



Fighting Blackmail: Khadija Ismayilova and Azerbaijan's First Family Epilogue

On the evening of Wednesday, March 7, 2012, Khadija Ismayilova prepared her response to the blackmail threat that she presumed came from the Azerbaijani government. She decided to make it public. She wrote out a statement, and posted it to her Facebook account. That way, it was public, but did not directly involve either of the news organizations for which she worked: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) or the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). Both, she says, “were very supportive and very quick to support me.” But, she adds:

I didn't want to put it on any of the organizations' links... because I don't want to depend on the bureaucracy of the organizations. Whenever I want to hold a news conference, I am holding a news conference without consulting them.¹

Her statement said she had received a blackmail letter together with photos of an intimate nature and threats. “I am convinced and determined that I can withstand any blackmail campaign against me. I will continue my professional activity and work. Because any journalist who respects her profession cannot act otherwise,” she wrote.² She explained that as a journalist she had investigated businesses owned by President Ilham Aliyev as well as other instances of corruption; she listed some of her reports. “I have been expecting new dirty blackmailing moves from people who are stealing our public money,” she wrote.

Ismayilova also decided to continue her current reporting project. In a comment on Facebook below her statement, she wrote about her investigation into the Azenco construction company. In subsequent interviews, she mentioned it prominently. She did this deliberately, she says, “because I was afraid that if I gave a thought to it, I might step back. To prevent myself from

¹ Author's interviews with Khadija Ismayilova on November 16 and 17, 2013, in Istanbul, Turkey. All further quotes from Ismayilova, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

² For the full statement, please see: <https://reportingproject.net/occrp/index.php/ccwatch/cc-watch-indepth/1387-read-khadijas-statement>

stepping back, I announced the topic of the investigation even though it wasn't ready." RFE Editor Kenan Aliyev comments:

It required enormous bravery for this woman who lives and works in a traditional society, a conservative society. She's not married, and this kind of relationship is not very well received in the public. But she said this is my life, I'm not going to let anybody blackmail me over my private life. I have to either live my life, or be destroyed and accept this and shut up. I will never shut up.³

On March 14, 2012, the video of Ismayilova and her boyfriend were available on two websites, one posing as an opposition website, and a second pretending to be the Iranian International Broadcasting Co. (which broadcast in Azerbaijani, among other languages). As she later learned, both false websites were hosted on servers in Houston, Texas, and the sites were updated from Moscow, Istanbul and Baku. Inaccurate and scurrilous stories about the reporter and her family ran in government-controlled publications.

Ismayilova, following legal procedures, submitted a report to the prosecutor general's office and the ministry of internal affairs the day after receiving the blackmail threat; an investigation started only after the videotape's publication. After many months, the investigation had identified no suspects.

The reporter, however, continued to work and to publish. On May 3, OCCRP and RFE/RL jointly published a piece she wrote about President Aliyev's secret family stake in Azerbaijani gold fields. The story, which OCCRP headlined "Azerbaijan's President Awarded Family Stake in Gold Fields," was co-authored by Nushaba Fatullayeva.⁴ Six days later, on May 9, Ismayilova's byline ran on an RFE/RL story that reflected her research so far into Azenco: "Azerbaijani President's Family Benefits from Eurovision Hall Construction."⁵ Both stories provided damning details about the first family's extensive business interests. In October 2012, she and two Czech journalists published with OCCRP an article on real estate holdings in the Czech Republic by high-ranking officials of Azerbaijan.⁶

³ Author's telephone interview with Kenan Aliyev on April 1, 2014. All further quotes from Aliyev, unless otherwise referenced, are from this interview.

⁴ Nushabe Fatullayeva and Khadija Ismayilova, "Azerbaijani Government Awarded Gold-Field Rights to President's Family," RFE/RL, May 3, 2012. See: <https://reportingproject.net/occrp/index.php/en/ccwatch/cc-watch-indepth/1495-azerbaijans-president-awarded-family-stake-in-gold-fields> and http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan_gold-field_contract_awarded_to_presidents_family/24569192.html

⁵ See: http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan_first_family_build_eurovision_arena/24575761.html

⁶ Pavla Holcova, Khadija Ismayilova and Jaromir Hason, "Azeri Enclave in Czech Republic," OCCRP, October 11, 2012. See: <https://reportingproject.net/occrp/index.php/en/ccwatch/cc-watch-indepth/1666-azerbaijans-czech-enclave>

Meanwhile, the international community mobilized on Ismayilova's behalf. A popular UK singer joined an Amnesty International campaign to end human rights abuses in Azerbaijan; Ismayilova was mentioned specifically. On May 3, the International Media Women's Foundation awarded her its annual Courage in Journalism award. She accepted the award later in the year during events in New York and Los Angeles. A year later, in October 2013, she and her colleague Fatullayeva were among the winners of that year's Global Shining Light Award for their work in uncovering "questionable business dealings" by President Aliyev's family.

It was not an easy time for the reporter. She recalls: "It was a crazy time. It was a lot of stress. I had to stay cool. It was very busy." The government also took steps to curtail news reports about business in Azerbaijan. On June 12, 2012, the Azerbaijani National Assembly amended three laws—henceforth, the ownership of companies could be made public only by court order, on the order of a financial monitoring agency, or by consent of the owner. The next day, the legislature passed a law giving all ex-presidents and their wives immunity from prosecution for life.

The campaign to undermine Ismayilova did not end. In January 2013, she was arrested during peaceful street protests and sentenced to community service: sweeping the streets. She responded by inviting her supporters to help her sweep the streets clean of corruption, figuratively speaking. The district changed her penalty. In February 2014, she was accused of being a spy for the US, and summoned to the prosecutor general's office for allegedly revealing state secrets. The US embassy in Baku called the charges "absurd."