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New ambassador from USA in Azerbaijan appointed after 18-month break

On 29 December, in the face of opposition from the US Congress, US President Barack Obama appointed Matthew Bryza to the post of ambassador to Azerbaijan, finally filling a position which had been vacant since July 2009. Obama's decision allows us to assume that the US plans to take more proactive steps in its policy towards Azerbaijan.

Despite opposition from Congress, the nomination was made possible by using procedures which allow the President to circumvent the Congress if it does not consider a nomination within 147 days. However, if the nomination is not approved by the Senate in its next session, Bryza will remain Ambassador only until the end of this year. Bryza had been actively carrying out and inspiring US policy in the Caucasus (e.g. he coordinated US energy policy in the Caspian region and represented the USA in the Minsk Group of the OSCE) during the administrations of both George W Bush and Bill Clinton. However, his candidacy has been blocked by the Armenian lobby in the US Congress. In a similar fashion, Francis Ricciardone was appointed Ambassador to Turkey despite the opposition of a pro-Armenian congressman. In this context, President Obama's decision means that the US is working to intensify its relations with Azerbaijan (and Turkey), which were damaged in 2009 by the process of Turkish-Armenian normalisation. It also appears that the US is trying to recover its position as an active player in the ongoing intense competition for Azeri gas (Baku will decide this year on the future of the Southern Corridor project), as well as in regional security issues (the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict). <ola>