



The Role of Georgia's Media—and Western Aid—in the Rose Revolution

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The Role of Georgia's Media—and Western Aid—in the Rose Revolution

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I. Introductionⁱ

It was November 2003. Tens of thousands of Georgians filled the wide open spaces of Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue, which links the presidential offices, parliament, the Opera House and central post office. The Georgian capital was awash in astonishingly peaceful but determined demonstrators.

In homes throughout much of the rest of the country, hundreds of thousands were glued to Rustavi-2 television—at least between the frequent power blackouts or on the many sets plugged crudely into car batteries. A constant “crawl” ran along the bottom of the screen, giving the results of the just completed parliamentary election. The crawl carried the official figures, showing a win for the government party. Right alongside those figures ran the exit polls and parallel vote count supplied by independent, Western-backed NGOs (non-governmental organizations), showing a clear victory for the opposition.

Above the crawl the screen was filled with live shots of demonstrators pouring into Tbilisi and denouncing the all-too-apparent election shenanigans of President Eduard Shevardnadze's corrupt and faltering regime. The screen also offered a platform for the new generation of younger, pro-Western opposition leaders as, brandishing roses, they finally gate-crashed Parliament and drove Shevardnadze into retirement.

The popular television station, Rustavi-2, built up in part by Western development assistance—the station that the government several times had tried to close down and some of whose reporters had been harassed, jailed, beaten up, and even murdered—had become the voice and vision of Georgia's “Rose Revolution.”

II. Summary

Georgia was the second of three “dominos”—Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine—where nonviolent revolutions swept aside Soviet-style authoritarian or semi-authoritarian leaders. The news media played a significant, though different, role in each case. And Western aid to the media and civil society, to one degree or another, supported this role.

This overturning, along with a similar “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, in March 2005, left anxious regimes quaking, from Beijing to Baku, and from Tashkent to Cairo. Said Russia's Vladimir Putin, referring to Central Asian heads of state gathered in Baku, Azerbaijan, in December 2003, just after the Georgian revolution but even before the Ukraine upheaval, “All the leaders of the CIS are [expletive] in their pants.”¹

In Georgia, that Western (not least, American) investment in media development assistance and civil society support paid off handsomely in a small but strategically significant nation wedged between Russia and the Muslim nations to its south, and between the oil-rich Caspian Sea and an oil-thirsty West. Even if the revolution did not establish a consistently independent and professional free press, there is wide consensus that this development aid helped position Georgia's media at the forefront of the

ⁱ The author would like to thank Rebecca Hummel for her many contributions and assistance with this paper. It would never have been completed without her.

November 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought a new, more vigorous, less corrupt and strongly pro-Western government to power. In the words of James V. Wertsch, director of International and Area Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, “The revolution was an important step in creating one of the most important laboratories for democracy in the world today.”²

This study examines the role of the Georgian media in the country’s Rose Revolution and the impact that Western media development aid played in enabling this to occur. It also looks at what has happened to the country’s media since the revolution, at the U.S. policies underlying the aid programs, and at whatever lessons have been learned.

III. Role of Media in Revolution

Most analysts agree that among the most basic requirements for such nonviolent revolutions are (1) a weak and unpopular state authority; (2) a credible opposition able to attract mass support; (3) an active civil society, especially one with enough independent media to inform and mobilize that support; and (4) passive or divided security forces.

This implies a chicken-and-egg argument: that it is only an authoritarian who has already ceded some influence to a free press who can be successfully toppled. At least a little press freedom has to come before such an overturning, rather than press freedom simply following in its wake.

“When strongmen allow some limited political space, the United States and other countries seeking to promote democratic change can usefully support those forces within the society that oppose the regime—usually a mix of opposition political groups, civic actors, unions, and independent media,” comments Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “Where dictators allow little or next-to-no political space, the ability of outside groups to encourage change is much more limited.”³

Michael McFaul, in his article “Transitions from Postcommunism,” refers to the “critical element in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine” of independent media. “For years, such media outlets and brave individual journalists had been reporting the misdeeds of semi-autocratic incumbents. At the moment of breakthrough, autonomous media remained vital in triggering change despite the incumbents’ last-ditch efforts to hang on to power.”⁴

Once the revolution is complete, of course, there is no guarantee that such overturnings will result in much greater press freedom. In Serbia and Ukraine, today’s media do appear to be operating comparatively freely. Wilson Center fellow Marta Dyczok, commenting on Ukraine, said, “One achievement of the Orange Revolution seems untainted: renewed freedom of speech. Heavy-handed state censorship ended. . . .” But Dyczok goes on to question whether, even now, journalists understand that their role should be to “provide objective information, be a watchdog of the state, and reflect public opinion” rather than either support or oppose the government.⁵

Many Georgian journalists contend that there is less freedom for their work in today’s Georgia under President Mikheil “Misha” Saakashvili than existed under ousted President Shevardnadze. On July 8, 2005, an appeal from 76 Georgian journalists to international organizations and to their own government declared:

We, journalists working in Georgia, declare that the government tries to intervene in and control our activities; to ban information that is not wanted for them from getting on air and on newspaper pages; prevent us from collecting information and spreading it further; to carry out punitive measures against the media outlets that contain news, analytical shows or talk-show broadcasts that government dislikes....⁶

Earlier in the chicken-and-egg stakes, Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, in his efforts to hang on to power, had cracked down hard on the media using the penal code and libel laws. But, as a working paper produced by USAID put it, "Milosevic was careful to maintain a façade of the rule of law. This gave the opposition and elements of civil society some room to move, and, in the end, democratic elements made use of that space."⁷

In the months and years that led up to Milosevic's defeat in the election of October 2000, Serbia's media was a complex mix of independent newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, and an array of outlets that had been co-opted by the regime. They shared the national audience, with the independents gaining ground during times of crisis, when their reporting became more credible and essential than in less stressful times. The feisty and magnificently independent B-92 Radio was forced off the air for long periods. But B-92's Veran Matic set up a regional broadcast, print and news agency network, ANEM, which continued to provide critical coverage of the regime, as well as encouragement for those who opposed it. ANEM and other independent media were the recipients of substantial Western—U.S., European and Scandinavian—development assistance. In 1999, the year before Milosevic was ousted, the U.S. spent more than \$1 per Serb on media assistance programs, for a population of roughly 10 million. And this was matched by significant European funding.⁸

A large slice of that aid went into financial support and business management of independent media, helping to buy vital newsprint and equipment, as well as providing training in management techniques. "What I did almost all the time was talk about money," says Chris Braithwaite, a Vermont editor who served as a media trainer in Serbia, especially in its outlying provinces, before the October Revolution.⁹

B-92 itself was kept alive, with Western support, on the Internet. When silenced at home, it fed its news back into Serbia via rebroadcasts on Voice of America and the BBC. Where television was the revolutionary driving force in Georgia, radio played a key role in Serbia, reaching across the country. When the crunch came with the election in the fall of 2000, an outpouring of support for Milosevic's ouster erupted in the provinces as well as in Belgrade. Demonstrators stormed into the capital in a cavalcade of buses and cars that the security forces could not or would not resist.

In Ukraine, media resistance to the regime during the buildup to the Orange Revolution was driven by two key news outlets: the Internet-based Pravda Ukraine (*Ukrainskaya Pravda*) and the independent cable TV station Channel 5. Pravda Ukraine was founded by Georgy Gongadze and Olena Prytula in 1999 as a fierce, muckraking, Web-based "newspaper" that challenged Leonid Kuchma's corrupt regime.¹⁰ It was catapulted into notoriety in 2000 when Gongadze was discovered murdered, his head cut off in what appeared to be a politically motivated attack on a symbol of independent

media. The Kuchma regime and Kuchma himself were accused of involvement in the murder in a case that continues to this day. Pravda Ukraine itself managed to stay alive. It moved its production base to Washington D.C., and, with some financial support from abroad, became a key voice in the revolution.

“America and Europe were the only places where we could get money and be independent of the Ukrainian oligarchs and authorities,” says Prytula. “It was the only possible choice.”¹¹

Channel 5 also played a significant role, despite its relatively small national audience. The station became a crucial tool for the opposition, especially when other, less independent news stations refused to cover protests and give air time to opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko’s accomplishments.¹²

Channel 5 broadcasts became so important to Ukrainians that the station that once had only a tiny 3 percent national audience rose to the country’s number three ranking.¹³ When the Kuchma regime tried to close it down just before the election, Channel 5’s journalists went on a hunger strike in protest, drawing support from fellow journalists in Ukraine and internationally. The government backed down.

When the election crisis struck in October–November 2004, reporters in other television stations broke with their bosses, defied government censorship, and demanded the right to broadcast the facts. A correspondent on the state channel, UT1, announced in a live broadcast on the evening bulletin that the entire news team was going to join the demonstrators in Independence Square with a message to them that “We are not lying any more.” And the channel’s sign-language translator, while ostensibly “translating” the government’s official election script, was actually informing her audience about the alleged vote-rigging.¹⁴ Increasingly well informed by the media, and prodded by young activists, Ukrainians poured into the streets. The fraudulent election results were eventually dismissed by the Supreme Court, and the way was opened up for a new election that brought opposition leader Yushchenko to power.

Student movements in all three domino countries also were a significant force for change. And the lessons on how to use nonviolent methods to induce change while avoiding regime repression, pioneered by Serbia’s Otpor (“Resistance”) student movement, were specifically taught to Georgia’s equivalent, Kmara (“Enough”) and thereafter to the Ukrainian student movement, Pora (“High Time”). In Georgia, the nonviolent techniques used by Otpor and the Serb opposition were broadcast by Rustavi-2 in a documentary about the Serbian revolution produced by Americans Steve York and Peter Ackerman.¹⁵

George Soros also provided a notable assist. In the spring of 2003 his Open Society Institute (OSI) sent the two leaders of the Liberty Institute, a civil society NGO, to Serbia to meet with Otpor leaders. Later that summer, he funded a return visit to Georgia, by Otpor activists, to train more than 1,000 Georgian students in “revolutionary techniques using humor and peaceful subversion.”¹⁶

In Georgia, these student movements and video education proved particularly effective in keeping the revolutionary demonstrations nonviolent and therefore less likely to trigger a violent reaction from the security forces. Georgians still wonder at the peaceful nature of the demonstrations. “It is incredible that tens of thousands of Georgians marched up and down Rustaveli Avenue without breaking a single window or

damaging a single car,” commented President Saakashvili’s co-revolutionary and first prime minister, Zurab Zhvania.¹⁷

But the media, working hand-in-hand with NGOs and the student movements, were a hugely important factor in informing and galvanizing the public, both in the lead-up to all three revolutions and in the actual massing of protestors on the streets. The media also contributed to slowly rekindling hopes that a change for the better was actually possible. In all three cases, too, Western media development aid had assisted in building and preserving at least a modicum of free press.

Not surprisingly, American pro-democracy aid programs are highly controversial among authoritarian governments, especially when such programs have some chance of success. Marta Dyczok explains how, in countries such as Ukraine, Russia, and Prime Minister Meciar’s Slovakia, “assistance to promote a free media tends to resemble support for the democratic opposition by providing a vehicle for independent political opinions, since ‘free’ media in such situations often simply means ‘beyond the control of the state.’ Consequently, efforts to promote free media, like aid to political parties, may encounter the perils of partisanship, and Western NGOs providing operating support for media run by the democratic opposition may risk threat and reprisal from the ruling states.”¹⁸

Even some Americans saw the U.S. democracy aid program in Ukraine as an example of Western partisan interference in another country’s election. Among the critics were two U.S. congressmen. According to the *New York Times*, Representative Ron Paul, Republican, of Texas, complained that the U.S. Government had “sent U.S. taxpayer dollars into Ukraine to influence the outcome. Much of that money was targeted to assist one particular candidate. . . .”¹⁹ And Representative Edolphus Towns, Democrat, of New York, said he believed that government contractors had helped instigate Ukraine’s popular uprising. Both called for a federal investigation.

Officials with USAID and some of the NGOs that administered the democracy programs dispute this view. They told the *New York Times* that the aid program was not a partisan effort but rather one directed at strengthening political parties and civil society in general, though antigovernment groups naturally tended to take greater advantage of it.

In the case of Georgia, the Bush Administration, in Washington and through its ambassador in Tbilisi, strongly urged Shevardnadze to play by genuinely democratic rules. It dispatched Shevardnadze’s old friend from Soviet days, former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, to Tbilisi to dramatize the point in July 2003, shortly before the November parliamentary elections. But the regime pushed ahead with its election chicanery, eventually prompting its downfall.

III.1. Media Was the Key to Georgia's Rose Revolution

"...one can confidently say that there would have been no revolution without the media." – Leading Georgian social scientist Ghia Nodia.²⁰

"Media was very good at informing the public about what was going on. And it had a huge role in calling people onto the streets." – Marc Behrendt, former Internews director for Georgia.²¹

In Georgia, few dispute that the media's role in the 2003 revolution was absolutely crucial. Eduard Shevardnadze himself unwittingly laid the groundwork for his own ouster with his remarkably open attitude toward Georgia's civil society and free press. In an interview in Tbilisi three months after the revolution he gave his view of this approach:

"You know, when I came back to Georgia in 1992, to the devastated country that lay in shambles after the civil war, I had two major aims in mind. First, I wanted to lay the foundation for a market economy, and second, I wanted to make the people of Georgia realize what democracy is."²²

Others see a variety of motives underlying Shevardnadze's openness, including

- a) A readiness to create a media model based on the values of his former colleague Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika, as well as on the values of the earlier revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe, and even of Western democracies. ("He had some fledgling democratic instincts," says Professor Wertsch.)²³
- b) A desire to placate Georgia's Western friends, allies and supporters, as well as his own pro-Western younger generation of political allies who had close ties to the media and who, at least then, were promoters of press freedom.
- c) Perhaps, after many years in public office, a personal weariness or weakness, along with an apparent disconnect from day-to-day Georgian realities. (As Michael McFaul puts it, "The president himself often seemed irresolute about repression.")²⁴

Clearly Shevardnadze was by no means a flat-out democrat nor yet a full-blown autocrat. The American ambassador in Georgia at the time, Richard Miles, makes the point that "Shevardnadze presided over an incredibly corrupt situation. Nonetheless, he was not a tyrant and was not prepared to beat people up and lock them up, although his ruling team did do so."²⁵

Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia describes the Shevardnadze regime as a "liberal autocracy" or "liberal oligarchy":

"The assumption of the rulers was that they had to conform to certain basic norms of liberal democracy. . . . To be clear, all this did not mean that the opposition should be allowed to actually displace the ruling elite from power through elections. The political system had to be 'civilized,' 'progressive' and 'reformist,' but political power should be held within a relatively small network of elites."²⁶

Whatever the Shevardnadze regime's shortcomings, Georgia, with its media policies, became a leader in the former Soviet republics. One example was the country's

surprisingly far-reaching freedom of information law. Another was the repeal of libel from the penal code in 1999, along with a requirement under the remaining civil libel law that government officials, much as in the United States, prove malicious intent. The new legislation took effect in July 2000. As the Committee to Protect Journalists reported at the time, “While many of its neighbors in the former Eastern Bloc grew increasingly intolerant of independent journalism, Georgia offered its journalists good news. . . .”²⁷

Making the most of this comparative freedom, the independent television station Rustavi-2, founded in 1994, was building a reputation as a remarkably professional source of news and investigative reporting, this despite chronic power shortages that blacked out Tbilisi and the outlying provinces for much of most days and nights. Rustavi-2 also had close ties with Georgia’s growing civil society groups and the country’s younger generation of pro-Western intellectuals.

One of Georgia’s leading human rights organizations, the Liberty Institute, for example, sprang directly from Rustavi-2. The institute was founded in the mid-1990s by two Rustavi-2 employees, Levan Ramishvili and Giga Bokeria, to defend the TV station from one of the Shevardnadze regime’s efforts to close it down. When the courts decided in Rustavi-2’s favor, in 1997, the two men stayed with the new institute.²⁸ And they were the two who, funded by George Soros’s foundations, visited Serbia in early 2003 to explore how the Serbian student movement had helped oust Milosevic three years earlier.

Meanwhile, a handful of newspapers were trying to follow Rustavi-2’s lead in an environment where few people could afford to buy newspapers, and where most papers tended to be short-lived, sponsored by political or other sugar daddies, unprofessionally written and edited, incapable of discerning between news, rumor and opinion, and able to maintain only tiny circulations. Of the 100 or so registered newspapers in Georgia, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists reported, only about 30 published with any regularity.

But as the twentieth century closed, Georgia’s media and civil society were about to face increasing pressures as the Shevardnadze regime began to run out of steam and its corruption became more and more obvious under media scrutiny. In the words of the University of London’s Dr. Laurence Broers:

“The existence of a relatively lively civil society has long been regarded as evidence of Georgia’s democratic credentials. Comparatively open conditions for the development of civic institutions led to the proliferation of political parties and civic groups in the 1990s and the accumulation of significant experience and political capital in the NGO sector. Likewise, the development of independent media was another major gain during this period. . . . However, the stalling of the Georgian political system during the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed increasing attempts to mitigate the impact of civic activism.”²⁹

III.2. Rustavi-2 Television Was the Key Media Force

“...Rustavi-2 was extremely important. It was really instrumental. . . . Most of the students who came out on the streets were brought out by Rustavi. . . .” – President Saakashvili.³⁰

“Rustavi-2 became the voice of the opposition. . . [During the disputed election] it ran a scroll at the bottom of the screen 24 hours a day showing the official results compared to the [NGOs’] exit polling and parallel vote count.” – Mark Mullen, former National Democratic Institute director in Tbilisi.³¹

“Rustavi-2 pretty much became the revolution television (it later promoted itself as the ‘television of the victorious people’).” – Ghia Nodia.³²

Rustavi-2 was founded in 1994 in the town of Rustavi, not far from Tbilisi. It was then a tiny local TV station crammed into a couple of rooms in a local hotel. Its main founder, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, with help and advice from the U.S. media assistance nonprofit Internews, set the station on a course of professionalism and independence. Within a year or two, Rustavi-2 had moved into Tbilisi, survived two regime attempts to close it, and was receiving the Western support and training that helped it to thwart such attacks and to bring it to prominence. In 1996, the Eurasia Foundation, which is funded in part by USAID, gave Rustavi-2 a grant of \$9,925.05—a considerable sum in Georgia in those days.

Rustavi-2 was one of the major beneficiaries of the broadcast media development work of the California-based, USAID-backed NGO Internews. And Internews not only provided Rustavi-2 with training and guidance but also mobilized local and international support to fend off attempts to close it down.

Rustavi-2 itself was a determined learner. It made the most of every opportunity for professional growth and improvement, both on the business and editorial sides. “Rustavi-2 journalists attended *all* Internews advisory and training sessions,” says Internews’s former director for Georgia, Marc Behrendt. “Rustavi-2 gobbled up all the training its journalists could find. Training had a huge impact on Rustavi-2’s television quality because the station had good management.”³³

Persephone Miel, training director for Internews during Rustavi-2’s early days and now regional director for Europe and Eurasia, concurs. “Rustavi-2 always stood out, not only in Georgia, but in the whole former Soviet Union,” she noted. “They knew what they needed to learn and they constantly requested more and more sophisticated professional training. Their production and management was on the level with the very best Russian stations.”³⁴

This training in management, as well as in journalistic professionalism and ethics, helped the station establish itself on a stronger business base than its competitors. According to Behrendt, Rustavi-2, unlike most media in Georgia, was financially successful, for the most part supporting itself on advertisements. By 2002, he says, it had garnered about 50 percent of Georgia’s total available ad market, with the remaining half

shared between state television (some 40 percent) and all other channels and newspapers combined (about 10 percent).³⁵

Concurrent with building a firm financial base, Rustavi-2 launched a variety of debate and investigative programs that caught public attention. Perhaps the most dramatic of these was called—surprise, surprise—“60 Minutes.” Reporters and producers of “60 Minutes” did not hesitate to “throw stones at everybody,” in the words of one Western media expert. The weekly program had “a lot of integrity” and was critical of the government and government corruption and of everyone else. The program served to legitimize what Georgians already gossiped about and knew, at least in Tbilisi. It signaled to people that government figures could be held accountable without serious repercussions.³⁶

According to those who helped train the station’s staff, Rustavi-2 was genuinely independent both of officials and, unlike most Georgian media, of its own management. Another Rustavi-2 program, “Night Courier,” also probed into the country’s social and political developments, the “meat and potatoes” of independent media.

Such critical reporting, and the fact that it was the only channel other than state TV that had a national reach, turned Rustavi-2 into the most watched channel in Georgia. It also brought down upon it the wrath of those exposed, not least the authorities—and the government made a series of ultimately unsuccessful efforts to close it down.

In May of 2000, a Rustavi-2 news anchor, Akaki Gogichaishvili, whose controversial broadcasts had exposed corruption in previous months, was threatened by local officials and businessmen and warned to leave the country. In September that year a “60 Minutes” news team interview with the minister of forestry was cut off and the team’s cameras seized. In December another Rustavi-2 news crew was attacked near the highly sensitive Georgia-Chechnya border, accused of gathering information for Russian intelligence, held captive for a day and their videotapes seized.

Then, in July 2001, an event occurred that traumatized public opinion. The popular young anchor of “Night Courier,” Giorgi Sanaia, who had recently hosted a segment about the Chechen conflict, was murdered—shot in the head at close range. Despite all the government’s efforts to portray it otherwise, Georgian journalists and the public expressed the common view that he was murdered because of his work. Thousands turned out to pay their final respects to his body. The murder both galvanized the public and turned Rustavi-2 and the media in general into a focal point of resistance to the regime. Two years later, a former police officer, Grigol Khurtsilava, was sentenced to 13 years in prison for the murder. He had confessed to the crime, and his 9mm weapon was linked to the murder by ballistics evidence. But doubts about the motive for the crime lingered.

Meanwhile, government-Rustavi relations went from bad to worse. On October 23, 2001, “Night Courier” aired a segment about political corruption, smuggling, and other illegal activities in the Abkhazia region. Government officials criticized Rustavi-2 and threatened to shut it down. On October 24, Minister of the Interior Kakha Targamadze accused the station of being subversive and a “front” for foreign money.

A week later, agents from the national security ministry raided Rustavi-2’s headquarters, claiming they were searching for financial records. Rather than back down, Rustavi-2 crews began to broadcast the raid live on television, bringing crowds of supporters onto the streets outside. Station Manager Nika Tabatadze, backed up by

members of parliament, protested that the tax authorities had already been to the station a week earlier, audited and cleared it.

By the next day, some 7,000 protesters, mobilized in part by the Liberty Institute, had massed on the streets outside Rustavi-2's headquarters in central Tbilisi and outside Parliament and the president's office.³⁷ They demanded the resignation of President Shevardnadze, his government and the parliament. Protests poured in from overseas, from international organizations such as the Paris-based Reporters without Borders and New York's Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). "We condemn this blatant effort to intimidate Rustavi-2," said CPJ Director Ann Cooper.³⁸

Within days, the minister of security, Vakhtang Kutateladze, had resigned and Shevardnadze had sacked his entire cabinet in hopes of defusing the protests. "I took this decision in order to show the people that freedom of expression really exists in the country," the president said.³⁹

This crisis was something of a foretaste of, or rehearsal for, the Rose Revolution, which took place exactly two years later. It triggered the resignations of two of the most prominent members of the younger generation of Georgian leaders, a pair who had until then been allies of Shevardnadze but who later became the key promoters of his downfall. Mikheil "Misha" Saakashvili resigned from his post as justice minister to form a new opposition party, the National Movement. Zurab Zhvania stepped down as Speaker of Parliament and the next year formed his own opposition party, the United Democrats.

Rustavi-2 continued on its way, still under frequent attack. Within a week, its crew members were detained when filming in the Pankisi Gorge region (neighboring Chechnya) taken to a local police station and beaten up. In February 2002, gunshots were fired in the night at the station's sixteenth-floor windows, where "60 Minutes" was based. No one was hurt. More shots were fired at the station in May; again no one was hurt.

In March 2003, the Georgian Supreme Court asked the General Prosecutor's Office to investigate alleged criminal conduct by "60 Minutes," including defamation and disinformation against the judicial system. In April Rustavi-2 lost a libel case brought by a former culture minister and was ordered to pay \$24,400 for "moral damage." In August Rustavi-2 was ordered to pay \$460,000 in a libel case brought by a leader of the presidential-backed election alliance; and, in September the Supreme Court ruled on the station's appeal, ordering it to pay \$450,000 in "compensation for moral damage as a result of the information included in an episode of the TV program '60 Minutes.'"⁴⁰

In the ten days before the November 2 parliamentary election, the station broadcast several times the documentary "Bringing down a Dictator." Made by director/producer Steve York, it portrays in detail how the Serbs had carried out their nonviolent revolution against Slobodan Milosevic. Peter Ackerman, the documentary's executive producer and founding chair of the documentary's sponsor, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, explains: "Our role is to have people understand nonviolent conflict and give them the ability to design their own strategies for liberation and freedom."⁴¹

The documentary's lessons did indeed sink in. "Most important was the film," Ivane Merabishvili, general secretary of the National Movement party that led the revolt, told the *Washington Post*. "All the demonstrators knew the tactics of the revolution in Belgrade by heart because they showed . . . the film on their revolution. Everyone knew what to do. This was a copy of that revolution, only louder."⁴²

On the eve of the election, the Central Election Commission tried to revoke Rustavi-2's license but failed to follow through. The Commission acted again two weeks later, when the crowds were already swarming the streets, and cancelled the station's accreditation. The Commission accused the station of "moral damage and mounting pressure on the CEC with broadcasting video of antigovernmental Kmara youth movement. . . ."43

The station's coverage of the election and its aftermath, as well as its close cooperation with groups such as the Liberty Institute and Kmara, became central to the events themselves. Rustavi-2 became an active and forceful part of the opposition. Its owner, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, himself acknowledged this, telling the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS that "[w]e gave a one-sided coverage of the events in Tbilisi."44

In "The Causes of the Rose Revolution," Cory Welt, a fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., refers to Rustavi-2 embracing "an activist platform" during the November 2003 election crisis, and "openly siding with the opposition and encouraging public involvement in protests."45

Former U.S. ambassador to Georgia, Richard Miles, says Rustavi-2 was, "almost over the top in trying to promote Shevardnadze's overthrow." The TV station was "important" in the revolution, and certainly played a "role in the opposition's ability to keep people's attention on what was going on and in keeping people on the streets" despite the bad November weather. "In that sense, it was instrumental," he concludes.46

"It was not so much that Rustavi-2 was an opposition station or that the other stations didn't cover the opposition, but that the months before Shevardnadze's resignation were exciting times here, and Rustavi-2 portrayed the excitement," says Mark Mullen, then the Tbilisi director of the National Democratic Institute. "The public felt a connection to the station they did not feel with other stations. The difference between Rustavi-2 and the other stations was as much about style as content."47

Nonetheless, well before the election Rustavi-2 was widely perceived as serving as what one Georgian journalist calls the "unofficial mouthpiece" of the Western-minded, younger leaders such as Saakashvili and Zhvania and their allies and NGOs. And Mark Mullen himself says that "it was essentially an opposition television station."48 The station's coverage gave the opposition leaders publicity and credibility in the public mind, enabling them to engineer the revolution. And its close links with the Western-backed NGOs that pushed for better press freedom laws and that provided reliable election statistics were also a significant factor.

The *Wall Street Journal's* Hugh Pope described how it all came together: "The fraudulent elections provided a greater catalyst for popular outrage than the Liberty Institute and Kmara expected. That was largely because of U.S.- and NGO-funded exit polls broadcast on Rustavi-2 TV, which showed everyone exactly how pro-Shevardnadze parties had stolen the election."49

Rustavi-2 by this time was not alone. Imedi ("Hope") television, set up by Georgia tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, had joined the fray and moved from modest support of the Shevardnadze regime to comparatively objective reporting. Another new station, Mze ("Sun"), followed a similar path. At the same time, regional media backed up the Rustavi-Imedi-Mze coverage, and journalists from around the country supported one another even without an effective journalists' association.

Perversely, from the regime's point of view, the government's hesitating attempts to curb or kill the station only managed to raise its stature in the public mind—especially when the international community was seen coming to its support. Rustavi-2 became a heroic David against the government Goliath, and Tbilisi's students and others were prepared to come onto the streets in its defense. This also enabled Rustavi-2 to give similar stature and exposure to the leaders of the opposition, as the station itself moved more and more toward an opposition, rather than an independent, stance in the months before the revolution.

III.3. Western Media Development Aid Was the Media's Builder and Enabler

“Americans helped us most by channeling support to free Georgian media. . . . That was more powerful than 5,000 Marines.” – President Mikheil Saakashvili.⁵⁰

“All media got international support. They needed financial support to be independent, because of the lack of a market and advertising. International support was incredible.” – Marina Vashakmadze, Georgian editor and media NGO director.⁵¹

“Training had a huge impact on Rustavi-2 TV's quality, because it had good management—a sound business model, not a political investment. Local TV news throughout Georgia would not have happened without international assistance.” – Marc Behrendt, former director of Internews in Georgia.⁵²

Capitalizing on the collapse of the USSR, the United States Congress decided in the early 1990s to do its best to gather the fragments of the fractured Soviet empire into the democratic fold. In 1992 it passed the Freedom Support Act to plow millions of American dollars into the former Soviet lands to promote freedom and democracy. The act specifically calls for “the development of a free and independent media.”

The overall policy goal is clearly laid out in last year's State Department report on development assistance for Eurasia:

In the twelve years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. Government (USG)-funded assistance programs have been a key element of the U.S. policy to support the political and economic transformation of the former Soviet states. By helping move the Eurasian countries in the direction of democracy and market-based economies, these programs promote long-term stability in the region and contribute to U.S. national security.⁵³

The report goes on to detail the specific areas that the program focuses on: “to help promote good governance, strengthen civil society, independent media, the rule of law and human rights, advance market reforms. . . .” And it refers specifically to the just-

concluded Georgian “Revolution of Roses” as demonstrating “the pent up pressures for political change when governments fail to keep their promises to their citizens.”⁵⁴

In the wake of the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, the concept of promoting democracy around the world was given a further, huge, at least rhetorical, boost by the administration of George W. Bush. This has been most visible, violent and controversial in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. But encouraging democratic trends through nonviolent means, such as development aid, remains a priority. Such aid tends to go through phases, as lessons are learned about its effectiveness and as Congress gets caught up in the latest political fads or needs, shifting from Africa to East-Central Europe and Eurasia when the Berlin Wall fell, and now shifting toward the Middle East.

With and/or without such Western aid, the last 30 years or more have seen some stunning advances for democracy. According to a Freedom House study, “In the last three decades, dozens of corrupt, authoritarian, autocratic, one-party, and military regimes have fallen. . . . According to more than three decades of survey data, the number of Free states, which ensure a broad array of political rights and civil liberties, has expanded from 43 to 88—an average of nearly 1.5 per year—while the number of Not Free states, where repression is widespread, has declined from 69 to 49, or by nearly 2 every three years.”⁵⁵

In more recent years, since the late 1990s, that surge toward democracy has stalled, with some outstanding exceptions, such as Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. The Freedom House surveys show hardly any change in the overall numbers of Free versus Not Free states over the past eight years. And there are many signs of regression, not least in Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

“The challenges now are more fundamental: how to stimulate democracy in regions where authoritarianism has bested the democratic trend, and how to support democracy where it is under siege because of poor performance,” writes Thomas Carothers.⁵⁶

* * * * *

In Georgia, Internews was a pioneer in the development of the country’s broadcast media, starting almost immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union. According to Mark Mullen, then director of the National Democratic Institute office in Tbilisi, “Internews was very, very important” in a country that was pretty much a basket case in the early 1990s. Internews, funded by USAID, deployed as media trainers fresh young people who were committed and, in Mullen’s words, “cared about the work they were doing.”⁵⁷

Internews was instrumental in supporting the fledgling broadcasting stations that had appeared around Georgia’s regions and working to improve their professional standards through training, equipment grants and the creation of cooperative productions. As described in Section III.2 above, it was also highly supportive of Rustavi-2 from the station’s founding, providing it with journalistic and management training. Internews mobilized local and national support for the station when it came under attack from the government, helping it survive and giving it added prominence.

“The Internews philosophy is to support the industry holistically, not only with management, journalism and technical training but also through activities like shared program production and distribution projects that build connections among stations,” said Persephone Miel, Internews regional director for Europe and Eurasia. “And, although we don’t consider ourselves primarily a freedom of expression organization, we often must also support media in their battles against censorship or government pressure.”⁵⁸

“Internews didn’t just help out Rustavi-2,” says Mark Mullen. “In fact, in the year or two before the revolution, Rustavi-2 had matured to the degree that Internews had sort of worked itself out of a job there, which is the way it is supposed to happen. Most of Internews’s work was with small regional stations that were much more susceptible to intimidation and needed a lot more help.”⁵⁹

The International Center for Journalists joined forces with Internews in Georgia in 2000, focusing on the country’s struggling and disorganized print media. (Full disclosure: The writer presided over ICFJ from 1997 to 2004, during which time ICFJ successfully bid for the print development contract in Georgia under USAID’s ProMedia program.) For three years, ICFJ conducted scores of workshops, consultancies and conferences, training hundreds of Georgian journalists in basic reporting skills, media management, and association development.

As an enduring spin-off from this USAID-funded program, ICFJ’s Tbilisi training center was reconstituted in 2002 as an independent Georgian nonprofit now called the Caucasus Center for Journalism. This training center for professional journalists is directed by a prominent Georgian editor, Marina Vashakmadze, who also teaches in Tbilisi State University’s journalism department.

In the same year, ICFJ won a State Department grant to launch a journalism school in Tbilisi to give master’s degrees to graduate students from Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The “Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management” (CSJMM) so far has graduated 86 students from the three countries. Most of the students—some 80 percent—are filtering back into, and strengthening, their respective nations’ media. Some already are in leading positions where their training pays off in better quality writing, editing, and broadcasting, and in better advice and guidance for the next generation of journalists and managers.

For example, Baadur “Badri” Koplatadze, the deputy director general of Georgia’s public broadcasting channel, is a CSJMM graduate, supervising more than 300 employees and teaching part-time at the J-school. Other CSJMM graduates are now reporters or producers on Rustavi-2, on Imedi TV, and on Georgia’s public TV, and working in radio, television and print media outlets throughout the Caucasus.

“When students come to our school, we tell them up front that we are not training them just to be better reporters,” says school academic director Dave Bloss. “We want them to be assignment editors and TV producers in the near future, and station directors and publishers down the road. We want them to be the real media decision makers in their countries.”⁶⁰

The Open Society Institute (OSI), set up by George Soros, has made major contributions to this journalism higher education program. OSI funding has sent five Georgians, one Azeri and one Armenian to theanship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University to gain master’s degrees, thus enabling the school to develop indigenous faculty. Marina Vashakmadze, herself a teacher at CSJMM, is

writing a Georgian textbook for journalists with assistance from LSU's journalism dean and faculty. OSI also funds the school's student newspaper—the *Brosse Street Journal* (www.bsj.ge)—and internships for students with local and international media.

Under the OSI-funded program, Azeri and Armenian students have interned together in neighboring Turkey's *Turkish Daily News*. Given the tensions between those countries and the failure of other efforts to get Azeris and Armenians to work together, this is in itself a peacemaking achievement.

“We are now entering our fourth year of educating Armenians and Azeris side by side,” says Margie Freaney, the founding academic director of the Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management. “They work on stories together, go out and shoot film together, and generally cooperate fully.”⁶¹

As the Georgian faculty become more involved in teaching and running the J-school, the whole entity is becoming indigenized and embedded more deeply into its host organization, the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA). Some of its Georgian-language journalism courses are now attracting numerous applications from potential students prepared to pay \$150 for a six-week session. Meanwhile, even as State Department funding for the J-school is being drastically cut, a modest infusion of USAID funds is opening the way for similar journalism teaching at Armenia's Yerevan State University, and perhaps later in Azerbaijan.

Since 2002, USAID's Media Innovations Program for Georgia, a broad-based program for both broadcast and print, has been administered by the International Research and Exchanges Board, usually known as IREX. Under this program, the D.C.-based nonprofit has offered training, small grants, and consulting to develop financially viable private broadcast and print outlets that penetrate the country; support an association that can represent the legal interests of journalists; build a media trade organization; and increase the quality and quantity of reporting on significant topics by all media.⁶²

Meanwhile, the local NGO created by Internews, called Internews Georgia, continues to play an important role on the local media scene. With funding from a number of donors, Internews Georgia creates innovative social issues programming and public education campaigns, and provides training for local media.

In 2003, as the crucial November parliamentary elections approached, IREX worked with print and broadcast media to “ensure that full, fair, and objective information regarding the candidates and issues reached the Georgian electorate.”

A centerpiece of this effort on the print side was the production of an election supplement “that was inserted into 35 national and regional newspapers.” (A similar supplement was also produced after the Rose Revolution in November, just before the emergency presidential election on January 4, 2004.) On the broadcast side, prior to the November parliamentary elections, IREX consultants “worked with Tbilisi-based and regional television and radio stations to produce a series of almost 200 political debates, informational programming, talk shows, and town hall meetings.”⁶³

Both the print supplement and the debates, while financially supported by IREX, were prepared by local media professionals at newspapers and stations. Trainers and IREX's Georgian staff provided training and consulting in coverage of elections. They emphasized how to provide fair and balanced coverage of candidates and parties

(including their platforms and voting records), and how to assume the educational role of media in helping citizens understand the voting process.

“In Georgia, while support of international organizations helped the media better cover the elections process and the immediate reaction on the streets, it was the media themselves who took the initiative, and the risks,” says Mark Whitehouse, director of IREX Media Development Division. “In the absence of this local initiative, media support would not have been nearly as successful. Georgia demonstrated that training, complemented by financial support for initiatives otherwise unaffordable (debates, supplements, special editions) can have an impact on allowing citizens to have the information needed to make informed choices.”⁶⁴

IV. Lessons Learned from Development Aid Programs

Much has been learned by donors and implementers from media development work in all three domino countries. Using Georgia as a central focus, here are six key lessons that, if followed, would make a real difference to future development assistance programs.

IV. 1. Developing Media Is a Long-Term Process

It takes time and persistence to

- a) Break journalists from deeply ingrained habits of regurgitating government propaganda; of substituting opinion and rumor for well researched facts; of reflecting owners’ political views rather than acting as a genuinely independent watchdog of government and society.
- b) Teach management how to find independent sources of revenue (such as advertising); how to attract audiences while maintaining journalistic integrity and credibility; how to set up channels of independent distribution; how to attract and train high quality technicians and other personnel.
- c) Change the legislative environment enabling a free press to flourish.

“You have got to have a long-term strategy for democracy and governance development,” says Peter Graves, senior media advisor for the Europe and Eurasian Bureau at USAID. “You need an entire portfolio of programs. The transition to democracy doesn’t happen overnight.”⁶⁵

IREX’s Mark Whitehouse also stresses that media development is a long-term process: “One cannot parachute in before an election and expect results. In Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia, media training had been going on for some time and had laid the groundwork for improved reporting in the elections period itself.”⁶⁶

“These media investments tend to be long term by their nature,” says Robert Ortega, an American journalist who has done media development work over many years in Latin America, in Belarus, and in Georgia, where he ran ICFJ’s part of the USAID-funded ProMedia program. “While there was ongoing and additional assistance in Georgia in the year or two leading up to the revolution, the major foreign donor assistance that allowed Rustavi-2 to become such an important broadcast entity took place starting about eight years earlier.

“Also the effect tends to be cumulative, that is, the training in basic journalism techniques, ethics, etc., and regular reinforcement was crucial in creating a cadre of journalists who played such an important role in the revolution. So the foreign assistance goals need to be long-range.”⁶⁷

Internews’s Marc Behrendt makes much the same point: “To this day, Georgia’s local news stations around the country have both the technical capacity—the camera operators’ and editors’ technical skills base—and the journalists’ skills base that have been developed over ten years of deep media assistance. And now there’s a market for that information.”⁶⁸

“The single toughest habit to break remains the instinct to start all newsgathering at the president’s office, parliament and the ministries, and then to take that information at face value,” says Dave Bloss. “It’s no surprise that a post-Soviet system would be top-down, but few Georgian reporters see the need to do the background digging so they have fair but tough questions to ask officials. And the type of investigative reporting where you get the facts first and then approach the responsible officials is rare.”⁶⁹

Ortega found that it took months of hard work to persuade journalists and managers to “do something out of their mindset.” He finally persuaded a group of newspapers to cooperate in assembling an advertising supplement that showed that gaining ad revenue was possible and made for much more independence than would serving as a secret mouthpiece for a political sponsor. As the State Department report for 2002 put it:

A pilot advertising project resulted in seven newspapers appointing full-time advertising managers, who, as part of this project, produced an eight-page advertising supplement that appeared in all seven papers. For two of the papers, the revenue from that single supplement exceeded all their advertising revenue for the previous two years. Georgia’s first newspaper advertising cooperative was launched and is producing monthly supplements on a continuing basis.⁷⁰

As a result of training and aid, said Ortega, “television and the newspapers became more aggressive in their reporting on the government. And, of course, the Liberty Institute had snuck a freedom of information act through Parliament as well.”⁷¹

IV. 2. Development Must Be Comprehensive

Without all three of the above actions—a, b, and c—which involve journalists, managers, civil society groups and legislators, the process is unlikely to succeed. In addition, media transformation must be matched by an overall strengthening of the whole civil society structure, substituting a “people power,” bottom-up approach for the stifling top-down methods of authoritarians.

Without the Liberty Institute, in partnership with the international community, defending media rights and pushing for better press laws, Rustavi-2 would not have had the same opportunities to inform and influence Georgians at large. Without the NGOs providing the exit polls and parallel vote counts that Rustavi-2 broadcast constantly

during the Rose Revolution, the regime's manipulation of the November 2003 parliamentary election results would not have been so demonstrably clear.

It is the combination of these forces that is effective. Hence, aid donors, working together, need to ensure that all of these latent forces are given the means to grow, rather than focusing on any one of them. And the focus needs to be more on training than providing grants for survival.

"It's time for the marketplace to sort out those media entities that aren't serious about becoming independent business operations," says Dave Bloss. "We've got to stop training the professional seminar crowd; they spend all their time in the trainings and none in their offices producing either journalism or revenue. We have got to start identifying the winners and working with them one-on-one, whether it's a TV producer or a newspaper ad salesman. As for the legal environment, there isn't any. It's government by decree at the moment, and what's on the books doesn't matter. The State Department is big on the rule of law; but at what point will it insist that the Georgian government share that goal?"⁷²

The Russian Duma's (parliament's) draft law to tighten state control over the country's civil society organizations suggests just how much those who have authoritarian leanings fear the combination of a robust civil society and genuinely independent media.

"We remember what human-rights groups did in Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Georgia, groups that got aid from CIA-funded foreign foundations," said Alexei Ostrovsky, a nationalist lawmaker, during the Russian parliamentary debate. "We, the co-authors of this bill, want to protect our citizens from the chaos this country could end up in thanks to such organizations."⁷³

A genuine democracy is, of course, precisely the "chaos" that a flourishing civil society and free press create. The Russian bill, as originally written, would "vastly increase the powers of government officials to interfere in NGOs' financial affairs, refuse them registration or close them down completely," according to the *Wall Street Journal*. "It also would force foreign nonprofits to register as Russian legal entities, a requirement organizations such as the Ford Foundation and Human Rights Watch say they can't meet."⁷⁴

Vladimir Putin's vow that the bill will not harm civil society is less than reassuring to those who may be hit by such legislation should it become law. And authoritarian rulers elsewhere in former Soviet states are following Russia's lead. Perversely, this move to constrict Russia's civil society—following Putin's reassertion of control over Russian media, which had previously been gaining vigor and independence in the post-Soviet era—itself illustrates the revolutionary potential of the civil society-media combination.

IV. 3. Don't Stop after the Revolution Is Over

Failure to maintain pressure for independent, professional media risks a slide toward a renewed authoritarian abyss.

"Once a political opening has occurred and a transition to democracy is under way, it is essential for donors to continue support for pro-democracy civic groups as a means of ensuring that there is civic pressure on the new authorities to continue down the path of liberalization and reform," says the Freedom House study "How Freedom is Won:

From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy.”⁷⁵ The same logic clearly applies to independent media.

In the words of former U.S. ambassador to Georgia, Richard Miles, “There is always a danger of backsliding, including in our own government, so we should keep up a high level of support of these programs.”⁷⁶

The new Georgian government is beginning to rebuild the country’s economy and tax base. The tax code has been simplified, and tax receipts are way up. Oil is about to flow through the new pipeline from Baku to Turkey via Tbilisi, bringing in \$50 million a year in transit fees. The natural gas pipeline will follow. The notoriously corrupt traffic police were all fired, the force was re-formed, and the new hires—with new uniforms and more of a living wage—appear to be less corrupt.⁷⁷

But democratic checks and balances have not been fully restored by the new government. The judiciary is still not independent. As for the press, it has lost its critical edge. Part of this is self-inflicted.

“Everybody wanted to be on the home team, wanted the new government to succeed. Coverage has become not so much slavish as worshipful,” says ICFJ’s Dave Bloss.⁷⁸

At the same time, the Saakashvili government appears to be exercising greater control over the media, especially television, than did Shevardnadze.

“Some of the very civic activists who helped engineer the revolution are the most disdainful now of the press and punitive toward any journalist who dares to criticize,” says ICFJ’s Margie Freaney. “Self-censorship and lack of journalistic courage have become real problems in the current atmosphere.”⁷⁹

According to another Western media expert who has monitored both pre and postrevolutionary governments, “Self-censorship and [government] censorship are significantly worse now than under Shevardnadze. Everyone is so desperate for this government to be successful that they don’t want to rock the boat. . . . What is most desperately needed right now is media strengthening. The media is the one thing you need to keep alive, because the public is *not* being informed. People do not know what is going on.”

It is just at this moment that U.S. development assistance for the media is being phased down, if not out. “At the same time that journalists are becoming less willing to challenge the government and ask tough questions, support and training programs for journalists have been cut back or eliminated,” says Margie Freaney.⁸⁰

Marina Vashakmadze speaks from the Georgian viewpoint: “Economic reforms are now being urged on the government, but who will monitor this process? We need independent media to do such monitoring. Our journalists need to learn how to report on economic issues, but there is no longer any money to do this. If the West wants reforms here, then we need to be able to develop the media to watch over them.”⁸¹

The Georgian media’s reluctance, at least temporarily, to criticize the new government illustrates another problem facing the remaining aid givers. Rustavi-2, for instance, came under new ownership after the revolution. Its founder, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, fell afoul of the new government that he had helped install. He was replaced by new owners with government connections, and he himself moved to New York. Rustavi-2 thereafter suspended some of the critical public-affairs programs that

were so important in exposing the failures and corruption of the Shevardnadze regime. The programs were simply taken off the air.

“Rustavi-2 did not cover the debates in Parliament when President Saakashvili was given largely unlimited powers,” says Marc Behrendt. “When those constitutional amendments went through Parliament, Rustavi-2 and Imedi pulled their discussion shows off the air. There was no real discussion of the amendments. When this was debated later at a meeting of Georgian journalists, they argued that it was important to support the new government as it made changes, because if Georgia’s fundamental problems were not dealt with there would be no later opportunity.”⁸²

According to Behrendt, this attitude changed later, when Russian journalists compared it to “selling their own souls to Yeltsin” and then regretting doing so. The Russian journalists warned the Georgians of the danger of giving up press freedom. And in the fall of 2005 the TV stations resumed their talk shows.

But some aid agencies are searching for new stratagems to combat such developments. Eurasia Foundation, for instance, now is no longer supporting Rustavi-2. Instead Eurasia is funneling funds to a group of independent journalists (www.circ.ge) who are doing their own investigative reporting and then finding television and print outlets that will put the reports before the public—a system that has interesting parallels with the investigative reporting done by the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, D.C.

So far, in short, Western aid policies have succeeded in producing a more effective, pro-Western regime. But power has been centralized in the presidency, and the risk remains that Georgia once again could become an authoritarian state.⁸³

“Like most revolutions, the Rose Revolution in Georgia has quite soon bred disillusionment among a considerable part of the Georgian society, including active participants of the revolution,” says Zaal N. Anjaparidze, a Georgian journalist who now works for the Eurasia Foundation in Tbilisi. “Several staunch followers of Saakashvili, including prominent civil leaders, now have become his opponents. It may sound paradoxical, but Lenin's well-known maxim, that any revolution is worthwhile only if it's able to defend itself, seems to be true of the Georgian Rose Revolution, which is now desperately defending its achievements.”⁸⁴

Nor has the country yet succeeded in producing a firmly established independent media capable of resisting government pressures, encouraging democratic progress, consistently adhering to professional and responsible journalistic standards, and managing itself on a genuinely independent financial base. That requires more work, more development assistance, more training—just when such aid is being re-channeled to new recipients (see Section IV.4, below) or to other U.S. priorities, such as the Middle East. This shift in focus appears to repeat a pattern of government development aid that follows political and strategic fads, rather than supporting long-term sustainability, and risks wasting the aid dollars already spent.

“Donors must consider post-elections/ postrevolutions support as equally important to that provided prior to elections,” says IREX’s Mark Whitehouse. “Looking at Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, it is clear that media freedom is not won overnight. New governments who may be more democratically aligned have not always proven to be great friends of free speech; in some cases it is simply neglect and an overloaded political agenda that pushes media reform towards the bottom of the agenda,

while in other cases governments have actively opposed media reforms. Donors must ensure that the openings for media freedom provided by elections or revolutions are secured in the years following.”⁸⁵

Or, as Robert Ortega puts it, “Continuing aid to media is absolutely essential *after* a revolution. Because if you’re going to establish a meaningful democracy and protect the progress made, you must have information coming out outside the system. You must have access to public records and meetings. You can’t sustain democracy without that.”⁸⁶

IV. 4. Maintain Integrity

Using government money to help produce “independent” media involves an obvious and inevitable tension. This has been dramatically illustrated by the American attempts to build new, “free” and ethical media in Iraq while at the same time making secret Pentagon payments to favored Iraqi journalists and secretly planting propaganda articles and advertisements in Iraqi media.⁸⁷

Even without such brazen contrasts, those who conduct media development training and support programs are very much aware of the underlying contradiction between encouraging independent, professional journalism and accepting the USAID and State Department funding that makes much of such training possible.

“This is one of the key issues. . . . the key paradox,” David Hoffman, president of Internews, testified at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on June 11, 2002. “We’re trying to teach people about the benefits of nongovernmental, independent media and we’re doing it with governmental money. . . . USAID has done a really good job in . . . keeping its hands off and not interfering editorially, and so that practice certainly helps it. But it’s something we have to overcome all the time.”⁸⁸

USAID’s Peter Graves emphasizes that his agency’s programs in places such as Georgia are directed at strengthening independent media and civil society NGOs, not controlling them. “We do not direct content,” he says. “It has to be the editors, publishers and producers who control content. We did not create the revolutions but simply supported the local institutions and enabled them to do their work.”⁸⁹

IREX’s Mark Whitehouse supports the USAID position: “Donors must ensure there remains a firewall between immediate policy imperatives and the independent journalism programs they support. USAID maintained that firewall effectively in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia, and the journalism programs they aided did not support a particular candidate or position. They supported balanced, comprehensive and professional reporting. At times, media and journalists who received training or support were highly critical of the U.S. government and at times highly critical of the democratic oppositions. This is healthy and desirable and reinforces democratic development.”⁹⁰

OSI’s Gordana Jankovic makes much the same point: “Each country that has a strong and critical and balanced society, with strong demands from civil society for the government to fulfill its promises to the people, these societies *do* produce change.”⁹¹

Jankovic is deeply concerned with the perception in some countries that OSI and other aid donors produced the revolutions: “This is absolutely far away from the truth. OSI is not there to create revolution. It is not there to stimulate revolution. It is there to help people learn how to better run their own societies and governments. It is they who can decide how they should do their work.”

This false view, she says, “has led to many difficulties in Georgia and other countries. Being wrongly linked to the Georgian revolution and the new president makes it much more difficult to encourage and stimulate the civil society groups that remain in critical watchdog roles in Georgia and elsewhere.”⁹²

The American media development NGOs emphasize their own independence from their funding sources. Internews’s strategy, according to Hoffman, has been to support the formation of local, indigenous NGOs to carry out the training. “In every country where we work there’s a local Internews or a local media NGO that we support.”⁹³ ICFJ has on occasion followed the same strategy. In Georgia it set up both the local media training center run by a respected Georgian journalist and the J-school attached to a Tbilisi educational institute.

Funds wholly independent of governments would be ideal. But the conundrum faced by those who specialize in media development is that there is simply not enough nongovernment money to meet the need. The vast majority of media development funding comes from government sources. In the United States, a handful of media foundations do make significant grants for international media development. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the McCormick Tribune Foundation, OSI, the Ford Foundation, and the Scripps Howard Foundation are among those that make such major grants. But in Europe and Scandinavia nongovernment funding is almost unknown, with the notable exception of the Soros foundations.

To make matters more difficult, some types of government funding come with more controlling strings than others.

“In Georgia,” says Dave Bloss, “the newest USAID money goes first to the Georgian ministries. And then the local democracy-building and media development NGOs must compete against themselves for a piece of the pie. There’s no way that giving the government control over the purse strings for media development is a good strategy for strengthening either democratic government or free media. It totally distorts the relationship between government and media.”⁹⁴

USAID’s new development policy, having refocused its strategy mainly on supporting the Georgian government and its ministries, is highly controversial, even within USAID itself and within the Department of State. “There are many critics of the new U.S. strategy in Georgia within USAID and the State Department,” says one insider. “The embassy and USAID mission in Georgia are making some wrong decisions. They are giving up on many Georgian democracy advocates, exemplified by ending the NGO support program and the media development program.”

Instead, this critic says, the funds are going to “support the new government, a government that has not shown a great deal of resolve in reforming itself. This change in strategy would have happened in Serbia, too, right after the downfall of Milosevic, if not for the strong pressure applied on the American embassy in Belgrade by Washington policymakers.”

A former U.S. embassy official makes the further point that the shift of policy toward funneling aid to and through the Georgian government sends precisely the wrong signal to the Saakashvili administration—that everything is “A-OK in our view.” This removes pressure for full accountability on the part of the Georgian government.

European development specialists also are critical of the new USAID policy. “We recognize that you need to improve the government,” says Gordana Jankovic, the director

of OSI's worldwide Network Media Program, "but you can't just jump into government-link programs. Can you imagine channeling aid for media through the government? It's just like Soviet times. Whoever gives you the money, you have difficulty criticizing."⁹⁵

IV. 5. Get More Than Just Geopolitical Bang for the Buck

If Western aid to civil society and the media can produce nonviolent, democratic reforms, without the need for more active and expensive interventions—let alone military ones—this would appear a good investment. It fits into the Bush administration's foreign policy goal of spreading democracy. And it is especially valuable if the country concerned has genuine geopolitical significance, as do all of the three dominos mentioned.

But a discrepancy exists between the underlying motives of Western journalism trainers—raising the quality and effectiveness of a country's media as intrinsically valuable to its citizenry—and the goals of the U.S. or other Western governments, such as moving a country from one sphere of influence to another, or promoting an important economic or other strategic outcome.

Western trainers in Georgia were successful over a decade or so in raising journalistic standards and fostering media independence, and this led to at least some strengthening of democracy through a more informed and galvanized population. This may, or may not, endure, as discussed below. At the same time, the revolutionary process served the U.S. and the West by cementing Georgia into a pro-Western stance and opening the door for the completion of a highly strategic oil pipeline, as well as an important natural gas pipeline that has yet to be completed.

Georgia is a small country with a population of only some 5 million people. But this largely Christian nation, with a proud pre-Soviet democratic history, lies at a vital intersection just below southern Russia's boiling Muslim provinces, such as Chechnya. It is also sandwiched between the world's third-largest oil reserves, on the Caspian Sea, and outlets for that energy on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline—just now about to deliver oil to the Mediterranean without going through Russia or the vulnerable Turkish Straits—is of great strategic significance to the United States and West, and will provide Georgia with transit revenues of about \$50 million a year.

Georgia may not compare in size or significance to Ukraine, but it does indeed matter. Both Russia and the U.S. see Georgia as important to their security interests. Even though some American aid is now being redirected toward the Middle East, Georgia retains enough geopolitical clout to ensure that the U.S. will not abandon it. And it clings tightly to the U.S.—including sending troops to be part of the Coalition in Iraq—and aims at eventual membership in NATO and the European Union.

IV. 6. Opening the Door for More Domino Toppling

What happened in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine has scared and shaken other authoritarian leaders in and beyond former Soviet lands. Even in Beijing, China's leaders convened top officials in May 2005 to warn them that what occurred in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan—stirred up by the U.S., in their view—could occur in China. According to the *New York Times*, the Chinese leaders argued that "the United States had fostered social unrest in those places and had similar designs on China, said people who said they had been told about the speeches."⁹⁶

However, the high watermark for “color” revolutions in countries of the former Soviet Union may have passed. Anxious about their own power and hides, authoritarians are tightening up. Assuming that the basic requirements for nonviolent revolution referred to in Section III above are correct, then opportunities for further domino effects seem modest.

The biggest domino, Russia, seems unlikely to fall in the immediate future. Far from being weak and unpopular, Vladimir Putin has proved both tough and popular with a traumatized post-Soviet population that, many polls suggest, still prefers stability to democracy. He has cracked down hard on the once-expanding free press, bringing national television firmly back under Kremlin control.

One symptom of this regression was the dispute in November 2005 at Ren-TV, which the *New York Times* describes as “the only major Russian channel with news not influenced by the Kremlin.”⁹⁷ Olga Romanova, an anchor for Ren-TV (which changed ownership in 2005), was taken off the air after complaining that the channel’s management was blocking her from airing reports that might irritate Kremlin officials.⁹⁸ “Such an attitude to Olga Romanova is a sign that the last channel that remained independent and impartial in covering events at least to some extent has been lost,” said former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, according to the Interfax news agency as reported in the *New York Times*.⁹⁹ Romanova and the channel’s news editor, Yelena Fyodorava, subsequently resigned.¹⁰⁰

At the same time, new civil society legislation that is wending its way through the Russian Duma would tighten state control over the whole sweep of the nonprofit sector.¹⁰¹ In the words of John Edwards and Jack Kemp, co-chairs of a Council on Foreign Relations task force on United States policy toward Russia, “If this measure becomes law, it will roll back pluralism in Russia and curtail contact between our societies. It will flagrantly breach the commitment that President Putin has made to numerous Western leaders to strengthen such ties.”¹⁰²

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also referred to the issue when visiting Ukraine on December 6, 2005: “We have concerns, and the United States government has expressed these concerns at all levels. We would hope that the importance of nongovernmental organizations would be understood by Russia.” And two senior State Department officials were in Moscow in early December to talk with Russian officials about the proposed law.¹⁰³

The remaining authoritarians in Central Asia and the Caucasus have seen the writing on the wall. They are making sure that they do not repeat Shevardnadze’s comparative softness in handling the media and NGOs. The Aleksandr Lukashenko regime in Belarus has long been taking no chances. “If any paper did any meaningful reporting, it was shut down,” says U.S. media trainer Robert Ortega of his time working on the Belarus media development program in 2003–2005. “No independent papers were left.”¹⁰⁴

This void enabled the regime to impose its propaganda on its people, says Ortega. “When I was in Minsk, the government TV constantly ran stories claiming that the neighboring Baltic countries and Poland were in economic shambles, with terrible crime and social problems that had resulted from their embrace of capitalism and the European Union.

“The stories, while completely false, convinced many Belarusians that they were better off than their neighbor countries. Only in areas where foreign broadcasts could be received or where independent papers were still then surviving did large numbers of people tend to disbelieve the government propaganda. The fostering of independent journalism is essential, not because it can lead to an immediate democratic revolution, but because without truthful information the possibility of change diminishes to nearly zero.”¹⁰⁵

In November 2005, President Lukashenko, who is running for a third term in March 2006, submitted legislation to parliament making it a crime to organize protests, join banned organizations or speak against the national interest.¹⁰⁶ He urged quick passage in wake of the revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. The lower house of parliament voted the legislation through within a week.¹⁰⁷ And the upper house approved it unanimously December 8.¹⁰⁸

“The bill will effectively criminalize criticism of the government and throw Belarus back into the dark days of Stalinism,” CPJ Director Ann Cooper said.¹⁰⁹ And Belarus’s opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich denounced the new legislation, saying, “This is the regime’s final stage of preparation for the election. The amendments have a single aim, to paralyze and put in prison any person who publicly disagrees with Lukashenko’s course.”¹¹⁰

In early December 2005, meanwhile, Kazakhstan held presidential elections in which President Nursultan Nazarbayev won with 91 percent of the votes cast. Kazakhstan has never yet held an election that met international standards.¹¹¹ And this one appears to be no exception to the Kazakh rule.

“Despite some efforts which were undertaken to improve the process, the authorities did not exhibit sufficient political will to hold a genuinely good election,” said Bruce George, the British Member of Parliament who led the observer team assembled by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Among the problems Mr. George pointed out were pro-government bias in the state media, voter intimidation, restrictions on freedom of press and assembly, ballot stuffing, multiple voting, pressure on students, and irregularities in vote counting.¹¹²

Two weeks before the election, a former ally of Nazarbayev who had turned against him, Zamanbek Nurkadilov, was found dead in his family compound in central Almaty. A lawyer representing the family dismissed the possibility of suicide, saying that the dead opposition leader had suffered two gunshot wounds to the chest and one to the head.¹¹³

Uzbekistan, for its part, has been busy cozying up to Russia. Presidents Islam Karimov and Putin signed a mutual defense pact on November 14 that leaves open the possibility that Russia could establish a military base in Uzbekistan. Earlier, in late July, Uzbekistan ordered the eviction of U.S. forces stationed at the Karshi-Khanabad air base in the southwestern part of the country.

Karimov’s violent crushing of a popular uprising in the Uzbek city of Andijan—in which hundreds of mostly unarmed protesters or bystanders were killed—was another symptom of the regime’s survival anxieties. “Besides Andijan, the trigger for a widening crackdown has been President Karimov’s growing anxieties following other popular revolutions in the region, starting with Georgia, then Ukraine and finally Kyrgyzstan, on

Uzbekistan's own border," wrote the *Economist*.¹¹⁴ "For all of these, he has explicitly blamed the 'intrusive meddling' of America and the West."

In a December 7 speech, for instance, the Uzbek leader suggested that the U.S. democratization strategy was ill-conceived. "There is not and cannot be a single model of universal democracy," Karimov said. "I think it is short-sighted for a country that views itself as the most powerful country to say that its own model of democracy is applicable everywhere. Think for yourselves, dear friends, exporting democracy and introducing it forcibly from abroad is in itself against the nature of the concept of democracy."¹¹⁵

In September 2005, the Uzbek authorities ordered Internews to close its office in Uzbekistan. A Tashkent court found the U.S. media development NGO guilty of violating Uzbek laws and told it to leave the country. This followed months of pressure on NGOs in Uzbekistan, especially those supporting the development of democracy.¹¹⁶

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is hanging in the balance, under international fire for its apparently fixed November 6 election, but with the opposition unable to muster enough unity or support to drive the regime from power. On November 26, riot police attacked a peaceful opposition rally in Baku, the capital, according to the *New York Times*, "beating and chasing away thousands of unarmed people protesting rigged parliamentary elections earlier this month."¹¹⁷

The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan appears to be 2005's exception to the rule in Central Asia. The popular revolt in March that ousted President Askar Akayev followed years of Western investment in the Kyrgyz media and civil society. "It would have been absolutely impossible for this [revolution] to have happened without that help," said Edil Baisolov, who leads a coalition of NGOs financed by the U.S. government through the National Democratic Institute.¹¹⁸

By the end of 2005, the new Kyrgyz government was described as "taking small yet determined steps toward embracing the fundamentals of democracy. . . . Still basic problems remain that many worry could undo the gains made last March."¹¹⁹ And, according to some reports, Russia and Uzbekistan want to roll back the gains made in the Kyrgyzstan revolution, driving U.S. forces from the region, since the sole remaining U.S. base in Central Asia is located just outside the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek.¹²⁰

V. Conclusions

Aiding and training journalists and media managers, along with civil society groups, paid off in Georgia. The American and Western investment helped to generate the Rose Revolution, and resulted in a potentially more democratic, open and Western-leaning society. It was a comparatively economical, and certainly more peaceful, way of inducing democratic change than most other forms of intervention.

In the ten years leading up to the Georgian revolution, the U.S. government spent just over \$154 million on democracy assistance projects in Georgia, most of it under the Freedom Support Act of 1992.¹²¹ In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as a whole, \$350 million has been spent since 1991 specifically to develop independent media.¹²² By comparison, the invasion and war in just one country, Iraq, has cost about \$200 billion in less than three years.

A Freedom House study puts it well: “Support for civic movements is far less expensive than major military expenditures and far less costly than the normal bill for large development programs. Yet given the correlations between open, transparent, democratic societies and peace, as well as sustainable development, there is an urgent need for greater international commitment to funding this sector, especially in closed societies and fragile new democracies.”¹²³

Georgia was a case where just such development assistance—from the U.S. and Europe—succeeded. “It’s hard to show quantitative results in democracy building,” says Ambassador Miles. “Finally in Georgia there was something you could look at and say, ‘it worked.’”¹²⁴

It is important to continue such development assistance after the revolutionary dust has settled. Pulling back, or pulling out, not only risks slippage in the quality of journalism and the dynamism of civil society but also makes a return to dictatorial ways more likely. “The gains made by more than 10 years of media assistance in Georgia appear to be waning already,” says Margie Freaney, founding director of ICFJ’s Tbilisi journalism school and long-time trainer and consultant in the Caucasus.¹²⁵

Nonviolent revolutions such as Georgia’s may be hard to reproduce more widely in the short term, especially when despots elsewhere have learned the lessons that President Shevardnadze learned too late. At this point, an authoritarian backlash has set in across much of the former Soviet Union, notably in Russia, as well as in other hard-nosed corners of the world.

Despite this, a long-term investment in free, independent media and in a supportive civil society would seem to be a sound policy option wherever local conditions make that at all possible. With an even modestly free media—growing increasingly professional and able to inform citizens about a government’s activities, follies, foibles and corruption—there remains the possibility of generating popular sentiment for change. Without such media, the constituency for change and greater democracy is stunted, if not totally stifled.

“By developing a core of indigenous journalists who at least understand good, ethical journalistic practices, you put an essential element in place that’s poised to move if an opportunity presents itself,” says Robert Ortega.¹²⁶

Within the United States itself, the news media’s reputation has taken a beating in recent years. A series of scandals engulfing individual journalists and their news organizations has damaged the profession’s credibility. But in many countries overseas, where life is far more difficult and freedom far more tentative, journalists tend to be perceived as vital defenders of liberty.

Honest, accurate, fearless reporting that throws light into the dark crevices of power remains an absolutely essential ingredient of democracy. Like grass springing up through cracks in concrete, independent media can become a force for change in repressive societies, informing and rallying citizens, exposing corruption, and generating support for human and civil rights. This is precisely the role that journalists and independent media played in the “color revolutions” that marked the opening years of this century. Western and American support for this role is a privilege—and very much in our own national interests.

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