

INTRODUCTION

From the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement to the Saffron Revolution and Euromaidan, prodemocracy protests worldwide are calling to end corruption. Commonly defined as “abuse of public office for private gain,” corruption is an impediment to meritocratic competition in business and government and a cause of rising inequality around the globe (Lambsdorff 2005; Mauro 1997; Shlapentokh 2013). Every year, the international community spends millions of dollars to fuel anti-corruption campaigns by civil society actors, national governments, and transnational and intergovernmental organizations (Rose-Sender et al. 2010; Sampson 2010).

Despite these colossal efforts by the international community, scholarly knowledge about the causes of corruption remains limited. Thus, two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, social scientists continue to think of the widespread corruption in Eastern Europe as a side effect of tumultuous democratization. Such dominant theories tie corruption to the allegedly ongoing political transition, with an implication that corruption will subside and ultimately disappear as democratic governance in the region matures.

The Politics of Bureaucratic Corruption challenges this transitional paradigm in the study of post-Soviet corruption. A careful mixed-methods investigation at the heart of this book reveals that bureaucratic corruption has little to do with political transitions that are, for all intents and purposes, over. Rather, everyday illicit exchanges between ordinary people and bureaucratic service providers are shaped

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by new hybrid regimes that have emerged in the region since the demise of the Soviet Union.

The Politics of Bureaucratic Corruption compares the corruption systems of post-Soviet Ukraine and Belarus. Over the past two decades, Transparency International, the largest global anti-corruption watchdog organization, has consistently ranked Ukraine and Belarus in the twentieth percentile of the most corrupt nations in the world (Appendix I, Table 4). Based on these rankings, many scholars and policy analysts conclude that under-the-table transactions between service providers and their clients, such as petty bribery, gift giving, and “string pulling,” are ubiquitous in both countries. Petty bureaucratic corruption is also believed to go hand in hand with illegal business practices, grand corruption in politics, and state capture by criminal-economic interests (Holmes 2012; Kostadinova 2012; Ledeneva 2006). As a result, in the Western popular imaginary, Ukraine and Belarus have emerged as interchangeable examples of states that are endemically and hopelessly riddled with corruption.

In contrast to this dominant view, the following chapters show that bureaucratic corruption is far from ubiquitous in the two countries. While many Ukrainians and Belarusians regularly resort to bribery and nepotism in their dealings with street-level officials, others avoid such transactions as inappropriate or unnecessary in ways that current theories of corruption fail to explain. Moreover, despite their nearly identical rankings on Transparency International’s and other corruption indicators, Ukraine and Belarus are characterized by different patterns of distribution of informal economic activity across local bureaucracies. While Ukraine has more and less corrupt organizations in different bureaucratic sectors (e.g., more and less corrupt universities and hospitals), in Belarus some sectors (e.g., higher education) are entirely free of corruption, while others (e.g., health care) have relatively high corruption levels.

The primary goal of this book is to explain such within- and across-country variation in bureaucratic corruption in light of the dissimilar political development of the two countries since the fall of socialism. Over the past quarter century, Ukraine has oscillated between the pro-Western and pro-Russian political trajectories, while Belarus reverted to semi-authoritarian governance under the idiosyncratic president Aleksandr Lukashenka. The argument of *The Politics of Bureaucratic Corruption* links these macro-level processes to the unique landscapes of petty organizational corruption in the two countries.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

At the heart of the inquiry that unfolds over the next five chapters lie firsthand accounts and ethnographic observations that reveal how ordinary Ukrainians and Belarusians understand organizational corruption systems, navigate conflicting institutional demands, and choose between legal and extralegal ways to obtain bureaucratic services. These data reveal that citizens' corruption conduct is contingent on their interactions with other organizational members and shaped by informal norms of different bureaucracies. In turn, such organizational dynamics are a function of macro-level political processes. Through concrete reforms and policies, as well as through less tangible changes in the living conditions of the citizenry, political transformations affect organizational environments, which then affect citizens' engagement in corruption. By tracing the institutional histories of local universities and linking them to political processes in the two countries, the book reveals that *the rate of political turnover* – the frequency of change in political leadership and orientation – has had a strong impact on the distribution of corruption across the street-level bureaucracies of Ukraine and Belarus.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The Politics of Bureaucratic Corruption employs a methodological approach that differs from that of existing comparative work on corruption. To capture ordinary people's journey between the legal and extralegal worlds of local organizations, I had to employ a wide gamut of methodological techniques and resort to some creative solutions. In an effort to learn about the practices and meanings of illicit exchange, as well as their distribution across local bureaucracies, I conducted interviews with ordinary Ukrainians and Belarusians, ethnographic observations in local universities, a survey of Ukrainian students, an analysis of online discussion forums, and an overview of local mass media reports and relevant polls.

The primary institutional focus of this book falls on higher educational establishments (HEEs).¹ For most Eastern Europeans, the undergraduate years mark their first and, arguably, most formative engagement with bureaucratic corruption. Comparative cases are

¹ HEEs include universities, institutes, colleges, academies, and other local institutions that issue state-backed diplomas of completed higher education (equivalent to Western bachelor of arts or science degrees).

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based on hospitals and secondary schools, which are also frequented by most local citizens.

Between 2006 and 2013, I made four research trips to Kiev and Minsk, the respective capitals of Ukraine and Belarus.² In each city, I spent approximately four months teaching English, observing, and taking part in the formal and informal lives of two HEEs that represent the major types of post-Soviet institutions of higher education. The first type of institution I observed in each city was a large public university that hosted departments in a wide range of disciplines and specializations. Universities of this type generate the bulk of local academic scholarship, employ the most prominent intellectuals, and offer highly prestigious diplomas to their graduates. The second type of HEE I observed in each country was a smaller, specialized institute that offered in-depth instruction in a specific field. Such institutes specialize in subjects such as law, linguistics, economics, transportation, environmental sciences, and so on; they vary in their prestige levels and can be either private or public.³

In each of the four HEEs, I spent between fifteen and twenty hours a week teaching English lessons, helping instructors with class preparation, and holding individual and group tutoring sessions. During recesses and after class, I spent time in faculty lounges and offices, attended extracurricular events (such as presentations and exhibits), participated in faculty meetings, observed in common student spaces (such as corridors and canteens), helped students with homework, and attended social gatherings.⁴ In the course of this fieldwork, I was able to learn about the official and unofficial ways that the universities operated, become familiar with interactional patterns among their different members, and discover how local cultures shaped these members' perceptions of the importance, stability, and permeability of administrative and legal rules.

² I focused on the capital cities for several reasons. First, both countries have high levels of administrative centralization. Their capitals host the vast majority of higher education establishments, ranging from the most prestigious old HEEs to the newest and the least recognized schools in each country. Second, while HEEs in other cities serve mostly local populations, Kiev and Minsk universities and colleges attract students from all over Ukraine and Belarus. These two cities offered access to a geographically diverse student body. Student respondents came from all over the two countries, including other large cities, smaller towns, and rural regions. Third, the two cities are comparable in their administrative and political functions, social class structure and in the ethnic composition of their populations.

³ In 2010, Kiev hosted sixteen HEEs of this type, while Minsk had twelve.

⁴ I took extensive field notes and used a voice recorder to record some classes, focus group discussions, and conversations.

TABLE 1 Interviewees by type

	Ukraine	Belarus
Students	35	28
Alumni	5	7
Parents of students ^a	20	11
Instructors ^b	27	18
Experts ^c	16	15

^a Parents of university students tend to be deeply involved with university corruption. At the time of admissions and in the early years of their children's studies, parents often arrange and carry out illicit transactions with university instructors and administrators. In later years, students tend to take over the arrangements and actual exchanges but often continue to use their parents' money. This group included parents of student interviewees and parents of students who had not been interviewed for this project.

^b The interviews conducted in Ukraine in 2010 were complemented with twenty interviews (with ten students, five instructors, and five parents) that I had carried out in Kiev in the winter of 2006. These interviews are included in the general count.

^c This group of interviewees consisted of experts on corruption, economic development, higher education, and human rights (such as journalists, NGO workers, political activists, and incumbent officials in the government).

During my time at the local HEEs, I was also able to recruit a diverse sample of students, parents, and instructors for in-depth, semi-structured interviews (see Table 1).⁵ I asked students and parents for their opinions on the state of higher education in their respective countries, their experiences with specific universities, their direct and indirect encounters with corruption, and their visions of their own

⁵ To gather my sample, I employed a variety of recruiting techniques targeting different respondent groups. I recruited most students and parents through snowball sampling. Because their acquaintances had "vetted" me, these respondents felt relatively comfortable discussing the sensitive topic of corruption. Snowball sampling is widely used in studies of illegal and stigmatized activities to reach hidden populations and increase participation rates (Osipian 2009). In each city, I started with personal or professional contacts (mostly those I made during fieldwork) who then introduced me to the next wave of respondents; second-wave interviewees introduced me to the third wave, and so on. To recruit university instructors, I relied on formal channels as well as the introductions of previous interviewees. I identified contact information of the instructors and experts online and contacted them by email, phone, or in person to request their participation. These respondents included instructors as well as professors and varied in gender, age, specialization, and tenure in their respective HEEs. Please see Appendix II for more information.

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professional trajectories.⁶ I also invited instructors to share their opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of local higher education institutions; relationships among students, instructors, administrators, and parents in their respective HEEs; and their personal experiences with bureaucratic corruption.⁷ Finally, I complemented these interviews with informational discussions with a number of oppositional activists, NGO officials, journalists, and politicians who study, write about, or work on eradicating corruption in their respective countries (see Appendices II and III for more information on interviewees).

In addition to ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, I also analyzed more than a dozen online discussion forums that were affiliated with either unofficial university websites or education and youth portals. It is a common practice among students of Eastern European HEEs to launch chat rooms to exchange information on different courses, offer paid assistance with assignments, share and sell class notes, and discuss instructors.⁸ Other non-university websites, dedicated to educational issues and similar topics of interest to the youth, also have discussion forums where students, alumni, and the general public share their thoughts about local higher education processes (see Appendix III for the list of discussion forums).⁹ On these discussion forums, I identified and coded stories of illicit exchanges as well as accounts of actors' relationships to one another and their HEEs. These websites offered an invaluable source of data, since they contained direct "conversations" among ordinary Ukrainians and Belarusians and were full of narratives of corruption uncolored by the presence of a researcher.

To build my understanding of local higher education policy and trace the institutional history of select HEEs, I also collected and analyzed relevant primary organizational and governmental documents, such as decrees from Ukrainian and Belarusian Ministries of Education, independent evaluations by local and Western NGOs, reports by government subcommittees, organizations' mission statements, and internal quality assessment briefs, among others. I complemented this analysis with a survey of local media reports and scholarship on Ukrainian and

⁶ Interviews lasted from thirty minutes to two hours.

⁷ These interviews lasted between half an hour and two and a half hours.

⁸ Sometimes, instructors and administrators contribute to these discussions, but their involvement is generally limited.

⁹ While other sources of data collected for this book pertain exclusively to Kiev and Minsk HEEs, contributors to these informal forums were affiliated with a variety of institutions throughout the two countries.

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Belarusian politics in the post-Soviet era (see Appendix III for more information on primary sources).

Finally, to increase the reliability of my findings and gather quantitative evidence to assess the trends emerging from my ethnographic and interview data, I carried out a survey of 193 students from four Kiev HEEs.¹⁰ The questionnaire presented student respondents with the names of eight departments across eight HEEs and asked students to rank these departments' levels of corruption, quality, and prestige¹¹ on a scale from 1 (representing the lowest value) to 5 (representing the highest value).¹²

To sum up, this book brings together a mixture of unique qualitative, quantitative, and documentary data on corruption and its political roots. To reconstruct relevant social processes on macro and micro levels, I combined the information gathered through several media – interviews, direct observations, official documentary reports, unmediated interactions among local actors, the press, expert and academic analyses, and a survey. On a micro level, these diverse data shed light on the actual processes of corruption “on the ground.” They allow me to identify different types of corruption and establish patterns of cross-organizational variation in informal economic processes. On the macro level, these data shed light on specific ways that hybrid political governance structures the formal and informal lives of local bureaucracies. Importantly, a mixed-method investigation is also key to identifying mechanisms that link the micro and macro levels of social life in post-transitional societies. Ultimately, what makes this book unique among works of comparative corruptology is its focus on causal chains that connect the corruption behavior of individual actors first to organizational structures and then to larger governance processes.¹³

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The Politics of Bureaucratic Corruption opens with an argument that a new theory is needed to explain bureaucratic corruption in countries

¹⁰ Based on my interviews, I had established that two of these universities were widely perceived to have high levels of corruption, while the other two were considered relatively non-corrupt. In each, I recruited respondents from two departments – the reportedly high and low prestige ones.

¹¹ Prestige was defined as “value that other students and employers ascribe to educational experience and diplomas from the specific institution.”

¹² See Appendix I for descriptive statistics.

¹³ The term *corruptology* refers to a large body of research on corruption across – social scientific disciplines.

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that, like Ukraine and Belarus, combine elements of autocratic and democratic governance. Chapter 1 lays out three theoretical principles that guide the book's inquiry and underpin a causal account of corruption that breaks out of the dominant understanding of informal economic systems as products of political transition.

The first two empirical chapters, Chapters 2 and 3, paint an “on the ground” picture of corruption economies in Ukrainian and Belarusian universities, respectively. In these chapters, I explore when, how, and why ordinary citizens resort to corrupt transactions in their dealings with university officials and administrators. Chapter 2 examines the motivations of ordinary Ukrainians engaged in corruption and describes how such transactions actually happen. Chapter 3 also discusses two comparison cases – Belarusian hospitals and secondary schools – that feature corruption processes that differ from those of local universities.

Chapters 4 and 5 link micro-level accounts of bureaucratic corruption in universities, schools, and hospitals to the recent political history of Ukraine and Belarus. In Chapter 4, I argue that independent Ukraine's continuous fluctuation between more and less democratic forms of governance in the post-Soviet period resulted in the fragmentation of its bureaucratic landscape into more and less corrupt subsectors. Chapter 5 focuses on the political trajectory of post-Soviet Belarus. It shows that the consolidation of power in the hands of President Lukashenka was achieved through political repression, which greatly, even if unintentionally, decreased corruption in select institutional sectors.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 6, summarizes the main principles of the sociological study of corruption in post-transitional hybrid regimes presented in this monograph. It debunks the myth of nationwide corruption cultures and stresses the anti-corruption potential of small-scale organizational interventions.

CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND TRANSITION: POLITICAL
TURNOVER AND BUREAUCRATIC
CORRUPTION IN HYBRID REGIMES

In early spring of 2010, after several months of fieldwork in the Ukrainian capital city of Kiev, I took a sixteen-hour train ride to Minsk to start my research on Belarusian universities. As the train pulled into Minsk Central Train Station, I could not shake the feeling that I had travelled back in time. Once “brotherly peoples” (братские народы, in Russian), present-day Ukrainians and Belarusians live in remarkably different social worlds. Brimming with commercial and artistic activity, Kiev is home to countless private businesses, a vibrant art scene that features performances by local and international artists, and a wide array of European and American stores and global restaurant franchises. In contrast, Minsk appears stern and regimented. With a meager selection of dining, entertainment, and retail venues, its streets are clean, its public transportation is on time, and its police (милиция, in Russian) are everywhere.

The distinct appearance of the two cities belies fundamental differences in the political and economic makeup of post-socialist Ukraine and Belarus. The two closest satellites to the Russian Republic during the Soviet era, these countries have followed dissimilar developmental trajectories after gaining national independence in the early 1990s. Although Ukraine’s political history is marked by pendulum-like swings between more and less democratic governance, Western analysts tend to categorize Ukraine as a new democracy (Barrington and Herron 2004; Karatnycky 2005; Sasse 2001; Wolczuk 2000). Following prescriptions of the international community, over the past two decades, Ukraine introduced competitive elections, adopted a number of

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democratic political institutions, liberalized its currency, and opened its economy to global trade. In contrast to the Western sweetheart Ukraine, post-Soviet Belarus is denounced by the international community as “the last dictatorship in Europe” (Amnesty International 2015). After a brief period of liberalization, in 1994 Belarusians elected an idiosyncratic president, Aleksandr Lukashenka, who has maintained an isolated authoritarian regime through falsified elections, prosecution of political opposition, and systematic restrictions on citizens’ expression and mobility (Allison, White, and Light 2005; Korosteleva 2012; Silitski 2005).

My fieldwork in Ukrainian and Belarusian universities revealed that differences in the formal makeup of the two countries go hand-in-hand with significant differences in their informal economies. In both Ukraine and Belarus, some people engage in bureaucratic corruption on a nearly daily basis, while others never resort to bribes, gifts, or favors to obtain bureaucratic goods and services. Yet, who partakes in petty corruption, in what situations, and for what reasons, differs strikingly across the two countries. Some but not all Ukrainian university students pay bribes and bring presents to their professors in exchange for satisfactory grades or assistance on examinations; some but not all also pay bribes in secondary schools and hospitals. By contrast, my interviews and observations did not reveal a single instance of petty corruption in Belarusian universities. Yet, many Belarusians complain about having to pay bribes in secondary schools and hospitals to receive proper treatment from teachers and doctors.

Such systematic differences in bureaucratic corruption patterns across the two countries are surprising in light of their shared legacy of Soviet informal economies. Historical accounts reveal that during the socialist era, Ukraine and Belarus had identical corruption systems based on in-kind delayed-reciprocity exchanges called *blat*. *Blat* allowed citizens to temporarily “lend” to one another the access and privileges stemming from their employment or social networks. For instance, hospital workers ensured that their friends and family could see good doctors without having to wait in long lines; university employees helped their friends’ children gain admission by calling on favors from their colleagues. In return, the beneficiaries of *blat* helped their benefactors when the latter needed something that they could access through their own jobs or friends (Ledeneva 1998).

Analysts agree that *blat* allowed ordinary citizens to fulfill their everyday needs in the context of consumer scarcity, pervasive red tape, and