



5 November 2008

STATEMENT

Azerbaijan: Government to close channels for last remaining independent broadcasters in the country

ARTICLE 19 is concerned about a recent decision by the Azerbaijan National Television and Radio Council to effectively ban international radio stations from broadcasting on national frequencies.

Radio Liberty, the Voice of America and BBC radio will all be affected by this decision.

Nushiravan Maharramli, Chairman of the Azerbaijan National Television and Radio Council declared in a statement on 31 October that national frequencies will be cleared of international broadcasters by 2009. He said, “These radios can further broadcast their programmes in Azerbaijan through satellite, cable network and internet.”

The Azerbaijan Journalists’ Union, Yeni Nesil, joins ARTICLE 19 in expressing its concerns. We believe that this restriction is a political decision aimed at further limiting the free flow of alternative views and opinions in the country. Although freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution of Azerbaijan, this has only a declarative significance, as authorities control and pressurise the media, endangering the very existence of independent media in the country.

In a country where the majority of the population does not have access to print media and the internet, TV and radio broadcasters are a primary source of information. Within this context, the international media provide access to diverse viewpoints, and are a forum for independent and opposition politicians and commentators to speak without fear of intimidation.

In 2007, the country had Europe’s highest rate of imprisonment of journalists, according to ARTICLE 19’s monitoring¹, although five journalists were pardoned by presidential decree and freed in January 2008. Violence against journalists is also common there.

¹ See also ARTICLE 19’s statement <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/letters/azerbaijan-foe-concerns-letter.pdf>; article of the Committee to Protect Journalists <http://cpj.org/2007/12/tenth-azerbaijani-journalist-imprisoned.php> and the Freedom House 2008 report <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2008>

Apart from general intimidation, the government's control over the broadcast media is exercised through the regulatory body, the Azerbaijan National Television and Radio Council, all nine members of which are appointed by the President.

“Even without going into the legal details of such a decision, one can unambiguously say that the ban on free broadcasting of international radio stations in Azerbaijan, who are good examples of media pluralism and stimulate social debate within this society, will considerably constrict freedom of expression in the country,” commented Arif Aliev, Chairman of Yeni Nesil Journalists' Union.

The existence of a free, independent and diverse media are essential prerequisites for democratic development. They also serve as a reflection of the overall situation within society. Therefore, we call upon the Azerbaijan National Television and Radio Council to review their decision and to approach the issue from the perspective of freedom of expression and the public interest.

ARTICLE 19 and Yeni Nesil further urge the authorities of Azerbaijan to undertake more profound reform of its legislation to bring about greater independence, pluralism and diversity of its broadcasting media.

In particular, we call on the government of Azerbaijan to implement legislative reforms that would ensure greater independence of the country's regulatory authority, the National Television and Radio council. The current practice whereby appointments to this regulatory body are made solely by the President falls foul of international standards on the independence of such regulatory authorities.

We note that Azerbaijan has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which both guarantee the fundamental human right to freedom of expression. ARTICLE 19, therefore, urges the Azerbaijani authorities to remain mindful of their international commitments on freedom of expression by taking measures that uphold rather than depart from them.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

- For more information: please contact Paul English, Senior Director of Regions, paul@article19.org Tel: +44 20 7278 9292.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.