Simonyan, A., & Schultz, D. (2023). Democracy building and the link between public trust and corruption perception: Comparative analysis before and after the Armenian Velvet Revolution in 2018. *Central European Journal of Public Policy*.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/cejpp-2023-0003>

## Third Chapter

### **Condoning Corrupt Behavior at Work: What Roles Do Machiavellianism, On-the-Job Experience, and Neutralisation Play?**

#### **Original publication**

Hauser, C., Simonyan, A., & Werner, A. (2021). Condoning corrupt behavior at work: what roles do Machiavellianism, on-the-job experience, and neutralization play?. *Business & Society*, 60(6), 1468-1506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319898474>

## Eidesstattliche Erklärung

### Erklärung zum selbständigen Verfassen der Arbeit

Ich erkläre hiermit, dass ich meine Doktorarbeit „Fighting Corruption Through Unbundling Individuals‘ Corruption Perception“ selbstständig und ohne fremde Hilfe angefertigt habe und dass ich als Koautor maßgeblich zu den weiteren Fachartikeln beigetragen habe. Alle von anderen Autoren wörtlich übernommenen Stellen, wie auch die sich an die Gedanken anderer Autoren eng anlehnenden Ausführungen der aufgeführten Beiträge wurden besonders gekennzeichnet und die Quellen nach den mir angegebenen Richtlinien zitiert.

Kiel, 06.11.2023



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## Declaration about the Co-authorship and the DFG-Guidelines

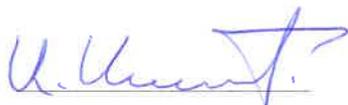
The research article titled:

**“Democracy building and the link between public trust and corruption perception. Comparative analysis before and after the Armenian velvet revolution in 2018?”**

was written in co-authorship between Aram Simonyan and Prof. Dr. David Schultz.

Hereby, we declare that all the authors have participated in composing the article. As a lead author, a vital role has played Aram Simonyan in writing the first draft since the research studies the case of Armenia. As part of his dissertation, Mr. Aram Simonyan significantly contributed during the (1) conceptualization and development of the research question, (2) preparation and interpretation of the research data, (3) using literature sources, as well as (4) writing up the manuscript and (5) translating required information from Armenian into English. Prof. Dr. David Schultz has vital input to items (1)-(4).

Hereby, we confirm that the DFG-Guidelines for “Safeguarding Good Research Practice” were followed.

  
Aram Simonyan

  
Prof. Dr. David Schultz

## Declaration about the Co-authorship and the DFG-Guidelines

The research article titled:

**„Condoning Corrupt Behavior at Work: What Roles Do Machiavellianism, On-the-Job Experience, and Neutralization Play?“**

was written in co-authorship between Aram Simonyan, Prof. Dr. Christian Hauser, and Prof. Dr. Arndt Werner.

Hereby, we declare that all the authors have participated in composing the article. A vital role has played Aram Simonyan in writing the first draft of the manuscript while consulting with Prof. Dr. Christian Hauser since this paper was meant to become part of his dissertation. As part of his dissertation, Mr. Aram Simonyan significantly contributed during the (1) conceptualization and development of the research question, (2) preparation and interpretation of the research data, (3) analyzing and assessing the research model, (4) using literature sources, as well as (5) writing up the manuscript. Prof. Dr. Christian Hauser has essential input to items (1), (4), and (5). Prof. Dr. Arndt Werner has significantly contributed to points (2) and (3).

Hereby, we confirm that the DFG-Guidelines for “Safeguarding Good Research Practice” were followed.



Aram Simonyan



Prof. Dr. Christian Hauser



Prof. Dr. Arndt Werner