

Malfunctions Bug Georgia's Digital Switchover

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The transition is not working well for people in more isolated areas.

Georgians living near breakaway regions and in remote parts of the country have complained that they can no longer access national television channels since last year's digital switchover.

Although the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting was widely hailed as a success, technical problems remain.

Users in more isolated areas have reported that their signal is of uneven quality, while those near breakaway regions say that they can't receive Georgian television at all. Media experts say that this is an infringement of their rights as citizens.

Analogue terrestrial television was switched off in stages in Georgia's regions starting in early July 2015 and finishing by late August.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) gave Georgia high marks for how it handled the switchover. Its representative on freedom of the media, Dunya Miyatovich, praised Georgia's civil society for its active participation, including in lawmaking and the preparation of a technical database.

But not everyone is happy with the switchover.

Rusudan Chubinidze, from the village of Chaladidi in the Khobi district of western Georgia, bought a special adapter before the analogue terrestrial signal was turned off.

Chubinidze said she still has problems with the reception. From time to time, Georgia's national channels are disconnected and during bad weather, the quality of the reception drops significantly.

The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) in Tbilisi confirmed that the network was unstable in some places. Broadcasting was sometimes disabled because of technical problems and difficulties with frequency matching and with receivers.

Analogue broadcasting was originally developed to deliver black and white television with mono sound. Digital television offers crystal-clear pictures, better sound and multiple stations, with viewers in Georgia theoretically able to access between 20 to 60 free TV channels.

Many regions worldwide, including North America and the European Union, have made the transition to digital broadcasting over the past decade.

Most first introduced the digital video broadcasting terrestrial standard (DVB-T) and are now changing to the improved second-generation digital terrestrial television standard (DVB-T2). Georgia went straight from analogue to DVB-T2.

To ensure a smooth switchover, responsibility for managing the transition was given to the Digital Broadcasting Agency, created in February 2014 under the auspices of the ministry of economy and sustainable development. A nationwide information campaign was launched to inform the public about what they needed to do to move to digital television, with more than 1.5 million information booklets distributed.

The 40 per cent of the population that received their TV signal through an antenna had to either buy a set-top box that would convert the signal or a new TV that would support DVB-T2 standard. The 30 per cent of the population with cable and the 30 per cent who viewed satellite television were not affected.

Not everyone received the information in time or was able to afford the 50-60 Georgian laris (20-25 US dollars) set-top box, although those living below the poverty line were given the boxes free of charge.

In many cases where people did not have the set-top box or a TV that supports the DVB T2 standard, national channels were replaced by those of neighbouring countries.

This problem is particularly acute in villages bordering the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where many people say they have no choice but to watch Russian channels.

Tbilisi lost control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the separatist conflicts of the early 1990s. Although Tbilisi insists that the breakaway entities must come back under central control, Russia recognised both in 2008.

In areas bordering Armenia or Azerbaijan, locals also say that they can no longer access Georgian television.

According to Natia Kuprashvili, director of the Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters (GARB), this is a violation of their rights.

The blocking of signals from neighbouring countries is the responsibility of the Georgian national communications commission (GNCC) and the ministry of economy, which must decide the question in cooperation with the colleagues of the neighbouring states.

Problems in the Adjara region, which borders Turkey, have already been resolved, and the commission has asked its counterparts in Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to reduce their analogue signal strengths across the border.

But this process could take a long time.

IDFI and GARB have applied to the office of the state minister of Georgia for reconciliation and civic equality and the GNCC to allow analogue broadcasting in areas near the breakaway regions. This government has yet to come to a decision.

“The problem with the blocking of the signal is still acute in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli [in southern Georgia] as well as in the Gori district [which borders South Ossetia],” Kuprashvili said.

“In addition, while Georgian television previously broadcast to several areas of Abkhazia, now that there is a need for special adapters, we have lost this audience,” said Kuprashvili.

Almost 18 per cent of Abkhazia’s population is ethnic Georgian, according to the territory’s last census in 2011. They live mostly in the eastern regions of Gali, Tkvarcheli and Ochamchira, which is now cut off from Georgian broadcasting.

“After the transition to digital broadcasting, access to Georgian channels disappeared and many had to buy set-top boxes, so they could watch Georgian programmes and news,” said Marina, who lives in Gali. “But the problem has remained, since the signal frequently turns off because of technical problems. For example, there was no access to Georgian channels through the box for three months. Moreover, the code is often changed and one cannot get technical support from anywhere.

“The problem is partially solved by the presence of satellite dishes of one of the Georgian mobile operators that allow you to watch Georgian channels,” she continued. “But not everyone can afford it due to the high cost of service. I think it would be good, if analogue broadcasting was restored.”

GARB’s Kuprashvili said it was important to ensure that Georgian channels were accessible for ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

“If the government takes our proposal into consideration, it will not diminish our international duties of digital broadcasting,” she said. “It will solve big problems for our compatriots.”

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Location: [Georgia](#)

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