

Focus groups conducted in Yerevan in 2008 also showed the influence of media on the perceptions of participants about the other side in the conflict.¹¹ While most of the participants of the focus groups considered media in Armenia biased, they tended to trust official news sources reporting on Azerbaijan or Nagorno Karabakh.

"I may trust independent sources, but when we receive official information we have to trust it. As a resident of this state I should trust official information." (Male, 18–40, Armenia)

The reporting on Turkey is also generally driven by the government position. A recent media monitoring project in Armenia and Turkey revealed that in the majority of cases media follow an "official" agenda in covering Armenian–Turkish relations.¹² Most coverage focuses on special events targeted at the media, official visits or public speeches by officials.

Prospects and Non-Traditional Media

With access to the internet growing, social media is coming to fill some of the gaps in the traditional media, giv-

ing space to alternative voices. Over the last two years Armenia saw unprecedented levels of on-line activism. Facebook groups such as "SAVE Cinema Moscow Open-Air Hall" or "Stop changes in maternity leave law" have resulted in real-life social activism. Social media has also encouraged projects on Armenian and Azerbaijani collaboration with blogs and online projects that provide grounds for mutual understanding. In the fall of 2010 two videos on YouTube, one on the humiliation of soldiers in the Armenian Army¹³ and a second one about student abuse at one of Yerevan's public schools¹⁴, resulted in official investigations in the Army and the school, respectively.

Non-traditional media is a dynamically changing environment and has the potential for bringing change. Currently only 11 percent of Armenians claim to use the internet on a daily basis,¹⁵ but expanding access to the internet could create a serious alternative to traditional media.

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12 Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Global Political Trends Center (2010). A Survey on Turkish–Armenian Relations in Armenian and Turkish Media 2006–2009. Retrieved from http://epfound.am/files/media_bias_joint_report_1.pdf.

13 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOTt2znY51c&has_verified=1. Retrieved January 10, 2011.

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Media in Azerbaijan: The Ruling Family Dominates TV, the Opposition Has Some Papers

By Arifa Kazimova, Baku

Abstract

The family of Azerbaijani President Aliiev maintains tight control over the country's TV stations. Mostly the opposition is limited to a small number of low-circulation newspapers. The opposition papers have no access to official news and frequently resort to publishing unverified information. Only BP and major telecoms are willing to advertise in the opposition press. The situation with the media reflects overall political conditions in the country.

Strict Controls on Television

In Azerbaijan, the ruling family controls almost all television channels. However, the opposition owns a few

papers and some web-sites.

There are nine TV channels—the Azerbaijan Television (AzTV), Azad Azerbaijan Television (ATV),

Ictimai (Public)TV (ITV), Lider TV, Space TV, Khazar TV, ANS TV, Idman Azerbaijan and also the newly-inaugurated Medeniyyet (Culture) Channel (opened in February). In addition there are 14 regional TV stations and 13 radio stations.

The Azerbaijan State Television and Radio Company (AZTV) became a closed stock company in 2005, initially raising hopes for positive changes, but to no avail. The decree privatizing AZTV gave 51 percent of its shares to the government, and the remaining part was to be sold to citizens. However the decree has not been implemented in the six years since it was issued.

No changes have taken place in AZTV programming as well. Today the station continues to provide extensive coverage of the activities of the ruling family and government officials. These reports usually are devoted to President Ilham Aliyev's ceremonial activities, where he is shown cutting ribbons in a variety of state facilities and meeting with visiting officials.

These segments are followed by stories depicting the public appearances of first lady Mehriban Aliyeva, who is also president of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation. Subsequently viewers see news reports about Ramiz Mehdiyev, the head of the Presidential Administration, and various ministers inaugurating new roads, schools, parks, theatres, and other public works. The international news broadcast on AZTV and other local TV stations mainly focuses on the aftermath of natural disasters—storms, floods, and tornados—in the USA, Brazil or China. These pieces serve to create the impression of turmoil in foreign countries, but stability and prosperity in Azerbaijan.

Public and Private TV Stations

The situation is similar on Azerbaijan's other stations. Funded by the state budget, Public TV (ITV) makes efforts to limit its news coverage of state officials, but they still receive much more attention than any other political or social figures. Even though ANS boasts that it is an objective, balanced and impartial broadcaster, viewers never see any criticism of the family of President Aliyev on this channel even though its founders have no direct links to the governing family. Despite the fact that it is privately owned, ANS TV also dedicates the bulk of its news coverage to the authorities and the ruling party; though it does give a small part of its program time to opposition figures.

The founders of the other TV channels are in some way related to the ruling family. The president's sister Sevil Aliyeva is among the founders of Space TV. Likewise, the founder of Lider TV is said to be a close relative of President Aliyev.

These privately-owned companies sometimes violate basic rules of journalistic ethics. In October 2010, Lider

TV broadcast the secretly-filmed sex video of an opposition paper editor as part of its main evening news show. After the appearance of the video, the editor resigned and the newspaper management said it was a provocation against the paper on the eve of the parliamentary elections.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) pointed out ahead of the November 7 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan that there was a clear tendency among local television stations to reflect positively on the work and activities of state officials, often pointing out achievements and successes, while avoiding any independent and critical opinions on their performance. "For example, only two TV channels, the public broadcaster ITV and privately-owned ANS TV, provided some news coverage in connection with the press conference of the APFP–Musavat bloc on 12 October, during which opposition leaders talked about problems with the registration of their candidate," the OSCE Observation Mission stated.

Despite the institutional structure, problems tend to be resolved informally. For example, the National Television and Radio Council (NTRC) was founded in 2002 to implement state policy regarding television and radio broadcasting and to regulate this activity. The main duties of the Council also include protecting the electronic media's independence and public interests in broadcasting. The nine-member Council is funded through the state budget. But when Lider TV began broadcasting adult videos in prime-time, NTRC Chief Nushirevan Maharramli told US-funded RFE/RL that the Council did not issue any warning to Lider TV, but had instead talked to the TV leadership and the problem had been resolved in this way.

The state maintains firm control of TV and radio frequencies and only issues them to pre-approved companies. Currently, 80 percent of TV and radio frequencies are not in use. Unfortunately, the NTRC does not disclose the list of frequencies used, even though the law requires that it do so on a monthly basis. The Media Rights Institute reported in October 2010 that frequencies are allocated to companies affiliated to the government. According to the report, claiming a frequency without first obtaining the government's consent could yield economic and political problems for the claimant.

The NTRC clearly works in the interests of the leadership. It recently allotted 103.3 FM, which formerly belonged to the BBC, to a new radio station called Araz Radio established by an unknown company called "Golden Prince." Other companies that sought the frequency questioned the transparency of the process and identity of the company that won the right to the frequency.

Calls for Change on Television

Ramiz Mehdiyev, head of the Presidential Administration, criticized local television in 2009. In a prominent article entitled “Problems and duties on Azerbaijan’s Airwaves,” he called on them to undertake reforms and emphasize analytical and educational programs over entertainment. Mehdiyev stressed that TV and radio stations should play a significant role in protecting national-moral values, propagating greater use of the Azerbaijani language, and promoting the country’s culture and historical heritage.

After this article appeared, there were similar appeals to local TV shows by other government officials. But no one called on television to offer balance and objectivity in news and analytical programs, or supported the idea of freedom of expression. As a result of this article, some educational programs were created for middle school students. Simultaneously, a new wave of wedding programs appeared on almost all local stations. The programs sought to broker marriages for those who could not find a suitable mate or afford the wedding expenses.

According to TV rating surveys conducted by the Baku-based AGB company, ANS TV is the most popular TV channel with 27 percent of the audience, followed by Khazar TV—13 percent, ATV—12 percent, Lider TV—11 percent, Space—6 percent, and ITV—5 percent. AZTV was not included in the survey. The percents indicate the portion of the 1,300 surveyed viewers watching a particular channel, i.e., 27 percent of the 1,300 were watching ANS, 5 percent of 1,300 tuned into ITV, etc.

Similar entertainment programs exist on local FM radio where there is also little political analysis. The radios mainly broadcast music programs and offer little news or commentary to influence ordinary Azerbaijanis’ socio-political views. There are a handful of websites (www.azadliqradiosu.az, www.mediaforum.az, www.turan.az) which report honestly on current developments in the country and the world.

Newspapers’ Access to Information

Yeni Musavat, *Azadliq*, *Demokrat*, and *Bizim Yol* are the only opposition papers published in Baku in Azerbaijani amongst 30 dailies and over 100 weeklies. Some of the opposition papers are published only once or twice a month.

The circulations for local papers are tiny, according to their own figures. They range from 5,000 for the Russian-language opposition paper *Zerkalo* to 10,650 for *Yeni Musavat*. Subscribing to government-sponsored papers like *Azerbaijan*, *Yeni Azerbaijan*, *Respublika*, *Xalq qezeti* is obligatory for all organizations sponsored by the state budget; subscription fees are deducted from the

salaries of teachers at schools and universities as well as employees at ministries and other budget organizations. However, these papers are rarely seen in the hands of readers in metro stations, buses or parks. Despite the obligatory individual deductions, copies of the government papers are also distributed to the libraries of these organizations.

Opposition papers are mostly read by ordinary people even though not all of them can afford to buy papers which cost 30–40 kopecks (half a dollar) on a daily basis.

The opposition papers mainly cover topics critical of the authorities, including corruption claims related to specific officials. Frequently, they report unconfirmed information or information received from just one source. When asked about the credibility of their sources, these papers refer to the fact that the authorities rarely refute the information they publish. However a number of lawsuits have also been brought against these papers on charges of defamation, which is still a criminal offense even though local and international media advocates have called for less harsh penalties.

The latest lawsuit against the *Yeni Musavat* and *Azadliq* papers was brought by Anar Mammadov, son of Transport Minister Ziya Mammadov, who is a major oligarch. The papers had claimed that Anar Mammadov ordered one of Qabala’s restaurants to kill a caged bear and prepare shish kabobs out of its meat. According to the papers, Anar Mammadov paid one million manats for that bear. Now the lawsuit is in court and Mammadov demands compensation of half a million manats.

There have been many cases when government officials or ministers have stated that they “do not read the libels carried in the opposition papers or foreign media outlets like RFE/RL.” But in a number of cases, they have given commentaries on what these media outlets have published. For instance, Ali Ahmadov, executive secretary of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party, stated in 2010, on the parliamentary election day that RFE/RL was carrying slanderous information about the Azerbaijani state and does not publish the commentaries sent by government supporters. “They publish only what their own supporters write,” he said.

One of the reasons that the papers publish unconfirmed news is the barriers blocking their access to governmental sources. The Law on Obtaining Information was adopted in 2005 which specified a maximum of seven days for organizations to answer any inquiries. But in most cases, the inquiries sent to them are delayed for weeks.

A local NGO, the Social Union for Assistance to the Free Economy, along with several other organizations, sued two ministries—the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection—for

not responding to the NGO's inquiry, which focused on the amount of money spent reconstructing ministry buildings. The Supreme Court upheld both inquiries.

What is the Way Out?

Ads of major companies are mostly seen in official and some of the so-called neutral papers, but they rarely appear in opposition papers like *Azadliq*, *Musavat*, *Bizim yol*, or *Demokrat*. Only some oil companies like BP, and major mobile providers advertise in these newspapers, the volume of the ads amounting to a few hundred dollars a month.

This ad blockade against opposition papers is seen as the major obstacle to economic development and consequently to the independence of the local media. The press is not economically independent because of this situation. The volume of the advertising market in countries like Estonia or Latvia is some 50 million dollars in comparison to 2–3 million dollars in Azerbaijan, even though the latter is an oil and gas producing country.

According to many media experts, offering credits to newspapers is not the way to solve their prob-

lems. Mehman Aliyev, director of the Turan Information agency, says the independence of the press depends on that of the whole economy. "Publishing a paper is not a business in Azerbaijan, it's a tool to realize one's political will. Nothing has changed during the recent five years because the basics of the economics have not changed. The monopoly has strengthened in all spheres, there is no competitiveness. Azerbaijan's economy remains closed," he said.

The situation with the media reflects the broader problems facing Azerbaijan. The country's ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index remains very poor in recent years. Currently, it ranks 134 amongst 178 countries. The ratings for freedom of expression and other basic rights remain grave as well. Azerbaijan falls into the Not Free category according to Freedom House's 2010 report. Another major international human rights advocate, Human Rights Watch, in its 2010 report noted that the situation for basic human rights is getting worse (see also the Documentation Section in this issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest).

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Georgia: Immature Media

By Nino Robakidze, Tbilisi

Abstract

Georgia's media faces numerous problems, including a difficult post-Soviet legacy, frequent interventions from the state, poor legislation, unclear ownership, and difficult access to public information and broadcast licenses. Most independent media cannot operate as businesses because they have problems attracting companies willing to risk government pressure to advertise on their stations. The result is that Georgia has only a semi-free media environment.

A Difficult Legacy

Why has the Georgian media been unable to play the role expected of it? This is a question repeatedly asked throughout Georgian society during the last twenty years. Since the Rose Revolution, the subject has not lost its significance even for a while.

As late as 2003, when I was a student at the Tbilisi State University Faculty of Journalism, future journalists who sought to improve their professional skills and writing abilities were diligently browsing the recommended manual entitled *Theory and Practice of Soviet Journal-*

ism. This book was older than all of us and recalled a time when *The Young Communist* and *Komsomolstaya Pravda* published Lenin's speeches, protocols of Communist Party Congresses, and annual reports for the five-year plans of Soviet collective farms.

Even though our faculty owned a professional video camera and students knew about it, none of them had seen it personally; the camera was carefully stored out of reach because the professors feared it would be broken by untrained hands. For many years, our department was managed by a Communist Party bureaucrat