On the morning of 10 October Azerbaijani politics cannot be rolled back into the bottle, to wait for the next election.

There are now only a few days left before the Presidential election in Azerbaijan on 9 October. Over the last two weeks the “political space” in the country opened up somewhat, with plurality of views expressed on television and on the streets. The wisdom of the Azerbaijani government in keeping political feelings that it does not like bottled up, and only let it come out during narrow windows ahead of elections, is very doubtful strategically, and unacceptable for many democrats.

The result is the odd campaign that has been witnessed so far. The incumbent President Ilham Aliev is expected to win. He decided not to campaign directly, even if he is seen every day on television “looking presidential”. His party, the New Azerbaijan Party has conducted the campaign on his behalf. It was efficient, sufficiently glitzy, but overall boring.

Of the other nine candidates only one is actually challenging the incumbent. Camil Hasanli was brought late and unexpectedly to the forefront to represent the mainstream opposition. (see page 2). He has so far performed better than expected.

The other eight candidates, many of who have been in front line politics for some time as MPs or leaders of Parties, have been largely in the background. Their criticism of the incumbent has certainly been either non-existent or muted. At least one, Hafiz Haciiev, has instead invented himself as the nemesis of the opposition and of Hasanli. He has been described as the Zhirinovski of Azerbaijan. Perhaps not, except that neither Haciiev nor Zhirinovski are loose-cannons, even if this is the image that they harness.

The political space is tightly managed but its parameters are also constantly being challenged. Azerbaijan’s ridiculously young, but amazingly talented, most famous photo-journalist, Mehman Husseynov, was questioned for several hours by the Prosecutor’s Office one week before the election for a political video-parody based on the film “300” that he uploaded on you tube and which was seen by thousands.

“They told me to behave and slow down my pre-election activities on the Internet,” Husseynov told RFE/RL’s Azerbaijani Service shortly after his release. “I reminded them that I am a journalist. I also noted what President Aliyev claims very often -- that the Internet is free in Azerbaijan. My activity is not against the law and I will continue to produce satirical and critical videos.”

And there lies the dilemma. Is Azerbaijan’s democracy a glass half full or a glass half empty? Could this predictable election, with its set-piece characters, that sometimes looked more like actors in a soap-opera than protagonists in a political process, be a defining moment for Azerbaijani politics? On the morning of 10 October Azerbaijani politics cannot be rolled back into the bottle, to wait for the next election. It is time for a serious political dialogue away from the pressures of electioneering, and all sides must find a way of engaging in this in a mature and responsible manner.

Source: Prepared by CEW Staff team.
Camil Hassanli, an unlikely “man on the white horse”.

In Azerbaijan’s tightly managed political and media environment it is not often that a person emerges from the shadows to steal the limelight and catch the imagination of people. Yet this is what a University History professor in his seventies has been able to do over the last weeks since he unexpectedly was chosen as a last minute substitute to represent the opposition “National Council of Democratic Forces” in the Presidential elections that are due in a few days time.

Camil Hassanli had never been in front-line politics before, but had within academic and intellectual circles a reputation as an honest and intellectual person of integrity. Few thought that he had the attributes necessary for the rough and tumble of Azerbaijani politics. Yet over a short period of time, and thanks mainly to a window of opportunity provided by the election campaign which gave him a few minutes of exposure on national television, Hasanli grew in stature by the minute. It was not only his own tough and uncompromising statements in which he lambasted the government for incompetence and corruption that earned him accolades, but also the fact that most of the other candidates in the election preferred to gang up against him. With a cool panache Hasanli saw them off one by one.

The fact that the fragmented Azerbaijani opposition could agree on a common candidate is an achievement in itself. In this they were unintentionally helped by the government who in one way or another eliminated different contenders. The last one still fighting was Ilgar Mammedov the candidate of the REAL movement, who languishes in prison. His appeal against a decision not to allow him to stand because of shortcomings in the list of the forty thousand voters required to nominate him, was quashed by the Supreme Court on Friday, and Mammedov and REAL finally formally endorsed Hassanli’s Presidential bid. In creating conditions that caused the opposition to unite the government may have made its most serious mistake of the election campaign. There is a further lesson: in politics, often, better the devil you know.

Camil Hassanli is an unlikely “man on the white horse”. He himself describes his candidacy as a means of managing a transition of power. Yet in many ways and in an extraordinary short period of time he has been able to change Azerbaijani politics.
President Ilham Aliev has addressed the issue of corruption in Azerbaijan in a tough speech a few days before presidential elections. Corruption has been one of the issues raised by the opposition candidate Camil Hasanli during his television broadcasts as part of the election campaign. Although Aliev is not participating himself in the election debates he has made numerous speeches, usually whilst opening new government facilities.

One such event happened on 30 September when Aliev opened the new offices of the Anti-corruption Unit within the prosecutors’ office and this gave him the opportunity to address the issue of corruption head-on.

The following is an extract of his speech:

“The fight against corruption is a priority issue. There are good results, successes in this fight. It is necessary to praise the work of the Anti-Corruption Department. I am confident that even greater success will be achieved in this area in the coming years. This problem should be completely eradicated in Azerbaijan. It’s also true that there is corruption in every country, in every society. But the main question is the level and scope of coverage. We must constantly narrow the area of corruption. Here we are using and will use a variety of methods. In the first place, the penalties should be even stricter. Every citizen must know that acts of corruption will not go unpunished. Administrative measures also take a special place.

Preventive measure, enlightenment and system reform in this area also play a role. Among them, I want to emphasize the system of “electronic government”. I would like to note the activities of “ASAN xidmət”. More than 500,000 citizens have addressed it. This service operates for less than a year, and covers Baku, Sumgait and Absheron peninsula. But people are addressing. Why? Because there is no corruption. There, people are provided with services at a high level.

We need to make our entire system transparent. The process to ensure greater transparency of financial and economic sectors continues successfully. Azerbaijan is at the forefront in the world for its transparency index. In such a case, given the success and excellent prospects of our country, we must be at the forefront, leading the way in the world in the fight against corruption.

I am delighted that the work done in recent years, work in this area gives the results. International organizations also appreciated the activities of Azerbaijan in this field. Every year the rating of corruption in Azerbaijan is improving. We are strengthening our ties with international organizations. According to my information now, there are close relations with the International Anti-Corruption Academy, other international organizations. We must fully apply the experience of the developed countries in this field.

Of course, Azerbaijan has its own history, its own features. We will apply the most positive experience that exists in the world in the future. I believe that the developed countries have achieved really great strides in the fight against corruption. We need to apply this experience in Azerbaijan. Once again several factors and consistency between them will play a role here.

There must be a strong political will and we have it.

There is a growing belief that we will completely eradicate this evil in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani society will recover from these plagues. Since corruption is a plague, a disease that undermines any society from within. Using all the possibilities, we must strive to ensure eradication of corruption in Azerbaijan, victory of social justice, since corruption is a factor that violates social justice. Strong political commitment, professionalism, honesty, truthfulness of the prosecutors, the atmosphere of serious fight against corruption - these factors, I am sure, will help us achieve our goals. Azerbaijan should be at the forefront in the fight against corruption. I’m sure it will be so. In the coming years, we should apply the experience of developed countries in Azerbaijan. Not to study, we have already studied it, but apply it in each area. Transparency, honesty, truth must become a way of life. I am sure that it will be so.

Source: CEW with news.az

Ilham Aliev’s election campaign has depicted him as a visionary leader.
ODIHR issues second interim report on Azerbaijani election.

On 1 October the ODIHR Election Observation Mission for the forthcoming presidential election in Azerbaijan published its second interim report which covers the period from 12-26 September 2013.

The report notes that “the official campaign began on 16 September and while it has been generally calm, it has been marred by some reported incidents of intimidation of family members of political figures. To date, the campaign has lacked substantive debate and has focused on personality rather than concrete political platforms.

It said that the Mission has monitored 21 campaign rallies so far. The CEC published a list of 152 indoor and outdoor venues designated for presidential election campaign events. Although allocated in line with the law, some candidates consider these venues to be unsatisfactory for holding public events.

Technical preparations for the election continue at all levels of the election administration, with the CEC meeting legal deadlines and training some 32,000 polling officials. Voters can vote at 5,273 regular and 219 special polling stations in-country, as well as at 38 polling stations abroad.

As of 14 September, the total number of registered voters was 5,016,365, an increase of some 30,000 since the May annual update. The CEC received and processed some 4,000 requests for verification of voter list entries online or through their telephone hotline. The CEC informed the OSCE/ODIHR EOM that more than 4,400 de-registration voting cards have been issued to absentee voters so far.

The CEC has allocated six hours of free airtime on public television and radio to candidates per week. Two candidates objected to the roundtable format for the free airtime. Following the 19 September televised candidate roundtable, the CEC issued a ‘serious’ warning to candidate Jamil Hasanli for violating Article 106 of the Constitution by insulting the honour and dignity of the President and members of his family.

The ODIHR report says that “Restrictive legal provisions and a subsequent call by the CEC not to publish or broadcast any campaign material in favour or against a candidate appear to have limited the editorial coverage of the campaign in the media. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM media monitoring results for the pre-campaign period indicate that the incumbent President received a much greater amount of coverage in news programmes on television in comparison to other political actors.”