

RF prefers not seeing AzR's media terrorism

ARVAK Center comment, 14.08.2024¹

The interpretation of events in Ukraine and now in the Russian Federation (hostilities have recently spread to its immediate territory) in the international media varies from full support of the Ukrainian position to promotion of the Russian view of events. Between these poles, there are media outlets that try to maintain a neutral and objective position. But there are very few of them, given the growing problem of limiting the independence of mass media in the world. Today, the interpretation of facts, the tone and emphasis of their presentation often testify to the politicization of editorial offices and their work in line with the decisions of their states as the main customers of political and information trends.

The information content related to the Russian–Ukrainian armed conflict is symptomatic and directly reflects the demands, positions and intentions of various countries that have their own interests in this confrontation and dictate the necessary trends and narratives to the subordinate media. In this regard, it seems that the most reliable indicator of the attitude of these states to the Russian–Ukrainian events should be the accents and statements of the media under their control, rather than the political and diplomatic phraseology voiced at the official level, which often directly contradicts the true sentiments of the countries of interest.

In this regard, the example of Azerbaijan is noteworthy, which at the level of political power at least demonstrates neutrality with regard to the Russian–Ukrainian confrontation but judging by the actions of the mass media under its control, gives reason for a radically different assessment of Baku's true sympathies.

The fact is that the information policy of Azerbaijan in connection with the events in Ukraine is explicitly anti-Russian, which contradicts not only to the “*equidistance from the parties*” policy, expressed by the Azerbaijani officialdom, but also to the spirit of the “Declaration on Allied Cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan” signed by the parties on February 22, 2024 in Moscow. In particular, the first paragraph of this declaration obliges the parties to “*mutually respect the independence, state sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of the state borders of the two countries*”, as well as to “*adhere to the principles of non-interference in each other's internal affairs...*”². The Azerbaijani media disregard the above-mentioned conditions and obligations of the document because the information presented in it, its wording and tone question Russian sovereignty and Moscow's actions are qualified as aggression, terrorism and occupation.

We are talking about a wide range of print and electronic media, as well as television channels, which, if not formally totally or partially owned by the state, are tightly controlled by the institutions specialized on censoring, and probably use unofficial channels of financing from the Aliyev regime.

It is hard to believe, for example, that the information portal *haqqin.az*, founded and run by Eynulla Fatullayev, a well-known journalist in Azerbaijan, has no financial interest in

¹ The Russian original was posted on our website on 12.08.2024.

² «Declaration on Allied Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan» (in Rus.), Kremlin.ru (22.02.2022), <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5777> (download date: 09.08.2024).

relations with the regime. The activity of this resource is an example of Baku's methodology of anti-Russian propaganda through a “private” media structure, which allegedly has no relation to the state policy of Azerbaijan regarding the confrontation between Moscow and Kiev. Nominally, *haqqin.az* is considered an independent information portal, but its bias is obvious to everyone in Azerbaijan itself. After radical opposition journalist Eynulla Fatullayev (founder and editor-in-chief of *haqqin.az*) was subjected to pressure (violence, kidnapping of relatives, imprisonment, etc.), his views on the realities in Azerbaijan “suddenly” changed drastically. The subsequent rewards in the form of cash bonuses, government awards and apartments in new buildings^{3,4} cemented the political-ideological metamorphosis in the worldview of the former Aliev regime fierce fighter. At present, *haqqin.az* is the flagship of the regime's propaganda and an accurate indicator of the Azerbaijani ruling family's attitude to events and trends in regional and world politics. In the context of the topic under consideration, *haqqin.az* precisely reflects official Baku's attitude towards the Russian–Ukrainian confrontation and, accordingly, the regime's desired outcome of the war.

At the time, the portal covered the “*Maidan*” period in Ukraine in a cautious tone and with a claim to neutrality, which can be explained by the concern of the political authorities in Baku about the events in Kiev. The overthrow of the Yanukovich regime concerned I. Aliyev, who feared that the parade of “*color revolutions*” along the borders of Russia could reach Azerbaijan itself. However, the hostilities in Donbass and the events in Crimea that began in 2014, changed Aliyev's attitude towards the Ukrainian reality, prompting him to provide not only material assistance, but also political and informational support to Kiev. *Haqqin.az*, among the pro-government and state media in Azerbaijan, began to cover the events in Ukraine using the “*aggressor–victim*” formula, clearly expressing its sympathy and solidarity with the Ukrainian side. Such a position did not pose a problem for the Azerbaijani authorities and media in their relations with Moscow, as Baku placed “*the Ukrainian people's struggle for the liberation of their territories*” in the context of Azerbaijan's aspirations to “*restore its own sovereignty and territorial integrity*”. And while in official rhetoric AzR officials still tried to avoid sharp language wherever possible and recommended the same to the official media, the “independent press” was granted full freedom in this matter, including the right to express radical positions. The same *haqqin.az* became the leader in injecting the most virulent anti-Russian content into the information space and interpreting the news in accordance with Kiev's instructions.

Ideally, with the signing of the “*Declaration on Allied Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan*” (February 22, 2022) on the eve of the beginning of the Special Military operation (SMO), the situation with the coverage of Ukrainian events in the Azerbaijani press should have changed somewhat in the interests of the Russian

³ Turan: Azerbaijani authorities gave apartments to journalists to ensure their silence ahead of elections (in Rus.), Panorama.am (24.07.2013), <https://www.panorama.am/ru/news/2013/07/24/azerbaijan-apartments/473477/> (download date: 10.08.2024).

⁴ What is more important to Azerbaijani journalists: a free apartment or a free environment? (in Rus.), OC Media (18.07.2017), <https://oc-media.org/ru/statyi/chto-vazhnee-azerbayodzanskim-zhurnalistam-besplatnaya-kvartira-ili-svobodnaya-sreda/> (download date: 10.08.2024).

Federation. It was a document that brought the relations between the two signatory countries to the level of “*strategic rapprochement*”, which implies, among other things, delicate handling of incoming and outgoing information about each other. This is true regardless of whether the media in question are state-owned or (formally) independent. After all, the media in both Russia and Azerbaijan cannot ignore the position of the authorities. However, Baku has preferred not to go down the path of censoring Russian issues in the controlled media. And this contrasts with Moscow, which imposed a taboo on topics and narratives unfavorable for Azerbaijani partners across the entire width of the multidimensional information front. On the contrary, with the beginning of the SMO, Azerbaijani information content exploded with anti-Russian sentiments and accusations of Moscow's aggression. For example, *haqqin.az* not only accused Moscow of attacking Ukrainian territories outside the “*disputed territories*”, but also launched an information campaign to create Russophobic sentiments in Azerbaijan and demarche against “*allied relations*”. From the very first days of SMO, the editor-in-chief E. Fatullayev personally went to Ukraine to cover the events from the ground and “*expose the neo-imperialist attempts of Putin's Russia*”. The terminology and accents of the material presented by *haqqin.az* on the topic of “*Russian invasion*” of Ukraine exceeded in intensity the similar content of Western and even Ukrainian media resources, widely using such terms as “*invaders*”, “*murderers*”, “*aggressors*”, “*insidious attack*”, “*acts of genocide*”, etc.

The specific activity of a popular Russian-language resource could not but attract the attention of the Russian authorities. According to reports, Moscow unsuccessfully asked Baku to revise *haqqin.az's* anti-Russian rhetoric. Baku refused to comply with this request, citing the independent status of the resource and allegedly the 1998 decree of H. Aliyev on freedom of the press and promotion of its objective activity, which was “*impeccably observed*” by the republic's authorities. As a result of the futile requests of the Russian side, in March 2022 Roskomnadzor decided to block the Azerbaijani website on the territory of the Russian Federation at the request of the Prosecutor General's Office due to “*the content of the information on it with incitements to unrest, extremism, as well as for the dissemination of inaccurate information disseminated under the guise of reliable reports*”⁵.

Thus, the propaganda resource was deprived of a large target audience in Russia, which could not but affect the number of its viewers and financial revenues. Obviously, both the information portal itself and the Azerbaijani authorities behind it actively lobbied for the possibility of *haqqin.az's* return to the Russian media space, which resulted in Roskomnadzor's decision to unblock its work in Russia exactly one year later. It can be assumed that the relevant structures in the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan reached an agreement on the transfer of the website's activities into the mainstream of “*constructivism*” and “*objective presentation of information*”, without processing and presenting it in a propagandistic manner: Moscow would hardly compromise with other conditions.

It would be logical to expect that in this case *haqqin.az* would abandon its previous methods of reporting on events in Ukraine and its way of presenting them with biased

⁵ Roskomnadzor of Russia blocked access to Azerbaijani websites *haqqin.az* and *minval.az* (in Rus.), Verelq (17.03.2022) <https://verelq.am/ru/node/105749/> (download date: 09.08.2024).

commentary. But, as reality shows, this did not happen. Perhaps the style of information presentation and categorical formulations were slightly modified, but the tone and accents of both news reports and analytical and journalistic essays retained the same propaganda-ideological matrix of Russian–Ukrainian issues. This has become particularly evident since the beginning of August 2024, when the hostilities between Moscow and Kiev spread to the territory of the Russian Federation. In “reports from the front” on the pages of *haqqin.az*, terminology questioning the territorial integrity of a “strategic ally” began to reappear. The term “*Ukrainian Crimea*” has reappeared in the relevant content⁶. Moscow “acquired” a new image of the organizer and sponsor of bloody coups and conflicts on other continents⁷. Russia was once again portrayed as a plunderer of Ukrainian wealth⁸. The Russian military became an object of ridicule and outright mockery for its “*inability to fight*”⁹.

The list goes on. The pages of the “*independent*” Russian-language portal *haqqin.az*, as well as dozens of other Azerbaijani media outlets, are once again full of unflattering language and anti-Russian tone, and information is processed in a distinctly harsh manner toward the northern neighbor. At the same time, this trend is getting worse.

Perhaps, from an objective point of view, there is nothing unacceptable in what has been described. “*Absolute freedom of speech*” in Azerbaijan does not mean any restrictions on the part of the state, and censorship can be conducted only in accordance with the legal acts of the republic, which, by the way, are quite liberal in comparison with other countries. However, considering the realities of Azerbaijan, it can be said that the anti-Russian campaign conducted in the Azerbaijani press cannot be initiated by the media themselves or only by them.

However, the main problem in this case is not the unscrupulous game of the Azerbaijani side against its “ally” – the Russian Federation, but the attitude of Russia itself to this fact. More precisely, the absence of any attitude and, accordingly, of an adequate response. At the same time, official Moscow has so far strictly adhered to its commitments to create a more than favorable image of Azerbaijan in the Russian information field. It has its own good reasons for doing so, which stretches its forced patience over time. But on the other hand, the algorithm of such a game exclusively “*in one gate*” every day removes the possibility of restoring the balance of mutual trust relations between the “*strategic allies*”.

⁶ Successful operation of Ukrainian intelligence officers (in Rus.), *haqqin.az* (07.08.2024). <https://haqqin.az/news/324332/> (download date: 10.08.2024).

⁷ Ukraine is expanding the front against Russia in Africa as well (in Rus.), *haqqin.az* (08.08.2024) <https://haqqin.az/news/324441/> (download date: 10.08.2024).

⁸ Special services detained an Azerbaijani citizen: he was exporting Ukrainian grain from Crimea, (in Rus.) *haqqin.az* (11.07.2024) <https://haqqin.az/news/321832/> (download date: 10.08.2024).

⁹ Mirror of Russia's defeat in Kursk (in Rus.), *haqqin.az* (10.08.2024) <https://haqqin.az/oldage/324628/> (download date: 10.08.2024).