

Chapter 10

The Role of the Media in Georgia's Transition to Democracy

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Introduction

According to law, Georgia's media is free. Article 24 of the Constitution states that “the mass media is free; censorship is impermissible” and that:

citizens of the Republic of Georgia have the right to express, distribute, and defend their opinions via any media, and to receive information on questions of social and state life ... Censorship of the press and other media are not permitted.

The media is regulated by the ‘Law on the Press and Other Mass Media’, which was first enacted in 1991 and amended several times since then. Article 4 of the law stipulates that

the mass media is forbidden to disclose state secrets; to call for the overthrow or change of the existing state and social system; to propagate war, cruelty, racial, national, or religious intolerance; to publish information that could contribute to the committing of crimes; to interfere in the private lives of citizens; or to infringe on their honour and dignity”.

In Georgia, as in other former socialist countries, there has been the letter of the law and there has been reality: this Chapter will explore both. In doing so we have to bear in mind the concept of a democratic media. The notion of a free media and a democratic media have been linked, but they have not been the same. Presumably, in well-established democracies the media have been conscious of obligations toward society and have carried them out in an objective, professional manner. We say ‘presumably’ because in Western states much of the media has been prone to inform the public about interesting scandals than serious economic or political developments. Although there has been a sector called the ‘serious media’, politicians and policy makers would not immediately agree that this area of journalism has always been objective, restrained, and even handed.

Nonetheless, as to the democratic functions that the media have carried out, there have been ideal goals. Most importantly, journalists should provide objective and reliable information to society about what has happened in the domestic and international arenas. They should also hold policy makers and public figures accountable for their actions in the public realm; provide citizens with information about political candidates and events; be vigilant against corruption practices and tendencies; and open communication channels and organise a dialogue among the various elements of society concerning everyday problems.

There is no doubt that Georgia’s mass media have had influence in society. With good reason, it has been characterized as an emerging “fourth power” since the country’s independence. For the last twelve years, Georgian authorities have not escaped crises due to this “fourth power”. As the country’s independent media have participated, stage by stage, in the democracy-building of the country, the media representatives themselves have been shaped, influenced, and circumscribed in and by this process. Today, the “fourth power” survived inflation, deflation and deliberate diversions; it has had its favourites and those who anxiously have waited for disclosures on what has taken place in the arena of politics.

Adjusting to Freedom

Georgia's media was profoundly changed and disoriented by the political, economic, and ideological collapse of the Soviet Union, as was the media in every other former Soviet Republic. There were great similarities in how Georgia's media developed in a newly independent state with what took place in other ones. There also have been differences. Georgia, Moldova, and Estonia have had different histories; and also had to overcome different problems. Sometimes, by chance, they were guided by policy makers with their individual and particular approach to problems, Shevardnadze probably being a prominent example. However, the media in the countries called transition states were placed in similar circumstances. If measurements and evaluations were applied to Georgia, they would be drawn from the recent Central and East European experience.

When the once-united and centrally-governed Soviet Union fell apart, so did the information space, control mechanisms, and government financing, common to all its former republics. On the one hand, the mass media became free from the Kremlin dogmas and orders from the top. On the other hand, state support - organizational and material - collapsed as immediately and visibly as state control. Some state broadcasting continued but for the most part Georgia's journalists, in newspapers, on the radio and on TV, were able to write freely and say what they wanted. Just as importantly, they were given the possibility to carry out journalistic investigations. This was novel to them and required not only some experience but considerable psychological reorientation as well. The media could do what it had not been empowered to do before - uncover and condemn the mighty of this world, shady politicians and businessmen engaged in corruption, financial frauds and links with criminals.

Georgia's new political setting enabled journalists, on the one hand, to penetrate in once forbidden spheres and publish the most courageous materials. On the other hand, it became possible to launch attacks with impunity on prominent persons and to condemn them on the pages of newspapers or in broadcasts. Information on plunder of the state property on a large scale was made public, including concrete names, but, as will be related, legal proceedings by the accused parties,

who proclaimed their innocence, were seldom initiated the next morning, or the next week, or even the next month. Georgia's independent media outlets were quite aggressive in criticizing the government and journalists vouchsafed few taboos. But journalists usually did not draw a clear line among reporting, analysis, and opinion.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, journalists became especially aggressive in relation to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Georgia's police committed many transgressions against the law and not the least against individual members of the media. The Ministry of Internal Affairs might not have directed such violations, but all too often it managed to turn a blind eye toward the perpetrators. The police had much to answer for and examples will be given in this Chapter. But there has been a perceptible tendency of us-versus-them when it comes to the media and the police. During the last few years, the situation has not greatly changed, with the journalists on one side, and the police on the other, and the journalists taking their case to the public.

The independent mass media have become aware of the well reasoned claims about the enforcement bodies of Georgia. Power structures have not been used to any criticism during the last 70 years. They have tried to respond to representatives of the mass media with physical violence and threats. During the last five years, employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have abused more than ten journalists. Policemen have also destroyed the equipment of journalists, cameras, TV cameras, and even broadcast facilities.

The Law

The freedom of the press in Georgia has been guaranteed by the Constitutional articles cited in the introduction of this Chapter and by a other laws. A "Law on Press and Other Means of Mass Media" was accepted in 1991, and amended twice, in 1994 and 1997. A conference on media, convoked in Tbilisi in 2004 on legal provisions governing the media, reviewed the legal situation of the media. "The legislative basis in general has provided for transparency and a competitive environment, although in practice legal requirements have not always been fulfilled", one participant concluded. For example, the draft law on the Freedom of Press was prepared by leading human-rights nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) in Georgia and passed in just one parliamentary sitting in 2002. The draft conformed to the Constitution and to international standards. However, it was not implemented because of a lack of political will.

The 1999 Law on the Post and Communications transferred the regulation of telecommunications licensing to the National Regulatory Commission for Communication (NRCC), an autonomous licensing commission created in May 2000. In the area of security and defence reform, a Law on State Secrets, adopted by the Parliament in September 1996, provided a list of state secrets developed by the National Security Council. The Law encompassed a large area, resembling Soviet practices, and could be used as a device to conceal information from the media. Public servants who leaked state secrets—and the journalists who disseminated them—could be legally held responsible. In practice, however, the government was reluctant to use these provisions against the media.

In June 2003, the Parliament added amendments to the Criminal Code during the first reading that instituted more severe penalties for libel. More importantly, the legal category of “insult” was also introduced, which effectively moved defamation cases from civil to criminal law. Most public officials chose to pay little heed to negative media coverage even when it alleges criminal activity. Occasionally, they have used defamation of character charges rather than accusations of libel responding to media criticism. In cases of libel, the burden of proof stays with the aggrieved party; in defamation cases, the accuser—in this case the media – must demonstrate the truthfulness of its charges.

One year later, in June 2004, the Parliament approved a new media law to provide for more media freedom. It was enacted to protect journalists’ rights by not subjecting the owner of a media company or a journalist itself to criminal charges of slander, but rather to civil actions. The Parliament also liberalized provisions on disclosing state secrets. Under the new law, not the journalist but the individual disclosing the secret is held responsible. According to the Independent Association of Georgian Journalists (IADJ), the reforms, scheduled to come into effect in 2005, have been regarded as marked improvements over the existing legislation. However, there has been some criticism concerning the new law as well. Mainly, that it was written in a complicated, ambiguous

language, allowing for different legal interpretations. The new broadcast law was drafted with the participation of the broadcast media and NGO community. The draft covers the transformation of the state television and radio system into public broadcasting stations, due to take place by the end of 2005. However, Georgia's media has worked in accordance with the existing legislation. The new laws have yet to come into effect.

A Free Media Market

About 300 print publications have been registered in Georgia, almost ten times as many as during Soviet times. 120 newspapers and 25 magazines have been published in Tbilisi, the capital of the country. As to the private newspapers issued in Tbilisi, in most cases they have been truly independent from government control. There are a few key figures that have provided financial support such as, a leader of one of the largest regions of Georgia, as well as some Ministers and other high-ranking persons. In practice, newspapers of all political viewpoints have been published: communistic, ultra-nationalistic, ultra-radical, and everything in-between. The nongovernmental commercial press has only published in the Georgian language. There have been no editions into the languages of national minorities. However, there have been TV and radio broadcasts in Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijan, Hebrew and Greek.

Private TV channels in Georgia have been well developed. Currently, there are six, but without having the possibility to broadcast throughout Georgia. The same has been true for private radio stations. For the most part, they are music, FM stations, with little content on political and public affairs. There have been two state-sponsored radio and TV channels that cover all of Georgia. The state press is small. The government periodicals include: "Sakartvelos Respublika" ("Georgian Republic"--in Georgian language) and "Svobodnaia Gruzia" ("Free Georgia"--in Russian), print laws, governmental chronicles, decrees, governmental events and political rearrangements. Although Georgian law has not provided for preferential legal treatment of state-owned media, these outlets have had better access to information and accreditation than private outlets.

Until 2003, the major electronic media had been controlled by the government. Until then, the first and second TV channels were the

only electronic broadcasting organisations with nationwide coverage. However, after the “Rose Revolution”, the first TV channel became a public broadcasting station. In the 1990’s, the privately owned Rustavi-2 became a competitor to state broadcasting owned television. It broadcasted mainly within Tbilisi but its news programming was rebroadcasted through local partner companies. In 2003, two new TV channels were launched by two financial groups—Imedi-TV, started by Badri Patarkatsishvili, a Georgian former oligarch and Mze, owned by a banker named Vano Chkhartishvili. Both TV stations were established in time to influence the 2003 elections, but neither could effectively compete in ratings with Rustavi-2.

Because of the growing popularity of the private broadcasters, government television introduced somewhat wider coverage, but largely continued to function as outlets for official views. Despite political preferences, the private broadcasters provided for a somewhat more balanced coverage of political events and brought attention to a variety of political views. However, before the Parliamentary elections of 2003 and especially during the ‘Rose Revolution’ Rustavi-2 openly supported the opposition.

At the end of 2003, a nation-wide radio broadcast appeared by a FM radio station “Imedi”, also owned by Patarkatsishvili. Initially, broadcasts only covered the two large cities, Tbilisi and Batumi. Today, its broadcast covers approximately 70 percent of Georgia’s territory and intends to reach its full territory. "Imedi" had been the only FM station with information programmes instead of music. Although it has not attracted a large audience in Tbilisi, it has the capability to become influential countrywide, where due to power problems TV broadcasting is very unstable, which increased the importance of radio.

Georgia has had more foreign news agencies than any other Republic of the former Soviet Union, with the exception of Russia. Here some agencies and representatives of the mass media located in Georgia: ORT, RTR, NTV, ИТАР-ТАСС, “Interfax”, “Maiak” (Lighthouse), “the Moscow news”, “Pravda” (Truth), “Komsomolskaia Pravda” (the Komsomol truth), “Obschaia Gazeta” (the General newspaper), “Trud” (Work), “Nezavisimaia Gazeta” (the Independent newspaper), “Kievskie Vedomosti” (the Kiev News), “Respublika Armenia” (Republic of Armenia), “Associated Press” (as TV, as well as information service),

“Reuters” (as TV, as well as information service), WTN, “France Press”, EFE Agency, BBC, “New York Times”, and others.

There have been news agencies with good reputations—with some exceptions. For example, one of the most popular agencies has been influenced due to financial investments by leading persons who, recently sided with the opposition, largely because Shevardnadze’s policies conflicted with their interests. On 1 January 2004, a Georgian-Russian project named “News – Georgia” was successfully launched. Its purpose has been to improve the flow of information to the public of Russia and other CIS countries on events in Georgia, and to provide the population of Georgia with a full picture of events in Russia.

Georgia’s integration into the web community has taken place and electronic media versions have become available. By 1999, the Internet was no longer something new and strange in Tbilisi and other large cities of Georgia. In other regions the Internet has only been accessible through long distance telephone because the electrocommunication infrastructure has been poorly developed. Many print media editions have created their websites. News agencies and English-speaking editions have tried to distribute their information through the Internet (“Georgia Times” - www.sanet.ge/gtze). The websites have also included Russian language newspapers: “Svobodnaia Gruzia” (Free Georgia) and “Vecherni Tbilisi” (Evening Tbilisi). The government has not impeded access to the Internet and therefore the number of users has grown steadily. However, the majority of the public still cannot afford Internet access and many regions lack service providers.

Georgian-speaking newspapers have not been actively engaged in Internet-publishing. Apart from insufficient financing, the difficulty has been the absence of a standard coding for the unique Georgian alphabet and symbols. A project to resolve this problem has been underway by a nongovernmental organization called “Open Text” (www.opentext.org.ge) and has been financed by fund Eurasia. Within the framework of the project, a computer archive of the Georgian press has been created with access through the Internet.

The Free Media Market and Consequences

Taken as a whole, Georgia's media outlets, electronic and printed, central and regional, have been numerous, but they have competed in a limited market. The rapid development and fragmentation of the mass media has been typical for all countries of the post-Soviet space. As the mass media needed to reorient itself politically, it had to overcome a plethora of unanticipated economic problems. In the first years of democratic reforms, an inflow of foreign funds financed many of the publications. But throughout the last five or six years, the financing of separate printed editions has practically stopped. In the end, a sudden transition to chaotic economic circumstances and an increase in the number of the mass media have led, directly and evenly, to the enhancement of overall political pluralism.

The media have had limited sources of income. For most newspapers, 80 to 90 percent of the income has originated from copy sales. The majority of the newspapers have not benefited from a large circulation. The highest circulation for Georgia has ranged from 25 to 30 thousand, but only concerns weekly journals. As to other revenues for the media, the income from advertising has been small, external grants have been rare, and there has been shadowy financing, not frequent but not unknown. The advertising market has been small and underdeveloped, and businesses have been hesitant to advertise due to fear of getting the attention of the tax authorities.

The tax legislation has made life difficult for the majority of the mass media. Georgia counts 22 forms of taxes, and the media has not been exempt from them. The Georgian media outlets have been considered as any other business enterprise, and market entries and tax structures have been similar to those of other businesses. The print media has enjoyed slightly preferential tax benefits through an exemption from the Value-Added Tax (VAT) for printing and distribution, but have been fully taxed on imports.

As a consequence, at many media outlets, the salaries have been meagre, the employment uncertain, and the working conditions modest at best, although television journalists tend to have earned a bit more than the ones working in the print media. These conditions have compelled some experienced journalists to leave their professions. Some

publications and channels have been under the protection of certain financial and political groups. Naturally, they have been obliged to comply with the desires of their financiers. Financing can be both general and specific--for overall editorial policies and for particular articles. Some journalists and editors have accepted bribes for reporting, as well as not reporting, certain stories. Recently, there has been a tendency for businessmen and entrepreneurs to become the official owners of the media.

“Due to the falling circulation numbers and a highly unfavourable taxation system, the general environment for the print media in Georgia drastically degenerated”, concluded a Georgian expert in an internationally organized study:

Today the only media outlets that can survive are part of larger corporations and are run by people who can afford to invest vast amounts of money in the media without taking the outlets capacity for sustainable development into consideration.

A somewhat disreputable businessman, Badri Patarkatsishvili, in 2002 and 2003, invested into the media market, gaining control over some of the leading print editions and the broadcasting company “Imedi”.

The Political Consequences

The market forces it would seem, should determine who can continue to compete and who drops out of the contest. The media has been battered by the powerful unregulated market mechanisms on the one hand, and constrained by government regulations and illicit influences on the other hand. The market economy of Georgia has remained unsettled; many of the new newspapers and magazines have attempted to emulate what succeeds in profit terms. A majority of the print publications have struggled to find readers and thus have lowered their standards to that of a sensationalistic or yellow press. Journalists and experts allege that there have been frequent instances of “commissioned journalism”, when political and economic interest groups have paid to discredit their opponents and competitors, which has added to the contentious tone in

the media. Politically frustrated and entertainment-driven audiences, desiring more drama and TV shows, have been an influential motivation behind the transformation of the media sector not just in Georgia, but in the entire region.

Observers say that the mass media of Georgia have followed the principle of sensationalism in politics. A political leader from Abkhazia described the following experience: “The mass media in Georgia has determined the public opinion to a greater extent, and it has dealt with certain events and completely ignored others”. After having issued the first part of our research concerning the means of settlement of the Abkhazian conflict, I visited “Rustavi-2”, and other bodies of the TV and press. I provided them with the following information: Nadareishvili and his group convinced the population that there is no other solution of the Abkhazian problem, except for a military one. We believe that the majority of the population supports a peaceful settlement of the issue. This should help reasonable thought. Should not this information be provided to the population? I have proposed to arrange a discussion, to compare both points of view, to find out what the different arguments are. In vain! ... I got the impression that the mass media perceives a violent solution of the problem as newsworthy, because it falls in line with commercial needs. In their opinion, a peace process would not nearly contain as much dynamism as would a military one, or just the talk about it. From the point of view of the mass media, sensations are commercially more valuable.

Thus many media outlets have accepted contributions from businesses and political groups in order to survive. The media has found it difficult to adjust to the confusing economic, social, and political realities in Central and Eastern Europe, and there has been more chaos in Georgia than in most other countries. The rapid and uncontrolled privatisation of most media resources (notably in Russia) during the mid-1990s, has led to the penetration of former nomenklatura and new oligarchy interests into public radio and television. This has allowed various nationalistic and populist leaders to voice their propaganda with the help of recently-privatised broadcast companies. Under such conditions, the ongoing transformation of the political system may be perceived as entertainment, where personal appearances and extravagant

behaviour portrayed by the media matter more than political ideals and affiliations to social or political issues.

The newspaper GT interviewed one of the leading political persons of the country. Two years ago, he was considered the right hand of President Shevardnadze. It was the interviewees wish not to be identified. "As a politician, I am able to say that the Georgian mass media has been guided by certain political groups". It is difficult to indicate the basic causes for this tendency, though it is likely, that it is caused by the fact that the press has demanded constant subsidizing. Politicians, especially before elections, do not spare means for the mass media. A study has already indicated that typically in Georgia, the media outlets materialize before elections, and often disappear after the end of the polling.

The Time of Shevardnadze

A survey *Nations in Transit* evaluated Georgia's media situation as Shevardnadze's time in power was coming to an end.

The Media legislation has been mainly liberal. Independent newspapers have fully dominated the print market. Independent TV and radio companies have dominated the airwaves in the capital and have increasingly competed with state-run broadcasting in the provinces. The competition by independent broadcasters has forced state-run TV to make its programming somewhat more pluralistic, but it has continued to serve as an outlet for government propaganda. There has been no state censorship of the independent media. The programming content of the independent media has been pluralistic but often skewed by the interests of specific oligarchic groups. Outside the capital, journalists have often been intimidated by the government. In 2003, the government's attitude toward the media grew more hostile but did not effectively curb the freedom of the media; indeed, media pluralism has actually increased.

Shevardnadze himself gave public praise to the freedom of the media and, of course, to the public condemnation of corruption.

One of the big achievements of democracy in Georgia has been the independent mass-media. I am the President of the country, the guarantor of the Constitution and democracy, and I shall not allow that anybody puts pressure upon the mass media.

Shevardnadze said this to the Parliament before the elections in 1999. Generally, when the mass media held charges against the politicians in power, there never was much reaction from the official side. Shevardnadze, notably, would not publicly respond or criticize them. Evidently, the tactic was to ignore specific criticism. There were instances of media representatives being harassed or attacked, but no persistent, concerted persecution campaign against them took place. However, as the government's popularity diminished, leading officials, including the President, became noticeably hostile toward the media and called for more restrictive legislation. In October 2001, a raid by the Ministry of Security at the Rustavi-2 TV broadcasting station (for alleged tax evasion) triggered large demonstrations and led to the dismissal of the entire cabinet and the resignation of the Speaker of Parliament.

Georgian officials have seldom gone to court, even if speculative accusations were published against them. When legal proceedings were initiated, the courts tended to be lenient or favourable towards the media, either acquitting the accused or having them pay minimal sums, not the large amounts asked for by the plaintiffs. However, in 2003, the television station Rustavi-2, which had become a major Shevardnadze critic, was targeted by a broad government campaign for harassment and discreditation. A court imposed a penalty of 1 million GEL (some USD 475,000) on it, for defaming Akaki Chkhaidze, head of the State Railways Department. Chkhaidze was a strong political ally of Shevardnadze and known as 'the main cashier' of the Shevardnadze family. The huge fine would have forced the station into bankruptcy, but as the result of an appeal the amount was greatly reduced. (Shortly after

the Rose Revolution, Chkaidze was charged with corrupt practices and detained by the authorities).

During the years of Shevardnadze, the Georgian political spectrum of the mass media tended to gravitate towards two political poles, towards the legislative and executive authority. The legislative authority perceptibly enjoyed more sympathy of the mass media. Journalists and analysts tended to focus their criticism on the executive authority. It has been alleged that here was a time when many political editors wrote articles in a private office of the Deputy Press Secretary of the Parliament, Eteri Maisashvili. Thus, a certain climate of politics was created with the assistance of the Parliament of Georgia. Georgia's public has gotten used to the newspaper and TV styles. For many of them, which group supports which media outlet was (and still is) taken for granted. Of course, there have also been exceptions; some companies have tried to maintain objectivity. But, unfortunately, their financial situation and circulation have not allowed for dissemination and public influence; therefore, they have not been able to alter the public tenor of the country's media.

As Horchilava Vakhtang, the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper "Martali Gazeti", described the media's situation:

"I believe that the freedom of speech in Georgia has not been oppressed during the last twelve years. Some editions intend to please certain groups. According to a saying, he who pays the piper calls the tune. Perhaps, it has been too much to expect objectivity and adherence to principles from journalists who have not received their salary for several months. If the economic situation in the country improves, then fully independent publications will appear".

The Rose Revolution

Georgia spent most of 2003 anticipating the November elections, which were widely viewed as the only means available for bringing about long-desired reforms. Georgian media outlets had become deeply engaged in the political events, often abandoning the role of a neutral observer and becoming partisan participants. Opposition leaders extensively used the

television as a means to gather the political support. The broadcasting company “Rustavi 2” openly supported the opposition. Before and after the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, almost all media outlets revealed political allegiances or external guiding hands. This went on well after the revolution. The intense focus of attention and the immediacy of coverage of events produced a massive public response and an impact on the political outcome.

With the elections approaching, the Georgian government became more repressive toward the media. Abuses and attacks on journalists and media outlets increased in frequency, while the government tried to restrict the freedom of the media with legislative efforts. The Central Election Commission proposed to ban broadcasts of political debates 50 days before the election day. Also, during the election year, three new broadcasters were launched—TV Imedi, TV Mze, and TV 202. The competition for viewers and scarce advertising revenue immediately increased. These stations were ostensibly created to shape the public discourse prior to the elections. It has been observed in Georgia that media outlets materialize before the elections, and often disappear after the end of the polling.

As the Presidential and Parliamentary elections from January to March were under way, the presence of a huge number of foreign journalists was recorded. In total, more than 250 journalists covered the Presidential elections. According to “Mtavari Gazeti” and estimates of the international observers, the work of the Georgian mass media left much to be desired. International experts noted that in the print and electronic media, attention was predominantly focused on Mikhail Saakashvili.

Basically, the most popular TV channels covered their favourite part of the elections. In most cases, the information provided was positive: 27 per cent of the broadcasting time of popular TV channels was devoted to Saakashvili. International observers also noticed that the Georgian press devoted the majority of articles to Saakashvili, although they were offered a wider spectrum of political views. The TV of Adjara, however, devoted 73 percent of its broadcasting time to the Party “Agordzineba” (Revival). A subsequent report stated that the TV channel “Imedi” covered the elections most evenly. That trend was shared by channels on the other side of the political spectrum. Imedi and

Mze television, established shortly before the elections, had distinct pro-government programming which was praised by Shevardnadze. He compared them favourably to the state-owned Channel 1 which, according to the incumbent, did not adequately present the Government's position. "One television channel -- at least one -- ought to work for the benefit of the state", Shevardnadze complained.

An increasing political militancy of Georgia's television channels was clearly obvious on the eve of the elections. "We witnessed the transformation of Rustavi-2 into a political party", commented the Western radio station Radio Liberty. "All state independent channels tried to maintain the level of pluralism to some extent by giving voice to various forces", said Ghia Nodia, a political commentator, "not managing, though, to hide their personal sympathies for one or the other political force". During the last days of the opposition, the leader of the revolution movement, Saakashvili, blocked the building of the state television Channel 1 and demanded that the events at the House of the Government were to be broadcasted live.

After the elections, an observer study wrote that the "Georgian media outlets became so involved in the political process that they almost abandoned the traditional role of a neutral observer. Opposition leaders used television extensively as a tool to rally the public. The real-time coverage of events had an enormous impact on the political outcome. In the pre- and post-election period, almost all media outlets demonstrated their political alliances, and this continued well after the end of the revolution".

Retrospect and Prospect

A major challenge the Georgian media faced was to regain credibility that declined during the revolution. This decline has been indicated by a drop in audiences and readership numbers. To regain lost popularity, media businesses will have to distance themselves from the chaos of the transition period—a difficult task given the emotional attachment many journalists have to the political groups swept into power by the revolution. The mass media of Georgia understood that after the Rose Revolution it was in the midst of a new stage of development. Looking

at what had taken place before and what could be anticipated, journalists had mixed feelings.

Inga Grigolia, the leading journalist of the broadcasting company “Mze” (Sun) said:

I think there are no grounds to be afraid of oppressions of the mass media in Georgia. Recent events have shown that the mass media possesses real power. And journalists will not easily give this power away for a quiet and comfortable life.

Eka Khoperia, the presenter of the analytical program on a TV channel “Rustavi – 2” believed that:

Freedom of speech – the biggest achievement of democracy in Georgia. I think that journalists really influence the formation of public opinion. With the new authority, the situation regarding freedom of speech, at least as it seems to me, will not change. On the contrary, the professional level will be raised.

Zaza Abzianidze, the editor of the newspaper “Literary Georgia” stated:

I do not think that the situation in Georgia can be named as freedom of speech. The “printed word” should have a certain value. Investigations of journalists resemble a voice in the wilderness. The economic situation in Georgia has practically destroyed the non-commercial journalism. There really have been no publications focused on the development of an intellectual potential.

Gutniashvili Lali, the editor of the newspaper “Kviris Palitra” commented:

I do not remember a case when an inappropriate reaction on this or that revelatory article has followed from the part of authorities. Neither do I remember calls from the top, nor threats directed at journalists. I think that journalists in

Georgia are entirely free--they can choose a theme, find the necessary facts and publish them. The problem is that the authorities do not respond to revelations made by journalists. I hope, with the arrival of new authorities, this situation will change, and a statement of a journalist will find value again.

After the Revolution

The news media had hopes that Georgia would open the road for a greater press after the journalist played a key role in the “Rose Revolution”, but many journalists turned out to be disappointed. The television news coverage usually follows the lead of the new government. Only a month after Saakashvili came to power, Rustavi-2 cancelled the political talk show “Nochnoi Kurier” (Night Courier). Although Rustavi-2 had been Saakashvili’s major supporter, broadcasting opposition protests giving its airtime to government critics, and openly celebrating the opposition’s victory, it continued its independent and critical stance toward the new government and evidently suffered for it.

The station’s owners claimed that the program needed to be reorganised to compete in the new media. Rustavi-2’s main creditor was the state. When the government agreed to postpone Rustavi-2’s 2004 debt payments, the station continued broadcasts in a different vein. Political talk shows on other leading television stations—including state television and the independent channels Imedi and Mze—were also taken off the air, with executives citing the need to restructure programs to fit post-revolution realities. While no overt government pressure was reported in the programming changes, media analysts and opposition-party members were dismayed at the disappearance of television talk shows and feared that it might have been due to indirect political and financial influences.

The Saakashvili government began an aggressive and very public campaign against corruption, singling out high-ranking Shevardnadze officials which received public support. The government also used it against independent and opposition media outlets. The case that drew most of the attention was the fate of the television station Iberiya, owned by the business conglomerate Omega. The Prosecutor General ordered a

raid against Omega in February during a tax-evasion probe, but police took over Iberiya facilities as well and then authorities suspended it for four months. When the station went back on air, its format had been fundamentally changed, from a predominantly news to entertainment programmes. The raid and its effect on Iberiya “rose serious concerns” about free expression, the Georgian Ombudsman, Teimuzad Lombadze, said. The financial police raided the offices of *The Georgian Times*, an English-language weekly, that had published a series of articles questioning how Tbilisi's chief prosecutor had acquired some properties.

While there were no physical attacks on media representatives, state tax authorities occasionally harassed independent newspapers and television stations. Journalists claimed that they were vulnerable to official pressure from authorities, as well as from businesses and societal elements. Business enterprises would not dare to advertise in media outlets criticizing the Government, because they were afraid of retaliation. If, compared to 2003, physical harassment of the media decreased, self-censorship increased. Under the new government, the media continued to operate relatively free. However, in early 2004, there were concerns that the diversity of the media was being significantly reduced since most of the media formerly connected to the opposition now supported the government, leaving only very few outlets that did not have a pro-governmental orientation.

Although most journalists had regular access to government officials and agencies, a few government officials denied journalists access to public briefings. For example, the Minister of Interior temporarily denied the television station Kavkasia access to the Ministry and to his public briefings. The mayor of Poti prohibited television cameras during public briefings and effectively blocked interviews of local government officials. Later, the mayor was arrested based on unrelated charges. The Government also used financial pressures to influence media outlets and sometimes sent financial tax investigators to investigate critical journals.

Conclusion

We have been able to evaluate the development and the situation of Georgia's media in a wider context. In transition countries, the role of

the mass media is often assessed alongside that of parliaments, executives, political parties and non-governmental organizations. The media can have an influence in politics. These opportunities for the media to influence the political climate have appeared as a result of the uncertain role of political parties and the slow emergence of a civil society. The media have been intermediaries between state elites and citizens. Although it has been hard to quantify the direct impact of media on political behaviour and decision-making processes, it has been clear that the media fills important gaps in social and political communication, serving as a powerful factor of consolidation of democracy. However, such a role can be fully and effectively exercised by a free, powerful, and democratic media.

Is Georgia's media free? We have referred to the findings of an international organization, Reporters Sans Frontiers. It has issued annual reports on the freedom of media worldwide. It has recorded every kind of violation directly affecting journalists and news media--censorship, confiscation of issues, searches and harassment, threats and physical attacks. The assessment has been made by people who have a thorough knowledge of the state of press freedom in a country: local journalists, foreign reporters, legal experts, and regional specialists. It has taken account of the legal and judicial situation affecting the news media (such as the penalties for press offences, the existence of a state monopoly in certain areas and the existence of a regulatory body) and the behaviour of the authorities towards the state-owned news media and international press. However, no attempt has been made to evaluate the quality of the news content or editorial policy. Only the freedom of press has been assessed, not how it is used--for the better or worse. How has Georgia fared in a worldwide comparison? In the Report issued in 2003, Georgia was in the 73rd place--with the Dominican Republic just above it and Mexico immediately below. The Ukraine was ranked 132nd and Russia 148th. A year later, in October 2004, Reporters Sans Frontiers ranked Georgia as 94th noting, however, that the decline was largely due to press freedom violations in Adzhara and Abkhazia.

Is Georgia's media powerful? On occasions, it has possessed much power. Perhaps it reached its highest point on the day when Shevardnadze was compelled to relinquish office. But the power rose to a high level because of immediate circumstances—public excitement

surrounding controversial elections. The direction of power was seldom decided upon in editorial offices, as generally is the practice in established democracies. Often, the direction was given by business and political interests—which also has been known to happen in the same established democracies, but without the powerful impact as in Georgia. Is Georgia’s media democratic? Again, here one should consider it in the context of the region: Central and Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus. On the one hand, observers have said that the mass media of Georgia, in contrast to the fourth estate of Armenia and Azerbaijan, have come closest to the democratic standards. On the other hand, both a decrease in professionalism and chaos have been mentioned. The opinions of Georgian journalists themselves concerning freedom of speech have differed. Journalists—as well as media readers, viewers and listeners—have spoken of a necessity to improve the professionalism of journalists, and to develop and ratify journalistic ethical standards. Commonly, media representatives, editors and journalists of the print and electronic media, have been aware of the issue of media and democracy. In March 2004, a meeting organized by Internews Georgia, Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association and Trade-Industry Chamber of Georgia brought together mass media managers and representatives. The main theme was the performance of Georgian TV stations during the “Rose Revolution” with a key question: “Who do the TV stations serve – governments, owners or the public”? The main problems of Georgia’s mass media have been the financial dependency and excessive commitment to the new leadership of the country. “We believe the new leadership of Georgia is able to drag the country out of the crisis, but the journalists shouldn’t forget about objectivity, it’s always necessary to reflect the opinions of the opposing side. If a journalist does not fulfil that task and if he or she will not be a bit critical towards the government – we’ll get a worse result” concluded Genadi Uchumbegashvili, Director of the Tbilisi Bureau of Internews.