

Improving access to information on elections for ethnic minorities in Georgia

As part of the [INSPIRES project](#), Flexible Response Funds (FRFs) are designed to provide USAID missions and partners with easily accessible and flexible support in the form of technical assistance and subgrants to local organizations that can help address urgent and emerging threats to civic space.

In **Georgia**, Internews collaborated with six local media outlets to improve the coverage and quality of election-related reporting available to ethnic minorities and minority language communities through three key activities:

- Production and distribution of news packages on issues of public concern;
- Training and mentoring for media outlets on content creation and editorial processes; and,
- Production of town hall events focused on election issues.

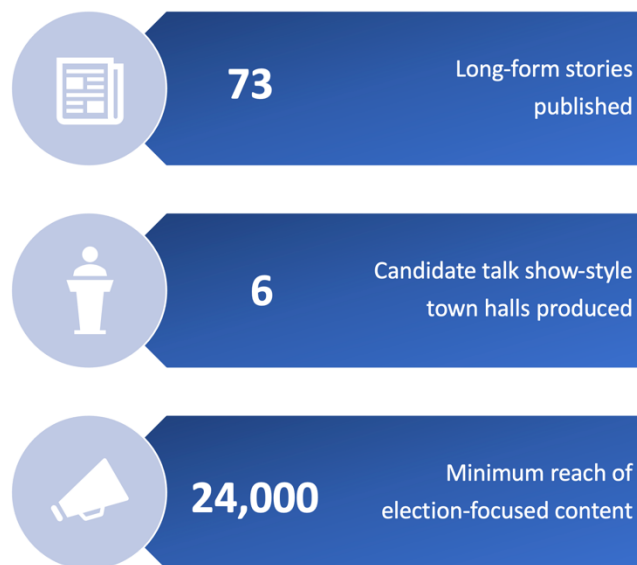
Support was provided over the course of seven months between July 2020 and January 2021.

In this summary brief, we share learnings and lessons from key informant interviews and document reviews for these activities.

Outputs and Outcomes. The FRF activities in Georgia were designed to produce several outputs including long-form stories on candidates and elections issues of concern to minority language communities and talk shows with political candidates.

Based on interviews with key informants who were involved in the program as well as a review of documentation from the FRF activities, there is significant evidence that the activities in Georgia led to several key outputs, as highlighted in Figure 1 (FRF outputs).

Figure 1. Georgia FRF Outputs



Note: Minimum reach is the highest number of views/downloads for one product or story. As such, these are likely to be significant underestimates for actual reach.

Evidence from key informant interviews as well as documentation from partners suggest that the FRF activities contributed to several key outcomes:

- **Strengthened engagement between media and communities.** Several informants experienced and/or observed a mindset shift for media outlets in which they recognized the importance of reaching out and including the perspective of communities in their reporting. In tandem, media partners also experienced more proactive engagement from communities.

"Now people are writing to us [media outlet] and calling us all the time with their issues. It was not like this before. So, our engagement with the community and our position in the region has been strengthened."

- Key Informant Interview (April 2021)

- **Increased engagement and interaction between communities and politicians.** For minority language communities, engagement with political candidates and even reporting in local languages has been limited in Georgia. The activities undertaken as part of this FRF led to a marked increase in the ability of citizens to access information on candidate views and experience. Further, the FRF-supported talk shows provided opportunities for community members to speak directly with candidates and ask politicians about the highest priority issues in their communities. Informant highlighted that both community members and politicians recognized this change and even became more engaged in opportunities to interact over the course of the FRF timeline.
- **Improved capacity and quality of content of media outlets.** In light of COVID-19 and the need to shift to virtual activities in many cases, the mentoring provided by technical experts helped media outlets strengthen their ability to use social media to deliver content, including many of the town hall events. Informants also expressed that the quality of content improved over the course of the FRF activity timeline, with one supported media outlet even receiving an international award for their reporting on election issues for minority communities.

"In the case of [one media outlet], they found men who were deported and have now come back but are not integrated into society yet. It was their first time that they could go and vote as Georgians but not all of them have trust. So, a person who talks about his experience and his family and how they struggled through years, it is very interesting to me because this man represented many others who want to return to Georgia or those who are here but cannot integrate. In other places where the rights of women are suppressed, we have stories where women talk about how the election influences women. Sometimes we need basic reporting to explain what rights citizens have and how they can avoid intimidation. Sometimes even giving basic information very important."

- Key Informant Interview (March 2021)

"For the first time, we allowed local voters to meet with politicians one-on-one in virtual or offline settings which they had not done. They saw them on screen, but now through us they managed to talk to the guys. And the last sentence was not "and it made a wonderful programming" – they liked the result for people. High ratings were not what they cared about; that they did something for the community, that was what they cared about. They mediated communication and meetings with voters, they liked it very much and liked the role of a facilitator. So, this was the big effect."

- Key Informant Interview (February 2021)

Helping factors include:

- **Local knowledge and experience** – several informants noted the importance of the local knowledge of the technical experts and mentors as well as the demand-driven nature of the support.
- **Flexibility** – to adapt to changing needs, especially related to the pandemic.
- **Media partner incentives** – informants noted that the media partners were enthusiastic to engage with Internews in this activity because they saw the value, from the support from international editors to resources to produce content to the reputational payoff of receiving an award for their journalism.

Hindering factors include:

- **COVID-19** – the pandemic forced many activities to be virtual, requiring time and energy from media to adapt to restrictions. Further, COVID-19 resulted in the de-prioritization of election issues in some communities.
- **Initial resistance from politicians and communities** – while both candidates and community members ultimately supported and engaged with the FRF activities, informants noted some initial resistance to engage with media outlets due to concerns about airing dirty laundry (for communities) and how they would be covered (politicians).

For more information about this FRF, please contact: info@insporesconsortium.org.

