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GEORGIAN MEDIA: NEW CHALLENGES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Eduard Shevardnadze once said that freedom of the press was the main achievement of democracy in Georgia. That was, by and large, true: media freedom during his presidency was not restricted. The media, especially TV channels, exerted huge influence on public opinion; therefore high-ranking officials had profound respect for journalists and even stood in awe of them.

Asked, immediately after the revolution, where he had gone very wrong while in office, Shevardnadze replied without hesitation: I allowed too much democracy in the country. The ex-President meant too much media freedom, above all. Unlike other former Soviet republics' leaders with the same background, Shevardnadze did not (or could not) impose restrictions on the free press. Towards the end of his rule he decided to "rectify the situation" but his attempt to shut down the most popular and influential TV channel Rustavi 2 under the pretext of tax evasion failed. People, already very unhappy with Shevardnadze's rule, took to the streets to salvage that TV channel as the most reliable source of information. The government, caught unawares by the riotous protests, backed down. Shevardnadze had to sack the most unpopular ministers, and Rustavi 2 survived.

Two years later, Rustavi 2 was a key player in the Rose Revolution. It is believed to have played the decisive role in toppling the corrupt Shevardnadze regime and helping the new leadership come to power. However, after the revolution, it turned out to be very hard for Rustavi 2, and most other media outlets for that matter, to reassert themselves as independent and influential organizations.

It is a strong conviction in Georgia that the level of media freedom has dropped after the revolution. Criticism is coming mostly from NGOs while most active journalists, especially those connected with television, carefully avoid discussions on the subject. On the other hand, accusations of media freedom restriction and censorship are vigorously rejected by the government. Its spokesmen argue that liberal media legislation has been adopted by the new parliament and, on their part, accuse journalists of incompetence, low ethical standards, and irresponsibility. It is remarkable that such accusations come from once celebrated NGO activists, former campaigners for media freedom who have now defected to the government.

It would be unfair, however, to lay the blame for the major problems the Georgian media are now faced with on journalists, media owners or the government alone. Both sides are right but only partly so. At this conference we must put the situation in the right perspective and view it in all its aspects.

Let me start with the issue of government pressure and censorship.

Shortly after the revolution, two talk shows were shut down on two major channels – allegedly on the channel owners' own initiative – as "low-rating." The closure of two

political talk shows at one time was hardly a mere coincidence. Later on, another popular talk show disappeared from the air. Although the government representatives argued it was the TV channel's internal affair, journalists and NGO representatives are sure the management's decision was enforced by those in high places or at least came as welcome news to them.

Why are private TV channel owners so obedient and doing what the government wants them to do?

The root of the matter is that the media business is not profitable or even self-supportive. So, when somebody wants to establish, let's say, a TV channel, it is taken for granted that he or she wants to achieve political or personal ends. After the revolution, when a lot of people were detained, private channel owners of dubious backgrounds sought to save or expand their businesses. That means being on the government's side or sometimes manoeuvring your way into its good books. Therefore, journalists hired by these owners have to act on their bosses' instructions. How can one talk about unbiased reporting when journalists are forced by media owners either to please or manipulate the government?

Every government in every country is tempted to bend the media to its will, and the Georgian government is no exception. In a situation where media owners themselves offer their services, the government is only too willing to accept them knowing the power that the media wield.

Those in high places have established close relationships with journalists and can always "suggest" to them the angle from which to report this or that event (if, in their opinion, it is worth reporting at all). I call it friendly pressure which is common practice and which works without fail. Pressure like this is beyond documentary proof, and, consequently, it cannot be used as condemning evidence against the government. Incidentally, pressure coming from the high and mightiest is not always friendly, especially in the regions. A report published by the Ombudsmen's office some time ago revealed instances of the local authorities bringing pressure to bear on regional journalists.

The central government admits that the media have problems in the regions and promises to solve them but hasn't kept the promise so far.

Heated debates on media freedom restrictions have produced new talk shows on the channels where they were not allowed before, and anti-government reports are aired frequently; yet, such reports do not contain constructive criticism, their coverage of events is far from objective and obviously mirrors media owners' attitudes.

Self-censorship and lack of constructive criticism – these are some of the comments found in a report made by international organizations focusing on media problems in Georgia.

Self-censorship – what does this notion stand for as applied to Georgian reality?

Once a Russian journalist working for the NTV channel pointed out that her colleagues did not even try to investigate problems in depth knowing beforehand that a truly investigative report would not be aired anyway. I am not sure that this is always the case as far as self-censorship in the Georgian media is concerned. As I already said, our journalists are on friendly terms with high ranking officials and have actually made a practice of taking instructions from them on how to cover various events.

Incompetence, unscrupulousness, low ethical standards and, sometimes, poor educational background make Georgian journalists a target of well-deserved criticism.

A few days ago, a very famous and popular program aired a report on French riots. The reporter was sadly unequal to the job: he didn't even know the name of the French Prime-Minister and had no idea of what was going on although he had spent a couple of days in France familiarizing himself with the situation. Examples like that abound. They go to show that what we have here is not really a matter of censorship or restrictions. The whole trouble lies in a professional crisis our media are now in the throes of.

Those set on fanning up anti-Western sentiments have made cat's paws of our poorly educated journalists. Most Georgian newspapers carry headlines insulting to religious and ethnic minorities. Articles are full of misinformation based on popular myths about evil Westerners who are coming to Georgia in order to destroy our unique culture, etc.

As for professional ethics, they are widely ignored. Some of the journalists and media owners, emphasizing media freedom, do not care for professional standards and ethics at all. They dismiss these values as outdated. But a lot of people in Georgia think that freedom is closely intertwined with responsibility. They want Georgia's media to be more responsible, more accurate and more objective if they are to gain support from the public and respect from the government.

The Media Council, a self-regulating public body, was established three months ago to look into the problem of professional ethics. It consists of 10 national, 11 regional media (both TV channels and newspapers), including all major national TV networks, and 7 nongovernmental organizations. The Council was established against the will of certain newspapers that refused to join it and launched an anti-Media Council campaign. The campaigners alleged, first, that the Council would be used by the government as a vehicle for imposing censorship on the free media (though the mechanism of censorship was not disclosed) and, second, that the Council was part of a conspiracy hatched by George Soros. Behind these allegations lurks fear of new rules of the game. Unethical journalism has long been a lucrative business for many media owners and now they shudder at the thought of that feeding-trough being taken away from them.

The Council Board is composed of 11 elected members. It is remarkable that most of them are highly respected and famous members of society, whose opinions carry great weight with the public.

To sum up, we are now tackling two media problems: pressure from the government and professional crisis within the media. These problems are interdependent because the media need media freedom for their professional advancement – and that’s exactly what the Georgian government is in no position to give them now, most people believe.

This is not a problem that can be solved overnight. New independent players with purely business interests in mind will hardly emerge on the media market in the foreseeable future to impose new and more exacting requirements on journalists.

Unless there is demand for the more professional media, journalists will have no motivation for professional advancement. Such demand should come either from the public, or from the owner. At this juncture, media owners care little for their hired journalists’ professionalism and ethics; therefore, it is up to the public to give them an impetus to do their professional best and to set higher standards of achievement for them.

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