

# Europe’s “democratic culture” in the fight against corruption

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Published online: 6 November 2017

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**Abstract** This study investigates the influencing factors of corruption in Europe over the period of 1995–2013. Considering corruption as a cultural, multilevel phenomenon, the project proposes the design of models at both the micro and macro levels, allowing for panel-analyses as well as cross- and within-national comparisons. The findings reveal that a bundle of factors adding up to a specific “democratic culture” in Europe that hinders the growth of corruption by generating strong democratic institutions and fostering citizen norms and values aimed at monitoring and sanctioning corrupt actors. As a result, democracy promotion was and it is still the best remedy against corruption spread in Europe. The article emphasizes the relevance and need of area- and cultural-specific knowledge of factors affecting corruption.

## Corruption in Europe

Corruption, defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain<sup>1</sup> [1, 2], is detrimental to economic, social and political development. It disturbs macroeconomic and fiscal stability, stunts economic growth, exacerbates inflation and promotes social inequality and poverty [3–5]. It violates the fundamental principles of democracy such as equality, fairness, transparency and accountability and further threatens regime stability. Research shows that high degrees of corruption foster low levels of citizen trust in political processes and institutions and even erode general trust in the whole community [6–13].

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<sup>1</sup>This public-office-centered definition focusses on corruption in the public sector or actions that involve public officials, civil servants or politicians. Yet, in this context, private corruption is not necessarily excluded, because the public sector is often in exchange with the private industry, particularly when government contracts are awarded. In general, corruption occurs where private wealth and public power overlap.

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Although Europe is often perceived as clean, recent scandals in nearly all European states illustrate that corruption still continues. In 2013, Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe claimed that “corruption is the biggest threat to democracy in Europe today” [14]. The economic costs of corruption are immense as well. While the EU Anti-Corruption Report revealed in 2014 that corruption costs the European economy about 120 billion Euro a year [15], the European Parliament study [16] concludes that corruption could even cost up to 990 billion Euro a year. Given its large negative impact, much stands to be gained from understanding the cause of corruption and the ways in which it can be reduced. Yet, there is still little knowledge about the area-specific factors that affect the extent of corruption. I argue that a middle ground has to be found in order to better understand which regional, especially cultural, factors are responsible for the occurrence of corruption.

For studying the causes of corruption, European countries present special cases. They exhibit an array of corrupt activities and are characterized by large cross-national and over time differences in the extent of corruption. Particularly, in both new and established democracies (Western, Central, and Eastern Europe) one observes varying levels of corrupt behavior. Since the beginning of the economic crises in 2007, country corruption values have continuously increased in Southern European countries such as Spain, Greece and Portugal [17]. Moreover, there is no other region in the world where young democracies (e.g. Slovenia, Estonia), well-established democracies (e.g. Greece, United Kingdom, France) as well as authoritarian systems (e.g. Belarus, Ukraine) are located so close to each other. With the ending of the Cold War and the transition of communist countries to nascent democracies, the political, economic and socio-cultural situation in Europe changed considerably, notably in the manifestation of corruption [6, 18]. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe have experienced a long political transition that may have had a strong effect on the extent of corruption in Europe as a whole. Besides, Europe is the continent with the longest history of nation-states, and the rule of law is one of the oldest traditional European constitutional principles. Nevertheless, Europe is still looking for effective strategies in fighting corruption [11].

Finally, a review of the empirical corruption literature indicates that the majority of the empirical studies of corruption has mainly consisted of qualitative case studies that are strongly case-related and less comparative (such as [19–22]),<sup>2</sup> or of quantitative studies that focus on aggregated large-n analyses that tend to gloss over significant cross-regional differences and variations within countries (such as [24, 25]).

Given the above, I ask: “What affects corruption in European states over time as well as across and within countries?” To answer this question, I design models at the micro and macro levels that allow for panel-analyses as well as cross- and within-national comparisons. I study 37 European countries at the macro level and 20 countries at the micro level. The time span for both analyses (panel and cross-section) encompasses the period from 1995 to 2013.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Della Porta and Vannucci [19] focus on corruption in the Italian party system and explicitly describe the involvement of certain political parties in the organization of corrupt practices, while Pujas and Rohdes [21] compare party finance and political scandals in Italy, Spain and France. Additionally, Angermund [23] undertakes a historical study of corruption under German National Socialism and depicts corruption as a structural and supportive element of the Nazi-regime and its politics. Although case studies exist and country based evidence is available, these studies are often limited to a specific country’s experience.

## Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Analyses on the Causes of Corruption

Considering corruption as a cultural, multilevel phenomenon, I mainly draw on cultural approaches such as sociological and historical institutionalism that are applied to certain levels of analysis and are reflected in the hypotheses of this study. Cultural approaches highlight norms and values and focus on actors' social behavior as well as their operations in communities, institutions and societies over time. Corruption is conceived of as a way of life, as a kind of tradition and set of values that belong to a society's culture and institutions. More broadly, cultural approaches enable researchers to get beyond explanations that posit social processes to be the mere aggregate of individuals' actions and allow them to identify and explain differences in behavior among groups and societies [26, 27]. This implies that corruptive behavior is caused not only by interests of rational actors, institutional lack of competition and transparency in economic and political areas, as often assumed in economic approaches [28, 29], but also by certain contexts such as culture, traditions and informal conventions that, in turn, influence institutions and organizations people operate in [30]. In contrast to sociological approaches, economists, in particular, neglect informal institutions such as cultural norms in their considerations and rather use the term as a somehow residual explanation [29]. Generally, economic approaches consider human beings as self-interested actors who attempt to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs [31, 32]. Thus, corruption is regarded as individual misbehavior, motivated by material interests, that arises where and when the costs of behaving corruptly do not exceed the gains that are expected from it. This implies that people commit or refrain from corrupt acts for purely material reasons and that they are not culturally predisposed to bribery, favors, or fraud [18]. Besides, cultural approaches do not deny that individuals attempt to calculate their interests, but argue that outcomes are the product of the interaction among various groups, interests, ideas, and institutional structures (*homo sociologicus*) [33, 34].

Studies that focus on the impact of cultural transmission of corruption assume that culture<sup>3</sup> interacts with corruption through two channels – both, formal and informal institutions [8, 9, 36–38]. Formal institutions are usually observed as formal rules that govern individual behavior and that are also influenced by values and attitudes. Whereas, informal institutions are informal rules, driven by norms, values and beliefs that are constitutive elements of personal identities and govern interaction, and are shared and sustained by group members. They can include forms of trust such as interpersonal trust, reputation and reciprocity. Informal rules are a powerful motivator of action and can be a moral resource from which societies can profit. In this context, corruption norms are a specific form of social norms and dictate the extent to which individuals engage in, and expect others to engage in corruption [36, 39]. In the following analyses, I examine both formal and informal institutions related to corruption in Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Culture is often considered a product of whole societies that consists of attitudes and behaviors. It is essentially observed as a collective concept, applicable to social groups, composed of shared meanings and interpretations [35].

Moreover, assuming that institutional evolution is path-dependent, I also refer to historical institutionalist approaches suggesting that the historical development of institutions affect the extent of corruption in a society. They particularly emphasize that historical developments of institutions people operate in, and certain cultural values and traditions that have developed over a number of years [34, 40]. Thus, corruption evolves over time and has numerous historical roots [30]. One of the proposed links between historical factors and corruption is the role of historical precedents and customs that shape institutions and cultural norms in a country [28]. This implies that established practices and norms can be difficult to abandon and it also implies that many of these established practices might be viewed as corrupt over time by outsiders. Consequently, a country's degree of corruption is path-dependent and can be considered as cultural heritage.

Thus, the following hypotheses refer to social and cultural characteristics of a country and society, but also to variables that are already very well-established in the common research on corruption such as a country's economic development.

## **Hypotheses: Macro and Micro Level**

### **Country Level**

Previous research has demonstrated that a country's economic situation, usually measured by the GDP, strongly influences the extent of corruption [28, 41]. Basu [42] asserts that economic benefits are the root of most forms of corruption in modern societies and serve as a strong incentive of controlling economic resources. In European countries, data on corruption development show that, although it is increasing over time, corruption is still lower compared to developing economies. In most cases, the least corrupt countries are also economically well developed. This implies that people in good economic situations are not dependent on bribery payments. For Europe, I hypothesize that the extent of corruption will be higher in countries with lower levels of economic development.

Moreover, I argue that a country's international involvements affect its extent of corruption. In particular, countries that are more integrated into Western international networks of exchange, communication, and organization, are more exposed to both economic and normative pressures against corruption and also certain norms and values that are represented by these networks and organizations [18, 43]. On the one hand, international integration can offer economic incentives, altering the costs and benefits of engaging in corrupt acts for various actors. On the other hand, a country's participation in international organizations affects corruption levels in a normative way, by creating channels and informal rules for the diffusion and absorption of anti-corruption norms to other member countries. For Europe, I posit that the extent of corruption will be higher the lower the degree of international integration into organizations such as the European Union.

The degree of democracy and the quality of governmental institutions might be one of the most important contributors to corruption. Corruption is conceived as a symptom of poorly functioning systems, a lack of ethical leadership and poor governance [9, 28, 44]. Therefore, corruption is to be affected by political systems that are deficient in

democratic power-sharing formulas, bereft of checks and balances, and lacks accountable and transparent institutions and procedures of the formal and ideal system of democratic governance. I assume that more advanced democratic structures creating anti-corruption norms lead to a lower extent of corruption in European countries.

The impact of gender on corruption has long been neglected in corruption research. Swamy et al. [45] and Dollar et al. [46] are some of the first scholars who found that women are less involved in corrupt transactions and are less likely to condone bribetaking than men. Over the last decades, Europe is characterized by an increase of women working in private organizations and public institutions. Using data on female involvement in government from the inter-parliamentary union's survey (1945–1995), Dollar et al. [46], for example, illustrate that greater representation of women in parliament may lead to lower levels of corruption. They argue that women are more trustworthy and public-spirited than men by nature and have stronger norms condemning bribery.<sup>4</sup> However, there might be other reasons explaining why women seem to be averse towards corruption, such as work seniority and their job positions. Sung [48] and Alatas et al. [49], conducted experiments on corruption that illustrate different gender effects seems to be more culture-specific, implying that the social roles of women across cultures differ and corrupt behaviour is not caused by gender differences. Alatas et al. [49] assume that "In relatively more patriarchal societies where women do not play as active a role in the public domain, women's views on social issues may be influenced to a greater extent by men's views. Hence, in such societies, one would expect to see less of a gender difference in behaviour towards corruption in comparison to societies where women feel more comfortable in voicing their own opinions" (see also [50]). For the European states, I expect that the extent of corruption will be lower in countries that have higher levels of female participation in parliaments.

Furthermore, I assume that an individual's religion shapes her social attitudes towards social hierarchies and family values and thus determines the acceptability, or otherwise, of corrupt practices [51]. La Porta et al. [52] illustrated that a high proportion of Catholics or Muslims reduces a country's quality of government and, by extension, may increase the extent of corruption. The authors consider the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Muslim religions as particularly hierarchical and detrimental to civic engagement that, in turn, reduces corruption. In a similar vein, Treisman [41] demonstrates that countries with larger proportions of Protestants tend to be less corrupt than traditionally Catholic countries. Additionally, in most Protestant countries, the church has traditionally been separated from the state and even played a role of opposition to the abuses of the government [41]. The Puritan aspects related to this religious tradition could also have a corruption-preventing effect on both providers and receivers of bribery [53]. Moreover, Protestants are less embedded in social networks that seem to be a breeding ground for corruption in other religions. Likewise, "Corruption belongs to a sinister informal network

<sup>4</sup> Gottfredson and Hirschi ([47], 149) claim that women seem to be more honest or more risk-averse than men by nature, which may be because they feel that there is a greater probability of being caught. Second, they are typically more involved in raising children, an activity in which they practice honesty in order to teach their children appropriate values. Third, it is assumed that "women may feel more than men- the physically stronger sex, that laws exist to protect them and therefore be more willing to follow rules." Fourth, "girls may be brought up to have higher levels of self-control than boys which affects their propensity to indulge in criminal behaviour".

of giving and taking, demanding a basic form of trust. There are no contracts or actionable agreements. Corruption flourishes in well-established networks, whether it is a matter of having long-standing connections to building authorities or long-term supply contracts with large corporations. Since both parties may be guilty of a punishable offense, there is trust on both sides” ([54], 33). For Europe, I posit that countries with higher levels of Protestants are likely to be less corrupt.

Treisman [41] was one of the first researchers who observed a significant impact of the distant past on the degree of corruption and illustrated that a long duration of democracy seems to be necessary to significantly reduce corruption. Blake and Martin [55] also show that longitudinal measures of democracy have a strong association with the level of corruption, when examining the CPI data from 1996 to 2000. Similarly, Pellegrini and Gerlach [56] show a negative relationship between a medium-long exposure to uninterrupted democracy (30 years) and corruption, whereas political turnover leads to an increase of corruption. Based on these findings, I expect that European states with longer democratic histories will have lower levels of corruption.

Finally, previous research indicates that a country’s communist past has a strong impact on a country’s future corruption level [57].<sup>5</sup> Sandholtz and Taagepera [39] have empirically shown a positive relationship between high levels of corruption and exposure to communist regimes and the adoption of communist structures and institutions. They suggest that communism created structural incentives that institutionalized corrupt behavior and have become strongly rooted in these societies’ culture. These social norms and practices are prevalent in communist countries and the transitions toward democracy and market economies have not yet erased this culture of corruption. In this study, I expect that the extent of corruption in countries will be higher, if the country has a communist past.

## Individual Level

Considering corruption as a cultural, multilevel phenomenon that takes place between individuals at the micro level, personal characteristics of individuals are expected to impact the extent of corruption in Europe. Above (variable “women in parliaments”), I discussed, that gender might have an impact on an individual’s corrupt actions. Similar to the macro level, I hypothesize that females are likely to be less corrupt than males.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, I assume that there is a significant relationship between corruption and an individual’s age. Torgler and Valev [58] provide evidence that older people are less likely to view corruption as justifiable and illustrate that the age effect is robust across different social and cultural conditions. They argue that older people tend to be more tax compliant and less likely to be involved in criminal activities. Hunt [59] shows

<sup>5</sup> Kostadinova [18] claims that “Because of the multifaceted character of postcommunist transition, numerous opportunities emerged for illicit payments, patronage, allocation of public contracts, black market interactions, and covert networks. These could spread and grow in the Eastern Europe societies, already suffering from endemic bribery and lack of elite integrity” (see also [6]).

<sup>6</sup> To measure corruption at the individual level I finally use data from the World Values Survey that refer to the perception of corruption by individuals from multiple countries. This is in contrast to the data from the macro level based on survey data by experts. For this reason, I call the dependent variable of the micro level “extent of perceived corruption”. Both variables are highly correlated.

similar results by indicating a negative relationship between corruption and age. She claims that older people have had time to develop networks that, in turn, could lead to honesty. As a result, older people tend to bribe less than younger people.<sup>7</sup>

I expect that unemployed people tend to engage more in corrupt activity, compared to the employed, implying that the lack of a stable income creates strong economic incentives to take some extra-money in the form of bribery. Torgler and Valev [58] illustrate that self-employed and unemployed people have a lower tolerance for corrupt activities compared to other citizens. They assume that such a position or a certain status, in turn, may influence the norms regarding bribery and state: "Being away from a job with its regular hours, restrictions, and compensations may increase the incentive to act illegally." Yet, Mocan [60] using micro level data shows that enhancing the unemployment rate increases the counts of bribery. Macro level studies also show that that increased joblessness is associated with higher levels of corruption [61]. On the basis of these findings, I posit that an individual's employment status influences the extent of corruption.

Similar to the assumption of my "employment status" hypothesis, I expect that people with lower incomes have greater incentives to engage in corrupt activities. A low income creates a degree of financial uncertainty and is likely to create incentives for generating supplementary income. Moreover, Torgler and Valev [58] indicated that people with a higher income are more likely to be asked for a bribe, as are those with a better education. On the contrary, individuals with a lower income have lower social "stakes" or restrictions but are "less in a position to take risks because of a high marginal utility loss (wealth reduction) if they are caught and penalized" ([58], 15).

Several researchers have found high correlations between various societal values such as trust and the extent of corruption (e.g. [62–64]). Previous research offers different theoretical considerations and contradicting empirical findings on the relationship between trust and corruption. Uslaner [65] defines trust as faith in people who are different from yourself. He claims that, even if trust and corruption represent opposing moral values, the two are very strongly related.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, trust as a central component of social capital is a value expressing the belief that others are part of your moral community. Yet, some scholars are more hesitant to inject such a strongly moralistic interpretation of trust. Among other empirical studies, Paldam and Svendsen [66] and You [67] conclude that a strong negative relationship between corruption and interpersonal trust exists, implying that trusting societies have less people behaving corruptly.<sup>9</sup> For the European states, I expect that the level of interpersonal trust influences the extent of corruption.

I also assume that people's attitudes towards illegal behavior have an influence on the extent of perceived corruption. Similar to the assumed relationship between

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<sup>7</sup> Hunt [59] suggests that "A higher probability of detection and a greater value of reputation within networks could lead to honesty rather than implicit quid pro quos, although there is no clear dividing line between the two. In the context of the links between crime and trust, trust should lead to honesty, rather than a network for mutually beneficial but possibly illegal exchange."

<sup>8</sup> Uslaner [5] finds strong support for the claims that: (1) inequality depresses trust; (2) low trust leads to high levels of corruption; and (3) a high level of corruption leads to more inequality—thus forming a "loop" with lower trust and more corruption in turn.

<sup>9</sup> Even though some researchers suggest that societies with high levels of trust also tend to be more tolerant of corrupt practices. Moreno [68] argues that high levels of interpersonal trust support corruption because trust plays an important role in the relationship between corrupt individuals who usually operate with high levels of interpersonal trust necessary to maintain their relationship and decreases the risk of disclosure.

corruption and the level of income, it relates to an individual's satisfaction with the financial situation. However, this variable relates to the subjective perception of one's own financial situation. Torgler and Valev [58] demonstrate that people who are dissatisfied with their financial situation tend to be more willing to act illegally. Such discontentment, in turn, can create "a sense of distress, especially when there is a discrepancy between the actual and the desired financial situation. Thus, there may be a higher incentive to act illegally to reduce this gap" ([58], 7). I assume that people who are unsatisfied with their own financial situation strive for higher income and are also prepared to accept illegal payments.

Finally, I expect that people who are more tolerant towards corruption are more likely to behave corruptive as well. Using data from the World Values Survey, Moreno [68] indicates that there are significant cross-national and cross-regional variations in the permissiveness of corruption, suggesting that some societies justify corrupt acts based on cultural values. He demonstrates that these attitudes toward corruption are negatively associated with interpersonal trust and democratic attitudes such as the support for democracy that are important components of democratic political culture. Moreno [68] shows that permissiveness towards the level of corruption was very high in post-communist countries, followed by Latin American countries, and South Asian societies. I posit that the level of the justification of bribery influences the extent of corruption.

The operationalization of the described independent variables and data sources are included in the [Appendix](#).

## **Method: Panel and Multilevel analysis**

### **Macro models of corruption**

At the country level, the empirical analysis follows a panel-data research design that includes regression analyses that regard both the spatial and temporal dimension of data. After checking for multicollinearity, I run several linear regression models including economic, political, socio-cultural and economic, and historical variables with panel-corrected standard errors for estimating variance in these models.

### **Measuring Corruption at the Country level**

Corruption cannot be measured directly. It is secretive by nature and frequently takes place in hidden and unofficial settings. Thus, the most common strategy for capturing corruption is in an indirect way by measuring the perception of corrupt actions. I measure the extent of corruption at the macro level using the Corruption Perception Index<sup>10</sup> for a period of 19 years (1995–2013). While the CPI has been estimated since

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<sup>10</sup> The Corruption Perception Index compiled by Transparency International has become one of the most reliable and widely used indicators of corruption around the world. The meta-index was first launched in 1995 and ranks almost 200 countries based on the degree to which corruption is perceived among public officials and politicians. The CPI is a composite index drawing on 14 different polls and surveys from seven independent institutions and is carried out among business people and country experts. It also includes surveys of local residents and expatriates who rank countries on a scale from zero (high corruption) to ten (low corruption), according to the level of perceived corruption.



1995, the methodology and sources changed recurrently until 2012. For this reason, the findings of the analyses over time and across countries should be interpreted in a prudent way. Yet, all the calculations were double checked by data of the World Bank (Control of Corruption Index) and show similar results indicating the robustness of the CPI data. The CPI-scales are rescaled to a range of 0 to 10, where 0 indicates low corruption and 10 the highest level. Figure 1 illustrates that corruption varies widely across different European countries. The average extent of corruption (1995–2013) in 37 European states is 3.94.<sup>11</sup> The highest levels of corruption are found in Ukraine (7.6), Albania (7.1), Moldova (7.1), Belarus (6.9) and Georgia (6.6). The countries with the lowest extent of corruption include the Scandinavian countries: Denmark (0.5), Finland (0.5) and Sweden (0.8). On the whole, Europe is characterized by widely diverging corruption values<sup>12</sup> [17].

Taking a closer look at each individual country, the different developments of corruption illustrate various dynamics in certain countries for the time period of 1995–2013. It is notable that there are countries that have had rather constant levels of corruption over time such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands. In contrast to this, countries such as Belarus, Belgium, Italy or Poland show strong dynamics in the development of corruption.

### Micro models of corruption

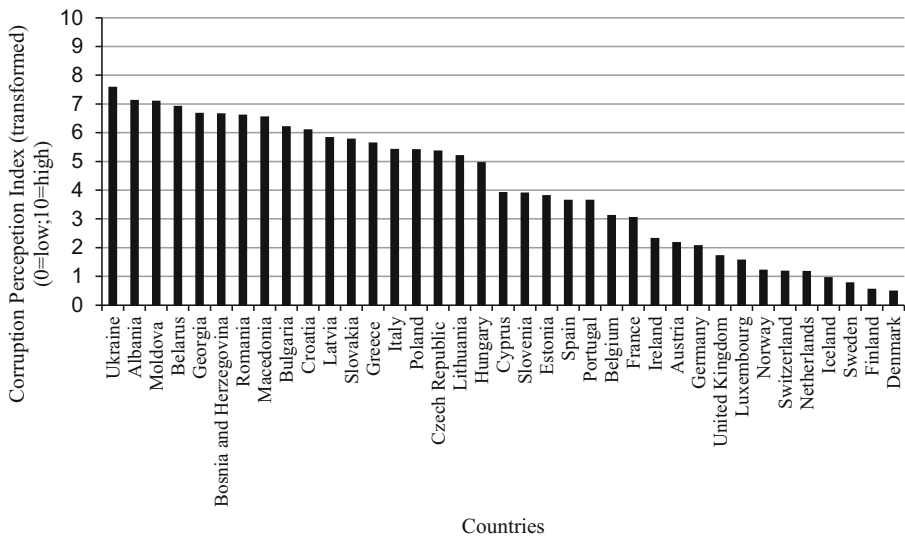
To explain corrupt behavior at the individual level and to provide a more thorough explanation of the extent of corruption, I run several multilevel models. After checking for multicollinearity, I specify certain multilevel models<sup>13</sup>: a random intercept model, including micro level variables such as an individual's socio-demographic characteristics, values and attitudes (Model 1); a model that integrates the significant micro level variables of model 1 and the macro level model (Model 2), and finally I estimate a model that additionally integrates four cross-level variables<sup>14</sup> (Model 3).

<sup>11</sup> Excluded states are either not considered by most other data sources such as Andorra, Liechtenstein and Malta, or are outliers within the dataset, such as Turkey or Russia.

<sup>12</sup> More precisely, it is striking, that there are still significant differences between Western and Eastern European states. The average score of the Western countries is 2.06. With this score, Western Europe is found at the bottom of corruption values in Europe. Contrary to this, the average corruption level of Eastern states is 6.37 and thereby considerably higher. A comparison of Northern (2.28) and Southern Europe (5.33) show a similar picture. Notably, levels of corruption are not exceptionally lower in Southern Europe than in post-communist societies. Countries such as Greece (5.53), Italy (5.36), Portugal (3.64) or Spain (3.65) are similarly rated by the Corruption Perception Index as post-communist countries such as Romania (6.79), Hungary (5.01), Slovenia (3.88) or Estonia (3.91).

<sup>13</sup> Contrary to the panel analyses at the macro level, countries such as Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Denmark, France, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom have to be excluded because of missing data.

<sup>14</sup> These cross-level variables encompass an individual's satisfaction with financial situation and a country's degree of democracy; an individual's interpersonal trust and a country's degree of democracy; the percentage of women in parliaments and a country's degree of democracy; and a country's duration and degree of democracy.



Source: Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International

**Fig. 1** Corruption across Europe (Average Level: 1995–2013)

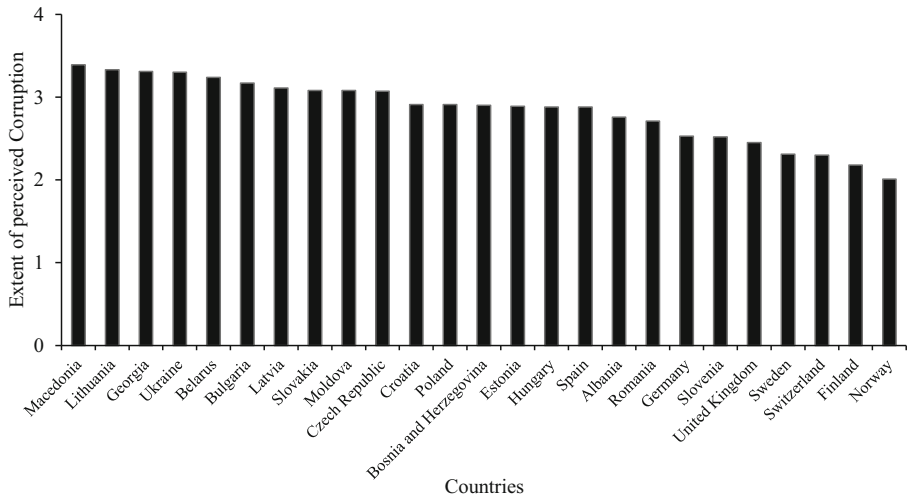
## Measuring corruption at the individual level

To measure corruption at the individual level I use the item “Extent of political corruption” of the World Values Survey covering more than 90 % of the world population. The item is generated by asking “How widespread do you think bribe taking and corruption is in this country?” Responses were recorded on a four-point scale where “1” implies “no public officials engaged in it”; 2 = “a few are”; 3 = “most are” and 4 implies “almost all public officials are engaged in it” [69].

It is important to underline that, similar to the Corruption Perception Index, this WVS-item measures the extent of corruption that is perceived by interviewed people and not the actual level of corrupt activities. Therefore, using subjective perceptions while measuring culture dimensions and corruption are prone to bias [70]. Consequently, I call the dependent variable “extent of perceived corruption” and results have to be interpreted cautiously.

Moreover, of particular importance in comparing the dependent variables of the macro and micro level is their high correlation. The correlation between the CPI (transformed) and the aggregated item “Extent of political corruption” of the WVS is 0.84. In fact, the correlation of both levels, macro and micro, especially indicates the linkage between the country and the individual level.

For the following analyses, I use four waves from the World Values Survey: 1995–1998, 1999–2004, 2005–2009 and 2010–2014. This is nearly equivalent to the time period that is used at the macro level (1995–2013). Between these years, almost 30.000 respondents were surveyed. Figure 2 below illustrates how European societies differ over the extent of perceived corruption.



Source: World Values Survey: 1995-1998, 1999-2004, 2005-2009 and 2010-2014

**Fig. 2** Extent of perceived corruption in Europe

Similar to the extent of corruption at the macro level, Fig. 2 demonstrates that corruption varies widely across different European countries. The overall mean score on the four point scale in these 25 European countries is 2.88. The highest extent of perceived corruption are found in Macedonia (3.39), Lithuania (3.33), and Georgia (3.31), whereas the countries with the lowest extent of corruption turn out to be, in particular, the Scandinavian countries Norway (2.01) and Finland (2.18), followed by Switzerland (2.30), and Sweden (2.31). It is again striking, that there are significant differences between West and East European states. These findings are very similar to the descriptive results at the macro level.

Similar to the country level, there are also significant differences in the perception of corruption between West and East European states. The average score of the extent of perceived corruption in Western European countries<sup>15</sup> is 2.41. On the contrary, the average corruption level of the Eastern societies<sup>16</sup> is 3.09, and thereby comparatively higher. A comparison of Northern<sup>17</sup> (2.63) and Southern Europe<sup>18</sup> (2.89) show a similar picture. Notably, levels of corruption are not exceptionally lower in Southern Europe than in post-communist societies.

<sup>15</sup> The sample of Western Europe only includes Germany and Switzerland. As a result of the exclusion of a lot of Western countries such as Belgium, France or Luxembourg this sample is comparatively underrepresented. This only serves as an illustration.

<sup>16</sup> Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Ukraine and belong to the sample of Eastern Europe.

<sup>17</sup> Northern Europe includes Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway and Sweden.

<sup>18</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Macedonia and Slovenia belong to the sample of Southern Europe [71].

## Explaining Corruption in Europe

### The Impact of Country Characteristics on Corruption

Table 1 presents the empirical findings of panel analysis at the macro level. It shows that all included independent variables have significant relationships with corruption, measured by the CPI, in Europe. These results confirm previous studies and demonstrate the robustness of these factors in explaining corruption.

In this model, holding other factors constant, a country's economic development is the most important contributor to the reduction of corruption levels in Europe. This result confirms previous research [28, 42] and identifies that when economic conditions improve, European countries are likely to improve their corruption scores, and experience less corruption. Furthermore, the findings indicate, that a country's EU-membership tends to hinder an increase in corruption in European states. Especially after becoming a member in the European Union, the corruption scores of several countries such as Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia have significantly improved. This provides initial support that countries that are more integrated into international networks such as the EU are more exposed to economic pressure, maybe normative pressures as well, against corruption [18, 43]. This also implies that rules such as the Copenhagen Criteria, which define whether a country is eligible to join the European Union, have a significant influence on a country's level of corruption. The establishment of the rule of law in a country is not compatible with widespread levels of corruption, and if countries attempt to join the EU, they have to minimize corrupt activities as far as possible. Therefore, the admission of countries into organizations with high anti-corruption standards such as the European Union seems to be an overall efficient anti-corruption instrument because international pressure tends to produce behavioral changes in countries regarding their corruption levels.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the degree of democracy and the percentage of women in parliaments are influential in explaining the levels of corruption in Europe. As expected, the model indicates that the extent of corruption is lower in countries that have higher levels of female participation in parliaments. This result is attributed to the fact that democracies are strongly related to greater gender equality [72]. Gender equality may be conducive to democracy by promoting a less hierarchical cultural milieu for decision-making [73]. Moreover, in democratic states, principles such as equality, fairness, transparency, checks and balances, and accountability are more strongly fostered than in authoritarian regimes that are characterized in particular by strong hierarchies. Therefore, specific components of liberal democracies such as the protection of women's political rights and democratization processes include necessary conditions for honest governments because their institutions provide a fairer system and tend to include corruption-restraining mechanisms [48]. In other words, more advanced democratic structures and institutions and high percentages of women in parliaments lead to lower levels of corruption. As a result, my findings confirm cultural approaches

<sup>19</sup> This also confirms Kostadinova's [18] assumption that "the desire to join the European Union was a much more effective driving force for implementation of anticorruption policies. [...] Ironically, many people in the admittedly more corrupt Romania and Bulgaria think that only the Union can save them from corrupt politicians".

**Table 1** Macro Model of Corruption

Variables	Extent of Corruption in Europe
Economic Development	-0.425*** (0.116)
EU-Membership	-0.019*** (0.006)
Degree of Democracy	-0.123*** (0.036)
Women in Parliaments	-0.094*** (0.026)
Percentage of Catholics	0.088*** (0.009)
Percentage of Orthodox	0.176*** (0.013)
Percentage of Protestants	-0.112*** (0.017)
Percentage of Muslims	0.141*** (0.020)
Years of Democracy	-0.234*** (0.013)
Communist Past	0.062*** (0.013)
Constant	0.754*** (0.053)
Observations	536
R-squared	0.87
Number of Countries	37

Standard errors in parentheses  
 \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  
 $p < 0.1$ . Dependent Variable:  
 "Extent of Corruption" (Corruption Perception Index transformed); 0 = low corruption;  
 10 = highest level of corruption

that claim democratic societies and polities are often committed to norms and values of justice and equal opportunities that are in opposition to corruption norms [65, 74]. Additionally, I analyze the interaction between a country's degree of democracy and the percentage of women in parliaments in terms of reducing the extent of perceived corruption by multilevel models (Table 2).

Furthermore, the model illustrates that religion is a strong predictor of corruption levels in Europe and confirms my assumption that countries with higher levels of Protestants are likely to be less corrupt. My findings indicate that societies with a higher percentage of individuals of Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim faiths show higher levels of corruption, while the relationship in Protestant societies such as Denmark, Sweden or Norway seems to be the opposite. My results lend credence to the argument that "In more hierarchical systems (for example, Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam), challenges to the status quo are less frequent than in more egalitarian or individualistic religions" ([75], 448). Theoretically, this association is often ascribed to egalitarian and individualistic features of Protestantism that facilitate the extent to which office-holders are held accountable for their actions. Thus, compared to other religions such as the Orthodox and Catholic churches as well as Islam, Protestant societies show less hierarchy and are less prone to tolerance towards power abuses and corrupt behavior. As a result, societies that indicate more egalitarian and individualistic features are more likely to show lower levels of corruption. This also suggests for the argument that democratic values such as equality decrease corruption levels.

As assumed, there are significant relationships between historical factors such as the durability of democratic systems and a country's communist past and the extent of corruption. This finding implies that democratic structures not only decrease levels of corruption, but that this effect is also strengthened by the duration of democratic principles. In other words, the longer a democracy lasts, the less corrupt it is. The relationship between the duration of democracy and the extent of corruption is even stronger than the relationship with a country's degree of democracy. I also analyze the

**Table 2** Micro Model of Corruption

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Individual Level</b>			
Gender	0.012 (0.016)		
Age	0.000 (0.000)		
Employment Status	0.008* (0.005)	0.007** (0.003)	0.005** (0.002)
Level of Income	-3.29 (2.31)		
Level of Interpersonal Trust	-0.243*** (0.065)	-0.168*** (0.024)	-0.136*** (0.018)
Satisfaction with Financial Situation	-0.072*** (0.0119)	-0.033*** (0.004)	-0.034*** (0.004)
Justification of Bribery	0.038*** (0.009)	0.021*** (0.006)	0.023*** (0.005)
<b>Country Level</b>			
Extent of Corruption (CPI (transformed))		0.100*** (0.037)	0.099** (0.040)
Economic Development		-0.077 (0.187)	-0.191 (0.131)
EU-Membership		0.062 (0.073)	0.014 (0.083)
Degree of Democracy		0.037* (0.019)	0.039 (0.098)
Women in Parliaments		0.007 (0.008)	-0.002* (0.001)
Percentage of Catholics		-0.000 (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)
Percentage of Orthodox		-0.001 (0.003)	-0.006*** (0.002)
Percentage of Protestants		-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.012*** (0.002)
Percentage of Muslims		-0.003 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.002)
Years of Democracy		0.002 (0.004)	0.024* (0.014)
Communist Past		0.090 (0.091)	0.098 (0.083)
<b>Cross Level</b>			
Satisfaction with Financial Situation x Degree of Democracy			0.000 (0.001)
Interpersonal Trust x Degree of Democracy			-0.026*** (0.007)
Women in Parliaments x Degree of Democracy			-0.029*** (0.008)
Duration x Degree of Democracy			-0.008* (0.004)
Constant	-0.111 (0.072)	0.387 (1.109)	1.061 (0.912)
Observations	19,289	21,210	21,210
Number of Countries	20	21	21
Variance (cons)	2.37 (1.02)	3.48 (1.11)	5.71 (4.80)
Variance (Residual)	.59 (.07)	.55 (.03)	.54 (.06)
Between Country-Variation of Dependent Variable	19%	14%	8%
Within Country-Variation of Dependent Variable	81%	86%	92%

Robust Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . Dependent Variable: "Extent of perceived Corruption" is generated by asking "How widespread do you think bribe taking and corruption is in this country?"; Responses were recorded on a four-point scale: "1" = "no public officials engaged in it"; 2 = "a few are"; 3 = "most are" and 4 = "almost all public officials are engaged in it". Individual-level variables (except for dummies) are centered on country means; Country-level variables are centered on the global mean; all variables are standardized into the same number format; Sampling weights are assigned at one or both levels in the two-level model. Models calculated with STATA 12.1. Data cover all societies and respondents from four waves of World Values Survey (1994–2014). Average sample size per country (standard deviation thereof)

interaction between the degree and duration of democracy with regard to the extent of perceived corruption at the individual level (Table 2).

To conclude, democracies in Europe are not free of corruption per se and do not necessarily exhibit honest governments and politicians, but they have fewer problems with corruption reflecting the duration of democratic rule. Consequently, reducing levels of corruption would imply a change of specific practices and habits that are deeply embedded in a society's culture and its institutions. In contrast to this, a country's communist past significantly increases the extent of its level of corruption in Europe. This indicates that a country's communist past fosters the growth of corruption levels and that post-communist countries seem to still be susceptible to corrupt practices. This is in line with Skaaning [53] who assumes that "as culture only changes slowly, the corrupt traditions have arguably survived the end of communist regimes. Communism is thus likely to have established a negative legacy. New bureaucracies were not created from scratch, large extents of the personnel carried over, and enterprises as well as private people in general had 'internalized' certain practices." Overall, these results strongly support sociological approaches that highlight cultural norms and values and focus on actors' social behavior in societies.

### **The Impact of Individual Characteristics on Corruption**

Table 2 presents the empirical findings of the multilevel models. It shows that all included variables have significant relationships with the extent of perceived corruption in Europe, measured by the WVS-item "How widespread do you think bribe taking and corruption is in this country?"

The results of all multilevel models demonstrate that, holding other factors constant, an individual's employment status, level of interpersonal trust, satisfaction with the financial situation, and the justification of bribery are significant in the explanation of the extent of perceived corruption. While an individual's employment status and justification of bribery show a positive relationship with the extent of perceived corruption, the variables level of interpersonal trust and satisfaction with the financial situation are negatively associated with perceived corruption (Model 1). Socio-demographic characteristics such as an individual's gender, age and level of income do not show significant relationships with the perception of corruption. This means, that in terms of the gender variable, the assumption that an individual's gender influences the probability of corrupt behavior cannot be confirmed and contradicts studies by Swamy et al. [45] and Dollar et al. [46]. Both of these authors demonstrate that women are less involved in corrupt transactions and are less likely to condone bribe-taking than men. This result rather supports the study of Alatas et al. [49] and their argument that the perception of corruption is more culture-specific than gender-dependent.

Interpersonal trust is constantly the strongest predictor of the extent of perceived corruption. This implies that people who have high levels of interpersonal trust show lower levels in the perception of corruption. Based on this result, my analysis indicates that trust seems to be a good control mechanism of corruption within a society. Generally, trust is a central component of social capital and a value that expresses the belief that others are part of your moral community [64, 65].

In all models, an individual's satisfaction with their financial situation indicates a negative relationship with the extent of perceived corruption. This implies that people who are unsatisfied with their financial situation perceive a higher extent of corruption of public officials. However, this result does not necessarily confirm the study of Torgler and Valev [58] who demonstrated that people who are dissatisfied with their financial situation tend to be more willing to act illegally. It merely shows that these people perceive higher levels of corruption to exist or are more sensitive towards corrupt actions.

Model 2, which includes the significant variables of the macro level as well, demonstrates that the extent of corruption and Protestantism are explanatory variables in terms of the extent of perceived corruption. While the extent of corruption, measured by the transformed CPI, has a positive association with the perceived extent of corruption, Protestantism reduces the perception of corrupt actions. In terms of the significant relationship of a country's extent of corruption this implies that people living in countries with high levels of corruption also perceive higher levels of corruption. While in Protestant countries with a high number of women in parliaments that generally show lower levels of corruption, the individual perception of corruption is less likely as well. This again confirms the results of the macro model and demonstrates their robustness.

The findings illustrate that both the extent of corruption and its perception are culturally influenced and determine individuals' behavior. It seems that people have greater expectations and a higher estimated probability that, for instance, a given public official will engage in corrupt acts in societies with high levels of corruption [76]. These results also clearly demonstrate the cultural transmission of corruption, which implies that individuals from societies in which corrupt transactions are quite common are more likely to engage in corruption and expect others to engage in it as well [37].

Additionally, there are significant relationships between three cross-level variables and the extent of perceived corruption (an individual's interpersonal trust and a country's degree of democracy; the percentage of women in parliaments and a country's degree of democracy; and a country's duration and degree of democracy). However, there is no significant relationship between the cross-level variable an individual's financial and a country's degree of democracy and corruption (Model 3). This confirms again the assumption that the extent of perceived corruption is strongly linked with a country's degree and duration of democracy and is associated with a high level of interpersonal trust. These three factors reduces the extent of corruption, while an individual's financial satisfaction plays a minor role in explaining the perception of corrupt actions. As a result, corruption is a cultural, multilevel phenomenon that can be explained very well by sociological approaches that highlight cultural norms and values and focus on actors' social behavior in communities, institutions and societies. Thereby, my analysis also confirms that culture interacts with corruption through two channels, formal (democratic) institutions, and informal institutions such as interpersonal trust [36].

## Conclusion

The analysis reveals that a country's contextual conditions such as the economic development, international integration (EU-membership), women's percentage in



parliaments, Protestantism, the degree and duration of democracy and historical factors such as the post-communist past influence the extent of corruption over time and across European countries. These results confirm previous research from other parts of the world and demonstrate their robustness also for Europe [8]. With regard to the micro level, I have identified that corruption is likely experienced differently depending on certain values and attitudes. However, socio-demographic features such as an individual's gender, age and level of income do not show any influence in European countries. Yet, the multilevel analysis demonstrates that an individual's level of interpersonal trust, satisfaction with the financial situation and justification of bribery affect the individual's perception of corruption. While interpersonal trust and an individual's satisfaction with the financial situation decrease the extent of perceived corruption, the justification of bribery increases its perception. Moreover, the multilevel analysis has indicated that women's percentage in parliaments, Protestantism, the degree and duration of democracy and interpersonal trust acting as cross-level phenomenon have a significant effect on the perception of corruption as well. These results suggest that corruption exists, persists, and varies significantly across cultures in Europe. The channels through which culture and corruption interact include formal and informal institutions such as democratic institutions and interpersonal trust.

Furthermore, my analysis implies that improving an individual's economic situation is an adequate way of reducing and preventing corruption. Only a society where relatively few people live in poverty offers the requisites for equal economic, political and social participation and therefore equality. But a country's economic development is not a sole criterion for generating an economy devoid of corruption. More precisely, a highly unequal distribution of key resources such as income and wealth that are strongly linked to education and knowledge are equivalent to inequality in the distribution of key political resources and hence unfavorable to competitive politics [77, 78]. Therefore, in addition to the level of economic development of a country, the distribution of material resources is regarded as important for the prospects and benefits of democracy that in turn hinders corruption development [79].

However, my study also shows and confirms previous research that democracy does not necessarily guarantee honest governments and corruption-free societies. Corruption appears regardless of the regime type and scandals turn up frequently in young as well as well-established liberal democracies. In contrast, the duration of democracy is the decisive element that improves corruption levels in the long-term. In sum, by providing the institutional component of people power, democracy leads to higher levels of transparency and enables the civil society and social engagement of groups including non-governmental organizations, media and the press, to call attention to corruption, sensitize the population and act as watch-dogs. As studies have indicated, in mature democracies these social organizations and movements have become a constant source of influence on government, keeping elected officials under permanent pressure in terms of accountability and responsiveness [80]. In this context, Collier [81] has also revealed that "an empowered civil society playing a vital role in elite accountability emerges as the foundation to building commitment rules." Social empowerment,<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Social empowerment means "strengthening civil society in order to enhance its political and economic vitality, providing more orderly paths of access and rules of interaction between state and society, and balancing economic and political opportunities" ([82], 85).

especially through mass citizen participation, is therefore essential in the fight against corruption. A strong civil society cultivates anti-corruption commitment rules that, in turn, lead to self-enforcing mechanisms where the ruling elites make it their duty not to behave corruptly and civil society takes this promise as their corresponding right. Civil society is therefore the chief manifestation of a vital democracy and a main source of governmental accountability and responsiveness [64, 81]. The key is not only the formal hardware of democracy, but rather fairness, loyalty, legitimacy, and credible accountability – the values that make democracy worth pursuing, and corruption worth worrying about, in the first place ([83], 342). In this context, norm and values based corruption control is required, which is based on the notion that values, social sanctions, and widely shared conceptions of right and wrong should play an important role, alongside laws and punishments, in guiding the uses of public power and resources. As a result, fighting corruption consists of the combination of formal democratic institutions that provide transparency and accountability, but also include mechanisms that allow for the monitoring and sanctioning of corrupt actors. Preventing corruption implies fostering informal institutions such as interpersonal trust.

Consequently, I conclude that a specific “democratic culture” including certain norms and values such as interpersonal trust and social and economic equality is the most important contributor in the fight of corruption in Europe. This democratic culture goes along with the degree and especially the duration of democracy, economic development and EU-membership which overall represent a system of democratic values. In other words, a democratic culture as specified above hinders the growth of corruption and acts as remedy by generating strong democratic institutions and norms and values as well. As a result, democracy promotion was and it is still the best remedy against corruption spread in Europe. The article emphasizes the relevance and need of area- and cultural-specific knowledge of factors affecting corruption.

Turning the tables, governance and government performance can, in turn, help to improve the democratic situation and enhance citizens’ trust in political institutions because citizens who perceive clean and honest governments, higher levels of fairness, satisfaction, and brightening economic prospects develop higher trust in institutions [68, 84].<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the measurement of corruption, my study also point out that there is a high correlation between the dependent variables of the country level, measured by the CPI, and individual level, measured by WVS survey data. Although both variables are measured differently, this demonstrates that both levels are strongly linked and suggests that both indices seem to measure the same phenomenon: the extent of perceived corruption. Prospectively, researchers analyzing corruption can additionally rely on the perceptions of citizens as well, however, always be considered in connection with survey data by experts.

Overall, my analysis provides a diagnostic as well as a broad, coherent analytical framework of the factors that influence corruption in Europe. This framework can be used as a template for future analyses such as case studies

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<sup>21</sup> Tavits [84] finds out that governments can have a significant impact on people’s well-being. Examining the effect of corruption and representation on people’s subjective well-being she demonstrates that people report higher levels of subjective well-being when especially their governments perform well (i.e., are clean rather than corrupt).

with stronger focus on institutions and organizations (meso level) and on the underlying mechanisms of corruption.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank Georg Plattner and Jessica Flakne as well as the anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments.

## Appendix

**Table 3** Independent Variables

	Operationalization	Source
<b>Economic factors</b>		
Economic Development	GDP / per capita, PPP (Constant International USD) (logarithmized).	World Bank, OECD
International Integration (EU-Membership)	Dummy-variables (1/0)	European Union; World Trade Organization; OECD
Political factors		Source
Degree of Democracy	Freedom-House-Index / Imputed Polity IV	Freedom House; Polity IV
Women in Parliaments	Percentage of parliamentary seats in a single or lower chamber held by women.	World Bank; United Nations
<b>Socio-cultural factors</b>		
Percentage of Catholics	Catholics as percentage of population	Source Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations; Statistical Abstract of the World; United Nations
Percentage of Orthodox	Orthodox as percentage of population	Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations; Statistical Abstract of the World; United Nations
Percentage of Protestants	Protestants as percentage of population	Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations; Statistical Abstract of the World; United Nations
Percentage of Muslims	Muslims as percentage of population	Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations; Statistical Abstract of the World; United Nations
<b>Historical factors</b>		
Years of Democracy	The number of consecutive years since 1930 the system had been democratic as of 2000	Quality of Government Dataset (2011)
Communist Past	Dummy-Variable: 1) If a country has a communist past; 0) if not	Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations; Statistical Abstract of the World; United Nations

**Table 3** (continued)

	Operationalization	Source
Socio-demographic characteristics		
Gender	Question text:Categories: -5 Missing; Unknown -4 Not asked in survey -3 Not applicable -2 No answer -1 Don't know 1 Male 2 Female	World Values Survey
Age	Question text:"Year of birth" Categories: -5 Missing; Unknown -4 Not asked in survey -3 Not applicable -2 No answer -1 Don't know	World Values Survey
Employment Status	Question text: "Are you employed now or not? IF YES: About how many hours a week? If more than one job: only for the main job." Categories: -5 Missing; Unknown -4 Not asked in survey -3 Not applicable -2 No answer -1 Don't know 1 Full time 2 Part time 3 Self employed 4 Retired 5 Housewife 6 Students 7 Unemployed 8 Other	World Values Survey
Level of Income	Question text:"Here is a scale of incomes. We would like to know in what group your household is, counting all wages, salaries, pensions and other incomes that come in. Just give the letter of the group your household falls into, before taxes and other deductions." Categories: By decides for your society, 1 = Lowest decide, 10 = Highest decide	World Values Survey
Values and Norms		
Level of Interpersonal Trust	Question text:"Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?" Categories:	World Values Survey

**Table 3** (continued)

	Operationalization	Source
Attitudes	1) Most people can be trusted 0) Can't be too careful	
Satisfaction with Financial Situation	Question text: "How satisfied are you with the financial situation of your household? If '1' means you are completely dissatisfied on this scale, and '10' means you are completely satisfied, where would you put your satisfaction with your household's financial situation?" The item is scaled from 1 ("Dissatisfied") to 10 ("Satisfied").	World Values Survey
Justification of Bribery	Question text: "Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between, using this card. (Read out statements. Code one answer for each statement): Someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties." The item is scaled from 1 ("Never justifiable") to 10 ("Always justifiable").	World Values Survey

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