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FREEDOM OF MEDIA / AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA

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Introduction

According to recently issued Freedom in the World 2017 report by Freedom House, assessing the condition of political rights and civil liberties around the world, Georgia and its press are ‘partly free’ and take the 96th place among the world’s 199 countries and regions¹. Georgia continues to have the freest and most diverse media environment in the South Caucasus, though political polarization and close links between media companies and politicians continue to negatively affect the sector. While none of the country’s major broadcasters are known to be directly owned by a public official, strong ties remain between media outlets and political parties or interests. Despite such evaluation, media environment in Georgia has been gradually improving.

Currently no media channels that are critical of government or ruling party are under scrutiny of secret service, as for example Imedi TV in 2007 was accused by former president Mr Mikheil Saakashvili of attempts to subvert the government, nor endangered by possibility of physical attack, as Maestro TV, which experienced a grenade attack in 2009. Among troublesome events is a court case related to the ownership of the largest television channel Rustavi-2, as in 2016 the previous owner appealed to the court claiming that he was forced to transfer the ownership rights and requested for their return. Other major challenges Georgian media faces today include: practical implementation of media-related legislation, especially in minimizing political control and self-imposed censorship, increasing media sustainability and quality, which are direct prerequisites for limiting Russian disinformation.

Reasons which are hindering full media freedom in Georgia are analysed and recommendations for Georgian decision makers and civil society on increasing and sustaining media freedom, as well as to the EU and its Member States on ways to support and assist Georgian counterparts are provided within this report. The main goal should be set to have a high-quality pluralistic media, which would serve as an objective informant and initiator of discussions regarding internal and external developments, and which would reach and address the issues important to all Georgian population, including the ethnic minorities. Furthermore, Georgian media is seen as an important partner for raising public awareness about the implementation of the EU-Georgian Association Agreement and promoting values, freedoms and ideals shared by European democracies.

¹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017. Online access: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/georgia>

Media access in Georgia

A large number (over 300) of private print outlets operate in the country, but they have very limited circulation. More than 70 radio stations are also available, but television remains the most popular source of news.² Leading television stations include the public 1TV (one of the Georgian Public Broadcaster channels) and the privately owned Rustavi 2, Imedi TV, Maestro TV, and Kavkasia TV. The expansion of the “must carry/must offer” rule has widened the reach of many channels, and a series of ownership changes since 2012 have altered the landscape of the industry and reduced polarization.

Television in Georgia remains as a dominant source of information for the majority of the population: 88 % use TV as the main source of information, while only 7 % use Internet. Georgians most often use the Internet for social networks (75%) or to search for information (41%). Furthermore, users often visit social networks to receive information. According to a public opinion poll conducted by National Democracy Institute, the Internet is the second most important source of information about current events for Georgians³.

Numerous newspapers and several television stations produce online content, and social-media platforms play a growing role in the dissemination of news and information. Approximately 45 percent of Georgians accessed the Internet in 2015.

According to the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC), there were over 640.000 Internet users registered in Georgia in 2016⁴. Currently, the Georgian government is working on a project that would make broadband Internet available in every populated area of Georgia.

Fibre-optic Internet remains a challenge, with access for less than half of the Georgian population. In the meantime, the mobile Internet with wide reach outside the cities fills the gap. According to the GNCC, the number of registered users of mobile Internet (persons and legal entities) is 1.566 million.

According to a study conducted in spring 2015 by Transparency International Georgia and Caucasus Research Resource Centre, the number of daily Internet users had increased by 4% compared to 2013, however, 46% of the population still does not use Internet.⁵ Computer literacy and access to the Internet is much lower in the population living in villages and among citizens over 56 years old.⁶

Media environment

Georgia has managed to implement a successful transition to digital broadcasting in a relatively short period of time – less than two years. Despite risks of political manipulation during the switch, the government managed to run the entire process smoothly, avoiding such interference. On the other hand, shortcomings in the switchover’s technical execution left some rural areas without access to broadcasting. And these are the places where the newspaper circulation is almost non-existent—where Internet infrastructure is poor and where the people depend on the television.

² IREX Media Sustainability Index, Georgia’s Media in 2016. Online access: <https://medium.com/irex-msi/georgia-s-media-in-2016-4c02774108ae#.7k1ka2ni1>

³ National Democratic Institute, Georgia Public Issues Poll. Online access:

https://ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April%202015%20Poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF_0.pdf

⁴ Georgian National Communication Commission, Analytical Portal, Internet Subscribers by Companies. Online access:

<https://analytics.gncc.ge/en/statistics-share/?c=internet&total=total&sid=309351>

⁵ Transparency International Georgia, “The public expects more coverage of social issues from the media”,

July 2015. Online access: <http://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/public-expects-more-coverage-social-issues-media>

⁶ Transparency International Georgia, “Who Owns Georgia’s Media?”, Report, 2014. Online access:

http://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/who_owns_georgias_media.pdf

Amendments to the *Law on Advertising* were hastily adopted at the beginning of 2015, in keeping with EU directives, which limit television advertising time and sponsorship services. Without a clear analysis on how it is going to affect different media outlets, the smallest and most vulnerable media outlets got weakened (market shrunk by around 17% compared with the previous year), while dominant three television channels – Rustavi-2, Imedi TV and Maestro TV – ended up receiving more than 90 % of total advertising revenues⁷.

Georgian media faced other challenges in 2015, including: the stalled election of two members of the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) board of trustees; rising concern over the infiltration of pro-Russian narratives in Georgian media; and the closure of the Journalists Legal Defense Center at Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), which left journalists without legal support.

Adoption of the *Law on Broadcasting* in 2004 was followed by the transformation of the State Television and Radio into GPB. Performance of GPB is seen as improved and its strength is in different cultural and public affairs related programs. But it is limited when it comes to reporting international news.⁸ Compared to major privately owned television channels (Rustavi-2, Imedi TV and Maestro TV), GPB is seen as less popular, less active and its journalists to be of lower qualification. Out of three television channels managed by GPB none outranks the popularity of the aforementioned private channels.

The *Law on Broadcasting* also obliges to disclose ownership information. Amendments that banned ownership of broadcasters by offshore companies and required disclosure of ownership information came into force in 2012. Transparency International Georgia confirms that generally the ownership of major media outlets is transparent, none of them are owned by political groups. The report further determined that several cable and Internet outlets are owned by anti-Western and religious organizations⁹.

However, it is the biased content that reveals political leanings of the broadcasters and empowers the public judgement, for example: Rustavi-2 has originated from the times of Rose revolution and during the rule of Mr Saakashvili it was openly pro-government television and currently continues being affiliated with the opposition United National Movement (UNM); during the 2012 elections Imedi TV was also seen as pro-UNM, the leader of the Georgian Dream (GD) Mr Bidzina Ivanishvili even established TV9 (to be closed after election) to compete with Rustavi-2 and Imedi TV, but nowadays Imedi TV is pro-government; furthermore, the current owner of Imedi TV has recently acquired Maestro TV and the Georgian Studio (the latter was owned by Ivanishvili family, while the content of the first is dominated by Russian programs translated into Georgian).

Although freedom of speech is protected and is subject to regulations, Transparency International reported 15 cases of mistreatment of the media in the past two years, in the form of physical and verbal abuse by public officials. According to their report, the most frequent victims are the journalists in the regions of Adjara and Kakheti, while several instances of such pressure were also documented in Guria, Imereti, Samegrelo, Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti¹⁰.

Several journalists' complaints to the court were recorded stating difficulties in accessing public information. The general practice is that some "trusted" by the government media outlets are provided with public information, while other outlets are not. The first draft of the legal act on freedom of information was proposed in the 1990s, but the actual *Freedom of Information Act* found its way to the

⁷ IREX Media Sustainability Index.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Transparency International Georgia, "Who Owns Georgia's Media?".

¹⁰ IREX's Media Sustainability Index.

Ministry of Justice only 2 years ago at the initiative of Georgian civil society and currently it is still within the Ministry's competency to send it to the Parliament for consideration and approval.

The media sector has carried out important initiatives in recent years to ensure that ethnic minorities have access to information about public life in the country. Language barriers and scarcity of programming in minority languages widen the existing gap between the regions and the center of the country. More than the half of the population in minority-settled regions continue receiving their news from Russian channels, also from Armenian and Azeri broadcasters who often share different interpretation of policies and events than Georgia. Media outlets in the capital city are not keen on including minority representatives into discussion programs or reporting the stories that are important to the minority-populated areas.

The issue of access to Georgian media remains in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia due to the lack of signal capabilities and special infrastructure. It is crucial to search for ways to expand the media offerings and strengthen the signal in these regions, as well as to make sure that the potential viewers can access Georgian media without additional expenses (such as DVB devices and Set-Top-Boxes currently needed to access the signal).

There are several explanations for the increase in the number of news websites in Georgia. Licensing regulations do not apply to online media, thus the market entry barriers are low. Furthermore, production costs in online media are much lower than in broadcasting or print media, decreasing dependence on external sponsors. Consequently, there are several online publishers on the market that offer their readers valuable journalistic material. Among such publishers are regional online media outlets, which cover current events in their respective regions. Several such news outlets are important sources of information in those regions.

However, in recent years, the number of online outlets associated with various political groups has increased significantly. Apart from a large number of such web resources and online media outlets, it is important to note their interconnection. Some news websites are informally connected with each other and cover some topics in a coordinated manner.

Overall media in Georgia is underfunded. Broadcasters do not receive payments for re-broadcasting their products via cable stations. Despite successful examples when media outlets were able to pay back loans to international funds, the banks are not granting loans. As a result, Georgian media is highly dependent on donor support. A major variety of print media reaches Georgian households with severe delays. Among reasons for this is a ceased tradition to receive press to the mailboxes, which are almost non-existent in Georgia. This creates a vicious circle of poor subscription rates, to poor funding of print media and then irregular and inefficient delivery.

Anti-Western media

87 % of Georgians name television as their first source of information; 20 % of television viewers watch the news on foreign channels; and out of those, the majority rely on Russian channels. Among the most watched are Russian Channel One, RTR, and Russia 1. CNN, Euronews, and BBC World Service share the fifth, sixth and the eighth places on the list¹¹. Only 0,7%¹² of Russians are a part of population in Georgia. But 70% of the whole population has a good command of the Russian language, while only 21% – of English¹³.

¹¹ National Democratic Institute.

¹² National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2014 General Population Census, 2014. Online access: http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf

¹³ Caucasus Barometer Georgia 2013. Online access: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013ge/codebook/>

Pro-Russian narrative can also be heard in some Georgian media as well – Obieqtivi TV, known for spreading xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Western sentiments, relies exclusively on Russian sources. Obieqtivi TV is included in standard packages of all major cable distributors.

In the past several years, a group of websites that are actively engaged in anti-Western propaganda has formed in the Georgian online space. According to a media monitoring report of Media Development Foundation for 2014-2015 entitled to Anti-Western Propaganda, the main source of anti-Western sentiments is media, while anti-Western rhetoric is usually applied in xenophobic and homophobic contexts. In some cases, anti-Western media outlets receive revenue from the state budget in form of sales. For example, the creator of the TV program Etaloni, LTD Media-Etaloni, broadcasted on TV channel Obieqtivi, received GEL 68,616 from state agencies¹⁴.

A study¹⁵ exploring Russian connections of Georgian media and civil society described activities of two major anti-Western organizations – Eurasia Institute and Eurasian Choice – along with other organizations and media outlets associated with them. According to the study, these organizations and media outlets are exceptionally anti-Western, xenophobic and homophobic, and they are usually led by the same individuals. The study shows that anti-Western media outlets are connected with the Russian foundations.

Unregulated broadcasting of Russian channels in the TV space of Georgia creates fertile ground for nurturing anti-Western feelings. In 2008 all Russian channels were banned (it was done by a political will, not a legal regulation), but after GD took power in 2012 Russian channels were brought back with the aim to normalize/regulate relations with Russia.

The main goals of Russian propaganda in Georgia are to nurture warm feelings of Georgian citizens towards Russia; increase negative attitude towards the EU and the West among Russian-speaking population (similar attempts with Georgian population); promote one-man leadership model, which undermines the basic principle of any democracy – participation. As a result – Russian manipulation of information and influence over Georgian population gains power to reverse and/or endanger reforms closely related to the implementation of Association Agreement and EU-Georgia Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

Other targets of Russian propaganda – ethnic minorities in Georgia: Azerbaijanis (6.5%) and Armenians (5.7% of population). These minorities are poorly integrated and use Russian as main language for communication in between different ethnicities. These minorities reside by the borders, thus, are even more vulnerable to the Russian propaganda.

Currently there are no laws giving competence to the GNCC to evaluate the content and initiate a ban and/or suspend a channel of any country. The GNCC's authority is limited to supervisory of agreements and permits, thus the Commission can only regulate and monitor the content and compliance to the standards of journalism of Georgian TV stations. Taking into account the position of GD to normalize relations with Russia, it is unlikely for regulations to suspend, fine or even ban international media outlets that promote speech of hatred, incite divisions among the society, distort historical truth and challenges Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia to be installed.

¹⁴ Transparency International Georgia, "Who Owns Georgia's Media?". For more: Media Development Foundation, Anti-Western Propaganda 2014-2015. Online access: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//Antidasavluri-ENG-web.pdf>

¹⁵ Transparency International Georgia, "Who Owns Georgia's Media?". For more: Russian Influence on Georgian Civil Society and Media [in Georgian], Damoukidebloba.com, <http://damoukidebloba.com/assets/up-modul/uploads/pdf/rusuli%20gavlana%20media%20da%20NGO-1.pdf>

Remaining challenges

Georgian leadership declares a commitment to lead by the example. However, this analysis shows that decision makers and public officials lack understanding about the core principles of media freedom, as the separation between government and media is not fully executed and officials who interfere with the work of media remain unpunished. Enhancing legitimate media associations, which should be the ones representing and advocating the interests and concerns of the local media is of the utmost importance.

Furthermore, communication capacities of Georgian public institutions, including communication and coordination between them, are low. The State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic Integration, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence have established units for strategic communication, but at the same time public relations divisions within the country's ministries lack competences. Most common mistakes are the following: official press releases are not appealing to the public, they are difficult to understand, do not explain executed decisions and reforms, and do not inform about the achieved results. While such communication is best to be led by country's leadership, the latter is not engaged into a regular conversation with the public. Georgian strategic communication lacks an action plan and capacities to address arising challenges, especially anti-Western rhetoric and Russian propaganda.

Georgian civil society was able to establish strong and institutionalised links with the government. At the moment, it has dedicated a venue to its needs at the Parliament and possesses a Memorandum and Action Plan of Cooperation with the State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic Integration. However, other ministries remain difficult to engage.

Experience exchange and/or capacity building initiatives by the EU or its Member States are applied to Georgian media specialists. Several EU Member States already launched projects aiming to train Georgian journalists, especially in increasing their level of objectivity on what is a part of efforts to limit anti-Western discourse in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. The EU visa liberalisation for Georgia promises additional opportunities for such professional engagements.

However, many shortcomings of attempts to provide Georgian media specialists with missing skills were recorded, including the fact that only seldom initiatives get continued. Patterns recorded in Ukraine show that in some occasions journalists refuse the proposed few-day long experience exchange trips, which shows that the supply of such trainings is higher than the demand and what is actually needed is technical support for equipping work places, such as purchasing virtual space for data storage, etc.

There is a clear need for streamlining media training activities, which are currently not effective. Ad hoc approach needs to be dropped and the EU should move towards a more tailored-made system of training and advancement through more effective approaches such as mentorship and embedding/placements. To make this work, there needs to be a facilitator and a consolidated database or a comprehensive system, which could match the demand from the region and supply from the West.

During the 1st Media Conference in 2015, European Endowment for Democracy (EED) presented a thorough analysis¹⁶ with suggestions how to bring plurality and balance to the Russian language media space. Recently the EC granted funds enabling EED to support media outlets in the EaP countries. Furthermore, EED launched a Content Fund, which will purchase programs from the BBC, translate them into Russian and distribute for free to media outlets in the EaP countries. Considering that it took

¹⁶ European Endowment for Democracy, "Bringing Plurality and Balance to the Russian Language Media Space, Feasibility Study on Russian Language Media Initiatives in the Eastern Partnership and Beyond", June 2015. Online access: <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/news/bringing-plurality-1/>

two years to start implementing only a part of EED report findings, there is clearly some space for the EU, its institutions and donor community to improve.

The Action Plan on Strategic Communication¹⁷ states that it is in the EU's interest to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by external actors. Taking into account that negative activities implemented in the neighbouring country, especially the one with the Association Agreement (Georgia), has direct impact to the image of EU, as well as puts pro-democratic achievements of local government in jeopardy, Georgia should also be equipped with actual tools to resist Russian disinformation.

There are ambitions, of which most vocal one comes from the BBC, to establish a pan-European Russian language media channel. Georgian actors also discuss the possibility of launching a Georgian channel in Russian language. Before embarking on new projects, there is a need to revise the capacities of existing media outlets in Georgia. It is often assumed that Armenian and Azeri populations in Georgia will shift from Russian, Armenian and Azeri media, if alternative channel by Georgian government to be offered. Yet, it might be more cost-effective to instead support GPD by making its production more appealing to the public and by scaling up media outlets that reaches their way to the houses of ethnic minorities of Georgia.

There is also a clear need to move beyond the usual recipients of EU support, who are often based in capitals. This essentially means identifying and appreciating local outlets, which are often in dire situations, but have little capacity and knowledge how to get support. At the same time, such media outlets usually are the first to report on local stories, thus they need to be strengthened to better serve the local audiences. One way for doing it could be to organise regular, practical networking meetings where they can share best practices and learn from each other leading to greater cooperation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- In order to ensure the continuation of positive developments of media freedom in Georgia which took place over the past years, further development of media freedom in Georgia needs to be based on lessons learned, by utilizing all available capacities, including strong and engaged civil society, and deepening cooperation with the EU, its Member States and likeminded countries such as Ukraine and Moldova.
- Raise the understanding of Georgian officials about media freedom and advantages of independent media by linking Georgian officials to their counterparts in the EU Member States and by supporting the civil society in its efforts to react and report on the cases of interference in the work of media.
- Strengthen the regulation of political advertisement and ensure equal media accessibility for all parties during the election cycles.
- Tackle Georgian media's dependency on donor support by initiating a revision of state funding to the media outlets.
- Strengthen the position of GPB by increasing the appeal of its channels to the general public and by ensuring objective and informative news coverage of national and international events, spreading tolerance, equality, respect of the human rights and democratic ideals, as well as representing all layers of the society, including ethnic minorities.

¹⁷ EU Action Plan on Strategic Communication, Ref. Ares(2015)2608242 - 22/06/2015.

- Promote civic education from young age by supporting television programs and initiatives for children, which would address topics of responsible citizenship, tolerance, equality and diversity.
- Increase the competence and internal cooperation of the Georgian public institutions by supporting an internal revision of existing and missing capacities and preparing an action plan for strategic communication. According to the findings, invest into developing communication capacities of Georgian officials and public relation specialists via trainings and experience exchanges with the EU institutions Member States.
- Encourage and support Georgian civil society in its attempts to build similar cooperation as with the State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic Integration with the remaining ministries and other public institutions.
- Ensure the rights of journalists by supporting such organizations as the recently closed GYLA and by initiating the establishment of journalists' trade unions.
- Execute a thorough capacity analysis of Georgian media, as it might be more cost-effective to scale up the support for already existing media outlets than to establish the new ones, especially when it comes to reaching ethnic minorities and increasing resilience to Russian propaganda.
- Tailored compensation programmes, which would fully or at least partially refund the expenses of the persons willing to access Georgian media in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as general signal strengthening initiatives should be considered by both the government of Georgia and related media outlets as a long-term investment.
- Regularly assess the impact of international support, define remaining needs and set priorities for continuous support.
- In order to manage the damage done by a rushed implementation of the *Law on Advertisement*, develop capacities to determine the audience reach and composition of different media outlets. If succeeded, this will strengthen the smallest outlets by enabling them to compete for advertising revenues.
- Support regular monitoring of anti-Western and pro-Russian activities, including content analysis, in Georgia. Preferably, this should be executed by Georgian actors, as Georgian civil society has already delivered upon such task.
- Empower the GNCC to analyse the contents of broadcasting media and to determine their suitability for the public in terms of standards of journalism, respect for human rights, tolerance, etc. Mechanism of fines and suspension for the content in violation to aforementioned values could be considered, based on the recent experiences of EU Member States.
- Raise the standard of journalistic quality, objectivity and ethics based on the good experiences of EU Member States. Such standards should also be applied not only for the television, radio and printed media, but also for the Internet news outlets – this would allow a harmonised approach in ensuring the quality of media reporting throughout the main means of information dissemination.

- Increase Georgian households' accessibility to information, especially to the printed and Internet media.
- Continue initiatives to provide Georgian language lessons to the ethnic minorities.
- Establish nation-wide digital literacy classes to increase Internet usage in Georgia.
- Limit the risks of termination of the private funding for the extension of Internet coverage in Georgia by encouraging greater long-term involvement of governmental institutions of Georgia with the support and assurance of international donors.

Recommendations for the institutions and Member States of the European Union

- Practice of delegating EU communication specialists to Georgian institutions to help implement innovative approaches and apply skills gained during provided trainings should be continued.
- Widen the network of specialists involved into strengthening the media of EaP countries to increase the resilience of these countries to Russian propaganda.
- Make small grants available for media outlets in EaP countries, either through EU delegations or by launching wider media grant programmes. Also, consider giving core support financing to struggling media outlets, especially for smaller outlets unable to sustain themselves through advertising revenues. Such support schemes for the EaP countries have already been successfully introduced¹⁸ and could serve as good examples.
- Coordinate donor support and make it more adaptable to the needs of Georgian media. For example, instead of short trainings or experience exchange visits to the EU and its Member States, develop capacities to provide technical support in the form of missing equipment, encourage media networking projects between the EU and EaP countries, invest more in media/information literacy programmes in EaP countries, encourage public consultations on legal framework in media regulatory bodies.
- Further develop and enrich the Content Fund with production from different European and EaP countries. Where possible, subtitling should be available as a choice for the public, as it has a direct impact on the level of multilingualism in the country.
- Use the upcoming 2nd Media Conference for raising awareness about the media situation in Georgia and EaP countries and for building cooperation and understanding between the decision makers and media specialists.
- Support a network of contributors from the EaP and Western Balkan countries who can provide the East Stratcom Task Force with regular updates of pro-Kremlin disinformation stories circulating in their local media.
- Make funds available for supporting the governments in EaP countries so they can build their own strategic communications capacities. Funds could be earmarked for purchasing media monitoring tools, providing external experts for improving their capacity, advancing cross-government coordination and training on practical implementation of campaigns.

¹⁸ Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)