Abstract

Civil society activism against corruption is widely assumed to improve the quality of democracy. The following paper proposes a framework for testing this assumption in the case of Bulgaria. Since 1997, Bulgarian NGOs have been campaigning against corruption. The NGOs are funded and inspired by the global anticorruption agenda, viewing corruption as a measurable problem to be remedied through a ‘multipronged’ approach. The NGOs succeeded in raising awareness about corruption and mobilizing citizen expectations. However, these expectations were largely disappointed, resulting in deepened cynicism about democracy. Anticorruption rhetoric also contributed to a degeneration of political debate. At the root of the problem may be a misunderstanding between global (donor) and local (citizen) views on corruption. Preliminary results suggest that the effects of anticorruption NGOs on the quality of democracy are more ambiguous than commonly assumed.

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I. Introduction

This paper provides a framework for analyzing the impact of anticorruption NGOs, inspired and funded from the West, on the quality of democracy in Bulgaria. The quality of democracy is a function of both external and domestic factors, which interact. Anticorruption NGOs act as a transmission belt (but also a local adapter) for global anticorruption discourse, including deliberate policies and conditionalities, as well as more subtly disseminated norms and perceptions.

A global discourse emerged in the mid-1990s, proclaiming corruption to be a measurable problem that could be solved through a standardized, ‘multipronged’ approach. As key proponents of this discourse, the World Bank, the IMF, and other Western donors and investors exerted pressure on Sofia to address widespread corruption. Later, the European Union also emphasized the fight against corruption as a requirement for accession. The government adopted an anticorruption strategy with the help of a coalition of Bulgarian NGOs (Coalition 2000) which received Western funding to raise public awareness about corruption. Transparency International opened a Sofia branch with similar goals. Anticorruption activism initially benefited from popular support. However, the lack of convicted officials eventually led to public disillusionment, and deepened cynicism about the democratic process. NGOs also fuelled anticorruption rhetoric which contributed to the degeneration of politics into mutual incriminations, rather than substantive policy debate.

At the same time, Bulgarian NGOs credit themselves with having played a central part in a tangible reduction of actual corrupt transactions. If true, such claims would mean that the anticorruption campaign improved the accountability of public institutions and the quality of democracy. Coalition 2000 contends that since its launch

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1 ‘Multipronged’ is the World Bank’s adjective of choice.
in 1997, ‘the public no longer puts up with rent seeking from public servants’. The World Bank praises the Coalition for having proved that ‘a determined citizenry can demand better government and turn the tables on those who are corrupt’.

Nearly all contemporary analysts diagnose corruption as a symptom as well as a cause of serious dysfunctions within democracy. Therefore, one would expect a remedy for corruption to improve democracy’s wellbeing. Has anticorruption activism boosted democracy by enlightening and mobilizing citizens, and making officials more accountable? Or has anticorruption activism undermined popular trust in institutions and distorted political debate? Did anticorruption NGOs harm or improve the quality of Bulgarian democracy? Or perhaps neither or both?

The answer to this question is unlikely to be a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Some anticorruption activities may have strengthened some dimensions of democratic quality and weakened others. Various dimensions of democratic quality, as detailed by Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, are interrelated but do not always reinforce each other. The quality of democracy involves a ‘balance between virtues that lie in tension’, entailing trade-offs. Given the complexity of both (anti)corruption and democracy, the goal of this paper is not to marshal irrefutable ‘proofs’ of causality. Instead, I hope to shed light on important processes that have not yet been analyzed in depth. Like Aristotle, I must be content with only so much certainty as the nature of the subject permits.

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II. Analytical Framework

1. Corruption, Democracy and Civil Society

The global anticorruption discourse tends to sidestep debates about the definition of corruption by referring to the World Bank’s standard and pithy ‘abuse of public office for private gain’.7 Since I examine NGO activism, I remain agnostic on the ‘best’ definition of corruption. Instead, I will try to explore how global and local actors have defined corruption, and trace the consequences of potential divergences in definition.

Used and misused for over 2,000 years, the term ‘democracy’, too, has accumulated multiple layers of meaning. Subtypes abound, such as ‘guided’, ‘liberal’, or ‘electoral’ democracy.8 Even under a stable definition, ‘[n]o single factor is sufficient to explain the development of democracy in all countries or in a single country’.9 The combination of causes varies across societies. Identifying the sources of democratic quality is a ‘difficult and controversial endeavour’, as many determinants are ‘double-edged’: too many or too few parties, too many or too few alternations in government, too much or too little party influence on civil servant recruitment, can harm democratic quality.10 Perhaps too much or too little anticorruption activism can be added to the list?

Every enquiry into democracy’s determinants has grappled with overdetermination. A compelling analysis of distortion in US presidential campaigns focused on the role of the media, leaving aside other causes such as polling or political

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8 More than 550 ‘subtypes’ of democracy were identified by David Collier and Steven Levitsky, 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', World Politics 49, no. 3 (1997). An updated list would include another twenty or more subtypes as suggested by Svetlozar A. Andreev, 'Consolidating Democracies: The Theory and Practice of Democratisation in Post-Communist Eastern Europe (1989-2000)' (European University Institute, 2003), p. 35.
advertising. Another study highlighted the effect of living standards on democracy\textsuperscript{12} while ignoring, say, the number of political parties or the type of electoral system. Causal complexity does not invalidate findings about a single factor. In-depth case studies can add flesh and blood to the skeleton of quantitative indices and large-\textit{n} comparisons.

Anticorruption assistance, like other kinds of democracy promotion, has rested on an implicit equation of NGOs, civil society, and democracy. Donors take it as a given that NGOs are indispensable for successful anticorruption. The World Bank sees civil society as ‘essential in constraining corruption’\textsuperscript{13}. The OECD published a 27-page report on the role of civil society in fighting corruption,\textsuperscript{14} while the \textit{Anti-Corruption Toolkit} issued by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime mentions ‘civil society’ 151 times.\textsuperscript{15} The 2001 European Commission report on Lithuania insisted that ‘greater involvement of civil society in the fight against corruption should be encouraged’.\textsuperscript{16} By the same token, the Commission commended Bulgaria’s civil society for being ‘active in raising awareness and putting corruption on the political agenda’.\textsuperscript{17} There is consensus that anticorruption must involve civil society, as embodied in NGOs that raise public awareness, formulate strategies, and monitor government behaviour.\textsuperscript{18}

On the other hand, critics of democracy promotion in general have argued that there is no inevitable connection between NGOs, civil society, and democracy.

‘Whether a particular NGO will help build democracy in a particular country depends

\textsuperscript{15} UN Office on Drugs and Crime, \textit{Anti-Corruption Toolkit} (Vienna: 2004).
\textsuperscript{18} Some definitions of civil society also include the media, which falls outside this paper’s focus.
on the political conditions in that country, the organization involved, and how the activities are carried out, among other variables'.\textsuperscript{19} These caveats are likely to apply in the case of anticorruption NGOs.

The evaluation of democracy promotion programs (including anticorruption initiatives) has suffered from methodological difficulties. Evaluators have struggled to identify indicators of democratization, and to establish causal links between democracy assistance and actual political developments.

Donors and their NGO recipients, especially those bound by USAID’s strict accounting rules, tend to produce technical reports that exaggerate the benefits of projects and overlook their shortcomings. Many evaluation instruments do not even consider the possibility that projects may have negative side effects. Project evaluations typically cover short time periods, ignore the local context, and focus on the question \textit{whether}, not \textit{how}, democratic development works. Western consultants who are hired to carry out evaluations (at significant cost), base their assessments on a single visit, frequently without speaking the local language. Evaluator interactions with respondents are typically formal, and the consequent reports are works of advocacy more than impartial analysis.

Evaluations of NGO anticorruption projects, like evaluations of Western democracy assistance, belong in a ‘culture of success’, focusing on quantifiable results, exaggerating benefits, and overlooking potential drawbacks.\textsuperscript{20} Corruption fighters, like democracy promoters, often shrink from acknowledging their own mistakes and thus fail to make substantial progress along Carothers’s learning curve. Both kinds of activists are more inclined toward action than retrospective reflection – a tendency

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Paul Stubbs, ‘Ethnography for Evaluation?’ (paper presented at the Conference on Evaluating International Democracy Promotion, Ohrid, 24 June 2005), pp. 6-8.
\end{itemize}
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reinforced by the bureaucratic imperative to move from one project to the next. Like democracy promotion as described by Carothers, anticorruption is pervaded by missionary zeal, ‘bringing with it a disinclination for self-doubt and a reflexive belief in the value of the enterprise’.21 Furthermore, competition among anticorruption NGOs discourages tough-minded reviews of their own performance.22

Civil society has been crucial in legitimating the global anticorruption agenda, through Transparency International and its 85 chapters, as well as additional advocacy NGOs funded by USAID, the World Bank, and others. Such NGOs have sometimes been more responsive to the concerns of their donors than to those of their presumed constituents. They transmit the global anticorruption discourse into their local political environments.

Like other Western-funded advocacy NGOs, these specialized elite groups are assumed to represent the core of civil society. For example, Carothers notes that it is common for US aid officers in transition countries, while describing NGO activities they are funding, ‘to say grandly, “Civil society has decided to do this” or “Civil society disagrees with the government on that.”’ Thus, as few as one or two dozen people who happen to have close relations with the donors are thus characterized as deciding and acting for the entire civil society of the country’.23 In the words of a harsher critic, the staff of Western-funded NGOs are ‘under no pressure to win respect from the citizenry whose concerns they … allegedly represent’.24 More charitably, it may be said that anticorruption NGOs are straddling a gap between global and local discourses on corruption.

22 A notable exception is the balanced and thoughtful report by Martin Tisné and Daniel Smilov, From the Ground Up: Assessing the Record of Anticorruption Assistance in Southeastern Europe (Budapest: CEU Center for Policy Studies, 2004).
2. Global vs. Local Anticorruption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global</th>
<th>Local</th>
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<tr>
<td>neo-liberal</td>
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<td>preventive</td>
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*Diagram 1. Global vs. local understanding of anticorruption*

The global anticorruption agenda stems from the post-Cold War economic and security interests of the United States, from World Bank and IMF efforts to remain relevant, and from NGOs clamouring to be noticed. Not all elements of the global anticorruption movement are in agreement on all questions, but they share a ‘definite social construct of what corruption is about and how to challenge it’.\(^{25}\) The global agenda is premised on a shared understanding of corruption as a measurable problem requiring global, technocratic solutions, including a smaller role for the state and a larger one for ‘civil society’.

Global anticorruption slogans did capture the popular imagination. Anticorruption NGOs achieved real successes in mobilizing public support by drawing on people’s disgust with corruption. Yet, donor (global) and popular (local) visions of corruption are often at variance. Steven Sampson brings attention to ‘conflicts between global elites and grass roots, between the moral imperatives of fighting against corruption and the grant-getting intrigues involved in procuring funds for projects’.\(^{26}\)

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Such conflicts are often pushed under the rug by the ‘anticorruption community’, but they have deep roots and serious consequences.

At the international level, corruption is construed primarily as an economic problem requiring liberalization, deregulation, and institutional reform. On the other hand, local publics in countries targeted by international anticorruption – developing and transition countries – are eager to see corrupt officials and politicians punished and replaced. In the words of Ernest Harsch, ‘not everyone considers corruption in the same way, nor opposes it for the same reasons’.27 Harsch examines popular sentiments in Ghana and Burkina Faso, which diverge from the standardized anticorruption agenda. Ghanaians and Burkinans ‘favored a state free of corruption, but also strong, effective, and capable of ensuring social welfare and equity’.28 Such perspectives are typically ignored by the prevalent anticorruption discourse. In another sign of a disconnect between global and local concerns, surveys in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Ukraine found that corruption was not citizens’ biggest complaint in dealings with public officials.29

Communism was premised on ideals of equality, which were contradicted by a reality of privileges for the nomenklatura. Egalitarian norms and resentment survived the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many citizens of post-communist counties have remained suspicious of private wealth, which is automatically attributed to illicit means. In these circumstances, local anticorruption discourse is based on social envy and generalized suspicion. For example, the prevalence of anticorruption rhetoric led many Romanians who lost civil trials to suspect that the judge had been bribed.30

28 Ibid., p. 3.
For ordinary Romanians, to denounce corruption was to lament ‘their own experience and their inability to deal with it’. Like an earlier narrative about witchcraft, corruption provides an all-embracing trope that explains the inexplicable and channels social resentment. In the words of Krastev, corruption explains why industries that were once the jewels of the communist economies have bankrupted. Corruption explains why poor are poor and why rich are rich. Blaming corruption for the post-communist citizen is the way to express his disappointment with the present political elites, to mourn the death of his 1989 expectations for better life, and to reject responsibility for his own well being. Talking about corruption is the way post-communist public talks about politics, economy, past and future.

Of course, the distinction between global and local understandings of anticorruption is relative rather than absolute. Some elements of the global agenda are not necessarily neo-liberal, and may place an equal emphasis on punishment and prevention. Likewise, not all at the local level share egalitarian ideals. Some Bulgarians have even argued for an ‘amnesty’ for illicit funds. Nevertheless, there are perceptible differences between the thrust of local and global views on what corruption is and how to fight it.

Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, successive governments won elections on promises of curbing corruption, but before long came to be seen as corrupt themselves. Western-funded NGOs successfully raised public awareness of corruption. However, their technical and consensual approach to anticorruption brought them too close to government to be effective. Anticorruption has floundered at the implementation stage.

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
34 Tisné and Smilov, *From the Ground Up*. 
3. Anticorruption in the Context of Debates about Democracy Promotion

Western attempts at democratic engineering have stirred a controversy in the academic and policy literature. The arguments on both sides could be applied to anticorruption NGOs funded by the West under the rubric of democracy promotion. Proponents argue that the West has a moral duty to support democracy in developing and transition countries. In addition, supporters invoke the West’s enlightened self-interest, based on the argument that democracies ‘do not fight each other’ and are less likely to generate refugees or terrorists.

Critics, on the other hand, question the legitimacy of imposing Western values on other countries. Democracy aid has been condemned as a rhetorical disguise for Western economic and security interests. Detractors also dismiss such assistance as futile, on the grounds that democracy must be home-grown. Finally, critics exhort the West to purge the log from its own eye before teaching others how to be democratic.35

Caught between extremes, the debate on democracy promotion has generated more heat than light. Democracy aid is extolled as heroic and universally beneficial, dismissed as naïve and irrelevant, or condemned as a Trojan horse for self-interested intrusion. Attempts at a deeper, more impartial analysis (such as the one by Carothers) are rare.

Some analyses deliberately aim to provoke controversy rather than to arrive at a balanced view. David Chandler and Adam Burgess are unapologetically polemical in criticizing democracy promotion. ‘Although the language of democratisation appears universal’, Chandler argues, ‘its content today is a highly ideological one that qualifies liberal democracy in the states of Eastern Europe and justifies the interference of

35 Cf. Matthew 7:5.
Western institutions in their domestic affairs’. For Chandler, international bodies seek to teach or impose democracy because some cultures are not sufficiently ‘rational’ or ‘civil’ to govern themselves.

Burgess shares Chandler’s critique of Western efforts to consolidate democracy and establish civil society in Eastern Europe as a process of moving the goal posts, whereby East Europe is cast in the role of a savage who must learn the superior civilization but can never reach the exemplar, who also acts as the judge of Eastern progress. According to Burgess, the promotion of democracy and civil society in Eastern Europe allows the West to take the high moral ground and to claim superiority externally to compensate for its internal self-doubts. The Red Scare of the Cold War, Burgess argues, was replaced by the image of a dangerously unstable region, a source of illegal immigration, crime and corruption.

Burgess’s resort to sweeping expressions such as ‘the neocolonial relationship between East and West’ sidesteps the need for a more detailed analysis of unequal relationships across the erstwhile Iron Curtain. It is simplistic to blame the West for all the problems of a helpless East. Such an explanation deprives East Europeans of agency as much as the most patronizing civil society promotion program.

Like democracy promotion, anticorruption has provoked an intense debate with a propensity for polemics and an underdeveloped middle ground. Like the case for democracy promotion, the case for anticorruption relies on a mixture of altruism and enlightened self-interest. There is also strong domestic support in transition countries for external pressure on anticorruption. Sceptics, in turn, criticize Western anticorruption efforts in developing and transition countries as moralistic, insensitive to

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37 Ibid., p. 3.
38 Burgess, *Divided Europe*, p. 168.
39 Miller, Grødeland, and Koschechkina, *A Culture of Corruption?*
the local context, and hypocritical in paying lip service to deep-seated corruption in the West.  

In a backlash against such ‘revisionism’, the World Bank’s Daniel Kaufmann attacked those who consider culture to be relevant, and those who think that market reforms may have an ambiguous effect on corruption. Denouncing such scholars as ‘corruption apologists’ and ‘fatalists’, Kaufmann went on to establish ‘the facts’ (embodied in econometric data). The facts unfailingly point to deregulation and privatization as cure-all solutions, in addition to greater involvement of the ‘international community’ in fighting corruption in emerging economies.

The reports of anticorruption organizations read as PR exercises, ignoring the potential for negative side effects, despite longstanding evidence of the possibility of such side effects. Economic studies sponsored by the World Bank and the IMF are not uncritical towards anticorruption but share a reluctance to delve into the definition of corruption, and an instinctive tendency to condemn corruption as the root of all evil.

Even former enthusiasts are now questioning the effects of the global anticorruption movement on democracy. In 1995, Moisés Naim was optimistic that growing clamour against corruption would shrink corruption to a ‘historical minimum’, leading to a ‘catharsis’ of world politics. Ten years later, Naim observed that global efforts against corruption had proven ineffective or even counterproductive. ‘Today, the war on corruption is undermining democracy, helping the wrong leaders get elected,

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40 The global anticorruption discourse does mention the role of Western companies in developing and transition countries, but rarely refers to corruption within Western states, which are not subject to conditionality.
42 See also the response of an author labelled by Kaufmann as a ‘corruption apologist’ – Robert S. Leiken, ‘Corruption Revisited’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 108 (1997).
and distracting societies from facing urgent problems’. 45 Corruption too easily became a universal diagnosis for a nation’s ills, making it more difficult rally public support for indispensable measures like tax reform, because ‘the general assumption is that any new public revenues will inevitably evaporate in corrupt hands’. Crucial problems such as education or health care cannot compete for attention with headlines about the latest corruption scandal. Obsession with corruption also promoted ‘the fiction that if voters could simply get rid of the current crop of venal officials and find an honest leader, progress would ensue’. In many countries, political stability suffered as too many leaders ousted their predecessors on charges of corruption, only to face similar accusations themselves. 46

If anticorruption rhetoric lacks tangible results, it may reinforce popular cynicism about politics. A corruption scandal that leads to resignations and prosecutions serves as a ritual of catharsis and re legitimization. However, if protagonists remain unpunished, corruption scandals become part of a delegitimizing spiral that undermines the credibility of democratic norms. 47 The global campaign against corruption, in which NGOs have played a key role, has raised enormous, and yet unfulfilled, expectations for catharsis.

It has added to the appeal of demagogues and extremists whose rhetoric pits an innocent ‘people’ against corrupt a corrupt elite. Mainstream politicians have also unscrupulously manipulated popular fixations on corruption. In Russia, anticorruption campaigns became so distorted that ‘everyone who denounced corruption was now perceived as corrupt himself, eager to use anticorruption campaigns as a means to

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46 Ibid.
denounce political rivals and therefore acquire power’. 48 Obsession with corruption has also drained political life of its content. Political discussion has degenerated from substantive policy issues into accusations of corruption and promises of integrity. 49

Mark Philp finds that

Western agencies have often shown a lack of sensitivity is in their willingness to supply a lexicon of corruption to political forces in transition states which, rather than assisting in the process of cleaning up government, has simultaneously armed political groups with a resource that they have no incentive to use responsibly and has further weakened the legitimacy of these states both domestically and in the international community. 50

By weakening the legitimacy of the democratizing state, anticorruption rhetoric has sometimes proven to be counterproductive. James Jacobs concurs that ‘Countries going through a political transition from dictatorship to democracy may be especially vulnerable to too much corruption and too much anticorruption ideology’. 51

III. A Model: Anticorruption NGOs and the Quality of Democracy

Proponents of NGO anticorruption advocacy claim that it enlightens and empowers citizens, and makes officials more accountable. Opponents think that such advocacy undermines popular trust in democracy, distracts from substantive policy debate, and contributes to instability. How can these competing claims be conceptualized and tested?

49 Luchezar Bogdanov, 'Politicheskiat Risk Raste s Otkaza ot Ideologia v Partiite', Dnevnik, 10 February 2005.
The relationship between corruption and perceived corruption is tenuous because most citizens base their estimates not on personal experience but on hearsay and media reports. Conversely, a high perception of corruption may encourage actual ‘corrupt’ behaviour through a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. If successful, anticorruption activism directly affects the actual level of corruption, making democratic institutions more accountable. The accountability of institutions is difficult to observe, but it ought to be reflected in public trust in those institutions.

Anticorruption activism by an NGO also raises the visibility of the corruption topic, increasing the level of perceived corruption. Activism may also stigmatize as corrupt behaviour that was previously overlooked or excused as harmless. Higher levels of perceived corruption cause citizens to lose faith in the democratic system, lowering its legitimacy. Political discourse shifts from substantive policy issues to mutual accusations of corruption. The deteriorating political discourse leads perceptions of corruption to rise still more in a vicious cycle. As an indicator of the
legitimacy of the democratic system, one can examine election turnouts and polls of 
public confidence in various institutions. A review of media reports and party platforms 
can give an indication of the content of political discourse.

Like any other graphic representation, the diagram necessarily simplifies 
complex relationships. The featured variables are subject to numerous other influences 
that, if represented, would appear as a jungle of arrows. For instance, system legitimacy 
depends on the degree of democratic ‘consolidation’ and on the viability of 
antidemocratic alternatives. The content of political discourse may falter even without 
an obsession with corruption. Poor system legitimacy may encourage corrupt 
behaviour, etc.

IV. Preliminary Conclusions, Problems, Questions

Preliminary evidence suggests that Bulgaria is one of many aid recipient 
countries where the vague and emotive term ‘corruption’ has masked a gap between 
global and local discourses, a gap that Western-funded ‘civil society’ organizations have 
been unable to bridge.

A possible reason why anticorruption activism may not have quite succeeded is 
a misunderstanding between Western donors and Bulgarian citizens about the nature of 
corruption. Donors viewed corruption as an economic problem, which could be 
minimized by altering officials’ incentives. Citizens condemned corruption in order to 
air frustration with rapid social stratification, and to demand the punishment of nouveau
riche bureaucrats and politicians. Bulgarians who criticize a privatization deal as 
‘corrupt’ may view the very policy of privatization as a form of ‘looting’. It was the 
elusive and value-ridden term ‘corruption’ that allowed Western-funded NGOs to
initially mobilize a significant part of the population in support of the campaign. The lack of convicted officials undermined public confidence in the political process.

Of course, even before the creation of such NGOs, Bulgarian citizens were concerned about occurrences of bribery and malfeasance. Even without NGO activism, Bulgarian journalists would have been eager to exploit a sensational topic. But the influence of Western-inspired NGOs can be recognized in their language and approach to the corruption topic. Phrases such as *koruptsionni praktiki* (corrupt practices) or *konflikt na interesi* (conflict of interests) are obvious translations from English that were not used in Bulgarian prior to the NGO campaigns.

Further analysis would need to distinguish between various NGO activities.

Questions and problems:
- how to isolate relevant evidence given the variety of factors at play
- more indicators for Diagram 2
- is it possible to assess the effect of anticorruption NGOs on the quality of democracy while remaining agnostic about their effect on ‘actual’ corruption levels?
- any other criticisms, ideas, suggestions welcome


Bogdanov, Luchezar. 'Politicheskiat Risk Raste s Otkaza ot Ideologia v Partiite'. Dnevnik, 10 February 2005.


Naím, Moisés. 'Bad Medicine'. *Foreign Policy* (2005), pp. 96-95.


