FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND CORRUPTION IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

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By

Abby Mills

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of freedom of the press on corruption levels in the countries and satellite states of the former Soviet Union. Though these countries have common issues resulting from their shared heritage in the Soviet regime, their courses of development since the collapse have diverged widely. Many have made remarkable strides in democratic development and market reform, but corruption continues to be a problem. Press freedom has shown to be an effective anti-corruption tool in many countries, but because of corruption issues particular to the Soviet legacy, its effect in this region cannot be considered without addressing broader issues of governance. These issues must be taken into account on a country-by-country basis when formulating an effective strategy against corruption.
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I. Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the individual states that once comprised the superpower and its sphere of influence have taken widely divergent courses. Nine former Soviet republics and satellite states are now members of the European Union and have reformed their governments to meet stringent economic and political standards. In other countries in the region, autocratic governments continue to cling to power with intimidation and violence. Uzbekistan, for example, has recently been banned from receiving U.S. aid because of repeated human rights abuses. It and its central Asian neighbors frequent international human rights watchdog lists such as Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Amnesty International.

This region is also of interest to groups that track corruption such as Transparency International and Global Integrity. All the transitioning countries have faced endemic corruption problems as a legacy of the former Communist regime. While as a region it is still considered one of the most corrupt in the world, there is significant variation between FSU countries in corruption levels. The region has attracted many international organizations that combat corruption, all of whom are trying to implement successful anti-corruption strategies. This paper aims to examine the significance of press freedom on levels of corruption in this region and recommend strategies for combating corruption based on analyses of its effects.
II. Literature Review

Though any successful program must address the complex issue of corruption from multiple fronts, strong and independent media have proven to be a powerful tool because an independent press is an essential safeguard against government abuses. Journalists have strong incentives to uncover governmental misdeeds and inform the public when they have the freedom and ability to do so. Because corruption is by nature hidden, and all parties involved often have an interest in keeping it unexposed, journalists play an especially important role in the corruption fight.

The World Bank in particular has emphasized strengthening the press within its civil society programs for developing countries. Stapenhurst (2000) identified two types of media effects: tangible and intangible. Tangible effects are those that produce some concrete product, such as a news story or series. When the media uncovers government corruption, these products inform the public of the misdeed and political actors can be held to account. The intangible effects are harder to qualify because they often do not lead to direct action, but they are no less important. They are “checks on corruption which arise from the broader social climate of enhanced political pluralism, enlivened public debate and a heightened sense of accountability among politicians, public bodies and institutions” (Stapenhurst, 2000:3). It is easiest to gauge the value of intangible effects by looking at those societies in which they are absent, such as Indonesia. President Suharto ruled Indonesia for more than 30 years before he was forced from office in 1998. Social turmoil and economic crises caused by disastrous
policies implemented for personal gain of government officials were a contributing factor to the coup that overthrew him. Stapenhurst contends that this type of debilitating grand corruption was only possible because Suharto muzzled the press with persistent censorship and violent repression.

Brunetti and Weder (2003) analyze the media as one of several possible checks on corruption. They determine three categories of corruption controls: internal, external and indirect determinants. Freedom of the press is an external control because it provides a system of checks outside of the administration. Other external controls include an independent judiciary and civil society. Internal controls are systems that control corruption from within the bureaucracy. They improve governance by decreasing meritocracy and nepotism and promoting accountability among government officials. Indirect determinants are factors that have been identified in the literature as increasing the risk for corruption. Brunetti and Weder include GDP per capita, education, openness to trade, black market premium on foreign exchange and ethnolinguistic diversity in their regression analysis. The analysis includes corruption and press freedom variables measured as an average score from the period 1994 to 1998 in 128 countries. They find continuously robust results that press freedom decreases corruption levels.

One criticism of analyses of press freedom on corruption is that direction of causation is difficult to determine. Does a free press reduce corruption, or do corrupt regimes stifle press freedom? Brunetti and Weder (2003) attempt to address this issue
by including a model in which repressive regimes are excluded from the sample on the hypothesis that such regimes are more likely to crackdown on press intervention than freer governments, regardless of corruption levels. Total sample size dropped by about half, but the coefficient on press freedom remained significant.

Ahrend (2002) takes this analysis further using a Granger test for causality. He finds, “strong evidence that more press freedom leads to less corruption, and no evidence that more corruption leads to less press freedom. Increasing press freedom is thus an important indirect mechanism for fighting corruption” (2002:17).

III. Regional Considerations

The depth and focus of corruption research in countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) has varied substantially over time as it reacts to both political factors within the region as a whole and demands of donor institutions, most of whom are located in Western countries. Schmidt (1995) has identified several different phases of corruption research in the region.

The first period is pre-1990’s, when the Soviet Union still existed. During early studies of corruption, researchers were still debating whether corruption itself was harmful, or a necessary step in some situations. Huntington (1968), for example, asserted that, “[I]n terms of economic growth, the only thing worse than a society with a rigid, over-centralized dishonest bureaucracy, is one with a rigid, over-centralized, honest bureaucracy” (1968:386). Research was especially difficult in the Soviet Union because scholars were unable to gather reliable data from the secretive regime.
Analysis was based primarily on anecdotal evidence collected from Soviet immigrants to the United States and colored by outside impressions of the Soviet elite.

By the early 1990’s, enough international, quantitative research had shown the overall negative effects of corruption on developing economies that research focused on the most effective ways of rooting out entrenched corruption. The collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War provided new opportunities in this field and a wave of corruption research followed. As Schmidt (1995: 6) describes:

The post-communist world became interesting to the anti-corruption debates in two respects: A hopeful association of the end of the Cold War with the final collapse of communism and ‘eroded support for kleptocratic regimes’ on the one hand, and concern about comparatively high levels of corruption and new forms of corruption in context of transformation and privatization, on the other. While democracy-promoting networks have been created across West-East dimensions to assist the democratization and marketization processes, anti-corruption became a key concern for many of the donors since the mid-1990’s.

As international organizations began putting more money into anti-corruption programs in the region, they conducted their own studies and encouraged other research into anti-corruption within the cultural context of the FSU.

Though the 90’s ushered in a new focus on corruption in the FSU, the early 2000’s represented a stagnation and even decline in interest. After 10 years of reform, most countries in the region scored worse on common corruption indicators than they had just after independence. In countries including Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, programs implemented to combat corruption were being used as a weapon against political opponents by those in power, most guilty of corruption themselves. Anti-corruption activists on the ground, who had been excited by new possibilities after the Cold War, bemoaned the entrenched state of corruption not only in political culture,
but society more broadly. Rather than focus on how to implement anti-corruption strategies, most researchers during this time studied the unintended counter-effects of those strategies and why they had failed to bring success.

The reasons for this change in mentality vary. Mingiu-Pippidi (2006) argues that Western scholars and donors simply failed to take into account the type of corruption present in FSU countries. She contends that they were trying to fight Western-style corruption, which is less intrinsic than the political corruption present in FSU countries, “What we label corruption in these countries is not the same phenomenon as corruption in developed countries. In the latter, the term corruption usually designates individual cases of infringement of the norm of integrity. In the former, corruption actually means ‘particularism’ – a mode of social organization characterized by the regular distribution of public goods on a nonuniversalistic basis that mirrors the vicious distribution of power within such societies” (2006:86).

Mingiu-Pippidi contrasts particularism with universalism, the expectation that each individual should expect equal treatment from a state whose actions are bounded by a rule of law. Particularist societies are governed by rule of convention rather than law, however, and individuals only expect to be treated equally with those who have the same societal status as themselves. In this case, status is gained by proximity to the source of power, whether an individual or a privileged group. Influence is more important than currency for garnering state services, which are “distributed or denied
as part of a customary exchange with rules of its own, sometimes not involving direct personal gain for the ‘gatekeeper’” (2006:88).

In the context of the former Soviet Union, this particularism was stable with the Party acting as the common source of power. Democratization has changed the formula, however, and many of these countries have transformed into what Mingiu-Pippidi calls “competitive particularism.” When multiple groups compete for privileged positions, regular elections do not produce the kind of democratic accountability found in developed Western democracies, but rather a captured state in which politicians’ unaccountable behavior legitimizes illegality in society more generally and dissolves rule of law from its roots.

Since accountability is the mechanism through which a free press reduces corruption, particularism poses an especially difficult challenge for media in the region of the former Soviet Union. In fact, Nelson (1999) has found evidence that despite extensive media coverage of governmental corruption, the press has not had the same impact in these countries as it has in other regions of the world, largely because of the effects of particularism. “Freedom of the media is only one part of the equation… The media, which is sometimes said to occupy the role of ‘fourth estate’ among the other executive, legislative and judicial powers of a nation, is nevertheless not responsible for law enforcement, the administration of justice, or regulation of the private sector. All those tasks, essential to the effective management of a country’s daily affairs, need
to be provided by other independent institutions. Without those institutions in place, the media becomes a lone voice crying in the wilderness” (Nelson, 1999: 4).

IV. Data and Methodology

Many international organizations and consultancy groups compile indices of press freedom and corruption. The reasoning behind these measurements is often opaque, however, and it can be difficult to determine exactly what they purport to measure. In addition to concerns surrounding the clarity of definitions, the methods and transparency of assessments cannot be easily appraised (Knack, 2006). To reduce uncertainty inherent in these indicators and increase validity in the results derived, I use four commonly used indicators, two for corruption and two for press freedom, and compare results across each. Below is a description of each measurement, including what it measures, the method in which it is derived and how it should be interpreted.

Press Measures

**Freedom House** is a non-governmental organization known for compiling and publishing widely used indexes of political rights and civil liberties. Of the four annual surveys Freedom House publishes, this paper will work with data from *Nations in Transit*, which measures democratic progress in 29 FSU countries and satellite states using seven categories of democratic progression. Data have been collected annually since 2000. Each country is assigned a score for each category in each year. Scores range from 1 to 7, with 1 representing the most democratic progress and 7 the least.
Ratings follow a quarter-point scale and changes are based on events in the study year compared to the previous year.


1) Authors for each country report suggest preliminary numbers for each category in their country of expertise.
2) Academic advisers from both the United States and FSU countries review the reports for accuracy, objectivity and objectiveness of information.
3) Report authors look at revised ratings and may dispute any changes of more than half a point.
4) Any disputes are settled by Freedom House, which retains editorial control over ratings.

Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) assesses the state of press freedom in 169 countries with its Worldwide Press Freedom Index. The index has been compiled since 2002 and uses a questionnaire that measures 50 criteria of press freedom to gauge “the extent to which legal and political environments, circumstances and institutions permit and promote media freedom and the ability of journalists to collect and disseminate information unimpeded by physical, psychological or legal attacks and harassment” (Becker, Vlad and Nusser, 2007:11). Specific criteria upon which countries are
evaluated include physical attacks and threats, imprisonment, murders, censorship, legal harassment, financial pressures, ability to investigate and criticize, regulation and legal framework, level of independence and the degree of impunity for those who violate press freedoms.

The questionnaire is distributed to local and foreign in-country journalists, legal experts and members of non-governmental organizations concerned with freedom of speech and human rights. A country must have three completed questionnaires to be included in the survey, though most countries average about four. RSF staff then scores the questionnaires on a scale weighted for seriousness of the offense, sums the scores, and takes the average to get an overall rating. Lower scores indicate more press freedom and over the course of the survey have ranged from .5 to 114.75. These scores are then used give each country a competitive ranking. The RSF Worldwide Press Freedom Index (2007) is available at http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24025.

Corruption measures

Transparency International (TI) (2007) has released its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the most widely-known and commonly used corruption measure, since 1995. It ranks 180 countries on their perceived levels of corruption. It is a composite index generated from 14 different information sources, both expert panel and business survey data, complied by 12 independent organizations. Scores from each source are first standardized to fit within the CPI bounds of 1, high corruption, to 10, low corruption. Those scores are then averaged to produce an overall country score.
By relying on perceptions of corruption, TI attempts to circumvent some of the inherent difficulties in quantifying corruption. In addition to the challenge of finding reliable information on illegal acts in general, corruption often involves more than one party with vested interests in keeping their activities secret. The definition of corruption itself varies and the phenomenon can manifest itself in a variety of forms that require different measures. Those measures themselves can be misleading. Relying on the number of bribes reported or corruption prosecutions, for example, may be more indicative of media interest in corruption or strength of prosecution than of actual levels of corruption. TI thus defines corruption as “the abuse of public office for private gain” and then asks experts and business leaders who have the most immediate, direct knowledge to gauge its extent.

The World Bank also constructs a composite index for corruption as part of its Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) research project. The project develops indicators on six key governance areas, three of which will be used in this analysis: control of corruption, government effectiveness, and rule of law. The indicators are compiled for 212 countries in the years 1996, 1998, 2000, and annually for 2002-2006. They utilize 33 separate data sources constructed by 30 different organizations.

Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi (2007) describe the precise statistical procedures used to derive individual scores from these sources at some length. In brief, they use these multiple sources to construct aggregate indicators that are “weighted averages of the underlying data, with weights reflecting the precision of the individual
The units in which these indicators are measured follow a normal distribution with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Scores lie between -2.5 and 2.5, with higher scores indicating less corruption.

Table 1 provides the possible range and simple descriptive statistics for each of the governance variables mentioned above. The unit of analysis is country, with data for 24 FSU countries available over the appropriate time range for all variables. To avoid the effect of shocks such as a terrorist attack or financial crisis that would temporarily affect corruption and press ratings based on somewhat subjective evaluations, I use an average of the indicators over the time period 2004 through 2006. This time period gives the maximum possible number of countries and years to be included in the sample across all indicators. Taking an average rather than simply a snapshot of a single year also makes the variables interval ratios and allows me to use an ordinary least squares model. If I had used a single year, an ordered probit or logit model would
be more appropriate for a bounded range of scores for which the actual numerical difference from one score to the next has no set meaning.

It is important to keep direction in mind when interpreting these results, since increasing numbers require different interpretations for different indicators. A useful rubric to keep in mind is in which way the situation improves. Thus, when numbers increase for indicators from the World Bank and TI, the indicators get better, i.e. less corruption. The reverse is true for Freedom House and Reporters Sans Frontieres, for which higher numbers indicate less press freedom.

In addition to the governance indicators above, several other factors that previous literature has linked to corruption will be included for analysis. Each of them, for consistency, is taken as an average over the same period as the governance indicators and all come from development indicators gathered by the World Bank. These include:

- **GDP** is gross domestic product per capita, measured in 2000 U.S. dollars.

- **SECEDUC** is gross secondary school enrollment. Note: Measurements are reported as a percent. However, because gross enrollment is measured as total enrollment as a percentage of the population within an age cohort deemed eligible for secondary education, students enrolled in secondary school but not within that cohort can cause percentages to exceed 100.

- **TRADE** is defined as imports plus exports as a percentage of GDP.

In choosing which variables to include, I based my conceptual model on Weder and Brunetti’s framework of internal and external checks on corruption described in
the literature review above (Brunetti and Weder, 2003). The indicator of internal
control is an estimator of the effectiveness of government, EFFECTIVE, which
measures, “the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree
of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and
implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies”
(Kaufmann, et al., 2007: 3). The external control estimates the degree to which rule of
law exists in a country, LAW, which marks “the extent to which agents have
confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract
enforcement, the police, and the courts” (Kaufmann, et al., 2007: 4). It measures the
strength of checks and balances within a society and the extent to which those affect all
members of the society. These indicators will be analyzed alongside and in relation to
the external control of interest, press freedom.

The full conceptual model being tested is thus:

\[ \text{CORRUPTION} = a + b \text{PRESS} + c \text{LAW} + d \text{EFFECTIVE} + f \text{GDP} + g \text{SECEDUC} + h \text{TRADE} + u \]

V. Results

Though Weder and Brunetti (2003) use governance indicators similar to
EFFECTIVE and LAW as control variables in their analysis, I was not able to do so
because of the high correlations shown in table 2.

For this sample of countries, the governance indicators are too highly correlated
with the press freedom indicators to be included in the model. The result is near
multicollinearity and it becomes difficult to distinguish the effects of press freedom
outside of the effects of governance. As predicted, when these variables were included in regression models, standard errors increased dramatically and all coefficients in the models lost significance. I therefore used only indicators of press freedom, without

Table 2: Correlation between governance indicators and corruption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>W.B. corrupt</th>
<th>T.I. corrupt</th>
<th>RSF press</th>
<th>F.H. press</th>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Effective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W.B. corrupt</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.948</td>
<td>-0.844</td>
<td>-0.935</td>
<td>0.976</td>
<td>0.964</td>
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LAW and EFFECTIVE, in subsequent analyses. The reasons for this high correlation in FSU countries are discussed in the final section of this paper.
In addition to the high correlation between dependent variables, table 2 raises concern about the correlation between corruption and press freedom. Such high correlations indicate that endogeniety may be a concern in regression analyses. The problem of endogeniety is discussed in further detail after the presentation of the results.

Tables 3 and 4 present the cross-section results using each combination of indicators for the dependent and independent variable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Dependent variable, TI corruption</th>
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<td>(I)</td>
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<tr>
<td>F.H. Press</td>
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<td>RSF Press</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>R²</td>
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</table>

Standard errors in parentheses;
* significant at 10% level, ** significant at 5% level, *** significant at 1% level.

Table 3 shows results when corruption as measured by Transparency International is the dependent variable and table 4 does the same for the World Bank.
In each, columns (I) and (II) use the Freedom House indicator as the primary independent variable of interest and columns (Ia) and (IIa) use the indicator from Reporters Sans Frontieres. In all models, press freedom is significant within a 99-percent confidence interval. Each also moves in the expected direction, i.e. when the meaning of the sign is taken into account, they all show that increasing press freedom decreases corruption.

Columns (II) and (IIa) in each table represent the full model, since LAW and EFFECTIVE are not included due to multicollinearity concerns. GDP is the only explanatory variable that continues to be significant through all the specifications. Education and openness to trade are significant at times, depending on which indicators are used for press freedom and corruption. This is probably due to the different definitions and measures used to construct each indicator.
VI. Limitations

The large $R^2$ values for each of the models, and the high correlations between press freedom and corruption regardless of which indicators are used, lead me to conclude that the cross-country regressions presented here may be subject to endogeneity problems. Endogeniety would arise if press freedom itself were influenced by the same processes governing corruption levels. Factors common among these countries that arose in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse could be unobservable in the model, but driving both press freedom and corruption simultaneously. There would thus exist a correlation between press freedom and the country-specific error term, which would bias the estimated coefficients.

Although, in principle, the endogeneity problem can be avoided by applying instrumental variable techniques, the fundamental problem is that there are no ideal instruments available. A good instrument would be a variable which is highly correlated with press freedom, but not with the error term in these regressions that is also influencing corruption. Chowdhury (2004) suggested using ethnolinguistic fragmentation as such an instrument in another cross-country analysis of press freedom and corruption. But Mauro (1995) found a positive correlation between ethnolinguistic diversity and corruption. Therefore, it is possible that this variable may be correlated with corruption independent of its effect on press freedom and it is not a suitable instrument.
In addition to the problem of endogeneity, excluding LAW and EFFECTIVE from the final model may introduce problems of omitted variable bias. It is possible that the unobservable factors that affect both press freedom and corruption are related to governance. Given the high correlation between these variables, in fact, it seems highly likely that some overarching determinant is affecting press freedom, corruption and governance simultaneously. This study can thus not conclude a definitive effect of press freedom exclusive of its ties to governance.

In the absence of a suitable instrument, it is impossible to isolate the effects of press freedom on corruption. Among this sample of countries, the connection between quality of governance, freedom of the press and corruption is simply too high to parcel out the individual effects. However, these results show that taken together, the governance indicators have an effect on corruption so strong, that it is unlikely that results could be due solely to biases.

**VII. Conclusion and Policy Recommendation**

This analysis shows that the effect of press freedom on corruption cited by Ahrend (2002), Brunetti and Weder (2003) and Chowdhury (2004) does not necessarily hold true in the region of the former Soviet Union. Rather, press freedom is a component in a wider range of governance decisions that taken together do have an effect. This result is due to the unique historical trends of the region that established societies based on particularism and favor, as described by Mungiu-Pippidi (2006) and
summarized above. This particularism spawned a form of corruption that is an inherent feature of the state, rather than an aberration of regular state functions.

Early efforts of international assistance did not take this type of corruption into account. They focused on developing market economies with the assumption that democratic institutions and accountability would naturally follow. Carothers (2002) describes how early missteps in efforts to assist democratic transition actually helped elites’ efforts to quickly consolidate their access to power and resources. “In countries with existing but extremely weak states, the democracy-building efforts funded by donors usually neglected the issue of state-building. With their frequent emphasis on diffusing power and weakening the relative power of the executive branch—by strengthening the legislative and judicial branches of government, encouraging decentralization, and building civil society—they were more about the redistribution of state power than about state-building. The programs that democracy promoters have directed at governance have tended to be minor technocratic efforts, such as training ministerial staff or aiding cabinet offices, rather than major efforts at bolstering state capacity (Carothers, 2002:17).”

Implementation of these efforts by donors varied little between countries of the region, and thus their success depended primarily on the strength of institutions that existed before the Communist Party came to power. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe had stronger traditions of independence and state sovereignty than did countries in regions such as Central Asia. The World Bank emphasizes these
differences as a primary factor in subsequent development. “These initial conditions
influenced early choices about the basic structure of the political institutions governing
the transition as well as the speed and comprehensiveness of the first moves of
economic reform. As a result, countries began to follow divergent transition paths from
the very beginning, with equally divergent outcomes in terms of economic

But this does not imply that corruption is inevitable in countries that do not
have a history of these institutions. Rather, it means that the international donor
community must attempt to focus on matters of governance and state-building,
promoting freedom of the press as a component of those efforts, in order to create any
lasting decrease in corruption. More importantly, these efforts must respond to the
realities of the countries in which the efforts are being attempted. Donors must make
the effort to assess what form corruption takes in each individual country and create a
response appropriate to the relative strength of institutions already in place.

The World Bank (2000) has developed a potentially useful tool for conducting
this sort of analysis. It focuses on corruption as a result of two separate processes: state
capture and administrative corruption. State capture occurs when interested parties
influence the formation of government policy to their own advantage, such as through
legislative laws or executive decrees. Administrative corruption, on the other hand, is
when those parties influence implementation of existing laws to their benefit. The
World Bank examines institutional processes and outcomes surrounding how policy is
created and implemented in each country and then determines whether it is facing “medium” or “high” challenges in these two areas of corruption. This approach thus produces four typologies of corruption in the area and discusses what priorities must be met first in each situation for an anti-corruption strategy to be effective.

The World Bank looks at a number of governance areas within this rubric to determine what actions would be appropriate in different situations. In terms of press freedom, for example, a country that faces medium challenges in both state capture and administrative corruption likely already has well-developed civil society and media institutions that have helped to hold government leaders accountable for their actions. A legacy of mistrust of the government and the media that it formally controlled, however, can inhibit the effectiveness of the press. An important step in these countries, therefore, is to strengthen the professional norms that underpin a reliable media industry.

In countries that face high challenges in both areas, these institutions are unlikely to exist already. Programs such as professional training are less useful if the problems journalists face are state ownership or intimidation of the media structure itself. In these countries, donors must look for windows of opportunity in which to begin building the foundations for a functioning press. One way of going about this may be to cobble together a group of interested non-governmental organizations, activists and journalists, for example, and support their efforts to get a conversation about corruption started among the public at large. The key factor is to realize that such
efforts will take a long time to bear fruit, but such small actions on several fronts can begin to chip away at the roots of corruption.

Even these categories are fairly broad and there will be instances in which strategies that work in one country may fail in another country that face similar challenges within this model. The situation on the ground must be the primary consideration for determining the appropriate action. However, by breaking corruption down into components that address the level of particularism at its roots and basing a strategy around improving governance overall as much as possible given the country-specific context, international donors may be able to make significant process on battling corruption.


