

The widow of killed Azeri investigative journalist Elmar Huseynov and other mourners call on the government to speed up the investigation into his murder and give more freedom to the press.

Source: Reuters/Rafail Shakirov

Between freedom and taboo

media coverage of the Karabakh conflict

Mark Grigoryan and Shahin Rzayev

Formerly a reporter for the newspaper *Istiglal*, Shahin Rzayev has worked for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting in Azerbaijan since 1999.

Mark Grigoryan, a founder of the Caucasus Media Institute in Yerevan, moved to London after an attempt on his life. He writes on journalism in the former Soviet Union and has been involved in training journalists from the region. He is now a producer for the BBC World Service.

The Karabakh conflict provides a useful prism through which to examine the vicissitudes of media freedom in post-Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan. In neither state have robust media independent of the state or other political or business interests emerged. Although the conflict posed a major challenge to Soviet traditions of state-muzzled media, the post-ceasefire situation since 1994 has seen a backtracking trend towards media conformity with official positions. This is linked to a homogenization of political views dictated by positions of victory and defeat respectively, and to the political economy of the post-Soviet information market. Current media coverage of the conflict tends to be nationalistic, although media in Armenia, which has more reason to be satisfied with the status quo, tends to be more reserved and ready to express preparedness to restore good relations. In both countries, however, societies are deprived of objective or full information on the content and direction of the negotiations to resolve the conflict, an information deficit precluding any meaningful public participation in the peace process.

The Soviet period (1988–1990)

The birth of the movement in 1988 to bring Nagorny Karabakh under Armenian control came at a time when the Soviet press was flourishing. Thanks to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, previously censored materials – archive documents, forbidden literary works and critiques of Soviet policy – could now be made public in the Moscow press. This only applied to the past, however. When it came to coverage of current affairs, the media offered comment and analysis from positions put forward and approved by the Communist authorities, rather than providing objective information.

Predictably enough, the Soviet media's first response to the mass demonstrations in Stepanakert and Yerevan was profound silence. Subsequent events in Kafan in Armenia (the flight of Azeris) and Sumgait in Azerbaijan (anti-Armenian pogroms) received little or no mention at all. Instead, the media resorted to the standard didactic promotion of Soviet internationalism and the



'brotherhood of peoples'; the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators were labelled 'a handful of nationalists and extremists', labels completely at odds with the jubilant mood of patriotic fervour sweeping through Armenian society and indeed the reality it could see before its very eyes. Azerbaijani society was also frustrated by the lack of information: it was only known that 'something was happening in and around Karabakh'. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1988, the public on both sides perceived the Moscow media, on which they depended in the absence of any local reporting on the conflict, as supporting the enemy.

The Soviet media's attempts to conceal the seriousness of the conflict contributed to a climate of rumour and speculation conducive to escalation. They also forced populations to seek alternative sources of information. Public rallies formed one: people even spoke about 'information meetings'. The alternative dissident press, known as *samizdat*, formed another. *Samizdat* traditionally reported facts never seen in the official press, but reached only a small audience. *Samizdat* publications flourished at this time, printing nationalistic and anti-Soviet material that could not be published by official sources and was largely seen by the public as 'the truth'. By summer 1989, over ten periodicals were coming out in Yerevan. The first independent newspaper to appear in Baku was *Azerbaydzhan*, the organ of the Committee for People's Aid to Karabakh. Around that time, programmes such as 'Dalga' (Wave), openly discussing the escalating conflict, began to be shown on Azeri television.

In autumn 1989, the USSR adopted a law on the press and abolished censorship. This inaugurated a period of new, openly non-Communist newspapers both

disseminating and reflecting emergent nationalist platforms in their respective societies. Although representing an alternative to official sources, these outlets (such as *Hayk*, published by the Armenian National Movement, and *Azadlyg*, published by the Popular Front of Azerbaijan) cannot be seen as the development of a genuinely free press. Rather, they represented 'counter-propaganda', shaped by rejection of Soviet stereotypes and labels and thus a discourse still structured by Soviet rules of the game. A battle had been joined in the media between the Soviet establishment and nationalist constituencies for reform, but the terms of engagement were still defined by the regime.

Soviet collapse and conflict escalation

The attainment of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 was followed by the emergence of new independent papers in Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan many of these became extremely popular, notably *Ayna*, *Zerkalo*, *Seher*, *7 Giun* and *Aidylyg*. Azerbaijan's first independent information agency Turan appeared around that time, as did party newspapers: *Millet* of Etibar Mamedov's National Independence Party; *Istiglal* of the Social Democratic Party led by the Alizade brothers; and *Yeni Musavat* of Isa Gambar's Musavat party. Chingiz Mustafayev established an independent television studio 215 KL. As well as providing a more widely trusted source of information the quality and timeliness of conflict reporting significantly increased. New independent papers were also springing up in Armenia. *Munetik*, *Vremya*, *Azg* (the newspaper of the Ramkavar-Azatakan party) and *Yerkir* (affiliated to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) began to gain popularity.

Many of these outlets enthusiastically projected diametrically opposed nationalist visions of the events unfolding in Karabakh. It was common in the Armenian media to portray Armenians as victims of Stalin's policy and the Bolsheviks' territorial agreement with Turkey, and more recently of the Kremlin's political short-sightedness and Turkey's allegiance to Azerbaijan. Further, the media claimed Azeris had responded to peaceful and lawful Armenian demonstrations by subjecting Armenian civilians living in Azerbaijan to terror, ethnic cleansing and mass deportation, including 'Operation Ring' from April 1991. Naturally, this stance was effective in enhancing images of 'victim' and 'aggressor'.

Articles in the Azerbaijani media tended to contrast Armenian nationalist tendencies with the Azeri spirit of internationalism. Often written by members of the intelligentsia, they also dwelt on the 'friends of the Armenians' in the Kremlin, the corruption of Moscow journalists, the information blockade of Azerbaijan, Armenian terrorist organizations such as the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the mass deportation of Azeris from Armenia under Stalin. The native population of Karabakh was said to consist of assimilated Caucasian Albanians, with Armenians coming in to settle from Turkey during the Russian imperial period.

Full-scale war in Karabakh

The onset of full-scale war in Karabakh in 1992 provided new evidence of the power and potential of the new generation of journalists, a number of whom became war correspondents reporting from or near the front line. Working far from centres of censorship and at a time of general political upheaval, war correspondents were harder to control. The resulting divergence between official reports of events on the battlefield and the eyewitness accounts and video coverage broadcast in independent sources contributed to the rise and fall of governments. Azerbaijani President Ayaz Mutalibov's dismissal was in part due to revelations in independent sources regarding the numbers of Azeris killed at Khojaly in February 1992.

The significance of the media's new-found power was not lost on those who acceded to power in part as a result of its influence. The Popular Front of Azerbaijan, led by President Abulfaz Elchibey, that replaced Mutalibov's administration oversaw the rise of a multitude of new publications and private TV and radio companies; Elchibey's administration also passed a new law on the media. This flourishing of the media was expedient for as long as it supported the regime. Most Azerbaijani media supported Elchibey, calling on Azeris to continue the fight for Karabakh until 'victory was theirs'. Dissenting voices were few – only the Social Democratic Party newspaper *Istiglal* contradicted the

hawkish chorus with an article entitled 'Time to stop!' at the height of the Azerbaijani offensive in summer 1992 after the capture of Mardakert/Agdere. This call was ignored by most media and the population at large, yet *Istiglal* proved right: the fleeting Azeri victories were soon followed by heavy losses. The onset of the stunning series of military defeats in 1993 was met with a media clampdown in Azerbaijan. On 2 April 1993, on the eve of the Armenian occupation of the Kelbajar district, Elchibey issued a decree introducing military censorship. In the end the Popular Front government fell to a military coup rather than media revelations; military and political censorship nonetheless continued for another five years.

In spite of the conflict strong links between information agencies of the two sides were forged during the war. Partnership was developed between the Azeri Turan and Armenian Snark (now Arminfo). The agencies exchanged information throughout the entire war and continue to do so today.

Post-ceasefire developments

In the period of state building and consolidation following the ceasefire of 1994 the media in both countries have undergone a transformative process reflecting new social and political realities. For impoverished populations television is by far the most influential medium, which consequently attracts overweening influence from both the state and business interests with political ambitions (or at least desires to appease those in control of regulatory mechanisms). While there is a higher margin of autonomy in the press, the influence of political groups and wealthy individuals is also significant here. Lean resources, undeveloped distribution networks, self-censorship and in some cases harassment further limit the potential for independent print journalism.

The post-ceasefire period has seen an overall decline of interest and coverage of the conflict, despite periodic peaks related to specific events in the peace process. In both Azerbaijan and Armenia discourse on the peace process in governmental and oppositional media have converged to express seemingly consensual understandings of 'national interests'. A key implication is the wide observation of taboos on the nature and specifics of concessions that could be made to the other side. These taboos are supported by ingrained terminologies used to structure discourse on the conflict. In Azerbaijan, for instance, Armenia and Armenians are routinely referred to as 'aggressors', while Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian was forced to retreat before a media storm when he publicly referred to the 'occupied territories', rather than the popular labels 'security zone' or even 'liberated territories'.

In Armenia, a consistent decline of interest towards the Karabakh problem over the post-ceasefire years reflects the public mood that the conflict is solved by *de facto* Armenian control over Karabakh. Even if public opinion also considers concessions necessary to gain a peaceful resolution to the conflict, the specifics of Armenia's possible concessions remain one of the most tabooed subjects in the press. Few analytical articles are published on Nagorny Karabakh, and those that are usually deal with the legal and political reasons for Karabakh's secession, Armenia's historical right to Karabakh and the 'liberated territories' (the seven neighbouring districts), or the might of the Armenian army.

By contrast Azerbaijani public opinion does not believe that the conflict is over, a view reflected and encouraged by the media. The possibility of a military solution features increasingly frequently, occasionally spilling over into blatant war propaganda. For instance, ANS, the leading private Azerbaijani TV and radio company, opens its daily news programmes with the words 'Armenia's aggression towards Azerbaijan continues'. ANS presenters refer to the conflict as the 'first Karabakh war', thereby clearly preparing viewers for a second. In the state-controlled Azerbaijani media, 'pro-Armenian tendencies' and 'cooperation with Armenians' are negative labels regularly used in campaigns to discredit opposition parties and independent NGOs. Human rights activists and journalists who meet and communicate with Armenian colleagues are ostracized.

Media in Azerbaijan have also had to contend with a dramatically deteriorating political climate since 2002. Regulatory mechanisms have multiplied, financial pressure has increased and non-conformist media have faced increasing persecution, culminating in the murder in March 2005 of journalist Elmar Huseynov, editor of what was widely seen as Azerbaijan's most outspoken newspaper *Monitor*; the newspaper subsequently closed. The scope for autonomous initiatives, including contacts with Armenian journalists, is thus extremely narrow. Some contacts have nonetheless been maintained, some within regional frameworks, others bilaterally. A regional example is the Internews Crossroads programme, a project producing a half-hour magazine programme with ten minutes apiece from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting also works throughout the region to support independent journalists. Bilateral contacts have been maintained by the Yerevan and Baku Press Clubs, including joint public opinion surveys. Contacts between Azerbaijani and Karabakh Armenian journalists remain especially sparse. Although groups of Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists have visited Baku and Stepanakert respectively, these contacts have declined in recent

years. Contacts are now limited to one or two individuals, notably journalist Eynulla Fatullaev's visit to Karabakh in 2005, covered in the newspaper *Realny Azerbaydzhan*. A small number of articles from the Azerbaijani press are printed in the independent newspaper *Demo* published by the Stepanakert Press Club and supported as part of the Consortium Initiative.

Room for debate?

Coverage of the Karabakh conflict has evolved parallel to and as a result of changing political realities in post-Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the conflict's initial stages Soviet traditions of propaganda and misinformation predominated. Once the conflict had escalated into war, however, two parallel processes occurred: the professionalization of the media took place simultaneously with its 'nationalization', that is, its adoption and projection of nationalist values and narratives. These values were seen as compatible with democracy, insofar as national democratic forces were seen, at least initially, as upholding media freedoms and pluralism. Furthermore, censorship and control were difficult to enforce in the conditions of war and political upheaval characterising the early 1990s.

However, the outcome of the war, the linking of political legitimacy to stances arising from it and new socio-economic realities have inhibited the post-war disentanglement of the media from nationalist platforms. In Armenia, victory has dulled interest in questioning the outcome of the war or the national idea underlying it; in Azerbaijan a fragile regime's exploitation of defeat as a 'consensus issue' has made nationalist rhetoric compelling. In both countries, impoverished populations, rudimentary infrastructure and a tough regulatory environment mean that media outlets do not survive through direct relationships with their consumers, but through patronage from either the state or individuals vulnerable to state pressures on account of their wealth. This situation differs from the Balkans, where Western policy rendered far more assistance to independent media, especially if they were oppositional. As a result success in the Armenian or Azerbaijani media market dictates the accommodation of official policy lines on key issues.

Whereas nationalist discourse in the media in the early 1990s was initially associated with anti-Soviet and democratic values, it is now associated with a homogenization of political views and conformity with official state positions in the peace process. Still primarily concerned with their own survival, the media in Armenia and Azerbaijan have yet to secure the necessary autonomy to engage their respective societies in a debate on the Karabakh peace process that is critical, yet constructive.