

UNIVERSITY OF KONSTANZ  
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# Crime

# & Culture

**Crime as a Cultural Problem**

**The Relevance of Perceptions of Corruption to Crime Prevention. A Comparative Cultural Study in the EU-Accession States Bulgaria and Romania, the EU-Candidate States Turkey and Croatia and the EU-States Germany, Greece and United Kingdom**

Daniel Smilov, Rashko Dorosiev

**Perceptions of Corruption in Bulgaria  
A Content Analysis of Interviews with  
Politicians, Representatives of Judiciary,  
Police, Media, Civil Society and Economy**



Sixth Framework Programme of the European Commission  
Specific Targeted Research Project



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**SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION**



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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of corruption was defined as a grave social problem in Bulgaria towards the end of the 1990s. Similarly to Western democracies, the topic of corruption in Bulgaria was first studied and brought to the social agenda by non-governmental actors. Broad corruption awareness campaigns, studies on corruption, and many other initiatives got underway at that time, with the support of the international donor community. Gradually, the anti-corruption agenda pervaded the programs of political parties and governments, while some of its main principles were converted into legislation. In spite of all these achievements, corruption and organised crime were identified by the European Commission as two of the most serious problems in Bulgaria throughout its monitoring during the accession process: the emphasis on corruption became even stronger in the last pre-accession reports of the Commission. System reforms, as well as practical results in the fight against corruption and organised crime, were specifically mentioned as conditions for the integration of Bulgaria into the European Union. There was a constant threat during the course of 2006 that the safeguard clauses regarding the country's membership in the EU could be triggered because of the government's failure to effectively counteract corruption and organised crime. However, and somewhat anti-climactically, the European Commission finally accepted that the government had made sufficient efforts in this respect. Respectively, Bulgaria joined the Union on schedule on January 1, 2007.

Corruption in Bulgaria has been of interest for academics and policy researchers alike. Since the end of the 1990s the country has been included in a number of international surveys measuring corruption. According to the best known studies among them, the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, after a period of marked improvement between 1998 and 2002, corruption perceptions seem to be stabilising around a relatively moderate level over the last five years (4.1 for 2007). In 2007, Bulgaria ranked 64<sup>th</sup> out of 180 states included in the survey, scoring similarly as countries like Poland, Greece, and Romania.

The huge interest in the topic of corruption has resulted in numerous surveys not only of experts' opinions but also of public perceptions. According to *Anti-corruption Reforms in Bulgaria: Key Results and Risks*<sup>1</sup>, a 2007 report by Centre for the Study of Democracy, the Bulgarian public perceives corruption as one of the most serious problems in the country. Since 1998, corruption has been ranking among the top three gravest problems in Bulgaria,

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-Corruption Reforms in Bulgaria: Key Results and Risks, Center for the Study of Democracy/Coalition 2000,2007.



along with unemployment and the low incomes, but until 2007 it had never been ranked first by Bulgarian citizens. However, as a result of the stable macroeconomic situation in the country and the improved incomes of the population, concerns such as unemployment and poverty have diminished in urgency over the last several years. Thus, corruption has emerged as the first most important problem in Bulgaria according to public opinion polls. At the same time, the mentioned report indicates a stable decline of the number of Bulgarians, who report to have participated in corrupt transactions. The discrepancy between actual and perceived corruption is very indicative for the ambiguous nature of the phenomenon that requires an interdisciplinary research approach going beyond the traditional anti-corruption discourse that has been dominating the policy community over the last decade.

In spite of the complexity of the problem and the huge interest in the topic of corruption, few researchers have studied the phenomenon in its socio-cultural aspects. The present study offers a different approach, which attempts to examine how corruption and anti-corruption are understood at the everyday level and why the anti-corruption measures implemented up to now have not managed to achieve the initially planned results. We investigate the correspondence and discrepancies between the perceptions of corruption and anti-corruption grounded in the anti-corruption programs, on the one hand, and those of the political and administrative decision-makers on the other. On the basis of the analysis we attempt to make recommendations on possible ways to optimise corruption prevention.

## **METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Our study is based on information about the perceptions, notions and ideas of corruption of the six important target groups within society. The groups are: politics, judiciary, media, police and prosecutors, civil society, and economy. We collected the data by conducting a number of in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of these groups. At both stages, we used two case studies to frame the process of data generation – the privatisation process of *Bulgartabac Holding* and the scandal concerning a suspicious donation to the United Democratic Forces party foundation, *Democracy*. (The UDF has been the main right-of-the-centre party during much of the Bulgarian transition). We then applied the research method of qualitative content analysis by the means of specially designed software. For the purposes of the present paper, we leave out the comprehensive description of the perceptions of the target groups studied and focus directly on a possible reconstruction of the logic of



perception of corruption.<sup>2</sup> Our final goal is to offer a better understanding of the current anti-corruption efforts in the country and their shortcomings. Based on our conclusions, we will also attempt to offer a discussion on possible recommendations for optimisation of anti-corruption measures.

In order to better understand the social logic in which the phenomenon of corruption is constructed we used a model approach. We examined perceptions of representatives of the six target groups to identify repeating patterns and links between ideas of the concepts we studied. Our final goal was to reconstruct existing models of understanding of corruption. The models we use to organise the social perception on corruption are ideal theoretical constructs in Weberian sense. They exist in reality not in pure but rather in mixed forms. Some models however, prevail in the perceptions of some of the six target groups we studied.

## EXPLANATORY MODELS

There are several possible explanatory models of corruption that could be found in the perception studied. We reduced them down to two broader models or even groups of models that could explain and organise most of the ideas grounded in the respondents' perceptions. Our goal here was not to exhaustively describe the features of the explanatory models on theory but rather to reconstruct them only to the extent they exist in the particular perceptions that we studied.

### *“Rational” explanatory model*

We called the first model `rational` since it sees corruption to a great extent as a rational phenomenon in the tradition of western modernity: it can be relatively easy measured, understood and tackled by a set of certain policy actions. The major assumption behind this model is that individuals are rational, and that in similar situations they are going to act in similar ways – essentially maximising their benefits and minimising their costs. Because of this assumption, the model is largely insensitive to subtle differences in the context. According to the model, corruption happens in Bulgarian as a result of the incomplete

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<sup>2</sup> An extensive description and discussion on the perceptions of corruption of the six target groups is included in: Daniel Smilov, Rashko Dorosiev, *Perceptions of Corruption in Bulgaria. A Content Analysis of Interviews with Politicians, Representatives of Judiciary, Police, Media, Civil Society and businessman*, October 2007.



processes of modernisation: every society at the Bulgarian developmental stage would encounter similar processes with corruption, since the incentive structure for the individuals will be similar. Further, with the advance of modernisation that started with the collapse of Communism in 1989, corruption is bound to diminish. It could be concluded that the NGO sector has been the major importer of the rational explanatory model of corruption to the country.

The definition of corruption used within the rational model is `abuse of power`. There is a broad consensus amongst respondents from all target groups that abuse of power is broad enough to comprise all manifestations of the phenomenon. Within the rational model however, there is a tendency to narrow down the definition to `abuse of power for personal gain`. This makes the phenomenon easy to distinguish on the field among other forms of bad governance, which are often associated with corruption in the media and the political debate. Thought not always, corruption here is often understood in the framework of crime. This vision fits well within the overall rational framework of perception of the phenomenon presuming that as a crime corruption can be easily normatively defined and then tackled with penal instruments.

As regards ranking the different forms of corruption according to the danger they pose, the focus within the rational model falls on the political and grand corruption. The importance of these types of corruption is determined by several factors. First, politics itself is very important for the society as whole. Second, negative effects for society in terms of economic resources are larger when corruption occurs at high levels of governance and politics. Third, this model considers corruption as a crime and therefore it is very difficult to detect and prove political and grand corruption since they involve a trade-off in influence and take place as very complex and consensual deals.

Causes of corruption according to the rational model are largely universal and have little to do with the cultural context. Only several manifestations of petty corruption can be considered culturally determined. The origin of corruption in this sense is related to the development of modern capitalist societies in general. Universal factors like poverty, poor or lacking institutional control and enforcement, weak judiciary and investigative agencies and the lack of political will could cause corruption in the different societies.

One of the key features of the rational model is the belief that corruption can be measured although difficult to do. The measurement takes place through combining studies on the



perceptions of experts, businessmen and the general public. According to this understanding, particular aspects of the phenomenon such as the amount of bribes paid or the absolute cost of corruption for a given society can be measured.

In line with the above mentioned, the rational model paradigm presumes that the size and the spread of corruption in given segments of the society can be determined in a relatively precise manner. The idea of corruption as a phenomenon present everywhere in society contradicts this concept.

The negative effects of corruption within this model are seen at two major levels. First, corruption brings economic harm to society: losses from direct corruption payments, missed benefits to society as a result of corruption deals, etc. Second, corruption affects society negatively in terms of undermining people's confidence in democratic institutions and procedures.

The strategies to counteract corruption within this model are logically connected to understandings about the origin and causes of the phenomenon. The major focus here is on formal institutions and might include measures for improvement of the institutions in terms of legislative support, technical capacity, institutional powers, competences design, etc. Corruption conceptualisation as a crime invokes a special attention to investigative institutions and functions. In terms of which type of corruption should be tackled first, the priority is given to the grand and political corruption and the top-down approach at the expense of the petty corruption and the bottom-up approach.

The roles of different social actors in counteracting corruption as seen by the rational model largely correspond to the above mentioned strategies. The media is generally expected to take part in awareness raising campaigns on corruption and carry out journalistic investigations of separate cases of corruption. NGOs and civil society structures should support the government in its anti-corruption efforts and reprimand it when needed. Public institutions should push the process of establishing of a normative framework for counteracting corruption and more importantly ensure better coordination and enforcement of all anti-corruption policies and measures in the country. Similar roles are intended for political parties: they are expected to ensure public support for the anti-corruption legislation and reforms. The general presumption of the model is that businesses have an immediate and unquestionable interest in fair and non-corrupt governance and therefore it would support the government and other public institutions in their anti-corruption efforts.



### “Cultural” explanatory models

For reasons of methodological consistency it would be very difficult to argue that only one cultural explanatory model of corruption can exist and can be reconstructed from the perceptions we studied. In the rational model there is a certain degree of logical clarity due to the fact that this discourse was brought to the domestic context by NGOs and foreign donors after a period of long conceptualisation. This is not the case of the cultural explanation of corruption, where usually several differing, and more importantly sometimes contradicting, ideas can exist. We called these models ‘cultural’ basically because some of their explanatory aspects refer to specific cultural features in a broader sense. Culture however, is subject to permanent influence and change and in this process perceptions of corruption are very much affected by the rational discourse on the problem. This explains why in certain points of the explanatory constructs there might be some similarities to the ideas of the rational model while not in others. The important feature of the cultural models, however, is of course the fact that they reflect domestic knowledge, specific insights into long standing domestic practices and experiences in most of their explanatory mechanisms. They are much more complex, eclectic and last but not least, they are more sceptical with respect to the possible success in reducing corruption. For the purpose of our research we did focus more on the important differences between the rational and cultural discourses rather than on reconstructing the complex cultural explanatory models *per se*.

The definitions of corruption within the cultural models do not generally contradict the one used by the rational model, but they tend to be broader and more inclusive. They go beyond the abuse of power for personal gain to include phenomena such as distorted political process, abuse of power in the private sector, various forms of bad governance and even negative patterns of social values and morals. The definitions of corruption are also not limited only within the framework of the crime concept. The broader definition of the phenomenon is determined largely by the different points of departure of the respondents. Those who perceive the problem with corruption as part of the whole process of transformation of the formal and informal institutions in the country tend to broaden the definition in order to place the phenomenon in an appropriate explanatory context. On the contrary, in the rational explanatory model the phenomenon is being narrowed so as to fit well in a single definition and be tackled with a clear set of concrete measures.

As regards the most dangerous form of corruption, the focus here is rather on petty corruption in contradiction to the rational model where grand and political corruption are more



important. Importance of petty corruption is determined by the belief that it affects negatively people's perceptions about the democratic system and the social values, as it appears in people's everyday social interactions. As a result, most citizens lose their confidence in democracy and believe that society functions in a fair way. Other forms of corruption that might involve grand corruption could also be dangerous, since they produce massive negative effects for society and cause general public distrust in its functioning. These are forms of corruption that affect interests of large social groups and are very visible for the general public (such as the corruption in healthcare).

The ideas about the origin and causes of corruption in Bulgaria within the cultural models offer more variations in comparison to those of the rational model. They can be summarised in two main groups that interact and influence each other. The first group includes factors related to the institutional context of transition and the effects of the Communist heritage. These are weak state institutions, legal instability, the privatisation of state properties and the specific role of the state in the economy. The second group includes factors such as the lack of specific social values to prevent corrupt behaviour and the existence of historically determined cultural patterns that facilitate the social tolerance of corruption. These factors go beyond the social habits immediately related to particular practices of corruption to include deeper characteristics of the political culture such as the perception about the just and fair functioning of democratic governance and society in general.

One of the key discrepancies between the cultural and the rational models concerns the possibility to measure corruption. Within the cultural models, corruption cannot be measured in a precise enough manner to be used for policy purposes. Only peoples' perceptions of corruption can be measured, but they are formed and influenced by various factors that have nothing or little to do with actual levels of corruption. In the case of corruption seen as a crime it is even more difficult to measure it since the predominant part of the corruption transactions involves the consensus of both parties.

In spite of the firm belief that corruption cannot be measured, it is perceived by the cultural models to be present everywhere in the social organism. The justification of such a belief comes from the character of communications within the social co-existence. Social actors often speak about corruption, they share stories and personal or retold experiences about corruption, and everyday the media feed the public debate with stories of corruption. All this results in an embedded social perception that corruption is everywhere in society and that it is an inevitable tool for solving problems of various types. In such circumstances it is very



difficult to judge which story is true and which is not, but perceptions that corruption is everywhere become very powerful.

The cultural models recognise the same negative effects of corruption as the rational model does, but the main difference is that the focus here is on large-scale popular effects. As mentioned above, these effects to a great extent result from the petty and very visible corruption on the one hand and the media discourse on grand and political corruption on the other hand. The most dangerous consequence of corruption in these circumstances is the destruction of social values and the demoralisation of the society. This is perceived to be the most important effect since it damages the very system in which society functions. These effects can have long term negative consequences that are difficult to tackle since they become embedded in social culture.

Culture-focused models entail several possible strategies for counteracting corruption. The most prominent strategies can be classified into two groups. The first group encompasses measures aimed at improving the administrative capacity for dealing with petty corruption. These measures, however, are not based on purely technical explanations, but rather on the perception that the more petty corruption exists, the greater chance that people have had a first-hand experience of corruption, which justifies their overall perception of the system as corrupt. The second group of strategies requires changes in the system of values, but there are hardly any specific proposals on how to effect these changes. This lack of specificity is directly related to the scepticism intrinsic to cultural explanations. Most of them are based on the presumption that culture is a very inert system and that widespread social attitudes and practices are extremely difficult to change, at least in the short or medium term. Therefore, the most promising approaches aim at long-term goals, for example through influencing education, the upbringing, and the living environment of the younger generation.

Culture-determined explanations also differ from the rational model on the roles various institutions and actors could play in counteracting corruption. While the rational model proposes cooperation between NGOs and the government, the culture-based models call for NGOs that stand apart from the interests of the government and represent genuine civil-society platforms. On the role of political parties and business circles in counteracting corruption expectations of the culture-determined model are rather negative or sceptical. This is so, because political parties and business circles are seen as the main forces generating corruption. Therefore they cannot be expected to initiate the change, but rather they should be



subject to change that might come as a result of the civil society pressure. The role of the media in the past is seen as negative as they are perceived to have trivialised the anti-corruption discourse and to have played a serious role in lowering public interest in politics.

### *Target groups and models of corruption*

As this study is qualitative, rather than quantitative, and the number of respondents is limited, the breakdown below should be considered as purely illustrative and is not representative or comprehensive in any way. The analysis of the empirical data indicates that the rational explanatory model is most prominent among NGO representatives. This is not surprising, having in mind that the NGOs have been the main actors to initiate the corruption/anti-corruption discourse in Bulgaria, and that they based their work on concepts imported from abroad. Yet some of the local culture-focused explanations have influenced NGO representatives as well, especially the perception about the importance of petty corruption. This has influenced the measures they propose and for many of the representatives of NGOs addressing petty corruption (the bottom-up approach) is now just as important as fighting grand corruption (the top-down approach).

Certain assumptions based on the rational model are also used by respondents from the other target groups, to a greater or lesser degree. This may be related to the fact that corruption/anti-corruption discussions in Bulgaria were first initiated on the basis of the rational model. Yet, not all of the assumptions of the rational model have stood the test of critical examination, following the events of the past decade. For example there is a consensus among most of the respondents that corruption should be fought on a case-by-case basis and that the greatest focus should be on institutions with investigative functions.

In the table below we have attempted to illustrate the presence of the two types of explanatory models among the respondents of the different target groups:

**Table 1**

<i>Indicators/Target groups</i>	<b>Politics</b>	<b>Judiciary</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Police/PO</b>	<b>Civil Society</b>	<b>Economy</b>
<b>Definitions</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>Forms</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>Origin/Causes</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>Measurement</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>Size and Scope</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>Effects</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>Strategies</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■
<b>Roles of other institutions</b>	■	■	■	■	■	■

*Rational model*
 *Cultural models*

## MODELS OF CORRUPTION AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS

In this section we attempt to show how the different models of perception of corruption interact in the discourse of the different groups. We set this interaction in a political context, and try to explore to what extent different groups can use the anti-corruption discourse to promote their interests. Our main focus is on the politicians and governing politicians in particular. The questions we are trying to answer are the following:

1. Why do governing politicians admit the wide-spread character of corruption?
2. Why are they interested at all in anti-corruption measures, such as setting up anti-corruption bodies, for instance?

Governmental parties risk losing the public debate if they rely only on the legalistic discourse towards the phenomenon of corruption. Practice seems to prove such a hypothesis. In 2000-2001 the government of the Bulgarian Prime Minister Ivan Kostov was in the business of vehement denial of the existence of corruption unless proven in court. This government was swept aside by King Simeon II's movement, which came in office on an anti-corruption ticket using a much more inflated concept of corruption. Thus, governments, sticking only to the



narrow, legalistic conception of corruption, could rely only on a very limited discursive support – coming mainly from the judiciary, which is hardly a vocal player in political life. Against such a “legalistic discourse coalition”, the government will see virtually everybody – the media, the NGOs, the businesses, eventually the prosecutors and the police, if they enjoy a degree of autonomy. Governments, therefore, need to re-examine their discourse coalitions very carefully, if they do not want to be left in isolation.

Further, it is rational for governing parties to attempt to broaden their discourse coalitions – to relate to the discourse not only of the judiciary, but to other important groups as well, the media and civil society mainly. In order to break up their discourse isolation, however, governments must take at least some of the following steps:

- i) publicly “admit” and “recognise” the problem of corruption. In this way they build a discourse bridge to potential partners in other groups, who are not directly interested in political changes (like the opposition);
- ii) start cultivating the partnerships with these other groups by using their discursive support for the adoption of specific anti-corruption measures;
- iii) with regard to civil society, in exchange for the public “recognition” of corruption, governments could require cooperation with NGOs in a number of spheres, such as measuring corruption, legislative drafting of programmes, action plans, and other normative acts, consultation with experts, etc. The governments will be successful in breaking up their discourse isolation, if most of the influential NGOs in the country adopt a “non-confrontational” stance towards them. This would mean that corruption is de-politicised and that change of government is no longer seen as the key measure to be taken;
- iv) in the case with the media, the situation is more complex. In contrast to NGOs, the media are not that interested in long-term institutional and legislative measures. They frame public discourse mostly through the scandal and personalisation of politics: therefore, personnel changes are indispensable in order to bridge the gap between media and governmental discourse on corruption. For this purpose, governments must involve as potential partners elements of the prosecutors and the police, with the goal of *starting* investigations of public persons, possibly including members of the governing parties as well (but in exceptional cases, of course). It is important to stress that for the purposes of collaboration with the media, governments need to focus only on the start of investigations, since media interest is highest at this point, and goes down dramatically at the more complex



judicial stages, whose intricate procedures are often impenetrable for the public in general;

v) even the opposition could be co-opted in terms of anti-corruption discourse by a skilful government. The key element here is the de-politicisation of the issue through the elaboration of a comprehensive anti-corruption plan, which requires long-term profound institutional changes in all areas of governance. Ultimately, governing parties will be successful if they obtain the consent of the opposition for these programmes and plans, which is normally not impossible, since these contain predominantly common-sense measures aiming at the general improvement of governance. In certain cases, members of the opposition could become also members of watchdog bodies, supervising the implementation of legislative and institutional reforms;

vi) the government must read very carefully the silent discourse of the business sector on the issue of corruption. The best strategy to ensure that this silence means support is to lead a policy of downsizing of the state and lowering the taxes. These are the key anti-corruption measures which the business community looks for; normally, political change especially in terms of a political crisis and instability are not in the interest of the economic players.

There are several residual problems with these strategies of breaking up the discourse isolation by a government. First, the adoption of legislative and institutional measures – which is the core of what a government can offer to the public and other influential players in terms of anti-corruption – is potentially threatening to limit governmental discretion in important areas. This alienates traditional clientelistic partners (the role of patronage decreases) but also leads to a certain convergence of the acceptable party platforms in the longer run. Thus, in order to become suitable for government, a party must plan for the following: institutional reforms, downsizing of the state, lower taxes. Cooperation with civil society – understood as a monolithic, non-partisan entity – also leads to a certain “de-politicisation of politics”, which dilutes the dividing lines between the major parties.

Thus, by creating successful discourse coalitions with other influential players, governments resolve their short-term political problems of electoral mobilisation: they break up their discourse isolation, and their messages start to find support in what the other actors are saying as well. However, the long-term cost of this strategy seems to be a particular level of de-politicisation and of further undermining of the tools for political mobilisation of the *established political parties as a whole*. It is no surprise, from this perspective, that despite



the commitment of governments in South East Europe to the fight against corruption for more than seven years now, there has been no revival of public trust in the established political parties. In most of the countries, trust in governments and the representative structures of society as a whole is very low: parties and parliaments are usually most at risk.

The troubles of the established parties have recently taken two major forms. In the Romanian case, the two major political parties (the ex-communist Social Democrats, controlling Parliament and the block of the President Basescu) went on an all-out anti-corruption war against each other in an act of desperation to win back public trust. Before Romania's accession to the EU, the anti-corruption effort was led by the charismatic Minister of Justice Monica Macovei, who was closer to the presidential camp. The Social Democrats, who saw themselves as victims of the anti-corruption campaign, retaliated by sacking Macovei immediately after the accession of Romania to the EU, and by starting impeachment proceedings against Basescu himself. The impeachment failed, because the Romanian people confirmed Basescu in office in a referendum. So far, high profile investigations against important party leaders on both sides have not led to convictions – some of them never reach the judicial phase, while the others usually take a long time for final resolution. For an external observer, it would be a real miracle if these developments were to restore public trust in the political process and the representative structures of democracy in Romania.

In Bulgaria, the mainstream parties have adopted another strategy. In general, they have so far avoided an all-out anti-corruption war against each other, with one significant exception in the first part of 2007, when a vice-PM of the Socialist Party was forced to resign, together with the Chief Investigator (who was seen as an appointee of another coalition partner – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms). These two figures started accusing each other of corrupt behaviour, accusations which remained unproven in court, but had a dramatic public effect. This was just an exception to the general rule of avoidance of anti-corruption warfare among the major parties, however. The result of this avoidance is the public perception of all of the major parties as corrupt, which opens the political stage for ever new anti-corruption populist actors. Accordingly, all new elections bring a new popular anti-corruption hero in Bulgarian politics. In 2001 this was Simeon II and his movement, in 2005 the nationalist Ataka, and in 2007 – the charismatic Boyko Borisov – the former bodyguard of the ex-tsar, who made a career in the Ministry of Interior in the period 2001-2005.

Somewhat paradoxically, whether avoiding an all-out confrontation on the issue of corruption or not, major parties suffer from a long-term tendency of loss of public support in South East



Europe. The impasse that we are trying to describe here is the following: in order to break up their discourse siege on the issue of corruption, governing parties must attempt to build “discourse coalitions”. This has short-term positive effects in electoral context: for instance, King Simeon II’s movement did not win as a governing party the elections in 2005, but it still managed to win enough votes to participate in the next “broad coalition” government. In Romania, President Basescu managed to convince the public to vote for his staying in office in a referendum. The long-term trend in terms of winning public support through anti-corruption discourse strategies is hardly encouraging for the major parties in these two countries, however. The door for new populist players seems wide open.

### *Rational and cultural explanations in a political context*

Anti-corruption programmes started more than seven years ago in Bulgaria. Our case study shows that over this period of time they have managed to change to a degree the perception of corruption of different target groups. The most dramatic change in our view concerns the groups of governing politicians. They have undergone significant metamorphosis in terms of discourse in the following direction:

- They have “admitted” the “existence” and “wide-spread character” of corruption;
- They have abandoned the “legalistic” and embraced the “inflated” public interest-based definition of the concept of corruption;
- They have adopted the view that modernisation and structural reforms in a neo-liberal direction (downsizing of the state, deregulation) are the key anti-corruption measures;
- They have agreed to form coalitions with civil society (understood as a monolithic whole) in the fight against corruption, thus “de-politicising” corruption as an issue;
- They have generally abandoned “the cultural” model of explaining corruption, and have adopted the “rationalistic” discourse of changing “the structure of incentives”, institutional reform, etc.

The paradox which the Bulgarian case study exhibits is that none of these elements of a quite substantial metamorphosis led to an increased public trust in the Bulgarian governing parties. On the contrary, despite this “rational” approach to the issue of corruption which they have adopted, governing parties in Bulgaria continue to lose elections and the confidence of the people. First, Kostov’s government was swept aside by King Simeon II’s movement in 2001. Then Simeon II dramatically lost the elections in 2005 to the Socialist – the two parties were



ultimately forced to enter a coalition government. In the final act thus far, the King's movement (local and European elections 2007) the King's movement shrunk to the point of non-significance, while the Socialists were badly beaten by the party of a new charismatic leader – Boyko Borissov.

Curiously, the Bulgarian case study demonstrates that the more one “rationalises” anti-corruption discourse, the more one “disenchants” the anti-corruption world (in the Weberian sense), the more anti-corruption magicians and superheroes emerge. Thus, first the ex-tsar Simeon II built his anti-corruption platform on the fairy tale character of his personal story. Then, his bodyguard Boyko Borissov followed the model and created his own party. He won the hearts of the public with words, looks, behaviour: subtle details which only a connoisseur of domestic public consciousness would truly appreciate.

And here is the paradox. Politicians must have adopted the “rational” explanatory model, but the public wants a “cultural” hero, somebody who truly expresses their identity, to carry out the anti-corruption fight. For the believers of the “cultural” explanatory model, this is the only consolation that we could offer.

## CONCLUSION

In this final section we attempt to place our research findings in a broader context so as to contribute to the better understanding and conceptualisation of the problems of corruption and anti-corruption in Bulgaria. The last decade has been marked by continuous anti-corruption efforts and various attempts to study corruption. In the beginning this process was driven and the phenomena exclusively conceptualised by external factors, but over time a domestic, culturally determined discourse on corruption has developed. This discourse consists both of broader cultural features that might have some relation to corruption and reflections on the recent discourse on anti-corruption and corruption. Our goal here is to make a critical assessment of the `official` or `formal` conceptualisations of corruption and anti-corruption based on the results of our study of the local, culturally determined discourse on these problems.

As we showed above, there is a crucial difference in the way in which corruption is defined by the rational model and the culturally determined models. While the former aims at a clear-cut, universal definition, the latter prefers a broader definition that might easily connect the



phenomenon to the context and explain it in relation with other social problems and developments. Anti-corruption strategies within the rational model deal exclusively with corruption itself, without giving an account of either the deeper causes of the problem grounded in the context or the possible side effects of these strategies. According to the rational model, corruption itself undermines the confidence of the people in the democratic system. According to the culturally determined models, not corruption itself, but corruption and anti-corruption rhetoric are the major reasons both for the declining confidence in the democratic institutions and procedures and for the growing popularity of corrupt behaviour in the society.

These observations show that in fact there are two major interconnected sets of problems related to corruption in the country. First, there are problems of actual corrupt dealings and their negative effects measured largely in terms of economic losses and damages for the society. Second, there are problems related to public perceptions of corruption that negatively affect social trust and values. Strategies that are meant to cope with the first set of problems come in combination with increased information and tabloid media discourse on corruption. At the end of the day, this creates a vicious circle, where the more information on corruption appears the more corruption becomes spread in society. This of course is possible because of the lack of effective responses to the cases of corruption on behalf of the state institutions and in particular the judicial system.

What should be done in this situation? The presumption of the `official` or `formal` discourse on corruption (that overlaps to great extent what we found in the field as a rational model) was that the top-down approach, where the political class is the major actor in implementing large-scale anti-corruption policies as the best strategy. It also presumed that this process will be pushed at a political level by external conditionality such as the European Union and will be supported at the local level by civil society groups most of which are funded by foreign donors. The focus of this strategy was on grand and political corruption. It was expected that convictions of corruption of high-profile public servants and politicians would increase the general public confidence in the democratic system and make corruption a less attractive option.

What happened in reality is different. First, since Bulgaria joined EU, the soft power of the Union that might trigger reforms has been dramatically limited. Even before that, in the accession period, the EU pressure for reforms in anti-corruption and anti-crime policies did not achieve much. The government undertook a number of so called `showcase` activities to



convince the European Commission that the country takes seriously problems of corruption and organised crime. These activities, however, were more a kind of PR rather than deep system changes. These observations are indirectly confirmed by the fact that most of the large court cases involving high-profile public servants and organised criminals that have been initiated over the last year have proved to be very difficult and are not very likely to end with convictions. Most of these cases were seen by media and public at large as direct responses to the European Commission's explicit demands for convictions of corrupt high-profile public officials and members of the organised crime groups. Second, civil society groups have indeed carried out a lot of anti-corruption initiatives and managed to establish corruption as a social priority and promote many anti-corruption tools and measures in the legislation and institutional setting. However, as our study shows, the representatives of NGOs themselves admit that normative anti-corruption tools have not achieved their full potential because there is no real implementation and coordination. Broad awareness campaigns on corruption that were conducted by NGOs have made a significant contribution to the trivialisation of the anti-corruption issue and have triggered the general public perceptions about the spread of corruption in society. This has made the general public rather passive and tolerant of corruption.

On the contrary, the culturally determined strategies place petty corruption in the centre of the required efforts. Successful anti-petty corruption strategies would make ordinary citizens more optimistic about the fairness of the democratic governance as whole. This in turn will have a positive affect on social values that do not tolerate corrupt behaviour within society. Eventually, under such circumstances, the citizens would be perhaps more willing to vote for non-corrupt politicians and political parties. All this however seems too simple to be true. The reduction of corruption in Bulgaria cannot be considered in isolation from the overall political and social situation. Anti-corruption measures cannot be successful unless intertwined with the overall development of democracy in the country and solving the problems such as the lowering interest and confidence in politics, and the increasing commercialisation of the political process.



**SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
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**SPECIFIC TARGETED RESEARCH PROJECT: CRIME AND CULTURE**

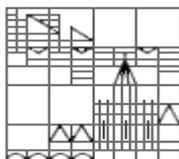
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