

# Georgian media: covering conflict in Abkhazia

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## **Abstract**

The collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by numerous violent conflicts in some of its former territories, which was simultaneously transformed into armed clashes. Georgia had to face two extremely violent conflicts – in Abkhazia and Ossetia, and our population has still to live with the pain of losses and a great amount of unsolved and, as it seems, unsolvable, problems up today.

Newly emerged Georgian media had to cover the hostility within and between ethnic communities, which was further degenerated into war in Abkhazia. The main problem that journalists and their audience faced in that period was that nobody knew, how the issues of this type must be covered: during the Soviet regime, the Communist Party once declared that all the nations in that huge imperia were “brothers” and were equal, nobody dared to point out that thing didn’t go in an ideal way, so there was no culture or experience of reporting on ethnic problems. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a lot of problems emerged in the political and social life of the former Soviet republics; Georgia was among them. Conflicts among “brothers” started and Abkhazia and Ossetia appeared to be the so called “hot points”.

## **I.**

It is not new that the collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by numerous violent conflicts in some of its former territories, which was simultaneously transformed into armed clashes. Georgia had to face two extremely violent conflicts – in Abkhazia and Ossetia, and our population has still to live with the pain of losses and a great amount of unsolved and, as it seems, unsolvable, problems up today.

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As it usually happens, both people, Georgians and Abkhazs, though having a long-lasting common history, preferred to see all that from their own point of view. For Georgians, who’s national memory lasts for at least 30 centuries (23 centuries ago Georgia as a state faced the necessity of governmental reforms and a problem of unification of rules of spelling), Abkhaz tribes, that settled on their territories much more later, are new-comers, who must behave themselves like guests, and that was the main point, that troubled the citizens and journalists as well. Nobody even tried to analyze the fact, that Abkhazs have no alternative motherland, as representatives of other ethnic groups living in Georgia have, and all Abkhazs as they are today, originate from our common territories.

Newly emerged media at that time obviously couldn’t have either clear concept of international standards regarding journalistic ethics or responsibilities to realize what kind of role can media play and how the way of reporting can influence on creation of public opinion. It seems that things went vice versa – public opinion was leading. And what could public opinion first provide and then accept? Everybody in Georgia still remembers those barefooted, hungry, crying people, who arrived at Tbilisi railway station, telling horrible stories of their relatives and neighbors murdered. That was the only side of truth available to Georgian society, proved by TV and newspapers that were rather supportive of war. The only side of reality stayed in Georgian media for a long time, and the images of enemy, intentionally or unintentionally, became so common to Georgians, that even such a tolerant race as Georgians are, started to believe, that there was nothing good in our relations in the past. The new generation that grew up in this hard 15 years after conflict has no experience in living in undivided country or a personal point of view on the problem. They even can’t imagine, that elder ones once could have friends among Abkhazs and that those friends of ours are even less happy then we are, because the warfare took place at their homes and that the other side of truth is not as beautiful as Georgians would like. This young part of our society learns about all this issues from media that has a great impact on their minds. Here we face

the most complicated question, concerning the role of media in peacebuilding in divided societies.

A few years ago, one of our students at the entrance exam wrote an essay, where he described a story of a Georgian from Abkhazia, whose family was murdered by Georgian soldiers. The novel was really outstanding not only because of problem it concerned, and according to the tradition of our Department, we let the editor of one of our newspapers DILIS GAZETY (The Morning Newspaper) who was one of the examiners, publish it. Nobody could imagine the reaction of society – angry calls and letters of protest from different organizations lasted for weeks: our citizens didn't want to face such truth even 12 years after conflict. Here it comes clear, why almost all the publications of Georgian media are so alike. That is a classic example of symbiotic relations of media and society – both have to move in one and the same direction, otherwise the newspapers will not be sold and TV-s not be watched.

Today in Georgia you can come across directly aggressive articles very seldom. It is obvious, that journalism has developed and our journalists have got some experience in covering these issues, but it is too early to declare that we have a great progress in this field. Is this progress really the achievement of better journalistic education or the result of self-developed professional skills? It is hard to answer this question, maybe, both.

While interviewing people not concerned with Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, our students find out, that they do really seek to learn more about events that took place in Abkhazia during the warfare and after it to find the proper way to get to solution, but there is no adequate source where one can find and compare both side's positions. One of the rare attempts to come closer in providing readers with such a source is the newspaper PANORAMA, a unique product of Georgian-Abkhaz journalist's collaboration, supported by International War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) organization. A bilingual (Georgian and Russian) monthly newspaper for the Caucasus started in March 2003. Covering the Caucasus on the whole, PANORAMA focuses on the events of Georgia and especially Abkhazia. Since the end of the armed conflict, due to the lack of communication between the parties in conflict, editors of the newspaper (IWPR Georgia Coordinator Margarita Akhvlediani in Tbilisi, Inal Khashig in Sukhumi, Abkhazia and IWPR Caucasus Project Coordinator Tom de Waal in London) came to a decision to select and train young Abkhaz and Georgian journalists, who hopefully will become the professionals of the next generation in their common homeland. But there is one considerable point – the newspaper is not popular, and even that part of the

mass audience, which is really interested in the issue has mostly never heard about it. Maybe the main reason is that PANORAMA “is not dedicated to conflict resolution or analyzing alternative ways to settle the conflict over Abkhazia. “The goal of the newspaper is to inform Georgian and Abkhaz societies about socio-political life of two parties, divided by war,” – argues one of the editors Margarita Akhvlediani, and although Salome Odisharia, a young scholar, working on this issue, states in her research that PANORAMA “gained popularity among journalists, as well as within Georgian and Abkhaz societies”, this statement doesn’t seem to be true yet. The first reason, in my opinion is one, declared above by the editor herself – readers in war-torn society are looking for items that are ignored by the newspaper, *conflict resolution and alternative ways to settle the conflict over Abkhazia*. The answers to these questions bother the minds of people on both sides most of all. We consider that the other reason derives from the editor’s too careful position, and concerns with the possibility for journalists to reach the project. “Dozen requests from journalists are coming to include them in this project. But we have really strict criteria for hiring journalists and only few had a possibility to reach it” – states Margarita Akhvlediani. It is hard to imagine that without a mood of competition and within a limited number of authors it will be easy to achieve any progress in journalistic activities. Maybe it would be better to get strict criteria for writings, rather than journalists. More young people, even if they are not professional journalists yet, can be engaged in this project as free-lancers. I guess that the problem comes from the point of financial support of this project that means that editors are limited by a lot of restrictions, but there always can be found a way to make things better. Avoiding painful issues and limiting the access of journalists to your newsroom is not a way that leads to popularity.

A few years ago one of Georgian TV-channels demonstrated two documentaries, produced by Georgian and Abkhaz journalists. No doubt, that those films were the first and up to today the only visible afford of journalists to start the process of restoring relations. “10 years later...” is the title of the film, shoot in 2003. The goal of journalists was to show the conditions of life of ordinary people in Abkhazia, to give them an opportunity to express their thought and to ask their questions.” The whole movie is full of terrifying personal stories, horror, mourning and tragedy “– states Salome Odisharia. Georgians, for the first time had an opportunity to see what damages caused that war to one of the most beautiful places in the world. Yes, we live much better – declared Georgians. To tell the truth, the main feeling while watching this documentary was pity to those, who are declared to be “enemies” by the one part of our society.

In Gudauta, one of Abkhaz towns, Georgian team has visited the museum, dedicated to the honor of common people fall in war. There were photos of infants and babies, pregnant women, young fellows, teenagers, combatants, old people... Such photos are very common for us, but most of us even never had an idea, that not only Georgians were the victims in that war. I hope that this very movie made many people start thinking of Abkhazs really having some background to be afraid of Georgians.

There was a very significant episode in that film – one woman, whose father was Georgian and mother Abkhaz made a decision to change her Georgian family name to her mother's, and her Abkhaz mother told her, that a person getting rid of father's name today will easily get rid of mother's name tomorrow. One who can't carry his name with honor is not worth of carrying any name at all... Is that old woman our enemy?

One more episode of the movie – the interview of Abkhaz woman, who acted as a nurse in wartime: "I have seen the horror of war. Now I am a teacher and I never retell the stories about war to students, as I don't want to stimulate the hatred and anger within them and I don't want them endure war in their lives". This is the position that is worth to be shared not only by journalists on both sides.

It will not be a truth to say that everyone in Georgia enjoys the idea of resolving Georgian-Abkhaz (if not to take in consideration the third Russian party) conflict by peaceful means. However, the reaction from Georgian audience was quite diverse. The most aggressive response has been observed from officials' side of Abkhazian government in exile. "We were blamed, that the Abkhaz side bribed us, and therefore we made a movie so tolerant and showed Abkhaz's sorrow and tragedy" – said one of the journalists. However, the aggressive reaction from IDP society, as well as from other ordinary Georgian citizens was not detected: "The most IDP-s had more reasonable response. As they are victims of the war, they can appreciate other's feelings and emotions, even if the "others" are your "enemies", stated another journalist.

Here we face one of the most paradox situations one could imagine. Society, or common citizens appeared wiser and more sophisticated than the government and media workers, who still fail to provide the audience with needed and desired information.

Professional journalists do not set to resolve conflicts. It's not their business. They seek to present accurate and impartial news, but a conflict can often be reduced through good reporting. And it is very important for the divided societies to be informed of how the authorities of their country view the way of settling the problem too, or here I mean that while covering some particular issue, journalist must have a very

definite idea on the official position on it, and then make his/her choice to agree or disagree.

Today it seems that young Georgian government has no clear idea how to settle ethnic conflicts in Georgia or settle them or not at all. It gets obvious after the recent “armed journey” to another “hot point”. The comments of Georgian media on these events were as chaotic and diverse as the actions of militaries. What goals were seeking our politicians while taking such a decision? This issue remains an unsolved puzzle for citizens even today. The strategy of Georgian side in Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is not determined as well. From one hand, our government claims that the only way to resolve this conflict and bring the war-torn society to further coexistence are exclusively peaceful means, from the other hand, some of our officials promise their nation to return the lost territories even if military invasion will be needed. How has the Georgian media to act in this situation?

While our authorities are looking for the answers in the numerous trips all over the world, Georgian journalists and common people seem to come to the ways of solving of their numerous problems asking each other – is there a way to return to Abkhazia without a new escalation of conflict and is it worth to kill each other again if it doesn't lead to any visible result, but promoting Russian military business in the region?

**References:**

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