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Lots of Laughs, Little Freedom On Television

By Paul Rimple

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Few things rattle Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili more than criticism about Georgia's media freedom.

At the 2010 Milken Institute Global Conference, the Georgian president said: "Everything is said in Georgia, there are no taboos. There are no libel, defamation laws."

Nobody understands this better than Rustavi 2, the country's most-watched television station. Co-owned by Davit Bezhuashvili, brother of the chief of intelligence, the station functions as a state propaganda tool and has perfected the technique of "creative subjectivity."

Because the Georgian media are not permitted into Abkhazia, they must rely on eyewitness accounts from ambiguous sources. In other cases, they create the news with the complacency of the government.

Several months prior to the 2008 war, Tbilisi claimed that the Abkhaz attacked two busloads of voters in the border village of Kurcha, which Norwegian Helsinki Committee investigators deemed a poorly staged provocation. Somehow, a Rustavi 2 crew happened to be in the insignificant border village to film the entire sequence with one camera positioned with its back to the line of fire.

Imedi TV's fake broadcast in March 2010 of a Russian invasion is a case in point. It scored few unscrupulous points in Georgia because this is what is largely expected from the news.

Tbilisi has been working on media damage control by slowly pushing a transparency law though parliament that would ban ownership of broadcasters by offshore-registered firms. Media experts are pressing for provisions like easing access to public information, a long-time obstacle for journalists.

While the bill has been applauded as a step forward, the media situation in Georgia is still a farce. Nobody knows who really makes the decisions about what stories are covered or not. In its media freedom index, Freedom House ranks Georgia "partly free," next to Nepal.

It's hard to take Georgia's media freedom seriously when the government trumpets its democratic development while all the main media outlets are influenced by government, politics and economic control. It's like saying that having an independent media would be a threat to your freedom.

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