

Open Society Georgia Foundation

Tbilisi, July, 2016



Kingdom of the Netherlands

This policy brief is prepared in the framework of the project “monitoring implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement by coalition of civil society organizations” funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The document does not necessarily reflect the views of the donor.

AUTHOR:

Maia Mikashvidze*

on behalf of the Georgian
Institute of Public Affairs

Peer review:

Kornely Kakachia

Proofreading:

Camrin Christensen



OPEN SOCIETY GEORGIA FOUNDATION
ფონდო ღია საზოგადოება საქართველო

This policy brief covers period from October, 2015 till June, 2016.

This policy brief is prepared within the framework of the Open Society Georgia Foundation's in-house project “monitoring implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement by coalition of civil society organizations”. The views, opinions and statements expressed by the author and those providing comments are her only and do not necessarily reflect the position of Open Society Georgia Foundation. Therefore, the Open Society Georgia Foundation is not responsible for the content of the material.

* Maia Mikashvidze (PhD) is a mass communication scholar and development professional. She is currently a professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, and a trainer at the Management Academy. Her primary interest is political communication, with the emphasis on the role of journalism and mass media.

Ethnic Communities in Georgia: Moving from engagement to empowerment through media

POLICY BRIEF

Executive Summary

Ethnic minorities in Georgia have poor access to information due to underdeveloped minority media and limited minority-oriented content in the mainstream Georgian media. Georgian citizens of ethnic origin have a poor command of Georgian, the official language of the state, and are therefore unable to use the mainstream media. The limited number of media outlets appearing in minority languages does not satisfy the informational needs of local communities nor do they allow the minorities to communicate their concerns to the Georgian-speaking majority. To fill the gap, these communities tune in to foreign media¹ and become easy targets for propaganda and disinformation.

Informing and giving voice to ethnic minorities has been a challenge for all governments of independent Georgia, including the current government. Georgia's leaders have avoided opening communication channels for fear of inciting ethnic separatism.² The current government appears to continue the securitisation of the issue, faced with the new threat of separatism instigated by Russian propaganda. The government is taking indecisive measures towards strengthening the minority media and bridging the information gap between the majority and minority ethnicities.

This goes against Georgia's commitment to strengthening pluralism and cultural diversity in the media, stipulated in the Association Agreement with the European Union and the corresponding Association Agenda. The National Action Plans and Communication Plans for the implementation of the Association Agenda insufficiently emphasise the media needs of ethnic communities. While these plans correctly list ethnic communities among ‘vulnerable groups of the population to whom information on the European integration process is not easily accessible and who require special explanations’,³ the government relies on one-way, controlled communication (information fliers, adverts) and meetings with communities rather than ethnic media as sustained channels of two-way communication.

The lack of access to media content in minority languages and/or oriented at ethnic interests is negatively affecting the development of ethnic communities, their participation in public affairs of Georgia and their shared vision of Georgia's future. The disapproval of Georgia's European Integration is two times higher than the national average in ethnic minority communities, with some 27% of citizens being opposed to this process.⁴

This paper recommends that the government prioritise support for local ethnic media and expansion of the content oriented at ethnic communities in the mainstream media in the Association Agenda 2017-2019 and the resultant National Action Plans and Communication Strategies.

Introduction

Though Georgia has achieved some success in the protection of ethnic minority rights in recent years, it has not managed to bridge the information gap between its ethnic majority and minority communities. Georgia's ethnic minorities, whose knowledge of Georgian is limited, rely on a handful of local ethnic media for news and information. Their knowledge of public affairs of Georgia is therefore limited, as is their ability to communicate needs and concerns to nation-wide audiences. As a result, Georgia's ethnic minorities, which comprise approximately one seventh of the population,⁵ remain largely isolated, are uninvolved in public affairs and do not always have a clear understanding of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.⁶

Relations between the state and ethnic minorities have been a challenge for all governments of independent Georgia. After the war of 1992-93 and the secession and de facto independence of two territories populated by ethnic minorities, Abkhazia and Ossetia, the government of Eduard Shevardnadze sealed off the remaining ethnic enclaves and established tight information control there. The war of 1991-92 left painful memories and drove a wedge between the Georgians, as the ethnic majority, and the ethnic minorities, and turned minority relations into a national security issue.⁷

President Mikheil Saakashvili reversed the course by reframing majority-minority relations as a matter of broader civic integration across all communities. He emphasised the vision of Georgia 'as a state for all of its citizens', and introduced the idea of 'Georgian-ness' based on knowledge of the state language (Georgian) and Georgian citizenship.⁸ He annulled the requirement to indicate ethnicity in Georgian passports, and elaborated a comprehensive National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration and the Action Plan for 2009-2014.

On the negative side, Saakashvili failed to allocate sufficient resources towards his ambitious integration agenda⁹ and fell short of strengthening ethnic media and other channels of communication. The government, for instance, has withheld FM broadcast licenses from Azerbaijani- and Armenian-language community radios.¹⁰

- ¹ Thornton, L., & Sichinava, D. (2015) Public attitudes in Georgia. National Democratic Institute. Available at https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_April%202015%20Poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF_0.pdf
- ² Metreveli, M. (2014). *Conflicting Threat Perceptions in Georgia*, Tbilisi, Georgia: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, p. 4
- ³ Communication and Information Strategy of the Government of Georgia in the sphere of EU Integration 2014-17, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/en/news/4913>
- ⁴ Thornton, L. & Turmanidze, K. (2016). Public attitudes in Georgia. National Democratic Institute, Available at https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_vf.pdf
- ⁵ According www.geostat.ge, Azerbaijanis are the largest ethnic minority group (233 024 or 7,23%), followed by Armenians (168 120 or 5,21%). These communities reside primarily in the Kvemo Kartli (Azerbaijanis) and the Samtskhe-Javakheti (Armenians) regions and border their kin states, Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- ⁶ Thornton, L. & Turmanidze, K. (2016). Public attitudes in Georgia. National Democratic Institute, Available at https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_vf.pdf
- ⁷ Metreveli, M. (2014). *Conflicting Threat Perceptions in Georgia*, Tbilisi, Georgia: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, p. 4
- ⁸ Berglund, C. (2016). Forward to David the Builder!" Georgia's (re)turn to language-centered nationalism, *Nationalities Papers*, p. 5, DOI:10.1080/00905992.2016.1142519, Available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00905992.2016.1142519>
- ⁹ Metreveli, M. (2014). *Conflicting Threat Perceptions in Georgia*, Tbilisi, Georgia: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, p. 5
- ¹⁰ IREX (2006). Media Sustainability Index for 2006/7, p. 130, available at https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/MSIE06_ga.pdf; IREX (2008). Media Sustainability Index for 2008, p. 136, available at <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/MSIE08-Georgia.pdf>; See also IREX Media Sustainability Indexes for 2009, 2010

The Georgian Dream government, which replaced Saakashvili's government in 2012, has not made clear steps towards closing the information gap and integrating minorities through the media. While the government's relations with the minorities are marked with 'stability and an overall positive trend in development', much remains to be done to more fully integrate ethnic groups,¹¹ with the improvement of information flow in the ethnic enclaves being a critical factor.¹² The Georgian National Communications Commission granted an FM license to the Armenian-language community radio Nor,¹³ which had been withheld for over eight years, but its counterpart, Azerbaijani-language radio Marneuli, is still without a license. The government's decision to drop the licensing requirement for all TV stations following the successful digital switchover in 2015 has opened additional avenues for the ethnic media to expand, however the lack of funds and HD equipment prevents Samtskhe-Javakheti's Armenian-language TV stations Parvana and ATV12 from utilising digital channels. Mainstream media, especially the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), have to do more to satisfy information needs in the ethnic enclaves.¹⁴

The issue of ethnic media and information is tied to the problem of Russian propaganda. Acting under its new foreign and security policy doctrine towards the post-Soviet space,¹⁵ Russia is seeking closer ties with the wider Russian-speaking population.¹⁶ Russian propaganda misinforms Russian-speaking citizens of ethnic origin, including citizens of Georgia. Currently, the viewership of foreign channels in the ethnic enclaves is the highest in Georgia at 53%.¹⁷ The government has to support a plurality of media sources available to ethnic minorities and strengthen ethnic media to neutralise propaganda messages.

Approaches and Results

The government appears to continue securitising the issue of ethnic relations, which entails cautious treatment of ethnic media and information issues. Part of the reason may lie in subjective, perceptual domain whereby conflicting threat perceptions in the majority and the minority communities¹⁸ erode trust and limit space for action. Objective reasons include the threat of Russian propaganda, which incites ethnic distrust and separatism. This context may draw Georgia back into the vicious circle of distrust and miscommunication.

State Strategy for Civic Tolerance and Integration

The Georgian Government's State Strategy for Civic Tolerance and Integration and Action Plan 2015-2020,¹⁹ a set of policies oriented towards supporting ethnic minorities, calls for 'improved access to mass-media and information by ethnic minorities' (sub-goal 1.5 under goal 1. 'equal and full participation in civic and political life').²⁰ The document aims to: 'ensure access to broadcast, electronic and print media in ethnic languages', primarily through financing media products in ethnic languages and distributing them in the ethnic enclaves; 'ensure coverage of ethnic issues and participation of ethnic minority representatives in broadcast programming' through ethnic-language programming on the GPB and the par-

¹¹ Sabanadze, N. (2014), "Georgia's Ethnic Diversity. A Challenge to State-building," In *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012. The First Georgian Republic and its Successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones, Routledge, p. 119

¹² Gogsadze, G., Kachkachishvili, I. & Bashaleishvili, L. (2014). *Minority Integration in Georgia: Main Challenges and Opportunities (Case of Javakheti)*. The Levan Mikeladze Foundation, p. 10, available at http://mikeladzefoundation.org/multimedia/ups/1/Minority_Integration_In_Georgia_Eng_-_Levan_Mikeladze_Foundation.pdf

¹³ IREX, (2015). *Media Sustainability Index for 2015*. p. 160, available at https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/u105/EE_MSI_2015_Georgia.pdf

¹⁴ Gogsadze, G., Kachkachishvili, I. & Bashaleishvili, L. (2014). *Minority Integration in Georgia: Main Challenges and Opportunities (Case of Javakheti)*. The Levan Mikeladze Foundation, p. 10, available at http://mikeladzefoundation.org/multimedia/ups/1/Minority_Integration_In_Georgia_Eng_-_Levan_Mikeladze_Foundation.pdf

¹⁵ Rondeli, A. (2014) "The Russian-Georgian War and its Implications for Georgia's State-building," *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012. In. The First Georgian Republic and its Successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones, Routledge, p. 41

¹⁶ Alexandrova, L. (2014) "Russia Keeps Pressing for Reunification of the 'Russian World'", April 2, Available at: www.en.itar-tass.com/opinions/1723.

¹⁷ Thornton, L., & Sichinava, D. (2015) *Public attitudes in Georgia*. National Democratic Institute Available at https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_April%202015%20Poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF_0.pdf

¹⁸ Nilsson, N. (2009). *Obstacles to Building a Civic Nation: Georgia's Armenian Minority and Conflicting Threat Perceptions*, *Ethnopolitics*, 8(2)

¹⁹ *State Strategy for Civic Tolerance and Integration and Action Plan 2015-2020*, Available at http://new.smr.gov.ge/Uploads/___a5f10e90.pdf

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 13-14

ticipation of minorities in the GPB programmes; 'increase tolerance and cultural pluralism in the media' through popularisation of the GPB's code of ethics.²¹

The implementation report for 2015²² lists the following activities towards these goals: publication and distribution of former state newspapers – Gurjistan and Vrastan, support for limited Azerbaijani-language content in local newspapers of Kvemo Kartli and Georgian-language newspaper in Samtskhe-Javakheti, once-a-day ethnic language newscasts and a Russian-language show targeting the broader spectrum of post-soviet citizens on the GPB's less-developed Channel 2, and a minority-oriented TV talk-show in Georgian on Channel 1. These activities are arguably not the best tools to implement the important and challenging goals set forth by the State Strategy for Civic Tolerance and Integration and Action Plan 2015-2020. They insufficiently provide ethnic citizens with information in their own languages and ensure that their voices are heard and tolerant attitudes nurtured.

The Action Plan for 2016²³ exclusively focuses on this limited set of activities: a) support for the GPB's newscasts in ethnic languages and for a Georgian-language talk-show and b) access to minority media in prisons.

EU-Georgia Association Agenda and Ethnic Media Needs

Expanding media plurality and diversity in the media has been part of Georgia's commitments under the Association Agreement with the European Union and the corresponding Association Agenda. Article 365 of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement reads: 'the Parties shall develop a regular dialogue in the field of audio-visual and media policies and cooperate to reinforce independence and professionalism of the media...in compliance with relevant European standards, including standards of the Council of Europe and the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions'.²⁴ Section 2.6 of the Association Agenda, entitled Cooperation in Audio-visual and Media Fields, calls for the 'exchange of best practices and regarding freedom of the media, media pluralism... cultural diversity aspects of media through regular dialogue'.²⁵ These commitments imply support for ethnic media and inclusion of ethnic voices in the public discourse.

Yet, Georgia's National Action Plans for 2014, 2015 and 2016 lack activities to increase plurality and cultural diversity in the media, including through strengthening ethnic media and minority oriented content, as stipulated in Section 2.6 of the Association Agenda - Cooperation in Audio-visual and Media Fields.

The analysis of the National Action Plan for 2014²⁶ found only two references to the media in the context of ethnic minorities under Section 2.2 'Foreign and Security Policy, Peaceful Conflict Resolution'. These activities include distribution of information leaflets and broadcasting of TV adverts for ethnic minorities in minority languages about the European integration processes and conducting meetings with the representatives of media, including the ethnic media.²⁷ The Implementation Report for the National Action Plan 2014 shows that these activities were

²¹ Ibid. p. 13-14

²² Implementation Report of the 2015 Action Plan and State Strategy for Civic Tolerance and Integration <http://new.smr.gov.ge/smr/FileList.aspx?ID=34>

²³ Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. (2016) Action Plan for 2016, available at http://new.smr.gov.ge/Uploads/2016_...e8e32ec1.pdf

²⁴ The EU – Georgia Association Agreement, title VI, Chapter 18, article 365, paragraph 1. Available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2014:261:FULL&from=EN>

²⁵ Association Agenda between the European Union and Georgia. Available at http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/documents/eap_aa/associationagenda_2014_en.pdf

²⁶ 2014 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Georgia, Available at http://www.eu-nato.gov.ge/sites/default/files/AA%20Action%20Plan-2014-Final-ENG_0.pdf

²⁷ Ibid. p. 21

implemented by means of video and print information materials in Georgian and four minority languages.²⁸

The National Action Plan for 2015²⁹ contains the same two activities, carried out by means of an information campaign dedicated to the visa liberalisation issues, as noted in the respective Implementation Report for 2015.³⁰

The 2016 National Action Plan³¹ includes only one of the two above-mentioned activities, namely, the preparation and dissemination of print and audio-visual information among ethnic minorities in line with the 2014-17 Communication and Information Strategy.³²

Communication and Information Strategy and Action Plan 2014-17

The Communication and Information Strategy of the Government of Georgia in the sphere of EU Integration 2014-2017³³ stipulates that ethnic minorities are 'vulnerable elements of the population... to whom information on the European integration process is not easily accessible and who require special explanations relating to the European integration process and its implications'.³⁴ The strategy notes that 'special attention should be paid to the dissemination of information to ethnic minorities in a language that they understand'.³⁵ Further, the document specifically mentions TV and radio programmes, thematic articles in newspapers and magazines, and websites, among the planned activities to meet the stated goals.

However, the action plans and implementation reports lack adequate measures towards these goals. The action plan for 2014³⁶ contains no activity involving ethnic media or any other media content in ethnic languages. The corresponding Implementation Report for the year 2014³⁷ mentions an information video about European integration in ethnic languages and the publication of students' essays on the topic of integration in Gurjistan and Vrastan.

The action plan for 2015³⁸ lists the following activities: preparing printed and electronic roadmaps, video and social commercials in native languages of ethnic minorities, thematic meetings with the media, including the ethnic media, and dissemination of printed, electronic and broadcast articles, and interviews within the regional media outlets. The corresponding Implementation Report for 2015³⁹ shows that articles appeared in newspapers Gurjistan and Vrastan,⁴⁰ information materials about the European Union association process were distributed among ethnic communities⁴¹ and information campaigns and social adverts in minority languages were broadcast in regional media and the GPB.⁴²

The action plan for 2016⁴³ commits to similar activities as in 2015: publication of articles in Vrastan, Gurjistan and Svobodnaya Gruzia, dissemination of brochures and other information materials in ethnic languages, and broadcast information campaigns in regional media and the GPB.

²⁸ Report of the 2014 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Georgia, pp. 53-54 Available at <http://www.eu-nato.gov.ge/sites/default/files/REPORT%20of%20the%20AA%20Action%20Plan-2014%20ENG%20-%20FINAL%20ENG.pdf>

²⁹ 2015 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Georgia, p. 28, Available at <http://www.eu-nato.gov.ge/en/eu/association-agreement>

³⁰ Report of the 2015 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Georgia, p. 12, Available at http://eu-nato.gov.ge/sites/default/files/AA%20NAP%202015%20Summary_0.pdf

³¹ 2016 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Georgia, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/sites/default/files/AA%20NAP%202016%20ENG.pdf>

³² Ibid. p. 59

³³ Communication and Information Strategy of the Government of Georgia in the sphere of EU Integration 2014-2017, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/en/news/4913>

³⁴ Ibid. p. 7

³⁵ Ibid. p. 18

³⁶ Communication and Information Strategy and Action Plan for 2014, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/ge/strategic-communications/documents>

³⁷ Implementation Report for Communication and Information Strategy and Action Plan for 2014, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/ge/strategic-communications/documents>

³⁸ Communication and Information Strategy and Action Plan for 2015, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/en/news/4913>

³⁹ Implementation Report for Communication and Information Strategy and Action Plan for 2015, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/ge/strategic-communications/documents>

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 73

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 109

⁴² Ibid. p. 2

⁴³ Communication and Information Strategy and Action Plan for 2016, Available at <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/en/news/4913>

Thus, the Strategic Communication and Information Strategy and Action Plans only marginally meet the goal of strengthening ethnic media and broadening minority-oriented media content to increase plurality and cultural diversity in the Georgian media, as stipulated in Section 2.6 of the Association Agenda - Cooperation in Audio-visual and Media Fields.

Conclusion

The Georgian Government has made it a strategic priority to fill the information gap dividing Georgia's majority and minority ethnicities and improving access to the media content in ethnic languages. These goals, set forth in the State Strategy for Civic Tolerance and Integration, are reinforced in the Association Agreement with the European Union and the Association Agenda, which call for equal opportunities for all citizens, including the citizens of ethnic origin, and for increasing plurality and cultural diversity in the media. The government has also committed to strengthening plurality and cultural diversity in the media, which implies support for ethnic media and inclusion of ethnic voices in the public discourse.

Yet, the specific objectives and activities chosen towards these goals in the National Action Plans and Communication and Information Strategy in the sphere of EU Integration 2014-2017 are limited in scope, and arguably not the best tools to meet the goals. The National Action Plans for 2014-17 contain no specific measures to facilitate the development of ethnic media or to expand the discussion on minority issues in the mainstream media. Instead, they show an overreliance on controlled communication (leaflets, brochures, educational videos, information campaigns, paid content in news media). The primary source of news content in ethnic languages is the GPB, although it too produces limited content in ethnic languages and/or targeting ethnic minorities. The Communication and Information Strategy of the Government of Georgia in the sphere of EU Integration 2014-2017 and corresponding action plans also rely on controlled communication. The National Action Plans and Communication and Information Strategy only marginally support the government's pledge to promote cultural diversity and pluralism in the media. As a result, the sources of information available to ethnic minorities in their own languages or the languages that they comprehend remain meagre. Since minority-language and minority oriented content is limited, ethnic minorities are more likely to use foreign media and become victims of propaganda.

Recommendations

This policy brief recommends that the access to media for ethnic minorities become a high priority of the association with the European Union and be incorporated in both the Association Agenda 2017-2019 and the resultant National Action Plan for 2017 as well as the next version of the Communication and Information Strategy.

More specifically, the government should:

- a) invest in journalism and media management skills among professional journalists and media managers in the ethnic enclaves;
- b) invest in media skills and literacy among ethnic communities to encourage citizen journalism and greater content generation locally;
- c) invest in media production and distribution facilities and technologies in the ethnic localities;
- d) encourage mainstream media to diversify its content to reflect minority interests and hire more journalists from minority communities;
- e) find technological solution for the access to Georgian-language print, broadcast (e.g. multiplexes fitted with translation capacity), and Internet content in ethnic languages;
- f) mandate the Georgian Public Broadcaster to take the lead in diversifying content to reflect minority needs and interests, open local bureaus and hire local journalists, including in leadership positions.

