



openDemocracy is an independent global media organisation.

Our goal is to challenge power and inspire change by producing reliable, trustworthy journalism and through building skills, knowledge and capacity within the media and civil society across the world.

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Message from the editor-in-chief



2022 was a year that the world changed, changed utterly. Amidst the horrors of war, our long-established networks of Ukrainian and Russian contributors and reporters explained the history, politics and culture behind the conflict and told crucial stories from on the ground. Read more on page 9.

We have also intensified our coverage of another global crisis that will dominate all our lives: the climate. We set our brilliant investigative reporters to find out who was behind attempts to sabotage the UK's drive for net-zero carbon emissions. And guess what? The trail led back to Big Oil – find out more on page 24.

We received huge vindications for our work: first, the UK government disbanded the secretive 'Clearing House' unit, whose "Orwellian" activities we had exposed; and then we won 'Campaign of the Year' at the British journalism awards. In May, our Africa reporter Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu won New Voice at the One World Media Awards. Pages 6 and 12 have the details.

Doing journalism is a privilege – but it can also be a struggle. Over the past year, we have faced major legal threats. This 'lawfare' is costly and time-consuming – but be assured, we will fight on.

Peter Geoghegan

Thanks to our supporters

We'd like to thank everyone who has donated to openDemocracy. You are helping to build a secure future for our journalism.

We hope this report shows that your generosity was well placed: that we've kept up our end of the bargain by challenging power and showing a way forward to a better world.

The UK government disbanded the secretive 'Clearing House' unit, whose "Orwellian" activities we had exposed



Where we work

Our stories

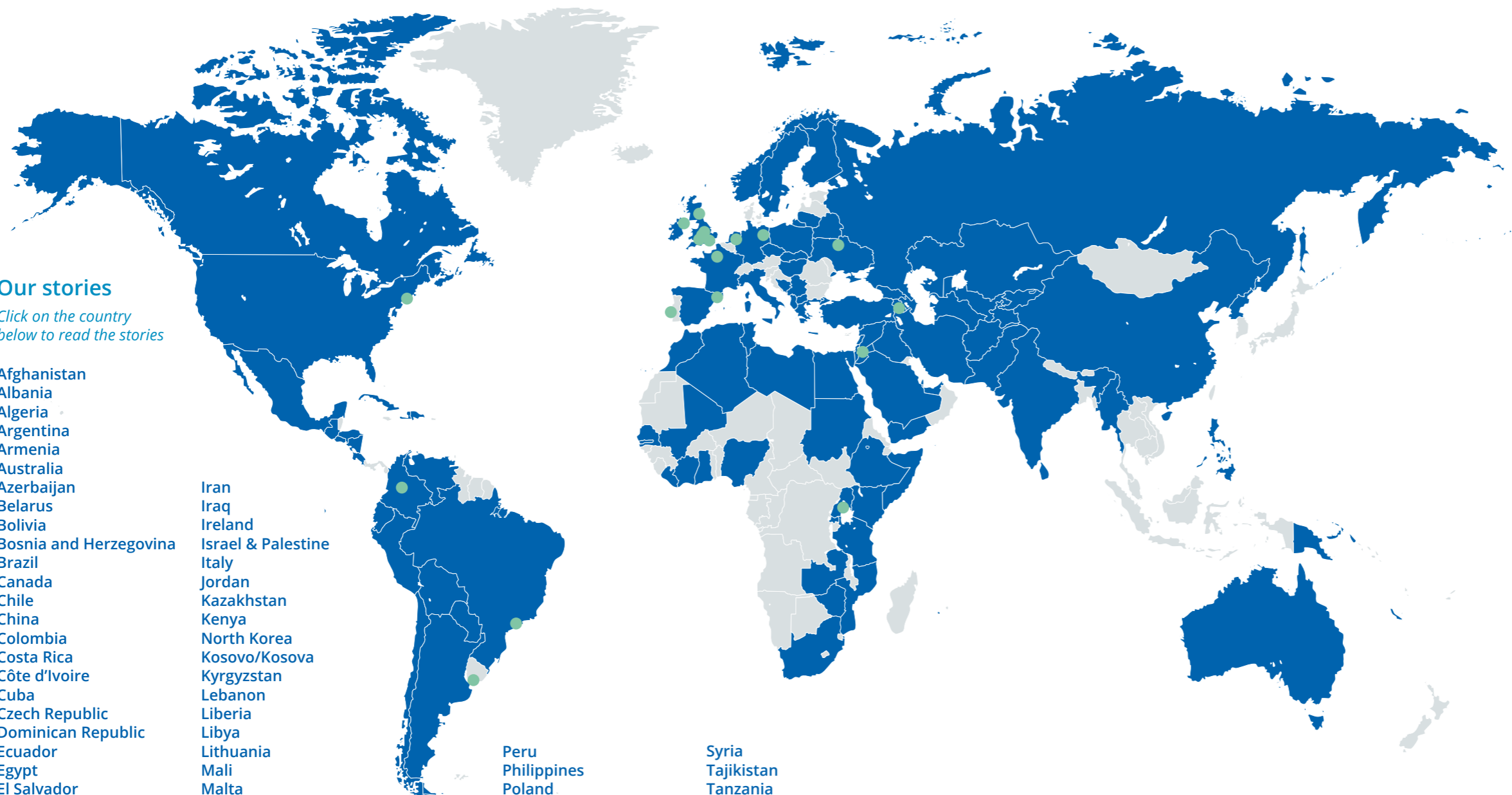
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- Somalia
- South Africa
- Spain
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Sweden
- Syria
- Tajikistan
- Tanzania
- Tunisia
- Turkey
- Turkmenistan
- Uganda
- Ukraine
- United Arab Emirates
- United Kingdom
- United States
- Uzbekistan
- Venezuela
- Yemen
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

Our people

- Barcelona
- Belfast
- Berlin
- Bogotá
- Bristol
- Edinburgh
- Jordan
- Kampala
- Kyiv
- Lisbon
- London
- Manchester
- Montevideo
- New York
- Nijmegen
- Paris
- São Paulo
- Stroud
- Yerevan



2022 in numbers

1,861 stories published

14.1m page views

7.84m new users

3,246 regular donors – thank you!

456k social media shares

313k social media followers

2.7m video views

134 times our work was followed up by major media outlets

5 languages published on our site

Secret government

On 25 August the ironically named Lord True, minister of state at the Cabinet Office, announced that the “FOI Clearing House” should be redesigned to more clearly operate as an advisory function”. Particular attention would be paid to transparency, the applicant-blind principle for freedom-of-information requests and reform of the ‘round robin’ system whereby FOI requests to one government department would be shared across all departments.

In other words, the government would disband the Clearing House and the systems it ran that we [exposed in 2020](#). It’s a long way from Michael Gove’s response to our revelations about the existence of the Clearing House work, when, in early 2021, the Cabinet Office minister [called openDemocracy’s reporting “ridiculous and tendentious”](#).

The government didn’t mention openDemocracy in its announcement, but without [our reporting](#), none of this would have happened. After our first reports we had to take the government to court in 2021 to force it to come clean about the Clearing House. It was our work that inspired the parliamentary Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee investigation into the unit, which [reported in April 2022](#), mentioning us 14 times – without all this it’s fair to say that the [Cabinet Office review](#) that followed would never have happened.

Our reporter, Jenna Corderoy, continued to score freedom-of-information wins in other areas too. One case that shows how she doggedly pursues the truth was related to the new Advanced Research and Invention Agency, a pet project of Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson’s former chief adviser. The government wanted to exclude it from the Freedom of Information Act, so Jenna asked the government for documents that justified this secrecy. The government refused to hand them over, so Jenna complained to the

In August, the UK government announced that it would disband the Clearing House and the systems it ran that we first exposed in 2020

Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO). In July [the ICO ruled](#) that the government had to provide the evidence.

Jenna has been pushing for transparency of cabinet ministers’ official diaries too. In July the Department for Education updated official transparency releases of ministerial diary of Gavin Williamson, the former education secretary, after we contacted them about [our story](#).

In November, after a 12-month battle by the UK’s biggest police force to keep the details secret, [Scotland Yard handed openDemocracy heavily redacted documents](#) about Met Police officers sending racist and sexist messages. Once again, Jenna had to complain to the ICO so that the public could know this shocking information. And after an 18-month freedom-of-information battle [the government is still fighting us legally](#) to wriggle out of publishing its secret ‘lessons learnt’ review of the Covid pandemic – after [the ICO ordered them](#) to release it.

We launched a series of surveys about government transparency, which received 10,000 responses from readers. We asked readers to crowdfund opinion polling, which showed that 87% of respondents said they were much less likely to vote for a party with a record of government secrecy. We used the findings in our journalism and also in evidence to MPs.

It’s a long way from when, in early 2021, Michael Gove called openDemocracy’s reporting “ridiculous and tendentious”



Mark Thomas/Alamy Stock Photo

After meeting openDemocracy, the Information Commissioner committed himself to “fix a system that clearly needs fixing”

Further, using a tool on our website, readers have sent more than 5,000 emails to their MPs on lobbying and media freedom.

However, in our campaigning for government transparency, we did not limit ourselves to the government. We coordinated an [open letter](#) to John Edwards, the UK’s new Information Commissioner, laying out our expectations for his role in overseeing FOI. More than 100 journalists, campaigners, lawyers, MPs and celebrities signed it, including the editor of The Guardian, Katharine Viner, The Observer’s Paul Webster, and senior Tory MP David Davis. The Green Party’s Caroline Lucas, former shadow chancellor John McDonnell and comedian Joe Lycett also added their names.

It was timed to coincide with an listening exercise at the ICO: as a result, Edwards organised a roundtable with stakeholders including openDemocracy. He became very vocal on FOI in his public statements and committed himself to “fix a system that clearly needs fixing”.

We rounded off the year by co-hosting a December event in Parliament on FOI and the future of accountability in government. Panellists included Labour MPs Fleur Anderson and Andy Slaughter, The Guardian’s Rachel Oldroyd, Information Commissioner John Edwards and our own Jenna Corderoy.

Anderson namechecked our ‘Art Of Darkness’ report into FOI failures, and Jenna lamented the backlog of delayed and refused requests, which can take “months if not years”. Edwards added: “Information delayed is information denied.”

No ID, no vote

We have long been puzzled by the government’s plans to require voters to prove their identity at polling booths, given that voter fraud is not really a problem in the UK. Is this really about voter suppression, given that the poor and young and people in ethnic minorities are less likely to have the IDs demanded?

In November, our reporter Jim Fitzpatrick discovered just how determined the Tories are to put this hurdle in the way of voters: [he found](#)

[that the chair of the Electoral Commission told ministers he had “fundamental concerns” over their plans, which he thought were neither “workable” nor “secure”](#). But the government said it would press ahead regardless with the changes in time for local elections in May 2023.

[The story was picked up by Channel 4 News, The Independent and Daily Mirror, and BBC Radio 4’s PM programme interviewed Jim about the story.](#)

War in Ukraine



Gleb Garanich/Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine destroyed thousands of lives, put the very existence of a country under threat and upended the international order. Our coverage of the crisis has drawn on our in-house expertise and our long history of working with some of the best journalists and researchers in the region.

Aftermath of a Russian missile strike in Kyiv, 31 December 2022

On the day that Russia invaded Ukraine – 24 February 2022 – we published a series of articles that reflected the unique range and depth of our coverage of those countries. For insight we turned not to Western analysts but a [Ukrainian journalist](#) and [two Russian writers](#). An [Armenian colleague](#) explained how the world’s focus on Ukraine looked from her country, which was itself [at war last year](#).

Thousands of people read passionate and in-depth analyses of the situation by leading writers from Ukraine and Russia – arguing why, exactly, progressives in the West got the Kremlin’s reasoning wrong, and why the Kremlin was probably ready for a long war.

Ukraine's labour reforms

Who watches the reformers, even during war time? oDR lead editor Tom Rowley and journalist Serhiy Guz broke a number of stories this year on the Zelenskyi administration's wartime socio-economic reforms, including pushing through new labour legislation under the pretext of 'liberalising' and 'de-Sovietising' the country's labour laws.

Our work on the Ukrainian government's plans to shift to a 'smaller state' when it comes to workplace and social protections was unique in the international media. But we got through to people who can make a difference: a committee of experts at the International Labour Organization's general assembly in Geneva in May discussed our coverage of Ukraine's labour laws. And one of our articles was the lone citation in an open letter from the international trade union organisations to the leaders of the European Union expressing their concern about workers' rights in Ukraine and the exclusion of unions from reconstruction.

We have also painstakingly followed the threads of money and influence linking corrupt elites in the former Soviet countries to their enablers in the UK. At the same time, we publish in both English and Russian in an effort to counteract the lack of media freedom in the region.

To help meet the scale of the challenge of covering Russia's war, reporter [Kateryna Semchuk](#) joined openDemocracy as our reporter in Ukraine, covering the human and socio-economic cost of Russia's all-out war on the country. Kateryna broke some incredible stories, such as the reality of life for Ukrainian captives in Russian prisons, how the families of Ukrainian prisoners of war have to fight for information on their loved ones held in Russia or the fact that the Ukrainian authorities are now prosecuting men forcibly mobilised in the occupied east.

Two other long-term contacts of ours, brilliant reporter [Igor Burdyga](#) and media veteran [Serhiy Guz](#), worked on stories of secret trials of Pwutin's henchmen in Ukraine, life under Russia occupation and Ukraine's own radical wartime socio-economic reforms.

From the Russian side, we published shocking eye-witness accounts of police violence and abuse of anti-war protesters. We explored the attitudes of ordinary Russians and teenagers and the elite to the war – and to themselves. And we had fascinating on-the-ground reports from Victory Day celebrations across Russia. This coverage is designed to tap into how Russian society is changing during the invasion of Ukraine – and to reveal how the Kremlin tries to sew up all dissent at home.

We have also scaled up our coverage of Belarus, Russia's silent partner in the war against Ukraine. Reporters have tracked sabotage operations against the war effort inside the country, new tools in the regime's repressive toolkit and why President Lukashenka has, so far, continued to hedge his bets against joining the full-scale war.

After eight years of working with some of the best journalists in these three countries, it's this holistic picture of Russia's war that we're interested in: the brutal, tragic effects on Ukraine of the Kremlin's invasion, how Ukrainian society is resisting these threats – and the need for public scrutiny of government actions, even in wartime. At the same time, the fault lines of the new social contract in Russia and Belarus are vital to understand – and we need to keep contact with the people who can explain them.



A former Ukrainian prisoner hugs a relative after arriving to Boryspil airport following a prisoners' exchange with Russia, September 2019

How readers helped

In spring we asked openDemocracy readers to help journalists in Ukraine. The response was simply staggering. We pledged to match every pound given, up to a total of £6,000 – which is the amount we usually raise thanks to the generosity of our readers in a week. We hit that target within 24 hours.

In the end, readers gave more than £36,000, in addition to the £6,000 from openDemocracy. Another appeal in December raised donations worth around £13,000.

At the time of writing we've given £5,000 to help journalists get access to vital equipment such

as flak jackets and trauma kits, £10,000 to the National Union of Journalists in Ukraine, €4,000 to Procherk, a news agency in Cherkasy, a city south of Kyiv, €4,000 to Spilne, a progressive comment platform, and €15,000 to Graty, a Ukrainian media organisation that focuses on the law and justice system. With the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine we have set up a journalism competition in the Dnipro region, to help support journalists who have been displaced by the Russian invasion. All the remaining money donated by readers has been used to pay Ukrainian journalists for their work published in openDemocracy.

Trophy cabinet

Up where we belong.
Left to right: Jo Allan of Newsworks, which sponsored the award; openDemocracy's Jenna Corderoy and Ramzy Alwakeel; Jeremy Vine, host of the ceremony

Fellow journalists recognised openDemocracy's work with the most prestigious trophies and nominations we have ever received. The biggest prize was Campaign of the Year at the British Journalism Awards, which we won for our work on transparency in British public life (see 'Secret government', page 6). We were the only 'independent' outlet on the shortlist, alongside entries from The Sunday Times, the Daily Express, The Sun, the Daily Mail, the Mail on Sunday and CNN.

The judges said: "This campaign matters hugely for British journalism and encourages other journalists to fight freedom of information battles."

ASV Photography



In May, the breadth of our coverage and depth of talent was recognised when our Africa reporter Khatondi Soita Wepukhulu won New Voice at the One World Media Awards. Khatondi's winning nomination included her undercover work on gay conversion 'therapy' in Uganda (see 'Freedom to love', page 32).

And our Europe and Eurasia editor Tatev Hovhannisyan won an Emma Goldman Award for innovative research on feminist and inequality issues in Europe – the first journalist to win the award.

There was an impressive tally of runner-up places, too. Our reporter Adam Bychawski was shortlisted in the political journalist of the year category at the prestigious Press Awards. In March 2023 he received the second-place spot, beating star writers from The Sunday Times, The Independent, the Mail on Sunday, The Sun and The Guardian.

Freelance author Sam Asumadu was shortlisted for the Paul Foot Award for her work on indefinite sentences in British prisons. This is the third time in four years that we have been shortlisted for the Paul Foot, which is the most prestigious award in British investigative journalism; Sam's work was shortlisted alongside entries from The Sunday Times, the Daily Mirror, Private Eye, Liberty Investigates and The Observer.

Our work on transparency got us in the running for campaign of the year at the Press Awards too, alongside four national newspapers.

We were also shortlisted in two categories of the inaugural Media Freedom Awards. Our transparency work was again up for national campaign of the year, against five major newspapers. Meanwhile, Sam Asumadu's work on indefinite prison sentences competed with five national papers for national investigation of the year.

Again in impressive company, we were shortlisted in the energy and environmental journalism category in the British Journalism Awards for our investigation into corporate surveillance of climate activists.

The Drum Awards judges highly commended us in the specialist news site of the year category for our work on women's and LGBTQ rights. And the judges of the Investigative Journalism for Europe fund awards shortlisted the same openDemocracy team for our work on an unproven, unethical treatment intended to prevent abortion pills from working for their IJ4EU Impact Award.

Lastly – and fittingly, considering our mission – we were shortlisted for making an outstanding contribution to democratic change in the inaugural Democracy Awards, organised by The Democracy Network.

The judges said: "This campaign matters hugely for British journalism and encourages other journalists to fight freedom of information battles"



London: heart of dark money



More in common than you might think: the City of London and Nursultan Nazarbayev

Meet the Nazarbayevs

In the first week of January 2022, at least 238 people were killed in clashes between security forces and demonstrators against the Kazakhstan regime, whose leaders have become spectacularly rich from the country's abundant oil, gas and metals. The crackdown on protesters was aided by an estimated 2,500 Russian paratroopers.

Four thousand miles away in London, though, the UK assets of the Kazakhstani ruling class were sitting quietly. The Central Asian state's elite owns at least £530m of luxury property in London and the south-east, we reported. Some £330m of that luxury property is owned by the extended family of Kazakhstan's former leader Nursultan Nazarbayev – whose ongoing political and economic influence in the country catalysed the protests.



ITAR-TASS News Agency/Alamy Live News

That story was followed up by Forbes and led Tom Tugendhat, the Tory MP who chaired the British parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, to say the government should consider sanctioning such assets.

In late January openDemocracy and SourceMaterial revealed that Nazarbayev's grandson was at the centre of the collapse of a City firm specialising in 'golden visas' for the super-rich. Dolfin Financial went into administration in 2021 after the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) banned it from regulated activities, saying it "dishonestly or recklessly provided misleading information" about its visa schemes and a relationship with an "ultra-high net worth client". The FCA did not name the client but openDemocracy and SourceMaterial established it was Nurali Aliyev, Nazarbayev's favoured grandson. The story was picked up by The Telegraph, the Financial Times, The Guardian, the Daily Mail (twice) and The Times. In February, home secretary Priti Patel announced that the golden visa scheme would be closed.

At the same time we reported that a fund named after and chaired by Nursultan Nazarbayev himself had been linked to \$7.8bn of assets via a UK company. That company, Jusan Technologies Ltd, and the Nazarbayev Fund, a Kazakhstan endowment fund, later sued us for defamation. At the time of writing, the case is ongoing – see 'SLAPP happy', page 20.

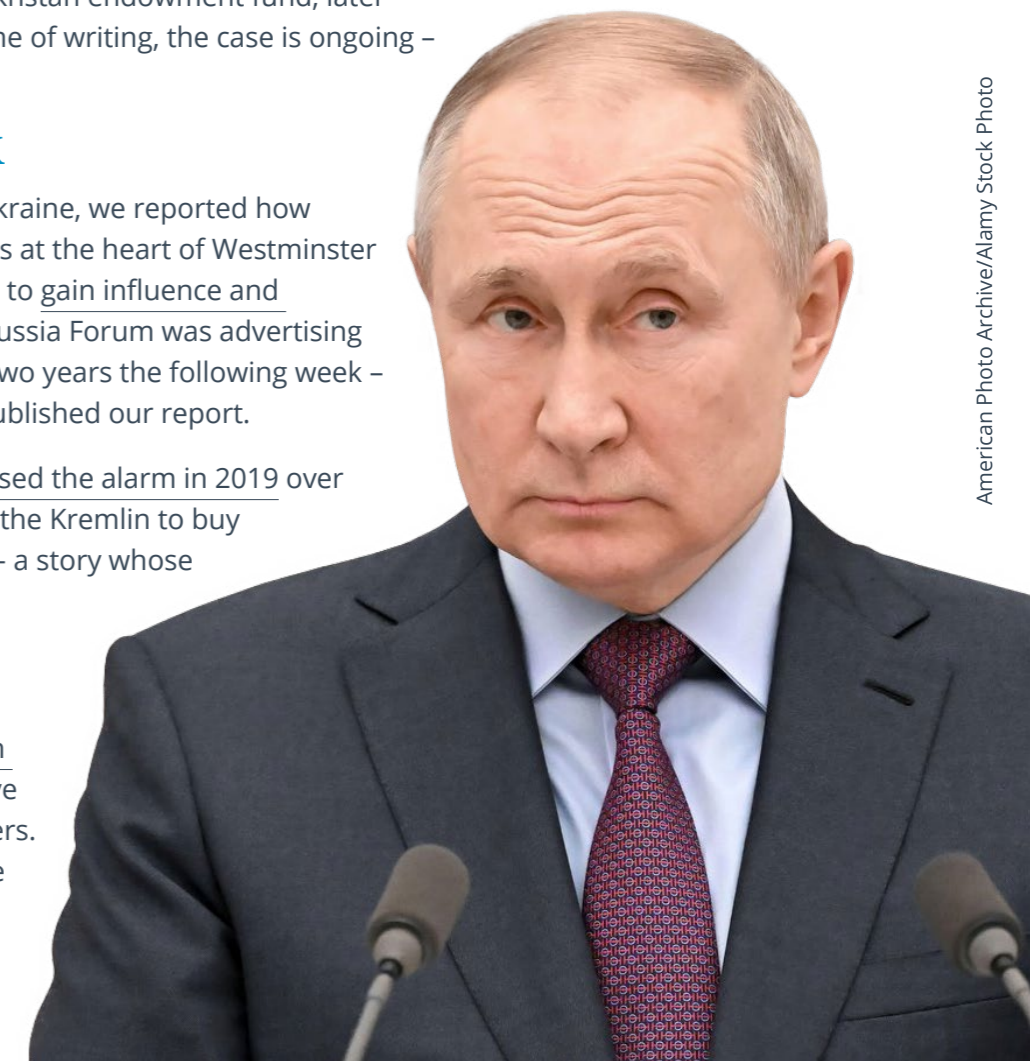
"Just asking for a friend"

Russian riches in the UK

On the day that Russia invaded Ukraine, we reported how unregulated pro-Moscow lobbyists at the heart of Westminster were using their links to Tory MPs to gain influence and respectability. The Westminster Russia Forum was advertising its first in-person conference for two years the following week – though it postponed it after we published our report.

It came as no surprise: we had raised the alarm in 2019 over the potential for donors linked to the Kremlin to buy influence over the Conservatives – a story whose reverberations continue today.

We continued to probe Russia's long-overlooked influence in the UK, revealing how an elite Russian lobbyist offers his clients "exclusive access" to UK government ministers. We were then pleased to see Clive



American Photo Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

£7m

of funding from Russian sources had gone to top British universities over the preceding five years

Alison Thewliss told us: “Knowing who is paying for [the APPG], knowing where that influence is – if you don’t do that, then it is very hard to pin down who is pushing the agenda behind the scenes.”

Lewis MP showing what appeared to be a printout from that story – we had reproduced a Christmas card from the lobbyist showing himself with Boris Johnson in black tie – on the BBC’s political debate programme Politics Live.

We also revealed how Oxford University accepted more than £3m in donations from a billionaire Putin “crony” who was accused in the UK parliament of “robbing assets from the Russian people”. And we found that more than £7m of funding from Russian sources had gone to top British universities over the preceding five years, including at least £3.4m from donors with close links to the Kremlin.

Lobbying Parliament by the back door

openDemocracy’s year-long investigation into lobbying in Westminster revealed how All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) were being exploited by private firms to gain access to MPs. Arms manufacturers and healthcare businesses were among those to pump more than £25m into the unregulated groups, providing a ‘back door’ for lobbying.

The story – which featured on the front page of The Guardian – sparked calls by Chris Bryant, the chair of the Commons’ Committee on Standards, for parliamentary authorities to have the power to shut down the groups if there are conflicts of interest.

Our investigation found numerous examples of controversial firms like Huawei and British American Tobacco paying their way into Parliament. In some cases, corporate lobbyists were even used to write parliamentary reports, allowing them to skew conclusions to favour their clients.

Meanwhile, the MPs running these groups were routinely breaching transparency rules by failing to declare their accounts, meaning that private donors could be kept secret. One Tory MP initially told openDemocracy: “I am not releasing anything to you.”

In a follow-up, we found that MPs from the APPG for British Bioethanol who successfully lobbied the UK government to roll out a controversial ‘greener’ petrol to filling stations across the UK had received funding and support from the fuel industry.

And Scottish National Party MP Alison Thewliss spoke exclusively to openDemocracy about how she rejected an approach from a public relations firm to set up an APPG to be sponsored by the drinks industry. In May, the Committee on Standards published a major new report calling for improved regulation of APPGs.



CC BY NC 2.0 Freedom House/ Flickr. Some rights reserved

Another APPG investigation found that a senior Tory MP had boasted of being “fed” propaganda by the Azerbaijani embassy and using it to lobby the UK government.

The admission came in a 2020 student podcast that we unearthed. In it, Bob Blackman, the MP for Harrow East and chair of the Azerbaijan APPG, also said: “On a regular basis I put down positions on behalf of our good friends in Azerbaijan.”

In November we uncovered another channel through which the Azerbaijani dictatorship had been trying to clean up its reputation when we reported that the BBC had broadcast a film made with the support of the country’s controversial ruling family – and sponsored by British oil and gas giant BP.

Audiences tuning into BBC World News in August had been promised that they would discover “how Azerbaijan’s oil wealth enabled the capital Baku to flourish” and “gain the reputation of being the ‘Paris of the East’” in the BP-sponsored ‘Wonders of Azerbaijan’ film.

BP spent £300,000 on the film, which was made by a British production company with support from a foundation and a media centre run by members of Azerbaijan’s ruling Aliyev family.

Over the past decade, Azerbaijani authorities have repeatedly cracked down on protesters



Skully/Alamy Live News



E.ON lobbied for 0% VAT for the energy retail sector

£14m

raised by the UK's most secretive think tanks from mystery donors in the past two years

But who needs lobbying or reputation laundering when you can just insert your own staff into the machinery of government?

In September we reported that more than 50 employees of global arms companies were working inside the UK's Ministry of Defence. They included nine staffers on long-term secondment from the UK's biggest weapons manufacturer, BAE Systems, some of whom have been embedded inside the department for years. Last year, the company made more than £4.1bn in sales from the MoD, boasting about its "strong and long-standing relationships" with the UK government. Almost all of this money was spent through contracts that were awarded without competitive tender.

Alarming, the department admitted it could not identify the employers of at least 23 people currently there on secondment.

And it's still astonishingly easy for big business to find the ear of government. In October we revealed that E.ON, the UK's biggest energy supplier, had spent the summer lobbying the government to cut taxes and avoid "intrusive" regulation. E.ON complained to Conservative ministers about the capping of energy bills, saying it had made the UK an "unattractive place to be an energy supplier". Energy bills were expected to top £4,000 in 2023 at the time of E.ON's warnings. The company also warned about the "existential" risk posed by campaigners who threatened to stop paying their bills.

Who Funds You?

Think tanks can have a huge influence in British politics. But who funds them? openDemocracy found that the UK's most secretive think tanks have raised more than £14m from mystery donors in the past two years.

Among them are some of the most influential groups in UK politics. Think tanks often boast that they have driven changes to the law and economic policy, such as the tax cuts that short-lived prime minister Liz Truss announced and were blamed for tanking the British economy.

In 2022 we rebooted the formerly volunteer-run Who Funds You? campaign, which uses think tanks' own income disclosures to position them on a funding transparency scale. The project originally ran for seven years before coming to an end in 2019.

Deidre Brock MP mentioned the project in Parliament and wrote to the prime minister seeking an urgent meeting on shadily funded think tanks.

Who Funds You?

The UK campaign for think tank transparency



Our analysis assigned a third of think tanks – nine out of 28 – an 'E' rating, the worst possible score. These organisations had a total income of at least £14.3m according to their most recent corporate filings, yet we found no, or negligible, relevant information made public about where most of this money comes from.

These notoriously 'dark money'-funded organisations claim to have influence with the government – and often employ high-profile politicians.

Six of the least transparent think tanks – the Adam Smith Institute, the Centre for Policy Studies, Civitas, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Policy Exchange and the TaxPayers' Alliance – also received an 'E' rating in 2019, meaning they have not made any significant improvements.

The three other think tanks that received the lowest transparency rating this year are the Centre for Social Justice, the Legatum Institute and ResPublica, all of which scored higher in 2019.

There is no legal requirement for think tanks to reveal their funders, but this lack of transparency is a major concern, say campaigners, especially for institutions that seek to affect government policy.

"Think tanks can play an important role informing policy in Westminster, yet opacity about their funding can raise suspicion that they're peddling positions in favour of vested interests," said Steve Goodrich, head of research and investigations at Transparency International UK.

At the other end of the spectrum, think tanks rated 'A' are highly transparent, naming all funders who gave them £5,000 or more in the past year and declaring the amounts given.

Ten think tanks (just over a third) received an 'A' rating, including the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the New Economics Foundation. The 2019 audit gave nine institutions an 'A' rating, including these two.

For a third of think tanks we found no, or negligible, relevant public information about where most of their money comes from

SLAPP happy

At the time of writing in January 2023, openDemocracy was being sued over its investigative journalism by an organisation linked to Kazakhstan's notorious former dictator.

Last year, openDemocracy reported that Jusan Technologies Limited held billions of dollars in assets that were ultimately controlled by the Nazarbayev Fund, whose chairman is Kazakhstan's erstwhile authoritarian ruler Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Jusan subsequently hired a US law firm to sue us, as well the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) and the Telegraph for reporting on the same subject. The lawsuit has already cost openDemocracy tens of thousands of pounds, but we are very grateful to our supporters who contributed to both a public crowdfunder and our appeals to back our defence.

Legal experts and campaigners described the case as the latest example of a so-called SLAPP – Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation.

“The threats facing TBIJ and openDemocracy are emblematic of the growing use of SLAPPs to target and silence open reporting,” said Nik Williams of the free speech campaign group Index on Censorship.

“For too long, the UK has been the centre of legal threats brought by the world's wealthy, powerful and opaque to stifle media freedom and the public's right to know.”

A group of influential rights organisations signalled their strong support for openDemocracy's “public interest” journalism in the face of legal threats, in a joint statement calling for government action.

The statement – signed by campaign groups and NGOs ranging from Index on Censorship to Global Witness – urged the UK government to follow through with promised measures designed to stamp out the use of UK courts to close down public-interest journalism.

Two of the groups behind the statement – Index on Censorship and Article 19 – issued an alert to the Council of Europe's platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists.

The case was discussed in Parliament during a debate on ‘Lawfare and Investigative Journalism’ secured by Conservative MP and former cabinet minister David Davis. It was also revealed in the

Dominic Raab promised to “uphold freedom of speech, end the abuse of our justice system, and defend those who bravely shine a light on corruption”: we're still waiting



Ian Davidson/Alamy Stock Photo

debate that an MP had received legal representations from lawyers acting for the company asking him to withdraw a written question in Parliament.

Davis, describing the case as an “outrage”, said this suggested “the lawyers clearly do not understand parliamentary privilege” and were “trying to repress free speech and transparency” in the UK.

Peter Geoghegan, editor-in-chief of openDemocracy, said: “This is a clear attempt to intimidate independent investigative journalism. We are a small not-for-profit media organisation being threatened by rich and powerful organisations for reporting on what we believe is in the public interest.”

Kazakhstan ranks 122nd out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index.

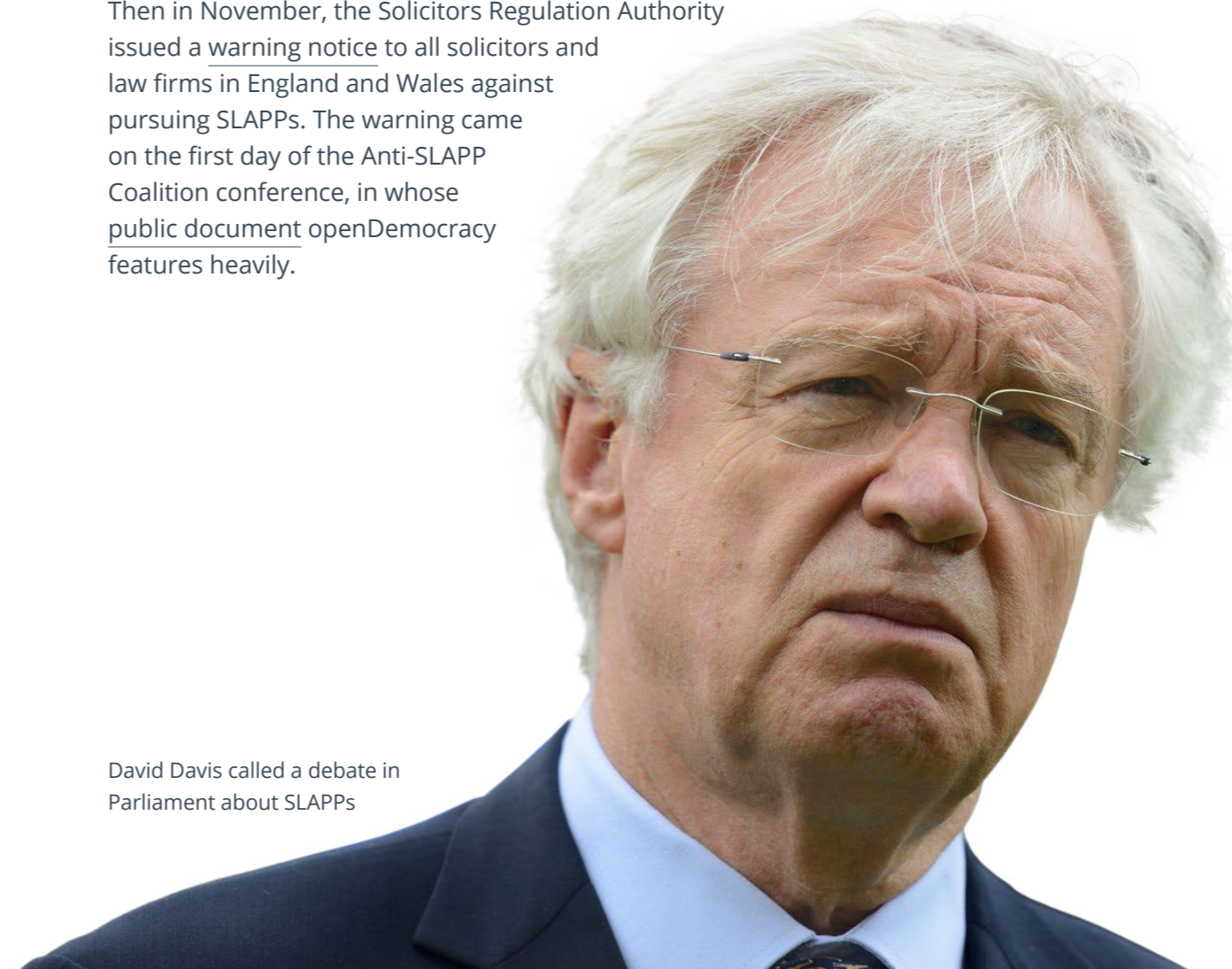
We are working to end all SLAPPs in the UK. In May, Peter Geoghegan gave evidence to a Ministry of Justice round table on SLAPP reform. The following month, the judgement in the dramatic Arron Banks/Carole Cadwalladr libel trial cited our stories and journalists cited numerous times.

Then in November, the Solicitors Regulation Authority issued a warning notice to all solicitors and law firms in England and Wales against pursuing SLAPPs. The warning came on the first day of the Anti-SLAPP Coalition conference, in whose public document openDemocracy features heavily.

David Davis called a debate in Parliament about SLAPPs

“The threats facing TBIJ and openDemocracy are emblematic of the growing use of SLAPPs to target and silence open reporting”

Nik Williams,
Index on Censorship



PjrNews/Alamy Stock Photo

Mentions in Parliament(s)

OpenDemocracy featured heavily in parliamentary debates in 2022. Conservative MP and former cabinet minister David Davis used his [debate on 'Lawfare and Investigative Journalism'](#) to discuss the defamation case brought against us by Jusan Technologies Ltd in Parliament (see 'SLAPP happy', page 20). In the debate, it was revealed that another MP had received legal representations from "lawyers for the company" asking him to withdraw a written question in Parliament.

MPs also sought our evidence and experience in examining the work of government. It was our work that inspired the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) investigation into the freedom of information ['Clearing House'](#) unit, which [reported](#) in April 2022, mentioning us 14 times. The [Cabinet Office](#) subsequently launched a review, which culminated in an announcement that the Clearing House will be disbanded and replaced (see 'Secret government', page 6).

They both heard our name at Prime Minister's Questions



PACAC also cited editor-in-chief Peter Geoghegan and openDemocracy repeatedly in its [report on the Electoral Commission](#).

Two different prime ministers – Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak – faced questions inspired by our reporting. In February Ian Blackford, then leader of the Scottish National Party at Westminster, referred to openDemocracy by name at Johnson's Prime Minister's Questions when citing [our story](#) about the financial impact of planned National Insurance increase on nurses.

In November, Sunak heard Blackford's SNP colleague Deidre Brock cite [our report](#) that a former member of the Charity Commission board has called for the right-wing think tank the Institute of Economic Affairs to be stripped of its charitable status.

We had a sign of our influence on legislation when the Clerk of the House of Lords Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee asked a coalition of the National Union of Journalists, Index on Censorship, Reporters Without Borders and openDemocracy for further information relating to [our submission on the National Security Bill](#).

Beyond Westminster, our Europe and Eurasia editor Tatev Hovhannisyan was invited to give evidence at a [special hearing](#) by the European Parliament's committee on women's rights and gender equality.

And Michelle Thomson, an MSP for the SNP, named us when citing a 2017 [story about the Legatum Institute](#) in the Scottish parliament.

Back in the House of Commons, Deidre Brock showed herself an attentive reader of our work. She raised [our report on the Tories' election spending](#) at Questions for Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission; cited our story about [ministers refusing to publish their official diaries in Parliament](#); and cited our [Who Funds You? project](#) (see page 19) and [wrote to the prime minister](#) seeking an urgent meeting on the questions of shadily funded think tanks that it raises.

Labour MP Diana Johnson asked Priti Patel about our [Ukraine visas story](#); Martyn Day of the SNP asked three written questions following up on [our story on the Renewable Heat Incentive](#), mentioning us by name (see 'Oil on the fire', page 24). And the Greens' Caroline Lucas tabled a written question based on [our article about British overseas aid invested in fossil fuels](#).

Meanwhile in the House of Lords, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath [referred extensively to our Freedom of Information reporting](#) while speaking on a related amendment.

14

The number of times MPs mentioned our investigation into the freedom of information 'Clearing House'

MP Deidre Brock cited our Who Funds You? project in Parliament and wrote to the prime minister about questions it raised

Oil on the fire



Steve Baker MP, a trustee of the Global Warming Policy Foundation, has led the opposition to the government's net-zero policies

Photo: Tommy London/
Alamy Stock Photo

It's hard to understand why anyone would want to sabotage the climate. But that is exactly what a lot of very wealthy and well-connected people are trying to do, and 2022 was the year we really got on their trail.

We found that an influential lobby group leading the backlash against the UK government's net-zero policy and linked to the Conservative Party has received hundreds of thousands of dollars from an oil-rich foundation with huge investments in energy firms. It was one of our most-picked-up stories of the year: we collaborated with The Guardian on a version of the story that received over 200,000 views on its site.

The lobby group we investigated is the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF). Founded in 2009, it has risen in prominence by pushing the idea that the UK's net-zero policies are responsible for the energy crisis. It has called for the Climate Change Act to be repealed and for existing renewable energy to be "wound down" and replaced with gas and coal.

The group is notoriously secretive about its backers, saying only that it will not take cash from anyone with an interest in fossil fuels. But we thought it was vital for the public to know who bankrolls it.

We started following the money and traced some of it back to a US non-profit that had received millions in donations from US donors – money that was then funnelled to the UK.

But it wasn't clear from the financial filings who was giving that money to the GWPF. To unmask the donors, we would have to find references to the GWPF in the filings of these unnamed funders.

This involved a painstaking search for matches in other financial records in the US Internal Revenue Service's database. After searching through hundreds of filings, we discovered that the group

received more than half a million dollars through a fund linked to the controversial billionaire Koch brothers. It had also received hundreds of thousands of dollars from a foundation that owned \$30m-worth of shares in 22 companies working in coal, oil and gas.

Our findings cast doubt on the GWPF's claims that it does not take money from fossil fuel interests.

The story prompted MPs, scientists, campaigners and public figures including Irvine Welsh and Zadie Smith to submit a complaint to the Charity Commission regarding the GWPF's charity status.

The investigation raised more questions: just how much money do lobby groups and think tanks in the UK receive from anonymous US donors?

This time we looked at five think tanks close to the government which also do not disclose their funders, and found that they received \$9m from US donors – many of them also linked to climate denial campaigns. Most shocking was our revelation that the UK government's legislative crackdown on protest in England and Wales was dreamed up by Policy Exchange, a secretive right-wing think tank that had been funded by US oil giant ExxonMobil.

Irony was added to outrage when we reported that the US public relations firm helping Egypt organise COP27 also worked for major oil companies and had been accused of greenwashing on their behalf. This was picked up by everyone from PR Week to the Financial Times and The Washington Post, plus media outlets for the Middle East and North Africa.

In another big scoop, we revealed that British Gas had been selling 'green' energy that may have no environmental benefit. The energy giant claims to reduce its climate footprint by using 'carbon credits', which pump money into environmental work abroad. But our investigation found that almost half the carbon offsets held by British Gas owner Centrica are 'junk' credits that were issued under a discredited scheme that critics called a "scam". They came from a chemical factory in China that was previously forced to deny gaming the system following an international probe into its supposed green credentials.

And we know that our work on climate reached the people who count because the Building Research Establishment – leading experts (and advisors to government) in building standards for sustainability – shared our story 'Sweltering at home? Blame government for failing on insulation'.

Policy Exchange explicitly said the government should pass legislation to target Extinction Rebellion (XR) in a 2019 report that got the attention of Tory MPs and peers

Photo: Marc Gascoigne/
Alamy Stock Photo



British Gas claimed to have "one of the most environment-friendly tariffs available anywhere" thanks to its carbon-offsetting programme

Photo: True Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Rainforest Defenders

A new season of stunning photography, video and reports from the Amazon region in this award-winning series on Indigenous and other local activists fighting to defend their lands.



Pablo Albarenga



Pablo Albarenga



Pablo Albarenga

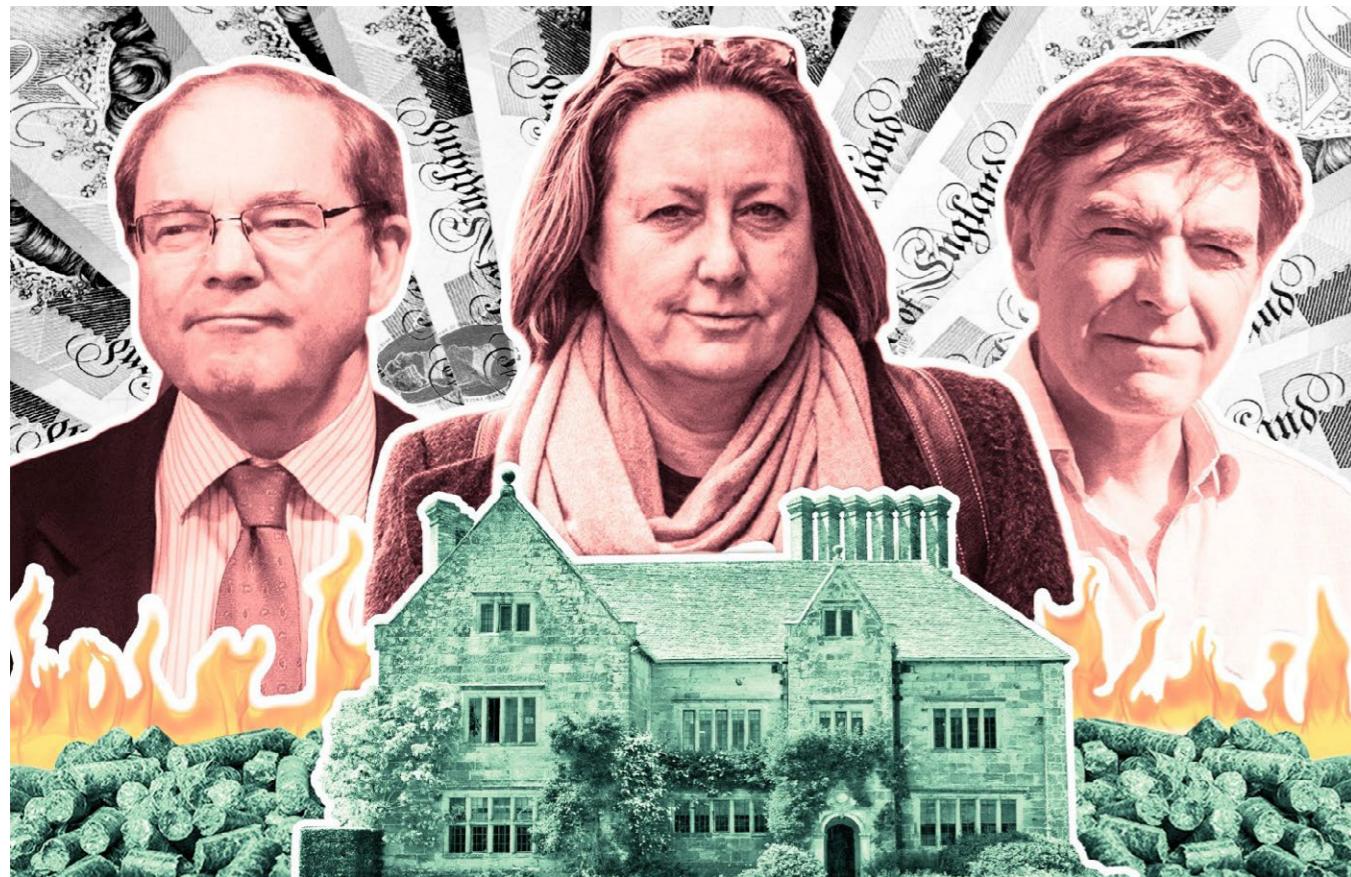


Pablo Albarenga

Walking on the edge of migration

Our Latin American project [democraciaAbierta](#) also went to meet some of the thousands of Venezuelans fleeing the economic collapse of their homeland by crossing the border into Colombia on foot or travelling to the Caribbean holiday island of Aruba, where they struggle to survive in far from idyllic conditions. The team found heartbreaking poverty but also resilience, generosity and creativity, captured in [four articles](#) and [striking videos](#).

Surviving the market



Tory MPs Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Anne-Marie Trevelyan and Philip Dunne have all benefited from the Renewable Heat Incentive

Take the UK's demand for a property bubble that never bursts, add rocketing inflation and you have a crisis about the primal necessities of life – shelter, heat and food – felt across most of the population. So in 2022 we decided to focus on these most basic of human needs by asking who is exploiting them.

Our most extraordinary finding was perhaps that Tory MPs, Lords members and multi-millionaire landowners were raking in eye-watering sums from a taxpayer-funded renewal heating subsidy to warm their mansions. It had been an open secret amongst

Amer Ghazzal, Tony Watson, PA Images, Simon Kohli, Thicha, fotofabrikal/ Adobe Stock Photos. Composite by James Battershill

the landed classes that the scheme is, for them, a licence to print money. Back in 2015, an unnamed Tory peer told The Telegraph that, thanks to biomass boilers, “every stately home I know is now like a sauna in winter, with windows wide open”.

We began the year at the other end of the wealth scale with the shocking finding that half of councils in England and Wales have not prosecuted a single rogue landlord in the past three years, despite a rise in the number of complaints from tenants. A British renters' union, Acorn, launched a campaign using our research and it reached a wider audience than would ever visit [opendemocracy.net](https://www.opendemocracy.net) via The Independent and three local news outlets.

Our work on housing and poverty continued to make the news. A collaboration with The Independent saw co-publication of stories on the hundreds of millions of pounds of public money given to substandard landlords for providing what should be a safe haven for those with nowhere else to go – including rough sleepers, people with mental health issues and victims of domestic violence.

We also hired a news and politics reporter, Ruby Lott-Lavigna, who has a specialist background in housing reporting. As well as her work for openDemocracy she wrote about the rent crisis for [The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com) and chaired a discussion on racial inequality in housing at the Stuart Hall Foundation.

At least our grassroots democratic representatives will be on the side of the people who elect them, right? In fact it seems their loyalties may be divided: our analysis of hundreds of council documents found that at least 75 of London's most powerful local councillors are also working for the property and development industry. This story reached wider national and local audiences thanks to the [i](https://www.theguardian.com) and [Inside Croydon](https://www.insidecroydon.com).

Another deep dig using freedom of information requests revealed the shocking fact that more than 2,300 people died while waiting for social housing in the UK last year, with tens of thousands waiting a decade or more.

And Channel 4 News used our figures for Big Six energy companies' profits – they raked in more than a billion pounds of profit ahead of this year's record hike in bills – in its report.

Our revelation that British MPs had charged taxpayers £420,000 for energy bills in their second homes over the past three years reached far beyond our core audience, thanks to pickup by The Telegraph, the Daily Express and the youth-oriented outlet Joe.

75

of London's most powerful local councillors are also working for the property and development industry

Half of councils in England and Wales have not prosecuted a single rogue landlord in the past three years, despite a rise in the number of complaints from tenants

Journalism+



We have continued to leverage the impact of our journalism through empowering our readers as well as informing them. This has played a key role in the incredibly successful year that openDemocracy has had.

Reader campaign actions supported our work on the Clearing House (see 'Trophy cabinet', page 22). More than 4,000 filled out a survey on government secrecy which we used as evidence to the parliamentary inquiry and in briefings to MPs on the issue.

In fact, readers have submitted more than 21,000 responses to surveys on issues as diverse as freedom of information, the climate crisis and the health of UK democracy. We have used their views in evidence to decision-makers and to inform our journalistic choices.

Readers have also sent more than 17,000 emails to their MPs about the National Security Bill, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, the NHS, the Health and Care Bill and more.

We have also worked with other organisations to great effect. We coordinated an open letter signed by more than 100 newspaper editors, MPs, journalists, celebrities and campaigners calling on the information commissioner to fix freedom of information. Since then there has been a definite, positive change in approach from the Information Commissioner's Office (see 'Secret government', page 6).

21,000

responses to surveys on issues as diverse as freedom of information, the climate crisis and the health of UK democracy

Boomerang

Over the past year, people across the UK have faced a devastating cost of living crisis – and the mainstream economics profession has failed to respond. In our documentary 'Boomerang', academic and author Kojo Koram visits Liverpool and speaks with legendary footballer John Barnes, academic Dalia Gebrial and Labour MP Clive Lewis to explore how many of the challenges faced today, from austerity to climate breakdown, are the legacies of a darker history that forms the bedrock of our failing economic system. Koram ultimately argues that an honest reckoning with the legacies of empire is crucial to helping us build an economy that works for all.

In November, openDemocracy hosted a sold-out premiere and Q&A with Kojo Koram, Dalia Gebrial and Owen Jones at ArtHouse Cinema in London. The documentary was also covered by [The Independent](#), [AJ+](#) and [Africa Is A Country](#).



World Cup

The suffering of migrant workers in building the stadiums in [Qatar](#) was global news, but it was rare to hear their individual stories in all their awful complexity – so that is [what we reported](#). And the founder of [Beirut Pride](#) wrote for us warning how performative politics by well-meaning Westerners do not benefit LGBTQ Qataris.

Child workers speak

OpenDemocracy does groundbreaking and utterly unique work to bring marginalised voices into global conversations. In 2022 we platformed child workers from around the world so that they could explain in their own words why they work, publishing both [children in Ghana](#) and [child human smugglers in Mexico](#).

The Ghana series was illustrated by Hayford Telli, a former child worker who taught himself illustration as a street 'busker', and is now making his way as a freelancer in Accra, Ghana.



Tracking the backlash



March For Life, an annual rally organised by the UK's anti-abortion movement

Photo: Sipa USA/Alamy Stock Photo

The battle for abortion rights

In the wake of the US Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe vs Wade, we published a series of stories looking at what the decision could mean for [abortion in Europe](#) and [the UK](#), and around the world. In the UK, we found that [20 British MPs had taken free interns](#) from an organisation that wants to replicate the success of the US Christian Right in overturning abortion rights.

Our investigation into how a [US-linked anti-abortion centre in Cote d'Ivoire](#) has been targeting women with misinformation was covered by the BBC, the BBC World Service, AFP and France TV Info.

Freedom to love

In spring 2022 our Africa-based reporting team published an exclusive story with [The Continent](#), a pan-African magazine, revealing a secretive partnership between [local Ghanaian journalists and allies of the US Christian right](#). It built both funding and disinformation networks that set the stage for Ghana's repressive anti-gay bill, a piece of legislation which [Human Rights Watch](#) says is so odious, it "beggars belief".

This cover story reached [The Continent's](#) estimated 100,000 readers in 115 countries, and reinforced openDemocracy's reputation to a new group of African readers as a fearless and peerless reporting outlet on gender and equality issues.

Impact within Ghana was immediate and significant. Healthcare workers in Ghana who saw our reporting alerted us to another disturbing scoop: doctors and medical professionals working in respected state-run facilities or in partnership with international organisations were sponsoring training sessions pushing anti-LGBTQ 'conversion therapy' as a credible medical practice.

Once our [exclusive story exposing the doctors involved](#) was published, the medical group behind the seminars stopped publicising those training sessions.

On a more micro level, our fearless reporting has catapulted openDemocracy as a trusted platform for the continent's local LGBTQ activists. People like [Alex Donkor](#) of LGBTQ+ Rights Ghana have turned to us to write [freely and without fear](#) about the harm and negative impact the country's anti-gay bill would have on his fellow Ghanaians.

At the end of 2022, Ghana's discriminatory bill remains dormant. The speaker of Ghana's parliament, Alban Bagbin – who is traditionally politically neutral – stated that the bill "will definitely be passed before the next elections" in 2024.

In a wider global context, our reporting about Senegal spurred change. We asked [change.org](#), the global petitions platform, about a flare-up in public homophobia in Senegal based in part on a [Senegalese petition](#) signed by 50,000 that promoted discrimination and violence against queer communities. In response to our questions for comment, [change.org](#) removed the petition.

In Latin America, Costa Rica's professional association of psychologists decided to report one of the [two psychologists](#) featured in our report into anti-gay 'conversion therapy' to the authorities for illegal practice, which is a criminal offence in Costa Rica.

Our 2021 [conversion therapy investigation in Uganda](#) was cited by the British Home Office in its guidance to officials who evaluate asylum claims from Uganda.

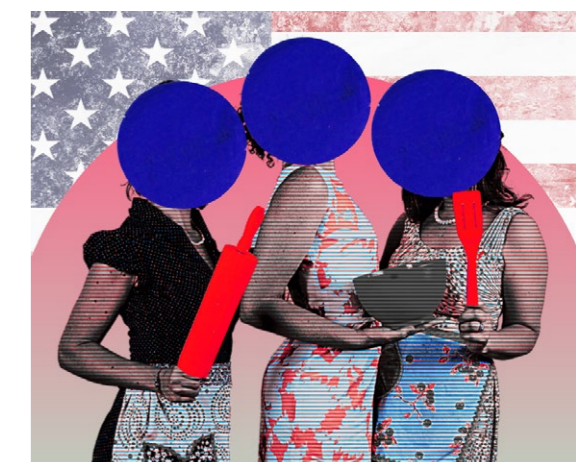
Violence begins at home

In Latin America the major Tracking the Backlash investigation focused on how the homeschooling movement – including [far-right groups in the US](#) who advocate for Christians to homeschool their kids – often promotes corporal punishment.

A [disturbing investigation](#) by openDemocracy and Brazilian investigative journalists Agência Pública found that Brazil's burgeoning homeschooling industry mirrors this approach, teaching parents to spank their children "calmly and patiently" – even though corporal punishment in education is illegal in Brazil. Published in English, Spanish and Portuguese, the story was cited or republished by 36 media outlets, including Brazil's most read news site, and outlets in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Mexico.

Members of Ghana's LGBTIQ community are being targeted by a disinformation campaign

Photo: Eleventh Hour Photography/ Alamy Stock Photo



The founder of the US Home School Legal Defense Association suggested parents use hands or a "small wooden object such as a spoon"

Illustration: Inge Snip

Inclusivity information

At the end of 2022, openDemocracy had 57 team members, including four fellows – early- or mid-career journalists joining us for six months to develop their skills and careers.

- 53% of our team were women, 42% were men and 5% were gender non-conforming
- 68% were white
- They lived in Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Germany, Kenya, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Spain, Uganda, the UK, Ukraine, the US and Uruguay.

The senior management team had seven members

- 29% were women, 71% were men
- 71% were white

Over the year we hired 23 people, including the fellows

- 59% were women, 37% were men and 4% were gender non-conforming
- 61% were white

The openDemocracy board had 11 members (including some staff members already covered above)

- 36% were women, 64% were men
- 73% were white

We are committed to continuous learning and transparency about our performance on diversity, equity and inclusion.

How you can support openDemocracy

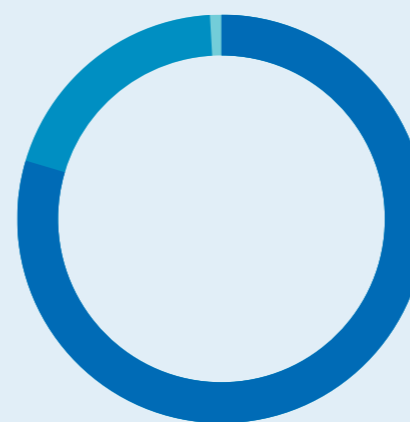
We rely on ordinary readers to give us a long-term future. Please support us at opendemocracy.net/donate

Financial highlights

In 2022 we received

£3.44m

in income



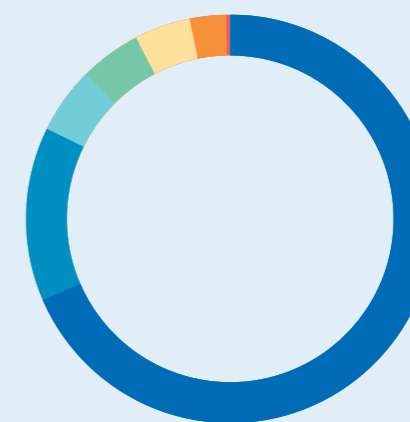
Revenue

1 January to 31 December 2022

■ Grants	79.5%
■ Donations by individuals	19.6%
■ Partnerships	0.9%
■ Other	0.0%

And we spent

£3.33m



Expenditure

1 January to 31 December 2022

■ Staff and freelancers	68.4%
■ Commissioning and marketing	13.8%
■ Website, software and web hosting	5.2%
■ Administration	4.9%
■ Professional fees	4.5%
■ Travel	2.9%
■ Donations we made	0.1%

We publish a list of every major donor that funds us each year on our website.

openDemocracy

free thinking for the world



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