

# How should corruption be defined?

*SciTech Europa Quarterly* highlights the research of celebrated Swedish political scientist Professor Bo Rothstein, which is moving us ever closer to a universal understanding of corruption

**W**hat is corruption? How does it impact on society? And how can it be effectively curtailed? Professor Bo Rothstein has devoted much of his life to finding answers to these questions, in a celebrated career which has seen him recognised as the second most important Swedish political scientist ever by the Swedish Association for Political Science.

His research – which identifies government corruption as a serious threat not only to democracy but also to human health and wellbeing, prosperity, and contentedness – has shed new light on our understanding of the causes of corruption, its relationship to social trust, and also moved us closer to an accessible and universal definition of precisely what corruption is – and what it isn't. In doing so, Rothstein is at the forefront of efforts to build truly effective and lasting anticorruption legislation both in Europe and beyond.

## The Quality of Government (QoG) Institute

Against this background, in 2004 Rothstein and Professor Soren Holmberg founded the Quality of Government Institute in the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg, an independent research institution committed to pursuing research into the trustworthiness, reliability, impartiality, corruptness, and competence (i.e. quality) of government.

To this end, its 30-strong team of researchers seeks to address – from both theoretical and methodological perspectives – exactly how political institutions of high quality can be created and maintained, and in what ways the quality of government affects socioeconomic conditions and



policy areas such as health, the environment, social policy, and poverty.

The QoG Institute, which has made an extensive contribution to the literature on both good governance and corruption, maintains a regular newsletter, hosts a visiting scholars programme, and updates a comprehensive, freely available, and country-comparative set of databases containing a variety of information on high-quality government practices and their effects.

## ANTICORRP (Anticorruption Policies Revisited)

Between March 2012 and February 2017, the QoG Institute was the lead partner among 20 organisations involved in the FP7-funded research project ANTICORRP, which brought together experts from the fields of anthropology, political

science, law, economics, and gender studies to investigate global trends in corruption.

In particular, the project sought to identify:

- What causes and enables corruption;
- How corruption can be conceptualised, measured and analysed;
- What impact corruption has on societies; and
- How policy responses can be tailored to deal effectively with corruption.

ANTICORRP has made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of corruption from national, regional, historical, and ethnographic perspectives, and has also delivered key insights into such topics as the drivers of citizen action against corruption, the relationship between



democratisation and corruption, and the way corruption is reported in the media.

It has also produced three online resources that aim to help strengthen transparency and contribute to the more effective control of corruption worldwide:

- The Index of Public Integrity ranks 109 countries according to their judicial independence, administrative burden, trade openness, budget transparency, e-citizenship, and freedom of the press, six factors which play a key role in a society's 'capacity to control corruption and ensure that public resources are spent without corrupt practices';
- tendertracking.eu provides a searchable and publicly accessible database of public procurement contracts in Hungary, their issuers, winners, and individual Corruption Risk Index scores; and
- The Global Informality Project is a searchable online platform mapping the unspoken and informal practices that determine how things 'get done' throughout the world – from ticket touting to cash for access and pork barrelling.

This diverse research output, which has been disseminated over a wide range of published articles, special issues, and books, has firmly cemented ANTICORRP as a key resource for all those interested in corruption as both an academic field of study and a public policy problem, and is expected to play an important role in anticorruption policymaking going forward.

### The Performance of Democracies (PERDEM)

Further to the success of ANTICORRP, in 2013 Rothstein was awarded a prestigious advanced grant from the European Research Council for a five-year project entitled The Performance of Democracies.

PERDEM seeks to investigate the effect of democracies on the general population – i.e. on their health and wellbeing, the level of social trust, and the amount of corruption – and also explain why some democracies produce better outcomes than others.

The project runs until May 2019 but is already yielding some interesting results:

- Nicholas Charron and Rothstein has shown that corruption, more so than democracy, explains cross-country variation in rates of inter-generational social mobility;
- Georgios Xezonakis has been examining the role of elections in curtailing corruption. His work suggests that partisan bias and a country's overall economic performance influence whether or not voters are willing to overlook corruption amongst political candidates; as such, Xezonakis posits, changes to the electoral system would not necessarily do much to tackle corruption; and
- Marina Nistotskaya has (together with Michelle D'Arcy at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland) investigated the relationship between democratisation and human wellbeing, and to what extent developmental outcomes are determined by state capacity. Her research, which includes a detailed comparison of Sweden and Ireland, has led to a novel theoretical argument which advocates a 'state first, democracy second' approach to the process of democratisation.

Altogether, this work is contributing to a much fuller understanding of what makes a democracy successful, and how far democracies are an effective instrument of high-quality government – like much of Rothstein's work, moving us ever closer to a fairer, more prosperous, and corrupt-free world.

### About Professor Bo Rothstein

Professor Bo Rothstein completed his PhD in political science at Lund University in 1986, before joining Uppsala University as an assistant and associate professor. In 1995 he took up his current position of August Röhss chair in political science at the University of Gothenburg.

Rothstein has also held academic appointments at the universities of Copenhagen (Denmark), Bergen (Norway), and Harvard (US), and is a member of both the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences in Gothenburg and the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

In 2016 Rothstein was named the Blavatnik chair of government and public policy at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government (UK). He resigned from the position in August 2017, to much controversy, after it emerged that the Ukrainian-born billionaire for whom the school was named had made a substantial donation to President Donald Trump's inauguration committee, a decision Rothstein criticised as 'incomprehensible and irresponsible'. After leaving Oxford, he returned to the University of Gothenburg in January 2018.

Rothstein is the author of several works, including *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust*, *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective*, and *Quality of Government and Corruption from a European Perspective: A Comparative Study of Good Government in EU Regions* (co-authored with Charron and Victor Lapuente).

His latest book, *Making Sense of Corruption* (co-authored with Aiysha Varraich), was published in 2017 by Cambridge University Press.



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