

Transcription for Public Distribution

Ambassador Morningstar

IREX Media Ethics Conference – Question and Answer Session

Park Inn, Baku, Azerbaijan

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Question (Interpreted): It is going to be a surprise question. But I cannot not speak about this issue. In his speech, Mr. Ambassador touched upon Khadija Ismayil's issue, but I think it is better not to have efforts to defend Khadija Ismayil because attacks against her intensify every time there are such efforts. Can't we stop the efforts to defend Khadija Ismayil to stop the terrifying attacks against her?

Ambassador Morningstar: I think it is unfortunate if, by defending the rights of any journalist, that just creates further attacks on that journalist. My own feeling is that it could be Khadija or it could be anybody else. But when journalists undergo fierce attacks it is the responsibility of clear-thinking individuals and governments to come to the defense of that person.

I said before that Khadija and other journalists say what they believe and that is what freedom of the press is all about. No journalist should suffer the indignities that she has suffered.

I also think that it is very much in Azerbaijan's interest as a country and as a government to avoid those kinds of attacks because they can only serve to damage the image of Azerbaijan in the world. There is no way that anybody can justify the kinds of things that have been said about Khadija on the internet. Total untruths. Total provocations. And, as far as I am concerned, indecent and unacceptable. I think that, when those things happen, one has to speak out.

Question (Interpreted): I must note that the issue related to elections—to the media's work during the elections—is put aside completely, and all the discussion is built around Khadija Ismayilova. I have a question. The ambassador spoke about the attacks against her. I also condemn interference to anybody's personal life. However, I would like to remind one case. When Azerbaijan's ex-president

Abulfaz Elchibey was very ill, Khadija Ismayilova was the media representative who wrote that he was suffering from a grave sexual disease. What do you think? Is this decent behavior? To speak against an ill person falsely, claiming that he suffered from sexual disease and was receiving treatment for it? Is this a decent behavior? I would like you to assess this.

Ambassador Morningstar: No, I do not think it is. And I am not aware of the specifics of what she wrote in that case, but any kind of personal attack like that are not right.

As I said before with respect to Khadija, I think there is too much discussion on Khadija. I agree with some things she says. I do not agree with some things she says. All I am saying is that the appropriate response is, in any case, is not the indecent assaults that took place over on some of the internet pieces. It is perfectly fair if someone does not agree with what Khadija says, or what anybody else says, to have a responsible rebuttal in the press to what she says. But not these incredible personal attacks that do not help anybody and, again, frankly, do not help the image of Azerbaijan.

I will also make the point that, a week or two ago, there was a critical article in the Economist on Azerbaijan. There was a letter to the editor that was submitted by... I forget who actually wrote the article, but somebody from the government. And I thought, even though I did not necessarily agree with everything that was in the letter to the editor, that it was a very substantive and appropriate response—A well written response. That is the way that freedom of the press should work. And when there is a reason for rebuttal, substantive objective rebuttals are the way to go—not personal attacks.

Again, nobody is perfect. We have problems in the United States, problems everywhere.

Question (Interpreted): Before, the U.S. Embassy in Baku used to implement programs in Azerbaijan to deepen freedoms of press and speech. They would send journalists from mainstream, opposition and independent media to the United States for exchange of experience, where they had dialogues and learned what the freedom of press was. Here, they used to organize a number of programs or

roundtables on legislation and various other issues. Do you consider restoring these programs? Thank you

Ambassador Morningstar: First of all I would like to do as much as we can to have programs as you describe relating to the media and professional media. I think what IREX is doing is a real example of that.

We do have a whole series of programs. Stephen Guice, who is our new public affairs officer replacing Victoria, is here. I am sure at some point that he would be happy to talk to you and others as to what all of the different programs are. This is a top priority.

The fact of life is that our budget money is due to decrease, so it makes it difficult to do maybe as much as we have done in the past. But I think it is something that we have to emphasize and continue to work on. It is an important factor.

Question (Interpreted): I wonder if the U.S. embassy monitors unethical behavior against itself in media?

Ambassador Morningstar: An interesting question. I do not think we specifically monitor the attacks on me. I certainly have grown to have a thick skin being here in Baku. Sometimes I feel that we are in a difficult situation because sometimes what we say can be annoying to the government and sometimes what we say, a lot of the opposition press and opposition people think this is not enough. So it is hard to get it right sometimes, and it is hard to create the appropriate balance between the kinds of issues that we are talking about today which are very important issues, as well as all of the other important issues that we have to work with in Azerbaijan.

We obviously follow the press. Again, not specifically as to what people say about me. I do not pay a whole lot of attention to that at this point, but we do compile various press clips every day from all of the media—independent media, opposition media, mainstream media. So we see those things.

That is why frankly I made the comments that I made before. It is so important that what we say is reported accurately. Particularly, when there are things that

relate to the United States and the U.S. embassy, check the quote or check the facts before reporting it so that it does not come out inaccurately.

I guess that pretty much answers the question. Thank you.

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