



ANALYS, ENGLISH om AZERBAJDZJAN, EU, KAVIARDIPLOMATI

## After a paid trip to Azerbaijan several EU parliamentarians stopped criticizing the regime

After an EU delegation of elected parliamentarians went on a trip to Azerbaijan, their criticism was exchanged for praise for the dictatorship. Although the trip was paid for by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the parliamentarians never declared a transparency report. Blankspot's investigation shows how the Azerbaijan lobby uses "smart villages" to smooth over criticism of it.

> Av **RASMUSCANBÄCK** © 7 december, 2022

*The investigation is conducted together with Sascha Düerkop.*

German MEP Engin Eroglu (Renew group) has made a name for himself by consistently presenting resolutions critical of the dictatorship. On September 14, Eroglu criticised European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the opening of the European Parliament. However, he later said he lacked "any critical words about Azerbaijan".

Two weeks later, he travelled with a delegation to Azerbaijan. In addition to himself, the delegation included the Slovenian parliamentarian Franc Bogovic from the Christian Democratic Group.

Eroglu and Bogovic have voted for a [resolution condemning](#) Azerbaijan's actions in destroying Armenian cultural heritage and historical revisionism from February 2022.

Both are members of the cross-political intergroup RUMRA & Smart villages – The Group for Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas and Smart Villages – where Bogovic is the chairman.

Throughout this article, RUMRA will be used for brevity.

The trip to Azerbaijan took place over a couple of days at the end of September. Several Azerbaijani media have covered it, and the EU parliamentarians delegation has appeared in frequent interviews.

In a [30-minute TV interview conducted in English](#), they spoke positively about the country. Engin Eroglu, who was previously critical of Azerbaijan, is now heard saying that the EU should develop energy cooperation and further the friendship with Azerbaijan.

After returning home, similar rhetoric continued from both parliamentarians.

The question is, what happened on the trip that caused Azerbaijan's condemnations to shift toward promoting friendly relations with the dictatorship?

The annual travel budget for a given EU parliamentarian outside ordinary trips is €4,716. This budget can only be used to cover the cost of the individual parliamentarian. In addition to this allocated personal travel budget, there is a special monthly budget for parliamentary assistance of €26,735, where the MP can spend the money at their discretion. With this money, the MP can hire more staff or prioritise other costs, such as travel costs for the accompanying team.

Trips outside the allocated budget, which the MP does not pay, require the MP to register the trip within one month of the trip for transparency purposes in front of the EU citizens.

An additional rule in the [parliamentarians' code of conduct](#) (5.3) states that it is forbidden to receive a dinner, trip or other gift worth more than €150. In some circumstances, such as during a trip like this, it can be accepted, but must be declared.

Neither Bogovic nor Eroglu has declared the trip or that they received gifts worth more than €150. This means either they have paid for it themselves or received gifts without following EU regulations.

While Azerbaijan is [known to be generous](#) in extensively covering foreign political delegations' travel, such tempting offers will require the utmost integrity to pass such "generosity".

In addition to the two EU parliamentarians, five accompanying staff also participated. One of them is German Adam Mouchtar, who is the coordinator of the RUMRA group and a hired assistant to Bogovic. Another is the Lithuanian adviser Angele Kedaitiene.

The latter states on her website that she carries out assignments for the Azerbaijani EU delegation. In her social media, she has frequently participated in uncritical terms at Azerbaijani events in Brussels and Azerbaijan. Her mission can be interpreted as a hired lobbyist for the regime.

Lobbying for a country that, according to the Freedom House's latest democracy index, gets 9 points out of a possible 100 on the "Global Freedom Scores". Belarus gets 8, Russia gets 19. On "Democracy Scores", Azerbaijan gets 1, Belarus 3 and Russia 5 – may have its own rewards and benefits.

One of the primary expressions of democracy and freedom is a free press. Every year, Reporters Without Borders ranks countries according to their press freedom. This year's ranking covers 180 countries. Azerbaijan is ranked 154 before Russia (155) and after Belarus (153).

Additionally, both EU and Human Rights Watch accuse Azerbaijan of having committed several severe war crimes against Armenia on September 13-14 when it invaded the neighbouring country.

The primary purpose of the delegation trip was to visit Azerbaijan's so-called smart villages in the Zangilan region in the parts of Azerbaijan that the regime took back by force from the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020.

The place formally belongs to Azerbaijan but has been surrounded by peace negotiations since the 1990s war, when the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh took control of the area.

After almost 30 years, Azerbaijan abandoned the UN-mandated OSCE-driven peace talks. Instead, they invaded Nagorno-Karabakh. Freedom House has called the invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh "an inspiration for Russia's invasion of Ukraine".

The co-chairs of the OSCE group are France, Russia and the United States. The French and the US ambassadors to Azerbaijan have yet to make any trips to these areas, despite repeated invitations from the Azerbaijani Interior Ministry.

It is considered too controversial to visit this area since such a visit can indirectly lend legitimacy to the Azerbaijani actions. Azerbaijan openly criticised the ambassadors of co-chairs of the OSCE group for not visiting the region. Several Azerbaijani politicians went out in the open to have France and the US diplomats be boycotted from the diplomatic community in Azerbaijan.

The so-called smart village was planned shortly after the takeover of power in the area. The US-funded Eurasianet, which is one of the leading English-language media platforms covering the region, published a review this summer.

It showed that lands around Zangilan has in principle been exclusively given to people with close relations to friends of the presidential family, Ilham Aliyev. This includes wealthy businessmen and people connected to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The Azerbaijani state finances the construction of the smart villages, but the construction contracts have been given to people with close connections to the Aliyev family.

Among other things is, the company NMS LLC responsible for the technical development, an important part of the concept. NMS LLC is a subsidiary of AS Group. The founder of AS Group, Shahin Movsumov, is the brother of Shahmar Movsumov, assistant to Ilham Aliyev and head of the Agency for Economic Affairs and Innovative Development.

This is in line with Ilham Aliyev's statement when the project started: the reconstruction of Karabakh should go to friends.

Somewhat simplified: the smart villages of Azerbaijan favour the elite. It takes place in a country that is considered to be one of the world's most corrupt and where the economy is considered to be completely controlled by the regime and the Aliyev family's own companies.

"Smart villages" came into existence as a concept in the EU a couple of years ago. Until 2019, RUMRA only worked with rural development. After 2019, however, they added "smart villages" to the full name to emphasise as well the focus on rural development.

The concept originates in "smart cities", where cities have been developed based on several attributes. One is accessibility, another is technical development, and the third is an adaptation to needs.

For smart villages, the approach is combined to create relevant solutions according to prevailing needs.

In the case of Azerbaijan, a village has been built at record speed, which the EU emphasizes. It only took eight months. The Azerbaijani media describes the village as innovative and focused on local business activities. Among other things, an Israeli company has opened a bakery in the city.

In Azerbaijan, such smart village development is considered part of the EU project through RUMRA.

In Azerbaijan, they also emphasise the technological and digital developments in Zangilan. It happens in a country where privacy laws are considered only superficial, and surveillance systems, including the usage of Pegasus spyware, are rampant. Other dictatorships, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which are at par with the democratic level of Azerbaijan, are also accused of a lack of integrity – and of spying on those who live in the smart villages of their countries.

The home page AZ-netwatch actively reviews the technological development towards people's privacy. It plainly states that the country's digital protection is far below international standards.

At the same time, all foreign delegations and foreign journalists are sent on paid press trips and group trips for tourists to the smart villages to be shown their facades while hiding how badly the infrastructure is built.

Formally, these places were built for internally displaced people from the war in the 1990s, who are allowed to return to the cities which they might have come from.

Among [the displaced themselves](#), criticisms started spreading against the fact that nothing works in these villages, which are conveniently concealed during the arranged trips of those foreigners.

Back to the parliamentarians' trip, the key question to be addressed is, what happened on the trip that made them change their views on Azerbaijan?

On RUMRA's own website, there is only a short text stating that the trip has taken place – nothing else. It is briefly mentioned that the chairman [of the RUMRA group](#) participated, despite being a well-planned trip.

From the Azerbaijani side, the local parliamentarian Tural Ganjali participated, but also several ministers in the field of economy and development. Ganjali, for his part, has visited the EU several times to talk about smart villages. Among other things, he organised an event for [The RUMRA group this summer](#) where Bogovic and Eroglu participated.

Another name is also added: Hannes Heide, an Austrian EU parliamentarian. Many [Azerbaijani media reports](#) that he participated in the trip to Azerbaijan.

When Blankspot contacted Mr Heide, he briefly replied, "Sorry, but I did not participate in any trip to Azerbaijan". To the follow-up question of why the Azerbaijani media is stating that you visited the region, he answered, "I wasn't there!". He then stopped responding to emails when asked to explain why the Azeri media would bring up his name for such a visit.

It seems to be that he was not there. He is not seen in any photos with the rest of the delegation or the Azerbaijani media crew.

One thing that is certain is that he is part of the Azerbaijani friendship group in the EU Parliament that had [an event on September 14](#). The same day, Engin Eroglu accused Ursula von der Leyen of not criticising Azerbaijan's invasion of Armenia.

It is worth mentioning that the event organiser was Tural Ganjali.

Since returning home, Franc Bogovic published a [long and positive post](#) about the smart villages on his blog from the trip. Blankspot has tried to reach both Engin Eroglu and Franc Bogovic.

Mr. Bogovic replied that the travel expenses were shared between themselves and the host who invited him (Azerbaijan). Furthermore, he wrote that the Azerbaijani embassy, responsible for the program, organised the trip.

*“The Azerbaijani ambassador in Brussels got in touch with me last June claiming that Azerbaijan built a “smart village” and invited members of our intergroup (RUMRA) to visit it.*

*They (Azerbaijan) prepared the programme, which included the trip to the village, farms, winegrowers, as well as a visit to the Azerbaijani ministries of agriculture and finance.*

*During the discussions with the Azerbaijani counterparts we were focusing on the issues, related to the revival of rural and mountainous areas and we did not discuss or comment the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.”*

He also commented on the reasons for going on such a trip. It can be summed up in the fact that he is co-chairman of RUMRA and that the trip to Azerbaijan was a way to learn about the development of smart villages.

When asked why Mr. Bogovic has not filed a transparency report following the EU’s code of conduct, a person from his office returned instead of Bogovic himself. He announced that he has reviewed the regulations and will submit a so-called declaration as soon as possible. A few minutes later, the required and missed declaration was attached to an email sent to Blankspot.

It stated that the group had stayed at the Marriot Hotel in Baku, paid by the Azerbaijani state. The hotel is owned by [Pasha Holding Group](#), an Aliyev company. Furthermore, adding more details on the events. These include the same schedules and itineraries as other invitational trips for many solicited journalists, which [Blankspot reviewed previously](#).

Bogovic was elected to the EU parliament in 2014, and on a previous occasion back in 2017, he also left out another such declaration.

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Engin Eroglu’s assistant replied to an email sent to Eroglu. She wrote that he is not fluent enough in speaking English to be interviewed over the phone and asked to have the questions in writing even though Engin Eroglu appeared [live interview in perfect](#) once and with relatively fluent English on Azerbaijani TV.

However, she stressed that he would reach back.

The questions that were sent to Mr Eroglu were: “What was the purpose of the trip?”, “How was it financed?” and “How do the smart villages in Azerbaijan relate to the EU’s strategy for the country?”.

Eroglu’s office never reaches back with answers to the questions.

After a reply from Franc Bogovic confirming that Azerbaijan partly paid for the trip, Blankspot tried to reach Eroglu again. This time he was asked why there was no transparency report from the trip and how he viewed the relationship with Azerbaijan.

In the email, we mentioned that he had historically been critical of Azerbaijan, but after the trip, he instead emphasized the friendships and trade exchange with the country.

His assistant eventually returned with an answer.

She responded that Engin Eroglu's flight was also self-financed, while Azerbaijan paid for hotels and the official meals.

As for a transparency declaration, the blame is put on the office rather than himself. Although Engin Eroglu, like Bogovic, is fully aware of the regulations and code of conduct. Knowing earlier, Eroglu promptly declared a similar trip to Taiwan.

According to the code of conduct, it is the responsibility of parliamentarians to declare transparency reports and no one else. It does not regulate how the parliamentarians should delegate the responsibility.

Regarding his view of Azerbaijan, he believes that the trip did not have a political nature. Even though the trip covered an area that Azerbaijan took back by launching its war in 2020, he claimed that he is neutral on the issue of the conflict and listens to both sides equally. The answer is summarized to ease the reading.

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Finally, the coordinator for RUMRA, Adam Mouchtar, was also contacted with similar questions on how the trip was financed. He only managed to respond a week after, and after the third email attempt and a sharper question, while apologising for the delay.

He provided a similar summary justification as Franc Bogovic about the trip's motives: they went to Azerbaijan to learn about smart villages. He emphasised that the delegates avoided discussing the conflict with Armenia.

Furthermore, he wrote that the EU parliamentarians paid for tickets themselves but that the inviting party (Azerbaijan) covered the rest. He also noted that it is "usus (customary) in the European Parliament for such trips".

He was also asked who paid for the accompanying administrative staff's travel; he provided no answer.

The person who can best speak about what happened on the trip is the Lithuanian-hired lobbyist Angele Kedaitiene, who posted several pictures under her Twitter account – where on her bio, she writes that she is an EU civil servant.

For the captions, she wrote that the delegation had visited a vineyard, museums, agriculture fields, and places where handicrafts are produced. Furthermore, she praised Azerbaijan for its economy and the EU's new trade agreement with the country.

On November 19, two months after the trip, [Engin Eroglu](#) posted on his Facebook page praising the trade agreement with Azerbaijan. Above all, he emphasised that Azerbaijan is a good partner for gas imports – especially considering that ”Russia has started an energy war” against Europe.

On November 18, Azerbaijan and Russia signed an agreement that Azerbaijan would import gas from Russia. It followed the intentions of an alliance agreement between [countries from February 24](#), the same day Russia invaded Ukraine. One of the points worth highlighting is the non-competitive clause in the energy market, where priority is given to Russian companies in this sector.

Energy journalist [David O’Byrne](#) asked: is Azerbaijan importing gas from Russia to fulfil its export promises to the EU?

In addition, [Russian Lukoil owns 20% of the Azerbaijani gas production](#) and a significant part of the gas pipelines that run from Azerbaijan to the EU.

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Parliamentarians [Franc Bogovic](#), [Engin Eroglu](#) and coordinator [Adam Mouchtar](#) returned with similar answers to the motives for the trip. All emphasized that the trip was not political and that they avoided discussing the conflict with Armenia.

This is despite the fact that the trip went to an area of a highly political nature and relevance, a place surrounded by a conflict zone where even diplomatic delegations from neither the US nor France go as it is perceived as sensitive.

That everything on the trip, except plane tickets, was paid for by the Azerbaijani dictatorship did not occur to the parliamentarians until they were asked uncomfortable questions.

But, instead, they chose to cast the blame on their assistants instead of asking themselves the question: can one, as an elected EU delegate, go on an invitational trip to a dictatorship land and not mix trade with politics?

The answer is possibly found in [Engin Eroglu’s](#) withdrawn criticism of the regime in Baku, which is replaced by friendly words about increased trade.

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## About the authors

**Rasmus Canbäck** is the author of the book ”Every day I die slowly” about the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which will be published in January. For Blankspot, he covers the Caucasus and Azerbaijani caviar diplomacy, among other things.

**Sascha Düerkop** is a German freelance journalist and has mostly worked on investigating how autocracies engage in lobbying, so-called nation branding and the influence of politicians in and outside Europe.

*Top photo: Baku's skyline can be seen in the background, photo Thomas Wedérus. Franc Bogovic is on the left and Engin Eroglu is on the right.*

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