

ANNUAL REVIEW 2023

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WHO WE ARE

Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) is a research and campaign group working to expose and challenge the privileged access and influence enjoyed by corporations and their lobby groups in EU policy making.

WHY WE'RE NEEDED

The corporate capture of EU decision-making leads to policies that cause social injustice, economic inequality, climate change, and environmental destruction.

EU decisions and policies frequently reflect the interests of big business instead of people and the planet. Corporate lobbies often prefer to act in secret, so we expose and challenge what they do, increase public awareness, and build momentum to curb corporate influence over EU policy-making.

WHAT WE'RE WORKING TOWARDS

1. **Building stronger movements** at the local, national and European level to denounce and resist corporate capture;
2. **Creating momentum for solutions** that democratise EU decision-making and protect it from corporate capture;
3. **Building public pressure** against corporate-influenced decisions in specific lobby battles – resulting in better decisions at the EU, national and local level;
4. **Challenging the neoliberal ideology** being institutionalised in EU treaties and laws that is leading to deregulation and privatisation and that creates obstacles to social and ecological transformation.



PHOTO BY MIKA BAUMEISTER/UNSPLASH.COM

HOW WE WORK

Through high-profile investigations, in-depth reports, media articles and briefing (investigative) journalists, building movements, participating in public events, producing infographics, videos, and podcasts we expose corporate lobbying, the actors involved, and the solutions we need for a socially and environmentally-just Europe.

We work with a wide range of groups and organisations across Europe, from mainstream NGOs and coalitions, to academics and investigative journalists, to more radical grassroots activist and civil society networks.



OVERVIEW OF 2023

This year was not easy. Not only has the world been on the warpath with old and new conflicts, but climate and environmental disaster is drawing closer and closer. While 2023 was the hottest year on record by a huge margin, CO2 emissions continue to increase along with the profits of the fossil fuel industry, who keep pushing for false solutions and techno-fixes that lead us nowhere. We saw several of the topics we have been working on for years handled by the European institutions, but as a result being discarded or altered so profoundly (in many cases by the actions of corporate lobbyists) they were left as nothing but a shadow of themselves. Or simply changed for the worse.

But we are fighting back. We are organising, we are creating alliances, we are researching, challenging corporate capture, and informing people, we are talking to the media, activists, EU officials, MEPs and we are taking it to the streets, social media and international meetings. We know change will not be easy, but we are here to make it happen and we will continue to make it happen. Read below about our results in our three main areas of work: climate justice, environmental justice, and economic justice and democracy.

KEY ACTIVITIES, ARTICLES AND REPORTS

CLIMATE JUSTICE

2023 has been a year full of highlights for our climate justice team. We continued our work with a network of climate justice NGOs and grassroots groups, trade unions, housing activists, energy poverty groups and others to tackle the role of the fossil fuel industry in creating, prolonging, and profiting from the energy and cost of living crisis.

We published several investigations highlighting fossil fuel companies' undue influence in EU decision-making – including their role in weakening social measures to tackle energy poverty, and how politicians received them with open arms. Following our complaint, the European Ombudsman launched a case to inquire into the EU Energy Platform Industry Advisory Group, set up at the request of major oil and gas companies to advise the European Commission on how to respond to the energy crisis after the Ukraine invasion. We also helped local groups in Vienna challenge the European Gas Conference for the first time, which saw hundreds of activists across Europe trying to block the conference and thousands in the streets marching against the power of the gas and hydrogen lobbies.

Our work contributed to ensure the fossil fuel industry's false solutions are widely recognized as a delay/diversion tactic. Through a series of publications and workshops we challenged the hydrogen hype; it is not the miracle that the EU is selling as the cure for our fossil fuel addiction. Our investigations shed light on the dirty truth about hydrogen: it risks extending fossil fuel use, as well as deepening neo-colonial extractivist practices. With the **Real Zero Europe** campaign we kept calling on the European Union to deliver real reductions in carbon emissions and real solutions to the climate crisis, instead of corporate greenwashed 'net zero', as they do with its proposed carbon removals law.



As part of the **Fossil Free Politics** coalition, we have organised different actions to stress the urgent need to kick big polluters out of climate policy – and bring people in, including trade unions, anti-poverty networks, social justice, and climate groups. In February, we organised a sold-out cross-party conference in the European Parliament where MEPs met with more than 140 people; we launched a petition to get fossil fuel companies out of EU decision-making signed by over 100,000 people. In October we organised the People over Polluters action days, including the launch of a [political declaration](#), endorsed by over 100 civil society groups and trade unions. As a result our demands got more traction in the EU bubble. MEPs across four political groups (The Left, Greens/EFA, S&Ds, and EPP) called for a conflict of interest framework on fossil fuel companies' influence, and we secured a public hearing in the European Parliament on fossil fuel companies' responsibility on the energy crisis, for early 2024.

We also helped expose Wopke Hoekstra's fossil fuel ties, demanded transparency over his past allegiances, and challenged his nomination as the new EU Climate Commissioner.

Last but not least, with **Kick Big Polluters Out**, (KBPO) of which CEO is the European co-coordinator, we help win the first step towards kicking the fossil fuel industry out of the UN climate talks, as it is now mandatory for participants to disclose who they work for, which has long been one of our demands. Our research with KBPO showing that over 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists infiltrated COP28 (an incredible fourfold increase from last year) attracted very significant media attention and caused a political outcry.

TIMELINE

Through the year: Continued Cost of Living Crisis work

MAY

Transatlantic alliance of 130+ EU and US decision makers call to end fossil

JULY

Oil-linked group's EU influencing exposed: Corporate Europe Observatory complains to EU institutions

OCTOBER

The dirty truth about the EU's hydrogen push
People Over Polluters Declaration
People Over Polluters Infographics
Cold Homes Hot Profits

DECEMBER

Record number of fossil fuel lobbyists granted access to COP28 climate talks
EU floods COP28 climate talks with fossil fuel lobbyists
COP28 is running into overtime, but your time is up to deliver climate justice
COP28 facilitates fossil fuel frenzy: Wrap-up blog from UN climate summit

MARCH

Germany's great hydrogen race
- The corporate perpetuation of fossil fuels, energy colonialism, and climate disaster

JUNE

UN Climate treaty participants required to disclose industry ties
New figures show Big Oil & Gas flooding UN climate talks since Paris Agreement

SEPTEMBER

50 orgs say no to fossil fuel ally Hoekstra as EU Climate Commissioner.

NOVEMBER

European ombudsman opens case into fossil-fueled EU advisory group.
Fossil fuel lobbyists attend UN climate talks more than 7000 times
Hoekstra's inconvenient past a liability at COP28?
COP28 push for hydrogen

MAR

MAY

JUN

JUL

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC

FOSSIL FUEL FRENZY

Despite the hailed deal to “transition away from fossil fuels”, the 2023 UN climate summit’s text has the oily fingerprints of the fossil fuel lobby all over it. The reality is COP28 is more likely to facilitate a fossil fuel frenzy by cementing false solutions in the text: exactly what the army of lobbyists ordered.

The COP28 agreement to “transition away” from fossil fuels was historic. Believe it or not, this is the first time fossil fuels – all fossil fuels – were explicitly included in a UN climate change text in over 28 years of negotiating.

Governments, scientists, and campaigners had pushed for a “phase-out” of fossil fuels to maintain the slim hope of keeping average global temperature rise below 1.5oc. But given the COP28 President was an oil executive with the industry taking centre-stage, achieving this was more than some expected.

From the article [COP28 facilitates fossil fuel frenzy](#)

More than 7 times the number of fossil fuel lobbyists admitted to COP28 than official Indigenous representatives



KICK BIG POLLUTERS OUT

#KickBigPollutersOut | #COP28

2,400+ fossil fuel lobbyists ARE ATTENDING the climate talks

MORE THAN THE 10 most climate vulnerable countries combined

We need an accountability framework to protect climate action

KICK BIG POLLUTERS OUT

JOIN THE CALL TO KICK BIG POLLUTERS OUT

#KickBigPollutersOut | #COP28

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

During 2023 our Environmental Justice team worked full speed to defend key EU legislation on pesticides and chemicals from being watered down, delayed, or blocked by corporate lobbyists and right wing MEPs. However, the political assault on key pillars of the Green Deal such as the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability, has led to the postponement or even wrecking of green proposals.

We exposed the pesticide industry's latest attempts **to sabotage the EU pesticide reduction law SUR**. We contributed to analysis on post-truth arguments used by various conservative MEPs to undermine the pesticide reduction law using misleading, incorrect, and scientifically unsubstantiated claims. This analysis contributed to more and more actors including scientists, the media, and politicians taking a stronger critical stance in the debate on the Green Deal – as well as helping the media to expose the post-truth rhetoric. In the end, the SUR law was voted down in the European Parliament in November 2023 – a dramatic setback for people's health and the future of food production due to corporate lobbying. This result highlights the need for firewall measures against corporate lobbies for the common interest. We commissioned a legal report supporting the case for an export ban of hazardous chemicals banned in the EU, facing competition rules from the World Trade Organisation, which was published and presented in an event in the European Parliament on the 29 of November.

Moreover, during 2023 we worked with national-level coalitions to stop the deregulation of new GMOs. In this context, we made significant contributions to the EU-level coordination, participated in protests, commissioned a legal analysis of the Commission's proposal, and exposed how lobby groups tried to worsen the new law further.

Our work has featured in major TV productions, such as a German programme on PFAS ('Forever Chemicals') with 3 million viewers on the night of broadcast, and a prime-time programme on Dutch TV.



BIG TOXICS

We also stepped up our work on EU chemicals policy, focusing on the implementation of the EU Commission's 2020 Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability (CSS). Unfortunately, one of the flagship elements of the CSS, the reform of the REACH regulation on chemicals, was kicked into the long grass of the next Commission. It is another victim of internal Commission wrangling, corporate lobbying, and political pressure from the political right in the European Parliament and beyond. To raise public awareness about the threats posed by corporate lobbying and the pressure posed by right-wing parties, we published in-depth investigations such as 'Chemical romance: How politicians fell for BASF' and 'Big Toxics and their lobby firepower', to mention but a few.

Throughout 2023, awareness grew of how corporations have been polluting our bodies and environments via the use of persistent 'forever chemicals' or PFAS. We exposed their cynical lobbying around a new EU proposal to implement a wide restriction on the use of such chemicals, and drew parallels with the denial tactics deployed by the tobacco and fossil fuel industries.

In June, we hosted two successful workshops, for journalists (in-person, 50+ attendees) and online for Toxic-free Future campaigners (25+ attendees), to provide techniques to expose the lobbying of the chemicals industry, using tools such as LobbyFacts and freedom of information requests.

All our chemical articles have included a 'toxic-free politics' framework. This has helped us build momentum and interest in a firewall around the producers of toxic chemicals and pesticides.



TIMELINE

MARCH

Chemical romance: how politicians fell for BASF

MAR

APRIL

Dutch biotech researchers with conflicting roles lobby for deregulation of new GMOs

APR

MAY

Campaign action - Timmermans: Prevent deregulation of GM now!

Big Toxics and their lobby firepower

MAY

JUNE

Campaign action: Pesticide reduction under threat. We need your help to Save Bees and Farmers

Right-wing Europe on a hunt to kill the remains of the Green Deal

Leaked proposal to deregulate new GMOs: Commission plan gives in to biotech seed corporations

JUN

JULY

PFAS are forever? How the chemical industry is fighting back against regulation

Are PFAS the new tobacco?

Out of REACH? Redacted documents suggest Commission's chemicals backsliding

JUL

SEPTEMBER

EU Ombudsman criticises Commission failure to disclose full REACH revision impact assessment

SEP

NOVEMBER

Tackling global plastic pollution... and plastic polluters

Sabotaging EU Pesticide Reduction Law (SUR) - Pesticide industry lobby's reckless assault on biodiversity and health

Legal opinion on a Chemical export ban and compatibility with World Trade Organisation Rules

NOV

DECEMBER

Bayer, BASF lobby pushed to scrap safety rules on new GM crops – even if they increase pesticide use

DEC

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY

In 2023, our Economic Justice & Democracy team focused on challenging the influence of economic consultancies in facilitating mergers and acquisitions for Big Tech clients. A joint letter from 20 CSOs initiated by LobbyControl and Corporate Europe Observatory urged the European Commission for transparency in consultancy practices. Following a complaint with the Ombudsman, we achieved a significant victory as the Commission terminated a contract with the economic consultancy RBB Economics due to conflicts of interest. We scored another victory: our advocacy also played a key role in shaping new rules preventing EU contracts from going to consultancies with conflicts of interest.

Also, during the past year, we have raised awareness about the Qatargate scandal, emphasising the lax lobbying regulations in Brussels. CEO's decade-long investigation into human rights abusers influencing EU decision-making contributed to a coordinated NGO effort to influence post-Qatargate reforms in the European Parliament. While the reforms showed some progress, particularly requiring all MEPs to disclose lobbyist meetings, we will continue to advocate for more robust regulations.

We have been vocal in criticising the Commission's plans for a 'foreign influence' directive, given concerns about the risks of limiting civic space. Instead, we proposed a compulsory register targeting covert lobbying for increased visibility.

Meanwhile, ongoing dialogue with Commission Vice-President Jourova's cabinet indicated progress in implementing UN tobacco lobby rules, potentially extending these regulations across all DGs.

In June, we published a comprehensive report on the EU Single Market's impact on social-ecological transformation, highlighting industry lobby challenges to national environmental policies. The report gained positive feedback from MEPs and was complemented by a EuroNews op-ed, podcast episode, and... a board game! A Spanish version of the report was launched in November, accompanied by an open letter to the European Commission in collaboration with major trade unions and environmental NGOs.

We continued to challenge the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB), prompting an investigation by the European Ombudsman into how the board weakens social and environmental aspects of EU legislation. Follow-up complaints also led to an investigation into the Commission's failure to publish unredacted impact assessments and RSB opinions on two crucial chemicals files.



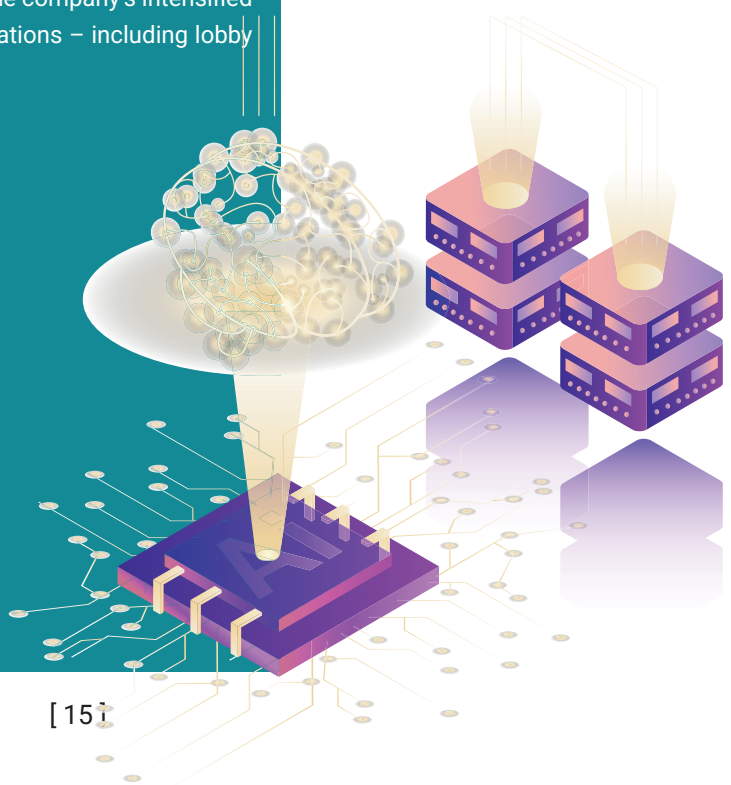
Determined to see the EU adopt policies that defend profits over people and planet, they have won privileged access to decision-makers like no other and even shape the direction of the EU as a whole. It is high time to roll back their power and privileged access. **WATCH HERE**

BIG TECH

In 2023 we brought to light the extent of Big Tech lobbying within the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act through a series of publications. Thanks to our work we revealed Big Tech's efforts to avoid regulation on its most advanced AI products, which are undermining safety and human rights standards. Some well-established media outlets, such as Bloomberg and Time Magazine, covered our investigations exposing OpenAI's contradictory stance of publicly endorsing regulation while lobbying against stringent measures behind closed doors.

We shone a spotlight on the substantial financial resources Big Tech allocates to lobbying. Our updated study illustrated a 16 per cent increase in the tech sector's total lobbying spending, reaching 113 million euros annually; a revelation that garnered attention across Europe. In a deep dive into Amazon's lobbying activities within the EU, we demonstrated the company's intensified lobby presence via its funding of third-party organisations – including lobby firms, think tanks, and business associations

In collaboration with a cross-party alliance of MEPs, we introduced an encrypted mailbox **Lobbyleaks.eu**, providing a secure platform for individuals to confidentially share information on Big Tech lobbying. The launch generated widespread media coverage, and the website received **10,000 visits in its first week!**

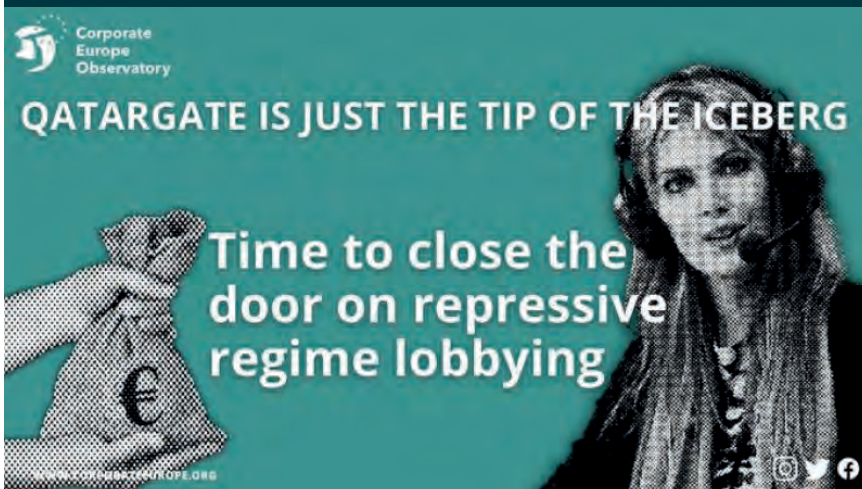




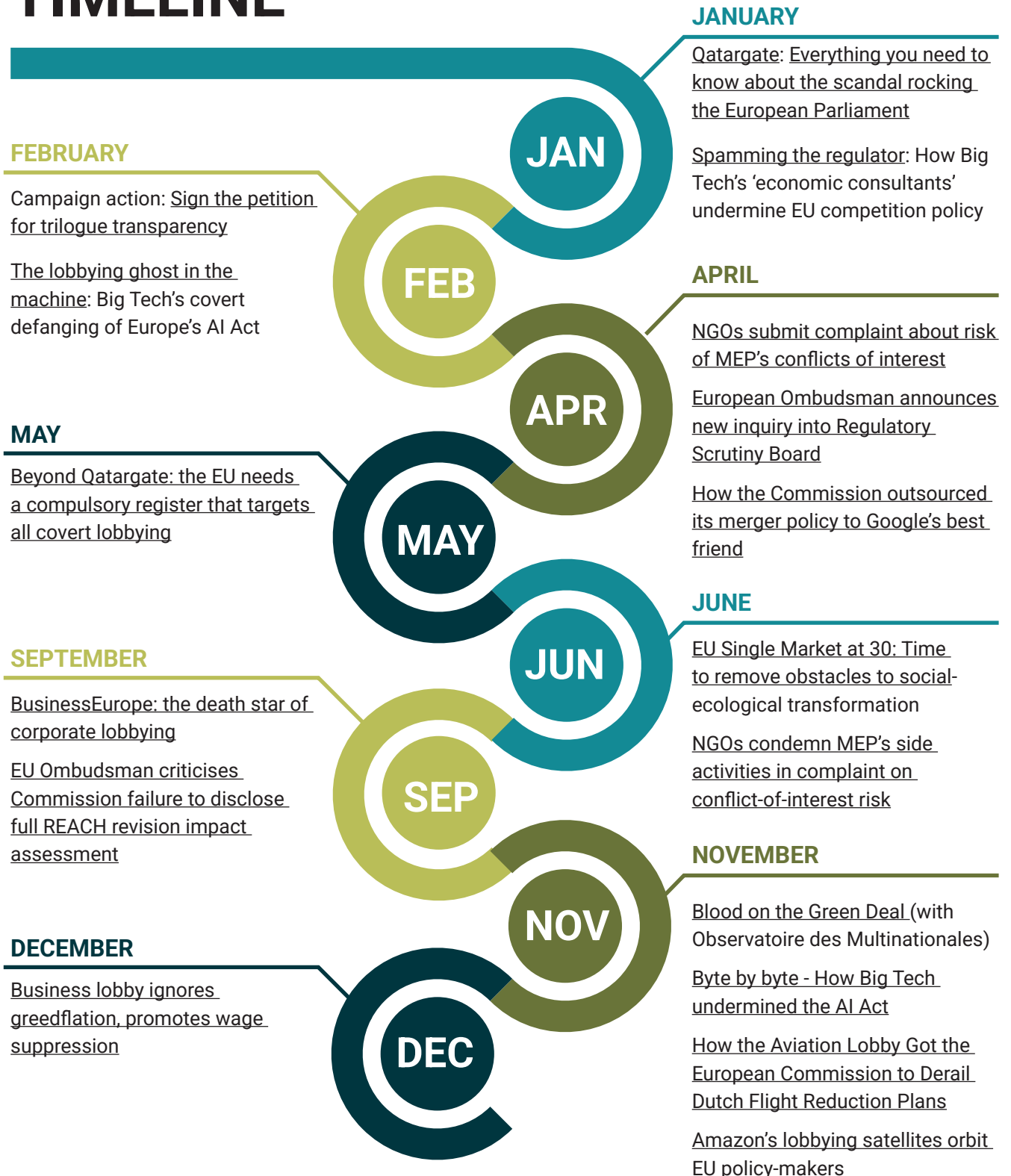
This is the 42nd episode of EU Watchdog Radio where we talk all things Qatargate. What the EPP is plotting against civil society, what the problems are with the current EU transparency register and what better examples are used in other countries. [LISTEN HERE](#)

QATARGATE

The Qatargate scandal put radical options for curbing corporate lobbying influence back on the agenda, including far better lobby transparency (also for MEP meetings with lobbyists), limits of revolving door moves, and MEPs holding problematic second jobs. We called on MEPs to finally introduce the strong transparency and ethics system that can prevent such scandals. The European Commission is working on a proposal for an EU-wide directive on non-EU government lobbying interference, including national level registers. But there is a very real risk that rather than effectively targeting repressive regime lobbying, the rules will instead reduce civil society space. Also there is strong pushback from conservative forces in the European Parliament and right wing politicians are using the scandal to undermine civil society and NGOs. This makes our work in the next year especially important.



TIMELINE





30 YEARS OF EU SINGLE MARKET

Time to remove the obstacles to social-ecological transformation



SINGLE MARKET

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the creation of the European Union's Single Market. Single Market legislation touches on almost every aspect of our daily lives, and it is hard to imagine life before an integrated European market. Yet most Europeans are unaware of its inner workings. Our new report exposes how corporate interests have used Single Market rules to obstruct progressive social and environmental policies and regulations that might harm their profits.

[READ IT HERE](#)



LOOKING AHEAD

Throughout the year, we have started developing an ambitious project for the European Parliament elections, collaborating with civil society allies and political parties, including Greens and The Left.

By actively contributing to political party manifestos, mapping allied candidate-MEPs, and joining hands with Fix the Status Quo and other NGOs, we worked together to compile a comprehensive MEP candidate database for Europe.

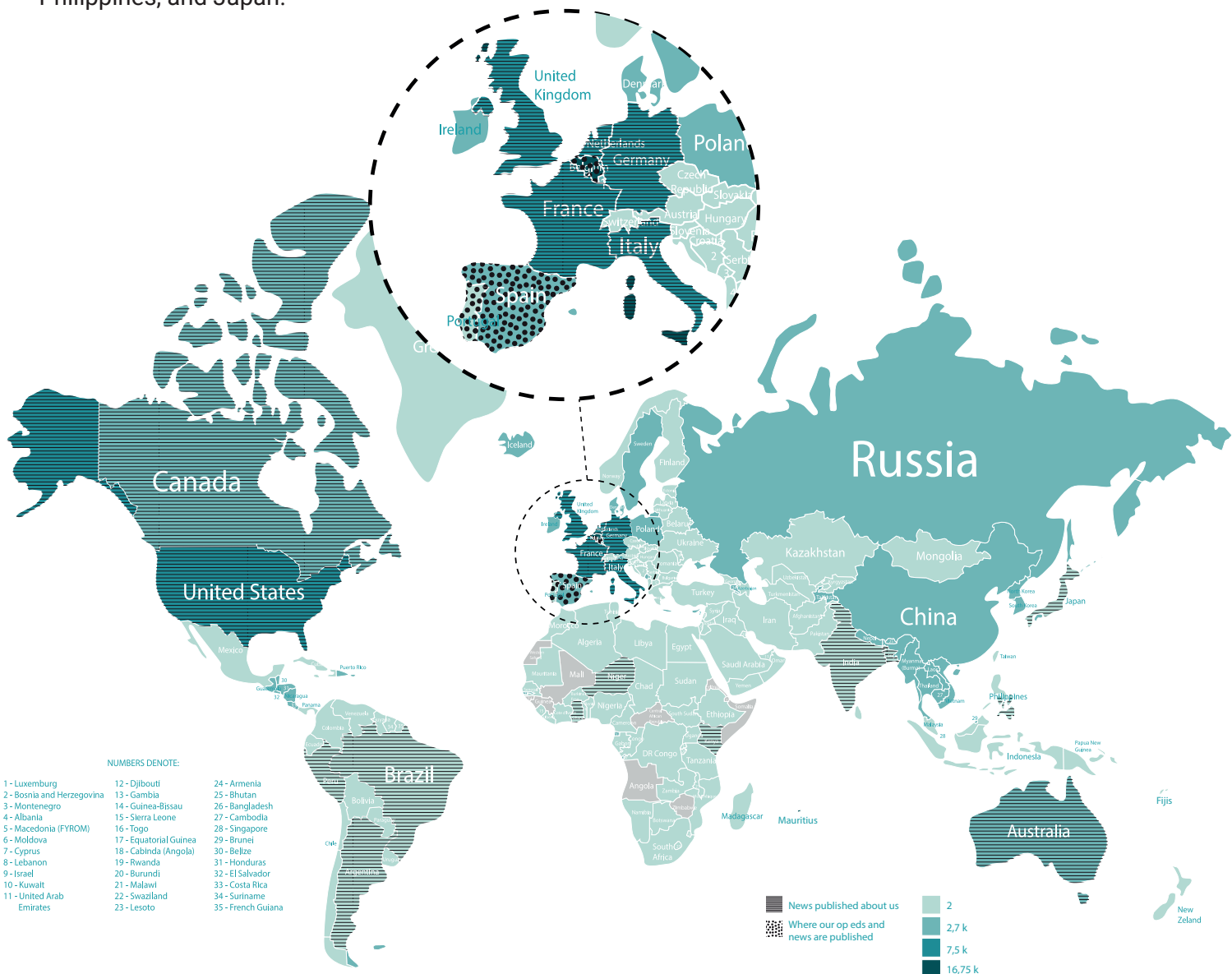
In 2024, our project for the European Parliament elections will come to fruition. We will work on different fronts: with civil society, MEP candidates, and researching the funding of the far-right. Stay tuned for regular updates!

MEDIA COVERAGE

In 2023, we hosted two press conferences on Qatargate and glyphosate. We were also featured in a **documentary from the European public channel ARTE**. Our voices reached far and wide with over 700 media mentions in different national, international, and EU news outlets, including CNN (USA), The Guardian (UK), The Independent (UK), El Salto Diario (Spain), El Diario (Spain), De Standaard (Belgium), De Spiegel (Germany), El Pais (Spain), Público (Portugal), Le Monde (France), La Libre (Belgium), Follow The Money (Netherlands) and Il Fatto Quotidiano (Italy).

We were featured multiple times in Brussels-based media outlets Politico, Euronews, EurActiv, and EU Observer, as well as international outlets, including CNN and Social Europe.

Outside Europe, we were covered in a variety of countries, including the US, Türkiye, Argentina, Bangladesh, Ghana, Nigeria, Canada, Kenya, Australia, Iraq, India, Brazil, Peru, Mauritius, Fijis, the Philippines, and Japan.



We published over 18 opinion articles in various national and international outlets in English, Danish, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Italian, German and Spanish including:

REPORTS (TOP 10)

1. Chemical romance: how politicians fell for BASF - 4.7k views
2. The lobbying ghost in the machine - 4.3k views
3. The lobby network: Big Tech's web of influence in the EU - 3.7k views
4. Spamming the regulator - 3.6k views
5. Germany's great hydrogen race - 3.1k views
6. A loud lobby for a silent spring - 3.1k views
7. The dirty truth about the EU's hydrogen push - 2.6k views
8. A ranking of lobbying activities: Who spends most? - 2.5k views
9. PFAS are forever? - 2.6k views
10. Byte by byte - 2.2k views

OP-EDS

FEBRUARY 2023:

- Qatargate, authoritarian backlash and Orban's fleas (EU Observer), Big Tech's attempt to water down the EU AI Act revealed (EU Observer), Cost of living crisis affects women the most, but it's men who are causing it (Euronews)

MARCH 2023:

- Will this be the last European Gas Conference? (SocialEurope)

APRIL 2023:

- Germany and the EU are falling for corporate lobbyists' hydrogen hoax (Euronews)

MAY 2023:

- It's time to tackle BASF's legacy of pollution and end its burden shifting (Euronews)
- Why are Google's consultants advising on EU monopoly policy? (EU Observer)

JULY 2023:

- EU Vaccine Transparency: A shot in the dark (EU Observer), Os obstáculos do Mercado Único Europeu a uma transição climática justa (Público), As the EU Single Market turns 30, we can't allow further obstacles to its just future (Euronews), Are PFAS the new Tobacco? (Euractiv)

SEPTEMBER 2023:

- Amid rising climate catastrophes, why is the EU putting an oil man in charge? (Euronews), Which comes first - chemical-industry profits or health? (Social Europe)

OCTOBER 2023:

- Why EU Commission dumped Google's favourite consultant (joint op-ed with LobbyControl published in the EU Observer), The EU's hydrogen plans are a dangerous distraction driven by corporate interests (Euronews), Hidrogénio, a armadilha que não resolverá a dependência dos combustíveis fósseis (Público), Los planes de hidrógeno de la UE, la trampa que no resolverá la adicción a los combustibles fósiles (El Salto)

NOVEMBER 2023:

- Big Tech lobbying is derailing the AI Act (Social Europe), The two-year lobbying campaign to sabotage pesticide-reduction (EU Observer)

DECEMBER:

- COP28: an historic outcome, but for whom? (Euronews)

OUTREACH

- We published over 43 articles and reports.
- We launched our first ever board game called 'EU Single Market at 30'.
- We produced 8 episodes of our podcast 'EU Watchdog Radio' with over 2,4k downloads.
- We made 47 videos, with a total of 68.4k views on Instagram and 2k total views on Youtube.
- CEO staff spoke in hundreds of public debates, workshops, and hearings in Brussels and in cities across Europe.
- We created accounts on social networks Mastodon and on BlueSky.
- We had over 169k visits to the website (+11.4% than last year) and over 271k pageviews (+11.1% than last year) and 14k downloads (+6.8% than last year).
- On Twitter, we had over 1.4M mentions during 2023. We ended the year with 26.7k followers.
- On Facebook we had over 18.6k followers.
- On Instagram we had over 1.6k followers and reached over 23.4k people, having had 68.4k views in our videos 2023.
- On Youtube we had 1.14K followers, and on LinkedIn 1.39K followers.



OUR TEAM

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THE FOLLOWING STAFF MEMBERS LEFT IN 2023:

LUCY HALL **PRESS OFFICER**



OUR BOARD

- Analía Penchaszadeh (The Netherlands/Argentina)
- Brid Brennan (The Netherlands/Ireland)
- Saskia Ozinga (Belgium)

Our advisory council includes the board members as well as:

- Pratap Chatterjee (India/US)
- Jakub Patočka (Czech Republic)
- Thomas Wallgren (Finland)
- Emma Avilés (Spain)
- Lisa Mittendrein (Austria)

INTERNATIONAL COALITION WORK

We're members of several international coalitions including:



European Alliance for Responsible R&D and Affordable Medicines



- Seattle to Brussels Network (S2B) www.s2bnetwork.org
- European Coalition for Corporate Justice (ECCJ) www.corporatejustice.org
- Climate Justice Now! (CJN!) <https://climatejusticenow.org/>
- European Network of Corporate Observatories <https://corpwatchers.eu/>
- Change Finance coalition <http://www.changefinance.org/>
- Fossil free politics coalition <https://fossilfreepolitics.org/>
- No Patents on Seeds <https://www.no-patents-on-seeds.org/en/start>
- European Alliance for Responsible R&D and Affordable Medicines <https://medicinesalliance.eu/>
- Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice <https://demandclimatejustice.org/>
- People vs. Big Tech <https://peoplevsbig.tech/>
- EU Food Policy Coalition <https://foodpolicycoalition.eu/>
- Justice is Everybody's Business Coalition <https://justice-business.org/>
- Real Zero Europe Coalition <https://www.realsolutions-not-netzero.org/>
- Kick Big Polluters Out coalition <https://kickbigpollutersout.org/>
- Ban PFAS manifesto: <https://banpfasmanifesto.org/en/>

HOW WE'RE FUNDED

CEO receives donations from individual supporters as well as grants from a number of trusts and grant-making foundations. Our funding policy rejects funding from EU institutions and corporations in order to maintain the independence of our research. You can access our accounts as well as a list of the trusts and foundations that are supporting us financially on our website.

SUPPORT US

We are the only fully independent organisation in Europe constantly monitoring and challenging the influence of many corporate lobby groups on policy making in the EU. We are committed to remaining independent from EU and - of course - corporate funding, so we rely on your support to keep going.

Every donation helps us fight the power corporations have in the EU. You can make a one-off or recurrent donation using these details or on our website:

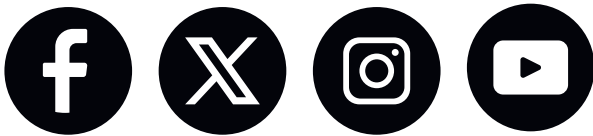
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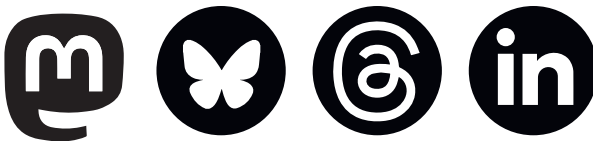
Account holder: Stichting CEO

FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

FACEBOOK X/EX-TWITTER INSTAGRAM YOUTUBE



MASTODON BLUESKY THREADS LINKDIN



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