



# Representative on Freedom of the Media

## Press release

### OSCE Representative concerned about deteriorating media situation in Azerbaijan

VIENNA, 27 November 2006 - The recent shutdown of an Azerbaijani broadcast channel and a print press editorial building is a clear sign of the deterioration of the media situation in the country, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, said today.

In a letter sent to Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, Haraszti wrote: "In October, I welcomed your decision to pardon editors who were serving prison sentences for insulting public officials. Unfortunately, recent developments are again seriously restricting media pluralism and freedom of expression. I ask you again to do everything in your power to stop the deterioration of the situation for the independent media."

Azerbaijan's most-watched independent TV Channel, *ANS*, was shut down on 24 November. The decision by the National TV and Radio Council (NTRC) also put an end to *ANS*'s news programmes contracted from international public-service producers like *BBC*, *Radio Liberty*, and *Voice of America*.

On the same day, the police evicted *Azadliq*, an opposition newspaper, from the state-owned building that was assigned to the paper by the Mayor of Baku in 1992. Other outlets also forced to leave the building were *Bizim Yol*, the *Turan* news agency, the *Yeni Nesil* Publishing House, as well as the Institute for Reporter Freedom and Safety, a civil body.

Commenting on these cases, the OSCE Representative said: "The silencing of *ANS* is a serious loss of independent information for the audiences in Azerbaijan. This sudden decision of the National TV and Radio Council is a clear misuse of its administrative power."

*ANS* has been waiting for a renewal of its license by the National Council since 2003. "Instead of closing down TV channels, the NTRC should guarantee media diversity by assuring that *ANS* can continue broadcasting, while the administrative paperwork is completed," added Mr Haraszti.

The eviction of *Azadliq* was requested by the State Property Agency because of a rent dispute. "This behaviour is discriminative towards the independent press," Haraszti wrote. "In a country where the largest newspapers are still state-owned, the Government should devise special policies to help maintain pluralism in the press, applying the same preferential treatment to the independent papers that it offers to its own outlets."

The letter also stated that the OSCE Representative was monitoring the case of writer Rafiq Tagi and editor Samir Sedagetoglu of the Baku-based *Senet* who have been detained on charges of stirring up religious hatred with an allegedly derogatory statement on the prophet Mohammed in an essay published on 1 November.

At the end of the letter, Mr Haraszti referred to the 10 November hunger strike by several editors and journalists who protested the media situation.

"The new measures against *ANS* and *Azadliq* do not contribute to resolving the situation," said

Haraszi. "For the sake of easing tensions, it is vital that you help reverse the trend of negative developments. Azerbaijan's OSCE commitments to protect the free flow of information, pluralism in the media, and freedom of expression, demand the same."

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