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# Atlantic Eye : Taking Aliyev at his word

By MARC S. ELLENBOGEN

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BAKU, Azerbaijan, Sept. 21 (UPI) -- The delegation moved through security and up the elevators to a grand foyer. From the window, Gen. Constantin Degeratu, the Romanian national security adviser, and Eduard Kukan, who recently left his post after eight years as Slovak foreign minister, peered out to the Caspian Sea. I too was at the window looking at the massive building projects in Baku. I turned to Hassan Abouyoub, the chief adviser to Morocco's King Mohammed VI, and Seffi Bodansky, a senior adviser to the U.S. Congress, as the door opened.

President Ilham Aliyev greeted his guests, all part of Global Panel's Black Sea Initiative. A tall man with a big mustache, he pointed us to a massive conference table that filled the large room. The president sat down with his foreign policy adviser on the other side of the delegation. Polish Special Envoy Richard Schnepf, sitting to my right, nudged me to begin. I started by describing our meetings and interactions of the previous days.

In the late morning we had flown to the Russian-proposed joint U.S.-Russian radar site in the northern portion of Azerbaijan near Russia. The 40-minute helicopter ride had shown us the vast oil fields below. Azerbaijan is known for its oil springs and natural gas.

Only recently has the oil market helped pour wealth upon Azerbaijan. The largest of three south Caucasus states, it is bordered by the Caspian Sea to the east, Iran to the south, Armenia to the west and Georgia and Russia to the north. Armenia and Azerbaijan have had a long-simmering dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

A delegation representing the regional governor met us as we landed. We were taken by entourage to a local restaurant overlooking an enormous bluff.

There the governor greeted us. As is Azerbaijani custom, a large table of food awaited us. This ritual would be repeated four times that day, showing us great respect. Respect or not, these sessions are not for the light-hearted, and the ability to stay focused and fit after numerous toasts of vodka is a prerequisite for doing business.

We proceeded to a modern bottling plant, a European Union-Azerbaijan joint venture. We were struck by the generosity of our guests at every turn. A visit to a museum commemorating the late President Haider Aliyev, the founder of modern Azerbaijan, rounded out the afternoon. We returned to the helicopter for our ride back.

As I began to brief Aliyev of our meetings, I sensed shyness. Somewhere in the middle of our briefing, after a good laugh, the rest of the delegation began to interact with the president. The conversation was forthright and interactive.

Aliyev spoke of the vast work that lies ahead for his country. He explained that he knew he was being measured by his progress in economic development. He noted that poverty had decreased from 49 percent to 20 percent, but that there was still some way to go to include all citizens of Azerbaijan in the upswing. He pointed to the massive housing projects that we could all see as we passed through Baku that were being built to improve living conditions.

The president spoke of the discrepancies between the main cities and the rural areas.

"I am committed to dispersing the wealth of our country to all of our citizens."

He spoke of press freedoms, religious rights and democracy. These did not seem like political platitudes, but the genuine desire of a youngish president to move his country forward.

We spoke of the necessity for direct negotiations with Nagorno-Karabakh. Global Panel and the Prague Society see a role in facilitating direct contacts and negotiations about this frozen conflict. We expressed this to the president, who seemed interested in this role. Later he would confirm his commitment to a Global Panel-led initiative. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been subject to a great deal of external interference, rendering it not so much "frozen" but distorted. Either way, it must be resolved.

Earlier in the day we had spoken to Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov and Industry and Energy Minister Natiq Aliyev (not related to the president). The question of energy security was a pre-eminent theme. Also the expansion of the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) states' initiative, which deals with regional security and stability, was addressed. The second GUAM summit held earlier this year in Baku brought together the original members plus the presidents of Poland, Romania, Lithuania and Bulgaria -- an expression of the growing international importance of Azerbaijan. Energy diplomacy and summits are another area where Global Panel already plays an active role.

At a final dinner, on the banks of the Caspian Sea, with Col. Gen. Kamaladdin Heydarov, the minister for emergency situations, it became clear that a long-term rapport and strategy was being developed with Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has a long list of tasks ahead of it. Human-rights groups have been exceptionally critical of its record. But its young people are very focused on Europe and Turkey, and very European indeed.

I liked Aliyev and believe him when he says he is committed to change.

His actions will speak louder than his words.

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