



COMMENTARY - In January 2012, Ambassador Matthew Bryza left Baku and returned to Washington following the U.S. Senate's decision to go to recess without voting on his appointment. This decision pleased the Armenian-American special interest and a few senators who opposed his nomination. These groups underlined that their disapproval of Bryza's nomination is based on "the respect for the Armenian people" and they do not consider him as "the right person to represent the United States." However, considering the history of the diaspora politics, their statements are bound to raise certain questions.

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***Gadir Shiraliyev** graduated from Georgetown University, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service with an M.A. degree in Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies. He holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs: Middle Eastern Studies from the George Washington University. Gadir's research interests include post-Soviet politics, Azerbaijan's foreign policy, ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet territory, and energy security in Eurasia. He is fluent in Azeri, Turkish, Russian, and English languages. Currently, he works as a research intern at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.*

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Beside those who are against Mr. Bryza's nomination, a group of prominent experts, former U.S. officials and journalists voiced their support of him and also their concern about the influence exercised by special interest groups over the U.S. foreign policy. Fred Hiatt wrote in The Washington Post that, "the failing nomination of Matthew Bryza, out of public view and without so much as a committee vote, offers a vivid example of how the larger U.S. national interest can fall victim to special-interest jockeying and political accommodation." In a recent letter addressed to the Congress, prominent policy experts and former U.S. government officials praised Matthew Bryza's career and personality and urged the Congress that "holding up a qualified career nominee who is already serving in a key position will not change U.S. policy, and does a disservice to U.S. interests in a critical region."

Ever since President Obama nominated Mr. Bryza for the position, he was under constant fire from the Armenian lobbying groups and Senators Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Barbara Boxer (D-CA), who have strong ties with those groups. Their criticisms consisted of Mr. Bryza's close ties with both Azerbaijani and Turkish officials, his so-called "refusal" to recognize the Armenian genocide, and his alleged pro-Azerbaijani bias on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, they took issue with Mr. Bryza's wife, Zeyno Baran, an ethnic Turk who works at the Hudson Institute. This last point was heavily propagated by ANCA (Armenian National Committee of America), although the marriage of a U.S. diplomat should not be an obstruction to his/her nomination.

Mr. Bryza's suitability for the job has been at issue from the beginning partly due to his high profile in Washington as well as the region itself. The doubts were about Georgia and his role in the failed U.S. diplomacy in the wake of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War (Bryza was accused of informal communication with the Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili). However, his nomination was not to Georgia but to Azerbaijan and Armenia, and both of these states were generally positive about it. Mr. Bryza has traveled to the region many times, he is familiar with the political dynamics in both states, and he is well acquainted with the sensitivities regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Frequent labeling of Mr. Bryza as "partial" or "unfair" can be explained by the emotional nature of Azerbaijan and Armenia, something he already knew very well. "Being criticized or being thought of as being closer to one side or the other is part of the game, and I have to just remain always objective and deliver the tough messages when necessary," he stated during the Senate Committee hearings. Moreover, being accused of partiality by both sides should be seen as an indicator of Mr. Bryza's impartiality in the Azerbaijani-Armenian dispute. Beside his critics, Mr. Bryza's performance in the region was also praised by some of the officials from both states, including the former Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian. He wrote a farewell letter to Mr. Bryza in which he described the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group as "honest brokers, fair mediators, and persistent diplomats," and praised Mr. Bryza by saying, "I have enjoyed working with you and have been grateful for your candor and the spirit of teamwork." On the genocide issue, Mr. Bryza, in the spirit of professionalism, is not doing anything but articulating the official view of the U.S. government that 1915 deportations and killings of Armenians should not be labeled as genocide.

The Armenian-American lobbying groups are defending themselves by arguing that they are making their voices heard through their democratically elected representatives. There is nothing wrong with this. Like the Armenian diaspora, other ethnic groups benefit from U.S. liberal democratic culture which empowers individuals, regardless of their ethnic origins, to have an influence over the U.S. foreign policy. However, by ostensibly advocating the cause of their country of origin in the context of the U.S. foreign policy, diaspora Armenians and their representatives face a problem of loyalty. According to Georgetown Professor Yossi Shain, an expert on interest group politics, diaspora organizations "must justify their actions in terms of

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American national interests and values, answer to their U.S. ethnic compatriots, and prove their loyalty to their home country.”

While I do not in any way question the loyalty of Armenian-Americans to the United States of America, the actions of ANCA and their representatives should be questioned on whether they coincide with the American interests. The absence of an ambassador in Baku will not significantly affect the U.S.-Azerbaijani relations because Azerbaijan proved itself as a trustworthy strategic ally and the U.S. policy is formulated in Washington D.C. and not in Baku. However, the end of Mr. Bryza’s tenure can have shortcomings for the U.S. interests in the region in the long-term. First, it would send negative messages to other countries about the consistency and coherence of the U.S. foreign policy toward the strategically vital region. Second, it would show Baku that Armenian-American lobby interests have significant influence over the U.S. policy towards Azerbaijan and this, in turn, will harm U.S. image as a fair and unbiased arbiter in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and other regional disputes. Lastly, the impartiality of future U.S. envoys to Turkey and Azerbaijan would be questioned and might further upset the relations between the U.S. and its two strategic allies. In his recent speech in Washington D.C., Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Araz Azimov said, “If Ambassador Bryza returns from his current Baku position because of Senate’s fail, that will strongly urge the US diplomats to think over which policy they have to implement: A policy of the U.S. President, of some Senators and lobby members?”

Absence of an ambassador in Baku will also not benefit Armenian interests. Armenia is a small landlocked country with its Azerbaijan and Turkey borders closed and thus is excluded from the major economic projects in the region. Therefore, Yerevan is deleteriously dependent on the Armenian diaspora and other international powers, which in turn restrains independence of its foreign policy. This dependence permits the diaspora to raise funds and consolidate its position among constituents and political circles in the U.S. and Armenia. Any step towards the reconciliation with either Azerbaijan or Turkey is vehemently opposed by the Armenian diaspora, which takes extreme measures to hinder developments in this direction. It would be naïve to assume that Armenia’s economic difficulties will end with Mr. Bryza’s nomination, but it is clear that the dogmatic stance of the Armenian diaspora is undermining progress in Armenian reconciliation with its neighbors that further isolates Armenia.

Unfortunately, the desire to remain in office by pleasing the ethnocentric and Turkophobic Armenian-American lobby groups like ANCA explains the actions of Senators Menendez and Boxer. Although raising criticisms against any nomination normal, some of the objections coming from these senators and Armenian-American lobbying groups against Mr. Bryza are unjustified at best. Matthew Bryza is an experienced diplomat who has done extensive and positive work to achieve progress on the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to push forward Armenian- Turkish Rapprochement and to promote dialogue between the

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governments and civil society. Obstructing his nomination because his wife is Turkish, because he agrees with the U.S. government's views on the 1915 events, and because he is perceived as not pro-Armenian enough in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute will harm longer-term U.S. interests in this strategically important region. On the contrary, it will serve to prolong the conflict that isolates Armenia in the region and undermines the well-being of its people.