

TRANSCRIPT

U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Morningstar

Remarks at Free Thought University

April 11, 2013

Baku, Azerbaijan

Ambassador Morningstar: Thank you very much. I am really happy to be here. It is great to see all of you today. As you all know, I had planned to visit Free Thought University's facilities today to speak to all of you over there, however, after the authorities closed AFU's facility last night, we talked with the organizers and it was decided that we would hold the event here instead. I will talk more about the closing of the facilities in a few minutes. But I also want to thank you for being flexible and for being able, with the last minute change, to be here today.

I want to say that it is a real honor, and I mean this sincerely: it is a tremendous honor to be addressing such a talented group of active and critically minded young people.

For several years now, the U.S. government and other international donors have provided support for the informal learning environment that the Free Thought University provides. Maybe some of you do not know, but the United States Mission to the OSCE gave its first Ambassadorial Award for Freedom of Expression over the Internet to AFU in the year 2010. This award recognized Free Thought University for its significant, sustained, and innovative use of the Internet, especially new media, to promote what are the key OSCE human dimension principles, such as democratic reform, civil society, independent media, human rights, and the rule of law. We said back then that we were proud to be AFU's partner, and we still are.

I have been hearing about you since I arrived as ambassador at the end of August last year. We often use Free Thought University as a venue for American speakers because it offers such a delightful forum for thoughtful and engaging discussion—the kind of thing you find at any good university campus anywhere in the world. And just as you would find at such campuses, discussions that are sponsored by AFU have included persons of varying political views from one end of the

spectrum to the other. That is what "free thought" is all about, being willing to listen to anybody's views.

So let me give you a brief overview of the U.S.-Azerbaijani relationship, and after that I would like to hear from you, which I think is far more important than anything I have to say.

I have often said there are three pillars to our bilateral partnership with Azerbaijan and that that encompasses a wide range of cooperation. One pillar is regional security, which includes the United States' role as a Minsk Group co-chair, seeking a peaceful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Counter-terrorism is part of the regional security pillar, as well as Azerbaijan's contributions in Afghanistan and other global security efforts.

The second pillar is energy security and the diversification of the economy.

Third, and critically, is democratic and economic reform.

When I list that as third, that does not mean that it is third in importance. These pillars are in no particular order. In fact, progress in each of these areas is dependent on progress in the other. We strongly believe that the best way to support regional security, energy security, and economic growth is by supporting the development of a vigorous democracy.

The long term stability of Azerbaijan is best ensured by continued democratic reform and by people like you being able to talk about ideas and openly work on those ideas and work towards a better future. We continue to urge the government to respect citizens' human rights, to provide space for an independent media, and to take the necessary measures to conduct free and fair elections.

I am a friend of Azerbaijan and I admire—I truly admire—its achievements since it regained independence in 1991. I have been coming here since 1995. I know and have seen the changes that have taken place, and there have been improvements in this country since 1995. I am confident that Azerbaijan, with your help, can reach its great democratic and economic potential, but only if the government respects

the right of peaceful protest, promotes the rule of law, and engages in meaningful dialogue with citizens to address legitimate public concerns.

I have been very troubled by the government's reactions to protests this year, including the arrest and interrogation of youths active in protests and civil society movements, including your organization. I am sure there are people in this room who have been detained and interrogated. I was dismayed last month to see three such activists give televised confessions contrary to internationally recognized laws. I was particularly disappointed to hear that authorities closed your offices just last night.

I know what you do. I know how much we have supported you. And I know that what you are doing is very constructive for Azerbaijan. I believe that respect for peaceful protests, independent and transparent courts, and government engagement with citizens, especially young citizens, to address your legitimate concerns are the best and most effective ways democratic governments can secure their fundamental stability.

I have also followed with concern the media attacks and government investigation into the National Democratic Institute—NDI. I want to reiterate our unequivocal support for NDI and its work in Azerbaijan. The insinuation that NDI and by extension the United States government, its main funding source, is seeking to destabilize Azerbaijan has no basis whatsoever in fact. NDI is scrupulously non-partisan in every country where it works. It works for partners across the political spectrum, including some pro-government groups, because its goal is democratic development.

The United States' support for democratic development worldwide reflects our values, but it is also based on pragmatic considerations. As former Secretary Clinton said during one of her visits to Baku, our closest relationships are with democratic states that respect the full range of human rights of their citizens. We want and need strong partners to deal with complex challenges around the world and strong democracies are our strongest partners.

With that I will open it up for questions and comments; and any topic is on the table.

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