

cover story

Fair, Free... And Oil

Western Journalists on Armenia's Elections

As the election campaign started to unfold in Armenia, dozens of foreign journalists were dispatched to Yerevan to cover the presidential elections—a place they described as a “small,” “mountainous,” “landlocked” country in the Caucasus, where “corruption is widespread and unemployment high.”

Based on a survey of 193 reports, between March 1 and April 1, by 19 foreign news agencies and newspapers, the most extensive coverage was provided by Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty (72 reports), Reuters (31 reports), and Agence France Presse (20 reports).

Some reports (RFE/RL) reflected in-depth knowledge of Armenia and the region, others (AFP, AP) provided a fairly balanced picture of the situation, some (Reuters, UK newspapers) were alarmist, and others showed serious political and geographic dyslexia.

CNN's Betsy Aarons, in a news report which aired on March 30, reported that in Nagorno Karabakh “the people are Iranian.” This is a “huge problem” Aarons noted. Indeed it is. She said, “For Armenians who live here, Nagorno Karabakh is now an independent state with a flag and a president. The state is not recognized by Azerbaijan or, for that matter, the rest of the world, excepting Armenia. But there is a

problem. A huge problem. On this land, claimed

by Azerbaijan, the people are Iranian.”

Two particular reporters were fascinated by Karen Demirchian's looks. Reuters' Lawrence Sheets' now famous “tall,” “charismatic,” “slicked-back hair” description was surpassed only by *The Independent's* Phil Reeves' “glossy-jowled, with a Clinton haircut and a silver tongue” description.

As for Robert Kocharian, Sheets'

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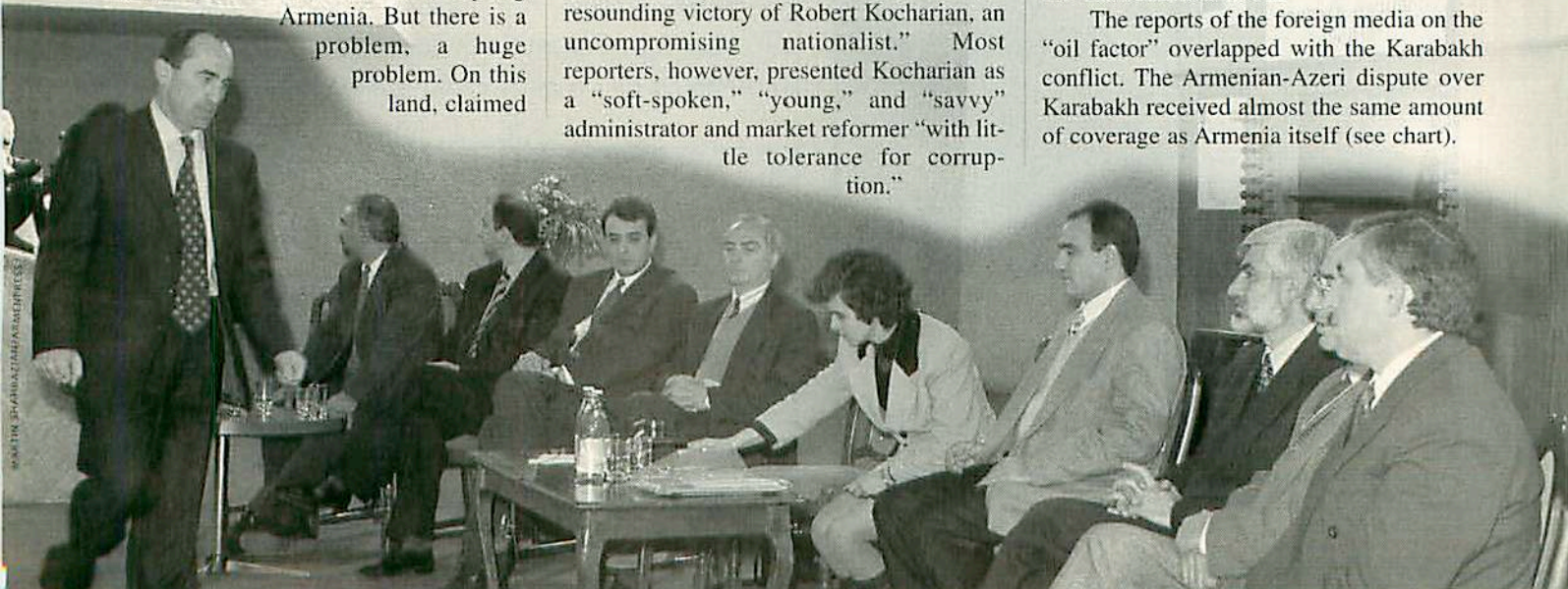
favorite descriptive terms were “nationalist” and “hardliner.” Borrowing from Sheets, on April 1, *The Guardian* heralded “the resounding victory of Robert Kocharian, an uncompromising nationalist.” Most reporters, however, presented Kocharian as a “soft-spoken,” “young,” and “savvy” administrator and market reformer “with little tolerance for corruption.”

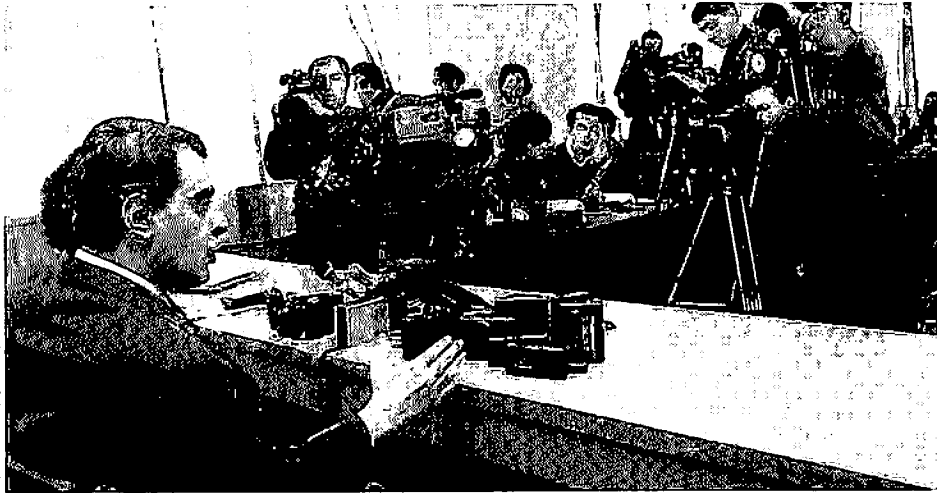
Two issues were of particular interest to foreign journalists: US and Western interest in Caspian oil and Armenia's past two not-so-free elections.

Unlike the 1996 presidential elections when coverage focused mostly on democracy in Armenia, the focus this time was more on the oil and pipeline politics in the region and Armenia's “negative” impact on regional economic developments vis-a-vis the conflict with Azerbaijan.

Voice of America's Michael Kelemen reflected what most journalists reported: “The vote comes against the backdrop of growing US interest in the oil business in Azerbaijan, which makes the continuation of Western aid and political support even more important for Armenia.” Generally, the 1998 vote was presented as a critical determinant for regional peace and economic development. *Boston Globe's* David Filipov wrote, “The Armenian vote could have serious implications for the race to develop the huge oil reserves in the Caspian Sea and the stability of the conflict-torn Caucasus region.” At times, the line of demarcation between oil politics and democratic elections were blurred. Commenting on the controversial preliminary OSCE statement, RFE/RL's Liz Fuller, a respected analyst, stated more bluntly “the West's primary criterion for assessing the relative fairness of elections in the Transcaucasus is oil.”

The reports of the foreign media on the “oil factor” overlapped with the Karabakh conflict. The Armenian-Azeri dispute over Karabakh received almost the same amount of coverage as Armenia itself (see chart).





Candidate David Shahnazarian during a pre-election press conference, above. All 12 candidates before the Central Electoral Commission on March 7, at the start of the election campaign, lower left.

Armenia's possible failure to conduct "free, fair and transparent" election was presented, on one hand, as a political lever for the West to use in the future to pressure the Armenian authorities; on the other hand, it was presented as a threat to Armenia's much-needed foreign aid. Quoting an omnipresent Western diplomat, Reuters reported: "This is the last chance [for Armenians]. If they don't get it right this time, then aid could be affected."

New York Times' Steve LeVine echoed the same sentiment. "Washington might decrease its considerable financial and political support for Armenia, to the benefit of Azerbaijan, whose oil has made it a key US policy interest." Other US reporters repeatedly reminded their readers that Armenia is "the highest per capita US aid" recipient

among "the former Soviet republics" and "the second-highest per capita recipient ... trailing only Israel." To be exact, that's "nearly \$300 a resident," wrote *Chicago Tribune's* Colin McMahon (March 30).

There is no doubt that generally, foreign reporting from Yerevan reflected the perceptions and interests of the West. The relative apprehension of the international community about Robert Kocharian was the subtext of their reports.

Viewed as the "hardliner", "nationalist" leader who comes from "secessionist" Karabakh with an "uncompromising" stance on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict, Kocharian presents a challenge to the international community, who will have to find a new political modus operandi—other than the current oil-centered diplomacy.

by Hratch Tchilingirian

What they said—

A breakdown of the selection and frequency of words used by three major news agencies in articles on the Armenian elections from March 1 to April 1.

| | RFE/RL | Reuters | AFP |
|----------------|--------|---------|-----|
| # of reports | 72 | 31 | 20 |
| Armenia | 98 | 60 | 14 |
| Karabakh | 63 | 57 | 16 |
| Azerbaijan | 25 | 38 | 8 |
| Irregularities | 22 | 17 | 15 |
| Fraud | 16 | 2 | 17 |
| Violations | 15 | 13 | 12 |
| Disputed | 11 | 19 | 4 |
| Marred | 9 | 10 | 4 |
| Flawed | 7 | 13 | 9 |
| Hardliner | 0 | 8 | 2 |

| | | | |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| TOTAL | 80 | 90 | 63 |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|



1998 CYMA MISSION TO ARMENIA

The Canadian Youth Mission to Armenia (CYMA), is a Youth for Youth humanitarian aid project dedicated to assisting the children of Armenia while binding young Armenians in Canada forever to their homeland. CYMA is a project of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of Canada.

CYMA 98 will take place in ARARAT region and will consist of running a children's day camp, distribution of humanitarian aid and local community house visitations. Participants will live with local families to develop and strengthen the emotional and spiritual bond between Armenian youth as well as Canada and Armenia.

CYMA 98 is open to anyone over the age of 18.

The tentative departure date for this year's Mission is July 8, 1998 from Toronto and will return one month later.

For more information, please contact:

St. Catherines Armenian Church
905-685-8701

Diocese of the Armenian Church
514-276-9479

Karin Garakyan **Talar Hopyan**
416-493-3854 416-222-6202

Joanne Semerdjian **Sero Andonian**
604-925-0114 514-286-6149

or Visit our website at:
www.interlog.com/~acyoc/cyma
email: cyma@interlog.com