

Democracy Deferred: The State of Elections and Fundamental Freedoms in Azerbaijan



MAY 9, 2018

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held at 10:32 a.m. in Room SVC 215, Capitol Visitor Center, Washington, DC, Everett Price, Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Panelists present: Everett Price, Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Dr. Audrey L. Altstadt, Professor of History, University of Massachusetts-Amherst; Maran Turner, Executive Director, Freedom Now; and Emin Milli, Director, Meydan TV.

Mr. PRICE. Good morning, everyone. I'll let people take a second to get seated. On behalf of our Chairman, Senator Roger Wicker, and Co-Chairman, Congressman Chris Smith, I want to welcome you to this U.S. Helsinki Commission briefing titled "Democracy Deferred: The State of Elections and Fundamental Freedoms in Azerbaijan." I'm grateful for your presence with us this morning and extend my appreciation to all of those who are tuning in from around the world via our Facebook Live stream.

My name is Everett Price. I am the commission's policy advisor responsible for the Southern Caucasus region. The commission is convening this briefing this morning to assess the state of democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan today. As a participating State of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Azerbaijan, like the United States and over 50 other nations, has freely undertaken robust commitments in the fields of democratic principles and basic rights. Our commission is charged with monitoring the implementation of these commitments across Europe and Eurasia and informing American foreign policy toward the OSCE and its member States.

Regrettably, the actions of the Azerbaijani Government have given us cause for concern in recent years. At the start of his second decade in power, President Ilham Aliyev in 2013 tightened his regime's grip on national institutions, the political opposition, and independent press. Our commissioners closely followed these developments and drew

attention to them. In December 2015, then-Commission Chairman Congressman Chris Smith introduced the Azerbaijan Democracy Act which, among other things, sought to impose strict travel bans and asset freezes on Azerbaijan's leadership until the government released political prisoners, ceased its harassment of the media and civil society, and demonstrated progress toward free, fair, and transparent elections.

Since the introduction of the Azerbaijan Democracy Act, the government has freed some political prisoners. But it has continued, and in some ways escalated, its clampdown on political activists and the press. What's more, the country has not held a single free and fair election. Quite to the contrary, President Aliyev staged a popular referendum in September 2016 that extended presidential terms from 5 to 7 years and empowered himself to appoint his wife as vice president, unilaterally placing her at the top of the line of succession. Amidst widespread harassment of journalists and anti-referendum campaigners, the government reported that the sweeping constitutional changes were approved with around 90 percent of the vote.

2017 brought more worrying developments. Having, over the years, shuttered, co-opted, or otherwise censored all independent print, TV, and radio media, the government took the next step by blocking virtually all the country's major online sources of independent reporting, including Meydan TV, whose director is here with us this morning. There were also disturbing claims that the government has resorted to kidnapping independent journalists abroad. In September of last year, Congressman Smith and Congressman McGovern responded to these events by introducing a successor bill to the Azerbaijan Democracy Act, House Resolution 537. H. Res. 537 calls on the U.S. administration to pursue targeted human rights and religious freedom sanctions against Azerbaijani authorities.

Just last month, President Aliyev was re-elected to a 7-year term with more than 86 percent of the vote. The government fulfilled its commitment to invite the OSCE to observe the election and the observation mission conducted its work freely. Unfortunately, however, the international observers had a bleak story to tell. The OSCE's preliminary conclusions described a vote that "lacked genuine competition" amidst a "restrictive political environment and legal framework that curtails fundamental rights and freedoms."

Azerbaijan is an important partner for the United States in a sensitive and critical region. Our examination of Azerbaijan's human rights record is born out of this recognition. The United States holds its friends to a higher standard in the interest of fostering stable and enduring partnerships that are rooted in core values. As Azerbaijan prepares to mark 100 years of independence on May 28, it has the opportunity to open a new century by renewing its respect for the fundamental freedoms and dignity of its people. Our expert panel today will help us to take stock of this moment in Azerbaijani history, and the steps that are needed to begin charting a new path. With us today are distinguished experts in Azerbaijan in different aspects of this situation that we're examining.

First, we'll begin with Audrey Altstadt, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She is the author of numerous articles, op-ed essays, and three books, most recently "Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," published by the Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Columbia University Press just last year in 2017. She is chair of the George F. Kennan Institute Advisory Council and has been a consultant to The Freedom House, Radio Liberty, U.S. Departments of State and Justice, other U.S. Government agencies, and the U.S. Army War College. She earned a doctorate from the

University of Chicago and an honorary doctorate from Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Dr. Altstadt will help us with an overview of the situation facing democracy and elections in Azerbaijan. And then we'll move on to our other panelists who will discuss the situation regarding political prisoners as well as media freedom in the country. And without further ado, I will turn it over to Dr. Altstadt. Thank you for being here.

Dr. ALTSTADT. Thank you. I want to thank Everett and I want to thank the commission for the opportunity to be here and make these comments.

Azerbaijan's political profile in both law and practice continues to move away from democratic norms, as exemplified in its recent presidential election of April 11. The turn away from democracy has been apparent throughout most of the post-Soviet period, but has changed noticeably under Ilham Aliyev's presidency, since 2003. Although we often hear about the crackdown of 2014, I think that the pattern that it refers to actually began after the 2012 elections to the national assembly, because in that election the major opposition parties were sidelined, and the ruling party and its supporters gained a substantial majority in the national assembly. That control of the legislature was instrumental in centralizing control in the executive.

The tightening of controls in Azerbaijani politics is readily measurable in the electoral process. And so I'll begin briefly by mentioning a few points that come up with the recent OSCE ODIHR monitoring reports concerning the April 11 election. Those of you familiar with the OSCE process—probably most of you in this room—know that there are several reports for each election: a needs assessment report, an interim report prior to election day, a preliminary post-election report, and the final report. The last time I checked, which was last night, that was not yet up on the website. The election itself, as previously, was marked by ballot box stuffing, carousel voting, irregularities in polling stations and in counting. At the end of the day, the election campaign was deemed to have been not competitive. None of the candidates offered significant alternative views or criticism of current policies, or of the incumbent.

One of the strengths of the OSCE ODIHR reports—which I've used over the years and read every one with respect to Azerbaijan—is that they not only examine the applicable laws and the events of the actual day of voting, but they also examine the laws and the structures, the media environment, and the role of authorities prior to the election day, as well as other times. I want to draw attention to just a couple of points here. This is by no means an exhaustive list. First is the timing of the election in April 11. This was in and of itself an anomaly, because in the past, elections have been held in the fall, usually October or November. And indeed, this election also was originally scheduled for October. It was moved to April 11 only in February.

The reason for the abrupt change has been a subject of lots of speculation, most vocally, I suppose, the undercutting of the opposition. But the opposition has been so significantly sidelined by previous policies and practices that that doesn't seem like a real major reason to make such a sudden change. There was also discussion about Ilham having serious illness and needing to undergo medical treatment. I don't know whether any of these things are true, but I will return to this point at the end.

The second point in my thinking really has to do with how it is the election got moved in the first place. And this is related to another aspect of the OSCE ODIHR reporting, which is the larger, complex legal and constitutional issues, some of which

Everett just talked about in his introduction—the constitutional amendments, more than 100 of them, which were rushed through in the summer of 2016, which then concentrated more power in the hands of the president.

A third aspect is the concentration of power in the ruling party in the national assembly. The ability to make changes in law and in conditions that allow for the ruling elite is really significant. First of all, with respect to elections, it means that YAP, the Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası, the ruling party, not only controls a third of the election commission, its other supporters control more than that. Therefore, it also controls all the lower level commissions. And it chairs all the commissions at all levels. Many of the opposition parties and opposition parliamentarians—used loosely in this instance—who are deputies of the national assembly are in fact nominal opposition. But they are actually regime supporters. This lock on the national assembly is what allows the assembly to introduce bills, debate them, and then implement them as if they were in fact a product of independent, elected action by an elected body, rather than a diktat of the regime. And this process is a charade.

A fourth point is the general environment in which the election took place. Constraints on the media, which others will talk about, and public demonstrations, which are constrained and sometimes quashed with the use of violence by the police. There is intimidation of potential participants, and sometimes just physically blocking access to demonstrations by closing streets or by closing subway stations. And these are significant because they are an important measure of civil society participation, which is essential in a democratic system. In the same way that many of the opposition parties are not really in the opposition, many of the so-called NGOs are actually GONGOs, or government-organized nongovernmental organizations. These are also a fiction.

And finally, one of the things which concerns me the most is the specific targeting of the younger generation, people that are 40 and under, those who have been shaped to the least degree by Soviet education and Soviet expectations.

There is a wider situation here, which is an important context for understanding political life, governance, and other issues in Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan we are seeing democracy in form but not in substance. The regime uses the terminology of democracy, but in fact it establishes a system which it controls and shapes for the regime's own benefit. This is really the opposite of a democracy. And yet, the regime and its representatives insist that the form is the substance. There are supporters who make this argument. There are those who have been persuaded by gifts or lobbying from Azerbaijan. But there are groups that are not fooled. And the OSCE is one of those. The Venice Commission has not been fooled. The European Court of Human Rights has not been fooled.

The numerous rulings which the court has made against cases brought from Azerbaijan have been ignored in Baku. And even though the regime talks about conforming to its principles and of the Council of Europe, in fact when it comes right down to the actions, they violate these regularly. Late last fall, the Council of Europe finally stood up to the pressures of the regime and voted to potentially expel Azerbaijan from its membership in a multistep process that it is beginning. This infringement process would first begin with loss of voting rights. If it should take place, and if they should ultimately get to a point of expelling Azerbaijan or getting close to expulsion, this would be an enormous embarrassment for the regime. And the Aliyev regime certainly does not like to be embarrassed.

And this, in my mind, brings us back to the reason which I believe is a crucial reason for having moved the elections in the first place, and that has to do with the case of Ilgar Mammadov. And, again, my colleagues will talk more about this, but the European Court for Human Rights ruled that his 2013 conviction was, in fact, politically motivated and ordered that he be released. But he was not. The warnings were ignored. And in November 2017, there was a Council of Europe deadline which passed, not surprisingly that the regime, again, ignored. And then that's when the Council of Europe threatened to take these infringement steps.

Perhaps it is only coincidental that a few weeks later Azerbaijani law was changed to allow the president to move the date of elections, as long as they were within 60 days—or, more than 60 days from the date of setting. It was then about a month and a half after that that the elections were, in fact, rescheduled. I don't believe in coincidences, so I suspect that this is in fact a way to move the election to beat this multistep process by the Council of Europe and then, before they could take an action, release Ilgar Mammadov—too late for him to be a contender in the Presidential election, but in time to stop this action against Azerbaijan.

There is a notion that Azerbaijan is a good partner for the West and for the United States with respect to energy cooperation, military, and business opportunities. I'm well familiar with this explanation, and also the plea that Westerners should be fair and talk about the advances that this regime has in fact made in terms of rebuilding the infrastructure, finding housing for internally displaced persons (IDPs), improving the poverty rate in the country. I do acknowledge that. And I do, indeed, want to be fair. And to be further fair, I also want to point out that many of these infrastructural improvements were made in such a way that the companies that in fact carried them out are owned directly or indirectly by the first family and other oligarchs, allegedly, in conjunction with international reporting, which has taken place and discovered ownership of these various companies.

So in other words, the picture is indeed complex. I want to acknowledge that. I want to point out that we are talking about that. And in Azerbaijan, there really are stark differences between, let's say, those who have these opportunities to make money through tourism and construction, who have the ability to gain immense private wealth while some IDPs are still living in train cars. There are people whose children go to schools in Baku that are underfunded. They have to pay teachers just to get the grades the students earn, much less better grades. And then there are other people who, of course, send their children to school abroad, where they can live in condos in London or New York and go to private schools. So the gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, is very stark here.

The underlying argument that Azerbaijan is a good partner in some ways is not the argument I'm making. I'm making quite the opposite argument. I'm making the argument instead that the key function of government is to protect the individual, regardless of the individual's views or beliefs. And I think, speaking as a historian, that one thing we learn from the 20th century is that systems that repress individual human rights and human beings ultimately may look like they're good partners, but in the end make poor partners because they are ultimately untrustworthy.

Mr. PRICE. Thank you very much for that insightful overview. That helps set the stage for the rest of our conversation.

Next, I'd like to turn to Maran Turner. She's the founding executive director of Freedom Now, a U.S.-based organization that works to eliminate politically motivated detention worldwide. Among its efforts is the individual representation of prisoners of conscience, working with pro bono counsel and NGO partners to provide legal assistance and targeted advocacy initiatives intended to secure the release of those arbitrarily detained. Freedom Now has worked extensively in Eurasia, and since 2010 has maintained active cases and projects in Azerbaijan. The rest of her bio is available in your folders.

So, Maran, thank you.

Ms. TURNER. Thank you, Everett. And my thanks to the Helsinki Commission and to all of you. I'm delighted to see a room that has quite filled out. I know all of us here maintain a keen eye on what happens in Azerbaijan. And it's important to see such interest from you all as well.

Subject to my bio, as Everett just read, I'm going to speak about the situation pertaining to political prisoners in Azerbaijan, which is an ongoing and destabilizing trend that's ripped apart families and ripped apart the strong networks of civil society. As small as it was, it was a great hope for the future of that country. And as my colleague, Audrey, has spoken about, President Aliyev has really meticulously consolidated power around his family and a small cabal of loyal allies. And this is really what's provided the framework for the sheer scale of politically motivated imprisonment. It's what has made it possible to keep him insulated from criticism and from political threat. And true to the authoritarian's playbook, Aliyev and his close associates do this by maintaining a strict hold and exploiting primary institutions like the judiciary, law enforcement, and the media.

But it's the law enforcement and the judiciary that's been especially busy, since commencing a crackdown that began in earnest around 2011–2013. This intensified, quite famously, in 2014, when civil society was quite decapitated in the country, and the leaders of a dozen civil society organizations were arrested. This was after the government had implemented a series of NGO laws which, at the time, we suspected where they were going with that. But there was optimism late in 2015 and 2016, when about a dozen of these individuals had been released. And these were people that a lot of us paid close attention to, because they were people—journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders—who we had worked with over the years, who had been bringing us cases of other political prisoners. And all of a sudden, they were in jail.

It meant a lot to us to advocate for their release. And we were all very heartened when we saw them released. But we were not operating under an illusion that change was coming. And in fact, the revolving door carried on. More arrests came. And many people actually were not released and stayed in prison, and still are. Today, there's around 140 to 160 political prisoners. This is actually more than the number that was reported in 2014, at the height of the crackdown. The people in prison are lawyers, journalists, activists, politicians. Since that time, since a number of them have been released, they've gone into exile. Even before those arrests, there were a number of people working in the country as journalists and human rights defenders who saw the writing on the wall and escaped.

Some came to the West. For the most part, they have been able to continue their advocacy from abroad. But as many can tell you, Emin as well, their family members have suffered on their behalf at home. Others went to neighboring Georgia. There are obvious drawbacks to activists. Even though they've been able to carry on their advocacy from

abroad, they are not on the ground. And the government has been able and has done their level best to paint them as traitors who've escaped the country to go join outside forces.

One particularly egregious example I want to speak about, which Audrey touched on as well, is the case of Ilgar Mammadov. He's important for a couple reasons. One, he has been in jail since 2013, when he wrote a blog post dispelling a narrative that the government had been putting out and promoting with respect to a demonstration that had turned destructive. He was sentenced for essentially fomenting mass disorder and was imprisoned—and put in prison for 7 years. And he's still there. I don't think any of us expected this. There was a lot of international and local attention on his case in 2013, in 2014. When the other arrests came in 2014, Ilgar Mammadov's case continued to be on every short list I saw that was going to the State Department and to the European Union calling for his release.

As Audrey mentioned, he actually was subject to two European Court decisions, one with respect to the denial of his pre-trial release, and then also with respect to the government's failure to provide him with a fair trial. And what was notable on both those cases is that the European Court found a violation of Article 18, which is essentially political motivations on the part of the government. Again, Ilgar is still in prison. And, again, as Audrey mentioned, the infringement proceedings have been taken up by the European Court at the request of the Council of Ministers. Suspension or expulsion is possible. A few years ago, I don't think any of us in the international human rights community wanted that. We continued to maintain that having Azerbaijan in the Council of Europe, subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court, was critical. That being surrounded by discussions and a spirit of rule of law and democratic principles could only fare well in the long term.

Unfortunately, now I don't know that there's many that continue to hold that position. Reports have come out in recent years—most recently from the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Europe—that detail a level of corruption that is staggering and beyond, I think, even what people working inside the Council of Europe were already aware of. It seems now that rather than what people thought would be a democratizing impact, has actually been the opposite. That in fact, having Azerbaijan inside the Council of Europe unfortunately has been a corrupting force. To put this in context, Ilgar's petition or application at the European Court is actually just one of 2,000. There are 2,000 cases pending at the European Court against Azerbaijan. Last year the court decided 26 cases, found human rights violations of 24 of them—violations related to rights to freedom from arbitrary detention, right to fair trial, and right to freedom of assembly and association.

I want to touch on a couple of things before I close. Among the cases that don't get enough attention, frankly, are the religious freedom cases. This issue has been made quite murky by the Azerbaijan Government which declares these individuals as extremists and under the influence of Iran. And while there are no doubt some radicals in the country, Iran has gained influence inside as well, and the Azerbaijani Government is secular, 60 percent of the prisoners of conscience on these lists are those who have been put in prison because of their independent practice of Islam, and their association with outspoken clerics that has been used as an impetus to imprison them.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has designated Azerbaijan as a tier two country, indicating that violations of religious freedom are systematic and ongoing. Best example of this is the so-called Nardaran raid in 2015, where a number of individuals associated with a group called the Muslim Unity Movement were arrested.

They were charged with inciting violence. Their leaders have been horrifically treated and tortured. In fact, just last week there were reports of new beatings. This group has been well known to civil society in the country. In fact, they're not known for religious advocacy or even particularly political. They're actually more known for protesting the government's treatment and policies toward them, as well as their calls for a better social support system. If there's a lesson that we've learned in the war on terror, it's that branding innocent people, especially community leaders, as terrorists can lead to radicalization within the country. And while their pleas might fall on deaf ears in Baku, I can tell you that Tehran is all ears.

The final trend I want to touch on is Azerbaijan's transnational activities. As more and more dissidents have fled, the government's tentacles have spread out in search of them. Those in exile in the U.S. and Europe, as I mentioned, have mostly been left alone. Their family members have not. They're harassed. They're threatened. They're detained. And in neighboring Georgia there's been sufficient evidence that the Azerbaijani authorities have acted in that country almost as though it's their backyard. We, along with a couple of other organizations, did a trip to Georgia last summer, where we documented systematic instances of people being followed, surveilled, and directly threatened.

The most egregious, of course, is the May abduction of the journalist Afgan Mukharli, who was convicted, after being kidnapped, of illegal border crossing and having 10,000 euros on him, which is an illegal amount. Exactly 10,000. Not 9,000, not 11,000, but the exact amount of 10,000. He got 7 years. His wife, no longer feeling safe in Georgia, fled the country for another country in Europe. The Georgians are still ostensibly carrying out that investigation. As last I understood it, the Azerbaijanis were still denying them access to Afgan himself so that they could question him.

So to close, it's time for a new strategy on Azerbaijan. Since the time I've been working on the country, this regime has gotten more emboldened and more calculating. They've also become impervious to outside pressure, but at the same time more concerned with cultivating a sophisticated image. But this is an authoritarian kleptocracy. And a seat in the elite circles in Washington and London should not come so cheaply. Until they actually start to meet the standards that they profess to adhere to, they should be shunned. Until they stop their systematic campaign against civil society and address the impunity within their law enforcement ranks, they should be turned away.

It's time to start naming and shaming. It's not Azerbaijan that's committing human rights violations. It's people inside the government that are committing human rights violations. These are ministers. These are prosecutors. These are judges. These are police officers. And it's time to hold them to account or call on the authorities in Baku to hold them to account. This means we have to start talking more stick and less carrot. And that includes Global Magnitsky.

I'll leave it at that.

Mr. PRICE. Thank you very much, Maran.

Now I'd like to turn to Emin Milli, managing director of Meydan TV, independent online media for Azerbaijan. Meydan TV has been launched from Berlin in 2013. It is reaching weekly around 10 percent of the entire population in Azerbaijan. From 2002 to 2004, Milli was coordinator of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. And prior to that, he was a coordinator of the International Republican Institute in Azerbaijan. Milli was sentenced in 2009 for 2½ years for his critical views about the government of Azerbaijan and spent

about 17 months in jail. He has a master's degree in state, society, and development from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. We're grateful that he's here with us from across the Atlantic.

Thank you, Emin. Please go ahead.

Mr. MILLI. Thank you very much for invitations. Thank you for coming. I really would like to apologize that what I will talk about now is not exactly the speech of a media manager, but more of a citizen of Azerbaijan.

On behalf of Ilgar Mammadov, who has been a candidate in presidential elections but was jailed and wasn't given this opportunity. On behalf of Giyas and Bayram, who just wrote graffiti on the monument of Heydar Aliyev, father of the current president, and got just for this 10 years in jail, and have been tortured. On behalf of the 2-years-old niece of Ordukhan, who is the most efficient and the greatest political activist who lives abroad now, who organized a lot of protests in front of embassies of Azerbaijan abroad. And for this, 12 members of his family—his brothers, sisters, and even 2-years-old niece, Siljan [ph]—were detained. They were threatened. And the government used this as a weapon to silence him.

On behalf of Tural Aliyev, Ordukhan's 19-year-old nephew, who was a student at Baku State University and who was arrested just a week ago, again to target Ordukhan personally. On behalf of Ilkin Rustamzadeh, who is now for years in jail just for organizing peaceful protest against the crimes committed in the army of Azerbaijan against soldiers of Azerbaijan by the government of Azerbaijan. I will try to speak briefly on behalf of all these people, and millions of others who are silenced, who live in fear, who are robbed by their own government.

One hundred years ago, Azerbaijan created the first democratic republic in the Muslim world. This is the heritage of 10 million people living today in Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, 100 years later we feel ashamed. We're feeling the shame that now in the Caucasus, we're the only country that didn't manage to get rid of the criminal and the dictator, who usurped the power. And I accuse Ilham Aliyev of all the crimes, all the detailed reporting that Audrey Altstadt and Maran Turner just presented to you, all these crimes of falsifying elections, torturing people, kidnapping people of Azerbaijan from other countries—like Afgan Mukharli, investigative journalist who was publishing his investigations about Aliyev and his businesses in Georgia at Meydan TV.

All these crimes of torturing people in prisons of Azerbaijan, going after their relatives when they speak out against the regime abroad, stealing of billions and tens of billions of dollars that came to Azerbaijan within last two decades from selling oil and gas—all these crimes, these are not abstract crimes. These are very specific crimes. And the person who leads this gang—because I cannot call it a government—is Aliyev. You know, there has never been, since Aliyev came to power, any sort of legitimate elections. These are not elections.

When Vaclav Havel wrote in his essays, and in "The Power of the Powerless," but also in other essays, that certain concepts that you are using, like democracy, or parliament, or freedom of assembly, rule of law—these concepts that are born in the West, and they have been developed and have certain meanings—when they're applied in authoritarian countries, like Azerbaijan today, they lose any meaning. So if we talk about elections, I cannot talk about elections in Azerbaijan because elections do not exist in Azerbaijan as you understand it here.

This is very important for when we analyze. All these election observation missions, they lose their meaning because there is nothing to analyze. There is no legitimate process that is going on in Azerbaijan. So today I stand here and, again, on behalf of people of Azerbaijan, accuse Ilham Aliyev for stealing 2.5 billion U.S. dollars and allocating this in British offshore bank accounts, and using this money not just against people of Azerbaijan, but against Europe, European Union, and against the U.S. What have they been doing with this money? And this is just 2.5 billion dollars.

This money has been put in these accounts by companies linked to Aliyev's family, linked to the International Bank of Azerbaijan, linked to ministries of Azerbaijan. This was a top story in The Guardian and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, OCCRP, investigated this. There is evidence from just 2012 till 2014, 2.5 billion U.S. dollars—just think about this. Three million dollars on average per day has been channeled from Azerbaijan to British offshore bank accounts to bribe European politicians, American politicians, journalists, the expert community.

When such American and European politicians talk about Aliyev as a friend or an ally—because there are such American politicians and European politicians who talk about Aliyev as an ally—you have to think about this. What Aliyev and his family have been doing now for decades is destroying and committing crimes not just against the people of Azerbaijan. They have been committing crimes against the United States of America, against European Union member States. The Council of Europe, in fact, just published a report—it's more than 200 pages—which exactly detailed how they have been spending these tens of millions and hundreds of millions.

They are bribing European politicians. Not just any politicians. Luca Volonte, who has been accused now of receiving more than 2 million euros from our government, he wasn't just any politician. He was leader of the faction of the European People's Party in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Another case, CNN producer Eckart Sager. If you watch CNN, what CNN is doing? They are promoting this dictatorship. They are promoting this money, which is also coming from these offshore bank accounts. This money has been robbed from the people of Azerbaijan.

There has been a call to investigate how the Aliyev regime has also corrupted members of the EU Parliament. And I think it's time that the U.S. Congress investigates if and how Aliyev regime corrupts politicians, journalists, media, and the expert community in the U.S. Two former U.S. ambassadors are now on the payroll of the Aliyev regime. It's a shame. If I was an American, I would feel ashamed. It's not just about Azerbaijan. Aliyev became a symbol of corruption. It's a global symbol of corruption. Someone who commits crimes against his own people. Someone who is very effective.

Azerbaijan's a small country. For a small country, Aliyev is extremely effective in helping to spread narratives like Kremlin propaganda spreads around the world. What does Kremlin propaganda say? That the West is corrupt. It's in decadence. It's corrupting. Everything is relative. We have corruption. They have corruption. What do you want from us, right? This is exactly word for word what Azerbaijani state propaganda says every day to 10 million people in Azerbaijan and around the world. It's not just the 10 million people living in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis are spread around the world.

So Aliyev is not a friend. He is an enemy. In my view, it is extremely important to talk about sanctions against Aliyev, because he is on the top of this criminal pyramid. He became a symbol. It became fashionable today to be a dictator, to be authoritarian. You know this here in the U.S. You know in Europe. Journalists are not just killed in

Azerbaijan anymore. They are killed in Europe. They're attacked in the U.S. And if you think, conservatives or Democrats, that just focusing on the U.S. will save the U.S., well, I have bad news for you.

The very reason that the frontlines of freedom of expression, democracy, freedom at large are not in this post-Soviet space anymore but, in Hungary, in Poland, in the U.S., in Britain, in France, is because for two decades European and American politicians thought that the best way to deal with people like Aliyev is to avoid escalation. Every time when some media outlet has been shut down, some politician has been killed, a political activist has been jailed, what was the reaction? Statements of 'we're deeply concerned,' accepting the reality, signing more contracts, more business, energy issues, and security issues.

All this backfired, because you have to understand, leaders like Aliyev, they have this gangster mentality. Aliyev doesn't say anything bad about Russia or Putin. He himself and his entire propaganda use very tough language against Europe and against the U.S. They shut down Radio Liberty in Azerbaijan. Even Putin didn't shut down Radio Liberty in Moscow. He thinks that these are weak leaders. They cannot do anything to him. He can bribe American and European politicians into accepting his way of life.

It's not just his way of life. This is the way of life and thinking supported by all dictators around the world. And this is coming to your home. This is in the U.S. now. This is in Europe now. If you are Le Pen and if you are supported by another dictatorship, you can go to the bank and take millions to fund your campaign. Now, show me the bank where you can go if you want to become president of Russia, if you want to become president of Uzbekistan, if you want to become a president of any other dictatorship—to fight against a dictatorship. Is there any bank you can go and take so much money?

So dictators became, like Aliyev, again, much more creative. The entire global civil society infrastructure of supporting freedom—we have to accept it—became more outdated. I really would like to thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission, Chris Smith personally, many congressmen and people in the U.S. Government and in Europe, who understand this and try to put, for example, Azerbaijani officials on the sanction list and who try to put Russian officials who violate human rights in Russia on the sanction list.

But unfortunately, this is not mainstream political decisionmaking. You know, much more needs to happen. So, again, I would like really to repeat that it is extremely important to personally put Ilham Aliyev on this sanctions list to show, for example, not just to Azerbaijan, not just to send a message around the world, but also to send a message here in the U.S., at this difficult time, to show people in the U.S. and around the world, what the U.S. is really about. That it's about values. It's about democracy. It's about human rights. And if you stop promoting this abroad, you will have these problems at home.

Thank you very much. [Applause.]

Mr. PRICE. Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Emin, for your powerful words and testimony, as you said, on behalf of people in Azerbaijan.

I want to take just a few moments in my prerogative as the moderator to ask a couple questions before turning over the floor to the audience for your questions as well. First, I'd like to address the question of the opposition, which some of you touched on. Obviously, the opposition that participates within the parliament, as you said, Audrey, is not a legitimate one or a credible one. But there are genuine opposition movements that

exist in Azerbaijan. And all of you, I think, discussed how many of them have fled the country and now exist in the diaspora.

Could you—from each of your perspectives—address what are the main opposition groups and what is the state of them now? And to what extent and how are they constrained and controlled by the government?

Dr. ALTSTADT. Okay. Well, one of the most potentially significant is the REAL Alternative—REAL, with which Ilgar Mammadov is associated. I'm saying that it is potentially influential because all the organizations that function or try to function inside of Azerbaijan are very sharply constrained in ways that my colleagues have both mentioned in terms of direct attacks on them or pressure on their families in and outside the country. One of the distinguishing features of REAL is that it tends to be a younger generation. It's that generation of people 40 and under who have not been as significantly shaped by Soviet system expectations, education, and so on, as the older generation had been.

I think that Aliyev and his group are, I believe, especially fearful of the younger group because there are lots of groups of young activists who are involved in all of the assorted color revolutions, so-called, starting with Georgia, which took place right next door when he first came to the presidency in 2003. And I think that that probably felt to him like the shot across the bow. I think that's potentially one of the most significant ones.

Mr. PRICE. Sorry, could you also address the opposition's participation or non-participation in the election? Was that a decision that was taken by the opposition? Were they constrained by the timing of the election as well? I know you talked about it a little bit, but I was wondering if you could expand on it.

Dr. ALTSTADT. Because the major opposition parties are the older parties with the older leadership, they've been effectively marginalized. Their offices that used to be downtown are now out in little rust-bucket suburbs and so on. They don't have the resources, they don't have the means to maintain a regular network. So for them, having a long time to prepare to contest elections, such as they are, is really essential for them. And so rather than try to scramble and put together with their minimal resources, their small networks, and so on something relatively last minute, I think that was a key reason why they decided to boycott.

Another reason, of course, as Emin mentioned, you really can't talk about elections in the way that we understand them in a Western country. And the opposition still understands this. The Milli Shura, the national council, has said these kinds of things. And so there's a sense of 'what's the point?' If we can't get out there and make our points, make our arguments, get ourselves into the public eye, then the next-best strategy is probably a boycott. And if they were not already so weakened and so constrained, there might have been other possibilities for them.

Of course, the additional problem, I suspect, is that lots of them are potentially discouraged. They've been fighting this fight for a lot of decades and they don't have any opportunity to move forward. So I think these components go into their thinking.

Mr. PRICE. Emin, want to say a few words on that?

Mr. MILLI. Yes. Regarding the opposition, well, again, it depends how you define opposition. There is no opposition in a sense that you understand opposition here in the U.S., because there is no condition. Opposition in the U.S. is a part of a system. It's part of how this country is run. This is not the case in Azerbaijan. Aliyev has created such

a system that opposition is branded 24/7 on the entire pro-government TV as enemies of the people, enemies of the state, all the time. These are people who are killed, jailed, tortured, forced into exile, travel ban is imposed on them. So you cannot talk about opposition.

You have a group of citizens—various groups, individuals—who are not giving up the fight inside of the country and outside of the country. And I am actually optimistic about the prospects of change in Azerbaijan, because REAL is one of the political groups who potentially has power to lead the change when the situation is right. So there are a lot of very educated, very talented experts, and politicians. This is another argument that kills everything that the government propagates inside and outside of the country, that there is no one except Aliyev who can run the country. This is just a lie.

There are also, you know, quite experienced, again, expert community inside and outside of Azerbaijan. There is a new phenomenon of bloggers and activists abroad. As Maran explained, many people had to flee. For example, Ordukhan is one of the most effective communicators and political activists who lives in the Netherlands. He communicates, alone, with 1 million people every week. Some of his videos get hundreds, thousands of views. He is not alone. There are several other bloggers like him. If Meydan TV communicates every week with 1 million people, people like Ordukhan alone communicate with hundreds, thousands, and up to 1 million and sometimes more than 1 million people inside of Azerbaijan.

This has never been the case before. And I ask myself a question: If people of Azerbaijan are so happy about this development and stability as Aliyev and his propaganda states, then why would people watch Ordukhan or Meydan TV or other bloggers who basically expose corruption, expose how the government and its officials treat ordinary citizens, the people's social problems, what people are facing. The reason why Meydan TV is popular is because we are just showing how people are living their everyday lives. That is the most popular content we have.

But when we show who is really vice president, the wife of the current president, Mehriba Aliyeva, just one video gets 1.5 million views, which is 15 percent of the entire population of Azerbaijan. When we showed a video of Ilham Aliyev's old and rotten team, 1 month ago we published such a video, it had 800,000 views, which is 8 percent of the population. And by the way, I think president and his team watched it, because recently Aliyev actually did appoint five younger and more educated ministers.

So my point is, there is genuine movement inside and outside of Azerbaijan. And Azerbaijan doesn't live in a vacuum. I told you about the history, heritage of this country. And despite all the attacks, organizing against people inside and outside of Azerbaijan, this movement is growing. It has never faded away. And the people are gathering their courage and have no doubt, there are millions of unhappy people in Azerbaijan who are waiting for the moment to show up in the street and get rid of Aliyev. So this will happen. It's a matter of time.

And in my view, policymakers here in U.S. and in Europe, the European Union, they shouldn't sit and do nothing and just get surprised when things change in Armenia, or get surprised when everything changes in Ukraine, or get surprised when things change in Georgia, or in other dictatorships. They must start believing in the values on which United States of America is based, what made America great. You really have to believe in this. And you have to integrate it in your policies abroad as well, in regard to dictators like Aliyev as well.

Mr. PRICE. And Emin, could you also address the state of access to information inside of Azerbaijan? I know your outlet has been blocked by the government. Does it remain blocked? What other outlets are blocked? What's the state of independent media within Azerbaijan?

Mr. MILLI. Well, the government monopolizes the entire TV, this classical TV infrastructure in Azerbaijan. They like to make statements. This is Aliyev's take at every Davos, at every forum that there is internet freedom in Azerbaijan. We have to understand that, Ordukhon can say later what is internet freedom. Even from the Netherlands—and the government tries to stop him in that by attacking his relatives and people who speak up on the internet. They are arresting and torturing people who write Facebook statuses. They blocked Meydan TV's website, Radio Liberty Azerbaijan Service website, Tehran TV website, Azadliq newspaper website, and many others. They are trying to block the information. They are not succeeding. They don't understand it. They have even shut down the entire internet.

And this is my message to policymakers here in D.C., and also to the government of Azerbaijan. All of you have to understand. In last 5 years—Meydan TV is a great example—they have been threatening me personally with this. They have been jailing my relatives. They have kidnapped our journalists. They blocked our website. They attacked us in every possible way. But every year, we just doubled our audience. So these repressions have never worked, and they will not work. So the only problem we actually have to grow and reach 60–70 percent of people in Azerbaijan is not Aliyev's repressions, it's our lack of resources.

My entire thinking now is can we actually create more resources so we can hire more journalists within and outside of Azerbaijan, citizen journalists—we have a huge network of citizen journalists. People in every corner of Azerbaijan feeding—sending us videos. The people became journalists, you know, because they jailed, killed, stopped, and silenced so many journalists. So the citizens became journalists. It's even more powerful than any media could ever imagine.

So they are trying, of course, to stop access to information. But the thing is, this is the problem for dictatorships, the more they try to close the free space, the more hunger for freedom they create, and the more people are interested in having more freedom and working for this and sacrificing for this. So this is what they tried. But they are failing. And I think the policymakers here have to understand these trends. They shouldn't be behind the trends. You know, they should be on top of those trends.

Mr. PRICE. And, Maran, could you discuss a little bit more about the restrictions that NGOs face, and religious organizations, as you mentioned in your testimony?

Ms. TURNER. Sure. Well, as many of you in the room are probably aware—and I touched on in my opening remarks—there was a series of NGO laws that were passed a few years ago. This was not unique to Azerbaijan. This was a wave that we were seeing across the region. And laws of these types have actually been in various countries, like India and China, for a long time. But what we saw was a real enthusiasm, particularly in Eurasia and especially in Azerbaijan. And they essentially implemented a series of laws that required organizations to register with the ministry of justice, and then also required them to register any grants they received. And what NGOs found when they tried to comply with these requirements, was that they couldn't get registered, that in fact there would be lots of delays, or the registration would be lost, et cetera.

So many of them were just, frankly, not able to register. And then even in some cases where they had registered, and even tried to register grants they were receiving, it didn't matter. These laws were passed with a real purpose in mind, and it was to really go after the leaders of civil society organizations. The cases that were brought against these individuals, bizarrely, were actually combined in one large case, I believe it had the same case number. And in the same case, they went after international organizations like Radio Free Europe and, I think, Open Society, and a few others. And the prosecutions, as well, were just identical—completely identical. The exact same allegations, which included abuse of office and illegal entrepreneurship. And these were also levied against Khadija Ismayilova, for example, who was with Radio Free Europe. But she wasn't running the office. So it was just a bizarre allegation against her. And it showed that they really weren't trying that hard.

These laws are still in force. And this is why so many people had fled the country and are working from outside of the country. And this is, frankly, why Tbilisi, I think, has really come to the forefront of the Azerbaijani authorities. I mean, I think that they have been seeking dissidents out in Georgia for a long time and harassing people. But in recent years, because so many people have been using it as a base and the authorities weren't able to get their hands on them in Baku, they just walked straight across the border and went to Tbilisi. So they're moving further afield. As Emin astutely pointed out, this has greatly frustrated civil society. But it hasn't ridden the regime of them. They are still working. And again, as Emin said, there's plenty of journalists still working inside the country. It's a very encouraging sign to see how many people are still in that fight, and I hope that continues. And I know that they've got a lot of support from the individuals in exile.

And the situation's probably even more dim for their religious groups. There are so many laws that the government has passed that really allow them to harass just innocent people practicing independently of the state. And they use those laws to put people in prison, not just leaders that are organizing but also just practitioners and people that are particularly associated with clerics that are outspoken. And as I said, they're generally not political. This is usually much more social. Azerbaijan has followed that trend, where once upon a time it was generally just fabricated charges like drug charges, hooliganism, and whatnot. In recent years they've really started to, in some ways, follow the path of rule of law, ironically—which is to say instead of just making stuff up, pass some laws that are just Byzantine and almost impossible to dissect and understand, and then just apply them, across the board and with little attention to how they're actually applying those laws.

Mr. PRICE. Thank you. I'd like to give the audience an opportunity to ask questions. Edwin here will pass around the microphone to anybody who's interested. I think we have a hand here in the back. If you'll wait for the microphone just for a second, because that way the folks on Facebook Live can hear as well.

QUESTIONER. My name is Abdullah Skarov [ph]. Just a few days ago, former U.S. Ambassador Richard Kauzlarich expressed his concern on social network and shared an article from the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. And I think the title of the article speaks for itself. It says how Israeli Jewish lobby groups in Capitol Hill are used by Azerbaijani Government as a secret weapon. And considering two sorts of Israel—oil is coming from Azerbaijan and multibillion dollar huge arms deals with Israel, and most recent escalating conflict with Iran, many Azerbaijani people believe this kind of inconsistent calls for sanc-

tions or hearings, at best, are lip service or, worse, it's used after every big impact—thing like elections or huge oil contracts—to put the pressure—to buildup a pressure on the government to extract concessions. So what's your take on this?

Thank you.

Mr. PRICE. Well, I would say from the U.S. Helsinki Commission's perspective, I think I laid out in my opening remarks the consistency of our focus in light of the developments in Azerbaijan. Obviously, we respond to developments, we monitor commitments, and we highlight concerns where they exist. And that's been our practice, especially since the crackdown that began around 2013 and 2014. And we're here having this hearing in order to continue doing so.

QUESTIONER. Just one small additional. Emin Milli mentioned about corruption. There's multibillion-dollar corruption and violence. There are federal officials, local officials. Where this money's going? This multibillion dollars is usually siphoned out of the country. And in this case, it's reflected on arms deals, so are these arms deals with Israel. So the money is not staying in Azerbaijan. Nobody talks about these Jewish lobby groups in D.C. No one talks about where this money goes. They just inconsistently point fingers at the Azerbaijani Government.

These sanction calls have been on the floor before. Where did it end up? They are not consistent. They go nowhere. It is just coming after elections, these hearings, these talks, good, it's closed. And, again, another oil contract. Some talks here and it's closed. And my thought is, where this is going. Are you consistent with your sorts of opinions on these human rights issues? Many people believe democracy in Azerbaijan is sacrificed. It's not a priority for U.S., as they are just used as a tool.

Mr. MILLI. So I think everything Abdullah [sp] said is legitimate. And this is unfortunately the reality of global politics today, and not just in regard to Azerbaijan.

But I want to make just one point, which is very important for audience here and audience back in Azerbaijan who are watching us live. In my view, it is, first of all, for the people of Azerbaijan, for the citizens of Azerbaijan to change the situation in Azerbaijan, to change the government, to keep the president and all these corrupt officials in Azerbaijan accountable. So this is first of all a mission of the people in Azerbaijan.

And everyone in Azerbaijan should understand this. Because unless we care about our own problem and we actually show the world by showing up, 1 million people on the streets, and demanding freedom and justice in Azerbaijan, why should the Israeli lobby care? Why should U.S. congressmen care? Why should the U.S. Government care? Of course, I'd make the argument that they should care, but to be honest with you—and I think everyone in Azerbaijan should be honest with himself or herself—that it is, first of all, our problem. Unless we change, unless we show courage and show criminals who are unfortunately occupying our government their place in history, this will not change much, unfortunately.

Dr. ALTSTADT. We hear a lot about the U.S. Government does or doesn't do that, or a government does or doesn't do that. Government-to-government relations do matter. But it is also important to recognize that there are groups and factions within governments and within societies in and out of government that are really working to support dictatorships. And there are those that are fighting against those dictatorships, and they're trying to promote democracy and human rights in whatever ways that they're able to do that.

And so in a sense, this case we're looking at today happens to be Azerbaijan, because we all work on Azerbaijan and that's our focal point.

But in the same way that dictators learn from one another across international borders, the human rights community and the pro-democracy community supports each other and they learn from each other as well. The lines are not only inside of individual countries, although they are and they must be, but there's really a much more international, a global division between people who favor dictatorships and favor supporting dictatorships by saying, oh, we can work with these people—which sounds chillingly like the 1930s.

And then there's the other faction that says, no, we don't accept all of that. We're interested in the ideals of democracy and human rights, even though countries that support those may do so imperfectly. And so the real question is, which side are you going to be on?

Mr. PRICE. I think we have a question up here in front.

QUESTIONER. My name is Ordukhan Teymurkhan. As Emin Milli said, I am a political activist and video blogger in Azerbaijan, but I'm abroad. And as he told you, my family is regularly, in the last 3 years, getting terrorized—I would say terrorized by the Azerbaijani Government. And as Emin Milli said, the accusations are going on Aliyev himself, Ilham, because I know a hundred percent all the orders are given by himself. And I would say thank you very much for Helsinki Commission that you are organizing these kind of discussions about the corruption and dictatorship of Aliyev.

But at the same time, some European countries and even the U.S. Government is playing double games. For example, about the sanctions—everybody knows that Aliyev, himself and his family is corrupt hundred percent, because even in The Guardian 2 weeks ago, in the newspaper they put that the two daughters of Aliyev, Leyla and Arzu, invested 110 million euros in Dubai for one palm island. They both want an island, and on one island, more than 20 houses. Why? Why can't the European countries and the U.S. Government put sanctions on these corrupt families? And they have to start from Aliyev, Aliyev himself, and then the other ministers and judges, as he said. And even they didn't say anything about when Ilham Aliyev appointed his wife as a vice president. And the European—in the countries, in the Western countries, democratic countries said nothing about these things.

And the elections—in one hand, in European countries we say we support democracy and human rights and we support only the humanity. And the elections in Azerbaijan, after the elections, everybody knew that he got 68 percent of votes. Can you imagine? And in one country even—no one is getting this kind of percentage in the elections. And in Venezuela, Europe—the U.S. Government didn't support the elections because the same happened in Venezuela as in Azerbaijan. And one day Aliyev comes and says, okay, the elections will be in April. And after the elections, the U.S. Government, even Trump, the President of the U.S., he sends a letter, congratulates Aliyev and says we are going to walk with you together, Mr. Aliyev. Why? Why not with Venezuela and with Aliyev as well?

I am very disappointed I couldn't speak as a speaker. As Emin said, 1 million people watch me in Azerbaijan and if there are four or five people, who can change the country in Azerbaijan, I am one of them. I may be exaggerating. I could speak and tell my people that we have to do it ourselves, but the democratic countries like the U.S. and the Euro-

pean countries have to give us, the Azerbaijani people, support—not the dictator Aliyev, because of oil and money.

I'm sorry for my long speech.

Mr. PRICE. Well, thank you for coming, and glad we have this opportunity to open the floor to the audience and to that sort of participation and to hear voices from the Azeri community.

I think there is a lot of interest here in sanctions. I was going to leave a question about sanctions more toward the end, but given the previous two questions I think it is fitting to discuss it now. There's been discussion of Global Magnitsky. Obviously, Global Magnitsky has provisions for travel bans and asset freezes for egregious human rights violations and also for levels of high corruption in the government.

I was wondering if the panel would perhaps like to talk about if there are ongoing efforts to pursue sanctions by the NGO community since NGOs have the ability to provide leads and information and evidence to the Department of State and to our Treasury Department. And also what obstacles they believe stand in the way to the application of sanctions against Azerbaijan?

Ms. TURNER. I guess I'm the first to use the term Global Magnitsky, so I should speak. In short, the answer to your question is yes, there certainly are conversations among organizations here in Washington—and not just Washington. The U.S. is not the only country to pass Global Magnitsky legislation. A number of others have as well, including the United Kingdom, and there have been some recent extensions of that. And there have been quite a lot of discussions in both these countries about how they should be used, and there's a lot of coordination, which is important.

I would say, sadly, the main obstacle is the fact that it's new and there's a certain amount of discomfort, I think, in the administration of maybe using them too liberally, and within that limited appetite there's a lot of people in a lot of countries that are all vying to put their names on a Global Magnitsky list. But certainly some names have been furnished to the State Department and to the Treasury Department, and there have been moves to try to promote within the administration to consider them closely, and they're primarily, I would say, police chiefs and people who've been directly accused of torture, but not just them. I mean, there's wider consideration of people within the various apparatus of government that is ongoing and systematically persecuting civil society. So, yes.

Mr. PRICE. Are there any other questions from the audience?

Here in the front.

QUESTIONER. Thank you very much for this opportunity. I would like us to focus on government, not on opposition, but I'm going to ask this question because I'm curious. Emin Milli said that the majority of Azerbaijani people are silenced, and he's right. This is the case. But when asking the question about opposition parties and movements near the outset, you mentioned Republican Alternative but you didn't mention others, especially Popular Front of Azerbaijan.

Now, to be clear, I'm not being supportive of Popular Front of Azerbaijan. But today this is the single political party who organizes demonstrations every month, and at least several thousand people come to those demonstrations, knowing that they are going to be subject to face recognition [technology]. Now, liking posts is good. Watching videos is also good. But to come to demonstrations in person, it needs more courage, right?

So, going back to the issue you've discussed, I think that if we are going to support the Azerbaijani people, we shouldn't try to silence political parties, people who are more active, who struggle in Azerbaijan. Because when you mention Republican Alternative but don't even mention Popular Front of Azerbaijan—which does, I believe, more now than others—that sounds to me like silencing the real struggle of the Azerbaijani people.

Thank you.

Dr. ALTSTADT. I suspect you and I both remember a time when the Popular Front was secretly meeting in the offices of the Academy of Science and the university, and they were the pioneers in the anti-Soviet movement back in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. And if you go back and look at some of the programs which they first articulated, what is striking and was always striking to me about the things that they wrote was that they really understood what democracy was about. They really understood the concepts.

And I think part of the reason was that these were largely historians and other intellectuals who had studied the First Republic and its leadership and its ideals. And they really had a good understanding of what this meant. They understand it wasn't simple. They understood that democracy is a struggle. Maybe we should treat it as a verb rather than as a noun. And I have great respect for that and for their tradition, and also the other parties that grew out of it and the National Council, which now includes many of those more traditional parties.

My point is that right at the moment, those parties have been effectively marginalized, that they've been pushed out of their offices. Their publications and their leadership have been constrained. Ali Karimli hasn't been allowed to leave Azerbaijan in over a decade. And all of these things, I think, have made it much more difficult for them to move ahead with agenda items that they now have. The——

Mr. PRICE. Sorry, could you say who Ali Karimli is.

Dr. ALTSTADT. Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, Ali Karimli has been the head of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party since the loss of Elchibey Rachmadli. And so these are an important cohort.

And I don't want to offend them or you, but they haven't changed their methods in a long time. And I don't think they're appealing in modern ways to a new group. That's why the younger generation's so important. That's why social media's so important, because it's this younger generation that needs to take up that baton and move forward.

In the early 1990s, people who were my teachers in Azerbaijan in the 1980s stuck their necks out. They stepped outside of their comfort zones. They got into doing political activism that was exceedingly dangerous for people who remembered Stalinism and remembered the midnight knock at the door.

Within a year, the next generation, people who then were in their 30s, guys who were considered to be the young radicals like Isa Gambar, who was the founder of the Müavət Party, and Etibar Mammadov, the Independence Party. These guys looked at the generation who were then in their 50s, who have now mostly passed away, and thought that they were much too conservative. They just weren't radical enough. They needed to go on and be more critical and do more of these kinds of things. And those people are now in their 50s and 60s and the next generation is coming along and saying you need to be more radical, you need to use different methods, and so on.

And so no disrespect to anybody intended—and these people were all my friends—so I don't want to offend them for personal and other reasons—but when I'm asked about

the activism for the future of Azerbaijan opposition—and agreeing that an opposition that we understand in a Western country doesn't truly exist in Azerbaijan—I think of that next generation that's pushing the boundaries and pushing the frontiers. And so I'm not silencing them. I'm trying to report what I think I see, and it's up to them domestically to find their own voices.

Mr. MILLI. Thank you very much for the question. I have personally huge respect for everything that Isa Gambar did, for all the struggle that Ali Karimli has shown in the last years. They have inspired and led ten thousands of people into struggle all these years under the worst conditions that anyone can imagine. But I think in the new generation of activists and the new generation of people who want to change Azerbaijan, they have quite different ideas about the tactics, strategy, methods of how this change can be achieved and what this change should look like.

Again, with all my due respect for all these leaders of opposition of Azerbaijan which have been in charge for the last two decades in leading this fight, I think it's very important—the best thing that these leaders can do now is actually support all of the young people in groups, within their parties and outside of their parties, and give a message to people of Azerbaijan that their struggle is not personal—it's not personally about Isa Gambar, it's not personally about Ali Karimli—because, unfortunately, if you talk about problems, we shouldn't just target the government—we should talk also about the opposition. There is also cult of personality in certain political parties.

And this is not something that the new generation accepts. Everyone should be the leader. This should be the message of any political activist, any political leader emerging in Azerbaijan. Anyone who comes and says, look, I'm so great, I'm fantastic, and I will lead you into the new life—like, this is not something that people of Azerbaijan are buying. And you can see it by the views and numbers of people that people are reaching.

And if people don't come to these protests in Azerbaijan that are monthly, routinely organized, maybe people doubt the tactics. Maybe they think that this is not effective. Maybe they don't see the point to come show up so government spies film them and then pressure them and their families. I think millions of people in Azerbaijan are ready to stand up and come and fight for freedom, but they are trying to understand how we can do it in one day, all of us together—one day to come on the street, finish this, and then go home and do our routine life.

And this leader should be ready that people are questioning it and they need to think about how they work with social media, how they communicate with people, what their attitudes are toward tactics, strategy and communication with the people. So when there are new political activists, political leaders or groups emerge and suggest something alternative, I think it's a process of national selection.

And you cannot say to someone, why do you do this or why you don't do this—it's a natural process. And time and history will show what can lead and who can change Azerbaijan and what this change will look like. But there are certainly, again, hundreds of people who are maybe not even on the surface now, but they are ready to lead the government, various ministers. They are experts. They are very successful abroad, all inside of the country in their own specific field, and they are just waiting for this moment that Azerbaijan will change, and then we will all see that we are hundreds, thousands of people who can make ministries, bureaucracy, political parties and new civic groups.

Mr. PRICE. I think we have time for one more question. I'm going to take the woman in the back, please.

QUESTIONER. Hi, I'm Cathy Cosman. I used to work at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Thank you so much, Maran, for bringing up the issue of religious prisoners, the majority, as they are, in all post-Soviet states. And I want to point out that the vast majority of political prisoners, or religious prisoners—however you want to call them—prisoners of conscience, who by definition have not used violence or advocated for it, are independent Muslims. And both human rights groups, civil society, government groups, with the exception of the organization where I used to work, do not pay attention to Muslims. And I really think this is not only a flaw from the point of view of human rights, but it's also a huge strategic error, because then by ignoring the problems of Muslims, be they still living under onerous and unfair legislation, or all the more so if they're imprisoned for their independent religious views and activities, as Muslims, they of course will be alienated from the West. And I think that's something that none of us want, I hope.

Mr. PRICE. Thank you.

I would also just comment that Congressman Smith's H. Res. 537 calls for the U.S. administration to pursue potential International Religious Freedom sanctions, which are travel bans against the worst violators of that fundamental freedom within Azerbaijan. So there's definitely an intention to that on the part of Congressman Smith's resolution.

Emin, if you'd like to say a last word, and then I think we'll wrap up.

Mr. MILLI. We have very courageous religious activists like Taleh Bagirzade, for example, who's languishing in jail in Azerbaijan. And I want you to know that he has quite tolerant and quite embracive views about the relationship between government and society.

And I think that Islam and religion in Azerbaijan has been historically quite different from many times. I mean, it's not for nothing that Azerbaijan was the first democratic country in the Muslim world, that created parliamentary republic, that gave rights to women to vote. And this is another propaganda of government, when they try to present situation in Azerbaijan as such, if Aliyev goes, there is this bunch of Muslim leaders and activists and Azerbaijan will turn into another Iran or Saudi Arabia. This is just not true. Anyone who traveled in Azerbaijan, anyone who lived in Azerbaijan, people when they come here, they're actually a bit surprised that the level of secularism in Azerbaijan, it goes beyond what this government thinks about this or can do about it, you know? It is just in the DNA of the history of Azerbaijan—and let's say tomorrow Aliyev is gone and we have a parliamentary republic, I'm sure there will be Islamist party and they will have probably 10–20 percent in parliament.

People understand very well the importance of the separation of state and religion. And I think a lot of people in Azerbaijan understand themselves as Muslims, and this is their constitutional right. But when it comes to practice, the majority of Azerbaijanis are not practicing Islam in the way, for example, that people in Saudi Arabia or Iran are practicing Islam. I'm absolutely sure that, as Maran also said, people who are practicing Islam in a way that it is practiced, for example, in Iran or other Muslim countries, they have major grievances. It's about injustice. It's about how government treats its own citizens regardless of them being Muslims or not Muslims.

And as long as this problem exists, this helps the radicalization of this minority, and it doesn't help the development of Azerbaijan. The situation is not as the government tries to present it, especially here in the West, in the U.S., in Europe. And just one trip to Azerbaijan would be enough to understand what kind of society is Azerbaijan. So this government, it stops Muslims, everyone in Azerbaijan from the next stage of development, unfortunately.

Mr. PRICE. I'm extremely grateful to our panelists, all of whom traveled fair distances to be here with us today. I'm especially grateful to Emin Milli. I think one of the great opportunities that we have with these briefings is to feature people who have been on the ground doing the difficult work of defending freedom and spreading free information, and at a very high personal cost oftentimes. So I'm grateful for your presence and the presence of the other Azeri activists who have spoken here today.

And I thank you all for your attendance here and for all those who have watched live on Facebook Live. The briefing is hereby adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:05 p.m., the briefing ended.]



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