

Conflicting discourses — Social constructions of corruption in Finland

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Abstract

The Nordic countries are generally regarded as beacons of anti-corruption. This perception also applies to Finland, where corruption is said to be conspicuous by its absence. The article at hand, however, conveys a more nuanced picture of corruption in Finland. It delves into opinions submitted during the formulation of the Finnish anti-corruption strategy, identifying two conflicting corruption-related discourses. The analysis shows that corruption is a contested concept and that views on corruption prevalence and the need for anti-corruption measures vary greatly within the national context. The article illustrates the struggle between national corruption discourses, arguing that such discourses and their overall context should be analysed thoroughly if corruption efforts are to be grounded in their setting and successful. This is the case regardless of context and thus applicable also to countries perceived as “clean and honest”.

Keywords: corruption, anti-corruption policy, discourse analysis, Finland, Nordic

Introduction

Over the past decades, researchers have drawn our attention to the multiple adverse effects of corruption on e.g., the economy, the political system, equality, state stability and access to services (see, e.g., Azfar et al., 2001; Kaufmann, 2005; Kunicová & Rose-Ackerman, 2005; Lundahl, 1997), thus advancing our understanding of corruption as a phenomenon. A continuous strengthening of the corruption-related knowledge base is, however, required if the fight against corruption is to be successful. The article at hand contributes to this effort by analysing conflicting discourses on corruption and corruption prevalence in the Finnish context.

The article is linked to an important strand of corruption-related research, namely that delving into factors affecting corruption prevalence, i.e., why certain individuals succumb to corrupt practices whereas other do not, and why certain countries exhibit relatively speaking higher prevalence of corruption than others. Research focused on the individual level, on the one hand, takes an interest in, for example, pre-dispositions towards corrupt practices as well as rational decision-making to maximize one’s own utility (see, e.g., de Graaf, 2007). Research focused on the societal level, on the other hand, delves into a variety of explanatory variables and causal chains. This includes, for example, Huntington (1996, p. 59), who

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links the prevalence of corruption to the process of modernization, stating that corruption often is “most prevalent during the most intense phases of modernization”. Huntington attributes this to changing values, new sources of wealth and power with yet unclear relations to the political sphere as well as an expansion of governmental authority and regulation. Gerring and Thacker (2004), as well as Groop (2017) take an interest in the linkages between corruption and political institutions and conclude that long-term consolidated democracy as well as parliamentarism are linked to lower corruption levels. Scholars delving into economic development as a factor contributing towards lower levels of corruption include Treisman (2000). Nye (1967), for his part, emphasizes the role of resource distribution rather than just overall levels of economic development. Mungiu-Pippidi (2006), finally, does not link corruption to modernization or single institutions but to the extent to which particularism (a culture of privilege and unequal treatment) rather than universalism (equal treatment regardless of group belonging) is the norm in society.

In the light of this and other research, the Nordic countries—with their high levels of economic development, advanced stage of modernization, consolidated democratic systems, established formal institutions, and institutionalized welfare systems—should exhibit relatively low levels of corruption. A number of international indices, including the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2020, further reinforce this impression by ranking Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway among the ten least corrupt countries, and Iceland among the 20 least corrupt (Transparency International, 2020).

Evaluations carried out by international organizations (see, e.g., Council of Europe, 2018) as well as qualitative studies focusing on particular Nordic country contexts, however, often paint a slightly different picture. Erlingsson and Kristinsson (2020, p. 91) emphasize that “top spots in international [...] rankings in no way guarantees immunity against corruption problems” and that traditional understandings of corruption are poorly suited for the Nordics, where corruption often assumes more “discreet forms” (Erlingsson & Kristinsson, 2020, p. 92). Langsted (2012) highlights how corruption—also in the Nordics—still is often seen as a “practical solution” (Langsted, 2012, p. 140) and an acceptable means to achieve certain ends. Like Erlingsson and Kristinsson, he stresses the importance of approaching corruption broadly, beyond mere bribery. Vaiman, Sigurjonsson and Davidsson (2011) echo the risk of interpreting corruption narrowly. Their analysis of the economic crisis in Iceland concludes that the crisis was not caused by traditional corruption but rather by forms of corruption which fall “outside of the traditional definition” (Vaiman et al., 2011, p. 259). The authors point to nepotism and a “symbiosis of business and politics” (Vaiman et al., 2011, p. 260) as the major causes of the crisis. Furthermore, they call for more comprehensive corruption measures, saying that Iceland was characterized by a “form of corruption [...] that was not detected using traditional notions and measurements of corruption” (Vaiman et al., 2011, p. 270). Sæmundsdóttir (2012) shares Vaiman and his colleagues’ view that nepotism and favouritism are typical forms of corruption in the Icelandic setting. She attributes this to the smallness of the country as well as the numerous close interpersonal relations. Corruption, she stresses, is fostered by these “close social relations and networks between trusted insiders” (Sæmundsdóttir, 2012, p. 144). Her analysis has many features in common with the article by Langsted (2012), including a sense of the end justifying the means and a lack of understanding of corruption and its severity.

Røstvik (2017) identifies a “particularly Norwegian form of corruption, [...] not one where money in brown envelopes are changing hands [...] but one where nepotism is practiced. People help each other; friends help friends by giving them jobs, projects, and other benefits by twisting the system [...]” (Røstvik, 2017, p. 93). Røstvik highlights forms of corruption which do not fit within a traditional understanding of the concept and which flourish, among other things, at the municipal level and in the oil and petroleum sectors (Røstvik, 2017, pp. 93–98). Breit (2010; 2011), for his part, illustrates how corruption scandals in Norway set in motion an unprecedented sense-making effort to establish the meaning of corruption in the national context. The articles illustrate the extent to which actors across society find it difficult to define what corruption actually is and whether particular activities can be considered as corruption. This is also the conclusion by Peurala and Muttillainen (2015), who find that opinions differ regarding the extent to which Finns regard corruption as condemnable. The authors conclude that petty corruption is rare in the

Finnish setting as opposed to more complicated cases of grand corruption, which at times involve top layers within society and which often have a structural character (Peurala & Mutttilainen, 2015, p. 28). The authors particularly highlight conflicts of interest, favouritism and closed (old boy's) networks as forms of corruption in Finland. Key risk areas highlighted in their analysis include procurement, construction, zoning and the political arena as well as the interface between the public and the private sectors (Peurala & Mutttilainen, 2015, p. 7). The interface between sectors is highlighted also by Andersson and Erlingsson (2012), who describe how administrative reforms inspired by New Public Management (NPM) have led to a shift within the Swedish public sector from rules and procedures to goal attainment and the absence of controls and interference (Andersson & Erlingsson, 2012, pp. 38–39). They state that NPM often involves the establishment of public enterprises, where the distinction between public and private are blurred and confusion prevails over norms. The reforms, furthermore, have led to an increased reliance on consultants and other external actors, who thereby gain influence over key processes and decisions (Andersson & Erlingsson, 2012, pp. 39–44; see also Thelander, 2012).

The above-mentioned studies confirm that corruption clearly is present in the Nordics, contrary to what could be expected based on the theories mentioned above. These studies, furthermore, highlight the social construction of the concepts of corruption and its prevalence as well as the need for in-depth context-based analyses in order to understand the nature and extent of corruption (see, e.g., Erlingsson & Kristinsson, 2020).

Research questions and method

What many of the above-mentioned studies focusing on the Nordics fail to portray in-depth, however, is (i) the *multitude* of views and discourses on corruption prevalence within a given national context, (ii) the different actors sustaining particular discourses to serve certain *interests*, (iii) the process of “*borrowing*” elements from other discourses, (iv) the *struggles* and “*collisions*” between discourses and (v) the *impact* of the discourses on processes and policy. Moreover, downright critical discourse analysis focusing on corruption and prevalence are rare, and this includes the Finnish context.

The article at hand seeks to contribute towards filling this gap by probing into the Finnish context and the corruption-related discourses and discursive struggles therein. More specifically, the article seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Which context-specific corruption discourses dominate in the Finnish setting?
2. How do these discourses construct the concepts of corruption, anti-corruption and corruption prevalence, and which corruption-related discursive struggles can be discerned?

The article is motivated by a constructivist perspective on corruption, thereby focusing on how the concept of corruption is constructed socially in a particular context (see de Graaf, 2007, who highlights the usefulness of discourse analysis in corruption research). A similar approach has been adopted by scholars such as Booker (2016), Breit (2010; 2011), Chibnall and Saunders (1977), Kajsiu (2013), and Slager (2017), whose analyses are premised on the idea that no “objective truth” exists when it comes to defining corruption or establishing the prevalence of corruption in a given setting. Instead, our understanding of corruption or corruption prevalence is regarded as a product of negotiation and discourse, i.e., how corruption is spoken of and depicted in a given setting. Such discourses reflect how corruption and corruption levels have been described in the past and also contribute towards shaping how corruption will be described and understood henceforth. As such, discourses constitute a powerful tool through which constructions of corruption can be sustained but also changed and moulded. At times, such change occurs silently and gradually, at times through active discursive struggles aimed at achieving hegemony and fixing the meaning of a particular concept or phenomenon (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002).

Cutting across the research by Booker (2016), Breit (2010; 2011), Kajsiu (2013), and Slager (2017) is an attempt to study how discourses on corruption affect and are affected by social outcomes and processes. In so doing, their lines of argument are based on critical discourse analysis (CDA), a theoretical and methodological approach applied across academic disciplines (Weninger, 2012). Critical discourse analysis considers discourses to be part and parcel of a broader context, which shapes and is reshaped by the discourses. Context-related factors of interest from a CDA-perspective include power structures and relationships, vested interests and efforts to use discourse to dominate, marginalize or challenge norms and values (see Cromdal et. al. 2009; Fairclough, 2003; Grant et al., 2005; Janks, 1997). In the words of Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 1034): “He who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality”.

The article delves into the Finnish setting, where citizens’ descriptions of the features of “hidden corruption” have been analysed by Salminen and Viinamäki (2017). The article at hand moves beyond the analysis in question, however, delving into different levels of discourse and inter-discursive struggles for hegemony concerning the concepts of corruption, anti-corruption and prevalence. This is of interest due to the longstanding perception of Finland as a country where corruption is conspicuous by its absence, which stands in contrast to, e.g., corruption-related recommendations from the Group of States Against Corruption (Council of Europe, 2018).

The rest of the article is structured as follows. To begin with, the context of interest to the article, namely the Finnish anti-corruption framework is introduced, followed by a description of the data used for the purpose of the discourse analysis and the different stages of analysis. This discussion is followed by the actual discourse analysis, which is divided into three sub-sections focusing on (i) the concept of corruption, (ii) corruption risks and the prevalence of corruption in Finnish society and (iii) the need for investment in anti-corruption efforts. Each sub-section starts with the proposals made in a draft anti-corruption strategy formulated in 2016, followed by opinions expressed with regard to the proposals. Thereafter, the analysis turns to the conflicting anti-corruption discourses identified and their linkages to the broader context. The final section of the article discusses the impact of the identified discourses on the process and outcome of the strategy formulation process as well as the theoretical contribution of the article.

The Finnish anti-corruption framework

Like any other anti-corruption framework, the Finnish one has its own distinctive institutional, policy-related and legislative features. First, Finland does not have stand-alone corruption-specific legislation. Instead, provisions related to the prevention and combating of corruption are included or mainstreamed into a number of different laws.

Second, institutionally the anti-corruption framework is characterized by fragmentation. Anti-corruption efforts are led and coordinated by the Ministry of Justice as the central authority. In its anti-corruption related undertakings, the Ministry of Justice works closely with other authorities. It furthermore coordinates the national Anti-Corruption Cooperation Network (ACCN), which was first established in 2002 by the Council of State. The ACCN brings together mostly authorities but also civil society organizations on a quarterly basis and its goal is to contribute towards the prevalence of corruption in Finland being as low as possible.

Third, Finland only very recently (in May 2021) adopted an anti-corruption strategy to guide anti-corruption efforts. The mandate to draft the strategy was given by the Council of State to the ACCN. Most likely, the task was linked to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and its article 5(1), which highlights the importance of “effective, coordinated anti-corruption policies” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004, p. 9).

On 9 January 2015, the ACCN established an internal task force charged with drafting the anti-corruption strategy. The term of the task force ran from 1 February 2015 to 31 March 2016. All member organiza-

tions of the ACCN were invited to join the task force and eight members expressed an interest.

The draft anti-corruption strategy formulated by the task force was approved by the ACCN (but not yet by the Council of State) on 8 June 2016 (Oikeusministeriö, 2017a). The draft, which included an ambitious action plan, was the first of its kind in the Finnish context and can be regarded as an important attempt to reconstruct the concepts of corruption and anti-corruption and set Finland on a path towards more concerted and determined anti-corruption efforts. As such, it constituted a watershed event in Finnish anti-corruption.

The draft strategy was sent for consultations in September the same year. Altogether 54 actors submitted an opinion. The Ministry of Justice formulated a summary of the opinions and the opinions were also made available in full text.

Research data and method

The data

The article at hand delves into the 54 opinions submitted in Finnish to the Ministry of Justice as part of the consultation process. Given the large number of respondents from different sectors of society (see Table 1 for a summary), the opinions constitute a rich and unique material, which provides insight into respondents' stances on corruption and anti-corruption.

Table 1. Groups of actors participating in the consultation on the draft anti-corruption strategy.

Category	No. of respondents
Authorities at the national level	28
Non-governmental organizations and registered associations	14
Municipalities	5
Regional Authorities	4
Academic institutions	1
Political parties	1
Companies	1

The data also provides important insights into the interconnectedness between (anti-)corruption discourse and context. As such, the opinions are interesting not just from the point of view of anti-corruption but also from a broader perspective of criminal policy and social dynamics.

Stages of data analysis

The analysis advanced in three stages. As a first step, a content analysis was carried out to map the views and stances expressed in the opinions, including dominant themes and concepts. Already at this stage of the analysis, a number of dividing lines became apparent in the data. Three themes stood out in this regard, namely (i) the concept of corruption and its definition, (ii) assessments of corruption risks and the prevalence of corruption in Finnish society and (iii) assessments of the need for investment in anti-corruption efforts.

The second step of the analysis focused on these very dividing lines and involved a search for broader

patterns and tendencies. More specifically, the endeavour focused on uniting single opinions on, e.g., the definition of corruption, the (non-)existence of corruption in Finland and the need for investment in anti-corruption into broader clusters, i.e., national discourses.

The final step of the analysis focused on analysing the features of the national discourses, antagonisms between the discourses and linkages between the discourses and the broader context. This stage included an analysis of intertextuality, i.e., the relationship between the discourses identified and other societal discourses.

Analysis of opinions

In the following, the dominant themes identified in the data will be explored in greater detail. Each subsection starts with the proposals made in the draft strategy and then turns to the views of respondents on the issues in question.

The concept of corruption

The definition included in the draft anti-corruption strategy

The draft anti-corruption strategy argued for the need to move from a narrow understanding of corruption towards a broader one, covering a multitude of contexts, actors and forms of corrupt behaviour (including unethical as well as illegal or criminal corrupt behaviour). The draft defined corruption as “the abuse of influence to obtain an advantage” (Oikeusministeriö, 2017a, p. 14, my translation).

Opinions expressed regarding the concept of corruption

The definition included in the draft was met with mixed reactions. These reactions can be divided into three groups, including respondents, who (i) criticized the definition, calling for an even broader and more comprehensive approach to corruption, (ii) simply expressed support for the broad definition and (iii) rejected the attempt to broaden the definition, calling the definition suggested unclear and/or problematic.

Respondents, who did not find the definition broad enough, included Transparency International Finland, which criticized the definition as “too focused on individuals and their actions” (Transparency International Finland, 2016, p. 1, my translation) and therefore not appropriate given the forms of corruption in Finland. Instead, the Organisation suggested that corruption be defined as “activities which run counter to the public interest” (Transparency International Finland, 2016, p. 1, my translation), arguing that such a definition would allow for discussions about structural corruption. The organisation Finnwatch, for its part, regarded the definition suggested in the draft as “completely obsolete and way too narrow [contributing towards] too rosy a picture” (Finnwatch, 2016, p. 1, my translation) of the corruption situation.

A majority of those taking a stand, however, simply expressed support for the broad definition suggested. These included the City of Vantaa, which highlighted the definition’s appropriateness with view to addressing the corruption problems outlined in the draft. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry also advocated explicitly for a broad definition, highlighting the importance of including illegal as well as unethical behaviour. Many respondents, furthermore, referred to a multitude of forms of corruption, showing that they approached corruption broadly. These included the Institute of Internal Auditors Finland, the NGO “Our Turku”, the “Liberal Party”, the Ministry of the Environment, the cities of Tampere and Espoo and the Finnish Bar Association. Others expressed their support for a broader interpretation by highlighting that corruption is often approached too narrowly. These included the Regional State Administrative Agency for Northern Finland and the City of Lahti.

Some respondents, however, regarded the definition included in the draft as too broad. These included

the Ministry of Justice, which found the inclusion of unethical corruption problematic, stating that “[t]he legal system must act in accordance with the law rather than leaving solutions to ethics” (Oikeusministeriö, 2016, p. 23, my translation). The Confederation of Finnish Industries, finally, called for a clear and understandable definition, highlighting that “in a state governed by the rule of law, it must be clear which activities are allowed, desirable and which are criminal and punishable” (Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto, 2016, p. 2, my translation).

Corruption risks and the prevalence of corruption in Finnish society

The situational picture included in the draft strategy

The draft strategy included a situational picture of the estimated prevalence of corruption in Finland. The situational picture sought to include as many forms of corruption as possible in different sectors and contexts of society and was therefore based on a multitude of sources, included corruption-related research, official statistics, evaluation reports and reports from a number of authorities which receive (formal or informal) corruption-related complaints or which come across corruption in their daily activities.

The situational picture concluded that visible, street-level corruption is rare in Finland. It stressed, however, that corruption occurs at all levels and within all sectors, and particularly highlighted the corruption-proneness of the interface between industry and public/political decision-making. Other risk areas highlighted in the situational picture included the construction sector, public procurement, external trade, sports, zoning, as well as political financing and decision-making. The situational picture, furthermore, stated that corruption typically manifests itself as the unethical giving or receiving of advantages or as unethical preparation or decision-making outside of formal structures. Such corruption often has the character of structural corruption.

Opinions expressed regarding corruption risks and the prevalence of corruption

Support for the situational picture. Once again, reactions were divided. A majority of respondents expressed support for the situational picture and many accounted for risk areas or hotspots related to their own activities. As such, respondents seemed to subscribe to the idea of corruption as a multifaceted phenomenon, which is present in Finnish society and serious enough to merit determined and intensified efforts.

These accounts included a broad range of corrupt practices including favouritism, abuse of power, conflicts of interest as well as unethical gifts, donations, appointments and political funding. Many accounts also brought up the issue of structural corruption and corruption as an informal institution or accepted *modus operandi*. Thematically, the examples were linked to, e.g., public procurement, publicly owned limited liability companies, business and the intersection between the private and the public sectors, zoning, construction, real estate, and the municipal level.

Respondents expressing support for the situational picture included the City of Espoo, which highlighted that “corruption in Finland occurs mostly as structural corruption: favouritism and other abuse of power, although in conformity with the law” (Espoon kaupunki, 2016, p. 1, my translation). The City referred to Finland as a small country with equally small circles and established networks, something that creates a “tacit consensus regarding how to operate” (Espoon kaupunki, 2016, p. 2, my translation). The City drew attention to new forms of unhealthy competition and criminal activity within the construction sector and the area of decontamination, highlighting that these forms are increasingly difficult to detect.

The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health, for its part, referred to the fact that norms applicable to businesses have been dismantled in an effort to enhance economic growth. According to the Authority, this has led to a more general questioning of the formal norms system as well as challenges with regard to the application of legislation. The Authority also pointed to an increased risk of decision-making

in informal networks and the risk of double roles, e.g., persons in prominent municipal positions of trust also having leading roles in industry. According to the Authority, the “border between public and private activity has [...] been blurred” (VALVIRA, 2016, p. 2, my translation), something that is conspicuous, for example, within the framework of the ongoing social welfare and healthcare reform.

The organisation Finnwatch stated that it did not agree with the widely held view that corruption in Finland is limited. The NGO stressed that corruption in Finland is “linked to the opacity of ownership, business information, lobbying and the drafting of legislation” (Finnwatch, 2016, p. 1, my translation). Finnwatch, furthermore, drew attention to cases of conflict of interest amongst politicians and public officials as well as cases related to the revolving doors phenomenon. The Organisation stated that structural corruption is well established in enterprises and related politics, and also pointed to a culture of tacit consent with regard to corruption.

The NGO “Our Turku” stated that corruption in Finland manifests itself above all as structural corruption, including old boys’ networks, political appointments, election and party financing linked to land leases and spatial planning as well as favouritism in public procurement, agreements, real estate deals and construction. Moreover, the NGO drew attention to the revolving doors phenomenon and the fact that companies often cultivate close relationships with political parties and politicians for their own gain. Gifts, donations and financial support are, according to the NGO, seen as “social investments aimed at promoting business” (Meidän Turku, 2016, p. 4, my translation).

The “Liberal Party” stated that one of the reasons for its establishment was to fight so-called “practices of the country” (fi. *maan tapa*), which the established parties have been either “unable or unwilling to deal with” (Liberaalipuolue, 2016, p. 1, my translation).

Corruption or corruption risks in procurement were highlighted by a number of respondents. The Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority emphasized that “double roles of staff involved in public procurement may increase the risk of corruption and cartels” (Kilpailu- ja Kuluttajavirasto, 2016, p. 1, my translation). The City of Espoo, for its part, mentioned that demands for equity and non-discrimination often are misunderstood or ignored. As a result, the preparation of tendering or the tender itself favours a particular actor in one way or another. The National Bureau of Investigation, finally, emphasized small-scale procurement to side-line procurement rules as well as corruption risks in IT-procurement.

Lastly, the corruption-risks related to publicly owned limited liability companies were raised by the Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority and the “Association of Investigative Journalism”. The latter drew attention to the fact that such companies are not covered by the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, something that hampers oversight.

Criticism of the situational picture. A number of (mainly business-related) respondents, however, questioned the views of corruption being anything but rare and/or concluded that actual corruption-related problems cannot be established due to the untrustworthiness or incompleteness of the data used to compile the situational picture. These same respondents called for more reliable and comprehensive data before discussing the need for reform.

The Central Chamber of Commerce, first, stated that “in general terms, the risk of corruption in Finland can be regarded as low, and in business the risks concern above all international activities” (Keskuskauppakamari, 2016, p. 1, my translation). The Chamber, furthermore, pointed to the “lack of trustworthy and comprehensive research data” (Keskuskauppakamari, 2016, p. 1, my translation) on corruption, making it difficult to formulate a sufficient risk analysis.

The Finnish Entrepreneurs association, second, referred to international assessments, according to which Finland is characterized by a relatively low prevalence of corruption. In addition, the association stated that information about corruption in Finland is very limited and that research is needed to further develop anti-corruption work. The association regarded the situational picture included in the draft as insufficient to assess the appropriateness of the measures suggested.

The Confederation of Finnish Industries, finally, stated that research on corruption in Finland is

piecemeal. The information at hand, the Confederation found, was not sufficiently clear to formulate cost-effective measures. As a result, more emphasis should be put on trustworthy research. Furthermore, the Confederation highlighted that positive development can be seen amongst Finnish companies, which are increasingly informed and aware of corruption risks, especially in international, cross-border activities. The Confederation found that these positive developments chiefly spring from the companies themselves and not from initiatives by authorities. The Confederation stressed that such “positive development should not be stifled through excessive legislation, sanctions and burdensome reporting and certification requirements” (Elinkeinoelämän Keskusliitto, 2016, p. 8, my translation).

The need for investment in anti-corruption

The arguments included in the draft strategy

The draft strategy included a number of arguments in favour of fighting corruption in a more focused and results-oriented manner as well as a long-term vision and objective of Finland as “a society where corruption cannot thrive or remain hidden” (Oikeusministeriö, 2017a, p. 11, my translation).

Opinions expressed regarding the need for anti-corruption measures

The ambitious vision-cum-long-term-objective was received favourably by the vast majority of respondents. Out of the 30 respondents who commented on the vision, 28 express support for it.

While doing so, many respondents echoed the direct and indirect benefits of intensified anti-corruption efforts. The “Association of Investigative Journalism”, for instance, deemed the fight against corruption to be important with a view to the functioning of the entire democratic system. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and the City of Tampere found that strategic anti-corruption efforts may “promote the trust in public authorities and the proper use of taxpayers’ money” (Tampereen kaupunki, 2016, p. 1, my translation). The association “Finnish Entrepreneurs” stressed that the fight against corruption improves societal trust, the efficient use of public funds and promotes effective and fair competition on the market. The National Police Board, for its part, highlighted that anti-corruption efforts should be strengthened “especially in times of economic stringency [since they] contribute towards the efficient use of public funds” (Poliisihallitus, 2016, p. 5, my translation). The NGO “Our Turku”, finally, stated that Finland should be serious about anti-corruption and that anti-corruption should not merely be about “producing reports for the Council of Europe/GRECO or the EU” (Meidän Turku, 2016, p. 12, my translation).

Given the above, several respondents, furthermore, highlighted that financial and/or human resources for anti-corruption should be increased. These included Transparency International Finland, the cities of Helsinki, Tampere and Espoo, the Council of State, the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, the Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, the National Audit Office, the Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman and the Finnish Safety and Chemicals Agency.

Two respondents, however, disagreed with the vision and long-term objective. These included the Central Chamber of Commerce, which found the vision to be incomplete and the Confederation of Finnish Industries, which chose to formulate a vision of its own, namely “corrupt conduct has no or must have no place in healthy, well-functioning markets” (Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto, 2016, p. 3, my translation).

The same actors, furthermore, strongly highlighted the downsides of intensified overall anti-corruption efforts. The Central Chamber of Commerce, first, stressed that the efforts against corruption “must not hamper or cause disproportionate costs to those acting legally” (Keskuskaupakamari, 2016, p. 2, my translation). Moreover, the Chamber highlighted that the societal benefits achieved through anti-corruption must outweigh the drawbacks and that the cost effectiveness of anti-corruption measures must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

The Confederation of Finnish Industries, second, highlighted market performance and healthy com-

petition as key objectives. These objectives, the Confederation argued, could be achieved if the administrative burden of companies was reduced, overlapping reporting requirements were dismantled and possibilities for companies and citizens to act correctly were improved. The Confederation opposed anti-corruption obligations being imposed without prior risk assessment on companies acting “legally and correctly” (Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto, 2016, p. 1 my translation).

Two conflicting anti-corruption discourses and their struggle for hegemony

Two distinct national corruption discourses can be discerned from the data analysed. The first discourse is best described as a “pro-change” discourse in that it reflects a willingness or desire to reconstruct the concepts of (anti-)corruption and corruption prevalence, and to embark on a new path. The second could be described as a “pro-status quo” discourse, which reflects a reluctance to review corruption prevalence or anti-corruption policy in the national context. The two discourses, which in interesting ways resonate with Walters’ (2008) analysis of anti-policies, are described and analysed below.

The “pro-change” discourse

The “pro-change” discourse remains rather heterogeneous, consisting of respondents, who advocate for change with varying intensity. In doing so, the respondents refer, for example, to the need to promote integrity, transparency, good governance, the efficient use of public funds and trust in public institutions. The most critical actors within the discourse do not merely criticize the framing of corruption or the measures proposed but also question the extent to which the authorities of the state and the political establishment are committed to openness and anti-corruption (see, e.g., Transparency International Finland, 2016, p. 1). Corruption-related problems are often regarded as structural, i.e., embedded into Finnish culture and society. As can be seen from the analysis, respondents express their support for:

1. a broader definition and approach to corruption, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon;
2. the situational picture produced and the view that corruption is more prevalent in Finland than international indices suggest;
3. prevalence being linked to opacity, informal networks and informal rules, the dismantling of norms, the ignorance or misunderstanding of norms, weak legislation, poor oversight, and ever closer connections between the public and the private sectors;
4. more ambitious, results-oriented and strategic anti-corruption efforts;
5. the idea that anti-corruption has an intrinsic value but that anti-corruption also contributes towards other good things;
6. increased resources for anti-corruption work.

The “pro-change” -discourse draws upon and uses arguments from other discourses in the national context. The main national discourse visible in the “pro-change” -discourse is that of a “*maan tapa*”, i.e., a “practice of the country”. The concept refers to corruption as an informal institution i.e. a set of entrenched practices, which are broadly accepted, yet illegal or immoral. As expressed by Korhonen (2015):

“Finnish corruption is happily hidden and tucked away since no one wishes to investigate it. [...] In Finland, corruption lurks where there is power and money; at all political levels, in Parliament, within the Council of State, in the parties and in municipal and regional politics. Industry buys its way to the political power, which it cannot get directly from the citizens. The underground economy [...] is a Finnish hobby just like driving drunk and walking on thin ice, and corruption is part of the everyday life of the police, the judiciary and the media.” (Korhonen, 2015, back cover,

my translation).

The discourse also highlights the need for facts- and risk-based corruption-related policy-making, i.e., urges policy-makers not to close their eyes to detected risks and actual cases of corruption.

The “pro-status quo” discourse

The “pro-status quo” discourse gathers determined and influential actors, which emphasize the many “weaknesses” of the draft strategy, its lack of credibility as well as its “non-strategic” and “one-sided” nature. Considerable stress is laid on the concept of risk or rather the perceived *absence thereof*. As can be seen from the analysis, these actors question:

1. corruption being approached from a broad perspective, arguing that a wider definition increases vagueness and creates uncertainty with regard to the line between “right and wrong”;
2. the quantitative and qualitative data produced on corruption in the Finnish context and the notion that corruption might be more prevalent than previously thought or than international indices lead us to believe;
3. the costs, obligations, requirements and burdens, which are perceived to be part and parcel of intensified anti-corruption efforts.

In so doing, the discourse draws upon and uses arguments from other discourses within the national context. The main national discourse discerned from the “pro-status quo”-discourse is that of Finland as a beacon of good governance and openness, and a country, which can be trusted through thick and thin. This discourse is conspicuous, among other things, in national efforts to attract investment and promote business:

“In Finland you feel safe anywhere, anytime. Companies appreciate Finland’s stable and transparent environment for doing successful business. [...] Finland is one of the least corrupt countries in the world, which is reflected in its business life. Finland consistently ranks among the least corrupt nations in surveys and studies conducted by Transparency International. Agreements are respected, and Finns are known to keep their word.” (Business Finland, n.d., my translation).

The “pro-status quo”-discourse also draws on a second powerful national discourse, namely that of “*normienpurku*” (the dismantling of norms). The discourse in question centres on the dismantling of unnecessary norms, the drafting of “enabling” legislation and reducing administrative burden so as to simplify the everyday lives of citizens, improve competitiveness and promote market access (Valtioneuvosto, 2018). The importance of dismantling norms is highlighted in a pamphlet published by the National Coalition Party:

“People complain that the EU produces silly directives but Finland is just as capable of doing so. According to an assessment, Finland has altogether 42 meters of shelf space worth of laws and regulations. The municipalities alone have 535 statutory functions. And it doesn’t stop there! New acts appear every year. It is much more popular to introduce new laws than to dismantle old ones. [...] We believe that Finns are capable of making choices of their own, when needed. [...] A preset rule actually passivates and reduces a person’s own reflection. Welcome to join the joint effort of dismantling norms!” (Kokoomus, n.d., p. 2, my translation).

The “*normienpurku*” -initiative was introduced by the former Prime Minister (PM) of Finland, Juha Sipilä, as part of his government’s initiative to promote entrepreneurship and economic growth. As can

be seen from the analysis, respondents with a linkage to business and/or with an objective to enhance competitiveness and a good business environment tend to draw on the “dismantling of norms” discourse. In so doing, they stress the additional costs and burdens of anti-corruption, which would hit “innocent actors”, i.e., actors, which, in their opinion, have not and would not engage in acts of corruption.

A third national (and international) discourse can be discerned from the “pro-status quo” discourse, namely that of promoting facts-based decision-making. The discourse can be seen in certain respondents’ calling into question of (i) the trustworthiness and comprehensiveness of corruption-related data in the Finnish context and (ii) its suitability as a basis for corruption-related decision-making.

The key elements distinguishing the two conflicting discourses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Key characteristics of the corruption discourses and areas of discursive struggle

	Pro-change discourse	Pro-status quo discourse
"Upholders" of the discourse	Heterogeneous group consisting of authorities, municipalities, smaller NGOs and a political party, promoting a diverse agenda of integrity, transparency, good governance and trust in public institutions.	More homogenous group of mostly (influential) umbrella organizations representing businesses and promoting e.g. competitiveness, entrepreneurship and market access.
Views on (anti-) corruption and prevalence in Finland	Condemns corruption and advocates for: (i) approaching corruption broadly; (ii) corruption being more prevalent than most Finns think; (iii) the need to intensify anti-corruption efforts and increase resources thereto.	Condemns corruption but advocates for: (i) a narrower definition to increase clarity; (ii) corruption not being a considerable problem in the national context; (iii) not intensifying anti-corruption efforts due to e.g. costs and burdens.
Linkages to other discourses	(i) Corruption as a practice of the country and a structural problem; (ii) Facts- and risk-based decision making i.e. the need to base policy-making on the <i>non-negligible risks observed</i> in the national context.	(i) Finland as a beacon of good governance and transparency; (ii) The need to dismantle norms and reduce unnecessary burdens on companies; (iii) Facts- and risk-based decision-making i.e. the need to base policy-making on the <i>close to non-existent corruption risk or prevalence</i> in the national context.

Other key concepts used in the struggle for hegemony

As can be seen from Table 2, the two discourses are united by a condemnation of corruption *per se*, approaching the phenomenon as something harmful and undesirable. Instead, the key struggle between discourses focuses on, among other things, the extent to which corruption has gained a foothold in Finland. As a consequence, the contest revolves not only around the core notion of corruption but also around a number of other very fundamental concepts and questions. One of these is the concept of “fact”, i.e., something that is known or demonstrated to be true. The data shows the extent to which also this very notion is socially constructed by the respondents, who present their own constructions of where the lines

between fact and fiction, reliable or unreliable or sufficient or insufficient data should be drawn. In so doing, they also use discourse to push their views on whether intensified anti-corruption measures are warranted or not.

The second core concept present in the struggle between discourses is the (equally socially constructed) concept of “risk”, i.e., exposure to hazard or danger. In an article on corruption risks, Hansen (2011) highlights that corporate anti-corruption is increasingly approached as risk management. According to Hansen, “[c]onsidering something a risk constitutes one of the primary ways in which a problem becomes visible and governable, and it presupposes expectations about actor and management responsibility” (Hansen, 2011, p. 254). By opting for a non-risk approach, the pro-status quo discourse ensures that corruption risks remain tucked away, invisible or appear unworthy of discussion. The discourse also clearly distances itself from responsibility, accountability and decision-making. The opposite applies to the pro-change discourse, which seeks visibility, debate and calls for governance and accountability.

Lurking under the surface is also the notion of “Finland”, i.e., what Finland represents and which values and customs Finland and the Finns should be associated with. Two diametrically opposed faces are depicted in the paper, namely that of a country of transparency, stability and kept promises, on the one hand, and one where corruption is something of an informal institution, on the other. This serves as an important reminder that also the concept of Finland is socially constructed and that actors may have an interest in promoting a certain construction to serve their own vested interests, whatever those might be.

Concluding remarks

The Finnish anti-corruption strategy was approved in May 2021, five years after its drafting (see Valtioneuvosto, 2021). The delayed approval of the strategy prompted speculations about efforts to stall the process or water down the draft. Interestingly enough, however, the final version of the strategy bears a (surprising) resemblance to the draft approved by the ACCN in 2016 in that the situational picture, the strategic vision and the priority areas as well as a considerable portion of the actions (by and large) remained unchanged. A major change, however, lies in the fact that no additional resources have been allocated for the implementation of the strategy.

An interesting question from the point of view of the article is whether the corruption-related discourses present in Finnish society can be considered to have affected the strategy formulation process or its outcome. The article argues that a combination of discourse and (lack of) political will, most likely, played a role in shaping the chain of events and the content of the final strategy. First, the finalization of the draft by the ACCN as well as the shelving of the strategy process (2016–2019), coincided with the center-right Sipilä government with its strong focus on e.g. growth, competitiveness, entrepreneurship, employment and the dismantling of “unnecessary” norms. Given its priorities, one can assume that the Sipilä government listened closely to the influential actors sustaining the pro-status quo discourse, giving the strategy formulation low priority. Second, the decision to reactivate the strategy process (see Valtioneuvosto, 2019), coincided with the coming into office of the center-left government under PM Rinne in 2019. As opposed to its predecessor, the Rinne government (with its focus on e.g., social justice, equality, the rule of law and sustainable development) is likely to have identified with the pro-change discourse, which could explain the decision to “dust down” the draft strategy. Albeit somewhat speculative, the conclusion of the article is therefore that the discourses in conjunction with other factors most likely affected the process as well as its outcome.

With a view to theory, the overall findings of the article are interesting in a number of ways. First, they serve as (yet another) reminder about the importance of looking beyond macro-level factors (such as, e.g., consolidated democracy, GDP or resource distribution) to gain an understanding of the pervasiveness of and approaches to corruption in a given context. Second, the article provides an insight into (constructions of) corruption in a country context usually deemed as a “bastion of purity and honesty”.

It does this using critical discourse analysis, pointing towards the presence of corruption, which is being linked to opacity, closed informal networks and informal rules, ignorance or misunderstanding of norms, incomplete corruption-legislation, poor oversight and privatization. Third, the article questions the prevalence of corruption being approached as a “monolith” and highlights the multitude of constructions of prevalence which coexist in a given contexts. The article highlights the “dualithic” and often “polylithic” nature of corruption prevalence by probing into the Finnish context and the corruption-related discourses and discursive struggles therein. The analysis shows that the discourse of Finland as “clean and honest” is accompanied by a diametrically opposed discourse of a country where corruption is woven into the cultural fabric. Such parallel “stories” or discourses are rarely analysed in depth along with their linkages to other societal discourses and circumstances. The article argues that parallel discourses on corruption as well as the struggles between them should receive more attention by scholars and practitioners alike. This applies also to the Nordic region where the discourses emphasising the “purity and honesty” of the Nordic countries appears to have established a firm foothold and where anti-corruption strategies, to the extent they exist, may not reflect other perspectives.

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Endnotes

- ¹ These include the Criminal Code, the State Civil Servants Act, the Act on Civil Servants in Local Government, the Act on Public Contracts, the Competition Act, the Act on a Candidate’s Election Funding, the Act on Political Parties, the Administrative Procedure Act and the Constitution of Finland, among others. For an overview, see Oikeusministeriö (2017a, pp. 84–86).
- ² The main partners include the Ministry of the Interior (in charge of coordinating the fight against the underground economy), the National Police Board (in charge of planning, directing, developing and supervising police operations), the National Bureau of Investigation (in charge of investigating major corruption cases) and the Ministry of Finance (in charge of public sector ethics), among others.
- ³ A list of the Finnish language names of institutions and organizations can be found in the appendix.
- ⁴ These included the Ministry of Justice, the Tax Administration, the Police Board, the National Bureau of Investigation, the Ministry of the Interior, Transparency International Finland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities.
- ⁵ The summary (see Oikeusministeriö, 2017a) provides an overview in Finnish of stances regarding the draft strategy. Due to the general nature of the summary, however, the analysis at hand has departed from the original opinions and all quotes hail from them. All submitted opinions are available in Finnish through the website of the Ministry of Justice under the drop-down menu “*asiakirjat*”, see Oikeusministeriö, (n.d.), unpaginated.
- ⁶ All direct quotes from the opinions, therefore, are my translations and any mistakes mine alone.
- ⁷ Certain organisations mentioned in the article do not have names in English. The names of these organisations have been translated to English by the author (see the appendix) and marked in the text by quotation marks.

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Appendix

List of Finnish institutions and organizations referred to in the article

English name	Finnish/Swedish name
Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities	Kuntaliitto
Association of Investigative Journalism *	Tutkivan Journalismin Yhdistys
Central Chamber of Commerce	Keskuskauppakamari
Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions	Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö SAK
City of Espoo	Espoon kaupunki
City of Helsinki	Helsingin kaupunki
City of Lahti	Lahden kaupunki
City of Tampere	Tampereen kaupunki
City of Vantaa	Vantaan kaupunki
Confederation of Finnish Industries	Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto EK
Council of State	Valtioneuvoston kanslia
Customs	Tulli
Finnish Bar Association	Suomen Asianajajaliitto
Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority	Kilpailu- ja kuluttajavirasto
Finnish Entrepreneurs *	Suomen Yrittäjät
Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation	Teknologian ja innovaatioiden kehittämiskeskus TEKES
Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare	Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos THL
Finnish Safety and Chemical Agency	Turvallisuus- ja kemikaalivirasto TUKES
Finnwatch	Finnwatch
Institute of Internal Auditors	Sisäiset Tarkastajat
Liberal Party *	Liberaalipuolue
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	Maa- ja metsätalousministeriö
Ministry of Justice	Oikeusministeriö
Ministry of the Environment	Ympäristöministeriö
National Audit Office	Valtiontalouden tarkastusvirasto
National Bureau of Investigation	Keskusrikospoliisi
National Police Board	Poliisihallitus
National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health	Sosiaali- ja terveysalan lupa- ja valvontavirasto VALVIRA
Office of the Chancellor of Justice	Oikeuskanslerinvirasto
Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman	Eduskunnan oikeusasiamiehen toimisto
Our Turku *	Meidän Turku/Vårt Åbo
Regional State Administrative Agency for Northern Finland	Pohjois-Suomen aluehallintovirasto
Transparency International Finland	Transparency International Suomi ry.
Union of Journalists in Finland	Suomen Journalistiliitto
Veikkaus Oy	Veikkaus Oy

*My translation.