ACE | GOVERNANCE & INTEGRITY
Anti-Corruption Evidence Research Programme
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX
CSC CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CORRUPTION

Gatekeepers, Enablers or Technicians: the contested interpretation of lawyers as facilitators of kleptocracy and grand corruption

Project Summary

This project investigates how solicitors in England & Wales navigate client selection when dealing with beneficiaries of kleptocracy and grand corruption. It examines the conflicting narratives around lawyers as "professional enablers," exploring how group norms shape their self-perception and responses to criticism. By analysing legal scholarship, codes of conduct, media discourse, and interviews, the research aims to identify flaws in enablers' self-perception and propose strategies to address them. The findings will contribute to academic literature, inform anti-corruption efforts, and be translated into policy recommendations through collaboration with a civil society organisation.

Policy and Programming Implications

The research highlights the urgent need for more precise regulations and ethical safeguards to prevent solicitors in England & Wales from being exploited as enablers of kleptocracy and illicit financial flows. While lawyers play a vital role in upholding justice, the blurred line between legitimate legal work and facilitation of corrupt wealth demands greater scrutiny. Strengthening compliance measures, increasing transparency in legal and financial transactions, and fostering a stronger ethical culture within the profession are essential steps toward addressing these risks. Importantly, this issue extends beyond the UK - kleptocracy is a global problem that requires coordinated international action.
By focusing on solicitors, this research provides a foundation for broader reforms across the legal profession, both at home and abroad, ensuring that legal services support the rule of law rather than undermining it.

Research Questions

1. What are the underlying principles by which those who provide legal services to kleptocrats and other beneficiaries of grand corruption might be regarded as enablers of corruption, and what alternative framings might legitimately describe their activities?
2. What are the self-perceptions of UK lawyers regarding their role in facilitating corruption, how do these narratives differ from those of critics, and where is the disconnect between these perspectives?
3. How do group norms in legal education and socialisation influence UK lawyers' self-perceptions, particularly the normalisation of servicing and assisting high net worth clients who have accumulated unexplained wealth?
4. What strategies can be developed to address the disconnect between lawyers' self-perceptions and external critiques, and what specific areas require further research (such as the extent of adherence to regulatory standards; a typology of legal 'enabling' activities; and the education and socialisation of lawyers) to enhance our understanding of lawyers' roles in enabling corruption?

Methodology

This research builds on unpublished data from the Centre for the Study of Corruption, which used a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, media comment analysis, and a review of legal ethics in education and law firm codes of conduct. To deepen the analysis, we will conduct additional interviews with lawyers who openly market services to high-risk clients, analysing them alongside the media comment dataset and the review of ethical commitments at leading UK law firms. The combined datasets will be analyzed using qualitative research tools to provide a clearer picture of the legal profession's role in enabling kleptocracy and inform policy recommendations.

Research Team Members

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