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**Is the SEC an Island of Integrity? A
study on perception of corruption in
public administration in Azerbaijan**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates corruption perception in civil service recruitment in the context of Azerbaijan. It specifically focuses on the State Examination Centre (SEC). The SEC is an interesting case because it is a public agency that, according to anecdotal evidence, is perceived as non-corrupt or corrupt to a minimal extent but operates in a highly corrupted context. The thesis aims to examine whether such anecdotal evidence reflects reality or not. Specifically, it seeks to understand how service users and experts perceive corruption in public administration overall and the SEC in particular concerning its organizational characteristics. It discusses the perception of corruption in relation to demographic characteristics of the users and organizational characteristics of the SEC, as viewed by the experts. The empirical basis comprises semi-structured interviews with nine service users and three experts and various SEC documents.

The research has found that both service users and experts perceive the corruption in the SEC as low to very low. In addition, specific demographic characteristics such as gender and the employment sector have been linked to corruption perception. In contrast, such a link has not been found when marital status, education, and age were under consideration due to insufficient data. The research concludes that the anecdotal claims have scientific ground given that corruption perception in the SEC has been found very low. However, even though the SEC does have integrity, it is not an island. Several other organizations share a similar level of integrity as well. The thesis also proposes recommendations for further research ideas and policy implications.

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List of Abbreviations

ASAN	State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
CSS	Civil Service Commission
DOST	Agency for Sustainable and Operative Social Provision
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoEc	Ministry of Economics
MoES	Ministry of Emergency Situations
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoLSPS	Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population
NSD	Norwegian Center for Research Data
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Presidential Administration
SCC	State Customs Committee
SCSA	State Commission on Student Admission
SEC	State Examination Center
SSS	State Security Service
TI	Transparency International

I. Introduction

Azerbaijan, one of the post-Soviet countries, is often defined as a consolidated authoritarian regime (Habdank-Kolaczowska, 2014, p.8). According to the Freedom House, in consolidated authoritarian regimes, political competition is prevented, and human rights violations are widespread.¹ Azerbaijan has a semi-presidential polity system in which the President is the head of the state. The prime minister, appointed by the President and approved by the legislative body, is the government's head. Centralized administration, low political participation, the non-working rule of law, and prevailing corruption are also among Azerbaijan's political system (Karimov, 2018, p.2). According to Transparency International, Azerbaijan was ranked 126th out of 190 countries worldwide on the Corruption Perception Index,² with a score of 30 (0 means highly corrupt, while 100 means no corruption).

“Corruption in Azerbaijan is perceived to be endemic and deeply institutionalized, permeating most spheres of public life, with entrenched political patronage networks and widespread conflicts of interest closely connected to the political elite” (McDevitt, 2015, p.15). McDevitt notes that even though Azerbaijan has nearly double GDP per capita than its neighbors in the Caucasus, it has the highest corruption perception (McDevitt, 2015, p.5). According to the Global Corruption Barometer Report in 2016, 38% of Azerbaijani households stated they had been engaged in bribery to access essential public services in the last 12 months.³ These essential services include road police, primary and secondary schools, health care, and so on. According to the Global Corruption Barometer, citizen-state interaction bribery is widespread (Bak, 2020, p.8), and there are also reports of illegal sales of the official post in the administration, army, education institutions, or other bureaucracies for pre-determined prices up to several thousand dollars depending on the rank in the patron-client pyramid (Meissner, 2011, p.7). These purchases will compensate the investment with illegal demands from public goods or services (Meissner, 2011, p.7). In Azerbaijan, the executive branch

¹ See <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/nations-transit/nations-transit-methodology> accessed 20 June 2021.

² See <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/azerbaijan> accessed 20 June 2021.

³ Check the page n.18 https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2016_GCB_ECA_EN.pdf accessed 20 June 2021.

dominates the judiciary and legislative branches, meaning limited executive accountability (McDevitt, 2015, p.15).

Since 2016, Azerbaijan has been pursuing reforms to diversify its economy, lessen its dependency on oil, maintain a competitive environment and sustainable economic growth. The main document leading these reform efforts was the "Perspectives of National Economy."⁴ Moreover, several roadmaps were also designed for different sectors. Well-operating public service is always needed to achieve the reforms. For that purpose, "the Strategy for Civil Service Development the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2015" has been approved by the Presidential Decree. It aims "... to reform the governance in the civil service system, develop staffing capacity of the state bodies, as well as to increase the effectiveness of public authorities through forming the base of civil servants with high moral and ethical values, knowledge, skills, and personal qualities".⁵

Currently, the State Examination Center is responsible for administering the civil servants' recruitment process in Azerbaijan. The SEC was established to ensure that the recruitment process is carried out legally and free from corruption. The former entity for recruitment (Civil Service Commission) had a good reputation when it comes to preventing corruption; it was seen as "*a credible, clean agency with a good reputation and performance*" (OECD, 2016, p.35). OECD monitoring team assessed its performance positively, emphasizing that it showed satisfactory performance in different respects, supporting merit-based recruitment practices, inviting civil society to interviews, and creating necessary appeals (OECD, 2016, p.34). The report wonders why the Civil Service Commission, the responsible entity for the civil service recruitment process in Azerbaijan before, was abolished, and instead, the SEC was established. CSC had positive feedback from the civil society representative, and whether this credible reputation will be the same for the SEC is debatable (OECD, 2016, p.36).

In a highly corrupted public administration system, CSC was an exception with the perceived low level of corruption. Anecdotal evidence claims that the SEC follows the tradition, and now the students fairly take exams and get admitted to universities. The

⁴ See https://iqtisadiislahat.org/store//media/documents/SYX/İqtisadiyyat_Yol_%20xeritesi.pdf accessed 20 June 2021.

⁵See <http://www.dim.gov.az/en/news/2834/> accessed 20 June 2021.

candidates for civil service positions must take an exam and interview to be offered a position. How can a person pay for being appointed to higher political positions in a country, but the same is not the case for lower positions in the civil service? The recruitment or appointment to the positions in the army, education institutions, and administration, which Meissner mentions that illegal sales are possible, was not organized or monitored by CSC (the same as the SEC now). Thus, it did not impact on the effectiveness of the CSC's performance in preventing corruption in its activities.

1.1 Research questions and relevance

The study is guided by the following research question:

1. How do users of SEC services perceive the level of corruption in the SEC?
2. How do they perceive the level of corruption of the rest of the public administration?
3. To what extent can these perceived levels of corruption be linked to users' demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, and employment status?
4. How do experts perceive the level of corruption in the SEC and the public administration in general in relation to SEC's organizational characteristics?

Considering that it is a newly established entity, there is not much research exploring corruption perception in the SEC. Corruption in Azerbaijan is not a new phenomenon, but we know very little about how the situation is in civil service recruitment. Thus, this study aims to investigate whether anecdotal evidence claiming that the SEC appearing as a less corrupt organization in Azerbaijan's highly corrupt public administration reflects reality or not. Examining the perception of corruption in civil service recruitment will clarify whether Azerbaijan is going toward public administration based on meritocracy or patron-client relationship remains unchanged. In addition to that, it will also analyze the relationship between the perceived level of corruption and the demographic characteristics of the service users. Besides service users, the opinion of the experts in terms of the perceived level of corruption in SEC and the rest of the public administration will also be explored. Findings will contribute to the literature on civil service recruitment in Azerbaijan. If the SEC is an island of integrity in the corrupt system, it will allow studying some of its reasons.

1.2 Outline of the thesis

The second chapter describes the context of the study, which includes information about the recruitment process in the SEC. The third chapter presents the literature review that starts with corruption theories and continues with research on the situation in Azerbaijan. It includes the discussion on the applicability of the theoretical frameworks to the Azerbaijan context. In the fourth chapter, research design and methodology are described. It also includes case selection, interview recruitment, interview design, and practical and ethical considerations. The fifth chapter presents and discusses the research findings, and conclusions are presented in the final chapter. The appendices and bibliography follow these chapters.

II. Context of the study

2.1 About the SEC

The SEC was established in 2016 by a Presidential Decree.⁶ The SEC is a public legal entity responsible for students' admission to higher education (undergraduate and graduate) and recruiting civil service personnel by conducting exams for state agencies and legal entities.

As stated in Article 1.2. of the SEC Charter, the SEC is not a part of any larger organization and is considered an independently performing organization.⁷ The SEC is only accountable to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and it regularly informs the President about its activities. Article 9. specifies that only the President has the right to create or abolish the center. Even though the SEC is only accountable to the President, one can find different reports and statistics on the SEC's website.⁸

The Board of Directors manages the SEC, consisting of a chairman, two deputy chairmen, and four board members. Only the President has the right to appoint or dismiss them from their position. According to the State Examination Center of the Republic of Azerbaijan public legal entity's Charter, the board is responsible for deciding the center's development strategies, attracting more funding to the center, controlling the annual budget, and implementing it.

Article 6.6 clarifies how the SEC is funded. The SEC's funding consists of different resources, including funding from the state budget. In addition to that, the center also gains money from holding fee-based exams, grants, contracts signed with state entities, and sales coming from old equipment and properties belong to the center. The value of the Charter capital equals 1 million AZN (approximately 588000 USD). The center can buy a new building, equipment, technology, or new transportation with income from fee-based exams and other publications.

In the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Article no.109 specifies that the President appoints and dismisses heads of central apparatus such as ministries, collegial

⁶ Check the Presidential decree <https://president.az/articles/19240> accessed 20 June 2021.

⁷ See the Charter <http://dim.gov.az/center/nizamnama.php> accessed 20 June 2021.

⁸ See the website of the State Examination Center <https://eservices.dim.gov.az/DQQ/DQreports/Diger> accessed 20 June 2021.

bodies, services, commission, and legal executive entities.⁹ Generally, there are two types of recruitment to civil service in Azerbaijan: general and specialized. Specialized recruitment is related to a specific group of state bodies with their recruitment and promotion system. Prosecutor's Office, Ministries of Justice, Defense, Foreign Policy, Internal Affairs, Tax, Migration; State Security, Intelligence, Customs Services, and Central Bank are the state bodies possessing specialized recruitment. The general civil service recruitment process includes open competition, which involves a written test and an interview. This process is applicable for the 1st-7th classification of administrative positions of the 1st – 5th category of state bodies. Before establishing the SEC, only the 5th-7th classification of administrative positions was subject to open competition by the CSC. The details related to the classification of positions can be found in Appendices.

2.2 SEC recruitment procedures

Suppose there is a vacancy for a position in state bodies. In that case, the Civil Service Recruitment system in Azerbaijan works as follows (see *Figure 1: Civil Service Recruitment*):

- 1) The related state body sends a query to its employees and interviews those interested to see whether there is a match with the vacancy.
- 2) If no suitable candidate is found, a vacancy for the position is transferred to open competition.
- 3) The civil service recruitment process combines a written exam (usually held every month) and an interview. SEC prepares written exams for each group of civil service positions (for example, administrative leadership such as head and deputy of state bodies, departments, or administrative executive positions such as consultants and accountants).
- 4) People who wish to participate in the competition register themselves online in the portal.

⁹ See the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan <https://mincom.gov.az/en/view/pages/13/> accessed 20 June 2021

- 5) SEC provides successful test-takers with a certificate that is valid for five years. (Those who have already worked at civil service for at least five years are not required to possess a certificate to be invited to interview).
- 6) At least one person from the state body, one from SEC, and one independent expert interview the candidates who have valid certificates of completing the written exam. During the interview, candidates are asked questions related to general world outlook, professional and reasoning skills, and very detailed position duties.
- 7) 3 experts scored the candidate and announced the results. Next, the head of the state body invites the successful candidate to meet and then decide who to hire. Finally, based on written test and interview results, the head of the state body decides who to hire.
- 8) After the interview, if a candidate disagrees with the results, s/he has the right to appeal. For that purpose, the interview process is video recorded.

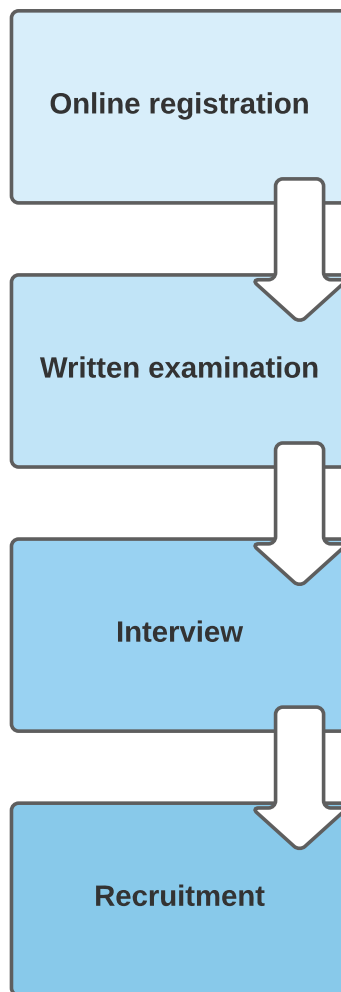


Figure 1 Civil Service Recruitment Process

The individual hired must complete a six-month internship under the mentorship of a specialist.

The written test examination process is organized based on law principles, objectivity, equality, transparency, and clarity.¹⁰The subjects of the exam questions are the Azerbaijan language, legislation, information technologies, and logic. The list of the literature that questions are based on is publicly available on the SEC's website.¹¹ The date and the location of the exam are decided at least 5 days before the exam date. Tests are graded automatically with the help of special machines. Exam results are published on the portal of the SEC. Participants of the exam have the right to complaint about the exam results within three business days. The SEC notifies the complainer about the decision on his/her complaint, and if not satisfied, the exam participant can sue the decision.

The interview is designed to measure the candidate's knowledge of the vacancy position, preparedness for the position, world outlook, and other qualifications for the related position. The interview commission consists of 3 experts from the SEC, one from recruiting state body, and one independent expert. Commission acts based on 7 principles:

1. The rule of law: following the requirements of normative legal statements to arrange the interview,
2. Objectivity: deciding whether the candidate is suitable for the position should be only based on an interview,
3. Impartiality: prohibited to include people to the interview commission who is a close relative of the candidate,
4. Independence: nobody can intervene in the independence of commission members on holding interview and making decisions,
5. Equality: everyone irrespective of their race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, origin, property holdings, position, faith, and political party, has the right to participate in the interview,

¹⁰ See the law on Procedure for conducting an interview for the purpose of holding a civil service position <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/35861> accessed 20 June 2021.

¹¹ The list of the literature for a written exam arranged by the SEC <https://eservices.dim.gov.az/DQQ/Elan/TestImtProq> accessed 20 June 2021.

6. Transparency and clarity: usage of video recording with the permission of candidate, mass media's ability to attend in interviews, and publicly announcing the results,
7. Professionalism: Grading based on revealing the potential abilities and their appropriateness for the vacancy position.

Participants of the interview need to secure at least 16 points from possible 20 points to proceed to the next stage, meeting with the head of the recruiting state body. It must be arranged within 5 business days. As one candidate is hired for the position, the rest successfully passed candidates for the vacancy are added to the reserve list for future job openings. It is worth mentioning that the interview recording is preserved for 5 years by the SEC in case any complaint regarding the transparency and fairness of the interview.

Upon completing the internship period, the individual is offered a three-month probationary contract followed by a long-term job contract. By that time, the other candidates who successfully passed the interview stage but could not be hired are added to the reserve list for two years. In case of any new vacancy in the state body, they are contacted first, and if a suitable candidate is found, the vacancy is announced on the SEC's website for open competition.

2.3 Opportunities for corruption

There are few issues in this setup. Karimov believes that not having open competition for supreme-3rd classes of administrative positions in the supreme category of state bodies is one of them (Karimov, 2018, p.5). The supreme category of state bodies consists of the Administration of President of Republic of Azerbaijan, including Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, Cabinet of Ministries, Milli Mejlis (Parliament), Constitutional Court, and Supreme Court. Supreme-3rd classes of administrative position in supreme category state bodies cover Head and deputy head of division in Presidential Administration, Deputy head of state bodies in the supreme category, heads and deputy heads of state agencies and state services established under relevant executive bodies, specialists in the Presidential Administration, Office of Cabinet of Ministers, Office of Milli Mejlis and Constitutional and Supreme Court and many more. He further notes that *“the recruitment process for this category involves direct promotion or internal interview, entailing a lack of transparency that casts doubt on the implementation of meritocratic principles at the highest level of public administration”* (Karimov,

2018, p.5). As a result, it is unknown to the public whether the most qualified candidate secured the position or not. The latest statistics show that in January 2019, Azerbaijan has 29,368 civil servants, and 1383 had a position in the supreme-3rd category of administrative positions. However, it does not specify how many of them were recruited without open competition based on merit.¹² One can add discretionary appointment of 239 deputy head of local executive bodies on top as well. Even though the SEC is responsible for civil service recruitment based on meritocracy, recruitment without open competition brings questions related to transparency and competitiveness of the recruitment.

Another issue is the last phase of the recruitment process. Thinking about the possible corruption opportunities, the most unlikely option is test examination because it is objective. Everyone gets the same test which has only one true answer. However, the same cannot be told for the interview process because the experts and questions change, and grading is subjective. The possible corruption opportunity is to bribe recruiting state body because s/he connects with the last word to select a candidate for the vacancy. Here, recruiting state bodies stands for the body with a vacancy to recruit civil servants, not the SEC.

Additionally, several candidates may pass the interview stage, and no criteria are stating that the candidate who achieves the highest result from the interview will be recruited. It also decreases the competitiveness the recruitment. On top of it, there is no justification provided for the decision. Parrado also highlighted that those personal connections were vital to look at in direct recruitment or promotions (Parrado, 2014, p.49). The SEC expert may not be interested in engaging in corruption because if any appeal is made, they must coordinate the appeal and new interview process once more. Even though to ensure transparency, the interview process is video recorded with the candidate's permission, it only covers one portion of recruitment. The SEC also ensures that competition results (who is hired for the position and added to the reserve list) are publicly published on their website and recruiting state bodies. These issues might negatively affect

¹² Check the statistics named "Number of employees holding civil service positions" under the heading "Civil Service" on the website of the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan

<https://www.stat.gov.az/source/labour/?lang=en> accessed 20 June 2021.

the SEC's corruption perception because they arrange the interviews, and any negative experience will be associated with higher corruption perception in the SEC.

2.4 Abolishment of the CSC

There was no other analysis of the CSC abolishment; thus, I only had local news stream as an option to dig into. 2016, the CSC was responsible for recruiting civil servants; however, the State Commission on Student Admission (SCSA) held exams for this purpose (Kaspi, 2016). At that time, the SCSA was the responsible body for student admission to higher education. As an education expert Vurgun Eyyub explained, there was inconsistency between the name of the SCSA and its activities. The name of the SEC enhances the responsibility and activities of the entity (Pia.az, 2016). Another expert Ejder Aghayev mentioned that the creation of the SEC was a necessity because there was no systematic process of civil service recruitment before (Pia.az, 2016). In 2016, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan signed a decree to establish the SEC responsible for both admissions to higher education and training and civil recruitment and once registered to abolish both CSC and SCSA. The establishment of the SEC consolidated the tasks of CSA and SCSA under one roof. However, the OECD mentions that some of the responsibilities, such as performance appraisal and enforcement of ethics rules, were not handed over to the SEC (OECD, 2016, p.6). The report further claims that the unification of both bodies might be explained by cost efficiency in public administration.

The third chapter presents the literature review that starts with corruption theories and continues with research on the situation in Azerbaijan. It includes the discussion on the applicability of the theoretical frameworks to the Azerbaijan context. In the fourth chapter, research design and methodology are described. It also includes case selection, interview recruitment, interview design, and practical and ethical considerations. The fifth chapter presents and discusses the research findings, and conclusions are presented in the final chapter. The appendices and bibliography follow these chapters.

III. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I review the existing literature on corruption. In the first part, I discuss the definition of corruption, including Klitgaard's corruption formula and classification of corruption based on scale and motive. This is followed by a discussion on what affects the perception of corruption, accompanied by the literature review, which focuses more specifically on the situation in Azerbaijan. Finally, theoretical discussions are followed by a summary of the chapter. The first step in selecting relevant literature was based on a search using Google Scholar and several University of Bergen library databases. The main keywords used in the search included "Civil Service Recruitment in Azerbaijan," "Corruption in Azerbaijan," "Meritocracy," and "Merit-based recruitment." The second step was essentially a snowballing approach, focusing on the sources used by the literature found in the first step. This approach was used both for the general literature on corruption and for the studies focusing on Azerbaijan.

3.1 Corruption and its types

Since the mid-1990s, the relationship between quality of government and corruption has been in particular focus of social sciences. Rothstein and Teorell note that increased interest in this relationship revealed some meaningful instances (Holmberg et al., 2014, p.14), such as that the countries that are reasonably free from corruption produce a better quality of governance. This is due to the quality government institutions that have strict control of corruption and the rule of law and maintains economic growth. Another set of literature supports that the consequences of bad governance appear as corruption and insufficient property rights. However, defining *quality* of governance as the absence of corruption is also problematic because practices that are labeled as corruption in some contexts (such as clientelism, absence of the rule of law, nepotism) are not considered as corruption in the others (Holmberg et al., 2014, p.19).

The definition and the concept of corruption have changed over the centuries, and still, the debate is going on. Interestingly, the United Nations Convention Against

Corruption does not define the term. Instead, the Convention deals with five main issues: preventive measures, criminalization and law enforcement, international cooperation, asset recovery, technical assistance, and information exchange (Convention Against Corruption, 2005). The standard definition of corruption comes from Transparency International, defined as "abuse of entrusted power for private gain."¹³

In its traditional meaning, corruption is referred to as moral impurity, spoiled, or abuse of power (Holmes, 2015, p.1). Rothstein argues that corruption can be defined as the antonym of impartiality (Rothstein, as cited in Sparling, 2017, p.377). Impartiality is understood as treating everybody in the same way and equally. Rothstein's definition of corruption is imperfect because he only considers the "output" of politics rather than "inputs." If officials cheat everyone equally, maintaining impartiality does not eliminate or prevent corruption. For example, demanding the same amount of bribe from drivers who exceed the speed limit and violate the law does not make road police uncorrupt or fair. Thus, Rothstein's definition cannot be applied to every case as the definition of corruption.

Svensson describes corruption as an outcome. According to him, corruption is a "reflection of a country's legal, economic, cultural and political institutions" (Svensson, 2005, p.20). Carjaval states that corruption is a social network phenomenon that attacks the "exchange relationship" between individuals or units. He also adds that there are three elements of this "exchange," which are the direction of exchange (horizontal or vertical), exchanged resource type (money, power, information), and mode of exchange (formal or informal) (Carjaval, 1999, p.337).

The main characteristics of corruption are listed as:

- 1) Violation of duties or obligations is present in the act.
- 2) Everybody (public or private position) can participate in corruption.
- 3) A person who provokes corruption in another is also corrupt (Carjaval, 1999, p.339).

Klitgaard notes that "Corruption exists in all countries. But the corruption tends to be more damaging to poor countries, where it can undermine property rights, the rule of law,

¹³ See <https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption> accessed 20 June 2021.

and incentives to invest" (Klitgaard, 2000, p.4). Svensson points out that being a developing or transition country, ruled by the socialist government, having low-income levels, and maintaining closed economies are the typical characteristics of the countries high in corruption (Svensson, 2005, p.24). Klitgaard also approaches corruption from a different perspective; he does not define corruption but comes up with a formula for corruption (See Figure 2).

$$C = M + D - A$$

Corruption (**C**) equals monopoly power (**M**) plus discretion of officials (**D**) minus accountability (**A**)

Figure 2 Klitgaard's corruption formula

He believes ... "*corruption flourishes when someone has monopoly power a good or service and has the discretion to decide how much you receive and where accountability and transparency are weak*" (Klitgaard, 2011, p.33). In his view, to reduce corruption, the government may consider supporting competition through different means such as government contracts. In addition, the rules of the game should be decided and explained to the public. For example, if a person wants to be recruited in civil service, the requirements and the overall process should be explained in a simple language that everyone can understand. People in power cannot use the lack of awareness of people in their favor. There are many methods suggested by Klitgaard related to increasing accountability. Methods include improving performance measurement, providing mechanisms for public complaints, and attracting outside agencies to monitor, control, and evaluate the organization (Klitgaard, 2011, p.34).

However, law scholar Matthew Stephenson finds this formula very dangerous and misleading. He believes the claims made by Klitgaard - reducing monopoly, tightening discretion, or increases accountability will decrease the corruption - might be valid under certain conditions, but not always, as Klitgaard argues (Stephenson, 2014). For example, fostering competition to reduce monopoly might hinder corruption but also trigger it. He

brings examples from competition among jurisdiction which "... can lead them to compete to offer the most attractive opportunities for corruption" (Stephenson, 2014).¹⁴

When studying, scholars classify corruption based on different factors, including scale and motivation. Corruption typology based on its scale seems rather prominent in the literature. According to this typology, corruption has two primary forms: petty and grand. Petty corruption involves a small sum of money and is seen as more tolerable than other corruption types. Petty corruption occurs in order "... to avoid fines and court summonses, ascend waiting lists, and secure preferential services" (Barr, Serra, 2009, p.489). In petty corruption, it is clear who is the seller and who is the buyer. Usually, civil servants hold junior positions which benefit petty corruption the most (Riley, 1999, p.190). Petty corruption is considered 'white corruption' according to Heidenheimer typology of corruption based on moral acceptance. In his own words,

"white corruption signifies that the majority of both elite and mass opinion probably would not vigorously support an attempt to punish a form of corruption that they regard as tolerable" (Heidenheimer, 2002, p.152).

Bauhr further notes that it could be considered white corruption because everybody knows that you do it or acknowledges that you need to be engaged in it to get the services you are entitled to. However, it does not mean that petty corruption is white in every context; for example, in developed countries where corruption is very low, petty corruption is not tolerable (Bauhr, 2012, p.70). Uslaner states that people tolerate petty corruption because they do not see any other choice. After all, the political system does not work correctly without these "gifts," making petty corruption come close to the need for corruption (Uslaner, 2008, p.11). Riley also emphasized that since petty corruption does not influence the economy in the long term, it is often considered trivial (Riley, 1999, p.190).

Transparency International defines "grand" corruption as "*the abuse of high-level power that benefits the few at the expense of the many and causes serious and widespread harm to individuals and society. It often goes unpunished*".¹⁵ Arvind Jain explains grand corruption as

¹⁴ See <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2014/05/27/klitgaards-misleading-corruption-formula/> accessed 20 June 2021.

¹⁵ Check <https://www.transparency.org/en/corruptionary/grand-corruption> accessed 20 June 2021.

“acts of the political elite by which they exploit their power to make economic policies” (Jain, 2001, p.73). In extreme cases, Jain believes grand corruption may lead to no distinction between the wealth of a dictator and the whole nation because the dictator exploits the country's resources and treats them as his own (Jain, 2001, p.74). This kind of corruption does not depend on individuals because the system itself is corrupted, and even the most virtuous man is forced to be corrupt if he wants to stay in the system (Mashali, 2012, p.777). Grand corruption highlights the system's characteristics, such as lack of transparency, lack of the rule of law, and regulations to prevent it. Since it usually happens at top-level negotiations between political officials, the public is unaware of grand corruption. Disclosure of the grand corruption is very challenging, primarily because of threats and opposition (Mashali, 2012, p.778). Uslaner differentiates petty and grand corruption from the perspective of inequality. He considers grand corruption more influential to inequality since it involves more enormous sums of money than petty corruption (Uslaner, 2008, p.44).

Scholars usually focus on the scale of corruption based on how widespread corruption is. However, Monika Bauhr comes up with a new classification of corruption. Her classification is based on the motivation behind engaging in corruption: need or greed (Bauhr, 2012, p.68). Need corruption occurs when citizens are asked to pay a bribe for the services they are officially entitled to, such as birth certificates or acquiring passports. It is also called systematic corruption. Bauhr further notes that the relationship between actors in need corruption is based on coercion and extortion. (Bauhr, 2012, p.68). Greed corruption takes when a paying bribe is not entitled to services that he or she is paying for. Unlike need corruption, greed corruption is less visible, and the action's cost is divided among many actors. Both actors engaged in corruption enjoy benefits (Bauhr, 2012, p.68).

What corruption is and is not has always been discussed in the literature. Reviewing several definitions and the formula of corruption enables one to understand its scale and motives better. In Azerbaijan, both petty and grand, as well as need and greed, corruption are present. As will be discussed later, possible corruption cases in the SEC possesses both need and greed corruption. From the service user's perspective, if s/he is asked to pay an additional amount for being provided by certificate upon successful test examination, then it is need corruption because you cannot get a public sector job if you do not go through the SEC. However, from the SEC's side, this is greed corruption. By saying from the SEC's side, I mean the individual who is employed at the SEC and acts on behalf of the organization. Because when people engage in corruption, they do not bribe the organization, but the

individuals who are working at the organization and have the authority over the services provided. This individual is likely to engage in corruption because of personal financial incentives. However, if the service user initiates the corruption, then it is merely greed corruption from both sides. Considering the scale of possible corruption activities happening in the test examination or interview stage, it is more appropriate to define it as petty corruption since it is improbable to involve higher sums of money.

3.2 What affects perception of corruption?

Corruption studies not always focus on societies or institutions but also on people individually. The absence of a unique definition of corruption makes it harder for researchers to study what influences corruption perception (Melgar, Rossi, Smith, 2010, p.184). Melgar, Rossi, and Smith believe that the perceived level of corruption varies as everybody acknowledges or understands corruption differently. They find out that "*... some socio-demographic variables are significant determinants of the perceived level of corruption*" (Melgar, Rossi, Smith, 2010, p.184). They further argue that assuming that people are rational actors who calculate the costs and benefits of their actions, perception of the corruption will change according to their moral values and beliefs (Melgar, Rossi, Smith, 2010, p.184). For some, financial interest may weigh more than being ethical or vice versa. Depending on people's moral values and beliefs, they have different approaches to corruption, thus different perceptions of corruption. In their research, Melgar, Rossi, and Smith argue that there might be some predictors of corruption perception and conclude that gender, marital status, educational level, and employment sector do influence the corruption perception (Melgar, Rossi, Smith, 2010, p.192). Specifically, women possess a higher corruption perception than men (see below for discussion). In addition, divorced people are prone to perceive higher corruption than married ones; however, they did not elaborate on the reasons for that relationship. They also note that private-sector employees perceive a higher level of corruption than those employed in the public sector (Melgar, Rossi, Smith, 2010, p.192). They claim that people who are on the "demand" side of the "bribe market" are more likely to perceive a lower level of corruption than people in the "supply" side of the "bribe market" (Melgar, Rossi, Smith, 2010, p.192). Educated people (completed at least secondary education) tend to perceive a lower level of corruption. Melgar and his colleagues relate this to the fact that educated people have more capability to process information (Melgar, Rossi,

Smith, 2010, p.192). In other words, educated people can assess corruption and differentiate it from other kinds of payments such as service fees. Torgler and Valev also add that higher educated people may know more about the government's activities and performances and evaluate corruption from this perspective. However, they also argue that educated people may well be engaged in corruption more because they are more aware of the corruption opportunities (Torgler, Valev, 2006, p.138).

Several studies, including "Are women really the "fairer sex? Corruption and women in government" and "The influence of Socioeconomic Trends and Experiences on Individual Perception of Corruption," were carried out on the relationship between gender and corruption perception. In the first research, Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti conclude that women are less likely to sacrifice the common good for private gains and more likely to perceive higher corruption. Thus, countries with higher women representation in government tend to have a lower perception of corruption (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2001 p.424). The second study by Zakaria explains why women perceive more corruption than men. They mention two reasons: the first, being more active in the labor market results in witnessing bribery or asking to pay bribery, leading them to perceive corruption higher than men. The second possible explanation is increased participation in government and closer observation of corruption (Zakaria, 2016, p.433). Torgler and Valev also point out that "*... being female rather than male increase the probability of a person stating that a bribe is never justifiable*" (Torgler, Valev, 2006, p.142). To conclude, a male is more tolerant to corruption; thus, they perceive less corruption.

Age is another demographic determinant of corruption perception. Even though Melgar, Rossi, and Smith reveal no significant difference among the corruption perception of different age groups (Melgar, Rossi & Smith, 2010, p.187). In "Corruption and Age," Torgler and Valev look at how age affects the justifiability of corruption. They conclude that the age of the person and his view on the justifiability of the corruption has a negative correlation because, as individual ages, s/he becomes more compliant with rules and regulations (Torgler & Valev, 2006, p.142).

In sum, there might be several predictors of corruption perception, such as gender, age, marital status, education level, and employment status. For example, researchers conclude that women perceive higher corruption than men as married people compared to single people. Moreover, educated people are more prone to perceive a lower level of corruption

than people who have not finished secondary school. They also determine that private-sector employees are more likely to have higher corruption perceptions than their counterparts in the public sector. However, age is found not to affect changes in corruption perception associated with different age groups among all these predictors.

3.3 Situation in Azerbaijan

This section demonstrates scholars' and researchers' scientific works related to the political system in Azerbaijan, the SEC. Unfortunately, we have a minimal understanding of how people perceive corruption in the SEC. Moreover, finding literature specifically for the SEC is a challenge because it is a newly established entity. Given that there is only one study on SEC¹⁶, I will first present how the situation is in Azerbaijan concerning corruption is presented in reports by think tanks and international organizations. Afterward, few scholarly articles will be reviewed on the issue of corruption in Azerbaijan.

Table 1 Azerbaijani Country Profile

Azerbaijan Country Profile								
	Control of Corruption		Corruption Perception Index (rank)	The Economist Democracy Index	Press Freedom Index (rank)	Freedom House Score	Global Peace Index	UNCAC Status
	Score	Percentile Rank						
Latest available data (year in brackets)	-0.38 (2018)	21.63 (2018)	30 (120/180) (2019)	2.75 (authoritarian regime) (2020)	166/180 (2019)	11/100 (not free)	120/163 (2019)	Ratified 2005

¹⁶ Karimov, E. (2018). Can an Authoritarian Regime Have a Meritocratic Public Administration? The Case of Azerbaijan. *CAAF Fellows Paper*.

Since 1995 CPI has been scaling and scoring countries based on how experts and business executives perceive corruption in the country's public sector. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index has some criticism; one is very explicit in the name. CPI measures perception, not the real, reported cases of proven incidences of corruption (Andersson & Heywood, 2009, p.752). If a person believes that everyone around him is engaging in corrupt activities, then s/he adapts to this environment and is more likely to perceive less corruption. The second problem with CPI is not knowing what participants of the surveys understand by corruption (Andersson & Heywood, 2009, p.753). Despite these criticisms, it is still beneficial for academic research, especially when conducting macro-oriented research (Andersson & Heywood, 2009, p.755). World Bank Enterprise Survey 2013 focusing on Azerbaijan stated that public officials' corruption is a strain on private firms because they need to pay "unofficial" and unlawful price to public officials for administrative and regulatory processes like registering the firm tax payments securing a government contract. Bribery for licenses and permits is also common (World Bank Group, 2014, p.9). (For more indicators, see Figure 3).¹⁷

At the moment, Azerbaijani public administration cannot be defined as a system based on meritocracy. The patron-client system seems a more suitable description of the current system, according to Karimov (2018, p.1). The ruling regime (patron) shares power among certain people (clients) to manipulate activities in the country. Clients who received "informal" authority from patron are subject to special protection and advantages, which, in turn, propagates corruption. Thus, the political system in Azerbaijan does not reflect the choices of its population but the patron-client network (Guliyev, 2012, p.118). It is noteworthy to mention that both in 2012 and 2018, two different scholars, Guliyev and Karimov, describe the system in Azerbaijan as corrupted.

Another study is by Hannes Meissner, which focuses on informal political patterns in Azerbaijan. In the article, the author traces the corrupt structures and practices frequently utilized by public officials. Specifically, he draws attention to client networks and corruption practices in Azerbaijan. At the end of the article, he concludes that "*Much of the*

¹⁷ *Azerbaijani Country Profile* taken from Overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (p.7) by M. Bak, 2020, U4 Anti-corruption Helpdesk https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/kproducts/Regional-profile-Eastern-Partnership-countries_2020_PR.pdf accessed 20 June 2021.

public sector is corrupt, as demonstrated by the sale of public posts and the illegal demands for money from the population in exchange for public services" (Meissner, 2011, p.9). He further claims that corruption is considered an everyday activity in Azerbaijan: "To ensure a steady source of income, the ruling regime draws on corrupt networks pervading state and society since Soviet times" (Meissner, 2011, p. 7). Meissner claims that there are established pricelists for the post in the administration, the education, the army, and many other sectors. Paying several hundred thousand dollars for a position in the pyramid is an investment for what they will gain through bribes in the future (Meissner, 2011, p. 7).

As mentioned in 2. Context of the study chapter, Azerbaijan's civil service recruitment is divided into two - specialized and general, and they both have a different process for getting employed in the public sector. General recruitment includes written competition and interview. However, the decision of whom to hire depends on the head of the state body, which enables an opportunity for corruption. Specialized recruitment is conducted internally by the state body, and there is no third-party monitoring of how the recruitment is organized. According to Meissner (2011), selling the positions for high sums of money more likely happens with the positions in state bodies with specialized recruitment and supreme-3rd classes of administrative positions in the supreme category of state bodies. To conclude, the civil service recruitment in Azerbaijan does not entirely belong to the SEC, as the aforementioned state bodies fall outside of the SEC's duty scope. Given that Meissner conducted his study in 2011, studying the SEC and whether it is perceived as an island of integrity or not will enable him to check his argument and assess if the positions filled by open competition are prone to be sold.

Elchin Karimov's "Can an Authoritarian Regime Have a Meritocratic Public Administration? The Case of Azerbaijan" may be the most relevant source for this study. He underlines the importance of institutionalization of meritocracy, which, according to him, seems absent in Azerbaijan. Both independent civil society organizations and autonomous parliament are missing to monitor bureaucrats' work (Karimov, 2018, p.7). This would mean that there is no accountability mechanism exists. In the article, Karimov remarks few suggestions to the SEC and Central Government of Azerbaijan to improve Azerbaijan's public administration. Instead, he recommends that the SEC conduct a study exploring the reasons behind the unwillingness of contact-based employees who are working impermanently in civil service positions to apply for becoming civil servants in open competition because this might help to increase the reputation of civil service (Karimov,

2018, p.11). Furthermore, he suggests that the Central Government of Azerbaijan increase the monthly salary of low and mid-level civil servants because without paying adequate salaries, it is tough to eliminate bribery. He expects that this will also prevent the lure of corruption, likewise attract and encourage qualified civil servants to remain in their positions and not switch to private-sector employment that offers higher salaries (Karimov, 2018, p.11). However, increasing salaries may only help prevent "petty corruption" not the "grand corruption." Given that in Azerbaijan, salaries of civil servants are comparatively low, it is likely that civil servants engage in corruption because they cannot meet the minimum standard of living with their official salaries; thus, they need an additional source of income from bribes. Karimov notes that in 2016 the average monthly salary for civil servants was approximately 373 USD, and to cover the expenses of a four-person family, at least 1389 USD is needed, which also excludes the rent (Karimov, 2018, p.6). It is visible that civil servants might fail to resist lucrative offers. Bribes involve a small amount of money but happen frequently. If a civil servant gets enough salary to maintain his/her living standards, their dependence and need for bribe also decrease, resulting in an overall decrease in corruption. On the other hand, we know that grand corruption occurs less frequently and involves a very big sum of money. Grand corruption happens not because of the need but greed. Thus, even increasing salaries will not affect to change the greed of the public officials. In addition, Karimov proposes sending the best senior bureaucrats to universities abroad to earn their degrees with the condition of returning to the country and working for the government for five years and, bringing change after learning best practices abroad. Another suggestion to the government is to create an independent accountability inspection within each state body to monitor its activities and evaluate its performance. Thus, it will benefit the state to achieve development agenda and push out incompetent civil servants.

Recalling Klitgaard's formula ($\text{Corruption} = \text{Monopoly} + \text{Discretion} - \text{Accountability}$), government officials and civil servants in higher positions in the administration have a monopoly over the resources in Azerbaijan. Not having competition in the services creates suitable conditions for corruption to flourish. On top of that, government officials also have extensive discretionary powers, such as recruiting civil servants to higher positions in the administration. Effective law enforcement, separation of power, independent judiciary is needed in Azerbaijan to decrease government officials' discretion. However, the political system in Azerbaijan is dominated by mighty executive

power and law enforcement agencies which are considered unaccountable because of weak surveillance (McDevitt, 2015, p.18). Since the dominant executive controls the judiciary's budget, Azerbaijan also lacks an independent judiciary to oversee activities of executive power. To ensure accountability, there should be a free press, civic organizations, independent auditing. However, the Azerbaijani government had experience with arresting and imprisoning political activists, journalists, and lawyers with bogus charges (McDevitt, 2015, p.18). Thus, establishing independent accountability inspection might affect state bodies that have a monopoly over public services.

Karimov emphasizes the significance of using e-governance tools to fight corruption too. He offers explicitly to develop a complete online form on the SEC or Commission on Combating Corruption website to collect complaints from citizens fast and effectively. He highlights the importance of raising awareness among the population to report any experience with civil servant's misuse of their power. Lastly, he reminds that all these suggestions or possible reforms will do no positive change to curb corruption if the political will is absent. He believes that these suggestions may positively impact corruption only if political elites favor curbing corruption. If not, *"creating a centralized exam to recruit meritorious civil servants will alone do nothing to fight corruption in the civil service"* (Karimov, 2018, p.11). It means that even though the SEC manages to prevent corruption in its activities and provide meritorious civil servants, it will not eliminate the corruption in the whole public administration. Karimov's statement also implies that it is possible to have a corrupt-free or corrupt to an extend organization in a corrupt system.

Azerbaijan's reputation for corruption is not so optimistic, according to international organizations and think tanks. Different scholars in different years agree that the public administration of Azerbaijan does not base on meritocratic principles but patron-client networks. Even though the SEC organizes recruitment based on competition, several problematic instances question the meritocratic principles in recruitment. One of them is selling high positions in the administration; in that case, specialized recruitment of several state bodies is relevant. As mentioned earlier in **2.3. Opportunities for corruption** direct promotions or appointments to high positions in the public administration without any competitive recruitment brings doubts about transparency and fairness to the minds. Another one is the discretion of state bodies discretion in deciding whom to recruit at the last stage. Head of the state body does not have any obligation to justify the recruitment

decision. The following section will offer a theoretical framework that will help understand how the users and experts perceive this.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

This part is organized based on the flow of the research questions. It starts with the corruption definition/perception by service users, followed by a discussion on user's individual level of characteristics and the SEC's organizational-level characteristics.

This thesis focuses on the SEC, seeking to understand how service users and experts perceive corruption. Given that there is no clear-cut definition of corruption for this thesis, I will use the one suggested by Transparency International, which is "misuse of entrusted power for private gain." Thus, any possible corruption activities in civil service recruitment, either by the SEC or other state bodies, is misuse of the entrusted power for illicit aims and gains.

Because corruption is deeply embedded in Azerbaijan's public administration, different kinds of corruption, including petty, grand, need, and greed corruption, are likely to be present. To investigate the corruption perception, first, we should know what kind of corruption is involved in civil service recruitment. Assuming that a candidate might offer a bribe or ask for a bribe to gain an unfair advantage in the exam or interview process, it is defined as petty corruption because it likely does not involve high amounts of money. It is improbable for a candidate to pay a higher amount for a public position with a decent salary because it is not a profitable investment. As Meissner claims, public officials or higher civil servants opt for "buying" positions in the system because they will compensate it with the bribes coming from provisions of goods and services in the future. From the perspective of the SEC, if exam inspectors engage in corruption and accept the payment to ignore cheating or usage of electronic devices, it is petty corruption. S/he does not have high-level political power but will still be engaged in petty corruption in this case. On top of it, inspectors in the test examination are not always the same, so it is not always the same person who can take bribes all the time.

On the other hand, at the very end of the recruitment process, if the head of the recruiting state body misuses his/her power and prefers one candidate over another merely because of any personal benefits, it might well fit the definition of grand corruption and

petty corruption at the same time depending on the amount of money and conditions on a bribe. If it is a relatively small amount, then it is likely to be petty; however, if it involves big amounts and promises, then it may well be considered as grand corruption as well. It is also applicable to the instances where the recruitment is carried out outside the scope of SEC's duties within recruiting state body's specialized recruitment process. Since there is no oversight mechanism to recruiting positions that do not proceed to open competition, it is very likely for the head of state bodies to use their discretion to engage in grand corruption, as Meissner claimed.

Given that potential corruption activities in civil service recruitment can both be petty and grand depending on which perspective to look, the motive behind the corruption is also debatable. For example, suppose everyone is asked to pay an additional amount (alongside payment for registering for the exam) to take and pass the test examination or interview stage successfully. In that case, it is need corruption because, legally, everyone has the right to apply for civil service, and conditioning the provision of legal rights requires corruption. However, need corruption is applicable only from the candidate's perspective. We can find greed motives in possible corrupt activities related to the recruitment as well if the service user initiates the offer. In other words, a person who lacks the knowledge or qualifications but wants to become a civil servant might offer money to pass the written test and/or interview. In times of powerful social media, it is relatively easier to raise an issue and complaint; however, it is very tough to find a complain related to the unfairness of the SEC in its activities. It might be due to the open competition (test examination), which is supposed to be transparent so that qualified individuals can proceed without engaging in corruption. I emphasize only the test examination because the SEC is the only actor in conducting the test examination. There is no third-party state body engaging in. Possible corruption cases that occurred in the civil service recruitment might consist of need as well as greed corruption. It is dichotomous.

Given that Azerbaijan is a country with an authoritarian regime and good governance practices are not entirely in place, petty corruption is needed to "grease" the process when bureaucracy is not working correctly. "A central theme of the grease-the-wheels argument was that corrupt acts such as bribery could be an efficient way of getting around burdensome regulations and ineffective legal systems" (Holmberg et al., 2014, p.260). When exhausting paperwork involves in the provision of service, bribery also contains "need motive." People need to pay a bribe, which is also called speed money in this context, to

enhance efficiency and get the services in a considerable time frame (Holmberg et al., 2014, p.261).

Regarding corruption perception, I expect specific demographic characteristics to have an impact on corruption perception in general. Recalling the studies of Melgar, Rossi, and Smith (2010), Torgler and Valev (2006), and Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti (2001), this might be gender, age, marital status, education level, and employment sector. Therefore, even though this study is qualitative, mentioned demographic characteristics are considered conditions while the corruption perception is the outcome.

The respondents of this study will be university graduates, so they will have higher education (higher education is a requirement for civil service). As mentioned in the literature review, educated people may perceive a lower level of corruption than uneducated ones because they have more capabilities to process information related to corruption. If the results imply that interviewees perceive a higher level of corruption in the SEC, other people are more likely to perceive even more.

Apart from analyzing perceptions of corruption using individual-level characteristics of users (demographic characteristics), the study also explores organizational-level characteristics. The study participants are also asked to compare the SEC with the rest of the public administration.

Among the different drivers of corruption, I choose Klitgaard's corruption formula as one of the ways to understand the organizational level aspects of why the SEC might be considered less corrupt than the rest of the system. Klitgaard explains his corruption formula as

"Whether the activity is public, private or nonprofit, and whether it is carried on in Ouagadougou or Washington, one will tend to find corruption when an organization or person has monopoly power over a good or service, has the discretion to decide who will receive it and how much that person will get and is not accountable"
(Klitgaard, 1998, p.4).

Albeit it has some critics, the corruption formula creates a ground to approach corruption from a different standpoint. It does not reflect on size or the motive. However, it allows to analyze the different aspects of corruption-related issues and predict some expectations. Klitgaard claims that corruption flourishes when monopoly and discretion are

available with the absence of accountability. Whereas most civil servants are employed through the SEC's recruitment, it does not have an absolute monopoly overfilling the post in public administration. Several significant state bodies such as Defense, Tax, Internal Affairs, and Customs do not employ the SEC to conduct the recruitment. Instead, they have their internal recruitment system. The SEC has no power to participate or oversight. According to the Charter, the SEC is independent in its activities, and decisions are made in board meetings with the majority vote. Thus, it has discretion over its activities, but the rules define this discretion. There are two specific documents, "Procedure for conducting an interview for the purpose of holding a civil service position"¹⁸ and "Rules for preparation, examination, approval of test samples for admission to the civil service, continuation of activity in civil service and holding of civil service positions"¹⁹ related to how to organize and plan written test examination and interview stage which clearly defines all the steps in the recruitment. However, one instance, deciding on whom to hire among successful candidates, is left outside the SEC's authority. The head of the state body is the authorized one to select any individual from the shortlisted candidate to employ without providing any justification. When analyzing the documents related to the rules on written examination and interview, as well as the Charter of the SEC, we see that most of the processes are very well defined, and there is not much room left for discretion.

To conclude, the SEC has neither absolute monopoly over employing public servants in all positions nor over deciding whom to recruit at the end. Nevertheless, the SEC still maintains high monopoly, if not absolute. At the same time, there is very limited discretion and the SEC is only accountable to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and must regularly report its performance and activities which, arguably, is not a robust accountability mechanism. To increase transparency and accountability, the board of directors, which is the managing body of the SEC, includes outsiders such as the Minister of Education, Head of the Institute of Management Systems, and so on. Furthermore, on the

¹⁸ See the law on Procedure for conducting an interview for the purpose of holding a civil service position. <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/35861> accessed 26 June 2021.

¹⁹ See the decision of the Cabinet of Ministers on Rules for preparation, examination, approval of test samples for admission to the civil service, continuation of activity in civil service and holding of civil service positions. <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/35054> accessed 26 June, 2021.

SEC website, one can easily find the reports on civil service recruitment which consists of statistical information.²⁰

Recalling Klitgaard's formula of corruption (Corruption= Monopoly + Discretion-Accountability), we see high monopoly, low discretion, and low accountability. If we follow Klitgaard's formula, we expect the SEC to be neither entirely corrupt nor corrupt-free, but rather somewhere in between. However, according to anecdotal evidence, it is perceived as the other way around. This exciting issue will be the focus of the expert interviews, which will specifically focus on their understanding of organizational-level conditions.

²⁰ See <https://eservices.dim.gov.az/dq/DQreports> accessed 20 June 2021.

IV. Research Design and Methodology

The research design is "a logical plan for getting from here to there, where here may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions" (Yin, 2009, p.26). The research is a case study of the SEC using a qualitative approach. A case study is a helpful strategy to explore a program, event, activity, process, or individual in detail (Creswell, p.30). An in-depth analysis of the case study provides readers an adequate basis for concluding results from the research. This is one of the most used social research methods, especially when "why" and "how" questions are chosen (Creswell, 2009, p.32). Yin also notes the valuable contribution of case studies to literature about the knowledge of the individual, organizational, social, or political phenomenon, especially complex ones (Yin, 2014, p.4).

4.1 Case selection and methodological approach

Trent and Cho state that

"typically, qualitative researchers begin with a starting point—a curiosity, a problem in need of solutions, research questions, and a desire to understand better a situation from the native perspectives of the individuals who inhabit that context (Trent & Cho, 2020, p.957).

In this study, the starting point was the anecdotal evidence related to the SEC. It suggests that candidates can take exams and apply for civil service recruitment without paying for bribery. It was surprising to hear that the SEC appeared corrupt-free or corrupt to a small extent in a corrupt environment my attention to exploring what reasons are behind this.

Interestingly, as a slightly deviant case it is working against the Klitgaards' formula. "A deviant case study is a research design or case selection technique for refining or replacing an existing theory or hypothesis" (Levy, 2010, p.3). Levy adds that deviant case studies explain the cases that do not meet the theoretical predictions (Levy, 2010, p.5). Looking at the SEC from the outside, we see that it has quite a high monopoly, minimal accountability, and high discretion in decision-making in the interview stage (written examinations are fully regulated). It is not an absolute deviant case, but considering organizational-level

characteristics, the SEC does not behave as expected; it would be perceived at least to some extent corrupt.

When we apply the formula to the SEC, two out of three elements, namely, a relatively high monopoly and minimal accountability, hints at the expectation that the SEC not being corrupt-free or corrupt to a small extent. However, still, this public agency is considered almost not corrupt at all in the context that overall considered as corrupt. This is due to the third element, discretion, and in the SEC's case, it is very low. Low discretion changes the expectations related to corruption in the SEC, and assumingly, the SEC should be not-fully corrupt.

The qualitative research method is utilized in this study to address the research questions mentioned above. As Creswell notes, the qualitative method involves non-numerical data analysis to understand a social phenomenon (Creswell, 2009, p.31). The study employs semi-structured interviews to collect social and personal data related to the issue under study. Semi-structured interviews "... are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee/s" (DiCacco-Bloom, & Crabtree, 2006, p.315). It is also the most used in human and social sciences (Brinkmann, 2020, p.437). This data collection method is famous for various reasons, including being versatile and flexible, enabling the researcher to adapt questions based on the answers by the interviewee (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016 p.2955). It also enables

"... the better use of the knowledge-producing potential of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee; as well, the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide" (Brinkmann, 2020, p.437).

What attracts me to use semi-structured interviews is that they allow understanding respondents' views better than surveys or questionnaires in quantitative studies. Open-ended questions leave room for creativity during the interview based on the researcher's answers and explore what is more relevant for the study. Of course, there are also some disadvantages of the interviews. Creswell, for example, states that gathered data is subject to filtering by interviewees. It means that the researcher can only get what the interviewee wants to share from their experience. Besides, poor recollection by the respondent is also a

constrain. Respondents may provide incorrect answers, especially if s/he had the experience many years ago. Another limitation is that respondents may give biased answers because of the researcher's presence, especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as corruption (Creswell, 2009, p.167). Giving out unconscious signals or leading questions to expected answers is another disadvantage.

The outcome of interest in this study is the users' and experts' perceived level of corruption of the SEC, relying on data gained from semi-structured interviews. Specifically, the interviews focus on experiences and perceptions of the service users of the SEC and experts regarding the extent of corruption in the civil service recruitment context. The format of the interviews was online because the Covid-19 related travel restrictions limited the possibility of face-to-face interviews. The interviewees were the people who took the exam in the SEC and the experts.

The conditions of interest in this study are individual-level conditions (demographic characteristics of users) and organizational-level conditions (monopoly, discretion, and accountability).²¹ Some of the information on demographic characteristics such as gender and age are gained through the data provided by the SEC, and the researcher asked the rest (education level, marital status, and employment sector) in the interview. Interviewing experts was a valuable source of data, especially related to organizational level conditions, complemented by document analysis, specifically SEC Constitution and Charter). These documents contain the rules of preparation, approval of test samples for admission to civil service, and rules for conducting interviews, and are beneficial to understand which measures are taken in the SEC to prevent corruption. However, not everything happens exactly how it is described in the documents. Thus, I mainly used these documents to understand the organizational characteristics of the SEC. Documents help to understand how much monopoly, discretion, and accountability it possesses.

4.2 Recruiting interviewees

Qualitative sampling demands the identifying suitable participants who can contribute to the research the most (Creswell, 2009, p.166). The first target for the interviews was people who have experience with the SEC. Since they have direct experience with the SEC, they can provide valuable insights about how transparent and fair the recruitment process is and

²¹ It is worth mentioning that conditions would be labeled as independent variables and outcomes as dependent variables if quantitative research were used.

in what instances corruption may erupt. On the SEC's website, there were few exam takers' statistic data on specific exam dates. To have more comprehensive data, I contacted the SEC and briefly informed them about the purpose of my study. Even though the corruption-related study is considered a sensitive issue in Azerbaijan, they were kind enough to contribute to my study by providing the data I need. They sent me the list of candidates who took the test exam, passed the test examination, and proceeded to the interview stage, and who passed the interview stage and were eventually recruited. The list also included the gender and birthdate of the candidates, which allows them to know their ages (all demographics are described in Figure 4). To contact them, I also received their emails. One drawback of the data set was not including the information about the people who failed the test examination that left me no data about the first group of interviewees explained below.

From the SEC dataset, I planned to have around 12 interviewees based on three categories:

- 1) Candidates who took the test exam and failed,
- 2) Candidates who passed the test exam and failed interview,
- 3) Candidates who were successful on both stages and recruited.

When selecting interviewees, the criterion included diversity regarding participants' gender and age to eliminate possible biases. It also allowed to compare and contrast their responses based on these characteristics and answer exciting questions such as how different a woman in her 30s working in the public sector perceive corruption in the SEC than her male counterpart.

After registering this study with the NSD, I pre-selected possible interviewees for the 2nd and third groups from the dataset. I contacted them over email, in which I explained the purpose of the study and that the data will be anonymized. With a few days' gaps, I sent emails to more than 100 individuals who took the SEC exam; however, given that corruption is a sensitive topic, turnout to these emails was low. I ended up interviewing only nine people from two categories together (people who passed the written examination but failed at the interview stage and people who passed both the written examination and interview).

Table 2 Demographic characteristics of service users

Demographics of the Service Users					
	Gender	Age	Education level	Marital Status	Sector
1	woman	42	bachelor	married	public
2	woman	34	bachelor	married	public
3	woman	33	bachelor	married	public
4	woman	27	master	single	public (not rec)
5	woman	25	bachelor	married	not working
6	woman	25	master	single	public
7	man	32	master	married	public
8	man	30	master	married	business
9	man	26	bachelor	single	public

Recruiting the participants for the first group was especially tricky since there was no list provided. Thus, I designed a post that included the name and the purpose of the study and requirements for being respondents. I posted it on different Facebook groups, including university alumni groups and groups created for preparation for civil service recruitment. However, nobody agreed to participate, and due to practical constraints and availability of the interviewees, I had nine people agreed to be interviewed in total. Service users of the SEC who were willing to interview me were given few options for a scheduling time slot. Due to several public holidays and time zone differences between Norway and Azerbaijan data collection process took longer than expected. Interviewing service users through Zoom meetings took about 3 months.

Another limitation during the recruitment was that people who are more than 40 years old either took the test before establishing the SEC or worked in the civil service for more than 5 years. They are not engaged in test examination. Thus, I only had one interviewee over 40 years old.

The second target of the interviews was the experts, who have more profound knowledge than service users to detect and analyze possible corruption cases. While interviews with service users provide valuable primary information related to corruption perception in the SEC and the influence of demographic characteristics on that perception, expert interviews help investigate the SEC’s organizational characteristics. Recruitment of experts (See Figure 5) started with looking at the website of Transparency International in Azerbaijan website. I planned to involve one expert from Transparency International's Azerbaijan office, who also participates in the interview stage as an independent expert, another expert on civil service who also participates in the interview stage on behalf of the SEC, and, lastly, one independent expert. Fortunately, Transparency International's Azerbaijan office agreed to arrange an interview with a member expert from leadership. He also provided me necessary contact info with an independent expert and expert working in the SEC. A separate information email was sent to the SEC in order to have permission for interviewing its expert. They also agreed to arrange an interview. Moreover, the third expert on corruption, who was working at Transparency International's Azerbaijan office for a long time and is working as an independent expert, gave her consent to be involved in the research.

Table 3 Characteristics of the experts

Recruited experts	Their expertise	Relationship with the SEC
Expert 1	Corruption	Engages in the interview process
Expert 2	Corruption	No relationship
Expert 3	Civil Service	Works at the SEC

The rationale behind my expert selection was diversity in terms of their relationship with the SEC. Transparency International has a "watchdog" function to fight against corruption. I expected expert from TI to provide valuable information without concealing

anything because it is his professional duty to reveal and fight against corruption. Given that he also participates in the interview stage of the recruitment, he would present primary data about how fair and transparent the interviews are. I also purposefully selected one expert who has a direct relationship with the SEC because I wanted insights into how the SEC itself assesses the corruption perception and answers the questions related to corruption opportunities and the preventive measures against it. Finally, one independent expert who does not participate in the interview stage and does not have any professional duty to the SEC nor Transparency International would add value to the quality of the research because she is in a neutral position to the SEC. She would not be so interested in exaggerating the situation as if it is her duty to reveal corruption cases or concealing any instances that are prone to corruption as if she has a duty to the SEC.

4.3 Interview design and pilot interview

While preparing the interview guide, research questions were my main focus. I tried to construct questions that will enable interviewees to provide me with valuable answers. The first section of the guide (See Appendix 3) is dedicated to the consent form and demographics of the interviewee. After that come warm-up questions. These questions served to prepare the interviewees for corruption-related questions, as well as to measure how much they know about corruption. Especially, the definition of corruption is asked because we need to be on the same page when specific questions are asked related to possible corruption activities in the SEC. One of the questions belongs to the justifiability of corruption, which should contribute to understanding the relationship between the respondents' demographic characteristics and corruption perception. Warm-up questions were followed by questions about their experience in the SEC. These questions were the most crucial ones to determine how service users perceive corruption in the SEC and what brings them to this perception. The interview guide also included corruption perception of public administration and locating the SEC in corruption activities. That shed light on whether the SEC is perceived as less corrupt than the rest of the administration; or is no different. The last section is devoted to their own experience with corruption, and it will enable me to understand the relationship between corruption experience and perception.

Questions addressed to the experts were almost the same as the ones to the service users. I excluded the questions related to experience in the examination and interview stage from

the user's perspective but asked whether they have done any research on the SEC specifically.

A pilot interview was arranged with a person who has successfully passed all the necessary recruitment for civil service. It should be noted that this person is the only one that I closely know; with the rest of the interviewees, I do not have any personal connections to ensure there are no compromises in the disclosure of the data after. The pilot interview helped me to get prepared for actual interviews better in terms of ensuring an uninterrupted process, increasing confidence about the question, and time management. I translated the interview guide to Azerbaijani because I wanted to ensure a smooth interview without any interruptions due to translating. Secondly, when the pilot interview was done, I asked my interviewee whether the questions were sensitive. Knowing that my questions were not "too much" to ask encouraged me to formulate follow-up questions when needed. Lastly, it gave me an idea of how long the interview lasts to mention it when contacting the study participant.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data collected in qualitative research is unstructured and unwieldy. According to Ritchie and Spencer, the data in qualitative research consists of text obtained from interviews or discussions, field notes, and other written documents (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, p.176). Thus, the researcher needs to structure what s/he gathers for analyzing and drawing conclusions. Even though the process is presented as a hierarchy, as Creswell agrees, the different parts are interrelated (Creswell, 2009, p.171). The process starts with raw data. In this research, raw data are the transcript of the recorded interviews. After each interview, I listened to the recording and transcribed it into the document. Each interview transcript has a heading of the interview code, signing the demographics such as "32manrecmarmas," which stands for 32 years old man, married, recruited in the public sector, and holds a master's degree. I also wrote the impression after each interview when my memory is still fresh. It helps to understand the overall tone of the interview and ease the analysis process. Johnny Saldaña calls it analytic memos.

A coding process followed this. Creswell describes that process as "segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories and labeling those categories with a term" (Creswell, 2009., p.173). I hand-coded the transcript even though it was a bit time-consuming

than equipping qualitative computer software programs to code and organize. The reason behind this choice was simple: there are no computer software programs that can help with text in Azerbaijani. The coding process in this thesis started with highlighting important segments with colors in the transcript then clustering them into different groups. Different colors stand for different codes. Examples of the codes that this research contains are "high perception," "low perception," similarly "high tolerance," "low tolerance," and so on. According to Saldaña, *"these codes function as a way of patterning, classifying, and later reorganizing them into emergent categories for further analysis"* (Saldaña, 2020, p.882). After that, I read the segments that cut from the transcript once more and gave them general headlines, eventually becoming the "themes" described in Creswell's illustration of Data Analysis in Qualitative Research. These themes included "CD" (Corruption Definition), "CA" (Corruption in Azerbaijan), CSEC (Corruption in the SEC), "CT" (Corruption Tolerance). Comprehensive information about each of these themes and will be given later in this section.

Finally, the last step in this process is interpretation. Alan Peshkin writes that

"an interpretation is to show the way a researcher's self, or identify in a situation, intertwines with his or her understanding of the object of the investigation" (Peshkin, 2000, p.5). It is asking, *"... what were the lessons learned?"* (Creswell, 2009, p.175).

If there is no interpretation presented in the study, then the study merely performs the descriptive role. Some argue that it is the researcher's duty to add understanding, interpretation, and meaning (Trent & Cho, 2020, p.960). Interpretation does not have to start after data analysis; it may even start early when documents are analyzed, interviews are conducted, and data is gathered (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, Davidson, 2002, p.729). The analysis of different documents and reports, first impressions from the interviews of both service users and experts already drafted an idea about how the overall perception would be before data analysis. My interpretations will also include a comparative analysis of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework. Later, I will situate the findings interpreted through the theoretical lenses concerning what we know already from the literature review to say what this study contributes.

4.5 Practical and Ethical Considerations

There have been a few practical challenges that resulted in changes in planned strategy. As mentioned earlier, corruption is still a sensitive topic for Azerbaijani people to talk with someone they do not know. Over 100 hundred emails were sent to the people who have experience with civil service recruitment arranged by the SEC. However, the majority of them did not reply. On top of that, around 10 people refused to participate when they were notified that there would be voice recording even though the whole interview was planned to be anonymous to protect the interviewee. They were mainly the ones who are currently holding positions in civil service. Another one who was not having any interview belonged to the first category of the participants, which consists of people who failed at test exam stage and did not proceed to the interview. Thus, this research lacks the view of service users who were unsuccessful at the first stage of the recruitment.

This study was registered with the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), and it complies with data collection and data storage methods concerning ethical considerations. Before all interviews, participants were notified about their rights, including their right to withdraw from the research within the seven days after the interview.

Maintaining the anonymity of the service users was not a challenge. No name was mentioned during or after the interview. When storing the data, a specific code was given to each interviewee, such as "30womrec" which means that the data was collected from a woman who is 30 years old and recruited in civil service. Dilemma happened with expert interviews because the pool of the experts was limited, and when mentioned where they work might point who they were. However, all experts raised no concern about this; they even wanted their names to be included.

4.6 Reliability and validity

Scholars outline that

"... central to the quality of qualitative research is whether participants' perspectives have been authentically represented in the research process and the interpretations made from information gathered; and whether the findings are coherent in the sense that they "fit" the data and social context from which they were derived" (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, Davidson, 2002, p.723).

Merriam and Tisdell further note that notwithstanding the nature of the research, reliability and validity deserve careful consideration of the study's conceptualization, in addition to thoughtful attention to data collection, analysis, presentation of findings, and finally interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 238). In qualitative research, it is the researcher's role to provide enough details to show that his/her conclusions are reasonable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 238).

Stiles suggests that in qualitative research when interviewing respondents, the good practice advises asking "what questions" rather than "why" questions (Stiles, 1993, p.606). The rationale behind this is that the researcher needs participants to answer questions, and "what" questions require direct knowledge, unlike "why" questions that depend on generally insufficient justification. Instead of having insufficient justification, it is always more desirable to know "what."

The quality of the research largely depends on the reliability and validity that are related to trustworthiness. Specifically, reliability concerns the trustworthiness of the data (whether observations are repeatable), while validity involves the trustworthiness of the interpretations (Stiles, 1993, p.601). Creswell additionally notes that validity and reliability in qualitative research do not have the same implication as in quantitative research (Creswell, 2009, p.175). The suggested criteria for evaluating qualitative research's trustworthiness (rigour) are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, imitating internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity in quantitative research (Check Figure 6) (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, Davidson, 2002, p.723).

i. Credibility

Thomas and Magilvy define credibility as "... *the element that allows others to recognize the experiences contained within the study through the interpretation of participants' experiences*" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.152). While acknowledging qualitative researchers can never fully see "the whole picture" or capture the "truth," several strategies address credibility, such as triangulation, which is the ultimate way of tackling reliability. An additional strategy is spending prolonged time with study participants, interview methods, and quoting participants while presenting findings that enhance credibility (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.153). Another strategy is member checking, which stands for when the interpretations are presented to the people from whom the data were generated to reflect their experiences

accurately. Moreover, the researcher may ask peers or experienced consultants to review the data analysis process.

In this research, the time spent with each participant of the research was around an hour, in which participants were encouraged to back up their arguments with examples and explanations. This contributed to the credibility of the research because each argument or statement by the participant is faced with the question of "why do you think so?". In this way, it was ensured that I got as close as possible to the understanding of the respondents. On top of that, in the research findings and discussion chapter, many quotes from the interviews are presented. By providing evidence to the researcher's interpretation, as well as conclusions, increases the credibility. Last but not least, my supervisor was engaged in reviewing the data analysis process, which also counts as the last strategy, peer checking. All the strategies used contribute significantly to the credibility of the research.

ii. Transferability

"The ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another, or how one determines the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry have applicability in other context or with other participants is called transferability in qualitative language" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.153).

To establish transferability, providing a thick description of the research participants, including demographic characteristics selection criteria for participants, depiction of the context and culture, and data analysis process. This ensures that the reader can decide whether the study might be replicated using the same data collection methods in the future.

In this research, the reader can find a dense description of the demographics and selection criteria of the interview participants under section 4.2. "**Recruiting interviewees,**" depiction of the context under section 2.0 "**Context of the study,**" and finally the process of the data analysis in 4.4. "**Data Analysis.**" These descriptions allow a reader to make an informed decision about the transferability of the research findings to another setting.

Table 4 Reliability and validity

Rigour	Suggested Strategies	Strategies used in this study
Credibility (internal validity) Value and believability of the findings	·Triangulation. ·Prolonged engagement and persistent observation. ·Peer debriefing.	·Prolonged engagement and persistent observation. ·Peer debriefing.
Transferability (external validity) Whether or not particular findings can be transferred to another similar context or situation	·Thick descriptions	·Thick description
Dependability (reliability) How stable the data are	·Audit trial. ·Reflexivity.	·Reflexivity
Confirmability (objectivity) Neutrality and accuracy of the data	·Audit trial. ·Reflexivity	·Reflexivity

iii. Dependability and Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba define dependability as "seeking means for considering both factors of instability and factors of phenomenal or design induced changes" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p.110). Dependability concerns the consistency of the data collected. In qualitative research, asking questions related to the same inquiry is essential; however, follow-up questions might offer new insights (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003, p.110). Confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are maintained in the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.154). Confirmability ensures that findings follow the participant's responses, and the researcher's biases and presumptions do not interfere. Thomas and Magilvy further advise that when conducting the interviewing researcher should not lead, instead follow the interviewee with asking for clarifications and so on (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.154).

The suggested strategy for establishing dependability and confirmability is audit trial and reflexivity. Qualitative research is advised to explain the rationale for the decisions on research design and methodological choices and the researcher's interpretative judgments.

It ensures that the reader may disagree with the researcher's interpretation but finds out how s/he reached that interpretation (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, Murphy, 2013, p.14). Audit trials serve that purpose; they illustrate how the researcher collects and transparently analyzes data.

The other strategy to establish dependability and conformability is reflexivity.

“The terms reflexivity, similar to construct validity in quantitative research, requires a self-critical attitude on the part of the researcher about how one's preconception affects the research” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p.154).

Dodgson defines reflexivity as a golden standard for establishing trustworthiness (Dodgson, 2019, p.220). The researcher's responsibility in establishing reflexivity is to acknowledge self-knowledge on the topic and sensitivity, his/her role in creating the knowledge while controlling possible biases, beliefs, and experiences in their research (Berger, 2015, p.220). Berger mentions that

“... personal characteristics such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic traditions, beliefs, biases, preference, theoretical, political and ideological stances”

are relevant for the researcher's position (Berger, 2015, p.220).

Among those personal characteristics relevant for this study might be personal experiences with the SEC or biases. I do not have any experience with the SEC's services, which differentiates me from the service users. The only experience I have that might count similar is an exam for university admission organized by SCSA (since 2016, the SEC performs its tasks). As a member of the Azerbaijani society, I was exposed to the notion of the SEC being non/less corrupt, which was the starting point for this thesis. However, the interpretation of the findings is based on only the data gathered by service users and experts.

V. Research Findings & Discussion

This section of the research presents research findings alongside the discussion. The sections are organized according to the research questions. Findings start with how service users define corruption and following with what their tolerance levels are. After that, corruption perception in the public administration is described and discussed. It is followed by a subsection dedicated to how corrupt the service users perceive the SEC. The reader can learn more about the link between demographic characteristics and corruption perception in the subsection after that. Last but not least, the findings related to expert interviews are presented.

5.1 Definition of corruption

When asked about the definition of corruption, most research participants started with the abuse of the power or authority coming within the public position. It is similar to the definition of corruption suggested by Transparency International, which is *"abuse of entrusted power for private gain."*²² Since some of the participants worked in the public sector, they also highlight the words such as abuse of public authority, illegitimate opportunities, and benefits. The remaining participants defined corruption as *"acting certain ways based on material and immaterial interests"* (42womedumarrecpub), *"enforcing illicit act under the influence of money or other gifts"* (30manedumarnotrecbuss), and *"performing legal procedures for any material gain and benefit"* (26manedusingrecpub).

As mentioned earlier in the study, candidates are asked to answer questions related to the Republic of Azerbaijan legislation in a written test examination. The legislation includes the "Law on Combating Corruption." The law starts with the definition of corruption which is

"... illicit obtaining by an official of material and other values, privileges, or advantages, by using for that purpose his or her position, or the status of the body he or she represents, or his or her official powers, or the opportunities deriving from those statuses or powers, as well as the bribery of an official by illicit offering, promising or

²² See <https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption> accessed 20 June 2021.

*giving him or her by individuals or legal persons of the said material and other values, privileges or advantages."*²³

It was expected that participants of this study, who already taken the written exam for civil service recruitment, would know the law and refer to it when asked what corruption is; thus, that was no surprise.

Given that, participants of the research also referred to the law when asked about the forms of corruption. Almost half of the participants recalled the law and mentioned two forms of corruption which are "... offenses related to corruption consist of corruption offenses themselves and offenses conducive to corruption."²⁴ They even stressed out that similar questions are commonly asked during test examinations and interviews. While one of the participants (30manedumarnotrecbuss) touched upon the classification of corruption based on the scale of it (petty vs. grand) and supported his answer with examples for each category (bribery to the police and high amounts of money circulating among big businesses and public officers, respectively), the other one (27womedusingnotrecpub) classified corruption as being material and immaterial. When she (27womedusingnotrecpub) mentioned this classification, she refers to the type of assets promised. For example, bribery occurs when someone with entrusted power demands or accepts an unfair advantage, which might be material such as money or immaterial such as an influence.

Furthermore, only one participant (34womedumarrecpub) classifies corruption based on the motive behind it. She believes (34womedumarrecpub) motive might be individual interest or pressure from the organization he or she is working at. Lastly, two participants did not give any answer to the question.

Answers provided by participants revealed different views on the forms of corruption, and the most common one was based on the type of offenses stated in the law. It is usual for most respondents to classify corruption based on how it is described in the law, and this is natural since they are trained to know the law, not to analyze the corruption scientifically. However, that classification does not include anything about the scale or

²³ See Article 1. of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Combating Corruption <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/5809> accessed 20 June 2021.

²⁴ Check Article 9 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Combating Corruption <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/5809> accessed 20 June 2021.

motive of the corruption discussed in this research. Thus, it is natural for participants not to know about the other classifications of corruption.

5.2 Corruption tolerance

To assess the study participants' corruption tolerance, one particular question was asked: "In which cases do you think that corruption might be justified?". When a person justifies corruption, it shows that s/he has a certain degree of tolerance toward corruption. Over half of the service users stated that in no cases could corruption be justified. Some of them explained the rationale behind their clear-cut attitude towards corruption:

"When you know the laws and demand the rightful implementation of the law, nobody can even try to initiate the "need corruption" (42womedumarrecpub).

"Even if creates more opportunities for you, corruption is violating other's rights" (32manedumarrecpub).

"For the sake of his or her future, society and country, nobody should justify the corruption" (34womedumarrecpub).

The remaining participants reported that in some instances, certain kinds of corruption offenses are justifiable. These participants explained their position along the following lines:

"It is easier to handle certain processes with petty corruption in Azerbaijan. Petty corruption prevents wasting time and stressing. However, greed corruption should never be justified" (27womedusingnotrecpub).

"When the provision of the public service is low in a country, corruption is a need. If there is slow working bureaucracy, even though nobody asks for a bribe, you offer to fasten the process". (30manedumarnotrecbuss).

"People can justify the petty corruption because nobody in Azerbaijan considers this as illegal" (25womedumarnotrec).

When people know the laws and their rights, they are expected to become more preventive toward corruption. Bearing in mind that participants of this research were trained to know the laws, I expected them to show less tolerance toward corruption. It is

evident from the answers that people who have a certain degree of tolerance towards corruption only show tolerance to petty or need corruption. Considering that petty corruption is also defined in the literature as more tolerable than political or grand corruption, such answers were expected. We know that petty corruption is considered white corruption, which is considered more acceptable than political corruption.

5.3 Service user's corruption perception of public administration

After participants were notified of how corruption is defined in this research (misuse of entrusted power), they were asked how they perceive the corruption in the overall public administration of Azerbaijan.

The majority of the respondent expressed that they perceive the level of corruption as medium or medium-high. They highlighted the fact that the government takes substantial measures to tackle corruption.

"A few years ago, the police would have no fear or concern to ask obviously for a bribe when you violate the rules; now they are afraid and worried"
(34womedumarrecpub).

A group of the respondents felt that compared to 5-10 years ago, the level of corruption in public administration is now very low. One of these respondents (42womedumarrecpub) supported her opinion that there are significant initiatives toward e-government. According to her, *"now most of the service provisions are carried out electronically, and there is no human intervention in the process"* (42womedumarrecpub). Another respondent felt that even though the government initiates essential measures, citizens still cannot perceive that they can get the services without paying bribes. *"Mentally, they are not there yet"* (25womedumarnotrec). Lastly, one respondent stressed that corruption in public administration is still very high (30manedumarnotrecbuss).

Participants were also questioned about the most corrupt and least corrupt (or corrupt-free) bodies in the public administration system. Visual presentation of the answers is illustrated above (Figure 7). As the most corrupt body, service users mention the local executive bodies alongside with Ministry of Emergency Situations (MoEs) and State Customs Committee (SCC). *"No matter whether they are executive bodies in regions or big cities, the most corrupt ones are them"* (25womedumarrecsing).

More or less, the answers provided by the participants conform with the findings in OECD reports. The OECD report stated that ASAN, Ministry of Education, and Presidential Administration are among the highest public trust among the Azerbaijani population (OECD, 2016, p.17). The majority of the participants felt that the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations (ASAN) is the least corrupt (or corrupt-free) body in the public administration. According to participants, the SEC follows ASAN in that matter.

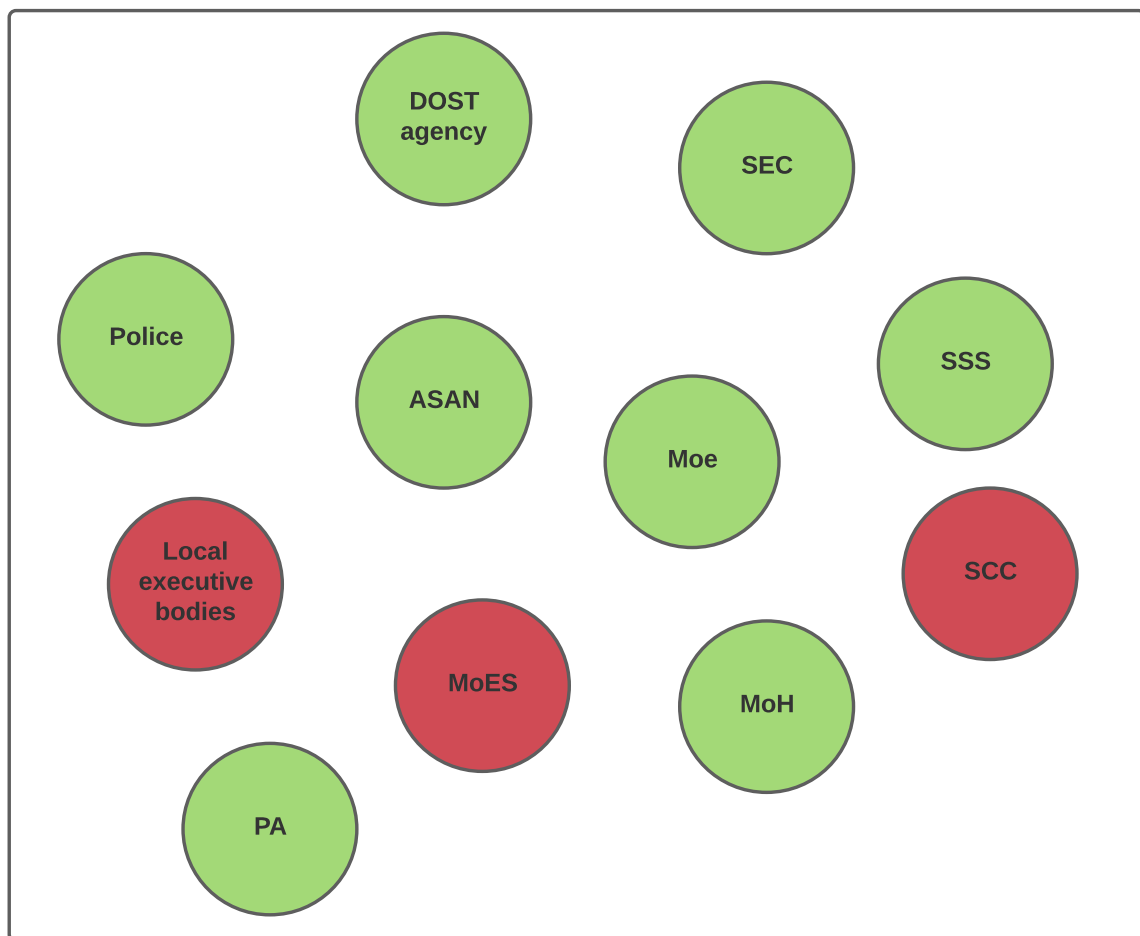


Figure 3 The most and the least corrupt entities in Azerbaijan

Note: The above abbreviations are Agency for Sustainable and Operative Social Provision (DOST), State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations (ASAN), Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Emergency Situations (MoES), State Customs Committee (SCC) State Examination Center (SEC) State Security Service (SSS), Presidential Administration (PA)

Questions revealed that service users perceive the corruption in the Azerbaijani public administration differently, but most felt it might be rated as medium. It is worth noting that respondents were educated people and, recalling what is discussed in the theoretical framework section, respondents were expected to perceive less corruption than uneducated ones, implying that other people would perceive even higher corruption in the public administration. Respondents stress the recent measures addressing corruption prevention by creating the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations (ASAN) and digitalizing public service provisions. Even though Transparency International ranks Azerbaijan among the countries with high corruption perception, the service users appreciate the recent trends. They believe that as the results of reforms and preventive initiatives, corruption will decrease in 5-10 years.

5.4 Service user's corruption perception of the SEC

The majority of the participants perceive the SEC as one of the least/non-corrupt organizations in the public administration. The remaining ones emphasize that they have no trust issues regarding the written examination process regarding fairness and transparency but do raise questions concerning the interview stage. Participants who do not consider the SEC as least/non-corrupt are those who did not pass the interview stage and did not participate in the interview, specifically, respondents coded (30manedumarnotrecbus) and (27womedusingnotrecpub). This perception might be due to unsuccessful results concluded that the process is not fair/transparent, or not having whole experience on the process.

Participants were also specifically asked how they perceive transparency and fairness in written examination and interview. Starting with a written test examination, all participants provided their positive thoughts. With no exception, all of them agreed that there is no human factor in written test examination since special machines automatically grade the test examination. Thus, they believe this stage is corruption-free. Some of them recalled their experience with a former commission on student's admission to a higher university. They stated that since that time, test examinations have an excellent reputation in terms of preventing corruption. One of the participants (42womedumarrecpub) is also working as an exam inspector during written test exams commented that whenever she is assigned to

monitoring exams, she is witnessing how strictly the SEC takes precautions about questions to have nobody access to them. She added that *"not a single breath of human being touches the questions after the experts sealed it."*

Even though participants of the study perceived written test examination corrupt-free, there were some doubts about their opinions on the interview stage. The overall response to this question was positive as well. Only one respondent (30manedumarnotrecbuss) indicated that he did not consider the interview stage as transparent. He further noted that there were three different experts and video recording to ensure transparency, but there was nothing extraordinary. This participant might feel that the process was not fully transparent because he did not pass the interview stage; however, he did not appeal the decision. One respondent (27womedusingnotrecpub) did not answer, as she did not participate in an interview. In response to this question, some participants felt that experts purposefully try to create a comfortable environment for the candidates to express their thoughts and answers freely. In their opinion, sometimes experts intend to "squeeze" answer from the candidate when they see that s/he stresses and has trouble answering.

Last but not least, participants were asked whether they or someone they know had any corruption experience with the SEC. All participants noted that they did not know anyone who got an unfair advantage in the written test or interview stage because of bribery or other corrupt offenses. Interestingly, the only participant, who does not consider the interview stage fully transparent, did not have or know any corrupt behavior related to the SEC (27womedusingnotrecpub). Given that she could not provide any substantial explanation as she did not have any experience, she may have a bias towards the SEC. One participant (25womedumarnotrec) confessed that she thought she could get an advantage in the interview stage to find someone who influences the decision. To be more specific, she

"... was thinking that if I could find some who has links to the recruiting state body, s/he could help me to get the job. I found it, but it did not help. I tried to use personal relationships; it did not work. They decided rightly; I was not ready or qualified for the position. Then I worked on myself and participated in the interview once more. I got a higher mark than the first interview, but still, it was not enough for passing the interview. At last, in my third try, I passed the interview stage" (25womedumarnotrec).

The other two participants (25womedusingrecrepub and 32manedumarrecrepub) also repeated that when they failed at the interview stage, they did not blame the experts saying that they undegraded his/their skills acknowledged that failure was due to shallow or incomplete answers. On top of that, another two participants (34womedumarrecrepub and 33womedumarrecrepub) recalled what they heard from people they know. These people tried to bribe either the expert from the SEC or the one from recruiting state body, but their efforts were useless. Because even if they would manage to bribe one expert to give a higher grade, there are still two experts who assess the candidate. In a simplistic view, it suggests that having three experts in the interview, who are independent of each other, ensures fairness in the interview stage.

There were doubts about the interview stage because grading is subjective, and experts have the right to evaluate the candidate's qualifications from their perspectives. In addition to that, the last word in the recruitment process belongs to the recruiting state body. As mentioned earlier in the study, this is the most suspicious part of the process because no justification is provided. However, most participants perceive the SEC as corrupt-free, if not significantly less corrupt. This study revealed that whoever participated in a written test examination organized by the SEC has no trust issues on transparency and fairness because their answers are graded objectively since there is no human factor involved. Nobody could argue that questions asked in the exam are out of topic because the list of the literature that questions are designed from is publicly available. Its the exam taker's responsibility to be prepared for the exam. Even though some service users doubt the recruitment decision, in their view, everything was smooth and transparent from the SEC's part. Given that this study aims to investigate the corruption perception of the service users, after discussing all the stages of the recruitment process, the service user's overall corruption perception in the SEC is very low, which supports the anecdotal evidence.

As stated earlier in the *3.4. Theoretical Framework* section educated people tend to perceive lower corruption. Considering that bachelor-level education is a requirement for civil service, all service users either have bachelor's or master's degrees. Results imply that interviewees perceive a lower level of corruption in the SEC, which might mean that other people may perceive more. However, this study does not involve any low educated people to prove that claim.

5.5 Differences in perception based on demographic characteristics

A brief review of how demographic characteristics such as gender, education level, employment sector, marital status, and age influence the corruption perception is mentioned earlier in the **3.4. Theoretical Framework section**. Here I will describe the research findings alongside discussion (See Table 5).

i. **Women have lower corruption tolerance than men.**

Starting with the relationship between corruption tolerance and gender, most women respondents show no tolerance toward corruption. In contrast, the man majority feel that, to some degree, corruption is justifiable and tolerable. Torgler and Valev note that gender does have an impact on corruption tolerance. They believe that women, in comparison, are less likely to justify corruption (Torgler & Valev, 2006, p.138). This study's research findings also conform with Torgler and Valev, suggesting that women tend to have less tolerance for corruption than men. A minority of female participants felt that corruption is justifiable, noting that petty corruption helps to cut the bureaucracy and stress. On the other hand, most man participants stated that corruption to some degree is tolerable. They also provided similar explanations for their statements, which are very similar to what women participants who, to some degree, tolerate the corruption.

ii. **Women have a higher corruption perception than men**

Turning now to the relationship between gender and corruption perception, researchers believed that being a woman increases the probability of perceiving higher corruption (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2001 p.424). They further claimed that women are less likely to sacrifice the common good for their benefit. Let us start with the findings related to corruption perception in the overall public administration system. On average, men participants perceive low-medium level corruption in public administration, while for women, it is medium-high. This supports the previous claims made by Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti, stating that women tend to perceive higher corruption than men. As far as perceived corruption in the SEC is concerned, findings revealed that it is very low for women, while for men, it is low-medium. It appears that findings related to corruption perception do not confirm the argument because, obviously, male participants perceive higher corruption in the SEC than women.

Table 5 Demographics of service users with corruption perception

Demographics of the Interview Participants							
Gender	Age	Education level	Marital Status	Sector	Corruption Tolerance	CP (public administration)	CP (SEC)
woman	42	bachelor	married	public	no tolerance	low	very low
woman	34	bachelor	married	public	no tolerance	medium	very low
woman	33	bachelor	married	public	no tolerance	medium-high	very low
woman	27	master	single	public (not rec)	some degree (petty)	medium-high	low
woman	25	bachelor	married	not working	some degree (petty)	medium	very low
woman	25	master	single	public	no tolerance	medium-high	very low
man	32	master	married	public	no tolerance	low	very low
man	30	master	married	business	some degree (petty)	high	medium
man	26	bachelor	single	public	some degree (petty)	low	low-medium

iii. Private Sector employees perceive higher corruption than the ones in the public sector

Melgar, Rossi, and Smith state that people who are working in the private sector usually perceive higher corruption than their counterparts in the public sector because they are on the "supply" side of the "bribe market" (Melgar, Rossi, Smith, 2010, p.192). Given that only one participant working in the private sector engaged in the study, the data is insufficient to claim the role of the employment sector in corruption perception, and further data collection is required. Nevertheless, findings show that the participant who works in the private sector has the highest corruption perception in public administration and the SEC. For public administration, he perceived the level as high and for the SEC as medium. In contrast, the remaining participants working in the public sector felt medium and very low, respectively. Given that findings are based on a limited number of participants working in the private sector, the interpretation should be treated cautiously. Thus, based on limited

information, it would be unsound to conclude that public sector employees perceive lower corruption than their counterparts in the private sector.

iv. Differences depending on the marital status, education, and age

Recalling discussion on marital status and corruption perception, we know that divorced people tend to perceive higher corruption than married ones. Unfortunately, this study does not include any divorced participant regarding the influence of marital status on corruption perception. However, if we compare the results between single and married participants, not a distinguished difference was found both in corruption overall public administration and in the SEC.

Unfortunately, this research does not involve any participant who does not have secondary education regarding the relationship between education and corruption perception. The research focuses on service users who directly experience the SEC and can evaluate the SEC's transparency and fairness.

Turning to the relationship between age and corruption perception, the literature suggests no significant influence. Belonging to a specific age group does not determine how much one person perceives corruption. This research does not contain enough data to confirm or reject this statement because an older segment of the recruited people either took the test before the SEC's establishment or worked on civil service for more than 5 years. Thus, the research lacks interviews with older civil servants or civil service candidates and their data to comment on the relationship between age and corruption perception. Data collected from interviews also confirm with the abovementioned statement.

5.6 Experts' corruption perception in the SEC and the rest of the public administration

Starting with the definition of corruption, two experts (Expert 1 and Expert 2) directly quote the definition suggested by Transparency International, i.e., misuse of trusted power, which is to be expected given that both have working experience with TI. The third expert defined corruption as misuse of the status of the position or the organization that a person is working at to get material or immaterial benefits. They also elaborated on the definition by saying, "*corruption is a form of stealing, it is stealing from resources*" (Expert 1), "*corruption is*

opposite of transparency; if there is no transparency, corruption exists" (Expert 3). Expert 1 also touched upon the corruption definition stated in Azerbaijani legislation and compared it with the definition suggested by TI. According to him, the definition stated in legislation is longer, harder to remember and understand. Expert 3 added that the legislation related to corruption should be reviewed because universally accepted corruption offenses, such as nepotism, are not described as corruption in Azerbaijani legislation.

Different opinions were expressed on the motivation behind corruption. However, 2 experts agreed on civil servants' low wages. *"Corruption usually happens when a civil servant cannot meet minimum living standards with his/her official wage"* (Expert 3). He justifies that when a civil servant fails to meet minimum standard of living with his/her official wage, his moral values can resist corruption on a few occasions, and followingly, s/he starts to engage in corruption. In this case, corruption has a need motive.

"Alongside with low wages, gaps in the legislation allow civil servants to engage in corruption. Gaps in the laws conduce that civil servants are offered money to fasten the process of, for example, provision of public services" (Expert 1).

The second motivation mentioned by the expert (Expert 3) is greediness by the civil servants. It does not happen because of the need to meet a minimum standard of living but from desires and ambitions.

Experts expressed various opinions on corruption trends in Azerbaijan. First of all, they acknowledged that there are positive trends in combating corruption in public administration; however, still corrupt-free or very least corrupted public administration is not achieved. Experts perceived the corruption level in overall public administration as medium, medium, and low, respectively (Expert 1, Expert 2, Expert 3). They believe that in the low levels of the civil service, petty corruption, if not entirely, but is almost gone, thanks to the e-government initiatives and establishment of ASAN Centers. Turning to grand corruption, Expert 2 noted that in comparison with ten years ago, now government tries to prevent it. Lately, there have been a few arrests of high-rank officials. Expert 1 felt that even though there are significant achievements related to curbing petty corruption, it is hard to change citizens' perceptions. They still believe that corruption is everywhere.

When questioned about the least corrupt/corrupt-free entity in the administration, all experts named ASAN Centers and the SEC. Besides them, Expert 2 mentioned that most state bodies are now aimed at institutional reforms to prevent corruption.

"Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population (MoLSPS) and Ministry of Economics (MoEc) can be examples in this regard. Especially MoLSPS was very corrupt. Of course, some civil servants are engaged in corruption using their relationships and link. However, it is not at the institutional level; they are the exception" (Expert 3).

As far as most corrupt state bodies, entities are concerned, again, different opinions were presented. Interestingly, Expert 2 remarked concerning MoLSPS,

"the most known one for corruption perception is MoLSPS. However, it is the entity that is in contact with the population the most because of the nature of the services. Moreover, they deal with the most fragile segments of the population, who do not have anything to lose if they raise their voices. Thus, we hear more about this ministry. Lots of complaints are also available about corruption in State Customs Commission (SCC). However, business owners are not interested in complaining officially" (Expert 2).

Expert 3 mentioned the SCC too, stating that media representatives revealed corruption activities in the SCC before it was known as very corrupt and business owners. However, now significant steps have been taken to prevent corruption. Last but not least, local executive bodies were suggested as the most corrupt entities in public administration by Expert 1.

i. Experts' corruption perception in the SEC

As previously mentioned, all experts agree that the SEC is among the least corrupt/corrupt-free entities in public administration. Expert 1 stated that he had been invited as an independent expert to the interview stage since the SEC was established, not in a single time, he encountered any corrupt activity. They were very confident when saying that written test examination is corrupt-free. Expert 2 highlighted the fact that everything is digitalized. Thus, no corruption is possible in the written examination.

"There is no problem with the SEC; the problem arises at the last stage, the recruitment decision. We do not know based on which criteria they choose whom to hire among successfully passed candidates. It is not transparent" (Expert 2).

Expert 1, who also attends interviews as the independent expert, expressed that the interview stage is also fair and transparent: *"It is possible to get bribery offers; however, there is no mechanism to realize bribery."*

He recalls the fact that there are three experts, who are independent of each other, evaluating the qualification of the candidates. Expert three emphasizes that practically all measures are taken into consideration in order to prevent any corruption intentions. For example, the SEC is responsible for inviting the independent experts for the interview, and the recruiting state body does not know who will be invited. In this way, the SEC aims to avoid any negotiation before interviews. Another measure is video recording that ensures that they can go over the recording if any dissatisfaction arises.

Table 6 Characteristics and corruption perception of the experts

Recruited experts	Their expertise	Relationship with the SEC	CP in public administration	CP in the SEC
Expert 1	Corruption	Engages in the interview process	Medium	Very low
Expert 2	Corruption	No relationship	Medium	Low
Expert 3	Civil Service	Works at the SEC	Low	Very low

When it comes to the most suspicious stage, which is the recruitment decision, Expert 2 felt that the process is incomplete; the SEC cannot do anything about the recruitment decision. If only one candidate passed the interview, then he is directly recruited. However, when more than one candidate passes the interview, then without any justification, the head of the state body has the right to choose whom to hire among candidates. Expert 1 admitted that they could not monitor that process, and there should be adjustment in the law in that regard. Expert 3 noted that this right is given to the head of the recruiting state body because they should have a certain degree of discretion at formulating their human capital. The SEC only monitors the recruitment of the candidates who are put to the reserve list, but it does

not have the right to question the head of the state body's decision on whom to hire the first place.

An employee from the SEC's civil service department kindly provided me with the documents related to the preparation rules, approval of test samples for admission to civil service, and rules for conducting interviews. The following points are based on these two documents and information gained from Expert3. When reviewing the whole process, we see that the system for written examination is designed so that no human intervention is possible. The tests for the examination are prepared in a secure location with no connection outside. The test writers are not allowed to go out for two days and contact anyone. Once all questions are formulated, they seal and present them to the special security guards to convey them to the exam venues. The relocation of the exam inspectors is also unknown until the night before the actual exam date, and inspectors only learn the venue, but not the actual room in which they will monitor candidates. So practically, the SEC prevents any interaction between candidates and the exam inspectors before the examination. When the examination ends, the exam papers are sealed and sent to the machines to grade. If there are few exam takers, then the exam is carried out electronically, and right after the exam, candidates can see their results on the screen.

In the interview stage, there are sufficient preventive measures against corruption. Grading by three experts, who are independent of each other, ensures that no expert can pressure others to be biased. It is not very probable for the same person to be graded very low by two experts but very high from the other one. Slight differences are probable, but significant differences are not logical. On top of that, all experts have the same rights; the expert from recruiting state body does not have any privileges to decide who will pass the interview stage. Experts are allowed to discuss the qualifications of the candidates; however, in the end, they are independent in grading.

Another issue aimed at ensuring transparency is the candidate's right to appeal the interview result. In this case, video recording seems very handy. The appeal commission investigates the issue based on video recording and arguments of both experts and candidates, then makes a decision.

Recalling Klitgaard's corruption formula (Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion – Accountability), as discussed earlier, the SEC has a certain degree of monopoly on civil service recruitment and discretion on its services and not a very strong accountability

mechanism. Considering all of these, we might expect the SEC to be corrupt to some degree. However, experts feel the opposite, stating it as one of the least corrupt or corrupt-free organizations in public administration. Expert 2 stated there is no absolute monopoly power belonging to SEC regarding civil service recruitment. They do not arrange recruitment for law enforcement bodies such as the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Courts, and Prosecutor's office. She also highlighted that having discretion is fine as long as the law defines this discretion. The processes were highly digitalized, and human intervention is minimized.

On top of that, alongside accountability to the President, there are also publicly available reports on the website. Expert 1 believed that the SEC is corrupt-free because it has mechanisms to ensure transparency, such as accessible literature for preparation for the exam, having different experts to interview, video recording, and the right to appeal. On top of that, Expert 3 added that anyone could easily watch the interview stage, and for that purpose, no prior consent is needed. Whoever wants to observe the process needs to write an email to SEC stating that s/he has that intent. Taking all responses into account, the reason why the SEC is perceived as corrupt free or least corrupt while Klitgaard's formula suggested it to be corrupt to some degree is the transparency measures.

Expert 3 adds another organizational characteristic that is potentially relevant in preventing corruption in the SEC - institutional culture. In his view, the SEC's ethical culture has already been maintained in which impartiality and preventing material benefits help to hinder corruption. He further stresses the role of the leadership in that regard.

"People behave based on the demands and requirements. It is sporadic to behave against the external demands in the public sector, especially in our society. From the first day, the leadership made it crystal clear that no corrupt practices are tolerable in the SEC, and anyone engaged in corruption will face severe problems. They lead with example, and colleagues in lower positions follow them. All processes are transparent in the SEC; it is impossible to engage in corruption" (Expert 3).

Considering that Expert 3 is working at the SEC, his views on this culture might be biased since it is in his interest to speak well about the SEC and its organizational culture.

According to the answer provided by experts participating in the research, the SEC successfully carries out all the duties and responsibilities written in the law. The only instance that is under question from the very beginning of this study, specifically the

recruitment decision, is not in the hands of the SEC. However, Expert 1 remarked that the responsibilities of the SEC are extensive, and it cannot handle all of them at once. According to him, the SEC mainly organizes written examinations and conducts interviews. There should be a separate organization called Civil Service Commission or Ethics Committee, dealing with ethics issues in civil service and comprehensive monitoring of the law's implementation. He suggests that the new entity must be accountable for both the President and parliament. This would also add to the accountability in the Klitgaard's formula and increases the possibility of having less corruption. In this regard, Expert 3 mentions an Ethics Code that applies to all civil servants. The Code²⁵ defines the norms and ethics applicable to the civil servants and establishes a legal mechanism to monitor these norms' executions. The SEC also monitors the execution of this Code. In addition, the SEC often organizes training to educate its employees about ethical conduct, and their employees arrange training for the civil servants in other organizations. Taken together, these findings would seem to suggest that the SEC fulfill its responsibilities defined by the law, but it would be much effective if a new entity is established just to monitor the implementation of the Ethics Code.

²⁵ See the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Rules of Ethical Conduct of Civil Servants. <https://mincom.gov.az/en/view/pages/63/> accessed on 26 June 2021.

VI. Conclusions

This chapter will briefly present general conclusions drawn based on the key findings of the research. In addition, policy recommendations and implications will be made. Furthermore, ideas for future studies alongside policy recommendations will follow.

6.1. Answering Research Questions

The findings of this research imply that the service users perceive the corruption in the overall public sector as a medium to medium-high while stressing that the government has recently taken significant measures to curb corruption. They also name a few organizations as the most corrupt such as State Security Services, local executive bodies, and Ministry of Emergency. In contrast, the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations (ASAN), the State Examination Center (SEC), and the Agency for Sustainable and Operative Social Provision (DOST), in addition to a handful of organizations, were perceived as corrupt-free or the least corrupt. Specifically, the service users felt that the SEC is corrupt-free or, to a tiny extent corrupt since they have absolute trust in written examination and few concerns related to the interview stage. After discussions, it was revealed that these concerns were not necessarily related to the interview process but instead to what happens after the interview is a recruitment decision by the recruiting state body.

Turning to how corruption perception is linked to demographic characteristics, findings confirm that women have a lower tolerance of corruption than men. Literature taken into consideration in this research suggested that women tend to perceive higher perceptions than men. Results show that when corruption perception in overall Azerbaijan public administration is concerned, then women perceive higher than men. Nevertheless, when it comes to the corruption perception in the SEC, it is the opposite; men perceive higher than women. Even though only one service user was working in the private sector, the findings still point towards the idea that people working in the private sector are more prone to perceive higher corruption than public sector employees. No particular pattern was observed as far as the link between marital status and corruption perception. Given that there is a bachelor's degree requirement for the civil service examination, all the service users were highly educated. Thus, study results allow making no argument on the effect of

education on corruption perception. Last but not least, while from previous studies, age is believed not to have a specific effect on corruption perception; however, not enough age groups were involved in the study to comment on this.

Experts vary somewhat in terms of their corruption perception in public administration, while two of them felt that is in medium level, the expert working in the SEC perceive it as low. However, concerning corruption perception in the SEC, they all agree that it is low to very low. The only instance noted by one of the experts was discretion at recruitment decision that lies in the recruiting state body's head.

This research started with the question of "Is the SEC an island of integrity?". According to the respondents, the SEC is perceived as corrupt-free or corrupt to a very limited extend. However, is it an island? Considering that the SEC was not the only answered to the questions of the least corrupt or corrupt-free organization in the public sector, it cannot be claimed as an island of integrity. It should be praised for its performance to prevent corruption; however, to name it an island of integrity would be wrong since other organizations are very similar to SEC regarding corruption perception.

6.2. Contributions and reflections

Considering the SEC being a newly established entity, this research is a valuable contribution to the literature on civil service in Azerbaijan. It has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of corruption perception in civil service recruitment. To the best of my knowledge, there was no research conducted to investigate whether anecdotal evidence regarding the low corruption perception in the SEC reflects reality or not. Secondly, it also revealed that corruption perception and specific demographic characteristics could be linked. Besides that, to the best of my knowledge, other than CPI by Transparency International, not many studies have been targeted to measure corruption perception in Azerbaijan, so this study is among the first in that respect as well.

Different theoretical approaches were discussed to investigate whether the SEC is an island of integrity in which, unlike the rest of the public administration, any corrupt activities are prevented. The corruption forms, including petty vs. grand and need vs. greed corruption, were considered to analyze possible corruption cases in the SEC. On top of that, Klitgaard's corruption formula was applied to the organizational characteristics of the SEC.

Namely, the SEC's monopoly, discretion, and accountability were explicitly reviewed in the theoretical framework section.

Interestingly, suppose we apply Klitgaard's formula to the SEC. In that case, we expect it to be corrupt to some extent, but it is not. Both service users and experts perceive it as a corrupt-free or the least corrupt organization. Yes, at face value, it has a certain degree of monopoly, yes it has low discretion in its services and minimal accountability, which is only to the President, but all practices are carried out transparently. It has mixed discretion regarding which processes they have discretion and what kind of discretion they have is not fully known, but there is not much room to maneuver. Therefore, Klitgaard's formula needs to be updated or reformulated because, in specific empirical contexts, the concepts of monopoly, discretion, and accountability are not dichotomous.

In this research, a qualitative approach was used to explore the SEC's corruption perception to check anecdotal claims. For that purpose, the case study strategy was chosen, utilizing semi-structured interviews to get necessary and related information from a specifically chosen research participant. Alongside the data gathered from semi-structured interviews, different documents were also analyzed, which were later used in the analysis.

This work has some limitations, such as not having any service user who failed at the written examination and not including civil servants belonging to older age groups. Thus, I could not analyze the relationship between age and corruption perception in detail and comment on statements by Melgar, Rossi, and Smith (2010).

6.3. Implications for further research and practice

This study can serve as a base for future studies on corruption perception in different organizations in Azerbaijan. The results of this research were encouraging, with more prominent participants including older age groups and people who failed at written examination study may well be repeated. On a broader level, a similar study is recommended to evaluate the corruption perception of civil service recruitment organized by the SEC and all services provided by them, including exams for admission to universities. Other than that, future work should concentrate on a more profound analysis of the reasons behind the low corruption perception in the SEC. It might be a large-scale quantitative

survey with service users that will collect subjective data on the nature and scale of the corruption and evaluate the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures.

Based on the research findings following policy recommendations are given:

Establishing clear criteria for the recruitment decision: Given that in both service user's and expert's interviews, the recruitment decision was the most suspicious instance in the whole process, I recommend having explicit criteria for hiring. Until a recruitment decision, phases in the recruitment process are considered transparent and fair since the written examination does not involve any human intervention. The interview stage includes three experts who are independent of each other to ensure transparency and fairness. As Expert 2 emphasized, there is too much discretion in the decision; neither are there clear criteria for selection nor justification. Expert 3 also mentioned that a new bill was presented to Milli Mejlis (legislative branch in Azerbaijan). New criteria for selecting the most qualified civil servants among candidates are mentioned. So far, this bill is not available to the public yet; however, according to Expert 3, the new criteria are: the candidate who got the highest point from the interview should be recruited, if more than one candidate got the same result, then priority will be given to the one who graduated with distinction. If several candidates satisfy this requirement, then language skills will be considered. Hopefully, this bill will be passed, and new regulations will increase the overall transparency of the recruitment process.

Establishing recruitment for civil servants at public legal entities: Even though there is a well-established process for recruitment for civil servants, there is no mechanism for those who want to be hired in public legal entities. Considering that there is a new trend establishing different public legal entities within ministries or larger state bodies, special attention must be given to its recruitment process. A public legal entity is neither totally public nor private, has the elements of both; thus, the SEC cannot be involved in its recruitment process. In the future, more such entities may well be established with vast discretion on whom to hire, which is a very suitable condition for practicing corruption. Moving towards those entities will result in a decrease in recruitment organized by the SEC. Thus, I propose establishing a new mechanism for recruiting employees in public legal entities or allowing the SEC to organize them.

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Appendix I.

Categorization of state bodies	
1st category state bodies	<p>Supreme Mejlis of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Chief Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan Chamber of Accounts of the Republic of Azerbaijan Office of Judicial Legal Board Office of an Attorney of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Human Rights (Ombudsman)</p>
2nd category state bodies	<p>Supreme Court of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Relevant executive power body of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Military Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan Prosecutor's Office of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Office of an Attorney of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic for Human Rights (Ombudsman) Appeal courts of the Republic of Azerbaijan Office of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan Secretariat of the Commission on Fight against Corruption of the Republic of Azerbaijan Relevant executive power bodies Office of the National TV and Radio-Broadcasting Board</p>
3rd category state bodies	<p>State agencies and state services established under the relevant executive power bodies Regional centers of the Office of an Attorney of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Human Rights (Ombudsman) Office of the central election commission of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Relevant executive power bodies of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Office of the National tv and Radio-Broadcasting Board Courts on grave crimes Administrative economic courts Military courts Military prosecutor's office of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Baku city prosecutor's office</p>
4th category state bodies	<p>Relevant executive power bodies Regional divisions of relevant executive power bodies Bodies subordinate to/under relevant executive power bodies City (region) courts District (city) prosecutor's offices</p>
5th category state bodies	<p>Local divisions of state agencies and state services established under relevant executive power bodies Bodies under relevant executive power Representations of relevant executive power bodies in an administrative territorial district</p>

Appendix 2

Classification of administrative positions in civil service	
<p>Supreme state bodies—the main executive, legislative and judiciary bodies of Republic of Azerbaijan: 1)Administration of President of Republic of Azerbaijan, including Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, and Cabinet of Ministries 2)Milli Mejlis(Parliament) 3)Constitutional Court 4)Supreme Court</p>	
Supreme category of administrative positions in supreme state bodies	<p>Head of the Presidential Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan Head of the Administrative Department of the President Head of Special Medical Service of the President Head of the Secretariat of the First Vice-President of Republic of Azerbaijan Head of Office of Milli Mejlis Head of Office of Constitutional Court</p>
First classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<p>Deputy head of the Secretariat of the First Vice-President in the Presidential Administration Head of division in Presidential Administration Assistant to the First Vice-President in the Administration Deputy head of Office of Milli Mejlis and Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, Cabinet of Ministries, and heads of divisions in these state bodies Head of the Office of the state bodies of the 1st category</p>
Second classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<p>Deputy head of division in the Presidential Administration Deputy head of divisions in the Office of Milli Mejlis and Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, and Cabinet of Ministries Deputy heads of the Office and heads of divisions of the state bodies of the 1st category Head of offices of the state bodies of the 2nd categories in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic §Heads of state agencies and state services established under relevant executive power bodies</p>
Third classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<p>Specialists in the Presidential Administration, Administrative Department of the President, Special Medical Service of the President, Office of Milli Mejlis, Office of Constitutional Court, Office of Supreme Court, and Office of Cabinet of Ministries Heads of divisions, their deputies and specialists of other state bodies directly supporting the head of the Azerbaijani state Deputy heads of state agencies and services under relevant executive bodies Deputy heads of division of the state bodies of the 1st category</p>
Fourth classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<p>Specialists in the offices of state bodies of the 1st category Heads of division and their deputies in 2nd-category state bodies Deputy heads of division of 2nd-category state bodies in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Deputy heads of relevant executive power bodies</p>
Fifth classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<p>Specialists of 2nd-category state bodies Heads of office of 3rd-category executive power bodies in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic Heads of division and their deputies of 3rd-category state bodies Heads of local division of 4th-category state bodies</p>
Sixth classification of administrative positions in the supreme state bodies	<p>Specialists of 3rd-category state bodies Head of division and deputies of relevant 4th-category executive power bodies Deputy heads of local divisions of 4th-category state bodies Heads and their deputies of the local divisions of state agencies and state services (5th category)</p>
Seventh classification of administrative positions in the supreme state	<p>Specialists of relevant executive power bodies – state bodies of the 4th and 5th categories, local divisions of relevant executive power bodies, bodies being under and subordinated to relevant executive power bodies, regional (city) courts, bodies subordinated to relevant executive power bodies, local divisions of state agencies and state services established under relevant executive power bodies, bodies being under and subordinated to such state agencies and state services</p>

Appendix 3. **Interview Guide:**

Introduction (for the experts as well)

1. Explaining what the research is about and presenting consent form.
2. Introducing of the interviewee: (name, gender, age, education level, employment, and marital status) woman25rec

Warm-up questions: (for the experts as well)

3. How do you define corruption? Its forms?
4. What do you think about the motives behind corruption? (if does not know, give brief info about need/greed corruption/ petty& grand.
5. Are there any circumstances under which corruption is justifiable?

Experience in the SEC:

6. When did you take the exam?
7. What was the result of the exam?
8. What was your thoughts about the SEC before you took the exam in terms of its fairness?
9. Was the whole exam process transparent? What tools did they have to ensure transparency?
10. Was the whole interview process transparent? What tools did they have to ensure transparency?
11. Was there any change in your thoughts after the results published?

Perception about the level of corruption in Azerbaijan (for the experts as well)

12. How do you perceive level of corruption in public administration?
13. Which organization/agency do you think is most corrupt?
14. Which organization/agency is least corrupt?
15. Compared with other agencies, where do you see place of SEC in terms of corruption?
16. Do you have an experience in analyzing work of the SEC?

Own experience with corruption

17. Have you or someone you know had experience with corruption? (The SEC, other organization, or both)
18. Have you or someone you know been asked to pay bribe in the examination/interview process?
19. Have you or someone you know considered paying bribe in the examination/interview process?

Appendix 4.

Research Questions	Interview Question
1.How do users of SEC services perceive the level of corruption in the SEC?	Compared with other agencies where do you see place of the SEC in terms of corruption?
	What was your thoughts about the SEC before/after you took the exam in terms of its fairness?
2.How do users of SEC services perceive the level of corruption in the overall public administration?	How do you perceive level of corruption in public administration?
	Which organization/agency do you think is most/least corrupt?
3.To what extent these perceived levels of corruption can be linked to users'	Are there any circumstances under which corruption is justifiable
4.How do experts perceive the level of corruption in the SEC and the public administration in general, in relation to SEC's organizational characteristics?	How do you perceive level of corruption in public administration?
	Which organization/agency do you think is most/least corrupt?
	Do you have an experience in analyzing work of the SEC?