Using Anti-corruption Communications to Tackle Corruption in Moldova

Key Challenges and Opportunities

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1. Executive summary

Corruption is a "social bad" regularly linked to lower quality public services and falling public trust in government. It is, therefore, critical to tackle corruption to avoid democratic decay and a disenchanted citizenry. One strategy that has been used to do this is to try to shift public attitudes toward corruption through public awareness-raising campaigns. This report assesses public opinion in Moldova, highlights the "pros" and "cons" of such campaigns, and offers **practical advice for how anti-corruption communication can be effectively deployed in the Moldovan context**.

Anti-corruption communication is important because the risks of corruption having negative economic, political and social impacts appear to be particularly significant in the case of Moldova. According to focus groups conducted in 2021, "Corruption is viewed as something akin to a cancer contaminating an organism, hindering its development, and slowly destroying it as it grows and spreads" (NDI 2023). Meanwhile, **88 percent of citizens believe that corruption is very or fairly widespread**, while 84 percent believe that corruption negatively impacts their country and locality "rather" or "very" much (NDI 2023).

These high perceptions of corruption appear to negatively impact citizens' willingness to act, which risks creating a **self-reinforcing cycle**. Comparing data from the Eurobarometer (2022) and NDI (2023) surveys reveals that only 79 percent of Moldovans said they had not witnessed or experienced corruption in the previous 12 months, well below the European Union average of 94 percent. Despite this figure, only 8 percent of Moldovans said that they had reported corruption, compared to 15 percent in EU countries.

Based on the evidence of surveys and focus groups, **we suggest five main aims for anti-corruption messaging**: (1) mobilizing citizens to report corruption, (2) helping citizens to know how to report, (3) reducing corruption in the health sector, (4) reducing corruption in the judiciary, and (5) improving confidence in political leaders. We also note, however, that for any such campaign to be effective, messages must be carefully **tailored, targeted and tested** because survey data suggests that Moldovans may be suffering from **"corruption fatigue"** when citizens do not believe their actions can make a difference. Moldovans believe there is more corruption than they actually experience, for example, and have particularly low levels of trust in the institutions they are most likely to report corruption to, such as the police and the courts.

This lack of trust is significant because it has been shown that anti-corruption messages that are "negative," such as those that emphasize that corruption is a massive problem, may "backfire" and worsen the situation. It is, therefore, especially important to (1) **tailor** messages using narratives that tell a positive story, (2) know the audience and **target** messages at particular communities, and (3) **test** messages before they are deployed. The good news is that Moldova has some positive stories that can be harnessed for an anti-corruption campaign. Under the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity, there are signs that governance is improving. Public opinion also features viable building blocks, with almost three-quarters of citizens saying that corruption is never justified. On this basis, we **recommend trialing messages** that (1) emphasize public disapproval of corruption, (2) explain how and where to report corruption, and (3) align public beliefs about corruption with reality.

The report also concludes that it would be advisable to consider crafting different messages and identifying specific messengers to reach out to different audiences that survey data suggests may have different perceptions of corruption, including Russian/Romanian speakers, women/men, urban/rural, and younger/older Moldovans. Throughout, the report also emphasizes the importance of ensuring that messages are credible by **integrating anti-corruption communication into a wider campaign** that includes concrete interventions to (1) emphasize that the government takes corruption seriously, (2) build public trust in key institutions, and (3) make it easier for Moldovans to report corruption. Messaging can help inform the public and increase reporting, but it is not a solution on its own.

2. Introduction

Corruption is a "social bad" regularly linked to lower quality public services – including education and health care – and falling public trust in government. Partly as a result, a growing literature has also demonstrated that corruption scandals help to drive support for destabilizing anti-system leaders and parties in countries as diverse as Brazil, Hungary and the United States. Falling public confidence in state officials and institutions has also been shown to translate into lower "tax morale," i.e., the willingness of citizens to pay taxes. Taken together, falling revenues and rising support for radical political movements can both weaken the political system and make it less stable. It is, therefore, critical to tackle corruption to avoid democratic decay and an increasingly disenchanted citizenry. One of the main ways this has historically been attempted is through public awareness-raising campaigns. The reason for using these campaigns is intuitive: the public can be an important ally in the fight against corruption if they can be encouraged to reject bribes and report cases of graft. Yet, getting the message right to shape public opinion and behavior for the better is not easy. Research has shown that messaging about corruption can backfire, worsening the situation. This report assesses public opinion in Moldova, highlights the "pros" and "cons" of public awareness campaigns, and offers practical advice for how anti-corruption communication campaigns are tailored and targeted in the Moldovan context.

Developing an effective response is important because the risks of corruption having negative economic, political and social impacts appear to be particularly significant in the case of Moldova. According to the aforementioned focus groups conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), "Corruption is viewed as something akin to a cancer contaminating an organism, hindering its development, and slowly destroying it as it grows and spreads" (2023). In turn, such attitudes and beliefs mean that corruption negatively impacts popular assessments of key democratic institutions. For example, "Anti-corruption laws are not seen as being enforced, and this contributes to a lack of trust in the justice system, a vicious cycle that is hard to break." Additional evidence further supports the idea that Moldovans are particularly concerned about corruption. A nationally representative survey conducted by NDI in 2023 found that 88 percent of citizens believe that corruption is very or fairly widespread, while 84 percent believe that corruption negatively impacts their country and locality "rather" or "very" much. Moreover, a survey conducted by the Institute for European Policies and Reform (IPRE) in 2023 found that Moldovans believe that fighting corruption is the most important "step that Moldova must take to join the European Union" (49 percent), while "lower corruption" (17 percent) is the main benefit citizens foresee EU membership delivering.

Comparatively high perceptions of corruption appear to negatively impact citizens' willingness to act, which risks creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Comparing data from the Eurobarometer (2022) and NDI (2023) surveys reveals that only 79 percent of Moldovans said they had not witnessed or experienced corruption in the previous 12 months, well below the European Union average of 94 percent. Despite this finding, only 8 percent of Moldovans said that they had reported corruption, a much lower figure than the 15 percent average within European Union countries. This may in part be down to public skepticism about recent progress toward fighting corruption. The same NDI survey finds that twice as many citizens believe that corruption is getting worse (40 percent) than is getting better (18 percent).

This context is clearly a challenging one in which to harness public opinion to combat corruption. Yet, several positive developments can be leveraged to turn this situation around. Under the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity, there are signs that governance is improving in Moldova – contrary to popular opinion – and that the country has moved toward democracy. Freedom House (2023), for example, records that "national democratic governance" improved in 2023 from 2.50 to 2.75 "to reflect the stability of the national political situation and maintenance of basic democratic institutions despite security crises throughout the year," and as a result, the country's Democracy Score also modestly improved from 3.11 to 3.14.

There are also some reasons for optimism when it comes to public opinion. Although Moldovans tend not to report corruption, this does not mean that they accept it. Instead, the NDI 2023 survey finds that most citizens believe that corruption is never justified (74.7 percent). This evidence of progress and the strength of popular disapproval of corruption are particularly significant because recent research suggests that anti-corruption messaging is more likely to be successful when it can emphasize positive public attitudes and is connected to concrete changes/improvements, as discussed in Section 4.

What anti-corruption communications should avoid – at least according to most of the research published so far – is simply informing citizens of the extent and dangers of corruption in an isolated awareness-raising campaign, which is unlikely to have a positive effect. For one thing, Moldovans already believe corruption is prevalent and damaging, and so the informative value of such messaging is likely to be low. For another, reminding citizens of the problems of corruption can entrench their beliefs that the problem is too big to be solved and reinforce corruption fatigue. In some cases, such as a recent study of Lagos in Nigeria, anti-corruption messages like this have even been shown to "backfire," making individuals who received them more likely to pay a bribe (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2021).

Therefore, it is critically important to think through how to design and target anti-corruption messages – and combine them with other interventions – to maximize the chances of success and reduce the risks that they backfire. This report provides a road map for how to do this across five sections (3 to 7). Section 3 discusses the aims of anti-corruption communication and argues that it is essential to have clear aims and objectives because, without this clarity, it is impossible to assess whether anti-corruption campaigns are likely to be successful. Section 4 then provides concrete suggestions on the kinds of messages most likely to work in the Moldovan context. Next, Section 5 shifts focus to the need to develop a deep understanding of the audience so that messages can be effectively designed and targeted for maximum effect. Section 6 then explains why it is important to get the form of communication right, both in terms of who communicates the message and how the message reaches citizens. Finally, Section 7 reviews strategies that can be used to ensure the messages work as intended and do no harm, for example, by effectively testing them before they are deployed.

The central argument that runs through the report is that following the "three Ts" is necessary: **tailoring** messages to reflect popular opinion and social psychology, **targeting** them to make sure they reach the right audience, and **testing** them before they are deployed. It is also important to ensure that anti-corruption messages are credible and believable and that they are reinforced by other actions and interventions that facilitate citizen engagement. Throughout, our suggestions and guidance are based on the latest scientific research and the attitudes and beliefs of Moldovan citizens.

3. The importance of being clear about the aims and objectives of anti-corruption interventions

It is important to start by being very clear about what you want to achieve from an anti-corruption strategy and the role that awareness-raising messages might play in achieving these aims. Being specific about aims enables better interventions to be designed and more accurate monitoring and evaluation of a communication campaign's success. Some aims clearly suggest messaging will be a key ingredient of your strategy, such as discouraging citizens from offering bribes or encouraging citizens to pressure elected leaders to enact a given anti-corruption reform. Other kinds of anti-corruption work are unlikely to benefit substantially from broader awareness raising, such as technical work with parts of the bureaucracy that are not public facing. It is, therefore, important not to simply assume that anti-corruption messaging must be a central part of your strategy or that it will necessarily be effective. This section is designed to help you to carefully think through:

⇨ What can we realistically expect in terms of changing popular attitudes or behavior?
⇨ What kind of impact are these changes likely to have on corruption and anti-corruption more broadly?

3.1 Adopting a realistic approach

It is important to be realistic and reflect on what you already know about public opinion and how corruption works when thinking about your aims and how to bring them about. It is also important to factor in the type of corruption you wish to tackle because suitable interventions and the role of public opinion will likely vary between them. Examples include tackling petty corruption, bureaucratic corruption, and grand political corruption, and informing citizens.

3.1.1 Petty corruption

If your main aim is to deal with everyday petty corruption, such as bribes paid to police officers or health workers, raising public awareness may be valuable to encourage citizens to reject and report such activity. It is important to consider, however, whether changing citizens' attitudes will be effective if you do not also change how these institutions function. For example, many citizens do not want to pay bribes but do so because they feel they have no choice, either because they are worried that they will be punished if they do not follow the instructions of a corrupt public official, or because they urgently need medical treatment. If demands for bribes continue, citizens may continue to pay them even if they feel more strongly about not doing so as a result of a communication campaign. Where petty corruption is concerned, it therefore makes sense to try and shift public attitudes, but this is only likely to be successful if citizens feel that they genuinely have a choice to not pay.

One strategy that can help is to simultaneously target frontline staff – i.e., those who may be asking for bribes – with tailored messages and interventions. This could include communicating the government's new priorities and backing this up with undercover anti-corruption officials posing as members of the public to identify – and discipline – institutions and individuals asking for bribes. Indeed, Baez-Camargo (2022) found that an anti-bribery and gift-giving/taking messaging intervention in a hospital in Tanzania, which targeted both users and health workers, substantially reduced gift-giving/bribery. The campaign made clear to users at points of service delivery that the staff did not accept bribes, and health service providers received a range of messages discouraging

bribery and the acceptance of gifts from users, endorsed by the Medical Association of Tanzania, hospital management and "staff champions" within peer networks. Baez-Camargo (2022) credits the intervention's effectiveness, in part, because it was targeted at users and health staff.

3.1.2 Bureaucratic corruption

If your main aim is to tackle corruption within parts of the bureaucracy that do not interface with the public – such as requests for small kickbacks to process invoices or the use of an official position to gain preferential access to land – public awareness raising may not be necessary or advisable. Because bureaucrats are not elected and this kind of corruption does not directly involve the public, it is likely to be comparatively insulated from public opinion. Other strategies may therefore be more effective, such as introducing new systems of public financial management, increasing internal transparency, and strengthening oversight bodies such as the ombudspeople. As a result, communication campaigns may not represent the best use of scarce resources for such aims.

One way to empower public opinion in these areas is to increase the transparency around financial transactions, for example, by making a greater proportion of documents and proceedings available online, publishing the details of procurement contracts over a certain value, and encouraging the media and civil society groups to scrutinize this data. The challenge of this course of action, however, is that if significant numbers of cases are not investigated, and they do not lead to prosecutions, publicizing such figures can undermine public confidence.

3.1.3 Grand political corruption

If your main aim is to tackle grand corruption (i.e., high-value corruption practices relating to government contracts and procurement), shifting public attitudes may be valuable, but this will likely have an indirect rather than a direct effect on corruption levels. Because politicians are elected and therefore susceptible to public pressure, they may change their behavior if citizens make it clear that they will only vote for "clean" candidates. This mechanism can be powerful, but it is indirect in the sense that citizens have no direct involvement in this kind of corruption, so their influence is most likely to be felt around elections or, more rarely, through mass protests. In this case, strengthening citizens' ability to act may create a powerful incentive for political leaders to change the way they behave in the long term, but it is only likely to have practical consequences if (1) citizens believe that their vote can play a role in changing the government, and (2) there is a party or are leaders they can clearly identify as being less corrupt and hence more worthy of their support.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the *aims of a campaign should be specific and focused both in terms of what you want to change and the audience*. It is important to be specific about the exact change you need to realize because even effective anti-corruption messages rarely impact every aspect of a citizen's understanding of corruption at the same time. It is therefore essential to work out whether you want to make citizens more likely to report corruption when they experience it, more determined to reject a bribe, or more willing to vote for an anti-corruption candidate or something else entirely. As well as enabling you to more accurately tailor your message, clarifying these issues will make it possible for you to meaningfully measure the impacts of your campaign. For example, messaging campaigns by the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in Hong Kong have aimed to promote public trust in the agency and willingness to report corruption. To evaluate their impacts, ICAC has tracked reports of corruption and conducted annual representative surveys, which have allowed them to track trust and confidence in their efforts. Research based on ICAC's annual surveys from 1991 to 2019 that were administered by independent research organizations and an original telephone survey in 2020 found that during Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests in 2019, all institutions concerned with the implementation of the rule of law were perceived to have performed poorly, but the ICAC lost less ground than others, such as the judiciary and the police. In 2020, the number of respondents who thought that the ICAC was very effective or quite effective went down to 72.4 percent (from 76.3 percent in 2019) – but it still represents a high percentage

compared to other countries. At its peak, the percentage was as high as 88.3 percent in 2012 (Xiao et al. 2022). However, democracy and fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong have drastically deteriorated since then and the promulgation of the National Security Law on June 30, 2020, affected perceived integrity of institutions such as the ICAC. This includes increased concern about the ICAC becoming a tool of authority in an environment where judicial independence and the rule of law are eroding.

3.1.4 Informing citizens

Public awareness campaigns are most appropriate if your main focus is on informing citizens, for example, about new government policies or specific reforms. Informing can be especially valuable if there are changes to the law that citizens need to be aware of, for example. Although this kind of messaging is often seen to be easier to "get right," it is still very important to think carefully about how to communicate this information. As we discuss below in greater detail, overpromising when it comes to reforms can quickly lead to popular disappointment, and it is important to frame messages in a way that does not risk backfiring. Indeed, this is, in some ways, even more important for general messages that will be communicated to all citizens with no specific tailoring or targeting.

3.2 Possible aims for anti-corruption messaging in the Moldovan context

Existing research on corruption and public attitudes to corruption in Moldova suggests five potential areas in which a messaging campaign could be particularly effective. Some of these aims relate to shaping/strengthening public opinion. Others address the importance of ensuring that citizens have the right information about their rights and how to report corruption.

3.2.1 Mobilizing citizens to report corruption

At present, only one in ten Moldovans exposed to corruption reports it (NDI 2023). This problem is particularly acute among very young and old citizens, and those living in rural areas. The main reasons given for not reporting are that citizens "do not trust the authorities to investigate" (42 percent), feel that reporting is "pointless" (28 percent), and did not feel safe reporting because they were "afraid of some repercussion" (17 percent) (figure 1).

Sample: 309 / 771 respondents who interacted with a corruption case
Q: Did you report it to anyone or not?
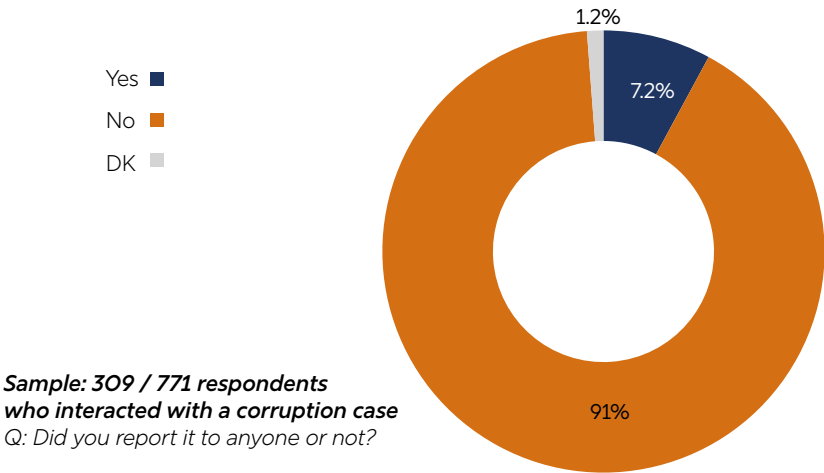
Figure 1. Reporting of corruption in Moldova. SOURCE: NDI 2023.

These figures suggest both that not reporting corruption has become a social norm and that a significant barrier is a lack of confidence that reports will be taken seriously. One reason for this belief is that most people who report corruption do so to the police or the courts, two of the institutions viewed as being most corrupt by the public. Indeed, only 6.6 percent of people said that the police was the institution they most trusted when reporting corruption, and just 1.6 percent

said the judiciary. These findings suggest that two complementary aims may be important in the Moldovan context: (1) changing the prevailing social norm to one of reporting and (2) strengthening and publicizing reporting mechanisms through anti-corruption bodies and ombudspeople so that citizens do not feel that they must report through the police if they are concerned about doing so. Of course, this strategy will only work if alternative forms of reporting exist, are accessible, and lead to serious investigations.

3.2.2 Helping citizens to know how to report

A relatively "easy win" to boost reporting of corruption is to ensure that citizens know how to do it and that it is as easy as possible. Survey data suggests that more could be done in this regard, as 6 percent of those who experienced corruption said that they did not know how to report it (NDI 2023). Focusing on this area will be particularly important if new reporting routes are introduced or efforts are made to encourage citizens not to always report to the police and the courts.

This is only likely to succeed in the long term if people feel that reporting is worth it. For example, ICAC in Hong Kong's messaging campaign – one of the examples mentioned above – was considered successful in encouraging reporting in part because the campaign was coupled with arrests and prosecutions of corrupt officials, which signaled to citizens that reports would be taken seriously. Therefore, along with helping citizens know how to report corruption through messaging, the government should consider transparently collecting figures on the number of complaints and how many proceed to an investigation/prosecution. As the ICAC's example shows, evidence that reporting corruption leads to cases being investigated may help to encourage more citizens to take action.

3.2.3 Reducing corruption in the health sector

The health sector is where Moldovans experience the most corruption and pay the most bribes. The NDI 2023 survey finds that almost half of all citizens interacted with health care services the previous year, and half of those who did were asked to pay a bribe. As a result, it is not surprising that 32.5 percent of respondents "totally agreed" that health care is corrupt (figure 2). Note that the figures highlighted in orange reflect the percentage of those who engaged with an institution that were asked for a bribe. In the case of health care, for example, 49 percent of people had contact with the institution and out of those 49 percent, some 25 percent were asked for a bribe. This means that around 12.5 percent of the population was asked for a bribe in a health care institution in the last year.

Focus groups conducted separately came to similar conclusions, with the summary report concluding that "Paying health care providers/doctors is the most common occurrence of petty corruption; bribing doctors is seen as a widespread practice, to the point where it has become the norm in the health care system." This is particularly problematic given that health care is a basic human right, and having to pay bribes to access a service means that citizens often do not give the government as much credit for providing it. Tackling health corruption is therefore important. Messaging could encourage citizens to refuse and report the bribes demanded by the sector as one way to help control health-related corruption. As noted above, to be effective, such a strategy will also likely require institutional changes to enable citizens to avoid paying bribes without detrimental impact on their ability to access treatment.

They will also need to engage with social norms regarding what is and is not a bribe. For example, if "bribes" are considered legitimate because they are framed as "gifts," one option is to run a campaign informing citizens that a new code of conduct makes it explicit that such gifts are no longer acceptable. Changing social norms can be extremely difficult, however, and it may be necessary to simultaneously make other interventions to support this change. One option, for example,

is to tie an increase in pay to health care workers to a campaign telling citizens that the government is paying workers more so that citizens do not have to give gifts and that, subsequently, giving gifts in health care institutions will be seen as morally wrong.
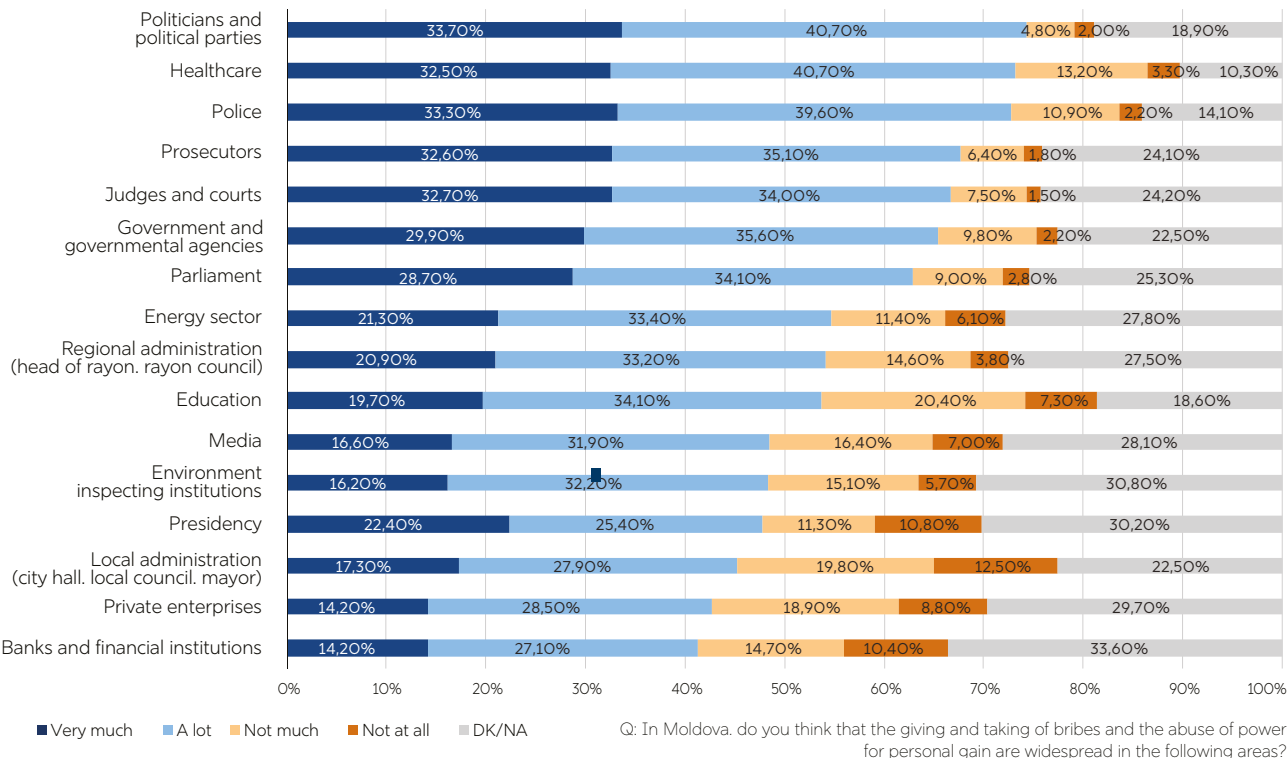

	Very much	A lot	Not much	Not at all	DK/NA
Politicians and political parties	33,70%	40,70%	4,80%	2,00%	18,90%
Healthcare	32,50%	40,70%	13,20%	3,30%	10,30%
Police	33,30%	39,60%	10,90%	2,20%	14,10%
Prosecutors	32,60%	35,10%	6,40%	1,80%	24,10%
Judges and courts	32,70%	34,00%	7,50%	1,50%	24,20%
Government and governmental agencies	29,90%	35,60%	9,80%	2,20%	22,50%
Parliament	28,70%	34,10%	9,00%	2,80%	25,30%
Energy sector	21,30%	33,40%	11,40%	6,10%	27,80%
Regional administration (head of rayon. rayon council)	20,90%	33,20%	14,60%	3,80%	27,50%
Education	19,70%	34,10%	20,40%	7,30%	18,60%
Media	16,60%	31,90%	16,40%	7,00%	28,10%
Environment inspecting institutions	16,20%	32,20%	15,10%	5,70%	30,80%
Presidency	22,40%	25,40%	11,30%	10,80%	30,20%
Local administration (city hall. local council. mayor)	17,30%	27,90%	19,80%	12,50%	22,50%
Private enterprises	14,20%	28,50%	18,90%	8,80%	29,70%
Banks and financial institutions	14,20%	27,10%	14,70%	10,40%	33,60%

Q: In Moldova. do you think that the giving and taking of bribes and the abuse of power for personal gain are widespread in the following areas?

Figure 2. Corruption experiences and attitudes in Moldova. SOURCE: NDI 2023.

3.2.4 Reducing corruption in the judiciary

Judges and courts are another area Moldovans are most concerned about when thinking about corruption. When asked where the fight against corruption should start, 40 percent of Moldovans said the courts. Similarly, 33 percent of respondents "totally agreed" that judges and courts are corrupt, the second highest figure for any institution. The judiciary also had the seventh-highest interaction with citizens in 2023 (6.9 percent) and was ranked sixth (out of 16) in terms of the institutions in which citizens were most likely to be asked for a bribe (2 percent).

These findings are particularly problematic because the courts are a central part of the rule of law infrastructure, so perceptions that the courts are corrupt are particularly damaging to efforts to increase reporting. This issue may play out in two ways. First, businesses involved in court cases may be more likely to pay bribes if they think there is no point in being honest, as the system is not just. Second, popular perceptions of corruption in the courts may reflect wider frustrations that more prominent cases are not prosecuted and adjudicated. In other words, the findings may reflect a broader perception that not enough is being done to combat high-level corruption. In addition to undermining popular engagement in the fight against corruption, this can result in lower popular support for the government's wider reform effort.

One possible building block that can be harnessed to respond to turn such attitudes around is that 59 percent of Moldovans report being aware of government efforts to vet judges as part of anti-corruption efforts, which 72 percent of people believe will contribute positively to combating corruption. This is an excellent example of how practical interventions can impact public attitudes, and one potential aim of a communication campaign could be to increase awareness of such efforts. As discussed in more detail below, framing communications around credible reform

processes may help counter "corruption fatigue" and encourage support for anti-corruption, more generally. Enabling broader behavioral change, like encouraging reporting or refusals to pay bribes, on the part of the public, though, will also require further reforms, including strengthening ways of reporting corruption in the courts to other institutions and ensuring that refusing to pay a bribe does not undermine an individual's ability to access justice.

3.2.5 Improving confidence in political leaders

Giving anti-corruption efforts credibility is an important component of any anti-corruption strategy. Citizens must believe that political leaders are serious about tackling corruption. It is significant that of all institutions, people trust the president the most when tackling corruption (43 percent, figure 3). People are also aware of specific measures that the government is taking, with 81 percent having heard about efforts to recover stolen money, 67 percent about bringing former and current corruption officials to justice, and 65 percent about punishing bribery and corruption. At the same time, however, Moldovans have little faith in the wider political class. Indeed, politicians and political parties are viewed as being the most corrupt, while the "personal interests of politicians" are seen as being one of the four most important triggers for corruption in the country (22.4 percent). Along with the high number of Moldovans who do not believe that corruption is improving, this finding suggests that a key aim of communications strategies could be to persuade citizens that the government is committed to the fight against corruption and to address negative perceptions of politicians more generally.

Identifying key aims is, of course, only one component of developing an effective anti-corruption strategy – it is just as important to understand what types of messaging might be most impactful, consider the audience and identify the right people to communicate with the public.
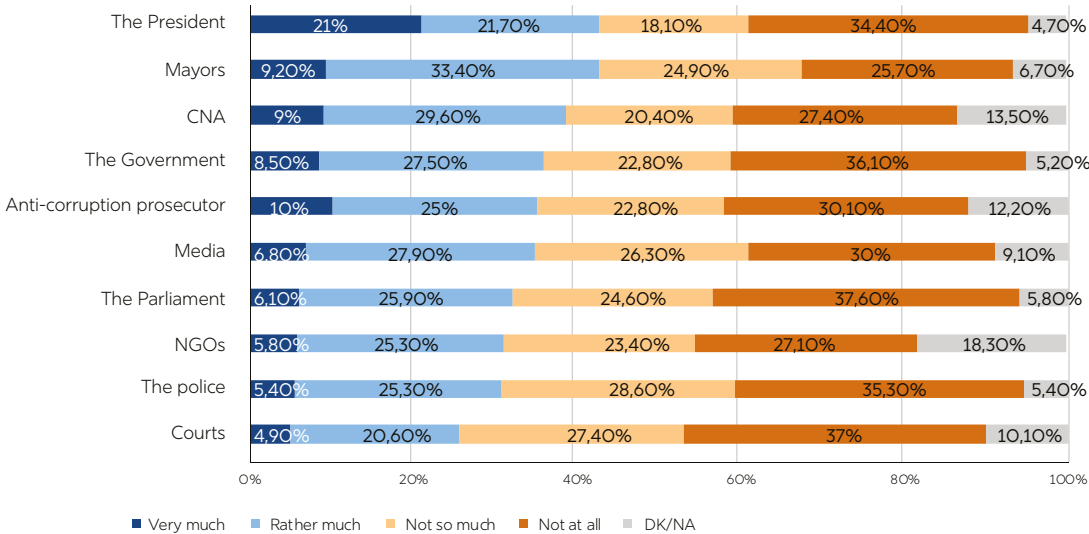
Q: How much confidence do you have in the following to fight corruption in Moldova?

Figure 3. Trust in institutions to tackle corruption in Moldova. SOURCE: NDI 2023.

4. What should be the messages?

The literature on anti-corruption messaging is still growing, but it has some clear lessons about what is most likely to work and what is least likely to work. This section highlights key "dos" and "don'ts" and explains what they mean in the Moldovan context. It is particularly important to understand both the "don'ts" and the "dos" because poorly designed messages have been shown to have no effect and, in some cases, even backfire and make the situation even worse. Anti-corruption communication campaigns therefore need to make sure that they do not inadvertently harm. The main takeaway of this section is that it is particularly important to avoid messages that emphasize descriptive narratives that highlight the extent of corruption and frame it as a problem. Instead, messaging should try and emphasize the strength of government and public rejection of corrupt practices and provide practical guidance to better inform citizens about steps they can take to reduce it.

4.1 What not to do

Traditional anti-corruption messaging campaigns typically focus on "descriptive" messaging, raising awareness about the extent of the problem. This might include messages that stress how widespread corruption has become and the negative implications. In many cases, these messages are fairly vague and aim to communicate that corruption is common and harms citizens, as depicted in figure 4.
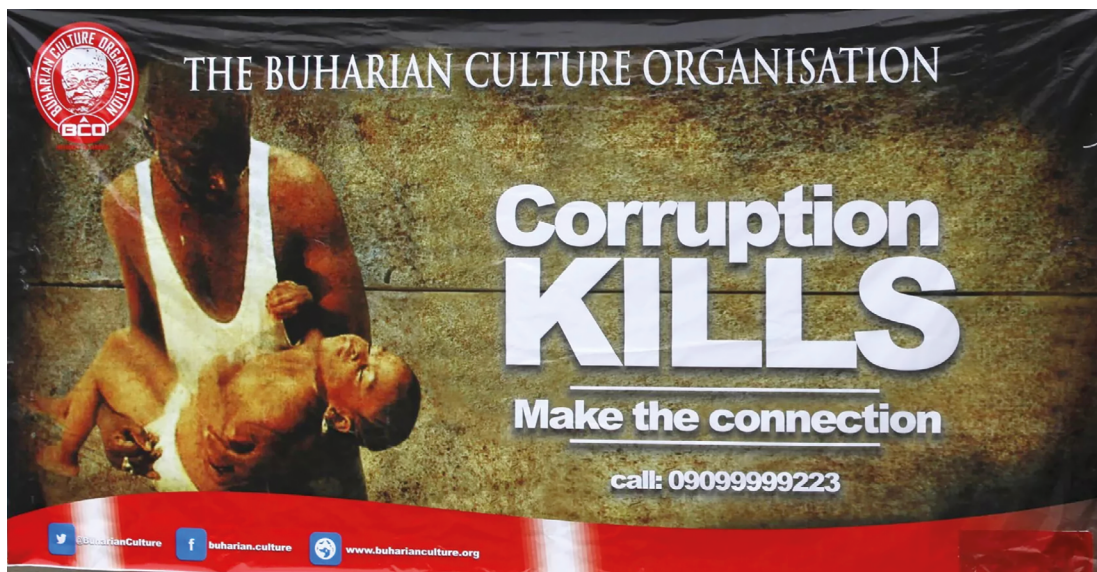

Figure 4. An anti-corruption billboard in Nigeria. SOURCE: Shettima and Sines 2016.

Unfortunately, research conducted on descriptive messages reveals that it often does not work. Of the 27 messages that have so far been tested, only three were shown to have a positive effect – the rest had no impact on public attitudes or backfired (Peiffer and Cheeseman 2023). Table 1 lists the studies and the messages that have been tested. Messages highlighted in red generated at least one unwanted effect. Messages in yellow tended to have no impact either way and did not represent good value for money. Only the messages highlighted in green worked as intended – and as can be seen, there are only a small minority of messages.

A study of Lagos, Nigeria, for example, revealed that exposure to these types of descriptive messages about corruption failed to increase public resolve to fight corruption or encourage them to be more

likely to report it. Moreover, individuals who received anti-corruption messages were shown to be more likely to pay a bribe in a "bribery game" played with real money than those who had received no message at all (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2021).

Significantly, the negative side effects of this kind of messaging are not limited to corruption itself. Recent research on Albania and Nigeria has demonstrated that "descriptive" messaging can also have many other problematic consequences. These negative effects include reducing tax morale (i.e., citizens' willingness to pay their taxes) and encouraging citizens to support anti-system ideas and leaders. Research in Albania, for example, found that descriptive anti-corruption messages increased the extent to which individuals agreed with three classic indicators of populist attitudes, such as the ideas that it is better to be represented by "a citizen like myself" than by a politician, and that the "country is divided between ordinary people and corrupt elites" (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2023). These examples suggest that poorly designed anti-corruption campaigns may make it harder for governments to raise money and increase the threat to democracy from "outsiders" and anti-system leaders. It is therefore important to understand why anti-corruption messages "backfire" in this way and how to avoid this risk.

Table 1. Summary of findings in anti-corruption messaging literature

Study	Location	Dominant theme of message(s) tested
Corbacho et al. (2016)	Costa Rica	Increasing rate of bribery in country
Peiffer (2017; 2018)	Jakarta	Grand corruption is endemic
		Petty corruption is endemic
		Government successes in anti-corruption
		Citizens can get involved in anti-corruption
Cheromoi and Sebaggala (2018)	Uganda	Negative consequences of corruption
Peiffer and Walton (2022)	Port Moresby	Corruption is endemic
		Corruption is illegal
		Corruption is against religious teachings
		Corruption is a "local" issue
Kobis et al. (2019)	Manguzi	Bribery declined in region
Blair, Littman, and Paluck (2019)	Niger Delta	Corruption is endemic/Celebrities report corruption
Hamelin, Nwankwo, and Gbadamosi (2020)	Morocco	Awareness of corruption and "beware of bribes"
Cheeseman and Peiffer (2021; 2022)	Lagos	Corruption is endemic
		Government successes in anti-corruption
		Corruption is against religious teachings
		Corruption steals tax money
		Corruption is a "local" issue
Agerberg (2021)	Mexico	Citizens strongly condemn corruption
Cheeseman and Peiffer (2022b)	Albania	Corruption is endemic
		Citizens strongly condemn corruption
		Wealth is lost to other countries
Baez-Camargo (2022)	Tanzania	Hospital staff do not accept bribes
Beesley and Hawkins (2022)[1]	Peru	Instance of grand corruption
		Instance of petty corruption
		Corruption has a positive impact
		Corruption has a negative impact

1   The authors tested whether mentioning a positive or negative consequence associated with corruption, as well as not mentioning a consequence, also impacted trust and donations to an anti-corruption NGO.

There appear to be two main reasons that descriptive anti-corruption messaging backfires. First, messaging may struggle to change how people think about corruption because this tends to be an issue that people already have strong feelings about (Lenz 2009). Especially for those who strongly believe that corruption is widespread, messaging may not change their minds and instead risks triggering and even reinforcing pre-existing beliefs that the problem is too big to solve. One obvious implication of this belief is that it is not worth trying to resist, and the rational thing to do is to "go with the flow" – strong evidence suggests that this corruption fatigue is entrenched in Moldova. According to the NDI 2023 survey, almost 40 percent of citizens believe Moldova will "never" be free of corruption, while only 16 percent believe a corruption-free country can be achieved within 10 years (figure 5).

Second, by highlighting the scale of the problem, descriptive anti-corruption awareness-raising messages risk explicitly or implicitly telling people that unwanted behaviors are widespread. This is problematic as doing so may unintentionally give the impression that problematic practices – such as paying a bribe – are socially acceptable. Indeed, research on social norms has shown that hearing or being reminded that people like us are behaving in the "wrong" way can actually encourage us – often subconsciously – to do the same (Paluck et al. 2010). Together, these risks help to explain why some anti-corruption messages have been found to backfire.
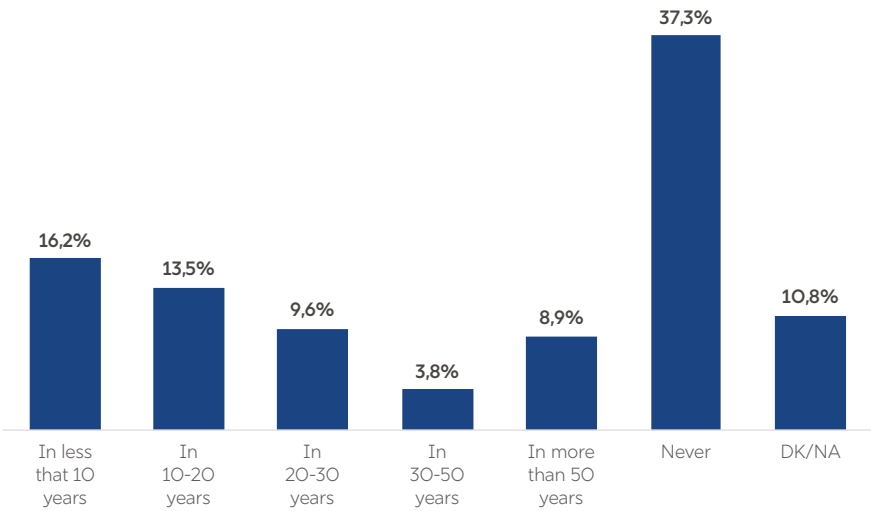
Q: How much confidence do you have in the following to fight corruption in Moldova?

Figure 5. Perceptions of the prospects of ending corruption in Moldova. SOURCE: NDI 2023.

Anti-corruption communication strategies should therefore seek to avoid emphasizing the extent of corruption and reinforcing negative stereotypes. A more productive approach is to communicate positive narratives, for example, emphasizing the strength of anti-corruption feelings among the public and government – although even these messages should be tested before being deployed, as discussed in Section 7. When such messages emphasize the extent of popular feeling against corruption, they are known as "injunctive" messages. Such a message might run as follows: "Seventy percent of Albanians believe that corruption can never be morally justified" or "81 percent of Nigerians say that corruption should be exposed and prosecuted."

Table 2. Types of messaging

Descriptive/negative	Injunctive/positive
Emphasizes the extent of the problem, for example, by stressing how often corruption happens or the extent of the problems that corruption can cause.	Emphasizes the strength of popular opinion against corruption and the desire of citizens to live in a "graft-free" country, and may also stress recent successes in the fight against corruption.

To give one example from a study of a similar issue in a very different context, Widner and Roggenbuck's (2000) study of the best way to prevent people from removing (stealing) petrified wood from the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona, U.S., found that different messages had different effects. The injunctive/positive message, which explained that most people who attended the park thought that removing wood was wrong, reduced the theft of wood as intended. By contrast, the descriptive/negative message that explained how often wood is removed and the challenges this theft generates for the National Park had the opposite effect – making the problem worse. It is therefore important to try and avoid descriptive/negative messages and to consider using injunctive/positive alternatives. Though, it is important to keep in mind that research on the use of injunctive/positive anti-corruption messaging is only just emerging. While early findings do suggest that positive messages are least at risk of backfiring, some findings suggest that they may also not always work as intended.

4.2 Messages likely to be effective in the Moldovan context

Fortunately, there are several positive building blocks that anti-corruption campaigns in Moldova can be built around. In addition to high public awareness of some of the government's actions to tackle corruption, Moldovans hold strong anti-corruption beliefs. This suggests that while they may feel forced to pay bribes for certain services, they do not view this as legitimate. Not only do three-quarters of Moldovans say that corruption is "never justified," as previously stated, but a majority (52 percent) of citizens say that corruption is unacceptable even if it improves people's well-being (figure 6). There is also evidence that, on the whole, citizens believe that the government's efforts are well-intentioned and suitable – despite the signs of corruption fatigue discussed above – with more Moldovans thinking that the government is on the "right path" (48 percent) than not (39 percent).

4.2.1 Emphasizing public disapproval of corrupt behavior

This belief is important because existing research suggests that positive messages emphasizing the strength of opinion against corruption are less likely to backfire and more likely to encourage citizens to act (Agerberg 2021). Emphasizing the strength of public feeling against corruption can reinforce solidarity and strengthen citizen's resolve. Evidencing real improvements, especially when combined with institutional innovations to make it easier for citizens to report corruption, can help to give anti-corruption greater credibility while making it easier for the public to take a stand, as discussed in greater detail in Section 7. Therefore, messages should focus on emphasizing the anti-corruption resolve of Moldovans and evidence that the fight against corruption is having a real impact.
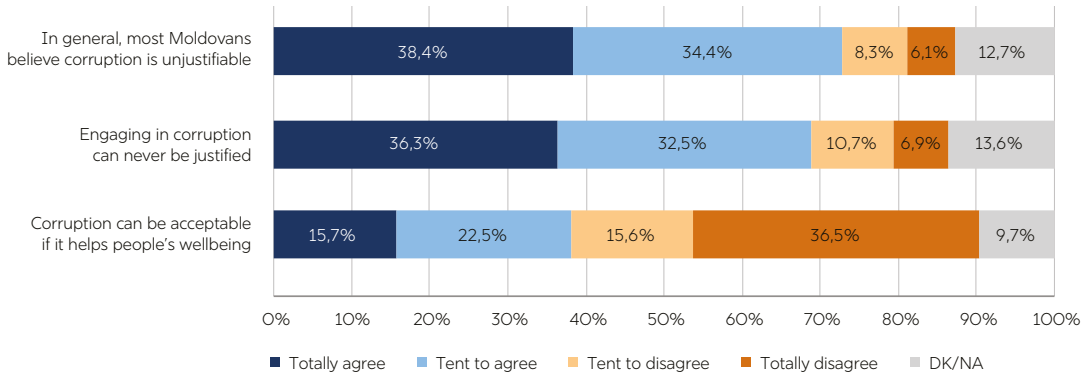

Figure 6. Attitudes toward the acceptability of corruption in Moldova. SOURCE: NDI 2023

4.2.2 Explaining how and where to report corruption

In addition to encouraging citizens to take a stand against corruption, it is also important to inform them of how they can do so and to make this process easier. While social norms such as corruption fatigue are more significant than lack of knowledge about reporting procedures, there is some evidence that citizens would benefit from better information. There are four complementary aspects to this (figure 7). First, 6 percent of Moldovans state that they do not know how to report corruption, so more information about how this can be done would be beneficial (NDI 2023). Second, 28 percent say that they believe reporting would be pointless, while 41 percent say that they "do not trust the authorities" to investigate, which implies that evidence that corruption reports lead to serious investigations and some prosecutions could shift public behavior. Third, 26 percent of people said they do not report because they are either afraid of punishment or ashamed. This perception suggests that creating anonymous corruption hotlines and protecting whistle-blowers – and ensuring these protections are widely known – could encourage more people to come forward.
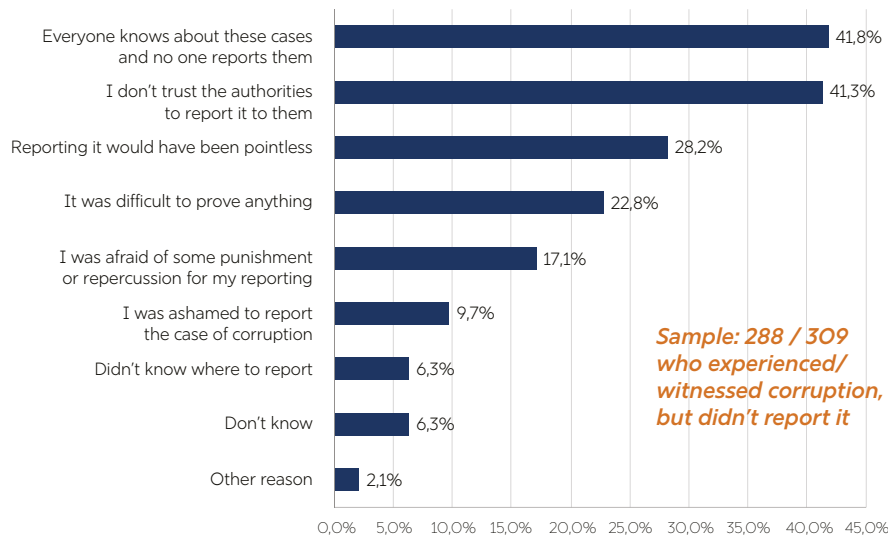
Q: How much confidence do you have in the following to fight corruption in Moldova?

Figure 7. Reasons for not reporting corruption in Moldova. SOURCE: NDI 2023

Finally, it may be that a lack of clarity about ways to report corruption that do not involve going through the police is undermining citizen's willingness to become involved. As noted above, survey results suggest that more people report to the police and the courts than any other institution, which is problematic because the police and the courts are two of the least trusted institutions in the country where corruption is concerned. By contrast, the same survey suggests that institutions such as the National Anti-corruption Centre (Centrul Național Anticorupție, CNA, in Romanian) and anti-corruption prosecutions are less likely to be contacted (NDI 2023), even though they are more trusted. For example, 15 percent said that CNA was the institution they trusted the most in terms of reporting graft, while 12 percent said anti-corruption prosecutions, and 11 percent said the ombudspeople – meaning that all these institutions are twice as trusted as the police.

Strengthening alternative reporting mechanisms and then sharing these other pathways with the public may help to rebuild confidence that it is worth bringing experiences of corruption to official attention. One way to encourage corruption reporting might include establishing anonymous online reporting mechanisms managed by respected civil society groups or an independent body, which can track reports and provide updates on the number of cases and their progress. The benefit of this kind of reporting mechanism in countries where trust in existing institutions is low is that individuals do not have to go to a police station or be seen personally when they report, reducing both the risks and the costs.

4.2.3 Aligning reality and beliefs when it comes to corruption

At present, Moldovans believe that the country is more corrupt than survey data suggests. While Moldovans see the country as endemically corrupt, a large majority (59 percent) say they do not know anyone who is corrupt. Moreover, almost two-thirds of citizens (65 percent) say that they have not been asked to pay a bribe in the last 12 months (figure 8). It may be the case that Moldovans are thinking of "grand" corruption when they are assessing corruption in the country, or it could also be the case that, as is common in countries with corruption fatigue, Moldovans may over-estimate the level of corruption and bribe payment taking place.

Either way, there may be an opportunity to combat corruption fatigue by correcting citizens' misperceptions by making it clear that bribery is relatively rare, or comparatively lower in Moldova than in other similar countries. There are two big caveats to this, however. First, citizens may be under-reporting how often they were asked for a bribe because they have paid one and are worried about admitting this, which is a particularly significant risk when such activity is illegal. If so, anti-corruption communications telling citizens that bribery is lower than they think may fall on deaf ears. Second, there is always a risk that focusing on the extent of corruption, even in a positive message and tone, reminds citizens of their deep skepticism about how feasible it is to deal with these issues. Given these caveats, it would be particularly important to test these messages to ensure they work as intended before deploying them (see Section 7).
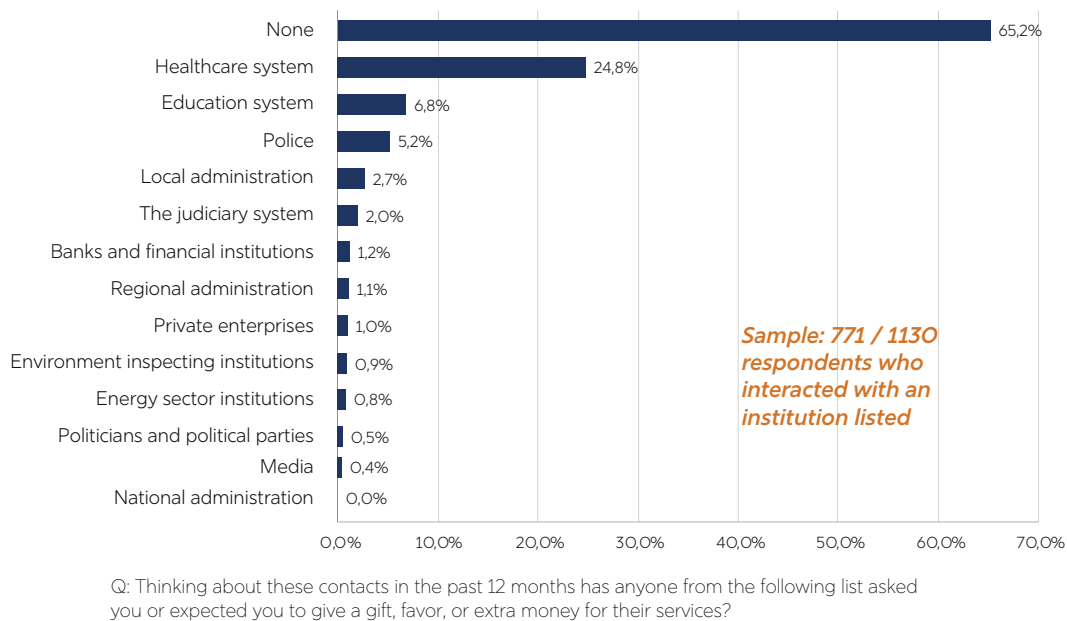

Q: Thinking about these contacts in the past 12 months has anyone from the following list asked you or expected you to give a gift, favor, or extra money for their services?

Figure 8. Experience of bribery requests in Moldova. SOURCE: NDI 2023.

Once the right messages have been identified, the next step is to ensure that you understand your audience to target messages as effectively as possible.

5. Understanding the audience and targeting messages effectively

Research on strategic and public interest communications makes clear that "blanket" anti-corruption messaging campaigns are unlikely to be effective and that messaging is most likely to work as intended when it is targeted to specific audiences and tailored to resonate with those specific audiences (Sanderson 2018). Recent research on anti-corruption messaging, specifically, supports the idea that messages should be narrowly targeted and tailored, with findings showing that messaging that worked for one segment of the population backfired for another (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2021).

Reflecting on the aims of an anti-corruption communications campaign will help to define target audiences. It is also important to consider differences in attitudes and opinions among target audiences when tailoring messages. Are there differences within groups of a target audience with respect to what they know and believe about anti-corruption efforts and corruption? Understanding the nuances of differing attitudes and behaviors can help immeasurably in efforts to target and tailor – or frame – messages so they resonate in the right ways. Available evidence suggests important differences in experiences with and attitudes about corruption across age groups, languages spoken and gender in the Moldovan context.

5.1 Age and language

Survey and focus group data show that older Moldovans are more likely to have "corruption fatigue" and hold pessimistic attitudes about the nature and future of governance in Moldova. Over half of people aged 60 and older agreed that things are going in the wrong direction, and a majority – 63 percent – of 45- to 59-year-olds also agreed with this sentiment. In contrast, only about two-fifths of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed with this notion (IPRE 2023). In a similar vein, focus groups conducted separately suggested that young participants were twice as likely to say that "some progress has been made" in the fight to control corruption than older participants (NDI 2021). This sense of optimism is interesting, especially as a national survey found that young people are more likely to report having frequent contact with corruption (NDI 2023). Additionally, in focus group discussions, older participants more frequently framed corruption as a part of "national culture," suggesting that older people may more likely view corruption as especially entrenched in Moldova's social fabric and therefore intractably difficult to control. The same focus group study found that younger participants were more likely to understand corruption to be a by-product of poverty and low wages (NDI 2021), which suggests that younger participants have some implicit hope that corruption will be reduced following economic development.

The evidence also suggests Russian speakers hold much more pessimistic views than Romanian speakers. Seventy-six percent of Russian speakers think Moldova is going in the "wrong direction," while only 44 percent of Romanian speakers think the same (IPRE 2023). Russian speakers are also more likely to not trust authorities' abilities to investigate corruption incidents and are generally more skeptical about authorities' actions in combating corruption (NDI 2023). In contrast, Romanian speakers have much more positive attitudes toward state institutions' and the justice system's efforts to fight corruption (NDI 2023).

For anti-corruption messaging, these differences in attitudes across age and language groups suggest that communicators should be especially cautious when raising awareness of the extent of the problem of corruption among older citizens and Russian speakers. As noted earlier, such messaging may strengthen pessimistic beliefs in those who already hold them. Communications with older citizens and Russian speakers about corruption should, instead, consider emphasizing the strength of public resolve against corruption among citizens, which, as reviewed above, has been shown to counter feelings of "corruption fatigue" and corruption being a part of national culture, and promote a sense of optimism that corruption can be countered effectively.

It is also crucial that any message tailored toward a Russian-speaking audience is indeed delivered in Russian. Messaging can only hope to resonate with audiences when it is understood, and it is more likely to be considered when it is delivered in a language that is indicative of the identity of its audience.

5.2 Gender, care and anti-corruption communications

There are also clear gendered differences that communicators should consider in Moldova. While women do not tend to be much more or less pessimistic about corruption being controlled, women are more likely to report that corruption is especially acute in health care and education sectors. This is demonstrated in survey data (NDI 2023) and focus group discussions, where women were more likely to give examples of corruption associated with receiving medical services than men (NDI 2022a).

Within households, women are more likely to engage with the health sector, as they disproportionately shoulder caretaking responsibilities for the young and elderly and also because they require health care associated with pregnancy. It is, therefore, no surprise that women are more sensitive toward corruption in the health sector. Given this understanding, it is interesting to note that women are also more likely to accept corruption as a means to obtain better services (24 percent, compared to 14.8 percent among men) and say that they have experienced or witnessed corruption (11.7 percent, as compared to 7.4 percent of men). In focus group discussions, women were also more likely to cite "better quality public services" as a benefit of eradicating corruption than men, who were more likely to refer to a "better standard of living, economic development" when considering the benefits of corruption reduction. A final gender difference is that women are also more likely to not report the corruption they experience (NDI 2023).

These gendered findings suggest that messengers should consider tailoring messaging campaigns in ways that are sensitive to the experiences and perceptions women have with health care-related public services. This focus may, for example, be on raising awareness around health-related entitlements and the rights of citizens and patients to a quality of care that empowers women to refuse to pay bribes and demand good treatment. Communicating positive norms may also be appropriate, such as that most patients and health care professionals believe that women should be treated with respect and equally to men and that the government has done something specific to curb these types of bribery women are most likely to be subjected to in health facilities.

Focusing this attention on targeted communication around health care promises to have wider benefits. Survey data shows that Moldovans, regardless of gender, are more likely to come into contact with the health sector than any other public service and, partly as a result, are more likely to pay bribes to it as well (NDI 2023). Therefore, raising awareness of health-related entitlements may have wider benefits when encouraging men and women to demand bribe-free care.

When targeting efforts toward women, such strategies should consider the types of communication channels that different groups of women are likely to encounter in their daily lives and also at critical points of service delivery (like within clinics, health centers and hospitals). As an example, Baez-Camargo's (2022) anti-bribery and gift-giving/taking intervention in hospitals in Tanzania displayed messages about entitlements on reception desks in health facilities.

6. Who are the right communicators?

The credibility and trust an audience has in the person or organization delivering an anti-corruption message is critical. Research on strategic messaging has affirmed that audiences are more likely to pay attention to and believe messaging delivered by a source they judge to be credible (e.g., Maclean, Buckell, and Marti 2019). Just as all messaging themes may not resonate or work the same for all, not all messengers will be considered equally credible by different groups of citizens. This means that part of effectively tailoring a message for a target audience involves considering who it is that different segments of a target audience trust and perceive to be credible regarding anti-corruption.

6.1 State messengers

Many potential state messengers are, unfortunately, not widely trusted in Moldova and therefore would not likely make credible and effective messengers for anti-corruption communications. As noted earlier, politicians and political parties are perceived to be the most corrupt; three-fourths of Moldovans agree that corruption is widespread among them (NDI 2022b). Two-thirds rate the government and government agencies as being impacted by widespread corruption (NDI 2023). Members of Parliaments (MPs) may also not make for the most effective messengers, as only 3 percent of people think parliament is not impacted by widespread corruption, and only 10 percent think that it is "not much" impacted (NDI 2023).

Among national authorities, the most trusted one is the president. Thirty-one percent of Moldovans say they trust the president (NDI 2022b), and 43 percent trust the president to tackle corruption (NDI 2023). However, survey data suggests that the president is likely not a credible messenger for all. The president enjoys relatively high levels of trust among people aged 60 and above, Romanian speakers and urban residents. Meanwhile, Russian speakers and rural dwellers, in contrast, are considerably more critical of the presidency.
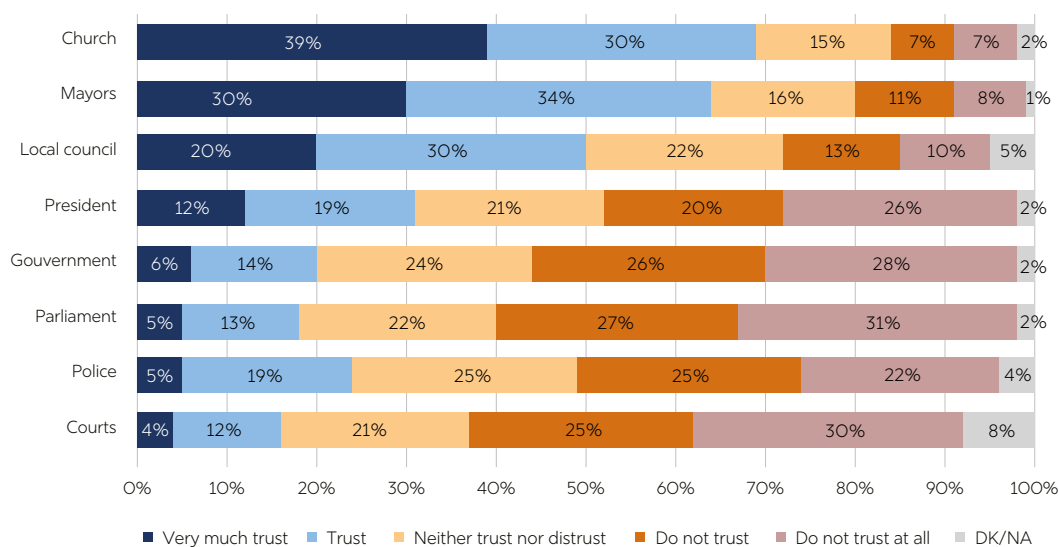
Q. How much do you trust each of the following institution? (closed question)

Figure 9. Trust in institutions. SOURCE: NDI 2022b.

In contrast, there are much higher levels of trust for subnational authorities (figure 9). Half of Moldovans trust local public authorities, and 64 percent report trusting mayors (NDI 2022b). Russian speakers and rural residents are likely to find mayors to be credible messengers of anti-corruption messages, as they are more likely to trust them. Language is also associated with trust in different anti-corruption institutions. Romanian speakers are more likely to trust the CNA, while Russian speakers and young people are more likely to trust the anti-corruption prosecution (NDI 2022b) and may rate their messages as differentially credible, accordingly.

6.2 Nongovernment messengers

Aside from the government, messengers can also be experts, community leaders, peers or a combination thereof. Survey data highlights that the church enjoys the highest level of trust of any institution asked about in a recent survey (69 percent) (NDI 2022b). However, it is important to note that when also asked whether the church should guide people on political topics, 85 percent of people disagreed that it should do so (figure 10). This is important when considering whether religious leaders should engage in anti-corruption messaging. Given strong feelings that the church should stay out of political matters, any anti-corruption messaging endorsed by the church or religious leaders should avoid framing the issue in political terms.
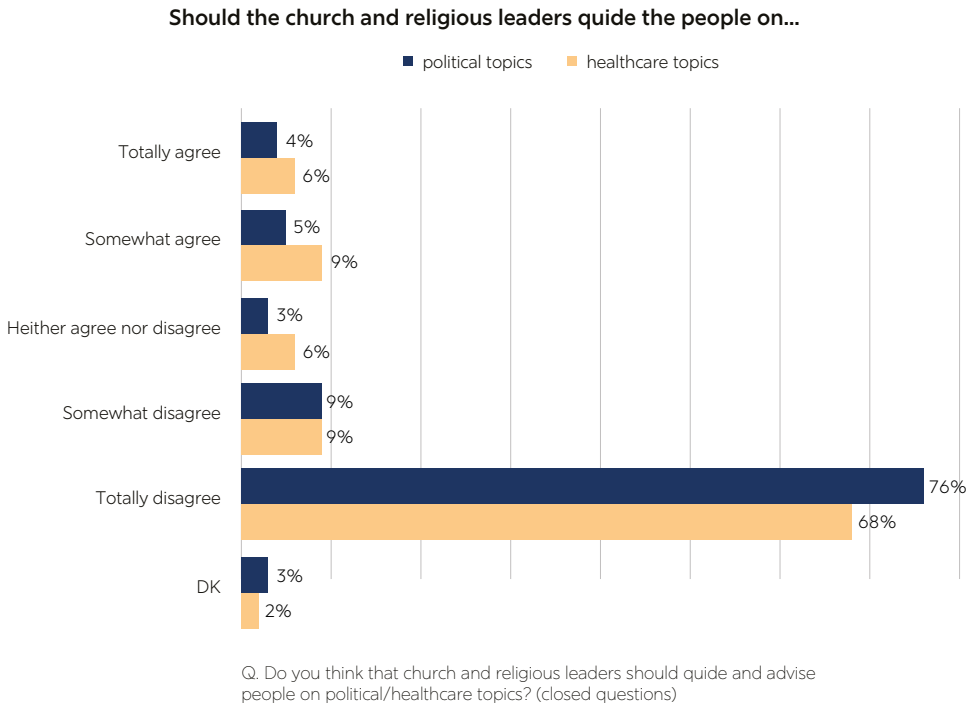
Should the church and religious leaders quide the people on...

■ political topics   ■ healthcare topics

Q. Do you think that church and religious leaders should quide and advise
people on political/healthcare topics? (closed questions)

Figure 10. Church should not lead on political topics. SOURCE: NDI 2022a.

It may be the case, however, that anti-corruption campaigners can harness citizens' trust in the church by working with religious leaders to craft and promote messages that align with religious beliefs. Such messaging, as tried in other contexts, frames corruption as immoral and against religious teachings rather than a political issue. It is worth noting here that two studies – one in Nigeria and one in Papua New Guinea – have tested messages along these lines, both of which failed to find that morality-focused messaging was impactful (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2021; Peiffer and Walton 2022). Given that the efficacy of messaging is very likely dependent on context, it may be the case that such messaging can work in Moldova, even though it did not work in the countries where those studies were conducted.

Survey data also suggests that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) may also be credible messengers for many. When asked about spreading disinformation, only 7 percent thought NGOs do so (NDI 2022b), which could more broadly indicate high levels of trust. Finally, it should be noted that some segments of the population also trust video bloggers and influencers. Such messengers can also be very effective in capturing the attention of engaged social media followers with messaging. However, relying on influencers to promote anti-corruption messages carries important risks. For example, it can be difficult to predict and impossible to control what an influencer advocates for or endorses outside of sponsored messaging, and so anti-corruption campaigners should consider the risk that an influencer they work with currently, or in the future, will endorse views that might not be aligned with the message they wish to communicate.

6.3 The right medium

Messaging should also be tailored to and deployed on trusted media likely to reach target audiences. In Moldova, TV is the most popular source of information. However, it should be noted that the degree to which people trust information from TV is unclear. For example, in the same national survey, respondents ranked TV as the most trusted source of information, but it was also the source most likely to spread disinformation (NDI 2022b). Moreover, while TV may be an effective medium to reach large audiences, it may be difficult to effectively target TV messages to specific segments of the population, if especially narrow targeting is required.

Social media is the second most popular source of information in the country. Fifty-three percent report using social media daily, with Facebook as the most popular social media outlet. Almost half (49 percent) of people use Facebook alone daily (NDI 2022b). Compared to TV, fewer people believe that disinformation is spread on social media or by video bloggers and other influencers, which indicates comparatively more trust in social media (figure 11). Specifically, 69 percent of people listed TV as an information channel where disinformation is spread, while 52 percent listed social media and only 38 percent listed video bloggers and opinion makers as channels that spread disinformation (NDI 2022b). Given the data collected on social media users, messengers can more effectively target narrowly defined target audiences using social media platforms, which may be helpful, depending on a message's aims and the specific target audience one hopes to reach.
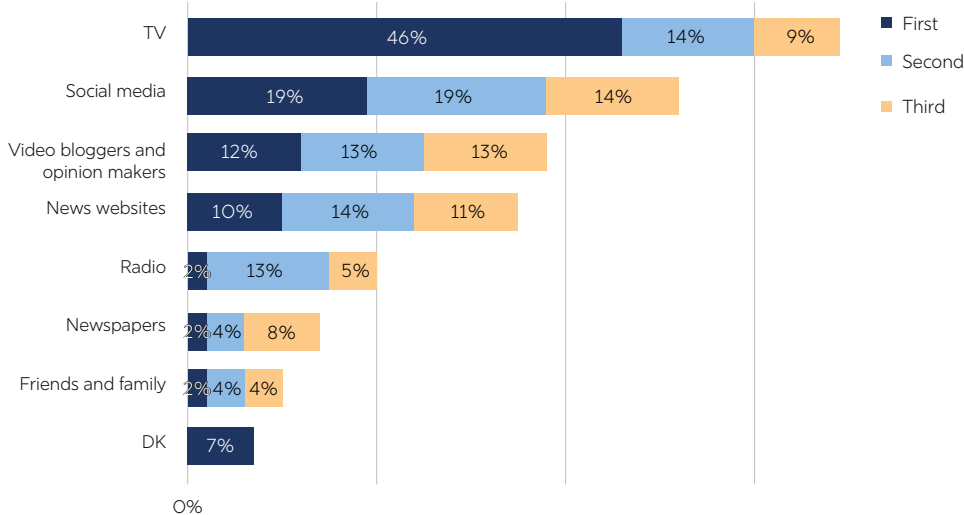
Q. In your opinion, wich of the following information do you think speards news with disinfomration caracter the most? (closed question)

Figure 11. Information channels and disinformation. SOURCE: NDI 2022b.

In addition to the risk associated with using social media influencers as messengers discussed above, messengers should take care in using "native advertising" to communicate messages about (anti)corruption. As it applies to social media, native advertising is a form of paid advertising in which content matches the look and tone of social media content. Research has shown that when audiences recognize content as native advertising (i.e., paid for), it negatively impacts the perceived credibility of the messenger (Amazeen and Muddiman 2018).

7. How to make messages more likely to work

Research on anti-corruption awareness raising suggests that predicting whether an anti-corruption message will have intended and desired impacts is difficult and has shown that anti-corruption messaging can backfire (see Cheeseman and Peiffer 2023, for a summary). It is also clear that anti-corruption communications are more likely to work when embedded within a broader anti-corruption strategy, seen as a tool to help reinforce efforts made through other means (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2024). These findings mean that anti-corruption communicators in Moldova should consider how messaging fits within and is related to other policy pushes and test the messages they design before they are deployed. We conclude by discussing these two issues as they relate to making anti-corruption messages more likely to work in Moldova.

7.1 Importance of testing messages before they are deployed

Only with tests can communicators check whether choices made over design, content and message targeting will likely lead to desired impacts and avoid unintentionally making the situation worse. Message testing is also important for evaluations, checking to ensure the desired outcome has been reached through a campaign. Three main approaches can be used to test or evaluate anti-corruption messaging: focus groups, surveys and experiments. Each has distinct strengths and weaknesses and is appropriate for different aims.

7.1.1 Focus groups

Focus groups are conducted by gathering a small group for a moderated discussion over an hour or so. Such discussions could focus on reactions to proposed messaging content and the aims of a messaging strategy. Focus groups are helpful, especially in the early stages of designing a message, as they can ensure a message's meaning is clear and develop initial expectations around how different groups within a target audience might react to a message. However, these conversations can be greatly impacted by the dynamic of the group – for example, if one person dominates – which can make it difficult to know how all participants feel. Also, research suggests that messaging about corruption likely impacts attitudes subconsciously, so individuals may not be fully aware of the true impact of a message and could misrepresent the impacts of messaging in a focus group discussion.

7.1.2 Surveys

A survey, in contrast, is best placed to gauge attitudes toward a topic of interest to an anti-corruption communications strategy among a large group of people. Representative surveys can generate useful insights into the beliefs, values and attitudes of the target audience, all of which can inform a messaging strategy or campaign. Indeed, this report has drawn on a wealth of survey data to inform the recommendations made. An additional original survey can be designed to answer questions about how an intended audience – and groups within – feel toward issues pertinent to a specific campaign.

7.1.3 Experimental approaches

Messages can also be experimentally tested by exposing one group of people to a message and comparing their reactions to another group that was not exposed to it (the "control" group). These types of experiments are often contained within a large survey, which means the test can assess the impact of exposure to a message across a large group of people. An experimental approach is the only way to reliably and rigorously establish a message's impact on a target population. As such, it is the most appropriate strategy for gauging the likely impact of individual messages, evaluating a messaging campaign and checking whether messages have differential impacts on different segments of the target audience.

7.1.4 Help with testing

For each of these methodologies, a careful research design and skilled analysis are required, which those tasked with anti-corruption communication may not be able to do alone. Communicators should consider collaborating with university researchers on testing. Many university researchers have the necessary skills and are keen to partner with policymakers to design more effective interventions and to be able to access new data. Another source of support may be from professional research firms, which often have the expertise needed to design, run and even analyze the types of tests discussed. A suitable research firm will have high standards and experience in the methodologies discussed, though it may be comparatively more expensive.

Ensuring that messages are likely to have the desired impacts through testing is one way to ensure that communications campaigns are value for money. Also important to this end is to make sure that any messaging strategy is embedded within a broader framework for fighting corruption, as discussed next.

7.2 The importance of embedding messaging within a campaign of action

Anti-corruption communications campaigns are most likely to be impactful when their messages are perceived to be credible from the audience they reach. Therefore, it is important to choose credible messengers (as discussed in Section 6) and ensure that such messaging is credible to its audience. Making anti-corruption messaging credible will require, to a large extent, making sure that any messaging strategy is embedded within broader anti-corruption efforts and the sequencing thereof. As noted earlier, anti-corruption communications alone will likely not be enough to encourage more reports of corruption. To encourage reporting, new reporting mechanisms may need to be created and reforms may be required to change how reports of corruption are investigated and ultimately prosecuted. Only after such changes are made will communications focusing on celebrating reforms or providing information about how to report have the best chance of changing attitudes and behavior.

Indeed, recent research by Xiao, Scott and Gong (2022) on building public support for the Independent Commission Against Corruption in Hong Kong shows that anti-corruption messaging can be particularly effective when it is part of a wider raft of mutually reinforcing strategies. It therefore may not make sense to undertake awareness raising as an isolated strategy; the timing of public awareness campaigns should be designed to maximize synergies with other kinds of interventions. For governments, making anti-corruption messaging plausible to citizens will largely involve demonstrating real political commitment to anti-corruption, more generally. This commitment can be communicated, for example, by investing in anti-corruption institutions, prosecuting high-profile cases of corruption and recovering money lost to corruption, some of which the government in Moldova is already doing.

Similarly, effective anti-corruption communication should not only be something that governments do reactively, for example, in response to corruption allegations. Reactive responses can create the impression that governments only act when there is a problem and that leaders are not truly committed to the anti-corruption fight. Instead, it makes more sense to be proactive, integrating effective communication as part of the anti-corruption strategy from the beginning. Early communication can also be important to align popular expectations with reality and avoid disappointment. In Ukraine, after the Maidan uprising in 2014, for example, expectations of rapid change were thwarted by the complexity of changing a complex and deeply embedded system. Given the importance of proactive messaging, it may be wise to communicate the government's commitment to dealing with graft and make sure that citizens know what the timeline will be at the beginning of a new reform-minded regime. As with all messaging, however, it will be important to ensure that such messages are tested to ensure they have the desired effect.

Given that communications campaigns are most often targeted at ordinary citizens, it will also be important for the government to make reforms that impact the services that citizens most often encounter, like within the health sector, where most bribes in the country are paid. Baez-Camargo's (2022) anti-bribery and gift-giving/taking intervention in a major hospital in Tanzania is a useful example to note here. They not only targeted awareness raising at service users, but they also engaged more broadly with health care providers and actors within the health sector to deliver and endorse messages and discuss issues to change the institutional culture around corruption (Baez-Camargo 2022). This communications campaign, therefore, was viewed as a continuous interaction and a part of broader changes within the institution around encouraging professional ethics and was demonstrated to be impactful in reducing gift-giving and bribery. This example shows that, ultimately, changing how people feel about corruption and anti-corruption is no easy or small task. While anti-corruption and communications strategies can potentially play an important role in bringing about desired change, they require careful thinking and planning, considering the anti-corruption efforts being made elsewhere.

In other words, it is critical to ensure that messages are credible by integrating anti-corruption communication into a wider campaign that includes concrete interventions to (1) emphasize that the government takes corruption seriously, (2) build public trust in key institutions, and (3) make it easier for Moldovans to report corruption. Messaging can help to inform the public and increase reporting, but experience suggests that it is not a solution on its own.

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