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MASS MEDIA SITUATION IN AZERBAIJAN: WHAT HAS CHANGED OVER THE PAST YEAR

The way things are now, one can hardly expect a mere year to bring any serious changes in the media situation in Azerbaijan. Events do happen, but none of them revolutionary. Such a state of affairs cannot but bring to mind the Chinese adage to the effect that whatever happens, nothing changes.

Which developments can be regarded as positive ones? Those are: the opening of public television, the adoption of the Access to Information Law, the promulgation of the President's special decree on supporting the Azeri mass media on the eve of the National Journalism Day, active media coverage of parliamentary elections.

Why didn't those developments effect any changes in our journalism or promote its progress?

The answer probably is that they are not the links of the chain of government information policy aimed at enhancing media independence and freedom of the press. Our public television (or rather radio and television – ORT) had a hard time taking shape. Early on, it came under fire from national and international organizations. As a result, ORT has not become a successor to the State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company but emerged as a parallel entity. What the Council of Europe insisted on was not having another TV system in Azerbaijan but on government-run television going public, with the television policy and electronic media management system transformed accordingly. None of this is forthcoming, however.

The Access to Information Law is, indeed, a most progressive and well-thought-out document but it can hardly do journalists and the media any good. There are no enforcement mechanisms and, more likely than not, this law is doomed to remain on paper. Barriers in the way to information haven't been lowered an inch.

Unfortunately, the President's decree has not provided a stimulus to the further progress of the mass media in the country, either. As a matter of fact, it boiled down to conferring government distinctions on a group of journalists which, according to many professional organizations, is impermissible from the viewpoint of preserving the media's independence and impartiality.

Media coverage of parliamentary elections was marked, as in previous years, by violations of the law, international principles and ethical canons. An overwhelming majority of politically-committed newspapers and TV companies vigorously campaigned for "their" candidates, engaged in hidden vote canvassing and defamation. This is confirmed by the data of election monitoring conducted by the CE and OSCE in Azerbaijan. Drawing on past experience, it is safe to claim that no monitoring, training, laws and codes of ethics will rectify the situation for as long as the nation's mass media remain practically dependent on the government and its political machinery. This is not to say that journalists are ignorant of their duties, of the laws and rules of election coverage. On the contrary, they are well versed in all that as certified professional journalists should be. In practice, their special knowledge is of no use to them. They have their political assignments to fulfil, and failing to do so will doom the media outlet they work for to a tough and, more often than not, losing struggle for survival. An independent company stands practically no chance of obtaining a broadcasting license, the printed media product distribution system is in decline and 75-percent government controlled (at a conservative estimate). The same is true of the advertising market. This

is where changes are to be made first and foremost if the mass media situation in Azerbaijan is to show any improvement at all.

The assassination of Elmar Huseinov, Editor-in-Chief of the *Monitor* magazine, merits special discussion in this context because it is an extraordinary event.

May I remind the reader that it was precisely Mr. Huseinov who made a report on the mass media situation in Azerbaijan at the last-year OSCE conference.

Over the years of its independence, Azerbaijan has lost nine journalists who died while pursuing their professional duties. This, however, is – beyond reasonable doubt for anyone here, the President included – the first case of a political contract killing. Elmar Huseinov had been threatened, persecuted, sued, jailed, shadowed – and finally gunned down at his own doorstep. The hit list has been opened. What we Azeri journalists are concerned about is that the authorities do not try hard enough to track down those who order and execute contract killings. Such is the impression Elmar's relatives, friends and colleagues get. International organizations share this view and repeatedly remind the Azeri government that the perpetrators of this horrible crime are still at large. Law enforcement agencies reassure the public they are making every effort to solve the murder. Here is an example to the contrary, though. One of Elmar's lifelong friends, also a journalist, has never been interrogated over nine months after the tragedy.

The country's journalistic community and public organizations are trying to get across to the government, to have it act more efficiently and transparently, but there is not much they can do single-handed. In this matter we reckon on help and attention from international organizations because media freedom and journalists' security cannot be regarded as any one country's internal affairs. Undoubtedly, Elmar's assassination and his murderers getting away with it have gone to restrict media freedom. The tragedy has brought into current use the term "unlit doorway syndrome" which stands for self-censorship and fear of speaking one's mind out.

I recall a tale-telling episode in this connection. On the day following the murder – 3 March 2005 – all papers front-paged photographs of Elmar Huseinov and carried reports from the scene of the crime. All papers, that is, except government publications which didn't say a word about the tragedy as if nothing had happened. The conspiracy of silence was finally broken by the President who, in a television address, voiced his indignation over the killing and promised to have the murderers found and punished in no time. I ask myself: what would their reaction have been had the fatal shot been fired a year, two or three years ago? The answer is: exactly the same, meaning that nothing has happened over those years. But for all that, Azeri journalism has lost none of its fighting spirit because to give up would mean to fall hopelessly behind our fast-moving times.

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