



Problems of Media Pluralism in Georgia

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Problems of pluralism in TV media

The level of pluralism is rather low in Georgian TV media, largely because since coming to power in 2003 the new political leadership has done little to promote a transparent, open to broad public participation, political system in the country. Instead, the political environment was actually monopolised. In other words, media freedom was curbed and stringent control was imposed on national information and communication networks (through disbanding or economically weakening media outlets). On the other hand, opponents of the political elite, who had limited ability to manoeuvre in the political space, allied either with partisan media organisations or those media that had to sell their resources to cope with their economic problems.

The following governmental policies restrict media freedom and pluralism in Georgia today:

- The change of ownership of media institutions: it often means that the government – more exactly, a politically loyal individual or organisation – takes controlling stake in media outlets
- Most of the scarce economic resources (advertisement market) are given to loyal TV companies
- Economic weakness prevents TV companies from implementing independent editorial policy and negatively affects their professional level- Administrative resources (courts, prosecutor's office, National Communications Regulatory Commission) are used to manipulate TV frequencies and, sometimes, to cancel broadcasting licenses.

Today the political elite is using two major instruments to change the ownership of TV media outlets:

- Direct pressure on media owners (without the help and involvement of governmental bodies)
- Revocation of broadcasting licenses with the help of administrative resources (courts, prosecutor's office, National Communications Regulatory Commission).

In the absence of professional journalistic standards and ethics, restrictions on the freedom of journalists and stringent regulation of the journalism profession remain major obstacles to the development of independent and competitive TV media. Despite quite a liberal legislation on freedom of expression, independence of journalists is greatly restricted by the labour regulation, partisan editorial policies and neglect of journalistic ethics.

- Despite liberal media regulation, journalists are still vulnerable because the government has adopted laws designed to protect interests of political groups and loyal media owners.
- Although the law does not regulate relations between journalists and their employers, it also does not prevent political interference in the journalists' work. The liberal law on freedom of speech and expression is unable to protect journalists and enable them to gather and distribute impartial information. This case represents a breach of editorial independence, one of the fundamental principles of the freedom of speech.

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For the ruling political elite and loyal media owners, the labour legislation is one of the tools to restrict freedom of journalists and influence the editorial policy.

Without independent editorial policy journalists are facing a dilemma: either to quit or continue working on the employer's terms – in fact, it is a conflict between the professional journalistic standards and ethics on the one hand, and the employer's political and economic interests on the other hand.

Alternative solutions to the problem

Several options are available to stakeholders (the civil sector, independent media, political parties) nowadays to increase the level of pluralism in mass media. Namely, the stakeholders should focus their efforts on the following tasks:

- a) Conditions should be created for the Public Broadcaster to implement its functions honestly
- b) The current media space should be maintained and expanded
- c) Alternative means of information distribution and public debate (printed media or other alternative sources of information: radio, Internet, etc) should be strengthened or created (television)
- d) Independence of journalists should be protected – as a result, every media outlet, regardless of its owner's political views, will have to defend public interests.

But due to the specific features of the Georgian political system (power is not shared between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government properly, the political and economic life is dominated and controlled by a single political party, etc) all the above-mentioned alternatives may encounter the following obstacles:

1. Public Broadcaster:

- because of political influence on court decisions, the Public Broadcaster is unlikely to meet the civil sector's demands
- the dominance of a single political party in the parliament makes it impossible to change/improve the legislation on the public broadcasting
- due to the absence of professional journalistic standards and ethics, journalists are unable to press for more independence

2. Maintenance/expansion of the existing media space:

- the unstable political context of Georgia may give way to a stricter governmental control over the public life
- as almost all available broadcasting frequencies are licensed to pro-government TV channels (even though some of them simply do not exist), Tbilisi-based TV companies are unable to enlarge their broadcasting area
- media organisations have difficulty maintaining/developing their human resources and technical infrastructure because their priorities are dictated by the market

3. Alternative means of information distribution and public debate:

- consumer market for print media is very limited, due to low purchasing power of the consumers and lukewarm interest in newspapers and magazines
- as the number of Internet users remains rather low in the country, only part of the public has access to pluralistic public information space
- there are few opportunities to found new broadcasting companies due to the above-described problem of broadcasting frequencies

4. Independence of journalists

- As the legislative activity has been monopolised by a single political party, it is hard to adopt/revise laws that can protect interests of other social groups in the context of journalistic independence. These laws include:

- a) The Labour legislation
- b) The law on broadcasting frequency regulation
- c) The law to regulate relations between professional associations (of journalists in this case) and private businesses

- The Georgian judiciary is not independent enough to allow journalists and other stakeholders to file individual or collective lawsuits against media owners

- Because of low awareness of professional standards and ethics among the journalists, their motivation to demand greater independence remains rather weak

- Current journalistic associations are not consolidated enough (do not have any common interests beyond organisational problems) to develop a common strategy of relations with the government and media owners

- Cooperation is weak between social groups (the civil sector and political parties) in developing mechanisms of accountability of private and public media organisations to the public.

Despite the above-described restrictions on the available options, these options are quite feasible. It is simply necessary to take account of the restrictions and understand that it depends, more or less, on the stakeholders' efforts whether they can be removed.

Conclusion

It is necessary to take note of the following aspects. The current political context of Georgia hampers efforts to remove political and economic obstacles to the development of media pluralism. But thanks to the international pressure a small number of alternative means of information distribution and public debate does exist in Georgia. Under such circumstances, to ensure media pluralism, social groups and journalists should join forces to achieve real independence of journalists.

In order to facilitate efforts to ensure independence of journalists, public organisations, and the civil sector in general, must give priority to the following measures:

- It is necessary to win support of the partner countries that critically assess the level of freedom of speech and protection of human rights in Georgia in efforts to make the parliament take into consideration interests of social groups in its legislative activities

- Since the Georgian judiciary are not independent enough, journalists and other stakeholders must be given an opportunity to file individual or collective lawsuits against the government or media owners in the European Court of Human Rights.

- To achieve real independence of journalists, steps should be taken to increase awareness of journalists of their professional standards and ethics, to mobilise stakeholders and set up coalitions for cooperation with journalists' associations.

- To develop a common strategy together with the government and media owners, journalists should establish strong professional associations (or set up coalitions of existing associations).

- Cooperation must be increased between the civil sector and political parties in developing mechanisms of accountability of private and public media organisations to the public (create precedents of their demands being satisfied).