

December 15, 2011

The Honorable
Senator Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable
Senator Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable
Senator John Kerry
Chairman
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

The Honorable
Senator Richard Lugar
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

The Honorable
Senator Jeanne Shaheen
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on European Affairs
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

The Honorable
Senator John Barrasso
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on European Affairs
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

Dear Senators –

We are writing to support the nomination of Matt Bryza as Ambassador to the Republic of Azerbaijan. Matt is a career Foreign Service Officer who has served with distinction as Ambassador to Azerbaijan for the past year under a recess appointment. His experience, professionalism, dedication and performance all demonstrate that he merits confirmation.

Matt has conducted himself as an exemplary Ambassador to Azerbaijan, a country of growing importance to U.S. interests. He has the right combination of everything – contacts, trust, strategic vision, operational ability, leadership – everything.

Matt's confirmation is being held up because a small minority of activists accuse him of being a "genocide-denier" – someone who denies that the Ottoman Empire committed genocide against Armenians in 1915.

United States policy under successive Administrations has been neither to affirm nor deny that a genocide occurred. Rather, it is to avoid having the United States place a label on the events that took place at the close of the Ottoman Empire, and in so doing, to help provide the best chance possible for the current states and people of Armenia and Turkey to explore their history together, and to build new relations and trade, in the interests of all people in the region.

To be sure, U.S. policy is to make clear that what happened to Armenians in the closing days of the Ottoman Empire was nothing short of mass murder and forced expulsion. Yet because U.S. policy is not to label these acts, ***Matt – as a career professional – has done what any professional American diplomat would do:*** adhere to the policy of successive U.S. Administrations and avoid labeling those acts on his own.

This in no way means Matt is insensitive to their occurrence, their nature, and their importance. And it in no way disqualifies him to serve with distinction as U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan. Indeed, such professional discipline in the face of extremely difficult and emotional issues only demonstrates his suitability to serve as Ambassador.

Finally, in looking for a U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, one can find no better substitute than Matt Bryza himself. He has served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and as a Senior NSC official with responsibility for the Caucasus region. He has worked extensively on energy issues that are so vital to U.S. and regional interests. He has been a staunch advocate for democratic reform. It is difficult to think of anyone who could match Matt's contacts, credibility, skills, language ability, and courage in taking on the job of Ambassador to such a strategic country.

It is understandable that Armenian Americans and even some Senators will disagree with the U.S. policy concerning whether to call the events of 1915 a genocide. That is an argument to be hashed out with the U.S. Administration on the merits. But 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.

We urge you to proceed to an immediate floor vote to confirm Ambassador Bryza as U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan.

Sincerely,

// signed //

(in alphabetical order) ¹

Elliott Abrams

Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relations
former Deputy National Security Advisor for Global Democracy Strategy

Judy Ansley

former Deputy National Security Advisor

¹ *Note: All signatories have signed in their personal capacities; institutional affiliations are noted for identification purposes only and do not imply any institutional endorsement of the views expressed.*

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former Executive Secretary, National Security Council
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former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs
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Jamie Fly

Executive Director, Foreign Policy Initiative

Carl Gershman

President, National Endowment for Democracy

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President, Project on Transitional Democracies

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