

EPF Project: “Institutionalizing Freedom of Expression in Armenia”

Summary of Recommendations

May 2009

This paper summarizes recommendations made to EPF on issues related to freedom of expression. The recommendations were made to EPF during a consultation meeting in Tzaghkadzor on January 30-February 1, 2009, and developed during meetings of a working group made up of consultation participants on March 13, 2009 and April 20, 2009.

Those who participated in the meetings emphasized a number of obstacles which must be overcome in order to protect freedom of expression in Armenia. The following is a list of those obstacles:

- Unresolved conflicts with neighboring states
- Scarcity or lack of information, as well as limitation of information flow
- Censorship, self-censorship and the absence of truly free and unbiased TV stations
- The devaluation of the meaning of freedom of expression
- A culture of poverty
- Social taboos
- Intolerance
- Deficiencies in the relevant laws and in enforcement of those laws, as well as the general absence of rule of law
- Economic factors, including corruption and bribery
- Lack of technology (i.e. poor internet connections)
- The public’s passivity and lack of civic action on the issue
- Education problems and lack of professionalism
- Authoritarian governance and the lack of true leadership

Resources which can be employed to overcome these obstacles to freedom of expression were also discussed. The following suggestions were developed:

Suggestions to civil society and the public

- **Increase the role of the government.** Civil society and the public should cooperate with their leaders, even if the majority of people consider those leaders illegitimate. Through continuous dialogue and by looking for means to express its ideas, the public (and civil society on its behalf) can galvanize its power for the nation’s security and development.
- **Expand cooperation with local and international organizations** to develop agendas, set goals, and ensure freedom of expression during public events, as well as to use modern technologies as an alternative source of expression.
- **Assist in increasing various methods of expression:**
 - a. Through internet clubs or “internet-renting” through CDs and DVDs, spread information about information technology (for example, how to upload photos, videos or recordings from a cellular phone onto YouTube or an Armenian version, how to send materials to an e-newspaper website, or how to prepare a video). This will greatly benefit the spread of “civic journalism.”
 - b. Create sections on popular websites related to professional fields (such as art, literature, politics, and high tech). Local and international information and news pertaining to the given specialties will be offered on these sites, including press analysis. When creating the sections, engage as administrators professionals who have international experience in their fields. Announce the new sections of these sites through the internet, press, and television to generate public interest.

- **Contribute to willingness to defend freedom of expression**
 - a. Research successful examples of when freedom of expression was defended in independent Armenia (for example, the steps undertaken by Gala TV station and “Asparez” Journalists’ Club to allow the independent TV station to continue operating when under threat of closure) to draw attention to the reasons for their success. These reasons include good legal knowledge, exhausting all legal options, readiness for a long-lasting struggle, cooperation with civil society organizations, and persistence in the defense of individual rights by avoiding unnecessary politicization of the issue. Widely publicize these success stories by producing a documentary film which can be shown on the internet, on television, and during public discussions.
 - b. Contribute to the widespread growth of legal knowledge pertaining to freedom of expression. Prepare films and videos, organize a television series, and submit newspaper and internet publications, as well as conduct discussions on websites (such as “ask a lawyer” or “legal consultancy sites. For the same purpose, NGOs should undertake legal projects which include a hotline and free-of-charge legal consultations to citizens, whose freedom of expression has been limited. NGOs should also conduct annual lectures on basic rights.
- **Create freedom of expression centers which assist with issues of immediate concern to the public.** Create district-level centers, where residents will be able to raise their concerns (for example, garbage collection, cleanliness of the area, lighting, illegal destruction of buildings’ foundations, issues regarding basements and garages, illegal stylistic changes to buildings or their upper floors, or noise from nearby business establishments). The centers, with the involvement of lawyers, engineers, architects, and other community members, will present these issues to the appropriate municipality or village governor and remain persistent until problems are solved.
- **Maintain contact with society.** Carry out discussions and research publications regarding national issues (economic, social, and cultural). Based on the results of these discussions and research, report conclusions and suggestions to government bodies. In this way, state-society mutual relations will be maintained.
- **Create a fund to assist journalists,** the purpose of which will be to protect the rights of journalists against all possible infringements, including through financing judicial proceedings on their behalf.
- **Periodically examine the condition of Freedom of Expression** in Armenia and give assessments and suggestions, making it the property of the public at large.

Suggestions to the Government

- **Differentiate between means of expression,** depoliticize them and make them attainable. In the modern world a government’s vitality depends on its competitiveness. Competitiveness in turn demands that the government pushes forward new ideas, projects and initiatives brought forth by society. In order to avoid losing track, government must function in an open and transparent manner. In order to improve, a country’s leaders must maintain contact with the public; they therefore should allow freedom of speech if they want to remain vital and competitive. In other words, a government’s survival depends on its respect towards freedom of expression.
- Ensure that the idea that **freedom of expression is necessary to ensure the government’s legitimacy** is ingrained. A leadership isolated from its public is weaker and less secure in the face of foreign threats. By accepting freedom of speech as a value, the government will prove that it is not scared to be criticized and in this way it will regain the public’s trust.

- **Seek public opinion through societal consultations, research and publications.** Ensuring stable dialogue between government representatives, working groups, cultural and information organizations and individuals, will help develop a set of principles, values and ideas which will improve the country's competitiveness.
- **Create or take advantage of distance learning opportunities:** considering the flaws in the Armenian education system, use distance-learning opportunities in order to prepare a generation which is well-educated and believes in democratic values. Distance learning also presents an opportunity to rely only on young people who remain in Armenia rather than those studying abroad, many of whom do not return.
- **Pursue rights violation cases that remain unpunished,** especially limitations on the media and violence committed against journalists
- **Ensure maximum transparency** in the government's work.
- **Make the internet more readily available.**
- **Do not inhibit the creation of new types of mass media.**

A number of topics have also been suggested for discussions on television and documentary films:

- Problems connected to education and freedom of expression
- Unsettled conflicts (neither war, nor peace) and their effects on freedom of expression
- The importance of freedom of expression for the development of society
- The lack of freedom of expression in daily life
- Mass media: is it a resource for freedom of expression, or an obstacle?
- Ethics and professionalism in journalism
- Journalists victimized: the journalist and the police

Other suggestions included holding additional public consultations and discussions on the following topics:

- Developing long-term resources on freedom of expression
- Freedom of expression and civic awareness,
- Civic orientations: essence and components
- Freedom of expression and individual, internal freedom
- The government and tolerance

The working group also suggested the formation of a **“Public Accord on an Alternative Screen.”** This “alternative screen” can be a forum for public discussion (either a face-to-face or virtual forum), as well as a series of television shows, through which various ideas will be presented to the public. The group emphasized that today in Armenia the existing “legitimate screen” is fully controlled and biased. It does not present the conceptual diversity that exists among the public. Yet cultural development and national values are formed through demonstrations of freedom of expression. The forum, or “alternative screen”, is created not only by the authors of the material contained there, but by their entire body of creative work. The discussions conducted by the forum will allow diverse ideas, thoughts, and beliefs to be available to the public. The groups suggested the following approach: by creating a new forum (alternative screen), neutralize the old one (that is, the official, which does not represent the public's true diversity). Creating a new “alternative screen” will be carried out step by step.

The working group will select seven to 14 professionals from different fields:

- The sciences, mathematics, astrology
- Culture, art, literature
- Education
- Information technology

- Business, finance, economics
- History, modern social sciences
- Industry
- Agriculture

Authors who have expressed their will to join will sign and publish a “Public Accord.” Authors who have joined the Public Accord agree to adopt the following principles:

- Demonstrate respect toward each other and toward the products of others
- Accept freedom of speech as a means to revitalize public thought
- Accept that by creating his/her “product” the author is no longer its sole proprietor. The response to the product becomes the main assessment of it, creating a variety of new understandings and analysis.
- During this analysis, an environment of truly diverse thought must be ensured. This usually does not take place in closed societies; diverse views are not created in narrow circles. The alternative screen must become a place where those views can be expressed.
- Competition should take place between analyses, understandings and ideas, and not between individuals

The selection of the first participants in the “Public Accord” is of great significance, because the expansion of the circle of participants will depend on the productivity of the work begun at this stage. The increase in the number of participants, in turn, depends on the dissemination of the Public Accord.