

Policy Paper: Demystifying Corruption and Reconstructing Social Models through Education and Accountability in the Western Balkans

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October 2024

Executive Summary

Corruption has become pervasive in the Western Balkans, creating a "new normality" where illicit practices are increasingly normalized, particularly among the youth. This paper aims to address the ways in which corruption is entrenched within the social fabric, its linkages to organized crime, and the role of education in perpetuating a corrupt social model. Drawing from interviews with experts in the region, the paper explores the roots of this problem and offers policy recommendations to deconstruct corruption networks, reform educational systems, and empower civil society and journalism to challenge the status quo.

Methodology of the Policy Paper

This policy paper employs a qualitative research approach, using a combination of primary and secondary data sources to investigate the underlying causes of corruption and the deteriorating social model in the Western Balkans. The methodology integrates data collection through interviews with experts, analysis of educational reports, and a review of existing literature on corruption and organized crime. The following outlines the methodology in detail:

1. Interviews with Key Stakeholders

To gather first-hand insights into the normalization of corruption and the shifting social model in the Western Balkans, interviews were conducted with:

- **Experts and Activists:** Individuals with deep knowledge of political corruption, organized crime, and youth engagement in the region. Migjen Qeraxhi (Actvitis, Executive Director "Qëndresa Qytetare" (Citizens Stand), Kolindo Vjerdha, researcher "Qëndresa Qytetare" (Citizens Stand), Ivan Ivanovic, Investigative Journalist BIRN Montenegro, Jasmina Damjanovic Investigative Journalist BIRN Montenegro

Key themes emerged from both the interviews and the literature review, including:

- The **normalization of corruption** and its impact on young people.
- The **role of education** in perpetuating or combating corrupt practices.
- The **interconnection between organized crime and political corruption**.
- The potential role of **civil society and journalism** in addressing these issues.

These interviews allowed for the exploration of how corruption manifests in daily life, how it is perceived by the younger generation, and how it has altered societal values. The qualitative data collected from these interviews provided a basis for understanding the deep-rooted issues and allowed for the formulation of targeted recommendations.

Introduction

The Western Balkans face a corruption crisis that has eroded the trust in institutions and normalized corrupt practices. The shift from conventional values to a corrupted social model is evident, particularly among young people, who grow up in environments where bribery, nepotism, and organized crime are not only tolerated but seen as necessary paths to success. The consequences of corruption extend to organized crime, which often infiltrates political and economic systems. This paper investigates how low-quality education and institutional failures contribute to this issue, and how civil society, journalism, and governance reforms can serve as tools for deconstructing these corrupt networks. Humanity has always needed to have a model or a journey to follow as a social construct, a resonance of success that permeates the world, while others follow it. In ancient times, emperors and epic warriors were followed, and later, in the past centuries, great inventors. Throughout this entire period, the spirit of those who cultivated knowledge and wisdom has dominated as a transversal theme across all these human models. In this era of excessive information and high consumption of technology and artificial intelligence, there is a global shift in the social model; however, in countries with deeper meanings for knowledge and social responsibility, the essence is being preserved.

In the Western Balkans, with a few exceptions, the opposite is happening; the social model has shifted drastically and is nearly entirely disintegrated. The social model in Western Balkans has been reduced solely to a coarse material dimension, to the fame of quick success, which often has its links to corruption.

It remains very important to deconstruct this established social model among the youth, explaining that the grim situations that have arisen are precisely due to corruption and erroneous models. This model is countered by offering a new social model based on values and concrete achievements from the youth. This can be achieved by explaining the roots of this destructive model in society. A very important dimension that has influenced this shift in the social model is undoubtedly the low quality of education, which is confirmed by the results of the last four cycles of PISA testing.

2. The Normalization of Corruption

In the countries of Western Balkans corruption has become a new normality, establishing a pervasive culture of corruption that significantly affects societal values and behaviors. Young people are often influenced by corrupt politicians and individuals connected to crime, leading them to view these figures as role models. This troubling trend is particularly pronounced in socio-economically marginalized regions, where the glaring contrast between the wealthy, who flaunt their luxurious lifestyles—complete with villas and fast cars—and the everyday struggles of ordinary citizens becomes all too evident. Many fail to recognize that this ostentatious display of wealth is often built on the exploitation of public resources and the taxes paid by the very communities suffering from inequality.

This dynamic contributes to a cycle where the potential for creating a new generation committed to integrity and civic responsibility is hindered. Relying solely on law enforcement to combat corruption is insufficient; a more comprehensive approach is needed to dismantle the elevated social models that glorify corruption and criminality among youth.

Corruption in the Western Balkans has reached a point where it often goes unpunished, which sends a message that these behaviors are acceptable. **Ivan Ivanović**, a key interviewee, emphasizes that the lack of consequences for corrupt practices, from local to national leadership, leads young people to perceive these actions as the norm. Corruption is often presented in ways that seem pragmatic or even essential, whether it's securing employment or expediting bureaucratic processes. Media plays a critical role, but in many cases, media outlets are politically influenced, limiting the exposure of corruption scandals. This results in a culture where corruption is not viewed as a problem but as part of the social fabric.

3. The Role of Education in “Promoting” Corruption

The Western Balkans suffer from a low-quality education system, which not only fails to teach critical thinking but often reinforces corrupt practices. **Jovana Damjanović** stresses that many educational systems lack the resources and curricula to promote ethics and civic responsibility. Instead, students are conditioned to accept the status quo without questioning authority. This weak foundation makes them susceptible to the norms of a corrupt society, perpetuating a cycle of corruption that undermines societal development.

As **Migjen Qeraxhi** notes, educational institutions themselves are rife with corruption, where practices such as bribing for grades are common. This contributes to a societal belief that corruption is a viable path to success. The failure of the educational system to foster integrity, transparency, and meritocracy exacerbates the problems in the political and economic systems.

PISA Test and Social Impact

Both interviewees from Albanian Qeraxhi and Vjerdha recognize the importance of PISA tests in diagnosing educational failures. However, Qeraxhi points out that neither society nor policymakers have fully understood or addressed the warning signs. He notes that the ministry deflects blame onto teachers, rather than acknowledging the systemic issues revealed by the test results.

Vjerdha criticizes the **institutional indifference** toward PISA results, especially the lack of accountability from authorities. He notes that in many European countries, such results lead to significant policy changes or even ministerial resignations, whereas in Albania, no real consequences follow.

Transition from Political Reforms to Expertise-Based Reforms

Both Qeraxhi and Vjerdha argue that political reforms, often driven by short-term goals, are the root cause of the recurring failures in the education system. Qeraxhi believes that education should be depoliticized and calls for a **broad political consensus** to create long-term education policies. He suggests establishing a parliamentary commission for academic vetting to ensure that education reforms are insulated from electoral politics.

Vjerdha similarly advocates for the creation of reforms based on **scientific research** and expert input. He argues for a bridge between universities and policymakers, ensuring that policies are grounded in thorough research and consultation with relevant stakeholders. This, he believes, would create more sustainable and effective policies that align with societal needs.

4. Organized Crime and the Social Model

Corruption and organized crime are deeply interconnected in the Western Balkans. As **Ivan Ivanović** notes, organized crime often infiltrates political and economic systems, allowing criminal organizations to operate with impunity. This creates an environment where wealth and power are closely linked to illicit activities, fostering a social model that glorifies success through any means necessary, regardless of legality or ethics. In communities where organized crime provides employment and social services that the state fails to offer, young people are drawn into this system, further perpetuating the cycle of corruption.

Promoting a New Social Model Based on Values

Migjen argues that the education system is key to promoting a new social model. He highlights the failures in both pre-university and university education, including a lack of critical thinking, outdated curricula, and poor-quality teacher recruitment. He suggests that education reform, which should focus on expertise rather than politics, is crucial for creating a generation of young people who can challenge the corrupt system,

meanwhile Jovana supports the idea that education should be a foundation for critical thinking, but notes that many educational systems in the region fail to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate a corrupt society. This weak foundation contributes to the perpetuation of corrupt practices as students are not empowered to question authority or systemic corruption.

It remains very important that this elevated social model to be deconstructed among young people, explaining the gloomy situations created by corruption and offering a new social model, which would be based on good values, on concrete achievements from the of young individuals. This can be achieved by explaining the roots of this destructive model in society, which is rooted in corruption and crime.

Corruption in the Western Balkans often goes unpunished, with local officials and national leaders engaging in corrupt practices without facing significant consequences. As **Ivan Ivanović** points out, this lack of accountability sends a message to young people that such behaviors are acceptable. Furthermore, he notes that corrupt practices are often framed as necessary means for advancement, leading to a normalization of unethical behavior. Media control further exacerbates the situation, limiting the exposure of youth to critical discussions about corruption.

The shift in societal values is driven by several factors:

- **Economic Instability:** High unemployment and pervasive poverty force individuals into survival mode, prioritizing short-term gains over ethical values. **Jovana Damjanović** emphasizes that economic uncertainty leads many to prioritize immediate financial security, making corruption appear as a viable path.
- **Weak Educational Systems:** Outdated curricula and a lack of resources fail to instill critical thinking and ethical behavior in students. Jovana points out that many educational systems in the region suffer from a focus on rote learning, which leaves students ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of a corrupt society.
- **Integration of Organized Crime:** Ivan highlights the deep connections between organized crime and political elites, which creates a culture where power and success are closely tied to illicit activities rather than merit or legality. This perpetuates a toxic cycle where young people perceive corruption as the norm.

5. Deconstructing Corruption and Organized Crime Networks

Effective deconstruction of corruption and organized crime networks requires political will, independent institutions, and civil society engagement. **Ivan Ivanović** highlights the importance of independent judicial systems and law enforcement that are free from political manipulation. Without independent prosecutorial bodies, even those involved in corruption scandals often escape justice. The civil sector also needs to play an active

role, yet the political will to enact reforms is often lacking, making systemic change difficult to achieve.

Ivan and Jovana illustrate the dangerous feedback loop between corruption and organized crime, where corruption facilitates organized crime's flourishing, which in turn normalizes corruption within society. To disrupt this cycle, it is essential to strengthen the rule of law and ensure that judicial and law enforcement bodies operate independently. This can be achieved through comprehensive judicial reforms aimed at increasing transparency and accountability in legal processes.

Ivan argues that deconstructing these corrupt networks requires political will, judicial independence, and stronger civil society oversight. He stresses that without genuine commitment from political elites, courts, and prosecutors, efforts to combat corruption will be ineffective, meanwhile Jovana reinforces Ivan's point by stressing the importance of strengthening the rule of law, financial transparency, and fostering a culture of accountability. She notes that without these measures, organized crime and corruption will continue to thrive.

6. The Role of Civil Society and Journalism

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and journalism are crucial in holding those in power accountable. As both **Ivan Ivanović** and **Jovana Damjanović** argue, CSOs can promote transparency, advocate for stronger laws, and create platforms for citizens to report corruption. Meanwhile, journalism, particularly investigative reporting, can expose corruption and organized crime. Both interviewees agree on the vital roles of civil society and journalism. **Ivanović** sees them as essential watchdogs in exposing corruption and promoting transparency. **Damjanović** adds that civil society organizations (CSOs) can mobilize public opinion and advocate for stronger anti-corruption laws, while investigative journalism plays a critical role in uncovering hidden networks and abuses of power. Investigative journalism is vital in exposing corrupt networks, but media freedom is limited in the Western Balkans. Both **Ivanović** and **Damjanović** emphasize the need for greater protection for journalists

However, these efforts are often hindered by limited media freedom and political influence over the press. Strengthening civil society and ensuring media independence are key to challenging the current social model of corruption.

7. Policy Recommendations

To combat corruption and shift societal values toward integrity and fairness, this paper offers the following policy recommendations:

1. **Judicial and Law Enforcement Reforms:** Ensure the independence of judicial and law enforcement bodies to allow them to function without political

interference. Transparent legal processes must be in place to hold corrupt individuals accountable.

2. **Educational Reform:** Reform the educational system to emphasize critical thinking, ethics, and civic responsibility. Address the corruption within educational institutions themselves, ensuring that universities and schools become incubators of integrity rather than breeding grounds for corrupt behavior.
3. **Civil Society and Journalism Support:** Provide support to CSOs and independent journalists to promote transparency and hold institutions accountable. This includes funding for investigative journalism and protections for media freedom.
4. **Economic Opportunities for Youth:** Develop programs that provide economic opportunities for young people based on merit rather than connections, reducing the appeal of corrupt practices and organized crime.
5. **International Cooperation and Pressure:** Work with international organizations to ensure that financial transparency and oversight are maintained, particularly in tracking money laundering and organized crime.

8. Conclusion

Corruption in the Western Balkans has reached critical levels, eroding trust in institutions and shifting societal values toward self-preservation and opportunism. To reverse this trend, it is essential to strengthen judicial independence, reform the educational system, and empower civil society and journalism. Through these efforts, the region can move toward a future where integrity and accountability are the foundations of success, rather than corruption and organized crime.

Looking at these circumstances, we see that the wrong social model has had the space ready to occupy it, because it would be different if this space was competitive from a more vocal academic world, with more interaction with the outside world, where young people, in addition to dignity and social legitimacy, would also have these models for economic ambitions.

In this context, it remains very important to achieve a synergy between debunking the wrong social model and offering a model of values, which will also be attractive to young people, because we cannot always judge students and young people for having a wrong social model without being offered a "cool" model, which represents value and which coincides with the economic ambitions that a young person may have, because young people will always, apart from values, want to be successful, do a job that will bring them financial benefits, always doing a job with values and dignity.