

# 4 INTERFERENCE IN EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE/CLOSURE OF THE PROGRAMS

Three political talk shows were closed in 2015. Two of them were among the best rated programs of Imedi TV. A comment by a representative of the governing party on the editorial decision of the TV company leaves the impression that the government is interested in this process. The third talk show was of the Public Broadcaster and its closure was connected to the program anchor's marriage to an opposition party leader and who was fired from the Public Broadcaster in 2016. The journalists and the head of news service program were fired at the Adjara regional TV channel – TV 25 at the end of 2015.

## 4.1. CLOSURE OF TALK SHOWS IN IMEDI TV

On 29 August 2015 Imedi TV issued the statement on suspension of political talk show and presenting them to the viewers in the new format in 2016.

Producers and journalists of these two programs – *Reaktsia* and *Imedis Kvira* – issued joint statement in the social network, saying that suspending commercially beneficial programs in the beginning of the TV season, 1 year before the election raised suspicions. The editors and an anchor Inga Grigolia stated that Imedi's decision was a result of political influence. Their suspicions are confirmed by the fact that the journalists learned about the decision of the programs' closure from TV, despite the fact that the programs had their new preview for the new fall season already recorded.

Imedi TV made its own statement in response, claiming that the journalists' comments were baseless.

Inga Grigolia spoke about the government's interference in the editorial issues even before the closure of her program. In March 2015 she publicly stated that the parliamentary faction of the Georgian Dream demanded from Imedi editors not to cover in *Reaktsia* the protest rally planned by the opposition National Movement for 21 March.

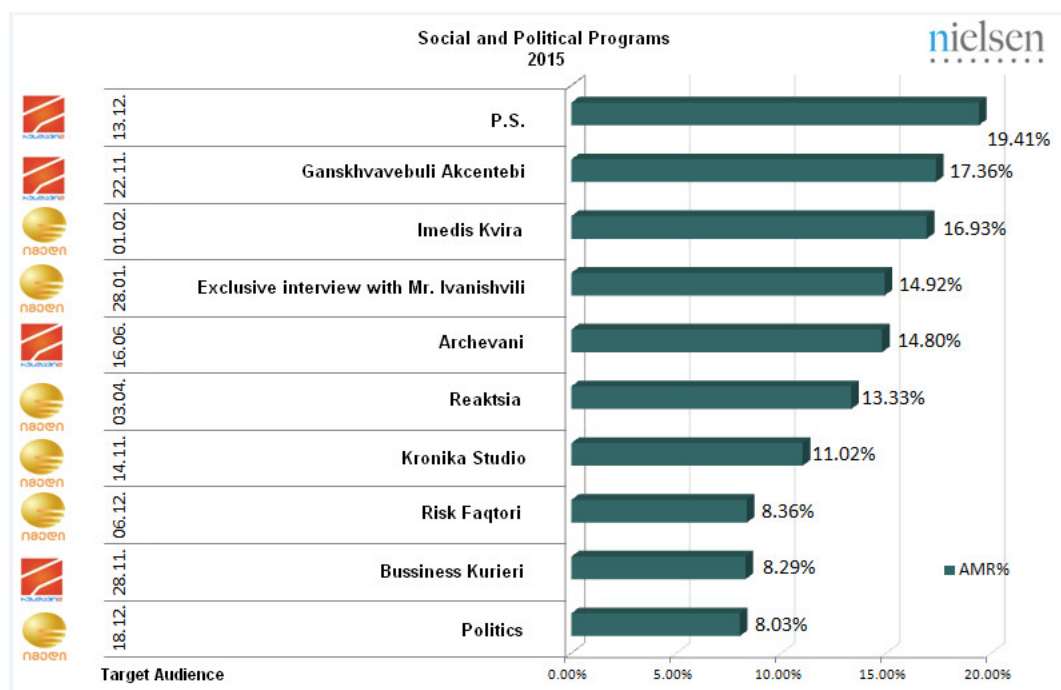
While speaking about the closure of Imedi programs with Rustavi 2 journalists, representative of the Georgian Dream parliamentary majority Gogi Topadze said<sup>1</sup>, that the anchors had been warned a number of times and that nobody could be forgiven for partiality.

Gogi Topadze, Georgian Dream: **“The channel began to only criticize and insult the government and of course they had to take some measures. They have been warned a number of times, that they should be objective, I also told them this a number of times. Nobody will be forgiven to be nonobjective.”**

Inga Grigolia also claimed<sup>2</sup> that Irakli Rukhadze who is involved in Maestro TV Channel ownership dispute and runs businesses of the family of Patarkatsihvili (owner of Imedi TV) was connected to her dismissal.

Ten opposition parties outside the Parliament made a statement on the programs’ closure, stating that closure of commercially profitable programs with high ratings could not be logically explained. They called on the international community to “pay attention to the increasing manifestations of authoritarianism in Georgia” .

According to the TV ratings measurement company TVMR data for Georgia, the talk show Reaktsia was among the 10 best TV programs of the year in the ratings for 2015.



Closure of political talk shows during the pre-election period has been assessed as problematic by the NGOs – Transparency International Georgia, ISFED and MDF.

<sup>1</sup> Kurieri, Rustavi 2 TV, 31 August 2015. <http://rustavi2.com/ka/news/25055>

<sup>2</sup> Timer, 9 February, 2015. <http://www.timer.ge/grigoliam-aseve-misi-da-irakli-rukhadzis-urthierthobaze-isaubra/>

## 4.2. CLOSURE OF THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER TALK SHOW

On 4 September, during the discussion about challenges for the TV media, organized by the Media Advocacy Coalition, Basa Janikashvili, advisor to the Director General of Public Broadcaster, announced that the anchor of the First Studio program Eka Mishveladze had a conflict of interest because of her marriage to politician Aleksi Petriashvili. The journalist herself learned about the closure of her program during this public meeting.

Eka Mishveladze's contract with Public Broadcaster did not include prohibition of the conflict of interest. According to Article 22.2 of the Code of Conduct of Public Broadcaster, employee is obliged to declare conflict of interest. Specifically, "If an employee, acting reasonably and in good faith, concludes at any time that there is a conflict of interest or that there are reasonable grounds for a perception of conflict of interest, then the employee has a duty to disclose the matter to his or her immediate supervisor. The Broadcaster and the employee should resort to any appropriate measure to remove the conflict. Based on the circumstances, the employee might have to refuse reporting certain issues or perform other service<sup>3</sup>." This Article does not envision closure of the program in the case of possible conflict of interest. Instead, it provides for overcoming conflict of interest in agreement with management, by refraining from covering certain issues or by working on other tasks.

After harsh critique from the civil sector came the news that the journalist received an offer from the channel's management and would anchor a new analytical program from January 2016<sup>4</sup>. After waiting for six months Eka Mishveladze received an official letter from the management informing her about the termination of her contract. Eka Mishveladze is going to appeal the decision in the court.

## 4.3. THE FIRING OF TV 25 JOURNALISTS

On 31 December 2015 all employees of TV 25 news service were fired by the management. Later it partly reversed its decision and fired only journalists Nino Kheladze, Jaba Ananidze, Irma Zoidze and the head of the news service Maia Merkviladze.

This decision was preceded by a briefing of the head of news service on 29 December 2015, who accused the TV channel's management and owners of interference in editorial independence. Such statement was made by journalist Jaba Ananidze, who said that an owner requested that the journalist make his tone softer while reporting on Giorgi Chkonia – a businessman close to the government.

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<sup>3</sup> Public Broadcaster Code of Conduct, Article 22.2, p. 51.

[http://eurocommunicator.ge/mdf/uploads/GPBs\\_in-house\\_Code\\_of\\_Conduct\\_ENG\\_-\\_Copy.pdf](http://eurocommunicator.ge/mdf/uploads/GPBs_in-house_Code_of_Conduct_ENG_-_Copy.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> IPN, 5 November, 2015. <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/politika/352911-eka-mishveladze-sazogadoebriv-mautsyebelze-sazogadoebriv-politikuri-thoq-shous-moamzadebs.html?ar=A>

The conflict in TV 25 came after the story about arrest of an employee of the Adjara Trade and Industry Chamber, aired on 14 December. The arrested person is family member of the channel's chief director, for which reason the chief director insulted and threatened the head of the news service Maia Merkviladze. 15 days after the incident, the management fired all employees of the news service.

The management of TV 25 made an announcement about hiring new employees. Meanwhile, the fired employees turned to Batumi City Court, claiming interference in editorial policy and violation of labor rights.