

## CLOSER LOOK ON ONGOING REFORMS IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES<sup>1</sup>:

### GEORGIA: MAIN TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN LOCAL LEVEL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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#### Summary<sup>2</sup>

#### **Main observations and key conclusions**

- Georgian media landscape is wide and diverse. There are 98 TV channels, 60 on-line media outlets and 31 newspapers and magazines in Georgia. However, media agenda is formed by the two leading TV channels and Georgian politicians fight for control over these two media outlets. As ECEAP local experts underline, the state interferes in the work of the media and Georgian media cannot yet be a strong, independent and sustainable. Weak and unsustainable democracy is viewed among the main reasons behind this problem. The most influential media sources in Georgia are TV channels; the popularity of websites grows, while the importance of newspapers drops down.
- The main result of reforms that have been taking place in recent 10–15 years is that Georgian media has managed to set themselves aside from pure partisan propaganda and demonstrated a significant progress on their way to international standards and democratic practises. Strong support from the international donor organizations has had significant impact on Georgian media landscape.
- At the same time, Georgian media is in the front line of information war. Georgia is often looked at as a leader and “exporter” of democracy in the Eastern Partnership region; therefore, certain countries tend to attempt minimize Georgia’s influence and positive practises of democratization. There is a serious concern about the stability in the country as internal intensive fight between the supporters of pro-Russian propaganda and those who support the Western values is separating the unity of the nation. Information war needs to have more attention from international community.

<sup>1</sup> Based on input and analyses of information collected by ECEAP local civil society/area experts

<sup>2</sup> Detailed comprehensive analysis report is available at request

- Gender aspects in media are often overlooked as majority of media workers are women. However, the obvious lack of equal opportunities for women is clearly demonstrated by the fact that most of media managers are male, yet, the number of women increases in media outlets with smaller budgets.
- The problem in Georgian media is control of main media groups by politically influential businessman and political groups. ECEAP local experts describe situation that state interferes in the work of the media.
- Although there is one government controlled and one opposition supporting media group, tight links with political parties makes objective media creation difficult. To achieve greater independence, Georgian media structures should be reformed.
- The local media in regions seems to be more distanced from political controversies; most of local TV channels focus on entertainment, only some have news and political shows. Some are dependent local authorities for their funding, some from private money. There is positive trend in this as journalists in regions evaluate development of media and find that the tendencies in the development were rather positive.
- There has been positive influence of international donor programs, like: IREX, USAID, EED, NED, IWPR, OSGF, EU Programs, US Embassy DemCom Small Grants Program, Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership. The training of journalists and supporting plurality of media should continue also in the future.
- Findings of this report show that Russian propaganda influences Georgian media space. Russian expansion of the media outlets is a serious problem in Georgia. To counter this, Georgian media organizations must raise quality of their production and international donors must continue to support them in this effort. It is positive, that regional media outlets in Georgia also use minority languages.
- Donor organization should encourage decentralization of media, including supporting media outlets in small towns, rather than regional centres.

### **Key challenges**

- Georgian local media still lacks professionalism, analytical skills and critical approach.
- The salaries in media are low, media professionals in Georgia lack strong professional unions.

- Among the challenges of media outlets in the regions of Georgia are: poor positions at the market and absence of advertisement; limited access to resources and control by local administration.
- Negative influence from neighbouring countries in the form of propaganda; the influence of religious fundamentalism and anti-European propaganda.
- Women journalists do not always recognize gender discrimination, for example on domestic violence cases hate speech towards women is used in media which, in turn, increases violence against women.

### **Key policy recommendations for international actors**

While supporting/implementing programmes with/for media outlets, international/donor organizations should:

- Make emphasize on the regions of the country (work outside capitals).
- Ensure that crosscutting topics are included in all programmes: gender equality, human rights, health, corruption, local government, European integration.
- Put special focus in capacity building programmes on investigative journalism and ethical journalism
- Encourage efforts on decentralization by supporting media outlets in small towns, rather than regional centres.
- Conduct educational programs for local journalists (marketing, laws, safety) and offer workshops revealing different types of disinformation, fake news, media manipulations
- Include gender equality principles in all your activities so it becomes integral part of any capacity building and gives understanding why it is needed in all societies workshops on gender equality.
- Acknowledge that Georgian society needs to be supported for choosing European vector of development. A consolidated group of journalists could be a big help in mobilizing the supporters of European integration. For this goal a training workshop for journalists with European experts should be organized as well as creating a network of journalists covering European integration topic and supporting international cooperation of journalists of Eastern Partnership countries.

## 1. General overview and background

### 1.1. General characterization of Georgian media landscape.

For this report three regions of Georgia (Kakheti, Shida Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti) were looked at closely and overall situation in the entire country was analysed as well.

The general characterization of Georgian media landscape is that it is wide and diverse. There are 98 TV channels, 60 online media outlets and 31 newspapers and magazines of different format and different periodicity. Tabloids are the biggest part of print media; TV channels and online media are most influential market players. Almost all print media has online versions too. Most of TV channels focus on entertainment, only some have news and political shows. The country's biggest media holdings are privately owned Telemedi LTD and TV company Rustavi 2.

Most of cable and internet TVs that appeared in Georgia during recent two or three years belong to anti-Western and religious organizations. According to their financial declarations, they do not generate significant income, which demonstrates their dependence on direct funding. Certain online media operating in Georgia reflect political interests of particular groups.

An absolute majority of the journalists have higher education degree, but only half of them are professional journalists. The lowest salary stated is about 70 Euro, the highest amount was 500 Euro.

There are more female managers in provinces, where incomes are lower and competition with male colleagues is less intensive. Usually women manage the type of media that has lower budget and is being funded by international grants. Most influential and privately funded media outlets are however generally headed by men.

### 1.2. The level of independence of the media.

Unsustainable media policy is the main problem in entire country. Weak and unsustainable democracy is viewed among the main reasons behind this problem. There is no independent large business in the country; business is related with political groups, it supports them and lobbies its own political interests with their help. As the result, authorities interfere both in business and in the media.

Presently, there is fight for two biggest TV channels of Georgia: 'Imedi' and 'Rustavi-2.' 'Imedi' is loyal towards the authorities, while 'Rustavi-2' remains an active supporter of opposition powers. Because of this support, the TV company repeatedly faces various challenges. It overcame one of them just recently, in 2017, when Strasbourg Court has suspended the enforcement of the Georgian Supreme Court decision regarding the

change of Rustavi-2 ownership. This decision made it possible to keep at least some balance in media, but the state interference continues.

Media in Georgia remains being a tool - either already obtained by politicians, or desired. In general, experts believe that the level of pluralism is satisfactory - there are plenty of media outlets that are less powerful than the TV channels listed above and are viewed as unbiased source of information. The fight around them is less intensive; however, authorities are willing to control these outlets too. Most of them face financial problems and entirely depend on donors' support.

### **1.3. The level of development of the media.**

Georgian media still lacks professionalism, analytical skills and critical approach. But despite serious problems, local experts positively evaluate achievements of the recent decade.

Journalism in Georgia is supported by international programs, but in many cases these programs fund the media in such an amount that it just survives; i.e. no strategic development of the field is considered. The ultimate goal for the media in Georgia is to become independent, sustainable and strong, monitored by the society, and oriented to the development of the society. Funding particular projects will not help without creating development strategy for the entire system.

Experts find it very important that international donors invest in the professional education of journalists.

### **1.4. Information war.**

Georgia is considered to be one of the newly emerged leaders and an "exporters" of democracy in post-Soviet region; therefore, certain countries tend to try minimizing Georgia's influence and undermine positive achievements in democratization. Presently, there is an intensive fight between the supporters of pro-Russian propaganda and those who choose the Western values as the development strategy. Experts believe that Russian expansion of the media outlets is a serious problem in Georgia. Georgian audience is still quite naive and does not necessarily filter the information it receives. Ethnic minorities, who do not speak national language and watch Russian TV shows are prone to Russian propaganda.

However, propaganda is now translated into plenty of other languages as well. Russia intrudes into the media coming out in Georgian language, finds media outlets and journalists who'd be willing to fabricate fake news. Russia had already introduced its

propaganda strategy to Georgia with 'Sputnik' and other similar projects with half-truth, manipulation and false information in it. For an average reader it is difficult to distinguish facts from Kremlin-supported narrative.

Not only Russia, but also other countries follow their own interests in Georgia: Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan all fight for their influence on local media outlets of Georgia.

Russia's propagandistic strategy is to support political tensions between Georgia and its other neighbours. Experts believe that information war in Georgia is not yet viewed as a serious danger by international community and should be taken with concern.

## **2. Media landscape in the three analysed regions**

### **2.1. Kakheti region**

Today, this large region has only three TV channels: 'Gurjaani TV', 'Tanamgzavri' and 'Lagodekhi TV'. All three experience lack of funding, although the sources are different: 'Gurjaani' is financed by the local authorities, while 'Tanamgzavri' and 'Lagodekhi' are funded by private businesses.

There are two radio stations in Kakheti: 'Hereti' and 'Way'. Radio Hereti is funded by private business, it also generates income from advertisement. Radio 'Way' was created for the local audience of Kists, ethnic Chechens. 'Way' broadcasts in the language of local community and in Georgian; grants offered by media programs and international organizations is the only source of funding for this broadcaster.

Kakheti has four newspapers. Two of them are independent and supported by international donors: 'KakhetisKhma' and 'Spektri'. They are published weekly, each has a circulation of 2 thousand copies. As for 'Gurjaani' and 'Shiraki', these are the papers belonging to the local municipalities; both funding and circulation is lower.

There are three local online news sites: the online version of 'KakhetisKhma' newspaper [www.knews.ge](http://www.knews.ge); the website of agricultural internet radio 'Agro-Media' <http://agromedia.ge/>; and online radio 'Ivrisi', whose target audience is Azerbaijani minority. The first two resources are funded by international donors, but the funder of Ivrisi is unknown.

### **2.2. Shida Kartli region**

There are two TV companies: 'Dia' and 'Trialeti'; two radio stations: 'Trialeti' and 'Mozai-ka'; 2 newspapers: 'KhashurisMoambe' and 'GorisMacne' and two popular news web-sites: <http://www.qartli.ge/> and <http://khashurinews.ge/>

Editorial offices of both TV companies are based in the region's administrative centre of Gori. Both belong to private enterprises. Journalists state that international donors' funding played a key role in the development of this media-holding. Both TV companies state their political neutrality, but it is obvious that 'Dia' is rather loyal to the authorities, while 'Trialeti' supports opposition. Radio 'Mozaika' was also created with support of international grant received in 2017. The programs of this radio station feature news and various talk shows, some of them tackle women's rights and gender balance related issues. Grant is the main source of operation for this media outlet.

Both websites of the region are quite new. <http://www.qartli.ge/> was created in 2017 as a NGO with support of USAID/IREX grant. The website has already obtained the reputation of impartial source of information and it brings a lot of challenges to the local authorities. Another website - <http://khashurineews.ge/> is even newer.

Both regional newspapers are state-owned, they come out weekly and have circulation of 1000-1500 copies. Authors are typically loyal towards the authorities.

### **2.3. Samtske Javakheti region**

Media sources operating here come out in three languages - Russian, Armenian and Georgian. Georgian is the least popular language because of ethnic composition of the region.

There are three TV companies in Samtskhe-Javakheti: 'ATB12', 'Paravani TV' and 'Channel 9'; the first two broadcast in Armenian language, the third one - in Georgian. All three channels are funded by local authorities and are seriously influenced by the state. There are 2 radio stations in region SamkhretisKaribche radio and Radio Nor and the only newspaper of the region is called Samkhretis Karibche.

Three websites of the region are: <http://sknews.ge/> - 'SamkhretisKaribche'. This mini-holding operating in Georgian language only includes newspaper and a radio station under the same brand. <http://jnews.ge/> - this website has Russian and Armenian language versions. <http://nor.ge/> - this resource also has a radio, which spreads its content through SoundCloud podcasts. Articles posted to Nor.ge are written in Russian, while the radio news are broadcasted mostly in Armenian language.

## **3. Positive results in media development**

Journalists in regions evaluate development of media and find that the tendencies in the development were rather positive. About one half of the media professionals believe that they have possibilities to improve their qualifications, because there are special international programs for that.

Georgian media are quite pluralistic- this is the main result of reforms that were taking place for recent 10-15 years. There has been positive influence of international donor programs such as IREX, USAID, EED, NED, IWPR, OSGF, EU Programs, US Embassy DemCom Small Grants Program, Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership.

#### **4. Challenges in media development**

However, there is negative influence on media and its audience.

The main sources of this influence are the following: Political developments in the neighbouring countries (Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan); religious fundamentalism; anti-European propaganda.

It is noteworthy that all three regions researched are located at the borders of Georgia. These regions are covered by TV and radio of the neighbouring countries.

The negative influence is distributed through TV programs broadcasted from other countries (Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan); through particular politicians and other lobbies inside Georgia; through social networks and other online resources; through radio and newspapers; through invitations to participate in journalistic programs/forums/trips funded by the countries of negative influence.

Among the biggest challenges of the regional media outlets are: low qualifications of staff and low budget. Poor positions at the market and absence of advertisement; unfair access to resources and control by local administration

#### **5. Key conclusions**

##### **5.1. General situation**

- Media agenda is formed by the two leading TV channels; Georgian politicians fight for control over these two media outlets.
- The state interferes in the work of the media.
- TV channels are the most influential media sources in Georgia; the popularity of websites grows, while the importance of newspapers drops down.
- Media cannot yet be a strong, independent and sustainable institution.
- Journalists working in the regions work in worse conditions than their colleagues in the capital: they are less paid, less protected, have less opportunities to for career development.

- Regional media outlets decrease in number because of decline of business.
- Media professionals in Georgia lack strong professional unions.

## 5.2. Reforms and international programs

- Georgian media are quite pluralistic- this is the main result of reforms that were taking place for recent 10-15 years.
- Internal political reforms do not bring any positive influence on the regional media.
- Georgian media is widely supported by the international donor organizations. If not this support, many outlets would not exist today.
- Most popular international media programs and institutions supporting media are: IREX, USAID, EED, NED, IWPR, OSGF, EU Programs, US Embassy DemComSmall Grants Program, Global Fund for Women, The Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership.
- Internationally supported media are more likely to demonstrate democratic approach in their everyday work.

## 5.3. Gender issues

- Majority of media workers are women. Bigger part of media managers are male, however, the number of women increases in the media outlets with lower budget and in the projects supported by international programs.
- Media workers lack professional knowledge and need to be supported by new educational projects.
- Number of gender programmes is reduced significantly.
- Women journalists do not always recognize gender discrimination and do not tend to unite around women's rights; media outlets are not gender-sensitive.
- Media uses hate speech towards women which leads to increased violence against women.

## 6. Recommendations for international actors

- For better efficiency, while supporting media outlets, donor organizations should emphasize on
  - the regions of the country and
  - on particular topics, such as gender equality, human rights, health, corruption, local government, European integration.
  - Supporting investigative journalism is very important.
- International programs need to monitor fair use of the grants they donate.
- Donor organization should encourage decentralization by supporting media outlets in small towns, rather than regional centres.
- Intensive educational programs aimed at giving media organizations/media professionals particular skills:
  - Marketing, strategic planning, distribution technologies.
  - Laws, legal practice, international experience that can help media protect themselves from the pressure and dictatorship.
  - Safety at work - journalists need to know how to protect themselves at protest actions dispersals, military operations, attacks.
- Gender issues should be brought back to the agenda. Media needs workshops and other events that would explain importance of gender equality.
- Media needs a program that would support ethical journalism and struggle against xenophobia, hate speech and violence (including violence against women).
- Measures aimed at reducing negative impact on media are critically important. Workshops revealing different types of manipulations and fake news would be very useful. Ukrainian experts, who demonstrate effective methodical and skills, can be invited to share their experience.
- Georgian society needs to be supported for choosing European vector of development. European choice is an actively discussed issue in the media; and Russia distributes slander and fake news through its channels and with the help of anti-European lobby of Georgia. A consolidated group of journalists, who are well-familiar with European integration issues, could be a big help in mobilizing the supporters of European integration. These are the components a project like this could include: training workshop with European experts; creating a network of journalists covering European integration topic; media tours to European countries; international cooperation of journalists of Eastern Partnership countries.