

Preliminary Report on Media Coverage prior to the 26 September Constitutional Referendum

20 August – 25 September 2016

AZERBAIJAN

IRFS | IMS | MEMO 98

Change in the Air: Monitoring and Promoting Media Pluralism in Azerbaijan

Baku, Tbilisi, Bratislava

10 October 2016

1. 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 watchdog organisation MEMO 98, have jointly monitored 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 intends to provide a comprehensive monitoring to assess the current level of political diversity in Azerbaijani's media news reporting. Prior and beyond the 26 September constitutional referendum, the project will in span of several months seek to assess the current level of political pluralism 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 18 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 six television channels, two radio stations and two 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 behavior during the whole period and disseminated to the public, media, civil society, political parties, and international community.

This is the first report which covers the period from 20 August to 2 September and the official referendum campaign (3-25 September 2016). Following is the summary of the main findings:

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, Lider, ATV, Space and Khazar*
 Radio: *Azerbaijan Radio and İhtimai Radio*
 Web portals: *Meydan.tv and Musavat.com*

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The media as a whole did not provide ample information about political alternatives ahead of the 26 September constitutional referendum. As such, based on the preliminary findings, even if voters followed several media, it was difficult for them to form an objective view of the campaign and to make an informed choice at the ballot box.
- Regrettably, current media monitoring findings indicate lack of any diversity or balance in the political reporting, particularly in the state-funded media. Major TV channels were engaged in promoting the incumbents, in particular the president and the government.
- The state-funded and private broadcasters positively reflected on the work of the president and other state officials, pointing out achievements and successes, while independent and critical opinions on their performance were largely absent.
- Moreover, the state-funded media offered limited coverage of the referendum campaign in their news programmes. This was combined with the facts that some, political groups decided not to utilize either free or paid airtime.
- There was no significant difference in coverage prior and during official referendum campaign by the state-funded broadcasters (AzTV and Radio, ITV and Radio). During the campaign period, the channels devoted between 91 to 99 per cent to the authorities, ruling party and members of the president's family (including the late president Heydar Aliyev).
- The private channels adopted a similar approach. In comparison with the pre-campaign period, they devoted less coverage to the ruling authorities but it still constituted between 80 per cent on *Lider* TV to 96 per cent on *Space* TV. *Khazar* TV presented greater diversity of views showing five parties and also independent deputies. Its political coverage was overall neutral in tone, except for the opposition.
- Only the online media provided voters with more diverse information about various political opinions, including alternative viewpoints concerning the referendum. Interestingly, the online source *musavat.com* offered rather informative reporting and presented the highest number of political parties and candidates (17).
- While the media aired educational spots and materials, there was a general lack of in-depth and analytical coverage that would help the voters to better understand different political views as well as questions, positions or context of referendum-related matters. In addition, ANS, the channel with more independent editorial line, was taken off the air prior to the campaign (in July), which further limited already marginalized independent media sources.

3. BACKGROUND OVERVIEW

The referendum campaign period started on 3 September. The Central Election Commission (CEC) registered three campaign groups, namely *New Azerbaijan*, *Municipality* and *Civil Society*. All three of them supported the referendum. At the same time, the CEC refused to register *Republic*, an opposition campaign group.

According to the Election Law, the public *Ichtimai Television* was obliged to offer free airtime to registered campaign groups. In addition, the law provides for paid airtime that could be utilized in private media and a number of private broadcasters published their price-lists.⁴ However, independent experts and some political groups considered the prices to be prohibitively high. For instance, the most popular *Khazar TV* charged 2,400 AZN per minute (approximately EUR 1,320) in the evening prime time. The public *Ichtimai TV* charged 3,000 AZN (approximately EUR 1,650) per minute. In result, the opposition parties or initiatives refused to take up such opportunity and instead conducted meetings in the regions and put their campaign materials on assigned promotional places.

4. MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS

TV CHANNELS (State-funded)

AzTV

AzTV is the first television channel in Azerbaijan that broadcast since 1956 and is financed entirely from the state budget. During the primetime, AzTV airs the Russian-language '*Novosti*' (News) news programme at 18:00, and two newscasts in Azeri language, namely '*Region Khabarlari*' (News on Regions) at 19:00 and '*Khabarlar*' (News) at 20:00. Noteworthy, the monitoring revealed that the state-owned AzTV and public ITV regularly exchanged their news stories and texts., with the same materials included in '*Region Khabarlari*', regional news of AzTV and '*Jarchi Region*', regional news of ITV.

Based on the findings, all the news coverage was presented in a manner resembling propaganda of the current authorities. At the same time, the channel, which is paid by all people's taxes, ignored any opposing or alternative views.

AzTV broadly covered activities of the president Ilham Aliyev, including in his capacity as the chairman of the National Olympic Committee – it dedicated him some 34 per cent in the first monitoring period (before the campaign) and 54 per cent during the official referendum campaign (the largest portion from among monitored channels). As a usual practice, 20-25 minutes of news programmes that normally last for 45-60 minutes were devoted to president's trips to regions, with special reports of these trips. These are then subsequently re-run in a Sunday's weekly analytical programme '*Hafta*' (Week). On 10 September, '*Novosti*' news programme devoted 32 out of the total 45 minutes to Ilham Aliyev's trips and meetings in one-sided propaganda style. Similar way of presentation was seen in the programme '*GununNabzi*' (Pulse of the Day) where the issues raised by the

⁴ The following media outlets offered a chance to purchase paid advertisements: *Ichtimai Television* and Radio Broadcasting Company, *Lider TV* and Radio Broadcasting Company, *Khazar TV* and *Azad Azerbaijan TV* (broadcast media); *Azerbaijan*, *Hafta Ichi*, *Yeni Azerbaijan*, *Bakinski Rabochi*, *Khalg Jabhasi*, *525th Newspaper*, *Khalg Newspaper*, *Movge* and *Iki Sahil* (newspapers) and *Report*, *Trend*, *Gundalik Telegraph*, *APA Holding* and *1news* (news agencies).

president were discussed with the heads of state agencies. At the same time, citizens are regularly shown thanking and praising the president for his activities. During the last ten days of August, the president allocated 65 mil. AZN (approximately EUR 35.7 mil.) for regional road constructions, which was widely promoted by the channel.

Among other monitored subjects, the government received considerable coverage with 19 per cent prior and some 11 per cent during the campaign period. On August 26, the channel dedicated large portion of its broadcast to the First lady Mehriban Aliyeva on the occasion of her birthday, resulting to some 16 per cent of the political coverage in the pre-campaign period. The former president Heydar Aliyev was given 10 per cent of the relevant news airtime during the campaign, the largest share from among monitored channels.

As far as the referendum topic is concerned, AzTV regularly covered meetings and activities of the CEC, and aired various educational spots. Nevertheless, there was no direct campaigning presented by the channel. It has repeatedly covered the registration of the pro-referendum campaign groups, while it failed to report on the denial of registration of the group opposing the referendum. In addition, a major anti-referendum rally organised by the opposition on 11 September was not shown in the news. During the campaign period, only the ruling YAP party (New Azerbaijan Party) received a more significant coverage on the channel, with 7 per cent.

Ichtimai Television (ITV)

Ichtimai TV airs three news programmes during the prime time; the Russian and Azerbaijani versions of 'Jarchi' (Herald) news programme at 18:30 (lasts for 10-15 min) and 20:30 (lasts for 30-45 min), and 'Jarchi Region' at 21:00 (lasts for 15 min). On Sundays, the channel airs 'HaftaninYekunu' (Review of the Week) analytical weekly programme (lasts for 60-75 min).

As for the news reporting, the channel's coverage is not driven by news worthiness, importance, relevance or topicality, but rather by the political ranking within the country. Its newscasts always start with Ilham Aliyev's decrees, receptions and visits. The longest news stories were the ones about the president. For example, on 4 September, most of the one-hour weekly analytical programme (48 minutes) was dedicated to Ilham Aliyev and included re-runs of already previously presented footages with similar narrations. Additionally, images of Heydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev were often displayed during within the news footage. In 'Jarchi Region' programme, citizens and businessmen are regularly shown as thanking Ilham Aliyev. During the reporting period, the president visited five regions of Azerbaijan and ITV prepared extensive reports of these trips, including focus on millions of AZN allocated for the road construction and repair of city buildings. All of these materials were presented with similar narrations.

On 26 August, which was Mehriban Aliyeva's birthday, she received significant news coverage, with a special broadcast and laudatory comments, e.g. "*the ideal of the modern Azerbaijani woman*", "*an example of the best woman*", etc. The channel also aired a programme on the Heydar Aliyev Foundation.

The coverage of authorities was exclusively positive and neutral on ITV and did not include any critical views, nor it covered any social issues or problems. The channel in their news reporting entirely lacked alternative opinions, as it did not present any materials concerning the opposition not represented in the Parliament. For example, on 11

September, a protest rally was held against the referendum in Baku at the initiative of the National Council, but ITV did not cover it.

In total, the channel provided the ruling authorities (including YAP party) with some 95 and 91 per cent of its politics-related coverage, prior and during the campaign respectively. During the campaign period, the president received 44 per cent (increase from 29 per cent before the campaign), followed by the government with 14 per cent (prior the campaign the next most covered subject was the government with 22 per cent) and Heydar Aliyev with 8 per cent (prior the campaign it was Aliyev's Foundation with 16 per cent).

Although the referendum campaign period started on 3 September, *Ichtimai TV* did not bring any form of direct political campaign reporting. It aired educational referendum-related spots as well as educational programme '*KhalginSasi*' (People's Voice). The latter was a joint project of the CEC and *Ichtimai TV*, produced once a week, with the CEC representatives introducing organisational matters concerning the referendum, voting procedures and voters' rights. While *ITV* on a daily basis presented the CEC-related meetings and reports concerning readiness of election administration to conduct the referendum, it failed to report on refusal to register Musavat Party's '*Republic*' campaign group. It did not cover the opposition anti-referendum rally, either.

TV CHANNELS (Private)

ATV

ATV airs its '*ATV Khabar*' (*ATV News*) news programme on a daily basis at 21:00 except Sunday. *ATV* covered the president's foreign visits, decrees, meetings, and other activities, including his trips to regions, or visits to repaired school buildings. At the same time, the first items of the news programme were always about the president. Alongside, the current government was regularly portrayed as very productive and useful for the country. On 25 August, *ATV* aired an item on Mehriban Aliyeva being named an honorary citizen of Bulgaria. It also covered an article published by an Arabic newspaper, which positively assessed Aliyev Foundation's and Mehriban Aliyeva's charity work.

As for the other subjects, the government received some 20 per cent, followed by the ruling YAP with 19 per cent (largest portion for a party from among monitored channels). By contrast, On August 23, *ATV* reported on the initiation of criminal investigations against two members of the Popular Front Party (APFP) based on the allegation that both men were connected to Fetullah Gulen's group (APFP received 5 per cent of overwhelmingly negative coverage).

As for the news coverage of the referendum, *ATV* presented items on the CEC almost every day (5 per cent of the subjects-related coverage), however, as in case of other channels the reporting was directed at process – the CEC meetings or preparations taking place in the regions of the country. According to such reports, the election precincts across the country were ready for the referendum, while the citizens were aware and informed of the referendum. However, the channel did not cover any real political referendum-oriented campaign.

Khazar TV

Khazar TV airs its 'AktualKhabar' (Trending News) programme at 18:00 and 'KhazarKhabar' (Khazar News) at 21:00. Similarly as in other monitored channels, there were no analytical shows or debates on during the whole monitored period.

Both news programmes usually started with news on the president Ilham Aliyev. The monitoring findings revealed that in the period before the official campaign (20 August – 2 September), President Ilham Aliyev received the largest coverage (similar to other channels) - 59 per cent (it was the second highest portion among the all monitored media in this period, with Space TV providing him with 62 per cent). The coverage was neutral in its tone. As far as the other political subjects, the channel presented information only on few CEC meetings and largely omitted any views of the opposition.

During the referendum campaign President Ilham Aliyev's trips to regions received again extensive coverage (46 per cent). From the political parties, the channel covered five of them as well as independent deputies, the most from among monitored channels (alongside Lider TV). YAP was the most covered (13 per cent), while there was one joint item on APFP and Musavat, where their chairpersons (Ali Karimli from APFP and Arif Hajili from Musavat) were accused of attempt to instigate unrests in the country.

Though Khazar TV offered paid campaign airtime, none of the parties utilised it. Besides, the channel did not air any programme on referendum and focused mostly on official and general, process oriented information when reporting about the campaign.

Lider TV

Lider TV airs 'Sada' (Voice) news programme at 19:00 every weekday. The president's foreign visits, decrees, meetings, and etc. were extensively covered in its news programmes (it received 45 and 38 per cent in both monitored periods, respectively), and the current government was similarly portrayed in a rather large portion (between 27 and 15 per cent). News programmes usually started with the President Ilham Aliyev and items usually consisted of the propaganda in favour of him and Heydar Aliyev. At every reference to Heydar Aliyev, Lider TV used the wording "Great Leader" and "National Leader" and he was portrayed as a very important and positive personality for Azerbaijan.

Lider TV allocated airtime to the president's family members, as well. On 26 August, it aired an extended item on the First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva that included parts from a film that she had starred in as a child, and also covered her current charitable activities such as opening of a school on cancer research. The news programme was followed by a one-hour programme about Aliyeva and the news item shown was again presented in even more elaborated version.

On contrary, the opposition was presented in a very negative manner. On 23 August, APFP's Khatai district youth organisation chairman (Fuad Ahmadli) was accused of ties to Fetullah Gulen's acolytes, as was the APFP deputy chairman (Faig Amirov) who was allegedly arrested for providing information resources to the organisation. On 6 September, the news programme showed a referendum protest rally of the APFP which was labelled as a "trite protest rally" and the organisers were called "a group of political amateurs that are self-proclaimed opposition". It was further stated "the opposition does not have the real backing of the population. Few people turn up for their rallies. Such rallies are

not a social demand of Azerbaijani citizens, but homework by the Western circles with anti-Azerbaijani mindset. Therefore, the 11 September rally is aimed at violating the political stability in Azerbaijan. The opposition uses these rallies to fill their pockets. This rally is also doomed to have an adequate and analogical fate.” Lider TV did not organise referendum-related campaigning.

While there was no real political coverage of the referendum campaign, the reports on the referendum consisted mostly of the CEC-related information, the reports on readiness of regional commissions as well as on the sufficient level of information provided in this respect to the citizens.

Space TV

Space TV airs in the prime-time *'Har Gun'* (Daily) news programme at 20:15, and *'HarHafta'* (Weekly) analytical programme on Sundays. Both programmes last for 40-45 minutes.

The topics covered by these broadcasts were focused almost entirely on official news and social issues, including some general unaddressed critical remarks. In the absence of ANS TV, Space TV became even more inclined to the social issues-related coverage. Alongside, the channel pursued an editorial policy where items of limited public significance were allocated significant airtime, and repeatedly announced throughout the programme, including on animals litter and sewage, what eventually trivialises the programme.

At the same time, based on the observations of the recent years, Space TV appeared to significantly reduce news items of political nature. When covering the politics, materials on Ilham Aliyev were presented more laconically compared to AzTV and ITV, but it still constituted 62 and 46 per cent before and during the campaign period, respectively. The channel did not mention the name of Mehriban Aliyeva, but allocated more coverage to Heydar Aliyev's images.

In a number of reports, monitoring team revealed technical mistakes in news items, e.g. in a story on Ilham Aliyev's trip to Masallior from a fruit jam festival organised in Gabala, both from 2 September. In other instances, audio and video footage did not match, as for example on 27 August while reporting on event in Armenia - the anchor referred to "*many people*" but some 10 people were shown.

Space TV covered the topic of referendum entirely through the coverage of the CEC, lower levels of election administration and educational advertisements. However, it did not cover the CEC's refusal to register 'Republic' campaign group of political party Musavat. Overall, there was no political referendum-related reporting provided by the channel.

RADIO STATIONS

Az Radio

Azerbaijan's state radio airs news at 18:00, 19:00, 20:00 and 22:00 during the prime time. Its news programmes usually started with the president's decrees, receptions, meetings and visits. News items were generally very brief, but the same items re-run four times a day. At weekends (on Sundays), Azerbaijan Radio with AzTV aired a joint analytical programme *'Hafta'* (Week) where last week's developments in the country were

commented in more details for 90 minutes. The Radio did not air programmes or talk shows on socio-political themes.

As for the coverage of the referendum campaign, the station similarly to all other major state-funded broadcasters, focused mainly on its preparatory stages and process-oriented official reports. For example, on 1 September, the station presented an item on the CEC-organised trainings. On 2 September, the Radio spoke about the preparations for the referendum undertaken by Azerbaijan's embassies in foreign countries; while the following day about the commencement of the pre-referendum campaign. On 7 September, the Radio covered the consultation workshop conducted by the CEC in Shirvan city and on 9 September it reported that patients in treatment facilities would also be enabled to participate in voting.

Most importantly, however, Azerbaijan Radio focused its coverage on activities of the ruling authorities. As a result, it devoted almost entire portion (99 per cent) of its politics-related coverage to the ruling or former authorities. Apart of the CEC's official referendum-related work, it devoted bulk of its political reporting to the president – 68 per cent during the official campaign. It included his trips to regions, visits to a number of schools in Khatai, Nizami and Nasimi districts of Baku to inspect their buildings after an overhaul; and his decrees concerning some regions and regional schools. Additionally, on 4 September his visits to Masalli, Bilasuvar and Salyan regions were presented, with local residents thanking the president.

On 3 September, the date when Heydar Aliyev came to power in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan Radio aired a special broadcast, where it said *"this day has gone down in the history in golden letters"*.

Ichtimai Radio

Schedule of *Ichtimai Radio* contains news programmes at 18:00, 19:00 and 20:30 in which daily and more important developments in the country are briefly covered. At the weekend, it airs 'Yekun' programme (Conclusion) where the weekly events are commented in more details.

However, all of the more extensively presented reports were about the president and his visits to the regions or events held in Baku, with 46 per cent of exclusively positive and neutral coverage. The next covered subject during the campaign was the ruling YAP, the only covered political party (there was some 9 per cent for independent deputies). As a result, it devoted some 91 per cent of its politics-related coverage to the ruling or former authorities.

Ichtimai Radio aired daily brief news items on the referendum, still they were of official, process-oriented or educational nature. For example, on 9 September, it broadcast an educational referendum-related programme in conjunction with the CEC.

WEBSITES

Meydan.tv

Meydan.tv is an independent online media source. The website aims to provide the society with alternative information on political, economical and social issues and serve as a platform for diverse discussions about all relevant events that are not covered by the major broadcast media. Meydan TV prioritises social problems and public discontent against officials and representatives of executive authorities. In addition to its written materials, it also publishes video materials on people's complaints and appeals being unaddressed. The political court trials held in the country are widely covered by the website, with most of the video content (some 80 per cent) are materials on unfairness taking place in the country and criticism of government policies.

The written segment of the website focused on three political parties, including two main opposition groups. In particular it was visible before the official campaign with 19, 16 and 12 per cent received by Musavat, YAP and APFP, respectively. They were portrayed mainly in a neutral manner. During the campaign period the online source covered mostly authorities, with the president receiving some 42 and the government some 22 per cent. While the coverage was overwhelmingly neutral, there was also some negative coverage of the government.

Meydan TV allocated significant space towards the promotion of opposition representatives in the video materials placed on the website. On the eve of the referendum, activities of Musavat Party and in particular of APFP were broadly covered– the latter dominated in the period before the campaign with some 60 per cent, and in the campaign period both APFP and Musavat received 28 per cent each, mostly of a neutral nature. On 11 September, Meydan TV live-streamed the Musavat's rally and uploaded an extended footage of it afterwards.

The referendum was covered mainly from a critical perspective, as the website presented opposition representatives and foreign individuals' negative assessments, highlighting its further chilling effect on already deteriorating situation in the country. Through the speeches of opposition members, the website criticised the government for attempting to conduct the referendum in a calm atmosphere and without alternatives, and condemned it for preventing the opposition from participating in the referendum campaign.

However, it is important to mention that Meydan TV's Facebook page and you tube channel have approximately 366,000 followers and 49,000 subscribers respectively. The number of views for the videos posted on the channel ranges from 10,000 to 50,000, which means that potential audience of Meydan TV is around one percent of the voters. As such, the channels could not serve as a real alternative and meliorate the lack of objective information on television.

Musavat.com

Musavat.com website operates under the newspaper Yeni Musavat, and is known as a pro-opposition website.⁵ It is updated round the clock with news items, articles of various

⁵ Musavat.com is the online version of the newspaper Yeni Musavat. Yeni Musavat newspaper is not affiliated with the opposition party Musavat. Yeni Musavat newspaper maintains that it operates independently and is not affiliated to any organization. Yeni Musavat newspaper has a circulation of only 5,000 copies in Azerbaijan, a country with a population of 10 million. The newspaper has zero sales in the regions. The news items published by Musavat.com receive on average 50,000 to 100,000 views. It has 5 million followers countrywide which shows that Musavat.com's election reporting does not cover even 1 percent of the population.

genres, photos and occasionally videos. Approximately 100-150 news items are published during a day, and 50-60% of these items are taken from other websites, with the source usually provided.

The monitoring revealed that the website provided more political diversity than the monitored TV channels – during the campaign period it covered 17 different political parties as well as independent deputies (it was 13 parties before the campaign). The monitoring subjects were covered in all sections of the website, including both the government's and the opposition's pre-referendum activities and various views in this respect.

At the same time, the website extensively covered activities of the authorities, dedicating them some 44 and 48 per cent of combined coverage (before and during the campaign) and additional 16 per cent to the ruling YAP (in both monitored periods). It published news items on the president's activities – meetings, decrees, trips to regions, participation in opening ceremonies. While the president was presented mostly in neutral and positive way, the government and YAP was portrayed in a more critical manner, mainly through remarks of opposition representatives.

In its parties-related coverage there was not any significant difference between the two monitored periods. In both periods it devoted most of the coverage (besides above mentioned YAP) to pro-ruling MLP (Motherland Party) – eight before and five per cent during the campaign, while it devoted between three and one per cent to other presented parties, including Musavat, the United Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (UAPFP), APFP, National Democratic Party (NDMP), the Hope Part (HOP) or the Great Establishment Party (GEP).

The website did not cover its 11 September rally in a balanced way, with estimates on fewer participants than suggested reports of other media outlets (*meydan.tv*, *Radio Liberty*) or pictures from social networks. In addition, it quoted critical comments from pro-governmental journalist Eynulla Fatullayev and from YAP members.

Also, *Musavat.com* appeared to often base their stories on the exchange of critical comments between opposition parties, as well as critical comments posted on social networks against the opposition. For example, after the anti-referendum 11 September rally, the website presented mutual criticism between APFP and Musavat Party, as well as Eynulla Fatullayev's offensive comments against APFP and its chairman Ali Karimli.

The referendum process was criticised through interviews with dissidents conducted by the website or through their social network posts. On the eve of the referendum, quite extensive coverage was devoted to possible consequences of the approved referendum question with theories on abolition of the Cabinet of Ministers, opinions on the administrative system reform and establishment of the institute of vice-presidency, along with dissidents' views that the referendum will turn the country into a monarchy.

5. CONCLUSION

The monitoring data prior to the 26 September constitutional referendum confirmed alarming trend of limited range of political diversity that was revealed in the previous

media monitoring projects (2009-2010). Instead of providing ample information that would help the electorate to learn about different platforms and views ahead of the referendum day, the monitored channels mostly acted as a mouthpiece of the government.

The major Azerbaijani broadcasters—*Azerbaijani TV and Radio* and *Ichtimai TV and Radio* as well as private channels in their evening newscasts demonstrated lack of balance, one-sided and incomplete information concerning political developments in the country. The most alarming finding was the consistent practice of neglecting to air opposing views in numerous news stories. In fact, such approach appeared to be a usual part, the norm of the Azerbaijani state-controlled broadcasters.

There was a clear problem in the way the state-funded media portrayed the campaign. As recipients of public resources, state-funded media have an enhanced duty to ensure balanced and fair treatment of politicians as well as comprehensive reporting on politically relevant events. They showed only the activities of state authorities and overwhelmingly from a positive perspective; whereas largely ignored any views independent of or critical of the authorities prior and during the campaign period. There was generally no discussion on social, economic and political problems of the country, with no information to the citizens about the consequences of bad governance. Only online monitored media tried to provide more diverse coverage based on which an informed choice at the ballot box would be possible.

Regrettably, such conduct violates internationally accepted standards for the use of public resources. Analysis of the results highlighted blatant misuse of state-funded broadcasters that were utilized as instruments of propaganda for specific state interests in their pre-referendum reporting and failed to provide the citizens with an objective, fair and impartial view of local events and topics.