



Fighting Blackmail: Khadija Ismayilova and Azerbaijan's First Family

By 2012, Khadija Ismayilova had reported on her native Azerbaijan for 15 years—about business, politics, the economy, and lifestyle. Besides jobs at numerous local publications, she had worked at the Voice of America in Washington, DC, served as grants manager for an international media project, and run a training program in investigative journalism. In 2008, she joined Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) as bureau chief for its Azerbaijani news service, based in the capital, Baku.

In 2010, she stepped down as bureau chief to return to reporting, and developed a professional relationship with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), with headquarters in Sarajevo (the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina). With a colleague, she had just researched and published a breakthrough story on a bank secretly owned by one of Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev's daughters. Another exposé would follow within a year.

Azerbaijan was a semi-autocratic country with enormous oil wealth. One family had ruled on and off for decades. President Heydar Aliyev had led Soviet Azerbaijan from 1969-82 (when he was promoted to first deputy chair of the USSR council of ministers). The country became independent in December 1991 upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and Aliyev was elected president in October 1993. He served until 2003, when his son Ilham succeeded him. A period of quasi-liberalization of the press post-independence gave way under Aliyev *films* to a pattern of harassment and even violence against critical journalists and publications.

In March 2012, Ismayilova was in the early stages of researching a story about the links between Aliyev's family and a new concert hall in Baku that would soon host the prestigious Eurovision song contest. The story was only one part of a larger expose of corruption within the Azerbaijani Energy Company (Azenco). But on March 7, an anonymous letter postmarked Moscow and addressed to Ismayilova arrived at her brother's house. Inside the letter were graphic photographs of the reporter with her boyfriend. The photos were visibly stills from a videocamera installed in her bedroom. An accompanying letter warned her: "Whore, behave."

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Ismayilova was not easily scared. She had grown up the daughter of a government minister, part of the Azerbaijani elite. As host of a local radio talk show, she had earned a reputation, of which she was proud, as “a bitch.” But this threat was at a level new to her. First, it was clearly only a first demarche—the video was to follow. Second, it involved her family and her boyfriend. Azerbaijani journalists had died in the pursuit of lesser targets than the president. She had others to consider besides herself.

She had two decisions: how to respond to the blackmail threat, and what to do about her reporting project. Above all, knowing the pain it would cause her friends and family, she wanted to prevent release of the videotape. RFE/RL and OCCRP could give her advice. But the 37-year-old reporter would have to decide for herself what to do, and soon.

A Language Specialist

Ismayilova was born on May 25, 1976 in Baku. At the time, Azerbaijan was a Soviet republic. Its oil wealth made it valuable to the Soviet Union, and Baku’s harbor on the Caspian Sea bristled with oil rigs and associated machinery. Her father, Rovshan Ismayilov, served as the state minister of oil machinery from 1992 to 1996. She had two sisters and a brother. Although her parents were not religious, her brother was a conservative Muslim. Ismayilova herself was an atheist.

After graduating from Baku State University in 1997 with a degree in Turkish language and literature (she spoke fluent English, Turkish, and Russian), Ismayilova in short order held a sequence of jobs. The first was at *Eurasia* (Eurasia), a daily newspaper, which hired her as a translator. When the editor found himself short-staffed, he sent Ismayilova out on stories. She was swiftly promoted to editor, but quit the job within four months. Next came *Hürriyet* (Liberty), which published twice a week and had the widest circulation of any paper in the country. Ismayilova lasted two weeks, because the owner fired the editor-in-chief and the entire staff resigned in protest. The editor started a new weekly publication, *Günaydin*, where Ismayilova remained for 2 ½ years. There she gained her first real experience as a reporter and editor.

In 1999, she resigned to take a better-paid job at a tabloid, *Uch nokta*. The paper, which published three times a week, hired Ismayilova in an attempt to make its coverage more serious. She stayed only nine months, however, before moving to a Russian-language paper, *Zerkalo* (Mirror). As if her presence were enough to jinx matters, within two weeks the editor resigned—taking the staff with him.

In 2000, she teamed up with the former *Zerkalo* editor to start *Ekho*. The daily, Russian-language publication developed a reputation as a reliable news source. Ismayilova was director of the political reporting department in the lead-up to the 2003 presidential election. “I’m proud to say that I had a role in building a very good audience, readership and reputation for the

newspaper,” she says.¹ In 2002, while at *Ekho*, she won an internship through the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and spent a month in the US, including two weeks at the *Washington Times*. It was an eye-opening experience, and her first trip to the US.

Resigned. Ismayilova was dismayed, however, that in the final days of the 2003 campaign *Ekho* endorsed Ilham Aliyev, the son of the outgoing president, to succeed his father. The son won the October vote by a landslide. But she was angrier about the treatment of her own stories, some of them edited beyond recognition. In particular, she had reported on the treatment of an 11-year-old boy called out in public by his school principal because his father was an opposition activist. The principal instructed all the students to ostracize the boy. The entire incident was stricken from the story Ismayilova wrote for *Ekho*, except for a reference in the final sentence to “unpleasantness” at the school. Two days after the election, she quit.

Ismayilova was developing a pattern. She was 27. She knew that she did not want to work for the opposition newspapers. “I didn’t know where to go, because basically I didn’t know what to do,” she recalls. After four days, however, the English-language Caspian Business News (CBN) hired her. She had never written in English on a regular basis before, so she took the job with some trepidation. She stayed a year, improved her language skills and learned the tools of business reporting.

In 2004, she resigned to go freelance and simultaneously work as a grants manager for IREX, an international non-profit with education and media programs. “I decided to do freelance writing for whoever would publish it, and to have a 9-6 job that would bring more financial stability to my life,” she recalls.

Two trainers

In parallel, a new program for investigative reporting in Eastern Europe was coming together. Investigative reporting was enjoying a renaissance worldwide due to ever-more-powerful technology for uncovering and disseminating information. As authoritarian regimes crumbled or collapsed, journalists were newly in a position to investigate their previous activities. Even those countries that remained secretive were no longer impenetrable. While the work was often dangerous, a growing number of journalists in repressive societies were prepared to research malfeasance and make it public. China, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Philippines and elsewhere saw the creation of investigative journalism centers. The reporters’ toolkit kept expanding: formerly national databases became available globally; mobile and satellite phones, video and graphics,

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.

global positioning systems and other tools improved steadily. Established newspapers, but also a legion of bloggers and entrepreneurs, took advantage.²

Drew Sullivan, a US journalist who had trained and worked as an aerospace engineer, first visited Eastern Europe in 1999 as a media trainer for IREX. Sullivan had early expertise in computer-assisted reporting (CAR), and was much in demand. Struck by the need for responsible reporting in Eastern Europe, in 2000 he quit his job as an investigative reporter for the *Tennessean* in Nashville, and instead pursued opportunities to train local journalists in the former Yugoslavia.³

Sullivan in 2002 moved to Sarajevo as an IREX media trainer. At a training on how to report human trafficking, he met Paul Radu, a Romanian journalist who in 2001 had founded the Romanian Center for Investigative Reporting. Radu had considerable expertise on the subject: “I would go undercover and buy women from traffickers, and then deliver them to a shelter.”⁴ Sullivan suggested Radu join him as co-trainer.

Radu had recently returned from an Alfred Friendly Press Fellowship in San Antonio, Texas. There he was struck by the rich potential of the databases available in the newsroom, databases that Romanian journalists could only dream about. He asked to use them, and “I was able to find right away some fugitives from Eastern Europe that were actually hiding in the US,” he says.

Those turned into big stories in Romania and elsewhere. So I realized the power of these databases and started playing a lot with them... For me, it was so easy to do investigative reporting in the US compared to Romania.

By 2003, Sullivan had gotten to know a number of officials from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Eastern Europe. They were on the verge of closing down their media training programs “as an exercise in futility,” he recalls.⁵ Sullivan thought that was a mistake. In his view, what Eastern European journalists needed was on the job training in accountability journalism. “You need to leverage [Western journalism] standards and you need to practice the standards in the industry,” he told USAID. The agency suggested he propose a project that practiced what he preached.

² For more detail on the growth of investigative reporting during the 2000s, see Mark Feldstein, “Muckraking Goes Global,” *American Journalism Review*, April/May 2012. See: <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=5294>

³ At about this time, he also spent 11 months as a stand-up comic—another vocation—in the southeast US.

⁴ Author’s interview with Paul Radu on November 17, 2013, in Istanbul, Turkey. All further quotes from Radu, unless otherwise attributed, come from this interview.

⁵ Author’s interview with Drew Sullivan on November 15, 2013, in Istanbul, Turkey. All further quotes from Sullivan, unless otherwise attributed, come from this interview.

CIN. In 2004, Sullivan opened the Center for Investigative Reporting (*Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo*, or CIN) in Bosnia-Herzegovina with USAID funds.⁶ The first months were challenging, but the experience of editing the work of local journalists opened up a new world to Sullivan. He says:

That's when I really fell in love. Once you realize what's going on, and you have that entrée into the system, and you have people who can figure it out and explain it and come back to you, and you really see what's happening—I mean, it's scary. These countries are incredibly corrupt.

That year, CIN offered training in Azerbaijan as well as other former Soviet republics. Khadija Ismayilova attended. Sullivan remembered her: "She stood out right away because of her attitude." A few months later, he and Radu, who had teamed up, offered the best of their regional trainees an enhanced course in Warsaw. Ismayilova was selected and attended. As she recalls: "Paul [Radu] was talking about following the money, about offshore things. I didn't know how to use all this, but it was interesting."

OCCRP. As they ran trainings and worked with journalists from a variety of countries, Radu and Sullivan realized that a whole group of important stories was not getting done. National publications did not have the resources, access or research capacity to write regional, cross-border stories. Yet some of the most significant topics that each country's media reported on—corruption, drug and human trafficking, fraud—represented only a small, national piece of a bigger, international story. The two trainers decided to pursue funding for a cross-border reporting project. They found donors receptive.

In early 2007, Sullivan and Radu launched the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) with headquarters in Sarajevo. The early funders were the United Nations Democracy Fund and USAID. OCCRP aimed to be an umbrella organization for investigative journalism centers throughout the region. It would provide individual centers and journalists with increased research capacity, a wider audience, the opportunity for joint projects, and increased protection for journalists engaged in the often-dangerous work of reporting on organized crime and corruption from Eastern Europe to Central Asia. "In America," comments Sullivan, "the stories are about quality of life. In this part of the world, they're about life and death."

There's no deal in this part of the world that there isn't some political or crime interest in it. There's no pot of money, no influence, no job, no resource that isn't closely coveted by people who are on the inside.

⁶ Sullivan first proposed that USAID fund an actual newspaper; this was not a popular suggestion. New York University's journalism department, for which Sullivan had conducted trainings, was part of the investigative venture as well. See: <http://www.cin.ba>, also available in English.

Most of the reporters who worked with OCCRP had other media affiliations. “We’re kind of a layer over the top of what they’re already doing,” explains Sullivan. “All our stuff is regional. They will often come to us when they have a regional story because, they’ll say, ‘This is beyond our resources.’”⁷ OCCRP recognized that its members ran daily risks. Journalists pursuing corruption stories had died, often in grisly ways.⁸ So OCCRP offered not just editing and information services, but also practical training in how to defend against attack, how to encrypt information on laptops and other useful tactics.

Journalism in Azerbaijan

Meanwhile, investigative journalism in Azerbaijan had lost ground since the hopeful days of 1991. At first, in the wake of independence, the media situation had improved greatly. While the local media had never been able to call itself a free press, the parameters for freedom of expression had expanded far beyond what existed in Soviet times. Opposition newspapers took root. The Turan Information Agency, founded in 1990 by journalists who refused to work in state media, consistently delivered hard-hitting reports on politics, the economy, religion, finance and more.⁹ In parallel, nongovernmental organizations devoted to public policy issues such as transparency, human rights, rule of law and corruption flourished. In 2001, the country joined the Council of Europe; it later signed the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

As Aliyev père and son tightened their hold on Azerbaijan, however, the atmosphere changed. Corruption, which had been a problem even during Soviet times, became endemic as members of the elite took advantage of the advent of a capitalist system to enrich themselves. International human rights organizations consistently downgraded Azerbaijan. But western governments courted the country’s rulers, both for its oil and gas and for its strategic location. In 2007, for example, Azerbaijan granted NATO permission to use two bases and an airfield as staging areas for its war in Afghanistan.

By then, journalists critical of the government were under siege. On March 2, 2005, Elmar Huseynov, founder and editor of the opposition weekly news magazine *Monitor*, was shot multiple times as he returned to his Baku apartment around 9 pm. He died on the spot. Years later, the crime remained unsolved; most journalists assumed the government stood behind it. Huseynov’s

⁷ With time, OCCRP was able to offer its journalist partners access to an experienced international investigator; media insurance; and access to databases such as Lexis-Nexis™. It also sought international recognition for its contributing journalists, acknowledgement from the global media community that reporters from the region could work to international standards.

⁸ In 2000, Ukrainian blogger Georgiy Gongadze, who had exposed corruption by President Leonid Kuchma and his family, was found strangled and beheaded in a forest outside Kyiv.

⁹ Turan published in Azerbaijani, Russian and English.

death was not the first anti-media action in Azerbaijan, but it was the most severe. The killing, says Ismayilova, resulted in media self-censorship:

Journalists stopped doing investigations. They stopped doing high profile stories. There were very few journalists who knew about [journalism] standards in the country. And there were very few journalists who had the experience of writing for international newsrooms.

She was one of the exceptions. By 2006, she was tiring of her IREX job as grants manager. She applied for and got a job with the Azerbaijani service of Voice of America (VOA) in Washington, DC. In June 2006, she moved to the US. It was not a happy experience. Ismayilova came to feel that VOA exhibited some of the same shortcomings as some East Bloc publications. She objected, for example, when editors rejected her idea to interview an Iranian human rights activist just out of jail, asking her instead to cover a solar cooking project in Africa. She was again indignant when VOA—she says at the request of a partner Azerbaijani TV station—cut from an interview with a US assistant secretary of state a section in which he referred to the Azerbaijani political opposition.

Only 18 months after her arrival, in September 2007, she resigned and returned to Baku. ICFJ immediately hired her as a media trainer; she also started to file reports on a freelance basis for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

RFE job

Unlike VOA, Ismayilova came to respect RFE/RL. On July 1, 2008, it hired her as Baku bureau chief for its Azerbaijani service. The radio service, known as *Radio Azadliq*, had operated since 1953. Its Baku bureau opened unofficially in 1994, and was officially registered in 2004.¹⁰ The service broadcast 30-some hours of original programming a week, and rebroadcast an additional 40 hours. One of the first stories Ismayilova covered as bureau chief was the October 2008 presidential election, which the opposition boycotted. President Aliyev won for a second time. His administration then scheduled a referendum for March 2009 to eliminate presidential term limits; if it passed, Aliyev would be able to serve as president for life.

Banned. Coincidentally, it claimed, the National Television and Radio Council on December 30, 2008 announced that henceforth Radio Azadliq, as well as the BBC and Voice of America would be banned from national FM and medium-wave radio frequencies. This built on a 2006 prohibition on the re-broadcast by local radio stations of international programs. The council chairman said the ban was a result of Azeri law and was “in no way connected to politics.”¹¹ The

¹⁰ For a history of RFE/RL, see <http://www.rferl.org/info/history/133.html>

¹¹ Daisy Sindelar, “Azerbaijan bans RFE/RL, other foreign radio from airwaves,” RFE/RL, December 30, 2008. See: http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijan_Bans_RFERL_Other_Foreign_Radio/1364986.html. The council argued that because the government owns the airwaves, they could not be used by international broadcasters.

foreign broadcasters could continue to deliver their programs via satellite, cable and the Internet. But all expected steep declines in audience as a result of the ruling; most Azerbaijani citizens received their news via over-the-air radio and television.

It was not an easy time to be a journalist in Azerbaijan. In December 2007, RFE/RL freelance reporter Ilgar Nasibov was sentenced to 90 days in jail on libel charges after he complained about police brutality.¹² In August 2008, Nasibov and another reporter were attacked while interviewing villagers about a ban on public gatherings. Three opposition journalists—Qanimat Zahid, Sakit Zahidov, and Eynulla Fatullayev—were in jail. In 2002, the US-based Freedom House classified Azerbaijan as "partly free" in its "Freedom in the World" report. By 2005, it had downgraded Azerbaijan to "not free" and the 2007 report cited a "decline in press freedom, including President [Ilham] Aliyev's increasingly tight grip on the media."¹³ As the media-freedom representative for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) put it in 2008:

In Azerbaijan, we have seen a deterioration in the security of journalists due to harassment. Many so-called criminal cases have been orchestrated by the prosecutors against independent-minded print media and their editors and journalists. Many of them are even in prison.¹⁴

Ismayilova digs deep

At RFE/RL, Ismayilova reported to Kenan Aliyev (Aliyev was a common surname), the Azerbaijani service chief, who sat in Prague. Aliyev hired her because, he recalls, "I saw immediately that this woman has amazing energy and curiosity, and determination. She's fearless in many ways, and she also spoke English."¹⁵ Very quickly, he says, "she became an integral part of our operation."

Ismayilova managed a staff of 19 fulltime and eight freelance reporters. With the 2009 broadcast ban, the service had to reorganize. She recalls that headquarters briefly considered halting the operation altogether. Instead, the service reduced its radio programing and built up its Web presence with multimedia content. It re-trained audio reporters as video reporters.

After Work. Meanwhile, in March 2009, Ismayilova agreed to take over as host of an RFE current affairs radio show. Its previous host had been so upset by the government's broadcast ban

¹² Broadcasting Board of Governors, Threats to Journalists: Azerbaijan. See: <http://www.bbg.gov/broadcasters/journalism-underfire/threats-to-journalists-by-country/azerbaijan/>. Under international pressure Nasibov was released and his sentence suspended.

¹³ Kenan Aliyev and Khadija Ismayilova, "Does Council of Europe Matter in Azerbaijan?" RFE/RL, June 24, 2008. See: http://www.rferl.org/content/Commentary_Does_Council_Of_Europe_Matter_In_Azerbaijan/1145037.html. Freedom House was an independent, watchdog organization promoting democracy worldwide.

¹⁴ Sindelar, "Azerbaijan bans RFE/RL, other foreign radio from airwaves."

¹⁵ Author's telephone interview with Kenan Aliyev on April 1, 2014. All further quotes from Aliyev, unless otherwise referenced, are from this interview.

that he resigned. “I didn’t want to lose the show,” remembers Ismayilova, “because I believed we could get our audience back. So I decided to do it myself.”

The broadcast ran daily from 5-7 pm (and repeated on weekends).¹⁶ Listeners who previously had tuned in from their cars would now have to stay at work to catch the program on their computers. Ismayilova needed a strategy to attract them. So she modeled her show, which she dubbed “After Work,” on the hard-hitting BBC news interview program, HARDtalk. She says:

What could I do to make people sit in one place and listen to us? I decided to spill some blood in the studio... I invited officials, MPs from the ruling part, from the opposition, from wherever. The only rule is I’m equally mean to everyone... I have the reputation of a bitch.

The program enhanced Ismayilova’s standing in Azerbaijan; she became a household name. In addition to her radio work, in the fall of 2009, she started work on what seemed to have the potential to become a significant story. Her RFE colleague, Ulviyye Asadzade, had read in the press about sales of shares in a private bank, Silk Way, and noticed a familiar name among the bank’s shareholders—someone with the same name as President Aliyev’s daughter. Asadzade sought Ismayilova’s help in pursuing the lead.

Washington Post. Another project in late 2009, however, drew Ismayilova away for a while. *Washington Post* reporter Andrew Higgins was working on a story about members of President Aliyev’s family who apparently owned some \$75 million worth of real estate in Dubai. The president’s 11-year-old son was listed as the ostensible owner of nine mansions worth \$44 million (330 times the president’s annual salary). Ismayilova was Higgins’ local “fixer,” a journalist with good connections who could help him obtain the material he needed to substantiate his story. The *Post* published the story in March 2010, under a Dubai dateline.¹⁷ Higgins used records from the Dubai Land Department to establish that three people with the same birthdates and same names as Aliyev’s three children had purchased the properties.

While the story may have caused a ripple in the US, it stunned Azerbaijan’s journalism community. Never had a reporter published so much concrete information about the Aliyev family and its doings. Ismayilova, in particular, felt she and her RFE/RL colleagues learned a valuable lesson. “Before that, we had a feeling that these documents are not available for us,” she notes.

We had kind of a complex about doing good stories. When [the *Post*] did it, it was kind of a signal like—why can’t we do it?... The way Andrew [Higgins] was fact-checking was quite a good experience for me. He was

¹⁶ It also ran on satellite television two hours after the radio broadcast.

¹⁷ Andrew Higgins, “Pricey real estate deals in Dubai raise questions about Azerbaijan’s president,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 2010. See: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/04/AR2010030405390.html>. The story did not credit Ismayilova.

checking the birth dates to prove that this is not a namesake—it's the same person.

Newly emboldened, she and Asadzade returned to the bank story. They found a document on the Baku stock exchange website which listed as an owner of the Silk Way bank someone named Arzu Aliyeva—the same name as the president's 21-year-old daughter—and provided an address. The address was 7 Samed Vurgun Street. The reporters then checked the voter list on the Central Election Commission's website to find out who lived at that address. Aliyev's wife and their two daughters were registered at that address for voting purposes. The birth years for those individuals in the registry corresponded to those of the first family. Another Silk Way owner, they discovered, had the same name and address as the wife of the president of the state airline company, AZAL.¹⁸

As they dug deeper, the two reporters were able to determine that during Azerbaijan's 2003 privatization of the state airline, many of its properties—including airline catering, taxis, aircraft maintenance, duty-free stores—went to an umbrella company called SW Holding. Many SW Holding owners were members of the elite. SW Holding also took over the airline bank, Azal Bank, now renamed Silk Way. The bank privatization had not followed the legal process—there were no competing bids and no announcement. Instead, AZAL President Jahangir Askerov had quietly privatized the bank and sold it to his wife. The State Committee for Privatization had no idea the bank had gone private.

On August 13, 2010, RFE/RL published the story "Aliyev's Azerbaijani Empire Grows, as Daughter Joins the Game" on its website in both English and Azerbaijani.¹⁹ A [photograph of Aliyev's two glamorous daughters](#) accompanied the story. RFE also hosted a radio discussion of the report. The story referenced other cases when government figures used close relatives to privatize a profitable part of the enterprise. For example, two sons of Minister for Emergency Situations Kemaladdin Heydarov owned a group of companies, United Enterprises International, which dealt in everything from caviar to soccer clubs. The investigative report attracted wide public attention. The government reaction, however, was silence.

Reporter fulltime

With the Azal Bank story, Ismayilova had rediscovered an enthusiasm for investigative journalism. So in September 2010, she stepped down as RFE bureau chief in Baku and turned her attention back to reporting—but now as a freelancer. She kept her position as host of the After Work radio program, also as a freelance contributor. "I continued doing the radio program, but I

¹⁸ Zarifa Hamzayeva was the wife of AZAL president Jahangir Asgarov.

¹⁹ Ulviyye Asadzade and Khadija Ismayilova, "Aliyev's Azerbaijani Empire Grows, As Daughter Joins the Game," RFE/RL, August 13, 2010. See: http://www.rferl.org/content/Aliyevs_Azerbaijani_Empire_Grows_As_Daughter_Joins_The_Game/2127137.html

stopped all this bullshit with administrative things,” she says. “I wanted to become just a reporter. I loved it.”

The transition made sense. “It’s difficult to be in a management role, an editorial role, and have such a pronounced opinion on many things,” notes her RFE boss, Aliyev. As a freelancer, she could enjoy greater latitude. “In societies like Azerbaijan,” he adds, “people pay attention to you more if you have an opinion. And she’s an opinion maker.” Aliyev found that in her investigative work, however, Ismayilova kept her views to herself. “Her investigative reporting is always done to the highest standards of journalism. It’s always fact-based. There no bias, no cooking of information,” he asserts.

She is not an ordinary person. She’s an extraordinary person, in my opinion. She can be very controversial in terms of her style of journalism. And I had a lot of difficult days working together with her, and I still do. But at the end of the day, you know this is a person, a journalist you can trust.

Together with RFE colleague Durna Safarli, Ismayilova started to work on a second investigative story about a bank, this time the International Bank of Azerbaijan (ABB). In public court records, the reporters noticed that the bank—although he never repaid the loans—repeatedly extended credit to a single individual using different company names. Khagani Bashirov, they learned, had a personal link to the bank president. At one point, he was arrested and mysteriously released.²⁰

As she was researching the story, Ismayilova noticed that one of the companies to which the International Bank had extended credit was registered in Panama. In September 2008, Ismayilova had attended a Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Lillehammer, Norway.²¹ There she had run into Paul Radu and Drew Sullivan, who had started OCCRP 18 months earlier. Sullivan invited Ismayilova to work with the reporting project: “She was one of the first people we chose to work with,” he remembers. She was intrigued: “It’s access to training. It’s doing what is interesting. Investigative reporting is basically what I like doing.” But nothing concrete had come up.

Now, however, she wrote to Sullivan, asking if there was a way to find out about companies registered in Panama. Radu had recently returned from a fellowship at Stanford University where, in 2009-10, he had created a tool for journalists trying to track money,

²⁰ Safarli and Ismayilova eventually published a story July 7, 2011 on Radio Azadliq. “It was a very complicated story,” says Ismayilova, “with a lot of numbers, a lot of figures. I don’t think we managed to present it in an interesting way.” See: Durna Safarli and Khadija Ismayilova, “How were 185 million manta in the bank,” *Radio Azadliq*, July 7, 2011. <http://www.azadliq.org/content/article/24263362.html>

²¹ For more on the conference, see: <http://www.gijc2008.no/news/141>. The network was created to unite journalists from the Europe and the Middle East to China and the Philippines engaged in investigative work.

shareholders and company ownership across international borders. He called it the Investigative Dashboard, and it became a crucial piece of OCCRP's contribution to regional journalism. "It's basically due diligence," says Radu. "We go beyond company records. It's a global research desk." In late 2010-early 2011, the dashboard was in its early stages, but functional.²²

ID had found a database that a hacker had "scraped" from the Panama State Registry of companies.²³ OCCRP included a link to the scraped database on ID and created a video on how to use it. The original registry did not allow searching by name, but the scraped version did. "They sent me a video tutorial on how to use that database," recalls Ismayilova. "That was amazing." As she played around with the database, she decided to try searching for President Aliyev's wife and daughters. She got a hit.

Azerfon. Ismayilova had already been researching the ownership of Azerfon, an Azerbaijani telecoms company created in March 2007. The company by 2011 had 1.7 million subscribers and a monopoly on high-speed mobile phone service. She had looked at records in the Tax Ministry, which showed that the company was owned by three Panama-registered companies: Hughson Management, Gladwin Management and Grinnell Management. That in itself was odd, because when the Communications Ministry announced the creation of Azerfon in late 2008, it said the company was owned by the German firm Siemens AG and two British firms. But Ismayilova had picked up the phone to ask Siemens about its ownership stake in Azerfon. A spokeswoman told her Siemens had never owned any part of Azerfon. Neither had the Finland-based Nokia Siemens Networks (NSN). Ismayilova was stumped.

Now, thanks to OCCRP, she had access to the Panamanian registry. It yielded some interesting information. Leyla Aliyeva, the president's then-25-year-old daughter, was registered as president of both Gladwin and Grinnell. Her sister, Arzu, was treasurer at both companies. As for Hughson, there Arzu was president and Leyla treasurer. Each company was started with an investment of \$10,000. Ismayilova had found the proof she needed.

Ismayilova submitted a draft of the story to RFE/RL in late spring. As always, Aliyev and other editors went through Ismayilova's story carefully, questioning, checking facts and trying to make it even stronger. Sometimes, says Aliyev, it could be hard to prove an allegation. If that happened, typically he would either decline the story or cut the part that was uncertain. At the same time, sometimes uncertainty had to be part of the package in reporting from Azerbaijan. "Some of our investigative reports are not just to prove that someone is doing something wrong," says Aliyev, "but also to raise the question for the public."

²² The Investigative Dashboard evolved to become by 2013 a global data clearinghouse (including 400 databases), plus an international network of journalists, and a community of professionals working together to report on corruption and crime.

²³ A proficient computer user can employ a computer program to "scrape" data from a database, making the information available in a form which can be searched in ways the original database may not have allowed. OCCRP soon hired the hacker, Daniel O'Huiginn.

The public has to have more information about what is happening. That's the main goal of our investigative reporting. Because in countries like Azerbaijan, it's impossible to prove everything. Our goal is to raise the question, and try to get answers. We may not get the answers, but even by raising the questions I think we're fulfilling our role as agents of the public interest.

Azerbaijani authorities had recently taken a hard line with journalists; the government apparently was worried about contagion from the "Arab spring" events in the Middle East. Despite what continued to be serious risk, journalists from the nonprofit Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism, for example, had tracked the wealth of a top associate of deposed Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak; other Arab media had reported such stories as government corruption in Tunisia and human rights abuses in Egypt.²⁴ The Azerbaijani government, apparently hoping to forestall similar efforts, had detained, interrogated and even abused reporters.

Nonetheless, on June 27, 2011, RFE/RL published Ismayilova's second story portraying corruption at the highest levels of the Azerbaijani government. The story, "Azerbaijani President's Daughters Tied to Fast-Rising Telecoms Firm," revealed the falsehood that Siemens owned the company and described in detail who actually benefited from its lucrative business.²⁵ The story provided another unsightly glimpse into how President Aliyev and his family were enriching themselves, often at public expense.

Fallout

Again, the administration seemed to meet the RFE/RL story with silence. However, it was not inactive. Unbeknownst to Ismayilova, the state phone company during the first week in July installed a landline in the apartment she lived in from mid-June to early September 2011. The landline allowed the authorities to spy on her using a videocamera concealed in her bedroom. Ismayilova had a boyfriend. In conservative Islamic circles, young people were forbidden to engage in sex before marriage. To do so brought shame not only on themselves, but on their families.

Ismayilova, however, knew nothing of the surveillance. She was working on another story about President Aliyev's family investments. Research was leading her to conclude that the Azenco construction company, which had won contracts for multiple high-profile and expensive public building projects, was owned by a series of front companies; she suspected the first family stood behind them. One of the projects was a lavish concert hall to host the next widely-followed

²⁴ Feldstein, "Muckraking Goes Global."

²⁵ Khadija Ismayilova, "Azerbaijani President's Daughters Tied to Fast-Rising Telecoms Firm," *RFE/RL*, June 27, 2011. See: http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan_president_aliyev_daughters_tied_to_telecoms_firm/24248340.html

Eurovision song contest. In January 2012, she sent inquiries to government agencies as she tried to substantiate her hypothesis.

For this story, Ismayilova decided to work with both RFE and OCCRP. She had also been busy consulting to CNBC television for a report that further explored the president's real estate holdings in Dubai. The report, "Filthy Rich," aired on February 23. That month, the German ZEIT Foundation awarded her its annual Gerd Bucerius Free Press of Eastern Europe prize. The foundation cited her "astute articles on corruption, the abuse of power and breaches of human rights," as well as "her discomfiting, fearless stories."²⁶

March 7, 2012. But on Wednesday, March 7, Ismayilova's investigation came to an abrupt halt. Her sister-in-law telephoned to say an envelope had arrived that morning, with an unknown (later proved fake) return address and postmarked Moscow. Although Ismayilova was living with a sister at the time, she was officially registered at her brother's apartment. In the letter were graphic photos of Ismayilova and her boyfriend, having sex. There was a letter as well. It said: "Whore, behave. Or you will be defamed." As she would soon learn, other copies of the letter and the photos, which were clearly stills from a video, went to her boyfriend, to other relatives and to the opposition media. Ismayilova was certain the package came from the Azerbaijani security service or even from the president's office.

Her brother, a conservative Muslim, had opened the package. He was headed over, bent on revenge, said his wife. "Well, that's what is expected to happen when your sister is having sex without marriage," comments Ismayilova. "You're supposed to kill someone. Either the guy, or your sister, or both... He is very conservative." Her first thought was to deflect her brother which, with the help of a friend and other relatives, she was able to do. Her second thought was for her work.

"I was kind of ready to get [the threat], because two of my colleagues [from opposition papers] had been filmed secretly before, and the footage had been shown on TV," she says. In those cases, the video aired in prime time, as part of the news program, and spared no details. "Every critical journalist would expect something to happen," she adds. She had even bought a tent, intending to put it up inside her apartment for privacy, "but it was just too hot in summer." The tent idea, she notes wryly, came from Libya's Col. Moammar Khadafy, who carried a tent everywhere to avoid surveillance.

Ismayilova recognized that the timing was deliberate: "They've been waiting, and when I was doing the next story, and they knew that I'm doing the next story, they sent me this letter," she says. Her first reaction was fury. "I was really angry," she recalls.

²⁶ Fritt Ord Foundation, Oslo, website. See: http://www.fritt-ord.no/en/priser/category/pressepriser_for_russland_og_ost_europa/

I'd been thinking about what will I do if it happens? And I never had to answer [before]. I thought that I don't know what I will do. I was angry, and I realized what I fear is that I will step back.

She also realized that she needed advice. So she called OCCRP to talk to Sullivan and Radu, and RFE to speak with her editor, Kenan Aliyev. OCCRP's first concern was her safety. As in Russia, where at least 17 journalists had been killed in the previous decade, Azerbaijani reporters were in danger. Just four months earlier, on November 19, 2011, journalist Rafiq Tagi had been attacked by two unknown assailants. Tagi, a critic of the Azerbaijani government, Iran and political Islam, died four days later of his stab wounds.²⁷ On March 26, 2011, six masked men had reportedly abducted and beaten Seymur Haziyeu, a journalist with the opposition newspaper *Azadliq*. He reported that his assailants warned him not to criticize the president in print. On April 2, police detained several journalists covering anti-government protests and prevented them from photographing and interviewing participants. The next day, another *Azadliq* journalist, Ramin Deko, was reportedly abducted, assaulted and warned not to write critical articles.²⁸

"Both [Sullivan and Radu] asked if I wanted to get out of the country right away," remembers Ismayilova. "I said no, no, no." Then together they walked through the likely scenarios. All three recognized that, because the photos were video stills, it was only a matter of time until the video itself was made public. "What will likely happen if you stop reporting?" Sullivan asked her hypothetically.

Is that [blackmail] information going to get out? Are you going to get all the tapes? And the probability is you're not... Then you look at the downside: what's going to happen if this information comes out?... There are a lot of people [in Azerbaijan] whose attitude would be that she should be stoned to death. So the downside is pretty heavy. There's no good answer either way. She had to make some decisions to what was important to her in her life.

Radu suggested she should go public with the threat, and in principle Sullivan agreed. "The best way is to call their bluff and fight it out," says Sullivan, "because what they're trying to do is illegal and immoral."

But it's not your life, you're not facing this thing. She has to face this thing... The work that she's done on the government of Azerbaijan has

²⁷ "Killed Azerbaijani journalist buried in Baku," RFE/RL, November 24, 2011. See: <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/24401287.html>

²⁸ Amnesty International, "Document-Azerbaijan: No More Running Scared," Media Briefing, February 20, 2012. AI index: EUR 55/001/2012. See: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR55/001/2012/en/2f90536f-c892-441e-add3-a0a1cedc16be/eur550012012en.html>

gotten other people killed for far less... Nobody really knows what that's like to go through—the risks, the threats, the extortion.

RFE's Aliyev offered full support. "We are fully behind you," he told her. "You're being targeted because of your work. I as an editor, and we as a company, will be behind you." Meanwhile, Ismayilova was scheduled to host her radio show in about two hours. Aliyev counseled her to stay home. "Kenan told me to stay home and stay safe and we will figure something out. I said no, I'm going in and running my show, and I'm not going to show that I'm upset," says Ismayilova. She did go in, and told only her producer that if anything happened, he should take over. "I know that an angry journalist is not a good journalist," Ismayilova told herself. "So [I told myself] I don't want to be an angry journalist. I will keep my anger under control."

After the show, Ismayilova consulted with her lawyer. She wanted to understand the legal consequences of any action she might take to defend herself. In addition, she had to decide what to do about the story she was currently researching on the construction company, Azenco. Then there was her personal life. She did not, for example, want to make things worse for her boyfriend. "I didn't want to affect his life. He didn't choose my profession. He didn't choose the risks he has faced," she says. She also feared for her relatives. Retribution against family members was all too common; already, government media had on occasion labeled her relatives as Armenian: code for traitor in a country that had recently fought a war over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. They had also written about her father, calling him corrupt. "That really hurt," she says.

Another consideration was her health. "I was afraid that my nerves will not endure it. I actually thought about my health a lot," she remembers. She acknowledges that there are some areas she will not write about because she is physically afraid. "Like there is a huge need to do a drug trafficking investigation in Azerbaijan," she says.

And nobody does it. I'm physically not feeling able to do that. First, because the government is involved in this business, so there is no way the government will defend you if you get in trouble. It's too risky.

On the other hand, there was her pride. Journalists, she says, "dig because we are curious, and we share information because it's also human. We want to share information, it's in human nature. When you don't do it, then you go against your nature. When you don't do it because you are scared, it's insulting. It's humiliating." It was already nearly 9 pm. Ismayilova had to decide whether to react at all to the blackmail attempt and, if so, what to do.