

Can messaging help in fighting serious organised crime (SOC) and corruption in Albania?¹

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Summary

Strategies to counter serious organised crime (SOC) and corruption typically include an awareness-raising or messaging element. The hope is that this will engender both intolerance of corruption and SOC as well as public support for non-corrupt leaders and anti-SOC policies. A growing body of research, however, suggests that raising awareness of 'social bads' like organised crime and corruption may risk doing more harm than good. This research project therefore aims to examine what effect a range of messaging strategies would have in Albania, a country that struggles with the malign effects of both corruption and SOC.⁵

- 1 For the full research paper, see Cheeseman, N. & Peiffer, C. (2022). *Can Messaging Help Us to Fight SOC and Corruption in Albania?* SOC ACE Research Paper No. 2. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.
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- 4 We are grateful to the FCDO-Albania programme team for working with us on the design of this research, and to the team at IDRA for working with us to conduct the fieldwork. We also thank Niheer Dasandi and Heather Marquette for reviewing previous drafts and providing helpful feedback.
- 5 Home Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), National Crime Agency (NCA), Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Department for International Development (DFID) (2020). 'CSSF Programme summary of Western Balkans Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) CSSF Programme'. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842434/Western_Balkans_Serious_and_Organised_Crime_Programme.odt; United States Department of State (2019). 'International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume II: Money Laundering'. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/INCSR-Vol-2.pdf>; Transparency International (2021). Corruption Perception Index, 2020. Transparency International. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2020>.



The research

A large (3,003-person sample), nationally representative survey experiment was conducted in Albania to test the impact of five anti-corruption and anti-SOC messages. The sample was divided into six groups, five of which were exposed to the kind of anti-SOC or anti-corruption messaging that might be used in an awareness-raising campaign, and one of which acted as the control group, receiving no messages at all.

All participants were then asked to complete a survey to elicit how they felt about SOC and corruption, including questions about the government's counter-SOC and anti-corruption approaches, whether they would be willing to report criminal activity or corruption, or use voting as a way of holding corrupt officials or those with ties to organised crime to account.

Regression analysis was used to examine whether individuals in the groups that were exposed to messaging had attitudes or beliefs that were different from those in the control group. This approach represents a systematic test of the impacts of exposure to the tested messages.

What messages were tested?

The messages were co-produced with the Albania programme team of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), which helped to ensure that the messages resonated in the Albanian context. In line with policy guidance on anti-corruption awareness raising, the first two messages tested highlighted the existence and gravity of Albania's corruption and SOC problems, respectively. The third and fourth messages, in contrast, highlighted the fact that most citizens disapprove of SOC and corruption. These were tested because there is some indication in the literature that such messaging has less risk of generating unintended effects.⁶ The final message tested stressed the transnational nature of high-level corruption; it was included because during the process of designing the messages some interlocutors felt that emphasising the fact that Albanian wealth and resources are lost to other countries because of kleptocratic patterns of corruption could prove to be a particularly effective narrative as it plays on a sense of national pride.

6 Widner, CJ and Roggenbuck, J (2000). 'Reducing theft of petrified wood at Petrified Forest National Park'. *Journal of Interpretation Research*, 5(1), pp. 1–18; Cialdini, RB, Demaine, LJ, Sagarin, BJ, Barrett, DW, Rhoads, K and Winter, PL (2006). 'Managing social norms for persuasive impact'. *Social Influence*, 1(1), pp. 3–15; Agerberg, M (2021). 'Messaging about corruption: the power of social norms' Governance, early view: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12633>.

Background

Evidence base on ‘social bads’ awareness raising

While – to the best of our knowledge – no systematic research has been conducted on the impact of SOC-specific awareness-raising efforts, findings from research on awareness-raising messaging focused on corruption suggest there may be cause for concern. These studies have almost universally found that such messaging has no impact or even that it backfires. Specifically, six of the 16 messages tested in the literature are found to largely have no impact, for example in fostering supportive attitudes about anti-corruption or a willingness to report corruption.⁷ *This suggests that, in practice, there is a real risk that investing in awareness raising will be a waste of resources.*

Moreover, half of the messages tested in the literature were found to have backfired to some extent. Peiffer’s⁸ study in Jakarta found that exposure to anti-corruption messaging reduced willingness to report corruption, for example, and most recently, the study undertaken by Cheeseman and Peiffer⁹ in Lagos found that, in a simulated bribery game, exposure to messaging made Lagosians more likely to pay a bribe.¹⁰ It is important to note that there was significant variation in the messages tested that were found to have backfired; some emphasised how endemic

corruption was, but others were more upbeat, by, for example, focusing on the government’s successes in fighting corruption, or describing ways citizens can get involved in fighting corruption. Given that different types of messages in different contexts have been found to backfire, *the risk that awareness raising may cause more harm than good appears to be quite high.*

Is there a risk that raising awareness of SOC will also backfire?

The literature on corruption messaging suggests that awareness raising unintentionally reinforces beliefs that the problem is too big and intractable to try to resist. Because corruption is an issue on which people have already formed strong opinions, this is said also to apply to messages which emphasise the widespread nature of corruption, and others which take a more buoyant and optimistic tone.¹¹ In other words, messaging is unlikely to change firmly held views on the topic; but even upbeat messages can cause people to recall beliefs that corruption is endemic and impossible to solve. This reasoning explains why any message about corruption may backfire.

A similar dynamic may be at work with SOC awareness-raising efforts. Like corruption, SOC is another ‘social bad’ which is thought to infiltrate the state and heavily influence the actions of public officials. By raising awareness

- 7 Peiffer, C and Walton, G (2022). ‘Getting the (right) message across: how to encourage citizens to report corruption’. *Development Policy Review*, early view: <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12621>; Kobis, N, Troost, M, Brandt, C and Soraperra, I (2019). ‘Social norms of corruption in the field: social nudges on posters can help to reduce bribery’. *Behavioural Public Policy*, first view, <https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2019.37>; Cheeseman, N and Peiffer, C (2020). *Why efforts to fight corruption hurt democracy: lessons from a survey experiment in Nigeria*. SOAS-ACE Working Paper no. 27. Available at: <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/publication/why-efforts-to-fight-corruption-hurt-democracy-nigeria/>; Cheeseman, N and Peiffer, C (2021). ‘The curse of good intentions: why anticorruption messaging can encourage bribery’. *American Political Science Review*, pp. 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001398>.
- 8 Peiffer, C (2017). *Getting the message: examining the intended – and unintended – impacts of corruption awareness-raising*. Birmingham, UK: Developmental Leadership Program. Available at: <https://www.dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/getting-the-message-examining-the-intended-and-unintended-impacts-of-corruption-awareness-raising>; Peiffer, C (2018). ‘Message received? Experimental findings on how messages about corruption shape perceptions’. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), pp. 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000108>.
- 9 Cheeseman, N and Peiffer, C (2021). ‘The Curse of Good Intentions: Why Anticorruption Messaging Can Encourage Bribery’. *American Political Science Review*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001398>.
- 10 For similar findings, see also Corbacho, A, Gingerich, D, Oliveros, V and Ruiz-Vega, M (2016). ‘Corruption as a self-fulfilling prophecy: evidence from a survey experiment in Costa Rica’. *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(4), pp. 1077–92.
- 11 Peiffer, C (2018). ‘Message Received? Experimental Findings on How Messages about Corruption Shape Perceptions’. *British Journal of Political Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000108>; Cheeseman, N and Peiffer, C (2021). ‘The Curse of Good Intentions: Why Anticorruption Messaging Can Encourage Bribery’. *American Political Science Review*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001398>.

of the problem of SOC, counter-SOC messaging may unintentionally make people feel that the system is beyond repair – too overrun by SOC for individual efforts to have any impact. With this logic, not only would we expect that messages that highlight the damage SOC causes could backfire in this way, but even messages that publicise counter-SOC wins – such as stories of seizing assets – may still make people feel pessimistic about the challenge of controlling SOC.

Key findings

How do Albanians think about SOC and corruption?

Our survey provides a wealth of information on the beliefs and attitudes of the Albanian population. These are very relevant to the design of anti-corruption and anti-SOC programmes, not least because they provide insights into which kinds of citizens are least critical of these ‘social bads’.

Overall, Albanians believe that corruption and SOC are widespread and represent a major challenge facing the country, and that they have either stayed the same or become worse in the last five years. Not everyone thinks the same way, however, and partisan (party political) identity heavily shapes these perceptions. Most notably, supporters of the ruling party believe that corruption and SOC are less prevalent and are more positive about the government’s performance. While there is strong popular support for political action to deal with these issues, Albanians are sceptical about the government’s efforts to do so – most believing that its efforts have been ineffective.

There is some worrying evidence of ‘patrimonial’ and ‘permissive’ attitudes towards corruption and SOC. For instance, 33.71% of respondents agreed that ‘sometimes money from organised crime can help the community’, while 23.7% agreed that ‘sometimes it is ok for government employees to use their position to benefit their community’. Such attitudes are likely to impede the

effectiveness of programmes in this area. Perhaps partly as a result, and given the risks involved, only a minority of Albanians say that they would report SOC and corruption if they witnessed or experienced it.

Significantly, policy interventions need to recognise that there is no universal ‘Albanian’ experience of corruption, and attitudes vary across demographic categories. In particular, younger Albanians, men, and urban residents are more likely to experience corruption and SOC. The idea that SOC can have positive impacts is most prevalent among younger Albanians, those with lower formal educational attainment, rural residents, and those who do not support the ruling party.

Do anti-SOC and anti-corruption messages work?

Our research confirms the patchy and often problematic impact of messaging in these areas. There are three trends in our experimental findings.

First, the messages had no influence in shaping willingness to pay a bribe, agreement that SOC or corruption are (un)acceptable, willingness of participants to report corruption and SOC, or willingness to take up activism to resist these ‘social bads’. *In other words, for some of the most important aims of awareness raising the messages we tested had no effect, suggesting that awareness raising would be a waste of money.*

In contrast, the second trend in our findings is that exposure to almost all of our messages encouraged optimism about being able to hold corrupt and SOC-influenced officials to account through voting, and that it is worth voting for an anti-corruption candidate. The message with the largest estimated impact, in this respect, was one describing the fact that Albanian wealth and resources are lost to other countries because of kleptocratic patterns of corruption. *This suggests that awareness raising may be worth pursuing, but only if these types of outcomes alone are deemed to be worth the investment.*

Finally, the results also suggest that some messaging may have unintended impacts. Messages which focused on the existence and gravity of these ‘social bads’ increase agreement with the idea that bribery is needed to get things done when dealing with the government – which risks bolstering the belief that bribes are inevitable and therefore not worth resisting – while increasing agreement that people have lost confidence in the government because of the extent of organised crime. *These findings confirm the difficulty of using messaging to shape public opinion in a desired direction.*

Unfortunately, there are no obvious solutions regarding the different types of messages that we tested. None of the messages had a positive effect overall; none of the messages that we tested both maximised the positive influence of the information being communicated while also minimising its negative influence. All messages work inconsistently, and there appears to be a trade-off between effectiveness and minimising unintended consequences.

Implications

In line with much of the previous literature on awareness raising about ‘social bads’, our findings provide little confidence that raising awareness of corruption or SOC would have the desired effect and represent value for money.

Taken together, the clearest conclusion suggested by these findings is that we have yet to design messages that have a consistently positive effect; that any messaging in these areas is therefore fraught with danger and likely to generate at least some unintended and unwanted consequences; and that even the most carefully

designed messages are unlikely – at least if they are communicated outside a wider package of engagement, as was the case in our study – to represent a value for money investment.

This suggests two ways forward. The first is to design and test a further set of messages, in the hope of designing one that maximises the positive effects identified above while minimising the negative unintended consequences.

A second possibility would be to accept that one-off messaging is always likely to have uneven and in many cases counter-productive consequences, and to therefore focus on testing programmes that seek to communicate information as part of a wider and deeper set of engagements with key communities that may be able to shape how messages are interpreted and their impact on actions and behaviour. Of course, there is no guarantee that such efforts would be successful – and we would need to carefully test the influence of any engagement in the same systematic way that we tested the messages outlined in this briefing note – but this approach perhaps offers the best prospects for shifting popular opinion in the desired direction.

In moving ahead, it will also be important to think about who is most affected by SOC and corruption, and who is least likely to be critical of these ‘social bads’. This will mean targeting interventions – as the FCDO and others are already doing to an extent – at younger Albanian men and those with lower educational attainment. It will also be important to keep in mind the impact of partisan identities and the differential attitudes to SOC and corruption in urban and rural areas in order to design ‘value for money programmes’ that have optimal impact.

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