



YEREVAN PRESS CLUB

1998: WHEN THE PRESS IS IN DISREGARD

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

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JANUARY 1998

The New Year's eve was marked by traditional letters from the two monopoly companies, the press distribution agency "**Haymamoul**" and the publishing house "**Tigran Mets.**" The papers were suggested to sign new contracts in the shortest possible time, otherwise "starting from January 1 the publication and distribution of the papers will be discontinued."

On January 23 the head of the National Assembly Administration Ashot Antinian invited Mesrop Haroutiunian, the acting Chief Editor of official "**Hayastani Hanrapetutiun**" daily, and informed him about NA Speaker Babken Ararktsian's considerations; that the paper was not good enough, didn't serve its purpose, that NA Speaker's photo with E. Stroyev was placed in the lower part of that day's issue and the Defence Minister's - on the top, besides, that he hadn't presented the next project of the paper, yet. Factually, M.Haroutiunian was being suggested to resign.

And though he still signed the next issue, he also submitted a resignation letter to the NA Speaker. The deputy chief editor of "Hayastani Hanrapetutiun" Ashot Aghababian was appointed to perform Chief Editor's duties.

(In fact, on January 29 a letter signed by 52 of the paper's staff-members was addressed to the Speaker of the Parliament with a request to confirm A.Aghababian on the post. However, the request was not taken into consideration, and in a month on NA Speaker Khossrov Haroutiunian's instruction Liza Chagharian, deputy chief editor of "Hayastani Hanrapetutiun," was appointed on the post.)

It is worth mentioning that Mesrop Haroutiunian, being the deputy editor since the daily was first founded, had been actually editing it since February 1997 and in the course of that time was able to find the right balance for the paper. Professional organisations expressed their protest in relation with such a forced resignation and once again directed the Parliament's attention on the legal ambiguity in relations of the Founder and the creative staff of the paper.

MAY 1998

On May 12 NA Speaker Khossrov Haroutiunian signed a decree on the assignment of Shamiram Aghabekian Chief Editor of the official "**Respublica Armenia**" daily, completely ignoring the unanimous request of the staff to appoint Arshavir Gazazian, who had performed the duties of the Chief Editor since February 1998.

On the same day the Co-Founder of "Respublica Armenia" - the paper's journalistic staff - turned to the NA Speaker Khossrov Haroutiunian (copies were addressed to President Robert Kocharian and the Chairman of Human Rights' Commission under the President - Parour Hayrikian), suggesting to delay the decision of replacement until the statute of the paper and the relationships of the co-founders were clarified. Otherwise, as decided at the

general meeting, production of the daily would be suspended. However, on May 13 and on the following days the paper continued to be issued, though almost completely consisting of news agency releases.

Journalists' unions made corresponding declarations in defence of the creative staff's rights and once again pointed out the inconsistency of provisions of a Charter adopted by the Parliament itself.

On May 18 the paper's editorial staff came forth with a new declaration, where, in particular, controversies in the Charter were pointed out which the staff would resolve jointly with the new Chief Editor. This would allow to keep the paper's potential intact, and consider the conflict closed. As a sign of protest, together with A.Gazazian three other members resigned from the daily.

By the end of the year no provision was changed in the Charter. Since then about 20 creative and technical employees have left the office for various reasons.

On May 14 during his meeting with the journalists NA Speaker Khossrov Haroutiunian declared "... I suppose, under a press completely free, we must understand a press completely irresponsible. This type of press is simply a menace. It is better not to have such a press."

JUNE 1998

During TV programme "Press Club" on June 2 (National Television of Armenia, Channel 1) dedicated to the theme "National Assembly; the Past and the Future" Haik Baboukhanian, Editor-in-Chief of "**Iravounk**" weekly, maintained that "95% of the NA deputies were elected in criminal and illegal methods", and besides, "part of them was criminally connected with the mafia". The other four editors, participating at the show, were also critical about the National Assembly.

On June 5 Baboukhanian's viewpoint was presented as the position of the "Constitutional Rights" Union (Founder of the paper). On the same day during the evening newscast of "Lraber" (NTA, Channel 1) two of the NA deputies most harshly condemned the "Press Club" show, in particular, Haik Baboukhanian's opinion. It was learnt that NA Speaker Khossrov Haroutiunian had turned to the General Prosecutor to file a criminal case against H.Baboukhanian for libel.

At a press-conference the editor of "Iravounk" declared that he would not try to avoid a possible litigation and motioned the Prosecutor's Office with a writ on investigating all the violations of 1995 Parliamentary elections. The reaction of the media and professional unions in defence of Baboukhanian followed.

In a little more than a month during an interview with "Aravot" daily, the NA Speaker said that "he had received the Prosecutor's response, which stated that the acting law did not provide for qualifying insult, slander or defamation of the state as an offence. In lue of this the Prosecutor's Office had rejected to process his appeal."

It is worth to remind that, according to Khossrov Haroutiunian, President Robert Kocharian had told him: "You were right to turn to the Prosecutor." It is also noteworthy, that it was the head of NA judicial service that had advised the Speaker to turn to the

Prosecutor's Office.

On June 21-23 more than 2000 subscribers of "**Arminco**" communications, most of the Armenian press among them, were unable to use international communication lines, in particular - Internet services. Once again "ArmenTel," the exclusive owner of Armenian communications network, had applied punitive sanctions against "Arminco," practically blocking all communication with the outer world for the Armenian press.

This was not the first incident. In March and then in September communication lines were blocked for half of the day.

JULY 1998

On July 7 the Central Community police department and the bailiff were enacting a decision to evict Lusineh Martirosian's family from their apartment at the address; Sarian 8, in Yerevan. (Producer Lusineh Martirosian was the author of several programmes on TV "AR"). Vahram Martirosian, vice-president of "**AR**", and two cameramen had arrived at the scene, trying to shoot the process of eviction. The bailiff attacked them with shrieks and threats and hit the camera, as a result of which cameramen Vigen Tatourian was injured. The vice-president expressed his exasperation, and another court officer filed an act about an alleged attack on them by journalists. As a result of this incident, two cameras were broken and became worthless (Panasonic M-1900). The material loss of the company formed about 3,000 US dollars. The camera group was summoned to the police department where threats and reprimands continued.

A day later, in an interview to the same company the Minister of Internal Affairs and National Security Serge Sargsian noted that "each had acted within the limits of their commission." Another day later the Central Community police department officially apologised before the television company, and expressed readiness to compensate for the loss. However, no reimbursement was made till the end of the year.

AUGUST 1998

On August 18 a group of journalists gathered to protest in front of the only kiosk of "**Haymamoul**" in the Erebouni Square in Yerevan. In relation with the festivities planned for October 10 to celebrate the establishment of ancient Erebouni, the City decided to pull down this hideous construction. As a result of continuous deliberations between the journalists, "Haymamoul" representatives and the City, a compromise settlement was arrived at; the kiosk was to be pulled down on condition that a new one was build the next day. It was only 15 days later that the kiosk with a more "modern" appearance was returned to the same location.

This was not the first incident of its kind. At the end of last year the local governments have pulled down four other kiosks, of which only one was recovered several months later.

SEPTEMBER 1998

On September 22 the camera group of "**Hrazdan**" TV station having filmed a story on the recovered operation of street lights, turned to the regional department of GAI (traffic police) with a request to comment on the fact. Journalists were not allowed to enter the

building. They were told that they needed to get the permission of the Press Department of Internal Affairs and National Security Ministry (INS) for access. Leaving, the cameraman had directed his camera towards the INS building of Hrazdan and was immediately attacked by the policeman on duty. The latter pushed the journalist and the cameraman, and snatched the camera from him.

The consequences of this "harmless" story were shown during the news broadcast. However, the real events had just started to unravel. Taking turns, the head of GAI, the Chief and deputy-chief of Hrazdan INS each, called the TV station's Director Mnatsakan Haroutiunian, ordered him to show himself up at the regional GAI and hand in the video-cassette. "If you don't come yourself, you will be brought in here," they threatened, in response to Mr. Mnatsakan Haroutiunian's refusal either to go there or to hand in the video. A little later there was a call from Armen Yeritsian, Chief of the regional INS in Kotayk, who according to M. Haroutiunian, warned the Director with the most derogatory terms, that he would "show you what will become of 'Hrazdan'."

At about 6 p.m. the next day three of the station's staff members - Gayaneh Hakopian, Chief Editor Artour Safarian and cameraman Nairi Hovannissian - were brought to the police station (because of which the news broadcast was cancelled), where they were threatened and terrorised. The young woman-journalist, for example, was threatened that she would be stripped naked and wouldn't be allowed to see her family for several months. They were forced to provide a written explanation of "why did they shoot the police building for the story." Then the detained were taken to the Chief of the regional INS. In the evening National Television news "Haylour" commented on the details of the incident, and the manner of treatment with the journalists changed. Nevertheless, they were set free just after 11 p.m.

On September 26 "Haylour" informed, that Major Hakopian, deputy-chief of the regional INS, had told them of their intent to turn to the Prosecutor's office to file a criminal case against the station's Director Mnatsakan Haroutiunian, for libel.

Participants of Byurakan meeting - leaders of Armenian media (September 26-27) - considered it germane to apply to the RA President in relation with the incident. The appeal particularly stated, that the incident was "the direct consequence of ungrounded restrictions in obtaining information from RA power structures, repeatedly brought up in papers. Considering, that the incident is not unique and that the problem needs immediate action, we deem your fair evaluation and immediate interference necessary."

On September 22-28 because of disrupted telephone lines, news agency "**Noyan Tapan**", newspapers "**RA**", "**Azg**" and "**Ayzhm**" were completely paralysed. Monopolist "ArmenTel" had again disconnected the lines with no warning, and not only of the indebted subscribers but also all the telephones in those offices.

At the above mentioned Byurakan meeting media leaders adopted a proclamation, which stated that similar behaviour of "ArmenTel" was absolutely unacceptable, the last cases being a preposterous violation of the freedom of the press and distribution of information, which cannot be justified under any argument, especially in lue of the fact, that in cases of delinquencies by "ArmenTel" itself, it has never paid fines or suffered losses.

Journalists were called to "consistently fight similar actions of 'ArmenTel', using all available methods."

On July 29, after the next issue of "**Ayzhm**" weekly was published, the Founder, the Board of the National Democratic Union party, forced the staff to take a month's leave against their will. By the end of August the staff was recommended to put off the publication of the next two issues (September 2, 9.) Meanwhile Vigen Sargsian, the Editor-in-Chief (a maverick,) was recommended to leave the post, for the publication did not maintain the party line. After an announcement in the press, V.Sargsian resigned.

The next issue of "Ayzhm" was published on September 16, and the post of the Chief Editor was occupied by one of the NDU Board members, with no journalistic background.

OCTOBER 1998

On October 2 there was a seven-lines information release in "**Aravot**" titled "Communists Check Hayrikian." The author, A.Z. quoted the communists' opinion on Hayrikian: " 'For 17 years co-operated with who knows what intelligence agencies', and besides, acts on order."

On the same day Chairman of the Human Rights' Commission under the President and the leader of the "Self-Determination" Union Parour Hayrikian attacked the author - Armen Zakarian - in the corridor of the National Assembly (at the time there was an ongoing seminar in the conference hall on elections organised by IFES,) and charged the journalist with the slanderous publication. In fact, fellow-party member, NA deputy N.Zeynalvandian had seized A.Zakarian by the hands. The skirmish did not turn into a fight only thanks to interference of the witnesses.

On October 14 Speaker of the National Assembly Khossrov Haroutiunian released Editor-in-Chief of "**Hayastani Hanrapetutian**" Liza Chagharian (decree #721) "for continuously distorting and misrepresenting the activities of the National Assembly - the Founder of the daily, discrediting its political importance, creating negative public opinion around the NA, consequently, violating the paper's charter, also, for being guided by personal sympathies in the management of the paper, and her negative stance for the opinions expressed by the political fractions in the Parliament."

By another decree of the NA Speaker Ashot Aghababian was appointed Chief Editor of "Hayastani Hanrapetutian."

On the same day the head of the NA Administration Tigran Balayan and NA Speaker's Advisor Vahagn Mkrтчian presented the decisions to the office. The latter reminded that eight months earlier the creative staff of the daily had addressed a letter to the NA endorsed by 52 staff-members with a request to appoint A.Aghababian Chief Editor. (The Advisor didn't explain why the request was overlooked eight months earlier, and was considered only at that time.)

L.Chagharian expressed her disagreement with the decision of the NA Speaker, and also informed, that part of the creative staff did not recognise the NA as the Founder of the daily. The argument of the journalists with the NA representatives at times grew into a tussle.

On the next day there was a press-conference held by the journalists on strike, where a political evaluation of the incident was given. In the letter addressed to the President he

was called to "actively interfere and support in evaluating the voluntary and illegal actions of the Parliamentary Speaker."

On October 16 President Robert Kocharian accepted the staff of striking "Hayastani Hanrapetutiun." In the following days a number of papers provided space to the journalists from "HH." The National Television also provided an opportunity to voice their concerns. Professional unions supported the staff, offering for the third time in a year, that the National Assembly review the charters of official publications. Former Chief Editor Liza Chagharian turned to the district court of Arabkir with an application to recover her on the job. Up to the end of 1998 the suit was not processed, though four judges were in charge.

On November 16 A.Aghababian released 14 picketing staff members of "Hayastani Hanrapetutiun."

On November 27 the first issue of "Nor Hanrapetutiun" was inaugurated, with the former staff members from "HH." In less than two weeks the daily ceased to exist.

DECEMBER 1998

On December 22 the Council of the Internet Subscribers Union of Armenia turned to Prime Minister Armen Darbinian with a petition stating that handing the monopoly of almost all types of communications services to "**ArmenTel**" had become an obstacle to access the Internet.

In particular, renting an Internet line of 64 KB/sec., is worth 5,000-6,500 US dollars which is 7-10 times higher than similar prices in the world. This is in contradiction with the 6A1 provision of the license issued to "ArmenTel." Besides "ArmenTel" has the right to cut off communication for five days in a month, which is also in contradiction with point 7A of the license. According to international standards, the corresponding time should not exceed several hours. Moreover, the articles of the agreement cannot be disputed.

Associations of Internet servers in Armenia are capable of hiring fast satellite lines, however, because of "ArmenTel's" monopoly this is forbidden by the law. Whereas, "ArmenTel" is not only unable to satisfy the bids for international prices, but never considers such, refusing to name even approximate figures or timeframes.

According to the Council of the Union, it is obvious that "ArmenTel" does not conform and is unable to conform with the license requirements. This is why the letter addressed to the government of Armenia recommended to allow Internet servers in Armenia to hire lines immediately from international providers.

On New Year's night airing of TV broadcasts by "**Nork**" station was discontinued. Still back in November the Minister of Communications and Postal Services announced at a National Assembly session that "the Government is unable to finance two TV companies and that the frequency will be granted by competition." (At the end of 1997 by a Government decision the RA state television was restructured into two closed Ltd. companies - "National Television" and "Nork.") However, a frequency has already been granted to the TV company "Culture" without competition.

Despite the fact, that in 1998 three and a half of the six hours of airtime were covered by state requisition, out of the 228 mln. drams, allotted by the budget for the two closed Ltd.

companies, "Nork" had received a little more than 20 mln.

Still in July the staff of "Nork" had turned to the government with a request to rent the channel, but the request was not considered. In the end, when the channel was dispersed 150 members of the studio lost their jobs.