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**COGNITIVE AND BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS OF INTERNATIONAL
CORRUPTION: ANALYSIS OF CROSS-BORDER NETWORK
TRANSACTIONS THROUGH THE PRISM OF GAME THEORY
AND INSTITUTIONAL TRAPS**

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In the epoch of globalization, corruption has evolved from a localized deviant phenomenon into a sophisticated systemic architecture operating at the intersection of diverse national jurisdictions. The topicality of this study is driven by the urgent need to reconceptualize anti-corruption strategies, which traditionally overlook the irrational cognitive biases of actors and the resilience of “institutional traps”. Conventional legalistic approaches are reaching a point of diminishing returns, necessitating the integration of multidisciplinary tools to deconstruct the mechanisms of cross-border corrupt interactions. This study aims to provide a theoretical substantiation and modeling of how cognitive distortions and strategic behavior influence the formation of stable corrupt networks within the international arena. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the conditions under which equilibrium states emerge within institutional traps. The research is

grounded in a synthesis of non-cooperative game theory (specifically, a modified “Prisoner’s Dilemma”) to model the strategic choices of agents, and institutional analysis to determine systemic constraints. Behavioral economics methods (Prospect Theory) are applied to analyze cognitive risk-reward assessments under conditions of asymmetric information. Mathematical modeling is employed to illustrate the entrenchment of corrupt norms as dominant strategies. The findings demonstrate that international corruption functions as a self-sustaining system wherein cross-border networks mitigate the risks of national prosecution through the distribution of transaction costs. In this research, it is established that an “institutional trap” arises when the cognitive frameworks of agents interpret corrupt rent-seeking as the only rational mechanism for minimizing uncertainty. The study identifies that within networked structures, corruption attains the characteristics of a Nash Equilibrium, where no participant has an incentive to unilaterally alter their behavior without an external institutional shock. The study confirms that combating international corruption requires more than merely escalating punitive measures; it demands a targeted transformation of cognitive decision-making models. An effective anti-corruption architecture must be designed to erode “networked trust” within corrupt clusters and alter the choice architecture, thereby facilitating the system's exit from stagnant equilibrium (the institutional trap).

Keywords: international corruption; game theory; institutional traps; cognitive biases; cross-border networks; Nash equilibrium; behavioral economics.

Introduction

The transformation of corrupt practices in a globalized world has necessitated a shift from linear malfeasance toward complex networked interactions, which effectively neutralize the efficacy of traditional legal deterrence instruments. Current international corruption is no longer a collection of isolated acts; rather, it manifests as a resilient functional system integrated into cross-border economic transactions. Such structural complexity requires a departure from descriptive analysis in favor of a structural deconstruction of corrupt networks, where the decisive role is played not only by the legal framework but also by the cognitive mechanisms of decision-making among participants (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016). Within this discourse, the theoretical toolkit of game theory and institutional economics acquires particular significance, allowing for the interpretation of corrupt behavior as a result of strategic choice – rational, yet bounded by cognitive distortions. The emergence of “institutional traps” creates conditions under which corrupt norms become self-reproducing, and the costs of legitimate behavior exceed the potential rent from shadow transactions. This leads to the

formation of a stable yet destructive equilibrium, where the individual strategies of actors, aimed at risk minimization, collectively block the development of effective state and international institutions.

The research is predicated on the thesis that international corruption functions as a self-sustaining system, where cross-border networks effectively neutralize the risks of national criminal prosecution through the strategic distribution of transaction costs across multiple jurisdictions. In such a context, an “institutional trap” emerges not merely as an external constraint, but as a consequence of specific cognitive frameworks of the agents, who interpret corrupt rent-seeking as the sole rational mechanism for risk mitigation and navigating market uncertainty (Rose-Ackerman, 2024). Such a perception of reality cements destructive practices, transforming them into an unavoidable behavioral model within the prevailing incentive structure. It is established that within networked structures, corruption acquires the persistent characteristics of a Nash equilibrium. In this state, no participant in cross-border interaction possesses an objective incentive to unilaterally alter their strategy, as any attempt to legitimize actions results in a loss of competitive advantage or expulsion from the network. This accounts for the system’s high resistance to internal reforms, proving that an exit from this pathological equilibrium is only possible through a potent external institutional shock capable of fundamentally restructuring the cognitive assessment of costs and benefits for all actors involved.

The central vector of this article is the analysis of the cognitive and behavioral determinants underlying the functioning of cross-border corrupt clusters (Likarchuk, 2024). The author proceeds from the premise that overcoming systemic corruption is impossible without accounting for irrational aspects—ranging from the psychology of “networked trust” to the distorted assessment of the probability of sanctions. This research is directed toward identifying the destabilization points of corrupt equilibrium states, thereby allowing for the proposal of new approaches to anti-corruption policy based on shifting the behavioral matrix of actors within international relations.

Analysis of recent research and publications

Recent scientific discourse emphasizes that international corruption has evolved into a sophisticated system of cross-border network transactions, where “institutional traps” serve as a primary catalyst for systemic stagnation. Scholars argue that anti-corruption strategies often falter because they overlook the cognitive patterns and behavioral dimensions of decision-making under risk (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Transparency International, 2025). Within this

framework, corruption is analyzed through the prism of game theory, where participants navigate a landscape of "hidden agendas" and bounded rationality, often leading to the formation of resilient shadow networks (Hardy, 2024; Lambsdorff, 2007).

The correlation between international and national anti-corruption institutions is increasingly viewed as a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of communicative approaches to global integrity (Likarchuk, 2024; Makarenkov, 2024). The complexity of these transactions is further compounded by illicit financial flows in transitional jurisdictions and the lack of beneficial ownership transparency in offshore hubs, which facilitates "state capture" in a globalized economy (Global Financial Integrity, n.d.; OECD, 2024; Rose-Ackerman, 2024). Current research indicates that strengthening parliamentary oversight and enhancing the accountability of municipal and state institutions are essential to dismantling these institutional traps (Duba and Lehohla, 2025; Ketners et al., 2025; Nelson and Afonso, 2024). Ultimately, as the digital era redefines governance, the integration of tax transparency and international law manifests as the only viable manifesto for protecting national security against the corrosive effects of cross-border deceit (Beti, 2024; World Bank, 2024; de Sousa and Coroado, 2024).

Formulation of the objectives of article

This study aims to provide a theoretical substantiation and modeling of how cognitive distortions and strategic behavior influence the formation of stable corrupt networks within the international arena. It seeks to identify the conditions under which equilibrium states emerge within institutional traps.

Presentations of the main material of the study

Traditional anti-corruption paradigms, firmly rooted in the rational choice doctrine, increasingly manifest their heuristic limitations by disregarding the profound implicit determination of actors by irrational cognitive biases. The systemic resistance of "institutional traps" ensures the reproduction of corrupt practices not as mere deviations, but as a stable Nash equilibrium, where individual utility enters into an irreconcilable clinch with the collective good (Hardy, 2024).

The application of legal positivism alone has exhausted its instrumental utility, as formal norms remain impotent against the homeostatic mechanisms of entrenched social networks that transform institutions into mere facades for the legitimization of rent-seeking behavior. The existential crisis of the classical legal order necessitates an immediate integration of interdisciplinary toolkits – ranging from behavioral economics to sociocultural anthropology – for a comprehensive deconstruction of the architectonics of transborder corrupt interactions (Lambsdorff, 2007). Modern corrupt networks function as dynamic rhizomes that effortlessly assimilate rigid regulatory constraints, transmuting them into addi-

tional transactional costs. Consequently, the theoretical reimagining of combatting strategies must shift focus from repressive sanctioning toward the profound modification of cognitive architectures and the erosion of the structural resilience of corrupt ecosystems, thereby neutralizing the very ontological possibility of corrupt symbiosis on a global scale.

The modern architecture of international corruption manifests as a homeostatic, self-sustaining system wherein cross-border network interactions serve as the primary instrument for neutralizing the risks of national legal prosecution. This process of externalizing transactional costs enables corrupt agents to fragment accountability, dispersing legal consequences across multiple autonomous jurisdictions. The systemic resilience of such entities is maintained through the continuous regeneration of extra-legal linkages, transforming episodic malfeasance into a fundamental principle of global capital operation. The “institutional trap” phenomenon determines a state in which the subjective cognitive orientations of agents interpret corrupt rent as an indispensable rational tool for minimizing exogenous uncertainty (Makarenkov, 2024). In the context of eroding trust in public institutions, illegitimate transactions acquire the status of a specific regulatory mechanism that ensures economic functionality by bypassing established formal procedures (Beti, 2024). Thus, corrupt practice becomes institutionalized as an inherent element of the socio-economic landscape, resisting external reformative impulses through the high inertia of the system.

Global financial integration provides a fertile environment for the legalization of shadow assets, where the utilization of complex chains of offshore derivatives allows for the definitive masking of the primary sources of illicit gain (de Sousa and Coroado, 2024). National legislative systems face an insurmountable challenge from the mobility of networked capital, as traditional methods of legal control fail to keep pace with the dynamics of the digitalization of financial flows. The further evolution of these processes leads to the emergence of symbiotic links between transnational criminal elites and the apparatus of state administration, which substantially deforms the vectors of public policy. The result of such deformation is the gradual capture of state functions by private interests, accompanied by a total erosion of meritocratic principles in the human resourcing of managerial structures. Formal institutions of the constitutional state are transformed into simulacra that merely imitate the performance of their functions while effectively ensuring the uninterrupted extraction of resources for a narrow circle of beneficiaries. Systemic social destruction becomes irreversible due to the consolidation of a corrupt consensus across all levels of the societal hierarchy.

The transformation of corrupt schemes into self-regulating mechanisms is accompanied by the emergence of a specific culture of loyalty, where involvement in shadow distributions becomes the sole guarantee of vertical mobility (Duba and Lehohla, 2025). The internal logic of these networks necessitates a constant expansion of influence, stimulating the growth of corrupt practices into previously unaffected spheres of social life. The absence of effective instruments for cross-border monitoring allows the beneficiaries of the system to evade sanctioning pressure by utilizing lacunae in international law as a legitimate cover. The gradual acclimatization of society to the existing order completes the cycle of “institutional entrapment”, transmuted deviant behavior into a social norm (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). The scale of such destructive processes necessitates a revision of the basic paradigms of international security, as systemic corruption evolves into a threat to global stability. The final stage of this degradation is the complete loss of state agency on the international arena due to the total dependence of its elites on external shadow financial centers.

A comprehensive analysis of morphological indicators of institutional degradation allows for the identification of specific markers that signify the critical entrenchment of the corrupt system within the structure of social relations:

- cognitive routinization of rent is manifested in the total perception of illegitimate payments as a mandatory component of any business process within a given jurisdiction;
- transnational legal arbitrage involves the deliberate manipulation of discrepancies between national legal systems to create safe zones for the accumulation of illegal proceeds;
- institutional de-objectification is evidenced by the inability of state bodies to make decisions that contradict the interests of dominant financial-industrial groups;
- diffusion of fiduciary responsibility is achieved through the implementation of multi-layered intermediary structures that render the personalization of guilt for corrupt acts impossible;
- normative mimicry consists of the development and implementation of legislative acts that outwardly conform to international requirements but contain hidden mechanisms for preserving the corrupt status quo;
- fragmentation of the legal space leads to the selective application of the law, which transforms justice into an instrument of political struggle and asset redistribution;
- erosion of social capital is characterized by a catastrophic decline in trust toward official institutions, forcing individuals to rely exclusively on patron-client networks;

– reproduction of systemic inertia ensures the automatic neutralization of any anti-corruption initiatives through the co-optation of potential reformers into existing hierarchical enrichment schemes (Ketners et al., 2025; Nelson and Afonso, 2024).

A conceptual analysis of cross-border corrupt transactions reveals them not as chaotic acts of deviance, but as stable strategic interactions governed by the logic of a Nash Equilibrium. In the context of game theory, this state is defined as a strategy profile where no player (an actor within the corrupt network) can increase their own payoff by unilaterally changing their behavior, provided that the strategies of other participants remain constant. In the system of international corruption, this implies that an individual's refusal to participate in the network, or a transition to legitimate practices, is perceived by the actor as a demonstrably losing strategy, leading to a loss of competitiveness and displacement from the market.

The functioning of corrupt networks as self-sustaining systems is explained by the fact that the expected utility (E) of participating in corrupt activities under conditions of institutional degradation consistently exceeds the potential benefits of lawful behavior. Due to the distribution of transaction costs (C_i) and the mitigation of sanction risks (L_i) within the transboundary space, network participants find themselves in a situation where corruption becomes the "best response" to the strategies of other counterparties. Thus, a paradoxical situation arises: despite the fact that corruption collectively damages social welfare and state institutions, at the individual level, it remains a rational choice for each discrete subject. It is at this point of rational choice that the "institutional trap" is formed (a stable yet inefficient equilibrium from which an exit is blocked by the very structure of the game). The cognitive frameworks of agents adapt to this reality, transforming the perception of corrupt rent (B_i) into the only available tool for risk hedging. As a result, the corrupt norm becomes an endogenous element of the governance system, where networked trust within clusters replaces trust in state institutions. This creates a state of pathological homeostasis, in which the system resists any fragmentary reforms because they are incapable of altering the overall balance of payoffs.

The global dimension of this problem lies in the fact that cross-border networks exploit the asymmetry of national legislations to artificially lower the L_i parameter (the probability and severity of sanctions). When a transaction passes through multiple jurisdictions, the costs of its legal support increase exponentially, while corrupt mechanisms offer a simplified and "cheaper" architecture of interaction (Picci, 2024). This reinforces the Nash Equilibrium, as any actor who decides to operate exclusively within the legal field immediately faces higher costs

compared to network participants, rendering their strategy economically unsustainable in the long term.

Table 1. Formalization of variables in the strategic choice model of cross-border corrupt transactions

$$E = \sum_{i=1}^n (P_i \cdot B_i) - (C_i + L_i)$$

E – expected utility of participating in a corrupt network; P_i – subjective probability of successful transaction completion; B_i – perceived magnitude of corrupt rent (benefit); C_i – transaction costs of maintaining network anonymity and stability; L_i – mathematical expectation of potential losses, including the perceived severity and probability of legal sanctions.

Consequently, the deconstruction of international corrupt networks requires more than just a localized escalation of legal liability; it demands a systemic disruption of the existing equilibrium conditions. This is only possible through the implementation of external institutional shocks—radical changes in the international legal landscape that would make the "fair play" strategy more profitable than corrupt interaction. Only by reformatting the choice architecture, where the E parameter for legitimate transactions becomes dominant, can an exit from the institutional trap be achieved, alongside a transformation of behavioral matrices within the system of public administration.

In jurisdictions characterized by high scores on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), typically ranging between 87 and 90 points, the manifestation of corruption undergoes a sophisticated transfiguration. In countries such as Denmark and Finland, transactional anomalies are rarely found in petty bribery, which maintains a statistical prevalence of less than 2% according to Eurobarometer surveys (Valérian, 2025). Instead, the analytical focus shifts toward the "groupthink" cognitive bias within elite networks involved in cross-border defense and energy procurement. Through the lens of game theory, these actors operate within a high-trust equilibrium where the psychological threshold for perceiving a conflict of interest is elevated. Consequently, even in environments with robust formal institutions, behavioral traps emerge in the form of "noble cause corruption", where illicit networking is cognitively reframed as a necessity for maintaining national competitive advantages in global markets (Transparency International, 2025). The Eastern European corridor presents a distinct behavioral landscape where corruption functions as a dominant strategy within a non-zero-sum game. Statistical data from Transparency International (2024–2025) indicates CPI scores fluctuating between 33 and 36, sig-

naling the presence of deep-seated institutional traps. In these systems, the cognitive patterns of public officials are dictated by the expectation of opportunistic behavior from counterparts; the decision to engage in a corrupt transaction is a rational response to the “corruption equilibrium” rather than a mere moral failing. Cross-border network transactions in this region facilitate significant capital flight, with Global Financial Integrity (GFI) estimates suggesting that illicit financial flows can account for up to 10–15% of the GDP (Transparency International, 2025; World Bank, 2024). These networks exploit cognitive dissonance by utilizing offshore intermediaries to decouple the act of embezzlement from its socioeconomic consequences, effectively institutionalizing rent-seeking behavior through systemic inertia.

Offshore jurisdictions serve as the primary nodes in the architecture of global shadow capital, exhibiting a statistical anomaly where the ratio of registered legal entities to the actual population often exceeds 20:1. The behavioral logic of these “grey zones” is predicated on the mechanism of moral disengagement, allowing financial intermediaries to facilitate illicit cross-border flows while maintaining a positive self-concept through professional detachment. According to OECD and FATF reports, over 70% of grand corruption cases involve the use of anonymous shell companies to obscure the beneficial owner. From a game-theoretic perspective, these jurisdictions act as “free riders” in the international regulatory system, utilizing information asymmetry to attract capital (OECD, 2024). The cognitive rigidity of the global financial monitoring system often fails to address the adaptive nature of these networks, which prioritize the equilibrium of secrecy over the collective benefit of international fiscal transparency.

Conclusions

Corruption has transcended localized deviance to become a sophisticated, cross-border systemic architecture. This study posits that traditional legalistic frameworks are experiencing diminishing returns because they fail to account for the irrational cognitive biases and the inherent resilience of “institutional traps”. By operating at the intersection of diverse national jurisdictions, modern corrupt networks effectively distribute transaction costs and mitigate the risks of prosecution, thereby transforming corrupt rent-seeking into a perceived rational mechanism for navigating environmental uncertainty. Utilizing a synthesis of non-cooperative game theory and Prospect Theory, the research demonstrates that international corruption functions as a self-sustaining system. When modeled through a modified “Prisoner’s Dilemma”, it becomes evident that corrupt interactions often reach a Nash Equilibrium—a stagnant state where no participant has a unilateral incentive to deviate from the established norm. These institutional traps are

reinforced by the cognitive frameworks of agents who view corrupt behavior as the dominant strategy for risk-reward assessment under conditions of asymmetric information. The findings confirm that a robust anti-corruption architecture must move beyond the mere escalation of punitive measures toward a targeted transformation of the “choice architecture”. Effective intervention requires multidisciplinary tools designed to erode the “networked trust” that binds corrupt clusters together. Ultimately, facilitating an exit from these entrenched equilibrium states necessitates an external institutional shock coupled with a fundamental shift in the cognitive decision-making models of the actors involved, thereby deconstructing the mechanisms of transnational corrupt synergy.

The cross-national analysis of corruption through the prism of behavioral economics reveals that while institutional frameworks vary, the cognitive mechanisms of exploitation remain systemic. In high-integrity jurisdictions (such as Denmark and Finland (CPI 87–90)), corruption is not a pervasive social norm but a sophisticated byproduct of “groupthink”, where elite networks operate under a cognitive bias of perceived moral superiority, leading to latent institutional erosion. Conversely, in transitional states like Ukraine and Moldova (CPI 33–36), corruption functions as a self-sustaining Nash equilibrium; actors are trapped in a behavioral loop where the expectation of opportunistic conduct by others renders illicit transactions a rational, albeit destructive, survival strategy. This cycle is further facilitated by offshore hubs (e.g., BVI, Panama), where the statistical anomaly of registered entities (exceeding 20:1 relative to population) reflects a deliberate strategy of “moral disengagement”. Consequently, global anti-corruption efforts must transcend formal legalism and address the underlying cognitive rigidities and regulatory asymmetries that allow these cross-border networks to persist in a state of stable, yet suboptimal, equilibrium.

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**КОГНІТИВНІ ТА ПОВЕДІНКОВІ АСПЕКТИ
МІЖНАРОДНОЇ КОРУПЦІЇ: АНАЛІЗ ТРАНСКОРДОННИХ
МЕРЕЖЕВИХ ТРАНЗАКЦІЙ КРИЗЬ ПРИЗМУ ТЕОРІЇ ІГОР
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У сучасних умовах глобалізації корупція трансформувалася з локального девіантного явища у складну системну архітектуру, що функціонує на перетині національних юрисдикцій. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена необхідністю переосмислення антикорупційних стратегій, які традиційно ігнорують ірраціональні когнітивні упередження акторів та стійкість «інституційних пасток». Традиційні правові підходи вичерпують свій ресурс, що потребує залучення міждисциплінарного інструментарію для деконструкції механізмів транскордонної корупційної взаємодії. Мета дослідження полягає у теоретичному обґрунтуванні та моделюванні впливу когнітивних спотворень і стратегічної поведінки суб'єктів на формування сталих корупційних мереж у міжнародному просторі, а також у виявленні умов виникнення рівноважних станів у межах інституційних пасток. Основу роботи становить синтез методів некооперативної теорії ігор (зокрема, модифікована «дилема в'язня») для моделювання стратегічного вибору агентів та інституційного аналізу для детермінації системних обмежень. Також застосовано методи поведінкової економіки (теорія перспектив) для аналізу когнітивної оцінки ризиків і вигоди в умовах асиметричної інформації. Математичне моделювання використано для ілюстрації процесу закріплення корупційних норм як домінуючих стратегій. Доведено, що міжнародна корупція функціонує як самопідтримувана система, де транскордонні мережі нівелюють ризики національного переслідування через розподіл транзакційних витрат. Виявлено, що «інституційна пастка» виникає тоді, коли когнітивні установки агентів інтерпретують корупційну

ренту як єдино раціональний механізм мінімізації невизначеності. Встановлено, що в мережевих структурах корупція набуває ознак «рівноваги Неша», де жоден з учасників не має стимулів до зміни поведінки в односторонньому порядку без зовнішнього інституційного шоку. Дослідження підтверджує, що подолання міжнародної корупції вимагає не лише посилення санкційного тиску, а й цілеспрямованої трансформації когнітивних моделей прийняття рішень. Ефективна антикорупційна архітектура повинна бути спрямована на руйнування «мережевої довіри» всередині корупційних кластерів та зміну архітектури вибору, що дозволить вивести систему зі стану стагнаційної рівноваги (інституційної пастки).

Ключові слова: міжнародна корупція; теорія ігор; інституційні пастки; когнітивні упередження; транскордонні мережі; рівновага Неша; поведінкова економіка.

