

Ambassador Matthew Bryza

Interview with Radio Liberty

Baku, Azerbaijan

February 25, 2011

Radio Liberty: Tell me how things are going. You are quite busy, I see in your ambassador capacity. How is it going? What did you start with? I guess there were lots of things piled while there was no ambassador here. What was the most important that needed your involvement and what did you start with?

Ambassador Bryza: The first thing I did was to focus on organizing our embassy itself, and getting to know everybody. But also doing anything I could to ensure that our programs were coordinated and that people who were covering similar issues were all working together and not duplicating their efforts.

Radio Liberty: So you had cuts in the embassy?

Ambassador Bryza: Cuts? No. We didn't really have any significant changes in personnel, but I found that one of the key jobs of a manager and a diplomat is to help make communication easier, and ensure that people know what their colleagues are doing, and that people trust each other and are working well together. So that was number one priority because there hadn't been an ambassador for all that time. Though, our chargé d'affaires was terrific. Both Don Lu and Adam Sterling.

Radio Liberty: How about outside the embassy, like in the [inaudible]? What was the urgent things that had been waiting for you?

Ambassador Bryza: Well, I was unable to begin my full-fledged official diplomatic activities really until I presented my credentials a week ago yesterday to President Aliyev, and I can tell you what the main issues were and are. Nothing more important than doing everything we can to support the Minsk Group and help negotiate a peaceful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. So that's in the area of security.

There's also a great deal to do on energy. This will be a very important year for the companies and countries that are trying to build southern corridor to connect gas in Azerbaijan and beyond to Europe.

Finally, an urgent issue is encouraging the continued liberalization and opening, and reform of society, of politics, of the economy in Azerbaijan. Internal reform.

I couldn't choose one of those as the most urgent or the most important because there has to be progress on all three for any of those sets of interests to be sustained in the long run.

Radio Liberty: Your appointment might be reconsidered in one year. Does it prevent you from starting projects, getting involved in long term activity?

Ambassador Bryza: No, not at all. I have been working in this part of the world for, as you know, many years. We've known each other for a long time. I have ideas and plans and begun implementing many of them when I was in my previous job. So I look at my tenure here as a continuation of the work I've begun in the past, and I'm honored to have a chance to continue that work in this capacity. Our democratic system and our Senate will decide whether or not to confirm me after the President has already renominated me, and I am anxious to stay here as long as our democratic processes will allow me to.

Radio Liberty: But that is when democracy hurts. People say here, commenting [on] your appointment.

Ambassador Bryza: I think that is a very nice compliment from people who I assume are wishing me good things, but I wouldn't say democracy hurts. When democracy is working, democracy doesn't hurt. Democracy does good things. And I'm here, by the way, thanks to our democratic process.

Radio Liberty: Let's go to the bilateral relations issues. First of all, what term would you use for bilateral relations? Is it strategic partnership? Are two countries strategic allies or just allies or just partners?

Ambassador Bryza: Each of those phrasings is subjective. They mean different things to different people. I will stick with what Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg said yesterday, since he's our boss, and he called our relationship a strategic partnership.

Radio Liberty: You said you will pay attention to the Minsk Group's activity and try to, and be working that area. There are a lot of negative feelings regarding this group. You as a former Co-Chair, what do you feel about the notion of disappointment that exists in this part of the world with the work Minsk Group done? And do you think there is still hope that they will manage to do something?

Ambassador Bryza: First I'd like to state very clearly that I'm not involved in the Minsk Group activities in any direct way. I'm an outsider now. I happen to work for the government of one of the co-chairs, but Ambassador Robert Bradtke is the co-chair, and I don't get involved in the actual negotiations.

What I can do, of course, is in close consultations with Ambassador Bradtke, help smooth the communications, help clarify our ideas when Ambassador Bradtke thinks that's necessary.

When it comes to disappointment, I think it's completely natural for people to feel disappointed until any negotiated process reaches its conclusion. And disappointment is felt on both sides about the conflict.

But what I do know from my own experience inside the negotiations, and now from the outside, is that there has been significant progress made. If we look back at where the negotiations were in say 2005, in the beginning of that, or 2004, the process didn't even exist. It had reached a stopping point. And since then a set of very constructive and hopeful ideas have been elaborated. The Madrid Principles, now they've been worked a bit more. And I'll say progress has been made and is being made.

The process is long because the issue is so important, in fact more important than any issue in the region, is peace.

Radio Liberty: So we are not in deadlock on this issue.

Ambassador Bryza: That's right. I'd say we are not in deadlock. And I'd refer you to the Co-Chairs' last statement where they said there has been progress, or progress was made at the last round of meetings.

Radio Liberty: I'll definitely ask them what the progress because I really wonder. We all do.

Let's go back to the partnership. Partnership is two-way process. What are the expectations from this country? From the U.S. side, and what U.S. may offer in return.

Ambassador Bryza: First I'm not sure I'd call them expectations. It's more mutual understanding on both sides. I think both sides understand that the other side and it shares strategic interest in the areas I talked about in the beginning, on security, on energy, on internal reform. And both sides I guess in this case do expect the other side to speak clearly, openly, constructively, and to make sure that our efforts are pursuing coordinated strategic goals.

More specifically on security we are both working together, of course, to try to bring peace to the region. I mean we, as countries. I'm not a co-chair, but as countries. Also we're working together successfully to combat terrorism. And we're working together as well to facilitate the international coalition fighting in Afghanistan.

On energy, it's a longstanding area of cooperation where we are working together so that our European allies have a diversified supply of natural gas so that they feel safer, both politically and economically.

Finally on internal reform we're working together to make sure that Azerbaijan establishes true stability. Stability that is based on freedom of its people and based on the realization of the full creative and economic potential of the citizenry of Azerbaijan.

Radio Liberty: I will actually put it simpler. You mean fighting monopolies, liberalization of economy, and more freedoms for citizens?

Ambassador Bryza: Absolutely. Number one: democratization. There is long-term stability when there is legitimacy conferred by a democratic process. The challenge is to encourage democratic change that helps a society evolve in a way that sustains stability.

And we know the full range of freedoms we always talk about. Media freedom, freedom of assembly, we talk about electoral processes as well. And what I'm really interested in is working together at all levels of Azerbaijani society. Yes, the government, but also elites in Baku from business, common people out in the regions, whether they're farmers or medical professionals or teachers, to build a culture of democracy rather than thinking only about the mechanics of democracy.

Media freedom is, of course, a crucial part of this equation, and what you do is helping to build evolutionary democratic progress in Azerbaijan.

And it's also important that people far from the center of political life in Azerbaijan or any country take responsibility for their own economic lives. Improve their economic situation. Group together to take care of their surroundings, of their property, and attract investment to their communities. Do things, in other words, based on their own initiative rather than waiting for someone in state authority to fix problems. That's also part of democracy.

Radio Liberty: As you said, you've worked in this part of the world many years. How do you describe your own experience with local media? Will you be in touch with media as often as you were before? Or your capacity demands different policy or different strategy?

Ambassador Bryza: I hope to be as open as ever, because I believe that to show respect to a society it's important to convey one's ideas through the media to that society.

My experience with professionals like you has been great. My experience with others, I won't say where or who, has not always been great. It angered me when I would say something in one of the languages I speak, say English; it would get translated into Russian or another regional language; then translated back into English, the language in which I originally spoke, and [translated] completely wrong. And when I would do my duty and say no, that translation is wrong, what I actually said in my native language is such and such, then I'd be accused of changing my statement or changing my position.

I guess it just goes to show that it's not only in certain political structures or economic structures where people sometimes behave unfairly and maybe not entirely honestly. But thank God there are professional journalists who uphold the highest ethical and professional standards.

Radio Liberty: I wanted to talk a little bit about Middle East and North Africa, what's going on there. Eyes turn on the region. Some thinkers suggest this opinion that the U.S. and actually the rest of the world have been deceived, have had a wrong stereotype about those countries. That the only alternative to dictators are radical Islamists in those countries. Then when protests started, protest electorate just occurred to be, like we thought that they exist. Do you share

that observation? Do you agree with that observation that the stereotype that existed before was wrong and it's basically impacted or affected policy of the U.S. also toward those regions?

Ambassador Bryza: There are many interpretations of U.S. foreign policy. In my experience encouraging and pressing for democracy has been constant since I began my career in 1989 in Poland as Solidarity was just taking power from the Communist regime. My whole career has been one of working in places where this democratic evolution as taking place.

When I worked in the White House in the last administration, some people actually criticized the White House for pushing too hard on democratic change, and some outside observers said we're naïve because we believe too much in democracy. I don't think it's possible to believe too much in democracy.

When it looked like President Mubarak was maybe going to refuse to leave office I saw some criticism of President Obama that he believed too much in democracy and pressed too hard for Mubarak to leave. Now we see that President Obama of course was right and we have to always be pressing for long term stability through democracy.

Radio Liberty: The events in North Africa, they probably prompt some changes in the policy, or maybe I'm wrong. But what are those changes if there are in the U.S. foreign policy or in U.S. policy toward those countries and overall, in other countries as well? Does the U.S. plan now to work more closely with civil society, with the invisible groups of the society or to look more in-depth to the civil society and other groups in the region? And how it will change the policy overall?

Ambassador Bryza: Again, I think in general U.S. foreign policy has been consistent in the modern era in supporting democracy everywhere possible. And I should probably focus most on Azerbaijan. Here like in many countries of the world, in fact like in all countries, we offer strong support for civil society where it needs support, and strong partnership where civil society is already vibrant.

So I would in simple terms say what has just happened in the Middle East and North Africa, and is happening, validates our approach of all these years.

Radio Liberty: You came here in the middle of the anti-corruption campaign declared by the government. And you said, you praised those efforts I your first

meeting with journalists. And how specifically the U.S. and maybe the embassy or you as an ambassador can be helpful? You've said the U.S. is ready to help in this regard. How specifically you can be helpful in this regard? And if possible, be as specific as possible.

Ambassador Bryza: That's actually a great question. There are two general ways we can help, as in so many diplomatic initiatives. We can offer diplomatic support, political praise or criticism, and we can offer programmatic support or technical assistance. So you're hearing the diplomatic support. We welcome what's been begun. Anecdotally we're hearing about positive steps from many circles here in Baku and out in the regions. And we hope that those steps will be deeper and broader and will be sustained, will continue.

Assuming the process continues, then there's technical assistance we can offer, in effect continue, because we've been doing a lot of this already. So we can continue to provide and even provide more advisors in the area of taxation reform, of judicial reform, of application of law, and all sorts of other reforms of government regulations. And even more specifically, I think we can concentrate on a couple of very important issue areas. In my mind those are education, health care, and women's rights. These are the issues that I think have the biggest impact on every Azerbaijani's daily life and are the areas in which, as honesty and cleanliness come to the surface, Azerbaijanis will feel closer and closer to their government and vice versa, and then we'll see democratic evolution create stability throughout the whole society.

Radio Liberty: In one of your previous answers you were talking about giving more chance to people to realize their creative and to give them chance to use all economic opportunities which goes under the monopoly issue. And in fact corruption is not just bribes and it does not only occur in the hospitals and the schools. There is much bigger corruption that needs to be addressed as well, which maybe involves high level officials of the country. How the U.S. can help Azerbaijan to improve its record in this regard?

Ambassador Bryza: That's a very difficult question. It's one that I don't have an answer to because it's a question about the actual political processes and sovereignty of the state.

What I know is that we can do the things that I've talked about already and accelerate what we hope is positive momentum within the society and help push

these emerging processes as far as they can go. To put it a different way, we can help those people who seek our help.

Radio Liberty: Now I'm going to use the "W" word, which is WikiLeaks. [Laughter]. The cables that have been published, they proved one more stereotype wrong, which is the U.S. doesn't know things happening in these countries. And so what we read from the cables is that diplomats are aware, they make their bosses in Washington aware of the problems and of things happening here, but on the other hand, and it's good to know that, like things are known. On the other hand it creates a lot of criticism about the tolerance issue, like specifically criticism regarding the U.S. work with corrupt officials in the regions. These criticisms have been reflected in media a lot, there were a lot of articles in Washington Post, New York Times, the U.S. officials have been criticized for being friends with corrupt dictators, corrupt officials of different countries, including Azerbaijan.

What is your response to that criticism?

Ambassador Bryza: Number one, I'd say it's a surprising interpretation. Many of the articles I read approached this question from a different angle. Speaking about the world at large, not about any one country, many of the analyses I read were that actually American diplomats were doing a pretty good job in understanding the places where they lived, and that American diplomats were saying in private to officials the same things they were saying in public about those countries. But of course there are individual diplomats who write things or wrote things that may have been rumors or innuendo, that may or may not have been true. That's part of the freedom of the U.S. Foreign Service, that people can write what they truly believe. Sometimes they're right, sometimes they're wrong, like any person.

What I know for sure is how I try to lead this mission when we report back on what's happening in this country. I insist that our officers analyze, do their best to understand beneath the surface, and are always respectful, whether they're writing secret or confidential or unclassified telegram or a speech for me. So think, understand beneath the surface, and show respect.

Radio Liberty: Just before you submitted your credentials there was an arrest of a young activist, Jabbar Savalanli, and the group that defends his rights, they appealed to the ambassador to raise the issue when he will submit credentials. I don't know if you've had a chance to raise the issue and I would like you to

comment on that. Also with the ongoing issues of the political support for political prisoners, including Eynulla Fatullayev.

Ambassador Bryza: As any diplomat or ambassador, I don't feel at liberty to get very specific about what I discussed with the President of a sovereign country where I am representing my country. That's part of what I said a moment ago about respect. I expect people who work for me to show respect to Azerbaijan's citizens, government, and I must do the same. But part of respecting Azerbaijan is to press for democratic evolution, for human rights across the full spectrum. So I can just say, maybe a little bit more generally than you can like, that of course the full range of human rights and democratic issues are relevant to, and were relevant to my discussions. I shouldn't say are relevant to, that's too vague. They are part of... are part of my discussions.

Radio Liberty: So you would not go specifically into cases?

Ambassador Bryza: I won't for the media. I will in private, but I won't in a public presentation, again, as a sign of respect for the entire group of people I deal with.

Radio Liberty: On the record, this is on the record, and is there a reason why you cannot --

Ambassador Bryza: I just explained it. As a professional diplomat this is the way I must operate.

Radio Liberty: And you will not go to the specific, to the case of the arrest of journalists [such as] Eynulla Fatullayev's case?

Ambassador Bryza: I will happily repeat our policy. Again, I simply on principle will not divulge the details of a conversation I had with the President of any country, no matter what the topic is. I will say though, that all of these issues were, are, and remain important elements in our dialogue, in my personal dialogue with the leadership here of Azerbaijan, whether it be political, civil society, or other leaders in the community.

We talked a bit about media freedom and how crucial it is really to everything we're trying to achieve here.

Radio Liberty: Basically, if I will go into the other issue, it will take too much time, so I think I am done for this time, but I hope to see you again when you will spend more time in the country, and you are always welcome in our studio.

Ambassador Bryza: Thank you. I hope to visit you soon. Thank you.

#