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INTERNATIONAL INFORMAL NETWORKS IN ASSET RECOVERY – A GLOBAL TOOL IN COMBATING CORRUPTION

YEVGENIY KOLENKO⁷, ALIMARDON AHMADOV⁸

Abstract

Informal communication networks have become a crucial but poorly studied element of worldwide asset recovery operations targeting corruption. This research examines how organizations like the Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network (ARIN), the Egmont Group, and regional Asset Recovery Networks enhance international cooperation through immediate intelligence exchange, relationship building, and bypassing formal mutual legal assistance limitations. By analyzing operational frameworks and expert perspectives, this study shows these unofficial channels have proven essential in retrieving billions in misappropriated funds while functioning within regulatory ambiguity that creates concerns regarding oversight, uniformity, and legal consistency. The research contends that with corruption tactics growing more complex and digital, the strategic evolution of these networks presents both possibilities and obstacles for international asset recovery's future. Furthermore, integrating such informal cooperation within national legal systems and harmonizing it with existing international mechanisms could provide an agile yet accountable framework for effective global anti-corruption efforts.

Keywords: *asset recovery, informal networks, anti-corruption, cross-border cooperation, financial intelligence, legal compliance, information exchange, international legal assistance.*

1. Introduction

Over the years, the battle against corruption worldwide has undergone a dramatic transformation, and recovering illicit assets has become one of the most crucial – yet incredibly difficult – parts of this fight. When you look at the numbers, it is staggering: the World Bank tells us that public officials in developing countries steal somewhere between 20 to 40 billion dollars every single year [27, p. 9]. Even more disheartening is what the UN Office on Drugs and Crime discovered – we are only managing to get back about 2% of all illicit money globally [24, p. 127]. While we have solid legal frameworks and international treaties that form the backbone of cross-border asset recovery efforts, there is another world operating alongside these formal systems. It is a network of dedicated professionals – investigators, prosecutors, regulatory officials, people working in financial intelligence units, and civil society advocates – who've learned to work together in ways that cut through red tape [8]. These networks have become essential for practitioners around the world, allowing them to share intelligence quickly, coordinate complicated investigations, and find their way through the maze of different countries' legal systems.

When you are dealing with criminals who move this fast, relying solely on formal mutual legal assistance treaties and diplomatic processes – important as they are [26] – simply is not enough to keep up with how quickly and cleverly corrupt actors operate [22]. These informal working relationships have proven their worth by helping recover billions in illicit assets. Just looking at StAR played a role in the confiscation and repatriation of nearly USD 1.9 billion worth of illicit assets following requests from diverse jurisdictions [25]. Meanwhile, the Egmont Group's 166 financial intelligence units share more than 65,000 intelligence reports with each other every year [7, p. 18].

This article explores how informal communication networks have become vital to recovering illicit assets around the world, looking at how they work, how effective they are, and tackling the ongoing struggle between the flexibility that makes them so useful and the formal legal requirements that still need to be met when it comes to getting assets back.

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II. Overview of informal communication networks

It is not possible to overstate how important informal information sharing has become when it comes to tracking down illicit assets. What happens is that officials in one country can reach out directly to their colleagues in other countries, get advice, and share information without going through all the usual bureaucratic channels. Using secure communication platforms, they can get financial information about bank transactions or specific individuals incredibly quickly.

Here is a real example of how this works: let us say the prosecution authorities in Uzbekistan need to know if someone has a bank account in another country. They can send an informal request through the ARIN-WCA Secretariat to the right authority in a member country from another ARIN network, simply asking whether this person has an account there [10]. These networks are incredibly useful because they are fast, and it is easy to contact the right people.

The reality is that in most cases, tracking down and recovering assets that have been moved illegally across borders is not something any single country can handle on its own – it requires countries to work together. This cooperation happens in two main ways: the formal route (through mutual legal assistance) and the informal route (through working networks and established contact points) [23]. As the world has gained experience fighting corruption, we have seen the development of several specialized networks and systems that allow countries to quickly share information, help each other out, and even work together to recover illicit assets.

Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network (ARIN).

Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Networks (ARINs) are basically international and regional groups that have been set up to help countries work together at every step of getting back stolen money. ARINs connect many countries through seven regional ARIN networks that have been established around the world [8], including: ARIN-WCA – Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for West and Central Asia; ARIN-AP – Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for Asia-Pacific; ARIN-WA – Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for West Africa; ARIN-EA – Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for East Africa; ARINSA – Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for Southern Africa; CARIN – Camden Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network (Europe and Eurasia); RAG – Red de Recuperación de Activos de GAFILAT (Asset Recovery Network of GAFILAT – Latin America) [8].

These networks create a connected global system of informal cooperation that dramatically improves how well cross-border asset recovery efforts work [16].

The way these networks operate is similar across the board: when you need to track down illicit assets that have been moved to another country, you make a request to a contact person in that jurisdiction, who then tries to get the information you need through their own network. Everyone uses English as the working language, and all members can communicate comfortably in it; contact people can reach out to each other directly by phone or email. ARIN contacts provide help throughout the entire investigation, especially when it comes to identifying assets, freezing or seizing them, confiscating them, and getting them returned, including figuring out how recovered assets should be divided up between countries. This is how ARIN networks have become so important for getting timely information about corruption and economic crimes and for speeding up formal legal processes by using informal communication channels.

Uzbekistan is not just a member of the ARIN-WCA network – it runs the show as the network's Secretariat [14]. What is worth pointing out is that the ARIN-WCA network handles quite a range of tasks when it comes to identifying, tracking down, freezing, seizing, confiscating, and getting back assets that were illicitly obtained through corruption and other crimes and then moved overseas.

Although ARIN-WCA is working through a difficult period, the Secretariat is deliberately tightening the nuts and bolts of cooperation. The fact that few recovery cases are described in public does not mean the network is idle. More often, it reflects confidentiality rules, procedural discipline, and the evidentiary thresholds that must be met. In practice, ARIN-WCA adds the plumbing that makes cases possible: trusted channels, quick pre-MLA checks, the right counterpart on the first try, better-drafted requests, and a clean handover from informal coordination to formal cooperation.

Its value shows up in three plain ways: speed (faster yes/no checks, fewer clashes between parallel requests, smoother MLA launches), capability (webinars and model forms that build practitioner skill on crypto-flows, e-transfers, and documentation), and standardization (SOPs, checklists, multilingual templates, and basic info-security protocols that lift the pace and quality of formal work).

So the results look less like headlines and more like leading indicators: shorter time to first response, fewer defects in formal requests, quicker cross-border teams, and a higher share of pre-MLA work maturing into MLA. In that sense, ARIN-WCA does more than “Asset Recovery” – it creates the conditions for recovery. The system it sustains – skills, trust, and shared standards – strengthens regional cooperation and directly supports investigators and the courts.

What makes the ARIN-WCA network so convenient and effective [1] is how straightforward it is to get information – you can make simple requests using a sample format they provide. Before you even submit a request, you can have consultations about it, and if you run into questions or things are not clear, national contact points can check with the Secretariat as part of their regular work. There is an important privacy protection built in any information or documents you get through a request cannot be shared with third parties or other countries without written permission from whoever made the original request.

Here is something crucial to understand about information you get through the ARIN-WCA network – it cannot be used as evidence in criminal, administrative, civil, or economic proceedings, or when resolving other disputes [14]. The only way such information can be used as evidence is if it has been collected following the procedures laid out in Uzbekistan’s Criminal Procedure Code and meets the specific requirements outlined in Articles 88, 90, and 92–94 of that Code.

Egmont group of financial intelligence units.

The Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) is an informal structure that unites FIUs from around the world. Its main objective is to strengthen mechanisms for information exchange among member FIUs and to provide methodological assistance. Currently, the Egmont Group includes over 150 countries [5] (181 FIUs) [6], and Uzbekistan has been a member of this network since 2011 [20]. For example, if Uzbekistan’s FIU (Department for Combating Economic Crimes [19]) needs information regarding proceeds transferred abroad, it may send a request through the Egmont Group to the competent authority of the relevant country via a secure channel.

It should be noted that the information or documents obtained through exchanges between FIUs cannot be used directly as procedural evidence. However, the Egmont Group is considered highly useful in the initial stages of investigating illicit assets by providing relevant information.

INTERPOL (International Criminal Police Organization).

Another global organization that plays an important role in asset recovery is INTERPOL, of which Uzbekistan has been a member since 1994 [2]. INTERPOL carries out its activities through a system of notices [12] – a mechanism of international police cooperation used to identify, track, and freeze assets linked to criminal proceedings.

While INTERPOL does not itself enforce asset freezes or confiscations, its tools and coordination channels often serve as the first point of contact or catalyst for formal mutual legal assistance procedures or informal interagency cooperation. In practice, INTERPOL complements other mechanisms such as the Egmont Group or ARIN networks, contributing to the rapid detection and early immobilization of criminal proceeds before they can be dissipated [11].

Through secure telecommunication channels, INTERPOL is capable of exchanging information quickly and responding immediately when a country requests assistance [3]. The purpose of this network is also to ensure informal and rapid cooperation in locating assets obtained as a result of corruption.

III. Challenges and opportunities

Academics who study asset recovery have increasingly started to recognize just how important informal communication networks have become as essential tools in fighting corruption across borders. While most of the early research focused heavily on formal mutual legal assistance (MLA) frameworks, more recent studies are highlighting the real problems with these official mechanisms – especially how

complicated their procedures are, how easily they can be influenced by politics, and how painfully slow they tend to be [21]. As a result, scholars have started thinking about informal networks not just as handy shortcuts but as fundamental parts of what we might call a hybrid enforcement approach.

A growing body of literature highlights how informal cooperation enhances institutional agility and circumvents the delays associated with treaty-based requests [13]. These networks foster what scholars have termed “communities of enforcement”, where mutual trust, iterative interaction, and shared norms catalyze collective problem-solving beyond what formal legal structures can accomplish [9].

However, concerns regarding the legal status and evidentiary admissibility of information obtained through informal means are recurrent in the literature. Pieth [18] argues that overreliance on such mechanisms may entrench asymmetries between well-resourced and under-resourced jurisdictions, thereby exacerbating global enforcement imbalances. Furthermore, the opacity of informal exchanges has been criticized for potentially undermining procedural safeguards and rule-of-law principles [4]. Nonetheless, empirical studies suggest that when combined with formal proceedings, informal channels substantially improve the responsiveness and success rates of asset recovery initiatives [15].

Another strand of research focuses on the institutional evolution of informal networks, analyzing how practitioner-led cooperation has gradually shaped transnational norms of anti-corruption enforcement [28]. As such, informal networks are increasingly seen not only as reactive tools but also as instruments of systemic alignment in international law enforcement architecture. At the same time, there are limitations related to the internal capacities, like limited human resources allocated to coordination and monitoring functions [17] in Uzbekistan.

Finally, when you look at policy reports from major international organizations like the World Bank, UNODC, and FATF, they keep pushing for countries to weave these informal mechanisms right into their national asset recovery strategies. These reports are perfectly in sync with what academics have been discovering – that informal approaches have real practical value when it comes to getting around fragmented legal systems and political foot-dragging, especially in situations where formal cooperation gets bogged down because countries are protective of their sovereignty or because diplomatic processes have simply ground to a halt.

IV. Conclusion

The contemporary global response to corruption is increasingly shaped by the strategic deployment of informal communication networks. These mechanisms have become integral to cross-border asset recovery, offering a means to circumvent bureaucratic inertia and enabling timely action during the critical early stages of intelligence gathering, where speed often determines the success of tracing illicit assets.

Despite the growing reliance on such networks, the Republic of Uzbekistan has yet to establish a formal regulatory framework to govern the informal exchange of information among domestic agencies operating within the ARIN-WCA structure. Addressing this gap is not merely a matter of legal formality but a strategic imperative. To this end, the adoption of a Joint Resolution involving the Prosecutor General's Office, the State Security Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Customs Committee, and the Tax Committee would provide the necessary legal and institutional infrastructure. Such a measure would facilitate coherent coordination, enhance the protection of sensitive data, and ensure conformity with both national legislation and relevant international obligations.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of taken actions hinges on the capacity to combine communication with regional ARIN-WCA networks, as well as with global platforms such as the Egmont Group and INTERPOL. Achieving this requires the development of harmonised standard operating procedures, the establishment of secure digital communication channels, and the articulation of clear protocols for transitioning from informal exchanges to formal mutual legal assistance processes.

In sum, as corruption becomes increasingly transnational and technologically advanced, the evolution and formalisation of informal cooperation networks must form a cornerstone of any effective, adaptive asset recovery strategy.

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BEYNƏLXALQ QEYRİ-RƏSMİ ŞƏBƏKƏLƏR VƏ AKTİVLƏRİN QAYTARILMASI – KORRUPSIYAYA QARŞI MÜBARİZƏDƏ QLOBAL VASITƏ

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Annotasiya

Qeyri-rəsmi kommunikasiya şəbəkələri korrupsiyaya qarşı yönəlmiş beynəlxalq aktivlərin qaytarılması əməliyyatlarının mühüm, lakin az öyrənilmiş elementi kimi meydana çıxmışdır. Bu tədqiqat, Aktivlərin Qaytarılması üzrə Beynəlxalq Şəbəkə (ARIN), “Egmont” Qrupu və regional aktivlərin qaytarılması şəbəkələri kimi təşkilatların dərhal məlumat mübadiləsi, qarşılıqlı mənasibətlərin formalaşması və rəsmi hüquqi yardım mexanizmlərinin məhdudiyyətlərini aradan qaldırmaq yolu ilə beynəlxalq əməkdaşlığı necə gücləndirdiyini araşdırır. Əməliyyat çərçivələrinin və ekspert yanaşmalarının təhlili göstərir ki, bu qeyri-rəsmi kanallar tənzimləmə qeyri-müəyyənliyi

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şəraitində fəaliyyət göstərməsinə baxmayaraq, milyardlarla dollar dəyərində mənimsənilmiş vəsaitlərin geri qaytarılmasında mühüm rol oynamışdır. Bu, eyni zamanda nəzarət, prosedur vahidliyi və hüquqi ardıcılıq baxımından müəyyən suallar doğurur. Tədqiqat göstərir ki, müasir korrupsiya mexanizmləri getdikcə daha mürəkkəbləşdikcə və rəqəmsallaşdıqca, bu şəbəkələrin strateji inkişafı həm imkanlar, həm də risklər yaradır. Qeyri-rəsmi kommunikasiya kanallarının inkişaf etdirilməsi və onların milli hüquqi sistemlərə integrasiyası beynəlxalq aktivlərin qaytarılması mexanizmlərinin gələcək effektivliyini müəyyənləşdirəcək əsas istiqamətlərdən biri ola bilər.

Açar sözlər: aktivlərin qaytarılması, qeyri-rəsmi şəbəkələr, korrupsiyaya qarşı mübarizə, transmilli əməkdaşlıq, maliyyə kəşfiyyatı, hüquqi uyğunluq, məlumat mübadiləsi, beynəlxalq hüquqi yardım.

МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ НЕФОРМАЛЬНЫЕ СЕТИ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ВОЗВРАТА АКТИВОВ – ГЛОБАЛЬНЫЙ ИНСТРУМЕНТ В БОРЬБЕ С КОРРУПЦИЕЙ

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Резюме

Неформальные коммуникационные сети стали важным, но недостаточно изученным элементом мировых операций по возврату активов, направленных на борьбу с коррупцией. В исследовании анализируется, как такие организации, как Межведомственная сеть по возврату активов (ARIN), Группа «Эгмонт» и региональные сети по возврату активов, укрепляют международное сотрудничество посредством оперативного обмена информацией, установления доверительных отношений и обхода ограничений, присущих официальным механизмам взаимной правовой помощи. Анализ операционных структур и экспертных подходов показывает, что эти неофициальные каналы, несмотря на существующую нормативную неопределенность, сыграли решающую роль в возвращении миллиардов незаконно присвоенных средств. Однако такая деятельность вызывает вопросы относительно прозрачности, надзора и правовой согласованности. С развитием и цифровизацией коррупционных схем стратегическое совершенствование этих сетей становится одновременно вызовом и возможностью. Их интеграция в национальные правовые системы и согласование с международными механизмами могут создать гибкую, но подотчетную основу для более эффективных и устойчивых глобальных антикоррупционных инициатив.

Ключевые слова: возврат активов, неформальные сети, борьба с коррупцией, трансграничное сотрудничество, финансовая разведка, правовое соответствие, обмен информацией, международная правовая помощь.

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