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ORGANIZED CRIME AND CORRUPTION REPORTING PROJECT

Ilya Lozovsky ³⁶

I am happy to be here and grateful for the invitation. I won't talk for too long because I think we could have a useful discussion and we've got will hearing from another organisation that is in some way is very similar to ours. But let me talk about OCCRP - Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and thank you for mentioning Jam Kusizak, our colleague who was tragically murdered along with his fiancée in Slovakia. I just want to mention that we have a film that just recently came out. It is an investigative film about the killing and who was responsible and how the nexus of the organised crime and corruption is really at the heart of these tragic affairs where these journalists are killed. The film is called "The Killing of Journalist", it just had its premiere in Toronto. So, everybody please look it up and see it. I've seen. It's very good.

So, OCCRP, what are we? And I think this theme of network to work in collaboration is going to pop up again and again on this panel. OCCRP is set up exactly in that way. It is an international group of independent journalists and the way we work is kind of a system of number centres. We have dozens of members around the world, each of them has a group of local journalists in. So, we have one in Ukraine, we have one in Serbia, we had one in Venezuela, we have all over the world. We've grown a lot after starting in South East Europe. We have spread across the world in recent years and this is really the heart of our model. We have a central base of edito-

³⁶ Senior Editor of Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. Intervenção proferida *online* em língua inglesa. (<https://doi.org/10.34628/b84s-wn31>)

rial talent, we have data team, we have a research team we have all sort of technological tools to help researchers cover financial crime and corruption and organised crime.

Those central resources are distributed to these spokes around the world. We believe that our goal is to empower local journalists on the ground with our resources that we receive to enable them to do their best work. So, the cooperation with us in the centre, US English language editors and all the other teams that I mentioned helping the people on the ground who really know their countries who really know the political players. I think this is the way of doing it because it's really unfortunate when a large well-funded Western organisation parachute a journalist into a country where they've never been before. They go around, he's a fixer to get information right story, then fly out and never go there again. We don't believe in doing that. We believe in empowering locals and working with the locals and a lot of the money that we are granted goes to them as well.

The other reason we are set up this way is because we believe that it takes a network to fight a network and what we are really exposing is networks of organised crime and corruption, not isolated incidents of organized crime and corruption and it is just impossible in 2022 to be in one country and to really get a grip on corrupt schemes because sure you may find some corrupt scheme that happened in that country specifically, but the money will not stay there, because the people who steal the money where the corrupt officials or a criminal or whoever else are going to take it and they are going to invest in Dubai's real estate or they are going to invest in London real state or they are going to put it in a bank account that's linked to an offshore firm 10,000 miles away.

These schemes reach all the way across the world and this is the fundamental sort of contradiction that I think our main mission is to expose. Corruption is not just in some far away corrupt country. Corruption is all around the world and the western global financial system enables it.

Teams of lawyers, teams of accountants, real estate agents, anybody you can think of all over the world are helping corrupt wealth

flow into the West and be laundered and separated from its corrupt origins and ends up in Miami or in New York or in London or in Dubai. This is the system we're exposing and that's why we are shaped like a network, because what we are fighting is a network. The Russian asset tracker, of course, is a good example of that. The war is in Ukraine, but corrupt Russian money is all over the world.

Of course, I want to use a few specific examples of stories we have all done, to show how we sort of trace those networks, but before I get into the specific stories, I just want to say that everyone has been talking about collaborations.

Karina mentioned the GAC - Global Anti-corruption Consortium initiative. I think it's a really elegant solution to the problem. Journalists should not be activists and activists are not journalists, but we, as journalists, want our work to have an impact and so partnership in this way where we do the journalistic work and then the activists, the advocates can take it and move it forward. I just think it's a really great partnership and is pretty innovative and I think there probably still a lot of journalists in the world who would be uncomfortable with something like that.

I don't believe that journalists, especially not us, I don't think we can be neutral on the issue of corruption, on the issue of democracy, because this is at the heart of the fight for democracy in our time.

I'm just so happy that part of that project is continuing to grow and bear fruit. If you just Google it, if you want to find out more, just google OCCRP, GAC or TI GAC and you'll find the info pages that are organisations maintained about that project.

I see IJ-Institute for Justice too and I'm sure we'll talk about how they are structured, without the collaboration of them in many of our projects, it would not be possible, because so many of our stories are based on data that they have obtained and shared with us and of course it goes vice versa as well and we've shared data with other regulations too.

So, we were fighting against the best financed people on Earth, with the best lawyers and the most expensive accounts and shell company after shell company, we are not as well funded as they are

and we need to work together to expose man. So, it's this kind of panel that I'm fortunate enough to be sitting on here, is just a great example of how organisations like ours can do that. So, let's just keep doing more of this.

I will end my presentation just with showing a few of the projects we've done to kind of showcase where our work takes us. I mentioned that corruption doesn't end in some country far away from Europe or from the Western world, but it begins there. So, we do work on the ground, as I say with our member centres, and I'm going to pull up this project that came out a few years ago. It's called "Plunder and Patronage in the Heart of Central Asia". This is one that I like to show, partially because I was very heavily involved in this, but I think it's a great showcase. This is about Kyrgyzstan, a country in Central Asia, where we essentially exposed, we were looking into a network of smugglers who were making huge amounts of money, collaborating with corrupt officials to basically trade goods without having to pay customs and pocketing enormous amounts of money off of that. One of the sources of this project, this man pictured here in the centre, this young man with the documents, he was actually murdered in the middle of communicating with our reporters. He gave us a lot of documents and then he was killed. He was the guy that this criminal gang had hired, actually a criminal family had hired to launder the money they earn. So, we have multiple stories, we call him "The \$700 Million Dollar Man" and we have an investigation into his murder, we have investigation into the family of the official who was enabling disruption, we have separate stories about the family of smugglers and how they obtained this money. So, to large extent this is a local Kyrgyzstan story about local corruption. In fact, after this came out, the country had a revolution when the party of the official who we wrote about did very well in the next election. People weren't happy and this official was sanctioned by the United States. I can say that this project had some impact as we published more documents so that our readers can convince themselves that this is not fake news and it's really important to maintain our commitment to showing our work, not just telling a story but showing the work that goes behind it.

This is a typical story of where the money can come from. Now, where does the money go? As we said, the main character, the heart of story, is a money launderer. Because if you are a corrupt official or a corrupt criminal family in Kirgizstan and you earn \$700 million, you're not going to keep those \$700 million dollars in Kirgizstan, because who knows if somebody could take it from you or what you're going to spend it on? So, you want to go and take it into the West. So, the next step is laundering the money.

The next story is the laundromats. We have done, over the years, a total of four major projects about "*laundromats*" and what we call a laundromat is a large system usually made-up of dozens and dozens of usher companies with bank accounts where the money goes in one and the money get split up among the different companies and sent round and shuffled around and then it comes out somewhere in the other side. By the time it comes out on the other side, you have no idea where it came from, or who is really belongs to. These are services essentially and some of the money that goes through them might be legitimate but it is questionable because they use a lot of techniques to disguise. They use fake transactions as explanations for each fake contract as explanations for each transaction, but a lot of the money is the proceeds of crime.

So, we have the Azerbaijani laundromat, which is used by a lot of Azerbaijani officials. By the way, money from that laundromat ended up in Europe with officials who later went to observe the elections in Azerbaijan and found that there was nothing wrong with that after all. So, that kind of thing can happen. The Troika laundromat is more based in Russia. Then we have another Russian Laundromat and each of these projects you can click on it, it's another 15, 20 stories and there's more added all the time. This is based on leaks of data generally, but this kind of the middle part of that chain where the corrupt money is made and now that it's washed into the West and laundered and put into real estate or something else.

Just to end, I will show another project we did about where some of the money can end up. Everybody recently has been talking about our Russian asset tracker. We got a huge amount of inter-

est in that story. Understandable reasons of course, given Russia's absolutely monstrous war in Ukraine, but I just wanted to show off another one. We did a project on the ruling family of Azerbaijan the Aliyevs. This is a long story and it talks about how they use offshore companies to secretly acquire property in London, by the way, thanks to ICIJ – International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, because this data comes from The Pandora Papers which is a leak of documents that was shared with us by ICIJ and enable us to do this story. In addition to the story, we made virtual tour. We found so many properties that they own in London that we just couldn't leave it at having a few pictures of story had to do something more. What we did is an interactive walking tour where you can actually go to this map and start the tour. It will take you step by step through London. I'm actually in London now, so I'm looking forward to actually doing a walk of this, when the weather gets nicer. You can click and see the price, the size, the description of each property and the offshore companies that secretly own it. In the UK, you actually can buy the records of the property register and find out who owns any given property. The problem is when that owner is an offshore company and you can't determine who owns the offshore company or it is an offshore company that has another offshore company behind it that has another offshore company behind it. I'll just click through a few of these to give you the idea, but this goes on and on and includes posh apartments that maybe are used by the family themselves. It includes investment properties that are office buildings or other things. One of them is a pub. We've got an historic townhouse, three apartments in this building, penthouse apartments, a house right by Speakers Corner in Hyde Park.

My favourite example is this one: an office building that is owned by the 11 years old son of President Ali from Azerbaijan, because he, not anymore, but at the time, he was 11 years old and he was actually the owner of the offshore company that owns this property. Apparently, no one is ashamed to enable things like that to happen through the London legal system. This will go on forever. There's a hotel, there's a building next door to the hotel, this

is Sicilian Avenue in the heart of London. This is a \$700 million dollars of property belonging to one family who have imprisoned dissidents who imprisoned one of our colleagues for many years, who have absolutely destroyed all opposition parties. You can find two dozen stories just in the last couple of years of the cruel and undemocratic things that the President elected has done with this country. This is what London lawyers and London accountants enabled his family to do. To park all of their illegal gotten money in properties like this.

This is why we exist. To expose these schemes, with the help of our partners on the ground and the help of partners like ICIJ and TI to take our word further. I'll just end with that same message: without this collaboration, I think we would be totally helpless at the hands of these people, but we are not.

Let's keep at it and I will be happy to participating in whatever discussions takes place. Thank you for having me.