



AZERBAIJAN IN THE NEWS

America, Meet Azerbaijan

By Hilary Kramer, Contributor

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When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, Americans were suddenly forced to add a host of newly independent countries to their global awareness. Some countries became a part of our lexicon more quickly than others (Ukraine and Georgia, for example). But few of these post-Soviet countries have been as valuable, pound-for-pound, to the United States in the last 20 years as Azerbaijan, a country that we all should seek to understand due to the resilience of its economy, richness of its culture and the relevance of its policies.

In fact, I will learn more for myself next week. On November 14th, policymakers and cultural influencers in Washington, D.C. will have the opportunity to learn more about Azerbaijan and the Azeri people thanks to the efforts of the Azerbaijan America Alliance, a Washington-based non-profit. The Alliance is hosting a gala dinner focused on fostering economic, cultural, and diplomatic exchange and understanding between the American and Azeri peoples.

The gala's attendees will include current and former members of Congress and White House officials, a *Who's Who* from D.C.'s political, economic, and media circles, as well as the typical *dramatis personae* from Embassy Row. The event is a compelling draw because Azerbaijan has flourished both economically and culturally in recent years (Jennifer Lopez and Rihanna were recently in the capital city of Baku, playing to crowds of more than 30,000 excited spectators). The gala event is one of the Alliance's first efforts to export news of Azerbaijan's success to the United States, where increased cross-cultural dialogue will be of great benefit to this small but determined powerhouse from the Caucasus.

I imagine that the gala will be an eye-opener for many of the Americans in attendance, including myself. There will be no shortage of authenticity. The cuisine and music will transport us to Azerbaijan, while the evening's entertainment—including the country's 2012 Eurovision finalist and National Dance Ensemble—is flying in all the way from Baku for the gala.

Globally, Azerbaijan is a little-known and underappreciated U.S. ally situated in one of the world's most turbulent regions. Sharing cramped geographic quarters with Iran, Russia, Georgia, and Armenia is no easy task, yet Azeris in this Muslim-

majority country enjoy one of the most pro-Western, liberalized societies in the region (consider that women gained the right to vote in pre-Soviet Azerbaijan in 1919, narrowly beating out the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment). The country is also a strong supporter of Israel, both economically and diplomatically, and has consistently supported that country and the U.S. in efforts to combat global terrorism.

The Azeri people also provide a notable cultural counterbalance to Iran to the south. One might say that Azerbaijan provides an example of what a free Iran would look like. An Azeri official, commenting on the recent Western concerts, told the *Washington Post* in October that “you could almost feel the Iranians seething... This stuff makes them crazy.”

Economically, Azerbaijan is in a unique position. Its abundant natural resources, in the form of crude oil and natural gas, position the country as a key energy supplier to Europe. A major energy boom over the past few decades has allowed for significant economic transformation and helped the country escape the global economic downturn that has ensnared so many other countries, both in the region and elsewhere.

The Azeris have put their substantial wealth to good use, reinvesting domestically by modernizing the country's infrastructure, developing a contemporary banking and financial network, and spurring growth in the telecommunications and automotive sectors—all with room to grow.

Ideally, our relationship with Azerbaijan will be one that continues to expand both economically and diplomatically in the coming years, as the country has already proven itself to be a key ally in a region of tumult.

The November 14th gala clearly aims to put a spotlight on the synergies that the U.S. and Azerbaijan already share. While I've yet to visit Azerbaijan myself (though I plan to), I have no doubt that this event will increase understanding through cultural exchange and further strengthen our alliance with one of the most interesting and pro-American countries in the Caucasus region.

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