
The authorities also came under fire from the media for arresting several prominent photographers on espionage charges. The arrests roiled Georgian media and civil society. Calling the allegations spurious, many media professionals launched a campaign to free the photo reporters.



GEORGIA

The year 2011 ended on a strange note for Georgian media with the hijacking of an entire television station. In the wee hours of November 30, a man with several associates in tow climbed over the fence of Maestro, a small Tbilisi-based television company and locked the station from the inside. Detecting the intrusion, Maestro's journalists locked themselves in the control room. The police arrived, and a long standoff ensued.

The standoff was particularly dramatic, if farcical, given that the intruder was Erosi Kitsmarishvili, a man hired to run Maestro and fully within his rights to walk through the station's front door. Maestro's owners had outsourced the station's management to Kitsmarishvili's firm, but he claimed the station's owners had slighted him, as they reportedly were considering a takeover proposal from Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili is interested in the station because he announced that he is entering politics and challenging the ruling party in upcoming parliamentary elections. Looking for an outlet for publicity, he made offers to Maestro and Kavkasia TV; Maestro is considering the offer and Kavkasia turned him down.

Maestro's co-owner accused Kitsmarishvili of attempting to silence a channel known for its criticism of the government. An avid government critic himself, Kitsmarishvili rejected the allegations. The channel's journalists eventually left the station and began broadcasting from a different location. Kitsmarishvili stayed behind, and the dispute has since migrated to a courthouse.

Maestro was the only channel that carried live a May 26 clash between riot police and an opposition rally, an event that shook Georgian media. Several journalists covering the event were physically abused in the crackdown. Riot police damaged and expropriated reporting gear. Police eventually redressed the damages to the reporters and the news companies, but many in the media community found the compensation unsatisfactory. The authorities also came under fire from the media for arresting several prominent photographers on espionage charges. The arrests roiled Georgian media and civil society. Calling the allegations spurious, many media professionals launched a campaign to free the photo reporters. On July 18, 2011, some print and online publications published their front pages without pictures in solidarity with the arrestees. The photographers' release did little to assuage public concerns.

Many of the previous year's challenges persisted in 2011. Partisanship and poor ethical practices pervade mainstream media, while quality news is mainly accessible only to the educated, media-savvy, and urban audiences. A study by Transparency International Georgia put into perspective the market concentration and nepotism that distorts competition in media business. On the positive side, a new law is expected to demystify ownership of large media conglomerates, and international development efforts continue to focus on journalism. Georgia's overall score remained unchanged, reflecting the opinion of Ia Antadze, director of the Civic Development Institute, and the majority of panelists' view that the media environment neither improved nor deteriorated since last year.

GEORGIA AT A GLANCE

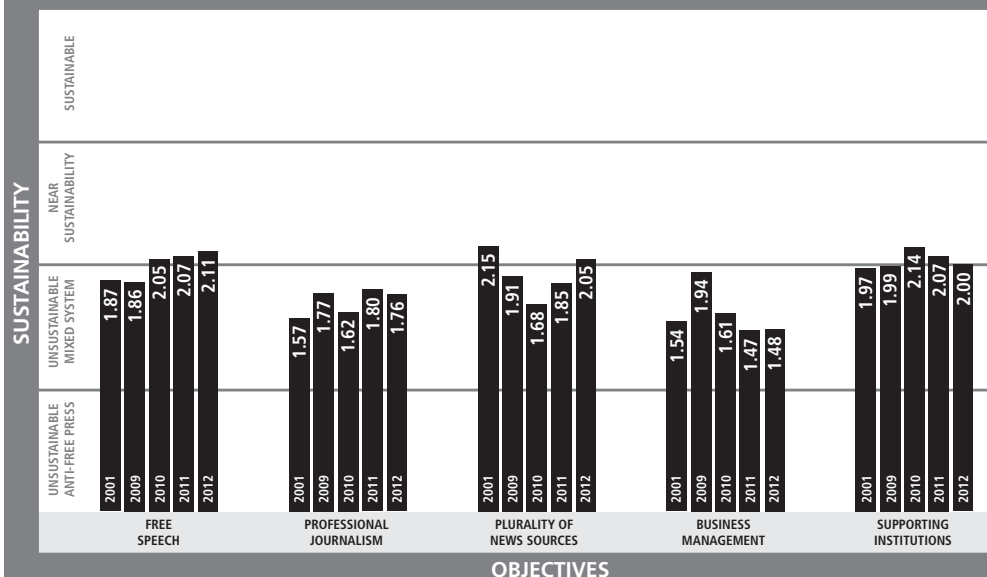
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 4,585,874 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Tbilisi
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Georgian 83.8%, Azeri 6.5%, Armenian 5.7%, Russian 1.5%, other 2.5% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religion (% of population):** Orthodox Christian 83.9%, Muslim 9.9%, Armenian-Gregorian 3.9%, Catholic 0.8%, other 0.8%, none 0.7% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Georgian 71% (official), Russian 9%, Armenian 7%, Azeri 6%, other 7% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$11.98 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$4,980 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 100% (male 100%, female 100%) (2004 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Mikheil Saakashvili (since January 25, 2004)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 70 newspapers, 95 magazines (yellowpages.ge); Broadcast: 79 broadcasting licenses (51 television broadcasting licenses, 12 satellite broadcasting licenses and 12 cable broadcasting licenses), 36 radio broadcasting licenses (Georgian National Communications Commission, December 2011 report)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics (total circulation and largest paper):** *Rezonansi* (4,000–5,000 daily), *24 Saati* (5,500 daily), *Kviris Palitra* (average 45,000–50,000 weekly) (individual newspaper claims)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Highest rated television outlets in Tbilisi are Rustavi2, 4.59%; Imedi, 4.75%; Channel 1, 0.78% (TV MR GE, Licensee of AGB Nielsen Media Research)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in the media sector:** For television, approximately \$28 million; unknown for print and radio (Media Sales House 'General Media', 2010)
- > **News agencies:** Black Sea Press, NovostiGruzia, Sarke, Interpressnews, Iprinda, ItarTass, Kavkazpress, Media News, Prime News, Prime News, Business, Pirveli, Georgian Business Consulting News, Georgian HotNews, GeoNews, Expressnews (www.yellowpages.ge)
- > **Internet usage:** 1.3 million (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: GEORGIA



Scores for all years may be found online at http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscorers.xls

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Georgia Objective Score: 2.11

The overall score for this remained nearly identical to last year's score. Panelists' evaluation of indicator 4 (attacks on journalists) deteriorated, most probably as a result of the problems described above. As far as legal environment is concerned, media professionals continue to say that the main problem is not the laws, but the practice. Freedom of speech is constitutionally protected and is subject to regulations and restrictions generally comparable to western norms. The panelists had few complaints about the Freedom of Information legislation per se, but named bureaucratic obstacles to accessing public information as the single biggest problem in this aspect of journalism in Georgia.

"There are no laws designed specifically to hinder journalists' work," said Zviad Koridze, journalism teacher and chairperson of Georgian Charter of Journalism Ethics, a media watchdog group. "The real problem is that these laws often do not work." He said that the executive branch tends to enforce the laws selectively, and the nation's docile judiciary does little to ensure indiscriminate enforcement of laws. Other panelists argued that such faulty practices are indicative of the defective nature of the law.

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state of public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets' access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

The Georgians' assessment of the freedom of the press situation in the country is bleak. According to an opinion poll by the Caucasus Resource and Research Centers (CRR) for the National Democratic Institute's office in Georgia, 45 percent of Georgians think there is no freedom of speech in Georgian media.¹ Georgians generally embrace freedom of speech as an important value, but it is not the utmost concern for everyone, surveys suggest. Another poll conducted by the CRR showed that freedom of speech sits far lower on the list of national concerns than main issues such as unemployment, territorial integrity or affordable healthcare.² Media independence is even less of a concern.

Several panel members complained that audiences sometimes judge news outlets not on the level of independence or quality of reporting, but instead by whether or not an outlet's political leanings match their own views. This became particularly obvious after billionaire Ivanishvili launched an opposition movement against Saakashvili's administration. The news media came under pressure to take sides in the confrontation, Jangirashvili said.

Regarding licensing concerns, the panelists noted that the industry regulatory system took more flak from the panel than the laws. They highlighted many questions about the government's regulation of broadcast news, especially television, the country's single most popular source of news.³

As in previous years, the regulatory authority, the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC), faces accusations of discriminatory licensing policy. The GNCC grants broadcast licenses based on spectrum availability and audience priorities. Georgia is running low on radio spectrum availability, and the competition is getting tougher. Two important radio outlets—one Tbilisi-based, another in the Kakheti Region—battled hard for access to the FM band, even taking their struggle to court. Eventually, local radio Hereti failed to expand broadcasting to the capital city, as the license it sought went to Radio Tskheli Shokoladi, an offshoot of a Tbilisi-based magazine with the same name. The court turned down Hereti's appeal of the GNCC's choice.

Nino Jangirashvili, director of Kavkasia television, noted that the Commission implements the same licensing rules in cable broadcasting as in the frequency allocation for traditional over-the-air television. Spectrum management rules, such as providing content-based and demand-based

¹ Eurasia Partnership Foundation. *The Georgian Media: Popular Assessments and Development Perspectives*. January 2012. Available at: http://www.epfound.ge/files/media_report_final_eng_print.pdf

² *Public Attitudes in Georgia*. National Democratic Institute: 2011. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2011/NDIpollMarch2011.pdf>

³ *Ibid*, *The Georgian Media: Popular Assessments and Development Perspectives*.

licenses, are irrelevant in cable programming, as this sector does not utilize a limited public resource such as broadcasting frequency spectrum, Tamar Kordzaia, a media lawyer with the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, stressed.

GNCC's credibility is farther undermined by a conflict of interest associated with its chair, Irakli Chikovani. Although no longer an owner of a large media sales house, Chikovani still earns income from the very industry that he is tasked to regulate, as found a report by Transparency International.⁴

Despite the doubts over the regulator's independence from the politics, the GNCC does permit government-criticizing news on the air. Maestro television, an ardent government critic, holds a license to broadcast via satellite and cable networks. A similar license was granted to a television channel planned by Ivanishvili.

The year 2011 brought some bad news for community media. According to an opinion poll conducted by the GNCC, community programming is low on the broadcast media audience's priority list. The Commission, which allocates frequencies based on the market demand, refused to give broadcasting licenses to community radio stations that had long requested permits. "Even if 500 people sign a request to provide community news, [the Commissioners] say that they would still turn it down," said Kordzaia. "We find this approach discriminatory."

For other sectors, print and online news are essentially free of regulations, and in terms of the ease of market entry the tax system does not discriminate against any type of media.

While public support for journalists tends to be a low priority, a smaller, an active circle of media professionals, civil sector representatives and intellectuals stand guard to protect freedom of speech and react to attacks on journalists. This was the case during scandalous arrests of prominent photojournalists in July, 2011. Saakashvili's personal photographer, Irakli Gedenidze, the Foreign Ministry's photographer Giorgi Abdaladze, and European Pressphoto Agency's Zurab Kurtsikidze were accused of photographing secret government documents, including Saakashvili's itinerary, and selling them to foreign intelligence services. The photographers freelanced both for the government and the newswires.

The accusations were taken with a large grain of salt by a significant part of the media community, but some journalists mounted a series of protests demanding that the Interior Ministry either provide evidence or release

the photographers. Individual journalists and members of Coalition for Media Advocacy demonstrated in front of key government offices, sporting T-shirts with crossed-out cameras. In addition, various rights groups both within the country and outside expressed concern over the arrests.

Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, the muscle of the Saakashvili administration, met with a delegation of media professionals that protested against the arrests, but he failed to allay their concerns. After 15 days in police custody, the photographers pled guilty and were released from the courthouse. They have been silenced by a court instruction not to divulge state secrets, and a large part of Georgia's media community remains doubtful about the true reasons of the arrests. Many link the arrests to images taken by journalists during the May 26 dispersal of the anti-government demonstration.

The May 26 crackdown on supporters of ex-parliamentary speaker-turned-opposition leader Nino Burjanadze proved a major challenge to Georgia's independent media in 2011. Journalists became collateral victims in the clash, which occurred after the protesters refused to make space for the Independence Day parade. Riot police beat and detained several journalists covering the demonstration. Police also destroyed and confiscated some reporting equipment.

The Interior Ministry later dismissed four policemen, and applied disciplinary punishment against nine other policemen who roughed up journalists on that night. The Ombudsman's office hailed the ministry's move, but went a step further and said that certain abuses warranted not only disciplinary measures but also a criminal investigation. In December, the Tbilisi City Court ordered the Interior Ministry to reimburse some of the reporters and media organizations for the damage to health and property.⁵ The May 26 clash would eventually cost Georgia its position as the least media-hostile country in the Caucasus in Reporters without Borders' press freedom report.

The panelists noted that instances of official restraint and acknowledgement of abuse of authority is often linked to the Georgian government's consciousness of its need to guard its international reputation. Reiterating the common criticism that the legislative and judiciary branches are obsequious to the executive, Jangirashvili said that the main deterrent against violations of freedom of speech is not a homegrown opposition, but international reactions. Rather than, or in parallel to, taking a legal course of action, media companies tend to take their complaints to the international diplomatic missions in the country.

⁴ *The Georgian Advertising Market*. Transparency International Georgia: December 2011. Available at: http://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/TI%20Georgia%20-%20The%20Georgian%20Advertising%20Market_0.pdf

⁵ Court Rules into Journalists vs. Interior Ministry Case. *In Civil.ge*, December 26, 2011. Retrieved from <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24307>

In terms of the editorial independence of the public media, panelists noted that appointments to the Georgian Public Broadcasting's (GPB) board of trustees are made on the basis of a political compromise among parties represented in the parliament, but the ruling party has the final say on appointments to the board. At least two of the three politically neutral, respected representatives of the media circles, who joined the board in 2009, have since left. Some of the remaining board members complained that the GPB's news executives and managers do not heed their advice on programming priorities, Koridze said. David Paitchadze, journalism professor and show host on public television and radio, countered that while complaints abound about the existing model of appointing the trustee board, nobody has offered a workable alternative. Past complaints consist mainly of accusations that Channel 1 does not allocate airtime equally among political forces and devotes little time to anti-government activities. Another complaint often leveled against GPB is that it does not address minority issues.

Libel is a civil law issue, and the burden of proof rests with the plaintiff. As far as the panelists were aware, there were no libel cases in the past year; in general libel cases are extremely rare. Paitchadze said that the fact that the law makes it hard for anyone to sue media outlets for libel sometimes reflects negatively on the quality of news. "By its mere existence, *Asaval-Dasavali* [a tabloid not held in high regard by the panelists] proves that libel laws favor the media," he said. Jangirashvili, however, said that most people would not care to sue the paper notorious for its untoward ways.

Regarding journalists' access to public information, the editor-in-chief of regional newspaper *Batumelebi Nestan Tsetskhladze* said that ambiguous wording creates loopholes in the rules that regulate release of public information and thus leave too much wiggle room for the officials and agencies to deny or delay release of public information. However, Kordzaia disagreed; she feels that the law is pretty clear, just poorly enforced. Disciplinary actions that uncooperative government officials face are too liberal, added Gela Mtvlishvili, head of Kakheti Information Center; they commonly just receive a verbal or written notice, not likely to compel civil servants to comply in the future.

The media community complains persistently about official gatekeeping of public information. Tsetskhladze said that the number of unmet public information requests filed by her newspaper stacked up to some 300 cases. Some panelists said that reporters are often not fully informed of their rights, while some officials are either unaware or neglectful of their obligations. In some cases, state agencies lack a proper archiving system and manpower devoted to public information sharing.

With funding from the Open Society Georgia Foundation, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information created an online dataset of public information, www.opendata.ge. Details of public finance, including official salaries and state-funded projects, are posted on the website, along with FOI requests statistics. The website's data for 2011 and early 2012 reveals that out of 6,221 requests, 3.54 percent have been denied and 22.7 percent have been ignored, while 57.42 percent have been addressed fully and on time.⁶

Panelists and other journalists described the Opendata.ge project as a useful tool for reporting on government spending. But some complain that government offices are reluctant to disclose select spending details such as salary raises and that, more broadly, the reporters and government officials' concepts of public information do not always match. Kordzaia argued that the law is perfectly clear in defining public information. Mtvlishvili added that it all boils down to political will, as the law cannot define everything that constitutes public information.

Regarding the final two Objective 1 indicators, a traditional strength of the Georgia MSI, media have no legal or *de facto* restrictions to access international news sources. As for entry into the profession, it is open to anyone, and the state sets no rules and limitations in this regard.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Georgia Objective Score: 1.76

Political fealties tend to override professional ethics, and most journalists at best pay lip service to the standards of objectivity and balance, the panelists said. Media is alive with debate, but also with scandal and sensationalism, and this applies across media, the panel said.

Many reporters do not bother to do a proper background check, and even if all relevant parties are included in a story it is often a perfunctory and pro forma exercise. But there is poor journalism in every media, the panelists said, not willing to point to any specific medium as doing worse or better than others. Some panelists think the television is the worst, while others say it is newspapers.

The lack of objectivity is a major shortcoming in terms of professional standards. The largest television stations uncritically convey the government's ideas and projects, while opposition-leaning stations do not do enough to balance their criticism of the government.

⁶ http://www.opendata.ge/en#!lang/en/cat/monitoring_2011_charts/

Jangirashvili, defending her channel and the fellow government critic Maestro TV, said that government officials often refuse invitations to respond to criticism on air. Unlike Maestro and Kavkasia, newscasts of big three channels Rustavi2, Imedi and GPB's Channel 1 are often indistinguishable, bland, excessively long and repetitive. "This obviously causes suspicion that all three follow the same editorial instructions," Antadze said.

Some panelists blamed editorial policies for the poor quality of mainstream media, but Gersamia believes that poor professional skills also play a role. "Whatever other constraints may be, I think many journalists themselves don't know how to do the job properly (ask the right questions, and seek facts and different views) especially when reporting on tight deadlines," she said.

Nonetheless, overall, the panel believes there are enclaves of quality journalism in every medium, not just online or new media. As the Dean of the Caucasus School of Media Nino Zhizhilashvili said, the assessment of the overall media scene would have been lower if not for these examples of professionalism in print, broadcast and online alike.

For example, panelists pointed to a handful of print publications that offer a welcome change from sensationalism and ad hominem attacks rampant in the wider print news. *Liberali*, which includes both hard news and socially liberal commentary, enjoys the reputation of the country's best publication. The magazine is often placed in the same league with *Tabula*, the conservative, government-friendly counterpart. The regional newspaper *Batumelebi* also reflects a commendable standard of journalism.

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well-sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

Online news service Netgazeti, *Batumelebi's* sister publication, provides well-rounded, in-depth and highly professional reporting. Other quality online news services available in the Georgian language are Civil.ge and the Georgian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Still, most print publications are either geared toward entertainment or publish content that is both apocryphal and excessively opinionated. "Take any cover page of *Alia* or *Asaval-Dasavali* [daily newspapers] and you will find proof galore," Davit Paitchadze said. These outlets often stoop to foul language.

Zhizhilashvili said that the largest television companies have the resources to improve their reporters' professional skills, but such improvement is compromised by political agendas. "Deviations from ethical standards become obvious whenever the political situation heats up," she said.

Koridze and Mtivlishvili said that media's coverage of minors is often particularly poor from an ethical standpoint. Regional television outlets tend to show faces and reveal identities of underage offenders, they said.

There have been no reported cases of graft by journalists, but some panel members believe that political and corporate financing subverts editorial independence and distorts the news. Some discussants are convinced that the government has indirect ways to financially support outlets loyal to it. Earlier studies have revealed a suspicious mismatch in government-leaning broadcasters' advertisement revenue and spending.

The deepest-pocketed opposition leader, Ivanishvili, funneled hefty sums for political ads to anti-government television, including Maestro and Kavkasia, causing some media observers to question editorial independence at these outlets.

Furthermore, the ethical boundary between news programming and advertisement has eroded. Print outlets often run advertorials without disclaimers, but even when promotional content is labeled as such readers often perceive it as editorial content, a recent study found. Interestingly, this study, commissioned by IREX with USAID funding, also found that middle-aged Georgians in general do not necessarily view advertisement as different from the news.⁷

Product-placement practices are rampant on television as stations have few qualms about presenting sponsored infomercials as news. It is an open secret that major television stations have price lists for commercial content packaged as news.

⁷ *Report on the Media and Advertising Research in Georgia*. IREX: October 11, 2011. Available at: <http://irex.ge/wp-content/uploads/Executive-Summary-Georgian-Media-industry-research-INNOVA.pdf>

Television outlets are bound by ethical standards developed by the Georgian National Communications Commission. Generally comparable to western equivalents, the code of ethics provides proper guidelines on a full range of topics from covering minors or handling confidential sources, but it does little to improve fairness, balance and quality of televised news, some panelists said.

Koridze and Antadze think that one weak area of the Code of Ethics is that only parties directly affected by a news story can file complaint against a broadcaster. Jangirashvili opposes changing this rule saying that if anyone gets the right to complain to the GNCC on ethics violations, the broadcasters would be swamped in complaints.

There is not really an established counterpart to these standards for print or online media. The Ethics Charter deals with some print and online media, but there is no working model of self-regulation for these media.

A grassroots effort to promote ethical journalism has had a limited impact. Set up in 2010, the Georgian Charter of Media Ethics now unites 210 journalists and reviews complaints associated with its signatories. This watchdog, however, does not cover the entire media scene.

Most panelists agree that self-censorship is rampant. Safety or personal wellbeing are not the main concerns. Although there have been a few reported attempts to intimidate or harm journalists, the driving force behind self-censorship is fear of losing a job. "Journalists know that their careers depend on their managers and 'obedience,' so they play by the rules," Zhizhilashvili said.

Natia Kuprashvili, executive director of the Georgian Regional Broadcaster's Association, says she often comes across self-censorship by reporters in her association. "Many times we had situations when journalists refuse to cover certain issues, although we know for sure that they are not facing any pressure both from their superiors and regional authorities," she said.

Though pay for journalists is generally regarded as very low (higher than teachers, but lower than civil servants), the panelists did not think of it as the cause of corruption or a mass outflow of journalists from the profession. Nobody makes money from blogging, unless the bloggers provide content for larger news outlets. Panelists blamed poor journalism and corruption on the owners, rather than journalists.

The panel diverged on whether or not infotainment eclipses hard news on Georgian television. Telenovelas, and the Georgian equivalents of American Idol, Saturday Night Live, Oprah Winfrey and The Apprentice take the top billing

on the largest television channels, with Channel 1 being the exception.

Debates on public issues are a staple of smaller television channels and several quality print and online publications. "It really depends on the audience type. Those who get news online do not sense a deficit of hard news, unlike those who only have access to Rustavi2 or Imedi" Jangirashvili said.

The big two outlets, Rustavi2 and Imedi, both offer talk shows that are big on melodrama and sensationalism, yet small on substance. The panelist especially criticized Imedi, which has a growing appetite for entertainment and celebrity gossip.

Mariam Gersamia, a journalism professor at Tbilisi State University, singled out a new prime time show on Imedi, "100 Degrees Celsius." The first installment of the show, ostensibly meant to educate the public on the problems caused by the lack of prenuptial agreements in the country, offered little more than petty entertainment centered on the in-studio squabbles between ex-spouses and in-laws.

In this regard, the smaller, hawkish Real TV is in a class by itself. Described by some panelists as "bizarre," Real TV is known for flamboyance and vitriolic attacks on government critics. From the moment eccentric oligarch Ivanishvili had the temerity to challenge President Saakashvili, Real TV did little more than a hack job against him. Toward this end, the channel even resorted to a rather unusual method of character assassination: magic. Real TV ran interviews with fortune-tellers, who predicted the ultimate failure of the billionaire's political ambitions.

A 2011 audience survey commissioned by the GNCC found that Georgian viewers want to see more entertainment and less hard news on television. The GNCC said that broadcasters do not have to adjust their existing programming according to the survey findings, but the poll results will affect the Commission's future licensing policy.

Some media observers and rights groups questioned the study's credibility. The result of the poll differed starkly from a similar 2009 survey, carried out by CRRC, which suggested that Georgians have a significant appetite for hard news.

The largest media outlets neither produce nor carry investigative stories. Investigative pieces sponsored by the Open Society Georgian Foundation and European Union money are not broadcast via national channels, but get picked up by smaller outlets like Maestro.

One investigative journalism outlet, Monitor, produces short, thorough investigative films. Among other important topics, Monitor covered the dispute between a bankrupt

real estate giant, Center Point, a corporation with close ties to government and whose co-owner is a vice parliamentary speaker, and more than 6,000 prospective homeowners, who bought unfinished apartments from the company.

Niche journalism (business, health) exists both in broadcast and in print.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Georgia Objective Score: 2.05

The panel's majority opinion on pluralism in the news is best summarized by radio MtsvaneTalgha (Green Wave) journalist Medea Imerlishvili, who said that "to get both sides of a story, you have to flip from one television channel to another."

To get the full picture of events, the panelists say, Georgian citizen must become critical media consumers and news junkies, collecting and juxtaposing news from a variety of sources. "You need to watch the channels, read the papers, check what the word is online, and then you get close to what's actually going on," Zhizhilashvili said.

Not everyone can or wants to do this, the panelists said. Eighty percent of Georgians receive current affairs news from the national television channels, according to a survey conducted by the CRRC for a media overview produced by Eurasia Partnership Foundation.⁸ Georgia's mainstream news outlets remain aligned along political lines, and those that manage to rise above partisan struggles are few and far between. On one side of the divide stands pro-government media that offer daily gushing praise of the government's achievements, and the largest television stations uncritically convey the government's ideas and projects. In the other corner, opposition-minded media see nothing but governmental failures.

Both camps have a penchant for exaggeration and any attempts to include opposing views, while present, are too lackadaisical to end the perception of political bias.

A significant part of the Georgian television audience seems to share the panel majority's views. According to the CRRC survey, 53 and 43 percent, respectively, think that Rustavi 2 and Imedi are pro-governmental, while 56 and 43 percent think that Kavkasia and Maestro serve the opposition' interest.⁹

⁸ Ibid, *The Georgian Media: Popular Assessments and Development Perspectives*.

⁹ Ibid, *The Georgian Media: Popular Assessments and Development Perspectives*.

"All in all, Georgian media is more polarized than pluralistic," said Antadze, mainly referring to broadcast media. The handful of shows that allow debate, rather than toe a pro- or anti-government line, are not enough to provide balanced and quality news to a national audience.

In terms of shaping public opinion, the odds fall in favor of the pro-governmental news organizations, for they have wider reach. Broadcasts of government-loyal private-owned television companies Rustavi-2 and Imedi are available nationally.

Maestro TV was the only opposition-leaning broadcaster to go on satellite and become available to everyone with a dish antenna. However, the confrontation between Maestro's owners and managers put the kibosh on the satellite broadcasts. At the request of Maestro's owners, the Turkish company Turksat cut the satellite connection to the television station. The owners and reporters say the satellite link was misused by temporary manager Erosi Kitsmarishvili, who took over the station's premises amid the dispute with the owners.

As for new media and social media, Facebook is increasingly popular as a news source. Most popular news services have a Facebook presence, and videos, photos and written stories actively travel through the network. While micro-blogging through Twitter is not getting noticeable traction yet, SocialBakers statistics shows that some 16.5 percent of Georgians are on Facebook, which is 756,780 users and counting.

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

Despite attempts to maintain balance in political coverage, Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB), and especially its flagship television station, Channel 1, is largely seen as favoring the ruling elite by the panel and the national audience.¹⁰ “I understand that the president’s work is a matter of public interest, but should a public broadcaster devote 35 minutes of its newscast to one political figure?” Jangirashvili asked.

Responding to the criticism, Davit Paitchadze mentioned Channel 2, GPB’s public affairs channel modeled after C-SPAN and BBC Parliament. Channel 2 has been offering live coverage of parliamentary sessions, and a variety of political parties and interest groups have access to the channel. Overall, the panelists agreed that Channel 1’s political talk-shows are well balanced and open to government critics, but some maintained that the overall coverage is distorted in favor of the ruling establishment. On his own show, Paitchadze frequently hosts opposition politicians.

Channel 2 is one of the least watched channels, however. By contrast, Channel 1 is the third most-watched channel, but even it falls far behind Rustavi 2 and Imedi.¹¹

Another GPB offshoot, a Russian-language channel, Perviy Informatsioniy Kavkazsky (PIK), gets flak from media observers. Essentially designed to counter Kremlin-centered propaganda spun by Russian state channels in the wider, Russian-speaking community, the channel is criticized for being the government’s near-abroad policy tool and a public investment not all taxpayers are happy to make.

GPB outsourced PIK, which debuted in January, 2011, to a company co-founded by Robert Parsons, a British journalist who worked for France 24 and, earlier, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The government invited Parsons to lead the channel, but he insisted that his team enjoy total editorial independence. Less than one year later, Parsons quit his executive post at the channel.

In 2011, the government gave GPB about GEL 11.9 million (\$7.22 million)—nearly a half of the public broadcasting’s budget—for channel PIK. The money came from government reserves, while the GPB funding is tied to the state spending as a percentile of national budget.

Tsetskhladze complained about the lack of transparency in the funding. “More than once we requested GPB provide details of how the money for PIK is being spent, but nobody deigned to respond,” she said.

¹⁰ Ibid, *The Georgian Media: Popular Assessments and Development Perspectives*.

¹¹ Ibid, *The Georgian Media: Popular Assessments and Development Perspectives*.

When it comes to history, culture and public affairs issues, Public TV does provide programming different from the private broadcasters, offering greater depth and diversity of opinion. GPB’s Channel 1 is the only television that brings political debate to the national audience. However, many panel members say that Channel 1 newscasts are nearly identical to the news programming of Rustavi2 and Imedi.

A sufficient number of newswires supply apolitical and editorially independent content to the media companies. Agency news is either used as a tip sheet for story ideas, or gets republished.

Baia Tsanova, managing editor of InterpressNews agency, complained that she often finds Interpress news items plagiarized by online news portals. “They copy-paste our news without any attribution and legally, there is little we can do,” she said. But, she conceded, major media outlets usually credit her company as a source.

Private media produce their own news about domestic issues, and rely on newswires for international news. The larger television stations have correspondents in the key international locations, such as US and Russia, and sometimes send journalists abroad to cover major Georgia-related news. The most popular current affairs bloggers and news sites produce original content, the panel said.

An upcoming bill on media transparency is expected to at least partly allay long-running concerns about the veil of secrecy surrounding ownership of the largest television companies. A package of amendments, signed into law in April 2011, bans offshore companies from holding a stake in Georgia’s broadcast media and requires broadcasters to make public their ownership structures.

The media ownership debate has been mainly centered on Rustavi2, with its mysterious parent company tucked away in the Caribbean. The law, which becomes effective in January 2012, requires both broadcasters and industry regulators to post ownership details online.

Antadze described the amendments as an important positive development in the democratization of Georgian media. However, she expressed regret that amendments that would have forced broadcasters to make cash flow details public were eventually axed from the bill.

Mainstream news dedicates little time to minority topics. Coverage of sexual minorities and criticism of the dominant Orthodox Church are largely taboo on national airwaves. Minority issues are actively covered by smaller, quality news outlets and blogs, however, and are shared via social networks.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Georgia Objective Score: 1.48

The Georgian media sector has yet to graduate to a fully self-sustainable, market-driven industry. Currently, the market is distorted by a number of factors, such as political grubstaking, nepotism and the want of creative business ideas. Development aid helps keep many news companies above the water.

Media is often seen as a social, rather than a business, enterprise. An industry study, implemented within the framework of the USAID-funded and IREX-run G-Media Program, backs this view.¹² The study found a lack of marketing dexterity and innovative thinking on the part of media managers, whose poor attitudes could be to blame for missed business opportunities. "Senior managers, owners and marketing managers are very conservative. New initiatives are rare," according to the "Report on Media and Advertising Research in Georgia."

Regional outlets often cannot afford to employ a dedicated and competent sales staff. Regional television broadcasters mostly generate income from news ticker announcements, while regional print outlets mainly live off obituaries, personal messages and classified ads. In Tbilisi, glossies attract more advertising than daily tabloids, despite the lower costs and higher circulations of the latter.

The bulk of media advertising goes to television, for this is the most popular medium. Bigger companies are skeptical

¹² Ibid, *Report on the Media and Advertising Research in Georgia*.

MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

about the potential of print and online press, but still place ads due to "low cost and already established partnerships."

Online media are looking at the click-through patterns, but fail to properly adjust their content and attract significant advertisement. InterpressNews, a popular newswire, is one of few news platforms that effectively pulls advertisements to its website. "We made daily news available for free, but we charge for the use of archived items," noted Tsanova.

Advertising agencies largely shape their clients' views on advertising and tend to push them toward television advertising, as it brings more lucrative commissions, the Industry Research found. Less than two-percent of the overall advertising market goes to online media, found the Report on Media and Advertising Research in Georgia. Print and radio have six and eight percent shares respectively, while the lion's share (85 percent) goes to television.¹³ And, a whopping 98 percent of total ad spend goes to Tbilisi.¹⁴ For the most part, the agencies do not consider regional and new media outlets worth their effort. Kuprashvili said that her association, the Georgian Association of Regional Television Broadcasters, began offering advertisers an option to place commercials simultaneously in all members of the group.

A clique of former and current government officials allegedly calls the shots on the advertising sector, and the industry suffers from the market concentration, little competition and the lack of transparency. Advertisers tend to steer clear of news outlets that criticize the government.

Last year's Transparency International report on corruption in Georgia said out loud what is mostly said privately in media circles: the advertising sector is largely dominated by a nepotistic network, with ex-defense minister David Kezerashvili in the middle. The report provides a guide through the daedal web of companies and people who together hold a near monopoly on the television ad market. Transparency International found that offshore companies and front owners are often used to cover the traces to the group of former and current government officials and their friends.

Fearing perceived or real consequences for their businesses, many advertisers often shun the outlets with a penchant for government criticism. Such "perceptions may be subjective and based on self-censorship," according to the "Report on Media and Advertising Research in Georgia." As in previous years, Jangirashvili complained that some advertisers walked out on tentative deals with her Kavkasia TV, as they decided ultimately that running commercials in the outspoken television could get them in trouble with the

¹³ Ibid, *Report on the Media and Advertising Research in Georgia*.

¹⁴ Ibid, *Report on the Media and Advertising Research in Georgia*.

government. Others made similar complaints. Some media representatives believe that the advertisers' hesitancy stems from self-censorship rather than deliberate state policy of intimidation.

Zhizhilashvili brought up the example of *Liberali* and *Tabula* magazines, which are often compared as direct competitors and ideological antipodes. The government-friendly *Tabula* is awash with advertising, while *Liberali* gets little and is addicted to donor funding. Transparency International's report also suggests that *Liberali-vs-Tabula* ad-placing patterns are directly linked to the magazines' political leanings and ownership. *Tabula's* editor, Tamar Chergoleishvili, denied the allegation and asserted that different pricing policies play a role.

Reports by an investigative journalism group, Studio Monitor, revealed repeated violations of advertising rules by the two biggest television networks, Rustavi2 and Imedi. The airtime devoted to advertising exceeded the caps stipulated by the law on broadcasting. Following complaints from Studio Monitor and the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) warned and then fined the two broadcasters. The Georgian parliament later amended the law on broadcasting, increasing the daily allowable share of advertorial content and the frequency of advertising slots.

The government does not provide direct subsidies to government-friendly media outlets; at least nobody can confirm that officially. There are questions about who owns major television outlets and how they get their money, but little information is available beyond speculation.

Advertising patterns tend to be impulsive and intuitive, and not informed by market statistics. Rather than researching the market for new opportunities, managers create content based on guesswork, and their products are rarely tailored to the target audience, some panelists said. Advertisers do tend to prefer television in part because relatively broader market data (reach, ratings, audience details) are available in this sector: mostly programming ratings measured with People Meters. Because of the lack of similar data, advertisers have no way to assess cost-efficiency of advertising with radio, print and online platforms.

There are some local online services that publish website statistics, but Kuprashvili and Ia Mamaladze, the chair of Georgian Regional Media Association, said they are not reliable.

TV MR GE, a licensee of AGB Nielsen Media Research, produces television ratings. It is considered reliable, and the main television channels use this service. There is no reliable data on circulation and sales for the print market or radio.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Georgia Objective Score: 2.00

The media community's attempts to forge unity around common issues are inconsistent. "Journalists take collective action when faced with a very serious challenge, but rarely get organized to tackle the ongoing, long-term issues," Zhizhilashvili said.

The Georgian Regional Broadcasters' Association is a dynamic institution lobbying the collective interest of regional broadcast media. On the print media side, there is the Regional Press Association.

The Media Trade Union is still in a nascent state, and is yet to emerge as a significant player in the media field. The Coalition for Media Advocacy is more effective in inspiring solidarity around journalists' concerns. The Georgian Charter of Media Ethics makes a good effort to oversee the journalism profession and safeguard public interest, but this mechanism is largely a club of journalists with higher professional credentials, Zhizhilashvili said. The mainstream media tend to snub the Charter.

Another organization, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), provides legal counsel to the media in association with Eurasia Partnership Foundation.

Georgian media continue to benefit from renewed focus on journalism development in the country by international

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

donors. The US government and the European Union contribute significant amounts of support to help improve Georgian media. Such assistance underwrites a great deal of news content in Georgia. If audiences come across a quality, well-rounded news story there is a good chance that there is donor money behind it.

Local NGOs include the two associations (print and broadcast) mentioned above. Transparency International and GYLA also work on local media issues. Additionally the Open Society Institute also financed several Information Centers in some of Georgia's regions. The centers conduct their own journalism, provide resources for reporters and engage in media advocacy.

The USAID-funded G-Media Program also provides multi-pronged assistance to journalism groups and companies. Implemented by IREX, the program sponsors television programming, print and online content on topical matters that are often slighted by main news outlets.

The panelists' views on journalism education strayed in different directions. Some panelists said that state-sponsored journalism education programs are out of touch with the needs of the market. But while media practitioners said that university graduates tend to be low on technical skills, journalism educators say that young journalism professionals lack analytical skills.

Gersamia said that the journalism department of Tbilisi State University is expanding the hands-on component of its journalism training by offering students an option to get academic credit for internships in news organizations. She said there is a growing industry demand for journalists who are conversant in various types of media, thus there is a need to expand on convergence journalism training. But the journalism school's multimedia capacity is limited.

The panelists underscored the launch of a Media Education Center as a significant development in journalism education. The Center aims to take journalism studies out of the class and into a newsroom environment. The Center features a so-called SMART newsroom, a multimedia studio accessible for both journalism students and professionals. IREX operates the studio, which will be later handed over to the Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management of GIPA.

Koridze believes that supply of young journalists exceeds the industry demand. "The education system produces way more journalism graduates than the market can accommodate," he said. This also means larger classes and less teaching efficiency, he noted.

One change that took place in the Tbilisi State University in 2011 is that the undergraduate-level journalism program now provides qualification in social science, not solely journalism.

"The state does not regard journalism education as a priority need," said Zhizhilashvili. She said state funding for journalism students has diminished dramatically in 2011. Kuprashvili added that the donor effort to improve journalism education is concentrated on the more advanced schools, such as the private Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, while relatively inferior journalism programs have less access to international development aid.

International assistance makes a number of training courses available for journalists and news companies. Koridze believes, however, that rather than offering blanket training courses for various media institutions, it would be more effective to gear such assistance toward the professional and institutional needs of a specific company. "Let's take one company, study its needs both in term of journalism and management, and then provide a multi-component training that deals with their specific needs," he said.

Except for Mtvlishvili, a majority of the panelists agreed that sources of media equipment are competitive and apolitical. However, the majority opinion was diametrically opposite in the assessment of the media distribution channels.

Tbilisi municipality's ongoing effort to replace old kiosks in the city touched off a series of protests from the Georgian press. The authorities auctioned spots for kiosks in the city. The bidders had the discretion to choose the type of merchandise—food, newspapers, cigarettes, etc. Press booths with expired licenses occupied many of these spots. Press distributors participated in the auction, but as the offers soared they said that they could not go head-to-head with other bidders. Only Elvaservice, a distribution arm of Palitra Media holding, won several permits in less competitive parts of the city.

By the end of 2011, the three largest press distributors were left with only a fraction of kiosk chains they used to operate in the city. These companies requested that the mayor's office allot spots specifically for the press through a new tender, but the municipality rejected the demand as discriminatory. As a result, food and other commodities are replacing media in these kiosks. "The winning companies are looking to sell products with the highest profit margins, and the press is obviously not high on their priority list," said Koridze.

Some of the new kiosks do carry newspapers, but the press is migrating to newsstands and retail shops. Not everyone is convinced that the kiosk auction was deliberately aimed at the press, an accusation the mayor's office certainly denies, but most of the panelists believe that newspaper sales will

fall. Newspapers rely heavily on retail sales, as subscriptions are very low, which some blame on the ineffective postal service. To make matters worse, similar tenders are underway in other large cities such as Batumi and Kutaisi.

Some broadcasters opposed outsourcing of the management of the state-owned chain of television towers and antennas. In July 2011, the Economy Ministry auctioned management rights of Alfacom, the company that operates 36 telecommunications masts throughout Georgia, including the Tbilisi television tower, a 274-meter spire perched on the city's landmark mountain. The winning and only bidder, Golden Com, is required to invest \$20 million in upgrading the system that serves upwards of 30 radio station and 16 television channels. However, Jangirashvili fears that outsourcing the system to a private company will result in higher transmission fees.

Some panelists said that politics intervene in television programming distribution networks. Maestro has long complained that most cable networks boycott it. Even though the channel's broadcasts were available via satellite for the better part of 2011, many Georgians receive television programming via cable carriers, not personal parabolic antennas. Maestro's popularity remains low.¹⁵

Printing business is varied, apolitical and competitive, but virtually all printing houses are based in Tbilisi—with one in Batumi. Because of the lack of proper distribution infrastructure, newspapers are not distributed in many regions. Because of this, and the limited Internet penetration, broadcast news and especially television is the most accessible media in the regions. With the growth of the Internet, an increase in the use of smart phones, and a variety of cable networks and personal parabolic antennas, citizens face a wide option of news sources. But these platforms are not financially accessible to poorer, mostly rural populations and cannot compete with national television in terms of access and popularity.

Facebook has become an important channel of news distribution. Some journalists even look for story ideas on Facebook. But only a handful of news outlets are making a good use of this resource; they simply maintain profiles on the network. Although the panelists say that Facebook has a growing role as a news distribution mechanism, the Report on Media and Advertising Research in Georgia suggests that a majority of the users would rather use the network for entertainment and for social networking. The CRRC survey found that only 45 percent of Internet users go online to browse for news.

¹⁵ Ibid, *The Georgian Media: Popular Assessments and Development Perspectives*.

List of Panel Participants

Zviad Koridze, freelance journalist, Tbilisi

Nino Zhizhlishvili, journalist, Radio Utsnobi; dean, Caucasus University's School of Media, Tbilisi

Nino Jangirashvili, director, TV Kavkasia, Tbilisi

Natia Kuprashvili, executive director, Georgian Association of Regional Television Broadcasters, Tbilisi

Beka Oniani, chairperson, Journalists' Trade Union, Tbilisi

Ia Mamaladze, chairperson, Georgian Regional Media Association; publisher, *Guria News*, Chokhatauri

Baia Tsanava, managing editor, InterpressNews Agency, Tbilisi

Ia Antadze, director, Civic Development Institute, Tbilisi

Gela Mtvlishvili, director, Kakheti Information Center, Gurjaani

Medea Imerlishvili, head of news service, Radio Mtsvane Talgha, Tbilisi

Tamar Zurabishvili, program manager, Eurasia Partnership Foundation media program, Tbilisi

Mariam Gersamia, professor, Tbilisi State University, Division of Journalism and Mass Communications, Tbilisi

David Paichadze, journalist, Georgian Public Broadcaster; professor, Ilia University, Department of Journalism, Tbilisi

Nestan Tsetskhladze, editor-in-chief, netgazeti.ge, Tbilisi

Tamar Kordzaia, lawyer, Georgian Young Lawyers Association, Tbilisi

Moderator

Ekaterina Basilaia, project coordinator, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi

Author

Giorgi Lomsadze, reporter and media analyst, EurasiaNet.org, Tbilisi

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