DO REFORMS INFLUENCE CORRUPTION PERSEPTIONS? How NPM-type reforms affect the corruption perceptions in Greece[1]

Introduction

Corruption is widely recognized as one of the most significant challenges in Greece. Various studies, such as those from Eurobarometer, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and the World Bank's Control of Corruption Index, as well as numerous national surveys, highlight the importance of this issue. This research paper investigates the hypothesis that New Public Management (NPM) reforms in Public Administration are correlated with perceptions of corruption. In Greece, numerous NPM-style reforms were introduced during the financial crisis as conditionalities imposed by lending institutions through the Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs). This study seeks to address the critical question: Did these reforms influence perceptions of corruption positively or negatively? By exploring the application of NPM type reforms on public administration the research aims to shed light on how structural reforms shape public attitudes toward corruption within the public sector. Focusing on Greece, the research employs two case studies to support the hypothesis and identify correlations: the Independent Authority for Public Revenue (IAPR/AADE) and urban planning departments within Local Authorities.

Research Questions

The research examines how citizens' perceptions of corruption[2] within Greece's public sector are influenced by NPM type public management reforms, as well as the methodologies and tools employed in their implementation. The lack of empirical research on the impact of diverse implementations of NPM on corruption perception highlights a critical gap, particularly in the context of Greece's reforms and its role in European integration. Addressing this gap could yield valuable insights to enhance the design of future reforms that positively impact perceptions of corruption across the country. However, as NPM represents a conceptual framework rather than a standardized set of practices, its effect on corruption perceptions is difficult to generalize.

The central research question is: *How does the implementation of NPM-style reforms in Greece's Public Administration influence corruption perceptions?* Three hypotheses and subsequent sub-questions frame this question: a) NPM reforms do not influence corruption perceptions. b) NPM reforms positively influence corruption perceptions, where citizens believe these reforms reduce corruption, and c) NPM reforms negatively

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[1] Marianna Kondylidou, PhD Candidate, University of Peloponnese, Greece (contact: mko@sedc.gr). Supervisor: Manos Papazoglou, Associate Professor in Political Systems, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of the Peloponnese.

[2] Globally, corruption is typically measured using perceptual indicators that capture the views of citizens and businesses regarding its penetration within the public sphere and society as a whole.

influence corruption perceptions, where citizens believe these reforms increase corruption. Two sub-questions emerge from these hypotheses: a) which of the reforms are most influential in shaping the perception of positive affect, and b) which of the reforms are most influential in shaping the perception of negative affect.

Why Greece?

Why focus solely on Greece, and not conduct intercountry research? Greece has the highest perceptions of corruption in Europe. According to the latest Eurobarometer in 2024[3], 98% of the research sample believed that corruption is widespread in the country, and 63% felt personally affected by corruption in their daily lives. These figures are the highest in Europe and have remained consistent for nearly two decades, despite increasing reform efforts. This is an important finding that needs further research within the Greek context. Recognising corruption perceptions as social constructions, they need to be analysed within the national context.

On the other hand, the Greek Public Administration has often been described as a "chronic patient," characterized by institutional crises and inadequate service provision, as highlighted by organizations such as the (OECD, 2011), the EU (2022), and the World Bank through its governance indicators. Greek public administration is distinguished by formalism, pervasive bureaucracy, politicization, partisanship at higher bureaucratic levels, favoritism, clientelism, a lack of strategic planning, mismanagement of resources, legislative redundancies and ambiguities, and other inefficiencies. These features create fertile ground for corruption and reinforce widespread perceptions of its prevalence in the country and in the public sector specifically (European Commission , 2024). Despite decades of public discourse emphasizing the need for reforms, it was primarily the financial crisis of 2009 that instigated a series of reforms aligned with the principles of New Public Management (NPM).

Therefore, Greece serves as a valuable case study where over 15 years of reforms on a public sector with serious defaults, coexist with persistent perceptions of widespread corruption. Research shows that Greece is implementing Public Sector Reforms fragmentally and without persistence. Following Knill & Tosun's (2012) taxonomy of administrative changes based on different triggers for reform, Greece mainly follows the opportunistic exploitation of political "windows" to advance changes. In addition, Ladi and Dalakou (2016, pp. 213-219) add Europeanization as a driver for change in the country, which is particularly the case for corruption through GRECO reports. Spanou (2021) advocates that the decade of the crisis and the use of conditionality by the EU/IMF/ECB (the Troika) to exchange implementation of reforms in the Public Sector for loan payments created a reform wave that continues up to today, for almost 15 years. Most of them in the direction of NPM. Therefore, there is a need to assess their impact on corruption perceptions in the country.

[3] https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3217

Research Methodology

The methodology chosen to explore this question involves comprehensive bibliographical research on the following topics: a) **Corruption**: Definitions, types of phenomena encountered in global north countries, theories on causes and effects, and the measurement of corruption. b) **Corruption perception data**: Analysis of several data sources, including Eurobarometer, Transparency International Index, and the World Bank's control of corruption index. This includes examining data on the tolerance of corruption, sectorial perceptions, and anti-corruption efficiency. c) **Public regulation theories**: Theories that serve as explanatory frameworks for corruption phenomena, such as rational choice theory, public choice theory, public interest theory, and new institutionalism (including rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, and discursive institutionalism). d) **Public Sector Reform theories**: Mainly focusing on NPM-type reforms but also including recent differentiations such as New Public Governance and New Public Service, which are currently influencing reform models through Europeanization.

Following the desk research, two case studies will be used for the field part of the study. The first examines a policy area where NPM-style reforms have been implemented comprehensively: the Independent Authority of Public Revenue (IAPR/AADE). The second examines urban planning departments within local authorities, where reforms have been introduced in an incomplete and fragmented manner. Both sectors have long been associated with narratives of extensive corruption, and recent corruption cases have surfaced. The varying types of reforms and their depth of implementation between the two sectors will provide insights into which tools are perceived as more influential on corruption perception.

Both sectors will be studied using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Initially, a pilot phase will include qualitative research with a few in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. For IAPR, this includes accountants, tax consultants, certified auditors, lawyers, and employees of tax authorities. For urban planning departments, interviews will be conducted with engineers, construction companies, employees at urban planning departments, and other local authority officials. There will be around 10 interviews per sector during this pilot phase, which will help structure the questions for the quantitative research. The pilot phase will also include testing the quantitative research, where the formulated questionnaire will be tested with 10 members of the sample for each case study before its full-scale launch to ensure comprehension of the questions and identify any potential issues.

Following the piloting phase, the quantitative research will commence. For the IAPR case study, the questionnaire will be sent to 220-250 private sector companies, segmented by geography and size. Approximately 120 companies will be very small and small or self-employed registers, 80 will be medium-sized enterprises, and 20-50 will be large enterprises. The sector of operation is irrelevant, but geographical distribution and size

are important due to the decentralized operation of the IAPR, the introduction of ICTs, the digital gap among companies, and the type of tax regime they face, all of which influence their perceptions of corruption.

Similarly, for urban planning departments, 250 questionnaires will be sent to engineers and construction companies, segmented geographically based on the build registry (e-adeies, TEE). The research will cover the last five years, during which reforms in the sector have started to be implemented.

Following the quantitative research, observed findings will be discussed for further explanations and fine-tuning with another set of in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders per sector. More than 20 additional interviews per case study are planned, although this number may be adjusted based on the needs of the research and the findings.

There is no need to conduct general public opinion research for the two sectors under study, as Eurobarometer annual research includes these sectors, and relevant perceptions can be tracked over a decade.

Given the sensitivity of the topic of corruption and the potential for respondents to be dishonest, hypothetical cases (vignettes) will be used in both interviews and questionnaires. The use of vignettes will help break down the sample groups into two, creating two control groups with two contradictory hypothetical cases. This counterfactual approach will assist in comparing reform tools that are currently implemented with those that are not, and in testing the perception of corruption each tool generates. In addition to the quantitative counterfactual, a qualitative approach will be employed with two focus groups (one per case study) based on the vignettes presented in the questionnaire to further analyze the findings.

The research findings will be analyzed based on theories of corruption, public regulation theories, and public sector reform theories to conclude how the implementation of reforms in these two specific cases influences the perception of corruption among users. The above research includes triangulation in the methods (bibliographical, qualitative and quantitative), in the data sources and entails a theoretical triangulation.

Bibliographical research

The bibliographical research consists of four main subjects, corruption theories, corruption data, public regulation theories and public sector reform theories, with emphasis on NPM. Following narratively the preliminary findings of the research carried out so far.

Definitions and Typology of Corruption

Corruption is a social phenomenon marked by significant ambiguity (Πρόντζας, 2018). Often described as multifaceted, multi-causal, and multidimensional (Sotiropoulos, 2020, p. 3); (Καρκατσουλης, 2015, pp. 45-46); (Bull & Heywood, 2019, p. 3), its study

spans diverse academic disciplines. Consequently, its dimensions range from legal, ethical, and philosophical to economic, developmental, sociological, and psychological, providing a comprehensive understanding of corruption while addressing both its causes and consequences.

Scientific approaches to studying corruption coexist with legal frameworks and societal conceptualizations, which shape collective perceptions across time and space. Corruption is not a contemporary phenomenon, and no evidence suggests its prevalence today exceeds that of earlier periods (Williams & Beare, 1999). Efforts to measure the phenomenon have emerged only over the past two to three decades. However, the complexities of modern society—resulting from the liberalization of politics and markets—are argued to have expanded opportunities for wealth creation while also enabling greater instances of corruption (Johnston, 2005, pp. 1, 5).

Amundsen (1999, p. 1) defines corruption broadly as encompassing "*everything from bribery of public officials in exchange for favors and misuse of public resources to a wide range of questionable economic and political practices that enrich politicians and bureaucrats, and any abusive use of public authority for personal purposes*". Contemporary definitions strive to capture its myriad manifestations, identifying behaviors that fall outside the moral boundaries of a given society. Legal definitions, although necessarily restrictive, often fail to encompass evolving societal examples.

Transparency International defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" [4]. The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC)[5] does not provide a specific definition but outlines a series of practices consistent with Transparency International's characterization. Similarly, organizations such as the OECD and the European Commission do not adopt specific definitions but align their recommendations within Transparency International's framework. The World Bank, on the other hand, defines corruption as "the misuse of public roles for private benefit."[6]

Unlike international organizations, the academic community—via its multidimensional scientific approach—has long debated how to define corruption. Nye (1967, p. 419) characterizes corruption as deviant behavior by individuals holding public roles who seek to benefit private interests, whether personal, familial, or for private groups. This can include seeking wealth, status positions, or violating rules for private influence. Heidenheimer (1970) provides a slightly different perspective, defining corruption as the misuse of public office for personal gain or the exploitation of public power for private benefit at the expense of public interest.

Rose and Peiffer (2019) focusing on public administration, defining corruption as behaviour that violates either formal bureaucratic standards, informal normative expectations about how public officials ought to act—or both. From a moral philosophy perspective, Lynch and Lynch (2015, p. 101) describe corruption as *"...a behavioural effect of an intentional deviation from acceptable ethical practices for personal gain*".

[4] https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption
[5] https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3217
[6] https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3217

Johnston (2005, p. 11) emphasizes that "*corruption involves the misuse of trust in the form of public power for private gain, often not limited to monetary rewards*".

Definitions of corruption vary significantly based on their scientific context, historical period, and cultural setting. Corruption also spans both public and private spheres, necessitating specialized approaches depending on the context. However, corruption within the public sphere remains central to this discussion.

The Public Sector and Corruption: A Focus on Entrusted Power

The public sector plays a critical role in defining corruption, as it underscores the relationship between the state and society. Members of public administration—whether elected or appointed—hold positions of authority to manage, regulate, and allocate public resources. These individuals can exploit this authority for private gain. Opposing these public-sector actors are corrupters or "suppliers" who provide rewards, whether material or otherwise, to secure benefits they seek—this group essentially includes the wider society (Amundsen, 1999, p. 2).

In public administration, corruption is typically categorized as either petty or grand, depending on the extent of economic damage caused. It is further divided into political corruption, which involves political actors, and bureaucratic corruption, which pertains to public administrators (Amundsen, 1999, p. 3). Rose-Ackerman highlights that the phrase "entrusted power," as used by Transparency International, encapsulates the principal-agent problem underlying corruption in the public sector. Public-sector roles are governed by formal rules and norms; deviations from these rules disrupt the intended goals of the public entity (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka , 2016, p. 9).

Other researchers explore whether private benefits necessarily result in public harm and how deviations undermine public interest (Friedrich, 2011, p. 15). However, ambiguities in defining public interest can complicate efforts to address corruption, as perceptions vary even within organizations tasked with its protection. While legal interpretations of public interest provide frameworks for tackling corruption, individual actors' conceptualizations influence how corruption is understood.

The two foundational concepts of "entrusted power" and "public interest", suggest that corruption is more visible and comprehensible in democratic systems. In democracies, behaviours labelled as corruption are more easily identified and recognized as deviant. Conversely, in monarchies or authoritarian regimes, similar behaviours may neither constitute legal violations nor be perceived as deviant by citizens (Friedrich, 2011, p. 17). Nonetheless, institutional weaknesses tend to exacerbate corruption in authoritarian systems (Johnston, 2005, p. 18) (Amundsen, 1999, p. 4).

Forms of Corruption: Deviations from Entrusted Power

By examining public roles that encompass "entrusted power"—such as political figures and bureaucratic administrators—and considering the behavioural norms associated with these roles, one can identify deviant actions labelled as corruption. These include:

1. **Nepotism**: The allocation of positions, privileges, or rights based on familial or close personal relationships by individuals in public authority. Nepotism often correlates with family-based governance.
2. **Political Patronage**: The use of public resources and authority derived from public roles to reward individuals or entities for their electoral support (Hale, 2014, p. 9).
3. **Conflict of Interest**: Situations where public interest may be influenced by an actor's private interest. These scenarios vary significantly and require vigilance, transparency, and preventive measures to avoid conflicts.
4. **Bribery**: The provision of monetary compensation, gifts, or favors to bypass regulations or as rewards for unjust privileges (e.g., public contracts, subsidies, permits, or expedited processes). Bribery is further categorized into "according to rule" (e.g., expediting legitimate processes) and "against the rule" (e.g., granting undeserved privileges) (Andersson & Heywood, 2009, p. 748).
5. **Rent-Seeking**: The manipulation of public policies or decisions to increase the revenues of a specific economic group without generating new wealth. Rent-seeking often results in market oligopolies formed through regulation (Krueger, 1974). When rent-seeking becomes extensive, it manifests as "state capture" (World Bank, 2000).
6. **Extortion**: The demand for bribery as a condition for fulfilling duties or breaching rules. Excessive bureaucracy and complex procedures are often perceived as indirect levers for extortion (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka , 2016, p. 8).
7. **Favoritism**: The preferential treatment of specific groups (e.g., political, religious, social, or professional) over others in employment or contracting. This practice opposes meritocracy and is closely related to nepotism. In Greece, favoritism frequently overlaps with partisan and clientelistic practices, signifying career advancement within public administration based on political or other affiliations.
8. **Embezzlement**: The misappropriation of resources (typically funds) entrusted to an individual by virtue of their position. In the public sector, embezzlement is commonly observed in roles managing finances, such as cashiers. Unlike theft, embezzlement involves misappropriation by someone in a position of trust.

A prevalent conceptualization of corruption in Greece is "crony capitalism," also referred to as "**entanglement**" (diaploki). This involves patronage-clientelism relationships within the political system, marked by favoritism toward specific stakeholders and the misuse of public resources. These systemic and recurring relationships are deeply ingrained (Philp & David-Barrett, 2015, p. 396). In Greece, the general perception of "systemic" entanglements between politics and stakeholders reflects a fusion of the aforementioned forms of corruption. Although such practices are often viewed as corruption, they are challenging to define legally and even more difficult to prove as violations (ibid., p. 397).

In addition to these behaviors, public administration encompasses various other actions in which bureaucratic members violate rules and guidelines to serve direct or indirect personal interests. Examples include producing quantitatively excessive but qualitatively poor work to improve performance evaluations, assisting students to

elevate institutional rankings, using public time for private work, misappropriating public resources, overprescribing medication, among others.

However, bribery remains the most easily perceived form of corruption, often forming part of a broader, more complex scheme involving other crimes such as smuggling, tax evasion, drug trafficking, and protection rackets. As such, bribery is considered a critical "tool" for criminal organizations. Frequently, bribery and rent-seeking—particularly notable in the Global North—are conflated with corruption, although they often coexist (Johnston, 2005, p. 6). Bribery is more commonly observed in bureaucracy, especially involving smaller monetary exchanges, while rent-seeking is prevalent among the political elite within public administration.

Broadening the Scope of Corruption Practices

The list of corrupt practices is inherently inexhaustible, as the ways in which authority within the public sector can be abused for personal gain—whether direct or indirect—are countless. Moreover, not all corrupt actions are strictly illegal; legal frameworks cannot encompass every conceivable scenario. However, many of these actions are morally condemned by citizens and society at large (Gardner, 2002, p. 25) though degrees of tolerance and acceptance may vary across social contexts (Κονδυλίδου, 2022, σ. 26).

Researchers often explore the initiation of corruption, distinguishing between acts instigated by public sector actors and those prompted by private individuals (citizens, companies, etc.) (Heidenheimer, Johnston, & Le Vine, 1993, p. 12). Other scholars emphasize the unequal distribution of benefits in corrupt acts, noting that while mutual benefits exist, the allocation is never equitable. Corruption creates resource flows either from society to the state (extractive corruption) or from the state to society (redistributive corruption) (Amundsen, 1999, p. 5). Embezzlement, nepotism, political patronage, favoritism, and rent-seeking typically involve flows from the state to society, whereas extortion and bribery involve flows from society to the state.

Another form of a deeper analysis reveals sectoral divisions in vulnerability to corruption. Certain portfolios within public administration are more prone to bribery and extortion (e.g., law enforcement, healthcare, licensing), while others are more susceptible to favoritism and rent-seeking (e.g., market regulation, taxation, labor) (Amundsen, 1999, p. 5).

Political Versus Bureaucratic Corruption

Public sector corruption is commonly categorized into "political corruption" or "grand corruption," which pertains to political leadership, and "bureaucratic corruption" or "petty corruption," which involves public sector employees (Amundsen, 1999, pp. 3-4). The distinction between petty and grand corruption is often interpreted by society as an economic impact measure. However, this binary classification can be misleading.

Within public sector Lessing (2013) introduces the concept of "institutional corruption," which includes legal or ethical behaviours that undermine an institution's effectiveness and public trust. This broader perspective helps identify systemic failures in governance. By focusing on deviations from institutional purposes, the framework highlights how legal or ethical practices can still erode public trust. For instance, policies aimed at securing electoral support may be perceived as corrupt despite conforming to democratic norms (Philp & David-Barrett, 2015, p. 391).

Another distinction concerns the degree of benefit appropriation in corruption. "Private corruption" refers to cases where benefits are concentrated among a few individuals, as in bribery, extortion, nepotism, or embezzlement. In contrast, "collective corruption" involves benefits accruing to groups, as seen in rent-seeking, favoritism, and political patronage (Amundsen, 1999, p. 5). Private corruption carries greater moral weight and often stricter legal consequences, while collective corruption is frequently diluted within broader interpretations of public interest.

The Complex Dynamics of Corruption

Corruption phenomena often exhibit a "quid pro quo" transactional identity. While this is evident in practices such as bribery or extortion, it is less discernible in cases of patronage, nepotism, rent-seeking, and conflicts of interest. The primary reason lies in the fact that such exchanges are "not on the table," meaning they are neither explicit, measurable, timely, nor guaranteed (Johnston, 2005, p. 11).

For this reason, Lessing criticizes the prevailing definition of corruption as "empty," noting that the concept of abuse is often ambiguous yet forms the boundary between corruption and non-corruption. A clear example is the use of popular public policies (beneficial to some) to secure a minister’s re-election (Philp & David-Barrett, 2015, p. 391). Morris (2021, p. 157) further argues that all actions by political figures, regardless of whether they meet definitions of corruption, are ultimately motivated by personal gain—whether private or political. Since policies are ideologically aligned with voters, political decisions are often accused of "clientelism." This term, frequently associated with corruption in public perception, can unfairly implicate both the political system and the electorate. While impartiality in policy implementation by administrative mechanisms is a clearer corruption-related issue, the general association of clientelism with corruption remains ambiguous (Philp & David-Barrett, 2015, pp. 394-395).

Conclusion: Nuances in Corruption Dynamics

The overuse of corruption as a catch-all term risks diluting its meaning. Narratives framing corruption as a "catch-all grievance" often reflect dissatisfaction with governance, inefficiency, or inequality rather than specific illegal acts. In many instances, corruption serves as an "explanatory framework" for broader state dysfunctions, without evident causal links. Such generalizations obscure the real impact of corruption and hinder efforts to combat it effectively.

Corruption is inherently complex, shaped by cultural, legal, and societal factors. Its manifestations—ranging from overt bribery and embezzlement to institutional failures—underscore the challenges of defining and addressing it comprehensively. By recognizing its typologies and contextual nuances, policymakers and researchers can develop targeted strategies to combat corruption, restore public trust in governance, and promote transparency.

Measuring Corruption in Greece

The need to measure corruption arises from the necessity to control and understand the phenomenon. This effort is relatively recent and particularly challenging. Corruption indices essentially measure perceptions of the phenomenon, but both the methodologies for measuring perceptions and the interpretations of findings can vary. Most measurements, which produce certain indices, are conducted by risk analysis companies and are useful for internationally active companies assessing investment risks. There are also measurements from non-profit organizations such as Transparency International, the Heritage Foundation, and the World Economic Forum.

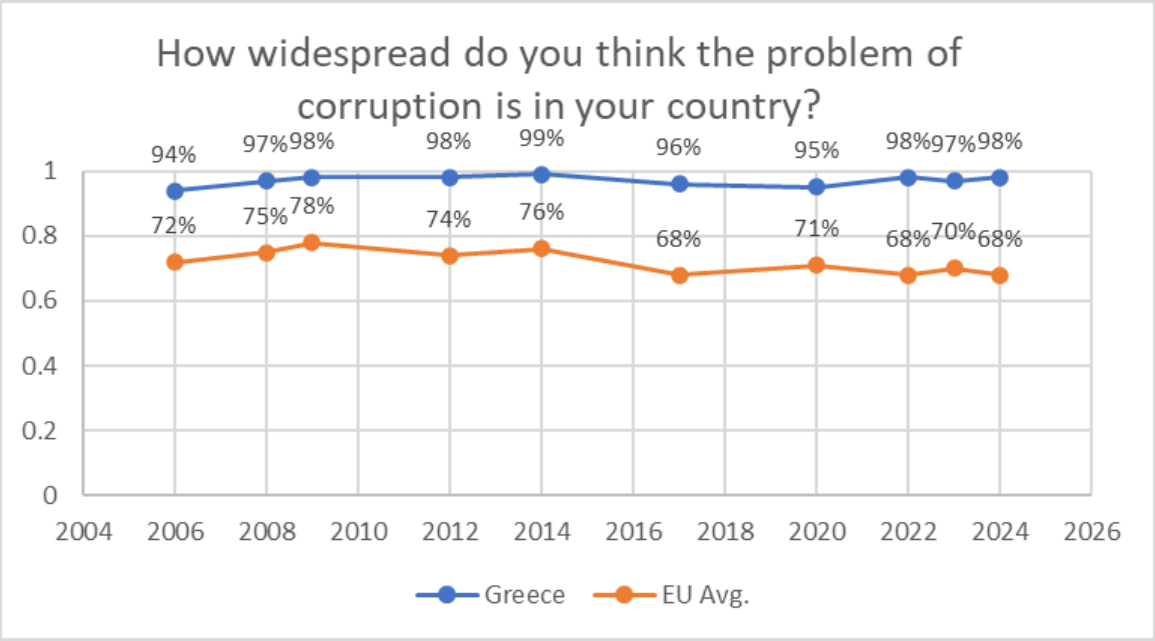
The most widely used index is Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which also produces the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB). Also, the European Commission conducts a special measurement for corruption, that includes the Corruption Tolerance Index. Additionally, the World Bank includes the "Control of Corruption" index in its governance indicators, which essentially measures institutional strengthening against corruption. Selected elements from these measurements are analyzed to create a picture of perceptions of corruption in Greece and selected comparisons with other EU member states. The choice for comparisons within the EU is due to the institutional homogeneity of these countries' characteristics due to Europeanization, as well as their level of democracy and culture compared to other regions.

Eurobarometer

The special Eurobarometer survey has been conducted approximately every two years since 2006, covering all EU countries as a quantitative public survey. The questions evolve over time, making it difficult to create time series to identify trends. The term "corruption" is sometimes used without definition or further conceptualization. One question mentions bribery and "abuse of power for private gain," indirectly offering a conceptualization that may not align with the respondents' understanding of corruption. Thus, citizens' responses reflect their personal perceptions of corruption, which may significantly diverge from academic definitions. For example, tax evasion might be seen as corruption by most citizens, while others might view the politicization of senior public administration officials as favoritism and thus corruption, while others may disagree.

The following diagram illustrates responses to the question "How widespread do you think the problem of corruption is in your country?" from the corresponding Eurobarometer surveys, comparing Greece to the European average.

Diagram1: Eurobarometer findings about widespread corruption in Greece

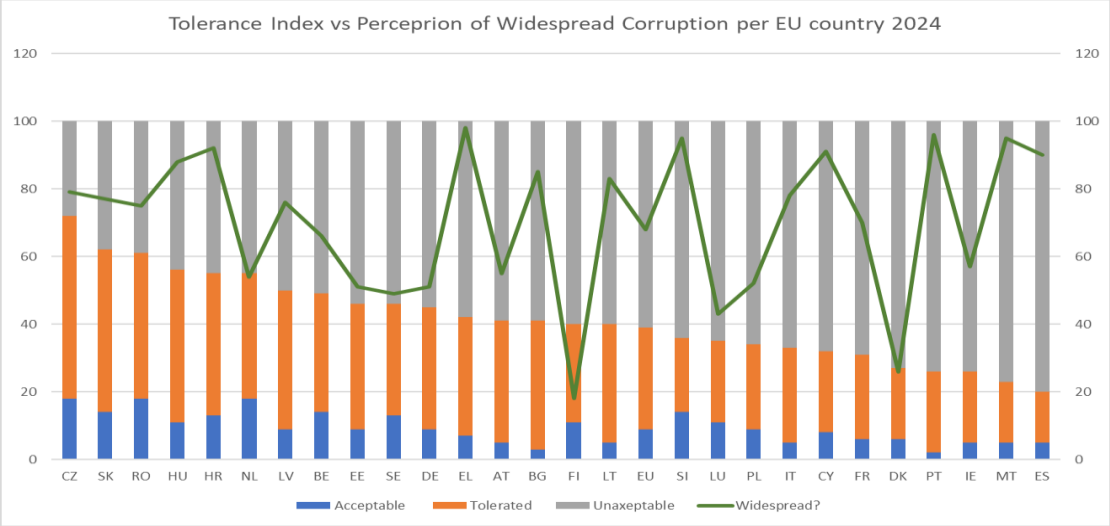


Source: Eurobarometer's surveys, own processing

There is a widespread perception that corruption is prevalent in Greece, with the highest percentage in the EU for 2024. This percentage is consistently 20% higher than the EU average. The 2024 measurement indicates that 98% of Greeks believe corruption is "widespread" in their country. Other EU citizens also perceive corruption as widespread, with an average of 68% holding this view in 2024, which is high for the EU. In Greece, this perception is nearly universal. These high percentages are, or should be, a significant concern that needs to be studied.

The following diagramme illustrates the corelation between Tolerance Index, calculated in the Eurobarometer survey and perception of widespread corruption in each EU member state, in 2024.

Diagram 2: Tolerance Index in corelation to perceptions of widespread corruption in EU Member States in 2024.

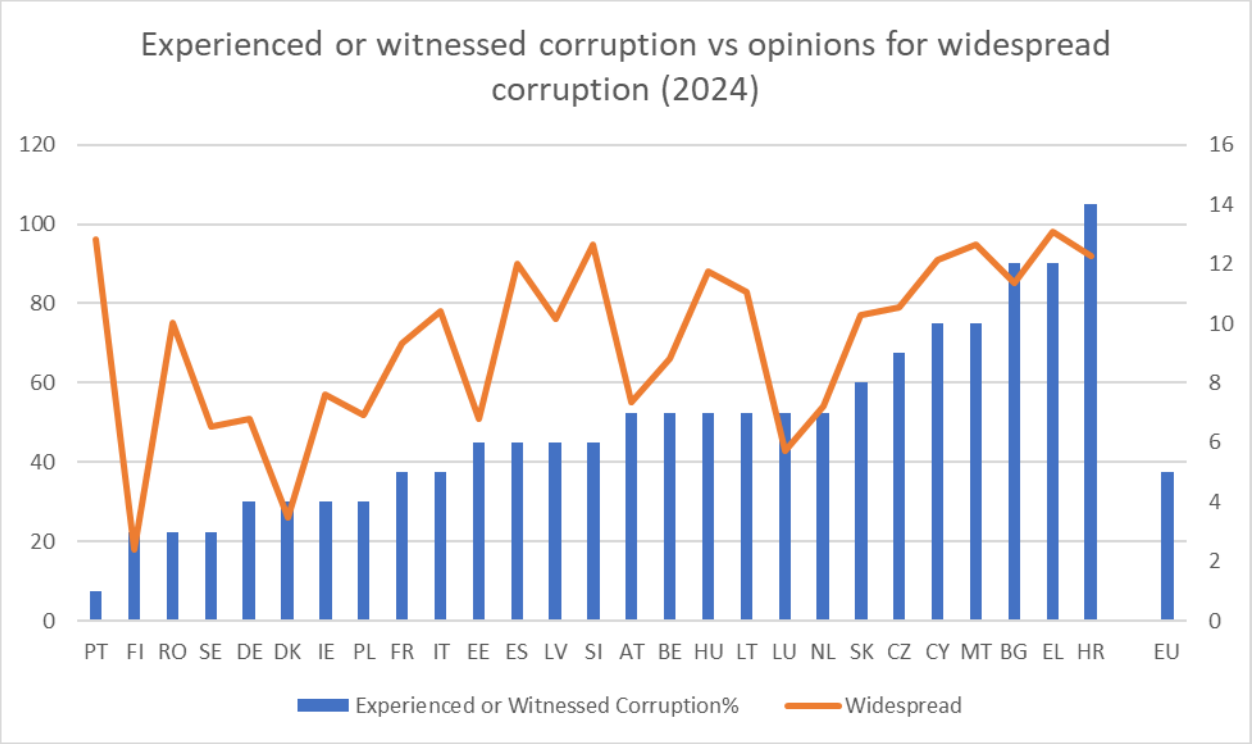


Source: Eurobarometer survey on corruption 2024, own processing

From this diagram, it is difficult to identify a correlation between the tolerance of corruption and the perceptions of widespread corruption. While tolerance towards corruption logically suggests the actual existence of such phenomena in a society, the snapshot provided and the lack of timeline data do not allow for a relevant conclusion. For example, Greece and Finland have similar tolerance levels, yet their corruption perceptions are extremely opposite.

Additionally, Eurobarometer survey asks about actual corruption experiences or witnesses citizens have from contacts they had with several public and private institutions and organizations (i.e. policy, tax authorities, licencing authorities, educational institutions, banks, private sector, courts, etc.) and the spontaneous negative responses are presented in the diagramme below.

Diagram 3: Experiences of corruption in EU Member States (2024)



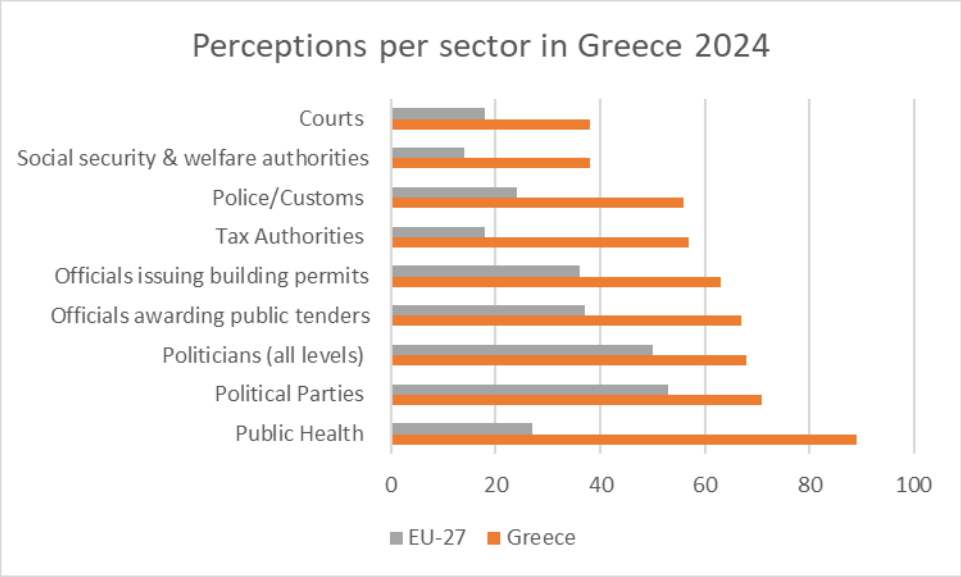
Source: Eurobarometer survey on corruption 2024, own processing

Again, this illustration demonstrates the social construction nature of corruption perceptions. The 88% of responders in Greece had no corruption experience and the ones they had were only in the health sector, which is a very peculiar case that will be analysed in the study (since the responses do not indicate actual bribery or a kind of blackmail, but a voluntary action of the citizen), yet they have the highest perception of corruption between EU member states. Even so, the perceived as corruption experiences or witnesses in the country are high and correlate with the opinion for widespread corruption, contrary to some other countries.

The following diagramme presents the perceptions in selected sectors of public sector in Greece.

Diagram 4: Perceptions of corruption per sector in Greece (2024)

Source: Eurobarometer survey on corruption 2024, own processing



Source: Eurobarometer survey on corruption 2024, own processing

The above demonstrates the corruption perception for the tax authorities and the building permits sectors, that are relative high for Greece.

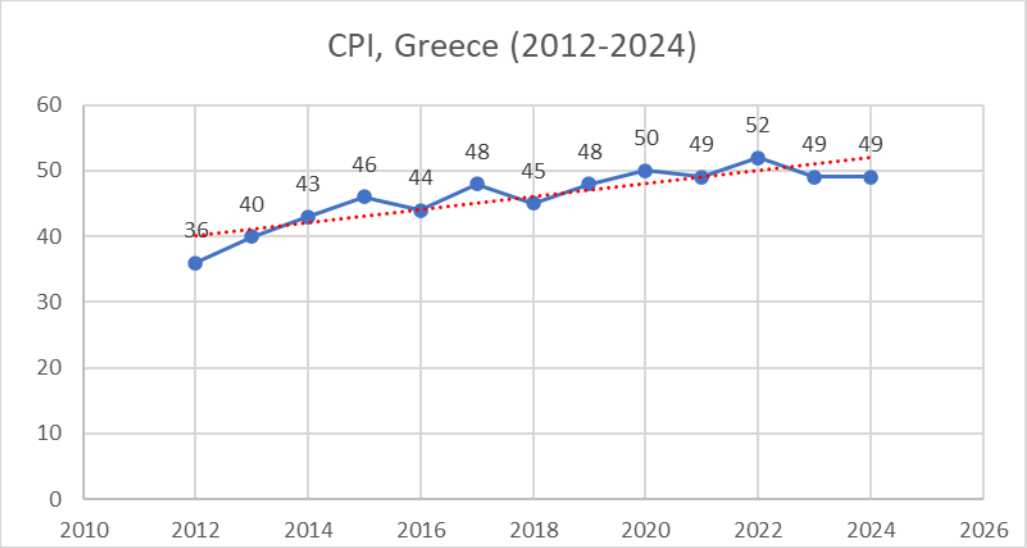
The Eurobarometer survey, include valuable data for the perceptions in Greece, and timeline comparisons will be made in the study. The above is just few of the data available in the survey of 2024.

Transparency International

The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) by Transparency International is the most widely used index. Transparency International is a global advocacy organization aiming to raise awareness about corruption worldwide and promote measures to combat it. The CPI is a qualitative index (though quantitative measurements are considered) that compiles assessments from various organizations and companies, measuring the opinions of experts and stakeholders (e.g., private sector, academia, institutions). Using a scale of 0-100, Denmark ranked first in 2024 with 90 points, while South Sudan ranked 180th with 8 points. The CPI measures only public sector corruption, with many questions addressing the existence of anti-corruption mechanisms and the institutional/operational fortification against corruption phenomena. There is a possibility of "recycling" opinions, as research sources feed into each other (Cobham, 2013), and it may also record narratives dominant in the private sector or stereotypical views, as many respondents come from the private sector, possibly from other countries (Andersson & Heywood, 2009, p. 753). According to Transparency International, the index measures bribery, diversion/mismanagement of public resources, use of public office for private gain, nepotism in public service, and state capture.

The evolution of the index for Greece over the past twelve years is presented in the following diagram.

Diagram 5: Evolution of CPI for Greece 2012-2024



Source: Transparency International CPI reports, own processing

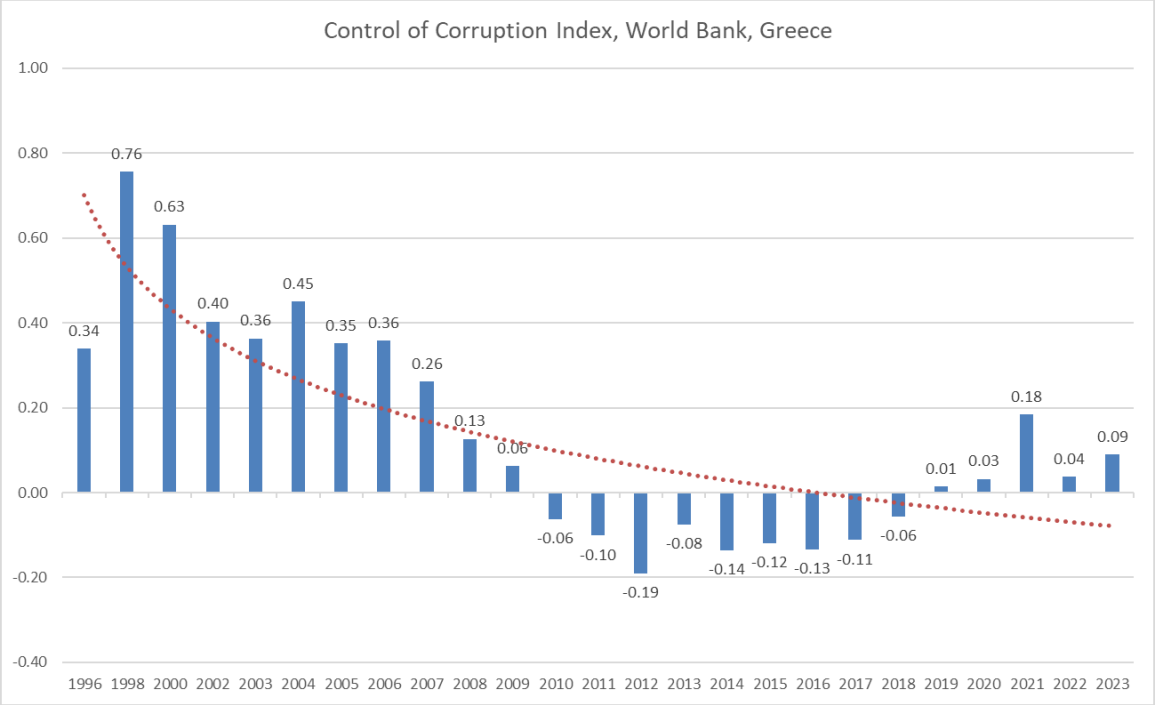
This illustration shows an overall improvement in perceptions, albeit at a slow pace. However, the starting point of this measurement was during a difficult period for the country, and the index has shown stagnation over the last five years.

More data and analysis of the CPI and the conceptualisations it entails will be presented at the study.

World Bank Corruption Control Index

The World Bank produces a composite index that gathers data from qualitative and quantitative surveys worldwide, using an average of 10-15 surveys per country. It places greater emphasis on the opinions of civil society and public sector experts, and less on business perspectives, which differentiates it from the Corruption Perception Index (CPI). For Europe, many of the surveys used are the same as those for the CPI, which is not surprising given the high cost of these extensive surveys. The index measures perceptions of corruption control, rather than its extent, changes, or specific sectors. The following diagram shows the evolution of this index for Greece from 1996 to 2022.

Diagram 6: Evolution of World Bank's Corruption Control Index



Source: World Bank Data, own processing

The index ranges from -2.5 to +2.5, and historically, Greece has been at low levels. However, this index may unfairly represent the efforts made for institutional strengthening against corruption. During the 1990s and the period before the economic crisis, institutional straightening against corruption was significantly weaker than it is today, as confirmed by GRECO reports. Nevertheless, this index is based on perception surveys, and institutional reforms often require time to be recognized and to show results.

In conclusion, indices and relevant data are useful tool for understanding general perceptions of corruption both within and outside a country. The opinions they express are highly subjective and influenced by narratives and stereotypes. They do not provide reliable information about corruption phenomena in a country, nor can they be correlated with specific conceptualizations or consequences. Rather, they reflect dissatisfaction with the functioning of a country's institutions and overall governance. There is no clear connection to specific corruption phenomena as recorded by experiential measurements. Conversely, the recorded increase in non-acceptance of corruption aligns with expressed dissatisfaction. It appears there is a link between the perception of increased corruption and good governance, as highlighted by many international organizations, and this needs further research.

Public Regulation: Theories and Challenges

These theories help understand better the roots and consequences of corruption within the public sector, but also the dominant narratives that shape the perceptions within the country. They will be used partly to frame the research results.

Public regulation—state intervention in society and the economy—is a fundamental function of public administration (Ναλπαντίδου & Χατζής , 2010, p. 134). Institutions, as both shapers and products of public policy, encompass both formal and informal elements. North (1991) defines institutions as "human constructs that structure political, economic, and social interaction, encompassing informal constraints such as norms and traditions, as well as formal rules like constitutions and laws" (Ανδρέου, 2018, p. 16). Institutions can broadly be considered as arenas where decisions are made (Cairney , 2012, σ. 75).

The postwar era saw prevailing regulatory theories focus on the behaviour of individual and collective actors, often neglecting the importance of institutions. The publication by March and Olsen (1984) marked a shift toward studying institutions via neo-institutionalist approaches (Ανδρέου, 2018, pp. 10, 16). These approaches offer insights into phenomena like corruption and reform efforts, often diverging along two dominant perspectives identified by Barry (1970): the economic approach, viewing the actor as an individualist and rational 'homo economicus', and the sociological approach, which emphasizes motivations driven by values and social norms (Αλεξανδρόπουλος, 1996, p. 82).

Following some regulation theories that are influencing interpretation of both corruption phenomena and public sector reform practices and are considered valuable for the analysis of the study.

Behaviouralism focuses on individual behaviour as isolated responses to stimuli, emphasizing measurable data and causal relationships. It contributed to the development of theories validated through empirical studies. For example, the quantitative measurement of electoral behaviour and political system inputs and outputs stems from this tradition, which heavily influenced American thought (Sartori, 2017), (Ανδρέου, 2018, p. 41) (Sanders, 2010, pp. 23,40). In addition, attempts to measure the corruption producing indices and comparative gradings are linked to this tradition.

Rational choice theory emerged alongside behaviouralism, emphasizing methodological individualism and the pursuit of self-interest as the driving force behind rational actions (Τσακατίκα , 2004, pp. 160-161); (Hindmoor , 2010, p. 42). However, empirical studies have yet to conclusively confirm or refute its assumptions (Frederickson , Smith , Larimer, & Licari , 2016, pp. 197-198, 217). Rational choice theory has proven influential in analyzing phenomena like rent-seeking, regulatory capture, bribery, and favoritism, highlighting individual actors' behaviours in liberal democratic societies (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka , 2016). Nonetheless, its one-dimensional interpretations overlook the cultural dynamics within political-administrative systems, and its bounded rationality—where actors rely on decision-making shortcuts due to asymmetric information—challenges comprehensive analysis (Simon, 1957); (Cairney , 2012); (Carson, 2014).

Public interest theory, rooted in classical representative democracy, posits regulation as a corrective measure against market failures. These include monopolies, externalities, transaction costs, and information asymmetries. Its central goal is the welfare of all citizens (Ναλπαντίδου & Χατζής , 2010, p. 135). While defined as a legal concept grounded in the rule of law, public interest is sociologically fluid and shaped by prevailing social values (Γιαννακόπουλος, 2012, p. 100) (Πρεβεδούρου , 2020) (Boot, 2024). The challenges of ex-ante judgments about public interest, illustrated by the postwar prioritization of fossil fuels—later deemed detrimental due to climate change—highlight its complexity and evolving nature (Ho, 2012).

In fragmented societies with diverse identities and values, consensus on public interest has become increasingly elusive. Citizens' perceptions of regulatory measures, influenced by their identities and interests, reflect this fragmentation. For example, while the European Union's green transition policies address intergenerational climate issues, they face resistance from groups like farmers who perceive these policies as misaligned with their interests (Boot, 2024). Such tensions were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, further complicating public interest discourse.

Public choice theory integrates the self-interest of regulators, both economic and value-driven, into the regulatory process. It highlights the need for rationality, efficiency, and effectiveness while addressing phenomena like state failure, transaction costs, and the influence of lobbying networks (North D. C., 1984); (Butler, 2019, pp. 28-29). However, it critiques the irrationality stemming from limited information and decision-making challenges (Ναλπαντίδου & Χατζής , 2010, p. 32). Although widely applied to corruption studies, public choice theory struggles to interpret systemic corruption in environments where corrupt behaviours are normalized (Persson , Rothstein, & Teorell, 2013, p. 456).

The **neo-institutionalist** approach broadens the scope of regulatory studies by incorporating informal institutions and focusing on their impact on policy design and implementation. Unlike earlier theories, neo-institutionalism examines how institutions embed values and power dynamics, influencing interactions between institutions and individuals (Lowndes, 2010, p. 61). Immergut (1998) argues that aggregated individual preferences, often assumed in utilitarian models, can be ineffective or misleading. She emphasizes the normative shortcomings of viewing public interest as the sum of individual interests.

Neo-institutionalism encompasses multiple perspectives**, including rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, and discursive institutionalism**. These typologies diverge in their analysis of institutional evolution, relationships among actors, and the influence of informal behaviours within structured organizations like ministries and regulatory agencies (Hall & Taylor , 1996); (Ανδρέου, 2018, pp. 48-49). Despite their strengths in interpreting recurring political realities, they face criticism for their limited ability to analyze institutional creation and change (Σωτηρόπουλος , 1996, p. 97).

Rational choice institutionalism analyzes phenomena within structured institutions, emphasizing rule-based processes that enable actors to develop strategies (Shepsle, 2008). The **principal-agent paradigm**, rooted in rational choice theory, examines representation relationships and conflicts of interest between principals (e.g., citizens/civil servants) and agents (e.g., elected officials/political hierarchy). It highlights the challenges posed by asymmetric information, which complicates accountability and integrity in public administration (Lambsdorff, 2007, pp. 63-65) (Mauri & Muccio, 2012, p. 47). While effective in addressing endemic corruption, this model struggles to interpret systemic corruption where self-serving behaviours are normalized (Booth , 2012, pp. 10-12) (Marquette & Peiffer, 2015, pp. 4-5).

Collective action theory, introduced by Mancur Olson (1965), partly embedded into the rational choice institutionalism, explores the inherent difficulties in providing public goods. It identifies **free-rider behaviour**, where individuals benefit from collective efforts without contributing, as a moral hazard within collective action systems (Αλεξανδρόπουλος, 1996, p. 120); (Shepsle, 2008). The theory's insights into public administration include the interplay between bureaucracy, corruption, and trust in regulatory systems. Efforts to exclude free-riders often lead to increased administrative burdens, which may inadvertently create opportunities for bribery and extortion (Marquette & Peiffer, 2015, pp. 7-8).

Sociological institutionalism emphasizes the cultural dimensions of institutions, encompassing both formal and informal rules. Advocates of this approach argue that institutions transmit cultural norms and values, often prioritizing symbolic and cognitive roles over operational efficiency (Hall & Taylor , 1996, p. 14); (Ανδρέου, 2018, p. 112). This perspective highlights the "**logic of appropriateness**" where behaviour aligns with societal norms rather than instrumental goals (March & Olsen, 1984). This logic is particularly evident in public administration practices promoting accountability, integrity, and anti-corruption measures. The idea of institutions as cognitive and moral frameworks also informs anti-corruption campaigns and reinforces public service as a vocation adhering to rules of appropriateness.

Historical institutionalism focuses on how institutional design influences future decision-making and policy outcomes. By studying historical trajectories and interactions with societal contexts, this approach emphasizes **path dependence**, where institutional choices create "pathways" that constrain actors' behaviours and lead to inertia (Pierson , 1997); (Ανδρέου, 2018, pp. 90-91). Critical junctures, such as external pressures or shifts in dominant ideas, can disrupt these pathways, enabling institutional transformation (Hall & Taylor , 1996, p. 9). This framework also examines the unintended consequences of institutional decisions and the asymmetry of power within institutional arrangements (Ανδρέου, 2018, p. 87). Historical institutionalism has been applied to systemic corruption studies, particularly in Greece, where clientelism in public administration has been analyzed. The establishment of ASEP (Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection) serves as an example of institutional self-regulation to curb clientelistic practices (Trantidis & Tsagkroni, 2017).

Discursive institutionalism addresses the limitations of other frameworks in explaining institutional change and re-legitimation processes. This theory emphasizes the power of ideas and discourse in shaping institutional behaviour and transformations (Ανδρέου, 2018, pp. 138-142). According to Schmidt (2008, p. 305), discourse encapsulates ideas at philosophical, political, and programmatic levels and considers their normative and cognitive dimensions. Discourse frames how issues are presented and contextualized, influencing political actions and collective behaviours. Advocacy coalitions, such as Transparency International, utilize discourse to shape public narratives, define normative boundaries, and mobilize anti-corruption efforts (Schmidt, 2010, pp. 4-5). Additionally, discursive dynamics between institutional actors can illuminate corruption phenomena and shape responses.

The relationship between institutional theories and corruption varies. Sociological and historical institutionalism offer tools for understanding systemic corruption through path dependence and culturally embedded practices. Discursive institutionalism highlights how advocacy and rhetoric influence public perceptions of corruption and institutional reforms. For example, Transparency International's successful communication strategies have shaped global anti-corruption narratives. However, oversimplified discourse may create unrealistic expectations for institutional interventions, affecting governance outcomes (Arellano-Gault, Trejo, & Rojas-Salazar, 2022).

In conclusion, institutional theories provide comprehensive insights into the stability and change of institutions. Together, sociological, historical, and discursive institutionalism explain how norms, historical trajectories, and discourse shape institutions' ability to address systemic corruption and promote governance reforms.

Administrative Reform: Drivers and Challenges

The necessity for administrative reforms stems naturally from the dynamics of societal evolution, encompassing economic crises, technological shifts, and other transformations. As Spanou aptly observes, administrative reform often appears self-evident (Σπανού , 2021, p. 33). It embodies the process of transforming state structures and public administration by reassessing existing perceptions, objectives, and mechanisms. These changes are essential for addressing new demands and improving governance. The effectiveness of administrative mechanisms significantly impacts the performance of governments, thereby drawing the attention of political systems as a whole (March & Olson, 1983, p. 281).

Pollit and Bouckaert (2017, p. 2) describe administrative reform as the deliberate effort to improve the structures, procedures, and cultural dynamics of public organizations to enhance their functionality. Such reforms incorporate the views and inputs of diverse stakeholders, integrating ideas and alternative approaches at the intersection of politics and policy (Σπανού , 2021, p. 34). Therefore, the process of reforming public administration is inherently rational, involving the identification of problems and designing "purpose-means" solutions through causal reasoning (March & Olsen, 1984, p. 291). However, reform is also inherently contentious, shaped by conflicting perspectives on problems, solutions, and the means to achieve them. These conflicts

often involve vested interests among groups that perceive reforms as a threat to their gains (Σπανού , 2021, p. 39). These vested interests are the main characters at the “perceived corruption” narrative. Thus, reforms have both intended or unintended consequences to those perceptions.

Knill and Tosun (2012) provide a taxonomy of administrative changes, emphasizing different triggers for reform: learning-driven transformations based on actors' beliefs and values; incremental or shock-induced policy changes that disrupt equilibrium; and opportunistic exploitation of political "windows" to advance changes. Ladi and Dalakou contribute a fourth category, policy transfer, where external entities like supranational organizations influence the adaptation of policies across various temporal and spatial contexts. This process aligns closely with the concept of Europeanization[7] (Λαδή & Νταλάκου, 2016, pp. 213-219).

One can notice that the discourse on administrative reform underscores its dual nature: simultaneously sought after yet resisted. Public and stakeholder reactions oscillate between the desire for change to address dissatisfaction with the status quo and resistance to the uncertainties it entails. However, while reforms occupy prominent positions on global agendas (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 5-9), their outcomes often include superficial adjustments or "symbolic gestures" instead of substantial transformations (Σπανού , 2021, pp. 40-42). True reform requires reframing problems and solutions at the level of ideas and values, a challenging task given the complexity of entrenched systems.

Hall (1993, p. 279) categorizes reforms into three orders based on their depth. First-order changes involve routine modifications, such as adjustments to existing practices. Second-order changes encompass the introduction of new tools or policy priorities. Third-order changes, however, represent paradigm shifts—fundamental transformations of underlying assumptions guiding policies. While first and second-order changes are common, third-order reforms are rare and require broad consensus (Σπανού , 2021, pp. 45-46).

Historically, Pollit and Bouckaert (2017, p. 11) identify three phases in the evolution of administrative reform thought. The first phase, from the mid-1960s to late-1970s, emphasized rational planning, hierarchical organization, and cost-benefit analysis, reflecting the optimism of behaviouralism and rational choice theory. The second phase, spanning the late-1970s to late-1990s, was marked by the dominance of New Public Management (NPM), emphasizing entrepreneurial techniques to improve efficiency. The third phase, post-1990s, has seen fragmented ideas emphasizing governance networks, trust-building, and transparency.

Reforms under the umbrella term of NPM, which is the topic of this research, promotes goal-oriented and result-driven governance, internal competition within public administration, and extensive collaboration with the private sector and civil society in the

[7] Radaelli (2020, pp. 1-2) defines Europeanization as the internalization of EU-level norms, practices, and policies into national systems. While facilitating alignment with EU standards, Europeanization reveals diverse reform outcomes among member states due to varying national contexts.

design and delivery of public services (Kickert, 1997). However, its implementation creates a multifaceted and uneven ecosystem, and its impact on corruption remains debated. Some scholars argue that NPM-style reforms, such as market-driven incentives and decentralization, can enhance transparency and accountability, thereby reducing corruption (Hood, 1991). Others highlight risks such as blurred boundaries between public and private sectors and increased discretion among third parties, which may facilitate corruption (Rhodes, 1994) (Salamon, 2002). Empirical evidence on this relationship is limited, with researchers like von Maravic (2007) suggesting that corruption could emerge as an unintended consequence of NPM strategies, particularly through marketization and decentralization. Furthermore, the adoption of NPM reforms is neither consistent nor standardized, leading to varied outcomes across sectors and countries.

Evidently, different countries embarked on administrative reforms at different times based on their unique sociopolitical and economic conditions. While nations like the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand adopted reforms earlier, countries such as Greece and post-communist Eastern European states began their reform efforts later, often under external influences, and the Europeanization process. In Greece, for example, significant administrative reforms gained momentum following the 2009 economic crisis.

This crisis served as a critical juncture for Greece's public administration, triggering a wave of externally imposed reforms under the Troika's conditionality (EU, ECB, IMF). At the early years of that period, OECD performed a functional evaluation of the Greek public administration and identified numerous systemic weaknesses, including complex bureaucracy, legal formalism, lack of coordination, inadequate infrastructure, and widespread corruption (OECD, 2011). These issues were attributed to clientelistic political systems that undermined institutional logic and perpetuated inefficiencies (Καρκατσούλης , 2014, p. 604). Furthermore, political dependency, favoritism, and inertia exacerbated administrative challenges (Σωτηρόπουλος, 2007) (Λαδή Σ. , 2022).

Given the above-mentioned situation, the reforms agreed to be implemented, were a mix of fragmented and integrated measures, implemented under tight deadlines to address decades of systemic failures. While some reforms succeeded, such as the transformation of the tax collection to an independent authority, others faced challenges due to insufficient planning and ineffective execution. These efforts highlighted the phenomenon of "reform fatigue" that was presented in the public discourse during the crises period and raised questions about their long-term impact (Σπανού , 2021, p. 38).

Similar thoughts are raised by Pollit and Bouckaert (2017, pp. 5-9) who argue that although globalization, external pressures from supranational bodies, and public trust deficits continue to drive reforms worldwide (also (Σπανού , 2021, pp. 64-66)), the evaluation of their impacts remains critical for their overall perception by the public.

A good example of the above concept is the e-governance 'reforms' implemented in a 'copy-paste' manner in many contexts, illustrating both the potential and limitations of administrative reform. While Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have

improved the efficiency of public administration, they are not standalone reform models but rather tools embedded within broader frameworks, such as digitizing bureaucratic processes or supporting New Public Management (NPM) principles (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 7). In Greece, e-governance has been a part of the broader reform agenda but faces challenges due to systemic issues, such as the lack of simplification and the digital divide among users. In many cases, it merely represents a digitization of existing red tape, or at the very least, this is how some citizens perceive it.

The research will provide an analytical presentation of NPM principles, alongside the emerging paradigms of New Public Governance and New Public Service. For the two selected case studies, the specific tools employed to reform the sectors will be thoroughly analyzed, and the potential theoretical impact of these interventions on corruption perceptions will be assessed. This analysis will serve as the foundation for developing the research questionnaires and vignettes.

Conclusion

The bibliographical research conducted so far suggests that the various corruption phenomena and their conceptualizations in public perceptions are diverse. The term "corruption" is often used in an inflammatory manner or as an explanation for citizens' dissatisfaction. Data from perception research highlight the conceptual puzzle that citizens express. Many of these perceptions may stem from certain regulatory theories that shape how citizens think about the operation of the public sector and the function of public administration. On the other hand, specific reforms, following certain methodologies, have been implemented in the public sector over the last 10 years. Is there evidence that these reforms have influenced or will influence perceptions of corruption in Greece? This question remains to be addressed by the presented study.

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