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CORRUPTION OF POLICE OFFICERS AS A FACTOR OF ORGANIZED CRIME

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Abstract: *Corruption among police officers represents one of the most significant factors enabling the development, functioning, and long-term maintenance of organized crime. In contemporary conditions, it does not represent solely individual deviant behavior but rather acquires the characteristics of a systemic phenomenon acting as a functional mechanism that connects criminal structures with state institutions.*

The subject of this paper is the analysis of the functional role of corruption within police structures in the context of organized crime, with the aim of indicating the ways in which corrupt police officers contribute to the formation, protection, and stabilization of organized criminal groups. The paper is based on theoretical, normative, institutional, and empirical analysis, with particular attention devoted to the criminal-law framework for the incrimination of corruption-related offenses, as well as to institutional mechanisms for controlling police work.

In this context, preventive measures such as internal control, the strengthening of integrity and ethical standards, as well as repressive measures, including criminal investigations, prosecution, and sanctioning of corrupt officials, are considered. It is concluded that the effective suppression of organized crime is impossible without a systemic and consistent fight against corruption within the police.

Keywords: *corruption, police officers, organized crime, preventive measures, repressive measures, institutional integrity*

INTRODUCTION

Corruption represents one of the most significant security and social challenges of contemporary states, particularly in the context of its connection with organized crime. Although it is most commonly defined as the abuse of public power for the purpose of obtaining personal benefit, in contemporary conditions it goes beyond the framework of individual deviant behavior and acquires the characteristics of a systemic phenomenon that undermines the institutional order and the rule of law [1, p. 42].

Corruption within police structures is of particular gravity, as it directly affects the effectiveness of criminal-law protection. Organized criminal groups strive to establish stable connections with holders of public authority in order to secure access to information, avoid prosecution, and ensure the continuity of illegal activities [2, p. 117]. In this context, corruption does not operate merely as an accompanying phenomenon, but as a functional mechanism integrating criminal activities into institutional structures [3, p. 89].

From the perspective of criminal law, corruption-related offenses committed by police officers include abuse of office, giving and receiving bribes, trading in influence, disclosure of official secrets, and obstruction of justice, all of which are criminalized under both national legislation and international instruments [4, p. 203]. It is particularly significant that international standards recognize corruption of public officials as one of the key preconditions for the development and functioning of organized crime [5, pp. 13–14].

Building on this foundation, the subject of this paper is the analysis of corruption among police officers as a factor in organized crime. The aim is to identify the mechanisms through which corruption within the police contributes to strengthening criminal structures and to highlight the importance of preventive and repressive measures in its suppression. The study is based on an analysis of relevant literature, legal regulations, and empirical data from the Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia.

1. THE CONCEPT AND FORMS OF POLICE CORRUPTION IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Corruption, as a social phenomenon, represents a complex and multidimensional concept, which significantly complicates its uniform and generally accepted definition. In contemporary societies, there is a wide range of interpretations of this notion, while certain forms of corrupt behavior are classified differently depending on the legal and institutional framework of a particular state [6, pp. 31–32]. This issue becomes even more pronounced in the field of police activity, particularly in the context of its connection with organized crime, where corruption assumes more complex, concealed, and functionally significant forms.

In academic literature, corruption is approached from different perspectives. From a legal standpoint, it is most commonly defined as unlawful conduct, i.e., the abuse of official position for the purpose of obtaining benefit. From an ethical perspective, corruption represents a deviation from moral norms and values, while in a sociological sense it is treated as a form of social deviance that undermines trust in institutions [7, p. 45]. Starting from the concept of deviant behavior within the police, Kesić points out that corruption may be understood as a violation of legal and ethical norms governing police conduct [8, pp. 134–150].

Given the multidimensional nature of this phenomenon, two basic approaches to defining police corruption are distinguished in theory. The narrow approach limits corruption to the abuse of official position for the purpose of obtaining personal gain, with bribery being its most typical form. In contrast, the broader approach encompasses any form of abuse of police powers, regardless of the existence of material gain, thereby linking corruption to a wider spectrum of unlawful and unethical behavior [Ibidem].

Of particular importance in the context of organized crime is the understanding that corruption of police officers represents a specific form of criminal behavior integrated into institutional structures, which enables the uninterrupted functioning of organized criminal groups. In this sense, it includes not only bribery, but also obstruction of criminal prosecution, disclosure of confidential information, and other forms of abuse of official powers [1, p. 43]. Such a functional understanding indicates that corruption transcends the framework of individual deviance and becomes a mechanism of support for criminal structures.

Classifications of police corruption further contribute to understanding its complexity. One of the most commonly cited divisions distinguishes petty, bureaucratic, criminal, and political corruption [9, p. 3]. In the context of organized crime, criminal corruption is particularly significant, as it implies continuous cooperation between police officers and criminal groups through the provision of protection, information, and facilitation of illegal activities. Additionally, the distinction between petty and grand corruption indicates that grand corruption, associated with holders of institutional power, has the greatest impact on the stability and persistence of organized crime.

From the perspective of the role of the police officer, a distinction is made between reactive and proactive corruption. Reactive corruption implies the acceptance of an already offered benefit, while proactive corruption includes situations in which the officer initiates corrupt activity [10, p. 23]. This division is further elaborated in the typology of "grass-eaters" and "meat-eaters," which points to different levels of involvement of officers in corrupt practices [11, p. 50]. In this context, corrupt behavior may be observed as a process of gradual escalation of deviant conduct [12, p. 103].

According to the degree of organization, corruption may be opportunistic or organized. While the former occurs sporadically, the latter implies continuous and pre-arranged relationships between police officers and criminal structures [13, p. 16]. In extreme cases, such relationships evolve into systemic corruption, which becomes part of institutional practice and leads to the erosion of institutional integrity [14, p. 299].

A particularly dangerous form is institutionalized corruption, in which corrupt mechanisms become established patterns of conduct within institutions. It enables organized criminal groups to secure long-term protection, stability, and the legitimization of illegal activities, including money laundering through legal financial flows [4, pp. 195–215]. Under such conditions, the boundary between lawful and unlawful conduct becomes blurred, which represents a serious threat to the rule of law.

2. THE ROLE OF CORRUPTION IN THE PROTECTION AND FUNCTIONING OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Starting from the previously presented theoretical definitions and classifications of police corruption, it can be observed that this phenomenon, in the context of organized crime, goes beyond the framework of individual deviant behavior and acquires the character of a structural mechanism that directly affects the functioning of criminal organizations. In this sense, corruption becomes a means of linking institutional structures with organized criminal groups, thereby acquiring its full criminological and security dimension.

In contemporary conditions, it manifests itself through stable and long-term relationships between police officers and criminal actors, based on continuous and pre-arranged arrangements aimed at ensuring the uninterrupted performance of illegal activities. In this way, corruption becomes a functional precondition for the survival of organized crime, and in practice it is manifested through the establishment of a parallel system of "protection," in which holders of public authority effectively ensure the impunity of criminal groups, thereby distorting the fundamental function of the police. Empirical research indicates that this phenomenon may take organized forms, including systematic cooperation between certain police officers and criminal groups [15, p. 436].

The dynamics of these relationships show that the initiative may originate both from criminal groups and from police officers themselves. While criminal actors seek to secure the safety of their activities through corruption, certain officers recognize in it an opportunity to obtain benefit, whereby in some cases this relationship evolves into an active phase of abuse of powers. It is precisely this transformation that marks the transition from individual corruption to its structural integration into criminal flows, as officers become an integral part of criminal networks, placing institutional power at the service of criminal interests.

The functioning of such a system implies organization, coordination, and division of roles, including the identification of profitable activities, the establishment of communication channels, and the distribution of illegally obtained benefits [16, p. 432]. This level of organization indicates the existence of internal corrupt networks within police structures, which represents a key distinction from classical forms of corruption.

A particular risk arises in areas of highly profitable crime, such as trafficking in narcotics, weapons, and human beings, where strong financial motives encourage the establishment of such relationships. In the context of transnational crime, this risk is further intensified, as it involves multiple states and complex mechanisms of coordination.

An additional dimension is represented by the engagement of police officers in private security activities, especially when they are linked to criminal structures. Although formally lawful, such activities may lead to conflicts of interest and undermine institutional integrity [17, pp. 25–50], whereby criminal actors exploit access to information and resources possessed by the officers.

Viewed as a whole, the protection of criminal activities by police officers represents one of the most destructive forms of corruption, as it enables the formation of parallel structures within institutions and leads to the erosion of the rule of law. Therefore, effective counteraction to this phenomenon is possible only through an integrated approach that includes strengthening internal control, integrity mechanisms, and the consistent application of criminal law sanctions.

3. NORMATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK IN COMBATING CORRUPTION OF POLICE OFFICERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Effective combating of corruption among police officers, particularly in the context of organized crime, requires the existence of a clearly defined and functionally interconnected normative and institutional framework. This framework includes both repressive and preventive mechanisms, encompassing criminal law, procedural, disciplinary, and ethical instruments, which enable the timely detection, proving, and sanctioning of corrupt conduct. In the legal system of the Republic of Serbia, this area is regulated through the synergy of international anti-corruption standards and domestic legislation, indicating the legislator's intention to establish a comprehensive system for countering this phenomenon.

The Republic of Serbia has ratified key international instruments in the field of anti-corruption, among which the United Nations Convention against Corruption occupies a prominent place, as well as the Council of Europe conventions, which recognize corruption as a serious threat to the rule of law and institutional integrity. Within the national legal framework, the Criminal Code holds a central position, criminalizing abuse of office, trading in influence, as well as giving and receiving bribes [1, Arts. 359, 366, 367, 368 CC]. These criminal offenses constitute the normative core of anti-corruption efforts, but in practice they often occur concurrently with other forms of criminality, particularly within organized criminal structures, where they are functionally connected with offenses such as money laundering or disclosure of official secrets. Of particular importance is also the criminal offense of association for the purpose of committing criminal offenses, which enables the sanctioning of organized criminal groups, including situations in which corrupt police officers become their integral members [1, Art. 346 CC].

Procedural mechanisms for detecting and proving corruption-related criminal offenses are regulated by the Criminal Procedure Code, which provides for the application of special evidentiary actions in situations where evidence cannot be obtained in another manner or where such obtaining would be significantly impeded. These measures include covert surveillance of communications, covert monitoring and recording, simulated business operations, computer data searches, controlled delivery, and the engagement of an undercover investigator, and they are of particular importance in cases related to organized crime, given the highly conspiratorial nature of such structures [2, Arts. 166, 171, 174, 178, 181, 183 CPC]. Additional institutional support is provided by the Law on the Organization and Competence of State Authorities in

Suppressing Organized Crime, Terrorism, and Corruption, which established a system of specialized prosecution offices and court departments, thereby enabling the concentration of expert and operational capacities in handling complex cases [3, Arts. 5, 6, 7].

A special role in the system of prevention and detection of corruption is played by the Law on Police, which regulates mechanisms for controlling the work of police officers. In this context, the Internal Control Sector represents a key institutional mechanism, whose function is directed both toward detecting unlawful conduct and preventing corruption risks [4, Arts. 222–233 LOP]. In accordance with its competences, this sector conducts integrity tests, corruption risk analyses, monitoring of asset declarations and changes in property status of employees, as well as internal controls in cases of suspected unlawful conduct. These mechanisms have a pronounced preventive character, as they enable the early detection of potential abuses and the prevention of their further development, indicating that the fight against corruption cannot be based solely on repression, but must also include systemic preventive instruments [4, Arts. 230, 233a, 230b, 230v LOP].

The broader anti-corruption framework is complemented by the Law on the Prevention of Corruption, which regulates issues of conflict of interest and asset control, thereby contributing to strengthening the integrity of the public sector [5, Art. 6 LPC]. Of particular importance in combating organized crime is the Law on the Seizure of Proceeds from Crime, which enables the deprivation of perpetrators of unlawfully acquired assets, directly targeting the economic basis of criminal activities [6, Art. 6 LSPC]. An additional mechanism is the Law on the Protection of Whistleblowers, which ensures protection for persons reporting corruption and thereby contributes to the detection of hidden forms of unlawful conduct [7, Arts. 2, 5, 10, 12].

At the strategic level, the fight against corruption is defined by the National Strategy for the period 2024–2028, which emphasizes the importance of prevention, institutional cooperation, and strengthening integrity [8, pp. 17–38]. Although the normative framework of the Republic of Serbia is largely aligned with international standards and formally well established, its actual effectiveness depends on consistent implementation. In my opinion, the key value of this system lies in the integration of repressive and preventive mechanisms, while the greatest challenge is reflected in their practical application, as without consistent and non-selective enforcement, even the most developed normative framework cannot ensure the expected results in combating corruption linked to organized crime.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLICE CORRUPTION AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Corruption of police officers represents one of the key mechanisms that enable the development, stability, and adaptation of organized crime to the institutional environment of the state. Unlike conventional forms of criminality, organized criminal groups strive for long-term operation and the minimization of the risk of criminal prosecution; therefore, the establishment of corrupt relationships with holders of public authority, particularly police officers, constitutes one of the fundamental preconditions for their functioning.

In practice, corrupt police officers provide criminal groups with access to confidential information regarding investigations, operational activities, and surveillance measures, thereby enabling members of organized criminal groups to avoid police interventions, adapt their methods of operation, and conceal evidence. In addition, corruption enables protection from prosecution, delays or redirection of investigations, as well as the misuse of institutional resources for the purpose of concealing illegal activities. In this way, it operates as an intermediary mechanism between the lawful institutional sphere and criminal activity, contributing to the formation of parallel power structures within institutions.

A particularly dangerous form is criminal corruption, which implies continuous cooperation between police officers and criminal groups. In such relationships, officers not only tolerate illegal activities but, in certain cases, actively participate in their execution, with unlawfully obtained benefits being shared among the actors. In more complex situations, police powers are abused as an instrument of criminal competition, further deepening the criminalization of institutional functions.

One of the most dangerous forms of this relationship is so-called "insider" corruption, which occurs when criminal groups succeed in exerting influence within the institutional system, particularly at the operational and decision-making levels. Under such conditions, organized crime acquires the capacity to influence the course of investigations, access to evidence, and decisions of prosecutorial authorities from within. At the same time, stable networks of corrupt officials are formed, enabling coordinated and long-term criminal activity while reducing the risk of detection [4, p. 112].

The consequences of such phenomena are multiple. At the institutional level, there is a decline in the effectiveness of police actions, the compromise of investigations, and the weakening of control mechanisms, while at the societal level there is a decline in public trust in state authorities and a weakening of the rule of law [3, pp. 78–81]. If corruption acquires a systemic character, it may lead to deep criminalization of institutions and the blurring of the boundary between lawful and unlawful conduct.

Empirical data from the Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia confirm these findings, indicating an increasing involvement of police officers in organized criminal structures. These data suggest that corruption is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a structural element of criminal systems, in which police officers, in certain cases, become active participants in criminal activities.

At the international level, corruption of police officers has been recognized as one of the key factors in the development of organized crime, which is why particular emphasis is placed on strengthening internal control, transparency, and institutional integrity [4, pp. 21–33]. These standards indicate that an effective fight against organized crime is not possible without the simultaneous suppression of corruption within the bodies responsible for its detection.

5. ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLICE CORRUPTION AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Empirical data from the Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2017–2022 indicate a high level of correlation between police corruption and organized crime. The analysis includes the number of filed criminal complaints, the structure of criminal offenses, and the categories of perpetrators, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and manifestations of this phenomenon. The particular significance of these data lies in the fact that they indicate the transformation of corruption from individual deviant behavior into a structural element of organized criminal activity.

For the purpose of a systematic presentation of the results, a tabular overview of filed criminal complaints for the criminal offense of association for the purpose of committing criminal offenses under Article 346 of the Criminal Code is presented below, as well as other criminal offenses encompassed by such complaints, together with the structure of perpetrators [28, pp. 1–5].

The analysis of the presented data indicates several significant trends. First, it is observed that a relatively small number of criminal complaints (10) encompasses a significantly larger number of criminal offenses (141+) and perpetrators (144), which indicates the existence of complex criminal structures in which association serves only as an initial legal framework for broader criminal activity. This disproportion clearly confirms the existence of

Table No. 1

Year	Number of Criminal Complaints (Art. 346 CC)	Number of Criminal Offenses	Total Perpetrators_	Police Officers	Citizens	Customs Officers	Structure of Other Criminal Offenses
2017.	2	21+	88	31	43	14	Arts. 367., 368., 359. CC
2019.	2	13	12	2	9		Arts. 359., 366., 355. и 246. CC
2020.	1	28	9	3	6		Arts. 246., 359., 348., 355. and 356. CC
2022.	5	79	35	11	24		Arts. 114., 246., 245., 359., 366., 348., 278. CC and Arts. 98. LCPD
Total	10	141+	144	47	82	14	

organized criminal networks in which corruption performs a systemic function.

The structure of perpetrators shows a significant participation of police officers (47 individuals), which confirms the presence of so-called "insider" corruption. At the same time, the presence of citizens and customs officers indicates inter-institutional connectivity and the existence of horizontal corrupt networks, particularly in high-risk areas such as border crossings and the control of goods flows.

From a chronological perspective, the year 2017 is characterized by a large number of perpetrators and the dominance of corruption-related criminal offenses, primarily the giving and receiving of bribes. The significant participation of police and customs officers indicates the existence of organized corruption networks, which already at this stage points to elements of transnational organized crime.

In 2019, a qualitative transformation occurs, whereby the structure of criminal offenses becomes more complex and includes trading in influence and document forgery. A particularly significant case involved police officers who, through abuse of official powers, enabled the issuance of false biometric documents to individuals from criminal milieus. This form of conduct represents a direct link between institutional mechanisms and criminal structures, thereby significantly increasing the threat to the legal order.

During 2020, further escalation is observed, reflected in the emergence of criminal offenses related to drug trafficking, illicit arms trafficking, and document forgery. The involvement of members of other structures is particularly significant, indicating the expansion of corrupt networks and the formation of complex criminal systems that extend beyond a single institution.

The highest degree of complexity is observed in 2022, when the largest number of criminal offenses is recorded, including the most serious forms of crime, such as aggravated murder, money laundering, and abuse of confidential data. This period is also characterized by increased participation of police officers in organized criminal groups, clearly indicating the development and deepening of "insider" corruption as a key mechanism for the protection of criminal structures.

These trends are further confirmed by concrete cases from practice. In a case related to a high-level organized criminal group, a pronounced degree of institutional infiltration is observed, whereby police officers in key positions were involved in abuse of office, disclosure of classified information, and provision of logistical support. Particularly significant is the misuse of official resources, which enables criminal actors to create the appearance of institutional legitimacy, representing one of the most dangerous forms of corruption.

In another example, which has a distinctly transnational character, a criminal group operated across multiple continents, with the involvement of members of the security system in collecting and transmitting confidential information. In this way, the avoidance of criminal prosecution and the uninterrupted functioning of criminal activities were enabled, including the transportation of narcotics and financial assets. The use of encrypted communication channels indicates a high level of technological sophistication, but also highlights the limitations of traditional control mechanisms.

A synthetic analysis of the tabular data and the presented examples leads to the conclusion that police corruption has a multi-layered character and manifests itself through various forms, ranging from classical corruption offenses to direct participation in organized criminal groups. The common function of all these forms lies in enabling, facilitating, and protecting organized crime, which makes corruption its constitutive element.

Accordingly, the key significance of this analysis lies in the fact that it unequivocally confirms that the fight against organized crime cannot be successfully conducted without the simultaneous suppression of corruption within institutions. The effectiveness of repressive mechanisms directly depends on the level of institutional integrity, indicating that preventive mechanisms, internal control, and international cooperation must be positioned as central elements of a modern strategy for combating organized crime.

CONCLUSION

Starting from a comprehensive theoretical, normative, and empirical analysis, it can be reliably concluded that corruption of police officers represents one of the key structural and functional factors that enable not only the emergence, but also the continuous functioning and adaptation of organized crime. In contemporary conditions, this phenomenon goes beyond the framework of individual deviant behavior and assumes the character of a systemic mechanism that establishes and maintains a connection between criminal structures and the institutional apparatus of the state, thereby directly endangering the fundamental values of the legal order, primarily the rule of law, legal certainty, and institutional integrity.

Empirical findings, particularly those derived from the practice of the Internal Control Sector, clearly indicate the existence of both continuity and evolution of corrupt patterns. A transition is observed from traditional, individual forms of corruption to complex, organized, and network-based forms, within which police officers in certain cases no longer act merely as passive actors, but as active participants, and even key agents in the functioning of organized criminal groups. Of particular importance in this context is the so-called “insider” corruption, which enables the abuse of official position through access to confidential information, influence over the course of investigations, manipulation of evidence, and obstruction of criminal prosecution, thereby significantly increasing the operational efficiency, but also the resilience of criminal structures to the actions of law enforcement authorities.

The analysis indicates that corruption within police structures encompasses a significantly broader spectrum of conduct than merely obtaining unlawful material gain. It includes the abuse of powers, resources, institutional position, and information for the purpose of protecting or advancing criminal activities, including those with a transnational element. In this sense, corruption appears as a key catalyst that enables organized crime to overcome institutional barriers, evade criminal liability, and achieve significant economic and social power.

Although it can be noted that the normative framework of the Republic of Serbia largely follows relevant international standards in the field of combating corruption and organized crime, the key issue remains its consistent and effective implementation. Deficiencies in implementation, institutional weaknesses, as well as certain organizational and functional challenges within the security system, represent significant obstacles to achieving the full effect of the existing legal mechanisms.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that effective counteraction to organized crime requires an integrated, multidisciplinary approach that combines repressive and preventive mechanisms, along with strengthening institutional capacities and system resilience. Particular importance lies in the development and improvement of preventive instruments, such as integrity tests, asset control systems, and internal control mechanisms, which contribute to the early detection and suppression of corrupt practices.

At the same time, strengthening international cooperation represents an indispensable segment of the contemporary strategy for combating organized crime, bearing in mind its distinctly transnational character. The exchange of information, joint investigations, and the harmonization of legal standards constitute key elements in building an effective response to this phenomenon.

Following the above, it is concluded that the essential challenge in the forthcoming period will not be further improvement of the normative framework, but rather the development of strong institutional integrity and a culture of accountability within the security system. Only the consistent application of the law, with clearly defined mechanisms of control and sanctioning, can lead to a substantial reduction of corruption and thereby weaken one of the most important pillars of organized crime.

Ultimately, the fight against corruption within police structures is not merely a matter of internal control, but a prerequisite for the effective protection of the legal order, public security, and public trust in state institutions.

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КОРУПЦИЈА ПОЛИЦИЈСКИХ СЛУЖБЕНИКА КАО ФАКТОР ОГРАНИЗОВАНОГ КРИМИНАЛА

Резиме: *Корупција међу полицијским службеницима представља један од најзначајнијих фактора који омогућава развој, функционисање и дугорочно одржавање организованог криминала. У савременим условима она не представља искључиво појединачно девијантно понашање, већ добија обележја системске појаве која делује као функционални механизам повезивања криминалних структура са институцијама државе. Предмет овог рада је анализа функционалне улоге корупције унутар полицијских структура у контексту организованог криминала, са циљем да се укаже на начине на које корумпирани полицијски службеници доприносе формирању, заштити и стабилизацији организованих криминалних група. Рад се заснива на теоријској, нормативној, институционалној епиријској анализи, при чему се посебна пажња посвећује кривичноправном оквиру инкриминације коруптивних кривичних дела, као и институционалним механизмима контроле рада полиције. У том контексту разматрају се превентивне мере, као што су унутрашња контрола, јачање интегритета и етичких стандарда, али и репресивне мере које обухватају кривичне истраге, процесуирање и санкционисање корумпираних службеника. Закључује се да је ефикасно сузбијање организованог криминала немогуће без системске и доследне борбе против корупције у полицији.*

Кључне речи: *корупција, полицијски службеници, организовани криминал, превентивне мере, репресивне мере, институционални интегритет*