

Draft 5 October 2021



Photo: Mogens Blicher Bjerregård

GEORGIA

Rapid Media Analysis on Georgia based on desk study and online interviews with key informants, September 2021

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#1 Findings regarding main challenges

Oligarchs and businessmen in control

Most important media are the private owned tv-stations run by businessmen offering the citizens an extremely polarized media market. Those media are divided into media controlled by the main oligarch in favor of the government. As tv is reaching most of the population, newspapers are read by less than 6 percent of the citizens, and only 1 percent use newspapers as a main source, while the use of online is increasing.

Most burning issue is the fact that the Ministry of Defense on the 30th September 2021 filed a civil suit against the former Defense Minister David Kezerashvili for alleged damages when he was in office. He is the founder and 51 percent shareholder of TV Formula. Kezerashvili left Georgia in 2012 and is running various businesses across Europe. The new court case would most likely lead to stripping his ownership of the tvchannel, which might be transferred to a more pro-government owner as it has happened for Rustavi 2.

The huge impact of the public tv stations is underlined by the Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) issued by the US Aid funded IREX saying: "Georgia's public is television centric. According to opinion polls, 84 percent of the respondents cited television as their main source of news about the pandemic in 2020. However, younger people rely heavily on the Internet and Facebook for their news" and in the same report: "Georgian society is clearly polarized across different political and social lines, creating a challenging climate for robust debate informed by quality news. This is especially evident when sensitive political issues are discussed in social media or in comment sections of web-based media."

During the first decades of independence the citizens enjoyed press freedom, but due to the Dutch analysis "Media Landscapes" by the European Journalism Centre on the state of media in Georgia the government is strengthening its pressure accordingly with media growing more critical in their coverage of public affairs.

Public broadcast is mainly loyal to the government, even though it seems more balanced than private tv. And the problem for most other media is that the national TV attracts so many ads that they drain other media of revenue.

Regional, local and small media

Small independent media created in the period between 10 and 25 years ago are highly challenged mainly because they count a huge number, 100 small broadcasters and other local news outlets, and because they are struggling in the transition to digitization, and that nobody has means to pay for media. To create sufficient income and sustainable business is therefore rather impossible without grants leaving them in a vicious circle as it is resulting in poor journalism. Furthermore, citizens do not have the capacity to pay for content.

The Community media exists in Georgia and are viewed as progressive and promising by the professional community opening up debates about important issues for local communities. A quote from Information

Centers Network: “locals often come to the station to share their concerns and usually end up having a program of their own”.

There is a mismatch between consuming newspapers and the traditional news outlets ability to set the agenda. Only one percent of the citizens declare reading newspapers as their main source of news information while it seems to have more influence.

This is a big challenge for local media as they are very close to the communities and citizens and could improve its role for the democracy. An attempt of innovation has been to create mobile studios getting out among the citizens bringing news and debates about access to health care, creating debates locally on local life, which is important during election campaigns.

Financing of media

During elections the state is legislatively obliged to support media by election funds, but the money mostly benefits the national private tv-stations, while the independent media, the smaller regional and local media are too small to benefit significantly from it.

According to the VIBE report, government subsidies and advertising contracts are allocated to outlets that are loyal to the government and that there is a direct correlation between the winners of the government tenders on advertising and pro-government stances.

Regional broadcasters have lack of capacity and lack of skills in professionalism but are attracted by donors as they also play a role as community media though financing will not be flourished.

The Dutch funded “Media Landscapes” writes in its recent report on Georgia about the financial situation for media: “The advertising market is small in size and dominated by television. Print and digital media are affected by the lack of advertising income and the reliance on direct and copy sales. While audience measurement mechanisms exist for big televisions, small regional TV stations, radios, newspapers, and magazines cannot accurately measure viewers, listeners and readers. Newspapers and magazines largely rely on copy sales. Web-based advertising is limited but growing. Except for a handful of rich TV stations, news organisations are poor and cannot invest in development, such as online distribution. Foreign investors, present in the Eastern Europe, are not interested in Georgia’s media business”.

Regional broadcasters play a role as being considered as community media that also attracts donors, and they could have an impact, but then two big challenges have to be met, namely the lack of capacity in professionalism, and that the financing will not be flourishing.

As in most countries in the Central and Eastern Europe, the working conditions for journalists are deteriorating with low salaries, sometimes added with “brown envelopes” often as extra bonus from the interviewed persons having a negative impact on ethics and trust in journalism; that journalists often need to find additional jobs; that often high qualified journalists are turning into PR-business; journalists left alone as individuals in their contracts with their employers; and for freelancers in particular it is impossible to make a living out of their profession. Together this has an impact on the quality of the content and also on safety.

Minority language media

Georgia has due to its endemic language a big challenge in reaching out to the non-ethnic Georgian population in the border areas towards Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia and Turkey. Among these one of six do not read Georgian and together with a significant part of the population in the border regions are consuming media from the neighboring countries, which has a potential to create divisions.

There are several community radios in the country that broadcast in the minority populated communities along the borders to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, the occupied provinces and Turkey. In most of the border areas, Russian propaganda media such as Sputnik and other pro-Russian media influence and in some cases succeeding to disseminate Russian narratives via Georgian media. Also, the Russian language media is very active and is reaching out, because the population in these areas have difficulties in the Georgian language and cope better with Russian, however foremost in their native languages. Another trend is that oppositional Russian journalists move to Georgia to introduce Russian exiled media.

Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) being on air for the minority is often criticized for being inefficient and is seen not to meet the demands of delivering relevant information during parts of the Covid-19 related state of emergency.

More difficult is it in the occupied areas Abkhazia and South Ossetia that both are totally militarized without any press freedom and without any accessibility for Georgian media stakeholders.

Ethics and self-regulation

The Georgian Press Council within the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics has two main problems that prevent it from creating trust in its work. It includes only individual journalists, not the media that are also responsible for the content, and it is not only dealing with complaints, but also monitoring media during elections. When monitoring it is also difficult to build trust when dealing with complaints, and without the editors or employers of the media on board there is no commitment to follow the decisions which at the end is bringing the charter to a toothless position. This problem is stressed by the big tv-stations being against the decisions made by the charter.

Lack of trust in journalism weakens the profession which makes it difficult to attract new journalists for three main reasons: Their work is not respected; the salary is low, and they will always be under pressure. This has a gender bias, where women more often accept low salaries while men are moving into PR, communication, or other related professions. It is also claimed by the stakeholders that there is a lack of common standards to journalism.

Safety

Journalists' safety is a growing challenge. Journalists are facing threats, harassments, and violations. Since 2018 media and journalists' organisations have submitted 11 cases to the Journalists Safety Platform at Council of Europe, where one of the latest attacks was in July 2021 during rallies on the LGBT issue, 55 journalists were violated with a lot of equipment damaged, and it had a fatal consequence as Alexandre Lashkarava died a week later. Also, 40 journalists covering demonstrations in 2019 were violated.

All the alerts are about physical attacks, and besides the reports to the platform, blackmailing due to Transparency International Georgia 168 SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation)-cases are reported on media and journalists either through court cases or illegal dismissals.

Instead of making an immediate clear investigation of the violations and the fatal case in particular, authorities refused to bring the cases to court. Journalists are getting demonized, and among the examples the vice prime minister grabbed the microphone from a journalist, when about to be interviewed. In September 2021 a journalist from TV Mtavari was pushed over a balcony from second floor. There are also examples of authorities forcing media outlets to reveal sources.

The VIBE for Georgia writes: “Journalists endured attacks and mistreatment as they tried to carry out their professional duties during the election season. Journalists and crew members of several media outlets - including Mtavari TV, TV Pirveli, Georgian Public Broadcaster, and Publika. Ge - were harassed and physically attacked. At least seven journalists were injured after the police used water cannons against the protesters in front of the Election Administration of Georgia in November 2020.

In a UNDP monitoring report in social media from the general elections, there are serious findings on gender sensitive issues: There are more than 300 cases of sexist hate speech and stereotyping. Women politicians were targeted because of their political affiliation and activity as well as gender identity. By typology of violations, Facebook accounts discrediting opponents of the government were in the lead in five out of six violation types, namely: attacks on the ground of moral criteria. Targets of sexist hate speech and gender discrimination included, in equal number, representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and the opposition party United National Movement (UNM). Photo and video manipulations were used to offend and ridicule women politicians. There were cases of spreading misinformation by means of photomanipulation to discredit women politicians

Furthermore IMS-conducted gender analysis indicate challenges for safety of women journalists and lack of a gendered perspective in prevention, protection and prosecution. Further, there are issues with portrayal of women and overall gender stereotypes in the media.

Legislation

Laws on rights to information exist in the country and conform to international standards, but the panelists in the VIBE report pointed to regression on the implementation side. The General Administrative Code of Georgia, adopted in 1999, regulates journalists’ and citizen’s access to public information. Still, many governments and public institutions do not cooperate with the media in a timely manner, providing requested materials so belatedly that the information loses relevance for journalists and the public.

In July, the Communications Commission attempted to introduce amendments to the Law on Electronic Communications and the Law on Broadcasting that would enable it to establish “a special manager” of telecom operators, which include broadcasters. After civil society organizations fought the measure, however, the original draft was rescinded, and a modified version was adopted. Another expected legislation is about banning foreign ownership.

Technology

Regardless of the struggle for media in the transition phase into digitization, it has an enormous potential for citizens to take part in the democracy with easy access to information, and for debates. While enabling citizens online access, tech companies, authorities and media have a responsibility to create safe platforms and to counter surveillance, hatred, and fakes. Self-regulation and ethics must be considered.

Added to this the new wave of Artificial Intelligence requires high ethical standards in using data and creating new software. It is important, that IT-experts are connected directly to the newsrooms in cooperating with the journalists when coding to ensure a reliable approach.

There are laws and tools that allow for safe information use and engagement. The Internet and social media are freely available, but privacy and security on the web can be questionable. The state cybersecurity system remains weak, and citizen's media literacy levels are still low, despite some progress.

Journalists know to be cautious about discussing certain issues over their phones because of the fear of eavesdropping by security services. The current legislation pertinent to secret surveillance, under hearing at the Constitutional Court, fails to set strict guarantees for the protection of privacy.

#2 Overview of the Media Landscape

National Public tv is divided between pro-government media in favor of the ruling party Georgian Dream such as TV Imedi TV, Rustavi 2; while the most popular pro-opposition media are TV Mtavari strong linked to the former president Mikhail Saakashvili, TV Pirvili owned by oligarch and financed by a tobacco company and the bank TDC, TV Formula owned by the former Defense Minister during Saakashvili's rule. Important to mention is also TV Obieqtivi run by pro-Russian party Patriots' Alliance.

Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) remains under an influence of the Government, even though its ratings are very low though with a more popular parallel channel during the pandemic. E.g. during the pre-election period of 2018, the Georgian Public Broadcaster's First Channel showed sympathy for the Georgian Dream party and the candidate it supported. It is widely perceived that the channel's editorial position remains "loyal to the government." It also has a history of firing critical TV journalists.

Due to "Media Landscapes": Georgia has a vibrant scene of small independent regional publications. These newspapers have a high degree of independence and contribute strongly to the national news gathering and investigative practice. The leaders are Samkhretis Karibche, Kakhetis Khma, Spektri, Guria News, Chemi Imereti, Batumelebi. Most of these newspapers operate online but some also produce print copies, if irregularly.

There are several community radios in the country that broadcast in the minority populated communities in the border areas with Armenia, Azeri, Russian and Turk minorities: i.e., Radio Nor and Radio Pankisi broadcasting in the Armenian populated area, Radio Marneuli operates in the Azerbaijani-populated region. GPB is supposed to deliver minority-oriented programs and news briefs

#3 Associations, unions and institutions

The former state organized union of Journalists turned into the current Independent Association of Georgian Journalists (IAGJ). The challenge today is that this organization is considered more as a club of friends or even a one-man band, which is underlined when key informants repeatedly express no knowledge about it. Only when the name of the leader is mentioned, a bell ring, because he also is editor and manager of a business media and is recognized as a credible person. Thus, de facto the association is very weak with lack of resources, though it also failed to be registered as a trade union.

The employers and publishers are organized in several organisations such as the Association of Publisher, the Association of Broadcasters, the Georgian Association of Regional Media Broadcasters, and the Georgian Regional Media Association, where in particular the association for the regional media have undertaken training for more development. They have all been more integrated into the variety of projects, and thus, the employers side has a stronger position in doing further development for media in Georgia.

Regarding ethics and self-regulation, the Georgian Charter of Journalism Ethics (founded by 157 journalists – and now 350 journalists as members) is established as an independent organization. It has a board of 9 members. Citizens can submit applications of complaints and will be offered dialogue with journalists involved. It started with very few complaints but has now reached an annual number of 100, and the decisions are visible on the Charter's website. But it is not mandatory for media outlets to publish corrections. Besides complaints the organization makes monitoring of the ethics in journalism including monitoring if the media cover elections in a fair way. Also, the charter trains journalists in ethics.

Another important player when it comes to media critics seems to be the Coalition of Media Advocacy, an umbrella of 11 organisations with Georgian Young Lawyers Association as one of the prominent one created the project "Media Critic Platform" where one of their tasks is to criticize media outlet being unprofessional. On Media Literacy it raises awareness, provides training in fact checking to counter disinformation and propaganda. On awareness raising the umbrella got 14 organisations and networks on board on a statement condemning the attacks on the 55 journalists during the Pride Parade and thus showed a leading role.

On the list of signatures are the bigger media support organisations, media associations and smaller organisations and network like Media Club, Media Rights, Rights Georgia. It shows there is a collaboration on advocacy work.

Europe Foundation, a development organization funded by among others Danida Denmark carried out in 2019 an EU-funded project on "Strengthening the Media's role as a Watchdog institution in Georgia" and conducted trainings for media and legal professionals on investigative journalism, media legislation and access to information, and furthermore established:

The Georgian Media Legal Defence Centre to provide free legal aid for journalists and media outlets to advocate for legislative changes.

The VIBE Barometer on Georgia writes due to a panelists assessment, that the civil society's role is more favorably and praises the significant role NGOs play in building healthy democratic processes in the country by carrying out research, fighting Russian disinformation, providing the public with training programs to raise awareness, and engaging with the government on various matters. Recalling the case of ISFED, the panel noted that NGOs should carry out rigorous research and should be very accurate with the sources they use to protect their image and credibility. ISFED, a powerful watchdog organization, admitted to making a mistake in a parallel vote tabulation for the 2020 parliamentary elections of Georgia, which damaged the organization's reputation. The panelists singled out several powerful NGOs operating in the country: the Georgian Young

Lawyers Association, Transparency International, the IDFI, the GCJE, the ISFED, Georgian Democracy Initiative, MDF, and Democracy Research Institute. They also mentioned home-grown government-sponsored non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) as being detrimental to the idea of the non-governmental sector; GONGOs, they say, are aimed at managing domestic politics and creating counternarratives against genuine NGOs.

The profession is criticized for being poor and outdated and is not at all enhanced by journalistic education at a sufficient professional level. It is suffering from the Soviet heritage with old fashioned content and performance by the universities. With professors without having liaisons with the media industry, not having sufficient practice experience if any.

There are private funded attempts to repair such as the School of Media with a pool of experts , media workers, former professors, prominent faces to offer media mid-career training for their staff. GIPA is another private funded school of journalists. Also Caucasus School of Journalism should be mentioned.

#4 Programmes and Projects

Existing international programmes and projects

The interest in Georgia is huge, and apart from Georgia being considered as a neighbor country for the EU, the reason is that it is a regional hub for a lot of regional programmes as Georgia is more advanced than the other countries in the region of Caucasus. As an example, the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung has its regional Caucasus office in Tbilisi.

US Aid, the EU ad and the British Embassy are among the core funders of media development in Georgia. E.g., the EU is active in strengthening the Media's Role as a Watchdog Institution in Georgia, though there has been so much criticism that EU has targeted non-independent media within their support. Also, the Tech companies are playing a role as Media Development Foundation cooperate with Facebook on a project for fair election for democracy.

Media.ge funded by Internews. Reuters Foundation and the British Embassy have a joint project on safety of journalists. EFJ and IFJ have been active partners together with media outlets on projects about ethical principles. Also, a capacity building on social dialogue is pending and ending.

Open Society Foundation is running a so-called Project 64 on Media and Information Literacy, where one of the ideas is explanatory videos on vaccinations. Also, US Aid and UNICEF are involved in Media Literacy. And within UNESCO framework research on the media environment.

UNDP supports Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics on training and coaching of journalists and citizens during pre-election monitoring encouraging both media and journalists to strengthen ethics and self-regulation.

Among many current projects it is worth mentioning that Soros Foundation and the EUdelegation have supported small media companies, but not sufficiently. For 15 years, smaller media outlets have survived constantly by short term funding without achieving commercial sustainability. Also, IREX is actively supporting local media through training. It is difficult to find the sustainable business model.

The decision in the European Parliament at its plenary meeting September 2021 on Russian influence includes following wording: “EU must counter the pressure on independent media outlets, including by establishing an EU democratic media fund to support independent media outlets around the world, including in Russia; the EU must also do more to support and strengthen independent journalists and media outlets that offer an alternative to the Kremlin’s disinformation, without which Russia cannot be democratic, prosperous and free; in this regard, the EU should support independent media outlets, such as Meduza and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, in the light of the onerous and impractical so-called foreign agent laws enacted by the Russian authorities to suppress free speech and independent journalism”.

Danish support for Media in Georgia

European Foundation Tbilisi started up with American funds, and now beside funds from the US Aid is core funded by SIDA Sweden and Danida Denmark creating innovative solutions for NGO’s integrating support for civil society and media. Due to the programme, CSO is requested to have partnership with media to make them feed each other and connect to European partners.

Another task for the foundation to use Danish resources is to make direct support to some of the selected local media.

The Investigative Journalism project, SCOOP, invented by the Danish Association of Investigative Journalists together with IMS, originally aimed for Ukraine has increased support also to cover individually investigative journalism in the Caucasus countries including Georgia.

#5 Recommendations

Following recommendations should be considered with cautiousness as they are mainly proposed on the background of desk studies and online meetings.

Georgia has good relations with Ukraine, Poland, and Moldova, so as a small country also being considered as the hub in Caucasus for international organisations, it could benefit from a more regional approach.

There is obviously also an interest in closer ties to the western civilization as the Soviet heritage according to Transparency International still seems to hinder innovation.

Safety is an increasing challenge for free media in Georgia. Journalists are attacked in for the country unprecedented ways and in particular during demonstrations. It is important to have a much more systematic monitoring of the violation including the SLAPP-cases. One approach could be to create a national action plan as recommended both in the UN Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity and as well the recommendations made by the Council of Europe. Examples on how to deal with this could be explored from the EU applicant countries in the Western Balkan.

Increase support to independent online media in a long-term perspective to let them create sustainable business models and don't leave them before they are in a transition to be profitable media companies. It is important to organize transition to online media and the new tools online, and let the stakeholders consider, if a Master for media entrepreneurs would be supported by the media themselves, as that would be crucial in order to succeed.

The decision of the European Parliament to establish a mechanism to deliver independent and high-quality journalism in Russian language for the border regions in countries with significant number of Russian diasporas should be met by a real project to develop and support Russian language Public service media, and to develop a pilot programme for this, it should be done by local journalists. Potential partners could consist of the relevant local media in Georgia twinned with experts from local minority language media in the Danish-German border region.

The profession of journalism is struggling with poor journalism, and even though there are some recognizable attempts it would have an add on value to support a development of new basic education of journalists and to establish mid-career training. One idea could be to develop an Academy à la TGS Academy in Istanbul, where the local journalist union by EU-support is organizing both direct training in all sorts of journalism and organizing training of local trainers.

Due to the journalistic level, there is a lack of investigative journalism. Thus, it will not be sufficient and an efficient approach just to grant investigative journalism as it should be followed by improving basic education and introducing more significantly mid-career training. This could be done in twinning project together with i.e. The Danish School of media and Journalism and the Danish Association of Investigative Reporters (Foreningen af Undersøgende Journalister).

Eventually local media support should not come from short-term funding, but rather a long-term strategy eventually including twinning-projects with new Danish media. Possible Danish partners could be considered during the New Media Festival in the end of October 2021 or among the members of New Media.

There is a huge need for building trust between the media and the citizens. Changing politicians and leaders have in their speeches often been hostile and intimidating journalists. Neither the media has sufficient knowledge about their audience. Therefore, very concretely data in general about the audience should be

provided in order better to develop a new dialogue between journalists, editors, and the citizens. In this context it could be worth considering also support for community media as a gateway to build trust.

A way to build trust is to strengthen the self-regulatory body and that requires the editors and employers onboard the charter of journalistic ethics and as the main and probably the only task to deal with complaints ensuring the state to stay away from the newsrooms. Given that such a transition has substantial challenges as competing media should commit themselves to cooperate and trust an independent body in dealing with complaints about the income, they control, here is room for cooperation or twinning with a well-functioning press council solely being a complaints commission such as the Danish “Pressenævnet”

The structure for journalists and employers must be developed. Journalists are suffering from not having a strong and solid journalist organization. It could be strengthened by a capacity building of the dormant IAGJ or by testing other ways of journalists to be organized in stronger networks also by having the existing organization on board. Regarding the employers they understand the benefit from cooperating – and for both journalists and the employers it is about creating a dialogue where the first step should be about common mutual tasks about press freedom, safety, media policy and education. Building trust requires topics you can start to agree on.

#6 Annexes

Individual informants:

Zviad Pochkhua, president of the Independent Association of Georgian Journalists

Giorgi Oniani, deputy director at Transparency International Georgia

Mamuke Andguladzé, Media project manager at Transparency International Georgia

Katevan Vashakidze, Director of European Foundation Tbilisi

Davit Kldiashvili, secretary of the council of Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics

Mariam Gogoshashvili, executive director of Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics

Adrien Collins, project manager at European Federation of Journalists

Rebecca Harms, former MEP for the Greens, Germany and co-president of Euronest

Gohar Khodjayan, IMS project manager

Mogens Schmidt, independent consultant, former director at the CI-sector of UNESCO Henrik Kaufholz, SCOOP investigative journalism projects

Links to international and Georgian reports Europe Foundation
<https://epfound.ge/programs/accomplished-projects/strengthening-the-medias-role-as-a-watchdog-institution-in-georgia-2/>

European Journalism Centre, FPU and Dutch government: Media Landscapes Georgia
<https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia> IREX Vibrant Media Barometer, Georgia
<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/vibe-georgia-2021.pdf>

Council of Europe, Journalists safety: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom> EP
recommendation 16th September 2021 on EU-Russia political relations
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0383_EN.html

Institute of War and Peace Reporting: <https://iwpr.net/projects/europe-eurasia> UNDP Georgia on SDG's
2020 https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/library/democratic_governance/gender-hate-speech.html