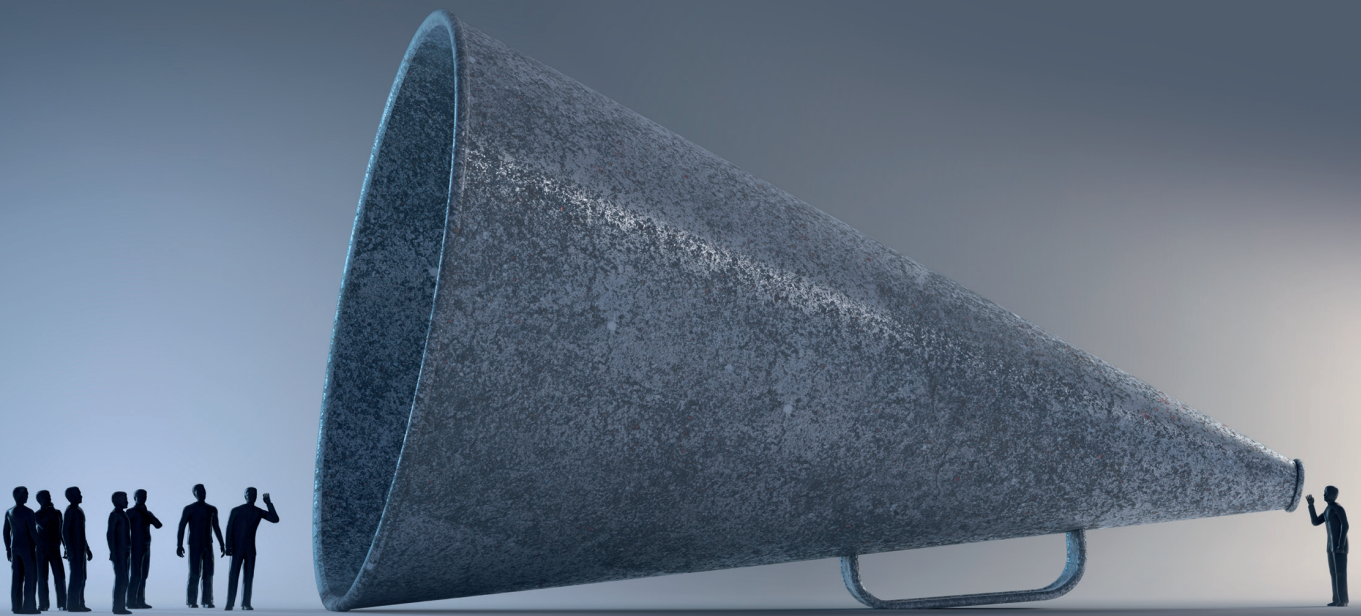


# REPORTING CRISES

Needs assessment survey





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**Needs assessment survey**



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The survey was conducted within the framework of the project “Prevention of and Responding to Radicalizing Narratives in Georgia,” implemented by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) with the financial assistance from Hedayah International Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism and the European Union. The views, findings and recommendations provided in this study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Hedayah and the EU.

# INTRODUCTION

This needs assessment survey was conducted within the framework of the project “Prevention of and Responding to Radicalizing Narratives in Georgia” implemented by the MDF with the assistance from Hedayah International Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism. The aim of the survey was to identify problems in reporting and accessing information about terrorist acts, violent extremism and other crises as well as to draw up recommendations based on the findings.

The survey envisaged the conduct of face-to-face interviews with representatives of media and relevant state entities’ strategic communication services so as to consider views of both parties in developing recommendations to tackle identified problems. However, due to the problem in communication on the part of state representatives, which was limited to providing a very small amount of information in writing alone, some changes were made to the design of the survey. To assess the activity of media and public strategic communication services, interviews were additionally conducted with experts in the areas of media, minority issues, security and strategic communications.

The project implemented with the support from Hedayah and the EU aims at strengthening capacity of Georgian media, state and non-state actors to prevent radicalization and efficiently respond to violent extremism and terrorism; in all this effective communication plays an important role.

This report contains the survey methodology, key findings, survey data and recommendations developed within the format of a working group involving various actors.

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The needs assessment applied a qualitative method and was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews.

**Questionnaire.** A questionnaire was developed to identify problems in communication between media and state entities responsible for strategic communication as well as to draw up relevant recommendations. The questionnaire concerned the existing policy and regulations and their practical application. In particular, the questionnaire contained the following basic issues:

MEDIA	GOVERNMENT
Regulations: editorial policy, codes of ethics, etc.	Regulations and mechanisms: communication protocols, formats of interaction with media
Practice	Practice

The questionnaire consisted of open and structured questions.

**Subjects.** Given the aims of the survey, there were two subjects defined for the survey:

1. Media representatives (19 journalists: nationwide TV channels, regional media, online media and international media – see Annex 1);
2. Representatives of state entities responsible for strategic communication. They were selected in accordance with a governmental ordinance<sup>1</sup> defining the composition of Permanent Interagency Commission working on the issues of the National Counterterrorism Strategy and its Action Plan. With a request to be interviewed, the questionnaire was sent to seven entities that are members of the Permanent Interagency Commission on Elaboration and Monitoring of Implementation of the National Counterterrorism Strategy and Relevant Action Plan, also to the Defense and Security Committee of the Parliament, the Public Safety Command Center 112, the Georgian Intelligence Service and the National Security Council; to 11 entities in total (see Annex #2)

<sup>1</sup> Legislative Herald of Georgia, Government of Georgia, On the Creation of the Permanent Interagency Commission on Elaboration and Monitoring of Implementation of the National Counterterrorism Strategy and Relevant Action Plan and Approval of its Statute, 14 September 2018, <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4325601?publication=0>

Since face-to-face interviews proved to be impossible to conduct with representatives of state entities while replies of the State Security Service and Financial Monitoring Service of Georgia provided in writing were incomplete, it became necessary to make changes to the design of the survey in order to assess the activity of public entities as well as coverage by media. To this end, additional interviews were conducted with experts in the areas of media, minority issues, security and strategic communications. The total of 11 experts were interviewed (see Annex #3).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 30 respondents in total, over the period between January and March 2020.



# KEY FINDINGS

The following tendencies have been outlined as a result of the survey:

- The absence of guidelines for covering crises is mainly seen in broadcast media. When reporting about crises, TV journalists rely on personal experience gained in practice and at trainings, as well as on in-house editorial consultations.
- Broadcast media representatives are more familiar with the principles of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics than the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters.
- The majority of journalists are not aware of Georgian government's national strategy that defines the governmental policy in the area of crises management.
- The majority of media outlets does not have a journalist specialized in reporting terrorism, radicalization or violent extremism, mainly due to lack of relevant human resources.
- Main problems in media coverage of crises/counterterrorist operations include lack of knowledge, lack of deep analysis and absence of thematic specialization.
- The most serious problem encountered by media when reporting crises, counterterrorist operations is the difficulty to obtain information from public entities. The majority of journalists tries to obtain information through personal contacts and alternative sources.
- Journalists also face difficulties in obtaining information on investigations into cases related to counterterrorist operations. On the one hand, investigative agencies declare that they cannot disclose details of investigation because the cases are classified; on the other hand, however, case materials are made available to media outlets that pursue progovernment editorial policy.
- Broadcast media representatives believe that specifics of news do not allow for providing a deep analysis of crises. Online media representatives hold an opposite view, believing that it is necessary to provide audience with a deep analysis of a crisis.
- The majority of journalists deem it acceptable to cooperate with law enforcement agencies only in the area of reporting crime. They think that cooperation in other areas will jeopardize their professional integrity.
- The likelihood that state entities lack an internal strategic communications guideline is high. It is therefore unknown whether during crises they act in accordance with an internal procedure or on an ad hoc basis, depending on a particular situation.
- The statute of the administration of State Security Service includes issues that smack of interference in editorial policy. In particular, the competences of the State Security Service include the development of joint TV projects with the Public Broadcaster and private broadcasters.

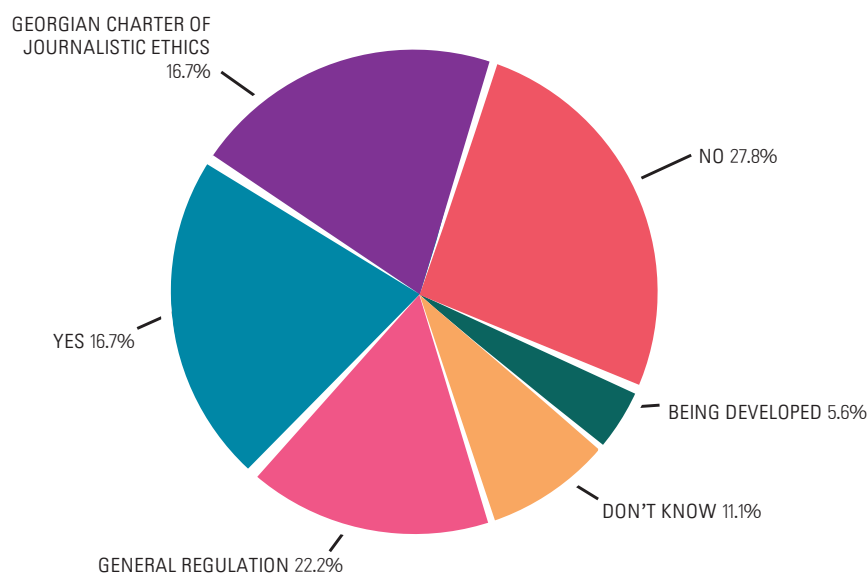
- There is no permanent format of cooperation created between the state entities and nongovernmental actors (media, nongovernmental organizations, private sector) to regularly exchange information and discuss pressing issues. The communication between these two parties is largely of one-off nature.
- According to an opinion, the State Security Service cooperates only with nongovernmental organizations that are loyal to the government, so-called GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organization) and the aim of this illusory cooperation is to show others, including foreign partners, that the cooperation exists.
- The key problem in communication on the part of state entities during crises/counterterrorist operations is the shortage of information and lack of coordination.

# 1 MEDIA REGULATIONS AND EDITORIAL POLICY

Journalists participating in the survey were requested to answer a number of questions that would help find out which regulations and what type of editorial policies they and various media outlets follow when reporting crises.

**Regulations.** To a question: **does your media outlet have a guideline for covering crises?** five out of 18 participants<sup>2</sup> replied that they did not have such a guideline while additional two respondents did not have information on this issue. One journalist (Rustavi 2) said that such regulation was being developed. All the three respondents who said that they had internal editorial rules on how to cover crises were from international media organizations (AP, Reuters, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty); three of those four respondents who said that they had a general internal editorial regulations and codes were from online media (Netgazeti, Batumelebi, On.ge) and one was from a TV channel (Maestro). Three respondents said that they mainly relied on the rules and guidelines of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (Pankisi Community Radio, Samkhretis Karibche, 1<sup>st</sup> Channel). The lack of internal editorial codes was mainly observed in case of broadcast media.

FIGURE 1. INTERNAL EDITORIAL RULES FOR REPORTING CRISES (INCLUDING TERRORISM)



<sup>2</sup> A freelance journalist did not reply to this question.

A representative of RFE/RL has added that since their guideline rests on international experience, it is not a static document and is updated regularly.

In response to the question as to **what they use as a guidance when covering crises/terrorist acts in the absence of internal editorial regulations**, two journalists named the Charter of Journalistic Ethics while the majority (10 journalists) named personal experience gained in practice as well as experience obtained at international and national trainings.

**Davit Kashiashvili, journalist at Formula:** “We do not have a document of strictly formalized guidelines, but we have gained greater knowledge from the experience and the events that took place in our country and were allegedly related to terrorism and terrorist organizations.”

In addition to gaining experience in practice, journalists reflect on their mistakes too.

**Natia Trapaidze, journalists at Mtavari Arkhi:** “Our standards result from journalistic experience we have accumulated through participating in local and international trainings. My manual in covering terrorism is a special operation carried out on Gabriel Salosi Street,<sup>3</sup> in the coverage of which, I think, media made many mistakes.”

One journalist recalled with a regret a case of disclosing the identity of a respondent, at the request of the latter, exposing a terrorist group, who was killed shortly thereafter:

“A young person contacted me for a video record to say that he knew the location of terrorists who shared ideas of Islamic State. I told him that I would change his name, voice, blur his face so as to avoid any threat to him and his family members. But he was an activist and did not want to conceal his identity. He was killed several days later. I feel guilty to date that despite his resistance, I did not blur his face.”

A practice of verbal arrangements and joint decisions within the editorial team was also named as a mechanism during covering crises:

**Aka Zarkua, journalist at Tabula:** “We are guided by general principles and standards formed as a result of oral communication. Journalists do not, normally, write about such sensitive topics arbitrarily; everything is agreed with the editorial teams, analysts, editor-in-chief.”

Replies to a question aiming at finding out whether **the broadcast media representatives were familiar with the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters** revealed that only two respondents (Public Broadcaster,

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<sup>3</sup> On 21-22 June 2017, a counterterrorist special operation was carried out on Gabriel Salosi Street in Tbilisi. According to the State Security Service, three members of a gang were liquidated, including Akhmed Chatayev. As announced by the State Security Service, persons killed in the special operation were planning terrorist acts against representatives of diplomatic corps in Georgia and Turkey. <https://bit.ly/2Nhc1A2>; <https://bit.ly/2Yk7gfE>; <https://bit.ly/2V79AEK> <https://bit.ly/2Nfanz8>

Meastro) were familiar with it, but none of them specified that they applied this code of conduct in practice. Furthermore, several broadcast media representatives asked to clarify the question to make sure whether it implied the in-house code of conduct of Public Broadcaster or not. This indicates that journalists are not familiar with the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters.

At the same time, broadcast journalists are more familiar with the principles of the Charter of journalistic Ethics than the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters<sup>4</sup> which was adopted based on the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting in 2009. It is a normative act and therefore, a binding document. Moreover, Articles 52 and 53 of the Code provide special regulations of reporting about armed conflicts, accidents, and emergencies while Paragraphs 3 and 4 of Article 53 are specifically dedicated to the coverage of terrorism:

### **Code of Conduct for Broadcasters. Article 53.**

3. Statements by terrorists, kidnappers or hostages as well as interviews with them should not be broadcast without the approval of the editorial manager. When taking a decision on carrying an interview, broadcasters should assess a potential benefit against anticipated benefits that may entail the broadcast of information.
4. Any statements or demands made by terrorists or kidnappers should be broadcast in an edited form in order to ensure that they do not manipulate public opinion.
5. Telephone or other direct contact with hostages, terrorists or hostage takers should not interfere with the measures undertaken by law enforcement authorities and further jeopardize the safety of hostages.

The Code of Conduct of Public Broadcaster<sup>5</sup>, which was adopted in 2006, also contains a special chapter on the coverage of emergencies and includes a separate subchapter about the coverage of terrorist acts:

### **Code of Conduct of Public Broadcaster**

#### **8. Emergencies**

##### **8.4. Acts of terror**

**We must report acts of terror quickly, accurately, fully and responsibly. Our credibility is undermined by the careless use of words which carry emotional or value judgements. Our responsibility is to remain objective and report in ways that enable our audiences to make their own assessments about who is doing what to whom.**

<sup>4</sup> Legislative Herald of Georgia, Georgian National Communications Commission, Ordinance of the Georgian National Communications Commission on the approval of Code of Conduct for Broadcasters, 12 March 2009. <https://cutt.ly/yyl2vxP>

<sup>5</sup> Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2006. Code of Conduct. <https://1tv.ge/document/sazogadoebrivi-mautsyebelis-qtsevis-kodeqsi/>

## Recommendation

When reporting an act of terror, we must take into account that any information provided by a terrorist may contain code-words, calls, etc., which may further complicate the situation.

When covering an act of terror, the following guidelines should apply:

- Any direct communication from terrorists which contains information about current or contemplated acts of terror should be reported immediately to the information programme manager or producer.
- No live or recorded broadcast of a statement by or interview with a terrorist/hostage taker or hostage may occur without authorization from the information programme manager or producer. Such authorization will only be provided in exceptional circumstances.
- Statements or demands by terrorists/hostage takers should be broadcast in summary or edited form to avoid the danger of manipulation.
- Telephone or other direct contact with hostages or terrorist/hostage takers or both should only be undertaken if, in the judgement of the information programme manager or producer, such activity does not interfere with the authorities' communications or further jeopardize the safety of hostages.
- Reporters and producers should promptly convey to the information programme manager any request made by the authorities to delay (for safety or other purposes) the broadcasting of certain information regarding the incident in progress.

Asked about the topics that are covered by oral or written regulations applied by journalists in practice, the majority of respondents ticked the terminology and the publication of image among the standards listed in the question; among other issues ticked were the coverage of records released by terrorists (6), confidentiality of a victim and his/her relatives (6) and live reporting (5).

WHAT ISSUES ARE COVERED BY GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING TERRORISM/TERRORISTS	
Terminology	13
Image	7
Records released by terrorists	6
Confidentiality of a victim and his/her relatives	6
Live reporting	5

The majority of journalists are not aware of the national strategy adopted by the government of Georgia, which defines an official policy in this area.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Government of Georgia, on the approval of the National Strategy of Georgia on Fight against Terrorism, 23 January 2019. <https://cutt.ly/6yl2xNv>

**Specialized correspondent.** To a question whether a media outlet has a journalist specialized in covering terrorism, radicalization and violent extremism, only five respondents gave a positive answer (AP, Public Broadcaster, Ajara Public Broadcaster, Formula, Maestro) whereas the majority of media outlets said they could not afford such specialization due to lack of relevant human resources.

**Trainings.** The majority of respondents (11) have undertaken trainings in reporting crises. The number of journalists that were trained in the issues of inclusive coverage and diversity was the lowest (5).

FIGURE 2. TRAININGS IN REPORTING ABOUT TERRORISM, RADICALIZATION AND INCLUSIVE COVERAGE



# 2 PRACTICE OF REPORTING

**Problem of information vacuum.** From among challenges faced in practice, the majority of journalists named a problem in obtaining information from official entities during crises, counterterrorism operations. They have added that such information vacuum leaves an ample room for interpretations which are not always free from errors and affect the quality of reporting.

**Gela Bochikashvili, journalist at On.ge:** [During special operations on Gabriel Salosi Street<sup>7</sup> and in Pankisi<sup>8</sup>] the media was, virtually, abandoned to its interpretations or citizens being there... when media is not provided with information, it always seeks interpretation.”

**Sopo Megrelidze, journalist at AP:** “Authorities often delay the release of information or refuse to cooperate with the media and inform the public at all. During an information vacuum, journalists say what they can see or hear from various sources, which poses a threat of disseminating unverified information.”

**Dea Mamiseishvili, journalist at Maestro:** “Since during crises relevant entities opt to stay silent and do not speak publicly, we, representatives of media have an obligation to seek information through our own means, which does not always lead us to a correct decision.”

A segment of journalists has also said that sometimes they even find difficult to verify the information (as officials apply a formula of neither confirming nor denying the information) or official entities limit themselves to providing very little information (making a reference only to an article from the law, under which a criminal proceeding was instituted – Netgazeti, Pankisi Community Radio). According to several respondents, a general standard followed by public entities is oriented on dodging questions from journalists.

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<sup>7</sup> On 21-22 June 2017, a counterterrorist special operation was carried out on Gabriel Salosi Street in Tbilisi. According to the State Security Service, three members of a gang were liquidated, including Akhmed Chatayev. As announced by the State Security Service, persons killed in the special operation were planning terrorist acts against representatives of diplomatic corps in Georgia and Turkey. <https://bit.ly/2Nhc1A2>; <https://bit.ly/2Yk7gfE>; <https://bit.ly/2V79AEK> <https://bit.ly/2Nfanz8>

<sup>8</sup> On 26 December 2017, Temirlan Machalikashvili was shot to death by a special force during the special operation. The State Security service accused him of having ties with members of Akhmed Chatayev’s group. <https://bit.ly/3aukx9S>



**Giorgi Tserodze, journalist at Adjara Public Broadcaster:** “Law enforcement employees, fearing to make a mistake, always shun communication with journalists. This is their internal standard. Therefore, if a terrorist act takes place somewhere in Georgia, every police officer will necessarily try to get rid of a journalist because that is the internal instruction and regulation they are given to follow.”

**Gela Mtivlishvili, Pankisi Community Radio:** “It is difficult for administrative bodies – and I do not mean security and special services alone, to realize that they should provide as comprehensive information as possible in a proper manner instead of concealing and filtering it.”

According to several journalists from international media organizations, competences are not defined in entities; nor are clear-cut instructions drawn up for journalists how to act on scenes of incidents.

**Maka Antudze, Reuters:** “Unfortunately, in the past 10 years, press centers do not provide the information you are interested in... There is no coordination inside an entity on what they should and should not say. The notions of a press center and a spokesperson are confused.”

**Nino Kharadze, RFE/RL:** “Instructions on to what extent journalists’ participation should be restricted in order to protect safety of journalists, on the one hand, and that of special operation, on the other hand, were not actually given to journalists [on Gabriel Salosi Street]. A person responsible for that did not approach journalists there to give instructions on what is prohibited or allowed.”

The majority of journalists mentioned the problem of obtaining information during investigations or after the completion of investigations. According to a Tabula journalist, given that investigation materials are classified while court trials closed, they do not have a possibility to track errors made during a special operation based on factual circumstances. As an example, the journalist cited a closed court trial of Chataev case:

**Aka Zarkua, Tabula:** “A court trial has been closed; identities of witnesses are known but we do not have any communication with them because the materials have been classified. Hence, our access to information on errors made during that special operation has been restricted although it is apparent that errors were made because when a terrorist on an international wanted list enters your country and possesses such a cache of weapons that enables him to offer an 18-hour-long resistance, that speaks about problems in state entities. Given the interest towards this issue, the information is concealed in order to avoid tarnishing of the image of state entities.”

The manager of Pankisi Community Radio has underlined that investigation materials are selectively, in the form of exclusive information, provided to the broadcast media that is loyal to the government, revealing a selective approach of authorities:

**Gela Mtvlishvili, Pankisi Community Radio:** “Imedi TV company, which is a pro-government TV channel, is given carte blanche in covering terrorism issues... The information they report on TV is taken directly from materials of criminal cases, which are not available to anyone, even defense lawyers signed non-disclosure agreement... Court trials are closed, as it was in the case of persons linked to Chatayev, and we are left with nothing else but to speculate and guess what is right and what is wrong.”

**Anuna Akhalaia, TV Pirveli:** “Public entities do not tell us about the progress in investigation, new circumstances revealed in it; they only confirm that the investigation is underway.”

Journalists cited examples from their personal experience: the Tabula journalist was not able to verify with official sources the information provided by an unofficial source about Khangoshvili’s activity in Georgia; an attempt of RFE/RL to obtain information from a state entity about the killing of Khangoshvili in Germany ended without any result and the outlet had to rely only on foreign media information.

The investigation into the Pankisi special operation has completed, but not all answers to the questions media is interested in have been provided.

**Gela Mtvlishvili, Pankisi Community Radio:** “We managed [to get information] via our sources, not with the support from the state. [State entities] give those footages to Imedi TV company because they know full well that no critical question will be asked there and everything will be done in accordance with the government’s wishes, not the state interests.”

**Communication with other sources.** To a question, **who journalists turn to when they do not obtain information from investigative authorities**, the majority named personal contacts (5) and alternative sources (5).

WHEN INVESTIGATIVE AUTHORITIES REFUSE TO COOPERATE WITH MEDIA ON MATTERS RELATED TO INVESTIGATION, WHAT SOURCES DO YOU RELY ON TO FILL THE INFORMATION VACUUM?	
Personal contacts	5
Alternative sources	5
Defense lawyers	4
Family members	3
Human rights defenders/civil sector/experts	3
Only state entities	1

Asked **whether journalists encounter problems from other sources when covering crises**, the respondents named gaining trust, protecting confidentiality of sources and maintaining open and transparent standards in relationship as main problems:

## GAINING TRUST:

**Eter Turadze, Batumelebi:** “When we report on radicalization, respondents display mistrust while a degree of unacceptability is high; therefore, if you do not have an acquaintance, the probability to return with no information is high.”

**Keti Tutberidze, Public Broadcaster:** “For example, I have my sources in Pankisi.... They see my anti-Islamophobic attitudes because I always try to underline that Pankisi is not a hotbed of terrorism, as Lavrov repeatedly says, but a territory wherefrom several dozens of people went, including some by luring, to Syria and Iraq.”

## PROTECTION OF SOURCES:

**Onik Krikoryan, freelance journalist:** “Key issues here are trust and protection of a source.”

## OPEN AND TRANSPARENT STANDARDS:

**Maka Antidze, Reuters:** “We observe standards of informing persons that what they tell us may be used in an article that will be published.”

Several respondents have also underlined that, sometimes, problems arise with regard to topics they are going to cover. As Gela Mtvlishvili of Pankisi Community Radio recalled, in 2015 and 2016, he was not able to enter Pankisi for several months because he intended to report about activities of those groups that supported the recruitment of people from Georgia to fight in Syria.

**Gela Mtvlishvili, Pankisi Community Radio:** “There were instances when my physical safety was jeopardized and I was not able to enter Pankisi for a certain period of time.”

According to Aka Zarkua of Tabula, the mention of radical Islam alongside terrorism often triggers Islamophobic comments.

**Background/context.** Response to a question: **How extensively is the background, or causes/preceding developments of a particular act/event researched when preparing a report about a terrorist act?** differed between TV and online media representatives. Broadcast news reporters stressed that the news specifics did not allow them to provide a comprehensive coverage while online media and international news agencies underlined the necessity to provide a comprehensive coverage.

**Tazo Kupreishvili, Netgazeti:** “Investigating and providing information on preceding events is a must in our reporting standard; otherwise, merely reporting facts will not constitute an exhaustive coverage.”

**Consulting experts.** Asked whether journalists, when reporting on these topics, consult experts in ethnic/religious/political issues, the majority said that they do consult experts; however, as an example of such consultation, a segment of them cited inviting experts as respondents to a studio or recording comments from them. According to a small group of respondents, there is a shortage of such experts in Georgia and they themselves have to get an insight into specific issues. In Onik Kirkoryan's view, Georgia lacks experience in using tools of international counterterrorist network that brings together journalists, analysts and practitioners.

As for the experts themselves, they said that journalists approached them for advice when covering issues concerning ethnic and religious minorities as well as concerning the use of terminology, but not when covering crisis or terrorist act.

**Cooperation with law enforcement authorities.** When asked whether journalist cooperate with law enforcement authorities with a view to exposing terrorists or preventing terrorism, only few respondents spoke about a need to take into consideration state interests. The majority of journalists see a possibility of cooperation only in terms of reporting a crime. One respondent from media recalled one instance when they, having learned about an intention of sending a 17-year-old girl to Syria as a bride, notified the police about it. Another journalists recalled an instance of providing the State Security Service with the addresses of the sites that released ISIS statement.

With the exception of reporting a crime, the majority of journalists deem the cooperation inappropriate as it would question their professional reliability.

**Onik Krikoryan, freelance journalist:** “Had I cooperated with police my name of a trustworthy and neutral reporter would have been tarnished... If I have information about a terrorist attack and I have no doubt that something will happen, it is, of course, a civic duty to notify police about that whereas the failure to notify is a crime.”

**Gela Bochikashvili, On.ge:** “It is important that during a special operation a journalist clearly understands his/her responsibility, which may be expressed in cooperation in observing the safety rules. However, this does not mean that a journalist should cover only what he/she is told to cover.”

# 3 QUALITY OF REPORTING

**Problems in media coverage.** The experts were asked about problems in media coverage of crises/terrorist acts. The problems highlighted in experts' answers are:

1. **Lack of knowledge:** One of main problems which is the root of other named problems is the lack of knowledge of issues related to terrorism, crises and radicalization.

**Tamta Mikeladze, EMC:** “The main problem is that in our reality there is no critical knowledge of terrorism, crises and radicalization policies either among academic circles or nongovernmental organizations, and even more so, among media.”

2. **Lack of deep, competent analysis:** This problem stems from the first problem – lack of knowledge. In experts' view, there is a shortage of deep analysis in media. Media often has to work impromptu, and often under time constraints, which leads to a superficial coverage of events.

**Batu Kutelia, Atlantic Council:** “Population needs answers to complex questions... a deep, competent analysis of long-term strategic changes caused [by an event] and a more fundamental social, economic analysis, etc.”

3. **Absence of thematic specialization:** The lack of deep analysis stems from, inter alia, the absence of specialization of journalists. It is difficult to require from a journalist covering all topics to be competent in any one of these topics. Thematic specialization equips a relevant journalist with some knowledge and experience. A journalist specializing in reporting crises knows how to behave in such a situation, how to observe safety norms, which one is a sensitive issue that if disclosed may play into hands of an adversary. Consequently, such a journalist is familiar with the sphere and to some extent, prepared to cover such events.

4. **Neglect of professional standards:** Experts believe that focus on sensational stories, chase after exclusive news and ratings often nudge journalists to ignore professional standards.

**Nodar Tangiashvili, East-West Management Institute:** “They often seek exclusive stories and ratings and spread unverified information... They produce reports that are not based on facts but on someone's opinions.”

Stigmatization, labeling, stereotyping, demonization of religious and ethnic minorities is frequent as well as improper use of terminology.

**Eka Chitanava, TDI:** “Issues concerning terrorism are often incorrectly reported. Use of incorrect terms is also a problem, for example, “Islamist terrorist.” One can often hear talks about potential terrorism in the context of Pankisi, thereby stigmatizing inhabitants of that region.”

**Threat coming from media.** The majority of experts agree that media coverage of terrorism/antiterrorist operations sometimes jeopardizes the operation itself, an investigation process.

**Beka Bajelidze, IWPR:** “There were such instances of coverage during the [2008 August] war too when in reports on military actions one could see vehicle number plates and the direction they were driving toward, as well as movement of infantry units. This was, of course, watched and analyzed by the adversary and the Russian TV channels totally faked the coverage, staged scenes.”

**Nino Narimanashvili, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics:** “Media jeopardized the special operation<sup>9</sup> [on Gabriel Salosi Street] because... media representatives were moving around freely, showing scenes that should not have been shown... reporting details of what was going on outside, roads that were blocked, location of special forces. The people indoors could have watched live everything had they had the Internet. The media needed special knowledge, recommendation or guidance as well as closer coordination and communication with the entities.”

However, as it has also been noted, the responsibility lies with the public entities because when carrying out a special operation they do not impose adequate restrictions on media.

**Tinatini Khidasheli, former Defense Minister, Civic Idea:** “If barriers are not erected for journalists and they can move freely, then why should they stop?! in such a case we do not hold journalists responsible for showing a detail that might thwart the entire special operation, this is a problem of the state. It is difficult to criticize media in such case.”

**Causes of unprofessional coverage.** The majority of experts also agree that the lack of proper communication/information vacuum on the part of public entities contributes to unprofessional coverage of crises.

**Aleko Kvakhadze, the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies:** “When government does not provide information, journalists seek other ways [of getting information].”

As revealed from the answers of experts, the main form of communication with public entities responsible for counterterrorist policy is a written request for information. According to the majority of them these agencies are extremely closed bodies and communication with them is very poor.

One expert, however, believes that the shortage of information does not relieve media from the responsibility to report about an event conscientiously and ethically, by observing professional standards.

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<sup>9</sup> On 21-22 June 2017, an antiterrorist special operation was carried out in Gabriel Salosi Street in Tbilisi. According to the State Security Service, three members of a gang were liquidated, including Akhmed Chatayev. As announced by the State Security Service, persons killed in the special operation were planning terrorist acts against representatives of diplomatic corps in Georgia and Turkey. <https://bit.ly/2Nhc1A2>; <https://bit.ly/2Yk7gfE>; <https://bit.ly/2V79AEK> <https://bit.ly/2Nfanz8>

# 4 REGULATIONS AND MECHANISMS OF STATE AGENCIES: COMMUNICATION PROTOCOLS, FORMATS OF RELATIONSHIP WITH MEDIA

As noted in the introductory part of this report, the survey envisaged face-to-face interviews with representatives of public entities responsible for strategic communication. However, face-to-face interviews proved to be impossible to conduct and the State Security Service provided limited information in writing. Therefore, interviews were additionally conducted with experts in the areas of media, minority issues, security and strategic communications. The total of 11 experts were interviewed.

The aim of questions to the experts was to obtain information about cooperation between public entities responsible for counterterrorism activities and other crises and nongovernmental actors and about communication mechanisms and existing practice; to reveal problems in this communication and also identify problems in media coverage of terrorist acts, violent extremism or other crises.

The questions to the experts could be divided into two sets where one set of questions concerned the activity of public entities while another set to the activity of media.

**Information provided by the State Security Service.** In response to the questionnaire sent by the Media Development Foundation, the State Security Service wrote<sup>10</sup> that there is a mass media and public relations department in the administration of the Service. Functions of the department include: media and public relations, conduct of thematic meetings, news conferences and briefings, preparation and publication of information about developments in the State Security Service. According to the letter, employees of this department “carry out daily, uninterrupted communication with representatives of both Georgian and foreign media.” Paragraph L of Article 13 of the Statute of the Service, however, contains issues that bear signs of interference into an editorial independence. In particular, one of competences of the department is the development of joint TV projects with the Public Broadcaster and private broadcasters:

## Statute of the Administration (Department) of the State Security Service<sup>11</sup>

### Article 13. Competence of Mass Media and Public Relations Department:

Competence of the Mass Media and Public Relations Department is:

L) Development of joint TV projects with the Public Broadcaster and private broadcasters.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from the State Security Service SSG 8 20 00037838. 05/03/2020.

<sup>11</sup> Statute of the Administration (Department) of the State Security Service. <https://bit.ly/2Fvc1ff>

The letter also informed that a two-day media workshop, “The Role of the Media in the Fight against Terrorism and Organized Crime,” was conducted in November 2019. It was organized by the State Security Service of Georgia and the EU Project “Supporting the Fight against Organized Crime in Georgia.” The workshop aimed at discussing the role of media in the fight against terrorism and further enhancement of cooperation in this area between media and law-enforcement authorities. The workshop was led by the experts from the UK and Georgia, as well as the representatives of the State Security Service.

More detailed information about the workshop available on the webpage of the Service<sup>12</sup> informs that the issues discussed during the workshop included the specifics of work of media in the course of terrorist incidents, cooperation between law-enforcement authorities and media during counterterrorism operations, improvement of coordination between media and law-enforcement authorities on counterterrorism matters, as well as prospects of future cooperation.

## RESULTS OF EXPERTS’ INTERVIEWS

**Internal communication guide.** An absolute majority of experts is unaware whether public entities have internal strategic communication guide which they would follow during crises/counterterrorism operations.

**Nodar Tangiashvili, EWMI:** “I think, it is important [for public entities] to have a crisis communication plan because the mode of communication during crises is absolutely different and as much as I know, the agencies do not have such plan.”

However, experts did not rule out the existence of such a document but in a closed form. According to an expert, every state agency is required to have such document.

**Tinatin Khidasheli, former Defense Minister of Georgia, Civic Idea:** “The fact that there is a government act on setting strategic communication to rights provides a ground to assume that all agencies must, as a rule, have their internal act approved, though not all of them may be publicly available and therefore, I cannot claim [that they do not have].”

One state agency, namely, the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, was named as having an internal communication document which is publicly available too.<sup>13</sup> However, this document is oriented on a strategic communication in the area of defense. Furthermore, the section “Recommendations and Risks” says: “This document is suitable for peaceful, ordinary situations. It is advisable to develop a crisis communication manual and define the importance and role of strategic communication at times of crises and war.”

According to one expert, public entities fail to fully realize the importance of strategic communication.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://bit.ly/2Q3jDb4>

<sup>13</sup> The Communications Strategy of Ministry of Defense of Georgia 2017-2020. [https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/strategia\\_geo.pdf](https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/strategia_geo.pdf)



**Teona Akubardia, Georgian Strategic Analysis Center:** “Although strategic communications departments were set up in various entities in 2015, the entities still find it difficult to perceive the essence of strategic communication.”

Only one expert (Shorena Lortkipanidze of Georgian Institute of Politics) said that since 2014, an intensive work has been carried out on the development of a document on strategic communications policy and according to her, this document exists on a national level.

**Cooperation formats.** Answers to the question **whether there are temporary or permanent formats of cooperation set with media, nongovernmental organizations and other stakeholders, which facilitate a regular exchange of information between public entities and non-state actors, were mixed.**

While one expert asserted that there was no cooperation format with the State Security Service, another claimed that the State Security Service cooperated only with so-called GONGOs, that is NGOs loyal to the government and that this illusory cooperation was just a showcase for others, including foreign partners.

**Batu Kutelia, Atlantic Council of Georgia:** “Yes, there is the cooperation but the one that brings comfort to the government, in other words, they have nongovernmental organizations that we call GONGOs, i.e. loyal to the government. They [public entities] thus show others, including foreign partners, that they cooperate, although in reality they do not.... They say that it [cooperation] is public, but they invite only those GONGOs that are loyal to them, ‘governmental NGOs’.”

The third expert, however, does not see any necessity in such a format:

**Giorgi Gogvadze, Terrorism Research Center:** “Terrorism and terrorist attacks do not represent a daily challenge for Georgia today, as it is in other countries (for example, in countries of the Middle East). At this stage, I do not see a need of a permanent council or committee (of public-private sector) that would work on terrorism. I think that such format should be put in operation when there is a need for it.”

The same expert believes that such format is beneficial and necessary in the area of prevention of radicalization and violent extremism (which does not always lead to terrorism) and that the civil sector may contribute larger resources to that.

Two experts recalled instances of one-off cooperation with the civil sector; in particular, a round table when a counterterrorism strategy was developed. According to one of these experts, NGOs were familiarized with a draft strategy, their opinions were heard and some of their comments considered in the strategy. However, another expert assesses such cooperation as insufficient.

**Nodar Tangiashvili, EWMI:** “Once that strategy was drafted, I know that the State Security Service met with nongovernmental sector; however, this is not the best practice because they should not limit themselves to introducing the strategy alone, but establish a dialogue on every stage, on every issue – situational analysis, specific programs, solutions, interventions.”

A segment of experts (3) said that establishment of such formats has started since 2005. There are permanent bodies in the form of commissions, public or thematic councils at various ministries and at the Parliament, with the civil sector represented therein. However, according to two of these three experts, there is no institutionalized format of cooperation with the State Security service.

**Tinatin Khidasheli, former Defense Minister of Georgia, Civic Idea:** “There has never been [such a format] at the State Security Service and frankly speaking, in a type of country we have I can hardly imagine a possibility of such a council to exist at the State Security Service.”

**Coordination of communication.** As regards the question as to which state agency is responsible for the coordination of communication at times of crises/counterterrorist operation, the majority of experts named the State Security Service (its information, analytical department and press center).

Experts also shared an opinion that a degree of responsibility for coordination of communication depends on a nature and scale of a crisis too: a general responsibility for strategic communication lies with the government while on a tactical level, with a relevant agency that is responsible to deal with a particular crisis.

**Tinatin Khidasheli, former Defense Minister of Georgia, Civic Idea:** “According to our legislation, the Prime Minister and his office is responsible for strategic communication and consequently, the communication with media and nongovernmental sector is part of that responsibility.”<sup>14</sup>

Several experts believe that the security council or a crisis management council should be a body coordinating the communication.

**Batu Kuteali, Atlantic Council of Georgia:** “Every crisis, be it counterterrorist or non-counterterrorist, has its peculiarities. Therefore, crisis has various dimensions – economic, and if it is a bioterrorism, it concerns health problems too; therefore, none of crises is a problem of only one agency.”

**Cooperation with partner states.** Experts noted that to share experience and enhance knowledge, public entities have been cooperating with partner states, including Great Britain, USA, Germany, for two decades now. Partner states provide significant material and intellectual aid to the Georgian side. They also noted that over these years, numerous trainings have been conducted on the issues of strategic communication; study tours were organized as well, including to Great Britain and Finland.

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<sup>14</sup> The interviews were conducted between January–March 2020 and consequently, reflect the situation existing at that time.

However, a segment of experts thinks that the Georgian side does not apply this experience properly.

**Batu Kuteali, Atlantic Council of Georgia:** “Following the advice of foreign partners... stratcoms have been set up in all public entities; in reality, however, as it is visible to the naked eye, these stratcoms have problems in communicating with one another, let alone drawing up some strategy.”

**Permanent speaker.** To a question, whether public entities have permanent appointees for communication with media and public or such persons are selected in accordance with a topic the media is interested in, all experts said that all entities have relevant permanent appointees. According to one expert, the law requires from public entities to have a permanent person responsible for communication. To this end, an individual is designated in an entity or this function is performed by a head of PR unit of an entity.

Several experts, however, have noted that not all public entities follow a single standard and depending on the nature and severity of a crisis, the function of speaker is assumed by high officials.

**Shorena Lortkipanidze, Georgian Institute of Politics:** “We should look at one thing – it depends on the level of a crisis; there is a certain level of crisis when it is important for a top official to step in.”

According to one expert, this issue is not fixed on the level of ministries and ministers act as speakers themselves, which, in the expert’s view, is a serious problem.

**Intensity of communication.** All experts believe that during crises, the communication with media/public must be intensive. However, there is no “golden rule” or a “recipe” as to the frequency of communication and the intensity of it depends on the severity of a crisis. For example, one of the experts believes that during the counterterrorist operation on Gabriel Salosi Street, communication in the form of news briefings was needed several times a day. In the same expert’s view, the communication should be continuous.

**Aleko Kvakhadze, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies:** “Communication should also take place during non-crises times in the regions with high risk of this ideology and terrorism. Law enforcement agency should carry out an intensive work with various public groups, but in an open format.”

Experts believe that relevant entities should communicate an official position to media in the shortest possible time in order not to leave any question unanswered, to avoid manipulation of facts, spread of disinformation, various interpretations, panic, information vacuum.

**Discussion formats.** When asked whether issues disclosed by open sources are discussed in a format of meetings with media/nongovernmental organizations, if any, the majority of experts has either said that such format does not exist or failed to recall any.

One expert recalled “some formats” within the scope of which NGOs get together to discuss various issues, including disinformation. Another expert recalled “few” instances and cited a meeting with NGOs called by the Defense Ministry as an example, where an incident of beating a conscript in the army, who was a Georgian citizen of Azerbaijani origin. NGOs specializing in ethnic minorities were involved in dealing with this problem.

According to yet another expert, such permanent format was created in the Parliament in 2016, though it exists only on paper. “How active it is in reality... I don’t know; it is permanent on the paper,” she said.

**Problems in communication on the part of state agencies.** The problems in public entities’ communication, judging by the answers to the question about problems in the communication during crises/ counterterrorist operations, are the following:

1. **Information deficiency:** Concealment and shortage of information was identified as one of main problems as it provides a fertile ground for speculations and various interpretations and often triggers panic.
2. **Lack of/shortcomings in communication and absence of coordination:** Among the problems named were: delay, inconsistency and controversy in communication. Ambiguity of communication – lack of clear messages and explanation. A problem in selecting an appropriate speaker. Also, the lack of common coordinated approach – spread of uncoordinated, sometimes even conflicting messages thereby causing confusion.
3. **Failure to define standards for media, lack of specific training for media.** Standards for the activity of media at times of crises, including safety standards for journalists, are not defined. As a result, media may harm an operation or contribute to the spread of panic. The need of journalistic training.
4. **Unpreparedness for crises.** Absence of a mechanism in public entities for containing panic. Also, a problem in communicating by public entities alternative information to counter disinformation or false information. At such times, a representative of the government must step forward and convincingly debunk false information. Absence of specific guidelines for the activity of media.
5. **Absence of value filter:** Communication of such messages that serve the aims of propagandist states.

**Tinat Khidasheli, former Defense Minister, Civic Idea:** “When the government lacks such filter, in strategic communication, it merely becomes a helper to those states that seek to spread those messages. The key problem in strategic communication of our country is that there is – sometimes conscientiously and sometimes unconscientiously – a value-wise inconsistency in these messages.”

# 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

## MEDIA

- Media organizations should draw up an internal editorial guide for covering crises, detailing a procedure of performing professional activity and rules of conduct during such events.
- An internal editorial guideline should draw upon national (“Reporting Terrorism” by the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics; “Chapter XIII. Armed conflicts, accidents, emergencies” of the Code of Conduct for Broadcaster) and international media regulations, internationally recognized journalistic standards, experience and the best practice.
- Media organizations should ensure that all journalists observe the procedure and the rules set out in an internal editorial guideline.
- Journalists should be provided with trainings on principles and professional standards of reporting terrorism, radicalization and other crises, also, rules of conduct during such situations.
- After each crisis, media organizations should organize meetings to discuss the coverage of the crises and share experience with one another; also, organize discussions with professional and public groups.
- Thematic specialization of journalists should take place. Media organizations should assign at least one journalist and ensure his/her training in reporting terrorism, radicalization, violent extremism and other similar crises. Thematic specialization will contribute to building knowledge and experience in a media organization and to comprehensive coverage of such emergencies.

## MEDIA SCHOOLS

- Schools of journalism should consider standards of reporting terrorism, radicalization, violent extremism and other similar crises and integrate them into curricula in order to ensure that not only practicing journalists but also future journalists have access to, and knowledge of, these standards. Base on a methodology developed by an international academic institution develop a syllabus and compile case studies. Also, analyze cases of Georgia and prepare a corresponding case study material.
- Schools of journalism should prepare a short training course for those professional groups that are involved in handling crises in order to have them better understand the objectives they face.

## NONGOVERNMENTAL AND PROFESSIONAL MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

- Nongovernmental and professional media organizations should continue the work and coordinated cooperation for a professional growth of journalists by supporting preparation of educational resources, providing professional training and consultations with a view to introducing best international practice.
- Nongovernmental and professional media organizations should facilitate awareness raising of society as well as media outlets about professional and ethical standards of journalism and media self-regulation mechanisms, thereby encouraging the establishment of culture of professional accountability to society among journalists.
- A database of local and international experts should be created, who will provide consultations to representatives of media on the coverage of terrorism, radicalization, violent extremism and other similar emergencies.

## STATE ENTITIES

- State entities should develop an internal strategic communication guide which they will follow at times of crises.
- Relevant state entities should develop a procedure of proactively providing society with timely, comprehensive and regular information about crises, counterterrorist operations, other emergencies as well as investigation into terrorist cases; it should detail a rule of such communication, specify a person(s) responsible for communication, a rule of ensuring indiscriminate access to information for all media outlets and other relevant issues.
- State entities should ensure a timely supply of information to all media outlets on an equal footing and, to the extent possible, without a selective approach to editorial policy of media outlets.
- State entities should develop a format of continuous cooperation with non-state actors (media, NGOs, private sector) in order to ensure a regular exchange of information (not only at times of crises) and discussion of pressing issues, and inform stakeholders, including media about key policy documents.
- Political, strategic and technical communication should be separated from one another. To this end, spokespersons should be designated on two levels to communicate with journalists (interviews, news briefings) during terrorists acts and counterterrorist operations:
  - a) **A tactical level** – a representative of counterterrorism or police forces, an officer, who will be in charge of communicating technical information about a fact/ongoing operation and providing, in the fastest possible manner, the data that is already known by that point of time (for example, an exact location of incident, number of victims/the injured, category of incident/article from the Criminal Code of Georgia, status of ongoing investigation, special operation, entities involved, etc.);
  - b) **A strategic-operative level** – a high level public or political official (Deputy Head of State Security Service, Head of Analytical Department or National Council Secretary/representative of secretariat, depending on the issue in question<sup>15</sup>) who is involved in, and informed about, every stage of

<sup>15</sup> It is a tested approach for the office of the national security council to determine, based on a significance/harm of incident and social and economic risks, whether to leave an issue to only one agency to handle or to elevate it to the national level – the national security council under the leadership of prime minister.

discussion and decision making on interagency or/and intra-agency tactical and operative as well as strategic and political issues, and simultaneously, is informed by the PR department's media monitoring unit about the status of coverage by the media of a topic in question, questions raised by media, gaps in information and existing issues. That person should have strong skills, adequate competence and authority to conduct strategic communication effectively so that to maximally meet public interests without jeopardizing security.

- A mode of communication with public and media in at non-crisis times by the political leadership of State Security Service and the entity should be specifically defined for the PR department of the Service.
- The State Security Service should draw up standard operative procedures and a list of information that is “safe” to communicate to journalists without prejudicing interests of investigation and public safety, taking into consideration best international democratic standards.
- Based on British COBRA system and using a relevant crises management center set up with the assistance from the British government, regular interagency and intersectoral trainings on scenarios of terrorist threats should be conducted and should involve tactical, operative and strategic units of all forces (police forces, rescue, fire service, emergency medical services, counterterrorist forces of the Interior Ministry and the State Security Service, special forces of Defense Ministry, etc.), journalists, experts, strategic communication department of Prime Minister's office, secretariat of the security council and other stakeholders. The trainings will help test internal regulations and professional practice of public entities as well as media, identify problems/challenges faced during terrorist acts and counterterrorism operations that affect/impede effective communication, improve coordination between public entities and based democratic, public interest-oriented cooperation between the state and the media.
- Ensure such cooperation with all non-state actors without selective approach.
- Draw up a procedure of timely, consistent, clear and coordinated communication.
- Define a communication coordination entity as well as levels of coordination.
- In cooperation with relevant non-state actors, define standards of conduct of journalists at times of crises (to ensure their safety, avoid interference in the operations on their part, etc.).
- Relevant entities should study the problems that, due to lack of relevant procedures, make it difficult for journalists to obtain information and thereby undermine the quality of reporting and based on the study, come up with ways of overcoming problems in communication in public entities.
- Relevant public entities should set up a common “hotline” which, when needed, will be activated and accessible to journalists.

# ANNEXES

## **Annex #1. Media outlets**

### **National broadcasters**

1. Guram Rogava, Rustavi 2
2. Levan Kvatashidze, Imedi
3. Ketii Tutberidze, Georgian Public Broadcaster
4. Anuna Akhalaia, TV Pirveli
5. Eka Lemonjava, Palitra TV
6. Natia Trapaidze, Mtavari Arkhi
7. Davit Kashiashvili, Formula
8. Dea Mamiseishvili, Maestro

### **Online media**

9. Tazo Kupreishvili, Netgazeti
10. Aka Zarkua, Tabula
11. Gela Bochikashvili, On.ge

### **Regional Media**

12. Giorgi Tserode, Adjara Public Broadcaster
13. Gela Mtivlishvili, Pankisi Community Radio
14. Eter Turadze, Batumelebi
15. Tinatin Zazadze, Samkhretis Karibche

### **International media**

16. Maka Antidze, Reuters
17. Sopo Megremidze, Associated Press
18. Nino Kharadze, RFE/RL Georgian service
19. Onik James Krikoryan, freelance journalist



## **Annex 2. State agencies**

1. State Security Service
2. Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia
3. Ministry of Defense of Georgia
4. Public Law Department of Ministry of Justice of Georgia
5. Prosecutor's Office of Georgia
6. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia
7. LEPL Financial Monitoring Service of Georgia
8. Public Safety Command Center 112
9. Georgian Intelligence Service
10. National Security Council of Georgia
11. Defense and Security Committee of the Parliament of Georgia

## **Annex #3. Experts**

### **Experts in media and ethnic minorities**

1. Beka Bajelidze, IWPR
2. Nino Narimanishvili, Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics
3. Eka Chitanava, Tolerance and Diversity Institute, TDI
4. Tama Mikeladze, EMC

### **Experts in security and strategic communication**

1. Batu Kutelia, Atlantic Council of Georgia
2. Tinatin Khidasheli, former Defense Minister of Georgia, Civic Idea
3. Teona Akubardia, Georgian Strategic Analysis Center
4. Shorena Lortkipanidze, Georgian Institute of Politics
5. Aleko Kvakhadze, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies
6. Giorgi Gogvadze, Terrorism Research center
7. Nodar Tangiashvili, EWMI