



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

forbidden stories

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A word from Laurent Richard, Founder and Director of Forbidden Stories

“ Access to information and democracy are today at a turning point. All around the world, large-scale disinformation operations are being orchestrated by powerful actors who aim to push their ideological agendas, deceive citizens, divide societies and undermine trust in democratic institutions.

The rise of disinformation places us all at the heart of an information warfare, in which established facts are openly disputed, diverse voices are drowned out, and dissent is stifled. And in these times of division and “post-truths”, reliable journalism is our best ally in upholding democratic and social cohesion.

Last year, we published “[Story Killers](#)”, a groundbreaking investigation that exposed how mercenaries of the global disinformation-for-hire industry work behind the scenes to influence opinions, destroy reputations and destabilize elections. Over the course of this investigation, the issue of Russian disinformation campaigns in Africa stood out to us. To explore this lead, we secretly met with Ephrem Yalike, a journalist from the Central African Republic who had once been an integral part of these operations and who had since decided to denounce these practices, at the risk of his own life.

” We had to wait close to 2 years, until Ephrem was safely in exile, to publish our revelations based on his unprecedented testimony in “The Propaganda Machine”. Together with 10 media partners, **we exposed the inner workings of a Wagner Group-affiliated organization named Africa Politology in the Central African Republic**, but also showed how the disinformation strategies developed by the Russians in the country have since been duplicated across the Sahel region.

But our work did not stop there. This year, our investigations covered issues such as torture, environmental crimes, land speculation, transnational repression, obstructions to justice, human rights violations and war in places such as Azerbaijan, India, France, Rwanda, Israel and Gaza.

One of our largest investigative projects published this year, the “Gaza Project”, examines how the war launched by Israel in the Gaza Strip following the 7 October attacks has become **the deadliest conflict for the press ever recorded by media freedom NGOs.*** With international reporters being denied access to the Gaza Strip, it is on courageous local journalists that we all rely on to access information about the war. They are our only window into one of the most devastating wars of the 21st century. And yet, this window seems to close a little more every day, as killings and imprisonments continue to rise in the Palestinian territories.

”

This is why we published the “Gaza Project”. In an unprecedented collaboration, we worked with Palestinian, Israeli and international journalists to inform the public about what our peers in the Palestinian territories are going through. This project is our contribution to uncovering the truth and combating impunity. It is also our way of showing solidarity with our Palestinian colleagues who tirelessly work to expose the violence of this war and the plight of civilians, in spite of bombardments, displacements, shortages and deprivations, and at the risk of their own safety.



At the same time as the war unleashes itself against our Palestinian colleagues, the rest of our peers around the world continue to face violent attacks, judicial harassment, imprisonment and murder. This year, the Committee to Protect Journalists recorded killings of journalists in over 15 countries, and Reporters Without Borders recorded more than a thousand exactions against media professionals.

Faced with rising attacks against journalists, it is imperative that we intensify our investigative activities. Our experience over the past 7 years has allowed us to build a solid foundation. And building on this foundation, we are in the process of making our journalistic response to crimes against reporters more automatic.



We at Forbidden Stories believe that enemies of press freedom only fear one thing: that what they wanted to hide will be revealed. And this is why we believe the only way to stop them in their tracks is to publish an investigation each time a journalist is silenced.

Through our investigations published this year, we once again showed **the impact that collaborative journalism can make**. From our publications being used as sources in UN reports to authorities opening investigations and civil society being moved to action, our work makes a difference and demonstrates that, no matter how hard some might try, the truth will always come out.

The challenges facing free and independent journalism today are enormous, but **Forbidden Stories remains steadfast in deploying its response to crimes against journalists. Because more than ever, we need journalism to defend journalism. And more than ever, we need your support.**

As put by Irene Khan during the closing of her speech at the 2024 ARIJ Forum,

“I want to end by repeating a slogan of one of the organizations on investigative journalists: killing a journalist does not kill the story.

The story will be told.”

Laurent Richard

2024 in numbers

**INTERNATIONAL
COLLABORATIVE
INVESTIGATIONS** **5**

33 **MEDIA
PARTNERS**

from 17 countries, including 7 international outlets and 11 new media partners (110 media partners total)

130 **JOURNALISTS**
took part in investigations
coordinated

by Forbidden Stories in 2024

FOLLOW-UP STORIES **2**

2024 in numbers

1 NEW GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

NEW DONORS

bringing the total to 17 donors

5

7 NEW POSITIONS

bringing our team to 27 staff members

1 lawsuit against us
DISMISSED

4 NEW AWARDS
bringing the total to **22**

2024 in numbers

11 **IN-PERSON SAFEBOX WORKSHOPS**
and one online session

169 **JOURNALISTS TRAINED ON**
the SafeBox Network Mechanism

75 new members of the
SAFEBOX NETWORK

LOCAL PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS **12**
of the **SafeBox Network**

CURRENT MEMBERS OF THE SAFEBOX NETWORK **166**
including **24** newsrooms

The investigations: Uncovering abuses worldwide



45M

people reached

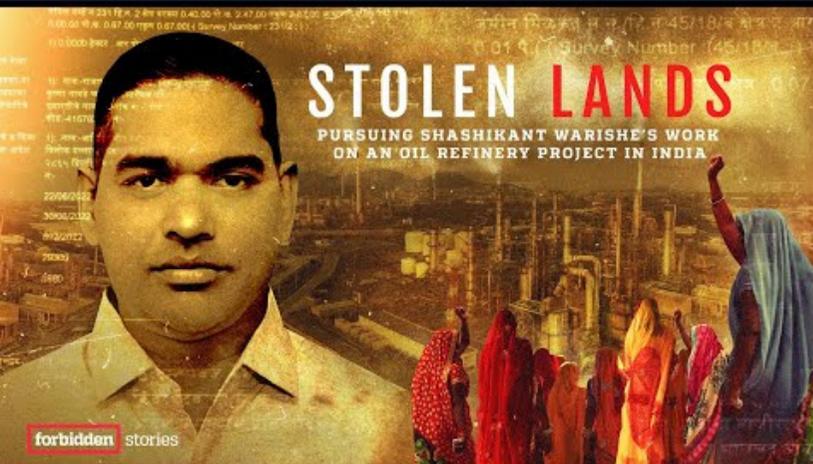
Reach amplified by **127 times***

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

34.4M
people reached



36.5M
people reached
Reach amplified by **694x**



4.7M
people reached
Reach amplified by **4,750x**

23M
people reached



Building on the momentum of previous years, we continued to intensify our activities and published 5 collaborative investigations as well as 2 follow-up stories in 2024.

We have increased our editorial resources to deploy our mission worldwide and progressively increase our pace of publication. From 4 investigations in 2020, we aim to publish at least 10 cross-border projects in 2025, and many more by 2030. Our objective is clear: to publish an investigation each time a reporter or a newsroom is silenced in reprisal for their work. We believe that only by making our response automatic will it have a deterrent effect on the enemies of the press.

In order to keep you informed of our impact and developments related to our work, we also started publishing news articles on our website on a more regular basis.

This year, these articles covered issues ranging from [lawsuits against NSO Group](#) and the [targeting of exiled journalists with Pegasus spyware](#), to the [arrest of a Moroccan journalist](#), the [US presidential elections' impact on media freedom](#), and the [silencing of journalists ahead of the COP29 in Azerbaijan](#).



The Baku Connection

(February & November)

It was with shock and dismay that we learnt in November 2023 of the arrest of several journalists from **Abzas Media** in Azerbaijan. That month, Ulvi Hasanli, its Director; Sevinc Vaqifqizi, its Editor; and Mahammad Kekalov, in charge of administration, were placed in pre-trial detention on dubious charges of “smuggling foreign currency”. Soon thereafter, several other journalists from this independent, investigative outlet were also detained.

Founded in 2016 as a nonprofit media outlet, Abzas Media regularly exposes human rights violations and state corruption in Azerbaijan. In the months before their arrests, Abzas Media journalists had published stories on the corruption of senior officials and the origins of the wealth of President Aliyev's relatives. The connection between their work and their detention leaves little room for doubt. As stated by the outlet itself:

"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."

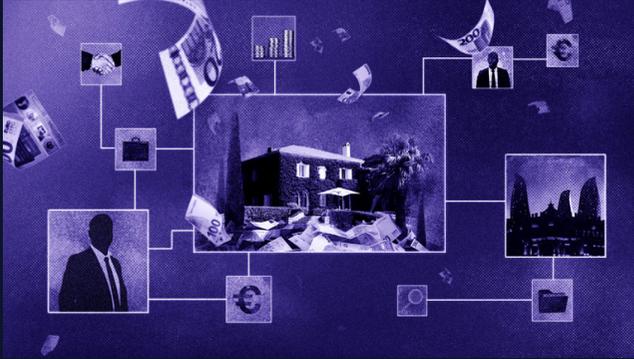
Their arrests occurred at a pivotal time for Azerbaijan, as the country prepared for two major events: presidential elections in February 2024, and the COP29 in November 2024. Their arrests also marked the beginning of a wider crackdown against critical voices in Azerbaijan, which saw over 20 of journalists and human rights defenders detained on equally suspicious charges.

Forbidden Stories had met with the Abzas Media team on several occasions in the past, and we were in touch with Sevinc a few hours before she was detained. Upon their arrest, Sevinc and her colleagues called for other journalists to continue their investigations. And that's exactly what we did.

We immediately **rallied our media partners and assembled a team of 17 outlets and over 40 journalists**. Together with Abzas Media's exiled, acting Editor-in-Chief Leyla Mustafayeva; d'Lëtzebuerger Land; Der Standard; France 24; IRPI Media; Knack; Le Monde; Le Soir; NRC; OCCRP; Paper Trail Media; Radio France; RFI; RTS; Tamedia; The Guardian and ZDF, we picked up the threads of their unfinished investigations and released the results of this cross-border project named "**The Baku Connection**" in 3 parts.

The first part of the Baku Connection investigation was published on 1 February 2024, in the run-up to presidential elections in Azerbaijan. It picked up two of Abzas Media's unfinished reports on the questionable management of Azerbaijani prisons and the issue of torture, and on the environmental and health damages caused by the Gedabek gold mine.

We published the second part of the project on 20 February, after the elections. For this section of the Baku Connection, we analyzed how Azerbaijan manipulates election observation to give itself a facade of democracy.



The third and final part of this investigation was made possible by our [SafeBox Network](#). Shortly before being detained, members of the Abzas Media team had shared a draft of an unfinished investigation with us through this mechanism, and asked us to take over their work should they be imprisoned as well. This story, published on 8 November ahead of the COP29, looks into the purchase of a luxurious villa on the French Riviera by an Azerbaijani civil servant, and [unveils a cascade of shady business arrangements involving companies mentioned in the Panama Papers](#).

Thanks to our consortium partners, the Baku Connection investigation reached at least 45 million people worldwide, or 127 times more than Abzas Media's regular audience. Through our collective efforts, we shed light on Abzas Media's work, on their wrongful detention, and on the repression faced by critical voices in Azerbaijan. We also demonstrated, once again, that silencing journalists will not stop the truth from coming out.

Through targeted online communications, our video trailer about the third part of the Baku Connection was seen 334,000 times on Instagram in Azerbaijan. Roughly 3 million Azerbaijanis use this social media platform, **meaning that 1 in 10 Azerbaijani users of Instagram viewed the video.**

As we write these lines, Abzas Media journalists are fighting additional charges of “money laundering by an organized group”, “tax evasion” and “illegal entrepreneurship”, and face up to 12 years in prison. Their case is indicative of a wider, worrying pattern of **misusing financial laws to pressure and silence independent media**, as documented by UNESCO. In a 2024 report, the UN agency shows that this practice is becoming more widespread, and that “financial crimes prove effective in silencing media and journalists as they do not require the need for a link to content produced and are not subject to the same international scrutiny as laws explicitly targeting media.”

Thankfully, many are seeing through these attempts at silencing and smearing independent Azerbaijani media. Civil society and international organizations have become increasingly vocal about the situation of Abzas Media and other imprisoned Azerbaijani journalists and human rights defenders. Stakeholders such as the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the OSCE Media Freedom Representative, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Amnesty International and a coalition of civil society organizations have all published statements calling for their release. We unite our voice to these calls. **No one should ever be jailed for exposing the truth.**



Stolen Lands

(February)

Our second investigation of the year, titled “Stolen Lands”, was published on 7 February 2024, on the first anniversary of the death of Indian journalist **Shashikant Warishe**.

Shashikant worked as a local reporter for the Mahanagari Times, in the state of Maharashtra. A native of the coastal region of Konkan, he covered **resistance movements against development projects** in the area. Over the past few years, his reporting had focused on a refinery and petrochemicals plant called the Ratnagiri Refinery And Petrochemicals Limited (RRPCL).

This project, estimated at \$44 billion, was proposed in 2017 as a joint partnership between 3 Indian state oil companies, with Saudi and Emirati oil companies also expressing interest. The refinery has since met fierce opposition from local activists, who say it will cause environmental damage and displace farmers.

On 6 February 2023, as Shashikant refueled his motorcycle at a gas station, he was rammed by an SUV. The driver was allegedly a local land dealer named Pandharinath Amberkar, who had unsuccessfully run for office as an independent, pro-refinery candidate in India's 2019 parliamentary elections, and about whom Shashikant had published a critical article the same morning. Early the next day, Shashikant was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Together with our partner the Indian Express, we picked up Sashikant's work investigating a land speculation ring and the involvement of his alleged murderer, Pandharinath Amberkar. Even though the refinery had always denied being associated with Amberkar, **we obtained bank records showing a payment from the refinery to a company owned by Amberkar.**

We also uncovered significant land speculation in the area earmarked for the refinery: land was purchased from locals at lower-than-market rates, with the expectation of selling it to the government at exponentially higher rates once the land required for the refinery is officially requested by the state of Maharashtra. Amberkar was at the heart of this speculation ring: between 2021 and 2023, Amberkar and one his relatives were involved in at least 34 land transactions in villages located within the project area.



Land interests are a critical issue for journalists in India, who are exposed to threats, violent attacks, and even murder. Interviewed by Forbidden Stories for this investigation, CPJ's India Representative Kunal Majumder stated he has detailed roughly one such case every 6 months over the past 5 years.

We estimate that, through our collaboration with the **Indian Express**, **this investigation reached at least 4.7 million people**, or 4,750 times more than if it had been published solely by the Mahanagari Times. This shows once again that silencing a journalist is counterproductive with a response such as Forbidden Stories.

Our revelations immediately generated impact in India. A day after the investigation's publication, opposition parties demand a re-investigation of Shashikant's murder case and a probe into the bank accounts of the refinery.

The following day, Maharashtra's Industries Minister announced a probe into the payment from the refinery to Amberkar.

Following up on Story Killers

(February)

Last year, we published “Story Killers”, a wide-ranging investigation into the **global disinformation industry**. This project pursued the work of slain Indian journalist **Gauri Lankesh**, and immediately generated impact in India, Belgium and France. But it is in France that the investigation had the deepest repercussions. We summarized them in a follow-up story, published on the first anniversary of the investigation, on 15 February 2024.



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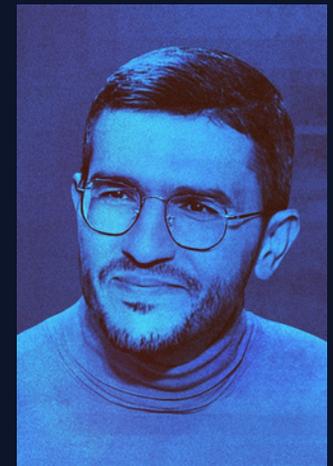
STORY KILLERS

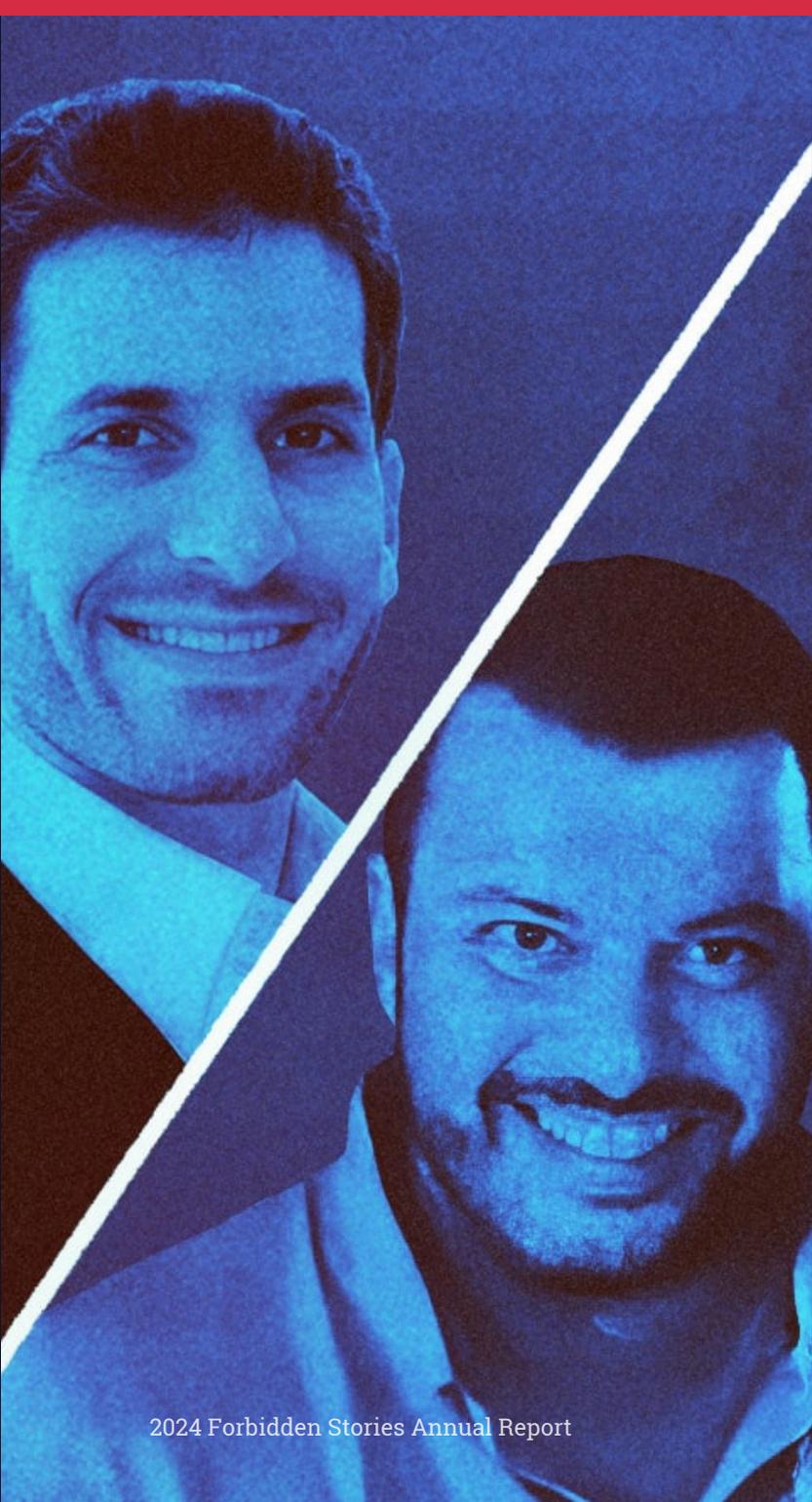
One journalist was murdered.
100 continued her work on disinformation mercenaries.

It all started with Team Jorge. **This ultra-secret Israeli company, whose existence we revealed in Story Killers, orchestrated numerous disinformation campaigns to manipulate elections around the world.** In 2022, during meetings with journalists from our consortium posing as potential buyers, Team Jorge's leader asserted that he could broadcast his clients' messages on French television.

He then showcased a segment from BFMTV, a major French news broadcaster and one of the country's most-watched channels. The segment featured one of the channel's main anchors, Rachid M'Barki.

Following our initial revelations, the French National Assembly's Commission of Inquiry into Political, Economic and Financial Interference by Foreign Powers took on the case, and Forbidden Stories as well as M'Barki were invited to testify.





The French Financial Prosecutor's Office then launched an investigation into alleged foreign interference as well as various offenses, including "corruption", "breach of trust", and "influence peddling". Although the investigation is still ongoing, **Rachid M'Barki has already been indicted, as was Jean-Pierre Duthion**, a lobbyist who has allegedly bribed M'Barki to broadcast unverified content. A third man named Nabil Ennasri was also indicted. Ennasri, a political scientist, is accused of having paid Duthion to lead his influence campaigns.

Story Killers continued to have repercussions in France even after the publication of this follow-up story. Ecologist MP Julien-Lafférière, who was under scrutiny for his connection to Duthion and having received payments from Ennasri, had his parliamentary immunity lifted and was indicted in July. According to our partner Le Monde, the French Financial Prosecutor's Office has uncovered new leads linked to interference by Kazakhstan, Sudan, Cameroon and Qatar, in a case that some judicial sources have described as "tentacular".

Rwanda Classified

(May)

We published on 28 May 2024 our third international investigation of the year, titled "Rwanda Classified". This investigation continued the work of two Rwandan journalists, **John Williams Ntwali** and **Samuel Baker Byansi**, who worked tirelessly to document **human rights violations, the persecution of political opponents and the silencing of the press in Rwanda.**

In 2022, the two men published an investigation into the presence of Rwandan troops in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo — a presence that the Kagame regime has always denied. Samuel was arrested and questioned and, although he was released, the threats he received prompted him to flee the country. John, despite fearing for his life, decided to stay in Rwanda. He was killed a few months later, in January 2023, in a traffic collision whose circumstances remain murky.





Together with Samuel, who now lives in exile, we brought together a team of 50 journalists from 18 media outlets to **investigate the pattern of repression of Rwandan authorities**, their presence in the DRC, and the troubling circumstances of John’s death. Alongside M28 Investigates (Samuel’s outlet); Der Spiegel; Der Standard; Die Zeit; Haaretz; Knack; Le Monde; Le Soir; NRC; OCCRP; Paper Trail Media; Radio France; RTBF; RTS; SVT; The Guardian; ZAM and ZDF, we published a series of 7 stories on these issues as well as an interview of human rights activist Paul Rusesabagina, known for having saved over a thousand people during the Rwandan genocide.



It is estimated that **Rwanda Classified reached at least 36.5 million people worldwide**, and that the reach of these stories was multiplied by 694 times compared to if they had been published solely by Samuel’s M28 Investigates.



The project immediately received **backlash from Rwandan authorities**, who had refused to respond to our questions during the investigation. On the same day that we published Rwanda Classified, the Rwandan government published a statement decrying a “Forbidden Stories media campaign”, accusing us of being “politically motivated campaigners” and of attempting to disrupt upcoming presidential and legislative elections.

President Paul Kagame also reacted to the investigation, dismissing our findings and claiming that our consortium was “up in arms” against Rwanda. We’d like to recall here that this project was based on the work of a local Rwandan journalist, and conducted together with a Rwandan outlet. And we’d also like to recall that Forbidden Stories has no political agenda: our sole objective is to ensure the truth comes out.

Rwanda Classified also received backlash online, so much so that it caught the attention of a group of academics.

In a study titled “Old Despots, New Tricks - An AI-Empowered Pro-Kagame/RPF Coordinated Influence Network on X”, researchers from **Clemson University** looked at the response to our investigation on Twitter/X, and describe **“an apparent coordinated response”** that aimed to **“both discredit and deflect attention from the reporting.”**



One day after we published Rwanda Classified, a group of Dutch parliamentarians called for diplomatic action and for the Ambassador of Rwanda to the Netherlands to be summoned. Ambassador Olivier Nduhungirehe was identified in our investigation as having harassed critics of the Kagame regime via an anonymous Twitter account. It was reported in September 2024 that the Dutch government had indeed summoned the Ambassador and asked him for “clarifications”.

Responding before the Parliament, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that the country was unable to investigate Ambassador Nduhungirehe as he was shielded by his diplomatic immunity.



Gaza Project

(June)

Our fourth international investigation of the year, the “Gaza Project”, was published on 25 June 2024.

Since 7 October 2023 and the outbreak of Israel’s war in Gaza, Palestinian journalists have faced unprecedented levels of killings, harassment, intimidation and violence, in both Gaza and the West Bank.

At the time when we published this investigation, preliminary estimates by the Committee to Protect Journalists showed that 103 Palestinian journalists were among the tens of thousands of Palestinian civilian casualties in the war.

As we write these words in February 2025, CPJ records 169 confirmed killings of journalists and media workers: 161 Palestinians, 2 Israelis, and 6 Lebanese.

The war in Gaza is the deadliest conflict for media workers since CPJ began recording killings of journalists in 1992. In the face of one of the worst attacks against press freedom in recent times, we had to unite and work together with our partners to inform the public.



Together with 50 journalists and 12 media partners, we investigated the deaths of more than 100 journalists in Gaza, and analyzed the cases of Palestinian journalists who have been targeted, threatened and injured in both Gaza and the West Bank since Hamas' terrorist attack on 7 October.

Alongside Agence France Presse (AFP); Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ); Der Spiegel; Der Standard; Le Monde; Paper Trail Media; Radio France; Tamedia Group; The Guardian; ZDF and local Israeli-Palestinian outlets +972 Magazine and Local Call/Sikha Mekomit, we pursued the work of these journalists, and, in some cases, endeavoured to relay their final reporting projects after they were killed. The project also features a contribution from open-source investigative collective Bellingcat.

As expressed by our partners at +972 Magazine:

“This project was especially important for us, as an act of solidarity with those journalists who paid with their lives, to show the world what is going on in Gaza.”

The Gaza Project consists in a series of 8 articles: 2 serve as an introduction to the project and explain the methodology behind it, 4 look into the targeting of journalists in Gaza, and 2 others pursue the work of journalists in the West Bank who suffered violent attacks.

As we, like most other international journalists, were prohibited from entering the Gaza Strip, we investigated remotely, **analyzing thousands of hours of footage and sound; consulting ballistics and audio experts; contacting over 100 witnesses in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank; and analyzing satellite images.**

To support information gathered from the ground, we pored through data from 3 different press freedom organizations: the Committee to Protect Journalists, Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (who is also a member of our consortium), and the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate. We also looked into the full or partial destruction of buildings and offices that were clearly flagged as press infrastructure.

We found that at least 40 journalists and media workers were killed while at home, and that at least 40 journalists and media workers working for what Israel described as Hamas-affiliated media were killed. We also identified at least 18 journalists who were killed, injured, or allegedly targeted by drones, and 6 buildings housing media offices that were completely or partially destroyed.

At least 14 journalists were wearing press vests at the moment they were killed, injured, or allegedly targeted.

We estimate that the Gaza Project reached at least 34.4M people around the world upon its publication. We are grateful that the stories of the Gaza Project were also republished widely by media outlets beyond our network, and especially in the MENA Region thanks to ARIJ, thus helping more people access these important revelations.

Various unions of journalists and press freedom organizations use our findings in their advocacy for the safety of journalists in Palestinian territories.

The Gaza Project was moreover used as a source in a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression titled “Global threats to freedom of expression arising from the conflict in Gaza”.



Following up on the Pegasus Project

(July)



On 25 July 2024, three years after the Pegasus Project, we published new revelations about WhatsApp's lawsuit against NSO Group, the company behind Pegasus spyware, and how Israeli authorities maneuvered to keep key evidence from being included in the lawsuit.

Together with our partners at Paper Trail Media, The Guardian, Radio France, Die Zeit, Der Spiegel and Der Standard, we analyzed a leak of emails and files from the Israeli Ministry of Justice obtained by non-profit Distributed Denial of Secrets (DDoSecrets). We also used background sources and document forensic analysis of some of the leaked files by Amnesty International's Security Lab.

We found that, in July 2020 (about 9 months after WhatsApp sued NSO Group in a California court), a Tel Aviv judge issued an order to seize documents at NSO's offices in Herzliya on behalf of the Israeli government, ahead of the trial's discovery process.

The leaked files we reviewed also suggest that the Israeli Ministry of Justice pushed NSO to remove language from court filings that implied Israel is a customer of NSO and uses Pegasus technology.



This follow-up story quickly had repercussions. In September, [the Washington Post](#) reported that Apple asked a [San Francisco](#) court to dismiss its 3-year old hacking lawsuit against NSO Group, mentioning our partner [The Guardian's article](#) about the seizure of documents and arguing that “it might never be able to get the most critical files about NSO's Pegasus surveillance tool and that its own disclosures could aid NSO and its increasing number of rivals.”

Apple also stated that “while Apple takes no position on the truth or falsity of the Guardian Story described above, its existence presents cause for concern about the potential for Apple to obtain the discovery it needs.”

We summarized these new developments in a [news article published in September](#). We also consulted two experts, Scott Horton, lecturer at Columbia Law School, and Donncha Ó Cearbhaill, Head of Security Lab at Amnesty International, to get their insights on these cases.

In December, a California judge eventually [found NSO Group liable for hacking](#), and found that the company had violated federal and California hacking statutes, as well as had breached WhatsApp’s terms of service. This decision was described as “the first major court victory against NSO Group in the world” [by Access Now](#).

The Propaganda Machine

(November)



For our last international investigation of the year, we uncovered the **hidden mechanisms of massive Russian disinformation operations in the Central African Republic** and the Sahel region.

The investigation is based on revelations by Central African journalist **Ephrem Yalike** who was once involved in these disinformation campaigns and who, despite facing serious threats, chose to expose what he witnessed. It was published on 21 November 2024 under the title "[The Propaganda Machine](#)".



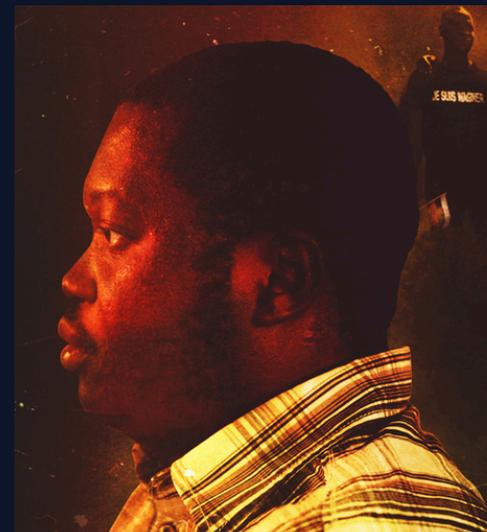
It all began in 2022, when Forbidden Stories launched the [Story Killers](#) project to investigate the global disinformation industry. One issue that stood out to us was Russian propaganda campaigns in Africa. In order to explore this line of inquiry, we secretly met with Ephrem Yalike in South Africa, alongside our partners at The Guardian and Paper Trail Media. There, Ephrem showed us evidence of how he participated in the disinformation operations put in place by the Wagner Group. We would have to wait 2 years before making his revelations public – a period during which Ephrem, fearing for his life, was forced into hiding and ultimately into exile.

To conduct this investigation, we brought together 10 media partners: Le Monde; Paper Trail Media; Der Spiegel; Der Standard; RFI; Radio France; IStories; Dossier Center; The Continent; and Actualite.cd. Together, [we published a series of 3 articles](#): an introduction to the project, an article on Russian propaganda in the Central African Republic, and an article about how these methods were replicated across the Sahel region.

In this series, **we reveal the inner workings of an unofficial Russian organization named Africa Politology**. This secret organization has close ties to the Wagner paramilitary group and orchestrates disinformation campaigns in the Central African Republic through invisible intermediaries, cash payments, brutal methods of intimidation, and a pervasive cult of secrecy.



The series also tells **the story of Ephrem and how he became a cog in the Russian propaganda machine** between 2019 and 2022. In March 2022, Ephrem was threatened with death by the Russian agents he worked with, after he was suspected of being a mole and having exposed a false story the Russians had planted. Terrorized by this episode, Ephrem became determined to flee his country and denounce the practices in which he had participated. With the crucial support of the Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa (PPLAAF), Ephrem tried every means possible to flee his homeland, and now lives in exile in a safe place.



We estimate that the **Propaganda Machine reached at least 23 million people worldwide**. Thanks to our media partners, the investigation was disseminated in 10 languages: Hausa, Fulani, Mandinka, Portuguese, English, French, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian and German. This provided unparalleled access to the audiences most affected by these revelations. We are also grateful to the Associated Press who picked up these stories and helped spread them globally.

Through targeted online communications, our video trailers about the investigation were seen over 1.5M times in the capital cities of the countries mentioned in the Propaganda Machine (Bangui, Ouagadougou, Niamey, and Bamako).

Central African authorities reacted to the Propaganda Machine less than a week after its publication.

Central African authorities reacted to the Propaganda Machine less than a week after its publication. In a press conference held on 26 November 2024, Maxime Balalou, Minister of Media and Communications and Government Spokesman, rejected our findings, claiming the country had been targeted by a “journalistic cabal” and “gross manipulation by foreign journalists”. He claimed the investigation was a “Russophobic” set-up to tarnish the image of the Central African Republic because of its close relationship with Russia. Let us once again make our mission clear: Forbidden Stories has no political agenda. Our only commitment is to ensure that everyone has access to information of public interest.

Minister Balalou also announced that the government had opened an investigation, and that legal action would be taken “against these people, or this group of people”. He however did not specify whether he was referring to journalists who received payments from Russian groups in the country, to journalists who blew the whistle on these practices, or to our consortium.

Opposition party MLPC (Mouvement de Libération du Peuple Centrafricain) also reacted to the investigation. On 25 November, the party shared [a statement on Facebook underlining](#) the consequences of Russia's stranglehold on Central African media and the importance of Ephrem's revelations:

”Ephrem Yalike's testimony marks a turning point in the fight against Russian propaganda in the Central African Republic. By denouncing the actions of the Wagner group, he has opened a breach in the wall of silence surrounding these practices. However, the battle is far from over. The Central African authorities and their Russian allies will do everything in their power to stifle dissident voices and maintain their grip on the country.”

Impact of previous investigations



PEGASUS PROJECT

(2021)

In addition to the repercussions of our follow-up story about WhatsApp's lawsuit against NSO Group, **the Pegasus Project itself continued to have an impact globally in 2024.** Although the investigation's ramifications are too numerous to list here, we wanted to share some major developments that occurred this year.

forbidden stories

THE PEGASUS PROJECT

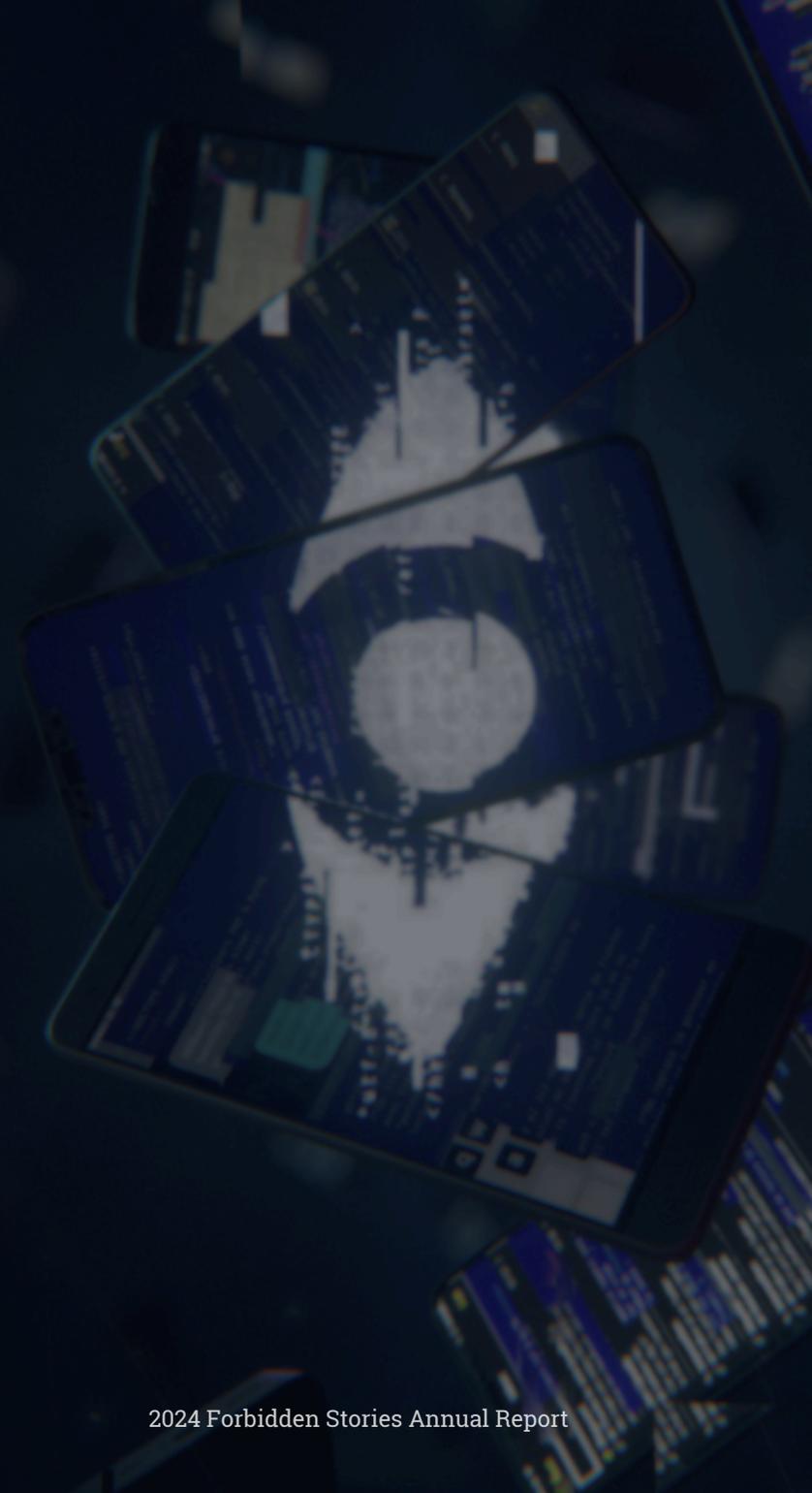
Global democracy under cyber attack

Investigations and lawsuits against NSO Group and its clients



Investigations into the use of Pegasus continued in **Poland and Spain**, where revelations about the spyware caused major political scandals. A parliamentary commission of inquiry was set up in Poland in January, which has asked prosecutors to press charges against a former Deputy Minister. In Spain, documents about the spying of a Catalan politician were declassified, and a judge decided in April to reopen an investigation into the spying of members of Pedro Sánchez's government.

An investigation into the purchase of Pegasus spyware was opened in Colombia in September. It was revealed 2 months later that this purchase had been financed by U.S. authorities, who affirmed that the purchase was part of collaboration in the fight against drug trafficking.



In light of NSO Group being found liable for hacking WhatsApp in December, the Congress Party in **India** asked the Supreme Court to reopen the spyware probe that had been launched in 2021, following the publication of the Pegasus Project.

Salvadorean media outlet El Faro, whose entire structure had been targeted by Pegasus, appealed the dismissal of its lawsuit against NSO Group. Several major U.S. technology companies, including Google and Microsoft, as well as press organizations supported this appeal by filing amicus curiae briefs in July.

In **Thailand**, a landmark case filed by a local activist against NSO Group was dismissed by a Bangkok Court in November, on the basis there was insufficient evidence. This dismissal was described as an “alarming setback in the fight against the unlawful use of spyware” by Amnesty International.

Media and activists face retaliation for their revelations about Pegasus

In **Morocco**, human rights defender Fouad Abdelmoumni was arrested in October after posting on Facebook about the Pegasus scandal, just hours after a visit of the French President to Morocco. Though he was released after 48 hours, Fouad Abdelmoumni is still being prosecuted for “spreading false allegations”. He gave his first interview since his arrest to Forbidden Stories.

The Kingdom of Morocco, who had filed lawsuits against Forbidden Stories and 6 French media outlets (Le Monde, Mediapart, France Info, France Inter, France Culture and L’Humanité) following the publication of the Pegasus Project, saw its complaint and subsequent appeals dismissed by the French Court of Cassation in September.

New victims continue to be identified

This year, media outlets and specialized organizations identified victims of Pegasus spyware among members of the **European Parliament**, **Russian and Belarusian**-speaking opposition activists and independent media based in Europe (about whom we also published a short news article), civil society in **Jordan**, and journalists in **Togo**.

MINING SECRETS

(2022)

Two years ago, in March 2022, we published Mining Secrets, an investigation into environmental damage, malpractice and human rights abuses of the mining industry in El Estor, Guatemala. The investigation pursued the work of Carlos Choc, a local journalist who was forced to live in hiding and faced judicial harassment for his reporting on the Fénix nickel mine. It was a follow-up to our 2019 Green Blood investigation, which looked into the abuses of the mining industry in Guatemala, India and Tanzania.

In November 2022, **6 months after we published Mining Secrets, the U.S Department of Treasury sanctioned the leaders of Solway mining operations in Guatemala,** leading to the suspension of the nickel mine's activities for over a year.

We reported last year on the impact the investigation continued to have, from 6 UN Special Rapporteurs enquiring about Carlos Choc's judicial harassment to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights using Mining Secrets as a source in a ruling affirming the rights of the Indigenous Maya Q'eqchi' people.

IN 2024, MINING SECRETS CONTINUED TO HAVE REPERCUSSIONS IN GUATEMALA.

The **Guatemalan Ministry of Energy and Mines** announced in January that it would review all mining licenses, following several allegations of bribery and corruption in the mining sector. It also stated that it was working with the U.S. Embassy to corroborate information about Solway's subsidiaries in Guatemala, which had been sanctioned in 2022 following our investigation.

The same month, **our partner OCCRP reported that the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets** had sanctioned Alberto Pimentel Mata, Guatemala's former Minister of Energy and Mining, for allegedly exploiting his country's mining sector through bribery schemes. Pimentel had previously been mentioned in OCCRP's investigation as part of the Mining Secrets consortium. An investigation into Pimentel Mata was then opened in September by Guatemalan authorities, under suspicion that he and his Vice-Minister had violated the rights of the Maya Q'eqchi' people by allowing the operations of the Fénix nickel mine without consulting them.

Solway was eventually allowed to resume its activities in El Estor by the Guatemalan Ministry of Energy in August, after U.S. sanctions were lifted in January 2024. PRONICO, one of Solway's subsidiaries that had faced sanction, stated it hoped production would resume within 8 to 10 months, and that the company had adopted new practices to fight against corruption and support human rights.

Finally, we were delighted to learn that, **after 7 years of delays and rescheduled hearings, all charges against Carlos Choc were dropped in January 2024.**

A few weeks later, in February 2024, we also learned that the lawsuit Solway had launched against our subsidiary Forbidden Films after the release of the Green Blood documentary **had been rejected as inadmissible by a French judge.**

SAFEBOX NETWORK



2024 was a year of major expansion for the SafeBox Network, which was launched in 2022 and **whose membership nearly doubled.**

This unique mechanism was created in order to **deter attacks against journalists before they happen.** It enables threatened journalists and newsrooms to secure their ongoing investigations and ensure their work will not disappear if they are ever silenced.

Many members of the SafeBox Network have also chosen to communicate about their membership: if their aggressors know they are backed by Forbidden Stories and our international network of media partners, they will realize that attempting to silence them is pointless.



”

“This will give us even more courage. If we are silenced, others will take over. And many people will think twice before trying to intimidate us.”

**– Alphonse Nekwa Makwala,
Congolese journalist at InfoBasCongo,
a newsroom that is a member of the Safebox Network**

This year, we continued on our path of global expansion of the mechanism. In partnership with local organizations, we held **12 workshops and online sessions** in Central and South America, as well as in West and Central Africa. Through these, we trained over 150 of the world's most threatened journalists on how to secure their sensitive information through the SafeBox Network.

**AS A RESULT,
75 NEW MEMBERS JOINED THE MECHANISM
THIS YEAR.**



All have faced persecution and intimidation for working on **sensitive issues such as local government and corruption; sexual violence and feminicides; armed conflict and internally displaced persons**; the illegal exploitation and contamination of natural resources; migration; and victims of disappearances, among other themes. Some of them have accepted to share their experiences on camera, and we published videos featuring the testimonies of participants in our workshops **in Mexico (Mexico City, Oaxaca and Chihuahua), Ecuador, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo**. We were also reunited with our dear friend Carlos Choc during a workshop in Guatemala City, and he too shared his experience in a short interview.

We would like to express our gratitude to CENOZO; Colectivo de Prácticas Psicosociales; Freelance Frontline Mexico; Fundamedios; the International Women's Media Foundation; Karisma; La Liga Contra el Silencio; Quinto Elemento Lab; Red de Periodistas de a Pie; RUDI International; Union Nationale pour la Presse Congolaise; and Veredas Psicosociales **for their support in organizing these workshops**.

In addition to the workshops, we promoted the SafeBox Network at various regional and international journalism events (Gabo Festival in Colombia; Africa Facts Summit in Ghana; the ACOS Alliance Meeting in London; COLPIN in Spain; and ForoCAP in Guatemala). These events helped us reach out to journalists who could benefit from this mechanism.

As of 31 December 2024, the SafeBox Network counted 166 active members in 27 countries across Africa, Latin America, Asia, MENA, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

The SafeBox Network was used to trigger an investigation this year, which became the third part of the Baku Connection project. **Shortly before being arrested, the Abzas Media team had secured a draft through the mechanism and asked us to continue their unfinished reporting.** Together with our media partners, we finished and published this investigation into shady business arrangements around the purchase of a luxurious villa in the South of France by an Azerbaijani civil servant.

Beyond continuing the investigations of silenced members, the SafeBox Network also breaks the isolation of these threatened journalists and emboldens them to continue working and to publish investigations they otherwise would have self-censored. This year, **members notably published important investigations about the torture of women prisoners in Mexico; the execution of dozens of people falsely reported as guerilla fighters in Colombia; and the embezzlement of educational funds in Nigeria,** mentioning each time that their information had been secured by Forbidden Stories, as a warning to those who might wish to threaten them.

Another milestone for the SafeBox Network was the **launch of Forbidden Stories' partnership with the Committee to Protect Journalists** in February 2024. Through this partnership, we are sharing information about threatened journalists and offering the SafeBox Network's support to journalists assisted by CPJ. Members of the SafeBox Network also have access to CPJ's safety consultations.



The partnership with CPJ **joins a growing list of partner organizations of the SafeBox Network all around the world.** We are currently supported by a dozen formal partnerships with local and regional organizations and journalists' unions, whom we thank for their collaboration: ABRAJI; Aliansi Jurnalis Independen; ARIJ; Association Haïtienne des Journalistes d'Investigation; the Belarusian Association of Journalists; CENOZO; Ekolab; Fundamedios; La Liga Contra el Silencio; Mesa para la Seguridad de Periodistas; the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines; and Press Club Belarus.



”

The fight against misinformation upsets powerful interests, and some people will do anything to get their way. Thanks to SafeBox, I can fight this battle with

greater serenity.”

— Mardochée Boli, Malian journalist and member of the SafeBox Network

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“What inspires me a lot is that it is created by journalists, by journalists who understand us, so it is not only our integral security but also the security and the defense of our investigations.”



— Patricia Mayoga, Mexican journalist at Raich, a newsroom that is a member of the Safebox network

The organization

forbidden stories |

Our Board of Directors

Forbidden Stories is governed by an international Board of Directors, with members drawn from a variety of specialist backgrounds, from investigative journalism to law, media development, human rights, and digital security. Our Board operates in a pro bono capacity, and meets on a quarterly basis, including once a year in person.



Lynette Clemetson
Co-Chair



Virginie Ducrot
Co-Chair



Laurence Franc-Menget
General secretary



Luisa Handem Piette
Treasurer



Bastian Obermayer
Member



Rémi Labeled
Member



Joanne Levine
Member

Edouard Perrin, who has held different responsibilities within Forbidden Stories' Board of Directors since 2019, stepped down from his role as Secretary General in July 2024 to join our newsroom as Editor. His former role as Secretary General was taken over by Laurence Franc-Menget.

Our team

We continued to expand our team this year thanks to the generous support of our donors. We created a total of 8 new positions across our newsroom, communications team, and support team, which will help us on our path towards global expansion and the systematization of our journalistic response.

Forbidden Stories is committed to ensuring that its staff reflects a diversity of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. This year, we were happy to welcome multiple international employees and binationals. The perspectives, knowledge and language skills they bring to our organization are an incredible asset towards the fulfilment of our mission.



Laurent Richard
Founder and Executive Director



Mariana Abreu
Journalist



Sofía Álvarez Jurado
Journalist



Cécile Andrzejewski
Journalist



Eloïse Layan
Journalist



Frédéric Métézeau
Editor



Edouard Perrin
Editor



Léa Péruchon
Lead Coordinator



Karine Pfenniger
Journalist



Clément Le Merlus
Deputy Executive Director



Paciane Rouchon
Work-study journalist



Phineas Rueckert
Lead Coordinator



Youssr Youssef
Journalist



Guillaume Venetitay
Journalist

Forbidden Stories also wishes to express its gratitude to **Sandrine Rigaud**,
our former Editor-in-Chief, who left the organization in March 2024.



Yuliana Calvillo Solis

SafeBox Network
Project Officer



Emmanuel Colombié

SafeBox Network Coordinator
for Latin America



H el ene Garreta

SafeBox Network Coordinator
for Asia & Africa



Fanny Toubin

SafeBox Network
Project Manager



Emma Chailloux

Partnership & Campaign
Manager



Sara Guglielmi

Chief Financial Officer



Elisa Kirkland

Fundraising Manager



Michelle Ponce

Administrative & Financial
Assistant



Ghysda Radwan

General Accountant



Anouk Aflalo Dor e

Video Journalist



Louise Berkane

IT & Publication Officer



Matthieu Gerrer

Communications Officer



Clarisse Jacq

Head of Communications

Events and visibility

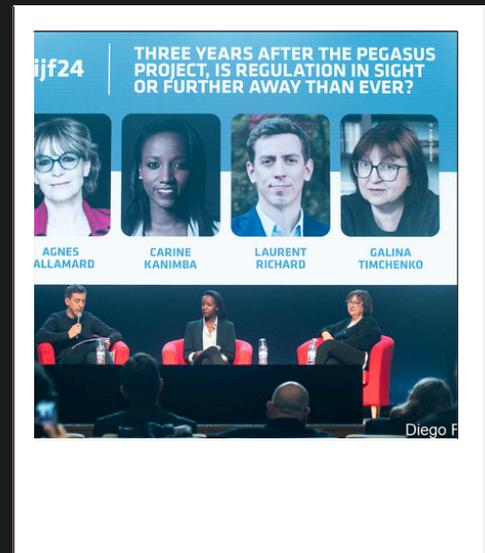
As in previous years, we were honored to be invited to take part in many different events to showcase our work. Ranging from forums organized by international organizations to regional journalism conferences, film screenings, masterclasses, seminars on our investigations, sessions at festivals and award ceremonies, all of these events helped reinforce our visibility and raise awareness of our mission.

We are grateful to the following **international media conferences and journalism events** for hosting us:

APRIL



The **Perugia International Journalism Festival in April**, where we held 2 sessions on “How can we pursue the investigations of silenced journalists?” (featuring an interview with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dmitry Muratov) and on “Three years after the Pegasus Project, is regulation in sight or further away than ever?”.



JULY

Festival Gabo, and a webinar on the Gaza Project organized by the International Press Institute (IPI) in July.



MAY

An event on investigative journalism and democracy at the Parisian Public Information Library (Centre Pompidou) in May.

SEPTEMBER



The 7th World Peace Forum in Normandie, the 45th News & Documentary Emmy Awards, and the IJ4EU Impact Awards ceremony in September.



OCTOBER



The News Impact Summit (where our partner Leyla Mustafayeva from Abzas Media presented the Baku Connection), Africa Facts Summit, and the ACOS Alliance Meeting in October.



NOVEMBER



The VVOJ Investigative Journalism Conference, and ForoCAP in November;



DECEMBER



The ARIJ Forum, and Festival OSINT in December.



We were also pleased to take part in screenings of our subsidiary Forbidden Films' documentaries, as well as of documentaries by our consortium partners:

FEBRUARY



In February, a screening of our partner France 24's documentary on the Baku Connection in Paris.



JUNE

In June, 2 screenings of our partner Repórter Brasil's documentary "Accounts of a War Correspondent in the Amazon" (part of the Bruno & Dom Project) in London and Paris, as well as a screening of Forbidden Films' Cartel Project documentary in Ecuador.

DECEMBER

In December, a screening of Forbidden Films' Daphne documentary in Paris, as part of the film festival La Corruption en Images.

Other events include the Etats généraux de l'information, organized by French authorities in February, and the 2024 OECD Global Anti-Corruption and Integrity Forum in March. Forum.



Our collaboration with Columbia University and its Global Center in Paris was particularly fruitful this year, and we were able to present our work at various events in Paris and New York.



We also wish to thank our donors at **the Limelight Foundation** and **the Adessium Foundation** for inviting us to showcase Forbidden Stories' impact at their own internal events and the Philea Forum.

A special thanks goes to World Press Photo, who showcased our work on the SafeBox Network and the Rafael Project during their exhibition in Amsterdam. Thanks to them, **over 60,000 visitors got to discover how we brought together an international community of reporters at risk** and how we keep stories alive.



credit: Marteen Nauw

As a final note, we want to mention that **Forbidden Stories' mission was highlighted in 2 documentaries** this year, one by Dutch public broadcaster VPRO and one by public French television, **as well as in 2 podcasts** by Radio France (“Mécaniques du journalisme – L’affaire Pegasus”) and Columbia University’s Global Center in Paris.

AWARDS

And the **Emmy** goes to... us! And not only did we win an Emmy Award, we won a total of 4 prestigious awards this year.



Our consortium's work on the Bruno & Dom Project was recognized by the Covering Climate Now Journalism Award for large projects and collaborations in July. The Dom & Bruno Project was also shortlisted for the IJ4EU Impact Award, which was eventually won by another of our investigations, Story Killers, in September.

On the same day that Story Killers won the IJ4EU Impact Award, we received an Emmy Award in the **"Outstanding Investigative Documentary"** category for our work on Forbidden Films' documentary on the Pegasus Project.



Finally, in November, the Gaza Project was awarded the Otto-Brenner Prize in Germany.

We are deeply honored by these recognitions of our work and that of our partners.

JURY COMMENTS

“This project trumps it all. Absolutely captivating.”

–Covering Climate Now Journalism Awards, on the Bruno & Dom Project

“By continuing Gauri Lankesh’s important work, not only did Story Killers uncover the global disinformation complex that threatens free expression and democracy in every country across the globe beyond India alone, they shone a light on Gauri’s tragic death. Through that, they also honoured her courageous life.”

– IJ4EU Impact Awards, on Story Killers

Supporters and donors

Our work wouldn't be possible without the generosity of our donors. We would like to wholeheartedly **thank all of you who helped us keep these "forbidden stories" alive** in 2024, both individuals and institutional donors.

**Every contribution, no matter how large or small,
helps our mission and supports our independence.**

We were deeply thankful to receive the support of 4 new foundations in 2024: **the Dutch Postcode Foundation** (Nationale Postcode Loterij), **the Ford Foundation**, **the Oak Foundation**, and **the Reva & David Logan Foundation**. We also wish to thank **ProtonMail**, who selected us for their 2023 end-of-year fundraiser and made a generous donation to us in 2024.

The **Dutch Postcode Foundation (Nationale Postcode Loterij)** is a charity lottery based in the Netherlands. It supports non profit organizations that work towards a just, green, and healthy world.



The **Ford Foundation** is a US-based foundation which works to reduce poverty and injustice, strengthen democratic values, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.



The staff of the **Oak Foundation** selected Forbidden Stories for a discretionary grant. The Oak Foundation holds its headquarters in Switzerland and works to make the world a safer, fairer and more sustainable place to live.



THE
REVA & DAVID LOGAN
FOUNDATION

Proton

FOUNDATION
Limelight

 NATIONAL
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FOR
DEMOCRACY
SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

 SEATTLE
FOUNDATION
the heart & science of philanthropy

The **Reva & David Logan Foundation**, based in the US, provides support to the arts, investigative journalism, and social justice.

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.

We also wish to express our sincere gratitude to the **Limelight Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Seattle Foundation** for renewing their support of Forbidden Stories this year.

In 2024, Forbidden Stories received support from:

- **the Adessium Foundation;**
- **the Dutch Postcode Foundation (Nationale Postcode Loterij);**
- **the Ford Foundation;**
- **the Fred Foundation;**
- **the Isocrates Foundation;**
- **the Limelight Foundation;**
- **Luminate; the National Endowment for Democracy;**
- **the Oak Foundation;**
- **Open Society Foundations; Proton;**
- **the Reva & David Logan Foundation;**
- **the Seattle Foundation;**
- **Tinius Trust;**
- **UNESCO;**
- **the Veronica Foundation;**
- **and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.**

Last but not least, we want to send a big, heartfelt thank you to all of the individuals who have supported us this year.

We received more than 1,500 donations

this year, of all amounts and sizes.

WE CAN NEVER THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR YOUR TRUST 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.

Donations are **tax-deductible in France.**

Tax-deductible donations can be made in the US through Donor-Advised Funds and CAF America.

Legal action

In 2019, we published Green Blood, an investigative project into the abuses of the mining industry in India, Tanzania and Guatemala. The following year, our subsidiary Forbidden Films produced a documentary on the project. After the documentary was released in 2020, mining conglomerate Solway filed a lawsuit against us and Forbidden Films. We are relieved to announce that **this complaint was rejected as inadmissible by a French judge in February 2024.**

This year, we also celebrated **the end of Carlos Choc's judicial harassment and Omar Radi's release from jail.** We are overjoyed to see these brilliant journalists and important voices regain their freedom.

In parallel, we are following the evolutions of legal cases around the killings of journalists whose work we pursued. The alleged masterminds for **Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira's** murders have been formally charged in Brazil, and a leader from Clan del Golfo was arrested in connection with **Rafael Moreno's** murder in Colombia. In India, the bail of **Shashikant Warishe's** alleged murderer was denied while he awaits trial. We hope that these are steps in the right direction, and that crimes against these journalists will not remain unpunished, as is currently the case for so many others.

Our financial report

Revenue	
Foundation grants	2 395 006 €
Public donations	37 535 €
Donation from Proton	45 124 €
Participation in conferences	1 656 €
Interests on income	4 488 €
State aid for work study programs	5 000 €
Agreement with an audiovisual production company	40 000€
TOTAL	2 528 809 €

* Please note that these figures (revenue and expenses) apply to the fiscal year from September 2023 to August 2024.

** Forbidden Stories received several portions of grants in advance that should be allocated to the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 fiscal years. The figure presented here therefore deducts those tranches to show the actual total of foundation grants allocated to the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

Our financial report

Expenses	
Staff Salaries and taxes	1 342 678 €
Operating expenses	724 048 €
TOTAL	2 066 726 €

* Please note that these figures (revenue and expenses) apply to the fiscal year from September 2023 to August 2024.

** Forbidden Stories received several portions of grants in advance that should be allocated to the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 fiscal years. The figure presented here therefore deducts those tranches to show the actual total of foundation grants allocated to the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

forbidden stories

Killing the journalist won't kill the story.



Follow us:



Media inquiries:

media@forbiddenstories.org