

Surveying Corruption

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Polish research on corruption began only as late as in the 1990s, following the publication of international reports on this issue. Two main approaches have dominated Polish academic studies: one focusing on individuals' attitudes towards corruption, the other on social norms

The most popular definition of corruption describes the phenomenon as the use of public offices for private gains. Although corruption is most often associated with bribery, it also takes on other no less frequent forms, like embezzlement, nepotism, and the trading of influence to obtain political decisions or legal regulations advantageous to particular group or sector in the economy.

A phenomenon as old as human history, corruption is not restricted to any particular form of political system. There were complaints about a lack of honesty among officials in ancient Sumer and China. While it may be impossible to eradicate corruption entirely, it is possible to keep it within reasonable limits.

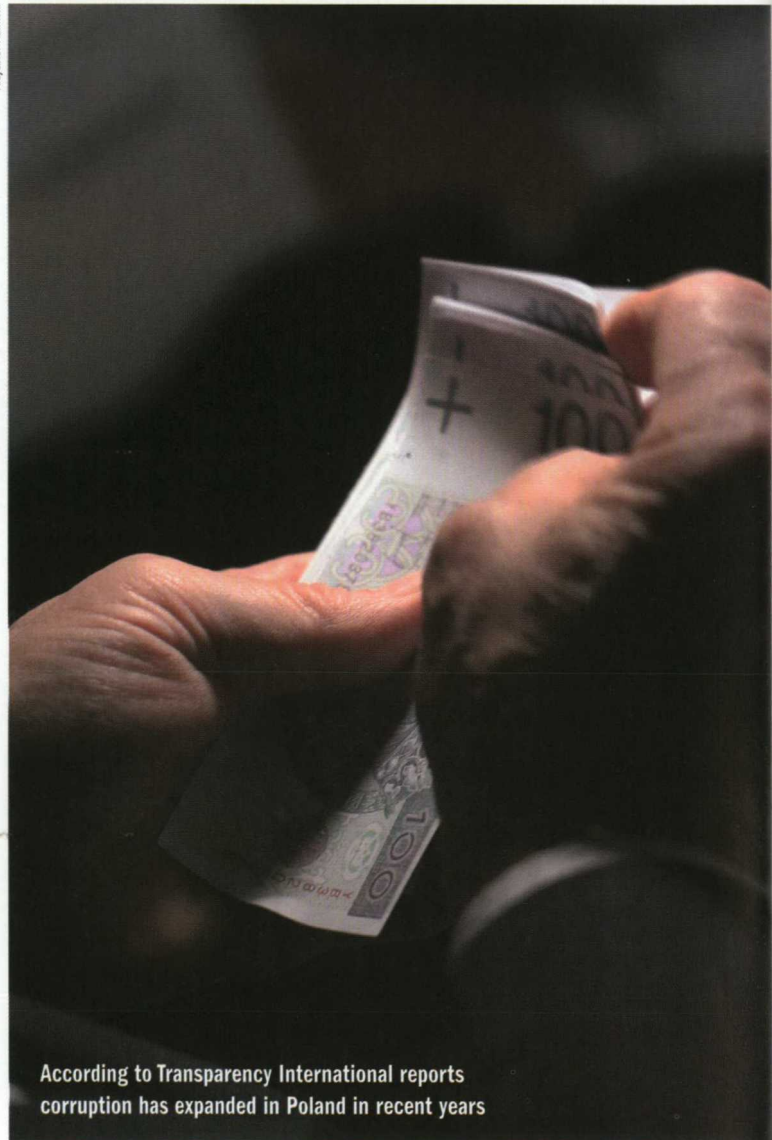
Indexing corruption

We are at present witnessing a veritable explosion of interest in corruption. It has become a topic of concern for international institutions like the World Bank and the UNDP, as well as for governments, NGOs, and research centers. Before 1990, one could hardly find the term "corruption" in the indexes of major publications on government or on political and economic development. Nowadays, studies on corruption abound. One of the causes for this change of priorities in policies and in research interests lies in the realization that the political organization of society, i.e. the state of its government, really does matter. In particular, corruption is seen as one of the key determinants of the quality of governance, which is in turn decisive for the economic and political developmental potential of nations.

It is no accident that this rise in the interest in corruption has coincided in time with the demise of Communism. First of all, the global conflict between the liberal-democratic and the Communist blocs disappeared

from the political agenda of Western governments. Hence, they gained the freedom to consider global political and economic problems at their own merit. Second, a change of political regime implies by definition that old institutions cease to function, while new ones have not yet acquired the necessary efficiency. Hence, regime change represents a moment when informal cliques with control of extra-institutional resources exert a non-merit-based impact on the process of redistributing power, property, and privileges. The more influence such cliques enjoy, the greater the probability that the constitutional design of the new state will be skewed in their favor.

Krzysztof Kalitński



According to Transparency International reports corruption has expanded in Poland in recent years

The onset of Polish research

The issue of corruption was largely neglected in Poland until the end of the 1990s. The few publications that did appear on the topic were ignored, and interpreted as expressing opposition to market reforms. Corruption was not properly prosecuted; the press did not investigate the few cases that did come to light. The public was aware of its existence, but the issue was effectively kept outside the realm of public debate.

Two factors contributed to the change of attitude towards corruption as a public issue. First, Transparency International published its Corruption Perception Index (CPI) in autumn 1999. It showed that between 1996, when the index first came to include Poland, and 1999, the value of the index for Poland dropped from 5.57 to 4.2. Since then, Poland's ratings have seen a further decline down to 3.5 in 2004, at the CPI variety between 10.0 for absolutely "clean" states to 0.0 for entirely corrupt ones. The second factor involved the World Bank's publication, two months later, of a report on Corruption in Poland. The most shocking information in this report was about an alleged transaction involving a group of MPs promising to sell legislation in exchange for \$3 million, to be paid by a sector of the economy vitally interested in the legislation's content. These two events caused a shift in public attitudes toward corruption, and motivated several NGOs, including the Polish chapter of Transparency International. Daily and weekly newspapers started publishing accounts of the most spectacular cases of corruption. Investigative journalism emerged as a field of professional specialization. In the social sciences, research on corruption became increasingly fashionable. The only group that limited its interest in the phenomenon to verbal statements, albeit always correct ones, were politicians. The rising public alarm did not translate into government policies.

Two mainstreams

Let us briefly examine different approaches to corruption that have dominated academic research in Poland, which can be classified into two groups. One of them considers social demoralization to be the major cause of the phenomenon. Advocates of this approach see the extent of corruption as stemming from the country's history – over five years of Nazi occupation plus 45 years of Communism. The major research instrument in this group involves surveys whereby individuals are asked to describe their own experiences with corruption, and to evaluate different types of corrupt behavior. This same category includes studies of particular areas where corruption occurs most often. Here too survey methods prevail, although sometimes participatory observations are also used. These studies have undoubtedly increased our

knowledge about the public awareness and attitudes of Poles toward corruption. The policy prescriptions coming from this approach emphasize the need to educate society, for there is no reason why politicians should be morally superior to the society that elects them. However, certain shortcomings of this approach should be mentioned. There is no statistically significant difference in terms of attitudes on corruption between Western Europeans and Poles. When Poles are asked about the most serious threats to the welfare of the country, corruption is always at the top. How can one explain, from this perspective, the discord between knowledge and values on the one hand, and actual behavior on the other? How can we explain the difference between Poland, with its increasing corruption, and Estonia, Slovenia or Hungary, which have done much better in this respect?

One of the causes for the expansion of researchers' interest in corruption in Poland lies in the realization that the political organization of society really does matter

The second approach, in turn, concentrates on institutions, understood as norms of behavior and mechanisms of enforcement through the provision of inducements (awards and sanctions). From this perspective, increased corruption is something unavoidable during a process of transition. However, when the new institutional regime is properly designed and due attention is paid to the mechanism of enforcement, corruption can be kept within reasonable limits. This approach does not deny the negative impact of the fifty years of totalitarian experience on the ethics of society and does not underestimate the need to educate, yet directs attention to the responsibility of the political elite, as regime-builders, for the emergence of systemic factors conducive to the spread of corruption. Thus, this approach is interdisciplinary for it combines knowledge from the fields of economics, political science and sociology, which I largely draw upon together with Bartłomiej Kamiński in our book *Corrupt Governance*. The policy prescriptions that stem from this approach are more complex than in the first case – if inducements favor the spread of corruption, no education will suffice to control the disease. We must look first into the workings of institutions, and educational effort should then accompany an institutional reform. ■

Further reading

- Kamiński A.Z., Kamiński B. (2004). *Corrupt Governance – Post-Communist States and Globalization* [in Polish]. Warszawa: ISP PAN & TRIO.
Kurczewski J., Łaciak B., [Eds.]. (2000). *Corruption in Public Life* [in Polish]. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych.