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## Newsletter

### Roundtable on Trust-Distrust of the Georgian Media

*February 24, 2010*

From September 2009, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) has been implementing the project *Strengthening the Media's Role as a Watchdog Institution in Georgia*, funded by the European Union. In partnership with the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) and Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters (GARB), EPF aims at increasing the Georgian population's access to independent sources of information and specifically investigative journalism. On February 24, 2010, EPF organized a roundtable on issues of trust of the Georgia media to assess the challenges facing the Georgian media and identify opportunities for improving the quality, increasing public trust, and promoting the role of the media as a watchdog institution in Georgia.

#### Key presenters at the forum

**H.E. Ambassador Per Eklund**, Head of the EU Delegation to Georgia, highlighted the importance of independent media for Georgia's democratic development. The Ambassador discussed the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities for the Georgian media, spoke about major recent events, such as the creation of the Journalistic Charter of Ethics (funded by the EU and implemented by the Council of Europe), changes in the composition of GPB Board of Trustees, and the case related to Vakhtang Komakhidze. The Ambassador stressed that changes in the media climate will not happen immediately, but need to be achieved through constant effort. H.E. Ambassador Per Eklund's speech is available in English at: <http://epfound.ge/files/pe - media trust distrust-24 02 2010 for epf newsletter 2 .pdf>

**Ms. Tinatin Zurabishvili**, the Caucasus Research Resource Center's (CRRC) Regional Coordinator of the Data Initiative Survey, presented data on the levels of trust in the Georgian media based on the Media Landscape Study conducted by CRRC in September-October 2009 as part of EPF's project. The study revealed that while answering to direct questions about trust in journalists and the media in general, respondents tended to be rather positive. Answers to indirect questions, however, demonstrated that the Georgian population does not consider the Georgian media and, specifically, Georgian TV stations to be a source of reliable information. Ms. Zurabishvili's presentation in Georgian can be accessed at: [http://epfound.ge/files/epf\\_feb\\_24\\_2010.pdf](http://epfound.ge/files/epf_feb_24_2010.pdf)

**Mr. Zviad Koridze**, an independent journalist, spoke about the necessity to have access to information, one of the most important resources in today's postmodern world. In Georgia,

however, propaganda is often *packaged* as information, a model replicated by the Georgian electronic media regardless of the political leanings of the media outlet. He questioned how it is possible to trust Georgian media if famous journalists such as Vakhtang Komakhidze have to leave the profession and flee the country. The explanation provided by the pro-governmental media outlets is that Mr. Komakhidze is not a journalist but a criminal who used the profession to cover his criminal activities. He stressed that the same approach has been used to discredit the Georgian Young Lawyers Association and Paata Zakareishvili, who traveled to Tskhinvali.

Today, Georgian journalism is far from modern because it is based on stereotyping. The more a media outlet tries to adhere to the ethical standards of fair journalism, the lower its circulation, and vice versa. Georgian print media believes that the only way to increase circulation is to write about very sensitive topics in a sensationalist and xenophobic way. And it becomes very easy to manipulate readers, who have internalized stereotypes and xenophobia. This is the most acute challenge for the Georgian media, and journalists have to take responsibility and provide the population with reliable information. If journalists themselves do not endeavor to fix the problem, the situation will not improve.

**Ms. Ana Keshelashvili**, assistant professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, noted that recently a new generation of journalists has appeared that is innately loyal to the government's policy. More experienced journalists have not managed to transfer knowledge to the new generations of journalists, and hence, journalistic ethics have deteriorated. Very often even when taught journalistic ethics, students are not able to follow them because they end up in media outlets that do not follow them where editors demand they guard not public's but some individual or political interests. Ms. Keshelashvili agreed with Mr. Koridze that today the Georgian media does not serve as a watchdog institution, but became a propaganda tool. As such, recommendations should be addressed not only to journalists themselves, but also to the management and editorial staff who determine editorial policy. In order to regain the trust, journalists have to provide the audience with facts, not propaganda. Today, media consumers need to access various sources of information to have enough information to form their own opinions. The audience is interested in facts: journalists must provide facts, otherwise it will be impossible to regain the public's trust.

**Ms. Shorena Shaverdashvili**, editor and publisher of the magazine *Liberali* and member of the Board of Trustees of the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), spoke about 1) media independence in Georgia and 2) the Board of Trustees of the GPB and the GPB in general.

Regarding the situation of the independent media, Ms. Shaverdashvili stressed that they are in a constant crisis mode in order to manage scarce resources, due to the lack of advertising revenues. Even when independent media outlets have high circulation rates, businesses are reluctant to advertize there because they consider them as *political*. Thus, funding provided by various foundations and donors is what sustains such outlets. In this climate, the prospects for independent media are gloomy unless donor organizations employ more effective mechanisms for fostering media independence. Another problem is access to information with many governmental bodies being extremely reluctant to provide it.

Regarding the GPB, Ms. Shaverdashvili pointed to the necessity to reform the channel in order to comply with the ethncal norms of impartiality so that it serves as a genuine public broadcaster. The GPB does not produce a unique product, it leaves audiences indifferent with almost no segment of the audience having a favorite program on the GPB. There is no management structure governing the channel, no control over implementation of decisions, no system of accountability. There is no culture of presenting information to the Board of Trustees, thus making it almost impossible for the members of the Board to make informed decisions. Ms. Shaverdashvili highlighted the positive impact of the EU funded project implemented by the BBC World Trust to support the GPB. She recommended that it might be more effective to focus planned trainings on the editorial staff rather than on journalists.

## **Recommendations adopted at the roundtable:**

### Donors/Research centers:

1. Conduct regular, comprehensive media monitoring of all programming (not only of political).
2. Produce studies of media content.
3. Produce regular studies of media audiences.
4. Cover court fees in cases when journalists are not provided public information, so that journalists are not discouraged from going to court in pursuit of public information.
5. Fund monitoring of legislation dealing with public information, journalist rights, and media law.

### Journalists, NGOs, Legal NGOs

1. Establish mechanisms to advocate against legal changes that stymie journalists' professional activities.
2. Assist the Media Club to address the parliament to facilitate legal changes (transparency of income sources of media outlets; transparency of the owners of media outlets; ensure must carry policies for cable TV networks).
3. Collect support to change the law that provides for a fine of 500 GEL for journalist observers if s/he interferes in the work of election committees.

### NGOs

1. Provide recommendations for candidates for the GPB's Board of Trustees since two vacancies will be announced soon.
2. Provide expertise and consultancy to the GPB's Board of Trustees.

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