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Freedom of the Press 2010 - Georgia

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 15

Political Environment: 26

Economic Environment: 18

Total Score: 59

The constitution and legal system provide for strong protection of freedom of the press. However, in practice the government has sought to stifle independent and opposition media, particularly broadcast media. The authorities have continued their efforts to control editorial and news content at all major television broadcasters in the country.

The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) remains subject to government influence. After repeated delays, the GNCC in July 2009 issued a 10-year satellite broadcast license to Maestro TV, which is connected to opposition leader and former parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze. Prior to its licensing, several local cable affiliates had reportedly been pressured to suspend rebroadcasts of Maestro TV, and unknown assailants attacked the station's offices with a grenade in May. After losing a court appeal in October, the small independent television station Channel 25 in the Ajara Autonomous Republic was ordered to pay a US\$160,000 fine; the owners of the station claimed the penalty was part of an effort to close it down ahead of local elections.

Due to strong protests against government influence over the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), some reform progress was made during 2009. Opposition pressure led to the resignation of GPB's general director in July and Parliament's approval of an increase in the number of GPB board members in September. The board now has 15 members, with seven nominated by the ruling party, seven by the opposition, and one by civil society. In August, a group of civil society and media members formed the Media Club, which was able to push through three nominations. Parliament approved legislation in December that made GPB's budget equivalent to no less than 0.12 percent of gross domestic product, meaning the broadcaster will have a relatively consistent budget and be less dependent on annual government decisions. Despite these changes, the GPB remained susceptible to government pressure, and its editorial line continued to be overtly progovernment throughout the year.

A number of journalists were physically attacked in 2009. Two newspaper journalists were assaulted in April while photographing police officers as they mistreated demonstrators outside the GPB building. In June, several journalists were attacked by local authorities using clubs to disperse a protest outside the police headquarters in Tbilisi. The journalists, including staff from Maestro TV, reported that their equipment was confiscated by police and its content erased. The Ministry of Internal Affairs subsequently suspended some of the officers involved in the incident. A well-known

investigative journalist, Vakhtang Komakhidze, reported receiving death threats from authorities in February after producing a documentary in South Ossetia about Georgia's 2008 conflict with Russia over the territory. Several other journalists across the country reported editorial pressure from local government officials. There were some additional reports of individual attacks on journalists, particularly in the context of clashes between protesters and police.

After the 2008 war, Tbilisi lost what little influence it had over the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia, which formally recognizes them as independent states, exercises varying degrees of de facto political, military, and economic control over the territories. The media environments in these regions are tightly restricted by the separatist authorities.

The media environment in Georgia is highly politicized. A large number of print outlets operate in the country, but with very limited circulation. The broadcast media tend to support either the government or the opposition. However, opposition stations such as Kavkasia TV and Maestro TV do not have national reach. The two privately owned television broadcasters with nationwide coverage, Rustavi-2 and Imedi TV, are subject to government editorial control through opaque ownership deals, managerial appointments, and pressure. These television stations declined to broadcast Western-sponsored reports detailing the causes of the 2008 war. The stations also carried little coverage of opposition protests that spanned several weeks in the spring of 2009. State control over Imedi TV continued to increase during the year. In March, Ministry of Defense spokesperson Nana Intskirveli was appointed to be Imedi's news director. In May, 50 Imedi employees submitted a joint statement protesting what they believed to be biased news coverage. Two of the signatories were fired, four resigned in protest, and the rest were pressured to withdraw their endorsements of the statement. In July, former economy minister Giorgi Arveladze was appointed general director of Imedi.

About 30 percent of the population uses the internet, which was generally not restricted during the year. However, the government reportedly launched an investigation in November into videos posted on Facebook that mocked the patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

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