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**‘Fighting corruption’ or ‘fighting the corrupt elite’?
Politicizing corruption within and beyond the populist divide**

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Abstract

Corruption has become a central issue of electoral campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe. The EU and international economic organizations first emphasized the fight against corruption as an important indicator of good governance. The topic of corruption, however, has also gained momentum on different terms. Populists praise ‘the good people’ and demonize the ‘*corrupt elite*’. As a result, anti-corruption claims are often only seen as a substitute of anti-elite rhetoric within the populist discourse. This paper sheds light on the way the term ‘corruption’ is used in electoral campaigns and argues that we do not get the full picture of the anti-corruption discourse, if we only focus on the populist narrative. Particularly, it argues that the ‘good governance’-framework creates incentives for pro-European and pro-market parties to politicize corruption independently of anti-establishment claims. Statistical analyses based on a new expert survey covering the campaigns of 62 parties in six CEE countries between 2000 and 2016 confirm this claim. While populists along the ideological spectrum use anti-corruption claims to highlight the dishonesty of the political elite, we also find parties that embed the fight against corruption in their pro-European and pro-market campaigns. Moreover, we find that these patterns are stable over time.

Introduction

Corruption has become a widespread topic in the political landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe. Corruption scandals are covered in national media, and used by politicians to attack their adversaries (Bågenholm 2013). New political actors often benefit from claiming that the entire political elite is caught in corrupt networks that need to be eradicated, and recently, the possibility of a judicial reform weakening anti-corruption efforts led to the largest manifestations Romania had seen since its transition to democracy (Bågenholm and Charron 2014; 2018; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015; Sikk 2012). Political parties play an important part in keeping anti-corruption claims salient. The credibility of their claims, however, is often questioned, as the topic of corruption does not only arise when assessing the quality of government, but is also a convenient companion of anti-elite rhetoric. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the ways parties use anti-corruption claims – if, in doing so, they mostly follow a populist narrative (combining such claims with an anti-elite rhetoric) or if their anti-corruption claims are rooted in a narrative of ‘good governance’ that is independent from anti-elite rhetoric.

With the rise of populism in Europe, anti-corruption rhetoric has received a lot of attention due to its complementing role in the populist divide. The dichotomy between ‘the good people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ at the core of populists’ rhetoric (Mudde 2004) makes anti-corruption claims a tool meant to strengthen the anti-establishment claims stating that the elite is only driven by self-interest (Stanley 2017; van Kessel 2015). In addition, several studies on new political parties discuss the role that corruption plays in differentiating the newcomers from the established parties (Bågenholm and Charron 2014; Sikk 2012). However, while the use of anti-establishment rhetoric has been explored in many recent studies on populist discourses (Bernhard and Kriesi 2019; Engler, Pytlas and Deegan-Krause 2019; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011), the role of the anti-corruption discourse has not yet been empirically assessed, neither within the debate on populism nor beyond. An exception is Polk et al. (2017), who provide a first comparison of the use of anti-establishment and anti-corruption claims. They show that the latter is indeed generally more salient in countries with high levels of corruption (e.g. in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe), while the former is more widespread geographically. In addition, their results also suggest that in these countries, the anti-corruption discourse often does not follow the same logic as anti-establishment rhetoric, indicating that it cannot only be explained by the use of anti-elite rhetoric. However, Polk et al. (2017) do not provide a theoretical foundation for these differences. This paper contributes to the debate by

discussing and empirically testing an alternative foundation for anti-corruption claims - the 'good governance' framework, and contrasting it with the populist narrative.

Other than anti-establishment rhetoric, talking about corruption can be more than a tool to attack political adversaries. Originally, the topic of corruption found its way on the political agenda in the mid-1990s, when international organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, introduced the control of corruption as an important criterion of 'good governance.' This happened in response to economists' findings that corruption is harmful for economic prosperity (Rothstein and Varraich 2017, 9). More important for Central and Eastern Europe, a few years later, the European Union made the fight against corruption an important prerequisite for the accession of new member states and monitored the implementation of anti-corruption policies during the accession period between 1999 and 2004 (Beblavy and Sicakova-Beblava 2014). Both the pressure from international organizations and the Europeanization process created incentives for national actors to put the fight against corruption on the political agenda (Vachudova 2009), and raised awareness of the importance of creating civil society initiatives against corruption (such as the national chapters of Transparency International). In this context, pro-European and pro-market parties are particularly likely to politicize corruption, as they want to signal to their voters that they are the most competent party to meet the expectations set by the EU and international economic organizations.

This paper argues that both the *populist* and the *good governance* narratives must be taken into account when analysing the role of anti-corruption claims in the electoral arena of Central and Eastern Europe and when discussing the potential implications of their politicization for the fight against corruption. If most parties only talk about corruption to strengthen their anti-establishment discourse, it is unlikely that anti-corruption measures are at the core of their political programs. However, if, instead, parties link their anti-corruption claims to a pro-European and pro-market ideology and promote the fight against corruption as an important tool in guaranteeing state efficiency and economic prosperity, there is a higher probability that the party shall keep the topic on the political agenda. To test which narrative is more dominant among different parties, the paper analyses how anti-corruption claims are associated with factors related to the populist narrative (anti-establishment claims, radical ideologies, being a new party) as opposed to factors related to the good governance narrative (pro-European and pro-market stances).

In a second step, we test whether the relationship between anti-corruption claims and the factors of the populist and good governance narratives has remained the same throughout the past two decades or whether the relationship has changed. With the new member states' accession to the European Union, the direct incentives to politicize corruption have decreased (Beblavy and Sicakova-Beblava 2014), while recurring corruption scandals, low political trust, and unstable party systems still make it easy for populists to promise to fight corruption (Bågenholm 2013; Engler 2016). This makes it likely that the populist narrative strengthen over time; however, such dynamics are not confirmed by the results. Rather, we find support for the stability thesis, which argues that the external incentives for politicizing corruption have been replaced by incentives from national actors (such as NGOs and researchers) who reiterate the *good governance* narrative of the EU and other international organizations.

A new expert survey on party claims on corruption and anti-establishment rhetoric for six Eastern European countries, with data for 62 parties in all national parliamentary elections between 2000 and 2016, allows us to explore the relationship between parties' populist narrative, good governance factors, and the corruption discourse, as well as the relationships' evolution over time. The paper finds support for both narratives. There is clear evidence that parties' promises to fight corruption often underpin an anti-establishment rhetoric, as expected by the populist narrative. However, while parties attacking the political elite usually also politicize corruption, we find numerous campaigns of political parties that emphasize the fight against corruption without embedding it into a populist discourse. Most important, while anti-establishment parties that talk about corruption are ideologically diverse, anti-corruption rhetoric without references to the 'bad elite' is concentrated within the pro-European and pro-market camp, thus confirming our main argument that the 'good governance' narrative often drives the anti-corruption discourse. The paper also finds that the adoption of anti-corruption claims is *not* more closely tied to an anti-establishment rhetoric than it was in the past, despite the general rise of populism across Europe and the EU's weakened attention to the fight against corruption since the new members' accession. Rather, the results suggest that the transparency discourse remains important among liberal parties that cannot be considered fully-fledged populists. We therefore conclude that the anti-corruption claims in electoral campaigns can be both – a tool to emphasize the 'corrupt elite' and an issue on the agenda of political parties focusing on 'good governance,' rather than 'the corrupt elite'. Our work thus enhances our understanding of the topic of corruption in political campaigns by showing that it often follows

another logic than anti-establishment rhetoric because it is an important issue in its own within the ‘good governance’ framework.

Corruption in political campaigns

Several studies have shown the importance of corruption for party systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Pop-Eleches (2010) and Slomczynski and Shabad (2012) have used experiments to demonstrate that voters prefer a third party if they consider all other parties to be corrupt. Engler (2016) and Hanley and Sikk (2016) provide evidence that increasing corruption is beneficial for new political parties challenging the old establishment. Furthermore, Bågenholm and Charron (2014) have found that new and opposition parties in this region are more successful when they politicize corruption– and that they do so more often than their counterparts in West European countries with lower levels of corruption (see also Polk et al. 2017). Within the region, however, the use of anti-corruption claims varies greatly among political parties. Some evidence suggests that anti-corruption claims is an important issue in itself and follows a different logic than anti-establishment rhetoric (Polk et al. 2017), while other findings, such as the prominence of the topic among new parties (Bågenholm and Charron 2014), strengthen the populist narrative of corruption being a suitable companion of anti-establishment rhetoric. In the next section, we will first discuss the expectations of the populist narrative in more detail, and then turn to the alternative explanations of adopting the ‘good governance’ discourse espoused by the EU and other international organizations. In a third step, we will discuss why the meaning of anti-corruption rhetoric might have or might have not changed over time.

Corruption in the populist narrative

Since its transition to democracy, Central and Eastern Europe has experienced the emergence, success, and decay of numerous political parties that have extensively criticized the political class and often fall into the category of populist parties (Engler, Pytlas and Deegan-Krause 2019; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015; Pop-Eleches 2010). The recurring corruption scandals involving politicians and the generally high corruption levels in the region make it easy for such parties to highlight their attack on the ‘corrupt elite,’ which is a crucial element of the populist discourse.¹ If the use of anti-corruption claims is mainly meant to strengthen the

¹ In his widely accepted definition, Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 543 states that populism “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus *‘the corrupt elite’* [author’s emphasis], and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté generale* (general will) of the people”.

anti-establishment rhetoric, we should therefore expect that these two elements correlate strongly in a party's electoral campaign.

H1: Parties that emphasize anti-corruption claims also strongly emphasize anti-establishment rhetoric.

Anti-establishment rhetoric is spread more widely in Central and Eastern Europe than just at the ideological fringes and often occupies positions within the political mainstream or ideological spaces considered 'centrist' (Hanley and Sikk 2016; Pop-Eleches 2010; Stanley 2017; Učeň 2004). Nevertheless, parties that promote a fully-fledged populist discourse (i.e. that is also people-centred and promotes the 'popular will') are still mostly found on the radical left or the radical right, and only a few of them reside in the centre (Engler, Pytlas and Deegan-Krause 2019). Consequently, if the populist narrative is true, we should find a positive relationship between the party's ideological radicalness and the salience of its anti-corruption claims (Polk et al. 2017).

H2: Parties on the radical left and the radical right emphasize anti-corruption claims more strongly than other parties.

A final set of expectations within the populist narrative can be derived from the challenger character of populist parties. First, we expect that the salience of the fight against corruption fade with party age, in particular after the party's first election. We hereby follow Polk et al. (2017) and Bågenholm and Charron (2014) who argue that anti-corruption claims are most useful when the party is not yet part of the political elite itself. Second, while political parties can most easily present themselves as 'political outsiders' while they are new, gaining seats in parliament and, particularly, entering government makes it more difficult for them to do so (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015; van Kessel 2015, 22). Consequently, resorting to anti-corruption claims for the sole reason of attacking the political elite is unlikely among governing parties.

H3: The salience of anti-corruption claims is highest among new parties and then fades in subsequent elections.

H4: Governing parties put lower emphasis on anti-corruption claims than opposition parties.

Joining the club of ‘good governance’: Incentives to fight corruption from a pro-European and pro-market agenda

According to the populist narrative, parties use corruption as a tool of attacking the political elite and are not concerned about the complex issue of fighting corruption. However, when corruption first gained attention in the mid-1990s, it did so not because of populist parties, but because corruption had been introduced as an important indicator of ‘good governance’ (Rothstein and Varraich 2017). It was put into the spotlight by organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund after economists started to investigate the negative consequences of corruption on economic growth (Rothstein and Varraich 2017, Ch. 2). Later, the accession process for the new member states of the European Union required Central and Eastern European countries to strengthen their efforts to fight corruption (Beblavy and Sicakova-Beblava 2014; Vachudova 2009). An anti-corruption discourse that follows the logic of the good governance discourse is unlikely to be combined with anti-establishment rhetoric, since it is driven by institutions that are themselves often targets of populist attacks. Rather, we expect pro-European parties, which support international cooperation, to emphasize the fight against corruption in their political campaigns. In the past, pro-EU parties were exposed to the additional direct incentives of joining the EU, which according to Vachudova (2009), operated in two ways. First, the pro-EU parties wanted to show to the EU that their countries were willing to fulfil the membership criteria, and second, the pro-EU parties also wanted to signal to the pro-EU voters that they were the parties most competent to prepare the country for accession to the EU.

H5: Pro-European parties are more likely to emphasize anti-corruption claims.

Anti-corruption efforts are also strongly encouraged by the IMF and the World Bank as they promise a better environment for future investments and economic growth (Rothstein and Varraich 2017, Ch. 2). We therefore expect the relationship described above to hold for economically liberal parties as well. Their ideology is rooted in a similar understanding of the importance of free markets and good governance for economic prosperity. Additionally, they are interested in a stronger economic cooperation with Western countries and access to international markets. As they follow the advice of the World Bank and its ‘good governance’ approach and want to signal to voters that they are competent in attracting foreign investment, pro-market parties should also be more likely to emphasize anti-corruption claims than other parties.

H6: Parties on the economic right are more likely to emphasize anti-corruption claims.

After the EU accession

After the EU enlargement in 2004, the EU stopped monitoring countries' performance on the issue of corruption.² As a result, the positive trend in the fight against corruption reversed in the region, and in many countries corruption started to increase again (Beblavy and Sicakova-Beblava 2014). Although international organizations and Transparency International continue to emphasize the importance that fighting corruption has for the quality of governance, the external incentives were reduced drastically after countries gained access to the European market and membership in the EU. This makes it less likely that pro-European and pro-market parties still urge the fight against corruption to the same degree that they did in the early 2000s. In addition, populist parties have remained successful players, corruption scandals of high-ranked politicians occur on a regular basis, and the level of corruption in the region is, despite all efforts, still much higher than in most Western European countries (Transparency International 2019). One can therefore expect that the populist narrative has become more relevant in explaining the use of anti-corruption claims, while the power of alternative explanations, such as pro-market stances and pro-European positions, has decreased. The **change hypothesis** therefore postulates that

H7a: The effect of anti-establishment rhetoric on the salience of anti-corruption claims has increased over time, while the effects of pro-European and pro-market stances have decreased.

However, we argue that this is not the only possible scenario. It is also possible that the 'good governance' narrative has remained important, because external incentives that lost strength over time have been replaced by incentives generated by national actors. The EU's investment in civil society in the region (Börzel 2010), Transparency International's efforts to strengthen NGOs working on the fight against corruption (e.g. establishing national chapters in all European countries), and the rise of national scholars studying the negative effect of corruption on their countries (Curini 2018; Rothstein and Varraich 2017) keep the 'good governance' narrative of fighting corruption salient and guarantee that the EU's and international economic organizations' claims are still heard. In addition to the possibility that scholars and activists can convince political actors to act on (or at least talk about) corruption, we can also regularly observe that new political parties form around anti-corruption activists, Siet' in Slovakia being a good example of a party that formed around activists from TI Slovakia. In this case, we should *not* find that the effects of the factors associated with the 'good governance' narrative on anti-

² Only in Bulgaria and Romania, which only joined in 2007, did the European Commission continue its monitoring under the newly created Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM; Spendzharova and Vachudova 2012).

corruption claims have decreased (nor that the effect of the anti-establishment rhetoric has increased) over time. The competing **stability hypothesis** therefore states that

H7b: The effects of anti-establishment rhetoric and pro-European and pro-market stances on the salience of anti-corruption claims do not change over time.

Data and Methods

The analysis focuses on six EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe. As we have elaborated before, the high corruption levels and regular political corruption scandals in the region make corruption both an easy target within the populist framework and a serious problem for the quality of governance. The region therefore lends itself to the analysis of the conflicting role of anti-corruption claims in political campaigns. The sample includes at least one country for each region with a different historical legacy: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia. The empirical analysis is based on OLS-regression models, with election-party as the unit of analysis and covers all national parliamentary elections between 2000 and 2016. Since we are interested in the differences across parties, and not across countries, country fixed-effects are included.³ Robust standard errors are clustered by party.

The dependent variable is the *salience of anti-corruption claims* in a party's campaign. The paper introduces a new expert survey on Party Claims on Corruption and Anti-Establishment Rhetoric (Engler et al. 2020). The expert survey asked country experts to indicate how salient the issue of corruption was in the electoral campaign of each party in each national parliamentary election between 2000 and 2016,⁴ with responses ranging from 0 (not important at all) to 10 (extremely important).

One of the main independent variables, the *salience of anti-establishment rhetoric*, was also included in the new expert survey. Respondents were asked to rate the salience of anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric in a party's electoral campaign on a scale from 0 (not important at

³ We also calculated models with country and time fixed effects in order to control for temporal shocks (see Appendix 3: Table A3). The results do not change. Further, an increase in a country's level of corruption could lead to increased politicization of the topic of corruption. We therefore calculated additional models that include the control of corruption variable (multiplied by -1) by the World Bank (WGI Indicators). Changes in corruption do not have a significant effect on the salience of anti-corruption claims, nor does the inclusion of the corruption variable change the main results (see Figure A3/A4 in Appendix 3). Only the effect of newness loses significance.

⁴ The sample covers all parties that received at least 5 % of the votes and belonged to the five strongest parties in at least one election between 2000 and 2016. The dataset includes 118 parties in 42 elections and 11 countries. Czechia, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia were included only from 2010 on and are therewith excluded from the analysis. A total of 122 experts (11.1 experts per country; from 5 experts in Latvia to 18 experts in the Czech Republic) participated in the survey.

all) to 10 (extremely important).⁵ The party's ideological positions are taken from the Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker and de Vries et al. 2015; 2015). *Ideological radicalness* is measured in two ways. First, a party was coded as radical based on values in the Chapel Hill expert survey. By definition, radical right parties display radical positions on the cultural dimension, which includes nativist, traditionalist and authoritarian stances (Mudde 2007). Consequently, all parties with a *galtan-value* higher or equal to 8 (from 0 green/alternative/libertarian to 10 traditional/alternative/nationalist) are classified as radical right. Radical left parties, on the other hand, are radical on the economic dimension (see also Bernhard and Kriesi 2019, 5; March 2007). Consequently, all parties with an *lrecon-value* lower than or equal to 2 (from 0 economic left to 10 economic right) are classified as radical left. As parties change positions over time, it is possible that a party is classified as radical in some, but not all elections. A second and less volatile way to measure ideological radicalism is to use the classification by the project Popu-List (Rooduijn et al. 2019) that applies the same definitions, but relies on the qualitative assessment of leading experts in the field of populism and extremism. The results are the same (see Figure A2 in Appendix 3). To test the 'good governance' narrative, *galtan*, *lrecon*, and *euposition* (0 strongly opposed to European integration; 7 strongly in favour of European integration) are further included as independent variables in the regression models. Finally, we include a dummy variable for *newness* (1 new party; 0 not new) and for *government participation* (1 government; 0 opposition).⁶ To test hypotheses 7a and 7b, we add interaction terms between the independent variables and *time* to the model. Additional models that include a dummy for the time after EU accession (0 before accession; 1 after accession) or time periods were also calculated (see Figure A5/A6 in Appendix 3). The results do not change.

Results

Looking at how anti-corruption claims correlate with one of the main elements of populism – anti-establishment rhetoric, we find evidence that the issue of corruption is indeed more widespread among parties that attack the political elite. As Figure 1 illustrates, the higher the

⁵ According to our understanding, anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric do not differ substantially and both refer to the political establishment/elite and other types of dominant groups in society (such as the economic elite, the intellectual elite, etc.). However, we are aware that there is a possibility that some respondents might not consider these two terms interchangeable. To minimize the risk that anti-elite or anti-establishment rhetoric is not reported, we included both terms and provided a definition to all experts: 'Those engaging in anti-establishment rhetoric explicitly identify with "ordinary people" and contrast themselves against a separate and coherent "political class" that is composed of all political opponents undifferentiated by party affiliation and may also (but need not) include economic, intellectual and/or international elites.'

⁶ Genuinely new parties and parties emerging from a party split are coded as new. Parties emerging from party mergers, however, are not, as they are usually a vehicle to maximize vote shares, rather than a challenger to the political establishment (Hug 2001, 13 f.).

salience of anti-establishment rhetoric in a party's discourse, the higher the salience of its anti-corruption claims. This is true both when we look at all electoral campaigns, i.e. including each party campaign as one observation (left), and at the party level, i.e. plotting each party's average salience of anti-establishment and anti-corruption claims over the entire period from 2000 to 2016 (right).

Figure 1: Salience of anti-establishment and anti-corruption claims in parties' electoral campaigns between 2000 and 2016

Source: Engler et al. 2020.

Notes: The figure on the left includes all party campaigns between 2000 and 2016 (N=170; $r = 0.48$); the figure on the right shows the average salience of all parties between 2000 and 2016 (N = 62; $r = 0.54$)

The results remain unchanged when we take other variables of the populist narrative into account and when we control for the national contexts the parties compete in by introducing country fixed effects. Figure 2 plots all coefficients of the populist narrative model and shows

that anti-establishment rhetoric has a significant positive effect on the use of anti-corruption claims. We therefore find support for hypothesis 1.

Figure 2: The effects of the populist narrative factors on the salience of anti-corruption claims

Notes: OLS-regression models (95%-confidence intervals) with country fixed-effects and robust standard errors clustered by party. Full model (m1) is displayed in Table A1 in Appendix 1; N=170; R-squared = 0.36.

In accordance with our hypotheses, we also find evidence that new political parties (H3) and those parties that are not in government, politicize corruption more strongly (H4). However, we must reject H2 that stipulates that parties on the radical right or the radical left support anti-corruption claims more strongly. The results also do not change when we exclude anti-establishment rhetoric in order to account for the fact that anti-establishment rhetoric correlates with the other elements of the populist narrative,⁷ or if we only include anti-establishment rhetoric in the model (see model 2.1/2.2 in Table A1).

⁷ Correlations between anti-establishment salience and newness ($r=0.44$), government ($r=-0.48$), radical right ($r=0.39$), and radical left ($r=0.33$)

The data therewith support the claim that the politicization of corruption is part of the populist narrative, with the exception that the results do not follow the typical ideological lines we had expected. One could argue that this is mainly because of the fact that anti-establishment politics in Central and Eastern Europe are generally more diverse than those in Western Europe and are not concentrated on the ideological extremes (Engler, Pytlas and Deegan-Krause 2019). However, as we see in the next figure, the ideological positions of parties using anti-corruption claims generally deviate from the ideological positions of anti-establishment parties. Figure 3 compares the ideological distributions of those parties that extensively talk about corruption in an electoral campaign (solid line) and those that extensively criticize the elite, with or without reference to corruption (dashed line).⁸ A third line shows the ideological positions of all other parties that are neither employing an anti-establishment rhetoric nor making use of any references to corruption. The higher the y-value, the more parties are located at the corresponding ideological position.

As Figure 3 illustrates, an overwhelming majority of anti-corruption parties are centre-right parties embracing an economically right and pro-European agenda. This is in large contrast to anti-establishment parties, which are more equally spread along the ideological spectrum, with an economically more leftist platform and a higher number of parties on the conservative and authoritarian side. Even though the use of anti-corruption and anti-establishment rhetoric overlaps in some cases, the populist narrative clearly falls short of explaining all parties with a high salience of anti-corruption claims. This holds true when we expand the statistical model to the factors linked with the ‘good governance’ framework.

⁸ The classification into the group of anti-corruption parties and anti-establishment parties is dynamic, i.e. every party has been classified at every election according to its salience on anti-corruption and anti-establishment claims compared to the average salience in the corresponding electoral campaign.

Figure 3: Kernel density distribution of all parties (between 2000 and 2016) in the ideological space

Notes: Anti-corruption parties are all parties with a salience of anti-corruption claims higher than that of the average party in the same election; anti-establishment parties are all parties with a salience of anti-establishment rhetoric higher than that of the average party in the same election. If a party fulfils both criteria, it is represented in both groups.

Figure 4 plots the coefficients of the ‘good governance’ model (on the left) and the coefficients of the full model that combines the factors derived from the good governance narrative with those of the populist narrative (on the right). It shows that a party’s economic position has a significant and positive effect on the salience of its anti-corruption claims, which is in line with hypothesis 5. However, we do not find support for hypothesis 6. In contrast to our predictions, pro-European positions do not exert a positive effect on the use of anti-corruption claims. Although a majority of the parties politicizing corruption are on the pro-European side, too many pro-European parties do not talk about corruption (this is also visible in Figure 3). If we do not control for the factors associated with the populist narrative, we even find a significant negative effect, as the Eurosceptic anti-establishment camp also makes use of anti-corruption

claims.⁹ We did not have an expectation with regard to the position on the cultural dimension, which is not significant in any of our models. Models 3.1-3.3. in Table A1 display the individual effects of all three ideological variables and show that the results remain unchanged: the economic position has a significant positive effect on anti-corruption claims, while the EU position and cultural positions cannot explain any variance in parties' discourses.

Figure 4: The effects of the factors associated with the 'good governance' narrative on anti-corruption claims separately (on the left) and combined with the factors of the populist narrative (on the right)

Notes: OLS-regression models (95%-confidence intervals) with country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by party. Full models (m3 and m4) are displayed in Table A1 Appendix 1; N=170; R-squared: 0.26 in m3 and 0.53 in m4.

⁹ In fact, anti-establishment rhetoric and a party's EU position have a relatively strong correlation ($r=-0.63$) and the effect of the EU position depends on whether the former is included or not. However, model 3.1 in the Appendix 1 shows that the EU position has no significant effect when excluding anti-establishment rhetoric and all other ideological variables.

So far, we have found evidence for both narratives. On the one hand, anti-corruption claims clearly complement the populist narrative that criticizes the ‘corrupt elite.’ Parties verbally attacking the establishment prominently use the issue of corruption and they do so regardless of their political platform. On the other hand, the observable ideological patterns follow a different logic than the populist narrative would predict. In contrast with anti-establishment claims, which peak on the economic left and the traditional and authoritarian right, anti-corruption claims clearly prevail among the parties on the economic right, and are more often combined with pro-European positions. This is in line with the ‘good governance’ narrative.

Do these findings mean that we are dealing with two different groups of parties? Looking at Figure 5, actually much of the evidence seems to suggest so. Like before, Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of parties on the ideological dimensions – the general left-right scale, the economic dimension, the cultural dimension, and the EU dimension. However, this time we only look at those parties that have extensively talked about corruption in their electoral campaign(s) and separate them according to their anti-establishment discourse, i.e. if they have combined their anti-corruption claims with an anti-establishment rhetoric or not. Looking at Figure 5, we can detect significant differences between these two groups.

Figure 5: Kernel density distribution of all parties with an above-average use of anti-corruption claims (between 2000 and 2016) in the ideological space

Source: Engler et al. 2020

The group of parties that combines anti-corruption claims with an anti-establishment rhetoric (dashed line) is spread widely along the ideological space and ranges from the xenophobic ATAKA in Bulgaria, to the national-conservative PiS in Poland, to the centre-left Smer in Slovakia at the beginning of its career. The populist narrative seems adequate for this group. In contrast, the parties that focus solely on anti-corruption claims (solid line) are clearly clustered on the pro-European, economically right, and libertarian poles. Recent examples are Siet' in Slovakia, which was formed around anti-corruption activists, or Unity, which for a long time, was the leading party in the Latvian anti-corruption camp (Auers 2013). Therefore, the latter group of parties clearly behaves according to the logic of the 'good governance' narrative, and not the populist account. In some cases, the populist and the good governance narratives overlap and are harder to disentangle – this, for example, is the case of the centre-right Res Publica in Estonia or the Latvian New Era in their first elections. For these cases, a clear-cut picture is only possible if we have more detailed information about the framing of the anti-

corruption claims, which we do not have for this analysis. However, the analyses at hand show clear evidence that the populist narrative holds true for some parties and the ‘good governance’ narrative for other parties.

Anti-corruption discourse over time

In general, corruption has been a salient issue throughout the early 2000s and up until today and there is no clear trend indicating that the topic has become more or less important. The only country where there is a significant and positive trend is Bulgaria (see Table A2 in Appendix 2). We know from the previous analyses that the salience of anti-corruption claims is higher when parties are new or when they are in opposition. However, when we look at the long-term development of the party’s anti-corruption platform, we see that the variation among parties tends to be higher than the variation within a party over time. Figure A1 in Appendix 2 illustrates the development of each party’s anti-corruption claims, and shows that although their use varies over time, we can generally draw a line between parties always talking about corruption and parties that barely talk about it. This is less the case in Slovakia than in the rest of the countries in our sample, and there are prominent examples of new parties, such as PO in Poland or NDSV in Bulgaria, that have significantly reduced their use of anti-corruption claims from very high levels to very low ones. Nevertheless, one can say that there is a surprising stability in the use of anti-corruption claims over time that even seems to structure the competition among parties to a certain extent.¹⁰

However, this finding does not yet say much about whether the logic behind the use of anti-corruption claims has stayed the same. As we mentioned in the theory section, the countries in the Central and Eastern region were subjected to the European Commission’s close attention as they were preparing for EU accession at the beginning of the 2000s. In most cases, the monitoring ended with their membership in 2004; with the exception of Bulgaria and Romania that joined later and are still part of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). As a result, the incentives for pro-European parties to fight corruption in order to achieve EU membership disappeared. Since the number of anti-establishment parties remained high, 7a expects that the populist narrative becomes more influential over time, with pro-market and pro-European stances decreasing in importance in the more recent years. In contrast, hypothesis 7b postulates that there is no change over time. Although the direct external incentives are

¹⁰ Nearly 73% of the variance in the salience of a party’s anti-corruption claims can be explained by the same party’s salience in the previous election.

gone, the continued efforts of international organizations, such as the EU and NGOs, have strengthened the civil societies in these six countries, further supporting the ‘good governance’ narrative and creating national incentive structures for pro-market and pro-European parties to politicize corruption.

Figure 6: Average marginal effects on salience of anti-corruption claims over time

Notes: OLS-regression models (95%-confidence intervals) with country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by party. Full models (m5 – m7) are displayed in Table A1 in the Appendix 1.

We test both hypotheses by looking at the interaction effects of parties’ anti-establishment rhetoric, their economic position, and their EU position with time.¹¹ The full models are displayed in Table A1 in Appendix 1, while the marginal effects are illustrated in Figure 6. The only meaningful interaction in the model is between time and parties’ economic positions, while neither the effect of their anti-establishment rhetoric nor the effect of their EU position change significantly over time. As one can see in Figure 6, the average marginal effect of the economic position has become slightly stronger over time, indicating that if there is any change

¹¹ We calculated models with different time specifications (time periods and a dummy for post-EU accession). The results are always the same (see Figures A5 and A6 in Appendix 3).

over time, the anti-corruption camp has become even more strongly represented among the economically right camp. The effect of parties' EU position remains insignificant throughout the observed years, probably because many EU-friendly parties abstained from talking about corruption both during the accession period and afterwards. Anti-establishment rhetoric remains important as well, but it neither decreases nor increases in importance. Therefore, the results clearly support hypothesis 7b. In a nutshell, although the EU incentives disappeared and corruption levels remained high, a significant number of political actors still believes in the fight against corruption, but is unwilling to join the chorus of populists claiming for the replacement of the entire political class.

Conclusion

Corruption has not lost its importance in the political arena of Central and Eastern Europe. It already was an important topic in the early 2000s, when it ranked high on the international agenda during the period before the countries' EU accession, and it continues to receive a lot of weight in political speeches and campaigns nowadays. As corruption is strongly related to low political trust and dissatisfaction (Kostadinova 2012), it is no surprise that corruption is a crucial component of the populist discourse, where the 'good people' need to be defended against the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004). The crucial part corruption plays in the populist worldview, on the one hand, and the promotion of the fight against corruption by international organizations and NGOs, on the other hand, create a tension surrounding the politicization of corruption in political campaigns. Parties that care about the topic face the risk of gaining the label of populist and protest parties solely because they discuss the corruption among the political elite.

This paper started out by asking the question whether the populist anti-corruption discourse dominates in the region or if the salience of corruption is also linked to movements that are close to the debate on 'good governance,' promoted by the EU and other international organizations. Introducing a new dataset on party claims on corruption and anti-establishment rhetoric, the paper was able to analyse how the anti-corruption discourse is related to other party characteristics that are either part of the populist narrative (such as anti-establishment rhetoric, ideological radicalness, and the challenger character of a party), or part of the 'good governance' narrative (defined as pro-European and pro-market stances). Both narratives are valid, and most important, they seem to separate parties talking about corruption into two groups: the economic liberal and pro-European parties that are talking about corruption without

attacking the political elite, and the very diverse group of protest parties that range across the ideological spectrum, but share an aversion to corruption. As some parties transform over time, the groups are penetrable. The Latvian Unity or the Bulgarian DSB, for example, started as liberal new parties with an anti-establishment character, but then transformed into parties politicizing corruption outside the populist framework. However, there is no example of the opposite change of direction. This paper contributes to the debate about the topic of corruption in the political arena of Central and Eastern Europe by showing that the phenomenon must not be seen exclusively through the lenses of political distrust and anti-establishment sentiments. The results clearly show that even though anti-establishment claims are usually accompanied by references to corruption, there is a different type of anti-corruption discourse built around the concept of ‘good governance’ that is just as important.

A second important finding of the paper is that this picture has not changed much since 2000. Corruption has always been used in the populist narrative, and it has always found its way to the political arena through the ‘good governance’ discourse. Although the external incentives to fight against corruption have decreased with the accession to the European Union, the liberal camp of parties denouncing the problems of corruption has not lost strength. The relationship between the anti-corruption discourse and the factors associated with the populist and the good governance narratives is very stable overall. If there is any change, the results suggest that pro-market stances are even more prominent among anti-corruption parties nowadays than they were in the past. This might be due to the growing civil society in the region and its increasing ties to political actors. The future will show whether this mix of different political actors with different political reasons to talk about corruption will help to actually reduce corruption or not. To understand these dynamics, however, future research needs more information about the type of corruption the parties target, whether and which solutions they propose, and how their efforts differ once they are in power.

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Appendix 1: Full models of Figure 2, 4 and 6

Table A1: OLS-regression models of the salience of anti-corruptions claims with country-fixed effects (party-clustered standard errors in parentheses)

	M1	M1.1	M1.2	M3	M3.1	M3.2	M3.3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Anti-est. salience	0.268* (2.60)		0.397*** (0.08)					0.534*** (5.00)	10.84 (0.63)	0.516*** (4.59)	0.518*** (4.65)
Radical right	0.0277 (0.05)	0.498 (0.87)									
Radical left	0.217 (0.41)	0.919 (1.53)									
New party	0.900* (2.22)	1.488*** (3.75)						-0.200 (-0.55)	-0.113 (-0.29)	-0.0695 (-0.18)	-0.105 (-0.28)
In government	-0.559* (-2.20)	-0.991*** (-3.79)						-0.464* (-2.28)	-0.504* (-2.38)	-0.464* (-2.24)	-0.488* (-2.31)
EU position				-0.600** (-3.46)	-0.21 (0.15)			0.141 (0.83)	0.131 (0.79)	0.171 (1.00)	-11.23 (-0.46)
Economic pos.				0.474*** (4.24)				0.533*** (5.70)	0.523*** (5.45)	-40.74* (-2.03)	0.521*** (5.47)
Cultural pos.				-0.0713 (-0.53)		0.281* (0.11)	0.018 (0.12)	0.0435 (0.36)	0.0436 (0.36)	0.0559 (0.47)	0.0439 (0.36)
Year									0.0579 (1.61)	-0.0694 (-1.40)	0.00684 (0.10)
Anti-est*Year									-0.00514 (-0.60)		
Econ. pos.*Year										0.0205* (2.05)	
EU pos.*Year											0.00566 (0.46)
_cons	4.300*** (5.64)	5.348*** (8.50)	3.758*** (0.67)	6.842*** (4.42)	6.71*** (6.90)	4.05*** (1.02)	5.43*** (0.95)	-0.510 (-0.26)	-116.6 (-1.61)	138.7 (1.40)	-14.14 (-0.10)
<i>Country fixed effects</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N party-election</i>	170	170	191	170	170	170	170	170	170	170	170
<i>N countries</i>	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
<i>R-squared</i>	0.3596	0.3018	0.3420	0.2568	0.1179	0.1605	0.0989	0.5342	0.5415	0.5482	0.5409

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Appendix 2: Time trends

Figure A1: Salience of anti-corruption claims in electoral campaigns over time, by party (2000 – 2016)

Figure A1 (continued): Salience of anti-corruption claims in electoral campaigns over time, by party (2000 – 2016)

Table A2: Bivariate OLS-regression models of salience of anti-corruption claims and year (time trends)

	Bulgaria	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland	Slovakia
Year	0.131*	0.062	-0.004	0.057	-0.048	0.077
	(0.57)	(0.076)	(0.097)	(0.028)	(0.043)	(0.096)
_cons	-257.297	-120.233	12.621	-108.839	99.998	-149.900
	(115.111)	(152.743)	(194.438)	(76.780)	(86.861)	(191.838)
<i>N party-election</i>	35	22	29	33	32	40
<i>R-squared</i>	0.0808	0.0343	0.0001	0.0389	0.0141	0.0286

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Appendix 3: Robustness checks

Table A3: OLS-regression models of salience of anti-corruptions claims with country- and time-fixed effects (party-clustered standard errors in parentheses)

	M1a	M2a	M3a	M4a
Anti-est. salience	0.241* (2.32)			0.559*** (4.67)
Radical right	-0.0354 (-0.06)	0.498 (0.87)		
Radical left	0.301 (0.53)	0.919 (1.53)		
New party	1.097* (2.64)	1.488*** (3.75)		-0.184 (-0.46)
In government	-0.623* (-2.09)	-0.991*** (-3.79)		-0.485* (-2.15)
EU position			-0.641** (-3.36)	0.246 (1.22)
Economic position			0.475*** (4.17)	0.536*** (5.45)
Cultural position			-0.100 (-0.67)	0.0671 (0.49)
_cons	3.599* (2.58)	4.202** (2.98)	5.947** (2.98)	-2.384 (-0.96)
<i>Country fixed effects</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Time fixed effect</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N party-election</i>	170	170	170	170
<i>N countries</i>	6	6	6	6
<i>R-squared</i>	0.3950	0.3504	0.3010	0.5688

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure A2: The effects of populist narrative factors on the salience of anti-corruption claims (far-right parties based on classification of PopuList)

Notes: OLS-regression models with country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by party. There is no party classified as ‘far left’ by PopuList in the sample.

Figure A3: The effects of populist narrative factors on the salience of anti-corruption claims (including corruption variable)

Notes: OLS-regression models with country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by party.

Figure A4: The effects of the ‘good governance’ narrative on anti-corruption claims separately, and combined with the factors of the populist narrative (including corruption)

Notes: OLS-regression models with country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by party.

Figure A5: Average marginal effects of salience of anti-corruption claims over time (time periods)

Notes: OLS-regression models with country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by party.

Figure A6: Average marginal effects on salience of anti-corruption claims over time (before and after EU accession)

Notes: OLS-regression models with country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by party.