

Chronicling Capture: How Investigative Journalism Covers State Capture

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Executive summary

Investigative journalism plays an essential role in exposing state capture, a phenomenon defined as the manipulation of state rules and functions for the benefit of a narrow few. Reporting reveals the mechanics of how state capture works in practice and provides evidence that can inform countervailing responses. But this work faces great difficulties: the attributes of state capture that make it so hard to rein in also make reporting on it both challenging and full of risk.

To examine how investigative journalists cover state capture, we identified 51 recent investigations published by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) about activities that resemble common symptoms of state capture. These stories, which cover events in 23 countries, reveal how diverse actors work to exert influence over state functions, including private sector elites, political leaders, organised crime groups, and foreign governments, and show how these groups can form alliances to consolidate control.

The stories also exhibit the different targets of state capture. Only a small number of the cases relate to the influence of policy *formation*, suggesting the difficulty of observing this behavior. The majority instead address the possible manipulation of policy *implementation*, particularly public contracting, and the subversion of accountability institutions.

Reporting on state capture faces two main hurdles. First, there exists a formidable gap between the big-picture phenomenon of state capture and the concrete evidence that proves it is happening. Traversing this divide is one of the most difficult practicalities of reporting on capture. Drawing on interviews with OCCRP editors, we describe how this challenge plays out at different stages of the editorial process.

Second, journalists are often the targets and victims of state capture as well as its observers. To avoid inconvenient information coming to light, the actors who engage in capture may attack journalists or try to influence the wider media environment. The specific experiences faced by OCCRP journalists and their colleagues speak to the diversity and seriousness of these threats.

Despite these difficulties, investigative reporting has provided detailed evidence of how capture operates around the world, revealing behaviors of high policy and public interest and providing fresh empirical cases for academic study. In particular, it can reveal capture as it is happening, providing anti-corruption stakeholders with crucial evidence before it is too late to act. OCCRP reporting has prompted responses which then make capture more costly. This aftermath also generates valuable insights, as captured entities close ranks while uncaptured ones fight back.

To strengthen future reporting, we provide several recommendations for journalists and their supporters. To document capture, newsrooms will need to cultivate knowledge of the local political economy while also prioritizing fact-checking and safeguarding editorial processes against bias. Cross-border collaboration can help track transnational elite groups and their offshore illicit flows, and investments in security are critical.

Finally, allies in the fight against corruption must move with urgency to protect investigative journalists from rising threats. Journalists can document capture, often while it is actively unfolding, and their findings have helped other accountability actors take action. Expanding this dynamic could offer a valuable tool for confronting state capture in the years ahead.

1. Introduction

Investigative journalism is one crucial source of information about state capture. Reporting reveals how state capture works in practice, providing valuable empirical data that informs how academics and policymakers understand this increasingly prominent theme. More importantly, reporting has the potential to inform countervailing responses and eventual accountability.

Investigative journalism is also a subject of capture, internal to its forces rather than an unaffected external safeguard. The attributes of state capture that make it so difficult to rein in also make reporting on it both challenging and full of risk.

This paper aims to illustrate what investigative reporting can teach us about state capture, and to identify the difficulties faced by this type of journalism.

To inform this inquiry, we reviewed reporting by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) from 2021 to 2025, looking for examples of activity that could represent symptoms of or efforts at state capture¹. We identified 51 investigations from 23 countries that uncovered behaviors that align with the leading definitions of state capture. Most of the stories describe advantages enjoyed by politically connected parties, or efforts by powerful groups to influence public functions and office-holders.

While the cases discussed here resemble patterns associated with some aspects of state capture, this paper is not meant to imply that any one case constitutes state capture. The cases also do not form a representative sample, given the uneven spread of OCCRP's network across the world and other factors.

Along with examining this body of work, we also interviewed two OCCRP editors whose responsibilities include overseeing the organization's entire production of more than 100 investigations per year. We also drew on our wider knowledge of the publication process at OCCRP and the impact and fallout of OCCRP stories, which is tracked internally.

State capture is typically defined as the manipulation of official policies and functions for the benefit of a narrow few.² Unlike more transactional types of corruption such as bribery,

¹ OCCRP is a non-profit media organization that aims to strengthen investigative journalism around the world and expose crime and corruption so the public can hold power to account. The authors work at OCCRP's Impact Department which follows up on the reporting produced by the organization's network of journalists.

² Dávid-Barrett, E. 2023. [State capture and development: a conceptual framework](#). *J Int Relat Dev* 26, 224–244. Hellman, J. S., Jones, G. and Kaufmann, D. 2000. "[Seize the State, Seize the Day](#)": [State Capture, Corruption, and Influence in Transition](#). Policy Research Working Paper No. 2444. World Bank, Washington, DC; The Economist. 2025, April 3. [State capture is a growing threat. Reversing it is hard](#).

state capture involves powerful actors shaping the very rules of the game to serve their own interests at the expense of the public good.

Recently, these ideas have proven instrumental to describing the power dynamics in diverse countries, including: post-Soviet Russia and other countries with powerful oligarchs; the manipulation of the state by alliances of political and economic elites in Brazil and South Africa; the previous self-enriching regimes of Angola, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka; and current self-dealing by the leaders of Hungary and the United States.

State capture can inflict serious harm on a country's economic and democratic well-being, with the public interest routinely superseded by the agendas of narrow interest groups. It is also difficult to reverse given the uneven balance of power it creates. As Dávid-Barrett notes, "Because it changes laws and institutions, state capture shapes the rules of the game under which the whole society must operate, with a much wider and longer-lasting impact than forms of corruption that simply distort one-off transactions."³

In the face of this phenomenon, timely investigative reporting becomes crucial. If the right stories are told at the right time, they can unveil slides towards state capture while there is still some chance of reversing the trend or protecting against its acceleration. We hope this paper helps inform this ongoing endeavor.

Towards that end, Section 2 contains insights from the analysis of our dataset of 51 OCCRP stories, with a focus on the different groups possibly engaging in capture and where their influence is observed. Section 3 examines two difficulties faced by journalists in this work: the informal and systemic nature of capture, and outright threats from the subjects of the reporting. Finally, we propose implications and lessons which could help generate stronger reporting on state capture in the future.

³ Dávid-Barrett, E. 2023. [State capture and development: a conceptual framework](#). *J Int Relat Dev* 26, 224–244.

2. Investigating the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of state capture

Recent analysis of state capture has identified that different types of interest groups work to capture state functions, and that this capture targets several stages of governance.⁴ The investigations from OCCRP and its partners flesh out these observations with fresh cases.

2.1 Who is capturing or seeking to capture?

While scholars and practitioners initially used the term “state capture” to explain how oligarchs and other economic heavyweights gain control over the state, recently the role of ruling political elites in capture has dominated discussions.⁵ The investigations we surveyed reveal capture orchestrated by these two interest groups, as well as others. Below we identify how different groups are driving the influence campaigns, and how they work together. As states and citizens seek to safeguard their public institutions from private takeover, all these groups must be kept in check.

Private sector groups

Capture by business elites is the classic model of state capture, where private sector groups use their economic power to bend the state into representing their interests.⁶ The goal is not to become the government but to make the government a subsidiary to their agendas. This can be achieved through financing political campaigns, lobbying for favorable regulations, ensuring allies are placed in key official posts, and other means.

Numerous media and research reports describe the close, mutually advantageous ties between the Adani family and Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the central and influential role played by the Adani Group in the Modi government’s plans for growing the Indian economy.⁷ Some accounts indicate how this closeness may also include undue influence, a key aspect of state capture. A *Washington Post* investigation documented “how Indian

⁴ Dávid-Barrett, E., Kaufmann, D., Ceballos, J. C., & International Anti-Corruption Academy. 2023. [MEASURING STATE CAPTURE](#). In INSIGHTS BRIEF. International Anti-Corruption Academy; Kaufmann, D. 2024. [State Capture Matters: Considerations and empirics toward a worldwide measure](#). Public Sector Performance, Corruption and State Capture in a Globalized World.

⁵ Hellman, J. S., Jones, G. and Kaufmann, D. 2000. [“Seize the State, Seize the Day”: State Capture, Corruption, and Influence in Transition](#). Policy Research Working Paper No. 2444. World Bank, Washington, DC; Kaufmann, D. 2024. [State Capture Matters: Considerations and empirics toward a worldwide measure](#). SSRN Electronic Journal.

⁶ Hellman, J. S., Jones, G., & Kaufmann, D. 2000. [“Seize the state, seize the day”: State capture, corruption, and influence in transition](#). The World Bank.

⁷ Chatterjee, Elizabeth. 2023. [India’s Oligarchic State Capitalism](#). *Current History*, vol. 122, issue 843. Lixin, Chu. 2024. “Analysis of the Mechanisms of Political-Business Relations in India under Modi’s Leadership,” *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, vol.7, issue 9: 22-30; Gupta, Rajenda. 2025. [Adani Group: A Critical Examination of Expansion, Political Patronage, Financial Practices, and Regulatory Oversight](#). ResearchGate. New York Times. 2023, February 4. [“Gautam Adani’s Rise Was Intertwined With India’s. Now It’s Unraveling.”](#)

officials repeatedly facilitated a [Adani Group] project that seemed to make little economic sense” and other practices that “illustrate the remarkable influence of a self-made billionaire.”⁸ In 2024, U.S. authorities indicted Gutum Adani, the Group’s founder and chair, and other top executives for their roles in an “elaborate scheme to bribe Indian government officials to secure contracts worth billions of dollars,” charges the Adani Group denies.⁹

Two OCCRP stories document practices that could be relevant to understanding how powerful companies benefit in such a context. One story revealed how the Adani Group sold low-quality coal to a state-owned company while charging it the price for higher-quality coal, over-billing the Indian state and, by extension, the public.¹⁰ As the story pointed out, this resulted in both inflated fuel costs and more pollution from the burning of lower-grade coal. Another investigation, published by OCCRP¹¹, the *Financial Times*¹² and the *Guardian*,¹³ documented ties between the Adani family and two foreign owners of Adani Group stock. These findings supplement the wider allegations of stock manipulation that erupted in 2023.¹⁴ If these “public” investors were in fact Adani insiders, it could possibly violate the limits established in Indian securities law on a company’s ownership of its own stock. Official investigations of these matters faced evidentiary hurdles and failed to advance, with some of the allegations of stock manipulation and financial fraud officially dismissed.¹⁵

Professional enablers

One interesting subset of private sector actors are the service providers that large scale corruption and money laundering depend on to function, or professional enablers. The anti-corruption field has devoted increasing attention to the role played by banks, lawyers, accountants, corporate service providers, lobbyists and others in facilitating corruption and other financial crimes.¹⁶

⁸ Shih, Gerry, Niha Masih and Anant Gupta. 2022, December 9. [How political will often favors a coal billionaire and his dirty fossil fuel](#). *The Washington Post*.

⁹ U.S. Department of Justice. 2024, November 20. [Billionaire Chairman of Conglomerate and Seven Other Senior Business Executives Indicted](#).

¹⁰ OCCRP. 2024, May 22. [New Evidence Bolsters Allegations Adani Group Overcharged for Coal](#).

¹¹ OCCRP. 2023, August 31. [Documents Provide Fresh Insight Into Allegations of Stock Manipulation That Rocked India’s Powerful Adani Group](#).

¹² Financial Times. 2023, August 31. [Adani shares slide and politicians demand action after reports on hidden investors](#).

¹³ The Guardian. 2023, August 31. [Modi-linked Adani family secretly invested in own shares, documents suggest](#).

¹⁴ Hindenburg Research. 2023. [Adani Group: How The World’s 3rd Richest Man Is Pulling The Largest Con In Corporate History](#).

¹⁵ BBC. 2025, September 19. [India regulator rejects US firm's fraud claims against Adani Group](#).

¹⁶ See, for instance: John Heathershaw, Tena Prelec, and Tom Mayne, *Indulging Kleptocracy* (OUP, 2025); FATF, July 2024. *Horizontal Review of Gatekeepers’ Technical Compliance Related to Corruption*.

When operating within the country where the capture is taking place, professional enablers act as intermediate agents between private interests and the state. Lobbying firms carry the wishes of powerful business elites, and lawyers paper over the benefits awarded to favored parties.

When operating offshore, professional enablers facilitate the external activities of capture.¹⁷ Perhaps most prominently, when moving wealth offshore is a primary objective of state capture by certain political elites, these firms make it possible. In doing so, the enablers act as a bridge between captured regimes and the more democratic countries where such funds are often headed.

The investigation by OCCRP¹⁸ and its partners¹⁹ into Credit Suisse and recent stories²⁰ on two private banks reveal how the Swiss banks accepted billions in assets linked to top officials from countries where state capture is a prevailing challenge, such as Venezuela, Azerbaijan, Zimbabwe, Serbia and others. One 2025 story centred on a Swiss private bank that, according to Swiss authorities, had failed to conduct proper due diligence on high-risk clients linked to the former first families of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The bank allegedly ignored warnings and compliance risks to onboard politically exposed persons (PEPs) who had been rejected or ejected by other financial institutions, offering a safe haven for potentially illicit wealth.

This reporting on Swiss financial institutions also points to possible capture *by the professional service firms themselves* over certain sectors or policy areas. Switzerland's enormous banking sector is a global leader, particularly in cross-border wealth management where it holds a global market share of 25 percent.²¹ The industry enjoys great influence, and certain rules suggest state decision-making reflects its interests.

Section 47 of the Swiss Banking Act criminalises reporting on confidential banking information without any public interest exception, a unique restriction across Western countries.²² Journalists breaking this rule could face up to five years in prison or fines of 250,000 Swiss francs. This is not without consequence: in 2025, Zurich police raided the home and workplace of one Swiss journalist; a bank lodged a criminal complaint against

¹⁷ Sophie Lemaître and Anrike Visser. 2023. Horizontal Review of Gatekeepers' Technical Compliance Related to Corruption. U4.

¹⁸ OCCRP. 2022, February 20. [Suisse Secrets](#).

¹⁹ Deutsche Welle. 2022, February 20. [Credit Suisse had autocrats, criminals as clients — report](#).

²⁰ OCCRP. 2025, April 9. [Leaked Letters Give Insight Into Anti-Money Laundering Gaps at Swiss Bank Reyl](#).

²¹ Swiss Federal Authorities. 2025. [Banks and insurance companies](#).

²² European Federation of Journalists. 2025, July 4. [Switzerland: Article 47 of the Banking Act must be amended to include strong public interest protections](#).

OCCRP under the provision; and Swiss journalists regularly opt out of investigative projects on their own country's financial sector.

Political leaders

Capture exists in diverse political systems, an observation backed up by the State Capture Index, a global measurement tool that tracks the extent of undue influence in the formation of laws, policies, and institutions across 172 countries.²³ Democratic countries display a wide variance in capture levels, with advanced economies exhibiting more capture than traditional corruption measures may suggest.²⁴ In authoritarian and kleptocratic regimes, capture by political elites is widespread. For several of these countries, OCCRP has documented these practices for many years, making clear that corruption and influence peddling are systemic rather than irregularities.

One example is Azerbaijan's ruling Aliyev family. Building on a long legacy of reporting by OCCRP on the regime, one recent investigation illustrated the kind of advantages they enjoy.²⁵ In 2024, Azerbaijan hosted COP29, the 29th annual U.N. conference on tackling climate change. Reporters found that nearly every local company named as one of the conference's "official partners" is owned by the country's ruling family or someone with reported business ties to them. This suggests that the ruling elite not only used a prestigious UN event to "greenwash" their reputation but also to direct public funds and sponsorship opportunities to their own businesses.

Another example is the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. In Belarus, capture is centralized under the authority of the president who then distributes spoils to a loyal inner circle of businessmen, often referred to as "Lukashenko's wallets."²⁶ Independent media outlets and civil society organizations are systematically criminalized, often being designated as "extremist formations."²⁷

Recent investigative journalism shows how the ruling kleptocratic network continues to profit in the face of international sanctions.²⁸ Journalists at OCCRP and the Belarusian Investigative Center (BIC) identified a Cypriot shell company facilitating the export of

²³ Kaufmann, D. 2024. [State Capture Matters](#). Results for Development.

²⁴ For more information see: <https://r4d.org/resources/state-capture-index>.

²⁵ OCCRP. 2024, November 1. ['Official Partners' of Azerbaijan's COP29 Climate Summit Linked To Ruling Aliyev Family and Their Inner Circle](#). For a summary of OCCRP reporting on Azerbaijan, see <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/know-your-host>

²⁶ Belarusian Investigative Center. 2025, July 15. [How Lukashenko's cronies make money from the state-owned giant Grodno Azot](#); U.S. Treasury Department. 2021. [Treasury Holds the Belarusian Regime to Account on Anniversary of Fraudulent Election](#).

²⁷ European Parliament. Briefing. 2022. [Media environment in Belarus](#).

²⁸ OCCRP. 2024, November 27. [Sanctions Bypassed: Belarus' Microchip Pipeline to Russia](#).

Belarusian potash from Belarus to Russia, despite EU sanctions.²⁹ Leaked documents identified the company's ties to a former top official, and indicate that the fees paid to the company were excessively high for the services it provided.

Another BIC and OCCRP story uncovered how the government secretly sold a prime plot of land in Russia for a fraction of its market value to a company owned by a former member of Lukashenko's personal security service.³⁰ The evidence suggests the luxury residence under construction could eventually belong to the president. The project, funded by loans from companies linked to one of Lukashenko's "wallets", demonstrates how public assets can be privatised to benefit individual interests.

In contrast with these authoritarian examples, Dávid-Barrett notes the increasing number of democratically elected leaders who engage in state capture.³¹ They "abuse their legitimate access to formal power to administer processes or distribute resources in ways that expand their control over core state functions for their own private gain." Reporting by Direkt36, Atlatszo and other independent outlets in Hungary provides mounting evidence of this trend. Journalists are also documenting how the family of US president Donald Trump has engaged in a "global dealmaking blitz" since his re-election in 2024.³²

Organised crime groups

In some countries, organised crime groups have become political actors and participate in state capture. Unlike capture by business elites which seek favorable regulation, organised crime groups typically want to neutralize the state's ability to enforce the law, hollowing out institutions like the judiciary, police, and intelligence services.

OCCRP reporting on an alleged crime group from northern Cyprus illustrates one way such players exert their influence.³³ One insider described to reporters the operation's alleged money laundering systems which, according to his accounts, included arranging some \$15 million in "sponsorship" payments per month to public officials in Turkey and northern Cyprus. The group's leader was commonly caught on camera with senior officials from northern Cyprus's ruling party, advertising his political ties.

²⁹ OCCRP. 2024, August 8. [A Murky Cypriot Firm Is Helping Belarus Export Potash — In Breach of EU Sanctions](#).

³⁰ Belarusian Investigative Center. 2025, 28 October. [A mountain chalet: how companies linked to Belarusian elites are building a secret Russian residence, allegedly for Lukashenko](#).

³¹ Dávid-Barrett E. 2024. [State Capture: How democracy can be systematically corrupted](#).

³² The Guardian. 2025, November 30. [All the president's millions: how the Trumps are turning the presidency into riches](#).

³³ OCCRP. 2025, February 13. [Inside the Global Online Betting Empire of a Slain Turkish Cypriot Businessman](#).

In Serbia, an investigation by OCCRP and KRIK further revealed how a powerful businessman close to the president also had business ties with operatives in a Balkan drug trafficking cartel.³⁴ As explained by an expert quoted in the story, “State ties to organised crime have been a serious problem in Serbia for the past three decades, impeding the country’s development and democratization and eroding the public’s trust.... These links corrupt the governance system [and] undermine law enforcement efforts to fight organised crime.”

Many journalists have uncovered similar dynamics in countries across Latin America as well, and organised crime also emerged as part of influence operations in the Pacific, as noted below.

Foreign governments

State capture is increasingly transnational, with foreign governments acting as captors in order to spread their power in target states. This dynamic relates closely to concepts of “strategic corruption,” where foreign actors strengthen their positions and alliances by weaponizing their capital and exploiting governance gaps in the target countries.³⁵

OCCRP and partner reporting has shown how Russia and China use infrastructure deals and other investments, influence campaigns, intelligence-linked entities, and other tactics to influence policymaking and suppress democratic oversight in countries such as Spain,³⁶ Cyprus,³⁷ Serbia,³⁸ Georgia,³⁹ Moldova,⁴⁰ and the Pacific Islands.⁴¹

As an example, investigative journalists from Moldova unveiled how Russia’s influence operations target electoral outcomes. One investigation, led by OCCRP’s Moldovan partner CU SENS, describes the infrastructure, financing and logistics of a vote-buying and influence network in Moldova run through a Moscow-based non-profit.⁴² While officially promoting cultural and economic cooperation, it functions as a front for funneling money and propaganda into Moldova. Part of a “relentless pro-Kremlin influence effort,” the

³⁴ OCCRP. 2023, April 11. [Member of Serbian President’s Inner Circle Partnered With Alleged Drug Trafficker](#).

³⁵ Prelec, T. 2020. [The vicious circle of corrosive capital, authoritarian tendencies and state capture in the Western Balkans](#). *Journal of Regional Security*, 15(2), 167–198.

³⁶ OCCRP. 2022, May 8. [Fueling Secession, Promising Bitcoins: How a Russian Operator Urged Catalanian Leaders to Break With Madrid](#).

³⁷ OCCRP. 2023, February 3. [How a Russian Influence Group Infiltrated Cypriot Party Politics](#).

³⁸ Deutsche Welle. 2023, December 16. [Russia's influence overshadows Serbia's election](#).

³⁹ OCCRP. 2020, September 1. [NGO Probe Finds Russia “Directly Influencing” Georgian Politics](#).

⁴⁰ OCCRP. 2025, September 26. [‘We Play on People’s Fears’: Inner Workings of Russian Influence Operations in Moldova Revealed](#).

⁴¹ OCCRP. 2023, July 30. [Solomon Islands Newspaper Promised to “Promote China” in Return for Funding](#).

⁴² OCCRP. 2024, October 15. [A Russian Non-Profit Interferes in Moldova’s EU Referendum — And Builds an Anti-Western Influence Machine](#).

organisation includes Russian officials among its members. Moldovan authorities announced that some 130,000 citizens had received a total of \$15 million from affiliated entities for boosting “no” votes in the 2024 referendum on joining the European Union.

CU SENS also revealed how pro-Russian politicians funded the travel of Moldovan youth to the training camps in the Balkans to learn about protest tactics and the use of weapons and drones – including from instructors with ties to the Wagner Group.⁴³ Another independent media group, RISE Moldova, reported on how dozens of pro-Russian propaganda pages continued to reappear even after being banned by Moldovan authorities.⁴⁴ Taken together, these activities form part of a multi-faceted Russian effort to secure influence over the Moldovan state.

Alliances in capture

Investigative reporting also helps us to observe how these groups can work in concert. Scholars of capture have noted the often seamless collaboration between economic and political elites in capture systems, such as the alliance between the Gupta family and the Zuma administration in South Africa.⁴⁵ But such cooperation can assume other, more unexpected forms among the actors mentioned above.

Several OCCRP investigations from the Pacific show how Chinese organised crime groups and Chinese diaspora businesses help advance Chinese government influence in the region. One story describes how a prominent Chinese-born businessman in Fiji has a “parallel job: promoting China’s influence in the Pacific country.” From the hotel he owns, he hosts functions for the Chinese embassy and top Fijian officials alike, and a “service center” for Chinese citizens pushes for stronger China-Fiji ties. Chinese media reports and official documents confirm his role as a representative of Beijing, and he served in multiple positions in state-linked diaspora groups and a Fiji-based organization advocating for Taiwan-China “reunification.” These activities fit the mould of the Chinese Communist Party using prominent diaspora members to push its interests.⁴⁶

But the businessman’s activities may extend even further still. According to Australian law enforcement, he is also alleged to be a top organised crime figure, with ties to a syndicate

⁴³ BalkanInsight. 2025, July 15. [Disruptors: Inside Russia’s Balkan Training Camps for Moldovan ‘Destabilisation’](#).

⁴⁴ RISE Moldova. 2025, September 25. [The Russian network is hard to stop](#).

⁴⁵ Acemoglu and Robinson. 2006, as referenced in <https://scispace.com/pdf/state-capture-and-development-a-conceptual-framework-24qb865c.pdf>. On South Africa, see <https://www.gupta-leaks.com/>

⁴⁶ Australian Strategic Policy Institute. 2020, June 9. [The party speaks for you. Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s united front system](#).

involved in drug smuggling, money laundering, and human trafficking.⁴⁷ While he has not been charged with a crime, Australian and Fiji police have briefed senior Fiji officials about these suspected criminal ties. Drawing on relationships built over years, members of the political elite nevertheless have continued warm public relations with him.

Similarly, in Palau, the influence of foreign government, business and organised crime groups coalesce. OCCRP has reported on the growing activities of Chinese organised crime groups, including individuals tied to a major syndicate called “Broken Tooth.”⁴⁸ Paluan authorities believe the groups’ operations are “tied to influence efforts by the Chinese Communist Party.” Palau is one of a few nations worldwide that diplomatically recognise Taiwan. These crime groups exist alongside growing business activities by the Chinese diaspora. According to the investigation, some of these groups “have openly proclaimed they are promoting the CCP’s foreign policy goals, while others have furthered Chinese influence by setting up new business ventures and cultivating close relationships with Palau’s elite, also intended to extend Beijing’s influence.”

Trying to differentiate between government, business and criminal campaigns such as these would miss the key point: they operate in concert, as a network, to more effectively acquire influence over the state.

2.2 What does capture target?

The efforts at state capture driven by the actors outlined above have different targets. According to the categorization suggested by Dávid-Barrett, state capture occurs through three distinct “pillars” of activity, with the influence campaigns targeting: the formation of law and policy (Pillar 1); the implementation of policy (Pillar 2); and the disabling of accountability institutions (Pillar 3).⁴⁹

Using this approach, as shown in table 1, we assigned our 51 examples of investigative reporting by OCCRP and its partners to these three pillars. Not all fit nicely and, as noted above, this is not a representative sample. But the distribution still prompts interesting insights. Relatively few cases in our dataset cover pillar 1, cases of pillar 2 are most common, and there are also many instances of pillar 3.

⁴⁷ OCCRP. 2024, March 24. [Chinese Communist Party-Backed Businessman in Fiji is a Top Australian Criminal Target.](#)

⁴⁸ OCCRP. 2022, December 12. [Pacific Gambit: Inside the Chinese Communist Party and Triad Push into Palau.](#)

⁴⁹ Dávid-Barrett E. 2023. State capture and development: a conceptual framework. DOI: 10.1057/s41268-023-00290-6

Table 1. Instances of OCCRP reporting and the related countries, across the three pillars of state capture

Pillar 1. Capture of policy formation
3 cases from: China, Kyrgyzstan, India, Palau
Pillar 2. Capture of policy implementation
31 cases from: Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan
Pillar 3. Capture of accountability institutions
13 cases from: Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, China, Cyprus, Fiji, Georgia, Palau, Serbia, Turkey

The capture of policy formation (pillar 1) is one of the harder forms of capture for journalists to detect and expose, likely because these activities are frequently ambiguous or hidden within legitimate political processes. For example, lobbying and campaign donations are both standard parts of the democratic process and potential vectors of capture. Exploiting this grey area, capture of policy formation is highly efficient: the ensuing advantages for the captor group are “baked in”, requiring no further corrupt actions that investigative journalists could more easily catch.⁵⁰

From our sample, only three stories document the mechanics of this type of capture. In one, a major Indian mining and energy conglomerate with strong ties to the ruling party launched a secretive and successful lobbying campaign to dismantle key environmental safeguards.⁵¹ An environmental lawyer quoted in the story explained, “It is a clear case of corporate capture of environmental governance.... Over the last few years, it is clear that most changes in environmental laws and policies have been largely guided in terms of the economic benefit it would bring to certain corporate entities or sectors.” With these rules altered, the company’s future expansions could legally avoid hurdles set up to protect the public interest.

In a Kyrgyz case, political leaders altered procurement rules for their own benefit. Since assuming power in 2020, President Sadyr Japarov and his inner circle have created new procurement channels and altered contracting protocols while directing business opportunities to favored insiders. This is detailed further in Box 1.

⁵⁰ Dávid-Barrett E. 2024. [State Capture: How democracy can be systematically corrupted.](#)

⁵¹ OCCRP. 2023, August 31. [Inside Indian Energy and Mining Giant Vedanta's Campaign to Weaken Key Environmental Regulations.](#)

The capture of policy implementation (pillar 2) is more visible, as journalists can sometimes find hard evidence of its tactics. These machinations can include, for example, specification tailoring (state agencies writing contract requirements only one firm can meet) or bid rigging (companies colluding to submit artificially high prices).

Procurement is one area where this type of capture is commonly observed. OCCRP investigated how the Georgian government granted lucrative rights to develop at least 25 hydroelectric power plants to two companies owned by a former state official with close family ties to the billionaire founder of Georgia's ruling party.⁵² Despite the companies having no prior track record in the renewable energy sector, they received these contracts at below-market rates. To protect this arrangement, journalists found that the government kept the specific details of the contracts secret, violating legal obligations for public transparency. This case demonstrates how even if laws require open bidding, implementation can be distorted to funnel wealth to favored parties.

In Turkmenistan, the government built a state-of-the-art "International Aesthetics Center" at a cost of \$51 million to the public budget, according to another investigation.⁵³ Just two days before its grand opening, the former president signed a secret decree privatizing the facility without a competitive tender. At a sale price totaling less than construction costs, ownership was transferred to a private entity in which the president's family held significant interests. In another case, reporters revealed how the Turkmen state granted control of the country's only mobile telecoms operator to a member of the president's family.⁵⁴ Along with pouring state funds into the poorly performing company, the government also stripped its main competitor of its license.

Capture of accountability institutions (pillar 3), including formal checks and balances such as the judiciary and auditors, and non-state actors such as the media and civil society, diffuses threats to the captor network and boosts narratives favorable to their interests. Section 3.2 further details the risks faced by journalists due to this dynamic.

When journalists expose the suspicious financial activities of politicians, what happens next can indicate whether accountability institutions have been captured. Over several years, journalists revealed suspicious financial activities related to a senior Serbian official, such as the purchase of 24 apartments in Bulgaria and secretive offshore companies paying his

⁵² OCCRP. 2024, November 16. [Well-Connected Private Investor Scoops Up Hydropower Rights in Georgia.](#)

⁵³ OCCRP. 2023, December 18. [How a \\$51-million State-Built Beauty Clinic in Turkmenistan Ended Up in the Hands of the President's Family at a Massive Discount.](#)

⁵⁴ OCCRP. 2022, March 31. [One Family's 'Golden Age': President's Relative Controls Turkmenistan's Only Mobile Operator.](#)

children's school fees.⁵⁵ Instead of facing serious investigation, he accumulated power, rising from mayor to minister. In the course of doing so, he assumed control over the very agency authorized to investigate his finances.

In contrast, when journalists exposed several suspicious business deals involving Lithuania's Prime Minister Gintautas Paluckas in 2025, the response looked very different.⁵⁶ Public protests erupted, and law enforcement agencies launched official probes, while the president and coalition partners demanded explanations. Faced with the scandal and institutional pressure, Prime Minister Paluckas resigned, demonstrating that accurate reporting can prompt accountability in a functioning democracy.

While most countries have politicians with suspicious wealth, it is in captured countries that they thrive. Captured accountability institutions protect the corrupt, while their independent counterparts will hold self-dealing individuals to account.

By examining the reporting divided across the three pillars, we can observe that, rather than a single entity that is either "captured" or "free," the state is a complex marketplace with many elements and assets that can be influenced or controlled.

3. The difficulties of reporting on capture

Along with providing insights into how capture works, the investigations we analysed also reveal why it is very challenging for journalists to report on capture as it is occurring. There are two main challenges holding back this important work: the systemic and informal nature of capture; and the threats posed by state capture to journalists and the media landscape.

3.1. Capture is systemic not episodic, more legal than illegal

There exists a formidable gap between the phenomenon of state capture and the documentary evidence that proves it is happening. The former is a big-picture analytical conclusion, often arrived at on the basis of years of observing and aggregating individual actions. The latter is found on the micro-level, in meetings with decision-makers, lopsided contracts, tweaked regulations, or lax enforcement.

Traversing this divide is one of the most difficult practicalities of reporting on state capture. Interviews with OCCRP editors helped unpack the challenges that arise when evaluating and

⁵⁵ OCCRP. 2025, May 6. [Pricey Private School Tuition for Serbian Official's Children Was Paid Through Offshore Companies](#); and, OCCRP. 2025, June 23. ["We Couldn't Avoid Him": Why Serbian Journalists Have Spent 10 Years Investigating One Man](#).

⁵⁶ OCCRP. 2025, July 31. [Lithuanian Prime Minister Resigns Amid Corruption Scandal Involving EU Funds](#).

working to publish stories about state capture, with a focus on editorial decisions on whether and how to document capture, and evidencing the investigations.

These obstacles resemble the struggles of other anti-corruption actors to tackle state capture. Law enforcement, for instance, can only pursue corruption cases when specific actions appear to have broken a law. When a first family acquires wealth over decades thanks to its position, or backroom meetings result in more lenient standards for powerful companies, law enforcement struggles to build cases – assuming they have retained enough independence to act. Prosecutors typically need to demonstrate a specific *quid pro quo*, rather than more aggregate and informal exchanges of benefits. Foreign authorities examining suspicious offshore wealth also struggle to take action without a clear predicate crime, i.e., an illegal act that generated the funds which then moved abroad.

While journalism is less constrained than law enforcement, similar dynamics crop up during the reporting process. Investigative journalists specialize in uncovering wrongdoing, and wrongdoing is most easily understood and documented when it involves specific behaviors that run counter to the law or directly cause observable harm.

“You can’t just pitch a concept.”

As an investigative newsroom, OCCRP usually initiates stories around evidence of wrongdoing. Editors then assess the strength of the evidence and the importance of the story to the public interest, and decide whether to approve and allocate resources to the project. The journalists dig further, and also build up the context around the individual acts of wrongdoing, explaining to readers how they happened and why they matter. Finally, at the fact-checking stage, the documentary evidence for each assertion is carefully checked, with very few exceptions made for more informal sourcing.

In this workflow, potential stories on state capture face a varied fate. In most cases, the journalists need to start with micro-level evidence, and build up to the macro. When journalists instead start with the macro and “pitch a concept,” such as state capture, they often face an uphill battle. At least some evidence related to specific transactions is needed to gain approvals.

Along with the need for concrete evidence, stories about capture progress more easily where there is editorial agreement around whether state capture is happening in a given country. This contextual understanding helps inform decisions about which stories are worth pursuing, particularly those that might otherwise seem lacking in significance. As one editor mentioned, “When South Africa started calling it state capture, it became easier to report” about all the individual deals that were part of this wider problem. When senior editors agree with the journalists that a group is clearly engaging in large-scale state capture

to the detriment of public accountability, individual stories evidencing that trend have an easier time being approved.

Editorial recognition of state capture also leads, more implicitly, to the allocation of resources, such as assigning journalists and researchers to a certain country where capture is taking place. For instance, when OCCRP dug into a leak of data about property holdings in Dubai, the team prioritised checking for the leading members of regimes understood to be systematically enriching themselves with public funds. Such increased activity then leads to more evidence being uncovered.

On the contrary, when internal knowledge about a country is weaker or inconclusive, pitches centred around pieces of evidence indicating preferential treatment or other relevant micro-behaviors may not be approved. This is particularly true because the documentary evidence of capture is often scattered and subtle, and therefore may not appear newsworthy in its own right.

For example, the stories about India's Adani Group mentioned above detailed very specific pieces of data – the quality of 25 shipments of coal and the names of two corporate shareholders. In the grand scheme of India's enormous economy, these may not appear particularly important. But when they are observed alongside an understanding of the prevailing power dynamics in the country, they provide potentially tangible proof of a leading trend shaping the nation. The decision about whether to pursue those stories depended on an agreed editorial understanding of what was at stake. However, in other instances, stories have not advanced because the political context was less clear or less familiar to the editors making decisions about the importance of new evidence in a particular country.

Other pitches struggle because of concerns around subjectivity. As one editor asked, "Do we go out and announce capture? How do we do that while being fact led, and not led by assumptions?" If the investigation begins with the premise of state capture, and journalists go out looking for proof, this can lead to "lazy thinking and under-evidenced stories." The outcome is assumed, which risks creating confirmation bias and downplaying contradictory findings.

In some cases, the individuals driving the reporting are passionately determined to expose the capture – and often for very good reason. However, editors recounted several occasions where journalists relied on too much "hand waving" to make the leap between circumstantial evidence and the capture of state functions. Their ideas did not make it through to publication. While this dynamic protects the independence and reliability of the reporting, it also leads capture to be underreported.

Even when stories do advance, editors then face additional decisions about how strongly to draw implications from the evidence. One colleague recounted a recent story that was greenlit because everyone understood the findings helped to demonstrate the long-standing state capture by a prominent ruling family. However, given OCCRP's emphasis on documentary evidence, the initial drafts focused so exclusively on specific transactions that the bigger picture was lost. Editing helped bring back the broader narrative and the meaning of the evidence, emphasizing the systemic conflicts of interest the transactions helped represent.

Proving influence

State capture's frequent reliance on informality poses another unique challenge for journalists who must provide evidence for each assertion they make. While some outlets regularly publish well-informed intelligence, OCCRP's fact-checking system prioritises documentary evidence, with source accounts allowed only exceptionally. As a result, a very prominent tension is how to evidence claims of influence. One editor described it as "kryptonite" to our fact-checking system.

Influence is often informal, making it less documented. One story idea that never led to publication was about a warlord who had taken control over a stretch of territory, including by capturing state functions. A journalist had travelled to this place and talked to people, but had little in writing to show, causing the project to stall.

In many other instances, there is some scattered evidence of influence and capture, but it fails to get the job done – either in providing proof or crafting a good-enough narrative. Another story that never emerged was the influence of a tycoon from Country A on Country B's political leaders. The journalists believed that Country B officials had helped out the tycoon, in a personal legal dispute and again to change its investment rules. Despite the journalist's conviction, the evidence remained too suggestive, and they could never sufficiently document what favours the Country B officials received in return.

The editors mentioned other stories where undue influence over state functions was certainly taking place, but the proof was a mishmash of mundane details, and the timelines did not line up cleanly. In one case, a power company with great political influence received a waiver that allowed it to exceed limits on volumes sold, and there was a meeting with political principals before this waiver was received. A breach of procedure very likely occurred, but it was obscured and too circumstantial to assert – a "storytelling nightmare," according to one editor.

Finding the kind of evidence that can powerfully back up claims of influence is very demanding. Often, the strongest evidence of state capture, the kind that can propel major exposés, comes from insiders. These well-placed sources are able to see capture in action, but then must be willing to describe it to journalists and provide some proof. Sources of this kind provide valuable leads, but are hard to come by given the enormous risks.

These challenges likely help explain why there is more reporting on the capture of policy implementation and accountability institutions, and less about policy formation, as noted in Section 2. Manipulations of policy implementation are more observable and more likely to produce breaches of written procedure, whereas policy formation occurs less publicly and through more informal systems.

Even descriptive, contextual statements about state capture face hurdles. Journalists often seek to describe a country's prevailing power dynamics in their stories, such as the influence of oligarchs over a president or of a foreign government over certain political parties, and then face trouble during the fact-checking. They argue, often with frustration, "this is how things obviously are" and "everyone knows this," and indeed they are likely correct. But *proving* relationships is another matter. To move from granular data points to assertions of influence is, again, a large leap to make. The descriptions of influence in a story often are, as a result, dialled back or removed.

While navigating this tough terrain, editors also face major legal risks that sometimes lead stories to be edited down. As the next section explores, lawsuits are one of the many threats faced by journalists covering state capture, because they too are in its sights.

3.2 Capture targets the media

Journalists not only document capture; they are often subjected to it as well. In this way, they become part of the wider phenomenon that they are reporting about.

For those elite groups engaged in state capture, exposure and public scrutiny pose a real threat. Just in the past few months, protests related to corruption and the harms of state capture have erupted in countries including Madagascar, Nepal, the Philippines, and Serbia; in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka similar uprisings led powerful regimes to collapse.

Less dramatically, investigative reporting also makes capture more costly for its perpetrators and beneficiaries. When capture extends only to certain sectors or agencies, exposure can attract attention from those parts of the state still committed to the public interest. It also may prompt foreign law enforcement or private sector institutions to start asking questions, disengage, or impose sanctions.

To avoid inconvenient information coming to light, the actors who engage in capture often attack journalists, or they take steps to influence the wider media environment so as to make investigative reporting harder to conduct.

Attacks on journalists and their reporting

State institutions can take steps to shut down the work of investigative journalists through intimidation campaigns, license withdrawals, investigations or arrests on false charges, and the passage and enforcement of predatory media laws.

In countries where the regime in power has captured the state, such as Russia, Azerbaijan or Venezuela, this is quite common. For example, Hungary's Sovereignty Protection Office has, since its creation in 2023, published lengthy reports lambasting the credibility of OCCRP and several Hungarian media outlets who have reported on the current government.⁵⁷ The European Commission initiated proceedings against Hungary over the law establishing the Office, finding that it violates the rights and freedoms protected by EU law.⁵⁸

State repression of journalism can even occur when non-state groups are doing the capture. Private sector or criminal actors, for instance, can compel the state to go after the media on their behalf. The example from India below suggests how this could look in practice.

Non-state actors also fight back directly. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, or SLAPPS, are one popular tool. KRIK, an independent media outlet in Serbia and frequent OCCRP collaborator, faced 12 lawsuits in 2021-2023 alone, cases which the European Federation of Journalists characterize as SLAPPS.^{59,60} The head of the Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia once attended five court trials in one day.⁶¹ OCCRP regularly faces more than 40 lawsuits at a time.

Along with "lawfare," non-state actors can also deploy public-relations manoeuvres. There are many firms out there who will help wealthy clients avoid the reputational harm caused by critical reporting. These firms can bury the work of investigative journalists in search

⁵⁷ OCCRP. 2025, October 21. [Hungary's "Sovereignty Protection Office" Publishes Smear Report on OCCRP.](#)

⁵⁸ European Commission. Press release. 2024, October 3. [The Commission decides to refer HUNGARY to the Court of Justice of the European Union considering its national law on the Defence of Sovereignty to be in breach of EU law.](#)

⁵⁹ European Federation of Journalists. 2023, May 30. [Serbia: Legal harassment of investigative media outlet KRIK must stop.](#)

⁶⁰ One judge sued KRIK three times, including a criminal claim calling for prison sentences against two of the outlet's staff. The Coalition Against SLAPPS in Europe spoke out about these particular cases: "What is particularly concerning is that these lawsuits are initiated by a judge – a figure sworn to uphold the rule of law, not to use the legal system for personal needs."

⁶¹ OCCRP . 2022, November 11. [Battling 41 "SLAPP" Cases, OCCRP Network Launches In-House Legal Defense Fund.](#)

engine results, or request web platforms to de-list stories. Smear campaigns, digital attacks, and threats of violence are also evident.

Manipulating the media context

Along with attacking journalists and their organisations, powerful groups also extend their influence over the wider media and information landscapes.

In many countries, media outlets are either owned by those engaging in capture, or heavily influenced by them. For example, attempts at media capture featured as part of a wider Chinese influence campaign in Palau, one of only 12 countries with diplomatic ties to Taiwan.⁶² OCCRP reported on how Chinese players with connections to the state sought to invest in a local media outlet and encouraged favorable reporting. In the Solomon Islands, China’s ambassador offered trips and donations to media outlets there.⁶³

Reporting on capture also encounters powerful counter-narratives. As noted above, OCCRP investigated a prominent organised crime operation based out of northern Cyprus and its ties to the state.⁶⁴ The reporting focused on the group’s leader who had faced investigation by US and Turkish authorities, prior to his murder in 2022. His widow was then indicted by Turkish authorities on money laundering charges in 2024.

A few days after the OCCRP investigation was published, a major newspaper in northern Cyprus ran a glowing interview of the widow, detailing her charity works, romantic gestures from her late husband, and coping strategies for managing grief – but failing to mention the Turkish indictment from just three months prior.⁶⁵

Along with driving media coverage, capture tactics also shape the wider information landscape. Everything from social media platforms to internet access can be manipulated for those in control. And today’s communication channels allow government and private actors to “flood the zone” with misinformation or distracting content that strengthens their positions of power.

The legal framework offers still further avenues for influence. “Foreign agent laws” are currently a popular tool to protect against critique.⁶⁶ Typically modelled after 2012 Russian legislation, these laws are proliferating across parts of Central Asia, Europe, Latin America

⁶² Island Times. 2024, September 24. [Celebrating 25 Years: Taiwan and Palau’s Partnership in Growth and Development](#)

⁶³ OCCRP. 2023, July 30. [Solomon Islands Newspaper Promised to “Promote China” in Return for Funding](#)

⁶⁴ OCCRP. 2025, February 13. [Inside the Global Online Betting Empire of a Slain Turkish Cypriot Businessman.](#)

⁶⁵ Kibris. 2025, February 17. [Özge Taşker Falyalı: I heal with the love of my children.](#)

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch. 2024, September 19. [Foreign Agent Laws in the Authoritarian Playbook.](#)

and beyond.⁶⁷ Other laws and regulations helpful for capturing the information landscape include those dealing with defamation, media registration and licensing, and cyber security, as well as the type of reporting restrictions observed in Switzerland’s Banking Act as mentioned above.

Finally, in contexts of state capture, the institutions that journalists rely on also suffer. For instance, disclosure practices and FOIA implementation in captured states often fail to provide the full, unbiased and timely information that can help with investigative reporting. Transparency regimes, such as asset declarations or open contracting, can also falter.

Reactions to capture reporting

Threats to the press have been widely documented by academics, press freedom groups and others. But the ties to capture are not always considered. To observe this interplay, reactions to recent OCCRP reporting from India are instructive.

In 2023 and 2024, OCCRP published two stories about the Adani Group, one of India’s largest corporate conglomerates.⁶⁸ As noted above, the stories point out the Group’s “widely perceived closeness to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and its central role in his plan for developing the country.” The first, a collaboration with *The Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, adds details to allegations of stock manipulation first made by a short-seller firm, Hindenberg Research. The second provides further evidence of allegations that the Adani Group was over-charging for coal.

The reactions to the reporting speak to the influence and reach of its subjects. Following the 2023 story of possible stock manipulation, the two Indian journalists who led the OCCRP reporting were summoned by the Gujarat state police to appear for questioning.⁶⁹ The Supreme Court then granted them interim protection from being arrested.

Around the same time, Apple warned 20 prominent Indians, including the two journalists, that they were the target of state-sponsored cyber attacks.⁷⁰ One of the journalist’s phones has also been targeted by Pegasus, sophisticated spyware software.⁷¹ Pegasus is only licensed to governments, and has been used by India in the past. The attack occurred within hours of the journalist sending pre-publication questions to the Adani Group, though there is no way to trace who ordered it.

⁶⁷ Civicus. 2024-2025 [Foreign agents laws go global](#).

⁶⁸ Business Today. 2024, May 28. [How has Adani Group performed in 5 years?](#)

⁶⁹ OCCRP. 2023, November 8. [Indian Journalists Targeted with State Intimidation and Spyware](#).

⁷⁰ The Washington Post. 2023, October 31. [Apple warns Indian opposition and journalists of state-backed hacking](#).

⁷¹ OCCRP. 2023, November 8. [Indian Journalists Targeted with State Intimidation and Spyware](#).

Around the same time, other journalists writing similar stories faced defamation suits filed by the Adani conglomerate. Favorable court rulings on these suits were then criticized by groups such as Reporters Without Borders as “dangerous”.⁷²

Finally, the ruling BJP party publicly spoke out against OCCRP and the journalists.⁷³ Official social media accounts spread false accusations about the journalist who led the project, and pointed to the ties between OCCRP and George Soros and his Open Society Foundations (OSF is one of OCCRP’s 27 funders and has no control over its editorial decision-making.) Members of Parliament spoke of OCCRP in formal proceedings, with one stating that OCCRP “are trying their best to hold the Parliament hostage and derail the government.”

In Box 1, the case of Kyrgyzstan further reveals the challenges of reporting on very current and unfolding instances of state capture.

⁷² The News Minute. 2025, September 16. [Govt orders takedown of 138 YouTube videos, 83 Instagram posts on Adani citing court order.](#)

⁷³ Sakshi Dayal. December 6, 2024. [“Modi’s BJP says US State Department targeting India,”](#) Reuters.

BOX 1. Reporting state capture as it unfolds in Kyrgyzstan

Reporting on Kyrgyzstan from 2021 to 2025 offers accounts of state capture in action. Stories by OCCRP and several Kyrgyz outlets identify the specific mechanics through which President Sadyr Japarov and his close associates have, since coming to power in 2020, asserted personalised control over state institutions and how this control benefits their interests. In parallel runs the destruction of accountability mechanisms, so as to further shore up their positions.

In 2022, Japarov announced he would eliminate the country's procurement system which he saw as "a headache," promising that he would "take responsibility" and assume "personal control" of projects.⁷⁴ Under the new system, state-owned enterprises can bypass tender procedures, and the government shut off access to its open budget website. He also expanded the mandate of the Presidential Administrative Directorate, which sits directly under his control. The Directorate now oversees large prestige projects, including building a new presidential palace and airport expansions, with contractors chosen without public tender.⁷⁵

By analysing internal documents, land records, social media posts and insider accounts, journalists from OCCRP, Kloop and Temirov Live identified the ties between five companies and either the president or the head of his Presidential Administrative Directorate. The companies had received contracts for 11 major state initiatives between 2021 and 2024. The six for which pricing information was available are worth over \$137 million in total. Other stories have followed, documenting a pattern of insider deal-making.

At the same time, Kyrgyz media outlets have faced growing attacks.⁷⁶ A Kyrgyz court labelled Kloop and Temirov as "extremist" organizations and banned their publications.⁷⁷ Eleven Temirov journalists were charged with "inciting mass protest" and most were arrested, as were colleagues at Kloop. The authorities went so far as to issue an Interpol "Red Notice" for Kloop's co-founder, which Interpol states it has rejected.⁷⁸

While facing these attacks and others, the journalists continue to document the unfolding of state capture. Just in the final weeks of 2025 alone, they reported on multiple examples. According to their reports, the assets of a jailed local oligarch ended up in the hands of those close to the government.⁷⁹ The president's sister became a business

⁷⁴ OCCRP. 2024, May 28. [All the President's Men: State Projects Handed to Apparent Proxies in Kyrgyzstan](#).

⁷⁵ State Capture Accountability Project and Kloop. 2026, January 12. [Kyrgyzstan. The Japarov - Tashiev Network: Coercive Asset Seizures, State Capture, and Implications for EU Policy](#)

⁷⁶ OCCRP. 2025, September 5. [Inside the Crackdown: Kyrgyzstan's Preemptive Assault on Investigative Journalism](#).

⁷⁷ The Committee to Protect Journalists. 2025, October 28. [Kyrgyzstan declares investigative outlets Kloop and Temirov Live 'extremist'](#).

⁷⁸ OCCRP. 2025, October 31. [Interpol Rejects Kyrgyzstan's Request For Arrest of Journalist](#).

⁷⁹ Kloop. 2025, December 23. [«Порвут за Жапарова». Окружение президента доедает активы предшественников](#).

partner of a local entrepreneur after his relative was detained by law enforcement.⁸⁰ Authorities engaged in intimidation and extortion under the guise of "fighting corruption".⁸¹ The stories go on and on.

4. Cultivating Strong Reporting on Capture

Investigative reporting has provided detailed evidence of how capture operates around the world, revealing behaviors of high policy and public interest and providing fresh empirical cases for academic study. The OCCRP stories profiled here exhibit how journalists can uncover who is seeking to capture state functions, how these groups work together, and the mechanisms through which capture takes place. Crucially, as in the case of Kyrgyzstan, reporting can offer current rather than historical accounts of capture – providing stakeholders with information before it is too late to act.

Along with the investigations themselves, the aftermath of the stories also provides important lessons. Very often, groups pick up the findings and use them to push back. This further bolsters the idea that state capture is contested and rarely a comprehensive success. Interest groups succeed in capturing certain functions of the state or parts of the political landscape. Even those regimes that control the domestic economy and political system exert only partial control over foreign actors.

A few examples show how reporting makes state capture more costly. Investigative reporting on state capture has informed the protest movements in Serbia, such as the protests organised after OCCRP and its partners uncovered an effort to assert greater control over one of the few mainstream media outlets still producing independent content.⁸² Following reporting by OCCRP and its partners, a state government in India authorized its anti-corruption commission to launch an inquiry into the allegations that the Adani Group imported low-quality coal and sold it for far higher rates to a state-owned power company.⁸³ A key figure in securing access for Chinese organised crime to Palau was sanctioned.⁸⁴ While none of these responses are decisive, they make capture more difficult to pursue.

⁸⁰ Kloop. 2025, December 29. [Ташиев вяжет, Жапаров отнимает. Как два друга подбираются к рынку «Дордой».](#)

⁸¹ Temirov Live. 2025, December 5. [WHO OWNED THE ZHUMALIEV PLANT?](#)

⁸² OCCRP. 2025, August 27. [Telecom Chief and United Group CEO in Talks to Weaken Serbia's Last Independent Broadcaster.](#)

⁸³ The Wire. 2024, July 4. [TN Government Launches Probe Into Allegations of Coal Import Scam by Adani: Reports.](#)

⁸⁴ OCCRP. 2025, October 15. [Palau-based Figure Exposed by OCCRP is Among Scores Sanctioned Over Online Scams.](#)

Policymakers and analysts can learn a great deal from examining what happens *after* journalists publish evidence of state capture. Uncaptured entities will notice and respond, and in doing so identify that they still function with some independence and accountability to the public. As noted above, contrasting examples of Serbia and Lithuania bear this out. In one, revelations of a politician’s suspicious financial flows were followed by his promotion; in the other, the politician is now out of office. These uncaptured actors, once identified, warrant support.

Encouraging more reporting

Investigative reporting itself represents a powerful form of pushback against state capture. For countries where state capture is not historical but a present-day reality, bolstering this source of resistance represents a top priority.

Surveying OCCRP reporting and related lessons learned suggests several recommendations for newsrooms which may help them to produce more and stronger investigations on state capture.

There is no substitution for local knowledge and a solid understanding of a country’s political economy. Within international reporting collaborations, creating time for transferring this knowledge can help. This enables editors to prioritise telling the stories that matter, and allocate resources to the tough work of finding evidence that proves state capture is taking place.

Relatedly, securing trusted insider sources will help uncover leads. Because the evidence of state capture is often obscure, knowing where to look can be essential.

While incorporating deep country expertise is essential, the editorial process should safeguard against bias. Section 3 described how OCCRP stories typically start from evidence of specific acts of wrongdoing, and then the broader context is brought in to explain their meaning. In such a system, reporting on informal, aggregate state capture faces some handicaps. However, just publishing big-picture stories that assert state capture without hard evidence can also lead to problems.

A “sandwich” approach could help, with big picture considerations of state capture featuring at the start and end of the reporting process. For countries where state capture is raging, editors can recognise this big picture and prioritise reporting on this theme. Then the journalists go small, and find the hard evidence without which the story cannot advance. At the end, the big picture comes back again to explain to readers what the evidence signifies and what’s at stake.

The OCCRP stories also speak to the importance of cross-border cooperation. When globe-trotting elites engage in capture, their activities do not stay confined to their country of origin. They often move the spoils of capture offshore, such as in the case of Azerbaijani first family's UK property holdings.⁸⁵ Or the captor in question is a foreign entity, as in the Russian and Chinese influence campaigns mentioned above. Cooperating across borders can help journalists to cover these activities and source local expertise in all the relevant jurisdictions.⁸⁶

Finally, security must be prioritised. Reporting on state capture is usually a dangerous undertaking, requiring media outlets to invest in protecting against physical, digital and legal threats.

Allies in the fight against corruption must also act with some urgency if investigative journalists are to report on state capture. Journalists face enormous challenges and hostile actions from an increasing number of political and economic factions. Many groups have proven able to continue working despite this context, but they need funding and protection.

Public and private funders who care about state capture and its devastating effects should prioritise financial support for independent investigative journalism, and that funding should allow these groups to retain full editorial independence. Longer-term grants enable newsrooms to maintain the expertise, networks and safeguards needed to report on state capture effectively.

Governments and other prominent players should also prioritise the protection of journalists in their domestic and international affairs. Those who engage in capture will go after the media; whether this is an easy or difficult task depends in part on how these other players react. If there is no pushback from international authorities and other influential voices, capture is free to continue without scrutiny.

The term state capture was coined to characterise shifts in power and influence that fall outside traditional, more transactional concepts of corruption. State capture's systemic nature increases the harm it can cause and the difficulty of its reversal, and creates challenges for anti-corruption actors including journalists. But the reporting summarised in this report is cause for hope. Journalists were able to document behaviors associated with capture, and their findings helped other anti-corruption actors to take action. Expanding this dynamic could offer a valuable tool in confronting state capture in the years ahead.

⁸⁵ OCCRP. 2024, December 18. [Luxury London Properties Linked to Family of Azerbaijan's President Are Hidden Behind an Offshore Trust.](#)

⁸⁶ Dávid-Barrett, E. and Tomic, S. 2022. [News never sleeps: When and how transnational investigative journalism complements law enforcement in the fight against global corruption.](#) SOC-ACE Briefing Note No. 14.



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