

Between state control and self-censorship

ROG Report regarding the condition of the media in Azerbaijan

24.05.2012 – Before the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) *Reporters Without Borders Germany (ROG)* disseminated extensive information about the difficult working conditions for journalists in Azerbaijan, documented assaults on critical journalists and made them public. The ROG representative Ingo Petz was on site in Baku from the 15th to the 20th of May in order to get a complete picture of the situation by speaking to journalists, bloggers, politicians and human rights activists. This report summarises the results of his research trip and provides an overview of the current situation of the media in Azerbaijan.

Before the ESC: Resounding media interest and political lobbying

„The ESC is a stroke of luck for us“, explains blogger Emin Milli, an Azerbaijani living in London. „Azerbaijan never had this much attention before.“¹ It is true that the Western media never reported as much about Azerbaijan as in the time leading up to the Eurovision Song Contest on May 26th in Baku. The Azerbaijani government has invested high sums of money in order to give the impression of being a modern, open-minded country. Among other tools, they have had the help of the Berlin-based public affairs agency Consultum Communications. However, in the past weeks human rights violations and political prisoners have dominated the reports about Azerbaijan in the German language media. Activists who are critical of the government received much attention in interviews, attacks against independent journalists were comprehensively covered – such as the smear campaign against the investigative reporter Khadija Ismayilova or the brutal attack of Idrak Abbasov. The 35-year-old journalist was beaten unconscious by security officers of the state oil company Socar in mid April – the same company which is financially supporting the private viewing of the Eurovision Song Contest in the Azerbaijani embassy in Berlin, organised by the agency Hardenberg Concept

The Azerbaijani media, which is loyal to the regime, immediately reacted to the critical reporting in Germany: the public TV channel Az-TV reported on drug addicts and prostitutes in German metropolises at the beginning of March and in April the beginning of the Second World War was addressed. The newspaper *Yeni Azerbaijan*, which is published by the party of the same name, released a photo collage in which the federal representative for human rights, Markus Löning, the German ambassador in Baku, Herbert Quelle, and the Azerbaijani opposition leader were all depicted alongside Adolf Hitler.

Before the ESC, ROG calls upon all of those involved – jury, producers, singers and journalists – to not ignore the human rights violations in Azerbaijan. However, the organisation decided against a boycott of the ESC. Khadija Ismayilova, one of the most well-known female journalists from Baku, described the consequences of the enormous media interest in her country: „Because the entire world is listening to us, for the first time – at least for a short while – the government is also forced to listen to us. However, afterwards we expect a hot summer. The government will seek revenge on those who spoiled their party.“²

¹ Emin Milli in an ROG press conference on 10.05.2012 in Berlin

² Khadija Ismayilova in an ROG pre conference on 23.05.2012 in Berlin

Under state control: TV channels and print media

The Azerbaijani constitution guarantees the „freedom of the mass media“ and forbids state censorship. The state refers to „numerous TV and radio stations“ and „over 200 print media outlets“ in the country³ in order to demonstrate the diversity of the Azerbaijani media system. However, in comparison with other countries, Azerbaijan is far behind, taking 162nd place (out of 179 places) in the ROG ranking for freedom of the press. ROG counts President Ilham Aliyev among the greatest enemies of the press worldwide.

The alleged diversity serves as a facade for a degree of state control and dominance which greatly impedes the work of independent journalists, in some cases even making it impossible. The state controls television, which is by far the most important source of information for the population, almost exclusively. From more than 20 stations only the private channel ANS TV was able to maintain a certain independence. The operators have already been warned multiple times, and after the reports about the 2010 Parliament elections they had to undergo an extensive tax audit.⁴

The print media market is hardly more diverse: even though more than 4,000 newspapers and magazines are registered with the Ministry of Justice, only approx. 200 of those are actually published. 80% of the media is owned by the state. The most important newspapers which are critical of the government belong to the opposition parties or are associated with them, such as *Yeni Musavat*, the newspaper of the opposition party Musavat, or *Azadliq*, the weekly newspaper for the Popular Front party. Independent, balanced reporting is nearly impossible in this situation. „Many journalists in Azerbaijan see themselves as politicians and ideologists as opposed to reporters,“ the freelance journalist Schehla Sultanova explains.⁵

In addition, the state controls the media with economic pressure. The state media, or media loyal to the government, are financed on one hand via the compulsory subscriptions of state authorities, universities or hospitals, while on the other hand they are financed via advertisements on an advertising market which is dominated by state companies. Rahim Hajibajli, director of *Azadliq*, reports that companies which wanted to advertise in critical media outlets are intimidated.⁶ In addition there are problems with the delivery of the newspapers. In the meantime, even in the centre of Baku newspaper dealers are becoming rare, according to Hajibajli. For these reasons critical reporting and social debates occur on the internet for the most part (see below).

Threatened, arrested, beaten: Critical journalists in danger

Five journalists and one blogger are currently in prison in Azerbaijan. In 2011 the Institute for the Freedom and Security of Journalists (IRFS) in Baku counted approx. 50 cases in which journalists had been attacked or threatened. Most recently, the smear campaign against the investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova and the brutal assault of Idrak Abassov have shown how dangerous the work of independent journalists is.

³ ROG interview with Asaj Guliyev (Chairman of the Federal Office for the support of NGOs) and Vugar Aliyev (Media department of the Department of State); Azerbaijan embassy press release from 23.05.2012 (<http://www.azembassy.de/>)

⁴ IREX Media Sustainability Index 2011 (http://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/EE_MSI_2011_Azerbaijan.pdf)

⁵ ROG interview with Shehla Sultanova in Baku

⁶ ROG interview with Rahim Hajibajli in Baku

Khadija Ismayilova, one of the most well-known journalists in the country, researched for the foreign station *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* and for the project to monitor organised crime and corruption (OCCRP). She published articles about the presidential family's lucrative business abroad and the profits of a company associated with the government in the building of an event hall for the Eurovision Song Contest.⁷ At the beginning of March Ismayilova was blackmailed with intimate photos and a video which was recorded with a hidden camera in her bedroom. The journalist made the threats public and explained: „I will continue in my profession. As a journalist who takes her work seriously, I have no other choice.“⁸ Ismayilova received overwhelming support for her courageous response in Azerbaijan as well as abroad. On May 24th she was awarded the Förderpreis Freie Presse Osteuropa (award for free press in Eastern Europe) by the Zeit Foundation. Similar smear campaigns were carried out against employees of the oppositional newspaper *Azadliq* in 2005 and 2010; however, they received less press.

The reporter Idrak Abbasov, who works for the independent newspaper *Zerkalo*, among others, was beaten unconscious and admitted into a hospital on April 18th. He had attempted to document forced resettlements close to Baku with his camera.⁹ Private homeowners have been fighting for months with the state oil company Socar for the property rights to the land there. Numerous houses have already been torn down without court order on the pretext that they were dilapidated. Abbasov's family's house was also partially destroyed in September 2011. In the investigation the security guards of the Socar company, who seriously injured Abbasov, denied all responsibility.¹⁰

Such assaults on journalists are rarely prosecuted. Even the murders of Elmar Huseynov (2005) and Rafik Tagi (2011) remain unsolved. Quite the opposite is true of cases against journalists: politically motivated criminal proceedings are carried out again and again in order to hinder the work of critical journalists under pretexts such as drug possession or refusal to serve in the military. Self-censorship is thus widespread among Azerbaijani journalists. „Many of us are paranoid because we feel like we are being followed and monitored,“ said the freelance journalist Ulwiyya Asadzadeh.¹¹

Uncensored, but nearly inaccessible: Information on the internet

Most authoritarian countries handle the internet the same way they treat print media – they censor it. Azerbaijan is different. Internet contents are not blocked or filtered.¹² Instead, the regime left the internet open for a long time in order to monitor and punish oppositional, independent contents. „The internet is still an open platform for free information and ideas. However, one must assume that the internet is also being monitored. You have to be careful about what you write on Facebook. After all, there could also be agents among your Facebook friends,“ the blogger Ali Nowruzow remarked.¹³

Thus in 2009 the bloggers Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade were both jailed for making fun of corrupt politicians in a satirical video. The case was not mentioned in the Azerbaijani print media,

⁷ Khadija Ismayilova / OCCRP: President's Family Benefits from Eurovision Hall (<http://bit.ly/JYA8hk>)

⁸ ROG, 15.03.2012: ROG outraged over smear campaign against investigative journalist (<http://bit.ly/HZDAX4>)

⁹ ROG, 19.04.2012: Independent journalist beaten unconscious (<http://bit.ly/Kek89R>)

¹⁰ IRFS, 23.05.2012: Socar's Investigation Team Places Blame on Journalist Idrak Abbasov in New Smear Campaign (<http://www.irfs.az/content/view/8605/28/lang,eng/>)

¹¹ ROG Interview with Ulwiyya Asadzadeh in Baku

¹² IPGA, 26.03.2012: Running Scared. Azerbaijan's Silenced Voices, p. 36 (<http://bit.ly/JYAUdX>)

¹³ ROG Interview with Ali Novruzov in Baku

but it was widely discussed online. After spending 17 months in prison Milli and Hajizade were released, thanks to international protest, including that of Reporters Without Borders. The regime changed its internet policies in response to several demonstrations in the spring of 2011, which were organised via social media and inspired by the Arab Spring. While people already active online continue to be intimidated, the remaining population is discouraged from using the internet through the defamation of internet users in general as poor citizens.

In February Jabbar Savalan was jailed for calling for protests on Facebook. He was released early in December 2011, but shortly before the Eurovision Song Contest he was called to military duty, although he had been previously exempted from military service. In April 2011 the Public Prosecutor's Office directed investigations against the blogger Elnur Majidli for „incitement of national, ethnic or religious hate“. Majidli now lives in exile in France. The blogger Bachtiyar Haijew, on the other hand, has been in prison since May 2011, likewise for calling to protests on Facebook.

Thus social media and the internet have become important political factors, even though Azerbaijan has one of the lowest levels of internet use in comparison to other countries in the southern Caucasus. According to data from the Caucasus Research Resources Center, 78% of all Azerbaijanis have never used the internet. 7% of all Azerbaijanis use it daily, while in Armenia and Georgia 20% of the population accesses the internet daily. Likewise, 7% of all Azerbaijanis have their own Facebook profiles.¹⁴ In addition, there are several independent news portals such as Contact.AZ or the online channel Obyektiv.TV, which offer critical reporting. They are financed by Western organisations such as the European Union, the German Marshall Fund and the National Endowment for Democracy. According to data from the Freedom House, there are also approx. 27,000 blogs,¹⁵ although experts from the Caucasus Research Resource Center consider the blogosphere to be largely politically unimportant.

Nevertheless, these numbers are rising and the government strategy of defaming internet use as anti-civic behaviour seems to have been as yet unsuccessful. Therefore the significance of the internet for political mobilisation is also increasing. It is not yet clear whether the regime will switch to upfront measures to censor the internet in the future. This question is particularly interesting because the annual meeting of the Internet Governance Forum will take place in Baku from November 6th to the 9th, which also advises the UN General Secretary in matters of internet policy and the freedom of information online.¹⁶

After the Eurovision Song Contest: Conclusions and demands

Reporters Without Borders Germany is calling upon international reporters to keep an eye on the situation in Azerbaijan after the Eurovision Song Contest. ROG is worried that the government will clamp down on journalists and human rights activists after the contest is over. Independent journalists have to uncover attempts by the government to influence reporting and the close ties between politics, PR agencies and lobbyists.¹⁷

¹⁴ Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2010: Caucasus Barometer Azerbaijan (<http://crrc.ge/oda/>)

¹⁵ Freedom House 2011, Freedom on the Net / Azerbaijan, S.4 (<http://bit.ly/KsXwTk>)

¹⁶ <http://www.intgovforum.org>

¹⁷ European Stability Initiative, 24.05.2012: Caviar Diplomacy. How Azerbaijan silenced the Council of Europe (http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_131.pdf)

Reporters Without Borders Germany demands that the Azerbaijani government release the journalists and bloggers from prison. International journalists must also be allowed to enter the country freely after the ESC and the relaxed visa requirements should be maintained. In addition, Azerbaijan must fulfill its international obligations which result from its membership in the UN Security Council (2012/2013) and the Council of Europe (since 2001). This is particularly true for Article 10 of the European Human Rights Convention, which guarantees their freedom of expression.

Reporters Without Borders Germany calls upon German and international politicians to demand adherence to the international human rights agreements and to make this a condition for political cooperation. Topics such as human rights and freedom of the press should not become subordinate to economic interests.

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