The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Free Press' Means 'Free To Support Saakashvili'

By Paul Rimple

March 18, 2012



On Feb. 27, 46-year-old Solomon Kimeridze died of contusions in a police station located in a small Georgian town. The prosecutor's office maintains that he accidentally fell over the handrail of the third-floor stairway. Case closed.

In developed countries, mainstream news would cover the story by questioning the possibility of foul play because even in upstanding cities like Los Angeles and Chicago, people have been known to die after being accidentally pushed around too much in police stations.

In the West, people expect to hear all sides to a story. In Georgian media, there is only "our side" to a story.

The major Georgian television networks will never suggest that some bad cops may have killed a detainee because their job is to remind us that the police are all good guys and that the all-glass "see-through" police stations were supposed to guarantee transparency

and honesty.

To hear how the police are really bad guys, you have to tune into Kavkasia TV and Maestro TV, Tbilisi's two small opposition television stations. In Georgia, this is called "free press."

When Georgia's three major television stations, Rustavi 2, Imedi and The Georgian Public Broadcaster covered Kimeridze's death, they all read from the same script and used the same footage for a story that emphasized how opposition leader Bidzina Ivanishvili is exploiting Kimeridze's death for political purposes.

When Ivanishvili announced his intention to challenge President Mikheil Saakashvili's authority, the multibillionaire became bad guy No. 1. The major networks have ignored his demands for an open investigation into Kimeridze's death and snub stories of how his supporters are continually intimidated by authorities. Apparently, this is also a free press.

Ivanishvili bought the license to Igrika TV and gave it to his wife. The last time a billionaire owned a television station that broadcast anti-government views, riot cops stormed the studio during a live broadcast, threw journalists down on the floor at gunpoint, destroyed much of the station's equipment and shut it down. It is now a pro-government station. Georgia does not need another opposition television network.

Some defenders of the status quo say media freedom is better in Georgia than in Armenia and Azerbaijan, but they forget that Georgia has set itself a Western benchmark. People are tired of propaganda on television and wonder whether they'll ever be able to get two sides of a story without changing channels from one skewed station to another.

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