

## Article<sup>1</sup>

### Public or private corruption?

The ideological dimension of anti-corruption discourses in Colombia, Ecuador and Albania

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#### Abstract

This is a summary of some of the main arguments and findings of the book *¿Corrupción pública o privada? La dimensión ideológica de los discursos anti-corrupción en Colombia, Ecuador y Albania* (Bogotá: Tirant lo Blanch, 2020). The book compares the official anti-corruption discourses of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) in Colombia, President Rafael Correa (2007-2017) in Ecuador and prime minister Edi Rama (2013-present) in Albania. It shows that although these three countries face very similar levels and perceptions of corruption their governments articulate this phenomenon differently due to their distinct ideological positions. While the neoliberal governments of Santos and Rama defined corruption primarily as abuse of public office and locate it mainly in the public sector, or in its interaction with the private one, the government of Rafael Correa, which embraced the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism, defined corruption primarily as a problem of the private sector that captures and distorts the public sector.

#### Keywords

ideology, anti-corruption, neoliberalism, socialism, Colombia, Ecuador, Albania

#### Introduction: The illusion of corruption

In many developing countries, such as Colombia, Ecuador and Albania, the topic of corruption is so ubiquitous that it is easy to imagine that we are dealing with an objective phenomenon that can be identified as easily as poverty, inequality, or breast cancer. In fact, politicians present it as a disease when they denounce ‘the cancer of corruption’. Therefore, the ‘war against corruption’ often resembles the war against poverty or the war against breast cancer.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an English summary of the book *¿Corrupción pública o privada? La dimensión ideológica de los discursos anti-corrupción en Colombia, Ecuador and Albania*. (Bogota: Tirant lo Blanch, 2020) and as such it has not been peer-reviewed by JEA.

This is what I call the illusion of corruption. The idea that this phenomenon exists out there and that it can be objectively identified or measured. This is an illusion that vanishes as soon as we ask what is corruption? In the academia many refer to corruption as the abuse of public power for private ends. Some like Nye define it as behaviour that deviates from the formal duties of public office due to private considerations (Nye 1967, 419) or like Dobel understand it as a general failure of citizens to commit to the common good (Dobel 1978, 960). Others define corruption at a more political level as a form of political exclusion (Warren 2004) or as the failure of liberal democracy to live up to its standards (Sullivan 2005, 100). The definitions of corruption are so varied and numerous that it is difficult to believe that they refer to the same phenomenon. The disagreement on the nature of corruption extends well beyond academia. Although politicians, journalists and citizens all denounce, and complain about corruption, it is not always clear that they are talking about the same practices, actions, or phenomena (Isaza y Sandoval 2018, 111).

Naturally, one could argue that corruption is not the only contested concept in politics. There is hardly a complete consensus over concepts such as poverty or inequality, which are widely debated. The level of disagreement over the concept of corruption, however, is much deeper than in the case of poverty and inequality. This is reflected in the simple fact that while there are indexes that measure actual levels of poverty and inequality, such as the Gini coefficient, there is no such an index in the case of corruption. It is easy to forget that the most commonly used index of corruption developed by Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index (CPI) measures *perceptions* of corruption and not its actual levels. In a similar fashion the Control of Corruption Index (CCI) developed by the World Bank measures the degree to which there is a perception that public power is exercised for private benefit (World Bank 2018).

In other words, corruption is so elusive that there is no measure of its actual levels. This happens not only because corrupt acts take place under the shadow of secrecy but also because we are dealing with a concept that is far more ideological than cancer, poverty, or inequality. Even if we agreed at a very abstract level that corruption essentially means the transformation of something from good to bad, which means that it refers to degradation, perversion, degeneration, depravation, and so on, it would be difficult to reach a consensus over its meaning in the political sphere. This happens because there is no agreement as to what is the 'good' political condition from which a political system, a public official or a citizen has deviated. There can be no consensus as to what corruption is in politics 'because there is hardly a consensus on the "naturally sound condition of politics"' (Philp 1997, 445).

This means that every definition of corruption reflects certain political ideals as well as certain ways of understanding politics in general (Philp and David-Barrett 2015, 392). So, if social justice constitutes one's principal political ideal, then corruption will most likely be defined as social injustice. If, on the other hand, the

highest political ideal that one advocates is free competition, corruption will appear as the deviation from such an ideal, or else, as distorted, or unfair competition. Consequently, there is no agreement as to the meaning of corruption because there cannot be an agreement on the ideal political regime. For some, the ideal political system should prioritise freedom, for others equality or stability.

Given how central the ideological dimension is to the concept of corruption it is rather surprising that it has received such scarce attention in political science. In the case of Colombia, for example, out of myriads of articles and books on corruption I could only find two that directly addressed its ideological dimension (Vasquez and Montoya 2011; Montoya 2000). Such neglect was also reflected in the four-volume monumental study of the Universidad de Externado entitled *Corruption in Colombia* that explored the nature, causes, consequences, perceptions of and the fight against corruption in the country. None of the fifty research articles of this four-volume study explicitly addressed its ideological dimension.

Hence my book *¿Corrupción pública o privada? La dimensión ideológica de los discursos anti-corrupción en Colombia, Ecuador y Albania* (*Public or private corruption? The ideological dimension of anti-corruption discourses in Colombia, Ecuador and Albania*) aimed to fill this void in corruption literature. What follows is a presentation of the key ideas in the book for the English-speaking audience. The book filled this void by identifying the ideological implications of different definitions of corruption and the anti-corruption policies they give rise to. To this end I compared the official anti-corruption discourses of the government of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) in Colombia, President Rafael Correa (2007-2017) in Ecuador and prime minister Edi Rama (2013-present) in Albania. Although these three countries faced similar levels and perceptions of corruption their governments differ both in its articulation and in their anti-corruption policies. I argue that such differences are an outcome of their different ideological positions. Santos in Colombia advocated a moderate neoliberal ideology which, while identifying the market as the primary source of socio-economic development, did recognize the necessity of state intervention. Correa in Ecuador propagated 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism, which was highly critical of the neoliberal developmental model and identified the state as the key motor of socio-economic development. Finally, Edi Rama in Albania advocated a more fundamental neoliberal ideology which identified the market as the only source of development while reducing the state to an obstacle that had to be overcome.

## **The Ideological and Discursive Analysis of Corruption: A Theoretical Framework**

A discursive and ideological analysis of corruption combines discourse theory developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1984) with the conceptual analysis of ideologies developed by Michael Freeden (1996). From a discourse theory perspective corruption does not enjoy a fixed signified or an essence. Its meaning appears within a specific discourse which determines what signified will be associated with

the signifier corruption. From a conceptual analysis, on the other hand, the meaning of corruption is relational, it is construed through association with other concepts that are articulated along with it. That is to say, the meaning of corruption differs depending on whether it is articulated in association with a concept such as ‘public’ (public corruption) or ‘private’ (private corruption).

Despite their differences these two perspectives are complementary. The discursive perspective allows us to identify the conditions, as well as the power relations, that enable the connection between a signifier such as ‘corruption’ and a specific signified, such as ‘abuse of public office for private ends’. This is an ideological process insofar as fixing the meaning of a concept is one of the core functions of ideology (Freeden 2013, 75). Thus, the dominant definition of corruption as ‘abuse of public office for private gain’ has ideological implications because it limits the phenomenon in the public sphere. It, therefore, tends to legitimize neoliberal policies that under the anti-corruption banner seek to reduce the public sphere through privatization or the extension of the market logic.

Nevertheless, the ideological dimension of corruption above is not exhausted by its definition. This means that a left-wing ideology, such as the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can also define corruption as ‘abuse of public office’, but articulate it in association with the capture of the state by private actors. In this case the signifier ‘corruption’ while connected to the signifier ‘abuse of public office’ does not exclude the private sector from where it originates. In a similar fashion a populist ideology could articulate the concept of corruption as abuse of public office in association with the political elite, articulating it as a problem that results primarily from the corrupt elites. Finally, a neoliberal ideology can articulate the same concept in proximity with other concepts such as free competition or government intervention articulating a corruption that has to do with the distortion of the market by government intervention. To sum up, the concept of corruption as abuse of public office has different ideological dimensions depending on whether it is articulated as the capture of the state by private actors, as a characteristic of the ruling elites or as a consequence of state intervention in the market.

### ***Corruption as a discursive phenomenon: floating and empty signifiers***

Discourses are practices that ‘systematically constitute the objects they talk about’ (Foucault 1972, 49). This means that instead of analysing corruption as concept with a stable meaning it is more useful to analyse it as a sign which consists of a stable signifier ‘corruption’ that connects to a multitude of distinct signified such as ‘degradation’, ‘abuse of public office’, ‘state capture’, ‘political exclusion’, ‘bribery’, etc. This means that instead of looking for a singularity, the common denominator of the different definitions of corruption or the phenomena that they all define as corrupt (such as bribery), we should recognize and identify the plurality of meanings that the signifier ‘corruption’ denotes. The concept of floating signifier developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1984) is very useful here. A floating signifier is characterized by the ‘sliding of the signified under the

signifier’ (Torfing 2004, 62). Corruption can be analysed as a ‘floating signifier’ insofar as it is assigned different meanings by different actors in different contexts. This happens not only in politics where different actors compete to connect the signifier ‘corruption’ to different signified, but also in academia.

Thus, in the modernization paradigm developed in the 1950s corruption marked the distance between a modern state and a traditional or a modernizing one. In the economic paradigm that followed it in the 1980s, corruption was understood more as a public sector problem that resulted from state intervention in the economy. Finally, in the political paradigm corruption was understood more as a failure of politics or democracy. Table 1 below summarizes the way the signifier ‘corruption’ was connected to different signifieds in different academic paradigms.

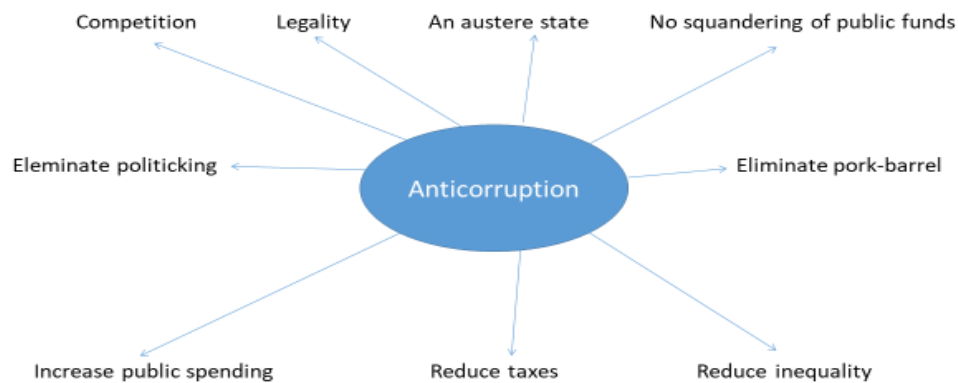
**Table 1.** Corruption as a floating signifier, Source: Kajsiu 2020, 73.

<b>Discourse/Paradigm</b>	Modernization	Economic	Political
<b>Signifier</b>	Corruption	Corruption	Corruption
<b>Signified</b>	Lack of modernization Nepotism Clientelism Bribery Abuse of public office	Rent seeking State capture Bribery Lack of free competition	Injustice Betrayal of public interest Deceptive exclusion Failure of liberal democracy

A floating signifier can be transformed into an empty signifier if it begins to represent such a multitude of different demands that it tends to *lose specific meaning*. The easiest way to describe an empty signifier is as a signifier without a signified (Torfing 2004, 301). A particular social demand (such as democratization, development or order) becomes an empty signifier when without necessarily completely abandoning its particularity it is transformed into a signifier that represents a variety of other social demands (Laclau 2005, 39). Anti-corruption can be a good example of an empty signifier because it often serves to represent such a wide variety of demands that the signifier ‘anti-corruption’ comes to stand for almost anything in general – from democracy to development – and nothing in particular. By representing myriad demands, often contradictory, anti-corruption can articulate a political, economic, or social order that is free of internal contradictions, whose failure is simply due to corruption or its bad implementation.

This was the function performed by the anti-corruption discourse of Ivan Duque, the presidential candidate of the right-wing *Centro Democrático*, in the 2018 presidential campaign in Colombia. Against corruption Duque could promise more democracy, a cleaner politics, more market, less taxes and more social spending at the same time. See figure 1 below:

**Figure 1.** Anti-corruption as an empty signifier in Ivan Duque’s discourses in the 2018 presidential campaign in Colombia, Source: Kajsiiu 2020, 198.



As we can see from the figure above anti-corruption has embraced so many different signifieds that it came to represent a number of different social demands, which would otherwise be contradictory. It is against corruption that such different demands appear as equivalent, defined not in opposition to each other but rather in opposition to corruption.

### **The Ideological Dimension of Corruption**

According to Freedden ideologies are characterized ‘by a morphology that displays core, adjacent, and peripheral concepts’ (Freedden 1996, 77). The central concepts of an ideology constitute its conceptual core that can be identified in its diverse manifestations. They are defined not only in relation to each other but also in relation to adjacent concepts that limit their meaning within a given cultural or logical context. Liberty, for example, is a central concept of liberalism, but its specific meaning depends on whether it is placed in proximity to adjacent concepts such as ‘free competition’ or ‘human rights’. The latter represents a cultural constraint on the concept of liberty given that the notion of universal human rights is a western cultural construction (Freedden 2013, 81). Unlike the adjacent concepts the peripheral ones are ‘situated in the exterior perimeter of an ideology, between thought and action’ (Freedden 2013, 84). In other words, the peripheral concepts consist in the practices or policies that certain ideology engenders in a given context.

I utilize the conceptual analysis of ideologies developed by Freeden (1996) to spell out the conceptual structure of four important ideologies in contemporary Latin America - neoliberalism, populism, the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and conservatism. Table 2 below summarizes their central, adjacent, and peripheral concepts.

**Table 2.** The morphology of four ideologies in Latin America, Source: Kajsiiu, 2020, 99-100.

<b>Ideology</b>	Socialism of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	Populism	Neoliberalism	Conservatism
<b>Core Concepts</b>	<p>Equality</p> <p>Solidarity</p> <p>Social Justice</p> <p>The state as a source of socio-economic development</p> <p>Work as a source of socio-economic development</p>	<p>Antagonism between the honest people and the corrupt elite</p> <p>Popular will as the main source of political legitimacy</p> <p>The people as the underdog</p>	<p>The market as the principal source of socio-economic development</p> <p>Free competition</p> <p>Economic liberty</p> <p>Personal responsibility</p> <p>Private property</p>	<p>The extra-human origin of the social order</p> <p>Order, Authority, Tradition</p> <p>Gradual not radical change</p> <p>Private property</p>

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<b>Adjacent Concepts</b>	Participative democracy	Direct democracy	Electoral democracy	Legal democracy: respect for the law
	Pluri-nationalism	Anti-corruption	Anti-corruption	and authority
	The state as collective action	Anti-imperialism	Human rights	Equality before the law
	Anti-Corruption	National sovereignty	Equality before the law	Anti-corruption
	Anti-imperialism	Solidarity	Fair competition	
	Anti-neoliberalism	Human rights		
	National sovereignty	Equality		
<b>Peripheral Concepts</b>		<i>Caudillismo</i>		
	Income redistribution policies	Referendums	Tax reduction	Protection of the traditional family, religion and values
	Social inclusion	Social inclusion policies	Deregulation	Strengthening of institutional authority
	Increase of social spending	Increase of social spending	Privatization	
	Public education	Redistribution of resources	Free trade	Tough on crime
	Universal health			
	Nationalization of natural resources.			



As the above table shows different ideologies share common concepts such as democracy, equality, or corruption, but they articulate them in distinct ways. The notion of democracy, for example, when articulated in proximity with concepts such as equality gives rise to ‘participative democracy’ where all participate in equal fashion in the decision-making process. However, when democracy is articulated with notions such as ‘free competition’ it implies ‘electoral democracy’ where its key feature is not participation as much as free and fair competition between different political actors. In a similar fashion when the concept of democracy is related to other concepts such as popular will it becomes ‘direct democracy’, where the people make decisions directly without intermediaries, not through representation (utilizing referendums, for example). Finally, if democracy is articulated with concepts such as order and authority, as in the case of conservatism, then it can become ‘legal democracy’ that it can be identified with the respect for the law, institutions, and authority.

The same logic applies in the case of corruption. A neoliberal ideology places it in relation to concepts such as free competition and the market, which is why it is articulated as lack or distortion of free competition that results from state intervention. Corruption, therefore, serves to distinguish between a clean private sector and a corrupt public one. Likewise, in the populist ideology corruption is placed in proximity to the elites, as their core feature. It serves to distinguish the honest people from the corrupt elites. From the perspective of the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the relation of corruption with other concepts such as equality, social justice and the state as a source of development articulates a concept that is characteristic of the private sector. Finally, the articulation of corruption with core concepts of a conservative ideology such as order and authority identifies it with illegality. In sum, different ideologies define corruption in distinctive ways because they place it in proximity with their core concepts which fill it with different meanings.

## **Public vs. Private Corruption: The Ideological Dimension of Anti-corruption Discourses in Colombia, Ecuador and Albania, 2002-2017**

I utilize the above theoretical framework in order to compare anti-corruption discourses and policies of three governments in three countries, Colombia, Ecuador and Albania. Although these three countries faced similar levels and perceptions of corruption their governments differed both in their articulation of corruption and their anti-corruption policies due to their distinct ideological positions. President Santos (2010-2018) in Colombia advocated a moderate, third way, neoliberal ideology that while identifying the market as the primary source of socio-economic development did recognize the necessity of state intervention. President Correa (2007-2017) in Ecuador, on the other hand, propagated the 21<sup>st</sup>

century socialism, which was highly critical of the neoliberal developmental model and identified the state as the key motor of socio-economic development. Hence, while the neoliberal government of Santos presented corruption as a problem of the public sector and its interaction with the private one, Correa articulated it as a phenomenon that originated primarily in the private sector. Finally, prime minister Edi Rama (2013 – present) in Albania advocated a more fundamental neoliberal ideology which identified the market as the only source of development while reducing the state to an obstacle that had to be overcome. As a consequence, he identified corruption with bribery situating it almost exclusively in the public sector.

### **The Government of Rafael Correa: Private Corruption**

The key anti-corruption strategies and legislation produced by the Correa Government, where corruption was defined implicitly or explicitly, were the New Constitution of Ecuador of 2008, The National Plan of Prevention and War Against Corruption, 2013-2017, The Organic Law on Fiscal Paradises, the National Plan of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living) 2013-2017 and the Integral Organic Penal Code of Ecuador of 2014. Despite their differences all these documents shared a common objective: they sought to identify corruption in the private sector. The attempt to rearticulate corruption as something inherent to the private sector can be first seen in the article 204 of the New Constitution of Ecuador (*Nueva Constitución de Ecuador*) in 2008, which stated that the Office of Transparency and Social Control:

[...] will promote and stimulate the control of entities and organisms of the public sector and of natural or legal persons in the private sector that provide services or carry out activities of public interest, so that they perform them with responsibility, transparency and equity [...]; and it will prevent and fight corruption (p. 108).

It is interesting to note here that anti-corruption applied to the public and the private sector. The latter was not restricted to the companies that interacted with the state through state contracts or public tenders, it included all natural or legal persons that provided services of ‘public interest’. Such definition included almost all private sector as it is easy to argue that any private company offered services that were of ‘public interest’.

This understanding of corruption as something pertaining to the private sector was further developed in the National Plan for the Prevention of and War Against Corruption 2013-2017 (*Plan Nacional de Prevención y Lucha Contra la Corrupción 2013-2017*). Here corruption was defined as:

[...] the deliberate and covert illicit or illegitimate action of public officials or private persons in order to benefit particular

interests, realized through any means or bases of power in institutionalized and structured normative spaces, affecting the interests of the public, of collective subjects, of individuals and ethics (p. 11).

The definition of corruption as a phenomenon that undermined public interest implied that it could be present both in the public and the private sector, insofar as the public interest could be subverted both by public and private actors. For this reason, the above document emphasised that one could not argue that corruption was inherent to the state and its bureaucracy, it was ‘a phenomenon that encompasses all the institutions and organizational forms of society’ (Ibid., p. 14).

This in turn meant that there was a kind of corruption that was typical of the private sector which had nothing to do with the public one, ‘it is carried out by private actors, amongst them and to their detriment, without the direct participation of the public sector’ (Ibid., p. 16). Such examples of corruption in the private sector included: ‘money laundering, telecommunications fraud, abuse against the consumer, abuse of privileged information’ (Ibid., pp. 16-17). All of these phenomena had to do with corruption by private actors, such as the financial sector, telecommunications and enterprises in general. According to the Superintendence of Market Control, one of the institutions that constituted the Office of Transparency and Social Control, they were instances of ‘abuse of the market power by economic operators’ (Superintendencia del Control del Mercado, 2018).

Corruption defined as ‘abuse of power’ was situated both in the public and the private sector. That is to say, if public officials abused their power so did private actors. Accordingly, if the unjustified enrichment of public sector officials was called corruption, the same should be true for the unjustified enrichment of private actors. Hence, as part of the attempt to define corruption as inherent to the private sector Correa’s government introduced a new type of violation in the Organic Integral Penal Code of Ecuador (2014), article 297, ‘Unjustified private enrichment’ which was defined as obtaining ‘for oneself or for another [person], directly or through another, an unjustified patrimonial increase of more than 200 minimal salaries of a general worker [68 000 USD]’. In a similar fashion, the Law Against Fiscal Paradises, while not mentioning corruption explicitly, was introduced by Correa’s government as a key instrument in its war against corruption. According to Correa:

Fiscal paradises [were] an extreme expression of capitalism without a face, without responsibility, without transparency, without country, without humanity. The war against fiscal evasion and corruption cannot be carried out in isolation. We need global action in order to end this form of savage capitalism. (cited in Andes, 2017).

It is important at this point to emphasise that a large part of the National Plan of Prevention and War Against Corruption 2013-2017 focused on public sector corruption (pp. 15-16, for example). It also paid special attention to corruption that surged from the interaction between the public and the private sector due to the ‘corporatist structure of the state, because of which public administration has responded to particular interests in power’ (p. 22). The problem here was the connection of the public sector ‘with powerful economic groups and politicians in order to favour particular and specific interests’ (p. 27). It is interesting to note here that even when dealing with corruption in the interaction between the public and the private sector the National Plan identified the origin of this phenomenon in the private sector, whether in the private enterprises or the corporatist logics of governance.

### **Juan Manuel Santos: The Public-private Corruption**

The anti-corruption strategy of Santos Government recognized that corruption could be carried out by both public and private actors, so that it involved both sectors. Nevertheless, the phenomenon was primarily defined in relation to the public sector:

[...] corruption is understood as ‘the use of public power in order to divert the administration of the public towards private benefits’. This implies that corrupt practices are realized by public and/or private actors who have power and influence in the taking of decisions about and the administration of public goods (Conpes 2013, 18).

Corruption here was defined in relation to the administration of public goods, which meant that it always involved the public sector although at times in collusion with the private one. Hence the main objective of the anti-corruption strategy of Santo’s government was ‘to strengthen the instruments and mechanisms necessary to prevent, investigate, and sanction corruption, so that [...] better levels of integrity and transparency are achieved in the public sector’ (Conpes 2013, 8).

In a similar fashion the Secretary of Transparency of the Presidency of Colombia in 2016 declared that ‘the Public Administration is the natural space for the implementation of measures against corruption’ (Conpes 2013, 39). From this perspective anticorruption was essentially a problem of good governance which entailed an efficient and transparent public administration: ‘The prevention and the control of corruption are covered by the guiding principles of good governance and administrative efficiency and are associated with the transparency and the proper functioning of public administration’ (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo, 2010-2014, 653). Corruption was a disease of the public sector that affected the legitimacy of the state and of its public policies: ‘A corrupt practice does not violate only a particular rule or influences a specific collective decision, it

also affects the legitimacy of the State [...]. Social systems with high levels of corruption have ineffective and badly focused public policies' (Conpes 2013, 20-1). In other words, corruption was connected essentially with the state and its public policies, even when committed by private actors from the private sector.

Santos did recognize the involvement of private actors in corruption. He understood that the problem was not only the corrupted public official but also the private corrupter: 'We know that corruption has two sides: the public official and the private person. That is why we shall sanction in exemplary fashion the traffic of influences by private persons' (Santos, 2011). Therefore, he would declare that 'the private sector should play a protagonist role in reducing corruption within enterprises and mechanisms of self-regulation in order to prevent bribery' (Ibid.). To this end he introduced measures to 'prevent corruption in the business world' (Santos, 2015). Such measures included 'more severe punishments for private corruption, fiscal evasion, illegal enrichment, bribery and [...] transnational bribery' (Santos 2018). In order to avoid the capture of the state by private actors Santos engaged with the private sector in order to clarify norms on lobbying so that 'private interests did not interfere improperly in the decisions of the state' (Santos 2017a, 3). All these measures show that in his understanding corruption could also be encountered in the private sector.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out here that even when talking about corruption in the private sector Santos was in fact articulating it in the context of its interaction with the public sector. In other words, he was talking about the public-private corruption. Thus, he often mentioned activities such as collusion of private firms to fix prices in public tenders: 'We should eradicate corrupt practices, such as, for example, when competitors in public tenders agree to present proposals or to regulate their participation in public tenders' (Santos, 2017b). In other words, Santos defined as corruption the collusion between private actors in relation to the state market of public tenders. The concept of corruption disappeared, however, when Santos talked about the same practice in the private sector, such as collusion between private actors in order to fix market prices. In this case instead of corruption he talked about "harmful practices": 'One of our principal duties has been to undo harmful practices (*practicās nocivās*) that undermine this free competition [...] we have managed to break up cartels of competitors in areas such as diapers, toilet paper, livestock auctions, private security and sugar' (Santos, 2017b, 3). This implies that even when corruption was situated in the private sector it was always related directly or indirectly to the public sector. It was difficult to find in Santos's discourse an articulation of corruption as inherent to the private sector, by associating it with fiscal paradises or oligopolistic practices.

### **Edi Rama: Public Corruption**

Rama defined corruption almost exclusively as state failure, its inability to offer efficient services to its citizens, to defend free competition and to build a meritocratic public administration. These failures forced citizens to resort to corruption in order to enjoy the services they were entitled to but the state did not provide. According to Rama (2014a):

In the end, corruption is nothing more, in general terms, than the alternative to a service the citizen expects from the State. When the service that citizens expects from the state, and which the state has the obligation to provide, is slow, bad and leads to completely obscure procedures, corruption appears as a rapid and efficient alternative.

In this context, the elimination of corruption called for the modernization of the state so that it could provide its citizens with rapid, high quality and transparent services, in addition to a meritocratic public administration and a free competitive market. According to Rama (2014b) ‘modern states do not have corruption as an alternative to [public] services. [...] Archaic states develop corruption as an alternative to [public] services and the answer is modernization’. Hence, Albanian corruption was essentially a problem of the public sector. What differentiated corruption in Albania from corruption in other developed European countries was the fact that it was ‘endemic in every cell of the state organism and in every contact of the state with the extended hand of the citizen that is asking for a service’ (Rama 2013).

There were occasions when Rama alluded to corruption in the private sector, especially in higher education, where he would criticise high levels of corruption in both public and private institutions. This was, however, quite rare, and even in this case his focus was primarily on the public education sector. It was this understanding of corruption as a public sector issue that structured Rama’s anti-corruption strategy 2015-2020. Its primary objective was: ‘Transparent Albanian institutions with high levels of integrity which enjoy the trust of citizens and guarantee high quality and incorruptible services’ (Këshilli i Ministrave 2015, 11). According to this strategy the principal challenges that anti-corruption faced in Albania were:

- Strengthening the integrity of public administration
- Reforming and strengthening the independence of judicial power
- Improving the quality of legislation
- Improving the stability of public administration
- Supporting the independent or/and autonomous functioning of key institutions (executive and independent)
- Lack of inter-institutional trust and cooperation (Ibid., p. 8)

As the above list indicates the anti-corruption challenge in Albania was limited to the public sector. This is why the key objective of anti-corruption policies in Rama's government was to 'eradicate corruption primarily in the public administration and in all the state institutions and especially in the institutions that services to citizens' (Ibid., p. 11). The anti-corruption strategy would clarify that its principal objective was to strengthen transparency 'in all the areas of activity by the state' (Ibid.).

There was no mention in the 2015 Albanian anticorruption strategy of phenomena such as lobbying, state capture, or the 'revolving door' between the private and the public sector. Such absence is quite telling given that by the end of 2011 there were no legal provisions in the Albanian legislation to regulate lobbying or revolving doors phenomena (Chari and Murphy 2011, 5).

In Rama's discourse the private sector appeared primarily as the victim rather than the perpetrator of corruption. Even when businesses participated in corrupt acts they were forced to pay bribes by the inefficient bureaucracy and complex procedures. This is why the anti-corruption strategy sought to reduce:

Contacts between enterprises and the state. The larger the number of contacts, the larger the bureaucracy, the larger the amount of impediments and corruption. The smaller the number of contacts, the smaller the bureaucracy, less impediments and corruption, and more freedom for enterprises (Rama 2015).

Corruption here appeared as a consequence of the bureaucracy and its obstacles. In order to overcome these obstacles enterprises had to resort to corruption. They were passive participants in a phenomenon perpetrated by public actors. This is why Rama (2013a) would promise that:

There will be no more entrepreneurs obligated to pay, to pay and hold silence. Hold silence out of fear that if they speak up they have to pay more and their tongue is completely cut off. The opposite will happen! We consider every entrepreneur as a partner in the process against this endemic corruption that appears in every contact between the entrepreneur and the [public] administration, as if it were a contact with the plague.

It is interesting to note that the 'plague' in the above citation refers to the public administration, which terrorizes the honest entrepreneurs with corruption. The same happened to citizens in general. In Rama's words corruption was 'a system that every day sucked the blood of the citizens, the families, sucked from their pockets the money that they should not have to pay for services they are entitled to

by law and custom’ (Rama 2014b). Corruption here stood for the bribes that citizens had to pay in order to receive a service.

### **Different Ideologies, Different Articulations of Corruption**

A simple quantitative way to compare the articulation of corruption in the governments of Correa, Santos and Rama is through content analysis. To this end I have measured the frequency with which each of them defined corruption in their speeches as a problem of the public sector, of the private sector, of the interaction between the private and the public sector, or as a socio-cultural problem that did not have to do with neither the public nor the private sector as such but with society at large. See Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** The concept ‘corruption’ in the speeches of Correa, Santos and Rama, 2002-2017, Source: Kajsiiu 2020, 122, 156.

Politician	Rafael Correa	Juan Manuel Santos	Edi Rama
Category			
Corruption as a phenomenon of the public sphere	13%	28%	57%
Corruption as a phenomenon of the private sphere	26%	6%	5%
Corruption as a public-private phenomenon	23%	13%	10%
Corruption as a socio-cultural phenomenon	10%	14%	3%
None of the above	28%	39%	25%

As the above table shows, Edi Rama emphasised corruption as a problem of the public sector more than Juan Manuel Santos and much more than Rafael Correa. The latter on the other hand tended to see corruption much more frequently as a problem of the private sector and its interaction with the public one, rather than as primarily a problem of the public sector *per se*.

The differences reflect the distinct ideological positions of these political leaders. Unlike Santos in Colombia and Rama in Albania who propagated a neoliberal development model, the government of Rafael Correa in Ecuador embraced the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an ideology that ‘in Venezuela as much as in Ecuador and Bolivia was an anti-neoliberal social alliance’ (Monereo 2010, i). Such embrace of anti-neoliberalism led to projects such as ‘the nationalization of natural resources, increase of public spending and a realigning of foreign policy in Latin America [away from the USA]’ (Valencia 2016, 114). The 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism was ‘a developmental project based on the state rather than the market’ (Valencia 2016, 118). It criticised the neoliberal development model,



especially its tendency to prioritise the market and capital at the expense of human labour. Correa's 'citizen revolution' was socialist because it sided with 'the supremacy of the human being over capital [...] expressed in decent wages, labour stability, adequate work environment, social security, fair distribution of the social product' (Paz and Cepeda 2015, 3-4). In this context, the role of the state as a source of socio-economic development was crucial. President Correa criticized neoliberal ideology because it 'negated the necessity of the state, of collective action, pretending that all could be solved by that illusion called the market' (Correa 2010, 5). To accept the importance of the public sector as the principal motor of development did not entail a complete negation of the importance of the private sector, but a recognition of the 'obvious imperfections of the market' (Correa 2010, 5).

This relationship between the private and the public sector was articulated in Correa's anti-corruption discourses. They emphasised the importance of the public sector and the imperfections of the market. It is no surprise, then, that in Correa's discourse corruption was situated more in the private rather than the public sector. Such articulation reflected his ideology – 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism, which identifies the state as the expression of the collective action of society and as a source of socio-economic development and the private sector as an obstacle to this end.

Santos and Rama, on the other hand, both developed their anti-corruption discourse from a neoliberal position which identified the market as the fundamental motor of socio-economic development. Hence, in both cases corruption was articulated primarily as a public sector challenge. There were, however, differences between these two articulations that reflect distinct nuances of neoliberalism. In Santo's case the articulation of corruption as a public-private sector phenomenon reflected his 'third way' ideology that while prioritizing the market did recognize some of its limits and the need for state intervention when necessary. Rama's articulation of corruption, on the other hand, reflected a more fundamental neoliberal ideology that identified the private sector as the only source of socio-economic development and saw the state primarily as an obstacle that had to be removed.

The differences between Colombian and Albanian neoliberalism reflected the wider context within which neoliberalism emerged in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Although neoliberalism has been dominant in both regions it has met with far more resistance in the former than in the latter. In Latin America numerous social and political movements have mounted a strong resistance to neoliberal reforms (Harris 2003). Although such resistance has been weaker in Colombia as compared to other neighbouring countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela) it has been important, nonetheless (Chambers 2017). As a consequence, Colombian political elites have moderated their neoliberal ideology, even when implementing it in practice, criticizing the market on occasion,

recognizing the necessity of state intervention in others, and often paying lip service to concepts such as social justice.

In the case of Eastern Europe, on the other hand, resistance to the neoliberal hegemony has been much weaker, especially at the elite level (Hirt, Sellar and Young 2013). The societies of Eastern Europe when faced with the structural reforms of the 1990-ies were far more patient than ‘the rebel countries of Latin America’ (Greskovits 1998, 15). The communist past served as a perfect enemy against which the new neoliberal order could be legitimized and implemented. This could explain, in part, why neoliberalism met with far less resistance in Eastern Europe than in Latin America. This was especially the case in Albania where a traumatic communist past hampered the emergence of political movements, whether left or right, which would challenge a dominant neoliberal ideology that was legitimized as the opposite of Albanian communism (Kajsiiu 2016, 282).

Table 4 (p. 45) summarizes the differences in the different articulations of corruption we have seen so far, bringing together the discursive and ideological analysis of this phenomenon.

## **Conclusion: Beyond Anti-corruption**

My main aim has been to expose the ideological dimension of anti-corruption discourses. To this end I have spelled out how anti-corruption proposals of different governments and politicians reflected and at the same time articulated their ideological positions. This ideological dimension, however, was not present only in political discourses but also in academic analysis of corruption in general, even those that claimed to be objective and value-free. This is not surprising given that corruption is an essentially ideological concept, which marks the distance between a given ideal and its limited realization in practice.

Therefore, anti-corruption policies had a strong ideological dimension although they were often presented as technocratic or scientific reforms. The economic analysis that shaped most anti-corruption reforms, especially by leading international institutions such as the World Bank, built upon a specific ideal: the free market as the central source of socio-economic development. A neoliberal order of free, open and perfect competition was deemed inherently free of corruption. As a consequence, the elimination of corruption called for open and deregulated markets, privatization, marketization and a general reduction of state intervention into the economy along with the improvement of public administration so it could better support the market framework. Much of the anti-corruption programs and discourses of Santo’s government in Colombia, and most of the anti-corruption policies of Edi Rama’s government in Albania, were shaped by the anti-corruption programs developed by institutions such as the World Bank.

**Table 4.** Ideological dimensions of corruption discourses in Ecuador, Colombia and Albania, 2007-2019, Source: Kajsiiu 2020, 209.

Ideology	Socialism of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	Moderate Neoliberalism	“Hard” neoliberalism
Representative	Rafael Correa	Juan Manuel Santos	Edi Rama
Country	Ecuador	Colombia	Albania
Signifier	Corruption	Corruption	Corruption
Signified	<p>Capture of the state by private actors</p> <p>Abuse of private power and market power</p> <p>Abuse of public office for private gain.</p> <p>Unjustified enrichment in the private sector</p>	<p>Abuse of public office for private gain.</p> <p>Bribery</p> <p>Squandering and stealing of public funds</p> <p>Lack of competition</p> <p>State capture</p>	<p>Abuse of public office for private gain.</p> <p>The failure of the state to provide services to citizens</p> <p>Bribery</p>
Principal location of corruption	<p>Private Sector</p> <p>Public-Private sector</p>	<p>Public sector</p> <p>Public-private sector</p>	Public sector
Key anti-corruption policies	<p>Eliminate private corruption</p> <p>Fight fiscal paradises</p> <p>Fight the capture of the state by private actors</p> <p>Expand the public sector</p> <p>Nationalize public resources</p>	<p>Stronger penalties for corrupt behaviour</p> <p>More competitive public bidding</p> <p>Reform the state and public administration</p>	<p>Modernize the state</p> <p>Limit the contacts between the state and citizens</p> <p>De – regulate, privatize</p> <p>Reform the state and public administration</p>

The strong ideological dimension of the anti-corruption programs could explain, in part, why anti-corruption policies whether in Ecuador, Albania or Colombia have failed so often (Isaza 2011, 236). Anti-corruption can be easily transformed into an empty signifier that articulates a certain political order (neoliberal or otherwise) as free of internal contradictions. So the problem is no longer with the political and economic order *per se* but rather with its corrupt implementation. As I showed in the case of the anticorruption discourse of the presidential candidate Ivan Duque in the 2018 presidential elections in Colombia, against corruption one could demand at the same time more capitalism, more free market, more democracy, more political participation, less taxes and more social spending. In this aspect, corruption is a very useful enemy because it serves to obscure the internal contradictions of a political agenda. It is this usefulness that can, in part, explain why anti-corruption discourses and programs are as ubiquitous as they are unsuccessful.

That is not to say that all anti-corruption policies are useless or that we should build anti-corruption programs that are free of ideology. Quite to the contrary, the best anti-corruption policies should spell out in a transparent manner their political ideals and assumptions instead of implementing them surreptitiously against corruption. This is why the anti-corruption programs developed within the economic paradigm are quite problematic. They tend to bury their ideological assumptions under ‘scientific’ pretensions. Yet no amount of econometric analysis can overcome the ideological aspect of the definition of corruption.

The implication here is that when analysing and evaluating an anti-corruption discourse one must pay close attention to two elements. First, it is necessary to identify the ideals or political suppositions that inform it. It is important to ask, which political, economic or social ideal will be realized through the elimination of corruption? Second, it is important to assess the extent to which the anti-corruption discourse is utilized in order to obscure or spell out such political, economic or social ideal. Any discourse that articulates corruption as an empirical fact, or an objective phenomenon, which has to be eradicated tends to ignore its ideological dimension and serves to stifle the political debate on its causes and remedies.

Unfortunately, this is the perspective of most anti-corruption programs. The ‘war’ against corruption (like many other ‘wars’ against terrorism and drugs) often focus on the consequences of corruption and ignore its causes. The articulation of corruption as an enemy that wreaks havoc in society and, therefore, has to be defeated, creates the illusion of an autonomous subject, which is the cause more than consequence of the degradation of a given political, economic or social order. Thus, the war against corruption can easily serve to divert attention from the evaluation of the justice, legitimacy and the functioning of a given political order towards its restoration through the elimination of corruption.

## Author Bio

Blendi Kajsiu is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia. He has written two books (*A Discourse Analysis of Corruption: Instituting Neoliberalism Against Corruption in Albania, 1998-2005*, London: Routledge, 2015 and *¿Corrupción Pública o Privada? La dimensión ideológica de los discursos anti-corrupción en Colombia, Ecuador y Albania*, Bogotá: Tirant lo Blanch, 2020) and various articles on corruption, ideology, anti-politics and populism. His research has appeared in various international academic journals, such as the *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *East European Politics and Societies*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *Nationalities Papers* and *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*.

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