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Reporting on EU- Related Issues by Local Media Outlets in Georgia: Effectiveness of Government-Media Cooperation

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Introduction

Informing the public about the European Union (EU) (its functions, goals, etc.) is a complex task. Given its scope, this task cannot be exclusive to government agencies. In its own efforts, the government of Georgia needs partners to disseminate information. Civil society at large, including media organizations, is one key partner to engage in awareness-raising campaigns. However, in the Georgian context these campaigns have been considerably successful in mobilizing support for Georgia's EU integration but not necessarily successful in informing the public on what this support should be based. This point is demonstrated in the analysis below.

This report focuses on one aspect of such information campaigns: local media outlets. The report is based on a quantitative survey of representatives of local media outlets conducted by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) as well as in-depth interviews and discussions by the author with representatives of local media and civil society organizations (CSOs) located in Georgia's regions. The report evaluates the challenges faced by such organizations in reporting on EU-related affairs. Special attention is paid to what extent these organizations' cooperation with government agencies is effective for facilitating effective EU reporting by local media outlets.

Consequently, the analysis begins by evaluating public support for EU membership in Georgia, a complex issue that cannot be assessed through any single survey question. This is followed by a discussion on why and how Georgia's regions matter to the public discourse on Europeanization and EU integration. Based on the data collected from conducted interviews², the next section outlines the challenges local media face while covering issues related to Georgia's EU integration, followed by analysis of the strategic communication documents adopted by the government of Georgia. The next section explores the link between local media and central government agencies based on the interviews with media and government representatives. Finally, the report's findings are summarized in the conclusion with an outlook on what can be done to strengthen the link between local media and government authorities in Georgia.

Public support for EU membership in Georgia

Public support for Georgia's integration into the European Union is strong and stable. Public opinion polls consistently demonstrate that roughly three-quarters (and sometimes even more) of Georgian society supports accession to the EU. According to the most recent survey commissioned by the National Democratic

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² The in-depth interviews with media representatives were conducted in the framework of the research Basilaia, E., F. Pazderski, P. Kuchyňková, and J. Cingel. 2019. "Informing the public about the EU: The media practitioners from Georgia, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic share experiences", Report, Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ReporEU-final%20paper.pdf>

Institute (NDI) and conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), 77 percent of respondents said they approved the “Georgian government’s stated goal to join EU.”³ Only 13 percent listed disapproval, while 11 percent said they could not answer the question.⁴ Furthermore, according to the same survey, 73 percent of those who support Georgia’s membership in the EU reported “strong” support for the goal. Notably, this high level of support does not vary across settlement type. Similar levels of support are found outside the capital in other urban areas and in rural areas. There is only one notable exception: areas primarily populated by ethnic minorities. Approval ratings were nine percent lower in Armenian-populated areas and 23 percent lower in Azerbaijani-populated areas (see Figure 1). All these numbers should be viewed with considerable caution, however. The reported support for Georgia’s accession to the EU does not necessarily mean the public is well-informed about the matter. Public knowledge about of EU-related issues is not particularly high. For example, on average, one out of every five Georgians who support the government’s stated goal of joining the EU think that Georgia is already a member of the EU.⁵ As demonstrated in the 2017 survey on “Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia,” 16 percent of Georgians believe the country is a member of the EU, while an additional 10 percent could not answer the question.⁶ Furthermore, in minority-populated areas, 39 percent could not answer the question of whether Georgia is an EU member.⁷ This is the most basic aspect of Georgia’s EU integration and there is currently a significant segment of the public that is not aware of the correct status quo. Lack of knowledge is compounded when slightly more complicated issues are considered, such as the Association Agreement (AA) (of which almost half of respondents, 48 percent, had not heard of at the time the survey was taken).⁸ The figure in the capital was 10 percentage points lower than the aggregate, while in minority settlements it was 24 percentage points higher. Even those who had heard of the AA indicated having unrealistic expectations about it. For example, 80 percent of such respondents expected improvement of Georgia’s healthcare sector as a result of the AA, 79 percent expected improvement in higher education, and 76 percent expected improvement in primary education and security, respectively.⁹

³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2019. “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 15 June 2019.

⁴ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2019. “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 15 June 2019.

⁵ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. “Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 15 June 2019.

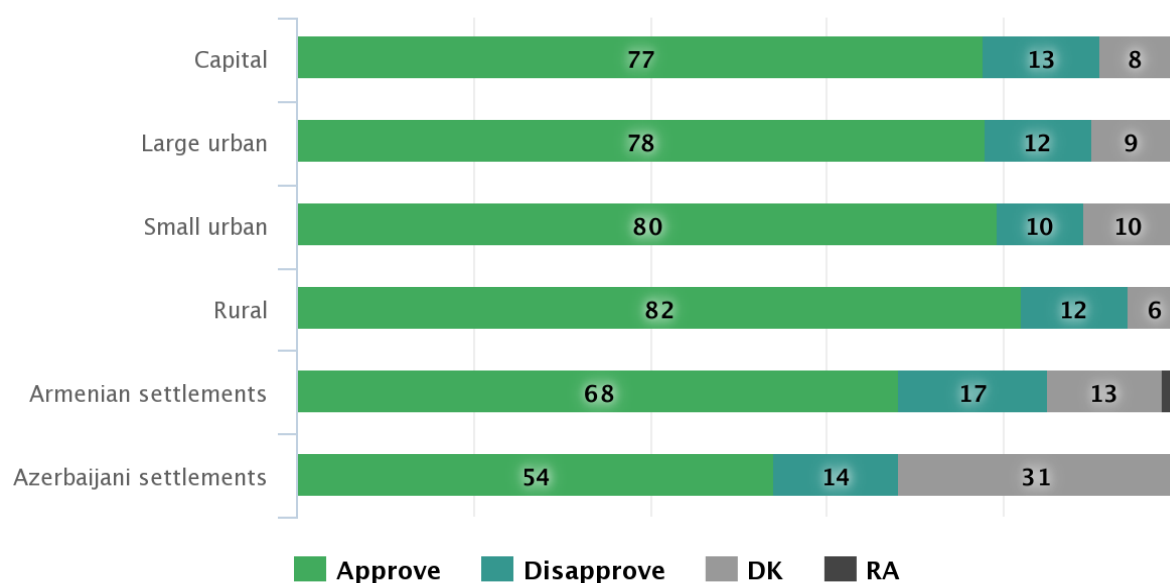
⁶ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. “Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 15 June 2019.

⁷ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. “Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 15 June 2019.

⁸ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. “Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 15 June 2019.

⁹ For more details about Georgian public’s knowledge of the EU-related issues, please see: Europe Foundation. 2017. “Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia: 2017 Survey Report”. [online] Available at: <http://www.epfound.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2017-EU-survey-report-ENG-.pdf> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

Figure 1: Approval of Georgia's EU membership, by settlement type



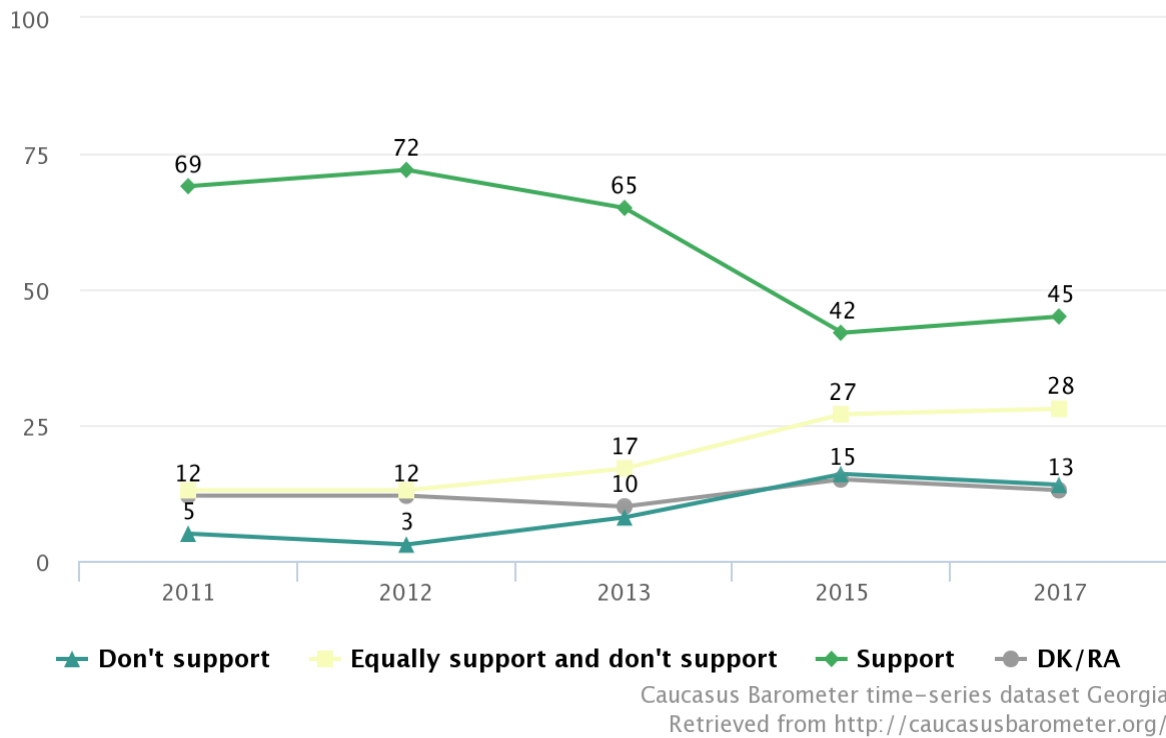
NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Another gap in understanding public support for EU integration is the difficulty in identifying the undecided segment of society.¹⁰ Depending on how the question is formulated and which answer options are available to respondents, responses can vary significantly. For example, in the Caucasus Barometer surveys, this question has five possible answers ranging from “fully support” to “do not support at all.”¹¹ This means that respondents can register an answer that is a middle point on a five-point scale. Given that responses tend to concentrate around the middle point, such a formulation of the question creates a significant amount of “swing” respondents that choose the option “equally support and do not support.” Such respondents accounted for 28 percent of the total in 2017, the highest since 2011 when the figure stood at 12 percent (see Figure 2). It must be emphasized, however, that neither one nor the other formulation of the question and answer categories is a better way to understand the degree of public support for Georgia’s EU membership. These questions simply provide insights and it is up to analysts to interpret the results.

¹⁰ Kakhishvili, L. and E. Panchulidze. 2018. “Democratization and Europeanization in Georgia: How to lead the process?” [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/democratization-and-europeanization-in-georgia-how-to-lead-the-process/> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

¹¹ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. 2017. “Caucasus Barometer 2017 Georgia”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 15 June 2019.

Figure 2: Public support for Georgia's EU membership, 2011-2017



The high degree of support elicited from survey data, no matter how strong, should not be viewed as an end in itself. Instead, Georgia's government and civil society should work to provide more information to the public to raise awareness of EU-related issues. Moreover, they should work to ensure that strong public support for EU membership is an informed choice rather than an echo of the broader political discourse. Such outcomes, if they materialize, would additionally decrease the share of swing respondents in society as more information helps them form firm and well-informed positions.

Why do Georgia's regions matter?

As already demonstrated, information campaigns are effective for increasing support for Georgia's EU integration, but less effective for raising awareness of what this integration entails. Local media can play an important role in this regard. In small communities, interpersonal linkages between residents and local journalists are stronger than in urban areas. Therefore, journalists can disseminate information not only through media coverage but also by serving as informed agents in local interpersonal networks. Consequently, the factors impeding information campaigns in regions should be analyzed in more detail. Often, neither residents nor local media outlets are given enough importance to participate in the political discourse in the capital.

More often than not, when analyzing Georgia's political life or when planning a social intervention, Tbilisi receives primary attention. The country's regions are treated as second-rate in terms of importance. While it is true that roughly one-third of

Georgia's population resides in Tbilisi, this does not justify the overwhelming focus on the capital. As a result, residents of the regions (as revealed by previous GIP research) often feel neglected and that their voices are unheard. Furthermore, CSOs from Tbilisi, which sometimes hold public seminars outside the capital, are often viewed as having an instructive "know-it-all" attitude spreading the "absolute truth." This has counter-productive results, as local leaders often feel offended or fatigued by seminars, lectures, and trainings that rely on one-way communication. These formats do not allow adequate space for residents to voice their own concerns and questions as they see them.

A previous GIP report on issues related to Europeanization and democratization found that three major recurring challenges across various regions of Georgia negatively influenced public perceptions of Europeanization. These challenges included: the perceived flawed nature of the agents of mobilization (e.g. national and local government bodies, CSOs, etc.); distrust towards, frustration with, and fear of political participation (e.g. questioning the motives of political activists and CSOs, lack of visible achievements, personal repercussions in case of political activism, etc.); and an overly materialist political culture (e.g. vague macroeconomic indicators of economic growth as opposed to the perception of one's own economic performance over time).¹²

As a result of these perceptual challenges to information campaigns conducted from the capital, two major questions often come to the minds of residents of Georgia's regions: "First, considering the democratic fatigue of countries such as Hungary and the events of the Brexit referendum, what if Georgia is heading to the place from which other countries are fleeing?" Secondly: "What if Georgians do not want a Western-style liberal democracy,"¹³ a feature inherent to Georgia's further Europeanization? Although these questions are not highly complex and can be answered relatively easily, the fact that they are often asked in Georgia's regions but less often asked in the capital can mean two things: "Either regions in Georgia lack information about these issues or they do not intend to accept any offer [from the capital] without first questioning it, discussing publicly and coming up with a consensual decision."¹⁴ The latter option is a highly positive sign for Georgia's local political culture, while the former indicates that current information campaigns are not sufficiently effective and locals still lack awareness of EU integration.

¹² Kakhishvili, L. and E. Panchulidze. 2018. "Democratization and Europeanization in Georgia: How to lead the process?" [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/democratization-and-europeanization-in-georgia-how-to-lead-the-process/> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

¹³ Kakhishvili, L. and E. Panchulidze. 2018. "Democratization and Europeanization in Georgia: How to lead the process?" [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/democratization-and-europeanization-in-georgia-how-to-lead-the-process/> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

¹⁴ Kakhishvili, L. and E. Panchulidze. 2018. "Democratization and Europeanization in Georgia: How to lead the process?" [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/democratization-and-europeanization-in-georgia-how-to-lead-the-process/> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

Challenges for local media outlets in reporting on EU-related affairs

The challenges facing local media outlets, identified through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with media professionals, can be placed into four distinct but interconnected categories: deficiency in terms of resources; lack of access to competent respondents; anti-Western and/or pro-Russian propaganda; and peculiarities of the target audience. Elimination of these problems is crucial for local media outlets to disseminate evidence-based information. Each specified challenge is discussed below.

Deficiency of resources

The lack of both human and financial resources are significant problems for local media outlets. It is noteworthy that the lack of resources is a general problem not exclusively associated with coverage of issues related to EU integration.

Lack of human resources remains a prominent problem. Since there are no specialized journalists working on specific issues, everyone has to work on everything and journalists do not have time to engage in extra activities such as trainings. Consequently, journalists are not able to specialize in one particular area. Due to the lack of human resources, local journalists have always had a lot of work, hence they tend not to be enthusiastic about participating in trainings. Although trainings are aimed at raising qualifications, one or two days off from work is a challenge for journalists.

Each news item requires a prompt response from media so the issue is covered in a timely manner. However, due to the limited number of staff members, a significant number of issues may not ultimately be reported. Besides, it is virtually impossible for most local media outlets to send a crew to the capital to prepare a news report due to the simple fact of not having enough members on the team. Journalists, therefore, focus on preparing short news that require less time and energy rather than producing in-depth analytical content. According to one respondent:

“When we prepare more analytical content, a journalist works on a single issue for a prolonged time and, therefore, receives lower remuneration. This is a challenge for [the media outlet]. The journalist does not have sufficient motivation either. Therefore, we are doing smaller projects so that the journalists stay motivated.”

Furthermore, often journalists lack necessary language skills to collect information from reliable foreign-language sources. Consequently, media outlets also need to have translators. This is not only related to financial costs but also time, as translation slows down the content preparation process.

The issue of human resources is, of course, intertwined with that of financial resources. Local media outlets are in a difficult position in terms of finances, since they do not get many commercials and the income received from them is minimal. Furthermore, the funding of media outlets by donors has dramatically decreased.

Often local media outlets have to resort to a model by which media staff are involved in the management and/or other activities of NGOs, which involve working with donors or on projects funded through various granting schemes. Journalists receive compensation based on the activities they carry out within NGOs while working at media outlets largely on a voluntary basis. Noted one respondent during an interview:

“Working on each topic requires finances and time, and doing everything in a timely manner is very hard. If we had more financial and human resources, these topics [EU-related issues] would be covered more frequently and more in-depth.”

This creates additional problems, on the one hand, in terms of the high competition within civil society and, on the other hand, in terms of the dual workload of journalists, leaving less time for them to build their skills and qualifications. In addition, the majority of journalists are female. Taking into consideration the traditional gender roles in Georgian society, many are also responsible for domestic work. Consequently, it is obvious why journalists from local media outlets might be reluctant to participate in various trainings.

Based on the above discussion, lack of resources is one of the main challenges local media outlets face in their daily work. This directly threatens the ability of local media outlets to disseminate accurate information about the EU integration issues.

Access to competent sources

When reporting, especially on issues related to EU integration, local journalists face three types of problems with regard to expert sources. First, there is a lack of experts at the local level, and those based in Tbilisi are not always available to provide comment or insight. Second, the language used by experts is often not accessible to members of the public. Third, experts in Tbilisi do not have sufficient competence regarding existing processes in the regions or about those issues in which local residents are interested. At the local level, there is little to no available expertise on issues related to Georgia’s integration into the EU. Accordingly, local journalists often must travel to larger cities such as Tbilisi to conduct interviews. This is especially problematic for TV outlets, since they need quality video materials and often interviews conducted via Skype do not meet the required standards. On the other hand, experts tend to treat local media outlets as of secondary importance and prioritize their appearances on national TV channels. For example, one respondent recollected that when the local outlet was trying to cover the issue of visa liberalization, experts “could not find time for local media outlets due to overbooking from the central media in Tbilisi.” Another respondent discussing the issue of visa liberalization pointed out that in general it is difficult to find experts even in Tbilisi who would know the details of visa liberalization: “Over 95 percent of experts [in Tbilisi] had no idea what procedures Georgia still had to go through to get visa liberalization. This is confusing for journalists and for the public at the same time.” For this reason, if local media outlets are in the process of preparing in-depth

analytical content, they often have to take commentary from a number of people: “When we were working on the issues of pesticides and fulfillment of Georgia’s commitments in this regard, we had to record over 15 respondents and majority of them did not know what obligations were included in the action plan.” This creates further hurdles for journalists and makes the process of analytical reporting even slower and less efficient.

The second problem is related to the language used by experts when speaking to the media. Experts often use overly-specialized language which is inaccessible to the audience. Consequently, important messages are not delivered to the public. This challenge is especially prominent when covering issues related to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), as one respondent argued:

“We have recorded a lot of experts on various [DCFTA-related] issues but their responses are vague. They do not specify anything, for example, how the registration process works, who is a farmer, is a person owning a single cow considered as a farmer? Everything [experts say] is very general ... We do try to simplify the language and talk to the public in a more accessible language but it is not working because those people, who have to be competent in these issues, are not.”

Furthermore, the experts’ competence on local issues is usually low, while respondents who are either from Tbilisi or other urban centers do not have information regarding the issues relevant at the local level. Therefore, the comments of such experts are often irrelevant and/or incomprehensible to local audiences.

The main areas of interest for citizens living in regions are the following: culture; protection of churches and cultural heritage; issues related to agriculture; protection of minority rights, especially in areas where ethnic and religious minorities are residing. Accordingly, it remains unclear for much of the public how Georgia’s integration into the EU is connected to the areas of their interest. It is still unclear what particular benefit a citizen engaged in small-scale farming can receive from EU integration.

Finally, another problem identified by media representatives is that of NGO representatives promoting a specific agenda. One respondent claimed they had witnessed cases when they were clearly being misled by a commentator because of their or their organization’s own specific interests. Consequently, local media outlets find it extremely challenging to gain access to competent, balanced, and comprehensible commentary on issues of national significance related to Georgia’s EU integration. This leads to complications in terms of reporting such issues on a local level, making it more difficult to effectively inform the public.

Anti-western and pro-Russian propaganda

Another significant challenge for local media outlets (which is a general problem in Georgia) is the presence of anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda. Particularly problematic is viral fake news and the inefficiency of countering such content.

Pro-Russian propaganda remains a significant challenge because members of the public generally do not investigate the validity of viral information, which is expressed in very simple language or represented visually. This, in turn, complicates the fight against disinformation. It is difficult for media outlets to determine the sources of viral fake news. Moreover, the time for responding to disinformation is very limited; a story can become viral within one or two hours from being released, and after that time pointing out disinformation is ineffective. According to one respondent, this is the area in which media outlets require a lot of assistance:

“Media need help specifically in this regard so that we can work against the Russian methodology, against Russian soft power ... Media need help with regards to the informational stream, what news is fake, what news is created, we need to protect the public from the influence of such news. This is a challenge for the whole media spectrum including us.”

Furthermore, propaganda spreads quickly and easily, and analytical responses to disinformation are not popular among the public. In fact, there are no effective mechanisms to combat pro-Russian propaganda. In general, detecting fake news and fighting against it can require several days, while two hours is enough for fake news to become viral through social media and word of mouth. Afterwards, even if the fake news is debunked, the damage is done and ignoring it is practically impossible. Finally, it is also problematic that the preparation of analytical materials is not only time-consuming but also requires human resources, a luxury that local media outlets cannot afford. Therefore, one of the only ways for local media to cope with this challenge is to be extra cautious about their own sources:

“Unfortunately, we do not have any means to independently work against propaganda. However, we do have reliable media sources that we use. We commit this way and spend our resources, for example the time of the translator, to cover issues that are a priority for us even if we know that the news is not going to be popular among the audience.”

An additional, related problem is the prevalence of prejudice and stereotypes in the regions of Georgia. The DCFTA is one of the most important achievements for Georgia’s EU integration process. Information on how to access the benefits provided by the DCFTA is increasingly important for farmers and small and medium-sized entrepreneurs operating outside the capital. However, farmers and entrepreneurs often either do not have information about the benefits of the DCFTA or they do not even want to try use opportunities to export to the EU because they perceive the Russian market to be more easily accessible. This assumption is based on two widespread perceptions: (1) Russia is geographically closer than the EU, thus, it is easier to export to Russia; (2) Past experience of exporting to Russia makes it easier to access the Russian market relative to the EU market, especially for small farmers and entrepreneurs. For instance, one respondent pointed out:

“In our region, there are a lot of myths about the EU, for example, regarding exporting agricultural products. [People believe] Russia is close, the EU does not need our products, we will never export to Europe, Russia is the only market for us. Why do we need to go abroad? It is far, expensive, there is a lot of perversion in the EU and so on. If we ask farmers, probably six out of ten will say that Russia is the market for our exports so we have to have good relations with Russia so that our economy survives.”

According to experts on the DCFTA, however, compared to the Russian market the European market is much more stable and reliable. Furthermore, once a product is exported to the EU for the first time, the process of dealing with bureaucracy becomes much easier. Although the EU market should be more desirable than the Russian due to higher export prices, there remains a clear lack of awareness in rural areas on this particular issue. Hence, it is crucial to inform farmers and entrepreneurs more effectively on the advantages of access to the European market.

Target audience interest

One final challenge faced by local media outlets is closely related to widespread stereotypes and prejudices. This challenge is related to the interests of the target audience of any given local media outlet. From the interviews conducted in the course of this research, two main problems emerged: first, some topics are not interesting or appealing for the local public; and second, sometimes the local public perceives certain issues to be highly sensitive, accordingly media outlets must keep a delicate balance between providing evidence-based information to their audience and maintaining their level of trust.

That the population in Georgia's regions are skeptical about the country's achievements in EU integration is not a novel idea. Journalists often come across people who show little interest in such achievements. According to one respondent who recollected covering visa liberalization, “there were a few respondents [that we recorded] who would say that this would not bring any benefits because this is not for us [‘ordinary’ people], this is for the rich, we, the poor will not be able to go anywhere.” Consequently, even if the target audience is not interested in such topics, media outlets make a responsible decision to cover the issues they deem important.

On the other hand, such a scenario may sometimes lead to complications. In some areas where anti-Western prejudice has stronger roots, which can be the case in minority-populated areas, media outlets face a dilemma between informing the public about existing prejudice or debunking fake news, on the one hand, and maintaining the trust of the public on the other. If media outlets declare a war on prejudice and stereotypes, they might suffer from decreasing trust among their audience, which for small, local media agencies is of vital importance. Therefore, as one respondent claimed: “There is one problem of keeping a balance. We know our audience and we know that some topics we have to cover carefully so that we do not lose the trust that we have among the public.” The topics that can cause such

complications, however, may not seem harmful at first glance; e.g. successful stories about farmers who have managed to successfully export their products to the EU. On the other hand, issues such as fake news regarding the Lugar Laboratory's alleged experiments on humans can prove more problematic to cover.

In sum, local media outlets often work with a more vulnerable audience in terms of fake news, prejudice, and stereotypes than do media outlets operating in the capital. This, therefore, creates further complexities in the daily work of local media professionals.

Government communication and information strategy

It must be emphasized that the Georgian government is not passive in terms of communicating on EU-related issues. Various ministries hold informative meetings and seminars outside the capital with stakeholders including representatives of business associations, media organizations, CSOs, local authorities, etc. For example, over 2018 and 2019, the Information Center on NATO and EU has organized over half a dozen meetings, seminars, and study tours for stakeholders in various regions of Georgia. Furthermore, Information the Center is currently implementing a USAID-funded project involving mini-grants for local media organizations and supporting consultations to increase journalists' qualifications.¹⁵ Additionally, the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development has conducted up to ten regional workshops on the DCFTA since 2017 aimed at public-private dialogue with local business representatives as well as trainings for small and medium businesses.¹⁶ More importantly, however, these activities are coordinated under the government 2017-2020 strategy on "Communicating Georgia's Accession in EU and NATO" adopted in 2017.¹⁷ This is not the first such strategy and was preceded by "Georgian Government's Strategy on "Communication and Information on European Integration 2014-2017".¹⁸ Having a strategic document to manage communication is a welcoming step. On the other hand, the design and implementation should be of high quality at the same time.

It should be noted that there are three major differences in terms of the design of the two strategies. First, the 2014-2017 strategy focuses exclusively on European integration, while the 2017-2020 strategy focuses on accession rather than integration and includes both EU and NATO. Second, while the 2014-2017 strategy focuses mostly on the domestic audience, the 2017-2020 strategy sets a broader

¹⁵ "რეგიონალური მედიასაშუალებებისთვის მცირე გრანტების კონკურსი გამოცხადდა" [online] Available at: <http://infocenter.gov.ge/2273-regionaluri-mediasashualebebishvis-mcire-grantebis-konkursi-gamockhadda.html> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

¹⁶ თავისუფალი ვაჭრობა ევროკავშირთან <http://www.dcfta.gov.ge> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

¹⁷ საქართველოს მთავრობა. 2017. „ევროკავშირსა და ნატოში საქართველოს გაწევრების კომუნიკაციის საქართველოს მთავრობის სტრატეგია 2017-2020 წლებისთვის“. ხელმისაწვდომია: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3650131?publication=0>

¹⁸ საქართველოს მთავრობა. 2014. „საქართველოს მთავრობის სტრატეგია ევროინტეგრაციის საკითხთა კომუნიკაციისა და ინფორმაციის შესახებ 2014-2017 წლებისთვის“. ხელმისაწვდომია: http://gov.ge/files/275_38230_373340_1237-1.pdf

goal of not only communicating with citizens of Georgia but also with audiences in EU member states. This change serves the purpose of increasing the support for Georgia's membership in EU and NATO in the member states of the two organizations. Finally, the 2014-2017 strategy is more comprehensive and elaborated than the follow-up strategy for 2017-2020. This means that the latest strategy treats the Georgian public mostly as a homogenous entity and does not identify sub-groups. The document leaves the task of identifying specific target audiences within the Georgian society to the action plan and action plan implementation reports. On the other hand, the earlier strategy for 2014-2017 differentiates between the national level, youth, vulnerable groups, and public opinion influencers. Particularly, commendable is identification of ten different target groups within the sub-group of vulnerable groups that include people living on occupied territories, IDPs, youth not receiving education, pensioners, ethnic minorities, rural population, unemployed persons, socially vulnerable groups, emigrants, and persons with special needs. For each of these target groups, the document identifies specific information channels to be used in communicating with them. Such an approach sets clearer goals from the start.

In terms of the institutional framework, the implementation of the strategy including designing the action plans and reporting is currently coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) following the fusion of the MFA and State Minister's Office for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. Furthermore, all involved ministries, e.g. Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Defense, etc. have established strategic communication departments. However, the working of these units is not always satisfactory. As one expert on the matter noted at a recent conference organized by Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), these departments often cannot draw a line between what their task should be and what the ordinary public relations departments do.¹⁹ Moreover, as one of the representatives of Georgian government stated during the interview, the process of communication is sometimes proactive but mostly has "reactionary" character and responds to the requests of media when they express interest about a certain topic or an issue. This points to the idea that departments of strategic communication have not fully comprehended their tasks and function as the focal points of media requests without necessarily planning large-scale informational campaigns with a specific strategic goal.

If strategic communication departments do not function effectively, which needs a more comprehensive research than the present study, the implementation process of the communication strategy will be jeopardized. Based on conducted interviews with representatives of various government agencies, the most active actor seems to be the Information Center on NATO and EU. The respondents from the center seemed to be the most informed and were capable of naming specific projects and campaigns aimed at raising public awareness on Georgia's European integration. Additionally, the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development is an important actor managing the DCFTA part of the AA and communication process. The Ministry, with the initial support of German Society for International Cooperation

¹⁹ Statement by an expert at the panel discussion organized by the Georgian Institute of Politics, Tbilisi, July 4, 2019.

(GIZ), launched a dedicated website on DCFTA.²⁰ The website includes information about various activities implemented by the ministry as well as information and instructions for businesses.

Consequently, it can be summed up that the government has a communication strategy, which has a broader goal now than before and includes EU and NATO member states as well. However, the strategy is no longer sufficiently detailed, especially in terms of differentiating various target groups for the intervention, as it used to be. Furthermore, strategic communication departments in all involved ministries is a step forward institutionally but their functioning still faces challenging as the teams adjust to their new tasks that are different from the tasks of the ordinary public relations department. Finally, the Information Center on NATO and EU as well as the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development seem to be most proactive actors in terms of strategic communication and their activities are indeed valuable but challenges remain particularly in terms of local media covering these activities.

Cooperation between government and media

Considering all the discussed challenges faced by local media outlets in Georgia, it can be concluded that there is significant room to strengthen how EU-related issues are covered, thus increasing public awareness of Georgia's Europeanization process. One way to strengthen coverage is to establish a strong partnership between government agencies and local media outlets. It seems that such partnerships remain underdeveloped currently. According to a survey of media professionals conducted by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)²¹, 39 percent of surveyed respondents said they do not refer to the websites of governmental agencies while working on EU-related reporting. Furthermore, only 17 percent of the surveyed media professionals regularly use representatives of government organizations, parliament, or the Information Center on NATO and EU as sources when covering EU-related issues.²² This data indicates that the link between government agencies and local media remains weak. This is despite the fact the government of Georgia has declared promoting EU integration, AA/DCFTA implementation, and informing the Georgian public on EU-related issues to be major priorities. Additionally, various government ministries have established units tasked with strategic communication specifically on these issues. Therefore, the fact that local media remains unable to utilize such resources seems puzzling.

²⁰ See: Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia. 2017. "dcfta.gov.ge – Free Trade with the EU". Available at: <http://www.dcfta.gov.ge>

²¹ Basilaia, E., F. Pazderski, P. Kuchyňková, and J. Cingel. 2019. "Informing the public about the EU: The media practitioners from Georgia, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic share experiences", Report, Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ReporEU-final%20paper.pdf>

²² Basilaia, E., F. Pazderski, P. Kuchyňková, and J. Cingel. 2019. "Informing the public about the EU: The media practitioners from Georgia, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic share experiences", Report, Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ReporEU-final%20paper.pdf>

This research has identified four major challenges to government-media cooperation that hinder effective reporting on EU-related issues. These challenges include: accessing respondents from the central authorities; accessing information from the central authorities; the competence of the local authorities; and the effectiveness of activities communicating EU-related issues. It must be noted, however, that these are the perceptions and/or experiences of the interviewed journalists and, therefore, the perspective of government agencies may differ. Nevertheless, these challenges do point to the weakness of government-media cooperation with regards to reporting on Georgia's EU integration.

Accessing respondents from the central authorities

It is self-evident that journalists require information from the central authorities when reporting on issues related to EU integration. However, this is a complex process that is not as straightforward as one might expect. Local media outlets do not have sufficient resources to travel to the capital every time they need an interview from central government officials. Consequently, journalists often resort to three main strategies: conduct the interview through a video call; invite the official to the region; or request a video recording from the public relations department of a specific government agency.

Each of these strategies has its own problems. For example, local TV channels often lack sufficient video conferencing equipment and, as a result, they tend to avoid conducting interviews this way. On the other hand, inviting a central government official to the region is time-consuming and problematic for various reasons. As one respondent maintained:

“If we want to have an interview [with an official from the central authorities], first we need to agree on it a week earlier. Then they have to decide who they will send. Eventually they will send someone who would only know a very specific issue and when we want to ask further questions on broader subjects, they do not have information and this creates awkward situations.”

The final alternative to the two abovementioned strategies is interviews conducted by the Public Relations Offices of a certain government agency with representatives of the government. In this case, quality materials are delivered to the local media outlets. However, the problem is that in this scenario there is no interaction between journalists and respondents and no possibility to ask further questions that might arise in the course of the interview. Therefore, even though delivering such interviews to the local media is a positive gesture from the government, it remains problematic.

Similarly, as the representative of the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development stated during the interview, local media do not tend to request interviews from them:

“We have not had any [requests for interview or information] from local media. I cannot remember anything. ... However, interviews are recorded during the meetings that we organize [in the regions] and are covered by local media. Apart from that, I do not remember any other case of local media coming to us requesting interviews. We do have requests from [Tbilisi-based] media though.”

Consequently, the lack of addresses to the Ministry of Economy additionally indicates that local media, possibly due to objective constraints, fails to access respondents from representatives of government agencies. One probably exception is the Information Center on EU and NATO because they do have regional representatives who can also serve as respondents, albeit, perhaps, not as qualified in terms of details of DCFTA and other complex issues, as representatives of the Ministry of Economy would be.

Accessing information from the central authorities

There are scenarios when media outlets simply require official information in lieu of interviewing central government officials. Even in such cases, the process of obtaining such information can be difficult. In many cases, the media outlet will officially request information from the given ministry. This trend was also confirmed by the interviewed representatives of the government agencies. For example, according to the representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, issues related to visa-free regime is one of the most interesting topic for media in general, including local media outlets: “The interest regarding statistics and border crossings is high. ... There is also high interest related to violations of the visa-free regime, for example, those who returned to Georgia.” However, as media representatives argue during interviews, this process is not very smooth.

According to the interviewed media representatives, three problems often arise from this practice. First, more often than not, the information received in response to the request is vague, and in some cases cannot be used. Second, there have been cases when journalists have waited for over a month to receive requested information from the central authorities. Such practice hinders the daily routine of media organizations and prevents journalists from preparing quality content, especially when the matter is time-sensitive. Finally, even if the requested information arrives in due time and is sufficiently detailed, journalists naturally have follow-up questions to the information provided. However, as there is no direct and instantaneous interaction between the journalist and the source of information, these follow-up questions are either never asked or it takes too long to receive responses:

“Mostly, we request information from ministries and departments. Usually, the problem is that when we submit the official request, it means we cannot conduct a normal interview. On the basis of the answers, new questions arise. However, we do not have the opportunity to ask these questions. Besides, ministries do not tend to answer questions in a precise manner. They provide rather general information and as a result we cannot get answers to specific questions.”

Consequently, not only conducting interviews with central government representatives but also requesting official information entails problems that hinder the professional work of journalists.

Competence of the local authorities

When the central authorities are inaccessible to local media outlets, journalists often turn to representatives of local governments. Local officials, in fact, should be the primary pool of sources for comment on Georgia's EU integration processes. However, this is not the case for a very simple reason: local officials also lack information on and awareness of Georgia's EU integration.

Research has revealed that local officials are often unaware of Georgia's obligations towards the EU and of how these obligations should be met. Furthermore, when local journalists need an interview on either the AA or the DCFTA, representatives of the local self-government bodies typically lack the competence to comment. Therefore, journalists must look to sources in Tbilisi which, as already demonstrated, comes with its own set of challenges.

The problem of local authorities lacking competence on EU-related affairs was a recurring theme in the interviews conducted for this research. As one of respondent argued, "representatives of the local authorities themselves are not informed regarding the topics related to the EU. Besides, they do not have any person who would be able to communicate some information to us, representatives of media, or any other stakeholder." This is a significant challenge not only for local media making evidence-based reporting on EU integration-related issues but also generally for the government's communication strategy.

On the other hand, the Information Center on NATO and EU does organize meetings with representatives of local governments in various regions to strengthen strategic communications at the local level.²³ According to the representative of the Information Center, they are running a self-initiated project "Communicators for More Communication", which involves trainings on EU integration issues for Mayors, Governors and representatives of Public Relations units of local self-government. Furthermore, the representative of the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development also confirmed the lack of competence especially at the local level of governance:

"Generally, when the implementation of DCFTA started, not only the self-government officials but also MPs lacked this information [about DCFTA]. We have conducted targeted trainings for both, MPs and representatives

²³ "სტრატეგიული კომუნიკაციების საკითხებზე ბათუმში შეხვედრა გაიმართა" [online] Available at: <http://infocenter.gov.ge/2164-strategiuli-komunikaciebis-sakithkhebze-bathumshi-shekhvedra-gaimartha.html> Accessed on 15 June 2019. "შეხვედრა სტრატეგიული კომუნიკაციების დაგეგმვის შესახებ ქუთაისში" [online] Available at: <http://infocenter.gov.ge/2163-shekhvedra-strategiuli-komunikaciebis-dagegmvis-shesakheb-quthaisshi.html> Accessed on 15 June 2019.

of local self-government, in order to increase their awareness on DCFTA issues. Additionally, when there are regional meetings we always invite local authorities in order to save time and resources.”

Notwithstanding these efforts, however, the situation in this regard remains far from ideal. Local authorities need to become focal points for local media to gain information and commentary on how to connect the benefits of European integration for Georgia and specific improvements of quality of life or economic opportunities for the rural population of the country.

Effectiveness of communication activities regarding EU-related issues

The fourth important problem is connected with the effectiveness of activities dedicated to communicating EU-related issues. Such activities primarily include (but are not limited to) the Information Center on NATO and EU. This research revealed there are multiple challenges related to the activities of Information Center employees. First of all, the lack of resources must be noted – since the salaries at the Information Center on NATO and EU are not sufficiently high for local representatives of the Center, its employees are engaged in various different activities in addition to their normal workload. Furthermore, there is no separate budget allocated for activities by which information campaigns could be funded. Therefore, the work carried out by the employees of the Information Center on NATO and EU cannot reach a large audience since it is limited to small-scale meetings. These small-scale meetings do not have sufficient significance for local media outlets to report on them and prepare individual stories for news programs. Consequently, the media cannot deliver information about the activities carried out by the regional representatives of the Information Center on NATO and EU to an audience which is not present at such meetings. For its part, the Ministry of Agriculture has established consultation centers but, according to one respondent, the centers “do not do any interesting job” and “exist only formally.”

Consequently, the respondents of this study did not consider the Georgian government’s communication activities to be effective. This lack of effectiveness hinders the work of local media outlets in terms of providing balanced and evidence-based coverage of EU integration-related issues.

Conclusion: Towards more effective local media coverage of Georgia's EU integration

Local media outlets represent important channels for informing the public in Georgia's regions. Consequently, cooperation with these organizations, particularly on issues related to Georgia's EU integration, is useful for all stakeholders: the government of Georgia, civil society organizations, and the media itself. It is noteworthy that each stakeholder has the capacity to assuage the challenges currently faced by the regional media. Cooperation with media outlets can ensure the public is properly informed of why the government of Georgia seeks to join the EU and how the integration process can benefit particular regions, residents, and communities.

Georgia's government has become increasingly active in strategic communication regarding EU integration. This is manifested in the establishment of strategic communication departments at various ministries, expansion of regional coverage of the Information Center on NATO and EU, and regular meetings, seminars, roundtables, and workshops organized in Georgia's regions. However, this research has demonstrated that local media interested in reporting on EU-related issues still often find themselves faced with challenges (see Table 1) which cannot be surmounted without additional support from government agencies and civil society organizations.

Table 1: Challenges to reporting on EU-related issues in Georgia's regions

General challenges for local media outlets in reporting EU-related issues	Weaknesses of cooperation between the government and local media
Lack of financial and human resources	Lack of access to officials as sources
Lack of access to competent respondents	Lack of access to official information
Anti-western and pro-Russian propaganda	Lack of competence of local authorities
Lack of interest among the target audience on some EU-related issues	Lack of effectiveness of activities dedicated to communicating EU-related issues

Consequently, it is strongly recommended that government agencies as well as CSOs partner with local media outlets to facilitate more comprehensive and effective communication strategies to inform citizens of Georgia's regions about EU integration. This can take various forms. The central authorities in Tbilisi should intensify awareness-raising campaigns to inform representatives of local governments so as to enable them to provide commentary to local media. Furthermore, CSOs, especially think tanks, can be of significant assistance to local

media as sources of expert commentary. Representatives of think tanks are an important part of expert circles and therefore are capable of cooperating with local media outlets. It is crucial that organizations functioning in Tbilisi are available to local media and work to develop expertise about issues relevant to Georgia's regions. Despite the fact that often even think-tanks do not have enough staff, it is important that they connect issues of national importance to problems existing at the local level, to make these issues more relevant and understandable to residents of the regions. In this regard, it is important that when CSOs from the capital organize various events in the regions, they proactively contact local media and offer their expertise as commentators, so that media are informed in advance and do not have to seek out such events on their own. This will contribute to establishing stronger connections between media organizations and CSOs.

Additionally, in order to decrease the impact of the lack of human resources on the work of local journalists, expanding the qualifications of local journalists is of the utmost importance. This can be achieved through the government providing trainings and workshops, in many cases in partnership with CSOs. Local journalists lack information about EU integration processes and do not have a lot of opportunities of professional development. Therefore, trainings dedicated to these topics can bring significant benefits to journalists. Trainings can also be provided in online formats, which may be even more favorable for some journalists. In terms of raising the next generation of qualified journalists, it is equally important that early-career journalists and journalism students are provided with training opportunities.

Finally, local media tend not to have necessary financial resources and may need to work in partnership with analytical organizations. Alternatively, an analytical organization may consider including funding for media outlets in their project proposals. A good practice in this sense is the project of the Information Center on NATO and EU, in the framework of which mini-grants are provided to media organizations. This can have multiple benefits for local media outlets and such practices can also be adopted by CSOs in Tbilisi.

Overall, such activities, if implemented affectively, can have significant benefits for better informing residents of Georgia's regions. This, in turn, will help citizens reach informed opinions on Georgia's EU integration as well as the specific benefits that derive from the integration process. Finally, the Georgian public will gain a deeper understanding of how individuals and communities directly benefit from EU integration.

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