



RAFTO SYMPOSIUM 2009

Azerbaijan's brave voices: The role of critical journalism in an oil rich state

Venue: Radisson Blu Royal Hotel, Bryggen, Bergen
Date: Friday, October 30, 2009
Time: 09:00 – 16:15

Speech by Malahat Nasibova, the 2009 Rafto Prize Laureate

I want to start by thanking the Rafto Committee for recognizing the challenges faced by my colleagues and compatriots in such an unrecognized corner of the world. I want to thank the Rafto Committee for lending its great prestige to our small struggle and for giving us hope.

Let me tell you about Nakhichevan – where I come from, where I work. It's a beautiful place, surrounded by mountains. It's a lot like Bergen – minus the sea, minus the fjords, minus the freedom.

It's important at the outset to appreciate Nakhichevan's isolation. It's bordered by Armenia, Turkey and Iran – but not Azerbaijan, despite being a territory of the country. To get from Baku to Nakhichevan, you can go only by air. And from the Baku airport, you can't buy a roundtrip ticket. For many people, it's a one-way trip. For decades, it was the most politically active part of Azerbaijan, producing generations of the country's leadership. It's now like a labor camp, like a dead zone, where people enjoy no rights, no personal security, no economic or political opportunity, no hope.

When Nakhchivan resident Mahammad Gurbanov, a 57 year old merchant challenged the customs officials who demanded bribes from him at the Azerbaijan-Turkish border, he did not know that he would have to spend months in a mental hospital as punishment for his protest.

But he was not the first.

In September 2007, another resident of Nakhichevan, 71 year old opposition activist Alasgar Ismayilov, was forcibly committed to a mental institution. He was confined not for reasons of mental health, but for criticism of local authorities that he communicated in the form of a letter to the President's website. He was released few weeks later, thanks to pressure from international organizations that raised their voice on his behalf. Two years later, no one has been tried or punished for this act. No one has been held to account.

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72 year old Nakhichevani resident Ismayil Huseynov was next. He was put in a mental hospital after protesting the detention of his son on unsubstantiated charges during New Years holidays earlier this year.

The "rehabilitation" of wrongdoers by means of forced "psychological therapy" of course conjures up vivid associations with the Soviet regime. But the flagrant, attacks on citizens who choose to exercise their constitutional rights continue now. One resident of Nakhichevan was tied to a tree and tortured after he protested illegal fees that were added to his electricity bill. Sahib Huseynov, an opposition candidate in the the....parliamentary elections, was severely beaten and submerged in boiling water before his half-dead body was then smuggled to Turkey and dumped in a desert. He survived and is making his living as a construction worker in Baku. There has been no investigation of his complaints. The list of those who have been punished for thinking critically, acting independently and questioning authoritarianism is long. The attacks suggest profound abuses of local authority and a broken justice system.

The power also reinforces itself in ways that are less dramatic but which continue some of the most insidious practices, and worst humiliations, perpetrated earlier under Stalin. These practices turn individuals into servants of the state, and obliterate their sense of independence, individuality and free will. For example, the fall harvest in Nakhichevan is gathered not by paid farm hands, but by government workers – teachers, doctors, clerks - for whom weekend labor in the fields is compulsory. As is well known, votes for approved candidates in the country's so-called elections are compulsory as well. For last 16 years all the votes held in election districts in Nakhichevan produced almost 100 percent turnout and always in favor of the candidates from the ruling party. Music and art have been turned to serve the president's cult of personality: those artists who have not left the region make their living by painting portraits of the president, his wife, his father and several ministers, designing monuments to honor them and weaving carpets with their likeness.

Keep in mind that Nakhichevan is culturally east and under-developed to begin with. In some villages women are forced to wear hijabs and girls are married off at 15. Domestic violence against spouses and daughters-in-law is widespread, but little discussed and almost never remedied. Such traditions, combined with poverty and a lack of education, help maintain a repressive and degrading status quo.

There is a name for those who seek to oppose this system: we are called "enemies of the nation," or "traitors" –just like under Stalin. And just like under Stalin, our families, our colleagues and our friends are made to pay the price for our work. In December 2007 my husband Ilgar Nasibov, also a correspondent for Radio Liberty, was taken to court, handcuffed and arrested. It was later announced that local officials, including the Nakhichevan city police chief, demanded Ilgar's arrest for a critical story published in Azadliq, a local independent newspaper. Ilgar doesn't work for that newspaper, nor did he write the article, but nevertheless the

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local prosecutor demanded two and half years imprisonment, and in the end he was sentenced to three months in jail and a year of public works. He was released after international organizations took up his case, but the sentence remains in force. He has submitted the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

On the day Ilgar was arrested about two dozen police officers came to my apartment where my 14 year old daughter was home by herself. They made her open the door and proceeded to search the house, turning it upside down before her eyes. They seized everything - my computers, my equipment, even books of my children. Next, police organized a midnight raid on the office of the Resource Center- our office. They seized some of the equipment and destroyed the rest. This case is also pending in the European Court. My children, their teachers and friends have read "official" accounts of my "anti-state" activities in a state-sponsored newspaper that they receive at school.

But we resist. As journalists and human rights activists, we report on crime, corruption and human rights abuses, we seek accountability and demand justice.

In such a bleak landscape, what are our tools?

We have Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Despite the ban on international broadcasters on FM and MW, people tune in on satellite dish or try to listen to programs on shortwave, but they close their windows first. There are opposition newspapers and independent newspapers like Turan and Azadliq, but they are distributed secretly. People discuss events and look for answers at tea houses, but they are closed or put under surveillance to stop such chatter. People gather to discuss current events, but unofficial decree was passed two years ago outlawing groups of more than two people in the markets or on the street.

But our voices have been heard. It doesn't end the abuse of power or provide justice, but it can open the prison gates and save a life - when strangers, across the ocean, in Europe, Asia or the United States raise a protest, question an official or organize an appeal about a case that offends their sense of justice and decency or a person they have never seen.

In Azerbaijan, during the Soviet period, it helped Nadir Aghayev, a dissident imprisoned in a psychiatric ward who was released after Reagan administration published a list of political prisoners in USSR.

In independent Azerbaijan, it helped Alasgar Ismayilov, who was released after 15 days of forced "care" in psychiatric hospital in 2007.

It took longer with Ismayil Huseynov, but campaigns in the press attracted international attention and Western intervention, and he was ultimately released.

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Mahammad Gurbanov was released from a month-long detention in a mental hospital after local and international media reported on his case and international human rights organizations responded.

But many independent journalists, human rights activists and government critics remain in jeopardy, remain in jail.

Ganimat Zahidov, the editor of Azadliq newspaper, is serving a four and a half year prison sentence on fabricated charges of hooliganism.

Eynulla Fatullayev, editor in chief of Realniy Azerbaijan, is in prison serving an eight year sentence for a story he wrote.

Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade, two young, brave, energetic bloggers, are serving their fifth month of pre-trial detention on charges of hooliganism that observers believe to be fake - because of videos and other materials they produced that mocked the government.

Novruzali Mammadov, editor of Talyshi Sado newspaper, a newspaper representing the Talysh minority, died in prison before international pressure could succeed in gaining his release.

There is more. The killer of Elmar Huseynov, the fiercely independent editor of Monitor magazine who was killed in front of his apartment in 2005, has not been found. You hear about such cases in Russia. We have them in Azerbaijan as well. We have heard nothing about the investigation since 2006; his wife and young son now live here, in Norway, as political asylees.

Azerbaijan's independence did not bring freedom. As we reflect during these days on the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, we should be brutally aware that the end of Communism did not bring democracy. To the contrary, many of the evils of that system have continued, and, indeed, corruption, criminality, lawlessness, impunity and hunger for power have flourished. And the truth is as scarce as ever.

Election fraud, refugees, public finance, public policy, public welfare, public health, environmental degradation, national security – all these issues are taboo in the official national and regional electronic media and press. Indeed, the state has monopolized Television and radio and filled it with mindless entertainment and endless tributes to its leaders. It is numbing its citizens with its content. Some local newspapers struggle heroically to fill the gap in print. RFE/RL, the VOA and BBC provided uncensored news, necessary information and critical debate on FM before the government ended their broadcasts on national airwaves in 2008; now access to them is as vital as ever, but it is limited to Satellite, short wave and internet. The situation is cruelly, and deliberately, ironic: those who work and report in the public interest don't have adequate means to deliver the news, and those who have such means are in the service of the state and have little to say.

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Twenty years since the wall went down leading to the Soviet Union's collapse, democracy remains a daily battle and a distant wish for the people of Azerbaijan. Ilgar and I represent the generation that fought for independence: we were newly-weds in 1988. Now we are among those who fight for freedom.

On November 1st I will accept the Rafto award on behalf of our fellow Nakhichevanis and Azerbaijanis who struggled before during the Soviet period and continue to struggle now for a country governed by reason, laws, decency and popular consent. We have faced violence, intimidation, death threats, humiliation, professional compromise and personal loss, but with your support and recognition we will continue to hope and to fight. Our collective efforts brought down one wall and began a new era, and they will triumph again.

Malahat Nasibova

October 30, 2009
Bergen, Norway

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