

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 8, 2015

His Excellency Ilham Aliyev
President of the Republic of Azerbaijan
Presidential Palace
Istiglaliyyat Street 19
Baku, AZ 1066

Dear President Aliyev:

We write with growing concern on the diminishing space for both civil society and the freedom of press within Azerbaijan. In August, a number of us wrote to you expressing concern on the rising rate of politically motivated arrests. Since that letter, which highlighted the arrests and continued detention of Anar Mammadli, Leyla and Arif Yunus, and Intigam Aliyev, troublingly Rasul Jafarov and many more human rights activists and journalists have either been arrested or barred from leaving the country. Moreover, we have heard reports that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), of which Azerbaijan is a member, was ordered to close its office and that representatives from Amnesty International, an international human rights organization, are barred from entering the country. Even more troubling is your government's efforts to stifle the freedom of press in Azerbaijan, as witnessed by the closure of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) office and the imprisonment of investigative reporter Khadija Ismayilova.

Last December, Azerbaijani authorities sealed RFE/RL's Baku bureau under spurious charges clearly used as a means to stifle freedom of the press. After several months trying to negotiate a way to reopen its office, RFE/RL was, unfortunately, forced to announce recently that its bureau would close permanently. RFE/RL's mission is to provide a free flow of information and news to populations who otherwise would be restricted to official media only.

Your government's efforts to censor the media has earned the Committee to Protect Journalists' ranking as the fifth most censored country in the world after Eritrea, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia. Moreover, according to Freedom House's Freedom of the Press report, press freedom in Azerbaijan has been in decline over the past decade. Since RFE/RL's initial closure in December, we have heard troubling reports that its staff continues to be harassed and live with a fear of arrest. In the case of Khadija Ismayilova, on June 5 she marked the six month anniversary of her detention, which has yet again been extended, until August 24. Providing accurate, independent reporting is what its reporters, like Khadija, were admirably doing prior to this closure.

Over the past year, numerous human rights organizations have continuously raised concerns that there appears to be a systematic crackdown on human rights and independent civil society, including the freedom of press, in Azerbaijan. We join those voices and call on you to respect those fundamental rights by allowing for a more tolerant environment for free media like RFE/RL and to immediately release those journalists, activists and civil society leaders currently detained. Doing so will remove an important obstacle to strengthen US - Azerbaijan relations.

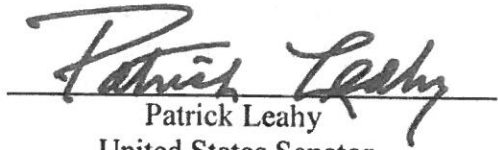
Sincerely,



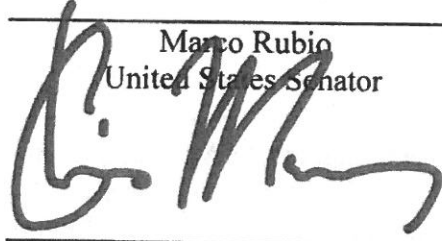
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



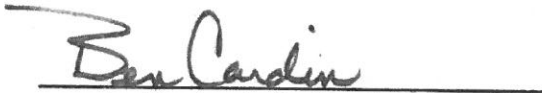
Marco Rubio
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



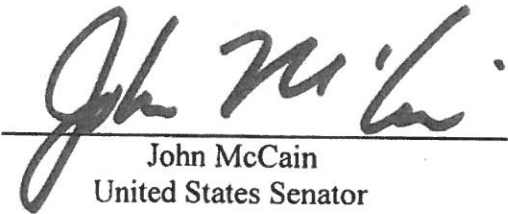
Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



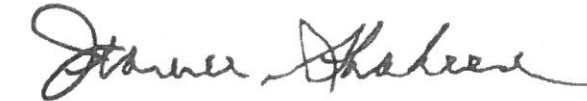
Barbara Boxer
United States Senator



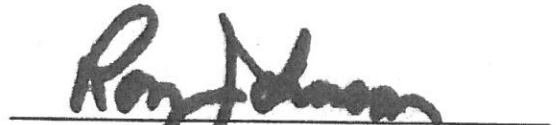
John McCain
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



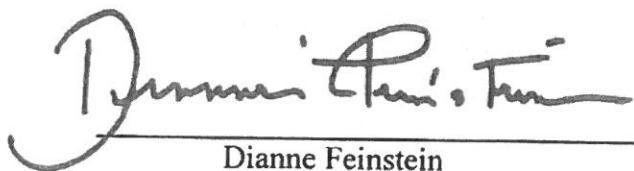
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Ron Johnson
United States Senator



Mark Kirk
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Sheldon Whitehouse

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Robert Menezes

Robert Menezes
United States Senator

Jack Reed

Jack Reed
United States Senator