

Caucasus: Apr '09

Journalists hone their war reporting skills in IWPR-organised military exercise
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An unprecedented simulated military operation, involving real soldiers, was organised by IWPR's Georgia office in April to improve local journalists' conflict reporting skills

More than a hundred people participated in the event, on April 26-27, including 14 television, radio and print journalists, up to 70 enthusiasts of the war game Strike Ball, as well as soldiers

The whole arrangement felt like a real emergency, with the deafening roar of explosions, aggressive-looking troops equipped with the latest weapons and press briefings by participants posing as international political figures. The adverse terrain and cold weather added to the trainees' sense of being part of a real emergency

The event was staged in an abandoned village in the Kiketi Forest outside the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. The participants formed two groups pitted against each other – Georgians and Russians – in imitation of the two sides in last August's conflict over South Ossetia

The choice of Russia and Georgia as the warring sides was a deliberate one," said Dimitri Avaliani, a political commentator from the newspaper 24 saati, who was assigned the role of field editor in the show. "We also made a point of bringing in political characters who were conspicuously active during the August conflict

This was a kind of a test for the journalists, one designed to reveal their ability to provide unbiased "coverage of battlefield activities"

Photo diary of the exercise □

During the simulated operation, which lasted for nine hours, the journalists produced over 200 news pieces and 14 reports. They were in constant contact – by mobile phone or radio – with the four editors, who were camped out in a makeshift editorial office set up in a half-ruined house near where the "hostilities" were under way

- Details of the operational scenario were kept secret from the participating journalists, who used maps, given to them by IWPR trainers, to navigate their way in the “battleground”, a territory with a radius of five kilometres.

We planned for the operation to be conducted in an adverse terrain deliberately, to make it difficult for the journalists to find their bearings and move about, but their physical endurance just stunned me,” said Ucha Abashidze, the president of a Strike Ball club

Some slopes were so steep we couldn’t descend them except by lying down in the mud and sliding, our hands clutching at the plants, and as we did so we tried to create as little noise as possible,” said Marika Tsikoridze, one of the participating journalists

“Several times I skidded. It was very difficult, but I passed the test and take great pride in the fact”

IWPR projects manager Nino Gerzmava said organising the event had proved difficult, and the selection process for participants had been thorough

At first, the idea of organising a training game for journalists, where up to 100 people would have to be controlled at the same time in the course of nine hours and on a large territory was dismissed by everybody as impracticable,” she said

We wanted the team to consist of people who’d already had some experience in covering conflicts or at least attended a training workshop on doing this, in addition to being capable of great endurance,” said Maia Avaliani, another of the event organisers

We were interested to see how they would make practical use of whatever theoretical knowledge they had gained at training workshops

The journalists taking part praised the event, saying that it gave them invaluable experience of conflict reporting

I learned how a journalist should behave during a conflict at an IWPR training session several months ago,” said Bacho Gurabanidze, a journalist from Batumi

But during the simulated military operation, I found out I was apt to lose my head in an emergency, and the theoretical knowledge did not prevent me from making one mistake after another. I put the soldiers’ lives, as well as my own, in danger many times, and let myself be carried away by provocations that I later found out had been planned by the organisers

The soldiers who took part in the exercise said it helped encourage trust between them and journalists

It’s true we, the military, find it difficult to communicate with journalists, but this is what we still have to do, since there are no legal bans on them collecting information during a war. Training workshops like this one help reduce the distrust and misconceptions between soldiers and journalists,” said Captain Levan Asatiani of the Georgian defence ministry, whom IWPR consulted when organising the operation

On the second day of the event, a special panel of experts assessed the journalists’ coverage of the operation

In how they covered the ‘hostilities’, there were all the drawbacks that are typical of journalists’ work during a conflict,” said Irakli Tskhadadze, from the Georgian Ombudsman’s office, one of the members of the panel

It was common to see hostile language being used, disinformation being spread and state secrets being“
”.made public

This is the first time such an event has been held in Georgia,” said military expert Irakli Aladashvili. “This“
”.kind of training is what might help reduce the risk of casualties among journalists during a war

Another member of the panel, media expert Ia Antadze, said such training events should be staged again
.so Georgia’s media could avoid deaths in any future conflicts

This kind of training should be provided more frequently for journalists to become more skilled, to learn to“
.avoid making mistakes,” said Antadze

The April 26-27 event was dedicated to the memory of journalists Alexander Klimchuk and Giga
.Chikhladze, who were killed in the last year’s August war

Caucasus :**Location**
Stavropol
South Ossetia
Russia
Project Highlight :**Topic**
Caucasus :**Focus**

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