

**WELCOMING WORDS BY
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**Project: *Strengthening the Media's Role as a Watchdog Institution in Georgia*
Round Table - Trust-Distrust of the Georgian Media
February 24, 2010
Sheraton Metechi Palace, "Salkhino" Hall**

Dear Chairperson, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, members of the media and civil society.

Three months have passed since we launched the "Media as Watchdog" project and held an in-depth discussion about media freedom during the EU-funded seminar for civil society. There and then, Dr. Gutbrod presented the main findings of the Caucasus Research and Resource Center's (CRRC) comprehensive media research conducted at the EU's request. This study helped identify the *strengths*, *weaknesses*, *opportunities*, and *threats* to the Georgian media:

- *Strengths* are the high public interest in information on the media and the predominance of television as the preferred medium of information. Television in Georgia determines what people think on current events, and in the capital there is a broad diversity of sources available to viewers.
- *Weaknesses* are the sharp contrast in how the government and the opposition are covered by national broadcasters, and the very different ways in which news is presented – largely positive on national broadcasters and largely negative or neutral on Tbilisi-based channels (Maestro and Kavkasia). Whilst professionals think that the news is influenced by owners, the general public thinks that journalists in Georgia serve the interests of the government.
- *Opportunities*: the internet is an opportunity – within 20 years professionals expect it to be dominant; consumers are quality-driven; the appetite for investigative journalism both among the public and the professionals; and the increasing pluralism throughout the country.
- Finally, the *threats* this study revealed were the further polarization of the media, and Georgian media's delays in engaging the society.

Now, three months down the road, I am glad to be here with you again to follow-up on the trust issue towards the media. I will be most interested to hear what Ms. Tinatin Zurabishvili can tell us about the recent data collected and analysed by the CRRC.

Have the public perception of the media changed since the first CRRC study?

No later than last week, in Chatham House, President Saakashvili reiterated his government's commitment to implement a number of reforms to ensure media freedom and broaden the political debate. He made a specific reference to the BBC support and consultancy work, which is part of another EU-funded project with the Public Broadcaster.

I spoke recently with our BBC consultants. They indeed told me that "**Moambe's**" **editorial line has recently started to change**, for the better – that is, it is becoming more professional and independent.

Is it the case? Would you agree? I will be most interested to hear your collective assessment. In particular, I would be eager to hear the views of the **independent media experts who are now sitting on the Public Broadcaster's Board of Trustees** – in this respect I am glad to acknowledge the presence with us today of Ms. Shorena Shaverdashvili: your very appointment to the Board of Trustees is an important signal. Has it started to change things, and increase trust, both on the part of media professionals and the general public?

And how about the **Charter of Journalistic Ethics** launched last December – also an EU project, conducted in partnership with the Council of Europe? How many journalists have adhered to it? What impact is it having on their work? Does it beef up their sense of trust in their own work and, as a consequence, the trust of their readers or viewers? Please tell me!

Now, two recent events which lead us to reflect on media inclusiveness and freedom:

Over the past few weeks, there has been some concern about **the future of broadcasting in minority languages**. I am now pleased to hear from Mr. Gia Chanturia, the Director General of the Public Broadcaster, that he sees broadcasting in minority languages as "an obligation." This reminds me of a unique EU-funded project some two years ago under which the BBC – again! – together with its partner *Studio Re* established community radios in the minority-populated areas of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe Javakheti. BBC/Studio Re applied for a broadcasting licence, which they never received despite several requests from the European Commission. I hope that giving due consideration to broadcasting in minority languages will improve the general situation in this regard and help the ultimate objective of integration of minorities. Indeed, such broadcasting should not be seen as an "obligation," but also as an opportunity to further integrate all Georgian citizens into the national fold.

You certainly all know **Mr. Vakhtang Komakhidze**; as I understand, he is a well-known and respected investigative journalist. He has been working on a documentary film about the August 2008 War, and travelled last December to Tskhinvali to gather information. When he came back, he suffered very harsh criticisms from politicians – widely aired in

some media. A month ago, Mr. Komakhidze left for Switzerland where he is now seeking political asylum. He claims that pressure and harassment prevent him from freely pursuing his journalistic activities. Subsequently, a TV channel ran a portrait of Mr. Komakhidze, with disparaging and possibly defamatory allegations about his professional and private life.

What is your take on this? Has Mr. Komakhidze breached any Georgian law? If so, let him be charged. Otherwise, what brings him to believe that he cannot work freely in his own country, Georgia?

If journalists themselves do not trust that they can work freely, how can the public trust media who do not trust in themselves?

Of course, changes to the media and media environment cannot happen overnight; moreover, they cannot be taken for granted forever. Hence the need to work continuously and relentlessly. Let the media play fully and freely their role of watchdog towards the powers-that-be!

Although we all know it is an absolute utopia, let us work altogether so that, one day, Oscar Wilde's good word comes true:

"Newspapers have degenerated. They may now be absolutely relied upon!"