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## NEWSLETTER

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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 the Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters (GARB), EPF aims to increase the Georgian population's access to independent sources of information and to foster the development of investigative reporting. On September 2, 2010, EPF organized a roundtable discussion devoted to the characteristics of professional associations in the Georgian media to open a discussion about the need to build stronger associations that will be able to successfully advocate for the interests of their members and the media sector at large. The roundtable discussion, which was moderated by EPF Georgia Country Director Ms. Ketevan Vashakidze, focused on identifying why associations are weak in Georgia and how they could increase their efficacy.

### Key presenters at the forum

**Mr. David Lee**, Chair of EPF's Board of Trustees, delivered a welcoming speech, in which he stressed the importance of the topic. He urged the participants to use this roundtable not only to learn about the benefits of membership in media professional associations, but also to discuss ways in which the already existing associations can improve their service delivery to support the journalists and the media outlets in becoming more independent and professional. Mr. Lee also voiced his hope that the roundtable will have a long-term effect of encouraging cooperation among various stakeholders to establish institutionally strong media associations that will, in turn, support the media independence in Georgia.

**H.E. Ambassador Per Eklund**, Head of the EU Delegation to Georgia, delivered a keynote speech at the roundtable. The Ambassador highlighted the importance of independent media for Georgia's democratic development and noted that the issue of media freedom is very high on the EU-Georgia agenda. He also stated that the fact that there is high public interest in information provided by the media requires that journalists have easier access to public information, and both media outlets and journalists ensure that the information provided to the public is verified and factual. The Ambassador hailed the development of the Code of Ethics for journalists, but noted that ethics alone cannot lead to developing a professional media, as to function properly, the media (as any business) requires enabling and supportive environment. Ambassador Eklund cautioned the roundtable participants that changes within the media and the media environment will not happen overnight; it has, to a large part, to come from within, from the sector itself and the people engaged there, as journalists and owners.

Ambassador Eklund's speech is available in English at: [http://epfound.ge/files/amb\\_pe\\_-\\_media\\_association\\_building\\_-2.09.2010\\_epf.pdf](http://epfound.ge/files/amb_pe_-_media_association_building_-2.09.2010_epf.pdf)

**Ms. Tamar Kordzaia**, representing GYLA, focused her discussion on the issues of protection of journalists in Georgian legislation. She noted that there are very few legal provisions that could be discussed in this regard, but even those that are available are not applied fully. Most of the discussion centered on labor rights and the fact that Georgian labor legislation is hampering the developing of free and objective media. To begin with, very few journalists have contracts with their employers, as this is no longer a legal requirement. Furthermore, even in those cases when a journalist has an employment contract with a media outlet, he or she can be terminated immediately and without justification. In case of termination, the journalist is entitled to one month of severance pay, which arguably is not a strong enough safeguard to ensure journalistic independence and integrity. Consequently, journalists are forced to resort to self-censorship, which further curtails the media's independence. According to the speaker, this issue can only be resolved with amending the Labor Code, so that it requires employers to conclude written and longer-term contracts with journalists and to present valid reasons for termination. Having strong media professional associations will go a long way in protecting and advocating for the rights of Georgia's journalists.

**Mr. Beka Oniani**, Chair of the Board of the Trade Union of Mass Media Employees provided an overview of the history of this newly established Trade Union and discussed its future plans, which include popularization of the trade union and cooperation with already existing media associations in Georgia. Mr. Oniani discussed in detail the problems faced by mass media employees, which generally emanate from certain provision of the Labor Code, including but not limited to often non-existent contractual relationships, lack of social guarantees, and "at will" termination.

**Ms. Natia Kuprashvili**, Executive Director of the Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters (GARB) briefly reviewed the history of media associations in Georgia and focused on the common challenges that all media associations face in Georgia. Namely, she talked about the need to create a common information and advertising space, and foster constructive cooperation between the existing media associations, as well as among different association members, who often distrust each other and undercut the goals of the association by unhealthy internal competition. Ms. Kuprashvili also noted that while donor support to media associations is welcome, it also poses challenges to ensuring their ultimate sustainability, as associations used to donor funding often become complacent and cease their activities, once the donor has left the scene.

## **Discussion**

The discussion that ensued after the presentations focused on various issues that according to the participants affect the media independence. Thus, according to **Ms. Maia Mikashavidze** (Dean, Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management at GIPA), journalism students should complete special courses on media law, so that they are better aware of their rights and responsibilities. According to her, such courses could be offered by the Georgian Media Legal Defense Center (GMLDC) or by journalism faculties themselves.

**Mr. Lasha Tugushi** (Head of Georgian Press Association) suggested that it is necessary to look at the whole context and not to focus only on one aspect that is affecting the independence of the media. He noted that while the issues of employment and Labor Code are important, there are various sides of the problem and employers have their own issues regarding the level of qualification of the journalists. According to Mr. Tugushi, it will be useful to have further meetings in a broader format and based on a comprehensive analysis of the media landscape, so that the discussion is informed by the findings of such a study.

**Mr. Ramaz Samkharadze** (Radio Hereti) discussed the needs of the regional media and urged the international community to find ways to influence the Georgian National Communications Commissions (GNCC) to announce a long overdue competition for TV and radio frequencies. He noted that all interested parties should figure out how to ensure that businesses are more actively involved in supporting the media associations and media outlets through commissioning advertisements. Lastly, Mr. Samkharadze discussed the lack of coordination among existing media associations, which hinders collective action.

**Ms. Ia Antadze** (independent journalist) noted that the two EU-funded projects that work with regional media associations are extremely important, since they provide assistance to those 'islands of freedom' in journalism that still exist – investigative journalism and analytic journalism. She also noted that increasing number of journalists and media outlets, including regional TV stations, are adhering to the Charter of Ethics, which is a very promising tendency that should be encouraged.

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

1. Organize to develop a common strategy and apply for the upcoming European Commission's call under the Non-State Actors and Local Authorities thematic program.
2. Continue discussions in a broader format that includes trade unions, other media associations, and employers.
3. Ensure more transparency regarding the activities of existing media associations.
4. Coordinate better among these associations to identify common areas of concern and advocacy.
5. Conduct a comprehensive media landscape study to inform further discussions about the independence of Georgian media.

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