

Sponsor of Congressional Travel to Azerbaijan Indicted for Submitting False Forms to House Ethics Committee

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In a federal indictment unsealed on September 24, 2018, Kemal (also known as “Kevin”) Oksuz – the former head of the Turquoise Council of Americans and Eurasians [*sic*] (TCAE) – was charged in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia with four felony counts of making false statements to the U.S. House Committee on Ethics and one felony count of devising a scheme to falsify, conceal, and cover up material facts to the Committee on Ethics in connection with pre- and post-travel forms submitted to the Committee for Member and staff travel to Azerbaijan in May 2013.

In April 2013, Oksuz’s organization TCAE invited a number of Members of the House and their staff on a trip to Turkey and Azerbaijan; while in Azerbaijan, the Members and staff were to attend a convention in Baku focusing on energy and trade issues. The indictment in this matter alleges that, in pre- and post-travel forms required to be filed with the House Committee on Ethics in connection to House Member and staff travel paid for by a private source, Oksuz falsely disclosed and certified that TCAE had “not accepted from any other source funds intended directly or indirectly to finance any aspect” of this trip. The indictment further alleges that, in fact, as “Oksuz well knew, TCAE accepted [for this trip], both directly and indirectly, funds from other sources including”: the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR), a wholly state-owned oil and gas company; Practical Solutions Group (PSG), a consulting firm based in Azerbaijan; and the Assembly of Friends of Azerbaijan (AFAZ), a nonprofit organization focused on promoting U.S.-Azerbaijan relations and also led by Oksuz.

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Ultimately, according to the House Committee on Ethics, 10 House Members and 32 House staff accepted privately sponsored travel to Azerbaijan in connection with the May 2013 conference. All House travelers sought and received preapproval from the Committee on Ethics for this travel; forms submitted for this preapproval included false information and certifications from Oksuz. In its July 31, 2015 report on its investigation into this matter, the Committee on Ethics concluded: "The evidence demonstrates that the House travelers submitted their forms in good faith, and there is no evidence that the House travelers knew, or should have known, of the sponsors' false statements regarding the true source of funding for the travel." The Committee also concluded, however, that there was "evidence of concerted, possibly criminal efforts by various non-House individuals and entities to mislead the House travelers and the Committee about the Trips' true sponsors and the funding sources used to pay for Member and House employee travel to Azerbaijan." The Committee referred its finding regarding these "non-House individuals," presumably including Oksuz, to the U.S. Department of Justice.

As evidenced by the Oksuz criminal indictment and the preceding ethics investigation, the congressional ethics committees (both House and Senate) and (on referral from the ethics committees) the Department of Justice scrutinize privately sponsored travel forms carefully to assure that the representations made on those forms are true, accurate, and complete. Attorneys in Wiley Rein's Election Law and Government Ethics Group are experienced in assisting prospective sponsors of congressional travel in completing the required forms and in navigating all steps of the congressional travel approval process.