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A Review of Recent Changes in the Media In Azerbaijan

by Thomas Goltz

The failed coup in Moscow of August 19th and the subsequent disintegration of many of the authoritarian structures of the old USSR has had a profound effect on the lives of the citizens of the erstwhile Union, not the least of which has been evinced in the new-found freedom of the press.

Suddenly, the members of the (former) Soviet media are acting less like part of the apparatchik elite and more like journalists in the usually understood sense of the word. Papers, too, are now obliged to attract readership and advertisements in order to stay afloat and not rely on the largesse of the state.

But if many outside observers regard the Russian press as now 'free'--and thus reliable--many continue to believe that the media in the non-Slavic members of the new Commonwealth of Independent States remain muzzled and manipulated. Accordingly, many western publications are reluctant to use reports sourced from local media.

This is nowhere more true than in the Muslim/Turkic areas of the former USSR, where the population is generally regarded as being willfully kept uninformed by the powers that be--and thus incapable of making reasoned decisions about the political, economic and social events swirling around them.

To see if this bias is merited, I conducted a survey of the media in Azerbaijan--the Muslim/Turkic republic with which I am most familiar, to determine to what degree control still obtains and to what degree it has been lifted, and when.

The results are spotty.

But while it is true that there is room for improvement in certain areas, one of the most surprising and unexpected things one discovers is the diversity of the media in Azerbaijan.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the present diversity existed prior to the collapse of the old Soviet Union. Indeed, an argument can be made that Azerbaijan was and is one of the best informed of the old republics about events in the country and the (old) Union. The recent connection of information links to Turkey also qualifies the Azeris as being rather better informed than most former Soviets on events in the world as well.

My limited contact with the media in the 'cousin' Turkic/Muslim states of Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakistan, Turkmenia, Kirghizia and Tadjikistan) suggests that those states compare rather badly in this regard.

This, then, is a survey of the media in Azerbaijan. One can only hope that present positive developments will continue.

Historical Perspective

The press in Azerbaijan has a much longer history than the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan and its current successor state, the Azerbaijani Republic.

One can even argue that the relative free flow of information and ideas today is less a new phenomenon than a return to a tradition established in the 19th century, when Azerbaijan was not a country per se, but a Turkic and Farsi-speaking colonial territory of the empire of the Russian Czars.

In contemporary, nationalistic terms, the Russian conquest of the early 19th century may have been humiliating, but even extreme nationalists agree upon one thing: the colonial power, in shaving off (northern) Azerbaijan from Iran, removed Azerbaijan from a purely 'Islamic' orbit and introduced, however imperfectly, 'western' ideas concerning social organization, education and the notion of public media.

And even if these new, 'western' notions did not flourish in the dry soil of Russian autocratic imperialism, they did take some root and a tradition of a relatively free flow of information and ideas thus began.

The medium of communication was either Azeri Turkish, Ottoman Turkish, 'Tatar' (Crimean Turkish) or Farsi. The last may seem odd, but due to social and historical reasons, High Persian had long been the literary language of much of the eastern Turkic-speaking world and was thus a natural language of written communication.

Not surprisingly, most of the journalists of that period were also regarded as leading intellectuals and many eventually graduated to the precarious position of native, opposition political leadership in a colonial milieu.

Preeminent among them was Mehmet Amin Resulzade, the first president of the short-lived Republic of Azerbaijan of 1918-20. His career as a 'journalist' essentially consisted in reopening his paper under a new name everytime the authorities had issued closure orders on the last, and bouncing from temporary exile in Turkey to temporary exile in Iran.

But if the establishment of the short lived Republic is regarded as the halcyon days of Azeri political life and an independent, national voice, the demise of the Republic in 1920 signaled the beginning of a long hibernation of ideas. As in most of the former Soviet Republics, the press and media in Soviet Azerbaijan became little more than a crude propaganda tool of the Communist Party or affiliated institutions, used mainly to publish fermans and ukazs (official pronouncements) or state approved poetry.

There was also the tacit program of Russification that occurred elsewhere in the Soviet Union: the discouragement of local language development by keeping higher education in Russian as well as the insidious editorial policy that reduced Azeri language publications to periodicals designed for village-level readers. It is significant that even today, the only 'dailies' in Baku are Russian language publications.

The biggest single blow to the Azeri press, however, was unquestionably the forced conversion of written Azeri from the modified Latin script adopted in the early 1920s into Cyrillic--a process that began in the late 1939 and culminated at the end of World War Two.

Although the same process was also enforced in the Central Asia states, one can argue that it hit hardest in Azerbaijan. Not only did the country have a contemporary political and literary heritage to look back upon, but had itself taken the initiative to effect the change of alphabet from Arabic/Farsi to Latin in the first place--and several years before Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's famed 'Alphabet Revolution' in Turkey in 1928.

The forced conversion to Cyrillic, as such, might be regarded as the greatest cultural affront effected by Moscow upon Azerbaijan, and has reverberations to this day.

Accompanying the change of alphabet from Latin to Cyrillic was a campaign of 'de-Turkification' of Azeri in order to further separate the populations of Azerbaijan from Anatolia.

Although cloaked in 'Azeri' nationalist tones, the clear, unspoken aim of this policy was to create a kitchen language--and thus culture--incapable of natural growth and development. A dialect was to be raised to the status of a separate language and the people who spoke it elevated from a branch of a tree to a tree itself--but one with no roots to sustain them.

It is hardly surprising that writers and readers, themselves force-educated in Russian, increasingly gravitated toward the Russian language press as a medium of communication and away from the increasingly unsophisticated and artificial language called 'Azerbaijani.'

Resistance to this subtle campaign fell under the general rubric of 'Pan-Turkism', and there were many victims; throughout the 1930s and 1940s, any number of Azeri/Turkish nationalists were jailed or even executed for the catch-all crime. The concept included everything from advocating the unity of Turkic peoples to using 'old' words while lecturing in the university.

One contemporary survivor of the campaign is Abulfaz Elchibey, the current chairman of the Popular Front, who was jailed for two years in the mid-1970s on the familiar anti-Soviet/Pan-Turkic charges. The evidence against him was his call for making Azeri an equal language of higher education in Azerbaijan.

Happily, much of this began to change during the early days of glasnost and perestroika. One might even argue that the semi-legal re-emergence of Resulzade as the symbol of Azeri patriotism in the late 1980s coincided with semi-official toleration of critical writing on current events--IE, a semi free press.

The crucial date in the process was January 20th, 1990, when Soviet Army tanks rolled into Baku to put down anti-Armenian demonstrations, and the population responded with an explosion of pent-up nationalism. A dynamic process ensued, with the government attempting to pre-empt the opposition, known as the Popular Front, by embracing such symbols of Azeri nationalism as Resulzade, the flag of the first Republic and policies like re-converting written Azeri into a Latin based script.

Another aspect was a new toleration of opposition newspapers, a loosening of editorial control on governmental press and even the acceptance, in late 1991, of opposition broadcasting on state run television.

The process continues today, and it is by no means clear where it will end. Freedom of the press is often confused with inchoate nationalism--IE, the freedom to write as much as one wants on Nagorno Karabakh--but also includes a good amount of straight-forward criticism of other issues, ranging from investigations of why the Karabakh problem has gotten so far out of hand to hard hitting analysis of the role played by many contemporary leaders whose current positions in power date back to the dark days of January, 1990.

It is inconceivable that such discussion of hot political issues could occur in the press of Uzbekistan or Kazakistan, and one can anticipate even more lively debate (and innuendo) in the future as the Azeri press falls under the influence of main-stream Turkish journalism--as would seem to be its fate.

The Contemporary Press

There are no less than 115 daily, weekly or fortnightly Baku-based papers, plus another 70 to 80 rayon, or regional papers that also maintain their head offices in the capital.

Most of these still maintain their offices in one large building--the Metbuat Saray--a Kruzschev-era monolith located in back of the Supreme Soviet, or parliament. The proximity of the law-making body and confined nature of the editorial offices may serve the distribution of official statements, but it can also make for some fairly predictable reading. Also, most papers are printed on government presses which might be said to represent a final, if rarely exercised, control.

In addition to the official announcements--laws, draft laws, greetings, etc--it is not unusual to discover the same article on different days in different government newspapers. Usually, such articles are products of the official Azerbaijan news agency, Azerinform--formerly a TASS affiliate but now allegedly independent--and one might generously regard the multiple print-run phenomenon as something akin to two or three city newspapers in the United States using the same AP or UPI story.

Often, though, the story is not breaking news but a long and self-serving interview with a minister or other official, and the reader accustomed to the idea of journalistic give & take with an interview subject has to wonder why the sense of competition in writing the better interview is so attenuated.

Accordingly, it would be naive to claim that all traces of control and (self) censorship are over, especially in the editorial offices of the pro-government (not necessarily always ex-communist) daily and weekly papers.

But this system is starting to break down and Azeri journalists are increasingly more demanding of immediate contact with and ability to grill movers and shakers.

As I write this, a new system of weekly briefings by members of the cabinet has been set up to address specifically this need, and the sessions can be spirited and lively. Recently, there was a long article in the pro-government Russian language daily Vyshka entitled "Non-news at the News Conference," in which a withering attack was made on the presidential press secretary for dodging too many questions.

None of the scores of newspapers on sale at the stands make a profit, and 'industry sources' maintain that the larger circulation papers make a larger loss due to the proportionately greater costs of printing more papers on increasingly expensive paper: prices have gone up from 800 Roubles a ton to 10,000 Roubles over the past year.

Previously, this made little difference as the vast majority of newspapers were state owned and all staff, by definition, state employees.

But as of January 1st, 1992, the newspapers have been cut free and managers are, in principle, able to hire and fire at their own discretion and a shake-out can be anticipated. Already 'better' journalists (there are no stars or even well known columnists yet) are leaving the (former) government newspapers and working as stringers for Moscow-based agencies like Interfax or other Russian-language independent papers.

As with other parts of the economy, papers, too, will have to establish their own bottom-line and develop such revenue-gathering devices as advertising to off-set greater costs and even, possibly, make a profit. It remains too early to quantify the impact of this new source of income for the papers--mainly because it is difficult to quantify the impact and implementation of privatization of the Azerbaijan economy as a whole. But already papers are carrying full page ads on everything from satellite telephone time to Help Wanted; how much money they collect from this service is unknown.

Major Papers

Compared with the population of Turkey, the Azeris are a reading public--IE, subscription and circulation of newspapers is high, even if much of the news contained within is redundant.

In terms of daily circulation/subscription, Halg ("People"; pro-government/Azeri-language) enjoys the largest readership--and thus presumably the greatest impact. The official subscription runs at 130,000; the paper claims a circulation of 165,800. One might increase this by another third with the addition of the Russian-language sister publication Vyshka ("Oil Derrick") with its 43,000 subscribers.

Some say that *Vyshka* somehow reflects the views of the substantial Jewish community that still lives in Baku, but I have seen little evidence of this. Generally, *Halk/Vyshka* follows a 'government' line, although oblique criticism is now allowed or even encouraged.

Next in popularity comes *Hayat* ("Life") a pro-government/Azeri publication with a subscription of 48,000 and an alleged distribution of 60,000. Again, one might add *Hayat's* Russian language equivalent, *Bakinsky Robotcu* ("Baku Worker") with its subscription of 39,000. Often it is difficult to see much difference between any of these publications, save for the date of issue. The *deja vu* phenomenon is very strong here, as will be shown in the appendix below.

In addition to the 'government dailies' (none actually appear everyday, but on an average of four days a week) there is a murky group of 'liberal' papers that do not necessarily tow the government line.

At the top of this short list is the weekly *Azerbaijan*, which owns the distinction of maintaining offices outside the aforementioned Press Palace. Subscription hovers at around 30,000.

This 'acceptable outsider' position resulted in the recent appointment of the editor-in-chief, Wagif Rustamov as a compromise choice as chief press advisor in the presidential palace. An outside observer might well wonder if this does not suggest that the paper was less independent as many were wont to believe, but within the context of Azerbaijan it seemed to make both government and opposition happy.

A second "liberal" opposition paper published on a weekly basis is *Muhalafat* ("Opposition"), with a distribution of 41,000. The paper is allegedly close to the Social Democratic Party of Azerbaijan which has attracted a certain amount of international attention due to its links with such individuals as Willi Brandt. The party has a very limited following in Azerbaijan itself, and aside from the official distribution figures, the paper has no apparent loyal readership or impact.

Most of the newspapers included in the Press Palace do not even merit that sketchy analysis, as they are purely 'indulgence' papers created as the public face of various institutions.

For example, there is *Aydinliq* ('Enlightenment'), which qualifies itself as the weekly newspaper of the *Kayqhi* ('Concern') Society. It started publication in 1990; subscription figures are unavailable and editorial policy is vague aside from a preponderance of news about Nagorno Karabakh.

Reflecting concern about the free market economy, another new addition this year is *Biznes* ('Business')--a paper that describes itself as the 'Organ of the Administrative Group of

the Azeri Union'. A sampling of the 3rd number of the paper, dated February 8th, however, suggests that the paper is less interested in business per se than the usual national issues--concern and despair about Karabakh.

There is also, perhaps inevitably, another newspaper wholly devoted to the idea of Karabakh. It is entitled, appropriately, Karabakh. The editorial offices are in the Press Palace and to my knowledge, it has never once been distributed in Karabakh itself.

One curious new addition to the scene is the Halg Ordusu ("Peoples' Army"), the organ of the newly created Azerbaijan Ministry of Defense. It began to appear on newsstand on February 11th and, not surprisingly, it is almost exclusively devoted to military matters. In the Azeri context, that means Karabakh.

On the far side of the spectrum is a new, 'ecological' periodical entitled Fergan ("Nature") that espouses green causes and finds villains sullyng the environment. In an oil state like Azerbaijan, there are many.

To complete the list of 'government' papers there are also two papers allegedly devoted to religious issues--Islam and Nur ("Light"). Both are monthly, and reliable subscription figures are unavailable.

The former is the more interesting because it is the in house publication of the Directorate of Caucasian Muslims--a government institution. The Sheikh ul Islam, Shukurallah Pashazade, in addition to his duties tending to the Shiites and Sunni Muslims of Azerbaijan, was also a delegate to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow and has long been regarded as a flunky of the Communist Party. As such, Islam seems more a 'control' of Islamic sentiment than an expression of it. Still, it seems inevitable that an independent newspaper reflecting a Muslim position will be established--either by local believers or with the assistance of Iran or Turkey.

Azadliq

In a category by itself is the bi-weekly organ of the Popular Front, Azadliq, ("Independence"). Although it enjoys a subscription of 49,000 and a distribution of 86,000, it is unquestionably the most important paper in the country.

Azadliq started print-life as a samizdat sheet--that is, an underground, anti-government publication in the Sakharov tradition that often seemed closer to anti-communist propaganda than actually purveying 'news'. For those unfamiliar with the samizdat tradition, the reverse image of the editorial style of Sparticus League publications or other radical Left organs in the United States or Europe might be imagined: shrill, over-long shouting that often seems a step removed from reality (and a general sense of responsibility).

But following its legalization in late 1989 (coinciding with the legalization of the Popular Front as an organization) the tone has subtly changed: although Azadliq remains 'pristine' in an absolute sense, the volume has been turned down and ^Asense of journalistic responsibility generally prevails. Long, positional editorials remain the essence of the paper. There is no Sports page, for example, but as an index of the times, the paper even started taking advertisements to bolster revenue.

Another interesting change in the editorial offices is the decision to create a Russian-language edition of Azadlik, Svaboda, as part of an out-reach program to ethnic Russians (and Russified Azeris) who cannot read Azeri Turkish as well as others outside the country who find the language equally inaccessible. I include a sample of headlines in the appendix along with those of the deja vu publications.

A last note on Azadliq: one can expect that it will be the first publication to make the transition from Cyrillic to Latin characters, although no date has yet been announced; perhaps they are just waiting for an infusion of cash (or a donated printing house) from backers in Turkey: Azadliq still is run on a shoestring budget, and the quality of printing is often so bad that it is difficult to read.

The 'Foreign' Press

Lastly, in this tasting of the local press it would be a serious oversight to exclude the 'foreign' press in Azerbaijan--the Russian language newspapers and magazines produced in Moscow and the Turkish language press produced in Istanbul.

One is almost tempted to make a theory of the inverse impact of the 'foreign' publications: the more conspicuous, the less real impact--for the immediate future, in any case.

The 'inconspicuous' category is that of the 'imported' Russian language press. If nothing new in Azerbaijan, it is difficult to exaggerate its importance.

Indifferent to the fact that the USSR is no longer, most people (and all in government) continue to read at least one of the (former) pan-Union, Russian-language and Russian-cultured papers like Pravda or Isvestia for their basic digest of information. Conversely, government officials tend to see the Moscow publications as their vehicle for public announcement and it is more than a little irritating for a working reporter like myself to be told to find the government position on this issue or that in yesterday's Pravda.

It takes no great insight to discover why: most people in Azerbaijan, and especially those associated with the defunct Communist Party apparatus, remain the products of a Russian language education and a Moscow-based world view. As such, they quite naturally prefer the non-local, Big Picture

purveyed by the 'national' newspapers--even if there is a growing suspicion that these papers are often the source of disinformation as part of an alleged anti-Azeri plot hatched by Armenian editors in Moscow. (Isvestia, the most oft-quoted on other subjects, is also most-oft-accused of sewing bad stories for convoluted purpose.)

Going head to head with this are the new purveyors of the Big Picture--Istanbul based publications published in Turkish that now dominate the windows of kiosks throughout Baku. This is curious because most of the news published in the Turkish press is exclusively about Turkey, and aside from the general fascination Azeris have for all things Turkish, there are very few who really want to know under what article of the TCK the DGM intends to charge HEP members of the TBMM with and why--or can even read well enough to understand the difference between a liberal paper like Cumhuriyet and a conservative journal like Tercuman. Also, most of the Turkish language press is old--I have accidentally purchased newspapers that date to the month before.

Still, there is one Turkish newspaper on the market that requires greater comment, even though its impact is far more limited than its circulation.

This is the special Azerbaijan edition of Zaman (Time), which might be laughable but for its very dangerous politics and unclear purpose.

The Istanbul-based, mother publication is essentially the low-circulation organ of the ultra-nationalist fringe. It is this editorial policy that Zaman is now promoting in Azerbaijan. Distressing as it may be, it is understandable that many Azeris are very receptive to this message. Denied access to run-of-the-mill 'Turkishness' for so long, Zaman's shrill message now speaks to their souls.

Alparslan Turkesh, for example, the head of the viciously nationalistic Grey Wolves movement, has been promoted to the status of a giant. Most Turks regard him as a fascist murderer. Armenians, needless to say, are by definition demonized.

There is also a lot of Islamic piety, guides of how to pray and calendars of religious events--but of the kind that one wonders how well informed the editors are of their own cultural heritage. My favorite faux pas was a long article devoted to Aisha, the favorite wife of the Prophet Muhammad. She was held up as a portrait of "Exemplary Muslim Woman" to be emulated by other Muslim ladies. Sadly, the editors had apparently failed to take into consideration the fact that the Azeris are mainly Shiite, and the name Aisha in the Shiite tradition is almost anathema due to the rivalry between the Prophet's youngest wife and his cousin/son-in-law Ali...

Zaman also carries a good deal of gratuitous and inconsistent America-bashing as well as a curious sort of anti-Semitism one usually doesn't associate with the Turks:

one banner headline declared 'Full Support of Jews for Assad!' suggesting that the tiny Damascene Jewish community were completely behind the Syrian strongman during recent elections there.

To be perfectly fair and to give credit where credit is due, the Zaman correspondent in Baku, Yilmaz Polat, consistently churns out a prodigious amount of basic news on Azerbaijan and, if a little too nice to the powers *THAT* be, the collected stories represent a unique archive of fairly reliable information about day to day events.

Still, it is sobering and maybe even frightening to see Zaman plastered in the windows of every kiosk in town (and distributed free in parliament and in governmental offices) but it is a relief to note that few people ever read it.

Other Turkish newspapers are *now* talking about setting up shop in Azerbaijan; the flashy Gunaydin, Tercuman and possibly even the paper of record, Hurriyet. All these publications have gone up-market in terms of newspaper production at home and have old printing presses to give away to their Azeri cousins--programs in consort with announced Turkish government policy in promoting the transition from Cyrillic to Latin as quickly as possible.

It seems likely, then, that rather than a return to the Azeri Turkish of the 1920s, the result will far more resemble the contemporary Turkish of Turkey today. It seems logical, too, that the Azeri press of today will soon start resembling that available in Turkey: garish, often inaccurate, but free.

News Agencies

When one thinks of a news agency, one usually imagines an organization like the United Press International, the Associated Press, Knight-Ridder or Reuters--IE, news gathering services tied into newspapers or newspaper groups or those that function as individual organizations.

But in a society emerging from information-by-command, it is not surprising that system works differently. As such, it might be useful to sketch in some notes about the agencies.

The single largest news agency in Azerbaijan is Azerinform--the local 'sister' operation to the pan-Union TASS (the specific relationship lapsed in the post-coup period) and thus the font of most 'official' news. The organization has a large staff, a large building and appears to be well financed: Olivetti is coming in soon to redo their in-house computer system this year.

The agency has long been criticized for being too close to the government and pandering to official needs; the director, Azad Sharifov, was elected a member of parliament running on the (now defunct) Communist Party ticket and there are constant rumors that its Russian-speaking correspondents are among those who continue to serve more than one master.

(Indeed, this seems true of TASS as a whole. There have always been rumors about the KGB connection, but following the August 19th coup much of the onus appears to have disappeared--albeit for reasons I can't quite understand: either the organization suffers from an unbelievably sloppy editorial board, or TASS is still being used as a conduit for disinformation: I suspect the former. There have been far too many 'errors' in basic coverage of important events in both Azerbaijan and Georgia to rule out calculated news coverage.)

The main traditional pan-Union 'rival' of TASS in the context of the old Soviet Union was Novesti. But for reasons I have been unable to investigate (short of the obvious nationalistic ones) the news agency renamed itself the Russian Information Agency, or RIA. They say it has been privatized, or soon will be.

The Novesti building in down-town Baku, in any case, has now been bought out by something called Haber Servis (News Service), a joint venture with the Turkish conservative newspaper Tercuman which seems more interested in conducting business deals than gathering and disseminating news. Strangely, the local stringer for Tercuman works elsewhere (I see him often in the Presidential palace for reasons that continue to mystify me), as does the Azeri reporter for RIA. The 'news room' of the Haber Servis, meanwhile, is made up of very young, mainly Jewish reporters who cannot speak Azeri or Turkish. It is an odd set up.

The first 'independent' news agency to be set up in Azerbaijan is Asa-Irada, a rag-tag assortment of journalists who once worked for government papers supported by an assortment of young translators who often double as interpreters for high government officials--including the president and prime minister.

Run by a certain Irada Velikova who allegedly pioneered the 'new journalism' in Azerbaijan, the news agency excels in writing news about Karabakh. Stories are then faxed and telexed out to 60 'subscribers' every day--only 14 of whom pay for the service.

It is thus perfectly clear that on an economic/business level, there is no bottom line. It follows that the finances for the agency almost certainly come from the government. This is not necessarily sinister, but disturbing in that no-one who works there will admit to being anything but an 'independent'. Another rumor is that they are supported by the Turkish newspaper Gunaydin--yellow press if there ever was jaundice on the page.

Asa Irada's chief 'rival' as the main purveyor of 'independent' news for free is Turan. The agency also appears to enjoy invisible support from somewhere, and, like Asa-Irada, are housed in a government building. I do not know them well.

Lastly, there is the Information Bureau of the Popular Front. This is not a news agency per se, but a sort of watch-dog with contacts everywhere that prints a daily bulletin for anybody who wants it. With time, it's likely that this service will become the first, truly 'independent' news gathering organization in the country although at present it is clearly as pro-opposition as Azerinform is pro-government.

Reporting

It is hardly surprising that with so many different papers most reporting is not conducted by staff correspondents but by decree or agency.

This is starting to change, and the press conference is actually starting to become a regular feature of public life, and investigative journalism cannot be far behind.

I have already mentioned the attack on the Non-News Conference in Vyshka; another front page feature article in the same paper even detailed the trails and travails of The First Foreign Journalist in Azerbaijan (me) and his adventures dealing with rapacious/criminal bureaucracy: the attempt of certain members of the Ministry of Communications to try and charge \$30 per minute for telex use. The real rate was more like \$.30 per minute and the bureaucrats intended pocketing the difference).

But in the inchoate state of Azeri politics today it is difficult to say whether 'critical' articles are planted in order to tarnish the reputation of political rivals or whether they are the result of true freedom to investigate.

I remain convinced that many reporters report to more than one master--either the security services or other parts of government. This seems less sinister when one reflects on the society from which Azeri (and other former Soviet) journalists are emerging, and the fact that the entire security apparatus is now being cast anew. What was acceptable yesterday (by local standards) is not necessarily so today.

Indeed, many of the reporters at press conferences or briefings seem to regard the events as venues for them to air their own views by means of posing long rhetorical questions to make their own positions crystal clear. This can be tedious going at times, but I guess such soap-box standing is a process that the young press has to go through and it is certainly more refreshing than watching other journalists slavishly writing down every utterance of any given speaker.

With time, I have no doubt that star reporters will emerge, and with them, bidding wars on press personalities. At present, though, newspapers remain dependent on news agencies for their copy--which makes the agencies a subject in and of themselves.

Television

The most influential aspect of the media, not surprisingly, is television. Every house, even the most humble, has at least one set. I know some households with seven.

Programming essentially comes in three 'flavors': news and features in Azeri Turkish; news and features in Russian but produced in Azerbaijan; and news and features in Russian beamed in from the central television in Moscow. A fourth and increasingly important aspect of the television digest is programming in Turkish.

The government lost control over the locally produced news and features sometime during the Fall of 1991 when the failure of the putchists in Moscow, the collapse of the Communist Party and the declaration of Independence by Azerbaijan led to some fairly dramatic changes on the tube.

First came the demand of the Popular Front that the proceedings of the national parliament concerning the future relationship with the other former Republics be aired, live.

The government first declined but finally had to comply after the Popular Front brought thousands of hunger-striking demonstrators to the parliament--which happens to be across the street from the television tower.

An additional demand was the replacement of programmers with people more acceptable to the Popular Front and a weekly Front program to be run, uncensored in its entirety.

Remarkably, the government accepted and on September 20th the public was treated to a poorly produced, hour-long lecture by leaders of the Popular Front talking in monotone into the camera.

If it was a bore stylistically speaking, it was still the most exciting media event in Azeri history. People were glued to their television sets, calling up friends and family to make sure that everyone in the country was watching as Isa Kamberov, wearing dark-glasses that made him look like a frog, droned on and on about the evils of the regime and the old communist 'mafia' that still controlled the parliament and the country.

Happily, the general quality^{of} television programming has improved to the degree that the Popular Front weekly broadcast has now been discontinued: lively discussions about the nature of independence, the state of the environment, continued exploitation of Azeri oil are now standard fare and one can say that the essence of 'non-government' news reporting has been absorbed into the normal broadcasts of Azeri TV.

One might quibble about the selection of news on a daily basis, but rarely on the accuracy of the reporting and certainly not with the news and programming digest as a whole: if it is not CNN or PBS (exemplifying the fastest paced and

the most reflective of the USA TV stations) neither is Azeri television to be compared with the idiocy of television in Uzbekistan, where 'news' seemed to consist only of reports of a new bumper cotton crop and features consisted only of reports of happy workers on collective farms.

As suggested, there are two aspects of local news--Azeri and Russian language; these mirror each other, and reflect the colonial, bi-lingual nature of society. For obvious (nationalist) reasons, special programming and round-table discussions are almost always held in Azeri Turkish--thus cutting out all those residents of the country who either do not speak Azeri or understand it poorly. For these people, Russian programming, and usually that beamed out of Moscow, is the standard diet.

I am not in a position to comment intelligently on the general quality of broadcasting of Central TV in Moscow, but would hazard two remarks:

1) the newly discovered art of advertizing seems to be obsessive in its use of the dollar and other foreign currencies as a motif and

2) there would seem to be a consistent bias against Azerbaijan when it comes to news--to the point where the use of the word 'disinformation' does not seem far from the mark. Similar bad reporting was carried about ousted Georgian President Zviada Gamsakhourdia as well.

As such, one must wonder about the rest of the reporting.

Lastly, a survey of electronic media in Azerbaijan would be incomplete without referring to Turkish broadcasting. In 1990, the Turkish government agreed (or demanded) to set up a television link between Ankara/Istanbul and Baku. It took more than a year and a half to get the project off the ground, however, and the first broadcasts only began in December, 1991 with a nightly, day-old 15 minute digest of news provided by Turkey's first independent cable network, Star. Turkish language movies, foreign films dubbed in Turkish and 'post card from Turkey'-type programming rounded out the offerings.

Significantly, the Azeri authorities took the decision to run the Turkish material on the countries second channel, thus cutting out most Russian-language programming. Recently, the Turkish news broadcasts have been increased to a half hour of same-day news with the change from Star programming to that of the state-run Turkish Radio and Television corporation, TRT. The move suggests a new interest of Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel in Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Star is regarded as close to the Turkish President Turgut Ozal, Demirel's long time rival.

The significance of the Turkish broadcasting cannot be exaggerated, as it will have to impact on the development not only of Azeri as a language but also on Azerbaijan society.

Coming in a poor second is Iran, which has also made arrangements with Azeri television to broadcast its own special programs on culture and religion.

Typically and pathetically, the most recent offering ("Welcome to Iran") was delivered in dubbed Russian with scratchy background Farsi provided by the viewers' host, a woman draped in a shador. The Turkish postcards, in contrast, feature buxom Arabesque singers belting out popular tunes and then sending their warmest regards to newly independent fraternal Azerbaijan in personalized back-stage interviews.

Guess which programs viewers prefer.

There is even talk of expanding the service to other Turkic-speaking republics of Central Asia, with Turkey footing most of the satellite bill. It seems a curious project, as Anatolia Turkish is sufficiently different from Uzbek or Kazak as to make a Turkish announcer almost incomprehensible.

HEADLINES IN THE NEWS: De Je Vu From The Azeri Press

The following is a sample of stories that appeared in the Azeri press at the end of 1991 and with the first editions of the New Year, drawn from the two most 'influential' Russian language newspapers in the country, Bakinsky Rabotchi and Vyshka ('Baku Worker' and 'Oil Derrick') and Halg (The People), the pro-government Azeri Turkish paper. I also included headlines from the bi-weekly Azadlig over the period.

For the international reader, most of the references will be obscure or meaningless without a description of the week that was. Essentially, the last week of the year was burdened by several stories:

- 1) the up-coming referendum on independence (a pre-gone conclusion)
- 2) continued recognition of Azerbaijan by foreign states
- 3) the pending lifting of price controls in line with other former Soviet Republics and
- 4) the continued crisis in Karabakh.

Note the similarities of titles on different days between the pro-government papers that work out of the same building; asterics designate a duplicated story; double asterics the same story on a different day--IE, the interview with Minister of the Economy Rahim Husseinov that appeared on December 31st in Bakinsky Rabotchi, then again in Halg and Vyshka on January 1st. Bakinsky Rabotchi also beats out Vyshka in an interview with Interior Minister Towfik Kerimov, running the same piece on December 28th that its 'rival' ran on December 29th. There are plenty more examples of this deja vu.

I also include a short explanation when content is not clear from the headline as well as an approximate word count of each story to give an idea of length, if not of importance.

APPENDIX

BAKINSKY RABOTCHI (daily/government/Russian) December 26, 1991

*Official Restoration of Latin Alphabet (350 words)
 Appeal of Azerbaijan to the People of Georgia (200 words)
 New law on 'Status of the servicemen' (150 words)
 All kinds of advertizing services (on various possibilities
 of placement ads in 'Bakinsky Rabotchi') (300 words)
 Whose purpose does the (Karabakh) conflict play? (500 words)
 **Nagorno Karabakh--not a single calm day (200 words)
 *Contacts strengthen (Azeri diaspora in USA) (250 words)
 *Nine days in Iran (Parliamentary visit) (2000 words)
 *Together towards independence (non-Azeris--Russians and
 Jews--in connection with referendum) (200 words)
 News conference (preparatory for referendum) (300 words)
 Rainbow will blossom (perfume plant in Zakatala) (500 words)
 Response to James Baker by Foreign Ministry (300 words)
 Murdered Philosopher (12th cent. Sukhravardiy) (600 words)
 **Mussavat and the Truth Moment (Mussavat party) (400 words)
 Medicines from Mujuk (Herbal exports to Germany) (300 words)
 Beer Sells Millions (Azerbaijan Exchange) (250 words)
 Long way toward themselves (music group "Gaya") (100 words)
 *Rector of the Oil Academy (interview; 2000 words)
 Rainman (pop-singer Igor Kornelyuk in Baku) (400 words)
 When Science Strikes (strike of Academy workers) (150 words)

VYSHKA (daily/government/Russian) Dec 26, 1991

Escalation of tension in Karabakh (300 words)
 It's Rakhshanda's character (factory workers) (300 words)
 *Selling petro-waste products (250 words)
 **Nine days in Iran (2000 words)
 Info-service private enterprise in Ganja (100 words)
 To mothers & kids (kindergarten in Salyan) (100 words)
 Moskva leased (Turkish firm rents Hotel) (250 words)
 We work and we will work (bus workers' strike) (400 words)
 Hodjali, we are with you (Karabakh) (200 words)
 Chemists contribute to Defense (200 words)
 American diplomats in Baku (150 words)
 **Interview with Oil Drilling chief) (1000 words)
 Micro-District standing by itself (500 words)
 End to confrontation (Defense) (600 words)
 College for ladies (200 words)
 Scientist, citizen and author (Abulfaz Gasymov) (400 words)
 Azerbaijan Social Democratic Party Congress (250 words)
 **Turkish envoy speaks to Vetten society (200 words)

HALG GAZETI (daily/government/Azeri) Dec 27th, 1991.

December 29th is Public Referendum day (headline only)
 Appeal to oil workers (Concerning referendum) (100 words)
 *Iran's recognition of Azerbaijan Independence (250 words)
 *Mutalibov receives Nurbakhsh (Iranian Minister (500 words)
 Mutalibov's telegram to Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs
 (Armenian guerrillas' seize army equipment) (300 words)

**Holy Quran in Azeri language (300 words)
 Plenty of cars on the streets (traffic) (100 words)
 US diplomats meet with Social Democrats (150 words)
 Gift from German Youth (to Afghan vets) (150 words)
 Gun-powder days (Armenians attack Fizuli) (200 words)
 Talks at poll-station (Referendum) (250 words)
 *How can we know the truth? (Karabakh) (2000 words)
 **Nagorno-Karabakh--Fighting continues (200 words)
 *Economy: the way out of crisis. (oil survey) (2000 words)
 Agricultural problems in Shamkir (200 words)
 *Let's create new textbooks (500 words)
 **Its worth thinking about (Azeri language in North and
 South Azerbaijan) (1500 words)
 Refugees come to Barda province (Karabakh) (200 words)
 USA will recognize us...(300 words)
 They're not afraid of shortage (Workers of Gakh province are
 happy with 460 rouble (\$5) salary per month (500 words)
 Sons continue fathers' work (500 words)
 **The 80th Anniversary of 'Mussavat' party (400 words)
 Agricultural problems in Yardimli province (3500 words)

BAKINSKY Rabotchi (d/g/r) Dec 27, 1991

*Iran recognizes Azerbaijan Independence (350 words)
 *Draft law on conscription (150 words)
 Ultel Started (Azeri-Turkish communications JV (300 words)
 *SOS: Save the environment (800 words)
 Baker wasn't informed (US diplomats in Baku) (150 words)
 *Gorbachev's resignation and Azerbaijan (600 words)
 Why are the housewives sad? (economic review) (500 words)
 *Running in the steppe (protected species) (600 words)
 **Quran in Azeri language (200 words)

AZADLIG (biweekly/opposition/Azeri) Dec 27, 1991

Referendum on Azerbaijan's independence (headline)
 Iran to set up bank in Azerbaijan (50 words)
 Popular Front protests commonwealth treaty (150 words)
 December 31: Azeri International Day (300 words)
 Azeris evaluate Gorbachev's resignation (500 words)
 Clashes in Karabakh (350 words)
 A letter: Adverse conditions in Karabakh (250 words)
 Popular Front refutes 100 Armenians killed (1000 words)
 Letter: Call for democratic TV (450 words)
 Commonwealth not dangerous for Azerbaijan (1200 words)
 Armenians to bring Karabakh problem to UN (1200 words)
 Political situation in Uzbekistan (2000 words)
 Afghan leader: hope for united Azerbaijan (100 words)
 Turkish counsel general speaks to Vetem (400 words)
 British parliament vs Azerbaijan's mejlis (3000 words)

BAKINSKY Rabotchi (daily/government/Russian) Dec 28th, 1991

Switzerland and Egypt recognize Azerbaijan (100 words)
 Preparations for referendum of Dec 29 (200 words)
 40 days after Karabakh helicopter tragedy (1000 words)

Arnold Ruytel congratulates Ayaz Mutalibov (50 words)
 Guarantees for deposits' safety (tactics of transition to
 market economy in Azerbaijan) (350 words)
 Karabakh conflict is Azeri Internal Affair (500 words)
 **Interview w/ Interior Minister Towfik Kerimov (900 words)
 Reception of Turkish observers for Referendum (200 words)
 Azeri Foreign Minister receives Iranian diplomat (50 words)
 Resolution of Nakhichevan Supreme Mejlis (50 words)
 Second Republican TV channel (60 words)
 If your partner fails you (problems of Yevlakh cotton-
 cleaning plant) (500 words)
 New bridge built in Agdam (100 words)
 Azerbaijan secondary school today (2000 words)
 France is ready for economic cooperation (800 words)

VYSHKA (daily, government, Russian) Dec 31, 1991

*Tribute to Martyrs (40 days after helicopter) (300 words)
 New passport regulations for foreigners (400 words)
 **Meeting of republican leaders in Minsk (800 words)
 Business school for women (800 words)
 Today we choose our future (referendum, 1600 words)
 Condolences for reporter killed in Karabakh (100 words)
 **Interview w/ Towfik Kerimov, Interior Minister (900 words)
 *Karkidjahan under the fire (350 words)
 Problems publishing Azerbaijan Encyclopedia (350 words)

BAKINSKY RABOTCHI (daily/government/Russian) Dec 31, 1991

The choice (reports on the referendum) (500 words)
 Azerbaijan President's statement (100 words)
 Mutalibov's condolences to relatives of Lazarevich (Russian
 reporter killed in Karabakh) (300 words)
 **Statement of Azerbaijan Union of Journalists (on killing of
 Russian reporter in Karabakh) (300 words)
 North Korea recognizes Azerbaijan (50 words)
 Initial results (Dec 29 referendum) (2000 words)
 **Blessed memory of Martyrs (40 days after) (300 words)
 We are indivisible people (Azeri Solidarity Day) (600 words)
 Protest letter to Armenia (200 words)
 **Iran to help Nakhichevan (Iranian Red Crescent) (500 words)
 Train fare doubled (50 words)
 **Will avoid hunger? (Rahim Husseinov) (800 words)
 *Kharkijihan on fire (Nagorno Karabakh conflict) (350 words)
 Armenians blow up electricity line in Shusha (200 words)

VYSHKA (daily/government/Russian) Jan 1, 1992

Central Commission on Referendum (250 words)
 Keeping the balance of interests (CIS in Minsk) (600 words)
 **Can we avoid hunger? (Rahim Husseinov) (800 words)
 We believe in our future (New Year Interviews) (2000 words)
 **Leonid Lazarevich (Reporter killed in Karabakh) (250 words)
 It's will be tough year (clairvoyant Zemfirali) (400 words)

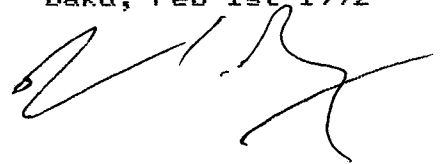
HALG GAZETI (daily, government, Azeri) January 1, 1992

New Year congratulations to Mutalibov (500 words)
 Latin script valuable for Azeri alphabet (300 words)
 *The balance of interests should be kept (800 words)
 Referendum: initial results (200 words)
 We must protect independence (400 words)
 UMUD ("HOPE") society helps the orphans (1200 words)
 **Economy: will we win or lose? (800 words)
 Intellectuals on the history of independence (1500 words)
 Azeri writers discuss Karabakh problem (500 words)
 **Will we avoid the famine? (Rahim Husseinov) (800 words)
 **Nakhichevan's close ties with Iran (500 words)
 We should hoist our flag together ("Veten" society chairman
 Elchin on Azeris living abroad) (2500 words)
 Sport: Famous wrestler Jeyhun Mamedov's record (300 words)
 Shirvan anecdotes (funny stories) (300 words)

AZADLIG (bi-weekly, opposition, Azeri) Dec 31st, 1991

Provisional results of the referendum (500 words)
 Referendum now; what next? (2500 words)
 The end of Nakhichevan K.G.B. (2000 words)
 Chronicle of Karabakh battles (1000 words)
 Value of the New Year (price rises) (3000 words)
 The Commonwealth will not survive (3000 words)
 The period of Buddha? Yes. (1000 words)
 National Council in danger (2000 words)

Thomas Goltz
 Baku, Feb 1st 1992



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