

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 Ilie Gabara of PR firm BGR Gabara, 2011.¹



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

Kazakhstan has seen a marked regression in civil liberties since Blair's hiring

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 Academic Gulnar Kendirbai 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.

Doctor Gulnar Kendirbai 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 Aff** (ECFA) launched in Brussels in November 2014 and is intended to bring Kazakhstan closer to the EU. Though ECFA defi 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 fits 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

Nationalist euphoria and massaged wikipedia pages

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

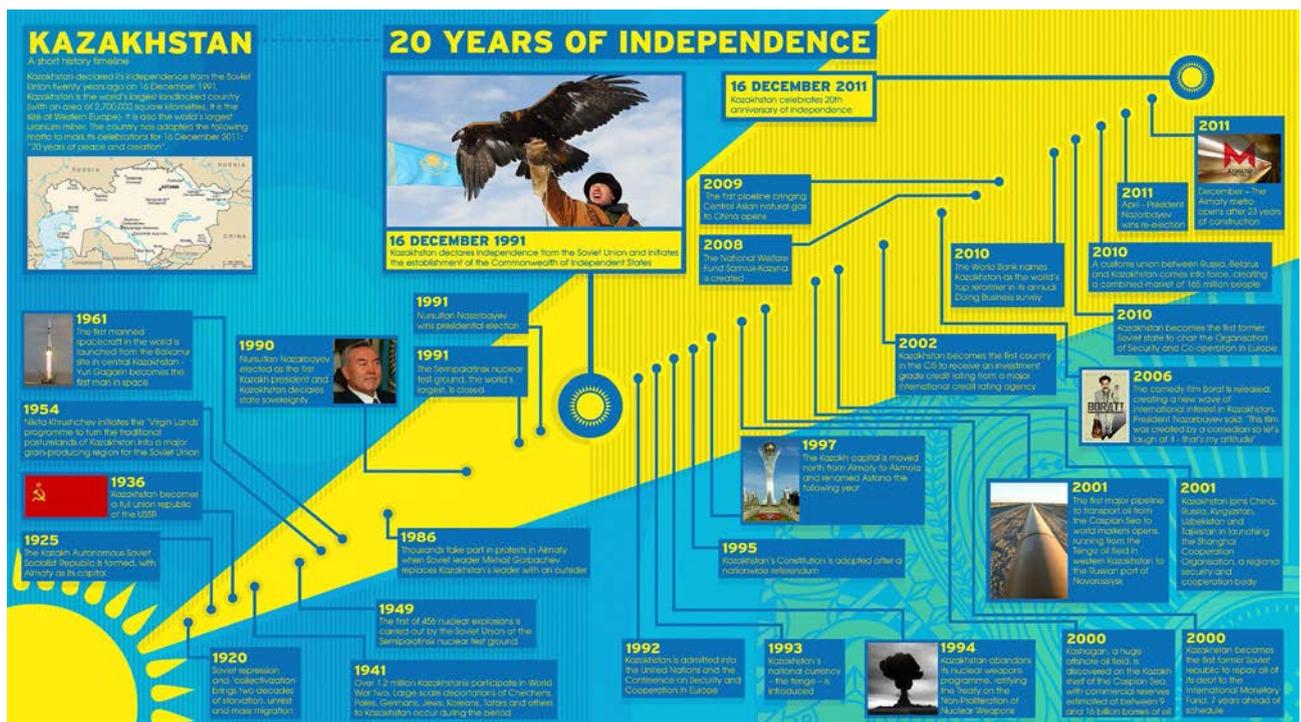
of former senior advisors from the highest level of British Government and politics, the EU, the UN and the World Economic Forum, Portland has unrivaled first-hand experience of the complex interplay between government, politics, media, business and public audiences.”³²⁰

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.

Doctor Gulnar Kendirbai 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:

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

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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