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**Media Coverage of the 15 October Presidential Election in Azerbaijan**

**Report n.2**

***17 September – 8 October 2008***

*Composed by the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety*

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**Baku, 11 October** - Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, an independent, non-partisan Azerbaijani NGO dedicated to freedom of expression and the media, has been systematically monitoring media coverage of the 15 October presidential election. IRFS seeks to evaluate the mass media's performance in providing objective and balanced coverage of the candidates and their platforms so the citizens of Azerbaijan can make well-informed choices at the ballot box.

The project's findings are determined through a well-defined and rigorous methodology and are not intended to support any one candidate or political party, but the integrity of the media environment as a whole during the campaign season. This project is conducted with support from MEMO 98, a Slovak media monitoring organization. Within the framework of this support, a MEMO 98 consultant provided training and consultancy to help IRFS in conducting its media and elections-focused project, and analyzing the broadcast and print media.

Since 15 August, IRFS has been monitoring seven TV channels<sup>1</sup> and four newspapers<sup>2</sup>. The monitoring team has been analyzing TV programming and daily newspapers, and assessing findings on the time or space allocated to all candidates running in the election, as well as the time/space allocation given to other political actors (including those who chose not to participate or to boycott the election). The tone of the coverage is also being evaluated. Quantitative analysis measures the total amount of time devoted to monitored subjects on all programming between 6 p.m. and midnight. Qualitative analysis evaluates the tone in which the monitored subjects have been portrayed – positive, neutral or negative. While the monitoring focused on prime time (daily from 18.00 till 24.00), the enclosed charts show only coverage of candidates in the prime time news.

This is the second report released prior to the 15 October presidential election.<sup>3</sup> While the field of seven candidates offered voters a choice, this election campaign was far from competitive given the lack of a vibrant political discourse and meaningful pluralism. The incumbent president refrained from conventional campaign discourse, including his decision not to participate in televised debates between candidates personally. The democratic deficit thus created in the campaign environment by other candidates' lack of opportunity to directly address questions and comments to the incumbent President on his performance in office was compounded by the general absence of critical mass media posing such questions in its reporting.

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<sup>1</sup> ANS, ATV, AZTV (State TV), ITV (Public TV), Khazar, Lider and Space.

<sup>2</sup> Khalg, Azerbaijan, Zerkalo and Yeni Musavat.

<sup>3</sup> To date, monitoring has taken place over two periods, 15 August – 12 September (the first monitoring period) and 17 September – 8 October (the second monitoring period).

The low key character of the campaign and the absence of competitiveness could have been created also due to the decision by several opposition political leaders to boycott the election. In result, the incumbent President faced a group of candidates from smaller, lesser-known political parties.

- **Public TV reduced its reporting on the incumbent's activities and it also allocated some news coverage to other candidates.**
- **State TV and most of the private TV channels demonstrated bias in favor of the incumbent President – both in tone and amount of allocated coverage.**
- **Of the monitored TV channels, ANS provided most diversity in its news programs concerning the coverage of candidates**
- **Print media offered a greater diversity of views than television**

Mass media's crucial role of offering citizens information they need to make well-informed choices in their lives is most clearly demonstrated during elections. People often decide their vote on what they learn from the mass media. What the media reports, then, is an important part of the electoral landscape. Balance and fairness of media coverage of political parties, candidates, and issues is an important part of the level playing field required for genuinely free elections. While all media should offer responsible and fair coverage, it is especially incumbent upon state media, which is financed by all of a country's citizens, to provide unbiased coverage.

### **Summary of Findings**

**Public TV** fulfilled its legal obligation to allocate free airtime to all candidates who have participated in the program "Khalq Sechirir" (the People Vote) aired three times a week. In comparison with the previous monitoring period, **Public TV** reduced its reporting on the incumbent's activities and it also allocated some news coverage to other candidates. However, he still received much more coverage than the rest of his contestants. Since the commencement of the official campaign, President Ilham Aliyev received 14 minutes and 18 seconds on **Public TV's** news programs. 75.6 per cent of this coverage was assessed to be positive and 24.4 per cent neutral in tone. By comparison, the next most covered candidate – Fazil Gazanfaroglu – received only 1 minute and 42 seconds, which was mainly neutral in tone. All other remaining candidates together received 5 minutes and 19 seconds. **Public TV** thus did not provide equitable news coverage for all candidates.

State TV **AZTV** is no longer under legal obligation to allocate free airtime or to create equal conditions for all candidates. It showed its overwhelming support to the incumbent President who received as much as 14 hours, 38 minutes and 27 seconds during the news in this monitoring period. This coverage was exclusively positive or neutral in tone. By contrast, all other candidates together received only 49 seconds of such coverage, assessed mainly as neutral in tone. In particular, decrees are read in their entirety on the **AZTV** news, often while a picture of Ilham Aliyev is shown on the screen. Some of these decrees are quite lengthy, for example on 27 September **AZTV** allocated over 7 minutes to the reading of a decree on the president's decision to give awards to prosecutors and prosecutor office employees, and on 4 October **AZTV** allocated nearly 5 minutes for the reading of a decree about rewarding education employees. In addition, throughout this monitoring period, Aliyev most often portrayed on **AZTV** in ceremonial events and committing acts of charity. To be specific, significant amounts of time are allocated to coverage of Aliyev's visits regions throughout Azerbaijan, his participation in events like Iftar, his opening of objects like an airport in Lankeran, and the giving of awards and prizes, like a car to a handicapped veteran from the World War II.

On the 5 October edition of “Hefta” (Week) on **AZTV** all of the names of the candidates are listed and their pictures are each shown for three to five seconds. However, the moderator explicitly stated that Ilham Aliyev is in a better situation and is ahead of the other candidates because of the work he has done over the past five years.

In the three weeks of monitoring, IRFS did not find big differences between the monitored private broadcasters` portrayal of the candidates – most of them adopted a similar approach to **AZTV** and devoted the bulk of their news coverage to the incumbent President.

**Lider TV**, one of the private channels with nationwide outreach, allocated 1 hours, 16 minutes and 58 seconds to the incumbent with an exclusively positive tone. In contrast, all other candidates received a combined total of only 37 seconds, with this coverage mainly neutral. **Space TV**, another nationwide private broadcaster, allocated the incumbent 42 minutes and 20 seconds of its primetime news coverage, which was overwhelmingly positive in tone. In comparison, the channel completely ignored other candidates who received 0 seconds. **ATV** allocated 1hours, 2 minutes and 30 seconds of its primetime news coverage to the incumbent, with an overwhelmingly positive slant. **Khazar TV** allocated slightly less coverage to the incumbent - 28 minutes and 54 seconds, which was once again mainly positive. The next most covered candidate – Hafiz Hajiyeu - 42 seconds of mainly neutral primetime news coverage.

Only **ANS** provided all candidates with an opportunity to present their views on different issues in the framework of its news program Khabar. Overall, however, the channels also provided the bulk of its news coverage to the incumbent president - 39 minutes and 9 seconds. This coverage was mainly neutral or positive in tone. By comparison, Igbal Agazadeh received 5 minutes and 6 seconds of coverage that was split in tone nearly 50/50 between neutral and positive.

None of the monitored TV channels provided any coverage of those political leaders who decided to boycott the election – as such, viewers were not given an opportunity to better understand what the motivation behind such a decision was.

Monitored newspapers offered a greater diversity of views than television.

Both monitored state newspapers, **Azerbaijan** and **Khalg**, adhered to their legal obligation to allocate free space to candidates. Outside of the free space, however, President Aliyev received the bulk of the coverage devoted to candidates with 78% of space allocated to him in **Azerbaijan** and 87% in **Khalg**. As before, nearly all of the coverage in both newspapers was related to his activities as incumbent President. There was extensive coverage of ceremonial acts including trips to the regions, opening ceremonies for factories and sports complexes and the giving of “gifts” and “prizes” including cars. All of the coverage was positive.

**Khalg** allocated 194 square centimeters to positive coverage of the ruling “Yeni Azerbaijan Party” rally in support of Ilham Aliyev on September 17. Most of this space was occupied by pictures of high-ranking officials participating at the rally, with people carrying pictures of Ilham Aliyev in the background. **Azerbaijan** did not cover the event, and neither **Khalg** nor **Azerbaijan** allocated space for coverage of any other events conducted by other candidates in the election.

Both **Zerkalo** and **Yeni Musavat** newspapers continued to give highly diversified coverage of the participants in the elections, however **Zerkalo** actually allocated a slightly greater percentage of space focusing on election candidates to Ilham Aliyev during this reporting period than it did previously.

*Yeni Musavat* allocated the most space to Igbal Agazade – 53%. In fact, Agazade’s speech from *Public TV* was even published in *Yeni Musavat*. In contrast, several other candidates, like Fuad Aliyev and Haifz Hajyev, were most commonly referred to in opinion columns.

More of the references to Ilham Aliyev were negative than positive in *Yeni Musavat*, but candidate Haifz Hajiyev received 100% negative coverage in this newspaper. The coverage of Igbal Agazade and boycotting Musavat Party leader Isa Gambar were almost 100% positive.

*Zerkalo* maintained its manifold allocation of space of candidates in the presidential elections, although there seemed to be a stronger preference for Ilham Aliyev during this monitoring period. For example, on 7 October *Zerkalo* allocated an entire page (2146 square centimeters) to an analytical article to Ilham Aliyev’s work as incumbent president. The article written by a parliamentarian was positive and accompanied by large portrait of Aliyev (436 square centimeters).

## **Conclusion**

It became apparent that several disturbing trends in the way the Azerbaijani mainstream media covered candidates unveiled by the IRFS monitoring are not the result of short-term anomalies, but appear to reflect genuine trends in Azerbaijani media. These trends include the fact that the monitored media neglected to offer opposition with any significant airtime and opportunities to challenge the political opinions of the current establishment. Furthermore, contrary to its public mandate, the State-funded media failed to grant opposition significant airtime to express its political views. The results confirm that the Azerbaijani media in general still does not serve as a forum for the exchange of opinions, public debate, investigation and commentary that would offer the public fully informed, analyzed and assessed views of persons seeking elected office. This situation has made it very difficult for Azerbaijanis to get accurate and unbiased coverage of candidates.