



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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*****as prepared for delivery*****

**Statement to the Permanent Council
(under “Current Issues”)**

Vienna, 4 October 2001

Media Developments in Azerbaijan Violate Freedom of Expression

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am saddened to have to report to you today that since my quarterly report in July, we have seen endless pressure by authorities in Azerbaijan on the country's independent media, so much so that it appears more journalists are in prison in Azerbaijan than at any time since independence. In addition, court orders have forced the closure of a number of independent newspapers including *Milletin Sesi*, *Etimad*, *Avropa* and *Femida*, while imposing large fines on major independent newspapers *Azadliq* and *Yeni Musavat* which will make it very difficult for them to continue with their daily work.

In my 19 July report to the Permanent Council, I spoke of an unsatisfactory number of violations against journalists and the freedom of the media in Azerbaijan, about serious problems of *structural censorship*, and I underscored to you the major obstacles the electronic media is facing in the area of licensing and frequencies, putting the very existence of most radio and TV stations in jeopardy. I drew your attention to the decision of the president of a prominent independent TV station, *ABA*, to close indefinitely his highly popular station because of incessant harassment by tax authorities, which subsequently confiscated the station's valuable broadcasting equipment.

At that time, the only positive news I had to give you on this subject was a decrease in direct political pressure and media lawsuits and that no Azerbaijan journalist was in jail. That has changed dramatically.

In the second half of September 2001 alone, we have seen an unprecedented rise in the number of journalists who have been targets of the government's most recent crackdown. At latest count, there are five journalists in jail, three on probation and others awaiting trial. Those in jail include **Elmar Huseinov**, the founder of the now-defunct *Bakinskii bulvard*, sentenced to six months in a prison camp for allegedly "insulting the honor and dignity" of the mayor of Baku by printing an article on the mayor by journalist **Irada Hueseynov**. The paper's editor, **Bella Zakirova**, received a six-month suspended sentence as well.

On 17 September **Shabaz Khuduoglu**, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Milletin sesi* (*Voice of the People*) was sent to prison for six months, journalist **Gulnaz Qamberli** received a three-month conditional sentence and editor **Eynulla Fatullayev** faces imprisonment on the same charges. Their "crime": "insulting the honor and dignity" of President Aliyev's Chief of Staff. I should note that *Milletin sesi* has taken a strong stand against corruption since its founding late last year.

Shahlar Mamedov, the director of the independent publishing house, *Baku Printing Press*, is in jail, sentenced to an 18-month term for tax fraud.

Finally, we should not forget **Yagub Abbasov**, founder of *Ulus* newspaper and his deputy **Surkhay Gojayev** who have been imprisoned since July on charges of insult and assault.

Almost every day now, news is reaching my Office of this type of severe intimidation and harassment, with the presumed intent of putting the independent media in Azerbaijan out of business. The situation is so negative, that the Council of Europe Secretary General Walter Schwimmer has issued a press release expressing alarm at the worsening media situation in Azerbaijan, a new member of the Council. I share the Secretary General's alarm and call on the government of Azerbaijan to honor their commitments to the OSCE and to cease what can only be called an assault on freedom of media in Azerbaijan.