

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	182
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	Committee to Protect Journalists
Titel:	Attacks on the Press 2010
Udgivet:	15. februar 2011
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	10. juni 2011

Title	Attacks on the Press 2010 - Armenia
Publisher	Committee to Protect Journalists
Country	Armenia
Publication Date	15 February 2011
Cite as	Committee to Protect Journalists, <i>Attacks on the Press 2010 - Armenia</i> , 15 February 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d5b95d9c.html [accessed 10 April 2011]

Attacks on the Press 2010 - Armenia

Top Developments

- New broadcast law gives regulators broad powers to revoke TV licenses.
- Gala TV, a rare critical broadcaster, faces array of government pressures.

Key Statistic

- **1:** Number of digital television licenses the government will grant per region. The plan will cut diversity.

As his government strengthened ties with Russia, President Serzh Sargsyan had to quell lingering domestic discontent over electoral fraud and economic woes, particularly in the construction and mining industries. New legislation granted regulators broad new powers to award and revoke licenses, while putting severe limits on the number of provincial broadcast licenses. Self-censorship remained widespread in the media, as lawlessness curbed the activities of journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition leaders.

In August, Moscow and Yerevan signed an agreement extending to 2044 Russia's lease on a military base outside the northern city of Gyumri, according to international press reports. The agreement offered Armenia new security guarantees, while lifting restrictions on the movements of Russian forces and fighter jets. The Sargsyan administration also agreed to pay Moscow US\$5 billion to build two nuclear reactors in Armenia, The Associated Press reported.

At home, Sargsyan's government faced a restive population battered by the global recession and angered anew by electoral problems. A special parliamentary election in

Yerevan in January was marred by reports of ballot-stuffing and harassment of opposition supporters, according to international press reports, a reminder of the irregularities that international observers documented during the 2008 presidential vote. The administration sought to control the news narrative by suppressing public protests, imprisoning opposition activists, and adopting restrictive regulations.

The most drastic step occurred in June when parliament passed and the president signed into law amendments to the Law on Television and Radio that tightened control of the country's influential broadcast media, according to local and international press reports. The government tried to deflect attention from the restrictive amendments by embedding them into a package of measures meant to move radio and television stations from analog to digital signals. Sargsyan ignored domestic and international protests over the restrictions, which are seen as benefiting his Republican Party as it approaches parliamentary elections set for 2012.

The amendments enable government regulators to grant or revoke licenses without explanation, as well as impose programming restrictions that would confine some stations to narrow themes such as culture, education, and sports, according to news reports. Analysts said the changes would provide the government legal cover to keep the popular news outlet A1+ off the air. Armenian authorities revoked A1+'s broadcasting license in 2002 □ after the station aired critical news reports about President Robert Kocharian □ and then denied a dozen subsequent license applications. The government has essentially ignored a June 2008 ruling by the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights that said authorities improperly revoked the A1+ license without adequate explanation. A1+ continued to operate as an online outlet. The government claimed domestic Internet penetration was approaching 50 percent, although independent estimates were much lower.

Another amendment stipulates that only one digital television license would be issued for each of the 10 regions outside the capital. The restriction was seen by some as a means to silence Gyumri-based Gala television, the one domestic station that continued to broadcast criticism of the government.

The National Commission on Television and Radio □ whose members are appointed by the president □ announced in July that it was seeking applications for the new digital broadcasting frequencies, according to press reports. Independent journalists said they believed the process would be politicized. "Digitalization is supposed to increase the choices people have on TV, but here the authorities are using it to eliminate competition and have only one loyal station per region," Gala owner Vahan Khachatryan told CPJ. "These are all the consequences of the fraudulent elections because the

government is not legitimate and cannot appeal to the people, so the only thing left is to increase control over society." Authorities were expecting to announce the results of the application process in 2011.

Officials in Gyumri, the country's second-largest city, escalated their campaign of harassment against Gala during 2010. Tax officials froze the station's bank accounts, customs officers seized equipment bound for the station, and authorities pressured businesses to stop advertising on the station. Authorities have harassed the station since 2007 in retaliation for broadcasting speeches by Levon Ter-Petrossian, the former president turned opposition leader.

The amendments positioned Sargsyan to maintain control over the country's docile television and radio stations, most of which were owned by pro-government politicians and businessmen. Propagandistic state media retained important financial subsidies from various government budgets and privileged access to official information. While print and online media were more pluralistic, their reach was limited to a primarily urban and educated audience.

One positive legal change occurred in May when parliament amended the penal and administrative codes to decriminalize defamation. Sargsyan later signed the measure, although it was considered largely symbolic because the law was rarely used to harass journalists and authorities retained many other levers of influence.

Throughout the year, police officers routinely harassed, assaulted, and arrested journalists, according to local press reports and media analysts. Prosecutors regularly colluded in this practice by failing to investigate police officers, even filing charges on occasion against journalists who protested abuses, CPJ research showed.

On February 24, a police officer assaulted photojournalist Gagik Shamshian, who worked for several pro-opposition newspapers, as he was taking pictures of officials outside the prosecutor general's office in Yerevan, according to local and international press reports. Shamshian filed a complaint with the police, who identified the officer from the journalist's photos and from a security camera that captured him punching the photojournalist in the face several times, news reports said. But the police dropped the assault charges against the alleged assailant and in April charged Shamshian with filing a "false" complaint, punishable by up to three years in prison, according to local and international news reports. Police offered no explanation but dropped the case in late year.

On May 31, police arrested three journalists covering a gathering of opposition activists at Liberty Square in Yerevan, according to news reports. Police arrested Ani Gevorgian

and Syuzanna Pogolian of the pro-opposition daily *Haykakan Zhamanak*, as well as Lilit Tadevosian of the Yerevan-based daily *Hayq*, according to *Haykakan Zhamanak* Director Anna Hakobian. Authorities released Tadevosian and Pogolian later that day, but they charged the 23-year-old Gevorgian with assaulting a police officer and detained her for three more days. The arrest was seen as retaliation for Gevorgian's articles alleging that the Armenian police anthem had been lifted from a song used in neighboring Georgia, according to news reports. The charge against her was pending in late year.

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