

# Georgia's Regional Media – Local Watchdogs Under Pressure

Transparency International Georgia

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# Overview

- Assaults on journalists
- Atmosphere of impunity
- Tensions over filming
- Difficulties covering high-level events
- Public funds for local media
- Recommendations
- Discussion of potential solutions

# Assaults on journalists

- Kutaisi: Irakli Vachiberidze, (newspaper *P.S.*), says he was beaten up twice by government security guards, on May 2 and 3.
  - An investigation is ongoing.
- Tianeti: Gela Mtivlishvili (Kakheti and Mtskheta-Mtianeti Information Centers) was detained and says he was beaten by police on May 20.
  - Ministry of Interior says that the incident was a provocation and that there was no beating.

# Atmosphere of impunity

- Article 154 of Criminal Code punishes illegal interference into journalists' professional activities
- Mari Otarashvili (*Rezonansi*, Mtskheta-Mtianeti Information Center)
  - Threatened via phone by a senior employee of the company Interplast (partly owned by Mtskheta-Mtianeti governor Ceasar Chocheli and his brother)
  - Investigation ongoing, but Otarashvili has yet to be provided an opportunity to testify and provide evidence

# Atmosphere of impunity II

- Shorena Khabelashvili and Nino Terunashvili (*Khalkhis Gazeti*)
  - were prevented from recording video footage in the Karaleti IDP settlement in December 2011, stopped by two men, insulted and told to leave the area
  - After reporter Rezo Nadiradze uploaded raw footage to his Facebook profile in May, he says he received a death threat
  - Nadiradze says that prosecutors took his testimony but several weeks after that, he is not aware of any follow-up action or progress in the investigation.
- In November 2011, staff of *Batumelebi* identified and tracked down a man who allegedly blackmailed the paper's leading investigative reporter in 2009.
  - Although the *Batumelebi* staff informed law-enforcement about their findings and led police to the suspect's Tbilisi apartment, no procedures against the suspect were launched

# Tensions over filming

- Situations in which reporters want to film inside schools and other public buildings at times escalate
- Several incidents when police, security or Ministry of Defense personnel prevent reporters from filming and make them delete footage
- Code of Conduct for Broadcasters provides guidelines but does not apply to reporters who work for newspapers or online outlets
- Bela Zakaidze, a TV reporter working with Studio GNS, and his camera man, Zurab Pataridze, were stopped by guards when filming the local government building in Dusheti on May 11 while standing on the city's main square.

# Difficulties covering high-level events

- Regional media representatives do not have same access to information as national TV
  - Several instances when local journalists were not able to cover presidential visits,
  - Cases when reporters were forced out of locations by security
- Presidential administration recently entered into a dialogue with regional media representatives
  - Reopened accreditation
  - Says it is committed to improve communication with regional media associations and to ensure equal access to events and information

# Access to public information and local officials

- New administrative hurdles introduced in several municipalities
  - Municipalities with strong local media outlets require passes for entering local government buildings
  - Announcements of public meetings difficult to access
  - Difficult to informally meet with local government employees
- Local officials reluctant to give interviews and answer questions
- Reporters use freedom of information requests instead
  - Often problems to receive the requested information in time

# More problems

- Kakheti Information Center, interviewed residents of Akhmeta, asking about restoration of opposition leader Bidzina Ivanishvili's citizenship
  - Several respondents who said they were in favor of Ivanishvili regaining citizenship were later advised, apparently by individuals linked to the local government, to refrain from commenting on politics in public.
- Dusheti: Mtskheta-Mtianeti Information Center had difficulties hiring staff and some locals are afraid of talking to locals after alleged firings
- Kharagauli, Guria: Intimidation of newspaper distributors

# Public funds for media activities I

- Total spending of local and regional government bodies for media and information activities:
  - 2010: GEL 7,834.40
  - 2011: GEL 7,466.90
  - 2012: GEL 8,555.80
- 37 municipalities have budget lines for media spending
- Adjara AR:
  - Adjara TV: GEL 6.65 million (2012)
    - Lack of legal basis for its operation
  - Ajara & Adjaria newspaper: GEL 230,000
- Distortion of local media markets
  - Example: Kharagauli – Municipality provides GEL 36,000 for publishing activities to government-controlled *Akhali Kharagauli*

	Region	Municipality	Purpose	2010	2011	2012
				(GEL 1,000)	(GEL 1,000)	(GEL 1,000)
1	Ajarian AR	<a href="#">Ajarian AR</a>	Adjara TV, newspaper <i>Adjara &amp; Adjaria</i>	6,347.60	6,046.10	6,877.80
2	Abkhazia AR	<a href="#">Abkhazia AR</a>	Providing information to citizens of Abkhazia	249.9	250	250
3	Imereti	<a href="#">Kutaisi</a>	Tele-Radio Broadcasting and Publishing activity	78.1	122.2	150
4	Kvemo Kartli	<a href="#">Bolnisi</a>	Broadcasting and publishing activity, <i>Gazeti Bolnisi</i>	221.8	130	136.8
5	Kakheti	<a href="#">Gurjaani</a>	Broadcasting and publishing activity, municipality's newspaper	71.4	93.5	125
6	Imereti	<a href="#">Samtredia</a>	Broadcasting and publishing activity	81.5	81.3	84
7	Shida Kartli	<a href="#">Gori</a>	Non-profit paper <i>Goris Matsne</i> , broadcasting and publishing, Imedi TV show 'Heroes'	72	73	74
8	Imereti	<a href="#">Sachkhere</a>	Broadcasting and publishing activity, funding for LLC <i>Imervizia</i> and the organization Massmedia	67.8	68.2	71
9	Samegrelo da Zemo Svaneti	<a href="#">Zugdidi</a>	Broadcasting and publishing activity	17.8	7.8	65
10	Imereti	<a href="#">Khoni</a>	Broadcasting and publishing activity	38.9	50.5	58
<b>39</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Expenditures for media and information activities</b>	<b>7,834.40</b>	<b>7,466.90</b>	<b>8,555.80</b>

# Recommendations I

- *The Georgian government*
  - Ensure that all incidents of intimidation and attacks against journalists are quickly and effectively investigated and that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions;
  - Ensure easy and equal access for all interested media outlets to events attended by high-level officials and candidates;
  - Law enforcement and military staff should receive training and clear guidelines in how to behave when interacting with journalists and media workers, including in tense situations;
  - Government bodies on the regional and local level should ensure easy access for journalists to government buildings and public meetings, including by granting them long-term accreditations to enter relevant government buildings;

# Recommendations II

- Local and regional government bodies should evaluate if their media spending;
- The government, in consultation with the government of the Adjara AR, should initiate the transformation of Adjara TV;
- The government should consider offering communications trainings to local officials, encouraging them to communicate directly and more often with local journalists. Municipalities should have designated spokespeople who are able and allowed to respond to questions by the media in a timely manner;
- Municipalities should consider introducing bulletin boards that are located outside the government building, easily accessible and visible to the general public, where all recent relevant notices and decrees are published and public local government meetings are announced. Municipalities that operate their own websites should post scheduled public meetings and relevant documents online.

# Recommendations III

- *To regional media*
  - Journalists in the regions should consider ways how to avoid unnecessary confrontation and overcome often highly antagonistic relationships with local officials, try new ways of engaging local government representatives and contribute to developing a professional and constructive working relationship with them;
  - Reporters should make better use of available electronic public information, allowing them to draft more specific and targeted requests for the release of public information, which might contribute to a quicker processing of these requests and help to reduce the workload of government bodies;
  - Reporters should be aware of ethical and professional guidelines, including those provided by the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters and the Charter of Ethics, and act in accordance with professional journalistic principles.

Thank you for your attention!

- Report available at <http://transparency.ge/en/regionalmedia>
- <http://transparency.ge/regionalmedia>
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- What are other major challenges local media outlets are facing?
- What specific steps could be taken to ensure that local media has better access to local officials and information?
- How to ensure that journalists are protected?

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