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Freedom Of The Press - Georgia (2011)

Status: Partly Free
Legal Environment: 14
Political Environment: 22
Economic Environment: 19
Total Score: 55

The constitution protects media freedom, and Georgia has some of the most progressive legislation in the region. However, there are concerns that the government has sought to control the independent and opposition media, particularly broadcast outlets. That said, there were far fewer reports of direct government intervention in 2010 than in previous years.

Article 19 of the 1995 constitution as well as the Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression explicitly protect freedoms of speech and expression, and also contain provisions for protection against censorship. The government decriminalized libel in 2004 in an effort to bring Georgian media law in line with European standards. Fewer legal cases were brought against journalists in 2010 than in previous years. However, legislation is at times slowly implemented, and enforcement is often determined by political concerns. Although Georgia adopted freedom of information legislation several years ago, local media report that government officials, particularly local authorities, work to limit or delay media access to information.

The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC), which regulates and licenses the country's telecommunications and broadcast media, has been criticized for a lack of independence. Progovernment outlets have at times been allowed to operate without licenses, while enforcement is often rigorous for opposition outlets. Although the GNCC renewed Maestro TV's general satellite broadcast license in 2009 after repeated delays, since May 2008 the GNCC has not issued any new terrestrial broadcast licenses, ostensibly because of an ongoing study of the existing media landscape. The director of the GNCC is the former director and shareholder of one of the main progovernment television channels, Rustavi-2.

The political situation in Georgia remains highly polarized, but tension between the ruling party led by President Mikheil Saakashvili and the opposition was significantly lower in 2010—and political stability higher—than in the previous three years. Similarly, the state's influence over the broadcast media was not as big of a concern in 2010 as in previous years, although it is likely to be a critical issue in future election periods. The members of the board of the state-run outlet Georgia Public Broadcaster (GPB), which operates television and radio stations, are approved by the president, and its main television channel, 1TV, is perceived as politicized and partisan. In 2009, the number of board members was increased to 15 after a campaign by opposition and civil society groups. The broadcaster rolled out a new channel in February 2010 devoted to politics, including live coverage of parliament and opportunities for a wide range of parties to air their viewpoints, and coverage of

the May local elections was judged by independent researchers as significantly fairer than past coverage. However, the GPB retains a significant advantage over other media in that it is funded by state subsidies as well as commercial advertisements.

Instances of physical harassment and intimidation of journalists and media outlets occur occasionally. The independent outlet Trialeti TV, which is often critical of the government, reported several incidents of harassment throughout the year. A journalist and cameraman from the station were physically assaulted while covering the midnight removal of a Stalin statue in Gori. The station's owner reported being harassed by police and claimed that the arrest of his brother, a director at Trialeti, was politically motivated. Concerns about state harassment prompted a visit by the U.S. Ambassador to Trialeti's headquarters in December. Separately, investigative journalist Vakhtang Komakhidze reported receiving death threats from Georgian authorities in February 2010. Komakhidze was reporting on the separatist region of South Ossetia and producing a documentary about the 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia.

A large number of private print outlets operate in the country and typically enjoy editorial independence, but have very limited circulation. Broadcast media tend to support either the government or the opposition. The two privately owned television broadcasters with nationwide coverage, Rustavi-2 and Imedi TV, are subject to government editorial control through opaque ownership deals, managerial appointments, and pressure, while opposition stations such as Kavkasia TV and Maestro TV do not have national reach. Several programs on Rustavi-2, for instance, are officially sponsored by government ministries. Local media organizations report that one of their biggest challenges is the lack of transparency in media ownership and property rights, especially for television stations. Of particular concern is the lack of financial transparency related to licensing and the transfer of public funds to the media. The media, particularly broadcasters, do not have a high degree of financial independence; nationwide television stations are owned and subsidized by large businesses, which typically have close links to the state. As a result, these stations face indirect government control. The media market in Georgia is not competitive and highly monopolized, as is the advertising market with state and public broadcasters receiving a significantly larger portion of overall advertising than independent broadcasters. Several television stations have faced serious financial difficulties in the past year. Maestro TV was forced off the air twice after running out of money. Print media in Georgia are also challenged by a lack of advertising income and financial resources—problems that particularly affect their distribution capacity.

Approximately 27 percent of Georgians accessed the internet in 2010. The internet is not subject to government regulation. However, few newspapers have regularly updated websites, and many journalists lack knowledge about internet technology and web tools. Despite this, blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are playing a growing role in spreading news and information.

The separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are effectively under Russian control. Russia recognizes the two

regions as independent states, and although the terms of the 2008 ceasefire stipulate that Russian troops are to pull out of the regions, this has yet to take place. International monitors are only present on the Georgian side of the buffer zone between Georgia proper and the separatist regions. There is little media presence in the scarcely populated region of South Ossetia. Local authorities operate a television stations, although most programming is rebroadcast from Russia. There is almost no independent press. In Abkhazia, a more ethnically mixed region, the media environment is more diverse. The local population has access to Russian TV and Abkhaz TV; Georgian TV is only available via satellite. Abkhazia's residents have access to Georgian and Turkish radio, and several private print media outlets exist. Overall, media ownership and coverage is dominated by local authorities. At the year's end, the Georgian government was preparing to re-launch a state-funded Russian-language TV service in an effort to reach out to the Russian-speaking populations in the separatist regions. The channel is called PIK—an acronym for First Information Caucasus in Russian—and is run by former British Broadcasting Corporation and France 24 journalist Robert Parsons. A previous incarnation run by GPB was on the air from 2009 to 2010.

[The scores for Georgia do not reflect conditions for the media in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, although these separatist regions are covered in the narrative report.]