

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/azerbaijan-main-opposition-daily-on-verge-of-08-11-2012,43658.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Azerbaijan

Insolvency plot

Main opposition daily on verge of suffocation: its editor speaks out

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Reporters Without Borders strongly condemns the decision by an Azeri court to freeze the bank accounts of the opposition newspaper [Azadlig](#), on 5 November 2012.

"This illegal decision is a decisive phase in moves over the past few months to suffocate *Azadlig*," the press freedom organization said. "Exorbitant fines and a deliberate attempt to squeeze its circulation have put the newspaper in a precarious position, further exacerbated by its bank account being frozen. The paper's survival is under greater threat than ever, which is precisely the intention of the courts.

"Most of the opposition newspapers in Azerbaijan have been closed, one after another. Broadcast outlets are totally controlled by the authorities. In these circumstances, the closure of *Azadlig* would be a fatal blow for media pluralism in Azerbaijan. Such a prospect is unimaginable."

Azadlig has been the target of a series of prosecutions in recent months. In the past year, no less than ten complaints have been lodged against the daily, mostly by people close to the government. As a result, the newspaper has been forced to pay a series of exorbitant fines totalling more than 65,000 manat (approx 65,000 euros).

The department responsible for implementing penalties at the court in the Baku district of Yasamal said *Azadlig's* accounts were frozen in order to recover the one of the fines, amounting to 4,200 manat, which was levied as a result of a complaint by the businessman Anar Mammadov, the son of the transport minister, Ziya Mammadov. Yet the newspaper lodged an appeal against the verdict a week ago. Under the law on the application of court decisions, a court ruling cannot be executed while an appeal is pending.

[The editor of Azadlig, Ganimat Zahid](#), told Reporters Without Borders by telephone that the court's decision was illegal. "We are still publishing the newspaper, but if this situation continues we won't be able to hold out for very long," he said.

Apart from the series of fines, *Azadlig* is also having to deal with changes in the newspaper distribution network. Over the past few months, newsstands in the capital have been replaced by a new network of outlets, from which independent newspapers are frequently excluded. Moreover, the GASID distribution network has accumulated large debts towards the newspaper, which [has contributed to Azadlig's inability to settle its own arrears with the state-owned printing house](#). As a result, it could stop printing at any time.

"This multiplicity of harassment must stop," Reporters Without Borders said. "We repeat that the Baku government must finally decriminalize defamation and guarantee independent journalists and media organizations a fair hearing. The international community, present in the Azeri capital for a meeting of the Internet Governance Forum, must apply its influence."

Azerbaijan is ranked 162nd of 179 countries in [the latest World Press Freedom Index](#) compiled by Reporters Without Borders.

Following is an exclusive interview by Reporters Without Borders with *Azadlig* editor Ganimat Zahid:

Can you describe briefly the situation at your newspaper?



Our work is far from being purely editorial. We are journalists, dissidents, mechanics and carpenters.... However the authorities do not want there to be one single free newspaper in the country. *Azadlig* suffers from this policy on an almost daily basis. We have received a number of fines and we find it difficult to work under this kind of pressure. All these court rulings are one-sided and unjust. There is no independent justice in Azerbaijan.

Now our bank accounts have been frozen. This is totally illegal since we have lodged an appeal against the conviction. Under Azeri law, an appeal against a court decision like this has a suspensive effect – the verdict cannot be applied unless it is confirmed on appeal. Although the justice system is controlled by the executive, it does not comply with its own laws! This shows once again to what extent judges and court officers carry out the orders of the presidential administration.

How are the staff of Azadlig able to do their work?

I don't think a single one of our colleagues has escaped pressure of one sort or another from the authorities. They have been [kidnapped, assaulted, arrested, threatened and blackmailed](#)... They can expect all the weapons of a classic authoritarian regime to be used against them.

On a less extreme level, you even see police officers insulting readers who buy *Azadlig*. This is a symptom of the hostile attitude towards our journalists and freedom of expression in general. Our website is regularly hacked, and we are in no doubt that the secret services are behind it. The attacks always occur after the publication of items that are particularly sensitive for the government, such as cases of corruption, or examples showing there is no rule of law in the country. However, we carry on working, come what may.

How has the recent change in the distribution system affected your newspaper's circulation?

The change to the way newsstands are run is a corrupt attempt to control the distribution of the press. It should be pointed out that in Azerbaijan, only three or four newspapers are read by 90 percent of the population. Pro-government newspapers do not need a readership – they exist although no-one buys them (editor's note: they are subsidised by the government). Over many years, vast sums have been spent on these newspapers, which no-one needs. The authorities have suddenly woken up to the fact that no-one buys them and the distribution network benefited only from a handful of independent papers.

That is why they decided to open a vast network of shops that sell everything – from needles to pantyhose – except newspapers. At the same time, they are closing down the old kiosks, since it was almost impossible to persuade the kiosk holders, who have been doing the job for many years, to stop selling newspapers. Ultimately, the change has resulted in the emergence of a profitable new firm that controls a vast chain of shops, which are rented to new tenants who are not allowed to sell newspapers. That's it, really.

What can the international community do?

I expect a response from the European Court of Human Rights. I have lodged several appeals with it over the illegal arrests to which I have been subjected. If these had been investigated, I believe we would not now have to put up with these illegal court decisions...

Independent media organizations have been left to sink or swim ... (It is not enough) simply to report that independent newspapers could disappear. They are actually disappearing. Only two or three are left. In the face of such pressure, they need direct support ... It is important to understand that in a country like Azerbaijan, a media organization is not simply a business. It is a genuine civic activity, which involves significant risks, even to the lives of those who take part in it.

But despite everything, we are still here, thanks to those inside and outside the country who give us their support.

(Picture: Turan, Stringer/AFP)

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