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New Wreckage for Old Some Lessons from Eastern Europe

[Lima Declaration](#)

Jolanta Babiuch-Luxmoore

Corruption is no stranger to post-communist Eastern Europe. Its various and the motives behind them are well known here. The authoritarian states of the communist period witnessed widespread corruption. Today's budding democracies are witnessing it again.

Having been a historical point of vulnerability in the region, everyday petty corruption provided a building block for socialism. Moral double standards, the decline of professional ethics, inefficiencies in centralised planning, the necessity of self-defence in an economy of shortages the lack of a clear distinction between "private" and "public", the appropriation of public resources for private advantage, lack of transparency in public finances; lack of independent agencies of control, of stable public institutions, of an independent press, of laws and regulations for fighting corruption, of clear decision-making procedures - these factors all contributed to the spread of corrupt practices.

Paradoxically, corruption functioned as a kind of stabiliser of the system. But in their last days, communist officials also misappropriated public property on a large scale, diverting it to personal or political uses. Thus, much of today's criminal activity can be seen as a legacy of the communist state.

Of course, we cannot simply blame the past. Change in Eastern Europe has opened the door to new chances and opportunities, both honest and dishonest. In Poland, however, there are signs that a non-transparent system has already become beneficial for certain influential social groups. Unclear property rights and forms of ownership have boosted the power of managers and reduced the need for companies to act transparently or lay themselves open to external oversight.

Such ambiguities can benefit employees too, by creating parallel forms of power. Arbitrary management and lack of transparency pose dangers for a functioning democratic system, as well placing a brake on economic efficiency. Yet some groups have an even simpler reason for not wanting market rules and norms to be transparent: they fear outright competition, and believe they can survive best when supported by informal connections.

This is a legacy of communism too. But the situation is often even more complex. Some groups not only fear competition: they also see it as illegitimate. Research findings suggest they value personal friendships more highly than company loyalties. They also indicate that Poles reject corruption when it takes the form of bribery, but are a lot less opposed to it when it occurs through clientelism.

Corruption is a phenomenon found on the axes of morality and law. In a country like Poland, however, it is important to remember that it is not only corrupt act which is harmful. but also the perception that power is corrupted and not exercised through objective decisions. The absence of strong public values detracts from any notion of scandal in public life. Very often, the exposure of unethical behaviour on the part of public personalities has no consequences for their careers. This in turn severely endangers the legitimacy of the political and economic system.

What can be done? The solution most frequently tendered is an improvement in the legal system, which will enable effective techniques and procedures to consolidate the rule of law. Yet a state of law is not enough: we also need clear values, expounded by people of sound integrity. Indeed, most analyses fail to acknowledge the many ideological justifications which are put forward to legitimise corruption and help

individuals and groups overcome their sense of ethical dissonance.

During the communist period, obtaining products through bribery was socially accepted as a way of life. Indeed, it could even amount to a necessity for survival; so it was given various justifications - such as that it "normalised" and assisted the redistribution of products. enabled normal people to intervene in centrally decreed distribution patterns - and constituted, paradoxically, a necessary tool for making the bureaucratic system more efficient. For many individuals, the giving and accepting of bribes was an indication that they were enterprising, self-sufficient and doing well. Corruption was deemed to be necessary. Since the whole system was corrupt, could people really avoid being compelled to participate accordingly?

After 1989, as a consumer market emerged and products became more widely available, a new kind of corruption emerged out of the legal system's unpreparedness for change. A gigantic process of property redistribution created shady links between political power and the newly emerging sphere of finances. A new kind of ideological justification began to be presented too.

The tolerance of corruption was justified on the grounds that it helped compensate for inadequate regulations and gave struggling companies a chance. There was no proof. it was argued, that corruption had a negative impact on economic growth - Italy, after all, had an economy that was both efficient and corrupt. Corruption helped create a national capital. It facilitated the circulation of money.

Such ideological justifications bring us to the heart of the matter. For corruption consists not only of bribery, protectionism, defraudation - it derives, in reality, from a society's moral destruction. Not is it always linked to material benefits. More often, it expresses itself in the simple lack of a sense of guilt.

This moral destruction entails that we cease to be aware of the values present both in our own activity and in other people. Instead, we look at the world through the prism of material gains and losses. Corruption is bad not only because it corrodes the objectivity and efficiency of power, but also because it destroys the basic relationship between government and citizen, and generates distrust towards all forms of authority. Corruption produces strong inter- personal bonds of mutual dependence. This makes it superficially convenient for both givers and receivers ~ endowing the rulers with power and their subordinates with a sense of security. But it does so through a negative solidarity, based on distorted social interactions and pathological ties of interest, which in turn spawn their own subcultural infrastructure.

The experience of Eastern Europe suggests that corruption becomes most dangerous not when private interests are placed above public ones, or when official positions are abused, but when public interests are replaced by group interests - when solidarity in a wide sense is replaced by solidarity in a narrow sense, and civil society by a corporationist network of mutually hostile interest- groups.

The dilemmas we face today are simply put. How can an already-corrupt society combat its own corruption? How can people find the will to oppose what seems to be normal and unexceptional?

Observations from Eastern Europe suggest the barriers are twofold, and can be summed up by the terms "integrity" and "cynicism". Integrity induces a sense of solidarity with the interests of one's own group or clan, on the understanding that that the group or clan in question enjoys mutual superiority as possessor of the truth. This type of hermetic exclusiveness produces corrupt mentalities and subcultures within the group.

By contrast, cynicism puts its stress on purely private interests. It creates its own cliques and networks too. But this type of corruption encourages fewer of the emotional, moralising self-justifications of integrity. It all comes down to cold calculations' of advantage.

Neither form of corruption - corporationist or cliquish can coexist with civil societies. This is why the countries of Eastern Europe urgently need to find the social motivation to fight against them. It will be a tall order.. Evidence suggests the collusion between briber and bribed could be disrupted through the appearance of another competitive agent. or through the introduction of mechanisms for directly controlling corrupt exchanges.

More commonly, however, briber and bribed share between them a kind of monopoly with respect to the rest of society. One is an "institutional" monopoly, conferred through the exclusive possession of public decision-makers. The other is a "non-institutional" monopoly, represented by the ability to control private information. Corruption can assume the form of an established rule of conduct, or of a social convention governing the relationship between private individuals and companies, and public officials. It can take the form of illicit confidences. But it can also engender a very clear sense of honour and loyalty.

Thus, before assessing the viability of any solutions, we must first verify whether it is possible to modify the nature of corrupt relationships by somehow breaking up the established monopolies. For this, we need a vision for the future, a consensus about the common good, and readiness to struggle for a civil society at global level. We need a concept of "progress" too - and it must be based on values, not just procedures, on a conception of the person accompanied by a global moral law which we can uphold together.

And since corruption ultimately involves a struggle for power - positions, influence, money - our challenge is to create a positive solidarity - not just a solidarity of the strong and endowed, but a solidarity which embraces the poor and powerless too. Without this, the power of supranational elite's is certain to grow, unconstrained by state controls and international legal norms, while those excluded from decision making processes find themselves increasingly marginalised.

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