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# **National Minorities and the Media Situation in Georgia**

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# National Minorities and the Media Situation in Georgia

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*Media plays a central role in forming relationships between members of minority and majority communities. On the one hand there is access to information as key to the successful integration of minority communities, and on the other there is the portrayal of minorities in the media shaping the views of the general public. Issues related to the Georgian media and minority communities have received little attention from practitioners and think tanks working on minority-related issues. This working paper envisages analyzing issues related to media and national minorities in Georgia in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the current situation of minority media and of the impact of media on majority-minority relations. To gather data on this topic, 30 interviews with various media and NGO actors both in Tbilisi and the regions were conducted from October 2010 through April 2011.*

**Tobias Akerlund, January 2012**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years Georgia has seen positive developments on the policy level as well as on the ground concerning media. The Law on Broadcasting already obliged the Georgian Public Broadcaster to highlight the concerns and issues of relevance to minorities, in addition to airing programs in minority languages.<sup>1</sup> To improve the situation for minorities in Georgia, The National Concept for Tolerance and Civil Integration was adopted in 2009 and contains provisions to remedy deficiencies with regard to media. Despite these positive developments, however, access to information remains an impediment to integration into wider society as Georgia's minority communities are largely distanced from mainstream media due to a lack

of quality information in the languages they understand.

In spite of efforts to broadcast in minority languages throughout Georgia, minorities living in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, two regions with compact minority settlement, experience a lack of access to national/Georgian media. Both Armenians and Azeris, Georgia's largest minority contingents, rely heavily on news from neighboring states. As a result, minority communities living in regions where they constitute a majority are, for the most part, unaware of what is happening in the rest of the country. While this in part is due to limited knowledge of the Georgian language among minority groups, socio-economic and institutional factors hinder the kind of general media development that could potentially bridge that gap. Access to televised information is in some cases also limited by sub-standard coverage resulting from technological deficiencies.

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<sup>1</sup> The Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, Article 16, available at [http://www.gncc.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=7050&info\\_id=3380](http://www.gncc.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=7050&info_id=3380).



Apart from informing minority communities, media outlets also play a role in shaping majority attitudes toward minorities; the ways in which minorities and minority issues are covered in the mainstream media are thus of crucial importance. In this regard, problems endemic to Georgian media at large again serve to exacerbate the current situation. Lack of professionalism among journalists, for example, results in discrimination when the ethnicity of criminal suspects is highlighted in conjunction with reporting from crime scenes. Unfortunately, there have also been few efforts on part of Georgian media following its reporting on minorities as separatists to regain the trust of minority communities. Together with an absence of enforcement of existing frameworks to deal with discrimination and stereotyping in the media, minorities still face obstacles in becoming a part of Georgian society.

## II. GENERAL PICTURE OF THE MEDIA IN GEORGIA

After the demise of the Soviet Union, several new newspapers and TV channels sprang up in the wake of newfound independence. However, the absence of state-run media did not translate into free and unbiased outlets. Instead, television channels and newspapers supporting independent Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia were filled with nationalist propaganda and acerbic attacks on opposition members. The new leadership made sure to place loyal supporters in key positions at the state television and cracked down on opposition publications.<sup>2</sup> Following the ousting of Gamsakhurdia in late 1992, independent media outlets proliferated under President Eduard Shevardnadze even though restrictions on party-affiliated publications were not eased until 1994.

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<sup>2</sup> Topouria, Giorgi; "Media and Civil Conflicts in Georgia" in "Regional Media in Conflict", IWPR, 2001: 15-22, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/C097ED71A0C840CAC1256C14003778BA-iwpr-media-30jun.pdf>.

Gradually the curtain would close on this unprecedented freedom enjoyed by the Georgian media. The Shevardnadze government grew uncomfortable with the many reports chronicling the chaotic situation in the country and wrongdoings at the official level, and already by the mid-nineties the government tried to shut down newly formed TV station *Rustavi 2* on two occasions.<sup>3</sup> The new millennium brought with it attacks on journalists and even the killing of a television anchor. In spite of tighter restrictions, the media played an important role in the events that led up to the Rose Revolution in 2003. The coverage of electoral irregularities by the national media was the main factor triggering the mass demonstrations that eventually brought an end to the Shevardnadze government.<sup>4</sup>

The Rose Revolution and the accession to power of Mikhail Saakashvili brought about a general trend towards liberalization of Georgian economic and social life. Eight years later however, freedom of media remains a political controversy and the subject of fierce fighting between the government and opposition. Moreover, the August 2008 war with Russia and the nationalistic propaganda that followed made for deterioration in the media environment.<sup>5</sup> Compared to other countries in the South Caucasus and post-Soviet region, with the exceptions of the Baltic States and Ukraine, media in Georgia is freer and more developed. The U.S. based watchdog organization Freedom House rates Georgian media as 'partly free', due in part to governmental control over some TV stations with national coverage and the lack of transparency of TV station ownership. In addition, independent media outlets are subject

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<sup>3</sup> Bokeria, Giga, Givi Targamadze, and Levan Ramishvili; "Georgian Media in the 90s: A Step to Liberty", 1997, available at: <http://www.liberty.ge/eng/files/Georgian%20Media%20in%20the%2090s.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Mikashavidze, Maia; "Media Landscape: Georgia", European Journalist Centre, 2010, available at [http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/georgia/#15](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/georgia/#15).

<sup>5</sup> Akhvlediani, Marina; "The fatal flaw: the media and Russian invasion of Georgia", in *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, June 2009, 387.



to various pressures from the government. Together with the problems of ownership and editorial independence, Freedom House cites low journalistic professionalism as an obstacle that the Georgian media has to overcome.<sup>6</sup>

The three main TV channels with national coverage are privately held *Rustavi 2* and *Imedi* as well as public television's *First Channel*. While the *First Channel* is part of the state-funded public broadcaster, foreign registered companies currently control both *Rustavi 2* and *Imedi* in a scheme that renders ownership opaque and subject to rumours regarding possible government involvement. However, new legislation to prevent offshore ownership of media outlets was passed in April of 2011, compliance with which has to be in line by January 2012.<sup>7</sup> In a 2009 report, the anti-corruption NGO Transparency International (TI) pointed out the national channels' reluctance to air any criticism of the Georgian government and the fact that, taken together, they claim 70% of the urban market.<sup>8</sup> Comparatively, *Maestro* and *Kavkasia TV*, two channels which are labelled as the major opposition-leaning outlets by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) in its Media Sustainability Index for 2010,<sup>9</sup> claim a meagre 6.7%. In the beginning of 2010, the Public Broadcaster reorganized its *Second Channel*, modelling it after political channels like the United States' *C-SPAN*, providing live coverage of parliamentary debates. Under the new format rallies and other political events are also covered in addition to

the guaranteed prime time coverage afforded to each opposition party every month.<sup>10</sup> Currently, the *Second Channel* is mainly available in bigger cities and reaches about 60% of the population.<sup>11</sup> Access to balanced information thus remains limited and the current situation leaves it up to the Georgian population to account for the polarization in media by actively seeking out both sides of the news in order to piece together their own version.

In terms of independence of the media, it should be noted that there is a difference between TV stations and newspapers. According to interviewees, because TV broadcasts are much more influential, they are therefore subject to tighter control. Newspapers, on the other hand, can usually operate more freely due to their low impact, which has made the print media opposition dominated. Also, sensationalist journalism flourishes in the print media.<sup>12</sup> Adding to the problem of independence is the scarcity of funding resources available. If they do not depend on governmental grants, media outlets rely on international donors, especially since the very limited advertisement market is far from allowing a financially independent media to grow. Furthermore, IREX and other organizations report on government pressure being put on the companies that advertise in publications or on TV channels that are viewed unfavourably by the government.<sup>13</sup>

A survey conducted by the American organization National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2011 showed that television dominates

<sup>6</sup> Aprasidze, David; "Freedom House Report on Georgia", 2010, 222, available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/nit/2010/NIT-2010-Georgia-proof-II.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, "Broadcast Media Ownership Transparency Bill Passed", *Civil.ge*, 8 April 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23324>.

<sup>8</sup> Transparency International, "Television in Georgia - Ownership, Control and Regulation", 2009, 5, <http://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/Media%20wnership%20November%202009%20Eng.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Lomsadze, Giorgi; "IREX Media Sustainability Index 2010, Georgia", 147, [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_MSI\\_2010\\_Georgia.pdf](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_MSI_2010_Georgia.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> "13 Parties Agree on Terms of Political Channel", *Civil.ge*, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22009>.

<sup>11</sup> "Human Rights Report 2010 Section on Georgia", U.S. Department of State, April 2011, [http://georgia.usembassy.gov/officialreports/hrr2010\\_georgia.html](http://georgia.usembassy.gov/officialreports/hrr2010_georgia.html).

<sup>12</sup> Lomsadze, Giorgi; "IREX Media Sustainability Index 2011, Georgia", 149, [http://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/EE\\_MSI\\_2011\\_Georgia.pdf](http://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/EE_MSI_2011_Georgia.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Lomsadze, Giorgi; "IREX Media Sustainability Index 2010, Georgia", 150, [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_MSI\\_2010\\_Georgia.pdf](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_MSI_2010_Georgia.pdf).



consumer preferences with 89% of the population listing TV broadcasts as their primary source for news, trailed by the Internet (4%). The most popular secondary source of news was newspapers and news magazines, garnering 24% of the second choices.<sup>14</sup> The written press, despite a large number of publications, plays a minor role as a primary source of information for Georgians (2% according to the aforementioned survey). The average circulation of Tbilisi dailies is between 4,000 and 5,000, while circulation of weekly magazines ranges from 25,000 to 30,000.<sup>15</sup> Many media outlets suffer from low quality of reporting. Oftentimes, the focus is only on what one interviewee calls the ‘big issues’, for instance a presidential visit, with little insight or critical commentary. Together with the general media situation described above, this has led to a drop in trust of the media from what it was at the time of the Rose Revolution in 2003.

### III. INTERNATIONAL LEGISLATION ON MEDIA AND MINORITIES

Georgia is party to most international human rights treaties guaranteeing freedom of opinion, expression and thought. It is also party to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), which contains provisions concerning media and was ratified in 2005. Specifically, Article 6 of the FCNM states that:

The Parties shall encourage a spirit of tolerance and intercultural dialogue and take effective measures to promote mutual respect and understanding and co-operation among all persons living on their territory, irrespective of

those persons’ ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity, in particular in the fields of education, culture and the media.

Furthermore, Article 9 focuses more precisely on media issues:

1. The Parties undertake to recognise that the right to freedom of expression of every person belonging to a national minority includes freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas in the minority language, without interference by public authorities and regardless of frontiers. The Parties shall ensure within the framework of their legal systems that persons belonging to a national minority are not discriminated against in their access to the media.

2. Paragraph 1 shall not prevent Parties from requiring the licensing, without discrimination and based on objective criteria, of sound radio and television broadcasting, or cinema enterprises.

3. The Parties shall not hinder the creation and the use of printed media by persons belonging to national minorities. In the legal framework of sound radio and television broadcasting, they shall ensure, as far as possible, and taking into account the provisions of paragraph 1, that persons belonging to national minorities are granted the possibility of creating and using their own media.

4. In the framework of their legal systems, the Parties shall adopt adequate measures in order to facilitate access to the

<sup>14</sup> Navarro, Luis; Ian T. Woodward; NDI, “Public Attitudes in Georgia”, <http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Survey-Results-0411.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Mikashavidze, Maia; “Media Landscape: Georgia”, European Journalist Centre, 2010, available at [http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/georgia/#13](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/georgia/#13).



media for persons belonging to national minorities and in order to promote tolerance and permit cultural pluralism.

Georgia has regularly honoured its reporting obligations toward the Advisory Committee of the FCNM. As can be seen in Article 9, Paragraph 4, the convention requires not only the establishment of an appropriate legal framework but also active state measures to promote access to the media for minorities. These measures have been assessed in the Opinion on Georgia adopted by the Advisory Committee on the FCNM in March 2009 and will be considered below.<sup>16</sup>

The country is not yet party to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), which focuses on linguistic minorities and also contains provisions regarding media. Ratification of this treaty is one of Georgia's commitments upon accession to the Council of Europe. However, the widespread perception that affording minority languages special status would threaten the national language has made it a difficult process. Also, the perception that minorities could potentially threaten the cohesiveness of Georgia complicates matters further. The Charter obliges states to apply a set of 'objectives and principles', the so-called Part II, to all minority languages found within their borders, to afford these languages protection and thus preserve linguistic diversity. Part III of the ECRML then offers more concrete provisions from which states choose a minimum number to apply to the larger minority languages. Theoretically, Georgia could choose to undertake only one paragraph or sub-paragraph from ECRML's Article 11, dealing with media.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) published

<sup>16</sup> See Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia, 19 March 2009, [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNDocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNDocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> See <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/148.htm>.

Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media in 2003. This document is part of a series of recommendations from the OSCE HCNM designed to clarify the international legal framework on minority governance and serve as references for states dealing with minority issues. Specifically, the purpose of these guidelines is to alleviate tensions related to national minorities and thus serve the conflict prevention role of the OSCE.<sup>18</sup>

In a 2009 report,<sup>19</sup> ECMI found that Georgian plans with regard to media and minorities were already in line with six out of nine paragraphs of the Charter's Article 11. There is a clear expression of desire to promote access to information to national minorities and the use of minority language in broadcast media as evidenced by the adoption of the National Concept for Civil Integration and Tolerance in 2009 and the accompanying Action Plan, to be considered below. The report questioned, however, whether Georgian authorities lived up to its promises in terms of implementation and resource allocation.

#### IV. MINORITIES AND THE CURRENT MEDIA SITUATION

Georgia's media legislation is widely acknowledged as compliant with international standards. Freedom of speech and freedom of information are guaranteed in the constitution, which also prohibits censorship (Articles 19 and 24).<sup>20</sup> The Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression adopted after the Rose Revolution is the main legal document that ensures the free practice of journalism.<sup>21</sup> The 2004 Law on

<sup>18</sup> See [http://www.osce.org/hcnm/item\\_11\\_31598.html](http://www.osce.org/hcnm/item_11_31598.html).

<sup>19</sup> Wheatley, Jonathan; *Georgia and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, ECMI Working Paper #42, June 2009, [http://www.ecmiceucasus.org/upload/publications/working\\_paper\\_42\\_en.pdf](http://www.ecmiceucasus.org/upload/publications/working_paper_42_en.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Constitution of Georgia, 5-7: [http://www.parliament.ge/files/68\\_1944\\_951190\\_CONSTIT\\_27\\_12.06.pdf](http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_951190_CONSTIT_27_12.06.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Mikashavidze, Maia; "Media Landscape: Georgia", European Journalist Centre, 2010, available at



Broadcasting regulates the broadcast media sector, setting rules for the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) as well as other license holders, defining the scope and authority of the Georgian National Communications Commission, and drawing up licensing rules. Article 56 of this law obliges license holders to ‘avoid’ broadcasting discriminatory or offensive programs; or, more specifically, airing material that could ‘incite’ or ‘stir up’ ‘ethnic ... hatred’.<sup>22</sup>

The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) comprises three TV channels (*First Channel*, *Second Channel*, and *First Caucasus News*, *PIK*) as well as two radio stations (*Radio One* and *Radio Two*). Following legislative amendments made in 2008, the GPB was mandated to air political talk shows on a regular basis and dedicate 25% of the programming budget to broadcasting programs in minority languages and on the breakaway regions.<sup>23</sup> However, the latter amendment proved unsustainable and was repealed in 2009.<sup>24</sup> In 2009, after demonstrations by the political opposition, which accused the government of *de facto* controlling the GPB, the number of trustees on the board was increased to its current fifteen. A minimum of five opposition representatives are now included on the board which currently also has three non-partisan members nominated by civil society representatives in a move to take politics out of the GPB. As noted by the FCNM Advisory Committee in its report on Georgia, however, attempts to get minority representatives included on the board have so far been unsuccessful.<sup>25</sup> As

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[http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/georgia/#15](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/georgia/#15).

<sup>22</sup> The Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, 21, [http://www.gncc.ge/files/7050\\_3380\\_492233\\_mauw\\_yebloba-eng.pdf](http://www.gncc.ge/files/7050_3380_492233_mauw_yebloba-eng.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Wheatley, 2009, 31-32.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Zurab Dvali, Chief producer at Department for National Minorities Broadcasting, Georgian Public Broadcaster, 31 May 2011.

<sup>25</sup> “Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia”, 19 March 2009, 29, [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNMdocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).

of 2011, minorities are still without representation on the Public Broadcaster’s board. In addition to the board of trustees, eight public boards, or civic councils, exist within the GPB to represent the public’s interests and demands. One of these public boards is the Board of Ethnic Minorities at the Public Broadcaster, which has been convening since 2006 and gathers ten national minority organizations. However, the councils, which monitor programs and advise the board, have largely been marginalized since their inception. This might change this year following advocacy on part of the non-partisan board members in favour of rectifying the role of the councils. The call for candidates closed on 1 July 2011 and even though the impact remains to be seen, if managed well it will be a step in the right direction.

In 2006, the GPB adopted an internal Code of Conduct, applicable to all its employees, establishing basic professional standards and journalistic ethics. According to the Code, the “GPB must reflect in its programmes representatives of all minorities ... living in Georgia [and] aims at comprehensive and fair covering of all peoples living in Georgia and their cultures, pay respect for the right of ethnic and religious minorities and contribute to their development”.<sup>26</sup> It is however unclear if the unit in charge of monitoring the Code’s implementation at the GPB is actually ensuring its application.<sup>27</sup> Still, the GPB remains the only national media outlet offering news in minority languages.

The body tasked with overseeing electronic media outlets is the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC). It is comprised of five members elected by the

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<sup>26</sup> Georgian Public Broadcaster Code of Conduct, 49-53, available at:

[http://www.gpb.ge/uploads/documents/bdd67a1a-00c4-46c4-a95c-d6fa064cf56fGPB\\_Code\\_of\\_Conduct\\_eng.pdf](http://www.gpb.ge/uploads/documents/bdd67a1a-00c4-46c4-a95c-d6fa064cf56fGPB_Code_of_Conduct_eng.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> “Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia”, 19 March 2009, par. 82, [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNMdocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).



parliament and includes one representative nominated by the parliamentary opposition.<sup>28</sup> The commission has come under fire from various NGOs for the lack of transparency of its operations and licensing procedures. It is accused of pandering to the executive power and restricting access to the media market for companies that are hostile to the government or perceived as such.<sup>29</sup> According to the Advisory Committee of the FCNM, the requirements to obtain a license are disproportionate in the current socio-economic situation of the country. In particular, the Committee pointed out the requirement to prove one's ability to broadcast over a 10-year period as a 'serious obstacle'.<sup>30</sup> Some media outlets used to broadcast without a license and while this is still possible, since the Rose Revolution many international donors have been reluctant to fund media outlets broadcasting without a license. Operating without a license also puts the TV or radio station at the mercy of the government which then has a legal reason to close down the station should it fail to follow the preferred line of reporting. Two community radios – one in Ninotsminda and one in Marneuli – met this problem in 2008. Established in 2006 but never granted frequencies for broadcasting, they had to close down. One explanation offered by journalist Zviad Koridze, who worked on the project, was that the government is afraid that such independent media could spread separatist agendas in the regions or provide too much space for local concerns.<sup>31</sup>

The commission has not granted new licenses in years, citing the need to conduct a nationwide survey of programming preferences in order to establish what type of channels the Georgian media landscape lacks. According to the Georgian Law on Broadcasting, the GNCC is obliged to produce such a survey biannually and use the results as basis for the issuance of new licenses.<sup>32</sup> For the first time since 2004, due to problems with the contracted surveying company,<sup>33</sup> new findings were presented in April of 2011 establishing that the Georgian population, by a significant margin, prefers entertainment to news. Transparency International noted problems in the survey tender process as well as the surveying company's ties to the government and called on the GNCC to favour variety in issuing licenses.<sup>34</sup> Taken together with the form of programmatic licenses (either general or for entertainment only) issued by the GNCC, the survey results enables the Commission to effectively limit the number of new outlets legally allowed to broadcast news, telling of a bleak future for potential independent minority media outlets.

The GNCC in March 2009 adopted a Code of Conduct applicable to all broadcasters in Georgia. This code, much like that of the Public Broadcaster, contains provisions against inciting hatred and intolerance (Article 31); requires broadcasters to “report accurate, reliable, balanced, proportional information on all cultural, religious, ethnic and social groups living in Georgia,” (Article 32); and, also, provides guidelines to avoid misleading parallels

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<sup>28</sup> Aprasidze, David; “Freedom House Report on Georgia”, 2010, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/nit/2010/NIT-2010-Georgia-proof-II.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Lomsadze, Giorgi; “IREX Media Sustainability Index 2010, Georgia”, 143, [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_MSI\\_2010\\_Georgia.pdf](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_MSI_2010_Georgia.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> “Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia”, 19 March 2009, par. 107, [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNDocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNDocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Zviad Koridze, freelance journalist, 18 March 2011.

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<sup>32</sup> The Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, Article 4, p. 4, [http://www.gncc.ge/files/7050\\_3380\\_492233\\_mauw\\_yebloba-eng.pdf](http://www.gncc.ge/files/7050_3380_492233_mauw_yebloba-eng.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Georgian National Communications Commission, “Annual Report 2009”, 59-60, [http://www.gncc.ge/files/3100\\_3389\\_682251\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2009-eng.pdf](http://www.gncc.ge/files/3100_3389_682251_Annual_Report_2009-eng.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Transparency International Georgia, “GNCC decides Georgians don't want news or community information – prefer entertainment”, 21 April 2001, <http://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/pgncc-decides-georgians-dont-want-news-or-community-information-prefer-entertainment>.



between negative events and minorities and spreading stereotypes (Article 33).<sup>35</sup> While rigid on paper, many media outlets disregard the self-regulatory nature of the Code and enforcement is lacking. For example, the stipulation in the Georgian Law on Broadcasting, reiterated in the Code of Conduct, that license holders are obliged to set up self-regulating structures has been ignored without any reaction from the GNCC.<sup>36</sup>

In May 2009, the government of Georgia adopted the ‘National Concept for Tolerance and Civil Integration’ along with an Action Plan of specific activities in various areas for the following five years (2009-2014). Representatives of national minorities were consulted during the Concept’s drafting, a process which was guided by the provisions set out in the FCNM. The resulting document outlines state priorities and practical measures aimed at achieving integration of all national minorities with the main goal of “support[ing] the building of democratic and consolidated civil society that is based on common values, which considers diversity as a source of its strength and provides every citizen with the opportunity to maintain and develop his/her identity”.<sup>37</sup> Focus lies on six areas: the rule of law; education and the state language; media and access to information; political integration and civil participation; social and regional integration; as well as culture and the preservation of identity. With regards to media, the following objectives are set forth:

- a) Ensure access to national broadcaster in the regions populated by the national minorities;
- b) Ensure accessibility of the broadcasting programs in minority languages;
- c) Ensure media coverage and participation of national minorities in the broadcasting programs;
- d) Support electronic and print media in minority languages;
- e) Support establishment of tolerance and cultural pluralism in the media.

Initially, the idea was for the plans outlined in the original document to remain unchanged. The drafters quickly realized, however, that the activities set forth in the Action Plan were not enough and decided to further elaborate these on a yearly basis in a ‘detailed Action Plan’. Hence, while the objectives stay the same, some flexibility was added, enabling further lobbying on part of minority organizations to influence the content of the Action Plan. Moreover, along with the adoption of the National Concept, a State Inter-Agency Commission (SIAC), was also created to implement the Action Plan and gathers mainly representatives from state ministries and agencies, as well as government officials from Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kakheti regions. The media component of the Action Plan is mainly focused on the GPB, the public media network, which since 2004 broadcasts news programs in minority languages. According to the SIAC’s 2010 report “On Completion of National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and Action Plan”, the Public Broadcaster last year spent 463,213 GEL on minority-related programming.<sup>38</sup>

Looking at the Action Plan’s first objective, the accompanying activity of which is the “rehabilitation of GPB’s coverage system”, efforts have been carried out to ensure access to the Public Broadcaster in remote regions.

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<sup>35</sup> Code of Conduct for Broadcasters, 15-16, [http://www.gncc.ge/files/7200\\_7176\\_124355\\_Codex88504\\_1\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.gncc.ge/files/7200_7176_124355_Codex88504_1_ENG.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Danelia, Nino; “Financially Viable Media in Emerging and Developing Markets”, WAN-IFRA, 57, [http://www.wan-ifra.org/system/files/field\\_article\\_file/Financial%20viability%20Report%20WAN-IFRA.pdf](http://www.wan-ifra.org/system/files/field_article_file/Financial%20viability%20Report%20WAN-IFRA.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> See Government of Georgia, *National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration* (8 May 2009), [http://www.diversity.ge/files/files/National%20Concept\\_Eng\\_ADOPTED.pdf](http://www.diversity.ge/files/files/National%20Concept_Eng_ADOPTED.pdf).

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<sup>38</sup> “Report 2010 On Completion of National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and Action Plan”, 15, [http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/2010\\_Annual\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/2010_Annual_Report_ENG.pdf).



Although this measure shows that Georgian authorities have taken the FCNM Advisory Committee's comments into consideration, according to GPB representatives, the Public Broadcaster's programmes are still not accessible everywhere. In Abkhazia the signal only reaches Gali and in South Ossetia the signal from Gori provides spotty coverage along the administrative boundary line, the signal having been blocked since the August 2008 war. In terms of Georgian controlled areas, Tsalka in Kvemo Kartli is the only district not covered by GPB signals. While the two breakaway regions fall outside of any realistic rehabilitation plan, the reason why money has not been spent restoring GPB's reach to Tsalka is the advent of digitalization of television broadcasts. As funds are limited already, the authorities are reluctant to put money into a project the outcome of which will be obsolete in 2015 when the transition to digital broadcasting is slated to take place. Additionally, the GPB views Tsalka, due to its diversity, as a district with demand for programs in Russian, something that the Public Broadcaster does not offer any longer. Currently, TV stations *Imedi* and *Rustavi* cover Tsalka. Although these stations do not offer programming in minority languages, *Region TV*, a Russian language channel based in Georgia, pays a local contractor to re-broadcast its programs in Tsalka.<sup>39</sup> This station, established in 2005 under the name *Alania TV*, was meant to provide information to the population of South Ossetia, and currently broadcasts movies, TV shows and news in Russian. Although without ties to the GPB and officially an independent outlet, media analysts claim that the government in fact runs the station.<sup>40</sup>

The second objective in the Action Plan, to ensure the availability of broadcasting programmes in minority languages, has seen

some improvement. Until November 2009, the minority language news format was made up of a twenty six-minute program, aired on the *First Channel* once a week in five languages: Abkhazian, Ossetian, Armenian, Azeri and Russian. In addition, *Radio One* of the GPB broadcasted a five-minute daily and a twenty-minute weekly news program in these languages and also added Kurmanji (Kurdish) in 2009. However, broadcasting a news show on television only once a week meant that information was not always up-to-date. Combined with the fact that these programs were also mostly aired in daytime, when a large portion of potential viewers were working and thus unable to watch, it made for a small audience.

The format was thus changed in March 2010 to better serve the target audiences. At present, the GPB edits its 12 pm and 4 pm *First Channel* newscasts into a twelve-minute news digest and translates it into four languages: Abkhaz, Armenian, Azeri and Ossetian. In an effort to provide minorities with access to news in their language during evening prime time, the GPB has outsourced the airing of the news digest to four local TV stations in regions where minority languages are spoken: in Armenian in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda; in Abkhaz in Zugdidi; in Azeri in Marneuli; and in Ossetian in Gori. The transfer of the digest to local broadcasters takes place daily at 9:30 pm.<sup>41</sup> Depending on the programs scheduled to air on the local stations on any given day, the actual time of the local broadcast falls somewhere between 9:30 pm and 11 pm. The news digest is also aired in all four languages over the course of one hour on the GPB *Second Channel* at 11 pm as well as rebroadcasted the following morning on the *First Channel*. The current setup effectively means that the news digest 'Moambe' is not accessible at primetime in all regions populated by ethnic minorities since the *Second Channel* does not reach beyond the

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Zurab Dvali, Chief producer at Department for National Minorities Broadcasting, GPB, 31 May 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Transparency International, "Television in Georgia - Ownership, Control and Regulation", 2009, 15, <http://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/Media%20wnership%20November%202009%20Eng.pdf>

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<sup>41</sup> This time has been set to ensure quality translation and production as well as the including of any breaking news potentially aired during the six o'clock newscast on the GPB.



bigger cities. However, the GPB plan for 2011, budget allowing, is to add local TV stations in Akhaltsikhe, Bolnisi, Lagodekhi, Khashuri, Chiatura and Poti to the list of contracted outlets.

To further enhance the television news available in minority languages, the GPB decided that, as of 15 April 2011, three additional minutes of regional news catering to the interests of minorities would be added to the regular news program. The reporting would be conducted in part by the team of ten translators, most of whom are also trained journalists, currently working on translating the ‘Moambe’ news program. According to the GPB, the team has adequate contacts in the regions and is sufficiently aware of the situations there to be able to cover them.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, *Perviy Informatsionny Kavkazsky (PIK; First Caucasus News)*, a Russian language satellite channel also falls under the umbrella of the GPB and is responsible for the discontinuing of the Russian translation of ‘Moambe’. This channel, with a focus on the Caucasus region, aims at reaching Russian-speaking audiences not only in Georgia, but in the entire post-Soviet space and to counter-balance the impact of Russian media on the non-Georgian speaking population of the country. Even though the channel was established in January 2010, under the name *First Caucasian*, broadcasting was suspended until early 2011 due to a legal dispute involving the French-based satellite provider Eutelsat, which ceased transmission only two weeks after its launch, allegedly under pressure from Russia.<sup>43</sup> Thus re-launched in January 2011, *PIK* is slated to receive 20 million GEL in funding for the same year through an extra injection into

the GPB’s budget.<sup>44</sup> Still funded through the GPB, the management of the channel, however, was outsourced in July 2010 to a private company, K-1 LLC. Headed by former BBC journalist Robert Parsons, K-1 says it is looking at running a propaganda-free station without governmental interference.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of radio, the GPB still offers a radio news digest in six languages. According to GPB representatives,<sup>46</sup> the translation of the current minority television news digest is made in such a way as to satisfy the extracting and transferring of audio straight to radio. Thus, a one-hour program is aired at 11 pm and repeated the next morning with additional rebroadcasts during the day at varying times. According to the Public Defender’s 2010 report on human rights in Georgia, however, the public radio signal does not cover all of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti.<sup>47</sup>

The third objective of the Action Plan is to ensure media coverage and participation of national minorities in broadcasted programs. A weekly talk show, called ‘Our Yard’ (formerly ‘Italian Yard’), with a focus on tolerance, minority issues and cultural diversity has been broadcast since 2007 on the GPB *First Channel*. The show was initially financed through the ‘National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia’<sup>48</sup> (NITG), a USAID supported program of the United Nations Association Georgia (UNAG), and in 2010 the program was transferred to the GPB budget. Currently only available in Georgian, one of the planned projects of the GPB for 2011 is to translate ‘Our

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Zurab Dvali, Chief producer at Department for National Minorities Broadcasting, GPB, and Malkhaz Vardosanidze, Regional producer at the Department, GPB, 17 March 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Lomsadze, Giorgi; “Georgia: Tbilisi Blames Moscow for End of Anti-Kremlin Satellite Channel’s Broadcasts”, 31 January 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/article/s/eav020110d.shtml>.

<sup>44</sup> “GPB to Receive GEL 20 Mln for Russian-Language Channel”, Civil.ge, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23325>.

<sup>45</sup> “Relaunch of Georgia’s Russian Language Channel”, Civil.ge, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23076>.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Zurab Dvali and Malkhaz Vardosanidze, GPB, 17 March 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Public Defender of Georgia, “State of Human Rights in Georgia – 2010”, 2011, 329-30, <http://ombudsman.ge/files/downloads/ge/ktifezlljkytwmbpggc.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> For more information on the NITG project, see <http://www.una.ge/eng/nitg.php>.



Yard’ into Armenian and Azeri for broadcasting on regional TV stations.

Although a positive addition, some media experts criticize ‘Our Yard’ and would rather see a cross-section of the Georgian population, minorities included, represented in everyday programming. Without efforts to promote minority participation in regular programming, ‘Our Yard’ could isolate minority groups and feed into the view of other ethnicities as distinctly separate from the Georgian nation. Another more serious criticism against the show is that parts of it could actually serve to reinforce certain stereotypes about minorities. Reportedly, the show has highlighted topics such as ‘Kurds keeping Tbilisi clean’, ‘Armenian hairdressers’ and ‘Azeri bath owners’. The stereotypes of Kurds, Armenians and Azeris being that they are all ‘street cleaners’, ‘hairdressers’ and ‘working at the baths’ respectively. Taken within the National Concept, and even the project under which ‘Our Yard’ was created, this not only goes against the spirit of the FCNM but also the provisions against discrimination in the Law on Broadcasting.

Under the Action Plan’s fourth objective support is to be given to electronic and print media in minority languages. While there are no examples of electronic media receiving support, two newspapers in minority languages receive grants from the Ministry of Culture, Monuments Protection and Sports: Armenian newspaper *Vrastan* and Azeri newspaper *Gurjistan*. These newspapers received 45,000 GEL each in 2010 with the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection contributing 30,000 GEL and the remainder being supplied through the Reserve Fund of the President of Georgia.<sup>49</sup> The Russian language newspaper *Svobodnaya Gruzia*, which used to be funded by the Ministry, is now

sustaining itself.<sup>50</sup> Other minority language publications in Assyrian, German, and Greek do not receive any public funding.

According to David Mchedlidze, editor-in-chief at Media.ge, connected to the media development NGO Internews, the relevance of *Gurjistan* and *Vrastan* for the minority communities outside of Tbilisi is questionable. Inherited from Soviet times and maintaining a pro-government stance, the publications, produced out of small publishing houses in the capital, mainly target its longtime subscribers – a group which has decreased in recent years. In terms of distribution, *Gurjistan* sees better circulation due to the proximity of Marneuli (in Kvemo Kartli region) while it is more rare to see *Vrastan* outside of Tbilisi.<sup>51</sup> The Action Plan stipulates that support is to be given to publications in minority languages and both *Vrastan* and *Gurjistan* certainly fulfill the language requirement. Considering the goals of the National Concept, however, the activities under objective four seem to miss the mark, especially seeing as minority representatives involved in media issues *also* describe said publications in pessimistic terms and challenge the government’s support of them.<sup>52</sup>

Keeping the fifth objective of the Action Plan in mind, supporting the establishment of tolerance and cultural pluralism in the media, the GPB has already fulfilled its initial Action Plan commitment by airing a series of documentaries under the name ‘Multiethnic Georgia’. Produced by the GPB, these nine documentaries were financed through the media component of the NITG project of UNAG. According to GPB representatives, the documentaries are sometimes re-broadcasted in conjunctions with certain holidays or when relevant.<sup>53</sup> A

<sup>49</sup> “Report 2010 On Completion of National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and Action Plan”, 15, [http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/2010\\_Annual\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/2010_Annual_Report_ENG.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> United Nations Association Georgia, “Assessment of Civic Integration of National Minorities”, 2010, 65.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with David Mchedlidze, Editor-in-chief of Media.ge, 21 April 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Zaur Khalilov, CNM Media working group expert, 17 May 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Zurab Dvali, Chief producer at Department for national minorities broadcasting, GPB, 31 May 2011.



documentary series showing the lives and telling the histories of Georgia's minorities is certainly a welcome addition to the GPB's listings. While one can question whether nine documentaries over a five-year period is enough to establish tolerance and cultural pluralism in the media, and the wording in the National Concept only mentions 'support', the problem is not quantitative. Documentaries such as these do serve an important function as long as they are accompanied by efforts to mainstream minorities' participation in regular programming, so as to make minorities part of the Georgian narrative and avoid perpetuating the image of the minority-wanting-to-separate. In the 2010 report of the SIAC, there are no new activities save the creation of a website about the Kurdish minority (see below).

For the Georgian-speaking audience, a weekly 20-minute show called 'Our Georgia', which focused on cultural diversity, used to be aired on public radio but was abolished in March of 2010 due to "reorganization ... of the radio station".<sup>54</sup> The program has since been resuscitated through October 2011 with funding from the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) and still airs on public radio frequencies.

Before the adoption of the National Concept, the website Diversity.ge was launched in 2008, with support from the President's office, as part of the same USAID funded multi-year project that funded the establishing of the TV program 'Our Yard', mentioned above.<sup>55</sup> The website works as a portal, informing the public about minority-related issues and data, in Georgian, Russian and English. At the time of writing,

however, the 'News' section has not been updated in four months.<sup>56</sup>

As a document purportedly based on the FCNM, Georgia's National Concept received little praise from the FCNM Advisory Committee. The Committee wanted a more detailed document "accompanied by the allocation of adequate resources and clear legislative guarantees".<sup>57</sup> While it is unclear whether enough resources have been allocated to ensure a successful implementation of the activities set forth in the Action Plan, a more acute problem is whether or not these activities are enough to reach the ambitious objectives set forth in the media component of the National Concept. With an almost exclusive focus on the GPB, the Concept leaves the rest of the media landscape relying on a legal code that is not enforced and, considering the low market share of the GPB (about eight percent, according to Transparency International<sup>58</sup>), this limits its impact.

An important step in terms of making sure that appropriate measures are taken has been the formation of a working group on media and information issues by the Council of National Minorities (CNM), the consultative body under the auspices of the Public Defender's Office. Its role is to monitor the implementation of the Action Plan, monitor Georgian media's coverage of minorities and subsequently issue recommendations to improve access to information in minority regions and keep intolerance out of the media.

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<sup>54</sup> UNAG, Assessment of Civic Integration of National Minorities, 2010, 64-65.

<sup>55</sup> While a launch date is not to be found on Diversity.ge itself, an article on UNAG's website (<http://www.una.ge/eng/artdetail.php?group=articles&id=122>) mentions a presentation of Diversity.ge in Akhalkalaki. Some news items on Diversity.ge date back to 2007, but in light of the aforementioned article this paper considers 2008 to be the official starting year.

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<sup>56</sup> The latest update in the English language section of the website dates back to 5 January 2011. As of 1 May, this was still the case. The Russian and Georgian language news sections were updated on 16 and 24 of June 2010 respectively.

<sup>57</sup> "Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia", 19 March 2009, 47, [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNMdocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Transparency International, "Television in Georgia - Ownership, Control and Regulation", 2009, 5, <http://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/Media%20ownership%20November%202009%20Eng.pdf>



## V. THE MEDIA SITUATION IN MINORITY REGIONS

At the heart of the problem regarding minorities' access to information in Georgia is a generally poor command of the Georgian language among the minority population. The 2002 national census established that some 31% of the entire minority population speaks Georgian fluently. According to a 2008 ECMI survey,<sup>59</sup> covering the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, 32.2% of Armenians and 27.7% of Azeris do not understand Georgian at all, while only 8.4% Armenians and 9.8% Azeris are fluent in the state language. Although the Ministry of Education and Science has made a number of efforts to enhance the learning of the state language in minority regions, the Armenian population in Samtskhe-Javakheti and the Azeris in Kvemo Kartli are still suffering from a serious lack of access to adequate Georgian language teaching. Coupled with a media policy in want of resources for the implementation of effective transmitting of information, large parts of the minority populations are left outside of Georgian society.

Economic hardship facing the regions densely settled by minority populations add to the problem, and the issue cannot be tackled without taking this into consideration. In terms of media, this means that the chances for establishing independent outlets financed by ads are slim - as one interviewee put it: "you cannot launch media in a desert".<sup>60</sup> Instead, media outlets sometimes choose to take financial support from local government; whether it is a contract for reporting on the local Gamgeoba's activities or simply a grant to stay afloat, it could lead to self-censorship. Financial woes also translate into well-educated young people,

among them future journalists, choosing to move to urban areas or even going abroad to seek new opportunities. Even those who choose to stay and learn to speak Georgian can sometimes be left outside the mainstream information channels due to poor infrastructure. Below, the media situation in the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli will be considered. Minorities dominate both these economically disadvantaged regions where knowledge of the state language remains low and many of the above-mentioned obstacles have to be overcome.

According to representatives of Internews, a media development NGO that has worked extensively in both regions, many local television media outlets suffer from poor management. On the one hand there is little resistance to, for instance, bilingual programming, but on the other not enough effort is put into the actual production of material that could attract a larger audience. Salaries allocated in the budget thus, in some instances, have not been paid out and as soon as funding ran out, new initiatives were shelved. In spite of all this, the regions offer hope in that its inhabitants still flock to see local news even though the quality leaves much to be desired.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ECMI, Majority/Minority Attitudes Towards Democratic Processes in Georgia, Quantitative Survey, May 2008. The survey included 1,699 minority respondents from eight municipalities of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Beka Bajelidze, Caucasus Operations Director, Institute of War and Peace Reporting, 19 October 2010.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Tamuna Kakulia, Development director, Internews Georgia, 21 April 2011.



The Samtskhe-Javakheti region is densely settled by ethnic Armenians and is divided into six districts with the following demographic makeup.<sup>62</sup>

*Table 1: Samtskhe-Javakheti*

Population						
	Total	Georgia n	Armenia n	Russian	Ossetian	Other
<b>Samtskhe-Javakheti</b>	<b>207,598</b>	<b>89,995</b>	<b>113,347</b>	<b>2,230</b>	<b>822</b>	<b>1204</b>
Adigeni	20,752	19,860	698	101	28	65
Aspindza	13,010	10,671	2,273	34	9	23
Akhalkalaki	60,975	3,214	57,516	157	10	78
Akhalsikhe	46,134	28,473	16,879	410	52	320
Borjomi	32,422	27,301	3,124	585	719	693
Ninotsminda	34,305	476	32,857	943	4	25

<sup>62</sup> Data from the 2002 census, State Department of Statistics, Tbilisi, 2002.



Armenians represent almost 95% of the population in Javakheti, i.e. the Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki districts. Until recently, the general situation in this remote area was characterized by isolation from Georgian political life. As the central government paid little attention to the region, corruption was allowed to flourish among local bureaucrats.<sup>63</sup> This isolation together with poor command of the Georgian language has rendered local people more reliant on Armenian and Russian media outlets than Georgian ones. This appeared in a crude light during the August 2008 war in Georgia when many locals were getting their news by satellite from Russian channels and not the other side – ‘their side’ – of the conflict.

Many interviewees point to the closed nature of Javakheti and the interconnectedness of its inhabitants as impediments to local media development. Friendship and family ties, a fear of dissatisfaction and alienation, supersede investigative journalism. At the same time, trust in central media is low due to its historically focusing mostly on negative developments.<sup>64</sup>

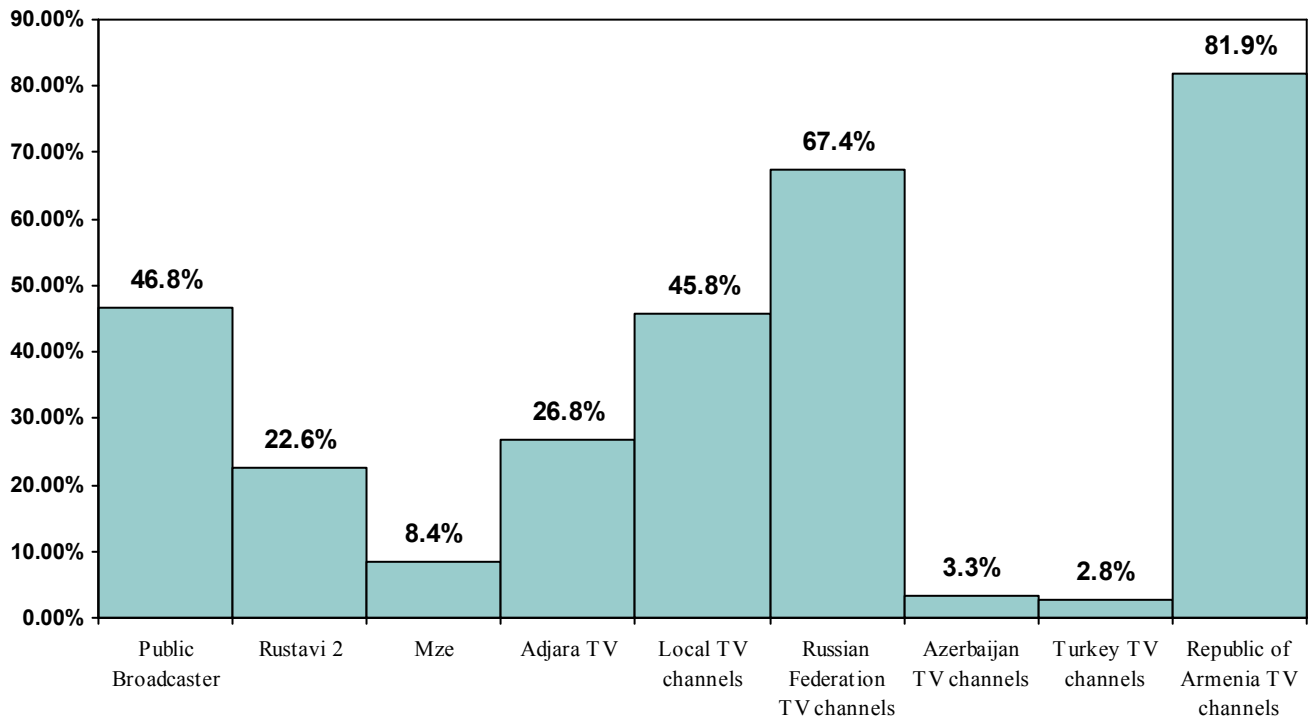
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<sup>63</sup> Saldadze, Malkhaz, and Giorgi Shubitidze; “Regional Media Map of Georgia”, CIPDD, 2005, 14, [http://www.cipdd.org/files/7\\_26\\_612532\\_RegionalMediaMapofGeorgiatext.pdf](http://www.cipdd.org/files/7_26_612532_RegionalMediaMapofGeorgiatext.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> An example of the origins of this distrust, provided in a February of 2011 ECMI interview with local NGO representatives, was the reporting in central media of a gathering in Akhalkalaki in 2007. While the actual reason was a show of solidarity following the assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in Istanbul, journalists framed it as a protest against something completely unrelated. While we have been unable to verify that the reporting was in fact carried out in this way by central media, anecdotal evidence shows that there is little trust toward certain media outlets and their reporting on minority regions.



*TV Channels watched by ethnic Armenians<sup>65</sup>*



<sup>65</sup> ECMI, Majority/Minority Attitudes Towards Democratic Processes in Georgia, Quantitative Survey, May 2008.



The media situation in the region varies according to the dominant ethnicity of one specific area. Districts densely populated by Georgians are usually well connected to national media. In Javakheti, the Armenian-populated area, there are two TV channels in Akhalkalaki, one in Ninotsminda and one in Borjomi. While *Borjomi TV* has its own license, Ninotsminda station *Parvana TV* and Akhalkalaki station *ATV-12* are sub-licensed under the television stations *Imperia* (Channel 9) and *Spectri* respectively. This means that the latter channels could suspend broadcasting of the former, should opinions differ on editorial decisions, a set-up that raises questions about possible self-censorship on the part of the sub-licensees.

Programs broadcasted on Javakheti's local television channels are in Armenian, both locally produced and re-broadcasting of Armenian public televisions first channel, and *Region TV*, in Russian, airs during empty slots. The channels also receive grants from the GPB to rebroadcast the *First Channel* news program 'Moambe' in Armenian with local journalists supplying their own daily news bulletin from the region. Local television channels usually receive funding from NGOs and other international donors but resources remain limited and accordingly the production quality is rather low. Despite the fact that many NGOs have provided some educational support for local media actors, albeit not always in Armenian in addition to Georgian, no trainings for journalists are held on a regular basis.

There used to be a community radio station in Ninotsminda, which was launched in 2006 with the support of the Georgian media development NGO Studio Re and the BBC World Service. The idea was to have interested parties from the community itself create original content, which also meant that programs were aired in all languages of the community, Georgian, Russian as well as Armenian. Initially allowed to put a speaker on the central square of the town, the radio station eventually had to close down since it was not granted the required license from the GNCC. Studio Re, acting as the applicant for the license (which would cover the Ninotsminda branch as well as the Marneuli

community radio station part of the same project), received three rejection letters from the GNCC. At first, the GNCC stated that it had to inventory its frequencies and that no new frequencies would be awarded until this process was finished. A second letter pointed to the need for surveying the public's preferences, which it is obliged by law to do every two years, and make a decision based on the results. Finally, in a third letter, the GNCC said that a competition for licenses would be announced on the Commission's website, but nothing about a competition was ever published and eventually the project was terminated.<sup>66</sup>

A positive example from print media in Samtskhe-Javakheti is found in the newspaper *Samkhretis Karibche* (*The Southern Gate*), which started in 2005 with support from the Institute on War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). After a chaotic beginning in 2005-2007, the weekly newspaper is now regularly published and the only locally produced Armenian language newspaper available on a regular basis in the region. Two editions, one in Georgian and the other in Armenian, carrying the same articles, circulate to around 2000-3000 readers in Akhalkalaki. *Samkhretis Karibche* aims to focus on regional matters and present stories in a balanced, non-partisan way. The main editorial office, staffed with six journalists, is based in Akhaltsikhe, and three journalists out of this office edit the Armenian edition.

Relations between local authorities and regional media actors are usually good; the latter facing neither pressure nor censorship. Some regional TV representatives even praised local officials for their cooperation. However, it is questionable whether the media is really challenging them on sensitive issues; according to one interviewee, journalists shy away from political problems.

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Zviad Koridze, freelance journalist, 18 March 2011.



### *Kvemo Kartli*

The media situation in Kvemo Kartli is comparable to that of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Ethnically more mixed, with Azeris representing a little less than half of the population, the region has important Armenian settlements especially in the districts of Marneuli and Tsalka. A Greek minority is also represented, although in decreasing numbers.

In Kvemo Kartli, just as in other regions and Georgian media in general, journalists usually stay away from potentially sensitive issues. Ethnic and religious minority topics are considered as taboo and seldom raised by local media. The media landscape was negatively affected both by the August 2008 war and the financial crisis that same year. Many NGO-funded projects were stopped, causing a decrease in access to information in minority languages. This has left some media outlets, for instance in Bolnisi, financially dependent on local government.<sup>67</sup> In terms of trust from the local population and influence on reporting, this setup is far from ideal and in the case of *Bolnisi TV* which is partly owned by the municipality of Bolnisi, it is also in violation of the Law on Broadcasting. It is therefore not surprising that the Azeri community mostly relies on satellite channels broadcasting from Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia, while the Georgian population gets information from the main national channels.

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<sup>67</sup> Tsikoridze, Marika; “Impact of the World Economic Crisis on Mass Media in Kvemo Kartli”, *Kvemokartli.ge*, 12 March 2009. <http://www.kvemokartli.ge/eng/articles.php?id=67>.

*Table 2: Kvemo Kartli region*

Population						
	Total	Georgian	Azeri	Armenian	Greek	Other
<b>Kvemo-Kartli</b>	<b>497,530</b>	<b>222,450</b>	<b>224,606</b>	<b>31,777</b>	<b>7,415</b>	<b>11,282</b>
Rustavi	116,384	102,151	4,993	2,809	257	6,174
Bolnisi	74,301	19,926	49,026	4,316	438	595
Dmanisi	28,034	8,759	18,716	147	218	194
Marneuli	118,221	9,503	98,245	9,329	396	748
Tetriskaro	25,354	18,769	1,641	2,632	1,218	1,031
Tsalka	20,888	2,510	1,992	11,484	4,589	313
Gardabani	114,348	60,832	49,993	1,060	236	2,227

There are four regional TV stations in Kvemo Kartli: two in Bolnisi, one in Marneuli and one in Rustavi. In 2006-2009 the OSCE HCNM financed a program to provide simultaneous translation of Georgian news programs into the Azeri language, as it did in Javakheti in 2003-2008.<sup>68</sup> Just like its predecessor, even in the face of reportedly higher ratings for the television station than usual, this program was stopped when the OSCE suspended funding. *Bolneli TV* in Bolnisi is currently planning to start a new project, funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI) to broadcast news in Azeri. *Marneuli TV* broadcasts news in Azeri everyday, with the assistance of the United States' embassy. This is in addition to broadcasting the 'Moambe' program in Azeri on primetime.

As in Javakheti, a community radio station was launched in Marneuli in 2007 with grants from the BBC and in collaboration with the

Georgian media NGO Studio Re. Its tri-lingual programs in Georgian, Azeri and Russian were aired on loudspeakers in the central park of the town and in a café. However, just as in Javakheti, the radio station was not granted a license and so could not use FM frequencies. Consequently, all programs have now been stopped.

Print media is difficult to assess in Kvemo Kartli, a region where there are few regularly published newspapers; depending on the financial situation, newspapers are published once a month at best and are usually dependent on local Gamgeoba or donations from Azerbaijan to survive. While newspapers in general are scarce, publications in Azeri are even harder to come by. Aside from the state-supported *Gurjistan* paper, most interviewees knew of no Azeri language newspapers produced in Georgia and published on a regular basis. The Marneuli based, Azeri language paper *Region Press* comes out three times every month in an edition of 2,000 copies. The paper is part of Azerbaijanis' Cultural Center (AMM) which works to integrate ethnic Azeris into Georgian

<sup>68</sup> The project in Javakheti also contained a media development component which meant that the simultaneous translation of news did not start right away in 2003.



society and receives support from the Heydar Aliev Fund, Azeri oil company Socar, and the State Committee on Work with Diaspora as well as various other Azeri sources.<sup>69</sup> The bilingual, Georgian and Azeri language, newspaper *Timer*, created in 2006 and supported by the IWPR, was published until 2009 when even the transformation from a bi-weekly to a monthly publication was not enough to prevent closure. Many of its journalists now work for the online news source *Kvemokartli.ge*, which, while giving more attention to local issues, is only available in Georgian and English. The Rustavi-based organization Civil Development Agency (CiDA), in addition to supporting the newspaper *Timer*, also created a local news agency *RegInfo* to supply news stories from the region. This news agency has also been incorporated into the *Kvemokartli.ge* website.

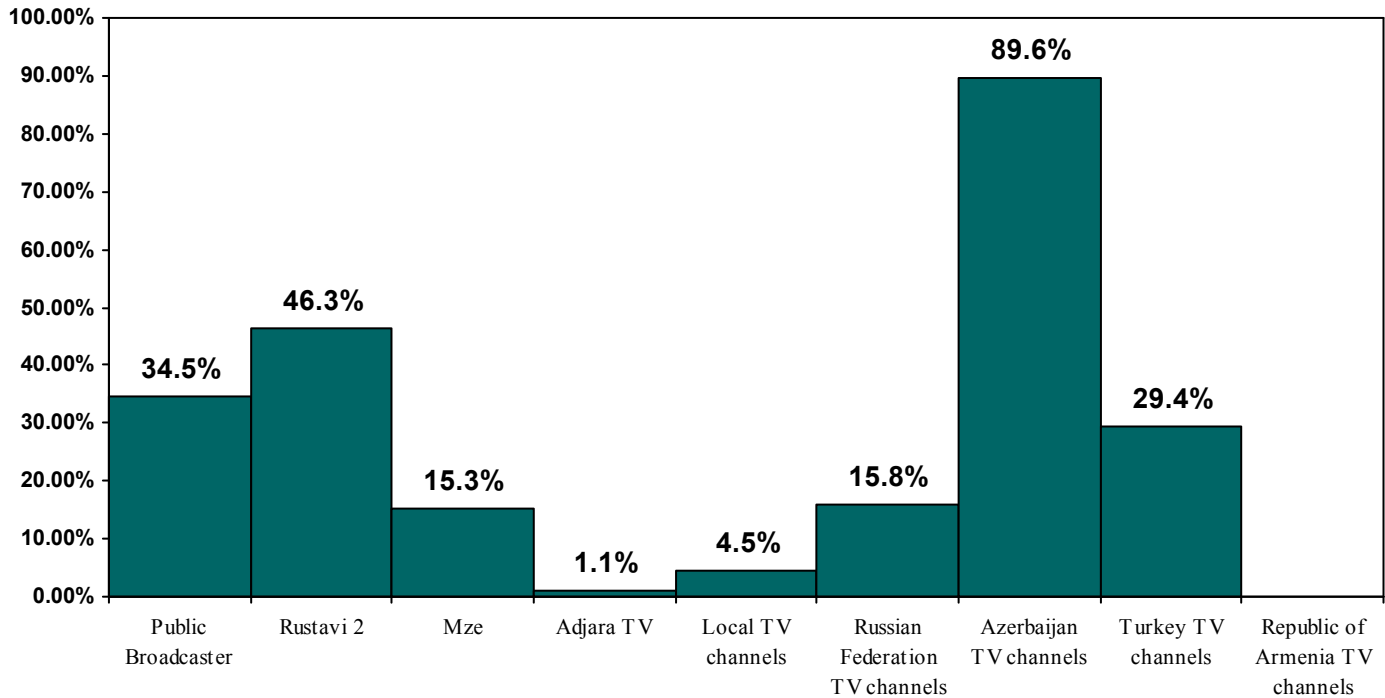
A limited number of newspapers from Azerbaijan also reach the region. Even though this is in keeping with provisions on allowing cross-border flow of information, older Azeris living in Georgia sometimes are left outside this information channel as well. The reason for this is Azerbaijan's changing of its alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin in 1998, which many older people simply do not command. For these people, the spoken word, whether heard on the radio or TV, is essential for staying updated on news and other developments.

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<sup>69</sup> See <http://www.amm.ge> and <http://amm.ge/index.php?s=about>.



*TV channels watched by ethnic Azeris<sup>70</sup>*



The quality of information in local Kvemo Kartli media is reported as low. Several NGOs implementing media development projects in the region have faced difficulties in locating ethnic Azeri journalists and have had to recruit talented individuals and train them as journalists. Traditional family values sometimes proved challenging to overcome but also constituted the motivation to do more work in the region, especially targeting young women.

## VI. MINORITIES AND MEDIA

For the successful integration of minorities into wider society, access to information is crucial. Of equal importance to majority-minority relations is the way minorities are portrayed in the media as this has the potential to shape attitudes toward minority communities. In addition, these same communities feel an interest in their lives from society at large, building trust and promoting integration. In Georgia, coverage of minority issues in national media has seen improvements in recent years. Mention used to be made of minority regions when something negative happened, in conjunction with for example demonstrations or activities of separatist groups. Nowadays, this trend has been replaced by more positive

<sup>70</sup> ECMI, Majority/Minority Attitudes Towards Democratic Processes in Georgia, Quantitative Survey, May 2008.



reporting.<sup>71</sup> Government-friendly outlets even try to promote integration for example through showing the president visiting Kvemo Kartli during Ramadan. However, certain newspapers continue to focus on negative reporting and stereotyping, as also noted by the FCNM Advisory Committee in 2009.<sup>72</sup> A 2011 report on Javakheti by International Crisis Group (ICG), for instance, cites examples of newspapers drawing parallels between the breakaway regions and Javakheti as well as Kvemo Kartli.<sup>73</sup> Recent reports also show that similar stereotypes are prevalent in Georgian media less bent on inflammatory reporting, something that will be discussed below. Thus, coverage of minorities is lacking a qualitative perspective but as the regions remain underrepresented in the media as a whole, coverage of minorities does not measure up quantitatively either. Georgian media continues to neglect the everyday life of minority communities in favor of stories on public works projects, border openings or international issues.

In general, media monitoring projects and studies of the portrayal of minorities in the media are few and far between. A survey conducted in 2007 on the news programs of GPB's *First Channel* and *Rustavi 2*, 'Moambe' and 'Kurieri' respectively, showed that a

majority of news reports concerning minorities related to the Abkhaz or Ossetian conflicts.<sup>74</sup>

News broadcast	All	Reporting on conflict regions	Reporting on minority issues
'Moambe'	234 (100%)	166 (71%)	68 (29%)
'Kurieri'	206 (100%)	161 (78%)	45 (22%)

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Eka Metreveli, Research fellow, GFSIS, 10 March 2011.

<sup>72</sup> "Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia", 19 March 2009, 23, [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNMdocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> The headline referred to in the briefing comes from a September 2010 issue of the Georgian newspaper *Sakartvelos Respublika* and reads "Javakheti and Borchalo [the old Georgian name for the Kvemo Kartli region] will share the fate of Abkhazia and South Ossetia"; see "Georgia: The Javakheti Region's Integration Challenges", CrisisGroup, 9-10, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/B63%20Georgia%20The%20Javakheti%20Regions%20Integration%20Challenges.ashx>.

<sup>74</sup> Mameshvili, Tamar; "Minority Issues Covering in Georgian Media", Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, MA Thesis, 2007.

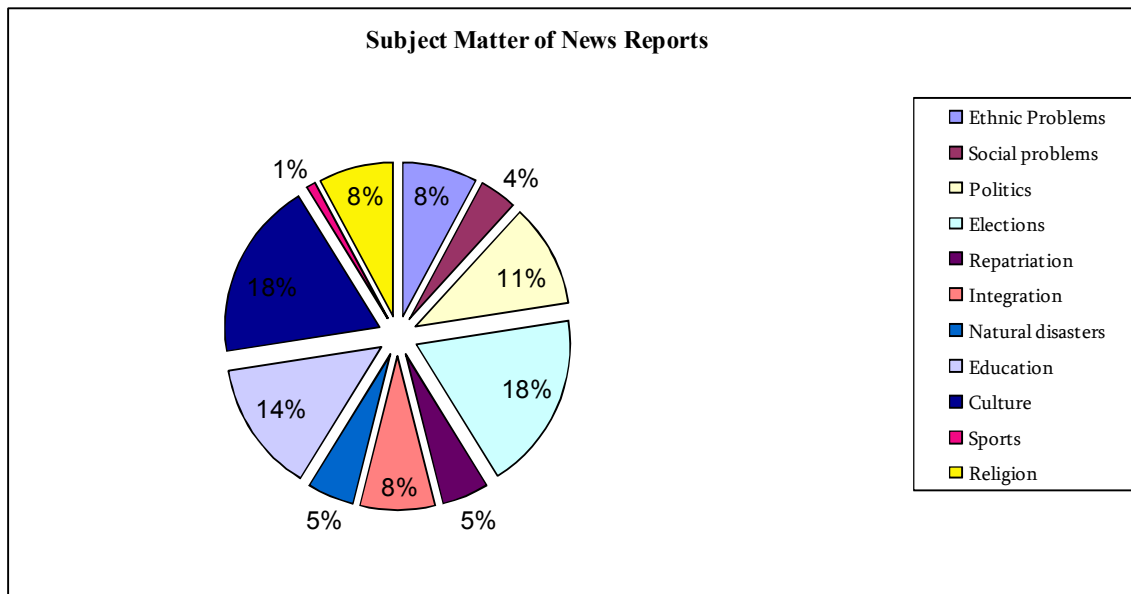


Among the news stories dealing with minority issues not related to the conflict regions, 29.2% concerned general minority issues and 70.8% focused on specific minority groups, broken down as follows:

Armenians	19.5 %
Azeris	14.2 %
Ossetians	12.4 %
Jews	6.2 %
Meskhetians	6.2 %
Abkhaz	4.4 %
Chechens	3.5 %
Russians	3.5 %

The general news reports were split following the diagram below.<sup>75</sup> According to the survey, most of the stories were broadcast in a news format without deeper analysis or interviews of minority representatives. Moreover, the majority of reports failed to provide a background or context to the specific stories. The fact that culture-related stories are among the dominating categories of the diagram is symptomatic of reporting on minorities in Georgian media – it is uncontroversial to give an account of a certain minority holiday compared to touching on politically sensitive issues.

Table 3: News Reports



<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



Negative stereotypes and discriminatory statements about minorities, ethnic and religious, predominantly emanate from, but are not limited to, the print media.<sup>76</sup> As the results of a recent media monitoring project by the Georgian NGO Media Development Foundation (MDF) show, however, discriminatory statements also are found on national television. The study encompassed the *First Channel*, *Rustavi 2*, *Maestro* and *Kavkasia* on television, national papers *24 Hours*, *Resonansi*, *Akhali Taoba*, *Alia*, *Asaval-Dasavali*, *Kviris-Palitra* and *Georgian Times*, as well as the regional papers *Samkhretis Karibche*, *Tavisupali Sityva*, and *Batumelebi*, and took place during the beginning of 2010. In general, coverage of minority issues was low with 147 mentions from January 1 through April 1, 2010. Among these stories, 126 were about ethnic minorities and the remainder about religious minorities. In qualitative terms, of the 126 stories dealing with ethnic minorities 41, most of them from newspapers, MDF deemed discriminatory or in other ways not living up to international standards of reporting. Among the examples of reporting in violation of international standards was highlighting the nationality of an offender in a national TV channel's story on smuggling. The same station laid blame and unjustifiably pointed out the nationality of a person even though the police had not established who caused the accident. According to the authors of the monitoring report, these types of violations declined by 35% during the course of the study as weekly results were sent out to journalists in an attempt to raise awareness on standards of reporting.<sup>77</sup>

Many media experts claim that outside of certain provocative newspapers the occurrence of this kind of reporting is not due to intentional malice on part of the reporter. Instead, many reporters simply do not understand that what they are saying could offend minorities and

actually constitutes a violation of journalistic standards as well as the law. Some media actors have taken it upon themselves to address this and other problems by forming a volunteer-based ethics council, with stipulated standards not to be breached by its members. Unfortunately, many central media representatives are missing among its membership and so far the council is only regulating professionals who already adhere to journalistic standards. In terms of legislation, as mentioned above, the Law on Broadcasting as well as the Code of Ethics of the GPB and the GNCC's Code of Conduct all mandate the creation of complaint boards and internal monitoring units for broadcasters. So far, compliance with these regulations is virtually non-existent, giving minorities and the population at large little means to address their grievances.<sup>78</sup> The FCNM Advisory Committee also highlighted this problem and pointed to the need for improvement of the mechanisms for filing complaints coupled with adequate information to the public on how to use these mechanisms.<sup>79</sup> This touches on a problem brought up in interviews that part of the equation is the population's unfamiliarity with the options available to deal with instances of discrimination in the media and its rights in this area in general. News stories from the regions are not often seen in national media, which favors bigger stories for instance involving the president.

The Public Defender's Office pointed out the lack of reporting from the minority regions and on "topics pertinent to national minorities" in its 2010 human rights report, noting its importance for minority communities.<sup>80</sup> One explanation for this is that the media exercises

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<sup>76</sup> See Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia, 19 March 2009, par. 80-81, [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNMdocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Interview with MDF representatives, 1 March 2011.

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<sup>78</sup> Danelia, Nino; "Financially Viable Media in Emerging and Developing Markets", WAN-IFRA: 57.

<sup>79</sup> "Advisory Committee on the FCNM, Opinion on Georgia", 19 March 2009, 23-24. [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNMdocs/PDF\\_1st\\_OP\\_Georgia\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf).

<sup>80</sup> Public Defender of Georgia, "State of Human Rights in Georgia – 2010", 2011, 329-30, [http://ombudsman.ge/files/downloads/ge/ktifezlljkyt\\_wmwbpggc.pdf](http://ombudsman.ge/files/downloads/ge/ktifezlljkyt_wmwbpggc.pdf).



self-censorship so as not to offend anyone and not fall out of favor with the government. However, experts note that media outlets claim to air these stories because they are of interest to the entire country. A few of the bigger outlets do have correspondents in some regions but, as noted by several media analysts, if stories from the regions air, the reporting is not in-depth and rarely covers relevant issues. Thus, the qualitative deficiencies in reporting are not mitigated by stories that present the problems minorities go through on a daily basis – many of which are shared with the ethnic Georgian population. Also, as noted by the Public Defender’s Office, minorities’ involvement in public discourse outside of minority-related issues remains limited.<sup>81</sup> This may cause the popular image of minorities to turn into one of everything being fine, one of the members of minority populations disinterested in being part of Georgian society, or one of them being separate from Georgian society. On the minorities’ side, the interest in integrating might diminish. This is also why it is important that efforts such as ‘Our Yard’ are made in collaboration with minority representatives: it is a chance to empower minorities and afford them the opportunity to properly represent themselves.

## VII. Conclusion

With progressive media legislation and new policy initiatives highlighting minority concerns regarding media and access to information, Georgia is slowly making headway in securing basic rights for its minority population. Ethnic Georgians face many of the same problems as minorities in their lack of access to balanced information and professional reporting. While these shortcomings would have to be addressed to get to the core of the problem, it is evident that minorities face additional obstacles that are not being resolved by the government despite lofty aspirations signed onto in policy documents. In some cases, such as rehabilitation

of the Public Broadcaster’s coverage, clear solutions are readily available in policy documents but are not being implemented properly. In other cases, such as support for print media, government measures are disconnected from the realities in the regions compactly settled by minorities.

Looking at the current media situation for minorities, four areas requiring more attention emerge: the deficiencies in access to information; licensing of new media outlets; the GPB’s geographical coverage; and journalistic professionalism and ethical standards.

The Georgian media suffers from a lack of investigative reporting and news stories from the regions are underrepresented, passed over for journalism bent on offending no one. Together with a polarized media climate, this has turned Georgians into active media consumers trying to piece stories together on their own. Language barriers, however, prevent minorities from doing the same and a lack of programming in minority languages make foreign outlets more interesting. Currently, small, local media outlets and the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) are the actors involved in bridging the divide. The latter has tried to live up to its public service mandate and offers news in minority languages. By revising its previous scheduling of these news broadcasts to better suit the audience, the government has shown that it is receptive to reform. The adding to these newscasts of local stories catering to minority communities also has the potential to positively affect the current situation and should be monitored closely. Still, however, the current setup of outsourcing the broadcasting of news to local television outlets leaves some regions without prime time access to minority language news.

Local media outlets which could balance the situation, however, find it hard to fill the gap left by national media in terms of reporting on local and regional issues. The unfavorable financial situation and investment climate in the regions make it hard for independent media outlets to sustain themselves. Compounding this difficulty is that the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) has been reluctant to issue new licenses and currently

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



seems to plan granting only entertainment licenses, based on the results of the survey they use to legitimize this choice. Television is the most popular medium for news in Georgia, yet stations catering to minority audiences have the option of either operating without a license or under the auspices of other outlets. This curtails the independence of the very same outlets that could make up part of the solution to a problem the Georgian government is purportedly trying to solve. When not even community radio stations can obtain a license for local broadcasting, the question remains on who will report on the everyday lives of minorities.

The question of balance aside, that the whole of Georgia is not covered by the Public Broadcaster's signal also clearly affects minorities' access to information. As the only media outlet covered by policy directives aimed at integrating minorities, as well as the originator of national news about Georgia in minority languages, the GPB should guarantee countrywide access.

The few studies carried out on how minorities are portrayed in Georgian media show that discriminatory reporting is still prevalent. A lack of enforcement of regulations related to breaches of journalistic standards

allows the practice to continue. Newspapers with a radical agenda carry on the practice of inflammatory reporting and employees of bigger news outlets work without a yardstick against which their journalistic standards can be measured. Since enforcement of existing regulations arguably could improve the situation in terms of how minorities are portrayed, it is unclear whether the Georgian government has the will to truly come to terms with the problems beyond setting out impressive objectives on paper. In this respect, an opaque GNCC that is also left out of the National Concept unfortunately speaks to the contrary.

To come to terms with these problems, the beneficiaries of the activities presented in the National Concept Action Plan ought to be included in the elaboration of future plans. While this to a certain extent has already been the case, for the activities to have real results, to maximize the positive effects and provide minorities with basic access to information, it is vital for the Georgian government to involve in a meaningful and pro-active way the beneficiaries themselves in the process.

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE

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