

Testimony to Lantos Commission
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National Endowment for Democracy
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I am grateful to the Lantos Commission for holding this very important hearing and for giving me the opportunity to speak about repression against civil society in Azerbaijan.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. Each year, NED makes more than 2,000 grants to support the projects of non-governmental groups abroad who are working for democratic goals in more than 100 countries. NED has supported civil society in Azerbaijan since the 1990s.

Political Context: Azerbaijan uses sophisticated diplomatic tactics to blunt international criticism repressive and kleptocratic system. In addition to “caviar diplomacy” including bribes, gifts and favors for foreign officials and parliamentarians, Azerbaijan is very adept at the use of diplomatic foils to remain in good graces of western governments even as it violates every norm and value that should underpin those relationships. In one famous instance an Italian MEP Luka Velonte was sentenced to four years in jail for accepting bribes from Azerbaijan to derail Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe (PACE) response to Azerbaijan’s human rights abuses.¹ After extensive investigation PACE disciplined the MEPs involved and Azerbaijan eventually lost its seat in the body.

Azerbaijan took a profound authoritarian turn in 2013 adopting legislation hostile to media and civil society and putting many prominent public figures in jail. Since Russia’s 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine Europe became more motivated to move away from Russian gas, Azerbaijan has grown even more adept at using these assets to preempt any attempt at domestic or international accountability. However, as research by Dr. Gubad Ibadoglu indicates Azerbaijan can only meet increasing demand for gas in Europe through swaps with Russia and Iran.² A new pipeline from Russia to Iran through Azerbaijan is also being projected.³

¹ For details please see report by European Stability Initiative “Caviar Diplomacy” <https://www.esiweb.org/proposals/caviar-diplomacy> and report by OCCRP “Azerbaijan Laundromat” [The Azerbaijani Laundromat | OCCRP](#) .

² Ibadoglu, Gubad, Three Key Factors Reducing Oil Revenues in Azerbaijan (August 09, 2024). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4920430> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4920430>

³³ [Russia, Iran agree on gas pipeline route via Azerbaijan, talks in final stage — minister - Business & Economy - TASS](#)

Similarly Azerbaijan uses the peace process with Armenia to avoid accountability for human rights abuses. There were expectations that permitting Azerbaijan to host COP would lead to human rights improvements and to a peace with Armenia. It was expected that the peace would be completed prior to the conference, instead the COP turned into an embarrassing confrontation with President Aliyev who used the occasion to praise oil and gas industry showing he did not share the basic environmental premises of the event. The desire to bring the conflict with Armenia to a close shaped how USG under the last administration approached human rights and democracy issues with Azerbaijan. Far from paving the way to release of prisoners, reform of restrictive norms, and a peace treaty Azerbaijan arrested more journalists, scholars and activities and at the same time strengthened ties with US adversaries such as Iran, Russia, and China.

Political Prisoners:

There are 350 political prisoners. (Please see the website [Anar Mammadli Campaign to end repression in Azerbaijan](https://free-anar.site) | [Https:free-anar.site](https://free-anar.site)) I wish I could name each one here. I will limit myself to three cases:

Dr. Gubad Ibadoglu

Anar Mammadli

Farid Mehralizada