

EU STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO COMBATING CORRUPTION

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Abstract

Corruption remains a persistent challenge within the European Union, eroding institutional trust, economic stability, and the rule of law. In response, a comprehensive framework of strategic documents, policies, and instruments has been developed to foster transparency, accountability, and integrity across member states. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the Union's anti-corruption strategy, focusing on key documents, governance reforms, and legal tools that enhance enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, the study explores disparities in national anti-corruption measures across various countries, evaluating their alignment with common standards and identifying ongoing challenges. Special attention is given to the roles of key institutions in combating cross-border corruption. The paper concludes that achieving a corruption-free Europe will require sustained collaboration among institutions, member states, and civil society, emphasizing the importance of consistent monitoring and implementation of anti-corruption frameworks.

Keywords: corruption, European Union, anti-corruption strategy, governance, transparency, enforcement mechanisms, legal frameworks

JEL: K42, D73, H11, 052

Introduction

Corruption is one of the most pervasive challenges confronting the European Union (EU), posing serious threats to the integrity of institutions, economic stability, and the rule of law. This complex issue spans both public and private sectors and infiltrates the political sphere, manifesting in forms ranging from petty offences to sophisticated, high-level corruption. Practices such as favoritism, nepotism, and conflicts of interest often blur the boundaries between business and politics, exacerbating the problem and fostering an environment ripe for exploitation.

The consequences of corruption are far-reaching, fueling organized crime, money laundering, and even terrorism. It deepens social inequalities, erodes public trust in institutions, and undermines efforts to promote good governance

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and social justice. Economically, corruption creates uncertainty, discourages investment, and distorts fair competition, ultimately threatening the EU's broader objectives of sustainable development and economic stability.

Recognizing the severity of these issues, corruption remains a significant challenge for the European Union, threatening both the integrity of its institutions and public trust. Combating corruption is a top priority, as it directly affects the fairness of resource distribution and the overall stability of the EU. The EU employs a range of anti-corruption mechanisms to promote transparency and accountability, not only to protect financial interests but also to build public trust in the Union's governance. Key institutions, including OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office), EPPO (European Public Prosecutor's Office), and Europol, are central to these efforts, ensuring a coordinated and effective approach to addressing corruption across all member states.

The European Union has established a comprehensive framework of strategic documents, policies, and legal instruments designed to enhance transparency, accountability, and governance across its member states. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the EU's anti-corruption strategies, focusing on key initiatives such as the EU Anti-Corruption Report and major directives and regulations. By evaluating the effectiveness of these measures, the study aims to assess the successes and ongoing challenges in the EU's efforts to combat corruption, contributing to the ongoing discourse on improving governance within the Union.

Impact of Corruption

Corruption has a profound negative impact on society, democracy, and the economy, influencing both individuals and public institutions. It undermines the credibility of institutions, weakening their capacity to implement effective policies and provide high-quality public services. Corruption also fuels organized crime, promotes foreign interference, and threatens the rule of law by creating environments where legal frameworks are either weakened or disregarded (European Commission, 2023).

Economically, corruption leads to inefficient resource distribution, deters foreign investment, and distorts competitive markets. In countries where corruption is prevalent, public funds are often misused, resulting in poor infrastructure and services that contribute to deepening social inequality. Additionally, corruption raises the cost of doing business as companies may face the necessity of paying bribes or dealing with cumbersome bureaucratic processes, which stifles innovation and growth (Dreher & Schneider, 2010).

The consequences of corruption on democracy and governance are equally severe. It erodes public confidence in government institutions, making it

challenging to enforce effective policies and maintain social stability. In certain instances, high-profile corruption scandals can lead to political unrest, as citizens lose faith in their leaders and push for reform. This loss of trust is especially harmful in democratic systems, where government legitimacy relies heavily on public confidence.

Addressing corruption is crucial for upholding EU values, ensuring the success of EU policies, and preserving the rule of law and public trust in governance. „Public awareness is also essential in the fight against corruption, as informed citizens are more likely to hold officials accountable and resist engaging in corrupt practices“ (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). The European Union acknowledges that combating corruption is not only vital for economic stability but also for safeguarding the core principles of democracy, equality, and human rights throughout its member states.

Recent data emphasizes the pressing need for stronger anti-corruption measures. Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, for example, shows that several EU member states continue to grapple with significant levels of corruption, which hinders their efforts to achieve sustainable development and economic resilience. These ongoing challenges highlight the importance of continued efforts to enhance anti-corruption frameworks and ensure their effective enforcement across the EU.

In response to the pervasive harm caused by corruption, the European Union has developed a comprehensive range of anti-corruption policies and institutions aimed at promoting transparency, accountability, and the protection of financial interests across its member states.

Anti-Corruption Policies and Institutions

Corruption has long been recognized as a pervasive challenge within the European Union (EU), significantly undermining public trust and the integrity of its institutions. In response, the EU has developed a comprehensive framework of anti-corruption policies to ensure transparency, accountability, and the safeguarding of financial interests across member states.

A key player in this effort is the European Commission, which plays a pivotal role in the development and enforcement of the EU’s anti-corruption strategy. The Commission not only initiates legislation but also ensures that member states adhere to these regulations through mechanisms like the European Semester. The European Semester monitors the progress of member states in implementing anti-corruption measures and provides recommendations where further action is needed.

In her 2022 State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasized the urgency of modernizing the EU’s

legislative framework to more effectively address evolving corruption challenges. Consequently, in 2023, the European Commission introduced new legislative proposals that expanded the scope of corruption-related offences beyond traditional bribery to include misappropriation, abuse of functions, obstruction of justice, and illicit enrichment.

One key tool in assessing the implementation of these policies is the Rule of Law Report 2023, which evaluates each member state's progress in combating corruption. The report helps identify gaps in policy implementation and provides recommendations for improvement, ensuring that anti-corruption measures are uniformly applied across the EU. By monitoring member states' efforts and enforcing anti-corruption regulations, the European Commission plays a crucial role in upholding the EU's legal and ethical standards (European Commission, 2023b; Dimitry, Laurent, 2015).

The EU's anti-corruption framework is further supported by institutions like OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office) and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), which work together to investigate and prosecute corruption offenses, particularly those that affect the financial interests of the Union.

While the EU has developed robust anti-corruption policies, the effectiveness of these measures relies on continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure proper implementation and improvement across all member states.

Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

Monitoring and evaluation are essential components of the European Union's anti-corruption framework, ensuring that policies, legal instruments, and initiatives are effectively implemented and continuously improved. In addition to traditional monitoring tools, the integration of digital platforms, such as whistleblowing systems and e-government services, has significantly reduced opportunities for corruption by ensuring transparency and real-time data access across member states (Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2016). These mechanisms include regular reporting, audits, and assessments conducted by specialized bodies and independent agencies. Moreover, the EU collaborates with international organizations and civil society to gather data and insights on corruption trends and the effectiveness of its strategies.

Monitoring and Evaluation in Practice

The importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation is evident in various EU and non-EU contexts. For instance, Ukraine's experience with anti-corruption reforms highlights the critical need for ongoing assessment. Despite implementing reforms in areas such as public procurement and deregulation,

challenges like institutional corruption and inefficiencies in policy enforcement persist. A 2019 World Bank survey found that 74% of Ukrainian entrepreneurs viewed corruption as a significant obstacle to business, underscoring the necessity for robust monitoring mechanisms (World Bank Group, 2023).

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) is instrumental in ensuring the effective monitoring and evaluation of anti-fraud measures across the EU. OLAF's investigations have led to significant financial recoveries for the EU budget, including the recovery of nearly €3 billion from a customs undervaluation scheme. These recoveries demonstrate OLAF's critical role in protecting the EU's financial interests and highlight the importance of continuous monitoring to detect and address fraud (OLAF, 2023b).

In addition to monitoring and evaluation, the sustainability of anti-corruption measures is critical. The EU's long-term success in fighting corruption depends on continuous education, training, and institutional reforms.

Sustainability of Anti-Corruption Efforts

The sustainable efforts to combat corruption within the European Union as of 2019 required a combination of education, training, and institutional reforms. The EU continued to emphasize the need to raise awareness about the legal and ethical aspects of corruption through educational programs aimed at both citizens and public officials. During this period, digital tools such as e-government platforms and whistleblowing systems played a significant role in combating corruption by enhancing transparency and minimizing opportunities for fraudulent activities (Gheraouti-Helie, 2013).

For instance, in the framework of the European Semester in 2019, regular monitoring of anti-corruption practices in member states was carried out, with recommendations provided for improving transparency and accountability (European Commission, 2020). Moreover, the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) remained a key instrument for monitoring progress in combating corruption in Bulgaria and Romania, ensuring that these countries adhered to EU standards, as applicable in 2019 (European Commission, 2019).

The integration of digital technologies, such as e-government and whistleblowing platforms, is crucial for the sustainable development of anti-corruption measures. For instance, „the digitalization of public services in Estonia has significantly reduced opportunities for corruption and increased transparency“ (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). These technological advancements help minimize human interference in processes prone to corruption, thereby fostering a more transparent governance environment.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation of anti-corruption initiatives, supported by SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals and

the integration of new technologies, are crucial for maintaining and enhancing the EU's anti-corruption framework in the long term. „The EU's commitment to setting clear objectives and leveraging digital tools is vital for sustaining its anti-corruption efforts and ensuring that these measures remain effective in a rapidly changing environment“ (Transparency International, 2021).

To further ensure the sustainability of these efforts, the European Parliament has played a crucial role in reinforcing anti-corruption measures and promoting transparency and accountability across EU institutions.

The Role of the European Parliament in the Fight Against Corruption

The European Parliament plays a pivotal role in the European Union's battle against corruption, particularly through its legislative initiatives and institutional reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability. Over the years, the Parliament has passed various resolutions aimed at addressing corruption within both EU institutions and member states.

The Parliament also pushes for the expansion of EU-wide mechanisms that combat corruption beyond just financial crimes. By encouraging member states to adopt stronger anti-corruption measures, the Parliament ensures that EU directives and guidelines are uniformly applied across all regions. It has been especially vocal about the need to protect whistleblowers and strengthen legal frameworks that hold public officials accountable.

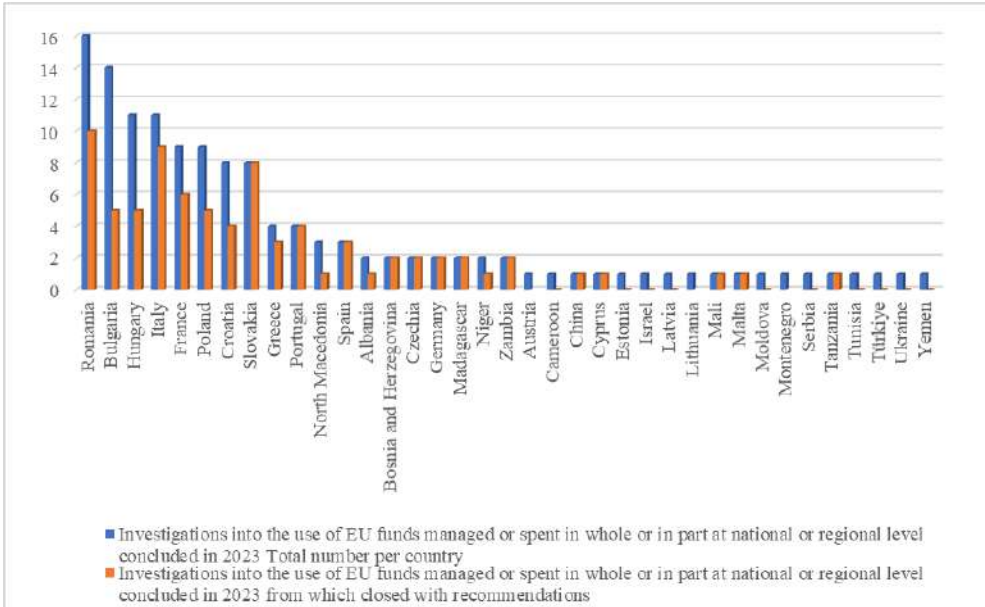
The European Parliament's active role in shaping and reinforcing anti-corruption measures has been instrumental in fostering a more transparent and accountable governance structure across the EU. Its continued advocacy for legislative reforms and institutional oversight serves as a vital component in the Union's ongoing efforts to combat corruption.

While the European Parliament sets the legislative framework, specialized agencies such as OLAF, EPPO, and Europol are responsible for implementing and enforcing these anti-corruption policies across the Union.

Specialized Agencies and Bodies

Several specialized agencies and bodies are integral to the EU's anti-corruption efforts, each with specific mandates and responsibilities.

OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office): Since its inception in 1999, OLAF has been dedicated to safeguarding the financial interests of the European Union by investigating cases of fraud, corruption, and misconduct within EU institutions. In 2023, OLAF recommended the recovery of over €1 billion and prevented €209.4 million from being improperly spent, highlighting its critical role in protecting the EU's budget (OLAF, 2023a).



Source: OLAF (2023b).

Figure 1: Investigations into the use of EU

EPPO (European Public Prosecutor’s Office): Operational since June 2021, the EPPO is responsible for investigating and prosecuting crimes that impact the EU’s financial interests, such as fraud, corruption, and cross-border VAT fraud. The EPPO’s jurisdiction is primarily focused on criminal activities that threaten the financial interests of the European Union, with a particular emphasis on high-profile, cross-border cases (EPPO, 2023).

Eurojust (European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation): In 2023, Eurojust handled over 13,000 cases, a 14% increase compared to 2022, underscoring its role in orchestrating joint investigation teams (JITs) and facilitating cross-border cooperation. Eurojust’s efforts have been instrumental in tackling complex criminal networks involved in corruption, leading to the arrest of more than 4,200 suspects and the freezing of criminal assets worth over €1 billion (Eurojust, 2023).

Europol: Europol, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, plays a pivotal role in combating serious international crime, including corruption. It assists EU member states by providing analytical and operational support, facilitating information exchange, and coordinating joint operations against organized crime networks. Europol’s primary objective is to enhance the effectiveness and cooperation of law enforcement authorities across

the EU. Europol's activities against corruption encompass both preventive and enforcement measures. The agency's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU SOCTA) report identifies corruption as a significant enabler of organized crime networks, which often engage in bribery, manipulation of public officials, and judicial interference. Europol's advanced analytical capabilities help to identify and dismantle these networks, providing crucial intelligence and operational support to member states (Europol's Anti-Corruption Efforts). In 2023, Europol supported numerous high-profile anti-corruption investigations across Europe, resulting in the freezing of €5.5 million in assets. These operations highlight the agency's role in facilitating cross-border collaboration between national law enforcement agencies and other EU bodies such as OLAF and the EPPO. The enhancement of Europol's mandate in June 2022 has further bolstered its operational capabilities, allowing for more effective coordination and support in tackling corruption and other serious crimes (Europol, 2023).

An essential part of the EU's efforts is the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), which is tasked with investigating and prosecuting crimes affecting the financial interests of the Union. „Through joint efforts with national authorities, EPPO ensures effectiveness and coherence in the fight against corruption“ (European Commission, 2021). This collaboration enhances the Union's capacity to combat cross-border financial crimes and uphold the integrity of its financial management.

The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) also plays a crucial role in monitoring and evaluating anti-corruption efforts. EPPO's effectiveness relies heavily on its collaboration with other EU agencies like Eurojust, Europol, and OLAF. This multi-layered cooperation is vital in tackling complex, cross-border financial crimes, ensuring that all EU bodies work in concert to protect the Union's financial resources (EPPO, 2023).

Key institutions such as the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), OLAF, Eurojust, and Europol are instrumental in the EU's anti-corruption framework, particularly in safeguarding financial interests. Complementary tools, such as the Early Detection and Exclusion System (EDES), are critical in preventing financial misconduct and enforcing accountability. The ongoing modernization of the EU's anti-corruption policies is closely aligned with international standards, particularly those outlined in the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), reinforcing the EU's commitment to both domestic and global anti-corruption efforts (Oliinyk, Sierova, Huliaieva, 2023).

These efforts include supporting the establishment of robust frameworks to monitor and mitigate corrupt practices, such as advocating for greater transparency in lobbying activities and reinforcing the role of oversight bodies like the European

Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO). Furthermore, the Parliament's response to scandals such as Qatargate has led to heightened awareness and calls for stricter ethical standards within its own operations.

The work of these specialized agencies is guided by key strategic documents that outline the EU's comprehensive approach to combating corruption.

EU anti-corruption strategic documents

Corruption remains a significant challenge for the European Union, affecting governance, economic stability, and public trust across member states. In response, the EU has developed a comprehensive range of strategies and initiatives, often in collaboration with international organizations, to enhance transparency and accountability across the region.

The EU Anti-Corruption Report, published by the European Commission in February 2014, provided a detailed overview of the corruption landscape across EU Member States. It identified effective measures, highlighted ongoing challenges, and facilitated the exchange of best practices among countries. The report revealed significant disparities in the scope of corruption and the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies across the EU, underscoring the need for continuous improvement. Since its publication, the report has served as a foundation for dialogue with national authorities, leading to better implementation of anti-corruption laws and the development of initiatives like the experience-sharing program launched in 2015 (European Commission, 2015).

EU Anti-Corruption Directives

Directive (EU) 2017/1371 on the Protection of the Union's Financial Interests (PIF Directive): The PIF Directive is a cornerstone in the EU's fight against financial crimes, particularly those affecting the EU budget. It defines criminal offences related to fraud, corruption, and misappropriation of EU funds and harmonizes these definitions across member states. By establishing minimum penalties for these offences, the directive ensures that financial crimes are effectively prosecuted throughout the EU, promoting a unified approach to combating corruption and protecting the Union's financial interests (Directive (EU) 2017/1371).

Furthermore, Directive (EU) 2017/1371 broadens the scope of corruption-related offences, ensuring that activities such as passive and active corruption, as well as misappropriation by public officials, are clearly defined and subject to prosecution. By establishing common legal standards, the EU aims to eliminate disparities in how different member states approach anti-corruption efforts. Additionally, this directive promotes enhanced cooperation between member

states and EU institutions, including Eurojust and the EPPO, facilitating a coordinated response to corruption that threatens the financial interests of the Union (Panov, 2019). The EPPO Regulation mandates that PIF (Protection of the Union's Financial Interests) criminal offences be integrated into national law, ensuring consistency in legal enforcement across the EU and enhancing the effectiveness of cross-border anti-corruption measures.

EU directives are central to the Union's efforts to combat corruption, providing a legal foundation that member states must implement within their national systems. A key example is the Directive on the Protection of the Union's Financial Interests (PIF Directive), which seeks to safeguard the EU's financial interests by criminalizing offences such as fraud, corruption, and the misappropriation of funds. The directive establishes minimum standards for penalties, ensuring that crimes affecting the EU budget are met with effective, proportionate, and deterrent sanctions across all member states (Directive (EU) 2017/1371).

Directive (EU) 2018/843, an amendment to Directive (EU) 2015/849, plays a crucial role in enhancing the European Union's legal framework against money laundering and terrorist financing. This directive focuses on increasing transparency within financial transactions, especially considering the rise of virtual currencies and custodian wallet providers. By broadening the scope of anti-money laundering measures, it directly addresses modern challenges, such as the anonymity of digital transactions. Furthermore, the directive harmonizes anti-money laundering regulations across EU member states, establishing centralized mechanisms for the identification and monitoring of high-risk financial activities. These reforms are integral in maintaining the integrity of the EU financial system, while ensuring compliance with global standards (Directive (EU) 2018/843).

Directive (EU) 2019/1937 of the European Parliament and the Council, known as the Whistleblower Protection Directive, establishes a comprehensive legal framework aimed at protecting individuals who report breaches of Union law. It was adopted on 23 October 2019 and reflects the growing recognition of whistleblowers as essential to enforcing laws and safeguarding the public interest.

This directive introduces minimum standards for whistleblower protection across EU Member States, requiring them to implement secure and confidential reporting channels within both public and private organizations. It mandates protection against retaliation for individuals who expose violations, ensuring their rights are safeguarded through legal remedies and compensations in cases of adverse consequences.

Furthermore, the directive applies to a wide range of areas, including public procurement, financial services, product and transport safety, environmental protection, public health, consumer rights, and privacy. It emphasizes the crucial role whistleblowers play in detecting misconduct and ensuring compliance with

Union law, thereby promoting transparency and accountability across the EU (Directive (EU) 2019/1937).

The European Union has established a robust legislative framework to combat corruption, ensuring that member states adhere to minimum standards for addressing offences such as fraud, corruption, and the misappropriation of funds. This framework is supported by a range of EU directives, international conventions, and specialized agencies, each playing a critical role in the EU's comprehensive anti-corruption strategy.

These legislative acts are fundamental for harmonizing anti-corruption efforts across the EU. They establish minimum criminal penalties for corruption offences and extend the statute of limitations for prosecution, thereby creating a consistent legal environment across all member states. This harmonization is critical for ensuring that anti-corruption efforts are uniformly implemented and enforced, thereby mitigating disparities in the legal treatment of corruption across the Union. Moreover, the new framework enhances the operational capacities of law enforcement agencies and prosecutorial bodies by providing them with the necessary legal tools and resources to combat corruption more effectively.

The European Anti-Corruption Strategy serves as a fundamental aspect of the EU's mission to enhance transparency, integrity, and accountability among its member states. This strategy is tailored to aid member states in formulating and executing robust anti-corruption policies, ensuring these efforts are in line with EU-wide benchmarks and global best practices. A key focus of the strategy is the promotion of cross-border cooperation, the standardization of anti-corruption legislation, and the integration of anti-corruption initiatives within broader governance structures. Furthermore, the strategy underscores the necessity of ongoing evaluations of member states' anti-corruption systems, as detailed in the EU's Rule of Law Mechanism, to guarantee continuous enhancement and responsiveness to emerging challenges (European Commission, 2021).

By mandating the transposition of these directives into national law, the EU promotes legislative harmonization, which is crucial for consistent enforcement and cross-border cooperation in the fight against corruption. According to Mungiu-Pippidi (2015), this harmonization is a key factor in strengthening the EU's overall governance framework, as it ensures that all member states operate under the same legal standards when addressing corruption.

EU Legislative Acts in the Criminal Field

Criminalization of Violations: Directive (EU) 2024/1226 marks a significant step in the harmonization of criminal law across the European Union. It establishes that violations of the Union's restrictive measures, such as asset freezes or economic resource freezes and travel bans, constitute criminal offences. The

directive requires that penalties for these violations be „effective, deterrent, and proportionate,“ thereby ensuring consistent and fair consequences across all member states. Additionally, the directive extends the scope of criminal liability to include serious negligence, thus covering both intentional and negligent actions that breach the Union’s measures. Alongside these more recent legislative acts, two key legal instruments form the cornerstone of the EU’s anti-corruption framework. The first is **Framework Decision 2003/568/JHA**, which addresses both active and passive corruption in the private sector. This decision obliges Member States to criminalize corruption in private sector transactions, ensuring that offences are subject to penalties that are ‘effective, proportionate, and dissuasive’. It also sets out a common definition of corruption across Member States to harmonize legal approaches and facilitate cooperation in the prosecution of cross-border corruption offences.

The second is the **EU Convention on the Fight Against Corruption**, adopted in 1997, which focuses on combating corruption within public institutions. The Convention requires Member States to implement measures to criminalize corruption involving both EU and national officials, reinforcing the accountability of public officials and promoting transparency within the EU’s institutions. Together, these instruments continue to underpin the EU’s efforts to prevent and prosecute corruption, ensuring that both public and private sector corruption are addressed under a unified legal framework.

Jurisdiction and Cooperation: The directive highlights the crucial importance of cross-border jurisdiction and cooperation between member states and EU bodies such as Europol and Eurojust. This aspect of judicial cooperation is vital for the effective prosecution of corruption-related offences, aligning with the broader goal of the EU to harmonize criminal law and ensure a unified response to corruption throughout the Union.

The Principle of Direct Effect in Criminal Law: The principle of direct effect in criminal law is limited, as directives cannot directly impose criminal liability without being transposed into national legislation. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has consistently ruled that criminal law directives must be transposed into national law to be enforceable, respecting the principles of legality, non-retroactivity, and legal certainty. However, the CJEU also emphasizes that national courts should interpret national law in light of EU directives, where possible, to ensure alignment with EU law. This approach ensures that while directives set minimum standards, their effective implementation depends on the commitment of national authorities to adapt and enforce these standards within their legal systems (Gruodyte, Milčiuvienė & Palioniene, 2020).

Criminal Sanctions and the Expansion of EU Competence: The European Union continues to expand its competence in the field of criminal law, with

increasing recognition that criminal sanctions play a key role in deterring serious offences, including corruption and other cross-border crimes. While competition law traditionally relies on administrative fines, the introduction of criminal sanctions reflects the EU's broader strategy under Article 83 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) to address serious transnational crimes through harmonized legal measures. This strategic expansion underscores the EU's commitment to strengthening its legal framework for effectively combating corruption and protecting the integrity of its institutions (Gurgen, 2010).

The Role of the International Organizations in the fight against corruption

International organizations play a pivotal role in shaping global anti-corruption strategies, which in turn influence the policies and legal frameworks of the EU. The EU aligns its anti-corruption measures with international standards established by key global organizations, ensuring that its efforts are both comprehensive and globally consistent.

Governmental International Organizations: Governmental international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have been instrumental in setting global anti-corruption standards that are widely adopted by countries, including those within the EU. These organizations develop conventions and guidelines that form the backbone of international anti-corruption efforts.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as the leading UN agency in combating corruption, plays a critical role in setting global anti-corruption standards. The EU integrates many of UNODC's principles into its own legal frameworks, ensuring alignment with international efforts to fight corruption. Within the academic component of the Education for Justice (E4J) initiative, UNODC provides higher education institutions with a series of modules covering topics such as integrity, ethics, and anti-corruption. These modules are freely accessible and can be integrated into various disciplines, allowing the inclusion of anti-corruption education without the need for creating new specialized courses. These resources are designed to enhance educational programs across disciplines such as economics, law, and national security, offering opportunities to teach ethics and anti-corruption in a variety of academic contexts (Spasov, 2022).

OECD Anti-Bribery Convention: The OECD's Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions requires signatories to criminalize bribery in international business and implement effective

measures to detect and punish offenders. By adopting these standards, the EU enhances its ability to combat cross-border corruption and ensures adherence to recognized global anti-bribery practices (OECD, 2010).

The Role of the World Bank: The World Bank, although not a standard-setting body, significantly impacts global anti-corruption efforts through its focus on governance indicators and its support for the implementation of anti-corruption strategies at both governmental and sectoral levels. The Bank's strategies, grounded in rigorous analysis, provide essential support for the EU's broader anti-corruption framework by offering tools and methodologies that national authorities can adopt to combat corruption effectively (Matei, 2011).

Alignment with EU Policies

The EU's legal framework for combating corruption is closely aligned with these international standards, reflecting its commitment to a unified global approach. By incorporating the principles established by UNCAC, the OECD, and the World Bank, the EU ensures that its anti-corruption measures are not only comprehensive but also consistent with the best practices recognized worldwide.

Advanced and Lagging Anti-Corruption Practices in EU Member States: A Comparative Analysis

Corruption remains a critical challenge within the European Union, with member states exhibiting varying levels of success in combating this pervasive issue. Based on recent academic research and international assessments, EU member states can broadly be categorized into two groups: those with advanced anti-corruption practices and those lagging behind. In recent years, a noticeable trend has emerged where northern EU countries, such as Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, have developed and maintained stricter anti-corruption frameworks, while southern member states, including Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria, continue to face significant challenges in this area. These regional differences highlight the varying political, economic, and cultural factors that influence each country's ability to effectively combat corruption.

Advanced Anti-Corruption Practices:

Denmark consistently ranks as one of the least corrupt countries globally, characterized by its strong legal framework, high levels of transparency, and a deeply ingrained culture of integrity within its public institutions. The country's success in combating corruption can be attributed to robust systems of public accountability, comprehensive auditing mechanisms, and an effective legal

system that enforces anti-corruption measures. The emphasis on transparency and public participation in governance has established Denmark as a model of good governance within the EU (Heywood, 2015).

Germany is recognized for its advanced anti-corruption framework, which is supported by a stable legal system and effective law enforcement. Germany's approach includes stringent regulations in the public sector and proactive measures in the corporate sector, where anti-corruption programs are widely implemented. Germany's collaborative efforts between government bodies and private enterprises have significantly reduced opportunities for corruption, particularly in public procurement and corporate governance. However, recent challenges in corporate oversight, such as the „Dieselgate“ scandal, highlight areas for ongoing vigilance (Karklins, 2007).

Netherlands is widely regarded as one of the leading countries in terms of anti-corruption practices, characterized by a robust legal framework and a strong culture of integrity. „The Dutch public sector is marked by a high level of transparency, supported by stringent regulations on lobbying and political financing, which significantly reduce opportunities for corrupt practices“ (OECD, 2018). The country's approach includes comprehensive systems of public accountability, with mandatory asset declarations for public officials and strict enforcement of ethical standards. „The emphasis on integrity within both the public and private sectors is reinforced by regular integrity training for civil servants, contributing to the Netherlands' strong performance in global corruption indices“ (Hoekstra, 2022).

The Netherlands also actively engages in international anti-corruption efforts, further enhancing its reputation as a model of good governance within the EU. However, the country remains vigilant, continuously improving its policies and practices to address emerging risks and maintain its high standards of governance (European Commission, 2020).

Lagging Anti-Corruption Practices

Romania represents a case where, despite some institutional successes, anti-corruption efforts continue to face significant obstacles. The National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA) has achieved notable successes in prosecuting high-level corruption; however, persistent political interference and attempts to undermine the independence of anti-corruption institutions have hindered sustainable progress. Romania's challenges underscore the difficulties in maintaining the integrity of anti-corruption institutions in a politically volatile environment.

Greece continues to face considerable challenges in its efforts to combat corruption, particularly within the public sector. Despite recent reforms aimed

at improving transparency and accountability, systemic issues such as bribery, tax evasion, and bureaucratic inefficiencies persist. The creation of the National Transparency Authority has been a positive step, but the inconsistent enforcement of anti-corruption laws remains a significant barrier to progress. Corruption continues to undermine public trust and the effectiveness of governance in Greece. Weak institutional oversight and political interference further exacerbate the problem, preventing sustained improvements in governance and the rule of law. Although some efforts have been made to strengthen the fight against corruption, their impact has been limited, and substantial challenges remain. For Greece to make meaningful progress, more consistent application of anti-corruption measures and stronger institutional frameworks will be crucial in the coming years (Transparency International, 2023a).

Bulgaria is another EU member state that faces significant challenges in its fight against corruption. Despite the creation of anti-corruption agencies and legislative reforms, systemic corruption continues to be a pervasive issue. The country's efforts to combat corruption are often undermined by political interference, a lack of judicial independence, and widespread public sector corruption. „Bulgaria has struggled to enforce its anti-corruption laws effectively, with key institutions like the Commission for Counteracting Corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture (KPKONPI) often criticized for their lack of autonomy and transparency“ (European Commission, 2020, p. 12). Moreover, Bulgaria ranks among the lowest in the EU in terms of public perception of corruption, reflecting deep-rooted challenges in governance and law enforcement. These persistent issues highlight the ongoing struggle to implement sustainable anti-corruption measures in a politically and institutionally fragile environment.

For instance, Bulgaria's National Security Strategy underscores how corruption undermines public confidence in institutions and fosters the expansion of organized crime, thereby highlighting the need for its inclusion within broader national security efforts (Terziev, Nichev & Bankov, 2017).

The comparison of anti-corruption practices between leading and lagging EU member states reveals notable regional differences, shaped by various political, economic, and institutional dynamics. Countries such as Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands illustrate how robust legal systems, strong public accountability, and a well-established culture of integrity can significantly curb corruption. In contrast, nations like Romania, Greece, and Bulgaria continue to face ongoing issues, including political meddling, weak institutional oversight, and uneven enforcement of anti-corruption laws. This analysis highlights the need for tailored strategies that address the specific challenges of each country, especially in regions with deeper structural problems. Looking ahead, the EU's focus on harmonizing legislation, enhancing cross-border collaboration, and offering targeted assistance

to underperforming states will be essential for raising governance standards and fostering integrity throughout the Union.

Table 1: Corruption perception index score of EU member states 2023

Country	CPI Score (0 = Highly Corrupt, 100 = Very Clean)
Denmark	90
Netherlands	79
Germany	78
Greece	49
Romania	46
Bulgaria	45

Source: Statista Research Department (2024).

To better understand these disparities and address the underlying issues, research-based insights provide critical analysis of the institutional, political, and economic factors influencing corruption across member states.

Corruption in the Western Balkans: Insights from the Center for the Study of Democracy

Corruption in the Western Balkans continues to be a significant issue, with high levels of reported corruption victimization. Even in countries with relatively low administrative corruption, around 20% of the population admit to having paid a bribe. This figure is notably higher than the average found in EU countries, as reported by specialized Eurobarometer surveys. These statistics indicate that corruption is a widespread issue in the region, posing a serious challenge to the effective functioning of public institutions.

Although there was progress in reducing corruption in the Western Balkans between the early 2000s and mid-2010s, that momentum has since slowed. In some countries, there are even signs of increasing administrative corruption, although minor improvements were observed in 2021 when compared to 2019.

According to data from the SELDI Corruption Monitoring System (2021), countries with a clear prospect of EU accession tend to perform better in combating corruption. However, this positive trend was most noticeable in Kosovo, with other countries in the region showing less progress. Three key points emerge from the data:

Corruption victimization remains alarmingly high, with 20% to 40% of citizens in the Western Balkans admitting to having paid a bribe.

Public tolerance for corruption, while decreasing, remains significant, ranging from 25% to 40%.

The majority of citizens in these countries express pessimism regarding the effectiveness of ongoing anti-corruption efforts (SELDI, 2022). Looking ahead, the prospect of EU accession remains a crucial incentive for implementing stronger anti-corruption reforms in the Western Balkans. Countries like Kosovo and North Macedonia have already shown improvements due to aligning with EU standards, but sustained progress requires further integration of EU legal frameworks and the strengthening of independent anti-corruption institutions. Additionally, reforms in the judiciary and public procurement systems, alongside increased support from civil society organizations, will be key to ensuring transparency and reducing corruption over the long term.

Table 2: Corruption Monitoring System

Country	2016	2019	2021	Difference 2021 – 2016
Albania	50	45	57	+7.3
Montenegro	35	22	32	+10.2
Serbia	23	24	27	+1.8
North Macedonia	30	29	34	+3.2
Kosovo	27	31	26	-1.4
Bosnia and Herzegovina	55	33	42	+8.7

Source: SELDI (2022).

Research-Based Insights

National security strategy documents play a vital role in outlining how a nation protects its core interests, such as economic stability, public safety, and the integrity of its governance systems. Within the EU, many national security strategies explicitly recognize corruption as a significant threat to national security. These documents often stress the importance of implementing thorough measures to combat and prevent corruption, acknowledging that corruption can erode public trust, weaken institutional frameworks, and contribute to the proliferation of organized crime.

Recent studies underscore the importance of institutional quality and the rule of law in effectively combating corruption. Countries with higher levels of impartial institutions and effective legal frameworks are more successful in reducing corruption. This finding is supported by the consistent performance of

countries like Denmark and Germany, where strong legal systems and public accountability mechanisms have established these states as leaders in anti-corruption efforts (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

Conversely, in countries like Romania and Greece, where institutional weaknesses and political interference are prevalent, corruption poses a significant challenge. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2015) notes, „anti-corruption efforts are often undermined by a lack of political will and the entrenchment of corrupt practices within the state apparatus, leading to persistent governance failures”. (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). It is here that practical resources, such as the Handbook of Good Practices in the Fight Against Corruption, become crucial.

Drawing from these research insights, the EU has developed practical tools, such as the ‘Handbook of Good Practices in the Fight Against Corruption’, to offer guidance on addressing corruption across member states.

Handbook of Good Practices in the Fight Against Corruption

To support the ongoing fight against corruption, the European Commission has published the „Handbook of Good Practices in the Fight Against Corruption”, which showcases 27 successful anti-corruption initiatives from across the EU, each representing a different Member State. These practices include both long-established methods and innovative solutions that have proven effective in preventing or repressing corruption. The handbook serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, offering adaptable strategies that can be implemented in various contexts across the EU. This document also facilitates peer learning and exchange, providing a structured approach to transferring successful anti-corruption practices between different national settings, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the EU’s anti-corruption efforts (Huss, Beke, Wynarski, & Slot, 2023).

In addition to traditional practices, digitalization has become an essential tool in the fight against corruption, providing innovative solutions to enhance transparency and accountability.

The role of non-governmental organizations

Non-Governmental International Organizations: Non-governmental international organizations also play a crucial role in the fight against corruption by influencing policy, raising awareness, and providing technical assistance to governments.

Transparency International

One of the key partners in this effort is Transparency International, a leading organization in the global fight against corruption. Transparency International supports the EU's anti-corruption strategies by advocating for stronger political integrity frameworks and combating kleptocracy. In its latest strategic cycle, the organization has emphasized the need for more robust anti-corruption measures, including enhanced transparency and greater public participation. These priorities align closely with the EU's objectives to close legal loopholes, promote good governance, and strengthen the legislative framework at both the national and international levels (Transparency International, 2022). Transparency International has also contributed significantly to strengthening political integrity in Europe by advocating for stricter legislative measures against political corruption. The organization played a pivotal role in advancing anti-money laundering efforts, particularly by promoting beneficial ownership transparency, which was instrumental in shaping the EU's 6th Anti-Money Laundering Directive. Furthermore, Transparency International's efforts to improve whistleblower protection across various EU countries have ensured better support and safety for those reporting corruption, thereby reinforcing the integrity of governance systems (Transparency International, 2023).

Fighting corruption in the EU requires sustained efforts nationally and internationally. Significant progress has been made, particularly through the contributions of organizations like Transparency International and the initiatives led by the EU. However, persistent challenges remain, and the evolving nature of corruption necessitates continued vigilance and innovation. The integration of new strategies, including the adoption of advanced technologies and the strengthening of international cooperation, is essential to ensuring the continued effectiveness of anti-corruption measures across all Member States.

Global Witness

Global Witness is an international organization that plays a key role in exposing corruption networks and the abuse of natural resources. The organization works closely with governments and international institutions to uncover the links between corruption, organized crime, and environmental destruction. Global Witness has been instrumental in increasing pressure on governments for greater transparency in financial flows related to natural resources and in protecting the rights of journalists and activists who expose corruption schemes. The organization also actively advocates for the adoption of laws on transparency and accountability in the international trade of natural resources, which is critical to preventing corrupt practices.

This addition emphasizes the importance of diverse approaches in the fight against corruption and highlights that multiple organizations are working globally to improve transparency and accountability.

Conclusion

The European Union's fight against corruption has made significant strides through the development of a comprehensive legal framework, robust monitoring mechanisms, and the involvement of key institutions like OLAF, EPPO, and Eurojust. These efforts have helped mitigate corruption's damaging effects on governance, economic stability, and public trust. However, challenges persist, particularly in the uneven application of anti-corruption measures across member states, with southern and eastern EU countries often lagging behind in enforcement due to political instability, institutional weakness, and organized crime.

A key takeaway from this analysis is that while legislative and institutional frameworks are essential, their success is contingent upon consistent implementation at the national level. Enhanced judicial independence, increased transparency in public procurement, and sustained collaboration with civil society organizations will be critical to achieving these objectives. Additionally, the role of digital tools and innovative approaches, such as e-government platforms and whistleblowing systems, has proven to be pivotal in reducing opportunities for corruption.

Looking forward, the EU must remain proactive and adaptive in its anti-corruption strategies, particularly in the face of evolving threats such as digital corruption and cross-border crime. Strengthening cross-border cooperation and continuing to harmonize anti-corruption efforts within the EU and in collaboration with international organizations are crucial for long-term success. Ultimately, a corruption-free Europe will require not only the EU's continued efforts but also unwavering political commitment from all member states to enforce transparency and accountability consistently.

Through sustained vigilance, innovation, and international collaboration, the EU can move closer to realizing its vision of a transparent and accountable governance system that serves its citizens and upholds the values of integrity and justice.

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