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The Role of Trust in Political Corruption: Outline of the Subject

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THE ROLE OF TRUST IN POLITICAL CORRUPTION: OUTLINE OF THE SUBJECT

Abstract:

The article is an attempt to analyze the relations between political trust and one of the greatest problems of the public domain: political corruption. It seems obvious that corrupt behaviors revealed in the public space are supposed to undermine citizens' political trust. This thesis has been empirically verified many times. The author of the paper presents the cause and effect model with institutional trust as the independent variable. The article is an attempt to analyze the possible directions of its influence on political corrupt behaviors, assuming political trust to be the starting point, not the consequence, of the “social disease” occurring in the public domain.

Key words:

political corruption, political trust, political behaviors

Politics is a dynamic area. As observers of political authorities' actions, citizens usually do not have enough knowledge to be able to understand those behaviors fully. Often they do not have all the information on those behaviors either, because to a considerable extent the political sphere is available through the media and it is journalists who decide both which behaviors or events to show the viewers/citizens and how to interpret them. Furthermore, the growing speed of content circulation often generates the phenomenon of content merging and blurring. The problem with comprehensive absorption of information is also connected e.g. with the limited time a citizen has. Trust is a bridge between a citizen with a certain political entity, which makes it possible to avoid the above-mentioned problems. It allows the person to actively participate in making important psychological decisions without incurring great psychological cost connected with the need to systematically following political activities, thoroughly analyzing

the information reaching the public domain, and devoting a considerable amount of time to that. Trust reduces the complexity of the reality by means of conviction that the social system is determined by mutual expectations concerning the future behavior of the actors and encourages to choose specific options of social activity. Thanks to that, the fundamental functions of social interaction coordination and cooperation are achieved [Clegg, Hardy 1996]. Even in 1979, Niklas Luhmann [1979] proved that trust is essential in the lives of contemporary communities, since their complexity and lack of transparency are growing, intensifying the areas of uncertainty and risk. From a more general perspective, when a citizen trusts certain areas on broadly understood politics, it gives the possibility to focus the citizen's attention on the elements of the system which evoke the lack of trust in them. Thus, it deepens more conscious political participation by ensuring complete knowledge and information, but also lowers the vigilance to actions occurring in the area of trust.

The article is an attempt to analyze the relations between political trust and one of the greatest problems of the public domain: political corruption. Political corruption is a special form of "social disease" – special, because, first of all, it usually refers to entities (both politicians and institutions) that are trusted in the community. Secondly, these entities have received a credit of trust to influence the social order with their decisions, to take actions oriented at the benefit of the state or region and its citizens, which means that the consequences of political corruption may be much broader than only individual. Thirdly, the actions of these entities are observed by the public opinion, and each revelation of a corrupt act significantly affects the citizens' consciousness concerning the transparency of the public domain, the approval for the actions of political decision makers, or support for political institutions. According to Arnold J. Heidenheimer [1970], public opinion is a defining element for political corruption. The author stresses that the public opinion is flexible, it can embrace new problems not regulated by the existing law, as well as those that are regulated by the law but made obscure by the wrong attitudes.

Political corruption is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Although it is revealed at the individual level, it is determined by a number of structural factors. The specificity of political corruption determinants allows to identify their fundamental qualities. Firstly, they are common. This means that as long as corruption exists in the society and information on it reaches the public opinion, it will be a constant element of citizens' awareness, which will be a factor promoting certain attitudes to the phenomenon. Secondly (and partly as a consequence of the first one), the determinants are entropic, which means they are contagious, grow larger and include more and more areas. And thirdly, they are interactive: groups of determinants are not autonomous factors but interact with each other and usually intensify.

It seems obvious that corrupt behaviors revealed in the public space are supposed to undermine citizens' political trust. This thesis has been empirically verified many times. For example, Della Porta [2000] demonstrated that corruption lowered the trust in governments in Italy, Germany and France. Other studies have also proved that there is a significant relation between the level of corruption in a state and the level of citizens' trust in the political system. Such studies have been carried out among others in Latin America [Seligson 2002], East Asia [Chang, Chu 2006], Africa [LaVallee, Razafindrakoto, Roubaud 2008] or countries of Eastern and Western Europe [Anderson, Tverdova 2003]. According to B. Guy Peters, we cannot expect the society to regard as legitimate the decisions taken in a political system they do not trust. In such situations citizens will always suspect that decisions in public matters are influenced by corrupt practices, that these decisions are associated with some deceptions or favoring some entities to the detriment of others [1999: 97]. The author of the paper presents the cause and effect model with institutional trust as the independent variable. The article is an attempt to analyze the possible directions of its influence on political corrupt behaviors, assuming political trust to be the starting point, not the consequence, of the "social disease" occurring in the public domain.

Political trust

Political trust is usually perceived as a multi-level concept [Levi, Stoker 2000]. The structure of political trust proposed by David Easton [1965] is considered as the classic one. He identifies trust for the wider political system or regime and specific support for the politicians and parties that staff the system's institutions, and the structure has been an inspiration for many authors. Hence, political trust is commonly analyzed at a macro or micro level [Blind 2006]. The object of trust is the category used to divide between them. In the former case, also referred to as the organizational level, it is the political system and the institutions and organizations operating within it. Fluctuations of trust in that area are connected with approving or rejecting the directions of policy of the institution, e.g. the government [Miller 1974]. Institutional trust reduces the psychological and social costs of implementing legal rules, carrying out political strategies, and introducing reforms. According to Marc J. Hetherington [2005], trust in the government in itself provides support for the government, sometimes more important than the ideology or political affiliation. The object of the other category (micro level), also referred to as individual political trust, is particular persons functioning in the political sphere. Here, in turn, the level of trust is regulated by behaviors of certain political

actors [Citrin 1974]. It has been proved that trust in a politician is even more important in voters' views than are qualities closely connected with the performance of the profession, such as leadership skills, party affiliation, ideology, or the domestic and foreign policy [Cwalina, Falkowski 2006: 559-560].

Another division of political trust draws on the system of different underlying motivations. Mark E. Warren [2006] refers to the first of them as the first-order or encapsulated trust. This kind of trust is associated with specific calculation: it is the result of expecting the government or political leaders to behave in accordance with their partisan agenda. The other kind of trust is psychological or second-order political trust. It includes the evaluation of moral values and attributes associated with the government, political institution, and political leaders. From the psychological perspective, the foundation of trust is the search for and diagnosis of sincerity in politicians' personalities, their public talks and observed behaviors.

Despite these model divisions, we need to remember that the categories – identified either on the basis of the subject or the motivations – are not autonomous. They overlap and interact. For example, trust in individual politicians may be the source of trust in the institutions or organizations they represent. Organizational trust more often develops from indirect experience, shared information and observed actions of the representatives of those institutions. This kind of trust is generalized, yet its sources are often personal. In the other division, the identified motivations can also overlap in many ways. Trust based on psychological motivations is often the foundation of trust based on rational motivations. The object of calculation is not chosen randomly but rather can attract the citizen's attention by the psychological factors observed (e.g. during public talks).

The subject of political trust is people (citizens, voters) who interact with each other all the time. Thus, many authors analyze the relations between political and social trust, looking for many cause and effect connections between them. Robert E. Lane [1959: 164] is of the opinion that "trust in government officials may be a 'specific instance of trust in mankind'". Ronald Inglehart [1999] observes that democratic institutions foster social trust, just like trust fosters democracy. According to Bo Rothstein [2004: 7], a specific kind of public institutions – bodies maintaining the law and order – more often create social capital than social capital influences the work of political institutions. It is so because these institutions, due to direct contacts with citizens, are evaluated by them, and these evaluations translate into generalized trust in public domain entities which are not directly available for the citizens [see Rothstein, Stolle 2001; 2001A]. Then the so-called collective memory is created, connected with the functioning of institutions [2000]. Robert Putnam [2000] disagrees; according to him trust in another person is fundamental for trust in institutions. Seymour

M. Lipset and William Schneider [1983: 120] claim that “a general feeling of confidence in institutions seems to derive from a personal outlook of optimism, satisfaction and trust”. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the research by Luke Keele [2004], demonstrating that social capital has a significant influence on trust in the government and its political directions. Peri K. Blind [2006] attempts to explain these relations, pointing out that face-to-face contact with members of the community in societal associations allows people not only to get to know each other better in personal terms, but it also permits them to extend the positive feeling derived out of this civic experience to strangers in the society and in the government. It is a well-known fact that citizens who are not involved in civic activities tend to view the government and its institutions in more negative terms.

The role of political trust in preventing corrupt political behaviors

Approval for behaviors and designed directions of activity of entities in the public domain is an expression of political trust. It is an important variable, which is quite often taken into consideration in studies aimed at identifying the determinants of corruption. On the basis of statistical analyses, Eric M. Uslaner [2002] concludes that trust explains the level of corruption to a much greater degree than do the structural indices which describe the level of democracy, ownership rights, the degree of decentralization or political stability. Trust has a strong impact on corruption, while the opposite relation is much weaker. As a result, Ulsaner claims that lowering the level of corruption in the society does not lead to an increase in social trust, but increasing the level of trust is related to a drop of the corruption level.

In literature of the subject there is a very clear trend in which the authors try to explain this relationship with references to social capital, which is naturally associated with the level of corruption. The direction of these relationships is based on the thesis that a high level of social capital generally promotes a lower level of corruption. Many common definitions of social capital point out that trust is one of its important dimensions. Pierre Bourdieu [1986: 250], proving the existence of so-called individual social capital, defines it as a set of real and potential resources connected with having a permanent network of more or less institutionalized relations based on familiarity and mutual appreciation, or, in other words, with membership in a group, which provides each member support in the form of capital possessed collectively by the group, the reliability which gives them access to credit in the broadest meaning. Although the author does not mention trust directly, trust is actually the informal foundation of these processes. James S. Coleman [1988] and Robert Putnam [1993] refer to

trust as one of the fundamental dimensions of social capital. Francois Fukuyama [1997: 26] underscores that “social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in certain parts of it.” Further, this author observes direct relations between trust and the system of norms and values [1997: 38]. A potential mechanism connecting corruption and social capital is a simple model which has the principal-agent-client structure well known from a number of theoretical works in the corruption literature [e.g. Groenendijk 1997; Pechlivanos 2002; Bjørnskov 2003]. It illustrates a mechanism where higher levels of social capital lead to less corruption by both implying more agents that are unlikely to accept a bribe and fewer attempts at bribing agents.

The motivational role of political trust in effective and reliable activity of public domain entities is explained with the psychological contract theory. Psychological contract is an informal agreement between the parties, rather understood indirectly than directly. The contract can be universally defined as mutual beliefs based on bilateral expectations, obligations and promises. The beliefs determine the behaviors and attitudes of the parties to that contract. They influence the quality of relationships between the parties: they can be a source of misunderstandings (e.g. if they are false) or of long-term excellent cooperation. These beliefs are not formulated *ad hoc*. They are the product of one’s experience, personal circumstances, or traits of personality.

The concept of psychological contract has been adapted from industrial and organizational psychology and has a broad application in empirical studies. However, the universal character of its fundamental principles and similarity of the structure of organizational and political system make its assumptions applicable in the field of political science. In this context, the psychological contract may be considered from two perspectives. *The broad perspective* [Turska-Kawa 2015] explains it as an informal agreement between the subjects of democracy: citizens and authorities. Psychological contract is developed and modified by means of interactions between a citizen and different links of the socio-political system, but from the citizen’s point of view it is made between him or her and the authority. This specific personification of the state makes the contract continuous regardless of the links occurring in the system. The contract usually refers to the perception of what the state can offer an individual (certain democratic rights, the feeling that the main state institutions work on the basis of democratic principles, the freedom of speech, the sense of security, honesty, wealth etc.) and what the individual can offer the state in return (participation in elections, participation in direct ways of exercising power such as a referendum, membership in different organizations, interest in the political mechanisms etc.). In the *narrower* perspective, the parties to psychological contract are the potential voter on the one hand and the entity that is active on the political market

and fights for votes in successive elections on the other hand. Each party to the contract contributes their experiences, expectations and promises. A visible expression of the contract in this perspective is an election, which shows how strong the psychological contract is.

Apart from fair exchange and performing agreements, the level of trust is the factor which reflects the condition of psychological contract. The entities in the public domain usually receive information on the level of political trust in themselves or the institutions they represent from the media or published social surveys. In the language of psychological contract theory, for them it is a signal showing the condition of the contract made with the citizens. A strong contract justified by the received social trust credit should generate the psychological custom of reciprocally performing the entrusted public activities and strong engagement in the work. In that area, actions that are contrary to the partner's expectations, such as corrupt political behaviors, should never occur, because if such a behavior is found, the psychological contract will obviously be broken. The essence of the contract is mutual exchange, which should be satisfying for both parties to the contract. It is important for the developing relationships that the psychological contract can never assume its ultimate form. Actually, it can be referred to as a dynamic process affected by the current activities of the parties to it. Each failure to meet the formulated expectations, promises and obligations will lead to the violation or total breakup of relationship, in many cases being strengthened for years. Thus, for public entities visible trust may be the motor of reliable activities, as it proves a strong psychological contract. As argued by Della Porta [2000: 205] the "lack of confidence in government actually favors corruption insofar as it transforms citizens into clients and bribers who look for private protection to gain access to decision-makers". This thesis is confirmed by research carried out by Matthew R. Cleary and Susan Stokes [2006], who argue that the lack of trust in institutions fosters clientelism. Research by Manuel A. Guerrero and Arturo del Castillo [2003] also supports the thesis, as they prove that the decrease of trust in the government, co-existing with the observed incidents of corruption within certain institutions greatly reduces the risk of detection and punishment and thus creates a disincentive to follow the written rules.

Many empirical studies show that effective economic and social systems have high levels of culture of trust. This culture means the feeling prevalent in the community that trust is a norm and the lack of trust is a pathology [Sztompka 1997: 54]. It is commonly believed that the level of generalized trust is the measure of the culture of trust. For instance the World Value Survey shows that the countries with the highest culture of trust are Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada, the USA and Great Britain, meaning countries with a high level of economic development and strong democratic

institutions. The coexistence of a low level of corruption and high culture of trust is also clear when we compare the results of the latest edition of European Social Survey and a ranking of countries with regard to the level of corruption published by *Transparency International* [Lewicka-Strzałecka 2006]. The 2007 Pew survey [*Where Trust is high...*] found that in countries where people generally trust one another, there is also more confidence in the integrity of political leaders. The percentage of people rating corrupt political leaders as a very big problem tends to be lower in countries that have high levels of trust such as Sweden, Canada, and Britain. On the other hand, in nations such as Nigeria and Lebanon, trust is rare and concerns about political corruption are widespread. There are some significant exceptions from this relation pattern. Kuwait is both a low trust and low corruption society. Indonesia is a high trust, high corruption country. Sweden is once again even less concerned about corruption than their high score on the trust measure would predict. These exceptions encourage to look for the determinants of an opposite relation between trust and political corruption, in which trust can contribute to intensifying corrupt political behaviors, which is discussed further in the paper.

The role of political trust in generating political corrupt behaviors

Trust and corruption seem to be opposite concepts [Uslaner 2002]. Trust is based on accepting others and on openness. Transparency, in turn, is the enemy of corruption, which tries to find any possible ways to prevent unethical behaviors from going public. Trust refers to what people have in common. Francis Fukuyama [1997: 38] treats trust as a mechanism based on the assumption that other members of the community are honest and cooperative, and their behavior results from the shared values. Corruption is an expression of egoism and only focusing on one's own needs. Trust is often connected with possible sacrifices for others (voluntary work, altruistic help). Corruption involves the seizure of something that actually belongs to others or is a common good. Trust and corruption are also based on opposing views of the human nature. Those who trust others perceive the world in a more optimistic way, believing that people are worth their trust, and do not regret taking that risk. According to a definition of political trust by Richard Fenno [1978: 55-56], if a voter trusts a member of parliament, then he or she thinks: *I am ready to give in to you. I know you can hurt me, though I don't know when. But I assume you will not hurt me and I will not worry about your behavior.* The view of human nature from the perspective of a person who resorts to corruption is completely different: oriented at personal profits and combating someone who – in accordance with this opinion – is not clever and cunning enough to be regarded as a partner.

Despite the obvious opposing character of the concepts, political trust can intensify corrupt political behaviors. As communities develop, diversify and the networks of their interrelations become stronger, an individual faces a certain paradox. On the one hand, this diversity gives much more choice. But on the other hand, it makes it impossible to fully analyze each piece of information and monitor its weak points [Otte 1999: 42-87]. The sources of cognition that enable an individual to develop an optimum judgement and gain sufficient knowledge about all the elements of the surrounding that can affect the individual's life are limited. One mechanism to minimize those limitations is trust, which allows to make some unreflective choices based on belief in good intentions of others (other people, groups or institutions). Besides, trust minimizes the variety and complexity of the individual's surroundings and its unpredictability in many aspects, which ensures greater sense of security and allows to be sure of closer or more distant relationships the individual has. This situation has a number of benefits both for an individual and for their social surroundings. But paradoxically it can also generate a specific kind of consent to political crimes involving corruption, resulting from less attention devoted to the behaviors of entities in the public domain, in which the individual trusts. Trust makes it possible to transfer the attention from the trusted entity to another one, if the citizen feels he or she needs to be careful about that entity. Thus, trust can make a person insensitive to unacceptable signals coming from the object of trust or effectively delay the moment they are noticed. This is a specific kind of consent to political entities violating moral and legal principles, resulting not from the attitude of rational approval for such behaviors but from the callousness based on the mechanism of political trust.

Paradoxically, one of the mechanisms which explain the negative influence of trust on the level of political corruption may be social capital. Robert Putnam [2000] identifies two kinds of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital. Whilst the former represents social capital which develops within inward looking and exclusive groups of similar people or people who share similar interests; the latter consists of social relations which are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Political corruption is often fostered by bonding social capital since close social relations create high level of trust and trustworthiness as well as in-group loyalty, which enforce specific reciprocity within the in-group, but not towards outsiders. Donna Harris [2007] explains that bonding social capital can help foster corruption particularly when enables the exclusion of outsiders. Exclusiveness is essential in a corrupt network because of imperative need for concealment of corrupt transactions. This is because corruption is not only illegal, but it also violates the norm of fairness which is likely to outrage those who do not belong to the 'in-group'.

Therefore, the members of corrupt networks have to be cautious in deciding with whom they choose to associate. Consequently, access to a corrupt network tends to be limited only to those who have established long-term relationships with one another. This argument is closely related to ‘amoral familism’ [more in: Banfield 1958].

Political trust is the product of certain calculation resulting in a citizen deciding to trust the political entity or specifying their level of trust in an institution. Obviously, trust itself includes a certain belief, though not clearly expressed. When someone trusts a person, he or she accepts the risk of being hurt as a result of prospective or promised exchange of broadly understood goods (values, support, material goods etc.). According to Annette Baier [1986: 235]: When an individual relies on the free will of another person, he or she must remember that the free will is not limitless. In fact, trusting someone means that the individual can be hurt, but it also provides the possibility of proving (to oneself) that the other person is reliable unless he or she abuses the benefit of the doubt. Constant suspicion and thinking about possibly getting hurt would mean that trust does not give the confidence and peace, not reduce the complexity of the reality by means of conviction that the social system is determined by mutual expectations concerning the future behavior of the actors, but to the contrary, it would cause the citizen permanent doubt about the stability of the mutual agreement. This would not suit the definition of the phenomenon of trust and undermine its role in the life of the community. Therefore, people use a number of defence mechanisms to eliminate negative feelings and protect their self-esteem. This process can be explained using the theory of cognitive dissonance. Its main assumptions were proposed by Leon Festinger [1957] and demonstrate the process of individuals rationalizing their own behavior. The mechanism occurs when a person has two contradictory cognitive elements (judgements, beliefs, ideas) which cause them anxiety and distress. The discomfort experienced by the person evokes motivational tension and initiates certain actions aimed at reducing it (e.g. by modifying one or more beliefs so as to make them more consistent, or introducing a new judgement). The sense of internal stabilization requires logical coherence and affective balance, which is reflected in the strength directed at neutralizing the dissonance. Regarding the subject of this paper, cognitive dissonance can be generated by a situation when an object of political trust commits a political crime connected with corruption. Then a citizen experiences a contradiction: *I trust a person/institution that behaves in a way which undermines my trust*. The cognitive process may go two ways. The person may conclude that the object of trust does not deserve that trust and develop distrust instead. But what is much more dangerous is the other way, negation, in accordance with the thesis that people do not like

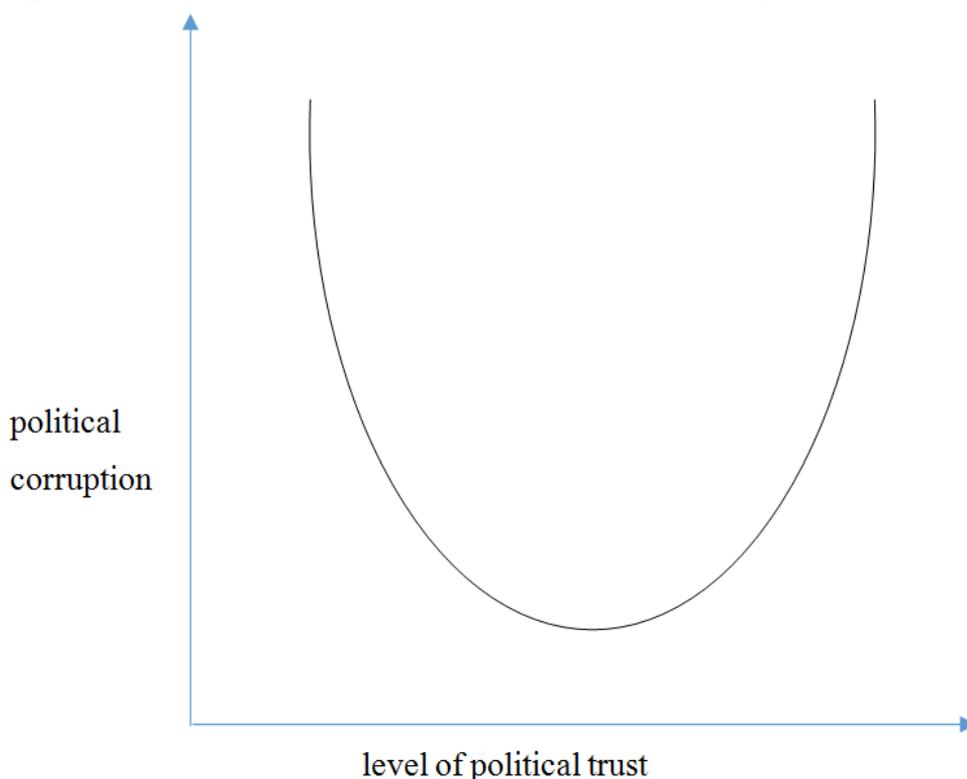
it when their decisions prove to be erroneous or fail to meet their expectations. Thus, the individual activates a number of defence mechanisms, aimed at maintaining the taken decision at any cost. One of them is rationalizations (Lat *ratio* – mind). They involve re-interpretation or revaluation of the experience which is not fully consistent with the person's decision, so that it becomes less burdensome. It means looking for rational justifications for one's decisions and attitudes afterwards, whose goal is to prevent the lowering of the individual's self-esteem. If the political trust a citizen has in a certain entity (whether at the macro or micro level) is upset by learning of a political crime involving corruption, initiating the rationalization mechanism will be oriented at looking for evidence to protect the citizen's decision, at the same time justifying the corrupt act. For instance, the citizen may blame persons who are not the object of trust but share the responsibility for the incident. Or the citizen may negate the guilt of the entity, trying to convince himself or herself that corruption is common in the public domain and the object of trust has committed it just once.

Conclusion

The above discussion shows that it is hard to clearly outline the consequences of political trust for corrupt political behaviors. The paper shows the areas in which it is both a variable that blocks the spreading of unethical behaviors in the public domain and a variable that can play a significant role in their proliferation. The determination of clear directions of the relations is difficult because both political corruption and political trust are complex phenomena, in which the authors can see a multi-level structure.

What is important, political trust is a dimensional variable, which means that the person (or, if we analyze aggregated indices, the whole community) represents a certain level of political trust as a point on a continuum whose extremes are zero and maximum values. Political corruption, in turn, is a zero-one phenomenon, which in geographical analysis is usually shown from the perspective of the number of (identified) cases. Thus, the analysis of influence of different levels of political trust in political corruption seems to be an interesting and open topic, as due to different, sometimes contradictory directions of that influence, the differences in that regard may be considerable. Creating the theoretical model on the basis of the presented discussion, the author makes an attempt to present a chart of correlations between the analyzed variables, emphasizing that it is only a model, which opens the way for further research, especially empirical research.

Figure 1. Relations between the level of political trust and political corruption



Source: author's own study.

The relations between political trust and political corruption seem to be U-shaped (Figure 1). This means that both very low and very high political trust can generate a higher number of political crimes involving corruption. The first extreme presents the classic relation expressed in the psychological contract theory. The lack of trust reflecting the state of psychological contract shows that it does not exist. In this case there are no external¹ mechanisms blocking corrupt behaviors, even those resulting from the desire to meet the informal rules of psychological contract. The other one emphasizes the role of too high political trust, causing cognitive callousness and difficulties in coding behaviors that undermine that trust. The medium level of political trust coexists with the lower level of political corruption. It results from a specific cognitive sensitivity of the citizen observing the political scene, which serves a sentinel role and sensitizes the individual to behaviors that do not much their civic expectations.

¹ It differs in this regard from the internal ones, resulting among others from internalized norms or the appropriate stage of moral development [see the report].

Apart from the above-mentioned factors which make empirical verification of relations between political trust and political corruption difficult, such as (1) internal complexity of the concepts, and (2) their functioning on different measurement scales, it needs to be emphasized that (3) trust is a declarative variable, whose self-diagnosis may be the result of different social interactions, and (4) corruption is a variable which by nature can never be reflected in the constructed diagnostic indices. Thus, these are variables that are very difficult to present in a clear methodological framework, which means that each such attempt is a valuable contribution to the discussion on the subject.

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