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# Investigative journalists built a global network to expose fraud and corruption

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**OCCRP founders Drew Sullivan and Paul Radu have spent two decades creating an investigative journalism infrastructure to match the rapid expansion of global fraud networks and the acceleration of technology. Their leadership and journalistic prowess have transformed global partnership into a frontline defense against modern financial crime. The recipients of the ACFE's 2026 Guardian Award explain why international collaboration is more essential than ever to uncovering fraud.**

In 2025, the full scale of the organization Drew Sullivan and Paul Radu created came into sharp focus when the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), and dozens of international media partners, exposed the inner workings of a sprawling, sophisticated investment fraud network. The investigation, known as Scam Empire, began with an extraordinary leak of nearly two terabytes of internal data from two major networks of call centers operating from Israel, Eastern Europe and Georgia. The leak featured thousands of hours of recorded phone calls, screen captures, spreadsheets and internal chats. Journalists had access to an unfiltered, real-time view of scammers at work as they manipulated victims, coached one another, celebrated "wins" and coordinated global financial deception.

What they uncovered wasn't a loose network of petty criminals but a structured fraud industry. Call center agents used polished scripts, bogus celebrity endorsements, fake identities and forged documents to convince older

couples, working professionals and retirees around the world to drain their bank accounts and hand over their life savings for fictional investments. Behind the scenes, a refined ecosystem of third-party marketing firms, shell companies and unregulated payment processors kept money flowing through a web of crypto channels and shadow banking systems, enabling scammers to operate with relative impunity. The leak also revealed the toll the scam took on victims who believed they were speaking with trusted advisers only to discover they'd been cheated by fraudsters who mocked their desperation in internal chats. Public outcry soon followed as authorities in Georgia launched criminal probes and froze assets linked to key fraudsters.

This investigation and others like it encapsulate the goals that OCCRP founders Sullivan, who serves as OCCRP's publisher, and Radu, head of innovation, set nearly two decades earlier: Expose criminal systems that thrive in secrecy, reveal the networks enabling them, and bring global transparency to crimes capable of destroying lives and destabilizing institutions. OCCRP's investigative work demonstrates that confronting modern-day fraud and corruption demands more than a single reporter or newsroom. It requires the cross-border investigative firepower Sullivan and Radu envisioned when they first built a network to fight corrupt networks.

**OCCRP FOUNDERS DREW SULLIVAN AND PAUL RADU BUILT A NETWORK OF MORE THAN 150 JOURNALISTS OPERATING ACROSS 30 NATIONS.**

Because criminal systems are evolving so rapidly, global collaboration has become essential, says Radu, who regards criminal networks as the earliest adopters of new technologies. As artificial intelligence (AI) and automation reshape the global economy, organized crime groups are exploiting large language models (advanced AI systems designed to understand, generate and process human language by analyzing massive datasets) and related tools to identify victims and refine targeting at unprecedented speed.

This threat, Radu says, is further magnified by the immense power criminal organizations have quietly accumulated over decades. Today, they control vast wealth across nearly every asset class, including land, water, real estate and financial infrastructure. That ownership translates directly into political influence, regulatory capture and weakened accountability, giving criminal actors leverage not only over markets but over governments. In this environment, Radu stresses that investigative journalism is a critical line of defense.

“We’ve only witnessed the first waves of global scams and fraud, and we have to prepare for a tsunami of crime and corruption if our democratic systems are further eroded,” Radu warns.

Sullivan and Radu’s determination, perseverance and commitment to the truth in the global fight against fraud earned them the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners’ (ACFE) Guardian Award. The founders of OCCRP say the award is “an honor for the entire OCCRP family,” adding that they’re “very grateful for this recognition.” They’ll accept the award at the *37th Annual ACFE Global Fraud Conference*, July 12–17, held in Boston, Massachusetts, and virtually.

## A partnership born in the field

OCCRP emerged less from a grand plan than from a shared sense of urgency, according to Sullivan. In the early 2000s, investigative reporters across Eastern Europe were wrestling with the same entrenched criminal networks and corrupt power structures, often without realizing their colleagues in neighboring countries were following the same trails. That changed when Sullivan and Radu met in 2003 at an International Center for Journalists training event in Bulgaria. Radu, who is Romanian, had recently launched the Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism while Sullivan was in the process of establishing the Center for Investigative Reporting in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Sullivan trained in Bosnia through a New York University program and decided to stay and open the center. Their initial conversations revealed that their work overlapped far more than either journalist expected.

What began as an exchange of expertise quickly developed into a weekly collaboration. They swapped information on everything from cybersecurity to public records access, but most importantly, they compared notes on the shadowy figures they were following. They reasoned that journalists should be able to move fluidly across borders to uncover criminal enterprises across the globe.

By 2005, Sullivan and Radu joined forces on their first cross-border investigation, enlisting colleagues from around the Balkans to examine a murky cluster of energy-sector companies. The result, known as The Power Brokers project, revealed how obscure businessmen orchestrated deals that left citizens in four countries facing frequent blackouts and paying exorbitant electricity prices. The project showed how middlemen gained preferential access to state power companies and bought electricity below production cost, draining public utilities in countries such as Romania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. Romania’s Energy Holding and the UK-based, Serbia-linked Energy Financing Team dominated cross-border power trading and were repeatedly accused of market manipulation and influence peddling. As a result of the reporting and parallel inquiries, national prosecutors, parliamentary commissions, police and international bodies, including Romania’s National Anti-Corruption Directorate and the U.K.’s Serious Fraud Office, investigated both companies. The project received the inaugural Global Shining Light Award, validating OCCRP’s commitment to regional collaboration.

That success sparked a realization: Cooperation wasn't just beneficial; it was essential. Centralizing resources such as insurance, data access, fundraising and research tools could dramatically improve the journalists' ability to investigate sprawling criminal systems. With support from the U.N. Democracy Fund, Radu and Sullivan formalized this vision, founding the nonprofit OCCRP. "We didn't intend to create OCCRP or even an organization. We just wanted to do stories. We still just want to do stories. OCCRP came about because we needed it to do these kinds of stories," Sullivan says.

From its first office in Sarajevo in 2007, OCCRP grew quickly, welcoming new investigative centers every month. When Radu departed temporarily for a Knight Fellowship at Stanford University, the organization gained an unexpected advantage. Immersed in Silicon Valley's spirit of innovation, he returned with a new understanding of how technology could strengthen investigative journalism. He soon launched the Investigative Dashboard, a global index of public registries for company, land and court records from more than 1,000 sources spanning more than 180 countries. As the organization expanded, Radu and Sullivan opened a branch in Bucharest, Romania, in 2011, further anchoring OCCRP's presence in the EU.

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Today, OCCRP has grown from a handful of reporters in five countries to a network of more than 150 journalists operating across 30 nations. Its model of independent, country-based investigative centers united by shared tools and cross-border cooperation has inspired similar initiatives throughout Europe and beyond. Supported by partnerships with major regional journalism groups, OCCRP has evolved into one of the world's most influential investigative media organizations, driven not by strategy documents or grand design but by the demands of the work itself.

Sullivan says the partnership works because it blends his U.S. investigative reporting background with Radu's deep understanding of local systems and politics. Together, their complementary skills created an approach neither of them could have achieved alone. Sullivan's experience helped establish credibility with donors while Radu's reputation persuaded local journalists to trust and join the effort. Together they shared a broad strategic vision, with Radu driving technological innovation and Sullivan shaping organizational direction. "We're different and have different skills and interests, but they are perfectly compatible for what we did," Sullivan explains.

## An investigative vacuum waiting to be filled

Convincing other investigative journalists in Eastern Europe and the Balkans to join OCCRP in reporting on dangerous issues wasn't an easy task in 2007. Toxic, compromised media environments, minimal data and resources for investigative training, and fear of covering organized crime characterized the journalism landscape in the region at that time, according to Sullivan. Organized crime was a hazardous topic, and corruption was a prevalent issue seldom proven but often implied in media stories.

"Most 'investigative reporting' was based on the leak of individual documents by politicians or businessmen typically designed to harm someone. Local media lived off unnamed sources. The owners of mainstream media companies were often individuals with a checkered past [that included] criminal convictions, political affiliations, organized crime ties and no interest whatsoever in serving the public interest," Sullivan says. Investigative reporting, he adds, was a means to attack business opponents, curry political favors, blackmail rivals or accumulate kompromat (real or fabricated compromising material used to extort, manipulate or discredit public figures) on perceived enemies.

Journalists desperately needed resources and investigative training at a time when rigorous standards for such reporting were lacking, and politics swayed editorial decisions. "We thought everyone would think what we were doing was cool, and they'd join us. But in truth, nobody wanted the hassle of reporting on dangerous issues. We were alone as completely independent investigative reporters," Sullivan recalls. Eventually, what Sullivan describes as a "very small, cadre of journalists" found their way to OCCRP. "And then our stories started having an impact. That led to more donors, more reporters and more stories. We had arrived," Sullivan says.

He describes OCCRP's trajectory from a small regional initiative to a global investigative powerhouse as "a 19-year overnight success," adding that the organization has remained committed to "old-fashioned investigative reporting to the highest standards we can achieve."

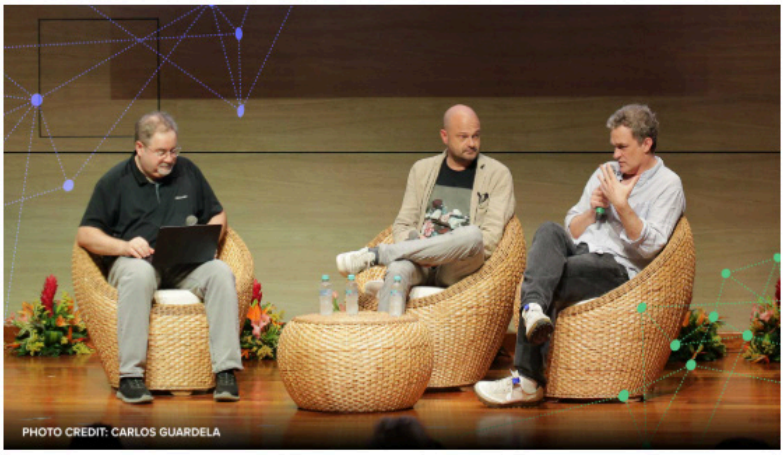


PHOTO CREDIT: CARLOS GUARDELA

## The tools that transformed financial crime investigation

Radu says he realized early on that exposing large-scale criminal organizations requires large-scale investigative capacity, which relied on technological innovation. While he researched criminal systems at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Austria, around 2001, he started traveling to Colombia and countries in the Balkan Peninsula to learn about criminal supply chains linked to drug and human trafficking. “During that period, I interviewed criminals who were in and out of jail, and I realized that most of their actions took place across trusted networks that they built over the years. We had to build our own trusted network to be efficient against what criminals had in place,” he says.

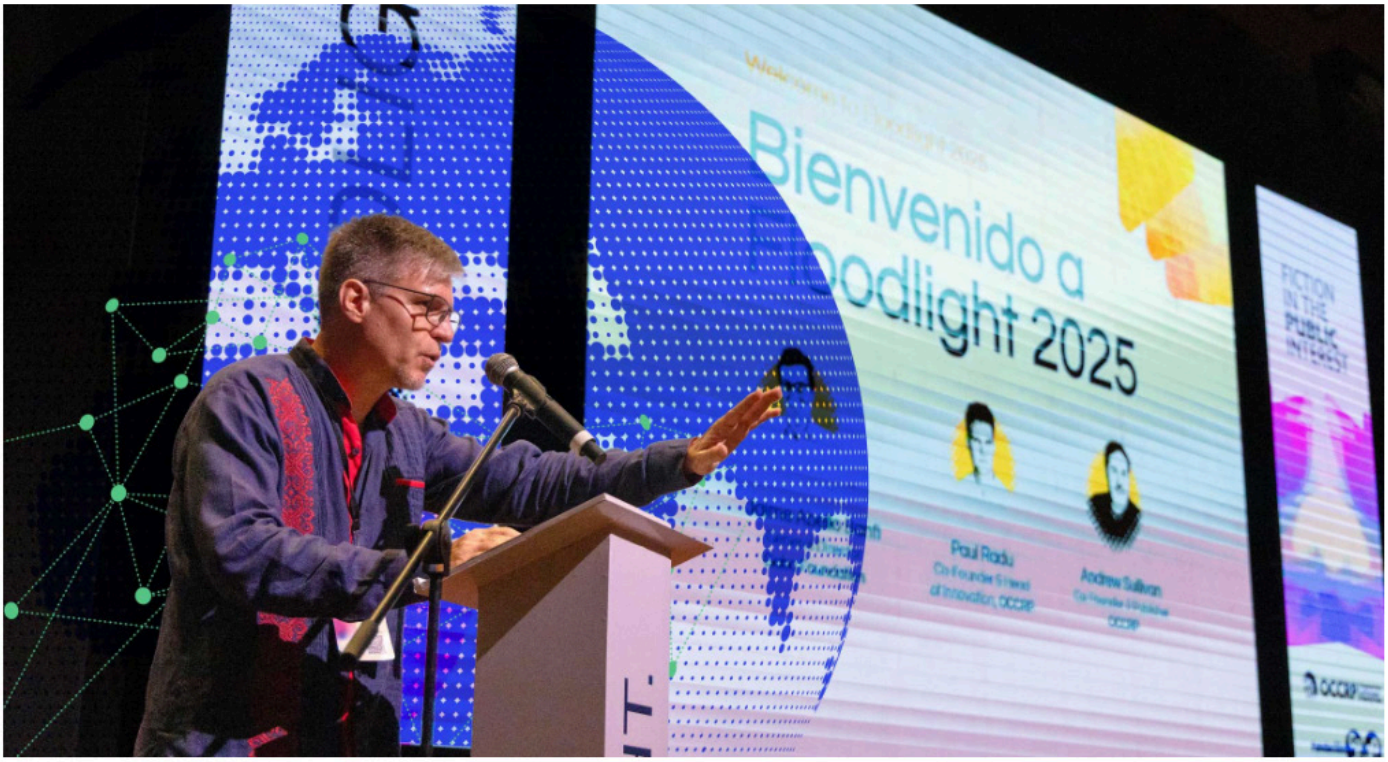
Creation of such a counter-network would require technological tools that would reimagine what’s possible in financial crime and corruption investigations. The goal of this new tech, according to Radu, was to ensure a continuous flow of information exchange and analysis across its network of journalists. To help reporters follow money trails, the organization created Aleph Pro, an investigative data platform that features a vast archive of current and historic databases, documents, leaks and investigations. OCCRP’s Investigative Dashboard offers members of the organization’s network access to a team of expert researchers and data specialists who aid in tracking people, companies and assets anywhere in the world. It also offers public access to a global index of public registries for company, land and court records. “Our systems and approaches to tackling large-scale criminality allowed us to acquire more and more of a bird’s-eye view on crime and corruption, and to focus on critical parts of these systems, such as their enablers and their intersection points with licit economies,” Radu explains.

The technological tools behind OCCRP’s trusted network led to the publication of OCCRP’s 2011 Proxy Platform, a project that exposed an immense, hidden money laundering system that moved billions of euros through Europe using thousands of shell companies controlled by unwitting or paid proxy directors, allowing organized crime figures and corrupt officials to hide their identities and profits. The reporting showed how these phantom companies, often registered offshore and linked to banks in Russia and Latvia, laundered proceeds from crimes including drug trafficking, tax evasion, corruption and terrorist financing. Journalists traced the network through leaked bank records and court documents, identifying companies such as Tormex Ltd. that processed hundreds of millions of dollars despite having no real business operations. One of the central figures connected to the system, Vietnamese businessman Le Duc Hoa, was arrested and put on trial in Romania, where prosecutors accused him of embezzling more than $800 million and leading Asian organized crime operations in Eastern Europe. Proxy Platform and subsequent large-scale investigations pioneered a new wave of investigative reporting that culminated with the organization’s Laundromat series and its collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists on publication of the Panama Papers. “The banking and other financial sectors reacted, albeit too slowly at times, and adapted their due diligence processes while politicians started tailoring the anti-money laundering laws to the new reality uncovered by OCCRP’s network of journalists,” Radu says.

# The birth of the ‘laundromat’

In 2014, OCCRP first published its Laundromat investigative reporting project, which unveiled the existence of an in-bulk money laundering infrastructure that corrupt bankers were offering criminals all over the world. Also known as bulk cash smuggling, in-bulk money laundering involves the physical transportation of large quantities of illicit cash across borders to circumvent financial reporting requirements and obscure the audit trail. Radu helped coin the term “laundromat” to describe this type of massive financial fraud vehicle. He first realized these schemes represented a new class of global risk when he obtained a banking document attached to a commercial dispute from a court of justice in Chisinau, Moldova. The document contained two years’ worth of financial information that belonged to an Auckland, New Zealand-based company banking with a financial institution in Riga, Latvia. The company in New Zealand was laundering money for Vietnamese, Russian, Mexican and other organized crime groups in addition to corrupt politicians. “It was a win-win as the criminals had a wide pipeline to launder hundreds of billions [of dollars] while the bankers made a lot of money by taking a slice of the laundered proceeds. It was money laundering at a discount with automated systems in place to generate fake invoices, companies and bank accounts with several layers of proxies and its own kompromat gathering,” Radu says. Discovery of the laundromat, he adds, coincided with the acceleration of trade-based money laundering (disguising illegal proceeds and moving value across borders using trade transactions in an attempt to legitimize their illicit origins) to help individuals evade taxes and support regimes that were under sanctions such as Iran, North Korea and Russia.

Radu considers the Laundromat reporting series to be his “starting point … for grasping how organized crime evolves and increases its footprint into global economies and politics.” Since then, he says OCCRP has “reached a level where every bit of information can become an entry point into a criminal ecosystem and expose the multiple vulnerabilities of each of these systems.” For example, the Riviera Maya Gang project gave the organization’s journalists extensive access to the world of an organized crime group that moved from Europe to North America with the help of technological innovation. The investigation details how a group of Romanian criminals built a sophisticated global ATM skimming operation by mastering banking technology and customizing ATM software. Operating under the leadership of an alleged crime figure known as “The Shark,” the group laundered profits through real estate, bribery and intimidation, eventually controlling more than 100 ATMs in major Mexican tourist hubs and capturing a significant share of the global skimming market.




**PAUL RADU HELPED COIN THE TERM "LAUNDROMAT" TO DESCRIBE THE EXISTENCE OF AN IN-BULK MONEY LAUNDERING INFRASTRUCTURE THAT CORRUPT BANKERS WERE OFFERING CRIMINALS ALL OVER THE WORLD. PHOTO CREDIT: NAME FOR WHAT?**

The Riviera Maya Gang eventually drew intense law enforcement and media attention that disrupted its operations and exposed its leadership. Romanian and Mexican authorities opened criminal investigations into the group and its alleged leader, Florian Tudor, accusing him and his associates of running a large-scale organized crime network connected to fraud, money laundering, violence and murder threats, even as Tudor publicly denied the charges. The gang had to temporarily shut down and remove skimming devices after international reporting revealed their methods, eroding their ability to operate unnoticed and bringing their once hidden enterprise under sustained scrutiny. "This particular project showed us that crime and criminals are not safe if journalists do their job," Radu says.

## The impact of investigative journalism

OCCRP measures impact primarily through increased accountability, including the recovery of illicit funds, sanctions, civic protests, government and corporate actions, resignations or dismissals, official investigations, and criminal charges or convictions. The organization's investigative reporting has helped return more than $12 billion to governments in fines and monies seized since 2009. "Our job is not to judge or punish people. Our job is to tell people how their world works. We can't be police investigators, prosecutors and judges. We inform and empower activists, law enforcement and citizens to act," Radu says. He describes the OCCRP's work as "the first draft of history," adding that the organization "often defines for the public the character and morals of organized crime and corrupt politicians. They want people to see them a certain way, and as time passes, that becomes very important to them. But we deny them respectability."

In 2016, to reinforce OCCRP's commitment to making a difference across the globe, it started the Global Anti-Corruption Consortium, now known as the impact department, with Transparency International to advance the use of investigative journalism among organizations committed to defending democracy and fighting

corruption and organized crime. OCCRP's Illicit Finance Data Lab connects journalists with researchers so that both groups can effectively use data to expose and understand corruption. OCCRP collaborates with filmmakers, television series creators and game developers to ensure that the most important stories reach the widest possible audience. "We have several film and television projects in different stages of development in addition to two video games we are working on bringing to market," Sullivan says.

OCCRP's founders aim to publish stories with actionable information that policymakers, advocates, law enforcement and citizens can use to make an impact themselves. "Changing a law that closes a loophole in the global financial system, in banking for example, is especially rewarding because so much money is laundered through that system," Sullivan explains. Measuring impact in countries ruled by a corrupt or authoritarian regime is especially challenging, according to Radu. "In those cases, sometimes what is most important is just getting people to have the expectation that when they see crime or corruption, change is going to come. Justice will be done. We want people to believe we can all be part of a better society. That's fundamentally the start of moving the needle," he says.


PHOTO CREDIT: CODY BAHN

## The challenges of a high-risk newsroom

OCCRP's journalists often operate in hostile environments and produce work under dangerous circumstances. Overseeing the safety of the journalists who make up the reporting network is a priority. "We talk about these things every day. We have a 24/7 rapid response safety and security team that just had to move several of our journalists out of Lebanon because of the war [in Iran]. We talk about journalists' safety as part of every story we do," Sullivan says. In addition, OCCRP offers free mental health services in many languages and has a liberal time-off policy. "We try to be just a little extra compassionate with the life problems people face, knowing their families often share the same stress and problems our employees face," Radu adds.

Mitigating personal risk amid OCCRP's resolute commitment to publish is another challenge. "We have to publish," Sullivan says. "It is our mission and our responsibility to our readers and to the truth. If bad people know we won't publish then they will only threaten us more." Radu and Sullivan have strategies for reducing safety risks to journalists, including eliminating writers' bylines, delaying publishing until a time that's safer, or publishing in other media outlets with low or no risk of harm. "And when we can't remove all risk, we take other measures, including temporary relocation and other protections," Sullivan says.

As OCCRP continues to grow and their reporting attracts more attention, Sullivan says one of the biggest operational challenges in sustaining and funding a nonprofit newsroom is maintaining momentum. “We’ve always kept a surprisingly low profile, and that served us well. The people who appreciated our work used our reporting, but we didn’t need to be a global name,” he says. But producing high-profile reporting, he explains, has led to public criticism of OCCRP’s work from the subjects of stories, other media outlets and competitors. It’s common for the organization to be accused of being an instrument of U.S. foreign policy or attempting to destabilize governments around the world.

Exposing wrongdoing and holding power to account inevitably create adversaries. Radu says OCCRP welcomes good faith criticism, which strengthens its reporting. Most attacks, he says, ignore the facts, instead questioning journalists’ motives and alleging hidden agendas to distract from OCCRP’s reporting. “Our success has led to many people adopting our model and trying to imitate or expand on our successes. Some of these people are competitive and territorial, but I think it’s good for the industry that people try to beat us at our own game. It makes us all better,” Radu says.

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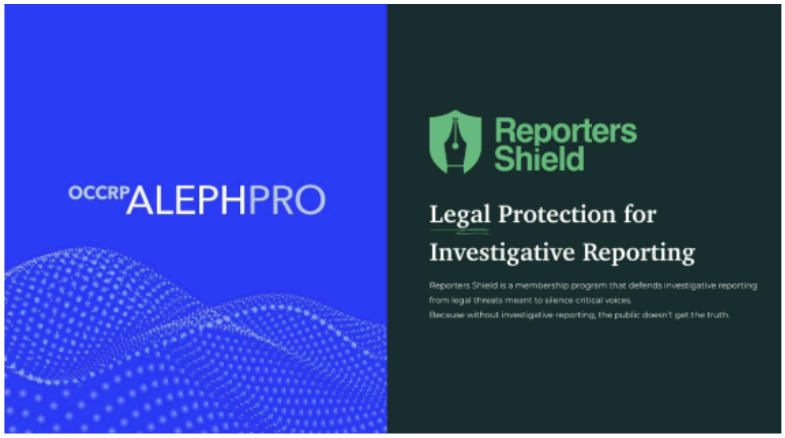
OCCRP is no stranger to legal challenges, including Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) suits. A SLAPP is a lawsuit that aims to dissuade critics from speaking out on matters of public interest. These suits often lack legal merit and are intended to burden defendants with litigation costs and intimidation. In early 2026, an OCCRP partner newsroom in North Macedonia was targeted in a lawsuit widely described by press freedom advocates as a SLAPP following a corruption investigation conducted in collaboration with OCCRP. To address the rising use of SLAPPs to intimidate and silence independent media, OCCRP and its partners launched Reporters Shield in 2022. The initiative helps protect investigative journalists from legal harassment. “It’s very effective for the members [of OCCRP] who are getting badly needed coverage of their legal expenses. More than a dozen lawsuits are being paid around the world, which is money saved by those media,” Radu says.

## The future of investigative journalism

OCCRP operates in a hostile and worsening environment in which restrictive foreign agent laws, government intimidation and donor chilling effects are eroding support for independent journalism and civil society. At the same time, AI platforms extract and monetize reporting without consent, propaganda degrades public trust, and governments struggle to regulate rapidly changing technologies. These pressures, Sullivan says, intersect with a deeper challenge: Corruption and organized crime have globalized, operating across borders and aligning with sectarian regimes, powerful oligarchs, extremist actors, and criminal networks to weaken media, courts, law enforcement, regulation and democratic institutions. In response, Radu says, “We keep on building and modernizing an inclusive investigative reporting system. We are developing an ever-evolving operating system against wrongdoing.”




To be effective in the fight against global crime, OCCRP must adapt technologically, strategically and editorially. “We innovate to bring more allies into the fight against crime and corruption. We want citizens on our side as active participants in the investigative processes to increase the efficiency of our joint work,” Radu says.

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