

U.S. Embassy to Azerbaijan

Ambassador Richard Morningstar

RFE/RL Interview with Khadija Ismayilova

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Reporter Khadija Ismayilova (KI): Thank you for coming, Mr. Ambassador. It's a pleasure to have you here.

Ambassador Richard Morningstar (RM): I'm very happy to be here. It's always a pleasure to see you, Khadija.

KI: Let's start with the latest troubles that people have gone through in Azerbaijan—like human rights activists and journalists. So do you follow the situation? What do you think about it?

RM: We follow it very closely. And this is an area that we are always speaking about at the very highest levels of the government. You may remember that, when Hillary Clinton came here a few years ago, she said that the deepest relationships we have are with countries that are the most democratic. I think we are in a situation where we talk past each other on democracy issues. I think we clearly look at it differently. We are who we are and, when we see what we think are abuses, we are going to speak out about it. At the same time, we think that, oftentimes, the government tends to do be doing unnecessary things, and we can't understand often times why some things would even happen.

KI: Does that mean that you sometimes try to think with their minds and explain their actions with their point of view?

RM: Well, I do. I think I can put myself in the government's shoes at times. The government argues that they need to do the things they do in order to achieve stability. They say that Azerbaijan is in a very dangerous place—which it is. You know, drive three hours to the Iran border and two-and-a-half hours to Dagestan. So they argue that what they do is necessary in order to maintain that stability. You know, we have a different view. We think that things will be more stable by allowing more vibrancy in the civil society. And that that is in the interest of the people of Azerbaijan in the longer term. And, frankly, I think it is in the interest of the government of Azerbaijan. But I think we do look at things differently, and I think there are unnecessary things that happen sometimes that do hurt individual people. And do not really serve any benefit from the government's standpoint. And I want to emphasize that we talk about

democracy and human rights and they are very serious and we are going to continue to speak out about it. I did so at the U.S.-Azerbaijan convention in Washington. But from the U.S. standpoint, we also have to recognize that Azerbaijan has taken a different course than almost all of the post-soviet countries, stressing its independence and sovereignty. There are a lot of areas that we do cooperate in that are in the interest of both Azerbaijan and the United States. And we appreciate that. But these issues will continue to be there. And, hopefully, we can work towards resolving them. I hope that the government will take advantage of their Council of Europe chairmanship to make some progress and to take seriously the action plan that the government has agreed to with the Council of Europe.

KI: What would you call the success rate within the six months of chairmanship? What would happen to let you tell that it was successful?

RM: Well, there are trials that are going on now—and appeals. We've certainly been troubled by some of those trials—some of the verdicts have not been reached. I think fair results with respect to some of those trials and appeals would show progress. I think that fewer attacks on journalists during the period would show progress. I think the reopening of the civil society dialogue would show progress. A couple years ago, after one of Secretary Clinton's visits, the government agreed to hold a civil society dialogue. I think there was one session and there has not been one since then. I think that would help. There seems to be a huge amount of pressure right now on international NGOs that are working with respect to civil society. Investigations by the Tax Ministry, by the Justice Ministry. Again, I don't understand why these investigations are taking place other than to harass these organizations and the people who work for them. Lightening up on that, I think, would show progress. Freedom of assembly is part of the action plan. There was some freedom of assembly during the elections. Hopefully there will be less problems as far as that goes. There a whole host of areas- the action plan spells out—I think 10 or 12 areas. We could look at each one. I'm sure we could come up with some specifics as to the kind of things that would help.

KI: On the day Azerbaijan assumed the chairmanship, several things happened on that very day. The next day, they sentenced Parviz Hashimli to eight years in prison. In coming days, we are expecting sentences for Anar Mammadli and Abdul Abilov (the Facebook activist), and the Cabinet of Ministers issued more rules for international NGOs which makes their work even harder. It happened two days ago, and then the government city authority denied the assembly—

RM: That's what I was talking about earlier when we were talking about freedom of assembly.

KI: So the chairmanship has started and this happens after the chairmanship started.

RM: What can I tell you? I can only hope we'll see some improvement and I think we will know a lot more in the coming weeks. And we'll see what happens.

KI: Well—actually—there is an ongoing debate in what the U.S. can and cannot do about it. Can you enlighten people on that because some people have bigger expectations for the U.S. than the the U.S. can do. What can the U.S. do in general?

RM: I think you ask a very good question, and I can understand why some within the civil society would be somewhat frustrated and would be somehow expecting us to do more. First of all, I do think we are speaking out quite a bit. And—both publicly and privately—with respect to these issues. And the government knows well that these issues create irritants in the relationship that make it harder for us to accomplish some of the things that are in our mutual interest. So we certainly do that. I think it is important—whatever—even if we only can make incremental progress with the government—that we continue to speak out so that those in civil society that want to see constructive change here in Azerbaijan will at least feel as though they have morale support from us. So all of that is necessary. Can we wave a magic wand and fix it? No, we can't. We can make the case that it can have some ramifications with respect to our overall relationship, we can continue to make the case strongly that, ultimately, it is up to the Government of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani people as to what changes take place.

KI: Are there countries where the United States is able to do more and this is just the reality for Azerbaijan?

RM: It's hard for me to compare Azerbaijan to what we are doing in other countries because I am not directly involved in those countries. There are clearly problems here. I think there are worse countries. This is clearly not the worst country, but there are plenty of countries that are doing better. And one of the things that the government needs to consider is that—what makes Azerbaijan somewhat different from some of the other countries—Azerbaijan presents itself as a democracy. And there are worse countries. I want to be totally clear on that. But if Azerbaijan is presenting itself as a democracy, than it means to me that Azerbaijan has the responsibility to ensure that some of the things that have been happening here don't take place.

KI: There is a concern that a number of people who have been arrested in Azerbaijan are actually people who bring Western ideas and ideas of European democracy to the country. Do you share that concern that the pro-Western group is among the targets?

RM: I hate to put it in terms of pro-West groups being targets. I do believe that the government is not a monolithic government and I think there are some within the government who would like to undermine the relationship between the U.S. and Azerbaijan, and therefore make it harder sometimes for Western organizations or blame the U.S. or Europe or the West on various issues.

I think there are a lot of people with other view in the government as well—more positive views, so I don't want to label the whole government.

KI: When you meet with President Aliyev, do you point to those people?

RM: I'm not going to talk specifically about conversations with President Aliyev, but I have known President Aliyev for 19 years. I think, in spite of the issues that we've been talking about, that, personally, I think we have a very good relationship and I feel very free to talk to him about whatever I want to talk about and he will say whatever he thinks and—

KI: He is not among those people?

RM: First of all, I am not sure who those people are. And I particularly don't believe that he personally is among those people

KI: But there is also a discussion—especially in social media—about the vocabulary that the U.S. uses—especially that you use. And it's about the “concern” word. It turned out that, not only Azerbaijanis are concerned about the “concern” word, but in Ukraine, they recently started a hashtag “#deepconcern.” The time when “deep concern” is not a position, has not come yet in US diplomacy—is that right?

RM: I disagree with that. I think that people get too hung up over specific words and, frankly, I don't know Azerbaijani well enough—or Russian for that matter—to know how “concern” is translated, and maybe it has different nuances in Azerbaijani or Russian than it does in English. You can be sure that, ever since that actually quite funny satire about “concernitus” attributed to me (which I found very humorous and did not take any offense at) I have not used the word “concerned.” (Laughter)

KI: The other words like: “trouble,” etc... They translate into the same word in Azeri. (Laughter)

RM: I would ask you: What words are we supposed to use? Am I supposed to say, “Azerbaijan is a horrible place for doing these terrible unacceptable things, and it is going to ruin the relationship with the United States!” Is that what I'm supposed to say? I think that we do a good job at making clear how... (I want to say “concerned!”) how deeply disturbed we are by the events that are taking place, and we make it very clear to the government. And I think, incrementally, we've done some good with respect to certain cases. At the same time, I don't think it is in Azerbaijan's interest or in its civil society's interest or individual Azerbaijanis' interest that we say, “We don't like what you are doing, so we are going to walk away from Azerbaijan,” or, “We are going to make things so difficult for you on the human rights questions

that we recognize that we aren't just going to be able to deal with you." I think that would be bad for Azerbaijan. Who else is going to speak up for Azerbaijan sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis Russia—particularly after Ukraine? Who else is going to be a buffer to make sure that the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations are fair or don't go in an unfairly bad direction. Who else is going to work with Azerbaijan on (there are some) counterterrorism problems. I know that people think we care too much about energy. Yeah, we care about energy, but we are not going to see any Azerbaijani oil or gas, but we do think it's important as a counter to Russian monopolization in some places. If we just didn't care and walked away, I don't think that would be very helpful either. There has to be some kind of balance. I know that many—yourself included—wish that we would do more, but we do the best we can under the circumstances and I think we have actually spoken out more in the last couple of year than ever has been the case in the past on human rights issues

KI: Since you mentioned Ukraine, let's go to the post-Ukraine part of the questions. Has the Ukraine crisis affected the United States' views on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue? Has it changed?

RM: Not on the substance. It's affected our views from the standpoint that we believe that it is even more important to resolve Nagorno-Karabakh (it's always been important, but I think it's even more important now post-Ukraine crisis). It doesn't help Azerbaijan to have an area of instability (meaning the whole Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh). It doesn't help having that potentially explosive situation out there. Who knows—after looking at what Russia has done with Crimea and Ukraine—who knows whether Russia or a third party would take advantage of that situation? And it's important to get it resolved and we keep trying to emphasize that. We emphasize another thing with respect to Ukraine—which is essentially what I said before—that, given the situation now, Azerbaijan and the U.S. both have to work to protect the relationship because—as I said before—who else is going to stand up for Azerbaijan's independence? The United States and Europe, basically. And I think that the government—certainly many in the government, including the president-- recognize that the relationship with the U.S. is important. I think one of the unfortunate things from Azerbaijan maybe, is that the government does want to see anything happen here like what happened in Meydan Square, and that that—maybe—giving them (in some peoples' views) might be giving them an excuse to crack down even harder with respect to human rights and democracy issues. That's an unfortunate lesson from Ukraine, but I do sort of see a double track. "Yes, it's important to have a relationship with the United States given what's happened. On the other hand, we can never let that happen here," and that may be making it more difficult for civil society.

KI: So in your view, there is another lesson that the government could take from Meydan.

RM: My argument would be: I understand what you are saying, but if you take too hard a line and don't give enough breathing space to civil society, arguably, it's more likely that, at some point, there could be a real issue. It may not be today, but maybe 5 years from now, 10 years from now, or 20 years from now. But I think that's the risk if civil society is closed off too much.

KI: One thing the Ukrainian crisis told the world is how corruption can bring down a state

RM: That as well. Absolutely.

KI: ... And it shows how destabilizing it can be. Is the United States going to respond more actively to corruption challenges in the state?

RM: Well we always raise corruption as an issue and, again, the question is, "What can we do about it?" I do think that the government has made some progress with respect to day-to-day corruption issues that so can so infuriate individual citizens. I was talking to an Azerbaijani who works at the embassy earlier today, and I asked, "Do you still have problems with the police taking bribes if you are stopped for traffic?" And he said, "No," and that it's much better. "If you are stopped now, you need to pay a fine by using a credit card or you get something in the mail, but police are not generally asking for bribes," so he said. And I have heard that from others. There are still issues in the education areas, there are still issues in the health areas. But I think the ASAN service centers have actually been very helpful, and I hear that, universally, it has to become more widespread. In trying to be fair and objective. I think the government and certainly the president has realized that the day-to-day corruption can create problems within the society. I think they recognize that abuse by local authorities can go too far.

KI: There is another view on this. They say that, before, we had monopolization of the economy. Now, we have monopolization on bribes. So only those on top can get paid.

RM: It's an interesting point of view. Maybe the individual policemen aren't taking bribes, but I think even the government thinks that corruption is a problem at higher levels as well. There seems to be some action being taken against some relatively high-level officials as well, but it seems to be selective and there is still a long way to go.

KI: But corruption is not just petty bribes, it's also how to give people access to opportunities... equal opportunities.

RM: I think that's right and even apart from... I don't think you need to necessarily label that as corruption. I think the monopolization and the so-called oligarchic economy is a real problem, and that, for Azerbaijan to grow and be successful—particularly outside of the energy area (I

think Azerbaijan does a good job in the energy area). We all know and the president would agree that diversification is tremendously important, but there is not going to en—

KI: Do you take this issue up in your conversations with him?

RM: Sure.

KI: Does he take these issues personally because his family is part of the corruption?

RM: I believe he understands the necessity of diversifying the economy. The problem... (and I'm not going to say it's President Aliyev) but the problem is that steps that need to be taken so that entrepreneurs who go into business have the incentive and feel that, as they grow and become more successful, that they will not be interfered with by monopolized sectors. And, when I talk to younger business people, I think they see it opening up some, but it still needs to open up a lot more.

KI: There is an opinion that even anticorruption authorities worldwide—including embassies or the ambassadors—they are refraining to touch those issues because it concerns the president's family as well

RM: Well, I don't think we refrain at all from discussing the issues overall. Obviously, we are not in a position where we would be accusing any specific individuals, but we have been very strong in several areas: One, pushing for WTO accession, which I think will help open up the economy; constantly talking about problems with respect to customs and taxation which can make it very difficult to do business; to finally pass the competition code that means something, encouraging less interference with entrepreneurs and new companies as they are becoming more successful. I think we can work in all of those areas. It's not going to do us any good to say, "You're a bad person, you're doing this, that, or the other thing..." but we can certainly raise at all levels these issues. Some of our AID programs are working with young entrepreneurs, with women, in the agricultural area, with farmers and processes to try and get some independence there. It's the only way the economy is going to grow

KI: Some of the U.S.-owned hotel brands that are operating here—they refused to provide space for NGOs, for their events, and some of these NGOs are getting grants from USAID as well. Former Ambassador Richard Kauzlarich suggested that the US Embassy in Baku should never use these hotels for their events or help their businesses. What is your view?

RM: I agree with that. I don't know if I would state it quite that strongly, but there was one specific case that I don't want to get into where there are two sides to the story, and I am not sure which one is accurate. But we are making it clear to every hotel that if you have an American

name—even if it is a franchise and the hotel is owned by Azerbaijanis—that we will make clear to their headquarters back in Washington that it is totally unacceptable to refuse to allow organizations—that sign contracts, that pay according to the terms of the hotel—to not allow those events to take place. We can't put a gun to their head, but we can use our best efforts to cajole them and to work with their European and American headquarter. I—

KI: So I guess the 4th of July celebration will happen in a place that is open to everyone?

RM: And the 4th of July, “that happens in a place that is open to everyone” is in the garden of the US Embassy.

KI: ... because it used to be in the hotels that are not open to everyone.

RM: Well, at least certainly over the last 3-4 years, it has been in the embassy garden.

KI: We'll go back to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. James Warlick said six elements to achieve the peace there. Are they achievable?

RM: It's achievable if the countries involved (Armenia and Azerbaijan) have the political will to achieve it. There are two key points, ultimately. It's a question for negotiation and how things are phased and how it gets accomplished, and I won't get into details, but there are seven occupied territories. They have to go back to Azerbaijan. And I think we should be loud and clear about that. And that's—

KI: And that should be unconditional?

RM: As part of the negotiations. But any settlement will require those seven territories to go back to Azerbaijan and I think that Jim Warlick made that clear and that's clearly our policy. Yes- there could be a small corridor into Nagorno-Karabakh through Lachin. And that has to be negotiated. And when I talk about the seven occupied territories, I differentiate Nagorno-Karabakh only because NK, as a result of the final status, has to be determined as a result of those negotiations. And the sooner the two sides can get together and work out the concrete steps as to how to accomplish all of that... It's not as simple as I am saying. “How many territories could come back first? What kind of security guarantees would there be? Then would you do Kelbajar next? When is there ultimately some kind of referendum or determination as to the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh? At what point and time?” All of these things have to be negotiated, but none of it can happen without the two countries and the two presidents being committed to resolve that. We're committed to help that happen. We cannot force the settlement. Russia also has to be committed for that to happen

KI: But they can force it.

RM: I don't know whether they can force it or not, but they could prevent it. It's a good question: If the two presidents finally decided "Ok this is the plan and were going to carry it through," I don't know whether Russia could prevent that... I'm getting things a little circular... I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't think Russia can force either Azerbaijan or Armenia to sign on the dotted line. They could threaten military force, but it would be difficult to do. Maybe, that they could not prevent it if the two presidents were really determined. On the other hand, because of the pressure that they could put on both countries, maybe even more particularly on Armenia, if they decided to prevent it, there is a possibility that it could happen. It would be interesting to see if—if the two presidents could ever come to an resolution—whether Russia would try to prevent it or not. The other question is: Is Russia totally satisfied with the status quo right now? Because, right now, Russia has leverage on both Armenia and Azerbaijan and maybe continues to have the most leverage if there continues to be no resolution. I've heard people with a view that, Russia doesn't want war, they want no hostilities, but they may not want resolution, and I don't know. I think that, if the two presidents were to work together to try to reach a settlement, that it would test the Russians' resolve as to whether or not that would take place.

KI: How do you see in the post Ukraine period? Do you see that the level of independence of Azerbaijan: Has it grown in the past one year or Azerbaijan is now less independent than it used to be before Ukraine?

RM: I don't know if it is less independent. I don't think Azerbaijan's ability to conduct its own business in an independent way has changed much before and after the Ukraine situation. I think perhaps what's changed is the calculation as to risk, as to future interference with Azerbaijan. I'm not sure Azerbaijan has seen it yet. It could see it in the future. I think the Putin trip to Azerbaijan last summer was very interesting

KI: It was before the elections.

RM: It was before the elections. I think some read that that trip to have shown Putin saying "Yes. We'd rather have President Aliyev than anyone else at this point." I think that trip could be interpreted to be saying "Ok. You're independent. Let's cooperate as much as we can, but we recognize your independence." I don't know.

KI: Do you think Putin can give such reasonable messages? Like "We accept that you are independent?"

RM: Maybe. I don't know. I'm just talking off the top of my head. Obviously, I'm not in Putin's mind. I was not part of those meetings. Do you think that either Iran or Russia would

like to have common borders right now? In other words, if Russia were to, (I'm not predicting that this would ever happen) but even if Russia had the possibility to bring Azerbaijan back into its fold, do Russia and Iran want to have the same border at this point?

KI: I guess Azerbaijan should feel like a piece of paper between two blades of scissors.

RM: And you're making the point that the government makes all the time. They use that as the argument to justify the need for stability.

KI: Am I right that it's the last 3 months of your service?

RM: We're going to be leaving late summer

KI: I hope we will have chance to talk to you after the end of your service as an ambassador. I hope you will still be involved in the business of this region

RM: I'm sure I will in one way or another

KI: But you have three months to go. Do you have some goals to achieve? Just to get the, now to check with you at the end.

RM: If I could wish for results between now and when I leave, it would be a greater understanding and appreciation between us as to the importance of the relationship—which includes Azerbaijan's very brave maintenance of its independence. It includes cooperation in the areas that are in our common interests, but also that there be more of an understanding with Azerbaijan as to the need to open up society further to create greater stability and to avoid some of the unnecessary actions that again hurt individual people but that also create unnecessary irritants in the relationship because I can't understand any real benefit to some of the things that happen.

KI: Thank you again for coming today. It has been a pleasure. Is there anything you wanted me to ask and I didn't?

RM: I think we've covered everything

KI: Hope to see you again soon!

RM: I hope so. I enjoyed it very much. Thank you!

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