

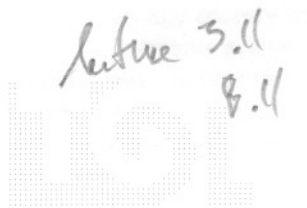
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TRANSITIONS ONLINE: Book Review: **The Sick System**

by [unreadable] [unreadable]
29 September 2005

Corruption can be fought with preventative medicine and cures, but what a sick system may most need is a shock.

The System Made Me Do It: Corruption in Post-Communist Societies, by Rasma Karklins. M. E. Sharpe, 2005.

If you want to start a business, drive down the street, enter university, or heal your aching back in a post-communist country, there is a good chance that you will pay a bribe to do so. The same goes if you want to add a steel factory to your portfolio of banks and oil companies or if you want to obtain a lucrative government contract.

Presidents, prime ministers, and lots of ordinary folks have been talking about the problem for a long time now. The World Bank, Transparency International, Freedom House, and a host of other organizations have sought to shine a light on the issue. Now, Rasma Karklins has given us a useful overview of the situation in her book *The System Made Me Do It: Corruption in Post-Communist Societies*.

This book represents the state of the art in the field of corruption studies, but that art unfortunately is still in a primitivist stage. Beyond the phrase "misuse of public power for private gain," corruption is extremely hard to define. Since most corruption takes place in the shadows, it is also very difficult to measure. Nobody really knows how much corruption there is, much less whether it is increasing or decreasing. We are forced to rely on untrustworthy measures, such as perceptions of corruption and what people say that their experiences with corruption are. Imperfect these may be, but these techniques can be useful if approached cautiously.

THE 15 DEADLY SINS

Karklins develops a typology of corruption that distinguishes three main varieties: everyday interaction between officials and citizens, interaction within public institutions, and influence over political institutions. She stresses that the higher-level political corruption is much more important than day-to-day corruption because it sets the tone for the way people behave throughout society. In countries where people perceive corruption to be rampant and have no trust in the government, they resort to corruption as the only way to pursue their interests. Naturally, the problem then becomes more extensive.

Within the three major categories, Karklins defines 15 specific types of corruption, ranging from "bribery of public officials to bend rules" to "corruption in and of the media." Defining and refining terms in this manner is necessary; it sorts out the issues that reformers must address in their efforts to reduce corruption.

Karklins deploys the full arsenal of social science theories to hammer away at the problem, not just of explaining corruption but of getting rid of it. Her analysis encompasses civic republicanism, institutionalism, and rational choice. This kind of synthetic analysis naturally sacrifices parsimony and some degrees of clarity in order to encompass a large set of explanatory variables in describing corruption and the ways to fight it. Certainly any effective strategy against the entrenched corruption of post-communist countries will have to include a wide array of remedies and this book provides a laundry list, though not a battle plan. The strength of the book is in forcing us all to think a little harder about how to deal with corruption. Unfortunately, the solution to the problem in the post-communist countries is beyond the horizon, as the conclusion makes clear.

PREVENTION OR CURE?

Karklins is concerned that institutional solutions, such as more checks and balances, by themselves will not be sufficient to eradicate this scourge. She therefore devotes a chapter to the "opposites of corruption." Here Karklins argues for the need for more "public-spiritedness" and "commitment to serving the public good."

Certainly, in any country some individuals are imbued with public-spiritedness and commitment to the greater good. Many civil servants are personally honest and work to improve the situation around them. Such feelings, however, are probably even harder to measure than corruption. It is also not clear how to encourage such attitudes among ordinary workers. And, of course, there is the problem of causality. Does the overall perception of less corruption in society lead to more public-spiritedness? Or does the process go the other way round? Unfortunately, this book does not enlighten us on how to address these issues.

Karklins lays out differing strategies on how to combat corruption. One approach employed successfully in Hong Kong was to use a high-profile arrest as a way to jump start a larger anti-corruption drive. A corrupt police official's escape from prison provoked mass outrage and the anti-corruption movement was able to score a visible public success when he was caught and thrown back into jail.

In contrast, the best-known international organization working to measure and combat corruption, Transparency International, urges a more cooperative approach with the elites in power. Transparency stresses that it is not interested in going after corrupt individual bureaucrats. Instead, it prefers to promote systemic change.

In this debate, Karklins ultimately backs the method of going after the big fish. She argues that prevention is ultimately better than prosecution, but that such prevention will only work "once the credibility of a high risk of being penalized for corruption is established." As long as bureaucrats believe that they can engage in corrupt practices with impunity, there will be little society can do to foster clean government.

EXTERNAL STIMULI

The book also addresses some of the most common bromides about corruption, such as the idea that officials take bribes because they are underpaid and that raising their salaries will solve the problem. Karklins warns that increasing the salaries of corrupt officials will not make them less corrupt, though helping underpaid honest public servants would make sense. Achieving such a goal requires connecting any salary increase with a review of risk zones for corruption and establishing safeguards for dealing with them.

Karklins also does not put much store in the creation of agencies with the specific purpose of fighting corruption, arguing that they "work best where they are least needed." She argues that it is much more important to have an independent judiciary, free press, and active civil society.

Ultimately, to fight corruption Karklins calls for three measures: institutional checks and balances, mechanisms of accountability that actually work, and citizens actively working to promote the public good. In looking at 28 post-communist countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Karklins finds (unsurprisingly) that the states joining the European Union and NATO had made the most progress in dealing with their corruption problems, though they still have much to do. In countries such as Russia, where there has been no similar external stimulus to fight corruption, there has been lots of talk, but the situation seems to be getting worse as the authorities continue to strengthen the state and crack down on the press, civil society, and independent-minded judges.

Robert Ortung is project director for the Transnational Crime and Corruption Center at American University in Washington, D.C.

Read an excerpt from [The Sick System](#)

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