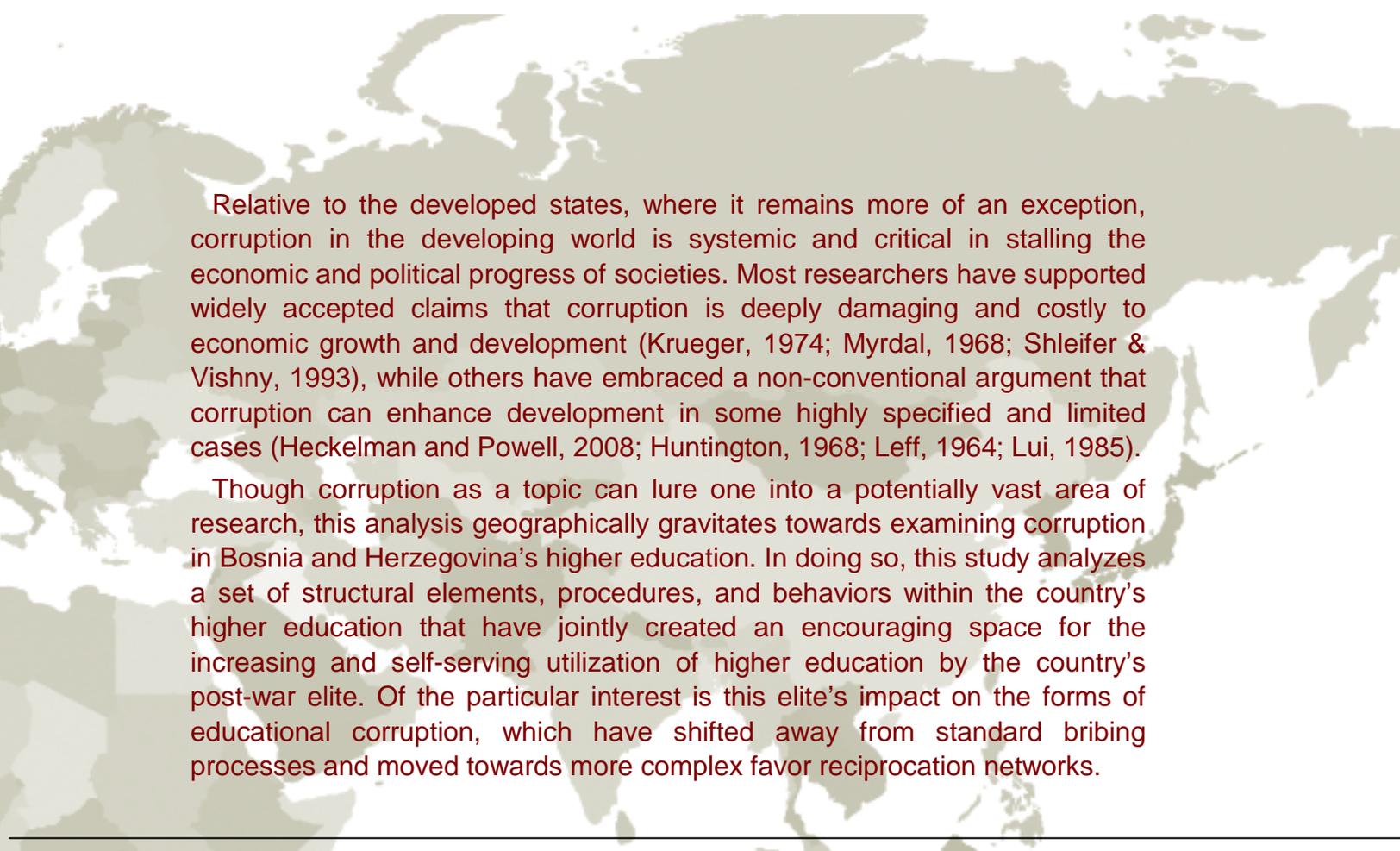


SCHOLAR RESEARCH BRIEF:
**POWERFUL FRIENDS: EDUCATIONAL CORRUPTION AND ELITE
CREATION IN POST-WAR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**



Relative to the developed states, where it remains more of an exception, corruption in the developing world is systemic and critical in stalling the economic and political progress of societies. Most researchers have supported widely accepted claims that corruption is deeply damaging and costly to economic growth and development (Krueger, 1974; Myrdal, 1968; Shleifer & Vishny, 1993), while others have embraced a non-conventional argument that corruption can enhance development in some highly specified and limited cases (Heckelman and Powell, 2008; Huntington, 1968; Leff, 1964; Lui, 1985).

Though corruption as a topic can lure one into a potentially vast area of research, this analysis geographically gravitates towards examining corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina's higher education. In doing so, this study analyzes a set of structural elements, procedures, and behaviors within the country's higher education that have jointly created an encouraging space for the increasing and self-serving utilization of higher education by the country's post-war elite. Of the particular interest is this elite's impact on the forms of educational corruption, which have shifted away from standard bribing processes and moved towards more complex favor reciprocation networks.

RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

Bosnia and Herzegovina's longstanding elite dissipated as a consequence of the socialist system's disintegration brought about by the 1990s war. To compensate for the lack of the old socialist elite that departed the country prior to the war or was marginalized due to the political shift from socialism towards nationalism, those who most actively engaged in the organization of life and defense during the war were now emerging as Bosnia's new and generally more nationalistically driven elite. As Andreas (2004, p. 5) elaborates: "While many of the best-educated professionals fled abroad, many residents who were previously on the margins of the society have experienced rapid upward mobility through their wartime roles and political connections."

For the new elite, the first step in the post-war period was to legitimize what was gained by illegal activities that took place in the 1992-1995 war. The local politicians, war profiteers, and military leaders, aka new Bosnia's elite, worked towards justifying their newly gained positions of power. While the international community propagated war amnesty referring only to "dodgers and deserters" (Andreas, p. 5), the new elite worked to secure its *de novo* economic and social standing by ensuring that the amnesty "include[ed] such crimes as illegal commerce, tax evasion, and illegal use of humanitarian aid. The amnesty cover[ed] January 1991 – December 22, 1995, a time period that closely corresponds to the rise of nationalist political parties" (Andreas, p. 5). I label this legalization of the war-time acquired wealth as the Phase 1 (see Figure 1) of the Elite Legitimization entered in by the political newcomers who felt an urgent need to legitimize their newly gained social prominence.

With the post-war reorganization of the country came the re-invention of the educational system as

Figure 1: Post-war Elite Legitimization in Bosnia



well. In what I call the Second Phase of the Elite Legitimization (see Figure 1), the newly forming elite felt compelled to finalize their legitimization process by obtaining educational degrees its members often lacked. While this educational legitimization may have first begun as a form of compensation to those who served the newly emerging Bosnian society under extraordinary war circumstances, the chaotic setting that characterized post-war Bosnia allowed the abuse of the educational system to expand significantly and to incorporate many of those individuals who rose to their prominent political standing during the war but felt they lacked significant educational pedigree to justify their social status long-term. No longer was Bosnia in the war and cut off from the rest of the world, but now it became the center-stage for the massive influx of foreign aid and experts who were in need of development partners. This milieu only placed further pressure on many new and rising elite members to back their sudden shift from the margins of society into the social limelight by, often questionably, obtaining diplomas.

RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

This study relied on the *concurrent mixed methods approach*, where the data on students' perceptions of corruption was collected via interviews and surveys simultaneously. The *mixed methods* research is informed by a pragmatic worldview, which is in favor of drawing on a theoretical foundation or method that ensures the most optimal understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2009). Data collected via surveys involved obtaining a representative and random sample from six public faculties in Bosnia. Of the total sample, 366 students (48.0% of the sample) were completing their first year of studies; 251 students (32.9% of the sample) were second year students; 89 students (11.7% of the sample) were in their third year; 51 students (6.7% of the sample) were near completion of their senior year in college, and 5 students (0.7% of the sample) did not provide information on their completion status. The survey instrument consisted of 39 questions on student's demographics, education, mobility issues, coping mechanisms, view of EU-related processes in education, and socio-economic background.

The interview-based data on Bosnian students were obtained via *purposeful sampling* through my personal and professional contacts; specifically, the analysis relied on *extreme-case sampling* (International Development Research Center, 2009). While a comprehensive representativeness of the entire student population was unattainable using *extreme-case sampling*, this study benefited from the in-depth data collected from the individuals willing to speak openly on educational corruption. In total, 15 open-ended interviews were conducted.

Of the surveyed sample, 8.5 percent of students view corruption as "completely absent"; 12.1 percent of the surveyed sample thinks of corruption as "somewhat absent"; 45.4 percent of the sampled student body has stated that corruption is "neither widespread nor absent"; 22.3 percent of the sampled population believes that corruption is

"widespread"; and 8.9 percent views corruption as "highly widespread". Overall, 88.7 percent of the surveyed sample believes that corruption is present at least to some degree. All interviewed students agreed that educational corruption was present, but to varying degrees.

A variety of organizational and procedural traits of Bosnia's higher education have emerged as conducive to corruption. Those that were most frequently discussed with the subjects of this study included: absenteeism of professors, "gradebook" (in Bosnian "indeks") problems, issues with the exam applications and infrequent exam periods, lacking faculty access, grading inconsistencies, and quality variations in teaching process.

With some exceptions, Bosnian faculties often lack adequate teaching cadres. As a result, professors are at times hired as consultants from the neighboring countries (Croatia and/or Serbia). These consultants tend to arrange all-day-long teaching sessions over the weekends or specific dates so that an entire course-content can be covered in fewer lump-sum periods relative to what would be seen as a typical weekly schedule. To note, 36.6 percent or 279 students stated that some professors do not show up at all for their lectures or exams.

Another dissatisfaction students frequently

A study participant commented on the foreign consultants that teach in Bosnia's higher education institutions: "Most of these professors have other jobs, and this is their side activity . . ." (Interviewee 7C).

checked off in their surveys is the “lack of knowledge” by the faculty: 34.6 percent of the surveyed sample shared such views while 48.3 percent said professors do not sufficiently explain their material. Such findings were also validated by some of the interviewed students, with one of the participants comparing the lack of English language knowledge of his former computer science professor to “driving a bus without knowing how to ride a bicycle” (Interviewee 2C). Of the surveyed pool, 20.9 percent of students think that professors lack adequate qualifications, which is similar and in line with 18.2 percent of the student body stating that professors are promoted without merit.

These trends partly stem from the overall variability in the quality of teaching, as well as the recurrent shuffling of the consultancy-based professors. Further and as Professor Tanovic (Svevijesti.ba, 2008, np) notably observes, the enclaves of powerful professors in Bosnia are often comprised of unqualified members yet exclusive and closed to outside talent. In fact, those faculty members that are inclined to reject corruption and resist making political accommodations for the students of social importance may be painted by these closed circles as not suitable for their positions, politically marginalized, and/or replaced by those who “listen” (Interviewee 4C).

Students also talked about the lack of exam periods, which prolongs time needed to complete a degree and helps create an increasingly negative perception of the system. This issue, combined with the fact that many professors schedule one exam period during a semester and then some do not appear at the exam, plays a significant role in delaying students by a semester or longer. Of the surveyed sample, 25.5 percent would like to have exams divided into multiple parts, and an even greater group, 39.5 percent, would like to have more opportunities to take the exams.

Not only do students get frustrated and discouraged with the not-appearing professors or

their lacking qualifications but such an approach to higher education creates inconsistencies in both students’ and professors’ expectations, discouraging many students from fully participating in educational processes but also encouraging others, both students and professors, to take the advantage of the unstable circumstances. In such settings, teaching assistants often act as the gatekeepers, limiting direct and continuous interaction between students and professors. Specifically, 23.9 percent of the student sample would like to have better access to the faculty members. Also, 39.1 percent of the surveyed students noted they would like to have a better support network at their faculties.

Another key enabler of corruption is the lack of consensus on grading standards. This vagueness in evaluating the student’s knowledge provides a space in which grades can be easily produced and manipulated. In fact, 40.8 percent of the surveyed sample said exam passing due to bribes and connections was one of their top dissatisfactions with the teaching process. In such an environment, students are often perplexed as to what constitutes a passing grade while this ambiguity enables professors to abuse the system, allowing subjective factors such as those reflective of one’s social background to play a role in the grading

There are also those students who are “mom and dad’s sons” ... who have the “privilege of passing irrespective of *our* [emphasis added] knowledge relative to *them* [emphasis added]” (Interviewee 14C).

process. As estimated by one of the study's participants, "half of the grades are fairly earned and the other half are not..." (Interviewee 6C).

An additional procedural enabler of educational corruption is student's "indeks", a gradebook that is carried by students into each of their exams and given to professors to write in grades. "Indeks" is a, *de facto*, transcript that evidences students' progress. For those faculties that use it, "indeks" makes past grades visible to each professor. In fact, if a student got a grade of 6 (out of 10) at his last exam, it is likely that the next professor will give the same grade regardless of student's knowledge (Interviewee 3C). Also, providing professors with the information on the student's family background via "indeks" allows professors to instantly evaluate student's potential to bribe and manner in which to leverage student's political or social standing.

When asked about the forms corruption takes, 44.5 percent of the surveyed sample said it takes a form of "purchased passing grades" while 19.2 percent stated that corruption manifests itself in the form of "purchased diplomas". Of the surveyed group, 18.6 percent considered "publishing of the plagiarized books" by their professors as an occurring form of corruption while 12.5 percent recognized corruption in the form of the "inappropriate student-professor relationships". About 10.4 percent of the surveyed thought corruption can take on a form of diplomas obtained in an "excessively short period of time".

The most frequently noted form of educational corruption does not involve a monetary exchange but rather the reciprocity of favors and is a function of one's access to the elite echelons of the society. More specifically, a significant majority - 62.1 percent of the surveyed students - thought that corruption appears in the form of "passing exams because of one's social connections." The interview-based data similarly suggests that the reciprocity of favors is one of the key articulations of educational corruption in Bosnia's higher education.

Direct exchanges of money to secure grades or diplomas are often seen as less frequent relative to the favor exchanges (Interviewee 4C; Interviewee 5C; Interviewee 7C). Such exchanges no longer involve tangible goods but jobs, favors, and promises of future reciprocation. Out of 15 interviewed students, only 2 would define corruption as "the criminal activity that involves the acceptance or giving of bribery" while the remainder of students defined it more broadly as a cluster of activities ranging from briberies to reciprocation of favors amongst the social elite. For instance, Interviewee 9C estimated that the favor exchanges take up about 80 percent of all corruption-related activities in higher education while remaining 20 percent is left to the bribing process.

While the Bosnian elite members and their children tend to leverage personal relationships to obtain their diplomas, it is important to note that the poor students continue to graduate from the higher educational institutions in the present-day Bosnia. However, this population of students continues to exist and work in a parallel, but separate universe from that of those who receive a preferential treatment because of their social status and connections to the elites. For the new elites in Bosnia, educational corruption is often beneficial; for others, it is an obstruction of the merit-based achievement.

It is of importance to have someone who will "speak on your behalf as grades do not speak for themselves" (Interviewee 15C).

CONTINUING RESEARCH

Firstly, the impact of educational corruption is highly complex and many aspects of its broader influence were not discussed in this study due to the limitations of the information that can be captured through the data on students' perceptions, as well as specific questions raised in this article. Secondly, it is difficult to fully quantify the effects of the elite's favor-reciprocity onto the broader development of the country - especially if one is aiming at determining the full impact of the inadequately educated individuals who may be in control of the influential and decision-making positions in the country's healthcare, media, government, legal and educational systems.

Next, research conducted herein was based on the students' perceptions rather than actual evidence of corruption. When study participants were asked whether they personally knew anyone who paid for a passing grade or leveraged his/her connections, some answered affirmatively. Others - implicitly or explicitly - suggested that despite their perception of corruption in higher education of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the witnessing of the corruption processes is rare and often shielded by those participating in corruption.

The nature of corruption naturally precludes researchers from fully understanding this phenomenon; thus, further evidencing of the specific and concrete occurrences of educational corruption would be of immense and additive value to the existing research. However, recognizing that the quantification of corruption comes with significant logistic challenges, I relied on students' perceptions to unveil a set of systemic and corruption-pertinent traits in the higher education system of Bosnia. This research hopes to have shed light on the vastness of the educational corruption issues that practitioners and academics alike need to account for when working towards the broader understanding of the educational corruption in the post-socialist and post-conflict regions.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY COMMUNITY

Over time, Bosnia has built up its tolerance towards a distorted value system that rewards personal relationships and political prominence rather than hard work and meritocratic success. In the words of a study participant: "Consequences of the war time are distorted moral norms because into the elite came corrupt individuals and they believe that it is OK to arrive [into the highest social status] via corruption" (Interviewee 5C). The importance of hard-work and morality has been marginalized, and the question remains open on when the youth will push the system towards a tipping point and transform from an indolent mass to an active reformer.

The role of the international community and its influence on the policy makers may rest in its push towards a more harmonized and standardized approach to public education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This would include ensuring that supervisory bodies exist at the national level and continuously oversee processes within higher education. On the non-governmental front, initial steps could be taken to seed and support those projects that will work towards halting corruption-susceptible elements within post-socialist and post-war educational environments.

Projects requiring greater transparency of the exam procedures, supporting student networks, and providing spaces for disclosure of incidences of corruption, when and if detected, would constitute a meaningful starting point. Involvement of the academic diaspora could be explored as a way to incentivize change. In the absence of the concern with the current level of educational corruption, the dominance of the incompetent elites will only continue to dilute the effectiveness of the aid being poured into the rehabilitation of the post-war Bosnia.

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ENDNOTES

1. For ease of writing, Bosnia and Herzegovina is used interchangeably with Bosnia.



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