

## **MEASURING THE WHITE-COLLAR CLIENTS' TRUST IN THE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS – AN INCREASING DEMAND TRIGGERED BY THE RAISING AWARENESS OF THE CORRUPTION PHENOMENON**

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**Abstract:** *The papers aims at adding to the current of assessing the level of corruption, public administration reform and their impact upon the economic development a in-depth study that emphasizes once again the strong link between corruption and public administration as a provider of public service (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Mauro 1998). Moreover, the issue that the paper is underlying refers to the lack of more developed and accurate instruments and methodologies that measure the corruption level in different fields of activity, and, as a consequence, the need to firstly estimate the intensity of the phenomenon upon the clients of the public administration. In order to avoid general perceptions, the authors decided to limit the research on a sample comprising only respondents that are both clients and providers of a public service (referred to as white-collar clients), hence assuming they have a more accurate understanding of the phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** *integrity, trust, anticorruption, public sector*

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The issue of corruption indicators is very extensive. This is triggered by the difficulties of measuring a phenomenon with very different origins. Much of these indicators are based on measuring the "perception" using various sociological researches. In the field literature there is a distinction made between subjective and objective indicators. Although they are using the same idea of the sociological questionnaire, the difference lies within the typology of the questions. For example, a subjective indicator will include questions like "Do you think that the government is corrupt?" while an objective indicator will include questions about their own experiences with the corrupt transactions (Urta 2007; Seligson 2002; Calrke and Xu, 2004). Another category of indicators are called aggregated indicators, which started to develop in mid 1990s. They are built by combining multiple primary measurements. They received several names: measurements of "second generation" (Johnston, 2000), "composite indicators" (Arndt and Oman, 2006) or "aggregated indicators" (Kaufmann et al., 1999, 2003). At

international level there are three major indicators of corruption. The first of these indicators was the *International Country Risk Guide* (ICRG), an indicator used by many companies to locate investments and development businesses in certain economic regions. A second very important indicator is the *Corruption Perception Index* (CPI) published by Transparency International, which measures the perception of the public and certain experts on corruption in a society. A third indicator, *Corruption Control*, was developed by Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2003).

## **RESEARCH METHOD AND THE EMPIRICAL BASIS OF THE WORK**

The methodology we are using in this research is both of a qualitative nature for the theoretical background needed to substantiate the argument of the entire research, and of quantitative nature, namely a sociological questionnaire for assessing the white collar clients' trust in the institutions with a strong involvement in combating corruption and their awareness as both consumers and providers of public service subjected to corruption. The items shall be aiming at factors influencing the corruption phenomenon, and also possible measures to be taken or measures already implemented (successfully or not) in order to raise the public institutions' trust level. The sample is three-folded in terms of the tested institutions' location – Transilvania area, Muntenia area and Moldova area - , and two-folded in terms of the white-collar's administrative level (local or central).

## **RESEARCH BOUNDARIES**

Choosing the best methods for fighting corruption is one theme with a high degree of difficulty. This situation occurs due to the lack of a system of indicators to measure the impact of certain specific measures for combating corruption. On an international level, one of the most popular tools for assessing corruption, and that also offers targeted recommendations for certain sectors is National Integrity System , a tool developed by Jeremy Pope (1997, 2000). The author analyzes the entire social and institutional structure at state level, assessing a number of predefined components, and proposing a series of amendments. But as Brown and Uhr (2004) were writing down, the system provides a qualitative analysis of the ethical infrastructure of a state, without a thorough evaluation of the expected impact of the proposed measures or of already adopted measures.

In fact, the field literature presents numerous questions about the future of research on the corruption phenomenon, related to our research directions. Among the questions that our research should, in the end, answers are: Corruption conditions trust or vice versa? What form of corruption is the most harmful? What was done and what can still be done? How can policies for combating corruption be assessed?

Out of these questions, our current research seeks to find an answer for the first two. Nevertheless, the research project aims to establish very clearly what public administration reform measures have an impact on reducing corruption. In the end, the research project intends to respond to the issue of government reform in correlation with

the economic growth, taking into account that the existing studies do not provide an analysis of causality between these elements. It should be noted that the focus of research will be on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, namely the economies in transition.

The text included in the section or subsection must begin one line after the section or subsection title. Leave one blank line (10 point) before the section title and one line before the subsection title.

## **MEASURING CORRUPTION AND TRUST**

The increased importance of corruption has generated a strong demand for specific strategies, measures of citizen trust in state institutions. The aim of having clear and simple indicators constitute a problem both for practitioners and for academics and researchers, this is because in this area more comprehensive indicators are required, with various factors of influence, often subjective, as opposed to the traditional direct and 'aseptic' approach of the econometric indicators, common in other areas of activity (Urta, 2007). In the field literature numerous indicators are being used, each expressing some aspects of corruption, of the public administration reform, as they are calculated for certain countries, certain political and administrative regimes and for certain periods of time. The set of indicators that the research project is considering are meant to have a wider application range, while not having the pretense of 'good for everything' to the issue of corruption in public administration.

Achieving this set of indicators is based on two courses of action. The first concerns the field literature, other assessments of corruption and analyses of strategies for the fight against corruption. The second direction is to identify indicators that reinforce the triangle "corruption - government - economic development".

Identifying the causes promoting corruption in the public system is one of the most difficult problems of researching the corruption phenomenon. The field literature identifies four categories of factors directly influencing a system corruption: political, juridical, historical, social and cultural factors and economic factors.

The category of political and juridical factors include the quality of the political system, legal system characteristics, Leite and Weidmann (1999) - in particular the laws and institutions that refer to the fight against corruption - the quality of the democratic system, the electoral system features, the administrative system features, the degree of administrative decentralization in a country, so on and so forth.

A number of studies, such as La Porta (1999), Treisman (2000) and many others highlight the traditions and historical factors' influence upon the level of corruption in a country and upon the characteristics of the mechanisms of substantiating and transmitting it. Also, the social and cultural factors have a special role in highlighting the characteristics of corruption in a country, La Porta (1999), Treisman (2000), Alesina (2003). Equally, religious factors play an important role in the spread of corruption in the social system.

The economic factors such as the level of economic openness, for example, Dreher (2003), Treisman (2000), Wei (2000), the size of the public sector, Tanzi (1998),

Treisman (2000), the public sector wages, van Rijckeghem (1997), etc. directly affect the level of corruption.

Regarding the issue of the influence of corruption on the economic growth the field literature has tried to find an answer to the differences in the influence in different states, but without giving a clear result (Allen and Qian, 2007). As it can be seen, the literature generally focuses on establishing the causes, on the effects' measurement and less on choosing the best measures for reforming the public administration to combat this phenomenon. Hence, the difficulties encountered are precisely arising from the nature of corruption. Corruption is a phenomenon with many facets: sociological, economic, cultural, legal and the possibilities to find a panacea is nonexistent.

Trust is usually associated with the citizen-government relations, and its decline is detrimental to public service delivery (Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek and Bouckaert, 2008). Moreover, the lack of trust fed by corruption is considered critical in that it undermines government efforts to mobilize society to help fight corruption and leads the public to routinely dismiss government promises to fight corruption (Morris and Klesner, 2010). In that same regard, scholars argued that corruption can never strengthen citizens' trust since bribe paying and clientelism open the door to otherwise scarce and inaccessible services and subsidies, and that it would never increase institutional trust (Lavalley E., Razafindrakoto M., Roubaud F., 2008), as the 'efficient grease' theory once claimed. It must be noted that when assessing trust in institutions and corruption we rely upon perceptions and not necessarily the real situation (Wallace, Latcheva, 2006: 82), so, we that in mind, we strive to get answers based upon respondents' estimations of their activities (the surveyed civil servants).

In that regard, some scholars have tried to better understand what drives interorganisational trust in public administration (Oomsels P., Bouckaert G. (2015), others have called it inner-trust and focused on assessing it for different categories of civil servants (Yang and Pang, 2015), or in-group trust measured by official reports like the one provided by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2010). Call it as you will.

## **THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

The questionnaire was build in order to test the *hypothesis* according to which an increase level of trust that would bring down corruption can only be reached by turning to a zoom out approach allowing us to firstly establish the level o trust of the inner circle and its consequent decisions, before expecting a stronger citizens-public administration relation. The argument here is that when considering different official reports showing a growing level of distrust and corruption (COM(2014)38 final), we cannot help but wonder whether, giving all the failing efforts made by Romania and the European Union aiming at bringing down corruption, we have been focusing more on the outer circle (citizens' trust), and less on the inner trust.

Europeans are deeply worried about corruption – Eurobarometer survey results show that three quarters (76%) of Europeans think that corruption is widespread and

more than half (56%) think that the level of corruption in their country has increased over the past three years (COM(2014)38 final: 5-7).

All the past public decisions on fighting corruption led us to believe that we must focus our analysis on establishing the level of trust of the providers in the provided good or service, which is actuality the topicality of this research. Should the public servant trust the public administration, then the one strong instrument that marketing offers us – word of mouth – can be better exploit for fighting corruption. But, should the opposite situation occur, as our findings would reveal, the issue becomes more severe and, moreover, wakens the ability of the public decision maker to continue making decisions, as it produces a decision fatigue and a bad public decisions' ripple (Dinu, 2012). The degree in which a public manager trusts its decisions depends on the level of certainty in which the decision is made. The surer the decider is about the results, the more trust he/she will have to make that decision. Being a two way street, a low level of trust in the decision's results would only worsen the already complex environment of the public decisions, which is one distinguished by high uncertainty, incomplete information and asymmetrical information.

The questionnaire was designed for assessing the white collar clients' trust in the institutions with a strong involvement in combating corruption and their awareness as both consumers and providers of public service subjected to corruption, and it contained eight questions:

- In your opinion, to what extent is corruption a key issue in the Romanian society? (Q1)
- How would you assess the prevalence of corruption in the following areas: education, health, police, justice, public procurement, local public administration, central public administration? (Q2)
- How do you assess the activity of the institutions having the mission to enforce the law? (Q3)
- How would you rate the impact of the following measures for combating corruption (increasing penalties, the confiscation of illicitly acquired assets, revenue growth, increasing the efficiency of the public administration. increasing the efficiency of the judiciary system, legislation clarity)? (Q4)
- How would you value the role of the following institution in combating corruption (The National Anticorruption Directorate, The General Anticorruption Directorate, The National Agency for Fiscal Administration, The National Office for Preventing and Combating Money Laundering, Ministry of Domestic Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Court of Accounts)? (Q5)
- How would you estimate the importance of the following elements in increasing corruption the Romanian public sector (wage level, work conditions, custom, quality of law, the desire for enrichment, the interference of politics in the public administration's activity)? (Q6)
- How would you consider the fight against corruption of the following institution in the past three years (The National Anticorruption Directorate, The General Anticorruption Directorate, The National Agency for Fiscal Administration, The National Office for Preventing and Combating Money Laundering, Ministry of

Domestic Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Court of Accounts, The Parliament, and The Church)? (Q7)

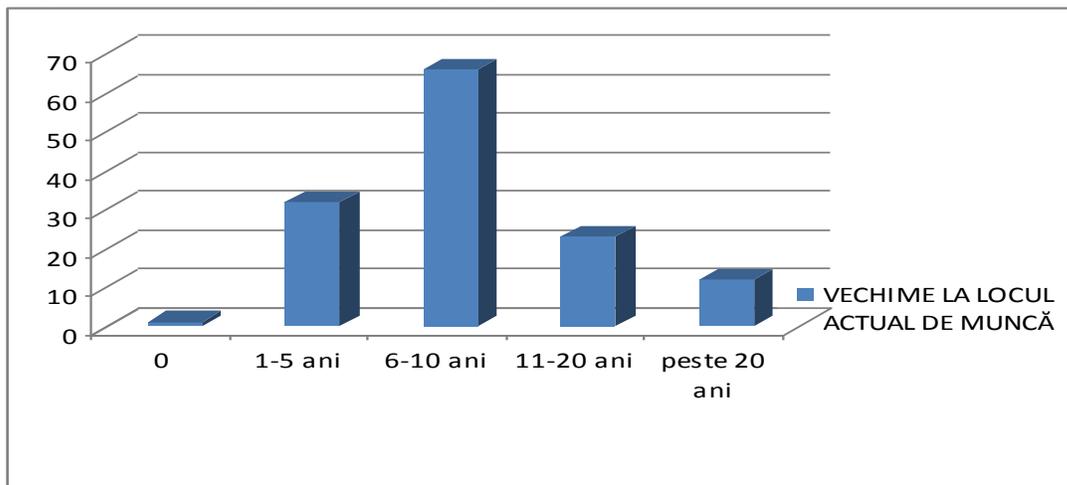
- How would you deem the frequency of the following informal manifestations of the corruption phenomenon (fees for granting contracts, gifts, pressures form the superiors, trading in influence, nepotism, political appointments)? (Q8)

### THE SAMPLE'S DUAL ROLE

The provider of the public goods and services must be the first ones interested in delivering both an appropriate and a trustworthy good or service. They are both consumers and providers of the public good or service, which would firstly imply believing in the service as a provider, and thus being concerned with the marketing of public services to their users and the governance of inter-organizational relationships (Osborne, 2009: 5), and secondly being satisfied with the service as a consumers – looking for a service not subjected to corruption.

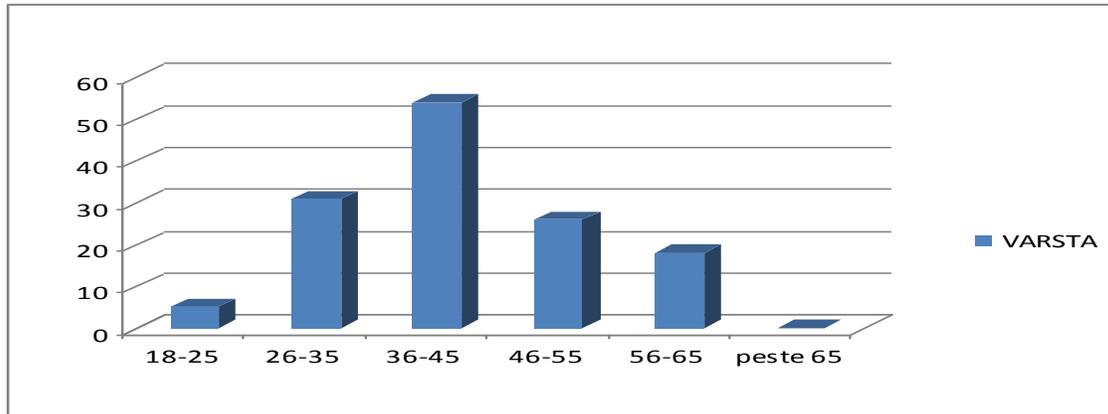
We gathered 134 respondents from eight counties in Romania (Galati, Ilfov, Bucharest, Bacau, Neamt, Timis, Bihor, and Cluj), most of them public servants from the executive branches, but also head positions, contractual personnel, and contractual personnel recruited by exam). More than 60 percent of the respondents have been working for at least 6 years in the public administration (see Graph 1), and were currently working for devoluted services, Government, Ministries, Local and County Councils, Municipality or other public services. More than half of them were women in between 36 and 45 years old (see Graph 2).

Graph 1 Work Seniority at the current job position



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

Graph 2 Age



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

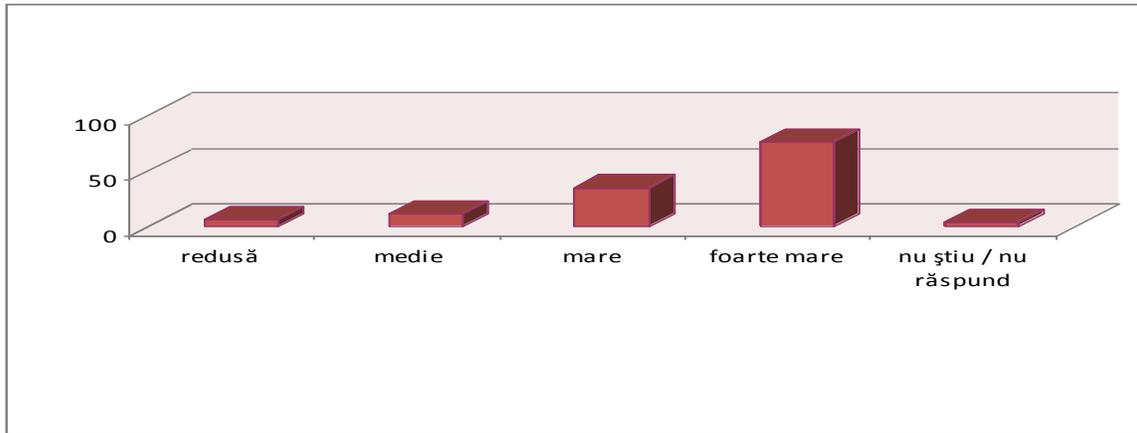
## FINDINGS

We aimed at testing three derived hypotheses:

- the white collar clients of the public services are not only aware of the corruption phenomenon, but rate it highly on the severity ladder;
- the awareness of the corruption phenomenon leads to a greater lack of trust in the service they are providing and, furthermore, to bumpy inner group decision-making;
- measuring the civil servants' perception of the corruption phenomenon, i.e. turning to a zoom out approach, may lead to better measures for combating corruption and, consequently, a better provided public service supported by appraised word of mouth coming from the white collar clients.

When designing this questionnaire, we kept in mind LiTS II Survey (EBRD, 2010) on corruption and trust in the transitions countries that showed us not only that societal and institutional trust is still an issue, but that it starts being associated with more elements than those investigated by the survey, i.e. economic development, economic growth, open markets, and investment. All in all, trust is an issue that must be investigated for all the stakeholders. Therefore, we started our *zoom out* approach from the assumption that a decision-making system can only become more efficient should its core be a true inner circle filled with a high trust level. In other words, a work environment aware of the fact that it is fostering corruption only proves that the inner group would definitely have low trust levels in both the provided service and the work colleagues (see Graph 3).

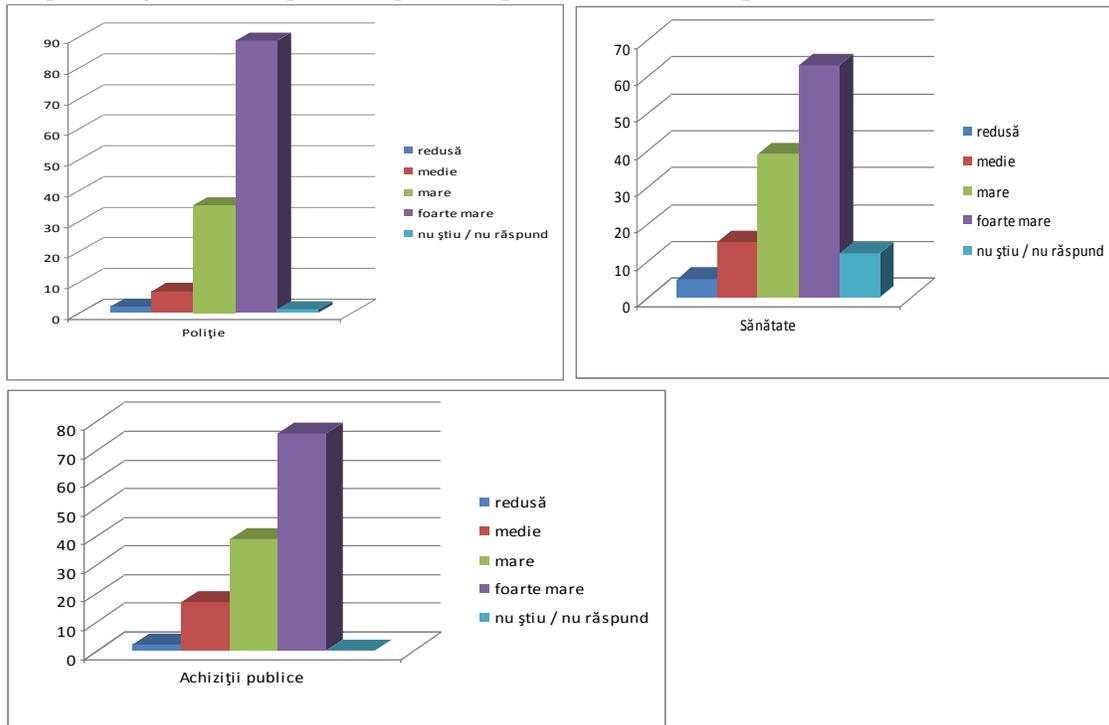
**Graph 3 Awareness of the corruption phenomenon**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

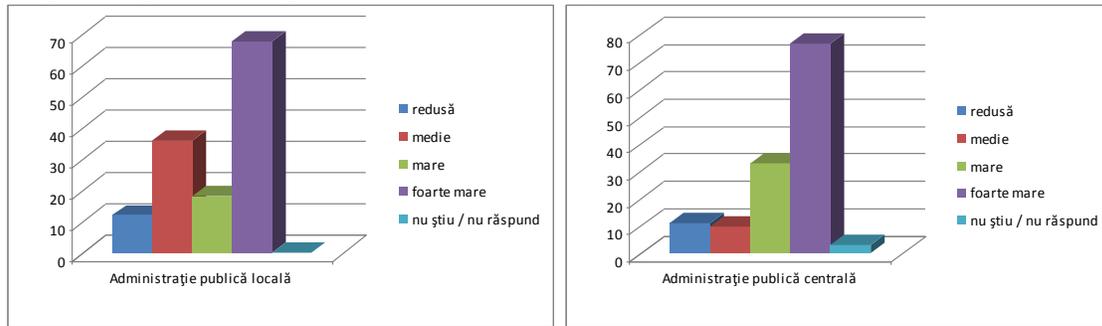
There are certain public services considered either vital for the society (police and healthcare) or defining for a well functioning economy (public procurement). A high degree of corruption in these key public services (very high, as our results show, see Graph 4 and Graph 5) only proves the seriousness of the investigated issue and the fact that the problem rises indeed from within the system.

**Graph 4. Degree of corruption for provided public services (Group A)**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

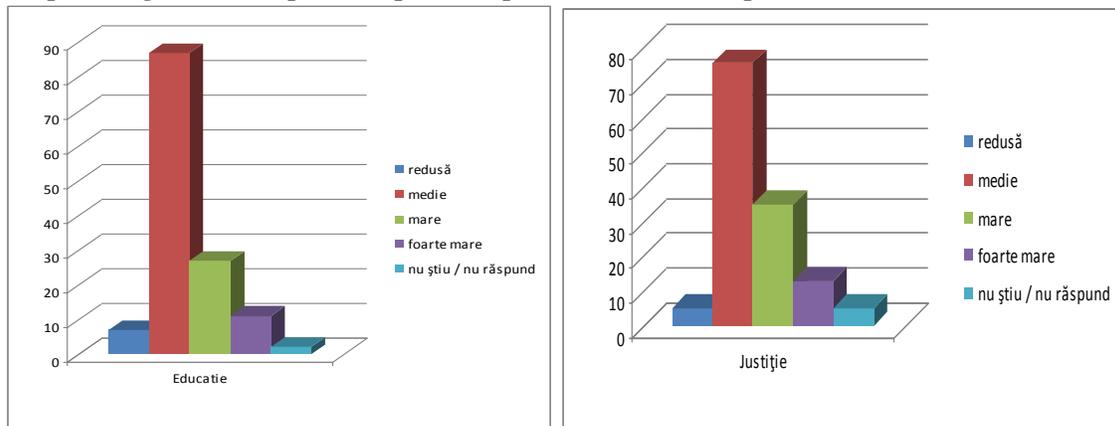
**Graph 5. Degree of corruption for local and central public administration**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

We also tested the possibility to repair the corruption damage both upstream and downstream, namely with the help of education and justice system. For that measure to be effective, we needed to have a positive feedback (which we did indeed receive it) from the white collars on the perceived degree of corruption for those particular systems (See Graph 6).

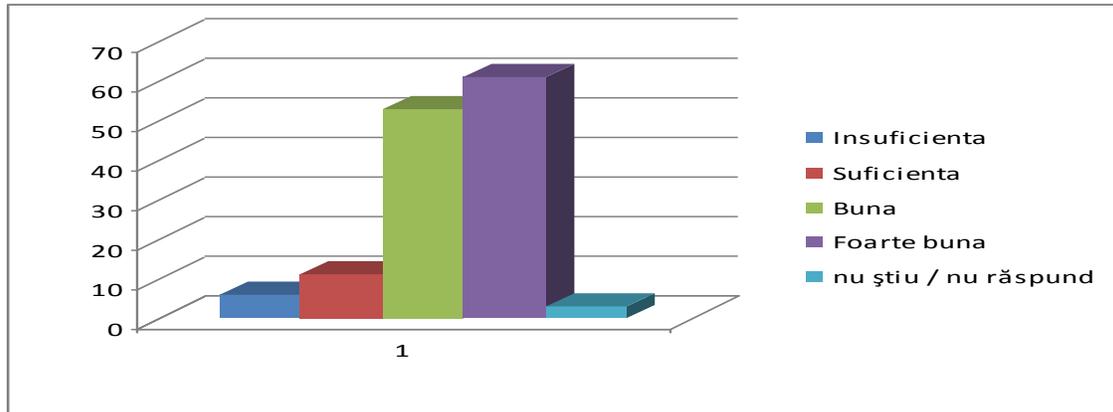
**Graph 6. Degree of corruption for provided public services (Group B)**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

The third question of our survey aimed at testing the second derived hypothesis, being in fact a blockstart of the testing process but a necessary one considering that no matter the measures we decide to propose at the end of the broader research project, we must be aware of the perception that the inner group have on the currently applied measures (see Graph 7).

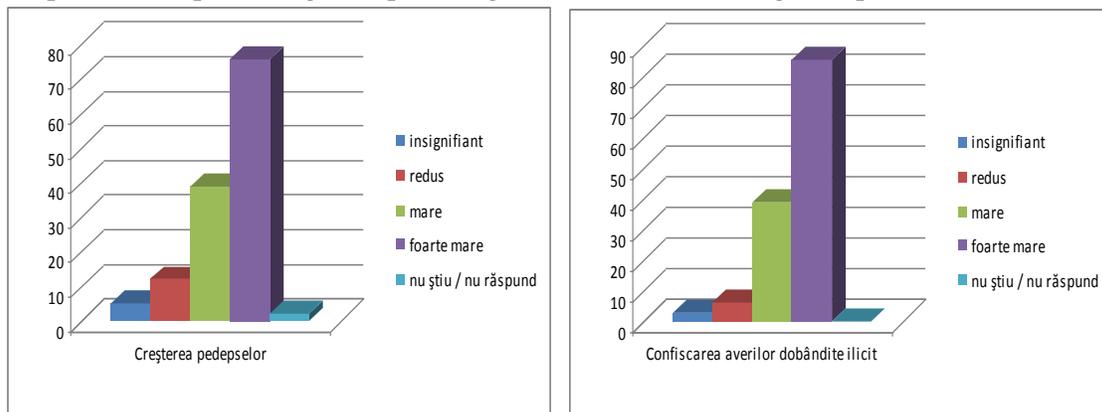
**Graph 7. The activity of Law enforcing public institutions**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

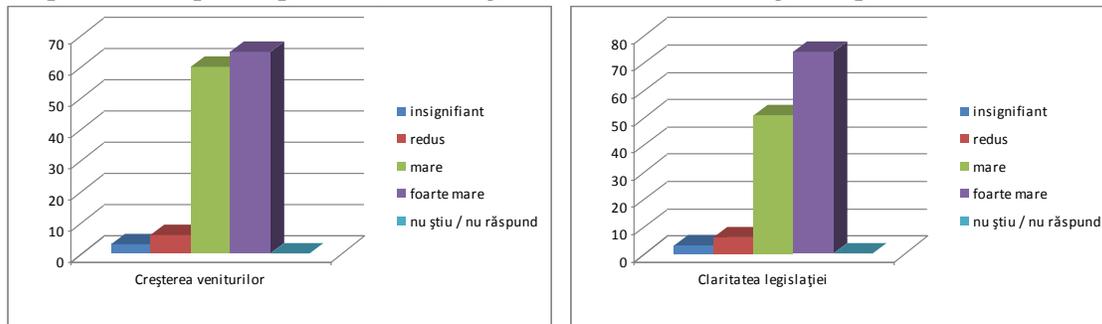
The fourth question, which was broken down by six general measures for combating corruption taught us an important aspect that somehow contradicts our belief that relied heavily on the fact that rewarding good behaviors would be more welcomed than punishing bad ones (see Graph 8 and Graph 9).

**Graph 8. The Impact of negative (punishing) measures for combating corruption**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

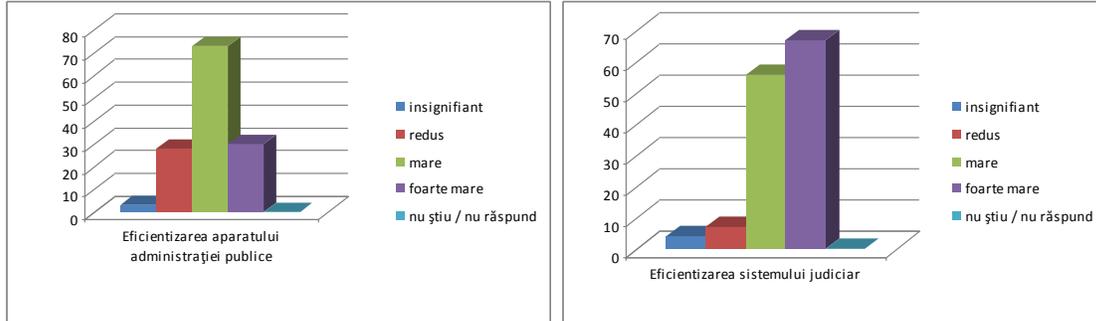
**Graph 9. The Impact of positive (rewarding) measures for combating corruption**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

In that line, we reached a similar result when testing whether the measure should be applied upstream, namely before or during the decision-making process, inside the public administration's apparatus, or downstream, in the judicial system supervising the activities of the civil servants (see Graph 10).

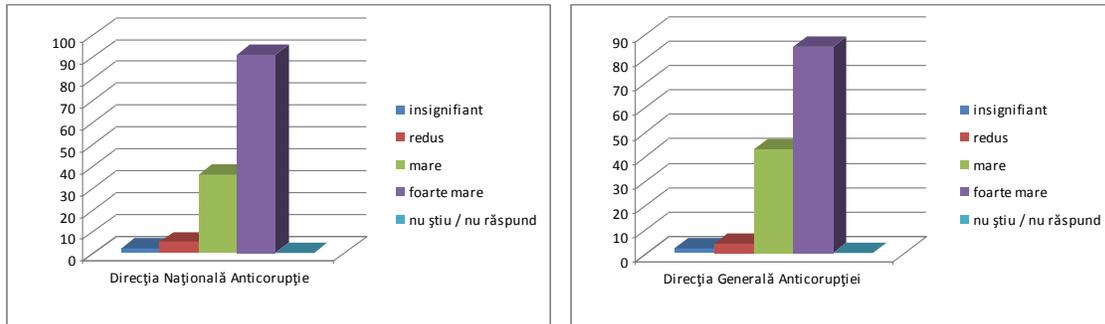
**Graph 10. The Impact of reforming measures for combating corruption**

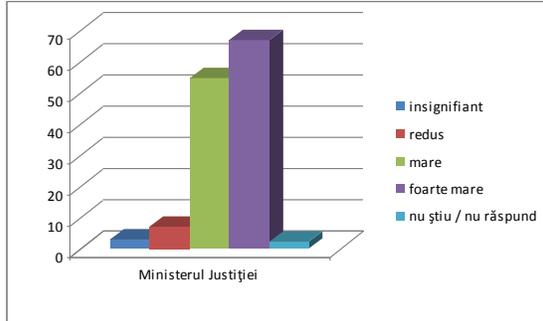
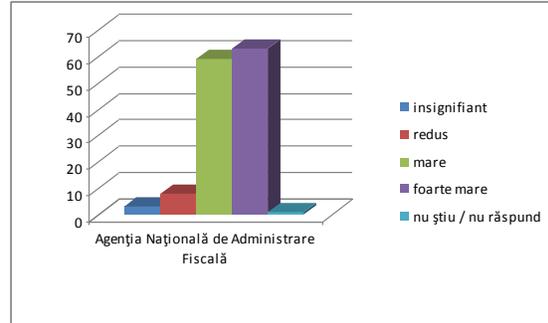
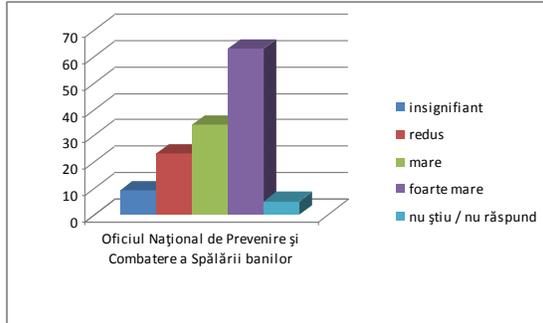


Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

Consequently, all the institutions with a strong involvement in the review process were rated as highly important (see Graph 11), while those providing a continuous review were given less importance (see Graph 12).

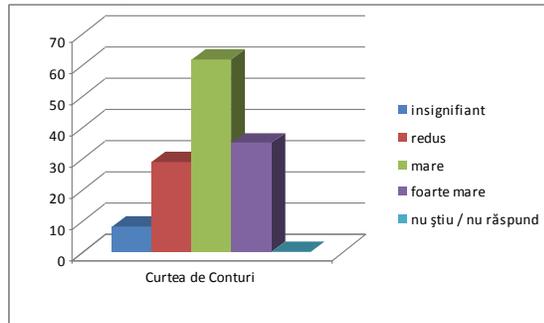
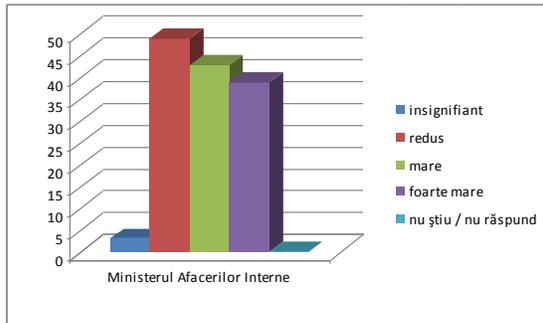
**Graph 11. The role of corruption fighting institutions (Group A)**





Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

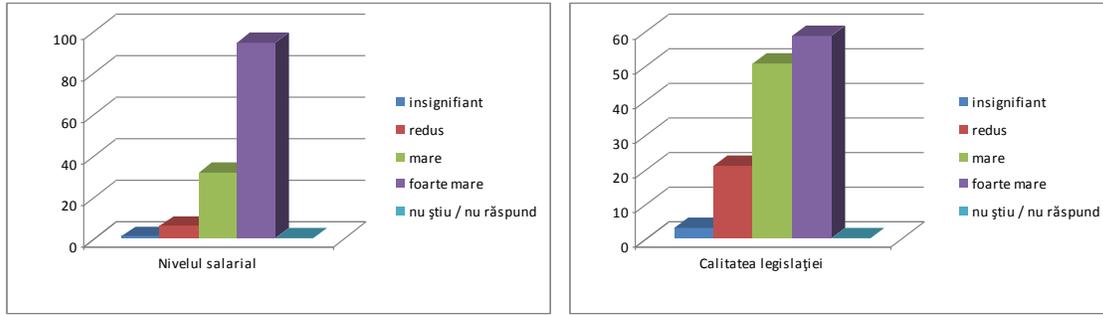
**Graph 12. The role of corruption fighting institutions (Group B)**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

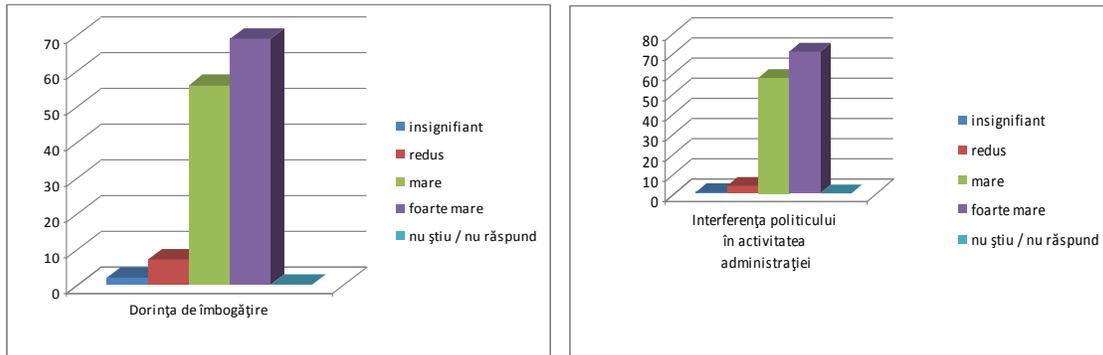
There are certain elements towards which the measures for combating corruption should be directed, or better said the white collar perceive as stringent and effective. The first category refers to positive actions, meaning raising wages and improving legislation quality, but our sample also admitted to the importance of combating the ‘get reach fast’ behavior and politics interference (see Graph 13 and Graph 14). What they rated as secondary (quite low in importance) in terms of the need to apply measures are the work environment and custom. Actually, there is currently a large debate about making gifts legal, which the civil servants’ unions rate as unacceptable as it would mean to allow a society to hold captive an entire public administration (see Graph 15).

**Graph 13. The importance of positive elements in increasing inner corruption**



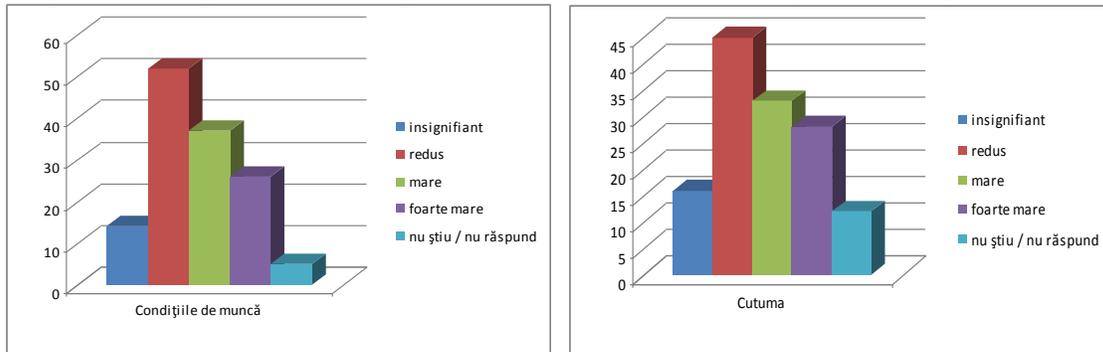
Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

**Graph 14. The importance of negative elements in increasing inner corruption**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

**Graph 15. The importance of work place related elements in increasing inner corruption**

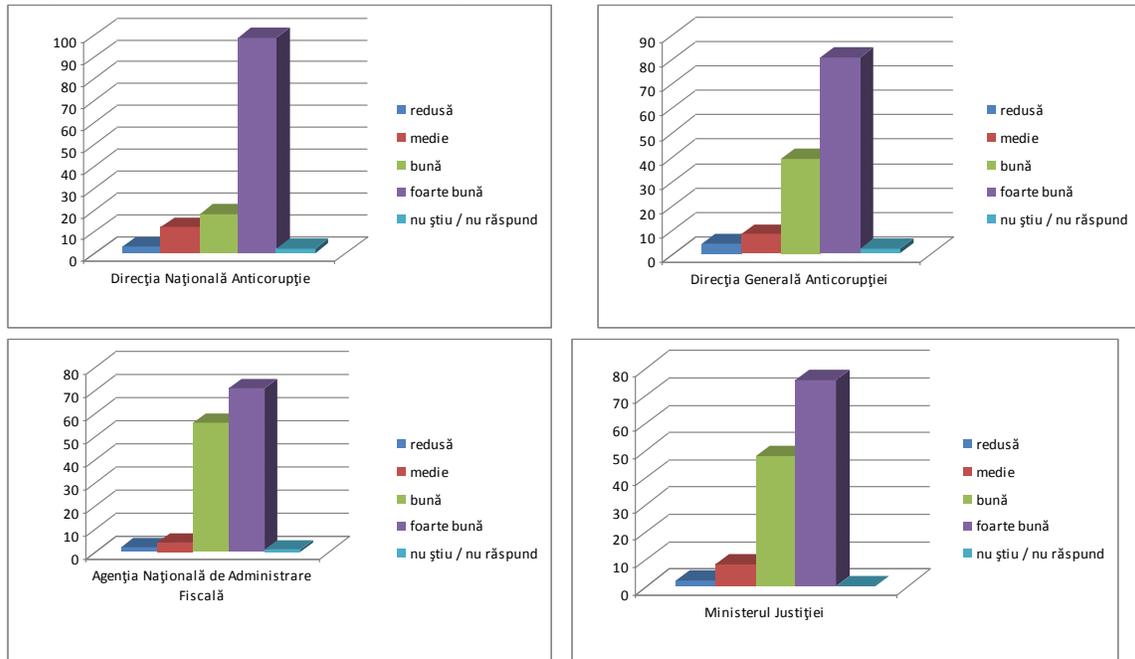


Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

The authors consider that a research on the issue regarding the activity of the public institutions in the fight against corruption that considered a three years timeframe would help sketch a hierarchy of the institutions that must be given priority when designing targeted measures (see Graph 16). One interesting case is that of the National Office for Preventing and Combating Money Laundering that is perceived as more important and active only during the past year, and not previously.

Another aspect to closely consider is the case of the institutions that the citizens perceive as the most trustworthy (the Church) and the less trustworthy (the Parliament) (IRES, 2014). Our sample, namely the white collar clients of the public servants, is giving them both little importance in the fight against corruption (see Graph 18).

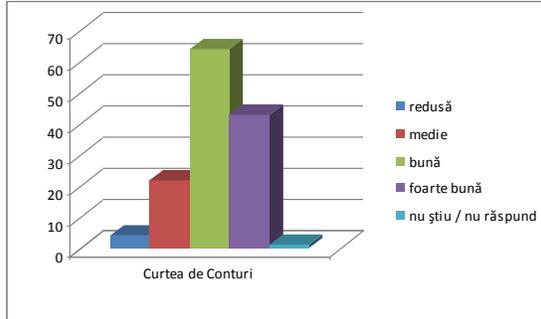
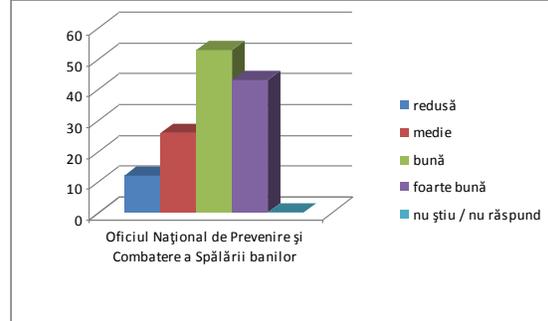
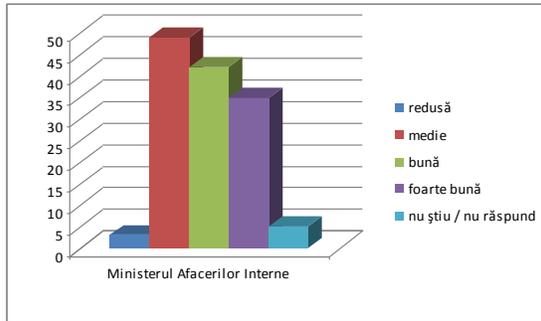
**Graph 16. The institutions three years fight against corruption (Group I)**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

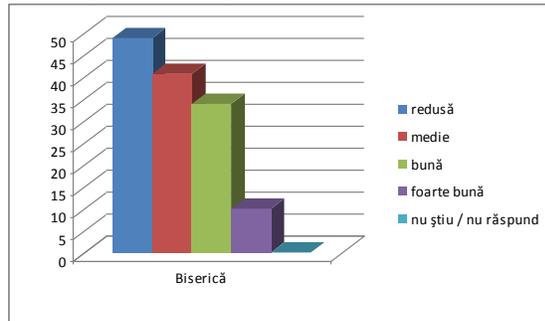
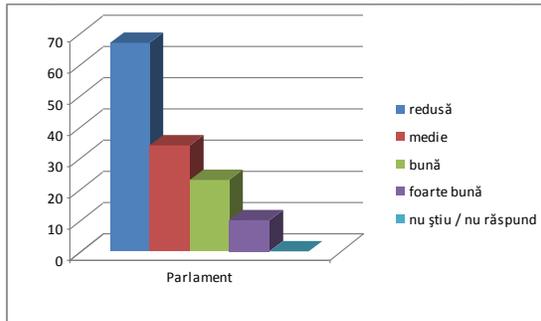
**Graph 17. The institutions three years fight against corruption (Group II)**





Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

**Graph 18. The institutions three years fight against corruption (Group 3)**

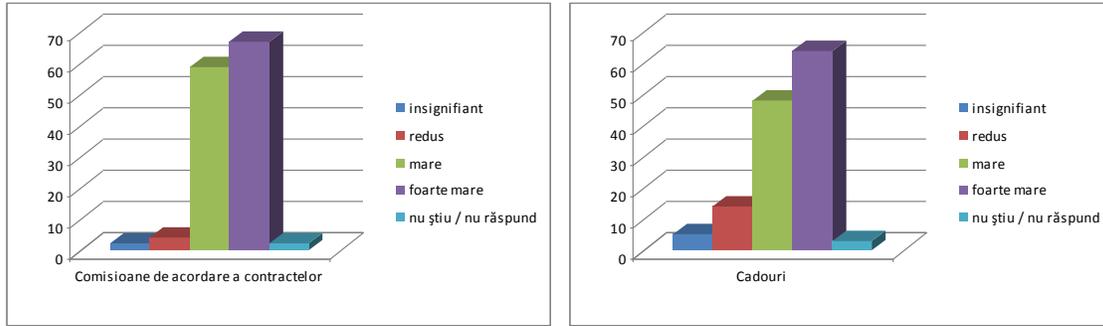


Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

The informal manifestations of corruptions are an astonishing case in terms of the recorded results for the inner group. No one would be surprise when reaching such a result on a citizens' survey (e.g. EBRD, 2010: 37) with regard to unofficial payment of goods, but it is certainly interesting to be aware of the lax attitude with which the respondents of our sample admitted to having fostered both the low-level administrative corruption and the high-level one, i.e. 'state capture' (Matei and Popa, 2009).

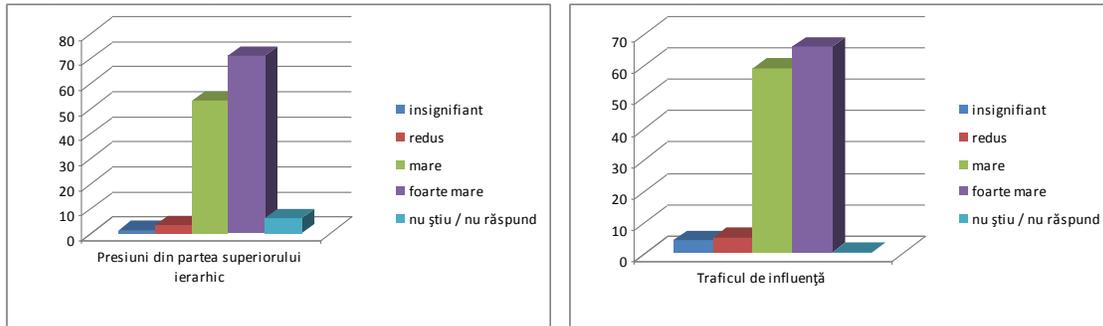
We tested their perception for six different kinds of informal manifestations of corruptions but have received the "very frequent" answer for all for of them, be them referring to rewards for obtaining different services (see Graph 19), actions for changing certain rules (see Graph 20), or even actions for getting public jobs (see Graph 21).

**Graph 19. The frequency of informal manifestations of corruption ('rewards')**



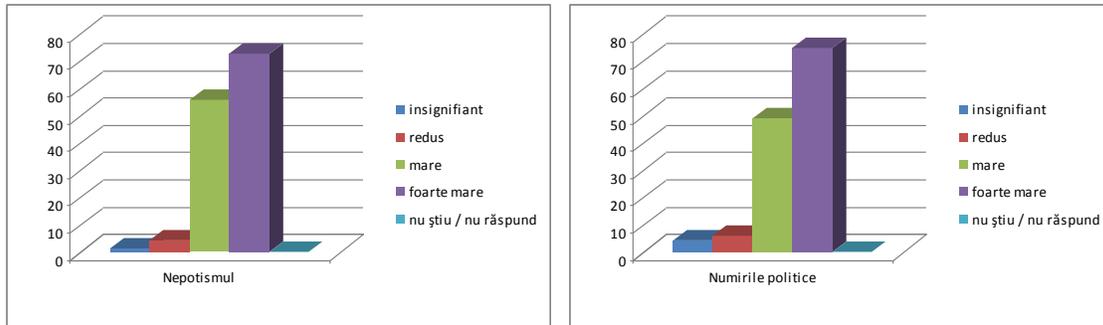
Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

**Graph 20. The frequency of informal manifestations of corruption ('put a good word')**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

**Graph 21. The frequency of informal manifestations of corruption ('I know someone')**



Source: own elaboration, data collected through the questionnaire

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Our broad research project, as mentioned in the beginning aims at designing a system of indicators assessing the impact of the measures to fight corruption in the economic development process. Therefore, this manuscript only presents our starting point, chosen in accordance with the zoom out approach, the perception on corruption of the public service providers and the in-group trust they show. The applied questionnaire confirmed all our derived hypotheses, mainly our general hypothesis that the inner group is not only aware of the phenomenon, but is also fostering it, which pushes us to take the

next step towards going in depth of the corruption phenomenon. Further research on that topic will probably involve a focus group, in our search for a more down to earth opinion on this highly sensitive issue.

The method we shall be using for further research is the adverse method: clearly analyze the corruption so that the decision makers know what they are dealing with when designing public policies and implementing decisions in order to reduce the phenomenon. First look at the cause, not at the cure. The primary sale of a public service is indeed trust, but a future analysis should also look in-depth of the “competition”, namely the corruption.

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