

TV at Heart of Georgian Crisis

Fate of opposition television station is subject of intense political haggling. With Georgia gearing up for a presidential election campaign in January and a degree of normality returning after the recent crisis, the Imedi television station remains at the centre of national and international controversy.

Imedi was Georgia's most-watched television station and had been the main mouthpiece of the opposition in recent times, lending its backing to the demonstrations against President Mikheil Saakashvili. On November 7, after riot police had violently broken up protests on the streets of Tbilisi, special-forces troops stormed into Imedi's headquarters and the station was pulled off the air.

"They burst into the building and forced all of us to lie down on the floor, even my pregnant colleague Diana Trapaidze," said Imedi journalist Zaza Tsuladze. "They ordered us to keep quiet and not to move, and took away our mobile phones. The special forces behaved in different ways. One of them gave some water to one of my colleagues who was feeling unwell. Another one beat a cameraman's head against a table."

The Georgian authorities said that the station was taken off the air because it had become a political instrument in the hands of the opposition and was instigating a coup d'etat.

Another pro-opposition television station, Caucasias, was also taken off the air on November 7, but has resumed broadcasting. However, it only covers the Tbilisi area.

Imedi was previously run by Georgian magnate Badri Patarkatsishvili and is now co-owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, but the exact management structure is unclear. While Patarkatsishvili has said he has sold his stake to News Corporation, there is no clear evidence of who owns what.

The continued suspension of Imedi has been the main focus of international criticism of Georgia over the last two weeks, provoking negative comments from Western countries, NATO and the European Union, amongst others. EU special representative Peter Semneby and OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti made a special visit to Tbilisi to call for Imedi to be reopened.

The authorities have said that they are willing to let Imedi resume broadcasting. Alexander Lomaia, secretary of Georgia's Security Council, offered an olive branch to News Corporation when he said the government was prepared to compensate Imedi for damage to equipment caused by the November 7 raid, something he described as an "unpleasant fact".

On November 29, Imedi journalists were told they may be allowed to return to their building on December 5.

The two sides are negotiating over terms. Following a meeting with News Corporation's vice-president Martin Pompadur, the new Georgian prime minister Lado Gurggenidze said the government was setting three conditions for Imedi to be re-launched. It wanted the company to be financially transparent, to have a clear management structure and to observe high professional and ethical standards.

In particular, Gurgenedze urged that News Corporation take over full ownership of the station, an invitation that Pompadur declined.

President Saakashvili said, "Imedi television will only resume its work when is not a weapon in the hands of its co-owner, businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili."

Relations between Imedi and the government deteriorated rapidly in October, when it gave airtime to former defence minister Irakli Okruashvili to voice spectacular allegations against his former ally, President Saakashvili.

However, the conflict dates back more than a year, to when government officials decided to boycott political talk shows on the channel.

"Despite that, Imedi did not lose its popularity, and the total lack of competition helped them," said television critic Ninia Kakabadze.

With Imedi off the air, three pro-government television stations, Public Television, Mze and Rustavi-2, currently dominate the airwaves.

Observers frequently draw parallels between the role of Imedi in recent events and that of Rustavi-2, a private station, during the Rose Revolution of 2003.

Inga Grigolia, the anchor on a popular political talk show on Imedi which had been accused of fomenting opposition to Saakashvili, said, "Those who were neutral during the Rose Revolution were regarded as opponents of the revolution. I think that by supporting the opposition during the revolution, Rustavi-2 got more deeply involved in politics than was required by journalism."

Some pro-government supporters argue that the comparison is not accurate. In 2003, they say, Rustavi-2 was defending Georgians' civil rights at a time when an election had been rigged, while Imedi has merely been a political instrument used against the government.

Independent analysts, while condemning Imedi's closure, are also critical of the station's news values. David Paichadze, dean of the journalism faculty at Tbilisi State University, said, "Maybe the journalists had a sense that since other media were 'indecisive', they were displaying civic courage. But this kind of bravery and stubbornness became quite hysterical and, most importantly, it led them to perceive and portray events in a distorted fashion."

Most viewers, however, say that Imedi was a valuable alternative voice in a media environment where most stations support the government.

Since 2003, Rustavi-2 has come under the de facto control of the government, and its popularity rating has fallen significantly. Its political shows have been replaced by entertainment programmes.

“In circumstances when there was just naked propaganda on Rustavi-2 and Public Television, the ratings of the opposition Imedi gradually rose, and over time it turned into practically the sole source of information,” said TV critic Kakabadze. “So for almost two years we had Imedi, which had no rival, which was boycotted by the authorities, and where we heard only one voice.”

She added, “There are basic journalistic standards and a code of ethics, and in different contexts and to different degrees, both these television companies [Imedi and Rustavi-2] have sinned against this.”

In search of a way out of the impasse over Imedi, deputy US assistant secretary of state Matt Bryza said there was a need for an independent monitoring group which could oversee professional standards in the Georgian media.

Bryza noted that one section of society blamed Rustavi-2 for spreading propaganda and another, supported by the government, accused Imedi of fomenting a coup d’etat.

When he met Pompadur, Prime Minister Gurgenzidze proposed that the existing media council should be given powers to monitor the output of all television channels. He said the body should base itself on Britain’s Press Council, as there was no domestic legislation that would cover it.

“This is a body with no administrative functions; what we are talking about the moral side of things,” said Gurgenzidze.

The Georgian media council was founded in 2005, but has been virtually inactive since then. It has now started working more actively, and is drawing up recommendations on television coverage.

Imedi, which is still off the air, has yet to decide whether and how it will take part in the council’s work.

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