



**Fighting Blackmail:  
Khadija Ismayilova and Azerbaijan's First Family  
Teaching Note**

**Case Summary**

On March 7, 2012, Azerbaijani investigative reporter Khadija Ismayilova received an anonymous package in the mail, postmarked Moscow. Inside were graphic photos of herself and her boyfriend having sex. A note inside said: "Whore, behave. Or you will be defamed." The photos were clearly stills from a video; presumably whoever had sent the package would soon post the video online, as had happened with other reporters in Azerbaijan. Ismayilova was convinced the blackmail threat came from the government.

Ismayilova at the time worked for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) as a freelance reporter. She also had an affiliation with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), based in Sarajevo, Bosnia. By 2012, she had spent 15 years in journalism as a writer, editor and trainer of other journalists. Fluent in English, Russian and Turkish in addition to her native language, she had worked at Azerbaijani as well as international news organizations. She had even spent 18 months in Washington, DC at the Voice of America (an organization she came to disdain).

While Ismayilova had reported on all manner of subjects, by 2010 she had found her vocation: investigative reporting. That was not easy in Azerbaijan, a country which had emerged from Soviet control only to fall under the rule of the Aliyev family (President Heydar Aliyev was succeeded by his son, Ilham). RFE/RL had been banned from over-the-air broadcast in late 2008 (it turned therefore to online broadcasts). This was widely perceived as censorship. Journalists were jailed for doing their job with disturbing frequency. From 2002-2007, the US-based International Freedom House downgraded Azerbaijan's media from "partly free" to "not free" and cited the president's "increasingly tight grip on the media."

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Ismayilova, however, was dogged. She came from a privileged background, but any sense of protection that might once have given her did not explain her willingness to practice Western-style journalism even under Azerbaijani constraints. She was best known in her native land for an RFE web-based radio show called *After Work*, in which she grilled all manner of guests, from government spokesmen to opposition politicians. In addition, she had published two blockbuster stories which revealed that President Ilham Aliyev's family had, unbeknownst to the public, amassed vast wealth through ownership in a variety of companies. One story ran on August 13, 2010 and the second on June 27, 2011.

In her reporting, Ismayilova found an invaluable resource in OCCRP. The organization, created in 2007 to promote cross-border investigative reporting, provided its members with access to global databases as well as a network of like-minded reporters. The journalists were willing to exchange operational know-how and information in pursuit of regional stories often beyond the reach of any one national publication. OCCRP founders Drew Sullivan and Paul Radu had early identified Ismayilova as an unusually intrepid reporter; their collaboration confirmed this.

In March 2012, Ismayilova was working on yet another story that linked the president's family to business dealings, this time to a major Azerbaijan construction company, Azenco, with multiple state contracts. Then on March 7, the anonymous threat arrived at her official residence, which happened to be the home of her brother, a conservative Muslim. As she quickly learned, copies of the photographs and the note inside had also been sent to a variety of news outlets.

In a conservative Muslim society like Azerbaijan's, the photographs were devastating. Based on the experience of colleagues, the video from which the stills apparently came would appear online or on television before long. The case concludes as Ismayilova had several decisions to make. Most immediately, she was about to go on air to host her daily radio show. Should she say anything about the mailing? Second, should she respond to the blackmail threat at all, and if so, what should she do? If, as she suspected, the government was the source of the documents, would it make sense to go through government channels to investigate the blackmail attempt? Finally, what about her research into Azenco? Should she continue her investigative work or hand it off to others in the interest of her own safety and the privacy of her family?

## Teaching Objectives

This case can be used to encourage students to think about the challenges of investigative reporting in an authoritarian society, about the role of state-funded broadcasters like VOA and RFE/RL, and about the emerging importance of cross-border reporting and organizations like OCCRP. Azerbaijan went through a period of measured liberalism after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, before falling back under the sway of the Aliyev family. The media enjoyed a brief flowering after independence as opposition publications sprang up, international news organizations opened bureaus and an independent press corps began to form. Even after the

Aliyevs clamped down, they were unable to return the press to the complete control exercised during the Soviet era.

Ask students to think about what it takes to become an investigative reporter in a country like Azerbaijan. What happens when a closed society breaks open? In the era of the Internet, can a government re-impose control and what role might journalists play in preventing renewed restrictions? How do journalists navigate changing levels of government tolerance of media? When is public inquiry welcome, and when do the authorities label it dissent—and should journalists care about the difference? Are there ways to practice responsible accountability journalism and stay out of jail?

Students may question whether Ismayilova has become too activist, especially on her radio show. Is she pushed to activism, or does she choose it? They should discuss whether and how the rules of journalism change when its practice incurs daily risk, either physical, psychological or political. She is fortunate to enjoy institutional support from RFE; what about her peers at Azeri publications? If blackmailed or threatened, such support becomes invaluable. But the journalist under attack, as Ismayilova discovers, remains essentially alone in deciding how to respond.

This point could lead smoothly to discussion of the role of state-financed news organizations. Students may point to Ismayilova's training in the US media as key to her professional growth, but she was disillusioned by her time at VOA. Is training in Western journalism practices necessary to develop a non-partisan journalistic style? More generally, try to define the difference between, for example, VOA and the BBC. Why does the public in general consider reports from the first propaganda and from the second impartial news? Is this just? Ask students to share their own experiences of news delivery in various countries. What is the impact of an organization like RFE/RL on Azerbaijani citizens, and should that influence our willingness as taxpayers to finance such enterprises? What about the impact of RFE/RL on Azerbaijani *journalists*?

Finally, encourage students to talk about the role of OCCRP. In a part of the world where the risks keep the numbers of investigative journalists low, an umbrella organization can offer moral support and a safety net. Technology, too, has played a crucial role in the evolution of reporting across borders. Thanks to the Internet, journalists worldwide now have tools that allow them to discover, for example, when government officials have looted their own countries and tried to hide the wealth. Discuss the role of online databases—of court cases, real estate ownership, corporate records etc.—and how these have opened up new worlds of inquiry to those with the ability to use them. Even in a closed society like Azerbaijan, secrets have become harder to keep because of globalization and the ability of investigators to look abroad for evidence of wrongdoing at home. Is OCCRP necessary, or simply good to have?

## Class Plan

Use this case in a class on investigative reporting, international reporting, ethics or data journalism.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

- 1) Should Khadija fight back against the blackmail threat? Why or why not?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

*In-class questions:* The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80–90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Khadija Ismayilova has the support of her editors at both RFE/RL and OCCRP. Should she involve them in her case? Why or why not?

b) Might Ismayilova have avoided this situation in the first place? How?

c) What are some of the strategies Ismayilova employed to do her work? List on board as start of a toolkit for journalists operating in authoritarian societies.

d) Is Ismayilova safer or less safe after the blackmail threat? Why?

e) What, if anything, can outside journalists or organizations do to help promote investigative journalism in parts of the world with no freedom of speech (or where the law is ignored)?

f) Discuss the role of OCCRP. Will it ever work its way out of a job?

g) Ismayilova's recent professional affiliations are with US-sponsored news outlets. Does this work for or against her?

h) How do you feel about RFE/RL and/or Voice of America? The BBC? What is the role of government-funded news organizations? Does it differ from other news outfits and, if so, how?

i) How has technology favored the investigative journalist? List some of the tools now available.

### **Suggested Readings**

Website for the Committee to Protect Journalists, Azerbaijan, 2012

SYNOPSIS: For a collection of articles about attacks on individual journalists in Azerbaijan during 2012, check out the website for the Committee to Protect Journalists. Ismayilova is mentioned in March articles. Explore the website further for the sidebar: Attacks on the Press.

<http://cpj.org/europe/azerbaijan/2012/?page=1>

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Country Program Snapshot: Azerbaijan, World Bank Group

SYNOPSIS: For an in-depth report on Azerbaijan's economy and political state, published in October 2013 but relevant to the period discussed in the case study, this World Bank account gives rich detail and is written in a factual tone.

<http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Azerbaijan-Snapshot.pdf>

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Website for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

SYNOPSIS: This website provides information not only about the broadcast organization, but about its Azerbaijani service. Take a look at the "about" sections for history and background. The history section includes a broadcast from the first RFE studio in Munich, in 1951.

<http://www.rferl.org/info/azerbaijani/183.html>

<http://www.rferl.org/info/history/133.html>

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Background on Khadija Ismailova

SYNOPSIS: There are two sources that reinforce one another and seem reliable. The first is Wikipedia. The second is in Russian, for those who can read it, and is hosted by Caucasian Knot (*Kavkazski Uzel*). The Russian one provides dates of her employment and other details.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khadija\\_Ismayilova](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khadija_Ismayilova)  
<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/221816/>

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Mark Feldstein, "Muckraking Goes Global," *American Journalism Review*, April/May 2012.

SYNOPSIS: This well-researched article looks at the "international proliferation of watchdog journalism." It contrasts the way the Internet has upended the business model for many Western publications with how the Web has given journalists in more repressive societies unprecedented access to information, paying special attention to the press in the Middle East and China.

<http://ajrarchive.org/Article.asp?id=5294>

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David Kaplan, *Global Investigative Journalism: Strategies for Support*, Center for International Media Assistance, January 14, 2013.

SYNOPSIS: This comprehensive report, first produced in 2007 and updated in 2013, documents the explosion of nonprofit investigative reporting groups from three in the 1980s to over 100 today. It details the significant role that technology has played in what journalists are able to do now, even in repressive societies. The report looks at different funding sources (multinational aid agencies, foundations, governments) and questions their sustainability. It also (p.10) makes an effort to define the term "investigative journalism."

<http://issuu.com/cima-publications/docs/global-investigative-journalism>