

INVESTIGATION

The Corleones of the Caspian

How Azerbaijan's dictator woos the United States and Europe.

By [Michael Weiss](#)

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On Oct. 9, 2012, the American subsidiary of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) purchased a five-story, 23,232-square-foot mansion in the heart of Washington, D.C., for the purposes of “expand[ing] its operations in the United States,” as the *Washington Business Journal* put it. Oil is the one thing Azerbaijan has plenty of, and it’s the one thing the United States is most interested in, so SOCAR’s “operations” are bound to be extensive.

Given the money at stake, the mansion’s sale price was a pittance: \$12 million. The exact address is 1319 18th St. NW, which ought to be familiar to many an old Cold War hand as the former office of Jeane Kirkpatrick, a onetime U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and one of the most influential officials in Ronald Reagan’s administration. This mansion is where *Demokratizatsiya*, the journal of post-Soviet democratization, founded in 1992, used to be published. And, for a time, its most famous lessee was Freedom House, the respected human rights monitor, which today counts Azerbaijan among the “not free” countries.

“I’m speechless,” said Jennifer Windsor, the executive director of Freedom House when it was based at the Kirkpatrick address and now the associate dean for programs and outreach at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. “I find it the highest form of irony that one of the world’s least free countries is now occupying what was the house of freedom.”

It’s as much a sign of the times as it is an irony. Barack Obama’s administration has cut the U.S. budget for democracy promotion and has struck all manner of cynical bargains with kleptocratic authoritarian regimes. Realpolitik and isolationism are trading at high premiums again, as whole swaths of Congress, beholden to a libertarian or Tea Party

ideology, view human rights as, at best, an afterthought of the national interest or, at worst, as an inconvenience that America can ill afford in the 21st century.

But SOCAR USA's tony new address also underscores the quiet success of one of the most energetic and free-spending foreign lobbies in American and European politics — that of the regime headed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Over the past decade, a South Caucasian country the size of Ireland but with possibly twice the oil reserves of Texas has managed to win friends and influence people who include past and present members of the U.S. Congress, British Parliament, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which was once known for pressuring dictatorships, not embracing them. Where it hasn't resorted to all-expenses-paid vacations to Azerbaijan's capital, Baku — a form of what one European think tank witheringly describes as “caviar diplomacy” — it has poured millions of dollars into top-drawer U.S. lobbying, consultancy, and PR firms to whitewash its image in the American media.

But it's a bit more subtle than that: The Aliyev regime has quietly made inroads into transatlantic establishments by recapitulating a hat trick of persuasive arguments.

The first is that Azerbaijan is the only secular Muslim-majority state that is an ally of the United States and NATO in the war on terror as well as a happy commercial and diplomatic ally of Israel, which imports around a third of its energy from the Caucasian state. Azerbaijani infrastructure is set to help facilitate NATO and U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan later this year.

The second is that its oil boom, which caused Azerbaijan's GDP to grow tenfold from 2001 to 2011, is a necessary counterweight for diversifying Europe's energy consumption and putting an end to Russia's monopolistic and bullying tactics, the nadir of which were its “gas wars” with Ukraine and Belarus. Almost all of Azerbaijan's exports in 2011 were in oil and petroleum products. The so-called Southern Gas Corridor, a pipeline rival to Russia's Nord Stream, advanced dramatically last December when a BP-led consortium began laying the groundwork for Shah Deniz 2, a \$28 billion natural gas exploration project in the Azerbaijani-controlled part of the Caspian Sea. British Foreign Secretary William Hague and EU Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger were both in Baku for the signing of this landmark deal, which will ship gas through two pipelines:

the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, running through Turkey, and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, running through Greece and Italy. Even though Azerbaijani gas going to the European Union represents just 2 percent of the 500 billion cubic meters per year that the continent imports, Europe wants to lower its energy dependence on Russia. Moscow's state-owned gas giant, Gazprom, is now under antitrust investigation by the European Commission. And the continuing Western standoff with the Kremlin over Russia's invasion and destabilization of Ukraine will mean that Azerbaijani gas becomes more important to Brussels in the coming months and years.

Finally, situated at the gateway between Asia and Europe, Azerbaijan is a strategic partner for the West in resisting Iran's nuclear threat as well as Russian President Vladimir Putin's attempts to "re-Sovietize the region," as then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton memorably characterized the Russian-conceived customs union, entry into which has sparked a political crisis in Ukraine. So as the United States goes looking for as many friends as it can find in the post-Soviet world — especially those with energy resources — Baku's influence in Washington is only poised to grow.

And if the West is ever ungrateful or unreceptive to these overtures, the Azerbaijani lobby passive-aggressively intimates, then the Aliyev regime always has the option of turning toward Moscow or Tehran, both of which are eagerly knocking at its door.

The immediate aim of this three-tiered charm offensive is to "Johnny Mercerize" an otherwise ugly domestic political reality, as one veteran Azerbaijan specialist, who spoke to **Foreign Policy** on the condition of anonymity, termed it. That is, accentuate the positive and ignore, downplay, or just plain lie about the negative. But there's another encoded agenda. "The Aliyev lobby's true purpose is to send a message back home that there is nothing that can be done to remove this family from power," said Elmar Chakhtakhtinski, chair of Azerbaijani-Americans for Democracy (AZAD), an opposition-linked diaspora group. "When a U.S. congressman or former congressman congratulates Aliyev on victory, it doesn't necessarily give the regime any better position in the West, but to the regime's own domestic population, it sends a powerful signal that even the West is behind it, that the world outside of Azerbaijan isn't that much different." The demoralizing effect such signaling can have on embattled dissidents or civil society

groups in Azerbaijan is profound.

A grim human rights record

Indeed, belying the lobby's in-plain-sight efforts to portray Azerbaijan as a democracy that shares America's values is an incredibly grim human rights situation, about which the U.S. government — a prominent target of Aliyev's overtures — is under no illusions, or at least isn't anymore. In 2010, Clinton, then the U.S. secretary of state, claimed that Azerbaijan had made "tremendous progress in democracy development." But contrast that to what the U.S. ambassador in Baku, Richard Morningstar, told Radio Azadliq, the Azerbaijani service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), on May 16 of this year: "I think we are in a situation where we talk past each other on democracy issues." That's putting it mildly.

The State Department's human rights report for Azerbaijan found in 2013 that there were "[i]ncreased restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, including intimidation, arrest, and use of force against journalists and human rights and democracy activists online and offline" and "[u]nfair administration of justice, including increased reports of arbitrary arrest and detention, politically motivated imprisonment, lack of due process, executive influence over the judiciary, and lengthy pretrial detention for individuals perceived as a threat by government officials, while crimes against such individuals or their family members went unpunished."

Take just a few examples. In January 2013, police beat and tear-gassed peaceful protesters in the city of Ismayilli. Two people who weren't there on that day, but only arrived afterward, were also arrested: Tofiq Yaqublu, the deputy chairman of the Musavat Party and a reporter for *Yeni Musavat* newspaper, and Ilgar Mammadov, the head of Republican Alternative, an anti-Aliyev civic movement. Mammadov was also denied admittance into the 2013 presidential race on the grounds that many of the required signatures were invalid; he has called Aliyev an illegitimate leader who ought to resign. In March 2014, he was sentenced to seven years in prison; Yaqublu was sentenced to five years. On May 22, the European Court of Human Rights stated in a news release that it found that Mammadov "had been arrested and detained without any evidence to reasonably suspect him of having committed the offence with which he was charged"

and that the “actual purpose of his detention had been to silence or punish” him for criticizing the government.

In March and April 2013, authorities used water cannons and rubber bullets against a demonstration in Baku. They then arrested seven members of NIDA (“Shout”), a youth activist group, initially charging them with drugs and explosives possession and then accusing them, along with another activist from the Free Youth movement, of plotting mass disorder — a common rap used against demonstrators in Putin’s Russia too. In May 2014, eight Azerbaijani activists, seven of them the NIDA members, were given lengthy prison sentences, ranging from six to eight years.

According to Rebecca Vincent, a former U.S. diplomat and a human rights activist, Aliyev has instituted a “climate of fear” in a country that has seen its number of political prisoners jump from 65 in January 2013 to “nearly 100 cases.” The Institute for Peace and Democracy, an Azerbaijani project funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and run by Leyla Yunus (who is herself now being criminally investigated by the Aliyev government), puts the figure at 130. Much of the crackdown coincided with the October 2013 presidential election, the results of which were declared an Aliyev landslide — an entire day before any voting took place. Following the election, the Azerbaijani regime presided over what Amnesty International’s program director for Europe and Central Asia termed a “ruthless and relentless attack on any dissenting voices in the media.” If anything, Aliyev has regressed in his repressive methods. “Normally President Aliyev signs pardon decrees to mark the new year, as well as the Novruz holiday, which sometimes include cases of political prisoners. However, this year, he did not sign decrees on either occasion,” Vincent said.

Instead, he locked up more people. One of them, Anar Mammadli, is the chair of the Baku-based Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS), a respected independent monitor partly funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and the National Democratic Institute. EMDS had documented “serious violations” at 91 percent of the 769 polling stations monitored during the October election. Mammadli was arrested in mid-December and charged not only with tax evasion and illegal business activity, but also with trying to rig the election himself, an allegation Vincent calls

“absurd.”

In March 2014, the Baku headquarters of the oppositional Azerbaijan Popular Front Party was blown up. Firefighters on the scene attributed the explosion to a faulty gas tank in the building’s basement, home to a barber shop. The barber, however, insists that no such tanks were in his establishment. The building’s Turkey-based owner, meanwhile, claimed that he had received threats against his family from a government official, and he even posted one recorded conversation online. The Popular Front blames the Aliyev regime for the headquarters blast and points out that several of its activists had been arrested around the same time on charges of “resisting police orders.” Among them was 18-year-old Tofiq Dadashov, who was held in the Binagadi Police Department for 48 hours without food or water. On March 5, Amnesty posted a notice on its website stating, “authorities in Azerbaijan have been using every trick in the book to stop members of the opposition.”

What remains of an adversarial or free media is also on the ropes. The oldest opposition newspaper, *Azadliq*, is nearing bankruptcy after a spate of civil damages claims and the State Publishing House’s demand that it pay all its outstanding debts at once. Another such outlet, *Yeni Musavat*, suspended publication in early November 2013 because of state restrictions on the release of its sales proceeds. In May, Parviz Hashimli, a reporter for the independent newspaper *Bizim Yol* and the editor of the online site *Moderator*, was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges that he prompted another man to smuggle weapons from Iran into Azerbaijan. Hashimli says that not only did he not know the alleged weapons trafficker (and now his accuser) but that he was denied a lawyer for 20 days following his arrest and kept from talking to anyone else. Both publications with which Hashimli is affiliated are known for their muckraking journalism on corruption and human rights abuses.

It is something of a national pastime in Azerbaijan that critics of the Aliyev regime or documenters of the country’s enormous state graft end up being accused of crimes themselves, and locked away in prisons.

Keeping up with the Aliyevs

Ilham Aliyev first attained power in 2003 when he succeeded his father, Heydar, the Soviet-era satrap of Moscow who had ruled Azerbaijan since 1969, making the elder Aliyev both a Soviet and post-Soviet dictator. His son now presides over one of the world's longest-running dynastic dictatorships and is paterfamilias of a family that WikiLeaks U.S. Embassy cables variously refer to as a medieval feudal fiefdom or Sonny Corleone of *The Godfather*.

It's also hopelessly corrupt, according to a number of published reports. Despite the president's official salary of \$228,000 per year, his children all own millions of dollars in property. As the *Washington Post* uncovered in 2010, when Heydar Aliyev (Ilham's son, who was named for the boy's grandfather) was just 11 years old, he bought \$44 million in luxury mansions on the man-made Palm Jumeirah archipelago in Dubai. Heydar's two sisters, Leyla and Arzu, both now in their 20s, also own extravagant digs in the United Arab Emirates, with the three children possessing a collective real estate portfolio worth \$75 million. Moreover, as I discovered several months ago, the younger Heydar, now well into his teenage years, is technically the legal owner of 48.99 percent of the Azerbaijani subsidiary of Vneshtorgbank (VTB), one of Russia's largest state-owned banks, with branches in two dozen countries and more than \$712 million in French and German pensioner deposits. (VTB was the subject of an in-depth corruption study by Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his Foundation for Fighting Corruption, the final report of which I edited.)

All three of the Aliyev brood were also found to be owners of a lucrative Azerbaijani telecom company called Azerfon, whose more colloquial moniker, Nar Mobile, is thought by the State Department to be named not just for the Azeri word for "pomegranate" but also for first lady Mehriban Aliyeva's sister, Nargiz. When RFE/RL reporter Khadija Ismayilova broke the story that Azerfon was likely controlled by the Aliyevs, the state targeted her for harassment by bugging her apartment, threatening her with nasty messages ("whore, behave, or you will be defamed") and publishing compromising photographs of her in newspapers associated with the ruling New Azerbaijan Party. The government has claimed to be investigating what was obviously the professional intimidation of a journalist.

“Nothing happened,” Ismayilova said in an interview several months ago. “I sued the prosecutor’s office for not investigating and for violating my rights and now the case is with the European Court of Human Rights.” But if Baku is investigating claims of intimidation, they have a funny way of doing it. On February 18, the Serious Crimes Investigation Department of the Prosecutor General’s Office in Baku accused Ismayilova of divulging state secrets and summoned her for questioning. She had posted a document to her Facebook account allegedly showing how Aliyev’s security service, the MNB, tried to recruit an Azerbaijani opposition activist as an informant. Pro-Aliyev media have branded her an American spy, an accusation both she and the U.S. Embassy in Baku ridiculed. Although she has not been formally charged with any crime, Ismayilova has been prohibited from leaving Baku without the consent of the authorities. In February 2014, she posted an appeal to her followers and defenders on Facebook, telling them not to keep quiet if she wound up in jail: “If/when I get arrested, I want you to make sure that your audience understand the reasons. Anti-corruption investigations are the reason of my arrest. The government is not comfortable with what I am doing. I am about to finish three investigations. I will make sure to finish them before anything happens. If not, my editors and colleagues will finish and publish [them].”

Then on March 12, Ismayilova was “summoned” again by Azerbaijan’s general prosecutor — this time for two days in a row — for questioning regarding meetings she had with two U.S. congressional staffers in Baku in January. “Who are these dogs that you would discuss with them Azerbaijan’s education system?” Ismayilova reported she was asked. She remains unbowed: It was Ismayilova who conducted the May interview with Ambassador Morningstar in which he said that the United States and Azerbaijan are “talking past each other” on human rights. That interview has already caused the diplomat a great deal of trouble with his host government: Ramiz Mehdiyev, the head of the Azerbaijani Presidential Administration, said Morningstar violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and that his comments constituted “a gross interference in the internal affairs of the country.”

Azerbaijan ought to be extremely fertile soil for the conduct of investigative journalism — which may account for why the Aliyev regime wants to ensure that it never is. In 2013,

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index rated Azerbaijan 127 out of 177 countries — on equal footing with Russia. And, as the World Bank concluded in 2011, "Corruption in Azerbaijan is an integral part of the governance regime, a multi-player prisoner's dilemma where no single player can make a unilateral move because they owe their position to the President's inner circle, and breaking the trust of this group would be severely punished." Rebecca Vincent, the human rights campaigner, said that this undermines the lobby's outreach to

foreign businesses: "Something that foreign investors should definitely be aware of is the lack of rule of law in the country. If you had to take something to a national court, you couldn't have a reasonable expectation to receive due process and a fair trial."

And while the national debate is controlled at home through means of intimidation, censorship, and legal jury-rigging, Azerbaijan's greater mission is to whitewash its reputation abroad. And as with any country evocative of *The Godfather*, this is mainly a family business.

Three families control or oversee most of the overseas lobbying apparatus: the Aliyevs, including the first lady's own family, the Pashayevs; the Mammadovs, headed by Transport Minister Ziya Mammadov, whose son, Anar, runs the U.S. arm; and the Heydarovs, headed by Emergency Situations Minister Kamaladdin Heydarov, whose ministry functions sort of like FEMA on amphetamines, retaining control over the fire departments, state grain reserves, construction licensing, and possibly even an anti-aircraft battery near Baku. Heydarov's son Tale runs the European lobby arm. "Whatever business we are investigating, it turns out that it's linked to one of these three families," Khadija Ismayilova said.

The American lobby

The 1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) forces any companies based in the United States to report on money they have received from foreign governments. A perusal of the Justice Department's FARA filings on Azerbaijan reveals a welter of law firms, consultancies, and prestigious lobby firms all on the Aliyev payroll. "The success of the Azeri lobby really lies [in] the amount of money it pours into the effort," said Chakhtakhtinski of Azerbaijani-Americans for Democracy. "And it pays top dollar."

So it does. The Podesta Group, a D.C.-based lobbying and public relations outfit founded by Tony Podesta, brother of John Podesta, the current special advisor to the Obama administration, has been the registered agent of the Azerbaijani Embassy for several years. On January 1, 2014, the group inked a new agreement to receive \$50,000 a month from the embassy, plus expenses to provide “strategic counsel to Azerbaijan on strengthening its ties to the United States government and institutions.” This agreement, which was signed by Elin Suleymanov, the Azerbaijani ambassador to the United States, and Anthony Podesta, the head of the Podesta Group, was amended on April 15, 2014, to encompass “additional services” defined as performing “public relations services for Azerbaijan.” It is good through July 14, 2014.

Foreign Policy contacted the Podesta Group for comment about the nature of its contract with the embassy. We were referred to the FARA filings. We also asked if the firm had any reservations about lobbying on behalf of a foreign government seen by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other international monitors as becoming worse, not better, in its respect for human rights norms. We were informed that someone from the “Azerbaijan desk” would respond to our inquiry. No one ever did.

DCI Group, LLC, another public-affairs firm with offices in Washington, Brussels, and Houston, also worked for the Azerbaijani Embassy in D.C., at least until Feb. 22, 2013, when its contract was terminated for unspecified reasons. According to DCI Group’s website, it “helps corporations navigate their most challenging political, legislative and regulatory problems anywhere in the world” by “re-framing the issue, and defining it on more favorable terms.” Its work for the embassy focused on media outreach promoting the country’s satellite launch, gas boom, bilateral relations, and SOCAR’s expansion. DCI Group also organized a dinner on Oct. 22, 2012, at the ambassador’s residence, related to “Azerbaijan economic development and investment in [the] U.S. economy and Azerbaijan support of [the] U.S. war on terror.” Among the guests were the former deputy U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Ken Adelman (who served under Jeane Kirkpatrick, in fact); James K. Glassman, the founding executive director of the George W. Bush Institute; Sheri Annis, a media consultant married to Fox News’s Howard Kurtz; and George Friedman, the CEO of private intelligence corporation Stratfor.

FP reached Craig Stevens, spokesman for DCI Group, by phone. The termination of the contract with the embassy, he said, was simply because “the terms had been completed. We had a good relationship [with the embassy] and we certainly support the ambassador.” Asked if DCI Group was ever concerned by Azerbaijan’s poor human rights record or its recent erosion of journalistic and political freedoms, Stevens replied: “Yeah, I wouldn’t get into that.” DCI Group is not, according to Stevens, “actively seeking” to work with the embassy again.

Roberti+White LLC, a “bipartisan federal government affairs and public relations” firm based in Washington and New York, received \$20,834 per month for six months — \$125,000 in total — from SOCAR USA in exchange for offering “strategic counsel” to the state oil company to “strengthen its ties to the United States government and institutions.” According to the consulting agreement signed in mid-July 2013, or just in time for SOCAR USA’s purchase of the Kirkpatrick building, Roberti+White was responsible for building the company’s website, manning its Twitter and Facebook accounts, and even creating an internship program in Washington. The contract expired on Dec. 31, 2013. FP reached Roberti+White for comment but was told that the company does not talk to the press.

Elsewhere, lobbying firms have taken U.S. politicians to Azerbaijan. In late May 2013, Oklahoma Rep. Jim Bridenstine traveled from Tulsa to Baku under the auspices of the Houston-based Turquoise Council of Americans and Eurasians (TCAE), a 501(c)(3) organization, which is apparently close to the Turkish Islamist cleric in exile Fethullah Gulen. According to Bridenstine’s Post-Travel Disclosure Form filed with the House Committee on Ethics, he described TCAE as being “committed to establishing and advancing long-term relationships and close cooperation between the U.S. and Azerbaijan,” “[t]o introduc[ing] and provid[ing] exposure to Azerbaijan’s military, regional, energy security and economic issues,” and “[t]o promot[ing] mutual understanding through conversation.” (FP contacted Rep. Bridenstine’s office seeking comment but was told the congressman was too busy with legislative matters to be interviewed in time for publication.)

On its website, TCAE claims to “make a bridge to the Turkic world” focusing on Turkey,

Azerbaijan, and all of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics, but it's also been linked to a number of charter schools founded in the United States by the Pennsylvania-based Gulen, now said to be the main antagonist of scandal-plagued Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Bridenstine was in Baku to attend a conference called "USA-Azerbaijan: Vision for the Future," a lavish affair sponsored by SOCAR, BP, ConocoPhillips and other energy majors, and opened by Ilham Aliyev. This multinational junket, complete with tours of a glittering new Caspian capital seen by many as a cross between Dubai and Paris, barred reporters from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the one news outlet that has done the most digging on the Aliyev families' questionable business dealings. But it earned write-ups by *Politico*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Washington Diplomat* (the only publication to attend) because of its recognizable guests and speakers. Among these were delegates from 42 states, 75 state representatives, 11 active congress members, and three newly retired Obama administration staffers: ex-Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, former Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Messina, and campaign strategist David Plouffe, all of whom received five-figure checks for addressing the conference, according to organizer and TCAE president Kemal Oksuz.

Also in attendance was Michael McMahon, the former Democratic representative from New York, who served on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Azerbaijan Caucus.* After Aliyev's re-election in October, McMahon told the *New York Times* that the vote was "honest, fair and really efficient. There were much shorter lines than in America, and no hanging chads." He also wrote a few op-eds praising Azerbaijan as a "partner to the U.S. and a stalwart in the region." (McMahon now co-chairs the lobbying division for Herrick, Feinstein LLP, a New York-based law firm that opened its first international office in Istanbul in the fall of 2013.)

No pro-Aliyev entity is more active in Washington — at least judging from its FARA disclosures — than the Azerbaijan American Alliance (AAA). Its current chairman is Dan Burton, former Republican congressman from Indiana and the former chair of the House Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats who announced upon his appointment on Feb. 13, 2013: "The friendship between our two countries is very important and I shall work hard to make it even stronger." A photograph of President

Aliyev is featured on the AAA's website as a clickable graphic that directs users to its "leadership" section.

The AAA aims to "develop an alliance of individuals and organizations in the United States and Azerbaijan," to "[a]dvance understanding, respect, friendship, cooperation and mutual support" between the two countries, and to "[e]ducate policy makers and leaders of industry about critical and complex issues related to the symbiotic relationship." And that relationship evidently needs a lot of insider help.

The Justice Department's FARA website also discloses that AAA paid Fabiani & Company \$2.4 million for "planning and executing strategies to encourage research and advocacy about the Azeri people, country, culture and international relations." Fabiani & Company is a D.C.-based "government affairs and strategy consulting firm" founded by James Fabiani, a former director of the House Committee on Appropriations. In October 2013, it hosted the AAA's second annual gala dinner in Washington, which the organization described as featuring "nearly 600 invited guests from Capitol Hill, the Diplomatic Corps, think tanks, academic and business communities." In the six months prior to May 31, 2013, Fabiani & Company received over \$800,000 from the AAA and incurred expenses in excess of \$664,000, including for advertising in the *Washington Post* and *Express* newspapers.

In fact, AAA and Fabiani & Company share the same address at 1101 Pennsylvania Ave. When **FP** called AAA, it reached the government affairs firm for a second time. A representative explained that AAA was indeed run out of Fabiani & Company's offices and that the same person would get back to us on behalf of both organizations. Follow-up attempts to reach both AAA and Fabiani & Company were unsuccessful.

Cited in a lengthy section of the AAA's FARA filing titled "Influential Individuals Who Have Met With the Azerbaijan America Alliance" are 85 House members; 21 senators; employees of the Heritage Foundation, Jamestown Foundation, and Atlantic Council; business leaders from the Thomas Reuters Foundation, Raytheon International, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman; and reporters from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and **Foreign Policy**.

Impressively, the AAA has even encouraged seven state legislatures to pass resolutions or proclamations announcing their friendship with Azerbaijan, often using language that would raise eyebrows among human rights monitors or opposition figures. The Oklahoma State Senate referred to Azerbaijan as a “democratic, secular and constitutional republic.” The Illinois State Senate claimed that Azerbaijan had “equal rights for all citizens, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation” and “shares American values,” the latter phrase also being taken up by Kentucky’s House of Representatives. Mississippi’s House resolution, dated Feb. 28, 2012, made special mention of the “noteworthy importance in supporting the continued relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel” and that “roughly a third of the crude oil supplied to Israel” comes from Azerbaijan.

The Mammadov mystery

The Azerbaijan America Alliance was founded a little over two years ago by a man named Anar Mammadov, who, according to FARA documents, has personally met with House Speaker John Boehner, former Speaker Nancy Pelosi, 13 other congress members, and 7 senators. Mammadov is described on AAA’s website as “an independent Azerbaijani businessman and entrepreneur,” which is certainly one way of putting it.

The scion of Ziya Mammadov, the state’s transport minister, Anar Mammadov has amassed a reputation as an international playboy. Allegedly worth \$1 billion, and based mainly in Baku, he sued two dissident newspapers in Azerbaijan for reporting that he once drunkenly ordered a restaurant — one owned by Kamaladdin Heydarov, the minister of emergency situations minister, no less — to serve him up a shish kebab made of bear meat. The alleged price for this off-menu cuisine was \$1.2 million, and Heydarov was said to have personally intervened with a reluctant wait staff to let the well-connected oligarch munch on this rarefied game. (Mammadov was also rumored to have propositioned Rihanna when the Grammy award-winning pop star traveled to Baku in October 2012 — against the objections of human rights groups — to perform for the FIFA Under-17 Women’s World Cup, which was held in the capital.)

But the Azeri’s portfolio doesn’t exactly bespeak an “independent” string of accomplishments, whatever the Azerbaijani

n American Alliance claims. Mammadov is president of Garant Holding, a company formerly known as ZQAN Holding. (Garant gets a special mention on the AAA [website's bio](#) of Mammadov.) That company's profit margins, as a number of media outlets have reported, appear inextricably linked to a number of sweetheart contracts signed with his father's Transport Ministry.

According to a detailed exposé by RFE/RL and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, Mammadov and his uncle Elton are partners with another family (also named Mammadov but not related) that founded an Azeri entity that is heavily invested in “transportation, construction, sports complexes, and oil exploration.” That firm, known as the Baghlan Group, “has received preferential treatment and the interlinked companies owned by the families have taken large shares or even monopolized certain transportation sectors like bus transport, taxis, road construction, and cargo-transportation services” in Azerbaijan, [writes](#) journalist Nushabe Fatullayeva. “In the Azeri language,” she observed, “the word ‘baghlan’ can mean ‘closed’ or it can mean ‘connected.’ In the case of Baghlan Group, both seem to apply.”

The Baghlan Group's subsidiaries have also been granted “lucrative, apparently noncompetitive contracts to import and operate taxis and buses, and to build roads.” All of these contracts were certified by the ministry run by Ziya Mammadov. And no minor dispensation has that been: Baghlan has earned an estimated \$1.3 billion in highway construction contracts alone. In fact, the Baghlan Group's registered address is the same address as Azerbaijan State Railway LLC, a department of the Transport Ministry.

The clearest case of Anar Mammadov's profiting from this connection appears to have been with the Baghlan Group's taxi and bus companies, both the largest in their respective industries. The bus company has “hundreds of buses,” Fatullayeva wrote, quoting the Baghlan website, that are responsible for transporting 20 percent of Baku's passengers. In the lead-up to the Eurovision Song Contest 2012 hosted in Baku, Baghlan Group's cab company, Baki Taxi, imported 1,000 London-style black cabs into Azerbaijan for \$28,000 apiece. There is no evidence that other cab companies were given a chance to bid for the service of shuttling thousands of international tourists around the capital city, Fatullayeva reported. And following the Eurovision contest, Baki Taxi

edged out any and all competition, preventing other cabs from parking in the city center or near subway terminals.

The bank that processed all of Baki Taxi's credit card transactions is the Bank of Azerbaijan, a financial institution that has "monopolized almost all taxi business," according to Fatullayeva. It was also listed as one of the many holdings of the Baghlan Group on the latter's website. (FP attempted to contact Anar Mammadov at the Baghlan Group by phone and email. There was no voicemail set up for the company's line and no one ever responded to our email request for an interview.)

According to Fatullayeva's report, Anar Mammadov previously owned an 81 percent stake in that bank until he divested in January 2013 — well after Baki Taxi's Eurovision windfall. Furthermore, a subsidiary of ZQAN Holding company was given the privilege of insuring all of Baki Taxis' London cab passengers. At present, Mammadov's cousin Ruslan is a member of the bank's supervisory board, of which a senior manager of ZQAN Holding is also the chairman. ZQAN Holding also took part in the construction of the Baku International Bus Station, which is owned by Mammadov's uncle Elton. The Baghlan Group, ZQAN Holding, and the Bank of Azerbaijan all sponsor the Baku Football Club, the honorary president of which is Mammadov.

One of the Baghlan Group's "major clients" is SOCAR.

How SOCAR does business

Last December, the London-based anti-corruption watchdog Global Witness released a detailed report titled "Azerbaijan Anonymous." It investigated SOCAR's business dealings that were in some way linked to a 35-year-old man named Anar Aliyev, who, over a five-year period, made around \$375 million from them in transactions. It is unknown whether or not this Aliyev is related to the president's family (Aliyev is a common surname in Azerbaijan) but it bears noting that he was born in Nakhchivan, an autonomous enclave of Azerbaijan that has produced most of the country's elite, including the current president of SOCAR, its executive director, President Aliyev, and his late father. Yet despite having almost no public profile as an Azeri oligarch or industrialist, Anar Aliyev managed to hold "ownership stakes in at least 48 deals with

[SOCAR], including production sharing agreements and joint ventures.”

In one case Global Witness examined, SOCAR created an oil trading company in 2007 called Socar Trading SA, which had \$33.66 billion in revenue in 2011. However, legally SOCAR only owned 50 percent of this entity; the ultimate beneficial owners of the other 50 percent were Anar Aliyev and Valery Golovushkin, Socar Trading SA’s CEO as well as the former vice president of Lukoil, Russia’s second-largest oil company. Both men used a series of offshore shell companies controlled by parent companies that they owned. Aliyev’s initial investment was \$5 million; Golovushkin’s was \$1.25 million. Then, in August 2012, SOCAR bought out both parent companies for \$103 million and \$30 million, respectively — a 2,360 percent return on Aliyev’s initial investment and a 2,700 percent return on Golovushkin’s. The fact that 50 percent equity in such a lucrative trading company was awarded to “obscure offshore entities with opaque ownership can only raise concerns about the motivation,” Global Witness found.

Nor did SOCAR, in responding to the report’s findings, ever account for why such an inscrutable oilman as Anar Aliyev was hand-selected to make such a fortune. SOCAR mainly evaded Global Witness’s direct questions altogether and even claimed, against evidence, that “no dividends were paid from the project” to Aliyev or Golovushkin. The widespread — but unproven — suspicion among Azeri journalists I’ve spoken to is that Anar Aliyev was a front for a well-connected member of the regime, if not several.

Moreover, while SOCAR Trading SA became fully state-owned when Aliyev and Golovushkin cashed out, a new, partially privately owned middleman, SOCAR International DMCC, still appears to be taking a cut of the profits. In June 2011, SOCAR established SOCAR International DMCC in Dubai but, again, saw fit to own only 50 percent of that company. Between June 2011 and December 2012, SOCAR International DMCC made \$66 million in profit from buying oil from SOCAR and then selling it to SOCAR’s now wholly owned subsidiary, SOCAR Trading SA. Why the need for another middleman, and who is the ultimate beneficiary owner of SOCAR International DMCC? The state oil company declined to answer that question when it was posed by Global Witness, although it did accuse the NGO of betraying “envy [of] the increasing influence of SOCAR.”

Following Global Witness’s report, and after what the NGO told FP had been three months of unsuccessful attempts to contact him for comment, Anar Aliyev decided to go public.

He gave an interview to the Azerbaijani publication *Business Time*, which he said he valued as a “purely objective business journal.” Aliyev/Alizade changed his surname to Alizade, owing in part to his possible filial connections to Baku, Azerbaijan, that he had “no family relations with any [sic] clan” or anyone else in the Azerbaijani government. *Business Time*, by importing Turkish text from Baku, then trading construction materials in Azerbaijan, as a result of the offer came from me [sic] : “I met Golovushkin,” Aliyev/Alizade insisted. As a result of interview requests prior to the report’s publication this year and had an extensive business track record. Global Witness were brought to my attention.

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Aliyev/Alizade’s interlocutor at *Business Time*, chief editor Mammad Hajiyev, was clearly satisfied with these answers and impressed with his subject. In an editorial comment at the bottom of his article, Hajiyev wrote: “Despite his young age our interlocutor positively impressed us by his self-confidence, experience, accuracy and patience.”

Global Witness seems less taken with this self-accounting. “There are still unanswered questions regarding how and why [Aliyev/Alizade] or his companies were selected to occupy this key role dealing with Azeri oil,” Tom Mayne, a researcher at the NGO, told FP. “We are still waiting for a full response from SOCAR on these and other matters.”

The European lobby

In addition to being a high-stakes property owner in the Gulf, first daughter Leyla Aliyeva is also fashion and art junkie — and a journalist. She’s editor-in-chief of the “style magazine” *Baku*, a publication financed by her father and published by Condé Nast Contract Publishing in London. Something of an Azeri Kim Kardashian, Aliyeva of course needs good PR people to help maintain her jet-set lifestyle. Enter Matthew Freud,

the son-in-law of Rupert Murdoch and head of the London-based PR firm Freud Communications. Having reportedly rejected contracts from Libyan strongman Muammar al-Qaddafi 10 times, and from ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak five times, Freud was clearly more amenable to a request for representation by the Azeri dauphine. In 2011, he organized what the British satirical weekly *Private Eye* called “a caviar-rich London party” to “launch” Aliyeva in British high society. Guests at this soirée included Lord Peter Mandelson, Tony Blair’s onetime political svengali; Freud’s wife and Murdoch’s daughter Elisabeth; Lord Browne, the former head of BP; Ed Vaizey, the current British culture minister; Stuart Rose, formerly the top man at Marks & Spencer; and Evgeny Lebedev, the Russian oligarch proprietor of the *Independent* and *Evening Standard* newspapers, and son of billionaire businessman Alexander Lebedev.*

But glossy journals, PR firms, and caviar-laden parties in England are the least of the Aliyevs’ outreach in Europe. “The Azerbaijan lobbying effort in Europe is headed by Tale Heydarov, son of the extremely wealthy emergency situations minister and a graduate of the London School of Economics,” Oliver Bullough, a London-based expert on the Caucasus and the author of *The Last Man in Russia: The Struggle to Save a Dying Nation*, told FP. “Tale is urbane and educated, hangs out with Prince Harry, and puts a lot of money into trying to improve Azerbaijan’s image. He wants to promote it as a reliable energy partner, a country to do business with.”

Tale Heydarov’s main vehicle for this effort is the European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS), headquartered at Queen Anne’s Gate in the Mayfair district of London, with additional offices in Istanbul, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels. A 2010 U.S. State Department cable published by WikiLeaks described the group as follows: “The ‘society’ purports to be an independent advocacy group, but its talking points very much reflect the goals and objectives of the [government of Azerbaijan]. In recent meetings, Tale and his cohorts have raised ‘Armenian aggression’ in Nagorno-Karabakh and ‘double standards’ of U.S. human rights and democracy reporting in the region, and complained about efforts of the U.S. Congress to provide humanitarian assistance within the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.”

Here, too, PR professionals are not far behind. TEAS’s current director is Lionel Zetter, a

fellow of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and of the Royal Society of Arts, as well the author of *Lobbying: The Art of Political Persuasion*. In an email to FP, Zetter denied that TEAS had any kind of allegiance to the regime in Baku. “The mission of TEAS is to promote the country (not the government) of Azerbaijan and to foster links with Western Europe,” he wrote. “It is not our place to interfere in or comment on the internal politics of any country.” Asked if he considers Azerbaijan a democracy, Zetter answered: “Azerbaijan holds regular elections for the Presidency, for the Milli Majlis and for municipal authorities, so of course it should be classified as a democracy. If you know of a perfect democracy anywhere in the world please do point it out to me.”

For TEAS, fostering links with Western Europe seems to involve regularly flying out members of national legislatures or the European Parliament for luxurious romps around Azerbaijan. Perhaps not surprisingly, these officials often return home with fond things to say about their hosts. The *Guardian* found, for instance, that TEAS had spent “at least £71,740” (\$118,177) in sending Tory MPs to Azerbaijan and “at least £9,700” (\$15,978) in sending Labour MPs. Sometimes politicians don’t even have to travel to be graced with TEAS’s largesse. In September 2013, for instance, the society held jazz festivals on the margins of all of Britain’s three major political party conferences: Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat. TEAS has also founded Conservative Friends of Azerbaijan, a London-based advocacy organization that classifies Azerbaijan as a “democratic country” and currently has 25 British MPs as members. It also sponsored an event put on by Progress, a New Labour “pressure group” seen as supportive of Tony Blair’s political legacy.

On TEAS’s advisory board sits Lord Kilclooney, a baron from Northern Ireland, who, according to his parliamentary disclosure of interests, is remunerated for his services. FP managed to reach Lord Kilclooney by phone. He said that this paid arrangement with the organization ended “some years ago” and that he has not sat in on any TEAS board meeting in “several years.” Contrary to what the State Department minuted in its cable, Kilclooney saw no pro-Aliyev bias in TEAS’s activities. “I find it totally open and very promotive of Azerbaijan generally, not the government. The Americans make a lot of mistakes; I wouldn’t pay attention to what they say,” he explained.

Lord Kilclooney told FP that he had personally met Tale Heydarov, who chairs the TEAS board meetings, and was “very impressed.” He thought the same of President Aliyev, whom he also met: “I was very impressed there as well.” And while he noted that freedom of expression in the media is “not the best,” and that Azerbaijan “has a long way to go to become a fully free democratic country,” Lord Kilclooney believes that it is “moving in the right direction.” Asked about the recent spate of arrests of journalists and dissidents, he told FP that Turkey has done far worse and that the United States executes more people per year than Azerbaijan. “I’m horrified at the way the United States supports Armenia, as does Russia, against the interests of Azerbaijan,” he said.

TEAS also paid £6,000 a year (\$10,000) to Mark Field, a Conservative MP who happens to sit on the House of Commons committee that oversees Britain’s intelligence and security services. Field was also formerly the chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Azerbaijan, a body designed to “maintain good relations between the legislatures and governments of the UK and Azerbaijan,” as its website states. According to the TEAS website, the organization first took Field to Baku in July 2010, on a joint invitation by TEAS and the NATO International School of Azerbaijan, an NGO founded in 2007 as a “research, education and training center on Euro-Atlantic security and integration and [to] further promote Euro-Atlantic values and ideas in academia and in a wider audience in the region at large.” And it was clearly money well spent. In a subsequent interview with TEAS conducted from his Portcullis office, Field praised Azerbaijan as a “great trading partner” with healthy oil and gas reserves that are of great importance to British companies such as BP. His impressions of the place? Field said he was struck by the sense of “vibrancy” and “optimism” in the country — all related to its burgeoning business sector, of course. He further described Azerbaijan as a “model state” that tolerates religious freedom and has a handle on extremism. Not a word was said about Azeri human rights.

FP tried unsuccessfully to contact Field by phone and at his parliamentary email. Zetter, however, confirmed that Field did earn £6,000 a year for approximately one and a half years — “which he duly declared to the Parliamentary authorities. He no longer has any paid or formal position with TEAS.”

The ability of TEAS to recruit pro-Aliyev politicians in Europe is made more disconcerting by the fact that Tale Heydarov's father is quite well known to the U.S. government. Previously the chairman of the State Customs Committee, which the State Department called "one of the most corrupt operations in Azerbaijan," Kamaladdin Heydarov "gain[ed] massive wealth, as significant illicit payments were paid 'up the food chain' in an elaborate and well-orchestrated system of payoff and patronage." The Heydarov clan, considered by Foggy Bottom to be the second-most-powerful family in Azerbaijan, owns everything from fruit juice companies to real estate.

Nowhere have TEAS's attentions been better rewarded than at the Council of Europe, the Strasbourg-based supranational institution sometimes known as Europe's oldest human rights monitor. Founded in 1949, it predates the European Union and today consists of 47 member states, encompassing more than 800 million citizens. There are three statutory bodies to the council: the Committee of Ministers, made up of all the foreign ministers of the member states; the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which consists of parliamentarians from the member states; and the Secretariat, which is headed by a secretary-general. All member states are meant to be democracies, and while the resolutions passed by the Council of Europe are nonbinding, they are still seen as highly symbolic — capable of conferring a clean bill of health on a member state's civil liberties and human rights record, or capable of demonstrating where that member state has fallen short.

Azerbaijan's admittance in 2001 to this purportedly exclusive club of democracies was itself the spadework of a contentious lobbying campaign. But since the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline was laid down in 2005, making Azerbaijan a fattened oil titan, the Council of Europe has increasingly become a vehicle for whitewashing Azerbaijan's international reputation, argues Gerald Knaus, the chairman of the European Stability Initiative (ESI), an independent Berlin-based think tank that has made a series of comprehensive studies of Azerbaijan's influence in the Council of Europe. "We have a failure of two types," Knaus told FP. "The failure of the parliamentarians is actually worse because they've done harm — by lending an alibi and giving an excuse to Azerbaijan. But the committee of ministers has also failed. When I go around and ask ministers from friendly countries, 'Why is no one raising their voice about Azerbaijani

human rights?’ they all say it’s energy interests, oil pipelines, and such. ‘Human rights just don’t matter for us.’”

No greater proof of this proposition is needed than the fact that on May 14, Azerbaijan ascended to the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers — the very same week in which the government sentenced eight Azeri activists to lengthy jail terms. In fact, two other political prisoners of the Aliyev regime are affiliated with the Council of Europe itself. Ilgar Mammadov, who received a seven-year sentence in March, ran the Council of Europe’s Political Studies Programme in Baku. Anar Mammadli, for whom the government has just requested a nine-year prison term, had advised the PACE rapporteur on political prisoners. Human Rights Watch’s South Caucasus researcher, Giorgi Gogia, was appalled. “The Council of Europe is the region’s foremost human rights body, but Azerbaijan’s chairmanship comes at a time when the government is blatantly flouting the organization’s core standards,” Gogia said in a statement published on the NGO’s website.

Baku has a very clear motive in orchestrating such perverse political theater, Knaus argues. “It’s to show any opponents of the regime that ‘we cannot be shamed. On the contrary, we are embarrassing you, and you have to accept it. Even the democratic guardians of Europe have given up on you.’”

The Azerbaijani president is clearly using the Council of Europe to congratulate himself and shield his regime from outside criticism. “[T]here are no political prisoners in Azerbaijan,” he pronounced in January at a joint press conference in Brussels with NATO

Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Bear in mind that Azerbaijan’s accession to the Council of Europe was partly predicated on its agreement to release all political prisoners in the country. However, the most critical resolution on the status of such prisoners in Azerbaijan ever drafted was defeated in January 2013 in what happened to be the best-attended vote in the history of PACE. And here Aliyev really does deserve congratulating, since this robust attendance appears to be the work of his lobbying efforts to mobilize the “no” votes.

According to Knaus, the co-optation of PACE has been relatively straightforward and

easy. All Azerbaijan has had to do is get sympathetic MPs from other member states to turn up whenever a vote on the country is held. “Usually people in PACE don’t turn up for votes,” Knaus said. “And the people who come whenever Azerbaijan is being voted on are already in favor of the government’s line. Then they become the majority.”

As a result, Baku has an excellent track record in watering down resolutions about its human rights abuses, assigning the sensitive role of rapporteur for Azerbaijan’s human rights monitoring committee to Aliyev loyalists, blocking attempts to suspend Azeri delegates’ voting rights, and dispatching delegations to give fraudulent Azeri elections the stamp of approval. It’s this last trick in particular that has been so embarrassing to PACE that it has led to a major confrontation with Europe’s most respected and deferred-to election monitor.

You call that a clean vote?

The Office of the Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe — which famously shined a spotlight on the cooked polls in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine 2004, leading to those countries’ “color revolutions” — was the only organization to send both long- and short-term teams of monitors to cover Azerbaijan’s parliamentary election in November 2010. It documented countless cases of fraud.

Some ballots cast, ODIHR found, exceeded the number of voter signatures at polling stations. Votes were also registered in some districts a full day before the election. In one prison, 1,000 inmates were handed filled-out ballots in closed envelopes and told to file them; one inmate demurred and was beaten by guards. A third of the 150 stations observed by ODIHR were listed as “bad” or “very bad.” One official from the office claimed that he’d never seen so many instances of ballot stuffing.

“By the end of the day,” ESI found in its widely discussed report *Caviar Diplomacy: How Azerbaijan Silenced the Council of Europe*, “it was clear that these had probably been the most fraudulent elections ever monitored in a Council of Europe member state.” A similar act of sanitization of Aliyev’s vote-rigging occurred during the October 2013 presidential election, which ESI also helpfully exposed in a follow-up publication.

Disgraced: Azerbaijan and the End of Election Monitoring as We Know It states that that election “may have been the worst vote count ever observed by an ODIHR election observation mission anywhere.” As discussed, before the election was even held, an Azerbaijani smartphone app run by the Central Election Commission released the results, with Aliyev taking 72.76 percent of the vote. In the event, the “official” results gave him 84.55 percent.

But that didn’t stop Aliyev’s most vociferous apologists in Europe from giving his “victory” the all-clear. The head of PACE’s election monitoring delegation, Robert Walter, a Conservative MP from Britain, gave a joint press conference with Pino Arlacchi, the Italian head of the European Parliament’s delegation, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Baku. “[F]ree, fair and transparent” was their verdict.

Following this certification, it was found that six of the nine MEPs who observed the election had committed a “manifest violation of the code of conduct” for European Parliament, according to a five-member advisory committee that monitors compliance with that code. The news service European Voice reported that “[m]ost of the trips had been organised and sponsored by Azerbaijan’s parliament and by two organisations that refused to reveal the source of their funding, the Society for the Promotion of German-Azerbaijani Relations (GEFDAB) in Berlin and the European Academy for Elections Observation (EAEO), registered in Belgium.” However, the president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, decided to take no disciplinary action against the six MEPs.

Walter, meanwhile, is the chair of the European Democrat Group (EDG) in PACE, a voting bloc that includes the British Conservatives, Putin’s United Russia, Aliyev’s New Azerbaijan Party, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party, and Ukraine’s Party of Regions, the party of ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. In 2011, Walter co-led a British trade mission to Baku sponsored by the Middle East Association, self-described as the “UK’s leading business forum for promoting trade and investment with the Middle East and North Africa.” That mission, according to the association, had the “full support” of the British Embassy in Baku, the Azerbaijani Embassy in London, and TEAS.

Other allies of Azerbaijan have now gotten into trouble. Take Leonid Slutsky, a deputy

from the chauvinistic Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and a member of PACE since 2004. Aliyev awarded Slutsky the “Order of Friendship” in 2009, and the camaraderie has been repaid. “Slutsky speaks at every debate in PACE on Azerbaijan,” Knaus says. He’s also the current chairman of the State Duma Committee on the Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Integration and Links with Compatriots. It was in this capacity that Slutsky found himself sanctioned by the U.S. government after Crimea’s Duma-certified “referendum” last March.

Another noted apologist is Mike Hancock, a Liberal Democrat MP from Portsmouth, England, who declared in a PACE debate in 2011 that he was “proud” to have been in Azerbaijan during the 2010 contest and that the “best you can say about any election in any country ... is that one the day following the election, the majority of people have the result that the majority want” — a proposition sometimes difficult to test in Western democracies, let alone in dictatorial petro-states.

Hancock resembles Karl Marx as dressed by Savile Row, and his famous tastes have cost him political credibility back home. He was forced to stand down from the Liberal Democrats in June 2013 owing to allegations that he had sexually assaulted a mentally handicapped constituent. Before that, in 2011, the married Hancock became embroiled in scandal because of his love affair with Ekaterina Zatuliveter, a 20-something parliamentary aide whom British intelligence identified as a Russian spy, although a security court later exonerated her of the charge. It had raised MI5’s concerns that Zatuliveter met with a Russian spook based at the Russian Embassy in London, and that Hancock was at the time a member of the House of Commons Defence Committee. (She also had affairs with a senior German NATO official and a Dutch diplomat, according to Britain’s *Telegraph*.) However, Zatuliveter had other foreign interests, as well. She was formerly paid £3,000 (nearly \$5,000) for services rendered to none other than TEAS. TEAS director Zetter told **FP** that Zatuliveter was compensated in 2009 “for her work in helping to organize events highlighting the plight of Azerbaijan’s 875,000 refugees and IDPs.”

An unnamed Azeri source explained to ESI how the quid pro quo arrangement for cultivating PACE MPs works. This, too, is remarkably straightforward. “One kilogram of

caviar,” the source said, “is worth between 1,300 and 1,400 euro. Each of our friends in PACE receives at every session, four times a year, at least 0.4 to 0.6 kg.”

Now that Azerbaijan heads the Committee of Ministers, both the art of gentle persuasion and buying up friends with sturgeon roe has become more naked and perverse. As chair, Baku is set to host a number of events on countering corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and educating children on the importance of human rights. “All the dignitaries, the MPs from the Council of Europe, are traveling to Baku to stay at these hotels linked to the First Family of the President,” Knaus said. “All of this is now totally open and transparent. It is a masterstroke of political engineering.”

Washington’s willing blinders

Viewed from afar, Azerbaijan may not seem like an important or newsworthy country. The Middle East, after all, has no shortage of resource-fattened authoritarian regimes ready to line up to do business with Big Oil or to lend a hand with overseas military operations. But the image Azerbaijan has cultivated over the past half-decade, as a secure and stable Muslim country that backs the West, is deeply attractive to policymakers of all ideological persuasions.

The timing for Azeri outreach also couldn’t be better. Russia’s invasion of Crimea hasn’t just killed off the zombie-corpse of the U.S.-Russian “reset,” it’s also led Washington to sanction Russian officials and politically keyed-in oligarchs. Rapprochement or detente with Iran may well be in the offing. As a result, this South Caucasus nation looks geopolitically poised to grow more important to the United States and the EU. But it pays to scrutinize who’s selling that importance. The children of the Aliyev regime have essentially “eclipsed Azerbaijan’s diplomats and effectively privatized the country’s foreign policy, from London to Brussels to Berlin,” in the words of Oliver Bullough.

In the United States, the lobby’s efforts seem to be paying off not only in the fulsome rhetoric of politicians and legislatures, but also in shrinking the maneuvering space for members of the anti-Aliyev diaspora and civil society. “I’ve been here for five years and every year the list of people I can talk to grows smaller and smaller,” Alakbar Raufoglu, a Washington-based Azeri journalist with Turan News Agency, told FP. “Someone will call

me up asking if I know this or that person at the Azerbaijani Embassy, I'll tell them I don't, and that's the last I'll hear from them."

The acquiescence of London, Brussels, and Berlin is one thing. But if the only Azeris now worth talking to in Washington are those connected to the embassy, should anyone be surprised to learn that the former address of a respected human rights organization now belongs to Aliyev's state oil company?

The only question in America's narrowing foreign policy appears to be how the erosion of freedoms or the imprisonment and harassment of dissidents and journalists abroad impact its "national interest," which is to say how they don't. The Obama administration simply doesn't care to make these issues a priority. K Street, meanwhile, has always existed to ensure that smiling, post-Soviet dynasties can buy friends in high places in the United States to ensure that our national interest is best served by serving kleptocrats bearing hydrocarbons. "In five years," Michael tells Kay in *The Godfather*, "the Corleone Family is going to be completely legitimate." At great expense, and with deft propaganda, the Corleones of the Caspian have convinced the West that they've gotten there in even less time. The tragedy is, no one seems to give a damn.

**Correction, June 11, 2014: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. This error has been corrected. ([Return to reading.](#))*

**Clarification, Aug. 25, 2014: Evgeny Lebedev was born in Russia but became a British citizen in 2010. ([Return to reading.](#))*

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