

# Briefing :: Troubled Partner: Growing Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan

Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission

Troubled Partner: Growing Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan

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Witnesses:

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H.E. Elin Suleymanov,  
Ambassador,  
Republic of Azerbaijan

Eldar Namazov,  
Leader of the "EL" Movement,  
National Council of Democratic Forces of Azerbaijan

Samad Seyidov, Dsc, MP

Erkin Gadirli,  
Chairman of the Assembly,  
Republican Alternative (ReAl)

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Shelly Han, Senior Adviser, CSCE moderating

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HAN: Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome you to a briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. We're very pleased to have an illustrious and large panel to discuss this issue.

Both Azerbaijan and the United States are participating states in the OSCE, and as such, have agreed to the principle that comprehensive security and stability requires not only physical security and economic development but respect for human rights as well.

We have six speakers today. And I'd like to remind them to keep their statements succinct as we want to have time, after all the speakers have finished, for questions. We will invite the audience to ask questions as well. And we have distributed bios for each of the speakers so I'll refer you to those instead of reading them out loud before each speaker.

Before we start with our witnesses, I'd like to turn to the commission's senior State Department adviser, Dr. Paul Carter, who's going to provide a few remarks to help frame our discussion for today.

Paul?

CARTER: Thank you, Shelly, for the introduction. As Shelly mentioned, I would like to take just a few minutes to provide some context and frame today's discussion. I note at the outset that my remarks are not an official statement of State Department policy, but are offered instead in my capacity as senior adviser to the Helsinki Commission.

The United States is a friend of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani people. We regard the government of Azerbaijan as a partner with whom we share many interests and cooperate on many issues. Azerbaijan is located in the strategically important Caucasus region, borders Russia and Iran, and is a key gateway along the new Silk Road to Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Azerbaijan established its economic independence soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union and now plays an important role in efforts to supply Europe with alternative sources of energy.

The government has supplied contingents of troops to work with us in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. And the country is a significant transit corridor for the United States to Afghanistan.

The United States has worked closely with Azerbaijan, as well as Armenia, through the OSCE Minsk Group to find a positive, forward-looking solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. And the government of Azerbaijan has taken a positive approach to significant international issues, including maintaining good relations with Israel and respecting sanctions against Iran.

These common interests and approaches have fostered good relations between the United States and the government of Azerbaijan and have received much attention in Washington and Baku.

But we are not here today to discuss energy, regional security or Nagorno-Karabakh. Our purpose today is to discuss a set of issues that has received less attention but is no less significant. These issues concern the many reports of the Azerbaijani government's decline in respect for democratic values and growing authoritarianism.

Reported trends include: intimidation, arrests and use of force against journalists and human rights activists; tough new NGO registration requirements; legal restrictions on the Internet, including criminalizing online libel and abuse; restrictions on freedom of assembly, forceful dispersion of unsanctioned protests, and detention of demonstrators; unfair administration of justice, including arbitrary arrests and detention; politically motivated imprisonment, lack of due process, lengthy pre-trial detention and executive interference in the judiciary; the jailing of religious believers; the closing, in April, of the Free Thought University; and, since April 28th, the jamming of Radio Liberty-Radio Free Europe broadcasts.

Azerbaijan will hold a presidential election in October of this year. The OSCE election observation mission's reports on previous elections in Azerbaijan found that those elections failed to meet OSCE and other international standards in significant ways.

We are concerned, given the current apparent decline in respect for democratic values in Azerbaijan, that the prospects for a free and fair presidential election have not improved and, indeed, may have significantly declined. In this regard, I note as well that the government of Azerbaijan still has not issued an invitation to the OSCE to send long and short-term observers to the October election.

We have a distinguished panel of Azerbaijani and American officials, politicians and experts to provide more information on these issues and help us to understand their significance.

While some of our panelists currently are active on the Azerbaijan political scene, I would like to stress that the Helsinki Commission does not take sides in the upcoming presidential election. Our only interest is in supporting a free and fair campaign and election as well as a greater respect for human rights and democratic values.

With that, I would like to return the floor to Shelly, who will introduce our first witness.

HAN: Thanks, Paul. Now, I'd like to turn to Thomas Melia, who's the deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

You have the floor.

MELIA: Thank you. Thank you, Ms. Han and Dr. Carter and all of the commission members and staff for inviting me here to brief about the situation in Azerbaijan and its implications for the October presidential election.

Azerbaijan is, as Dr. Carter summarized so well, an important partner for the United States. It plays a significant role in advancing energy security for our friends and allies, and provides vital support as a transportation hub for the international security mission in Afghanistan.

Thus, it is timely and important for us to take a sober look at recent Azerbaijani government actions, which raise concerns in advance of the October presidential election, and about democratic and civil society development more broadly.

As a friend of Azerbaijan, the United States supports the country's long-term stability in a tough neighborhood. In this connection, I want to share some of the concerns that we in Washington and our colleagues at our embassy in Baku have discussed with senior Azerbaijani government officials in recent months.

We have seen some positive efforts by the government in certain important areas affecting human rights situation, such as in combating human trafficking and battling against domestic violence, as well as an impressive new ASAN, administration services center, in Baku that's intended to decrease petty corruption.

Unfortunately, the political environment for human rights and fundamental freedoms more broadly has worsened since at least last November, when the Milli Mejlis passed amendments significantly increasing fines on participants and organizers of unauthorized protests.

Then, this year alone, restrictive actions have included an increase in the number of detained peaceful democracy activists, use of water cannons to disperse a peaceful protest in Baku, legislation further restricting NGO financing, criminal code amendments that extend penalties for defamation and insults to online content, and the closure of the facility of the Free Thought University, a non-partisan forum established by young activists to develop critical analytical skills and independent thinking, which the U.S. government has been proud to support in its formative months and for the first couple of years. And there's been pressure on independent defense lawyers, resulting in a decreasing number of such lawyers prepared to defend individuals charged in sensitive political cases.

U.S. officials consistently highlight the importance of greater respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms with Azerbaijani government officials at all levels in Baku and Washington. We also raise our concerns at OSCE fora, such as the weekly permanent council meetings in Vienna, most recently on July

4th.

To amplify U.S. government concerns, I have traveled to Azerbaijan three times since taking my current position in DRL. I was there in June 2011, last December, and in April of this year.

While in Azerbaijan, I've met with government officials at the highest levels, as well as democratic reform advocates, such as political party and civil society leaders, independent journalists and defense lawyers.

In the most recent visit, in April, to demonstrate solidarity with families of incarcerated democracy activists, I also met with Vafa Mammadova, the wife of ReAl presidential candidate Ilgar Mammadov, who has been in pre-trial detention for more than five months.

In my meetings, I have urged our partners, our counterparts in the government of Azerbaijan to respect universally recognized freedoms such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association, and not to penalize individuals for attempting to exercise these freedoms. I also have emphasized the importance of fostering an environment conducive to pluralism among civil society organizations, political parties and media outlets as a foundation of true long-term stability.

While in Baku in mid-April, on an inter-agency delegation that I co-led with USAID Assistant Administration Paige Alexander, we conveyed these messages to senior government officials and non-government leaders. In addition to the Department of State and USAID, the Department of Justice also participated in our inter-agency delegation to convey our strong support for strengthening the rule of law.

In April, I urged Azerbaijani authorities to take four concrete steps to enhance political stability during this important election year.

First, to investigate what appeared to be credible reports of harassment of lawyers defending journalists and activists, with an eye towards ending interference in the work of lawyers who play a pivotal role in establishing the rule of law in modern societies.

Second, to immediately release arrested democracy activists, such as Ilgar Mammadov - the European Parliament called in a resolution adopted on June 13th for his immediate and unconditional release, and we echo that, as well as others who have been incarcerated for having exercised their fundamental freedoms.

Third, to engage in a real dialogue with Azerbaijani civil society, including those such as Free Thought University and other nongovernmental, nonprofit organizations that are trying to advance civic culture and democratic principles, as well with international organizations that are present in Azerbaijan to support the country's democratic development. An important part of this broader dialogue would be to facilitate the timely registration of those NGOs that have sought to register with the appropriate authorities.

Fourth, to create conditions that would be conducive to open public debate and the unhindered functioning of political parties during this election year. As I said in public and in private in April, in Baku, is it up to Azerbaijanis to decide on the future of political developments in their country. The interest of the United States is solely in assuring that these decisions are reached through democratic, transparent processes and institutions.

The Azerbaijani people will have a choice of leadership in the presidential election this coming October. The government of Azerbaijan has an opportunity now to take bold steps to improve the political environment and to begin establishing the conditions that are necessary for a more open, competitive, fair and democratic electoral process, a process that doesn't take place just on election day but throughout these next several months.

Let me emphasize here the importance of three freedoms that are fundamental to democratic electoral processes and that are also discussed in the OSCE ODIHR's July 12th needs assessment mission report.

First is freedom of association. We will look for unhindered candidate registration, election campaigns and access to the media. Azerbaijanis should be able to join the non-governmental organization, political party or political movement of their choice without fear of detention or other punitive measures.

Second, freedom of expression - we will look for an environment conducive to an open public dialogue and freedom of the media. Azerbaijanis should be able to peacefully express their views, and receive and impart information and ideas without fear of detention or other obstacles. Similarly, journalists and media outlets should be able to do their work without fear of beatings, imprisonment, threats, loss of employment or other interference in the dissemination of their work.

And third, and finally, freedom of assembly - we will look for respect for freedom of peaceful assembly, including unhindered meetings between candidates and voters, and rallies that are accessible by public transportation without the risk of detention.

We urge the government of Azerbaijan to conduct a free and fair electoral process as observed by both domestic and international monitors. We will look for the ability of domestic monitors to organize, gain access to the electoral process and to report their observations.

Timely registration of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Study center, EMDS, one of the country's leading independent election monitoring organizations would be another positive step. And we welcome Foreign Minister Mammadyarov's statement that Azerbaijan intends to invite ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to monitor the October election. We're pleased that ODIHR conducted a needs assessment mission in June. And we urge the government to issue the requisite formal invitations soon.

Finally, I want to highlight a statement made yesterday by Ambassador Morningstar, who said that, quote now, "During this election year, it is particularly important for the Azerbaijani government to help guarantee the free flow of information to its people." In this connection, I urge the government to expeditiously investigate the problems recently encountered by RFERL and other Azerbaijani language media outlets in broadcasting some of their satellite programming to Azerbaijanis.

In closing, I would like to stress that the United States engages in human rights and democracy promotion with Azerbaijan as a friend and partner. Here, I would like to cite an Azerbaijani saying, which I'm doing with some trepidation: (In Azerbaijani) - which I'm told by my experts means a friend will speak with no curtain or veil. Is that a reasonable translation? It's just not a reasonable pronunciation probably. I should learn some more? All right. I'll learn more by the next hearing.

In my numerous meetings with Azerbaijanis, I've heard directly that enhanced respect for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law and clear steps toward liberalization and democracy, including a democratic electoral process are reforms that Azerbaijanis widely seek. Such reforms would also strengthen our bilateral relationship. Our strongest and most durable relationships around the world are with democracies that respect human rights in addition to sharing other interests with us.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to the remainder of the discussion.

HAN: Thank you, Mr. Melia. I appreciate that.

Now we're going to switch seats and we'll invite Ambassador Suleymanov to join us and to give his statement. We really appreciate that the ambassador is participating today. I think it's important to have a full range of voices on this issue and we appreciate his participation.

SULEYMANOV: Thank you.

HAN: Mr. Ambassador, you have the floor.

SULEYMANOV: Thank you very much. Mr. Carter, Ms. Han, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak before the U.S. commission, Helsinki Commission, and by monitoring the human rights and comprehensive security, you have done a great job. We appreciate your commitment. Thank you very much. I have submitted a comprehensive version of my remarks and I will make just major points.

The partnership between the United States and Azerbaijan is important to each of our countries. It's based on common values and common interests, in energy, regional security, and a variety of issues. I understand, as Mr. Carter pointed out, shoulder to shoulder in Iraq - and we were in Iraq and Kosovo, now we stand in the Balkans.

But modern reforms have always been an important part of our dialogue. In fact, Azerbaijan today is the only country in the South Caucasus which co-finances the civil society promotion projects, 50 percent co-financed with USAID jointly. And we always appreciate friendly and helpful advice from our friends.

I take Mr. Carter's statement that today's briefing is a reflection of our friendly and strategic partnership and that's why you have a briefing on Azerbaijan, not on other countries which had elections recently. And that's why I'm here representing my government, as a reflection of our partnership with you as well.

I also take at face value your statement that you do not take sides in Azerbaijani political system and debate. And I look forward to maintaining an objective view, which we hope will be maintained throughout this discussion. And I'm yet to see the full confirmation of that.

I also am talking among friends, as our good friend, Mr. Melia has said, (in Azerbaijani). You don't want me to speak without any veil with my American friends. I could go a little bit too critical, you know that. So I will not do that. However, I will also speak as among friends.

I respectfully reject the wrongful claim about going to authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. We do not accept that. In fact, make no mistake. What is going on in Azerbaijan is a truly independent nation with a vibrant political system and a free market economy. What is going on is a secular government with a diverse and inclusive society, where members of every faith can live together with dignity and mutual respect. What is going on is prosperity and economic opportunities for all our citizens, and I think that should be recognized here today.

Azerbaijan is an ancient civilization but a young democracy in a tough neighborhood. That was mentioned here as well. Just like every nation on earth, we are not perfect.

Consider the obstacles we must overcome. Our country has been independent for 22 years since ending of the communist rule for seven decades. Now, we suffer from the Armenian occupation of almost 1 percent - one-fifth of our international recognized territory and displacement of about one million people from their homes.

Since restoring independence, Azerbaijan has been building a free, democratic society, where everyone living on our soil can equally and fully enjoy human



rights and fundamental freedoms regardless of their racial, religious and ethnic background.

Now, I want to make this point very importantly. We believe that tolerance, inclusiveness and diversity are fundamental pillars – and gender rights – fundamental pillars of a democratic system. They're often overlooked, easily dismissed. We often go to the procedural issues, and say, OK. This, Azeris got that, that's OK. We don't need to talk about it. But that is what forms democracy and that's where democracy fails is exactly because we don't have sufficient respect for tolerance, inclusiveness (and diversity ?) and I think that's a fundamental point I want to make. Azerbaijan is very proud of its – (inaudible). In that, I think Azerbaijan can actually be an example for many on how to be an inclusive society, tolerant and respectful of all its citizens, regardless of their background and ethnicity.

We still have to do a lot of work to eliminate the vestiges of the Soviet mentality, to address our challenges, among them fighting corruption and building democratic institutions. That's obvious. But our progress is remarkable. It is especially remarkable if you look at the neighborhood we live. I mean, that's an important factor.

Now, before I go any further, I want to talk about the elephant in the room. We could try to dismiss it. We could not mention it. But the major and the greatest and the gravest challenge facing the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan is the ongoing occupation, forceful displacement of one million of my people. We could talk about all the rights of our people. We could talk about all we want, but we cannot ignore the fact that one million of Azerbaijanis – children, women and men – have been living outside their homes, forcefully displaced, having no rights for reproductive health, gender, voting, health care, and education. I think that's very important.

Now, in that spirit, I am actually somewhat surprised by the bizarre move by our colleagues from the Armenian Assembly of America who decided to submit their testimony here.

First of all, I thought it was a discussion on Azerbaijan. Second, I hope – I haven't seen that testimony, but I believe that it addresses three very important issues. I think it does – I hope it addresses the fact that the Armenian government today grossly violates the rights of Azerbaijani displaced people. I hope they submitted it because there was no event on Armenian elections, which are very problematic, and it addresses the fact that presidential candidates get shot in Armenia before the elections. And since you didn't have the event on that, I hope our Armenian friends actually mentioned that in their own submission.

And I do hope that they express concern with their government's treatment of Moldovan human rights commissioner Mrs. Aurelia Grigoriu, who was kidnapped and held hostage in the Republic of Armenia by the government of Armenia. So I hope those things are outlined in that particular statement. I think that's a welcome one. If it is aimed at bashing Azerbaijan, then I would take an issue with Mr. Carter's statement about objectivity of this event today.

In three months, the citizens of Azerbaijan will exercise their constitutional and civic right to elect the president of the republic to lead the nation over the next five years. We will everything possible to hold democratic elections that the Azerbaijani people deserve and expect because the future of independent Azerbaijan is and should be decided and determined only by our citizens living in Azerbaijan, not in foreign capitals, not in neighboring capitals. And I think that's a very important point.

For those Azerbaijani citizens who are living abroad, our diplomatic missions, including one which I lead, will be open and providing an opportunity to vote. And I encourage everybody to register with our consulate and exercise their right and civic duty to vote for the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan once the election campaign begins.

Since adopting our constitution in 1995, Azerbaijan has been creating the mechanism to protect human rights, (extensive ?) democracy and ensure rule of law. We benefit from our ever expanding participation in the European community and strong support from the United States and other members of the worldwide community of democratic societies.

We joined the Council of Europe in 2001. It's an important step. By 2014, Azerbaijan will assume for the first time the chairmanship of the Committee of the (Ministers ?) Council of Europe.

To our national program to raise awareness of the protection of human rights, we're building institutions that gives life to a free society. There are five issues on that, five building blocks for democracy.

For our democracy, first, a fully functioning, independent judiciary is not a choice but a prerogative. It's an imperative. In the very short term of time, the national judiciary and legal system has been organized subject to democratic principles. We are working very hard and include the World Bank and other international institutions to build a depoliticized judicial system which is independent of any interference.

Second, freedom of expression, of course, is (the lifeblood ?) of democracy. In Azerbaijan today, there are about 5,000 media outlets affiliated to a wide range of private organizations and individuals. Some of them are here. There are about 40 daily and 200 weekly and monthly newspapers. There are 50 information agencies.

Our state fund for support of mass media supports newspapers and other outlets, including opposition papers without interfering with their content. In 2010, under the program initiated by President Muhavaliv, around \$6.4 million have been allocated to strengthening the social protection for journalists, including housing assistance.

President's fund for support of media actually allocates money to the very media which spends most of the time criticizing the government. Actually, those - we have a fund which does not interfere with the work of journalists.

Freedom of expression includes freedom of Internet. In Azerbaijan, there's unrestricted - absolutely unrestricted Internet access. About 65 percent of the Azerbaijani population have access to Internet. We will increase that number. We're working very hard and we appreciate the help from our American friends on working with us to make it about 100 percent connectivity. Of course, that is an ambitious goal and we'll try to as much.

Still, democracy requests a vibrant civil society. Within the last five years, the council of state support to NGOs has allocated more than \$14 million to 1,800 projects. Azerbaijan is a lively - and the political discourse is very diverse with many voices, including the opposition, and much of that support also goes to the opposition groups.

Fourth, a strong democracy required educated citizens. Our top priority is developing our human capital. What happens in Azerbaijan is launching additional reforms in education. I think everybody who watches Azerbaijan closely knows that. And we will also provide full government support for our students studying abroad, about 5,000 Azerbaijani students studying abroad in leading institutions internationally.

Fifth, and I think this is the most visible and the most - not a civil progress been in combating corruption. I think - I appreciate Mr. Melia mentioning the ASAN service, which has basically revolutionized and opened access of Azerbaijani citizens to their government services.

We're fighting corruption. In fact, one of the interesting things you would look at is that Transparency International, with which we often disagree and



which is mostly very critical of many governments around the world, has noticed an increase of corruption instances throughout the world and decrease of such in Azerbaijan. I think that recognition should be mentioned here as well.

Azerbaijani - prosperity of the Azerbaijani people is increasing. Azerbaijan today accounts for 80 percent, 80 percent of South Caucasus economy. And, you know, the poverty level has come down from 49 percent to 6 percent. So we are facing a very prosperous, increasingly - a population which is increasingly - whose welfare is increasing on a regular basis.

Now, once again, before I complete my words, I would like to point out that the greatest support the United States government can do to for our people is to help us, us and Armenians to come at the end of the day to a solution and a fair settlement of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict so finally our people have the ability to fully enjoy the rights, which are very basic rights. We're not talking about freedom of assembly even. We're talking rights to live and rights to basically enjoy their lives as human beings in dignity.

With that, I think the one very important step would be, very obviously, to encourage the United States to appoint a full-time negotiator, which the United States is lacking. And while I appreciate the statements made by the U.S. government at the OSCE permanent council in Vienna, I would be also very appreciative if equal attention would be paid to the mistreatment of Azerbaijani citizens and made an effort to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

And, in closing, let me welcome all the representatives of Azerbaijan who are here, both from the government and from the opposition. You could see that we have a vibrant society. You read about the activities of our different political groups from the media, which is actually freely accessible to you. Our people have events, which are held without much interference. And we appreciate American support to Azerbaijan in general and our working together with Americans on promoting democracy and reforms in our part of the world.

We appreciate your support and thank you for your attention. And I will be remaining here for the remainder of the discussion. Thank you very much.

HAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador. I appreciate your remarks. And we do look forward to having you back up on the panel after this next panel.

If I could invite Mr. Namazov, Mr. Gadirli, Dr. Lansky, and Mr. Seyidov. Thank you.

OK. We'd like to start with Mr. Namazov, if you could start off the panel. And he'll be using our interpreter to make his statement. Thank you.

(Mr. Namazov's remarks are delivered via interpreter.)

NAMAZOV: Thank you for inviting me to this event. I represent here the National Council of Democratic Forces in Azerbaijan and I speak on their behalf. I have travelled 6,000 miles here to speak about the realities of Azerbaijan, which makes less than one minute for a mile. Less than one minute for a mile.

I encourage you to look into the documents that I'm going to distribute. These are the statements from our council and information we'd like to disperse. For the first time since Azerbaijan regained its independence, leading Azerbaijani political party leaders and delegates here, representatives of civil society, media captains, youth have united together in the eve of presidential elections creating the national council and they have agreed to go to this election with a single candidate.

Our council has prepared a special declaration, a paper discussing the next two years that will happen if we win the elections, that discusses the major reforms, legal and democratic reforms that will take during the two years.

And another document that we have adopted and it will also be distributed to you is our petition to law enforcement agencies in Azerbaijan that discusses the situation of the president that foreign media has written about, about allegations about various properties around the world that are significant corruption cases that we want to be investigated. These are serious facts that we have asked the central election commission, public prosecutor's office, Supreme Court to investigate because these are important allegations that need to be investigated, which are about the president. And we will try to get concrete responses from these institutions why they have not done anything so far to start those investigations

Another important document that I will distribute today is a letter written from jail. This is a letter written by arrested members of NIDA youth movement who are in jail now. And just yesterday, two more members of the youth groups, Ulvi Hasanli and Megeyli (ph) have been arrested while they were helping us to prepare documents for here.

Out of 129 members of the national council, 12 are in jail now. And, of course, we demand the release of all political prisoners. The names were mentioned today, Ilgar Mammadov, Yadigar Sadiqov, and others who are in jail now should all be released.

The spread of corruption and lack of social justice leads to the situation when without intervention of political parties in Azerbaijan, people in rural areas, in districts rise against the corrupt officials.

All this social crisis in Azerbaijan and political-social crisis shows that Azerbaijan needs to have reforms, needs to have significant changes. If there are not democratic - if democratic elections are not held in Azerbaijan, chaos and confrontations wait Azerbaijan, which will in turn - which will significantly damage its relationship with partners and with its neighbors.

At the end of my presentation, I would like to pass to you three important messages of our national council to you.

First is to exert appropriate pressure on Azerbaijani government officials who have violated freedom of rights similar to that of the Magnitsky Act. To liberalize pre-election situation, all political prisoners should be released, the right of freedom, right of assembly, freedom of expression have to be restored. And there should be no pressure on independent media and their outlets. And the legislative - the electoral legislation has to be reformed based on recommendations from ODIHR and OSCE and Venice Commission, Council of Europe.

And we want the provision of maybe - by independent institute, provision of exit polls in Azerbaijan from independent institutions because all previous elections in Azerbaijan have been falsified and they did not meet international standards. The democratic elections need to be born in Azerbaijan. They're not only an issue related to the people of Azerbaijan but also to the security and stability of Azerbaijan.

I hope our American partners understand the same way as we do that to transition to a democratic government is necessary. Thank you so much.

HAN: Thank very much, Mr. Namazov. I appreciate that. I think you got more miles out of that statement than you originally planned.

Dr. Seyidov, we welcome your participation.

SEYIDOV: Thank you very much for having me today. And I think that this is really very important to take part in this briefing and to discuss issues which are related to my country.

Of course, my ambassador made my life so easy. He actually presented facts

which I thought to present. And that's why I will try to cover much more with the situation with human rights, with the geopolitical situation in Azerbaijan.

And let me start with my disagreement with Mr. Carter's statement that today we are here and today we are not going to discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and we are thinking only about human rights and we should think about human rights.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a problem of human rights. That's a great violation of the human rights of Azerbaijanis. One million approximately Azerbaijanis have been violated and ethnically cleansed from Azerbaijan. And to think and discuss a human rights issue in the Azerbaijani region without the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, that's impossible. We should take into account this reality.

The second remark, my disagreement with the title of today's briefing, troubled partner - "Troubled partners and growing authoritarianism in Azerbaijan." Troubled partner, how can it be possible? We as a state, as Azerbaijan, opened all our facilities for America exactly after 9/11. We're today doing our best for the coalition and our soldiers shoulder to shoulder fighting in Afghanistan, in Iraq and Kosovo, as you said. We are doing our best not only for our country, for the region, but for Europe and the United States of America.

And that's why I think that you lost the focus. The real troubled partner is not far from us, the country which created the occupation of my land, the country which ethnically cleansed 20 percent of my territory, a country where the real human rights is really dangerous.

My second remark is about growing authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. You know, Mr. Namazov just said that today we can see in Azerbaijan that democratic forces try to unite and this is very good and unique opportunity to see in Azerbaijan, but who created this environment. When our foreign visitors, guests came to Azerbaijan, already you have mentioned that your opposition is very fragile. Your opposition is really very weak. Today, opposition is sitting together with us and talking about the future of Azerbaijan. Is it authoritarian regime? Or maybe we can say that just a few days ago the leading chief of the very, very radical oppositional newspaper became a member of the board which has been created after the congress, journalist congress in Azerbaijan. And this is the real sign of democratization, not the sign of authoritarianism.

Or maybe we are talking about - we should talk about the role of women in Azerbaijan. I can speak about other things and today, I think, my ambassador is absolutely right. What we can see in Azerbaijan, that's a growing economy, growing our relationships with neighboring countries, and growing the role of Azerbaijan in our region. And maybe because of that and exactly because of that today we can see that pressure from different regions, from different countries are growing. Not authoritarianism is growing in Azerbaijan. I'm from parliament, I can't say, but attempts to destabilize situation in Azerbaijan is growing.

Today, Azerbaijan maybe is the last state in our region which is defending Western values and cooperation with Europe and United States of America. We have seen what happened to Georgia, to Ukraine, what kind of process is going on in the Russian Federation. And I think today there is such strong pressure on Azerbaijan exactly because of our desire to be together with the rest of the democratic and civilized world.

The president of Azerbaijan is a leader who is doing his best to integrate with Europe and with the United States of America. And that's why I'm so proud that today my government said yes to the Trans-Anatolian pipeline, which brings closer Italy, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Georgia to Europe and to the United States of America.

Of course, we are not so perfect, but we are doing our best. We became a member of the Council of Europe, where 47 countries are existing. And next year, we will chair the Council of Europe. At the same time, we are very active in the Islamic Conference. And we have a special attitude concerning cooperation between East and West. From this point of view, I think it is very, very important to take this into account in this kind of discussion, when opposition and people who are not agree with you can see - can express their views much more important than use Molotov cocktail against the government, against the forces in Azerbaijan. And I ask my colleagues and friends to understand that democracy is rule of law and human rights, it's discussions, exchange of views, not use of force.

Today, human rights is a very, very special issue for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has joined the European Charter of the Human Rights. And we're under jurisdiction of the European Court for Human Rights. You can compare the number of appeals from Azerbaijan and from countries who are member of the European Union: United Kingdom, Romania, Bulgaria, France, and other countries. And you can see that the number of appeals from Azerbaijan is much less than from these countries.

You can compare the number of prisoners within the prisons in Azerbaijan, in Georgia, in France, in United Kingdom, and you will see that the number of prisoners within the prison in Azerbaijan, according the European standards, and especially taking into account the last pardoning decrees and amnesties which were adopted by the parliament.

You can see that day by day the number of women within the parliament and within the municipalities is growing. And from this point of view, the last municipality elections and parliamentary elections gave us possibility to have approximately 20 percent women members in the parliament and more than 30 percent women at the municipalities.

Today, Azerbaijan is doing its best for human rights and for democracy, rule of law not only within the country, but taking in all programs, in all initiatives. My president just recently has signed the special action plan to improve human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

As you know, we are coming to the chair position at the Council of Europe at the beginning - at the middle of the 2014. An action plan on the discussion together with Council of Europe concerning human rights development in Azerbaijan. That's impossible to change everything overnight. Only 20 years, we are an independent country.

United States of America 237 years is independent, but even in United States of America we can see some problematic issues. The main - the most important thing, the political will of the country to change, to see, new developments, new reforms, and government of Azerbaijan is keen to provide these reforms.

We have sent an invitation to the Council of Europe to see observation mission for presidential elections here, this year, in October. And 32 members from the Council of Europe will be in Azerbaijan for pre-election mission and for election mission.

The same invitation will be sent from Azerbaijan to other international organizations. But what we don't want to see and what we have seen during the last elections - parliamentary elections and presidential elections in Azerbaijan, previously prepared opinion, previously prepared papers about the results of the elections in Azerbaijan, about the situation in Azerbaijan.

Today, my country is struggle for democratization, human rights, and rule of law. The war, the struggle is going on. We, as Azerbaijani representatives, we are doing all our best being surrounding with very difficult neighbors. Could you imagine from one side so great, so big, so influential Russian Federation? From another side, fundamentalistic and fundamental - fundamentalistic tensions and Iran. Twenty percent of territories under

occupation. Situation in Georgia, which is not so understandable. And taking into account all these difficulties, Azerbaijani leadership is insisting to be together with the rest of the civilized world and to do its best.

Thank you very much.

HAN: Thank you very much for that.

Next, I'd like to call on Mr. Gadirli, if you can please - I'm sorry I'm not saying anybody's title, so I apologize for that. You are the representative of the ReAl network. And I'll rely on you to explain your affiliation. Thanks.

GADIRLI: Thank you very much. I also would like to express my personal gratitude for having been invited for such an event.

I sincerely welcome our Azerbaijani friends, Mr. Ambassador - (inaudible). It's very rare opportunity for us to sit together in our own country. I'm bit confused because I had another idea of what I'm going to say before coming here. Now, listening to the previous presentation, I've changed my mind.

I would like to start with a quote. The quote goes like this. "Do you know where Azerbaijan is? Well, today, they came in a group of very interesting and intelligent gentlemen who are coming from Azerbaijan. I couldn't have time to find until they begun where they came from, but I find this out immediately, that I was talking to men who talk exactly the same language that I did in respect of ideas, in respect of conceptions of liberty, in respect of conceptions of justice and rights." End of quote.

These words belong to the president of the United States Woodrow Wilson. He said this - actually wrote these words after meeting with Azerbaijani delegation to Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

That was a time when Azerbaijan established its first republic. (Inaudible) - was not only the first in Azerbaijani history, but in the history of entire Muslim world and the Turk people, in fact, the first republic in that geography.

At that time, the population was very poor, illiterate, only 64 people held university degrees. The country - the war with Armenia over Karabakh was still ongoing. Azerbaijan was threatened by its neighbors, yet the people was capable of effectively establishing a republic without any foreign aid.

The strategies then was to seek an international recognition of that republic. Now, today, we are independent and proudly so. We're rich - never in our history our society was as rich as it is today. Our population is literate. The level of literacy is well above 90 percent. But there're certain differences that I would like to talk about.

When we had the republic - I mean, the first republic - Azerbaijan was exporting ideas to some of its neighbors such as Persia, as it was then called, and Ottoman Empire, ideas out of which, among many other things, a Turkish Republic evolved. It was Azerbaijan from where ideas of Turkishness, (inaudible?), and republicanism went to Turkey, not the other way around.

Now, today, we're a country which jams radios, which bans opposition to appear on the television, which effectively shuts down other sorts of media who have nationwide broadcast. Not only opposition, but different thinking intellectuals are not allowed to appear on television.

When we had the republic, in the second decade of the 20th century, within two years that the republic was alive, the government changed four times. We have five governmental coalition. Well, to some this is a sign of political instability. Yes, there is some portion of truth in that. But it also signifies the culture of negotiation, coordination, and cooperation that Azerbaijan had at that time.

Today, that is exactly what our society is like. And today, we have a society ruled by one family, effectively, since 1969, with a short break in the '80s. When we had the first republic, we had a prime minister, who after his resignation wrote a letter to his father asking for a financial help because he was short of money after resignation. Today, we read from various sources reports about billions of wealth owned by ruling elite.

Now, all that is possible today because we don't have a republic. And this is the strategy that - and the challenge that our nation is facing. I join and I don't want just to reiterate, but I want to undersign what Mr. Ambassador and other - Samad Seyidov that said about the Karabakh issue. Our nation stands united, so there is no fundamental disagreement on that.

There're few disagreements about details, but in general - so that has nothing to do with being in opposition in Azerbaijan, even though we sometimes see it from the government side that opposition is either trying to destabilize the situation or sell out the country order.

I represent here Republican Alternative. That is an opposition movement. We are on the way to transforming our movement into a political party. The chairman of our board is in jail now. He was arrested on February 4, still kept in custody. The charges he's faced with are quite serious. He may end up in jail for another 12 years. But in fact, what he was arrested for? Exactly because he was advocating for republican ideals, because he was advocating for Euro-Atlantic integration, the deep integration, the true integration.

The republicanism - I know that this word can confuse American audiences, but I'm speaking not in terms of political parties, but in terms of the trend, the form of the government - can be organized in various forms. When we had the first republic, the people then had a vision and knowledge and the courage and very difficult environment compared to which we have today, but even in a harder situation, to create a parliamentary form of government. They were aware of a presidential form. They knew that - the system in America, how it was organized. But they had a deeper vision about the future of the country. They somehow intuitively knew that presidential system wouldn't fit our country.

And in fact, if you study, whoever tried to copy the American system of the government - take Latin America, post-Soviet countries, African countries, whoever tried to have a strong president as a head of executive failed in democracy building.

That fact is quite telling. So another challenge in front of us is to transform our country into a proper parliamentary republic which will reflect the diversity of the country, where political parties can cooperate, negotiate, establish coalitions. What we don't have is a republic. And we will pursue this goal. We will continue to follow our strategy because it is much more than simply changing the government.

If you simply change the people, I mean the officials, that wouldn't work. The deeper understanding is required. A country must be radically reformed and transformed.

And - am I running out of time?

HAN: Close.

GADIRLI: OK, thank you. But anyway, I better stop here because I assume there will be questions and I will have more time on - (inaudible) - detail. Thank you.

HAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Gadirli.

Now, I'd like to turn to our final witness, Dr. Miriam Lansky. She's the



director for Russia and Eurasia at the National Endowment for Democracy.

LANSKOY: I'm very grateful to the Helsinki Commission for holding this briefing and for giving me the opportunity to speak about democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan.

The National Endowment for Democracy is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. The NED has been working in Azerbaijan since the mid 1990s and has supported various projects there.

Over the last decade, freedom in Azerbaijan has declined substantially. The Nations in Transit Index shows a deep decline in every category of governance and the combined score going from 5.6 to 6.6. President Ilham Aliyev, who came to power in 2003, is now seeking a third term as president. This was forbidden by the constitution until 2009, when term limits were removed, opening the way to any number of future terms as president.

The early months of 2013 saw an unexpected increase in social unrest. And this was followed by a harsh government crackdown. There were various protests, some in Baku and some in the regions, some of which became violent. There were peaceful rallies in Baku that were violently dispersed by the police, who used water cannons and rubber bullets. Dozens of peaceful protesters were fined and sentenced to short periods of administrative detention. I provide a lot more detail in my written comments, but here, in the interest of time, I'm going to focus on a few things that I consider to be the most pressing issues.

Human Rights Watch reports 16 critics of the government who have been arrested in the first six months of 2013. Two prominent opposition figures, Tofiq Yaqublu of Musavat and Ilgar Mammadov of ReAl have already - already been mentioned here and they have already been in jail for six months waiting trial on false charges of having instigated civil unrest in Ismayilli. Seven members of the youth movement NIDA have been in jail since March. And four of them are considered Amnesty International prisoners of conscience.

Human Rights Watch has profiled other cases of opposition youth activists who apparently had drugs planted on them by police. Some of them are religious activists as well.

In the realm of media, freedom of information has also declined in the first half of 2013. The government has, for a long time, controlled broadcast media and most newspapers, but now it is trying to establish greater control on the Internet and in satellite broadcasts.

June 2013 amendments to the criminal code made defamation on the Internet a criminal offense, making it possible to make criminal cases against online activists. Since April 2013, signals carrying Azeri language news produced by Radio Free Europe have been jammed.

There's also been problems with respect to NGOs. A new amendment in the NGO law increases existing sanctions against unregistered NGO activity in conjunction with arbitrary denial of registration, which places activists in an impossible position. They cannot work without registration, but they're arbitrarily denied registration. The case of EMDS has already been mentioned.

The youth organization OL!, which ran a highly successful free thought university, was shut down suddenly this spring. Several articles and statements smearing the work of NDI and NED appeared in March.

Freedom of religion is another area of steep decline this year. The U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom has downgraded Azerbaijan to a tier two country. The commission focused its criticism on a 2009 law on religion, which led to numerous raids, detentions, and arrests.

I'd like to turn now to the pre-election environment which is probably of

greatest interest to the Commission. In July – in a July 2nd speech, President Aliyev seemed to encourage the police to abuse the opposition. He recalled that during past elections, international organization sought investigations into the conduct of police, to which he said, “I said back then and I want to say again now that not a single policemen will be punished.” President Aliyev went on to characterize his political opponents as traitors, betrayers, slave-minded people.

Opposition activists are harassed, detained, barred from travel. There’s been no sanctioned rally in the center of Baku since 2006. And unsanctioned rallies are broken up violently.

Despite this deepening authoritarianism, there has been a very significant development. In May, the National Council was formed. It is an umbrella organization that brings together opposition, politicians, NGOs, scholars, youth, bloggers, and even former government officials. In June, the National Council resolved to support a single presidential candidate from all the opposition forces. They chose Rustam Ibragimbekov, an Oscar-winning director and screenwriter who is revered in Azerbaijan.

The National Council has outlined an ambitious program for constitutional reform that would reduce the powers of the president, institute checks and balances, and restore basic freedoms.

Going into this election period, which is likely to be more competitive and more volatile than recent elections, ensuring independent and credible vote monitoring is of the utmost importance. Many contentious issues, including the registration of Mr. Ibragimbekov or other opposition candidates as they come forth and their ability to campaign are likely to require international attention.

Domestic election monitoring organization EMDS remains unregistered. And domestic monitors are very vulnerable in the absence of a large and comprehensive OSCE mission. As has already been observed here, there still has not been an official invitation for OSCE monitoring.

A preliminary ODIHR report indicates a request for 30 long-term and 280 short-term observers. It would be better if this mission could be larger. By comparison, there were 600 observers in Azerbaijan in 2003 in the presidential elections and there were 400 in Georgia last year. And Georgia has, by far, fewer polling stations.

In closing, I’m very grateful to the Helsinki Commission for convening this briefing. It comes at a very important time. And I hope that you will remain equally engaged in the coming months and will continue to call attention to the cases of political prisoners and the ability of civil society to do their work without harassment and intimidation. Thank you.

HAN: Thank you, Dr. Lanskoj.

Now, I’d like to bring all of our panelists back up, if you don’t mind. Mr. Melia, you’ll be joining us over here.

HAN: OK. I think we’re all set and I’m going to turn to Paul to start us off, ask a couple of questions, and then we’ll turn to the audience.

CARTER: OK. I want to give the audience time here to ask questions, so I won’t take much. I did want to – Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much for your remarks. And I noted when you said that the government of Azerbaijan would do all that it could to ensure a democratic election, I thought that was a very good point. Can you assure the Helsinki Commission that Mr. Rustam Ibragimbekov will be allowed to return to Azerbaijan without the threat of arrest and to conduct a campaign for the presidency free of harassment by the government?

SULEYMANOV: Mr. Carter, thank you very much for your question. Well, I don't know of any obstacles for Mr. Ibragimbekov to come back to Azerbaijan when he wishes. I genuinely believe that a person who wants to run for a leadership position in Azerbaijan needs, first of all, to be in Azerbaijan and perhaps to be citizen of Azerbaijan. That would be helpful.

Azerbaijan has laws which have been in place for a long time. It's not a new procedure. If Mr. Ibragimbekov actually - his candidacy and nomination complies - first of all, he has to be nominated by a number - there're special rules, you know. There has to be 40,000 people registered voters submitting the request. There has to be - they have to come for at least from 60 precincts and he has to basically be registered by the Central Electoral Commission in compliance with Azerbaijani laws.

Those laws, as a matter of fact, require no commitment to any other foreign nation. As it stands now, it is my understanding that Mr. Ibragimbekov is a citizen of the Russian Federation. While we do enjoy our friendly relationships with the citizens of Russian Federation, we do try to elect people in our country who are citizens of Azerbaijan only. So should his procedures be done, that's up to him. We don't interfere with his decision-making. And should he comply with all the requirements for a presidential candidate, I don't know of any reason not to do that.

But now, let me tell you something. I, as a representative of Azerbaijani - of Azerbaijan Republic and as a diplomat here, I have no power and no direct influence over the Central Electoral Commission. So to make a commitment on behalf of a body I do not control, I cannot. I can ask you, for instance, can you assure that Section 907, which is obviously a counterproductive part of the legislation, needs to be - will be repealed? You agree with me that that's wrong, but you do not have power over parliament to commit to that.

So I think we're in equal situation. We'll do what we can, but he has to comply with the Central Election Committee requirements.

HAN: Mr. Melia, I wondered if I could ask you to just give us some comments on this pre-election period is really often the most important part of an election because on polling day, we've seen in many places, the outcome is pretty much already predetermined because of who's on the ballot and who gets registered and who's - so if you can talk about what you would like to see happen in Azerbaijan and maybe how the U.S. is engaging with Azerbaijan on this issue in this important period.

MELIA: Sure. Well, we're not treating Azerbaijan differently than we would treat any other country. The kinds of assessment that we do, the reports that we write, such in the Annual Human Rights report, we apply the same standards globally and conducting consistent assessment, as do, I think, many of the NGOs and think tanks that describe political processes and so on.

So the - you very correctly say - and I think I touched on this in my initial statement, that an election doesn't just happen on voting day or vote counting day. So an overall assessment of the electoral process naturally includes what happens in the 90 days preceding an election. And we're about at - all of the precise data hasn't been announced yet - we're probably about 90 days out from the election right now.

So you know, the opportunity for candidates and voters to meet and assemble and talk about ideas and to have some access to the broadcast media and other opportunities to make their case to the voters, all of that will be part of what we and international monitors from other countries will be looking at.

As I said, release of Mr. Mammadov from prison - he's been in pretrial detention for more than five months now - would be an important step forward. He's an announced presidential candidate. He should have a chance to talk to voters. So there's a number of things - I laid them out in my testimony - that I think would be good steps in the right direction to live up to the

aspirations and commitments that I think the ambassador conveyed and I think Azerbaijan is quite capable of.

HAN: Thank you very much. I just wanted to have a follow up – two follow up quick questions before we move on from – if Mr. Namazov would like to talk about the status of Mr. Ibragimbekov and how – perhaps what the plans are from your party's standpoint.

And also, Mr. Gadirli, given that Mr. Mammadov is in prison, what options do you have for his candidacy? Thanks.

NAMAZOV: Thank you. I want to refer to previous question about Mr. Ibragimbekov ability to travel to Azerbaijan and be registered as a candidate. With this question, I want to mention that Mr. Ibragimbekov has, in recent times, twice had problems in both entering and exiting Azerbaijan at the border. State officials created troubles for him, including border control and other agencies. And each time, I had to go to the airport personally to help him out. And during this time, he was held at the airport for several hours. And each time the border officials that were mentioning to him personally that because he's speaking against president, he's criticizing president, they're giving him this trouble.

At that time Mr. Ibragimbekov was not our single candidate. He was just an intellectual or a filmmaker.

Regarding the registration of him as a candidate, I want to emphasize that our experts are working on – our lawyers are working on his registration. And according to them, there's no – according to them, there're no legal obstacles that can prevent him to be registered as a candidate. And they will be working definitely on collecting those signatures from the regions and et cetera, but even prior to that, already, there're statements made from the government, members of the ruling party, who openly say that he cannot be registered as a candidate. And this is before the elections.

And if – we hope that our candidate will be registered, but if he's not going to be registered, then legitimacy of these elections will be questioned. And we as National Council will organize rallies to protect his rights. But we wish that the government will change its mind and register him as a candidate and not create extra problems for themselves.

HAN: OK. Mr. Gadirli, if you could answer, and then the ambassador wanted to say something.

GADIRLI: Thank you. Now, Ilgar Mammadov situation, as I said, he is in pretrial detention now, since February 4. No investigation goes on. Actually, he was not visited by investigators since then, so he's just kept there. That's quite indicative. That reveals the purpose of his arrest, to keep him out of this election for various reasons, because he is, as I said, stands for republicanism, stands for Euro-Atlantic integration. He was capable to raise the hope of the new generation of voters. And in fact, by the way, one of the few positive changes that goes on in Azerbaijan is a generational change, is an unstoppable and uncontrollable.

So Ilgar Mammadov is dedicated, is devoted to his ideals, and he's strong enough and he is – he has a will to stand in this election as a candidate. And we as a group of his supporters and members of the organization he's presiding over, will pursue with the nomination we have announced earlier, January, February this year.

What if he's not registered, as I assume, that was the second part of the question or – well, ideally, we have two options, either to have another candidate from our organization, or to support someone else from the opposition. Obviously, we're not going to support the incumbent party's candidate. But is far too early to elaborate on that.

We pursue - we continue with Ilgar Mammadov. He's our candidate. We will do our best to try to get registered. With the registration, the entire situation is rather confusing. It's not just about - (inaudible) - Ilham Aliyev himself is not eligible to stand in election this year because the constitution - you all know perhaps that the constitution was amended and that limitation about for one person to be two times - to be no more than two times president in a row is now lifted. But that amendment was made after Ilham Aliyev became president for the second time. Ilham Aliyev made a constitutional promise to the people, he swore on the constitution. He took an oath. And at that time, the constitution did contain that limitation. So now Aliyev made a constitutional promise to the people that he will not run - as a candidate - not become a president for more than two times in a row.

So that amendment, if we stay within the logic of the law, which forbids the retroactive application of amendments, is applicable. Something from 2013, we still in principle disagree with that amendment because we think that no more two times is the moral established practice. But if that amendment is going to be applied, it should not apply to Ilham Aliyev himself. And of course, given the brutal situation at hand, if Ilham Aliyev is registered, then, of course, it would be fair to register Rustam Ibragimbekov as well because, regardless of some other legal obstacles he may have.

HAN: OK. Thank you.

SEYIDOV: Thank you very much. Thank you very much for giving me the floor. That's, you know, a very familiar picture. When facts which, in front of us, try to present absolutely in different way, in not so understandable way. This is the constitution of Azerbaijan, my dear friends. Article 100 and I think you are familiar with the constitution of Azerbaijan. And I want to just to read the Article 100. Any citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan not younger than 35 years of age, who has resided permanently on the territory of Republic of Azerbaijan, no longer than 10 years - et cetera - previously committed a serious crime - has no obligation to other states, has higher education, who has no dual citizenship may be elected president of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

We all knows that for at present, Mr. Ibragimbekov has his Russian citizenship. He, today, is not able to be registered as a candidate for the presidency. This is the constitution of Azerbaijan.

That's a very strange situation when my oppositional friends talking about legal steps and democratic elections and they started from violation of the constitution, the fundamental law of my country.

The same situation with my friend Mr. Gadirli. Mr. Gadirli, this is your interpretation. I can bring a lot of lawyers who can bring you absolutely different interpretation of the constitution of Azerbaijan, but these amendments has been amended by the majority of Azerbaijani population. And my president has his right to be elected for the third term.

And that's why, please, my dear friends, the problem of Azerbaijani opposition is not speak about the concrete steps, the concrete items from the constitution and to think how can they avoid the law which already adopted by Azerbaijani nation. We, as a leading party, we will do our best to organize the election in a free and fair manner, according to the constitution of Azerbaijan. Thank you.

HAN: OK. I think that Mr. Namazov wants to address the - hopefully, you'll address the citizenship issue. And then I really do want to go to the audience.

NAMAZOV: Well, it's apparent that the passport Rustam Ibragimbekov had from Soviet times, that's a Soviet passport, which was transferred - became a Russian citizenship passport, he has - he didn't deny this fact, so he admits that he has a Russian passport. He's submitted his recusal or refusal of his

Russian citizenship to Russian authorities. And according to Russian procedures – procedures in Russia, within a matter of few weeks, maximum a month, the Russian government has to make a decision on that – a positive decision on that request.

And for me it's very strange that Mr. Samad Seyidov, the chairman of the governmental committee – International Relations Committee, does not want to see this. He has write about this in the media. There's just the discussion about this, and is presenting this situation in a different way. I try to find a soft way to say it, but I think basically it's a lie.

SEYIDOV: And I think this is a constitution. This is not my words.

HAN: OK. Yeah. Now, I'm going to go to the audience now, and – but first of all, I see there's a lot of interest and because of that interest, I'm going to set some ground rules for your participation. And the first ground rule is that there's no statements. It has to be a question, direct question – please, sit down, just one second please – OK, a direct question and I'm going to time you. You get one minute to ask your question. And then I'm going to ring this bell, OK? And then, that will be the end of your question and we'll move to answer it. And I think what we're going to do is we'll take two or three questions, and then we'll have the panelists respond.

First of all, I want to ask, are there any journalists that are in the room because I would like to call on a journalist first?

Q: I'm a journalist. I'm a political expert from Continet (sp) Media Group.

HAN: OK. But I actually saw this gentleman's hand first, so –

Q: But I'm former chief of staff of government. I'm former chief of staff of parliament. Please let me have an opportunity to ask our representative.

HAN: OK. I hope to give you a chance in just a minute. Thank you. And if you – I'm sorry, the third rule is that you need to identify yourself. And I'm starting my timer.

Q: My name is Ilhan – (inaudible) – I represent AZ, AZ news agency of Azerbaijan. My question would be to Eldar Namazov. Rustam Ibragimbekov is a great person, valuable, well-known in Azerbaijan as merely the person of art, scenarist, and so on. But it's a known fact that he has this dual citizenship and it's also known that he's been out of Azerbaijan for very long time. At the same time, the National Council is uniting force of opposition. What I'm wondering about is why not find a candidate which lives in Azerbaijan, which has single citizenship, and which can represent the whole country, and knows the issues of the country, has been living with the people? So why to set it up for failure basically?

HAN: I am going to take two or three questions, and then we'll – OK – no, please, if you'll wait for the microphone and identify yourself, thank you.

Q: Ramis Yunusov. I'm former chief of staff of government. I'm former chief of staff of parliament of Azerbaijan.

HAN: I'm sorry, you need to use the microphone for the record.

Q: My question is for Samad Seyidov. Mr. Seyidov, you're talking about the constitution. According to international human right organization such as Amnesty International, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and regarding political prisons in Azerbaijan, political prisons – situation in political prisons in Azerbaijan, can you tell us for everybody how many political prisoners are there today in Azerbaijan, number?

HAN: OK, I'm going to take one more from this gentleman in the second row, if you wait for the mic., please.



Q: Hi. My name is Yusuf - (inaudible) - Azerbaijan State Telegraph Agency. My question is to the representative on the State Department, Mr. Melia. Since as you saw opposition usually refers to human rights groups such as, for instance, Freedom House, I wanted to mention that if you look at the report for 2013 Freedom in the World, Freedom House identifies Azerbaijan as not free, while identifying Armenia and even Nagorno-Karabakh, occupied Nagorno-Karabakh as partly free. My question is that - I'm not even going to talk about Armenia, where people are massacred even post-election, during post-election protests in 2008, but if you look - my question's about Nagorno-Karabakh: How can a U.S. government funded agency go into an internationally recognized Azerbaijani territory under occupation, conduct a survey, and then declare it as -

HAN: Just finish your question.

Q: - as partly free? Isn't it an invitation for other countries to follow the suit, invade another country, occupy a large chunk of territory, and then, you know, remove the 600,000 natives from that land, and then open a few news agencies and, you know, declare it - invite the Freedom House and such organizations -

HAN: OK. I think we got it. Thank you. So we've got three questions on the table. Mr. Melia, would you like to start first, since we just had that question, and then we'll turn over to you.

MELIA: Freedom in the World is not funded by the U.S. government. It's funded by private donations to Freedom House. Some other publications that Freedom House does, like Nations in Transit, do get some assistance from the U.S. government. And what we give them a grant to do is to provide their own honest, independent assessment of the state of political rights and civil liberties in countries around the world. We don't exercise any editorial control over the way they write the reports or the judgments they come to, the conclusions they come to. So I'll redirect you to the editors and managers of Freedom House to discuss their methodology.

HAN: Mr. Seyidov.

SEYIDOV: Thank you for your questions. When we became a member of the Council of Europe, in front of me appeared the list of so-called political prisoners which consist 716 person. We released all, and then after one month, one month, some agents from Azerbaijan presented to the Council of Europe another list of 500 political prisoners.

We as a very young member of the Council of Europe released them all. And then, after two weeks, appeared new list of political prisoners with 400 or approximately 500 again. That's why, from this point of view, Mr. Ramis Yunus, we do not have political prisons. We have our obligations in front of the European Court of Human Rights and any person who convicted in Azerbaijan who made any kind of crimes can appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

And I want to give you some very interesting fact. European Court of Human Rights made some decisions concerning Azerbaijan, and all these decisions have been implemented by Azerbaijani government. Despite of the fact that some European countries, including very, very famous and very influential, so-called old democracies, even today are not ready to implement the decision of the European Court of Human Rights.

That's why when we are talking about so-called political prisoners which used as a pressure to Azerbaijani policy, that's another story. When we can see that some problematic issues had happened in Azerbaijan, we're ready to investigate by ourselves. And we did it for a long period of time. Together with representative of NGOs in Azerbaijan, we had created special group in order to find solution of these kind of arrests and this kind of intimidation - this kind of attitudes. And what had happened? Some international

organizations appointed very famous just now person, Mr. Strasser, as a rapporteur on political prisoners in Azerbaijan and send us message, you are working in Azerbaijan by yourself. That's not so fair. Some supervisor from the Council of Europe should monitor you.

That's why, again, we are ready to do our best for human rights, but we don't want to see human rights as a tool in order to push to Azerbaijan to achieve some goals which some international organization has concerning Azerbaijan.

Thank you.

Q: Can you tell me -

HAN: No, I'm sorry. There's no response from - we're going to cut off. You could probably approach him afterwards to discuss that, but now, I'll ask Mr. Namazov to answer the question from the gentleman.

NAMAZOV: Rustam Ibragimbekov is citizen of Azerbaijan Republic constantly living in the territory of Azerbaijan Republic, is a chairman of the Cinematographers Union, is a chairman of Forum of Intelligentsia of Azerbaijan. He's a founder and the chairman of Ibrus Theater, a drama theater Azerbaijan. Each year, he attends tens of events in Azerbaijan. And it's unfair to say that he is not living - he's living outside of Azerbaijan.

When we were selecting, voting for Rustam Ibragimbekov, there were 87 members of National Council in the hall, and out of 87 members, 86 voted for him and only one abstained, which shows that we made the right decision in selecting him as unified single candidate.

HAN: OK, thank you. We're going to take three more questions, and that will draw our briefing to a close. So I'm going to call on you, in the second row right there. If you could wait - in the pink shirt - I'm sorry, purple shirt - whatever color that is. And Mr. Mollazade, did you - OK, and then Mr. Mollazade.

Q: OK. Good afternoon. I'm Professor Brenda Shaffer at Georgetown University and my question I would like to offer to Mr. Melia and to Dr. Carter. In this Cold War period, the Soviet Union and the United States pursued a strategic competition between them through arming different movements, the different national movements in the Third World, different ideological movements, different religious movements. We saw the results of this. It brought societies apart. It created civil wars. It killed millions of people and destabilized countries, and in the end, it even hurt the security of the United States.

In the post-Soviet period, we see that the countries have actually learned a new cheaper model and actually probably more efficient, which is instead of arming different movements around the world, we're seeing the strategic competitions taking place in the ballot box and in the street and through protests. So we see, for instance, in the post-Arab Spring Middle East it's not just about the people's will, but it's also the will of Russia, the will of Iran, the will of foreign powers.

We see in the Caucasus in the past couple of years that not only is U.S. aid active there, but Russia's version of aid, Iran's version of aid. And even the list of political prisoners that Dr. Lansky discussed, many of them are there because they're representatives of the Iranian government, funded by the Iranian government, being used for terrorist activities, and not just religious believers.

So I'd like to know what is the U.S. policy on helping states find a balance between true democratic processes or misuse of the democratic processes for the promotion of external forces. Again, in the Middle East, but also specifically we're seeing this focus in the South Caucasus, in Georgia, a Russian citizen elected for prime minister; in Azerbaijan, a Russian citizen, a candidate - how

to allow this not to be an arena of external competition?

HAN: And then, well, if you could allow these two to ask their questions -

Q: Hello, my name is Rafiq (sp) from University of Delaware. I have a really simply question to Azerbaijani official policymakers. I wonder whether there will be any changes regarding the settlement, the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia after the presidential election. Do you expect any major changes, any changes in your counterparts? Thank you very much.

HAN: And then, right here in the front row.

Q: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank for your commission for a very important hearing.

HAN: Could you please identify yourself?

Q: My question to representative of U.S. government - my name is Asim Mollazade. I'm chairman of Democratic Reform Party of Azerbaijan. My question is to Mr. Melia. Mr. Putin said that one of the biggest tragedy of 20th century was collapse of Soviet Union. And now, after idea of Eurasian Union, we have the active involvement of Russia to political process of post-Soviet world elections in Latvia, elections in Georgia, a lot of Russian citizens were elected there. And as a result, we had arrest of prime minister of Georgia, Ivane Merabishvili, and the silence in the world about this fact when people from Rose Revolution in jail. And also situations continue in Azerbaijan, and Madam Shaffer said about the Hezbollah-type of organization going to kill U.S. ambassador, Israel ambassador, leaders of Jewish Azerbaijani community.

And - (inaudible) - these people are in list of political prisoners, so called discussing. I mean, can anybody accept Hezbollah activity or Russian network activity financing - (inaudible) - in former Soviet territory? Is it a lack of U.S. interest to this situation? What do you think about the restoration of Soviet Union by Putin?

HAN: I'll give you a moment to think about that. (Laughter.) And so let's start with - Paul, did you want to comment first on the professor from Georgetown -

MELIA: Two versions of the same question actually.

HAN: OK. Would you like to start? Yeah, and I'll give you - I'll call on you, yes.

MELIA: Yeah, I was going to say that the two questions are intertwined, the discussion about nationality and politics and external influences in neighboring states and so on.

In my time in the U.S. government, which is brief but illuminating, I have come to appreciate the limits of American and other governments' ability to influence outcomes in other countries. And it reminds me of a fundamental premise that I had learned working in the NGO world over the previous 25 years, which is that the outcomes in foreign political process will be determined by the people in those countries, and that there will be - whether they move forward or backwards, whether they have conflict or they have, you know, reconciliation, those are largely decisions that will be taken by the people of each country. And Azerbaijan, in this sense, is no different than any of the other countries.

We as international actors play a supporting role. We can encourage what we think are good decisions. We can try to discourage bad decisions. We can demonstrate that we support the work of certain kinds of actors like civil groups or journalist or government agencies. You know, we work a lot with government agencies and we try to improve their capacity to do their business

better.

So - but we can't make them do their work better. We can't make them more professional or more democratic or more transparent. That's not a function of the assistance we provide. That's a function of decisions that are taken by other people who live in other countries.

Now, I know there are other actors out there that are perhaps a tad more malevolent than the United States generally is. But again, I would not overstate the degree of international influence in these political processes. I think the Russian role in Georgia has been vastly overstated by some. I think, again, it's Georgians driving decisions in Georgia and I think that that would be the case in Azerbaijan. It would be the people and officials and the voters in Azerbaijan that will ultimately decide the future of the country. But Dr. Carter is much more of an expert on the nationalities of the former Soviet Union than I am. So he can explain what's really going on.

CARTER: Thank you very much, Tom. (Laughs.) I guess my observation on this would be that actually echoing what Tom had to say about the influence of bigger powers on other countries. I mean, certainly history shows that sooner or later it's the domestic situations in these countries that win out. And you know, sometimes these big powers can influence developments even for long periods of time, but then eventually, it's the situations within the countries that prevail.

The United States, in many countries - we can't want democracy more than the people of the countries with which we have a relationship. Our assistance overseas, history and the record of our assistance shows that - that where the people really want this, we can help them, but where the people are not ready yet or have other ideas, things don't work out.

We think that given the developments in Azerbaijan that things seem to be going in a - at least popular opinion wants democracy. We believe that. And we certainly would like to do everything we can to support that. And that's one of the reasons that we had this hearing today, to try to give a little bit of a support to that effort.

HAN: OK. I'm going to turn next to the Ambassador and Mr. Seyidov, are you going to address the Nagorno-Karabakh question?

SEYIDOV: Yes.

HAN: OK. And then what I'm going to do is I'll allow everyone to have one to two minutes to sort of wrap up with any final comments you'd like to make.

Mr. Seyidov.

SEYIDOV: Thank you very much, again. That's a very, very essential question because today, Nagorno-Karabakh issue is the question which we should discuss everywhere. And today, the pressure which we can see to Azerbaijan because of our independent policy. We did our best to be an independent and we're doing our best to be an independent, but unfortunately not only we are able to see our possibilities and our influence in the region, and that's why I think Karabakh issue is the key point to show who is a master in the region.

And Azerbaijan is in favor to find a solution, peaceful solution of Nagorno-Karabakh issue and then several times mentioned that unfortunately we faced with three Armenia, not with one. The one Armenia is just nation which are living in a neighboring country. Poor people, they are isolated because of the policy which provided by the government Armenia. But the second Armenia living here, in United States of America, in Los Angeles, that's a Diaspora, rich, influential, standing there and maybe here and try to influence to these briefings. And the third Armenia is existing, Armenia as a tool in the hands of the big power to show he's a master in South Caucasian region.

You said, my dear colleagues, that, you know, nation is responsible for future and for democracy. Of course nation is responsible, but why we have seen the same déjà vu in Georgia, Russian citizen coming and taking part in election; in Azerbaijan, Russian citizen is coming and taking part, negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan deadlock. United States of America is in favor to change status quo, but even you are not able to change the situation.

And that's why, despite of all this pressure, despite of all these obstacles, the leadership of Azerbaijan is doing its best for finding the solution of Nagorno-Karabakh – peaceful solution of Nagorno-Karabakh. Because we have a lot of things to lose. We want to keep our future. We want to do our best for our country. Thank you very much.

HAN: Mr. Namazov.

NAMAZOV: We observe today that pre-election situation in Azerbaijan has already started, that there're steps taken towards already with clear outcome for – towards the elections. Government is trying to present National Council here in Washington as Russia's project. But other member of Azeri government, like the chairman of president staff, Mr. Rammetiev (ph), he travels to Moscow or Tehran, where he says that National Council is a project of the West. And if they – the National Council wins this election, Azerbaijan will be more integrated to Europe, to West, to NATO. So as you see, that there's in the same amount of time two different presentations of the National Council.

But I want to assure you that the decision of what will be the next government will be decided not in Moscow, Tehran, or Washington, but by the will of Azerbaijani people and they will be determined by voting in October and then defending their laws to make the change.

HAN: Mr. Ambassador, if you could spend two minutes wrapping up.

SULEYMANOV: Yes. Thank you very much once again. And let me raise one question right away. As someone who grew up in the Soviet Union, I am quite used to the Soviet propaganda casually using words like racism and I know it is (irrelevant to ?) the United States. So I grew up living in an imperialist racist society here. If you look at the propaganda efforts today against the United States, you would often see the same thing.

I'm very saddened at what I heard here – (inaudible) – casual use of words “false,” “planted,” “smearing.” So for instance, when it is someone in Azerbaijan, when it's written against somebody who you like, it's a smearing campaign. If it's written about somebody in the government, it's freedom of speech and can never be stopped.

So we need to be a little bit more grown up about this and basically think about things which are realistic. I mean, I spent five and a half years as consul general in Los Angeles. We saw yesterday what happened in Los Angeles between police force and protesters. Now, what should we – should we have a briefing at the parliament of Azerbaijan and somebody coming and mentoring Ambassador Morningstar? He's not a young man. I don't want him to suffer like that. So let us get a little bit realistic here.

Another thing is, for instance, I – so – and be a little bit careful in casual using words. I mean, those words actually matter. And if we want them to matter, then let's use them more carefully.

Now, I – another thing which surprised me here is that we have spent discussing a potential candidacy of Mr. Ibragimbekov, who's a well-known actor, but what are we discussing? It's a superficial – I'm not as familiar as Mr. Namazov is with the Russian decision-making process. So I don't know exactly what the Russians decide or what they don't decide. I don't know. I don't know Russians that well.

But at the moment, the fact is obvious: Mr. Ibragimbekov has a Russian

passport. He said he wants to get rid of it. If he gets rid of it by time and he's eligible to be registered, he will be registered by law. If he's not eligible, he will not be eligible. So discussion of this but - and using this discussion in order to attack the government when the fact stands is actually kind of - just - I mean, it's kind of strange, to be honest.

The other thing that I wanted to say is first of all, Mr. Gadirli, I thank you for bringing up the words of Mr. Wilson, President Wilson. I think every Azerbaijani in this room and beyond, we all share the aspiration of Mr. Topchubashev, Fatahi Khan Khoyski, and everybody else who built Azerbaijan's republic. Every day, I can tell you that my mission here defends the flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan because we believe in the spirit of that flag.

Now, Mr. Gadirli, you know how much I respect you, but you also know that the republic you referred to lived 23 months and no, Mr. Melia, it did not fall because of domestic dissidents, it fell because of the obvious foreign invasion. So please, while in a - you know - in a continent - the great continent of North America surrounded oceans, it seems that foreign intervention is a very remote possibility. In my country, it's not the same.

Mr. Gadirli, I share your aspiration for democratic and independent Azerbaijan. We do everything possible to make sure that happens. Let us work together. Let us work together to make sure that the spirit which instilled in that republic remains forever. Azerbaijan must be independent. And let me tell you something. As much as you might disagree with the government of Azerbaijan, it is because of the leadership of Haydar Alyiev and Ilham Alyiev, the Republic of Azerbaijan (stands ?) at the most independent, most sovereign, and in most progressive republic of the former Soviet Union. So in fact, when you blow down the words of Mr. Wilson, you know what we're trying to do is to solidify that spirit.

Now, I will just make a very small reference to what you said. I know that you basically believe in parliamentary system, and you're entitled to your view. Based on that you offer a very narrow interpretation of a referendum and a constitution. I disagree with your view on that. I think that majority view in Azerbaijan is obvious and majority view around the world supports the idea that amendment into constitution enters into force for the moment it's adopted. So I think there's no legal preclusion for the incumbent president to be elected.

HAN: I'm sorry, but we're going to lose our room and I apologize for cutting you off. Mr. Melia if you could start, then we'll go to Dr. Lansky and then Mr. Gadirli, you'll have the last word. Oh, I'm sorry, and Paul.

MELIA: I'll just conclude where we began by saying that Azerbaijan is an important partner of the United States. It is our policy that we want them to succeed as a sovereign, secure, and prosperous country based on the shared democratic aspirations that we have all committed to in joining the OSCE and the Council of Europe. And everything we do and say is intended to contribute to the consolidation of Azerbaijan's success as an independent nation.

I think in the context of these 90 days or so until the presidential election comes, there are a handful of things that the government of Azerbaijan could do tomorrow that would advance the democratic process. We talked about the need to release Ilgar Mammadov. I think it's entirely within the power of the government to register the EMDS as a domestic election monitoring organization, to invite ODIHR, the OSCE ODIHR to send their observers short and long-term. And to permit ordinary political activity - let people come and go, have their meetings, make their speeches, and get their messages out, and let the people decide whether to vote for one candidate or the other.

We in the United States don't have any preferences for candidates of parties. We focus on a process and the more transparent and fair the process is, the more confident we are that Azerbaijan will move forward.



HAN: Dr. Lanskoj.

LANSKOJ: Thank you. Let me say a couple of things. First, on the whole question of kind of what do we look for in the election period, one of the sort of basic issues is whether there's an acceptance that there can be an opposition, and not just saying - not just automatically painting the opposition as a projection of bad foreign influence.

We see a lot of authoritarian governments that do that, that say the opposition is not authentic. The opposition is somehow influenced by others. We see this right now in Russia, where Putin is basically saying this is - you know - those NGOs, they're foreign agents and members of the opposition met with the Georgian parliamentarian - this is not an authentic opposition. And it's a shame to see some of that happening in Azerbaijan.

Ilgar Mammadov is well-known to us. He's not an agent of Russia. He's not an agent of Iran. He's certainly a political prisoner. It is a shame to hear that type of argument being used against people who are totally pro-Western. The time that I've spent watching Azerbaijan actually predates those back to when I was at the EU and I was following Azerbaijan closely and publishing on it all the time. And you could see how over these 20 years Azerbaijan has gone in the wrong direction. It used to be roughly on parity with Georgia when it came to things like NATO expansion. Azerbaijan and Georgia in the mid-'90s were about in the same place as they - Azerbaijan was saying we really want to be in NATO and was looking for a path in that direction.

Now, there's such a big difference. If you look at, again, referring to Freedom House surveys, and those are based on extensive research, Azerbaijan's scores are getting closer to Uzbekistan. It's not getting closer to Georgia or closer to Europe. It's getting closer to the Central Asians, and that's very unfortunate.

Finally, with - it's already been said. Azerbaijan has a very vibrant civil society. And on that, I do agree with the representatives of the government. There's really a great civil society. It is a very diverse country. And there's no place that's more ready for democratic government and I wish all the Azerbaijanis the best in the elections.

HAN: Mr. Gadirli.

GADIRLI: Thank you. I deliberately started my speech with a quote from former President Wilson. He didn't say that he agreed or disagreed with Azerbaijani delegation. The only thing he said that he noticed that they were speaking the same language. Now, this is very important. It's important because it reveals the fact how people conceptualize the world, how they envision the future of their country, how they understand their own existence, what mental map they have in their own hand in the end.

So we have a very bright ambassador here in the U.S. It's not that I'm paying the tribute to what he has just said to me -

SULEYMANOV: It looks that way. (Laughter.)

GADIRLI: No, we have - there're bright people in the government, employed by the government, who speak various languages, who built a personal career and have self-esteem. That goes without saying. It's not that we don't see that. The problem is and what I try to explain here is how government communicates to its own people internally.

I don't believe in - I have no illusion about foreign aid, especially in a democracy building. And we're not here to complain or ask for something. But the language the government uses to communicate to its own people is extremely outdated, extremely outdated. The concepts they use, the terminologies they employ, the phraseology they use actually. I mean, one of the MPs whom I personally respect, is not a member of incumbent party, but he's a bright

lawyer himself, recently, relatively recently said to the media that Ilgar Mammadov, I quote, "is a last and unsuccessful attempt by the West to have a color revolution in Azerbaijan." End of quote.

Now, regardless of whether - I'm not getting into the fact statement of whether he's true or not, but the language is quite indicative.

Now, we hear here and there in Azerbaijan, someone is Russian agent. Someone is Iranian agent. Someone is Western agent. I'm really fed up with this. We have to pay attention to the conduct, to the process. We have to ensure that ideas become part of the process and people are valued because of the things they say.

There's another thing that is overlooked, what is called intellectual dependence. That's very different thing from the thing that agency of change. If I studied, for example, German philosophy, which greatly influenced myself, I can fairly enough say that I am intellectually dependent on German philosophy. I didn't study Chinese philosophy. I'm not intellectually dependent on what the greatest Chinese civilization produced.

But the worldview I have is a Western. But now, what we see is the government, again, communicating to its own people. I know that they say a lot of nice and sometimes true things to the West. But the way they communicate to its own people is very outdated and very Russian-like, not in terms that the Russians instructs them, but in terms of the system, the similarity in the system, the similarity in the problems.

Look what the Russia - how Russia treats its NGO and how Azerbaijani government treats the NGO. The same talks: agents, agents, agents, foreign aid, grants, blah, blah. How Russia treats its parties, its political parties and the political process, how Azerbaijani government treats its political parties and process, and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Now, Professor Brenda Shaffer mentioned about the task upon the Iranian influence, et cetera. This is another truth, by the way. A growing Islam, for example. Yes, Islam grows in Azerbaijan, but partly because it was oppressed during Soviet time. Now, it simply is reaching its traditional level. I think it will catch some 30-35 percent of the society. Yes, it's visible because the number of voters increased who have some religious aspirations and for any politician, including the incumbent party - and they do so, which is fair enough and it's legitimate to - in public people's campaign - we have to address the needs of the believers. And that says, yes, Islam has become politically - political factor. But not in the sense that Islam is becoming a political factor in a way that any Islamic group can grab the power.

They have significant and very deep disagreements among themselves. They have different intellectual dependencies. Some depend on Iran. Some depend on Turkey. Some depend on (Arab ?). And there's no way they can come to any agreement among themselves.

So let's just stop these speculations and manipulations about Islam, about Russia, about Iran without - with due account to the real geostrategical threats. And I agree with you, Mr. Ambassador, they are threats. They are threats. They're existential threats. And they're not going to go anywhere if the government changes. And we do share that concern. Also about Karabakh. I don't know if there're Armenians here, no matter from which part of the world they're from. But I also want our American friends to know this. It's not just about Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In the beginning, in the end of the '90s and beginning -

HAN: I'm sorry, Mr. Gadirlı, you have to wrap up your -

GADIRLI: If I may just -

HAN: Yeah, just finish this comment, please, but quickly.

GADIRLI: - finish this particular comment because this is very important. This also reveals how deep understanding in our society is.

We have to have a clear picture. And the end of the '80s and the beginning of '90s were two different trends. Armenians wanted Karabakh at any price. Azerbaijanis wanted independence at any price. When you want something at any price, you pay the highest price possible. And what we have, Azerbaijan got its independence, but lost a control over the Karabakh and surrounding area. Armenia got control over Karabakh and surrounding areas, but lost its independence.

Now, I have - I want to understand everyone here in this room, occupation is the price Azerbaijan pays for its independence.

Now, Mr. Ambassador -

HAN: This has to be your last point because -

GADIRLI: - I want you to know that the reason I'm standing in opposition about that is just the fact that we don't talk to each other in our country - no, not you and myself. But is no talk in Azerbaijan.

SULEYMANOV: You know my email account, come on.

GADIRLI: I know that I can access you. (Laughter.) And in fact, unlike Americans here, I have a luxury to ignore your diplomatic status because for me you're first of all my fellow compatriot. But because we don't have a talk, a dialogue, a process - there is no process. No one can misuse it or use it if there is no process.

HAN: Thank you.

SEYIDOV: Mr. Gadirli -

GADIRLI: Yes.

HAN: Actually, I'm going to have to stop it right there. I'm sorry.

SEYIDOV: The romantic period is over. That's a romantic period. (Laughter.)

GADIRLI: It's not romantic. That's realistic.

SEYIDOV: That's a romantic period.

HAN: All right. Thank you. I'm going to call on Dr. Carter to provide some concluding remarks and then we'll wrap it up.

CARTER: OK. We've heard testimony from a distinguished group of American and Azerbaijan officials, politicians, and experts. They've offered diverse perspectives on the current political situation in Azerbaijan and the prospects for a free and fair presidential election this fall. We are grateful to each for agreeing to appear at this briefing today.

I began my introductory remarks earlier by noting that the United States is a friend of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani people and that we have many common interests with the government in Baku. These strong ties have an important - have been an important factor in our close cooperation over the years and we would like to see our relationship become even stronger. As we have heard today, Azerbaijan is indeed at a crossroads. One path leads forward toward democracy and economic prosperity. The other leads toward authoritarianism, corruption, and eventually, economic stagnation and decline.

The presidential election this fall will be an important opportunity for Azerbaijan to act on this choice. All candidates must be allowed to move and campaign freely without fear of arrest or harassment. Journalists must be free to cover and report on the election and other stories without the threat of detention on trumped up charges, physical assault, or the jamming of broadcasts.

NGOs, religious organizations, and other elements of civil society must be allowed to operate without arbitrary bureaucratic or legal impediments. And all of Azerbaijani society must be able to trust that it is governed in a transparent and rule-based manner in the interests of all and not in the interests of a small group.

These are obligations that Azerbaijan has undertaken as a member of the United Nations, the OSCE, and other international organizations. It has - excuse me - it is our sincere hope that Azerbaijan will see this opportunity, guarantee these basic democratic and human rights, and take its rightful place as a regional cornerstone of democracy, social peace, and prosperity.

Thank you again to all of our panelists and to all of you who have attended this briefing today.

HAN: Thank you very much. (Applause.)

[Whereupon, at 4:19 p.m., the briefing was concluded.]