

Manifesto for Media Reform in Azerbaijan

(The manifesto was prepared within the “Ethical Journalism Initiative-Azerbaijan” implemented in 2010-2012 by International Federation of Journalists, its’ affiliate Trade Union of Azerbaijani Journalists’ (JuHI) and the “Freedom of Speech and Journalist Professionalism” coalition, and was discussed on 25-26 September 2012)

Participants of the “Media environment of Azerbaijan: current situation and new challenges”, media editors, heads of media organisations, experts, researchers and journalists met in Baku on 25-26 September 2012 to debate media environment in Azerbaijan. These journalists and organizations, representing the wide range of opinion and positions within Azeri society, came together to overcome the deep divisions that exist and to develop a road map for reforming the media. They decided to include the following crucial issues to the manifesto:

- Journalist Safety
- Ethics and Self-Regulation
- Trade Union Development
- Public Service Broadcasting, Pluralism, media ownership
- Professional rights and media freedom

JOURNALISTS SAFETY

The conference noted the following:

- While there have been no military conflict in Azerbaijan since 1994, journalists are nevertheless often required to report from militarized zones and front lines in and around the Caucasus for which they are inadequately protected and prepared.
- Violence against journalists remains a serious problem with many incidents not properly investigated and the perpetrators left unpunished.
- Investigative journalists, who uncover corruption and abuse of power are exposed to threats and violence.
- The murders of Elmar Huseynov and Rafiq Tagi remain unsolved.

This conference recommends the following:

- While reporting in the extreme conditions, the journalists should be trained to be able to reduce the risks they face, provide self-security and report in a effective manner. The activities in this direction should be significantly improved.
- Employers have a responsibility to ensure all their staff is appropriately trained, insured and equipped to be able to perform their jobs as safely as possible and raise issues regarding the journalists safety in extreme conditions, initiate and provide suggestions.
- Law enforcement agencies must enable journalists to report free of harassment and fear of violence or arrest. In particular journalists must be enabled to report public events and demonstrations.
- An attack on one journalist is an attack on all journalists. The journalists’ community should be responsive to the issues regarding journalists’

fundamental rights and where journalists rights are abused or attacked, all journalists and their organisations should show solidarity.

- Where journalists are beaten and injured, the authorities must do much more to ensure that those responsible are punished. Failure to do so creates a climate of impunity for those ready to assault critical voices.
- Support the promotion of the handbook on safety of journalists published jointly by the JuHI and IFJ

ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

The conference noted the following:

- Basic standards of journalism and awareness of ethical issues is insufficiently understood and implemented in Azeri newsrooms.
- Many media are too heavily influenced by political parties that undermines the journalists ability to provide independent news.
- Considering the specificity of the profession and it's public significance, to try to build different samples of working contracts for journalists, which is already exists, according to legislation, and passing them in legislative bodies. In these contract samples, the responsibility of neglecting ethical principles and rights of journalists' to refuse jobs which contradicts ethical codecs should be taken place.
- The Press Council of Azerbaijan should improve its' activity on regulations of media-public, media-government relations.

The conference recommends the following:

- All measures should be taken to provide journalists with systematic, consistent professional trainings and educational activity on current ethical standards should be on regular basis.
- Journalists must be protected from the undue influence of political groups, while dialogue between media and journalists groups should be deepened to help protect the profession's independence.
- The media industry and government should invest in a complete reform of the journalists training facilities in Azerbaijan and support initiatives to modernise and expand the teaching of professional journalism.
- Media should commit themselves to following the professional codes of ethics and ensure that all staff are fully trained and aware of how these codes should be applied daily in the work place
- Journalists must be enabled to conduct their work independently and to report events as they see them. Journalists should never be forced to distort their coverage or to perform assignments that breach the ethical code. Journalists contracts should include the conscience clause that enables journalists to refuse assignments that breach their code of ethics.
- Encourage the promotion of the EJI Handbook, recently published jointly by the JUHI and IFJ as essential reading for all journalists aspiring to improved ethical standards.

TRADE UNION RIGHTS

The Conference noted the following:

- Journalists are poorly paid, work on insecure contracts and are obstructed from organising union representation in the news rooms.
- Decent contracts and working conditions are essential for developing a strong professional and independent journalistic culture
- Journalists are always better off when represented by one strong democratic and independent journalists union fighting for their rights with one voice.
- Regrettably, journalists unions are not properly recognised and enabled to organise and recruit in media and to negotiate improved conditions on behalf of their members.
- According to the JuHI survey on journalism, 45% of journalists are women. Despite this their representation in decision making positions is only 10%

The conference recommends the following:

- The fundamental rights of journalists and decent labour standards should be recognized and implemented in practice.
- The media employers and government actors should respect freedom of association and create an enabling environment for the organising of journalists associations and unions within their companies.
- Employers must recognise the journalists union as a formal partner for the negotiating of contracts for their members and a mechanism for this should be implemented.
- Journalists should work towards a unified union voice for the profession able to represent its interests and protect its rights.
- Journalists unions, editors and employers must do more to promote women journalists into senior positions to ensure gender equality and equal conditions.

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING, PLURALISM, MEDIA OWNERSHIP

The Conference noted the following:

- The advertisement revenues of media are low and distributed unequally.
- There are problems on circulating of newspapers. The seller networks should be enlarged and the transportation of newspapers to all regions and villages should be provided.

The Conference recommends the following:

- The national Public Broadcaster needs to be fully reformed to ensure its political and financial independence from government and that no doubts, contrary thoughts raises.
- Full transparency of media ownership must be ensured through legislation procedures in Azerbaijan. By doing so, a mechanism for public awareness on who controls the media should supported.

- Private media should establish editorial statutes that ensure the independence of the editor and the news room from the employer.
- Media ownership laws must limit the proportion of media controlled by any one individual or company and ensure pluralism throughout the media scene.
- All media should face a fair economic playing field with equal access to government subsidies, advertising, printing and distribution networks

PROFESSIONAL RIGHTS AND MEDIA FREEDOMS

The conference recommended the following:

- The government should complete the decriminalization of defamation. While it remains on the statute books it has a chilling effect on media
- The Reform and implementation of the law on access to information. The lack of transparency and access to information on the activities of the government prevents journalists from being able to perform their role in reporting the performance of the public's representatives.
- We condemn all public attacks on the profession and urge all politicians and government representatives to demonstrate support for journalism and their role in holding government to account.