

# Media Environment 2022

THREATS AND SUPPORTIVE INSTRUMENTS IN GEORGIA

**Mariam Gersamia**  
**Maia Toradze**





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Media and Communication Educational and Research Center  
“Media Voice”

**MEDIA ENVIRONMENT 2022: THREATS AND  
SUPPORTIVE INSTRUMENTS IN GEORGIA**

Mariam Gersamia  
Maia Toradze

**TBILISI  
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## Media Environment 2022: Threats and Supportive Instruments in Georgia

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Email: [info@mcerc.ge](mailto:info@mcerc.ge); Website: [www.mcerc.ge](http://www.mcerc.ge)



Reviewer: Mamuka Andguladze, Ph.D in Law Sciences

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**It's easy to speak the truth**

Hryhorii Skovoroda  
(1722-1794) Ukrainian philosopher and poet

## Introduction

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The purpose of this study is to assess the threats and supporting mechanisms present in the Georgian media environment in 2022. Observation of the media environment, similar to the previous year's research, was based on the evaluation of the participants involved in the research and further comparative analysis.

The research highlights the impact of political polarization and crises on media viability and the impact of global and local crises (including Russia's war in Ukraine) on the media environment; focuses on the extent to which the safety of journalists is ensured in Georgia, how the investigation of crimes committed against journalists is conducted, and what is being done to end any impunity. Based on the challenges that have existed since previous years, the study analyzes the existing threats in relation to self-censorship and freedom of expression.

How media manage to maintain institutional viability (e.g., financial sustainability, content production, relationships with sources and access to information) is particularly important in the context of political polarization. In this process, the hindering and supporting mechanisms present in the media from the side of various actors are evaluated. The study includes an evaluation of solidarity journalism as a support mechanism through the lens of situations observed in 2022: 1. Solidarity towards the media; 2. Mutual solidarity between media outlets; 3. Solidarity from the media towards various vulnerable groups.

At the beginning of the study, the key events influencing the media agenda and media environment are highlighted. One of the main aspects of the research is the assessment of the challenges in the Georgian media environment as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis that followed. In this regard, under the existing conditions of Russian propaganda, the possible mechanisms of the influence of disinformation and its reduction are analyzed. The direct connection of artificial polarization, as a propaganda mechanism, to the Russian hybrid war, which deliberately destroys the credibility of journalism as a profession, is highlighted.

Milestones: 2022

FEBRUARY 24

Eight years after its first military intervention, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale war in Ukraine, changing the world, including the Georgian media agenda;

FEBRUARY 28

Ukraine submitted an application for joining the European Union;

MARCH 1

Amendments to the “Law of Georgia on Broadcasting” (Chapter VIII, Article 63) entered into force, according to which it was forbidden to advertise, including sponsor announcements or product placement about gambling games, bookmakers, lotto, bingo, and their organizers;

MARCH 3

Following in the footsteps of Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova submitted their application for membership in the European Union;

MAY 16

Nika Gvaramia, the founder and director of the TV channel Mtavari, was sentenced to 3 years and 6 months in prison by the Tbilisi City Court on politically motivated charges, which caused a new wave of deterioration of the media environment, the Court of Appeals upheld the decision;



JUNE 16

The European Commission published an evaluation report regarding the granting of Georgia's European Union candidate status, recommending the Council of the EU to give Georgia the prospect of becoming a member state on condition it meets a number of priority issues;

JUNE 23

The European Council adopted the decision to grant candidate status for EU membership to Ukraine and Moldova, and to recognize the European perspective for Georgia, which means that the Council is ready to grant candidacy status for membership as soon as the priority problems determined by the European Commission are resolved; among the 12-point recommendations: reducing political polarization, de-oligarchization, and improving the media environment occupy an important place;

SEPTEMBER 7

A project was registered in the Parliament of Georgia, which aims to make changes to "the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting" (adopted by the leading committee in the third reading) and according to which the mandate of the Communications Commission to carry out supervision is expanded.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union, COM(2022) 405 final, (17.6.2022), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/Georgia%20opinion%20and%20Annex.pdf> (last seen: 12.12.2022)

<sup>2</sup> In particular, the European Commission's recommendations state: „Undertake stronger efforts to guarantee a free, professional, pluralistic and independent media environment, notably by ensuring that criminal procedures brought against media owners fulfil the highest legal standards, and by launching impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of journalists and other media professionals”

# 1. Literature Review

## 1.1. Media during wartime communications

The year 2022 began with Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, which caused a humanitarian disaster and crisis. The war affected the media and political environment in the Black Sea region, including Georgia.

The Fourth Geneva Convention, which deals with the protection of civilians in a time of war, designates journalists as non-targets in war zones. According to a study by Griffen (2022), this principle was violated by the Russian Federation in Ukraine. Griffen, in reference to the International Press Institute as early as June, documented 365 attacks on journalists, despite various international guarantees<sup>3</sup>. According to the updated data of the International Press Institute, from February 24, 2022, until the writing this report, 707 alarming cases (alerts) were recorded (including murders, verbal, physical and online attacks, arrests, fines, etc.)<sup>4</sup>. According to UNESCO data, 10 journalists were killed in Ukraine during 2022, including two women and international journalists from the USA, Ireland, France, Russia, and Lithuania<sup>5</sup>.

Pavlik (2022) argues that these dangerous circumstances mean the press members covering Ukraine often have to seek alternative sources to gather material, such as messaging platforms like Telegram channels, open-source intelligence (OSINT) tools, and CCTV camera footage, which are not easily accessible. The only option to gain a semblance of security for reporters appears to be embedding in military units. However, embedded journalists in an active war zone must run their news reports by unit commanders, and sometimes have to go through a rather lengthy approval process, which may

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<sup>3</sup> Griffen, S. (2022), Analyses the cost to journalism. *British Journalism Review*, 33(2), pp.21–24. doi:10.1177/09564748221103429.

<sup>4</sup> IPI Tracker: 707 media freedom alerts linked to Russia-Ukraine war, (2022), International Press Institute (IPI), available at: <https://ipi.media/ipi-tracker-russia-ukraine-war-visualisations/> (last seen: 15.12.2022)

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO observatory of killed journalists – Ukraine, (2022), available at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/observatory/country/223833> (last seen: 15.12.2022)

significantly limit their freedom and inevitably bring the integrity of their reporting to question<sup>6</sup>.

The war highlighted the role of Ukrainian citizen journalists, especially in the first months, when the reality of the war was seen without an editorial filter and had a “cold shower effect”. In the conditions of an ongoing digital transformation, real war and cyber-attacks (part of which are disinformation campaigns) change the process of production and transmission of journalistic content itself, highlighting the role of citizen journalists. In this period, Telegram-channels were activated in Georgia, where information in the Georgian language also began to be disseminated.

Makhortykh (2022) points out that the algorithm-driven audience policies practically force reporters covering Ukraine to often process traumatic and polarizing content, likely in detriment to themselves. In a study of citizen journalists, Dosenko et al. (2022) concluded that for residents of Russian-occupied Crimea, citizen journalism is a passive form of resistance in response to the forced expulsion of anti-Russian journalists from Crimea. Citizen journalists try to spread information about human rights violations and fill the existing information vacuum<sup>7</sup>. Related to this phenomenon, Zheng (2022), with the example of BBC’s reporting, argues that the press is now responsible for the encouragement of the Ukrainian people, drawing attention to the shifting role of media in the conflict as a psychological tool<sup>8</sup>.

In this regard, it is important to strengthen the role of solidarity journalism. According to Anita Varma, the initiator of the concept of solidarity journalism, “solidarity reporting focuses on issues that disrespect or deny communities that are disrespected or denied their humanity and represents the perspectives of people directly affected. It intentionally moves beyond parroting officials’ or outside experts’ claims about a marginalized community to centralize the truth of people whose knowledge is based on lived experience.”<sup>9</sup>. In the MCERC research report, which is about the demonstration of solidarity of the Georgian media towards Ukraine, four directions of solidarity journalism are mentioned. These are: solidarity expressed by the society with the media(1);

<sup>6</sup> Pavlik, J. (2022), *The Russian War in Ukraine and the Implications for the News Media*, Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications.

<sup>7</sup> Dosenko, Anzhelika and Iuksel, Gaiana and Sydorenko, Natalia and Sytnyk, Oleksii and Dubetska, Oksana, (2022), *Crimean Citizen Journalism: Genesis and Trends in Communication Network*, International Journal of Computer Science and Network Security (2), pp. 63-74. ISSN 1738-7906

<sup>8</sup> Zheng, N. (2022), *The Content Analysis of BBC Live News Reports of the RussiaUkraine War*, In 2022 International Conference on Science Education and Art Appreciation (SEAA 2022) (pp. 1269-1276). Atlantis Press

<sup>9</sup> Varma A.,(2021), *What Solidarity Journalism Reveals to Us*, available at: <https://independent.org/2021/12/what-solidarity-journalism-reveals-to-us/> (last seen: 20.12.2022).

solidarity journalism in the classical sense, when the media itself demonstrates solidarity with vulnerable groups (2); expression of mutual solidarity between media organizations (3); and strengthening collective resilience – by showing psychological support in a crisis situation or by demonstrating prosocial behaviors and positive micro-moments (4)<sup>10</sup>. Researcher Patrick Noren (2022) points out that solidarity is effective when it is multilateral and not one-sided or even bilateral and calls this model the “solidarity matrix”<sup>11</sup>.

In his article, Samuel Wooley (Wooley, 2020) focuses on vulnerable groups and says that they are often the targets of disinformation, but not only in the online space. Along with traditional and social media, the experience gained in the physical environment plays a very important role. The researcher calls this structural disinformation<sup>12</sup>.

Researchers (Geissler et al., 2022) draw attention to the fact that the extent and influence of Russian disinformation in social networks is very large<sup>13</sup>. According to Hanley and others (2022), even citing Russian sources has a negative impact on audiences<sup>14</sup>. Social media, in turn, influences the agenda of traditional media. In this context, of course, Georgian social media customers are also targets of Russian propaganda. Chivvis (2017) points out that the purpose of Russian propaganda information operations is, first of all, to stir the water, and then to cast doubt on objective truths and shape a political discussion that benefits the Kremlin<sup>15</sup>.

According to Liaropoulos (2022), the Kremlin’s disinformation target is mainly Ukraine and NATO member states, “In terms of reaching and convincing Western audiences, Russia scored a low record, but seemed to be more successful in exploiting ambiguity and distrust in the social media and thereby undermine the truth and the very idea of objective reporting”<sup>16</sup>. When ana-

<sup>10</sup> Gersamia M., Gigauri E., Mamasakhlisi S., Bodokia M., Nakoevi M., (2022), Russia’s War in Ukraine and Georgian Media Solidarity Towards Ukraine, Media and Communication Educational and Research Center “Media Voice” Research.

<sup>11</sup> Noren P., (2022), *The Three Pillars of Solidarity Journalism and Why It Is So Important*, Media and Communication Educational and Research Center “Media Voice”, available at: <https://www.mcerc.ge/post/journalist-subject-society-the-three-pillars-of-solidarity-journalism-and-why-it-so-important> (last seen: 13.12.2022)

<sup>12</sup> Wooley S., (2022), In Many Democracies, Disinformation Targets the Most Vulnerable, Center for International Governance Innovation, available at: <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/in-many-democracies-disinformation-targets-the-most-vulnerable/> (last seen: 13.12.2022)

<sup>13</sup> Geissler, D., Bär, D., Pröllochs, N., & Feuerriegel, S. (2022), Russian propaganda on social media during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, arXiv preprint arXiv:2211.04154.

<sup>14</sup> Hanley, H. W., Kumar, D., & Durumeric, Z. (2022), “A Special Operation”: A Quantitative Approach to Dissecting and Comparing Different Media Ecosystems’ Coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War. arXiv preprint arXiv:2210.03016.

<sup>15</sup> Chivvis Ch., (2017), Understanding Russian “Hybrid Warfare” And What Can Be Done About it, RAND Corporation, p. 3; available at: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND\\_CT468.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf) (last seen: 13.12.2022)

<sup>16</sup> Liaropoulos N., (2022), Information as an Instrument of Power - Lessons learned from the War in Ukraine, NATO OPEN Publications, vol.7, no.6, p. 20; available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365635155\\_Information\\_as\\_an\\_Instrument\\_of\\_Power\\_-\\_Lessons\\_learned\\_from\\_the\\_War\\_in\\_Ukraine\\_NATO\\_OPEN\\_Publications\\_vol7\\_no6\\_2022](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365635155_Information_as_an_Instrument_of_Power_-_Lessons_learned_from_the_War_in_Ukraine_NATO_OPEN_Publications_vol7_no6_2022) (last seen: 15.12.2022)

lyzing the Georgian media environment, it should also be taken into account that after “Kremlin-backed news outlets were banned across the European Union, and platforms like Facebook and Twitter reduced their reach worldwide, Moscow has shifted its game plan to focus increasingly on its domestic audience, as well as the Russian-speaking diaspora in neighboring countries and those farther afield”<sup>17</sup>. Researchers (Giesler, Barry, et al., 2022) point out that pro-Russian propaganda messages were mainly disseminated through a systematic and coordinated propaganda campaign. Journalists were also the Kremlin’s targets in the information war waged in Georgia, and this systemic attack was even more visible in social media.<sup>18</sup>

In order to analyze the changes in the Ukrainian Front and Kremlin policy, it is important for journalists to listen to both Western sources and bloggers who see the situation from inside Russia and systematically identify Russian propaganda methods and predict events. Although there are not many such bloggers who fight against Putin’s regime, for example Maxim Katz<sup>19</sup>, who has his own YouTube channel with more than a million subscribers. When listening to Russian bloggers of oppositional political views, the issue of perspective is important. In order to understand the current processes, it is essential not only to see the events from a Western perspective, but also to recognize the structure of the imperialist mindset. Media representatives feel the linguistic sense of propaganda, create “strategies of memory and forgetting” in their daily routine, and can defeat nihilism and strengthen democratic resilience. Because of all this, any reliable news media become the target of an empire and its allies.

## 1.2. Political polarization and the media

Political polarization, like in the previous year, continued to be a significant challenge to media viability. The 2021 media environment study (Gersamia & Toradze, 2021) revealed that the main threat to the media was political polarization and polarization among media organizations themselves, which led to: 1. stigmatization (attachment of partisan media labels) and the dis-

<sup>17</sup> Scott M., (2022), As war in Ukraine evolves, so do disinformation tactics, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-russia-disinformation-propaganda/> (last seen: 17.12.2022).

<sup>18</sup> Geissler D., Bär D., et al, (2022), Russian propaganda on social media during the 2022: Invasion of Ukraine, Cornell University, p. 2; online archive available at: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2211.04154.pdf> (last seen: 17.12.2022)

<sup>19</sup> After the events of February 2022, Maxim Katz had to leave Russia and move to Poland, because his activities in Russia, due to his criticism of Putin’s regime, could be considered illegal. In his videos, he includes the nuances of Russian life and mentality, which is not easy to see for a person with a Western mentality. Maxim Katz’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/maxkatz1/videos> (last seen: 15.12.2022)

crediting of journalists and media outlets; 2. interference with journalistic activity<sup>20</sup>.

Researchers (Tóth, Mihelj, Štětka, Kondor, 2022) confirm “while the selection of news sources is in line with people’s electoral (and to a lesser extent ideological) preferences... exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can also be strongly correlated with political and ideological leanings.”<sup>21</sup>. Polarization may be exacerbated by social network algorithms, which offer users more information similar to those that meet their needs. It should also be noted that in Georgia, according to studies, the rate of Internet usage in 2022 has increased significantly (up to 81%)<sup>22</sup>. Accordingly, we assume that influence of information spread on internet has also expanded.

Newman (2022) links political polarization to the trend of harassment of journalists around the world and notes that in 2021, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to two fearless journalists – Maria Ressa from the Philippines and Dmitry Muratov from Russia – highlighted the urgency of this problem<sup>23</sup>. According to the 2022 report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the level of confidence in journalism was lower (60%) “especially in countries where there is political polarization, economic weakness, and journalists themselves are under attack”<sup>24</sup>. According to data for 2022, trust in the media decreased in Georgia. In particular, according to the population survey conducted by IRI, in March, 60% trusted the media, and by September, trust had decreased by 5%.<sup>25</sup>

Samkharadze (2022), based on various reports (OSCE 2018; 2020; 2021; GIP 2021), indicates that Georgian political competition (political debates, pre-election campaigns, parliamentary activities of parties, etc.) is devoid of ideological discourse and is replaced by radicalization and a high degree of uncompromising confrontation.<sup>26</sup> These characteristics of polarization are

<sup>20</sup> Gersamia, M. ., & Toradze, M. . (2022). Media Environment in Georgia during the Crisis. *GEORGIAN SCIENTISTS*, 4(4), 220–242. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.52340/gc.2022.04.04.25> (last seen: 13.12.2022)

<sup>21</sup> Tóth, F., Mihelj, S., Štětka, V., Kondor, K. (2022), A media repertoires approach to selective exposure: news consumption and political polarization in Eastern Europe, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 19401612211072552.

<sup>22</sup> Public mood in Georgia, results of face-to-face survey conducted in August 2022, NDI-CRRC, available at: [www.ndi.org/georgia-polls](http://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls), [www.caucasusbarometer.org](http://www.caucasusbarometer.org) (last seen: 16.12. 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Newman N., (2022), *Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2022*, Digital News Project, Published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism with the support of the Google News Initiative. p. 28, available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/Newman%20-%20Trends%20and%20Predictions%202022%20FINAL.pdf> (last seen: 17.12.2022)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Public Opinion Surveys, Residents of Georgia, International Republican Institute, March and September, 2022, <https://www.iri.org/search/?search=Georgia> (last seen: 20.12.2022)

<sup>26</sup>Samkharadze, N., (2022), What Does Polarization Look Like in Georgia and How to Measure It?, Georgia Institute of Policy (GIP) Policy Memorandum #60, p. 3., available at: <https://bit.ly/3BHPp5F> (last seen: 20.12.2022)

also reflected in the media agenda. For example, Samkharadze (2022) notes that during 2022, 80% of Georgian Dream's media briefings were directly related to the United National Movement, of which 92% contained a polarizing narrative.<sup>27</sup>

The 2021 study (Gersamia, Toradze, 2021) confirmed that polarization in Georgia also had a so-called demonization effect. "On the part of politicians, the media is perceived as a political opponent, and its discrediting and delegitimization is taking place in this discourse"<sup>28</sup>. The government had a similar polarizing strategy towards critical media as it had the previous year: The opposition and the media are often considered in the same discourse and treated the same way. Such an agenda of the government affects the formation of public attitudes towards the media. Politicians continue to treat the media as a political opponent. In 2022, this tactic was already reflected in the aggressive, antisocial behavior of supporters of a particular party towards media representatives. While working in the field, journalists felt that citizens' dissatisfaction with political issues shifted to journalists. The symbiotic relationship with parties and polarization have been killing journalism as a profession and replacing critical discourse with silence that, in turn, threatens the resilience of democracy.

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<sup>27</sup> Samkharadze, N., (2022), What Does Polarization Look Like in Georgia and How to Measure It?, Georgia Institute of Policy (GIP) Policy Memorandum #60, p. 3., available at: <https://bit.ly/3BHPp5F> (last seen: 20.12.2022)

<sup>28</sup> Gersamia, M., Toradze, M., (2021), Media Environment before and after 2021 Elections: Threats and Supportive Instruments, Media and Communication Educational and Research Center, p. 32





## 2. Research Methodology

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In the present study, the challenges and supporting mechanisms of the 2022 media environment are analyzed from the perspective of representatives (reporters, producers, media managers, media owners, journalists, and talk show hosts, etc.) in various media outlets. Among them are journalists from different “poles/sides” who are united by common concerns and different challenges caused by polarization.

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

November and December 2022 were defined as the data collection period. As part of the research, two “offline” focus groups (number of participants: 17) and one online focus group (number of participants: 5) were conducted. Representatives of 13 media outlets participated in these focus groups. Among the participants were journalists, media managers, producers, media founders, writers, and talk show hosts.

In parallel with the focus groups, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of several media outlets (upon their request). In total, 25 representatives of 16 media outlets participated in the research, whose identities are confidential (see the list of media outlets in the Appendices).

## 3. Analysis and Results

### 3.1. The influence of the Russia's War in Ukraine on the media environment

Ukraine is exclusive!... It is trained in such a way that it has great endurance. In today's world, it is invaluable!

**Lina Kostenko**

Ukrainian public figure and journalist



The war waged by Russia against Ukraine has opened a “Pandora’s box” and the West has a new understanding of the dangers that have been coming from the Russian Federation for years. Russia’s war in Ukraine united the West around a single goal and highlighted the interests and European identity it shares with Ukraine and Georgia. Following war, the target audience of the information warfare has been increased, because “war is a reliable audience grabber, even if the war is not direct threat to the reader or viewer”<sup>29</sup>. In this context, in Georgia, the attack from the Russian side has intensified with a focus on pro-Western political opposition, non-governmental organizations, and especially the media.

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<sup>29</sup> Kitty A., (2005), *Don't Believe It, How lies Become News*, published by Desinformation Company, 2005, p. 140

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, new challenges appeared in the Georgian media, which were largely related to the fight against Russian disinformation. Despite the fact that the Georgian media has always lacked international and global discourse and in-depth analysis, with news programs mostly being interested in domestic political topics, since February 2022, the media's agenda has largely been about covering the large-scale war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

As soon as the war began, the Georgian media systematically expressed solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainians. According to the MCERC study, in the first 10 days after the start of the war, 85% of the 857 items analyzed in the main primetime news programs and talk shows were about Ukraine. The research covered: Georgian Public Broadcaster, TV Company Mtavari, Formula TV, TV Pirveli, TV Company Imedi and TV Company Rustavi 2. In the research on the manifestation of solidarity by Georgian media (Gersamia, Gigauri, et al., 2022), indicators of solidarity are highlighted<sup>30</sup>.

Ten months after the start of the war, according to the journalists participating in the focus-group discussion, only visual demonstration of solidarity from media (e.g., the use of the colors of the Ukrainian flag in the studio, the dress code of journalists) was no longer a deciding factor, but instead the content and structure of top-news, media agenda and program schedule/advance plan – which should not be adapted to Russian propaganda. For example, a focus group participant recalls a case when the visual form of solidarity was confusing precisely because of the content: “We have cases when representatives and supporters of the ruling party criticize the Ukrainian government through media, and the Ukrainian flag is still flying in the background,” says the talk show host from Formula TV.

With the ongoing war in Ukraine, the contours of the influence of Russian propaganda appeared more clearly in the Georgian media. According to the participants of the discussion, every detail matters, even what footage of the war the media uses to tell the story. To illustrate how Russian propaganda is captured in the media, one participant of the discussion recalled one of the stories aired by TV Imedi, which may not have directly carried an anti-Ukrainian message, but the footage was presented in such a way that it did not reflect the horrors of the war caused by Russia. “It was showing how Ukrainians

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<sup>30</sup> Gersamia M., Gigauri E., Mamasakhlisi S., Bodokia M., Nakoevi M., (2022), Russia's War in Ukraine and Georgian Media Solidarity Towards Ukraine, Media and Communication Educational and Research Center “Media Voice” Research.

were shooting rockets, collapsed buildings were not visible, and heavy shots were missed. There was no human tragedy or loss. The impression remained that this was a field study,” says the host of the Formula TV program.

After the start of the Russia’s war in Ukraine, the government’s pressure on the media increased, “the reason for which is that the government did not turn out to be a member of the coalition supporting Ukraine,” says a representative of Publika. According to the participants of the discussion, the work of the media is complicated by the fact that, unlike in previous years, the spreader of Russian propaganda messages is now the government of Georgia itself: “Government policy is in full agreement with Russian propaganda. We (journalists) have to intensively show solidarity with Ukraine on the part of the people as a counterweight to portraying a different picture from the government’s policy and rhetoric,” the political talk show host from TV Pirveli says. The correspondence between the messages of the Georgian authorities, pro-Russian organizations (such as Alt-Info) and representatives of the Kremlin is confirmed by a journalistic investigation conducted by iFact<sup>31</sup>, that revealed the synchronization of messages between these three parties in the context of the war with Ukraine.

Social networks play a role in the spread of Russian disinformation and, in some cases, influence the agenda of traditional media. According to journalists’ observations, the official anti-Ukrainian rhetoric is synchronized with the concerted work of trolls and bots in social networks. It is possible for journalists to discover disinformation on social networks before the topic and message become relevant in traditional media: “On Telegram or Facebook, we can already see in advance what message is being tested, what topics will bring a new wave of Russian propaganda attack. In the Georgian social media space, misinformation about Zelensky is orchestrated (how he ‘kills his own people and turns them into disgusting meat’; that the ‘Russian army is invincible’, etc.),” says the political talk show host from TV Pirveli.

In Georgia, with the start of the Russia’s war in Ukraine, such social media platforms, which were less popular until now, became active. By the end of 2022, through Telegram channels created by Georgian freelancers and bloggers, thousands of subscribers had become able to read news about Ukraine in Georgian every day. Among the Telegram channels created for the Geor-

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<sup>31</sup> Asatiani, I., Kachkachishvili, M., Mikheladze, N., (21.12.2022), The government as a conduit for Russian disinformation, investigative studio iFact, Available at: <http://bit.ly/3YRGZIX> (last seen: 23.12.2022)

gian audience, several blogger channels stand out, which were created at the beginning of the war in Ukraine. In this process, the filtering of disinformation and the creation of a product in the Georgian language when it comes to military communications make it difficult to disseminate reliable information promptly. "Verification of information is associated with difficulties because visual material is falsified. It often happens that the success of Ukraine is recorded by Russians, including on television." For example, both Ukrainians and Russians spread information about identical military successes. Lately, Ukrainians have been tying grenades with Ukrainian flag ribbons, and Russians can no longer use cards taken from a drone," says a Georgian blogger, who believes that after the end of the war in Ukraine, Telegram will probably lose its popularity, because, in reality, it still has few users in Georgia. It is confirmed by studies done in 2022, where the number of Telegram users in Georgia is 1%, and on Facebook, it is 97%.<sup>32</sup>

"After the start of the war in Ukraine, the number of fake news in social networks has increased on a large scale – a specific story may contain several fake stories of different content and context," says an iFact journalist, recalling the case related to the Bucha (Ukraine) tragedy. According to the journalist's observation, it was easier to find the primary source in the case of the Facebook pages and more difficult in the case of the Telegram channel.

The discussion highlighted that representatives of traditional media in Georgia have little trust in Telegram channels, consider it a product of citizen journalism, and additionally verify information with personal, reliable sources (i.e., journalists have constant communication with Ukrainian colleagues, experts, government representatives, etc.). Due to the specifics of war communications, difficulties can be seen here as well: "In order for expectations to be correct, we try to cover the reality of war, not the desired reality. The difficulty is that military experts do not want to appear on air and they are careful when disseminating specific information," says a journalist from Georgia Today.

In order to understand the scope of disinformation, journalists consider it necessary to monitor TV speeches by Russian politicians and military experts. For instance, the statements made by the spokesman of the Ministry of Defense of Russia, Major General Konashenkov, were brought up during a discussion, where he mentioned the number of Ukrainians killed: "According to

<sup>32</sup> Public Opinion Surveys, Residents of Georgia, International Republican Institute, March and September, 2022, available at: <https://www.iri.org/search/?search=Georgia> (last seen: 20.12.2022)

my observation and what Konashenkov has stated, the statistics of the dead have already exceeded the number of the population of Ukraine. I'm not saying anything about the information related to the destruction of Ukraine's military equipment," said the talk show host at Formula TV.

Following the military mobilization in Russia, there was an influx of hundreds of thousands of Russian Federation citizens.<sup>33</sup> Discussion raised the question: How do the civilians from Russia appear in the stories covered by Georgian media during wartime? Journalists looked back on the arrival of Russian citizens in Georgia is being presented by the officials as a positive event and connected with double-digit economic growth<sup>34</sup>. At the same time, critical media is covering news that describes the data confirmed by various research sources. For example, the fact that after the influx of Russian citizens in this amount, social inequality increased and the social backdrop worsened<sup>35</sup>.

Journalists referred to those Russian television stations considered as oppositional media to Putin (for example, Dozhd) that moved to Tbilisi two weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and were provided with technical assistance by the Georgian media. However, some Georgian journalists are still cautious about their professional relations with Russian journalists. "We have no desire to contact journalists who have escaped. They are not fighting Putin's regime, but they want to strengthen their media resources here," says the representative from InterPressNews.

According to the observation of the iFact journalist, requesting information from various agencies and agreeing to interviews became even more difficult after the start of the Russia's war in Ukraine. It is problematic to prepare materials on topics related to migration from Russia after the war and gather specific statistics. During the discussion, it was noted that after the start of the war in Ukraine, the flow of disinformation coming from Russia was activated, especially in the direction of discrediting the media. This process is especially visible on social networks with the activity of Internet trolls and bots.

As for news reports from Ukraine, representatives of the Georgian media have covered events from Ukraine several times. They wish to have a cor-

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<sup>33</sup> Tourism or Migration? (indicator of Russian citizen stay in Georgia – March-June 2022), Institute for Development for Freedom of Information (2022), available at: [https://idfi.ge/ge/tourism\\_or\\_migration\\_rate\\_of\\_stay\\_of\\_russian\\_citizens\\_in\\_georgia](https://idfi.ge/ge/tourism_or_migration_rate_of_stay_of_russian_citizens_in_georgia) (last seen: 13.12.2022)

<sup>34</sup> Vardiashvili M., (2022). The Georgian government should focus on fundamental issues – ADB, Available: <https://bm.ge/ka/article/saqartvelos-mtavrobam-fundamentur-sakitxebze-unda-gamaxvilos-yuradgeba--adb/117502> (last accessed: December 25, 2022)

<sup>35</sup> Kakachia K., Kandelaki S., (2022), Migration from Russia: danger or opportunity for Georgia?, Georgia Policy Institute, Policy Memorandum, #61, Available at: <http://bit.ly/3WNbmlx> (last seen: 21.12.2022)

respondent on the ground, but the financial resources for this are limited. During the discussion, the professionalism of the work of female journalists from Georgia in the war was especially noted.

Media representative from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region also confirmed that disinformation campaigns intensified throughout the region after the start of the war in Ukraine. For an example, she cited a citizen that showed ignorance of Ukrainian history: "When the war started, some said: 'What happened so far? Russia entered Kyiv's Russia". Aggressive rhetoric occurs not only from trolls and bots but also among the uninformed population. There people are particularly aggressive on topics such as the US ambassador's visit to the region, the public defender's statement, etc. "Nostalgic attitude towards Russia in the regions remains a challenge," says a representative of Borjomi TV.

The main challenge is that awareness of Ukrainian history is very low in the regions. They cited the Gori district as an example, where part of the population thinks that Ukraine belonged to Russia. "Studying the history of Georgia and Ukraine in parallel and preparing programs on it would work very well. It affects all of us!" says the talk show host at the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB). In this regard, the journalist of GPB considers educational programs as important: "Donors' help is needed in this regard. It would be one of the very good tools to neutralize Russia's hybrid war".

In this process, according to the participants of the discussion, clear positions of international organizations are important. The host of Formula TV assesses the situation alarmingly: "If they [international organizations] want to save the political opposition, if they want to save local NGOs, they should save the media first, because the main target of the Russian hybrid war is the media. Georgian media is at war, but instead of a Kalashnikov, other weapons are at work here."

The war starting in 2022 might gradually fulfil Russocentrism, when "everything is possible only through Russia", and this, in turn, might free the countries of the South Caucasus from the syndrome of "geo-pathological embrace" with Russia. In this context, the role of the European Union as a membership-based organization, where it is important that it does not expand borders (as imperialist Russia does), but is joined and united around shared values, is even more pronounced.

**SUMMARY:** Coverage of the war in Ukraine is also a “litmus test” for the media to understand how to see the dangers of Russian disinformation. Russian propaganda poisons the audience most of all on topics about which the public has insufficient knowledge (these topics can be the history of Ukraine, European institutions and aspirations). The media’s role is immeasurably greater in being able to identify the international context, threats and support mechanisms in reporting local news on a daily basis. They aim to create a reliable and resourceful environment for the audience, which will contribute to the strengthening of an informed society and democracy.

### 3.2. Political polarization as a threat to media credibility

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The trend throughout the world is such that you no longer need tyrants and despots to silence the press. Elected leaders have found out that they do not really have to kill journalists anymore.  
You can just kill journalism.

**Kunda Dixit**

Nepalese journalist



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According to the 2021 media environment study (Gersamia, Toradze, 2021), political polarization in Georgia strengthens self-censorship, the goal of which is to replace the journalist’s critical questions with silence and fear. It should be emphasized that during crises, collective organizing of journalists and showing solidarity can also reduce polarization in the media environment and strengthen the viability of media institutions.<sup>36</sup> In 2022, the challenge was the connection between polarization and self-censorship, which becomes even stronger during crises, when not only the comments of the “other side” disappear from the media content, but the whole picture is distorted, and the profession of journalism is discredited. The media environment is negatively affected by the practice established over the years, where media organizations and political parties are in a symbiotic relationship.

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<sup>36</sup> Gersamia, M. ., & Toradze, M., (2022), Media Environment in Georgia during the Crisis, GEORGIAN SCIENTISTS, 4(4), 220–242. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.52340/g.s.2022.04.04.25>, (last seen: 12.12.2022)



The roots of political polarization and its influence on the media can be found in the Soviet legacy. In this regard, the legitimacy of polarization in Georgia begins immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union: Instead of one party, a multi-party space appeared, where the “independent media” immediately connected with its old support system – political parties. It is with this historical context that one of the focus group participants, the political talk show host of Formula TV, explained the legacy of polarization: “Back then it was important for the new parties to get their word out to the people, and everyone went the tried and tested Soviet way – everyone created their own Iskra [The Spark] newspaper. As a result, media outlets affiliated with particular parties were created once again in Georgia. In this way, party poles appeared from the beginning in the Georgian press of independent Georgia.”

Thirty-one years after independence, the conflict between political parties has moved directly into the media and, according to journalists, has become more of a matter of life and death than it was in the late 80s and early 90s. Journalists associate the further polarization of the media environment and the institutional weakening of the media with the existence of an oligarchic system in Georgia. “After the oligarch Ivanishvili narrowed and weakened the field of opposition parties, it turned out that the Georgian media remained viable and now the policy of ‘picking in the middle’ is being carried out,” notes the Formula TV talk show host.

The participants of the discussion recalled that Bidzina Ivanishvili always wanted to create an alternative media reality and introduce “new media standards”. This refers to the practice of preparing programs with the TV company GDS, where the expert space, 20/30, was temporarily established. Ivanishvili himself was involved in the preparation of the media production and even appeared on air. “It is after this that forced and harsh methods began to be used – the state institution was harshly used to seize the media,” says the host of the Formula TV program.

Against the backdrop of the weakening of the opposition parties, in recent years, the media has emerged as a viable institution influencing public opinion (both at the individual and structural levels). It has become important to what extent the media as an institution can produce content on a daily basis and maintain a professional niche. In this regard, it can be seen that the media is struggling for existence; as for survival, it turns to professional compromises and takes into account business and political party interests. Georgian media is not financially stable or self-sufficient. “Political polar-

ization is the very tool that kills the media as an institution and weakens its viability. The goal of the government is to kill free journalism,” says the Formula talk show host.

According to the participants of the discussion, political polarization is directly related to media polarization. Political debates also help the media to increase their credibility, and in Georgia, it is the media that is harmed by the government’s communication strategy. Despite the stigmatization of critical media by the government and the ruling party, the participants note that they constantly try to get the ruling party’s members to agree to an interview or participation in a debate.

According to the host of the political talk show of the TV company Mtavari Channel, in the face of political polarization and boycott by the government, journalists can no longer fulfil their professional duty, because they can only ever have “one side” on the air. Polarization is strengthened by the government’s approach – not attending any critical media debates or face-to-face interviews with the journalists on their talk shows. “It is an established practice: A representative of the ruling party conducts a briefing, which deals with the discrediting of a particular journalist. Naturally, in response, we invite them to the program or ask for a comment. We are met with a refusal. Then, to cover the topic, we are forced to invite only a representative of the opposition to the studio. As a result, in the eyes of the audience, the media seems more biased,” says the journalist of the TV company Formula.

Media representatives see a role both for the government and the opposition in reducing political polarization. From the point of view of the journalist from the Imedi TV company, polarization increased after the arrival and arrest of the 3rd president Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia, since the topic took an important place on the media agenda.

When discussing polarization, the media representatives expressed the opinion that it is an artificially provoked process and a continuation of a specific war situation – the Russian hybrid war. Therefore, it is important to analyze the influence of the media environment and political polarization not by analyzing the natural processes of the development of Western journalism, but by considering the context.

Journalists feel an atmosphere of polarization while working in the field and notice that the attitude and tone of politicians (the ruling party or the oppo-

sition) change depending on the channel the journalist holding the microphone is from. Political polarization has damaged the journalist profession itself when it no longer matters which “side” of the polarization the journalist represents. The journalist of Rustavi 2 recalled a case when, during the coverage of crises and demonstrations, journalists of all channels agreed to remove the identifying marks of the channels on the microphones for safety. “I remember a critical/oppositional media journalist was assaulted by a passerby on the street. Of course, we protected each other. That’s right, we have to protect each other,” recalls the journalist of Rustavi 2. To enhance the protection of the journalists, it is important to introduce successful examples of other countries, and as such, the TV company Maestro offered to establish the media ombudsman institute.

Although the dynamics of the deterioration of the media environment have been constant in recent years, in 2021, the situation changed for the worse even for those media organizations that were able to work in the conditions of polarization and had a reputation of impartial media, representing a reliable source for everyone, not associated with any political party. In 2022, it became clear that the government was trying to polarize so much that it did not shy away from party stigmatization of such media. The same approach was adopted by the government in addressing representatives of international organizations.

**SUMMARY:** Political polarization is one of the main, but not the sole, threats that reduce media credibility in society. The role of the journalists themselves is no less important when it comes to restoring the credibility of the media – they strive to protect not only their professional standards but also colleagues on “different poles” from the violence that, with regard to the continuous flow of Russian disinformation, is purposefully killing the profession.

### 3.3. Russian hybrid war and polarization in the media

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It is important to understand the broader context of hybrid warfare, as it is often impossible to draw the line between war and peace.

**VERONIKA VÍCHOVÁ**

Head of the Kremlin Watch program



If in the study of 2021, the malign influence of Russia on the media environment was mentioned fragmentarily, in 2022, in the context of all relevant topics, traces of the Russian hybrid war and malign effects were systematically highlighted.

According to the participants of the discussion, the ongoing processes in the Georgian media are part of a well-thought-out, pre-planned Russian hybrid war, and it is being transferred by a specific source in Georgia – in the form of Bidzina Ivanishvili. The participants recalled that this plan was formulated by Ivanishvili in his program letter in 2011 as a doctrine which he consistently follows, including in relation to the media. The attitude towards the media is different when comparing the periods of “Ivanishvili” and “Saakashvili”. According to the explanation of one of the participants, “in the media, there were always free spaces for the expression of second, third and some other type of interests. Today, this task of artificial radicalization and polarization constantly puts Ivanishvili in a profitable position and brings constant success to the Russian hybrid war in terms of dividing the local society, erasing the ability to unite around common ideas, the feeling of helplessness, and developing and deepening nihilism towards the West,” notes the TV company Formula talk show host.

During the discussion, political polarization was repeatedly assessed as a continuation of the Russian hybrid war, where topics that are painful for Georgian society are chosen as the targets of manipulation. It should be noted that in 2021 the media representatives only hinted at the Russian footprint in the media<sup>37</sup> and expressed concern that the attitude towards the media in Georgia is similar to the “Russian model”. This year, however, in their evalu-

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<sup>37</sup> Gersamia, M., Toradze, M., (2021), Media Environment before and after 2021 Elections: Threats and Supportive Instruments, Media and Communication Educational and Research Center “Media Voice”, p. 45.

ations of the media environment, the harmful effects of Russia and its work structure are more often mentioned. If last year, the “invisible hand of Russia” was felt in the media environment, which created fear and insecurity in journalism, this year Russian influences can be seen more clearly.

The context of the war waged by Russia in Ukraine also contributed to the identification of threats. According to the participants’ assessment, Russia’s defeat against Ukraine may have an impact on the artificially created polarization in Georgia. It is important to remove or weaken the influence of Russian hybrid warfare and its local actor to reveal the channel of natural development. According to one of the participants, despite the Soviet heritage, in Georgia (due to the individualistic nature of the society) there is a greater probability that, if natural conditions were to exist, a multi-party environment would be formed.

To improve the political environment, it is important for the media to promote the appearance of young politicians in politics. Journalists believe that such promotion is not done by the political parties themselves, and they face barriers in this regard.

**SUMMARY:** Other Russian-style methods used against the media are perceived as part of the hybrid war strategy, which aims to gradually limit the legal and financial aspects required for the existence of the media. The implementation of this strategy started from the initial years of the Georgian Dream government and continued in 2022 with the amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting<sup>38</sup>. Polarization and mistrust of the media create a fertile ground for the implementation of the Russian strategy.

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<sup>38</sup> On March 1, 2022, the Amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting (Chapter VIII, Article 63) entered into force, according to which it was forbidden to advertise, include sponsor announcements or product placement about gambling games, bookmakers, lotto, bingo and their organizers. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5316823?publication=0#-DOCUMENT:1> (last seen: 13.12.2022)

### 3.4. “Legal pathways” of media harassment ---

Democracy is created by self-confident democrats.

**Sabina Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger**

Human rights defender



Ensuring free flow of information is a necessary precondition for building a democratic, rule of law-based state. Ensuring the effective application of freedom of expression includes creating adequate safeguards to freedom of information, while the state has both negative and positive obligations in this regard. When evaluating potential interventions in the area concerned, it is important that the state considers, in each specific case, potential damage inflicted to the freedom of speech and expression. The Georgian media landscape and its viability are deliberately damaged by the government’s legislative amendments packaged as legitimate purposes, as well as the forms and terms of their implementation. The year 2022 was notable for harsh methods of harassment used against Georgian media.

#### 3.4.1. Arrest of the founder of Mtavari Channel ---

On May 16, the Tbilisi City Court sentenced Nika Gvaramia, the founder and director of the broadcasting company Mtavari Channel to 3 years and 6 months in prison, which, according to journalists, led to a new wave of deterioration of the media environment. The Court of Appeals upheld the decision. Before that, the Public Defender of Georgia concluded that the prosecution (under Article 220 of the Criminal Code, Abuse of Power) was legally unfounded. This fact was called to be politically motivated by various international and local organizations. The arrest of Nika Gvaramia, the director of the most influential critical media, was followed by a large-scale response. The arrest was evaluated by several organizations with similar reactions, inter alia, Reporters Without Borders, who noted that for the first time in Georgia, a director of an opposition channel had been arrested, and made a statement calling

on the authorities to reconsider the decision<sup>39</sup>, the Committee to Protect Journalists, who called on the authorities to release Nika Gvaramia<sup>40</sup>, Amnesty International, who called Nika Gvaramia's case politically motivated, the purpose of which was to suppress freedom of speech<sup>41</sup>, the International Press Institute (IPI), who assessed the arrest as an attack on media freedom and a politically motivated case, and called on the authorities to immediately release Gvaramia and protect media freedom<sup>42</sup>.

In the conditions when the government had increased pressure on the media, such outlets in Georgia, which according to international organizations have always maintained the image of reliable and non-affiliated media, saw their role in supporting the opposition broadcasters and demonstrating solidarity. During the discussion, it was noted that it became important for such media outlets to highlight that not only the so-called opposition media, but also other media outlets look critically at the ongoing processes in Georgia. Thus, in the list of media supporters appeared the signatures and critical statements of publications that have around 20 years of experience in Georgia and an image of unbiased media. According to the representative of one such highly trusted publication, Netgazeti, the arrest of Nika Gvaramia has greatly deepened the crisis in the media, because a thorough study of the case and a journalistic investigation revealed that the arrest of the Mtavari Channel director was indeed politically motivated. The Charter of Journalistic Ethics of Georgia and other media outlets associated with non-partisan media (including Netgazeti, Batumelebi, Publika<sup>43</sup> etc.). made a joint statement of media and NGOs and call on President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili to pardon Gvaramia. It is worth noting that journalists from non-partisan media associate their position with the increasingly aggressive rhetoric from the government directed at them.

A joint statement was issued by four so-called opposition channels, where Nika Gvaramia's arrest was directly linked to the Russian regime's methods, and Western partners were asked for help. The statement mentions: "The

<sup>39</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2022), @RSF\_inter [Twitter]. Available at: [https://twitter.com/RSF\\_inter/status/1529044780809871361?s=20&t=7pRp54\\_hFQKMLcWMx777A](https://twitter.com/RSF_inter/status/1529044780809871361?s=20&t=7pRp54_hFQKMLcWMx777A) (last seen: 20.12.2022).

<sup>40</sup> Georgian pro-opposition journalist Nika Gvaramia sentenced to 3.5 years in prison,(2022), Committee to Protect Journalists, available at: <https://cpj.org/2022/05/georgian-pro-opposition-journalist-nika-gvaramia-sentenced-to-3-5-years-in-prison/> (last seen: 20.12.2022).

<sup>41</sup> Georgia: Sentencing of pro-opposition media owner Nika Gvaramia a political motivated silencing of dissenting voice, (2022), Amnesty International, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/georgia-sentencing-of-pro-opposition-media-owner-nika-gvaramia-a-political-motivated-silencing-of-s-dissenting-voice/> (last seen: 20.12.2022).

<sup>42</sup> Georgia: TV channel director Nika Gvaramia sentenced to prison, (2022), International Press Institute, <https://ipi.media/georgia-tv-channel-director-nika-gvaramia-sentenced-to-prison/> (last seen: 19:12.2022)

<sup>43</sup> Call on Zurbishvili to pardon Gvaramia – NGO and media letter to Charles Michel, Netgazeti, 07.11.2022; Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/639477/> (last seen: 12.12.2022)

capture of Gvaramia is a direct, demonstrative message to the West that Georgia is a Russian, oligarchic, captured country and it is governed by Putin's methods. Capturing Gvaramia means that Georgia refuses Europe and NATO. This is especially visible in the light of consideration of Georgia's application for EU membership<sup>44</sup>. It should be noted that the media representatives evaluated the government's persecution of the media and Gvaramia's arrest as confirmation of the government's anti-Western position.

Media representatives were further alarmed by lawsuits and investigations against the owners of other critical television stations, which they believe were also politically motivated.

### **3.4.2. Amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting**

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According to studies done in 2022 for the population of Georgia, democracy means equality before the law and freedom of speech<sup>45</sup>. In this regard, the legislative environment and amendments that have damaged the media environment and media viability in 2022 remain a challenge.

According to journalists, the amendments implemented in the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting at the beginning of the year completely disrupted the market for critical media. Before the amendments to the law came into force, gambling companies were major financiers of broadcasting companies. The sharp decrease in revenues is confirmed by the data published by the Communications Commission, which states that in the second quarter of 2022, "the total commercial advertising revenue of television and radio broadcasters amounted to 19 million GEL, which is 4.1 million GEL (17.5%) less compared to the same period of the previous year. The decrease in advertising revenues is caused by the new regulation on gambling broadcast advertising, which came into force on March 1, 2022."<sup>46</sup> In the third quarter, the dynamic of decline was maintained, and the total commercial advertising income of television and radio broadcasters amounted to 16.3 million GEL, which is 1.7 million GEL (9.3%) less than the same period of the previous year. According to the

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<sup>44</sup> Do not allow the oligarchic regime to kill democracy in the end – Appeal of 4 opposition channels to the West, (16.05.2022), online media: on.ge, available at: <https://bit.ly/3I9lrLX> (last seen: 25.12.2022)

<sup>45</sup> Public sentiment in Georgia August 2022 face-to-face survey results, NDI-CRRC, available at: [www.ndi.org/georgia-polls](http://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls), [www.caucasusbarometer.org](http://www.caucasusbarometer.org) (last seen: 16.12.2022).

<sup>46</sup> The statement of the Communications Commission, in the second quarter of 2022, television and radio advertising revenue was 19 million GEL, 2022, available at: <https://comcom.ge/ge/yvela-siaxe/2022-wlis-meore-kvartalshi-televiziebisa-da-radioeb-is-sareklamo-shemosavali-19-milioni-lari-iyi.page> (last seen: 13.12.2022).



announcement of the Communications Commission, “Imedi TV” had the largest share of television commercial advertising revenues in both quarters.<sup>47</sup>

Legislative amendments may be preceded by a legitimate aim, but the result achieved in the process of implementation may be harmful to the democratic environment. For example, the changes to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting were made due to the request of the public to ban the advertising of gambling games in order to reduce the harmful effects of ludomania on young people. However, after the ban on advertising, statistical data on the decrease in the number of people engaged in gambling is not observed. Despite the legitimate aim of adopting the amendments to the law, its adoption in an accelerated time frame significantly damaged the viability of the media. According to the discussion participants, the changes in the law were part of a well-thought-out strategic plan aimed at increasing financial pressure on critical media.

In September 2022, another project was registered in the Parliament of Georgia, which aims to make further amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting (adopted by the leading committee in the third reading). According to NGOs, the changes will also have a negative impact on the media environment. The NGO, Democratic Initiative of Georgia,<sup>48</sup> believes that the changes contradict the process of integration with the European Union and addresses the following:

1. Despite the broadcaster’s appeal to the court, the decision made by the National Communications Commission of Georgia should come into force immediately;
2. The right to respond to the commission’s mandate for supervision; regulation of “hate speech”: The NGO Media Advocacy Coalition believes that part of the amendments to be introduced in the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting contains the risks of limiting the freedom of expression and will worsen the media environment in Georgia.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> The statement of the Communications Commission, in the second quarter of 2022, television and radio advertising revenue was 19 million GEL, 2022, available at: <https://comcom.ge/ge/yvela-siaxle/2022-wlis-meore-kvartalshi-televiziebisa-da-radioebis-sareklamo-shemosavali-19-milioni-lari-iy0.page> (last seen: 13.12.2022).

<sup>48</sup> The statement of the Communications Commission, in the third quarter of 2022, the advertising revenue of television and radio stations was 16.3 million GEL, (2022). Available at: <https://comcom.ge/ge/yvela-siaxle/2022-wlis-mesame-kvartalshi-televiziebisa-da-radioebis-sareklamo-shemosavali-163-milioni-lari-iy0.page> (last seen: December 13.12. 2022).

<sup>49</sup> notes and recommendations prepared by «Democratic Initiative of Georgia» in connection with the project of legislative changes initiated in the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting (07-3/236/10), (2022), Democratic Initiative of Georgia, available at: <https://gdi.ge/uploads/other/1/1552.pdf> (last seen: 13.12.2022).

According to the journalists' observations, in 2022, the authorities began to establish a new approach in their fight with the media. The government representatives, in case of complaints against journalists, rarely refer to self-regulation bodies (e.g., the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics) and go directly to court in order to fine the journalist and the TV company. Establishing this practice, according to journalists, serves to further increase the number of fines for broadcasters and further limit freedom of expression.

**SUMMARY:** The media has a major role in spreading information and ideas of public importance. The media provides discussion on important topics and increases the involvement of an informed public in political processes. Access to information in the Georgian media space is determined by the filter established by the ruling party's (Georgian Dream) team, which systematically and synchronously controls the flow of information in relation to specific media outlets and topics sensitive to the government. Limiting access to information of public importance to the media and society is a clear indicator of increasing polarization and democratic backsliding.

### **3.5. Challenges to freedom of expression: access to sources**

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Freedom of spoken and written speech is of great importance and for this reason, it is necessary to limit the power of officials. If a judge commits an illegal act, an official takes a bribe or oppresses someone, who will save the powerless? Free speech. Since with the help of free speech people will be made aware of an illegality, they will try to avoid it and punish the perpetrator of such illegality. 1906.

**Mikheil Javakhishvili**

Georgian writer, shot by the Soviet Regime in 1937



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Access to public information remains a challenge in 2022, which is most acutely manifested in the lack of accountability to the media on the part of the ruling party (Georgian Dream) and its selective approach to providing information. In conditions of political polarization, the government imposes

restrictions on specific topics and/or the media, and the barriers to access to information increase, which ultimately reduces the credibility of the media and the quality of public awareness.

Formal communication practices for obtaining information between politicians and the media have been disrupted, which makes it difficult to prepare quality media content, balance material, and record comments and interviews (for both Georgian and English outlets). This especially damages the credibility of the media critical of the government, and according to the participants of the focus groups, this is the goal of the ruling team.

In the absence of comments and information, the media must create an imperfect product and an “artificial balance”. “The media cannot create complete material, because government representatives no longer come to talk shows, and press conferences may be blocked from the presence of unwanted media. The government has declared an ordinary war against the media, which it considers as its enemy only because it asks critical questions,” notes the representative of the online platform Publika.

The government has a single strategic approach to media representatives with a critical opinion, and even in the media outlet loyal to them, they appear only in programs where they are not criticized. For example, there are programs with a critical discourse on the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), in which getting government representatives to be involved is quite problematic. The representative of the Public Broadcaster recalled the case when, in covering the problems of oncological patients, it was vitally important to present the position of government representatives within the program, but the journalist was met with refusal. “There is no accountability even when we work on the problems of vulnerable groups. I am limited when asking questions to government officials on topics of public interest. Instead, the Deputy Minister of Health would rather come to GPB’s another television program where no critical question will be asked and thus show that he appears in the media without any problems,” says the talk show host from the Public Broadcaster.

For the ruling party, it does not matter what format and what type of media product the critical media offers them to participate in. Focus group participants say that the rejection template from the press team is as follows: “We will not participate in the proposed project, because we do not perceive you as a media group, you are a political party.” Journalists are forced to offer the

debate format not to the government and the opposition, but rather to two representatives of the opposition. This is less interesting for the audience and damaging to the opposition. “The purpose of the debate is to wrestle between different political ideas, and this discourse is not visible in the media. In such circumstances, the media sees a solution in inviting the former members of Georgian Dream, who are still visible in the political field, although this is an artificial discourse devoid of political interest. All this affects the credibility of the media,” says the journalist from Mtavari Channel.

Regional media representatives also confirm that due to restrictions on access to information, complete and balanced journalistic content cannot be created anymore, the public hears the story told by one side systematically, and as a result, the credibility of the media is damaged.

The TV company Palitra TV has no problem with obtaining information (including public information) and inviting government representatives on the air, and the representative of the TV company considers that the reason for this is that it is not on the “side of any party”. However, the journalist from the Formula TV investigative program explains the different attitude of the government toward the media as follows: “Here we are not talking about what Palitra does professionally well, but what it does not do at all. I mean that Palitra does not work in the direction of investigative journalism.” According to the participants of the discussion, the government’s approach and attitude are determined by how loyal the founder and owner of the TV company is to the government.

The situation in the news agency is slightly different from the TV companies. For example, one of the largest news agencies InterPressNews has no problem recording respondents if they are quoted directly. However, a delay occurs when the questions are critical, and this applies to both the government and the opposition representatives.

All participants of the focus groups agreed that the government’s attitude towards giving interviews and participating in programs is determined by the topic and not by the professionalism of journalists and adherence to standards. It can be said that those TV companies where government representatives appear in programs acceptable to them are less affected by polarization than those TV outlets that are unequivocally critical and/or produce investigative materials.

It is problematic for journalists when there is no longer a normal practice of interviewing members of the government team in a formal setting and professional format. Refusing an interview with a journalist is accompanied by cynicism, humiliation, and ridicule from the authorities. One of the parliamentary journalists recalls that at the end of the briefings, after asking for an interview, he was told “to get ready to run”, that is, he should chase the respondent. The participants of the discussion think that this practice presents them in an undesirable light (as bothersome, immature people) in the eyes of the audience. Constantly showing this model of behavior and establishing it in practice contributes to the discrediting of the journalistic profession.

It is a problem to record an interview intended for exclusive material (in which, due to professional interest, it is necessary to ask questions only in the presence of the respondent and not in the presence of colleagues). Journalists note that the interview format is disappearing from work practice, and this, especially when preparing television material, is problematic. “When I refuse an interview, in order to maintain the standard, I am forced to use a public comment that may not have anything to do with what I really care about. This is how critical questions disappear unanswered,” says the Mtavari Channel journalist.

A selective approach to access to information is observed in the distribution of questions at the briefings. Journalists recalled the occasion when they had the opportunity to ask a total of three questions after the briefing of the European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi. The first two of these were similar questions from the journalists of the pro-government channel.

Although journalists have personal relationships with state public relations workers (which is largely because professional migration in the field of PR occurs from the media), access to information and obtaining consent for interviews, regardless of definition, remains a problem. Since it is impossible to obtain an official agreement for an interview, there are cases when journalists are given a “friendly” offer by persons employed in public affairs to see the minister in a specific place and try to get a comment without prior agreement. The journalist from Mtavari Channel recalled the case when he needed the ministry’s comment due to the changes related to the construction of the road connecting to Russia in Khada Valley: “I contacted my acquaintance who works in the public relations unit of the ministry and asked for the minis-

ter's comment. I explained that I didn't want this comment just for balance, I needed a qualified explanation. Finally, I got a tip that the minister was going to come to a certain place and I could meet him. In other words, she offered me to run to get a comment."

Access to information is a problem for critical media even when they work on material that is profitable for the government or is "non-political". In this case, the political decision to boycott specific media is likely to work. The work practice of journalists shows that representatives of the executive and legislative authorities cannot independently decide whether to give comments to the media or not. They comply with the Single Directive.

The Formula TV journalist recalled a case when the Ministry of Defense refused to prepare positive profiles of military heroes, where their activities would be popularized. "This decision is made in top management and everyone obeys it," says the journalist. The producer of Formula TV recalled a case when, while communicating with the former chairman of the parliament, Kakha Kuchava, Formula TV offered him an interview in an academic format. Despite the initial approval, the producer later received an explanation from the chairman of the parliament, which sounded like this: if it were up to him, he would have come to the program, but there was resistance to this in the team.

The producer of Formula recalled another case when an agro-festival was held in the United Arab Emirates, where Georgian farmers were working to promote Georgian sheep: "It was a very good precedent to show that Georgia is trying to diversify the market, it is not tied only to Russia. The Ministry of Agriculture would also appear in a positive context. Since our correspondent was there, we offered to prepare the story. We got approval from the public relations unit and then, despite our best efforts, no one came on the line. This is why we will chase the ministers on the street for their comments. We have no other choice."

During the course of the discussion, the alleged scheme that controls the execution of such directives in the government team was talked about. According to the journalists, the members of the government team are given instructions on their relations with the media by the "Trio". It is known to critical media journalists that there is a communication chat in which the public relations units of the ministries are gathered, and every morning they receive information about what topics critical media will work on. This is followed by

instructions on what to say, how to act, etc.

Beginners and the so-called Parliamentary journalists are in a particularly difficult situation. Attempts to build friendly, personal relationships initiated by politicians (familial addresses and compliments, invitations to coffee, gifts), which at the same time lead to self-censorship, contribute to their rise. Their attitude changes radically as soon as the journalist asks a critical question. By observing journalists, certain guidelines are emerging regarding how the government should interact with critical media in a non-work environment. In particular, they try to establish friendly relations with journalists in a non-working environment and thus encourage self-censorship. One of the participants recalled: “While in a restaurant, one of the leaders of Georgian Dream, whom I do not know personally, quietly paid for my dinner. This is an attempt at self-censorship.”

The public should have access to the information available in state agencies because “without information it is impossible to form a free opinion. Therefore, freedom of information is one of the fundamental rights guaranteed in a legal state.”<sup>50</sup> Access to public information by journalists is an effective means of informing the public in a timely manner and a mechanism for government control, accountability, and transparency. When accessing public information, artificial restrictions imposed on journalists can be considered a challenge to freedom of expression, as the audience is given incomplete information about the political environment and ongoing processes.

Legal professionals explain that “any information available in a state agency is public, if it does not belong in the category of classified information... In case of a restriction of access to public information, Georgian legislation divides the right to appeal into two parts: in the form of an administrative complaint and the possibility of filing a lawsuit.”<sup>51</sup> The attitude of state agencies on writing an administrative complaint by a journalist has changed. Notably, in previous years, civil servants tried to avoid written complaints from the journalists and in some cases, they provided information, “Now they answer journalists: ‘Sue us,’” says the representative from Chemi Kharagauli.

Getting answers to administrative complaints is also problematic. In the course of the discussion, the journalist from iFact gave an example that dur-

<sup>50</sup> Turava P., Avalishvili L., Zorbenadze S., *Freedom of information – A guide for public institutions (second edition)*, p. 6. Available: <https://idfi.ge/public/upload/courts/EBRD/Freedom%20of%20Information%20Guidebook%20%20Second%20Edition.pdf> (last seen: 20.12.2022)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

ing the preparation of the investigative material,<sup>52</sup> she wrote seven administrative complaints to find out why the government signs contracts for tens of thousands of GEL to the openly pro-Russian platform Marshall Press. The journalist confirms that the delay, in this case, is also caused by a specific topic: “We were told by internal sources that when working on topics that are painful for the government, they receive a directive that they should no longer give information to this or that media group (in this case, iFact). In our case, this decision was made by the government after the investigative studio prepared the material on the Namakhvan hydropower project,” says the iFact journalist.

The government team has informally agreed on rules regarding which media outlet and on which topics it will (not) release as public information. Limiting the access to information of critical journalists is systematic and synchronized between state agencies and works especially actively when it comes to sensitive topics and/or investigative materials. The investigative journalist from Formula TV recalled a report which was related to the interests of Bidzina Ivanishvili<sup>53</sup>: “following the payment of the fee according to the procedure established by the National Agency of Public Registry, when it takes at most one hour to search for information, access to information was completely restricted.”<sup>54</sup>

The 2022 report of the Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) confirms that access to public information for journalists is unfavorable. In particular, only 12% of journalists were able to fully obtain public information by observing the deadline stipulated by the law. IDFI’s research confirms that administrative complaints are usually not satisfied, and receiving information is delayed. For example, “It takes an average of 2.5 years to complete a public information dispute in the general court system.”<sup>55</sup>

Investigative journalists also talked about a new problematic trend in relation to requesting information from state agencies. In particular, state bodies already require a written request for any kind of information and interview according to the established procedure for public information. However, the

<sup>52</sup> Asatiani I., (12.12.2022), Why do we pay money to Marshallpress?, Investigative Studio iFact, Available: <http://bit.ly/3HZAAAPM> (last seen: 20.12.2022)

<sup>53</sup> Oligarch’s Forest, (12.11.2022), Formula on Suterday, Formula TV, available at: <http://bit.ly/3GkxSD1> (last seen: 24.12.2022)

<sup>54</sup> According to Article 35 of the General Administrative Code of Georgia, the public institution is obliged to enter the public information available in this institution into the public register. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/16270?publication=41> (last seen: 20.12.2022)

<sup>55</sup> Media Access to Public Information: Legislation v. Reality, (2022), Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI). November p. 1-3. Available at: [https://idfi.ge/public/upload/Analysis/access\\_to\\_public\\_information\\_by\\_the\\_media\\_legislation\\_v\\_reality.pdf](https://idfi.ge/public/upload/Analysis/access_to_public_information_by_the_media_legislation_v_reality.pdf) (last seen: 20.12.2022)



provision of granting the media access to public information immediately or within a reasonable time frame is problematic regardless of whether the specific request meets the 10-day deadline for information processing and delivery. This approach is applied by the press offices of state agencies, especially when it comes to the preparation of investigative material.

Representatives of the regional media confirm the same approach regarding access to public information. To provide public information, the press offices automatically set deadlines for receiving public information in the regions as well. “The situation is getting worse every month and for us, it has become especially difficult after September 2022. It is already a problem for regional journalists to attend state agency meetings. If in previous years we were informed about the topics to be discussed and the schedule of the sessions, in 2022 the most important sessions (for example the budget discussion) became secret for the regional media,” says the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

It is equally difficult for Public Broadcaster programs with a critical discourse to receive public information in time. “I am sending a letter with the official letterhead of the Public Broadcaster regarding the request for public information, and despite obligations, months pass, and I have no information!” says the talk show host from the Public Broadcaster program.

TV company Maestro has fewer problems with access to public information. According to the participants, the reason for this is that the media loyal to the government probably do not even ask for information that will create any kind of problem for the government.

The regional journalists mentioned the established practice of state agencies replying to NGOs with the same information that they had blocked specific media from. Because of this, in some cases, they prefer having an NGO request information from the government on their behalf. According to the discussion participants, this approach may be due to the fact that NGOs have less and non-operational access to the audience than the media. To illustrate this approach, investigative materials dealing with migration from Russia after the war are useful. The journalist from the investigative studio iFact said that she had been waiting for information from a public agency for three months about how many citizens of the Russian Federation crossed the border of Georgia and how many left Georgia after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The answer she was given is that the agency did not have

the resources to process that information. At the same time, NGOs already had studies based on the requested information (for example, the studies of IDFI<sup>56</sup> and GIP<sup>57</sup> refer to these issues).

Access to sources and obtaining public information is also a problem for online media. The representative of Netgazeti recalled a case when the Prime Minister turned his back on a journalist asking a critical question years ago when this “visual ignorance” was new and shocking. This has become an established practice. The culture and practice of professional relations with the media on the part of politicians are low. Some politicians (both in the government and in the opposition) do not consider online media representatives as a priority. “In most cases, it is difficult to record interviews with members of the government, deputies, and leaders of the opposition. There are cases when they refuse the agreed interview after they find out that we are an online media and not a TV company,” says the representative from Netgazeti / Batumelebi.

In 2022, it became difficult for regional media to work with the opposition. Journalists relate this to the fact that, compared to previous years, the opposition was weaker and less qualified. Communication became especially difficult after the internal selection process for the chairman of the largest opposition party, the United National Movement, began. A regional journalist from Gori recalled that information about the intra-party meeting of the United National Movement was hidden from the media in Kareli because the opposition does not like critical questions from the media either. In general, journalists express dissatisfaction with the label/name of “opposition media” assigned to critical media. According to journalists, this damages the image of critical media.

In terms of access to information, an Imedi TV journalist receives information from the government and records an interview through the press office or through direct communication. In the case of the opposition, this mainly occurs through direct communication. Regarding the attitude of politicians towards the media, the Imedi TV journalist recalled a case when, while making the same comment, the tone of the opposition politician was aggressive towards him, but not towards the journalists critical of the government.

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<sup>56</sup> Tourism or migration? (Indicator of Russian citizens staying in Georgia – March-June 2022), (09.07.2022), Freedom of Information Development Institute, Available at: [https://idfi.ge/ge/tourism\\_or\\_migration\\_rate\\_of\\_stay\\_of\\_russian\\_citizens\\_in\\_georgia](https://idfi.ge/ge/tourism_or_migration_rate_of_stay_of_russian_citizens_in_georgia) (last seen: 20.12.2022)

<sup>57</sup> Kakachia K., Kandelaki S., (2022), Migration from Russia: danger or opportunity for Georgia?, Georgia Policy Institute, Policy Memorandum, #61. Available at: <http://bit.ly/3WNbmlx> (last seen: 21.12.2022)

Stigmatization of the media and partisan labelling has an impact on the diversity of coverage as well. In a violent context, self-censorship is also strengthened, and “if there is self-censorship, whether due to fear or trauma, the media will not be able to play any of their roles and freedom of expression and the free flow of information are in jeopardy.”<sup>58</sup> When covering this or that problem, self-censorship can be seen in the sources as well. Particularly, vulnerable groups avoid communication with critical media. “People are more open when communicating without cameras. They are afraid to appear in the critical media and talk about their problems, because as a result they may be deprived of support or fired from their jobs,” the Mtavari Channel journalist notes.

**SUMMARY:** Restricting freedom of information kills quality journalism and damages fundamental human rights. In times of political polarization and crises, in the process of the strengthening of the hybrid regime and the decline of democracy, the media will have the power to “reinsure” those institutions that do not and cannot protect human rights and to create, with greater involvement of various actors, the necessary resources for the resilience of democracy. These resources are primarily for a more informed public that can deal with misinformation and harmful propaganda on specific topics.

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<sup>58</sup> Journalist safety and self-censorship, (2020), edited by Anna Grøndahl Larsen, Ingrid Fadnes, et al, Routledge, p. 157

### 3.6. Impunity for crimes committed against journalists

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Every murder is a tragedy, but when a journalist is killed, public debate loses a voice that can make a significant contribution to the development of democracy.

**Irina Bokova**

Former Director General of UNESCO



In the impunity of the crimes committed against journalists, the most obvious thing is how the government fulfils its obligation – to protect the freedom of speech and expression. Impunity further increases the atmosphere of fear in professional circles and reinforces and perpetuates existing stigmas, stereotypes and hate speech about journalists. “Traumatized journalism” is how the state of the Georgian media can be called, especially after the tragic events of July 5, 2021<sup>59</sup> that are still irreparable and relevant for journalists. Media representatives recalled the tragedy that happened on July 5 in different contexts throughout the discussion. The unhealed pain is intensified by the non-investigation and impunity of the crimes committed against journalists. Importantly, the aforementioned 12-point recommendations of the European Commission emphasize the launch of impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of journalists and other media professionals<sup>60</sup>.

The lack of investigation and impunity is even more visible during political crises and polarization. Unlike in previous years, media representatives lost hope that the crimes committed against them would be fully investigated and impunity would end. The investigation was carried out at a slow pace following the so-called rumors spread by the media last year in the case of “State Security Service of Georgia – SSSG collection of recordings”, where illegal surveillance of journalists was revealed. In 2022, 10 journalists’ complaints about illegal hearings were sent to the European Court of Human

<sup>59</sup>The tragic events that took place on July 5, 2021, when radical, anti-Western groups deliberately and forcefully dispersed journalists covering the demonstration, more than 50 media representatives were injured and Lekso Lashkarava, a severely beaten cameraman, died after a few days.

<sup>60</sup> European Commission opinion on Georgia’s application for membership of the European Union, COM(2022) 405 final, (17.6.2022), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/Georgia%20opinion%20and%20Annex.pdf> (last seen: 12.12.2022)

Rights<sup>61</sup>. In addition to the government, pressure on the media had also increased from the side of the dominant and influential religious organization, the Patriarchate of Georgia.

On July 5, one of the injured journalists from Formula TV recalled: “Verbal violence, threats, continued for months. We sent about 1300 such messages to the European Court of Human Rights. The main actor here is not only the state, but also the Patriarchate of Georgia and its parish. I am sure that the government knows the identity of the persons who physically assaulted the journalists on July 5, the organizers also know, but there is no political will to end impunity.” According to journalists, this is a green light to continue violence against them. Representatives of the regional media repeatedly mention July 5 in the context of impunity: “I was filming, preparing to go live, and a passer-by first waved at me, then snatched the microphone from me. As we found out, he was arrested after July 5 and then released. As a result, he has assaulted [someone] again and will continue to do so,” recalls the regional journalist from TV Pirveli. An investigative journalist from iFact recalls that a thorough investigation was conducted on the perpetrators of July 5, but, despite this, no one was punished.

From the point of view of one year, the expression of aggression towards the media increased especially after July 5, 2021, and this was facilitated by the rhetoric of the government. In light of the fact that crimes committed against journalists are not fully investigated and the organizers of the violence are not punished, “the government is trying to establish the opinion that journalists are not untouchable, they are criminals who must be punished. We are physically assaulted,” says the journalist from Mtavari Channel.

One of the reasons for the outflow of staff (especially camerapersons) from media organizations in 2022 (along with the financial crisis in the media) is the raid on journalists on July 5, 2021 and the photos of famous journalists posted on pre-election “bloody banners” in previous years.

Various crimes committed against journalists go uninvestigated or the investigations are delayed. The journalist from Mtavari Channel recalled a case of surveillance in the building of the TV company. “During our investigation, we assumed that the illegal surveillance was carried out by the (State Security Service of Georgia) SSSG. The host of the program where the illegal recordings were made public was summoned, who indicated that he would protect

<sup>61</sup> Complaints of 10 journalists were sent to the European Court in the case of illegal wiretapping, (13.07.2022), Radio Liberty, Available: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31941548.html> (last seen: 18.12.2022).

the confidentiality of the source. The investigation ended with this, despite the fact that additional investigative procedures could have been carried out,” the journalist recalled.

Illegal surveillance of journalists remains a problem, and to illustrate this, the participants of the discussion cite a number of examples that appear in their daily work routine. The Mtavari Channel journalist recalled the case when a source informed them about a specific violation committed by an official: “After telling this story in the newsroom, on the same day, my source informed me that the official already knew that Mtavari Channel was going to prepare the material and the violation was corrected. It seems that they are listening to us live,” said the journalist.

Covert surveillance of journalists intensifies fear and self-censorship. Journalists know that their communication with the producers and their sources is being listened to. To confirm this, the discussion participant recalled another example: “We conducted a media experiment: We contacted our two different media-groups through an open (telephone) line and informed them that protests were being held near the houses of Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze and Bidzina Ivanishvili. In exactly 10 minutes, the police were mobilized at both locations. State resources are being spent on our secret surveillance,” said the Formula journalist.

Investigative materials prepared by journalists, which refer to a possible crime, remain without a response from the authorities. A journalist of the investigation agency iFact recalled a case of the publication of investigative material, which was repeatedly verified and confirmed (the material was related to an alleged crime committed by a high-ranking cleric)<sup>62</sup>, did not result in any response (including a comment or statement) from the government, despite the fact that the topic was later extensively covered by nationwide mainstream TV channels. This weakens the function of the media – to perform the function of a watchdog – and it diminishes the role of the media itself, showing that the government does not respond with accountability. The participants recalled other cases when crimes committed against journalists in previous years remained uninvestigated. One of them was about the burglary of a political talk show host’s house in 2021 and the taking of laptops.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Asatiani I., Yusif A., (10.05.2022), Protospesbyter’s father’s call to a relative, investigative studio ifact. Available: <http://bit.ly/3GoV976> (last seen: 22.12.2022).

<sup>63</sup> In order to protect the confidentiality of the journalist’s identity, we do not indicate the media source.

**SUMMARY:** Two indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of democracy is how safe journalists feel in their professional activities and how well the state can fulfil its obligations, including protecting the rights of speech and expression. The function of the media is to remind the authorities of their responsibilities. The state is obligated to end any impunity for crimes committed against journalists to create a way for the media to function and develop freely.

### 3.7. Safety of journalists: physical and verbal violence \_\_\_\_\_

Journalists should be able to work safely. Their physical and ideal protection within the rule of law is a key component of security.

**Sabina Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger**  
Human rights defender



In 2022, the physical and psychological safety of journalists remained a challenge. Similar to the previous year, various forms of violence against journalists (online and in physical space), attempts to discredit, obstruction of journalistic activity (including restriction of access to sources and illegal surveillance), and the stigmatization and humiliation of journalists were repeatedly revealed.

The government’s encouragement of physical and verbal violence against journalists remains a distinct threat in the media environment. In 2022, the most influential organization in Georgia, the Patriarchate of Georgia, whose representatives are distinguished by their aggressive rhetoric towards the media, became more actively involved in the campaign to discredit it. The journalist of the Gori regional media (Radio Mosaic) recalled a case when criminals assaulted an elderly nun, and high-ranking clerics blamed this case on the activities of the media<sup>64</sup>. After that, in religious sermons, critical media was mentioned in a distorted context: The media was accused of encour-

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<sup>64</sup> The Patriarchate declares that the media “immorally” covered the incident of thug attack and rape in the monastery. (19.11. 2022), Radio Liberty, available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32151617.html> (last seen: 21.12.2022).

aging crime against the clergy (rape of a nun) because journalists covered the gift of an expensive car to a high-ranking clergyman. Journalists recalled that as a result of this aggressive rhetoric, during the court process of this story, more aggression from the public came towards the media than towards the perpetrators themselves.

In the regions, psychological violence against the media is a daily occurrence, especially if the investigative material is about the patriarchy. An iFact journalist recalled a case when she was physically and psychologically assaulted while distributing free newspapers in the region (in which there was a piece titled, “The Transfiguration of the Patriarch”). “This violence creates fear and self-censorship towards specific communities. While working in the field in Tbilisi and regions, we think about whether we will be able to return alive or not”- she says.

For their own safety, several representatives of the media critical of the government are forced to walk in the street accompanied by security. From the point of view of one of the victims on July 5, 2021, the government’s aggressive rhetoric towards the media is the reason why nothing has changed for the better in terms of journalists’ safety. “They attacked me. Every speech I make on the street is accompanied by verbal abuse. After July 5, I’ve had to walk in the street with security,” says the Formula journalist. The host of the political talk show of TV Pirveli recalls: “I end the broadcast at 11 o’clock in the evening. I am always afraid that they will meet me somewhere and not necessarily kill me, but they will scare me. The atmosphere of fear is not going anywhere.”

According to the focus group participants, entering the profession of journalism already means that a person is ready for emotional and psychological oppression. Journalists need stress resistance, but they (especially entry-level journalists) are emotionally affected by the aggression of Internet trolls. In newsrooms, there is a practice of moderation of social networks, which needs to be improved. For example, a moderator may filter sensitive topics and comments that refer to minors but have less control over hate speech directed at a journalist. In this regard, it is necessary to improve the procedures. In the case of online aggression, the journalist (if desired) should be given the opportunity to post a response in the comments section, however, at the same time, it is necessary to delete/report any comments with hate speech.



In social networks (mostly in Facebook), journalists have become victims of particular aggression when they report in a negative context about pro-Russian groups that openly support Kremlin policy, such as Alt-Info, or if they criticize Kremlin policy. An iFact journalist recalled a case of online bullying when she wrote that Alt-Info was using Russian servers. Following this, massive reporting of the iFact Facebook page began.

The online discrediting of journalists by trolls and bots is a problem, but more oppressive for journalists is the violence and bullying in the physical environment. If there is still an illusion of physical security in the online space, these imaginary barriers disappear in the physical environment and the pressure on the journalist becomes even stronger. The participants of the discussion recalled incidents that happened, for example, on a minibus taxi or a bus, by a passer-by or an acquaintance, as a traumatic experience. The participant of the discussion mentioned that he does not remember a day when he was not psychologically harassed in the physical environment: “A man I didn’t know called me on the bus: Did you see Shalva talking about you yesterday?” (meaning Post TV host Shalva Ramishvili, who is famous for his hate speech). Such an attitude strengthens the atmosphere of oppression, serves to demoralize journalists, legitimizes negative actions in the physical space, and establishes the pseudo-reality that trolls and bots massively create in the online space.

The atmosphere of fear spreads to the journalist’s neighborhood and family members as well. They are harassed, intimidated, and dismissed from work. Focus group participants gave several examples of this:

- “When the program ends, my mum calls me nervously and asks how I am getting home.” – says Formula investigative program host;
- “My son was let go from the pro-governmental TV company Rustavi 2. Reorganization was given as the primary reason, but almost everyone was offered an alternative while he was refused.” – says TV Pirveli political talk show host;
- “My family member was harassed at work because of me. This forces you to self-censor and stop talking about certain topics.” – says Formula parliamentary journalist.

Like last year, journalists noted that the government team treats journalists as political opponents and ultimately undermines their authority. Discrediting stories published in the media encourages physical and psychological violence against journalists.

The year 2022 was distinguished by the fact that the government's pressure increased not only on the so-called opposition media but also on those publications that, according to the reports of international organizations, managed to maintain their impartiality even in a polarized media environment. In the assessment of the 2021 media environment by an authoritative international organization, these included such online publications as: Netgazeti, Publika, Radio Liberty, and others<sup>65</sup>. During the discussion, it was confirmed that in 2022 the government expanded the target audience of their aggressive rhetoric. In previous years, broadcasters were the targets of discrediting, and the idea was established that "they [opposition television stations] are not the media, but are the continuation of the United National Movement." Other types of [online] media were also "not liked" by the government. Financially independent online media did manage to maintain their own niche.

The participants of the discussion recalled cases when government representatives dedicated briefings to specific journalists and their activities. According to their explanation, the purpose of this was to stigmatize and discredit the media and specific journalists. A participant in the discussion recalls being publicly called an "FSB agent" (agent of the Federal Security Service of Russia) by members of the government team. Such labels have a particularly depressing effect on novice journalists. Aggressive rhetoric is not always heard on camera and may go unnoticed by the public. The off-camera effect is manifested in the communication between representatives of the government and critical media. That is, according to the journalists, the government establishes a confusing way of playing with the media, when the members of the government's team become "non-aggressive and friendly" with the journalists in the non-working format, and their attitude changes radically during their professional activities. "After the attack on me, the mayor of Tbilisi interviewed me on the phone in a caring tone, and a week later, when I asked for an interview, he called me 'Zonder,'" recalled the Formula TV journalist.

Organizations created by the government (meaning the employees of N(N)LE) show negative behavior towards the media as well. They express aggression

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<sup>65</sup> Vibrant Information Barometer, (2022), IREX, available at: [https://www.irex.org/VIBE\\_2022\\_Georgia](https://www.irex.org/VIBE_2022_Georgia) (last seen: 19.12.2022)

on questions such as: “Why does the employee of the city council, whose salary is 3500 GEL, receive an additional social allowance?” says the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

**SUMMARY:** The aggressive rhetoric towards journalists demonstrated by politicians (especially the government) and influential organizations (e.g. the Georgian Patriarchate), as well as anti-Western groups, has an effect: Public trust in the media is decreasing. An atmosphere of fear and self-censorship is growing in professional circles, which negatively affects the process of creating a quality media product and weakens the vitality of the media as an institution.

### 3.8. Microphone as the trigger of aggression

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The words are terrible, when they are silent.

**Lina Kostenko**

Ukrainian public figure and journalist



The government’s continuous aggressive rhetoric towards journalists, lack of investigations, and impunity have contributed to the discrediting of the journalism profession. As a result, a polarized society is encouraged and does not hesitate to openly demonstrate anti-social behavior (verbal and physical attacks) in public space against journalists who represent one or the other “side”. For media representatives themselves, journalism is a dangerous profession. They say, that in Georgia, every day, when they go out on the street, they must fight for your physical survival, regardless of the media outlet logo and for which “side” it’s acceptable, is on the microphone.

The 2021 study already highlighted the additional effect of political polarization, “using the media itself against the journalist,” which leads to polarization within the media itself, pitting journalists against each other<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> Gersamia, M. , & Toradze, M.,(2022), Media Environment in Georgia during the Crisis, GEORGIAN SCIENTISTS, 4(4), 220–242. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.52340/g.s.2022.04.04.25> (last seen: 14.12.2022)

The 2022 study highlighted the negative result of this approach: 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.

Aggression on the part of the population is especially evident during the coverage of rallies, and their rhetoric towards journalists (both from the government and opposition supporters) is similar to each other (for example: “Murderer”, “Why did you drag yourself here?”, various obscene expressions). There are cases when journalists (both from alleged pro-government and pro-opposition channels) when covering the events where aggression towards journalists is expected, agree in advance among themselves to work without branded microphones and logos. It should be noted that all TV channel journalists who participated in the research (starting from Mtavari Channel and ending with Imedi TV) note that aggression is not caused by any specific journalist, but simply by seeing their logo: “People show their mood according to the editorial policy of the channel. I may not even have the camera turned on, they don’t even know the question I am asking yet, and the logo is already causing aggression,” says the Imedi TV journalist.

According to the journalists, this kind of polarization is the fault of the journalists themselves, because there are cases when the media encourages violence against other colleagues. The aggressive charge and atmosphere spread to everyone, regardless of their network. Within the framework of the research, fragmentary, but still, specific cases of solidarity were identified: “While working in the field, there are cases when we all stand in solidarity with each other. There was a case when I was collegially defended by a journalist from Mtavari Channel at the protest. In general, less solidarity is seen from the well-known journalists who work in the studio. In my opinion, in order for journalists to be safe in the conditions of political polarization, we ourselves should not call for aggression. Let’s stand in solidarity. Let’s find not a common political language, but a common professional language,” notes the Imedi TV journalist.

The microphone is also associated with danger for the sources themselves and reinforces fear and self-censorship among them. The Mtavari Channel journalist recalled how when she had arrived in Kutaisi accompanied by the Polish ambassador and prepared a story there, after which one of the sources called him and first thanked the journalist, then apologized and told her that she would not be able to share the story on social networks, although (!) if she were able to send the story without the Mtavari Channel logo and be able to edit out the places where the journalist herself was visible, she would share the story.

Speaking about the unacceptable practice of relations between politicians and journalists, the participants of the discussion repeatedly recalled the case of last year, when the Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs, Tea Tsulukiani, after listening to a critical question, snatched the microphone out of the regional journalist's hand, then went on stage with it in her own, addressed the audience and publicly humiliated the journalist<sup>67</sup>. According to journalists, it is disturbing when such behavior from the government towards journalists becomes a part of daily routine.

If in 2021, in crisis situations, "for the safety of journalists, the editors had advised them to hide that they are journalists and not to show identifying signs<sup>68</sup>, in 2022, journalists in crisis situations (for example, during demonstrations or protests) agreed to remove the identifying logos of this or that media outlet from their microphones before filming, in order to feel safe.

**SUMMARY:** In a polarized society and media environment, discrediting journalists has affected everyone, regardless of the logo of the media outlet. The microphone itself has become a trigger for aggression, and the so-called government and opposition media representatives express concern about this. In this process, the responsibility and obligation of the influential organizations and the government are particularly large and they must protect media people from violence.

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<sup>67</sup> From the television archives: Footage of the Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs taking away the microphone from a journalist, available at: <https://youtu.be/lHaENvjetPQ> (last seen: 20.12.2022).

<sup>68</sup> Gersamia, M., Toradze, M., (2021), Media Environment before and after 2021 Elections: Threats and Supportive Instruments, Media and Communication Educational and Research Center, p. 38.

### 3.9. Media viability and financial challenges

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In 2022, the financial situation of critical media outlets worsened, which negatively affected the viability of the media. According to the participants of the discussion, these problems are also caused by artificial and deliberate interventions by the government and include pressure on private media companies and the advertisers, owners, and founders of critical media. According to the participants, this is a fight against freedom of speech using the Soviet methodology. "I lived in the Soviet era and I see how we are approaching the methods on which the Soviet Union stood. The system has hardly changed," says the journalist from the Public Broadcaster.

The deterioration of the financial situation of the media was affected by the arrest of Nika Gvaramia, the founder and director of the private TV company Mtavari Channel, the prosecution of the founders of the other critical channels (TV Pirveli and Formula) and ongoing court proceedings. Participants of the discussion connect financial challenges with examples of pressure exerted by the government. These are:

1. New regulations that have reduced the flow of funds from the already scarce advertising market;
2. The arrest of the founder and general director of the TV company Mtavari Channel for political reasons;
3. The legal dispute against the founder of the TV company TV Pirveli<sup>69</sup>;
4. The investigation against the owner of the controlling share of Formula TV company<sup>70</sup>;

For the financial sustainability of the media, it is necessary that the revenues are transparent and non-political. In this regard, the involvement of international donors is important, although donors are somewhat wary of funding private media organizations (especially national broadcasters) because there is no trust and transparency in the political interests of the groups' owners. It is difficult to get grants for the development of mainstream critical television because they are stigmatized as partisan media.

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<sup>69</sup> "There is a political motive in the decision" – on the case of TI Khazaradze-Japaridze, (12.01.2022), Netgazeti, available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/586308/> (last seen: 22.12.2022)

<sup>70</sup> There is an intention to close "Formula" - Kezerashvili, (30.09.2021), Netgazeti, available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/566021/> (last seen: 22.12.2022)

Journalists assessed what was the role of international organizations in this regard and what type of support was and/or would be effective from their side. According to the participants of the discussion, donors and NGOs are not fully aware of the current challenges of the media and do not see that the main target of Russia's hybrid war is the media. Journalists consider it important to support national broadcasters and to create a tone in international political reports that truly reflects the current situation.

During the discussion, it was noted that donor funding is mainly aimed at small companies and regional media, which, according to media representatives working in Tbilisi, is irrational, because regional media have ties to the local budget and local business, which also affects the quality of their products.

Research conducted by Transparency International-Georgia in previous years confirms that there is indeed a bond between local municipalities and regional media through state procurement. In 2020, as a result of state purchases, 15 local television stations received a total of more than 686 thousand GEL, "for individual broadcasters, the money received from state purchases has a significant share in the total income – in most cases it is more than 20%, and sometimes it even exceeds 50%." The research notes that "the subject of purchase is mainly social advertising, production and launch of commercials and dissemination of information important to society. However, some of the contracts involve the release of information about the municipality's activities in the news release, the placement of materials prepared by the municipality's press center on the air, and the preparation of programs."<sup>71</sup>

It is important to identify what types of costs are vital to the media. First of all, these are salary obligations, office expenses, without which it is impossible to create any type of product. It is also important to have access to quality photographic products and up to date technical equipment. "Donors are often interested in trainings, trying to improve media standards in various ways, however, if we don't have employees and we don't have an office, we won't be able to create any products" the representative of Netgazeti/Batumelebi notes.

Regional media representatives point out that donors in most cases finance training and not the production of media content. Media organizations must

<sup>71</sup> Overview of Local Municipalities' Television Purchases, (2022), Transparency International Georgia, Available at: <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/adgilobrivi-municipalitetebis-satelevizio-shesqidvebis-mimoxilva> (last seen: 17.12.2022)

adapt to the demands and priorities of donors (for example, to work as NGOs, to conduct training and various activities that leave no time for journalistic activities). “The main challenge of the media is to create content, cover the story and pay journalists and camera people,” says the representative from Borjomi TV company. “It is very important to fund investigative journalism. Also, it is important for donors to thoroughly study whom they are funding,” says the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

Regarding the creation of trainings and educational modules for active (especially novice) journalists, the areas where retraining is desirable were named:

- Coverage of religious issues;
- Solidarity journalism: Coverage of vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ groups, religious and ethnic minorities, etc.);
- Criminal and court reporting;
- Media law and human rights coverage;
- Coverage of women’s rights (including coverage of domestic violence, discrimination-harassment, and femicide);
- Coverage of the process of preparation for elections (study of party activities, coverage of intra-party democracy, coverage of election programs, etc.)
- Safety issues: How should journalists protect themselves in the event of an attack?
- Beat journalism: How to cover the activities of European institutions, the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, and international news.

During the discussion, it was revealed that the right way to financial sustainability is when the media is financed by the audience itself. Speaking of financial sustainability, the representative of the regional media Chemi Kharagauli noted that they mainly exist with financial sources coming from their subscribers. Recently, due to the deterioration of the general social context and the increase in prices, subscribers have also decreased. The popularity of Internet media has also affected this. The representative from Chemi Kharagauli also mentioned that the authorities in the regions have created their



own N(N)LEs to publish information in the media, only sharing the information of which the local self-government and mayor approve.

In terms of financial sustainability, large news agencies (such as InterPress-News) are more viable and are able to maintain stability with their advertisements. The situation is different though in broadcasting companies. The financial crisis makes it difficult for national broadcasters to prepare regional news and weakens the connection with viewers. In 2022, a number of broadcasters made public statements and/or appealed to viewers for financial assistance due to problems caused by the deteriorating media environment. This was the case with the TV companies Kavkasia<sup>72</sup>, and Mtavari Channel<sup>73</sup>, as well as such broadcasting companies (regional media TV 25<sup>74</sup>) which have existed for 29 years.

A big challenge for the viability of the media is the outflow of personnel, the so-called brain drain in both national and regional media. Due to financial problems, television companies cannot pay salaries and cannot allow correspondents to go on regional business trips. Due to the outflow of employees, the quality of the media product deteriorates. It was also mentioned that the intervention of big money in the Georgian media market, in any media outlet, causes professional migration and also damages the media environment.

**SUMMARY:** The viability of the Georgian media is under threat due to financial pressure from the government. For greater financial independence, it is important to promote a healthy separation process of media and political parties and end the “symbiotic relationship”. This includes developing various mechanisms to increase financial transparency and accountability to the audience. In this regard, it is important to increase the involvement of local organizations and international donors.

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<sup>72</sup> Kavkasia TV Company is contacting you for support, available at: <https://kavkasiatv.ge/2022/07/14/%e1%83%97%e1%83%98%e1%83%91%e1%83%98%e1%83%a1%e1%83%98/> (last seen: 19.12.2022).

<sup>73</sup> On the very front page of the TV company, there is a video clip, «You can save Mtavari Channel”, where bank accounts for donations are located, available at: <https://mtavari.tv/> (last seen: 19.12.2022).

<sup>74</sup> TV 25 announces that it is in danger of closing – The reason is the financial crisis, (09.07.2022), Batumelebi, Available at: <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/434174/> (last seen: 19.12.2022).

### 3.10. Institutionalization of solidarity and resilience of media environment

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At its core, Solidarity Journalism aims to help journalists report stories more accurately.

**Anita Varma**

Author of the Solidarity Journalism Initiative



Institutionalizing solidarity and increasing the inclusiveness of different groups in the process were cited as ways of strengthening a supportive media environment. The issue is important in three directions:

#### **1) Solidarity journalism – Media support towards the public**

In the context of solidarity journalism, it is important to cover people's lives and their problems more. In order to increase solidarity towards journalists, it is necessary to constantly bring forward topics relevant to the population. It is also important to make direct contact with the audience, including off-camera, when they are more comfortable talking to the journalist. "Society and media are in the same boat. We should cover their problems more," says the journalist from the Public Broadcaster.

#### **2) Solidarity between media organizations**

Journalists in polarized media organizations can no longer show solidarity towards each other and this has also affected their collegial and personal relationships. As a result, in the presence of problems, mutual solidarity is seen to a large extent among representatives of the critical media.

Elements of solidarity between different media can be seen while working in the Parliament. A media representative critical of the government recalls that

his colleagues from the government channel confidentially inform him when a member of the Parliament plans to secretly make a comment.

Although there is professional competition among journalists, especially in broadcasting, there is also a supportive environment when it comes to personal relationships. Some journalists believe that there is a resource for the institutionalization of solidarity, and it is possible to create a modern, professional union. The actualization of the demonstration of solidarity was also helped by the fact that when working in the field, journalists are forced to come to each other's aid.

There is the opposite reality, too, which damages the supportive environment: "The public looks at the aggressive attitude of the government towards the media and sees journalists who do not protect their colleagues. This is what needs to be changed, we should not allow it. Making noise increases solidarity, so we should not be silent, and where the state does not protect us, media organizations and journalists should protect each other," says the representative of iFact. "The trust of the public is up to us to get back. Before we talk about problems with other people, we should be able to talk with each other," says the journalist of Rustavi 2.

During the discussion, it was mentioned that the institutionalization of solidarity should begin with the fact that when expressing aggression towards any journalist, all journalists should demonstratively protect their colleague as a sign of solidarity (e.g., they should turn their backs to the respondent).

### **3) Solidarity towards media from the public**

According to journalists, it is difficult to demand solidarity from the public towards the media, when aggression is encouraged by the government's rhetoric.

There are groups (in the form of political parties, NGOs, and influential groups) that participate in creating a positive or negative attitude towards journalists. It is important for them to respond in a timely manner to the cases of harassment of journalists and the media. According to the discussion's participants, more systematization of support is necessary in this regard. The

opposition political parties should constantly actualize media-supporting topics and problems in cases when there are attacks on the media by the government.

During the discussion, it was noted that the opposition also refrains from openly criticizing the Patriarchate of Georgia, while there is an open attack on the media from their side. This creates a sense that politicians (both government and opposition) hold the Patriarchate and their controlled groups as a force to be reckoned with. The attitude of politicians on both sides receives criticism from the participants. “The opposition is not your friend, in the end, it uses you. The government does not need a media team that is experienced and understands the effects of censorship and self-censorship,” says the Formula journalist.

**SUMMARY:** Compared to previous years, it has become more relevant for journalists to talk about mutual solidarity and to discuss ways of finding a way out of this situation, not through individual, but collective resilience. In this case, the institutionalization of solidarity may guarantee the survival and greater protection of professional standards. It is important to strengthen solidarity not only in fragments but also in daily routine. That is why the protection of human rights (especially of vulnerable groups) is the cornerstone of solidarity journalism. The “matrix of solidarity” is strengthened by the inclusion of different parties and “making noise”. Trust in the media can be restored by strengthening human rights and their voice in the media.

## Conclusion

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Since February 2022, the media agenda has largely been covered by the large-scale war in Ukraine launched by the Russian Federation, which has turned out to be a “litmus test” for understanding the dangers of Russian disinformation. Compared to the previous year, journalists also saw more clearly the contours of the establishment and influence of the “Russian model” in the Georgian media.

Polarization in the media remains a challenge, an atmosphere of fear that increases self-censorship, and damages the credibility and viability of the media. Against the backdrop of the deliberate discrediting of the journalistic profession and the encouragement of aggression by influential organizations (such as the Patriarchate of Georgia) and the government of Georgia, impunity and protracted investigations remain a challenge. The accountability of the authorities to the media is low, as well as in terms of responding to investigative materials related to alleged crimes. The July 5, 2021 tragedy, illegal hearings, etc. remain among the cases that have not been fully investigated.

The media environment was considerably aggravated by the arrest of the main critical media director Nika Gvaramia on politically motivated charges. Pressure has increased on other critical media as well, including those that have never had a party affiliation.

The media environment was worsened by the implemented and planned changes in the Georgian Law on Broadcasting, which had a negative impact on the financial viability of critical media. There has been an outflow of journalists and cameraperson from the profession, one of the reasons for which is financial instability.

It became even more difficult for the media to access public information and interview politicians. Political polarization and limited access to information affect the quality of the media content itself and, therefore, the credibility of the media, as the audience is not fully informed about the political environment and processes. Restrictions on journalists' access to information are systemic and are particularly effective when it comes to topics and investigative materials that are sensitive to the government team.

Illegal surveillance of journalists remains a problem, fueling fear and self-censorship. Journalists know that their communications with producers, and their communications with their sources, are likely to be illegally wiretapped. Physical and psychological violence, and aggressive rhetoric of the government, which affects a large part of society, remain a challenge.

In a polarized environment and in light of the decline in media credibility, the trigger for violence against media representatives by various groups in society is which media the journalist represents. Representatives of all TV channels that participated in the research note that aggression is not caused by any single journalist, but by seeing the logo of the microphone. Regardless of which "side" journalists represent, they are victims of physical and verbal violence. In this process, solidarity between media representatives is fragmented as a defense mechanism. In order to strengthen the supportive environment, the possibilities of institutionalizing solidarity and the need to increase the inclusiveness of different groups in this process are highlighted.

Since the start of the Russian war in Ukraine, the flow of Russian-directed disinformation has increased, targets of which are the pro-Western media, the civil society, and the political opposition. In the larger picture, the victory of democracy itself in Georgia and Ukraine will already signal the defeat of the imperialist mindset and the Russian dream.

It should be noted that even if Russia is defeated in Ukraine, the threats to Georgia will remain a challenge, because the defeat of Russia will not lead to their immediate democratization of RF. For some time, the imperial aspirations will be manifested again in the information sphere, the target of which will be Georgia. In this regard, the main guarantees of security for Georgia appear in joining the Euro-Atlantic structures and further integration into Europe. Georgia will have challenges even after the end of the oligarchy and it will be necessary to evolve this vicious system. This system created with the Soviet mentality has its own tentacles in the media. Media democratiza-

tion and the strengthening of accountability are essential in this process. It is important that NGOs perform not only the “watchdog” function but also get involved in the implementation of reforms, which will have added value in the development of a consolidated democracy. In this regard, it will be important to increase the inclusiveness of the civil society itself, break the symbiotic relationship between the media and political parties, and restore the trust of the media.

In recent years, the public’s attitude towards the media has also changed, which is reflected in the fact that credibility has decreased and aggression towards journalists has increased. All this is facilitated by nihilism, polarization, and weak democratic institutions. The role of the free media is the main resource for the resilience of democracy and works towards the main direction for improving the media environment, that is – the restoration of trust.

## Recommendations

### **For media organizations:**

- Systematically demanding for an investigation of crimes committed against journalists, and bring an end to impunity;
- Promotion of the institutionalization of solidarity between media organizations: for example, in professional activities, encouraging the expression of mutual solidarity towards colleagues in various forms;
- End the “symbiotic” relationship between the media and political parties, in order to strengthen the media’s financial sustainability and editorial independence;
- Constant reminding of transparency and accountability to the public for public persons and agencies, including in case of restriction and/or denial of access to information of public importance during professional activities;
- For increasing trust in the media: A focus on covering issues concerning the public and emphasize separation from political parties in professional activities;
- For the reduction of self-censorship, limiting informal relations with politicians and strengthen the practice of professional relations;
- To increase society’s trust in the media, establish solidarity journalism in daily practice: in terms of human rights protection, covering vulnerable groups (religious and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ community, children and women, persons with disabilities, etc.); cover beats of issues concerning the general public; get closer to the population – organize meetings without cameras involved and organize discussions on current issues with the inclusion of various parties, encourage connectivity;
- Establishment of the practice of showing collective solidarity to create a reliable environment in newsrooms to strengthen resilience of journalists and reduce self-censorship;



- Strengthening of the moderation in social networks: Protect journalists from comments containing hate speech, including hateful activities of Internet trolls and bots;
- To weaken the effect of Russian propaganda, strengthening public awareness and resilience by proactively covering topics (e.g., European integration, European history, human rights, etc.) about which the public has insufficient knowledge;
- In crisis situations and in the conditions of increased pressure on the media, putting additional efforts to strengthen professional standards;
- Supporting investigative journalism.

### **For Civil Society Organizations and Donor Organizations:**

- Systematically demanding for an investigation of crimes committed against journalists, and bring an end to impunity;
- For media democratization and financial viability, starting discussions on establishing a healthy model of financing mainstream media companies. Among them, starting a discussion on mechanisms of separating from the involved interest groups and political parties;
- Supporting beat journalism, which includes: systematic coverage of human rights; solidarity journalism, in particular, coverage of vulnerable groups, domestic violence and femicide, and religious issues; Also, improve the coverage of European history and European integration, court reporting;
- To weaken the effect of Russian propaganda and to strengthen the competencies of journalists in this regard, encouraging proactive coverage of topics targeted by Russian disinformation (e.g., European integration, European history, rights of vulnerable groups/minorities, etc.); in order to strengthen the community's resilience and awareness, creating educational modules and encourage research on the above-mentioned topics;

- Strengthening the monitoring of legislative initiatives related to media;
- Promotion of the institutionalization of solidarity towards the media and between media organizations (e.g., organize discussions and meetings on the establishment of professional unions/centers, and support events focused on strengthening solidarity);
- Supporting the components necessary for the viability of the media (especially mainstream broadcasting organizations and online media); for example, providing support in terms of media content creation, payroll obligations and technical equipment renewal;
- Supporting the strengthening of investigative journalism and, in this regard, the creation of media content;
- Training political party representatives in terms of their relations with the media; create a platform for cooperation between media and politicians in an institutional format and organize joint discussions;
- Training journalists to cover internal party processes and current topics (intra-party democracy, formation of programs and lists of candidates, etc.) before the elections, as well as coverage after the elections;
- Increasing public awareness of free, pluralistic and diverse media and encourage public solidarity towards the media;
- Starting a discussion on the process of establishing a media ombudsman as a supporting institution.

### **Political Organizations:**

- Systematically demanding from various platforms an investigation of crimes committed against journalists and bring an end to impunity;
- Establishing the practice of formal, business relations with media representatives;
- Refraining from assigning party labels and using aggressive rhetoric and hate speech to employees in the media;
- To end polarization, participating in debates (if any) proposed by media organizations.

**For State Agencies:**

- Increasing the inclusiveness of various interest groups (including CSOs and media critical of the government) in the decision-making process;
- To end polarization, participate in critical media and programs, especially debates (if any);
- Investigating crimes committed against journalists and ending impunity (including thorough and impartial investigation of cases of illegal surveillance of media representatives);
- Termination of prosecution of media owners and review of politically motivated cases;
- Ending rhetoric inciting violence against journalists and terminating the encouragement of hate speech;
- Removing artificial barriers to accessing public information;

**For Academia and Higher Educational Institutions:**

- Organizing educational modules and training students and media workers on topics that are the target of Russian disinformation (e.g., human rights, EU institutions, European history, Russian propaganda, etc.);
- Strengthening solidarity journalism (covering human rights / vulnerable groups); Strengthening the training of court reporting;
- Raising awareness of the importance of the journalist's profession and freedom of expression;
- Promotion of interdisciplinary (for example, journalism studies, media psychology, law studies, political sciences) modules and studies;

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## Appendices

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### **Media outlets who took part in the research**

Journalists, producers, talk-show hosts/presenters, media owners/founders, editors from the following media outlets participated in the focus group discussions:

1. Georgian Public Broadcaster – the First Channel;
2. Broadcasting TV company “Rustavi 2”;
3. Broadcasting TV company “Maestro”;
4. Broadcasting TV company “Mtavari Channel”;
5. Broadcasting company “TV Pirveli”;
6. Broadcasting TV company “Formula”;
7. Broadcasting company “TV Imedi”;
8. News service “Interpressnews”;
9. Radio “Commercant”;
10. Online media “publika.ge”;
11. Online media “Netgazeti / batumelebi”;
12. Investigative Studio “ifact”;
13. Newspaper “Georgia Today”;
14. Broadcasting company “TV Borjomi”;
15. Online Media Chemi Imereti & newspaper Chemi Kharagauli
16. Broadcasting radio company in Gori Mozaika;

## About the authors

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**Mariam Gersamia** is a founder and chairwoman of Media and Communication Educational and Research Center “media Voice”. Mariam is a full professor and media psychologist at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU, Georgia). She received her doctoral degree in journalism studies (2004) and post-diploma education in body-oriented psychology (2017). With 22 years of experience in academia, she was in charge of the journalism and mass communication department and programs, twice-elected as a member of the academic council (2010-2015). Mariam is an author of research papers, textbook, and monography. She has cooperated with local and international organizations, worked for the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia as the head of the PR Department and Minister’s adviser (2006-2009), was Executive Director of the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (2009-2014). For now, she is in charge of the English taught graduate program “Media Psychology and Communications” at TSU. Mariam is a member of international scientific associations and editorial boards. She is an honourable citizen of Louisville (USA). She is the Eastern Partnership Civil Society fellow (2022); Her major fields are: media psychology, gender and media, public relations, media education, and political communications.

**Maia Toradze** is a board member and senior fellow at Media and Communication Educational and Research Center “Media Voice”. She is an associate professor at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU, Georgia) and the head of the journalism undergraduate program. Over the course of 30 years of practical work in the media, she used to be a journalist and an editor-in-chief at a number of media outlets (“Shansi”, “Kavkasioni”, “Akt senti”, etc.). Currently, she works at the TSU media center. Maia Toradze started her pedagogical career in 2005. She got her PHD in Journalism Studies in 2006. She is an author and co-author of more than a dozen books, co-author of 13 journalistic compilations and editor of 5 books. With 16 years of experience in academia, she has participated in various international scientific conferences and has published numerous scientific articles. Her works have been published in both Georgian and international scientific journals. Her major fields of expertise are: fake news and disinformation, media education, mass communications, media history.

## **About MCERC – Media Voice**

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 the 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 advising in the fields of media psychology, public relations, media and mass-communication, media law, support to transfer interdisciplinary knowledge. Center collaborates with higher educational institutions, local and international organizations, companies, educational and research centers.

Website: [www.mcerc.ge](http://www.mcerc.ge)

Email: [info@mcerc.ge](mailto:info@mcerc.ge)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mcerc.ge>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/media-and-communication-educational-research-center-mcerc/>

Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/mcerc\\_georgia/](https://www.instagram.com/mcerc_georgia/)



