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Current results of international legal cooperation in combating corruption in Eastern European and Balkan countries in the 21st century: Successes and failures

Abstract. The relevance of this study lies in the need to examine the effectiveness of international anti-corruption programmes in Eastern European and Balkan countries, as corruption remains a serious obstacle to their sustainable development and integration into the EU. This study aimed to identify the main achievements and challenges in combating corruption and to assess their impact on the Corruption Perceptions Index. The methodology was based on the analysis of Corruption Perceptions Index data for the years 2014-2024, comparative examination of the region's political and social conditions, and systematisation of the results of anti-corruption standard implementation. The findings demonstrated that the successful application of international anti-corruption standards depends on the combination of political will, judicial independence, and the involvement of civil society. The analysis of the relationship between international corruption rankings and the foreign policy prospects of Eastern European and Balkan countries revealed a complex dynamic in how anti corruption reforms affect states' international standing. The Ukrainian experience illustrated the dual nature of such influence: on the one hand, progress in Corruption Perceptions Index indicators strengthened international support, while on the other, the limited effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions restricted tangible achievements. Albania and Moldova achieved moderate progress through the establishment of anti-corruption bodies and EU support. By contrast, Serbia and North Macedonia experienced a decline in performance due to political crises and institutional weakness. The study underlined the importance of a comprehensive approach to combating corruption, combining both national reforms and international support. The results obtained may serve to refine the anti-corruption strategies of Eastern European and Balkan countries, taking into account the key success factors of institutional independence, judicial reform, and public oversight

Keywords: institutional reforms; social trust; digitalisation of governance; European integration; legislative implementation

Introduction

The relevance of this topic arises from the persistent need to strengthen international legal cooperation in the fight against corruption, which is of particular significance for Eastern European and Balkan countries in light of their aspirations for integration into the European political and legal sphere. Corruption in these states continues to pose one of the main challenges to ensuring the rule of law, transparency in public administration, and economic stability. In the current context, international anti-corruption cooperation functions not only as a mechanism of legal pressure but also as a platform for sharing best practices, providing technical assistance, and harmonising national legislation with international standards. The effectiveness of such cooperation largely depends on the ability of national institutions to adapt the proposed approaches to the local context, which involves not only legal but also political, cultural, and administrative factors. Within this framework, a systematic analysis of contemporary trends, achievements, and shortcomings in anti-corruption policy under international legal initiatives becomes particularly important for understanding the prospects of further regional integration into the European legal community.

O. Makarenkov (2024) emphasised the necessity of aligning international and national legal approaches to anti-corruption policy, as unsystematic implementation of international standards may lead to their formal application without producing any real impact on corruption levels. The author stressed that the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures largely depends on their institutional implementation, rather than solely on political declarations or public pressure. He proposed a conceptual model that incorporates legal, administrative, and social

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dimensions, enabling not only an assessment of the degree to which international norms are adopted but also the extent of their integration into national legal systems. K. Takacs Haynes & M. Rašković (2021) suggested an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of corrupt practices in Central and Eastern European countries, viewing them through the lens of socio-psychological factors. By applying theories of social identity and mechanisms of moral disengagement, the authors demonstrated that corrupt behaviour is not merely the product of institutional deficiencies but is also shaped by historical and cultural influences. They found that in countries with deep-rooted traditions of patronage, corruption is often perceived not as a crime but as an acceptable form of social interaction. The study placed particular emphasis on the specific characteristics of corrupt practices in North Macedonia, Hungary, and Slovenia, where differences in societal tolerance towards corruption were identified, depending on historical experience and levels of trust in state institutions. A. Puljiz (2022) and R. Safarov (2024) examined the European Union's enlargement policy as a mechanism for promoting democratisation and combating corruption in the Western Balkans. Safarov focused on the legal aspects of EU accession, particularly the significance of the rule of law and the necessity of deep judicial reforms as prerequisites for integration. His analysis indicates that even in candidate countries that formally comply with European standards, corruption levels remain high due to weak mechanisms for implementing reforms. A. Puljiz, in turn, investigated the effectiveness of the EU's conditionality policy, which involves providing financial and institutional support in exchange for concrete reforms. The study demonstrated that although such a strategy can stimulate democratic transformation, it often encounters political resistance in candidate countries where corruption is a structural element of the political system.

B. Frey (2024) explored the historical context of corruption in the private sectors of Serbia and Croatia, tracing its evolution from the socialist period to the present day. He found that informal practices such as nepotism and the interconnection between business and politics form part of these countries' historical legacy and continue to shape their economic systems. His study emphasised that even after the reform of state institutions, the business environment often remains vulnerable to corruption risks due to weak enforcement mechanisms. S. Wickberg (2021), in his research, highlighted the theoretical complexity of defining corruption, noting that the absence of a universal definition complicates the development of effective international mechanisms to combat the phenomenon. He proposed a revival of the constructivist approach, one that would take into account the social, political, and economic specificities of different regions. His research demonstrated that corruption is not solely a legal or economic issue but a multifaceted phenomenon that requires differentiated approaches to counter it.

D. Dimitrijević (2023) analysed the key international legal instruments for combating corruption developed by the UN, the EU, the Council of Europe, the OECD, and other organisations, identifying divergences in their approaches to the criminalisation of corruption and the imposition of sanctions. The study, based on comparative, normative, and teleological methods, underscored the need for harmonising international anti-corruption standards to ensure effective resistance to transnational corruption through institutional cooperation and the coordinated incorporation of these norms into national legislation. S. Roksandić (2021) conducted a systematic analysis of corruption in EU member states, developing criteria to distinguish between petty and systemic corruption. He highlighted the importance of international cooperation in this area, particularly the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms in countries such as Germany, Italy, and Poland. His research is especially valuable for assessing the role of the European Union in tackling corruption, as it helps to identify effective tools that may also be applied in candidate countries. However, he noted that existing EU mechanisms do not yet adequately account for the specific features of corrupt practices in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, which limits their effectiveness in these regions.

Despite the considerable theoretical and practical basis of existing research, questions remain insufficiently explored concerning how Eastern European and Balkan countries adapt international anti-corruption standards to their legal systems, and which mechanisms ensure the sustainability of anti-corruption policies under conditions of political instability. This study aimed to analyse the successes and failures of implementing international anti-corruption standards in Eastern European and Balkan states, in order to identify the key factors influencing the effectiveness of anti-corruption policy. The objectives of the research were: to determine the principal factors shaping the effectiveness of implementing international anti-corruption standards in Eastern European and Balkan countries; to examine the correlation between the level of institutional development (particularly the independence of the judiciary) and the dynamics of anti-corruption reforms in the states under study; and to formulate practical recommendations for optimising mechanisms of adaptation of international anti-corruption standards, taking into account the specific features of national legal systems and the political realities of the region.

Materials and methods

The study was based on an analysis of recommendations issued by international organisations and specialised anti-corruption institutions. The main sources included: National AntiCorruption Bureau of Ukraine (n.d.); Serbian Anti-corruption Agency (OECD, 2013); European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (n.d.); U.S. Agency for International Development (n.d.); EGAP programme (n.d.); GRECO – Group of States against Corruption (Council of Europe, n.d.); Copenhagen Criteria (Dir, 2023); Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine (n.d.). The Association Agreements with the European Union were analysed, specifically the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia (European Commission, 2016) and the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU (2021). The research also drew on the following legislative acts and documents: the reform of anti-corruption policy in the framework of North Macedonia's preparation for EU accession (Bexheti, 2024); Law of Ukraine No. 1700-VII (2014); Law of Serbia No. 35 (2019); and the Moldova National Strategy for Corruption Prevention and Fighting (2004). In addition, online platforms were examined, such as the electronic asset declaration system for public officials (National Agency on Corruption Prevention, n.d.); the Prozorro system (n.d.); and the Vytraty (Expenditures) platform (Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, 2025).

The study was conducted in the form of a comparative analysis based on secondary data collected from official sources of international organisations, including Transparency International (2024), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (n.d.), the World Bank (n.d.), and the International Monetary Fund (n.d.), covering the period 2014-2024. The analysis focused on the relationship between Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) indicators and the foreign policy prospects of the selected countries in the context of European integration and the implementation of international anti-corruption standards. The sample included countries of Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Moldova) and the Balkan region (Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia), which met the following criteria: availability of official CPI data for the specified period; implementation of international anticorruption programmes financed by the EU, IMF, or other international donors; and publication of progress reports on anti-corruption efforts in relevant national and international sources.

A combination of methods was employed in the study, each serving a specific function within the analysis of the effectiveness of international anti-corruption programmes. Document analysis was used to examine the legal and regulatory frameworks of the countries under study, as well as international agreements and strategies containing anti-corruption provisions. This analysis encompassed both primary legislative acts and secondary regulations governing the operation of anticorruption bodies. The comparative method made it possible to evaluate differences in the structure, functions, and powers of anti-corruption institutions in the selected countries. In particular, the activities of the NABU and the Serbian Anti-Corruption Agency were analysed to identify key success factors and obstacles in their work. The experience of other states, such as Germany, Italy, and Poland, was also considered, allowing the identification of effective enforcement mechanisms. Content analysis was applied to qualitatively assess the effectiveness of international anti-corruption initiatives, particularly their impact on institutional and legal systems. Reports of international organisations, such as the Council of Europe and GRECO (the Council of Europe's anti-corruption monitoring body), were examined to evaluate the implementation of international anti-corruption standards in the selected countries.

The case study method was employed to explore specific anti-corruption initiatives in greater depth, including the introduction of electronic asset declaration in Ukraine, judicial reform in Serbia, and measures to combat banking fraud in Moldova. Each case was analysed with consideration of the country's political, social, and economic context. Legal hermeneutics was applied to interpret international and national legislative acts, allowing an assessment of their effectiveness in the context of combating corruption. The hermeneutic approach provided a deeper understanding of the content of legal norms and revealed potential gaps or contradictions in legislation. Qualitative analysis involved comparing the successes and failures of implementing international anti-corruption standards. Particular attention was given to interpreting the causes of positive or negative changes, based on data concerning political, social, and economic factors that influenced the effectiveness of the programmes. For processing information, the following approaches were employed: systematisation of information for comprehensive analysis; data visualisation to compare the effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions; and thematic analysis, which highlighted key issues such as judicial reform, the fight against money laundering, and the use of international donor programmes. The research was carried out in line with the principles of transparency and accountability, while taking into account the specific features of the legal systems of the countries under study.

Results

Historical context of anti-corruption efforts in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Political and economic instability became one of the main drivers of corruption in Eastern European and Balkan countries following the collapse of Yugoslavia. In the post-Soviet states, the transformation of the economic system from planned to market-oriented was accompanied by the dismantling of former political institutions, the weakening of the legal system, and a lack of effective oversight of financial flows. In many cases, these processes resulted in the abuse of power, particularly in the early years of independence. Frequent changes of government and the absence of political continuity became significant factors in the spread of corruption. For instance, in Romania during the 1990s, shifts in power structures were often accompanied by large-scale personnel reshuffles, which encouraged the emergence of new corrupt practices (Miszczyński, 2019). Similarly, in Serbia, after the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime in 2000, a large part of the state apparatus remained loyal to entrenched practices, creating obstacles to the implementation of anti-corruption reforms (Vučićević & Atlagić, 2023). In the Balkan states, political corruption was closely intertwined with ethnic conflicts. Serbia, having endured years of international isolation, economic sanctions, and authoritarian rule, faced a situation where corruption had permeated all levels of public administration (Losoncz, 2022). The absence of external oversight and binding international commitments only reinforced this trend. In North Macedonia, corruption was closely linked to ethnic tensions, which hindered the reform of the public sector and encouraged the allocation of resources based on ethnic quotas rather than transparent competitive procedures (Vidal Cortés, 2024).

Against the backdrop of prolonged economic instability that spread across the post-Soviet space following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, conditions emerged for the development of systemic corruption. In Moldova, for example, the deep economic crisis of the 1990s forced many businesses and citizens to resort to informal practices for survival, which subsequently became normalised. In Ukraine, the period of mass privatisation was accompanied by non-transparent procedures, enabling certain groups to accumulate wealth at the expense of state property. Political and economic instability played a decisive role in the spread of corruption across the region. In the early years of independence (the 1990s), when democratic reforms were often unsystematic and governments changed frequently, conditions arose that facilitated the abuse of public authority. In countries with transitional economies, weak legal and regulatory mechanisms encouraged manipulation of public contracts, privatisation processes, and the use of foreign aid. For example, in Moldova, the investigation into the major banking fraud of 2014 – then an amount equivalent to 12% of the country's GDP disappeared from the banking system – revealed the ineffectiveness of anti-corruption mechanisms (Haider, 2022). Economic instability also encouraged the emergence of corrupt practices by lowering living standards. In Serbia, the low salaries of public officials and judges increased their vulnerability to bribery. In Ukraine, the economic crisis of the early 1990s pushed the population to participate in "shadow" schemes, which quickly became commonplace. These factors largely determined the inability of state institutions to combat corruption effectively, rendering it an ingrained feature of socio-political life.

Institutional weakness manifested in several key aspects. First, it was reflected in the low professionalism and corruption within the state apparatus. Many officials lacked adequate education or experience, which heightened their susceptibility to bribery. Second, the weakness of the judiciary and law enforcement bodies made the effective investigation of corruption crimes virtually impossible. In Serbia, for example, the transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy was accompanied by considerable difficulties in reforming the judiciary, which remained under the influence of political forces. A particularly significant issue was the absence of independent anti-corruption institutions capable of ensuring transparency in public administration. Following independence, Ukraine faced pervasive corruption across key sectors of the state apparatus, including energy, transport, and privatisation, due to the lack of adequate oversight and mechanisms of checks and balances. The EBRD, IMF, and World Bank actively promoted anti-corruption requirements, which were intended to form part of broader structural reforms in these countries. For instance, the IMF often linked its macro-financial stabilisation programmes to measures enhancing transparency in public finances, reforming the tax system, and combating corruption. In Ukraine, IMF programmes repeatedly included obligations to establish effective anti-corruption institutions. Notably, in 2014, cooperation with the IMF led to the creation of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) (National AntiCorruption Bureau of Ukraine, n.d.) and the introduction of an electronic asset declaration system for public officials (National Agency on Corruption Prevention, n.d.). Despite NABU's considerable achievements, its work has frequently faced political resistance and attempts to undermine the institution's independence.

In Serbia, in order to counter systemic corruption, the Anti-Corruption Agency was established in 2010 (OECD, 2013). This body was granted extensive powers, including oversight of officials' incomes, investigation of corruption cases, and monitoring of political party financing. However, the effectiveness of the agency remained limited due to a lack of resources, insufficient independence, and the influence of political elites. A similar situation was observed in other countries in the region, where anti-corruption institutions were often established under external pressure, particularly from the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, or other international organisations. For example, in North Macedonia, following 2015, anti-corruption policy reforms were introduced as part of preparations for EU accession (Bexheti, 2024). The government established a Special Prosecutor's Office tasked with investigating high-profile corruption cases linked to the former political leadership. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (n.d.) also played a significant role in promoting transparency in corporate governance and the public sector. In Serbia, for instance, EBRD activities supported the reform of state-owned enterprises and the introduction of corporate governance standards that reduced corruption risks. Through EBRD-funded programmes, the country was able to create new mechanisms for monitoring resource use in large infrastructure projects. Legislative initiatives have proven crucial in post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav countries for implementing systemic changes aimed at ensuring transparency in public administration and financial flows. One of the main elements of international cooperation in combating corruption is the inclusion of specific anti-corruption provisions in agreements with international donors, which establish the legal and institutional frameworks necessary for implementing anti-corruption measures. Such provisions may include obligations for the parties to establish anti-corruption bodies, prevent corrupt practices, promote transparency and openness in the management of public funds, uphold the rule of law, and combat money laundering. Prominent examples of such agreements are the bilateral treaties between the European Union and the Western Balkan countries, in particular the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia, which came into force in 2016 (European Commission, 2016). This agreement contains anti-corruption provisions aimed at enhancing transparency in public administration, combating corruption across all sectors, and establishing effective institutions to oversee the use of public finances. Similar agreements have been concluded with Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other countries seeking EU membership. Other examples of cooperation with international donors include technical and financial support from the IMF and the World Bank. The IMF provides loans to Eastern European and Balkan countries on the condition that they implement economic and administrative reforms, including anti-corruption initiatives. The World Bank also actively supports anti-corruption efforts, notably in Ukraine, where it has funded reforms in public administration and measures to increase transparency in public procurement (International Monetary Fund, n.d.; World Bank, n.d.).

Technical assistance and expert support are provided by international organisations and donors, notably USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development, n.d.), which collaborates with a number of countries to strengthen their anti-corruption institutions and establish mechanisms to combat corruption in the public sector. USAID programmes in Ukraine, Moldova, and other countries, aimed at reforming the judiciary and creating mechanisms to reduce corruption risks in the public sector, are examples of such cooperation. Examples of collaboration with international donors and experts on anti-corruption initiatives are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Cooperation with international donors and experts on anti-corruption issues

Country	International donor	Joint initiatives and projects	Key anti-corruption measures
Ukraine	IMF, World Bank, USAID	Public administration reforms, anti-corruption policy	Establishment of NABU, reform of public procurement, financial transparency
Moldova	EU, IMF, World Bank	Governance reform programmes and anti-corruption initiatives	Establishment of anti-corruption agencies, judicial system modernisation
Serbia	EU, World Bank, USAID	Support for anti-corruption reforms and policy	Establishment of the Anti-Corruption Agency, anti-money laundering measures
Albania	EU, IMF, USAID	Public sector reforms and anti-corruption efforts	Establishment of specialised anticorruption bodies, strengthening of the judiciary
North Macedonia	EU, IMF, USAID	Anti-corruption reform in public institutions, anti-money laundering	Implementation of anti-corruption strategies, police and prosecution reform

Source: created by the author based on research M. Miszczyński (2019), M. Losoncz (2022), H. Haider (2022), D. Vučićević & S. Atlagić (2023), C. Vidal Cortés (2024), O. Busol & B. Romaniuk (2024), M. Bexheti (2024)

The adoption of legislation is also a crucial step in establishing an anti-corruption infrastructure founded on the principles of transparency, accountability, and independence. In post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, a key objective of legislative initiatives was to ensure public access to information regarding the activities of state institutions. The enactment of the Law of Ukraine No. 1700-VII (2014) was particularly significant in this regard. The law introduced mandatory income and asset declarations for public officials, established mechanisms for public monitoring, and implemented an electronic declaration system, which became one of the most advanced oversight tools in the region. Similarly, in Moldova, laws were enacted to enhance the transparency of budgetary processes and public procurement, aiming to minimise corruption risks in the use of public funds (Depo, 2021). Post-Yugoslav countries also undertook extensive legislative reforms. For instance, in Serbia, the Law of Serbia No. 35 (2019) established a centralised system for monitoring officials' incomes and ensured transparency in the financing of political parties.

Early international programmes and projects aimed at strengthening anti-corruption policies played an important role in improving public administration efficiency and creating conditions for sustainable development. For example, under the EGAP programme (n.d.), implemented with the support of the European Union, Eastern European countries introduced electronic public procurement management systems, significantly reducing opportunities for abuse. The Council of Europe is actively engaged in combating corruption, concentrating its efforts on several key areas. Firstly, it develops European standards that define best practices in the field. Secondly, the Council monitors the implementation of these standards, assessing countries' progress in enacting anti-corruption measures and identifying areas that require additional attention. In addition, the organisation provides technical assistance to countries and regions, offering expert advice, training programmes, and resources to enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives (Kostiuk & Drok, 2024).

The GRECO programme (Council of Europe, n.d.), established by the Council of Europe, aims to support anti-corruption reforms, notably in Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, and other countries. GRECO monitors states' compliance with their commitments and provides recommendations to improve legislation. Through this programme, countries in the region gain access to best practices designed to strengthen financial transparency. For example, in Moldova, collaboration with international organisations enabled the introduction of a budget expenditure control system, which became a model for other countries. In Serbia, following the ratification of the UN Convention against Corruption, a series of reforms were undertaken in anti-corruption legislation. The country subsequently received positive assessments from GRECO regarding its progress, providing a foundation for further steps towards European integration. In the case of Ukraine, the European Commission will consider the implementation of GRECO's recommendations in the context of the requirements for full membership in the European Union. It is particularly noteworthy that Ukraine continues to implement anti-corruption measures recommended by GRECO, even under conditions of martial law (Council of Europe, 2021). These policies are positively regarded by international partners and are taken into account when assessing the level of corruption in Ukraine.

Projects related to European Union integration have acquired particular significance. For countries seeking EU membership, compliance with the Copenhagen criteria (Dir, 2023) – which include upholding the rule of law, ensuring transparency, and effectively combating corruption – has become a mandatory prerequisite for membership. For Ukraine, the process of European integration has had a substantial impact on the development of anti-corruption policy, especially following the signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU (2021). Under this agreement, Ukraine undertook a series of commitments, including harmonising national legislation with European standards, reforming the judicial system, and establishing mechanisms for public oversight. For instance, the introduction of the Prozorro system (n.d.) for public procurement has been one of the most successful reforms in response to EU transparency requirements. Since its implementation, Prozorro has facilitated over 15 million contracts, amounting to a total of 4.3 trillion UAH. In 2020, Prozorro was recognised as the most transparent public procurement platform in the world. The Prozoro-Sale system, operating as a state joint-stock company, is managed by the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine and functions as an online auction platform for the sale and lease of state-owned property. As of early 2024, Prozorro-Sale auctions had contributed over UAH 83 billion to the state and local budgets at various levels (What is Prozorro, 2023). The Vytraty platform serves as a unique official source of information on the use of public finances in Ukraine, established under the Law of Ukraine No. 183-VIII (2015). This resource provides access to detailed data on the financial operations of budgetary authorities, including expenditure amounts, their purposes, and the recipients of funds (Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, 2025).

North Macedonia, which aspires to EU membership, has also undertaken significant anticorruption reforms under the influence of European institutions. The country has established new anti-corruption bodies, reformed its judicial system, and adopted legislation to enhance the accountability of public officials. Importantly, progress in these reforms has become a condition for opening new stages of EU membership negotiations. Serbia, likewise pursuing European integration, has implemented a range of anti-corruption measures aligned with EU requirements. For instance, reforms to legislation governing the financing of political parties represented a key step towards greater transparency in the electoral process. At the same time, the introduction of mechanisms to control conflicts of interest has contributed to improving the country's perception in the international community.

Consequences of international commitments: A comparative analysis of successes and failures. The relationship between international corruption rankings – particularly the Corruption Perceptions Index developed by Transparency International (2024) – and the foreign policy prospects of Eastern European and Balkan countries is of crucial importance for evaluating the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies and for determining these countries' standing on the international stage. International corruption rankings have become a vital tool for the global community in assessing corruption levels in individual states, influencing their relations with international organisations and other countries, as well as their ability to integrate into European and global structures. The Corruption Perceptions Index, published by Transparency International (2024), is one of the most widely recognised instruments for assessing corruption in public institutions across countries, based on surveys and studies conducted among experts and business leaders. The ranking allows for the observation of how countries' positions on the global stage evolve in the context of anti-corruption efforts. This has a significant impact on their foreign policy prospects, as countries with high levels of corruption face international isolation, more challenging conditions for attracting investment, and reduced chances of membership in international organisations, including the European Union.

Countries with low positions in the Corruption Perceptions Index, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia, frequently face criticism from international financial institutions and developed states. At the same time, for countries seeking European integration, such rankings serve as an important indicator of compliance with European requirements regarding transparency in public administration. A low ranking can make it difficult for a country to access financial assistance programmes, such as those offered by the IMF or the EU, and can also complicate the maintenance of bilateral relations with Western partners. A pertinent example is Ukraine, which has repeatedly faced criticism for its high levels of corruption, significantly affecting its European integration prospects. CPI scores before and after the implementation of international programmes in Eastern European and Balkan countries are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) scores before and after the implementation of international programmes in Eastern European and Balkan countries

Country	Year before programme implementation	Year after programme implementation	CPI (before)	CPI (after)	Change (points)	Current status (2024)
Ukraine	2014	2017	26	30	+4	35
Moldova	2014	2018	35	33	−2	43
Serbia	2014	2018	41	39	−2	35
Albania	2014	2017	33	38	+5	42
North Macedonia	2014	2017	45	35	+10	40

Source: created by the author based on the source Transparency International (2024)

The data in the table illustrate changes in CPI scores in Eastern European and Balkan countries following the implementation of international anti-corruption programmes. Analysis of the results shows that the effectiveness of these initiatives is uneven, with both positive and negative trends depending on the country. Ukraine, for instance, experienced a 4-point increase in its CPI score, rising from 26 to 30 during the period from 2014 to 2017. This indicates some progress, which can be associated with reforms implemented after the Revolution of Dignity, such as the establishment of anti-corruption institutions (NABU, SAP) and the introduction of the Prozorro system. However, even a CPI increase to 30 still points to significant challenges in combating corruption. Albania also shows a CPI rise of five points (from 33 to 38) between 2014 and 2017. This improvement is linked to judicial system reforms and measures to enhance transparency in the financial sector, supported by the European Union. Moldova and Serbia, by contrast, each experienced a two-point decline in their CPI scores despite active international support. In Moldova, the drop from 35 to 33 between 2014 and 2018 can be attributed to numerous corruption scandals, including the theft of one billion dollars from the banking system, which severely undermined confidence in anti-corruption initiatives. Serbia, although enacting anti-corruption laws under EU pressure, failed to ensure their effective implementation due to the judiciary's political dependence. The most negative trend is observed in North Macedonia, where the CPI fell from 45 to 35, a loss of 10 points. This sharp decline is explained by a political crisis and multiple corruption scandals, which intensified public distrust in state institutions. While international programmes aimed to stabilise the situation, the lack of political will and comprehensive judicial reform rendered their effectiveness largely null.

In Ukraine, the CPI saw a noticeable improvement of four points between 2014 and 2017; however, by 2024, it had risen only to 35, indicating the limited impact of reforms, the prolonged struggle against corruption within the judicial system, and ongoing political challenges, particularly in the context of war. Moldova, by contrast, initially experienced a negative trend, but by 2024 its CPI had increased to 43, reflecting the effectiveness of subsequent anti-corruption reforms, including judicial system restructuring and cooperation with the EU. Serbia demonstrates a negative trajectory, as the CPI declined by two points after 2018 and fell to 35 by 2024. Albania shows steady improvement, with a five-point increase in CPI by 2017 following the implementation of an anticorruption programme, and by 2024, the index had reached 42. This improvement can be attributed to comprehensive judicial reform, strengthened independence of anti-corruption institutions, and the influence of the European integration process. North Macedonia exhibits sharp CPI fluctuations: after 2017, the index dropped by ten points, likely due to a political crisis and interference in the functioning of anti-corruption bodies. Nevertheless, by 2024, the CPI had recovered to 40, suggesting gradual political stabilisation and a return to reform efforts. The situation regarding anti-corruption institutions in Ukraine remains complex. Following the Revolution of Dignity, several bodies were established to combat corruption, among which the most significant are the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (n.d.) and the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine (n.d.). The establishment of these institutions was regarded as a significant step in combating corruption; however, in practice, their work faces numerous challenges. The most pressing issues include political pressure, a lack of proper coordination between agencies, and the reluctance of some senior officials to support these reforms. Despite the exposure of numerous corruption schemes, corruption remains a serious problem within the judicial system and other branches of government. Moreover, public trust in anti-corruption policies in Ukraine remains low, as reflected in sociological surveys. In spring 2023, 53% of respondents identified corrupt officials in power as the country's greatest internal adversary. At the same time, 84% supported the view that corruption should be publicly exposed. These survey results indicate that Ukrainians recognise the importance of tackling corruption to achieve societal cohesion, maintain international support, and secure victory (Samayeva, 2023). Many Ukrainians believe that anti-corruption reforms are ineffective and that the established institutions are unable to combat corruption fairly due to political influence and entrenched corrupt networks within the state apparatus.

A key reason for this lack of trust is the absence of real penalties for senior officials and delays in resolving high-profile cases, which undermine confidence in the newly created anti-corruption bodies. The ongoing war in the country further complicates the implementation of effective anticorruption mechanisms, while simultaneously mobilising community efforts. Moreover, in Ukraine, a traditionally tolerant attitude towards corruption persists in both society and government, reflecting Soviet-era legacies that have endured for decades. A crucial condition for overcoming these challenges is the cultivation of a European civic identity and the development of an anti-corruption mindset. An important factor in assessing the effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions is the level of public trust. In North Macedonia, where institutions have gained recognition through successful investigations of corruption cases and higher transparency, citizens demonstrate greater confidence in anti-corruption policies. By contrast, in Ukraine, where trust in anti-corruption bodies remains low, it is clear that simply creating institutions is insufficient for effectively combating corruption. Political will, stability, the independence of institutions, and continuous communication with citizens to ensure transparency are all essential components. Table 3 summarises the successes and shortcomings of anti-corruption policy implementation.

Table 3. Successes and failures in implementing international anti-corruption standards

Country	Successes of anti-corruption policy	Failures of anti-corruption policy	Example
Ukraine	- Establishment of the NABU and the SAP. - Implementation of the Prozorro system for transparent public procurement.	- Political pressure on anti-corruption agencies. - Absence of penalties for senior officials. - Low levels of public trust in anti-corruption reforms.	- Prozorro reduced budget losses in public procurement. - The high-profile "Rotterdam+" case remains unresolved, undermining trust.
Moldova	- Adoption of new anti-corruption laws. - Implementation of an anti-corruption strategy.	- The "theft of a billion" from the banking system. - Political dependence of the judiciary.	- The 2014 banking scandal severely damaged public trust in the authorities and in international programmes.
Serbia	- Anti-corruption laws were adopted under EU pressure. - Establishment of anti-corruption bodies.	- Ineffective enforcement of legislation. - The judiciary remains politically influenced. - Cases often stall at the trial stage.	- Laws on financial transparency exist, but are ineffective due to a lack of political will.
Albania	- Judicial reform to cleanse the system. - Efforts to increase transparency in the financial sector, supported by the EU.	- Reforms remain incomplete due to resistance from political elites. - Corruption among civil servants persists in provincial regions.	- Successful integrity checks on judges have reduced the number of corrupt judges. - However, corruption among civil servants remains a serious problem in the provinces.
North Macedonia	- Creation of a specialised anti-corruption agency. - International donors attempted to stabilise the situation.	- Low public trust in state institutions due to repeated scandals. - Lack of political will for deep reforms.	- CPI fell by 10 points, reflecting political influence over investigations. -The "Wiretapping" case revealed systemic corruption in government, but no meaningful reforms followed.

Source: created by the author based on the sources Prozorro (n.d.), Anti-Corruption Center (n.d.), Moldova National Strategy (2004), H. Haider (2022), I. Prezelj & T. Ristevska (2022), K. Petro (2023)

In Ukraine, despite progress linked to the launch of Prozorro and the establishment of the NABU, the effectiveness of reforms remains limited due to the political dependence of the judiciary and the absence of meaningful sanctions for senior officials. The implementation of international best practices requires support for the independence of anti-corruption bodies and the resolution of issues related to judicial decisions. For example, 456 procurement violations were identified, including cases where the purchased items did not meet the contractor's qualification requirements, contract conditions were not observed, and conflicts of interest arose between the procuring entity and the contractor. Additionally, the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine reported that between January and August 2023, law enforcement authorities registered 132 criminal offences in the Unified Register of Pre-Trial Investigations related to Article 191 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine (2018), concerning the misappropriation, embezzlement, or unlawful acquisition of property through abuse of official position in large amounts (Kolomiiets, 2023).

In Moldova, the failure to combat corruption became critical following the theft of one billion dollars. This not only undermined trust in state institutions but also set a precedent for impunity. Moldova demonstrates that the mere existence of legislation without genuine political will yields no results. Serbia enacted several anti-corruption laws; however, their implementation remains inadequate due to the judiciary's political dependence. Political will remains a critical factor for the success of anti-corruption policies. Judicial reform in Albania serves as an example of the successful implementation of international recommendations, resulting in a modest increase in the CPI. However, the uneven pace of reforms across different regions of the country highlights the need for a systemic approach. Serbia demonstrates formal compliance with EU anti-corruption requirements, including the adoption of laws and the establishment of specialised agencies; nevertheless, real effectiveness remains low due to political influence over the judiciary and the absence of sanctions for corrupt officials. North Macedonia exhibits the poorest performance among the countries studied, where political crises and numerous scandals undermine the effectiveness of any reforms. A lack of political will and entrenched systemic corruption negate the results of international programmes. International cooperation in combating corruption holds considerable potential for implementing institutional reforms and enhancing transparency in public administration. However, it does not always achieve the anticipated outcomes due to a range of objective and subjective factors. One major challenge is the insufficient adaptation of international recommendations to national realities. For example, in Ukraine, the adoption of numerous anti-corruption laws and the creation of specialised agencies (NABU, SAP) were partly driven by external pressure; yet their effectiveness has been constrained by political influence and delays in judicial reform. The absence of clear coordination between international donors and domestic authorities further weakens the impact of these initiatives. A second key issue is the low level of public perception and trust in the reforms. In Moldova, international support in combating corruption, particularly through the implementation of EU initiatives, encountered widespread public distrust of state institutions, which reduced the impact of the measures undertaken. The common practice of simulating reforms without their proper implementation further undermined confidence in international organisations. A third issue is the insufficient alignment of anti-corruption measures with the socio-economic context. In Serbia, despite the successful adoption of a series of laws under GRECO's influence, the persistence of corrupt practices in public procurement and the lack of judicial independence hindered tangible progress.

An analysis of experiences across Eastern Europe and the Balkans highlights the most effective models for combating corruption. Serbia achieved success in establishing effective anti-corruption tools through international cooperation. In particular, the Anti-Corruption Agency introduced an effective system for monitoring officials' asset declarations. A key factor was the collaboration with GRECO, which ensured proper oversight of the implementation of recommendations. Although political influence over the judiciary remains a challenge, transparency in public administration has improved significantly. A successful example in the fight against corruption was the introduction of Ukraine's electronic public procurement system, Prozorro, which minimised the human factor and reduced the prevalence of corrupt practices. The introduction of electronic income declarations was also an effective measure, allowing the public to monitor the earnings of senior officials. The edeclaration system represents an electronic platform of the Unified State Register of Declarations of Persons Authorised to Perform Functions at the State or Local Level. This system allows users to search for specific individuals' declarations and view them according to various criteria, such as the declarant's surname, first name, and patronymic, as well as to filter documents by type, year of submission, and category of position (National AntiCorruption Bureau of Ukraine, n.d.). Moldova has demonstrated progress in reforming legislation to combat money laundering. Cooperation with international institutions, such as the European Union, has enabled the country to adopt more transparent financial control mechanisms. However, this success has been limited by the weak implementation of the laws in practice. The effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms largely depends on their integration with broader political and economic transformations. Achieving sustainable results requires ensuring the independence of anti-corruption institutions, strengthening the rule of law, and engaging society in monitoring reforms. Only under these conditions can anti-corruption initiatives act as a catalyst for wider change within political and economic systems.

Discussion

Within the context of this study, the dynamics of international legal initiatives aimed at combating corruption in Eastern European and Balkan countries were examined, alongside an analysis of the key challenges and successes of the measures implemented. Comparing the results of this research with findings from other scholarly studies revealed both commonalities and differences in approaches to addressing corruption, facilitating EU integration, and promoting good governance. The findings of O.A. Uliutina (2021) emphasised the importance of the independence of the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAP) from the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine.

The present study also highlighted the positive impact of establishing anti-corruption institutions on the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts; however, unlike O.A. Uliutina's focus, it stressed a comprehensive approach involving the interaction of multiple institutions, rather than solely altering their subordination. The similarity with O.A. Uliutina's research lies in recognising the importance of anti-corruption bodies, while the distinction concerns the approaches to ensuring their independence. The article by P. Draçi *et al*. (2022) emphasised regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, viewing it as a mechanism for EU integration and as a catalyst for economic, social, and political development. The present study also addressed the significance of regional cooperation, particularly in combating corruption, but with a different focus. In P. Draçi *et al*.'s research, the key aspect was the role of European institutions, such as the OECD and the European Commission, whereas the current study concentrated on domestic transformations and the development of transparency mechanisms within individual countries. Thus, both studies confirm the importance of external incentives; however, the present study examined anti-corruption efforts through the lens of internal reforms.

The study by D. Soyaltin-Colella (2022) revealed a paradox in the development of Serbia and Montenegro, which, despite meeting EU conditions, maintained high levels of corruption due to the influence of Chinese financing and authoritarian practices. The authors emphasised that a significant proportion of corrupt practices was linked to insufficient monitoring of reform implementation and their reliance on external financial sources. The present study similarly highlighted that implementing anti-corruption reforms requires not only the fulfilment of formal requirements but also the effective introduction of transparency, accountability, and independent justice practices. Particular attention was given to the dilemma faced by countries such as Serbia and Montenegro between complying with EU conditions and maintaining access to alternative funding sources, which reinforced corrupt practices. The similarity with the current study lies in emphasising the impact of external factors on domestic processes and the importance of proper reform implementation. However, the present research did not focus on the role of alternative international partners, such as China, but rather examined the influence of the EU as the primary driver of reform in Eastern European and Balkan countries. In the article by I. Kubbe & L. Cvetanoska (2021), the authors analysed the EU's anticorruption efforts through the conditionality mechanism, with a focus on democratic governance, transparency, and the rule of law. The study examined a system of reform incentives through the provision of financial support conditional on the fulfilment of specific political and economic criteria. The present research also confirmed the role of the EU in promoting reforms but emphasised the challenges of ensuring these mechanisms have a tangible impact due to insufficient oversight of fund utilisation and compliance with conditions. The authors highlighted that corrupt practices often adapt to formal requirements, resulting in superficial implementation of reforms. The main distinction was that the present study focused more on practical challenges related to implementing anti-corruption reforms, particularly issues of oversight and transparency at the local level, whereas the article by I. Kubbe & L. Cvetanoska addressed a broader range of issues, including the interrelation between corruption, democracy, and social stability. Furthermore, the present research had a more applied orientation, concentrating on concrete mechanisms for interaction with the EU, whereas I. Kubbe & L. Cvetanoska adopted a more theoretical approach to analysing corruption in the region.

The findings presented in the article by M.A. Nijmeijer (2024) centred on the process of European Union enlargement, particularly regarding political learning from previous eastern expansions. The present study also examined mechanisms for policy adaptation during European integration. However, unlike M.A. Nijmeijer's conclusions, which emphasised stricter accession conditions for Serbia, including enhanced monitoring and interim benchmarks, the present research stressed the need for a balanced combination of oversight and support for countries undergoing reform. Both studies agreed that economic policy and the rule of law are critically important areas for further integration. However, the present research placed less emphasis on social aspects, considering them indirectly through economic mechanisms. In the article by C. Castro & I. Lopes (2023), the impact of e-governance on reducing corruption was analysed in detail. The authors concluded that implementing e-governance is an important tool in the fight against corruption, provided a certain level of digital infrastructure development is achieved. The present research also examined the role of digital technologies in enhancing transparency and mitigating corruption risks, creating a point of convergence between the two studies. At the same time, it highlighted the challenges of integrating e-governance under conditions of limited resources and weak institutional capacity, an aspect not explored in depth by C. Castro & I. Lopes.

The findings of L. Karpenko *et al*. (2023) shared much in common with the present study regarding the analysis of anti-corruption policy directions in Ukraine. Both studies emphasised the importance of establishing effective regulatory mechanisms to combat systemic corruption, implementing transparent procedures, and drawing on international experience in reforming key institutions. However, L. Karpenko *et al*. devoted more attention to the historical evolution of corrupt practices, the analysis of anti-corruption strategies for 2020-2024, and their impact on socioeconomic development. The present study, for its part, focused more on contemporary challenges and prospects in anti-corruption policy, particularly in the context of integration into the European legal framework, which necessitated the adaptation of regional approaches to international standards. In B. Rothstein's (2021) book, corruption is examined through the lens of the social contract, with primary emphasis placed on the importance of trust between the state and society as a fundamental element of effective anti-corruption policy. The author also highlighted the need to enhance civic engagement, ensure transparency in government procedures, and actively involve the public in oversight of authorities. The present study concurs with the thesis regarding the importance of trust and citizen engagement but places greater emphasis on the practical aspects of implementing anti-corruption reforms, such as establishing independent institutions, introducing digital technologies, and strengthening accountability for corrupt practices. Furthermore, B. Rothstein emphasised international cooperation in combating corruption, which partially aligns with the present study; however, the latter focused more on developing and implementing internal mechanisms for effective public governance. The discussion demonstrated that the present study partially aligns with the findings of other articles, highlighting similar aspects, such as the significance of institutional development, the role of international cooperation, the need to strengthen social trust, and the utilisation of innovative approaches in the fight against corruption. At the same time, notable differences were observed in methodological emphases, the level of detail in examining specific aspects, and the focus on different dimensions of the issue. For example, the study by L. Karpenko *et al.* (2023) concentrated on the historical evolution of corruption and the analysis of development strategies, whereas B. Rothstein's research approached the issue through the lens of social contract theory, and the present study focused more on contemporary challenges, such as digitalisation, the strengthening of internal regulatory mechanisms, and alignment with EU standards. This highlights the multidimensional nature of corruption, encompassing political, social, economic, and legal aspects, and underscores the need for further research to develop integrated approaches that ensure effective long-term anti-corruption efforts.

Conclusions

The research encompassed an analysis of anti-corruption policies in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, Serbia, North Macedonia, Moldova, and Albania. Key case studies examined included the activities of the NABU, judicial reforms in Serbia, the implementation of electronic asset declarations in Ukraine, and the fight against banking fraud in Moldova, among others. Countries in the region demonstrated varying levels of progress in implementing international anti-corruption standards. Ukraine exemplifies a comprehensive approach to combating corruption, particularly through the introduction of electronic asset declarations, which enhanced transparency but faced resistance from political and business elites. In Serbia, judicial reforms have led to improvements in procedural transparency; however, the actual powers of anti-corruption bodies remain limited. The most successful outcomes are seen in countries that have effectively combined the implementation of international standards with the development of robust national anti-corruption mechanisms. In Ukraine, the increase in the CPI indicates progress following the implementation of anticorruption reforms; however, this improvement remains insufficient to achieve a sustainable level of trust among citizens and international partners. The establishment of institutions such as the NABU, SAP, and the Prozorro system marked a significant step in the fight against corruption.

Nevertheless, the ineffective enforcement of laws, political pressure, and the inability to hold highranking officials accountable continue to present major challenges. An analysis of CPI trends in Eastern European and Balkan countries after the introduction of international anti-corruption programmes revealed significant fluctuations in the effectiveness of these initiatives. Ukraine, Albania, and Moldova demonstrated a positive trend, with CPI increases of 4-5 points during certain periods, reflecting the impact of anti-corruption reforms, the establishment of specialised institutions, and support from the EU. However, limited progress in some cases – such as Ukraine reaching only 35 points by 2024 – highlighted systemic issues, including a weak judicial system and political crises. Serbia and North Macedonia experienced declines in CPI due to corruption scandals, political instability, and ineffective reform implementation, although North Macedonia partially recovered to 40 points by 2024. The effectiveness of anti-corruption programmes depends on the independence of institutions, their capacity to operate autonomously and transparently, and the support of civil society. For countries pursuing European integration, fulfilling anti-corruption commitments is crucial not only for external diplomatic success but also for fostering trust within the country. Among the advantages of anti-corruption policies in the countries studied are the adaptation of international standards, the development of institutional frameworks, and enhanced transparency through digital technologies. However, shortcomings include weak political will, limited resources within anti-corruption bodies, low public trust in the judicial system, and frequent instances of political interference in key institutions. The research demonstrated that successful anti-corruption policy is achievable only through a comprehensive approach, encompassing the strengthening of institutional autonomy, support for reforms from international partners, and active engagement of civil society. Future studies should focus on empirical research methods and the analysis of informal practices that undermine the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms.

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