

Monday, October 27, 2008

[World Press Freedom | Caucasus does badly!](#)

Yet another index, and one with little happy news. How does world press freedom look? Reporters Without Borders, an advocacy group founded in 1985 ("investigate, expose, support"), has just released an international ranking. A total of 173 countries are ranked, and the Caucasus is in the bottom third.

Armenia does best, ranked at 102, but is also down sharply from last year, following the state of emergency. Armenia is behind Ukraine (87) and Moldova (98). Armenia shares its place with Turkey, which with restrictions on various topics has a curtailed public space.

Georgia, also down sharply, is ranked at 120, behind Sierra Leone, Indonesia and other troubled countries, but still ahead of Kazakhstan (125) and Russia (141). The press release notes the state of emergency imposed in late 2007, and that several journalists became victims of the recent conflict.

Azerbaijan is ranked at 150, following Swaziland, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and extraterritorial Israel, presumably the occupied territories. However, Azerbaijan is ahead of Zimbabwe (151), Belarus (154), Uzbekistan (172) and North Korea (173). Arguably, Azerbaijan should hope to move out of this company (where, as the report says, being a journalist "is a high risk exercise involving endless frustration and constant police and judicial harassment") and try to place itself closer to, say, Kuwait (61) or the United Arab Emirates (69), countries that build easy legitimacy through oil wealth.

But what exactly does the index measure? The website provides an overview over the methodology. The index is based on a survey with 49 questions, reflecting distinct criteria, and is available online. Attention is given to "every kind of violation directly affecting journalists (such as murders, imprisonment, physical attacks and threats) and news media (censorship, confiscation of newspaper issues, searches and harassment)." It also looks at whether those that violate press freedoms enjoy impunity. Moreover, it looks at legislation and the degree of self-censorship. Certainly, that's an important component: one friend, moderating a TV talk show found the producers interrupting through his earpiece, instructing him not to touch on certain topics.

While one has little reason to doubt that journalism is not in a happy state, and that unfortunately the rankings are broadly accurate, a little more detail on the methodology would have been useful. How are the different components weighted? To what extent, for example, was the sharp drop for Georgia explained by the recent conflict? Or did the index finally catch on more to problems of self-censorship? Or did it reflect, in particular, the violent closure of Imedi? Providing such detail would be helpful, since it could stimulate public debate, focusing on particular shortcomings.