

Not a Priority: Barriers to Environmental Reporting in the Republic of Georgia

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Abstract

The Republic of Georgia faces major ecological challenges, including threats to the Black Sea, climate change, overgrazing, habitat destruction, hazardous waste, water quality, deforestation and forest management, air pollution, large-scale hydropower projects, gold and manganese mining, litter, and invasive species. The implications cross national borders and affect economic, political, and cultural relationships on a large geographic scale, in the Caucasus and beyond. Meanwhile, levels of press freedom, autonomy, and news organization survivability have fluctuated since independence in 1991. In 2012, Georgia experienced its first peaceful election-based parliamentary change, and the news media's ability to disseminate political information was strengthened by legislation requiring satellite content providers and networks to carry all TV stations that broadcast news during the 60 days leading to that election. However, the governing Georgian Dream coalition that won the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections has become increasingly anti-press in the past two years, exerting political pressure on news organizations. Within that political and environmental context, this study explores obstacles to reporting on environmental issues. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with journalists, media support NGOs, and environmental NGOs, it finds a lack of analytical and in-depth reporting on ecological issues. Much of the coverage that does happen focuses on discrete events rather than broader investigative examinations of ecological problems. Major reasons coverage include the environment's lack of priority among news media owners and politicians; staff shortages at news organizations; journalists' inadequate substantive knowledge about the environment; fake news; and the costs of coverage.

Introduction

On the environmental front, the Republic of Georgia faces major ecological challenges. Among them are threats to the Black Sea, climate change, overgrazing, habitat destruction, hazardous waste, water quality, deforestation and forest management, air pollution, large-scale hydropower projects, gold and manganese mining, litter and solid waste, and invasive species. The implications of such eco-challenges cross national borders and affect economic, political, and cultural relationships on a large geographic scale, in the Caucasus and beyond

As for the mediascape, levels of press freedom, autonomy, and news organization survivability have fluctuated since independence in 1991. The press played a role in the 2003 Rose Revolution that ousted a corrupt and authoritarian administration. Even so, the successor regime carried out strong anti-press freedom measures of its own, such as closing a private TV station and blocking Russian websites and TV stations when Russian troops invaded Georgia in 2008. In 2012, Georgia experienced its first peaceful election-based parliamentary change; new legislation at the time strengthened the media's ability to disseminate political information by requiring satellite content providers and networks to carry all TV stations that broadcast news during the 60 days leading to that election.

However, the Georgian Dream governing coalition that won the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections has become increasingly anti-press in the past two years, exerting political pressure on news organizations. Freedom House (2017, 2018) rates Georgia overall and its press as "partly free" and its Internet as "free."

Within that political and environmental context, this study explores obstacles to reporting on environmental issues. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with journalists and leaders of media support and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), it finds a lack of analytical and in-depth reporting about these issues. Much of the coverage that does happen focuses on discrete events, such as public protests about development projects, rather than broader investigative examinations of ecological problems, policies, and economics, as well as their human impact. Such events include the April 21, 2019, clashes between residents of the Pankisi Gorge area and police during protests over a controversial hydropower construction project that opponents say could damage the environment and displace residents (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2019). Major reasons for the sparsity of coverage include the environment's lack of priority among news media owners and politicians; staff shortages at news organizations; journalists' inadequate substantive knowledge about the environment; fake news; low public interest; the expenses of coverage; and constraints on access to information.

The implications for public policy are significant. News organizations have the potential to help set the agenda for public discussion of environmental issues and to help shape decisions on how to address those issues. As Greenberg and Hier observed, “By selecting which events to report, interviewing and quoting experts who interpret those events, and assembling and distributing the final news product, news organizations create the discursive environment in which collective problematization about troubling events may occur (2001, p. 564.). Under the agenda-setting theory of mass communication, the press filters and shapes reality rather than reflecting reality, and media focus on a small number of issues and topics, leading the citizenry to perceive those issues as more important than others (University of Twente, n.d.).

Absent, inadequate, erroneous, superficial, or low-quality environmental reporting may have adverse impacts on the citizenry and on governance. It undermines well-informed decision-making by voters and policymakers. It weakens the ability of analysts, activists, and policy-shapers to recommend effective courses of action to address environmental problems. It impedes transparency by governments, businesses, and eco-NGOs.

There has been little academic examination of environmental news coverage in post-independent Georgia or of media-related activities by the country’s eco-NGOs. That dearth of scholarly attention is unfortunate. As Sultanalieva and Freedman wrote in a study of the role of eco-NGOs in generating press coverage of environmental issues in Kyrgyzstan, another post-Soviet state, “Eco-NGOs have the potential to disseminate important ecological-related messages to the public and, thus, help set and build the agenda for public, media, and governmental discussion” (2015, p. 147). Similarly, Freedman, Neuzil, Takahashi, and Carmichael (in press) wrote:

Any gaps in press coverage of environmental news carry serious public policy implications. Shallow or nonexistent coverage weakens the agenda-setting ability of the press, deters efforts to hold government and corporate interests accountable and transparent, impedes public awareness of threats to the environment and health, and reduces the capacity of international donors, funders, and multinational agencies to alleviate ecological perils

This paper attempts to help fill those gaps. It begins with overviews of environmental problems and the state of the news media in Georgia. It then presents the research questions, explains how the study was conducted and relates the findings.

The Environmental Landscape

Mountains cover two-thirds of Georgia, and nearly 40 percent of the country is forested (Quinn, 2017), with 98 percent of the forests located in mountainous areas (Patarkalashvili, 2017). The introduction identifies many of the most serious eco-challenges., some of which spill over to neighboring countries. As Veliyev, Gvasalia, and Manukyan observe in a study of water cooperation and conflict in the South Caucasus, “As nature is not limited to borders, and the deterioration of the environment has cross-border implications, not only does environmental protection stem from the need to protect livelihoods, but it is also important for avoiding future conflicts or the exacerbation of current ones” (2018:, p. 109).

The country’s 2012-2016 National Environmental Action Programme outlines a series of environmental themes and long-term goals. They include ensuring safe water quality and adequate water quantity; protecting ambient air quality; establishing a modern waste management system, protecting and rehabilitating unique eco-systems and biodiversity; development of sustainable forestry practices; sustainable management of land resources; minimizing deaths from natural disasters; improving ecological conditions of the Black Sea; and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Ministry of Environment Protection of Georgia, 2012). Addressing some of these challenges requires government and businesses to balance competing interests, a balance with societal, economic, and environmental consequences. For example, hydropower supplies over 80 percent of Georgia’s electricity through hydropower (Antidze, 2015) and has set a goal of getting 100 percent of its electricity from domestic hydropower. However, some environmental and rural community activists say proposed large hydropower projects could wipe out villages and damage or destroy wildlife habitat. Similarly, a crackdown on illegal logging could be harmful for Georgians who rely on firewood for heating and cooking.

Given the wide range of ecological problems in Georgia, it is impossible to discuss all of them in detail in this paper. Thus, it draws on recent science and social science research to highlight six of the major issues that carry public policy, scientific, and economic implications: water quality and quantity; climate change; forests; threatened and endangered fauna; urban eco-problems; and toxic contamination.

Water quality and quantity

Industry and mining contribute to contamination of Georgia’s waters, as do untreated wastewater and urban sewage, illegal dump sites and landfills. For example, a recent study of

sediments and water in the Mashavera River Basin found alarmingly high concentrations of heavy metals including cadmium, copper, zinc, and lead that exceed international and national thresholds. The sources of those contaminants include gold mining, construction along riverbanks, diversion of untreated municipal wastewater, and outflows from farmlands into the Mashavera and Poladauri rivers and their tributaries. The consequences are potentially serious because the basin is an important farming area for Georgia's food system, principally vegetables dairy products and wine (Withanachchi et al., 2018). The country's only functioning wastewater treatment plan is in Gardabani, near the border with Azerbaijan, and handles municipal wastewater from the cities of Tbilisi and Rustavi. However, it only partially treats wastewater before discharging it into the River Kura, which flows to Azerbaijan. "Seemingly, there is a lack of proper infrastructure to manage wastewaters across the borders" (Ibid: 128).

Transborder disputes over water quality and quantity include competing uses for irrigation, human consumption, industry, and fisheries. Floods, drought, and other artifacts of fluctuating climate exacerbate such conflicts. Consider the Kura-Araks River Basin, an area that includes parts of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran, and Turkey. Water pollution there comes from untreated urban wastewater, farming runoff, and chemical and metallurgical plants; other problems are caused by water diversion for agriculture and water flow modifications due to dams, reservoirs, and hydropower stations (Veliyev, Gvasalia, & Manukyan, 2018).

Elsewhere, however, there have been instances of transboundary cooperation. That is the case with the Enguri dam and hydropower complex located partly in Georgia and partly in the breakaway Abkhazia region¹. It is the biggest hydro complex in the South Caucasus and supplies most of the electricity for both sides of the border. The cooperation, "born out of economic and social necessity," enables the facility to remain in operation to ensure energy security" (Ibid: p. 123).

Climate change

The Ministry of Environment Protection has noted:

Climate [c]hange (CC) and its adverse impacts on ecosystems and the economy are a threat to sustainable development. CC process in Georgia first became apparent in the

¹ Russia-backed Abkhazia is a de facto independent country that separated from Georgia after the 1992-1993 War in Abkhazia. Most members of the United Nation consider it to legally part of Georgia. Russia is among that handful of countries that recognize it.

1960`s and has accelerated since the end of the last century... Precipitation has slightly decreased in most regions of Western Georgia since the 1960`s; however some areas have seen increased precipitation. Precipitation in Eastern Georgia has increased by no more than 6%. As a result of these changes, the intensity and frequency of extreme events caused by global warming have risen. In semi-arid regions, the frequency of droughts and strong winds in the spring has increased. In the Black Sea coastal zone, coastal erosion and abrasion processes have intensified... When withdrawing, glaciers of the Caucasus leave behind immense quantities of stones, pieces of rock, mud, and resulting mud-flows after intense rains. Such events pose a risk not only to the safety of the population but also to the economy of the country (Ministry, 2012, p. 77).

A recent study predicts that if current climate change trends continue, precipitation along the Black Sea coastline, Colchis lowland, and parts of the Western Caucasus will increase by 50 percent by the end of the 21st century. During the same period, annual precipitation could drop by at least 50 percent on the plains of Eastern Georgia (Elizbarashvili et al., 2017).

Forests

Georgia's forests are important ecologically, economically, and culturally. In 2013 the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection and the National Forestry Agency of Georgia produced a concept report for the future of the country's forests. The report emphasizes biological diversity, the value of forests in supplying natural resource products, their role in providing a clean water supply, their recreational and cultural value, and their ability to provide wildlife shelter and migration that helps maintain genetic diversity of animals (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, 2013).

The forests face threats from illegal logging and firewood collection, unsustainable levels of legal logging, invasive species, poor land management, inadequate enforcement of forestry laws, climate change, and poverty as a driver of illegal and unsustainable use of forest resources. For example the invasive box tree moth, which is native to subtropical parts of Eastern Asia, was first found in Georgia in 2014 and subsequently identified in several parts of the country (Matsiakh, Kramarets, and Mamardashvili, 2018). It feeds on boxwood, an evergreen on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, and is "causing great concern (about) the threat of the extinction of native boxwood forests in this region" (Ibid: 32). Patarkalashvili (2017) has called for expansion of "reserved territories"

such as nature reserves and national parks to preserve boxwood and other threatened relict and endemic tree species.

A second protected t species, the old-growth endemic Imeretian oak, is under threat from the great Capricorn beetle which, ironically, is protected under the European Union Habitats Directive and is categorized as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. The oak forests already were damaged by stem and root rot, farming activities such as pig and cow grazing, and cutting for fuel and timber. The situation has created what Matsiakh, Kramarets, and Tsiklauri (2017: 170), describe as “a conflict of interested between the two species which should be protected” and which in their opinion requires forest management planning measures.

Separately, a study of the impact of fractured governance of alpine forests says commercial logging operations are exacerbating livelihood and social challenges in those regions of the country. It goes on to say, “The turbulence and lack of political administration in forest governance since the Soviet Union’s collapse has fostered the development of an international black market, shipping large amounts of illegally harvested timber from Georgia and promoting even more locally intensive degradation of Georgia’s forests, especially those surrounding more easily accessible municipalities and urban areas” (Quinn, 2017, pp. 6-7).

Threatened and endangered fauna

Poaching remains a significant danger to wildlife, especially to threatened and endangered species. Consider the brown bear: Poachers shoot the mothers, orphaning the cubs, and usually get away without penalty. As research scientist Khatia Basilashvili of the Tbilisi Zoo explains, “If some person kills a brown bear, nothing happens. The government is not doing anything.” A journalistic investigative of judicial leniency toward poachers examined court records in 390 illegal hunting and fishing cases; it found that only five had been classified as criminal or killing protected species. All five of those cases ended with plea bargains, and “no poacher paid a huge fine and nobody was sent to prison.” The other cases were handled as minor administrative charges. The story said that “139 hunters confessed and asked to be assessed a small fine or none at all.” In 58 cases poachers got back their guns and illegal fishing nets; in 203 cases, violators received only verbal warnings and no fines (Gvasalia, 2017).

A study of poaching in Georgia’s Batumi Bottleneck area along the Black Sea coast reported that hunters illegally kill thousands of migratory birds of prey, such as greater spotted eagles and pallid harriers, each year; they are among more than a million raptors that funnel

through the area in an annual autumn migration. Based on interviews with local hunters, government officials, and representatives of conservation organizations, the researchers identified several major factors in the poaching: “lack of enforcement and low awareness of regulations among local communities”; “hunting traditions and an important custom in the coastal villages of Georgia”; the “economic and political environment (poverty and unemployment)”; and the inability of many hunters to distinguish among species” (Sándor & Anthony, 2018, pp. 11851, 11854, 11859).

The Media Landscape

As for the mediascape, levels of press freedom, autonomy, and news organization sustainability have fluctuated since independence in 1991. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian press was expected to play a crucial role in building democracy and communicating a sense of nationhood to the citizenry (Freedman and Shafer, 2014). Kacachia, Patariaia, and Cecire write that Georgia “may be moving again toward democratization (but) has generally fit the ‘competitive authoritarian’ hybrid model...And while post-independence Georgian regimes have consistently exhibited authoritarian tendencies to varying degrees, the country has also feature a degree of political competitiveness and pluralism that has set it apart from ‘classical’ authoritarian regimes” (2018, p. 170).

Currently, the government and the majority of Georgians aspire to join the European Union and NATO, and the country’s media law generally aligns with European standards. Libel has been decriminalized and freedom of information is guaranteed in Article 24 of the Georgian constitution: “Everyone has the right to freely receive and impart information, to express and impart his/her opinion orally, in writing or by any other means. Mass media shall be free. The [*sic*] censorship shall be impermissible” (Gersamia & Freedman, 2017). However, the ruling Georgian Dream party has become less and less supportive of press freedom as it consolidated power.

The country has pluralistic media and does not censor the Internet. The annual media sustainability report by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) paints this portrait of mixed results:

For Georgian media, 2017 was a vexing year. Trends that took hold the previous year—including politicization of media and shrinking advertising revenue—tightened their grip on the television stations that provide most Georgians with most of their news. The main, putatively independent state media bodies, the Georgian Public Broadcaster...and the

Georgia National Communications Commission ...showed worrying signs of becoming overtly political actors (IREX, 2018:, p. 261).

IREX is a U.S.-based media- and democracy-supporting NGO that assesses a country's news media sustainability in five categories of objectives: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions. It then rates each category as a) Unsustainable ("Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal"); b) Unsustainable Mixed System ("Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system."); c) Near Sustainability ("Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media"; and d) Sustainable ("Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives." Overall, Georgia's media system is in the Near Sustainability category for four of the five objectives, with free press close to a Sustainable rating; it falls into the Unsustainable Mixed System category for business management. Its overall rating is similar to that of neighboring Armenia and significantly higher than neighboring Azerbaijan (IREX, 2018, p. 160).

Business management remained the weakest element of Georgia's media landscape in a year that saw consolidation of the advertising market, mergers of pro-government channels, and the crisis at Rustavi 2, which was punctuated by the defection of several highly rated programs. With their financial viability at risk, major broadcasters, for the first time, sought income from cable carriers for transmitting their shows, challenging the "must carry, must offer" principle in Georgian law. The depth of the industry's problems remains unclear, as the GNCC did not release revenue figures for major stations" (IREX, 2018, p. 161)

As a result, the country's score dropped slightly from 2.34 in 2017 to 2.31 in 2018.

Overall, Georgia scores moderately well in Transparency International's "Corruption Perceptions Index." That NGO's latest report, which it describes as an "annual snapshot of the relative degree of corruption by ranking countries," places Georgia 41st among 180 countries. Its ranking ties that of Spain, Latvia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and puts it above all but two other former Soviet republics. The ranking is also higher than any of its neighbors (Transparency International, 2019).

Moscow's influence and "soft power" pose a serious challenge to the credibility of the Georgian news media. At a September 2018 off-the-record, by-invitation-only roundtable about Georgia's media landscape, a common discussion thread was Russia's growing influence over media outlets. That influence includes significant funding for "independent" news organization and news websites battered by declining advertising revenue. The roundtable was part of a "The World in 2018 Upside Down" conference sponsored by Arizona State University's McCain Institute for International Leadership and Georgia's Economic Policy Research Institute. The same media-related theme recurred during the conference's public session. For example, Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze spoke of fake news and foreign influence over the media. "Russian propaganda is an issue and a challenge," he said in response to a question from *Financial Times* columnist and commentator Edward Luce. "We're working closely with friends to combat Russian propaganda." Russian propaganda sometimes contains blatant falsehoods that are, nonetheless, repeated and passed on. For example, as Georgia seeks admission to NATO and the European Union, inflammatory propaganda falsely claims that membership would force the country to legalize same-sex marriage and would open the floodgates to millions of refugees from the Middle East (Freedman, 2018).

On the positive side, Georgia is a relatively safe place for journalists to work. The Committee to Protect Journalists tallied eight deaths since 1992, but none since 2008, the year of a brief war when Russian troops invaded the country. It has also provided a refuge for journalists from authoritarian Azerbaijan who are in self-exile because it is unsafe for them to work in their home country. However, in September 2018, the editor of the left-leaning magazine *Liberalli* was beaten on a Tbilisi street. According to press reports, the attackers jumped out of two SUVs after phoning him on the pretense of wanting to buy his car (Wayne, 2018).

Research Question

RQ1: What are major obstacles to effective environmental reporting in Georgia?

RQ2: How do eco-NGOs in Georgia deal with the press?

Method

This project draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with Georgian journalists, media experts and eco-NGO leaders. It identified potential respondents from multiple sources, including news stories, referrals, and journal articles. The author initially contacted them by

email to solicit their participation. Some of whom recommended additional interviewees (snowball sampling). In addition, the study was informed by additional conversations with journalists, journalism educators, and media, public policy, and environmental experts.

The author interviewed sixteen respondents and/or drew on presentations they made to the author's upper-level journalism class at a university in Tbilisi (see Table 1). Several of the eco-NGO interviewees are former journalists. Interviews took place in person in Tbilisi between September and December 2018, as did the presentations. The author analyzed the interviews and presentations by grouping the responses based on common content.

A small number of cases may permit researchers to associate closely with respondents by using in-depth interviewing (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). That is an appropriate method in studies such as this that "scrutinize the dynamic qualities of a situation (rather than elucidating the proportionate relationships among its constituents)" (Ibid: 483). This kind of interview "target[s] the respondents' perceptions and feelings rather than the social conditions surrounding those experiences: at least, the collection of the interview material and its interpretation and analysis are not primarily directed toward establishing 'objective facts' concerning these conditions" (Ibid: 485). Silverman wrote that the researchers' intent is to "generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences" (1993, p. 91).

Findings

RQ 1 asked about major obstacles to effective environmental reporting in Georgia. This analysis of the interviews and presentations in Georgia identified four principal themes that help explain the limitations and shortcomings of news coverage of environmental topics in the country

Shortcomings of journalists and news organizations

Interviewee after interviewee bemoaned the level of coverage of environmental topics as generally shallow, sparse, misleading, and inaccurate. Tamara Chergoleishvili, the director general of the magazine and news website Tabula, puts it bluntly: "There is no environmental journalism. There is just coverage of environmental issues. There is no professionalism."

Interviewees' observations and complaints focused on three interconnected obstacles: journalists' lack of knowledge about science and the environment; media owners' failure to treat the environment as a priority in news coverage, also reflected in inadequate staff and travel budgets and in limited career advancement opportunities; and difficulties in obtaining information from sources.

“The national media are so unprofessional when it comes to conservation issues. They don’t understand the issues. If you don’t understand the issue, you can’t convey it to the public,” says Irakli Shavgulidze, chair of the governing board of the NACRES (Center for Biodiversity Conservation & Research). “None of the (news) agencies or companies have specialists.” In addition, journalists are ill-prepared, he says. To illustrate, he recounts what happened when one journalist requested an interview about endangered species. The reporter came to the NGO’s office and “was completely unprepared,” asking questions about species that went extinct millions of years ago. When it came to recent extinctions, “she became disinterested. She couldn’t manage to prepare.”

Lia Chakhunashvili, a former environmental journalist who is now chief of party for IREX’s M-TAG media development program, describes it as a “difficult subject in general” that requires an understanding of science. However, most Georgian journalists, she says, have backgrounds in the humanities or, “in the best case,” in social sciences.”

In addition, journalists too often fail to connect the environment with other issues such as the economy, foreign relations, energy policy and health. For example, Sophie Tchitchinadze, a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) communications analyst and former journalist, says, “For Georgian media, the environment is regarded as a stand-alone, not linked to economics.” The media realized “only recently that it is an essential part of life, an essential part of economic development, and equally important to social issues.”

Access to information and sources

Journalists encounter obstacles in obtaining information and access to news sources, despite the existence of transparency laws. Discussing an investigative project about environmental practices of Georgia’s only gold mining company, Gvasalia describes her inability to obtain information from the local prosecutor, from the ministry with environmental responsibilities and court. “The company has a close connection with the government,” she says. FactCheck.ge editor David Kutidze notes that the degree of transparency varies among government ministries. “Most public officers try to give us the data completely and quickly. Some don’t. It’s frustrating.”

Also, ordinary citizens are not always eager to talk to the press. When journalist Gvasalia began her gold mining investigation in 2010, she visited the small town where the mining took place. Covering the roadways and bus stops were thick layers of dust from uncovered trucks carrying ore to the company’s processing facility. When she asked residents how the pollution affected their everyday lives, people were “very careful. Once I mentioned the

name of the company, everybody went silent.... Everyone worked for the company.” Since then, however, residents have become “more open, more daring to speak of it.”

Levan Butkhuzi, a former editor-in-chief at *National Geographic Georgia* who now heads the NGO governing board of SEED (Science, Environmental Educational Development) and has a television show about science and the environment on Rustavi 2 says, “The only credible source of information here on the environment is NGOs.” However, journalists should be cautious and not simply accept as true what those groups tell them. That is because eco-NGOs, as news sources, have agendas. Rothmyer (2011) presents a cautionary tale in examining Western news coverage of humanitarian aid NGOs in Africa, where such groups compete for funds and media attention and where some of the data they offer to journalists is inflated or questionable.

Lack of priority

Environmental coverage is not considered a priority among journalists and media owners, especially at the national level, according to Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN) environmental economist Melano Tkabladze. “If the environmental sector becomes a priority for the government, journalists will try to cover it better.” Gogi Zoidze, a project coordinator for the NGO GRASS (Georgia’s Reform Associates), agreed, saying the media “reflects what politicians are doing. Politicians don’t give a priority to environmental issues.”

IRES’s Chakhunashvili observed that covering the environment “is not as glamorous as being a political reporter or on TV all the time or having parliamentary credentials... The only beat is politics and Parliament and maybe here and there in specialty publications.” Owners and top-level managers determine how to allocate the limited resources of their news organizations, which means reporters have little discretion or control over their assignments. She says, “The new generation of journalists is more concerned about environmental issues but in many cases lack knowledge or are not as powerful in the newsroom to decide” what to cover.

That mirrors what the study of environmental news coverage and eco-NGOs in Kyrgyzstan found: “As eco-NGO representatives emphasized in interviews, ecological issues are not popular topics on the media agenda, while coverage priority focuses on economics and politics” (Sultanalieva and Freedman, 2015, p. 159).

Lack of public demand for more environmental coverage.

There is no widespread demand among the citizenry for more environmental coverage. Asked about media coverage of NACRES, Shavgulidze responds, “We have so many other issues people are concerned about, the media probably is trying to respond to issues the public perceives as problems.” He continues, “People are less interested in the forest and (things) outside their visible world because overall conservation awareness is not very high in this country,” although it is “getting a little better.” Caucasus Nature Fund executive director Geof Giacomini cites a lack of public awareness as the major barrier: “Where does your water come from?” Is plastic good or bad? What’s recycling?”

What environmental coverage exists is weakened by misinformation, disinformation and “fake news.” Tabula’s Chergoleishvili identifies an “inability to differentiate fake news from original sources” among the problems in journalism ethics in Georgia. As an example, the country’s leading investigative environmental reporter, Tsira Gvasalia, says fake news on Facebook claimed a hydroelectric project would “elevate local people” and provide “great social benefit.” She cautions, “Seventy percent of this needs to be double-checked.”

FactCheck.ge, a project of the NGO GRASS (Georgia’s Reforms Associates), describes itself as a nonpartisan independent news website that “offers readers researched, verified and evidence-based information” in Georgian and English and is staffed by “a team of motivated and like-minded individuals (that) brings together young professionals in the fields of journalism, economics, law, international relations, public policy, and other realms. FactCheck’s team monitors MPs, the President, government officials and other public figures and highlights factual accuracies and inaccuracies in their statements.” For example, it reported that the then-mayor of Tbilisi, who had campaigned on a promise of bolstering the city’s green spaces, falsely claimed that the city had planted a half-million trees. However, it also verified the accuracy of a challenged a politician’s statement that lead levels in the air of Tbilisi and other cities had dropped to within allowable levels after the country implemented European standards for petrol.

Eco-NGOs and the press

RQ2 asks how environmental NGOs deal with the press. A dominant goal of public relations specialists is agenda-building. From the perspective of eco-NGOs, their mission includes outreach—selling the story of their accomplishments to build political and public support for their endeavors. In the view of most of the interviewed NGO representatives, that includes active efforts to build relationships with news organizations and individual journalists who can carry their stories to broader publics. As the UNDP’s Tchitchinadze, says, “Communications work is

an essential part of UNDP work in Georgia... Communication and advocacy are very much linked,” and the media, “is one of our very good partners.”

Eco-NGO representatives recognize that most of the coverage they receive is event-driven and does not reflect in-depth, investigative, or analytical reporting. Giacomini of the Caucasus Nature Fund says, “There’s not much in the news about the environment unless a disaster happens, such as the massive 2017 wildfire in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park. Ted Jonas, a Caucasus Nature Fund board member, says reporters have been showing up at public meetings about controversial road projects in northeastern Georgia. “If somebody lies down in front of a bulldozer, they’ll be there.” Similarly, journalist Gvasalia, says, “More or less all the environmental hot spots get covered but frequency is the problem.” So is depth of coverage. Referring to the government’s priority to building more hydroelectric projects, she says river data and environmental assessments are not deeply covered.

The novel and the unusual also attract media attention. For example, Basilashvili, the Tbilisi Zoo scientist, says, “When something happens” – as when an elephant named Grandi underwent tusk surgery at the zoo in 2018 – “it’s a big story (in) every TV and newspaper,” In fact, the elephant story was big enough to draw coverage by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Reuters, as well as by Georgian media. Similarly, Kutidze of FactCheck.ge says local journalists are more likely than national media to cover environmental news unless “something happens”; When there are tensions among the local populace, he says, “the media try to cover only the protests, not the context,” and pay attention “only when an issue becomes hot.” Tbilisi Zoo director Zurab Gurielidze notes that when the zoo invited journalists to an October 2018 workshop about two of its projects with international experts, “journalists were quite interested.”

CENN works with the media on all its projects and conducts media tours. CENN’s Tkabladze says, “We are using the media as a tool” with ministries and to raise local awareness of the organization’s work. CENN also conducts competitions and workshops for journalists, takes journalists to “hot spots” like places where illegal logging occurs, “trying to prioritize the issue” via the media and giving them an opportunity to talk to community residents. CENN’s Davliandize says journalists are “mostly eager to participate, but the quality of reporting projects is still even poor after media tours and workshops. And journalist-turned-environmental projects coordinator Rezo Getiashvili says CENN partners with daily journalists who need information

and “grounding” but have limited time. “We have friends who call us when they need support from us, and we can call them when they need support from us.”

UNDP issues lots of press releases, pitches stories, and takes reporters from Tbilisi into rural parts of the country. On one media tour in September 2018, UNDP (2018) took print and broadcast journalists to Machakhela National Park and to villages in the Machakhela Gorge to showcase the agency’s sustainable development work there. The overarching goal, according to Tchitchinadze, is show reports the linkage between economic development and sustainable development.

Although most eco-NGOs seek press coverage, the Caucasus Nature Fund has been an exception. Giacomini, its executive director, says, “We have a unique focus on funding national parks. No one else does it. It hasn’t been in our interest to publicize that... We haven’t found the need to trumpet what we do, to announce it to the Georgian or Armenian public.” Even so, the organization did hold a public event with a member of the Cabinet to mark the 10th anniversary of its work in Georgia and plans a similar event in Armenia that “will raise our profile consciously.”

Conclusion

Without a doubt, environmental problems and challenges will continue in Georgia, propelled by such factors as changing climate, migration of people from rural areas to Tbilisi and other cities, the expansion of ecotourism, the drive for self-sufficiency in electric derived from hydropower, the need to comply with European Union environmental mandates and standards, and economic development efforts. At the same time, the country’s mediascape will continue to evolve in the context of political development, financial challenges faced by media organizations, the growth of alternative media, widening use of social media, limited career opportunities for aspiring and current journalists, and disinformation campaigns from abroad – principally Russia at this point but potentially Iran and other countries.

Although the press in every country operates in a unique media, political, cultural, historical, and economic landscape, the findings are consistent with studies of barriers to effective environmental coverage in other developing countries. For example, a survey-based study in Indonesia found most respondents agreed that skills were low and “environmental news is complex.” It also said that environmental journalists cited problems in persuading industry to give journalists access and that half the respondents “think the numbers of experts on

environmental issues are limited” (Parahita, 2017, p. 12). Similarly, interviews and a survey of eco-NGO leaders in Kyrgyzstan found that coverage of “serious environmental issues and newsworthy topics for future stories” was sparse and that “ecological issues are not popular topics on the media agenda, while coverage priority focuses on economics and politics” (Sultanalieva & Freedman, 2015, p. 159). The same study concluded that a significant contributor to lack of coverage was the absence of ongoing, effective relationships between eco-NGOs and journalists.

Is the realm of environmental journalism in Georgia changing for the better? It’s unclear. Gvasalia, the investigative reporter, has seen some attitudinal changes since she started covering the environment: “Now the younger-than-me journalists are interested, and younger editors think the environment is a priority. IREX’s Chakhunashvili says, “The new generation of journalists is more concerned about environmental issues but in many cases lack knowledge or are not as powerful in the newsroom to decide” what to cover.

A possible partial solution to the dearth of accurate and in-depth environmental news in the press may be to bypass the press and create a cohort of concerned citizens or scientists who are trained to disseminate information and news about ecological topics, according to two interviewees. “You can train environmental journalists but it’s easier if you can train biologists etc. who decide to become journalists. It’s an easier way to have journalists who can read maps, numbers, and statistics,” Shavgulidze of NACRES says. Butkhuzi of SEED says much of the populace “can’t differentiate between fake news on the environment. That made me think: Is the NatGeo audience the audience I really want to work with? Do they really need information about the environment? Most of them know English and have access to reliable information.” That line of thought led to a series of trainings for the general public and students on topics like photography and film of environmental topics and how to write engaging blogs and feature articles, with freelance photographers serving as mentors. “We don’t want to change anybody’s profession” but do want to build citizens’ “technical capacities so, in a popular way, you can cover fields of your interest or academic background.”

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Table 1: Interviewees and Presenters (alphabetical order)

NAME	JOB/POSITION	AFFILIATION	INTERVIEW DATE	PRESENTATION DATE
Basilashvili, Khatia	wildlife ecologist	Tbilisi Zoo	Nov. 16, 2018	
Butkhuzi, Levan	director & governing board head	SEED (Science Environment Education Development)	Nov. 30, 2018	
Chakhunashvili, Lia	chief of party	IREX	Nov. 2, 2018	
Chergoleishvili, Tamara	director general	Tabula Media	Nov. 30, 2018	
Davliandize, Natalia	geographer & communication specialist	CENN (Caucasus Environmental NGO Network)		Nov. 15, 2018
Getiashvili, Rezo	environmental projects coordinator	CENN (Caucasus Environmental NGO Network)		Nov. 15, 2018
Giacomini, Geof	executive director	Caucasus Nature Fund	Nov. 1, 2018	
Gurielidze, Zurab	director	Tbilisi Zoo	Dec. 5, 2018	
Gvasalia, Tsira	environmental journalist	Freelancer	Sept. 18, 2018	Nov. 8, 2018
Jonas, Ted	board member	Caucasus Nature Fund	Nov. 9, 2018	
Kutidze, David	editor	FactCheck.ga	Nov. 14, 2018	
Patarkalashvili, Tamaz	forestry scientist	Center for Studying Productive Forces & Natural Resources of Georgia	Sept. 2, 2018	
Shavgulidze, Irakli	Governing board chair	NACRES (Center for Biodiversity Conservation & Research)	Nov. 19, 2018	
Tchitchinadze, Sophie	communications analyst	UN Development Programme	Oct. 23, 2018	
Tkabladze, Melano	environmental economist	CENN	Sept. 14, 2018	

Zoidze, Gogi	project coordinator	GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates)	Nov. 14, 2018	
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