

### **General reforms in existing media legislation:**

- The progressive liberalisation of legislation, approximation of the principles governing the media industry to those areas of economic activity that do not require special regulation.
- Harmonisation of communication and media legislation to make the regulation of traditional and new media more uniform and fair.

### **Develop media as a business model:**

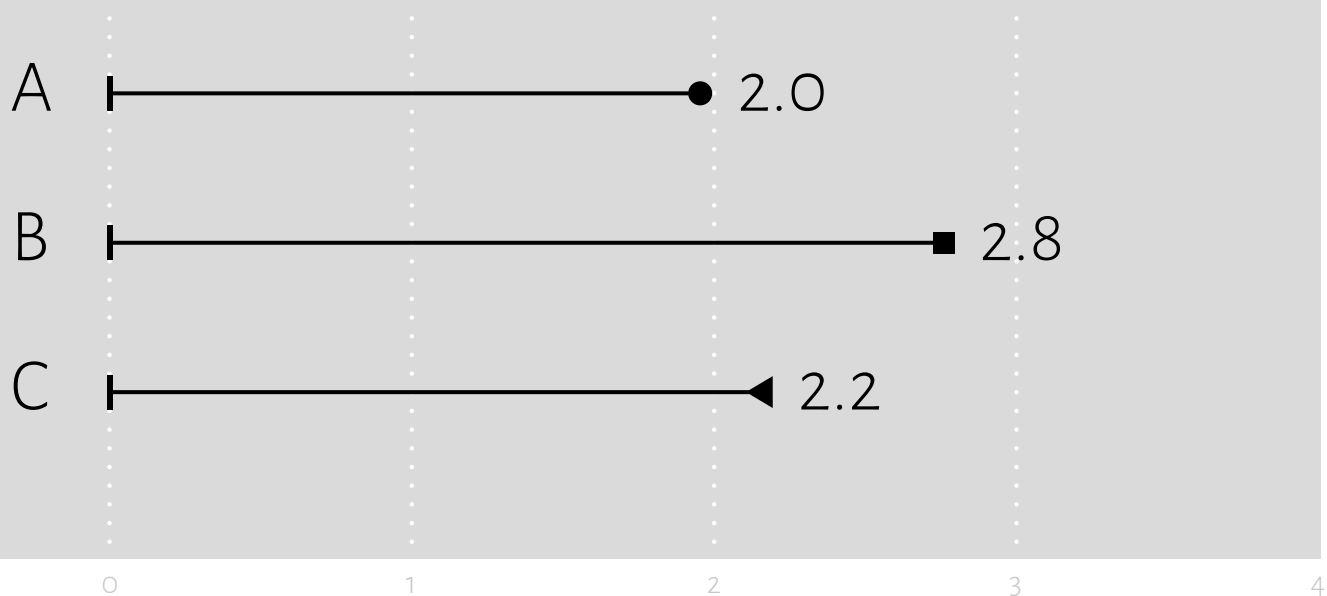
- The formation of industrial committees, with regular consultations with representatives of the media industry, to discuss the situation on the basis of objective data and research.
- The creation of funds (both by government, donors, and alternative means) designated for the ordering (through tenders) of media production important to the public. Aimed at creating competition in this field for the Public Broadcaster of Armenia, both to ensure quality consumer demand and to overcome the monopoly of PTRC on government orders.
- Increase the depth of media measurement methodology with the prospect of targeting advertisements, while promoting the fragmentation and segmentation of the advertising market, using progressive technologies of measuring the audience of the new media, and the implementation of special trainings for the introduction of modern methods of attractive advertising.



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# AZERBAIJAN



# INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical location of Azerbaijan, the only route for the Caspian oil and gas resources to reach the world markets avoiding both Russia and Iran, makes it an alluring destination for Kremlin-inspired propaganda. This is because the Kremlin tries to monopolise all energy and transit routes to and from Europe, hence making it essential to hold an advantage over Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan used to be a central piece of the Soviet Union's Middle East policy. Its shared borders with both Iran and Turkey, the large number of the Azerbaijanis living in Iran (where they are the second largest ethnic group after the Persians), and historical and linguistic ties with Turkey were all vital for the Soviet decision-makers.

During the Second World War, the Red Army was stationed in northern Iran, in the area inhabited by the Azerbaijanis. At some stages of history, including modern times, Azerbaijani elements were used against both Iran and Turkey. Russia used a variety of means to maintain its influence.

In the 1990s, Russia tried to keep Azerbaijan from joining the Western economic and political projects. At that time, Azerbaijan tried to attract some foreign investments in the region, and to build platforms for cooperation with the EU countries and the United States.

In response, Russia attempted to use the existing media institutions in Azerbaijan and, in some cases, to create new media institutions to increase its impact on society. However, Russia was not successful in this. There was a very negative public perception of Russia and its role in the South Caucasus. Russian support for Armenia during its war with Azerbaijan, in addition to other factors, created an unfavourable environment for the Russian media influence.

A significant majority of the Azerbaijani public perceives Russia as an aggressor due to its activities in the region in the early 1990s. The public image of Russia deteriorated even further after its invasion of Georgia.<sup>[1]</sup> According to a 2016 survey, only 16 % of the population supported Azerbaijan's integration into the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, whereas the accession to NATO and the EU were supported by 72 %

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[1] Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Azerbaijan: Treatment of ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan (1998–2002). (2002) <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4beof28.html>

of respondents.<sup>[2]</sup> According to a 2017 nationwide survey, 32 % and 51 % of the Azerbaijan population respectively tend to trust NATO and the EU, while 26 % favour the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>[3]</sup>

The statement made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, that Russia's border does not end anywhere', raised particular concerns in Azerbaijan, as Russian military activity in the Caucasus was on the rise.<sup>[4]</sup> Azerbaijan sided with neither the EU nor NATO, but neither was it connected to any Russian-led organisations (the Eurasian Economic Union or the CSTO), leaving the country susceptible to Russian political and economic pressure, as it was experts interviewed at the time mentioned. So far, Azerbaijan has pursued a balanced policy, which has helped to establish friendly and effective relations with regional and international powers.

Azerbaijan also plays a significant role in the North–South transit corridor between Russia and Iran, as these three countries recently held a forum. There are some beliefs among Azerbaijan's expert community that Russia wants to see Azerbaijan in the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>[5]</sup> The issue of the Azerbaijan's membership of the Russian-led organisations was raised several times by Russian officials, including Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>[6] [7]</sup>

On the other hand, Russia is a vital economic partner for Azerbaijan. While oil and gas dominate Azerbaijan's exports (around 90 % of the total) and the main buyers of carbohydrates from Azerbaijan are Italy (the EU) and Israel,<sup>[8]</sup> Russia is the major importer of the Azerbaijani non-oil products. According to the Centre for Economic Reforms and Communication and Committee of Customs, Russia was the main destination for Azerbaijan's non-oil export in 2017 (553 million USD). The second country, Turkey, imported only 292 million USD worth.<sup>[9]</sup>

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- [2] İsmayılov, Sədrəddin. 2016. "Atlas" Araşdırmalar Mərkəzi: "Vətəndaşlar 5 Dövləti Azərbaycanın Dostu Sayırlar:" (Atlas Research Center 2016 Surveys) Report.Az. <https://report.az/xarici-siyaset/atlas-arasdirmalar-merkezi-vetendaslar-5-dovleti-azerbaycanin-dostu-sayirlar>.
- [3] Annual Survey Report: Regional Overview (2017). OPEN Neighbourhood—Communication for a Stronger Partnership: Connecting With Citizens Across the Eastern Neighbourhood.
- [4] Utiashvili, Shota. 2017. "New Russian Weaponry in the Caucasus and Its Impact on Georgia's NATO Aspiration." <https://www.gfsis.org/blog/view/668>.
- [5] "Rusiya Azərbaycanı Aii-Yə Dəvət Etdi." 2017. <https://sputnik.az/azerbaijan/20171120/412829984/rusiya-azerbaycani-aii-de-gormek-isteyir.html>.
- [6] "Ереван назвал условие для вступления Азербайджана в ЕАЭС." 2017. ИА REGNUM. <https://regnum.ru/news/2348851.html>.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] State Customs Committee. Statistical Bulletins. <http://customs.gov.az/az/faydali/gomruk-statistikasi/statistics-bulletin/>
- [9] Center for Economic Reforms and Communication. Export Summary Report for January, 2018 Vol 1 (10).

To sum up, despite its negative image as Armenia's strategic partner, Russia tries to maintain its influence in Azerbaijan, focusing specifically on several groups with which it may be able to hold sway.

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

There are certain groups inside and outside Azerbaijan that are particularly vulnerable to the Russia's state-run propaganda machine. Basically, these are the Russian community in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis living and working in Russia. In addition, Russian is the second most spoken language in Azerbaijan, and although it does not have official status, it remains the *lingua franca* for several groups in Azerbaijani society, including members of the local political, economic, and cultural elite.

In the early 1990s, the Russian language lost its status as an official language in Azerbaijan. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the atrocities committed by the Red (Soviet) Army involving the death of the civilians, known as 'Black January' in Baku, and Russia's position regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in general, created a public outcry amongst the people. These events drastically diminished the prominent role of the Russian language in Azerbaijan, especially in urban areas. Due to a national awakening among Azerbaijanis and the mass emigration of ethnic Russians, the popularity of the Russian language deteriorated to a great extent and it lost its status as a language of communication in Baku.

However, Russian remains the most popular second language in Azerbaijan; 72 % of the population speak at least basic Russian, while 7 %, particularly concentrated in the urban areas,<sup>[10]</sup> have advanced skills. The language is preserved and allowed to develop further due to the government's current state policies, as it is widely taught in schools and at universities.<sup>[11]</sup>

According to data published by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, there are 15 Russian language secondary schools and 314 secondary schools that provide education both in Russian and Azerbaijani. Within the Azerbaijan independence period, not a single Russian language school

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[10] Ramazanova, Aynur. 2014. "Social Science in the Caucasus: Knowledge of Russian in Azerbaijan." Caucasus Research Resource Centers. <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2014/04/knowledge-of-russian-in-azerbaijan.html>.

[11] "Russian Language in Azerbaijan: Intensive Training." 2017. Vestnik Kavkaza. <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/articles/Russian-language-in-Azerbaijan-intensive-training.html>.

was shut down; however, a decrease in the enrolment was observed. Overall, 82 535 pupils<sup>[12]</sup> chose Russian as their language of instruction. Additionally, more than 450 000 pupils study Russian as a second language.<sup>[13]</sup>

Due to its public image, Russia was unsuccessful in consolidating its influence among the larger social groups. Nevertheless, there are very specific groups that did fall under Russian influence.

There were 119 300 (1.35 % of the total population) ethnic Russians living in Azerbaijan as of 2009, making them the third largest ethnic minority in the country. Experts interviewed for this research project believe that this group remains very susceptible to Russian propaganda, due to its continued use of the Russian language.

The latest official statistical figures put the number of Russians at 119 000, while the other major ethnic minorities, Lazgins and Talishes, comprise 112 000 people. Among ethnic-Russian Azerbaijanis, 98.9 % consider Russian to be their mother tongue, and only 42.6 % can speak Azerbaijani.<sup>[14]</sup>

Several institutions reinforce the position of the Russian language in Azerbaijan. The Russian Orthodox Church is among those religious institutions which receive sympathy from the local authorities and the community at large. Russian speakers currently enjoy great availability of Russian-language literature and schools. Additionally, most universities in the country offer higher education programmes in Russian alongside Azerbaijani.

There are no special media tools or public influence mechanisms designed for Russian speakers living in Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the role of this group in the formation of public opinion in the Azerbaijani and Russian media is obvious. In many cases, they try to display the reputation of Azerbaijan as a 'country non-threatening to Russia', and normalise relations between the two. According to interviews, many local media experts believe that, in many ways, Russia's influence is very subtle and not openly traceable, as relies on diplomatic channels and other mechanisms to build

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[12] Mirzəyev, Fərid. 2016. "Azərbaycanda 90 Min Şagird Rus Dilində Təhsil Alır" APA–Nazir. [https://apa.az/sosial\\_xeberler/nazir-azerbaycanda-90-min-sagird-rus-dilinde-tehsil-alirhtml](https://apa.az/sosial_xeberler/nazir-azerbaycanda-90-min-sagird-rus-dilinde-tehsil-alirhtml).

[13] "Rus Dili Azərbaycanın İkinci Dilidir." 2016. Sputnik. <https://sputnik.az/life/20160303/404009856.html>.

[14] AzeriStat. (2017). Demographic indicators. Retrieved from [http://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/az/001\\_11-12.xls](http://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/az/001_11-12.xls)

contacts and deliver a message to the wider public through groups such as the ethnic-Russian minority in Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani government is somewhat concerned about pro-Russian sentiment among the Caucasian ethnic minorities. There are large numbers of Lazgi communities living in the regions straddling northern Azerbaijan and the Russian Caucasus. Russia was also relatively hospitable towards the nationalist members of the Talish communities. Many such nationalists reside in Moscow and other Russian cities. These two non-ethnic Russian groups are among the most vulnerable to Kremlin-led misinformation, influenced by Russia's position.<sup>[15]</sup> <sup>[16]</sup>

Today, the Azerbaijani community residing in Russia consists of the ethnic Azerbaijani Russian citizens and the Azerbaijani economic migrants (long-term, short-term, and seasonal). According to the 2010 Russian Census, there are 603 070 Azerbaijanis residing in Russia, making it one of the top ten most numerous ethnic groups in the country. As pointed out by an expert consulted on the topic:

*'There are some social classes that are more vulnerable to Russian disinformation. Particularly, considering that some Azerbaijani citizens live in Russia, and Russia has a greater ability to influence them.'*<sup>[17]</sup>

The Azerbaijanis in Russia are well integrated in society and moderately active on the political scene; they have strong ties with the political establishment in Russia. The political discourse between Azerbaijan and Russia directly affected the lives of the Azerbaijanis living in Russia. From time to time, the group faced persecution from the Russian authorities,<sup>[18]</sup> and there is evidence that the Azerbaijani community in Russia was used as a tool to influence decision-making in Azerbaijan.

The annulment of the registration of the *All-Russian Azerbaijani Congress* by the Russian Supreme Court caused a great concern for the Azerbaijani authorities.<sup>[19]</sup> The organisation played a major role in strengthening

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[15] Shafee F. (2008) Inspired from Abroad: The external sources of Separatism in Azerbaijan. *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*. Vol 2(4).

[16] Noonan, Joshua. 2015. "The Danger of Russia Plotting More Ethnic Separatism in Azerbaijan." *The Hill*. <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/235547-the-danger-of-russia-plotting-more-ethnic-separatism-in>.

[17] Anonymous Informant, January-February, 2018. In-depth interview.

[18] Braux, Adeline. 2013. "Azerbaijani Migrants in Russia." No. 57. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-57-5-7.pdf>.

[19] Ismail, Alman Mir. 2017. "Why the Sharp Downturn in Russian-Azerbaijani Relations?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center*. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13456-why-the-sharp-downturn-in-russian-azerbaijani-relations?.html>.



socio-economic ties between the two nations, and its shutdown provoked several negative responses from the Azerbaijani government, which was known for its close association with the Congress.

The Azerbaijani community in Russia is heavily influenced by Kremlin-backed propaganda. As pointed out by an international relations expert:

*'The Azerbaijanis working in Russia are becoming the mediators of the disinformation exchange.'*<sup>[20]</sup>

The Azerbaijanis in Russia contribute quite a hefty sum to the economy of Azerbaijan. The ethnic Azerbaijanis in Russia are influential in building economic ties between the two countries. More than 80 % of agricultural products originating in Azerbaijan are exported to Russia.<sup>[21]</sup> The above-mentioned group established influential business contacts in Azerbaijan.

According to the World Bank, remittances to Azerbaijan are largely sent from Russia and total 2.2 billion USD. For the present, Russia hosts the largest workforce of Azerbaijani migrant labourers. Thus, the ethnic Azerbaijanis in Russia form a group which can have a significant impact on the domestic Azerbaijani situation.

Many Azerbaijani migrants working in Russia come from the country's rural areas, and send their remittances to the rural areas of Azerbaijan, accounting for 1.8 % of Azerbaijan's GDP. Due to the petroleum price decrease, trade between those countries also shrank from \$4 billion USD in 2014 to \$2.8 billion USD in 2015.

Today, 600 Russian companies operate in Azerbaijan, 200 of them backed by 100 % Russian investments.<sup>[22]</sup> One of the interviewed economic experts mentioned this factor, pointing out the vulnerability of these social groups to Kremlin-led narratives<sup>[23]</sup> and their subsequent prominent position from which they are able to influence Azerbaijan's domestic developments.

There has been some increase in cooperation between Azerbaijan and Russia in education, characterised by intensive Russian courses financed by the Azerbaijani government and Moscow-funded educational

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[20] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

[21] Nazarli, Amina. 2016. "Azerbaijan's Major Exporters of Agricultural Products Named." AzerNews. <https://www.azernews.az/business/106769.html>.

[22] "Relations between Russia and Azerbaijan Are Those of Strategic Partnership." 2016. AzerNews. <https://www.azernews.az/nation/100441.html>.

[23] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

and professional exchange programmes.<sup>[24]</sup> The Azerbaijani students in Russia make up one of the largest foreign student groups in the country: while there are 72 000 foreign students in Russia, 20 % of them, or roughly 14 000,<sup>[25]</sup> are from Azerbaijan.

In many cases, the Azerbaijanis who got their education in Russia are members of the current cultural, economic and political elite in Azerbaijan. The Russian language actually became a cementing element for some of them. The new generation representatives who join the Russian-language schools or other educational programmes are mainly influenced to do so by this community. Hence, despite having no ethnic or other ties to Russia, the use of Russian as a language of the Azerbaijani elite makes those who pursue such a path vulnerable to Russian cultural and even political influence, through the media content to which they are exposed.<sup>[26]</sup>

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In the second half of the 1990s, due to the Azerbaijan's pro-Western stance, a decrease in the number of students using Russian, the emigration of ethnic Russians and strict media control, Russia was able to exert some limited influence on the Azerbaijani media.

In the early 2000s, with the increasing popularity of news portals on the Internet, the local government started sponsoring several Russian-language websites. Their main aim was to disseminate pro-Azerbaijani narratives in the post-Soviet countries where the Russian language still held prominence. Nevertheless, this development led to intensified contacts with Russian media outlets, and allowed Russian disinformation to spread in the Azerbaijani media.<sup>[27]</sup>

After 2012, Russia changed its strategy towards Azerbaijan, supporting several media outlets operating in Azerbaijan. For example, in 2015, the Russian-sponsored media channel *Sputnik Azerbaijan* started to operate

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[24] Grove, Jack. 2017. "Russia Focuses on Soft Power in Its International Student Strategy." Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/16/russia-focuses-soft-power-its-international-student-strategy>.

[25] Shirinov, Rashid. 2016. "Baku Hosts Discussions on Azerbaijani-Russian Cooperation in Education, Science." AzerNews. <https://www.azernews.az/nation/105724.html>.

[26] Shiryev, Zaur. 2017. "Betwixt and between: The Reality of Russian Soft-Power in Azerbaijan." Böll South Caucasus. <https://ge.boell.org/en/2017/10/16/betwixt-and-between-reality-russian-soft-power-azerbaijan>.

[27] Ibid.

in both Azerbaijani and Russian. Overall, the main goal of the Russian media outlets in Azerbaijan is to create a positive image of Russia among the public.

According to *Alexa.com*, Sputnik.az does not rank among the Top 50 websites in Azerbaijan. Only the following Russian-language news sites are in that listing:

- Oxu.az
- Milli.az
- Big.az
- Musavat.com (opposition party newspaper website)
- Haqqin.az (in Russian, pro-governmental)
- Yenicag.az
- Qafqazinfo.az
- Day.az (in mixed languages, but mainly Russian, independent)
- Axar.az
- Lent.az
- Sonxeber.az<sup>[28]</sup>

Sputnik.az is ranked as 94<sup>th</sup> in Azerbaijan.<sup>[29]</sup> The Russian ‘Sputnik’ news agency is gaining momentum, but not yet among the most influential sources.

The country enjoys free access to the social networks. However, some members of parliament have recently called for limits on access to social media platforms to avoid a ‘foreign-sponsored uprising of a kind similar to the Arab Spring’. Nevertheless, in May, 2017, the authorities limited access to websites such as RFRL, Meydan TV, and other online TV channels. In 2017, the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index placed Azerbaijan 162<sup>th</sup> out of 180 in its ranking. In 2017, Freedom House ranked Azerbaijan as ‘*partly free*’, granting it an overall Internet freedom score of 58 out of 100.

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[28] Alexa. Top Sites in Azerbaijan. 2017. <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/AZ>

[29] Alexa. Sputnik.az. Traffic Statistics. 2017. <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/sputnik.az>

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 10 reporters are currently imprisoned in Azerbaijan. In previous years, there were several high ranking cases involving journalists being arrested, namely connected to Eynulla Fatullayev, Avaz Zeynalov, and Mehman Aliyev. All were later freed. According to government officials, the reasons for these journalists arrests were not related to their media activity. Officially, they were charged under articles of the Criminal Code, including in relation to tax evasion.

The majority of the news agencies and online sites also publish information in Russian (and English).

Alongside the state-owned broadcasting company AzTV and public broadcasting company Ictimai TV, several other TV broadcasting companies exist:

- 14 district TV broadcasting companies
- Five national non-state TV broadcasting companies

In addition, ATV International is a private satellite broadcasting company, while Idman-Azerbaijan and Medeniyyet-Azerbaijan are TV channels specialising in sport and culture, respectively. There are also about 30 Internet TV channels in Azerbaijan.

The prominent print media outlets are the following:

- Ekho (in Russian)
- Azerbaijan (a government newspaper)
- Yeni Azerbaijan (the ruling party's newspaper)
- Azadliq (grouped around opposition parties)
- Yeni Musavat (grouped around opposition parties)

Basically, all major Azerbaijani information agencies have a page for publications in Russian:

- Azertac (official state news agency)
- APA
- Turan
- Trend
- APA

Additionally, all major Russian TV channels are available through cable TV in Azerbaijan.

The main problem for the pro-Russian media outlets is the generally negative image of Russia. Even a cursory review of the daily media reveals that the Azerbaijani media openly view Russia as the main international force to help Armenia to gain control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Hence, there is little public favour towards Russia, and Russia cannot be influential in the Azerbaijani media simply by spreading pro-Russian news.

There are several factors which may work in favour of Russia to get Kremlin-backed messages to the public more successfully. One important point in this regard is that the living standards of journalists and media workers in Azerbaijan is low. According to some NGO and trade union reports, a print media journalist earns about 400 AZN per month (450 EUR before devaluation, and 350 EUR currently). The average salary for a broadcast media journalist is around 600 AZN (840 EUR before devaluation, 520 EUR currently). Given the high cost of living in Azerbaijan, these salaries place reporters in the lower middle class.<sup>[30]</sup>

The underlying reason for such low salaries is that media management advertising practices are not yet fully mature. This makes media companies financially weak, with rather low salaries for their employees. As a result, the majority of media outlets employ semi-professionals, and thus investigative journalism is weak and fact-checking desks are largely absent.

Due to the lack of the social security programmes (except the government-funded housing projects for a limited number of media professionals) targeting journalists and improving their living standards, journalists tend to seek external financial sources. This creates an opportunity for them to be recruited by external interest groups, including Russian ones.

The media trade union in Azerbaijan is also relatively weak. The legacy of the Soviet-era trade unions still persists, even though current understandings of their purpose and functions are not the same. Thus, journalists lack the skills to obtain fair job contracts that could ameliorate their work and living conditions. This is why the quality of journalism in Azerbaijan is poor.

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[30] "Azərbaycanda Jurnalistlər Nə Qədər Maaş Alır?" 2016. Femida.Az. <http://femida.az/az/news/16625>.

Even though media in Azerbaijan is quite diverse, it is in fact highly politicised. The media bodies grouped around the government and opposition parties set the media agenda in the country. As a result, editors-in-chief completely dominate the tone and content of the print media entities, and lack any interest in actual news reporting, while the political process results in media being highly biased and strongly focused on special interests.

## LEGAL REGULATIONS

In 1998, the official media censorship left over from the Soviet era was revoked by presidential decree. This became a turning point for the independent media in Azerbaijan. From then on, media content was mainly in the hands of the media outlets' editorial offices. In most cases, the legal media owner in Azerbaijan is also its editor-in-chief. In other words, this person is both a news reporter and an entrepreneur. The Azerbaijani ownership model does not follow the standards of European countries, in which ownership/business matters should be separated from editorial policies.

Currently, independent media bodies (see Institutional Setup) consist of professional journalists and managers regulating media.

The main legal regulatory documents for the media are the following:

For the broadcasting media:

- Law on Radio and TV Broadcasting (N 345-IIQ), adopted in 2002<sup>[31]</sup>
- Law on Public TV and Radio Broadcasting (N 767-IIQ), adopted in 2004<sup>[32]</sup>

For the print and online media:

- Law on Mass Media (N-231), adopted in 1992<sup>[33]</sup>

One of the legal problems regarding media in Azerbaijan is the lack of media ownership transparency. According to the law on the state

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[31] "345-IIQ—Televiziya və Radio Yayımı Haqqında." 2018. Azərbaycan Respublikası Ədliyyə Nazirliyinin Qanunvericilik Baş İdarəsi. (Electronic portal for legislative acts of Azerbaijan) <http://e-qanun.az/framework/1125>.

[32] "767-IIQ—İctimai Televiziya və Radio Yayımı Haqqında." 2018. Azərbaycan Respublikası Ədliyyə Nazirliyinin Qanunvericilik Baş İdarəsi. (Electronic portal for legislative acts of Azerbaijan) <http://e-qanun.az/framework/5546>.

[33] "231 – Kütəvi İnformasiya Vasitələri Haqqında." 2018. Azərbaycan Respublikası Ədliyyə Nazirliyinin Qanunvericilik Baş İdarəsi. (Electronic portal for legislative acts of Azerbaijan) <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/7512>.

registration of legal entities, ownership information can only be disclosed with the owner's approval. This makes it extremely difficult to publish a list of owners of media entities. Hence, it is not clear if there are any media organisations in Azerbaijan owned by foreign groups.

In spite of that, the country tries to protect its media sphere from foreign influence and, especially, from foreign funding. In 2014, the Azerbaijani parliament passed a law restricting the financing of non-governmental and civil society organisations and, subsequently, largely limiting their influence on individuals and the public. The incentives targeting foreign influence (including Russian) in the country came directly from the government. Russian influence in the media of Azerbaijan is limited mainly due to the high level of state control.

Nevertheless, despite the state control of media, some experts believe that there is much more to deal with:

*'There is a need for a national strategy. I do not think we have any effective counter-influencing measures. There is a need for programmes to improve the professionalism of journalists, and the first initiative should come from the government. There is also a need to identify the short-term targets. Some counter-influencing measures should be implemented as well.'*<sup>[34]</sup>

Another expert mentions the late response of the government institutions to the information challenge:

*'The operative response of state agencies is a problem. When the event occurs, the social media is very quick to react. During that time, after half an hour, one day, half a day, while public authorities do not provide any information on the issue, people start to panic.'*<sup>[35]</sup>

The Law on Information Security was adopted in 1998 (N-432-IQ), and is generally considered to be inadequate. Expert opinions differ in some cases, and rather than seeing the overall legislative base as being inadequate, they criticise its implementation and the technology behind it:

*'According to the mass media law, the establishment and dissemination of information through investments from abroad is prohibited. The media budget cannot have more than 30 % of funds from abroad... the attacks*

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[34] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

[35] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.

*cannot be technologically avoided. From a technological point of view, the safety of our information space has never been provided for.*<sup>[36]</sup>

In 2017, following parliamentary amendments to the law, the online media were considered equal to the print media, with the same regulation for content.

## INSTITUTIONAL SETUP

Since Soviet censorship was abolished, two self-regulatory bodies have been established:

- the Press Council for the print-media
- the National Broadcasting Council for broadcasting companies

The main objective of the Press Council is to execute the ‘Ethical Code of Azerbaijani Journalists’, adopted by the First Congress of Azerbaijani journalists in 2003. At a later stage, a joint working group was established by the OSCE Baku Office and the Press Council, where the latter’s role was to promote and enforce the Code. The chair of the Press Council of Azerbaijan has since 2015 been a member of parliament.

The National Television and Radio Council was established in 2002 ‘to provide the implementation of state policy in the field of television and radio broadcasting, and to regulate this activity’. Its board members are appointed by presidential decree, but the president cannot dismiss them. The Council is fully funded by the state budget, but declares itself independent in its activity. The Council is responsible for providing broadcasting licences. Hence, this limits the options for foreign-funded broadcasting companies, including those from Russia, to operate in Azerbaijan. However, it is also worth mentioning that the major Russian TV programmes are available via several cable television companies in Azerbaijan.

There is also the State Fund for Support of Mass Media Development under the Azerbaijani President (KIVDF). This is designed to improve the financial stability of media entities in Azerbaijan. One of the main aims

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[36] Anonymous Informant, January–February, 2018. In-depth interview.



of the Fund is to limit the activity of foreign influence groups in the media sector by providing some alternative funding options.

## MEDIA LITERACY PROJECTS AND DIGITAL DEBUNKING TEAMS

The overall civil society environment in Azerbaijan severely restricts the capability of local NGOs to function and implement various projects, including media literacy projects. Since there are very limited options (mainly for non-political issues) for foreign funding, the media NGOs are not capable of carrying out full-scale media literacy projects.

Due to the limitations imposed on civil society institutions, there is barely any source of information on non-governmental organisations, research institutions or digital debunking teams that openly counter Kremlin-backed propaganda in the country. Some experts interviewed for this research pointed out the importance of striking a balance between media freedom and the information security.

Previously, several projects implemented within the framework of the UN and the Council of Europe, and addressed the need to increase media literacy among the general population. Nowadays, such programmes are harder to come by. In previous years, some organisations (including the Journalists' Trade Union and Press Council) also implemented projects on ethical journalism standards and an ethical code for the journalists, increasing the professionalism of journalism and the capacity to withstand the foreign propaganda pressure.

In terms of digital debunking, a 2016 event hosted in Tbilisi (involving some young politicians from Azerbaijan) included two-day training provided by **StopFake** project members, on the detection and confrontation of foreign propaganda and the political fact-checking.<sup>[37]</sup> The StopFake project periodically includes information relevant to Azerbaijan on its website. Another initiative from 2017 came on the part of the U.S. Embassy, providing scholarships allowing Azerbaijani journalists to take an e-course to help them improve their skills in recognising fake news and exposing

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[37] "StopFake Trainers Told Journalists in Kazakhstan, Politicians from Georgia and Azerbaijan about Fact-Checking, Combating Propaganda." 2016. StopFake.Org (blog). 2016. <https://www.stopfake.org/en/stopfake-trainers-told-journalists-in-kazakhstan-politicians-from-georgia-and-azerbaijan-about-fact-checking-combating-propaganda/>.

inaccuracies, and to study best practices in debunking and communicating the truth around the misinformation.<sup>[38]</sup>

Despite the aforementioned sporadic initiatives, organised efforts and systematic debunking are hard to implement. There are several news sites and forums which report the wrong statistics, such as the *Azerbaijani Language Forum* on *disput.az*, where there are examples of users presenting dubious information and debating its veracity.<sup>[39]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While Azerbaijan did not align itself with either the EU or NATO, neither did it join any Russian led-projects. Without protection from NATO yet cooperating with the EU, particularly on the energy market, Azerbaijan has become a hot spot for Russian interests.

Up until now, Azerbaijan's balanced politics have helped it to build neutral and friendly relations with all regional and global powers. Azerbaijan did not choose sides, and continues to be a part of strategic energy projects, providing alternative gas routes to the global market, and irritating Moscow.

In Azerbaijan, Russia is largely considered to be a power that meddles in regional conflicts, and its role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not viewed as neutral. Hence, there is relatively low public support for the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, and Russia's image in Azerbaijan is rather negative in general.

Civil society has taken a strong hit in Azerbaijan in recent years. The role of NGOs and the influence of think-tanks in the society has been seriously degraded. Hence, the majority of incentives for limiting the Russian influence in Azerbaijan come from the government, and not from civil society members.

Tight state control over broadcasters and limited foreign funding have helped the government to balance out Russia's direct influence in Azerbaijan.

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[38] "TOL Education | Online Course: Become An Expert Fact Checker and Hoax Buster." 2018. <http://toleducation.org/courses/online-course-become-an-expert-fact-checker-and-hoax-buster/>.

[39] "Azərbaycanda İşsizlərin Sayı Açıqlandı." (Azerbaijani Language Forum) 2016. Disput.az. <https://www.disput.az/index.php?app=forums&module=forums&controller=topic&id=979807>