

RESEARCH REPORT IREX STG

Grantee: Rasma Karklins
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1. Research Report on "Corruption in Postcommunist States and Strategies for Reform."

Policy Research and Development Program

Research trip to Latvia, May 1-May 30, 2002

2. Research Objective and Relevance: I am working on a book about the nature and political consequences of corruption in post-communist systems. I argue that corruption is at the root of costly governance failure and significant popular disenchantment with democracy. This research trip focused on one part of the larger study, i.e. data collection for two crucial chapters where I use a detailed case study approach. In one chapter I assess the various anti-corruption programs and strategies that have been launched in Latvia since 1997. Another chapter focuses on public discourse about corruption. Understanding public perceptions and at times participation in corruption is a precondition for its containment and due to my native language knowledge of Latvian I use Latvia as a case study for comparative analysis.

Latvia is well-suited for a case study because it was the first post-communist state to make the prevention of corruption a formal state policy and thus has a track record. What's more, the World Bank and other international institutions have sponsored significant previous corruption research that I can build on, and the local Transparency International NGO is one of the most accomplished anti-corruption civic associations in the region.

3. Approach: I use a descriptive and institutional analysis to assess anti-corruption programs. In assessing the extent to which corrupt practices can be explained by cultural habits, I combine qualitative and quantitative methods. A primary focus during this trip was on the public discourse about corruption and how it affects democracy. I collected material from debates in the press, other media, and various public meetings. For the latter, I attended and took notes at a two day conference on Latvia's courts on May 3-4, and a conference on "Youth against Corruption," at the University of Latvia on May 25. I also collected press clippings and other material at the office of the Latvian branch of Transparency International, at the Parliamentary Information Service office, the Baltic Social Sciences Institute, and the Latvian Institute for International Affairs. I also met with numerous individual scholars to strengthen research contacts and pursue collaboration on issues of social trust and anti-corruption, in particular anthropologist Klavs Sedlenieks, sociologists Brigita Zepa and Aldis Paulins, and political scientists Valts Kalnins, Janis Ikstens, and Agnese Cimdira.

I also had discussions with the leaders involved in Latvia's branch of Transparency International and people who have been involved in anti-corruption projects of the government and the European Union. I collaborated with public policy specialists working at the Soros-Foundation Latvia and contributed an interview to their website, www.politka.lv. I was interviewed for a public policy program broadcast on national television on May 28 (fifteen minutes) and held discussions with journalists and media experts. One focus of these discussions was on experiences with anti-corruption programs and on recent events surrounding the formation of the new "Office for the Prevention of Corruption."

4. Findings: I have yet to evaluate most of the material that I collected. Preliminary findings are that the public in Latvia sees corruption as being pervasive and very difficult to deal with. While criticizing corruption at the top, many individuals themselves engage in petty corruption, do not believe that it "pays" to be honest, and use self-serving arguments that their personal dishonesty is justified by the corruption of the power elites and "the system." There also seems to be an underlying belief that circumventing cumbersome rules "humanizes" the system. Most people believe that higher level political corruption can only be contained by decisive action from the top.

Much of the public discussion includes rather cynical statements and lack of credibility of recent reform efforts. Yet patterns differ among subgroups: public officials such as the judges present at the May 3/4 conference deny that corruption is significant, whereas the general public sees it as being huge. Younger people and those involved in civic organizations are more optimistic about the chances of containing corruption and discuss ways how to go about it. Activists involved in recent Transparency International campaigns such as the one to prevent the illegal privatization of a public youth center are energized by their partial successes.

5. Suggestions for Future Research: There are innumerable important questions that need to be explored. A crucial one is how to engage civic society and convince the larger public that it "pays" for themselves to participate in private and group contributions for the public good. One needs to analyze nascent successes of communal activism and how they help in practice and in terms of promoting public spiritedness.

6. Policy Recommendations: Policy should focus on supporting civic society groups engaged in the containment of corruption, encourage investigative reporting, and very concrete programs that focus on the "how to" of corruption prevention and containment. One effective strategy is to acknowledge that corruption exists in other states as well and then to elaborate in detail how successful prevention and prosecution has worked, including in prominent cases. I have used experiences from Chicago with great effect.