

Summary

Democracies around the world are endangered, not just by Donald Trump’s shocking rebuke of democratic norms or Jair Bolsonaro’s brazen threats against political opponents, or even the petty corruption that marks North Macedonians’ daily lives. The threat to democracies around the world is not new, though it may be newly apparent to more people.

While the threats are real and important, and various helpful measures are available, communicators advocating for anti-corruption measures often find themselves unable to reach the public, unable to engage the widespread support that would push change forward.

The most popular advocacy approach focuses on emphasizing the danger and outrage of corrupt acts, either broadly or in reference to particular leaders, in order to provoke the public into action. But some communicators have recognized—through their own experience or through a growing body of recent social science research (see Literature Review— included as Annex to the report)—that this approach easily backfires, paralyzing people in a sense of powerlessness and further undermining faith in government,

“**Norms are the soft guardrails of democracy; as they break down, the zone of acceptable political behavior expands, giving rise to discourse and action that could imperil democracy.**”

Steven Levitsky

How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future

and/or reinforcing dynamics that lead to support for authoritarian leaders who promise to unilaterally “clean up” government.

In some countries, communications try other angles such as encouraging individuals to avoid corrupt practices in their daily lives, or to condemn these practices when they see them—again without much apparent impact.

How can communicators promote measures to curb corruption, without deepening people’s pessimism and fatalism, and in ways that encourage people to engage rather than turn their backs on government entirely?

This question was the starting point for the current Topos research.

Topos’s study of deep patterns of thinking (cognitive and cultural models)—conducted in Brazil, North Macedonia and the United States—finds that shifting communications from one basic mode to another can create a critical change in how messages are heard and responded to, and can make the difference between success and failure at engaging constructive support: *A shift from “Crime and Punishment” mode to “Guardrails” mode.*

Put simply, current communications tend to fall into a broad pattern of framing corruption in terms of particular acts and actors, and holding these actors accountable (either successfully or unsuccessfully). This “Crime and Punishment” mode is very distinct from what we can call “Guardrails” mode, which focuses instead on the key idea that government (only) serves the public when we have concrete mechanisms in place to keep it on track. While the cultural and political differences between the US,

North Macedonia and Brazil call for differences in emphasis, success stories focused on building, strengthening and protecting these “hard guardrails”¹ of democratic governance—from laws and regulations to websites that make certain information publicly available—are the key to engaging people in a hopeful, empowered and confident conversation related to corruption.

Sample “Hard Guardrails”²

A new rule that effectively prevented state legislators from accepting gifts over \$50 in value

A new website that published information about every dollar spent by a municipality, so that everyone could see whether expenditures were reasonable and justified

A new cellphone app publishing air quality data so that everyone could see whether pollution regulations were being effectively enforced

A rule that required publication of meetings and attendance lists for public decision-making meetings

An ombudsman process that made it easy to hold professors at a public university accountable if they asked for bribes

A new law giving more authority to an independent auditor looking at public spending



¹ As Steven Levitsky notes, the “soft guardrails” consisting of norms of acceptable behavior are not adequate to keep government on track. At least in the US, the Founders’ concerns with checks and balances suggest they never have been.

² The first four of these were helpful when included in testing, while the final two are examples of how the concept can be extended to additional types of mechanism.

While C&P mode tends to focus on problems, failures, threats and outrage, GR mode is more about hope, successes and solutions. GR mode is less about *why* we should address corruption (i.e., because corrupt acts are morally bad as well as objectively harmful, ideas that are already intuitively grasped) and more about *how* we address it—or better yet, prevent it—which is where people tend to draw a blank.

Most basically, C&P mode tends to emphasize *people/individuals*, while GR mode emphasizes *structures*. It is hard to imagine “fixing” immoral people, so implied solutions are limited to punishing or eliminating them—in which case, why should we hope the next ones will be better? A focus on structures—laws, institutions, processes—not only makes practical solutions easier to imagine, it also steers thinking away from another huge trap: the tendency to politicize the issue, so that “our” politicians are trusted while “theirs” are condemned.

Finally, while C&P mode treats corrupt acts as exceptional (even if widespread), GR mode addresses the public’s default sense (in all three countries) that government is *entirely corrupt by nature*, in that it consists of people who simply aren’t what they purport to be. (They pretend to be representatives working for the public interest; they are actually elites acting



in their own interest with no connection to the public.) Effective guardrails offer a vision of how government can realistically be set on its intended/supposed path.



CRIME & PUNISHMENT MODE

Tends to emphasize...

People, Morality, Outrage

Why address corruption —

Punishment, Episodic (particular) events, Problems and Failures



GUARDRAILS MODE

Tends to emphasize...

Structures, Practicality (getting things done), Hope

How to address corruption —

Prevention, Thematic (long-standing) situations, Solutions and successes

A critical element of effective communications across all three countries is at least one *success story* of how concrete steps set public institutions/ leadership on a path toward better serving the public. These might be as diverse as creating a website to publish real-time air quality data (as a way of holding local government accountable for pollution regulation) or stronger laws about gifts leaders can accept, but these stories also have important things in common.



that better serves the public interest. This focus is empowering—because it allows people to believe that positive change is possible—and enlightening, because it focuses people’s attention on new and important ideas about how we get good government, at whatever level. And not of least importance, it makes nonsense of any demagogue’s claims to be an *individual arbiter* of what is right.



They are easy to understand and to describe quickly. They are about real-world successes, showing that getting government on track serving the public can be done. They mention specific laws, processes, requirements or other tools for pushing leaders and institutions in the right directions, making corruption more difficult and less likely.

As more experts are realizing that norms of acceptable behavior—the “soft guardrails of democracy”—are not enough to keep governments on track, this research shows that their most effective path forward in anti-corruption advocacy is to tell stories of how “hard guardrails” can and have led to honest, transparent government





Introduction

The Topos Partnership, with the support of the Open Society Foundations, has developed a promising research-based narrative strategy to advance anti-corruption efforts in three countries: Brazil, North Macedonia, and the United States.

Effective strategy begins with first understanding where people are and the dominant cultural models that influence public discourse. That in mind, the Topos Partnership conducted deep research over the course of more than a year in each of the three project countries.

While the project treated the three countries independently—seeking to identify helpful ways of engaging support for anti-corruption efforts in each country based on its own context and culture—the research team was also attentive to overlaps in the learning from the three countries, which were, after all, selected in part due to parallels in their recent histories. All have recent experience with corrupt, right-wing populist leaders who had successfully smeared their more left-leaning opponents through accusations of corruption.

Importantly, while there are unique local dynamics, the work revealed a set of deep challenges in common across the three contexts, as well as a key strategic shift that engages broad public audiences in conversations about corruption, effective governance, and the public's role.

This brief document offers an overview of the shared challenges as well as the elements of a communication approach that can be effective in engaging the public in these three distinct national contexts, and may also have relevance elsewhere.





Research Approach

The research consisted mainly of lengthy, ethnographic conversations with diverse pools of roughly 150 individuals in each country. Participants were drawn from both metro and rural areas, in distinct regions of the countries, and represented a mix of education and economic levels, political orientations, genders, ages and other demographic factors—the goal being to elicit perspectives from broad cross sections of the public, including elements of the shared cultural common sense. In all three countries, conversations were initially conducted in person, then shifted to online and telephone due to the global COVID pandemic.³

These semi-structured conversations were designed to elicit how people think about topics related to corruption, the mental models upon which they rely, the stories they tell themselves, and how they respond to various issue framings.

In the course of conversations, and in subsequent analysis of transcripts and other data, researchers looked for particular indications of “effectiveness”:

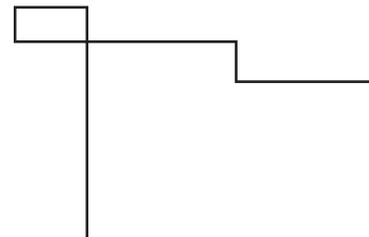
- Greater optimism about the possibility of reforms that reduce corruption / create better, more public-oriented government
- An ability to remember, understand and talk about a particular concept (i.e., the concept is clear and compelling enough to stay with people as they continue to think and talk about government)
- Signs that the perspective offered is new in some meaningful way, not simply a familiar complaint or exhortation
- Less politicized discourse, not focusing only on specific leaders or parties, but taking a broader perspective on how good government can be achieved



³ Despite concerns that the pandemic would significantly change or distort the conversations, researchers found that people were happy to talk about other topics besides the pandemic, and more generally happy to have conversations as a change of pace during lockdowns. In terms of substance, conversations during the epidemic did not appear to vary meaningfully from those before, with the obvious exception that certain new topics and themes occasionally came up.

In addition to the conversational research and testing, some participants completed online “TalkBack” surveys exploring the same types of messaging approaches and looking for the same kinds of indicators of success. In TalkBack testing, each participant sees a single message, and one of the key tasks is to repeat back the message as though passing it along to a friend. This task sets a surprisingly high bar regarding which parts of a message are understood, which are compelling enough to focus on and remember, which parts are misheard, and so forth.

Finally, the recommendations emerging from testing with the public were vetted and refined through a round of interviews with stakeholders who reflected on the fit between the recommendations and their own needs and contexts.





The Core Strategic Challenge: Corruption as the norm, not the exception

Communicators often act as though corruption is a matter of exceptional actions and events, taking place against the background of normal government function. To publics in the project countries, on the other hand, corruption is the regular and expected state of affairs.

Put more strongly, the default public perspective is that those in government are (all) inherently corrupt, in a very basic sense: They are not what they pretend to be. They pretend to be representatives of the people's interests, but in reality they are a rich and powerful elite acting in their own interest.

They supposedly represent and are guided by the people's wishes—but this clearly isn't true.

In principle they are accountable to the people—in fact they aren't.

They supposedly focus on promoting the public good—yet obviously don't.

They supposedly can identify with the people, but in fact have nothing in common with them and no connection to them.

Our research finds that people believe whole societies participate in a shared fiction about government's supposed nature vs. its true nature. To the publics in the project countries, this essentially amounts to the idea that their governments are corrupt by nature—regardless of any questions about illegality, for instance.

For anyone communicating about government or corruption, there are serious implications to this set of deep dynamics:

Disconnect: We are simply talking past people, with no hope of reaching them effectively, if we assume they share the view of corruption as a category of discrete violations of law, as opposed to their more fundamental and systemic view that a corrupt government is one that does not act on behalf of the public interest.

Reinforcing cynicism: Communications focusing on the problem—instances, prevalence, and harms of corruption—are counterproductive. People already know or even exaggerate the problem. Dwelling on it only makes them more pessimistic and hopeless.

Powerlessness: If problems have to with government as a *whole*, where do we even begin to “fix” it? (In fact, people usually *don’t* imagine fixing it, but instead figure out how to navigate it the best they can.)

Hard to even imagine solutions: As a personalized/moral picture (of faithless, hypocritical leaders), the default view makes it especially hard to picture “solutions”—how does one “fix” bad people, other than by getting rid of all of them?

“Successes” that don’t feel like successes: Catching/punishing a few individuals won’t make a dent in the overall dynamic.

Guilt/innocence trumped by politics: If basically all leaders are presumed corrupt, the particular substance of accusations is almost irrelevant, with the result that people just accept as true the accusations that reinforce their default preferences (about people, parties), and ignore or reject the ones that conflict with their default views. False accusations prove effective as political manipulation, while well-justified accusations don’t stick, all based on political leanings.

“Blaming the public”: When communications focus on asking citizens to reconsider their own behaviors—e.g., in a country like North Macedonia, where people may offer small bribes to doctors or other providers in order to get better service—the messaging easily fails because it seems to disregard the realities of life. While people may not be proud of using bribes or connections, they often see these as their only tools for navigating dysfunctional systems they did not create.

The Corrupt-By-Nature dynamic is made even deeper and more complex by a set of surrounding dynamics across all three project countries.

A focus on people and parties rather than institutions: For various reasons, the publics in the three countries tend not to focus on public institutions—what they are meant to be, why they are important, or how they work or are supposed to work.⁴ General lack of awareness about the essential role of public institutions—made worse by politicized conversations that downplay practical problem-solving—creates a significant stumbling block for communications. It reduces interest in thinking about the public sector, and reduces the focus of conversation to the *people and parties* in government.

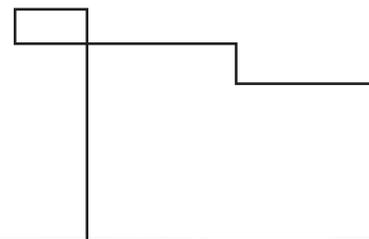
Consistent lack of “good news”: Related to the prior points, people in the project countries rarely hear much about well-functioning government that produces public benefits. By contrast, they regularly hear about failures and

⁴ There are some differences among the countries in the forms and degree to which public institutions are invisible or misunderstood. For instance, US culture tends to emphasize individual models of effort and success, obscuring the role of public institutions in promoting prosperity and well-being. There is awareness, at some level, of public institutions, but they tend to be off people’s radar most of the time. Among the three countries, Brazilian culture, particularly among the less educated, is characterized by the lowest degree of general awareness of what public institutions are and how they function. North Macedonian culture is characterized by strong awareness of political parties as powerful players in every sphere of life, and relatively strong awareness of public institutions. But a focus on the individuals within these institutions—as opposed to processes, rules, structures—remains a strong default.

abuses. While investigative journalism uncovering problems remains critical, the powerful imbalance in the news not only reinforces negativity, it means there are fewer opportunities to acquire basic understandings of how systems work and should work.

Lack of a shared reality: In all three project countries, an important obstacle to constructive engagement is people’s suspicion that information is being hidden or manipulated and that they can’t really know what’s going on in government. Hidden media and elite agendas mean that information can’t be trusted, or that others are deceived by biased information from “the other side.” The lack of a confident sense of shared reality makes communication difficult, particularly when the topic has to do with the real vs. hidden actions and agendas of public leaders.

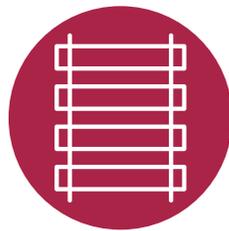
Above the law: In all three project countries—but particularly in North Macedonia and the US—people believe that the necessary rules or procedures for addressing corruption are in place, but that these aren’t enforced when it comes to powerful people. This perspective (regardless of whether it contains some truth) can cause people to question whether politicians will ever choose to police themselves. (They won’t.)





The Shift That Makes The Difference

From a focus on punishing bad actors (“Crime and Punishment Mode”) to a focus on effective apparatus of democracy (“Guardrails Mode”)



The common communications focus on punishing guilty parties does little to engage people’s interest or shift their perspectives.

Across all three project countries, we created much more engaged and constructive conversations by focusing instead on what we’re for: mechanisms that

successfully get/keep public institutions in line, serving the public—the “hard guardrails” of democracy, as opposed to the “soft guardrails” consisting of (often ignored) norms and expectations.

The following reflect⁵ test language that was very effective in the three respective project countries:

(US) *Boston used to be famously corrupt, but now ranks as one of the cleanest, best-run cities in the country. What happened? Massachusetts has been enacting laws that other places like Chicago haven’t. For example, it’s a crime for officials to accept a gift of more than \$50, or to vote on issues where they have a conflict of interest.*

(Brazil) *Prefeitura de Manduri is a great example of how we can make sure institutions are working for us. They made all the expenses of their projects visible on their web page, down to how many*

⁵ There were some variations in wording used at different times in testing, but each paragraph represents a core message that proved very effective—compelling, empowering, memorable, easy to talk about.

sacks of cement were used, so that people can judge for themselves how things are running. There are many more positive examples like this in Brazil—we just need to make sure we keep making changes like this.

(N. Mac.) New ways of sharing information are helping citizens of North Macedonia push for government to do positive things. For example, when a young environmental activist launched “AirCare,” an app that shows real-time air pollution levels in different regions, thousands of people started demanding government action, leading to the “Plan for Clean Air.” If people get involved, and use new information and communication tools, we can make sure government is working in our best interest—not just with pollution, but in other ways.

These examples all illustrate basic principles for engaging publics on this issue:

- They shift attention away from a problematic focus on people and their morality, to a more practical and structural view.
- They offer specific, concrete and empowering examples of real-world success, therefore reducing skepticism.
- They reinforce that public institutions can and must produce benefits that matter to us, the people.



- They remove the conversation from the sphere of partisan arguments and accusations.
- By focusing on a particular place, event, etc., they make the topic more manageable and less abstract than the general topic of corruption. (From there we can bridge to bigger principles.)
- They put the public in the “driver’s seat”—at least in a hypothetical sense—by showing how we can keep better track of what leaders are doing and where our money is going.

Additional examples could include the following. Unless mentioned otherwise, these are extrapolations from the findings, rather than language used in testing.

SAMPLE LANGUAGE	KEY PRINCIPLES
<p>(US) <i>If we want good leadership that strengthens our democracy, checks on power—such as impeachment—are how we demand it. If we don’t use our means for steering and correcting government, future leaders will know they can do and say whatever they want.</i></p>	<p>An initial focus on systems, not the particular individuals involved, fleshed out by reference to a particular solution, in this case the impeachment process</p>
<p>(US) <i>We get good government, serving the people, when we have good, strong laws and double-checks to make sure of it. We get bad, corrupt government when we let one man fire the inspectors and say, “I’ll be the oversight.”</i></p>	<p>Explicit contrast between, on one hand, relying on an individual to keep things on track, and on the other, having a strong process in place</p>
<p>(Brazil) <i>When it comes to our public institutions—bus systems, SUS, schools, or even the city council—we need them to function well for the good of all of us.</i></p>	<p>[Successful in testing] Specific mention of familiar, concrete examples, falling under the broader umbrella of public institutions that benefit the people</p>
<p>(Brazil) <i>It’s more obvious than ever how much our country depends on SUS [the national health system], and there are concrete steps we can take to make sure it is run in ways that help the public the most, not the officials in charge of it. Related to COVID, we could make it easy to see how much each ventilator costs, how many were bought, where they went ... That would make us more confident the pandemic is being handled well.</i></p>	<p>Emphasis on a concrete, familiar public institution, followed by specific mechanisms for making sure it is serving the public</p>
<p>(N. Mac.) <i>The training and professionalism of medical workers has been improving in North Macedonia. Recently, the first heart transplant operation was conducted in the country by our own surgeons and medical experts. Citizens and good government groups have pushed hard to make sure medical training focuses on medicine—not on distractions like political influence and connections—and other citizens of North Macedonia are pushing for this in their own professions as well.</i></p>	<p>[Successful in testing] A success story illustrating the possibility of keeping public institutions acting successfully on behalf of the public</p>

Sample mechanisms to keep government in line

As communicators look for sample “pro-public” mechanisms to keep in mind, the following were effective in testing in one or more of the project countries.

“Open checkbook” website where all state/city spending and purchasing information is available

“Open meetings law” giving citizens and journalists a full view into how decisions get made

App that shows real-time air quality data (so that public agencies can be held accountable for following through on promises to create healthier conditions)

Rule that government decisions have to get an extra strict review if they benefit any large political donors or legislators themselves

Rule that people who regulate specific industries can’t have ties to those industries

Full transparency for all meetings and communications

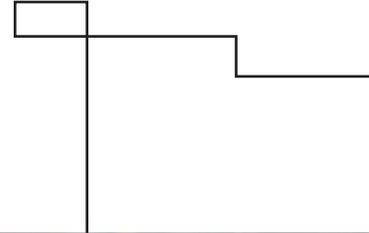
Protect whistleblowers who report on wrongdoing

Law against public official accepting a gift worth more than \$50

Law against voting on issues where a leader has a conflict of interest

Mandatory public meetings to give people a chance to weigh in on upcoming spending decisions

It is also compelling to include particular institutions in the discussion—city councils, health or transportation services, schools, environmental protection offices, and so forth—each of which is supposed to focus on the public and *yield results the public cares about.*



Summary of the recommended approach

To summarize, the research finds that, across project countries, it is possible to have more engaged and constructive conversations with members of the public by shifting from one set of common approaches (focusing on the harms of corruption and punishing offenders— Crime and Punishment Mode) to a different paradigm altogether, focused on specific, successful tools for keeping



government focused on the public good (Guardrails Mode).



INSTEAD OF...



TRY...

<p><u>Orienting the conversation around the problem/harms</u> (“Rampant public corruption is discouraging business activity ...”)</p>	<p><u>Orienting the conversation around successful solutions</u> (“City/state/institution X has successfully put the public interest first by ...”)</p>
<p><u>Focusing on individuals</u> (“Political leader X has repeatedly put his own interests ahead of the public’s by ...”)</p>	<p><u>Focusing on familiar institutions that are important to public well-being</u> (“The best way to make sure the health system works well for all of us is ...”)</p>
<p><u>Emphasizing catching/punishing</u> (“So far this year we have prosecuted ...”)</p>	<p><u>Emphasizing solutions that prevent problems and create beneficial outcomes</u> (“When we create a web page where all expenditures are visible and searchable ...”)</p>
<p><u>Focusing on everyday behaviors</u> (“We all know people who offer ‘gifts’ in order to get better service ...”)</p>	<p><u>Keeping the focus on the top-down changes needed</u> (“When offices work the way they should, getting good service is straightforward ...”)</p>



Conclusion

The three project countries are unique in important ways when it comes to this topic. US culture includes a stronger sense than others that government is *meant* to work on behalf of the public. North Macedonians have a sense that their country lags behind others, and particularly, behind European countries that function in more modern, transparent ways. Brazilians often see themselves as being culturally averse to rigid rules and procedures and saddled with a system that was never really designed to serve people like themselves.

But the parallels provide insights about deep conceptual models that likely transcend national borders. In all countries, it is important to shift the focus from corrupt individuals to institutions and how they can be kept in line serving the public interest. While acknowledging the shortcomings of government, it is essential to offer evidence that positive change is possible by advancing a vision of how particular institutions can be made more

transparent, more responsive, and so forth, yielding benefits people care about.

While the project was conducted in only three locations, and while it is too early to have real-world evidence of specific political or policy successes, we believe communicators and stakeholders elsewhere will benefit from considering how these insights apply in their own contexts.

