





openDemocracy is an independent global media organisation.

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

## Contents

*Click to go directly to the article*

- 3 Message from the editor-in-chief
- 3 Thanks to our supporters
- 4 Our strategy
- 6 Where we work
- 8 Secrets of the Clearing House
- 11 Setting the agenda in Parliament
- 12 A therapy that wounds
- 14 Flares from the Amazon
- 16 From the grassroots in Russia and Ukraine
- 20 Taking the government to court
- 22 We turned the tide on abortion pill reversal
- 24 The not-so-noble lords
- 26 'Net zero' oil giant spies on peaceful activists
- 28 A green paradox: cut down trees to cut emissions
- 29 Douglas Ross and the war on Scotland's Travellers
- 30 Journalism+: how we make change happen
- 32 Inclusivity information
- 33 Financial highlights

# Message from the editor-in-chief



We have deepened openDemocracy's innovative 'journalism+' model that places impact – and our readers – at the heart of our journalism

An editor-in-chief's first annual report should be a daunting task. What to say? How to say it? But my incredible colleagues have made it very easy.

2021 was a remarkable year for openDemocracy. We produced vital journalism that led the news agenda, exposed wrongdoing and clandestine influence, and led to real change.

In September, I took over from my peerless predecessor, Mary Fitzgerald. By then we had already sparked a UK parliamentary investigation into Freedom of Information, been nominated for major awards and revealed the grim reality of conversion therapy for LGBTIQ people around the world.

Since then we have deepened openDemocracy's innovative 'journalism+' model that places impact – and our readers – at the heart of our journalism. Tens of thousands of readers have taken action in direct response to our journalism.

The challenge facing us is great. The crisis of democracy is deepening. But if we all work together we believe change is possible.

Peter Geoghegan

## Thanks to our supporters

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

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



# Our strategy

## Vision

We seek to make our world more transparent and equitable by

- challenging the global backlash against democracy and human rights
- making corporate and political power more accountable
- stimulating the growth of a more inclusive international media ecosystem

## How?

To achieve this we

- publish high-quality reporting, analysis, multimedia and debate
- run long-term 'on the job' training and mentoring for groups under-represented in the media, particularly diverse women, LGBTIQ people and people of colour
- collaborate with, train, learn from and share intelligence with a wide network of media and civil society, from grassroots activists to journalists, lawyers, policymakers, educators and others
- invest in building a more sustainable business model, including via reader support

## Strategic objectives

- Grow and deepen the impact of openDemocracy's journalism across the world
- Expose and challenge the global backlash against democracy and human rights
- Build skills and capacity among groups under-represented in the media
- Foster pluralism and experimentation
- Grow and diversify openDemocracy income streams, in order to increase organisational capacity and financial sustainability

## If openDemocracy

reaches and engages more people with high-quality reporting, analysis, multimedia and debate

runs long-term training and mentoring for groups under-represented in the media

collaborates with, trains and exchanges learning and intelligence with a wide network of media and civil society

invests in building a more sustainable business model, including via reader support

## This will then

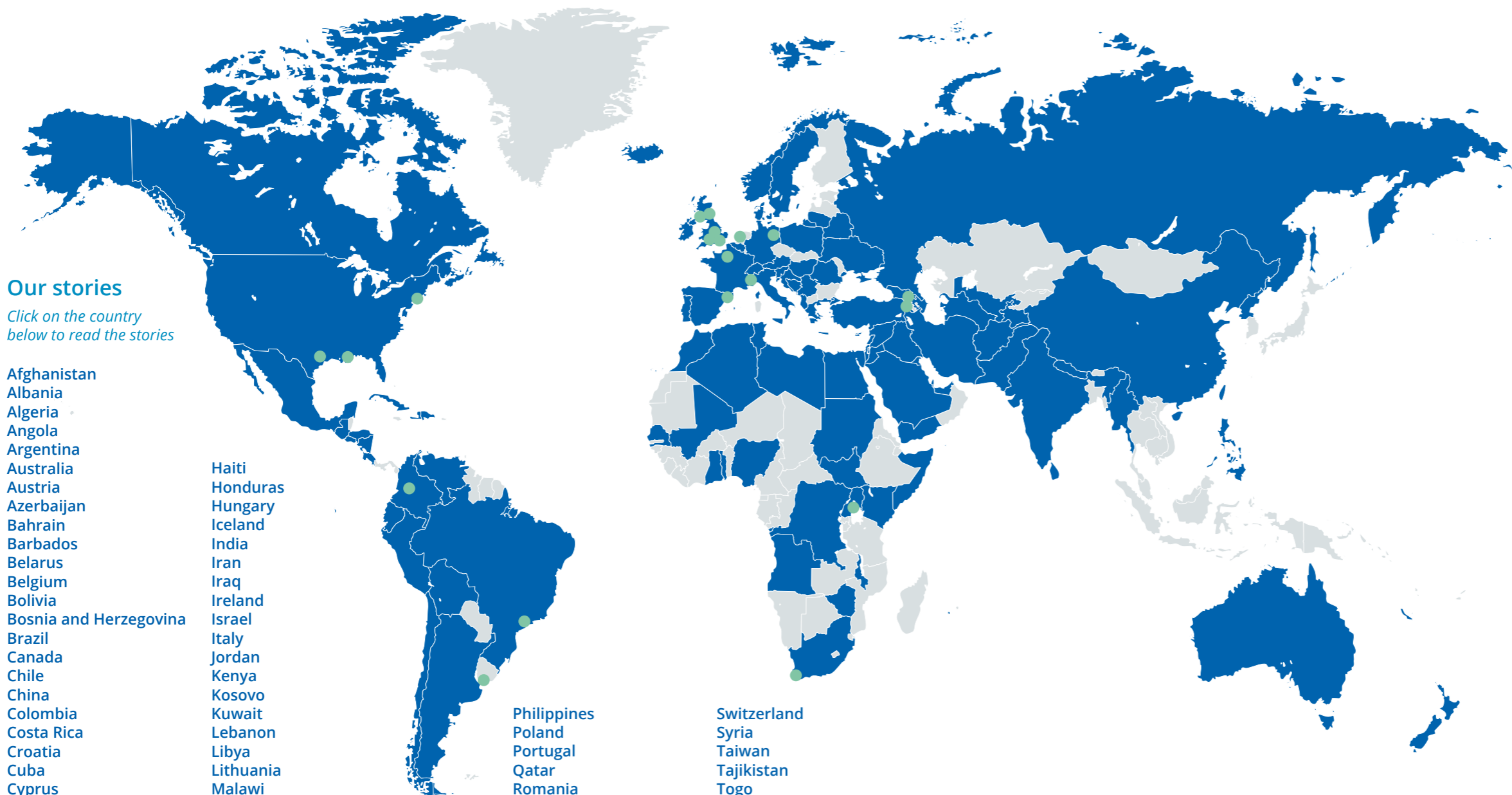
challenge the backlash against democracy and human rights

help make corporate and political power more accountable

## The impact will be

a more transparent and equitable world

# Where we work



## Our stories

Click on the country below to read the stories

- Afghanistan
- Albania
- Algeria
- Angola
- Argentina
- Australia
- Austria
- Azerbaijan
- Bahrain
- Barbados
- Belarus
- Belgium
- Bolivia
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Brazil
- Canada
- Chile
- China
- Colombia
- Costa Rica
- Croatia
- Cuba
- Cyprus
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Denmark
- Dominican Republic
- Ecuador
- Egypt
- El Salvador
- France
- Georgia
- Germany
- Ghana
- Greece
- Guatemala
- Haiti
- Honduras
- Hungary
- Iceland
- India
- Iran
- Iraq
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- Nepal
- Nicaragua
- Nigeria
- North Korea
- Norway
- Pakistan
- Palestine
- Peru
- Philippines
- Poland
- Portugal
- Qatar
- Romania
- Russia
- Samoa
- Saudi Arabia
- Senegal
- Serbia
- Slovenia
- Somalia
- South Africa
- South Sudan
- Spain
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Sweden
- Switzerland
- Syria
- Taiwan
- Tajikistan
- Togo
- Tunisia
- Turkey
- Turkmenistan
- Uganda
- Ukraine
- United Arab Emirates
- United Kingdom
- United States
- Uzbekistan
- Vatican City
- Venezuela
- Yemen
- Zimbabwe

## Our people

- Amsterdam
- Barcelona
- Berlin
- Bogotá
- Bristol
- Edinburgh
- Glasgow
- Kampala
- Lisbon
- London
- Montevideo
- New York
- Paris
- São Paulo
- Stroud, UK
- Tblisi
- Yerevan

## 2021 in numbers

**2,119**  
stories published

**15.3m**  
page views

**8.92m**  
new users

**35,834**  
donors – thank you!

**800k**  
social media shares

**263k**  
social media followers

**851k**  
video views

**152**  
times our work was followed up by major media outlets

**6**  
languages published on our site



# Secrets of the Clearing House

**F**reedom of Information has been a public right since 2004. But trying to prise information out of the British government through FOI has become increasingly difficult. Departments take longer to respond and reject more requests than ever before.

In November 2020, [openDemocracy revealed](#) one reason why: the Cabinet Office has been running a secretive unit called the 'Clearing House' that screens FOI requests from journalists, campaigners and researchers, often on matters of serious public interest. Experts believe it may break the law.

Through [follow-up stories](#), we revealed how the government has been undermining FOI. In one case that [we reported](#) in 2021 the housing ministry told local authorities it was

openDemocracy first asked the Cabinet Office for copies of the Clearing House lists back in 2018. It refused

"appropriate" not to release information that could identify multistorey buildings with the same type of cladding that burned on Grenfell Tower in 2017.

In February 2021, we managed to convince leading Fleet Street editors and numerous other senior media figures to do something unusual in journalism: to come together. The editors of The Guardian, The Times, The Daily Telegraph, the Financial Times, the Daily Mirror and a host of other national titles [signed an openDemocracy open letter](#) calling for FOI reform, putting FOI firmly on the political agenda.

We [took the government to an information tribunal](#) over its use of the Clearing House – [and won](#). The story was picked up in media across the political spectrum, ensuring that a large and broad audience was informed about the government's attempts to game the transparency rules.

Two days after we reported that victory, [Labour wrote to Prime Minister Boris Johnson](#) demanding an investigation into whether Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove had broken the ministerial code over the behaviour of the Clearing House.

The National Union of Journalists, English PEN, mySociety, the Campaign for Freedom of Information and the European Centre for Press Freedom all separately wrote to the [Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee \(PACAC\)](#) to call for an investigation into the Clearing House. Which [it then launched](#).

Since we started reporting on FOI, there has been a marked change in wider media treatment of the topic. More and more outlets are reporting failures to disclose information

Michael Gove called openDemocracy's journalism "ridiculous and tendentious"

## Tell it to the judge, Michael

In June 2021 [the High Court ruled](#) that Michael Gove had broken the law when the government handed a £560,000 COVID contract to a business he had "personal connections" with.

Justice O'Farrell found that the Cabinet Office's contract with PR firm Public First was "unlawful" and "gave rise to apparent bias".

The ruling followed a [joint investigation by openDemocracy and The Guardian](#) the year before, which revealed the company was run

by close allies of Gove and the prime minister's former chief adviser, Dominic Cummings.

One of Public First's founding partners, Rachel Wolf, used to be an adviser to Gove and co-wrote the Tory manifesto in 2019. The other founding partner is James Frayne: he first worked with Cummings 20 years ago and Gove as education secretary also hired him.

Emails shown in court show that both Gove and Number 10 wanted Public First to get the work.





## Dark money in UK election campaigning

Non-party campaigners that pushed anti-Labour attack ads to millions of voters ahead of the 2019 general election spent more than £700,000 without declaring any individual donation, [we found](#).

Among the so-called ‘third-party’ campaigns that spent heavily without naming any donors were groups run by a former Boris Johnson aide, a Conservative councillor and a former Tory cabinet minister.

Almost all of them were set up less than three months before the December 2019 vote and vanished directly after Johnson’s “stonking” victory.

John McDonnell MP [cited our reporting in Parliament as he called for a “serious and in-depth inquiry into third-party campaigning”](#). And our petition on the topic received more than [23,000 signatures](#).

These interventions also prompted an [Early Day Motion](#) in Parliament naming openDemocracy and welcoming the PACAC investigation. Our own Jenna Corderoy [gave evidence to this inquiry](#). And in September, the government [announced its own review](#) of the role of the Clearing House.

Since we started reporting on FOI, there has been a marked change in wider media treatment of the topic. More and more outlets are reporting failures to disclose information. The Times in particular has really taken on this strand of reporting (and published two separate editorials praising our work on FOI). Jenna Corderoy, Peter Geoghegan and Lucas Amin were also shortlisted for the prestigious Paul Foot award for investigative journalism.

The Clearing House story illuminated the reality of transparency inside the corridors of the British government and showed how our right of access to information is being undermined and frustrated.

Elizabeth Denham, then the UK’s information commissioner, told MPs she was “frustrated and disappointed” by the Cabinet Office



The Information Commissioner’s Office. CC BY-SA 4.0

## Setting the agenda in Parliament

OpenDemocracy and our work were frequently on MPs’ lips in 2021 – and we even inspired Parliament to serious action on several occasions.

Most impressively, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) [launched an inquiry](#) into the government’s ‘Clearing House’ (see pages 8–10).

PACAC also heard our [Peter Geoghegan giving evidence](#) to another of its inquiries, this time into the work of the Electoral Commission. And it [grilled the government’s new ethics adviser, Lord Geidt, over our revelation](#) that he worked for an arms company. The committee also cited our work on shadowy third-party political campaigns (see opposite). John McDonnell [spoke of that work](#) in the House of Commons.

After we published ‘Want a seat in the House of Lords? Be Tory treasurer and donate £3m’, [Keir Starmer asked questions](#) about the issue in the Commons, and Ian Blackford, leader of the SNP at Westminster, [asked Boris Johnson about it](#) during Prime Minister’s Questions. Angus MacNeil, another SNP MP, [asked the prime minister about this again](#) during a Commons Liaison Committee meeting. Stephen Flynn, also of the SNP, [mentioned our investigation](#) in the Commons.

That was not the only dodgy dealing in ermine we reported. We revealed that more than 40 peers [had not declared details of private companies that they run](#). Twenty-four lords were then placed under investigation by Parliament’s standards commissioner. As a result, the Lords Conduct Committee decided to [tighten the rules](#).

There were numerous other mentions of openDemocracy and our work in Parliament during the year.

Alyn Smith MP, SNP foreign affairs spokesman, [wrote to Dominic Raab, then foreign secretary, about our story on foreign aid cuts](#).

Labour’s Shadow Cabinet Office minister [Rachel Reeves asked Michael Gove two questions about our story on the refurbishment of Johnson’s Downing Street apartment](#).

And Labour’s Dawn Butler [mentioned openDemocracy as one of six organisations that had exposed government cronyism during the pandemic, shortly before she was ordered to leave the chamber for calling Johnson a liar](#).

SNP MP Owen Thompson [asked Johnson a question at Prime Minister’s Questions on the foot of our story about the government’s plans to weaken the Electoral Commission](#).

Labour MP Tony Lloyd [wrote to Raab over Belarus bonds in London after we reported on them](#).

Martin Docherty-Hughes, an SNP MP, [referred to one of our stories about Owen Paterson in a debate. He also mentioned our story ‘MP with stake in giant health insurer lobbied for “Australian-style” care insurance’ in the Commons, and cited David Leask’s work for us on Scottish limited partnerships](#).

Deidre Brock, another SNP MP, [quoted from our story ‘The Brexit dark money lobby has a new target – climate change action’ in Parliament](#).



# A therapy that wounds



Protesters in London calling for a ban on 'conversion therapy', June 2021

The therapy session over Zoom with a licensed therapist in Costa Rica left our undercover reporter Stephania Corpi in turmoil. "I'm straight, and I can't imagine how an LGBTIQ person might feel after talking to someone like that," she explained.

Stephania was part of our investigation into 'conversion therapy' in Costa Rica, Guatemala and the US, where we found therapists connected to US ultra-conservative Christian Right groups 'treating' or offering to 'treat' our undercover reporters who posed as LGBTIQ people.

Our investigation started in Africa, where one of our reporters came across videos of the controversial Nigerian televangelist pastor TB Joshua (now deceased) on YouTube.

In one video, Joshua hits a woman on the head. She falls to the floor. When she gets up, he hits her again. He tells her to call her "second", a woman he refers to as her "wife".

Joshua slaps and pushes the two women at least 16 times and tells them: "There is a spirit disturbing you. She has transplanted herself into you. It is the spirit of woman."

We asked YouTube whether the content of the TB Joshua Ministries channel violated its community guidelines. The result? YouTube terminated the channel for violating its hate speech policy.

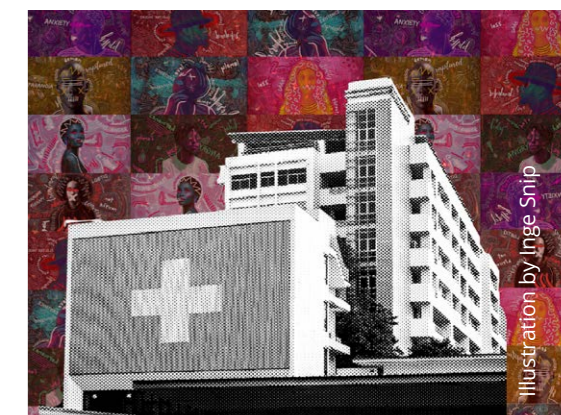
This was just the start of our work on this troubling anti-gay practice. What we found was perhaps even more disturbing. After collecting the testimonies of around 50 survivors of 'conversion therapy', we went undercover in clinics and hospitals in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. There, we were told they could offer the same kind of 'therapy'.

And it turned out that more than half of these health facilities receive aid from international donor organisations. When we presented our findings to these organisations, many said that they would investigate and take action. Leading health and legal experts said that openDemocracy's findings were "blatantly unethical" and "graphic" examples of 'conversion therapy'. The Costa Rican College of Professional Psychology (CPPCR) is investigating the licensed therapists who we found providing these so-called therapies to our undercover reporters.

Following our investigation, Ciudadanos, a centre-Right political party in Spain, asked its country's government whether any of its aid money could have supported projects that offer 'conversion therapy' overseas.

**We asked YouTube whether the content of the TB Joshua Ministries channel violated its community guidelines. The result? YouTube terminated the channel for violating its hate speech policy**

A six-month investigation revealed "degrading and discriminatory" treatment at health centres in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda



Inés Arrimadas, leader of Ciudadanos.



# Flares from the Amazon

To make this nine-episode documentary series, our Latin American team revisited the vast Amazon basin to collect the voices of Indigenous communities in the Colombian, Brazilian and Ecuadorian areas. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis they are fighting to defend their territory against extractivist projects and violence.



Ivan Castaneira, Agencia Teganta / Lanceros digitales



Juan Gabriel Soler - Gaia Amazonas Foundation



Juan Gabriel Soler / Fundación Gaia Amazonas



Nancy Padua



# From the grassroots in Russia and Ukraine

**O**n the day that Russia invaded Ukraine – 24 February 2022 – we published four articles that reflected the unique range and depth of our coverage of those countries. For insight we turned not to Western analysts but a [Ukrainian journalist](#) and two [Russian writers](#). An [Armenian colleague](#) gave a little-heard perspective from her country, which was itself at war only two years ago.

And we brought our extraordinary knowledge of dark money in British politics to the story, revealing that unregulated pro-Moscow lobbyists at the heart of Westminster were using their links to Tory MPs to gain influence and respectability. We had [raised the alarm in 2019](#) over the potential for donors linked to the Kremlin to buy influence over the Conservatives – a story whose reverberations continue today.

Since 2009 a dedicated openDemocracy team has given an international voice to the activists challenging power in all the post-Soviet countries. And we were covering the tensions between Russia and Ukraine long before the invasion of 2014.

We have built a rich network of local writers to cover grassroots opposition, labour rights, minority rights and the politics of art and media. We have also painstakingly followed the threads of money and influence linking corrupt elites in the former Soviet countries to their enablers in the UK. Publishing in both English and Russian means we help counteract the lack of media freedom in the region.

**Since 2009 a dedicated openDemocracy team has given an international voice to the activists challenging power in all the post-Soviet countries. And we were covering the tensions between Russia and Ukraine long before the invasion of 2014**



Ukraine's Ministry of Internal Affairs/Twitter

In February 2022, we asked openDemocracy readers to donate money to help journalists in Ukraine. The response was simply staggering. We pledged to match every pound given, up to a total of £6,000 – which is the amount we usually raise thanks to the generosity of our readers in a week. We hit that target within 24 hours.

In the end, readers gave more than £36,000, in addition to the £6,000 from openDemocracy.

At the time of writing we've given £5,000 to help journalists get access to vital equipment such as flak jackets and trauma kits, £5,000 to the National Union of Journalists in Ukraine, €4,000 to Procherk, a news agency in Cherkasy, a city south of Kyiv, and €4,000 to Spilne, a progressive comment platform. With the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine we have set up a journalism competition in the Dnipro region, to help support journalists who have been displaced by the Russian invasion.

And we'll be doing much more. Sending money to a war zone is a complicated business, but we're committed to making sure that every penny donated is used to support Ukrainian journalists.

The State Border Guard Service in the Kyiv region, shelled on the morning of 24 February 2022

## £36,000

donated by openDemocracy readers to help journalists in Ukraine



We began 2021 meeting women self-organising against gender-based violence in eastern Ukraine's frontlines – the Donbas region – the world would come to know the following year.

We explored difficult questions raised by sanctions against three pro-Russia TV channels and the dominance of wealthy individuals over the media. And we got the inside story of why the Kyiv Post, Ukraine's leading English-language newspaper, was closed down – written by one of its journalists. It gives telling details of how power operates in the country, including the pressures that President Volodymyr Zelenskyi puts on journalists.

We revealed the UK's hidden influence on Zelenskyi's government: the British foreign office advised the Ukrainian Ministry of Economy on how to push through new labour legislation, which experts warned could reduce Ukrainians' rights at work. The story brought an outcry from British and Ukrainian MPs and trade unionists. We followed up in May 2022, reporting concerns that Ukrainian officials are using Russia's invasion to push through radical deregulation under the pretext of 'liberalising' and 'de-Sovietising' the country's labour laws.

Still in 2021, the Ukrainian writer Olesya Khromeychuk explained what the war in the Donbas region – which started in 2014 – had already done to people, through her own journey of loss and mourning for her brother, killed while serving on the front line.

**Below left:** Why do so many Russians support the war? Sociologists who have studied the question in depth gave us the answers

**Below right:** We published a first-person account of being arrested at an anti-war protest in Moscow



From the Russian side, we published shocking eye-witness accounts of police violence and abuse of anti-war protesters. We explored the attitudes of ordinary Russians and teenagers and the elite to the war – and to themselves. And we had fascinating on-the-ground reports from Victory Day celebrations across Russia.

From Ukraine, we published the words of ordinary people and journalists in extraordinary eye-witness accounts from Kyiv; from Lviv – reporting from the crucial railway station and the volunteers helping those who were fleeing the fighting; from Mariupol – with social media postings, two articles from a journalist trapped in the city and an account of a forced evacuation to Russia; and from Kherson. We also reported from a refugee centre in Poland.

And we continued to probe Russia's long-overlooked influence in the UK, revealing how an elite Russian lobbyist offers his clients "exclusive access" to UK government ministers and how Oxford University accepted more than £3m in donations from a billionaire Putin "crony" who was accused in the UK Parliament of "robbing assets from the Russian people".

We revealed how an elite Russian lobbyist offers his clients "exclusive access" to UK government ministers and how Oxford University accepted more than £3m from a billionaire Putin "crony"

## As Kazakhstan burned, we looked to London

In the first week of January 2022, at least 225 people were killed in clashes between security forces and demonstrators against the Kazakhstan regime, whose leaders have become spectacularly rich from the country's abundant oil, gas and metals. Much of that wealth is stored in the UK.

Four thousand miles away in London, though, the UK assets of the Kazakhstani ruling class were sitting quietly. The Central Asian state's elite owns at least £530.4m of luxury property in London and the south-east, we reported. Some £330m of that luxury property is owned by the extended family of Kazakhstan's former leader Nursultan Nazarbayev. That story was followed up by Forbes and led Tom Tugendhat, the Tory MP who chairs the British parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, to say

the government should consider sanctioning such assets.

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



# Taking the government to court



Palantir didn't get what it wanted, and health secretary Matt Hancock has gone – but we still need to beware the government's healthcare plans

**W**e shouldn't have had to go to court. For a year, openDemocracy and the tech justice group Foxglove had been fighting legal battles over the British government's secretive NHS data deals with controversial 'spy tech' firm Palantir. But on 30 March 2021, we announced an important victory.

Back in December 2020, after we had spent months on legal efforts to get transparency, the government had signed a huge £23m deal with the CIA-backed Palantir to process our sensitive health data.

We raised objections. Government lawyers insisted that citizens have no right to a say in major NHS contracts with big tech. But we believed the public does have those rights. So we sued.

The government caved. It committed not to extend Palantir's contract beyond COVID without consulting the public.

It was a major U-turn at a critical moment. The NHS, with its unique trove of structured health data, is powerfully attractive to tech corporations. Palantir clearly stood to profit from managing or accessing this asset, estimated to be worth £10bn a year.

Our fight was about trust. Palantir was founded by a Trump-backing billionaire called Peter Thiel. The firm has a deep and controversial history with US police, and has recently landed a new contract supporting UK border enforcement.

Amid concerns over COVID vaccine hesitancy in some Black and minority ethnic communities and among migrants, trust in health services is vital. A long-term role for Palantir in the NHS risked eroding trust in key communities right when the government needed it most.

We worked again with Foxglove and other claimants to challenge the government's plans to extract the medical records of everyone in England from their GP without proper consultation or consent – just as the doctors were reeling from coping with COVID-19.

We delivered our legal letter on 4 June 2021. Four days later, the government announced that it was delaying its plans. Perhaps it took notice of the 18,000 readers who had signed our petition demanding that it shouldn't share our health data for profit.

The scheme has now been put on hold indefinitely, and NHS Digital has pledged to allow GP patients to opt out of any new data-sharing arrangements at any time.

## Revealing British foreign aid cuts

We were the first to report the government's plans to slash hundreds of millions of pounds in aid to countries in conflict zones around the world.

The cuts sparked criticism from senior Tory and Labour MPs, and left the threat of a Tory rebellion hanging over the government as a result.

Responding to our findings, LiveAid campaigner Bob Geldof accused Boris Johnson of "a grotesque betrayal of the UK and this government's own commitments" and of failing "some of the most hungry, terrified, hurt people of our world".

Mohamud Mohamed Hassan, Save the Children's country director for Somalia, said "the proposed cuts would be felt by millions of Somali children now, and for years to come".

**Our fight was about trust. A long-term role for Palantir in the NHS risked eroding trust in key communities right when the government needed it most**



# We turned the tide on abortion pill reversal

Following our revelations of the worldwide spread of an unproven and potentially dangerous method to 'reverse' abortions, the UK medical regulator took action against a doctor providing this 'treatment'.

The doctor, Eileen Reilly, was prevented from practising medicine unsupervised, pending further investigation.

Medical (as opposed to surgical) abortions consist of two pills taken over several days. The so-called 'abortion pill reversal' claims to interrupt the medical termination with high doses of hormones.

openDemocracy undercover reporters on four continents contacted a hotline run by US Christian Right activists



We reported how the practice was also being promoted in Russia, Canada and South Africa, and across Latin America and Europe. Our work drew a statement from Canada's national society of obstetricians and gynaecologists warning that the 'treatment' is "unproven" and can also cause "serious complications" for patients.

openDemocracy undercover reporters on four continents contacted a hotline run by the US Christian Right group Heartbeat International. They were connected to doctors willing to prescribe 'abortion pill reversal' by phone or email. Where hotline operators could not make connections to local doctors, they emailed reporters dosage instructions.

Each reporter was emailed a copy of the same 'consent form' stating that they understand the 'treatment' is an "off-label use of progesterone" and should "seek emergency medical care immediately" if they are in pain.

When asked about the potential health risks of this 'reversal' method, Reilly told our undercover reporter: "At the end of the day, you live in the UK, you've got a hospital there and if you were worried about the bleeding, you'd go get help."

The only clinical trial into the safety and efficacy of 'abortion pill reversal', conducted in the US, was halted in 2019 after several participants were hospitalised with severe haemorrhaging.

## 60

women tried 'abortion pill reversal' in the UK in the first half of 2020 alone

## openDemocracy at the European Parliament

Those seeking to block or roll back women's and LGBTIQ rights are transnational, coordinated, organised and incredibly wealthy, we told the European Parliament in February 2022.

Tatev Hovhannisyan, who leads our gender and women's rights work in Europe and Eurasia, was invited to give evidence to the committee on women's rights and gender equality.

"I always felt Europe was the best place in the world to live as a woman," said Hovhannisyan.

"Given this, I was truly startled when last year our team of feminist investigative journalists discovered that, in at least eight European countries, women were provided with an unproven, unethical treatment to 'reverse' medical abortions.

"These activities were pushed by US religious extremists... This is just one example of many, showing how the old continent is failing to ensure people's sexual and reproductive health and rights."



# The not-so-noble lords

Conservative treasurers who donate £3m to the party seem almost guaranteed a peerage. In the seven years to 2021, every former party treasurer had given at least this amount – and all but the most recently retired had been offered a seat in the House of Lords, a [joint investigation by openDemocracy and The Sunday Times](#) found.

Insiders claimed that peerages were being given to wealthy businessmen, in what “appeared to be a reward” for bankrolling Boris Johnson’s party. A former Conservative Party chairman told [The Sunday Times](#): “Once you pay your £3m, you get your peerage.”

In 2020 Boris Johnson had controversially overruled the House of Lords Appointments Commission to make former Conservative treasurer Peter Cruddas a peer. Cruddas gave half a million pounds within days of joining the Lords – taking his total donations to the Tories to just over £3m. [He denies any link](#) between the donation and his peerage.

After we published our story, [Stephen Flynn and Kevin Stewart](#), Scottish National Party MPs, wrote to Cressida Dick, then commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and the chief constable of Police Scotland calling on them to investigate. [Keir Starmer](#) questioned the government about the issue in the House of Commons. [Ian Blackford](#), leader of the SNP at Westminster, asked Boris Johnson about the issue during Prime Minister’s Questions. [Angus MacNeil](#), SNP MP, asked Boris Johnson about the issue during a House of Commons Liaison Committee meeting. [Stephen Flynn](#) mentioned our investigation, naming us, in the Commons.

The story was picked up in [BBC News](#), [The Andrew Marr Show](#) (BBC One), [Sky News](#) (twice), [Metro](#), the [Daily Mirror](#) (three times), [Daily Mail](#) (three times), [The Times](#) (twice), [Times Radio](#), [The Guardian](#) (three times), [Newsnight](#), [The World This Weekend](#) (BBC Radio 4),

**A former Conservative Party chairman told the Sunday Times: “Once you pay your £3m, you get your peerage”**



PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

[LBC](#) (twice), [The Independent](#), the [i](#) (three times), [Channel 4 News](#), [The Week](#), [Private Eye](#), [ZDF](#) (German TV), [City AM](#) (twice), [The Scotsman](#), [The Herald](#), [The National](#) (twice), [Politics Home](#), [Farage](#) (GB News) and [Joe](#).

Rules say that lords who are company directors should “give a broad indication of the company’s business”. Many didn’t

In another shocking dispatch from the world of red leather and ermine, we revealed that more than 40 members of the House of Lords may have been in breach of transparency rules, for failing to declare details of private companies that they run. This would make it one of the most wide-scale breaches of transparency rules ever reported in Westminster.

The peers included Eric Pickles, the chair of Westminster’s lobbying watchdog, who owns a consultancy business with his wife.

Parliament’s Standards Commissioner then [placed 24 lords under investigation](#), including Tory donor Lord Bamford, ‘The Apprentice’ star Alan Sugar, and the creator of ‘Downton Abbey’, Julian Fellowes. As a result the House of Lords Conduct Committee decided to [tighten the rules](#).



# ‘Net zero’ oil giant spies on peaceful activists

Oil and gas giant BP spent years spying on peaceful climate campaigners – and even hired a private intelligence firm set up by a former MI6 agent.

Working with The Sunday Times, we revealed a “shocking” web of surveillance that saw BP keep tabs on campaigners and share information with public institutions, including the British Museum and the University of Warwick.

The company’s targets include Chris Garrard, a classical music composer with a doctorate from Oxford University. The 34-year-old from Basingstoke works with the Art Not Oil group, campaigning against BP’s decades-long sponsorship of the British Museum.

CCTV image held by BP, showing Chris Garrard at a train station in 2015



Over several years, BP gathered personal details about Garrard, including a CCTV image of him waiting at a London train station in 2015, when he attended the oil giant’s annual general meeting.

Under the image, a note said: “Male, with ginger beard observed holding a protest banner outside Excel Centre.”

BP also obtained a number of other photos of Garrard and commented on changes to his hairstyle. One memo said: “Used to have long dreadlocks. Now short hair.”

The oil firm has publicly committed to a ‘net zero’ policy and claimed it is “fundamentally changing” to become greener. But documents obtained by openDemocracy reveal it has spent years gathering information on its critics.

“It’s very murky,” Garrard told openDemocracy. “Knowing that those CCTV images could be accessed in that way was really concerning... I find it quite disturbing that BP was able to do that.”

The oil company also retained the services of Welund, a controversial spy firm, to provide regular email updates about Garrard. This continued between at least July 2019 and January of this year, and included details about his social media activity.

Welund – the trading name for Papea Ltd – keeps details of its work closely guarded, but it has established a reputation for teaching the oil industry how to understand “the activist threat”.

Welund’s website says it works to “monitor the threats posed by international and domestic campaign groups”, and its client list is reported to include many of the world’s biggest oil and gas firms.

Silkie Carlo, director of Big Brother Watch, said the surveillance of Garrard was “intrusive, shocking, and wholly unacceptable”.

**Over several years, BP gathered personal details about Garrard, including a CCTV image of him waiting at a London train station in 2015, when he attended the oil giant’s annual general meeting**



# A green paradox: cut down trees to cut emissions



Jordi Monserrat

A wind farm in Spain and the Pastaza river in the Ecuadorian Amazon



Francesc Badia i Dalmaes

**W**hat has the destruction of balsa trees in the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest got to do with the wind power industry in Europe? We visited Indigenous communities in the region to find out.

As the international commitment to renewable energy has grown in recent years, the increase in wind farms has triggered a huge demand for balsa wood, leaving a trail of deforestation in its wake.

Balsa wood is used in Europe, and also more intensively in China, as a component in the construction of the blades of wind turbines. Recent wind turbine designs can incorporate blades that are up

to 100 metres long and consume about 150 cubic metres of balsa wood each – several tonnes – according to calculations attributed to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

In 2018, international demand for balsa increased significantly. The tropical wood is flexible and yet hard, light and resilient. Ecuador, the main exporter of balsa, with about 75% of the global market, is home to several large exporters.

The increased demand led to the deforestation of virgin balsa in the Amazon basin. Loggers began to illegally deforest virgin balsa from the islands and banks of the Amazonian rivers in an effort to overcome the shortage of cultivated wood. This has had a terrible impact on the Indigenous peoples of the Ecuadorian Amazon region, in a similarly brutal way to that caused by mining and oil extraction in recent decades, and the rubber boom at the start of the 20th century.

Our [long read](#), accompanied by a [documentary video](#), was picked up in the [Spanish](#), [US](#) and [Brazilian editions](#) of El País. It drew responses from Vestas, the world-leading wind turbine manufacturer, which said it was moving away from using balsa in its turbines, and the Spanish Wind Business Association, which said that it would move away from using balsa in the coming years.

## Douglas Ross and the war on Scotland's Travellers

For years, Scottish Tory leader Douglas Ross had been attacking Travellers. His attitude towards Scotland's Gypsy/Traveller community is no secret: in 2017, he said that his number one priority, if he were prime minister for a day, would be "tougher enforcement against Gypsy Travellers". But no one had fully explored his campaign against Travellers – until we did.

in 2011, Ross called his attempts to stop a constituent from establishing a Traveller site a "battle". "I am disappointed and frustrated that we seem to have to bend over backwards for this ethnic minority," he said, in 2013.

Rival candidates [grilled him about our investigation during the nationally televised Scottish leaders debate](#).

The increase in wind farms has triggered a huge demand for balsa wood, leaving a trail of deforestation in its wake



SST / Alamy Stock Photo



# Journalism+: how we make change happen

**W**e seek to give readers meaningful campaign actions to carry out on the back of our journalism. For instance, in our campaign against UK government secrecy, 50,000 readers signed a petition to strengthen Freedom of Information. More than 4,000 responded to a survey on FOI. We also crowdfunded opinion polling on secrecy and used these findings in our reporting, evidence and briefings.

We took a similar approach with our coverage of the NHS, with 7,000 readers completing a survey on their experiences, followed up by crowdfunded public opinion polling. And 1,400 readers emailed their MPs through our website to oppose the Health and Care Bill.

We also asked readers to contact their MPs when Boris Johnson's government wanted to throw out the rules governing MPs' conduct. Nearly 2,500 readers answered the call and we used the MPs' replies to show how split the Conservative Party is on the issue.

## Free online course on forced and precarious labour in the global economy



Drawing upon articles published by our [Beyond Trafficking and Slavery project](#), the course examines how different kinds of labour exploitation have been classified – as modern slavery, human trafficking, or forced labour – and considers some of the effects of using the language of slavery to describe various abuses which are happening today.

The eight modules of this course explore how this economic engine operates and how worker and migrant rights can be strengthened.

## Rosemary Bechler, 1951–2021

**A**fter a five-year struggle with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, Rosemary Bechler died in November. A passionate singer in the Welsh traditions of her mother, she was terribly afflicted by this slow but incurable lung disease. To the end she defied it, her mind undiminished. Until, swiftly, her unique capacity for combining deep empathy and tolerance with implacable assurance, was silenced. The loss is immeasurable.

openDemocracy would not exist without Rosemary. Across a rocky transitional period she was its guide and steady hand. More than anyone she insisted on openness, pluralism and the voice of others. She was an outstanding mentor to young, would-be editors, who learnt the need for humility and the exercise of principled judgment from her.

Never liberal or wishy-washy, she was an anti-capitalist to her core. Starting as a hard-line Communist she undertook the most profound and deepest reassessment of her political beliefs, with an integrity few have matched, while remaining true to her radicalism.



## Who is our audience?

**A** typical openDemocracy reader has a strong interest in politics and is vocal about it. They are likely to live in the UK but have a global outlook.

Probably they have a higher degree and may work in academia, policy or research. They are an active citizen: they believe in both thinking and doing.

They are probably a Remainer, on the Green Left. They wish that Corbynism had succeeded and that Scotland was independent. They support the NHS and are against privatisation.

They are committed to transparency, human rights, equality and the environment, but don't always follow progressive orthodoxy. They appreciate thought-provoking analysis as well as 'straight' accountability journalism. So they value

openDemocracy as a platform for left-of-centre views that may not be aired elsewhere.

It's easy to get dazzled by big numbers: in 2021, 8.92m new users visited our website and 2.4m of them came back at least once for another visit. But only 291,600 really engaged with our content actively – that's 3.27% of the total – and 35,834 were generous enough to support us with a donation: just 0.4% of everyone who saw our site at all.

Zooming back out, the largest group of our readers come from the UK: 40% of all returning readers are from there, as are a huge 96% of donors. The US supplies the next biggest group, with 17% of returners. No other single country provides more than 2%.

Among those British returning readers, 61% are men, with the biggest age group being 25 to 34.



# Inclusivity information

**In 2021, openDemocracy had 61 team members, including three ‘fellows’ – early- or mid-career journalists joining us for six months to develop their skills and careers**

- 53% of our team were women, 43% were men and two were gender non-conforming
- 74% were white
- They lived in Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Uganda, the UK, the US and Uruguay

**The senior management team had nine members**

- Five were women, four were men
- 77% were white

**We hired 15 people, including the ‘fellows’**

- 66% were women, 20% were men and two were gender non-conforming
- 60% were white

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

- Four were women, seven were men
- 81% were white

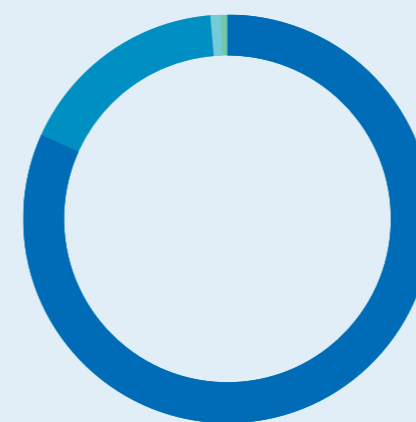
We are committed to continuous learning and transparency about our performance on diversity, equity and inclusion.

# Financial highlights

In 2021 we received

**£2.65m**

in income



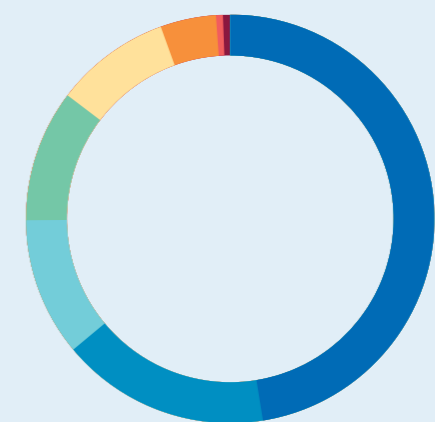
**Revenue**

1 January to 31 December 2021

■ Grants	81.7%
■ Reader donations	17.0%
■ Major individual donors	1.0%
■ Partnerships	0.3%

And we spent

**£2.71m**



**Expenditure**

1 January to 31 December 2021

■ Staff costs	47.4%
■ Freelancers	16.5%
■ Professional fees	10.9%
■ Commissioning	10.5%
■ Administration	9.2%
■ Technical	4.5%
■ Marketing	0.6%
■ Travel	0.5%

We publish a list of [every major donor that funds us each year](#) on our website.





## How you can support openDemocracy

We rely on ordinary readers to give us a long-term future.  
Please support us at [opendemocracy.net/donate](https://opendemocracy.net/donate)

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