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The instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures

Matthew Jenkins, Transparency International

Reviewed by

Laura Notess, Transparency International

The prevention and prosecution of corruption is widely recognised to be an important component of democratic accountability. Yet, in some countries, apparent improvements in the control of corruption are accompanied by a stagnation or even deterioration in the quality of democracy.

Part of the answer to this puzzle could lie in the growing scholarship documenting how powerholders' misapplication of anti-corruption instruments to pursue narrow group interests is associated with democratic backsliding. Methods used by powerholders to misuse the anti-corruption agenda include the deployment of anti-corruption rhetoric to justify the consolidation of executive power, the launch of spurious allegations and baseless criminal cases against political opponents and the repurposing of anti-corruption institutions to constrain civil society.

Measures implemented under the guise of anti-corruption campaigns but chiefly intended to entrench elite power may nonetheless be perceived as having a positive effect on reducing (certain forms of) corruption. Due to methodological issues, this impression may also be reflected in global governance indices.

Yet where anti-corruption measures are instrumentalised for political purposes, this can damage the rule of law, weaken oversight institutions and erode democratic checks and balances. As such, scholars theorise that the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption is likely to lead to an increase in real-world levels of corruption, because it allows insider groups to act with impunity.

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helpdesk@u4.no

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Rethinking anti-corruption in de-democratising regimes (2021)

The use of tax authorities to target civil society and independent media (2024)

Caveat

This Helpdesk Answer focuses primarily on the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures for private or political gain. The paper touches on how anti-corruption laws and institutions can be used to limit civic space and the operations of civil society, but this is not the main concern. Specifically, a comprehensive mapping of the impact of the abusive use of anti-money laundering frameworks and foreign agent laws is beyond the scope of this paper.

Query

Please provide examples of how anti-corruption policies and/or institutions that have been instrumentalised for political and/or personal gain, with analysis of relevant patterns.

Main points

- While, on aggregate, the quality of democracy is positively correlated with control of corruption on global governance indices, certain countries buck this trend. For these 'outlier' countries, global indices indicate relatively strong performance in controlling corruption but point to a decline in the quality of democracy.

- There is a growing scholarship that suggests that in some of these outliers, this apparent paradox can be partly explained by the so-called instrumentalisation of anti-corruption. This refers to instances when powerholders misuse the rhetoric of anti-corruption and/or the laws and institutions nominally intended to curb corruption to pursue their self-interest or the interest of a narrow group.

- The objective behind this abuse of the anti-corruption agenda often relates to the consolidation of power, including through the efforts to "stifle the opposition, to dismantle the institutional systems of checks and balances, and to change the rules of the game to lock in powerholders' advantages" (Jackson, Williams and Amundsen 2026: 14).

- As such, the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption typically forms part of a wider package of de-democratisation efforts, which may include interference by the executive branch in the judicial system, state repression and election rigging.

- It is possible that measures implemented under the guise of anti-corruption campaigns but intended to entrench elite power are perceived as having a positive effect on reducing (some forms of) corruption. This impression that may also be reflected in global governance indices, which – for methodological reasons – tend to assess the prevalence of administrative rather than elite corruption.

- Robust judicial oversight, independent prosecutors and investigatory bodies, and civil society scrutiny are usually what distinguish legitimate anti-corruption enforcement from its authoritarian imitation (see Table 1).

- It is important, especially for international partners, to be able recognise to instances of anti-corruption instrumentalisation to avoid inadvertently causing further harm. At the same time, better understanding of instrumentalisation can help counter efforts to de-legitimise genuine anti-corruption efforts.

- This Helpdesk Answer examines eight countries where, over the last decade, there has been some indication or reporting that anti-corruption efforts have been instrumentalised. All eight countries have declined on indices of democratic accountability. While democratic backsliding is a broad phenomenon not solely explained by the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures, this chimes with the view that instrumentalisation of anti-corruption policy damages the rule of law, weakens oversight institutions and erodes democratic checks and balances.

- However, during the same period across the sample of eight countries included, some have improved on the Corruption Perceptions Index while others have deteriorated. This could i) suggest that the impact of instrumentalisation on corruption control can be heterogeneous; ii) be explained by the gap between the real and perceived levels of corruption; and/or iii) indicate that current analytical frameworks for identifying genuine cases of instrumentalisation are underdeveloped.

Contents

Background

Corruption is an issue that often provokes public outrage and political backlash as it squanders public money and redirects it into the pockets of the few. This makes it both an ethical and moral dilemma as well as an institutional and political failure. However, given the strong public reaction and condemnation that corruption scandals can provoke, anti-corruption rhetoric can be a potent political instrument.

Moreover, the range of policy responses to corruption includes powerful and intrusive investigative tools such as transaction monitoring, financial audits, unexplained wealth orders and surveillance. In addition, anti-corruption cases can result in the imposition of serious sanctions including substantial fines, debarments from public office and custodial sentences.

This all means that the anti-corruption agenda – in both rhetorical and practical terms – equips governments with substantial coercive power. Like other forms of power, the power required by governments to curb hidden corrupt practices is itself vulnerable to abuse for private gain. Here, private gain is understood broadly as going beyond immediate financial advantage to include "partisan gain to a particular group or institution with which the powerholder is associated" (Phillips, David-Barret and Barrington 2025: 8).

The abuse and co-option of the anti-corruption agenda is generally referred to as the instrumentalisation or politicisation of anti-corruption.[1] We can distinguish between a broad and a narrow view of instrumentalisation.

The broader view would encompass *rhetorical* forms of instrumentalisation. By its very nature, anti-corruption is a contested agenda; political incumbents and electoral candidates strategically mobilise anti-corruption narratives to legitimise, advance, or gather support for broader policy agendas and regulatory initiatives. Often, an anti-corruption campaign can serve as a tool to win, stabilise and extend political power (Jackson and Amundsen 2022). This includes using anti-corruption rhetoric during election campaigns and accusing others of corruption to gather support (Engler 2020).

Populist politicians and candidates in particular have been observed using anti-corruption allegations as a discursive tool, often to burnish their anti-establishment credentials (Engler 2020). In their study on Mexico, for instance, Rojas-Salazar and Vargas-Pineda (2026) find that populist candidates have become adept at using anti-

[1] For the purposes of this Helpdesk Answer, the term instrumentalisation is preferred as there is a political dimension to all aspects of anti-corruption reform and enforcement.

corruption narratives to promote their own candidacies for public office, including through simplified or even contradictory messages to broaden their appeal and maximise voter support.

In short, anti-corruption rhetoric can function as a malleable instrument with which to attack political adversaries, garner support in party political struggles and reshape public discourse.

The narrower view of instrumentalisation focusses primarily on the *actions* taken by political incumbents to bend anti-corruption laws, institutions and policies to further their own "power, status and wealth ambitions" (Jackson, Williams and Amundsen 2026: 13). This narrower conceptualisation is encapsulated by Kassa (2025:564):

> Political instrumentalisation is [...] the informal repurposing of dedicated specialised anti-corruption institutions, or public institutions tasked with detecting, investigating and prosecuting corruption cases favourable to achieving narrow network aims. The aim of this instrumentalisation can be two-fold: first, to undermine the anti-corruption institution's formal powers and influence and reduce its impact on the power network, and second, to shape the institution's operations in a manner favourable to strengthening the power network.

The most extreme form of instrumentalisation often centres on the capture of anti-corruption institutions by those in power to benefit a specific group or political figure, thereby using these agencies as "extended arms" of the ruling regime (Kassa 2025; Ahlawat 2026). A classic example is the selective investigation and prosecution of corruption cases (Ahlawat 2026).

Jackson, Williams and Amundsen (2026: 14) argue that these tactics – particularly those that result in partisan enforcement or the hollowing out of checks and balances – severely weaken anti-corruption efforts. They suggest that the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures can lead to an increase in real-world levels of corruption because this instrumentalisation weakens accountability mechanisms and means insider groups are able to act with impunity.

Both the broad and narrower views of instrumentalisation imply that the *intention* behind anti-corruption measures that are announced and/or implemented really matters. Do powerholders genuinely want to reduce the socio-economic costs of corruption or are they pursuing their own political objectives?

Yet a considerable conceptual challenge in detecting instances of instrumentalisation relates to the difficulty of discerning powerholders' true intentions. Without understanding the motivations, incentives and competing interests of the various actors behind a given anti-corruption measure, it is hard to gauge whether the policy was a sincere attempt to reduce corruption or not. Jackson, Williams and Amundsen (2026: 14) thus suggest inferring intentions from the outcomes: did the supposed anti-corruption measure result in "boosted power positions, entrenched power-structures, reduced space for public participation and influence in politics, and economic privileges for the few"?

However, this kind of retrospective analysis is of limited utility during the implementation of the policy. Moreover, Carothers (2020) points out that, in practice, private advantage and public interest can be difficult to separate. Using the example of China, Carothers (2020) shows that the design and implementation of an anti-corruption reform can result both in the consolidation of an official's power and make a tangible contribution to curbing corruption. As such, it can be unclear how the intent behind a given anti-corruption policy relates to that policy's effectiveness in reducing the actual incidence of corruption.

Nonetheless, as the next section illustrates, where ill intent drives the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption policy, this can have severe ramifications on democratic accountability.

Instrumentalisation of anti-corruption and democratic backsliding

Instrumentalisation of anti-corruption is often situated within a wider context of executive aggrandisement and de-democratisation (see Dominguez 2026). As noted by Freedom House (Csaky 2020), those aiming to weaken democratic accountability and consolidate power (particularly in the executive branch) often seek to manipulate the electoral framework, bypass the lawmaking process and attack independent media and civil society.

The instrumentalisation of anti-corruption can form one part of these broader efforts to destabilise democratic institutions (Amundsen and Jackson 2022:4). Indeed, the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption policy and practice may be a logical response on the part of corrupt or kleptocratic officials. In order to safeguard the illicit gains from their own corruption and reduce the risk that they are held to account, these officials have incentives to infiltrate anti-corruption institutions to direct the spotlight away from their own nefarious activity and tighten their grip on power (Pring and Vrushi 2019). Amundsen and Jackson (2022: 9) even note that the proceeds of corruption themselves may be used to fund a power grab, providing the resources to sustain patronage networks, buy out potential challengers and finance election campaigns.

Kassa (2025:564) identifies three phases that powerholders and their network of associates deploy as part of a strategy of capturing anti-corruption institutions:

1. co-optation: the coerced alignment of institutional incentives with that of the powerholders
2. controlling: the weakening of the leverage of the institution vis-à-vis the powerholders and their associates
3. camouflage: finally, although formal rules remain in place these are not applied to network insiders and/or are selectively applied

In a similar vein, Amundsen and Jackson (2022: 9) identify the three stages of the de-democratisation process in relation to the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption:

1. the opposition is targeted along with the media: anti-corruption is weaponised at this stage by accusing opponents of corruption and initiating politically motivated arrests.
2. the regime targets the "referees": such as the judiciary, law enforcement and government oversight and regulation bodies, including anti-corruption institutions. Aspiring autocrats may seek to politicise and discipline these institutions, appoint their cronies to top positions and ensure that corruption charges against individuals who demonstrate loyalty disappear.
3. the rules of the game are changed: potentially including the electoral law, party registration law and the criminal code. At this point, corrupt practices can be used to disrupt free and fair elections.

Importantly, it is noted by the authors that de-democratisation does not always happen in the exact same way; the erosion can happen surreptitiously and incrementally without media attention (Amundsen and Jackson 2022: 16).

Finally, while instrumentalisation of anti-corruption is a common feature of autocratic regimes (e.g. Rahman 2020: 9; Zhu & Zhang 2017), it has also been regularly observed in electoral democracies in recent years.

Given this trend, there have been growing concerns – including on the part of the producer of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) – about the discrepancy in certain countries between performance on global corruption measures and broader democratic governance outcomes (Transparency International 2025a). This concern is particularly acute in relation to national outliers that perform above the trend line for control of corruption (as measured by the CPI[2]) relative to their level of democratic accountability.

Such cases potentially challenge the conventional view about the link between democratic accountability and control of corruption. This Helpdesk Answer therefore centres its examination of the instrumentalisation of the anti-corruption agenda on electoral democracies where there is a risk that support for anti-corruption reforms could have potential unintended consequences.

Nonetheless, before turning to a description of case studies from democratic countries, this paper briefly considers apparently successful cases of corruption control in authoritarian states. Box 1 thus serves as a counterpoint to the paper's focus on electoral democracies, but one that can shed further light on the relationship between corruption control and democratic accountability.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows.

Section 2 sets out how the eight case studies were selected and presents evidence of instrumentalisation in both rhetorical and practical terms for each.

Section 3 offers reflections on key themes emerging from the case studies.

Section 4 presents a tabular overview of archetypal methods of instrumentalisation. For each type, specific examples from the case studies are listed, red flags indicating instrumentalisation are identified and potential safeguards are presented.

Section 5 considers the broader steps that development partners can take both during the programme design and implementation phases to reduce the risk that they inadvertently support anti-corruption interventions that cause harm or weaken democratic accountability.

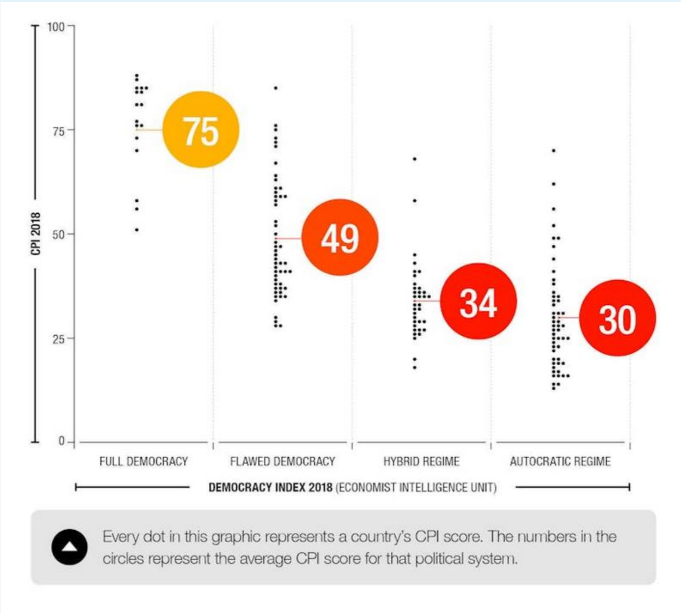
Box 1: Corruption control in authoritarian states

There is extensive literature on how the characteristics of so-called "embedded" or "full" democracies are important variables in the control of public sector corruption. These characteristics include checks and balances on executive power (Holmberg & Rothstein 2015), political pluralism and competitive elections (Bauhr & Grimes 2021),

[2] The issue here – that democratic backsliders perform relatively strongly on global indices of corruption control– may be partly methodological. The CPI, for instance, assesses the perceptions that experts and businesspeople have in relation to the prevalence of specific forms of corruption, primarily administrative or bureaucratic corruption. Conceivably, were it possible to more accurately measure the extent of elite corruption, apparent outliers might actually conform more closely to the oft-theorised positive association between quality of democracy and control of corruption.

rule of law (Rothstein 2014), active public participation (Saha & Campbell 2007), as well as transparency, media freedom and civil liberties (Brunetti & Weder 2003).

Previous analysis by Transparency International (2019a) has demonstrated that although, at the aggregate level, democratic regimes perform markedly better on the Corruption Perceptions Index than authoritarian states, CPI scores within a given category of regime type are widely distributed. In other words, while, in general, democratic polities appear to be better able to control public sector corruption than their autocratic counterparts, certain authoritarian regimes score higher on the CPI than some democracies.



Valid questions are how and why certain authoritarian states might be able to control corruption, as well as how meaningful and sustained their anti-corruption efforts and results are likely to be.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that just as democratic countries differ widely in terms of their political institutions and culture and have varying degrees of success in controlling public sector corruption, the same applies to authoritarian regimes, which can include monarchies, military juntas, personalistic dictatorships, theocracies and one-party states.

Some scholars argue that long-standing autocratic regimes, such as one-party systems or hereditary monarchies, are more sincere in their efforts to control certain forms of corruption than military juntas or personalistic dictatorships (Fisman & Golden 2017). For instance, Chang and Golden (2009) contend that autocratic leaders with longer time horizons are more likely to promote a social contract with citizens that includes economic development, and these leaders therefore have incentives to reduce the growth-inhibiting effects of widespread corruption (Pring & Vrushi 2019). These autocratic regimes may be the ones most likely to achieve the kind of levels of human development and state capacity that are also relevant variables in the control of corruption.

In addition, some authoritarian leaders, perhaps eager to encourage inward foreign investment, target forms of corruption in parts of the bureaucracy that heighten the cost of doing business, such as extortion in customs or collusion in public procurement. These states may see their CPI scores gradually increasing as the business community witnesses a reduction in the frequency of demands for bribes from public officials.

As such, it is not surprising that some authoritarian regimes have both the capacity and incentive to control certain forms of corruption – notably petty and administrative corruption – that impede other political objectives the regime sets.

Second, it is worth emphasising that the CPI assesses the perceptions that experts and businesspeople have in relation to specific forms of corruption, primarily administrative or bureaucratic corruption in public administration. Several of the 13 data sources on which the CPI draws do reference higher order governance challenges like state capture. However, overall, the CPI is less well equipped to assess the prevalence of forms of corruption like patronage networks, clientelism or grand corruption, which may be more pronounced in authoritarian states than in democratic countries.

Third, where anti-corruption strategies have been successful in authoritarian states, this has tended to be the result of a strong leader using their personal authority to disrupt corrupt networks and impose corruption control from above (Carothers 2022). These top-down approaches often involve centralising power, deregulation, modernisation initiatives such as digitalisation, combined with strong sanctions and exemplary punishments such as mass dismissals or arrests, and even extra-judicial measures or (threats of) violence (V-Dem 2022; Carothers 2022).

As such, control of corruption in authoritarian states may be shallower and less sustainable than in more democratic systems or come at the cost of civil liberties. This is because, where systemic checks and balances in the form of transparent and accountable public institutions are absent, control of corruption is largely dependent on the political will of incumbent leaders (Sutton 2017).

If anti-corruption measures come to be seen as an obstacle to the regime's other objectives, they can be rolled back quickly. That is because, in environments with restricted civil and political rights, limited political pluralism and media censorship, anti-corruption strategies may be less sustainable as they are unable to draw on the full range of anti-corruption measures, many of which rely on the participation of non-state actors (UNODC no date).

As such, any improvements in reducing corruption in these settings are typically contingent on the caprice of a few individuals at the top, meaning progress in clamping down on malfeasance may prove to be fragmentary, politically volatile and liable to backsliding during the transfer of power.

Case studies of instrumentalisation

Case study selection

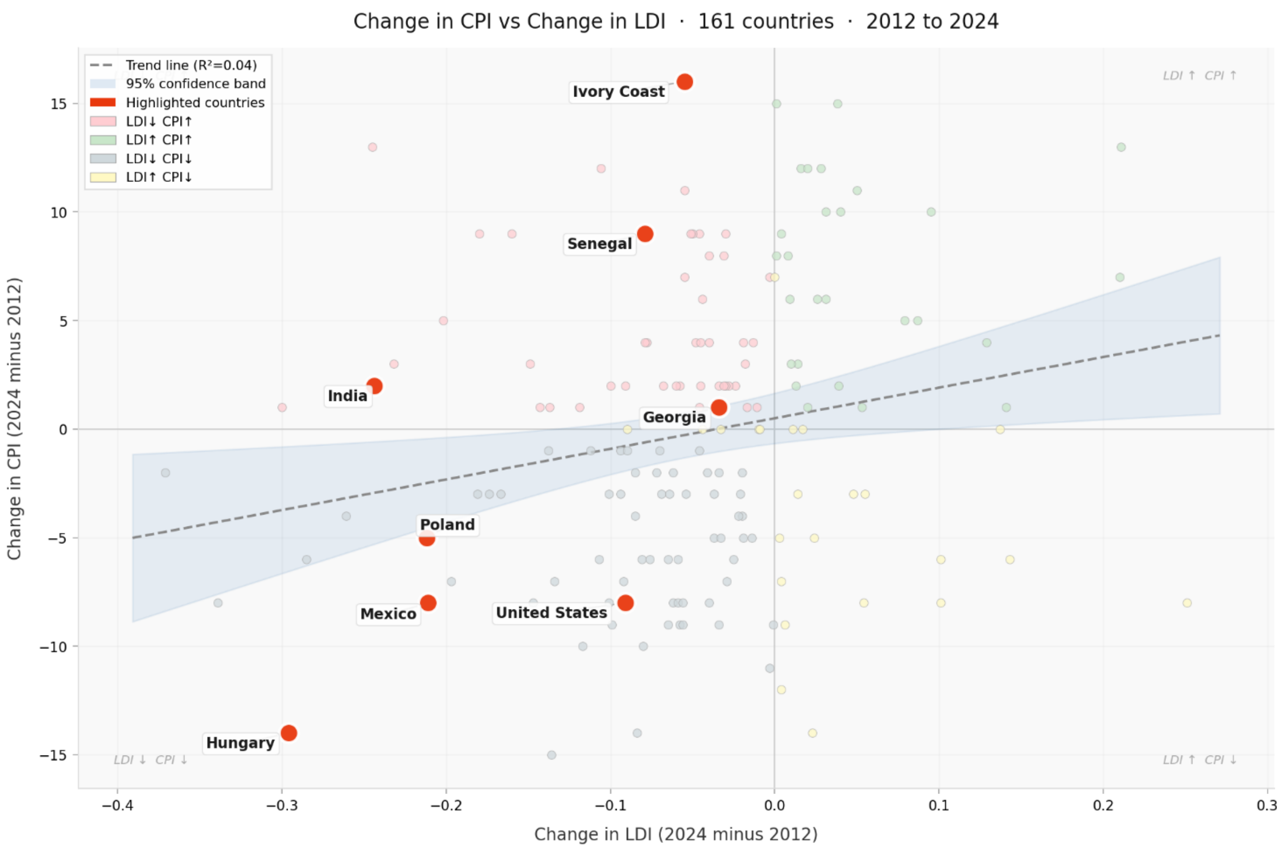
The search for suitable case studies drew upon two methods:

- method 1 involved comparing data from V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) with the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) between the years 2013 to 2023.[3] This data was analysed to identify countries that showed backsliding on the LDI while also seeing changes in CPI score over the same period.
- method 2 involved consultation with experts and a review of the literature on the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption policies and institutions in democracies to identify potential country case studies.

Figure 1 presents the eight countries selected for the case study analysis, plotting their scores on V-Dem's LDI against their respective CPI scores.

[3] There was a change in the CPI calculation methodology in 2012 that means that time series comparisons before then are not possible.

Figure 1: Changes in the Corruption Perceptions Index and the Liberal Democracy Index between 2012 to 2024



The scatter plot maps how 161 countries moved simultaneously on two dimensions between 2012 and 2024: the horizontal axis shows the change in liberal democratic quality (LDI), the vertical axis shows the change in perceived control of corruption in the public sector (CPI). The zero lines divide the chart into four quadrants, each representing a different combination of trajectories.

A dashed trend line confirms a weak positive relationship between the two — countries that improve in terms of quality of liberal democracy also tended to perform better on corruption control — but the fit is loose, meaning the two dimensions frequently move independently of one another.

Method 1 thus produced a set of countries in which declines in democratic accountability correlated with changes in perceived control of corruption. However, these may not necessarily be settings in which there is good evidence that anti-corruption measures have been instrumentalised.

As such, based on the quantitative data, the literature review (method 2) was used to refine the selection by isolating eight countries that:

a. while still typically classified as democracies, have experienced a decline in democratic performance in recent years
b. were explicitly identified in prior research as exhibiting instances of anti-corruption instrumentalisation

The eight highlighted countries all sit to the left of the vertical zero line: every one of them saw declines in the quality of liberal democracy over the 12-year period. But they diverge sharply on the vertical axis, splitting into two groups.

- Divergers — upper-left quadrant (LDI↓, CPI↑): Ivory Coast, Senegal, India and Georgia all improved on corruption control despite weakening democratic institutions. Ivory Coast shows the strongest CPI gain in the group (+16 points), followed by Senegal (+9). India and Georgia register smaller but positive CPI movements, with Georgia essentially flat at +1.
- Co-decliners — lower-left quadrant (LDI↓, CPI↓): Hungary, Mexico the United States and Poland all deteriorated on both dimensions simultaneously. Hungary is the most extreme case – the largest LDI drop (-0.296) paired with the largest CPI decline (-14 points), pushed furthest into the lower-left corner. Mexico (-0.211 LDI, -8 CPI) and the United States (−0.091 LDI, −8 CPI) show meaningful declines on both axes. Poland sits between them.

As such, the country case studies described below represent two distinct contexts. The first group of countries have improved on their control of public sector corruption over recent years, but at the same time have declined in terms of democratic accountability. The other group has declined in both quality of democracy and control of corruption.

The fact that there are reported instances of instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures in both groups ("divergers" and "co-decliners") illustrates two broader points.

First, instrumentalisation of anti-corruption may contribute to declining scores on indices of democratic accountability, for the reasons set out in the introduction, namely that instrumentalisation is thought to damage the rule of law, weaken oversight bodies and hollow out democratic checks and balances.[4]

Second, while we might expect, following Jackson, Williams and Amundsen (2026: 14) that where anti-corruption measures are abused this would undermine control of corruption, it appears – based on the set of country case studies considered here - that instrumentalisation may have heterogeneous effects on global indices of corruption control.

[4] Note, however, that this does not imply that anti-corruption measures in sample countries are responsible for causing democratic decline. There are many drivers of democratic decline, and instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures may only be one of many factors.

This is perhaps explained by the gap between the real and perceived levels of corruption; even if instrumentalisation does, in fact, weaken anti-corruption safeguards, well-known issues with aggregate global corruption indices (e.g. policy lag, attribution problems, external validity of indicators) may mean this is not reflected in a country's score. Indeed, the experts whose opinions are used to score the level of corruption in a given polity might:

a. perceive that an anti-corruption measure is being instrumentalised by powerholders, but nonetheless believe it to have some positive effect in reducing corruption
b. perceive that an anti-corruption measure is being instrumentalised by powerholders, and believe this has an adverse effect on corruption control
c. not perceive anti-corruption measures to be being instrumentalised by powerholders
d. not be aware of anti-corruption measures at all

In other words, a country's performance on indices such as the CPI can either improve or decline in settings where anti-corruption policies appear to have been instrumentalised or even captured by powerholders.

Case studies

An important caveat is that the case studies presented below refer to reported instances of instrumentalisation. They are drawn from a review of academic literature as well as reports by international organisations, civil society actors and media sources. Given the inherent difficulty of establishing definitively whether instrumentalisation has occurred,[5] it should be recognised that some accounts may be incomplete, based on limited or partisan evidence, or not wholly accurate.

Divergers

Côte d'Ivoire

In Côte d'Ivoire, there are some indications of potential instrumentalisation of anti-corruption, which mainly relate to accusations of, investigations into and prosecutions for corruption. Criminal cases, including anti-corruption enforcement

[5] As discussed in the introduction, it is epistemologically challenging to establish whether the intention of the powerholder designing or implementing the anti-corruption measure was to achieve the stated purpose of reducing the impact of corruption on society or rather to advance their own self-interest.

actions, against prominent political opponents of the president appear to be clustered around election cycles, such as in 2020 and 2025, which is suggestive of the intent behind them of narrowing the field of political contenders.

However, evidence of instrumentalisation of anti-corruption against prominent political opponents in the country remains largely anecdotal or contested as much of it is based on testimony from opposition figures who have alleged that cases against them are “politically motivated”. Moreover, certain civil society groups, including the Ivorian Youth Leaders’ Network (RIJLI) have argued that the government is increasingly willing to collaborate openly with civil society and the private sector to curb corruption (Young 2022).

While the literature does not definitively establish instances of instrumentalised anti-corruption enforcement, there a few cases of asymmetric enforcement at convenient moments that point to anti-corruption measures being used for political gain.

One of the most prominent examples cited is the prosecution of former prime minister Guillaume Soro who, in 2020, was convicted in absentia on charges of embezzlement and money laundering and sentenced to 20 years in prison (Bocchese 2020a). Soro’s lawyers, who boycotted the trial, argued that the prosecution was politically motivated (France24 2020), which is leant some plausibility by the facts that Soro had broken with President Ouattara in 2019 over their respective presidential ambitions and the conviction rendered Soro ineligible to run as a candidate in the 2020 presidential election (US Library of Congress 2020). Commentary at the time linked the timing of the prosecution to the political challenge he appeared to pose to Ouattara (Mutizwa 2019), viewing this as the “latest chapter of a power struggle that began to unravel since president Alassane Ouattara’s re-election in October 2015” (Bocchese 2020a).

In addition, shortly before the trial, the African Court on Human and People’s Rights (2020) ordered the government of Côte d’Ivoire to suspend its arrest warrant against Soro, which the Ivorian authorities appeared to ignore (US Library of Congress 2020). There were also concerns about due process in the trial, which appeared designed to prevent him returning to the country rather than secure a sound conviction (Bocchese 2020b).

There are other reports that the authorities have, in recent years, launched politically motivated cases against political opponents. However, it is worth noting that not all of these cases are brought on charges of corruption, suggesting that instrumentalisation of anti-corruption laws are just one part of a wider playbook to restrict the opposition through judicial action.[6]

For instance, in 2021 Soro was also sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment on separate charges relating to an alleged coup attempt (Al Jazeera 2021). More recently, ahead of the 2025 election, opposition leader Tidjane Thiam was struck from the electoral list by a court ruling that he had lost his Ivorian nationality decades earlier by acquiring French citizenship, despite having renounced French nationality in March 2025 specifically to run (The Africa Report 2025).

Likewise, the president of the Ivorian Youth Movement (MJCI) is an activist and outspoken critic of nepotism and corruption (Eboulé 2026). He was arrested during a sit-in that he had organised in front of the Ministry of Public Service, after he denounced irregularities and other “questionable practices” in the organisation of customs service entrance exams. He was in prison for 15 days (and received a suspended sentence and fine). According to Eboulé (2026), this is part of a wider system of crackdowns on freedom of association and exclusion of opposition voices in the political system.

Finally, some analysts point to the weak implementation of genuine anti-corruption reforms and impunity for corrupt officeholders (Bertelsmann Foundation 2026a). Comparative appraisals of the country’s anti-corruption progress note that Côte d’Ivoire has made progress in establishing the formal institutional framework for curbing corruption (Gebrihet 2025). For example, in 2021, the government established an Ivorian Ministry of Good Governance and Anti-Corruption (2022), though this was later dissolved in 2023 (Bertelsmann Foundation 2026a).

Yet both the Bertelsmann Foundation (2026a) and Gumba (2021) have pointed to instances of high-level corruption and nepotism in government as indicative of the fact that anti-corruption rhetoric exists alongside patronage politics, while symbolic prosecutions for corruption do not amount to systemic change.

Georgia

Georgia has experienced democratic backsliding in recent years, with the European Parliament (2026) recently stating that the ruling party has “not taken any steps to reverse [these] negative trends”. These include reports of violence and abuse against protestors, journalists, political opposition figures and other government critics with “near-total impunity for perpetrators” (Gogia 2026). Other legislative changes in the

[6] For example, a 2026 report on civic space in Côte d’Ivoire pointed to recent government ordinances to regulate the operations of civil society organisations that in practice restrict their activities (EU SEE 2026).

last few years have restricted fundamental freedoms, including broadcasting regulation, protest rules and laws that narrow civic space and public participation (Gogia 2026). Administrative proceedings have been misused to target political opponents and other critics (Gogia 2026).

The instrumentalisation of various anti-corruption tools appears to be a conscious component of the ruling party's arsenal to consolidate political power, including through foreign agent laws and the repurposing the anti-corruption agency as a means of limiting civic space and targeting opposing voices.

In 2024, the Georgian parliament adopted the law on transparency of foreign influence, which introduced burdensome reporting requirements on civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent media receiving foreign funding. While this law threatened to restrict these organisations' access to resources in violation of international law protecting freedom of association (ECNL 2025), the Georgian government has reportedly struggled to enforce it due to a lack of administrative capacity (HRW 2025a). This was followed in 2025 by amendments to the law on grants. These amendments sought to establish government control over which NGOs are permitted to receive foreign funding. Furthermore, the revisions to the law attempted to compel over 80 NGOs to hand over extensive financial and personal data to the anti-corruption bureau (ACB) (TI Georgia 2025), though many NGOs have reportedly refused to comply with the law (OC Media 2025).

Furthermore, in September 2024, the ACB designated the civil society organisations Transparency International Georgia and Choose Europe with the status of "person with a declared electoral goal" (ECNL 2025). This meant that these organisations were prevented from registering as observers of the 2024 election, monitoring the electoral campaign or conducting other oversight activities related to the electoral process (ECNL 2025). ECNL (2025) has argued that this designation is not compliant with Georgia's obligations under Article 13[7] of the UN Convention against Corruption and is an example of anti-corruption measures being used to restrict civic space.

TI Georgia (2025) alleges that the ACB has been used as a tool to persecute independent CSOs. TI Georgia (2022) has pointed out that the head of bureau is appointed by the prime minister, which undermines the independence of the institution. At the same time, the state security service and prosecutor's office maintain control of the investigative function, which hinders the ACB's operational autonomy (TI Georgia 2022). Georgia's Association of Young Lawyers (GYLA) has recently stated that

[7] Article 13 requires UNCAC States Parties to take measures to promote the participation of non-state actors in anti-corruption efforts.

the ACB has exceeded its anti-corruption mandate and has been used to control and restrict the activities of civil society (GYLA 2026).[8]

Moreover, since early 2025, the Georgian government has deployed a sequence of laws that equip it with non-conviction based freezing and confiscation powers over civil society. As administrative rather than criminal tools, these allow the government to freeze an organisation's funds without needing to secure a criminal conviction. The ACB has played an important role here in drawing up administrative offence reports that allow it to impose asset freezes on CSOs that are critical of the government (Amnesty International 2025; Human Rights Watch 2025). There is no clear timeline for resolution, and if the targeted organisation is ever able to successfully challenge the freezing order, it is probable that it will have been unable to pay staff, run programmes or support the communities it serves. Critics have argued that the true intention behind these measures was to silence critics of the government rather than to address genuine cases of corruption since the ACB has focused its energies on targeting the government's political opponents rather than scrutinising suspicious public procurement processes that awarded public funds to companies linked to the ruling party (TI Georgia 2025).

The instrumentalisation of the anti-corruption agency has occurred, perhaps not coincidentally, during a time that civil society watchdogs allege members of the ruling party enjoyed impunity for corruption. This would lend credence to the suggestion by Jackson, Williams and Amundsen (2026: 14) that the "abuse of anti-corruption has the side-effect of making corruption more likely to occur".

TI Georgia (2026) tracks alleged cases of high-level corruption in Georgia. As of May 2026, 315 alleged cases of elite corruption have been registered involving more than 267 current or former high-ranking officials of the ruling party (TI Georgia 2026).

Corrupt activities have been observed throughout the public procurement process in Georgia, including non-competitive procurements and simplified tenders that favour companies associated with the ruling party (TI Georgia 2025). Since 2013, companies linked to the incumbent party officials have secured around US$1.2 billion in state tenders (TI Georgia 2025).

Other forms of public finances may also have been misappropriated by the ruling party. For example, employment programmes intended to support vulnerable citizens

[8] As of November 2025, the Anti-Corruption Bureau was dissolved and will be absorbed into the state audit office (Bardouka 2025). This was reportedly done to ensure that it sits within a higher and more independent institutional body (Bardouka 2025). GYLA (2026) notes that it remains an open question whether moving the ACB's mandate and work to the state audit office will increase its future effectiveness and impartiality.

are allegedly redirected to further the party's interests, including financing informal networks of party affiliates (TI Georgia 2025).

India

In India, there have been numerous reports of anti-corruption allegations, investigations and prosecutions being politically motivated. This comes against a background of centralisation of executive power in the country (Vaishnav 2025). It has been accompanied by the imposition of constraints on the freedom of expression through the country's legal and constitutional framework and government suppression of dissent and vocal critics (Vaishnav 2025:36).

Political rhetoric

Corruption is almost invariably a topic in election campaigns in India, with candidates often depicting themselves as anti-corruption champions while accusing their opponents of corrupt practices (Thakurta 2024). Indeed, the timing of anti-corruption allegations in India generally aligns with the electoral cycle. One study of 30 Indian states between 1988 and 2009 found that incumbent politicians exert greater visible efforts to control corruption during election years, with scheduled elections (as opposed to unscheduled) resulting in an increased number of corruption cases registered with the state's anti-corruption agencies (Vadlamannati 2017). This could indicate that anti-corruption is used as a strategy to win elections rather than a genuine attempt to address public sector corruption.

While still in opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) proved adept at capitalising on popular anger against the previous United Progress Alliance government over high-profile corruption scandals and the emergence of huge anti-corruption protests in 2011 (Thakurta 2024). Under Narendra Modi's leadership, the BJP's use of anti-corruption rhetoric cast the incumbent government as irrevocably corrupt and positioned the BJP as the primary political alternative. This struck a chord with voters, which helped to fuel "the BJP's rise to power in 2014 on a platform of anti-corruption, clean governance, and inclusive development" (Vaishnav 2025: 43).

In power, the BJP has frequently levelled allegations of corruption against political opponents and used this as justification for a range of actions and policy measures (Thorner 2024).

For instance, the party deployed anti-corruption rhetoric to justify the introduction of a novel way of raising political finance (Shakil 2026). In 2017, the finance minister introduced a new scheme of "electoral bonds", nominally to reduce Indian political parties' reliance on undisclosed cash donations by forcing donations through the formal banking system (Deka 2024). In practice, the new system allowed the ruling party – but no-one else – to see details of political donations (Agarwal 2024; Mohan 2024). Moreover, journalists uncovered multiple instances of apparent quid pro quos between corporate donors and ruling parties, where firms make political donations to the BJP shortly after (or before) winning government contracts (Mudgal 2024). In addition, 14 of the top 30 donors had faced raids by federal enforcement agencies, feeding claims of "extortion" that the opposition levelled directly at the government (Mudgal 2024). Ultimately, the supreme court ruled in 2024 that the electoral bonds scheme was unconstitutional, holding that anonymous bonds violated voters' right to information (Deka 2024).

State practice

Since coming to power, Modi's administration has reportedly deployed law enforcement and oversight agencies including the directorate of enforcement (ED), the income tax department, the Central Bureau of Investigation and the national investigation agency to investigate corruption cases involving opposition leaders.

Vaishnav (2025: 45) points out that previous governments also relied on the ED – with its mandate to investigate and prosecute economic crimes including money laundering and ability to search and arrest without warrant – to "pressure opposition politicians through the selective filing (or withdrawal) of corruption charges". However, it is clear that the BJP government has scaled up this strategy; between 2014 and 2022, there was a fourfold increase in ED cases lodged against politicians, 95% of whom belonged to opposition parties (Tiwary 2022). In total, the ED summoned, questioned or raided nearly 150 opposition politicians between 2014 and 2024 (Das, Chaturvedi and Choudhury 2024).

For instance, in 2024, ahead of the general election, one of New Delhi's top elected officials was arrested by the federal enforcement directorate, which accused his party and ministers of accepting approximately US$12 million in bribes from liquor contractors (PBS News 2024). The opposition party accused the government of misusing its power to harass and weaken the opposition to gain unfair advantage in the polls (PBS News 2024). Likewise, the Central Bureau of Investigation has raided the homes of top opposition leaders, accusing them of acquiring assets through shell companies and corruption (OCCRP 2017). Shortly before the 2024 general elections, the opposition Congress Party had its bank accounts frozen by India's income tax department in relation to a pending tax case from 2018, which inhibited the party's ability to contest the election (Al Jazeera 2024a).

Similar tactics have been deployed against CSOs under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which allows the ED to cancel organisations' licences and freeze their accounts without needing to secure a criminal conviction against the target. This is a potential example of the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures, as the Indian government has claimed that the FCRA regime is needed to prevent the abuse of non-profit funds and ensure compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) framework to prevent money laundering and the financing of terrorism (Amnesty International 2023). Since 2014, the Indian government has reportedly cancelled the FCRA licences of more than 19,000 civil society organisations (ICJ 2020). In 2020 and 2021, the ED froze property valued at roughly US$2.64 million belonging to Amnesty International India on charges of money laundering (ICJ 2020), which was allegedly perpetrated as a means of bypassing restrictions imposed by the FCRA (The New Indian Express 2021).

Critics have labelled these moves as politically motivated (OCCRP 2017), arguing that "instead of curbing corruption, the government treated these agencies as 'weapons' to target those opposed to it" (Thakurta 2024; OCCRP 2017). Notably, between 2014 and 2024, 25 opposition figures facing corruption probes switched allegiance to the BJP, which resulted in 23 of these cases being paused or dropped (Tiwary 2024). This is suggestive of a pattern of corruption accusations being politically motivated (Bhattacharya 2025).

Corruption investigations have also targeted civil society actors. In 2020, the ED froze the bank accounts of Amnesty International on charges that it had been channelling money to four entities in India in contravention of laws governing foreign finance (Das, Chaturvedi and Choudhury 2024).

Alongside the institutional framework, Thakurta (2024) contends that the current government has used existing laws, including the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, more aggressively than its predecessors, as well as making it difficult for an accused person to obtain bail and shifting the "burden of proof" to the defendant. Additionally, a proposed bill in 2025 would allow the sacking of any minister if that individual remains in prison for 30 consecutive days (Bhattacharya 2025). Critics have claimed that this could be used to corner opposition led state governments where false allegations are mounted (Bhattacharya 2025).

Senegal

Political rhetoric

Anti-corruption in Senegal is, as elsewhere, closely tied to wider political contestation. A prominent example is the Y'en a marre protest movement, which linked concerns about former president Wade's breach of constitutional term limits with wider grievances arising from popular perceptions of a corrupt patronage system (Prause & Wienkoop 2017).

Since President Bassirou Diomaye Faye and Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko took power in April 2024, the government has made accountability for alleged misconduct on the part of former president Macky Sall's administration a central aspect of its platform (Barry 2025). Sonko notably declared a zero tolerance era against financial malpractice and corrupt practices (Barry 2025).

State practice

While corruption allegations in Senegalese politics have always been common (Resimić 2024), the Bertelsman Foundation (2026b) noted that, under former president Macky Sall from 2012 to 2024, these attracted more controversy because they led to the prosecution of members of the opposition or former ruling party. During Sall's tenure, the enforcement of anti-corruption legislation was repeatedly described as "politicised and selective" (Resimić 2024). In particular, under President Sall, a special anti-corruption court, the Cour de repression contre l'enrichissement illicite (CREI), primarily pursued political opponents or those associated with the former ruling party, rather than pursuing corruption cases even-handedly (Bertelsmann Foundation 2026b).

For example, in 2017, the then mayor of Dakar, Khalifa Sall, was arrested for allegedly embezzling public money, after US$2.9 million was reported missing (BBC 2017). This was in the run up to the 2019 presidential elections, in which he was widely considered to be a possible contender (BBC 2017). Khalifa Sall's lawyers claimed that this was a politically motivated arrest (BBC 2017).

Since the transfer of power to President Faye in 2024, there has been a significant increase in anti-corruption enforcement actions. Between September 2024 and April 2025, around 262 people were arrested and around CFA15 billion (around US$26 million) recovered (Jeune Afrique 2025). One prominent case involved the arrest of five former ministers on charges of embezzlement, misuse of public funds and acceptance of bribes during the Sall government (Africa Business 2025).

Critics – largely from the current opposition – have denounced this anti-corruption crackdown as a witch-hunt that disproportionately targets members of former president Sall's administration (Africa Business 2025). Certain journalists have also claimed that pressure has been exerted on media outlets, with 381 media outlets the government deemed to be non-compliant with the press code shut down in early 2025 (Africa Business 2025). Notably, two journalists were arrested for their attempt to interview one of the figures accused of corruption (Africa Business 2025).

However, some civil society observers have pointed to the passage of reforms – such as a whistleblower protection law and a restructuring of the anti-fraud agency OFNAC – as evidence that the new administration's political will to curb corruption is genuine (Africa Business 2025). However, International IDEA (2025) has criticised the fact that President Faye has been exempted from the scope of a law designed to expand the number of officials required to declare their assets.

Co-decliners

Hungary

During Viktor Orbán's administration, Hungary was characterised by serious democratic backsliding (Enyedi & Mikola 2025). This included constitutional amendments, court packing, media capture and the gradual removal of checks and balances (Zgut-Przybylska 2026). Local governments that were controlled by the opposition were drained financially, allowing the ruling party to monopolise resources and decision-making power (Zgut-Przybylska 2026).

The instrumentalisation of anti-corruption policy chiefly found expression in the repurposing of oversight institutions to target the administration's opponents and restrict civic space (Transparency International 2018). After 2010, anti-corruption enforcement became notably selective, targeting perpetrators of petty corruption while leaving corruption involving regime officials, their associates and influential oligarchs largely untouched (Zgut 2022). Indeed, Zgut (2022) argues that clientelist forms of corruption were an integral part of Orbán's governance model, which distributed informal political and economic power to a group of oligarchs, who also assisted the government in taking control of the media landscape.

Considering who is not investigated for corruption can shed light on the extent to which anti-corruption efforts have become instrumentalised. Companies linked to Orbán's family and inner circle – including his son-in-law István Tiborcz's firm Elios, and childhood friend Lőrinc Mészáros, who became Hungary's richest man initially and largely through EU funded public contracts – were repeatedly flagged by OLAF for irregularities (rigged bidding, conflicts of interest), yet Hungarian authorities found reasons to dismiss the cases domestically (Erdelyi 2018; Becker 2022; Harenbrock 2018). Tellingly, when a once-favoured oligarch, Lajos Simicska, fell out with Orbán in 2015, the pattern reversed and Simicska's financial interests were targeted and redistributed to Orbán's network (VSquare 2018; Petho & Szabo 2019; Petho 2018). This suggests that the issue of who is penalised and who enjoys impunity for corruption in Hungary was a function of political loyalty rather than the strength of the legal case against them.

Scheppele & Mészáros (2022) note that the national tax and customs office has been used to harass government opponents. This reportedly included the targeted use of invasive tax audits either directed at businesspeople with alleged ties to the political opposition or government critics or used to pressure businesspeople to sell their companies to associates of the ruling party.

Simultaneously, the political climate and repressive tactics of the Orbán administration reduced advocacy opportunities for civil society although anti-corruption groups including Transparency International Hungary remained critical and active under restrained civic space (Pirro & Della Porta 2020). This is encapsulated in the 2023 law on the defence of national sovereignty, which established the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO), nominally intended to address foreign influence, and equipped it with opaque powers (Transparency International 2025b).

In May 2025, a proposed bill, On the Transparency of Public Life, would have empowered the SPO (the enforcement arm of the protection of national sovereignty law) to recommend any legal entity receiving foreign support, including EU funding, be placed on a government watchlist (HRW 2025b). It would also have meant that all foreign funds would be pre-approved by the Hungarian tax authority (HRW 2025b). Largely due to increased domestic opposition and international pressure, in June 2025 the Orbán administration postponed the proposed bill, and it remained in legislative limbo until the general election on 12th April 2026 (Liberties 2025).

After 2022, external pressure from the European Union, which threatened to withhold billions in grants through its conditionality mechanism, prompted some concessions such as the establishment of the integrity authority and anti-corruption working group including civil society organisations to satisfy EU conditions (Enyedi & Mikola 2025; Gorni 2022). Yet while the EU-imposed reform package resulted in some positive effects, Orbán's government proved adept at engineering the new legal and institutional framework to render oversight institutions largely toothless and enable insider enrichment to continue (Mészáros & Scheppele 2022; Martin and Hajnal 2025).

Taken together, the evidence shows that in Orbán's Hungary, the anti-corruption agenda was politicised in rhetoric and selectively applied in practice, while anti-corruption institutions were largely designed to satisfy external (EU) pressure while remaining structurally unable to touch the ruling party's patronage network (Gorni 2025).

Mexico

Mexico is a complicated case in terms of the extent to which anti-corruption efforts are sincere or instrumentalised. While there is no single pattern in the literature, there are indications of anti-corruption being used rhetorically to denigrate opponents, suggestions of selective enforcement, and evidence that institutional designs have been shaped largely by political incentives.

Political rhetoric

Political rhetoric in Mexico has long made great play with corruption, and electoral campaigns have often involved denunciation of corrupt opponents and grand pledges of anti-corruption crackdowns (Nieto 2018).

President López Obrador, who was in office between 2018 and 2024, made anti-corruption a central plank of his political promise and communication strategy (De Hoyos, Lendo & Llanos 2021). Former president López Obrador and his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, have repeatedly declared that Mexico has entered a "regime of honesty" in which "privileges are over, corruption is over" framing their governments as a clean break from the graft of prior administrations (Mexico News Daily 2025).

At the same time, his critics have argued that this rhetorical sleight-of-hand of reducing all of the country's challenges to a simple idea of countering corruption served as a means of advancing his political agenda (De Hoyos, Lendo & Llanos 2021). While this political messaging appears to have been fairly successful – public approval of the government's efforts to curb corruption soared from 24% in 2017 to 61% in 2019 (Transparency International 2019b: 48) – Carrillo (2026: 118) places this firmly within the populist playbook.

In recent years, reforms to overhaul the judiciary have been introduced on the grounds that action is needed to curtail judicial corruption, even though citizen surveys have consistently rated judges as less corrupt than other public officials including the police and politicians (INEGI 2021). Former president López Obrador had long advocated for such reform, asserting that corruption, nepotism and abuses of power were deeply entrenched within the judiciary (Berg and Hidalgo 2025). According to Parra and Heckel (2024) the "constant mentions" of internal corruption within the judiciary in press conferences and by the spokespersons of political actors were an intentional attempt to build momentum for reform and win public support.

Some analysts contend that these reforms – including relaxed qualification requirements, shorter judicial tenures, reduced salaries and the creation of new oversight bodies – will in practice reduce the independence of the judiciary (Casey 2025).

The most consequential element of the package is the introduction of judicial elections, making Mexico one of the only countries to elect nearly all of its judges (Berg and Hidalgo 2025). Candidates for judicial office are elected from lists vetted by evaluation committees and subject to veto by the executive, legislature and judiciary (Casey 2025). Proponents have framed these reforms as an anti-corruption measure, arguing that elected judges will be more accountable to the public and less susceptible to influence from economic or criminal actors (Casey 2025).

International bodies have also raised concerns that this judicial reform may conflict with human rights standards by allowing political considerations to outweigh merit in judicial appointments, thereby undermining judicial independence (IACHR 2024). In addition, opposition parties, some members of civil society and some judges have appealed to the supreme court against the reform, arguing that in practice the measures will increase the executive branch's control over the courts and erode the separation of powers (Aguilar 2026:9). Nonetheless, in September 2024, Mexico's senate approved this constitutional reform, which resulted in over 1,800 judges being dismissed through a random selection process (Aguilar 2026:9).

State practice

According to observers, López Obrador's rhetorical campaigns had implications for anti-corruption practice as it privileged a personalistic approach to curbing corruption that prioritised symbolic gestures over measures to strengthen relevant institutions (De Hoyos, Lendo & Llanos 2021). This reportedly led to the neglect of institutions established to make anti-corruption enforcement independent and durable, most notably the national anti-corruption system and the federal tribunal of administrative justice, where his administration allowed key positions to remain unfulfilled (Meyer 2020). Indeed, while the national anti-corruption system experienced budget cuts, López Obrador continued emphasising the importance of anti-corruption efforts championed by his government (Rojas-Salazar and Vargas-Pineda 2026).

Moreover, the government has dismantled some of the infrastructure of institutional oversight. In December 2024, a constitutional reform eliminated INAI, Mexico's independent access to information commission and data protection watchdog,[9] along with six other independent regulators (Nieto-Morales 2024; Al Jazeera 2024b).

INAI's functions were folded into the secretariat of anti-corruption and good governance, an executive branch body reporting directly to the president, meaning the agency once tasked with checking government abuses now sits inside the government it was meant to check, and the new body has reduced oversight powers and resources (Nieto-Morales 2024). Critics, including the New York City Bar Association (2024), have warned that this centralisation weakens horizontal accountability.

[9] Some of INAI's functions were later replaced by a new administrative entity called Transparencia para el Pueblo. This reflects a use of anti-corruption framing to justify the disbandment of a well-regarded independent information commission.

At the same time, there is widespread reporting that López Obrador directed anti-corruption campaigns selectively against his political rivals while overlooking misconduct by his allies (Expansion Politica 2025; Wachauf 2025; Financial Times 2019; Los Angeles Times 2022). López Obrador's predecessor as president, Enrique Peña Nieto, has similarly been criticised for his unwillingness to target corruption on the part of his supporters (Garcia & Felbab-Brown 2026).

Since assuming office in 2024, President Sheinbaum has launched a broad crackdown on collusion between the country's political class and organised crime groups, resulting in the arrest of dozens of public officials, including many from her own party (Garcia & Felbab-Brown 2026). Despite this, some commentators allege that Sheinbaum's response to cartel-linked corruption has been too lenient on high-ranking politicians from her own party, with whom she has negotiated "golden parachutes" (cushy alternative positions meant to facilitate a quiet exit) rather than prosecuting them (Freeman 2025).

Poland

Poland offers one of the clearer European case studies of anti-corruption tools being turned into partisan weapons.

Political rhetoric

Dating back to the early 2000s and the first Law and Justice (PiS) administration from 2005 to 2007, there has been a rich tradition of anti-corruption slogans, agencies and campaigns being used against opponents or to bolster political legitimacy in Poland (Heurtaux 2009; Gadowska 2010). Historically, parliamentary investigative committees on corruption, heavily covered by media, became a standard tool that politicians used both as a career springboard and as a weapon against political rivals (Wolszczak 2012).

State practice

The Central Anti-Corruption Bureau (CBA) has long been a central player. Krajewska and Makowski (2017) describe a 2007 episode in which the CBA head, a former politician of the ruling camp, publicly disclosed an investigation into an opposition MP just before elections and framed it in explicitly electoral terms.

More recently, the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption practice has primarily concerned the deployment of surveillance tools by anti-corruption institutions to target political opponents. This occurred during a period of wider democratic backsliding between 2015 and 2023, when the governing PiS initiated a process of unpicking checks and balances established after the country's democratic transition in the 1990s (Chiopris & Nalepa 2024).

Since the PiS lost power in 2023, the current government under Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition has launched investigations into the use of a spyware tool called Pegasus by the PiS administration to spy on opposition linked figures (Notes from Poland 2025). Tusk's minister in charge of the security services, Tomasz Siemoniak, has stated that, between 2015 and 2023, the CBA purchased and used Pegasus spyware against 578 people, including political opponents of the PiS (Tilles 2026; Ptak 2024). In 2025, the former deputy head of Poland's CBA was charged with unlawfully sharing material obtained through surveillance using Pegasus (Notes from Poland 2025). Polish prosecutors are also seeking to charge the former justice minister with misusing public funds and purchasing the Israeli spyware, Pegasus, allegedly to target opposition politicians (OCCRP 2025). In November 2025, the Polish parliament voted to revoke the former justice minister's parliamentary immunity to allow the case against him to proceed (Politico 2025).

The European Parliament (2022: 6-7) found that Poland likely acquired the Pegasus spyware in 2017 following high-level meetings with Israeli and regional leaders framed around security and technological cooperation. Although the government initially denied the purchase, it later confirmed it in 2022, with evidence showing that Pegasus was bought for the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau using funds improperly diverted from the justice fund, in breach of Polish law.

The European Parliament (2022) further noted concerns about misuse and oversight, highlighting that Poland may have violated the terms of use set by the spyware's developer, though this has not been officially confirmed. The NSO Group has acknowledged revoking Pegasus licences from two European countries and stated that it investigates misuse only when alerted by whistleblowers or media reports, with the ability to suspend access if violations are confirmed (European Parliament 2022:10). Given the reports made on Pegasus' use in Poland, it is likely that Poland was among the countries whose access was revoked due to breaches of the company's terms of use (European Parliament 2022:10).

In 2026, the Polish parliament voted in favour of abolishing the CBA and transferring its powers to the domestic intelligence service, tax administration and police on the basis that the CBA had become "politicised" (Mularczyk 2026). While the law passed parliament, it faces a veto from the opposition aligned President Karol Nawrocki.

PiS has framed this move as retaliatory rather than reformist, arguing that abolishing the CBA would weaken anti-corruption enforcement (Tilles 2026). This is more widely illustrative of how different political factions accuse one another of instrumentalising the state's anti-corruption apparatus once in power.

United States

The enforcement by US authorities of extra-territorial anti-corruption instruments such as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) has long been held by some observers to adopt a selective focus that is tied to US interests (Gutterman 2026). Other analysts, such as Hogic (2023), have contended that the Biden administration's emphasis on countering "strategic corruption" was partly a means of instrumentalising anti-corruption efforts to counter the influence of geopolitical adversaries.

Domestically in the US, there are growing indications of the politicisation of anti-corruption efforts under the Trump administration, particularly regarding selective enforcement and executive interference in criminal cases.

Political rhetoric

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign explicitly ran on an anti-corruption platform, promising to "drain the swamp" in Washington DC. The "drain the swamp" slogan offers insight into how anti-corruption language can become a political tool. Critics have alleged that "drain the swamp" functioned less as a policy commitment and more as a rhetorical weapon, deployed to delegitimise the incumbent administration and win popular support (Newman 2021; Bigeon 2019). Bigeon (2019) argues that the phrase resonated with many voters and in their eyes cast Washington elites, bureaucrats, media and political opponents as "corrupt", while presenting Trump as the outsider uniquely able to cleanse the system.

Olivia Newman (2021) has argued that this anti-corruption rhetoric has provided cover for corrupt governance by enabling Trump to exploit widespread cynicism towards the political process to win backing for acts of political retribution and self-dealing. This places Trump in a wider pattern internationally of populist leaders winning power through anti-corruption appeals and then taking steps to weaken institutional constraints on executive power(Zhang 2023).

State practice

In 2023, the FBI launched a probe to determine whether the then mayor of New York, Eric Adams, had received illegal foreign donations from Turkey with a construction company as a conduit, resulting in Adams being indicted in September 2024 (Pereira 2025). During Trump's presidential campaign, Trump claimed that the investigation into Adams was politically motivated and met him days before the presidential inauguration (Pereira 2025). In February 2025, the Department of Justice (DoJ) requested the case be dismissed, not on the strength of the evidence but rather because the prosecution was hindering Adam's ability to help the Trump administration crack down on immigration (CBS News 2025). This led the assistant

US attorney for the Southern District of New York and five other federal officials to resign in protest. Nonetheless, in April 2025 the case was dismissed (Pereira 2025).

The US federal government is also reportedly scrutinising the financial history of governor of California, Gavin Newsom, who is a vocal critic of the Trump administration (Mason and White 2026). Mason and White (2026) also state that Newsom's wife is being scrutinised for potential conflict of interest due to her involvement with non-profit organisations while serving as the first partner of California. Yet according to Mason and White (2026), there has been no public evidence of improper influence or corruption in connection with these activities.

There have been some recent attempts to repurpose anti-corruption legislation in the US, including the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), which was established in 1977 to prohibit US citizens and US related entities from bribing foreign government officials. However, the FCPA was suspended by executive order in February 2025. After the executive order was signed, companies currently or previously under investigation for bribery saw their stock prices rapidly increase (Crippa, Malesky and Picci 2026). When the suspension was lifted in June 2025, the new FCPA enforcement guidelines prioritised cases tied to cartels and transnational criminal organisations, rather than corporate bribery of a public official, although what constitutes a cartel or criminal organisation is unclear. This leads Crippa, Malesky and Picci (2026) to note that these rules could be enforced selectively against political opponents.

At the same time, anti-corruption bodies in the United States have had their resourcing dramatically reduced during the second Trump administration; the public integrity section in the DoJ went from 40 full-time attorneys to just two (Lucas 2026). In parallel, Lucas (2026) found that President Trump has pardoned at least 15 former elected officials and their co-conspirators who were charged with or convicted of corruption offences. The Campaign Legal Center has tracked cases where pardons reportedly followed financial support to Trump linked causes (US Department of Justice 2025a). This includes cases like Timothy Leweike whose company donated US$250,000 to Trump's inaugural fund in January 2025 while under DoJ scrutiny, and who was then pre-emptively pardoned by Trump before being indicted in July 2025 on charges relating to conspiracy to rig the bidding process for a multi-use arena at a public university in Texas (US Department of Justice 2025a; 2025b). Similarly, Trevor Milton, convicted of defrauding investors, was pardoned and excused from hundreds of millions of dollars in restitution after donating significant sums of money to Trump's campaign and associated political action committees (PACs) (Campaign Legal Center 2026).

This, together with the other cases of pardons and commutations documented by the Campaign Legal Center (2026: 16-20), suggest a novel form of the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption enforcement that enables heads of government to derive direct financial benefits from interactions with perpetrators of corruption. This is perhaps an interesting example of what Jackson, Williams and Amundsen (2026) refer to as the “abuse of anti-corruption for pecuniary interests”.

Reflections on the case studies

Given that the cases described above all relate to democracies, it is apparent that all countries – whether authoritarian or not – can be subjected to the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption measures. Some of the countries considered here exhibit initial indications of politicisation and instrumentalisation (Mexico), others are moving towards more entrenched forms of capture (Georgia, India), while a third group appear to be in the early stages of reversing the instrumentalisation of previous administrations (Poland, Hungary).[10]

The case studies reveal a wide array of methods of instrumentalisation. Applying Kassa's (2025:564) mechanisms of instrumentalisation, the case studies include examples of the following:

1. co-optation: in Georgia, the anti-corruption agency enforced the ruling party's restrictions on civil society
2. controlling: in Mexico, the independence of the judiciary has been limited on the grounds of curbing corruption
3. camouflage: in India, corruption investigations have reportedly focused on political opponents, while anti-corruption laws are not enforced against the ruling party and investigations may be dropped once a political opponent pledges loyalty

Beyond the occasionally crude weaponisation of corruption charges against opponents, some of the cases such as Hungary demonstrate a more insidious form of instrumentalisation: the reengineering of the legal and institutional framework to effectively legalise insider corruption while leaving anti-corruption bodies toothless. This shows how anti-corruption and good governance reforms, even if well intentioned or externally imposed, can be reconfigured to sustain vested interests rather than disrupt them.

However, in many of these cases it is difficult to delineate the limits of "instrumentalisation". For example, in Mexico, President Sheinbaum has cracked down on collusion between politicians and organised crime, arresting dozens of officials, including members of her own party (Garcia & Felbab-Brown 2026).

[10] It is worth noting that democratic backsliding of the type that occurred under the PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary can create "institutional traps" for new administrations that are difficult to overcome without turning to the same "illiberal playbook" used by aspiring autocrats (Bill & Stanley 2025).

However, some commentators argue that she has been too lenient towards senior cartel-linked politicians within her party (Freeman 2025).

Particularly in the case of corruption investigations, it is often difficult to determine whether these are legitimate probes, whether they are politically motivated or a combination of the two.

This speaks to a more fundamental issue as, in all societies, anti-corruption enforcement is not simply a neutral rule-of-law mechanism, it always has a political dimension. Even in states characterised by widespread good governance, it is the norm rather than the exception that anti-corruption investigations are influenced by political interests and generally target opponents of those in power, if only for the simple reason that they are easier to prosecute than officeholders.

This does not imply that all anti-corruption measures are inherently bogus, rather that real reforms and legitimate prosecutions coexist with rhetorical use, selective application and institutional designs constrained by the political interests they are supposed to police.

This is especially true in countries in which corruption and anti-corruption enforcement operate inside informal, clientelist political orders (Lauwo 2025). In these settings, it is likely that broad swaths of the political class from across the political spectrum engage in illicit activity or corrupt practices at one time or another. As such, many anti-corruption enforcement cases against political figures may have legal merit.

Enforcement can nonetheless be selective in the sense that it targets members of the opposition or officials from the previous administration. Enforcement can also be used as a control mechanism within a government or political faction to ensure loyalty to the elite and purge rivals.

As such, regardless of who is targeted and the strength of the prosecution's case, defendants are likely to claim they are the victim of a politicised process.

A key consideration is therefore how politically convenient the timing of the investigation is to those in power. Unsurprisingly, periods that seem particularly vulnerable to instrumentalisation are electoral cycles, the rise of populist politicians, wider de-democratisation efforts and moments of anti-corruption crackdowns.

Ultimately, determining what counts as instrumentalisation is more of an art than a science. It rests on interpreting powerholders' intent and comparing conduct across consecutive administrations. This is challenging but not impossible. As set out in Table 1 below, one can identify red flags for each of the archetypes of instrumentalisation methods, as well as associated mitigation measures and safeguards.

Overview of instrumentalisation methods, red flags and potential safeguards

Table 1: Overview of instrumentalisation methods, associated red flags and potential safeguards

Instrumentalisation method	Case studies	Red flags that suggest instrumentalisation	Potential safeguards
Use of anti-corruption rhetoric to consolidate power and weaken democratic accountability mechanisms	Present in nearly all case studies. For instance: **India**: the BJP's use of anti-corruption rhetoric helped to fuel the BJP's rise to power in 2014. Since coming to power, the BJP has frequently levelled allegations of corruption against political opponents and used this as justification for a range of actions and policy measures, including the introduction of the controversial electoral bonds scheme. **Mexico**: former president López Obrador and his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, have repeatedly framed their governments as clean breaks from the graft of prior administrations. In office, Obrador used	Anti-corruption drives intensify right before elections or when the leader faces a political threat, rather than following a steady, rule-based enforcement pattern. Framing corruption as endemic to "the old system", "elites" or "the deep state" in ways that justify sweeping away entire institutions rather than reforming specific practices. Personalisation of the anti-corruption message around a single leader positioned as the only one capable of "cleaning house", discouraging institutional checks on that leader. Corruption rhetoric paired with attacks on judicial independence, term limits or electoral commissions; in other words, reforms that remove constraints on the leader's own power.	Civil society and academic sectors can highlight where anti-corruption rhetoric has not produced tangible results in reducing corruption (Rojas-Salazar and Vargas-Pineda 2026) or acts as a cover for democratic backsliding. Risk assessments and political economy analysis can potentially identify instances of instrumentalisation. Provide urgent reinforcement to institutions (e.g. ombuds offices, supreme audit institutions, etc) not yet captured (Amundsen and Jackson 2021: 19) Awareness raising and public education programmes can inform citizens about what constitutes corruption and how (within

	accusations of widespread judicial corruption to justify reforms to the judiciary that critics argued would reduce judicial independence. **US**: Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign explicitly ran on an anti-corruption platform, promising to "drain the swamp" in Washington D.C. Observers contend that this anti-corruption rhetoric has enabled Trump to exploit widespread cynicism towards the political process to win backing for acts of political retribution and self-dealing.	"Streamlining" or "reforming" anti-corruption bodies, prosecutorial offices or courts in ways that place them under direct executive control, often justified as making enforcement "more effective". New "anti-corruption" agencies created that report only to the executive, bypassing existing independent oversight bodies. Emergency powers, special tribunals, or expedited procedures justified by the urgency of countering corruption, which strip defendants of normal due process protections.	reasonable limits) a genuine corruption case is investigated and prosecuted. This may help them to detect false accusations, which is particularly important during elections.
Selective (or baseless) investigation and/or prosecution of corruption cases against political opponents Policy instruments: • anti-corruption legislation • illicit enrichment laws • anti-money laundering laws	While it is hard to determine the merits of the case in each instance, most of the case studies covered included corruption cases targeting members of the political opposition **Anti-corruption legislation** **Senegal:** in 2017, the then mayor of Dakar, Khalifa Sall, was arrested for allegedly embezzling public money in the run up to the 2019 presidential elections. **Illicit enrichment laws** **India:** in 2017, the Central Bureau of Investigation raided the homes of top opposition leaders, accusing them of	Telling evidence of instrumentalisation can be who does *not* get investigated and how that changes when someone's political usefulness to the head of government ends. Asymmetric enforcement, where corruption charges fall heavily and swiftly on political opponents (including official opposition, independent media and rivals within the ruling faction) while credible allegations against regime insiders (family appointments, patronage networks) draw less institutional response. Convenient timing, where major legal actions against opposition figures have clustered around election cycles, removing serious challengers from the ballot.	Ensure a constitutional right to the presumption of innocence and due process protections (OHCHR 2026:7). Map the groups and actors that are pursuing the de-democratisation process (in this case, selective investigations) (Amundsen and Jackson 2021: 16). Whistleblower and witness protection mechanisms to encourage officials in law enforcement agencies and the judicial system to disclose malpractice and protect them once they have done so. Establish rules requiring that investigations be opened based on predetermined evidentiary thresholds or referrals (e.g., from auditors,

	acquiring assets through shell companies and corruption. **Anti-money laundering laws** **Côte d'Ivoire:** former prime minister Soro was convicted in absentia on charges of money laundering and sentenced to 20 years in prison.	Cases are announced with great fanfare but rarely result in convictions, implying the accusation itself is what mattered rather than the legal outcome. From the UN Human Rights Council (2026:4-5) on recognising instrumentalisation of the justice sector: - People from targeted groups are disproportionately chosen in an observable pattern for legal processes such as criminal prosecution, civil proceedings and administrative proceedings. - Violations of due process guarantees or reduced fair trial guarantees are observable in cases brought against targeted individuals or groups. In particular, this may involve the use or abuse of pre-trial detention, undue delays, obstacles to adequate facilities to mount a defence, lack of access to adequate legal representation and a lack of transparency in proceedings. - Changing burdens and standards of proof or over-use of presumptions and imputations to the detriment of the targeted individual or group. - On examination [or in the screening by the prosecutor] the case(s) lacks legal merit.	ombuds offices, financial intelligence units) rather than on discretionary political initiative. Impose statutes of limitations to prevent corruption cases being opened against a government's political opponents but not taken to trial in order to maintain leverage. Empower courts to dismiss cases where evidence is weak, there is prosecutorial misconduct or procedural violations to reduce the risk of bad-faith prosecutions. Refer to international peer review mechanisms (GRECO, UNCAC, etc.) to ascertain whether domestic enforcement patterns demonstrate political bias. Promote transparency of and oversight of agencies responsible for investigation and prosecuting corruption. Support the establishment or empowerment of an independent ombuds office to investigate complaints of selective targeting.
Undue political influence over corruption investigations, including halting investigations and/or prosecution of	**Georgia**: reported impunity for corruption involving members of the ruling party. **India**: between 2014 and 2024, 25 opposition figures facing corruption probes switched allegiance to the BJP, which resulted in the	Suspicious timings on investigations being dropped; for instance, corruption cases are dropped or suspended once the individual in question demonstrates loyalty to the ruling party.	Courts should develop procedures and sets of criteria to identify abusive lawsuits (OHCHR 2026:11)

corruption against political supporters	cases against them being paused or dropped in 23 cases. **US**: a corruption case against the mayor of New York was dismissed not on the strength of the evidence but rather because the prosecution was hindering the mayor's ability to help the Trump administration crack down on immigration.	Signs of capture of the accountability ecosystem more broadly, which includes the function and independence of the judiciary, prosecutors' offices and other oversight mechanisms. These include arbitrary judicial proceedings, the delay of due process and packing courts and oversight bodies to create a culture of impunity for captors (Donaldson and Leuprecht 2026: 168-169). Retroactive application of laws or vague catch-all corruption statutes broad enough to criminalise ordinary political and business activity, giving prosecutors wide discretion over who to target. Civil lawsuits and criminal proceedings being used to serve economic and/or political interests over justice (OHCHR 2026:2).	Empower judges to dismiss instrumentalised actions through abuse of process provisions (OHCHR 2026:11). Develop legal remedies for those affected by instrumentalisation of the justice sector (OHCHR 2026:7). Stipulate that written, public explanations must be provided when opening or closing a case, as well as publishing data on judicial outcomes, to promote transparency and enable scrutiny by watchdogs and journalists. Require automatic, random case assignment of corruption cases to judges and prosecutors to make collusion with political interests more difficult. Support measures to enhance judicial integrity and independence more broadly, including: • the design or reform of judicial service commissions that remove political actors from appointment, promotion and disciplinary decisions • reforms that mean judiciaries control their own budgets rather than depending on annual negotiation with the executive/legislature

			• building or strengthening systems requiring judges to declare assets, with independent verification bodies • Supporting independent bodies that investigate judicial misconduct, with clear, published standards
Political capture of anti-corruption agencies and other oversight institutions	**Senegal**: during Sall's tenure, the Cour de repression contre l'enrichissement illicite (CREI) pursued political opponents or those associated with the former ruling party. **Poland**: the capture of the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau by the PiS party and its procurement of spyware to monitor political opponents.	Merging or abolishing independent anti-corruption bodies, or folding them into ministries or agencies controlled by the executive. Instances of the revolving door between anti-corruption agencies on one hand and the executive branch and political party organs on the other hand, which should suggest that nominally independent oversight bodies are being packed with loyalists (Capture Revisited 2024). Executive branch interference in the appointment and dismissals of auditor generals or directors of law enforcement agencies and oversight institutions. Budget and staffing cuts to anti-corruption bodies, auditors general or financial intelligence units without clear justification. Sudden personnel turnover, especially the removal or forced resignation of investigators or auditors working on politically sensitive cases. Procedural changes that stall cases, such as new immunity rules, jurisdictional reassignments or requirements for	Participation of different actors (particularly citizens) in anti-corruption policies and the work of anti-corruption agencies (Rojas-Salazar and Vargas-Pineda 2026). Establish independence of institutions in the law, ideally in the country's constitution (Yong 2024). Targeted provisions and urgent reinforcement of anti-corruption institutions before total capture (Amundsen and Jackson 2021: 15). Ensure that directors of anti-corruption agencies have fixed terms, protected budgets and can only be removed as part of an agreed process. Support the appointment of anti-corruption agency directors through non-partisan processes, including parliamentary votes, judicial councils or cross-party commissions, rather than unilateral executive appointment. Set minimum qualification criteria for these positions.

		parliamentary/executive pre-approval before officials can be investigated. Independent governance assessments consistently describe the anti-corruption architecture as more developed on paper than in practice.	
The use of anti-corruption laws and institutions to limit civic space and the operations of civil society Relevant policy instruments include: • anti-money laundering laws (ECNL 2026; Reimer 2024) • asset freezing orders • NGO registration requirements • foreign agent laws	**AML laws** **India:** In 2020, the Directorate of Enforcement froze more than US$2 million of assets belonging to Amnesty International India on charges of money laundering (ICJ 2020) While not evident in the other case studies included in this paper, further evidence from Uganda and Serbia illustrates how AML/CFT laws can be used to suppress civil society organisations: **Uganda**: in 2017, ActionAid Uganda's office was raided by police, and its bank accounts were frozen on allegations of money laundering. Similarly, two well-established NGOs – the Uganda NGO Forum and Uganda Women's Network – had their bank accounts frozen on accusations of being involved in terrorism financing activities (France 2021).	The introduction (or proposed introduction) of foreign agent laws and/or other restrictive legislation. Anti-corruption agencies' work (detection, prevention, investigation) focusing predominately on civil society rather than public officials, companies and/or politicians. Asset freezes, travel bans or arrests happening before formal charges, based on executive designation rather than judicial process. Journalists, NGOs and civil society groups investigating the ruling party get labelled as corrupt, "foreign agents" or are accused of being fronts for illicit money. Laws requiring financial disclosure or registration aimed at watchdog organisations and independent media, framed as transparency measures. Human rights mechanisms, UN special rapporteurs and peer review bodies like the UNCAC implementation review group[11] or GRECO may flag when anti-corruption	Diplomatic pressure and foreign assistance (Amundsen and Jackson 2021:15). Programmes to support a free press and digital media (Amundsen and Jackson 2021:21). Support legislative drafting to ensure that legal definitions are narrow and precise to avoid excessive discretion when it comes to operationalising terms like "undermining state interests". Push for the burden of proof to be placed on the authorities rather than requiring NGOs to prove their innocence, as well as due process guarantees such as the right to contest evidence, right to counsel and appeal mechanisms before punitive measures (freezing accounts, deregistering an NGO) are applied. Accounts should not be frozen or NGOs deregistered for mere administrative violations related to NGO registration rules.

[11] Transparency International (2025c) has voiced concern that the UNCAC review process does not consistently or effectively identify instances in which anti-corruption tools are used to constrain civic space.

• tax codes and financial audits (Maslen 2025)	**Serbia**: in 2020, the finance ministry launched a probe into money laundering and terrorism financing against 37 NGOs, including journalist associations and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (France 2021). **Asset freezing orders** Non-conviction based freezing allows states to financially cripple critical NGOs without needing to prove wrongdoing in court, meaning a lower evidentiary bar and often a reversed burden of proof. Even when the freeze is eventually overturned, the organisation may have already had to lay off staff, halt programmes or even close down. **Georgia**: the anti-corruption bureau drew up administrative offence reports that allowed the imposition of asset freezing orders on civil society organisations critical of the government. **India**: under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), authorities can freeze organisations' accounts for administrative violations involving the receipt of foreign funds, without needing to secure a criminal conviction against the target. **NGO registration requirements**	legislation is being used in ways inconsistent with its stated purpose.	Promote institutional independence for bodies that register and regulate NGOs, and discourage practices whereby NGOs are required to obtain prior approval for specific projects or to access funds. Support legal defence funds to support organisations unduly targeted by the state.

Georgia: the law on transparency of foreign influence introduced burdensome reporting requirements on CSOs and independent media receiving foreign funding. Amendments to the law on grants also compelled over 80 NGOs to hand over extensive financial and personal data to the anti-corruption bureau.

Foreign agent laws

Hungary: the 2023 law on the defence of national sovereignty established the sovereignty protection office, nominally intended to address foreign influence, and equipped it with a wide range of powers to clamp down on civil society.

Tax codes and financial audits

Hungary: the national tax and customs office has been used to harass government opponents. One of its powers included the ability to raid private property without warning to search for incriminating evidence; this power was used to target critics of Orbán's government.

India: the tax department raided the offices of the BBC and Oxfam India after a critical documentary was aired (Maslen 2025).

Dismantling or watering down anti-corruption legislation	**Senegal:** President Faye was exempted from the scope of a law designed to expand the number of officials required to declare their assets **US:** first suspended then redirected the operational focus of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA).	Narrowing definitions of corruption offences, raising thresholds for what counts as bribery, illicit enrichment or abuse of office, or removing categories of officials/conduct from scope of the offence. Shortening statutes of limitations on corruption cases, especially retroactively, effectively closing pending investigations. Reducing penalties for corruption offences or converting criminal liability into administrative/civil liability. Weakening asset declaration and conflict of interest rules, including removing verification mechanisms, reducing public access to declarations or reducing the number of officials who must file declarations. Restricting whistleblower protections or introducing new exemptions (defamation, “state secrets”, NDAs) that discourage reporting. Rollbacks in freedom of information laws, procurement transparency or beneficial ownership registries.	Support funding for local NGOs and/or awareness campaigns (Amundsen and Jackson 2021:21). Use data emerging from review mechanisms like the OECD, UNCAC, GRECO and EU rule of law reports to create external pressure and reputational cost for backsliding Call for procedural safeguards to protect anti-corruption legislation, such as the requirement of broad parliamentary consensus rather than a simple majority to amend the law. Explore judicial review where relevant to see whether it can strike down legislative actions that undermine the legal and institutional anti-corruption framework, especially where such actions violate constitutional principles (rule of law, separation of powers). Support NGOs or citizens to bring public interest litigation or lodge formal complaints when enforcement lags, and ensure that they have legal standing to bring such complaints. Conduct independent impact assessments of any proposed amendments to anti-corruption legislation and promote ex-ante “corruption proofing” of relevant laws.

Good practices in donor funded projects to resist the instrumentalisation

Beyond the specific safeguards described in Table 1 for each instrumentalisation method, there are some cross-cutting steps that development partners can take to reduce the risk of inadvertently supporting instrumentalisation and minimise harm.

During programme design phase

Before donor money begins to flow to development partners to support their anti-corruption efforts, it would be advisable for development agencies to design the intervention carefully.

As a first step, development agencies could conduct a robust needs assessments and commission political economy analysis as well as appraisals of the human rights and civic space situation. These tools can shed light on the nature of gaps in the anti-corruption framework, document the experience of previous reform efforts and assess how local actors are likely to respond to the intervention.

Country risk assessments and political economy analysis can also potentially identify vulnerabilities to instrumentalisation. These predominately desk-based research outputs can identify some of the red flags of current or potential instrumentalisation and can inform donors on how high these risks are (Bergin 2025). For example, this might include the recent election of a populist candidate who ran on a strong anti-corruption platform but who has past allegations of corruption.

Consultation and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders can help generate legitimacy and buy-in and make it more challenging for any one faction to “capture” the process to advance their own interests. Nonetheless, in countries with restrictive civic space environments, holding frank consultations can be difficult. This points to the need for longer-term engagement by development agencies with anti-corruption campaigners and activists.

Clear communication of expectations to recipients and intended beneficiaries and the inclusion of conditionalities and corruption clauses in any formal contract can make it easier for donors to rapidly suspend support where there are indications of instrumentalisation. Anti-corruption clauses can be both a preventive and reactive measure to: i) protect donor funds; and ii) break off support in cases where anti-corruption measures are being instrumentalised by in-country actors.

The OECD (2025:9) recommends that measures to prevent and detect corruption should be enshrined in development projects and to include measures such as:

- ensure that implementing partners who have been convicted of engaging in corruption are denied funding
- ensure that persons applying for contracts are required to declare that they have not been convicted of corruption offences
- establish mechanisms to ensure due diligence is carried out prior to granting
- verify publicly available debarment lists of national and multilateral financial institutions during the applicant's selection process
- prohibit implementing partners from engaging in corruption

However, these recommendations address corruption in general terms. Those specifically aimed at countering instrumentalisation could more explicitly refer to practices such as using anti-corruption measures to target opposition candidates or other practices outlined in Table 1. As another example, specific provisions regarding anti-corruption agencies and their guaranteed independence could also be included in these clauses. Any indicators of instrumentalisation or red flags could be discussed during the design phase, with a set of escalatory responses agreed upon in advance.

Finally, programmes could be designed to include a standard operational component that aims to bolster the participation of citizens and strengthen the independence of anti-corruption and criminal justice bodies.

Where donor support is ongoing

Once donor funds have started flowing to support anti-corruption and good governance reforms in partner countries, options become more limited. Regular monitoring to detect as early as possible any instances of anti-corruption instruments being abused is important to prevent donors becoming complicit in causing harm. Where this occurs, bilateral development agencies could look to terminate funding, notify their diplomatic services to explore willingness to raise concerns at the highest levels, communicate concerns publicly and ultimately switch financial support from state actors to non-state actors (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006; Schouten 2011).

Coordination with other donors in the country is of particular importance as jointly monitoring situations or sharing of information will help detect more efficiently when instrumentalisation has occurred. The OECD (2010:23) recommends that donors jointly monitor governance and anti-corruption reform programmes, particularly as each donor will contribute a different form of analysis. With a greater range of monitoring tools (such as donors' diagnostic assessments, NGO reports and international peer review mechanisms) and exchange of information, cases of instrumentalisation are more likely to be uncovered.

Broader measures to counteract instrumentalisation of anti-corruption rhetoric

A substantial proportion of development agencies' support to anti-corruption reforms is channelled towards state bodies, notably anti-corruption agencies and other oversight institutions. For example, the European Commission, in the 2021-2027 financial framework period, has committed to strengthening anti-corruption agencies, assisting investigative capacity and preventing money laundering in their 50+ partner countries (EU n.d.). Development agencies are more likely to be involved with supporting reforms to the institutional anti-corruption framework rather than engaging with individual anti-corruption investigations and cases.

Nonetheless, there is a range of support that development partners can provide in the field of access to information, transparency, civic space and media freedom, all of which can help journalists and civil society actors to identify and challenge instances of the instrumentalisation of anti-corruption efforts. At a minimum, development agencies supporting anti-corruption institutions can encourage those institutions to disclose information about their activities, and development agencies can themselves publish data on the nature of their support to these institutions.

Moreover, some interventions could be built into other projects to prevent and safeguard against instrumentalisation. A well-educated public is one bulwark against the abuse of corruption accusations. If the public is aware of what constitutes corruption and how (within reasonable limits) a genuine corruption case is investigated and prosecuted, then they may be better able to detect false accusations, which is particularly important during elections.

One example of community education is the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and the UN country team in Haiti who recently ran a national debate against corruption and impunity. This event brought together CSOs, institutional actors and experts to engage young people in governance and transparency discussions and to raise awareness about corruption (UNDEF 2025). Other awareness raising activities run by the project have included workshops on corruption and democracy, artistic sessions using music and dance for civic education, public awareness campaigns and school based electoral simulations to familiarise students with the voting process (UNDEF 2025).

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www.u4.no

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