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NEW CHALLENGES TO JOURNALISTS IN THE CAUCASUS

Journalists in the countries of the South Caucasus have to work in different conditions, owing primarily to the diverse political situations prevailing in these countries. In Georgia and Azerbaijan, the situation is mainly associated with the change of the country leadership (in Georgia, also with the political and economic reforms launched by President Mikhail Saakashvili). However, relationships between the authorities and the mass media, and the development of journalism per se for that matter, are still a cause for concern.

Georgian journalists, carried away by the spirit of freedom in 2004, have gradually come to realize that media freedom not only provided an opportunity to create new quality journalism, but also spelled the need for fundamental reforms designed to establish a public television and radio broadcasting service and change the education process. However, just like their colleagues in all the former Soviet republics, Georgian journalism came up against a basic problem: aspiring for freedom, one needs to know how to achieve it.

The first few months of revolutionary euphoria gave way to disappointment among journalists, who had believed the freedom of expression slogans and new legislation would immediately change the quality of their work. At the same time, it should be noted that the main achievement of the new Georgia has been to promote competitive privately-run television: alongside the recent private television monopoly Rustavi-2, two other television companies – Imedi and Mze – have gained firm positions in the popularity ratings. Private radio broadcasting is also developing.

Yet, the future of public service television is still vague. In all the countries of the South Caucasus, a mechanism for setting up a public television and radio broadcasting service is either mentioned in general legislation or specified in media laws:

- in Azerbaijan – the Law on the Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Service of 28 September 2004;
- in Armenia – Chapter IV “Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Company” of the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting of 20 November 2000, and article 27 of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, dated 5 June 1995;
- in Georgia – Chapter III “Public Broadcasting Service” of the Law on Broadcasting of 24 December 2004.

Even so, public service broadcasting remains under government control in both Azerbaijan and Armenia, acting as a mouthpiece for government information. In Georgia, public service television is only making its first steps but, in contrast to its neighbouring states, the problem here is one of economics.

This slow (in Georgia) or distorted (in Armenia and Azerbaijan) development of public service broadcasting is most likely due to the fact that it is the government, rather than journalists or the

public, that has assumed the main burden of organising its work in these countries. On the one hand, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are trying to maintain the democratic image of a country that joined the Council of Europe; on the other hand, the mechanism for creating public service television has not been subject to broad public discussion, let alone participation by the intellectual, liberal community. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the establishment of public service television was initiated by officials, including ones who were among the management of government-run television. Roughly the same scheme was applied in Georgia, too.

However, in contrast to Georgia, where private television is developing, measures have been taken in Armenia against two popular television channels – A1+ and Noyan Tapan, which had their own information services or broadcast programmes from the liberal Russian channels. Moreover, in Azerbaijan, there are plans to launch another public television channel, which, by all appearances, would hardly differ in any way from the first one that, in turn, has retained many of the features of an official government-run television channel.

Therefore, the future of public broadcasting in the countries of the South Caucasus is still unclear as regards both its professionalism and status, since the economic welfare of public service television depends largely on the national budget. This specific feature will hardly make it possible to create a public broadcasting service that would satisfy the public at large, let alone its politically active segment.

In order to change the situation, a broad discussion is needed on development of public service television in the countries of the South Caucasus, in which the leading role should be played primarily by public and professional organisations, political parties and movements, rather than government officials. On the other hand, a more accountable and transparent system needs to be used for financing public service television in order to avoid dependence on the national budget.

Considering the different political situations in the countries of the South Caucasus, as well as the differing standards of living and the economic status of their public service television, it is, of course, hard to imagine which of the traditional public service television models of the European countries might be applicable there. Even so, one should not forget that proclaiming the idea of public service television and actually establishing one are currently two totally different things.

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