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Mark Hollingsworth

How oligarchs use Brussels to launder their reputations

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W the most serious corruption case in the European Parliament in decades, nobody noticed one of his clients was an oligarch who is the subject of the biggest civil fraud case in British legal history.

This tawdry scandal has focused on claims that Qatar funded an influence operation in the European parliament which resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of MEPs and a former vice-president. Over €1.5 million in cash has since been discovered stashed away in flats, offices, and hotel rooms across Brussels, France and Italy. The payments were allegedly part of a lobbying operation to bolster Qatar's reputation and counter scrutiny during the World

Cup of its human rights record. It is a devastating blow to the EU's credibility.

The investigation is focusing on the parliament's human rights sub-committee which Panzeri was chairman of. Even though it is not a legislative body, the committee shines an influential spotlight on human rights abuses by countries outside the EU which makes it an ideal target for lobbying by international kleptocrats.

In exile the oligarch has assiduously courted European politicians to promote his defence

And like Qatar, oligarchs have used Europe as a vehicle for rehabilitating their reputation and diverting attention away from allegations of criminality and controversy. A case in point is the Kazakh oligarch fugitive Mukhtar Ablyazov who last month was found guilty of a \$218 million fraud in a US court and has been on the run from the UK courts since 2012. He was convicted in the UK of lying under oath about owning a London mansion, forging documents and contempt of court. He had been accused of embezzling \$6 billion from Kazakhstan's BTA Bank as chairman by channelling funds to thousands of offshore companies of which he was the beneficiary.

Ablyazov fled to London, bought several properties and was sued by BTA bank for fraud. He lived a lavish lifestyle, living in a nine-bedroom mansion with an indoor swimming pool on Bishops Avenue, Hampstead, and a 100-acre estate on the edge of Windsor Great Park. But he declined to disclose details of his assets to the High Court and in 2012 was found guilty of contempt of court. 'It is difficult to imagine a party to commercial litigation who has acted with more cynicism, opportunism and deviousness towards court orders than Mr Ablyazov', declared Lord Justice Maurice Kay.

An arrest warrant was issued against the oligarch who was sentenced to 22 months in jail for contempt of court. But just before the judgment was issued Ablyazov jumped out of a hotel room window, caught a coach from Victoria down to Dover and escaped to France by ferry. In his absence the High Court ordered Ablyazov to pay £1.02 billion and in 2019 issued a second arrest warrant. He was jailed in France but obtained political asylum.

Sam Leith

In exile the oligarch has assiduously courted European politicians to promote his defence that the fraud allegations are politically motivated because he was a vocal opponent of the Kazakhstan regime. One of his most diligent lawyers and active supporters was Panzeri who promoted Ablyazov's agenda. Multiple parliamentary motions condemned the persecution of 'dissidents' and one even called for the protection of Ablyazov himself.

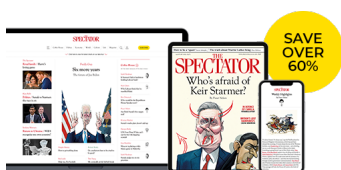
Panzeri worked closely with NGOs like the Brussels-based Open Dialogue Foundation (ODF) which campaigns against human rights abuses. The MEP hosted events, made introductions and acted as a de facto lobbyist for Ablyazov. Despite the overwhelming evidence against Ablyazov, the NGO remains a staunch supporter of the oligarch. 'ODF has included Ablyazov within our advocacy of defending thousands of victims of political persecution in

Kazakhstan,' a spokesperson told me. 'ODF defended Ablyazov, as well as his family members and associates between 2013 and 2016, at a time when Kazakhstan, through Russia and Ukraine, prosecuted dozens of people in politically motivated cases.'

The Kazakh oligarch claims the fraud and money laundering allegations are 'the culmination of the campaign by former President Nazarbayev and his allies to wrest ownership and control of BTA bank from (Ablyazov)'. His lawyers stated he fled London because of 'a death threat' and was 'constantly in fear of his life' by Kazakh intelligence agents.

Ablyazov remains in exile in France. But his luck appears to be running out. Last month he lost his appeal regarding his asylum status. Characteristically he appealed again and is allowed to stay in the country until the final ruling. 'In the Judgement of CNDA (French Asylum court), Mr Ablyazov was recognised as a politically prosecuted person as part of his fight to bring democracy to Kazakhstan,' his lawyer Karim Beylouni told me.

But the oligarch also potentially faces an ongoing criminal investigation in France for fraud. The prosecutors and BTA bank have filed an appeal with the Supreme Court after a court ruled the statute of limitation has expired. 'Ablyazov bankrupted one of Kazakhstan's biggest banks by committing one of the largest frauds in modern history, amounting to at least \$7.5 billion,' Elena Fedorova, a BTA bank lawyer, told me. The appeal will be heard before June of this year.



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Today the claim against Ablyazov remains the biggest civil fraud case in British legal history. Despite his conviction for contempt of court and multiple offences, the prosecuting authorities have been remarkably complacent. The Crown Prosecution Service reviewed the evidence and refused to act. In 2019, after the second arrest warrant was issued, the UK National Crime Agency had access to all the files but declined to investigate because of 'insufficient resources'. His extradition to face justice looks very unlikely.

Meanwhile, Ablyazov's cunning ploy of using political persecution as a diversionary tactic has been effective and the European parliament has been a willing accomplice. But his close relationship with one of the main suspects in this latest criminal investigation may return to haunt him.

WRITTEN BY

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Mark Hollingsworth is the author of 'Londongrad - From Russia with Cash, the Inside Story of the Oligarchs.'



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