



# HELSINKI COMMISSION REPORT

June 6, 2017

## IN BRIEF

### 14<sup>th</sup> Annual South Caucasus Media Conference

#### *Fake News, Disinformation, and Freedom of the Media*

The Annual South Caucasus Media Conference hosted by the OSCE Office of the Representative of Freedom of the Media brings together government officials, journalists, media experts, and civil society representatives to discuss media freedom in the countries of the South Caucasus: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

Initiated in 2004 by former Representative of Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti, the South Caucasus Media Conference aims to address modern challenges to media freedom and discuss common problems and potential solutions. Conference focuses have ranged from internet freedom and governance, to public service broadcasting, to dealing with libel. Following a year where the term “fake news” entered common media lexicon, the 2017 conference was appropriately titled “Fake news, disinformation, and freedom of the media.”

Panels at the conference were well-balanced with perspectives from government officials, journalists, and media experts across the countries of the South Caucasus and beyond. The practice of bringing many stakeholders to the table is an effective way to identify shared problems and best practices to promote media freedom in the South Caucasus region. Whenever possible, the OSCE practices an open-door policy to include participants from NGOs and civil society. This gives government and civil society

actors equal seats at the table and facilitates unfettered dialogue.

#### **Shared History, Shared Problems**

While Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan each face distinct and unique issues, there is significant overlap in the challenges to media freedom in the region. As nations of the former Soviet Union, participants at the conference readily admitted that the South Caucasus has inherited some negative features from its past environment. Throughout the Soviet Union, media was state-controlled and was a vehicle to fuel propaganda. While media freedom in the South Caucasus has largely improved since that time, the legacy of a restricted press is difficult to shake.

A significant obstacle to combatting “fake news” and disinformation, particularly in Georgia and Armenia, is the ubiquity of Russian media. Russian speaking populations sometimes prefer Russian broadcast media, which is largely state-run, because of its quality and entertainment value in comparison to options available in the country’s native language. In print media, the issue of Russian disinformation is more disguised: local news outlets will sometimes pull stories from Russian sources, which, depending on the original source, may contain biases or inaccuracies that seep into local media outlets. A number of strategies were discussed to combat inaccurate sources, ranging from internal



Participants at the 2017 South Caucasus Media Conference, “Fake News, Disinformation, and Freedom of the Media.”  
Credit: Arad Benkö

mechanisms within media outlets to screen for fake or questionable information, to training for journalists and the public, such as Georgian NGO Media Development Foundation’s “Myth Detector Lab” to promote media literacy among Georgian youth. The final session of the conference featured a workshop on best practices in countering disinformation and propaganda through media self-regulation, led by Russian expert and author on journalistic and media ethics, Yury Kazakov.

The profitability of independent media and issues with media ownership transparency serve as further impediments to media freedom in the region. Content can be severely impacted by the agendas of sponsors or patrons. It is important that ownership structures are known to the public, and that governments support economic and political environments that foster a free press.

**Conference Takeaways: The Situation in Georgia**

Although still facing significant challenges, Georgia has the strongest media freedom environment of the countries in the South Caucasus. The desire for European integration since the fall of the Soviet Union has driven Georgia to make strides toward legislating democratic policies, including fostering media pluralism

and a free press. Still, murky ties between media companies and government or political party interests negatively affect the ability of a free press to work unencumbered.

The most prominent media case in Georgia, which came up several times at the conference, is the legal dispute over ownership of Rustavi 2, the country’s most popular television broadcaster. Rustavi 2 often takes opposition stances against the ruling Georgian Dream party, and is owned by close associates of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, a sharp critic of the current government. Former owner Kibar Khalvashi, an ally of the current government, claimed he was strong-armed by Saakashvili in December 2006 into selling his shares of the media organization.

In November 2015, a Tbilisi City Court judge ruled an ownership change back to Khalvashi, a move that was considered an effort to limit anti-government media and called into question the impartiality of the judiciary. The European Court of Human Rights, however, ordered a suspension of this ruling and instructed the government to suspend interference in the station’s ownership. Promisingly, the Georgian government has completely complied with the decision of the European Court of Human Rights. At the conference Nino Nakashidze, Deputy Director General for External Relations

and Communications at Rustavi 2, strongly criticized what it regarded as the government's politically motivated campaign against the station.

### **Conference Takeaways: The Situation in Armenia**

Armenia's media freedom environment is far from ideal, but falls somewhere between the levels of freedom in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Participants at the conference expressed concern for the rights of journalists and press freedom, yet hopefulness for the future. Constitutional reform in 2015 shifted most executive power away from the president and established Armenia as a parliamentary republic, making the recent April 2017 parliamentary elections very important. While election observers found some foul play in election conduct including vote-buying and pressure on employees, these elections have been widely considered one of the most democratic in the country's history and hopefully indicate potential democratic progress in other areas of society.

Signs of Russian disinformation campaigns during the elections concerned conference participants. Gegham Vardanyan, Producer and Trainer at Media Initiatives Center in Armenia, presented to the conference on an influx of suspicious Russian-language Twitter profiles that in the weeks before the vote spammed users with a fake USAID Armenia article that ostensibly served as evidence of American meddling in Armenian politics. He believes these spam bots were also responsible for the suspension of four prominent Armenian Twitter accounts, including his own, the day before the election. Social media "troll" attacks like this have become increasingly common and are difficult to combat, but show strong evidence of Russian government backing.

Violence against journalists, particularly during outbreaks of protests in Armenia, has a problematic history of erupting. As recently as the April 2017 parliamentary elections, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, an Armenian media advocacy group, recorded ten cases

of "physical violence, obstruction of professional activity, and pressure [against journalists]." Other significant attacks against journalists have resulted from police violence, such as during June 2015 protests against electricity rises and a July 2016 hostage-taking incident by an armed nationalist group called "Sasna Tsrer". These cases of systemic attacks on peaceful protesters and journalists are very troubling.

### **Conference Takeaways: The Situation in Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan ranks the lowest of the three countries of the South Caucasus in major media freedom reports, and the country falls very low in global rankings – Reporters without Borders's 2017 World Press Freedom Index ranks Azerbaijan at 162 out of 180 countries. Despite widespread reports that point to the very grim situation for press freedom in Azerbaijan, government representatives at the conference deflected criticisms. Representatives from civil society, however, still sought to engage on the issues.

Seymur Kazimov, one of only a small handful of journalists in Azerbaijan who has chosen not to leave the country because of safety concerns, gave a compelling presentation on the Azerbaijani government's complete control, manipulation, and oppression of the media. Kazimov emphasized that broadcast media is completely controlled by the state, where "journalists" manipulate the audience with certain rhetorical tools, such as "us vs. them," stereotypes, generalizations, and emotional language. While journalism and expression on the internet is slightly freer than broadcast and print, citizens who take to social media, blogs, and independent online Azerbaijan news websites still risk their safety.

Azerbaijani media lawyer Alasgar Mammadli spoke to the legal situation for journalists in Azerbaijan, which has become increasingly harsh. Although freedoms of expression are guaranteed by Azerbaijan's constitution, journalists are often targeted and accused of other criminal charges, such as tax evasion or hooliganism. Defamation laws have increased incre-

mentally in recent years, Mammadli told the conference. Incarceration of journalists and bloggers has become commonplace since the country's recent crackdown on media. Among others, Mammadli mentioned Mehman Huseynov, an outspoken video blogger who was arrested in March 2017 on charges of slander.

Azerbaijan government representatives at the conference consistently asserted that journalists are free in Azerbaijan, but that they have a responsibility to follow the law and certain standards of conduct. Defamation of the head of state, for example, is not acceptable as "the President's honor is inviolable," one government official stated. They expressed concern with international and Western campaigns against Azerbaijan that in their opinion highlight negative, rather than positive, elements and misrepresent the true situation on the ground.

### **Conclusions**

The practice of annually bringing together media stakeholders in the South Caucasus region is valuable, but not without challenges. Regional tensions over historical and political issues are bound to surface, especially between officials of different countries. There is also bound to be collision between government representatives and civil society participants. This clash of perspectives is valuable, as long as opposing sides are willing to engage in meaningful and productive dialogue. The OSCE Office of the Representative of Freedom of the Media functions as an effective intermediary for these forums, and more efforts toward regional dialogue would be a welcome development for the future.

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## **About the Helsinki Commission**

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

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### **Report Contributors**

- Jordan Warlick, Staff Associate, U.S. Helsinki Commission

### **Editor**

- Stacy Hope, Communications Director, U.S. Helsinki Commission