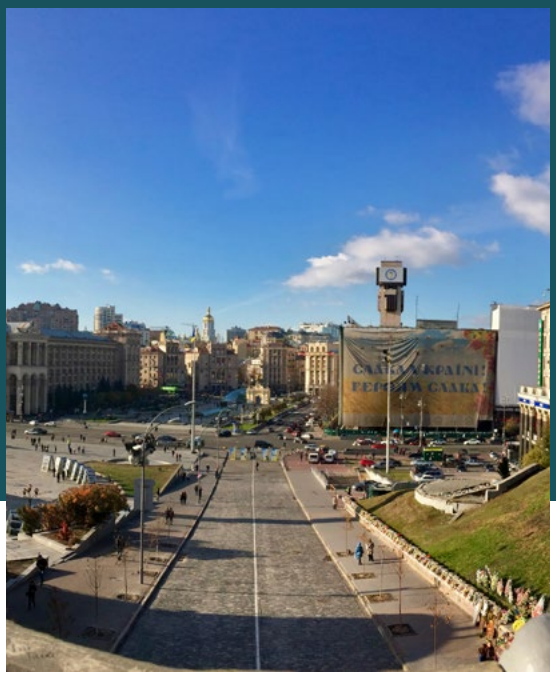


Maidan square, inaugurated soon after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, is still a symbol of citizens' sacrifices in challenging corruption.

Building Political Will to Combat Corruption

Key steps to mobilize local actors

Authors:
Marcia Grimes[1], Oksana Huss[2] and Ksenia Ivanyshyn[3]
Photos:
Oksana Huss

Abstract

Pervasive corruption presents a challenge to scholars, practitioners, and activists. This policy brief reviews academic and policy perspectives on political will in anti-corruption efforts. The importance of political will for the success of anti-corruption reforms is widely cited, but knowledge gaps remain regarding why political will arises (or fails to do so). This policy brief summarizes the academic literature on political will to combat corruption and identifies key strategies and questions that may help policy actors to better measure, analyze but also to mobilize anti-corruption political will.

Introduction

Political will is commonly cited in the policy literature, the media, and among civil society actors as a key factor necessary for change. International organizations in Ukraine refer to the absence of political will as a factor that hinders anti-corruption efforts at all levels of government in Ukraine.[4] Civil society experts point to a lack of political will as one of the main challenges for the realization of anticorruption reform.[5] Despite regular references to "political will", policy actors and the press rarely define the term.

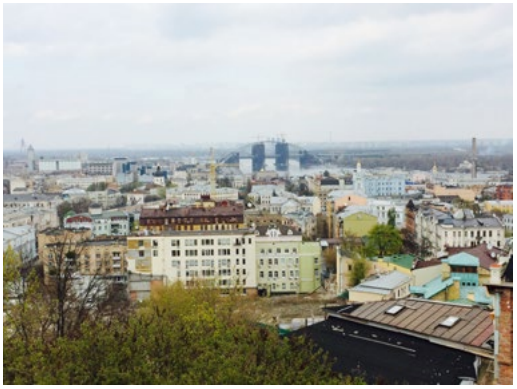
Most definitions see political will as an individual-level commitment to change among key actors (i.e. individuals in top positions of authority). A second structural approach sees political will as a function of institutional factors, measured as sustained action that builds on rigorous policy analysis. A third constructivist camp instead emphasizes that key actors must develop a shared understanding of the policy problem, as well as viable solutions, through dialogue.

Regarding measurement, many authors observe political will through actual policy outcomes. This approach conflates political will with the outcomes it is expected to generate. Policies may fail for reasons other

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

[1] University of Gothenburg, marcia.grimes@pol.gu.se
[2] Bologna University
[3] Anti-Corruption Research and Education Centre (ACREC)
[4] "National Security through a Prism of International Cooperation," Discussion Paper (Kyiv: Razumkov Centre, 2013), p.12, https://razumkov.org.ua/upload/1380112862_file.pdf.
[5] "Sectoral Briefs on Reforms in Ukraine" (Kyiv: Reanimation Package of Reforms Coalition, 2019), p.9, https://rpr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Brify_ENdlya_vebu.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0NDveeQn12zPD2WT-fwlCJa8M9L3xuHNiA4bFBIT3FWzAlfnhu33m9Hi9g.



Podíl bridge in Kyiv is a prominent symbol of corruption in construction in Ukraine.

than a lack of political will, especially in the area of anti-corruption, and especially where corruption is prevalent. This brief suggests conceptualizing and measuring anti-corruption political will as a commitment among key actors to bring about needed reform, but also whether these commitments are seen as credible by other key actors, i.e. that there is trust among key actors in each other's commitment to reform.

Methodology

Our literature survey entailed collecting academic and policy literature in major academic databases. After the pre-selection of relevant sources based on the keywords, we processed 79 articles (45 academic and 34 policy reports) and assigned tags and notes based on the abstracts. We then conducted a content analysis in MaxQDA of sixteen academic and ten policy sources from political science, philosophy, and psychology to map the conceptual and explanatory understandings of political will.

Results and conclusions

What is political will?

Political will is broadly cited without a precise definition. Implicitly, many sources reduce the term to the individual actor level, with the word "will" being semantically related to volition, which applies to individual behavior. However, a number of more precise conceptualizations exist, particularly to aid policy actors in estimating its presence or absence among public authorities, and form expectations and strategies for collaboration accordingly. Three primary analytical perspectives emerge: individual, structural and constructivist.[6]

Individual perspective

Most definitions embrace the individual perspective and refer to the will of political leaders. Psychology and behavioral economics focus attention on the role of personality in explaining political will (e.g. Blickle, Schütte, and Wihler 2018). This perspective notes that there may be a gap between leaders' *inner environment* (pursuing a feeling of satisfaction based on one's own achievements) *and outer environment* (the need for social belonging, conformism), introducing tension between the consistency of personality and its adaptability (Šmigoc, 2015). The gap between the inner and outer environments may result in personal motivation, or will, to bridge the gap between the two environments to resolve the state of personal dissonance. In this context, Malena (2009b) refers to the term "*political want*," which is defined by both personal

[6] There are multiple examples of a complex conceptualization of political will in the literature that combine different levels of analysis: e.g. multidimensional circle of political will by Malena (2009), who differentiates political want, can, and must; three models of analysis by Woocher (2001) that include rational actor behavior, organizational behavior, and governmental politics; Persson and Sjöstedt (2012) combine principal-agent theory and state theory.

values and rational benefit calculations. The personal level of political will is closely connected to the environment the person is acting in, as individual behavior largely reflects of the individual's values, but also their assessment of the environment.

Structural perspective

The structural perspective integrates the institutional context and actor constellations into the definition of political will. Post et al.'s (2010) widely-cited definition exemplifies this approach: "political will is the extent of committed support among key decision makers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem." The authors make reference to the "veto player" theory to help identify the decision makers considered 'key' in any given issue.[7] The role of "critical mass" or a combination of multiple actors backing change is necessary to identify and promote a solution, but it is also crucial to create a public demand for reform (i.e. political *must* by Malena 2009 or pressure from "the top" and from "below" by Spehar 2018). Raile et al. (2018) extend the concept further and equate *political will* to *public will*, which they describe as two sides of the same coin, both necessary for a change.[8]

Constructivist perspective

Finally, the constructivist perspective recognizes that a shared understanding of a problem and its solution are an integral components of political will. Post et al. (2010) highlight that political will presupposes a "common understanding of a particular problem" and agreement upon effective policy solutions. Kukutschka (2014) argues instead that public actor(s) do not necessarily have to agree with other actors upon the solution, but they have to interact in a meaningful dialogue on potential solutions. Dialogue is even more central in the conceptualization of political/public will put forth by Raile et.al. (2018), who argue that dialogue between stakeholders is essential for both *assessing* and *facilitating shared understanding of a* problem and potential solutions. Thus, communication processes become a key component to develop political will from the contructivist perspective.

Maidan square, inaugurated soon after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, is still a symbol of citizens' sacrifices in challenging corruption.

What conditions are conducive for political will to emerge?

Based on the conceptualizations above, it is possible to identify three sets of conditions that are seen as conducive to the development of political will: conditions internal to a government body, conditions external to the government body, and conditions that arise due to interactions among actors (see Fig. 1 below).

[7] "'Veto players' theory (Tsebelis 2002) provides a useful approach for thinking about potential blocking actors and the sources of positive assent when the bases of government authority are clear. Veto players theory proposes that a crucial element in understanding policy change is determining the players whose agreement or indifference is necessary to change the status quo policy position." Post et al. 2010, 661.

[8] While public support for reform is without doubt a contributing factor to policy change of any kind, we see value in distinguishing between public will (opinions and attitudes) and the political will of incumbent leaders. The concept of public will, as well as the conditions that contribute to mobilizing demands and support for reform efforts, are beyond the scope of this brief.

INTERNAL CONDITIONS
- individual motivation: personal beliefs and values, education, experiences, relationships
- public office capacity: authority to resolve the issue, basic human, financial, technological and time resources to allocate into a solution

EXTERNAL CONDITIONS
- regime type with basic conditions of democracy
- elections that lead to a change of political elites
- economic state, esp. periods of crisis or shock

RELATIONAL CONDITIONS
-possibility and capacity for a dialogue between key stakeholders
-availability of "critical mass" that poses the demand and supports a change
-mobilization, e.g. in form of coalition building

POLITICAL WILL

Internal conditions include those that are relevant to the individual-level behavior of a stakeholder and to the organizational-level conditions of government organizations or agencies. Blickle et al. (2018, 23) conclude that "political will is not humanistic and driven by altruism." It is motivated by the interests of a particular group to which a decision-maker belongs. Živanović (2015, p. 90) adds a number of individual factors that determine will, including **personal beliefs and values, education, experiences, and relationships**. Malena (2009) instead summarizes the internal conditions related to public office in the term "capacity" or "political *can*." Capacity implies that the actor not only has the **necessary authority** to respond to the issue, but also **basic human, financial, technological and time resources** to allocate to a problem.

External conditions constitute the contextual conditions that either constrain or provide opportunities for a political actor to act. This includes both organizational characteristics of the public offices, as well as the characteristics of a polity (Malena, 2009a; Woocher, 2001). Brinkerhoff (2000) provides the most comprehensive list of external conditions for political will, including **regime type (democracy), elections (specifically transitions of power), and economic events (specifically crisis and shock)**.

A final set – **relational conditions** – are the **possibility and capacity for dialogue between key stakeholders** to develop political will. Multiple authors highlight the need that a **"critical mass" demands and supports change**. This includes **active engagement of private sector, media, civil society, foreign donors, and sees coalition-building as a crucial component** (Chêne, 2010, p. 2). Hammergren (1998, p. 17) similarly argues that change requires an interest-based mobilization of forces in order to overcome resistance.

How to identify political will?

The "lack of political will" can express itself as unwillingness of authorities to initiate or support an initiative, efforts to obstruct reforms, or the strategic adoption of policies that are impossible to implement (Pham et al., 2019). Many authors discuss political will in dichotomous terms, as being either present or absent. Dichotomizing political will is counterproductive, as it fails to capture the complexity and different analytical layers of political will. It also puts a demotivating pressure on individual politicians, especially given that the failure of reforms can have other reasons than lack of individual support or initiative (Persson & Sjöstedt, 2012).

Post et al. (2010) and Pham et al. (2019, 1001) elaborate a measurement framework that sees political will as a **continuum** and its evolution as a **dynamic process**, which leaves space to assess not only gradual improvement but also reversals.

Brinkenhoff (2000, 242-3) elaborates **five indicators** of political will for anti-corruption, which we consider most useful for the recommendations on fostering political will:

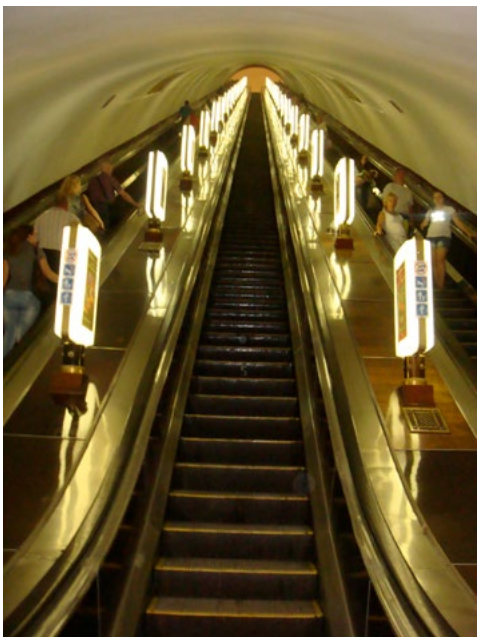
- **Source of initiative** – Are there indications that key political and administrative actors see corruption as an issue requiring attention? – Efforts to counteract corruption come from local authorities' *own initiatives*, indicating a genuine intent to pursue reform.

- **In-depth analysis of the problem –** Is there a systematic analysis that acknowledges the complexities of corruption and presents a plausible model to counteract the problem that reflects this analysis? – A superficial approach to the problem "demonstrates shallow willingness to pursue change" (p.242).

- **Mobilization of support** – Is there an ability of the reformer "to identify and mobilize support for anti-corruption activities"? (ibid.) – As a rule, a credible vision of a reform's success is participatory and incorporates the input and interests of important stakeholders. In addition, the reformer masters an "adequate and ongoing support to overcome resistance" of those who lose because of the reform.

- **Application of credible sanctions** – Does the reformer apply positive and negative sanctions as a part of the reform strategy? – Carefully tailored sanctions imply credible and enforceable measures aimed to induce behavioral change on the system level, not the individual level.

- **Continuity of effort** – Is there an ongoing learning process based on the evaluation and further improvement of anti-corruption efforts? – "This includes establishing a process for monitoring the impacts of anti-corruption/reform efforts and the means for incorporating those findings into a strategy to ensure that reformers can achieve results" (p.243).



Anti-corruption institutional reforms, and effective implementation and enforcement of those reforms, require the backing of a wide set of actors. Real improvements can require prolonged campaigns with numerous stages, and as with a stairway (like Arsenalna metro station in Kyiv, measuring 105.5 metres long), some actors may be seeking to move up while others continue to travel the other direction.

Three key strategies to stimulate political will for anti-corruption

1. Identify a wide set of actors "talking" about anti-corruption

In a political context where corruption is prevalent, commitment to anti-corruption efforts among a few individuals, even in key positions of leadership, is insufficient. For these reason, local politicians need to involve members of the political opposition, business representatives, local media and civil society organizations, and maybe even community-based organizations, religious leaders, and universities.

Widespread corruption benefits incumbents and others with insider status in the short term, and unlike other policy areas, change requires not only institutional reform but also that all actors make behavioral changes that may infringe on their short-term material interests (Persson et al., 2013). Broad involvement is needed.

Key findings and implications

- In the area of anti-corruption, we argue that efforts to assess political will should focus on two necessary conditions: that key relevant actors (political, administrative, and business leaders) show commitment to reduce corruption, and that these same actors trust one another's commitments to do the same.
- Given this conceptualization of political will, it is reasonable to expect that dialogue among the relevant actors, a dialogue which also involves civil society anti-corruption activists and policy experts, will foster its emergence.

International organizations seeking to support change must work together with local politicians that profess a commitment to making needed legal and institutional reforms, and to ensuring their implementation and enforcement, even (or perhaps even especially) changes that imply limiting their own power and opportunities to extract rents.

2. Identify, support, and bring together actors prepared to "walk the walk" to combat corruption

Developing political will to combat corruption is a collective action dilemma. The best short-term strategy for leaders is to "talk the talk" without "walking the walk" – i.e. to profess to work against corruption while in actuality doing little to promote change, or even obstructing change behind the scenes.

Relevant actors both need to have a commitment to promote change, but, crucially, also *need to trust one another's commitments as well.* A reform-minded political leader, however genuine, may abstain from vesting scarce time, resources—and risk her own political standing—to push for change if she deems that other key actors will not support the effort. **If only a small portion of actors genuinely seek change, the overall outcome will be marginal and short-lasting, and those pursuing reform or who abstain from corruption may even suffer retaliatory actions from others.**

Thus, local politicians who want to mobilize other actors to act together against corruption should bring those actors into dialogue on what actions they have taken to combat corruption. Relevant actors need to feel confident that the commitments of most other relevant actors are genuine and credible, and not merely rhetorical. Thus, generate spaces to ask relevant actors to show their own commitment to change, but also ask about others' commitments.

3. Build a "critical mass" by showing citizens that many others support anti-corruption efforts

After there is a critical group of actors that support anti-corruption actions in talk and in practice, it is important to communicate this to citizens. If there is a long history of corruption, citizens will tend to distrust the local government and believe that corruption is rampant even in cases where there is evidence of change. To show citizens that there is a wider will to combat corruption, that it is not only "talk" but also concrete actions, local politicians can make use of wider communication campaigns, including game-like interactive displays or applications, which may reveal to citizens that others are more honest that they may have thought, increasing trust.

Recommendations on a Dialogue about Political Will

Given the indicators of political will, adopted from Brinkenhoff 2000 and presented in this brief, combined with the insights that political will to combat corruption presents a collective action dilemma, we propose a number of steps local authorities might take in a specialized training in order to nurture political will:

Discussion questions

- Do you agree that political will is only likely to promote change when it is shared among key actors in a locality, or is it sufficient that a single leader (mayor or equivalent) tries to bring about change?
- This brief maintains that political will entails that key actors share a common conceptualization of the problem and share ideas about appropriate solutions. Do you agree, and if not, what approaches do you think will contribute to developing political will?
- What types of initiatives or strategies might local actors – either elected leaders, civil servants, business or civil society actors – take to try to promote political will? How can they foster a shared understanding of corruption as a problem and agreement about possible solutions?
- How can reform minded individuals convince key actors to join the discussion and to help bring about institutional improvement?

1. Defining the problems for the political initiative: at this stage, *authorities learn how to be sensitive to the "demand" for change in their communities.* In particular, this means finding methods to "listen" to opposition leaders, citizens, civil society, and businesses, in order to identify actors who share the conviction that corruption needs political attention. In addition, it is important to begin a dialogue about the perception, and variations in understandings of, the conditions in the locality that different stakeholders might have.

2. Analyzing the problem and searching for a solution: at this stage, *authorities can learn about the methods of policy analysis, basic work with data.*[9] In order to generate as many ideas as possible for the solution, *authorities can learn methods of citizen sourcing and co-creation.*[10] Such approaches will harness the civic involvement of the community to find creative and innovative solutions. They will also foster a sense of ownership among the citizenry.

3. Broadening the coalition and mobilizing support for a solution: at this stage, it is useful to *train authorities in methods of effective deliberation,* a method to come to decisions and identify suitable solutions jointly alongside multiple stakeholders. Based on what we know about corruption—the complexity of the issue, but also the possibility of short-term costs for local political and economic elites—it is crucial to involve a range of stakeholders as well as independent experts, and to mobilize support among citizens for a particular solution.

4. Credible implementation and sanctioning: at this stage, *authorities can learn how to introduce and promote social innovation* beyond legislation, and *how to communicate the credibility of the initiative.* Often, issues of high resonance require social innovation, which means changing practice and not only institutions. In other words, sustained change requires not only new regulations, but also new operating procedures within different departments and branches of local government. As a rule, *the change of behaviors must overcome both resistance and inertia, which local officials must learn how to deal with.*

5. Ensuring suitability of an effort: at this stage, the social innovation becomes institutionalized. Important skills to develop are *monitoring and assessment* in order to introduce necessary improvements for the next cycle of the initiative. It is almost impossible to avoid mistakes when introducing new practices. Critical skills at this stage are the ability to identify loopholes, learn from mistakes, and the openness to admit and correct those mistakes. Continued dialogue about the benefits of bringing about change is essential to sustain this process.

[9] E.g. courses for both politicians and civil servants in policy analysis methods and the use of data and statistics
[10] E.g. https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/estonia-citizens-assembly-restoring-political-legitimacy/ and https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/co-creation-of-prozorro-an-account-of-the-process-and-actors

References and Further Reading

Bauhr, M. and M. Grimes. (2014) Indignation or resignation: The implications of transparency for societal accountability. *Governance* 27(2): 291-320.

Blickle, G., Schütte, N., & Wihler, A. (2018). Political will, work values, and objective career success: A novel approach – The Trait-Reputation-Identity Model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *107*, 42–56. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.03.002

Brinkerhoff, D. W. (2000). Assessing political will for anti-corruption efforts: An analytic framework. *Public Administration and Development*, *20*(3), 239–252. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-162X(200008)20:3<239::AID-PAD138>3.0.CO;2-3

Chêne, M. (2010). *Mobilising broad anti-corruption coalitions* (U4 Expert Answer No. 262). U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/helpdesk/262_Mobilising_broad_anti_corruption_coalitions.pdf

Hammergren, L. (1998). *Political Will, Constituency Building, And Public Support In Rule Of Law Programs* [Research Report]. Center for Democracy and Governance, Bureau for Global Programs, Field Support, and Research, U.S. Agency for International Development.

Kukutschka, R. M. B. (2014). *Building Political Will: Topic Guide*. Transparency International, Anti-Corruption Helpdesk. https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Topic_Guide-_Political_Will.pdf

Malena, C. (Ed.). (2009). *From Political Won't to Political Will: Building Support for Participatory Governance*. Kumarian Press.

Persson, A., Rothstein, B., & Teorell, J. (2013). Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail-Systemic Corruption as a Collective Action Problem. *Governance*, *26*(3), 449–471.

Persson, A., & Sjöstedt, M. (2012). Responsive and Responsible Leaders: A Matter of Political Will? *Perspectives on Politics*, *10*(03), 617–632. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592712001648

Pham, P. N., Gibbons, N., & Vinck, P. (2019). A framework for assessing political will in transitional justice contexts. *International Journal of Human Rights*, *23*(6), 993–1009. Academic Search Index.

Post, L. A., Raile, A. N. W., & Raile, E. D. (2010). Defining Political Will. *Politics & Policy*, *38*(4), 653–676. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2010.00253.x

Raile, A. N. W., Raile, E. D., & Post, L. A. (2018). Analysis and action: The political will and public will approach. *Action Research*. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750318772662

Šmigoc, E. B. (2015). Political will for political behaviour. In D. Abazović & A. Mujkić (Eds.), *Political will: A short introduction* (pp. 33–61). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Spehar, A. (2018). The pursuit of political will: Decision makers' incentives and gender policy implementation in the Western Balkans. International Feminist Journal of Politics, 20(2), 236–250. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1391709

Tsebelis, George. (2002). Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Woocher, L. (2001). Deconstructing "Political Will": Explaining the Failure to Prevent Deadly Conflict and Mass Atrocities. Journal of Public and International Affairs, 12(1), 179–206.

Živanović, M. (2015). Political Will: Or Concept of Public Policy as Analytical Tool for Research of Political Will. In D. Abazović & A. Mujkić (Eds.), *Political will: A short introduction: Case study—Bosnia and Herzegovina* (pp. 77–124). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

The recommendations (or views) contained in this policy brief exclusively reflect those of its authors.

Contact details

Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

Visiting address	**Södervägen 1D, 621 58 Visby**
Telephone	**+46 498-29 91 00**
E-mail	**info@icld.se**
Web	**www.icld.se**