

Statement of Anar Mammadli
Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center of Azerbaijan
before the

**Subcommittee on Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related
Programs**
of the Senate Committee on Appropriations

March 29, 2017

*The prevention of Russia's negative effects on the democratization processes in the
post-Soviet countries*

Following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Russia's influence on the political processes in the post-Soviet countries has been in different forms. Until the mid 1990s, these impacts were in the form of igniting national and ethnic conflicts (Abkhazia, Pridnestriya, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia) and indirectly, through the participation in the military operations. With the acquisition of the ceasefire on military operations, a relatively new phase of Russian influence has started. By establishing a new union (the CIS) after the USSR, Russian political circles attempted to maintain political and geopolitical control over the post-Soviet countries, with the exception of the Baltic states. However, unlike the Council of Europe and the OSCE, this union did not consider the rule of law, protection of human rights and freedoms or the socio-economic development goals. On the contrary, the CIS gradually became the union deprived of democratic institutions, free market economy, social welfare and independent judicial systems.

In the early 2000s, the harsh authoritarian governance was formed with the help of Russia's high oil revenues, as in many post-Soviet countries, and contributed to strengthening the authoritarian regimes in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Since 2003, the establishment of a democratic political environment in Georgia and European-oriented political forces' rise to power has caused tensions in bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia. The political regimes in the other South Caucasus countries saw the Georgian experience as an undesirable example. In the face of criticism by the Western countries, the Council of Europe, OSCE and the European Union of these regimes' violations of human rights and freedoms, Russia's patronage, support and authoritarian governance system became more desirable.

At present, Russia's historical and cultural ties with the post-Soviet countries will keep those countries in the Russian information space. However, the most important problem in these countries, as well as in Russia, is restricting the access to alternative sources of information through the suppression of freedom of expression and constant pressure, and/or the shutdown of the independent television channels and radio stations. For instance, according to the survey conducted in 2015 by BBG and Gallup companies, in response to the question, "Which media source is reliable about Ukraine and Crimea?", the responses pointed out the Russian media as follows: Belarus 67%, Azerbaijan 64%, Uzbekistan 79%, Tajikistan 85%. The problem is that the non-democratic governments present in post-Soviet countries did not allow forming free media structures in those countries for many years, making those populations heavily dependent on the information space of Russia.

In recent years, the tensions Russia is experiencing with the Western Institutions, in particular with the Council of Europe and the OSCE in the field of human rights and democracy is also observed in the countries such as Azerbaijan and Belarus. By making its best efforts to cast shadows over the legitimacy and credibility of these institutions in the post-Soviet countries, the Russian government is setting bad examples for its other neighbors.

In addition, the political pressures by the Russian authorities on the international human rights organizations, including not allowing such organizations to operate in the country, is used by some former Soviet countries' governments as "best practices." As a result, following Russia and Belarus, the activities of the foreign NGOs and foundations were banned in Azerbaijan.

Another negative impact by Russia associated with the democratization processes in many former Soviet countries is reflected in Russia's support for the CIS' ruling political forces through election monitoring by non-professional election observation missions that give legitimacy to the flawed and falsified elections.

For instance, by giving only the biased political views in support for the position of the ruling political forces in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries, the CIS Election Observation Missions undermines the position of OSCE/ODIHR, as well as that of the local independent election monitoring groups.

The experience of recent years shows that a number of measures are to be taken by international institutions and democratic states to prevent the negative effects by Russia on the formation of human rights and democratic institutions in the post-Soviet countries:

- 1) Protection of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association, support for strengthening independent media institutions, defense for the members of political parties and civil society organizations in the Post-Soviet countries;
- 2) Protection of the international law principles through the resolution of the military conflicts, protection of the territorial integrity of post-Soviet countries and support for the peace-building processes;
- 3) Sanctions against public officials involved in the implementation of political repression, persecution and torture.