

## **Caucasus: Sept '07**

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IWPR visit to Samtskhe-Javakheti challenges biased reporting on this neglected region. Local journalists say an IWPR-organised study trip to Samtskhe-Javakheti has generated more balanced and informed reports on the isolated southern region of Georgia in the mainstream media.

In mid-September, 13 journalists from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia took part in the second OSCE-funded visit to the region - aimed at helping Tbilisi-based and regional media establish sustainable contacts with journalists, NGO activists, politicians and government officials there.

Samtskhe-Javakheti is considered one of Georgia's problem areas. In two of its six districts - Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda - ethnic Armenians make up 90 per cent of the population, the majority of which has little or no knowledge of the Georgian language.

This together with the mainstream Georgian media's lack of knowledge of the region has led to Samtskhe-Javakheti being misrepresented in the press, and stories which appear are often one-sided or based entirely on rumour.

Giorgi Putkaradze from the Tbilisi-based Prime News agency admitted that journalists in the capital have an unclear picture of Samtskhe-Javakheti.

"After taking part in the study trip, I can see I was in an information vacuum. It helped me a lot in my reporting, now that I know more about the ethnic minorities, local government and state structures here," he said.

According to Putkaradze, similar tours to the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are vital for Georgian journalists.

Local businessmen and former deputy governor of Samtskhe-Javakheti Armen Amirkhanyan said he had noticed a change in journalists' attitudes following the meetings - which is reflected in their stories.

"I took part in the last meeting with the journalists and saw with my own eyes that their attitudes were anything but positive towards the ethnic minorities," he said.

"However, I read the stories published after the meeting, and for the first time, I felt that some journalists were really trying to reach balance and break the tendencies that usually prevail in Georgian press."

Representative of the local government in Akhalkalaki region Artur Eremian said that his office - previously ignored by journalists - has now become an important source of information for the media throughout Georgia.

“These kinds of meetings are not only important but absolutely necessary. As a rule, journalists write about our region without ever having been here, never asking for our views. Although I must say that my phone now rings perhaps too often,” he said.

A third mission will take place in October and a concluding roundtable will be held in Tbilisi in late November.

As a part of the project, the IWPR Georgia office will continue to monitor the quality of reporting on Samtskhe-Javakheti in both Tbilisi-based and regional press and broadcast media.

**Location:** Caucasus  
North Ossetia  
South Ossetia  
Stavropol

**Focus:** Project Highlight  
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