

OCCRP AND PARTNERS FROM KYRGYZSTAN WIN TOP U.S. AWARD FOR CRIME REPORTING

April 6, 2020

A joint team from OCCRP, [RFE/RL's Radio Azattyk](#), and OCCRP member center [Kloop](#) has received the [2019 Tom Renner Award](#) from Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) for [Plunder and Patronage in the Heart of Central Asia](#), a series of stories that expose a massive outflow of dark money from Kyrgyzstan.

For the series, reporters revealed how, over the span of five years, more than \$700 million was funnelled out of the country — and across the world — by a single man: a self-confessed money launderer named Aierken Saimaiti. Over two dozen journalists worked for months to confirm Saimaiti's revelations, poring over his documents, following his leads, and reporting on the ground. In the midst of the investigation, Saimaiti was shot dead in Istanbul. His shocking murder increased the urgency to publish, not only as a matter of public interest, but to ensure the physical safety of the journalists working on the story. Reporters and editors spent the next 11 days working around the clock to finish piecing together, verifying, and expanding on the story Saimaiti had been trying to tell. Because the reporting team received multiple threats, their names are not disclosed.

"This, to me, is the reason that there is a Renner award — these crime syndicates that operate in the shadows, particularly in places that the world pays very little attention to," wrote one judge of "Plunder and Patronage." The project, the judge added, met "the true definition of revealing something that people do not want to be revealed, to the point of murder — and certainly danger for these journalists."

"It's a dangerous and often thankless job to write on this topic, but the reporters for RFE/RL and Kloop persevered to tell the last words of a dying source," said Drew Sullivan, co-founder and publisher of OCCRP. "This is a global award that recognizes that commitment, and we are honored to share in it."

When it was published, the series revealed in unprecedented detail how a vast criminal network depended on the collusion of corrupt officials to operate, and exposed the involvement of a former Kyrgyz customs chief widely seen as one of the country's most powerful men. The revelations led to outraged protests in Bishkek, the country's capital, in the days and weeks after publication, and Prime Minister Mukhammedkalyi Abylgaziev asked for an investigation into corruption in the country's customs.

Formed in 1975, IRE is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting. The IRE award for the best crime reporting is named after Tom Renner, a veteran investigative journalist who reported on organized crime and corruption.

By developing and equipping a global network of investigative journalists and publishing their stories, OCCRP exposes crime and corruption so the public can hold power to account.

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