

**Statement delivered after the European Broadcasting Union-organized workshop
on freedom of the media in Azerbaijan**

May 7, 2012

Dear representatives of the EBU,

On May 2, an EBU-organized workshop on media freedom in Azerbaijan was held at the broadcasting union's headquarters in Geneva. The workshop took place on the eve of World Press Freedom Day and in the run-up to the Eurovision Song Contest, which will take place in Baku later this month and gather participants from more than 40 countries as well as hundreds of journalists and media representatives.

The workshop was attended by a mix of local and international press freedom and human rights groups, Azerbaijani authorities, representatives of Azerbaijan's public service broadcaster, *Ictimai*, and EBU representatives.

While pleased with the opportunity to participate in a workshop on media freedom in Azerbaijan, the undersigned local and international press freedom and human rights groups are expressing the following concerns in its aftermath:

- While welcoming the willingness expressed by the EBU, the Azerbaijani authorities and *Ictimai*, to work together to strengthen the impartiality, independence and quality of public service broadcasting, we remain concerned that the workshop fell short of securing clear, tangible commitments from the Azerbaijani government to amend its alarming record of violations of press freedom in the run-up to Eurovision.
- Although a range of representatives from international organisations were in attendance, the Azerbaijani representation was heavily skewed in favour of the authorities, as 10 out of 14 Azerbaijani workshop participants were either direct representatives of the government or supported its agenda.
- In light of abrasive remarks made at the workshop by Ali Hasanov, the head of the Department for Public and Political Issues at the Administration of the President of Azerbaijan—specifically calling independent local advocacy and media-monitoring organizational representatives “inaccurate,” “non-objective,” and “opponentist,” the undersigned are deeply concerned for the safety and security of our Azerbaijani colleagues and fear retaliatory action against them. We call on the EBU and international institutions mandated with ensuring Azerbaijan's compliance with international standards on human rights and freedom of expression to pay close attention to the treatment in Azerbaijan of those representatives both in the immediate aftermath of the workshop and beyond.
- The defiant official attitude to criticism of Azerbaijan's press freedom record—as illustrated by Hasanov's belligerent statements at the workshop—negates the government's assurance that it is open to having a constructive dialogue with all stake holders, including those most critical of it. On the contrary, it cements the impression that the government will continue on its chosen path of hostility toward the independent press.
- The failure of the EBU to publicly criticize or in any way challenge the Azerbaijani authorities on their press freedom, human rights, and freedom of expression record left an

impression of wilful blindness toward the government's repressive policies and raises questions about the EBU's commitment to defending these values.

- Despite the workshop's title, which suggested that fundamental media freedom issues would be addressed, the discussion focused on technical issues, such as the ethics to which journalists do or do not subscribe in Azerbaijan, rather than delivering concrete, tangible results for the improvement of press conditions in the country.
- Instead of addressing concerns raised about the repressive environment for press in Azerbaijan, government representatives repeatedly stressed the need for professionalization of the media. While positive in principle, this emphasis was made to steer the discussion away from fundamental press freedom concerns and create the bogus impression that the press's main problems stem from the press itself. This is a rather banal caveat, used by authoritarian governments around the world, and should not fool anyone.
- Eurovision creates an opportunity for the EBU and international institutions to demand concrete results on press freedom issues from the Azerbaijani authorities. Among those ought to be:
 - the immediate release of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, including at least six journalists currently jailed in retaliation for their work
 - the prompt decriminalization of defamation
 - an immediate halt to engaging in selective, politically motivated prosecutions to target critical voices
 - the conduct of thorough, independent, effective, and transparent investigations into attacks against journalists
 - reforming the Azerbaijani broadcaster to meet the EBU's conditions for active membership, particularly the requirement to provide "varied and balanced" programming.
- Last but not least, the undersigned are dismayed at the conduct of the press conference that followed the May 2 workshop. The two parties given the floor at the press conference were the EBU and the Azerbaijani government. Even though an independent Azerbaijani human rights defender was announced as one of the participants at the beginning of the press conference, the human rights defender was eventually not allowed to speak, and he was pushed to sit on the sidelines.

The EBU has publicly committed itself to promoting freedom of expression in the countries where its member broadcasters operate. The EBU's General Assembly adopted a [Declaration on Freedom of Expression, Media Independence and Democracy at its 2010 General Assembly](#), held in Baku. In the declaration, the EBU made a commitment to promote respect for the right to freedom of expression and made a number of recommendations for governments, including the government of Azerbaijan, to improve freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

We, the undersigned, fear that, much as that local human rights defender, fundamental press freedom concerns are being pushed to the sidelines of Eurovision. If the EBU is serious about engaging with both governmental and non-governmental representatives in Azerbaijan in order to enhance press freedom conditions in the country, follow-up to this workshop—as well as any other related activities—must result in the formulation of concrete reform expectations (in line with the European Convention of Human Rights) that should be met within specific, tangible

timeframes. The formulation of these reform steps, and the monitoring of their implementation, should be done with the active participation of local journalist and human rights organizations and in consultation with international human rights, press freedom and media advocacy groups.

Sincerely,

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