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Azerbaijani President Aliyev Named Corruption's 'Person Of The Year'

by Robert Coalson

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In 2012, corruption watchdog Transparency International reported that two-thirds of the world's countries may be considered "highly corrupt." It would seem tough to choose someone for the dubious honor of corruption's "person of the year."

One investigative-journalism NGO has done just that.

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), based in Sarajevo and Bucharest, has awarded the crown to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev.

The group, which specializes in reporting on corruption in the region stretching from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, also gave out some "honorable" mentions. They went to alleged Kosovo-born cigarette and drugs smuggler Naser Kelmendi, Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, Russian President Vladimir Putin, politically connected Serbian entrepreneur Miroslav Miskovic, longtime Uzbek President Islam Karimov, and wanted Serbian drugs smuggler Darko Saric.

The informal list was determined by representatives of the 15 international media organizations that make up the OCCRP. It is aimed at highlighting the intrepid and often courageous reporting that is needed to expose corruption in these notoriously opaque countries.

The OCCRP gave the nod to Aliyev, citing extensive reports and "well-documented evidence" that "the Aliyev family has been systematically grabbing shares of the most profitable businesses" in Azerbaijan for many years.

Secret Ownership Stakes

The reports include secret ownership stakes in banks, construction firms, gold mines, and telecommunications firms. Many of the reports about Aliyev were investigated by OCCRP affiliate Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist with RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service.

"President Aliyev and his family, in fact, along with other persons in his inner circle are involved in so many secret businesses that we uncovered, actually together with Radio Free Europe this year," says Paul Radu, OCCRP's executive director. "We identified hidden companies that were owned by the first family of Azerbaijan in Panama, for instance, or in the Czech Republic. And we identified assets that they owned back in Azerbaijan via these companies."

Radu is optimistic about the new tools that are making this kind of reporting more and more effective. One example he cites is that OCCRP has successfully partnered with a Scottish computer hacker.

"He works right now with us at the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and he is the one who scraped [eds: got into] the Panamanian registry of companies and that allowed us to perform name-based searches," Radu says. "And this is how we found the companies that are owned by the daughters of Aliyev and by his wife in Panama."

However, Radu adds that the impact of such reporting in the case of the Aliyev family has not been what one might hope.

The ownership structures of the family's foreign assets have been changed; the Azerbaijani parliament in June passed a law making it more difficult to discover who actually owns commercial companies and shielding Aliyev and his family from prosecution.

A Terrifying Campaign Of Threats

Moreover, journalist Ismayilova was subjected to a terrifying campaign of threats and harassment that she alleges was orchestrated by Aliyev's political allies.

Nevertheless, OCCRP editor Drew Sullivan says that "2012 was a banner year for those of us who cover organized crime and corruption. It is a growth industry around the world."

According to Radu, the OCCRP is now combining numerous international databases and linking them to the organization's ongoing files of "persons of interest" -- future candidates to unseat Aliyev as "person of the year."

The OCCRP list is also intended to highlight the global impact of crime and corruption. Radu maintains that most of the people on the OCCRP list have dubious and opaque ties far beyond the borders of their country.

"There are persons such as Darko Sadic, for instance, who is a well-known drug trafficker," he says. "And these sorts of persons are not well-known outside of the Balkans, but in fact they are part of very, very large networks that stretch sometimes across continents. In this case, this person was involved in cocaine trafficking from Argentina all the way to the Balkans."

Radu adds that organized crime from the Balkans and the former Soviet Union is deeply involved in the savage drug wars in Mexico and in massive resource theft from impoverished countries in Africa. This makes it all the more important to expose these people and the corrupt schemes they exploit, he says.