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Ex-leaders call for global anti-corruption court to tackle Putin, more

By [Adam Taylor](#)

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, seen in the Black sea resort city of Sochi, Russia, on May 24. (Mikhail Metzel/Pool/Sputnik/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

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Forty-two former presidents and prime ministers have added their signatures to a growing list that calls for the creation of an International Anti-Corruption Court, citing both the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the loss of coronavirus funding to fraud as new evidence of the ill effects of grand corruption.

Among those signing the declaration were former leaders of Argentina, Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Mexico, Peru, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and many others, according to an announcement made Wednesday by nonprofits Integrity Initiatives International and Club de Madrid.

Grand corruption — the abuse of public office for private gain by a nation's leaders — “has global dimensions and cannot be combated by the affected countries alone,” said Danilo Turk, president of Slovenia between 2007 and 2012 and the current president of Club de Madrid, a forum for former elected world leaders.

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Though a proposal for the court was first made a decade ago, some of the signees are now explicitly linking a potential court to growing anger in Western capitals over the impact of dirty Russian money ahead of the invasion of Ukraine.

Former British prime minister Gordon Brown, one of the former world leaders calling for the court, wrote [for the Times of London this year](#) that Russian President Vladimir Putin needed to be brought to justice not only for the war in Ukraine but also for “three decades of deceit and corruption.”

Brown and others have added their names to a declaration that includes more than 250 high-profile figures from more than 75 countries. Sitting governments in Canada and the Netherlands have made establishing the court part of their official foreign policy, pushing the creation of the court as a vital international issue.

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“Corruption among public officials isn’t just a financial problem; it also undermines democracy and the rule of law in a country and exacerbates inequality among its people,” Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra [said at a meeting of European Union foreign ministers](#) in April.

But Hoekstra also emphasized that the Netherlands, which houses the International Criminal Court in The Hague, could only establish an anti-corruption court with the support of many other nations — a level of support that is far from assured.

No former U.S. president has signed the declaration, though [it was first proposed by Mark L. Wolf](#), a U.S. district judge appointed by President Ronald Reagan who founded Integrity Initiatives International. The United States, home to [a number of secretive tax havens](#), is considered one of the key facilitators of international corruption.

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Reps. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) and Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) introduced a bill that called on the United States to oppose kleptocracy around the world by supporting the development of an International Anti-Corruption Court in 2020. However, the momentum quickly fizzled due to a lack of support.

The United States has long had a fraught relationship with the International Criminal Court, with U.S. critics citing concerns about sovereignty and fears that Americans could be targeted for prosecution. Congress never ratified the 2002 Rome Statute that established the court, even though it had been signed by President Bill Clinton, putting the United States at odds with the 123 backers of the court.

After the court moved to open an investigation into possible war crimes in Afghanistan in 2019 — the first ICC investigation that could involve U.S. troops — the Trump administration sanctioned a variety of court officials, [including then-prosecutor Fatou Bensouda](#). (The Biden administration dropped the sanctions last year.)

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The ICC has also developed a complicated reputation in Africa, since so many of the cases it has brought have been against current or former African leaders — in part due to the difficulty of bringing cases against more-powerful nations.

The invasion of Ukraine might have led to a new perspective on international justice in countries that were once skeptical.

In March, [Sen. Lindsey O. Graham \(R-S.C.\) sponsored a bipartisan resolution](#) that called on the United States to petition the ICC to authorize any and all “investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Russian Armed Forces and their proxies and President Putin’s military commanders, at the direction of President Vladimir Putin.”

The invasion has also led to new moves against corruption in Western capitals once known as accepting receivers of suspect Russian money. “Oligarchs in London will have nowhere to hide,” British Prime Minister Boris Johnson [said in February](#), despite the fact that [many Russians accused of corrupt gains had been hiding in the British capital for decades](#).

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Though 189 countries are already party to the 2003 United Nations Convention Against Corruption, the treaty requires them only to have domestic laws criminalizing corruption. Though many do, such laws are often unenforced, while the sprawling, international nature of modern financial systems makes corruption an international issue.

The signed declaration in support of the court states that “kleptocrats enjoy impunity because they control the administration of justice in the countries that they rule.”

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