

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a camera. The camera's LCD screen is visible, showing a woman in a white jacket speaking into a microphone. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text 'Building Trust in Journalism - Georgia' is overlaid in bright green on dark blue bars.

Building

Trust in

Journalism

- Georgia

Lisa Clifford

Building Trust in Journalism - Georgia

Lisa Clifford, Ethical Journalism Network

The 'Building Trust in Journalism in CEE' project is developed by the Ethical Journalism Network in partnership with the Evens Foundation and the Fritt Ord Foundation. This report is funded by the Fritt Ord Foundation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy report provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities facing the media in Georgia. Based on desk research and key stakeholder interviews from across the media landscape, it finds that the Georgian press is pluralistic but highly politicised, polarised and as a result often unethical. Competing political interests are the drivers of pluralism at the large, politically affiliated television stations and websites rather than any genuine attempt to inform the Georgian public in an unbiased, balanced and ethical manner. Local media and independent websites are making a genuine effort to inform the population. Georgia is a deeply telecentric society but stations are affiliated with either the government or the opposition with little room for alternative opinions in their output. As a result, consumers seek out media that conforms with their existing political affiliations, serving to split society into bubbles. Obtaining a more balanced view of the news is only possible by switching between opposition and government stations, as well as dipping into the few independent online media outlets, small local TV, radio and websites and minority media outlets. The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) is required by law to produce content free from political bias but has little credibility among viewers and is widely seen as an instrument of the government of the day. This is also true of the country's media regulator, the Communications Commission (ComCom). As most large outlets serve political parties rather than the public, audience trust in the media is low. Websites supported by the donor community are the country's most independent and reliable source of journalism, with several sites producing content of a high standard, but their impact outside the major cities or among the diaspora is limited. They are also unsustainable without the financial support of international organisations. Some will not survive if donor's priorities move elsewhere and funding dries up. Online and offline, violence against journalists is increasingly common, especially during election periods, and has been fuelled by the incendiary statements of politicians, many of whom see a free press as an obstacle to their ambitions rather than the foundation of a democratic society.

This report draws the following conclusions:

Large television stations and some nationally-reaching websites consistently fail to provide Georgian audiences with the balanced and ethical content necessary to make important decisions, especially surrounding elections and the political life of the country. Audiences are mostly aware they are being badly informed and trust in media is low.

Mainstream media outlets follow editorial policies strongly against or in support of the government. The government openly attacks opposition-affiliated media as sources of 'fake news'. This has impacted on the safety of journalists.

Online outlets supported by the donor community are less partisan and more objective but lack influence outside the major conurbations. They are also financially unsustainable as Georgians are not inclined to pay for news content and the online and offline advertising market is limited. The donor-supported sector also suffers from 'brain drain' as internationally trained journalists leave the profession for higher wages in the private sector.

The Georgian media is intensifying polarisation in the country. Many citizens seek out media that matches their pre-existing beliefs. Television owners buy into the sector for business or political purposes rather than a genuine desire to inform the public.

The transfer to digital broadcasting added to the polarisation and politicisation of the media market. More than 100 channels are now fighting for advertising in a small market which makes many media outlets unprofitable. There are more outlets than advertisers to pay for them. Generating online advertising is particularly challenging. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the financial situation for all media.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster is failing to fulfil its role as a source of independent and unbiased news that represents the national and public interest. Despite a healthy guaranteed budget, it carries out few journalistic investigations and has lost credibility among members of the public who only tune in for its entertainment programmes.

Disinformation and propaganda comes from Russia, as well as domestic sources including groups associated with the government, churches and the far right. This disinformation is often circulated on Facebook, the most popular social media site in Georgia.

Journalists face threats and violence while doing their jobs, a situation that is exacerbated by the inflammatory remarks of politicians, particularly during elections. A number of journalists exercise self-censorship to stay safe.

METHODOLOGY

The independent evaluation of the Georgian media landscape presented in this document is based on research conducted by the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) between March and July 2021. It was produced as part of a project developed in partnership with the Evens Foundation and the Fritt Ord Foundation which aims to explore the condition and identify the needs of the media community in Georgia and Ukraine in order to better define the challenges of contemporary journalism.

The report is based on a combination of desk research and key stakeholder interviews with media practitioners and experts from across the Georgian media landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that all interviews were conducted online, as travel for in-person meetings was impossible. Interviews were carried out with 13 journalists, editors, academics and key organisations including the Charter of Journalistic Ethics and the Georgian Public Broadcaster. The focus was on assessing the key challenges facing the media with a view to presenting a set of recommendations. The EJN tried to include a broad spectrum of views and opinions from the media sector though the majority of interviews with practitioners were with journalists from independent online outlets.

This paper also draws upon the work of other media scholars and organisations who have examined the media landscape in Georgia including Internews, Reporters Without Borders, the Council of Europe, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Transparency International Georgia, IREX and the Open Society Georgia Foundation. Questions ranged from enquiries into business models, modes of governance, newsroom structures and hierarchies to factors which are impacting on practice and content.

This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the media in Georgia. It is primarily based on expert interviews and a desk study with additional input from stakeholders and experts in a peer review process. The EJN is not an expert on the Georgian media. It aims to provide an external perception of the challenges that the media are facing, based on its own journalistic experience and academic vigour.¹

1 All reports and further information can be found on the EJN's website at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org>

INTRODUCTION

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 ignited the independent media sector in Georgia and "some 600 newspapers were registered in the country between 1990 and 2000."² Independent television stations, among them Rustavi 2, mushroomed, feeding an audience hungry for news after decades under Soviet rule, and for a time citizens enjoyed a progressive and liberal media environment. Georgia's constitution guaranteed freedom of speech and its laws that granted access to information met international standards.

An early and notable victory for the newly-free press was the coverage of the rigged parliamentary elections of 2003. Investigations by journalists from Rustavi 2 and others into corruption led to the Rose Revolution and resulted in the ousting of President Eduard Shevardnadze, bringing Michael Saakashvili to power. "After the Rose Revolution, the country's parliament passed a new broadcasting law hailed as one of the best legal frameworks around, which laid a foundation for establishing the Georgian Public Broadcaster (Georgian Law on Broadcasting 2004)."³

However, the early promise that saw Georgia's media as the freest and most progressive in the region, backed by robust laws and good journalism, has not been fulfilled in the years since the revolution. The country now ranks 60th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders 2021 World Press Freedom Index. RSF cites issues including the complete change in ownership, and editorial policy, of Rustavi 2 as well as lack of editorial independence with TV owners calling the shots on content. Meanwhile, journalists struggle to access public information, exercise self-censorship and work with poor technical facilities.⁴

2 Mikashavidze, Maia. Media Landscapes, Expert Analysis of the State of the Media: Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

3 Bekerman, Marek. The Failure of a Success Story: Reforming Georgia's Public Service Broadcaster. [online] Available at: https://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/36807/1/GMJ8_Bekerman_final.pdf (Accessed 21 July 2021).

4 IREX (2019). Media Sustainability Index: Europe and Eurasia. [online]. Available at: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-full.pdf> (Accessed 7 July 2021).

PART 1

PUBLIC MEDIA AND THE RISING INFLUENCE OF THE STATE

Television

The switchover to digital in 2015 completely transformed the broadcasting sector as it made it easier to set up television stations and did away with the licensing requirement for terrestrial broadcasters. Today, there are approximately 100 stations in this country of around 3.7 million people.

Television has a huge impact on how public opinion is formed in Georgia which is a deeply telecentric society. A poll by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a US organisation working in Georgia, found that 72 percent of the population gets their news from television with social media in second place though young people are more likely to consume news online than older generations.⁵ However, the news they watch on Facebook, the most popular social media platform, is usually produced by the same legacy media outlets watched by their parents.

Though pluralistic, media in the country is highly polarised “reflecting the divisions in society”.⁶ There are many dozens of outlets representing a range of views, but broadcasters are unashamedly and openly partisan. Stations are affiliated with either the government, for example Imedi, Georgia’s most popular channel, or the opposition, such as TV Pirveli or Mtavari, and there is little room for alternative views on these stations.

Citizens looking for balanced journalism could switch between government-affiliated and opposition-supporting stations though many Georgians simply stick with the channel that conforms to their own political outlook. Unsurprisingly, trust is low, with “less than one third of Georgians fully or partially trusting media”.⁷

This “pattern of instrumentalising the media for political gains”⁸ is a longstanding one. Badri Patarkatsishvili, the late Georgian tycoon, founded one of the largest

broadcasting companies in 2001. The billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the ruling Georgian Dream party, launched Channel 9 before the 2012 parliamentary elections and defeated the ruling United National Movement (UNM). He has since closed down the station and officially stepped back from Georgian Dream but analysts say Ivanishvili’s influence still pervades the government, media and the entire country.

Illustrating how government still interferes in the media, analysts cite the battle for control of Rustavi 2, a harsh critic of the government and once the country’s most popular TV channel, which in 2019 was transferred back to its previous owner Kibar Khalvashi. Georgians believe “the case was politically motivated and that the government wished to get rid of its leading critical media.”⁹ The majority of the Rustavi 2 staff quit in protest at the change in ownership including the director general Nika Gvaramia who has since been charged with abuse of power.

Many of the Rustavi 2 journalists moved to the newly-formed opposition channels Mtavari TV and Formula TV which were set up by businessmen who oppose the current government or are linked to the previous administration of Mikhail Saakashvili.¹⁰ Rustavi 2 has now changed its editorial line in favour of the ruling Georgian Dream.

In an unrelated case that analysts cite as further proof of government interference in the media, the authorities have also prosecuted Avtandil Tsereteli, the father of the opposition TV Pirveli’s founder. Critics of the government insist the case is political and intended to put pressure on a station allied with the opposition.¹¹

‘There’s a sense that the country is teetering. One of the ways for the ruling party to hang on to power and strengthen its very weak position is to really control the media, because the media is playing a massive role in politics right now. It’s a real force.’ – Local journalist

5 Mikashavidze, Maia. Media Landscapes, Expert Analysis of the State of the Media: Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia>. (Accessed 6 July 2021).; Internews (2020). GEORGIA An Information Ecosystem Assessment. [online] Available at: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2021-03/Georgia-Information_Ecosystem-Part_1.pdf (Accessed 7 July 2021).

6 Mikashavidze, Maia. Media Landscapes, Expert Analysis of the State of the Media: Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

7 Internews (2020). GEORGIA An Information Ecosystem Assessment. [online] Available at: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2021-03/Georgia-Information_Ecosystem-Part_1.pdf (Accessed 7 July 2021).

8 Kintsurashvili, Tamar, Gelava, Sophie (2020). Media Market Risk Ratings: Georgia. Media Development Foundation. [online] Available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/185/file/eng/eng.pdf> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

9 Institute for War and Peace Reporting (2020). *Georgia’s Polarised Media Landscape*. [online] Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgias-polarised-media-landscape> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

10 Institute for War and Peace Reporting (2020). *Georgia’s Polarised Media Landscape*. [online] Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgias-polarised-media-landscape> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

11 Reporters Without Borders (2020). *Georgian TV channel’s deputy director resigns under pressure*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/georgian-tv-channels-deputy-director-resigns-under-pressure> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

Television, especially the big stations in Tbilisi affiliated with the political parties, dominates the already small advertising market which is too small to support all the players. Print and regional media have been especially hard hit but even television is suffering. A Georgian Advertisement Market study showed that television advertising revenues have been declining for many years, falling from \$40.9 million in 2016 to \$31.8 million in 2018. Overall advertising revenues dropped from \$37.1 million in 2016 to \$29.5 million in 2018.¹²

The worldwide decline in advertising revenues has been exacerbated by the pandemic but was already dwindling which means the situation is unlikely to improve. Big television channels are more likely to weather the storm than community radio stations like the respected Radio Mozaika in eastern Georgia. Stations such as Mozaika, which broadcasts across the IDP settlements around Gori, play a hugely important role in their communities and had previously been successful generating some local advertising. However, this has been hit by COVID-19 and those in the regions who haven't found generous international donors are struggling to survive.¹³

The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB)

Established under the 2004 Georgian Law on Public Broadcasting¹⁴, GPB consists of two television channels and two radio stations whose mandate is “to provide accurate and up-to-date information that is free from political and commercial bias and is shared without any hidden agendas. The programming seeks to address the needs and interests of the larger Georgian society through a diversity of programmes and viewpoints.”¹⁵

All analysts and practitioners interviewed for this research said it is falling far short of its obligation to serve the public interest. They cite political influence on the board of trustees, frequent changes of channel management under vague circumstances and coverage that is biased in favour of whoever is in power at the time. Under Saakashvili, the public broadcaster was repeatedly accused of working to his administration's agenda, having a low audience share and limited impact compared to commercial rivals. GPB has since been subjected to political and economic pressures by the new Georgian Dream administration.¹⁶

Elections are a source of particularly biased coverage, according to all analysts interviewed. A 2020 parliamentary elections monitoring report found that the channel's news programmes allocate the most positive coverage and the largest portion of their time to Georgian Dream.¹⁷ Similarly, an election monitoring report by the OSCE cited by Transparency International said that GPB was biased in favour of the government during the 2018 poll.¹⁸

‘They are following the government’s agenda. The GPB been captured by the state almost entirely. It’s tragic.’ – Media analyst

Lack of money isn't the problem for public television. The broadcaster is well funded from the state budget – by law it gets at least 0.14 percent of Georgia's gross domestic product (GDP) which rises if GDP increases. In 2018, its budget was almost GEL 52.5 million (\$17 million), money which came with a mandate to air social and political programmes, films and sports. By comparison, this was more than the combined budgets of seven major Georgian institutions including the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court of Justice and the presidential administration. The government gave the GPB more than it allocated to the education system for schoolbooks, ensuring a safe educational environment and teachers' professional development or the healthcare system for tuberculosis, hepatitis C, HIV/Aids management and medical services for drug addicts. But some question how the money is being spent, pointing out that more than half GPB's budget goes on salaries yet the true number of employees working at its stations and what exactly their job entails is unclear.¹⁹

The GPB is run by a supervisory board of nine members elected by parliament who are in charge of approving its staff list and employee salaries. They also determine the broadcaster's programme priorities and hear its quarterly reports.

Analysts say that in reality it's the government of the day that calls the shots and only those favourably disposed to the politicians in power get a place on the board. It is politics rather than suitability for the job that is usually “a driving force behind the appointment and dismissal of numerous board members”, according to one person

12 Institute for War and Peace Reporting (2020). *Georgia's Polarised Media Landscape*. [online] Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgias-polarised-media-landscape> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

13 Mikashvidze, Maia. Media Landscapes, Expert Analysis of the State of the Media: Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

14 Law of Georgia on Broadcasting. [online] Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/32866/39/en/pdf> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

15 Kintsurashvili, Tamar, Gelava, Sophie (2020). Media Market Risk Ratings: Georgia. Media Development Foundation. [online] Available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/185/file/eng/eng.pdf> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

16 Bekerman, Marek. The Failure of a Success Story: Reforming

Georgia's Public Service Broadcaster. [online] Available at: https://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/36807/1/GMJ8_Bekerman_final.pdf (Accessed 21 July 2021).

17 Media Environment in Georgia (2020). Media Advocacy Coalition. [online] Available at: https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Media-environment_English.pdf (Accessed 6 July 2021).

18 Georgian Media Environment in 2016-2020 (2020). Transparency International Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/georgian-media-environment-2016-2020> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

19 Gogosashvili, Mariam (2018). Open Society Georgia Foundation. How much does the Georgian public broadcaster cost. [online] Available at: <https://gyla.ge/files/banners/How%20much%20does%20the%20Public%20Broadcaster%20cost.pdf> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

interviewed for this report. Between 2005 and 2013, at least nine members of the Board of Trustees resigned for alleged politically motivated reasons.²⁰

'The procedure [to appoint board members] follows the law, of course, but then the figures who ultimately get to sit in the board really leave a lot of questions. You read their profiles and you do get the sense that there is something going on here. It's more than just being perfect fit for the position.' – Media academic

The supervisory board also appoints and dismisses the key role of director general of GPB. Directors seldom serve out their mandate and move on to other political appointments. A report from Transparency International Georgia in 2013 said none of the four previous directors had been able to complete their six-year term. "They were all either dismissed or forced to resign, mostly for politically motivated reasons."²¹ A new director, Tina Berdzenishvili, was appointed in 2020 after her predecessor left to become the vice chairman of the Georgian Dream party. Berdzenishvili's predecessor Vasil Maglaperidze originally came to the job from an Ivanishvili-owned station Channel 9.

'There's this board that pretends it is governing but it is the government that decides who's going to be the head of television.' – Media analyst

The public broadcaster includes two separate entities – one located in Tbilisi and Adjara TV which is a regional outlet based in Batumi. Until recently Adjara had maintained some journalistic integrity but that changed in 2019 when Natia Kapanadze was dismissed from her role as director and a politically-connected replacement was appointed. In February 2020 when "Shorena Glonti was relieved of her duties as the head of Adjara TV's newsroom and the deputy head of newsroom, Maia Merkviladze, was also dismissed. Both were key figures in maintaining independent editorial policy. The deputy director, Natia Zoidze, also resigned under political pressure."²²

20 Transparency International Georgia (2013). Crisis Uninterrupted: the Story of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. [online] Available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/crisis-uninterrupted-story-georgian-public-broadcaster> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

21 Transparency International Georgia (2013). Crisis Uninterrupted: the Story of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. [online] Available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/crisis-uninterrupted-story-georgian-public-broadcaster> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

22 Council of Europe (2020). Several Journalists Sacked Due to Political Pressure on Public Channel Adjara TV. [online] Available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/detail-alert?p_p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_pos=1&p_p_col_

There is little to draw in viewers looking for unbiased news or even interesting programming. GPB carries virtually no investigative content and fails as a public watchdog which analysts say is badly needed in the polarised political and media landscape. The broadcaster's reporting on COVID-19 was especially weak. Journalists did not press the government on key issues such as vaccines and lockdowns which analysts allege was intended to protect politicians running for office in the 2020 elections. As a result, ratings for GPB are low with audiences only tuning in when it broadcasts popular reality entertainment shows such as Georgian Idol or MasterChef. Many Georgians describe the majority of programmes as boring or simply "unwatchable".²³

'I would just abolish it. It's a government structure. Donors shouldn't invest in it, funding this big television to serve the partisan interests or whoever comes to power. And I don't believe that it is possible to reform or transform it. It is just a continuation of the government, whoever is in the government.' – Journalist, private media

Though acknowledging its flaws, most analysts and media watchers do not share this opinion. They point out that the GPB does have an important role to play as the only channel that is legally obliged to produce programming in Georgia's minority languages including Azeri and Armenian. However, even there the GPB is failing by switching many of the translated programmes to online only and not producing original reporting aimed at minority populated regions. This has excluded older audiences and forced many Georgian citizens of Azerbaijani or Armenian origin to seek out news programming outside their home country. One report says that as many "40 percent of Armenians and 27 percent of Azerbaijanis watch coverage of news and current affairs on non-Georgian TV channels".²⁴ This serves to exclude them from political life at home.

'Sometimes they don't even recognise key Georgian politicians or leaders because they are more tied to Armenian or Azerbaijani media so don't know what is happening in Georgia.' – Media development analyst

count=11&_sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet_alertPK=64492095&_sojdashboard_WAR_coesoportlet_displayLink=SojPortlet_getDashboardPortletId%28%29 (Accessed 6 July 2021).

23 Bekerman, Marek. The Failure of a Success Story: Reforming Georgia's Public Service Broadcaster. [online] Available at: https://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/36807/1/GMJ8_Bekerman_final.pdf (Accessed 21 July 2021).

24 Kintsurashvili, Tamar, Gelava, Sophie (2020). Media Market Risk Ratings: Georgia. Media Development Foundation. [online] Available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/185/file/eng/eng.pdf> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

Online media

International organisations such as Internews, Deutsche Welle Akademie, the Council of Europe (CoE), the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) looking to implement media development projects in Georgia have turned their focus to a handful of online outlets and small local television and radio stations that are run by young activists who have shunned jobs at legacy media outlets.

Donor funded websites like OC Media, Chai Khana and ClickMedia produce ethical, professional, non-partisan reports and cross-border investigations in a range of languages including Georgian, English and Russian. They are mostly aimed at international audiences and have a small impact locally. More significant to Georgians are netgazeti.ge, mtisambebi.ge, indigo.com.ge and on.ge.

These donor-funded websites are almost entirely dependent on grants – and the project cycles of the international media development organisations. This is seen by those who fund and produce the websites as a serious problem. All those interviewed for this report said online advertising is limited or non-existent and the concept of users paying for quality content has not taken off in Georgia so is not yet seen as a viable way of generating independent revenue.

It was also suggested that the overall quality of the online news produced must improve before people will pay for content.

‘Georgians don’t pay for the news. These websites offer independent and verified facts. And this is as far as it goes. I don’t know how many people would want to pay just for that.’ – Online journalist

The impact of the websites in a television centric society where older Georgians or those in rural areas are not online is unknown, but even those who work in media development admit it is probably limited.

‘When you ask the people about the news, the first thing that comes to their mind is the news that they watch on TV. Of course, there is this rather small niche audience who read or who follow online media.’ – Project director, international media development organisation

Meanwhile, the websites are competing with each other for donor funding and with the major television outlets

which are putting their content on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube for free.

‘We have these big competitors who have very big revenues from advertising through their channels. And now they’re pouring the money in digital media to be present there. In the long run it could be problematic for independent, small digital outlets. You have not only people watching them on TV, but now you have a lot of people following them on social media.’ – Editor, donor-supported website

All Georgian media outlets, even the major players in the capital, are competing with Facebook for advertising in an overcrowded market that has contracted due to the impact of COVID-19.

‘The number of outlets of all kinds has grown but advertising market hasn’t grown. People are paying Facebook for advertising not the media outlets. They can reach their audiences on Facebook. They can strategise on Facebook. They can reach out to who they want. So it does take a lot of money from everyone.’
– Media analyst

The Regulators

Legislation for regulating the media is liberal in Georgia while accountability rules and self-regulation are relatively weak. “These gaps reflect a general tendency among post-Soviet countries regarding how journalists view regulation. After decades of being a part of the state machinery, journalists tend to reject social responsibility as merely a nice term for state control.”²⁵

The Communications Commission is the main regulatory authority for the broadcast media and telecommunications sector and is the equivalent to OFCOM in the UK and the FCC in the United States. The Communications Commission was established as an independent state agency in 2000 and is mandated to ensure protection of consumer interests, guarantee a transparent and fair regulatory environment and guard against “monopolistic practices”.²⁶ In 2014 it led the switchover

25 Kintsurashvili, Tamar, Gelava, Sophie (2020). Media Market Risk Ratings: Georgia. Media Development Foundation. [online] Available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/185/file/eng/eng.pdf> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

26 <https://comcom.ge/en/the-commission/about-commission>

to digital broadcasting in Georgia and did away with the licensing requirements for television stations.^{27/28}

However, the regulator has been accused of lacking independence as it is accountable to the president, the government and the parliament rather than to the public. It has been frequently criticised for biased and ineffective decisions, issuing unfair fines, aligning with politicians and its members entering into corrupt business deals that constituted conflicts of interest.²⁹

Rather than promote fairness, experts say it has long silenced “critical and independent media in favour of certain political interests”. This has happened most recently through its so-called Media Academy which the regulator launched in 2019 to provide analysis of current media trends but has instead employed pro-government journalists to criticise opposition stations including TV Mtavari, TV Formula and TV Pirveli as well as credible online outlets such as netgazeti.ge.³⁰

‘According to the constitution the Communications Commission should be an independent regulatory authority which is charge of media and telecommunications. Just like with the public broadcaster the chairman is a former director of the station owned by Ivanishvili. The Communications Commission focuses on how it can restrict activity of critical media outlets. They have to please the ruling party, not the people.’ – Media analyst

Complaining about the media involves an ad hoc system of self-regulation policed by the broadcasters themselves that is based on their internal codes of conduct and ethical statements.³¹ These codes of conduct, which outline the broadcasters’ values and options for

redress, are not well publicised and as a result are little used by those who feel they may have a legitimate grievance against a broadcaster. Some outlets make no mention at all of codes of conduct on their website nor do they offer ways to complain. Though the media outlets could do better in dealing with complaints, one media analyst believes Georgians themselves are partly to blame as they don’t stand up for their rights.

‘There is no knowledge about this [self-regulation] mechanism among the public. In fact, the complaint culture in general is quite weak in our society. But we think a system of self-regulation is fine, because we don’t want these state authorities to interfere into the content of media outlets.’

– Media analyst

In the absence of formal self-regulation mechanisms, the highly respected Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (GCJE) serves an ombudsman role and handles dozens of complaints every year from media professionals, public officials and the general public. A charter employee said about 50-60 percent of complaints come from citizens though complaints also come from government, the police and the judiciary.

Though the 11-year-old charter does not impose sanctions, it assesses complaints using 11 ethical principles³² then publicises its findings. Analysts believe that this makes journalists more careful, as they fear being named and shamed by a well-known and respected journalistic body.

Some outlets publish corrections and even consult the charter for advice on ethical issues. As with the online media outlets, the charter relies on funding from international organisations. Staff say this is the only way to maintain their independence from government but acknowledge they would struggle to sustain themselves if donors pulled out.

‘We’ve refused to take money from the government as then we would be seen as a government mouthpiece.’ – Charter employee

The charter’s 350 members are mainly individual journalists from online and regional media outlets. Charter staff do sometimes meet with the Tbilisi-based television stations responsible for most of the ethical violations.

27 Media Environment in Georgia (2020). Media Advocacy Coalition. (Accessed 6 July 2021). [online] Available at: https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Media-environment_English.pdf

28 Mikashavidze, Maia (2018). *Systemic capacity building of the media regulatory authorities in Georgia: A hierarchy of needs (Policy brief)*. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322952537_Systemic_capacity_building_of_the_media_regulatory_authorities_in_Georgia_A_hierarchy_of_needs_Policy_brief (Accessed 6 July 2021).

29 Mikashavidze, Maia (2018). *Systemic capacity building of the media regulatory authorities in Georgia: A hierarchy of needs (Policy brief)*. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322952537_Systemic_capacity_building_of_the_media_regulatory_authorities_in_Georgia_A_hierarchy_of_needs_Policy_brief (Accessed 6 July 2021).

30 Media Environment in Georgia (2020). Media Advocacy Coalition. (Accessed 6 July 2021). [online] Available at: https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Media-environment_English.pdf

31 Find them here: https://formulanews.ge/About_us; <https://mtavari.tv/en/self-regulation>

32 Principles of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics: <https://www.qartia.ge/en/charter/article/38674-principles-of-charter>

In these meetings the station managers claim to be trying to work ethically, the charter employee said, but their output shows no sign of following basic principles of journalism such as balance and accuracy.

An analyst explained that the news talk shows in which politicians appear to discuss the news of the day, which are extremely popular with Georgians and for many their main source of news and opinion, are the worst ethical offenders. Ruling party politicians refuse to appear on the opposition station shows, increasing polarisation and divisions in society.

‘The talk show hosts simply say ‘this is my show and I am allowed to express my opinion. I’m allowed to just do anything. It’s my territory’. So most of the bias and partisanship and politicisation happens in talk shows. People listen to this and adopt the opinions of speakers, confirming attitudes they already have.’ – Media analyst

Those interviewed for this report including some who hold journalism degrees from local universities³³ say that Georgian journalism schools do teach their students about ethics. Most courses are not practical as schools don’t have television stations or even newspapers where students can practice their craft in an ethical, unbiased and balanced way. When they go into the real world of broadcast media there are even fewer opportunities to be ethical. Media analysts say that the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) and Caucasus University are among the few that produce highly skilled journalists though this isn’t always helpful when applying for jobs in television.

‘The industry has its own rules. They prefer the journalists to work in a way that is suitable to them. There is no demand for well-educated or trained journalists, except for their skills such as recording, editing or interviewing. The media owners have their political agenda. They prefer to have journalists who can be easily instrumentalised by them.’ – Journalist

One prominent Georgian editor sees nothing wrong with journalists making their feelings known.

‘I will always have a position when I see sexual minorities beaten up in the street. It’s unethical not to have a position on this. When I see a Russian communist MP sitting in the chair of the Georgian parliament, I will have a position that this is unacceptable. If you report the facts accurately, then you can have a position as a journalist.’ – Editor

³³ Journalism course at the Bachelors, Masters or PhD level are available in Georgia.

PART 2

DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

Russia is actively engaged in the dissemination of disinformation in Georgia, often through Georgian language websites to draw in readers who would be suspicious of information that more obviously originates from Russia.^{34/35} The editor of an online publication affiliated with the opposition said Russian propaganda in Georgia is based on three fears: war; hunger caused by an economic downturn; and the loss of Georgia's cultural and national identity.

'We all know Putin is a villain. But they are telling us the West is not going to come to help you. We are your neighbours. You have to get along with us. You have to behave. The West is far away. You're never going to become members of NATO. If you misbehave we're going to put an embargo against you, and you're going to suffer. And the other thing is that Americans are going to come and make all Georgian men gay.' – Editor

'They sound simple, even silly, some of these disinformation narratives, but sometimes they work.' – Analyst

Meanwhile, the Georgian government is failing to tackle Russian disinformation as it is busy running its own campaigns to discredit opponents including opposition media and undermine their credibility in the eyes of the public.

Both international and domestic disinformation is being transmitted through traditional and social media channels and by fringe media outlets with explicitly pro-Russian editorial policies (sakinform.ge, the newspaper Georgia and the World and its website geworld.ge, online newspress.ge, the TV station Obiektivi).³⁶

Facebook, the most popular social media site in Georgia for both information and disinformation, said it has taken down hundreds of fake social media pages that disseminate libellous, fake information and hate speech in support of the Georgian Dream, Russia, the far right and Nazis. Disinformation is most often about Western countries and NATO but also aimed at media outlets that oppose the government or promote closer relations with Europe and the US.

One online journalist summed up the serious consequences of disinformation on Georgian society:

'It's quite a tricky situation. You've got these Facebook pages, which who knows where they come from, and who knows what they're saying is true. Quite often it's not true. Then you've got your mainstream media, which is controlled by politicians. It's very politicised and polarised. You have to do quite some work to work out what's going on in your own country. You could do this work if you know what you're doing and you know where to look. But it seems like a lot of the citizens of Georgia, they simply don't know what's going on. This sounds like a very dangerous situation, particularly in the region which has the history that Georgia has.'
– Journalist

34 Georgian Media Environment in 2016-2020 (2020). Transparency International Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/georgian-media-environment-2016-2020> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

35 Kintsurashvili, Tamar, Gelava, Sophie (2020). Media Market Risk Ratings: Georgia. Media Development Foundation. [online] Available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/185/file/eng/eng.pdf> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

36 Georgian Media Environment in 2016-2020 (2020). Transparency International Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/georgian-media-environment-2016-2020> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

PART 3

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Georgia has ample funding from international donors willing to pay for projects to support and improve media in the country. With mainstream television and the public broadcaster widely considered to be lost causes in the current political climate, the internationals have turned their attention to independent websites.

Though all those interviewed for this report were grateful for the support of media development organisations, most were worried that their outlets were ultimately unsustainable and would fade away when the international money eventually dried up. Those working for independent online outlets said they live from one project tender to another, from one short term project to another, spending too much time applying for funding and reporting back on how the money is spent rather than producing content or making themselves sustainable.

“It’s soul sucking managing all these small projects. Some months, I pay core salaries from seven different budgets.”

– Website editor

Another contentious issue in the independent online sector are donors whose funding comes with strings attached, based on the priorities of their own governments and taxpayers rather than on the most important local issues.

“For example, there is funding for raising awareness about LGBT issues or for women’s empowerment. Except, it’s not our job to raise awareness of anyone. Our job is to give information to people. I feel that there is a complete lack of understanding of what media is. Media is not a member of civil society. Very often donors want, for example, an LGBT article every day so they can tick off some boxes. People are not stupid. If you’re trying to shove something down their throats, then it becomes like Western propaganda.”

– Website editor

One solution is to make the international funding more flexible and a greater emphasis placed on sustainability so websites can survive without donor money. This includes giving local projects the flexibility to hire and fire as well as to decide appropriate salaries in order to

retain staff. One website editor said staff at his website receive less than \$300 per month compared with the average monthly wage of a journalist of around \$500, still among the lowest paid professions in the country.³⁷

As a result, promising young journalists are trained then take their contacts and skills from the independent outlets to more lucrative jobs in the private sector where they are highly sought after. Those who stay tend to be women who are used to earning lower salaries than their male counterparts but are then forced to take a second job to survive.

“A donor asked me to consult on a training of female investigative journalists in the Caucasus. I told them almost all the journalists here are women and there’s a lot of them. We don’t need more. We need to pay the ones that are already here.”

– Website editor

37 IREX (2019). Media Sustainability Index. [online] Available at: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-full.pdf> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

PART 4

SAFETY

Georgia's constitution and other legislation guarantees journalists the freedom to work without fear, but on the ground media workers are increasingly under threat. Both physical and verbal assaults are becoming commonplace. Attacks have come from the police, members of the public, the far right and neo-Nazi groups. The government has done little to help and in fact is accused by some in the media community of fuelling the flames by failing to respond to attacks or even by encouraging them with incendiary statements about the press.³⁸

Most recently, more than 50 journalists were beaten in July 2021, some with sticks, while covering a protest against a Tbilisi Pride parade. Pirveli cameraman Alexander Lashkarava was targeted and beaten by the angry mob, sustaining a concussion and broken bones in his face. He died less than a week later and an investigation is ongoing into the cause of his death. Rather than condemn the violence Georgia's government has suggested Lashkarava was a drug user and the Pride organisers were irresponsible for organising the march.³⁹

'There is also a lot of disrespect coming from the politicians themselves. And from time to time you hear calls to punish the journalists.' – International journalist

In 2019, police used violence to disperse protestors during a protest that turned into a riot outside parliament in Tbilisi. Many journalists were injured, mostly by projectiles fired by police. The victims included a photographer who was hit by rubber bullets about 10 times. Some journalists were manhandled by protestors. A flying brick broke the ribs of another reporter. No one was ever held to account for the attacks.⁴⁰

Violence and harassment against journalists further escalated in the run up to Georgia's disputed 2020 elections. Five media workers were injured and their equipment damaged during clashes between

pro-government and pro-opposition activists in the southern town of Marneuli in September 2020.⁴¹

'It became harder for people to work in the run up to the election. We're not talking about imprisoning people. This is not Russia, but we're talking about a kind of stifling climate overall. There is a real fear now that the next thing that the government will do is further clamp down on media.' – Journalist, international media.

Online attacks have been a particular problem throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. TV Pirveli journalist Vakho Sanaia was subjected to a Facebook hate campaign after his interview with the director of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health about the government's coronavirus response and testing.⁴² Fear of reporting freely on the pandemic is particularly concerning in a country where research shows that many Georgians are highly sceptical of the vaccine.⁴³

The situation is especially bad for women working in the media. Online, Facebook is a frequent forum for the bullying of women who form the bulk of media workers in Georgia as they are more willing than their male counterparts to work for low pay. In the real world, female journalists are harassed, denied interviews and ignored by sexist politicians who refuse to answer their questions. One reporter with TV Pirveli was threatened with the release of an explicit video in which she featured.⁴⁴

A female radio journalist interviewed for this research said she is often told she is "not being feminine" and "should concentrate on her family". Many of the cruel comments come on social media, she said.

38 Georgian Media Environment in 2016-2020 (2020). Transparency International Georgia. [online] Available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/georgian-media-environment-2016-2020> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

39 The Guardian (2021). *Georgia TV stations protest over far-right attacks on journalists*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/14/georgia-tv-stations-protest-over-far-right-attacks-on-journalists> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

40 Reporters Without Borders (2019). *Many journalists injured during protest outside Georgian parliament*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/many-journalists-injured-during-protest-outside-georgian-parliament> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

41 Reporters Without Borders (2020). *At least five journalists attacked while covering Georgia's election campaign*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/least-five-journalists-attacked-while-covering-georgias-election-campaign> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

42 Myth Detector (2020). *Regulator's "Sponsored Criticism", Pro-Government and Antiliberal Pages against Sanaia*. [online] Available at: <https://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/regulators-sponsored-criticism-pro-government-and-antiliberal-pages-against-sanaia> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

43 Open Democracy (2020). *Majority of Georgians may reject COVID-19 vaccine, new survey suggests*. [online] Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/majority-georgians-may-reject-covid-19-vaccine-new-survey-suggests> (Accessed 21 July 2021).

44 OC Media (2019). *Georgia identifies suspect in leaked sex tape*. [online] Available at: <https://oc-media.org/georgia-identifies-suspect-in-leaked-sex-tape> (Accessed 6 July 2021).

CONCLUSION

This report provides an overview of the challenges to journalism in Georgia, particularly the polarisation and politicisation of the sector. It is based on a series of stakeholder interviews with representatives from across the Georgian media landscape.

Rather than helping the population reach a consensus on vital issues including the current political crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia's media only exacerbates the differences between its citizens. This is of concern as Georgia's democracy and institutions are fragile and its government and opposition self serving, making the media an essential component of understanding the political and social life of the country.

Data shows decreasing public trust in media outlets which make no secret of their support for the government or opposition of the day. Some journalists see nothing wrong with this. The online sector exists in a well funded donor niche but lacks the muscle to challenge the major television outlets which dominate the news agenda.

Looming over this unhealthy sector is the dwindling advertising market and the spectre of disinformation, both domestic and Russian, which some in the industry have described as a war which Western-leaning Georgians are slowly losing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations focus on providing long-term solutions to some of the issues facing Georgia journalists. These recommendations are aimed at the policy makers, media, NGOs, CSOs and donor communities which are active in the support and development of freedom of the press and media.

- Donors must continue their support for the Charter of Journalistic Ethics, to help it raise its profile and increase its membership into the mainstream media community where the majority of the ethical violations are occurring. Advocacy from both domestic and international institutions is also needed to improve the media's self-regulation mechanisms and to ensure the large television stations are accountable to the viewing public.
- Independent online outlets are a source of ethical and unbiased news, the only ones in Georgia performing this important role. However, their lack of sustainability and reliance on donor funding threatens their future. The donor community should continue to support these websites as well as other ethical local media but donor grant are not a permanent solution. Editors must consider other sources of funding and consider ideas such as crowdfunding if they don't want to live from one project cycle to another.
- The so-called 'brain drain' of trained and competent staff from the donor-supported media into the private sector is immense and can only be addressed by more attractive working conditions – including competitive salaries. Core funding could be one solution. Given the high turnover, continued and ongoing training on journalistic ethics and standards is essential for all new staff.
- Though the independent digital media are often in competition with each other for funding and content, more cooperation between websites is needed, as most share similar ethical and journalistic standards. Editors must build networks and develop coordination mechanisms. Sustainability should be high on the agenda. This conversation should involve donors but be driven by local outlets.
- Georgia's media and freedom of information laws meet international standards but there is a constant threat they will be weakened for political purposes. The donor community must join with local advocacy groups to carry out sustained lobbying to ensure this doesn't happen.
- Donors must also make clear that attacks on journalists are unacceptable and encourage the authorities to prosecute offenders and engage with press freedom projects such as the Council of Europe's platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists.⁴⁵

- The Georgian Public Broadcaster is a discredited institution in the eyes of journalists and the public but nonetheless remains an important part of the media landscape. Its mandate to translate programming into Georgia's ethnic minority languages is particularly important if all Georgia's citizens are to feel included in the life of the country. It must continue this work as well as produce original reporting from the areas populated by minorities to ensure their voices are being heard. However, reform is essential, particularly of the supervisory board which needs to function as an effective watchdog and manager rather than simply implementing the will of the government in power at the time. This is particularly important as public funds are being spent. The broadcaster must be more transparent in how it operates, the number of staff it employs and the jobs they carry out.
- Standards and values of fact-based, ethical, editorially-independent journalism should be taught and promoted by journalism associations, media self-regulatory bodies, journalism education programs, and journalists.
- Better and further education of citizens on how to understand and engage with online media and recognise disinformation and hate speech across all platforms is important. A media-literate audience would encourage greater professionalism among journalists and push for the inclusion of diverse voices that better represent all communities.

45 See here: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/home>

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)

The Ethical Journalism Network works to promote media ethics, good governance and the self-regulation of journalism with the aim of strengthening independent journalism and building a responsible and ethical public sphere in an age where trust in the media is at an all time low.

www.ethicaljournalismnetwork.org



Evens Foundation

The Evens Foundation aims to contribute to rethinking and building a European reality committed to the values of diversity, freedom, responsibility and solidarity. We identify and support innovative ideas and achievements through our prizes and calls, initiate experimental projects bridging the gap between research and practice, and facilitate knowledge exchange through our lectures, seminars, debates and publications.

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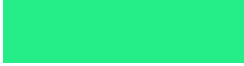
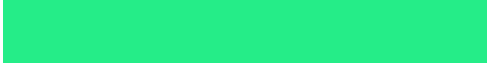
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