



YEREVAN PRESS CLUB

## **1997: TWELVE MONTHS IN THE LIFE OF THE MEDIA**

**The Annual Report of the Yerevan Press Club  
Commission on Protection of Freedom of Speech**

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#### JANUARY 1997

The director of the “**Parberakan**” publishing house (now the “Tigran Mets” printing house), Vrezh Markosian, sent a message to the editors of newspapers, announcing a 20 percent price increase for printing from *January 1*. The letter did not contain any explanations for the increase. Another point of the proposed contract planned an additional 20 percent price increase. However, the editors refused to sign it if this point is retained.

Over 90 percent of print media in Armenia continue to use this printing house.

#### FEBRUARY 1997

Publication of the “**Aravot**” daily stopped after the February 15 issue. Editor-in-chief Aram Abrahamian refuted rumors that the newspaper was closed for political reasons. He stressed in the February 18 issue of “Molorak” daily, “it was my initiative to cease publication of the newspaper. The main reason is that our society does not need newspapers today. Or, to be more precise, people are not willing to read the newspapers being published today. If someone feels offended by this conclusion, may he explain why the print run of the main dailies is only two or three thousand copies, the same as the print run of the factory newspapers in the Soviet period...”

Deputy editor-in-chief of the “Aravot” Hamlet Gasparian, who headed the newspaper in Aram Abrahamian’s absence and expected to become editor-in-chief, said he had no other information, apart from what Abrahamian said in the interview with “Molorak”: “After two weeks of work I was informed that the newspaper should close down. Nobody provided any explanation. I am sure this is in no way related to the composition of the editorial office, nor to finances, although the newspaper has had quite complex financial problems”.

According to a report in “Hayk” daily on March 20, Abrahamian said to an Armenpress news agency correspondent that “... they are now taking measures, so that “Aravot” can be supplied to the readers in a month, with a new design and contents” (but without Hamlet Gasparian).

Responding to a request of the YPC Commission to comment on resuming the publication of “Aravot”, Gasparian said this is equally unclear to him, as are the reasons for suspending the newspaper’s operation.

Publication of “Aravot” resumed on June 3, with a print run of 1,500 copies.

Provisions of the RA Code of Laws on Labor (CLL) were not met in regard to its employees during the suspension of the newspaper’s operation for an indefinite period.

On February 20, the Spandarian District Court of the Yerevan Central Community

continued hearing of the suit brought by the head of the Goris Community Electoral Committee Hakob Minassian against the “**Iravunk**” weekly (the case was opened on February 12). Minassian claimed the article “Criminal Terror Roaring in Goris”, published in “Iravunk” (#45, November, 1996) discredited his honor and dignity, and demanded refutation of statements which he believed were not true.

Editor-in-chief of “Iravunk”, Hayk Baboukhanian, insisted in court that the publication in no way affected Minassian’s honor and dignity. It was based solely on an analysis of letters that the editorial office had received from Goris.

The sides reached an agreement and accepted a joint declaration that the basis of the publication were statements, provided in the readers’ letters, and only an additional inquiry of the case might confirm or refute them. The plaintiff also conceded that it wasn’t the goal of the editorial office to offend his honor and dignity. The joint declaration was published in the following issue of “Iravunk”.

### **MARCH 1997**

“**Lragir**” daily was not issued on March 4. According to the chairman of the editorial board, Hovhannes Afrikan, the publication had no financial problems, and the “requirements of the editorial office are met by sales of the newspaper”. The simple reason was that, based on a preliminary demand of the “Parberakan” publishing house, the newspapers were to pay 20 percent of their debt by March 1. “Lragir” had paid the publishing house even more than the amount of its debt - but it had paid with newsprint. The problem was caused by incorrect calculation. The next issue of “Lragir” was printed the following day, on March 5.

Yet publication of the newspaper ceased again on March 15, and never resumed. Chairman of the editorial board explained this was a result of certain financial and technical problems, which they were trying to overcome.

Since the closure of “Lragir”, the newspapers “Hayk”, “Haykakan Zhamanak”, and “Azg” have printed “Lragir” materials on their pages.

The provisions of the CLL were not met in regard to the journalists, who lost their jobs with the closure of the newspaper.

On March 7, two unknown individuals forced their way into the editorial office of the “**Yerevanian Ozer**” weekly, demanding that editor-in-chief Michael Hayrapetian stop preparation of the regular issue. When refused, one of the intruders locked the door to the room of the secretary, and the second brutally beat Hayrapetian. Then he wiped the blood off his hands with paper on the editor’s table, threw it on the floor, and disappeared with his partner.

Michael Hayrapetian declared in a press conference on the following day there was no political background to the incident.

Hayrapetian’s condition became worse on March 9, and he was taken to the hospital. The doctor said he needed two weeks of treatment. Legal proceeding were instituted relating the beating, but the criminals have not been uncovered so far.

Journalist professional associations made a declaration in Hayrapetian's support. The RA Minister of National Security and Interior refused to meet with representatives of the Media Association of Armenia.

The YPC Commission is worried by the fact that more than ten journalists have become objects of physical violence during the past six years, but the law enforcement bodies have not solved any of these cases so far.

#### **APRIL 1997**

The "**Yerevanian Ozer**" weekly closed on April 24, for financial reasons. Again, the provisions of the CLL were not met in regard to journalists.

#### **MAY 1997**

The RA National Assembly accepted on first reading amendments to the **Law "On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organizations"**, seriously limiting the freedom of the press and, in fact, introducing censorship of publications on religious issues.

Particularly, Article 7, point 'h' of the Law stated: "Presentation of religious-theological issues in media outlets, not belonging to religious organizations, may only be carried out with consent of the state administration body authorized by the RA Government."

The second paragraph of the second part of Article 17 of the Law provided that "presentation of the theology of the Armenian Apostolic Church by media, or at any mass events may only be carried out with the approval of the Armenian Apostolic Church".

The Law was accepted on second reading, with consideration of the proposals of the RA President. Article 7, point 'h' was eliminated from the final version, and Article 17 read "... presentation of the official theology ..."

Editorial office of the "**Antsoudarts**" weekly of Gyumri, founded in 1997, the only independent publication in the city, should vacate its premises according to resolution 4/109 of the RA State Arbitration. According to a resolution of the Gyumri Moscow District Court, it should hand over the editorial property to the "Kumayri" newspaper. The latter receives the support of state authorities, and occupies 20 rooms, while having a staff of only 10 employees.

#### **JUNE 1997**

On June 17 the "**Noyan Tapan**" independent news agency disseminated an article about the regular plan for resolution of the Karabakh conflict, developed by the co-chairmen of the OSCE Minsk group. The article was published in the newspapers "Respublica Armenia", "Azg", "Aravot", "Menk+", and "Novoye Vremya". The author of the article Jhanna Grigorova, director of the news agency Tigran Harutyunian, and editor-in-chief Gayane Arakelian were called to the Ministry of National Security and Interior on the next day, and were sent to different rooms. Then, an hour-and-a-half long meeting with Tigran Harutyunian was held in the room of a high-ranking official. Harutyunian's suggestion to include Jhanna Grigorova in the meeting was refused. Five hours later Arakelian and Harutyunian were allowed to leave the building of the Ministry. Grigorova returned to the

agency two hours later. According to the employees there, she was in a severe psychological and physical state, and refused to respond to questions.

In protest, the “Noyan Tapan” agency issued a declaration on June 19, and went on a one-day strike. The declaration said particularly that according to Article 25 of the acting Law “On the Press and Other Media”, a journalist does not have to disclose his sources of information, except in the cases when this is required for a court trial. Nevertheless, the Ministry of National Security and Interior was persistently trying to force these three employees of the agency to name the source of the information used in the material.

## **JULY 1997**

The regular issue of the “**Haykakan Zhamanak**” daily was not published on July 11. According to the heads of the “Parberakan” publishing house, the newspaper was not published because of debts. Yet many newspapers had larger debts for that period than “Haykakan Zhamanak”.

Most probably, the non-publication of the newspaper was for political reasons: the sponsor of “Haykakan Zhamanak” is a leader of the opposition wing of the Armenian National Movement (ANM) party, Edward Yegorian. The 9th congress of the ANM started on July 11, and Yegorian was considered Vano Siradeghian’s main competitor for the position of chairman of the party.

The newspaper was printed the following day. On July 15, “Haykakan Zhamanak” informed readers that its publication would be temporarily suspended. According to observers, the reasons were Yegorian’s defeat at the congress plus financial problems.

Publication of “Haykakan Zhamanak” resumed on November 7 - but now as a weekly. Provisions of the CLL were not met in regard to the employees of the editorial office.

## **AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1997**

A short notice, “The Fund in Australia”, disseminated by the “Yerevan” information center, was published in the ‘Visit’ column of the “**Molorak**” daily of August 1. The notice particularly mentioned that “,000 were handed to Manoushak Petrossian - for the construction of the Goris-Stepanakert road. Another \$ 2,000 were donated to the Army of Artsakh by the parents of the late officer of special forces of the Australian Army Mihran Avetissian”. There wasn’t much noise about this publication.

In the article “Collection of Donations Harms the Establishment of Statehood”, published in the August 19 issue of “Molorak”, journalist Nikol Pashinian made arithmetical calculations, based on the published information, in order to find out “...how much money was spent to gain the amount mentioned.” As a result, the author came to the conclusion that the travel expenses of representatives of the “Hayastan” All Armenian Fund to Australia could not be justified.

Executive director of the Fund Manoushak Petrossian said in a press conference on September 2 that the information published in “Molorak”, was “unverified, fabricated, and deliberately false”. Presenting a claim “On protection of honor, dignity, and business authority, compensation for material and moral damage” to the Spandarian District Court, Manoushak Petrossian added that about \$ 2,380,000 of donations were endangered

because of the above-said publication in “Molorak”. Hence she insisted that the newspaper publish a refutation, and demanded the amount of 10 percent of the expected donations of the Armenian community of Australia (\$ 238,000) - to compensate for moral damage to the Fund. Asked by journalists whether compensation is realistic, as the property of “Molorak” is worth a hundred times less, the director of the Fund said that wasn’t her problem. Notably, journalists from “Molorak” were not invited to the press conference.

The Spandarian Court brought in a verdict on September 22, partially satisfying the “Hayastan” All Armenian Fund’s claim: the author of the article and the editorial board were obliged to publish a refutation, in the same place, and of the same size. It was also planned to charge “Molorak” with 1 percent of the expected amount, instead of the proposed 10 percent - which would also be a significant amount - \$ 23,800. “Molorak” was to pay another \$ 476 in charges to the state.

The YPC Commission believes that such sanctions against the newspaper resemble revenge. The verdict of the court does not specify the text of the refutation to be published by “Molorak”, nor why the newspaper has to pay the fine of that exact amount. The possibility of such an incident was predictable since the National Assembly accepted an amendment to Article 7 of the RA Civil Code in June.

Subsequently, the court executive made several attempts to estimate the value of the property of the editorial office, so far unsuccessfully, as it turned out that the editorial office leases the assets.

## **OCTOBER 1997**

A correspondent of the “**Ayzhm**” weekly applied orally to the RA State Registrar, Statistics and Analysis Department, requesting information about living conditions of the population. The Department declared that they will only reply to written requests. The editorial office obliged. Yet head of the Department Eduard Aghadjanov said to the correspondent that “the employees of his organization only receive a monthly salary of 12,000 drams”, and are not obliged to reply to questions free of charge. In another room of the Department the correspondent was asked to pay 50,000 drams; then the list of the questions was shortened, and the amount reduced to 10,000 drams. When the editorial office agreed to pay this amount - under the condition of doing this legally - the employee of the Department refused to answer the list of questions.

After the regular October 16 broadcast of the program “My Dears, Living and Dead” on the **First Channel of the Armenian National Television**, its author and producer Tsvetana Paskaleva was told that broadcasts of the program were frozen for an indefinite period. It is clear that the program was closed for political reasons. Specifically, the last broadcast was dedicated to the military past of Vahan Hovhannissian, one of the prominent figures of the ARF (“Dashnaktsutyun”), and his last words in court (he has been under arrest since July 30, 1995, and was sentenced to four years’ imprisonment on December 12, 1997).

## **NOVEMBER 1997**

An article in the “**Ayzhm**” weekly (#37, October 15-21, 1997), called “I Warned You It’ll Be Bad”, reported that a Yerevan shop sold three bottles of the expensive French cognac

“Louis-13” (the price of 1 bottle is \$ 2,500). “According to some sources”, said the article, one of the employees of the RA President’s guard was among the buyers.

Head of the RA Presidential Security Department Romik Ghazarian phoned to the editorial office a day after the publication and declared to the editor-in-chief Vigen Sargsian that “he wouldn’t tolerate being presented as a barman and an object of mockery”. He said “he planned to apply to the Prosecutor’s office, which would carry out an investigation, and pass on the case to the court, demanding a compensation of \$ 7,500 - the same as the cost of 3 bottles of the cognac.”

The inspector of the unit of control over enforcement of laws in economic, social, and ecology spheres of the RA Prosecutor’s office, Mr Badalian, visited the editorial office two days after the article. He said that, responding to an application by General Romik Ghazarian, the RA Attorney General has ordered verification of the purchase of the cognac by the employees of the RA Presidential Security Department. The inspector demanded that the editor-in-chief indicate the source of information. The editor-in-chief refused to name the source, and to sign a protocol about “refusing to provide statements”. The inspector visited the editorial office again the next day, again insisting Vigen Sargsian sign the protocol. The latter agreed to do this only if the formula was “refusing to mention the source of information”.

On November 11 the RA Prosecutor’s office informed the editorial office in writing that the newspaper has “violated Article 6 of the Law “On the Press and Other Media”, printing false and unverified information”, since investigation has shown that “the expensive French cognacs belonged to the owner of the shop, who had exhibited them for advertising, and then taken back home”.

To avoid further development of the incident, the editorial office preferred to publish the response of the Prosecutor’s office in the next issue of the newspaper.

## **DECEMBER 1997**

On December 3, the **heads of media and professional associations** held a press conference. It issued a joint declaration of the Armenian media, in which journalists made the following demands to the authorities:

- To improve the policy and operation of the “Haymamoul” state press distribution agency, and immediately pay the debts to the editorial offices, which have accumulated from sales by subscription and by retail.
- To provide special taxation rates to entities participating in production, distribution, and sales of media products.
- To provide special discount rates for using transportation and communication services to the media.
- To provide gratuitously to the media the premises they currently occupy.

In protest, editorial offices went on a one-day strike. 10 newspapers, 5 professional associations, one radio station, one radio program, and 6 news agencies joined this unique for the Armenian journalism action, and signed the declaration.

Regular issues of the newspapers “Azg”, “Hayastani Hanrapetutyun”, “Hayots Ashkhar”, “Molorak”, and “Golos Armenii”, were not published on December 4. The newspapers “Hayk”, “Aravot”, and “Respublica Armenia” did not join the action.

On December 5, the RA Prime Minister Robert Kocharian met the heads of media and journalist associations, promising to take measures and provide state support to the press.

According to a preliminary agreement, journalists held a one-hour (11:00-12:00) strike in front of the RA Presidential residence on December 10, protesting the closure of Tsvetana Paskaleva’s authorship program “My Dears, Living and Dead” by the heads of the National TV of Armenia. The students of the Department of Journalism of the Yerevan State University joined the strike. Participants of the demonstration handed a declaration to Levon Zourabian, the press secretary of the RA President, demanding to resume broadcasts of the program. The press secretary said resolution of this issue was in the sphere of competence of the NTA heads.

The status of the **National Radio of Armenia** being under consideration, the organization undergoes inner structural changes. Particularly, the editorial department of Social and political programs has split into two separate departments - of Social, and of Political and economic programs. By the decree of the NRA director Armen Amirian, chief editor of the former Department Gevorg Assatrian is dismissed of his post, and is offered another, lower-grade position. This demotion was neither been explained, nor grounded in professional and legal terms (no tests were applied), the only exception being the statement by Amirian that he has a better candidacy for the position.

Given the available data and publications in the press, the YPC Commission has a right to suppose that Assatrian’s dismissal of his post bears a political character. According to the journalist himself, the heads of the NRA have claimed to him several times that the broadcasts under his supervision fail to assure the proper quality of state propaganda (however, the majority of his colleagues believe the broadcasts were objective and impartial).