

Caucasus: Oct ' 07

New IWPR project helps to foster understanding between young journalists in Armenia and Azerbaijan. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, a generation is growing up that has virtually no knowledge of the neighboring country at all. The new IWPR project "Neighbours" is tackling this issue by establishing a network of young journalists from countries which have had no contact since the Karabakh conflict began in the late 1980s. The first meeting of Neighbours took place in Tbilisi in October, with ten young journalists from Armenia and Azerbaijan taking part in a three-day training seminar on feature writing.

"Talking to a person from another country is almost like reading a completely new book. Due to our ages, we have really never seen each other and we have imagined each other as being something really scary. Meetings like this give us a chance to try to understand each other," said Nigar Musayeva, 23, from Azerbaijan.

"The most useful part proved to be the contact with Azerbaijanis. They turned out to be normal people, I used to think they would be aggressive," noted Vahe Sarukhanian from Armenia.

During the first session, conducted by the editor-in-chief of online weekly Armenianow, John Hughes, the journalists learned about the difference between a Soviet and western-style feature story, including the importance of facts and fact-checking as well as interviewing techniques. During practical exercises, the journalists worked in pairs in downtown Tbilisi, preparing features on different neighborhoods of the Georgian capital.

"I found out many interesting and useful things. It was an eye-opener to learn about the history of Old Tbilisi, and also to get to know about the Western style of feature writing," said Nigar Musayeva. "It is not only good for us to get out of the usual routines and acquire new skills. We also get to know things about the profession that feel like opening secret pockets. That really shakes us and makes us want to learn more."

"The most useful part for me was learning how to write a feature, and seeing how John could compile an article out of a complete mess. I hope I will be able to follow this advice after the seminar," said Ararat Davtian from Armenia.

The product of the cooperation will be a joint periodical supplement prepared by the journalists that will be published in the local press in the Armenian, Azeri and Russian languages. The aim is to enable the readers in both countries get unbiased and diverse information about their neighbours beyond the closed borders. The first supplement is due to come out in December, including stories about Armenian and Azerbaijani capitals, about differences in genres of jazz music and other feature stories.

After the training session, Hughes said, "IWPR's project teaming young journalists from Azerbaijan and from Armenia is a major step in fostering understanding and in destroying misconceptions among each country's future leaders. Not only does the project strengthen individual journalists, but it forms significant bonds between young adults who might otherwise maintain ill-informed impressions of each other that have been fed by hatred rather than by understanding."

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