

Reporters Without Borders

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Georgia

High tension

Media face many unknowns after tense election campaign

1 October 2012

Reporters Without Borders condemns the polarization of the media and many physical attacks on journalists during the fraught campaign that preceded today's parliamentary elections in Georgia.

Recent legislative developments that will have major impact on the media are also a source of concern.

Legislative steps backward

"We deeply regret the Central Electoral Commission's hasty adoption of a regulation limiting the ability of journalists to work in polling stations," Reporters Without Borders said. "Why was it deemed necessary to curb media personnel rights on election day?"

Approved on the evening of 25 September, the regulation drastically restricts coverage by press photographers and TV cameramen. They will need express permission from the president of a polling station in order to enter and, if they get this, will be able to move about freely for only ten minutes. Thereafter they will be confined to the area reserved for observers. Any interview with polling station personnel must take place outside, and if cameramen go outside, they cannot reenter.

Today is also the day that [the "must carry" law](#) – under which cable TV operators were required to carry all the major satellite TV channels during the election campaign – ceases to have effect. While deploring its short duration, Reporters Without Borders had welcomed the law's adoption in June as a first step towards more broadcasting pluralism.

"It is very regrettable that this law ceases to have effect at the very moment when the election results will be announced," Reporters Without Borders said. "[Are we going back to the previous situation](#) in which pro-government satellite channels dominated cable TV and boycotted cable TV providers such as *Global TV* that carry opposition stations?"

"We urge the new parliament that will be installed after this election to turn the 'must carry' law into a permanent one and to extend its applicability to over-the-air broadcasting, which reaches a much wider public."

Obstruction, violence

The many physical attacks on journalists at political rallies or outside government buildings during the campaign were indicative of the marked social and media polarization. Incidents took place in Mereti on 26 June, Karaleti on 12 July, Beshumi on 4 August, Lantchkhut on 15 August, Gurdjaani on 17 August, Akhmeta on 23 August, Kazbegi on 9 September and Poti on 14 September. Other journalists were threatened, intimidated or denied access to events they wanted to cover.

"We firmly condemn these acts of violation and intimidation," Reporters Without Borders said. "It is essential that each of these cases is thoroughly investigation in order to punish those responsible and prevent a climate of impunity from taking hold."

Many journalists also report that, in general, access to both government and private-sector

information is very difficult and often unfairly granted.

Polarization and lack of independence

Although accentuated by the election, polarization has already been a feature of Georgia's media in ordinary times and affects the print media, which are more diverse, as well as radio and TV. The turmoil in the broadcasting media in recent years – such as the formerly opposition TV station *Imedi's* takeover by businessmen close to President Mikhail Saakashvili – has been very political in nature.

A more recent example was the May 2012 launch of TV9, a station owned by supporters of the billionaire and opposition leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili. TV9's revelations about the use of torture in prisons has led to two ministers losing their jobs and is widely seen as having had a major impact on public opinion.

An all-out news and information war is waged between the pro-government TV stations such as *Imedi* and *Rustavi 2* and opposition stations such as *TV9*, *Maestro* and *Kavkasia*. The former have the advantage in as much as their signals cover the entire country.

Independence is obviously very constrained for media personnel when the political orientation of media is so closely correlated with the views of their owners. The creation of really independent media with strong safeguards against owner interference in their editorial policies and investigative reporting is one of the leading challenges Georgia faces.

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