



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

# **Closure of the Free Thought University Facility in Azerbaijan**

As delivered by Political Counselor Christopher Robinson  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
April 18, 2013

The United States notes with grave concern the closure of the Free Thought University facility in Baku, Azerbaijan, on April 10.

The Free Thought University was the first organization to receive the Ambassadorial Award for Freedom of Expression over the Internet from the U.S. Mission to the OSCE, which was awarded during the 2010 Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. The University received this award for its innovative use of new media to promote democratic reforms, civil society, independent media, human rights, and the rule of law in support of OSCE values and commitments. On April 11, Ambassador Morningstar gave a speech in support of the Free Thought University because, as he put it, it “offers a delightful forum for thoughtful, engaging discussion – the kind of thing one finds at any good university campus.”

Azerbaijan is an important friend and partner of the United States, with many achievements over more than two decades of independence. These include major advances in education, health, increased standard of living, combating human trafficking and advancing women’s rights. Azerbaijan has also made important contributions to the NATO-ISAF mission in Afghanistan and toward advancing our goals of energy security and diversification. We want to see Azerbaijan continue to progress toward greater prosperity, security, sovereignty and democracy. It is for this reason that my government is troubled by the Azerbaijani government’s reaction to protests this year, including the arrest and interrogation of youth, and pressure on civil society organizations.

Respect for peaceful protests, independent and transparent courts, and government engagement with citizens, especially its young citizens, to address their concerns are the best and most effective ways democratic governments can secure their fundamental stability.

The United States urges the Government of Azerbaijan to uphold its international commitments and obligations to ensure that its citizens’ universal freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression are respected and protected. Actions such as these are what truly make a government strong and stable. The United States values the assistance provided to Azerbaijan by the OSCE Office in Baku and OSCE institutions. We call on the Azerbaijani government to ensure a continued robust OSCE field presence, and welcome the assurances that the Government of Azerbaijan will invite ODIHR to monitor the presidential election planned for October 16.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.