The Role of Information Policy in Shaping Public Opinion on Corruption in the Visegrad Group Countries

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Abstract

The state's information policy that limits press freedom and conceals incidents of corruption is a significant threat to democracy. The work aimed to identify the relationship between corruption and information policy in the Visegrad Group countries. The research employed statistical analysis, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and thematic analysis. The research established worsening trends in Poland and Hungary regarding the corruption rate. At the same time, there is an improvement in the positions of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which may indicate an effective anti-corruption policy. Press freedom indicators show similar trends, decreasing for Poland and Hungary and increasing for the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The correlation analysis revealed a close relationship between corruption indicators and press freedom in Poland and Hungary. The multiple regression analysis revealed the influence of the Press Freedom Index on the corruption rate. These results indicate the dependence of the corruption rate in Poland and Hungary on the information policy of the countries regarding the restriction of media freedom. The obtained conclusions can be useful for civil servants in the course of developing an information policy that takes into account anti-corruption trends.

Keywords: Information policy, public opinion, corruption, media freedom, Visegrad Group countries, civil society, political actors

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Introduction

The right to information and freedom of speech are basic democratic values. The state, on the one hand, must provide civil society with reliable and complete information within the scope of the current legislation, while on the other − ensure the right to freedom of speech and media freedom. The mass media is one of the key mediators between the state and the people because they provide people with information about the most important events. At the same time, the state's information policy can use various mechanisms to control the mass media, including those that limit freedom of speech and citizens' right to information (Cloet, 2020). Such actions can be carried out both within the general political course of the state and for the personal benefit of individual political actors or parties.

In turn, corruption is an acute problem for many countries, which undermines not only moral and social values but also threatens countries' national security. Corruption in the political sphere is particularly threatening because it can affect state decisions and the effectiveness of government policy (Slijepčević et al., 2020; Topchii et al., 2021). Decisions made only for personal gain and not for the benefit of society can harm order and security in the country and undermine the democratic system. Corruption in the top echelons of power can encourage corrupt public figures to exert influence in the field of information policy, not allowing coverage of certain incidents in the media, thereby limiting press freedom.

Central and Eastern European countries are characterised by a lower level of development of the democratic tradition and lower institutional efficiency (Laboutková & Vymětal, 2019). In particular, the corruption rate in the Visegrad Group countries is higher than the average indicators of other European Union countries (EU) countries. These countries were under the influence of the communist regime for a long time, which may be one of the main reasons for the current state (Soukupová, 2013). Resolving the current challenges may require a long period, during which it is necessary to strengthen the development of civil society to consolidate and strengthen liberal democratic values (Haydanka, 2021; Utama & Ramadhani, 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2023). This will enable the formation of a fair environment to ensure the interests of all members of society (Meyer et al., 2020). The catalyst of the process can be independent mass media, which acts as an intermediary between the state and citizens, providing the latter with timely and reliable information (Utama & Ramadhani, 2022). At the same time, the information policy of the state that limits the freedom of the mass media, which is often characteristic of the Visegrad Group countries (Schimpfössl &

Yablokov, 2020), may prove to be a significant obstacle to the development of a democratic society, including in the fight against corruption.

The aim of the research is to identify the relationship between corruption and information policy in the Visegrad Group countries. The aim involves the fulfilment of the following research objectives:

- describe the trends of corruption in the Visegrad Group countries;
- reveal the main aspects of the information policy of the Visegrad Group countries, in particular regarding the level of media freedom;
- determine the relationship between corruption and information policy in the Visegrad Group countries;
- identify the influence of the information policy of the studied countries on the formation of public opinion regarding corruption, taking into account the analysis results.

Literature review

The trends in the corruption rate in the Visegrad Group countries are of concern and have been explored in many studies. The information policy of the countries is discussed along with this, which is often the object of criticism.

The works of Linhartová and Halásková (2022) and Hrynicki (2020) became the background of the author's research. In their study, Linhartová and Halásková (2022) test the hypothesis about whether the level of control over corruption affects the level of its perception. Another hypothesis expressed in the study concerns the identification of the main determinants of corruption for the Visegrad Group countries. Hrynicki (2020) emphasises that countries that care about the rule of law tend to be much more successful in fighting corruption. The level of development of civil society also plays an important role here.

Arayankalam et al. (2021) find an indirect relationship between e-government development and corruption through government administrative efficiency. In addition, the researchers noted the influence of the spread of social media on the relationship between administrative efficiency and corruption.

The work of Makarenko (2020) is worth noting in the context of the research, which focuses on corruption in Hungary. The researcher found two main types of such activity in the country – illegal actions in the private sector and at the intersection of public and private spheres. Another work of the researcher (Makarenko & Bakumov, 2022) focused on the experience of the Czech Republic and noted many more positive trends. Regarding corruption in the Czech Republic, Kristek (2023) notes that the reports of companies in the country lack detailed information on the fight against corruption.

Pirro and Della Porta (2021) explore the possibilities of anti-corruption organisations and activists in Hungary. The researchers found that the current state policy limits the opportunities of such actors, prompting them to adopt outsider strategies and contradictory discourses. Snegovaya (2020) examines the impact of perceived corruption on voter intentions, using Hungary as an example. The researcher identified three alternative effects of the corruption perception: encouraging abstention from voting, decreasing support for the current government, or increasing support for opposition parties.

Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2022) examine the impact of disciplinary and ethical codes on anti-corruption in Poland. Researchers have found that such codes work most effectively in tandem without having a significant effect when applied alone. Haughton et al. (2022) study patterns of party behaviour in Slovakia, focusing on the issue of corruption. Researchers found that anti-corruption appeals in candidates' pre-election campaigns can significantly benefit the election results. Lendvorský et al. (2021) use the example of Slovakia, noting that public pressure to combat corruption in everyday life and the political elite tends to grow.

The literature review revealed some gaps in research on corruption in the Visegrad Group countries. The role of countries' information policy in forming public opinion on corruption is understudied. The researchers noted that high corruption in the country is often associated with the restriction of media freedom, while this thesis needs additional justification.

Methodology
Research design

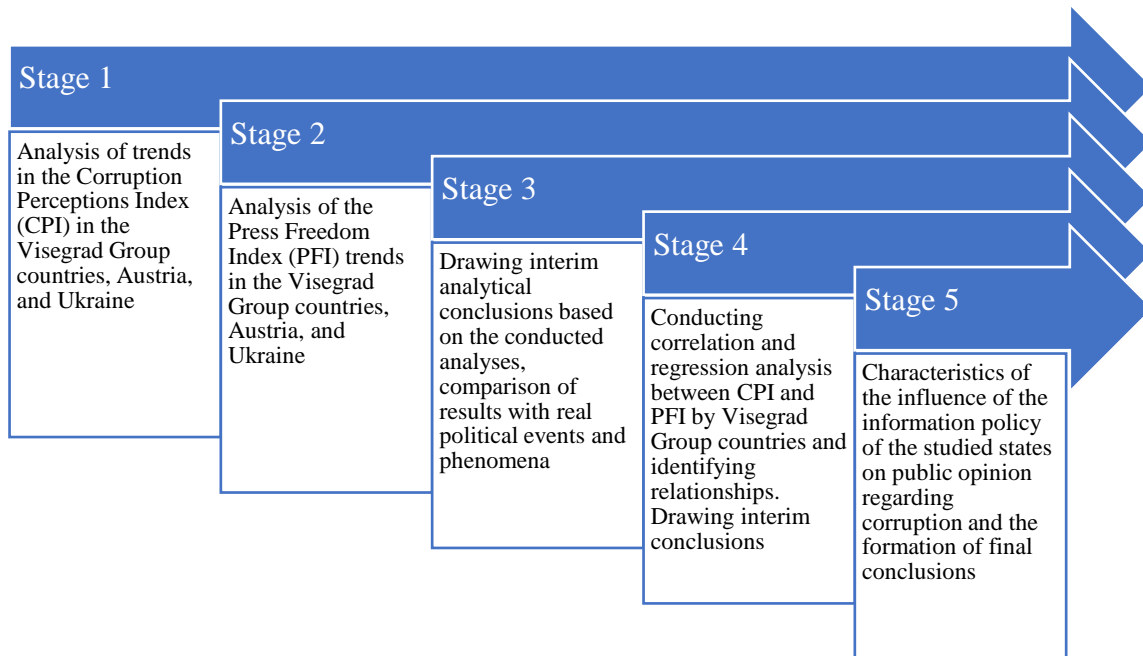The research was conducted in the following stages (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Research design (created by the author)

Sample

The sample of countries for the study included the Visegrad Group countries − Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. These countries are characterised by a significantly higher corruption rate than other EU countries, which was a key reason for their inclusion in the study. The values of the CPI and PFI for the Visegrad Group countries are relatively close. Therefore, it was decided to include two more countries in the study to enable comparison. Because of the geopolitical similarity, which is often characteristic of territorially close countries, it was determined that it is appropriate to compare the data of the Visegrad group countries with the countries with which they share common borders. The most successful examples are Austria and Ukraine. The former is a developed EU country that was not significantly affected by the communist regime but has similar economic, cultural, and political features. The latter − is a country that was also influenced by the communist regime but does not belong to the EU and has strong European integration intentions. It was possible to conduct an illustrative comparison and obtain thorough conclusions at the intersection of the similar and different features mentioned.

The key indicators for the analysis were CPI and PFI. The CPI is used to obtain a numerical measure of the corruption rate in the country (Transparency

International, 2023). PFI shows the degree of press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Both indices are measured from 0 to 100, the higher the value, the lower the level of corruption/the greater media freedom.

Methods

Statistical analysis was an important method during the study, and it was used to identify trends and compare values between countries for the key studied indicators (CPI and PFI). The most successful among the studied countries in the fight against corruption were found with the help of this method, which is characterised by a higher level of press freedom. Correlation analysis was used to identify the relationship between the CPI and the PFI for each Visegrad Group country. This made it possible to determine the countries where corruption is most closely related to the degree of press freedom. The multiple regression analysis revealed the influence of the PFI indicator as an independent variable on the CPI, which was used as a dependent variable. This made it possible to confirm the influence of information policy on the corruption rate in the country. Thematic analysis was used to explore corruption in the studied countries using various sources, particularly reports, surveys, news, statements of public figures, etc.

Results

Examining the experience of the Visegrad Group countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) concerning corruption, it is worth noting that the medium level of corruption in these countries is comparatively higher than in most other EU countries. This may be related to the influence of the communist regime, at the same time, such countries as Estonia (ranks twelfth with a score of 76) have coped with a similar problem, not least focusing on the experience of the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden), which are world leaders in the fight against corruption.

The indices for the Visegrad Group countries, which generally are quite close in terms of values (at least in certain periods) are compared with other countries (Austria and Ukraine). Figure 2 contains CPI values for the indicated countries for 2013 to 2023.
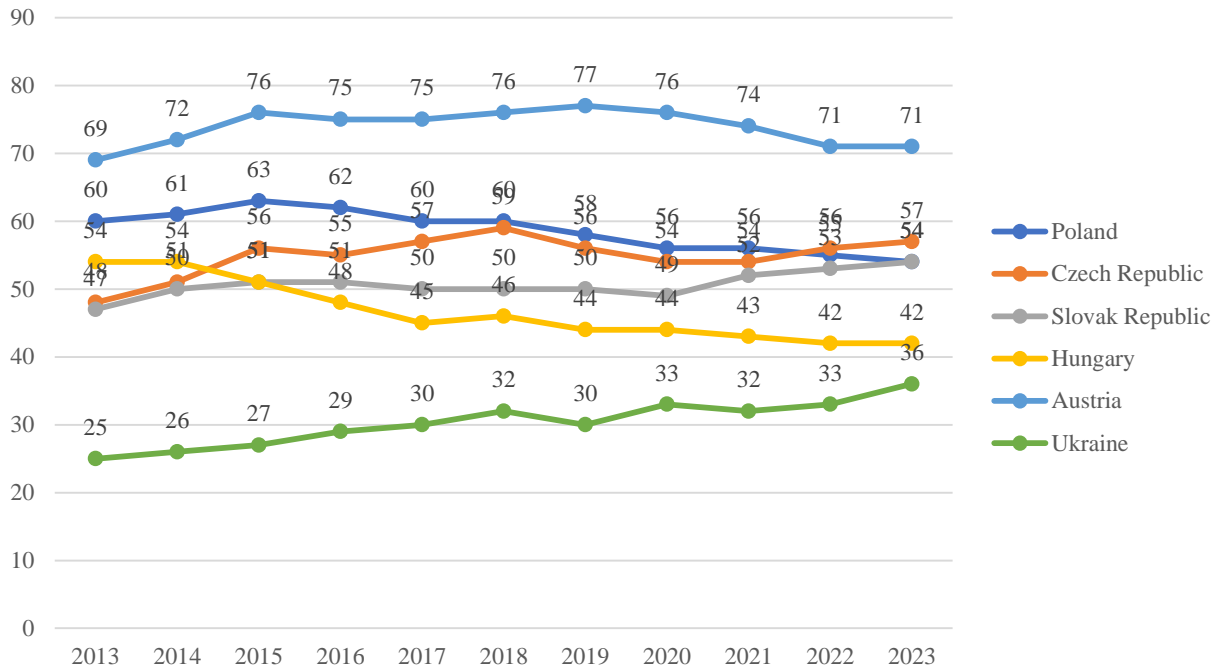
Figure 2. Corruption Perceptions Index in the Visegrad Group countries in comparison with Austria and Ukraine (created by the author based on Transparency International (2023))

Figure 2 shows that the highest CPI values are typical for Austria, and the high corruption rate is characteristic of Ukraine, although the country has risen 11 positions in ten years. CPI indicators for the Visegrad Group countries are between the indicators for Ukraine and Austria during the entire period under study. However, the trends of indicators differ significantly within the group. In particular, Poland was the group's leader from 2013 to 2021, but the value of the CPI for the country gradually decreased, and the Czech Republic overtook it in 2022 and 2023. Gradual growth of the indicator for Slovakia can be noted, as well as the most catastrophic decrease for Hungary — in 10 years, the indicator decreased by 12 positions.

Transparency International (2020) stated that a common feature of individual countries of the Visegrad Group during the assessment of corruption is the conflict of interests of political actors. For example, Hungary significantly worsened its position by adopting new legislative acts and unannounced negotiations (Linder, 2019). This led to an increase in corruption, which was actually state-sponsored. In addition, the country imposed restrictions on non-

governmental organisations fighting for human rights and democracy. According to Reuters, Hungary has also undermined the judicial system's independence. This, in turn, impairs the ability of courts to prosecute high-level corruption cases (Strupczewski, 2019). Most often, when it comes to corruption in Hungary, this phenomenon is associated with the activities of the Fidesz party and its leader V. Orbán, who is also often accused of misusing EU funds (Linder, 2019). The gradual decrease in Poland's position may be caused by the strengthening of government control over state institutions and the struggle for justice reforms. The Czech Republic is also characterised by certain problems, primarily the privatisation of public interests, the lack of independent media, and pressure on the media by civil servants. The country has experienced political scandals involving the prime minister and his efforts to obtain public money for his company, indicating a lack of political integrity (Transparency International, 2022). In Slovakia, where conflicts of political interests have already occurred, a high-profile event took place in 2018 — the murder of a journalist whose investigations were related to state-level corruption (Transparency International, 2020).

The head of Transparency International (2018), Delia Ferreira Rubio, noted that the results of the CPI are related to attacks on press freedom and oppression of non-governmental organisations. It should also be added that, in general, countries with high corruption rates also tend to provide very weak protections for journalists and the media (Transparency International, 2020). Such views can be confirmed by analysing the PFI alongside the CPI (Figure 3).
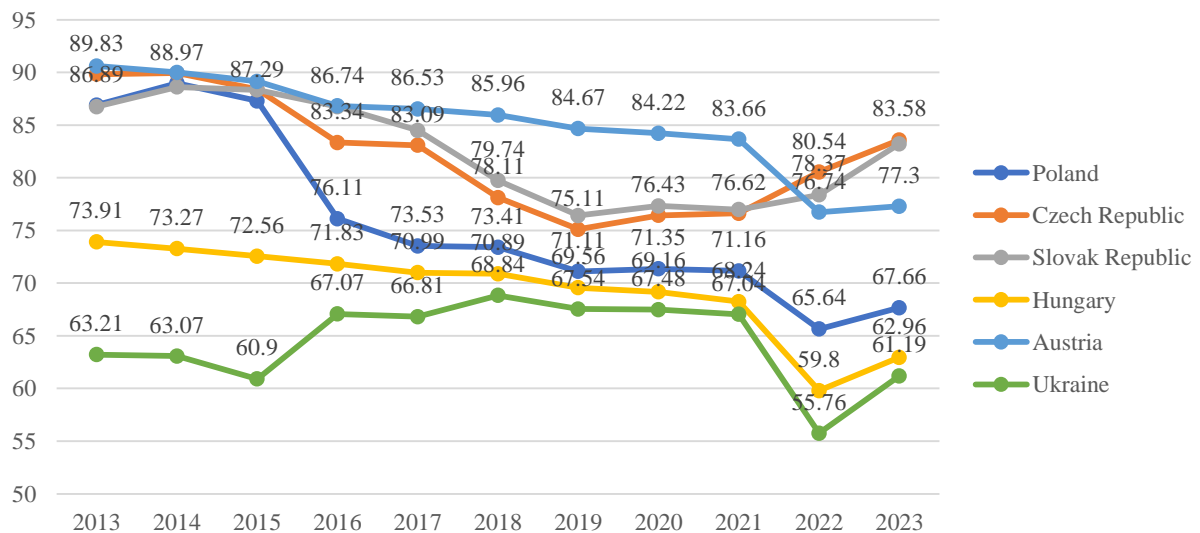

Figure 3. Press Freedom Index in the Visegrad Group countries in comparison with Austria and Ukraine (created by the author based on (Reporters without Borders, 2023))

A comparison of the PFI and CPI values reveals some differences in trends. So, the highest press freedom is characteristic of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which yielded to Austria in the last two years (2022 and 2023). Poland leads with a noticeable gap, followed by Hungary and Ukraine, and all three countries are characterised by a noticeable decrease in the Index in 2022 and a gradual return to previous values in 2023. It is possible to assume that this situation was caused by the beginning of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Poland and Hungary have common borders with Ukraine and actively participate in media coverage of the conflict.

More indicative data were obtained through a correlation analysis between PFI and CPI indicators for 2013 to 2023 for each country under study. Table 1 presents the results of the analysis.

Table 1
Correlation between PFI and CPI for 2013 to 2023 for the studied countries (calculated by the author)

Country	Correlation between PFI and CPI
Poland	0.781144
Czech Republic	-0.525493
Slovak Republic	-0.193014
Hungary	0.783225
Austria	0.173936
Ukraine	-0.021086

Table 1 shows that high correlation values are typical for two countries — Poland and Hungary. The relationship is positive, and therefore, the increase of one indicator is associated with the growth of another. So, it can be assumed that corruption in these two countries is significantly related to restricting press freedom. For further analysis, a multiple regression analysis was conducted for the indicators of Poland and Hungary (the dependent variable was the CPI and the independent variable was the PFI) (Tables 2-3).

Table 2
Results of the multiple regression analysis for Poland (calculated by the author)

	BETA	Standard error BETA	B	Standard error B	t(9)	p-value
Free term			36.92268	5.815816	6.348667	0.000133
PFI	0.781144	0.208117	0.28669	0.076383	3.753391	0.004531

PFI has a statistically significant effect on CPI in Poland, i.e. press freedom is closely related to the corruption rate. The coefficient is positive, so the higher the degree of press freedom, the greater the probability of a decrease in corruption.

Table 3
Results of the multiple regression analysis for Hungary (calculated by the author)

	BETA	Standard error BETA	B	Standard error B	t(9)	p-value
Free term			-9.31938	14.83291	-0.628291	0.545425
PFI	0.783225	0.207246	0.80652	0.21341	3.779203	0.004354

PFI for Hungary also has a statistically significant effect on CPI. It can be assumed that with the growth of one indicator, the other will grow as well, i.e., strengthening press freedom will contribute to success in the fight against corruption.

Therefore, the results of the analysis for Poland and Hungary give grounds to conclude that the corruption rate will most likely decrease as the level of press freedom increases. However, the current policy in both states is aimed at limiting the role of mass media in covering socially significant events, particularly in relation to incidents with a corruption component. At the same time, despite the restrictions on access to information, according to a survey in Hungary, two-thirds of the country's citizens considered their government corrupt even in 2016. About 60% of respondents also believe that corruption in the country is present among the top government ranks, including Prime Minister V. Orban (Linder, 2019). As of 2023, the situation in the country has not changed, it has only worsened, according to the CPI data, because the power concentrated in the ruling elite of the country and accumulated due to corruption allows the Fidesz party chaired by V. Orbán to continue to rule (Linder, 2019; Camut, 2023). A positive aspect is that despite restrictions on press freedom in the country, a large part of the population perceives the problem of corruption.

Discussion

The analysis showed a close connection between the growth of corruption and the restriction of press freedom in Poland and Hungary. Slovakia and the Czech Republic have had better success in the fight against corruption, and they are characterized by the highest PFI indices among the studied countries.

Linhartová and Halásková (2022) confirmed that countries with a higher corruption perception rate have lower corruption control. In addition, it was found that the political and economic determinants of corruption are the main ones for the Visegrad Group countries, in particular, the phase of economic development, the size of the public sector, the share of women in the workforce, the openness of the economy, the degree of urbanisation. Given that the author's work was primarily focused on the role of state information policy in corruption perceptions, the degree of press freedom should be added to the noted determinants. As noted in the author's work, this indicator significantly impacts perceptions of corruption in individual Visegrad Group countries.

In their study, Arayankalam et al. (2021) noted that the spread of social media has given citizens new ways to monitor government activities and leverage public administration to respond accordingly. At the same time, as was established in the study, the policy of individual Visegrad Group countries is aimed at strengthening control over social networks, which can lead to the levelling of benefits from their use and even the use of social media for one's purposes, for manipulation.

The work of Hrynicki (2020) confirms that, compared to the average world indicators, the corruption rate in the Visegrad Group countries is not very high. At the same time, the indicators of individual countries of the group are the lowest among the EU countries, and the preservation of current trends, further political scandals and crime can significantly worsen the situation of these states. Such conclusions were confirmed in the author's research by analysing the CPI of the Visegrad Group countries. However, it is worth adding that the trends within the group itself are not the same. In particular, the CPI and PFI indices for Slovakia and the Czech Republic have an upward trend, which may indicate effective steps in the fight against corruption.

Makarenko (2020) points out that to successfully fight corruption, it is necessary to increase the role of the public in this process, encourage the participation of the press, and improve the transparency of government activities. The case of Hungary shows that the main task is to ensure a transparent methodology for public procurement, procedures for submitting applications for tenders and grants, and appropriate monitoring. At the same time, the analysis carried out in the author's article demonstrates the high complexity of

implementing such measures because corruption in the country, as stated in many reputable sources, including Transparency International, can exist at the highest level and be sponsored by the state. In a later work, Makarenko and Bakumov (2022) reveal the experience of the Czech Republic in the fight against corruption, which, unlike Hungary, is generally positive. The Platform for the Reconstruction in Ukraine, which promotes political activity within the limits of the rules of democracy, is worthy of attention. The work of the General Inspectorate of Security Forces of the Czech Republic, which investigates individual corruption cases, should be noted. According to the results of the author's research, the significant growth of PFI should be added to the country's achievements, which will enable greater media freedom and media coverage of reliable information.

Kristek (2023) concludes that the disclosure of anti-corruption information by Czech companies contributes to forming a socially responsible image of such companies. Such conclusions confirm the importance of transparency and providing access to information, speaking more broadly – proper information policy both at the company and state levels).

Pirro and Della Porta (2021) stated that Hungary's mobilising potential for anti-corruption activism is limited under V. Orbán's rule. Looking at the political context of anti-corruption activities, condemning the actions of a party supported by the majority of voters makes this tactic ineffective. The researchers found that the most successful anti-corruption activities are at the cultural level. Snegovaya (2020) focused on corruption in Hungary and established that higher corruption perception indicators primarily cause abstention from voting in elections. The author found in this study that the corruption rate in Hungary causes the greatest concern among the Visegrad Group countries. The probability of corruption at the highest levels of government can, among other things, call into question both the possibilities of anti-corruption activities and the credibility of election results.

Studying the impact of disciplinary and ethical codes on corruption in Poland, Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2022) conclude that the isolated application of anti-corruption tools may not provide the expected effect. At the same time, the consistent use of several effective tools can significantly increase the chances of success in anti-corruption activities. In the author's opinion, one of the most important tools that should be applied in a complex environment with disciplinary and ethical codes is to find opportunities for the media to cover reliable information.

Haughton et al. (2022) note the effectiveness of the election campaign in Slovakia, where one of the main theses was a call to combat corruption. In addition, the information policy of the party – Ordinary People and Independent Personalities – provided for putting the ideas into voters' heads through television

and leaders' debates promoting topics related to effective governance, including anti-corruption activities. So, the party's information policy considered the civic attitude to the corruption problem, which was used to increase voter loyalty. In general, according to the results of the author's research, Slovakia is characterised by a positive trend according to the CPI, which may not least be connected with the established public opinion regarding the inadmissibility of corruption. This opinion is confirmed by Lendvorský et al. (2021), who notes that public pressure in Slovakia for political responsibility is increasing. At the same time, in the researcher's opinion, increased attention to the importance of anti-corruption activities does not imply an increase in its effectiveness.

Conclusion

Public opinion on corruption and understanding its inadmissibility in a democratic state is an important incentive to mobilise civil society to fight against this destructive phenomenon. Public opinion is formed, not least under the influence of mass media and new media. However, if the state's information policy is aimed at limiting the freedom of the press, people may not receive enough information to draw critical conclusions.

The study revealed that the CPI and PFI of Poland and Hungary are characterised by downward trends, while these indicators of the Czech Republic and Slovakia are gradually increasing. The correlation analysis between the CPI and PFI indicators revealed a significant strength of the relationship only for the indicators of Poland and Hungary. The results of the multiple regression analysis give grounds to assume that in these two countries, as the level of press freedom increases, the corruption rate will probably decrease. However, the current information policy of governments can become a significant obstacle in this process. Further research should focus on identifying opportunities for civil mobilisation to support and develop democratic values using social networks in the context of strict state censorship and media control.

Recommendations are as follows:

- increase media freedom through communication and cooperation of state, non-state organisations, the public, and independent mass media;
- conduct campaigns to improve media literacy;
- ensure disclosure of anti-corruption information by companies;
- to develop a culture that increases social consciousness;
- monitor the population's attitude to corruption through regular surveys.

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