

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/azerbaijan-main-opposition-newspaper-forced-07-08-2014,46772.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Financial strangulation

Main opposition newspaper forced to halt publication

7 August 2014

Update: After being forced to suspend printing for five days, the opposition daily *Azadlig* resumed publishing a print edition yesterday after finding a way to pay a third of the money it owes the company that prints the newspaper.

But *Azadlig's* problems have not been solved. The printer has given it until 15 August to repay all of its debt. If the state-owned newspaper distributor GASID continues to refuse to pay arrears to *Azadlig*, the daily will again be forced to suspend publication.

06.08.2014 : Despite holding Council of Europe chairmanship, Aliyev government steps up its campaign to silence independent voices.

The main opposition newspaper in Azerbaijan, *Azadlig*, was forced to halt publication once again on 1 August. This new blow to media pluralism took place as the authorities stepped up their campaign to eradicate critical voices in the country.

The atmosphere is increasingly suffocating for Azerbaijan's few remaining independent voices such as *Azadlig*.

The state-owned distribution network, GASID, has failed to transfer some of the proceeds of its sales back to the newspaper. The company now owes *Azadlig* more than 70,000 manats (67,000 euros). Deprived of this income, the newspaper has [accumulated](#) debts of 20,000 manats (19,000 euros) with its printers, another state-owned company.

"Azadlig is once again the victim of the pernicious strategy of financial censorship being implemented by the authorities," said Johann Bihl, head of the Reporters Without Borders Eastern Europe and Central Asia Desk.

"The government of Ilham Aliyev is in the process of completing its campaign to obliterate pluralism in defiance of the values of the Council of Europe, of which it is the current chairman. The international community cannot stand idly by while the last critical voices are silenced in Azerbaijan."

Government control of the advertising market deprives *Azadlig* of ad revenue and a series of recent changes in the law has increased the newspaper's dependence on GASID. In 2011, street traders [were banned](#), and in 2013 the sale of newspapers was banned in the underground. Together, these two sales channels accounted for up to 30 percent of the newspaper's income. Receipts from GASID also fell considerably after 2012 when the newsstands run by the network were closed and [replaced](#) by shops that for the most part do not sell independent newspapers.

[Ganimat Zahid](#), the editor of *Azadlig* and one of 100 "[information heroes](#)" highlighted by Reporters without Borders on 3 May this year, noted that it was not the first time that the newspaper had to stop publishing temporarily. *Azadlig* was censored several times during the 1990s and has been subjected to [increasing harassment](#) by the authorities.

In 2012 and 2013, the payment arrears by GASID made *Azadlig* insolvent and forced it to [stop printing temporarily](#). In addition, *Azadlig* was hit with several astronomical fines which led to the freezing of its bank accounts on several occasions.

Zahid, who has spent more than two-and-a-half years in prison on a ridiculous pretext, said: *"Azadlig, which means 'freedom', will live since freedom is the very essence of man and mankind. We have a clear understanding of the meaning of our name and the mission it implies, and that is why we shall fight for freedom of expression in our country."*

"We know that the fight for basic freedoms has no borders and that dictators all use similar methods to crack down on these freedoms. But we shall not give in."

The [online version](#) of *Azadlig* is still being published. Zahid said the print edition should reappear in about 10 days' time. Reporters Without Borders urges everyone to join the campaign of support launched by the newspaper on its [Facebook page](#).

Like *Azadlig*, the Russian-language independent newspaper *Zerkalo* was forced to [stop publishing](#) on 31 May after it was deprived of income. The crackdown on the last few independent voices and on civil society has been stepped up significantly in recent days. On 2 August, the human rights activist Rasul Jafarov was [arrested](#) on three months' pre-trial detention on trumped-up charges. Three days earlier, the noted human rights campaigner, Leyla Yunus, was also arrested and was [joined](#) in prison yesterday by her husband, Arif. The couple [were charged](#) in the same case as the journalist [Rauf Mirkadyrov](#), who has been in custody since 18 April awaiting trial.

Numerous NGOs and their heads have also come under pressure, including having their bank accounts [frozen](#). These include organizations that support the media such as the Media rights Institute (MRI), the Institute for Reporters Freedom and Safety (IRFS) and the Azeri section of International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX).

Azerbaijan is ranked 160th of 180 countries in the [2014 World Press Freedom Index](#) compiled by Reporters Without Borders. In May, the country assumed the chairmanship of the Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe. It is currently the most repressive of the human rights organization's 47 member countries.

(Photo : *Zerkalo*)
