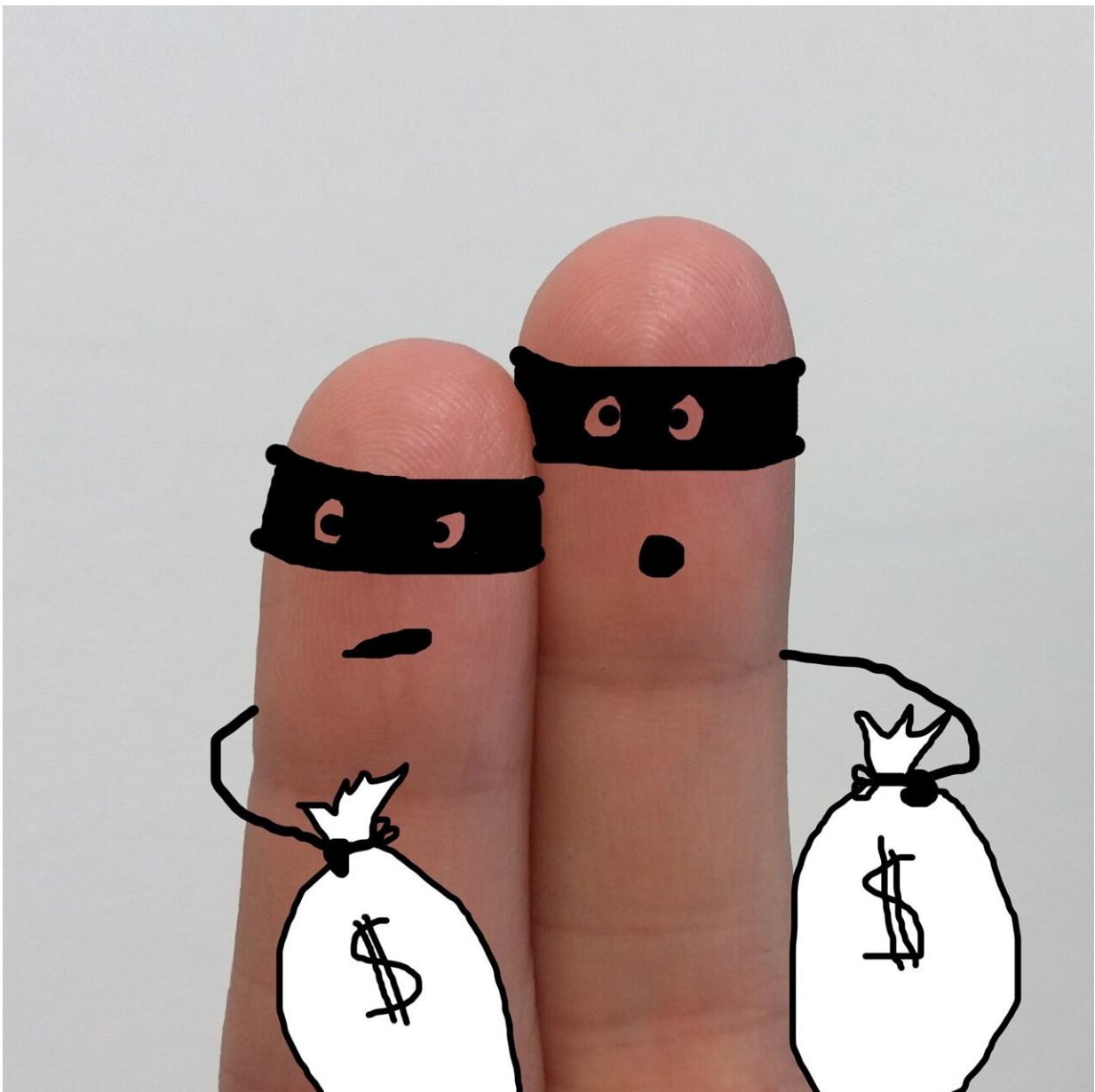


Strategies of kleptocrats and their enablers are becoming increasingly sophisticated, experts warn

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International assessments of corruption can't properly show the increasingly sophisticated way elite people from rogue states use global networks to manage illicit finances, experts have warned.

Lawyers and professional enablers are used to help disintermediate the shady origins of funds and convert them to spendable and protected assets, as well as recasting public images.

Philanthropy rather than politics is increasingly being used to change the image of countries and individuals.

Global corruption rankings don't recognize the structured use of wealth managers, accounting firms, and international bankers, as well as citizenship managers, brokers, lobbyists, PRs and lawyers.

The study describes this era of reputation laundering as 'transnational uncivil societies'. The aims of transnational uncivil societies extend beyond personal benefits to political aims and to further authoritarian and kleptocratic power. TUSNs act against transnational activists through [private investigators](#), the issuance of INTERPOL warrants, regional policing mechanisms and the courts.

The study, by Alexander Cooley from Barnard College, John Heathershaw from the University of Exeter and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira from the University of Oxford, is published in the *European Journal of International Relations*.

Professor Heathershaw said, "This is a growing type of conflict in [global politics](#). Kleptocrats eject liberal activists from their own territories and create new spaces to whitewash their own reputations and build their own transnational networks. To do so, they hire political consultants and reputation managers, engage in public philanthropy and forge new relationships with major global institutions."

"These strategies of reputation-laundering are neither illicit nor marginal, but very much a product of the actors, institutions and markets generated by the liberal international order."

The story shows how these relationships between elites, lawyers and others may begin as contractual but over the long term are likely to become clientelistic as each party gains greater knowledge of the 'grey' and illegal behaviors of the other.

As part of transnational uncivil society reputation management is used in an aggressive and targeted way, while 'strategic lawsuits against [public participation](#)' (SLAPPs) are also increasingly deployed in the United Kingdom to tie [civil society](#) and [media organizations](#) up in lengthy and uncertain court procedures that effectively stifle the free speech necessary for advocacy campaigns.

Elites use sovereign rights to move to or reside in the West through entering diplomatic service, securing citizenship or a foreign residence, as well as participation in an investor visa or second passport.

Professor Cooley said, "Transnational uncivil societies seek to protect their own exclusive national sovereignty and regime authority at home, while eroding popular sovereignty in overseas liberal democracies by securing the right of residency and nurturing clientelistic ties and influence."

"Cumulatively, these networks of elites, foundations and private service professionals enhance the authority and legitimacy of uncivil elites, helping to blunt other actual advocacy campaigns."

More information: Alexander Cooley et al, Transnational uncivil society networks: kleptocracy's global fightback against liberal activism, *European Journal of International Relations* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/13540661231186502](https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661231186502)

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