

## ***Freedom of Expression, Media and Information in Abkhazia***

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Working Session 4

Association "Inva-sodeystvie"

On 10 April 2008 the "Law on the Right for Access to Information" was adopted in Abkhazia. The draft of this law was prepared by the Abkhaz NGO "Sukhum-Media Club" with the expert support of Article 19.

This law defined all the procedures and mechanisms for transparency and free access to information as a right of all citizens.

The Abkhaz NGOs have monitored the implementation of this law and initiated different requests from individuals and different institutions such as Media and NGOs.

The main problem for the implementation of this law is time for in answering request. In the situation when there is no post service and the electronic documents are not considered as official this creates difficulties for a person or institutions to make a request and get an answer as a person has to go to the office personally.

The Law "On Media" adopted in August 2004, describes registration rules and responsibility for publication of various media sources(both paper and TV and radio).

Until now not a single case of closure or rejection by the government had been registered.

Now in Abkhazia are regularly printed 6 Republican weekly newspapers (2 official Gov ("Respublica Abkhazia", "Apsny"), 2 opposition ("EkhoAbkhazii", "Novy den" and 2 independent ("Nuzhnaya Gazeta", "Chegemskaya Pravda"). In additional each district has their own newspaper, including Gal district ("Gal'), with majority of Megrelian population.

In addition Abkhaz State TV "AGTRK" and "Abaza" TV (opposition) broadcast throughout the state and a number of regional TV studios broadcast in their regions.

Journalists can publish any materials they find interesting all over Abkhazia and in the Internet as well. We have few cases when some officials (including the Head of National bank) been criticized for their activities by independent media, as a response they negotiated with the newspaper to publish their answers in the newspapers.

Unfortunately there are some financial limitations in regularity and number of publications in media. Except one private newspaper and TV, and one Political party newspaper that is financed from private sources, we also have 2 independent newspapers that can operate only by their own income activities.

Three radio stations work in Abkhazia, one is the governmental “Abkhaz State Radio”, and two independent radio “Soma”, and “Hara Hradio”.

As the Internet became more accessible for the population of Abkhazia only the last 3-4 years ago, it is not yet available for a big part of population because of poor infrastructure and a high price, due to partial recognition of Abkhazia. During the election time or any other political activities when a lot of information is published, the number of printed copies can be increased and printed oftener, independent newspapers have no limitation in printing the information.

Most part of the population including people older than 30-35 still get information from newspapers and local TV. Local Internet-media poorly developed, the reason is both lack of resources and low interest from population.

We have an only limit of web-site, that re-publish the information from other sources. One NGO TV studio broadcasts regularly on web-site [www.asarkia.info](http://www.asarkia.info) since 2010 y., <http://allsmediamonitoring.blogspot.com> and “Nuzhnaya gazeta” <http://abh-ng.ru> page which published their own articles.

Different social networks such as Facebook became very popular In Abkhazia. During the research made this year, we found out that, 40% of the Internet users in Abkhazia have an account in Facebook and 35% use it to get information about different events inside Abkhazia. This information includes discussion on different social and political problems inside and outside Abkhazia and 93% of people use their own names and surnames. They discuss issues with comments it also can be published in the local newspapers and even officials sometimes respond on questions mentioned in Internet discussions.

Unfortunately most of the Internet information about Abkhazia is in Russian that makes this information not accessible for non-Russian speakers. We are attracting your attention to this very important issue as it is necessary to underline the fact that if the Russian Federation is the only state which assists Abkhazia economically it would be very useful if the EU could help in the democratization and particularly in creating and supporting the internet sites to have a view and the objective opinion from Abkhazia and the Abkhazian experts.

Difficulties in sharing information about Abkhazia beyond Abkhazia regrettably depends on the restriction of movement for our citizens, so that their participation in different international events is not usually possible. Our students cannot get education in Europe because they are excluded from programs as Abkhaz citizens, except Russian Universities, that kindly provide us this opportunity.

People living in Abkhazia still hope to have a chance to express their opinion, needs and hope to be heard by the entire world community.

According to the Freedom House 2012 report Abkhazia has been mentioned as partly free compared to the post-Soviet recognized states. One can note that all we achieved was in difficult conditions. The situation is improving in Abkhazia each year, we hope that very soon our state will be mentioned as free, and we will be able to get a chance to use our right to freedom of expression, right on information, freedom of movement etc. not only inside Abkhazia, but outside as well.

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