

Gallup Survey: “Atmosphere Of Fear” Or “Provocation”?

By Marianna Grigoryan
ArmeniaNow.com

The recently published results of a Gallup poll shows that 70 percent of Armenia's population is afraid to express their political views.

About 1,000 residents aged 15 or older were interviewed on such issues as freedom of speech, with a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percent.

The organization's experts register that among other issues, a deep mistrust of politicians is taken as a serious issue in Armenia.

Along with “mistrust”, the index of expression about individual political preferences is also worrisome, the report says.

While in 2006 to the question “In your opinion, how many in our country, if any, are afraid to openly express their political views?” about 50 percent in Armenia answered “most” or “many”, then in 2007, the number of “those afraid” has increased by at least 20 percent reaching 70 percent.

In the survey conducted among former Soviet countries, a similarly high index of “fear” as in Armenia was registered only in Tajikistan. Then Armenia is followed by Moldova (more than 60 percent).

In neighboring Azerbaijan 60 percent avoid expressing their political views, while in Georgia and Russia the percentage figures are 55 and 40, respectively, according to the survey.

“In 10 of 14 former Soviet republics Gallup surveyed, residents' likelihood to say most or many people in their country are afraid to openly express their political views rose significantly between 2006 and 2007. In seven countries, the proportion responding this way now represents a majority,” the Gallup report says.

The “atmosphere of fear” that became a topic for heated discussion especially after the bloody events of March 1 in the aftermath of which more than a thousand people were detained by police and the opposition stated the presence of scores of political prisoners, is not new in Armenian reality, according to political analysts.

“Naturally, the atmosphere of fear aggravated especially this year in the periods before and after the presidential election,” says political analyst Aghasi Yenokyan. “People see that they may be detained and persecuted for participation in marches, a large number of well-known opposition members are in custody, some are in the underground. Isn't it all enough for an atmosphere of fear? Though, despite all this the anger of people is so great that they overcome this feeling unlike for example it was last year.”

Governing Republican Party of Armenia lawmaker Eduard Sharmazanov

says that he does not trust the results of such surveys. He says that perhaps there is some deficit of “justice and confidence” after the March 1 events, however insists that there can be no word about an atmosphere of fear.

“If someone goes around the republic today, will he really have an opinion that people are afraid to express their political views? Of course they won't,” Sharmazanov says. “Public rallies and



marches, political walks show that people are free. It is enough to go to Northern Avenue and see how people express their views.”

In mid-March Armenian lawmakers hastily adopted legislative amendments giving the authorities the muscle to ban demonstrations and rallies practically at will. Northern Avenue has since become a meeting point for the Armenian opposition where they have organized so-called “popular” or “political” walks to date.

Despite this, even during those walks numerous cases were registered when people were detained by police.

Artur Sakunts, head of the Vanadzor-based regional branch of the Armenian Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, says that the results of the Gallup survey are not surprising.

“That people in Armenia can be persecuted for political views is not news of course, however I want to say that as a result of continual pressures in the recent period people have become braver and overcome the fear,” Sakunts said.

Sociologist Aharon Adibekyan, who heads the Sociometer center, insists that Gallup results are far from reality.

“The post-election developments could not but have an impact on the formation of an atmosphere of fear,” Adibekyan tells ArmeniaNow. “However, the Gallup questions are mainly incorrect and are not meant for our country. We think that their data cannot be trusted. This is not a survey but something like a provocation.”

ATP's Nursery Micro-Enterprise Program Recognized As National Winner Of Energy Globe Award For Sustainability

BRUSSELS -- implemented by Armenia Tree Project (ATP) was selected as the National Winner for Armenia of the Energy Globe Awards, also known as the World Award for Sustainability. ATP representatives attended the awards ceremony on May 26 at the European Parliament in Brussels, where the program was selected from among 853 projects from 109 nations.

During the televised evening gala attended by 1,000 guests in the Plenary Hall of the EU Parliament, an honorary Energy Globe Award was presented to Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mikhail Gorbachev. EU Parliament President Hans-Gert Pottering and EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso presented the award to Mr. Gorbachev for his leadership role as a cofounder of Green Cross International.

The innovative ATP program recognized by the Energy Globe Awards earlier in the day is mitigating poverty-driven deforestation by creating micro-enterprise tree nurseries in the Getik River Valley of northern Armenia. These nurseries are owned by hundreds of Armenia's most impoverished families, who have doubled their annual income by participating in the backyard nursery program.

The afternoon program at the European Parliament included remarks

by President Mikhail Gorbachev and Maneka Gandhi, chairwoman of the Energy Globe Awards jury. The most innovative and sustainable projects from over 100 countries were recognized, from alternative energy projects in Bangladesh, Georgia, Kenya, Nicaragua, Poland, and Sri Lanka, to forestry projects in Argentina and Honduras.

The Energy Globe Awards was initiated by Wolfgang Neumann of Austria in 1999, and he is one of the presidents of the Energy Globe Foundation. Mr. Neumann has been involved with energy efficiency projects for 25 years and he has developed significant expertise in the field. During the evening program, awards went to a Peruvian waste management program, a project building wells in Mozambique, a parabolic power plant in Spain which produces emission-free energy, and a South African project that raises youth awareness of environmental issues. The overall winner was Austrian-based Fronius International, which operates zero emissions vehicles with hydrogen fuel produced by photovoltaic cells and electrolysis.

The television gala also included remarks by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and EU Council President Janez Jansa, as well as performances by Dionne Warwick, Alanis Morissette, and Zucchero.

European Court Judges In Favor Of A1plus TV

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cants' complaint about being refused broadcasting licenses on seven separate occasions.

A1 Plus, the only national channel that was not controlled by the Armenian authorities, was taken off the air in April 2002 after losing its broadcasting frequency in a tender that was administered by a president-appointed regulatory body. The National Television and Radio Commission (NTRC) did not provide clear reasons for its decision then and has blocked all of the company's subsequent attempts to win another frequency despite international pressure exerted on Yerevan.

The company's founding chairman Mesrop Movsesian wrote to the NTRC requesting reasons for the refusals of Meltex's bids, but the NTRC repeatedly replied that it only made decisions as to which was the best company, following which it granted or refused broadcasting licenses. Meltex brought several sets of proceedings in which it sought to have those decisions annulled and complained about the NTRC's failure to give written reasons for its decisions to refuse broadcasting licenses. Ultimately, the Armenian courts dismissed Meltex's claims as unfounded, finding that the calls for tenders concerning those seven bands had been carried out in accordance with the law.

The Strasbourg-based Court that Meltex lodged an application with in August 2004 found that the NTRC's refusal of Meltex's bids for broadcast-

ing licenses had effectively amounted to an “interference” with their freedom to impart information and ideas.

The Court considered that “a procedure which did not require a licensing body to justify its decisions did not provide adequate protection against arbitrary interference by a public authority with the fundamental right to freedom of expression.”

“The Court recalled the guidelines adopted by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in the domain of broadcasting regulation which called for open and transparent application of the regulations governing licensing procedures and specifically recommended that “[a]ll decisions taken ... by the regulatory authorities ... be ... duly reasoned”. Similarly, the Court pointed to a Resolution concerning Armenia by the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly of 27 January 2004 which had concluded that “the vagueness of the law in force ha[d] resulted in the [NTRC] being given outright discretionary powers,” the statement said.

The Court therefore concluded that the interference with Meltex's freedom to impart information and ideas, namely having been refused a broadcasting license on seven separate occasions, had not met the requirement of lawfulness under the European Convention, in violation of Article 10.

Since A1 Plus was controversially denied a new broadcasting license in 2002, New York-based watchdog Freedom House has ranked Armenia among countries with not free media.

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