

Press often targeted when it’s doing its job

It’s difficult to imagine taking up residence in a land without freedom of expression. Under the stars and stripes, we have the right to protest oil drilling, probe intelligence agencies over shady surveillance programs and pen columns in the local daily expressing discontent over whichever issue we choose — from a governor’s latest scandal to a government’s perverse handling of the migrant crisis.

The journalist’s pencil is at its sharpest in this kind of arrangement. But this year I traveled to a little-known country where unchecked extravagance is the law of the land — and free speech is not. Tucked between Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan emerged from behind the Iron Curtain and within two decades seemed to transform into a state leveraging massive oil reserves to pay for international credibility. Here rules President Ilham Aliyev, a politician so far on the side of demolishing discord from journalists that he almost tripped over his buddy Vladimir Putin’s foot getting there.

At the start of this week, Azeri investigative reporter Khadija Ismayilova — who in May received the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write award — was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison, according to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Oregon Public Broadcasting President and CEO Steve Bass, who traveled to Azerbaijan within the last few years, reacted thus in an email to me: “In many countries around the world, journalists take enormous risks in order to inform the public about important events and issues. In some places, the risk to journalism comes from powerful oligarchs who control the media outlets and find ways to shape news coverage to suit their interests.”

He later adds, “Far too often, journalists like Khadija Ismayilova, who brought to light significant corruption by Azerbaijan’s ruling family, pay a huge personal price for practicing journalism, something that some take for granted and sometimes don’t appreciate enough in the United States.”



JONATHAN BACH
Comment



“Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to speak with a real journalist.”

Artwork by Ben Schwartz, courtesy of PEN American Center

The charges brought against Ismayilova were: illegal business activity, tax evasion and abuse of power, according to RFE/RL, the news source for which she used to produce scathing reports on the presidential family’s business dealings. Human rights organizations roundly described the court’s indictments to be trumped-up and Aliyev’s administration to be about as straight as the last letter of the president’s last name. I’ve made a fuss in other columns about press freedom in the country and how, according to Ismayilova’s reports for RFE/RL, the president’s family has made huge sums of

money off the construction of a stadium for the international singing competition Eurovision, and that they hold a stake in a gold mine near the Armenian border through various façade companies.

In the Azeri capital Baku, a city experiencing a boom that might put Seattle to shame, the president’s pet architectural projects stand as symbols of his dominance over the country, from the swooping, white and arched walls of the Heydar Aliyev Center (just think of a Sydney Opera House knock-off transplanted into Southwest Asia); to the LED-lit exteriors of the colossal Flame Tower

skyscrapers; to the glowing blue Olympic Stadium, which the government used when it hosted the first inaugural European Games this June, an Olympics-style event that drew thousands of athletes and spectators to the otherwise obscure oil state.

Dr. Karin Deutsch Karlekar, PEN American Center’s Director of Free Expression Programs in New York, said over the phone that Azerbaijan had “orchestrated” one of the largest-scale human rights and free expression “crackdowns” in the region.

Ismayilova “was one of the most pioneering and important journalists” in Azerbaijan, said Karlekar. To jail her is to deter others from following in her footsteps and acting as watchdogs.

While Azerbaijan is a small country, “it does have an important geopolitical position,” she said, noting its proximity to Russia and Iran.

Plus, “a lot of oil flows from Azerbaijan to the West,” she said. Most goes to Europe, but actions on the part of the Azeri government affect the world stage nonetheless, she said.

She said European leaders have decried the Azeri government’s efforts to suppress human rights, but letting it host international sporting events and singing competitions is counterproductive. Bans against high-level officials should be put in place, though not broad sanctions that may trickle down to the general population, she said.

Here in the United States, Americans can advocate for free press by spreading awareness via social media, she said.

Negative media coverage of the European Games also helped. But there are still eight journalists in jail, according to Karlekar, and 80 to 100 politically motivated imprisonments.

This week’s sentence is a bitter reminder that in some lands, advocacy and journalism have no home — but in 2015, that must not remain the status quo.

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Quick takes

On using marijuana sales tax to pay for roads

Pendleton POThole tax! Oh ... after Round-Up of course, we wouldn’t want out of towners to pay for any of that!

LoriAnne Dunagan

Not if I have to smell marijuana on the streets! I have friends that have children!

Shane Christensen

I think you, as a community, should fill them with dirt and plant flowers in them or pot ... whichever makes more sense.

Cheryl Cone

Keep the potholes.

Shawn O’Donnell

On the death of Mario Zubiria

My heart goes out to the family, all wonderful people, I hope God loves a good BBQ.

Leland Wilson

I once had a blue heeler that was mean and hard headed as hell. My dad told me “that dog has to go, he is biting the horses.” So I put him in a stall in my brother’s barn. Mario was at my brother’s and asked why I was upset, I told him about my dog and he said “I will take him! He can come live with me, I like them just as he is.” He was a family friend and the day he saved my dog from what I was sure to come I will never forget! RIP!

Jennifer Hamlin

He was amazing with remembering people. Once while ordering food at Round-Up he walked over and asked if I was Chalmers. I had no idea what he was talking about. As I later told my mom about the odd question, she smiled and said that my grandpa, who passed away before I was born and went by the name Chuck Sauers was actually named Chalmers. I have no idea how he could put the two of us together but I’ll never forget it.

Monica Hoffman

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week’s takes. Tweet yours @Tim_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com, and keep them to 140 characters.

Turkey newly attacking ISIS, wrongly attacking Kurds

After four years of steady Islamic State (ISIS) expansion from Iraq into Syria, Turkey finally permitted in July the use of its NATO bases for airstrikes. Intense U.S. pressure and the first ISIS suicide bomber deaths inside Turkey this summer finally clinched it.

But, alarmingly, Turkey has begun bombing the Kurds of Turkey and Syria far more than ISIS targets, showing President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s still differing priorities. Erdogan has seen ISIS as useful in helping defeat Syria’s President Bashar Assad. He regards the independence-seeking Kurds of Turkey/Syria as greater enemies than ISIS. (In contrast, he has good relations with the Iraqi Kurds who are a source of considerable oil purchases.) And now for domestic political reasons described below, he has abandoned peace talks with Turkey’s militant Kurds and resumed military operations against them.

Erdogan has too long permitted, in spite of denials, the flow through Turkey of fighters, materiel and ISIS black market oil, thus enormously aiding ISIS. But his placating ISIS has not paid off, as the recent suicide bombing that killed 30 Turks indicated. Worrisomely, ISIS sleeper cells have undoubtedly been established all over Turkey.

Erdogan has been upset by the success of a domestic Kurdish party (HDP) and its charismatic young leader in Turkey’s June parliamentary elections that foiled his plan for augmenting his presidential powers. The HDP appealed beyond the Kurdish population to urbanites, youth, women and secularists.

He also hated the dramatic victory of the Kurds over ISIS in Kobani with the key help of U.S. air strikes, air drops and an insertion of Peshmerga troops from northern Iraq. Again with the help of coordinated U.S. air strikes, the Syrian Kurds since January have easily captured from ISIS 245 miles of the border east of Kobani, thus

freeing more Syrian Kurd enclaves and cutting off important ISIS supply routes.

The Kurds are a very ancient ethnic group in West Asia. They number some 30 million today and were split up in the post-World War I agreements among Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. They desire a country of their own but those countries’ rulers have prevented it. Neither has the U.S. supported their independence goal so far. However, we obviously value enormously the pro-American attitude and the effectiveness of Syrian and Iraqi Kurd forces in combatting ISIS. In reality, the Kurds have been boosting their autonomy on their own because of the chaos in Syria and western Iraq.

Turkey has a home-grown Marxist Kurd group called the PKK who operate in southeastern Turkey and are on the U.S. terrorist list. But not all of Turkey’s Kurds are PKK. Many Kurds have been assimilated in Turkish urban areas and many others abhor violent tactics.

In the fall of 2014, several Pendletonians — Dr. Dan Marier, Dr. Connie Umphred, Susan DeMarsh and myself — were travelling in Turkey’s southeastern Anatolia as tourists seeing its remarkable ancient sites. Anatolia is the heartland of Islamic support for Erdogan, and he has cemented that support with billions of dollars in development for roads, dams, irrigation and tourist facilities. Visiting the ruins of Harran (between Gaziantep and Urfa), where Abraham is said to have lived on his way to the Promised Land, we were close to Kobani across the border in Syria where the ISIS siege was in full swing. We and our guide were closely monitoring the news for what was happening but we weren’t learning much at the time.

Erdogan, as it turned out, was refusing to let the Peshmerga troops from Iraq through Turkey to aid the desperate situation in Kobani. Furious Kurds began big demonstrations throughout Anatolia. Erdogan relented and did let 150 Peshmerga

troops and weapons through and Kobani was saved. Erdogan’s foot dragging over Kobani started the slide toward disrupted peace talks between Erdogan and the PKK, and it seriously affected the Kurd vote for Erdogan’s party in the June elections. Up to this time, Turkey’s Kurds had given him strong election support for his effort to find a peace settlement.

Unfortunately, Erdogan has been becoming more autocratic and erratic after 11 years as prime minister and as the new president, elected last year. He initially made Turkey a model of democracy, economic development and friendly foreign relations. But he has recently gone on a binge promoting a neo-Ottoman revival in Turkey with himself as a strong man leader of the Sunni Turks. He has moved into a new \$600 million palace with 1,000 rooms and Ottoman- era garbed honor guards. He is busy unraveling the secular government model that Ataturk set up for Turkey in the 1930s. And his statements have been increasingly anti-Western, anti-press and anti-women’s equality and more pro-China and pro-Russia.

His relentless drive for enhanced presidential power continues. He just announced new parliamentary elections on Nov. 1 to try again for a parliamentary majority for his party. His military attacks on the PKK appear designed to foster Turkish nationalism and to discredit the earlier broad appeal of the Kurdish party by linking it to the PKK — and it may work.

The good news about Turkey is that it is still a functioning democracy as the June elections proved. It will be of interest to see if Turkish voters in November succumb to Erdogan’s campaign tactics. From my perspective, it’s too bad that Erdogan didn’t opt to stay a mediator rather than an autocratic Ottoman.

Ambassador Harriet Isom grew up in Pendleton and has retired to the family ranch. She was a career diplomat serving in Asia and Africa from 1961 to 1996.

If gambling brings in most of the income, it’s a casino

The (Eugene) Register-Guard, Aug. 31

The Oregon Constitution clearly prohibits casinos, yet state regulators have failed to crack down on the more than 200 “delis” that rake in big bucks from video gambling and selling cigarettes while offering menus that consist of little more than microwave burritos and popcorn.

An audit released last week by the secretary of state’s office suggests one reason for that lax enforcement is the absence of a legislative definition of what exactly constitutes a casino.

Two decades ago, the state Supreme Court ruled that “voters intended to prohibit the operation of establishments whose dominant

use or dominant purpose, or both, is for gambling.” But, as the audit’s authors note, “neither the court nor the Legislature has defined the terms ‘casino,’ ‘dominant use,’ or ‘dominant.’”

Common sense leaves little doubt that the bulk of the so-called “limited-menu” purveyors across the state are operating in violation of state administrative rules intended to prevent retailers from making more than half their sales from gambling. As former state Rep. Carolyn Tomei, D-Milwaukie, a proponent of lottery reform until her retirement two years ago, recently told *The Oregonian* newspaper, “It’s clear what they are. They are gambling casinos ... it was never the intent of the public to have little casinos all over the state.”

Compounding the problems caused by absence of definitions is a recent shift in the lottery’s casino enforcement program. Regulators now rely mostly on visual records and less on financial records to judge compliance.

That change needs to be reversed. Auditors reviewed the financial records of 20 of the state’s 234 food-light retailers and found the majority earn most of their income from gambling.

The audit makes several recommendations. The first is that state lawmakers work with lottery officials to establish a “clear and enforceable definition” of a casino. The audit also recommends that lottery regulators analyze the financial records of food-light

retailers to determine compliance with the 50 percent non-lottery income threshold. For retailers found in violation, the lottery should determine whether removal of some video machines could bring the business into compliance.

The audit’s recommendations won’t please some lottery proponents in the Legislature. Lottery Director Jack Roberts warned in a formal response accompanying the audit that the recommended actions might diminish lottery revenues, reducing funding for schools, parks and economic development.

But court rulings and state rules are more than suggestions — they’re the law. The constitutional prohibition on casinos and the state’s administrative rules also

serve important purposes. One is to put sideboards on a lottery operation that has helped create a dismayingly large number of problem gamblers across the state. The ready availability of video machines in food-light delis across the state contributes to the problem.

Like many other states, Oregon has yet to fully acknowledge that its growing dependence on lottery revenue continues to create human costs that undermine its economic benefits. It’s unrealistic to expect that the state can afford to eliminate or significantly scale back the lottery, but it should clarify and enforce rules intended to limit the ready availability of highly addictive lottery machines.