

Network Insight: Films

Leyla Aliyeva's films and their role in whitewashing Azerbaijan's image overseas

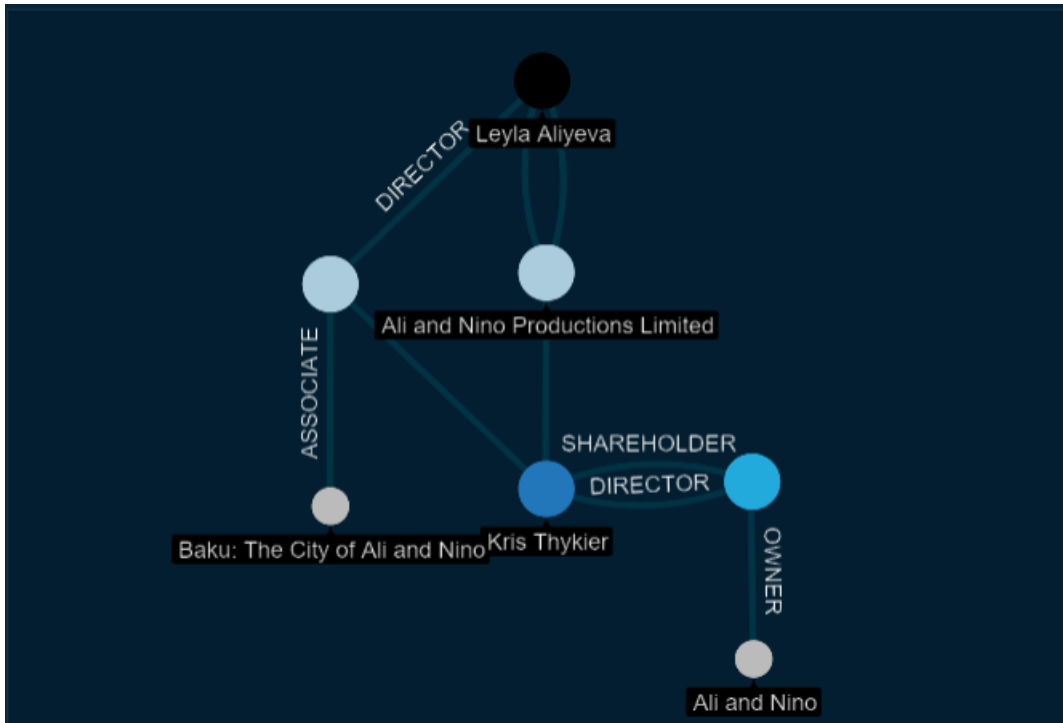
Ilham Aliyev's regime is behind a sophisticated operation to whitewash its image overseas—specifically its poor track record for corruption, human rights abuses, and military aggression.^[1014] Leyla Aliyeva, the president's daughter, has played a critical role in that effort, having produced several films and documentaries that present the country in a flattering light.

One of these films is “Ali and Nino,” a 2016 feature film that presents a romanticized image of Azerbaijan to international audiences. Despite premiering at the Sundance Film Festival,^[1295] the film was critically panned and earned a mere \$50,721 at the box office in Spain, Portugal, and the UAE.^{[1295] [1296] [1297]}

Two UK companies were involved in the film's production. The first, Ali and Nino Productions Limited, was set up in 2011,^[581] and Leyla Aliyeva provided “continuous support” to it as its sole shareholder and the film's executive producer.^[568]

In 2015, a second company—Ali and Nino Pictures Limited—was set up and became the film's main production company.^[704] However, this company had no trace of Leyla Aliyeva in its corporate filings, which may indicate an attempt to conceal her association with the project.

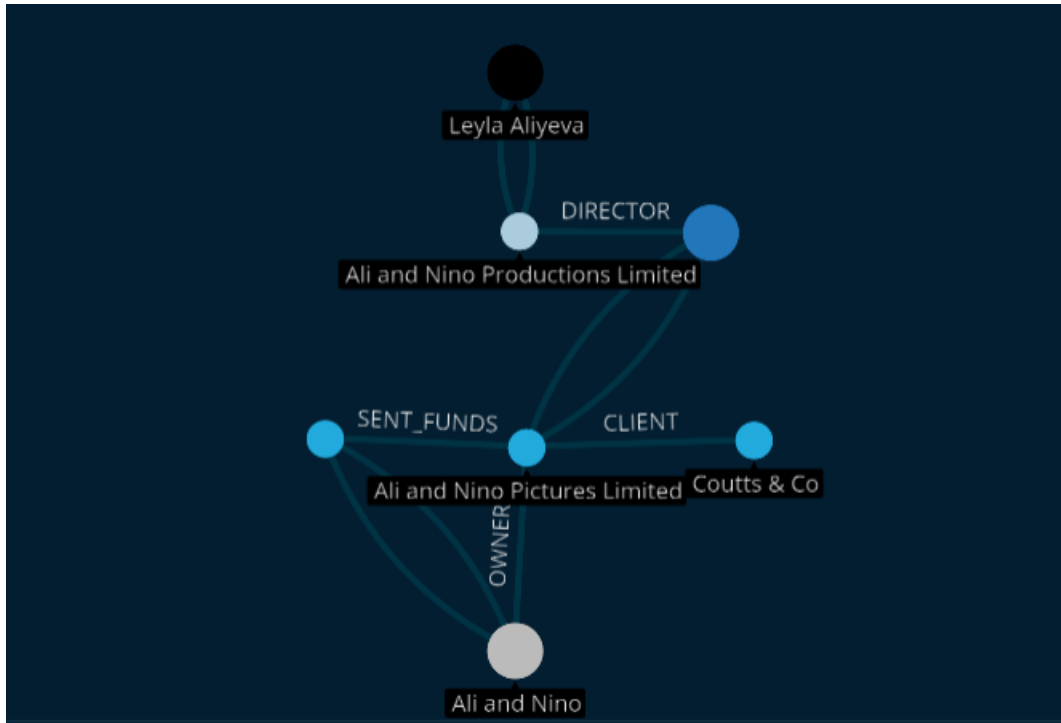
A third company, Between Asia and Europe Limited, produced a spin-off documentary called “Baku: The City of Ali and Nino.”^{[467] [705]} Kris Thykier, a Danish film producer, was a director of all three companies.^{[1269] [690] [582]}



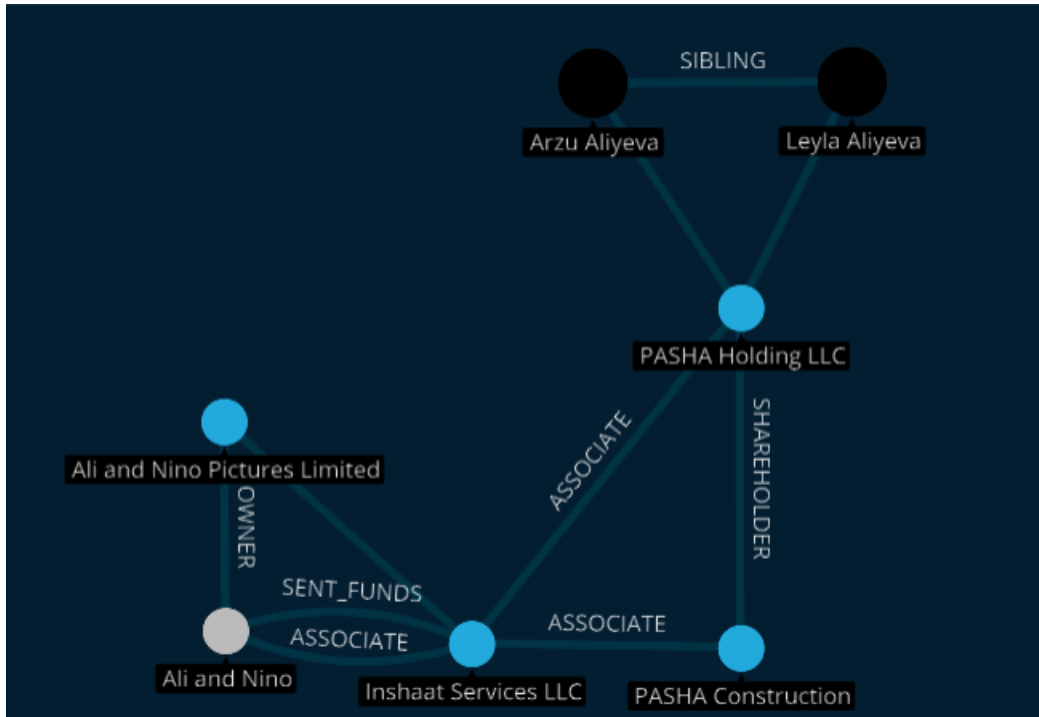
The film “Ali and Nino” was financed in part by a loan from an Azerbaijani company linked to the first family. In February 2016, Inshaat Services LLC lent Ali and Nino Pictures Limited funds to produce the film. In exchange, Inshaat Services acquired the rights to the finished film.^{[691] [658] [235] [237]} The loan amount was not specified,^[235] and as of 2023, it had not been repaid.^[691]

Ali and Nino Pictures Limited held “production accounts” at Coutts & Co,^[235] a private bank registered in the UK whose clients include celebrities, the aristocracy, and the ultra-wealthy.^{[628] [629]} Queen Elizabeth II was a client of the bank, earning it the nickname “the Queen’s bank.”^[630] According to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the use of private banks—regardless of the type of client—is a red flag for suspicious activity.^[1294] *

* The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an international body that develops and promotes policies to protect the global financial system and sets standards for money laundering controls.

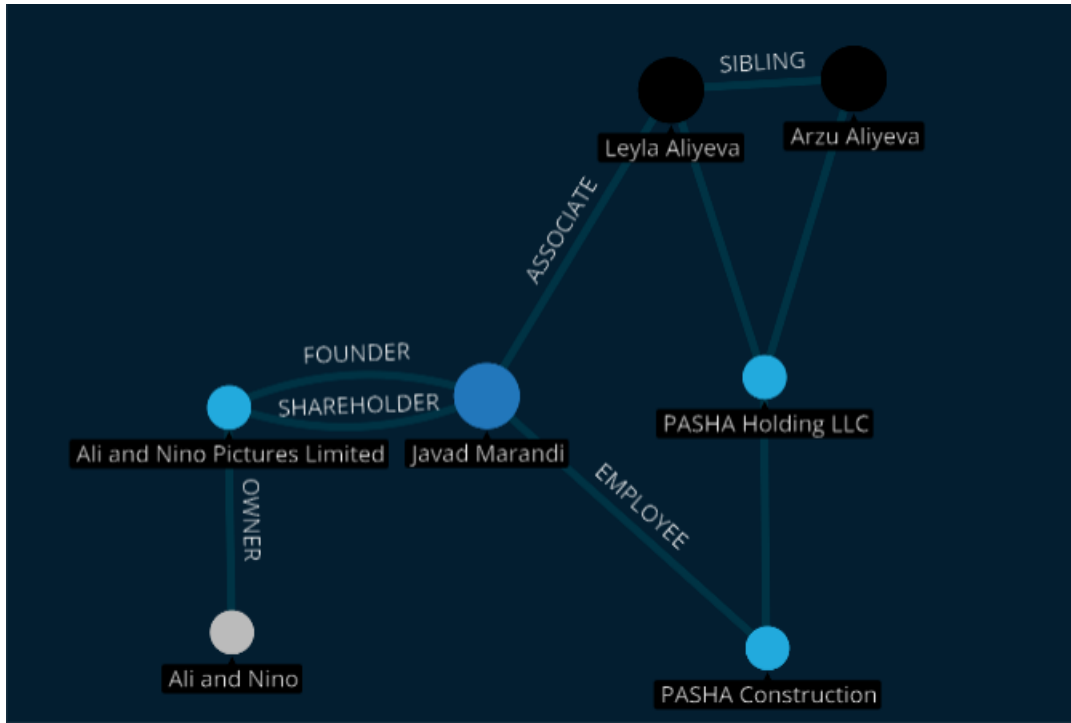


Inshaat Services is closely linked to PASHA Holding LLC, an Azerbaijani conglomerate majority-owned by Leyla and Arzu Aliyeva.^{[341] [445] [692] [528]} Inshaat Services' address has been listed as both 91 and 153 Neftchilyar Avenue in Baku.^{[440] [235]} Both addresses are associated with PASHA Holding and its subsidiaries.^{[443] [442] [441]} In addition, Inshaat Services is described as either a subsidiary of PASHA Holding or a contractor company affiliated with PASHA Construction,^{[693] [694] [698]} the conglomerate's construction arm. "Inshaat" means "construction" in Azerbaijani, and according to a former employee's LinkedIn profile, the two companies—PASHA Construction and Inshaat Services—are one and the same.^[469]



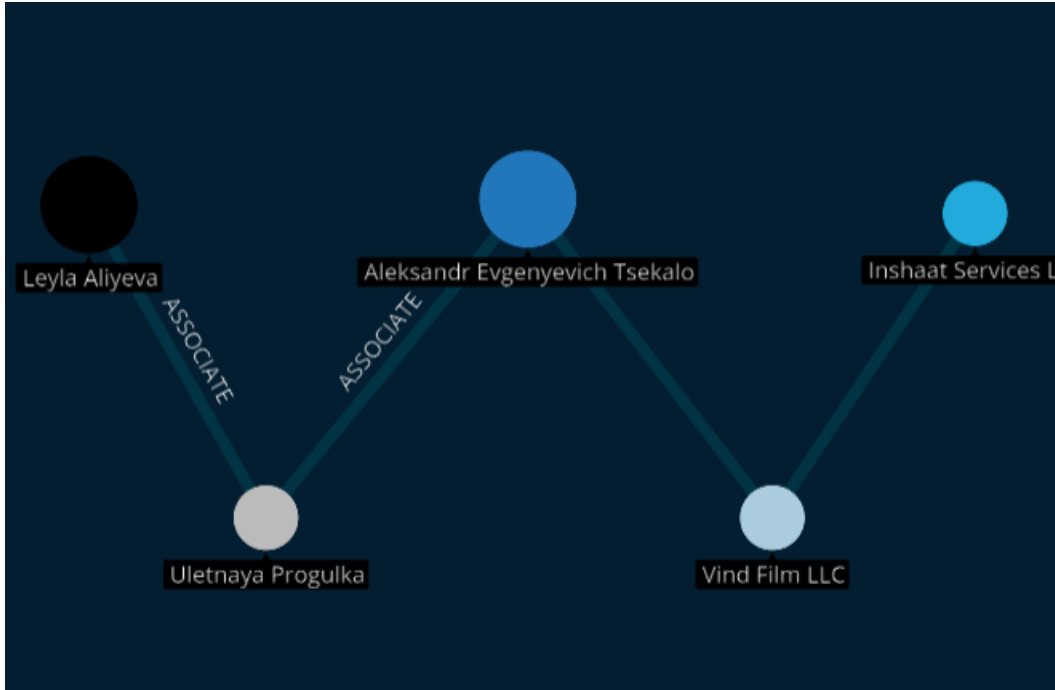
The main production company behind “Ali and Nino,” Ali and Nino Pictures Limited, was founded by Javad Marandi, a British-Iranian businessman.^[152] Marandi is an associate of Leyla Aliyeva;^{[565] [1188] [567]} he has also worked as a consultant for PASHA Construction.^{[565] [528]}

Separately, Marandi was found to have received large and suspicious payments from the “Azerbaijani Laundromat,”^[575] a \$2.9 billion alleged money laundering scheme uncovered in 2017 by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. According to the UK’s National Crime Agency, between 2005 and 2017, the alleged laundromat paid out more than \$150 million to Marandi and a shell company he owned.^[575] ^[577] Some of the funds were reportedly used to bribe a European politician into making decisions favorable to Azerbaijan.^[576] Marandi denies wrongdoing.^{[575] [577]}



Leyla Aliyeva was also the general producer of the film “Uletnaya Progulka” (“A Mindblowing Walk”), a 2017 Russian-Azerbaijani romantic comedy that presents a modern vision of Azerbaijan for Russian audiences.^[447] ^[700] Russia is a key mediator in Azerbaijan’s ongoing border conflict with its neighbor, Armenia, so the production of a film for a Russian audience is part of Azerbaijan’s campaign to influence public perceptions of the country in Russia and project soft power.

The film was produced by Aleksandr Evgenyevich Tsekalo,^[699] a Russian TV presenter and host of “Minuta slavy” (“Minute of Fame”), the Russian spinoff of the “Got Talent” TV show.^[447] Tsekalo was a shareholder of Vind Film LLC, a film production company registered in Moscow; Inshaat Services LLC was also a shareholder.^{[235] [445] [692]} The relationship between Vind Film and “Uletnaya Progulka” is unclear, but it may have been the film’s production company.



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