

RESEARCH PAPER

Psychological and Social Mechanisms Sustaining Corruption and Their Impact on Rule of Law and Democratic Governance in Albania

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Abstract

Corruption in Albania is examined through an interdisciplinary lens combining psychological theories and socio-legal analysis to reveal how cognitive biases, social norms, and institutional weaknesses interact to sustain corrupt practices. The study highlights how moral disengagement, anchoring bias, and social normalization embed unethical conduct within political and bureaucratic systems, undermining legal compliance and eroding public trust. Historical and cultural legacies, including patronage networks and kinship obligations, shape perceptions that justify misconduct as loyalty or necessity, complicating reform efforts. Structural anti-corruption measures often fall short without addressing underlying psychological mechanisms that rationalize and perpetuate corruption. Integrating behavioral interventions, such as moral identity reinforcement, peer group realignment, and transparency-enhancing strategies, with legal reforms is proposed to disrupt entrenched patterns. Emphasis is placed on consistent enforcement, visible accountability, and community-level norm recalibration to restore institutional credibility and support democratic integrity. This approach underscores the importance of aligning internalized ethical values with formal governance structures to achieve sustainable reductions in corruption and strengthen rule of law in transitional democracies.

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Published by Sulis International Press on behalf of the UK Law and Society Association (UKLSA).

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Introduction

Corruption in Albania, much like in other transitional democracies, operates within a web of social perceptions, psychological tendencies, and institutional weaknesses. It is not sufficient to view it as merely the product of poor legal frameworks or structural inefficiencies. These mechanisms subtly erode ethical accountability and diminish the capacity of formal safeguards to produce meaningful change (Mahilaj and Cenaj 2023). This effect intertwines with moral disengagement strategies, such as displacement of responsibility or euphemistic labeling, which enable actors to rationalize behavior that would otherwise conflict with internalized moral standards (Okafor, Umoh, and Chinweze 2020). Over years, such mental shortcuts may embed corrupt acts within the repertoire of socially accepted political maneuvering, making reform efforts harder to initiate from within the system. This form of normalization is pernicious because it shifts the locus of responsibility away from individual decision-making toward a collective narrative that corruption is inevitable or even necessary for achieving results (Sinaj, Nexhipi, and Sulaj 2024). For example, vetting processes for judicial and prosecutorial positions have shown promise but risk losing credibility when they exclude politically appointed decision-makers from scrutiny (Mahilaj and Cenaj 2023). Such selective enforcement can strengthen public perceptions that anti-corruption measures are instruments of political convenience rather than universal principles grounded in fairness. This perception gap further entrenches disillusionment and weakens trust in state institutions. Anti-corruption programs like PACO sought to align Albanian criminal legislation with European standards while building relevant monitoring mechanisms inside administrative structures (Dashi 2014). From a psychological standpoint, altering entrenched corrupt behaviors involves shifting both personal moral identity and collective sentiment about acceptable governance practices. Strong moral identity appears related to reduced likelihood of deviance in organizational contexts (Okafor, Umoh, and Chinweze 2020), which suggests intervention strategies should aim at reinforcing self-concepts tightly bound to honesty and service orientation among public officials. Given Albania's historical governance challenges and fragmented institutional credibility (Sinaj, Nexhipi, and Sulaj 2024), such capacity-building must be paired with reforms promoting transparency and equitable treatment across power hierarchies to encourage genuine behavioral change rather than performative compliance. Psychology's contribution here is twofold: first, it offers diagnostic tools for identifying unseen motives behind procedural misconduct; second, it provides empirically grounded methods for reshaping attitudes through behavioral reinforcement strategies (Anderson and Gibson 2020).

Legal definitions traditionally distinguish between grand corruption, involving high-level officials manipulating systemic policies for personal or group advantage, and petty corruption, arising from everyday exchanges between lower-tier staff and citizens seeking basic services (Roth, Sahonero, and Rodríguez 2023). Yet these categories fail to capture how psychological and social components interact with such acts. In contexts like Albania, rationalizations, such as claiming inevitability due to economic constraints, work alongside cognitive biases that privilege immediate self-interest over collective welfare. The process is often reinforced by selective enforcement;

laws exist but are applied disproportionately, cementing perceptions of impunity for certain groups (Mahilaj and Cenaj 2023). From a behavioral science perspective, institutional corruption cannot be reduced solely to rational choice paradigms. Individual decisions incorporate both internally generated impulses and contextual factors in the environment, what criminologist's term meso-level influences, including prevailing cultural attitudes, informal codes among colleagues, and reputational dynamics in recurring interactions (Suparman, Dewi, and Supandi 2024). When such forces align with permissive enforcement patterns, even those with an initial commitment to legality may adapt their behavior toward what they see as an acceptable compromise within prevailing norms. Defining corruption in socio-legal terms involves integrating these psychological realities with formal governance concepts. Personal agency theories suggest individuals are not passive recipients of external pressures; they have capacity for self-regulation grounded in moral identity (Okafor, Umoh, and Chinweze 2020). However, when moral identity is weakly tied to official role ethics or when institutions signal through omission that misconduct will not face consequences, self-regulation yields to opportunism. toward corruption; yet findings frequently point to minimal impact on actual behavior if concurrent institutional signals tolerate misconduct (Roth, Sahonero, and Rodríguez 2023). The substitution effect emerges: traditional values deteriorate under repeated exposure to systems where unlawful gain is normalized, leading individuals to replace socially constructive ideologies with pragmatic survival strategies. Socio-legal definitions also must account for the asymmetric way communities respond to corrupt acts depending on whether perpetrators are perceived as part of their in-group or out-group (Danaj and Iljazaj). This bias informs electoral decision-making and community support for implicated officials. Conceptually, such asymmetry undermines the deterrent effect enshrined in legal codes because punishment becomes negotiable based on social proximity rather than uniform application of law. This behavior aligns with strategic action field theory wherein the preservation of group interest often outweighs adherence to legal norms. In practice, states have attempted multidisciplinary anti-corruption reform programs combining legislative acts with administrative oversight bodies. While necessary for compliance with international standards, as required for potential EU accession, they often emphasize procedural outputs (laws passed, agencies formed) without addressing cognitive and social normalization processes enabling persistence of corrupt acts despite reforms. Such initiatives risk creating an appearance of alignment with anti-corruption benchmarks while daily interactions continue to reinforce illicit behavior patterns. Economic pressures further complicate this definition by making corrupt income streams seem not only logical but essential to maintaining lifestyles incongruent with official salaries (Dashi 2014). Judges earning per month yet engaging in conspicuous consumption exemplify how social signaling overrides statutory boundaries, this dissonance normalizes unofficial earnings internally while signaling externally that rule adherence is optional for those well placed within networks. Such contradictions create feedback loops eroding faith in procedural justice systems entirely.

Approaching corruption through this composite lens allows legal policy design to move beyond punitive deterrence alone toward interventions that disrupt its normalization cycle at the cognitive and social levels. Such interventions include reshaping

peer reference groups so integrity becomes a shared expectation rather than an aberration (Suparman, Dewi, and Supandi 2024), amplifying transparency signals from institutions that consistently apply rules irrespective of actor status (Mahilaj and Cenaj 2023), and embedding training programs oriented around strengthening occupational moral identity against clientelistic pressures (Okafor, Umoh, and Chinweze 2020).

Approaching corruption through the lens of psychological theory exposes mechanisms that legal analysis alone struggles to capture. Behavioral science points to a tapestry of cognitive biases, entrenched value systems, and social learning processes that collectively determine whether individuals resist or succumb to corrupt opportunities. Such processes do not operate in isolation; rather, they intertwine with institutional signals and cultural expectations to shape the perceived legitimacy of deviant acts. Biases like confirmation bias incline actors to seek information that supports self-serving narratives, effectively shielding them from cognitive dissonance that might otherwise deter misconduct. Anchoring effects function similarly by calibrating one's sense of what is "acceptable" against the prevailing informal norms around them, permitting small transgressions to expand gradually until they become ordinary practice (Suparman, Dewi, and Supandi 2024). Within moral psychology, disengagement theory explains how individuals decouple ethical standards from their behavior. Euphemistic labeling reframes harmful acts in benign terms, calling embezzlement "resource reallocation" or clientelistic favoritism "strategic alliance", thus dissolving moral accountability without altering the act's basic nature (Okafor, Umoh, and Chinweze 2020). From an interdisciplinary standpoint, effective policy against corruption should blend cognitive-behavioral approaches with institutional reforms targeting systemic vulnerabilities identified by socio-legal analysis in Section 2.1. Educational programs can be formulated using psychosocial frameworks where officials participate in scenario-based training designed to surface hidden biases and rationalizations before real-world exposure triggers them. Peer group restructuring, wherein role models exemplify transparent practice consistently, would help redefine acceptable conduct internally while leveraging social proof effects positively. Coupling these with procedural fairness visible across political hierarchies addresses both perception gaps and incentive structures encouraging deviance. Thus psychological theories relating to cognitive bias modulation, moral identity reinforcement, and social norm engineering present critical pathways for anti-corruption initiatives seeking durability beyond legislative enactments alone. Framing these efforts within hybrid models connecting behavioral insights and structural change may enable states like Albania to chip away at the normalization cycle sustaining misconduct across decades-old patronage networks (Riwanto 2022).

Interdisciplinary Integration of Psychology and Law

Integrating psychological insights into legal frameworks provides an avenue for addressing corruption beyond the static confines of legislation or institutional reorganization. While structural reforms invariably aim to deter misconduct by increasing the costs of illicit behavior, they often falter when individuals' cognitive architectures and social contexts remain unaltered. Behavioral science demonstrates that corrupt decision-making thrives in environments where biases like anchoring, optimism bias, and confirmation bias distort assessments of both risk and morality. Such distortions can operate beneath conscious awareness, leading officials to justify actions as administrative pragmatism rather than ethical violations (Okafor, Umoh, and Chinweze 2020). Embedding psychological principles into law allows for interventions that recalibrate these mental shortcuts before they solidify into habitual misconduct. The value of an interdisciplinary approach is evident when examining how legal norms acquire legitimacy in public perception. In systems marked by selective enforcement or clientelistic favoritism, laws are not interpreted as universal guarantees but rather as tools contingent on power dynamics (Danaj and Iljazaj). By explicitly designing regulations that reflect transparency principles, while coupling them with public-facing feedback loops, such as transparent complaint resolution reports, reformers can counter cynicism that corrodes compliance motivation (Mahilaj and Cenaj 2023). At the institutional level, merging disciplines enables training programs that move beyond procedural compliance toward active cultivation of moral identity linked to professional role ethics.

The political history of Albania carries a complex imprint on contemporary corrupt practices, shaped by experiences of authoritarian rule, abrupt regime changes, and prolonged political instability. The legacy of centralized power under the communist system created governance habits that prized loyalty to leadership over procedural fairness. Post-transition, instead of being dismantled entirely, these habits were adapted into competitive party politics where patronage and clientelism continued operating as dominant methods for building and sustaining authority (Kalemi 2024). Such continuities highlight a psychological dimension: officials embedded in a tradition of personalized obligation may interpret rules less as neutral obligations and more as tactical resources, flexible instruments to be traded in exchange for allegiance or personal security. This inheritance intertwines directly with cultural norms that shape how corruption is perceived and justified. In societies where kinship and tight social networks define much of public life, the provision of resources to one's group, even though illicit means, can be reframed internally as fulfilling social duties rather than violating legal codes (Danaj and Iljazaj).

Attempts to strengthen rule-of-law through judicial vetting processes or governance realignments have encountered political and cultural friction (Agalliu 2023). Where reforms focus exclusively on codification, such as asset declarations or procedural oversight, without modifying the cognitive frames through which these rules are interpreted, individuals adapt by meeting the formal requirements symbolically while

continuing pre-existing practices privately. This divergence between formal compliance and actual behavior undermines effectiveness; institutions present a facade of reform to meet international benchmarks while underlying patterns remain unchanged. External pressures, notably from EU accession frameworks, have driven Albania toward institutional restructuring intended to secure independence and accountability within its judiciary (Hoxhaj 2021)

Observing high-ranking actors escape accountability for malfeasance sends a powerful cue that legal prohibitions are negotiable (Roth, Sahonero, and Rodríguez 2023). When these signals filter down through occupational hierarchies, they normalize a kind of procedural fatalism among frontline staff: adherence to formal rules becomes a low-priority choice when advancement or protection depends more on personal loyalty than compliance. Over time, such normalization corrodes the perceived legitimacy not only of specific agencies but also of the rule-of-law concept itself. Economic inconsistencies further deepen distrust. Public awareness that lifestyle displays among officials often exceed plausible limits based on declared income triggers confirmation bias in support of the belief that corruption is endemic (Kalemi 2024). Each unaddressed instance validates prior assumptions and hardens the view that anti-corruption rhetoric is disconnected from institutional reality. This effect is heightened when asset declaration regimes exist in form but lack rigorous verification, creating dissonance between proclaimed transparency commitments and observable enforcement gaps (Mehmetaj 2020). Internationally driven reforms offer mixed consequences for trust recovery. EU accession frameworks have pressured Albania to implement anti-corruption measures and judicial vetting processes, raising initial expectations for impartial governance (Balliu 2023). However, when such initiatives are undermined by political disputes over implementation, as with disagreements on foreign oversight during vetting procedures, they risk reinforcing public suspicion that even externally anchored reforms will be subverted by entrenched interests (Hoxhaj 2021). The consistency gap between external commitments and internal follow-through costs institutions credibility at home: citizens perceive reform outcomes as symbolic concessions to international partners rather than genuine domestic transformations. Psychological responses to these patterns include learned helplessness among segments of the population who see little point in engaging with complaint mechanisms or transparency platforms after repeated evidence that such routes rarely induce change (Danaj and Iljazaj). This withdrawal reduces civic oversight pressure on institutions, enabling misconduct to persist with reduced scrutiny, a feedback loop detrimental to both enforcement efficacy and reputation rebuilding. At the same time, strain theory dynamics arise as citizens interpret exclusion from fairly distributed opportunities as justification for circumventing official systems altogether, substituting informal channels perceived as more responsive despite their illegality (Suparman, Dewi, and Supandi 2024). Breaking this cycle requires integrating behavioral insight into legal-institutional design. Rebuilding trust demands consistent application of standards across status lines so that deterrent credibility is restored through visibly impartial sanctioning (Mahilaj and Cenaj 2023). Beyond punitive capacity, interventions should target cognitive biases di-

rectly, public campaigns could highlight counter-stereotypical instances where transparent practice has yielded community benefit, increasing salience for integrity-based governance within collective memory (Mukti 2024).

Likewise, role model strategies within institutions can harness social influence effects positively: by elevating individuals whose career progression reflects meritocratic processes rather than clientelistic alignment, organizations send credible cues about shifting norms. For officials inside weakened institutions, structured moral identity reinforcement can act as an internal buffer against corrosive peer norms (Okafor, Umoh, and Chinweze 2020). Training modules combining scenario-based ethics simulations with explicit discussion of common rationalizations provide tools for recognizing and resisting pressures toward complicity. Such behavioral inoculation chimes with legal commitments but extends their reach into daily decision-making environments where discretion enables misconduct's reproduction. Ultimately public trust will remain fragile until citizens observe congruence between institutional narratives about accountability and the lived experience of fair treatment.

Conclusion

Addressing corruption in Albania requires a comprehensive approach that integrates both structural reforms and behavioral strategies to disrupt entrenched patterns of misconduct. The persistence of corrupt practices is deeply rooted in cognitive biases, social normalization, and cultural traditions that shape how individuals interpret and justify unethical behavior.

Moreover, addressing economic disparities and the dissonance between official salaries and observed lifestyles of public officials is essential to reduce incentives for illicit gain. Transparency measures must be paired with behavioral checkpoints that limit discretion prone to favoritism and diffusion of responsibility. Public engagement strategies that present credible examples of integrity yielding tangible benefits can help recalibrate community expectations and counteract the availability heuristic favoring clientelist experiences. Elevating role models who exemplify meritocratic advancement and impartial governance can shift social proof dynamics, encouraging wider acceptance of ethical conduct as normative.

Sustainable progress depends on embedding these interdisciplinary approaches within legal and institutional reforms, ensuring that compliance emerges from internalized values rather than fear of sanction alone. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate behavioral indicators reflecting shifts in attitudes and social norms alongside traditional metrics of enforcement. Only through such a holistic strategy can Albania begin to restore institutional credibility, rebuild public trust, and stabilize democratic integrity. The path forward involves persistent efforts to realign cognitive frameworks and social environments so that transparent governance becomes an ingrained expectation, ultimately transforming anti-corruption efforts from aspirational ideals into lived realities.

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