



## CORRUPTION PERCEPTION TRENDS: EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

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### ABSTRACT

The study analyzes the perception of the level of corruption in the countries of the European Union. We decided to summarize and explore the results of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for the period from 2012 to 2022 in all EU countries - Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. We then compared the 2012 results with the 2022 results for each EU country and identified the three countries with the best percentage performance. Our study identified three countries in the European Union, that saw the most rapid improvement in the CPI score from 2012 to 2022: Greece (+44%), Italy (+33%) and Latvia (+20%). These achievements are interesting and significant in two contexts. Firstly, the overall rating of the EU has increased by only 2% during this period. Secondly, our established in-depth study group (Greece, Italy and Latvia) demonstrated not only a significant percentage increase, but also the persistence of a positive trend. We can identify 3 trend leaders - Greece, Italy and Latvia - both in terms of percentage growth from 2012 to 2022, and in the proportion of years where there were noticeable improvement trends. It is significant that this dynamic was not affected by the overall trend in the EU.

**Keywords:** corruption, European Union, Corruption Perceptions Index

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### INTRODUCTION

The problem of corruption is relevant all over the world (Yessengeldin et al., 2019; Nenkov et al., 2016)). According to *Global Corruption Barometer European Union 2021* - people from the 27 countries surveyed in this Global Corruption Barometer - European Union are well aware of these issues and want their leaders to act with more integrity. An overwhelming majority see corruption as either stagnating or being on the rise in their country, and there is a widespread belief that governments are tackling it poorly. Many also encounter corruption directly, either through paying bribes or, more commonly, using personal connections to access essential services, such as health care and education. A large majority of people know that they can make a difference in the movement against corruption. If they are supported by their governments and by EU



bodies, which can now cut funding to countries breaching rule of law, the region could really earn its clean reputation (GCB 2021).

At the end of 2022, suspicions of corruption have also affected the European Parliament. Namely, Belgian police arrested a vice president of the institution and carried out multiple searches at the parliament, and in private residences. At least six individuals have been arrested by Belgian police following a "major investigation" into corruption, money laundering and criminal organisation. One of the individuals was one of 14 vice presidents of the European Parliament (Euronews 2022). Although the European Union has a fairly good record of corruption perceptions, not all EU countries are at the same level. In addition, in different EU states, there are multidirectional trends, multidirectional dynamics of perception of corruption.

The purpose of this article is to summarize the performance of the CPI in all EU countries in the period from 2012 to 2022. Then select the countries that showed the best dynamics in this time interval. At the end of the article, conclusions are drawn. In this article, we continue our previous efforts in the study of corruption (Krivins 2014; Vilks 2017; Krivins 2018; Krivins 2019; Vilks and Kipane 2022).

The methods: comparative and systematic literature and surveys review.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of corruption is traditionally an actively discussed problem. The studies are applicable both to the EU as a whole and to individual European countries and regions, for example: "Institutional and legal basis of counteracting corruption: experience of the European Union and Ukraine" - which allowed to distinguish three groups among the countries of the European Union: 1) highly developed countries, which have a high quality of life and low levels of corruption; 2) highly developed countries which provide high quality of life, but corruption is high enough; 3) countries with a high level of corruption and a relatively low level of quality of life (Blikhar et al. 2022); "Romania's Justice and Anti-Corruption Reform: A Stubborn Divergence from European Norms in Pursuit of Personal Gains" - the priority attached by the EU to the rule of law and justice reform can hardly eliminate the fundamental incentive for political corruption. A self-serving political elite remains unable to genuinely commit to the implementation of substantial anti-corruption reforms (Martin-Russu et al. 2022); "Phenomenon of corruption in Albania: towards cigarette smuggling" (Raistenskis et al. 2023); "The European Union's Anti-corruption Policy Advice in Ukraine Between Grand Visions and (Geo)political Realities" (Richter 2023); "Conditions for application of criminal liability to the board of a company in the legal system of the Republic of Latvia" (Teivans-Treinovskis et al. 2022).

The research "Competitiveness, fiscal policy and corruption: evidence from Central and Eastern European countries" shows how a growth in public spending affects the competitiveness of CEE economies through the real exchange rate. It takes into account the phenomenon of corruption applied to Eastern countries, emphasizing a decrease in the external competitiveness of these economies in response to the manifestation of corruption (Tiganasu et al. 2022); the paper "Institutional quality, corruption, and



impartiality: the role of process and outcome for citizen trust in public administration in 173 European regions" fits a multilevel model on a unique dataset (N= 129,773) with observations nested in 173 European regions, using data from a series of pooled Eurobarometer surveys and from the European Quality of Government Index (Van de Walle and Migchelbrink 2022).

A sufficiently large range of current research is related to the economic dimension – "The impact of corruption on investment and financing in the European Union: new insights" (Farinha and López-de-Foronda 2023), "Links between crime and economic development: EU classification" (Remeikiene et al. 2022), "Corruption, national culture and corporate investment: European evidence" (García-Gómez et al. 2022).

However, in addition to the usual research - related to the prevention and combating of corruption - "International implications of corruption in Eastern European prosecution offices: a field report" (Teichmann and Wittmann 2023); anti-corruption legal framework: "Practice of the member states of the European Union in the field of anti-corruption regulation" (Melyk et al. 2022) un pretkorupcijas stratēģijām: "Fraud Prevention, Political Corruption, and Anti-Corruption Strategies: The European Anti-Fraud Office" (Saiz-Alvarez 2023), - in 2022 and 2023, new directions of research have also emerged, for example, the impact of sanctions on the level of corruption: "Global sanctions against corruption and asset recovery: a European approach" - this paper argues in favour of a dedicated global sanctions regime against corruption, which is necessary to mitigate significant risks for the EU internal market (Pavlidis 2023); gender issues: "Unpacking the link between gender and injunctive norms on corruption using survey data: A multilevel analysis of 30 European countries" (Dotti Sani and Guglielmi 2022); the role of the political elite: "Introduction: The European Paradox of Expecting Corrupt Political Elites to Lead the Fight Against Corruption" (Martin-Russu 2022); impact of the Covid pandemic: "Accelerating Digital Transformation Implementation in the Fight Against Corruption? Evidence From European Countries Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Thanh 2022) and even the energy problem: "Energy security of the European Union and corruption in Central Asia as the main challenges for the European sustainable energy future" (Vasić et al. 2023).

Analyzing more current research directions, we have focused on the European Union as a whole, comparing the results of all EU member states in changes in the level of perception of corruption within 10 years.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We decided to summarize and explore the results of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for the period from 2012 to 2022 in all EU countries - Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. We then compared the 2012 results with the 2022 results for each EU country and identified the three countries with the best percentage performance.



We generalized indicators for each country-year indicating whether the dynamics of the results of each country in each analyzed year positive, negative or neutral. Positive results (improvement in the indicators of the Corruption Perceptions Index for the previous year) we marked with the sign "+". Negative results (deterioration of the indicators of the Corruption Perceptions Index for the previous year) we marked with the sign "-". Neutral results (no changes in the indicators of the Corruption Perception Index for the previous year) we marked with the sign "=". Thus, three dimensions of analysis were outlined. The results are tested using panel data on a global sample of 27 countries covering 2012–2022. The sample consists of 297 country years.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Changes in the perception of corruption from 2012 to 2022*

Clearly aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the CPI index methodology, we nevertheless recognize that today the CPI is the most important tool for cross-country comparison not only in the European Union, but also on a global scale. In Table 1, we have summarized the CPI data (Transparency International, 2022), indicating the results of all countries that are currently part of the European Union for the period from 2012 to 2022. Also, we have made a calculation regarding the changes in the result of each individual country, comparing the result of 2012 with the result of 2022 (we have presented these results in rows L-1 to L-27 of the table 1). Later, we have calculated the total score of all these countries for each year separately (we have presented these results in columns A-28 to L-28 of the table 1). Finally, we have calculated the average of all these countries for each year separately - we have presented these results in columns A-29 to L-29 of the table 1.

**Table 1.** Compilation of CPI index data in 27 member states of the European Union

№	CPI	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
		2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2012 vs 2022
1	Austria	71	74	76	77	76	75	75	76	72	69	69	1.03
2	Belgium	73	73	76	75	75	75	77	77	76	75	75	0.97
3	Bulgaria	43	42	44	43	42	43	41	41	43	41	41	1.05
4	Croatia	50	47	47	47	48	49	49	51	48	48	46	1.09
5	Cyprus	52	53	57	58	59	57	55	61	63	63	66	0.79
6	Czech Republic	56	54	54	56	59	57	55	56	51	48	49	1.14
7	Denmark	90	88	88	87	88	88	90	91	92	91	90	1
8	Estonia	74	74	75	74	73	71	70	70	69	68	64	1.16
9	Finland	87	88	85	86	85	85	89	90	89	89	90	0.97
10	France	72	71	69	69	72	70	69	70	69	71	71	1.01
11	Germany	79	80	80	80	80	81	81	81	79	78	79	1
12	Greece	52	49	50	48	45	48	44	46	43	40	36	1.44



13	Hungary	42	43	44	44	46	45	48	51	54	54	55	0.76
14	Ireland	77	74	72	74	73	74	73	75	74	72	69	1.12
15	Italy	56	56	53	53	52	50	47	44	43	43	42	1.33
16	Latvia	59	59	57	56	58	58	57	56	55	53	49	1.20
17	Lithuania	62	61	60	60	59	59	59	59	58	57	54	1.15
18	Luxem bourg	77	81	80	80	81	82	81	85	82	80	80	0.96
19	Malta	51	54	53	54	54	56	55	60	55	56	57	0.89
20	Nether lands	80	82	82	82	82	82	83	84	83	83	84	0.95
21	Poland	55	56	56	58	60	60	62	63	61	60	58	0.95
22	Portugal	62	62	61	62	64	63	62	64	63	62	63	0.98
23	Romania	46	45	44	44	47	48	48	46	43	43	44	1.05
24	Slovak Republic	53	52	49	50	50	50	51	51	50	47	46	1.15
25	Slovenia	56	57	60	60	60	61	61	60	58	57	61	0.92
26	Spain	60	61	62	62	58	57	58	58	60	59	65	0.92
27	Sweden	83	85	85	85	85	84	88	89	87	89	88	0.94
28	In total:	1718	1721	1719	1724	1731	1728	1728	1755	1720	1696	1691	1.02
29	Average:	63.6	63.7	63.6	63.8	64.1	64	64	65	63.7	62.8	62.6	1.02

Our summary shows that EU results are good in the world context. In 2022, out of the total ranking of 180 countries in the world, 11 EU countries entered in the first 27 places in the world - including Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Ireland, Estonia, Belgium, France, Austria. The EU average of 63.6 (see table 1, column A-29) is above the world average.

Turning to the task of our article, we have made calculations and found that among the member states of the European Union, Greece (+44%), Italy (+33%) and Latvia (+20%) have the largest increase in results. Even more so, this indicator can be evaluated positively considering the fact that the overall rating of the EU has increased by only 2% during this period (see column L-29 of the table).

However, this first table alone would not be enough, because it was necessary to conduct research also regarding the independence of the trend direction, or in other words, to make sure that these achieved high percentages are not a coincidence, not just a short-term "jump". Therefore, the results of all 27 EU countries were checked by determining the direction of the trend for each individual research year, namely by comparing the results of 2022 with the results of 2021, the results of 2021 with the results of 2020, etc. the resulting trend direction conclusion was labeled accordingly.

*Trends in the perception of corruption from 2012 to 2022*

In Table 2 we have summarized the CPI data, indicating the trends of all countries that are currently part of the European Union for the period from 2012 to 2022. Positive results (improvement in the indicators of the Corruption Perceptions Index for the previous year) in our table is marked with the sign "+". Negative results (deterioration of the indicators of the Corruption Perceptions Index for the previous year) in our table is



marked with the sign "-". Neutral results (no changes in the indicators of the Corruption Perceptions Index for the previous year) in our table is marked with the sign "=".

**Table 2.** Trends in the perception of corruption in 27 member states of the European Union

<b>CPI TREND</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>=</b>
Austria	-	-	-	+	+	=	-	+	+	=	=2+4-4	0
Belgium	=	-	+	=	=	-	=	+	+	=	=5+3-2	+1
Bulgaria	+	-	+	+	-	+	=	-	+	=	=2+5-3	+2
Croatia	+	=	=	-	-	=	-	+	=	+	=4+3-3	0
Cyprus	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	=	-	=1+2-7	-5
Czech Republic	+	=	-	-	+	+	-	+	+	-	=1+5-4	+1
Denmark	+	=	+	-	=	-	-	-	+	+	=2+4-4	0
Estonia	=	-	+	+	+	+	=	+	+	+	=2+7-1	+6
Finland	-	+	-	+	=	-	-	+	=	-	=2+3-5	-2
France	+	+	=	-	+	+	-	+	-	=	=2+5-3	+2
Germany	-	=	=	=	-	=	=	+	+	-	=5+2-3	-1
Greece	+	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	=0+8-2	+6
Hungary	-	-	=	-	+	-	-	-	=	-	=2+1-7	-6
Ireland	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	=0+7-3	+4
Italy	=	+	=	+	+	+	+	+	=	+	=3+7-0	+7
Latvia	=	+	+	-	=	+	+	+	+	+	=2+7-1	+6
Lithuania	+	+	=	+	=	=	=	+	+	+	=4+6-0	+6
Luxembourg	-	+	=	-	-	+	-	+	+	-	=1+4-5	-1
Malta	-	+	-	=	-	+	-	+	-	-	=1+3-6	-3
Netherlands	-	=	=	=	=	-	-	+	=	-	=5+1-4	-3
Poland	-	=	-	-	=	-	-	+	+	+	=2+3-5	-2
Portugal	=	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	+	-	=1+5-4	+1
Romania	+	+	=	-	-	=	+	+	=	-	=3+4-3	+1
Slovak Republic	+	+	-	=	=	-	=	+	+	+	=3+5-2	+3
Slovenia	-	-	=	=	-	=	+	+	+	-	=3+3-4	-1
Spain	-	-	=	+	+	-	=	-	+	-	=2+3-5	-2
Sweden	-	=	=	=	+	-	-	+	-	+	=3+3-4	-1
<b>In total "+"</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>11</b>		
<b>In total "-"</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>		
<b>In total "="</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>		
	<b>2022</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2013</b>		
<b>In total EU</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>+2</b>	<b>-3</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>+1</b>	<b>+3</b>	<b>-10</b>	<b>+17</b>	<b>+14</b>	<b>-1</b>		

The obtained data show that the most persistent improvement of CPI trends are in five EU countries: Italy, Greece, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. In this way, we have established that our previously established



in-depth study group (Greece, Italy and Latvia) demonstrated not only a significant percentage increase, but also the persistence of a positive trend. In both created, we can identify 3 trend leaders - Greece, Italy and Latvia - both in terms of percentage growth from 2012 to 2022, and in the proportion of years where there were noticeable improvement trends. It is significant that this dynamic was not affected by the overall trend in the EU. For example, when the results of 2016 compared to the results of 2015 had worsened in 15 EU countries, the situation in Greece, Italy and Latvia, on the contrary, had improved.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our study identified three countries in the European Union, that saw the most rapid improvement in the CPI score from 2012 to 2022: Greece (+44%), Italy (+33%) and Latvia (+20%). These achievements are interesting and significant in two contexts. Firstly, the overall rating of the EU has increased by only 2% during this period. Secondly, this group (Greece, Italy and Latvia) demonstrated not only a significant percentage increase, but also the persistence of a positive trend. We can identify 3 trend leaders - Greece, Italy and Latvia - both in terms of percentage growth from 2012 to 2022, and in the proportion of years where there were noticeable improvement trends. It is significant that this dynamic was not affected by the overall trend in the EU. For example, when the results of 2016 compared to the results of 2015 had worsened in 15 EU countries, the situation in Greece, Italy and Latvia, on the contrary, had improved.

Some patterns in the data present puzzles warranting further investigation. For example, using extended data led to our most intriguing discovery: in 2015 (compared with 2014) in the European Union there was a significant powerful improvement in the average CPI (which reached the level of 65 points). In subsequent years, the situation has returned to the previous level and the average level of 65 points has not yet been reached. Future research also should examine this phenomenon.

It is obvious that such relatively rapid positive results in Italy, Greece and Latvia have been possible, taking into account the small base effect. Naturally, significant percentage improvements are easier to achieve when the reference point is below the average. In countries such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Ireland, Estonia, Belgium, France, Austria, where very good results have already been achieved, the growth potential is severely limited. However, on the other hand, not all EU countries where the reference point is below the EU average are improving. On the contrary, there are cases when there is a decline - for example, Cyprus in 2022 has obtained only 0.79 of the result of 2012 (Cyprus CPI 2022 = 52, Cyprus CPI 2012 = 52); Hungary in 2022 has obtained only 0.76 of the 2012 result (Hungary CPI 2022 = 42, Hungary CPI 2012 = 66) Malta in 2022 has obtained 0.89 of the 2012 result of 0.89 (Malta CPI 2022 = 51, Malta CPI 2012 = 57).

During these years, Latvia, Italy and Greece solved various problems - the problems were different, everyone had to focus on a particularly acute problem in this country. For example, Latvia's specific challenges are prevention of wastage of public resources, political integrity, business integrity and regulation





of transparent interest representation (lobbying). It must be recognized that both Latvia and Greece lag behind the EU average in terms of political honesty. Italy also has specific problems.

In our future publications, we plan to study in depth the group of countries we have identified (Italy, Greece, Latvia) in order to establish the reasons for the improvement in the CPI index indicators.

It is also necessary to introspectively consider the main activities that these countries have carried out to achieve positive results of changes in the level of perception of corruption - based on the analysis of this successful experience, in our future publications we plan to summarize the most effective methods and formulate proposals for other EU countries.

#### **Author Contributions:**

All authors have contributed to the paper equally.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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#### **Conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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