## TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP PROPOSAL TEMPLATE

*To complete and submit once the concept note has been selected by the CEPPS/DEPP Leader Review Committee and partner(s) invited to submit a proposal by USAID.*

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| **DEPP Technical Leadership (TL) Snapshot** | |
| Project Title | A Mixed-Methods Approach to Distinguishing Genuine from Self-Serving Anti-corruption Campaigns |
| Executive Summary/Pitch | With the increase in global attention on genuine anti-corruption reforms as necessary to prevent democratic backsliding, this technical leadership project will apply a mixed methods approach to develop a methodology for civil society actors and journalists to assess whether, how, and to what extent anti-corruption campaigns might be used to target opponents rather than to sincerely address corruption challenges. Findings generated from this research will fill an important gap for anti-corruption efforts not only for electoral assistance but across all DRG programming by moving beyond qualitative and subjective assessments to developing a systematic approach, applicable across countries. It will equip reformers with the ability to rapidly diagnose what may be occurring and mobilize broader coalitions to push back against political attacks. The project will provide evidence to answer *DEPP Learning Agenda Question 2.2: What are the signs that anti-corruption campaigns are being used as a political strategy to target opponents rather than a sincere interest in addressing corruption?* |
| Project Duration (# of months) | 24 Months |
| Participating DEPP Partners | IFES, D-ARCH, Internews, IRI |
| Total Budget Amount | $600,000 |
| DEPP Objective/s  (check all applicable, see resource library for details) | **X** Objective 1 ☐ Objective 2 **X** Objective 3  ☐ Objective 4 **X** Objective 5 **X** Objective 6  ☐ Objective 7 ☐ Objective 8 ☐ Objective 9 |
| DEPP Cross-Cutting Priorities  (check all applicable, see resource library for details) | ☐Gender ☐ Youth ☐ Marginalized Groups  **X** Local Partners **X** Anti-Corruption **X** Sustainability |
| DEPP Learning Agenda Questions (check all applicable, see resource library for details) | ☐ Theme 1 ☐ Q1.1 ☐ Q1.2 ☐ Q1.3  **X** Theme 2 ☐ Q2.1 **X** Q2.2 ☐ Q2.3  ☐ Theme 3 ☐ Q3.1 ☐ Q3.2 ☐ Q3.3  ☐ Theme 4 ☐ Q4.1 ☐ Q4.2 ☐ Q4.3  ☐ Theme 5 ☐ Q5.1 ☐ Q5.2 ☐ Q5.3  ☐ Emerging Questions ☐ E.1 ☐ E.2 ☐ E.3  ☐ Process Reflection Questions ☐ PR.1 ☐ PR.2 ☐ PR.3 ☐ PR.4 |
| What audiences are program deliverables intended for?  (check all applicable) | ☐ Internal (single partner involved in this activity; e.g. sensitive or proprietary assessments, etc.)  **X** Cross-partner (among and across all DEPP partners; e.g. internal evaluations or assessments, CLA session reports)  **X** External partners (other organizations in the DRG sector; e.g. research reports, impact evaluations, CLA case studies, etc.)  **X** External (broader public; e.g. news, blog posts, podcasts) |
| DEPP BSMP Exception(s) Required? | ☐ Yes **X** No  Unless the exemption box above has been checked, CEPPS will ensure that all activities and products under this rapid response activity fully comply with the DEPP leader activity [Branding Strategy and Marking Plan (BSMP)](https://cepps.sharepoint.com/DEPP/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2FDEPP%2FDEPP%20Leader%20Award%20Documents%2FDEPP%20BSMP%20%2D%20Approved%202%2E17%2E2022%2Epdf&parent=%2FDEPP%2FDEPP%20Leader%20Award%20Documents). Should any exceptions be needed, CEPPS will discuss with USAID and seek approvals as required. |

**A Mixed-Methods Approach to Distinguishing Genuine from Self-Serving Anti-corruption Campaigns**

1. **Evidence Gap:**

Politicians increasingly attempt to preserve their power by weaponizing anti-corruption campaigns against opponents, including other politicians, civil society, and private sector actors.[[1]](#footnote-2) Yet, non-governmental anti-corruption actors[[2]](#footnote-3) – notably, civil society organizations (CSOs) and journalists – lack systematic tools to quickly and objectively identify and assess the co-opting of these campaigns for personal and political gain.[[3]](#footnote-4) With limited resources, they face an uphill battle in defending against powerful leaders’ efforts to undermine checks and balances and discredit opponents. We posit that *if* such non-governmental actors can systematically identify when political leaders are co-opting anti-corruption rhetoric, campaigns, or signaling for self-serving purposes, *and if* they can use this information in their work through advocacy and reporting, *then* the public will be better inoculated against these narratives, which may lead to improved capacity to resist abuses of power. Findings of this project will contribute to a better understanding of the diagonal accountability mechanism between the media/CSOs and the government. Given the importance of anti-corruption campaigns to intra-elite relations and how they can be used to bind ruling coalitions and deter defections, the project will also explore the possibility of how this improved understanding might impact on horizontal accountability between government officials. Overall, this research will allow donors and practitioners to better assess and diagnose governments commitments to anti-corruption reforms and to design more targeted and successful interventions.

1. **Research, Evaluation, or Learning Question:**

*DEPP Learning Agenda Theme:* Inclusive Accountability through Multi-Party Systems of Representation

* *DEPP Learning Agenda Question 2.2:* What are the signs that anti-corruption campaigns are being used as a political strategy to target opponents rather than a sincere interest in addressing corruption?
  + *TL Sub-questions:* N/A

1. **Methodological Approach:**

Our initial assumption is that there are three types of anti-corruption campaigns: 1) **legitimate/good-faith campaigns** that create positive substantive changes to mitigate corruption; 2) **superficial/feckless campaigns** which promise or appear to address corruption without yielding substantive change (e.g., empty campaign promises, superficial reforms, creation of powerless commissions); and 3) **fabricated and**/**or politically motivated** **campaigns** which create negative substantive changes that undermine democratic processes. Strategies for initiating and co-opting anti-corruption campaigns vary significantly by context. Key tactics include the use of disinformation or direct prosecution to attack reputations, undermine genuine reform efforts, and justify abuses of power.[[4]](#footnote-5) Methods for detecting and responding to these types of campaigns will also vary.

Most good practice guidance for anti-corruption programming by donors[[5]](#footnote-6) stresses the necessity of understanding local power dynamics and “political will.” Being able to accurately diagnose anti-corruption campaigns as outlined above will be a critical factor in ensuring this alignment while at the same time being able to raise broader awareness amongst citizens. Under this project, we will develop a quantitative methodology for identifying and differentiating between these three types of campaigns, with a particular focus on countries experiencing *democratic erosion* or *democratic breakdown.*[[6]](#footnote-7) The project will proceed in three phases (Analysis, Design, Testing) using a mixed-methods design (see Figure 1 below). We will ensure that results of the project are widely disseminated and tested and that feedback from stakeholders and users is incorporated into the outputs. These findings will respond to the current lack of evidence-based and consistent approaches to addressing this problem globally.

1. **Activities:**

***Activity 1: Produce Comparative Analyses to Determine Common Campaign Tactics (Months 1-8)***

The project will develop retrospective, comparative analyses to identify common tactics political leaders use to advance the three main categories of anti-corruption campaigns. Sub-activities will include:

* ***Activity 1.1:*** IFES will lead a **systematic literature review** to identify trends and common themes in the messaging that politicians use to target opponents,[[7]](#footnote-8) as well as additional variables that may assist in differentiating between legitimate, superficial, and politically fabricated campaigns (e.g., Were anti-corruption measures applied to the incumbent party? Were public resources allotted to support implementation of reforms? Were sanctions enforced in practice?). The literature review will also explain the definition of campaigns, which may include lawfare, election campaigns, messaging campaigns, and other activities.
* ***Activity 1.2:*** IFES and D-ARCH will conduct a **comprehensive review of the dataset** contained in the [Machine Learning for Peace (MLP) project](https://web.sas.upenn.edu/mlp-devlab/research/) (supported by the [USAID INSPIRES project](https://www.inspiresconsortium.org/) led by Internews) managed by DevLab@Penn. This uniquely expansive dataset captures international and local media coverage from approximately 60 countries since 2012. The articles collected through the MLP dataset are classified according to their content into 20 civic space-related events using a RoBERTa-based model, which provides predictive text analysis. One of these 20 events is corruption – specifically, articles that report on corruption scandals, corruption-related arrests, investigations, and prosecutions, and anti-corruption campaigns.
* ***Activity 1.3:*** Internews and DevLab@UPenn will then conduct **sentiment and content analysis** of the news coverage around anti-corruption campaigns contained in the MLP dataset, as well as entity extraction[[8]](#footnote-9) from each article. Taken together with the comprehensive review under Activity 1.2, these analyses will (a) identify coverage patterns across independent and government-aligned media and (b) identify the targets of the campaign. Using this information, the project will be able to classify specific anti-corruption campaigns as “likely legitimate” and “likely superficial/fabricated,” in line with our assumed typology.
* ***Activity 1.4:*** IFES will **combine open government data with rhetoric and political institutions data** to further understand how rhetoric translates into shifts in democracy via the adoption of (or resistance to) reforms. By leveraging the increased availability of online databases (such as procurement tenders**[[9]](#footnote-10)**), we can generate objective proxy measures of corruption that can be used to assess the degree to which anti-corruption rhetoric is reflected in the actions of the government.
* ***Activity 1.5:*** IFES will conduct **in-country assessments**[[10]](#footnote-11) in three countries to identify and assess a more comprehensive set of anti-corruption campaign messaging modalities beyond traditional media (e.g., billboards, posters, campaign speeches, political advertisements, and potential elite signaling).[[11]](#footnote-12) Assessment methodologies will be developed based on the findings of preceding activities and in conjunction with local experts.

***Activity 2: Develop and Validate Anti-Corruption Campaign Lexicon (Months 8-12)***

In this phase, the project will further develop the typology of anti-corruption campaign messaging, focusing on messages of an explicit or implicit anti-democratic type. Sub-activities will include:

* ***Activity 2.1:*** IFES, in collaboration with D-Arch and a cadre of local experts, will create **an anti-corruption campaign messaging lexicon** linked to preserving political power and weakening the opposition. The text from the media sources gathered during the in-country assessments will be combined with data available via the MLP project for a broader meta-analysis of the messaging around anti-corruption campaigns.
* ***Activity 2.2:*** IFES will conduct an **external validation check** of the Lexicon via key informant interviews, including with civil society, media, and other stakeholders in one additional country.
* ***Activity 2.3:*** D-Arch will identify measures within the V-Dem dataset[[12]](#footnote-13) that capture the strength and stability of democratic institutions;[[13]](#footnote-14) and **create a dataset** thatmerges these indicators with the rhetoric data to explore how anti-corruption messages of different types co-vary with the country-level strength and stability of democracy.

Taken together, the dataset and lexicon will create a quantitative framework for assessing whether anti-corruption campaigns are fabricated.

***Activity 3: Conduct Training and Apply Research to Categorize Anti-Corruption Campaigns (Months 12-24)***

The project will make the lexicon and dataset-backed research tools available to all partners, enabling them to apply these tools to carry out the following sub-activities:

* ***Activity 3.1:*** D-Arch will **identify contexts** **where anti-corruption campaigns are likely to be vulnerable to anti-democratic motives**. This will be done by adapting the forecasting tools developed through V-Dem’s V-Forecast research project.[[14]](#footnote-15) Specifically, we envision incorporating the rhetoric variables in the machine learning algorithms which forecast the risk of closing events and adverse regime transitions, developed as part of DemSpace and Predicting Adverse Regime Transitions (PART) project.[[15]](#footnote-16) The incorporation of the rhetoric variables will enable scholars and practitioners to understand and anticipate how a country’s future risk is likely to vary given the anti-corruption rhetoric employed on the ground.
* ***Activity 3.2:*** IFES, Internews, and DevLab@UPenn will develop **guidance for conducting rhetoric analysis** and applying these forecasting models in other contexts. Specifically, Internews and DevLab will work with journalists in the target countries to co-develop an appropriate engagement strategy, training package, and digital product to equip and encourage a network of journalists to regularly access and use the dataset in their reporting. This is likely to include an element of face-to-face interaction, but will also require a level of ongoing community management to enable sustained reporting on the motivations driving anti-corruption campaigns that succeed in building public awareness and action. The latter may include the sharing of potential story ideas, angles, and prompts towards collaborative reporting across different outlets.

**Timeline:**

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| **Activities** | **Q2**  **FY24** | **Q3**  **FY24** | **Q4**  **FY24** | **Q1**  **FY25** | **Q2**  **FY25** | **Q3**  **FY25** | **Q4**  **FY25** | **Q1**  **FY26** |
| *Activity 1:* *Produce Comparative Analyses to Determine Common Campaign Tactics* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Activity 2: Develop and Validate Anti-Corruption Campaign Lexicon* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Activity 3: Conduct Training and Apply Research to Categorize Anti-Corruption Campaigns* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

1. **Performance Tracking and Learning Plan:**

Attached as Annex 1.

1. **Deliverables, Dissemination, and Outreach Plan:**

Deliverables for USAID include:

1. A literature review report;
2. A global anti-corruption campaign messaging lexicon;
3. Datasets and models for anti-corruption language analysis and forecasting; and
4. An implementation guide and other training materials for anti-corruption partners.

These deliverables will allow the USAID DRG Bureau to advance objectives across a range of programming areas on democratic governance and countering authoritarian influences.

Findings from the technical leadership activity will be socialized at key events for anti-corruption practitioners (e.g., the International Anti-Corruption Conference) and traditional electoral support actors (e.g., the Global Network for Strengthening Electoral Integrity). Internews will **provide training to local media entities in priority countries** to help them understand the data, analysis, and forecasts and to position them effectively and proactively report on this information in a reader-friendly manner. Additionally, results will be shared at the DEPP Annual Learning Forum. We will also **target USAID DRG officials at headquarters and country/regional levels,** including the new USAID Anti-Corruption Center,as part of the CEPPS communications approach.

1. See, e.g., “Tuning in to the politics of (anti-)corruption: astute interventions and deeper accountability” U4 Issue Paper, March 2022, for a range of examples globally, including from Rwanda, Cambodia, Uganda, and Indonesia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Depending on the context, anti-corruption partners can include civil society organizations, the media, think tanks, pro-integrity politicians, and business leaders. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Weitz-Shapiro, R. & Winters, M. S. (2017). “Can citizens discern? Information credibility, political sophistication, and the punishment of corruption in Brazil.” *The Journal of Politics* 79(1): 60–74; Arias, E., Horacio L., Marshall, J., & Querubin, P. (2022). “Priors rule: When do malfeasance revelations help or hurt incumbent parties?” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 20(4): 1433–1477; Romero, D. & Wibbels, E. (2023). “Information, Civil Society and Corruption: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Guatemala” DevLab Research Paper, September 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For a brief overview, see “Contribution of anti-corruption measures to democracy promotion” U4 Helpdesk Answer, 2022. Backsliding and authoritarian regimes often resort to judicial strategies to repress the opposition (also known as “lawfare” (“Maravall, J. M. & Przeworski, A. (eds.), *Democracy and the Rule of Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003: 261-301)), as a way of legitimizing their actions. Previous research finds that African regimes use the courts as a means of repression against challengers from the ruling elite (Shen-Bayh, F. (2018). “Strategies of Repression: Judicial and Extrajudicial Methods of Autocratic Survival.” *World Politics* 70(3): 321-357), while former Communist party-controlled governments in Eastern Europe commonly rely on corruption prosecution to undermine weak rivals (Popova, M. & Post, V. (2018). “Prosecuting high-level corruption in Eastern Europe.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51(3): 231-244). Corruption lawsuits and anti-corruption prosecutions have also been used as a defamation tool by politicians during electoral periods in Argentina (Feierherd, G., Gonzalez-Ocantos, E., & Tuñón, G. (2023). “Witch hunts? Electoral cycles and corruption lawsuits in Argentina.” *British Journal of Political Science* 54(1): 1-20) and associated with the arrival of new leaders in China as a means to enable the incoming authorities to strengthen their position (Pei, M. (2018). “How Not to fight corruption: Lessons from China.” *Daedalus* 147(3): 216-230). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Tuning in to the politics of (anti-)corruption: Astute interventions and deeper accountability” U4 Issue 2022:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Democratic erosion is a style of democratic backsliding characterized by piecemeal, prolonged attacks on democratic norms, processes, or institutions, while democratic breakdowns are wholesale, acute declines in democratic decision making, institutions, and civic spaces. See Shein, E. & Emmons, C. (2023). “Paths to Democratic Resilience in an Era of Backsliding: A Roadmap for the Democracy Support Community.” IFES.See also “Rethinking anti-corruption in de-democratising regimes” U4 Issue Paper, April 2021, which provides examples from countries such as Pakistan, Russia, China, Hungary, Bangladesh, and Nigeria. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This will mainstream looking at how marginalized communities, including women and youth, have been treated as part of these campaigns (*DEPP Learning Agenda* *Question 2.2.1*). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. “Entity extraction” uses language processing tools to automatically extract data. See <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0950584918300752>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Open Contracting Partnership has a data registry with 106 procurement datasets from around the world. <https://data.open-contracting.org/en/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Countries of focus will be finalized with USAID. Illustrative selection criteria include CEPPS presence; number of corruption events; messaging during election campaigns; USAID mission interest; and safety. Initial consultations indicate Honduras and Lebanon would be valuable case study countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Signaling theory explains how two parties with different information behave. In this theory, one party (the sender) chooses how to communicate the information, and the other party (the receiver) chooses how to interpret the signal. Signaling corruption might involve conspicuous consumption to attract corrupt firms and obtain higher bribes. Signaling reform or anti-corruption might involve banning of interest groups (lobbyists) in meeting with politicians. Schnakenberg, K. & Turner, I. (2019). “Signaling with Reform: How the Threat of Corruption Prevents Informed Policy-making.” *American Political Science Review* 113(3): 762-777. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The V-Dem dataset is a series of indices that describe qualities of different democracies. It is published annually and available at <https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See data in V-Dem Varieties of Democracy codebook, e.g.: Consecutive Presidential Elections (v2elprescons) and Medzihorsky and Lindberg’s Anti-Pluralism Index as set out in Medzihorsky, J. & Lindberg, S. I. (2023). “Walking the Talk: How to Identify Anti-Pluralist Parties” V-Dem Working Paper 2023:116. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. V-Forecast – specifically DemSpace – was supported via a previous GEPT technical leadership award. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See Morgan, R., Beger, A., & Glynn, A. (2019). “Varieties of Forecasts: Predicting Adverse Regime Transitions” V-Dem Working Paper 2019:89, available at [http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3389194](https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3389194) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)