

## Statement by Senator Ben Cardin

### Azerbaijan's Persecution of RFE/RL Reporter Khadija Ismayilova *December 16, 2015*

I'm pleased to see that the Commission is holding this hearing today. A lot has happened in Azerbaijan over the past two years that has harmed our bilateral relationship, but the persecution and prosecution of Khadija Ismayilova and the closure of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty are among the most damaging. I'm glad that we are taking the time to highlight her case.

On November 19, 2014, I chaired a Commission hearing on combatting corruption in the OSCE region and the link between security and good governance. Khadija Ismayilova was an invited witness. We were looking forward to hearing her testimony on the role of journalism in combatting corruption. Unfortunately just a couple of days after we invited Khadija to testify she was banned from leaving the country. Just three weeks later she would be in jail.

Khadija was able to submit a written statement for our hearing and she provided quite a bit of information about the new laws on protection of information in Azerbaijan that would restrict her ability to find the detailed information on corrupt government connections that she has found in the past. I'd like to ask that Khadija's statement from the November 19, 2014, Commission hearing be submitted to the record for today's hearing as well.

In her statement she made reference to Azerbaijan's participation in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), an important multilateral initiative that has the potential to help countries be more transparent about their mineral wealth through engagement with their own citizens. Khadija's assessment of Azerbaijan's participation was not positive:

*Azerbaijan is a part of the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative since 2004. As in many other global initiatives, the Azerbaijani government uses the membership as an argument against criticisms of corruption. The country is currently under scrutiny by EITI, as one of the main parts of the Initiative - civil society - is paralyzed and cannot serve as a watchdog. In non-oil extractive industries government-linked monopolies have a huge stake. In 2007 the government of Azerbaijan signed a contract to develop six gold and copper mines with a consortium that is co-owned by President Aliyev's daughters.*

The situation for civil society in Azerbaijan has only deteriorated further since Khadija prepared her testimony. Azerbaijan's new regulations on NGO registration and specifically NGO's ability to receive funding from outside sources are so restrictive that almost all of the independent NGOs that have been working in Azerbaijan's Multilateral Stakeholder Group for EITI can no longer operate. I don't see how Azerbaijan can maintain its status as a compliant country under these circumstances. We need to see much greater space for independent NGOs and journalists to operate for the EITI process to achieve its true value.

Democratic societies function based on a high level of trust in each other and the institutions that underpin democracies. Corruption undermines that trust, and thus undermines

the very foundation of democracies. Corruption has corrosive, and cumulative, effects on societies. Wherever corruption rears its head -- and every country is vulnerable -- we must use all our tools to combat this scourge. A vibrant civil society and a free press is essential for that effort.

In Ukraine, the corruption which has plagued that country for decades only intensified during the regime of Viktor Yanukovich. A major component of the Euro-Maidan protests -- the "revolution for dignity" -- was the people's disgust with pervasive governmental corruption. Ukraine has taken important steps addressing corruption but much more needs to be done. In Hungary the government distribution of tobacco concessions, secrecy around the Paks nuclear deal with Russia, and a new law on public procurement, allowing close relatives of decision-makers to compete in public tenders, all erode transparency, accountability, and good governance.

Combating corruption may be the most important task we face today. Unfortunately Azerbaijan has taken one of our great anti-corruption warriors off the field of battle. We need to work to bring her back.