

# Petty corruption in Central and Eastern Europe: the client's perspective

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**Abstract** This qualitative study examines the role of clients in petty corruption by analyzing actual corrupt exchanges between ordinary citizens and low level public and private employees in post-communist Hungary. Using a grounded theory approach, interviews reveal how clients from different social strata deal with low-level agents in corrupt situations. Findings suggest two contrasting forms of low-level corruption: transactions where the client and the agent do not have a prior relationship and where external factors dominate the relationship; and cases with stronger social ties between the actors, where the client has more freedom to structure the transaction. However, a client's social background frequently determines the form of corrupt transaction and the form of resources illegally exchanged in the deal.

## Introduction

Scholars often distinguish between two types of corruption: petty and grand corruption. While grand corruption occurs at the highest levels of state institutions and private corporations, petty corruption typically involves low-level officials of state administrations and their clients [1]. In grand corruption, powerful economic or political actors—such as political parties, firms, international agencies and national governments—are able to influence policies and regulations to extract huge amounts of public expenditures for their own benefit [2, 3]. In contrast, petty corruption typically involves relatively small sums of money or exchanges of favors between street-level bureaucrats and ordinary citizens.

Empirical studies suggest that, since the fall of communism, corruption in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has permeated all spheres of society [4–6]. Personal experiences of petty corruption are part of an ordinary citizen's everyday life [7]. Locals report that extortion by corrupt street-level officials is the most typical form of

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