

Caucasus ELECTIONSWATCH

A weekly review of elections related processes in the Caucasus Region

05 June 2012

Hilary Clinton in the South Caucasus pushes for reforms and free elections

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has pushed for reforms and free elections during her whirlwind tour of the South Caucasus on 4-6 June 2012.

Using measured words aimed at not upsetting her government hosts Clinton flagged up important issues related to democratic reforms and free and fair elections.

Speaking in Yerevan after meeting with President Serzh Sargsyan, on 4 June, the US Secretary of State said "I was very pleased at the reports from international monitors about Armenia's parliamentary elections last month being generally competitive and inclusive, where candidates were able to campaign for the most part without interference. There were some electoral problems that were identified, and we hope that Armenia will work with the OSCE and others to ensure that the next election is even better."

A similar message was delivered in Georgia the following day when in Batumi, Clinton addressed the US Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission. In her opening remarks, the U.S. Secretary of State said that the two countries shared "common goals and common interests"

"We urge Georgia's leaders to ensure that it will be a competitive campaign and the elections are free and fair"



US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton with the Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan in Yerevan on 4 June 2012



Hilary Clinton in Batumi with Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri on 5 June 2012

She said that Georgia had "taken important steps" since the Rose Revolution and Georgia's "progress has been noted worldwide." "Now it is up to Georgia to consolidate your democratic gains. That is the key to Georgia's future and it will bring Georgia closer to achieving your Euro-Atlantic aspirations," Clinton said.

The parliamentary elections this fall and presidential election next year are opportunity for Georgia "to deepen its democracy and strengthen the legitimacy of Georgia's democratic institutions in the eyes of your public and of the world," she said.

"We urge Georgia's leaders to ensure that it will be a competitive campaign and the elections are free and fair" both during the elections day and in run up to it, Clinton said.

She said that creation of Inter-Agency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections (IATF) at the National Security Council of Georgia to prevent and react on possible electoral violations "is a good step."

Clinton also welcomed introduction of financial incentives for political parties to encourage them recruit women candidates in their party lists for parliamentary and local elections.

She said that "more difficult and ultimately the more important work may well be ahead" in order to build habits and practices to sustain democracy over time, "which means not only holding of successful elections, but also going beyond elections and strengthening the other pillars of democracy that is labor rights, judicial independence, media independence and access."

During her visit to the three South Caucasus countries Clinton has also made it a point to meet civil society leaders and to praise their work. ■

Source: CEW with US State Department Press Office and Civil.ge

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Tbilisi

The President of Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili signed Constitutional amendments that had been earlier been approved by the Georgian Parliament, including one aimed at enabling opposition leader Bidzina Ivanishvili to contest elections regardless of his citizenship. (See CEW 29 May 2012).

Ivanishvili reiterated in a statement that he will not contest the elections under those circumstances. The Georgian government had earlier stripped Ivanishvili of his citizenship claiming that his dual French citizenship was against Georgian law. ■

Yerevan

The Armenian Constitutional Court dismissed a request by the opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) to annul the results of the 6th May Parliamentary elections due to irregularities.



In a ruling that it gave on 31 May the Court upheld the results of the elections as had been announced by the Central Elections Commission. The lawyers representing the ANC said they were considering referring the matter to the European Court for Human Rights. ■

Batumi

Hilary Clinton met representatives of Georgian opposition political parties in Batumi on 5 June 2012.

Davit Usupashvili of the Georgian Dream said after the meeting that the Secretary of State "said that she was aware of all the problems, which we are concerned about in respect of democratic institutions."

"She said that she knows that media environment is monopolized by the authorities, that there are serious problems in the judiciary; she is aware of the cases of pressure on opposition activists and she said that the U.S. administration was paying serious attention to it and would continue working over these issues," Usupashvili said. "We talked about what should be done from today up to the elections so that a key player – Georgian people – has a possibility to elect and to determine who will come into power. She also spoke about Bidzina Ivanishvili. She showed interest in what is happening around his citizenship issue. We submitted all necessary information and documents. Once again it was made clear that the United States supports free choice of the Georgian people. It clearly means that the authorities will not and cannot have the United States' support; neither will the opposition have this support and we have never requested it. The U.S. support will be towards the Georgian people."

MP Giorgi Targamadze, the leader of Christian-Democratic Movement, said: It was a very interesting meeting and it lasted for over an hour instead of planned 45 minutes. We managed to discuss all the issues and listen to Mrs. Clinton's opinions."

"We are very satisfied with this meeting and we hope that Mrs. Clinton's visit will positively influence the election process, which is gaining momentum in Georgia," MP Targamadze said.

Davit Gamkrelidze, leader of the New Rights Party, said the fact that the meeting lasted more than it was scheduled demonstrated "the Secretary of State's huge interest towards developments within the opposition and pre-election situation in the country."

"I spoke about the importance of holding these elections fairly, freely and peacefully and to have multi-party [parliament] instead of one-party regime as a result of the upcoming elections; it applies equally to the ruling party and to the Georgian Dream, whose leader [Bidzina Ivanishvili] states that he wants to win constitutional majority," Gamkrelidze said.

"We also spoke about what should be done in order to make media equally accessible for the opposition, as well as about measure to prevent misuse of administrative resources by the authorities and to foster efficient work of the inter-agency task force [on elections]," Gamkrelidze said.

Tension over dismissals of government employees following opposition rally

Georgia's education system has been gripped by tension over the last weeks amidst continued reports of victimisation of staff members who are supporters of opposition parties, or who have relatives who are involved in opposition party politics.



Georgian Education Minister Dimitri Shashkin is blamed for political victimisation of opposition supporters ahead of next October's elections.

The issue came to a head when the Minister of Education, Dimitri Shashkin at the end of May, dismissed the Chairman of the National Examinations Centre, Maya Miminoshvili, days after her son attended an opposition rally in Tbilisi. The issue turned into a crisis after more than half of the staff at the National Examinations Centre subsequently resigned in protest just weeks before nation-wide university entry exams.

Shashkin's official reason for firing Maya Miminoshvili, was "incompatibility" between her and himself in how to continue with the reforms in the education sector, but Miminoshvili, who in the past has been credited with having set up an efficient and corruption-free examination system, claims that her dismissal had a political motivation.

Nearly 60 employees at Miminoshvili's exam center resigned in protest, saying that they backed her up on the reform issue.

Shashkin subsequently appointed the Rector of the Georgian Police Academy as Miminoshvili's replacement. The education ministry promised that the upcoming

exams will be conducted as usual, and on schedule.

Georgia's Ombudsman has also been asked to investigate the case of Paata Tushurashvili whose employment with the National Forensics Bureau was terminated on 1 May 2012. Paata Tushurashvili had worked since 2009 as the deputy head of the Forensic Chemical and Narcotic Substances Department and subsequently as the head of the same department. In a letter to the Ombudsman Tushurashvili claims that some time before he was told by the head of the National Forensics Bureau that his wife's political activity was causing a problem. Tushurashvili's wife is Maia Panjikidze the press officer of the opposition Georgian Dream coalition.

In the meantime the Georgian NGO ISFED has taken up the case of another employee who says that he has been dismissed for political reasons and has referred it to the government's special task force on free and fair elections. This involves an employee of United Water Supply Company of Georgia.

Lasha Shvangiradze has been employed in the company since 2006. He works in Khoni, in Imereti region. On May 29, a document was sent to his branch-office via Skype which said that he was fired. The date of the document is June 1. The official reason for the dismissal is that his job contract had expired. But according to Shvangiradze, he signed a one year contract with the company starting from the beginning of 2012, which means that there still are several months left. Shvangiradze says his dismissal followed a conversation he had with a board member of Khoni municipality on May 25, which might be the real reason why he was fired. He said he was visited by Darejan Kvateladze, an economic advisor on the municipality board. Their conversation touched on the topic of elections. Shvangiradze told Kvateladze that a change of government is normal in a country, and that it also is normal that if the government changes, professionals remain in their positions.

Kvateladze says that a few days later he was fired. When he asked for an explanation, the head of the regional office told him that it was because of downsizing. His dismissal letter indicated a different reason. ■

Source: CEW with Georgian media

Task Force issues Guidelines

The Georgian government Task Force empowered to ensure free and fair elections has issued guidelines to government departments following claims of political victimisation of opposition supporters.

A statement from the National Security Council which leads the Task Force said "The Inter-Agency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections (IATF) is conducting a series of meetings with representatives of civil society groups engaged in the electoral process. At these meetings, civil society representatives have presented several concerns based on monitoring that they have been conducting. One problem highlighted was that of civil servants being fired from their jobs—which, in some instances, according to these civil society groups, could be based on political motives.

The IATF's position on this issue is clear: It is unacceptable and illegal to fire public servants due to their political views or those of their family members. Such allegations must be examined

It should be noted, however, that some state agencies are in the process of optimizing their operations (and thus cutting staff), and thus it is not always possible to determine the motivation behind the dismissal of a particular individual.

In light of these considerations—and in order to ensure a free environment for the 2012 parliamentary elections—the IATF aims to avert both justified and unjustified claims of dismissals that could be due to political motivations by state agencies and agencies subordinated to them, as well as by high school principals. As such, the IATF recommends that:

In light of the current pre-electoral period, heads of the state agencies and of agencies subordinated to them, as well as high school administrations, should suspend optimization efforts and sanction staff only in cases of disciplinary or other violations. ■

Source: CEW with civil.ge

“Everyone knows what fair media is when they see it, and they don’t see it in Georgia.” Lincoln Mitchell

Ahead of the visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the South Caucasus, the Georgian advocacy website Democracy and Freedom Watch (www.dfwatch.net) interviewed Lincoln Mitchell, an academic at Columbia University in New York and long-time Georgia observer, about the visit and the current political situation in Georgia.

DF Watch: What are Georgia’s prospects are for NATO membership after the Chicago summit in May?

Lincoln Mitchell: I think Chicago is a dip sideways for Georgia and NATO. What I mean by that is that it didn’t move it forward or didn’t move it backwards, there was no MAP, there were the same positive statements without any concrete commitments from the NATO members as there were in 2008 in Bucharest, so I think it’s neither a step forward nor a step backwards. What strikes me are two things: one, how the Georgian leadership understood this and began to downplay expectations leading up to the summit. So instead of saying we’re going to get a MAP or we’re going to get in, they keep saying, we’re going to get some positive statement, which they did, but that’s meaningless, and secondly how Georgia’s failure – let me rephrase that – Saakashvili’s inability to keep his promise about NATO membership is bad for Georgia, but it also speaks for an unwillingness on the part of the Georgian leadership to do what is necessary to get into NATO. Let’s be honest. There are some countries like mine that want to get Georgia into NATO; there are some that don’t, but until Georgia does its own work, the countries that do want to get Georgia in, can’t help them and right now the problem is that until Georgia strengthens its democratic institutions it’s so easy to keep them out and when the government in Georgia, coming into an election season, is harassing the opposition, has this bizarre Kafkaesque story of taking away the citizenship of their major opponent, and is firing people because somebody they know attends a rally and all of these kinds of things, the message that

the Georgian government is sending to the Georgian people and the world is it’s more important for us to stay in power than it is to get into NATO. That’s seems to me to be very plain.

DFW: You speak about democratic institutions and does the Russia factor work here too, in the NATO issue?

LM: It’s a factor. There are countries in NATO that don’t want to let Georgia in, because they don’t want to ruffle the feathers with Russia. But, but we know that and we know that in Washington we can’t help Georgia; we can’t go to those countries and say we’ve got to get Georgia in, until Georgia gets its act together. So right now, Georgia is making very hard for USA, who is, frankly, Georgia’s biggest advocate, to help them.

DFW: The second question is about Hillary Clinton’s visit; what do you think, what will be the main topics of discussion with Saakashvili?

LM: I suspect the main topics are that Hillary Clinton is going to come to express her gratitude to Saakashvili and the Georgian people for sending troops out to support NATO efforts in Afghanistan. That’s what I’m hearing is the main topic. I hope that she takes this opportunity to be frank with Saakashvili about what the U.S. hopes to see from now and until the election, and how important democracy is for Georgia’s future and how it’s increasingly difficult for the U.S. to run around Europe and the world telling people that he is a democrat, because it’s just an impossible sell right now. But I don’t know if she’s going to say that or not.

DFW: What do you think, would it be the topic about the elections; last month the State Department was very vocal towards Georgian authorities regarding holding free and democratic elections in the fall and on the cases of pressure towards opposition. Do you think this will be a topic too?

LM: I think the U.S. has been much stronger and much more vocal on these issues over last few months. I would hope that



that would be a topic. I think this is a real opportunity for Secretary of State Clinton who is you know, broadly respected and who has addressed a whole range of issues in her very good tenure as Secretary of the State. It will be very good opportunity to bring that up. But I don’t know for sure that she will. I think it would be very smart for the U.S. if she did bring it up, but again I don’t know for sure.

DFW: Last weekend we had a large opposition rally in downtown Tbilisi held by this new Georgian Dream coalition led by the billionaire Ivanishvili, who has become the top opponent of Saakashvili here. How do people in Washington perceive these messages from Ivanishvili and what do people in Washington expect to hear from the Georgian opposition?

LM: I think that the message from the demonstration was a clear message and I think people in Washington got it. I think there were a few messages from the demonstration. One, that Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream have real support. And I know that we can argue about the numbers, I mean I wasn’t there, I can’t count the numbers, but I’m hearing plausible estimates in the one to two hundred thousand range and that shows that there is real support in the country like Georgia. Doesn’t show that he has won the election, it just shows that he has real support. I think it shows some other very important things too, which should not be overlooked. A year ago, other political leaders in Georgia had demonstrations, where they provoked, they spoke about

violence, they had ties to Russia and it were a mess and the Georgian government provoked them and Georgian government attacked them and it was a bloody mess and everyone looked terrible. This leader and this opposition bring people onto the streets. Again, I didn't say I was there, but I have seen lot of videos on various links. Bring people on the streets. The man, Ivanishvili, gives what I thought was – I have seen bits and pieces translated – a pretty good speech about Georgia and about Georgians and about his vision for his country and then what happened after the demonstration? Everyone took their signs and t-shirt and they went home. That tells me and that should tell Washington that this is a serious political operation. One that it's very anxious to play within the rules, and it would be a lot easier for them to play within the rules if he was allowed to be a citizen of Georgia, and my view is that preventing Ivanishvili being a citizen of Georgia is about as logical as preventing me from being a citizen of the U.S. I think most Georgians agree with me on that. So the message that I see is that this guy has support, and he's legit, and he's not going to try to do violence, and he wants to have a serious hard-fought campaign. That should be music to the ears for people in Washington. Might be a little frightening to the government of Georgia, but that's a different story.

DFW: Many people here in Georgia, and not only among the opposition but among civil society too, want to have long-term election observers here. What do you think, has this idea any prospect for becoming a reality?

LM: I think those decisions will be made soon; I think it does have a chance of coming true and I think it's very important, but I would add that we need long-term observers, because in countries like Georgia the election problems occur in well in advance and not just in Georgia. It's not just Georgia, but many countries like Georgia. People are harassed, people are intimidated, some parties don't get access to television, and people lose their jobs, all that kind of thing. It's not just enough to observe it. We have to have governments that are sending those observers and willing to make statements and have consequences for early election fraud, if we see it. That's a form of election fraud the same way that stuffing a ballot box on election day is.

DFW: We published this morning an opinion piece from former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Mr. Yalowitz and one of his points is that he expressed his concern about the situation around the mountainous

Karabakh Republic and at some point he doesn't rule out some escalation here with involving regional superpowers like Russia, Turkey and Iran. What's your opinion about the odds of a broader scenario of hostilities in this region?

LM: I'm told and I'm hearing now for couple of years that things are very tense there, so it's something we should be very concerned about and very aware about. I think there should be a fair amount of watchful attention paid to this. This is not just going to go away and it hasn't just gone. So I think Ambassador Yalowitz is right about that.

DFW: Civil society figures and editors proposed a draft bill about new regulations of TV channels and the question is whether the situation with the media is making ripples in Washington?

LM: It's a good question. Not as much as it should. To me the absence of a free media really makes any kind of meaningful democracy impossible. I think most people would agree with that statement. And while there are monitoring agencies, Freedom House and others, who report out how bad the Georgian media, let's be clear, we're talking about the television here. But television is where most Georgians get their news. So that's very important media in Georgia, television. Even though they report that out nobody really understand just how significant that is for questions of democracy in Georgia. I think the U.S. ambassador to Georgia has brought this up, but it remains a very very vexing problem. Without independent television that can reach the whole country it's very hard to speak meaningfully about fair elections. I mean it's very striking to me that the major opposition figure has to explore buying a television network, because he can't get any coverage on the regular television, and he knows he won't be able to get his ads on the regular television. That speaks to me about very-very bad media environment, and with a bad media environment, other things like whether there's fraud on election day aren't really so relevant, because the media environment precludes that kind of fairness.

DFW: The most important issue, discontent from the government from the majority in parliament is the 'must carry' principle. Because the government's people set up some large cable television networks and they didn't put in the sets from some independent and some opposition televisions. This means that the

opposition and independent TV channels won't have access to a majority of viewers and the main issue of this bill proposed by civil society is this 'must carry' principle, and what do you think, is this relevant to the situation in here?

LM: It is relevant. What the Georgian government has demonstrated, it is very very good at using legalistic and legislative pyrotechnics to ensure an unfair political system. To put it in more political science terms, using [inaudible] just to keep a non-democratic system in place, and this is an example of that. Everybody knows what media fairness is. Everyone knows what fair media is when they see it and they don't see it in Georgia. So, legal approaches to try to overcome that are very important. I'm not confident that they will be implemented, but they're very important.

DFW: The campaign This Affects You Too has made several proposals to parliament, first of all to introduce the 'must carry' and 'must offer' principles; and the second is that we want to have debates in this field because you know we never had debates between political parties here and we want to have debates here, especially on public TV. We want to have a voice from international community because our government doesn't want to secure pluralism in the media field and they want to have one voice during the election period, so we want to have equal opportunities for players.

LM: I think these debates would be a great idea. One thing that comes to mind is that you can't even have a debate between the candidates for Prime Minister, because we don't even know who the national movement wants to have as their Prime Minister candidate, but that would be interesting to know. And also, I think, for some of the single mandate seats, and those don't even have to be on national television, you know, you can do single mandate fora in a public place out in the regions, in Gori or somewhere, and have it broadcast locally. There's plenty of ways to get that information out there. I think it's very important and in a context where the state media is dominated by the governing party, you have to have alternate way to get information to voters. ■

This interview is reproduced from Freedom and Democracy Watch, a Georgian advocacy website, with their kind permission. It is available at www.dfwatch.net

PACE report adds to mixed reviews following the 6 May elections in Armenia.



On May 24, Baroness Emma Nicholson, Chairperson of the ad hoc committee for the Observation of the 6 May Parliamentary Elections in Armenia, presented the findings of the mission to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) in Tirana.

Noting that the electoral campaign was “vibrant, competitive, and largely peaceful”, the report highlights several issues observed leading up to and during the election, notably the general distrust of the election process as a whole. Issues raised include: inaccuracies in the voter lists, voter intimidation, voting and vote counting procedures, as well as the issuance of passports to facilitate fraud, vote buying and deficiencies in complaint and appeal mechanisms.

The International Electoral Observation Mission (IEOM), composed of observers from PACE, the European Parliament, OSCE/ODIHR and OSCE/PA, visited 1,000 out of 1,982 polling stations in and around Yerevan, Armavir, Ejmiatsin, Aragatsotn, Shirak, Vanadzor, Ararat and Vayotz Dzor on 6 May 2012.

PROGRESS

The process leading up to the elections was reported as “administered in an overall professional and efficient manner.” The report cites that parties and voters received the necessary information before the polls opened and that both the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the 41 Territorial Election Commissions (TECs) were accessible to stakeholders. Furthermore, the ad hoc committee welcomed the reform that CEC and TEC members were no longer appointed based on party nominations.

The report cites three particular areas of progress in Armenia: the guarantee by the Armenian Constitution of the fundamental rights and freedoms for democratic elections; the inclusive candidate registration process (with only one violent incident recorded), and the general balance provided by the major media networks to all major candidates with regard to both free and paid broadcasts.

Concerns remained, however, regarding lengthy citizenship and residency requirements for candidates and the disenfranchisement of prisoners; both inconsistent with international standards.

CONCERNS RAISED

The Voter Lists: Compiled by the Passport and Visa office of the Police and accessible for public scrutiny both online and in polling stations, the report emphasises the deep level of distrust amongst the public with regard to the voter lists.

The report stresses that the Armenian authorities did not “take all necessary steps”, as previously advised by the Venice Commission, to compile accurate voter lists. Opposition parties expressed strong concerns regarding the quality of the voter lists pointing to the “inflated numbers, inclusion of deceased people, [and] high numbers of voters registered at the same [sometimes inexistent] address.”

Despite demographic indicators signalling the decrease in the Armenian population since the 2008 presidential election, the voter lists represented an increase of 157,000.

Voter Intimidation: The report notes the observation of several cases of voter intimidation in polling stations, stating that “[observers] felt that the generalised intimidation of voters [...] was the result of a deliberate and well-orchestrated action from the parties of the ruling coalition.”

Instances of intimidation included persons with unidentifiable affiliations (badges reading “MaxInfo”) continuously filming voters “in an extremely intrusive manner,” inside polling stations as well as organised groups of 10 to 15 young men, dressed in black, at the entrances of polling stations. The report states, “[such] persons were observed approaching voters arriving at the polling station and whispering to them before they entered.”

Voting and Polling Stations: Regarding voting procedures, ten percent of observed polling stations were negatively assessed. Using ODIHR statistics, the report cites “a percentage higher than 10% means an election day with high concern.”

Other issues in polling stations included, general disorganisation, party proxies taking control of the polling station, violations of voting procedures, as well as the failure of the special ink to mark the passports of those who had voted.

Observers witnessed family and group voting, a lack of vote secrecy especially in small polling stations, persons assisting the elderly vote, and identical signatures on voting lists. In some instances, proxies from the ruling parties “were observed instructing voters how to vote, even showing them where to put the mark.”

IEOM teams negatively assessed the vote counting procedure in one fifth of polling stations observed. The presence of unauthorised persons was noted in several instances as well as isolated occurrences of ballot box stuffing and falsification of the results.

Other issues raised by the report include the issuance of passports to facilitate fraud, vote buying and the non-compliance by political parties with regulations concerning campaign materials and the use of public funds.

The report also expresses concern regarding the weak implementation of the complaints and appeals mechanisms. According to the report, the majority of the complaints brought to the CEC or to the TECs were dismissed on technical grounds without “due consideration of the claim’s substance of evidence.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The PACE report concludes that the Armenian authorities failed to ensure accurate voting lists and the absence of pressure on voters. The report recommends the Armenian authorities urgently address the issue of inaccurate voter lists and allow persons living abroad to vote, so as to dispel concerns about the misuse of this vote. To ensure both political parties and the general electorate have confidence in the political process, the ad hoc committee urges Armenia to act immediately to correct these discrepancies ahead of the 2013 presidential elections. ■



Baroness Nicholson, headed the Delegation of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly monitoring the 6 May Parliamentary Elections in Armenia.

The full report of the Council of Europe Mission to observe the Armenian Parliamentary elections is available at <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=18720&Language=EN>

Post-election developments in Armenia

The Armenian Parliament met in its first session on 31 May, following Parliamentary elections held earlier in the month. Six parties are represented in the new Parliament, which means that all significant political forces in the country are now within the parliamentary framework.



Ahead of the first session it was announced that the Republican Party of Armenia of President Serzh Sargsyan, which won an absolute majority of seats in the new Parliament, will form a coalition with the small Rule of Law Party. A number of people who were elected to parliament renounced their parliamentary seats, ahead of the first session, in order to take up positions in the executive branch of government.

There was uncertainty before the opening of parliament, regarding the role of the second largest party in the Parliament, the Prosperous Armenia Party. PAP had until now been part of the governing coalition but during the election it had campaigned robustly as a separate political force. The leadership of PAP refused government overtures to join again in a coalition government and its ministers resigned as soon as the new parliament was sworn in.

The new Armenian Parliament includes a lot of new faces, including some younger members and fourteen women MPs. ■

Source: CEV

Former Parliamentary Candidate released in Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani authorities have released a prominent youth activist nine months before the end of his jail term.

The release of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev comes on the eve of U.S. State Secretary Hillary Clinton's scheduled visit to Baku on June 6. Hajiyev, 30, is a former parliamentary candidate and a graduate of Harvard University.

He was arrested in March 2011 ahead of a planned demonstration against the Azerbaijani government that he helped organize.

In May 2011, he was convicted on charges of evading military service and sentenced to two years in prison. Hadjiyev has denied any wrongdoing.

Last month, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators urged Azerbaijan to release Hajiyev, calling his arrest "cruel treatment" and a breach of rights to freedom of expression and association.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, welcomed the early release from prison of social media activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, adding that she hoped all imprisoned journalists would also be set free soon.

"The decision to release Hajiyev is a positive step. However, the authorities could do more to foster freedom of expression by liberating all imprisoned journalists. I look forward to hearing more good news from Azerbaijan in the near future," Mijatović said. ■

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Azerbaijan Service

Georgian Media: Never have so many, broadcasted so much, to so few!

On paper the Georgia television media seems to be diverse and pluralistic. In reality few Georgians can hear more than one side of the story unless the recommendations of Georgian civil society are implemented.

Supporters of the Georgian government often refer to the period pre 2003 “Rose Revolution” as a time when Georgia was a quasi-failed state - which it probably was, and a corrupt society - which it definitely was. What they do not say however is that in this time Georgia also had the most free media environment in the post-Soviet space, where criticism of the government had become a national pastime, and journalists expected and received the respect of society.

Things started changing after 2004. Rustavi 2, up to that point the main opposition station, became pro government, and through cajoling or coercion most other media outlets fell in line. The low point came in November 2007 when Imedi TV, which was at that point spearheading criticism of the government, was occupied by the security forces, and eventually turned into a government mouthpiece. Since then there have been many attempts to try to launch alternative media outlets. Maestro TV, working on what looked like a shoestring budget, tried to provide an alternative space. But they were mainly half-hearted efforts. Over the last two years some important developments did occur, including the launch of a number of television stations in Tbilisi and beyond, which have the patronage of the opposition. One of them is the recently launched pro-opposition Channel 9.

The problem is that whilst many are now broadcasting, very few are watching. Several channels are by and large inaccessible for most Georgians. This is a result of a byzantine labyrinth of laws, commercial decisions and intricacies that have left Georgia with a pluralistic media on paper but not in reality.

TV stations, except the state controlled Public Television rely on cable networks to carry their programmes. Some cable networks refuse to carry certain stations to their subscribers, while some TV channels have themselves refused to be carried by one of the cable providers.

So for example, Tbilisi-based Maestro TV is not available in packages offered by Silk TV and Caucasus TV cable networks, which Maestro TV says is a politically-motivated decision. Channel 9, is not available for most of the viewers because it is now only carried by one cable operator, Global TV.

Global TV itself cannot carry several TV channels, including the two largest and most watched nationwide broadcasters – Imedi TV and Rustavi 2 TV, after they requested the Global TV to suspend their transmission, citing commercial reasons. Global TV, however, said that this was done deliberately to encourage its subscribers to switch to other cable operators and to discourage potential new clients from subscribing with Global TV with an eventual goal to limit the number of households with access to Channel 9’s broadcasts.

The issue has been taken up by the civil society coalition “This affects you”. In an appeal to US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton the group urges her to raise the issue with the Georgian government. The Group cites the recent Department of State’s human rights country report on Georgia which says that Georgian citizens “had limited access to diverse and unfettered media.” The issue is raised by the group in the package of legislative proposals which it announced recently, which suggest the introduction of “must-carry” and “must-offer” principles into the legislation regulating broadcasting.

“Their adoption would ensure that the Georgian public can access independent television channels,” the group says. “If the Georgian Government were to accept this proposal, we believe that this would address the controversy about the public availability of electoral information during the run-up to the elections.”

However some MPs from the ruling United National Movement have already expressed criticism of the proposals saying this would entail meddling in the business of private commercial companies. Others however disagree and say that the issue of balanced news broadcasting is central to any proper political system and that the proposals of the civil society coalition are worthy of consideration. ■

Source: CEW with various media outlets.