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Anti-corruption in the discourses of civil society actors in Russia

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Problem Statement

Anti-corruption emerged as a field of study in the 1990s echoing development scholarship in its association of corruption with countries 'transitioning' towards a Western democratic model, such as the post-Soviet republics.[1] In these years, international institutions and organizations such as the World Bank and Transparency International began to discursively construct corruption as a problem of expert knowledge, legitimizing a growing 'anti-corruption industry' that promoted universal solutions and programs.[2] This approach informed the academic scholarship that framed corruption as a threat caused by the behavior of self-interested individuals that could be reduced by implementing incentive schemes and mechanisms of control.[3]

In the 2000s, a critical body of scholarship began to dissect the anti-corruption discourse created by international organizations. These works explained how corruption was discursively constructed as a principal-agent problem caused by the absence of a clear distinction between the private and public sphere, overlooking the cultural norms and practices that characterized non-western and (semi)-peripheral countries.[4] Attention was also devoted to the local re-articulation of the international discourse revealing the contingency of discourses and conceptions of corruption.[5]

Recent studies on anti-corruption in Russia contributed to this literature by exploring the discourses created by the government and the opposition, highlighting their association of corruption with high-ranking officials only, and revealing the state's attempt to coopt the opposition's anti-corruption discourse by establishing para-statal civil society organizations.[6]

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[1] Polzer T. Corruption: deconstructing the World Bank discourse.Working Paper No. 01-18, Development Studies Institute, LSE. 2001. Bukovansky M. Corruption is bad: Normative dimensions of anti-corruption movement. Working Paper 2002/5, Australia National University, Canberra. 2002.

[2] Sampson S. The anti-corruption industry: from movement to institution. *Global Crime*. 2010. Vol. 11 № 2. P. 261-278.

[3] Bukovansky M. The hollowness of anti-corruption discourse. *Review of International Political Economy*. 2006. Vol. 13. № 2. P. 181–209.

[4] Haller D., Shore C. Corruption: anthropological perspectives. London: Pluto, 2005. Doshi S., Ranganathan M. Towards a critical geography of corruption and power in late capitalism. *Progress in Human Geography*. 2019. Vol. 43. № 3. P. 436-457.

[5] Gephart M. Contested meanings in the anti-corruption discourse: international and local narratives in the case of Paraguay. *Critical Policy Studies*. 2015. Vol. 9 № 2. P. 119-138. Kajsiu B. *A discourse analysis of corruption: Instituting neoliberalism against corruption in Albania, 1998-2005*. London: Routledge, 2016. Pertiwi K., Ainsworth S. "Democracy is the cure?": Evolving constructions of corruption in Indonesia 1994–2014. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 2021. Vol. 173. № 3. P. 507–523. Kiss T., Székely I.G. Populism on the semi-periphery: Some considerations for understanding the anti-corruption discourse in Romania. *Problems of Post-Communism*. 2022. Vol. 69. № 6. P. 514-527.

[6] Aburamoto M. The politics of anti-corruption campaigns in Putin's Russia: power, opposition, and the All-Russia People's Front. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2019. Vol. 71. № 3. P. 408-425. Pavlova E. Corrupt governance: Self-defeating anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Russia. *New Perspectives*. 2020. Vol. 28. № 2. P. 205-222.

Furthermore, the civil society organizations' (CSOs) articulations of anti-corruption in Russia were explored by unpacking different discursive conceptions of corruption and legitimation strategies.[7] The present research contributes to this scholarship by analyzing how the international anti-corruption discourse is articulated in Russia by CSOs, civil society initiatives, and self-organized groups engaged (in)directly in the field. Moreover, the study examines how the politicization of the topic by the government and the opposition has influenced civil society's discursive construction of anti-corruption and the local articulation of the international discourse.

The necessity to investigate the different articulations of the international anti-corruption discourse present within Russian civil society emerges if considering the increasing politicization of the topic since the early 2010s and the heterogeneity of actors engaged in this field, two aspects that have only partially been addressed in the extant literature.

Since the early 2010s, allegations concerning electoral fraud and the publication of investigations on corrupt high-ranking officials have caused mass protests in different Russian cities. According to a recent poll, 39% of the Russian population considers corruption and bribery as the country's main problems and a priority for the government's agenda.[8] The establishment of anti-corruption initiatives backed by the opposition, in response to the poor results achieved by the government in this field, and their increasing relevance in delegitimizing the state's anti-corruption discourse have led to the politicization of the topic.[9]

In the 1990s and 2000s, anti-corruption represented a side task for organizations that often received international funding, with the exception of domestic CSOs such as INDEM and the National Anti-Corruption Committee directly operating in the field.[10] In the 2010s, new 'local' actors were established, some within the framework of the National Anti-corruption Plans[11] approved by the government while others were created by the

[7] Makarova M. Between the State and Civil Society: Anti-corruption Discourse of Movements and Non-governmental Organizations in Russia. *Research in Social Change.* 2019. Vol. 11. № 3. P. 39–68.

[8] Levada Tsentr. Problemy Obshchestva. March 2021. https://www.levada.ru/2021/03/09/problemy-obshhestva/ (Accessed 10.06.22)

[9] Pavlova E. Corrupt governance: Self-defeating anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Russia. *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations.* 2020. Vol. 28. № 2. P. 205-222.

[10] Shelley L. Civil Society Mobilized against Corruption: Russia and Ukraine In: M. Johnston, (eds.), *Civil Society and Corruption*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2005; - p. 3-21.

[11] Natsional'niy plan protivodeystviya korruptsii 2016–2018 [In Russian.]. Accessed 27 December 2021. http://www. kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40657// Natsional'niy plan protivodeystviya korruptsii 2018–2020 [In Russian.]. Accessed 29 December 2021. http:// kremlin.ru/acts/bank/43253

opposition. Since the mid-2000s the government has increased the regulation of CSOs and, in the 2010s, the laws on 'foreign agents'[12] or 'undesirable organizations'[13] were approved.[14] As a consequence, many civil society actors engaged in this field were forced to stop their activity or to continue operating as non-registered initiatives.[15] Besides these organizations, the anti-corruption sector is constituted of actors indirectly engaged in the field, promoting democratic values and offering legal support to citizens.

The extant scholarship on anti-corruption in Russia only partially investigated the consequences of the politicization of the topic and mainly focused on actors directly engaged in the field or on initiatives and organizations that promoted democracy and human rights. However, the literature overlooked the relevance of self-organized urban initiatives in holding local governmental bodies accountable. Studies provided evidence of the role of corruption as a trigger for the mobilization of urban activism in Russia, but the way anti-corruption is articulated has remained unexplored.[16]

Drawing from the anti-corruption critical scholarship and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, in this study the articulation of anti-corruption by different Russian civil society actors is investigated. By applying the concept of 'floating signifiers', this work explores how the international anti-corruption discourse is articulated locally, revealing the discursive struggle occurring within the sector.[17]

The anti-corruption scholarship emphasizes the role of civil society in curbing corruption. In these studies, civil society is conceptualized as separated from the state and the

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[12] Russian Federal Law No. 121, Federal'nyi Zakon N 121-FZ 'O vnesenii izmenenii v otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossiiskoi Federatsii v chasti regulirovaniya deyatel'nosti nekommercheskikh organizatsii, vypolnyayushchikh funktsii inostrannogo agenta', 20 July 2012, available at: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_132900/. (Accessed June 2022)

[13] Russian Federal Law No. 129, Federal'nyi Zakon N 129-FZ 'O vnesenii izmeneni v otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akti Rossiiskoi Federatsii', 23 May 2015, available at: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_179979/. (Accessed June 2022)

[14] The study covers the period between November 2018 and October 2021 and it does not consider the developments that occurred in the period between November 2021 and January 2023.

[15] See Articles A and B.

[16] Zhelnina A., Tykanova, E. Formal'niye i neformal'niye grazhdanskiye infrastruktury: sovremenniye issledovaniya gorodskogo lokal'nogo aktivizma v Rossii' [Formal and informal civic infrastructure: contemporary studies of urban local activism in Russia]. *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsialnoy antropologii* [The Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology] 2019. Vol. 22. № 1. P. 162–192. Tykanova E., Khokhlova A. Grassroots Urban Protests in St. Petersburg: (Non-) Participation in Decision-Making About the Futures of City Territories. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society.* 2020. Vol. 33. P. 181-202.

[17] Laclau E., Mouffe C. *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. Verso Books, 2014.

market and representing citizens' interests, a definition that excludes governmental non-governmental organizations.[18] However, the present work does not explore the role of civil society in counteracting corruption, but rather its role in discursively constructing anti-corruption, in re-articulating the main signifiers that constitute the international discourse. For this reason, this research considers the development of civil society engaged in anti-corruption in Russia over time and it comprises para-statal organizations[19], organizations part of international networks, organizations and initiatives backed by the opposition, independent local organizations and initiatives, and self-organized groups.

The results of the project were presented in four articles.[20] Drawing from the critical literature on anti-corruption, articles B and D explored how academic international and domestic discourses informed the research on Russia, reflecting, on the one hand, the international anti-corruption discourse, and, on the other, the government's discourse. This allowed the distinction of uncovered questions and the development of an analytical strategy that allowed the investigation of the local articulation of the international anti-corruption discourse by civil society. Based on the findings that emerged from this study, and drawing from critical and post-colonial scholarship, article A unpacked the different conceptions of corruption and civil society present in the field, investigating how actors that reproduce and negotiate the international articulation discursively construct their legitimacy in a politicized context where the government and the opposition compete over the fixation of meaning. The articulation of the main signifiers that constitute the international discourse by urban grassroots activists was explored in article C, by applying a framing perspective to reveal how 'expertise' and 'civil society' are re-articulated to legitimize less formal actors in the anti-corruption field.

Degree of elaboration of the research topic

The origins of the 'anti-corruption industry' can be traced back to the 1990s, with the systematization and institutionalization of anti-corruption policies, and the construction of the international anti-corruption discourse.[21] Snyman explained how, in these years, "changes in

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[18] Kaufmann D. Challenges in the Next Stage of Anti-corruption. New Perspectives on Combating Corruption. The World Bank. 1998. P. 139-164.

[19] These organizations are registered as общественные организации (obshchestvennye organizatsii).

[20] During the PhD program the author was affiliated with the International Laboratory for Social Integration Research, HSE University.

[21] Sampson S. The anti-corruption industry: From movement to institution. *Global Crime.* 2010. Vol. 11. № 2. P. 271. Gebel A. C. *The ideal within. A discourse and hegemony theoretical analysis of the international anti-corruption discourse.* Aberystwyth University, 2012.

the anti-corruption discourse allowed [...] the quantification (of corruption) as a problem of economics"[22] that could be reduced with the implementation of standard policies and mechanisms of control. Nonetheless, the poor results achieved by the omnibus programs developed to curb the problem urged scholars to question the universalization of anti-corruption.[23] A growing critical body of scholarship began challenging the assumption that corruption has a standard meaning and that can be objectively measured.[24] These studies pointed to the fact that corruption is "a category of thought and organizing principle" and that (anti-)corruption articulations are necessarily embedded in particular historical, political, and cultural contexts.[25] Studies investigating the 'construction of corruption' focused on the role of international institutions in creating a "consolidated regime of knowledge" that frames corruption as a technical problem.[26]

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory was applied by Gebel to unpack the international anti-corruption discourse and detect the key signifiers that constitute it. It emerged how corruption is discursively constructed as caused by the rational and selfish behavior of public officials, therefore, as a problem that can be reduced by implementing incentives and mechanisms of control.[27] The key signifiers articulating the discourse correspond to the principles of the 'good uncorrupted society', such as 'transparency', 'accountability', 'integrity', and the instruments necessary to achieve it, such as 'civil society' and legal reforms. Gebel explains how all these signifiers are articulated as necessary for an efficient fight against corruption and the construction of an uncorrupt world. In this context, civil society plays a central role in holding actors accountable through advocacy, awareness raising, social mobilization, and promoting the 'right' way to fight anti-corruption. Therefore, civil society is discursively constructed as important to strengthen accountability, transparency, and integrity while its relevance in increasing the participation of citizens in decision-making processes remains vague. 'Expertise' is also a key element of the international anti-corruption discourse and it is understood as the technical knowledge

[22] Snyman R. A. Games of Truth in the age of Transparency: International Organisations and the Construction of Corruption. *Journal of Business Ethics.* 2022. Vol 181. P. 84-87.

[23] Sampson S. The anti-corruption industry: From movement to institution. *Global Crime.* 2010. Vol. 11. № 2. P. 261-278.

[24] Brown, E., Cloke, J. Critical perspectives on corruption: An overview. *Critical Perspectives on International Business.* 2011. Vol. 7. № 2. P. 116–124.

[25] Haller D., Shore C. Introduction - sharp practice: anthropology and the study of corruption In: D. Haller and Shore, C. (eds.) *Corruption: anthropological perspectives.* London: Pluto, 2005; - pp. 2.

[26] Polzer T. Corruption: deconstructing the World Bank discourse. Working Paper No. 01-18, Development Studies Institute, LSE. 2001. Gebel, A.C. *The ideal within. A discourse and hegemony theoretical analysis of the international anti-corruption discourse.* Aberystwyth University, 2012.

[27] Gebel A.C. *The ideal within. A discourse and hegemony theoretical analysis of the international anti-corruption discourse.* Aberystwyth University, 2012; - p. 81.

necessary both to implement the reforms within state bodies and to strengthen civil society. In this way, international organizations are articulated as fundamental for the efficient fight against corruption as they possess the right knowledge as opposed to local actors. Gebel explains how in order to result persuasive and applicable universally, the international discourse is constructed as apolitical and context-sensitive. [28]

The studies that focused on anti-corruption and civil society in Russia mainly overlooked the context-based meanings attached to anti-corruption and applied an approach that reflected the international and domestic anti-corruption discourses. As a result, scholars affiliated with local institutions offered broad studies on how to improve the National Anti-corruption Plans, focusing on the necessity to establish a partnership between civil society and the state, and omitting to investigate 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable organizations' as they are delegitimized by the government. On the other hand, scholars affiliated with external institutions explored the development of civil society over time and studied the impact of the increasing regulation of civil society on the activities carried out by different actors. Particular attention was paid to the establishment of para-statal organizations with the purpose of creating a 'faux collaboration' with civil society and co-opting the opposition's anti-corruption agenda to reinforce the legitimation of the government.[29] (Article A)

In this context, the works of Pavlova and Makarova represent some exceptions as they investigated the discursive construction of anti-corruption by different actors in Russia. Pavlova argued that, in the domestic debate, corruption is usually framed as a system for the redistribution of goods or as an instrument used by the opposition to delegitimize the government, overlooking and justifying the corrupt practices spread among citizens, and limiting the possibility to address corruption as a collective action problem.[30] This has led to "a very deep gap in the anti-corruption discourse: the willingness to combat corruption coexists with corruption in everyday life"[31]. Makarova analyzed the discourses of three

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[28] Gebel A.C. *The ideal within. A discourse and hegemony theoretical analysis of the international anti-corruption discourse*. Aberystwyth University, 2012.

[29] Zaloznaya M., Reisinger W. M., Claypool V. H. When civil engagement is part of the problem: Flawed anti-corruptionism in Russia and Ukraine. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. 2018. Vol. 51. № 3. P. 245-255. Aburamoto M. The politics of anti-corruption campaigns in Putin's Russia: power, opposition, and the All-Russia People's Front. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2019. Vol. 71. № 3. P. 408-425.

[30] Pavlova E. The Russian Federation and European Union against corruption: A slight misunderstanding?. *European Politics and Society*. 2015. Vol. 16. № 1. P. 117-118. Pavlova E. Corrupt governance: Self-defeating anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Russia. *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations*. 2020. Vol. 28. № 2. P. 205-222.

[31] Pavlova E. The Russian Federation and European Union against corruption: A slight misunderstanding?. *European Politics and Society*. 2015. Vol. 16. № 1. P. 118.

organizations in Russia exploring the different articulations of the causes of corruption and instruments to curb it, and the legitimization of strategies.[32] Nonetheless, this study does not investigate how the international discourse is articulated locally and it does not include civil society actors indirectly engaged in the field.

The international scholarship on anti-corruption discourses explored the 'translation' of anti-corruption projects at the local level revealing how they can be used by civil society actors to discoursively legitimize their role as mediators between citizens' interests and the government. The success of the activities carried out is constructed to maintain a relationship with donors, although the efficacy of the international discourse is contested in non-official accounts.[33] These works explained how local articulations that dislocate the international discourse are embedded in wider domestic discourses and can construct non-democratic models of anti-corruption.[34] Scholars demonstrated how the meanings attached to anti-corruption are contingent and they can be manipulated to establish populist articulations that delegitimize the corrupt elites, accusing them of refraining the country from 'transitioning towards modernity'.[35]

The present work contributes to the debate on anti-corruption in Russia drawing from the critical literature that investigated the international anti-corruption discourse and its articulation at the local level in different countries. Applying Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory which considers discourse as always open to contestation, the study explores how key signifiers are invested with new meaning locally, and how some signifiers acquire specific relevance within articulations.

Scope and limitation of the research

The study aims to explore how the international discourse is articulated locally by different civil society actors in Russia, revealing the discursive competition over the fixation of key signifiers.

The work considers only the period between November 2018 and November 2021, and it does not reflect the changes that occurred within the civil society sector since 2022.

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[32] Makarova M. Between the State and Civil Society: Anti-corruption Discourse of Movements and Non-governmental Organizations in Russia. *Research in Social Change*. 2019. Vol. 11. № 3. P. 39-68.
[33] Di Puppo L. Anti-corruption interventions in Georgia. *Global crime*. 2010. Vol. 11. № 2. P. 220–236.
[34] Gephart M. Contested meanings in the anti-corruption discourse: international and local narratives in the case of Paraguay. *Critical Policy Studies*. 2015. Vol. 9. № 2. P. 119-138.
[35] Kiss T., Székely I.G. Populism on the semi-periphery: Some considerations for understanding the anti-corruption discourse in Romania. *Problems of Post-Communism*. 2022. Vol. 69. № 6. P. 514-527.

Due to time constraints and the limitations caused by the pandemic, only Izhevsk, Kaliningrad, Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, and Tyumen were included in the study.

Research question

How is anti-corruption discursively articulated by Russian civil society actors?

Aim

The focus of the research is the articulation of anti-corruption in the discourses of civil society actors in Russia.

Tasks

1) To identify academic discourses on anti-corruption in Russia and explore how they have framed the extant scholarship on this topic and which questions have remained overlooked. On the basis of these findings, to apply the critical literature on anti-corruption to develop a research strategy to explore how anti-corruption is articulated locally by civil society in relation to the international discourse.

2) To explore how the key signifiers of the international discourse are re-articulated by local civil society actors in Russia and how this results in the emergence of different conceptions of anti-corruption.

3) To group the articulations of anti-corruption according to the different meanings and relevance of key signifiers.

4) To contextualize the groups of local articulations of anti-corruption in relation to the discursive field of anti-corruption in Russia.

Theoretical framework

Laclau and Mouffe define discourse as a structure characterized by a constant struggle over meaning and in which signifiers can be only temporarily fixed.[36] The construction of a discourse implies the investment of the key signifiers of a discourse with meaning, a process that allows the temporary closure of the discourse. Nodal points, or key signifiers, are understood as privileged elements that occupy a central place within a

[36] Laclau E., Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. Verso Books, 2014.

discourse.[37] These elements are relationally linked and modified by discursive articulations defined as "any practice establishing a relation among nodal points such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice"[38]. To explain the constant competition over meaning, the theoretical concept of 'floating signifiers' is used, which refers to "signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way"[39].

In fact, each signifier can be invested with various meanings that reflect the different discourses that constitute the field of discursivity which represents the 'surplus of meaning' that makes possible the re-articulation of nodal points, and which includes the meanings that each signifier could be connected with but that are excluded from the temporary fixation of one discourse.[40] In this study, I investigate 'the actual potential meaning' outside the international discourse that makes possible the articulation of competing discourses and that constitutes the field of discursivity of anti-corruption within civil society in Russia.[41]

In this discourse theory, the concept of hegemony plays an important role as it stabilizes the nodal points of discourses allowing the temporary 'sedimentation' of meaning and construction of a discourse. The fixation of a discourse, when a hegemonic order is established, transforms it into a 'universal' articulation representing a 'truth'.[42] Nonetheless, all discourses are contingent and only temporarily fixed, facing constant re-articulation and possible contestation with the purpose of creating alternative 'truths' "in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces"[43] such as the field of discursivity.

The temporary closure of a discourse requires the creation of a chain of equivalence, constituted of temporary fixed nodal points relationally linked, and of a chain of antagonism, which corresponds to the antagonistic 'Other'/'They' opposed to 'We', a constitutive outside which threatens the fixation of discourses.[44] The construction of a hegemonic discourse entails "the negation of alternative meanings and options and the negation of those people

[37] Jørgensen M. W., Phillips, L. J. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method.* London; Thousand Oaks, CA; New Delhi: SAGE, 2002; - p. 26.

[38] Laclau E., Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics* (Vol. 8). Verso Books, 2014; - p. 91.

[39] Jørgensen M. W., Phillips L. J. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method.* London; Thousand Oaks, CA; New Delhi: SAGE, 2002; - p. 28.

[40] Torfing J. *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. - p. 92.

[41] Jørgensen M. W., Phillips, L. J. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method.* London; Thousand Oaks, CA; New Delhi: SAGE, 2002; - p. 56.

[42] Torfing J. *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999; - p. 101-119.

[43] Torfing J. *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999; - p. 101.

[44] Torfing J. *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999; - p. 120-131.

who identify with them"[45]. At the same time, the creation of an antagonism reveals different ideas that are temporarily delegitimized but that could dislocate the hegemonic project.[46]

As explained by Gebel, the international anti-corruption discourse is "a hegemonic one for it manages to create a universal model of anti-corruption, by partially fixing the nodal points that constitute it"[47]. In this case, the chains of equivalence and antagonism correspond to the anti-corruption and corruption chains, whose elements discursively construct the non-corrupt to the corrupt world. The chain of equivalence represents the societal ideals that are promoted by the hegemonic discourse and that are juxtaposed with the antagonistic chain.

However, as Mouffe explained, "every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony."[48] The construction of a counter-hegemonic project implies the subversion of the key signifiers that constitute the hegemonic chain as part of a new antagonistic chain, a process that results in the discursive construction of different representations of reality and truths.

By applying the discourse theory developed by Laclau and Mouffe, this work understands the nodal points that constitute the anti-corruption discourse as 'floating signifiers' and the hegemonic international anti-corruption discourse as a "discourse generating tensions despite its universalization.

The politicization of the domestic anti-corruption discourse by the government and opposition and the heterogeneity of civil society actors engaged in the discursive construction of anti-corruption in Russia justify the necessity to explore how the international discourse is articulated at the local level.

Methodology

The research project was developed considering the results obtained from a literature review of the extant scholarship on anti-corruption in Russia that enabled the distinction of different anti-corruption academic discourses. For this analysis, attention was paid to the different conceptions of (anti-)corruption, the role of the state and civil society, the research methods applied, and the findings.

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[45] Torfing J. *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999; - p. 120.
[46] Howarth D. Power, discourse, and policy: articulating a hegemony approach to critical policy studies. *Critical policy studies.* 2010. Vol. 3 № 3-4. P. 313.
[47] Gebel A.C. *The ideal within. A discourse and hegemony theoretical analysis of the international anti-corruption discourse.* Aberystwyth University, 2012.
[48] Mouffle C. Critique as a counter-hegemonic intervention. The art of critique. 2008. Available from: https://transversal.at/transversal/0808/mouffe/en (Accessed on 14 September 2022).

The discourse analysis of texts was conducted considering the theoretical framework developed by Laclau and Mouffe described above. This discourse theory and the concept of 'floating signifiers' were applied to investigate the international discourse and explore local articulations. Gebel's research published in 2012 represented the basis for the development of the study, as it offers an in-depth analysis of the construction of the international discourse by applying this discourse theory.[49] The present project draws from Gebel's findings and compares them with the discursive analysis of official statements and documents published between 2012 and 2019. To guarantee consistency, this work considers the official documents produced by the same organizations considered by Gebel: Transparency International, the World Bank, and the UNPD. The purpose was to explore whether the nodal points distinguished by the scholar were articulated differently over the years.

The comparison of existing findings and the results that emerged from the 'new' discourse analysis of official documents justifies the use of the chain of equivalence and antagonism proposed by Gebel as the meanings attached to key signifiers have remained unvaried.

These findings allowed the analysis of different texts produced by civil society actors and the investigation of how anti-corruption is locally articulated in Russia. The analysis of texts was conducted in two phases. Initially, I scrutinized the websites of civil society actors, considering mission statements, anti-corruption strategies, policy documents, and accounts of activities. Attention was paid to the different conceptions of (anti-)corruption and of the role of civil society. During this first phase, the articulation of the international anti-corruption discourse's key signifiers was analyzed allowing a first grouping of the actors according to their different conceptions of (anti-)corruption. During the second phase, these findings were juxtaposed with the texts collected during semi-structured interviews and informal conversations that occurred during an internship and workshops. (Annex 1) The interview questions focused on the situated meanings of corruption, conceptions of anti-corruption, understanding of the role of civil society and the state, legitimization strategies adopted by the different actors, the relations with other civil society actors, the state and society, reflections on international and national strategies to counteract corruption. (Annex 2) During the second phase, it was also possible to identify disjunctures and inter- and intradiscoursive

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[49] Gebel A.C. Human nature and morality in the anti‑corruption discourse of transparency international. *Public Administration and Development.* 2012. Vol. 32. № 1. P. 109-128. Gebel A. C. *The ideal within. A discourse and hegemony theoretical analysis of the international anti-corruption discourse.* Aberystwyth University, 2012.

contradictions by comparing texts that reflected official articulations, and texts that emerged from the interviews and conversations.

The findings presented in the result section reflect the importance of comparing official and interview/conversation texts which allows a better understanding of the ongoing struggle over meaning in a discoursive field.

The analysis of the local articulation of the international discourse's nodal points was conducted by considering: 1) the presence and regularity of such nodal points in the texts collected, from which it emerged that some nodal points are not present in all articulations or that some signifieds are condensed into one signifier. This allowed the identification of the key nodal points that constitute the discursive battlefield: 'corruption', 'civil society', 'expertise', 'morality', 'stability', 'state'; 2) the privilege assigned to these signifiers in each articulation; 3) how these signifiers reflect the wider discourses that constitute the discoursive field they are embedded in.

Empirical data

The project comprised a literature review, desk research, and fieldwork.

For the literature review, the works published between 1999 and 2020 were included in the analysis; the period of time was determined considering the fact that no relevant studies on Russia were published until 1999. (Articles B and D) The publications were selected using Google Scholar as databases such as Scopus or Web of Science would have led to the exclusion of many Russian journals that are not indexed. The review was conducted in four phases. A first phase of 'review planning' was necessary to gather knowledge on the international and national anti-corruption discourses, and the development of Russian civil society and of the anti-corruption civil society sector. During the second phase, a total of 150 works were identified after an initial broad screening of studies that responded to three main characteristics: a) be in English or Russian; b) include the keywords '(anti-)corruption in Russia', 'fight against corruption in Russia', 'protivodeistivie korruptsii v Rossii/v Rossiskoi Federatsii', 'antikorruptsiya v Rossii/v Rossiskoi Federatsii' ('противодействие коррупции в России/ в Российскои Федерации'/ 'антикоррупция в России/ в Российской Федерации'); c) be academic journal articles, academic book chapters, scientific reports, and academic conference papers. The first selection was conducted on the basis of two criteria: a) the relevance of the questions addressed for the purpose of the literature review; b) the general quality of the publication. In the third phase, a total of 52 studies were selected for the final review on the basis of their quality considering research design, theoretical framework,

and methodological analysis.[50] In the fourth phase, a manual thematic and content analysis was conducted considering the following questions: a) What aspects of anti-corruption in Russia were addressed? b) How was (anti-)corruption articulated? c) How was the role of the government framed? d) How was the role of civil society framed? e) What are the findings of the study? The purpose was to understand if academic discourses that reflected different anti-corruption articulations could be distinguished. (Article B)

Articles B and C are based on data collected during desk research and fieldwork. The selection of the civil society actors included in the two empirical studies was conducted in two phases. The first one involved the analysis of previous studies on anti-corruption in Russia to collect information about civil society actors. Seventeen civil society actors, directly or indirectly engaged in the field, that operated in the country from 2000 to 2020 were found[51]. The data collected were verified using internet resources, such as official websites, or contacting directly via email the employees and members of these organizations and initiatives. It emerged that seven civil society actors had ceased to operate over the years, partly due to the approval of the laws on 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable organizations' that limited the activities of several organizations (see Articles A and B). During the second phase, the list of the remaining ten civil society actors was integrated with the information on organizations and initiatives gathered from the analysis of internet resources and media publications on anti-corruption, democracy, and human rights in Russia in English and Russian. A total number of fifteen civil society actors were included in the field study, a result that reflects the availability of respondents to participate in the project. The study includes: Russian organizations part of international networks, engaged directly or indirectly in the field; independent Russian organizations and initiatives engaged directly or indirectly in the field; para-statal Russian anti-corruption organizations; anti-corruption organizations and initiatives established by the opposition engaged directly or indirectly in the field; self-organized urban groups. (Annex 1)

The analysis of the websites of the organizations and initiatives included in the study allowed the selection of official statements, missions, strategies, and accounts of activities

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[50] Meyrick J. What is Good Qualitative Research? A First Step towards a Comprehensive Approach to Judging Rigour/Quality. *Journal of Health Psychology.* 2006. Vol. 11. P. 799-808. Nielsen R. B. Cues to Quality in Quantitative Research Papers. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal.* 2011. Vol. 40. P. 85-89.

[51] The analysis covers the period from the emergence of anti-corruption studies on Russia until the completion of the PhD program in 2021. See Article B for more details on the scholarship on anti-corruption in Russia.

and projects that problematized (anti-)corruption. The analysis of these texts was conducted considering the way the nodal points of the international discourse were articulated.

The data collected during this phase were compared with data emerging from the analysis of the texts thirty-five semi-structured interviews and four informal conversations with the representatives of the organizations and initiatives selected. Thirty-two representatives of these civil society actors took part in this research project; interviews with two respondents were conducted twice to further explore some aspects that emerged during the first interviews. In addition, five interviews were conducted with anti-corruption scholars and experts working in research centers, universities, and members of governmental bodies. The interviews were collected between 2019 and 2021. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, was conducted by the author in Russian, and was transcribed and analyzed by the author with regular consultations with native speakers when necessary. The quotes that are used in the publications were translated by the author from Russian into English.

The interviews took place in person and remotely, due to the pandemic limitations, in Izhevsk, Kaliningrad, Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, and Tyumen. The decision to include Moscow and Saint Petersburg in the study was made as most organizations are located in these two cities. Branches of international and national organizations and initiative groups based in Tyumen, and Kaliningrad were included in the study.

Scientific contribution to the subject field

1) This work includes the first literature review of domestic and external anti-corruption works on Russia. The analysis reveals that the field of study is composed of two strands, reflecting the international and national anti-corruption discourses. The study remarks on the necessity to apply a critical approach that focuses on the local meanings attached to anti-corruption and the possible discursive tensions within civil society.

2) The study represents the first investigation of how the international anti-corruption discourse is articulated by civil society actors in Russia.

3) The work contributes to the extant literature on anti-corruption discourses in Russia by proposing a study of civil society's articulations that considers both texts emerging from official statements and interviews, with the purpose of detecting disjunctures and

contradictions. The approach allowed the unpacking of the negotiation and contestation of meanings behind official statements.

4) The research project considers urban self-organized groups whose role was overlooked in the extant literature on anti-corruption in Russia. This work provides evidence of how their articulation of anti-corruption contests other local articulations and the international one.

Statements to be defended

1) The study provides evidence of the presence of competing articulations of anti-corruption within Russian civil society that reproduce, negotiate and contest the international anti-corruption discourse. The analysis of how the key signifiers of the international discourse are re-articulated locally allowed the distinction of four articulations.

2) The analysis of the local articulations of the 'floating signifiers' of the international discourse revealed the discursive competition over several main signifiers: 'corruption', 'civil society', 'expertise', 'stability', ''state', and 'morality'. These nodal points are invested with new meanings to legitimize actors and they acquire different relevance in each articulation.

3) The analysis of the articulations of anti-corruption allowed the exploration of what meaning remains excluded and is discursively constructed as the antagonistic 'Other'. In this way, the study discloses a discursive struggle and a reciprocal delegitimation of representations that prevents the creation of a common 'truth', a common anti-corruption model that could include all actors.

4) The study reveals the attempt made by para-statal organizations to create a counter-hegemonic discourse. Nonetheless, the articulation of 'corruption' as a problem concerning high-ranking officials by all articulations prevents the temporary fixation of meaning necessary to create an alternative anti-corruption model. The study also distinguishes the presence of agonistic articulations of anti-corruption that compete over meaning but that lack the legitimacy essential to close the discourse.

5) The findings demonstrate how the nodal points of the international discourse remain floating signifiers at the local level as no articulation manages to sediment meanings, and the anti-corruption articulations are reduced to an opportunistic competition over a limited number of signifiers that prevents the construction of discourses.

Main results

The analysis of the civil society actors' articulations of anti-corruption reveals the intra- and interdiscursive struggle occurring within the field of discoursivity. The work unfolds *how* key signifiers, in this case, 'floating signifiers', are invested with new meaning. This process results in the contestation, negotiation, and reproduction of the international discourse.

Gebel's study explained how 'corruption' represents the key signifier of the corruption chain, and how the anti-corruption chain was articulated by linking nodal points such as 'civil society' 'accountability', 'competition', 'transparency', 'integrity', 'minimization of discretion'. The attachment of elements to these key signifiers enables the temporary fixation of the international discourse.

The present work explains how the local articulations of anti-corruption condense the discourse competition around some key signifiers, with the simultaneous investment of some elements with more meaning and the dislocation of other signifiers. This is a consequence of the increasing politicization of the topic in Russia that constrains the boundaries of the debate and of the discursive struggle. The key signifiers that represent the discoursive battlefield not only are invested with different meanings by the various groups of actors but also acquire different relevance in each articulation, unrevealing an opportunistic use of meaning with the purpose of legitimizing each discursive construction of anti-corruption and delegitimizing other articulations. This prevents the sedimentation of meaning and results in a discursive struggle over legitimacy.

In the next paragraphs, the four different articulations of anti-corruption that emerged from the study are illustrated. The detection of these articulations enabled the grouping of civil society actors. The 'state stability' articulation includes para-statal organization; the 'social mobilization' articulation comprises the independent local actors and those part of international networks directly engaged in anti-corruption; 'political change' is articulated by local actors backed by the opposition or indirectly engaged in the field (democracy and

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human rights); the 'practical-oriented expertize' articulation includes self-organized urban activists.

The findings unveil the attempt made by para-statal organizations to subvert the international discourse, with the purpose of establishing a counter-hegemonic articulation, and the presence of agonistic discourses that rearticulate in different ways the nodal points of the international discourse. All these articulations result in the construction of different antagonisms which reveal the fragmentation of civil society and the difficulty of establishing a collaboration between actors.

This work reveals how the international construction of corruption as caused by individuals' self-interested human nature is re-articulated locally as a consequence of the power vertical, lack of state ideology, and lack of morality. These understandings of corruption contest and negotiate the nodal points of the international discourse, dislocating some elements. The different articulations are identified by considering the key signifier that acquires a central role in each articulation for it relationally invests with meaning the other signifiers.

The 'state stability' articulation

A counter-hegemonic discourse aims to replace the hegemonic one by disarticulating nodal points and establishing a new 'chain of equivalence', creating an antagonism that allows the temporary closure of the discourse. This study reveals the attempt made by Russian para-statal organizations to construct a counter-hegemonic project characterized by a domestic 'function' and by the disarticulation of the main signifiers which results in the discoursive *nationalization* of anti-corruption. On the one hand, this articulation remarks Russian government's willingness to comply with international anti-corruption standards, on the other hand, domestically these civil society organizations pursue the creation of a national-sovereign anti-corruption discourse around the main key signifier '(state) stability', a concept framed as crucial to combat corruption but also threatened by corruption. The resulting counter-hegemonic articulation subverts the meanings attached to 'civil society', 'knowledge', 'morality', and 'state' whose signifiers are all re-articulated with reference to 'corruption' and 'stability'.

In this articulation, 'corruption' is framed as a problem that can be counteracted with the implementation of mechanisms of control; at the same time, 'corruption' is also articulated as caused by the absence of a state ideology that would prevent public officials from 'betraying the state'. This articulation represents corruption as an act of 'treason' against

the stability of the state that can lead to the outbreak of 'colored revolutions' and the interference of foreign powers in domestic affairs. Corruption is a moral problem with respect to the state and only indirectly to society, as it can lead to political and, therefore, economic instability. This problem has to be counteracted with mechanisms of control and the creation of a state ideology. The non-corruption model of reference is not, however, the West, as indirectly the international discourse implies, but the Soviet system, where officials 'felt they were part of something big and important', the construction of a communist country, and this prevented them from engaging in corrupt practices. This finding resonates with Doshi and Ranganathan who explain how corruption is "always implicitly positioned relative to a perceived normal or previously 'uncorrupted' state of affairs" that informs the way corruption should be counteracted.[52]

The project to create a national-sovereign anti-corruption discourse is reproduced in the interviews, where the West is accused of instrumentally using anti-corruption international organizations and agencies to weaken the stability of countries as it happened in Russia in the 1990s. Present Russia, having regained its sovereignty, is discursively opposed to the unstable and corrupt liberal 1990s, in the attempt to legitimize the current leadership and its successful nationalization of the elites. (Interview 3, 14)[53]

The antagonist chain that emerges, the Other, is represented not only by corrupt countries in general but by the corrupt countries that allow the West to interfere in their internal affairs in the name of a 'right' anti-corruption, losing their sovereignty (Interview 3, 14, 16). Morality is in this articulation linked with the morality of 'loyal' public officials as opposed to immoral public officials and immoral non-patriotic civil society actors.

Justified by the central idea of preserving the sovereignty of the country, the counter-hegemonic project legitimizes only the segment of civil society considered patriotic and willing to collaborate with the state in pursuing the goals set in the National Anti-corruption Plans, therefore, delegitimizing independent civil society initiatives, and the organizations part of international networks or backed by the opposition.[54] The antagonism created is, therefore, represented not only by external powers and treacherous public officials

[52] Doshi, S., Ranganathan M. Towards a critical geography of corruption and power in late capitalism. *Progress in Human Geography.* 2019. Vol. 43. № 3. P. 438.

[53] Stuvøy K. 'The Foreign Within': State–Civil Society Relations in Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies.* 2020. Vol. 72. № 7. P. 1107.

[54] Chebankova E. Contemporary Russian conservatism. *Post-Soviet Affairs.* 2016. Vol. 32. № 1. P. 28-54.

but also by Russian civil society organizations accused of serving foreign interests, playing the role of the 'foreign within'[55]. (Interview 3, 14, 16)

However, the attempt to create a counter-hegemonic project has only a domestic 'function' as Russia is internationally framed as a country struggling with corruption, therefore, it lacks the legitimacy necessary to advance an anti-corruption universal model capable of subverting the international discourse at the global level. In addition, as Pavlova explained, Russia is interested in maintaining the external image of a country willing to counteract the problem.[56]

This articulation attempts to limit domestic contestation by constructing anti-corruption around '(state) stability' and emphasizing the central role played by the government in curbing corruption. The result is an articulation that rejects the necessity to fully adopt the model promoted by the international discourse, contesting the superiority and universality of international expertise and watchdogs organizations, promoting a project of 'sovereign/national' anti-corruption that implies at least formally the adoption of standard international mechanisms of control but articulating it in relation to the main nodal point '(state) stability'. Nonetheless, the project to create a counter-hegemonic discourse based on state stability is limited by the widespread perception within the society of the government as corrupt, fueled also by the investigations published by the opposition on corrupt scandals concerning high-ranking officials. The lack of alternative solutions to counteract the problem besides ideology, which remains vaguely articulated and is opportunistically used to remark on the centrality of the state, prevents the successful creation of a counter-hegemonic project.

The 'social mobilization' articulation

The 'social mobilization' articulation constructs corruption both as a 'principal-agent' and a 'collective action' problem, that can be counteracted by strengthening awareness in all spheres, triggering social mobilization and forcing in this way the government to enhance mechanisms of control and reforms.[57] Corruption in Russia is caused by a power structure based on 'kinship and loyalty to the government', the presence of the state in all spheres, but

[55] Stuvøy K. 'The Foreign Within': State–Civil Society Relations in Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2020. Vol. 72. № 7. P. 1107.
[56] Pavlova E. Corrupt governance: Self-defeating anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Russia. *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations*. 2020. Vol. 28. № 2. P. 205-222.
[57] Gebel A.C. Human nature and morality in the anti‑corruption discourse of transparency international. *Public Administration and Development*. 2012. Vol. 32. № 1. P. 109-128. Pavlova E. Corrupt governance: Self-defeating anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Russia. *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations*. 2020. Vol. 28. № 2. P. 205-222.

also by the lack of understanding among the society of the consequences of the corrupt practices deployed in every day's activities. Therefore, the articulation of 'corruption' in the international discourse is reproduced, and it informs also the articulation of 'civil society' as a mediator representing citizens' interests by keeping the government accountable. Constructed as a consequence of corruption, the element 'instability' is articulated as an economic issue resulting in the incapability of the state to cope with crises and address the needs of the population. However, 'instability' is also represented as a consequence of the increasing isolation of Russia at the global level which prevents the establishment of partnerships with international anti-corruption agencies and institutions, crucial for the efficient implementation of anti-corruption policies, as articulated also in the international discourse. Reproducing the international discourse, this articulation emphasizes the importance to apply the right 'knowledge' to fight corruption through the mediation of an apolitical civil society. In this way, this articulation delegitimizes both the actors backed by the opposition, for focusing on 'naming and shaming corrupt officials' instead of pursuing long-term structural changes, and para-statal organizations, for being established 'to redistribute state resources among officials'. (Interview 1, 19, 27)

However, the comparison of the different types of texts reveals intradiscursive contradictions between official statements and interviews. In fact, the construction of civil society as a non-confrontational mediator possessing the 'right knowledge' is in Russia discursively contested by the 'regime change' articulation that frames protests as the only efficient anti-corruption instrument. From the analysis of the 'social mobilization articulation', it emerges how actually respondents of this group of actors see protests as the only efficient instrument to gain the support of society in Russia, unrevealing the struggle to engage with the latter by positioning themselves as 'experts' and mediators (Interview 5, 6, 19). In fact, in a context where such actors are discoursively constructed as the 'foreign within' and anti-corruption is politicized, such discursive legitimation is not efficient, and respondents admit being the 'mouthpiece only of themselves, not of citizens'. (Interview 5, 22, 24) Therefore, the articulation of a non-confrontational and 'expert' civil society is negotiated and adjusted to the context.

In the attempt to overcome the lack of legitimation within society caused by the government's discourse on civil society and by the 'regime change' articulation, it emerges how some of the actors grouped in the articulation 'social mobilization' engage with the politicization of anti-corruption yet remaining non-confrontational. In fact, it emerges how they try to establish a partnership with the segment of society that supports the conservative

discourse of the government on civil society but whose religious values question the corrupt behavior of the Russian elite. In its discourses, this segment accuses the latter of pursuing its own interests to the detriment of the national interest, despite the attempts of the government's discourse to promote the idea of a successful 'nationalization of the elites' and the 'removal' of oligarchs from power positions in Russia.[58] This segment of society links the question of 'foreign interference' to both 'foreign' civil society and the image of the 'neo-liberal, global, cosmopolitan party'[59] of the ruling elite, whose behavior is in contrast with orthodox values. In this way, the actors of the 'social mobilization articulation' represent 'civil society' not only as possessing the 'right knowledge' but also representing the 'values' of society as opposed to the elite, therefore, engaging with the political discourse. (Interview 1, 5, 27)

As explained above, the creation of an antagonist 'Other' is fundamental for the fixation of discourses. From these findings, it emerges how in the official texts this articulation reproduces the international discourse by 'othering' the civil society actors established by the government and the opposition accused of lacking the right knowledge and pursuing political goals and not the structural changes necessary to implement efficient anti-corruption policies. (Interview 1, 15 ,27) At the same time, as explained above, in the text gathered during interviews, protests are articulated as efficient in such a context as Russia. In the intradiscoursive articulation, it emerges how the segment of society with a 'Soviet mentality' and with an aversion to whistle-blowing is constructed as an 'internal other', together with the citizens 'who are not Kantians but simply follow the political leader', therefore, that show no critical thinking. (Interview 5, 27)

The 'practical-oriented expertise' articulation

In this articulation, corruption is represented as caused by the incompetent and immoral behavior of public officials. This construction of anti-corruption around the main signifiers 'expertise' and 'civil society' partially contests the international discourse. The articulation ignores the informal practices used by ordinary citizens, self-excluding activists from corruption, and reflects the domestic process of politicization of the topic that resulted in the association of corruption with high-ranking officials.[60] At the same time, the articulation

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[58] Chebankova E. Competing ideologies of Russia's civil society. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2015. Vol. 67. № 2. P. 244-268.

[59] Chebankova E. Competing ideologies of Russia's civil society. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2015. Vol. 67. № 2. P. 257.

[60] Pavlova E. Corrupt governance: Self-defeating anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Russia. *New Perspectives*. 2020. Vol. 28. № 2. P. 205-222.

contests the international discourse that represents corruption as caused mainly by the lack of incentives and control by emphasizing the absence of 'professionalism' and 'morality' among public officials, the latter understood as respect towards citizens. In the texts collected during the interviews, 'expertise' is articulated as the ability to 'gather scientific data' about concrete urban issues, correctly implement deliberative decision-making instruments, and develop projects that respond to citizens' interests, in contrast to public officials who are hired for their loyalty to the power. (Interview 7, 9, 10, 30) Anti-corruption is associated with the principle of 'self-evidence' central to the development of activism in Russia.[61] In this way, this articulation challenges the legitimacy of the government as an anti-corruption actor accusing it of applying corrupt schemes that prevent the urban development of the territory according to citizens' needs. (Interview 7, 11, 12, 28, 29, 30, 32) At the same time, this articulation questions the 'social mobilization' and 'regime change' discourses, juxtaposing the 'good people with expertise defending citizens' rights' to actors pursuing political or abstract goals. These findings echo the intradiscursive disjunctures in the 'social mobilization' articulation that reveal the struggle of independent anti-corruption organizations to represent citizens and legitimize themselves as 'experts'. In this way, urban activists contest the central role assigned to non-governmental organizations by the international discourse articulating the good 'civil society' as representing local needs and context-based knowledge. In addition, the 'regime change' discourse, which articulates 'civil society' actors as defenders of the 'good people', is challenged by the 'practical oriented' articulation that constructs them as oriented toward political goals and mirroring the hierarchical/vertical and masculinized decision-making structure of the government. (Interview 8, 9, 31, 32)

In this articulation, the West and Europe are represented as reference models, as the 'good non-corrupt society' where citizens can participate in the decision-making process and have access to information, and where corruption does not prevent 'professionalism' within state bodies (7, 12, 30).

The 'regime change' articulation

The 'regime change' articulation was already partially investigated in the extant literature on anti-corruption in Russia.[62] The findings of this study remark on the

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[61] Zhelnina A., Tykanova E. Formal'niye i neformal'niye grazhdanskiye infrastruktury: sovremenniye issledovaniya gorodskogo lokal'nogo aktivizma v Rossii' [Formal and informal civic infrastructure: contemporary studies of urban local activism in Russia]. *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsialnoy antropologii* [The Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology]. 2019. Vol. 22. № 1. P. 162–192.

[62] Aburamoto M. The politics of anti-corruption campaigns in Putin's Russia: power, opposition, and the All-Russia People's Front. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2019. Vol. 71. № 3. P. 408-425. Makarova M. Between the

opportunistic construction of corruption as a problem concerning high-ranking officials to legitimize protests and regime change claims.

In this articulation, the right 'civil society' is represented as political, for remaining apolitical means 'not to be fully engaged in anti-corruption', to remain 'passive'. (Interview 4, 21, 23, 25, 33) The role of civil society is to mobilize citizens and to raise awareness not about the effects of corruption but about the corrupt behavior of well-known public officials through media investigations. (Interview 4, 21, 33) Therefore, the non-confrontational role of 'civil society' as articulated in the international discourse is here subverted because considered ineffective with the consequent delegitimation of the civil society actors that support a non-political approach. 'Expertise' is also invested with a new meaning becoming the ability to conduct corrupt investigations and to 'pack' them effectively to catch the attention of a wide audience. (Interview 4, 21) 'Stability' is here linked with prosperity, a goal that can be achieved by subverting the corrupt political regime. The West and Europe represent the 'non-corrupt world' Russia should aim to become, a world constructed as a place where people live 'normally' rather than a place where specific anti-corruption policies or mechanisms are implemented. (Interview 21, 25, 34, 36) The intradiscursive analysis reveals how the antagonists are not only corrupt officials but also 'passive' citizens and civil society actors that do not participate in protests (Interview 4, 21, 34, 37)

Conclusions

The literature review that explored the scholarship on anti-corruption in Russia distinguished two academic discourses, one reflecting the international articulation of anti-corruption, the other reflecting the domestic one created by the government. In this context, the heterogeneity of the civil society actors engaged in anti-corruption, the effects of the politicization of the topic, and the local articulations of the international discourse remained unexplored.

Drawing from the critical works on anti-corruption, this project analyzes how the international discourse is re-articulated locally by different civil society actors. By applying the concept of 'floating signifier', this study understates the key signifiers of the international discourse as open to different ascriptions of meanings.

State and Civil Society: Anti-corruption Discourse of Movements and Non-governmental Organizations in Russia. *Research in Social Change.* 2019. Vol. 11. № 3. P. 39–68. Pavlova E. Corrupt governance: Self-defeating anti-corruption rhetoric and initiatives in Russia. *New Perspectives.* 2020. Vol. 28. № 2. P. 205-222.

The findings provide evidence of the presence of four articulations of anti-corruption on the basis of the different constructions of main signifiers such as 'corruption', 'civil society', 'stability', 'expertise', 'morality', and 'state'. The analysis of the negotiation, reproduction, and contestation of meanings reveals the struggle in the anti-corruption field of discursivity and the impossibility to create a common model of 'good anti-corrupt world' which prevents collaboration among civil society actors.

Publications and project approbation

The research results formed the basis for the following publications:

Chiarvesio F., Di Puppo L. "If one is Orthodox, one should not strive for luxury": political values and the changing strategies of anti-corruption CSOs in Russia. *Globalizations.* 2022. Vol. 19. № 8. P. 1241-1256. DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2022.2054086.

Chiarvesio F. Exploring anti-corruption knowledge on Russia: an analysis of how the context matters. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe.* 2021. Vol. 29. № 2-3. P 209-224. DOI: 10.1080/25739638.2021.2007606.

Chiarvesio F. Urban activists from the perspective of anti-corruption: a framing approach, *Journal of Social Policy Studies.* 2021. Vol. 19. № 2. P. 315-326. DOI: 10.17323/727-0634-2021-19-2-315-326.

Chiarvesio F. The stagnation of anti-corruption studies on Russia: how to reverse the situation. *Vestnik Tomsk State University Journal of Philosophy, Sociology and Political Science.* 2020. Vol. 58. P. 198-206. DOI: 10.17223/1998863X/58/18.

The research results were presented at the following scientific conferences and roundtables:

07.06.21, Tartu University, Post-Socialist (dis)Orders, "Inside the promotion of anti-corruption and democratic principles in Russia: understanding the agency grassroots urban initiatives"

17.11.20, ELKH Budapest, "Social dynamics. Inequalities, integration, mobility and migration", "Going beyond the normative approach to investigate civil society engaged in anti-corruption in Russia and its dialogue with the state"

21.12.20, IL SIR HSE University, Interaction. Integration. Inclusion, "Contextualising anti-corruption: Analysing CSOs' legitimisation strategies in Russia's anti-corruption field" (with Lili Di Puppo)

22.07.20, Il SIR HSE University, "New perspectives on Russian civil society. Discovering new boundaries" (Round table)

Annex 1. List of interviews and informal conversations

1	May 2019 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption CSO, international network (1a)	Director of the Russian branch
2	May 2019 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption research center affiliated to a Russian university and established with framework of National Anti-corruption Plans	Director/Expert
3	May 2019 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption organization established within the framework of the National Anti-corruption Plans	Director
4	June 2019 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption CSO established by the opposition (2a)	Project manager
5	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Anti-corruption CSO, international network (1b)	Regional branch manager
6	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Anti-corruption CSO, international network (1c)	Researcher
7	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
8	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
9	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
10	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
11	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
12	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group (informal conversation)	Activist
13	August 2019 (Kaliningrad)	Environmental organization	Project manager
14	October 2019 (Moscow)	Independent anti-corruption CSO that supports the agenda of the government	Director
15	October 2019 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption research center affiliated to a Russian university, former employee of a local anti-corruption organization (3a)	Expert
16	October 2019 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption research center affiliated to a Russian university (3b)	Director
17	April 2020 (Izhevsk)	Anti-corruption researcher affiliated to a national university	Researcher
18	June 2020 (Saint Petersburg)	Independent initiative with focus on democracy established by the opposition (informal conversation)	Employee
19	June 2020 (Moscow)	Local independent anti-corruption CSO	Director
20	July 2020 (Moscow)	Former member of the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights	Expert
21	July 2020 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption CSO, supported by the opposition (2b)	Project manager
22	August 2020 (Moscow)	Civil society researcher affiliated to a Russian	Expert/deputy board

		university and member of the deputy board of an independent anti-corruption organization part of an international network	member
23	September 2020 (Moscow)	Branch of international CSO that focuses on human rights and democracy (4a)	Project manager
24	December 2020 (Moscow)	Political researcher affiliated to international research center and member of the deputy board of an independent anti-corruption organization part of an international network	Expert/ deputy board member
25	January 2021 (Moscow)	Initiative with focus on democracy	Employee
26	February 2021 (Moscow)	Branch of international CSO that focuses on human rights and democracy (4b)	Project manager
27	February 2021 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption CSO, international network (1d)	Director
28	February 2021 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
29	February 2021 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
30	February 2021 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
31	February 2021 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
32	February 2021 (Kaliningrad)	Urban self-organized group	Activist
33	February 2021 (Moscow)	Initiative with focus on human rights	Lawyer
34	February 2021 (Moscow)	Independent CSO with focus on human rights	Employee
35	February 2021 (Moscow)	Anti-corruption initiative (Informal conversation)	Volunteer
36	March 2021 (Tyumen)	Initiative with focus on democracy	Volunteer
37	April 2021 (Moscow)	Initiative backed by the opposition with focus on democracy	Volunteer
38	April 2021 (Saint-Petersburg)	Anti-corruption CSO with focus on third sector	Employee
39	May 2021 (Saint Petersburg)	CSO for the development of civil society	Employee

Annex 2. Interview scheme

1. Could you tell me something about your organisation, your activities, and what you do here?
2. Do you think your work is successful in general? What are positive results?
3. What do you think is the major cause of corruption in Russia? What is corruption for you?
4. What are the most efficient measures to counteract corruption in Russia?
5. Do you encounter obstacles in your activities? Which ones?
6. What are the other organizations working in this field? How do you consider their work? Do you think that they are effective?
7. Do you collaborate with these other organizations?
8. What is the role of your organization in the anti-corruption field?
9. What is the role of the government in the anti-corruption field?
10. What is the role of civil society in the anti-corruption field?
11. Did the anti-corruption field change over time?
12. Did your activities change over time?
13. Do you think that the fight against corruption is more effective today or not?
14. Did the problem of corruption change over the years, since Soviet times? How?
15. Do you think your work is successful in general? What are positive results?