

Media Monitoring Report

1 February – 31 March 2016

IRFS/RATI

IRFS | IMS | MEMO 98

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INTRODUCTION

Institute for Reporters` Freedom and Safety (IRFS), an independent, non-partisan Azerbaijani NGO dedicated to freedom of expression and the media, and a Slovak media monitoring organisation MEMO 98, have been jointly monitoring the coverage of the Azerbaijani political scene in the selected media in the framework of the '*Change in the Air: Monitoring and Promoting Media Pluralism in Azerbaijan*' project.

The project is implemented in cooperation with the International Media Support (IMS) and provides a comprehensive monitoring to assess the current level of political diversity in Azerbaijani's media reporting. The project seeks to assess the current level of political diversity in media reporting, including concrete comparisons and analysis.

The methodology that measures the total amount of time and space devoted to monitored subjects as well as the manner in which the monitored subjects have been portrayed (positive, neutral or negative), was developed by MEMO 98 which has carried out similar projects in more than 50 countries in the last 19 years, including in Azerbaijan.¹ Given its comprehensive content-oriented approach, the methodology is specially designed to provide in-depth feedback on pluralism and diversity in media reporting, including coverage of chosen subjects and themes.²

The monitoring aims to offer professional, comprehensive, and objective assessment of political diversity, accuracy, and balance in the news programmes and politics-related materials on five television channels, and ten online media outlets.³ The project's findings are not intended to support any one political party but the integrity of the media environment as a whole during and beyond the campaign season. The findings will be compiled into three monitoring reports about the media's behaviour during the whole period and disseminated to the public, media, civil society, political parties, and the international community.

This is the third report which covers the period from 1 February to 31 March 2017. Following is the summary of the main findings:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TV CHANNELS

AzTV

The Azerbaijan Television (AzTV) stands out among the national television channels for its position, stance, style and administrative governance. It is funded directly from the state budget and acts as a mouthpiece of the ruling powers.

¹ More information about MEMO 98 is available at: <http://www.memo98.sk>

² The media monitoring includes quantitative analysis of the coverage which focussed on the amount of time allocated to each subject, as well as the tone of the coverage in which the relevant political subjects are portrayed: positive, neutral or negative. Qualitative analysis assesses the performance of the media against specific principles or benchmarks – such as ethical or professional standards – that cannot be easily quantified. Monitors report on distortions, unbalanced coverage, unfairness, inaccuracy, bias, and anything else that is important to good quality reporting.

³ Television: *AzTV, İTV, and ARB*
Web portals: *Azadliq.info, Azadliq.org, Contact.az, Meydan TV, and BBC,*

AzTV's primetime news programs include Russian-language Novosti (News) program aired at 6 pm, Region Khabarlari (News on Regions) aired at 7 pm, and the main edition of Khabarlar (News) aired at 8 pm. On Sundays, Hafta (Week) analytical program is broadcast. Twice a month, additional editions of news program were aired at 11 pm for unknown reasons. The days they went on air did not bear topicality for any notable events, but additional news editions were included in primetime.

Designed for Russian-speaking audience, Novosti focuses more on the daily political news, just like the main edition of Khabarlar. The main news topics during the monitoring period were the President's decrees, receptions, visits, conferences and meetings of Milli Meclis (the Parliament). Both news editions lacked any news on regions of the country. On the other hand, Region Khabarlari is a newscast which is aimed to present news on regions. Its daily editions average 16-17 news items but lacks thematic diversity. Topics were limited to techno-park in Sumgayit, crop farming in regions, animal farming, new roads and medical checkups are done at the President's order. News items with the same content were aired every day with the only change in the names of regions. It should be mentioned that all of them were positive news. For example, these items included a war veteran provided with an apartment, a patient treated in a newly commissioned hospital, a citizen undergoing medical checkup, an IDP from Kalbajar region accommodated in Gabala, or a resident of a village whose roads have been renovated expressed appreciation to the President.(10 March). The monitoring team did not come across any critical items aired during this monitoring period. There was a clear tendency to only highlight positive news, particularly achievements and successes by the president and the government, including medical checkups of people, constructions of new roads, development of crop and animal farming as well as activities of employment centres. However, unemployment, difficulties created by the economic crisis, the arbitrariness of officials, corruption, and other problems are known to everyone in the country are hidden and not reported by the majority of the mainstream media. If these issues are covered, it is only through social networks and pro-opposition media. AzTV is devoid of political diversity. Independent civil society and critically-minded people are not invited even to non-political programs. Unemployment is a problem not only in regions but also in big cities. Inexplicably, AzTV made no mention of this issue.

Novosti and Khabarlar programs usually started with items on the president. First, his decrees, receptions and visits were fully covered. The next usually covered the First Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva and then Heydar Aliyev Foundation's activities and the work done with its support and on the initiative of the Foundation's Vice-President Leyla Aliyeva. The late leader Heydar Aliyev was mentioned almost in every item. Even at the reception in honour of the participants of the Fifth Global Forum, the President dedicated his speech to Heydar Aliyev and AzTV aired the full speech (17.03.17). AzTV showed Heydar Aliyev's image on the top corner of the screen from 20 to 25 of March.

RELEVANCE – when it comes to fulfilling this basic journalistic standard, it is clear that AzTV aired the majority of news which lacks relevance. The news on AzTV are derived not based on newsworthiness but to please the current establishment. Moreover, many of the news items had the same content, were based on government propaganda, and each is devoted

excessive airtime. The excessive depiction of Heydar and Ilham Aliyev's images without relevance to the topic should be specifically underlined.

EXACTNESS – News items should consist of facts reflecting reality. But, the facts presented often do not reflect reality. On the day of the professional holiday of road workers, citing the President, it was said that 'We have actively tackled unemployment in recent years. Thus, the unemployment rate has declined to 5 percent. This is indeed our historical achievement. Along with unemployment, the poverty rate has also gone down to 5 percent'. These facts do not reflect reality as they are inaccurate. Today, unemployment is the main problem for people in the country, with many young people leaving the country due to unemployment.

TRANSPARENCY – News items presented by AzTV are prepared by its staff and their correspondents in foreign countries. In particular, the news items on foreign news lack clarity when it comes to sources as frequently, the sources are often not named.

BALANCE – The longer term monitoring, unfortunately, confirmed that the lack of balance in the framework of AzTV news items are not results of short-term anomalies but are genuine trends. AzTV keeps presenting only the official position, largely ignoring any views which are independent of or critical of the presidency. For example, speaking about one of the opposition leaders the APFP Chairman Ali Karimli, Deputy Prime Minister A. Hasanov says 'He is making a big mistake. That shows his level of intelligence. This is a habit of the opposition.' (19.02.17). The view of Ali Kerimi is not presented. Political alternatives are not presented on equal terms. AzTV lacks debatable issues, or rather, parties to engage in debate. There is always just one party – the ruling party. An alternative opinion is missing.

VARIETY – This journalistic standard is almost non-existent on AzTV coverage as there is rarely any variety of sources in the framework of news items.

TIMELY – It is very important for information to be publicised in time. AzTV has a different attitude to this issue. Azerbaijan has a big problem as Karabakh conflict. There is an ongoing war in this region. Azerbaijan suffers casualties. But AzTV remains silent on that. After the vice-president's statement, AzTV was so preoccupied with this topic that it did not provide information to viewers about the five martyrs killed by Armenians on those days. The news was not presented in time. The principle of timeliness was violated. Only a week later, an item titled 'Dead bodies of our soldiers killed on the frontline collected' was presented (27.02.17).

There is some diversity in the foreign news segment. However, as a rule, AzTV appears to highlight only catastrophic or very negative news from the Western countries, largely ignoring development, global innovations, today's living standards of people, and accomplishments in democratic countries. The channel only shows a dispiriting item running for 1-2 minutes under the title of No Comment prior to evening editions of Khabarlar, e.g. flooding in Peru, a wildfire in the United States, protest against police injustices in France, political activist A. Sargsyan's sudden death in Armenian prison and associated protests. These kinds of events happen all over the world, including in Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, police injustice, imprisonment of political activists, and frequent suicides in Azerbaijan are not touched upon.

On February 9, AzTV aired an item dedicated to the 93rd anniversary of Nakhchivan. This item was rebroadcast every year on February 9. The same item with the same text and video had also been aired on the 90th anniversary.

March 27 is World Theatre Day. The video presented on that day had also been recorded years before. Most of the people shown in that video are no longer alive.

Sometimes, non-professional propagandistic materials are aired. On February 21, the Novosti presented an item on the celebration of the Wednesday of Water (one of four Wednesdays leading up to our national holiday Nowruz). In this connection, AzTV spoke about the Oguz-Gabala-Baku water pipeline. It said that the pipeline, constructed in 2010, provided uninterrupted water supply to residents of Baku which does not correspond to reality as the majority of Baku households receive water with intervals. There are even people affected by water scarcity who buy water from water trucks.

“Today is Water Wednesday.” President Ilham Aliyev presses the button launching the water pipeline. Water flowed. (Khabarlar) They clapped merrily. But, what does it have to do with Water Wednesday? Here, the TV channel manipulated with the fact.

Events held in the regions on the occasion of March 8 International Women’s Day were covered on Region Khabarlari. They spoke about events held in eight regions in a 3-minute item, i.e. one sentence per region (08.03.17).

Nowruz festivities are conducted in the regions. All of them were very similar events and all of them were shown at length on all TVs. Region Khabarlari aired a 12-minute item, where it mentioned 20 regions and presented footages (18.03.17). A 6-minute item dealt with festivities in 10 regions (17.03.17).

AzTV’s edition of Region Khabarlari sometimes re-runs same items. The items on Sumgayit Technologies Park (18.03.17, 11.03.17), liquorice processing in Kurdamir, Katekh village of Balakan, Shirvan fishery, construction of Kish Bridge in Shaki (11.03.17), Sumgayit copper processing plant (11.03.17), and an Agdam-based matchstick artist (11.03.17) were rebroadcast 2-3 times.

There is a clear lack of social issues in the framework of AzTV coverage. For example, one of the real problems in the country is the rate of suicides which is very high. While this topic is covered on social networks on a daily basis AzTV does not address this topic and does not air public service announcements (PSAs) reflecting on this serious issue.

AzTV airs daily Gunun Nabzi (Pulse of the Day) program, which should focus on important events of the day, supporting the government’s position on all occasions.

AzTV continues its activities based on government propaganda, aloof from people’s problems. The majority of the population does not trust or watch this channel. AzTV’s audience is those in power.

ITV (Ichtimai Television)

Operating since 2004, Ictimai (Public) Television airs two prime-time news editions of Jarchi (Herald) on weekdays; the Russian-language version at 6.30pm and the Azerbaijani-language version at 8.30pm. Jarchi does not have a fixed airtime. It may last 18 minutes on one day, and 1 hour 15 minutes (15 March) on another day. It is followed by Jarchi Region consisting of regional news and then a news bulletin called Sports. On Sundays, a weekly analytical program called Haftanin Yekunu (Summary of the Week) is aired at 9 pm. The Russian version of Jarchi did not go on air from March 20 to March 27 (due to Nowruz holiday), and Haftanin Yekunu was off-air on March 26.

The airtime of the main news program varies depending on the number and length of materials on the government and the President.

There also are weekly discussion programs called Aktual Ekran (Pressing), Muzakira Vakhti (Discussion Time), Ortag Makhraj (Consensus), Media va Zaman (Media and Time), Dars Saati (Class Time), and Diggat Markazi (Center of Attention). The same programs are repeated during the week. Sometimes, the TV schedule is not properly organised; the same host appears on air with two programs, one old and one new (8 February). Cultural programs such as literary and artistic programs, documentaries, soap operas and concerts are prevalent. Same as on AzTV, ITV also ignores social issues which create a clear divide between the television which claims to be public and people who do not see their problems covered by this television.

From 20 March to 24 March, an image of Ex-President Heydar Aliyev was shown on screen day and night in connection with Nowruz holiday. Since 2004, ITV followed in the steps of other channels in terms of keeping Heydar Aliyev's image on screen 24/7 (except for commercials) on holidays and other significant days.

As always, news programs usually start with President Ilham Aliyev's decrees, receptions, meetings, visits and participation in opening ceremonies. This pattern has continued since the inception of Ilham Aliyev's presidency in 2003. Previous monitoring sessions conducted by IRFS in different periods revealed the fact that Ictimai Television-based its news policy on the activities and popularization of the president, mentioned this fact in its reports as 'moving away from the principles of public broadcasting', and assessed this situation as an unwelcome trend in comparison to public television stations of developed countries. Despite the fact that IRFS widely publicised those reports, ITV continues its activities at the same standards. A loyal approach to remarks and criticisms is observed. According to calculations, the longest items are those about Ilham Aliyev. Such items may last for 19, 21 and 22 minutes. Thus, a half of the news program averaging 30-40 minutes is devoted to the President and three-fourth to the government and foreign news. In March, ITV allocated 1 hour and 30 minutes to Ilham Aliyev's official visit to France during one week (March 13-19), which is equal to three average main news programs. Ilham Aliyev's speech in the Munich conference was presented as an item with a length of 11 minutes 13 seconds (February 17). On the same day, 18 minutes of the 50-minute Jarchi program were devoted to the Munich trip. Four items, which included Ilham Aliyev, ran for 25 minutes (February 27). Mehriban Aliyeva's election as vice-president was also covered (February 21). Sometimes, the number of items on a single program is too excessive, e.g. 25-30, which is boring and devoid of precision.

Fact-based – A material produced on the topic of March 8 International Women’s Day brought up Heydar Aliyev’s name, mentioned Ilham Aliyev and then moved on to Mehriban Aliyeva. Azerbaijani woman remained on the back burner. Similar to other topics, they all end up with mentioning Heydar Aliyev. March 27 is the Theatre Day. ITV started the item on this subject by speaking about Heydar Aliyev and his contributions. Ilham Aliyev’s support for the development of culture was underlined, and videos from the 2000s were presented. The same footages have been shown in the past 15 years. It lacks clarity and gives rise to the question ‘why is the President’s support invisible?’ The purpose of this item was unclear. Not a single theatre figure was interviewed, no actor was reached for comment, and no light was shed on the behind-the-scenes situation of any theatre (10.03). One can definitely say that ITV’s purpose when covering any significant day, holiday or historic event was not necessarily conveying real facts to the audience, but rather conducting propaganda for the Aliyev government on the background of that event. Heydar Aliyev was talked about even in an item dealing with the massacre of March 30, 1918. One edition of Media Zaman program was filmed in Heydar Aliyev Center in Khirdalan city. Instead of the media’s problems, the program spoke about the ‘Strategic Roadmap on Heydar Aliyev.’ This topic was irrelevant to the media and time.

Sometimes it happens that ITV says Prime Minister Artur Rasizade has presented his report to Milli Meclis (Parliament), but Rasizade himself was not shown (17.03) because the channel used an older footage. Sometimes former MPs are even seen in long shots.

ITV generally complies with the criteria of timeliness and promptness in regard to political news. Sometimes the channel causes misunderstandings, e.g. on 13 March, it broadcast Ilham Aliyev’s meetings in Paris, and then on 14 March, the President’s grand ceremonial welcome. A 10-minute item consisting of 4-5 scenes was presented at the banquet that took place during the Paris visit, meaning that the same scene was shown repeatedly for about 10-12 times (15.03).

Among the national TV channels, Ictimai Television is closer to AzTV in terms of the share of political news and the amount and tone of airtime allocated to the government including President Ilham Aliyev and his family (wife and daughter). All of the materials on the President, vice-president and their daughter are made using footages filmed by AzTV, and most of them are even exact repetitions including the text part.

At times, ITV picks up items from AzTV ‘as is’ and only blots out the corporate logo. At times, it just uses AzTV’s footages and prepares the text on its own. During the two months, 58 such facts were observed.

Worst of all, no reference is made to the source in this case. In general, ITV does not cite any source except the President’s press service and Azertag.az. Similar to AzTV, no reference to the source is made in information in all foreign news.

Ictimai TV does not present alternative or critical views or commentary. Citizens’ problems or complaints are not covered. Economic and social news on regions are exclusively in a positive tone. Azerbaijan looks very bright on ITV.

ITV does not ensure balance. Top domestic news such as arrests of political activists and journalists, trials, the crackdown on freedom of expression and international organisations are always neglected. These are taboo topics for ITV. To the contrary, programs of an opposite character are broadcast. For example, critical views were voiced against opposition-minded people challenging the government policies in Azerbaijan on Aktual Movzu program aired on February 3. The host of the program called opposition groups the fifth colon. He blamed them by saying ‘radical opposition wants to turn Azerbaijan into Syria’. The host acted as if he is a prosecutor. UAPFP Chairman, MP G. Hasanguliyev called APFP Chairman A. Karimli the chairman of the National Council (PS: the chairman of NC is J. Hasanli), and neither he nor the host corrected this mistake.

As for the crime news, they are presented in a separate program during night hours.

ITV does not comply with the principle of exactness. There are cases of indirect change of facts and over-exaggeration. The extradition of journalist A. Lapshin from Belarus to Azerbaijan after his trip to Karabakh was presented by the channel as ‘the triumph of the President’s political will’ (08.02). In our opinion, ITV could have voiced that view in the event of Karabakh’s return to Azerbaijan by means of political negotiations. The TV stations turned the Lapshin issue into a propaganda tool. “Lapshin’s extradition is the triumph of justice” was the title given to the item (09.02). “This fact goes to show that Ilham Aliyev is a political leader pursuing an effective and worthy policy on the international arena and enjoying deep respect and strong reputation,” is another quote.

It is worth noting that after the President’s wife M. Aliyeva became vice-president, ITV has portrayed Ms Aliyeva almost at the same level as the President, pouring praises on her through the tongues of journalists and citizens (06.03). Same texts and images were repeatedly presented in items on M. Aliyeva due to the absence of new facts (February 21, February 26). At the meeting of Milli Meclis (Parliament) on termination of M. Aliyeva’s MP status, the MPs applaud her four times from their seats and twice on their feet. ITV presents this segment at a high volume.

February also coincided with the anniversary of the Khojali tragedy. In recent years, the materials produced by TV channels on this tragedy were associated with the name of L. Aliyeva, vice-president of H. Aliyev Foundation. For almost one week, praiseful remarks on L. Aliyeva prevailed. Although ITV did not allocate as much airtime to the topic of Armenia as AzTV did, everything was black in all of its items on Armenia. No matter how negative the attitude towards Armenia is due to it being at war with Azerbaijan after the former’s occupation of the latter’s territories, the viewer is entitled to get some real facts rather than ITV’s perspective. It is a minus for ITV to use footages of downtown Yerevan dating back to 1980s when speaking about Armenia at an age of availability of all kinds of technical means.

Hafta program comes across as a tool of propaganda for the President, his family and the government rather than a weekly summary and analysis of news programs. This is evidenced by facts and figures. For example, the Aliyev were present in 21 items of a news chronicle consisting of 22 items in total (19.03). Four analytical items were also about I. Aliyev. The 1 hour 10 minutes long program revolved around the Aliyev. This goes to show that Ictimai TV does not fulfil its duty of public broadcasting. In an item dealing with services provided

by Asan Gatar (Easy Train) to people in Gazakh, the reporter irrelevantly speaks about I. Aliyev (February 1, Jarchi Region). Items on cotton growing, hazelnut cultivation, medical checkups and other topics start with the following sentence: “At the order of I. Aliyev, on the instruction of the President.” Jarchi Region presents positively toned materials on regions. It mainly shows certain developments and events held. The least covered region is the Southern region.

The Aliyev’s images are on screen whether relevant or not. An item on the remembrance of a martyr shows a large picture of H. Aliyev (10.02). A report is presented on the decree on the restoration of Jojug Marjanli village of Jabrayil recently liberated from occupation, and then experts and citizens praise I. Aliyev. Issuing decrees is one of the duties of the President (11.02).

The multitude of analyses on the President in the report on the monitoring of ITV is justified by the multitude of materials on this subject. Laws adopted in Milli Meclis (Parliament) and aimed at monitoring social networks and online media were presented as a fact, and the only endorsement of those laws was mentioned. ITV failed to present other concerned parties’ positions on the issue, thus failing to ensure balance.

ITV ran a PSA focusing on voter list on February 3 asking people to check their names on the voters’ list.

As a rule, ITV does not provide diversity. It airs a series of items of the same content and with the same texts on any topic (Khojali, Nowruz, Massacre, March 8, reporting and electoral meetings on the results of the year, schoolchildren’s countrywide tour titled “Let’s know Azerbaijan,” etc). For example, a 6-minute item on the fifth anniversary of the Service for Mobilization and Conscription presented similar footages from 10 regions (13.02). The monotony is tiresome for people to watch.

A news item presented on March 23 was re-broadcast on March 29, and the only difference was that in the first case the item dealing with the Ministry of Defense Industry did not mention the name of Minister Y. Jamalov, which was mentioned in the second item. In many cases, materials concentrate on state agencies and individuals rather than on social issues.

Problems are not investigated or tracked down. In general, investigative materials are non-existent. ITV is closed to criticism.

Foreign news items do not stand out in terms of interestingness or significance. Sometimes, the principle of relevance is not complied with. A car accident in Peru cannot be of relevance or importance to Azerbaijani viewers unless it highlights similar problems in Azerbaijan (25.02).

Another example of such news was the item on actress Natalie Portman’s expecting her second child. On some days, 10 minutes out of a 30-minute broadcast are foreign news. Similar to AzTV, foreign topics are primarily covered from a negative, problematic and controversial aspect, against the background of natural disasters. References to the source are never provided when presenting news items picked up from foreign TV stations, news

agencies or websites. The most prevalent topics on ITV are political topics, followed by foreign media reports on Azerbaijan and on other countries.

Sports program occasionally covers the hassle-free sporting life of Azerbaijan and presents extensive materials on the sports games organised abroad.

Issues largely ignored by ITV are also ethnic minorities. While ITV has interesting documentaries on ethnic minorities in their archives (which has been re-broadcast for years) there are no new documentaries created on this topic. This shows that ITV does not act as the voice of voiceless – in the public interest. It sides with the government rather than the people.

As such, the biggest problems of Ictimai TV include the lack of focus on social issues,; the complete lack of political diversity; to conduct critical or investigative journalism and to provide a platform to civil society; and the pro-government inclination of the monitored subjects selected and perceived by ITV as non-affiliated. Ictimai TV should open its doors not only to the government, officials, MPs and businessmen but also to ordinary people.

ARB

Launched on May 10, 2014, Region TV was renamed to ARB on September 19, 2016. In cable operators delivering television programming within the country, ARB is broadcast on the frequency of ANS Television, which was closed in the summer of 2016. ARB focuses on regional news.

During primetime, one news program titled ARB Khabar (ARB News) is presented. The channel's main news broadcast starts at 6.30pm and runs for half an hour. The program usually begins with information on the frontline situation. After a couple of items, the President's decrees, foreign trips and meetings in Baku are shown. The current government is typically praised on the news program. It is propagandised that the government is very useful for the country and takes sound steps towards development and improved living conditions. Critical materials are not aired. Neither government nor opposition representatives are criticised which is in contrast to ANS which in 2003 was known for its more diverse reporting, including criticism of some government ministers.

On Sundays, Haftalik (Weekly) analytical-information program hosted by Nadir Safiyev is aired. Haftalik presents the past week's political, economic and social developments in the country in a detailed form, and also touches on significant events happening abroad. In this case, no source is referenced.

Besides, after the daily news program, Gunun Ardinja (Following the Day) program, which lasts for about 1 hour 30 minutes, is presented. The program usually discusses the events occurring in the country and across the globe, e.g. introduction of a new system for payment of phone subscription fees, the fate of medical courses, price rise of meat, etc.

Similar to AzTV and ITV, on ARB, facts on political and social topics do not reflect reality either. They are presented in an exaggerated and positive tone. For example, on 21.02.17, M.Aliyeva's selection as first vice-president was presented as the will of the people, whereas in fact, this appointment happened suddenly and unexpectedly with no prior public discussion

The channel broadcast no news or informational programs from 20.02.17 to 26.02.17 in connection with Nowruz holidays. Only entertainment and musical shows, stage plays and movies were aired.

ARB produces mainly entertainment and competition-based reality shows, e.g. Ferma (Farm) and Giz Ana Kimi (Girl as a Mother) competition-style programs.

WEBSITES

AZADLIQ.INFO

Azadliq newspaper, the last surviving example of independent print media in Azerbaijan, continues its existence through its online version, Azadliq.info, after the newspaper ceased publication as a result of government pressures in September of 2016. Monitoring-based analysis of Azadliq.info according to different criteria and conclusions drawn provides an insight into the extent to which the website has complied with the principles of professionalism. Before proceeding to the monitoring results of the website, we consider it necessary to note one point as an important factor: for objective reasons, Azadliq newspaper exhibits an obvious decline, instead of improvement, in media professionalism to which its readers were accustomed. The objective reason is that as a result of court fines imposed on the newspaper for various reasons, financial hardships further exacerbated after the cessation of the newspaper's publication and increasingly repressive government policies, the newspaper's staff virtually broke up which has led to the gradual loss of reporting promptness, diverseness of materials, exclusive news items, commentaries, reactions, in a nutshell, aspects that make a media outlet unique and professional, and the events taking place in the country and globally began to be presented more often with reference to other news sources. The above-mentioned reasons inevitably bore the website's readers and gradually reduces the interest in the website, regardless of the fact that Azadliq.info still remains to be one of the handfuls of alternative news sources in the country. In general, it is a commendable thing that the website still survives against all odds. Hopefully, the shortcomings will be eliminated over time and our monitoring remarks will be useful to that end. Intolerance to strong criticism in Azadliq newspaper is the case with Azadliq.info, too. As of March 27, the Azerbaijani authorities have officially blocked access to Azadliq.info from Azerbaijan.

Issues making headlines in Azerbaijan's socio-political life in the monitoring period such as court proceedings worthy of attention known as KGB case, Communications Ministry case and Nardaran case, politically important events such as blogger Mehman Huseynov's and political activists' arrests, crackdown on freedom of expression, Mehriban Aliyev's appointment as first vice-president, and public reaction evoked by them have been attached relevant importance by the website and kept on the front burner. Court proceedings have been covered from a neutral standpoint, and cases of torture, illegality and corruption revealed in court were presented with due exactness and accuracy and without commentary. It should be noted with regret that the materials on court trials, M. Huseynov's arrest and trial are mainly those prepared by Radio Azadliq or Meydan TV. Azadliq.info website's journalists did not participate in or report from almost any court proceedings. Any reactions to or comments on the facts discovered during trials were limited to National Council chairman Jamil Hasanli's or APFP chairman Ali Karimli's Facebook posts published on the website one or several days

later. Thus, the necessary criterion of separating commentaries from facts has been complied with. References to sources were provided in all cases.

Analysis of the economic crisis in the country, expert opinions and comments can be considered satisfactory. In this regard, economist Nemat Aliyev's (though he is not a monitored subject) and ADR Movement chairman G. Ibadoglu's comments were given more space. The website's focus on the subject of agriculture and expert Vahid Maharramov's comments should be particularly underlined. The coverage of the problems in this sphere, which are explained to the readers in a simpler language than economic terminology, is notable. But there are shortcomings here, too. Expert opinions were limited to their Facebook posts rather than conversations between journalists and experts. Invariability of this approach and absence of live communication makes comments look monotonous, and the reader does not have the opportunity to obtain further information on the topic. Such cases also undermine the criterion of clarity of information. It becomes difficult for the unpoliticized wide readership to easily understand an event, and there is a need for additional analysis. Such an analysis is important, but it is almost rarely observed on the website.

The website's coverage of the activities of civil society organisations and their members can be considered satisfactory. Despite the difficult situation of the website, human rights violations, political prisoners behind bars and their family members, human rights defenders' activities and lawyers' opinions are among the regularly covered topics. However, an overall analysis of the civil society's existing problems and the fact that this sector is being harmed or paralysed by the government is almost lacking. The only exception here could be the website's shedding light on the crisis within the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the reasons for Azerbaijan's removal from this organisation.

Social problems of the society and hardships of life encountered by internally displaced people are also partly covered topics. Although refugees' occasional protest rallies and confrontations with representatives of authorities are covered by the website, we want to reiterate the shortcoming pointed out above that sources of information are not the website's own staff, but other media outlets, mainly Azadliq.org and Meydan.tv.

The area, to which Azadliq.info pays the least attention, is the country's number one problem, the Nagorno-Karabakh topic. Political and military materials on Nagorno-Karabakh are extremely limited. Apart from the Defense Ministry's daily official statements on violation of the ceasefire, the website has dedicated almost no articles to the government policy in this direction. It should be noted that analysing and criticising the government's effectively failed policies on the Karabakh problem would only be to the benefit of an independent website.

Usually, 35-50 materials are uploaded on the website's newsfeed on a daily basis. Sometimes, articles featuring monitored subjects do not constitute even 10 percent of all materials. Such a case was particularly observed in March. Since the monitored subjects include politically active people and organisations, articles dealing with or involving them would be of more interest. For example, 16 of the 59 materials on the news-feed of March 13 are foreign news and do not attract readers' attention due to their irrelevance to the domestic policy of Azerbaijan. Had J. Hasanli's Facebook post not been posted, there would have been absolutely no material on politics that day, given the less significance of the remaining

materials. This pattern continued on March 14. In other words, the qualitative parameters such as relevance and importance of information were at a low level during the month in question.

The website's promoting of APFP chairman Ali Karimli's and National Council chairman Jamil Hasanli's political activities is another long-term pattern, which sometimes leads to an imbalance of information on events and political figures. For example, in February, APFP's and its chairman's names were mentioned 63 times, whereas another leading opposition party - Musavat - was mentioned only 9 times.

Earlier, the number of columnists allowed the society's problems to be covered from different angles and through telling opinion pieces, and specific perspectives to be put forward. Currently, columnists are less active. Factors such as escalating government repression and specific authors' becoming targets more quickly also play a role in this.

Countrywide geographical distribution of news items is also disproportionate; materials from regions constitute less than 10 percent of the monitoring period. The worst case is related to Nakhchivan. During the two months, only one social and two political news items (release of APFP's Nakhchivan branch member) were presented on Nakhchivan, which leads to a decline in the interest in the website on the part of regional readers.

Azadliq.info also posts video materials, which are an integral element of online media outlets. It is a fact that video materials attract more interest from viewers. The main video material of the website is Azerbaijani Hour program produced by Turan TV. Azerbaijani Hours' clear and understandable depiction of the reality of the country and more effective criticism of the authorities has won the program a big audience. Program host Ganimat Zahid's anchoring skills, direct criticism of the target, and ability to present news in the vernacular makes the video material more watchable and does not tire the viewer. The one-hour program goes on air twice a week, and rather than instantaneous news, it presents analyses, forecasts and items on problems, and serves as a real source of alternative news. The fact that people's problems are presented through their own words makes the program more appealing to them. Having unsuccessfully asked for help from the authorities, citizens usually turn to Azerbaijani Hour as an alternative option. The fact that a program, which has no audience, issues, resorts to the vernacular to criticise the authorities can sometimes be interpreted as an insult. For example, host Ganimat Zahid's following remarks, which he made towards the end of the March 5 edition of the program while commenting on Mehriban Aliyeva's appointment as first vice-president, could be assessed as negative: "I swear to God, this woman is going to put a leash on this country and throw it into such a state that..." Overall, Azerbaijani Hour should be considered a successful project as an alternative source of information. The program can retain its popularity by bringing new features to its form and content.

Along with Azerbaijani Hour, Azadliq.info posted 24 video materials of different length in February and 32 video materials in March, which included videos showing the severe social situation of people and updates on court proceedings provided by lawyers. Foreign videos were also published. We believe that instead of the 18-hour video material from a political rally against President Putin held in Russia on March 26, it would be more effective to prepare a 30-minute summary video showing key moments.

Azadliq.info is the successor of Azadliq newspaper, which has played a unique and important role in our journalism history. We believe that the shortcomings pointed out for the monitoring period are due to staff shortages caused by financial difficulties resulting from the repressive government policies, rather than creativity issues, and that down the line Azadliq.info will become an exemplary media outlet meeting the requirements and quality criteria for online media.

MEYDAN TV

Meydan TV is one of the youngest websites in Azerbaijan's online media sector. It was launched in May of 2013. Despite its short history, the website quickly came into popularity as an alternative news source in the country thanks to its approach to events from a factual perspective rather than through a political prism and its correct use of various journalistic genres. Due to the government's repressive policies against free speech and independent media, Meydan TV began operating abroad and it is based in Germany. Journalists, who live in Azerbaijan and collaborate with the website, are under constant pressure. It has been a long while since the authorities blocked access to the website from Azerbaijan. Thus, it has become difficult to read and watch Meydan TV's materials, but despite the absence of a direct access, it is possible through alternative ways.

Repressions inevitably have a negative impact on the quality of creativity. Journalists face difficulties in collecting information and producing news, interviews and reports openly. This fact exerts chilling effect not only on journalists but also on respondents, public figures not affiliated to official opposition, cultural and literary figures and people from other categories, who refrain from having an interview with the website or providing an expert opinion. As long as the human spectrum is not wide, it becomes impossible to achieve the website's goals of qualitative journalism standards at the desired level. Against all odds, Meydan TV staff retains their alternative media status by objectively approaching the issues and events of interest to the Azerbaijani society and continues its activities at its usual tempo despite the government's blockage of the access to the website in recent months.

The monitoring session covered the period of February 1 through March 31. Despite having 'TV' in its corporate name, the website's written reports outnumber its video materials by a large margin. Meydan TV has 11 permanent categories. The main category is 'news' and an average of 15-17 news reports are produced per day. It should be noted that the website covers not all news, but the events relating to Azerbaijan and the country's socio-political life that arouse more interest. The main focus is on human rights violations, political prisoners and their court proceedings, and important events in internal and foreign policies. Aside from that, during the monitoring period, the website staff produced written and video reports on court proceedings known as Nardaran case, KGB case and Communications case, blogger Mehman Huseynov's arrest, the appointment of President's wife Mehriban Aliyeva to the post of first vice-president, and the general public's and experts' reactions to this appointment. In so doing, they complied with the qualitative criteria such as importance, accuracy and relevance of news, and journalists managed to present the collected information without including their personal opinions or commentary. The monitored subjects were mentioned in the majority of the news reports. Thus, despite the small number of news items,

their relevance to the subjects increased their socio-political substance making them more interesting.

Despite being primarily in opposition to the authorities, the website opted to remain neutral towards the President and officials and created opportunities for appropriate criticism which manifested in opinion pieces through different people's words.

The balance was ensured in the presentation of wide-ranging information on political subjects, and news reports posted corresponded to everyone's activity rate.

The fact that the website operates from abroad leads to moderate and sometimes big delays in presentation of important news. This undermines the timeliness of the news.

One of the shortcomings of the website is the website's failure to keep the above-mentioned categories updated on a regular basis. For example, Investigation, Democracy and People's News categories are not updated for one and sometimes two months, and new articles cannot be found. During both the monitoring period and beyond, the website has been found out to publish no materials on weekends and holidays. We believe that this tradition needs to be changed and a duty journalist and an employee should be employed to work on the above-mentioned days.

The protest rally of IDPs, and social issues, in general, were covered primarily through video materials. This makes the news more believable by presenting it to the viewer 'as is'.

The website's video materials are broadcast mainly through Daily Review, Weekly Review and Your Voice news summaries and Most Important of All program. Unlike the news summaries having fixed broadcast times, Most Important of All is broadcasted not at a specific hour, but depending on the importance of the socio-political situation that has emerged. This program, which has an average length of 20-30 minutes, was sometimes posted twice in one day in connection with different events (13.03.2017). This fact is commendable in terms of timeliness, but unfortunately, such an interesting program is not produced sometimes for two weeks. The author-related problem of the program could be due to the repressions, but in our opinion, having reserve authors could at least help grow website audience.

Criticism on Meydan TV is not at a level of insult, but during the monitoring period (February 7, 2017), Head of Meydan TV Emin Milli accused Ilham Aliyev of misappropriating people's money, and referring to him Milli said 'you are a thief' at the end of his 11minutes and 32seconds long speech in the European Union.

It is possible to broaden Meydan TV's capabilities. Meydan TV is one of the three websites blocked by the authorities. If there are significant financial resources available, the website can expand its technological abilities, and achieve even bigger success in terms of creativity by benefitting from perfect examples of online television channels worldwide and increasing journalistic staff capacity in the country and abroad.

AZADLIQ.ORG

Azadliq.org stands out among the monitored websites due to its abundance of news. News on domestic and global events can be found on this website, though not so promptly at times. The website is also known for investigative reports. These reports are what make the website popular in Azerbaijan, even though the investigation of top-level government corruption leads to serious annoyance and consequences. It is no coincidence that access to this website was blocked in Azerbaijan during the monitoring period (March 27). On the territory of the country, the blocked websites were only accessible through different software programs. Azadliq.org, which saw its office premises sealed shut several years ago, had indeed been operating semi-secretly since. Authors' names were not provided in the articles. While it is clearly done for security purposes, it does have an impact on the reader who thus cannot form a fully independent assessment on the reliability of received information. The fact that at times even the articles on less sensitive issues are presented without the author's name can be considered a shortcoming of this website. By contrast, for investigative reports, which are way more sensitive, the author's signature is given (Khadija Ismayilova), whereas, a report on some court proceedings or demolition work in Sovetski goes without a signature.

This website always keeps track of top subjects and presents them to readers with timely commentary and expert opinions. Also, balance is ensured in the information presented, and the opposite party's comments are always sought. The most detailed information on the events taking place is provided to readers in a neutral and impartial manner. The website also reports on the president's visits and meetings. One can frequently come across civil society activists' names, too. Leaders of political parties are able to share their views on various issues through this website. In all cases, the principles of journalism are at the forefront.

Economic topics are also in the centre of attention. Economic experts Rovshan Agayev, Gubad Ibadoglu, Natig Jafarli and Samir Aliyev's names are more visible on this website. Elkhan Shahinoglu is one of the experts who is approached for comments on political issues more often. The monitoring revealed that Ilham Aliyev, Mehman Huseynov, Mehriban Aliyeva, National Council chairman Jamil Hasanli, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov are the monitored subjects whose names have been mentioned with the highest frequency.

The website always posts reports on court proceedings, whether shot at the court hearing or in front of the court building. Regardless of the cases of subjectivity in titles or inside the text on certain occasions, this website publishes information on almost the majority of the court proceedings. On Azadliq.org, one can read balanced information on the recently widespread hunt for oppositionists. Another asset of the website is the absence of insults in its articles.

CONTACT.AZ

Contact.az website is an independent outlet of Turan Information Agency. However, all information published on Turan IA is re-posted on this website. It is difficult to estimate the number of daily news reports; they may be few or many. Political, economic and social topics are a priority for this website. In addition, one or several articles are uploaded on the

analytical section of the website. The analytical group's commentaries on topical subjects are promptly presented to readers.

The website seemed to cover 'both sides of the coin' – government and opposition representatives – during the reporting period. Civil society activists are also given the opportunity to have their say. President Ilham Aliyev's meetings within the country and outside also receive coverage. This is usually neutral information. In the monitoring period, Ilham Aliyev, Mehman Huseynov and Mehriban Aliyeva were the most-covered subjects. The most consulted economic experts were Gubad Ibadoglu, Natig Jafarli and Rovshan Agayev.

Contact.az also enables opposition representatives to comment on or criticise the government policies. Besides, names or perspectives of people representing different branches of the government can also be found on the website. Representatives of opposition parties and organisations such as National Council, Musavat and APFP are also given the opportunity to express opinions or share comments on one or another issue.

Judging from the monitoring results, it can be said that Contact.az also devotes space to parliamentary discussions enabling MPs with various perspectives to reach out to readers and to share their opinions on the processes inside the country. Most importantly, the information posted on the website is accurate and impartial.

The implemented monitoring study suggests that among civil society representatives Ogtay Gulaliyev and among party functionaries Gozal Bayramli and Gulaga Aslanli were allocated more coverage. This opposition figures' statements have been primarily neutral, and these information items did not contain insults. As usual, the website provides detailed information and reports on high-profile court proceedings. The Difficult Question program, which is a section of the website, is a talk show where social, economic and other different issues, the country's main problems are discussed with experts. Politicians, lawyers, economists and media experts answer difficult questions.

Unfortunately, the website also has some poorly updated sections. There are few materials in Culture, Interview and Actual Report sections. For example, only 6 articles were uploaded onto the Actual Report section during the reporting period. The same number of articles was put up in the Interview section. In conclusion, it can be said that Contact.az website demonstrates a balanced and mainly neutral stance.

BBC-azeri.com website

During the reporting period, i.e. in February and March, BBC.com.azeri website presented few items on Azerbaijan, which were mainly about regions of the country, national customs and traditions, national cuisine and other social issues. The balance was ensured in the information and reports published. Information on political developments was also touched upon. The website put up a series of materials on Mehriban Aliyeva's appointment as First Vice-President. Reactions to this appointment in foreign media were also covered. Political parties and civil society activists were reached for comments on the issue of the vice-presidency, which was the main headline-making topic on those days. The website provided information on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's meetings held both domestically and abroad. In terms of coverage rate, Ilham Aliyev is above all other subjects. His name is

mentioned in almost the majority of other information posted and the tone of the coverage is mainly neutral.

However, the monitoring conducted suggests that the processes taking place in the economic life of the country were more attractive to the website. Thus, economic experts were devoted more space than their political counterparts. Economic experts Gubad Ibadoglu and Natig Jafarli were referred to more often during the monitoring period. Among the government ministers, Elmar Mammadyarov's name is mentioned more frequently.

Media reviews, i.e. weekly summaries of the materials published on Azerbaijani newspapers and websites are a more preferred format. It should be stressed that foreign news items are prevalent on BBC, which makes the website less appealing to Azerbaijani readers. What is more important for Azerbaijani readers is to have access to the information on events happening within the country that are sidelined by the official and pro-government media. Foreign news, unlike information on domestic developments, is already presented to the country's population in a timely and detailed manner by Azerbaijani television stations. In this light, the website's monitoring results cannot be considered that successful.

Conclusion

While there are several television stations with national coverage in Azerbaijan, citizens have exceptionally limited access to diverse political views in the broadcast media. This is due to the government monopoly on television, with all national TV channels presenting mainly the activities of the authorities and largely ignoring opposition leaders and their views. It is only some online media which offers an independent platform so that people in Azerbaijan are exposed to different views to those of the ruling establishment. In general, the media environment continues to significantly deteriorate, with detentions, defamation lawsuits and other forms of pressure on journalists constraining freedom of the media and creating an atmosphere that is very far from being conducive to the freedom of expression inherent in a democratic system.

Data from the third monitoring period conducted under the Change in the Air project confirmed the trends identified in the previous monitoring periods. Similarly as during previous media monitoring projects conducted by IRFS and MEMO 98, the data shows that the monitored broadcast media invariably neglect to offer Azerbaijani citizens opposing views on particular stories. It is also of concern that several disturbing trends in the way the Azerbaijani broadcast media cover political entities are long term trends confirming that they are mouthpieces of the ruling powers. As mentioned previously, state-funded media neglected to offer opposition any significant airtime and opportunities to challenge the political opinions of the current establishment. The results also confirm that Azerbaijani media generally lack investigative and critical reporting that would offer the public an in-depth analysis and assessment of political entities, in particular, the work of state officials managing public funds.

News reports were mainly driven by activities of the president, his family members and the government - journalists themselves did not try to dwell on problems, single them out. There was an apparent lack of any analytical approach, and conversely, reports were sometimes limited to superficial coverage. By contrast, some monitored online media tried to provide alternative coverage.

The overall environment in which the Azerbaijani media operates does not give them the opportunity to hold those in power to account, and from providing citizens with quality

independent news reporting. When the media is unable to fulfil their basic functions, the society cannot properly voice its concerns or communicate its discontent through peaceful, institutionalised means. Until the freedom of expression is guaranteed, a more democratic Azerbaijan remains a distant prospect.