



ARMENIAN ASSEMBLY OF AMERICA

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January 9, 2017

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
Chairman
The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Ranking Member
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Leahy:

As you prepare to consider the nomination of your colleague, Senator Jeff Sessions, to serve as the Attorney General of the United States, we would like to call your attention to several issues of concern, particularly as it relates to the undue influence of foreign governments on America's democratic institutions and the need to fully enforce the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) and ensure compliance of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

As highlighted in a January 3, 2017 *Bloomberg News* article entitled "Azeri Oil Money Got a Pass From This Ethics Committee," the columnist writes: "In May and June, 2013, a delegation of 11 U.S. Congress members and 32 congressional staff members visited Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, to attend a conference called 'U.S.-Azerbaijan: Vision for the Future.' It was ostensibly funded by two non-profit groups, from which the U.S. legislators and their staff were allowed to accept travel. The OCE [Office of Congressional Ethics] found, however, that the nonprofits received the money for the trip from the Azerbaijani state-owned oil company, Socar, and one of the groups -- paid \$750,000 by Socar -- had been set up just one month prior to the conference. While in Baku, all the U.S. legislators received 'rugs of various sizes and value' as gifts, and some legislators and staffers also got crystal tea sets and silk scarves."

All Americans are deeply troubled by such reported activities, which constitute a flagrant disregard for the law and strike at the core of our constitutional government through blatant foreign influence peddling. This is especially disconcerting given that Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev is the recipient of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project's first ever "Person of the Year" award.

A crude recent example of Azerbaijan's strategy to influence United States policy was its attempt to buy influence through the Azerbaijan Embassy hosting a Hanukkah event at the Trump Hotel in Washington, DC, which many organizations boycotted. The Aliyev regime is also engaged in this type of foreign influence buying to distract from its efforts to continue violating its ceasefire agreements with the Republics of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh - to avoid democracy and human rights issues there by eliminating the Christian Armenians. Azerbaijan's activities in the United States come at a time when the Aliyev regime continues to deprive its citizens of basic human rights and freedoms. Last fall, Human Rights Watch reported that the Azerbaijani government has renewed its vicious crackdown on critics and independent

groups. Per this report, "Arrests in Azerbaijan increased sharply as activists and other citizens spoke out about the economic downturn, currency devaluation, and inflation in early 2016, and ahead of a September constitutional referendum that expanded presidential powers, Human Rights Watch found."

Azerbaijan, rather than relent, continued to repress freedoms through changes to its criminal code, of which then Helsinki Commission Chairman Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) stated last month, "Make no mistake, anyone imprisoned under the new provisions of Azerbaijan's criminal code – which make online 'insults' of the president a punishable offense – will be a political prisoner. These new provisions clearly violate international human rights standards and Azerbaijan's OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] commitments."

Azerbaijan's caviar diplomacy is also amply documented in the December 2016 European Stability Initiative (ESI) report, wherein expensive watches, jewelry, computers, and large sums of money, among other gifts, were provided to several politicians from a number of countries in Europe. ESI states that "the ease with which democratic institutions and safeguards can be undermined has emerged as a fundamental threat to European democracy."

At a time when the U.S. is investigating Russia's attempts to influence America's election process, we must do all we can to safeguard America. As such, we are also concerned about emails discovered on WikiLeaks in which there is correspondence among campaign staffers discussing the legality of accepting donations from foreign governments, such as Azerbaijan, by FARA registrants. Such revelations are deeply troubling.

The Justice Department has brought some cases involving Azerbaijan through the FCPA, but much more is needed. According to the "Azeri Oil Money Got a Pass From This Ethics Committee" article in *Bloomberg News*, Azerbaijan continues to shell out over \$45,000 monthly to the Podesta Group, of which the columnist states "It's hard to tell whether it's this creativity and generosity or any real U.S. strategic interest that makes the U.S. overlook the country's brutal dictatorship. A combination of both is likely: Without the 'caviar diplomacy,' Azerbaijan might be considered too small to defy declared U.S. values and principles for its sake."

We prefer not to think that Azerbaijan's retention of the Podesta Group at hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to lobby for Azerbaijan is preventing such investigations. When it comes to the integrity of America's Constitution, the rule of law and our governance process, we must ensure that the law is duly enforced and that any attempt by foreign governments and their agents are roundly condemned and promptly prosecuted.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Anthony Barsamian
Co- Chair, Board of Trustees



Van Z. Krikorian
Co- Chair, Board of Trustees