

Televisions to air pre-election debates

It was a nerve-wracking day for the staff of the Khoni television station “Mega TV”. On October 12, 2003, they were organizing probably the most ambitious project any Georgian TV station has ever taken on - public election debates. Three hundred-fifty people gathered at the local Cultural House to attend the debates and it had to be aired the same day. The personnel knew what to do. They had been well trained by IREX consultants Terry Fitzpatrick and Stan Matthews, but now the training was over and they had to actually implement what they had been taught.

When a journalist asked the first question, the recording began and so did the problems. Microphones, which had been operating without failures before, refused to work. Speakers were too weak and not all people could hear the candidates. After the microphones and speakers were repaired, other technical problems arose, though these were also swiftly taken care of. The debates ended, the program was edited and in the end, the problems were unable to ruin the program. The consultants and the journalists were happy with the outcome.

“If not for IREX and other donors, it would have been impossible for us to conduct debates of such magnitude,” said Merab Kikabidze, the director of “Mega TV”. “But with the knowledge we acquired it became possible for us to organize similar debates in the cultural center of neighboring Martvili without external assistance.”



Terry FitzPatrick helping journalists from radio “Hereti”, Lagodekhi with the debates format for November 2003 Parliamentary Elections

The “Mega TV” debates were one of two hundred such debates IREX helped organize throughout Georgia for the November 2, 2003 parliamentary elections. IREX helped local TV and radio companies with training, grants and on-site consultations, ensuring that the pre-election coverage of the 2003 elections was full and accurate.

This was important, because local media is the best instrument when it comes to attracting the attention of the voters to issues of local concern. Many local Georgian TV stations tried their best to provide their viewers with full and accurate coverage of the elections, but this noble intention alone was not enough. Stations needed journalists with knowledge of how to properly cover elections and they needed the equipment to fully apply this knowledge.

IREX, Open Society Georgian Foundation (OSGF) and the Eurasia Foundation joined forces to support fair and accurate coverage and increase open discussions in the pre-election and election period of the 2003 Parliamentary Elections. Open discussions were aimed at encouraging two-way communication between the public and politicians and draw attention to the really important issues.

IREX invited American consultants Stan Matthews and Terry Fitzpatrick to provide training and on-site consultations for TV and radio stations throughout Georgia. Terry Fitzpatrick has extensive experience training radio and television journalists everywhere from Kosovo to Uganda. Stan Matthews, during his 25-year career in journalism, has designed and produced hundreds of political debates in the United States.

From September to November, the consultants visited 12 TV and radio stations in Tbilisi and the regions, met with the directors, producers, technical crews and journalists of each station and helped them plan for the debate programs. In total, Matthews and Fitzpatrick paid 50 visits to different stations, consulting them on the set-up for the debates.

“The consultants offered us various different formats for the election programs,” said Goga Aptsiauri, anchor of “Trialeti TV” in Gori. “What they taught us was very new. Using focus groups in the programs, inviting audiences to recordings, giving parties equal time during the debates... We had not thought about that before. After we started producing debates in this new way, our programming greatly improved. Besides, the representatives of the political parties had no more reason to accuse us of being biased. By following Western standards of debates production, we showed everyone our impartiality.”

After their initial visits to the regions, Matthews and Fitzpatrick conducted training sessions in Tbilisi for participating TV and radio stations, where they discussed in detail how to produce and run a show.

IREX gave the participants a wealth of material to prepare for the upcoming elections. A poster produced by the National Democratic Institute in cooperation with IREX listed the 15 most important bills passed by the Georgian Parliament between 1999 and 2003. The poster also showed the voting results and which parties had actually attended which of the sessions, thus enabling the public to identify whether a party had really been fulfilling its promises.



Stan in the Studio Re giving instructions during debate rehearsal with participant journalists instead of politicians

Probably the most important material distributed amongst the participants was the so-called “fairness criteria” developed by the consultants with a specific focus on elections coverage.

Journalists can be unfair and biased without acknowledging it. Fairness is a vague term and to be accurate, unbiased and impartial, a good reporter follows very specific and very practical procedures according to the specific situation. The elections fairness criteria ensured that the journalists were aware of those procedures.



Preparation for majoritarian debates for November 2003 Parliamentary Elections in the studio of “Odishi TV”

Some of the fairness criteria are quite obvious though often neglected, such as granting equal time to all participating parties or not allowing one candidate to be questioned about an embarrassing personal incident, while another is questioned about issues of national policy. Others are more subtle, but equally important, like making seating arrangements and the order of speaking for the candidates by objective criteria, for example by drawing numbers.

IREX employed two highly respected Georgian journalists, Jano Zhvania and David Paichadze, to act as fairness monitors and check the coverage for potential bias. “It was really encouraging to see how hard the stations tried to remain fair and accurate,”

said Zhvania, the administrative director of “Rustavi 2”. “The consultants come and go, but the journalists work on their programs and never forget about the fairness standards.”

Zhvania added that one of the reasons TV and radio stations remained accurate and balanced were the grants from IREX, OSGF and the Eurasia Foundation that financed the debates. “The organization of debates costs money and stations often cannot afford it. In this situation, it is extremely easy to succumb to pressures from the local politicians who offer money in exchange for favorable coverage. The grants from the donors ensured that this did not happen.”

The extraordinary presidential elections, followed by the 2004 parliamentary elections and the emergency Supreme Council elections in the breakaway Adjara region proved that IREX’s contribution had had a lasting effect. “We had the format, we knew the rules and we had the experience,” said Aptsiauri. “Thanks to this, we were able to produce many shows on our own.”



Preparation for the debates prior to the emergency Supreme Council Elections in Adjara. TV Channel 25 studio, Batumi