

CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM IN AZERBAIJAN 2016

Baku, 10 October - Institute for Reporters` Freedom and Safety (IRFS), an independent, non-partisan Azerbaijani NGO dedicated to freedom of expression and the media, in cooperation with the Slovak media-monitoring organisation MEMO 98 and International Media Support, monitored the media coverage of the 26 September referendum in Azerbaijan to determine whether voters had ample information to make informed choices.

"People did not get objective information about the proposed constitutional amendments and so could not fully understand the proposed changes", said Emin Huseynov, the IRFS director. "Access to fair information is essential if any referendum should be deemed legitimate. Instead, the media served once again as a mouthpiece of the government, largely ignoring any opposing views."

The monitoring was carried out from 20 August until 25 September using qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis and focusing on six television channels, two radio stations, and two online media outlets. Quantitative analysis identified numeric measures or indicators that can be counted and analysed, such as the total amount of time devoted to monitored subjects and also the tone of their coverage (positive, negative, or neutral). Qualitative analysis assessed the performance of media against ethical and professional standards.

"The monitoring data indicated that there was a very limited range of political diversity in Azerbaijani media reporting", said Ivan Godársky of MEMO 98. "This is particularly worrying when it comes to state-funded broadcasters which have a clear legal and moral obligation to remain impartial and offer diverse views. We will continue our monitoring to inform the public and international community about the conduct of media, hoping to raise awareness about the identified problems."

Online media was the only source of more diverse information about political opinions, including alternative viewpoints concerning the referendum. Interestingly, *musavat.com* offered more informative reporting and presented the highest number of political parties and candidates.

"Selective and biased reporting not only deprives the electorate of the ability to make informed choice during the referendum but it also defies the fundamental principles of journalism." said Gulnara Akhundova, the Team Leader for Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia at IMS. "The situation with the freedom of expression has deteriorated significantly and combined with the erosion of other fundamental freedoms, there were no grounds to conduct the referendum according to international standards. We hope to continue supporting independent initiatives which aim to improve the current situation with the freedom of the media in Azerbaijan."

The full version of the monitoring report and results are here

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