The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal, 31(2), 2026, article 4.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21937008

Strategic Directions for Strengthening Democratic Institutions by Improving the Quality of Public Services and Enhancing the Anti-Corruption Capacity of Civil Society

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ABSTRACT

The impact of public governance on corruption risks and democratic institutions remains one of the most significant issues facing democratic governments today. There are large increases in what citizens expect government to do for them, and there also needs to be better accountability within the democratic institutions. However, the current role of civil society organizations in supporting the development of anti-corruption capacities within states is not yet sufficiently developed to create an adequate support network at the intergovernmental level. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into how public governance quality, participation by civil society, and the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures are related in the context of modern public administration. The subject of this study is the institutional features of democracy across a sample of countries. A quantitative applied analysis was used for this study, which employed both descriptive and correlational statistical techniques, as well as international institutional indicators, to analyze data from 35 countries over the years 2018-2024. Results from this study show moderate institutional dynamics: the average score for the Government Effectiveness Indicator increased from -0.12 to +0.05, while the average score for the Corruption Perception Index increased from 46.2 to 49.8 points. Additionally, correlation analyses identified very strong and statistically significant relationships between public service quality and corruption risks ($r = .812$; $p < .001$) and between public service quality and democratic institutional effectiveness ($r = .742$; $p < .001$). Countries with a Corruption Perception Index (CPI) score greater than 55 had significantly higher government effectiveness ratings than those with a CPI score below 40. The implications of these results can be directly used to inform public policies, institutional reforms, anti-corruption strategies, and to enhance opportunities for civil society organizations to promote citizen oversight of democracies.

Keywords: government effectiveness, institutional accountability, corruption perception, digital governance, civic oversight, administrative capacity

Introduction

Public administration corruption remains a pervasive, long-standing systemic issue that compromises the delivery of high-quality governance, undercuts the overall capacity of government institutions, and diminishes the public sector's ability to effectively implement public policy at all levels of government, despite the establishment of formal anti-corruption measures.

The unevenness of institutional development, the variable degree of participation from civil society, and the conflicting impacts of decentralizing efforts have resulted in corruption practices adapting to changing administrative circumstances, continuing to exert significant influence over decision-making and the allocation of resources.

Modern states see corruption as a systemic issue that affects both the delivery of high-quality public governance and citizens' trust in institutions and ultimately the effective functioning of socio-economic development. Research has demonstrated that a decline in governance metrics corresponds with increased perceptions of corruption, which confirms that it is the quality of institutional design that plays the largest role in creating corruption risk (Koeswayo, Handoyo & Hasyir, 2024).

One of the most debated issues among researchers today is assessing the impact of civil society engagement in promoting good governance. The majority of researchers agree that there exists a positive relationship between civil society engagement and governments and increasing transparency and accountability, but also emphasize that this relationship is heavily dependent on the existing political and institutional context within democratic systems (Phuyel et al., 2024). Systemic improvements in public governance through better service quality, civil society engagement, and stronger institutional accountability. Provides empirical evidence linking public service quality, corruption, and democratic effectiveness, highlighting civil society as a governance innovation.

The literature pays particular attention to the impact of decentralization on corruption in the provision of public services. Empirical results have shown that local institutional configurations can both reduce and exacerbate corrupt practices, depending on the mechanisms of control and management organization at the local level (Zarychta et al., 2024). At the same time, studies of anti-corruption strategies in state institutions have shown that their effectiveness is determined not so much by the formal introduction of tools as by the coherence of policies and the institutional capacity to implement them (Ketners et al., 2025). At the same time, recent studies emphasize that corruption and governance should be considered in the broader context of sustainable development, as weak governance institutions can negate social and economic achievements, especially in developing countries (Le & Dang, 2026). At the same time, a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between governance, civil society, and anti-corruption mechanisms remains fragmentary, which creates a scientific gap.

Although there is a large amount of science studying corruption and public governance, current research lacks a number of conceptual and methodological shortcomings. First of all, most of the investigations have been based on either macro-level indicators of governance or specific anti-corruption tools, ignoring a global analysis of its interaction with civil society and the institutional frame of policy implementation. Additionally, the relationship between decentralization and corruption risk reduction/ increase remains poorly studied. Finally, very few studies analyze the institutional/social/administrative aspects of a unique analytical framework, allowing for evaluating the effects of corruption both on the effectiveness of the governance and on the long-term results of the development.

The purpose of this study is to identify the characteristics of the relationship between the quality of public governance, civil society participation, and the effectiveness of anti-corruption mechanisms in modern public administration systems. To achieve this goal, the following research tasks have been identified: to analyze theoretical approaches to the interpretation of corruption and good governance in contemporary scientific literature; to characterize the institutional factors that influence the effectiveness of anti-corruption policy; to identify the role of civil society in the processes of reducing corruption risks; to determine the impact of decentralization mechanisms on the formation of corrupt practices; to outline the conditions under which the interaction of these elements contributes to improving the effectiveness of public administration.

Literature Review

Corruption, which can be defined by many factors, is considered to be multi-faceted and to relate to institutional performance, citizen participation in democratic activities, and performance of mechanisms for accountability. Bader et al. (2019) also studied the influence of civil society on reducing fraud and corruption; this study showed that civil society's potential in influencing fraud and corruption reduction depends on both legislative tools, organizational capacity, and access to decision-making (Bader et al., 2019). However, when it comes to the economic and juridical aspects, there are several studies arguing that, if anti-corruption strategies are developed in isolation from other fiscal and juridical policies, then these strategies will lose their operational potential (Dluhopolskyi et al., 2021).

A body of literature examines how citizens perceive corruption and how it affects the legitimacy of democracies. The empirical studies demonstrated a relationship between perceived corruption rates and political disengagement and decreasing support for democracy. These findings suggest that reform efforts may be hindered by citizen disillusionment with politics, regardless of the number of formal changes to institutions. As such, increased efficacy in the role of civil society organizations as catalysts for the formation and implementation of public policies (Onyshchuk, 2018), as well as active citizen engagement in the process of implementing anti-corruption reforms (Bondarenko, 2023), are considered important factors.

Comparative studies of civil society participation in public administration have shown that the implementation of international experience is only possible if it is adapted to the national institutional environment, as the mechanical transfer of models does not deliver the expected results (Bila-Tiunova et al., 2019). Contemporary works also emphasize the role of transparency and ethical standards as key factors in strengthening democratic governance (Modise, 2025; Mchunu et al., 2025), while the activities of civil society organizations are seen as an important tool for increasing accountability and control in the public sector (Olumese et al., 2025).

At the local level, considerable attention is paid to public engagement as a strategy for controlling corruption in local government, where the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures is largely determined by the level of interaction between the authorities and the community (Sirejeki & Kharurrizqo, 2025). At the same time, research in the field of infrastructure development shows that political and institutional conditions can affect the effectiveness of

external aid, creating additional corruption risks (Jambadu et al., 2024). In a broader managerial and political context, researchers analyzed the mechanisms of forming public support for policies, in particular through the effects of negative feedback in social policy (Zhang et al., 2023), the role of ideological factors in political processes (Isotalo et al., 2026), and the specifics of management decisions in crisis conditions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dash & Anupama, 2023). Experimental studies of the perception of government actions in different countries have confirmed that public trust is a critically important variable for assessing the effectiveness of public administration (Amirkhanyan et al., 2023). Theoretical generalizations in the field of public administration emphasize the need to integrate political science into the analysis of management processes, which allows for a deeper understanding of the institutional constraints of anti-corruption reforms (Peters et al., 2022). The literature suggests that both the components of good governance and effective management decision-making are interdependent, which is also an indication that the principles of good governance could be viewed as an integral component to a systematic reduction in corruption risk (Sari, 2023).

It appears from the summary of the literature that there is significant fragmentation among the various disciplines studying the issue, with most studies being limited to only one aspect of institutions, politics, and/or society; or, conversely, focused on those issues within very narrow or specific contexts. As such, there exists a clear need for integrated research examining the three dimensions: governance, civil society, and anti-corruption mechanisms simultaneously through a common theoretical lens.

Methodology

The study was conducted in 2024–2025 as an applied quantitative cross-country analysis of the relationships among public service quality, perceived corruption, trust in government, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions. The empirical observation period covered 2018–2024. Civil society participation was considered as an institutional and interpretative component of anti-corruption capacity rather than as a separately quantified variable. The research design combined descriptive, correlational, comparative, and graphical methods based on internationally recognized institutional indicators (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

The empirical data were obtained from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, and OECD datasets concerning public service performance, open government, public participation, and trust in government (Transparency International, 2024; OECD, 2023, 2024, 2025). Government Effectiveness was used as the principal proxy for the institutional capacity of public authorities and the quality of public service delivery. This indicator remained on the original WGI scale from −2.5 to +2.5. Perceived corruption was assessed through the Corruption Perceptions Index on its original 0–100 scale, where higher scores indicate lower perceived corruption. Trust in government was expressed as the percentage of respondents reporting confidence in the central government.

Public service performance was operationalized as an aggregate dimension comprising three equally weighted components: accessibility of public services, responsiveness of administrative institutions, and availability of digital public services. Democratic institutional effectiveness was operationalized as an aggregate index comprising institutional accountability, public participation in decision-making, the rule of law, and transparency of public administration. Each component contributed an equal weight to its respective aggregate indicator. Indicators with different original measurement ranges were transformed to a common 0–1 scale through min–max normalization:

$$X_{norm} = (X - X_{min}) / (X_{max} - X_{min}).$$

Higher normalized values represented stronger public service performance or greater democratic institutional effectiveness. The aggregate score for each dimension was calculated as the arithmetic mean of its normalized components. Normalization was applied only to the construction of these aggregate indicators. Government Effectiveness, CPI, and trust in government were retained on their original scales in the descriptive and comparative presentation of results.

The final purposive sample comprised 35 countries listed in Appendix A. A country was included when comparable observations were available for Government Effectiveness, CPI, public service performance, democratic institutional effectiveness, and trust in government during 2018–2024, and when its observations could be consistently matched across the World Bank, Transparency International, and OECD datasets. Countries with incomplete records, internally inconsistent values, duplicate observations, or indicators that could not be compared across sources were excluded. The same inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to all countries. The sample retained countries with different levels of institutional capacity to avoid concentrating the analysis exclusively on high-performing public administration systems. Nevertheless, because country selection depended on the availability of comparable international data, the results may be affected by data-availability selection bias and should not be generalized automatically to countries outside the analytical sample.

The research was implemented in four consecutive stages. At the first stage, academic publications and institutional reports were identified using combinations of the terms “government effectiveness,” “public service quality,” “corruption perception,” “democratic institutions,” “civil society,” “anti-corruption mechanisms,” “digital governance,” “public accountability,” and “trust in government.” Publications were included when they directly addressed at least one principal research dimension, had an identifiable theoretical or empirical basis, and contributed to interpreting cross-country institutional relationships. Duplicate publications, materials without a clear methodological basis, and sources unrelated to public governance, corruption, civil society, or democratic institutional capacity were excluded. The literature search was used to construct the conceptual framework and interpret the empirical findings. It was not designed as a systematic review or meta-analysis.

At the second stage, country-year observations for 2018–2024 were collected and consolidated into a single analytical dataset. Each country was assigned a unique identifier, while the year, indicator name, original value, measurement scale, and data source were retained.

Records were checked for missing values, duplicate entries, inconsistent country names, and cross-database comparability. Raw source files were stored separately from the processed analytical dataset. Annual observations were subsequently aggregated into country-level averages for 2018–2024, which formed the principal unit of the cross-country correlation and comparative analyses. The resulting country-level averages are presented in Appendix B.

At the third stage, descriptive statistics were calculated to identify temporal dynamics, central tendencies, dispersion, and cross-country variability. The analysis included arithmetic means, medians, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values, and interquartile characteristics. Government Effectiveness, CPI, public service performance, and trust in government were compared across the observation years. Boxplot analysis was used to examine the median, interquartile range, extreme values, and distributional asymmetry of Government Effectiveness in 2024.

The observed trajectories of Government Effectiveness and CPI for 2018–2024 were additionally extended descriptively to 2025–2028. The extension reproduced the general direction of the observed institutional trends under the assumption that no major structural break occurred. It was used only as an illustrative outlook and was not interpreted as a formal statistical forecast, predictive model, or causal estimate.

At the fourth stage, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to estimate the strength and direction of linear relationships among Government Effectiveness, CPI, and democratic institutional effectiveness. Spearman's rank coefficient was additionally calculated to assess whether the identified relationships remained stable when countries were ordered according to their ranked institutional positions. The principal unit of correlation analysis was the country-level average for 2018–2024. All coefficients were interpreted as measures of statistical association rather than evidence of causal effects.

For the principal comparative analysis, an institutional position score was calculated for each country as the arithmetic mean of the standardized values of Government Effectiveness, CPI, and democratic institutional effectiveness. The countries were ordered according to this combined score and divided at the sample median into a higher-capacity group comprising 18 countries and a lower-capacity group comprising 17 countries. This median-based division was used to compare average Government Effectiveness, CPI, and democratic institutional effectiveness between the two principal institutional groups. Countries with the median observation were assigned to the higher-capacity group to preserve the complete sample and obtain groups of 18 and 17 observations.

A supplementary descriptive classification divided the ordered institutional position scores into three approximately equal groups using the 33rd and 67th percentile thresholds. Countries below the 33rd percentile were classified as having low institutional capacity, those between the 33rd and 67th percentiles as having medium institutional capacity, and those above the 67th percentile as having high institutional capacity. This classification was used to illustrate gradual differences between institutional profiles and was not treated as an additional inferential model. The principal hypothesis testing remained based on the two-group median division.

The comparative analysis also distinguished countries with average CPI values above 55 and below 40. These thresholds were established before the group comparison as analytically interpretable cut-off points representing comparatively lower and higher levels of perceived corruption. Countries with CPI values from 40 to 55 were not included in this specific contrast but remained in all other descriptive, correlational, and institutional group analyses. The comparison was used to determine whether institutionally contrasting CPI groups differed in their average Government Effectiveness values.

Student's t-test for independent samples was used to evaluate differences between group means. The Mann–Whitney U-test was applied as a non-parametric robustness check that did not depend on the assumption of normally distributed observations. The use of both procedures made it possible to assess whether the statistical significance of intergroup differences remained stable under parametric and rank-based comparison. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < 0.05$, while the principal correlations and intergroup differences reported in the study reached $p < 0.001$. All statistical calculations were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 29 (IBM Corp., 2023).

The study relied exclusively on publicly available, aggregated country-level data and did not involve human participants, personal identifiers, confidential records, or direct interaction with respondents. Therefore, informed consent and institutional ethics approval were not required. The datasets were stored and processed in accordance with the citation, attribution, and data-use requirements of the respective institutional providers.

Results

Before moving to the interpretation of individual indicators, it is important to clarify the analytical role of this descriptive stage. The purpose of this subsection is not to establish causal relationships, but to identify the general direction, intensity, and variability of institutional changes within the selected country sample. This provides a necessary empirical baseline for the subsequent correlation and comparative analysis, where the relationships between public service quality, corruption risks, and democratic institutional effectiveness are examined more directly.

Descriptive dynamics of public service quality indicators, corruption risks, and institutional effectiveness in a sample of countries

The descriptive analysis covered 35 countries over the period 2018–2024. Its purpose was to establish the baseline levels and temporal dynamics of public service quality, perceived corruption, and institutional effectiveness across the selected sample. Government Effectiveness, CPI, and trust in government were analyzed using their original measurement scales, whereas the components of the aggregate public service performance indicator were normalized to a common 0–1 scale before aggregation. For each observation year, arithmetic means, medians, standard deviations, minimum values, and maximum values were calculated.

Over the course of the study time frame, the average Government Effectiveness score increased by 0.17 points, from −0.12 in 2018 to 0.05 in 2024. By contrast, the median increased

more moderately, from −0.08 to 0.01. The difference between the mean and median trajectories indicates some asymmetry in the distribution, partly attributable to countries with comparatively high levels of institutional effectiveness.

At the same time, indicators of public service quality, based on OECD data, showed moderately positive dynamics. The average aggregate value of public service performance indicators in the sample increased from 0.47 in 2018 to 0.54 in 2024. The most noticeable changes were recorded in the period 2021–2023, when the average annual increase was about 0.03 points, while in previous years it did not exceed 0.01–0.015 points. This pattern may reflect an acceleration of public administration reforms in part of the country sample, although the descriptive design does not establish the causes of the observed change (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023, 2025).

The level of perceived corruption, as measured by the Corruption Perceptions Index, remained relatively stable on average for the sample, but with a clear trend towards gradual improvement. The average CPI value increased from 46.2 points in 2018 to 49.8 points in 2024, representing an increase of 3.6 points. The median value of the indicator increased from 45 to 48 points, indicating a more uniform nature of changes in the middle of the distribution. At the same time, the standard deviation of the CPI remained at 16–18 points, reflecting the significant heterogeneity of the sample in terms of the level of perceived corruption (Transparency International, 2024).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of key institutional indicators in a sample of countries (2018–2024)

Indicator	2018	2020	2022	2024
Government Effectiveness (average)	–0.12	–0.09	–0.02	0
Government Effectiveness (SD)	0.64	0.66	0.63	0.62
CPI, points (average)	46.2	47	48	49.8
CPI, points (median)	45	46	47	48
Quality of public services (average)	0.47	0.48	0.52	0.54
Trust in government, % (average)	41	39	44	45.9

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the World Bank (2024), Transparency International (2024), OECD (2023, 2024, 2025)
Note: SD = standard deviation; indicators are normalized to ensure cross-country comparability.

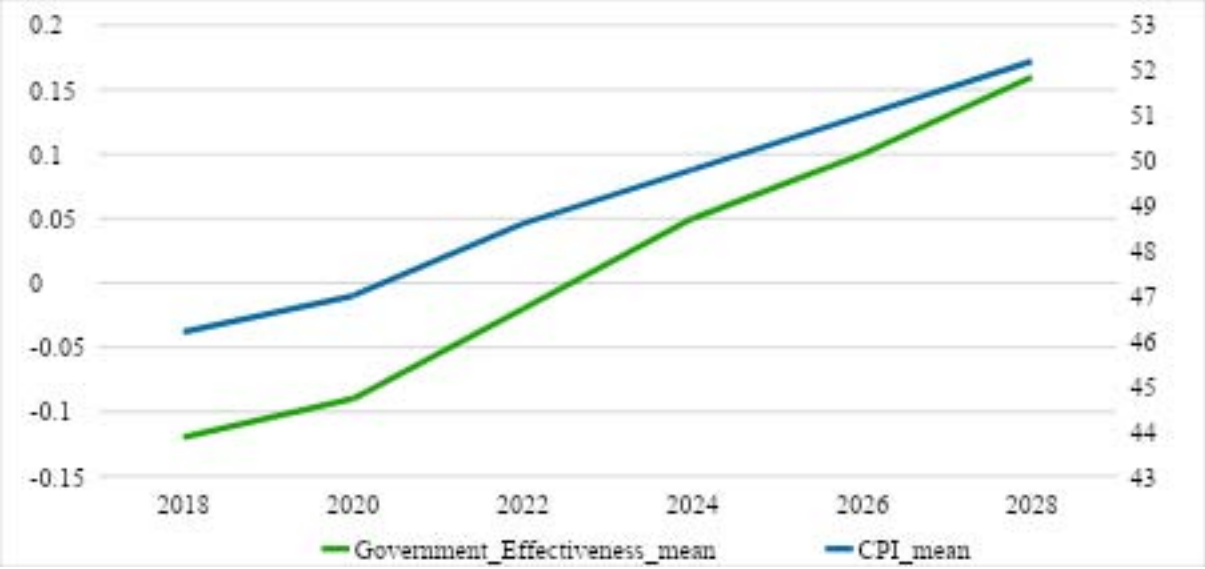
The indicators for governmental trustworthiness also have been included within the framework of institutional responsibility. Trust in central government was at an average rate of 45.9% in 2024 compared to 41.5% in 2018; the least amount of confidence for average values was found in 2020 (39.8%) as that is when there was the most stress on institutions, but as we can see an increase in Trust over the last two years of this time frame (OECD, 2024), it appears

that confidence has returned gradually. A summary of the findings of the descriptive statistical analysis for each of the important institutional variables in the sample of countries for the period of 2018-2024 is shown in Table 1.

To identify and illustrate the common trends among all of the countries analyzed and to understand these commonalities at an international level, we have developed a graph illustrating the trends of institutional indicators over time in our representative sample of countries. The graphs allow for tracking of the degree of synchronization among trends of public service quality and levels of risk from corruption for each country examined; they also provide for assessing of both the magnitude and the direction of the trends in the short- to medium-term. Trends were interpreted for indicators of government effectiveness (Government Effectiveness) and corruption perceptions (Corruption Perceptions Index), through development of general average values for those indicators for the period 2018 – 2024. A descriptive continuation of the trends was also developed for subsequent years. While this approach does not represent forecasting using strictly statistical methods, it provides conceptual guidance regarding possible future directions of institutional development if the present structural patterns are maintained.

The dynamics presented in Figure 1 show a consistent increase in the average values of Government Effectiveness and Corruption Perceptions Index in the sample of countries, reflecting a gradual improvement in the institutional capacity of the public sector against the backdrop of a reduction in corruption risks.

Figure 1: Observed dynamics of Government Effectiveness and Corruption Perceptions Index in the sample of countries with a trend-based descriptive outlook for 2025–2028



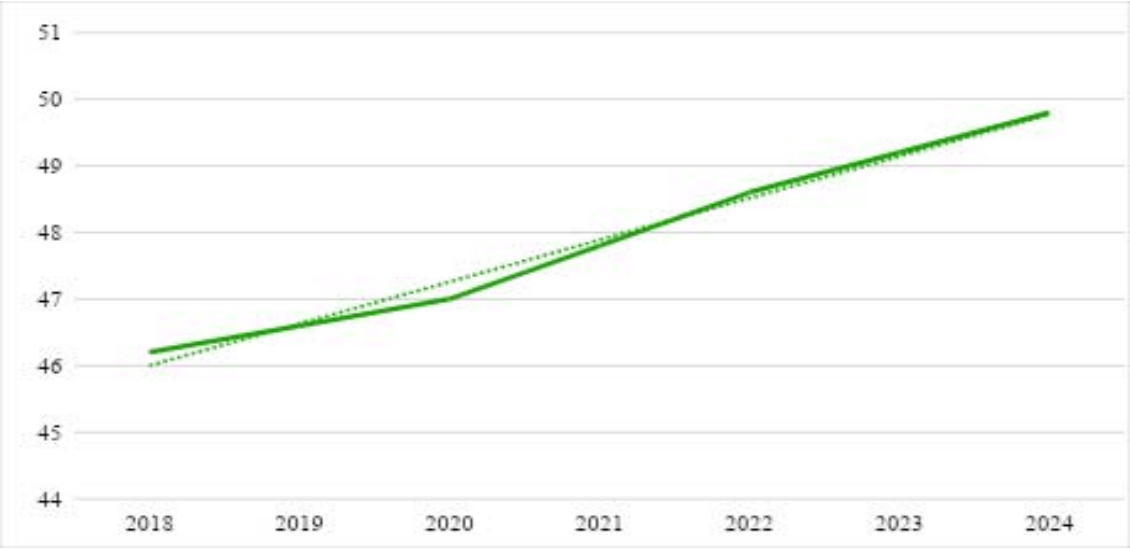
Source: Compiled by the authors based on Worldwide Governance Indicators (World Bank, 2024), Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2024), and OECD institutional indicators (OECD, 2023, 2024, 2025)
Note: Government Effectiveness is presented on the left axis, Corruption Perceptions Index on the right axis. Data for 2018–2024 reflect observed values. Values for 2025–2028 represent a descriptive continuation of the observed trend and do not constitute a formal forecast or predictive modelling results.

Visually, a more intense convergence of the trajectories of the indicators can be observed in the post-crisis period of 2021–2024, which may indicate a strengthening of the role of anti-corruption and governance reforms in maintaining the stability of democratic institutions. A descriptive extension of the trends beyond the observation period shows that the positive direction of change will continue in the absence of significant structural breaks, while not eliminating significant inter-country variability in institutional indicators. The identified synchronism of dynamics creates analytical prerequisites for further quantitative analysis of the interrelations between the quality of public services, the level of corruption risks, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Based on the descriptive characteristics presented, the extreme values of the indicators in the sample were also identified. Thus, in 2024, the minimum value of Government Effectiveness was –1.21, while the maximum reached 1.84. For the CPI, the corresponding extreme values ranged from 24 to 87 points, which further confirms the high level of structural heterogeneity of the sample. Similar disparities were observed in the indicators of public service quality, where the gap between the first and fourth quartiles in 2024 was 0.31 points.

To identify temporal changes in the average level of corruption risks in the sample of countries, the dynamics of the aggregated values of the Corruption Perceptions Index for the period 2018–2024 were analyzed. Generalizing indicators at the intergovernmental level allows us to abstract from individual national fluctuations and focus on systemic trends that characterize the evolution of the anti-corruption environment in democratic and transitional economies. Figure 2 shows the change in average CPI values in the sample of countries, which provides an empirical basis for further comparison of the dynamics of corruption risks with indicators of institutional efficiency and quality of public services.

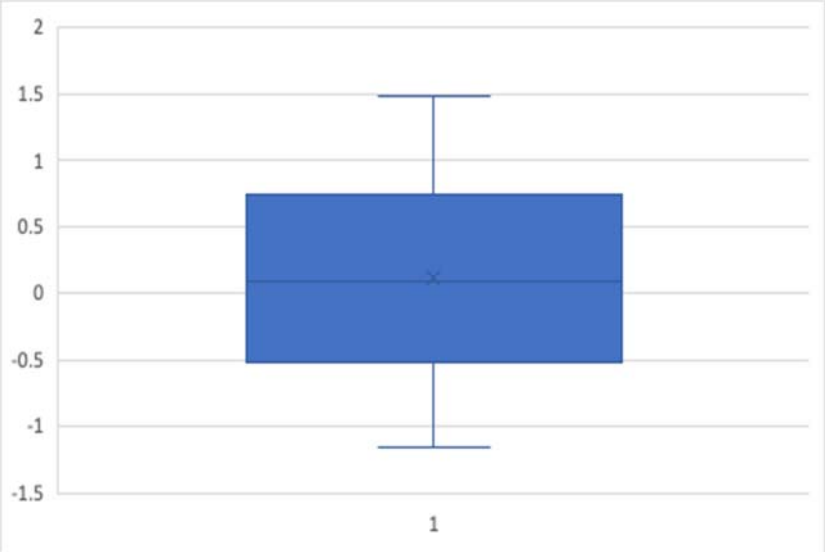
Figure 2: Dynamics of average values of Government Effectiveness and CPI in a sample of countries in 2018–2024



Source: Compiled by the authors based on *Worldwide Governance Indicators* (World Bank, 2024) and *Corruption Perceptions Index* data (Transparency International, 2024).

For a generalized assessment of spatial variability in the quality of public services in a sample of countries in 2024, the distribution of the Government Effectiveness indicator was analyzed, which is used as an integral indicator of the institutional capacity of the state to ensure the effective provision of public services. The use of boxplot analysis made it possible to identify the central tendency, interquartile range, and extreme values of the indicator, which is critical for identifying distribution asymmetry and the degree of inter-state differentiation in institutional effectiveness. Figure 3 shows the distribution of Government Effectiveness values in a sample of 35 countries, allowing for a visual assessment of the concentration of most observations, as well as the extent of deviations in countries with the lowest and highest public service quality indicators.

Figure 3: Distribution of public service quality indicators in a sample of countries in 2024



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from *Worldwide Governance Indicators* (World Bank, 2024)

The distribution shown in Figure 3 indicates significant cross-country differentiation in the quality of public services in the sample countries in 2024. The median value of the Government Effectiveness indicator is close to zero, indicating the dominance of countries with average institutional effectiveness. At the same time, the significant interquartile range and the presence of extreme values reflect the structural asymmetry of the sample and the significant gap between countries with high and low public sector capacity. The distribution obtained confirms the feasibility of further correlation and comparative analysis to clarify the role of corruption risks and democratic institutions in shaping the quality of public services.

Overall, the results of the descriptive analysis showed moderately positive dynamics in institutional efficiency and public service quality on average across the sample, combined with continued high cross-country variability. The trends observed provide an empirical basis for further analysis of the correlations between the quality of public services, the level of corruption risks, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Correlations between the quality of public services, the level of corruption, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions

While the previous subsection established the descriptive dynamics of institutional indicators, it did not determine whether these indicators are statistically connected within the selected sample. For this reason, the analysis now shifts from observing general trends to testing the strength and direction of relationships between the quality of public services, corruption risks, and democratic institutional effectiveness. This step is necessary to clarify whether the parallel movement of the indicators reflects a stable institutional association rather than a merely descriptive coincidence.

The purpose of conducting the correlation analysis was to measure systematically (quantitatively) how the performance of public services is related to both the level of risk of corruption and to the functioning of democracy in a random selection of thirty-five nations over the time frame from 2018-2024.

To complete this task, the country-based institutional averages were used as well as were grouped based on the sampling methodology outlined above; see appendix A. For additional information regarding each nation that was part of the sample of analyzed countries and their institutional groupings, please refer to Appendix A. To provide an example of the data used in conducting the analysis, please find in Appendix B, the unaggregated, raw institutional data for each country examined.

The results showed a strong positive statistical relationship between the quality of public services and the effectiveness of democratic institutions. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the Government Effectiveness indicator and the integral indicators of democratic governance was $r = 0.742$ ($p < 0.001$). The Spearman coefficient ($\rho = 0.718$; $p < 0.001$) confirmed the monotonic nature of this relationship regardless of possible deviations from the normal distribution. This means that the growth of the institutional capacity of democratic mechanisms is directly associated with an increase in the effectiveness of public service delivery.

As well as finding an association with the risk of corruption there is also an equally significant association found with the quality of public service. A highly statistically significant positive relationship exists between government effectiveness and corruption perceptions index (Pearson's $r=0.812$; $p<.01$). Additionally, a Spearman rank-order correlation of 0.79 ($p<.01$), confirms the stable nature of this association. Therefore, reducing corruption risks appears to be a principal factor contributing to increased institutional efficiency in the public sector.

In terms of quantitative data, it was shown that where an average CPI score existed over 55 the average level of Government Effectiveness was 0.87, whilst in those nations where an average CPI score existed less than 40 the level of Government Effectiveness had fallen to -0.46. As such, there existed an institutional disparity in excess of 1.33 units concerning the quality of public services provided. This institutional contrast occurs across national averages reported in appendix b, and therefore provides transparency in the identification of the noted disparities.

The connection between the amount of corruption and how well democratic systems work is both highly statistically reliable and very strong. The relationship between CPI scores and other measures of government performance were demonstrated using Pearson's r with a value of r= .769, p< .00001; and using Spearman rho as a measure of rank order correlation with a value of r=. 734, p< .00001. Therefore, we can conclude that democratic systems provide an overall anti-corruption function through their ability to reduce opportunity for misuse through such accountability, transparency and controls.

A dynamic cross-sectional view of these data show that over time, (specifically during the years 2021-2024) relative to the prior years (2018-2020), the correlations between the various variables are stronger than they had been previously. Specifically, the correlation coefficient for CPI and Government Effectiveness has moved from .76 to .84; this could suggest that the state's institutional capacity in providing sustainable public administration functions, as a result of global shock crises, will be strengthened.

The findings listed in Table 2 clearly show that there is a systematic dependency of public sector performance from the capacity of the state to suppress corruption risk due to the high statistical significance and stability of all the institutional indicators used for the sample countries. There was an even higher correlation coefficient than quality of public service and level of corruption ($r = 0.812$; $p < 0.001$). In addition, there was a very large positive correlation coefficient between quality of public services and effectiveness of democratic institutions ($r = 0.742$; $p < 0.001$) and thus it can be concluded that effective democratic institutions contribute positively to the development of the administrative capacities of the public sector.

Table 2: Correlation matrix of relationships between key institutional indicators (n = 35)

Indicator	**Quality of public services (Government Effectiveness)**	**Level of corruption (CPI)**	**Effectiveness of democratic institutions**
Quality of public services (Government Effectiveness)	1.00	0.812	0.742
Level of corruption (CPI)	0.812	1.00	0.769
Effectiveness of democratic institutions	0.742	0.769	1.00

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, and generalized international indicators of democratic governance
Note: Pearson correlation coefficients are given. *** Statistical significance at $p < 0.001$

Additionally, a significant correlation between the level of corruption and effectiveness of democratic institutions ($r = 0.769$; $p < 0.001$) demonstrates that mechanisms of democratic accountability and control are a significant factor in fighting against corruption. Overall, these findings demonstrate the unified nature of institutional development where the quality of public services, anti-corruption conditions and democratic institutions constitute a mutually dependent, integral system, and therefore any change in any element will have a corresponding proportionate effect on other elements.

Comparative statistical differences between groups of countries formed according to institutional indicators

The correlation analysis confirmed the existence of statistically significant relationships between public service quality, corruption risks, and democratic institutional effectiveness. However, correlation coefficients do not show whether countries with different levels of institutional capacity form clearly distinguishable groups. Therefore, the next stage of the analysis focuses on comparative testing of intergroup differences, which makes it possible to determine whether high- and low-capacity countries differ not only descriptively, but also statistically.

For an in-depth analysis of structural differences in the quality of public services, the level of corruption risks, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions, the sample of 35 countries was stratified into comparative groups based on institutional indicators. For each country, a combined institutional position score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the standardized values of Government Effectiveness, CPI, and democratic institutional effectiveness. The countries were then ordered according to this combined score and divided at the sample median. This approach made it possible to assess the statistical significance of intergroup differences between countries with different levels of institutional capacity.

The median-based division produced two approximately equal groups: a higher-capacity group comprising 18 countries and a lower-capacity group comprising 17 countries. The average value of Government Effectiveness in the higher-capacity group was 0.92 (SD = 0.34), while in the lower-capacity group it decreased to −0.51 (SD = 0.29). The corresponding intergroup difference was 1.43 points, reflecting a significant differentiation between countries in terms of institutional effectiveness

Table 3: **Comparative average values of institutional indicators in country groups**

Indicator	High institutional capacity (n = 18)	Low level of institutional capacity (n = 17)
Government Effectiveness (average)	0.92	−0.51
Corruption Perceptions Index (average)	63	38
Democratic Institutions Index (average)	0.79	0.34
Standard deviation GE	0.34	0.29

Note: Average values for the period 2018–2024 are given
Source: Compiled by the authors based on international institutional databases

At the same time, significant differences were observed in terms of corruption risks. The average Corruption Perceptions Index score in the group of countries with high institutional indicators was 63.8 points, while in the group with low institutional indicators it did not exceed 38.6 points. The intergroup difference of 25.2 CPI points indicates fundamentally different conditions for the functioning of accountability and control mechanisms in the respective groups of countries. Comparative average values of key institutional indicators in groups of countries with high and low institutional capacity for the period 2018–2024 are presented in Table 3,

which allows us to quantify the scale of intergroup differences in the quality of public services, the level of corruption risks, and the effectiveness of democratic institutions.

To verify the statistical significance of the intergroup differences identified, Student's t-test for independent samples was used, as well as Mann–Whitney's U-test as a nonparametric alternative. The results of the t-test showed statistically significant differences between the groups for all key indicators. For Government Effectiveness, the t-statistic was $t = 12.47$ at $p < 0.001$. Similarly, for the Corruption Perceptions Index, $t = 9.83$ ($p < 0.001$) was obtained, and for the indicator of the effectiveness of democratic institutions, $t = 10.16$ ($p < 0.001$).

Nonparametric analysis confirmed the stability of the results obtained. The Mann–Whitney U-test value for Government Effectiveness was $U = 21.0$ ($p < 0.001$), and for the Corruption Perceptions Index – $U = 28.5$ ($p < 0.001$), which indicates the preservation of statistical significance of intergroup differences regardless of the form of data distribution.

Additionally, a supplementary descriptive classification was conducted using the 33rd and 67th percentile thresholds of the combined institutional position score**,** which distinguished countries with high, medium, and low institutional capacity. The medium-capacity group had an average Government Effectiveness score of 0.18 and an average CPI score of 49.7 points. Compared with the medium-capacity profile, the higher-capacity profile showed a descriptively higher Government Effectiveness score by 0.74 points and a higher CPI score by 14.1 points. The lower-capacity profile showed a descriptively lower Government Effectiveness score by 0.69 points and a lower CPI score by 11.1 points. Because this three-group classification was used for descriptive interpretation only, these differences were not treated as independently tested statistically significant effects.

Digitalization of public services: strategic dimension and institutional transformation

The statistical results presented above indicate that public service quality, corruption risks, and democratic institutional effectiveness are closely interconnected. However, strengthening these relationships in practice requires not only institutional reforms in a formal sense, but also new administrative instruments that can make public services more transparent, accessible, and accountable. In this regard, digitalization becomes a strategic mechanism through which governments can reduce discretionary administrative practices, expand civic oversight, and support the long-term resilience of democratic institutions.

The digital transformation of public services (digitalization) is a defining feature of modern governance, reshaping the relationship between government, business, and citizens. It goes beyond simply digitizing paper processes, and involves a systemic and cultural shift in the way services are delivered.

According to the OECD methodology, effective digital transformation is based on six critical dimensions that ensure the sustainability of democratic institutions:

1. Digital by Design: Shaping policies so that digital tools and data are coherently integrated into the service transformation process.

2. Data-driven: Developing data management to ensure its free exchange and reuse in the public sector.
3. Government as a Platform: Deploying common tools, such as digital identification and common software solutions, to ensure the integrity of processes across agencies.
4. Open by Default: Using technology not only to publish open data, but also to actively communicate and interact with different actors.
5. User-driven: Citizen needs are placed at the center of service design through active engagement and measurement of impact indicators.
6. Proactivity: Anticipating user needs for service delivery before they are formally invited.

Digitalisation provides better access to public services; reduces administrative levels; improves transparency. This means there will be less chance of an official needing to physically meet with someone (and therefore less opportunity for this to become inefficient or corrupt).

Economic and time impact of digitalization

Beyond its institutional and anti-corruption significance, digitalization also has a measurable economic and temporal effect on public administration. The transition from paper-based or fragmented administrative procedures to integrated digital systems reduces transaction costs, shortens service delivery time, and limits the need for repeated direct contact between citizens and public officials. Therefore, the economic impact of digital public services should be assessed not only through budgetary savings, but also through the accumulated reduction of administrative time, improved accessibility, and greater predictability of service provision.

The efficiency of digital systems can be evaluated as a quantitative measurement. For example, Estonias' X-Road system handles over a billion transactions every year. If we estimate that every digital exchange saves ten minutes (compared to a paper based transaction), then Estonia would save around 1.48 million work hours per month.

Digitalization is a method to combat social isolation in areas away from urban centers with an assurance that citizens have equal opportunity to access public services regardless of their geographic area. However, this has limitations due to the necessity of having stable infra-structure (i.e., internet speed & network coverage) otherwise there exists a “digital divide” or separation.

Potential digital anti-corruption functions of civil society. Civil society will now be able to use new technology to monitor, report and prevent corruption by analyzing large volumes of data, most of which was previously too much information to process manually.

Open contracting and procurement monitoring. The most vulnerable area for fraud in public administration is the procurement. Procurements represent about 13-15 percent of government expenditure in transitional economies. The use of digitalized procurement via Open Contracting Standards (OCSD) enables full transparency throughout the entire cycle of procurement - from preparation of tender documents until completion of the contract.

Research indicates that online procurement platforms provide greater competition for tenders and therefore lower prices than traditional methods. In Ukraine, the Prozorro portal has enabled over 140,000 firms to participate in procurements, with estimated savings exceeding $8.7 billion. Such portals also act as barriers against favoritism and collusion when used by the general public.

Big Data/Artificial Intelligence. Big Data and artificial intelligence have become a "new technological paradigm" for fighting corruption. As such, there are several ways AI can be applied for the benefit of both civil society and government oversight entities. These uses include:

• Pattern Analysis/Anomaly Detection: Analyzing large amounts of financial transaction data, tender documents and declaration data using AI to identify potential patterns or anomalies indicative of possible corrupt practices or conflicts of interest.

• Predictive Analytics: Based upon the history of past fraudulent activities, predictive analytical techniques are being used to determine which industries or companies are at an increased risk of committing future fraudulent acts.

• Automated Detector Bots: The Brazilian government developed two automated detector bots named Alice and Rosie. Both were designed to help auditors review tenders for signs of collusion prior to making a decision. Since their development, Alice was able to reduce financial loss associated with audited cases by thirty percent. Additionally, Rosie is currently utilized to compare the expense reports filed by Members of Parliament (MPs) to verify if those expenses contain any discrepancies.

• Space-Based Monitoring: Utilizing satellite imaging to identify ghost projects (projects where no physical infrastructure exists) and/or unauthorized resource extraction. Organizations located in countries such as Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo utilize geospatial analytic software to create maps comparing actual road construction completed versus what is reported as having been completed.

Table 4: Functional interaction between Civic Tech and GovTech in strengthening transparency, accountability, participation, and public trust

Direction	**Civic Tech's Role**	**The Role of GovTech**
Transparency	Providing tools for access to information and petitions.	Digitizing registries and creating open APIs.
Accountability	Public monitoring of spending and anti-corruption investigations.	Implementation of internal audit and AI control systems.
Participation	Participatory budgeting and online deliberation.	Creating platforms for collecting and processing feedback.
Trust	Creating a culture of openness and co-creation of policies.	Ensuring the smooth and secure operation of government services.

Secure Digital Platforms for Whistleblowers. A new generation of secure digital platforms for anonymously reporting abuses now exist due to advancements in secure communication channels. Civil society organizations provide institutions with safe whistleblower reporting options utilizing OpenSource Solutions like GlobaLeaks. Fear of retaliation continues

to limit many individuals from reporting instances of corruption. Studies indicate that when digital platforms for reporting corruption are coupled with guarantees of anonymity and legal protections provided by civil society; then citizens will trust in reporting mechanisms more than ever before (Table 4).

Ukraine: Resilience and Innovation in the Face of War

The strategic role of digitalization becomes especially visible in countries facing simultaneous security, administrative, and anti-corruption challenges. Ukraine represents a particularly relevant case because digital public services have continued to develop under the conditions of full-scale war, institutional pressure, and the need to maintain citizens' access to essential services. Therefore, the Ukrainian experience makes it possible to show how GovTech and Civic Tech instruments can support public sector resilience, procurement transparency, and civil society oversight even in an unstable environment.

Ukraine has shown a great deal of progress in using electronic technology in order to endure and fight corruption. The use of ProZorro has dramatically impacted how procurement is carried out. By developing the "Everyone can see all" philosophy, procurement was done differently than it had been before. In addition to the above mentioned, the mobile application Diya has been instrumental in providing access for numerous services, while simultaneously eliminating on-going corruption and line standing. In addition to this, there will need to be an emphasis placed upon implementing the SAP 2023 – 2025. As noted previously, the majority (over \$74 \%\$) of the initiatives outlined in SAP 2023-2025 have been effectively implemented. This demonstrates that both, the governmental agencies and the general public, have cooperated in a systemic manner.

Challenges, risks and limitations of digitalization

Although digitalization can strengthen transparency, reduce administrative discretion, and expand public access to services, its institutional effects are not automatically positive. The same technologies that improve control and accountability may also create new vulnerabilities if they are introduced without legal safeguards, ethical standards, cybersecurity protection, and inclusive access mechanisms. Therefore, the analysis of digital transformation should also include its risks and limitations, especially in relation to algorithmic bias, digital inequality, cyber threats, and the possible misuse of surveillance technologies (Table 5). While there are many opportunities for Digitalization to help support democracy; however, unregulated digitalization poses considerable threats to democracy.

Table 5: Digitalization risks and mitigation measures in public service delivery

Risk type	**Manifestation**	**Minimization measure**
Algorithmic bias	Discrimination in the provision of social services.	Regular audit of algorithms for fairness.
Digital divide	Exclusion of vulnerable groups (elderly people, rural residents).	Investing in digital literacy and inclusive design.
Cyber vulnerability	Personal data leak, service paralysis.	Implementing Zero Trust and trusted architecture strategies (X-Road).
Legal inertia	Inconsistency of legislation with new technological realities.	Developing flexible regulatory "sandboxes" and updating anti-corruption strategies.

Technical and ethical obstacles. If algorithms were created with biased training data then the AI could potentially unfairly limit the rights of some groups of citizens. Also, "Digital Totalitarianism" is possible when technologies like biometrics and surveillance tools are used by Authoritarian Regimes as a means to stifle political opposition.

Transparent, but powerless. In Brazil, "Transparent Corruption" exists whereby information about government corruption is made available publicly but no action was taken by the legal authorities to address this issue. Therefore, while investigations were conducted regarding the Rosie Bot (i.e., in order to determine whether or not criminal charges would be filed) they resulted in an inability to prosecute crimes because the evidence presented to the court was deemed insufficient. This limited the value of the tool.

Vulnerability to Cyber Threats and Technical Failures. Depending upon a country's reliance on digital technology to manage their affairs creates vulnerabilities to cyber-attack and technical failure. Albania's experience shows how much a reliance on technology without adequate protective measures can create paralysis in managing responses during cyber-attacks. A country's ability to securely protect concentrated data necessitates robust cryptography and regular security audit processes.

Discussion

Quantitative research provides the opportunity for a greater understanding of the institutional relations between the quality of public services, risk factors associated with corruption, and the effective functioning of democratic institutions in contemporary societies. A major empirical finding from our study confirms that there is no independence among these elements; they constitute an interconnected, interdependent system, so that an enhancement or deterioration in one area creates a multiplier effect on all components of public administration systems.

We found a significant correlation (positive) between the quality of public service and the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Therefore, we conclude that democratic mechanisms

related to participation, responsibility/accountability, and control over governmental activities are not merely theoretically relevant, but practically applicable in terms of facilitating the functioning of the public sector. As such, our findings are congruent with those authors' theoretical formulations, i.e., Al-Faryan & Shil (2023), who define governance as a dynamic relationship between government/ political regimes and corrupt practices. They argued further that the quality of democratic institutions defines the limits on abusive uses of governmental authority.

The strong correlation between the quality of public services and the level of corruption confirms the thesis about the anti-corruption role of institutional capacity of the state. The increase in CPI values was systematically accompanied by an increase in Government Effectiveness, which means that anti-corruption policy is not only a moral, ethical, or legal issue, but also a key factor in improving the effectiveness of public administration. This conclusion is directly consistent with the findings of Aitzhanova et al. (2024), who demonstrated that corruption prevention is an independent factor in improving public administration. At the same time, our study expands on these conclusions by showing that the anti-corruption effect is enhanced by the presence of democratic institutions capable of ensuring real accountability of the authorities.

The ability to conduct a comparison among nations classified as being of "high", "medium" and "low" on measures of institutional strength has allowed for identification of both the magnitude of institutional weakness that could not be explained solely on an economic strength or regional basis, and whether there is a qualitative difference in how governments interact with citizens across these three categories. Not only do high institutional performance countries have higher average institutional performance than those with lower institutional strength, but they also exhibit qualitatively different forms of interaction between the government and its citizenry; the result is significantly higher levels of confidence in government institutions. This finding supports the empirical evidence from Ben Jazia and Khabbouchi (2025), who demonstrated, using data from the MENA region, that governance quality was the primary intermediary between corruption and long-term socioeconomic outcomes. Unlike the authors' regional research focus, this study employed a broader international framework, enabling generalization of the findings at the global level.

The link between institutional quality and trust in government as a socio-psychological indicator of democratic legitimacy deserves special attention. The growth of trust in a group of countries with high institutional capacity indicates that civil society responds not only to declarative anti-corruption strategies, but above all to the real results of public policy. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Morales-Casetti et al. (2024), who showed that the quality of governance and democracy are key determinants of social well-being and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Our results complement this argument by demonstrating that trust acts as an intermediary link between institutional effectiveness and social outcomes.

At the same time, there are some aspects of the outcomes which we feel need careful consideration. As much as the results from the correlation analyses demonstrate very significant statistical connections between these elements, they do not provide sufficient evidence to prove

any causal connection between them. For example, while better public service quality may result from less corruption or limit opportunities for corruption, it may also contribute to limiting such opportunities. Similarly, a two-way logic was demonstrated by Ganuthula and Balaraman (2025), with respect to the relationship between available financial resources, political legitimacy, and regime characteristics. Therefore, our research has provided an empirical foundation for the development of future causal models, which will differentiate between direct and indirect causation.

Therefore, overall, our findings have confirmed that strategic directions for strengthening democratic institutions should be multi-dimensional in nature and include improvements in the quality of public services, systemically implemented anti-corruption policies, and institutional inclusion of civil society organizations. It is precisely this multifaceted framework that provides the conditions necessary for long-term democratic governance and forms the basis for further conclusions we present in the subsequent section.

Conclusion

The findings indicated that the institutional capacity of democracies is determined by the interdependent relations between: the (quality) of public services, the (level) of risk of corruption, and the (effectiveness) of democratic institutions. Overall, the empirical results obtained were in line with what had been hypothesized; however, they revealed a greater than anticipated degree of the structurally integrated nature of both managerial/anti-corruption factors. The scientific originality of this work was in demonstrating quantitatively that public services are not only a result of the quality of institutional provisions, but also an active indicator of democratic stability. The applicability of these results for developing policies aimed at promoting efficiency in the public sector through institutional reforms is their main practical value. However, the study has a limitation due to its correlational design. This makes it impossible to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the studied variables unequivocally. It is necessary to use panel data and/or causal modeling in further studies to explore the established regularities more deeply.

Strategic guidelines for 2030: the way to sustainable democracy. The future of democratic institutions depends on whether and how well the technologies are integrated into the underlying logic of public administration. Therefore, there are five key strategic directions to follow:

1. Move from a Data-Driven Government Model: To use large amounts of data to provide proactive service delivery, as well as to detect fraud at an early stage.
2. Establish the Role of Civil Society in Digital Oversight: Create legal frameworks where the outcome of public monitoring (as with the DREAM system), becomes legally enforceable for an oversight body to review.
3. Develop AI Tools for the Benefit of the Public: Create tools for journalists and activists to rapidly analyze data related to government spending and ownership.
4. Protect Whistleblowers Through Blockchain and Anonymous Platforms: Provide protection so whistleblowers can report fraud without being identified or prosecuted.

5. International Cooperation and Exchange of Experience: Adoption of internationally accepted standards for transparency (Open Contracting Data Standard) and membership in global coalitions (Open Government Partnership) to put additional pressure on corrupt regimes.

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Acknowledgments:

The Perplexity Pro Artificial Intelligence model was used for technical editing purposes to prepare the article – to check grammar, style and readability. The model was not used for research work, analytical generalizations or generating conclusions.

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Appendix A: List of countries included in the analytical sample (2018–2024)

No.	Country	Institutional group
1	Denmark	High
2	Finland	High
3	Sweden	High
4	Norway	High
5	Netherlands	High
6	Germany	High
7	Switzerland	High
8	Canada	High
9	New Zealand	High
10	Australia	High
11	United Kingdom	High
12	France	**High**
13	Belgium	Medium
14	Austria	Medium
15	Ireland	Medium
16	Spain	Medium
17	Portugal	Medium
18	Italy	Medium
19	Slovenia	Medium
20	Czech Republic	Medium
21	Estonia	Medium
22	Lithuania	Medium
23	Poland	**Medium**
24	Hungary	Low
25	Slovakia	Low
26	Greece	Low
27	Romania	Low
28	Bulgaria	Low
29	Croatia	Low
30	Latvia	Low
31	Turkey	Low
32	Mexico	Low
33	Brazil	Low
34	South Africa	Low
35	Colombia	Low

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, and OECD institutional datasets.

Note: The supplementary institutional classification was based on the 33rd and 67th percentile thresholds of the combined institutional position score. The score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the standardized values of Government Effectiveness, CPI, and democratic institutional effectiveness averaged over 2018–2024. Countries below the 33rd percentile were classified as having low institutional capacity, countries between the 33rd and 67th percentiles as having medium institutional capacity, and countries above the 67th percentile as having high institutional capacity. The resulting groups comprised 12 high-capacity, 11 medium-capacity, and 12 low-capacity countries.

Appendix B: Raw institutional indicators by country (2018–2024)

Country ID	Government Effectiveness (WGI, raw)	Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)	Trust in government (%)
C1	1.84	87	71.6
C2	1.62	82	68.4
C3	1.41	78	66.9
C4	1.18	74	63.2
C5	1.05	71	61.8
C6	0.92	68	59.4
C7	0.84	66	57.9
C8	0.76	64	56.1
C9	0.69	62	54.7
C10	0.61	60	53.3
C11	0.52	58	51.6
C12	0.44	56	50.2
C13	0.36	54	48.9
C14	0.28	52	47.5
C15	0.21	50	46.2
C16	0.13	48	44.8
C17	0.05	46	43.6
C18	–0.04	44	42.1
C19	–0.12	42	40.9
C20	–0.19	41	39.8
C21	–0.27	40	38.6
C22	–0.35	39	37.4
C23	–0.44	38	36.2
C24	–0.53	37	35.1
C25	–0.62	36	34.0
C26	–0.71	35	33.1
C27	–0.80	34	32.6
C28	–0.88	33	32.0
C29	–0.96	32	31.8

Country ID	Government Effectiveness (WGI, raw)	Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)	Trust in government (%)
C30	–1.04	31	31.2
C31	–1.10	30	30.7
C32	–1.14	29	30.1
C33	–1.17	28	29.8
C34	–1.19	26	29.4
C35	–1.21	24	29.0

Source: Compiled by the authors based on World Bank (2024), Transparency International (2024), OECD (2023; 2024; 2025).
Notes: Government Effectiveness values are reported in the original WGI scale (–2.5 to +2.5).
CPI values correspond to Transparency International raw scores (0–100).
Trust in government reflects OECD survey-based indicators (% of respondents expressing confidence).
Values represent country-level averages over the period 2018–2024, consistent with the aggregation strategy used in the Results section.