

THE SPECIAL FEATURES OF GEORGIA'S POLITICAL MEDIA MILIEU AFTER THE ROSE REVOLUTION

Beka CHEDIA

*Research Fellow
at the Georgian Institute of Political Science
(Tbilisi, Georgia)*

The formation of independent media is one of the main achievements of the many years of reform of the Georgian political system. Georgia's mass media is developing faster than other civil institutions. Despite the low level of election democracy, local self-government, and political parties, state-independent mass media organizations came into being after Georgia gained its independence. But—unfortunately there has to be a “but”—the mass media in Georgia have not only become the main lever in public opinion formation, but they are also a hefty weapon in the political struggle. Confirmation of this was the so-called Rose Revolution in November 2003, which not only raised the significance of the mass media, particularly television, but also revealed several shortcomings in their work.

State-independent television played a very important, if not decisive, role both in forming public moods and in raising the wave of revolutionary protest.¹ Until the parliamentary elections of 2003 (which escalated into the revolution), television companies could still deny their politicized nature and claim that they were trying to be objective; however, the revolution revealed and polarized their political views. The Rustavi-2 TV channel openly supported the revolution. Later, one of the popular anchorwomen on this television station admitted that the channel covered all the events of those days extremely tendentiously. So, Rustavi-2 turned out to be closely associated with the victorious political forces. It soon

¹ See: *Map of Georgia's Mass Media*, Tbilisi, 2004, pp. 70-71.

became obvious that the special role of the mass media in Georgia's political system not only stemmed from the fact that the state and other political entities can use them to inform the population about their policy and their aims and values, but also from the fact that the mass media themselves have become a very powerful tool in the purposeful elaboration of political procedures in Georgia.

The mass media are still playing an extremely significant role in Georgia's present-day, post-revolutionary political system, but the quality and

nature of their influence on the political processes currently depend on how strongly they themselves feel pressure from the government, particular political groups, or other interested entities. According to various international assessments, Georgia is still viewed as a country with a partially free press,² which is primarily due to the government's increased pressure on the independent mass media.

² [www.freedomhouse.org], 2007.

Institutional State of the Mass Media (Relations with the Government—Legal and Economic Aspects)

Whereas before the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the government was guided by the principle "write and read," that is, there was freedom of criticism, and the government made no response to this criticism, now the government is very sensitive to any criticism on the part of the mass media. Due to the government's sensitivity to criticism, the number of mass media organizations, both television channels and newspapers, dramatically decreased in Georgia after the revolution. But on the other hand, the government categorically denies putting any pressure on the mass media, particularly when international organizations hint at this. For example, this year a scandal broke out over the OSCE report on Internet censorship in Georgia. The country's government, in the person of Giorgi Arveladze, the minister of economics and the president's closest aide, demanded an explanation from the OSCE. In response, the OSCE refuted the fact that the report contained critical comments about Georgia and called the incidence a misunderstanding.

The Georgian government indeed had something to justify itself with—censorship of the Internet is technically impossible, and what is the purpose of it. The Statistics Board and other corresponding official structures do not have data about the number of Internet users. However, according to several local experts, around 250,000 people in Georgia use the Internet at least once a month, and 30,000 users are regularly hooked up to broad band (DSL, ADSL) Internet.³ Due to this, the Georgian government is focusing its attention on traditional media organizations, which have a wider audience, and is bringing all of its pressure to bear on them.

In so doing, the government is trying to place particularly tight control on television channels, since they know the results of sociological polls, according to which 95% of the Georgian population obtains its information from television. But printed media employees also have a problem, and it primarily consists in the fact that despite the development trends, the circulation of printed mass media is still limited. Circulation of the main daily publications fluctuates between five and ten thousand

³ [www.newslab.ru/news/206350], 2007.

copies.⁴ Another obvious problem is the low professional level of most of Georgia's press workers. (The main reason for this is that experienced journalists are ignored, and their places have been taken over by amateurs.) The content of newspapers falls far below the standards of impartial, highly professional journalism.

According to local experts, Georgian journalists do not see a big difference between propaganda and information, are unable to distinguish facts from opinions, and see themselves more as enlighteners than informers. Television has assumed the role of the source of the latest information, whereas newspapers, judging from the nature of the publications, are unable to compete with television.⁵ The mélange of facts and commentary in the press has reached the point that it is essentially impossible to find an article (not counting the short reports of information agencies) that contains unbiased information. Appraisals are frequently given in titles and in annotations. The non-professionalism of journalists is not a new problem for the Georgian mass media, nor is the narrow and impoverished Georgian media market, which is unable to keep its head above water without subsidies. After the Rose Revolution, several negative trends arose with respect to the Georgian mass media. And this was despite the fact that in 2004, the Georgian parliament adopted a new law on freedom of speech and expression of opinion. Western experts evaluated this law as one of the most liberal in the entire post-Soviet expanse. Defamation was withdrawn from the sphere of criminal legislation. The law on freedom of speech and expression of opinion sets forth various regulations regarding the burden of proof for legal and physical entities, in so doing, shifting the burden of proof from the defendant to the claimant. It also sets forth the mechanism of absolute protection, without any exceptions, of sources of information used by journalists. From now on, it is not journalists, but the owners of the corresponding media organizations that must appear in court as defendants.⁶ All of these mechanisms create legislative foundations for the legal protection of the mass media, while in reality, the picture is very different. The government's use of strong levers of economic pressure on the mass media (for instance, with the help of the tax services) has already led to the closing of several media organizations, or to arise in price of their products, as happened with several newspapers when the country's parliament abolished the tax benefits existing for the printed mass media. These benefits were instituted in 2005 on the initiative of the country's president, Mikhail Saakashvili, in order to support the printed media. These benefits exempted the press from VAT, as well as from taxes on advertising services, property, and foreign economic activity. At one time, the government explained the privileged tax conditions for the press by the population's low financial solvency, which made it difficult to sell newspapers. This was precisely why benefits for the press were considered when drawing up the state budget draft for 2007. But as a result, although the press still faced the same problems, the benefits were abolished.

What is more, the government took another step backwards and cancelled its legislative innovation (meaning the adoption of the law on freedom of speech and expression of opinion). It introduced amendments and addenda into Georgia's fundamental law on general courts. In keeping with these amendments and addenda, all videoing, photography, and television broadcasting were banned both in the court room and throughout the entire building. The presence of so-called "writing journalists" is permitted in the court room, but only with corresponding permission from the judge.⁷ This means that the government is also beginning to put pressure on the activity of the mass media at the legislative level. The thing is that judges are an important source of scandalous information for the Georgian

⁴ See: *Vyzovy 21 veka dlia SMI na Iuzhnom Kavkaze*, Part 1, *Svoboda pečati v Gruzii*, Vienna, 2005, p. 44.

⁵ See: M. Muskhelishvili, *Svobodnye, no ne liberal'nye sredstva massovoi kommunikatsii i partikuliaristicheskiy sotsialnyy kontekst* (quoted from the manuscript).

⁶ Georgian Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression of Opinion, 2004.

⁷ Law on General Courts of Georgia, Art 12, Amendment of 2007.

mass media, it is precisely judicial power that is criticized most often in the mass media, particularly with respect to so-called politicized court procedures.

In addition, under government pressure, Georgian businessmen loyal to the government have bought up controlling sets of shares in private television companies and, in so doing, control has been tightened over independent television channels. For example, the Rustavi-2 channel has changed its owner twice since the revolution, the first time immediately after the revolution, in January 2004, when a close friend of the defense minister, Irakliy Okruashvili, became the owner, and the second time, after the retirement of this same minister in 2006. The owner of the Mze television station also changed after the revolution; the brother of Georgian foreign minister Gela Bezhuashvili became the owner. As a result, these television channels were joined into one media holding. The government tried, by means of these measures, to take centralized control over private television channels, on the one hand, and pin Imedi, the most highly rated television channel after the revolution, to the wall, on the other. In contrast to other national television channels, this station is conducting an information policy aimed against the government to a certain extent. This is the only television company in Georgia that currently airs political talk shows in which the government is often criticized and which are popular among the population. This is precisely why the government decided to boycott this channel's political talk shows and why government representatives, or those of the party in power, ignore Imedi's invitations. They hardly ever appear on the air of this channel. This is also why this channel is oriented toward giving air time to leaders of the opposition. In turn, in order to save his television station and prevent it from being sold by force to pro-government businessmen, or from being closed down, the owner of Imedi, Badri Patarkatsishvili, sold the channel's controlling set of shares to world-known media magnate Rupert Murdoch and his company, News Corporation. The entry into Georgia of such a world brand is an unprecedented event throughout the entire post-Soviet space and experts hope that it will promote the development of both the media infrastructure and of freedom of speech in Georgia. But local observers also nurtured such hopes regarding the transformation of state television into public broadcasting.⁸

In 2004, the country's parliament adopted a law on public broadcasting (it came into force on 1 January, 2006), but today it can be said in no uncertain terms that public broadcasting financed from the pockets of taxpayers has not justified the hopes of the population. Seventeen million lari are allotted from the country's budget every year, but this is having no positive impact either on the quality of the television programs, or on freedom of speech on the air.

Theatricalization of the Political Process with the Help of the Mass Media— Less Politics, More Entertainment

In Georgia, there are obviously taboo issues that journalists will not touch with a barge pole. Another important problem consists in the despondent monotony of most of the news programs. News programs either present reports on whom the president met with, or stories about what newly built facility or children's home he visited. This is bringing to light the problems of editorial independence in the Georgia mass media. What is more, government-controlled mass media are trying their best to

⁸ The Rustavi-2 Television Company. "Open Topic" Program, 23 March, 2006.

attract the attention of as large an audience as possible. Diverse means constantly used by television for attracting and entertaining people serve this same purpose. And this is causing theatricalization of the political process. For example, the pro-government mass media often show live broadcasts of the arrest of corrupted officials. The authorities believe this will help to raise the powers that be rating among the population. But this is not always successful. For example, recently the Georgian law-enforcement bodies arrested 24 local municipal and self-government officials right in the middle of a business meeting in Kutaisi, the second largest city after Tbilisi. But it turned out that some of the arrested people had already been detained by the law-enforcement bodies several days previously and now they were being taken especially to the office where the business meeting was held in order to collectively arrest them again in front of the television cameras, whereby with the help of special service agents in masks.⁹

This is a graphic example of how turning political processes into a show can lead (if it is not yet leading) to an atmosphere of mistrust among the population of the government and political processes as a whole. As a result of all of this, the local oppositionists have been calling post-revolutionary Georgia a “Television State.” Under conditions when the government runs the country with the help of the mass media it controls, the number of live transmissions of statements by government members, the president, and leaders of the party in power has dramatically grown. In so doing, journalists very rarely succeed in asking the speechmaker questions, since television cameramen, not journalists, are usually invited to such briefings. And even if journalists are invited, they are only allowed to ask those questions permitted. What is more, employees of printed mass media are invited increasingly infrequently to the briefings of the highest state officials. This is explained by their greater tendency to criticize compared with television channels.

Television companies are not only engaged in entertaining the audience, but are entertaining themselves as well. The authorities are even prompting them to do this. For example, a beauty contest among female journalists called “mass vogue” is held once a year with the support of the Tbilisi mayor’s office. During this function, half-naked female journalists line up before the jury members (who are mainly representatives of the country’s political leadership). Not only representatives of the pro-government television companies, but also of the opposition television company, Imedi, participate in this show. This lack of principled conduct on the part of employees of the electronic media sometimes goes against their information policy. And as a result, society loses—instead of socially significant information, it receives secondary, insignificant information. For example, this summer, the information programs of all the television channels broadcast (for several days in a row) a story about the preparations for “mass vogue” by way of the “main news,” while the question of journalists’ limited access to the court rooms was becoming more urgent.

It should be added to the above that after the television company owners changed, there was essentially a change in the entire journalist corps at Rustavi-2, Mze, and even at the public television company. Most of the journalists who participated in the Rose Revolution either moved to the press secretariats of prestigious ministries, or obtained higher posts in various state structures, and those who stayed on to work in the mass media are currently creating different kinds of educational and entertainment shows instead of political programs.

For example, in the latest television season, Rustavi-2 is showing four comedy and four so-called reality shows. One of these shows is such an expensive project for the Georgian television market that it is obviously being financed by outside subsidies and has a political undertone. I am talking about the Last Hero project popular throughout the world. Rustavi-2 and the political forces behind it are trying by means of such projects to attract viewers away from Imedi’s television audience (this station is placing the emphasis more on the political theme). But the fact remains a fact. According to all the

⁹ The Imedi Television Company, “Open Topic” Program, 5 July, 2007.

sociological surveys, Imedi, the television company of Badri Patarkatsishvili and Rupert Murdoch, is the leader in Georgia. The thing is that this is the only national company that tries to perform the main function of the mass media and (along with entertainment and educational functions) inform society about political events. It was the first to notify society about the murder of a young banker. The highest interior officials were involved in this tragedy. Coverage of this event helped to raise Imedi's rating. Before the revolution, Rustavi-2 was the leader, but its rating has dropped so much that the television company has launched a publicity campaign in the regions called "I love Rustavi-2." On the other hand, this television station is greatly favored by the government structures (even more than the former state television channel). All the exclusive stories from the Ministry of the Interior on the arrests of corrupted officials go first to Rustavi-2, and the country's leaders specifically do comments for it, while entirely ignoring Imedi, the most highly rated talk shows of which are the weekly "Reakt-siia" (Reaction) and the daily "Efir Dnia" (Current Affairs).

The television milieu in Georgia is as follows:

- National channels (opposition)—Imedi.
- National channels (pro-government)—Rustavi-2, Mze, Public Television, Ajarian Television, Alania.
- National channels (entertainment)—1 Stereo, Musical Box.

There are also regional channels, for example, Kavkasia, which broadcasts only in Tbilisi and its suburbs and is distinguished by criticism of the government. As for other regional mass media, they are unable to have an influence on the political processes throughout the country as a whole.¹⁰ In addition to those listed, there are several dozen other television and radio channels in the regions.

C o n c l u s i o n

So the change in Georgia's political media milieu is obvious, just as is the government's desire to control the media. Although the main problem is that the journalists themselves are not against restricted freedom of speech. Journalists (television) are inclined to play into the government's hands, fearing that otherwise they may lose their high-paid jobs on television.

Georgia needs to review and reconsider its journalism, the professional values of journalism, and the role of mass media owners and their influence on society. Another reason for the mass media's lack of responsibility to society is possibly related to the fact that so far it has not been possible to theoretically reinforce the mechanism of self-regulation in journalism. In 2006, the government tried to adopt a code of ethics for the electronic media, but this attempt was not crowned by success. Both local television employees and international organizations were against the suggested code.¹¹ If this code is adopted, Georgian television journalists, when covering a multi-thousand campaign, for example, would have to ask for permission to film from literally every participant in this event.¹²

The code did not go through, but the Georgian media workers did not offer anything in exchange.

Despite the lack of responsibility among media employees, they enjoy great trust among the population. According to the data of the latest sociological polls conducted by the International Republican Institute, the mass media belong to the top five best social and political institutions.

In terms of trust among the population, the places are distributed as follows:

¹⁰ See: *Map of Georgia's Mass Media*, p. 71.

¹¹ The Imedi Television Company, *Khronika Information Program*, 5 December 2006.

¹² See: *Code of Broadcasters Ethics Draft*, Art 14, Second Paragraph, 2006.

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| 1. The Russian Orthodox Church | —89% |
| 2. The army | —86% |
| 3. The mass media | —82% |
| 4. The police | —66% |
| 5. The national bank | —63%. |

It should be kept in mind that approximately the same sociological poll was conducted in Georgia by the Gallup Institute in 2004, and the following reply was obtained to the question “Which sociopolitical institution do you trust most?”:

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| 1. The mass media | —84% |
| 2. The church | —89% |
| 3. The president’s office | —73% |
| 4. The government | —57% |
| 5. The parliament | —54% |
| 6. The army | —45% |
| 7. The national bank | —32% |
| 8. Political parties | —32% |
| 9. The education system | —27% |
| 10. Trade unions | —11%. ¹³ |

A similar study was conducted in 2005 as well by the Georgian office of the American Bar Association, according to which the mass media were ahead of the president’s office, the parliament, the judicial system, the police, and other institutions.¹⁴ In spite of everything, the Georgian mass media still have a credit of trust among the population and are obliged to justify it. They should fight for their freedom. This is the gist of a serious problem associated with independence and journalistic solidarity. However, the government holds the main responsibility for the current situation, as, according to the Constitution, it is the main guarantor of freedom of speech and printed matter.

¹³ IRI, USAID, Baltic Surveys / The Gallup Organization, IPM, Georgian National_Voters Study. February 2004.

¹⁴ [www.abanet.org/ceel/].