



YURISPRUDENSIYA

HUQUQIY ILMIIY-AMALIY JURNALI

2026-yil 1-son

VOLUME 6 / ISSUE 1 / 2026

DOI: 10.51788/tsul.jurisprudence.6.1.



Crossref
Content
Registration

ISSN: 2181-1938

DOI: 10.51788/tsul.jurisprudence

**MUASSIS: TOSHKENT DAVLAT
YURIDIK UNIVERSITETI**

“Yurisprudensiya” – “Юриспруденция” – “Jurisprudence” huquqiy ilmiy-amaliy jurnali O‘zbekiston matbuot va axborot agentligi tomonidan 2020-yil 22-dekabrda 1140-sonli guvohnoma bilan davlat ro‘yxatidan o‘tkazilgan.

Jurnal O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Oliy ta‘lim, fan va innovatsiyalar vazirligi huzuridagi Oliy attestatsiya komissiyasi jurnallari ro‘yxatiga kiritilgan.

Mualliflik huquqlari Toshkent davlat yuridik universitetiga tegishli. Barcha huquqlar himoyalangan. Jurnal materiallaridan foydalanish, tarqatish va ko‘paytirish muassis ruxsati bilan amalga oshiriladi.

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E-mail: lawjournal@tsul.uz

Obuna indeksi: 1387

Tasdiqnom

№ 174625, 29.11.2023.

Jurnal 2026-yil 24-fevralda bosmaxonaga topshirildi.
Qog‘oz bichimi: A4.
Shartli bosma tabog‘i: 18,1
Adadi: 100. Buyurtma: № 32.

TDYU bosmaxonasida chop etildi.
Bosmaxona manzili:
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Правовой научно-практический журнал «Юриспруденция» – «Yurisprudensiya» – «Jurisprudence» зарегистрирован Агентством печати и информации Узбекистана 22 декабря 2020 года с удостоверением № 1140.

Журнал включён в перечень журналов Высшей аттестационной комиссии при Министерстве высшего образования, науки и инноваций Республики Узбекистан.

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Реализуется по договорной цене.

Ответственный за выпуск:

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Редакторы:

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улица Сайилгох, 35.
Тел.: (0371) 233-66-36 (1169)

Веб-сайт: jurisprudence.tsul.uz

E-mail: lawjournal@tsul.uz

Подписной индекс: 1387.

Свидетельство

от 29.11.2023 № 174625.

Журнал передан в типографию
24.02.2026.

Формат бумаги: А4.
Усл. п. л. 18,1. Тираж: 100 экз.
Номер заказа: 32.

Отпечатано в типографии
Ташкентского государственного
юридического университета.
100047, г. Ташкент,
ул. Сайилгох, дом 37.

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“Yurisprudensiya” – “Юриспруденция” – “Jurisprudence” legal scientific and practical journal was registered by the Press and Information Agency of Uzbekistan on December 22, 2020 with certificate No. 1140.

The journal is included in the list of journals of the Higher Attestation Commission under the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovations of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

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Agreed-upon price.

Publication Officer:

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Sayilgoh street, 35.
Phone: (0371) 233-66-36 (1169)

Website: jurisprudence.tsul.uz

E-mail: lawjournal@tsul.uz

Subscription index: 1387.

Certificate

№ 174625, 29.11.2023.

The journal is submitted to the Printing house on 24.02.2026.

Paper size: A4. Cond.p.f: 18,1.

Units: 100. Order: № 32.

Published in the Printing house of
Tashkent State University of Law.
100047. Tashkent city,
Sayilgoh street, 37.

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Kelib tushgan / Получено / Received: 15.01.2026
Qabul qilingan / Принято / Accepted: 11.02.2026
Nashr etilgan / Опубликовано / Published: 24.02.2026

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.51788/tsul.jurisprudence.6.1./KQRR5513>

UDC: 347.73:343.23(045)(575.1)

CRYPTO-ASSETS IN THE SHADOW ECONOMY: A LEGAL ANALYSIS OF THE ASSET RECOVERY USED IN CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

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Abstract. *This article examines the role of crypto-assets, which became an instrument for committing a wide range of financial and/or corruption-related crimes, including money laundering, financing terrorism, and obtaining illicit assets in the digital economy era. The decentralized nature, anonymity, and transnational character of cryptocurrencies and other virtual assets create new challenges for law enforcement bodies and regulators, which are also explored in the article. Particular emphasis is placed on the relevant international legal frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), the FATF Recommendations, and the OECD Crypto-Asset Reporting Framework (CARF). In addition to the domestic legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan that contains recent legal definitions, licensing requirements, and liability mechanisms for criminal illicit activities involving crypto-assets. The paper will also provide a review of academic views from both international and Uzbek scholars regarding the regulatory, forensic, and criminological aspects of crypto-assets. Based on a combination of comparative and analytical methodologies, the research identified existing legal voids, institutional shortcomings, and best practices derived from international experience. These findings serve to develop practical recommendations to improve the efficiency of traceability, freezing, seizure, and recovery of assets at the national level in order to strengthen Uzbekistan's compliance with global anti-financial crime standards in an age of digital transformation.*

Keywords: *crypto-assets, laundering, asset recovery, international documents, legal framework, informal networks*

KRIPTOAKTIVLAR SOYADAGI IQTISODIYOTDA: JINOIY FAOLIYATDA FOYDALANILGAN AKTIVLARNI QAYTARISHNING HUQUQIY TAHLILI

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Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada raqamli iqtisodiyot sharoitida kriptovalyutalarning keng ko'lami moliyaviy va korrupsiyaga doir jinoyatlarni, jumladan, jinoiy faoliyatdan olingan daromadlarni legallashtirish, terrorizmni moliyalashtirish va noqonuniy aktivlarni qo'lga kiritish vositasi sifatidagi roli tahlil qilinadi. Kriptovalyutalar va boshqa virtual aktivlarning markazlashtirilmagan tabiati, anonimligi hamda transmilliy xususiyatlari huquqni muhofaza qiluvchi organlar va tartibga soluvchi idoralar uchun qanday yangi muammo va qiyinchiliklarni yuzaga keltirayotgani ham maqolada o'rganiladi. BMTning Korrupsiyaga qarshi konvensiyasi (UNCAC), FATF tavsiyalari hamda Iqtisodiy hamkorlik va taraqqiyot tashkilotining Kriptovalyutalar to'g'risida hisobot berish tizimi (CARF) kabi xalqaro huquqiy asoslarga alohida e'tibor qaratiladi. Shu bilan birga, O'zbekiston Respublikasi milliy qonunchiligining zamonaviy huquqiy ta'riflar, litsenziyalash talablari va kriptovalyutalardan foydalangan holda amalga oshiriladigan jinoiy faoliyat uchun javobgarlik mexanizmlarini o'z ichiga olgan qoidalarini ko'rib chiqiladi. Maqolada, shuningdek, kriptovalyutalar aylanmasining regulatsion, kriminalistik va kriminologik jihatlari bo'yicha ham xalqaro, ham o'zbekistonlik olimlarning ilmiy qarashlari sharhi taqdim etiladi. Qiyosiy-huquqiy va tahliliy usullarga tayanilgan holda tadqiqotda amalda mavjud bo'lgan huquqiy bo'shliqlar, institutsional kamchiliklar hamda xalqaro tajribada shakllangan eng yaxshi amaliyotlar aniqlandi. Ushbu xulosalar milliy darajada aktivlarni kuzatish, muzlatish, musodara qilish va qaytarish jarayonlarining samaradorligini oshirishga qaratilgan amaliy tavsiyalarni ishlab chiqishda asos bo'lib xizmat qiladi. Bundan maqsad raqamli transformatsiya davrida O'zbekistonning moliyaviy jinoyatlarga qarshi kurashishda xalqaro standartlarga muvofiqligini mustahkamlashdan iborat.

Kalit so'zlar: kriptovalyutalar, pul yuvish, aktivlarni qaytarish, xalqaro hujjatlar, huquqiy asos, norasmiy tarmoqlar

КРИПТОАКТИВЫ В ТЕНЕВОЙ ЭКОНОМИКЕ: ПРАВОВОЙ АНАЛИЗ ВОЗВРАТА АКТИВОВ, ИСПОЛЬЗУЕМЫХ В ПРЕСТУПНОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ

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Аннотация. В статье исследуется роль криптовалют как инструмента совершения широкого спектра финансовых и коррупционных преступлений, включая отмывание доходов,

финансирование терроризма и получение незаконных активов в условиях цифровой экономики. Децентрализованный характер, анонимность и транснациональная природа криптовалют и иных виртуальных активов создают новые вызовы для правоохранительных органов и регуляторов, которые также анализируются в работе. Особое внимание уделяется международно-правовым документам, в частности Конвенции Организации Объединённых Наций против коррупции (UNCAC), Рекомендациям FATF и Рамочной программе отчётности по криптоактивам ОЭСР (CARF). Наряду с этим рассматриваются положения национального законодательства Республики Узбекистан, включающие современные правовые дефиниции, лицензионные требования и механизмы ответственности за преступную деятельность с использованием криптоактивов. В статье представлен обзор научных подходов зарубежных и отечественных исследователей к регуляторным, криминалистическим и криминологическим аспектам оборота криптоактивов. На основе сравнительно-правового и аналитического методов выявлены существующие правовые пробелы, институциональные недостатки и лучшие практики, сформированные в международном опыте. Полученные результаты положены в основу практических рекомендаций, направленных на повышение эффективности процедур отслеживания, замораживания, ареста и возврата активов на национальном уровне, а также на укрепление соответствия Узбекистана международным стандартам противодействия финансовым преступлениям в условиях цифровой трансформации.

Ключевые слова: криптоактивы, отмывание доходов, возврат активов, международные документы, правовое регулирование, неформальные сети

Introduction

The emergence of the global digital economy has created an increased reliance on cryptocurrencies and other forms of crypto-asset usage in cross-border financial transactions; however, the global and largely anonymous nature of these assets has been linked to an increase in corruption and illegal activity in this space (Aidoo et al., 2025). Although each crypto transaction is recorded on the public blockchain ledger, it does not record the name of the individual who made the transaction and instead only records the alphanumeric wallet address of the recipient (Elsayd, 2023). This level of anonymity allows individuals that are engaged in criminal activity to utilize these assets as a means of concealing their identities and increases the risk of criminal activity affecting anti-crime initiatives implemented by the international community. The specific dimensions related to crypto-assets allow wide usage in illicit activities; in 2023 alone, there were over \$24.2 billion in crypto-assets that were transferred to crypto-wallets that have been identified as being associated with

criminal activity (Figure 1) (Bounlenguer, 2025).

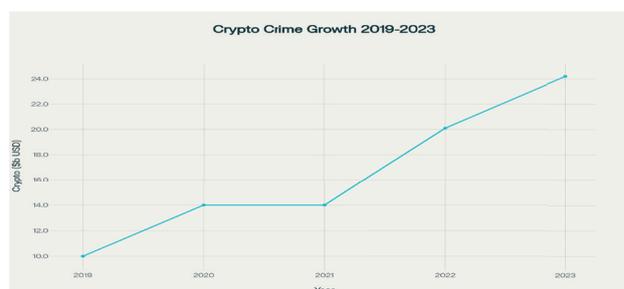


Figure 1. Growth of Crypto-Asset-Related Criminal Activity (2019–2023)

Another danger is due to the number of different crypto-asset types and also the rapid growth in the size of the mining sector. By the end of 2023, there were over 23,000 different crypto-assets registered (Yang et al., 2025; Ataniyazov & Azizkhonov, 2025). The illicit movement of these assets from a country causes a huge loss of finances for that country's economy, reduces government budgetary revenues, and deteriorates an environment of investment. Such occurrences are extremely damaging to a nation's financial stability, legal protection

system and public trust as well. In fact, the ability of crypto-assets to be easily used in corrupt schemes and the difficulty faced by law enforcement agencies in detecting and preventing such transactions (Wawrosz & Lansky, 2021) make it difficult or even impossible for those who engage in criminal activities to be punished. Despite the growing regulatory attention to virtual assets, significant institutional and enforcement gaps remain in Uzbekistan, particularly in the areas of cross-border tracing of crypto-assets, inter-agency coordination during confiscation procedures, and the absence of specialized asset-recovery mechanisms dealing specifically with virtual assets.

Accordingly, this article addresses the following research questions: (1) What legal and institutional gaps exist in the current Uzbek framework for tracing and recovering crypto-assets? (2) To what extent do existing AML/CFT and asset-recovery instruments adequately cover virtual assets? (3) What regulatory and institutional reforms could enhance the effectiveness of crypto-asset recovery mechanisms?

Therefore, the prevention of the illicit outflow of crypto-assets and their subsequent recovery have become two of the most important issues facing nations on both an international and domestic basis and have developed into one of the key areas of modern financial security policies. In turn, however, Uzbekistan lacks the efficient mechanisms of asset recovery in general, with no separate body (or unit) responsible for returning illicitly obtained assets from abroad, which makes the asset recovery related to crypto-assets even more complicated. As a result, given the broad nature of asset recovery process in general, this paper attempts to analyze scientific scholarship, legal discourse, and law enforcement in order to propose further applicable steps for efficient crypto-asset recovery in Uzbekistan.

The study employs a qualitative comparative legal methodology combining doctrinal legal analysis, institutional analysis, and policy evaluation techniques. The research object includes (a) international asset-recovery instruments (UNCAC, FATF Recommendations, CARF), (b) national legislative acts regulating crypto-asset circulation in Uzbekistan (laws, governmental resolutions, regulatory acts), and (c) institutional enforcement practices of competent authorities involved in AML/CFT and asset recovery.

Firstly, this study has undertaken an empirical and normative comparative analysis of relevant fundamental international legal instruments, such as UNCAC, as well as practical documents such as FATF Recommendations and CARF from the OECD. These documents are considered to be the current global standards that govern cross-border transparency, AML, and CTF within virtual asset markets. Therefore, these documents were selected as they provide definitions, regulatory obligations, supervisory mechanisms, and the formal process for tracing, freezing, confiscating and recovering assets.

Secondly, the study has provided a comparative overview of the national legislation of Uzbekistan with regard to digital assets. Taking into account that there is no specific asset recovery legal framework including virtual assets, it is assumed to be useful to analyze the function of crypto-asset service providers. In particular, this study is interested in analyzing recent legislative enactments and regulation in relation to the registration and licensure of crypto-asset service providers, compliance obligations, and both criminal and administrative liability for carrying out illegal activities in relation to digital assets.

Thirdly, this study has undertaken a thematic review of all of the relevant scholarly articles published by local and global authors in the fields of criminal law,

financial crime, digital forensic science and blockchain governance. These scholarly articles have been analyzed to gain insights into the most current and applicable scientific debate and theoretical approaches to regulating digital assets.

Finally, the study has developed recommendations to address the regulatory, institutional and practical issues raised by the findings of the study.

Main part

The analysis identified three measurable institutional weaknesses affecting crypto-asset recovery effectiveness: absence of a specialized national asset-recovery coordination body dealing with virtual assets; limited cross-border data-exchange participation (including incomplete integration into CARF-type information-exchange systems); and regulatory gaps concerning beneficial ownership transparency in crypto-asset service provider structures. Hence, this section covers the legal framework and enforcement situation analysis results.

Service providers dealing with the circulation of crypto-assets fall under the category of those who conduct business with money or other assets in Uzbekistan (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2024, August). Rules on internal controls (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021, June) were put into place for individuals involved in crypto-asset-related activity to prevent money laundering and funding terrorism or weapons of mass destruction. The rules indicate what type of transaction is viewed as suspicious and that would need to be submitted to the Department by the service provider.

“Know Your Customer” (KYC) (Sotiropoulou, et al., 2021), sometimes called “Customer Due Diligence (CDD)” (Eurasian Group, 2022), is used by cryptocurrency exchanges to identify their customers in Uzbekistan. They are also required to find out who the beneficial owner(s) are (Republic

of Uzbekistan, 2021, June) under FATF Recommendation 10 (section b) (Financial Action Task Force, 2012-2025).



Figure 2. Crypto-Asset Compliance, Security Audit, and Verification Process

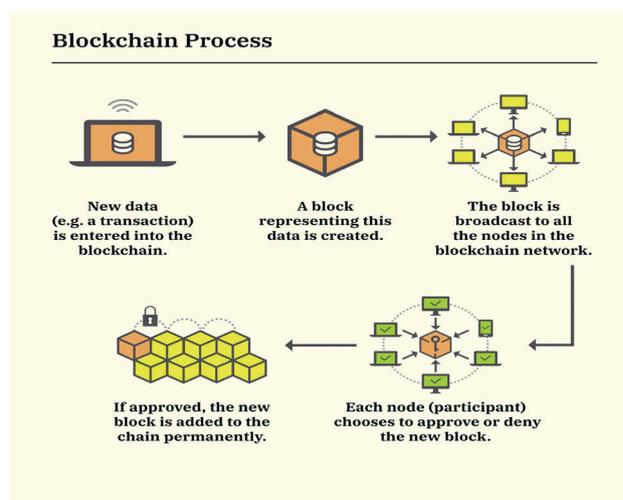


Figure 3. Blockchain Transaction Verification Process

Nominees (e.g., nominee persons), in particular, need to be identified (Financial Action Task Force, 2012–2025) in FATF Recommendation 24. However, neither national legislation nor the enforcement of Uzbekistan imposes such a requirement on service providers, which represents a serious gap in the legal framework. Participants in crypto-asset trading should also pay attention to other “red flag indicators” (Financial Action Task Force, 2020) and seek to prevent emerging risks.



Figure 4. Money Laundering Through Crypto: Gaps in Founder & Beneficial Ownership Controls

Although internal control regulations stipulate that a person convicted of a crime cannot serve as the head of an entity engaged in crypto-asset operations (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021), the issue of whether such a person may act as a founder or beneficial owner remains unaddressed (Eurasian Group, 2022).



Figure 5. Regulatory Frameworks for Crypto-Assets: Addressing Beneficial Ownership and Global Reporting Standards

Given the crucial importance of information exchange in the recovery of illicit assets and the emergence of new types of risks in the field of crypto-assets, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched in 2022 the Crypto-Asset Reporting Framework (CARF) (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Among the countries,

Kazakhstan has announced its readiness to begin exchanging such data by 2027 (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025, September).

However, Uzbekistan has not initiated the attendance in CARF, which helps countries to unite their efforts in this regard.

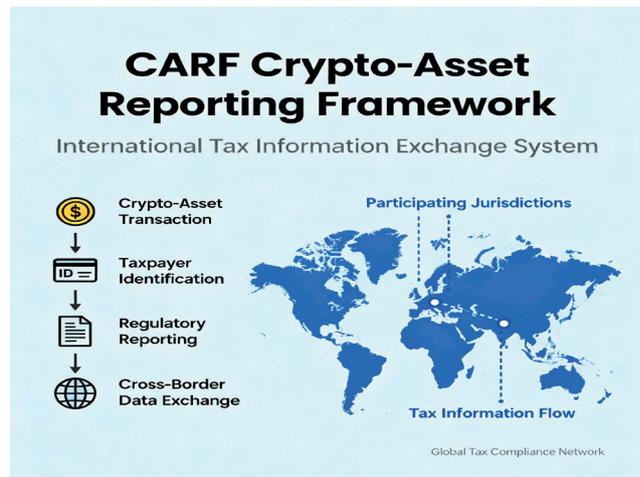


Figure 6. The Crypto-Asset Reporting Framework (CARF)

The Republic of Uzbekistan acceded to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) (United Nations Convention against Corruption, 2003, October) in 2008 (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2008, July). In the terminology section of the Convention, property is defined as encompassing all types of assets as well as documents related to them.

According to Recommendation 15 of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), countries must manage and mitigate the risks associated with virtual assets by ensuring that virtual asset service providers (VASPs) are subject to regulation, licensing, or registration. They must also be included within effective systems of monitoring and compliance designed to combat money laundering (Anti-Money Laundering – AML) and the financing of terrorism (CFT) (Financial Action Task Force, 2012–2025).

A large number of scientists who conduct studies related to this subject, such as

S.M. Elsayed, are now starting to take into account that, in addition to being a part of cybercrime, cryptocurrencies could also fall under the category of any other financial transaction-based crimes (Elsayed, 2023). As a result, a number of researchers are analyzing the use of cryptocurrencies in conjunction with a variety of types of criminal offenses.

For example, professor Ye.V. Kolenko, in the country, is arguing that cryptocurrencies can be used as an object of bribes in cases of corruption-related crimes (Kolenko, 2023). Additionally, D. Khamzaev suggested that the Department for Combating Economic Crimes under the General Prosecutor's Office (Department) of the Republic of Uzbekistan should impose a strong level of control over this area (Khamzaev, 2021). Lastly, Kh. Kudratillaev has investigated the use of crypto-currencies within the scope of anti-money laundering (AML) measures (Kudratillaev, 2022). However, these studies focused on using crypto-assets as material objects in committing crimes, but the issues related to the asset recovery mechanism and the dimensions of virtual assets affecting this process were not the aims of this research.

Within the CIS, A.I. Bastrykin discussed the above-mentioned problems of identification and investigation of crypto-assets (Bastrykin, 2021). D. Kunev correctly notes that while the recovery of illegally obtained assets is a serious problem for most states, the search, seizure, confiscation and sale of crypto-assets is an even more complex task (Kunev, 2022). Even though scholars illuminate the complexity of virtual asset recovery, they do not dive into proposing possible solutions in this regard.

V.V. Zemskov and V.I. Prasolov drew attention to the fact that it would be necessary to take into account the legal status of crypto-assets both under criminal law and under civil law (Zemskov & Prasolov, 2021). Meanwhile, Ye.N. Sochneva,

Yu.I. Nasyrov, V.B. Dulepova, and Ye.V. Nuriyeva (2021) investigated the application of blockchain analysis in investigating such crimes. Such studies are fragmented without full coverage of the asset recovery process, including the limitations present in Uzbekistan.

The need for a new and separate method for the recovery of crypto-asset is underlined by A. Sotiropoulou, J-P. Brun, L. Gray, C. Scott, and K. M. Stephenson (2021) with respect to the recovery of crypto-asset during the process of the recovery of other assets. The volatility of prices of the crypto-assets was taken into account when L. Bostwick, N. Bartlett, H. Cronje, and T. J. Abernathy (2021) II described the difficulties of the management of the seized and confiscated crypto-assets while they made a distinction between the crypto-assets and the tokens as the different types of the virtual assets.

The integration of the crypto-assets in the systems of the declaration of the property (assets) was proposed by L. Pop, D. Kotlyar, and I. Rossi (2023). The most difficult problem of this sphere, according to C. King, C. Walker, and J. Gurule (2018) is the differentiation of the approaches of the various states.

This problem has high relevance for the Republic of Uzbekistan. Together with the development of the digital economy, the "reputation" and the use of the crypto-assets in the Republic of Uzbekistan will continue to increase. However, there are great difficulties for the agencies of law-enforcement bodies and the sectoral specialists connected with the possibility of using the crypto-assets for the illegal purposes.

The attention was given by the President of Uzbekistan recently. On November 3, 2025, the President emphasized the importance of advancing scientific research focused on preventing emerging forms of cybercrime, particularly those involving attacks on smart devices and the unlawful appropriation of

crypto-assets (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). This shows the necessity to continue efforts in this regard.

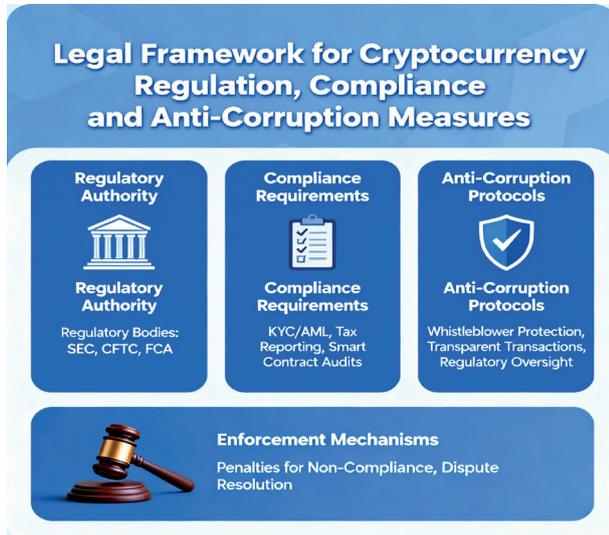


Figure 7. The Legal Framework for Cryptocurrency Regulation: Compliance and Anti-Corruption Measures

A number of normative and legal acts have been adopted in Uzbekistan to regulate the field of crypto-assets. This activity is carried out by licensed service providers through crypto stock exchanges, mining pools, crypto-depositories, and crypto-shops (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022, August), including Binance (via Coinpay) (Gazeta.uz, 2025), Asterium (n.d.), UzNEX (n.d.), and tcrypto.uz (n.d.) in Uzbekistan.

A crypto-wallet is defined as software or a software-technical tool designed for the storage and management of crypto-assets. Mining activity is defined as an “activity of maintaining a distributed ledger of data, creating blocks, and verifying their integrity through computational operations” (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2024). A token is defined as a type of crypto-asset that is managed on the basis of a smart contract and represents a unit of account in a distributed ledger intended to confirm an obligation or ownership right to a specific asset (National Agency of Perspective

Projects of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022).

The authorized body in this sphere is the National Agency of Perspective Projects of the Republic of Uzbekistan (the Agency) (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2017). The Agency, among other functions, participates in the development and implementation of AML measures in the sphere of circulation of crypto-assets (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2017).

By December 2023, 26 mining farms had been identified, which is considered one of the reasons for introducing administrative and criminal liability measures in this field.



Figure 8. Legal Liability for the Mining of Anonymous Crypto-Assets

Accordingly, in 2024, relevant amendments and additions were made to the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Responsibility of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2024), establishing administrative (Republic of Uzbekistan, 1994) and criminal responsibility for the illegal acquisition, transfer, or exchange of crypto-assets; for carrying out the activities of crypto-asset service providers without obtaining a license in the prescribed manner; for conducting operations with anonymous crypto-assets by crypto-asset

service providers; as well as for engaging in the mining of anonymous crypto-assets or conducting mining activities in violation of the established procedure.

As an example of the practical measures implemented in our country, it can be noted that the Law Enforcement Academy of the Republic of Uzbekistan has been granted access to specialized information systems such as DarkWebMonitor, Elliptic ICAC-COPS, and Arthropod. These systems make it possible to monitor illegal activities on the darknet and analyze crypto-asset transactions (Kolenko, 2025).

An interdepartmental document has been adopted regarding the identification, seizure, storage, and confiscation of crypto-assets, and in the report of the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (EAG), the measures implemented in Uzbekistan have been highly evaluated (Eurasian Group, 2022).

The main problem is not the absence of legislation, but institutional fragmentation of enforcement powers. Unlike in some countries, where asset-recovery coordination is centralised, the Uzbek system takes a fragmented approach, assigning a range of agencies responsibilities that can slow cross-border confiscation, coordination and enforcement proceedings. Policymakers must improve institutional coordination to address the fact that gaps in coordination currently hamper enforcement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while crypto-assets offer convenience in financial circulation, they also serve as an effective tool for criminal activity. This, in turn, creates new threats to the financial security of states and the stability of the global economy. International practice shows that the main ways to ensure effective counteraction include: the licensing and strict regulation of crypto-asset service providers; the full implementation of AML requirements and adherence to “Know Your

Customer” (KYC) principles; the development of information exchange systems such as CARF between states; the improvement of national legal frameworks for the seizure, confiscation, and management of crypto-assets; and the expansion of blockchain analysis tools and digital forensics capabilities.

From this perspective, three institutional measures are needed. First, a dedicated coordination unit should be established for crypto-asset recovery with clear functions and enough power to exercise in order to have efficient mechanisms of law enforcement. Secondly, national systems that monitor crypto-asset transactions should link up with international data-exchange systems incorporating CARF-type infrastructures. Thirdly, regulators shall also require crypto-asset service providers to report beneficial ownership, which decreases the time and efforts of specialized bodies in the asset recovery process. These measures are expected to considerably boost the ability of national authorities to track and seize crypto-assets connected to criminal activities.

In the process of combating the involvement of crypto-assets in illegal activities and ensuring their recovery, effective utilization of the capabilities of the Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for West and Central Asia (ARIN-WCA) serves as an important solution for tracking and recovering transnationally moved assets. This network enhances information exchange, rapid cooperation among states, and the ability to trace assets located beyond national borders.

Practical steps devoted to implementing these recommendations may include:

1) drafting a special law on asset recovery, with substantial articles regarding virtual asset recovery;

2) create a specialized unit in Prosecutors office, which will be responsible

only for the asset recovery process in Uzbekistan;

3) deepen the understanding of AML and KYC principles, especially for crypto-asset service providers;

4) consider the possibility of engaging with CARF-type institutions, with further steps required to fulfill obligations as a member;

5) consider the implementation of confiscation measures specifically in the asset recovery process via adding it to the Criminal Procedure Code of Uzbekistan;

6) with the support of international and foreign partners, analyze the possibility of enlarging the blockchain, and analyze tools and other technical tools for digital forensics.

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YURISPRUDENSIYA

HUQUQIY ILMIY-AMALIY JURNALI

2026-YIL 1-SON

VOLUME 6 / ISSUE 1 / 2026

DOI: 10.51788/tsul.jurisprudence.6.1.