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FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN MEDIA

When speaking about the problems related to the media freedom in Armenia, one first of all notes the economic difficulties impeding the establishment and development of independent press in the country.

The low purchasing ability does not allow the population to be an active consumer of the newspaper information. To follow the publication of only one daily, a resident of Armenia has to spend an amount almost equal to half the minimal monthly salary. The newspapers in the country may seem rather cheap in comparison with the international standards, yet the price of one copy is equal to that of a loaf of bread, and the poor population groups, currently making up the majority, will naturally prefer the vitally important goods.

The print runs of newspapers keep reducing and even when recalling the period of 5-6 years ago their consumption has reduced by half. Today a daily with a print run of 3-4 thousand copies is considered successful, whereas in early 90s, during the first years of independence, the print runs of the mainstream newspapers made dozens of thousands of copies.

The second reason is the underdeveloped advertising market. The lack of interest of the potential advertisers towards the print media has resulted in the dumping of advertising prices. As a result, the advertising revenues (including the political advertising) cover 10% of newspaper publishing costs at best.

In general, the "natural" funding sources for the media – the sales and advertising revenues – come to 20-40% of the real incomes of the national newspapers. The rest is covered by explicit or implicit sponsorship based on political interest and a quest for a tribune. Under the circumstances it is of course naïve to speak about independent print journalism.

Moreover, the Armenian press thus finds itself in a vicious circle. The orientation to political orders as the main income source reduces the interest of publishers and journalists towards the exploration of advertising market, towards attraction of the mass reader. This, consequently, brings about the continuous decrease of the "natural" income source proportion and intensifies the dependence on sponsors...

The state could and was obliged to change the trend, so perilous for the print media. However, even the most obvious steps, which could have stimulated the development of press as independent business, were not made. The Armenian media are probably the only professional sphere which has gained nothing from the privatization of state property. Neither the printing houses, nor the real estate and the dissemination system (even as a part of the stock) were received by the newspapers. As a result, the press remains outside the private property sector and is little attractive for the implementation of loan and investment programs.

While the RA state budget allocates amounts, quite significant for Armenia, for the development of information sphere, practically no funds are directed to the support of private media. If at least one tenth of the amounts spent on the establishment and subsequent dissolution of the RA Ministry of Information, on the maintenance of state-owned newspapers (the reason of their existence remains a

mystery), had been used in proper programs for the development of private newspaper industry, the situation would be much more optimistic today.

The situation in the broadcasting was much more promising, especially for television – radio during the past years in Armenia was more of an entertaining nature than a communication medium aiming at providing information. The television channels, both the national and regional ones, could not complain of audience shortage. And in late 90s already the Armenian broadcasters started to compete with and later left behind the Russian TV channels in terms of popularity. The advertisers could not fail to respond to these, and significant amounts flowed into the budgets of the leading TV companies. The election campaigns and the associated political advertising even allowed the broadcasters to accumulate resources for further development.

Here a reservation must be made that the broadcast media development process mostly occurred spontaneously and could have rooted only in case of a civilized state and legal regulation. However, we encountered contrary tendencies here, too. The regressive law "On Television and Radio" passed in October 2000 and its application in accordance with the worst traditions of the bureaucratic totalitarianism caused the disappearance of opposition TV channels from the media market. Loyalty to the authorities, avoidance of acute problems has become nearly the main requirement when determining the winners of the broadcast licensing competitions. Thus, since April 2002, when the results of the first licensing competition were announced, the Armenian information air has suffered huge losses with regard to pluralism, openness and professionalism.

Many observers relate the restriction of the media freedom with the intensified political debate on the eve of presidential and parliamentary elections and believe the pluralism will be back on the Armenian air after elections. In any case, this is a major factor for the democratic development of Armenia. The freedom of expressions and press during the past decade, though quite restricted, was named to be one of the few obvious accomplishments of independence. This makes it all the more difficult to say good-bye to this achievement.

An important indicator of the freedom of expression in Armenia is the absence of taboos on the coverage of certain subjects, views by print media. Certainly, each newspaper is restricted by the interests, the political preferences and the taste of the people and the groups that influence itself. However, in their totality the Armenian media do present the whole range of opinion on all the political issues of interest for the Armenian society. Even on such sensitive issues as the Karabagh conflict, the international recognition of the Armenian genocide the scope of approaches as reflected in the media is quite broad.

This fact comes to reconfirm the idea that the basis for the freedom of speech in Armenia for the moment is not the independence of individual media – we still have a long way to go to achieve this – but the pluralism, the possibility to disseminate or receive any views and opinion via certain information channels. Hence, the maintenance of this pluralism and the formation of independent journalism proceeding from it is the very task that our media community faces currently.

In broadcast media situation is much different. Using limited public resource, the frequency, TV and radio companies have a mission to serve interest of the public at large, and not various separate groups of it. While in practice all broadcasting companies, with small exception (first of all GALA TV in Gyumri) are serving interests of the ruling political grouping. And the first steps to change the situation is ensuring independence of the management of Public TV and Radio company, as well as national regulator – NCTR (National Commission on TV and Radio).