

## **Reporting About Environmental Issues in Georgian Media**

### **Media Monitoring Report**

Human Rights Center



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### **Introduction**

The Human Rights Center conducted monitoring of reporting about environmental issues in the Georgian media between May 30 and December 31, 2011. The monitoring covered a study of the following media outlets: the Alia, Resonansi (Resonance), Akhali Taoba (New Generation) newspapers and the main daily TV news program, Moambe, on the Public Broadcaster channel. It focused on analyzing existing trends in the reporting and collecting of quantitative and qualitative data.

The research was carried out under a UNDP project, Development of Media Monitoring Capacities in Georgia, funded by the European Union.

### **Methodology**

The Human Rights Center organized the monitoring of reporting about environmental issues in three phases:

- Phase one: May 30 – July 3, 2011
- Phase two: July 18 – September 4, 2011
- Phase three: November 10 – December 31, 2011

The investigation included the gathering and analysing of qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative parameters included information about time and area, themes, tone and type of reporting (direct/indirect), geography and regions. Qualitative data focused on balance (number of sources), objective/partial reporting, delivery of fact-based information and professional journalism standards.

The selection of media outlets was based on the following criteria:

- Coverage area: as for the Public Broadcaster TV channel, the coverage area of the selected newspapers should take in the whole territory of Georgia;
- The number of published copies and the rating of selected newspapers.

## **Principal Findings**

During the first two periods of the nineteen-week monitoring process, the research team analysed 78 articles (8,093 sq. cm) and 63 reports (2 hours and 39 minutes). The third period was marked by a sharp decline in the number of articles and reports on environmental issues: in November and December Moambe aired only 21 reports with a total duration of 38 minutes. Among those the majority covered international events (69%). Despite the fact that several reports focused on the heavy snowfalls in Georgia, it would not be correct to link them to the environmental issues as these in fact were weather reports. Alia did not publish any articles at all on the environment. Akhali Taoba (New Generation) printed four articles which were written in a “news” style and did not contain any analysis, being reduced to dry listing of facts. Resonansi (Resonance) allocated a total area of 2,564 sq. cm to the topic of the environment.

The study of the newspapers (Alia, Resonansi (Resonance), Akhali Taoba (New Generation)) and the Public Broadcaster (Moambe) revealed the following trends:

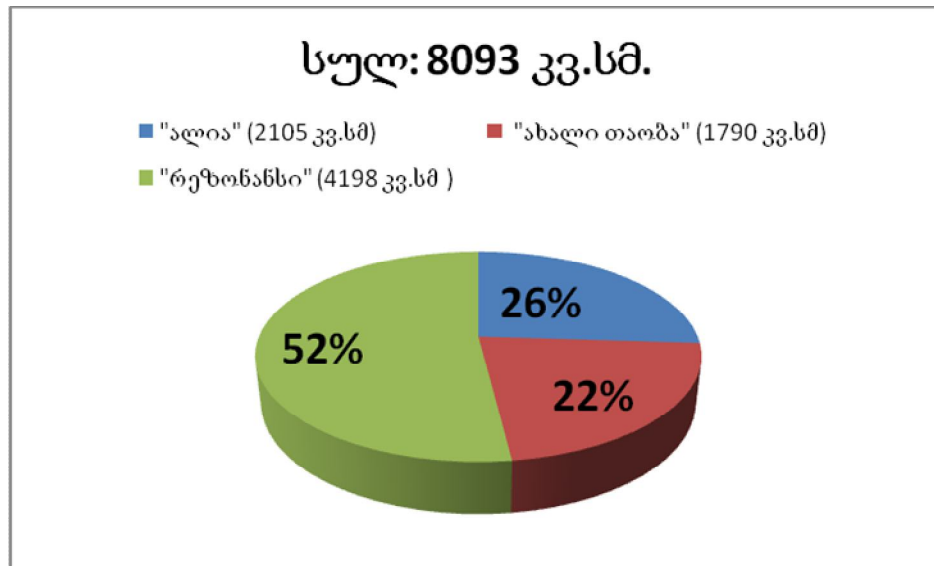
- Georgian media cover the issue of environment spontaneously and fragmentarily;
- The attitude of journalists towards environmental issues is superficial;
- Articles and reports rarely present an analysis of facts and events;
- Many journalists are incompetent in environmental issues;
- Topics about the environment lack diversity;
- In contrast to Public Broadcaster, the Georgian print media publish very few articles about the regions, using a limited amount of information from outside the capital.

## **Quantitative Data**

### **Time and Area**

Our analysis of the area distribution (%) of articles during the first two periods of monitoring revealed that Resonansi (Resonance) allocated the largest amount of space to the environment topic (52%). It was followed by Alia (26%) and Akhali Taoba (New Generation, 22%).

Diagram #1. Area distribution by newspapers of articles about the environment (% , May 30 – September 4, 2011).



According to an important general trend, as a rule, articles about the environment were published in the middle or on the back pages of the newspaper. The monitoring team registered only rare cases when the title of an article appeared on the cover page of a newspaper. However, the small size of the script made it less possible that the readers would have paid attention to it. This fact once again points to the low priority given to environmental issues by the newspapers under study. The presumed reason for this limited interest may be connected to the assumption by the journalists that the environment topic is commercially less profitable and the interest of society towards it is low.

During the first two periods of monitoring, the main news program on Public Broadcaster (Moambe) aired 63 reports with a total duration of 9,531 seconds (158 minutes). In the third phase (November 10 – December 31, 2011) the number of reports went down to 21 with a total duration of 38 minutes.

### Themes

In May-December 2011, the print media (Alia, Resonansi (Resonance) and Akhali Taoba (New Generation) dedicated the highest number of articles to the discussion of natural phenomena. All the articles concerning environment published by Akhali Taoba (New Generation) contained information about either natural phenomena or natural calamities. During the first two phases of research, only 22% (2,105 sq. cm) of articles in Alia covered the issues of biodiversity and conservation, leaving 78% of the area to the topic of natural disasters. Comparatively diverse themes were offered to the readers by Resonansi (Resonance) which, along with natural calamities (a small number of articles but still), also covered ecology, climate change, biodiversity and conservation. .

During the third period of monitoring (November 10 – December 31, 2011) it became obvious that print outlets take an interest in environmental issues (this especially concerns Alia and Akhali Taoba (New Generation)) only at a time when natural disasters take place. Information is limited to the recording and description of events and facts and a quick fragmentary report. Journalists don't offer general overviews of the topics or their analyses. The majority of materials about the environment belong to the "news" category and rarely contain analytical information. It was interesting that, starting from July, the number of articles relevant to the research topic sharply declined in all three newspapers. Presumably, the reason for this had to be searched for in the fact that no large scale natural disasters happened during the months of July and August. This fact reinforces the conclusion that media outlets show their interest towards environmental issues only in immediate connection with natural calamities and report them from the

perspective of a “news story”. Even less material on the environment was published in the newspapers during the third phase of research (November 10 – December 31, 2011). Akhali Taoba (New Generation) wrote only four news notes, all four of them covering natural phenomena. In contrast to the previous periods, the majority of the articles in Resonansi (Resonance) discussed biodiversity and conservation. Natural phenomena were given only 1% of the entire area devoted to the topic (2,564 sq. cm). As already mentioned, Alia did not publish any articles about the environment during the third period of monitoring. The total duration of reports in Moambe amounted to 38 minutes, covering natural phenomena and natural disasters (91%) and biodiversity and conservation (9%).

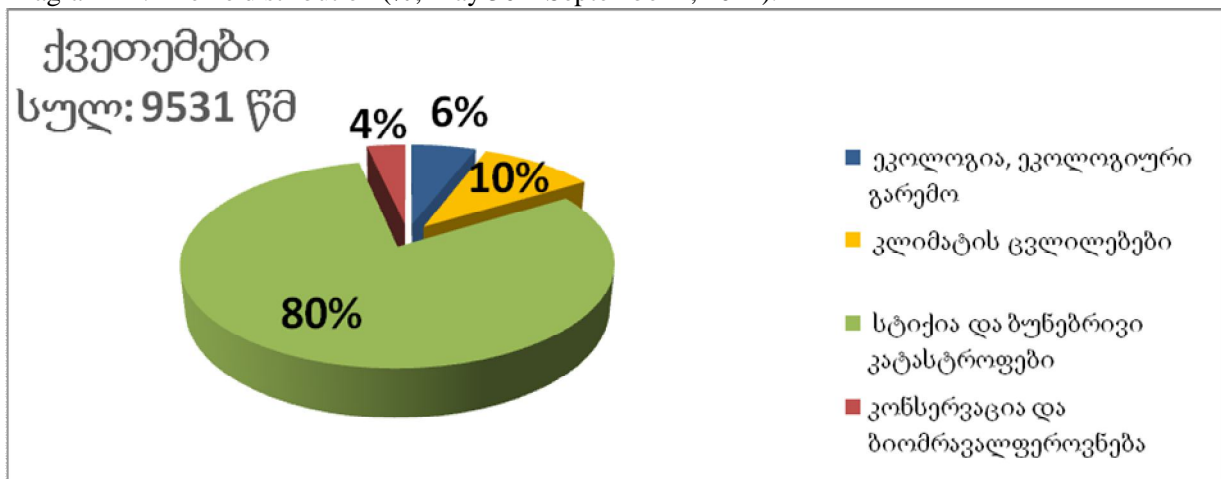
As a result, it became clear that Public Broadcaster allocates a very small amount of time and attention to the discussion of environmental issues. Journalists report in a very superficial way and offer no critical analysis and in-depth study of the subject.

During the first two periods, the majority of reports broadcast by Moambe were dedicated to the topic of natural calamities (80%). Most of the attention was directed towards a description of the impacts, which were mentioned in the titles of the reports as well. Journalists used the same title, Results of the Natural Phenomena, on several occasions. However they did not inform the viewers about the causes of the events and did not discuss possibilities for reducing or avoiding losses.

Despite the fact that Moambe allocated the least amount of time to biodiversity and conservation issues (4%) during the first two periods, the monitoring team believes that the reports were done in the most competent way. A good example was Alarming Conclusions, which was broadcast on June 22, 2011. In the case of this particular report, viewers had an opportunity to enjoy in-depth coverage, a clear presentation of a problem and discussion of its regional and global importance. The professionalism of the journalist was obvious and the information delivered was sufficient for a clear understanding of the problem.

During the first two periods of research, reporting on environmental issues by the Public Broadcaster produced the following results:

Diagram #2: Theme distribution (% , May 30 – September 4, 2011).



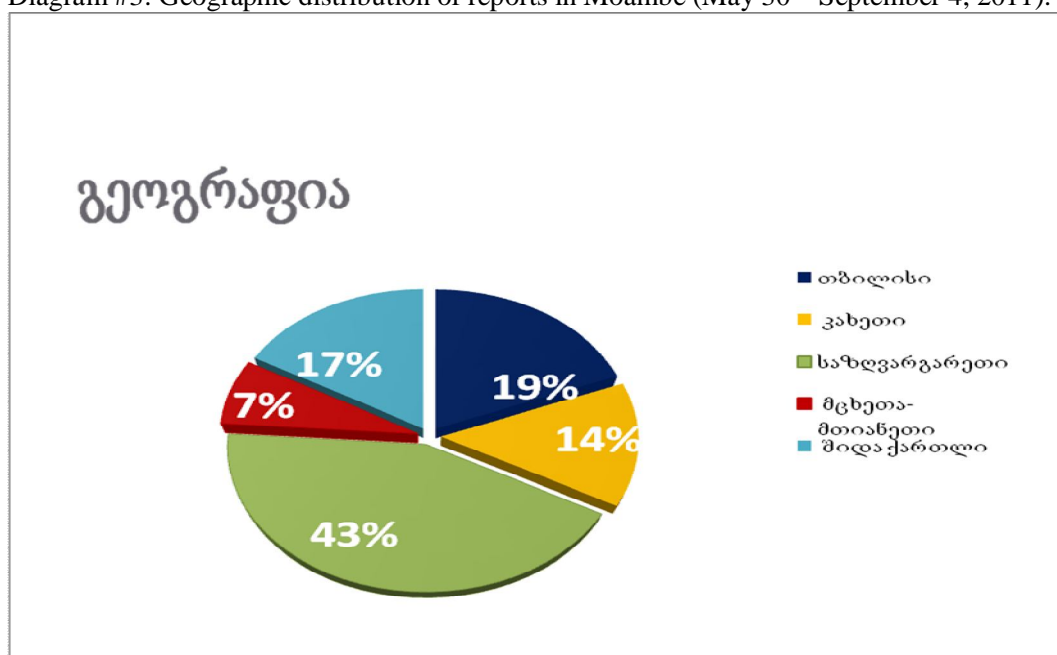
It has to be emphasized that journalists gave a significant share of the time to comments by representatives of the authorities and a positive coverage of their activities. Reports mainly informed the viewers about the timely arrival of the governmental agencies in the affected regions and the rapid start of the recovery works.

## Geography

Most of the materials published in the three newspapers (Alia, Akhali Taoba (New Generation) and Resonansi (Resonance)) during the first two phases of our research reported events which took place in Tbilisi and the Kakheti Region. An especially low number of articles were dedicated to happenings in Adjara, Racha-Lrtshkhumi and Samegrelo. Several regions have never been mentioned at all. As a rule, newspaper journalists covered the regions while being based in Tbilisi. They rarely traveled to the provinces to make themselves familiar with problems on the spot.

43% of the reports broadcast by Moambe in the first and the second research periods reported events from abroad.

Diagram #3: Geographic distribution of reports in Moambe (May 30 – September 4, 2011).



The entire published material of Akhali Taoba (New Generation) during the third period was dedicated to international events. Resonansi (Resonance), on the contrary, wrote only about Tbilisi and Samtskhe-Javakheti. It has to be emphasized that the proportion of information about Samtskhe-Javakheti was only 1% of the total area that was used for reporting on environmental issues (2,564 sq. cm). The total duration of coverage in Moambe (38 minutes) was distributed between international events (69%), events taking place in Kakheti (7%) and other regions of Georgia (24%).

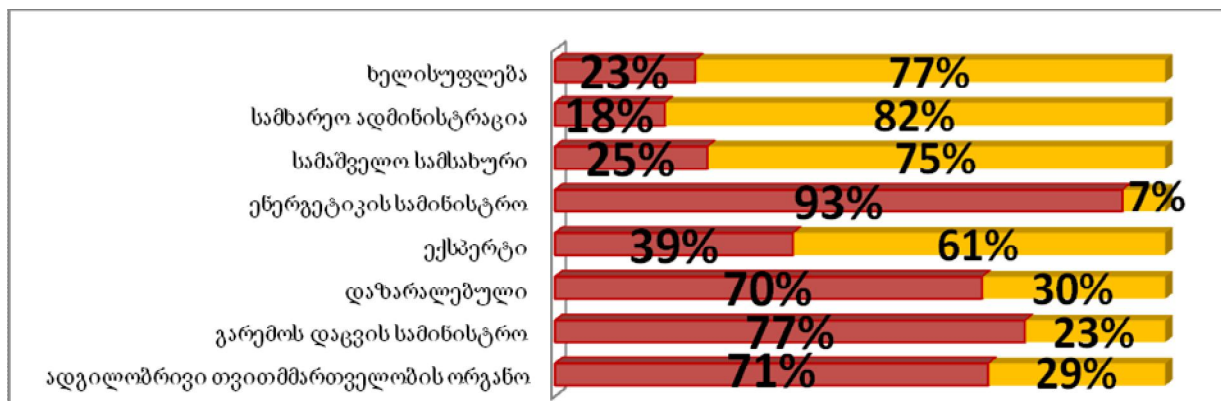
## Time/area, tone and type (direct/indirect)

During the first two phases of the monitoring, the newspapers allocated the biggest area to the activities of organisations of environmental protection, local self-government, the Ministry of Environment Protection and the Green Party. All three editions gave very limited attention to the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources and never mentioned the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons which is directly responsible for finding solutions to the problems of 11,000 eco-migrants.

During the first two periods of monitoring, Moambe dedicated the greatest amount of time to the victims of natural disasters, experts and local self-government. In general, reports about environmental issues did

not include any political content, which eliminated the possibility of partial reporting. The first two phases revealed no use of a negative tone towards the subjects, journalists mainly using positive or neutral wording in their reports. The same happened also in the case of the printed media, where most of the themes were discussed in a neutral way. Akhali Taoba (New Generation) was neutral in its assessment of all subjects, Alia demonstrated a negative attitude only towards the authorities and was neutral with regard to all others, Resonansi (Resonance) showed a more diverse approach, using both positive and negative tones. Moambe reported on the standpoints of the authorities, regional administration, rescue services and experts indirectly. The Ministry of Energy, victims, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and local self-governments presented their ideas during direct coverage.

Diagram #4: Type of reporting in Moambe (Direct/Indirect, May 30 – September 4, 2011).



The third period (November 10 – December 31, 2011) produced only one subject for Akhali Taoba (New Generation) – a victim of a natural disaster who was given the total area of 98 sq. cm and was discussed in a neutral tone. Resonansi (Resonance) reported most of the time about the Ministry of Energy (204 sq. cm), the non-parliamentary opposition (144 sq.cm) and local self-governments (141 sq. cm) in mostly a neutral tone. Partly negative was the assessment of the activities of the Ministry of Energy (28% positive, 17% neutral, 45% negative). The rest of the cases hardly revealed any negative reporting at all. During the third phase of the monitoring, Moambe still allocated the biggest amount of time to the victims of natural disasters ( 242 seconds), experts (122 seconds) and rescue services (80 seconds). All subjects were reported with a neutral tone and with the use of the same rate of direct and indirect coverage.

## Qualitative Sources

### Information Sources, Balance, Objectivity, Partial Reporting

The first and second phases of the media monitoring revealed that governmental agencies and environment protection organisations are the main sources of information for newspapers. As it became obvious, there is a serious problem of communication between scientists, experts and journalists. Journalists approach scientists and experts only in rare cases. Also, it is an alarming trend that only a very small number of authors use victims as a source of information. While writing about environmental issues and natural disasters, they almost never let them express their ideas. The situation was better in the case of Alia, which gave the victims of natural disasters an opportunity to express themselves during the first two phases of the research (in total 177 sq. cm). Despite this positive trend, articles in this newspaper and Akhali Taoba (New Generation) were often unbalanced, mainly using only one source and never presenting an opposing or different assessment of the topic. In frequent cases, articles did not have any apparent source of information at all. After being recognised as a general trend, these actions, naturally, gave birth to doubts about impartial reporting on the part of the journalists. As a rule, material published

in Resonansi (Resonance) stands out for its impartial and fact-based style. However, the newspaper also published some pieces of information which violated journalistic standards and were not verified by two or more sources.

During the third phase of monitoring (November 10 – December 31, 2011), Resonansi (Resonance) used the NGO sector as its major source. Compared to the last period, governmental agencies were more frequently quoted as a source of information as well. It has to be mentioned that in this phase the newspaper carried out highly professional journalistic investigations which were mostly made possible with financial support from donor organizations. It was obvious that, in all cases, the journalists were well aware of the subject and knew what they were writing about. Akhali Taoba (New Generation) used foreign news agencies as sources for all four news pieces it published. No other sources were mentioned in the articles.

Moambe never used opposition parties as a source of information during the first two phases of the nineteen-week monitoring. The largest amount of time was allocated to victims (1,329 seconds) and experts (777 seconds). However, opinions from experts were often used, not for further analysis, but as a presentation of the weather forecast – the ‘experts’ being mainly weather forecasters and meteorologists).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The media monitoring, conducted by the Human Rights Center between May 30 and December 31, 2011 and involving the study of three newspapers (Alia, Resonansi (Resonance), Akhali Taoba (New Generation)) and the main daily Moambe news program of Public Broadcaster, revealed that the approach of the Georgian media towards reporting on environmental issues is quite uniform: the topic is considered to be of secondary interest.

As a rule, journalists report on the environment in a superficial manner with no in-depth analysis of the problems or coverage of interesting topics. It is possible that such articles or TV reports are not profitable from a commercial point of view but, despite this argument, the media have to give more attention to the such issues and discuss them in a more serious way. This approach is especially applicable in the case of the Public Broadcaster, as the channel is not a profit-oriented one which must focus on advertisers and viewer rating. Funding for the Public Broadcaster is provided by the government and its accountability to society is correspondingly higher.

The media, and especially TV, have enormous opportunities to raise awareness levels in different layers of society. However, reporting which is directed towards achievement of this goal is very rare in the Georgian media.

In general, environmental issues do not belong to the field of priority topics. In order to improve the situation in this regard the Pubic Broadcaster could start by broadcasting a program for teenagers and the whole population of Georgia.

The Human Rights Center elaborated the following recommendations based on the results of the study:

1. Environmental issues have to be covered more intensively and in greater depth through epistemological or other programs that would be directed at the raising of the level of awareness;
2. It is necessary to prepare materials on important issues such as climate change, biodiversity, and conservation;
3. It is necessary to prepare materials not only about the problems of Tbilisi, but of all Georgian regions;

4. Journalists have to travel to the places where events took place, to personally get familiar with the problem and prepare their articles/reports only afterwards;
5. It is necessary to enhance communication between journalists and scientists, experts, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources and the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons;
6. Newspapers should allow victims and ordinary citizens to talk about events. Journalists should approach and use them more often as sources of information;
7. It is necessary to increase the knowledge of the journalists in the area of environmental issues and to enhance their skills through professional training.