

Azerbaijan: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Vera Choo, Samantha Custer, and Rodney Knight for their advice and assistance in the research and compilation of this profile. We additionally want to acknowledge AidData’s team of student Research Assistants who collected data for this project, including Diane Frangulea, Maggie Herndon, Daniel Highland, Katherine Hughes, Sonia Kelly, Morgan King, Deb Kornblut, Amelia

Larson, Abby Maher, Daniella Marx, Harper Ortlieb, Caroline Prout, Andrew Tanner,
Emmeline Walker, Sophia Zaman, and Noa Zielinski.

Introduction

What are the entry points for foreign actors to shape and influence the narrative in the Azerbaijani media market? This profile seeks to address some of the entry points related to media ownership and Russian state-owned media. AidData recognizes that malign influence may permeate narrative creation in other ways, including the republishing of foreign content in domestic media outlets, interactions on social media, and journalist biases. However, this project focuses solely on direct and indirect ownership of traditional domestic media outlets to flesh out entry points for Russian influence through elites and media owners. By better understanding Azerbaijan's domestic media ownership environment, including what media outlets citizens consume and who the owners of those outlets are, we can anticipate entry points where malign actors may try to influence domestic narratives.

Azerbaijan remains one of the least transparent countries in the Europe and Eurasia region.¹ A complex web of shell companies and proxy owners obscure who really owns and de facto controls Azerbaijan's domestic media market. Since owners of top media houses have the potential to influence the content and tone of topics covered by journalists in their employ, understanding who owns the media is crucial to identifying avenues for influence and potential bias in reporting. In this profile, we begin to close this gap with an in-depth look at domestic media ownership in Azerbaijan.

This media ownership profile and the supporting data were prepared by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute.² The data for this profile was collected manually by AidData staff and student research assistants. We began by conducting web searches to identify a list of media in Azerbaijan, and then identified a list of the top-ranked outlets in terms of overall consumption. We then used this information to gather the ownership data. We used cross-country sources when

¹ Bak, Mathias. "Overview of Corruption and Anti-Corruption in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine." Published July 4, 2020.

² This profile is part of a collaboration with the USAID E&E Bureau made possible through a buy-in to a Higher Education Solutions Network cooperative agreement (AID-A-12-00096) in place between USAID/LAB/HESN, AidData, and William & Mary.

available (e.g., Zenith, Alexa³), as well as Turkish business registries, survey data and media watchdog sources, and other open source data. This profile includes data for the entire country of Azerbaijan and does not separate out any information that may differ in breakaway regions, such as Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the following sections, we provide summary data on the presence of Russian state-owned media, top outlets, and media ownership in Azerbaijan as of 2021 (or the most contemporary data available). This profile focuses on the ownership of traditional broadcast, print, and online media outlets. Social media is not included in this analysis. By mapping out the ownership and influence of traditional forms of media, these profiles lend insights into potential channels for foreign influence in the top consumed outlets.

Russian Media Footprints

The most direct form of Kremlin influence in Azerbaijan's media landscape is via Russian state-owned media (see Table 1). Nine of the eleven Russian state-owned media outlets we tracked have a physical presence in Azerbaijan, which provides the Kremlin with a potent channel to directly communicate with, and ultimately influence, Azerbaijani citizens. Physical presence includes physical infrastructure, such as cable packages, physical office space or local bureaus, and radio broadcasters, but excludes satellite broadcasting and online or streaming availability. Table 1 provides a basic footprint of Russian state-owned media presence in Azerbaijan, but does not speak to how well-consumed each outlet is by Azerbaijani citizens.

³ Zenith is a media intelligence database that provides insights into media, including television viewership and newspaper circulation, in several dozen countries around the world. Alexa is an online analysis tool. AidData Staff used Alexa's API to gauge website traffic. <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo>.

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Azerbaijan, 2021

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✓	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✗	Sputnik	✓	TASS	✓
Russia 24	✓					Sputnik	✓
Russia K	✓						
RTR-Planeta	✓						
TV Centre	✓						
Channel One	✗						
RT	✓						

Other indirect forms of Russian influence are possible, including domestic outlets republishing narratives and pro-Russian journalists in-country. In this profile, AidData has captured direct Russian channels of influence through state-owned media infrastructure.

Top Media Outlets

Table 2 identifies the top five most-consumed media outlets in Azerbaijan by medium (television, print, radio, and online) based on cross-sectional indicators such as viewership share and circulation. According to a European Union opinion poll, television and internet are the most consumed mediums for information in Azerbaijan and are therefore likely more influential, while radio and print media are less consumed.⁴ While we cannot know the exact influence of each individual outlet, we can assume that outlets that reach higher numbers of consumers have greater potential to influence more citizens. Despite the presence of nine measured Russian state-owned media outlets in Azerbaijan, none of the tracked Russian state media appears in the top five outlets for any medium.

⁴ "Opinion Survey 2020: Azerbaijan." EU Neighbors East. Published June 16, 2020. <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news-and-stories/opinion-polls/opinion-survey-2020-azerbaijan/>.

AidData used a weighted average of media consumption survey rankings from 2017 to 2021 to determine the top media outlets in Azerbaijan. This strategy offers a more long-term perspective of top media outlets, rather than a snapshot of the top media outlets right now. As such, the top outlets may not exactly reflect the current order of most-consumed outlets, but do show a solid picture of the media landscape over the past five years. Recent rankings are weighted more heavily to adjust for new changes.⁵

Table 2: Top Azerbaijani media outlets ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Television	Print	Radio	Online
1	ATV	Azerbaijan	Azad Azerbaijan Radio	Oxu.az
2	Xezer TV	Bizim Yol	İctimai Radio	yenicag.az
3	AzTV	Yeni Müsavat	Radio 106 FM	Qafqazinfo.az
4	İctimai Televiziya (İTV)	The Azeri Times	Media FM	Haqqin.az
5	ARB TV	525 Qəzet	Avto FM	musavat.com

According to findings from an AidData survey of regional and local media experts in 2021, the majority of top Azerbaijan outlets mirror the results of open-source data collection by AidData researchers. However, additional outlets excluded from this list but ranked highly by local experts include the television channel ANS TV, the print outlet Internews Azerbaijan, the radio stations ASAN Radio and Azadliq Radiosu, and the online outlets meydan.tv, 1news.az, azadliq.info, and azertag.az.

Foreign media is limited in Azerbaijan, and live broadcasts from foreign media outlets are against the law. However, foreign outlets in Azerbaijan are available via cable and satellite packages. AidData staff partially used Nielsen ratings from the Azerbaijani

⁵ Television, Print and Radio sources: Television, radio and print rankings were calculated using multiple publicly available surveys and circulation data, including an AidData survey of country and regional experts conducted in summer 2021. Additional survey data came from: Business Insight’s “Most Listening Radio Channels Research Report” (May 2020), IREX’s Media Sustainability Index (2019), and media reports on official Nielsen ratings from Fins.az (2017), Facemark.az (2018), and Fed.az (2020). Online sources: Alexa, April 2021

government to determine the top national outlets. Viewership of foreign channels was not reported publicly under the most recent ratings and was not available after 2018. These ratings were outdated and did not significantly affect the overall rankings in this report; however, it is worth noting that the Turkish outlets Star TV and TV8, as well as the Russian state-owned outlet Channel One, were among the most-consumed outlets in Azerbaijan in 2018.⁶ In 2020, research from Ilgar Seyidov noted that Turkish and Russian channels are preferred and predominantly consumed by the Azerbaijani population, who seem to largely distrust national media.⁷ As a result, the influence of foreign outlets is likely understated in the top outlets of this report and in official Azerbaijan government media consumption rankings.

Media Ownership

Table 3 lists the ownership information of top Azerbaijani media outlets by medium (television, newspaper, radio, and online). Azerbaijan remains highly secretive about media ownership and has no public central database that tracks media outlets or media owners. According to one Azerbaijani media expert interviewed by AidData staff, ownership on paper means very little in Azerbaijan, as media outlets will often name individuals that are not the true owners or are only partial owners as the sole owner of the outlet. This lack of transparency about who owns domestic outlets has two important repercussions with the potential to undercut the resilience of Azerbaijan's media sector. Absent mandatory public disclosure of ownership, conflicts of interest, and financing, media outlets are more vulnerable to both domestic corruption and foreign influence, as their owners can more easily conceal their ties with domestic and foreign organizations or governments. Further examples of ownership ties and relationships are discussed in the following section.

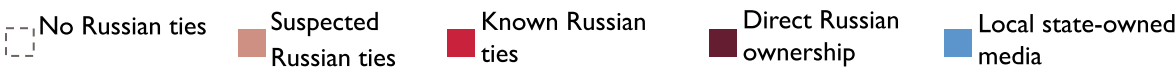
In order to highlight which outlets may be more susceptible to Russian influence, AidData staff have devised a four-point scale to indicate levels of Russian ownership. This scale is color-coded shades of red in the table below to indicate 1) Direct Russian

⁶ "Azərbaycanlılar ən çox hansı kanala baxır? – Reytinq." Facemark.az. Published July 31, 2018. <https://www.facemark.az/site/news/8529/azerbaycanlilar-en-cox-hansi-kanala-baxir-reytinq-8529.html>.

⁷ Seyidov, Ilgar. "As quiet as a mouse": Media use in Azerbaijan" Communications, vol. 45, no. s1, 2020, pp. 893-911. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2020-0021>.

ownership, 2) Known Russian ties, 3) Suspected Russian ties, and 4) No Russian ties. Additionally, Azerbaijani state-owned media is color-coded blue. In Azerbaijan, no owners had suspected or known ties to the Russian government, and no top outlets had direct Russian ownership. As such, this profile has no red color-coded outlets and four designations of state-owned media.

Table 3: Ownership of top Azerbaijani media outlets by share

Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)
					
Television	1	ATV	Azad Azərbaycan Müstəqil Teleradio Kompaniyası	Unknown	Unknown
	2	Xezer TV	"Xəzər TV" Məhdud Məsuliyyətli Cəmiyyətinin	Unknown	Unknown
	3	AzTV	Azerbaijan Television and Radio Broadcasting CJSC (Government of Azerbaijan)		100
	4	İctimai Televiziya (İTV)	Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (Government of Azerbaijan)		100
	5	ARB TV	ARB Media Group	İsmet Səttarov	Unknown
Print	1	Azərbaycan	Government of Azerbaijan		100
	2	Bizim Yol	Bizim Yol LLC	Bəhəddin Həziyev	100
	3	Yeni Məsəvat	Yeni Məsəvat Media Group	Rauf Arifoglu	100
	4	Azeri Times	AzeriTimes.com LLC	Ziya İbrahim	100
	5	525 Qəzet	525 LLC	Rəşad Məjid	100
Radio	1	Azad Azərbaycan Radio	Azad Azərbaycan Müstəqil Teleradio Kompaniyası	Unknown	Unknown

	2	İctimai Radio	Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (Government of Azerbaijan)		100
	3	Radio 106 FM	Azad Azərbaycan Müstəqil Teleradio Kompaniyası	Unknown	Unknown
	4	Media FM	Digital Media LLC	Nigar Mehdiyeva Rustam Aliyev Anara Ismayilova Aysel Akbarova	Unknown Unknown Unknown Unknown
	5	Avto FM	Pro Media Group	Unknown	Unknown
Online	1	Oxu.az	Global Media Group	Elnur Abdullayev Gazi Karadag	Majority Minority
	2	yenicag.az	Yeni Cag Media Group	Agil Alasger	100
	3	Qafqazinfo.az	"Qafqazinform MMC" Limited Liability Company	Elbrus Arud	100
	4	Haqqin.az	"For Human Rights" Public Union	Eynulla Fatullayev	100
	5	musavat.com	Yeni Musavat Media Group	Rauf Arifoglu	100

Results

Television

While television is the most-consumed medium in Azerbaijan,⁸ Azerbaijan lacks a diversity of owners in top television outlets. According to IREX's Media Sustainability Index, all top television channels in Azerbaijan are either owned directly by the government or by private companies with ties to ruling political elites.⁹ Additionally, ownership opacity of print and broadcast media is backed by law and protects the mechanisms of clandestine control over media outlets. Media legislation passed in

⁸ "Opinion Survey 2020: Azerbaijan." EU Neighbors East. Published June 16, 2020.

⁹ "Azerbaijan 2016: Media Sustainability Index." International Research and Exchanges Board. Published 2016.

<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2016-azerbaijan.pdf>.

2012 allows companies to withhold information about ownership structure, severely limiting ownership transparency in Azerbaijan.¹⁰ Due to these systems of opacity, owners of television outlets are difficult to determine.

The presence of the Azerbaijani government in the television sector is apparent. The third and fourth most-watched outlets in Azerbaijan, AzTV and Ictimai TV, are state-owned outlets. Additionally, a deeper look into the fifth most-watched outlet, ARB TV, clearly shows the fingerprints of the Azerbaijani government. Ismet Sattarov, longtime Director and Head of ARB Media Group, is also the Chairman of the National Television and Radio Council (NTRC), the main broadcast regulator in Azerbaijan. Sattarov has clear ties to the Aliyev government, as he formerly worked for the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the private charitable foundation of the former president of Azerbaijan and father of the current president, Ilham Aliyev.¹¹ While Sattarov is confirmed to be a stakeholder in ARB TV, it is unknown if he is the sole shareholder of the channel.

The management of the second most-consumed television channel, Xezer TV, also has clear ties to the government. While he is no longer in charge of the company, the rise of Shamkhal Hasanli to President of Xezer TV in January 2016 highlights the level of government control over the television sector. Hasanli is the son of Ali Hasanov, head of the social-political department of the Azerbaijani Presidential Administration, and Sona Veliyeva, a voting member of the NTRC. However, Hasanli was subsequently fired from the position and replaced with Azerbaijani showman Murad Dadashov in July 2020.

For outlets where ownership could be determined, all of the owners of top television outlets are either directly or indirectly tied to the current Azerbaijani administration. However, most of the ownership remains opaque. The true owners of both top outlets, Azad Azerbaijan TV (ATV) and Xezer TV, are unclear. While local news outlets report on the presidents of these two broadcasters, Azer Khalilov and Murad Dadashov

¹⁰ "Azerbaijan: Concerns Regarding Freedom of the Media and Freedom of Expression." Human Rights Watch. Published November 2, 2012.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/02/azerbaijan-concerns-regarding-freedom-media-and-freedom-expression>.

¹¹ "Ismet Sattarov headed the National Broadcasting Council (NBC)." Turan.az. Published April 6, 2020.

<https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2020/4/free/politics%20news/en/122970.htm>

respectively, ownership stakes in these major media outlets are indeterminate. While none of the owners that we were able to identify had ties to the Russian government, the opaque ownership structure and government control of television channels provides potential vulnerabilities for foreign influence.

Print

Print media, particularly independent print media, is nearly non-existent in Azerbaijan.¹² Even some of the top print media outlets recorded in our rankings have recently ceased to produce print versions and have fully moved to online circulation, such as the second most-read newspaper, Bizim Yol.¹³ AidData staff have determined that many print owners continue to have influence in the Azerbaijani media space and have decided that recording top print outlet ownership is valuable. Our rankings rely on a weighted average of the past five years to produce a more comprehensive picture, rather than relying on a current snapshot, meaning that some print outlets that have ceased printing are still in our top rankings. However, it is worth noting that these newspapers predominantly rely on online readership in Azerbaijan and not print circulation. Currently, many print media outlets in Azerbaijan are wholly reliant on state funding in order to survive, meaning that many top print outlets are either owned directly by the government or by private companies with ties to ruling political elites.¹⁴ Following this trend, the top most-consumed newspaper in Azerbaijan is the state-owned outlet "Azerbaijan."

The second most-read newspaper, Bizim Yol, was founded by current editor-in-chief Bahaddin Haziyeu. Though Bizim Yol has moved to a solely online format, the newspaper was influential in its print format. Haziyeu is a long-time journalist, and has been subject to harassment by the Azerbaijani government, most recently in July

¹² "Space for Free Media in Azerbaijan Shrinking, Journalists Say." Voice of America. Published May 7, 2020. https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom_space-free-media-azerbaijan-shrinking-journalists-say/6188888.html.

¹³ "'Bizim Yol' un çap versiyası dayandı." Bizim Yol. Published January 31, 2019. <https://www.bizimyol.info/az/news/139684.html>.

¹⁴ Seyidov, Ilgar. "'As quiet as a mouse': Media use in Azerbaijan" Communications, vol. 45, no. s1, 2020, pp. 893-911.

2021.¹⁵ The third most-read newspaper is Yeni Musavat, the newspaper of journalist and politician Rauf Arifoglu. Formerly a member of the opposition Musavat Party, Arifoglu started Yeni Musavat to support his political ideology. Currently, Yeni Musavat is largely pro-government, following Arifoglu's departure from the Musavat Party; however, like Haziyev, the government also spied on Arifoglu as revealed in July 2021.¹⁶ While Haziyev and Arifoglu are longtime journalists and the founders of these newspapers, the final owners and beneficiaries of their newspapers are likely tied to the state. Print media heavily relies on state funding to remain afloat and the true ownership structure is highly opaque, meaning that while journalists are presented as "owners," they are likely not the principal beneficiaries of their own newspapers.

The fourth most-read newspaper in Azerbaijan is the Azeri Times, a New York-based newspaper with a large online presence created by Ziya Ibrahim, a member of the Azerbaijani diaspora. Little is known about Ziya Ibrahim, and the ownership structure of the newspaper is entirely opaque.

Finally, the fifth most-read newspaper in Azerbaijan is 525 Qezet, founded and run by longtime journalist Rashad Majid. Majid has held positions in government before, including most recently as a member of the Management Board of the Azerbaijan Press Council, a regulatory body for media in Azerbaijan.¹⁷ Through his roles, Majid has ties to the Azerbaijani government. It is possible, but unlikely, that Majid is the final beneficiary of 525 Qezet, as reliance on state funding and pressure by the Azerbaijani government in the print sector has resulted in few independent newspapers. However, his ties to the government may mean that it is more likely that he owns his newspaper, as opposed to Haziyev's or Arifoglu's alleged ownership of their respective newspapers.

No final beneficiaries could be determined for any privately owned print outlet in Azerbaijan, though the identified founders and proxy owners provide some insight into the mechanisms of state control over print media in Azerbaijan. As noted above, the opaque ownership structure of traditional media in Azerbaijan highlights potential

¹⁵ "Bahaddin Haziyev." Journalists for Justice. Published July 19, 2021. <https://jfi.fund/jfi/bahaddin-haziyev/>.

¹⁶ "Azerbaijan suspected of spying on journalists using Israeli Pegasus spyware." JAM News. Published July 19, 2021.

<https://jam-news.net/azerbaijan-suspected-of-spying-on-journalists-using-israeli-pegasus-spyware/>

¹⁷ "Rashad Majid." Report.az. Published 2018. <https://report.az/en/person/rashad-majid/>.

vulnerabilities for foreign influence. While no clear foreign influence was identified amongst the founders and proxy owners of the newspapers, the true beneficiaries of these outlets is unknown, providing a clear avenue for undetected influence.

Radio

Like television and print media, radio in Azerbaijan is opaque, state-controlled, and centralized around the same major companies. The second most-consumed radio station is the public station Ictimai Radio, controlled by the government of Azerbaijan. The most-consumed and third most-consumed media outlets, Radio Azad Azerbaijan and Radio 106 FM, are both owned by the wholly opaque Free Azerbaijan Independent Television and Radio Company (Azad Azərbaycan Müstəqil Teleradio Kompaniyası), which also owns top television outlet ATV. While Azer Khalilov is known to be the president and director of the company, the ultimate beneficiaries of Azad Azerbaijan are unknown.

The fourth most-consumed radio station is Media FM, which is owned by Digital Media LLC. Digital Media LLC was founded by Nigar Mehdiyeva, the daughter-in-law of Ramiz Mehdiyev, longtime head of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan, and a powerful ally of the Aliyev government. Mehdiyeva founded Digital Media LLC along with Anara Ismayilova, the first Director of Media FM, and Aysel Akbarova. However, Ismayilova was eventually replaced as director by Rustam Aliyev, the director and owner of Antenna Television and Radio Company.¹⁸ As a result, the Mehdiyev family directly owns Media FM, with deeper connections to Antenna Television and Radio Company, providing some insight into how powerful politicians control the traditional media space.

Lastly, the fifth most-consumed radio station is Avto FM, owned by Pro Media Group (PMG). The ownership structure of this company is completely opaque as well, continuing the trend of ownership opacity. The only clear owners of top radio stations in Azerbaijan are the government of Azerbaijan and the Mehdiyev family, which is a part of the current regime. As noted, opacity of ownership and clear government

¹⁸ "Ramiz Mehdiyevin biznes imperiyası - ŞOK SİYAHİ." IfadeTV. Published September 3, 2020. <http://ifadetv.com/1818-ramiz-mehdiyevin-biznes-imperiyasi-sok-syah.html>.

control over the media opens channels to foreign influence in the Azerbaijani media space.

Online

Online outlets are an increasingly important medium of information in Azerbaijan. While the government has attempted to censor some foreign and opposition media online, online outlets remain less controlled by the state than traditional media.¹⁹ However, political elites still have a strong presence in top online outlets. For example, the most-visited online outlet in Azerbaijan is Oxu.az, owned by Global Media Group, an Azerbaijan-based media company registered in Turkey. Majority owner Elnur Abdullayev is a former Chief of the State Automobile Service of Azerbaijan and has ties to the state oil company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) as well.²⁰ Global Media Group, in addition to owning Oxu.az, owns a number of Turkish and Azerbaijani television stations, including Haber Global, highlighting the presence of political elites in the media space.

Additionally, some online outlets follow the same form of proxy control as print outlets. Rauf Arifoglu, founder of the fifth most-consumed online outlet Musavat.com, and Eynulla Fatullayev, founder of the fourth most-consumed online outlet Haqqin.az, are both pro-government journalists. It is unlikely that either of these founders are the true beneficiaries of the outlets, and particularly not Fatullayev, who spent four years in prison before transitioning his newspaper into an ally of the Aliyev government.²¹ As such, through both censorship and traditional tactics, the government of Azerbaijan has increased its control of online outlets.

However, when it comes to the second and third most-consumed online outlets, Yenicag.az and Qafqazinfo.az, government control is less apparent. Yenicag.az owner Agil Alasger and Qafqazinfo.az owner Elbrus Arud are both journalists and share less

¹⁹ "Space for Free Media in Azerbaijan Shrinking, Journalists Say." Voice of America. Published May 7, 2020.

²⁰ Gokdemir, Orhan. "SOCAR'ın sakar kraliçesinin aşırı acıklı hikayesi." SolTV. Published August 1, 2020. <https://haber.sol.org.tr/yazar/socarin-sakar-kralicesinin-asiri-acikli-hikayesi-11034>.

²¹ Kucera, Joshua. "Azerbaijan: Government Watchdog Transforms Into Attack Dog." Eurasianet. Published March 16, 2017.

<https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-government-watchdog-transforms-into-attack-dog>.

direct connections to the Azerbaijani government than other broadcast or print media owners. However, Yeni Cag remains a print outlet as well, meaning that Alasger may be subject to further pressures from the Azerbaijan government. In sum, while the Azerbaijan government has less control over the online media space, many top online outlets in Azerbaijan are still subject to censorship and other mechanisms of control by the regime.

Conclusion

In this brief, we have presented an overview of the domestic media ownership environment of Azerbaijan. The collected data highlight two trends in Azerbaijani media. First, the opaque and government-controlled nature of the media environment of Azerbaijan creates vulnerabilities to foreign influence. Second, foreign influence plays a significant role in the media environment of Azerbaijan and may be understated in top media rankings.

The opacity of media ownership in Azerbaijan is defended by law and is intended to protect from institutional corruption by members of the Azerbaijani political elite. However, this structure may have unintended consequences in protecting owners with foreign ties or foreign interests. Under the current opaque system, foreign money can more readily infiltrate the media market, allowing foreign narratives and influence to permeate through the Azerbaijani population undetected.

Additionally, the influence of foreign outlets, predominantly Turkish and Russian outlets, is likely understated in reports of the media consumption habits of Azerbaijani citizens. Government control over traditional media has led to an increased reliance on foreign and online outlets for non-government news, which means that foreign governments may have a larger direct audience in Azerbaijan than previously realized. Nine Russian state-owned media outlets are available in Azerbaijan, even if they are not allowed to broadcast live, meaning that Russian influence is present.

In sum, the Azerbaijan media environment provides significant channels for Russian government influence. Through top-down means, such as leveraging political power to influence Azerbaijani politicians that own media outlets, or through bottom-up means,

such as directly influencing the Azerbaijani population online, the Russian government has many potential avenues to manipulate media narratives in Azerbaijan.