

# GEORGIAN MEDIA IN THE 90s:

## A STEP TO LIBERTY

**Giga Bokeria, Givi Targamadze, Levan Ramishvili**

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**Note:** My only contribution to this paper has involved modest formatting and uploading it to the Georgia Media Web Site. Questions involving copyright, or the content of this paper should be directed to the authors. Page references ("Contents") are to the original, hard copy, publication. -  
- Nicholas Johnson, March 12, 1998

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A review of the state of media in the Republic of Georgia faces certain difficulties, most notably because thorough and reliable information on the subject simply does not exist. Neither government nor private institutions possess complete data. It is thought that about 500 newspapers and 60 magazines are registered in Georgia. According to the law, the information media must undergo registration as limited liability companies. This process was carried out previously by the Ministry of Justice, but starting from spring 1995, registration has been a duty of local courts. The lack of centralized registration prevents the collection of precise figures.

Although there are several public opinion research centers in Tbilisi, studies of media influence on the formation of public opinion have not been done yet. Some newspapers along with state television periodically carry out rating polls, but in most cases the sampling is not representative and the questionnaires are not professionally composed, and so we cannot rely on them for our conclusions. Although for several reasons this report cannot be considered comprehensive, the available data provide an acceptable picture of the situation.

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## **ORIGINS AND THE PARTY PRESS SYSTEM**

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of perestroika reached Georgia relatively late and gained much less momentum compared to the countries of the European part of the USSR. In Georgia, perestroika did not embrace all media, and even those that were allowed to liberalize did not have complete freedom of speech.

Television was the medium least receptive to the policy of glasnost. Even in their weakened state, the Communist authorities did not relinquish their ideological control over it until the last moment (although a different opinion would sometimes surface at live broadcasts of political round-tables). Today we are witnessing a virtually unchanged picture — the major channels are still loyally carrying out orders from the ruling political group.

The late 1980s were characterized by a more pluralistic atmosphere in print media. The number of editions successfully completing the perestroika process included Tbilisi newspaper — an organ of the capital's Communist Party organization; the others were the Komsomol (Young Communist League) papers Akhlagzarda Comunisti and Molodezh Gruzii (respectively renamed Akhlagzarda Iverieli and Novaia Gazeta in 1990), the Georgian Writers Union organ, Literaturuli Sakartvelo, and the paper of cinematographers, Kartuli Pilmi, which acted like it was a National Democratic party organ.

Newspapers and other periodicals under the newly established opposition parties became the embryo of the free press, and were referred to as samizdat, after the underground media that appeared in the late 1960s. Eventually, however, as the genuinely free media emerged and developed, the perestroika-influenced Soviet press, as well as the dissident editions, suffered a drastic drop in their ability to mold public opinion. Of all the newspapers that were transformed under perestroika, only Literaturuli Sakartvelo still exists, though only with the help of state subsidies.

The end of 1987 should be considered the starting point in the development of party organs, when Moambe was first published, with an editorial board of well-known dissidents. Moambe cannot be considered a pioneer of Georgian self-publications, i.e. samizdat, but it was the first to be geared towards all of society, and not just a narrow circle of dissidents. With this approach, it achieved a great popular response.

Before 1990, the party publications were produced with typewriters and photocopiers. Correspondingly, circulation was small. The first paper that used offset printing was Tavisupleba (Liberty), owned by the National Independence Party (of Democrats). Its illegally-published 13,000-copy first edition in the spring of 1989 featured the innovations of a two-column layout and illustrations. It made a great impression not only on the public, but on the KGB, which expropriated the following issue right in the printing house.

The deaths of 20 protesters in Tbilisi at the hands of Soviet troops on April 9, 1989, produced great upheaval which gave a start to new publications and political organizations. The first climax of the flourishing party press came in 1990. It was a period of uncertainty, with communism crumbling, and the nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia about to take the reins of power.

The winter of 1991 saw a wave of repression fall on the party publications from President Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian administration. The repression, however, brought about a rise in support for the Popular Front's Sakartvelo (Georgia) — a parliamentary opposition newspaper — and its circulation climbed to 70,000.

The second climax of the party press came in January 1992 when Gamsakhurdia was overthrown, and Eduard Shevardnadze returned from Moscow to lead the country. He proclaimed the return of democratic principles and a multi-party system, which resulted in a correspondingly larger scope of political-party publications. Although the number of party-oriented publications grew, their share of the market lessened as the democratic process spurred the development of the independent press.

However, government control over the media of the radical opposition slackened only in 1994 when the suppression of the printed matter of Gamsakhurdia's adherents, the so-called Zviadists, stopped.

Today, the political organs are in an anemic state. The Georgian United Communist Party's *Comunisti* is published irregularly, with a limited amount of copies. The parliamentary majority *Mokalaketa Kavshiri* (Citizens' Union) publishes a weekly *Mokalake*, while its regional branch in Ozurgeti publishes the weekly *Ozurgeti*. *Aghordzineba* (The Revival), the party of the Chairman of the Ajarian Supreme Council (Ajaria is an autonomous region in southwest Georgia), publishes in Batumi a daily paper under the same name, and a weekly youth supplement, *The Revival of Youth*. Both publications are basically still being distributed in the organizations as obligatory subscriptions.

The political-party press certainly played a notable role in the development of democracy, but now their influence and circulation have sharply dropped. Out of 36 registered party

publications, only 10 still put out issues, with the Popular Front's Sakartvelo being the only one left from the old stock.

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## TODAY'S INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Newspapers. The founding in 1990 of 7 Dghe (7 Days) — the first non-party newspaper — was a watershed in Georgia's development of an independent media and the democratic process in general. Published under the aegis of the Journalists' Association, the newspaper is regarded as the forerunner of today's independent media.

Since May 1991, having gone through a reorganization and a split within the editorial body, the newspaper was published under the name of Droni (the Times). It gained popularity rather fast, since that period was characterized by the scarcity of unofficial papers. However, being an opposition forum rather than a neutral story-teller, it still did not represent free media in a full sense.

The winter of 1992 and the Christmas coup overthrowing Gamsakhurdia sparked a boom in independent media. 7 Dghe was revived, and Iveria-Express appeared in the fall. Rezonansi, a former bulletin of the National Concordance Association, was issued as an independent publication. Alia Sakartvelodan ([Jewish] Immigration [to Israel] from Georgia) appeared on the eve of 19931, while an additional split of 7 Dghe gave birth to Mimomkhilveli (the Observer).

The acute desire for information provided perfect conditions for these newspapers to thrive, and they gained the confidence of readers and kept increasing their circulation. In spite of the political turmoil, as well as the economic depression which brought about an overall drastic drop in circulation (average number of issues not exceeding 1,500 in 1993-95), many have been able to maintain the position they acquired in the recent past.

Beginning in the mid 1990s the number of new editions mushroomed. Many were stillborn, disappearing after the first issue, and others appeared irregularly, with intervals stretching to several months. Only a few proved capable of making the list of stable editions. Only 20% of registered newspapers are effectively being published and hardly half publish on schedule. There is a geographical concentration as well: 90% of the newspapers are from Tbilisi.

The circulation leader is Rezonansi (53,000 copies including supplements), while the rest of the pack average 15-20,000. The circulation tends to frequently fluctuate, and the papers usually do not publish their sales figures. The lack of precise data, as well as their unreliability still cannot prevent us from broadly forming a picture. The overview generally corresponds with surveys of newspaper readers. The following data of non-government newspapers gathered from printers and distributors is extremely relative and dates to June 1997.

Ø Rezonansi (Resonance) — 7,000 copies (daily) plus a supplement of 4,000 per week

Ø Alia — 15,000 copies (3 times a week)

Ø Kviris Palitra (The Weekly Palette) — 25,000 copies (once a week)

Ø Asaval-Dasavali (This and That ) — 25,000 copies (once a week)

Ø Dilis Gazeti (Morning Paper) — 4,000 copies (6 days a week)

Ø Akhali Taoba (New Generation) — 4,000 copies (5 days a week)

Ø 7 Dghe (7 Days) — 5,000 copies (3 days a week)

Ø Sakartvelo (Georgia) — 2,000 copies (5 days a week)

Ø Sarbieli (Arena) — 3,000 copies (3 days a week)

Ø Capital — 2,000 copies (3 days a week)

Ø Droni (the Times) — 2,000 copies (3 days a week)

It should be noted that during Communist rule the highest circulation was Comunisti newspaper, at 700,000 copies a day. Soplis Tskhovreba (Rural Life) followed with 240,000, then Tbilisi at 145,000, Zaria Vostoka (The Dawn of the Orient) at 140,000, the Armenian-language Sovetakan Vrastan (Soviet Georgia) at 33,000, and the Azerbaijani Sovetan Gurjistani (Soviet Georgia) at 35,000. The Lelo sports newspaper had a circulation of 120,000, while Akhlagzrda Comunisti (Young Communists), published 240,000 copies three days a week.

In 1981, 141 newspapers were published including 12 national, 7 regional, 9 town-level, 66 district and 47 village newspapers among them. The total amount of their circulation was 4.04 million copies.

There are now four independent daily newspapers: Rezonansi, Akhali Taoba, Dilis Gazeti, and Cavcasioni (Caucasus); and two official papers, Sakartvelos Respublica (Republic of Georgia) and Svobodnaya Gruziya (Free Georgia), although the last two have not been able to stick to their publishing schedule. According to our estimation, an average of 25-35,000 newspapers are sold every day in Georgia, with annual circulation at 500-600,000. Circulation tends to drop 30 to 40 percent in winter and summer.

The official newspapers Sakartvelos Respublica and Svobodnaia Gruziya are formally proclaimed as independent papers, but at the end of the year all editorial expenditures are reimbursed by the state. The Georgian Writers Union's Literaturuli Sakartvelo, is also supplied with subsidies. Sum total of state subsidies allotted to the press amounts to 900,000 GEL (\$700,000). The free media do not get material support from the state.

The government is unable to move away from subsidizing media because it is addicted to having its own personal press. The official organs dodge the elucidation of the news, turn aside from addressing problems and are instead busy with chronicling only government activities.

The information market has stabilized, being dominated by the non-governmental press which has proved capable of not only survival but of profitability, with Rezonansi, Alia, Akhali Taoba, Asaval-Dasavali and 7 Dghe at the top of the list. The existing underdevelopment of the advertising market results in a higher cost to the reader. The average price of a single issue varies from 30 to 50 tetri (\$0.24 to \$0.40), but in provinces where the purchasing ability of population is lower, prices are 10 to 15 tetri higher.

Outside of the capital, independent media have not done so well. They have faced pressure from local government, a lack of advertising, and an impoverished population. The few attempts to establish independent papers in several cities have ended in failure. A feeble local-government press attempts to fill the vacuum. Twelve regional administrations, along with 75 at the district level, publish newspapers, usually two to three four-page issues a month, with circulation of

about a thousand copies. During the Communist period, circulation of these papers averaged 15-18,000, with some at 20-30,000.

These municipal and regional papers mainly chronicle the local authorities' activities. They deal with the real life of a town or district only in the context of the accomplishments of the local administration. Any shred of objectivity is lost during election campaigns when they unwaveringly support the government-approved candidates.

Readers have not shown much interest in these kinds of organs. This means the papers are chronically in debt to their printers and are not published frequently. The main source of income is from obligatory subscription, where local authorities compel regional offices and organizations to buy the papers.

Magazines. The vacuum existing in the magazine market today can be illustrated by a comparison. In 1981, 80 magazines were published, with total circulation at 2.7 million. Average circulation was 20-30,000, with a few reaching 135-140,000. However, when looking at the Soviet-era statistics it must be kept in mind that the circulation was propped up by government funding and was not subject to market forces. The state fully financed the publishing industry and used it to carry out dissemination of propaganda. Some magazines managed to publish "subversive" material and subsequently became more popular, but this point is related to other issues and does not deal directly with publishing policy.

Today, with the old system having disintegrated and the principles of the market economics being put into play, few magazines, especially ones in color, are published in Georgia. The ones that do make it to the newsstands appear infrequently. This can be explained by a number of subjective and objective reasons, including a lack of funding and skilled personnel. Most magazines are either entertainment-oriented, or scientific and literary journals. Magazines covering current news do not exist. High-quality printing equipment is simply not found in the country. The most modern example of late was the Image, which was published in Greece and lasted only four issues. The Bulgarian-printed Panjara (Window) magazine must be considered the most stable among the color ones. Some of the old magazines appeared again in 1997, but most of them have low circulations and depend on subsidies.

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## **BROADCAST MEDIA**

Television. The first unsuccessful attempt at independent television came when a group of staff left the State Radio-TV Company in 1990 to start their own venture. After several months of pressure from the authorities, the private TV station Mermisi (Future) was closed. In addition, its equipment stored in the Ministry of Communications was destroyed in the 1991-92 civil war. However, the setback did not halt the movement towards independent TV broadcasting.

The next major event was the establishment of the (state-owned) Channel 2 in 1991. The predominantly young staff adopted a fast-paced, MTV-like style. The station was temporarily closed when some employees took part in the rallies against Gamsakhurdia. It started broadcasting again after Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in early 1992, but the new authorities soon curtailed its independence. The quality of the programming declined, and a number of creative teams left for other stations. The liberal image of Channel 2 news coverage is now gone, and it does not greatly differ from the propaganda-disseminating Channel 1.

Ibervisia, which joined the scene in 1992, also played an important but short-lived role in the development of independent television. Unlike the entertainment-focused Channel 2, Ibervisia focused more on the news, and tried to be like CNN rather than MTV. The way it presented the news visibly differed from the outdated image of state television, though the content was not safe from the influence of the political situation. Unofficially, Ibervisia was a joint venture of the former Komsomol leaders and the so-called Borotebi (Evils), a branch of the paramilitary Mkhedrioni organization. The controversial images of the partners paralyzed the work of the channel, which was finally closed after the weakening of the Mkhedrioni's political influence, and all attempts to revive it gave no results.

The economic problems of the country with the resulting lack of advertising put regional TV stations in difficult financial conditions. To secure their survival, the stations frequently seek a "protector" in the local administration, which is followed by the limitation of their independence. This can be said about many stations in Tbilisi, including Sakartvelos Khma (the Voice of Georgia), which openly supports Aslan Abashidze, the Chairman of the Ajarian Supreme Council, and Kakha Targamadze, the Minister of Internal Affairs.

The 1995 parliamentary elections boosted the development of a few provincial TV stations. Following the beginning of independent broadcasting, the local administration hurried to provide itself with personal TV stations. Provincial authorities often "commandeer" Channel 1, lacking their own broadcasting frequency. For instance, the Ajarian State TV Company almost completely changes the programming of Channel 1, leaving intact only the "Moambe" (the Storyteller) news show, and Latin American soap opera series.

The broadcasts of independent television generally follow the same standard, with production consisting mainly of irregularly supplied information and news, with the remaining time filled by movies and clips. Stations also lack money to buy licensed productions, and piracy is practiced equally at independent and state outlets.

Altogether 40 TV stations, including municipal channels, broadcast in Georgia today. The professional skill of their staff, together with the quality of programs, is low. Such types of stations were founded mostly by self-taught enthusiasts, who even constructed the transmission devices themselves. A primitive montage set made out of two VHS recorders is regarded as a great achievement, almost a luxury.

The Georgian television network (TNG) started its work in 1996, bringing together 15 TV stations not owned by the state that covered 15 cities and towns. 80% of the TNG members' broadcast time consists of licensed videoproductions. The purchase of these programs is the main goal of the network.

In May 1996, the independent TV stations started broadcasting a joint weekly program, exchanging material with the US Internews Network. The "Kvira" (Week) program still presents the sole attempt at reviewing the events of the whole country. State-run programs usually prepare reports concerning the work of the President, parliament and State Chancellery, while other independent broadcasters are reluctant "to step out" of their regions.

The majority of the TV stations in the provinces are very poor. Their average monthly profits are 300 to 400 GEL (\$230 to \$310). Profits in the capital are about double this amount. Provincial TV stations make most of their profit from paid obituaries announcing the funerals and burial time.

As we have already mentioned, the press circulation is low and distribution is concentrated in the capital. The supply of papers to the provinces is limited, and considering the low incomes, they are relatively expensive. This situation makes television the only genuine mass medium. According to a survey by the Caucasian Institute of Peace, Democracy and Development, and Open Media Research Institute (OMRI), 75% of the respondents in Tbilisi watched television at least three times a week, while only 15% read newspapers at least three times a week. Obviously, the difference will be even more marked outside the capital.

The dominance of broadcast media seems clear to those in power, as they are more active in attempting to monopolize television broadcasting. Taking into consideration that one-third of the Georgian population lives in Tbilisi, it becomes clear why the authorities there hinder the development of independent TV stations. The case of the closing of Rustavi-2 offers the best example of this behavior (see details below p. 21).

The Rustavi-2 news broadcasting service was guided by the principle that all news deserves broadcasting. Apart from the broadcasts of parliamentary sessions and the extended conferences of the government, this channel is the most active in live broadcasting and pays greater attention to controversial issues, which other channels shy away from for political reasons. The low ratings of the previously-mentioned Sakartvelos Khma results from its low quality and weak signals that reach only a small part of the population. This problem is solved by Kavkasia TV Company, which uses the Channel 2 frequency for broadcasting in the morning and later at night. Not long ago it filled its airtime mostly with low quality pirated programs, but now it has changed for the better and allots more time to news and pressing issues in politics.

Cable TV exists almost in all the regions and big cities, most prominently in Tbilisi, and has already accomplished definite achievements. The cable Channel VII which covers a substantial part of the city is one example. The main rival of the VII Channel is Ayety-TV, an American-Georgian venture which offers the for-fee encoded broadcasts to the population of Tbilisi and the outlying regions. Although they are planning original productions, these stations still are involved in pirated re-broadcasts.

The broadcasting market is still dominated by state television. Its structure, as well as the staff, is extremely bureaucratized with the number of its employees greatly exceeding the total of all other channels. The technical equipment is outdated, to the point that the broadcast signal does not reach all the regions of the country.

The two state channels broadcast a total of 12 hours of programming a day. On top of that, Channel 1 offers live feeds of parliamentary sessions. The channels were allotted 15 million GEL (\$11.6 million) by the state this year, and are also allowed to keep advertising money.

The state TV information service allots the smallest time to the news, because the media for the government is only a vehicle for getting its viewpoint out there, not for reporting actual events or analyzing them, or even for public relations rather than old-style propaganda. But propaganda is effective only when the authorities monopolize the sources of information. Although the government dominates the airwaves in Georgia, there are still alternative sources of information. The government's attempt to get its viewpoint out backfires, and the public distrusts the openly tendentious propaganda machine.

Radio. Ironically, Georgian radio owes its popularity to the energy crisis. The frequent power outages mean the TV screens fade and the battery-operated radios hum to life. Nowadays in Tbilisi the FM waves are used by one state-owned radio station and six private ones. Most stations play music and are paying less and less attention to the news. Some stations rebroadcast

news in Georgian from Voice of America and Radio Liberty. One of the stations, Audientsia, broadcasts in Russian. Private FM stations operate in Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Samtredia and Batumi (although the latter actually appears to be owned by the local ruling party). Most of the FM broadcasters provide only superficial news coverage, as they find other ways to compete for the attention of teenagers, the basic listeners of private radio stations.

The playing field is not level in this medium either, as the best location for broadcast transmitters is the state-owned TV tower on Mtatsminda mountain near Tbilisi, where the two transmitters of Audientsia and Evrika are located. The former belongs to a financial group "friendly" to the ministries of Security and Internal Affairs (Audientsia prepares propaganda about the Ministry for Channel 1). As for the second station, although it is more independent-like, its co-founder happens to be the deputy-chief of the tower. Other radio stations' requests to install their own transmitters on the tower are met with refusals on the grounds of the lack of space.

Speaking of state-owned radio, broadcasting on long, middle and ultrashort waves, the problem of freedom of speech is not as acute as with state television, but nevertheless, the impact of censorship is still felt.

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## **INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE MEDIA**

The dissemination of information is hampered by political and economic factors, and other obstacles as well. The collapse of the old distribution system hurts the printed media, while the lack of personal re-transmission and relay lines is a problem for the independent broadcasters. Although the subscription system does function, it plays only a small role, whether in case of mainstream or tabloid newspapers.

Distribution of periodicals is healthy only in the two biggest cities, Tbilisi and Kutaisi. The biggest heirs of the former Soyuzpechat, which held the monopoly on press distribution, are Matsne and Sakpresa, the former serving Tbilisi and the latter supplying the regions. Their service is so ineffective, however, that independent publications do not use either of them. Soyuzpechat was transformed into a joint stock company in 1993, but newspapers were discouraged from buying shares by the Ministry of Communication. This led Alia, Rezonansi, Akhali Taoba and 7 Dghe to found the Association of Free Press in 1995, which fostered professional solidarity and created a network of newsstands to bypass the distribution bottleneck. The new but already popular Dilis Gazeti (Morning Paper) established its own system of regional distribution using automobiles, which allows it to make speedy deliveries across the country. For instance, a car which heads for Batumi at 5 am reaches the destination by 1 pm. As a result, Dilis Gazeti is the only Tbilisi paper read in Batumi on the same day.

Press distributors must annually apply for licenses. After the expiration of the current license, the Tbilisi and Kutaisi authorities plan to take over distribution under the pretext of preserving the image of their cities.

According to the established practice, TV and radio stations use their own reporters to cover local stories, and news agencies cover stories affecting larger areas. Most newspapers and TV and radio stations do not have correspondents in other regions of the country, and consequently, there is little information appearing about the provinces. News agencies, both the state (Sakinformi, Moambe, Contacti, Ajaria) and the private (BS-Press, BGI, Prime News, Sarke, Kavkas Press, Iprinda, Iberia), rarely obtain information from the provinces.

Due to the lack of correspondents in other countries, the private agencies try to establish contacts with foreign counterparts to exchange information. Kavkas Press collaborates with ANS in Azerbaijan, Noyan Tapan in Armenia, and Nega in Russia. The Georgian media arrange subscription with local agencies. Many papers subscribe to several agencies, but the basic sources are Internet and foreign broadcasts.

The size of a newspaper's staff generally ranges from 25 to 35, including technical personnel. The professional level of journalists is not satisfactory, and the language and style of most publications is also at a low level. Low wages play a part in the lack of talent. With rare exceptions, a monthly salary does not exceed 100 GEL (\$77), which cannot be considered adequate under today's circumstances. The more well-off publications generally do not use their profits to increase the pay of their staff.

Another concern for the future is the fear that some newspapers will fall into the hands of political or business groups — an accusation already leveled against some. Usually, such incriminations are mere speculation, but as long as the economy is shaky, the danger remains that a company will trade favorable coverage for financial help.

Many papers have their own computers at their disposal, but usually they do not have enough, and the ones they have are not the most up-to-date models. Machines fit for computer graphics are in especially short supply. Furthermore, with an exception of those working for Rezonansi newspaper, journalists themselves do not have access to computers, and thus are not experienced in their use.

Rezonansi is rare in that it has its own printing facilities, but overall the quality of printing facilities is low, and does not meet the industry's requirements. Even quality black-and-white production is difficult. New printing technology is a must.

In the age of television, to say nothing of interactive multimedia, the problems at the printing house present a serious situation. Otherwise, newspapers and magazines will meet an early end, unable to compete with their visually attractive colleagues.

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## **THE MEDIA AND ADVERTISING**

Advertising cannot be considered a source of essential income for most newspapers, and there is a reliance on retail sales. The ratio of income from retail sales to advertising is generally 80 to 20. Almost all papers publish free classifieds as a way to attract readers — rather than trying to attract the advertisers with the access to wider audience. As in many other aspects, provincial newspapers do not have a healthy base in advertising. The relatively high cover price of the newspaper (compared to the low incomes of readers) causes a downward spiral in the circulation and thus the efficacy of advertising. In spite of this, neither advertisers nor the press have formulated policies to reverse the trend. The former do not know where to put their ads to get the most effective results, while the newspaper bosses do not know how to attract advertisers.

Although not comprehensive, our study showed that high growth in advertising was taking place recently. Comparing the space allotted for advertisements by the most widely-read papers in April 1996 and 1997 respectively, Akhali Taoba grew by 15%, Alia by 300%, and Rezonansi by 600%.

Potential advertisers can be divided into two major categories:

First — branches of large foreign companies, such as Philip Morris. The budget of these companies envisages expenditures on advertising, but with zero competition, they can pay less attention to the efficiency of the campaign. For example, the official dealer of Samsung Electronics publishes its ads in Sakartvelos Respublika, despite its low readership.

Second — joint ventures and Georgian companies oriented toward narrow segments of the market; such companies usually start campaigns only if a serious competitor arrives on the scene.

The cost of advertising at private regional TV stations differs sharply from those in the capital. In provincial towns, the costs range from 9.9 to 12.6 GEL per minute (\$7.70 — \$9.80), and 14.8 to 19.9 GEL (\$11.50 — \$15.40) in larger cities. More specifically, the cost of advertising on a news program on the Rustavi-2 channel costs from 51.6 to 219.3 GEL (\$40-\$170), while the state television charges 258 to 774 GEL (\$200-\$600).

Here are prices of advertising in leading Georgian newspapers:

Cost of one square centimeter of advertising, in GEL and dollars:

front page inside pages last page

Rezonansi 1.60 (\$1.24) 0.52 (\$0.41) 0.7 (\$0.54)

Alia 1.50 (\$1.16) 0.30 (\$0.23) 0.50 (\$0.38)

7 Dghe 0.70 (\$0.54) 0.20 (\$0.15) 0.30 (\$0.23)

Asaval-Dasavali 0.30 (\$0.23) 0.30 (\$0.23) 0.30 (\$0.23)

Sarbieli 0.5 (\$0.38) 0.2 (\$0.15) 0.2 (\$0.15)

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## MEDIA AND THE LAW

The Georgian law on mass media has been in force since 1991. Along with separate libel regulations, this law contains a number of restrictive provisions. It contains a juridical curiosity called the responsibility for illegal (sic) creation and dissemination of information (Article 27).

Information services are required to register and obtain a license (Article 7). If the registration body considers the goals of the applicant to be in contradiction with the law (Article 10), it is entitled to reject the request for registration; for the same reason, it can suspend the activity of previously-registered media for one year without prior legal proceedings. The law also has provisions for shutting down a media outlet if it advocates the overthrow of or the change of the existing state system, or if state secrets are published, or if pornography or immorality are propagated.

According to the law, only Georgian citizens have the right to establish media outlets (Article 6). Non-citizens can establish outlets, and disseminate information only after they are given permission by the president or authorities of the state, provided it does not contradict the interests of the state (sic) (Article 3). A journalist is obliged to respect the state and the president (Article 24). With regards to the state print media, the government stipulates the number of

copies printed, although the president and parliament have a say as well. State media are obliged to publish official reports.

In 1996 the Georgian parliament was planning to pass a new law on mass media, but the submission of different versions for discussion was canceled for the autumn session. Now, several bills exist, drawn-up both by the power bodies and by the journalists. Two bills, one written by the Association of Free Press and another by the Parliamentary Media Subcommittee, are of special interest.

The bill worked out by the Media Subcommittee covers all branches of the media. The bill proposes a National Council of Information, which, by the assessment of the journalism community, will effectively be in charge of censoring and controlling the functions of all types of media. Understandably, this bill met a lot of opposition from journalists, who said it provided for new levers of state control over media.

The Association of Free Press presented a bill on Freedom of Information which was prompted both by the parliamentary draft, and by the February 1, 1997, law "On State Secrets" coming into force. The latter, according to journalists, infringes upon the freedom of speech, as it bans the dissemination of any information that has been put on a list signed by the president. The list, based on Soviet regulations, makes secret a wealth of information from the routes of bird migration to topographical maps.

The bill on Freedom of Information mostly deals with general civil rights, and according to the authors, it will establish a foundation for the adoption of further laws regulating media activity, licensing television broadcasts, and so forth. The Association of Free Press is planning to lobby for its bill, and it was to be placed under discussion in the 1997 autumn session. Leading non-governmental media have been taking an active part in the lawmaking process, in an attempt to forestall a draconian press law.

There is a wide difference between the point of view of most journalists and of the parliament. The journalists say the right to free speech is inherent, and thus exists in its own right, and not because of the law. The purpose of legislation is to protect free speech, to the point where it may come into conflict with other natural rights. According to the stance taken by the independent press, the law must clearly define the issues regarding the possession and dissemination of information, and balance the right of society to know, with such things as an individual's right to privacy. The journalists also believe constitutional protection is needed for information that is considered insulting, shocking and provocative (except in rare cases).

Another concern is that court cases regarding defamation may be turned into another instrument of state control over the press. The behavior of Georgian courts (especially lower ones) leaves no ground to regard them as allies of the free press. Both journalists and the public express their hope that when Georgia joins the Council of Europe, certain conventions and European Court decisions on human rights will acquire the force of law.

Regulation of the electronic media is especially inadequate. The existence of independent television certainly does not mean independence and freedom for Georgian broadcasting. The licensing process for television and radio is extremely complicated, and is an important lever for government pressure. The licenses are issued by the Ministry of Communication, which is under the president. The chance of starting an independent TV or radio station is small, and the closer the planned station is to the capital, the smaller the chance becomes. Broadcasters also cannot be sure of their ability to continue their work following the airing of a critical piece of information.

The media, together with the civil rights organizations, the public, and significantly, Georgian and especially foreign businesses, insist on the slackening of controls and the deregulation of the communications system.

The existing practice of the licensing of frequencies provides one side with an advantage, and leaves the other no chance to spread information. Licensees are unfairly protected from active competition, and they rarely introduce innovations. This type of stodgy media, supported by the authorities, only leads to a society clinging to outdated views.

Previously, it was thought that government regulation of broadcasting was necessary in order to properly allocate scarce resources, and to look after the public good. However, new technology, led by cable TV, the Internet, and satellites, have destroyed the underpinning of this way of thinking. Georgia cannot enter the modern information age without attracting financial resources, whether local or foreign. These resources, in turn, will not come unless the government regulations are relaxed.

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## **RESTRICTIONS OF MEDIA FREEDOM**

According to evaluations by the US State Department and certain international organizations, Georgia has the status of a "partially free" country, and belongs to the group of 58 states that lack legislative guarantees of freedom of speech.

In the annual record of Freedom House — "Press Freedom in the World 1996" — Georgia had 68 penalty points. In the spheres of violation of freedom of speech, political pressure and the legislative limitation of economic independence, Georgia appeared in the category of "unfree to partially-free." Improvements in the state of freedom of speech were noted in the report, but it was not enough warrant an upgrade to a "partially-free" country. (The latter category, according to the Freedom House system, are the countries that score between 31 to 61 points, while "free" countries score less than 30 points.)

A 1996 report by the organization Journalists Sans Frontieres put Georgia among the countries where the legislative conditions affecting journalists vastly improved. Although 1992 to 1994 was substantially better than the Gamsakhurdia period, the reality of the officially-declared principle of freedom of speech was still in doubt. Political and paramilitary groups were active in settling accounts with the members of the press who made critical statements.

Although the state monopoly on printing and distribution, which presented a powerful mechanism for control of the press, is gone, there are other significant levers in the hands of the authorities. For instance, the tax police have extraordinary power, and can paralyze the activities of the subject under inspection. Even if no violations are revealed, losses due to stoppage of work are not reimbursed. (Non-media businesses have also suffered from this practice.) During the 1995 election campaign, tax inspectors carried out a two-month audit of Rezonansi. No wrongdoing was uncovered, but the activities of the paper were seriously hindered during the audit.

Although Article 24 of the Constitution clearly prohibits prior restraint, arbitrary actions of the governing bodies are a routine affair. As soon as journalists trespass certain limits, they find themselves under some kind of pressure. Outside the capital, the situation is even worse.

Since the courts are not independent of political influence, they are not a guardian of the free press as in some other countries. Even if the legislative state of affairs is taken care of, problems

will still exist if the fundamental principle of division of powers as outlined in the Constitution is not put into practice.

On the positive side, it should be added that if the courts of the first instance neglect the principle of freedom of speech, the Supreme Court, as a rule, sides with the media. The Supreme Court is comparatively free from political pressure, and any influence from the government is in some way balanced by the media and Georgian and foreign public opinion.

Diversity of opinion also exists in Georgia, in that the press of the communists or the so-called Zviadists is not singled out for restrictions. Tolerant attitude of the state is consistent but not indifferent, as the powers that be follow everything that is said, sometimes literally.

In June 1997, the Parliamentary Investigation Commission presented evidence that the Security Ministry illegally eavesdropped on the telephone conversations of Sakartvelo editor Nodar Grigalashvili and the editors of other newspapers. Following the scandal security chief Shota Kviraia resigned. It is widely believed that the main cause of his departure was due to other political considerations, but the fact itself that the chief of this agency became a victim of a scandal over eavesdropping still should be considered a positive step in the creation of a democratic state.

Below we will present some particular cases of infringements by the state upon the freedom of the media. We shall also deal with the issues of the public pressure and self-censorship – or those socio-cultural and psychological factors, which in fact, cause similar limitations.

### **Government pressure on the media**

#### Closing of media outlets

The story of Rustavi-2 is an example of how the government may shut a media outlet without legal grounds. In July 1995 and July 1996, the Ministry of Communication twice closed this fledgling TV station. In the second case, this happened after then Security Minister Shota Kviraia publicly appealed to Minister of Communication Pridon Injia to show greater prudence in issuing licenses and to learn more about the backers behind Rustavi-2.

Rustavi-2 TV channel began broadcasting in June 1994 in the city of Rustavi, near Tbilisi. It quickly became popular, and for two years, its news program, "The Courier," was included in the top two programs at the Mana National TV Festival. In 1996 it was licensed to broadcast in Tbilisi. Within a month, Rustavi-2 was winning both audience and advertising from the state TV. After an eight-month battle, the Supreme Court overturned the lower courts and declared the decision of the Ministry of Communication to be illegal.

#### Repercussions for unfavorable coverage

On June 18, 1996, at a press conference in State Minister Niko Lekishvili's office, a BGI press agency reporter brought up a comment by Michel Ribeaux, the World Bank representative, that hinted at the incompetence of Minister of Agriculture Bakur Gulua. In return, Gulua announced at another press-conference that the "mass media acts against state interests." He said the material published about him, and generally about the Ministry of Agriculture, was an intentional malice. "I raised this subject and the publications have received a corresponding reprimand. I will not allow any arbitrariness, as long as I hold this post," Gulua said. On June 19, he turned out the BGI reporter from his press conference, and later all representatives of that agency were banned from Ministry of Agriculture proceedings. (BGI 27.06.96) In another speech, Gulua

interrupted his talk about agriculture and the liberalization of bread prices to announce with emotion: "Sometimes reporters ask questions that are naive or provocative. They publish in papers things which do not correspond to reality."

In support, President Shevardnadze said "Whatever is going on exceeds any limits. The law enforcement bodies are obliged to defend the government from such cases. If they are not able to protect the government, they cannot be capable of defending the people as well." Shevardnadze ordered law enforcement authorities to present a report within a week concerning the progress in the struggle against the slanderers. (Kavkas Press 20.06.96). Government representatives make this kind of statement quite frequently, although it is fair to note that they have not transformed their wishes into concrete measures. The press centers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor's Office informed Kavkas Press that they had not received any written instructions after President Shevardnadze's statement (following the incident with Mr. Gulua) and so no action would be taken against the press.

In January 1997, Rezonansi published an interview with a businessman, sporting a quotation in the title: "Our ministers are idiots." The same issue contained a picture of Nanuli Shevardnadze looking at her husband with admiration, with the caption saying "Oh, what a boy!" The supreme authorities were not pleased. Finding themselves under political pressure, the publishers of Rezonansi chose to fire Giorgi Gakhelidze, the journalist responsible for the issue.

At a press conference, held in the House of Journalists (a kind of journalists' club), the chairman of the Abkhazian government-in-exile's cabinet, Zurab Erkvania, said that all materials about Abkhazia must undergo a censorship check. (Abkhazia is a region of Georgia that was taken over by separatist rebels in 1993.) This innovation was to be introduced in the interest of state defense, he said. (BGI 30.09.96)

During a January 1996 interview, the Tbilisi Vice-Mayor Zaza Shengelia decided he didn't like the reporter's questions, and demanded the videotape from the "Chor-News" (a tabloid show of Channel 1) director. After he was rebuffed, the vice-mayor proceeded to physically assault the director.

In 1997, Rustavi-2 reporter Nino Khoshtaria took an ironic tone when covering the official reception at the State Office dedicated to the May 26 independence day. A week later, State Office press-secretary Soso Tkebuchava threatened Khoshtaria, saying he was going to have her fired.

On September 23, 1993, BGI published an article by Inga Dadiani revealing a State Chancellery Supply Service plan to purchase 100 Volvo cars for government representatives, at a cost to taxpayers of \$4 million. Following publication, reporters were refused admittance to a government session that is usually open to the press. Authorities said Dadiani's reporting was the reason for the ban. Representatives of the State Chancellery press-center did not try to deny the facts of the story, but insisted it was the reporter's obligation to disclose the source of the information. Furthermore, the deputy-director of the Chancellery Supply Service said Dadiani was "antipatriotic, and equated the story with taking the "Georgian peasantry at gunpoint and shooting at them," since some of the cars were to be sold and the profits invested in agriculture. This line of thinking was continued in unofficial talks, when a State Security representative told the BGI directorate that the source of the story was not a patriot and his/her name should be revealed.

Impeding the collection and distribution of information

All official documents are of a public nature and should be open, except those containing state, commercial, or personal secrets. But in Georgia the public does not have access to some materials, in defiance of both the law and common sense. Limiting access to information has become a wide spread trick for punishing certain journalists. The sanctions include denials of requests for credentials, eviction from press-conferences, and refusals for interviews.

Government guards prohibit picture-taking in and around a number of official buildings, and exposed film is usually confiscated.

On May 26, 1997, the police forced reporters to disperse along with opposition demonstrators at a celebration of Georgia's independence from the USSR. The following day, Tbilisi's chief of police, first name Alavidze, demanded that in the future reporters be accredited before they cover such events.

Likewise on February 20, 1997, police from Tbilisi's Didube district prohibited Kavkasia TV company from shooting film of the dispersal of street traders. But when the reporters went on shooting, the policemen battered them and destroyed their videocamera.

Frequently reporters face harassment when covering events from outside the Supreme Court, such as representatives from Dilis Gazeti in March, Rustavi-2 TV in May, and Rezonansi at the beginning of June 1997. The newspaper reporters were merely prohibited from gathering information, while the Rustavi-2 reporters were assaulted, their IDs confiscated and their videocamera broken.

The police's intense dislike of the visual arts was in evidence again on July 30, 1997, in the center of Tbilisi when another Kavkasia TV camera was broken in the middle of filming a street a few minutes before the presidential motorcade was due to pass. Security regulations prohibit the shooting of such events without prior consent.

#### Pressure on provincial media

The closing of Rustavi-2 made the situation with the regional press more complicated. When the popular TV channel, protected by the free media, general public and Western embassies was closed, this encouraged local authorities to act with impunity. During the 10 month period of the case of Rustavi-2, the incidence of violation of journalists' rights increased almost two-fold.

In August 1996, Edisher Mushkudiani, a reporter of the independent TV station Rioni in Kutaisi, faced the wrath of the city mayor and regional governor Temur Shashiashvili because of a story for the program "Kvira" (Week). The story was about the condition of pensioners, who had not received their allotments for the past two months. Shashiashvili's press-secretary summoned the reporter and induced him to write an explanatory note. In order to avoid further complications, the Rioni director fired Mushkudiani.

The independent TV station Kolkheti was founded in the Samegrelo region in 1992. The governor of that region decided to establish his own private station in 1996 under the same name and demanded the existing station change its identification. The owners refused, and a week later the Ministry of Communication notified them that their license was suspended until they changed the name.

The situation in the Ajarian Autonomous Republic in southwest Georgia deserves special mention. Here, privately-owned media barely exists, except for the routine Saojakho Gazeti (Family Gazette) and Channel 25 TV. Among Ajarian periodicals, the Young Lawyer, published

by the Young Lawyers' Association, is significant because it succeeds in presenting a few independent opinions, but only because it does not deal with politics. In contrast, the state and party (only a single party is allowed to have its own publications in Ajaria) media is widely represented. The Supreme Council (which is in charge of the region's government) owns the Ajaria and Russian-language Ajara newspapers, and the Ajaria TV channel is owned by the state.

The views of Ajarian media outlets are identical. Even a hint of diverse opinion is inconceivable, as well as any variance in portraying the monolithic power structure. The semi-official media praise the personal qualities of local leader Aslan Abashidze, while at the same time demonizing the opposition.

The national press is not limited in its access to Ajaria, but the publications containing unfavorable material are confiscated by police at the distribution center. Channel 1 covers Ajaria but the local channel replaces offensive material before the signal is broadcast.

Rustavi-2 reporters on a mission to cover the Ajarian Supreme Council elections were deprived of the camera they used to film violations of the law by security officials at a polling place, and part of the material was erased (BGI 09.10.96).

Issue #30 of 7 Dghe in 1996 was confiscated at the distributors. The article "Memed Abashidze — to a ship and to a man," telling about a shipwreck, offended the government.

In May and June 1997, Giorgi Sanaia published a series of articles in Rezonansi, about ecological problems in Ajaria. The mayor of Batumi, the largest city in the region, promised "to hang Sanaia on the pier." Then a suit was brought in Batumi court against the reporter for slander. The articles were held responsible for affecting the summer's tourism on the region's Black Sea beaches. Since Sanaia was beyond the reach of the local court, Rezonansi's Batumi bureau chief was held responsible.

#### State policy towards its own media

The previous Parliament adopted a resolution dictating the order of stories on the "Matsne" news program on the state-run Channel 1 network. According to that order, the president's activities were to be covered in the first place, followed by Parliament, the work of ministries and other offices, and finally, current events in the country and the world. The official chronicle was to be covered according to materials provided by the press-centers of the corresponding departments.

It can be said that pluralism does not exist on state television, and its authorities stop any deviation from official policy, even firing journalists and shutting down broadcasts.

In a September 1996 interview with one of the authors of this paper, the state's Channel 2 director Zaza Daraseli discussed his conception of how journalists are supposed to work: "The reporter is forbidden to express his/her ideas, or stance, or judgment, comments, and so forth. It is forbidden to disapprove of the role of the government, and strongly forbidden to criticize the president and his family members."

Here are some cases of ideological control:

In September 1995, the program "TV-Inform" broadcasting on the Channel 1 (of state television) was closed. During the first part of its existence the program was subjected to strict control by the channel's authorities.

In January 1995 TV-Inform broadcast a program about the imprisonment of former Defense

Minister Tengiz Kitovani. In his traditional radio speech, Shevardnadze reprimanded the show for saying: "Kitovani must get what he deserves, but he must not be turned into a scapegoat when bigger culprits are amongst the authorities." and asked: "Whom does it [TV-Inform] serve?" (Later this comment of journalists was proven true by series of arrests amongst high officials.)

The TV-Inform coverage dedicated to the attempted assassination of Shevardnadze (in August 1995) was not allowed to be aired until "the situation was cleared to the end." After the matter was cleared up, Channel 1 authorities announced to the journalists new political restrictions. Since the journalists did not yield to them, TV-Inform was closed.

TBC TV Studio made a program about September 1996 local elections in Ajaria for its traditional program, revealing a large number of violations of campaign legislation (TBC TV Studio is an independent company, but its news programs are regularly broadcasted on Channel 1). The material underwent the censorship of the Channel 1 authorities and Archil Gogelia, president of the TV and Radio Corporation, did not allow the broadcast of the material.

#### Public pressure on the media

The government is unfortunately not the only party interested in restrictions. The public and church are quick to condemn material that they find in violation of their beliefs in Christianity and patriotism.

The Georgian Orthodox Church is especially aggressive in hindering the spread of information regarding religious problems, corruption in its staff, or violations of the constitutional principle of separation of the church from the school system. The church also does not want other sects or religions to receive any type of publicity. The media acquiesces in this matter, and coverage of other churches is nonexistent or superficial.

In May 1993, Mimomkhilveli published Givi Targamadze's and Levan Tarkhnishvili's article entitled "Forward — to fundamentalism." It was about a youth center founded by youth organizations under the protection of Patriarch Ilia II. The authors were concerned about the aggressive fundamentalism that seemed to be growing in force. The reaction was immediate — the secretary of the Patriarch threatened the authors and editorial board of the paper with excommunication, along with a pair of TV announcers who had mentioned the article in their newscast.

In March 1997, representatives of the Orthodox Church started an aggressive campaign against a history of religion textbook authored by Nugzar Papuashvili, because the book gave equal coverage to all basic religious movements. Orthodox fundamentalists staged a public burning of that and other books they considered offensive. The bonfire was carried out in the presence of the police, and the action found a sympathizer in Demur Mikadze, then chief of Tbilisi police. Yielding to the pressure of the church, the Ministry of Education removed the book from the school curriculum. Representatives of the church said the reporting on the book burning fanned anticlerical hysteria.

In September 1996, first in Mtatsminda and later in the semi-official paper Sakartvelos Respublika, Temur Mirianashvili's article "7 days in darkness" was published, accusing the editorial board of 7 Dghe of advocating immorality. The article ended with an appeal for the authorities to "put an end to the problem of the press once and forever". Since the author was the president's advisor, the free press considered the piece to be the official opinion of the government. In response, independent media banded together and issued a statement that said:

"This publication does not fundamentally differ from the notorious denunciations of the '30s [by Stalinist authorities], which were aimed at persecution, but not at the classification of reality." The article appeared right before the consideration of the Law on the Free Press and was an attempt to stir up hysteria against the media. (BGI, 26.09.95)

BGI published an interview with Alexander Chachia, director of the presidential campaign of Jumber Patiashvili, former first secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee, in July 1996. The material was reprinted in the Russian-language Yujnaia Ossetia (South Ossetia), and resulted in the president's press-secretary accusing BGI of having an antipatriotic attitude.

On June 24, 1996, members of the "Imedi" (Hope) parliamentary faction had a meeting with media representatives. Along with a number of reproaches addressed to the Georgian press, deputy Avtandil Sakvarelidze said negative information about the country should not reach the foreign media, because it would scare off investors. (Kavkas Press 25.06.96)

### Self-censorship

Representatives of the older generation continue their duties in state publications which earlier this decade changed only their names and not their form or style of work. They constitute the top and medium levels of the official media.

Unlike "the old folks," the journalists of the '90s do not even know — let alone follow — the authoritarian ethos. Critical thinking and a drive for perfection are clearly more developed among them. But forbidden themes still exist for young journalists, and sometimes the coverage from the old guard and the newcomers are not distinguishable. This is most evident when the issues concern ethnic conflicts, religion, cultural heredity and history. In such cases the media confines itself to the deeply rooted views and presents the situation with extreme partiality.

Clearly there has been a breakdown in the system that cultivated monolithic attitudes. However, the system retains significant inertia — there is only a brief history of an independent press, and concrete government measures like licensing and tax inspections serve to compound the problem.

The attitude of the Georgian press in general towards coverage of the president's work is rather reserved. Although criticism — especially of foreign policy — is not rare, it usually stays within strictly established limits. If it goes beyond the limits, consequences follow. Therefore, criticism most often is superficial.

The code of silence was most evident regarding coverage of the commercial activities of the Shevardnadze family. On a positive note, in the spring of 1997, sharply-critical articles began appearing about the subject, and it seems the taboo has been removed from this particular issue.

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## PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

The history of the Georgian press goes back to 1819, when the first Georgian newspaper, Sakartvelos Gazeti, was published. In 1897 the average circulation of Georgian periodicals reached 3,000 (daily). At this time, the population equaled 1,92 million people, and illiteracy was widespread.

In comparison, the population has now increased almost threefold, and illiteracy has been wiped out, but the average daily circulation is again about 3,000.

The dawn of the 21st century is witnessing the emergence of "micro-media" like the Internet alongside traditional mass media. But if this development is marked by excessive amounts of information in the West, in Georgia it is rooted in an acute lack of information.

The abolition of most elements of state control caused a noticeable growth in the availability of information. Georgia made an important step forward in freedom of speech, but the creation of a forum of unbiased information still has not occurred. The present stage of the development of Georgian media may be characterized as a dynamic transformation. Leaders in the newspaper market have emerged, but they are still undergoing deep inner changes.

The availability of information is not evenly spread around the country. The media of Tbilisi, as a rule, cover events related to the central power and rarely venture outside the capital. None of the market leaders have a wide-reaching network of correspondents. Press agencies, in spite of their large numbers, are still far from covering the whole country. For the future, the Internet provides one possible way of overcoming this deficit. Although access is rather expensive, many papers can afford it.

Before the Internet is effectively harnessed, though, journalists must be trained in how to send and search out information via the computer network. This lack of training becomes especially problematic in cases when the only source of foreign news available to a Georgian reporter is through the Internet — thus the creation of an international network of correspondents is out of the question.

The fundamental issues of public life in Georgia — the free market, civil society and the development of legislation — are not covered in-depth, which makes it possible for the government to carry out its activities without restraint. The media is incapable of presenting the true picture of the life of the country, and coverage is fragmented and superficial. Modern society requires a new mentality and new approaches when covering the news.

The establishment of independent and well-informed public opinion — one of the underpinnings of democracy — would bring additional impetus to the process of change. The views of political scientists, sociologists, economists and lawyers would raise the quality of debate, but in many cases the media has no means of paying them honoraria. This is the reason why expert opinions of current events rarely reach a wide audience.

Lacking the right habits and abilities, the media is not able to ensure the genuine implementation of an open government. Only a well-informed society is capable of monitoring the government's activities, making the organs of power accountable not only during elections, but on an everyday level.

In spite of all the problems, it must be said that in the last few years, particularly starting in the spring of 1997, certain changes have taken place that show the process of democratic development is entering a new phase. The development of civil society requires more publicity in public life. The media is doing its part to end the problem of an under-informed society by presenting diverse viewpoints and forming an open system of disseminating information.

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