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Azerbaijan: new survey shows ruling party on track to win easily in elections next week; Azeris show mix of optimism and concern about future

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Ahead of Azerbaijan’s 6 November parliamentary elections, global media research institute **InterMedia** today released findings from a national survey of 1,092 Azeris which found continued strong support for the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan (YAP) party of President Ilham Aliyev. Forty-seven percent of respondents in the survey, conducted 24 September through 4 October, said they would vote for the YAP. Support for the respective parties making up the opposition Azadlyq bloc is divided – 8 percent would vote for the Musavat party, 4 percent for the Azerbaijan Popular Front and 1 percent for the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan. Nearly 27 percent of respondents indicated they would not vote or were against all the parties running.

Despite clashes between the government and opposition parties and groups, and a string of firings of high-ranking officials by the Aliyev regime in past weeks, Azeris are generally optimistic about the future: more than half (51 percent) think the elections will be free and fair (versus close to 31 percent who don’t think so) and 44 percent believe the country will be more democratic after November 6. This positive outlook continues a trend noted in InterMedia’s March 2005 national survey, in which 62 percent of respondents said they viewed the next 12 months with hope.

Another consistent pattern is support for Aliyev: in March, 60 percent of respondents said that of all the potential leaders for the country, they felt most close to the incumbent. The next highest candidate garnered just 3 percent of support. The early 2005 survey also found an almost even split between those who believe the country needs a strong leader to bring order, versus those who do not.

“As our research shows, Azerbaijan continues to be an intriguing case of a regime that is accused by some of being less than fully democratic and yet is able to maintain its popularity with a majority of the population,” said Nino Japaridze, InterMedia’s regional research manager for the CIS, including the Caucasus and Central Asia. “And despite widespread concerns about the economy and unemployment, most respondents are optimistic about the future. This hopefulness might be attributed to several factors, including the widely-publicized promises of oil and gas revenue which could boost GDP and individual standards of living, and the prospect of

Azerbaijan joining NATO and EU, which would enhance the country's security and perhaps have a knock-on democratizing effect.”

InterMedia finds television remains the most popular source of news and information in Azerbaijan, a country which, in the past, has placed restrictions on media freedom and intimidated journalists. Of the stations available, the privately-owned but state-controlled (as is all Azeri media) ANS TV channel is the most popular, although InterMedia research finds that audience trust in this outlet has declined somewhat in recent years. “It is tempting to speculate that one reason opposition points of view have not resonated with the average citizen is that they have had less access to media outlets and so less chance to have their message heard, and the coverage overall had been biased in favor of the current government,” said Japaridze.

Despite respondents' optimism, many Azeris are not doing well economically: just under 19 percent said they do not even have enough money for food; 47 percent said they had money for food but buying clothes would be difficult. Respondents in the March survey said unemployment was the most serious problem facing the country.

On foreign affairs, the March survey found strong support for Azerbaijan joining NATO but even more support for joining the EU. Almost a third of respondents said they were neither favorably nor unfavorably inclined towards the United States, but 53 percent said the U.S. has too much influence in Azeri affairs.

InterMedia is a leading international media research, public opinion, evaluation and consulting organization creatively equipping clients to understand their audiences, gauge their effectiveness and target their communications in transitional and developing societies worldwide. Based in Washington, D.C., and active year-round in more than 60 countries, InterMedia helps clients understand complex issues in challenging research environments. The company's strengths include its people—area experts skilled in scientifically-based research and focused on client solutions—its vast global network of local research partners and contacts and its rich data archive of close to 500 media and opinion surveys carried out over the past 15 years.

Survey note: The most recent InterMedia-sponsored survey was of 1,092 adults 15 and older and was conducted September 24-October 4. Range of error with a 95 percent confidence interval is +/- 3 percent. InterMedia's previous national survey of 2000 adults was conducted 20 February - 19 March 2005.