

Media Environment 2023:

Challenges during Political Polarization
and Crisis in Georgia

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe and assess the media environment in Georgia in 2023 and to identify the threats and support mechanisms that affect the media viability in Georgia.

The study highlights the impact of political polarization on the media, journalistic activities, product quality and media credibility amid global and local challenges. It analyzes how the media manages to maintain institutional viability (e.g. financial sustainability, content production, relationships with sources and access to information) in the context of political polarization. In doing so, it assesses the obstacles and support mechanisms in the media on the part of various actors (ruling and other political parties, the civil society sector and media consumers, the business sector, international organizations and donors).

As in previous years, the study provides an evaluation of solidarity journalism as a support mechanism through the lens of situations observed in 2023: 1. Solidarity towards the media; 2. Mutual solidarity between media outlets; 3. Solidarity from the media towards various vulnerable groups.

The study highlights how the media operates under political polarization and how it copes with the challenges of Russian disinformation. Additionally, another facet of the research involves analyzing the role and transformation process of the media environment within the context of Georgia's European integration.

Key developments that have influenced the media agenda and environment are highlighted at the beginning of the study.

Milestones 2023

February 6 - The Speaker of the Parliament issued an [order](#) (1/31/23; 06-02-2023) on the new rules of conduct for journalists in the legislature.

February 14 - People's Power, a political group that is part of the ruling team, announced initiating the bill "On Transparency of Foreign Influence."

February 20 - Media organizations launched a protest against the bill. Soon after, 260 civil society organizations issued a joint statement calling the bill a "Russian law."

March 7-10 - The bill "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" was passed in the first reading on March 7. Amid mass protests, the ruling majority was forced to vote down the bill on March 10.

June 19 - The Supreme Court upheld the prison sentence of Nika Gvaramia, co-founder and general director of Mtavari Arkhi TV.

June 22 - Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili signed the act of pardoning Nika Gvaramia.

October 18 - The ruling Georgian Dream party [registered](#) amendments to the Law on Broadcasting related to the regulation of hate speech.

October 19 - The Georgian Parliament fast-tracked amendments to the Law on Broadcasting in the third reading, moving hate speech and obscenity from the realm of self-regulation to that of regulation. The amendments further expand the powers of the Georgian National Communications Commission.

November 8 - The European Commission recommended that Georgia be granted EU candidate status.

December 14 - The European Council decided to grant Georgia candidate status.



1. Research Methodology and Procedures

The present study analyzes the challenges and support mechanisms of the media environment of 2023 from the perspective of representatives of various media outlets. Among them are journalists from different “poles/sides”, united by common concerns and different challenges caused by polarization.

A qualitative research approach – focus group discussions and in-depth interviews – was chosen as the research methodology. A discussion guideline with primary semi-structured questions was used as the qualitative research instrument. Secondary questions were identified during the discussion and interviews. The media environment was examined, like in the previous years’ research (2021 and 2022), based on the evaluations of respondents and the reality seen by them.

October and November 2023 were defined as the data collection period. Six of the media outlets involved in the study are major national broadcasters, two are investigative studios, two are radio stations (including one international bureau), and eight are online and/or regional media outlets. The selection takes into account that according to the 2022 Caucasus Barometer [survey](#) (NDI, February, 2022), 49% of respondents in Georgia cite television as the main source of information and news. The selected media outlets have different audiences, credibility, and influence. Among them are the most influential media outlets (TV channels: Imedi, Mtavari Arkhi, Rustavi 2, TV Pirveli, Formula, Georgian Public Broadcaster, etc.) according to the public opinion poll conducted by [NDI](#) in March 2023 and [IRI](#) in the fall (NDI, CRRC Georgia; March, 2023).

As part of the research, two “offline” focus groups (number of participants: 13) and one online focus group (number of participants: 5) were conducted. Among the participants were journalists/reporters, media managers, producers, media founders, editors, and talk show hosts. In parallel with the focus groups, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of two media outlets (upon their request). In total, 20 representatives of 18 media outlets participated in the research, whose identities are confidential (see the list of media outlets in the Appendix).



2. Key Findings

- ▶ As in previous years, political polarization remains one of the main challenges for the Georgian media environment. The existence of real polarization in Georgia does not exclude the existence of false/illusory polarization. The study revealed that the manifestation of both forms of polarization is harmful for the media environment. In 2023, the negative impact of the so-called false polarization on the media environment has increased even more. A chain of these negative effects was highlighted, in which: polarization affects journalistic activities and creates artificial barriers, removes issues/discourse important for the public from the media agenda and subsequently damages the quality of a media product. This, in turn, affects public trust and ultimately solidarity with the media.
- ▶ As a result of false and illusory polarization, issues of public concern are artificially removed from the media agenda. They are replaced by less critical topics for society: a discussion based on meaningless, hostile rhetoric and illusory issues. Journalists agree that “polarization has created a gap between the media and the public,” presenting a significant challenge for media representatives on both sides, be it pro-government or pro-opposition.
- ▶ Polarization negatively impacts the quality of media content and introduces artificial barriers into the daily activities of journalists. This includes interactions with sources, information gathering, content creation, and even safety considerations. Additionally, polarization influences the behavior of journalistic sources, often leading to self-censorship. Consequently, the same individuals may engage with the media differently depending on the editorial stance of the specific channel, reflecting the extent of polarization.
- ▶ Political polarization poisons the viability of media organizations (daily professional routine), reduces solidarity between media organizations and public trust in journalism as a whole. As a result, society displays reduced solidarity with the media, with the exception of brief moments of unity that occurred during discussions of the draft law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence,” though even during these instances, solidarity remained fragmented.
- ▶ As a result of polarization, psychological harassment of media professionals affects not only their journalistic activities, but also their personal lives and safety (this is especially acute in relation to female journalists).
- ▶ The monotony and repetitiveness of sources has a negative impact on the quality of media content. In the polarized media, the space for unbiased and impartial discourse has further narrowed, and polarization has also affected the niche once dominated by expert opinions.
- ▶ Not only does the media cover and reflect political polarization, but it has also become one of the primary targets and sources through which “the image of the enemy” is constructed. In recent years, collegiality has disappeared, and media outlets on one “side” are being used to fight with those on the other “side.”

- ▶ The negative impact of polarization on the media are progressively intensifying each year and are evident in both national and regional media outlets. Anticipations of negative developments in the media landscape, such as increased pressure on the media, heightened aggression, harassment, discrediting, and even physical retaliation, are particularly pronounced, especially in the context of the upcoming 2024 elections.
- ▶ In 2023, the aggression against journalism as a profession has reached a critical point. According to media representatives, aggression comes from a highly polarized society, the ruling team and the opposition. All the journalists participating in the study constantly mention the emotion of fear, which comes from their physical and psychological vulnerability. The atmosphere of increased fear in the media reminds journalists of the Russian, Soviet system.
- ▶ The situation regarding the safety and vulnerability of journalists has worsened. As in previous years, journalists' sense of insecurity is exacerbated by the syndrome of impunity, which legitimizes various forms of violence against them.
- ▶ Media representatives say that trust in the media has declined due to the effects of polarization. In the context of the forthcoming elections, this poses a challenge: if voters lack trust in the media (as well as other institutions), it limits their access to well-informed choices. This, in turn, leaves more room for the spread of populist discourse and manipulation.
- ▶ The Georgian media is not a strong institutional actor that can change the degree of political polarization. The main lever for reducing polarization is in the hands of the ruling party - Georgian Dream and then other political parties. Ultimately, only the coordinated action of various actors can reduce polarization.
- ▶ The ruling party systematically referred to the instrumentalization of the law and the tightening of regulations in an attempt to hinder and restrict journalistic activities. Journalists believe that the ruling party will implement these regulations during the elections, when the public is most in need of objective and diverse information to make well-informed choices.
- ▶ There may be more cases of SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) in Georgia than the official statistics show. The media representatives involved in the study are not familiar with the SLAPP mechanism, but they recall specific cases that fall into this category of lawsuits. They believe that it is important for media outlets and civil society organizations to show solidarity and express coordinated protest in case of the establishment of this faulty practice and harassment of the media.
- ▶ Journalists are not adequately prepared for the coverage of the first electronic election process in 2024, and they consider professional training in this area important.
- ▶ The targeted use of trolls and bots to spread Russian disinformation has intensified. The activity of partisan trolls and bots on social media and media websites has become damaging and this is because the election year is approaching, and journalists believe that this year will be particularly dangerous for them.

- ▶ Russian soft power has intensified in the regions, where influential people living in the regions appear to be spreading disinformation to which the population is vulnerable.
- ▶ Political polarization is one of the main reasons for the financial crisis of independent media. Limited funding and/or partisan taste/bias of media owners affects the quality of a media product. Changing the media funding model is one of the solutions that will allow independent media to set the agenda.
- ▶ If media owners do not have party affiliations, the media will become more independent. In a polarized media environment, media outlets funded by international donors often stand out as beacons of independence. Their freedom is safeguarded by their unique funding model, but precisely due to the unsustainable funding, this model contains risk factors.
- ▶ There is a lack of solidarity and trust in the media on the part of the public, which is related to the fact that the media has distanced itself from the people and their problems. The media is no longer seen as a bridge for addressing societal issues. A prerequisite for the restoration of collegiality and solidarity among media organizations may be an ethical approach that unites the media in their daily activities.

Threats to the media environment affect both media critical of the ruling party and media loyal to it. Media representatives from both “sides” involved in the research identified threats to the media environment. The data in Table N1 show that when identifying threats, the media on both sides almost unanimously points to all existing or potential threats, which means that the media environment is damaged for both media critical of the ruling party and media loyal to the ruling party. Both sides agree that there is self-censorship in newsrooms and among sources due to political polarization. Both sides believe that media legislation has deteriorated, aggression against journalists has increased, physical and psychological safety of journalists and media workers, in general, is at risk, journalists are stigmatized and labeled as supporters of this or that party, the influence of trolls and bots on journalistic activities has increased, etc.

The table below shows that only the **financial stability of the media and access to public information** are not problematic for media outlets loyal to the government, once again highlighting the negative impact of polarization and systemic threats to the free flow of information.

Table N1: Identifying threats in the media environment

Media environment threats	Media loyal to the government	Media critical of the government
Limited access to public information	—	✓
Self-censorship in sources due to polarization	✓	✓
Self-censorship in newsrooms	✓	✓
Media legislation has deteriorated	✓	✓
Physical safety of media professionals at risk	✓	✓
Psychological safety of media professionals at risk	✓	✓
Lack of financial viability and stability	—	✓
Lack of public solidarity and confidence	✓	✓
Lack of solidarity between media organizations	✓	✓
Crimes against journalists are not investigated and perpetrators go unpunished	✓	✓
Increased aggression against journalists compared to previous years	✓	✓
Stigmatization of journalists (as supporters of one party or another) is a problem	✓	✓
Disinformation and troll/bot activities affecting journalistic activities	✓	✓
Threats will increase during the election year	✓	✓

Throughout the research, when addressing the threats in the media environment, the predominant emotion encountered was fear. This fear serves as the foundation for disinformation, self-censorship, and the limitation of freedom of expression. Eliminating this fear-based barrier is imperative for the development of society and the consolidation of democracy.

3. Literature Review

A number of factors have influenced the deterioration of the media environment in recent years. According to the Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE), [published](#) by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX, 2023), the assessment of Georgia's information environment has deteriorated by six points since 2020 (from 19 to 13). According to Freedom House's 2023 [report](#) (Freedom House, 2023), the media environment is pluralistic but highly partisan. In the context of assessing the electoral environment, it points to highly polarized and nonanalytic media coverage. On the global freedom scale, Georgia scores 58 out of 100, which places the country among the "partly free" nations.

Monitoring global trends is crucial. The Media Freedom Cohort [report](#) prepared with the contribution of the international organization Media Freedom Coalition¹ (as part of the 2023 [Summit](#) for Democracy) notes that independent media has been in decline for more than a decade. A collapse of the traditional journalistic business model, growing political polarization, democratic backsliding, and the added burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to a potential "media extinction event." The report also notes that "greater citizen engagement, stronger accountability, lower corruption, and better policies are all attributable to the presence of professional news media" (The Media Freedom Cohort; pp.10-11).

In 2023, one of the most frequently mentioned words in the statements of political elites in the media about Georgia was "polarization". According to the Dictionary-Reference of Social and Political Terms (2004), polarization is the increase of differences in the positions of various public and political groups, opposition (polarity). Polarization can be manifested as a form of opposition between different classes, strata, social groups, parties, etc.

According to McCoy (2019), polarization is a broad concept that includes political, social and cultural dimensions. In academic literature, more attention is paid to the phenomenon of political polarization, when society and leaders become increasingly divided from each other (p. 8). In defining polarization, McCoy et al (2018) state that it is a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'Us' versus 'Them'." It is the impact of political polarization on the media environment that is of particular interest for our research.

Desk research and empirical observations show that a polarized society and media are part of the political process in many democracies, although their effects may vary in different settings. According to Wagner (2021), the effect of polarization is not always negative. For example, it can determine political engagement and electoral choice. However, it cannot be explicitly said that it is the media that has a negative or positive effect on polarization. There are several variables to consider that affect the media agenda, the degree of freedom

¹ In 2023, Media Voice, which is the only member organization of the [Consultative Network](#) of the Media Freedom Coalition from the South Caucasus, participated in the preparation of the Media Freedom Cohort reports. In total, the governments of 28 countries and 117 civil society organizations, philanthropic associations and business companies participated in the preparation of the report.

and the characteristics of the work. If these variables (political engagement, diversity of information, socio-economic status, pluralism and competitiveness, education and culture) are evaluated separately, the indicator may not be alarming, but in the political context and interdependence, the effect may be the same as in authoritarian countries.

Studies confirm that it is possible for the media to retain the characteristics of a free and democratic institution even when it has been captured by the state. According to Gitmez and Molavi (2022), not all autocracies are alike... and there is a wide variation in media freedom across informational autocracies. As Egorov and Sonin (2022) point out, “media freedom varies a lot across nondemocratic regimes, from levels comparable to mature democracies to that of totalitarian regimes” (Whitten-Woodring, Van Belle, 2017).

In a democracy, the media is directly influenced by the public agenda, which consists of the issues that concern the people. To a certain extent, it is these very issues that the democratic media reflects and presents to society as part of its agenda. The public agenda (in its importance and order) may leave some traces on the media’s bias: as a result, the media covers what concerns the public. The key questions in this context are: to what extent does the polarized media reflect the issues of public concern? How much space is left for coverage of real problems in times of polarization? How natural or artificial is the polarization promoted by the media?

Polarization and the hostile environment can lead to the exclusion of important public concerns from the media agenda, replaced instead by depictions of the “enemy” and false or illusory issues. Consequently, not only do people’s problems fail to make it onto the political agenda, but they are also left unaddressed by the media. This issue affects the entire agenda-building cycle and involves all the actors participating in it, including political elites, society, and the media.

Dozens of studies in academic circles discuss how the media influences polarization, how it participates in the formation of public opinion. In the Georgian media environment, the issue is raised in a different light. Here it is relevant to discuss how political polarization affects the media environment and how it damages it. In this process, the Georgian media is not a strong institutional actor that can change the degree of political polarization. The participants of the discussion repeatedly note that the reason for the weakening of the media and the “destruction of journalism” is that the media has distanced itself from the people, does not reflect the public agenda, and accordingly, does not create it.

Like Wagner (2021) and Wilson et al. (2020) point out, that political polarization is not in itself a negative phenomenon, and that sharp disagreements can be important in a system that aims to represent the diverse interests of voters. In discussing political polarization, Wilson et al. (2020) distinguish between ideological, affective and false polarization. In discussing real and illusory polarization, they identify the main contributors: political elites, partisan media, and social media. The researchers note that false polarization can also be facilitated by the media, creating an environment in which groups believe they are more divided than they actually are. As a result, divided groups may not even see obvious common interests.

What are the consequences of real and illusory polarization? Wilson et al. (2020) support McCoy et al.'s (2018) assessment that partisan differences are an integral part of the political process. However, polarization and outright hostility prevent problems from being diagnosed, force people to fight imaginary enemies and stop thinking about important reforms.

Polarization causes politicians and the media to distance themselves from the people and to stop talking about the issues and reforms of public concern. This, in turn, negatively impacts trust in the media. The 2023 public opinion [survey](#) (NDI; CRRC Georgia; May, 2023) confirmed the low trust in the media, revealing that 51% of respondents do not trust any channel to get reliable information about current and political news. In our research, we also explore the factors contributing to the decline in trust in the media.

The previous studies of Media Voice (2021 and 2022) focused mainly on the influence of polarization on the Georgian media. In this regard, the existing polarization between media organizations was revealed (Gersamia, Toradze, 2022). Also, the negative impact of political polarization was quite obvious, which led to stigmatization of journalists and media outlets (labeling them as supporters of this or that party), discrediting and hindering journalistic activities. In the 2022 assessment of the media environment, it is noted that “polarization in the media remains a challenge, an atmosphere of fear that increases self-censorship, and damages the credibility and viability of the media” (Gersamia, Toradze, 2022, p. 61). As a result, the negative effects of polarization and aggressive attitudes towards journalists have spread to both sides of the polarization. This alarming trend threatens the journalistic profession and its credibility in society. The existence of real polarization in Georgia does not exclude the existence of a space for false/illusory polarization. For us, the manifestation of polarization in both forms is interesting and an object of observation.

When it comes to the impact on society, the line between traditional and social media is blurred. Campaigns to discredit and stigmatize journalists continued online and offline in 2023. However, the massive involvement of users (including trolls and bots) in negative social media campaigns was particularly striking. Discourses created on social media, discrediting campaigns, can influence public opinion. The echo chambers effect can also exacerbate political polarization. This is confirmed by research conducted in recent years. The studies by Kubin & Sikorski (2021) emphasize the potential of social media to contribute to increased polarization by creating ideologically homogeneous environments and limiting exposure to opposing views. This aligns with the study by Bail et al. (2018), which emphasizes the role of social media in exacerbating political polarization by creating echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse information. Additionally, the study by Enjolras & Salway (2022) posits a causal relationship between homophilic tendencies, echo chamber formation, and increased polarization, further supporting the findings.

Researchers pay particular attention to the influence of social media in the process of polarization. Studies (Sharevski et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2023) confirm that social media bubbles are a powerful platform for spreading disinformation, discrediting campaigns and rumors. Research by Choi et al. (2020) confirms that members of echo chambers actively participate in spreading rumors in the early stages. Silen et al. (2019) note that social media has changed the ways of mass reporting, perception and processing of reality,

and engagement in public debate. Their research confirms that users are more likely to select and spread their preferred narrative and ignore information that is different. This exacerbates polarization within certain groups. In Georgia, where social networks are widely popular ([NDI, February 2022](#)), it is noteworthy that 43% of respondents identify the internet and social media as a source of information, ranking second after television. This phenomenon warrants thorough examination and study. While our current research briefly touches on this issue, an in-depth study of the impact of social networks on polarization requires in-depth research in the future. It is also noteworthy that the popularity of television is decreasing over the years, and the share of the Internet and social networks as a source of information is increasing (according to the [data](#) of NDI and Caucasus Barometer, in 2018, 72% of respondents named television as the primary source of information, and in 2022, the figure decreased to 49%).

Campaigns to discredit journalists and media in traditional and social media are also relevant in Georgia and affect public trust in the media. International organizations have paid attention to the impact of campaigns in social networks on the credibility of journalism. In this regard, it is alarming that “powerful companies, including social media platforms, have not always taken adequate steps to promote information integrity, which has contributed to a decline of public trust in journalism” (MFC [statement](#), 2023).

In addition, female journalists have been disproportionately and specifically threatened in recent years. The Media Development Foundation’s [guide](#) (Chakhunashvili, 2023) on gendered disinformation shows that in Georgia “female journalists, activists and politicians have to endure offensive attitudes and deal with online attacks.” The study refers to the [online edition](#) of the international organization “Article 19”, which provides an explanation of what spectrum of online attacks includes gender-based harassment of female journalists, the purpose of which is to intimidate, silence and stigmatize women journalists.

Threats to the media environment are particularly acute during elections and crises. In 2024, 81 countries will hold elections, and during 2023 the Media Freedom Coalition [focused](#) (MFC; November, 2023) on the fundamental importance of independent journalism and media to electoral processes: “The integrity of democratic processes relies upon the free flow of information and ideas, as guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Beyond political parties and candidates, the media, often supported by interpreters, are one of the most important sources of election-related information for the public and a key enabler of transparent, free and fair electoral procedures.” The coalition notes in its statement that violence and crimes against journalists are a major concern during elections. From January 2019 to June 2022, [UNESCO registered](#) physical attacks on journalists during elections (UNESCO, 2023). At least, 759 journalists and media professionals were attacked during 89 elections in 70 countries, and 42% of the attacks were carried out by law enforcement agencies. UNESCO [calls](#) 2024 a “super-election year” (UNESCO, November, 2023) and focuses on the need to protect journalists in this context. As Georgia’s elections approach, the expectation of fear and threats among journalists increases. We will address this issue in our research.

In an election year, it is especially important to monitor attacks on journalists in the online space and to strengthen the resilience of media organizations. The Media Freedom Coalition talks about the threats facing journalists in the context of the global election

year (2024): “While digital technologies can broaden and deepen citizen engagement in electoral processes, online violence, hate speech and disinformation is increasingly targeted at journalists and media workers, with a disproportionately severe impact on women journalists.”

The threats in the Georgian media environment are part of a global picture, where journalists face systematic harassment, particularly from the ruling political party. In its [statement](#) (MFC; September 2023) on transnational repression of journalists and media workers, the Media Freedom Coalition notes that:

“Journalists and media workers play an indispensable role in fostering the free flow of information in open and informed societies, hold governments to account and expose malpractices. Worryingly, they are increasingly targeted by governments who wish to stifle critical voices and the reporting of facts, and silence freedom of expression even beyond their borders. Journalists are deterred from reporting inconvenient truths even if they are not taking a specific stance. This trend poses a significant threat not only to journalists, media workers and their families, but also to the fundamental principles of democracy, good governance and human rights.”

Unfortunately, the hallmarks of transnational repression tactics are also familiar to the Georgian media environment. These include killings of media workers, arrests, defamation, physical and digital harassment, threats, misuse of surveillance technologies (including spyware practices - software intrusion and data collection and dissemination for commercial purposes), online harassment, smear campaigns and dissemination of disinformation. Our research (Media Voice, [2021](#), [2022](#)) confirms that established practices reinforce an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship.

Financial stability and ownership independence are important for media viability. On a global scale, the challenges in the business environment have an impact on the decline of advertising revenues (MFC, [Statement](#), May 2023). The situation in Georgia is alarming in this regard. According to Transparency International Georgia’s annual [report](#) on the TV advertising market (Gersamia, Vakh tangashvili, 2022), last year “financial viability came under an additional threat due to limited time frames, the media met the deteriorated legislation unprepared and pressure on the media mounted. The Georgian media is finding it difficult to evolve as a successful/profitable business, the reason for which may be the increased self-censorship in the business environment.” According to the report published in 2023, “...the already scarce advertising revenues of broadcasters decreased by GEL 10 million in 2022 and amounted to GEL 73.6 million. The decrease in advertising revenues was largely caused by the ‘chilling effect’ of the law. After the amendments to the Law on Broadcasting came into force, the advertising revenues of broadcasters from gambling in 2022 decreased almost four times”. It should also be noted that pro-government televisions received twice as much advertising revenue as critical media. Last year, the largest share of advertising revenues (over GEL 27 million) was traditionally received by Imedi Holding. The advertising revenues of pro-government TV channel POSTV increased to GEL 4.8 million compared to the previous year. 52.8% of the revenues of the anti-Western Obieqtivi TV came from commercial advertising (Transparency International – Georgia, 2023).

In a global context, global advocacy for targeted sanctions becomes important to build resilience and protect journalists. The Media Freedom Coalition's High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom (MFC; February 2020) [explains](#) that targeted sanctions are an international tool that can be used to respond to human rights violations by freezing individuals' assets and banning their entry into certain countries. They can be imposed unilaterally by governments, or by a small group of governments acting together. And they target individuals or corporate entities (as well as those directly or indirectly involved, such as collaborators and 'middlemen') rather than entire states. The international community believes that targeted sanctions (especially financial sanctions) are one, and in some cases the only, way to strengthen international norms. According to the European Parliament's Targeted Sanctions [Report](#) (2018), targeted sanctions have a stigmatizing effect and, as Robertson and Ramer (2018) explain, are a tool for "naming, blaming and shaming" perpetrators (p.10).

It is noteworthy that the practice of demanding targeted sanctions for crimes committed against journalists and their harassment has not been established in Georgia. Among them, in the case of July 5, 2021, the demand to sanction certain individuals, officials, and judges (in relation to the countries that have established this practice) was not voiced from open platforms. This line is not emphasized in the public statements made after the illegal arrest of Nika Gvaramia, the general director of the Mtavari Arkhi TV channel, although this request might have been heard in meetings or appeals behind closed doors. The high-profile case of [Afgan Mukhtarli](#) in Georgia (OC Media, October 2022), the July 5 tragedy and the arrest of Nika Gvaramia may be the cases that meet the relevant criteria for the imposition of targeted sanctions. Similar practices are discussed in the above-mentioned [report](#) of the MFC's High Level Panel of Legal Experts (MFC, February 2020) and require detailed study in the context of Georgia. Referring to the New York Times publication, high-level law experts identify particularly relevant threats and consider them as a prerequisite for targeted sanctions against this or that perpetrator (individual or company). The list of these threats is quite extensive and their identification is also possible in the Georgian media space. They are: murder, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, abduction and ill-treatment, unlawful arrest, unfair trial and arbitrary detention, other forms of persecution, including: defamation lawsuits, systemic media restrictions through excessive prosecution, unfounded lawsuits or financial investigations, threats and online harassment, surveillance and doxing, including restrictions on licensing, accreditation, and funding, and shutting down entire media outlets and internet communications. It is also alarming that journalists are being silenced through false charges, unfair trials and lengthy prison sentences (CPJ, 2019). In this regard, the Human Rights Committee's [resolution](#) on the safety of journalists (October 6, 2020, 45/18) remains noteworthy and relevant. The context of human rights protection is the foundation that not only protects journalists and their sources, but also largely determines the creation and strengthening of the environment necessary to produce quality media products.

Aggressive rhetoric against civil society activists, organizations and journalists is a challenge in Georgia. Mary Lawlor, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, in her monitoring report (Publika, November 2023) [spoke](#) about the activities of human rights defenders, journalistic activities and problems in Georgia. It is noteworthy that she referred to journalists and media professionals who cover human rights issues as human rights defenders.

The report notes that the problem of impunity for attacks on journalists is acute; the tendency of the ruling team to create artificial obstacles to the work of the media can be observed; the introduction of new rules of conduct for journalists in parliament is a cause for concern. The report notes that journalists are “at high risk and that the state is not taking sufficient measures to ensure that they can carry out their work free from fear of retaliation... In some ways, the authorities also appear to be obstructing the work of journalists, as signaled by reports of a very low rate of responses to requests for information, as well as a concerning code of conduct recently introduced by the Parliament, which appears to open a path to potentially arbitrary sanctions for journalists deemed troublesome by parliamentarians.”

In 2023, a disturbing trend was observed when the ruling party (“Georgian Dream”) representatives publicly expressed its dissatisfaction with international organizations and donors, asking donors to respond to the content and editorial policy of this or that media outlet (see statements regarding [Indigo](#) magazine (civil.ge, October 2023) and [OC Media](#) (Media Checker, September 2023), which the ruling party did not like.

In this study, we will try to comprehensively discuss these and other challenges seen by media professionals and present the support mechanisms that will be resourceful for strengthening the media environment in Georgia in 2024.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. How does polarization affect the media environment in Georgia?

As in previous years, one of the main challenges of the Georgian media environment is political polarization, which is characterized by a chain reaction and spread to the media (including content and credibility) and public attitudes. Moreover, the polarized media syndrome is not directly caused by the media, but by highly polarized political factors. Political polarization has a negative impact on the media environment, weakens the viability of media organizations, reduces solidarity and public trust in journalism as a profession.

Polarization negatively impacts the quality of media content and introduces artificial barriers into the daily activities of journalists. This includes interactions with sources, information gathering, content creation, safety considerations, etc. However, it would be more correct to say that all links in the chain reaction of polarization - political environment, media, society - play their role. This chain reaction ultimately has a negative impact on both pro-opposition and pro-government media outlets, and discredits the profession of journalism and its role.

Discussions in focus groups revealed several factors that prove that political polarization is damaging the media environment and turning the media into a tool of partisan propaganda.

According to the respondents:

- ▶ The political polarization in the country leads to the division of media owners and, consequently, media outlets based on loyalty to a particular political party.
- ▶ Media owners are affiliated with political parties, which negatively affects media independence. Media owners interfere in the editorial policy of their own media outlets, further polarizing the media environment, restricting journalists and, in many cases, causing bias among reporters. The Transparency International - Georgia [study](#) (Tsetskhladze, Gogiashvili, 2019) on media owners of large broadcasting companies notes that some of these media owners use the media for their personal and business purposes. The negative influence of the owners is also confirmed by our research, in which the journalist of Imedi TV noted that the negative background is not created by the journalists, but by the “rules of the game” set by the owners.
- ▶ Due to incompatibility with the editorial policy, TV journalists, the so-called “famous faces”, move to the media with different editorial policy, which reduces the level of public trust.
- ▶ There is a particular tendency among government public relations services not to connect media journalists who are critical of the ruling party with their leaders, or to require a written appeal and “forwarding questions”, which affects the quality of a media product.

- ▶ Unbiased expert opinions have disappeared from the Georgian media space. One gets the impression that media outlets have their own “experts” who speak not about objective reality and forecasts, but about the correctness of the decisions made by a particular political party. The appearance of this or that expert in the media results in his/her labeling as a supporter of this or that party.
- ▶ The actors creating political polarization are acting in a systematic and coordinated manner with the ruling party. Part of this system is the so-called Government StratCom, government public relations services, pro-government TV channels, the Communications Commission, senior officials of the parliamentary majority (media professionals involved in the research give specific names). The interviewees highlight that the strategy to discredit the media mirrors the Russian model, and the current system exhibits strong similarities with the Russian approach.
- ▶ The respondents note with regret that the negative influence of polarization on the media is increasing year by year and that the ruling party and its affiliated NGOs (the so-called GoNGOs) play the main role in this process. Accordingly, the legal framework is being adjusted in a systematic and coordinated manner, the atmosphere of fear is being strengthened and, as a result, critical journalists and the profession of journalism in general are being discredited.

The connection of the system of struggle against the media with the Russian model is not unfounded. Georgian media researchers and experts often point not only to the intensification of Russian propaganda, but also the adoption of methods employed by Russian media and government in suppressing freedom of expression. These methods include demonizing specific groups, labeling them as supporters of particular parties, or attributing partisan motives behind critical questions.

The fact that the government distances itself from critical media and appears more in the media loyal to it contributes to the polarization and stigmatization of the media. There is an artificial separation: on one side there are media outlets (and content) loyal to the opposition, and on the other side there are media outlets loyal to the government (and radically different content). This separation has a negative impact on the coverage of objective reality and the creation of a quality media product. As a result, “the ruling team and the media also contribute to polarization...” (the respondent from Mtavari Arkhi TV).

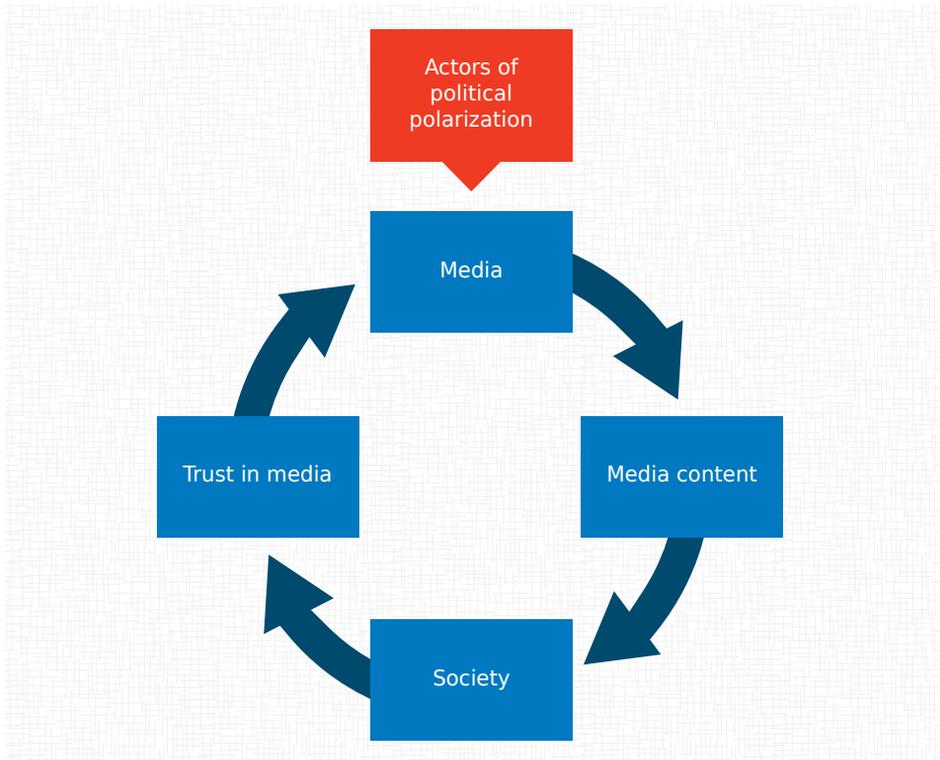
Almost all participants in the focus groups associate the vicious process of polarization with the ruling party, media owners or media financing practices. Unfortunately, the funding model and practices clearly determine the degree of critical nature of the media in the process of reporting. “Fear and self-censorship” dictated by owners and/or political parties filters information and aggravates the quality of a media product.

Media professionals on both sides of the polarization express concerns about the potential impact of political preferences and donations on the quality and editorial policies of news outlets. Participants in the discussion recognize the unfortunate reality that sources of funding, including state support (as seen with the Georgian Public Broadcaster) and financial backing from entities closely affiliated with the ruling party (such as the business

sector and individual donations), can lead to a media organization adopting a loyal stance and being beholden to its “donor,” which, in this context, would be the ruling team (as mentioned by the respondent from Netgazeti). Similar concerns were raised regarding media outlets funded by parties associated with the opposition.

The more polarized the political environment, the more polarized the media landscape and society itself. The result is the so-called “vicious circle” in which all links are interdependent in a chain reaction (see chart N1).

Chart N1: Cycle of negative influence of polarization on the media



If media donors/owners do not have party affiliation - media will become more independent. There are such media outlets in Georgia. They are not influenced by party-affiliated owners and businesses and maintain their credibility; however, their audience is very small compared to television. In contrast to large television stations, there are fewer attempts to capture small media outlets. Respondents involved in the research identify such independent media as a bright spot in the polarized media environment. These are the media outlets that manage to operate with international donor funding. Their freedom is safeguarded by their unique funding model, but precisely due to the unsustainable

funding, this model contains risk factors. Respondents identified greater international donor involvement as a prerequisite for mitigating polarization and as a model for media financing. It is also a challenge that the creation of a quality media product requires professional human resources, a high-tech material-technical base and the maximum geographical coverage, which requires significant financial mobilization.

The division of media outlets by the ruling party over coverage of the war in Ukraine was cited as another reason for polarization. All media outlets that did not support the ruling party's position on the Russia-Ukraine war "turned" into opposition media, which further increased the degree of polarization.

According to the Formula TV journalist, while the polarized environment is detrimental to all parties involved, including the ruling team, the civil society sector, the media, and the people, it is unfortunate that both the opposition and the ruling team derive some benefits from polarization. It could be argued that the political elite is, in fact, "capitalizing on polarization."

Lack of coordination between media outlets and antagonistic attitude towards each other were cited by focus group participants as one of the main reasons for polarization. "When there is coordination between media outlets, there is less polarization," notes a representative of the Formula TV company. The March 2023 protests were cited as an example of this, when the ruling party-sponsored "Transparency of Foreign Influence" bill (so-called "Russian law") was assessed as an attack on the media. The unprecedented mobilization around this issue and the corresponding result (the withdrawal of the bill following protests) were linked to the coordination between media outlets.

Polarization also affects journalistic sources and manifests itself in self-censorship. For example, the same respondents talk to the media on different sides of the polarization in different ways. The respondent from Formula TV recalls a case in which respondents in a "Vox Populi"² on unemployment told a journalist from Imedi TV that they were very satisfied with their salaries, while the same respondents either did not comment on the issue with a journalist from Formula TV or expressed a neutral position.

It is important for the media viability to produce daily content that contains valuable information and is balanced. This in turn means getting comments from people with different points of view and making them available to the public. Polarization also creates artificial barriers for journalists in this daily routine. A representative of Radio Liberty talks about such negative consequences caused by polarization, noting that preparing objective material is a problem for more and more journalists in an environment aggravated by polarization. The problem is that the government agencies cooperate more with the media loyal to the government and give them comments without any problems, while they refuse to do the same with the critical media. The reason for this refusal is explained as follows: "You are liars, you are motivated by certain political interests, and therefore we do not want to talk to you." As a result, it is impossible to create a quality journalistic

² Vox populi (Lat.) - means "voice of the people." In journalism, the term refers to short interviews with members of the public.

product and the material is one-sided: only the voice of the opposition is heard in the critical (so-called pro-oppositional) media, and the voice of the ruling party - in the so-called pro-government media.

Journalists note that they want to provide the public with objective information that shows the positions of all sides. However, if they do not get all the public information they are entitled to by law, a TV story turns out to be one-sided and the media is seen as biased and polarized. The practice of requesting and accessing public information has become even more complicated. If in previous years journalists' requests for information/comments were followed by some responses, now "journalists' requests are neglected, which further exacerbates the effect of polarization." All of this, in turn, affects the quality of reporting, because reporting insufficient, unbalanced information also means bias (a respondent from iFact: "We try to present all sides, but it is difficult when you do not get comments and information, and that is why the material turns out to be one-sided").

The respondent from Mtavari Arkhi TV focuses on this very issue: "When it comes to balance, where it is necessary to get comments from both sides, the situation becomes complicated. We no longer have the opportunity to talk to the other side [referring to the government and the ruling party] to ensure balance, and just due to these barriers, we cannot provide objective information to our audience..."

The lack of diversity of sources also has a negative impact on the quality of a media product. In this respect, the discourse of unbiased content in the polarized media became even narrower, and polarization touched even the niche where expert opinions dominated. According to the respondents, the effect of polarization has significantly reduced expert opinions in media commentaries and their place has been taken by homogeneous political actors.

Polarization is characterized by the dead-end discourse without results that journalists talk about. According to the journalists, almost none of the sides speaks with the desire to reach a consensus. The respondent from Rustavi 2 TV says: "We just try to prove our truth to each other, without trying to listen to each other and see the "truth" of the other. And the worst thing is that the polarization is getting more and more intense - especially with the upcoming elections."

The negative and even destructive impact of polarization on the regional media should be mentioned separately. Representatives of the regional media note that it is very difficult for them to get information from both sides and to cover developments objectively, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to get government sources to agree to an interview or to obtain any information/commentary from them.

The respondent from "Samkhretis Karibche" says: "During the preparation of a story, we have almost no access to public information from government agencies. This, of course, affects the quality of the prepared journalistic content, because sometimes there are more questions about the published material than there were in the public before its publication, which, in turn, requires additional clarifications from the relevant sources. Barriers created in the process of obtaining clarifications are naturally reflected in our audience's attitude toward us - they have the impression that we are biased. Ultimately, it all affects the level of media credibility..."

Although the journalists involved in the research try to get balanced information on this or that issue from both sides, this is less possible under polarization. The reason for this is that there are preconceived stigmas and narratives according to which independent media outlets that raise critical issues are associated with any party or side. In this case, one of the main functions of the media – voicing people’s interests and problems – is equated with an anti-government positioning due to polarization. Moreover, the population perceives the critical media not as representing people’s interests but as enforcing a particular political order.

The division and stigmatization of the media into “critical” and “non-critical” media is another problematic issue. These terms and labels already reflect the distorted media environment. The media is critical by nature, and a quality media product is formed on the basis of a healthy critical approach (of course, bearing in mind that the goal is not to intentionally harm anyone, but to present an objective reality).

The respondents also talked about another malicious practice that has been observed recently, especially on the part of government agencies – the request for written communication from press centers to provide comments or public information. The problem is that when written information is requested, on the one hand, the deadlines for providing the information are very long, which prevents prompt and comprehensive coverage of a current issue, and on the other hand, written answers are not comprehensive, they are general and, in some cases, require additional explanations. This further complicates the quality and speed of perfect coverage of information. In addition, the answers are often selective and only given on issues that are beneficial to government agencies. It is also noteworthy that during this type of written communication, a journalist is deprived of the opportunity to clarify, specify, or ask additional questions on an interesting issue. Representatives of the regional media say that often the time for providing the requested information is delayed so much that the coverage of the mentioned problem loses its relevance. As a result, the population is irritated with the media for allegedly not being interested in their problems – and in the end, all this is reflected in the loss of trust in the media (the respondent from the Borjomi TV channel).

A representative of the regional newspaper “Chemi Kharagauli” notes that the local government cooperates unilaterally with the media, which is manifested by the fact that in case of a request, media representatives do not remain without comments, and they somehow provide information, but they never inform about when, for example, an extraordinary session of the Sakrebulo (local council) will be held. This deprives the media of the opportunity to report on the changes or decisions for which this or that session was scheduled: “We have the impression that the members of the Sakrebulo and the representatives of the local self-government have no need to bring information to the voters. This logically indicates that they do not feel accountable to the voters...” (the representative of “My Kharagauli”).

Representatives of the regional media speak boldly about the media sponsored by the local government or their favorite media outlets, for which they never spare information. However, these “news stories” are full of “advertising” information about their deeds, not about what needs to be done and what is problematic. According to the journalists, such

an attitude actually cuts off the objective feedback with the local population and their real needs. With this practice, the local government avoids putting the real problems and/or the real needs of the population on the agenda. They have a hostile attitude towards the media, which is financially independent and focuses on critical aspects.

Journalists working in the regions also describe the problems of relationships with sources, which are also related to the local government. According to them, the government is so afraid of talking about real problems that it tries to “intimidate/blackmail” the respondents not to express their dissatisfaction to independent (in the government’s opinion, pro-opposition) media outlets. As a tool of blackmail, they usually use the social employment program, in which the local population is employed. Thus, for fear of losing their jobs and income, the population is afraid to speak out about specific needs and problems. This, in turn, is a barrier to information for the media outlets, preventing them from reporting on real problems in an argumentative manner based on facts.

Representatives of almost all media outlets, both regional and national ones, note the increase in the level of polarization in recent years and emphasize its increased intensity with the upcoming elections. A representative of the Georgian Public Broadcaster notes that the process of polarization is a well-planned and orchestrated process supported by major media outlets. “However, the role of the media is to create its own agenda for the welfare of society, not to dance to someone else’s tune,” the respondent notes. The public realizes that the media is involved in all this and loses trust in it. Moreover, there is aggression against journalists and the profession of journalism stemming from here.

Among the negative effects of polarization, the loss of public trust and, consequently, the lack of solidarity with the media are cited by respondents as particularly problematic. In this context, the respondent from Tok-TV recalls the problem of the regional television station TV-25, when a few years ago the entire population of Batumi took to the streets in support of the media outlet, which was threatened with closure, and the TV channel continued to broadcast. The same respondent regrets that “today, after years, we cannot see such solidarity towards any media outlet, because television (as well as other media outlets) has lost its connection with the people. People no longer have trust and cannot understand the needs of the media.” Maintaining trust in the media in the regions requires a lot of effort, personal relationships and human resources. If the search for information, sources and respondents were not artificially hindered, trust and the results of the work (concrete solutions to problems) would be more tangible.

The respondents considered it impossible to overcome the problem caused by polarization due to the lack of mobilization of all stakeholders (ruling party and government, opposition, media organizations) and their real will. When discussing this involvement, journalists noted that under political polarization, politicians feel comfortable, have “rostrums” and an audience. Although the media can have a small influence on polarization, it is still limited in its maneuvering because it is tied to an unhealthy funding model and media owners. The media outlets are forced to follow the instructions of their donors/owners or to constantly fight for survival. In this process, it no longer has the resources to make efforts to reduce polarization. As a result, the people, the audience of the media, the very part to whose well-being the activities of politicians and the media should be directed, suffer.

Media democratization is seen as one of the solutions in the research process: “To increase the influence of the media, media outlets need to start creating content that is tailored to people’s interests and that people care about. Journalists should ‘give the microphone to the people’ and find a niche that the public is interested in,” says the respondent from Radio Liberty.

Summary: Polarization manifests itself with a negative chain reaction and damages both the media environment and society. Polarization, “supported” by the ruling party and the opposition, first of all, creates unequal conditions for the media outlets, depending on whether they are more loyal or critical. This, in turn, creates a problem of access to information for individual media outlets, because “only the voice of the opposition is heard in the so-called pro-opposition media, and the voice of the ruling party – in the so-called pro-government media.” Logically, this leads to the problem of creating a quality media product, which exacerbates public polarization and reduces trust in the media. Ultimately, polarization hams all stakeholders - the government, the ruling party and the opposition, the media, and most importantly, society.

■ 4.2. Challenges to journalistic activities: the instrumentalization of the law against the media

In 2023, the instrumentalization of the legal framework and the weaponization of laws and regulations in the context of the media environment was one of the noteworthy trends. This chapter includes the changes in the rules of accreditation of journalists, the law on “Transparency of Foreign Influence” (so-called Russian law), the attitude of journalists towards SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), the planned and implemented amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, etc. The trends of media threats follow the challenges faced by the world media and are characterized by the differences based on the Georgian context. For example, media representatives do not mention and are not familiar with SLAPP practices, but they recall the cases when their activities were hindered after being sued in court. They also recall a case when the source threatened them with arrest if they published the material. Here, the journalist mentioned the practice of suing in court, which is one of the ways of intimidation and creates barriers to work. “We were sued by the Tobacco Control Alliance and the trial dragged on terribly. During this time, a journalist is under constant pressure,” said an iFact journalist.

The limits of media regulation and self-regulation are set by Georgian legislation. The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) is a key actor. Transparency International Georgia (December 2020) [questions](#) the impartiality of the GNCC and its leadership. The commission is headed by Kakha Bekauri, a former director of Channel 9 – a TV company founded by Bidzina Ivanishvili in 2012. Individual statements, projects and legislative proposals of the Commission are mainly aimed at restricting the activities and discrediting the media critical of the government. The 2023 amendments to the Law on Broadcasting, which further expanded the powers of the Georgian National Communications Commission and tightened regulations, were assessed by the civil society sector as a risky decision for the existence of critical media.

It is noteworthy that the [Charter of Journalistic Ethics](#) has been operating in Georgia since 2009, “whose mission is to increase the public responsibility of the media through the protection of professional and ethical standards and the creation of self-regulation mechanisms.” Currently the Charter unites 318 journalists. According to the statistics and annual report published on the website of the Charter, in 2022 the Council of the Charter considered 89 applications. As in the previous years, most of the considered statements were traditionally related to violation of the first principle of the Charter - accuracy. Strengthening various mechanisms of self-regulation is one of the ways to improve journalistic standards and make the profession healthier.

In assessing the media environment in 2023, we should focus on the instrumentalization of the law by the ruling Georgian Dream party aimed at framing media activities, which, [according](#) to a large part of media organizations and civil society (see the statements of the Media Advocacy Coalition), threatens such democratic principles as freedom of expression, information publicity and openness. The latter is particularly important in terms of conscious and informed choices in the run-up to the 2024 parliamentary elections.

4.2.1. Changes in the rules of accreditation of journalists

On February 6, 2023, the Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia issued an [order](#) (1/31/23) “On Approval of the Rules of Accreditation of Representatives of Mass Media in the Parliament of Georgia”, according to which an accredited journalist should observe the following rules: not to disrupt the parliamentary proceedings; not to record the place of work of an MP or a staff member without prior permission; to interrupt an interview if an MP, staff member or guest objects; not to record the documents, the screen of a telephone or any other electronic device belonging to an MP, staff member or guest in such a way that information or images on them can be seen. Sanctions (suspension and revocation of accreditation) for violation of the rules have been defined.

The changes prompted a number of reactions from the Public Defender, Georgian media professionals and civil society organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Media Advocacy Coalition, Transparency International – Georgia and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. A researcher of Gnomon Wise (Kutidze, 2023) notes: “It is noteworthy within this context that if there is a high public interest, the journalist should be allowed to repeat the question to the MP or member of the apparatus several times, despite their refusal, as well as to record their rooms, documents, or screens of their electronic devices”. The new rule allows an MP to avoid embarrassing questions, and to treat a journalist’s attempt to get an answer to a critical question as a violation of the accreditation rule.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, April 2023) [responded](#) to the issue of suspending journalists’ accreditation and called on the Parliament to change the rules. It said: “If Georgian authorities are serious about reducing political and media polarization, they should work with all journalists to devise acceptable and sustainable regulatory frameworks.” The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics said in its [statement](#) (February 7, 2023) that “in a situation where it is practically impossible for the media to receive public information and representatives of the ruling party selectively give interviews to the media, such regulations will make it impossible to obtain information and provide it

to the public.” According to the [data](#) of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (April, 2023), 197 journalists received one-year accreditation. The first precedent of suspension of accreditation of journalists was observed on April 6.

On June 14, 2023, Georgian Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili [published](#) on his official Facebook page a 100-day report on the introduction of the new rules of media accreditation in the Parliament, according to which during this period, the measure of one-month suspension of accreditation was applied in 9 cases - 5 in respect of journalists and 4 - in respect of cameramen. According to the same document, 1 out of 9 cases was applied because of disobedience to the Parliament’s security service, and 8 - because the journalist chased the respondent and continued the interview despite the latter’s refusal.

Transparency International - Georgia calls the new rule a “bureaucratic scalpel.” According to the organization’s [assessment](#), “systematic interference in journalistic activities was further intensified by the revised accreditation regulations adopted in 2023, which introduced punitive mechanisms against critical media representatives, worsened access to information and, consequently, the quality of informing the public” (Transparency International Georgia, June, 2023). [According](#) to the Media Advocacy Coalition, “these decisions are punitive, especially in light of the ruling Georgian Dream party’s boycott of critical media and the polarized media environment.”

The tightening of the rules caused additional anxiety among journalists. Media representatives agreed that it would lead to further restrictions on access to already limited information. The new accreditation rule, envisaging sanctions against media professionals, allowed MPs to restrict the activities and get rid of “undesirable journalists with undesirable questions.” In practice, this rule worked as an instrument of threats and intimidation. Journalists are threatened with this rule, but the practice of “sanctioning” has been paused.

According to the respondents, the new rule was a punitive measure for journalists, and a tool for MPs to defend themselves and avoid critical questions. The respondent from Maestro TV clarifies that the purpose of this rule was to protect those MPs who do not want to talk to journalists and who talk “nonsense” when asked repeatedly. The respondent from Studio Monitor says: “Previously, the government was not your enemy... and now we know that if they need to - they can destroy you...”. The respondent from Netgazeti says: “This rule restricts journalistic activities, it was the only legitimate space where we could demand answers from MPs...”

Journalists also talk about other filters applied to critical questions in the Parliament. For example, they recall the cases when the employees of the Parliament’s press office tell the representatives of the critical media what questions they should ask and what questions they should not ask. All this obviously affects the access to information and its free flow.

Thus, with the introduction of the new accreditation rule, the ruling majority has the opportunity not to answer critical questions, not to provide information to journalists from media outlets that are unwanted or critical of the government, thus preventing the implementation of both the main function of the media and the principles of democracy, which is a clear sign of the instrumentalization of the law against the media.

4.2.2. Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence and Media

One of the most notable days of the current year is related to the attempt of the Parliament to pass the law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” (informally called “Russian law” and “law on agents”) in March. The protests were initiated by the independent media, but subsequent developments angered a large part of the population. As a result of the protests, the ruling majority voted down the bill in its second reading and eventually withdrew it.

The online media outlet Publica (Publica, March 2023) [reported](#) that the protests against the draft law initiated in the Parliament began during the session of the Parliamentary Bureau on February 20 after the media professionals expressed their protest against the draft law. According to the journalists, the attempt to approve the draft law caused an ambivalent attitude among the broad public, which was less informed about what was written in the “Russian law”. On the one hand, the society showed unanimity, and on the other hand, the polarization between the two sides reached its peak.

A representative of TV Pirveli recalls that “as soon as the MPs started discussing the bill at the very first session of the Parliament, everyone realized that it would have a negative impact on their activities and would mean the beginning of the end of their free journalistic activities. The adoption of this law would affect not only journalistic activities, but also the civil society sector as a whole, because the scope of the law was very broad” (the respondent from TV Pirveli).

Journalists used their TV channels to constantly talk about the dangers of the draft law, and they consider it a merit of the media that the initiation of the bill was followed by an unprecedented number of people coming out to the rallies, which the ruling team did not dare to openly confront.

Journalists highlight that the most significant aspect concerning the developments surrounding the “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” law is the unprecedented solidarity witnessed. This unity extended not only among media representatives but also throughout civil society and among the general public. A journalist from Studio Monitor notes that as soon as the draft law became public, they made a collective decision that if the law were to be enacted, they would not comply with it by registering in the so-called register of agents. This stance would undoubtedly result in the closure of their organization. However, the intention behind the initiation of the law was to gradually restrict or even eliminate the activities of foreign-funded media outlets, among others.

The respondent from Formula TV: “For example, during the initiation of the ‘Russian law’, I acted as an ordinary activist. At that time, journalism was secondary because we were facing a completely different challenge. When you are confronted physically, it is easier to resist, but when you are confronted with the law - it means that either you are arrested, or you flee the country, or you tolerate it...”

The respondent from Netgazeti: “Our editorial policy prohibits us from participating in any protest rallies, unless it is about protecting the rights and freedom of expression of journalists or any media outlet. In the case of the ‘Russian law’, we all stood together and they [ruling party] did not expect such a reaction.”

Despite the draft law being voted down in the second reading after protests, journalists maintain the belief that the ruling party's efforts to implement this law in various forms are not over. According to their perspective, what's concerning is that the law has been divided into separate components, and there is an attempt to present and pass it piece by piece.

The journalist from the regional media Tok-TV believes that the initiation of the draft law had a "chilling effect": "The initiation of the bill, despite its failure, had a rather harmful effect on a certain part of society. In particular, although it was not approved, it formed a negative attitude of society towards international organizations." According to the journalist, the goal was to discredit the sides (which this initiative managed to do in a certain part of the society). The initiation of the "Transparency of Foreign Influence" law jeopardized the existence of democratic institutions and at the same time revealed a resource for coordination and solidarity.

4.2.3. Regulation of hate speech and obscenity

Another example of the instrumentalization of the law against the media are the amendments made by the Georgian Parliament to the Law on Broadcasting, which further expanded the powers of the Georgian National Communications Commission, and transferred the expression of hate speech and obscenity through the media from the realm of self-regulation to that of regulation.

Both the media and civil society have reacted to the changes. Their reports or analyses assess the ruling party's attempt to portray a particular media product as a manifestation of hate speech and obscenity. It is also noteworthy that with this amendment, the violation of professional standards by the media has moved from the realm of self-regulation to that of regulation, which can become another tool to silence undesirable and critical media. For example, [according](#) to Transparency International – Georgia (October 2023): "The disputed changes to the Law on Broadcasting that were adopted by the Georgian Dream further deteriorate the already deteriorated standard of freedom of speech and expression and create additional risks of exerting influence on broadcasters." The organization assesses that "legal regulation of hate speech contains a threat... against the background of the lack of strong and independent regulatory bodies, and the low confidence in the judicial system."

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [criticized](#) the amendment (CPJ, October 2023), which bolsters the regulatory commission's powers to sanction broadcast media. The Media Advocacy Coalition has also critically [assessed](#) the rushed adoption of the amendments by the Parliament without stakeholder participation and risk assessment.

The ruling party cited the need for the aforementioned amendments (Formula TV, November, 2023) as part of the European directive that had to be fulfilled on the way to obtaining candidate status. In turn, the EU Delegation to Georgia [reacted](#) to the amendments (Civil. ge, October 2023), noting that the "obscenity" element of the new legislation "is not part of the directive" and "there is no need to regulate it under the directive."

Journalists involved in the research note that enforcing legislative changes is fraught with threats, such as increasing financial pressure on the media and self-censorship in newsrooms. There is also a lack of knowledge about the definition of hate speech and

obscenity. Media representatives are concerned about the lack of awareness among politicians on this issue. They recalled cases when the parliamentarians who supported the amendments made it clear that from now on journalists would no longer be able to ask critical questions and use insulting language.

The regulation of hate speech and obscenity is a major challenge. A polarized environment is fertile ground for hate speech, as it is saturated with discrediting and disinformation campaigns, stigmatization and labeling of vulnerable groups. The purpose of using hate speech is to split the target audience and reduce the level of solidarity, which is in line with the goals of polarization.

The challenge is both the use of hate speech by journalists and their respondents, and the use of hate speech against media professionals (deliberate labeling that reduces solidarity and trust in the media). Unfortunately, we see precedents of the use of hate speech against journalists both by representatives of the ruling party and the opposition. The journalist from TV Pirveli notes that their goal is to create “the image of the enemy out of a journalist”: “No matter how many critical questions I have asked the ruling party - Georgian Dream, I cannot remember when the answer to these questions did not begin with the following: your patrons are the Natsis [referring to the opposition National Movement party]... I cannot remember when I was not rebuked by them. In fact, the answer to the question begins with an attack. All this increases polarization.”

Journalists believe that the fight against hate speech is very important and that regulation or co-regulation in itself is not an exclusively negative phenomenon. However, journalists do not trust the government, the Communications Commission and the judiciary, and they suspect that the ruling party will use this leverage to increase pressure on critical media. Media professionals suggest that due to the broad interpretation of the law, the courts may also adopt and enforce practices that restrict freedom of expression.

Despite the critical attitude of regional media professionals towards the amendments, they still do not expect the punitive effect of this wording to be directed towards the regional media and believe that it will be used to intimidate the national and pro-opposition media. Media professionals emphasize that the law poses a threat regardless of who is in power, as the definition of the relationship between hate speech, obscenity and freedom of expression is obscure. Journalists expect the ruling party to use the amendment to financially punish “undesirable” media, while the implementation of the law could lead to the bankruptcy and even closure of a media outlet.

It is especially noteworthy that the awareness of journalists in Georgia about the practice of SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) cases is quite low. It is also noteworthy that there is a growing practice of using such lawsuits against journalists in Georgia. In a [statement](#) on World Press Freedom Day, the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC, May 2023) highlights that powerful companies and individuals continue to abuse the legal system to shut down or undermine the credibility of journalists trying to report on them. In this regard, the use of defamation lawsuits to obstruct journalistic activities is alarming. The [report](#) prepared by the Georgian Democratic Initiative (June 2023) notes that the number of groundless lawsuits has increased in 2021-23 and currently stands at 38.

Although the media professionals who participated in the study are not familiar with the SLAPP issue, they generally believe that it is important for media organizations and NGOs to demonstrate solidarity in the case of malicious practices and to express coordinated protest in the case of media harassment.

4.2.4. The case of Nika Gvaramia 2023

The charges against Nika Gvaramia, the founder of Mtavari Arkhi TV, were brought on August 9, 2019, as part of the investigation launched on July 20 of the same year. The charges were mainly related to the period of Nika Gvaramia's leadership of Rustavi 2 TV. On the basis of various investigations, studying the case materials and observing the trial, a number of organizations concluded that the mentioned case was politically motivated; however, on May 16, 2022, the Tbilisi City Court found Nika Gvaramia guilty and sentenced him to 3 years and 6 months in prison for abuse of power in his managerial decisions when he ran Rustavi 2 TV. In November 2022, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals upheld the verdict of the first instance court.

Nika Gvaramia's imprisonment sparked protests from the media and non-governmental organizations. International organizations called for Gvaramia's release. In April 2023, 11 influential international organizations [called](#) on Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili to pardon Nika Gvaramia (CPJ, April 2023). On May 22, 2023, President Zourabichvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia.

The presidential pardon of Nika Gvaramia, the general director of Mtavari Arkhi TV, was an important development in 2023, which was positively assessed in the European Commission's 2023 [Communication](#) on EU Enlargement Policy (excerpt on Georgia, November; 2023). According to journalists, Nika Gvaramia's pardon was also the result of the coordinated efforts of the media, civil society, and international organizations, as well as raising the issue from various platforms. The impact of this development on the media environment is assessed positively by journalists. The journalist from Mtavari Arkhi TV says that Nika Gvaramia's release has motivated the journalists to continue the struggle and showed society once again the positive effects of coordinated work. The journalist from Imedi TV has a different opinion, noting that the positive emotions expressed by Mtavari Arkhi TV journalists on the day of the amnesty were unacceptable. The same journalist believes that such an emotional attachment of the journalist to the employer was a manifestation of unprofessionalism.

On November 17, Nika Gvaramia was named one of four recipients of the 2023 International Press Freedom Awards by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Summary: The instrumentalization of the law against the media by the ruling party is a dangerous trend. The case of media manager Nika Gvaramia made it clear that the ruling party is trying to suppress the critical voice of the media in various ways. In the end, the coordinated demands of local and international organizations, politicians and governments of democratic countries, the media and the continuous raising of the issue led to a positive result. However, despite Nika Gvaramia's pardon, significant threats and challenges remain in the media environment, such as the increased powers of the regulator and, in this context, the regulation of hate speech and obscenity.

■ 4.3. Media in the Context of Local and Global Crises

Global trends, as well as current local developments and socio-political processes influence the media agenda and the specifics of journalistic activities. In 2023, there were a number of developments taking place inside and outside the country that, according to journalists, had an impact on the media environment. Some of these developments directly affected the daily activities of journalists, and others indirectly affected the media environment.

In the context of the influence of global crises, the media environment considers the Russia-Ukraine war and the Georgian government's attitude to it as the main factor that passes through the discourse of polarization. This issue also led to the stigmatization of journalists. In particular, the journalist from Formula TV says that if the journalist presents a Georgian fighter in Ukraine in a positive context, through the efforts of the ruling party, this fact will also be included in the discourse of the "global war party."

It is problematic for journalists that the Georgian government does not bury Georgian soldiers who died fighting in Ukraine with military honors. They believe that this is due to the policy of appeasement towards Russia, which is an attempt to cover up Russian aggression and send a message "Well, do you want war?" In this regard, journalists from pro-government media outlets note that the war in Ukraine has further divided society and increased polarization. The journalist from Imedi TV (pro-governmental media) says that there is a lot of self-censorship on this issue. It also happens that the facts are not reported for fear of being accused of being pro-Russian and accused of Russian propaganda. The intensity of war coverage is different in the cases of Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine. Russia's war in Ukraine was covered 24/7.

Self-censorship also applies to local crises and tragedies. The respondent from Imedi TV recalls: "When the news of the Racha tragedy broke, it happened that we were covering the issue of the flood that happened in the world that day. As a result, we were accused of trying to cover up the tragic news of Shovi."

4.3.1. Media in anticipation of "candidate status"

In its [opinion](#) of April, 2022, the European Commission notes that "intimidation and physical and verbal attacks on media professionals have increasingly taken place, especially in the context of demonstrations and election rallies, and investigations are lackluster. Court proceedings and investigations against opposition media owners have become frequent. Recent verdicts have a chilling effect on critical media reporting. Further alignment of the legislation on the media regulator (the Georgian National Communication Commission) with European standards is needed." One of the 12 recommendations set out by the European Commission for Georgia to be granted candidate status was "to undertake stronger efforts to guarantee a free, professional, pluralistic and independent media environment, notably by ensuring that criminal procedures brought against media owners fulfill the highest legal standards, and by launching impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of journalists and other media professionals."

In November 2023, the European Commission recommended that Georgia be granted EU candidate status. In its November 2023 [Communication](#), the European Commission noted: “On media pluralism, an opposition media director was released from prison following a Presidential pardon, and Parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Broadcasting to align with EU legislation.” It also defined the following steps that Georgia should take on its path to EU integration, including those related to media challenges: “Improve the protection of human rights including by implementing an ambitious human rights strategy and ensuring freedom of assembly and expression; launch impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of vulnerable groups, media professionals and civil society activists, and bring organizers and perpetrators of violence to justice; consult and engage with civil society, allowing for their meaningful involvement in legislative and policymaking processes and ensure they can operate freely.”

In December, the European Council made a final decision to grant Georgia candidate status. During the period of the focus groups (October-November), the issue of granting Georgia the status of an EU candidate country was not resolved. Despite the desire for a positive answer, media professionals were skeptical about this perspective, citing the uninvestigated cases of crimes committed against journalists, the July 5 (homophobic violence) case, the investigation of which has not yet been completed. It is noteworthy that even after the decision to grant the status was announced, these issues remained on the agenda for improving the media environment.

Journalists note that public awareness of the benefits of European integration is low. The journalist from Formula TV notes that there are no targeted campaigns that would raise awareness about what the EU candidate status means and what the real benefits are. According to the journalists, the process of raising public awareness should have a campaign and strategic nature. Journalists do not expect the positive decision of the European Council to have an impact on reducing polarization.

4.3.2. Media in the face of Russian “malign influence”

The spread of Russian disinformation and propaganda narratives through Georgian media outlets remained one of the characteristics of the media environment over the past year. All attempts to discredit the media repeated the well-tested method promoted by the Russian authorities - to somehow silence the critical voice and to wrap all different opinions in the labels that create negative public attitudes towards the media. For example, the ruling party frequently targets journalists from critical media: “You represent a side”, “I will not give you a comment because you are biased”, etc.

Most of the journalists participating in the research consider media outlets loyal to the government as supporters of disinformation and Russian narratives. The journalist from Formula TV says that in a number of cases, the narrative of propaganda TV stories in Russian and pro-government Georgian media is actually the same and is even repeated word for word. According to the representative of the regional media Tok-TV, the main problem is that the purveyors of disinformation manipulate by influencing emotions, while the independent media tries to analyze the material and show the audience the objective truth.

The opening of dozens of regional offices by the anti-Western broadcaster Alt-Info is cited as an attempt to spread disinformation and Russian narratives, thus influencing the regional population. According to the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED, July 2022), the pro-Russian Conservative Movement/Alt-Info party started actively opening offices in regions since January 2022, opening 64 offices across Georgia. Alt-Info TV is also part of the Conservative Movement/Alt-Info party. The journalists involved in our research note that as a result of the active work of the Conservative Movement/Alt-Info, the regional population considers Alt-Info TV as “close to them.”

Propaganda includes reporting government news in a uniquely positive context and targeted advertising campaigns that also include elements of disinformation. In addition, there is the factor of modern trolls and bots, which in an organized and coordinated manner are sparing no effort to cover up unwanted information, on the one hand, and to promote news favorable to their client, on the other. The target audience for disinformation is a broad public that has difficulty recognizing cleverly disguised disinformation. At the same time, pro-Western media outlets have to deal with the “invasion” of trolls and bots in parallel with their journalistic activities. The lack of financial and human resources makes this a difficult task.

A representative of Formula TV says that Georgian pro-government media outlets follow the Russian scenario and are structurally organized in the same way as the Russian propaganda media. Unlike the opposition, groups associated with the ruling party act in a more planned and coordinated manner: “Polarization is profitable for the opposition and the ruling party, and moreover, polarization is planned by them daily. The problem is the lack of coordination on the pro-Western side. The pro-Western media also has a coordination problem that cannot be said about the pro-Russian and pro-government media, which is well-coordinated. Everyone is controlled from the “center” created by the ruling party, several people from Georgian Dream directly control the media, public relations services of the ministries control social media (mostly Facebook). As soon as the “center” makes a decision, everyone knows what to do and how. If you watch the main news program of the pro-government Imedi TV channel, you already know that the topic can be continued by Rustavi 2, Georgian Public Broadcaster, etc. It is their policy to repeat the same messages every day. They do it systematically and this is exactly the Russian and Soviet model,” the journalist said. According to the same participant, there is only one solution - media outlets critical of the government should also find a common language: “No matter what kind of competitors we are, if there is no strategic communication between us, nothing will come out.”

This problem is particularly relevant in the regions where the Russian narrative is being deliberately spread, with the public opinion being shaped to support this narrative. The regional population is particularly vulnerable to local influential people, and this poses a threat in terms of the spread of disinformation. For example, a representative of the Kharagauli newspaper notes that Russian “soft power” has recently intensified its efforts in their region to win public favor. To this end, they are actively using influential people in the region. The journalist recalled a diplomat of the occupying country/Russia, who finances the events held in state institutions, helps a school, etc. In the end, it influences public attitudes.

A representative from Borjomi TV also discusses the utilization of influential individuals by Russian “soft power.” According to the journalist, there are notable figures in the region who hold pro-Russian sentiments, which is surprising considering the current geopolitical landscape but is nevertheless a reality. This situation poses a potential threat because the influence of these individuals carries significant weight, especially among the regional population. The respondent highlights that such attitudes are not limited to areas with ethnic minorities but can also be found in other municipalities, with some individuals expressing favorable views towards Russia. These sentiments may become apparent during elections, according to the Borjomi TV representative.

4.3.3. Pre-election media challenges

The process of preparing for elections leads to a change in the social and political lifestyle of any country and its society. In a polarized environment, the extent of confrontation between political parties becomes more evident in the media. As for the media itself, the existing threats (lack of safety for journalists, barriers to access to information, discrediting campaigns, etc.) are intensified. The media not only covers political crises, but also tries to deal with threats created in the media. It is important to understand the challenges, resources, and expectations of the media in the run-up to the 2024 elections.

In the pre-election period, the Georgian media is the main tool for winning the battle, because it is the channel of information between the political parties and the people, and in fact, it is the media that determines the informed choice of a voter. It becomes even more difficult for independent media when the ruling party is represented on one side of the media and the opposition on the other. Political parties have a guaranteed platform and spend less effort on independent media platforms.

Regional and national media professionals who participated in the research say that the biggest challenge is to provide impartial coverage of the electoral process in a polarized environment. Citing their experience, journalists note that polarization intensifies in the run-up to elections, and this affects the daily activities of the media. In fact, polarized sides avoid appearing in the media associated with the opposing party, providing comments and information. This, as already mentioned, affects the quality of reporting, and reduces public trust and awareness. In this process, the attempts of journalists to search for information in all possible ways (including besieging respondents and trying to get answers in this way), in turn, cause irritation of the sides (politicians and often, the audience).

A representative of Borjomi TV notes that during the pre-election period, TV programming includes live debates, but as a rule, representatives of the government and the ruling party refuse to participate in such debates. As a result, the public’s questions remain unanswered, on the one hand, and the population believes that the media is biased in covering only one side. This leads to public irritation and dissatisfaction with the media.

A representative of Mtavari Arkhi TV believes that all the legislative changes initiated by the ruling party regarding the media are aimed at restricting/complicating their activities - which will be well used during the elections, when the public most needs objective and diverse information to make a decision.

According to media professionals, the financial situation of critical and/or independent media has deteriorated significantly compared to the previous parliamentary elections (2020), and the entire government campaign is aimed at blocking financial sources for critical media. Financial problems lead to lack of human resources, and lack of human resources, in turn, leads to problems in reporting.

Media representatives find it alarming that during the pre-election period the incidents of insulting journalists, physical and psychological violence against them, use of abusive language and defamation reach their peak. "This is already a natural environment for us, and we are even used to working in such an environment," says the journalist from Samkhretis Karibche.

Among the pre-election challenges, the issue of so-called "trolls and bots" is particularly relevant. It is actually impossible for media professionals to deal with them, because "they are everywhere" and journalists cannot cope with the targeted, well-planned and well-funded campaign of "trolls and bots." This leads to the dissemination of inaccurate and biased information to the population," the respondents from Borjomi TV and Kakhetis Khma note.

Media professionals consider it a challenge to conduct the 2024 elections electronically for the first time, because they believe it will cause some confusion and problems among voters. Journalists believe that they will need to be retrained to adequately cover the process of electronic elections. A representative of the regional media outlet Tok-TV says: "The elections will be held electronically this year and you need to be equipped with new skills to know what to pay attention to..."

The process of preparing for elections begins with media planning. Planning involves the mobilization and allocation of both financial and human resources. The preparation of the media for the elections includes safety training, but no active work has begun in this regard.

Summary: All those external or internal factors that are at the center of public attention at a given time and that directly and/or indirectly change/create public attitudes are directly reflected in media content. In this context, the fight against Russian disinformation is a major challenge. Independent media outlets find it difficult to combat this problem due to limited financial resources. One of the most critical periods for the media is the election period, when threats existing in the media environment become more visible and intense. Polarization makes access to information difficult and hampers the process of informing voters. All of this can have an indirect impact on the quality of informed choices and, ultimately, on the outcome of the election.

■ 4.4. Access to Journalistic Sources

The main prerequisite for effective media activity, objective, critical and free broadcasting is access to journalistic sources and thus the possibility of creating balanced information. Therefore, it is vital for any media to have access to the necessary information resources. Access to information, its free flow from society to the media and vice versa determines the protection of fundamental rights, media credibility and solidarity with it.

In the Georgian media environment, the problem of access to sources is becoming increasingly relevant. Journalists are concerned about the artificial complication of the process of receiving information, obtaining comments and access to sources from both sides (the ruling party and the opposition). The daily relationship with the critical media is largely determined by the ruling party's practice of limiting information, blocking and allegedly intimidating sources. It is also a problem for media outlets loyal to the government to get information from opposition parties. This, as we have mentioned on several occasions, prevents the creation of a balanced media product, which, in turn, has a negative impact on the quality of media credibility in the eyes of the public. Journalists from Rustavi 2 TV and Imedi TV note that there are frequent cases when opposition parties do not inform them about briefings and press conferences, because they are perceived as "undesirable" media.

The representatives of the critical media recall the facts of intimidation and blackmailing of the sources, which deprives them of the opportunity to cover the reality objectively and deprives the public of the opportunity to see the objective reality. An iFact journalist says: "Our respondent was even afraid to share the article in the social network where he was the respondent. This fear is already felt among all sources."

Journalists talk about the long and deliberately protracted timeframes for requesting public information, during which the problem may lose its relevance. Journalists recall various excuses for refusing to provide information, such as technical delays, prohibitions on filming in public agencies, etc.

It is noteworthy that the parliamentary space is a relatively comfortable space for journalists to receive information and communicate with officials and opposition sources. It is more difficult for journalists who do not work in the legislature to find respondents. In practice, the implementation of new accreditation rules has restricted access to sources. A journalist from TV Pirveli points out a concern that respondents are chosen by the government press center rather than by the journalists themselves. They note, "There are MPs who actually cannot answer you; they provide general comments, and critical questions go unanswered. When the unanswered questions are broadcast, it can once again portray the media as biased."

This logic applies to both government and opposition representatives. A respondent from Formula TV notes that "it is very difficult to communicate with the opposition parties and bring the party leaders to a TV program." When commenting, political parties do not care what content is created by the media and whether it is about politics or not. According to journalists, there is a so-called blacklist, where journalists end up after reporting critical material. After that, the restriction of cooperation with them continues constantly (the respondent from Studio Monitor). It is an unfortunate reality that both national and regional media talk about similar problems.

Summary: As polarization intensifies, the barriers to accessing information become more pronounced. Both the opposition and the ruling party tend to avoid engaging with media outlets critical of them, often providing minimal information without additional explanations or even refraining from providing information altogether.

■ 4.5. Challenges to Investigative Journalism

One of the priority areas of journalistic activity is investigative journalism, which requires much more human, technological, time and, of course, financial resources. Since the purpose of investigative journalism is to expose the criminal activities of top officials, to bring to light the issues that certain forces try to cover up, to force the guilty to leave the government circles and to contribute to the formation of an informed society, this field of journalistic activities often becomes the target of discrediting and harassment by the ruling party. A number of organizations such as Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, in their reports show data from Russia, China, North Korea, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, including the examples of harassment and sometimes physical destruction of investigative journalists. Our research shows that investigative journalists are also at risk in Georgia.

There are several investigative programs and studios/groups of investigative journalists in the Georgian media market: Studio Monitor (monitori.ge) and iFact (ifact.ge), Radio Liberty's group of investigative journalists, Nodar Meladze's Shabati (TV Pirveli), Shabatis Formula (Formula TV). Investigative material can also be found in the Sunday program of Mtavari Arkhi TV and the program Droeba (Formula TV). The Georgian Public Broadcaster also has an investigative program. Investigative journalists of critical media note that it is even more complicated to get official comments from public agencies, to obtain public information, to get acquainted with court materials when it comes to investigative materials. It is also difficult for investigative journalists to get funding. Regional media outlets, despite their desire, cannot prepare investigative materials only because of lack of funds. A representative of regional media Chemi Kharagauli noted that in the conditions of scarce funds and budget, when even informing the public in the region is a problem, there are no more resources for investigative journalists; however, the desire and need is great: "We have a great desire to develop in the direction of investigative journalism, but it is connected with human resources. At least one journalist is needed to focus on investigative material, who cannot simultaneously work on preparing news material," the respondent said. "Since we work only in the direction of investigative journalism, we exclude fundraising from advertising and business. Therefore, we are completely dependent on international donors," says a journalist from iFact.

Investigative journalists consistently point to the challenge of obtaining information from public agencies and securing official comments as the primary obstacle they have faced over the past year. They emphasize that this trend is particularly pronounced when it comes to TV channels and investigative studios deemed "unacceptable" to the ruling party, as the primary target of journalists' inquiries is typically the government. A respondent from Samkhretis Karibche mentions, "The chain of investigation ends with them, and the media encounters obstacles." An iFact journalist adds, "They block all types of information for us. Barriers are created not only by the ruling party but also by the opposition."

The research reveals that individuals linked to the ruling party and government agencies employ various tactics to avoid the coverage of "unacceptable" topics. They may refuse to provide comments or create obstacles for journalists trying to access public institutions. A journalist from Studio Monitor highlights this issue, stating, "Studio Monitor was established

in 2005, and there has never been a case where we didn't have Parliament accreditation. However, this year, we don't have accreditation because we had to agree to their conditions to obtain it..."

Another problem for investigative journalism is that sources generally prefer to remain anonymous out of fear, which reduces trust in an investigative media product. A respondent from iFact says: "Sources prefer to remain anonymous, but public trust in anonymous sources is lower." A focus group participant from the regional media confirms that respondents are reluctant to comment out of fear. Although an investigative media product is rarely published here, sometimes they need a specific source to confirm or deny certain information, which is practically impossible recently. During the discussion, a representative of Chemi Kharagauli said: "Recently, our respondents have been harassed a lot. Even people who are very close to me are afraid to communicate... I have been collecting information in this region for 25 years and more, and I know this region very well. Now these frightened acquaintances of mine say that they are prevented from talking about certain problems... The problem is that the ruling party has involved too many people in the social employment program, and they feel obliged to do whatever the ruling party tells them to do."

Summary: The challenges confronting investigative journalism primarily revolve around the constrained access to information and subsequently, the issue of funding. The shortage of information is an artificial problem driven by polarization. The funding challenge is closely linked to the unsustainable funding model of independent media, where financial resources from donors are limited, and there is a lack of financial support from the public. These difficulties frequently lead independent media outlets to refuse producing investigative content.

■ 4.6. Safety of Journalists

Against the backdrop of ongoing hostilities in the world, particularly the full-scale wars between Russia and Ukraine, and Israel and Gaza, the issue of journalist safety is particularly noteworthy. According to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ, 2023), 69 journalists and media workers were killed in the line of duty worldwide in 2023. Against this backdrop, it is even more important and necessary to develop mechanisms that will create a safe working environment for journalists.

This study shows that, like in 2022 (Gersamia, Toradze, 2022), physical or psychological violence against journalists is still relevant. Psychological pressure and what the respondents call "risks of human destruction" are very familiar and painful issues for all active journalists. When discussing the risks of physical destruction, one of the journalists from the Georgian Public Broadcaster even takes the initiative during the discussion to provide security guards for active journalists.

Violence against journalists comes from different groups and takes place in different spaces - in institutions, on the streets, in social networks. Journalists speak openly about the facts of violence against them - be it physical, psychological, emotional or economic. They face violence from almost all sides, whether from the ruling party or the opposition,

so they have a sense of insecurity and feel contempt shown to them simply because they represent a media outlet that is unacceptable to someone. To illustrate the various forms of violence, journalists recall cases of being offered bribes, threats of being sued and arrested, physical and verbal abuse of journalists during live broadcasts, etc. The threats highlighted in the previous year's study of the media environment (Gersamia, Toradze, 2022) are repeated. Namely, in 2022:

“Discrediting the profession affected all journalists, regardless of the logo of the media outlet. Allegedly pro-government and pro-opposition media representatives expressed concern about this. Journalists working in Tbilisi and the regions expect that when they go to work, they might be greeted aggressively. The main trigger of aggression is the logo of one or another television company drawn on the microphone. If the journalist represents the government media, the aggression comes from the supporters of the opposition; if the journalist is from the opposition channel, the aggression comes from the supporters of the government.”

The problem of the microphone as a trigger of aggression is still relevant in 2023. The focus group participants say that the negative attitude towards the profession of journalism is pre-established and is not determined by a specific media product and/or a question, but rather by the activity in which the specific media outlet is engaged. This applies to a journalist on any “side” and damages the profession of journalism. A journalist from Imedi TV notes: “There has always been aggression against journalists, but now it is at a critical level. Just because I work for a certain media, they show undisguised aggression and contempt towards me. I have even lost friends because of the label, which also damages personal relationships.”

The sense of insecurity of journalists is especially aggravated by the syndrome of impunity, which, in fact, legitimizes various forms of violence against them. The participants of the discussion repeatedly mentioned the crimes committed against journalists during the rallies of July 5, 2021, whose organizers remain unpunished.

In addition to the fact that violence is a threat to one's physical existence, it has a direct negative impact on the effectiveness of a media outlet and a journalist's work, because a journalist should also think about safety when obtaining information. This pressure has a negative impact on the quality of a media product, creating fear and self-censorship. In order to prevent these threats, media workers expressed the idea of creating such a strong organization that will act under the mandate of the Media Ombudsman, will have an immediate and effective response to any kind of aggression or crime against journalists and will take care of their protection: “I need an organization, or a person who will do everything for me as a journalist and will have an immediate response to all kinds of misconduct,” says a respondent from the Georgian Public Broadcaster. The focus group participants noted that the problem of legal protection for journalists is a persistent one and that a reporter should know which organization has the resources to defend a journalist free of charge: “It would be good if there was an organization that you could go to and say that you have been sued and you need a lawyer to defend you,” says an iFact journalist.

Another way to ensure the safety of journalists, according to the respondents, is the active involvement of experienced journalists. For example, a representative of the Georgian Public Broadcaster says that it would be better if famous journalists with great experience took part in the rallies, which pose the threat of physical confrontation, as it happened on July 5, 2021, because violence against them would not be dared.

Summary: Media representatives explicitly note the deteriorating situation in recent years in terms of the safety and vulnerability of journalists. This is linked to the polarized political environment and the impunity, which seems to legitimize the crimes committed against journalists and, at the same time, damages the public image of journalism as a profession. In assessing the year 2023, the key word and, accordingly, the leading emotion is “fear,” which, according to journalists, is killing the profession.

■ 4.7. Media in the Face of Financial Collapse

The traditional model of media funding is facing challenges, and debates on alternative models of funding are relevant in democratic countries. The transparency of media ownership and funding in Georgia is, first of all, important for assessing the quality of democracy in the country. This factor affects the editorial independence of a media outlet. Financial sustainability and independence are the most important factors for media viability.

In 2023, the financial situation of independent media continued to deteriorate compared to 2022. As mentioned above, Transparency International - Georgia cites deteriorating legislation (ban on gambling ads on TV from the second quarter of 2022), increased self-censorship in the business environment, and increased pressure on the media as the reason. What are the challenges to financial sustainability and what has changed in 2023? To what extent is political polarization related to the financial sustainability of the media? What is the attitude of the business sector (media advertising, sponsorship, donations) towards independent media? - These questions were also put to the focus group participants.

The financial needs necessary for the creation of media content are primarily related to the financial costs/salaries of human resources, the needs of the office and material-technical base, and other unforeseen costs. Less financial resources are directly related to less qualified human resources, low quality of material and technical base, the problem of creating a diverse and customer-oriented media product, and logically - to low quality of journalism. This, in turn, affects media ratings.

According to the focus group participants, the current model of media funding is in crisis, or more precisely, “the media free from the influence of the ruling party is breathing its last” (a respondent from the regional media). The reason for this situation is political polarization, which has a negative impact on the financing of independent media.

According to the researchers of Transparency International - Georgia, “Georgian media, as a successful/profitable business, is difficult to establish and the reason for this may be increased self-censorship in the business environment... Under hybrid information warfare and polarized environment, this situation makes the media even more vulnerable. This challenge becomes especially relevant in the pre-election period, when the share of political advertising on television increases” (Gersamia, Vakhtangashvili, 2023).

In terms of financial sustainability, regional media outlets that rely primarily on international donor funding face a particularly difficult situation. Respondents say that grant obligations imply the fulfillment of various conditions - in a number of cases these conditions are related to the creation of specific media content, which may be of secondary importance for the regional population. A respondent from Borjomi TV says: "A journalist who works on the material defined by the grant conditions can no longer devote his/her time to the issues that are very important for the regional population. hiring additional staff is also a problem," - thus a vicious circle is created, in which all components are simultaneously the cause and the result of the problem.

A representative of Samkhretis Karibche also talks about the stagnation due to financial problems. According to the respondent, the lack of advertising and the dependence only on international donors do not allow the media outlet to think about the diversity and development of products: "It is very bad that regional media outlets do not have their resources and income - for example, advertising! We are dependent on donors, whereas financial sustainability is important to increase human resources and to cover all the issues that are important for the local population."

Journalists emphasize that the media should adapt to modern technologies and implement alternative digital distribution methods alongside traditional broadcasting channels. However, this transition necessitates adequately trained personnel and technological expertise, both of which are contingent on financial resources, which can be in short supply, particularly for regional media outlets.

National broadcasters also talk about the need to change the funding model for free media and introduce a model where the media is not forced to meet the requirements of the owner/donor. The issue of journalists' salaries in both regional and national broadcasters is also problematic. Although there are no financial problems in pro-government TV stations (e.g. late payment of salaries), journalists from Imedi TV and Rustavi 2 TV also mentioned miserable salaries. Financial challenges were cited as the reason for staff turnover and recruitment.

Summary: A necessary condition for media viability is financial sustainability, which will be the basis for creating a pluralistic, free, independent, and audience-accountable media environment. According to the respondents, this requires the changes in the media funding model, because the scarce advertising market, the artificially and deliberately worsened legal environment, and the dependence on donor funding alone do not give the media, especially in the regions, the opportunity to develop, which ultimately leads to the production of low-quality media products, staff turnover, and creates more fertile ground for pursuing the interests of certain political forces.

■ 4.8. Support Mechanisms and Solidarity Journalism

Although media professionals openly talk about the high degree of polarization among media workers, solidarity among each other is the issue they consider most important in journalistic activities - especially in crisis and critical times for media and society.

Journalists recall cases in which they share materials and help each other prepare media products as part of their professional activities. Such a demonstration of solidarity is considered important especially as pro-opposition and/or non-parliamentary journalists face communication problems with government sources. A journalist from Rustavi 2 TV notes: "There are cases when government officials refuse to give interviews to pro-opposition channels; in such cases journalists from pro-government channels broadcast interviews with a "cut microphone" (when the logo is not visible). This is a demonstration of solidarity, but we also understand that it is the same as the government providing a content framework for the media." The journalist from Rustavi 2 TV talks about the cases when colleagues from critical media are not allowed to personally attend a meeting in any state agency and ask critical questions. In this situation, they have to be guided by the "common commentary," which leads to information selectivity.

Polarization reduces mutual solidarity among media representatives. It is precisely because of the fear that the media associated with the ruling party avoids expressing solidarity with the representatives of the pro-opposition media, because this gesture will not be perceived as appropriate. A respondent from Imedi TV says: "I am afraid to express solidarity with a journalist from the opposition channel, because I think that my comments or posts will be 'screened' by my colleagues (including those from the pro-opposition channels) and they will attack me just because I work for Imedi TV and now I 'have decided' to express solidarity". The respondents believe that the antagonistic attitude and labeling of each other has become unprofitable and harmful for the media itself.

All media representatives talk about the importance of solidarity as the main support mechanism. According to them, the prerequisite for restoring collegiality and solidarity among the media organizations may be ethical behavior that will unite the media in their daily activities.

Journalists consider both the solidarity among media outlets and the unity between media and society to be crucial. This is demonstrated in ethical reporting on sensitive issues affecting people and vulnerable groups, as well as in advocating for people's concerns and bringing them to the attention of politicians, especially the ruling party.

Journalists explain that the media's damaged image and shaken trust are due to the fact that "under polarization, the media itself has forgotten the people, it no longer listens to the voice of the people and therefore the people no longer have solidarity with it," says a journalist from the Georgian Public Broadcaster. A journalist from the pro-government Imedi TV company talks about the same problem: "The problem is that we, journalists, have distanced ourselves from the people. We are perceived as part of politics and politicians. In this process, solidarity has been lost and political propaganda has damaged journalism as a profession, more precisely, it has killed journalism..."

The media landscape in the country is not a self-contained institution; rather, its quality and effectiveness are intertwined with various factors. Just like any interactive process, the relationship between society, the political spectrum, and the media is mutually interdependent, with each side playing a pivotal role in determining the effectiveness of this interaction. The institutionalization of solidarity is also a crucial element in this context.

Thus, it is important to analyze the role of individual elements of society in media effectiveness:

- ▶ The respondents note that the involvement of politicians (both from the ruling party and the opposition), especially in recent years, does not lead to the improvement of the media environment, but, on the contrary, to the aggravation of polarization, the restriction of access to information, the blocking of media funding sources, the reduction of the degree of solidarity between the parties involved (media, people, government), the increase of antagonism, the deterioration of the quality of a media product and the reduction of the audience's awareness.
- ▶ Journalists speak openly about the need for impartial sources of funding for free and critical media, highlighting the role of international and local organizations in promoting media funding.
- ▶ With regard to the involvement of civil society organizations, they emphasize the need for solidarity with media organizations, which will be supported mainly by their immediate response to crimes committed against the media and by initiating the protection of journalists.
- ▶ The role of business representatives is important in terms of funding, which should also be impartial.
- ▶ The role of influential religious organizations and individuals is assessed very negatively. "The Patriarchate, like the ruling party and the opposition, is destructive in the process of improving the media environment..." (a respondent from Tok-TV). They also consider the use of hate speech against journalists and the promotion of antagonism as a "merit" of the Church: "The Church declares us the enemy of Christianity. They incite the parish against us, they curse us" (a respondent from iFact).

In order to increase the effectiveness of journalistic activities, journalists consider it necessary to retrain in the following directions:

- ▶ The process and peculiarities of holding electronic elections;
- ▶ Retraining of producers;
- ▶ Investigative journalism and open data processing;
- ▶ Physical safety;
- ▶ Journalistic ethics;
- ▶ Sectoral journalism;
- ▶ Artificial intelligence and the media;
- ▶ Improving foreign language skills.

Summary: While the main achievement of democratization and civil society is freedom of speech, all parties involved in the process are responsible for maintaining and strengthening this achievement: the ruling party and the opposition, international and local organizations, the business sector, influential institutions and, of course, the people - whose welfare should be the main product of democracy. The lack of public solidarity in the process of democratization of the media is related to the fact that the media has distanced itself from the people and their problems, it is no longer a bridge to the society and solving its problems, which is a challenge to the media environment.

Recommendations

To improve the media environment, it is important for actors to work in a coordinated and systematic way, both to reduce polarization, and in the process of covering the elections and dealing with Russian disinformation. Recommendations are addressed to media organizations, the government/ruling party and the opposition, local and international organizations and the business sector, and are broken down to respond to various problems. It is also noteworthy that the reduction of polarization in itself will have an impact on strengthening the safety of journalists, improving the electoral environment, strengthening solidarity and other challenges.

What should be done to reduce polarization?

The ruling party should:

- ▶ Establish formal cooperation (providing comments and information, participating in TV programs) with critical media outlets;
- ▶ End the campaign of stigmatizing the media and demonizing journalists;
- ▶ Increase access to public information for critical and independent media, so that the media can serve as a channel for the dual information flow.

Other political parties should:

- ▶ Promote the return of issues relevant to society to the media agenda, stop creating the “enemy image” of the media and campaign-style stigmatization;
- ▶ Provide timely information to the media, make public comments, participate in programs and debates (where both sides, the ruling party and the opposition, are represented);
- ▶ Expand the list of thematic speakers offered to the media.

Media organizations should:

- ▶ In order to increase trust in the media, focus on the problems of the population, bring back to the media the issues that are important to society and that have been artificially removed from the agenda as a result of real or false/illusory polarization;
- ▶ Reduce polarization among media organizations. This requires strengthening solidarity and ethical standards. The first step could be to agree on mechanisms necessary for the safety of journalists; further steps could include discussions and agreements related to journalistic activities (e.g. accreditation of journalists, relations with sources, etc.), compliance with ethical standards;
- ▶ It is also important to expand journalistic sources (thematic and expert);
- ▶ In order to reduce self-censorship, limit informal relationships with politicians and establish the practice of business/formal relationships.

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ In order to reduce self-censorship in the media and sources, call on politicians to stop stigmatizing the media and journalists;

- ▶ Encourage politicians to participate in debates, remove barriers to the release of information, and establish business practice in relations with journalists;
- ▶ Support the development of beat journalism, which includes the raising of competences on the coverage of various topics relevant to the population, and thus, promoting the return of these topics to the agenda.

Academia and higher educational institutions

- ▶ In order to understand the role and activity of the media in the process of building democracy, promote interdisciplinary (e.g. journalism studies, media psychology, law, political science, etc.) modules and studies not only for journalists.

What should be done for the safety of journalists?

The ruling party should:

- ▶ End impunity for crimes committed against journalists, starting with an immediate response to each crime, and investigating crimes to the end (including punishing the organizers of the July 5, 2021 attack on journalists);
- ▶ Stop aggressive rhetoric, use of hate speech and incitement to violence against journalists;
- ▶ Publicly condemn the cases of verbal and physical violence against journalists (including those involving members of its own political team).

Media organizations should:

- ▶ Develop professional standards for the physical and psychological safety of journalists;
- ▶ Remind the public and politicians of the crimes committed against journalists, demand an investigation and an end to impunity;
- ▶ Express solidarity in cases of violence against colleagues and condemn violence (no matter which media or “side” a journalist represents).

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ Initiate a coordinated effort by media organizations and the civil society sector to inform the international community about cases of harassment of journalists in Georgia;
- ▶ Demand a full investigation into the crimes committed against journalists and an end to impunity;
- ▶ Call in a coordinated manner for targeted sanctions against those individuals and companies implicated in human rights violations and crimes against journalists;
- ▶ Discuss the creation of a powerful media ombudsman institution to respond immediately and effectively to any kind of aggression or crime against journalists and to ensure their protection;
- ▶ Promote the establishment of a psychological support center/platform for journalists.

How to prepare for the elections?

Before the elections, it is important to increase trust in the media. To raise voter awareness, it is necessary to hold thematic debates and discussions on issues of importance to society both in the capital and in the regions (including the regions populated by ethnic minorities). For this to happen,

The ruling party and/or politicians should:

- ▶ Stop boycotting the media, start participating in live debates and giving comments;
- ▶ Establish the practice of formal, businesslike relations with media representatives;
- ▶ Remove barriers to the provision of public information.

Media organizations should:

- ▶ Put important issues for the population on the media agenda, demand accountability from the government and political parties;
- ▶ Create content for different social media platforms (TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, X, etc.), start micro-targeting the audience when distributing materials.

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ Offer modules and workshops to the media on the peculiarities of covering the electronic election process;
- ▶ Strengthen monitoring of the use of hate speech in the media and develop recommendations to reduce it;
- ▶ Promote investigative journalism and support media content produced in this regard.

What should be done to stop the instrumentalization of the law against the media?

The ruling party should:

- ▶ Stop the instrumentalization of the law to hinder and restrict journalistic activities, ensure an inclusive environment (involvement of the media and civil society sector) to improve the legislation.

Media organizations should:

- ▶ Express solidarity against the SLAPP practices used against the media and activists;
- ▶ Report on cases of harassment of journalists and remind the authorities of their accountability.

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ Increase monitoring of legislative initiatives related to media activities and advocate for improved legislation;

- ▶ Call for a change in the accreditation rules;
- ▶ Conduct monitoring to suspend the implementation of the Law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” in various forms;
- ▶ Begin monitoring the regulation of hate speech and obscenity;
- ▶ Strengthen SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) monitoring, start raising awareness among journalists about such lawsuits.

Academia and higher educational institutions should:

- ▶ Promote awareness about the importance of the journalistic profession and freedom of expression;
- ▶ Promote the teaching of media law;
- ▶ Include SLAPP issues in training modules.

How to reduce the impact of Russian disinformation?

Media organizations should:

- ▶ Start to preemptively inform the public on specific issues (where public awareness is lower and vulnerability is high) to counter Russian disinformation and build resilience. For example, it is important to raise public awareness about the benefits of European integration and the evils of Russian imperialism; it is important to prepare historical films and educational programs;
- ▶ Reduce the use of hate speech and stop stigmatizing vulnerable groups; uphold ethical standards;
- ▶ Ensure the preparation of news clips and other types of media products to increase media literacy in society on the issues of Russian disinformation, fake news, neglect and identification of trolls and bots in social networks.

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ Support the systematic production of content and strengthening of pro-Western media to expose Russian disinformation and build public resilience.

Academia and higher educational institutions should:

- ▶ Include topics and literature on countering Russian disinformation in training modules;
- ▶ Organize training for students and media professionals on topics targeted by Russian disinformation.

What should be done to ensure the financial viability of the media?

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ Discuss, with the involvement of the media, the creation and support of different funding models;

- ▶ Strengthen the field of investigative journalism.

The ruling party should:

- ▶ Stop pressuring the business sector to restrict funding to critical and independent media;
- ▶ Stop pressuring international donor organizations not to fund critical and independent media.

Business sector should:

- ▶ Stop acting in the interests of the pro-government or any other party when cooperating with the media;

Media organizations should:

- ▶ Initiate a discussion about the establishment of healthy funding models for media companies.

What should be done to strengthen solidarity?

Media organizations should:

- ▶ To promote mutual solidarity, organize informal meetings with different public groups (without cameras and not for the purpose of producing journalistic content) to discuss the role and purpose of the media (especially in the context of the upcoming elections);
- ▶ To increase public trust, take care to establish solidarity journalism in daily practice: in terms of human rights protection, by preparing support materials for vulnerable groups (religious and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ community, children and women, people with disabilities); by thematic coverage of population problems;
- ▶ Stop preparing discrediting materials about colleagues working for other media outlets and maintain collegiality and ethical standards;
- ▶ To increase journalists' resilience and reduce self-censorship, create a reliable, supportive environment in newsrooms and establish the practice of demonstrating collective solidarity.

With the participation of local and international organizations:

- ▶ Institutionalize solidarity, create a solidarity platform of critical and independent media organizations.

Academia and higher educational institutions should:

- ▶ Create and strengthen solidarity journalism modules (covering human rights / vulnerable groups); focus on the negative effects of using hate speech in the modules;
- ▶ Strengthen the teaching of journalism ethics and cooperation with civil society organizations.



Conclusion

The present study has revealed that the existence of real polarization in Georgia does not exclude that there is a space for false/illusory polarization. The manifestation of both forms of polarization negatively affects and damages the media environment.

Polarization creates artificial barriers in the process of journalistic activities (obtaining, processing and distributing information). Illusory polarization removes the topics/discourse that are important to the public from the media agenda, which damages media content and makes it uninteresting to the public. Consequently, this has a negative impact on public trust and solidarity with the media, which is particularly alarming in the context of the upcoming 2024 elections. As a result of reduced trust in the media, voters' sources of information (and their credibility) are limited, and public groups become even more vulnerable to populist ideologies.

Throughout the research, when examining the challenges within the media environment, the prevailing emotion identified was fear. This fear serves as a foundation for various issues such as disinformation, self-censorship, and limitations on freedom of expression. It is imperative to address and eliminate this barrier as it is crucial for the progress of society and the consolidation of democracy.

Independent media in Georgia continues to operate in the midst of Russian aggression and faces numerous threats. To combat these challenges effectively, a coordinated and sustained effort by various pro-Western actors for strengthening the media environment is essential. In order to reduce the atmosphere of fear and self-censorship in the media, it is crucial to confront and address remnants of Soviet and imperialist mindset. The key objectives on this path involve democratizing the media, empowering both the people and the media outlets to strengthen their voices.



Appendices

Media outlets who took part in the research:

1. Broadcasting TV company “Formula”;
2. Broadcasting TV company “Mtavari Arkhi”;
3. Georgian Public Broadcaster – the First Channel;
4. Broadcasting TV company “Imedi”;
5. Broadcasting TV company “Rustavi 2”;
6. Broadcasting TV company “Maestro”;
7. Broadcasting TV company “TV Pirveli”;
8. Investigative Studio “iFact”;
9. Investigative Studio “Monitori”;
10. Radio “Commersant”;
11. Online media “publika.ge”;
12. Online media “Netgazeti / batumelebi”;
13. Regional TV company “Tok TV”;
14. Regional newspaper “Chemi Kharagauli”;
15. Media holding “Samkhretis Karibche”;
16. Online media “Kakhetis Khma”;
17. Regional TV company “Borjomi TV”;
18. Radio Liberty



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MediaVoice

Media and Communication Educational and Research Center “media Voice” was founded in 2015. The Center aims to support the enhancement of a media and mass-communication field in the manner of creation of new knowledge and through educational-research activities, raise awareness in media literacy and support introduction and strengthening democratic values in a civil society. The center aims at advising in the fields of media psychology, public relations, media and mass-communication, media law, and support to transfer interdisciplinary knowledge. Center aims to conduct research on local and international platforms. Center collaborates with higher educational institutions, local and international organizations, companies, educational and research centers. from 2023 Media Voice is a member of the Media Freedom Coalition Consultative Network (MFC-CN), a global alliance dedicated to preserving and promoting media freedom.

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