



ANNUAL 2023 REPORT

forbidden stories

Table of contents

A word from the founder and director.....	2
2023 in numbers.....	5
Our Investigations	7
An unprecedented pace of publication.....	9
Story Killers	10
The Rafael Project	14
Pursuing Rafael Moreno's final investigation	18
The Front Companies Robbing the State of Mexico	21
The Bruno & Dom Project	25
The Pegasus Project: 2 Years After	28
Impact of previous investigations.....	33
Upcoming investigations.....	35
Expanding the SafeBox Network globally.....	38
Development and growth of Forbidden Stories.....	42
About the Organization	43
Our Board of Directors	45
Our Team	47
Events and conferences	50
Awards	53
Supporters and donors	55
Forbidden Films	57
Our financial report	59



A word from Laurent Richard, founder and director of Forbidden Stories



2023 was a year of considerable growth for Forbidden Stories. We published more investigations this year than in any other, we welcomed new donors, and we doubled our workforce and our budget for 2024. This is the result of tireless efforts to give ourselves the means to keep stories alive.

This year, at least 99 journalists were killed according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, in countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Albania, Haiti, Paraguay, the Philippines, Rwanda, and Ukraine, to only name a few. The war in Gaza has been particularly devastating, with at least 94 journalists and media workers killed since 7 October, most of them Palestinian.

Violence against journalists knows no borders, so neither does our work. In the face of a global phenomenon, our response has to be global as well. This is why, this year, we strived to publish more, more frequently, and to expand the SafeBox Network around the world. Our goal: to build a systematic, journalistic response to violence against journalists. We need enemies of press freedom to know, wherever they are, that they will not kill the stories.

“This year, our investigations covered corruption, cronyism, and the disinformation industry – issues that are all essential to reinforce transparency and democracy.

We also gave particular prominence to environmental crimes, an issue for which journalists, environmentalists and Indigenous rights defenders are too often made to pay the ultimate price. We first began investigating environmental crimes in 2019 with Green Blood, which we followed up on in 2022 with Mining Secrets. This year, two of our four international investigations brought environmental crimes to light: the Rafael Project, and the Bruno and Dom Project.

With these two projects, our consortium made a powerful statement: environmental crimes will not go unnoticed or unchallenged. At a time when big multinationals are redoubling efforts to greenwash their PR campaigns, these investigations demonstrate once again the importance of free and independent journalism to uncover facts of public interest.

” This year was also marked by the publication of the first two investigations based on information entrusted to our SafeBox Network. Through the Rafael Project and The Front Companies Robbing the State of Mexico, we pursued and gave visibility and reach to the stories investigated by Rafael Moreno in Colombia, and by María Teresa Montaña Delgado in Mexico. These two courageous journalists received persistent, bone-chilling threats in reprisal for their work, which tragically materialized in Rafael’s case. But by ensuring the survival of their stories, we showed that these attempts to silence journalists are pointless. Their aggressors must know that we stand ready to continue the stories they tried to hide.

In 2023, Forbidden Stories continued to make an impact globally. The revelations of our Story Killers investigation for example triggered a far-reaching investigation into foreign interference in France, leading to the indictment of three influential figures in the country. And this impact is yet another testament to the role of independent journalism as a cornerstone of democracy, and to the fact that collaborative journalism makes a difference.

Laurent Richard

2023 in numbers

3 new awards
bringing the
total to **17**

**FORBIDDEN FILMS
DOCUMENTARIES**

2

**FOLLOW-UP
INVESTIGATIONS** **2**

47 **MEDIA PARTNERS**
from **25** countries
and **7** **INTERNATIONAL OUTLETS**

4 **NEW
INVESTIGATIONS**
including
linked to the **2**
SafeBox Network

8 **SAFEBOX NETWORK**
workshops

NEW SAFEBOX MEMBERS
including **3** newsrooms **64**

14 **SAFEBOX PARTNER**
ORGANIZATIONS

NEW STAFF **11**
MEMBERS **11**
bringing the total to **22**

1 new co-chair of the
board of directors

NEW DONORS **5**
bringing the total
to **12** donors

Our investigations



55M

people reached

Reach amplified by **4,400 times***

*ratio between the silenced media's audience and that of our media partners

37,5M

people reached

Reach amplified by **670 times**



41,4M
people reached
Reach amplified by **3.8 times**



11M
people reached
Reach amplified by **1,005 times**

An unprecedented pace of publication

This year, we published more than ever before. Together with our media partners, we published four international investigations, including the first two connected to the SafeBox Network, as well as two follow-up stories. And this is just the beginning: as Forbidden Stories expands globally and progressively works to systematize its journalistic response, we will continue to increase our number and frequency of publication. Four projects and two follow-up stories are already launched for 2024.





Story Killers

We published in February 2023 our first investigation of the year, Story Killers, which continued the work of Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh. A seasoned reporter with close to 30 years of experience, Lankesh was based in Bengaluru, where she founded her own media outlet, Gauri Lankesh Patrike, a Kannada-language weekly. Concerned about the rise of Hindu nationalism in her country, Lankesh persistently denounced right-wing extremism, which made her a target of online harassment and smear campaigns. On 5 September 2017, she was fatally shot outside her home as she returned from her office.

At the time of her murder, Lankesh was working on an editorial titled “In the age of false news”, in which she denounced India’s “lie factories” and deciphered the mechanisms and virality of disinformation circulating on social networks. She never got to see her editorial in print.

Starting from Lankesh’s premise that disinformation has become both weaponized and industrialized, we gathered in June 2022 a consortium of over 100 journalists from 30 media outlets in Paris to launch the Story Killers investigation. It was the first time such a large consortium investigated the disinformation industry.

Together, we spent over six months investigating the global disinformation-for-hire market, tracing disinformation narratives back to their original sources. From India to Saudi Arabia, via Israel, Spain and the United States, we examined artisan-like efforts to promote foreign states’ propaganda to professionalized black-ops. We tracked companies selling disinformation and hacking services to influence opinions, destabilize democratic elections, destroy reputations, track political opponents, and erase the truth. One of our major revelations was the existence of “Team Jorge”, an ultra-secret Israeli company that worked with Cambridge Analytica and claims to have manipulated some 30 presidential elections worldwide and hacked African politicians.



Through this investigation we showed, for the first time, the hidden face of the disinformation business. Together with our consortium partners, we reached more than 55 million people worldwide – 4,400 times more than if the investigation had been published solely by Gauri Lankesh.

The investigation immediately generated impact. Two days after we published Story Killers, the Congress Party in India demanded a probe into the possible use of an Israeli firm’s services to interfere in Indian elections and spread disinformation.

A week later, our consortium partner Knack was invited to share its findings before the Belgian Parliament’s Committee on Democratic Renewal, Citizenship and International Affairs. Alongside our partners at Le Monde and Radio France, we were also invited to speak before the French National Assembly’s Commission of Inquiry into Foreign Interference. We were then invited to speak at a hearing on “Election manipulation attempts” by two Committees of the European Parliament.

Tech giants, such as Facebook and Twitter, deleted the fake accounts used by “Team Jorge” in disinformation campaigns.



Our revelations about Team Jorge’s manipulation of journalists also caused a media storm in France, where a well-known TV Host, Rachid M’Barki, was fired by BFM TV on suspicion of having broadcast unverified and biased content. Following a complaint by the TV channel, the French Financial Prosecutor’s Office launched an investigation into alleged foreign interference as well as various offenses including “breach of trust”, “corruption”, “influence peddling”, and “aggravated tax fraud”.



Two influential figures, lobbyist Jean-Pierre Duthion and political scientist Nabil Ennasri, were indicted in October as part of this investigation. M’Barki was then indicted in December on suspicion of “breach of trust” and “private passive corruption”. He eventually confessed to the crime, and now risks further prosecution under charges of perjury, as his confessions contradict the testimony he delivered before the parliamentary commission. In addition to the three men, French MP Hubert Julien-Laferrière is also suspected of having been a mouthpiece for foreign influence campaigns in France. Though his office and home were searched in September, he had not yet been indicted at the time of redaction of this report, and still benefits from his parliamentary immunity.



Forbidden Stories will continue to monitor the legal and judicial repercussions of Story Killers in the coming months, and will publish a follow-up story on its impact in February 2024.



The Rafael Project

Our second investigation of the year, the Rafael Project, was published in April, six months after Colombian journalist Rafael Moreno was tragically murdered. In the days leading up to his killing, Rafael was in contact with Forbidden Stories to secure his documents through our SafeBox Network. The Rafael Project is the first time we triggered the SafeBox Network mechanism and pursued investigations entrusted to us.

Known by locals as “the people’s voice”, Rafael tirelessly denounced corruption, illegal armed groups and environmental crimes in his native department of Córdoba — a dangerous region dominated by the Gulf Clan, a powerful organized crime group.

His reporting on his online page, Voces de Córdoba, made him some enemies, and Rafael was regularly threatened. In July 2022, he found a bullet and an anonymous note in the trunk of his motorcycle, threatening him with death. Determined to publish the truth at all cost, Rafael was not willing to be intimidated. In a video uploaded to his online page, he addressed those threatening him: “If you’re going to kill me, kill me. But I’ll tell you straight up: you will not silence me”. The threat unfortunately materialized and, on 16 October 2022, he was shot dead in a restaurant in the city of Montelíbano.

Rafael had been in contact with Forbidden Stories in early October 2022 to safeguard his work through the SafeBox Network, a mechanism we designed to protect threatened journalists’ sensitive information. He confided his concerns about his safety, and asked that we continue his work if anything happened to him. And that’s exactly what we did.



Upon hearing of his killing, we immediately traveled to Colombia. We got in touch with Rafael's relatives and met with dozens of Colombian, Latin American and international journalists. A few days later, we gathered them during the Gabo Festival in Bogotá. On 23 October, one week after Rafael's murder, 30 journalists decided to join forces to pursue his work and formally launch the Rafael Project. It was the first time Forbidden Stories continued the work of a journalist based on information they had protected through the SafeBox Network.

Six months later, we published the Rafael Project worldwide, together with 31 media partners. Through this collaborative investigation, we unmasked a massive system of cronyism, the probable embezzlement of public funds that Rafael had begun to look into, as well as significant information on environmental and health damage by mining companies in Córdoba.

”

In a region where impunity and silence prevail, it was vital that the investigations initiated by Rafael Moreno were completed and known to the people, both within Colombia and beyond its borders.

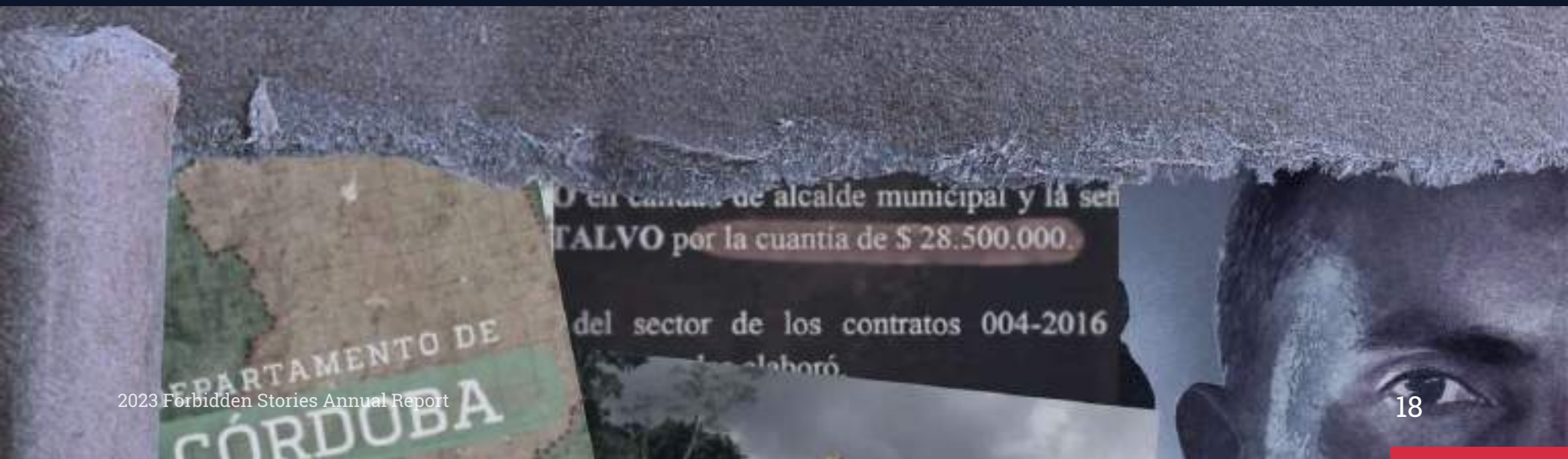
Together with our consortium and republishing partners, we gave global resonance to Rafael's investigations, and reached an estimated 37.5 million people around the world, or 670 times the readership of Voces de Córdoba. We also sent a strong message to enemies of press freedom, by showing them how reactive and powerful the SafeBox Network is.

The Rafael Project has since received two distinctions: an Honorable Mention for In-Depth Journalism at the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa Awards, and a special jury recognition in the Investigative Journalism Category at the Premio Nacional de Periodismo Simón Bolívar, the highest distinction awarded in Colombia for professional journalism. The second prize was also awarded posthumously to Rafael Moreno.



Pursuing Rafael Moreno's Final Investigation

Six months after our first publication pursuing the work of Rafael Moreno, and on the first anniversary of his assassination, on 16 October 2023, we took up his last investigation, together with our partners at Cuestión Pública and France 24. The second part of the Rafael Project took over another of Rafael's leads, and undoubtedly one of his most dangerous: the plundering of the San José de Uré river.



Six months after our first publication pursuing the work of Rafael Moreno, and on the first anniversary of his assassination, on 16 October 2023, we took up his last investigation, together with our partners at Cuestión Pública and France 24. The second part of the Rafael Project took over another of Rafael's leads, and undoubtedly one of his most dangerous: the plundering of the San José de Uré river.

Through documents and testimonies, we were able to corroborate Rafael's hypothesis that natural resources were being illegally extracted from the San José de Uré river and may have benefited political leaders in the region.

These extractions, used to build roads around the village of the same name, caused irreparable damage to the basin and to local farmers and fishermen, for whom the river is a primary source of food and income.

For this follow-up story, we spoke with several past collaborators of Rafael, whose death compelled them to abandon their investigations, like many journalists in the region who have stopped investigative reporting for fear of retaliation. A year on, the criminal investigation into Rafael's murder has stalled, and his passing continues to have a chilling effect on media freedom in Córdoba. This is why continuing the Rafael Project was so important to us. Through this publication, we not only ensured that Rafael's investigations did not disappear, but we also signaled to his murderers that we stand ready to continue the stories they tried to silence.



Rafael's legacy is also carried forward by his nephew, José Fernando Bula Moreno, who was elected to the municipal council of their hometown of Puerto Libertador in October. José Fernando, who talked to Forbidden Stories and our partners for this follow-up story, stated that he uses his political platform to honor Rafael's memory: "There's not a speech that I'll recite without naming him [...] it's inconceivable to forget the good he did for our city". He added that he "would like his work and his investigations to continue to have an impact after his death."

The second part of the Rafael Project was republished by 21 partners all over the world: in Belgium; Brazil; Colombia; Germany; Ecuador; Mexico; Panama; Peru; the Philippines; Portugal; Spain; Switzerland; Venezuela; regionally in MENA and Latin America, as well as globally. Thanks to them, it is estimated that the story reached at least 30 million people around the world. We also published two video trailers in Spanish, which generated over 800,000 impressions locally in Colombia.

The Front Companies Robbing the State of Mexico

We published in May our third investigation of the year, and the second linked to the SafeBox Network. Together with Mexican investigative journalist María Teresa Montaña Delgado, and in partnership with The Guardian and OCCRP, we published The Front Companies Robbing the State of Mexico, which looks into the embezzlement of public funds in the federal state of Mexico – also known as Edomex.



María Teresa, one of the few independent journalists in her hometown of Toluca, has investigated and denounced corruption in Mexico for over 30 years. During this time, she has braved harassment, smear campaigns, surveillance, lawsuits, and death threats. Despite continuous abuse, she never ceased to report.



In August 2021, she was abducted and had her home ransacked by her captors, who robbed her of her work material in an attempt to erase evidence and prevent her from continuing her investigations. At the time, María Teresa suspected that a network of corruption was financing a political campaign run by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had governed Edomex since 1929. She spent months downloading and analyzing more than 200 contracts signed by Edomex, and noticed that the contracts had multiple irregularities, including several of the contractors being located hundreds of kilometers away. Suspecting these were front companies created to embezzle public funds through fake contracts, María Teresa set herself on a mission to investigate the suspect contractors.

María Teresa joined the SafeBox Network in March 2022, during the first-ever workshop organized by Forbidden Stories, in São Paulo, Brazil. As she re-gathered the evidence stolen from her during her abduction and the ransacking of her home, she protected it with the SafeBox Network and kept regular contact with us.

Given the risks incurred by María Teresa, she asked that we support her during the final phase of her investigation and publish it jointly.

Together with María Teresa and our two media partners, we revealed how major figures from Edomex's PRI Party were involved in the signing of contracts awarding more than \$250 million to front companies. It is estimated that the investigation reached at least 11 million people worldwide, representing a 66,600-fold increase in María Teresa's usual readership.

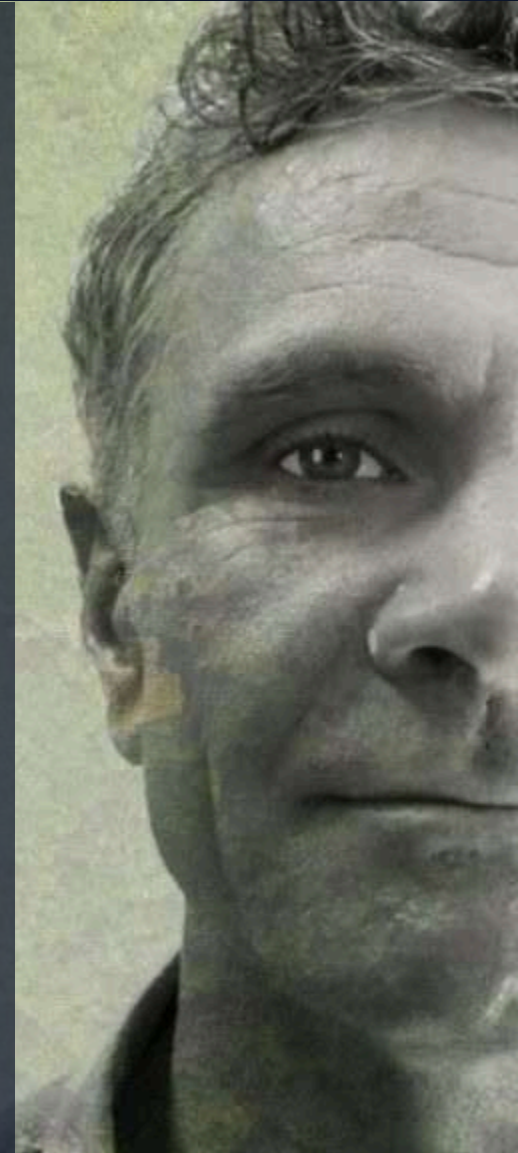
The investigation was published a few days before gubernatorial elections in Edomex and had significant repercussions on the public debate. While more than 15 local media outlets immediately republished the investigation's findings, the PRI candidate Alejandra del Moral canceled all interviews planned as part of her political campaign. At the same time, the government of Edomex immediately reacted to the investigation, rechazing all the accusations of corruption in a press release published on the same day. The PRI eventually lost the elections, coming second with 44.5% of ballots, effectively ending its 90-year rule over Edomex.

Even after the elections, the repercussions of the investigation continued for María Teresa, who was approached by a publishing house to write a book about her experience as an investigative journalist in Mexico. She also received two major awards for her courageous reporting: the 2023 Committee to Protect Journalists' International Press Freedom Award, and the 2023 International Women's Media Forum Courage in Journalism Award.



The Bruno & Dom Project

Our fourth international investigation of 2023, the Bruno and Dom Project, was published in June, on the first anniversary of the assassination of British journalist Dom Phillips and Brazilian Indigenous rights defender Bruno Pereira. Both disappeared in the Javari Valley in the Brazilian Amazon on 5 June 2022, as Pereira assisted Phillips with interviews for a book titled “How to Save the Amazon”. Their remains were found ten days later after the prime suspects – illegal fishermen – confessed to the crime.





Dom Phillips was a contributor to The Guardian, for whom he covered social and environmental issues in Brazil. For 15 years, he criss-crossed the Amazon region and grew increasingly convinced that Indigenous communities play a crucial role in protecting the rainforest and stabilizing the climate.



Bruno Pereira, who was helping him with the interviews for his book, knew this territory better than anyone. A former employee of Funai, the Brazilian government agency for the protection of Indigenous peoples, he worked at the time of his murder with the Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley (UNIVAJA). There, he created and coordinated a surveillance team which collected evidence of environmental and other violations.



Moved by the common objective of protecting Indigenous peoples and their territories, Phillips and Pereira traveled in 2022 to the Javari Valley, a region that had become a den of illegal timber, drugs, and natural resource trafficking. They were killed because they tried to inform the world about the crimes puncturing the lungs of the planet.

“We launched an investigation immediately after the assassination of Phillips and Pereira was revealed. For a year, we led and coordinated a team of 18 media organizations and over 50 journalists to pursue Phillips and Pereira’s work on the plundering of the Amazon rainforest.

Together with our consortium partners, we investigated land grabbing, ranching’s ties to deforestation, mining, and illegal fishing – the issues that cost these two defenders of the Amazon their lives. The project, through its investigation into cattle farming in the Amazon, also draws attention to our collective responsibility in deforestation. We estimate that the investigation reached at least 41.4 million people worldwide, or 3.8x more than if it had only been published by the Guardian.

Several of the companies incriminated by our investigation, whether direct or indirect plunderers of the Amazon, exchanged with us following the rights of reply sent to them. Meta for example told us it was examining ads selling potentially protected Amazonian land on Facebook Marketplace to “identify those that might violate its rules.” The Loetje restaurant chain in the Netherlands said it would immediately stop sourcing from the Marfrig slaughterhouse, which, as our investigation revealed, was sourcing from a farm linked to cattle laundering and deforestation.

Brazilian President Lula, in a statement to consortium member The Guardian, said that the killings “were one of the results of the encouragement of anarchy and environment crime and illegal mining in the Amazon”. He added that “In the name of a sovereign Brazil, the planet, and the legacy and memory of Dom and Bruno, we are fighting to revive policies to protect Indigenous peoples and the Amazon rainforest, in the Javari Valley where they died and in the whole region.” He furthermore promised an independent investigation into their killings and to bring the perpetrators to justice. In November, President Lula posthumously decorated the two men, granting them the rank of Commander of the Order of Rio Branco.

An important development regarding the case of Phillips and Pereira is that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights announced in August the creation of a working group to investigate their murders.

This working group is the result of a joint proposal by the Brazilian state, members of UNIVAJA, and several media freedom organizations, including consortium member ABRAJI. This working group will also be tasked with developing measures with a structural impact to end human rights violations in the Javari Valley and protect human rights defenders, environmentalists and journalists. Its action plan was approved in early December, and the Inter-American Commission is accompanying the installation of the working group in Brasilia.

Phillips and Pereira’s legacy will also be carried forward by a group of writers and environmentalists who have committed to collaborate and complete Phillips’ book on the Amazon, at the request of Alessandra Sampaio, Phillips’ widow. Announced by consortium member The Guardian, this project materialized in December, after additional funding was secured. “How to Save the Amazon: Ask the People Who Know” will be published in April 2025.



The Pegasus Project: 2 years after

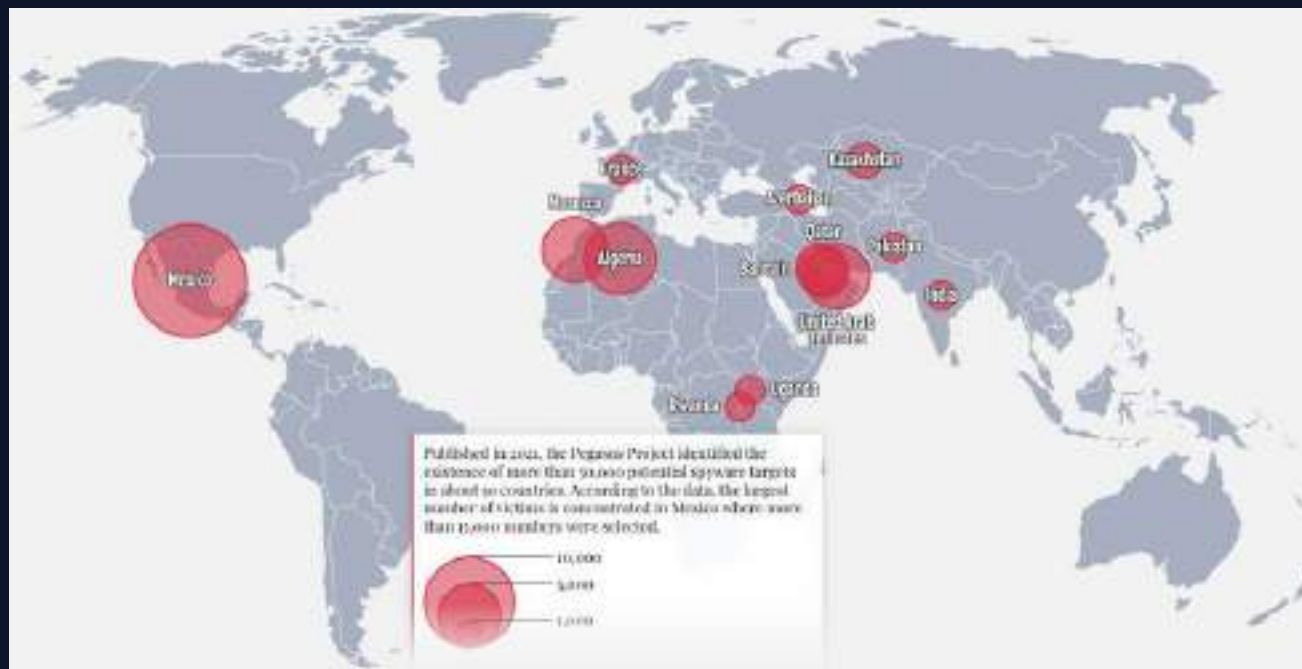
Two years after its publication, the Pegasus Project continues to send shockwaves around the world. Last year, to mark its first anniversary, we compiled all available information about the repercussions of the Pegasus Project in the form of an online map. We updated it in July this year on the second anniversary of the investigation, with new revelations about NSO Group's spyware, new identified victims, and new actions taken by governments and international organizations around the world to curb spyware use.

A better understanding of the technology behind Pegasus.

Research published by Citizen Lab in April identified three Pegasus “exploits” (exploit codes that take advantage of vulnerabilities in the system) deployed in 2022, suggesting that the spyware was still being used by NSO customers against civil society targets in 2022. The laboratory also documented cases where Apple’s Lockdown Mode had successfully protected individuals from targeted attacks.

More revelations about clients and victims.

During the first half of 2023, media outlets uncovered attempts to purchase NSO Group spyware in the United States and NSO Group’s lobbying efforts in the country, as well as retraced how Mexico had become the most prolific user of Pegasus. New victims were identified in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, France, and Israel.



First proof of Pegasus being used in the context of an international war.

A joint investigation by Access Now, Citizen Lab, Amnesty International, CyberHUB-AM and an independent researcher revealed in May that the phones of a dozen of Armenian officials, journalists and activists had been infected with Pegasus at various times between October 2020 and December 2022.

This constitutes the first documented evidence of the use of NSO Group's spyware in an international war context. The team noted that "many other civil society individuals in Armenia also received Apple notifications," but that they could not access their devices to analyze them. One month later, the International Press Institute condemned the use of Pegasus against journalists amidst the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

Governments and regional organizations move to curb spyware use.

The White House announced in March an executive order to ban the use by the U.S. government of commercial spyware that "poses a risk to national security".

Three months later, in June, the European Parliament adopted the recommendations of its Committee of Inquiry to investigate the use of Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware (PEGA). The resolution outlines reforms to curb spyware use; establishes targeted recommendations for Hungary, Poland, Greece, Cyprus and Spain; and states that MEPs saw "strong indications" that the governments of Morocco and Rwanda had spied on high-profile EU citizens, including heads of states.

New investigations and lawsuits.

An investigation into the use of NSO Group spyware by Israeli police was announced by a Knesset committee in April. Two months later, the Israeli Ombudsman upheld a complaint against the Attorney General of Israel for alleged delays in opening a criminal investigation against NSO Group. In a hearing with a Knesset subcommittee, the Head of the State Prosecutor's Cyber Department said that his unit would be "obliged" to reexamine all cases involving NSO's spyware.

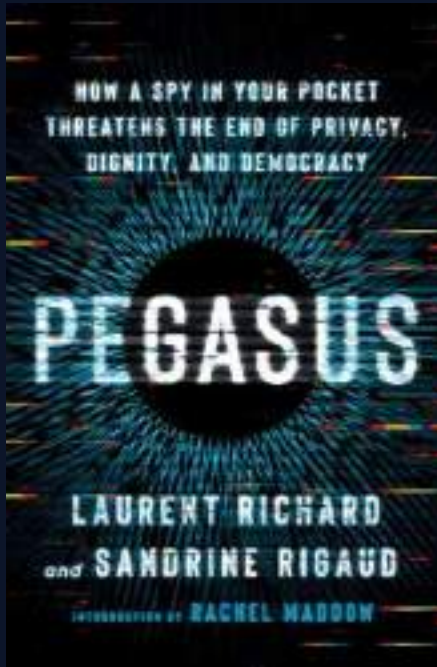
An investigation into the use of Pegasus against Prime Minister of Spain Pedro Sánchez and various ministers was shelved by the High Court of Spain in July, citing an "absolute" lack of cooperation from Israel.

With regards to lawsuits against NSO Group and its clients, The Washington Post reported in June that Hanan Elatr, Jamal Khashoggi's widow, had launched a lawsuit in the U.S. against the Israeli firm. Two lawsuits were also launched in Thailand against the country's government by legal non-profit iLaw and by two activists, over Thai authorities' alleged use of Pegasus spyware.

Future developments and 2024 update of the map.

In anticipation of the third anniversary of the Pegasus Project and of the upcoming update of the online map in July 2024, we continue to monitor the repercussions of the investigation. Some examples of impact during the second half of 2023 that will be uploaded to the map next year include: the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopting in October 2023 a Resolution on "Pegasus and similar spyware and secret state surveillance"; NSO Group renewing its lobbying efforts amid the war in Gaza; Amnesty International and the Washington Post finding evidence that Indian journalists had been targeted with Pegasus spyware, and Spain's former head of intelligence appearing before a Court in December.

Behind the scenes of the Pegasus Project.



Laurent Richard and Sandrine Rigaud, Forbidden Stories' Director and Editor-in-Chief, jointly published in January "Pegasus: How a Spy in Your Pocket Threatens the End of Privacy, Dignity, and Democracy". Featuring an introduction by Emmy-winning journalist Rachel Maddow, the book unveils the behind-the-scenes story of our international collaborative investigation and shines a light on how authoritarian regimes are eroding privacy, freedom of expression and media freedom.

In partnership with Mediawan's Atlantique Productions, the book will be adapted into an espionage thriller mini-series.

Through our subsidiary Forbidden Films, we also released "The Spy in Your Mobile", a documentary retracing the work of our international consortium in the months leading to the publication of the Pegasus Project.

Legal action.

A complaint filed against Forbidden Stories by Morocco following the publication of the Pegasus Project was finally rejected by French courts, after numerous appeals by the country. This is a great relief for our organization, and we are pleased that French courts took a stance in defense of media freedom.

Impact of previous investigations

Last year, we published *Mining Secrets*, an investigation into mining malpractice in the Guatemalan province of Izabal. The investigation, which followed up on our 2019 *Green Blood* project, pursued the work of Carlos Choc, a local journalist who was relentlessly criminalized in reprisal for his work. The investigation was conducted with *Prensa Comunitaria*, the outlet for which Carlos Choc worked, as well as 19 other partners.



The investigation immediately generated impact, as a powerful Finnish multinational suspended the purchase of ferronickel from the Fénix nickel mine we had investigated, and as the U.S. Department of Treasury adopted sanctions against the leaders of the mine. We were also delighted to learn that one of the complaints against Carlos Choc had been dropped.

But the impact of Mining Secrets did not end there. In November, six UN Special Rapporteurs jointly wrote to the government of Guatemala and to the Solway mining conglomerate and its subsidiaries who operate the Fénix mine in El Estor, Izabal. In these letters, the Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression; human rights and transnational corporations; human rights and the environment; human rights defenders; the rights of Indigenous peoples; and toxics and human rights, express their concern about “allegations of judicial harassment and criminalisation of independent journalist and human rights defender Mr. Carlos Ernesto Choc Chub, in relation to his journalistic work reporting on the activities of Solway Holding LTD’s subsidiary (...) in the Fénix-nickel mine in El Estor, Izabal, and the deeply concerning health and environmental impacts on the local Maya Q’eqchi Indigenous community”. The letter sent to Guatemalan authorities also asks for explanations regarding the legal basis for several charges faced by Choc.

In December, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued a ruling that found that the state of Guatemala had violated the rights of the Indigenous Maya Q’eqchi’ people by permitting the huge Fénix nickel mine on tribal land in El Estor. The Court’s ruling cites two of Forbidden Stories’ articles as sources, as well as an article by consortium member El País.

As we write this report, Carlos Choc’s name has finally been cleared. After seven years of delays and rescheduled hearing, he appeared before the Criminal Court of First Instance in Puerto Barrios, Izabal, which dismissed all charges against him and the fishermen who were accused alongside him.

Upcoming investigations

We were dismayed to hear in November of the arrest of three members of Azerbaijani outlet Abzas Media. On 20 and 21 November, local authorities arrested Ulvi Hasanli, its Director; Sevinc Vaqifqizi, its Editor; and Mahammad Kekalov, Hasanli's assistant, and placed them in pre-trial detention on charges of "smuggling foreign currency". Their arrests were only the beginning of a wider crackdown against critical voices and independent media ahead of early presidential elections called by Aliyev. As we write this report, six members of Abzas Media are detained on dubious charges, and at least 11 Azerbaijani journalists are behind bars.



Abzas Media had recently published investigations into the corruption of senior officials and the origins of the wealth of Aliyev's relatives. The motive for their detention leaves little room for doubt, as stated by the outlet itself after Hasanli's arrest: "We think that by ordering his arrest, the president aims to shut down the media and prevent information about corruption crimes from reaching you. But as Abzas Media, no arrest or other pressure can prevent us from delivering the right news to you."

Forbidden Stories had met with the Abzas Media team on several occasions in the past, and we were in touch with Vaqifqızı a few hours before she was detained. She and her colleagues requested that other journalists pursue their investigations, and so we stepped in and rallied our partners to ensure their stories got out to the public, especially in Azerbaijan.

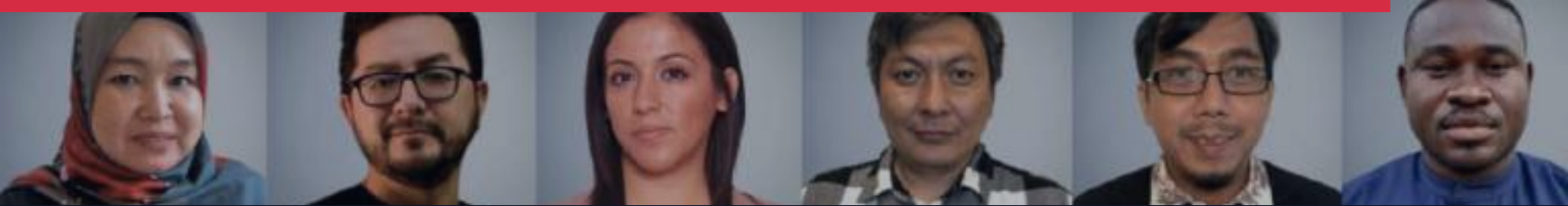
We published on 23 November a press release denouncing their arrests and announcing that, together with Paper Trail Media and OCCRP, we would pick up the investigations of Abzas journalists where they left off. The full investigation, titled "The Baku Connection", will be published on 1 February 2024.

In parallel to pursuing the work of these journalists, we are also working on multiple investigations which will be published in 2024.

Among these is “Stolen Lands”, an investigation pursuing the work of slain Indian journalist Shashikant Warishe, who investigated suspicious land dealings in connection with an oil refinery project in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Together with Indian Express, we picked up his work where he left off, and looked into connections between Warishe’s alleged murderers and the refinery.

As we continue to monitor the repercussions of Story Killers, we are also preparing a follow-up story summarizing its impacts in France.





Expanding the SafeBox Network globally

Last year, in May 2022, we officially launched the SafeBox Network, an innovative mechanism that enables threatened journalists to safeguard their information, and thus ensure that their investigations will not disappear should anything happen to them. With the SafeBox Network, Forbidden Stories and our global network of media partners will be able to continue their investigations and publish them worldwide.



The SafeBox Network is a collective, global, and journalistic response to defeat impunity and ensure access to information of public interest for as many people as possible. It can also help protect these threatened journalists, as disclosing their membership (if they so wish) can act as a deterrent to those who might try to silence them, by letting them know that whatever they try to conceal will be amplified by an international network.

While last year was dedicated to getting the SafeBox Network up and running, this year was dedicated to strengthening and deploying it around the world. And the network has significantly grown: its membership tripled from last year, growing from 27 members in 2022 to 91 members by the end of 2023. We have also forged partnerships with more local organizations, and can now count on the support of 14 allies.



“The SafeBox Network offers an opportunity for me to not only get some of the most important information protected, but also send a very strong signal to the aggressors that no matter what you do to try to silence me, you guys are wasting your time.”

Haruna Mohammed Salisu, Nigerian Journalist

”

Announcing that our information is secure has a deterrent effect on attempts of repression, silencing or threat.

Hala Nasreddine, Lebanese journalist



This year, we reached Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the MENA region for the first time. We organized eight in-person workshops through which we were able to train 108 journalists from Benin, Togo, Nigeria, Indonesia, the Philippines, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and several Russian-speaking countries. Eleven more workshops are planned for the upcoming year, with locations including Central and South America, and Africa.

Another major achievement was the triggering of the first two investigations based on information entrusted to the SafeBox Network: the Rafael Project, which continued the work of slain Colombian journalist Rafael Moreno on cronyism and environmental crimes in northern Colombia; and The Front Companies Robbing the State of Mexico, published alongside threatened Mexican investigative journalist María Teresa Montaña Delgado, and which looks into the embezzlement of public funds in said state.

These investigations also helped raise awareness of the SafeBox network locally, and helped us get in touch with local journalists at risk who might be interested in securing their sensitive information with us.

This is only the beginning of the SafeBox Network. Next year, we will continue to expand the mechanism to reach the journalists who need this initiative the most, wherever they are. We will organize more workshops, reach more countries, and support threatened reporters in safeguarding their work all around the world.

If you are at risk due to your journalistic investigations and would like to secure your sensitive information with Forbidden Stories, please get in touch with us.



It is important to let those who oppose us know that even if something happens to one of us, the investigation will be published.

Óscar Parra, Colombian Journalist

Forbidden Stories is an alternative to shield myself and protect information that is for the people.

María Teresa Montaña Delgado, Mexican journalist



Development and growth of Forbidden Stories

[About the Organization](#)

[Our Board of Directors](#)

[Our Team](#)

[Events and conferences](#)

[Awards](#)

[Supporters and donors](#)

[Forbidden Films](#)

About the Organization

Forbidden Stories is an international network of journalists whose mission, unique in the world, is to pursue the work of reporters who have been silenced.

A non-profit organization based in France, Forbidden Stories was founded by award-winning journalist and filmmaker Laurent Richard in October 2017. Richard previously produced long form documentaries from conflict zones such as Iraq and Kashmir, and has investigated money laundering, corruption, and human rights violations in many parts of the world. After witnessing the traumatic Charlie Hebdo attack in 2015, he became convinced of the need for a journalistic response to attacks on the press, and of the need to create a worldwide organization to continue the work of silenced journalists and keep their stories alive.

”

By keeping alive the stories of journalists who have been impeded from reporting, whether through imprisonment, abduction or murder, Forbidden Stories sends a powerful message to the enemies of press freedom: **killing the journalist won't kill the story.**

Through its unique mission, the organization both deters violence against journalists and enhances access to information of public interest for millions of citizens around the world.

Since 2017, we have coordinated and published 21 stories on issues ranging from environmental crimes to corruption, organized crime, disinformation and cyber-surveillance, such as the Daphne Project; Green Blood; the Cartel Project; the Pegasus Project ; and Story Killers.

"We have so far built a network of close to 90 media partners and over 150 journalists across 49 countries and five continents.

Six years after its creation, Forbidden Stories is expanding globally through the growth of its investigative consortium worldwide and through the deployment of its SafeBox Network across all continents.



Our Board of Directors

Forbidden Stories is governed by an international Board of Directors, currently composed of eight members from different backgrounds and areas of expertise, including investigative journalism; law; finance; development strategies; media development; human rights; and digital security. The Board operates in a pro bono capacity. It meets on a quarterly basis, including once a year in person. Its first in-person meeting was held in October 2022, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of Forbidden Stories.



Lynette Clemetson
Co-Chair



Virginie Ducrot
Co-Chair



Edouard Perrin
General secretary



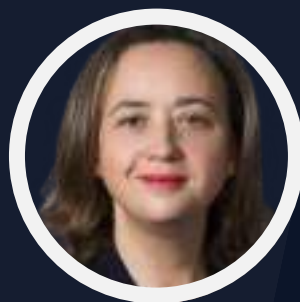
Luisa Handem Piette
Treasurer

Our Board of Directors welcomed Virginie Ducrot as a new Member in January 2023. A French entrepreneur and manager with extensive experience in the web sector, Ducrot is passionate about developing organizations and teams. She has previous experience at La Poste Group, which acquired Bortal, a company she co-founded in 2021. She was nominated in 2018 for the Veuve Clicquot Businesswoman Award, which recognizes boldness, entrepreneurship, creativity and determination.

Two months after her introduction as Member of the Board, Ducrot was elected Co-Chair. Lynette Clemetson, who previously served as sole Chair of the Board, thus also became Co-Chair. Ducrot will manage the French administrative side, while Clemetson will focus on international representation and fundraising.



Bastian Obermayer
Member



Laurence Franc-Menget
Member



Rémi Labed
Member



Joanne Levine
Member

We will continue strengthening and diversifying our Board in the coming years, in line with the emphasis Forbidden Stories places on international partnerships and collaboration.

Our team

What a year for the Forbidden Stories team! Thanks to the generous support of our donors, we were able to double our workforce and meet the most pressing needs of Forbidden Stories' development and global expansion.

As we publish more investigations, more often, and in more regions of the world, we have reinforced our editorial team through the recruitment of a Deputy Editor-in-Chief, a journalist, and a work-study journalist. We've also expanded our SafeBox Network team to respond to growing demands for support from journalists through the recruitment of three Journalist-Coordinators, and a Project Officer.

Finally, to help us steer the organization through this phase of growth and transformation, we created several new positions in our support team: a Head of Development, a Fundraising Manager, a Financial & Administrative Officer, and an Executive Assistant.

Two additional recruitments were finalized this year, for new staff members who will join us in the beginning of 2024: a Communications Officer, and a Publication Coordinator.

As our team grows, we pay particular attention to developing greater gender, cultural, and generational diversity by giving a chance to young graduates and recruiting professionals from various nationalities and cultural backgrounds. These new talents, with their diversity of experience, knowledge, and language skills, will allow us to meet Forbidden Stories' full potential.



Laurent Richard
Founder and Executive Director



Sandrine Rigaud
Editor-in-chief



Cécile Andrzejewski
Journalist



Léa Péruchon
Journalist



Karine Pfenninger
Journalist



Annie Hylton
Deputy editor



Youssr Youssef
Journalist



Phineas Rueckert
Journalist



Paciane Rouchon
Apprentice journalist



Clément Le Merlus
Head of Development



Fanny Toubin
SafeBok Network Project
Manager



Emmanuel Colombié
Journalist, coordinator for
the Latin American desk



Eloïse Layan
Journaliste



Yuliana Calvillo Solis
Project Officer



Sara Guglielmi
Chief Financial Officer



Elisa Kirkland
Fundraising manager



Violaine Saint-Martin
Administrative Officer



Clarisse Jacq
Head of Communications



Emma Chailloux
Executive Assistant

Events and conferences

Knowledge of our work continues to grow globally, as does our reputation. This year, we were again invited to a wide variety of events and conferences on journalism, media freedom, and other issues relevant to our investigations.

By participating in these events, we were able to reinforce our visibility around the world and to raise awareness on our unique mission of protecting the work of threatened journalists and pursuing the work of imprisoned or assassinated journalists.



This year, we were invited to participate in:

The [International Journalism Festival in Perugia](#) in April;

A [Pulitzer Center Conference](#) in June;

The [BIRN Summer School of Investigative Reporting](#) in August;

The [News Impact Summit](#) in October;

The [Latin American Investigative Journalism Conference \(COLPIN\)](#) in December.

The [Assises du Journalisme de Tours](#), the [Geneva International Film Festival and Forum of Human Rights \(FIFDH\)](#), and the [US Summit for Democracy](#) in March;

The [Sir Harry Evans Global Summit in Investigative Journalism](#) in May;

The [Festival International de Journalisme](#) in July;

The [Global Investigative Journalism Conference](#) in September;

The [16th Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism \(ARIJ\) Annual Forum](#) in November-December;

Other events in which Forbidden Stories participated include the Frontline Club in February; the Change Now Summit, for a session on “Democracy and Peace: The Confluence of Environmental Crisis, Climate Change and Conflict”, in May; an event at the European Parliament to present the book “Pegasus: How a Spy in Your Pocket Threatens the End of Privacy, Dignity, and Democracy” the same month; a panel at Impakt Center for Media Culture in June; the European Forum Alpbach in August; and a roundtable on “Protecting Journalists in Times of Crisis: Resilience through Collaboration” at Global Columbia Centers in Paris in December.

In addition, together with some of our consortium partners, we were invited to share the findings of our Story Killers investigation before the French, Belgian, and European Parliaments. We were then invited to deliver a speech on disinformation before the European Commission in September.



” Our work also inspired the arts this year.

Forbidden Stories is featured in a French play titled « Big Mother », which tells the story of a group of journalists who work to uncover a mass manipulation system at the risk of their lives.

Authored by Méloody Mourey, the play was nominated for 5 Molière awards, which recognize achievements of French theater, including « Best Play » and « Best Direction ». The play notably features scenes of the journalists securing their information through the SafeBox Network. It opened in February 2023, and will show through May 2024.

Awards

We had the honor of receiving three new awards for our international collaborative investigations this year.

In August, we received the Online Journalism - Excellence in Collaboration and Partnerships Award for Story Killers.

”

This is a vital, global story that could only be told by such a collaboration. The project melds two of the biggest concerns of our time: threats to the safety of journalists and freedom of the press, and the growth of disinformation and how it undermines our communities. The breadth of the collaboration is important and the results are revelatory.

Online Journalism Awards,
on Story Killers



”

For several years, journalist Rafael Moreno collected information, evidence and testimonies about corruption in public contracts in Córdoba through which land was taken from the victims of the conflict. After his assassination in October 2022, several Colombian and foreign media, in collaboration with the NGO Forbidden Stories, completed the in-depth and risky investigation that Moreno had advanced. This publication, which is an example of skill and ethics in the practice of journalism, pays tribute to Moreno and points out the risks to which regional journalism in Colombia is exposed.



Premio Nacional de Periodismo Simón Bolívar, on the Rafael Project

We then received an Honorable Mention for In-Depth Journalism at the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa Awards for the Rafael Project in October. A month later, the investigation also received a special jury recognition in the Investigative Journalism Category at the Premio Nacional de Periodismo Simón Bolívar, the highest distinction awarded in Colombia for professional journalism. This second prize was also awarded posthumously to Rafael Moreno.

We are deeply grateful for these recognitions of our work and that of our partners.

Supporters and donors

- Forbidden Stories is deeply thankful to receive the support of four new foundations this year: **the Adessium Foundation, the Fred Foundation, the Isocrates Foundation, and Tinius Trust.**
- The Adessium Foundation is a charitable foundation based in the Netherlands. Adessium Foundation aspires to help build a society in which people live in harmony with each other and their environment.
- The Fred Foundation, also based in the Netherlands, supports social initiatives dedicated to living life in harmony with ourselves, each other, and with nature.
- The Isocrates Foundation, formerly known as the Nicolas Puech Foundation, is a Swiss philanthropic foundation dedicated to the protection and promotion of public debate.
- Tinius Trust is a Norwegian trust which manages the Schibsted Media Group and supports projects that impact the general conditions essential to ensure a free and independent press.
- We also wish to express our gratitude to **Open Society Foundations, the Seattle Foundation, UNESCO, and the Veronica Foundation** for renewing their support of Forbidden Stories this year.

Forbidden Stories is currently supported by the Adessium Foundation, the Fred Foundation, the Isocrates Foundation, the Limelight Foundation, Luminare, the National Endowment for Democracy, Open Society Foundations, the Seattle Foundation, Tinius Trust, UNESCO, the Veronica Foundation, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

In parallel to these funding agreements, Forbidden Stories was also selected as a beneficiary of the 2023 fundraiser organized by the secure and encrypted email service **Proton Mail**.

Proton is a Swiss company which provides free and open-source technology to expand access to privacy, security and freedom online. Each year, it organizes a raffle, the proceeds of which it distributes to organizations that advance privacy and freedom around the world.

These new donor agreements and funding sources will enable us to continue on our path of development and global expansion, by giving us the resources to publish more investigations and to support more journalists through the SafeBox Network.

We also wish to sincerely thank our individual donors who have supported us throughout the year. As a non-profit organization, our work is made possible by your support. Thank you for your generosity and for believing in our mission!

If you wish to help us continue the work of journalists who have been silenced, you can **make a donation to Forbidden Stories through our website**.

Forbidden Films

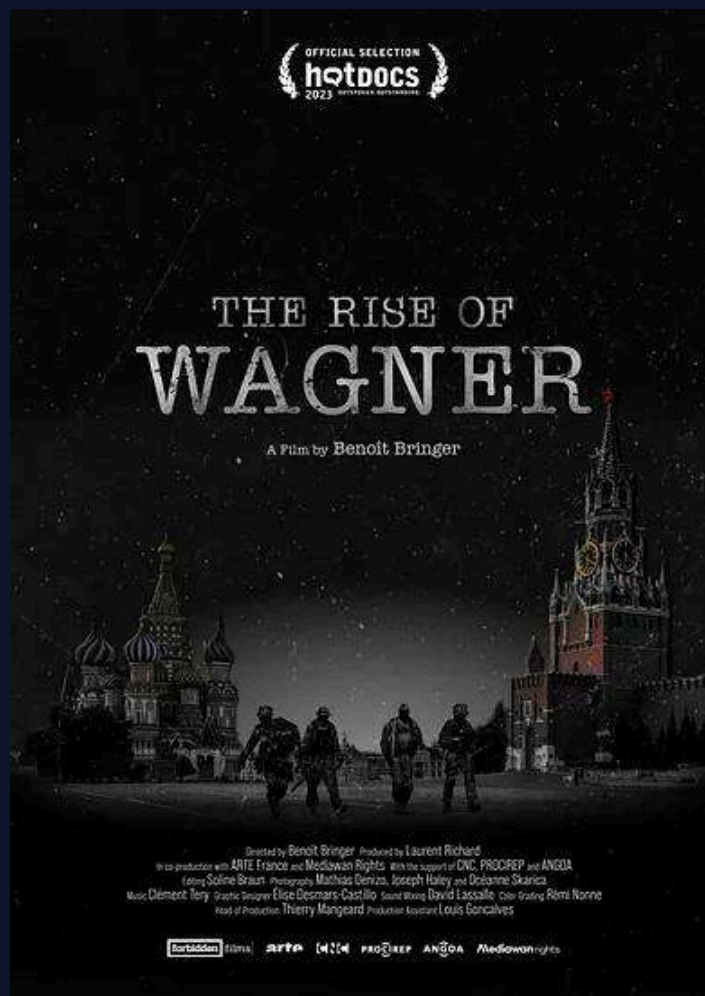


Through our subsidiary company Forbidden Films, we also produce documentaries from behind the scenes of our international collaborative investigations. Our aim through Forbidden Films is to present complex investigations in a compelling and accessible format, and thus raise awareness and increase visibility of Forbidden Stories' investigations and mission. Through its dividends, Forbidden Films also contributes to the financing of Forbidden Stories.

We released two documentaries this year. The first, "The Spy in Your Mobile", was co-produced by Arte France, PBS Frontline, BBC Storyville, and Mediawan Rights. It retraces the work of the international consortium we coordinated in the months leading up to the publication of the Pegasus Project. It was released in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It was selected in March for the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (FIFDH) in Geneva.

The second, "The Rise of Wagner", was co-produced by Arte France and Mediawan Rights. It tells the story of the Russian journalists who risked their lives investigating civilian deaths in Syria and the Central African Republic, and who revealed to the world the existence of the Wagner group of mercenaries. The documentary accumulated an audience of 3.5 million viewers.

We were also invited to screen our 2021 documentary "The Caviar Connection", on attempts by the Azerbaijani regime to corrupt European officials, at the Paris City Hall in October. This special evening featured a screening and a debate, with the participation of Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo; Azerbaijani blogger Mahammad Mirrzali; Austrian sociologist and Co-Founder of the European Stability Initiative think-tank Gerald Knaus; and Representative of Nagorno-Karabakh to France Hovhannes Guevorkian.



Our financial report

Revenue	
Foundation grants	1 229 778€
Public donations	41 974€
Dividends from Forbidden Films	28 700€
Participation in conferences	500€
Interest income	454€
Total	1 301 406€

*Please note that these figures - revenue and expenses - apply to the fiscal year (September 2022 to August 2023).

Our financial report

Expenses	
Staff salaries and taxes	851 439€
Operating expenses	470 609€
Total	1 322 048€

*Please note that these figures - revenue and expenses - apply to the fiscal year (September 2022 to August 2023).

Join us to **protect the information of silenced journalists**. As a non-profit entity providing **free access** to cross-border investigations, **Forbidden Stories** relies on charitable foundations and **contributions from supporters like yourself.**

[I'd like to make a donation](#)

Forbidden Stories is an international collaborative journalism network.

Follow us:



Media inquiries:

media@forbiddenstories.org

forbidden stories