

From Putin To Trump: Corruption Without Borders

By Andy J. Semotiuk



Russian President Vladimir Putin may control one of the largest hidden personal fortunes in the world. Unlike Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, his wealth does not appear on any stock exchange. It is believed to be hidden through an elaborate network of oligarchs, shell corporations, state-controlled enterprises, and loyal intermediaries who hold assets on his behalf. U.S.-born financier Bill Browder [told the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2017](#) that he estimates Putin's hidden wealth at roughly \$200 billion.

For more than two decades, Putin has transformed Russia from a struggling post-Soviet democracy into what analysts now describe as a [personalized kleptocracy](#). Political power and private enrichment have become inseparable.

The war in Ukraine has exposed both Russia's military aggression and the corruption beneath it. What began as an authoritarian system became a [machine for elite enrichment](#). A small ruling circle accumulated extraordinary wealth. Dissent was suppressed. Courts were captured. Elections were manipulated. Political opposition was eliminated.

Critics of the Kremlin argue that corruption was not a side effect of Putin's government. [It was the business model.](#)

Today, European nations are laying the groundwork for one of the most important international legal proceedings since the Nuremberg Trials. The Council of Europe, together with the European Union and Ukraine, has signed agreements establishing the [Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine](#). This month, [thirty-six countries and the European Union formally adopted the Enlarged Partial Agreement](#) governing the tribunal at a Council of Europe meeting in Moldova. The tribunal's mandate is to investigate and prosecute senior Russian officials responsible for launching the invasion.

The tribunal exists for a reason. The International Criminal Court has already [issued an arrest warrant against Putin](#) for war crimes tied to the deportation of Ukrainian children. But the ICC faces jurisdictional limits when prosecuting the specific crime of aggression by leaders of countries that are not parties to the Rome Statute. Russia is one such country.

The proposed tribunal [remains a work in progress](#). Funding, staffing, jurisdiction, and enforcement all remain unresolved. Even its supporters concede that Putin himself is unlikely to appear in court unless Russia suffers a decisive geopolitical defeat or experiences major internal upheaval.

Still, history suggests that [legal accountability often begins long before powerful leaders are actually brought to trial](#). Slobodan Milošević once appeared untouchable. So did Augusto Pinochet. So did Nazi leaders before Germany's collapse in 1945.

International justice moves slowly — until suddenly it moves quickly.

The deeper importance of the tribunal may ultimately lie elsewhere. Prosecuting war crimes is one purpose. Documenting how corruption, authoritarianism, and aggression became intertwined in modern Russia is another. [Investigative journalists have already spent years mapping](#) the hidden financial networks, oligarchic intermediaries, and personal enrichment that surround the Kremlin's inner circle — evidence any eventual prosecution would build on.

And that raises an uncomfortable question for Americans.

Could the United States someday face its own reckoning over corruption at the highest levels of government?

Donald Trump is obviously not Vladimir Putin. America remains a constitutional democracy with functioning courts, opposition parties, and independent media. Yet Trump's presidency has introduced levels of financial conflict, ethical controversy, and personal profiteering that legal scholars argue are [unprecedented in modern American politics](#).

The U.S. Constitution speaks directly to this issue. The [Foreign and Domestic Emoluments Clauses](#) prohibit federal officeholders from accepting gifts, payments, or financial benefits from foreign states without congressional consent.

During and after Trump's first term, critics alleged that foreign governments and business actors used Trump-owned hotels, golf courses, and licensing deals to curry favor with the administration. Multiple lawsuits followed, including [District of Columbia and Maryland v. Trump](#). The Supreme Court ultimately dismissed those cases as moot after Trump left office. The constitutional questions were never resolved on the merits.

More recent controversies have revived those questions. In May 2025, [Qatar's royal family offered the Trump administration a Boeing 747-8](#) valued at roughly \$400 million for use as a temporary Air Force One, with ownership eventually passing to Trump's presidential library foundation. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth accepted the jet despite ethics objections. Modifications began in September 2025, and [the Air Force expects the aircraft to enter presidential service in summer 2026](#). Ethics experts told NPR the arrangement appeared to violate the Foreign Emoluments Clause. The administration disagreed.

The jet was not an isolated controversy. Since Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, the [Trump Organization has signed a string of high-profile real estate deals](#) across Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. The list includes Trump Tower Jeddah, a Trump hotel and tower in Dubai, and a luxury golf and resort project in Oman. In Qatar, the Trump Organization partnered with Qatari Diar — the real estate arm of Qatar's sovereign wealth fund — on a Trump-branded golf club near Doha. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund has also invested \$2 billion in a private equity firm run by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. The same fund finances LIV Golf, which holds tournaments at Trump-owned courses. Each of these arrangements is legally distinct. Together, they sketch a pattern the Constitution's drafters would have recognized immediately.

Whether any specific act ultimately constitutes a criminal violation is a question for courts and investigators — not columnists.

But democracies cannot survive if citizens lose faith that laws apply equally to the powerful and the powerless.

That principle is precisely why the American founders included anti-corruption protections in the Constitution. They feared that foreign governments, wealthy elites, and personal business interests could compromise the independence of elected officials. The [Emoluments Clauses were designed to stop presidents from turning public office into a private profit center](#).

The concern today is larger than Trump himself.

It involves the [growing normalization of political corruption across democratic societies](#). Modern populist leaders increasingly blur the line between state power and personal enrichment. Public office

becomes branding. Political influence becomes monetized. Family members become business partners. Loyalty replaces institutional accountability.

Russia represents the extreme endpoint of that process.

America is not Russia. But the lesson of Russia is unmistakable. Corruption ignored eventually becomes corruption institutionalized.

If the United States hopes to restore confidence in democratic governance, it may eventually require something politically difficult but historically necessary: a fully independent special counsel — or a national investigative commission — empowered to examine allegations of financial corruption, conflicts of interest, abuse of power, and constitutional violations connected to Trump, his family, and senior associates.

Such an investigation should not be driven by revenge or partisan politics. It should be driven by transparency and accountability.

The purpose would not merely be to punish individuals. It would be to reaffirm a principle older than the republic itself. No public official is above the law.

That principle is now being tested internationally. Europe is moving to hold Putin accountable for aggression and corruption tied to the war in Ukraine.

The United States may eventually face a similar test at home.

History suggests that democracies survive such tests only when they confront corruption directly — rather than pretend it does not exist.



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