

Methodology

The research is based on mixed methodology: document analysis, interviews, qualitative and quantitative media monitoring.

Document analysis involved the analysis of contracts as well as documents certifying the delivery and acceptance of services signed with media outlets for the purpose of advertising or information dissemination. Besides requesting documents in a form of public information, we also analyzed the documents available in the database of the State Procurement Agency.

The studies conducted by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) on the impact of soft censorship were also analyzed.

Interviews. A structured questionnaire was developed to analyze the practice and criteria for allocation of funds necessary for advertising and information dissemination by public agencies. A total of 22 respondents were interviewed with 14 entities giving their consent on face-to-face interviews, while the remaining 8 respondents¹ were interviewed in writing.

The representatives of four news agencies were interviewed about the practice of placement of advertising and paid news articles. A representative of Info 9 refused either to give a face-to-face interview or to fill in a questionnaire.

Media monitoring. Online media content was analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods (see detailed description of methodology in section 5). Monitoring of advertising articles placed in newspapers was conducted through the principle of random sampling, based on the data indicated in the documents certifying the delivery and acceptance of services.

¹ Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure; 2) Ministry of Finance; 3) Ministry of Corrections; 4) Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection; 5) Ministry of Internal Affairs; 6) Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development; 7) Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection; 8) Government of Georgia

Main findings and recommendations

The results of the survey revealed the following trends:

- **Distribution criteria and procedures:** Criteria and procedures for the selection of media outlets to have them release advertisement/information of budget organizations, which would ensure equal conditions, fair competition and transparency, are not formalized; nor is a uniform practice established in this regard.
- **Rating and print run system:** A certified rating system of international standards is applied to Broadcast media alone though it does not extend to regional TV channels; print run of newspapers is not transparent; nor are international systems of online media access used; all this makes it unclear based on what technical criteria are concrete media outlets selected from among regional TV channels, newspapers and online media.
- **Antidiscrimination policy:** Recommendation #7 of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), which requires that States Parties make antidiscrimination policy part of contracts, is not reflected in the contracts signed with media outlets.
- **Xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Western media platforms:** Separate entities continued to sign service contracts with media outlets with editorial policies favoring xenophobia, homophobia and anti-Western sentiments in 2015 too.
- **Spreading information reported by Sputnik and other Russian media platforms:** The news agency Newspress, associated with the pro-Russian political party Democratic Movement and the Russian propaganda media platform Sputnik, which is engaged in promoting Sputnik and spreading anti-Western messages is among media outlets that receive budget funding (in 2015: GEL 23,371; in 2016: GEL 28,941).
- **National TV channels:** Advertisements on TV channels of national coverage and mixed coverage are placed mainly according to the results of TV audience surveys; in this regard, Rustavi 2 and Imedi TV channels are in the lead of TV ratings. The exception is GDS which was sixth by TV ratings in 2015 and had the income lower by 21.7 percent than Maestro TV channel which ranked the third and higher by 82.4 percent than Kavkasia TV channel which ranked the eighth.
- **Breach of law by broadcasters:** Several contracts with national as well as regional broadcasters envisage the provision of service which is prohibited by the law: production of programs or reports sponsored and financed by administrative bodies, which represents the interference with the editorial independence.
- **Regional TV channels:** The highest share of financing among regional broadcasters were received by the regional broadcaster of Kvemo Kartli and “Rioni.” Four regional broadcasters depend on budget revenues either fully or by 70 percent, which, in fact, means that they are subsidized.
- **Radios:** Among radio channels, the highest share of budget advertising was received by Fortuna holding and the regional radio “Dzveli Kalaki.”
- **Print Media:** The newspapers “Sakartvelos Respublika” and “Rezonansi” are those outlets among print media, which received the highest shares of budget revenues. Moreover, several

newspapers do not clearly separate articles financed by government or other entities from editorial materials, thereby misleading the customers.

- **Online media:** The financing of news agencies does not always pursue the objective of reaching as larger audience as possible, because budget monies are sometimes allocated to newly established media platforms. In certain cases, contracts include such provisions that represent a blatant meddling in editorial independence. Sponsored articles are mainly not separated from editorial materials, including from the content financed by political parties. The exception is the news agency IPN which, in contrast to the practice of previous years, signposts sponsored materials though one can still observe exceptions to this rule. The content analysis of online media shows that on certain occasions the coverage favors the government though, basically, the news agencies publish critical opinions.
- **Pre-election context:** If a media information service in pre-election period is used not for public interests but to promote a concrete political party or an election subject, the use of this service will be considered the abuse of administrative resources which is prohibited by the law.

Recommendations drawn up on the basis of the above mentioned findings partially rest on guidelines of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and partially rest on local peculiarities:

- **WAN-IFRA:** Laws and regulations guaranteeing fair and transparent official advertising should be enacted and properly enforced.
- **WAN-IFRA:** Impartial audience measuring systems based on certified standards should be established to ensure that advertising allocation can be based on technical criteria.
- **WAN-IFRA:** All state funding for media development and support should be allocated in public competitions on principles of transparent and non-discriminatory state aid under equal conditions for all media.
- The government should consider the Recommendation #7 of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and make the award of contracts to media outlets conditional upon the observance of antidiscrimination policy.
- Administrative bodies should not enter into contracts with those media outlets which use hate speech and spread information of Russian propaganda media platforms.
- Broadcasters and administrative bodies should observe the requirement of the law, which prohibits the sponsorship and financing of programs and reports by administrative bodies. The regulatory commission should immediately respond to such cases.
- **WAN-IFRA:** Any state support of content production must be clearly separated from its role as advertiser, with editorial integrity explicitly guaranteed, and be subject to transparent review.
- In order to rule out the use of media service for political aims in the pre-election period (which is prohibited by the law), nongovernmental organizations and the regulatory commission should monitor this process and respond to any such case by notifying the inter-agency commission set up at the Central Election Committee and the Ministry of Justice of Georgia.