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Blaming the State or Sharing Responsibility - The Ukrainian Maidan Movement and Changing Opinions on Ukrainian and Russian Corruption

Lenhag, Mi

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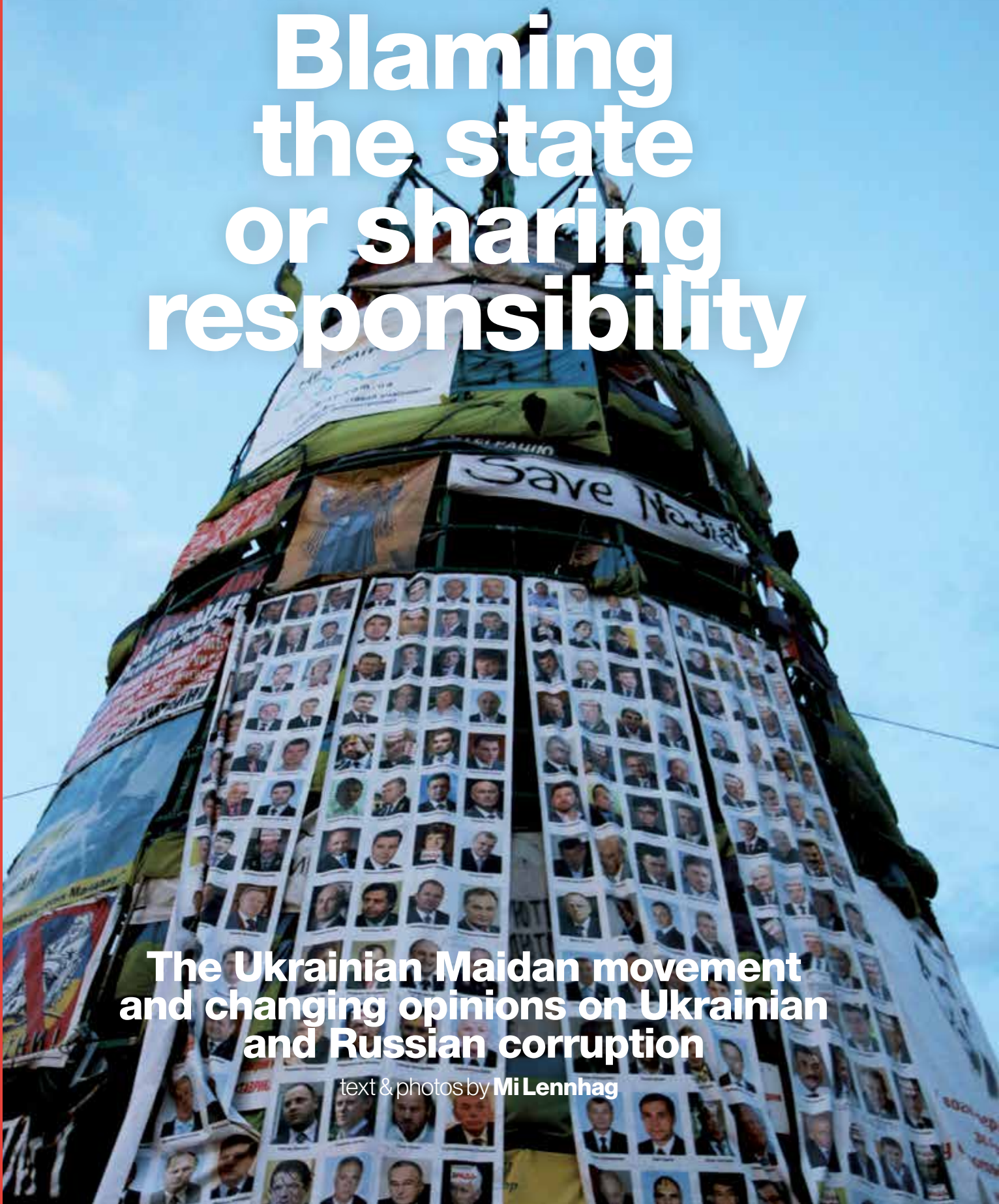
LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Blaming the state or sharing responsibility

The Ukrainian Maidan movement
and changing opinions on Ukrainian
and Russian corruption

text & photos by **Mi Lennhag**



Corruption is often said to be a phenomenon hard to combat; it is even harder to fight if, over time, it becomes increasingly widespread, well known, persistent and sometimes almost institutionalized. Ordinary citizens whom I have interviewed¹ in Eastern Europe often express their hatred of systems of extensive corruption, typically blaming state authorities and politicians. However, they simultaneously feel trapped by the informal economic “rules,” without real – or for them obvious – possibilities for either leaving or changing this ongoing “game”.

On a day-to-day basis, citizens feel caught in a post-Soviet system of everyday informal connections, which has a great deal of similarity with the informal distribution networks of Soviet times, but also has new and emerging “market-based” characteristics. From a wider perspective, citizens also express wide-ranging disappointment with high-level corruption among politicians, political parties, leading civil servants, and businessmen.

During recent years, Russia and Ukraine have undergone dramatic and rapid political, economic, and military changes. The media climate in both countries changed simultaneously and fundamentally, including Russian media restrictions and increased state media propaganda, as well as the rise of extensive impact of social media in Ukraine. It has however become more dangerous to be a Russian or Ukrainian journalist.² Nevertheless, a free press, freedom of speech and adequate protection of whistleblowers are thought to be key components in the fight against corruption.

Over the past few years, corruption has been highlighted on the Russian and Ukrainian agendas, both as a widespread problem in society and as basis for new public demands and political initiatives. The Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny has acted as a spokesperson for anti-corruption work. During 2014 the Maidan movement became an important factor for concrete Ukrainian post-Soviet attempts to curb corruption through legislation and new bodies, and it was also the beginning of a process where corruption is described and discussed in new ways.

The World Bank has identified corruption as “the single greatest obstacle to economic and social development.”³ Corruption is a prioritized crime area for Interpol⁴, and the United Nations states that corruption “contributes to governmental instability” and “attacks the foundation of democratic institutions”.⁵ Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”.⁶ Michael Johnston, professor of political science, defines corruption as “the abuse of public roles or resources for private benefit,”

while also emphasizing “that ‘abuse,’ ‘public,’ ‘private,’ and even ‘benefit’ are matters of contention in many societies and of varying degrees of ambiguity in most.”⁷

Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index* (CPI) ranked 175 countries in the latest index, with number one being least corrupt. Ukraine ranked 142nd – with the highest levels of corruption in Europe – and Russia was classed as number 136.⁸

According to opinion polls conducted by the independent Russian research organization Levada Center, Russian public opinion and perception of corruption have changed to some extent. Corruption has long irritated Russians, but the topic has since become more commonly raised as a major problem in society, with the same importance as unemployment, education and medical care. According to a 2013 survey by Levada Center, 39% of respondents stated that corruption and bribery was a key issue of concern, compared with 23% in 2006.⁹ In the Levada polls after Vladimir Putin’s press conferences in December 2013 and December 2014, citizens were asked which of the issues raised by Putin was the single most urgent one. In both years, the most common answer was “the fight against corruption”.¹⁰

IN LEVADA’S LARGE-SCALE survey “Russian Public Opinion 2012–2013,” a majority in 2012 replied that “adherence to constitution” should be the “foundation for authority in the country”. Simultaneously, the most common answer was that “the current primary foundation” was “cover-up and corruption among the country’s bureaucracy”.¹¹ In 2013, a majority replied that there, among top officials, is more “corruption and embezzlement [now] than 10–12 years earlier”.¹² In 2013, 42% of respondents stated “bureaucratic abuse of power, corruption and bribery in the top echelons of power” as one reason why “Russia does not demonstrate any considerable economic growth”. This is a higher percentage than answers relating to taxes, investments, the government’s economic policies, outflow of capital, or even oligarchs.¹³

In the latest Global Corruption Barometer (2013), 59% of Ukrainians answered that “the levels of corruption” had increased over the past two years. As many as 43% declared that corruption had “increased a lot”. Only 5% answered that levels of corruption had decreased. 74% stated that corruption is “a serious problem” within the public sector in Ukraine. The most common replies to a question about governmental actions in the fight against corruption are that they are “ineffective” (43%) or “very ineffective” (37%). Institutions described by respondents as “corrupt/extremely corrupt” are the ju-

abstract

This article examines how ordinary Russian and Ukrainian citizens experience and relate to extensive and pervasive corruption (high-level, everyday, political) in everyday discussions and demands – in relation to authorities, politicians, civil servants, and fellow citizens. Anonymous interviews conducted in Ukraine and Kaliningrad oblast from 2009 to 2014 show differences in anti-corruption demands and citizens’ attitudes to the states’ versus individuals’ roles and whom to blame for corruption. National corruption debates and quantitative surveys enhance our understanding. In Kaliningrad, citizens continued seeing the state as the main enemy blamed for corruption. Along with the Maidan events, corruption became more significant in Ukrainian everyday discussions, civil society, and media debate. Individuals in Ukraine, unlike in Russia, started to elaborate “personal” or “shared” responsibility regarding corruption. The interview material indicates that abrupt changes in attitudes to corruption are possible.

KEYWORDS: Corruption, Ukraine, Russia, Kaliningrad, Maidan.

diciary (87%), police (84), public officials and civil servants (82), medical and health services (77), parliament/legislature (77), political parties (74), educational systems (69), and business (65).¹⁴ According to large-scale surveys on perceptions of corruption in Ukraine conducted by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) during 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011, Ukrainian citizens stressed that the main reasons for corruption are the abuse of power by officials, the absence of adequate government control, the lack of political will to curb corruption, and confusing legislation.¹⁵ We can clearly see how Ukrainians experience corruption in most arenas in society.

Citizens' perspectives on corruption

A great deal of contemporary corruption research places the focus on high-level corruption among politicians and high ranking state officials, or on economic crime in the spheres of business, trade or foreign aid. Moreover, corruption research in political science is regularly based on quantitative methods for inference, and economists might try to measure the “size” of the black or grey economy. Everyday corruption is not excluded from corruption research, but citizens' opinions in the post-Soviet region might not have had a sufficient hearing, through qualitative interviews for instance, as an important basis for research within social sciences.

Despite this, our everyday informal behavior and interactions, along with traditions, attitudes and norms among ordinary citizens, have great impact. They affect the creation of formal institutions and might limit state authorities in creating functional formal rules.¹⁶ Widespread informality and the persistence of parallel economies can be regarded as threats to (weak) states. It can also be an illustration of a government's failure to incorporate or even consider existing norms and social systems of behavior – or a sign of a state being too weak to be able to adopt new practices or to exert control over its citizens.

Studying corruption – a phenomenon said to undermine democracy, equality and possibilities for social trust and functioning formal institutions – is sometimes quite a discouraging activity for a researcher. It is not made easier if the countries studied are facing a downward spiral – in terms of economy, security and aspects of democracy and freedom of expression – with no predictable end. However, it does become easier when, during interviews, individuals encourage you, trust you, express the wish for changes, and point out that they – ordinary citizens with ordinary jobs – feel excluded when it comes to matters regarding corruption and anti-corruption work. In this study, citizens and their observations, explanations and arguments are included and considered important.

MORE THAN 20 YEARS have now passed since the breakdown¹⁷ of the Soviet Union. After 1991, a new market-based order has, to varying degrees, been introduced within the “new” post-Soviet states that followed (or were re-established). Alena Ledeneva's book *Russia's Economy of Favours – Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (1998) described the Soviet phenomenon of blat

as an informal economic (but mostly non-monetary), non-hierarchical, network-based channel for transactions, parallel to the Soviet state, that had been in existence since the 1930s. Several researchers¹⁸ have described Soviet blat. Blat¹⁹ was primarily a reaction to shortages in goods, and to “political” hierarchies and bureaucratic routines, but eventually became a more integrated and time-consuming part of ordinary everyday Soviet life. People spent considerable time “collecting” and taking good care of useful contacts and arranging non-monetary exchange chains. Citizens simultaneously associated Soviet blat transactions with precarious circumstances and reduced possibilities, *forcing* them to engage in informal exchange. The unofficial economy did in fact help the official economy, as well as individuals, to survive. Presumably, this double mechanism made this informal economic institution even more stable.

Despite new economic routines and the considerable time that has passed since the Soviet period, it is important to study and incorporate the legacy of up to almost 70 years of informal, time-consuming economic strategies – which both ruled and were necessary for Soviet everyday life – into contemporary corruption research regarding this geographical area. Post-Soviet corrupt practices do differ in many ways from the Soviet ones, as for instance Alena Ledeneva has shown in later work on “post-Soviet blat” and other forms of corruption, embezzlement and informal business practices. Nevertheless, by taking its history and probable legacy into account, we will better understand the present context. I also claim that we need to recognize and comprehend the stories of ordinary citizens in order to improve our understanding of persistent and widespread corruption – both high-level and everyday based – in the post-Soviet region.

Research focus and material

This study examines and contributes to the understanding of how ordinary citizens (i.e. not politicians, company executives or experts) in parts of contemporary Russia and Ukraine experience, describe and relate to corruption. This article focuses on the role of corruption (high-level, everyday, political, etc.) *as a subject in everyday discussions, as a political topic, and as a component in public demands among ordinary citizens* – toward state authorities, politicians, political parties, civil servants, but also toward fellow citizens.

In essence, I show how citizens in the Russian Kaliningrad oblast and in central and western Ukraine *frame* corruption, and whom they *blame* for its existence and appearance. I focus on citizens' attitudes to the state's role versus their own in contemporary corruption, and on anti-corruption demands.

My new empirical interview material explores the contemporary informal economy in two *former Soviet style economies*²⁰ as a stable informal institution. According to my respondents, however, corruption has become a more frequently discussed issue.

During several fieldwork visits to post-Soviet states, I arranged interview situations in which ordinary citizens trusted me with extensive information, stories, and personal reflections. During interviews I tried to comprehend 1) *how today's everyday informal economic behavior is described in terms of goods and*



Central Kyiv, nearby the Maidan press center, summer of 2014.

services involved, and 2) *how the extensive corruption is described, explained, motivated and justified* by citizens. I also asked *questions about corruption, the economy and politics in general*, letting respondents discuss those topics more freely.

This article is based on 44²¹ anonymous, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which I conducted and recorded in Ukraine in 2009 and 2014, and in the Kaliningrad oblast in 2011. Additionally, several relevant discussions with citizens under other circumstances than recorded interviews contributed to my understanding.

The inhabitants of Kaliningrad can present opinions and perceptions like Russians in general, but Kaliningrad cannot automatically be treated as representative of Russia as a whole. Kaliningrad, like Ukraine, has a history of frequent contact with surrounding countries in terms of movement of people and goods, and has important EU and Schengen borders. Ukraine and Kaliningrad share a contemporary history: many citizens moved there from other countries or territories, and the regions incorporate, within today's borders, territories that used to "belong" to other states.

THE OUTLINE OF THIS ARTICLE is basically chronological; first the Kaliningrad context in 2011 is presented through interview material, followed by the Russian debate on corruption from 2011 to 2014. Next, the Ukrainian context in 2014 is discussed, based on interviews and media debate, and contrasted to both the Kaliningrad case of 2011, and that of Ukraine in 2009.

The Russian and Ukrainian national debates on corruption are emphasized to enhance the understanding of national differences in citizens' descriptions. Excising survey data on public opinion improves our understanding of the interview contexts, but is of course methodologically treated as something different

from qualitative personal stories. Personal stories, however, capture unique, important knowledge.

Based on respondents' descriptions and explanations, this study highlights differences in Ukraine and Kaliningrad regarding anti-corruption demands and in citizens' attitudes to the states' role in corruption versus their own. Furthermore, the article shows how corruption – both everyday and high-level – quite abruptly became a more significant and important component of Ukrainian everyday discussions, media debate, and within civil society, through the Maidan movement and the new political climate that followed Kyiv's deadly riots in 2014. Corruption in Ukraine in 2014 was not only mentioned when describing society, but also as part of newly expressed demands for change.²²

Both the Maidan movement's and the citizens' strong focus on new, efficient anti-corruption projects marks a significant change compared to my previous interviews. When the rather exceptional case of Ukraine in 2014 is compared to previous interviews from Ukraine and Kaliningrad, different narratives emerge regarding everyday discussions on corruption. Most interesting is how personal/individual responsibility related to corruption – based on descriptions by my respondents – became a highly debated topic in Ukraine during 2014. Individuals in Ukraine, unlike in Kaliningrad, are starting to accept a share of the blame for the widespread corruption. In Kaliningrad, in citizens' minds, the state is still the main enemy blamed for extensive and pervasive corruption.

The rather dissimilar social movements in Kaliningrad versus Ukraine will not be compared, but describing them is important for seeing the context for the personal stories, and the movements themselves stress the importance of studying individuals' perceptions of corruption. This article aims to demonstrate



Old couple and their dog, Rynok Square, Lviv, 2014.



Sunday activity at Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Kyiv, July 2014.

differences described by respondents, in public debate and in surveys assessing public opinion. The qualitative material in this article indicates a possibility for abrupt changes in attitudes toward corruption, in contrast to what is sometimes seen as a normally slow process.

Interviews, selection, and ethics

When I study corruption and conduct a narrative analysis by looking for recurring *descriptions*, *explanations* and *motivations* presented by ordinary people, I gather *subjective*, *personal stories*. I do not present *objective reasons* explaining the informal economy (or its change or persistence) with the help of those stories. My standpoint is, however, that those explanations and perceptions themselves are noteworthy and important. Personal stories can through thoughtful selection of respondents, combined with enough material to comprehend the recurring stories, increase the understanding of post-Soviet corruption.

My interview sampling is strategically determined and varies along demographic and social status criteria, portraying the Russian and Ukrainian population. To gather information both from generations who lived and worked during the Soviet era, and from those without memories from Soviet times, the respondents are aged between 18 and 85. Respondents are not “experts,” nor “exceptionally corrupt individuals,” but ordinary citizens. They furthermore embody sectors which during both Soviet and post-Soviet times have been associated with extensive corruption, i.e. universities; kindergarten/schools; medical care; public administration; state employment; police/military; customs; private business/trade; public transportation; journalism/cultural events; politics/opposition.

Interviews were conducted throughout the Kaliningrad oblast. Ukraine is represented by central and western regions, even if several respondents had moved there from other regions,

including eastern oblasts. Ukraine of 2014 was not represented by more “activists” than in 2009. The number of interviews performed was determined by the amount of relevant information gathered; I continued until the later interviews stopped providing substantially new “stories”.

My respondents were offered anonymity and felt surprisingly comfortable when talking with me about the informal economy. Reliability in an interview study is mostly affected by confidentiality, trust and respect. Several ethical dilemmas are associated with interviews on questionable economic transactions, or researchers dealing with potentially harmful information about respondents’ possibly illegal acts.²³

I tackled the ethical problem of getting information about illegal transactions by not asking about respondents’ *personal acts*, but *indirect questions* about what they regard as “normal behavior” or the common ways (for others) to behave in their work places/generations/surroundings. If someone shared own experiences of giving or accepting bribes anyway, it always occurred at her own initiative.²⁴

Studying and analyzing corruption

Studying corruption is important in many ways: to help understand a lack of efficiency, economic growth, and investments – but also to analyze why foreign aid is not helping as intended, to investigate political corruption and manipulations of elections, or to grasp the possibilities for implementing new laws, to correctly address economic inequities, or to understand low levels of trust and identification with (often recently established) states.

My respondents present stories comprising different informal economic practices. In addition to everyday corrupt acts which they might see or encounter in their daily life, citizens can naturally have thoughts about other corrupt practices, such as

political corruption or high-level corruption within public procurement, for instance.

All types of corruption, according to the most commonly used definitions, capture a tension between self-seeking acts (with both monetary and non-monetary ambitions) and public good. This makes it increasingly interesting to examine citizens' subjective feelings regarding corruption in relation to the state, state representatives, politicians, and civil servants. However – a most important point – citizens might not present or see a clear distinction between bribing a state official, and “bribing” an employee in a private company. This was obvious throughout my fieldwork.

The informal economy, which ordinary citizens observe, take part in, or have opportunities to take part in during daily life, includes transactions and acts that I have chosen to label *everyday corruption*. Other terms for the more or less the same phenomena are: street-level corruption, petty corruption, low-level corruption, small-scale corruption, household corruption, social bribery, grey economy, administrative corruption, bureaucratic corruption, corruption of need, survival corruption, or the Russian/Slavonic word *blat*.

TALKING EXCLUSIVELY ABOUT everyday corruption would consequently exclude *political corruption* (when politicians (mis)use legislated power for illegitimate private gain); *electoral corruption/fraud* (illegal/criminal interference with the process of elections or the counting of votes); *business corruption* (additional payments to win a procurement, which occasionally does not qualify as corruption, but as e.g. corporate crime) and *cartels*.

To put it simply, everyday corruption *excludes* corrupt acts performed by companies and politicians and places the focus on ordinary citizens and civil servants. This *includes* everyday corrupt acts such as offering, giving, accepting or demanding bribes. A typical example would be “paying” a small “fee” or giving a bottle of cognac to a civil servant in order to either simply get what one is actually entitled to by law, or for any preferential or additional treatment. Everyday corruption can also include *nepotism/favoritism/cronyism* (“helping” relatives or friends to access goods or services, or to get an appointment regardless of qualifications), and *extortion* (e.g. when police officers demand payment in order to “help” citizens to avoid fines, imprisonment or violence).

It is however problematic to reduce the question of what qualifies as corruption simply to a matter of what is legal or not. In many new states (with the post-Soviet ones as good examples), the legal frameworks might show many weaknesses. In the book *Rotten states?*, political scientist Leslie Holmes, who has presented extensive research on post-Soviet corruption, highlights situations where “many actions or nonactions are not clearly forbidden by law”.²⁵ Considering corruption solely in terms of illegal acts might not fully capture the informal economy and the public opinions and norms surrounding it.

Political scientist Keith Darden emphasizes environments where “bribery takes the form of a convention” in contact with officials.²⁶ Darden elaborates informal acts as an obvious

and permitted part of an informal agreement or contract in some societies, and describes situations where “the state is not grounded in the rule of law and functions largely through informal institutions.”²⁷ He thereby traces and sees deeply embedded rules – enforced by the state itself or widely rooted in expectations among citizens and officials – as an institution, rather than a behavioral pattern. A somewhat similar reflection is made by Rasma Karklins in *The System Made Me Do It*, when describing the “self-sustaining system of corruption”, in which citizens become used to civil servants wanting (and later on expecting) bribes.²⁸ When, over time, state officials seek bribes, citizens can become willing to pay and, eventually, also offer bribes of their own “free” will.

Corruption in Kaliningrad oblast

During 2009 and 2010, Kaliningrad faced growing protests related to socio-economic problems such as the rapid decline of the economy, the healthcare system and social institutions, along with rising taxes and prices, isolation from the EU, high unemployment rates, and corruption. These protests eventually also incorporated criticism of the government and Putin, and successful demands for replacement of Kaliningrad's governor Georgy Boos. The now murdered Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov was part of the movement, which eventually engaged both common people and local elites. The demonstrations influenced national Russian media. It surprised the Kremlin, where the events' impact was not predicted.²⁹ These local protests make it even more interesting to conduct interviews in Kaliningrad and see how citizens frame corruption – even if the local protests did not generate changes in citizens' opinions on corruption.

During my fieldwork in the Kaliningrad oblast in the summer of 2011, I was told that the inequalities in society are infinitely bigger than what is required for a revolution. Yet the main political and economic problems articulated by citizens seem to remain unsolved and mostly untouched. Ordinary Kaliningrad citizens described wide political resignation in 2011. They could not image how and when things could change for the better; few could even visualize things getting better during their lifetime. Politics was something happening on a level very far from their sphere of influence. For many respondents it did not matter whether Putin or Medvedev would win the then up-coming presidential election. People spoke of the two leaders with a somewhat surprising contempt. A retired nurse described Putin and Medvedev as a funny pair of parrots that just repeat each other. Respondents overwhelmingly agree that if Russia should establish itself for real, it would require a new leader who really sees the people, who is not corrupt, and who does not derive from the old political class. But according to ordinary people I talked to, no such leader was there to vote for. Without huge amounts of money and questionable contacts, the honest presidential candidates would never make it to the corridors of power.

THE IDEA THAT SOVIET citizens “enjoyed beating the system” is often mentioned as a feature and consequence of the Soviet peri-

od, rooted in a perception of citizens as being outside of, and not represented by, or part of, the state.³⁰ Leslie Holmes argues that most Soviet citizens had a clearly defined conception of “them” – the party and state authorities – and “us,” the fellow citizens.³¹ The Soviet so-called planned economy is said to have encouraged a lack of respect for formal institutions, as well as having generated cryptic laws and rules and extraordinary public feelings. Rasma Karklins describes this as a perception that institutions cannot be designed to serve the public good³², which also seems to be applicable to the lack of political representation and possibilities of exercising influence, experienced and described by my Kaliningrad respondents. Trust, identity, and feelings of legitimacy are mind-sets that are difficult to implement.

My respondents described widespread Russian corruption. It might nevertheless be possible to “arrange” most things – but for this you need useful connections, know-how, time, and money. Citizens struggle to keep up with the growing sums of informal money demanded in exchange in Kaliningrad. A female doctor at a Kaliningrad state hospital described how one third of life is spent on finding “alternative solutions”. She said that everything today is about money, and that the levels of the bribes have doubled several times since year 2000. The Soviet non-monetary informal economy has developed into, or is replaced by, an informal system involving increasing amounts of money. The time-consuming aspects of the informal economy are however similar.

As an employee at a state hospital, the doctor described her salary as too low for survival without also accepting bribes or taking on a night job. The healthcare sector in many post-Soviet states is associated with extensive corruption, along with schools and universities, the police force, various authorities that either issue documents and licenses or conduct controls, as well as recruitment processes for state employment. In Kaliningrad, respondents described how one can bribe to access most goods and services: academic degrees, heart surgery, buying land for building, “correcting” failed school tests, passing driving tests, obtaining daycare places for children or permanent Schengen visas, or avoiding the long wait to get married.

In many situations, bribery is definitely what Keith Darden describes as “a convention” in contact with state officials. Karklins’ notion of the “self-sustaining system of corruption” also appears to flourish, since citizens are used to civil servants wanting (or needing) unofficial payment or small gifts, and so a common practice emerges of regularly offering them – since they will be required anyway. A Kaliningrad translator working for foreign companies told me that she had bribed a traffic police officer that very morning to avoid a trial, since that would have required her taking several days off work. It appears to be common for the traffic police to stop drivers, even when no law has been violated. It is in essence a convention, and citizens know that traffic police officers hardly can survive on their low salaries; the police job includes the possibility, and almost obligation, to “collect” informal money, and citizens simply cannot avoid that game and the informal rules.

The widespread everyday corruption in Kaliningrad is described by respondents as involving increasing amounts of

money in a rising number of situations, with a growing number of autonomous bribe collectors. In 1993, Andrei Shleifer and Robert Vishny described how post-Soviet Russia (compared to the Soviet state) had a system of “independent monopolists” who collected bribes based on a free and easy entry to the bribe collecting market. Shleifer and Vishny argued that this model had “devastating economic consequences”, and that eventually “the total bribe rises to infinity and production output falls”.³³ Based on my interviews, this statement seems to be valid in the Kaliningrad oblast in 2011. Furthermore, it is in line with estimations by Russian Interior Ministry’s Department for Combating Economic Crimes, indicating that the average bribe in rubles in 2011 was 26 times greater than in 2008.³⁴

THE “FACT” THAT A BRIBE amounts to one third of an “official fine” – for instance if you pay a bribe to avoid a formal traffic fine – seems to be fairly common knowledge in Kaliningrad, based on my interviews (the amounts of money involved in other types of bribery – regarding preferential access to schools, hospitals etc. – follow a different logic, and seem, as said, to be rising). Hence I find evidence for an unofficial – but rather widely known – “price” or “informal fee” in contact with state employees. The unofficial is almost official, or: the informal price is a stable informal institution, appearing as general public knowledge. I therefore stress that today’s everyday corrupt practices actually show similarities with the “mafia-style” corruption, described by Shleifer and Vishny as the ruling type during Soviet times.³⁵ Then, you knew whom you needed to bribe and what you informally had to “pay”. I noticed the same phenomenon of widely known informal “prices” in post-Soviet Ukraine in 2009, where young university students, independent of each other, referred to comparable “prices” for being accepted to popular universities, and “fees” for receiving better school grades. There also appeared to be commonly known prices useful in order to speed up the process of obtaining a new passport, for instance.³⁶

The system of corruption is not just rooted within state authorities and formal institutions, but also in the ways citizens interact, show distrust, and continue to feel that they need to collect useful “friends” in strategic places. In Kaliningrad I saw more resignation and anger than actual demands for curbing the widespread corruption. The main enemy in the everyday discussions about corruption is the state and, to some extent, politicians and rich businessmen. Respondents articulated a distinct and present division between the state and the citizens today, similar to how Holmes and others have described Soviet society.

A young Russian journalist I interviewed was very critical of how Kaliningrad has managed foreign, including Swedish, aid. He had himself assisted foreign journalists who tried to unravel corrupt foreign aid scandals. This journalist is a good illustration of a person criticizing corruption on different levels of society by including high-level corruption and state businesses involving huge amounts of informal money. In the years represented in Levada Center’s 2013 Russian public opinion poll (2000, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2011 and 2012) the most common reply to a question



Citizens selling vegetables, Kaliningrad oblast, 2011.



Man and grandson at Lavra Monastery, Ukraine, 2009.

about the “main obstacle to democratic market reforms in Russia” was the “corrupt ruling elite”.³⁷ In 2006, 2010, 2011 and 2012, about 60% of the respondents replied “definitely yes” or “most likely, yes” that Russia would face “high profile corruption scandals and resignation of ministers” within the next year.³⁸

An older historian whom I interviewed at his library office presented an unusual attitude toward Russian corruption. He described how he always took a pride in not using contacts to access anything, not even during Soviet times. People used to say he is a very honest man, and therefore a very poor man. He described himself as a happy man.

The most common stories during interviews however include rather good knowledge of informal economic routines and procedures, including numerous different concrete examples. Their reasoning is also advanced. A taxi driver told me that people in Kaliningrad prefer their neighbors to be rich, albeit because of corruption, because then some of their prosperity might benefit them as well. Many of my respondents stated, that according to public perceptions it is not beneficial to be part of the formal economy only. This does not in any way mean that these respondents like the system. The pessimism I could see in Kaliningrad comprised a sense of futility in the general public; there were few reasons for trying to do things legally since few fellow citizens were acting that way, especially not politicians and rich people. Furthermore, it was uncommon for my respondents to articulate the view that most people, within an imaginable future, would benefit from leaving the corrupt system. And since from citizens’ perspective, the roots of and reasons for the widespread corruption emanate from the state, the everyday discussions on corruption also place very little focus on how things could be changed.

IN SUMMARY, my respondents in Kaliningrad were comfortable talking about corruption – a phenomenon that according to them is time-consuming, widespread, and increasing. During interviews, citizens presented good “knowledge” of how to

“act” in the informal economy, and pessimism about possible changes. Everyday corruption appeared to be a stable informal institution, and respondents often felt they lacked possibilities to create or even initiate change.

Russia, Navalny, and public debate

I will now move on to illustrate some important aspects of Russian public debate and national media since 2011. Even if Kaliningrad does not border “Big Russia”, its inhabitants have common access to Russian TV channels and newspapers. It is said that Kaliningrad inhabitants are more critical of Russian politics and the Kremlin, as well as Putin and the party United Russia, due to historical reasons and the geographical separation.³⁹

The Russian lawyer, blogger and political activist Alexei Navalny is known for playing a key role in encouraging the large-scale Russian demonstrations during the winter before the 2012 presidential election. The demonstrations in December 2011 were Moscow’s largest protests since the breakdown of the USSR.⁴⁰ The big demonstration on December 10th was partly organized through a Facebook event.⁴¹ The gatherings on December 24th included rallies under the parole “For Fair Elections”. Reporters at The Moscow Times stated that approximately 80,000 protesters participated. Navalny gave a speech declaring there were enough people present to march and seize the Kremlin, but that they should avoid such violence.⁴²

As early as February 2011, Navalny described United Russia as a “the party of crooks and thieves”.⁴³ The focuses of the winter demonstrations were Putin’s regime and leadership, the ruling party United Russia and the then upcoming so-called “stolen” parliamentary election (and after December 4th’s widely disputed election). Another focus, addressed during demonstrations and by civil society and Navalny, was widespread political and administrative corruption.

On March 3rd 2012 – the day before Russia’s presidential election – The Wall Street Journal published a well-cited weekend interview titled “The Man Vladimir Putin Fears Most”, referring



Housing area, Western Kaliningrad oblast, 2011.

to Navalny. The article stated that “in Russia, poking into corruption is a serious health risk”. Navalny is quoted as saying, “it’s obvious now that [Putin’s] system of power is based on corruption, and people around him depend only on money and corruption”.⁴⁴

Navalny is founder of the Russian “Anti-Corruption foundation”, which has met with several attempts to stop its anti-corruption activities.⁴⁵ It unites several projects, such as RosPil (РосПил), based on voluntary contributions from citizens. RosPil urges ordinary citizens to report suspicious governmental contracts within public procurement, for instance.⁴⁶ In the info section of the RosPil blog it is pointed out that “this is our money”.⁴⁷ The present Russian situation – described as when the crooks in power grab money, while ordinary people barley survive – is compared with what could be an alternative situation, with normal medical care, high-quality education, safe roads, clean streets and better opportunities for everyone.

This is one of many examples of how the Russian anti-corruption movement focuses first and foremost on ways to combat high-level corruption, often in state-owned companies, and on framing high-level (political) leaders.

Another Russian initiative for curbing corruption was the smartphone anti-corruption application *Bribr*, launched in October 2012. It encouraged citizens to report incidents where civil servants demanded informal payment. One hypothetical example could be when traffic policemen “offered” drivers the chance to pay lower “direct informal fees”, instead of time-consuming procedures with formal traffic offences (which correspondingly most likely would be a more costly alternatives, since the “informal fees” are normally lower).⁴⁸

The big demonstrations during the winter of 2011 were initially viewed as a possible start of “orange” Russian protests. In line with the tradition of naming post-Soviet protests, the 2011 to 2013 Russian protests began, mostly in foreign media, being called the “Snow Revolution” or the “Winter Revolution”. Now, however,

we know that no “color revolution” emerged in Russia, and that Navalny has struggled with lawsuits against him for a considerable time. We can moreover observe that the present Russian debate on corruption still focuses mostly on high-level corruption among politicians, leaders, and businessmen. Before the 2014 Sochi Olympic games the anti-corruption debate in Russia intensified somewhat, with signs of a possible public movement growing stronger. But with new Russian laws limiting possibilities for political debate, along with the annexation of Crimea and the development in Eastern Ukraine, the political focus in Russia gradually changed from social issues to other topics. During the winter of 2014/2015, daily life in Russia focused generally on trade sanctions, military matters, food shortages, the falling ruble, rising food prices, and other economic problems that affected both the state economy and the everyday lives of ordinary Russians. To sum up, the Russian media debate on corruption – where permitted or possible – focuses mostly on high-level and political corruption. Despite some attempts, including the large-scale winter demonstrations, there is currently no solid civil society movement involved in anti-corruption work. This is presumable partly a consequence of new laws and continuing punishments of oppositional activists and journalists.

Maidan, changing opinions, and new anti-corruption demands

It is not hard to comprehend that the Maidan events and the war in Eastern Ukraine affected many Ukrainians dramatically. The discussions in Europe about how to label the development and occurrences in Ukraine continued. On August 24th 2014 – the 23rd anniversary of Ukraine’s independence – president Petro Poroshenko gave a speech, mentioning Ukraine’s “war against foreign aggression”.⁴⁹ The speech was translated and published online. Shortly afterwards, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs labeled the conflict an “invasion” on an official Twitter account.⁵⁰ The Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs, Arsen Ava-

kov, often uses Facebook for his first comments on events.⁵¹

During this time, the importance and impact of social media and the Internet in Ukraine increased. Ukraine's contemporary fight against corruption, including attempts to raise awareness of the problem, is partly viral. The creativity and good knowledge of social media among activists and Ukrainian journalists contributed to the impact of the movement and the spread of updated information. For instance, in 2014, foreigners could constantly stream online videos from central Kyiv.⁵² Well-organized press centers were established, and Twitter, Instagram and Facebook were widely used to gather people or quickly share information.

It is noticeable how the cases of Ukraine 2009, Kaliningrad 2011 and Ukraine 2014 display significant differences. In the latest Global Corruption Barometer on Ukraine – which was based on surveys conducted in 2012, before the Maidan protests started – as many as 72% of respondents did “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with the statement that “ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption”.⁵³ In 2009 my Ukrainian respondents described good common knowledge of how to behave in the informal sector, as well as a general lack of fear of getting caught for being corrupt. Corruption was often considered as common – and not rarely also acceptable – procedure. A young university student described in 2009 how acquaintances and classmates had paid approximately 400,000 dollars to be accepted into prominent Kyiv universities. She described that “a friend got help from a contact to get better result on a [university] test”, and others gave money for better grades. She stated that “it's not strange, it's normal”.

INCORPORATING THE IMPACT of informal institutions, attitudes and norms is helpful when looking at economic development (or the lack of it). A situation with widespread post-Soviet corruption can – from an outside and economic point of view – appear as a sub-optimal state of equilibrium.⁵⁴ We might wonder why those societies do not change, since in terms of economy and democracy they would most likely benefit greatly from leaving extensive corrupt practices behind. In institutional theory, institutions constitute the socially and humanly devised framework that defines, enables, simplifies and sometimes limits decision-making and interaction. Repeated interaction might form patterns and establish common expectations and mutual trust.⁵⁵ Political scientist Paul Pierson highlights path dependence and the importance of seeing institutional development as a long-term process. Economist Douglass North has furthermore stated that informal institutions often remain stable even when formal institutions change, and that informal institutions are much more resilient to intentional political actions, since they are deeply embedded in traditions and patterns of behavior.⁵⁶ Regarding the ability of actors to create change or affect institutional development, Pierson however points out, “institutions, once in place, may ‘select’ actors”.⁵⁷ Actors might, over long periods of time, adapt to different institutional arrangements. Soviet blat, an informal economic distributing system almost sanctioned by the state, could constitute such an institutional arrangement. Individu-

als invested an increasing amount of time on adapting, making and maintaining good relations with “useful people,” and accumulating knowledge. This presumably generated increasing resistance to change, making the possibility of a new social order increasingly remote – even if changes would bring greater future benefits. This feature is well captured in North's idea of “pirates” who will go on investing in becoming better pirates – in this case more corrupt or street-smart – in a society that lacks incentives for them to abandon their behavior.⁵⁸ Even if several reasons for the necessity of Soviet blat have disappeared, and the blat system has changed, contemporary ways of thinking, acting and calculating among citizens I have interviewed fairly often show great similarities with the Soviet era networks.⁵⁹

It is generally problematic to compare different post-Soviet “color revolutions”, or to see them in isolation. The Maidan movement generated exceptional international publicity, but is also different from Kaliningrad's (and Moscow's) protests in other aspects. One important aspect regarding Ukraine is the remaining disappointment after the 2004 “orange revolution”. Ukraine's state bureaucracy did not become significantly more transparent, few anti-corruption mechanisms were fully implemented, and politicians and corruption remained dangerously intertwined. In *Orange Revolution and Aftermath: Mobilization, Apathy, and the State in Ukraine* (2010), the size and impact of the protests is described as surprising to both observers and participants. Back then, Ukrainian civil society was expected to exert active and significant influence on Ukraine and its democracy. Yet that influence weakened quickly, and corruption remained a major problem.⁶⁰

In Ukraine 2014 one group of important actors – ordinary citizens – started talking about and describing informal economic practices in new ways. As a result of knowing that other citizens also talked about corruption, my respondents described feelings of increased optimism about future changes. People started to elaborate thoughts on how to “leave” current informal behavioral patterns of the corrupt system – instead of primarily describing either how they feel trapped in the informal system, or how one needs to act to survive in everyday life, which respondents often expressed during interviews in 2009. In 2014, Ukrainians seemed more open toward the idea of a new system, even if their “collected contacts” thereby would become less useful in the near future, or if things would get more costly; the “pirates” were discussing how to leave the system. Respondents described that both they, and their children, would benefit from changed informal economic behavior. One respondent in 2014 stated she wanted something different for her grandchildren as a reason for starting to act differently today.

THE SURVEYS CONDUCTED by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2011 indicate increased and intensified corruption over these years, primarily due to an increased number of government bodies where ordinary citizens are confronted with not very secret extortion as part of the common bureaucratic routines.⁶¹ In Ukraine, the common perception is that corruption is everywhere. In Kyiv, one

respondent, born during the time of Ukraine's independence, described: "People blame authorities [for corruption], of course! Maidan was a big demonstration of this. /.../ Business and the government can't draw a line between them. It's a mix." Ukrainian respondents, not only in Kyiv but also in Western Ukraine, described in 2014 how the Maidan events made them wake up, rethink, and realize they might have to start with themselves in the fight against corruption. However, this does not mean that levels of corruption have started to decrease. A middle-aged businesswoman in Kyiv explained that average citizens have also started to rethink and develop better knowledge about economic aspects of society. A female economist currently unemployed in central Ukraine described how in 2014, she began to engage in society and economy whereas previously she was never really interested.

Many young Kyiv citizens have started to describe corruption as morally wrong. In line with this, a Kyiv citizen in his mid-20s, with a degree in law, born in rural western Ukraine and active in the Maidan movement, declared:

"I think that the word corruption derives from everything that is morally repugnant or wrong. /.../ Asking for a benefit when you are not entitled to it is wrong."

"I hope that corruption is not increasing. There are hopes for future leaders, but in order for corruption to decrease, peoples' values have to change. I mean all people, not only those who run the country. Because otherwise, if it is fuelled from down, there will be no real result. /.../ Of course, some people are immune to any changes. A person has to want to change."

One Kyiv NGO coordinator stopped working as successful lawyer after two years because he felt the system was too corrupt:

"I came to such decision that I don't like this; I don't like working as a lawyer because in our country a lot of people in a lot of state and government institutions, they don't follow the law; they don't want to work legally. For me, my future depended on being a non-legal man. I would need to make non-legal things to be a good lawyer. /.../ I was very angry. I don't want to 'help' the corruption in our country. I want to be out of this. /.../ It's quite difficult to work in Ukraine in a legal way. It's a pity. But if everybody don't care about laws, I don't want to work as a lawyer, so I quit my career."

"We had a revolution of minds. People just want to live in a new society with new legal rules. For example, some of my friends who wanted to get driver's licenses a year ago said: 'Oh, I don't need any exam, I'll pay a few hundred dollars and I'll get it in a few days'. After the revolution they say, 'We don't want to develop corruption, we don't want to give money for this; we will get these driver's licenses in legal ways'".

In Ukraine 2009, in contrast, several respondents described citizens taking a pride in being corrupt and knowing the informal game. They also talked about corruption as a way of managing to get back at the immoral and rather hated state. As in Kalinin-grad 2011, the state was the main "enemy" in my interviews in Ukraine back in 2009. A Ukrainian dentist described in 2009 how people and the state always have been enemies, and that people never expect to get anything good from the state. He stated that it therefore also became a pleasure to fool the state. A Ukrainian accountant correspondingly stated in 2009: "People think all the time about how to cheat". This is a contrast to 2014, when my respondents often described how Ukraine and Ukrainians are undergoing extensive changes, including changing opinions on how to curb corruption and the role individuals can play in this process.

The Maidan movement's as well as the citizens' stronger focus on new effective anti-corruption projects and improved legal frameworks was present to a considerable extent in everyday life and discussions among ordinary citizens in 2014. This marks a significant change compared to my previous interviews. Ukrainian respondents in 2014 also described and had good knowledge of minor initiatives for fighting corruption, such as guidelines online for how to make videos of traffic police workers demanding bribes and websites where these reports could be shared. There is, however, a fear that the ones who "should" monitor the "results" of Maidan, are now being sent to or volunteering as soldiers in Eastern Ukraine. Other activists are busy working extra to purchase equipment for the Ukrainian troops.

UKRAINE'S FIGHT AGAINST corruption is taking place in many arenas and levels of society. The different media landscapes in Ukraine and Russia however deeply affect the possibilities for citizens, politicians and civil servants to discuss corruption. In the article "Ukraine Fights Second Enemy: Corruption," published in *Foreign Policy* in February 2015, Ukraine's two wars are described. One is taking place in Eastern Ukraine; the other one is Kyiv's intensified battle against corruption, also within the state's own bureaucracy. A new electronic, streamlined and more transparent system aiming at combatting tax fraud is one example of new initiatives. Ukraine's finance minister Natalie Jaresko is quoted in the article, saying: "War is not a reason or an excuse to not reform. It has spurred us toward reform". The US-Ukraine Business Council's president, Morgan Williams, said that "Ukraine [is] fighting against the last 80 years of corruption and illegality".⁶² This illustrates how new anti-corruption demands are found not only among ordinary citizens or activists, but also within state authorities and among high-profiled politicians. The "80 years of corruption" most likely refers to the period from 1930s Soviet Union, when blat practices emerged.

Conclusions – how to frame and whom to blame

Based on my qualitative interview material, I cannot announce solid *reasons* for differences in citizens' opinions on corruption between Russia and Ukraine, or within Ukraine over time. In this



At the end of the metro line, Ukraine, spring of 2009.



Financial crisis, Ukraine, February 2009.

article, I have presented common and recurring descriptions and personal stories about corruption in my respondents' societies. When comparing the Ukrainian case of 2014 with interviews conducted in Ukraine 2009 and in the Kaliningrad oblast 2011, everyday discussions of corruption display distinct and interesting differences in these three contexts.

However, I want to stress that we need to comprehend that corruption cannot be treated first and foremost as a result of citizens' lack of morality. Important reasons for high levels of corruption are, in most cases, economic inequality, widespread bureaucracy, a history of informal arrangements, and restricted possibilities of acting as whistleblowers or of criticizing the state and corrupt practices freely and without fear.⁶³

First, there are distinct similarities in the studied settings. The distrust, toward both the state, civil servants and fellow citizens, is obvious throughout my interviews in the different contexts. This is correspondingly clear in reliable Russian and Ukrainian surveys described in this article. According to Bo Rothstein, cooperation is based on trust, i.e. social capital, defined as "access to beneficial social networks and having generalized trust in other people".⁶⁴ The link between formal institutions, trust, and informal practices is understandable. A social trap is a situation where individuals or groups are unable to cooperate because of mutual distrust and lack of social capital – even if cooperation would benefit all parties and, from the outside, appear as a realistic solution. Individuals then act in order to obtain short-term personal gain, rather than promoting the best long-term public good. Pervasive corruption is an example of short-term individual benefit, existing at the expense of long-term development of the economy and formal institutions. One can see a negative spiral, where corruption leads to less trust, and less trust fosters

corruption. When social trust instead is widespread, economic transactions are made much easier.⁶⁵

The roots of the post-Soviet corruption, in the eyes of ordinary citizens and as incentives for citizens to interact in the informal economy, are described in similar ways throughout my interviews in Kaliningrad and Ukraine. The recurring descriptions are also reminiscent of Soviet era narratives on everyday corruption as well as the historical importance of useful personal networks. As in the Soviet Union, both Russia and Ukraine have many professions, such as doctors, teachers, police workers and other civil servants, where salaries are very low, thus leading to informal payments and gifts as a "convention" or stable informal institution when in contact with those offices, sometimes with almost "official approval".⁶⁶ The common argument that corruption is best curbed by increased economic equality seems applicable to both Kaliningrad and Ukraine, and is articulated by my respondents. However the incentives for civil servants with low salaries to stop demanding bribes cannot be changed only by ordinary citizens displaying repulsion toward such acts or everyday "traditions".

THE COMMON KNOWLEDGE of contemporary corrupt practices in both Russia and Ukraine is rather good, as illustrated by my interviews and quantitative surveys. Corruption and informal practices as topics of discussion in everyday life, as well as within civil society and the media, appear to have become more common in both Russia and Ukraine over recent years. There has indeed been a rise in anti-corruption demands, although with certain differences in characteristics, dimensions and outcomes in Russia and Ukraine. While this development in Russia seems to have slowed down or ceased, Ukraine has displayed a growing focus on corruption.

There is a probable change now in Ukraine, based on the Maidan movement's focus on corruption, justice and transparency, along with the media debate and my respondents' descriptions of contemporary changes within Ukraine, both among ordinary citizens, civil servants, and politicians. The differences between the three contexts cannot be explained easily.

Firstly, we have the different demands for, and attitudes toward, anti-corruption projects and mechanisms. In Kaliningrad in 2011, the resignation toward possible changes was obvious during my interviews, even if the socio-economic protests shortly before gathered many citizens. Even if formal and intentional attempts to change the informal rules might take time to have real effect, Kaliningrad inhabitants did anyway not see such initiatives from above – or below. The anti-corruption demands in Ukraine of 2014, on the other hand, were raised and discussed both by citizens, civil society, politicians and eventually ministers. To some extent, the anti-corruption demands have become a natural part of Ukrainian political life and everyday discussions. This development did not start in Ukraine in 2014, but it became stronger.

Secondly, corruption as a phenomenon described by my Ukrainian respondents is today more commonly interconnected with politicians, members of parliament, political parties and certain high-stake professions – and not only “the state” in a wider sense, which was more common in Kaliningrad, and also in Ukraine in 2009. Whether this difference is a result of the oligarchs in Ukraine (and their political positions, power and wealth), of the Maidan movement's effects on society, or Ukrainian civil society traditions, cannot be answered with my interview material, but is a research question for future examination.

Thirdly, an increased sense of both “shared responsibility” and “personal/individual responsibility” in Ukraine in 2014 can be observed through my interview material. In contrast to Kaliningrad, individuals in Ukraine are starting to accept some of their share of the responsibility for widespread and pervasive corruption. My interview material is however coherent in the aspect that opinions and knowledge about corruption are not dependent on level of education or profession; the respondents arguing for “personal responsibility” do not represent particular categories in society. In Kaliningrad, in citizens' minds, the state was the main enemy and guilty party when it came to corruption. My Ukrainian respondents described Maidan as a crucial breaking point in terms of responsibility and blame. We thereby acquire new knowledge about the effects the Maidan events and dramatic Ukrainian era have had on Ukraine and its citizens – in terms of personal perceptions of corruption, new roles individuals picture themselves in, and opinions on power over change when it comes to informal economic institutions. Those tentative findings would benefit from future similar interview studies.

The stories presented by my respondents in Ukraine 2014 also show a possibility for abrupt changes in attitudes toward corruption, compared to what is often seen as a normally slow process. Even if Kaliningrad citizens told me in 2011 that the inequality in society was enough for a revolution, the situation regarding corruption seems rather constant. The sense of resignation in Ukraine during my fieldwork in the winter and spring of 2009,

parallel to the ongoing financial crises, was widespread. In Ukraine 2014, respondents instead often told me stories of how they already saw or envisaged changes within the near future, and explained how they could contribute and take active part. It remains to be seen if this positive mindset and these perceptions will endure over time. ✖

Mi Lennhag, PhD candidate in political science, Lund University.

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countries based on ideologies that actually never were the ruling ones. This term also places the focus on economy, rather than on ideologies that non-democratically “chosen” leaders stated they were implementing in those, to different extent, authoritarian or totalitarian states and unions. This region in no way was, or is, homogeneous.

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