
Spin doctors to the autocrats:

how European PR firms
whitewash repressive regimes



Mother Teresa doesn't need our services. She isn't going to come to us as a client. It's always the difficult issues. If someone is willing to spend money on media relations, it's because they have a problem.

- Ivo Ilic Gabara of PR firm BGR Gabara, 2011.¹



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Summary

Repressive regimes outsourcing their diplomacy to public relations firms, lobbyists, and front groups, is increasingly big business in Europe. This little-examined area of work involves lobbyists laundering the reputations of dictators, seeking lucrative trade and investment deals, pushing back against sanctions, smearing dissidents and opponents, and electioneering. Yet whether pressuring the EU institutions or their member-states, these lobbyists are often working below the radar. In contrast the US has strict reporting requirements for representatives of foreign agents. This kind of activity must come under better regulation along ethical guidelines, and democratic scrutiny via a mandatory EU Transparency Register for lobbyists, as per the report's recommendations. The report contains 18 case studies of PR firms and lobbying associations based in Europe working for repressive regimes accused of war crimes and human rights violations.

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Introduction

From all around the world, dictators, repressive regimes, and governments that abuse human rights are paying European public relations firms and lobby consultancies to whitewash their images, smear dissidents and opponents, run their elections, hide their abuses, and lobby for lucrative investment, trade deals, aid, and political support with the EU institutions and member states. At the heart of the EU in Brussels, and across European capitals, public relations professionals and lobbying consultants are working for some of the world's most autocratic regimes and human rights abusers.

To take just a few examples from the case studies in this report, while the EU is imposing wide-ranging economic sanctions on [Russia](#) over its military annexation of the Crimea, the

PR professionals are working for some of the world's most autocratic regimes and human rights abusers.

Kremlin's contracted PR firm GPlus – which employs several former spokespeople of the European Commission – continues to conduct press and lobbying for Putin, communicating Russia's gas brinkmanship and its bullish position on [Ukraine](#). [Bahrain](#) crushes opposition from democracy rights activists while its PR firms spin positive coverage for their client. [Azerbaijan](#) funds lavish trips for EU politicians while imprisoning journalists and campaigners. The dictatorship of [Kazakhstan](#) creates a Brussels front group to push its interests, as well as recruiting current and former European leaders, from Roman Prodi to Gerhard Schröder to Tony Blair, as political advisers. The President of [Nigeria](#) hires a London PR firm to run his election campaign and distract from his catastrophic handling of Boko Haram. Likewise, leaders from [Rwanda](#), [Kenya](#), and [Benin](#), have war crimes, human rights persecutions, and troublesome elections at home whitewashed in Europe.

Andrew Stroehlein, the European Media Director of Human Rights Watch told CEO: “Paranoia costs a lot of money. These regimes can vastly outspend human rights organisations on any campaign, by an order of ten or fifty to one. Ironically, it would actually be cheaper and more effective for these regimes to just release political prisoners than to pay firms around Europe to try and get meetings and media coverage and influence, to attempt to reputation-wash dictators. But that's the mentality of authoritarianism.”

While some firms and lobbyists working for these clients in Brussels are entered in the EU's voluntary Transparency Register, others do not appear on it at all, and those that do may be omitting controversial clients. Even where they are registered, many of the budgets claimed may be inaccurate.² As a result, it is almost impossible for the public to find reliable information about who all the firms or the governments in question are, how much they spend, what they are lobbying about, and whether they are successful in their aims. Continuing to allow this activity to go un-monitored is a shameful indictment of democracy in the EU.

Indeed, this report showcasing eighteen case studies of repressive regimes and countries accused of war crimes or other very serious human rights abuses that have enlisted the help of PR firms in Europe, can only be considered the tip of a larger iceberg. Needless to say, due to the weakness of lobby reporting requirements, the more controversial the client, the less likely it is to have been uncovered by our research.

The President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker has in theory committed to replace the current voluntary lobby register in the EU with a mandatory one. For this to be effective, however, it will be vital that the proposal is legally-binding upon lobbyists to register and

to disclose far more information than is currently required. It should be noted that the United States' Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) requires all lobbyists working for any foreign government to be registered, and this should be an explicit requirement for a new mandatory register for Europe.

In addition, the code of conduct attached to the EU's lobbying register should add to its existing requirements of ethical behaviour, prohibiting the representation by private firms of regimes the EU considers to be in breach of human rights. Representation of these clients should result in a 'blacklist' with the EU institutions boycotting the firms in question, either for listening to their lobbying representation on any case, or contracting communications work from them. Simply put, there is no legitimate business case for the PR representation of war criminals, torturers, and human rights abusers.

This report also shows various cases of lavish paid trips and business interests on the part of European officials and elected representatives. There need to be stronger sanctions against MEPs who fail to conform to the ethics code. As an example of the failings of the current system, the MEPs criticised for not declaring paid trips to Azerbaijan in 2013, where they described a fraudulent election as "free and fair", had no official sanction imposed by the European Parliament. A proactive transparency approach also means that decision-makers should publish lists of all lobby meetings.

Mandatory lobby registers also need to be implemented at the EU member state levels. This report shows London is a global hot spot for this kind of reputation laundering – indeed the firms there doing this kind of work have become known as the 'London laundrettes'; Berlin and Paris also play a big role.

These measures are minimum requirements of a democracy, in order to shed light on and properly scrutinise this world of hidden contracts, image laundering, and shadow diplomacy.

Outsourcing diplomacy

Corporate Europe Observatory estimates there are an estimated 15,000 to 25,000 professional

lobbyists in Brussels.³ While most represent corporate interests, governments outsourcing their diplomacy is a growing area of business for lobby consultancies.

While embassies are still important, they may simply not be able to handle all the logistics and complexities of modern diplomacy.

The kinds of activity these public relations firms perform for their government clients are not so different to those they perform for their corporate ones. "Our clients are with us because we are their eyes and ears in Brussels and sometimes their mouth," says Karl Isaksson, the EU Chief of lobbying firm Kream Gavin Anderson.⁴ In particular, these governments are paying Brussels lobbyists to gain better access to EU institutions and sell their point of view. Big lobby firms are able to pay to hire former EU officials (see Corporate Europe Observatory's [Revolving Door Watch](#)) which can give them instant access to political know-how and extensive insider networks. These companies will even make complex organograms like those used by police investigations, mapping who has the influence and where they might be able to exert pressure.⁵

'Monitoring' – that is, detailed surveillance – of the EU institutions and their policy making is an important part of the job, including keeping track of who is who.⁶

While in the past, countries often relied on their intelligence services to a certain extent to do their monitoring, the journal *Intelligence Online* reports that, in the US, "Rather than paying undercover agents for many years in the hope that they will eventually infiltrate decision-making circles in the US, most countries nowadays prefer to leave diplomatic and political information-gathering in Washington to lobbyists."⁷ There is no reason to imagine that this trend of foreign governments employing lobbyists is not also occurring in Brussels.

While this is a trend across the board, there is currently a particularly fierce 'scramble for Africa' among Western PR firms. Lobbyists say they can aid African nations by "sidestepping the delicate world of diplomatic language and embassy protocol to get right to key... decision makers."⁸ A piece on 'shadow diplomacy' by 100Reporters

"We are their eyes and ears in Brussels and sometimes their mouth"

claims that “developing countries in Africa lack established embassy operations and diplomatic finesse, and frequently need help to get access to key policymakers. Sometimes they need lobbyists to lead their entire effort in Washington. Larger nations, meanwhile, seek extra help in achieving specific objectives, or to press their cases in ways that an embassy staffer, or even ambassador, would shy away from attempting.”⁹ Again, this also appears to be applicable in Brussels. Many of the countries in question, both from the continent of Africa and further afield, are brutal regimes.

seemingly independent associations or societies are in fact front groups set up by the regimes in question

So what are they lobbying for? These governments are often seeking trade preferences and preferential accession talks – and they need a good image in order to succeed. Staving off the threat of European sanctions, as [Russian](#) state gas firm Gazprom successfully did earlier in 2014, is another key role.

Electioneering is a key moment to bring in the expertise of the spin doctors. Infamous London PR firm Bell Pottinger, for example, boasts of their core expertise in “enhanced electoral campaigning” in the field of geopolitics and is currently running Goodluck Jonathan’s re-election campaign in [Nigeria](#).¹⁰ Uhuru Kenyatta hired BTP Advisers to develop his election

strategy, and became the President of [Kenya](#) after the British PR firm successfully spun the International Criminal Court war crime charges against Kenyatta as ‘neo-colonial’.

Some firms brought in for election campaigns become the government’s lobbyist when the party wins office. This happened when a Georgian billionaire, whose wealth equals half that of his country’s GDP, created a new coalition to run for the presidency of [Georgia](#) and won. Governing parties also recruit lobbyists to smear their opponents or justify their punishment to the international community. For example, PR firm Burson Marsteller conducted a campaign on behalf of the former [Ukrainian](#) regime to target the jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko, and the [Bangladeshi](#) Government has hired the firm BGR Gabara to manage its reputation as it tries and executes leading opposition party members.

General promotion of an image, and country branding (see box below) are used to attract inward investment and tourism, and can involve countering perceptions of political instability, as with [Rwanda](#) and [Bahrain](#). After a brutal crackdown on democracy protesters during the Arab Spring, [Bahrain](#) used PR help to regain its allure as an investment and banking hub, as well as to maintain security support. Communications firms are also used to monitor both traditional and social media – particularly dissenting voices. PR help to host and organise international

Country branding

Lobbyists may avoid registering their activities in the EU’s Transparency Register because they describe their work as ‘country branding’ – that is marketing the nation as a brand like any other. However, the same companies that lobby often also work on country branding, and in reality, there can be a thin to vanishing line between the two.

The current definition of lobbying in the EU’s Transparency Register includes all “interest representation”, which arguably includes country branding. That is activities:

[C]arried out with the objective of directly or indirectly influencing the formulation or implementation of policy and the decision-making processes of the EU institutions, irrespective of the channel or medium of communication used, for example outsourcing, media, contracts with professional intermediaries, think-tanks, platforms, forums, campaigns and grassroots initiatives... These activities include, inter alia, contacting Members, officials or other staff of the EU institutions, preparing,

circulating and communicating letters, information material or discussion papers and position papers, and organising events, meetings or promotional activities and social events or conferences, invitations to which have been sent to Members, officials or other staff of the EU institutions. Voluntary contributions and participation in formal consultations on envisaged EU legislative or other legal acts and other open consultations are also included.¹¹

Companies that specialise in country branding such as British firm Acanchi, who ran rebranding campaigns for [Rwanda](#) and [Israel](#), and advertising firms such as M&C Saatchi (see relevant case studies) who took contracts from [Bahrain](#) during a vicious crackdown on protest, need to be fully transparent about their lobbying activities and think through the full ethical consequences of their activities when they take on clients. Presenting a destination as desirable for tourism and investment or sporting events means occluding undesirable stories such as human rights abuses.

events – such as the first 2015 European Olympics in [Azerbaijan](#) and the 2017 World Expo in [Kazakhstan](#), both to be held in repressive and corrupt dictatorships with serious records of human rights abuse – are also a key part of these efforts of promoting a nation abroad and attracting investors. Country branding and trade preferences are also key to the [Israel](#) case study, where the country is countering a boycott movement which is gathering strength in Europe. These efforts at rebranding often involve paid trips for politicians and journalists.

Lobbyists can also provide also media support, from the press work that for example GPlus does communicating the Kremlin’s position on the current [Ukraine](#) crisis, to ‘darker’ arts such as firms using sock-puppet accounts (where someone assumes a false identity online) to edit Wikipedia entries on say, Kazakhstan’s human rights record, (see [Kazakhstan](#) case study) or making sure the first page of Google search results delivers the right impression for the client.

Some firms are part of this push for this model of outsourced diplomacy. Alber & Geiger, for example, is a lobbying-focused law firm which prides itself on bringing US-style lobbying to Brussels, where it has worked for the governments of Morocco, Latvia, and members of the former [Ukrainian](#) regime. In a recent comment piece, partner Andreas Geiger suggests that representing former members of toppled regimes retain their assets and rights may be a growing business, and actually describes his ilk as “white knights” for riding to the rescue in this way (see [Ukrainian](#) case study).

Not all the lobbyists working for repressive regimes are PR or lobbying firms. Some are trade associations with disturbing regime connections, as with the Uzbek-British Trade and Industry Council (UBTIC) in London, set up jointly between the British government and the dictatorship of [Uzbekistan](#). This is an official business association promoting trade links and industry fairs with its members which includes the Uzbek cotton industry association – closely linked to the country’s secret service – where the cotton is harvested using slave labour.

Others are seemingly independent associations or societies which are in fact front groups set up by the regimes in question in order to promote

Free trips for EU politicians?

Former MEP Hans-Peter Martin, who retired in 2014 after the last European elections, published every lobbyist approach and freebie offer he received, and the information was revealing in a way that the Transparency Register isn’t. Offers came in almost daily, and included offers of free luxury travel, gala dinners, test drives, and so forth. These included invitations and offers from national governments. Highlights included free trips to Azerbaijan and China – the latter including a five star hotel and limousine service courtesy of the Chinese Government.¹⁶ While in theory these should now be declared by MEPs they can often remain off the radar, and the code of conduct is not being effectively enforced. (See [Azerbaijan](#) case study.)

their world view, political interests, and economic ties. The Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, described by *Intelligence Online* as “the voice of the [Kremlin](#) in Paris”,¹² is a think tank set up by the Putin administration in 2008, though it is opaque about its sources of funding.¹³ A new Brussels think-tank the [Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs](#) turns out to be funded by Kazakhstan’s Foreign Ministry. Another group, [The European Azerbaijan Society](#) pays for lavish trips to Baku for EU politicians. Meanwhile the [European Center for a Modern Ukraine](#), a lobbying group based in Brussels in fact had hidden close ties to the toppled Yanukovich regime. From Brussels it had contracted PR firms in the US for multimillion dollar contracts to represent the former Ukrainian ruling party, despite claiming a mere €10,000 total of expenditure in the EU lobbying register (see relevant case studies).

The influence of these types of front groups is particularly hard to trace and monitor – and much of this type of lobbying is shrouded in secrecy.

Mysterious gaps in the lobbying register

While most of the major lobby firms active in Brussels appear in the EU’s transparency register, a large number of medium-sized and small firms do not. In late 2013 Corporate Europe Observatory estimated that over 46 lobby firms remained unregistered. Of those that are registered, many do not contain up-to-date client

“the voice of the Kremlin in Paris”

information. The quality of reporting on financial data in the register is also unreliable. CEO considers that some firms actually exaggerate their lobby expenditure in order to look bigger than they are, as with a French consultancy who claimed to spend €5m a year on lobbying when its turnover was €4.5m, or big companies under-claiming or simply omitting major clients.¹⁴

GPlus was temporarily suspended from the register in 2009 because it was open in admitting it had missed off four clients from the register who wished to remain anonymous;¹⁵ it is suspected that other companies get away with such behaviour as there is little monitoring.

It seems unlikely that China, for example, which as of January 2015 had no less than 10 lobbying companies working for it listed in Washington, is paying no-one in Brussels to lobby the EU – but it and its various departments appear nowhere as clients on Europe’s Transparency Register. Because of the flaws in the current lobby register, and its voluntary nature, we have no way of knowing if this is accurate or not.

China has no less than 10 lobbying companies working for it listed in Washington

Meanwhile there is an almost complete absence of law firms on the register, who boycott it with the excuse that Bar rules for attorneys prevent them from mentioning client relationships without permission. This is despite the fact that the EU’s Transparency rules make clear that law firms conducting lobby work for clients should register them.

PR firms and lobbyists based in member states are also often missing from the register, despite the fact that, according to the European Commission, all entities engaged in “activities carried out with the objective of influencing the policy formulation and decision-making processes of the European institutions” are expected to register, whether based in Brussels or not.¹⁷

A mandatory lobby joint register for the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council of Ministers, in which every EU lobbyist has to register, and in which the information is checked, would bring much needed transparency to the sector.

This would also require reinforcing the fact that lobbying on behalf of governments is already covered by the Transparency Register’s definition. And in a mandatory transparency register, all lobbying, no matter who the client, should be fully disclosed.

The Society of European Affairs Professionals (SEAP) is opposed to a mandatory register. As recently as April 2014 its Vice President Philip Sheppard has said, “SEAP believes the register should be about the choice to do the right thing – to be transparent. It should not be about coercion and compliance.”¹⁸

Yet pushing for a voluntary measure is the oldest trick in the lobbying book – because it is by far the best way to avoid actual regulation. Transparency is not a choice but a duty in a democratic system.

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Member states’ pick and mix approach

Across Europe, at a national level lobbying regulation varies greatly depending on the member state. Indeed, Transparency International reports that in the EU, “Nineteen out of twenty-five countries assessed have yet to implement legislation to control lobbying and those that have often lack enforcement mechanisms and sanctions for non-compliance.”¹⁹

Selected EU member state

lobby regulations:

- » **Austria** responded to a 2011 lobbying scandal involving an Austrian member of the European Parliament by making a register mandatory in 2012.²⁰
- » The **UK**, home to the controversial PR ‘London Launderettes’, has a new, much derided statutory register expected to come into force in 2015, based on a law described by *The Independent* as “possibly one of the worst pieces of legislation ever to be enacted” which could reveal less than the voluntary registers it will replace.²¹
- » **France** still has a voluntary lobbying register, where clients are disclosed but no financial data is released.²²
- » **Germany** lists interest groups at the start of every year, and in theory officials can only hear from lobbyists on the list, but there are loopholes to get round this and includes no financial information.²³

The US model

Not all countries are as coy about requiring lobbyists working on behalf of governments to register.

The reason we know how many firms China is currently employing to lobby Washington is due to the US' Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which requires all lobbyists and lawyers representing the interests of foreign governments to be registered; and that register can be consulted online.

FARA came into being in 1938, just before the Second World War, over fears that Nazi Germany was spreading propaganda and influence via private interests within the borders of the United States. Ivy Ledbetter Lee, sometimes known as the 'godfather' of public relations, pioneered the art of reputation whitewashing, and as early as the 1920s was representing financial interests of foreign governments in the US, including Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union. From 1929 he represented IG Farben (a chemical company later to produce the lethal gas for the death chambers in the concentration camps) with a brief to work on "what could be done to improve [German-American] relations".²⁴ He worked to counter the growing boycott of Nazi Germany's products and travelled there in 1933-34, meeting Hitler and Goebbels, and advising the regime on propaganda as well as briefing US journalists in Berlin on behalf of the Nazis.²⁵

He was accused in 1934 of being Hitler's publicity agent by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); and it was fears of Lee and other's activity on behalf of Nazi Germany that led the same committee to create FARA in 1938.²⁶

FARA was designed to create mandatory disclosure requirements and legal retribution for avoiding them. It required "total public transparency over the operations of foreign agents in the US". The law was subsequently amended to "shield the US Congress and the President from foreign-influenced grassroots lobbying shaping policy, legislation and lawmaking".²⁷

While FARA does have loopholes, the general result is that we know far more about the governments contracting lobbyists in Washington than we do about those in Brussels. From the US register, for example, we know that the

Easy to say, hard to do: ethical

PR for General Sisi?

Ethical standards are easy to claim, but may not stand up to scrutiny. To take just one example, ESL & Network, a French strategic communication and public affairs group, with an EU affairs office in Brussels, claims, "Through our ethical and proven methodologies, we offer tailor-made services for our clients." But they were just one of the several firms that approached Egypt's Minister for Trade and Industry, Mounir Abdel Nour, in France in February 2014 to offer lobbying services to General Sisi. Sisi had recently come to power in a coup, with over 1000 protesters massacred, crushing dissent by lethal force and imprisoning over 22,000 people.²⁸ While no contract appears to have been awarded, clearly the firm did not feel that approaching Cairo under these circumstances was ethically proscribed.

brutal dictatorship of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea is paying Qorvis for PR services, as are Saudi Arabia, and China.²⁸ We even know, because details of the contract are published, that Qorvis' work for China includes "real-time monitoring of Twitter, Facebook, forums, blogs and other social media in the English language", as well as setting up a "war room to deal with challenges in times of crises," including "specific responses to negative/untrue articles in first-tier publications as directed".²⁹ Meanwhile General Sisi of Egypt who came to power in an army coup and is leading a savage backlash against dissenters is paying the Glover Park Group³⁰ for PR representation in Washington. Uganda's dictator of more than two decades, Yoweri Museveni, is paying Mercury Public Affairs,³¹ as is the government of the oil-state Nigeria.³²

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Some Washington PR firms have their own branches in Brussels, or relationships with European companies. For example, Ketchum in the US works with GPlus in Europe, both owned by the Omnicom Group; they co-operate on the Russia brief (see [Russia](#) case study). Unhappy former staff members of US PR firm Qorvis, mentioned above, claimed that many of its most controversial 'black hat' clients come via that company's relationship with the UK's largest public relations firm Bell Pottinger. The latter appeared in the 2010 version of this report for representing Sri Lanka during a draconian crackdown on rebels in the country. "[Bell Pottinger]

have zero conscience in what they do,” the former insider is quoted as saying.³³

Yet while we know which governments the US firms are lobbying for, we remain relatively in the dark in Brussels. The fact is, it would be simple for the EU to achieve FARA-like reporting standards. It would merely have to clarify that lobbying as defined in the Transparency Register for non-EU governments is required to be reported – and be able to enforce this.

Ethical tunnel vision

Quite aside from the normal moral codes that most people adhere to, representing authoritarian regimes, and governments that are responsible for war crimes or serious human rights abuses, as clients sits at complete odds with the various codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility discourses that many PR firms and lobbyists have signed up to. The first article of the Society of European Affairs Professionals (SEAP)’s Code of Conduct is, “Act with honesty and integrity at all times, conducting their business in a fair and professional manner;” while the European Public Affairs Consultancies Association’s (EPACA) Code of Conduct swears “to observe the highest professional and ethical standards.”³⁴ PR giant Burson Marsteller in Brussels says that it not only follows the EPACA Code but goes beyond it.³⁵

The European Association of Communication Directors also goes further in its code of conduct, claiming to “encourage the ethical, legal, responsible, honest, competent and tactful behaviour

of all communications professionals. We believe that the communications professional has an important role to play to promote the values of our democratic society,” and also outlines under a section entitled ‘Integrity’ that, “We represent our respective organisations honestly, loyally and to the utmost of our ability, whilst disseminating accurate and reliable information, and encouraging our employers to behave with consideration to their social responsibilities. We believe that communications must be guided not solely by the interests of an organisation, but by a broader view of the public good.”³⁷

Yet many of these companies suffer from an ethical tunnel vision when it comes to taking on these clients, claiming as an editorial in the PR news site the *Holmes Report* does that, “the underlying question ought to be about the ethics of the firm’s advice, not the ethics of the client”.³⁸ (This, incidentally, was also the argument old-school PR man Ivy Lee used – his “Declaration of Principles” called for honesty with the press and public – when defending his work for the Nazis.)

But the work of public relations, of media communications, of branding, and of lobbying, are all essentially about telling a story about the values and ethics of the clients, about who they are, what they represent, why one might want to ally with them, and what they stand for. Managing the message is a key component in the exercise of power. Its very purpose is to create financial and political support for a regime at home and abroad. There is no question of not being ethically implicated if a PR firm is doing this work.

The risk to the PR practitioners who work in this field is not just ethical but financial. What

Popular outrage and the Syria effect

Bad publicity, when it comes to light that PR firms are working for some of the worst regimes in the world, can help end these mercenary deals.

From 2006 onwards London PR firm Bell Pottinger advised Syria’s first lady, Asma Al-Assad, on how to shape her image. Despite her key role in a ruthless dictatorship, articles appeared in outlets from *Paris Match*, who called her “the eastern Diana”, to the *Huffington Post*, who ran a story on “Syria’s First Lady and All-Natural Beauty”, and most notoriously, *Vogue*, which described her as “A Rose in the Desert”, unfortunately just as the Rose’s husband started slaughtering thousands of pro-democracy protesters in 2011. Asma Al-Assad paid \$5000 a

month to Washington PR firm Brown Lloyd James to co-ordinate the *Vogue* interview.⁴² After popular outrage over the Syrian PR deals and the 2011 uprising, no Western PR firm appears to be representing the Assads – at least not in public.

However, since then the Syrian dictator has appeared in a US TV interview positioning himself as a bastion against terrorism. *Foreign Policy*’s Middle Eastern editor David Kenner says, “I am sure it was aided by a public relations company. This is generally how the Assad regime relates to the Western media.”⁴³

do other household brands being represented by said PR firms feel – are they tainted by association? What happens when the PR firm becomes the story?

The *Holmes Report* editorial quoted above was written in response to the 2011 sting operation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalists, in which five PR firms in London pitched to represent undercover reporters posing as representatives of the government of [Uzbekistan](#) – one of the most repressive in the world – and its cotton industry, which uses forced labour for its harvest. Bell Pottinger PR lost clients and trading value in the wake of the bad publicity it received when the story broke³⁹ – and still has a reputation as a company willing to represent the worst of the worst. Former employees say that previous clients have included Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, the Government of Yemen, Alexander Lukashenko the authoritarian President of Belarus, Saudi Arabia,⁴⁰ as well as the wife of Syrian President Assad (see box on previous page).⁴¹

The reputational risk is also an internal one. Qorvis PR firm in the US suffered a haemorrhaging of staff over ethics questions: “more than a third of the partners at Qorvis have left the firm to start their own lobby shops, partly because of the firm’s work on behalf of such clients as Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Central African nation of Equatorial Guinea,” reported the *Huffington Post*. “I just have trouble working with despotic dictators killing their own people,” said one Qorvis insider to the news site.⁴²

PR companies often argue that in engaging with these regimes they are able to bring about progress on human rights issues. But the testimony of ex-GPlus employee and former PR representative of the Kremlin, Angus Roxburgh (see [Russia](#) case study), casts doubt on the extent to which a PR firm can influence a client towards democratic rights: “The Kremlin wanted us to help distribute the message, not change it”, he says.⁴³

As Andrew Stroehlein of Human Rights Watch told CEO: “The idea that these companies come in with reformist mentalities is hogwash. There are maybe one or two individuals who believe that. Saying they are encouraging reform is just PR companies doing spin for themselves. These people are defending torturers.”

Many in the PR business are also forthright in their skepticism: as Fraser Seitel, a partner at US firm Emerald Partners, observes: “PR firms work with these thugs because these thugs have lots of money.... Firms like [US company] Brown Lloyd James, which worked for Syria, take the money, justify the work by citing ‘democratizing efforts,’ and hope they don’t get nailed.”⁴⁴

An opposing and hopefully far more powerful message to those regimes will have been sent by all the PR firms that have refused to work for them, citing ethical problems and human rights violations.

As Andrew Stroehlein points out, “This isn’t a situation where you have a right to PR as you would with a lawyer. PR companies can turn down clients, they don’t have to take these torturers. The PR firms’ other clients need to look at who they’re hiring. Why don’t they ask when they’re looking to hire a PR firm: ‘Why are you defending torturers, regimes that disappear people in the night?’”

After all, not all stains can be removed, even by the most expensive and professional of laundries. *The Guardian* quotes one PR executive who, on condition of anonymity, said, “You are often paid a lot to do something that you know from the outset you will not be able to achieve.... It is almost like a con. You can’t spray perfume on a turd. It will smell nice for a while, but eventually it will smell like what it is.”⁴⁵

The right to know

Perhaps some final words should go to the PR practitioners themselves. Harry Burson, the US founder of Burson Marsteller and one of the grand old men of modern PR is now in his nineties. *PR Week* lists some of his company’s most controversial clients, including being employed by, “the Nigerian government to discredit reports of genocide during the Biafran war, by the Argentinian junta after the disappearance of 35,000 civilians, and the Indonesian government after massacres in East Timor. It was also employed to buff up the image of the Romanian

Managing the message is a key component in the exercise of power. Its very purpose is to create financial and political support for a regime at home and abroad.

dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and the Saudi royal family.”

The only client he admits was a mistake to work for out of this list is the Argentinean junta: “Our job was economic, to help them pay their debts,” he says. “It wasn’t political, but yes, it was an error.”⁴⁸

When Peter Bingle, former Public Affairs chair for Bell Pottinger, was grilled by a committee of British MPs who asked him, “You’ve worked for mass murders, racists, people who’ve oppressed their own people.... Doesn’t the public have a right to know who your clients are?” Bingle replied: “The public has no right to know.”⁴⁹

But as Andrew Strohlein from Human Rights Watch points out: “If you’re embarrassed by your clients, if you don’t want to say who they are, maybe there’s a reason for that. It shows you know it’s indefensible work.”

Recommendations

- » The European Commission must replace the current voluntary lobbying register with a mandatory one.
- » This register must not just be obligatory for all lobbyists, but also be legally-binding, with oversight and sanctions for non-compliance.
- » Lobbyists must disclose up-to-date client and financial information.
- » Transparency rules should include a specific clarification that lobbying for non-EU governments and states is required to be reported.
- » Law firms that lobby on behalf of regimes, and country branding firms whose work goes into the lobbying arena, also need to be registered in the EU’s Transparency Register.
- » The code of conduct attached to the EU’s lobbying register should add to its existing requirements of ethical behaviour, prohibiting the representation by private firms of regimes the EU considers to be in breach of human rights.
- » Representation of these clients should result in a ‘blacklist’ with the EU institutions boycotting the firms in question, either for listening to their lobbying representation on any case, or contracting communications work from them.
- » The European institutions must adopt a pro-active transparency approach in which decision-makers publish lists of all lobby meetings.
- » There need to be consequences imposed by the European Parliament against MEPs who fail to conform to the ethics code, failing to declare paid trips and gifts, for example.
- » The European institutions need to implement codes of conduct for civil servants and politicians with regards to declaration of interests such as gifts and paid trips.
- » Member states should also implement mandatory lobby registers.

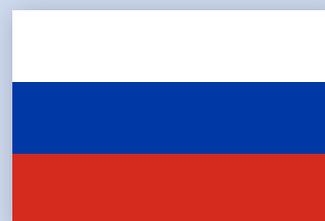
“You’ve worked for mass murders, racists, people who’ve oppressed their own people.... Doesn’t the public have a right to know who your clients are?”

Case studies

1. **Russia:** European PR firms as mouthpieces for the Kremlin

Key lobbyists:

Ketchum (US) | GPlus (Europe) | Institute for Democracy and Cooperation | Brunswick | Hill & Knowlton | Weber Shandwick



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian regime)⁵⁰

125th

In 2006, the year that Vladimir **Putin** became President of the G8, for the first time Russia contracted Western PR agencies – **GPlus** in Europe and **Ketchum** in the US – to work with the Presidential press team. In 2007 **Gazprom**, the Russian state gas company, also became a client of the PR firms, who are both part of the Omnicom family of agencies. Tim Price, a Senior Partner of GPlus in Brussels and Senior Media Adviser to the Press Service of the Kremlin said hosting the G8 was: “an opportunity for Russia to tell its story.... Our work consisted of explaining what Russia wanted to achieve as G8 President.” **Energy security** was high on that list: “Our main task was to help them explain... that Russia had some good ideas and some serious proposals which could contribute to European energy security. Another important task was the G8 summit in St Petersburg itself. We were working with Russian officials to help their communications with the international media.”⁵¹

According to PR news site the Holmes Report, Washington-based Ketchum “partners with... [GPlus] on much of its high-profile work for the Russian government and Gazprom”.⁵² GPlus, with offices in Brussels and London,

works to connect Russia and Gazprom to top EU officials and European and international media, with subcontracts for PR consultancies Dimap in Berlin, Reti in Rome,⁵³ and formerly, Portland Communications in London.⁵⁴ These are part of a multimillion dollar contract for an international consortium of agencies. In 2014 Russia ceased to be a Portland client, after an eight year contract ended.⁵⁵ Portland also previously represented Gazprom.⁵⁶ Portland’s work, according to leaked US intelligence cables was “monitoring media coverage and dealing with the Russian embassy [in London].”⁵⁷ The cables also say that Gazprom paid a total of \$5m to Gavin Anderson, a London financial PR firm (now Kreab Gavin Anderson) for representation from 2007.⁵⁸ Global PR firm Edelman, with a Brussels office, represents the European Gas Forum, of which Gazprom is a member.⁵⁹

GPlus declares an annual income of €150,000 - €200,000 from Russia (via Ketchum) in the EU’s Transparency Register,⁶⁰ and €300,000 to €350,000 from a UK-registered organisation called ‘Diversified Energy Communications’ for Gazprom Export.⁶¹

Doing PR in the EU for a President that describes Russia as a stronghold against “the dark (European) chaos” poses certain difficulties.

Given Russia’s 2014 military annexation of **Crimea**, and the shooting down of a passenger plane flying from Amsterdam by suspected Russian-backed rebels, the fact that Western lobby firms are working for the Putin administration is ever more controversial.⁶² Doing PR in the EU for a President that calls the liberal values of Europe “sexless and barren,” and describes Russia as a stronghold against “the dark (European) chaos” poses certain difficulties.⁶³

First on the list of PR challenges is the ongoing crisis in the Ukraine, which has caused Russia to be suspended from the G8. As the crisis reached its peak in April 2014, GPlus circulated a letter from Putin to the European press and heads of countries (mostly from the EU) dependent on Russian gas via Ukraine, **threatening to cut off gas supplies** via the country unless it started repaying a huge debt. GPlus explained that Putin’s “point is that Russia has been paying a huge price to stabilise Ukraine’s economy and the EU also has to play a part.”⁶⁴ GPlus holds regular meetings with the **Russian ambassador in Brussels** Vladimir Chizhov to discuss strategy and priorities.⁶⁵ The EU gets one third of its gas from Russia.

During the 2009 gas crisis Russia achieved a PR-framing that labelled Ukraine an unstable partner who had stolen gas, causing Gazprom to shut off supplies. This language is still being reflected in EU discussions, for example in August 2014 EU Energy Commissioner Gunther Oettinger warned in a TV interview of the possibility of Ukraine stealing gas.⁶⁶

Tim Price, a GPlus Senior Partner in Brussels, responsible for cooperating with the Kremlin press service, has responded to the accusation of peddling propaganda by saying, “We largely provide logistical support to assist [Russian] spokespeople with handling the European media. This includes facilitating communication between journalists and Russian officials, and providing monitoring and general advice on things such as the Western news cycle.”⁶⁷ Price describes the services that GPlus offer Russia, from press briefings to drafting policy documents, and emphasises that, “Providing **objective information to European Commission officials** is a very important aspect” because their resources are limited, “so they rely quite properly and correctly on input from outside.”⁶⁸

GPlus certainly have good relationships within these institutions as one of the most influential European lobbying firms, stacked with plenty of **former high level EU officials**,

even being described as “virtually the exclusive employer of former spokesmen at the European Commission”.⁶⁹ The two ‘G’s, founders of GPlus Peter Guildford and Nigel Gardner, are both former spokespersons for EU institutions. And in the face of fierce competition from the likes of PR firm EURO RSCG (now **Havas Worldwide**) as the Russia contract was coming up for renewal in 2011, and in order to beef up their chances GPlus recruited another EU heavy hitter, **Bruno Dethomas**, once Commission-Head Jacques Delors’ spokesperson, and until December 2010 responsible for relations with the non-EU states of Eastern Europe (including Russia). He was hired by GPlus three short months after his departure from European politics.⁷⁰

Other employees include Hans Kribbe, senior adviser to the press service of the Russian President; he joined GPlus from the European Commission.⁷¹ Gregor Kreuzhuber, who leads the Gazprom account, was previously a spokesperson in the European Commission, and political adviser to two different European Commissioners. Peter Witt, a senior advisor for both clients, is a retired German deputy ambassador to the EU.⁷²

Heavy lobbying in Europe successfully removed Gazprom’s Head from a list of EU sanctions in May 2014. Moscow newspaper Vedomosti reported that Gazprom’s European partners, energy firms from Italy, France, and Germany, were involved in the lobbying: “It wasn’t easy to get through to the authorities (in Brussels), it took a number of phone calls to get a reaction,” they report their anonymous source as saying.⁷³ Clearly it isn’t just paid lobbyists but business allies that can also work to influence EU institutions. As Chris Weafer of the Russian UralSib Bank once observed in the *New York Times*, “Gazprom is creating a lot of lobby groups in the form of its partners. Instead of Gazprom having to knock on the door of the European Parliament, Total and BASF will do it on their behalf.”⁷⁴

Sanctions: walking a fine line

President Obama said that as a result of the **economic sanctions** imposed on Russia by the US and Europe, the country “is already more isolated than at any time since the Cold War.”⁷⁵ Consequently GPlus’ sister organisation in the US, Ketchum, has come under serious fire over its role working for the Kremlin. While in 2007 Ketchum helped get Putin named Time magazine’s Person of the Year as well as

placing an op-ed by him in September 2013 in the New York Times, by March 2014 Ketchum's Senior Vice President for External Relations Dana Stambaugh felt obliged to clarify that, "We are not advising the Russian Federation on foreign policy, including the current situation in Ukraine."⁷⁶

A former GPlus PR man and ex-BBC correspondent who worked on the Russian brief, Angus Roxburgh, says, "That's [Ketchum's] stock answer, and always has been.... The contract is supposedly aimed at making Russia more attractive as an investment destination, but of course that means helping them disguise all the issues that make it unattractive: human rights, invasions of neighbouring countries, etc."⁷⁷

Meanwhile despite what Ketchum says, a simple web search brings up the site <http://www.gazpromukrainefacts.com> which explains a Russian perspective on the Ukraine / gas crisis, and says "Materials disseminated by Ketchum Inc. on behalf of Gazprom," while <http://www.thinkrussia.com/about> is another online forum for the Russian Government built by Ketchum.

The New York Times says the company is "walking an increasingly fine line" by representing the Russian Government. Ketchum has recently scaled back the number of its employees working on the Russian contract from thirty-five across six countries to ten as the Kremlin has cut spending.⁷⁸ Meanwhile Gazprom has ended its assignment with Ketchum completely after **US sanctions hit Gazprom** financial institution Gazprombank and other Russian companies.⁷⁹

Yet despite European sanctions, GPlus continues to represent both Russia and Gazprom, who are among their biggest clients.

GPlus' former key PR man to Russia, Angus Roxburgh, an ex-BBC correspondent for Chechnya, describes their work for the Kremlin at length in his book *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*,⁸⁰ including giving media training for Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, helping with Putin's speech bidding for the Sochi Winter Olympics, and devising video blogs.

Much of GPlus' work, he says, "involved the kind of things that most governments get done internally, by their embassies and foreign ministry – in whom the Kremlin evidently had little faith." He describes the PR team devising "regular 'road-maps' – big picture, PR strategies for the coming three months/six months/year, wrapped in management speak about 'leveraging opportunities going forward', 'deliverables', and 'reaching out to stakeholders,'" for the Kremlin. But, he says, "The Kremlin wanted us to help distribute the message, not change it."⁸¹

This was because, as he writes, "As the [human rights journalist] **Politkovskaya murder** was followed by the **Litvinenko murder** [an ex-spy killed in London], and then by the Russian **invasion of Georgia**, I began to wonder whether the very reason the Kremlin had decided to take on a Western PR agency was because they knew in advance that their image was about to nose-dive."⁸² Indeed, the **2009 conflict between Georgia and Russia** over South Ossetia and Abkhazia was also played out in the offices of the two countries' respective Brussels PR representatives.⁸³

A Kremlin front group in Paris, flirting with the far right

The **Institute for Democracy and Cooperation** in Paris, located very near to the official palace of the French Prime Minister, is a Russian-funded think tank set up by the Putin administration in 2008, with another branch in New York.⁸⁴ *Intelligence Online* describes it as, "the voice of the Kremlin in Paris."⁸⁵ Its mission statement says it looks at "the relationship between state sovereignty and human rights... [and] the place of Russia in Europe" and that it believes "the political order should be underpinned by a moral perspective, and specifically by the **Judeo-Christian ethic which unites both the Eastern and Western parts of the European continent**". It denies Kremlin backing but is opaque about its sources of funding.

Roxburgh describes it as "pernicious" and "the ultimate Soviet-style revival in today's Russia". Its Paris office is run by Natalia Narochnitskaya, whom Roxburgh provided media training to in his GPlus role and describes as "a Russian nationalist and apologist for Slobodan Milosevic". John Laughland, a British eurosceptic journalist and conservative blogger for *The Spectator*, (most recently appearing in the media defending Russia over the Ukraine crisis) is Director of Studies at the Institute.⁸⁶

Laughland, author of a sympathetic interview with Jean Marie Le Pen in 2002 for British magazine *The Spectator*⁸⁷ says that many French right-wing sympathizers admire the Kremlin – including **National Front** leader Marine le Pen, who visited Moscow in 2014. Laughland says, "Relations with the National Front [and the Kremlin] are very friendly." Although the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation itself denies co-ordinating with the National Front,⁸⁸ it has hosted a whole raft of French extreme-right thinkers through its doors, including Dominique Venner who later shot himself in Notre Dame after stating the need for a spectacular action against "Afro-Maghreb immigration" and gay marriage laws,⁸⁹ and National Front politician Aymeric Chauprade.⁹⁰

North stream, South stream: EU's energy ties to Russia

Brussels-based PR firm **Brunswick** is listed in the EU register as working for **Nord Stream**, a **Gazprom subsidiary** led by former German Chancellor **Gerhard Schröder** which has built a pipeline for natural gas directly from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea, as well as **South Stream**, a consortium to build a pipeline from Russia to Europe via the Black Sea in which Gazprom is the majority shareholder⁹¹ (see also [Azerbaijan](#) case study). Both pipelines serve Russia's strategic interests in the region. South Stream was also listed in the register as a former **GPlus** client.⁹² The EU recently announced the South Stream pipeline will not go ahead, presumably in an effort to wean itself off Russian gas.

The *EU Observer* reported in 2009 that "Moscow's EU message is amplified by PR firm **Hill and Knowlton**. The company's Brussels chief, Elaine Cruikshanks, promotes Gazprom offshoot Nord Stream as a "purely commercial" venture and a "strategic prospect" for EU energy diversity. In the past, Hill and Knowlton flew MEPs to Siberia on a private jet for Russian oil giant Rosneft."⁹³

The PR firm that came in from the cold: Sochi Winter Olympics

Weber Shandwick handled global public relations for the **Sochi Winter Olympics** out of a number of key offices, including London, after handling the 18-month long campaign for a successful bid to host the games.⁹⁴

2. **Rwanda:** rebranding – despite war crimes and repression

Key lobbyists:

Portland Communications | GPlus | BTP Advisers |
Racpoint (former contract) | Acanchi



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian regime)⁹⁵

131st

Rwanda has hired several PR firms to work on deflecting criticism, and rebranding the country. Leader Paul Kagame – who has been in power for 14 years – has been hailed as leading the country **from genocide to economic success story** while Rwanda has been held up as an African development model. Uncritical Western support is partly attributed to historical guilt from the international community over the 1994 genocide, and Kagame perceived as a key factor in ending it.

But Kagame is also accused of running an autocratic administration, with opposition parties unable to operate, controls on freedom of expression, and the disappearance of political opponents both in Rwanda and abroad.⁹⁶ Even more seriously, the country faces UN allegations of **war crimes** for arming and supplying the M23 guerrillas fighting in neighbouring **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**. These rebels have been accused of using rape as a weapon of war, summary executions, and forced recruitment particularly in militia-controlled mineral mines used to fund the conflict. A Human Rights Watch report says, “In violation of the UN arms embargo on non-state actors in eastern Congo, Rwandan military officials supplied the M23 with weapons, ammunition, and new recruits, including

children.”⁹⁷ Militia-controlled mines on all sides of the conflict, including the M23 guerrillas, have funded the fighting via selling gold and minerals. *National Geographic* reports that these “**militia-controlled mines in Eastern Congo** have been feeding raw materials into the world’s biggest electronics and jewellery companies... Turns out your laptop — or camera or gaming system or gold necklace — may have a smidgen of Congo’s pain somewhere in it.”⁹⁸

While the US has brought in a law banning the use of conflict minerals, the EU has thus far only proposed a voluntary scheme.⁹⁹ Gautier Muhindo Misonia, coordinator of the Centre for Research and Investigation into the Environment, Democracy and Human Rights, in DRC, said: “We urgently need a strong law in the EU which stops companies ignoring the harms their purchases fuel in countries like the Congo.... But international scrutiny of the sector has triggered real progress which the EU’s voluntary scheme would undermine. It would allow European companies to profit at the expense of local people.”¹⁰⁰

The EU is Rwanda’s biggest **aid donor**, in September 2014 awarding a €460 million grant over the next six years.¹⁰¹ However in 2012 it froze some aid funds due to these war

“The government of Rwanda is itself enormously controversial, it’s very uncertain what their role was in the deaths that occurred around the time of the genocide.”

crimes allegations. By 2013 as the situation improved, donors agreed to release funds; the Secretary to the Treasury Pichette Kampeta said, “Rwanda has done its best to communicate its position on the conflict in Eastern DR Congo”.¹⁰²

An informal group of MEPs in the European Parliament called the ‘**Friends of Rwanda**’ was launched in 2010 with an event with the Ambassador of Rwanda in Brussels as well as Rwandan ambassadors from across Europe. The group was founded by former European Commissioner Louis Michel (no longer an MEP), and other MEPs involved include Charles Goerens and Mariya Gabriel-Nedelcheva. The group was launched two months after the 2010 UN report accused Rwanda of war crimes in the DRC. Its objectives include, “to support, enhance and promote the interests of Rwanda through the various institutions of the European Union,” and “to inform on progress reaped by Rwanda in different areas: economic development, social progress and democracy.”¹⁰³ It is not funded by the Rwandan Government and there is no suggestion of impropriety about the group. While an MEP, Louis Michel called for a binding EU law prohibiting trade in conflict minerals.¹⁰⁴

However he opposed a proposal of sanctions as counter-productive after the issue of Rwandan war crimes was raised, calling Kagame “a visionary” and Rwanda an “anchor of stability” in the Great Lakes, according to Charles Onana, a Franco-Cameroonian investigative journalist.¹⁰⁵

A well primed PR machine

A Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative report notes that Rwanda has “excellent public relations machinery”, and that this has been key in “persuading the key members of the international community that it has an exemplary constitution emphasising democracy, power-sharing, and human rights which it fully respects”. It concluded: “The truth is, however, the opposite.”¹⁰⁶

Portland Communications form part of this ‘PR machinery’, confirming, “We do work with the Rwandan High Commission: we support their communications in the UK. I’m afraid, for client confidentiality reasons, we can’t go into details on the work that we do for them.”¹⁰⁷ Portland is a London-based PR company set up by an advisor to former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, with “over 80 staff, offices in London, New York and Nairobi, and a global network,”

whose team “is recruited from the highest levels of the media, politics and government,” according to its website. It also employs on a part-time contract the most notorious of Blair’s spin doctors, Alastair Campbell. According to the *Sunday Times*, the contract with Portland that dates from early 2013 is said to worth more than €1.25m.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile according to the EU’s Transparency Register, **GPlus** is subcontracted by Portland to lobby for Rwanda in the EU, and they declare it is with a spend below €50,000.¹⁰⁹ Likely lobbying topics could include marking the 20th anniversary of the genocide, the issue of conflict minerals and the EU’s aid-freeze over war crimes allegations, mentioned above.

Another British firm, **BTP Advisers**, has also worked for the Rwandan Government. Head of BTP Mark Pursey, international media relations adviser to the Rwandan Government, was secretly recorded in 2011 by the Bureau of Investigative Journalists. He described building an ‘**attack site**’ – a webpage targeted at people who “over-criticised” about “who did what in the genocide”. He mentioned that, “The government of Rwanda is itself enormously controversial, it’s very uncertain what their role was in the deaths that occurred around the time of the genocide.” Pursey also described his strategy for undermining the credibility of the 2010 UN report into Rwandan war crimes in the DRC, saying “In order to try and address it, we didn’t address the accusations that were made. We addressed and focused on the reasonableness of the accusers.”¹¹⁰

Previous PR firms working on the rebranding of Rwanda include British firm **Racepoint Group** in 2010 and 2011 to ‘re-position’ the country with key audiences in Europe and the US.

The Guardian reported on an event at Rwanda’s embassy in London in 2010 organised by Racepoint, which involved a fake Rwandan village hut for journalists to sit in, while “Smart-suited young British PR executives poured Rwandan coffee and burred about presenting ‘a different image’ and focusing on ‘mountains, gorillas, crops’ – all part of the country’s increasing efforts to reinvent itself 16 years after it was torn apart by genocide.”¹¹¹

PR journal *The Holmes Report* published a case study entitled ‘The New Rwanda’ about the work Racepoint did for this contract. Not only were interviews with ministers and the President placed in influential international media, and

articles placed on key issues such as human rights and democracy in Rwanda, but Racepoint also “embarked on an aggressive issues response programme” – ie responding to negative and critical press, that “focused on human rights, cultural redevelopment, independence and democratic misperceptions.”¹¹²

Also crucial to this effort were the “media familiarisation” tours Racepoint organised for journalists. The result was that media discussions about Rwanda increased by 4,400% during this time, and – key for a country bent on rebranding – discussions about the Rwandan genocide decreased by 11%.

The political strategy of Racepoint included, “stakeholder input sessions with President Kagame, various cabinet ministers, external groups including the Blair Foundation and Clinton Global Initiative,” as well as to more generally “advance Rwanda’s standing with key political influencers in global capitals.”¹¹³

Targeting dissidents abroad

One of the more worrying aspects of Racepoint’s objectives was to “Educate and correct the ill informed and factually incorrect information perpetuated by certain groups of expatriates and NGOs,” including, presumably, the critiques of the **crackdown on dissent among political opponents overseas**.¹¹⁴ This should be seen in the context of accusations that Rwanda has plotted to kill dissidents abroad. A recent investigation by the *Globe and Mail* claims, “Rwandan exiles in both South Africa and Belgium – speaking in clandestine meetings in secure locations because of their fears of attack – gave detailed accounts of being recruited to assassinate critics of President Kagame.... Their evidence is the strongest yet to support what human rights groups and Rwandan exiles have suspected for years about the Rwandan government’s involvement in attacks or planned attacks on dissidents, not only in South Africa but in Britain, Sweden, Belgium, Uganda, Kenya and Mozambique.”¹¹⁵

Another British PR firm **Acanchi**, working with high level stakeholders developed an ‘Enduring Spirit’ brand for Rwanda launched in March 2010.¹¹⁶ Acanchi is a small British firm that specialises in country branding, saying it has “taken on many assignments with Governments and leaders to position their countries, regions or cities in the world.” Clients have included the governments of the Dominican Republic, Mauritius, Hong Kong, Lebanon, and Israel (see [Israel](#) case study).¹¹⁷

3. Bangladesh: seeking support for executions



The Government of Bangladesh has contracted the PR firm **BGR Gabara** which works in London and Brussels, for a reported €17,000 a month.¹¹⁹

The EU gives preferential trade access to Bangladesh but after the collapse of the illegally built Rana Plaza factory in April 2013, in which 1,129 garment workers died, it considered trade action in order to pressure the government to enforce stricter safety standards. Sixty per cent of Bangladesh's clothes exports go to Europe.¹²⁰ Bangladesh was rocked by violent demonstrations by garment workers seeking pay hikes and better working conditions in the wake of the tragedy. The industry employs mostly women, some of whom only earn €29 a month.¹²¹

US PR news-sheet *O'Dwyers'* reported in September 2013 that the Government of Bangladesh had given a PR assignment to BGR Government Affairs to manage the country's international image in the wake of such protests – a contract now runs to March 2015.^{122,123} BGR Government Affairs, based in Washington, and BGR Gabara, based in London and focusing on European policymaking, are part of the BGR Group.¹²⁴

According to their website: “The BGR Gabara team is headed by **Ivo Ilic Gabara**, one of Europe's most distinguished public affairs practitioners, and John Lough, a former representative of NATO to Russia and current Vice-President at BGR Gabara.... We have an intimate understanding of Europe's decision-makers and media, at both the EU and national member state levels. Our staff brings a wealth of experience acquired from working with the European Commission in Brussels, NATO, and some of the leading global communications agencies.” They are keen to highlight the global nature of their work, “providing customized solutions that borrow the best of American campaign strategy and local talent”.¹²⁵

However it may be that BGR Gabara has a more specific task than recuperating Bangladesh's image after the garment factory disaster.

BGR Government Affairs in the US signed their contract with the Bangladeshi Government four days before the country's Supreme Court **sentenced to death by hanging Abdul Quader Molla**, Assistant Secretary General of Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamic party in December 2013.¹²⁶ The specially set-up-court the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh has been trying 16 accused, all

leading members of the main opposition parties; in the lead-up to the controversial January 2014 election, death sentences and life imprisonment were being handed down regularly.¹²⁷

The Law Minister of Bangladesh Shafique Ahmed says his government contracted lobbyists to tackle the widespread **criticism by rights groups** of the decision to execute Molla. He said, “The government was not slow in making the appointment of the public relation firm... The appointment was timely as many cases are in final stages.”¹²⁸ Jamaat-e-Islami leader Motiur Rahman Nizami was the latest figure to be given a death sentence on 29 October 2014.

The European Parliament passed three resolutions supporting the trials to uncover historical war crimes, though noting “strong opposition against the use of the death penalty in all cases”.¹²⁹ However, while at first rights groups also welcomed the creation of a tribunal to try crimes from the 1971 war of liberation by the Pakistani Army and militias and political groups who collaborated with them, concern among organisations such as Human Rights Watch and MEPs have grown that the tribunal is not fair or transparent.¹³⁰ The court convicted Molla, but only later applied the death penalty after retro-active changes to the law, implemented in response to political turbulence and public anger. In addition to concerns over political interference his trial also featured the resignation of a judge under suspicious circumstances, and a key witness who disappeared.¹³¹

A US intelligence cable from Wikileaks reports that in 2010 the US State Department had observed that, “There is little doubt that hard-line elements within the ruling party [AL] believe that the time is right to crush Jamaat and other Islamic parties.”¹³²

“There is little doubt that hard-line elements within the ruling party believe that the time is right to crush Jamaat and other Islamic parties.”

4. Azerbaijan: oil, gas, and caviar diplomacy



Azerbaijan is run “in a similar manner to the feudalism found in Europe during the Middle Ages... with general agreement among leading families to divide the spoils,” according to a confidential US intelligence report leaked in 2010.¹³⁴ The country has not had a competitive election since the father of the current President, Ilham Aliyev, came to power in 1993 following a coup, and is one of the most corrupt in the world.¹³⁵

The country's **oil and gas** is of increasingly important strategic value for the European Union, and there are ongoing negotiations to create an EU-Azerbaijan association agreement which would strengthen political and **trade ties**. The regime has spent large sums of money lobbying and building relations with politicians in the EU, from funding cultural centres, to lavish trips, to political events. Controversially, in 2014 Azerbaijan held the Presidency of the **Council of Europe**, the continent's leading human rights body.

Azerbaijan's already abysmal human rights record further deteriorated during the 2013 Presidential election which Ilham Aliyev won with 84.5% of the vote. Human rights activists, political opponents, and journalists were detained, beaten, and tortured.¹³⁶ The Organization for Security and

Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent election monitors in 2013 who found “intimidation, the imprisonment of opposition figures, a lack of media freedom,” and concluded the “evidence of systemic fraud was overwhelming”.¹³⁷

Caviar diplomacy and whitewashed elections

A report by think tank the European Stability Initiative is heavily critical of European politicians wooed by what one senior Azerbaijani policymaker calls “**caviar diplomacy**”:

Many deputies are regularly invited to Azerbaijan and generously paid.... In a normal year, at least 30 to 40 would be invited, some of them repeatedly. People are invited to conferences, events, sometimes for summer vacations. These are real vacations and there are many expensive gifts. Gifts are mostly expensive silk carpets, gold and silver items, drinks, caviar and money. In Baku, a common gift is 2 kg of caviar.¹³⁸

This gives a curious context to the story of how both members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and a delegation of MEPs praised Azerbaijan's 2013 elections, in embarrassing contrast to the OSCE's conclusions of "systemic fraud". At a joint press conference, the head of the MEP delegation Pino Arlacchi declared the elections "free and transparent", as did Robert Walter representing PACE, a British MP and member since 2010 of 'Conservative Friends of the Azerbaijan'.¹³⁹

After questions were raised about the report, the European Parliament ethics committee found that six of the MEPs who travelled to Azerbaijan to monitor the elections violated the new code of conduct in failing to declare the trip. *Euractiv* reports, "Some of [the MEPs] 'forgot' to tell Parliament that they had been invited by the Azeri government and did not declare the trip on their website.... The committee is also questioning whether some MEPs were remunerated for this task, on top of the paid trip."¹⁴⁰

When the head of the delegation MEP Pino Arlacchi was asked afterwards in an internal EP meeting why his conclusions on the election were so different to that of the OSCE he replied it was to "defend" Italian interests in the region (presumably related to an energy corridor).¹⁴¹ The MEPs questioned were Ivo Vajgl (liberal) from Slovenia; Kristiina Ojuland (liberal) from Estonia; Oleg Valjalo, from Croatia (centre-left); Jacek Wlosowicz from Poland and Slavi Binev, a Bulgarian (both Europe of Freedom and Democracy group); and Nick Griffin, a British extreme-right MEP.¹⁴² However, no punitive action was taken.

According to *Der Spiegel*, Berlin's **Society for the Promotion of German-Azerbaijani Relations** (GEFDAB), is "essentially a lobbying group funded by Azerbaijan".^{143,144} It funded 36 German Election Observation Group trips, and helped fund observers from the Brussels-based European Academy of Election Observation, which sent 135 MPs and political experts from 24 European countries.¹⁴⁵ MEP Alexandra Thein, funded by GEFDAB, found that the vote complied with "the basic and democratic rules of a free and independent election."¹⁴⁶

A mysterious advocacy group, lavish parties and trips for politicians

A seemingly independent advocacy association, **The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS)** is one of the bodies that organises trips for MEPs and other European officials to Azerbaijan. For example in 2011 they funded trips by Viscount and Baroness Eccles, members of PACE.¹⁴⁷ They also helped fund a trade trip by British MP Robert Walters who in 2013 acted as an election monitor (see above).

TEAS is a UK-registered, pan-European lobby group with offices in Brussels, London, Paris, Berlin, Istanbul, and Baku. It is chaired by Tale Heydarov, the London-based son of Kamaladdin Heydarov who is one of President Ilham Aliyev's inner circle, the Minister for Emergency Situations and business tycoon.¹⁴⁸ While TEAS says it has no funding from the Azerbaijani Government, according to US intelligence cables, "its talking points very much reflect the goals and objectives of the GOA [Government of Azerbaijan]."¹⁴⁹

According to TEAS' website its Public Affairs departments in Brussels and London work to "increase awareness about Azerbaijan amongst key opinion formers, key decision-makers and other political, academic and civil society stakeholders... TEAS works with parties across the full political spectrum in the UK, France, Germany, Brussels and other EU nation states and stakeholders."¹⁵⁰ TEAS Brussels is run by Roman Huna, former Programme Advisor of the Council of Europe's Directorate General of Legal Affairs. Veteran British lobbyist Lionel Zetter is TEAS' global Director, while its Director of Communications is former Burson Marsteller and Edelman employee Leon Cook, who focuses on "raising awareness of Azerbaijan as an investment destination and its energy offering with international energy consortia amongst policy stakeholders in the EU and beyond."¹⁵¹

Zetter is also Senior Counsel at international PR firm **APCO**,¹⁵² with global headquarters in Washington and its EMEA office based in Brussels. In April 2014 APCO signed a two-month contract in the US worth \$50,000 to bolster the image of Azerbaijan.¹⁵³ APCO London, where Zetter is based, lists The European Azerbaijan Society as

one of its clients in the UK's Public Relations Consultants' Association register.¹⁵⁴

TEAS Brussels office's mission is "to raise awareness about Azerbaijan, and to develop relationships with key stakeholders in the European Commission, the European Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament – as well as with civil society." It also mentions the trade ties under negotiation: "Azerbaijan has established strong relations with the European Union... and the opening of negotiations on Association Agreements will accelerate this process."¹⁵⁵ Raising awareness of the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh is also part of its work.

TEAS organizes events such as a 2013 meeting entitled 'Europe 2020: Focusing on the Energy Partnership with Azerbaijan' held in the European Parliament, co-organised by MEP Inese Vaidere. Roman Huna, head of TEAS Belgium, said of this event in the Parliament that his organisation "has established itself as a credible platform for information with regard to the South Caucasus". Speakers included MEPs, the Azeri ambassador, and Brendan Devlin, Advisor on Gas Policy, for the European Commission's Directorate-General for Energy.¹⁵⁶

Meanwhile TEAS offices from London to Berlin are notorious for the lavish parties they throw for national politicians; TEAS also donates generously to national political parties.¹⁵⁷

Europe's cultural gems

The **Heydar Aliyev Foundation** is a charitable fund run by first lady Mehriban Aliyeva, which has funded renovations in the Louvre, Versailles Palace, the Berlin City Palace, and the Cathedral in Strasbourg, the city where the Council of Europe is headquartered.^{158,159}

Olympic dreams

CSM Strategic, the London-based consultancy for global sporting events worked on Baku's bid to host the 2020 Olympic games,¹⁷⁰ as did PR giant **Burson Marsteller** in Brussels,¹⁷¹ the latter extolling Azerbaijan's "Olympic values of respect, excellence and fair play."¹⁷² Although this bid ended in failure, the European Olympic Committee (EOC)

Rachida Dati MEP – a close friend of the Azerbaijan dictatorship?

Former Minister for Sarkozy and now an MEP, Rachida Dati of France appears to be one of Azerbaijan's best friends. Declaring the country "an example of democracy for other Islamic countries"¹⁶⁰ she sent a letter of congratulation to Aliyev after the 2013 elections saying: "The result of this election represent a high assessment given by the people of your country for the activities carried out under your leadership."¹⁶¹

In 2012 President Aliyev and his wife Mehriban Aliyeva opened a lavish 3000m² Azerbaijan Cultural Centre – paid for by the First Lady's **Heydar Aliyev Foundation** and the Azer embassy – in Rachida's Dati's constituency as Mayor of the 7th arrondissement of Paris. Three months later Dati said in an interview, "The Azerbaijani model is the result of a real political will."¹⁶² Aside from various visits to Azerbaijan,¹⁶³ she seems to have a close relationship with Mehriban Aliyeva. Dati is also managing member of newly rejuvenated **Friends of Azerbaijan** society in France.¹⁶⁴

Dati co-organized a conference in 2011 with Mehriban Aliyeva, whose Heydar Aliyev Foundation funded the festivities. The event held in Paris was called 'Azerbaijan: a strategic partner for energy security in Europe' – in attendance were Azerbaijani Ministers, European politicians and energy company heads, including Jean-François Cirelli Vice-President of GDF-Suez, and Eishad Nasirov, Vice-President of Azer state oil company SOCAR.¹⁶⁵ This was followed by a 400-seat dinner for politicians, businesspeople, and celebrities at the Rodin Museum, where Dati and head of GDF-Suez Gérard Mestrallet were pictured together.¹⁶⁶

The event covered significant **gas discoveries in Absheron, Azerbaijan**, as well as the opening of negotiations between the EU and Azerbaijan on access to Caspian gas, something GDF-Suez is very much in favour of. In 2012 GDF-Suez, Total, and SOCAR developed the Absheron fields.

Concerns have been raised by Friends of the Earth and Corporate Europe Observatory

over media reports of Dati's dealings with GDF-Suez: they raised a potential conflict of interest over her work on the Parliament's Economic Affairs and Monetary Affairs committee (ECON) and the Industry, Research and Energy committee (ITRE). GDF-Suez has refused to confirm or deny whether Dati is working for them.¹⁶⁷

In April 2014, Gerald Häfner MEP, then Chair of the Code of Conduct advisory committee in the European Parliament, noted: "[Rachida Dati MEP] was completely inactive for a long time, and then she suddenly started to do a huge amount of work on energy, and strangely enough, everything that she does seems to correspond exactly to the interest of one particular industry lobby, namely Gaz De France [GDF-Suez]. At one time a publicist admitted that she was acting on behalf of Gaz De France and specifically stated the amount she got in payment for that; and that case was... recommended for an official investigation."^{168,169}

Forty thousand Baku residents will be evicted and their homes destroyed to make way for a 'green zone' for the Games.

has since awarded Baku the honour of hosting the very first **European Games in 2015**. CSM Strategic, whose Executive Director is Sebastian Coe, a British sports personality and life peer in the House of Lords, says his company, “played a leading role in bringing these Games to Baku. It introduced the idea to the EOC’s advisors in March 2012 and since then has worked closely with both the EOC and Baku in helping to bring the concept to reality.”¹⁷³ There was no competing bid.

The regime regards the success of the Games as a way to raise the country’s profile internationally. Yet the crack-down on human rights has escalated even further in the run up. A **leading Azerbaijani human rights activist**, Leyla Yunus, who had called for a boycott of the Games, has been detained (as has her husband) and beaten in detention.¹⁷⁴ Forty thousand Baku residents will be evicted and their homes destroyed to make way for a ‘green zone’ for the Games.¹⁷⁵

“Geostrategic importance”

Glocal Communications is a “Brussels-based European affairs and strategic communications consultancy” run by Demir Murat Seyrek, whose biggest client for 2013 was the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Azerbaijan.¹⁷⁶ According to the *EU Observer*, “Boutique PR firm Glocal Communications organises seminars with MEPs about Azerbaijan’s ‘geostrategic’ importance.”¹⁷⁷

The Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Kingdom of Belgium was formerly listed in the EU’s Transparency Register as a client generating €50,000. The activities of Glocal Communications are listed as including: “Meetings with MEPs and their assistants; Meetings with representatives of the EU institutions; Organisation of events at the EP; Committee Meetings.”¹⁷⁸

One of Glocal’s other clients is **DCI Group**, listed as paying €50,000 to Glocal Communications. In 2012 US PR company DCI Group signed a \$20,000 a month contract for strategic media, PR, and outreach focusing on “**Azerbaijan’s energy resources**” and its strategic role as part of the “**northern distribution network**” that supplies US troops in Afghanistan. However it is not clear from the register whether DCI’s commission of Glocal in Brussels was

Azerbaijan-related. When asked to confirm his lobbying activities by CEO, Mr Seyrek replied “F*** off.”

Glitzy connections

The German PR firm **Consultum Communications** set up a glitzy independence celebration for Azerbaijan in Berlin in 2011. Attendees included board members former Ministers Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Michael Glos. Hans-Eric Bilges of Consultum is a member of the Executive Board of the **German-Azerbaijan Forum** which collaborates with **TEAS** and boasts a significant number of prominent ex-politicians on its board.¹⁷⁹ Genscher reportedly called an MEP during a debate in the European Parliament about a resolution over Azerbaijan. The firm also represents [Kazakhstan](#) (see case study).

The **Office of Communication of Azerbaijan (OCAZ)** in Brussels claims to be a “non-profit” liaison between the country and the European institutions, and organises “meetings with members of Belgian and European parliament, business people from Western European countries”.¹⁸⁰ However, it appears to be an initiative funded by the government of Azerbaijan.

Despite all this lobby spending, in September 2014 the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for targeted sanctions against Aliyev’s regime, as a result of increasing human rights abuses in the country. It also condemned in strong terms the fact that Azerbaijan held the Presidency of the Council of Europe during 2014.¹⁸¹ MEP Ivo Vajgl, earlier singled out for failing to declare his trip to Azerbaijan to monitor the 2013 elections (see above) was one of the MEPs who voiced opposition to these measures, as TEAS approvingly pointed out in its press release.¹⁸²

5. **Nigeria:** Boko Haram catastrophe spun by PR electioneers

Key lobbyists:

Levick (US) | Bell Pottinger (Europe)



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian regime)¹⁸³

121st

The **Nigerian Government** faced a barrage of domestic and international criticism over its reaction to the kidnapping of more than 270 schoolgirls by Islamist group **Boko Haram**. After three weeks of silence post the event, the President's wife even suggested the abductions had been faked to discredit the Government. Outraged civilians took to the streets and called for President Goodluck Jonathan to stand down. Boko Haram went on to massacre up to 2000 civilians in an attack on the town of Baga during continuing unrest, something the government again remained silent on for some time. Seeking re-election in February 2015, the administration of the President has recruited PR counsel in the US and Europe to save his reputation at home and abroad. Nigeria is Africa's biggest spender on image-making, just ahead of Egypt and Morocco.¹⁸⁴

Human Rights Watch reports that, "The failure of Nigeria's government to address the widespread poverty, corruption, police abuse, and longstanding impunity for a range of crimes has created a fertile ground for violent militancy." The security forces in particular are implicated in torture, arbitrary arrest, extortion, and extrajudicial killings. Human Rights Watch also claims, "Abuses by government security forces and the ruling elite's mismanagement and

embezzlement of the country's vast oil wealth" continue largely unabated.¹⁸⁵ Although the EU has urged Nigeria to do its utmost to stop Boko Haram, the country's oil exports mean the international community has been reluctant to press too far on numerous human rights issues.

The EU is Nigeria's largest client for both oil and non-oil exports. As the biggest African economy, Nigeria is one of 16 countries negotiating the West African Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU. €512 million is earmarked for 2014-2020 development aid from the EU to Nigeria.

The PR help is focused internationally on maintaining investment and trade relationships in the face of perceptions of instability; and locally on the upcoming 2015 election.

The Nigerian Government hired **Levick**, a prominent Washington PR firm, for lobbying in the US in a \$1.2m contract to "change the international and local media narrative surrounding Nigeria's efforts to find and safely return the girls abducted by the terrorist organization Boko Haram." Levick is working to publicize "President Goodluck Jonathan Administration's past, present and

Nigeria is Africa's biggest spender on image-making, just ahead of Egypt and Morocco

future priority to foster transparency, democracy and the rule of law throughout Nigeria.”¹⁸⁶ A Levick employee was quoted as saying, “The main focus right now is **increasing investor confidence**. We have to include all fronts including economic angles. There has been a barrage of international media coverage and we need to try to convert this interest into positive coverage.”¹⁸⁷ However there was a social media backlash from Nigerians after the deal emerged, with outrage over reputation laundering and spending state money on PR, using the Twitter hashtag #SomeoneTellLevick.

In response, and in contrast to its comments about promoting investor confidence, Levick claimed its “only mission is assisting the Government of Nigeria with its number one priority — the rescue of the girls and combating terrorism.”¹⁸⁸

Meanwhile the Nigerian Minister of Petroleum Resources Diezani Alison-Madueke, Goodluck Jonathan's closest colleague, also met with **five PR companies in London** in spring of 2014 after sending out RFPs (requests for proposals) to mount the European wing of the PR offensive.¹⁸⁹

The Nigerian press reports: “According to the RFP, the successful firm will be required to target stakeholders in the UK, USA, Commonwealth countries, ‘**all relevant EU institutions**’, academic institutions and NGOs, ‘arrange one-on-one meetings with influential and open-minded potential champions’ and ‘arrange briefings to build links at various levels with the UK, US, Commonwealth and major European governments.’”¹⁹⁰ Despite the RFP reportedly requiring representation to the EU institutions, no company appears in the EU's Transparency Register to date with Nigeria as a client.

While there has been no confirmation of which of the bidding PR firms was successful in London, *Africa Confidential* reports that **Bell Pottinger** is now managing Goodluck Jonathan's election campaign alongside US election strategist Joe Trippi.¹⁹¹

Individual politicians can personally benefit by building a direct relationship with foreign lobbyists. For example **Nigeria's Minister for Petroleum** Diezani Alison-Madueke, the local press have suggested, may have her own reasons for building a relationship with a PR team. Not only is she President Goodluck Jonathan's closest advisor, but **the target of many accusations of corruption**. The former Executive Director of Shell International, Alison-Madueke is subject to a probe over allegedly spending Nigerian naira 10 billion (€4.8m) of public money on private jets for personal use.¹⁹² Perhaps the PR sheen is working, however, as she has been elected the President of **OPEC** for 2015.¹⁹³



Nigerian tweeters expressed their outrage against the \$1.2 million PR spend on Levick using the hashtag #SomeoneTellLevick

6. **Ukraine:** protecting the assets of a fallen regime

Key lobbyists:

Alber & Geiger | Burson Marsteller (former contract)
| European Centre for a Modern Ukraine



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Hybrid regime)¹⁹⁴

85th

In November 2013 Ukraine was rocked by the Euromaiden revolution driven by then President Victor Yanukovich moving politically away from the EU, and an association agreement with Europe which had been in process, and towards Russia.

The country was internally riven, as populations in the east were more pro-Russian, while many Ukrainians took to the streets to protest for closer ties with Europe and against the corruption of the Yanukovich government. According to Anders Aslund, an expert on the Ukraine at the Peterson Institute in Washington, the President and his cronies known as the *'familia'* **embezzled an estimated \$8 to \$10 billion a year** after taking power in 2010.¹⁹⁵ After months of civil disobedience and protests in which over 110 civilians were killed, in February 2014 Yanukovich fled the capital Kiev. Members of the Ukraine parliament set a May election date for his replacement.

The EU froze the assets of Yanukovich and other former elite regime members because of the systematic embezzlement of state funds. When he fled, Yanukovich left his absurdly opulent mansion in a 130 hectare estate with its own yacht club, cinema, golf course, and menagerie; the light fittings alone had cost €31 million. It has now been designated a 'museum of corruption'.¹⁹⁶

Those with their assets frozen by the EU are Yanukovich and his closest aides, including his son, former **Prime Minister Azarov, Azarov's son**, and a former interior minister, justice minister, prosecutor general, and head of the security services, among others; in total 22 people. Azarov, Yanukovich and two others are now wanted by Interpol for embezzlement and other crimes.¹⁹⁷

According to research by Ukrainian anti-corruption watchdogs and journalists, behind the seized property assets are a whole web of companies in Austria, Liechtenstein, the UK, Switzerland, and offshore.¹⁹⁸ EU sanctions mean that for

When he fled, Yanukovich left his absurdly opulent mansion, now designated a 'museum of corruption'

example, Italy has frozen the assets of two villas in Sardinia valued at €3 million that belong to Oleksiy Azarov, the son of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov.¹⁹⁹ Austria has frozen a company also owned by Azarov junior on suspicion of money laundering.²⁰⁰ However the EU is reported to be pursuing the cases very slowly.²⁰¹

Azarov, who fled to Russia when the regime fell, and his son have employed Brussels law firm **Alber and Geiger** to unfreeze their assets. Alber and Geiger describes itself as, “A political lobbying powerhouse and the leading European government relations law firm.”²⁰² According to the *EU Observer*, “Alber & Geiger... declined to disclose its fee, but PR industry sources in Brussels said the type of contract is worth ‘at least’ €80,000 a month.”²⁰³

In total 14 of those targeted by sanctions, including Yanukovich and his sons, have filed a challenge to the sanctions in EU courts, though Alber and Geiger denies working for other regime members apart from the Azarovs.²⁰⁴

The effort by Alber and Geiger is not just a legal endeavour, but a PR one. Writing in the journal *Euractiv*, partner Andreas Geiger describes himself and his company as “white knights” coming to the rescue of persecuted former regime members in the Ukraine – such as Azarov and son, ‘victims’ of the Euromaidan revolution.

Geiger writes, “In most people’s perception, these cases are somehow different from the Amnesty activist who gets beaten up by the police. This is because those people once were part of ‘the system’ themselves. But exactly for that reason, they often have to suffer even more from persecution and intimidation by their political enemy who is now in charge, culminating in fake allegations by the system that toppled them.”²⁰⁵

Geiger’s is a kind of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* moral universe, where the real victims of the revolution are those who have been toppled, not the people who faced repression and the snipers’ bullets. This is where Geiger as the ‘White knight’ steps in. Remember though, that in the Alice books, the white knight character is a haphazard fighter who travels backwards in order to go forwards.

“**Lobbying firms** are, therefore, increasingly working to **defend the human rights of former politicians and businessmen** that find themselves in such a situation. And rightfully so. These people need a ‘White Knight’ to lobby their legitimate interests in places like Washington and Brussels.” He finishes by suggesting that this is a growing area of business – presumably he foresees there will be more toppled elites to defend from future revolutions?²⁰⁶

The *EU Observer* reports that diplomats revealed the identities of Alber and Geiger’s clients are Azarov and his son, because Alber and Geiger sent a letter on their behalf to the EU Council the day the sanctions entered into force on 5 March 2014. The firm sent another note three weeks later with “points for consideration”; and a similar letter to all 28 EU countries’ Brussels embassies; as well as approaching MEP British Conservative Charles Tannock on the subject.²⁰⁷

Andreas Geiger of Alber and Geiger said, “We are going to say [to the EU Council]: ‘Look. You’ve got the wrong people and you’ve got no legal basis, so please take them off the list.’ And if they reject this, we’ll take them to court.”²⁰⁸

Smear campaigns and the Count of Monte Cristo

Before the Ukrainian regime was toppled, in early 2012 Yanukovich’s ruling party employed **Burson Marsteller** in Brussels to run a **smear campaign against Yulia Tymoshenko**, a political opponent who had been jailed in 2011 for seven years.²⁰⁹ Amnesty International stated, “The prosecution against Yuliya Tymoshenko is politically motivated. The charges against her are not internationally recognizable offences,” and called for her release.²¹⁰

It was in part the EU’s insistence on her release as part of the political association and trade pact that pushed Yanukovich into refusing to sign and moving towards Russia instead, thus triggering the unrest in Ukraine that eventually unseated him.

Tymoshenko said she was beaten by prison guards while in jail, and went on hunger strike in protest.

A senior manager at Burson Marsteller, Robert Mack, told the *EU Observer*: “Our brief is to help the PoR [Party of Regions] communicate its activities as the governing party of Ukraine, as well as to help it explain better its position on the Yulia Tymoshenko case.”²¹¹ This included organising press interviews with the Ukrainian Deputy Prosecutor General Renat Kuzmin when he visited Brussels. Kuzmin, friendly with the ruling party, had already accused Tymoshenko of involvement in a contract killing in the 1990s raising questions about his neutrality.²¹²

A Senior Associate in Burson Marsteller UK’s Corporate and Crisis Practice, Anna Richardson is listed in a profile on the company website as a “rising star” in the PR industry. The profile is dated 22 November 2013, three months before the Ukrainian revolution, and says: “She works directly

his company are “white knights” coming to the rescue of persecuted former regime members in the Ukraine

with Ukraine’s prime minister [ie Azarov], foreign affairs minister and deputy energy minister, as well as other leaders.”²¹³ Her tweets about Ukraine stopped abruptly as her client was toppled.

Prime Policy Group, the public affairs branch of Burson Marsteller which works out of both Washington and Brussels, is said by journal *Intelligence Online* to have “**campaigned to the bitter end for the government of Viktor Yanukovich**” on behalf of **Ukrainian billionaire Rinat Akhmetov**, Yanukovich’s “long standing and loyal supporter who is said to be the richest man in Ukraine.”²¹⁴ Prime Policy Group is headed by Charlie Black who in the past set up a political consulting firm with Paul Manafort. (Incidentally, their political consulting firm Black, Manafort and Stone’s clients included a roster of dictators and strongmen including Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, and Jonas Savimbi of Angola, as well as the state of Equatorial Guinea.)²¹⁵

Nicknamed ‘**The Count of Monte Cristo**’ Paul Manafort is a US political fixer who orchestrated Yanukovich’s election campaign. His company, Davis Manafort was already doing work for the Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov. According to *Politico*, “It was a “political love connection” as “the former Ukrainian PM and Manafort, the Georgetown-educated son of a Connecticut politician, hit it off.”²¹⁶ Manafort could have been in a position to introduce Black to Akhmetov, hence the Burson Marsteller connection.

Brussels front group with budgetary anomalies

In 2012 a think tank called the **European Centre for a Modern Ukraine (ECFMU)** was created in Brussels. Ostensibly it exists to “provide information about political life in Ukraine and the fulfilment of the country’s aspirations for European integration”.²¹⁷ However, a closer look reveals that despite its pro-Europe name the ECFMU had **ties with Yanukovich and his Party of Regions**. Its deeds of incorporation in 2012 show that former Minister of Foreign Affairs Leonid Kozhara was the Chair, soon to be replaced by Oleksiy Plotnikov who was another leading party member of Yanukovich’s.²¹⁸ The head of ECFMU is Ina Kirsh, married to Rob Van de Water, who according to his LinkedIn profile, is former adviser to the ousted Prime Minister Azarov (and currently adviser to the Prime

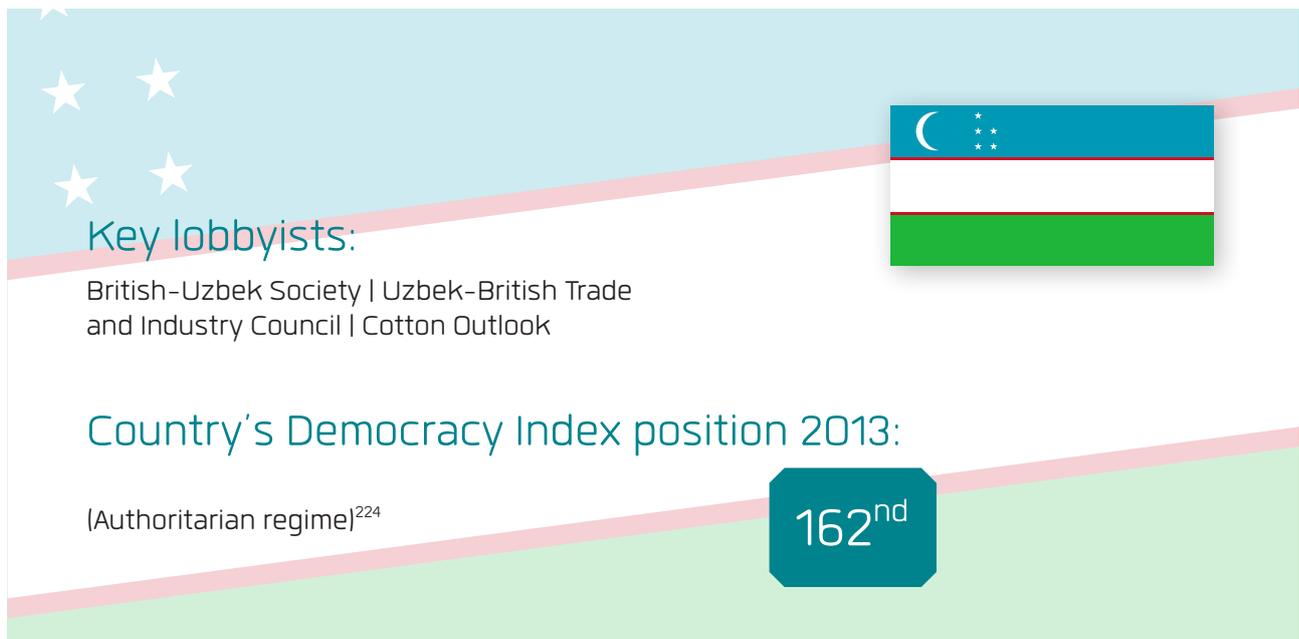
Minister of Malta).²¹⁹ Also according to his LinkedIn profile he was a “political advisor” in the European Parliament to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group until September 2012.²²⁰ An investigation by Sergiy Leschenko in the Ukrainian *Pravda*, found that Rob Van de Water was the Vice Chair of Sergei Klyuyev’s foundation, a financial backer of Yanukovich. Sergei Klyuyev’s brother was Yanukovich’s Chief of Staff Andrei Klyuyev, alleged to have ordered the firing on protesters in Kiev, leading to the eventual collapse of the regime.²²¹

In the US, **ECMFU hired Podesta Group and Mercury, to the tune of \$1.97million** to lobby for the Yanukovich regime, and against the release of Tymoshenko.²²² Not bad for a Brussels-based group that in 2013 claimed an expenditure of a mere €10,000 in the EU lobbying register.

New Ukraine Government – unsavoury alliances?

Svoboda, the far right party with a presence in the new Ukrainian Government, opened offices in Brussels in 2013 in order to “spread among the European community truthful information about the programmatic principles and operations of the Svoboda party. It will aim to refute any slander and defamation in relation to the party. In addition, we will establish contacts with the European Parliament, the European Commission, the parliamentary Assembly of NATO and other European institutions”. The move was welcomed by Belgian far right MEP Philip Claeys.²²³

7. Uzbekistan: cotton slavery still big business



Uzbekistan is one of the world's most repressive regimes. Under the rule of dictator Islam Karimov, **state-organised slavery** of at least a million adults and children is used for the cotton harvest, there is **systemic use of torture** in the prison system, persecution of political and religious expression,²²⁵ the massacre of protesters, cases of forced sterilization, repression of political opposition and NGOs, and in one recorded case the **boiling alive of a prisoner**.²²⁶

Uzbekistan is strategically important to both the EU and US, having been used as a **logistical base for NATO's** Afghanistan military operation, and for its **oil and gas**. It is also one of the largest suppliers of **cotton to Europe**, benefiting from the EU's import tariff privileges. Campaigners, several MEPs as well as the European United Left / Nordic Green Left European Parliamentary Group have called for commitments from both the European Commission and member states for responsible cotton trade measures, highlighting the Uzbekistan case.

In March 2014 the **EU and Uzbekistan** agreed to **deepen energy cooperation** via a bilateral memorandum of understanding. They also agreed to establish a **Joint Business and Investments Council**, which would promote EU trade and investment in Uzbekistan. However, if the British-Uzbek trade associations are anything to go by, human rights campaigners should be vigilant about whether cotton producers profiting from forced labour are included in any new EU-Uzbek trade body. The EU has opened a Human Rights Dialogue with Uzbekistan and supports the country's accession to the World Trade Organisation.

UK-Uzbek friendship association with a whiff of petrol

The **British Uzbek Society**, based in London, "aims to promote friendship and cooperation between the UK and Uzbekistan in such fields as business, education and the

state-organised slavery of at least a million adults and children is used for the cotton harvest

One of the Uzbek members of UBTIC is Uzpakhtasanoat, the Uzbek Cotton Industry Association.

arts. It is involved in different activities such as organising exhibitions, lectures, visits or joint projects in the field of art and cultural development”, according to its website. It was founded in 2001 as a charitable organisation “by a group of prominent people in the UK, including business, academic and artistic communities” and the **Embassy of Uzbekistan**. Members include Exxon Mobil, British American Tobacco, and Tethys Petroleum.²²⁷

The President of the Society is Lord Frederick Ponsonby, a Labour hereditary peer in the House of Lords who according to *Intelligence Online*, in 2010 “tried to invest in the **Uzbek gas sector**”.²²⁸ An oil and gas industry professional of many years standing, he has also been a UK delegate to the Council of Europe and his declarations of interests list him as Director of two oil and gas companies Eastsib, and Rostneftegaz registered in Russia.²²⁹

During a visit to Uzbekistan in the capacity of President of British Uzbek Society, Ponsonby praised the country’s parliamentary elections of 2009 on national television as “independent” saying the Uzbek Central Election Commission ensured an “atmosphere of freedom, openness, and impartiality in Uzbekistan”. He also claimed that Uzbek political parties and candidates “have the opportunity to express their own ideas, views and manifestos freely.”²³⁰ His travel costs were met by the Institute for Studies of Civil Society from Tashkent in Uzbekistan.²³¹

However, Human Rights Watch described the situation prior to this election as marked by intense repression: “Human rights are violated everywhere around the country, there is no political competition, all the parties that are running for this election are supporting the government.”²³²

Vice Chair of the British Uzbek Society, SOAS academic Doctor Shirin Akiner, drew criticism from human rights campaigners after she produced a report that absolved the Karimov regime from responsibility for the 2005 Andijan massacre in which security officials opened fire killing several hundred protesters.²³³

British government’s ties with slave cotton producers

The British Uzbek Society also works to co-ordinate annual meetings of the **Uzbek-British Trade and Industry Council (UBTIC)**, a trade association organised jointly between the

British Government’s overseas trade organisation (UKTI) and Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, Investments and Trade (MFERIT) of the Republic of Uzbekistan.²³⁴

UBTIC is co-chaired by Elyor Ganiev, the Minister of MFERIT of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and until very recently **Peter Lilley**, a British Conservative MP and non-executive board member of **Tethys Petroleum**, an oil and gas company with drilling operations in Uzbekistan, which awarded him on top of a quarterly fee, \$428,399 in share options between 2008 and 2011, according to *The Guardian*.²³⁵ Tethys is a member of both UBTIC and the British Uzbek Society. (See [Kazakhstan](#) case study for Lilley’s new role in a Central Asian think-tank.)

Other members of UBTIC include BP, Cargill Cotton, British banking lobbyists The City UK, Goldman Sachs, Shell, the British Ministry of Defence, Exxon Mobil, PR firm Gardant Communications (now Meade Hall Associates, see [Bahrain](#) case study), and global law firm DLA Piper which runs a lobbying arm in London called Global Government Relations²³⁶ which deals closely with Brussels, but does not provide a list of its clients.²³⁷ DLA Piper in Brussels told CEO: that “DLA Piper Brussels has no client relationship” with Uzbekistan in the EU sphere.

One of the Uzbek **members of UBTIC is Uzpakhtasanoat**,²³⁸ the **Uzbek Cotton Industry Association**.²³⁹ It advertises the tenth International Uzbek Cotton and Textile Fair for 2014, saying, “participants will enjoy an opportunity to sign contracts for Uzbek cotton, set up long-term cooperation in cotton trading, as well as to be familiar with the quality of Uzbek cotton and latest innovations in trade and logistics. Moreover, during the Cotton Fair “round tables” and bilateral negotiations between Uzbek cotton exporters and consumers will be organized. The guests of the Cotton Fair will have an opportunity to participate in the cotton trading session on Uzbek commodity exchange.”

UBTIC also promoted the 2014 textile fair, the country’s main annual showcase for its cotton industry, to investors.²⁴⁰ A controversial 2012 email from Peter Lilley MP invited UBTIC members to register for the 8th International Uzbek Cotton and Textile Fair in Tashkent in very similar terms to those above, including invitations to sign contracts for Uzbek cotton and participate in negotiations with Uzbek cotton exporters.²⁴¹

UBTIC’s connections with the Uzbek cotton industry exist despite the continued coercion by the **state of slave child and adult labour in the Uzbekistan cotton harvest**. The

Cotton Campaign, a coalition of international human rights organisations, trade unions, socially responsible investors and business organizations, says:

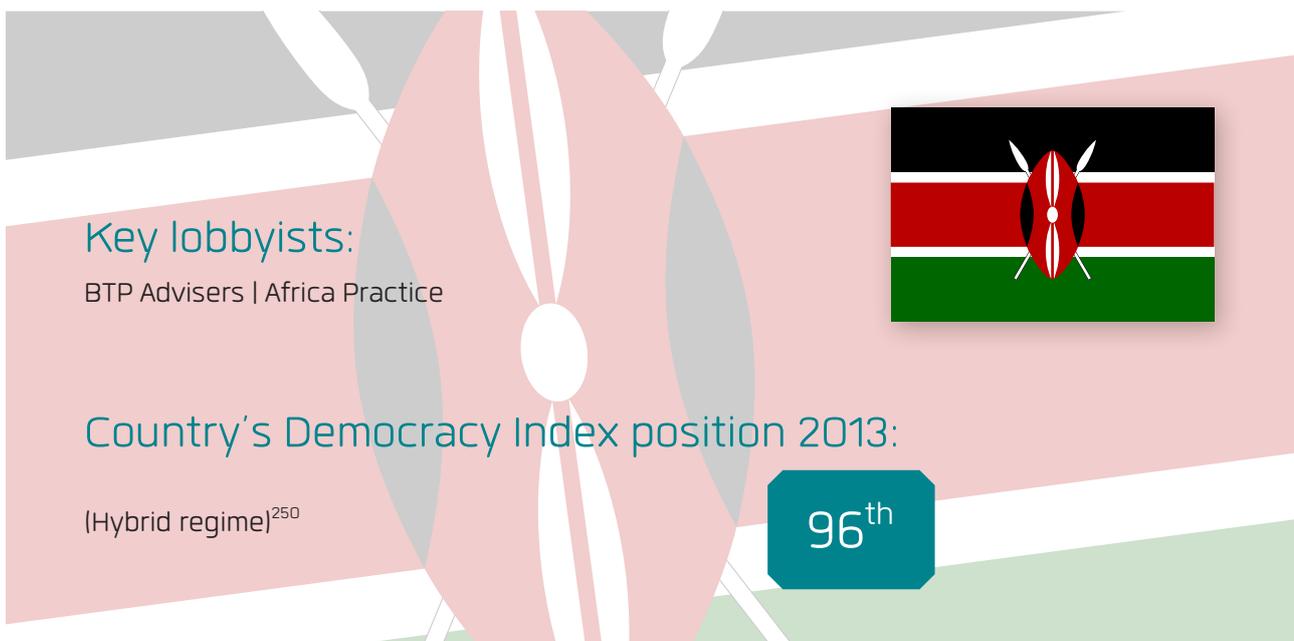
For decades, the government of Uzbekistan, under President Islam Karimov, has forced adults and children as young as 10 to pick cotton under appalling conditions each harvest season. Provincial government offices order schoolteachers to close schools and enforce quotas in the cotton fields.... The Uzbek government combines these orders with threats, detains and tortures Uzbek activists seeking to monitor the situation.²⁴²

Although there was a reduction in children participating in the 2013 harvest, the Cotton Campaign reported that, “At least eleven Uzbek citizens died in 2013 as a result of the forced-labor cotton production system, ranging in ages from 6-year old Amirbek Rakhmatov to 63-year old Tursunali Sadikov.”²⁴³ They conclude, “Profits of the Uzbek cotton sector support only the Karimov Government,” and that “The cotton ends up in brand-name retail and apparel supply chains and therefore on consumers.”²⁴⁴ In other words, buying Uzbek cotton means funding the dictatorship and benefiting from forced labour. Over 130 clothing brands have therefore pledged to avoid Uzbek cotton.

Moreover, insiders and the journal *Intelligence Online* suggest that much of the Uzbek cotton industry is controlled by the **Uzbek secret service**, the NSS (National Security Service).²⁴⁵ An anonymous former Uzbek official claims the profits from the cotton industry are “syphoned into a special account, the Selkhozfond of the Ministry of Finance, a totally non-transparent entity accountable to only a narrow circle within the leadership”.²⁴⁶

Cotton Outlook, a cotton industry information service based in Merseyside, UK, co-organised the 2008 Uzbek Cotton and Textile Fair.²⁴⁷ Its logo is listed prominently on the website of the 2014 fair,²⁴⁸ and its Managing Director Richard Butler was a keynote speaker.²⁴⁹ It did not respond to requests for information about its role in promoting Uzbek cotton.

8. Kenya: crimes against humanity no obstacle to Presidency with PR help



Dirty electioneering in Kenya

In a few short months, thanks in part to the PR strategy of British firm BTP Advisers, Presidential candidate Uhuru Kenyatta went from being seen as a dubious person wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague to leader of his country in the 2013 elections. It was the most expensive campaign in Kenya's history.

Kenyatta was charged by the ICC with **crimes against humanity**, following his alleged role in the ethnic massacres in the wake of the 2007 elections in which over 1000 people were killed and over 600,000 displaced in the country's worst violence since independence.

The BTP staff have experience in UK elections as well as former press work for the UK's Liberal Democrat Party. Ed Staite, former adviser to the British Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, handled the campaign in Kenya. BTP Advisers' website claims to have expertise of over two decades in fighting elections all over the world: "To win an election, a candidate or party needs to master a combination of communications and logistics, often for months or years before a poll. They need to ensure all the

messages they put across to their electorate are relevant to them, and heard in a language they wish to hear," they claim.²⁵¹

France24 conducted an interview with BTP executive Mark Pursey, who confirmed that the company was giving "strategic advice on the election campaign and providing international media relations support since there's an enormous amount of international interest in this election."²⁵² He refused to divulge time frames or how much the contract was worth. According to Kenyan newspaper *The Star*, BTP's brief was not just election strategising but deflecting negative media reports, locally and internationally, about Kenyatta's charges at the ICC.²⁵³

The British firm's role is rather ironic considering that Kenyatta was able to win power at home by drumming up populist feelings against Western imperialism – targeted at the International Criminal Court. As *The Star* reports, "BTP Advisers used their local and international networks to present the ICC process as a machination of Western powers and to turn what was initially considered a disadvantage into an advantage for Uhuru."²⁵⁴

Kenyatta was charged by the ICC with crimes against humanity

It is unconfirmed whether BTP also lobbied for Kenyatta in the EU. What is known is that the Kenyan Foreign Minister summoned EU envoys prior to the election after Britain, France, and other EU countries suggested they would avoid contact with a President facing war crimes charges. The charges have since been dropped – getting enough evidence for the prosecution required cooperation from the Government of Kenya, now run by Kenyatta himself.

BTP aren't the first British PR advisers in a Kenyan election. The controversial 2007 campaign that ended in violence and over 1000 deaths, and that gave rise to Kenyatta's criminal charges, was needless to say, particularly dirty. British PR man Marcus Courage, founder of the **Africa Practice** firm, worked on the election strategy of President Mwai Kibaki, a close colleague of his successor, Uhuru Kenyatta. *The Sunday Times* reported, "Marcus Courage has been accused of spreading defamatory pamphlets about opposition leader Raila Odinga." They went on to describe how:

The controversial re-election campaign of Mwai Kibaki, the Kenyan President, was masterminded by an Old Etonian public relations consultant who previously promoted Bob Geldof's Live 8 campaign to tackle poverty in Africa. Marcus Courage oversaw the communications team for Kibaki, whose government faces possible European Union sanctions for alleged vote-rigging.²⁵⁵

Wikileaks published the strategy, which included 'NGO Monitoring', saying: "[Marcus Courage of Africa Practice] is alleged to be running **black information operations** against ODM (Orange Democratic Movement) and organising the Kibaki international media/ propaganda campaign."²⁵⁶

9. Bahrain: crushing the Arab spring

Key lobbyists:

Bell Pottinger | Protection Group International | Meade Hall & Associates | G3 | Big Tent | Dragon Associates | M&C Saatchi



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian regime)²⁵⁷

146th

Despite the ongoing brutal crackdown on protest in **Bahrain** since the **uprising** of 2011, London firm **Bell Pottinger** continues its **multi-million dollar PR brief** for the Kingdom. In doing so it flies in the face of Bahraini rights activists who asked PR firms, “not to participate in the whitewashing process of the Bahraini government’s human rights record.”²⁵⁸

These rights activists estimate at least \$32.5m has been spent on UK and US PR since the unrest of 2011 began.²⁵⁹ For Bahrain, the Gulf state with the strongest opposition movement, PR has been an important fightback against the hit to its business reputation since the Arab Spring. Since then its police and military have **killed** almost 100 **democracy and human rights protesters** and injured many more, and the issue is ongoing. Amid the 2011 **crackdown**, doctors and nurses who treated the injured were themselves arrested and charged; later some testified they were **tormented** and sexually assaulted.²⁶⁰ The ratings downgrades for Bahrain as a result of political instability meant losing the status it is seeking as the region’s number one **banking hub**.

According to the *Holmes Report* dated April 2014 Bahrain retained Bell Pottinger for its “**lucrative global mandate**”, as unrest continued. The brief “aims to boost inward investment in Bahrain” and is regarded as a “vital component

of Bahrain’s efforts to restore its global reputation as a **business-friendly haven**.” David Wilson, the Managing Director of the Bell Pottinger group, “shrugged off concerns that the account may prove controversial, noting that it focused on only ‘economic development’. Former Bell Pottinger employees have launched an independent firm **Consulum**, which will support PR work in the region.²⁶¹ David Hamilton of Bell Pottinger in Brussels told CEO: “I am not in charge of the project but I can tell you that this work does not involve lobbying the EU institutions.”

Human Rights Watch has criticised in strong terms, “**Bahrain’s allies** in London, Washington, and Brussels” for failing “to press the government of Bahrain to take serious steps to hold security forces accountable for abuse, or to call openly for the release of high-profile political prisoners.” It continued, “Bahrain’s problem is not a dysfunctional justice system, but rather a highly functional injustice system.”²⁶² Human Rights Watch also points out that the crisis is ongoing: “Security forces continued to arrest scores of individuals arbitrarily in towns where **anti-government protests** regularly take place. High-profile critics of the government remain in jail on charges that relate solely to exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. The judicial system, headed by ruling family members, has yet to hold any senior official responsible for serious

“Bahrain’s problem is not a dysfunctional justice system, but rather a highly functional injustice system.”

human rights violations that have occurred since 2011, including torture-related deaths in detention.”²⁶³

The crackdown has created **embarrassment for the EU** and in particular the UK, which has very strong financial and security ties with Bahrain, a former colony. The UK’s shotguns, teargas, and stun grenades were all used on protesters.²⁶⁴ The EU enjoys close trade links with the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)**, an economic union of which Bahrain is a key member. Academic Toby Mattieson explains that in fact, “Strategic interests and the economic crisis have made the EU even more reluctant to alienate a **key investor and importer of European goods**. Some argue that the Arab uprisings have in fact strengthened cooperation between the EU and the GCC in the short-term.”²⁶⁵ He also explains the “timid Western response” was in part due to pressure from **Saudi Arabia** and the **UAE** (both GCC members and key oil suppliers to the EU) who sent troops to quell the uprising. The EU never imposed an arms embargo, despite MEP proposals in the European Parliament. And in fact, Mattieson explains, “EU countries have delivered or plan to deliver a record amount of weapons to Saudi Arabia since the start of the Arab uprisings” which could easily be used against the Bahrain protesters.²⁶⁶

The GCC refused a June 2014 meeting with the EU just after all member states signed a UN declaration criticising Bahrain’s human rights record. Said Yousif of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights said, “The ministers cancelled the meeting to put pressure on the EU not to speak about human rights in the GCC.” While welcoming the UN statement, he continued: “The situation is deteriorating and more innocent people are being killed. Dictators don’t respond to joint statements, **there must be sanctions to end human rights abuses** in Bahrain.”²⁶⁷

For Bell Pottinger, democracy is a ‘crisis’ to be ‘managed’

The Kingdom of Bahrain has had several PR briefs for Bell Pottinger, including one signed in 2009 worth over €12.8 million for a five year contract.²⁶⁸ A tender in October 2013 for a renewed PR contract with the **Bahrain Economic Development Board** shows seven firms bidding, although Bell Pottinger retained the brief. The board is “a governmental body responsible for attracting international investment to Bahrain, and re-branding the country as ‘**business-friendly**’.”²⁶⁹

In spring of 2011 Bell Pottinger helped set up a **media centre in Bahrain** to assist journalists covering the uprising and crackdown.²⁷⁰ *The Independent* newspaper reported that Bell Pottinger sent out regular emails to media contacts, “getting out the Manama administration’s line at the start of the opposition protests”. One such release described the government’s “readiness to receive the injured in hospitals”, not long before the detention of doctors and nurses began. The authorities also **raided the offices of Médecins Sans Frontières**.²⁷¹

In April 2011 amidst increased criticism, Bell Pottinger suspended some of the contracts,²⁷² though some remained current.²⁷³ Sure enough, by May 2011 the company was working on another contract for Bahrain’s Information Affairs Authority,²⁷⁴ and others followed, one worth €686,000 with the government’s holding company Mumtalakat,²⁷⁵ and a renewed contract with Bahrain’s Economic Development Board for €8.4million for a two year period.²⁷⁶

Bell Pottinger drew criticism for **tampering with Wikipedia** entries, a standard practice for whitewashing reputations (see [Kazakhstan](#) case study), leading Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales to tweet: “Bell Pottinger behaved unethically and broke several Wikipedia rules in doing so. The public record can be seen by anyone.”²⁷⁷ After feeling the glare of publicity, Bell Pottinger’s (now ex-)Head of Public Affairs Peter Bingle tweeted on 8 Dec 2011, “I don’t really care what hostile journalists and loonies think about us. BPPA [Bell Pottinger Public Affairs] remains best in class”.²⁷⁸

Helping arm the crackdown and tracking activists online

Bahrain retains Qorvis in the US, and in 2014 it also hired US law and lobbying DLA Piper in order “to convince the US and key **European countries** that they should send **police and security advisors** back to the country,” according to *Intelligence Online*.²⁷⁹ In the wake of the unrest that began in 2011, Western countries began an **embargo on security coordination and crowd control materials** such as teargas and stun grenades, although not necessarily strictly enforced, as France continued to send police officers to the capital Manama, and a former London Metropolitan police officer was advising on security.²⁸⁰ Federica Boledi, Policy Advisor to DLA Piper in Brussels told CEO: “We are not aware of any current or past contract with Bahrain in the EU sphere.”

Public tender documents also show in April 2011 the British corporate intelligence agency Olton, now **Protection Group International**, signed a two month contract extension with Bahrain “to develop an electronic system to track international media,” with a payment of €104,000.²⁸¹ Founder Paul Manister was a former Senior Intelligence Analyst in the UK Navy, and it may be just a coincidence that according to Bahrain Watch, in the description of the patent application for the company’s trademark web-trawling software that rapidly collects and collates information from the internet, is the phrase: “Security agencies may apply this capability to their efforts to **detect and track insurgent activity**, and provide a mechanism for operatives to pool and share their knowledge in a secure and controlled way.”²⁸²

The earl, the king, and car-crash PR

London-based Gardant Communications, now renamed **Meade Hall & Associates**, has worked for the British Bahraini Embassy from at least 2006.²⁸³ The company was set up by former advisor to the Conservative Party Patrick Meade, also known as Lord Paddy Gillford, Earl of Clanwilliam, in 1993. One of three declared clients as of June 2013 was the Embassy of Bahrain, according to the UK’s PRCA Public Affairs Register;²⁸⁴ though previously it has also held direct accounts with the Government of Bahrain.²⁸⁵ Other foreign government clients of the group have included Morocco and Azerbaijan.²⁸⁶

The company is the secretariat for the UK-Bahrain All-Party Parliamentary Group, and arranged politicians’ paid visit to Bahrain in October 2010.²⁸⁷ According to Bahrain Watch: “Paddy Gillford, the Chairman and Founder of Meade Hall & Associates, met with loyalist Bahraini politicians and the Speaker of the Council of Representatives during an annual security summit. Former UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Alistair Burt MP, travelled to Bahrain at the same time, as part of an APPG delegation. His trip was funded by Bahrain’s Parliament. Burt dealt extensively with Bahrain during his time as a government minister.”²⁸⁸

Paddy Gillford appeared on Al-Jazeera to defend the Bahraini government as a “**beacon of democracy**” as the protests erupted in 2011. He asserted the protests involved “a hundred or maybe a thousand people there. This is the vociferous minority, the malcontents, who want to change the nation from the tolerant society at the moment.”²⁸⁹

However all was not rosy in the state of Bahrain. Gillford was then personally attacked in Bahrain’s

Daily News – a government mouthpiece – by the editor Anwar Abdulrahman, who is close to the Bahraini Prime Minister. In a comment piece entitled, ‘Overtaken by lies?’ Abdulrahman lashed out at “individuals like Lord Gilford and public relations organisations such as Bell-Pottinger (whose staff deserted the kingdom en masse as soon as trouble started). They have milked the country’s financial resources for a long time, yet failed to deliver any positive result.”²⁹⁰

Perhaps in an effort to impress, when Bahrain’s King Hamad paid a visit to London in 2011, Gillford received him at the airport riding a Harley-Davidson with a Bahraini flag painted on it. As the entourage was en route there was reported to be a collision between the motorbike and Bahraini ambassador’s limousine.²⁹¹

Britain bats for Bahrain

In July 2011 another London firm, **G3** was hired by the Bahraini Government’s Information Affairs Authority, according to official tender documents, for a sum of €1.88 million to develop a “media campaign to support Bahrain’s position in the international community.”²⁹²

Former British army officer Lt Gen Sir Graeme Lamb is a “special adviser” to G3, having served as a commander of the **SAS**. He authored a number of op-eds on Bahrain in the media without declaring the G3 connection, later claiming in the *Daily Telegraph* that his support for the country’s government was “something that I have believed for a long time and it is nothing to do with any **business interests** I have.”²⁹³

The UK firm **Big Tent Communications** was also hired by Bahrain, to “correct inaccurate reporting” and cover communications work around the **Formula One** races held in Bahrain in 2012, which was facing a demand for a boycott.²⁹⁴ Another PR firm **Dragon Associates** were credited with having a critical comment piece about Bahrain hosting the Formula One Grand Prix removed from *The Guardian* website.²⁹⁵

Also in July 2011, the Bahraini Economic Development Board awarded British advertising firm **M&C Saatchi** a five-year contract worth €11.7 million to “develop and implement a comprehensive media and promotional plan” for Bahrain.²⁹⁶ In November 2011, the Ministry of Culture hired M&C Saatchi for a tourism campaign for Bahrain in a contract worth €420,000.²⁹⁷

10. **Kazakhstan:** favoured dictator of former EU leaders

Key lobbyists:

Portland Communications | Tony Blair Associates | BGR Gabara (former contract) | Consultum Communications | Bell Pottinger



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian regime. Joint place with Azerbaijan)²⁹⁸

140th

President Nazarbayev has been leader of Kazakhstan since 1991, and all elections since then have given him over 90% of the vote. He was awarded a 'lifetime Presidency' by parliament – not so hard when every seat is controlled by his party, the name of which roughly translates as 'Ray of Light of the Fatherland', a reference to Nazarbayev himself. He is now immune from prosecution and seizure of assets – for life. The Ray of Light's strategic use of PR and lobbying, particularly via Tony Blair's network of influence, has to be one of the most successful examples of a dictator white-washing his image.

Kazakhstan has a strategic location in Central Asia as well as huge oil and gas resources, gold and uranium. The EU and Kazakhstan concluded in October 2014 an 'enhanced **Partnership and Co-operation Agreement**' to bolster economic, trade, and political relations. Yevgeniy Zhovtis, Chair of the board of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law says, "the human rights situation in my country has significantly deteriorated since negotiations for an enhanced partnership began in June 2011. Meanwhile, the EU seems to have forgotten about its pledges to link enhanced relations to rights reform."²⁹⁹ The EU is Kazakhstan's largest trade and investment partner, and is now supporting the country's accession to the World Trade Organisation.

Freedom House reports that "Kazakhstan has engaged **top-notch public relations** and lobbying groups to enhance its international profile, highlight its economic achievements, and combat criticism of its failure to promote democratic reforms."³⁰⁰ This has allowed the country to achieve a series of near-Orwellian high profile successes on the international scene, such as chairing the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in 2012 despite the organisation deeming every single one of the elections since Nazarbayev has been in power as failing to meet democratic standards;³⁰¹ hosting of the World Fair EXPO 2017 on the theme 'future energy' in the oil-rich capital Astana; and access to the UN Human Rights Council at the end of 2012, despite ongoing rights abuses.

Indeed, despite Kazakhstan's claims to be reforming, in December 2011, during an oil workers' strike 15 demonstrators were killed and 64 wounded by state security services. Subsequently, opposition leader Vladimir Kozlov was sentenced "to prison on vague and overbroad criminal charges," according to Human Rights Watch, amid testimonies he was tortured. Kozlov's party was shut down and many independent media outlets closed.³⁰² Human Rights Watch concludes that "Kazakhstan's poor human rights record continued to deteriorate in 2013, with authorities cracking down on free speech and dissent through misuse of overly

broad laws. Authorities maintain strict controls on freedom of assembly and religion. Despite flawed trials, courts upheld the prison sentences of people convicted in the aftermath of violent clashes in December 2011.... Torture remains common in places of detention.”³⁰³

Tony Blair's web of influence

This is the context within which former UK Prime Minister **Tony Blair** is working as an “official advisor” to Nazarbayev, appointed in 2011 with a multimillion-euro deal for Tony Blair Associates. According to a former spokesperson for the Kazakhstani Foreign Ministry, Blair's work “will **increase the investment attractiveness** of the republic.”³⁰⁴ Ken Silverstein, writing in *The New Republic*, reported that a “source with inside knowledge of Kazakhstan's leadership told me that the former Prime Minister is expected to help buff Nazarbayev's personal image internationally.”³⁰⁵ Blair's network and connections are crucial in this endeavour. His former advisors while in office, now at London-based **Portland Communications** secured a PR role for “strategic and public affairs consulting and media activities”,³⁰⁶ and Blair's “close associate” Sir Richard Evans, once head of BAE, is currently head of Kazakhstan's state holding company, Samruk.³⁰⁷ Journalist and Central Asia expert Casey Michel notes: “Through Blair, Kazakhstan's usage of Western public relations firms and individuals... increase[d] exponentially.”³⁰⁸

This contract was signed just months after the 2011 presidential election in which Nazarbayev received an eyebrow-raising 96% of the vote. Blair's involvement with the regime was heavily criticised after a 2012 memo he sent to Nazarbayev was leaked. Sent in the wake of the **assassination of protesters** during the oil strike of December 2011 in Zhanaozen, the memo said, “**tragic though they were**, [the deaths] should not obscure the enormous progress that Kazakhstan has made”. Blair suggested how to handle the western media and offered key paragraphs for a speech for the President to give at the University of Cambridge defending the action.³⁰⁹

Director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia Division, Hugh Williamson, who had asked Blair in a letter to clarify the terms and references for his work in Kazakhstan, as well as the role and makeup of his advisory group, without getting much information in return, says, “From what we know, [Blair] has been indifferent to those suffering abuses and has given a veneer of respectability to the authorities during a severe crackdown on human

rights.”³¹⁰ The contract was ended in 2013, and it is unknown whether it has been renewed.

Casey Michel describes the nexus of much of the Western lobbying as Tony Blair, whose “presence, connections, and efforts have helped morph post-Zhanaozen Kazakhstan into a nation that can once more sell itself as a bulwark of stability. Unfortunately, that presence, and the marked regression in civil liberties Kazakhstan has seen since Blair's hiring, have all but undermined his efforts to craft Kazakhstan as a lucid, long-sight destination for Western visitors and capital.”³¹¹

A network of European ex-premiers

Nazarbayev also appointed an International Advisory Board founded in 2010 formed of a **veritable club of former European Prime Ministers**, including Blair, to “promote Kazakhstan's image internationally”. Headed by former Austrian Chancellor **Alfred Gusenbauer** attendees include ex-Italian Prime Minister and former President of the European Commission **Romano Prodi**, former German Chancellor **Gerhard Schröder**, former Spanish Foreign Minister and European Commissioner **Marcelino Oreja Aguirre**, former Polish President **Aleksander Kwasniewski**, and former German Interior Minister **Otto Schily**, meeting several times annually in the capital Astana.³¹² Various trade and business investments can arise from such connections, from Spain's €482 million contract to provide high speed trains,³¹³ to Italian group ENI's Caspian oil expansion in Kazakhstan.³¹⁴

A front for Kazakhstan in Brussels

A new Brussels-based **think-tank** the **Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs** (ECFA) launched in Brussels in November 2014 and is intended to bring Kazakhstan closer to the EU. Though ECFA defines Central Asia as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the latter four countries barely make an appearance in the rest of the site. While Kazakh government newspaper *The Astana Times* claims ECFA is a new, independent think tank,³¹⁵ and the organisation says it is developed on the model of the

European Council on Foreign Relations, *Intelligence Online* asserts that ECFA “is a front for the Kazakh foreign ministry which finances it”.³¹⁶

As we have come to expect from the dictatorship that wooed Blair, ECFA’s advisory board includes an embarrassment of well-connected European politicians including British Conservative MP and former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry **Peter Lilley** (see [Uzbekistan](#)), Vice Chair of the British-Kazakhstan All-Party Parliamentary Group. Lilley has a sizeable stake in oil firm [Tethys Petroleum](#), which is a member of the [Kazakhstan Petroleum Association](#) (KPA).³¹⁷

Other notables include former Spanish Prime Minister **Jose Maria Aznar**, **Kjell Magne Bondevik**, former Prime Minister of Norway, **Benita Ferrero-Waldner**, former Foreign Minister of Austria and former EU Commissioner for External Relations, and the long and illustrious list continues with the former Presidents of Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland, and the Czech Republic, as well as many other ex-Ministers, from the former Chancellor of the Exchequer Lord Lamont of the UK, to Guido Westerwelle, a former German Foreign Minister, to Franco Frattini, former Foreign Minister of Italy, to Jack Straw MP, former UK Foreign Secretary.³¹⁸

of former senior advisors from the highest level of British Government and politics, the EU, the UN and the World Economic Forum, Portland has unrivaled first-hand experience of the complex interplay between government, politics, media, business and public audiences.”³²⁰

To mark the country’s 20th anniversary of independence from the Soviet Union, Portland released a euphoric infographic showing the country’s upward trajectory, celebrating Kazakhstan’s economic development, elections, and “20 years of peace and creation” (see image).³²¹ It was the very same day of its release that troops fired on unarmed protesters, killing 15.

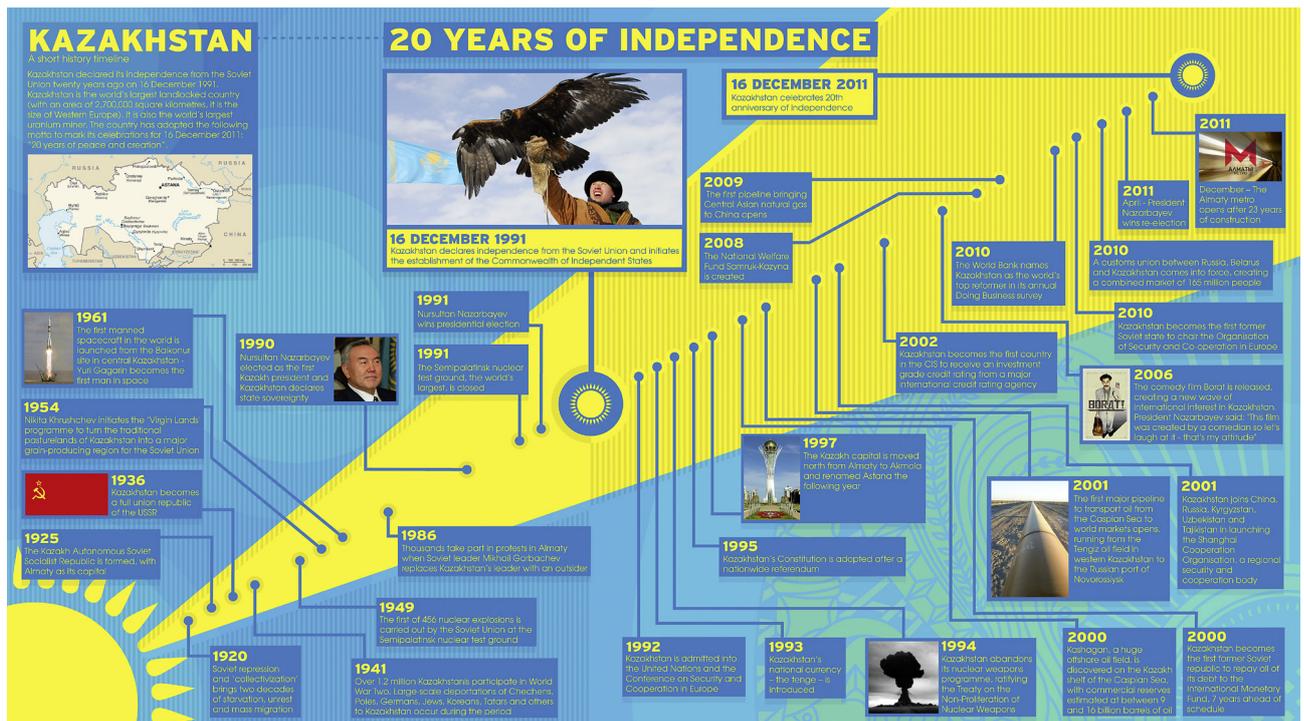
Journalist Casey Michel writes that after the crackdown in oil-town Zhanaozen and the repression that came in its aftermath, now, “Kazakhstan stands set to host the **2017 Expo [World Fair]**, and has enlisted a marked number of Western politicians and firms to streamline its image as an energy-conscious bastion of religious pluralism.”³²²

The Open Society’s Eurasia program’s news website *EurasiaNet.org* says that it “uncovered evidence that suggests PR firms may have massaged **Wikipedia** entries in ways that cast the Kazakhstani government in a better light.”³²³ It reports:

Nationalist euphoria and massaged wikipedia pages

Portland Communications has worked for Kazakhstan since 2011.³¹⁹ The London PR company says, “With a team

Web records indicate that **Portland** and at least one other firm, [German] **Media Consulta**, appeared to tinker with Wikipedia entries concerning Kazakhstan and its president, Nursultan Nazarbayev.... Users identified only by IP addresses are listed as frequent editors on a number of Kazakhstan-related Wikipedia entries.



Portland Communications’ euphoric graphic of Kazakh national pride

Portland and at least one other firm, [German] Media Consulta, appeared to tinker with Wikipedia entries concerning Kazakhstan

But those same IP addresses can be traced, using publicly available means, and they appear to be linked with Portland and Media Consulta.³²⁴

More “phenomenal” PR shine

Nazarbayev has plenty of other communications help. PR company BGR Government Affairs represents the Government of Kazakhstan both in the US and Europe.³²⁵ In September 2014 BGR Gabara in Brussels only listed three clients in the EU Transparency Register for 2012-2013: the Governments of Kazakhstan, Mauritius, and Bangladesh (see also [Bangladesh](#) case study).³²⁶ The BGR Gabara-Kazakhstan contract dates from 2010,³²⁷ for a monthly fee of \$45,000,³²⁸ and founder Ivo Ilic Gabara says it is now ended.³²⁹

Gabara, according to the BGR website, has worked for “several governments, including the governments of Kazakhstan, Greece, Ukraine, Mauritius, Malaysia and Bahrain,” and “has managed electoral campaigns across three continents in countries as diverse as Romania, Nigeria and Georgia, and worked on a number of global government relations and media campaigns including for Kazakhstan’s Chairmanship of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe).”³³⁰

During a 2011 sting operation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in the UK, in which undercover reporters pretended to be Uzbek cotton producers and potential clients, Gabara led a pitch for the job (which he later turned down) in which he says his firm achieved “**phenomenal media exposure**” for Kazakhstan during its chairmanship of the OCSE, feeding the media “a constant stream of information about what the country is doing to improve”. He said, “Every op-ed that you read that has come out of Kazakhstan, signed by Nazarbayev, signed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, signed by the Ambassador in the EU, the Ambassador in Washington, is our drive, our work.” When asked for clarification of these comments later, he said that was wrong, he was pitching for new clients, and his remarks should be seen in context.³³¹

Talking Bilge

Consultum Communications in Berlin also works on improving Kazakhstan’s image in Germany.³³² The company was founded by Hans-Erich Bilges and is well connected with German political establishment and media figures, including board members Michael Glos, Federal Minister of Economics, and Michael Jansen, Secretary of State, former US Ambassador John C Kornblum, Hans-Friedrich von Ploetz, State Secretary and longtime Ambassador in Brussels (NATO), London and Moscow, and Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Minister for Foreign Affairs (see [Azerbaijan](#) case study). **Media relations** and **building summits** are crucial tools in their work. For example, Nazarbayev’s communications service announces a February 2014 event at the Kazakh embassy in Germany in which the Ambassador explained the President’s economic development and reform plan Strategy-2050; and at which Bilges is described as a “German journalist” emphasizing business as “a locomotive of the economic development in Kazakhstan”, as well as promoting a **World Expo to be held in oil-town Astana** for the country’s “industrial and innovative breakthrough”. “In addition,” the Kazakh government website notes, “the German journalist drew attention of his colleagues on notable growth of Kazakhstan people wellbeing achieved during the years of Kazakhstan’s independence[sic].”³³³ One imagines painting Kazakhstan’s progress is part of Bilges’ job description.

French PR firm the **Marston-Nicholson Group** lists the Government of Kazakhstan as a client on its website – alongside the European Commission. It has offices in Paris and London, and its website claims, “We maintain contacts within the **European Union** and among French, German, British, and other governments at national, regional, and local level. We can move your issue or problem to the right sources so it will be addressed in a thoughtful and timely manner.”³³⁴ The group is listed as editors of Kazakhstan Live website, the “International information centre of the Republic of Kazakhstan” on behalf of the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³³⁵ This website includes the Kazakhstan Government’s ‘Path to Europe’ document outlining the promotion of Kazakhstan’s interests in Europe.

London PR firm **Bell Pottinger** organised the press activity around the **Astana Economic Forum**, in which Blair and other leading figures appeared, in 2014 billed as “A global forum of leading thinkers attracting over 10.000 participants from 150 countries.”³³⁶

11. **Israel:** redefining 'occupied' territories, fighting the boycott

Key lobbyists:

European Friends of Israel | Israel Allies Foundation | European Coalition for Israel | Havas PR | Kreab Gavin Anderson



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Flawed democracy)³³⁷

39th

Friends like these

Right next door to the European Commission are the offices of the **European Friends of Israel** (EFI), one of the largest pan-European parliamentary groups of its kind, with 1000 members of parliament from across the continent at national and European levels.

Set up to “improve the overall relationship between the European Union and Israel”,³³⁸ EFI brings together every national parliaments' Israel friendship group from the EU's 28 member-states, and a new Israel friendship group within the European Parliament. Its goals include:

- Encourage and cultivate an environment in which Israel's political and commercial interests are enhanced;
- Expand and reinforce European support of Israel;
- Provide decision-makers and those who influence public opinion with well-researched and balanced information about the historical and geo-political realities of the Middle East;
- Establish channels of communication within the EU political process in which those who share our goals can effectively express their support.³³⁹

Its most recent published financial data is its 2012 budget, listed as €400,000.³⁴⁰ In David Cronin's extensive research on EFI for Spinwatch, he says that its status as an 'informal grouping' means it doesn't have to reveal how it is funded.³⁴¹

Cronin also describes the extensive **arms industry connections** with the EFI; IAI (then called Israel Aircraft Industries), one of the largest suppliers of weapons to the Israeli military for example, was among the sponsors of the EFI's launch in September 2006.³⁴²

During Israel's bombardment of **Gaza** in the summer of 2014, 'Operation Protective Edge', the EFI held packed briefings in the European Parliament. Between 8 July and 27 August 2014, according to the UN over 2,100 Palestinians were killed by Israeli bombardment in Gaza, the majority civilian deaths, of which 495 were children. Seven Israeli civilians and 66 Israeli soldiers were killed in the conflict.³⁴³

EFI has been keen to reframe the image of the country as not just being defined by conflict, sometimes to the point of surrealism. A press release post 'Operation Protective Edge' full of “inspiring stuff” based on **Israeli innovation** says, “Whilst thousands of rockets rained down on the country during the latest conflict, Israelis have – between

“Israelis have – between running to bomb shelters – been creating technologies and devising strategies to make the world a better place.”

running to bomb shelters – been creating technologies and devising strategies to make the world a better place.”³⁴⁴ A recent EFI parliamentary event describes life for Israelis on the border with Gaza, who experienced “the worst of the recent war in Gaza, with quite literally thousands of rockets fired indiscriminately at the citizens of Sh’ar Hanegev”.³⁴⁵

Aside from events and briefings at the European Parliament, EFI also organises trips for parliamentarians to Israel. It has also been very pro-active in promoting the EU-Israel Agreement Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products (ACAA) agreement. Cronin says, “Helping to steer an **EU-Israel trade deal** through the European Parliament has undoubtedly been EFI’s biggest achievement in its relatively short history.”³⁴⁶ This free trade agreement covers pharmaceuticals, though it may be expanded to other products in the future. It was delayed for two years by the European Parliament after Israel opened fire killing nine on the Gaza freedom flotilla, a peaceful attempt to end Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip, and because of objections to the continued building of settlements in occupied Palestinian territory.

Cronin documents how the EFI exerted a “hellish pressure” according to one MEP on parliamentarians not to block ACAA, and how they pushed the benefits to the European public of the improved access to Israeli medicines that ACAA would usher in.³⁴⁷ The ACAA was passed but bans financial ties with illegal Israeli settlements. The EFI has been lobbying to lift this ruling.

Well-funded lobbying in the EU

Israel Allies Foundation is a US-based organisation with an office in Brussels. It lists its budget in the EU transparency register as €1,500,000.³⁴⁸ According to its website it “works with parliaments around the world to mobilize political support for Israel based on Judeo-Christian values.” It was founded in 2004 by Israeli politicians seeking support from the “Christian world”.³⁴⁹

Its website adds, “The Israel Allies Foundation supports the Israel Allies Caucuses in different Parliaments, in its leadership role within the European Parliament, as well as the national parliaments.” It holds events, publishes briefings, holds press conferences to highlight its “legislative initiatives with leaders from around Europe”. Its priorities

in Brussels include, “making sure European funding does not go to terror connected entities, fighting against the delegitimization of Israel, and holding the UN and UNRWA accountable.”³⁵⁰

MEP Magdi Cristiano Allam and MEP Roger Helmer, both members of the IAF caucus in the European Parliament, went on a ‘fact-finding mission’ to the occupied territories paid for by IAF. They tabled parliamentary questions challenging the European Commission Israel Grants Guidelines of July 2013 which do not allow EU funding to go to the occupied territories, arguing these areas were not under occupation.³⁵¹ IAF pledged to step up its lobbying in response to the guidelines.

The **European Coalition for Israel** was the first specifically European pro-Israel lobby, set up in Brussels in 2003. It describes itself as “a joint initiative by major international Christian pro-Israel organizations with activities in Europe”. In 2014 it sent an open letter signed by 42 European political leaders arguing “that the EU’s approach to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the disputed territories is not only unbalanced but based on basic legal and historical misconceptions.” It is challenging the EU’s definition of settlements in the occupied territories, and the boycott, divest, and sanctions movement.³⁵²

An image problem in Europe

In 2011 Israel was looking for PR firms in ten countries in order to improve its international reputation, particularly the way Europe perceives the country. According to PR newsletter the *Holmes Report* the contract worth seven figures focuses on “national industries and characteristics that are often obscured by the focus on war and conflict. These include the country’s booming high-tech sector, along with Israel’s culture, economy, food and music.”³⁵³

The unprecedented PR move came amidst an increasingly vocal movement to **boycott Israeli products**, particularly strong in Europe, and a **Palestinian campaign for UN recognition of statehood**.

The *Holmes Report* “understands that Euro RSCG PR [now **Havas PR**] has been tapped for the UK and France. Other firms thought to be involved are **Kreab Gavin Anderson**, **Burson Marsteller** and **CNC**, in Belgium, Italy and

“it is more important for Israel to be attractive than to be right”

Germany, respectively. In addition, firms have also been hired in the Nordics, Spain, Netherlands and the Czech Republic.³⁵⁴ The total budget was estimated at \$3.26 million a year.³⁵⁵ Indeed, Havas PR reports on its website that one of its clients is the Embassy of Israel in the UK.³⁵⁶

The EU’s Transparency Register data from 2013 showed that the Israeli Mission to the European Union paid €150,000-€200,000 to the PR agency Kreab Gavin Andersen, though not the dates of the contract.³⁵⁷ The Register no longer lists Israel as a current client.

David Cronin reports that Karl Isaksson, Head of the Kreab Gavin Andersen Brussels’ office, confirmed the work when the contract was signed, saying that it was “mainly focused on a couple of trade agreements” between the EU and Israel, including the Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industry Products (ACAA). Kreab Gavin Anderson has former EU **politicians** and officials as employees, and its Brussels team includes a former MEP Karin Riss-Jørgensen and a former high-ranking EU trade official Mogens Peter Carl.³⁵⁸

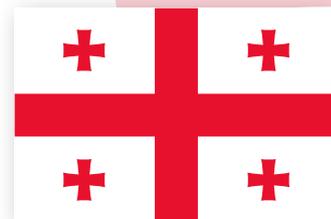
The PR firm was tasked with convincing MEPs that blocking ACAA was not the best way for them to show their objection to the expansion of Israeli settlements.

The British country rebranding firm **Acanchi** (see [Rwanda](#) case study) was also contracted to create a new **Brand Israel** in 2008. According to Ido Aharoni, the foreign ministry official who commissioned the programme, “Our research shows that Israel’s brand is essentially the conflict.” He continued, “Even those who recognize that Israel is in the right are not attracted to it, because they see it as a supplier of bad news. The conclusion is that it is more important for Israel to be attractive than to be right.”³⁵⁹

12. Georgia: the billionaire's dream

Key lobbyists:

Cambre Associates | Sandy McClean PR | KGGlobal (US) | Patton Boggs (US)



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Hybrid democracy)³⁶⁰

78th

Georgia's previous administration (who took power after 2004's 'Rose Revolution') came under fire for its heavy use of foreign PR (an estimated spending of €15 million in 2011 and 2012), not least from their political opponent the billionaire **Bidzina Ivanishvili**. However when Ivanishvili, who created the '**Georgian Dream**' coalition, won the 2012 election, he himself came to power on a veritable **tide of lobbying money** spent in Brussels and Washington.

Brussels-based PR firm **Cambre Associates** has been paid €40,000 a month to support and advise Georgia in media relations and its moves towards the **EU** and **NATO**, according to a contract from March 2013 made public by the government, which elaborates the role is:

[S]upporting and advising government of Georgia and its agencies on foreign developments, which affect the interests of Georgia, formulating strategies and policy initiatives in the pursuit of these interests, lending personal support to senior officials or the Government of Georgia in fulfilling their duties in the field of foreign policy, supporting Georgia's EU and NATO aspirations, relations with media and opinion makers, facilitating arrangement of relevant events and meetings and educating Europe about developments in Georgia.³⁶¹

The relations with the EU have indeed improved. In 2014 Georgia made a clear move towards Europe, signing an **association agreement** with the EU which would boost its role in the region, as well as a Deep and Comprehensive **Free Trade Agreement**.³⁶² Meanwhile France supports Georgia's wish to join NATO.³⁶³

In Washington Georgia employs **Patton Boggs** for a €90,000 a month fee. The contracts were signed by the Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, in charge of foreign consultants' government contracts.³⁶⁴ This is in addition to many other Washington lobbyists who worked for Ivanishvili's campaign; the Stratrisk blog claimed in October 2012 that, "It is estimated that about **\$4 million is spent per month** to cover his lobbying and public affairs costs – more than the companies in the [US] pharmaceutical or tobacco industry are spending."³⁶⁵

Some see the hire as a way to manage the West's perceptions of Georgian Dream, the coalition Ivanishvili created to run for power in 2012.³⁶⁶ In September 2013 Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili declared he was "studying" the option of joining **Russia's Eurasian Union**, posited as an alternative to the EU. His PR team at Cambre immediately began **firefighting**, circulating a release in Brussels which

“\$4 million is spent per month – more than the companies in the [US] pharmaceutical or tobacco industry are spending.”

clarified, ““While not ruling out the possibility of joining such a union in the future, should it be judged in the national interest, he [Ivanishvili] stated that ‘At this stage, we have no position at all.’”³⁶⁷

Ivanishvili’s **Russian connections** are not casual, however. Georgia’s richest man by some way, he is an **oligarch** with a **fortune of \$6.4 billion** – almost half the GDP of the country – made largely through buying up formerly state-owned businesses cheaply when they were privatised in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He is former owner of 1% of Russian state oil company Gazprom, and of the Russian bank Rossiyskiy Kredit, both of which he sold in 2012 before running for office; he said this was in order to be able to negotiate with Russia without them creating problems for him after coming to power. In order for these key businesses to have run successfully in Russia, he must have been at the very least, able to play by the rules of the Russian ruling caste.³⁶⁸ He now invests the fortunes he has made into art (his collection is estimated to be worth over \$1 billion), equities, and gold.³⁶⁹

His Rossiyskiy Kredit bank was linked to the 1990s ‘**Angolagate**’ arms scandal. Arkady Gaydamark, a Russian-Israeli businessman constructed deals during Angola’s civil war to sell the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) \$70m worth of helicopters, and helped in “logistics and financing of the legal supply of arms, weapons and food to the official Angolan army”.³⁷⁰ According to French court records, Gaydamark laundered his money through Ivanishvili’s Rossiyskiy Kredit Bank – and was Chairman of the board for a short period in 2000.³⁷¹

KGlobal, the US partner firm to Cambre in Brussels, has a case study on its website about helping Ivanishvili to power, “to help raise the profile of the Georgian Dream as a legitimate opposition choice.”³⁷² In a blog post entitled, ‘**Holy crap, we just won this election**’, they described Ivanishvili as:

[A] client, candidate and political coalition that no one... thought had a chance to win just a few months ago. At 2:05 in Tbilisi, Georgia / 6:05 a.m. EST, a client we are honored to represent, Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream coalition, officially declared victory in the Georgian Parliamentary election after President Saakashvili gave his concessionary speech.... Yes it was **a harsh, mudslinging and at times violent campaign** filled with twists and turns, but the people voted....

From my seat I can see an excited group of colleagues. A team that despite frustration and barriers at every step, found ways to bring attention to this historic story unfolding in Georgia.³⁷³

KGlobal commissioned London-based firm, **Sandy McClean PR**, with offices in Brussels and Washington and run by Cambre Associates’ executive Sandy McClean, to handle UK PR for the Georgian Dream party.³⁷⁴

Ivanishvili, having achieved his objective of ousting the former administration, resigned in November 2013. Irakli Garibashvili of Georgian Dream is now Prime Minister – and the Georgian Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic integration is still a client of Cambre Associates according to the last update of the Transparency Register of 3 October 2014.³⁷⁵ In contrast to the Ivanishvili’s remarks about joining Russia’s rival Eurasian Union, the new Prime Minister has clearly stated his desire for Georgia to become **a member of the EU**.³⁷⁶ He also called on the international community to condemn the breakaway region of Abkhazia’s “treaty on alliance and strategic partnership” with Russia, which has been seen as a reaction to Georgia’s recent EU agreement.³⁷⁷

While the 2012 election marked a peaceful transition of power, Human Rights Watch has registered concern that “Investigations into past abuses raised some concerns regarding selective justice and politically motivated prosecutions.”³⁷⁸ Meanwhile, despite Ivanishvili’s promises to dissolve the security services of the former regime, they have survived intact.³⁷⁹

13. Ethiopia: Brussels-based embassy communications help



Eurofuture was retained in 2013 by the **Paris Embassy of Ethiopia** for public relations work. The company based in Brussels, Paris, Geneva, and New York, was launched in 2000 by Marie-Jeanne Capuano, a French lawyer and specialist in public diplomacy and working with the EU institutions.³⁸¹ Eurofuture in Brussels and Paris has a particular focus on **PR services for embassies, international organizations, and EU agencies**. Eurofuture's website shows images of Afghanistan with the slogan 'Building reputation', Rwanda along with 'promoting performances', Saudi Arabia and 'Elevating uniqueness' and Guinea 'Asserting change', among others.³⁸² There is no client list on the site and Eurofuture is not listed in the EU's Transparency Register, despite its Brussels base.

Intelligence Online reports: "Several staff members based in various European capitals have produced, under Marie-Jeanne Capuano's captaincy, a new monthly magazine called *Ethioplus* on behalf of the Ethiopian embassy in France. Eurofuture's work for this embassy in the future

could be to expand the production of fact-sheets on more technical subjects in cooperation with Addis Ababa, aimed at specialist audiences such as government departments and companies."³⁸³

After the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012, Human Rights Watch reports, "Hopes that Ethiopia's new leadership would pursue human rights reforms... have been shattered." It outlines that "the Ethiopian authorities continue to severely restrict the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, using repressive laws to constrain civil society and independent media, and target individuals with politically motivated prosecutions." This includes "**Abuse and coercion** that in some cases amount to torture and other ill-treatment" for political detainees.³⁸⁴

"Hopes that Ethiopia's new leadership would pursue human rights reforms... have been shattered."

14. Côte d'Ivoire: after war, little justice

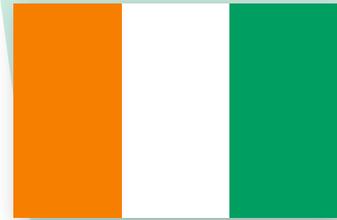
Key lobbyists:

Image Sept | 35°Nord | BTP Advisers

Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian regime)³⁸⁵

137th



Various French **PR firms** representing **heads of state from across Africa** emerged during a Franco-African summit in December 2013. President of **Côte d'Ivoire**, Alassane Ouattara was represented by **Image Sept**, a French PR firm with offices in Paris, London and Brussels, who organised interviews with Tv5 Monde during the summit. The country's military have been criticised for torture and repression of political opponents in the wake of a civil war.³⁸⁶ The EU has an embargo on export of arms and equipment for internal repression to the country.

While Image Sept has an office in Brussels, it doesn't appear in the EU's Transparency Register. It has also represented the President of **Niger**, Mamadou Issoufou.

Another French PR firm working with African governments is **35°Nord**, who has represented Jean-Louis Billon, **Ivorian** Minister of Trade, producing communications strategy, media relations, content production.³⁸⁷

Mark Pursey, founder of British firm **BTP Advisers** (see [Rwanda](#) case study) is said to have gained a "formidable reputation" in his work which includes representing the Government of Côte d'Ivoire.³⁸⁸

The country's military have been criticised for torture and repression of political opponents in the wake of a civil war

15. Democratic Republic of Congo: war crimes at home, French PR handlers abroad

Key lobbyists:

35°Nord | Public Systeme Hopscotch



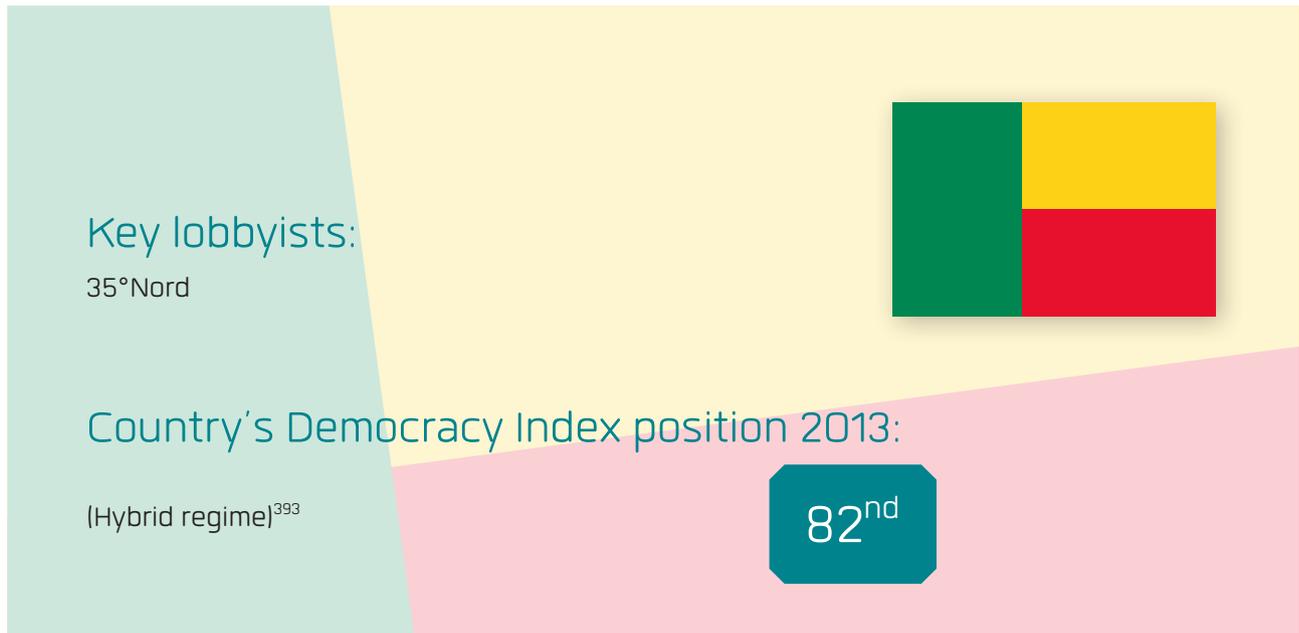
Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian regime)³⁸⁹

159th

French PR firm **35°Nord** represents the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, which they say involves strategy consulting with the **Prime Minister Augustin Matata Ponyo Mapon**, media relations, content production, and influencing strategy.³⁹⁰ Mapon was appointed by President Joseph **Kabila** in 2012, under whose regime Amnesty International describes impunity for human rights abuses, security forces committing **crimes against humanity** including rape as a weapon of war, general elections “marred by many human rights violations, including unlawful killings and arbitrary arrests”, and that “Human rights defenders and journalists faced intimidation and restrictions on the freedoms of expression and association.”³⁹¹ Another French firm, **Public Systeme Hopscotch** handled Mapon’s PR on a previous visit to Paris in 2012.³⁹² The EU has an arms embargo against the DRC, including travel bans and asset freezes for those in violation.

16. **Benin:** the PR men, the Brussels assassination plot, the fugitive tycoon, and the President



French PR company **35°Nord** were hired in 2013 to give a positive spin in France to the image of the President of **Benin**, Boni Yayi.³⁹⁴ This was during Yayi's failed attempt to extradite his former financial backer wealthy businessman Patrice Talon, and Talon's right hand man Olivier Boko, from France for masterminding an alleged **assassination plot**.

In Benin, after receiving an anonymous warning that he was in danger, Talon had fled into the bush in order to leave the country. Talon was later arrested in Paris, accused of offering President Yayi's niece, Zouberath Kora-Seke and his doctor, Ibrahim Mama Cisse, €1.5 million during a visit to Brussels if they could get President Yayi to take poison instead of his usual painkillers. Extradition from France failed because the Paris court said Talon would not receive a fair trial in Benin. Patrice Talon has said that since he refused to back Yayi's running for a third term in office by

amending the constitution, the President had threatened him, saying, "Patrice, you know, you are in danger, if you keep resisting me, because after all, I am the President of Benin."³⁹⁵ After the extradition attempt failed the contract with 35°Nord was not renewed.

"Patrice, you know, you are in danger, if you keep resisting me, because after all, I am the President of Benin."

17. United Arab Emirates - Ras al-Khaimah: the feuding princes and the Brussels connection

Key lobbyists:

Kreab Gavin Anderson (former)



Country's Democracy Index position 2013:

(Authoritarian democracy)³⁹⁶

152th

A strange feud between brothers over who should take power in the **Ras al-Khaimah emirate**, part of the **United Arab Emirates**, became a matter for top Brussels PR firm **Kreab Gavin Anderson**.

Kreab Gavin Anderson's client Sheikh Saud bin Saqr al-Qasimi was awarded power in October 2010 by the Emirates' Federal Supreme Council after the death of his father. But the day he took the throne, his older half-brother, Sheikh Khalid Bin Saqr Al-Qasimi attempted a palace coup using British mercenaries, but ended under house arrest.

The context of this lurid story was a year-long battle of the image between the brothers, played out in polite PR firm corridors thousands of miles away. Kreab alleges that Sheikh Khalid had spent a good \$15m on US lobbyists and private security consultants before his attempt to seize power – and that these lobbyists had depicted his younger brother Sheikh Saud as a rapist, anti-Semite, friend of the Iranian regime, and illegal arms trader.³⁹⁷

A leaked cable from the US consul in Dubai describes the Ras al-Khaimah airport as a “base of operations” for notorious Russian arms trader ‘**merchant of death**’ **Victor Bout** – certainly two of his aircraft were left abandoned there.³⁹⁸ And Sheikh Saud was briefly arrested on a sexual assault charge before the woman withdrew her testimony.

But Kreab has taken Sheikh Saud's image in hand. “We're **raising awareness in the EU**, positioning RAK as a good place for foreign direct investment,” Director Davis Hodge told the *EU Observer*.³⁹⁹ Karl Isaksson of Kreab said his staff had spoken to EU officials in positive terms about Sheikh Saud and RAK. Yet according to the *EU Observer* the company had not at the time registered Sheikh Saud as an interest, citing the vagueness of the Commission's lobbying definition which allowed room for interpretation over which clients to include.⁴⁰⁰

a year-long battle of the image between the brothers, played out in polite PR firm corridors thousands of miles away

18. **Qatar:** astroturfing support for the 2022 World Cup



In 2014 **Portland Communications** swapped Russia for **Qatar** as their biggest client.⁴⁰² Portland received criticism for ‘**astroturfing**’ – that is, creating a false impression of a grassroots movement – over Qatar-related activities after a UK Channel 4 investigation claiming it had helped set up a blog attacking critics of the controversial 2022 **Qatar World Cup**. ‘The Pressing Game’ blog claims to be set up by football fans. *PR Week* reports, “Portland has admitted its digital team helped set up [the blog]... but has insisted it does not run the site and it is not part of its work for the Government of Qatar.”⁴⁰³

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Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) is a research and campaign group working to expose and challenge the privileged access and influence enjoyed by corporations and their lobby groups in EU policy making.

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