

Media Environment 2024

THE FIGHT FOR TRUST
AND FREEDOM IN GEORGIA



Media Environment 2024: The Fight for Trust and Freedom in Georgia

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The logo for MediaVoice, featuring the word "MediaVoice" in a white, italicized sans-serif font inside a red speech bubble shape.

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“The vitality of fundamental rights is contingent upon their daily application.”

Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger

Human Rights Defender

“Without facts, you can’t have truth. Without truth, you can’t have trust. Without facts, truth and trust, we have no shared reality, and democracy.”

Journalist Maria Ressa,

“How to Stand Up to a Dictator”



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to describe and assess the media environment in Georgia in 2024 and to identify the threats and support mechanisms that affected the information ecosystem, media viability and trust in the media.

The study highlights how the challenges of the “super-election year” affected the media credibility and reliability, journalistic activity and product quality. It analyzes the impact of the Agents/Russian Law and pre-election and post-election protests on the information ecosystem. In doing so, it assesses the obstacles and support mechanisms in the media on the part of various actors (ruling and other political parties, the civil society sector and media consumers, academics, international organizations and donors); what and how trust in the media and other actors is affected and what mechanisms can be used to increase this trust; how polarization affects journalistic activity and what means exist to combat it. The study highlights how the media operates under kleptocratic rule, how it copes with Russian influences, as well as the challenges posed by disinformation and potent propaganda in the context of technological challenges. A significant facet of the study involves an examination of the evolving role of the media environment in the context of Georgia’s European integration process.

As in previous years, the study assesses the effectiveness of solidarity journalism as a support mechanism and describes how it manifested itself in 2024. This includes monitoring of indicators of increasing and assessing trust in the media.

In addition, for the first time, this year’s study highlights the role of citizen journalism in crisis situations, as well as new tools and examples of transformative experiences in the fight for media survival. The role of targeted sanctions and international courts necessary to prevent impunity for crimes committed against journalists is highlighted.

The situational analysis of the study is presented by highlighting the key developments that have influenced the media agenda and media environment in Georgia. The terminology framework and definitions are specified as well.

MILESTONES 2024

- **April 3** – The ruling Georgian Dream Party announces the [reintroduction](#) of the draft law on foreign agents, sparking mass protests and sharp criticism both domestically and internationally.
- **April 15** – Georgian Dream registers a draft law on amendments to the Tax Code, known as the Offshore Law (N: [07-1/31/10](#)).
- **May 7** – The European Court of Human Rights issues its [judgment](#) in the case of Tsaava and Others v. Georgia, finding a violation under the procedural limb of Article 3 of the Convention – ineffective criminal investigation. The case [concerned](#) the violent dispersal of protests outside the Parliament in Tbilisi on June 20-21, 2019, known as “Gavrilov’s Night”. The applicants were protesters and journalists covering the protests (more than 30 media representatives were injured during the dispersal).
- **May 14** – Despite mass protests and international criticism, the ruling party passes the Agents/Russian Law, titled the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence ([N 07-3/435/10](#)) in its third and final hearing.
- **May 28** – After the ruling party overrode the presidential veto on the Agents/Russian Law, Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili [signs it into law](#).
- **May 29** – The Georgian Parliament passes the amendments to the Tax Code of Georgia in a fast-track procedure ([N: 07-1/31/10](#)), exempting offshore companies from taxes if they decide to transfer their assets to a company registered in Georgia.
- **June 4** – The ruling party registers a bill considered as censorship and homophobic ([N: 07-3/446/10](#)) entitled On the Protection of Family Values and Minors.
- **June 6** – The U.S. Department of State [imposes](#) visa restrictions on dozens of Georgian individuals responsible for or complicit in the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law.
- **July 15** – President Salome Zourabichvili files a complaint with the Constitutional Court (complaint No. [1828](#)) demanding the revocation of the Agents/Russian Law.

- **July 17** – NGOs/N(N)LEs and media organizations (a total of 122 plaintiffs) file a complaint with the Constitutional Court (complaint No. [1829](#)) demanding the suspension of the unconstitutional provisions of the Agents/Russian Law pending the court’s final ruling.
- **July 31** – Members of the Georgian Parliament (a total of 38 MPs) file a complaint with the Constitutional Court (complaint No. [1834](#)) demanding the recognition of the Agents/Russian Law as unconstitutional.
- **September 4** – The deadline for organizations to [register](#) as entities pursuing the interests of a foreign power expires. Among the registered entities, only two were media organizations.
- **September 16** – Another set of targeted sanctions is announced by the U.S. Department of State.
- **September 17** – The Parliament [passes](#) the law On the Protection of Family Values and Minors, referred to as the “Censorship Law”, which consists of a package of laws and amendments to 18 related laws, including the Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression, the Law on Broadcasting, the Law on Higher Education, and others.
- **September 19** – The Network of Information Centers LLC and N(N)LP Studio Monitori file a complaint with the Constitutional Court (Complaint No. [1837](#)) demanding that the Agents/Russian Law be declared unconstitutional.
- **October 4** – The Constitutional Court agrees to hold a hearing on the merits of some of the plaintiffs’ claims regarding the Agents/Russian Law. However, it rejects the plaintiffs’ request to suspend the law’s unconstitutional provisions pending the court’s final ruling.
- **October 17** – The fight against the Agents/Russian Law [continues](#) in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) after the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA) filed a case with the Strasbourg-based court on behalf of 16 media organizations, 120 civil society organizations, and four individuals.
- **October 26** – Parliamentary elections are held in Georgia.

- **November 14** - The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) registers a case against the Agents/Russian Law.
- **November 27** - The Georgian Dream party nominates Mikheil Kavelashvili, a former football player and one of the leaders of the People's Power Party, as its presidential candidate. Kavelashvili is known for his anti-Western statements. People's Power was the first to register the draft law on foreign agents in 2023.
- **November 28** - Irakli Kobakhidze, the leader of Georgian Dream, announces that the ruling party has decided to suspend Georgia's EU accession process "until 2028".
- **December 12** - The U.S. Department of State [announces](#) another set of targeted sanctions.
- **December 13** - The Georgian Dream Parliament approves in its third hearing a package of amendments to the [Code of Administrative Offences](#) of Georgia and [the Law on Civil Service](#), which make the laws even more repressive.
- **December 19** - The U.S. Department of State announces another set of targeted sanctions. At the same time, the United Kingdom also [announces](#) sanctions against senior officials of Georgian Dream.
- **December 20** - The European Commission [proposes](#) suspending visa-free travel for Georgian diplomats, officials and their families holding diplomatic and official passports.
- **December 27** - The U.S. Department of State [sanctions](#) the founder of Georgian Dream, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili.
- **December 29** - The Georgian Dream Party holds an inauguration of its chosen candidate Mikheil Kavelashvili for the post of President of Georgia.
- **December 29** - The GD-elected President Mikheil Kavelashvili signs repressive laws.
- **December 31** - The German Foreign Ministry announces that Germany has imposed travel bans on nine individuals "primarily responsible for the violence against protesters and opposition members in Georgia." The Foreign Ministers of the Weimar Triangle also [issued](#) a statement on the latest developments in Georgia.

TERMINOLOGY FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

False/Illusory Polarization – In discussing political polarization, Wilson et al. (2020) distinguish between ideological, affective and false polarization. In Georgia, there is both real and so-called false/illusory polarization. Polarization and the hostile environment can lead to “the exclusion of important public concerns from the media agenda, replaced instead by depictions of the ‘enemy’ and false or illusory issues. Consequently, not only do people’s problems fail to make it onto the political agenda, but they are also left unaddressed by the media. This issue affects the entire agenda-building cycle and involves all the actors participating in it, including political elites, society, and the media” (Gersamia et al., 2024, p.13).

Kleptocracy – A form of government by individuals who primarily seek personal gain at the expense of those they govern. Kleptocracy is naturally associated with authoritarian regimes that seize state institutions, political power, and resources (Britannica).

Public interest media – According to the [International Fund for Public Interest Media](#), this includes media that create and distribute content that: exist to inform the public on matters that concern them; provide fact-based information in a trustworthy manner; commit to the demonstrable pursuit of truth, for example through sourcing practices and the representation of the audiences it hopes to serve; are editorially independent; are transparent about processes, finances, and policies used to produce it.

An information ecosystem – A geographic subset of the information environment, wherein information is processed on a shared basis. According to American journalist Courtney C. Radsch (2023), an ecosystem brings together different actors, structures, and entities that mutually influence the flow of information and public perception. The following entities participate in the functioning of the information ecosystem: media and media professionals; social networks and platforms; civil society; international organizations; state institutions; political parties, and individual users. The following layers interact in the information ecosystem: information production and dissemination, user response to and engagement with information, the role of technological platforms in information dissemination and filtering, political and social influences, and information credibility and reliability. The ecosystem encompasses hybrid, information warfare, and security challenges.

On-demand content – Content available on social networks and platforms on audiovisual demand, which is related to the reception of on-demand audiovisual media services. According to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, such media services are defined as “a service that allows the user to select and watch the programs from a catalogue of programs compiled by the on-demand audiovisual media service provider at his/her chosen time on his/her individual demand.”

OECD Principles – The OECD Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) has developed principles to strengthen media and information environments that serve the public interest. The principles include increasing support and developing a holistic approach towards the media and information environments, taking into account its legal, political, economic, gender, technological and societal dimensions. The principles

address the empowerment of media partners, civil society organizations, online content creators and other stakeholders. The committee also emphasizes the need to improve coordination between donors, local stakeholders and technology companies, and to invest in research and learning to adapt quickly to the media environment and ensure sustainable media development (OECD, 2024).

SLAPP – Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, or SLAPP, is a legal tool used by powerful individuals and organizations to intimidate and/or financially harm active citizens, journalists, and civil society representatives. The immediate goal of SLAPP is not to win a legal dispute, but to exhaust the financial, psychological, and time resources of the target of the lawsuit. In Georgia, there is an anti-SLAPP coalition of non-governmental organizations (including Media Voice).

Agents/Russian Law – Refers to the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. Although “Russian Law” or “Agents Law” does not represent the law’s official title, these neologisms encapsulate its essence and have gained traction in documents of local and international organizations. The adoption of these terms by society and their incorporation into political discourse have led to associations with authoritarianism, laws adopted in Russia, and the practice of its instrumentalization. Media professionals involved in the study also refer to the Law on Family Values as the “Censorship Law”.

In recent years, a variety of novel neologisms have gradually gained traction within the terminological domain of the media. These include pro-Western and anti-Western media, pro-Russian media, government and opposition media, and critical media, among others. These neologisms have emerged as a response to emergent political, social, and cultural phenomena, offering a linguistic expression of the prevailing polarization within the media environment.

Polarized media outlets employ labels (including stigmatizing terms) towards each other. On one hand, these labels are used to describe media outlets that are perceived as “opposition/critical/Western/radical”, and on the other hand, they are used to describe media outlets that are viewed as “government/pro-Russian/propaganda”. The labels “radical” and “propaganda” are relatively recent additions to this categorization. Online media is predominantly referred to as “independent media”.

At the end of 2024, after the parliamentary elections, the following terms have been established in critical and independent media outlets: “Georgian Dream’s/oligarch’s government/parliament/prime minister, etc. The following terms have also been used in relation to the ruling team: de facto and illegitimate.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The present study analyzes the challenges and support mechanisms of the media environment of 2024 from the perspective of representatives of various Georgian media outlets. Among them are journalists from different “poles/sides”, united by common concerns and different challenges caused by real and illusory polarization.

A qualitative research approach – focus group discussions and in-depth interviews – was selected as the research methodology. A discussion guideline was used as a qualitative research tool for in-depth interviews, while a discussion guideline with primary semi-structured questions was utilized for focus groups. The media environment was examined, as was the case in previous years’ research (2021-2023), based on the evaluations of respondents and their perceptions of reality.

The designated data collection period encompassed November and December of 2024, and January of 2025. Six of the media outlets involved in the study are major national broadcasters, two are investigative studios, one radio station (international bureau), one magazine, and ten are online and/or regional media outlets. The selection of these outlets was made with the understanding that, according to the 2024 Caucasus Barometer survey (April-May 2024), 49% of respondents in Georgia identified television as their primary source of information regarding ongoing developments. In addition, 21% of respondents cited social networks, while 19% indicated the Internet (excluding social networks). In this study, the focus is on television stations that are regarded as the most reliable sources of information regarding politics and current developments. According to the research (Atchaidze, CRRC-Georgia, 2024), these TV companies are: Imedi (22%), Mtavari Arkhi (8%), Rustavi 2 (8%), TV Pirveli (6%), Formula (2%), Georgian Public Broadcaster (2%). The remaining stations received 1% or less of respondents’ trust; every fourth respondent does not trust television; 16% do not watch it at all, and 6% do not express a position.

As part of the research, three focus groups were held in November and December, including one in an online format (total number of participants: 19). The participants included journalists/reporters, media managers, producers, media founders, television program creators and presenters. Concurrently, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of three media outlets, at their request (one of whom departed from the pro-government television at the end of 2024, who will be referred to in the study as “a journalist from Rustavi 2”). In early January 2025, due to the ongoing protests and shifts in political processes at the end of 2024, additional and/or repeated in-depth interviews were conducted with three journalists. A total of 23 representatives from 20 media outlets participated in the study, whose identities are kept confidential. The list of media outlets is presented in the form of an appendix.

2. KEY FINDINGS

In Georgia, the flow of information and public perception in the information ecosystem is negatively affected by both real and illusory polarization and kleptocracy, which harms the production and distribution of media content. This reduces trust in the media and negatively affects the media environment and the quality of content. The ruling team in Georgia has created a repressive legal environment and an information ecosystem in which the free flow of information is systemically and bureaucratically restricted. This increases polarization, which in turn reduces trust in the media.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the attainment of independence, the media environment in Georgia underwent substantial advancements. However, in recent years, the media environment has undergone a dramatic decline, due to the cascading adoption of repressive and anti-Western laws in 2024. This has led to a deterioration of Georgia's leadership position, previously established over the years, and has jeopardized the safeguards of freedom of expression, resulting in restrictions on media freedom and human rights.

In 2024, the primary political agenda of the Georgian media encompassed the following subjects: the instrumentalization of Russian-style laws, the demand or announcement of targeted sanctions, protests, elections, and the EU integration process.

Critical and independent media entered the global "super-election year" weakened – depleted of resources and unprepared (both in terms of content and finances), caused by the deterioration of the media environment in recent years and legislative changes. The participants in the discussion perceive the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law as a logical continuation of the ruling party's anti-Western course. However, they emphasize that the impact of this law on journalistic activity has proven to be much more detrimental than other laws adopted so far.

According to journalists, the Agents/Russian Law was part of a well-instrumentalized pre-election campaign that fully focused the attention and resources of the media and civil society on this issue. Consequently, during the pre-election period, the media failed to ask critical questions and did not/could not investigate them. The reintroduction and subsequent adoption of the law by the ruling team was a move aimed at diverting media resources from providing comprehensive election coverage and artificially excluding election-related topics from the media agenda. A notable "side effect" of the Agents/Russian Law was the media's adoption of a defensive and survival mode, characterized by the exhaustion of its physical, psychological, and legal resources.

Following the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law, there was a notable rise in self-censorship and an overall atmosphere of fear, which resulted in more limited access to sources. These sources, for their part, often opted to remain anonymous, which further reduced trust in the content. Access to public information became increasingly challenging, and representatives of the pro-government media outlets began to voice concerns about this issue for the first time.

In the aftermath of the reintroduction of the Agents/Russian Law in 2024, violent groups aligned with the government intensified their efforts to intimidate and stigmatize journalists. These actions were designed to suppress critical voices in the media. This pattern of conduct mirrors the strategies employed by the Kremlin regime.

The Agents/Russian Law lost its relevance after the elections. Journalists observed that the primary concerns associated with the enactment of this law (repressions, confiscation of offices and equipment, fines, etc.) were implemented by the ruling team even without the instrumentalization of the law: journalists were subjected to stigmatization and have been referred to as “agents”. Media professionals are pessimistic about the process of instrumentalization of the law and any other scenario under the current ruling team. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that this and other laws may be repressively implemented and “revived” in 2025.

After the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law, local and international organizations tried to empower media organizations and provide moral support.

The future of the donor work in Georgia remains unclear to journalists. There is a concern that donors may choose to depart from Georgia. Risks persist regarding the potential instrumentalization of the Russian/Agent Law. Currently, the media is focused on survival rather than on development. Journalists believe that it is imperative for donors to extend support to long-term projects and to increase resources.

The balance of power within the “fourth estate” has been compromised. It has been captured by the ruling team: on one side of the polarization is the media supporting the ruling team, whose resources and influence are greater than those of the critical/opposition and independent media.

During the election period, journalists have noted the lack of human resources and qualifications among media professionals and observers, in contrast to the ample resources of the ruling team. The lack of opposition observers at polling stations hindered the media’s ability to record comments on violations. The pre-election period was marked by both a lack of information and financial challenges, which adversely affected the quality of work.

During the pre-election period, the critical media partially fulfilled the “watchdog” function that is characteristic of democratic governance. Specifically, the media played an active role in disseminating information regarding electronic election procedures, fostering trust in both the Central Election Commission and the election system, and encouraging civic engagement. However, the analysis of potential electoral fraud and manipulation was given scant attention, as journalists deemed it would engender nihilism among the population. Consequently, Georgian media outlets demonstrated a relative lack of emphasis on enhancing accountability of political parties to the population, on actively countering the pro-government media’s propaganda, and on providing coverage of the actual concerns and issues facing the population.

The participants in the discussion believe that during the pre-election period, they should have been more critical of the election administration and the strategies employed by political parties. There was a divergence of opinions regarding the evaluation of the opposition's role and resources. It is noteworthy that during the discussion, critical and independent media representatives did not hesitate to criticize the opposition, while journalists from pro-government channels refrained from such criticism of the ruling team.

The focus group participants agree that the government's election campaign was conducted according to its plan "as if underground" and was part of an extensive "Russian special operation".

In the run-up to the elections, there have been notable changes in the working regime of critical media and the daily routine of journalists. It was less focused on the preparation of diverse journalistic materials. According to journalists, this change can be attributed to a pre-election strategy orchestrated by the ruling party to restrict media activities. Even in pro-government media outlets, there has been a noticeable change in editorial approaches, leading to an increased dependence on directives from the Georgian Dream Party. This shift has resulted in heightened polarization among media outlets, which has had a detrimental effect on the quality of content produced and the level of trust placed in the media.

During the period preceding the election, there was an increase in aggression against journalists on the part of the ruling team and its supporters. This increase was especially noticeable in the regions. The election environment was characterized as "toxic" for the regional media.

A rise in aggression has also been observed within the online media environment. According to journalists, their bullying on social media has also exhibited an organized nature. Notably, the prevalence of trolls and bots on social networks has increased, conducting an aggressive campaign against the media. Among them were the so-called "administrative resource trolls".

In contrast to previous years, the year 2024 witnessed an increase in aggression targeting journalists, manifesting in increasingly violent and obscene forms, including physical altercations, verbal confrontations, bullying, and threatening calls. The introduction of repressive laws and the execution of discrediting campaigns have led to the exclusion and estrangement of journalists from society. A new label for the media emerged – "agent", a designation that carries a pejorative connotation in Georgian society.

In the post-election period, critical media representatives felt uncertain and believed that they were left alone in the face of challenges. In this regard, they do not perceive political parties as their allies. They believe that political parties have been ineffective in safeguarding the media against threats (citing the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law).

In the aftermath of the elections, a significant segment of society mobilized in protest, generating an unprecedented scale of demonstrations that has profoundly impacted the balance of power within society, the media landscape, and the diversity of content.

Notably, as a result of societal pressures, previously marginalized and underrepresented groups were incorporated into the broadcasting network of the state-owned Public Broadcaster. Furthermore, sources were diversified in critical media outlets.

At the end of 2024, the arrests and fines imposed on journalists and activists during protest rallies “resurrected” the so-called repressive practice of SLAPPs. Consequently, judicial proceedings have drawn substantial resources from the media and civil society organizations (CSOs).

The primary challenge of the year 2024 pertains to the safety of journalists (physical, digital and psychological). Following the introduction and adoption of the Agents/Russian Law, the use of violence against the media and journalists has become a prevalent norm. Moreover, relatives, family members and minor children of journalists have also become targets of violence.

The physical violence against journalists encouraged by the ruling party has reached an unprecedented level and scope. The brutal beatings of media professionals were broadcast live, thereby contributing to the normalization of violence and criminal activity.

The normalization of violence against journalists has been facilitated by two factors. Firstly, the impunity of crimes committed against journalists has been a common occurrence. Secondly, cases brought against perpetrators of violence against journalists have been classified under the articles of hooliganism, not of attempted obstruction of journalistic activities.

In contrast to previous years, the year 2024 unfolded against the backdrop of intense international demands for targeted sanctions and their gradual announcement. The imposition of targeted sanctions, including those for crimes committed against journalists, can be considered an effective tool in the effort to combat the pervasive impunity syndrome. Moreover, the notion of the oligarch and his regime being above the law has begun to lose its credibility.

The discrediting of the profession of journalism and the media as an institution has continued over the years in Georgia. This phenomenon has had a negative impact on trust in the media. The participants of the discussion called this effect “polarization of trust”. The focus group participants identified the ruling team as the main perpetrator of the discrediting of the media, noting that it played a key role in promoting this process.

Unlike in previous years, journalists note that political party affiliation and personal relationships are detrimental to their professional activities and trust in them. The lack of financial independence of television stations is also a factor that indirectly affects trust.

The editorial policy of media outlets may imply a certain degree of loyalty to political ideology. This enables viewers to select information sources that align with their personal beliefs. However, such ideological identifications remain largely unarticulated in Georgia. The media and journalists change their political leaning depending on who owns and finances them. This dynamic also affects the level of trust in the media and journalists.

The media system has inherited from the Soviet era the vicious practice of symbiotic relations with the parties. This and other characteristics are manifested in unprofessional, unhealthy relations with politicians and parties (the ruling team and the opposition). This pattern of behavior has persisted over time due to the system's inability to undergo transformative experiences that could alter its fundamental nature. In this view, only separate media outlets and programs (including several online, regional and investigative media outlets; several television programs of the mainstream media) create exceptions and new experiences.

One of the important factors affecting trust is that "the media has deviated from their professional role by transforming themselves into a target". Such positioning was also a forced situation for independent media. In addition, due to the weakening of political parties and the non-governmental sector, the media has partially taken over the responsibilities of other institutions.

Distrust is fueled by the fact that the public does not and cannot participate in settling the media agenda. This strengthens populism, which occupies a niche that belongs to the people, increases the risks of manipulating public opinion, gives rise to the practice of blaming, and further reduces the public's desire for engagement.

The practice of journalists' fieldwork has a significant impact on public perception of the profession and, consequently, on the level of trust placed in it. The level of this trust is influenced by several factors, including the professional training and skills of journalists.

Journalists do not trust the police, the court, professional organizations, the Public Defender's Office and colleagues on the other side of polarization and rely only on themselves.

Polarization has created a crisis of trust, and this is best demonstrated by the fact that there is no longer the same solidarity among journalists as there was before Georgian Dream came to power. Political polarization has permeated personal relationships.

The concept of professional collegiality is subject to disruption when working in the field, with solidarity exhibiting greater strength in regional contexts. The media is currently undergoing a period of self-determination and survival. Therefore, media representatives agree that they must be in solidarity with each other and even physically protect each other.

A consensus among media representatives regarding professional guidelines is hoped to be established after the political crisis has been overcome. At this juncture, journalists believe that the prevailing degree of polarization will impede the ability of rival journalists to achieve a consensus. Concurrently, both sides perceive themselves as victims of bullying, whether from the ruling team or the public.

Journalists from opposing sides have continued to engage in collegial and friendly relations. This phenomenon, while seemingly paradoxical, has the potential to serve as a foundation for future dialogue. Journalists perceive this as an opportunity to "reset the media" during the transitional period.

The pervasive issue of monotony in media content remains a concern for journalists. The process of fieldwork, which encompasses the creation of high-quality, in-depth investigative and analytical materials, has become increasingly challenging for critical media. This situation can be attributed to restrictions imposed on commentaries and access to public information.

Control over the release of public information has increased, and it has also affected pro-government channels. The reason for this is the degree of polarization and control over the flow of information, where the journalist's free work with sources leads to the disruption of rigidly structured propaganda narratives.

The study identified several forms of restricting access to information. These forms include:

1. Restriction of access to public information;
2. Parliamentary regulations and so-called blacklists, which have made work more difficult;
3. Politicians' boycott of participation in TV programs and lack of accountability, which affects the quality of content;
4. Stigmatization of the media according to their affiliation with political parties;
5. Bureaucratic management system, which corrects the free flow of information with "an invisible hand";
6. The so-called shadow ban, when users' access to critical channels is limited by technical barriers.

The issue of access to public information poses significant challenges for small media outlets and investigative journalists. Access to public information has become increasingly difficult for journalists affiliated with pro-government television stations, a phenomenon that was not observed in previous years' surveys. This suggests that the ruling party may have reservations about the credibility of journalists and may be wary of media outlets that are perceived as loyal to it.

In regions across the country, the press services of the ruling team disseminate materials that align with their agenda, thereby limiting critical media outlets' access to information. This trend is expected to intensify further as local governments intend to procure video cameras for press services, thereby impeding the ability of critical media outlets to obtain information. This practice of providing information also applied to media outlets loyal to the ruling team.

Non-governmental organizations have also been known to produce media content, a practice that has given rise to divergent assessments among discussion participants. Some believe that this contributes to the dissemination of important information to the public, while others regard it as an encroachment on the functions of the media. The prevailing viewpoint is that NGOs should prioritize the publication of reports and studies, which the media will subsequently adopt as content.

During the pre-election period, access to information became more challenging in the regions. All representatives of the regional media involved in the study noted that the ruling party held “secret meetings” about which critical and independent media professionals were not informed. Anti-Western rhetoric was evident in such meetings of the ruling team, which was rarely and/or accidentally covered by the media and citizen journalists.

Another challenge that regions face is the diversification of sources. Regional media representatives are compelled to seek out respondents in Tbilisi for a variety of subjects. However, these respondents lack familiarity with the local population and consequently fail to inspire trust.

The media faced challenges in accessing the materials filmed by observers on election day, which hindered the dissemination of footage by journalists. The footage captured by these observers was initially disseminated to relevant parties or election observation organizations before being released to the media, thus resulting in a delay in the dissemination process. As a result, evidence of violations (including ballots with visible marks on the back) only became available to the media in the following days.

In this view, citizen journalists are considered to be a significant source for the media. During the election period, there was clear evidence of collaboration between media outlets and citizen journalists across all regions. This resource addresses a critical gap in small media organizations.

Polarization exerts a substantial influence on the accessibility of information, potentially impeding viewers’ ability to obtain comprehensive coverage of particular issues. According to the participants involved in the study, trust in the media is associated with the competence of journalists and adherence to professional standards, as these all affect the quality of journalistic production.

A legitimate demand has emerged from the public that the public broadcaster, which is financed from the budget, should reflect the interests of the people and cover their problems. This demand has been further articulated by the employees of the public broadcaster, who have also advocated for changes that align with societal expectations.

The focus group discussion revealed a general interest in covering topics that are tailored to the interests of the people. The development of public interest media is largely ensured by distancing itself from partisan and commercial interests and the support of international donors.

Journalists are also considering employment opportunities on various alternative platforms. However, using these platforms poses challenges for the media. Journalists believe that alternative media platforms created to save the media are no guarantee that they will not also be shut down. In addition, they fear that online platforms are more susceptible to propaganda than traditional media and will therefore be difficult to deal with. According to some journalists, the utilization of alternative platforms is not a solution, as autocratic/dictatorial regimes can also ban them. In this view, an important link in the Georgian information ecosystem is the challenge of hybrid, information warfare and security.

Opinions were divided on how to integrate various social platforms (e.g. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) into journalistic activities. Some journalists believe that by focusing on these platforms, content loses its value, and it is impossible to adapt high-quality, analytical material to the infrastructure of a specific medium. Others see these platforms as an opportunity to analyze audiences and target specific segments. In addition, some of the participants in the discussion believe that these platforms are useful in combating propaganda and disinformation.

Representatives of both traditional and online media concur that the primary challenge lies in the fact that the creation of content for social networks necessitates additional resources and is less suited to the particular requirements of traditional media genres.

The year 2024 was important for the media in terms of technological challenges. Artificial intelligence has become an important part of the media ecosystem, and this resource needs to be used in the Georgian media as well (including to combat disinformation). The media did not have this resource in 2024. Media representatives note that currently the priority is to ensure the safety of journalists, and in such a crisis, it is difficult to attend trainings and concentrate.

Focus group participants have noted that in 2024, there was also a problem with finding staff. They attribute this to the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law, which has led to the discrediting of the profession, resulting in a decline in its popularity. Despite market demand, there has been a decrease in individuals interested in pursuing a career as a journalist, particularly in the television and regional markets, where there has been an exodus and rotation of personnel. Moreover, media entities lack the resources to adequately prepare novice journalists for the demanding nature of the field.

A repressive environment has the potential to exert negative influence on other stakeholders. Specifically, it may harm academic freedom in higher education, encompassing the internationalization of journalism and mass communication programs, as well as the degree of compliance with international standards.

Journalists note that such a repressive media environment has never been seen under any government. Survey participants compared the violence used by the ruling team and its affiliated violent groups against journalists who were covering the protests at the end of 2024 to a “natural disaster”.

In assessing the threats, the media aligned with the ruling team encountered greater challenges in accessing information, in contrast to the previous year. Notably, financial stability remains the sole domain where they do not face threats. Table N1 presents an assessment of threats, as derived from the insights of journalists.

Table N1: Identifying threats in the media environment

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

The pre-election period was marked by a crisis of solidarity and trust in the media, precipitated by a confluence of social, political, organizational, and individual factors. Table N2 presents the indicators of trust in the media as perceived by media employees. These indicators were developed based on the opinions of the study participants and Radsch (Radsch, 2023).

Table N2. Assessment of media trust indicators based on journalists' opinions

Credibility Features	Indicators as seen by journalists
Credibility	
Access to reliable sources	insufficient
Possibility to verify information and facts	insufficient
Critical approach	insufficient
Training a journalist	insufficient
Quality of journalistic materials	
Upholding ethical standards	insufficient
Creation of public interest content	insufficient
Involvement and inclusiveness of audience in content creation and discussions	insufficient
Partisan, political and corporate impartiality	
Upholding editorial independence and distancing from the influences of political parties, media owners, and financial groups	insufficient
Maintaining the niche of professional activities during crises	insufficient
Political, cultural and social context	
Polarization	high
Censorship and self-censorship indicators	high
Legal framework	repressive
Audience perceptions, current attitudes, and beliefs	polarized

Media discrediting campaigns and influence of propaganda	damaging
Technological factors	
Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML), adaptation and ethical introduction	insufficient
Infrastructure upgrade	insufficient
Content continuity	insufficient
Positioning on different platforms	insufficient
Use of social platforms for discrediting the media	high
Establishment of culture of solidarity	
Support for vulnerable groups	insufficient
Demonstrating support for colleagues	insufficient

The resource for restoring trust in the media emerged at the end of 2024, during the protests, through the accumulation of shared and transformative experiences by people and media, and the unification around a common goal and interest.

Some journalists are still nihilistic about the future (especially in the context of the financial crisis), while others believe that nihilism has been overcome due to the ongoing protests, the imposition of targeted sanctions, and the ongoing processes around the Georgian Public Broadcaster (i.e. the allocation of airtime to protesters).

The majority of respondents expect that financial pressure on the media will increase, repressive laws will be instrumentalized, aggression against the media will increase, and impunity will prevail, discrediting campaigns against the media and specific journalists will continue, polarization will affect content and trust in and solidarity with the media, an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship in sources and newsrooms will increase. Due to financial and other challenges, the exodus of personnel from critical and independent media is also likely to continue.

It is noteworthy that the primary provisions of the repressive law in Georgia took effect several weeks before the parliamentary elections, which had a negative impact on independent media and civil society. The legislation gave the government the levers to stifle dissenting voices, control public discourse, and intimidate independent observers. This jeopardized the conduct of free and fair elections.

In 2025, critical media outlets still lack the resources to begin planning coverage of local elections. Trust in political actors and election administration has been compromised. The ruling team entered 2025 with challenges to its legitimacy and has found itself in a vacuum of seized power.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A balanced and collaborative model of the information ecosystem, as [described](#) by Courtney Radsch (2023), integrates the public and private sectors, civil society and the media. It highlights diversity, professionalism and sustainability as the **key pillars** based on a technological infrastructure and managed through **trust and transparency**. This ecosystem ensures access to reliable and inclusive information, thereby strengthening societies and creating an informed environment.

In Georgia, the post-Soviet legacy impedes the establishment and sustainable development of a democratic, healthy information ecosystem. The role of the media in restoring balance to this ecosystem is indispensable and can create transformative experiences, especially during periods of political crises and elections.

3.1. SUPER-ELECTION YEAR FOR THE MEDIA IN GEORGIA

In her book *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, Maria Ressa, a Filipino journalist and the founder of Rappler, recounts her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, which begins as follows: “Whoever wins these elections is going to determine not only our future, but also the past and how we mark history. If you don’t have integrity of facts, how can you have integrity of elections” (Ressa, 2022, pp. 21-22).

2024 was designated by UNESCO as a “super-election year”, with elections held in 75 countries. On June 6-9, 2024, the member states of the European Union held the European Parliament elections, which are held every five years and represent the largest transnational democratic process in the world. The 2024 elections covered half of the total population and went down in history as the largest election year. Elections around the world influenced the political and media agenda in Georgia. The Georgian media entered the year 2024 with worsening indicators: according to the Media Freedom Index ([Reporters Without Borders, 2024](#)), Georgia’s press freedom ranking dropped 26 places from the previous year to 103rd.

The role of the media in the electoral process is diverse. According to political scientist Stanley Kelley, Jr., the media can be perceived as a political actor because it decides what information to report and from what angle. For example, it can direct the audience’s attention to propaganda messages, present the “villains” and “heroes” of events in a disguised form, or focus on the strengths or weaknesses of political leaders (Kelley, 1962). This function of the media is still important today, because regardless of the agenda set by political parties, the media can independently highlight issues and function as a “watchdog” when it assumes this responsibility. In our study, it is relevant to discuss this role of the media in the pre-election and post-election periods.

The 2024 parliamentary elections were held for the first time under a fully proportional system and with electronic technologies in 90% of polling stations. According to official data, 158 press and other mass media were accredited by the Central Election Commission to cover the elections, of which 78 (49%) were international media and/or their bureaus. There were 54 more media organizations accredited for the 2024 elections than for the 2020 parliamentary elections. Journalists noted last year (Gersamia et al., 2024) that there was a need to retrain media representatives on the electronic conduct of elections so that voters would be better informed about the new rule.

During the pre-election period, the Georgian media partially fulfilled this function, which is characteristic of democratic governance. In particular, as Kelley explains, democratic governance is stable when the population perceives elections as a legitimate way of making decisions. To this end, the media propagate the idea that the voter's voice is important and that voting is a civic responsibility (Kelley, 1962, pp. 307-319). Indeed, the Georgian media has helped the parties to motivate voters and inform them about the election process.

The final report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission notes that in Georgia “the media landscape is diverse but highly polarized” (p. 22), reinforcing broader political power structures. The distribution of political power is also evident in the media, where “the most watched TV stations include Imedi, Rustavi 2 and POSTV, which are perceived to be affiliated with GD, and Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli and Formula, which are perceived to be affiliated with the opposition (p. 22). How and with what resources did the Georgian media perform this function (or not)? What challenges did it face in informing the electorate? These questions are also relevant in the 2024 study of the Georgian media environment.

Kevin Casas-Zamora, secretary-general of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [notes](#) that the world is experiencing a “political hangover” after the COVID-19 pandemic. Such hangovers, he said, arise post-crises, in which resultant turmoil, instability, and economic malaise reflect poorly on whoever is running the ship. In times like these, many people may turn to populists and authoritarians, he said, who “promise the restoration of order.” It can be said that in Georgia this process has coincided with a crisis of trust and solidarity in the media.

■ 3.2. CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY AND TRUST IN THE MEDIA

A fundamental observation of this study pertains to the trust indicators that ascertain the viability of media entities, both in the present and in the future. The presence of trust in the media is influenced by a multitude of factors, including social, political, organizational, and individual elements. The following factors are deemed to be integral in the cultivation of trust:

- ▶ **Credibility:** reliable sources, verification of information and facts, critical approach, journalistic skills and interpersonal influences.
- ▶ **Quality of journalistic material:** upholding ethical standards, creation of public interest content, involvement and inclusiveness of audience in content creation and discussions.
- ▶ **Partisan, financial, political and corporate impartiality:** upholding editorial independence and distancing from the influence of political parties, media owners and financial groups; maintaining the niche of professional activity during crises.
- ▶ **Political, cultural and social context:** polarization, censorship and self-censorship indicators, legal framework, audience perceptions, current attitudes and beliefs.
- ▶ **Technological factors:** adaptation and ethical introduction of modern tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML), infrastructure upgrade, content continuity and positioning on different platforms.
- ▶ **Establishment of culture of solidarity:** demonstrating support for colleagues and vulnerable groups.

The 2024 study by the Statista global platform, which examined perspectives on the news media from over 40 countries, revealed that Scandinavians had greater trust in the news media, with 69 percent of Finns trusting the news, while Slovakia, Hungary and Greece (23-25 percent) were among the lowest in the world when it came to how much consumers trusted the news media. The rate in Georgia is close to the latter. According to the 2024 data (CRRC-Georgia, Khoshtaria, 2024), 25% clearly trust the media and 36% do not. According to the Caucasus Barometer survey (CRRC-Georgia, Atchaidze, 2024), distrust of the media has increased over the past decade. In 2013, the majority of respondents (55%) had a neutral attitude towards the media, with only 12% expressing distrust. By 2024, as a generational shift unfolded, distrust of the media tripled to 36%” (p. 4). Studies suggest that distrust of the media is due to its partisan and polarized nature (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2021). Research (Silagadze, 2023) confirms the strong relationship between trust in TV channels and political preferences and the public perception that the media landscape is polarized. In particular, according to this study, those people who trust Imedi, Rustavi 2 or POSTV are more likely to support the Georgian Dream, while those who trust the so-called opposition TV channels are more likely to support the opposition.

According to Fisher (2018), the concept of trust in media encompasses three components: credibility of the news **medium** (e.g., newspapers, social media, television), the **message** (content, structure, accuracy, and presentation of material), and the **source** (journalists, media organizations). The specific medium, message, or source that an audience trusts is influenced by individual characteristics, such as age, gender, and political orientation (different studies identify different factors). As indicated by Schranz et al. (2018), politically polarized individuals, namely those who lean toward ideological extremes, exhibit a lower level of trust in the media compared to centrist individuals. The issue of polarization holds particular pertinence in the 2024 Media Environment Study by Media Voice. The adoption of the Agents/Russian Law and the post-election period have significantly increased societal polarization, which can be considered one of the factors that has reduced trust in the media.

Power grabs and imbalances in a country can have a negative impact on media freedom. When media outlets are concentrated in the hands of small groups or the government, it leads to a decrease in independence and a loss of pluralism (McChesney, 1999). Violation of the balance of power can result in political pressure, leading to censorship or self-censorship (Norris, 2000). The media are often under economic pressure, which can be associated with an unequal distribution of power (Bagdikian, 2004). As a result of power imbalance, the media can no longer play a key role in the process of democratic control (Curran, 2002). The role of social media in strengthening or weakening trust in the media is important, and this is also related to the distribution of power. Ultimately, as Pulitzer Prize-winning author Anne Applebaum (2024) writes, autocrats share a determination “to deprive their citizens of any real influence or public voice, to push back against all forms of transparency or accountability, and to repress anyone, at home or abroad, who challenges them (p.11).”

When society does not and cannot participate in the creation of the media agenda, when the voice of the people, their positioning is ignored (including in the media), this increases distrust. Such distrust strengthens populism, because it occupies a niche that belongs to the people. According to Bolton (2017), “when people lose trust in the political system it’s a dangerous time. It leaves people vulnerable to manipulation, to being offered someone to blame, to one group being pitted against another” (p. 6). Such reasons for distrust can also be observed in Georgia, where a polarized information ecosystem increases the risk of manipulating public opinion and the practice of blaming the media, while decreasing the public’s desire for engagement.

The crisis of trust in the media is a global trend. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2024), trust in traditional media, and especially in the national press, has fallen sharply over the past decade, although it is now showing some signs of recovery. According to Michailidou et al. (2023):

“Trust in journalism in Europe and beyond has been undermined by a series of scandals, by the closeness of journalists to political parties and government (Gallup, 2019), but also by more frequent attacks against freedom of speech and of the press run especially by populist leaders and new authoritarian governments. In some countries, like Hungary, Poland and Italy, the press freedom index is in steep decline, and governments have also entered a ‘war’ with journalism, putting increasing pressure on the free exercise of the profession, restricting budgets and the autonomy of public service broadcasting (Reporters Without Borders, 2020 (p. 60).”

Criticism of media representatives is often aimed at discrediting their competence and stigmatizing them, creating the image of the enemy. According to Krämer (2018), right-wing populists often criticize the established media for being untruthful or censoring what critics consider to be important information. According to the author, it is impossible for journalists to maintain complete impartiality because their professional norms are flexible and allow for subjective decisions about what to report (Krämer, 2018). This situation, combined with the anti-pluralist ideology of right-wing populists, makes it easier to accuse journalists of bias. In addition, according to Krämer (2018), the media outlets are not ready to respond to criticism from right-wing populists, but on the contrary, they contribute to the normalization of populist views when they respond to criticism of unequal/unbalanced coverage by covering populist views more frequently.

Lack of trust can reduce public support for journalists and the media. Polarization, disinformation, media discrediting campaigns, etc. have greatly contributed to the erosion of media credibility in Georgia. According to the study (Gersamia, Sajaia, 2024), “it is characteristic of kleptocracy to undermine trust in institutions and discredit them (media institutions included)” (p. 50). The 2023 study published by Media Voice (Gersamia, Toradze, Bandzeladze, 2024) notes that “trust in the media has declined due to the effects of polarization. In the context of the forthcoming elections, this poses a challenge: if voters lack trust in the media (as well as other institutions), it limits their access to well-informed choices. This, in turn, leaves more room for the spread of populist discourse and manipulation” (p.9). In addition, “polarization causes politicians and the media to distance themselves from the people and to stop talking about the issues and reforms of public concern”. This damages the quality of media content and negatively affects trust and solidarity in the media. Trust is damaged by media discrediting campaigns in the

online and offline media space (Gersamia et al., pp. 14-27). It is noteworthy that several organizations are working to rebuild audiences' trust in news and journalists, and to do so, they "are leveraging the same social media tools and platforms that have played a role in the diminishment of trust in journalism" (Johnson, Tully, 2023).

It is important to observe the presence of mutual trust and solidarity among pro-Western media outlets. The restoration of trust is strengthened by the accumulation of common experience, unification around a common goal and interest. Such solidarity should not be seen as a temporary phenomenon or a mere symbolic gesture; rather it should be integrated into ongoing processes and practices. Historically, media outlets have demonstrated solidarity in times of crises, even establishing a unified agenda when the influence of political actors on the media agenda was weakened. A notable example of this phenomenon is the solidarity that emerged after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Gersamia, Gigauri et al., 2024). Initially, pro-government channels supported this solidarity but later shifted to the pro-government agenda. In 2024, media solidarity rallies in Georgia took place alongside demonstrations and protests against violence against the media, with media outlets on the different sides trying to highlight their roles.

As emphasized by Fisher (2018), the role of trust in the media is crucial for the maintenance of democracy. In his opinion, digitalization has posed a threat to the media industry, as anyone can disseminate information online, be it a blogger or a citizen journalist, which reduces trust in journalism. On the one hand, this can be seen as positive because it increases public awareness, but on the other hand, it increases the amount of unreliable content and disinformation.

The subsequent factor that has the potential to influence distrust in the media is the overall economic situation in the country. Köhler and Otto (2018) describe the critical role of journalism in a democracy, with trust in it dependent on trust in political institutions. Accordingly, in a country with high unemployment, low wages, and rising inflation, trust in the media is lower (Köhler and Otto, 2018).

Increased trust in the media has a positive impact on the financial health of media organizations. Schranz et al. (2018) find that high levels of trust in the media lead to an increase in public interest in news and a preference for professionally produced journalism. Therefore, it must be a key concern of the industry to strengthen trust in the media, because intact media trust promotes not only a willingness to pay for news but also the acceptance of advertising (Schranz, Schneider, and Eisenegger, 2018).

In the context of Georgia, it is imperative to consider the historical background: the media system has inherited from the Soviet era the vicious practice of symbiotic relations with parties. This and other characteristics are manifested in unprofessional, unhealthy relations with politicians and parties (the ruling team and the opposition). This pattern of behavior has persisted over time due to the system's inability to undergo transformative experiences that could alter its fundamental nature. Since achieving independence, there have been sporadic instances of the presence of independent media in the television sector, although these have been overshadowed by party bias and financial instability. In this context, only few separate media outlets and programs (including several online, regional and investigative media outlets; several television programs of the mainstream media) create exceptions and new experiences in the Georgian media system.

■ 3.3. MEDIA AS A TARGET OF VIOLENCE

Following the reintroduction of the Russian/Agents Law in 2024, pro-government violent groups intensified their practice of intimidating and stigmatizing journalists in order to stifle critical voices in the media. These attacks were directly linked to journalists' participation in anti-Russian protests. The trend of pressure on critical media outlets was similar to the tactics used by the Kremlin regime.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) notes in its [report](#) that more than 15 journalists were subjected to violence or intimidation between April 3 and May 14, when the law was finally [passed](#) in its third and final reading. During this period, telephone threats began targeting civic activists, politicians, journalists and their families. The threats continued for several days and eventually escalated into physical violence. Parallel to the coverage of the protests, pro-government groups posted hate speech, stigmatizing messages, and offensive content on the homes and offices of critical journalists. Similar posters were found near the home and office of Gela Mtivlishvili, editor of Mtis Ambebi, and on the door of the home of Nino Zuriashvili, director of the investigative Studio Monitor; her car was also [damaged](#). The NGO Media Ombudsman [appealed](#) to the relevant authorities to investigate the threats, systemic persecution and violations of personal data protection against three journalists: Nino Zuriashvili, Nana Biganishvili, and [Natia Kuprashvili](#). The Special Investigation Service [launched](#) an investigation into interference in journalistic activities. Violence has also targeted representatives of civil society organizations. In one such case, the founder of Media Voice was assaulted near her home on May 14. During the attack, she was told that the reason for the assault was her opposition to the "Russian law".

During the pre-election period, [Afghan Sadygov](#), Azerbaijani journalist in exile, faced repression in Georgia. He was arrested on August 3, and on November 28, the Tbilisi City Court [ruled](#) to extradite him to the Republic of Azerbaijan. In previous years, Sadygov was found guilty in Azerbaijan on politically motivated charges, while international organizations recognized him as a political prisoner.

During the process of the reintroduction and adoption of the Agents/Russian Law¹, as well as in the post-election period, peaceful protests were held continuously, accompanied by an unprecedented mobilization of police forces. In 2024, the statistical data of violence against media representatives was alarming. [According](#) to Transparency International Georgia, around 200 cases of verbal and physical violence, as well as intimidation and attempts to silence media representatives in different ways, were documented, 80% of which occurred in the last two months alone. The number of publicly recorded incidents of violence against journalists in 2024 is nearly five times higher than in 2023.

On December 20, the Media Freedom Coalition issued a [statement](#) on behalf of the Co-Chairs (Germany and Estonia), which was joined by 27 countries. The Coalition expressed deep concern about the use of excessive force, violence and detentions against journalists and media workers by the Georgian authorities since the beginning of the pro-European protests. The joint statement was also [issued](#) by the Group of Friends for the Safety of Journalists and Media Freedom of the Council of Europe.

¹ Between April 15 and May 14 alone, 193 people were detained in connection with demonstrations and protests, including activists, foreign citizens, bloggers, and politicians.

[According](#) to the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), 138 press freedom violations were documented in Georgia in 2024. These violations included physical assaults on journalists (44), attacks on and damage to property (14), verbal attacks (36), instrumentalization of the law against the media (33), and censorship (34), which included obstruction of journalistic activities, refusal or cancellation of accreditation, blocking of access to information and attendance at meetings (30), etc. All participants involved in our study were affected by one or more incidents.

In 2024, the media discrediting campaign was coupled with physical violence. This practice is not an uncommon occurrence in autocratic regimes. Applebaum (2024) describes this type of campaign in her book, when “the public smear campaign was coupled with financial harassment, controls on movement, and physical violence, though not murder (p. 178).” Applebaum notes that the point was to scare and intimidate followers, not to make a concrete target disappear altogether. This practice is also described by journalists involved in our study on multiple occasions.

A persistent challenge in 2024 was the absence of thorough investigations and the prevalence of impunity for crimes perpetrated against journalists. Following the elections, individuals convicted of physical violence against media representatives in the July 5, 2021 case, including Lekso Lashkarava², a cameraman for TV Pirveli, were [released](#) early. The imposition of targeted international sanctions has emerged as a potential means to end the practice of impunity.

■ 3.4. IMPACT OF TARGETED SANCTIONS ON THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Unlike previous years, the year 2024 was marked by intense calls for targeted sanctions and their subsequent announcement. The 2023 study published by Media Voice focused on the importance of targeted sanctions, emphasizing that, “In a global context, global advocacy for targeted sanctions becomes important to build resilience and protect journalists” (Gersamia et al., p. 16). The Media Freedom Coalition’s High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom (MFC; February 2020) [explains](#) that targeted sanctions (particularly financial) can be one of the few ways, or in some cases the only way, to enforce international norms. According to the European Parliament Targeted Sanctions [Report](#) (2018), targeted sanctions have a stigmatizing effect and, as Robertson and Rummery (2018) explain, the use of sanctions regimes is a tool “to name, shame and blame human rights violators” (p.10). Pulitzer Prize-winning author Anne Applebaum (2024) writes that there is a common conviction among the most committed autocrats, that “the outside world cannot touch them—that the views of other nations don’t matter and that no court of public opinion will ever judge them” (p.15). It is precisely this relatively new myth of autocrats that the practice of targeted sanctions may serve to dismantle.

It is noteworthy that until 2024, there was no established practice in Georgia of requesting targeted sanctions for crimes committed against journalists and their harassment. This further strengthened the syndrome of impunity for crimes committed against journalists. The conditions and threats that experts consider to be the prerequisites for targeted sanctions against a particular perpetrator (individual or company) remain salient. These issues have been thoroughly examined in Media Voice’s 2023 study.

² On July 5, 2021, Lekso Lashkarava, a cameraman for TV Pirveli, was severely beaten during a protest rally while carrying out his professional duties. He succumbed to his injuries a few days later.

In 2024, it is even more important to highlight and identify these threats within the Georgian media space. They are: murder, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, abduction and ill-treatment, unlawful arrest, unfair trial and arbitrary detention. Other forms of persecution used include: defamation lawsuits, systemic media restrictions through excessive prosecution, unfounded lawsuits or financial investigations, threats and online harassment, surveillance and doxing, including restrictions on licensing, accreditation and funding and shutting down entire media outlets and Internet communications. It is also alarming that journalists are being silenced through false charges, unfair trials and lengthy prison sentences (CPJ, 2019).

The U.S. Department of State [announced](#) its first tranche of sanctions on June 6, 2024. The sanctions included travel bans targeting senior Georgian Dream officials, law enforcement officials, parliamentarians, individuals, and their family members. [According](#) to Matthew Miller, Spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State, the sanctioned individuals include Georgian citizens who have been involved in “antidemocratic actions”.

In late 2024, the United States sanctioned the founder of the Georgian Dream, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Earlier, on December 19, the United Kingdom [imposed](#) sanctions on Georgian officials responsible for the brutal crackdown on media and protesters. The U.K. has sanctioned five senior individuals responsible for violent attacks against journalists and peaceful protesters in Georgia, acting in coordination with the United States. Foreign Secretary David Lammy said: “The shocking violence inflicted upon protestors, opposition leaders and journalists is an egregious attack on democracy and the Georgian people’s right to exercise their fundamental freedoms.” The U.S. also expanded the sanctions further on December 19.

Finally, in her book *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, Maria Ressa relates how she came to see “how international law needed revamping because of the root cause: the changes in our information ecosystem. After all, facts lie at the heart of the rule of law (p. 210).” The announcement of targeted sanctions will have a stigmatizing effect in the long run and will play its part in ending impunity for crimes committed against journalists. The decisions of the European Court of Human Rights have the same effect.

■ 3.5. INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF THE LAW AGAINST THE MEDIA

The [Constitution of Georgia](#) (Article 17) protects freedom of opinion and expression: “No one shall be persecuted because of his/her opinion or for expressing his/her opinion; every person has the right to receive and impart information freely; the mass media shall be free. Censorship shall be inadmissible. Neither the state nor individuals shall have the right to monopolize the mass media or the means of disseminating information. Everyone has the right to access and freely use the Internet.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the achievement of independence, the media environment in Georgia experienced significant progress and was “considered the freest, most independent, and most diverse press among the ex-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asian countries” (Gersamia, Freedman, 2019). With the dramatic deterioration of the media environment in recent years and the repressive legislation adopted in 2024, Georgia has lost its leading position.

The media landscape in the super-election year has been affected globally and locally by the instrumentalization and chilling effect of repressive, Russian-style laws passed in 2024 and previous years. Researchers (Gersamia, Sajaia, 2024) note that investigative journalists, who play a crucial role as a means of promoting transparency and combating state capture and corruption, are particularly challenged and therefore targeted.

The repressive laws adopted in 2024 have jeopardized the guarantees of freedom of expression. Given the global context and trends of authoritarian regimes, the instrumentalization of laws against the media and more generally to restrict freedom of expression may continue. To build resilience, it is important to proactively discuss these risks and implement response mechanisms in a timely manner. In this study, we will focus on how media professionals view the implementation of Russian-style laws and scenarios of deterioration of the situation, as well as possible regulation of the Internet space, etc.

Last year's study by Media Voice (Gersamia, Toradze, Bandzeladze, 2024) notes that "the ruling party systematically referred to the instrumentalization of the law and the tightening of regulations in an attempt to hinder and restrict journalistic activities. Journalists believe that the ruling party will implement these regulations during the elections, when the public is most in need of objective and diverse information to make well-informed choices" (p.9). It is important to assess and analyze this expectation in this study.

In 2024, the ruling team adopted a series of repressive and anti-Western laws, leading to a significant restriction of freedom of speech and expression, media freedom, and human rights.

- ▶ The Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence, known as the [Russian/Agents Law](#).
- ▶ The Law of Georgia on the Protection of Family Values and Minors, known as the [Censorship Law](#), comprises a legislative package, which includes the following: amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, amendments to the Law of Georgia on Freedom of Speech and Expression, amendments to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, etc.
- ▶ [Amendments](#) to the Tax Code of Georgia, referred to here as the Offshore Law.
- ▶ [Amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Civil Service.
- ▶ [Amendments](#) to the Administrative Offenses Code.
- ▶ [Amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Police.
- ▶ [Amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Assemblies and Demonstrations.
- ▶ [Amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on the Special State Protection Service.
- ▶ [Amendments](#) to the Criminal Code of Georgia on the Storage and Use of Pyrotechnics.
- ▶ [Amendment](#) to the Law of Georgia on the Product Safety and Free Movement Code, which also applies to pyrotechnics.
- ▶ [Amendment](#) to the Organic Law of Georgia "the Election Code of Georgia".

Chronologically, on April 3, 2024, Mamuka Mdinardze, the leader of the parliamentary majority of the ruling Georgian Dream party, [announced](#) the reintroduction of the draft law on “foreign agents”. The law had previously been adopted in its first hearing in 2023, but was subsequently [withdrawn](#) due to large-scale protests and international criticism. On April 8, 2024, the parliamentary bureau [officially registered](#) a draft law entitled “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence”. This move was in direct opposition to the [commitment](#) made by GD officials in 2023, who had stated that they would not consider or introduce the draft law again.

On May 14, 2024, the ruling party passed the “Foreign Agents/Russian Law” in its third and final hearing, with 84 votes in favor and 30 votes against. This happened against the backdrop of mass protests and harsh criticism from the West. On May 28, 2024, the Georgian Dream majority overrode the presidential veto and the law officially came into effect on June 3, 2024 after being [signed](#) into law by Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili.

The Agents/Russian Law includes similar regulations that were [adopted](#) in Vladimir Putin’s Russia in 2012 (it is noteworthy that the European Court of Human Rights has [ruled](#) that Russia’s “foreign agents” law is a violation of human rights). According to an [analysis](#) by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, in Russia, the original 2012 law on foreign agents targeted NGOs, supposedly in the name of transparency. As a result, critical media were suppressed. In 2019, members of the State Duma voted in favor of expanding the law [to include](#) individuals.

The [final version](#) of the repressive law enacted in Georgia in 2024 incorporates provisions pertaining to individuals and a mechanism for the imposition of financial penalties on them. It also grants the government the prerogative to demand not only personal information, but also confidential information. This law could entail the marginalization of media outlets critical of the government and the termination of their funding, which could result in the liquidation of media outlets and civil society organizations. These risks were a subject of discussion throughout 2024 and dominated the media agenda in the run-up to the elections.

This law runs counter to Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, because it is tailored to authoritarian practices rather than democratic norms. The law also targets Georgia’s international friends. The risks include the stigmatization and isolation of media outlets, the possible loss of funding, and even the liquidation of civil society organizations. According to the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) [report](#), “foreign agent” laws not only affect the media or NGOs directly designated as such, they also produce a chilling effect on the right to seek and receive information.

Global trends should also be taken into account. Human Rights Watch draws attention to the similarity of “agent laws” in different countries (Kirova, 2024). Russian-style laws on “agents” have already been [adopted](#) and later tightened in many countries: in [Hungary](#) (2017), [India](#) (2014-2020), [Nicaragua](#) (2020), [Uzbekistan](#) (2022), and [Kyrgyzstan](#) (2024). Similar legislation has also been introduced in [Turkey](#) (2024) and [Slovakia](#) (2024). The strengthening of authoritarian regimes in various regions has threatened democratic processes, especially in the super-election year.

The reintroduction and adoption of the law was met with negative reactions from international partners ([the U.S. Department of State](#), [the U.S. Helsinki Commission](#), [the European Union](#), [the German Federal Foreign Office](#), [the NATO Secretary General](#), [Members of the European Parliament](#), [the UN Human Rights Council](#), [Freedom House](#), etc.). [The Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#) stressed that the law threatens press freedom ahead of the [October parliamentary elections](#) and [called on the ruling party](#) to repeal the law if Georgia is to succeed in its bid to join the European Union. CPJ issued a follow-up [statement](#) on May 14. The Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) released a [statement](#) signed by six organizations (ARTICLE 19 Europe, EFJ, ECPMF, FPU, IPI, OBC Transeuropa). They express their solidarity with independent journalists and press freedom defenders in Georgia and reiterate their call to the authorities to refrain from adopting the proposed legislation. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [published](#) a statement on April 3 calling on the Georgian parliament to reject the law, which aims to intimidate NGOs and the media. In a follow-up [statement](#) on May 15, RSF urged the authorities to conduct transparent investigation into attacks against journalists and to repeal the law, which restricts media freedom.

On 11 April, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O' Flaherty sent [a letter](#) to Georgian Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili, urging him to “refrain from adopting the draft law” and “to engage with national and international partners on how best to ensure an enabling environment for the legitimate work of non-commercial organizations and media outlets in the country.” The Commissioner asked Papuashvili to ensure that all members of the Parliament received a copy of the letter. This request, however, went unanswered.

On 21 May 2024, the Venice Commission [released](#) an urgent opinion on the Agents/Russian Law, strongly recommending that the law be repealed in its current form, as “its fundamental flaws will involve significant negative consequences for the freedoms of association and expression, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public affairs as well as the prohibition of discrimination”.

On July 16, 2024, the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) [issued](#) a statement on Transparency Law in Georgia. The 28 undersigned members of the Coalition expressed their deep concern about the declining freedom of media in Georgia. The statement emphasized that “this is worrying for the future of democracy in Georgia, including the upcoming Georgian parliamentary elections.”

In Georgia, representatives of opposition, civil society and media organizations (about 400 organizations) expressed strong disapproval in a joint [statement](#) regarding the reintroduction of the law. They believe that this step is a significant blow to Georgia's democracy and European integration goals. The draft law was strongly [criticized](#) by public opinion makers, professional associations and civil society organizations.

Civil society, media organizations, the President of Georgia and opposition parties consider the adopted law unconstitutional, citing its apparent contradiction with Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia. This particular article obliges the constitutional bodies to undertake all necessary measures to ensure Georgia's full integration into both the European Union

and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)³. On October 17, Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) filed a complaint against the Agents/Russian Law with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on behalf of 16 media organizations, 120 non-governmental organizations, and four individuals. The complaint asserts that the law in question contravenes the following rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights:

- ▶ Freedom of assembly and association (Article 11);
- ▶ Freedom of expression (Article 10);
- ▶ Right to respect for private and family life (Article 8);
- ▶ Prohibition of discrimination (Article 14);
- ▶ Right to an effective remedy (Article 13);
- ▶ Limitation on use of restrictions on rights (Article 18).

It is noteworthy that the European Court of Human Rights has [found](#) that the Russian Federation, through the “Foreign Agents Law” and its application, has violated Articles 10 and 11 of the Convention.

In Georgia, key provisions of the law were enforced several weeks before the parliamentary elections, negatively impacting independent media and civil society. The law gave the government leverage to stifle critical voices, control public discourse and intimidate independent observers. This posed a threat to the conduct of free and fair elections.

In 2024, researchers (Gersamia, Sajaia, 2024) assessed the chilling effect of the legislative amendments to the Law on Broadcasting adopted in 2022, which, according to the Russian hybrid warfare strategy, involves establishing a legal framework aimed at facilitating state and media capture. Participants in our study also mention the negative impact of the aforementioned law on critical media. This confirms that “legislative amendments may initially pursue legitimate aims, but their implementation can have detrimental effects on the democratic environment” (p. 53). According to the researchers, the accelerated adoption of these amendments significantly damaged the viability of the media.

During the pre-election period, the Georgian Communications Commission was exposed for its bias in favor of the ruling party's narrative. This bias included the imposition of fines on opposition-leaning TV channels. Notably, the Commission [fined](#) opposition-leaning Mtavari Arkhi TV for airing [video clips](#) that negatively portrayed MPs who supported the Foreign Agents Law. The Commission stressed that this action constituted a violation of broadcasting standards.

³ The Agents/Russian Law is being challenged in the Constitutional Court by the President of Georgia, MPs Tamar Kordzaia, Ana Natsvlishvili, Levan Bezhashvili and others (a total of 38 MPs), the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, Rights Georgia, Civil Society Foundation and others (a total of 122 claimants), as well as the Network of Information Centers and Studio Monitor.

Later, the Communications Commission satisfied the complaint filed by the Georgian Dream and [issued](#) an administrative violation report against three TV channels (Formula TV, TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi TV) and fined them 15,000 GEL each. These television stations refused to air Georgian Dream's political advertisements, which blatantly exploited the tragedy of the Ukrainian people for political purposes. The Media Advocacy Coalition [assessed](#) this demand by the Communications Commission for independent media to air political advertisements as a blatant violation of media freedom and ethical journalism. The placement of advertisements conveying this content on pro-government TV channels does not only serve to reinforce the anti-Ukrainian narrative espoused by the Georgian Dream, which emerged in the months following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. According to the study (Gersamia, Gigauri et al., 2024), in the initial months after Russia unleashed the war in Ukraine in 2022, Georgian broadcast media (including pro-government and opposition outlets) exhibited a pronounced solidarity with Ukraine and its population. Later, the anti-Ukrainian propaganda disseminated by the ruling team compromised the cohesive solidarity discourse of Georgian media outlets (including Imedi TV and Rustavi 2 TV), thereby establishing a pro-Russian propaganda line.

Strengthening self-regulatory mechanisms is important for improving the media environment, which is also a focus of media professionals in our study. This is especially important when “the government representatives, in case of complaints against journalists, rarely refer to self-regulation bodies and go directly to court to fine the journalist and the TV company” (Gersamia, Sajaia, 2024, p. 53). This situation reinforces the atmosphere of self-censorship and fear. In addition, there is a growing number of SLAPPs in Georgia, the goal of which is to cause reputational damage to journalists and media organizations, to exert psychological pressure on the media with winning the lawsuit considered a secondary or supplementary goal (Gersamia, Sajaia, 2024). Based on the analysis of previous years, the authors draw attention to the fact that the trial process negatively affects the daily life, personal relationships and financial stability of journalists. In this study, media professionals speak of the psychological terror caused by the fear of the instrumentalization of repressive laws, which has had a negative impact on their daily routines.

■ 3.6. DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND DISINFORMATION CHALLENGES

Over the past decade, television use has decreased from 88% to 49%, whereas the use of the Internet, including social media, has dramatically increased from 2% to 40% (RRC-Georgia, Atchaidze, 2024).

According to data from the [Statista](#) platform, the global trend shows that in the media market, 50.58% of the total revenue is anticipated to be generated through the digital media market by 2029. The global media market is increasingly dominated by digital platforms, reflecting a shift in consumer behavior towards on-demand content consumption and personalized experiences. According to the same source, 38.10% of the total media market revenue in Georgia is expected to be generated through digital media by 2029, as consumer preferences are shifting towards digital media platforms (this figure was approximately 30% in 2024). In addition, with the greater availability of high-speed Internet and smartphones, consumers in Georgia are increasingly gravitating towards on-demand video content. Because of this, businesses are directing a significant portion of

their advertising budgets towards digital channels. “The media landscape in the country is heavily influenced by political interests, which can impact the freedom of the press and the diversity of media outlets.”

According to [Statista](#), the data and forecasts for the Georgian media market for 2024 are as follows:

- ▶ Preliminary forecasts indicate that user penetration in the traditional television and home video market was 68.9% in 2024 and is expected to increase to 78.9% in 2029. The number of TV viewers is expected to increase to 2.3 million users by 2029, and the number of users in the OTT (Over-The-Top) video market will reach 2.9 million.
- ▶ The number of users in the digital magazines and newspapers market in Georgia is expected to increase to 1.5 million by 2029. The user penetration rate was 25.9% in 2024 and is expected to increase to 40.5% by 2029.

A substantial increase in the number of users of digital magazines and newspapers is projected in the coming years. In this context, it is interesting to consider how Georgian media representatives view the circulation of their content and the connection with the audience. It is also important to explore the strategies they are developing and the risks they anticipate.

Social media consumption remains a pertinent phenomenon in Georgia with a structure and immediacy that meets the needs and preferences of contemporary individuals. In particular, the format of “cards”, short posts and “shorts” is in line with the demands of contemporary life and is a means of quickly obtaining information. Even more important is the role of the algorithm, which is generated uniquely for each user and gives preference to certain types of content based on engagement analysis. Accordingly, knowledge of social media elements (hashtags, locations, description, upload time, etc.) can influence audience growth. It is important for traditional media to adapt to modern technological progress and for media professionals to acquire relevant knowledge on these issues and to analyze opportunities and threats. We also focused on this issue in our study.

To address the challenges of the information ecosystem, it is important to consider the local political context. The regulations that are a resource in the information ecosystem of democratic countries may introduce repressive practices in authoritarian countries. In this case, it is important who introduces the law and what previous practice on which it is based.

The year 2024 was important for the media in terms of technological challenges. Namely, artificial intelligence (AI) has become an important part of not only our lives, but also the media ecosystem in recent years. According to Simon, F. M., & Isaza-Ibarra (2023), media organizations use artificial intelligence for information retrieval and monitoring (e.g., audience and trend analysis and generating new ideas), selection and filtering (e.g., fact-checking, data collection and categorization, audio and video transcription and voiceovers), processing and editing (e.g., formatting material for different platforms, brainstorming, summarizing and translating) and publishing and distribution (e.g., content personalization, moderation and audience analytics).

Diakopoulos et al. (2024) note that AI makes it easier for journalists to perform tedious tasks, allowing them to spend the time freed up on more creative endeavors. However, there are also challenges associated with its use. These challenges include the risk of losing control of content and jobs, as well as problems related to the quality and ethics of the AI generated content (i.e. accuracy of information, bias, transparency, copyright and intellectual property protection).

Another important challenge is the contamination of the media ecosystem with disinformation through AI. According to Guzman and Lewis (2024), AI can be used to spread propaganda and deepfakes, manipulate audiences, create false narratives and damage reputations, ultimately threatening the credibility of the media. The European Union is actively working to address these threats. The first coordinated response in this regard is the AI Act, which aims to set clear requirements for AI systems for high-risk applications, to ensure transparency and oversight and to prohibit AI practices that pose unacceptable risks ([AI Act](#), 2024).

The World Economic Forum has identified the dissemination of fake news and disinformation as the most dangerous global risk for 2024-2025. This phenomenon has the potential to further exacerbate existing political and social divisions, reduce the legitimacy of elected governments and polarize societal perceptions, thereby contributing to social unrest and political repression. According to the Global Risks Report, another threat pertains to the increasing control of information by governments, a phenomenon that is poised to curtail media freedom and increase the risk of propaganda and censorship (World Economic Forum, 2024).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies threats to independent media worldwide. These threats include the rise of disinformation, polarization, insecurity for journalists, censorship, the spread of authoritarianism, and declining trust in journalism. The report notes that the process of digitization has widened the generational gap, manifesting in the increased reliance of young people on digital platforms for news consumption, which has led to the collapse of the traditional business model for media and journalism (OECD, 2024). In this context, the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) emphasizes the importance of safeguarding free and independent media and calls for increased support to strengthen this sector (Media Freedom Coalition, 2024).

In late April 2024, experts from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern about the increasing erosion of election-related rights across the globe. According to them, elections in many countries have been marred by violence and arbitrary arrests, targeting opposition candidates and political leaders, as well as human rights defenders, journalists, media workers and election observers; hate speech and negative discourse targeting marginalized and discriminated groups have been weaponized for political gain; laws have been instrumentalized (such as the Agents/Russian Law); and social media platform algorithms have been misused (OHCHR, 2024). This study of the media environment demonstrates that the aforementioned threats are also pertinent in Georgia, as evidenced by the daily professional routine described by media representatives, which is replete with physical and psychological violence against journalists, detentions and the practice of instrumentalizing laws adopted in recent years.

Despite the absence of legislative regulation in Georgia in response to the challenge of online disinformation, proactive discourse on these risks is imperative to ensure that this challenge remains within the framework of media self-regulation and the strengthening of ethical standards. The global discussion encompasses the potential enactment of regulations to combat online propaganda. Eleonora Mazzoli, a researcher at the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA, 2023), discusses the challenges that may arise after legal regulation of disinformation, citing various sources. In particular, according to Bontcheva and Posetti (2020), while online misinformation and disinformation pollute public discourse worldwide and pose a fundamental challenge to democracy and stability, any effort to combat propaganda and fake news must be balanced with freedom of expression. Citing Lim and Bradshaw (2023), the CIMA researcher emphasizes that this balance is especially important in countries where governments seek to control the information space and attack free, critical journalism.

Alternative media, which can be seen as an audience response to the challenges of polarization, is gaining traction around the world. According to Stocking, G. et al. (2022) and the Pew Research Center study, alternative social media platforms were created as a counterbalance to the established platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and claim not to restrict free speech. These alternative channels (BitChute, Gab, Gettr, Parler, Rumble, Telegram and Truth Social) have relatively small audiences, but the main reason for their loyalty is the reception of current, alternative news information, and users feel a friendly relationship with each other during discussions.

Citizen participation in the production of media content is on the rise. In her book *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, (2022, p.131) Maria Ressa, the founder of Rappler, notes that citizen journalism is a good example of how to use technology for better change, describing citizens armed with cell phones who are empowered to demand justice and accountability.

In this process, it is important for the audience to be aware of the role of the media and the importance of media literacy for establishing trust, with citizens serving as the primary contributors.

■ 3.7. JOURNALISM EDUCATION IN THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

Democratic decline and the deterioration of the media environment also affect the education system. In discussing the relationship between media, democracy and education, Howells (2001) notes that the equal health of all three is essential to the existence of a good society. Maria Ressa (2022) notes: “The ability to discern and question, which is crucial to both journalism and democracy, is also determined by education” (p. 96).

In 2024, there were 20 accredited bachelor’s programs in journalism and/or mass communication at 17 higher education institutions in Georgia (source: National Assessment and Examinations Center, Entrants’ Directory 2024). In addition, there were 11 master’s programs at 12 universities (including joint programs) (source: National Assessment and Examinations Center, Unified Master’s Exam, 2024).

After the implementation of reforms in the post-Soviet education system since 2004, the need to update journalism curricula and align them with international standards remained a significant challenge (Gersamia, Freedman, E. (2019), although a legislative framework limiting academic freedom that would directly impose censorship did not exist. The adoption of repressive laws in 2024 and the announcement of repressions by the Georgian Dream government may have a negative impact on academic freedom in higher education, including journalism and mass communication programs. In particular, this concerns the potential censorship of courses and literature, as well as the creation of an environment that restricts freedom of opinion and expression. Additionally, there is the possibility that lecturers may be dismissed on political grounds. The Censorship Law enacted at the end of 2024 has exacerbated these threats and may undermine the quality of the internationalization of higher education programs and their compliance with international standards. In this regard, it was an alarming signal when Georgia's registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was suspended at the end of the year.

The protest against the Agents/Russian Law was primarily led by young people and students, specifically members of the Gen Z generation. During the protest, students from 22 universities went on strike and professors expressed their support for the protest by signing petitions. This mobilization was met with the subsequent announcement of repressive measures targeting both students and professors. The Ministry of Education and Science [released](#) a letter signed by the rectors of 38 universities, which was perceived as a threat by members of the academic community. Subsequently, in an [interview](#), Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze threatened professors at Tbilisi State University (where Kobakhidze himself is a professor) that the government would implement a reform aimed at pressuring professors who are considered politically biased.

During the post-election period, students and professors maintained active involvement in ongoing protests, encompassing both Tbilisi-based and regional institutions of higher education.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The media environment in Georgia has been deteriorating year by year. Georgian critical and independent media outlets entered the super-election year in a state of marked weakness and inadequate preparation. The balance of power⁴ within the “fourth estate” was compromised. On one side of the polarization was the pro-government media, which wielded greater resources and influence than the critical/opposition and independent media. Overall, the kleptocratic environment had a toxic effect on the media environment and the viability of the media.

In 2024, pro-government media outlets possessed the most substantial resources for the development of political and entertainment programs, in addition to their audience reach. However, following the elections, protests by a large part of society reached unprecedented scales, affecting the balance of power within society, the media landscape and the diversity of content. Notably, in response to mounting societal pressures, previously marginalized and underrepresented groups were incorporated into the broadcasting network of the state-owned Public Broadcaster. Furthermore, sources were diversified in critical media outlets. The protest, engagement, joint pro-Western statements/petitions and revitalization of the information ecosystem observed during the protest rallies from diverse groups (including civil servants) have paved the way for the consolidation of democracy.

In 2024, the primary political agenda of the Georgian media comprised the following subjects: the demand/announcement of targeted sanctions, the instrumentalization of Russian-style laws, protest rallies, elections and the European integration process.

4.1. CHILLING EFFECT OF THE LAW ON THE MEDIA AGENDA

The reintroduction of the Agents/Russian Law had a negative impact on the media and the pre-election agenda. The already weakened critical and independent media across the country found themselves vulnerable to the threats posed by this law. As a result, the Agents/Russian Law took over the media agenda and pushed aside all issues relevant to the pre-election period. The focus group participants talk about the “chilling effect” of the law, suggesting that it contributed to a shift in media focus away from pre-election issues, thereby weakening the media’s role as a watchdog:

- ▶ “The Russian law completely changed the agenda. In the absence of this legislation, the media outlets would have directed their attention to addressing pressing issues, posing critical questions, and generating additional content prior to the elections,” stated a representative of Indigo magazine.
- ▶ “Participation in and media coverage of the protests led to our exhaustion before the pre-election period. The focus shifted from election preparations to mere survival. Instead of investigating examples of bribery and fraud before the elections, we were forced to explore legal methods of dealing with this law and procuring security equipment,” stated a representative of the online edition Netgazeti.

⁴ On the balance of power, see the works of Hamilton et al. (2003), IDEA (2021), Vile (1998) and Locke (Laslett ed. 1988), among others.

- ▶ “The media outlets are in survival mode. The reintroduction of the Russian law before the elections was a well-planned process that completely distracted our attention and harmed us. Discrediting journalists and putting them under psychological pressure was also part of the government’s pre-election campaign,” said a representative of the online edition civil.ge.

In addition to self-criticism, journalists believe that the media was unable to either suspend or prevent the damage caused by the Agents/Russian Law. During the discussion, it was noted that the first to protest against the law were representatives of online media. A journalist from Mtavari Arkhi TV noted, “It was journalists who demonstrated the most resistance to this process. We went beyond what our profession requires.”

Representatives of the regional media also note that during the pre-election period, the media outlets were more focused on responding to the Russian/Agents Law and had less time and resources to cover the pre-election period. The Russian/Agents Law affected and disrupted the previously established coordination among the members of the Regional Media Association. A representative of the Chemi Kharagauli newspaper stated, “During the previous elections, we, the representatives of the Association, had a common project, shared issues, planned together, consulted with lawyers to understand what violations were expected during the elections. Now, none of us had the ability or the opportunity to do that, we were all thinking about how to survive.”

The introduction and adoption of the Agents/Russian Law resulted in an escalation of aggression towards journalists and a direct stigmatization of the media. During the pre-election period, the ruling team held secret meetings in regions hidden from the media, meeting only with their own supporters. The regional media learned about these meetings by chance and attended them. A representative of Chemi Kharagauli recalls one such case:

- ▶ “During one such meeting, the mayor of the city reprimanded me for not registering in the ‘agents’ register’, calling me ‘agent, enemy’. This situation is very dangerous,” stated the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.
- ▶ “By adopting this law, they have achieved the most important thing: stigmatization, accusation and labeling as an agent. It no longer matters what subject you are working on. If you ask for a document or ask a question, you get the answer: ‘Who ordered you to do this?’ ‘Whose agents are you?’” stated a representative of iFact.

The adoption of the Russian/Agents Law has dramatically worsened the legal environment for the media. In recent years, despite the problems in the media environment, local and international organizations have positively assessed the existing legal framework for the media and freedom of expression in their reports. Journalists note that such a repressive media environment has not existed under any government: “Not only does the agents law label you, but it also legally prohibits the existence of independent media. The Law on Family Values directly imposes censorship,” said the representative of the online edition Netgazeti.

A representative of the regional media explained their decision not to register as an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power, despite the potential loss of assets on the organization’s balance sheet:

- ▶ “We only pursue the interests of the people and receive funding from donors when their interests and the interests of the people coincide. We have repeatedly refused to place ads in Russian on our website. The same goes for all offers that promote Russian interests. We accept funding from donors to maintain our independence. We refuse funding if it limits our independence and contradicts the interests of our people and country. We have received funds from the friends of our country – the European Union and the United States,” said the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.
- ▶ “This law, stigmatization and complicated bureaucracy have made it impossible to work. The situation is particularly difficult in the regions, where independent media outlets are completely dependent on donors,” the representative of the online platform Mravalkutkhedi stated.

The participants of the discussion noted an unprecedented level of pressure during the pre-election period, which they linked to the deterioration of the legislative environment: “Our publication has existed for 22 years, and we have covered the elections constantly. This year, the pressure on the media was unprecedented, and it was caused by the legislative environment and the introduction of the so-called Russian/Agents Law,” said a representative of Kakheti Khma.

After the law was passed, non-governmental organizations established by media companies and engaged in a variety of activities encountered difficulties. The representative of Chemi Kharagauli recalls one such case: “In the summer, we decided to organize a film screening on anti-Russian issues. But when the owners of the venue found out about the content, they cancelled our contract just one day before the event. Consequently, the screening was moved to the editorial office. We lost the opportunity to gather the public. All active NGOs that are currently engaged in community-related issues are facing challenges from local authorities.”

Pursuant to the stipulations outlined in the Agents/Russian Law, which was reintroduced on April 3, the deadline for organizations [to register](#) as organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power expired on September 4. Among the registered entities, only two were media organizations. An in-depth interview was conducted with one of the registered organizations, Telecompany Borjomi, which clarified that the decision to register was made through an analysis of the risks associated with financial penalties and the assets on the organization’s balance sheet. They stated: “We thought that this would allow us to work freely during the pre-election period and hoped that the law would be repealed after the elections. We knew that we would not be able to pay the fines and that donors would not be able to help us. In the case of the broadcaster, registering the organization in another country was not an option. This decision was emotionally devastating for everyone in the organization. We found ourselves in a situation in the region where neither the members of Georgian Dream, nor the members of the National Movement could tolerate us.” One of the participants in the study recalls this period with stress and noted that the organization was planning to stop working from the New Year and to establish a non-governmental organization. On December 31, 2024, the media organization actually ended its 27-year activity and [published](#) a statement about it.

We were interested in the opinions of journalists who worked for pro-government TV channels. A journalist from Rustavi 2 TV, who left the channel at the end of 2024, notes that the direct distortion of facts based on the party agenda began in the spring of 2024, when the Agents/Russian Law was reintroduced triggering protests: “In previous years, it was already clear that the channel was pro-government, but there were no demands or direct instructions. This approach changed after the law was reintroduced and the perception emerged that all this is not journalism, but rather party PR.”

According to the journalist from Rustavi 2 TV, the “tentacles” of polarization in the pro-government media became apparent precisely after the protests against the Russian/Agents Law. Polarization has had an even more negative impact on the content of the media product and internal editorial management. In particular, the journalist speaks about the pressure that was manifested in the specifics of coverage, the distribution of topics and the creation of content. In this process, the question of who to entrust with covering the rallies became important: “Management changed its priorities. Despite my experience, they stopped allowing me to cover the rallies. I think the pressure on them was increasing and they needed obedient people. During this time, I noticed that the story was being presented in a different way. For example, taking long shots of the protests from above, or choosing a bad angle. For example, some reporters say live that the protesters are dispersing, which is a lie and serves to reduce the momentum of the protest,” the journalist said.

According to a journalist from the pro-government Imedi TV, society, the media and the political environment were already quite polarized before the adoption of the law. However, the adoption of the law and the narratives surrounding it created an even greater divide between the pro-government and critical media. This was also due to the fact that the critical media saw themselves as the direct target of the law. The journalist stated that “in itself, the problem is when you say about a colleague that he/she is ‘one side’. The process of polarization began before and it was irreversible, but this year the media became like a ‘mutant’. The critical media was in a panic, it seemed to have separated itself from other media outlets and began to position itself as a separate organism. A gap, or rather a wound, appeared between the opposition and pro-government media.” The journalist from the pro-government TV channel believes that the problem lies in the reference to the law as a Russian law, because this reference results in journalists affiliated with pro-government TV channels being associated with Russia. The journalist further asserts that “this label is an insult to all Georgians”.

It was also revealed that, even without the law, journalists are stigmatized and already called agents and stooges. The focus groups revealed an expectation that even without the Agents/Russian Law, the government would be able to freely interfere in their activities. When discussing the repressive laws and the current situation, the participants mentioned a “big Russian special operation” several times: “I see a very harsh perspective. This is a very well-planned bad story, which I think follows the Russian scenario,” said a representative of the Georgian Public Broadcaster.

Media representatives are pessimistic about the process of instrumentalization of the law and any scenario, as the expectation that the law would be repealed after the elections was not justified:

- ▶ “What we intend to do in the future is important, because they are likely to fill in the gaps in the law that still allow us to function,” stated an iFact representative.
- ▶ “There is no scenario under this government, where there could be a positive solution. I admit that they may engage in a ‘horse trading’ that would ultimately result in a more unfavorable outcome,” said the OC Media representative.

In order to sustain their operations under the Agents/Russian Law, some NGOs and media organizations have registered in Armenia and Estonia, while others have established LLCs or new NGOs, following suit of the civil sector and critical media operating in Russia and Belarus. The year 2024 ended without the instrumentalization of the Agents/Russian Law. Nevertheless, journalists have asserted that this law has already engendered adverse consequences.

The chilling effect of the law has been particularly harmful to small media organizations: “The law targets precisely those organizations that manage to produce quality content with the financial support of donor organizations. These materials are not commercially attractive, and it is impossible to secure sponsorship for content that deals with socially sensitive issues,” said a representative of Indigo magazine. This dynamic, in turn, has led to an increased risk of exclusion of issues of public concern from the media agenda and will have a negative impact on audience engagement and awareness.

The Agents/Russian Law lost its relevance after the elections. This was due to the fact that journalists observed that the ruling team managed to launch repressions without implementing the law, so the legal preparation and self-defense regime proved useless. The main concerns associated with the adoption of this law (repressions, confiscation of offices and equipment, fines, etc.) were implemented by the government even without the instrumentalization of the law.

“We knew that at any time they could knock on our door and initiate an investigation. We were prepared for that with our lawyers. In reality, we have seen that they can bypass the ‘Russian law’, other laws and bureaucracy and just burst into our homes, take away our cell phones and laptops, as has happened in other cases [such as the search of Atlantic Council employees’ homes and indictment]. There is a greater danger ahead than the ‘Russian law,’ and those who receive funds from donors can be accused of money laundering, preparing a revolution and coup, etc.,” said a representative of the online publication Publika.

Reporting on repression is accompanied by a dilemma related to the sowing of fear. On the one hand, the news is dangerous and needs to be covered accurately. On the other hand, as a side effect, it can instill fear in the audience, a strategy often employed by authoritarian regimes. Georgian journalists have also faced this dilemma: “When they raided the homes of the Atlantic Council employees, it became a sign to me that no law is needed, they can just eliminate you. That’s when the dilemma arose of how to cover the story in a tone that would not increase fear,” stated the representative of the online publication Publika.

The discussion focused on the chilling effect of laws adopted in previous years that further intensified polarization, which became more evident during the crisis and pre-election period. Participants mentioned the amendment to the Law on Broadcasting adopted in 2022 (Chapter VIII, Article 63), which banned advertising, sponsorship and product placement in programs for gambling, totalizators, lottery, bingo and their organizers. The amendment to the law had particularly harmful financial consequences for regional broadcasters. A representative of a regional television station notes that the government was aware of this in advance and deliberately harmed the media: “Local businesses do not have the financial resources to invest enough money in TV advertising. In times of financial crisis, so-called political money appears, and this intensifies polarization,” notes a representative of Borjomi TV.

The political crisis has affected solidarity journalism and coverage of the problems of vulnerable groups. For example, mainstream media coverage of the Censorship Law has fallen victim to self-censorship: “Unfortunately, neither TV channels nor the opposition talked enough about the so-called censorship law. I think it was wrong to ignore this issue,” noted a representative of the online platform Mravalkutkhedi. The lack of discussion on the issue was due to the fear of stigmatization, which functioned as a filter in shaping the media agenda, while the context of human rights protection was subject to self-censorship.

■ 4.2. GEORGIAN MEDIA VIS-À-VIS SUPER ELECTIONS

Critical and independent media entered the super-election year weakened and depleted of resources (both in terms of content and finances), caused by the deterioration of the media environment and legislative changes in recent years. The participants in the discussion perceive the entire process, including the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law as a logical continuation of the ruling party’s anti-Western course. However, they emphasize that the impact of this law on journalistic activity has proven to be much more detrimental than other laws adopted so far.

The participants in the discussion believe that the Agents/Russian Law was part of a well-instrumentalized pre-election campaign that completely diverted the resources of the critical and independent media to this issue, artificially removing the election issue from the daily routine and negatively affecting the pre-election agenda of the media. As a result, during the pre-election period, the media could not fully play its watchdog role and could not focus on critical issues and questions related to the elections.

The participants of the focus group agree that in the spring, following the protests against the Agents/Russian Law and subsequently during the pre-election period, the media went into an uncharacteristic working routine. The media operated in a defensive, survival mode, which entailed the mobilization of physical, psychological and legal resources. The focus group participants explain that this is the reason for the reduced emphasis on electoral issues.

The working regime and daily routine of journalists during the pre-election period were less focused on the preparation of diverse journalistic materials. This phenomenon can be attributed to the artificial filling of the media agenda with issues and accents that

further intensified polarization, thereby overshadowing those issues that deserved more attention during the elections. This suggests that the government had carefully studied the routines and resources of critical media in the run-up to the elections and had taken measures to disrupt this order. According to journalists, this was a pre-election strategy planned by the ruling party to complicate the work of the media. A focus group participant from the online edition *civil.ge* notes: “In survival mode, the focus changes and you can no longer do things the same way. This shift in focus also has an impact on editorial policy, because you are not just reporting on developments, you are actively participating in them. As part of the government’s pre-election campaign, the campaign to discredit journalists intensified and the psychological pressure on them increased.”

During the pre-election period, the media played an active role in disseminating information regarding electronic voting procedures and encouraging civic engagement. In addition, increasing voter participation was a priority on its election agenda. The media agenda also coincided with the political parties’ strategy. The media paid less attention to possible fraud and undemocratic conduct of elections, which, according to them, could have caused nihilism and distrust of the population. As a result, the media paid less attention to increasing the accountability of political parties, debunking the propaganda disseminated by pro-government media outlets and reporting on the actual problems and issues facing the population. This strategy was met with a negative assessment.

“Coordinated silence” was the term one participant used to describe the pre-election message box, which included discussions about distrust in the electoral process and the raising of questions. Journalists agree that this tactic increased public confidence in the Central Election Commission, a development that proved beneficial to the government: “Prior to the elections, we were looking for news in a dark room. This silence had a negative effect. We did not discuss the potential for fraud, which could have been put on the agenda and did happen,” said a representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

The discussion centered on what role the media could have played in the pre-election period to prevent electoral fraud: “When we asked the Central Election Commission critical questions, they replied: ‘Don’t be nihilistic about everything and don’t be afraid.’ And we chose to be silent rather than talk a lot about anything that raised suspicions: be it a paper, a marker, or observers,” said a representative of iFact.

According to the participants in the discussion, the media failed to create an active pre-election agenda but rather went with the flow. According to them, asking questions about possible electoral fraud was “perceived as a bad tone” – both during the pre-election period and on election day: “During the pre-election period, the media should have been more critical of the opposition, the government, and the non-governmental sector. We are convinced that every time the media did not put its own agenda first, it lost. The media should reflect reality as it is, and not in a softened and embellished form,” said a representative of Tok TV.

The participants in the discussion criticized the opposition parties for not having enough observers at the polling stations. The lack of observers created a problem for the media in recording comments on violations: “There was a lack of human resources, especially in the regions. Not all polling stations had observers and therefore no one to speak about violations,” said a representative of Mtavari Arkhi. Regional media representatives agree

with the opinion of media representatives working in Tbilisi that critical media, the non-governmental sector and opposition parties were not equipped with necessary resources for the elections, while the ruling team's resources were extensive: "There were not enough resources at the polling stations. It was quite by chance that we filmed the fact of ballot leakage," said a representative of Studio Monitor.

During the discussion, critical and independent media representatives were quick to criticize the opposition, while journalists from pro-government channels refrained from such criticism of the ruling team. However, the latter focused on issues that were addressed to them. According to Rustavi 2 TV journalist, critical media outlets have failed to create an alternative agenda proposed by the government. The same journalist criticized the so-called opposition media but indirectly referred to the editorial filter of Rustavi 2 TV, explaining: "What actions did the opposition and the pro-opposition media take to counter the government's messages regarding the potential dangers of war?! Why did they not allocate airtime to analyzing whether the opening of a so-called second front in Georgia aligns with the interests of the West?! They started talking about mistakes only after the results were revealed. If you perceive the population as a victim of propaganda, then you should ask questions and lead the discussion in a manner that presents the process to the viewer differently. By narrowly concentrating on the party agenda, we have effectively left the voter devoid of crucial information." Although the respondent speaks from the perspective of a pro-government TV channel and its viewers, we can assume that the pro-government TV channel is also the subject of the journalist's complaint, and then it becomes clear that the journalist emphasizes the need to convey an alternative viewpoint to the audience, which is not/cannot be achieved. It is noteworthy that several journalists (including our respondent) left Rustavi 2 TV at the end of 2024, which suggests the presence of incompatibility with the editorial policy.

The focus group participants agree that the government's election campaign was conducted according to its plan "as if underground" and was part of an extensive "Russian special operation".

- ▶ "The government had a well-defined plan and agenda; it scared people with the threat of starting a war. In contrast, the opposition, civil society and the media chose to remain silent," noted a representative of Tok TV.
- ▶ Representatives of regional media outlets confirm that the government's Russian propaganda during the pre-election period was built on the message "Well, do you want war?" It was structured, while the response actions were uncoordinated.
- ▶ "The other side did not have a unified position and action plan because Russia has also worked on it. There are fewer resources and training to respond," said a Formula TV representative.

The discussion revealed that the prevailing practice of critical media's response to government propaganda is fragmented and unprepared, which is also manifested in the coordination with so-called stakeholders (pro-Western groups). In contrast, the structure and objectives of Russian hybrid information warfare are even more clearly visible, which, as it turns out, utilizes Georgian media precisely due to the absence of a deterrence agenda on the opposing side.

During an in-depth interview, a journalist from Imedi TV confirmed that during the super-election year there were hybrid Russian influences and interference wherever Russia had an interest. The journalist does not/cannot directly confirm the Russian influences at Imedi TV but notes that working at the so-called pro-government channel already means being pro-Russian, and these labels are unacceptable for journalists working there: “In this respect, Imedi TV has been stigmatized, it no longer matters what you do.” The perception of pursuing Russian propaganda is also a problem for other journalists working in the Imedi TV newsroom. Therefore, addressing this issue can serve as a potential catalyst for reducing polarization in the aftermath of the political crisis resolution.

Unlike the pro-government TV channels, the participants in the discussion are more self-critical and open about their mistakes. For example, they believe that they should have been more critical of the election administration and the strategies employed by political parties during the pre-election period:

- ▶ “The opposition sincerely believed that the most important thing was the voter turnout on election day. They ignored critical questions from the media about the quality of the elections and possible fraud. It was also our mistake to believe that democratic elections would be held here,” said a representative of Indigo magazine.
- ▶ “The elections were one big Russian special operation that the media had no idea about. The opposition should have seen these threats. They did not seem to have such resources, and therefore, it would have been better for us to prepare journalistic investigations on the existing threats,” stated a representative of Formula TV.

In the focus groups held in Tbilisi, participants exhibited divergent opinions regarding the assessment of the opposition’s role and resources. Despite the pervasive critical sentiment, some journalists believe that the opposition could not have done more and that its primary objective was to mobilize voters: “The special operation to rig the elections was very well prepared and the opposition could not have had information about it,” said a representative from TV Pirveli.

During the discussion, we raised the question regarding the media’s preparedness to cover electronic elections. Some of the journalists involved in the survey noted that they had undergone training during the pre-election period and had attended the simulation process of electronic elections. The journalists further recalled that the Central Election Commission had conducted so-called field training on election issues. At the time, some journalists expressed a sense of adequate preparation to cover the elections. However, others noted that they lacked access to such training opportunities and that “the media met the elections unprepared,” said the representative of Studio Monitor.

In 2024, parliamentary elections were held electronically throughout the country for the first time. However, elections using this method were held before in individual regions, and regional journalists had some experience with it. “Electronic elections were held in Gori a year ago, the candidate had no rivals and the elections were held in a peaceful atmosphere. We did not see any of the flaws (I mean leaked ballots) that were widespread in these elections. A year ago, we saw that citizens were better protected in electronic elections and the process was transparent. On October 26, 2024, we saw a completely different picture. We were led to believe that everything would be fine during the electronic

elections. The opposition supported this idea as well. They said that the elections would not be rigged, that the infrastructure would work well, that the most important thing was to ensure the voter turnout, and they did this to mobilize their supporters. They had no mechanisms to protect against fraud. We were also unprepared, because the issue of the law took a significant amount of time,” said a journalist from Radio Liberty.

Regional media outlets were actively involved in the campaign to raise awareness of e-voting. A key aspect of this campaign was the dissemination of information to ethnic minorities, a task in which the media cooperated with local observation organizations. However, representatives of the regional media note with regret that both they and the NGOs focused primarily on raising awareness about electronic voting, rather than on the nature of potential violations and manipulations:

- ▶ “We thought that raising awareness was the main challenge. I assured the people electronic voting was very secure, that no one would know who they were voting for, I urged them to be active, and unfortunately, we were wrong. Because of such a campaign, I think we have shaken people’s trust in us,” said the representative of Kakhetis Khma.
- ▶ “While the opposition may not have comprehended all aspects of the electoral process, it remains uncertain why they did not undertake a thorough technical examination of the elections and why they placed their trust in the government,” said the representative from Formula TV.
- ▶ “We were initially skeptical when the ruling party agreed to electronic voting with such apparent ease, but we could not find a competent person to talk about the risks associated with electronic voting. Had we had this information, we might have paid more attention to the details,” said the representative of OC Media.
- ▶ “We actively convinced people that the elections could not be rigged, that the equipment used by the election administration was reliable. In reality, we saw a completely different picture: the result of influencing people, bribery, intimidation and using other harsh methods,” said the representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

During the pre-election period, there was both a lack of information and financial challenges that affected the quality of work. Fear in society and the stigmatization of the media have also affected newspaper subscriptions in the regions.

“We have always added pages to the newspaper before the elections, increasing its size. Until now, we have always printed four issues in September, and this has been the case for the last 27 years. This year, for the first time, we published only two issues, and we were not able to increase the format. We have also not been able to attract advertisements. We no longer have camera operators due to low salaries,” said the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

During the pre-election period, aggression against journalists by the ruling team and its supporters increased, especially in the regions. Focus group participants recalled a case in which representatives of critical media who came to cover meetings organized by the opposition were physically assaulted by supporters of the ruling team, while the response of the investigative services was inadequate.

During the discussion, it was suggested that the scuffles and violence outside the polling stations might have been planned systemically to reduce the work of journalists directly at the polling stations and to shift the focus to areas outside the polling stations:

- ▶ “At the end of the day, we saw that very little footage was taken at the polling stations. We used footage taken by observers and citizens. We ran to where the situation was tense. There was shouting and violations outside, it turned out to be a distracting maneuver,” said a journalist from Radio Liberty.
- ▶ “The aggression against the media was especially high this year. So, it was very difficult to work. In some cases, we were not even allowed to enter the polling station,” said the representative of OC Media.
- ▶ “When a journalist shows up at the polling station, everyone behaves properly, and chaos begins when the journalist is not there. Instead, there is a citizen who records violations by phone. The footage captured by citizens in the course of the elections has been used on multiple occasions in our news stories,” stated the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

During the discussion, regional representatives recollected the elections held in previous years and noted that this year’s election environment was “toxic” for the regional media. Notably, the presence of trolls and bots on social media has increased, leading to a more assertive campaign against the media:

- ▶ “Administrative resources, public services have been transformed into a troll-bot factory,” said a representative of Samkhretis Karibche.
- ▶ “It has been observed that respondents have been known to withhold their comments on this platform due to the prevalence of troll-bot attacks and defamation. This is shocking, because it is impossible to moderate everything,” stated a representative of the online media Netgazeti.

The common line in the discussion on this issue was that media outlets were concerned about their physical survival and safety, and that it was no longer possible to mobilize resources for the elections. It can be said that the government’s well-instrumentalized plan also worked to divert the media’s attention.

In the post-election period, critical media representatives felt uncertain and believed that they were left alone in the face of challenges. In this regard, they do not perceive political parties as their allies. They believe that political parties have been ineffective in safeguarding the media against threats, citing the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law. The leading emotion in the post-election focus group discussion was anger and disappointment: “The government created a state of discomfort for us, exhausted us, and the opposition could not do anything to alleviate this discomfort,” said a journalist from Mtavari Arkhi TV.

Journalists expect a scenario similar to that in Russia and Belarus to unfold in Georgia. This perspective was reassessed in interviews conducted in January 2025. Some journalists are still nihilistic about the future, especially in the context of the financial crisis, while others

believe that nihilism has been overcome due to the ongoing protests, the imposition of targeted sanctions and the ongoing processes around the Georgian Public Broadcaster (i.e. the allocation of airtime to protesters).

In 2025, local elections will be held in Georgia and media outlets still lack the resources to initiate planning for election coverage. They feel alone and unprotected in the face of challenges.

■ 4.3. REPRESSIONS AGAINST THE MEDIA: SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

As in previous years, fear for the safety of media professionals and their family members was the predominant sentiment expressed by participants in the discussion. This fear was exacerbated after the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law, which manifested itself in the quality of journalistic activity during the pre-election period. In general, the safety of journalists (physical, digital and psychological) emerged as the main challenge for the media environment in 2024.

This year, the discussion participants again cited the crackdown on the July 5-6, 2021 protest rally as the starting point for the dramatic deterioration of the media environment. Negative attitudes towards journalists increased in 2023, after the initial introduction of the Agents/Russian Law: “If before, the regime fought against us, but the law protected us, now both are fighting against us. This profession has become vulnerable and dangerous after July 5,” said a representative of Formula TV.

Unlike previous years, in 2024, aggression against journalists was even more brutal (in obscene forms, fights, shouting and bullying). As a result of the introduction of this law and conducting discrediting campaigns, journalists were estranged and alienated. A new label was created for the media, “agent”, which has a negative connotation in Georgia. “Aggression against journalists manifests itself even when we cover non-political, everyday issues. What they used to thank us for, they now argue with us. This change in attitude took us by surprise. At one of the meetings, we were met with aggression. They told us, ‘You are here because you want to stir things up, you are agents,’” recalls a representative of Borjomi TV.

The representative of the newspaper Chemi Kharagauli recalls the period of consideration of the Agents/Russian Law, when, having come to cover an April 29 rally of civil servants in Tbilisi in support of the ruling party, they were met with unprecedented aggression from the local authorities: “When they saw us, they started shouting, swearing and accusing us of being representatives of the National Movement and of wanting to destroy the country.”

The representative of Samkhretis Karibche recollects the verbal aggression that occurred on the same day: “During my tenure as a journalist, I do not recall such verbal harassment and insults as those experienced during the April 29 rally coverage. After the introduction of the ‘Russian Law’, the level of aggression has escalated considerably. If previously their negative sentiments were expressed through refusals to comment or through glances, now they feel free to express aggression, insult you, and obstruct you. They level absurd accusations against us, label us as a party and an opposition, and seek to discredit us.”

Media representatives working in Tbilisi recollect similar cases: “Whenever we ask a question during briefings, government officials insult critical media, mock them, and call them agents,” said a representative of OC Media.

Another challenge during the pre-election period was the psychological safety of journalists. Journalists had to work under considerable pressure, which led to the exhaustion of their resources and necessitated consultations with psychologists. They recall that their anxiety was related to the fears that arose after the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law. “We could no longer work in the usual way. I kept looking at the doors, expecting them to come in and fine us and confiscate our equipment,” said the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.” Another focus group participant stated, “I told the psychologist that I could no longer work normally because of my constant fear.”

The sense of fear was expressed by the focus group participants in the form of carrying protective equipment (e.g., “pepper spray”), increased caution in their daily lives, and the expectation that violation of privacy, illegal home entry, and physical and verbal violence will become the norm.

Journalists do not trust the police, the courts, or professional organizations. It becomes clear that they only trust themselves. For some of the focus group participants, talking about threats caused a strong emotional reaction (raising their tone of voice, putting their heads in their hands). Sometimes the participants try to desensitize strong emotions and give rather difficult life examples as anecdotal stories (e.g., how they check if there is a surveillance camera turned around in their vicinity, which indicates that they might be beaten or killed, etc.). “I understand that they will attack me physically if they want to, but I am more careful when I open the door. Sometimes a neighbor calls me and warns me that there are suspicious people in the yard,” said a representative of Formula TV. An unsafe environment creates a sense of hopelessness and loss of control over the present and the future. One participant describes daily life as a “struggle for survival”, while another asks the question: “Do we have a future?”

Almost all the participants of the discussion confirmed that they received anonymous threatening and abusive phone calls from both Georgian and foreign numbers during the consideration of the law. Threatening calls were also made to their family members (including minors):

- ▶ “It is very difficult to work when you are afraid that a 20-year-old organization will be closed or that we will be physically attacked. They have also called us and sworn at us. The case is being investigated by the Special Investigation Service, but they have not yet found the organizer and the person responsible. It is psychologically difficult to see colleagues being threatened every day. Out of fear, we stopped walking home, we took taxis, some bought ‘pepper spray’. It was difficult to work with these fears and it was difficult to hear accusations from people who are convinced that the media is an ‘agent and does not serve the Georgian cause’”, said a representative of Samkhretis Karibche.
- ▶ “The work is further complicated by the psychological pressure exerted not only on journalists, but also on their family members,” said the representative from the online platform Mravalkutkhedi.

- ▶ Focus group participants identified the ruling team as the main party responsible for discrediting the media and noted that they had encouraged this process: “They have labeled the media as the enemy, have not investigated the crimes committed against journalists. This is a direct signal to society that if you do not like a journalist, you can hit them. In other words, violence against journalists is normalized. In some cases, for reasons of personal safety, we may choose to hide the fact that we are journalists,” said a representative of Indigo magazine.
- ▶ The syndrome of impunity increases disgust and aggression towards the media. “It costs 3,000 GEL to break a journalist’s nose,” said a representative of Formula TV.

The focus group held before November 28 was dominated by a sense of insecurity. “If they want, they can freely attack us, arrest us, assault us, and we really have no hope for the court in this process, said the representative of Tok TV. Insecurity undermines mutual trust and ultimately damages the media product. A representative of Indigo magazine stated, “Security, trust and quality are interlinked.”

Cases of violence against journalists and impunity deepen polarization and portray journalists as taking sides. “This aggression surprised us at first, and then it became normalized. The violence intensified at the end of April and increased during the pre-election period. If before it was just a negative attitude, after the adoption of the ‘agents law’, the deputy mayor told me at a meeting, ‘You are the enemy.’ That scared me. The aggression was caused by the fact that our organization was not registered as an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power,” said a representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

Aggression has also increased in the digital media environment: “Social networks have become a platform for cyberbullying, anyone can write to you in private messages, threaten you, and trolls prepare the ground for this cyberbullying,” said the representative of Indigo magazine. The bullying of journalists on social media has an organized nature. During the discussion, it was suggested that the ruling team instructs employees of the city hall and local councils of various municipalities to write negative comments. This happens when critical material is published. According to the observations of one focus group participant, “after the publication of critical material, they come to our Facebook page in an organized manner and attack us. It is impossible for people from six municipalities of the region to have the same position on the same critical material at the same time and to write comments using the same message box,” said the journalist from Samkhretis Karibche, recalling the case when the deputy mayor of Akhaltsikhe municipality made an obscene gesture to a media employee, and the media [covered](#) it.

The Imedi TV journalist deplors the fact that personal attacks have begun on social networks by mentioning the names and surnames of certain people: “Today, the whole media is traumatized. Aggression against journalists has increased even more in the field, on the street and on social networks. Verbal attacks among journalists themselves have become more frequent. This is destroying journalists mentally. Of course, physical violence is a more serious crime, but psychological violence is also a trauma.” According to the journalist, such pressure includes calls for journalists working for propaganda television stations to quit their jobs in protest. The Imedi TV journalist expressed concern about the

bullying faced by media professionals working for pro-government television stations. A representative of the regional media confirmed that Imedi TV journalists working in the regions are also concerned about the bullying they face and do not see the guilt of the ruling team: “There is a big difference between the state repressing the media and society bullying it. The representatives of the pro-government channels do not understand this,” said a representative of Radio Liberty. A representative of Publika, whose colleague was physically assaulted while covering the protests, noted in this regard: “If pro-government channels make a terrible story about one of my colleagues, how can I greet these pro-government journalists the next day?!” said the Publika representative.

Professional solidarity and collegiality are disrupted when working in the field, which is also evident in the routine process of asking questions. The participants in the discussion emphasized that the pro-government media outlets are likely to act in a coordinated manner during briefings (for example, by preventing questions from being asked) and while working in the field:

- ▶ “In addition to the fact that a politician can insult you during briefings and ridicule your appearance, they also have auxiliary ‘links’ from their own television stations who have received instructions that when you ask a question, they will interrupt you with an alternative question at that very moment. Consequently, the politician will easily dismiss you and answer the second question,” said a representative of Formula TV.
- ▶ “When we published investigative material about Bidzina Ivanishvili, pro-government TV channels rushed to us and dedicated a program to us,” said the representative of iFact.
- ▶ “There is a special group within the pro-government TV channels that is working to harm and discredit us. This group is known for editing and distributing footage of conversations with our guests in a way that significantly changes the context,” said the representative of Formula TV.

So far, journalists considered the July 5-6, 2021 crackdown to be the most severe experience of violence against the media. At the end of 2024 (from November 28), violence against media professionals during the coverage of protests created a new, most severe practice. As mentioned above, [according](#) to Transparency International Georgia, 80% of all cases of violence against the media during the year occurred in the last two months. During this period, violent groups subordinate to law enforcement and the ruling party conducted targeted, physical attacks against journalists and camera operators from critical media outlets. The crimes remain uninvestigated and the perpetrators go unpunished. There have been no physical attacks on pro-government journalists by these criminal groups. In other words, they have targeted critical media. The threats described by journalists are even more dramatic in reality. When violence against journalists occurs, the focus shifts to how journalists from different poles express mutual solidarity.

It is noteworthy that pro-government and opposition TV media outlets in the regions exhibit a greater degree of solidarity as evidenced by their attendance at rallies to support and express solidarity to journalists from critical media following the violence against them. The survey participants also consider the fact that camera operators share their footage with each other as an indicator of professional solidarity. Media representatives

agree that they should be in solidarity with each other: “We should physically save each other, be in solidarity with each other, and physically protect each other,” said the representative of Netgazeti.

The events unfolding at the protest rallies since November 28 have also affected the agenda of the regional media, and their attention has been focused on the developments in Tbilisi. The regional media disseminated information about the rallies, which was accompanied by retaliatory harassment by the local authorities. Demonstrations were also held in regional centers.

The analysis revealed that the forms of violence that were prevalent during the post-election protests were previously tried and approved practices against journalists:

- ▶ “Even if someone attacks you in the street, a formal investigation is opened and then the case is shelved. It has become very common for journalists to be detained during protests, which used to be a rarity. We know in advance what the judge will say,” said the representative of OC Media.
- ▶ “For a long time, it has been seen during demonstrations that the police use violence against journalists live,” stated the representative of TV Pirveli.
- ▶ “This regime has labeled us as its main enemy. They started hunting us on Gavrilov’s Night, when they deliberately shot at us. I expect worse, because I have no hope for anyone. If I call 112 and say that I, a journalist, have been attacked, we will see that the police will either not react or they will come a week later, when the bruises from the beating will have disappeared,” said the representative of Formula TV.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with focus group participants in early January 2025 due to the continuous demonstrations and changes in the political processes at the end of 2024. “I have been covering demonstrations for years, and this year the difference was dramatic. I can call the crackdown on citizens and journalists a ‘mudflow, a natural disaster’ that does not stop until it completely spoils and destroys. This lasted for several days, during which we witnessed unprecedented violence,” recalled the representative of Formula TV.

After the elections, the media began to refer to Georgian Dream as the de facto and illegitimate government. Regional media representatives have mixed opinions about this trend. Some view the use of such labels negatively and believe that the media should find a golden mean and adhere to ethical standards. However, maintaining this balance becomes difficult when colleagues are physically attacked, and such labels are also a kind of response to violence. It is difficult for critical media to maintain neutrality when the ruling team deliberately accuses and attacks them. Here is what a representative of Radio Liberty said:

“Relatively objective media tries to refrain from labeling Georgian Dream as de facto, opting instead to characterize it as a government that is not recognized by the opposition. The assessment should not be perceived as emanating from a journalist, as it is also part of propaganda and will further exacerbate polarization. We see that on one side there is a prevalence of disinformation and propaganda, while on the other, journalists are perceived as actors. There is no room for real journalism in this polarization and information warfare,” said a representative of Radio Liberty.

In recent years, violence against journalists has become a common occurrence; however, the survey participants suggest that this attitude may change after the November-December 2024 protests, leading to a public perception that the media is not an adversary but an ally. Society and international organizations have [expressed](#) solidarity with journalists injured during the ongoing protests: “It was especially unexpected and emotional when they greeted me with [applause](#) at the rally,” recalls one of the affected journalists, who was [attacked](#) live by violent groups, in an interview we recorded later.

Furthermore, the incorporation of human rights violations and violence against media professionals in decisions regarding targeted sanctions will, eventually, engender a stigmatizing effect and contribute to the end of the impunity syndrome. The decisions of the European Court of Human Rights exert a similar effect.

■ 4.4. CONTENT QUALITY AND INFORMATION AVAILABILITY

The pervasive issue of monotony in media content remains a concern for journalists. The process of fieldwork, which encompasses the creation of high-quality, in-depth investigative and analytical materials, has become increasingly challenging for critical media. This situation can be attributed to restrictions imposed on commentaries and access to public information. According to the Criminal Code of Georgia ([Article 154](#)), unlawful interference with the professional activities of a journalist is defined as the coercion of a journalist to disseminate or withhold information. This interference can take various forms, including the influence on the journalist and others to impede the journalist’s ability to perform their professional duties. Such interference can include the destruction of information collected by the journalist, demands to cease journalistic activities, verbal or physical abuse, various forms of influence on the journalist’s will and blackmail. Paragraph 2 of the aforementioned article accentuates the severity of liability if the aforementioned actions are perpetrated with the use of a threat of violence or official position, stipulating imprisonment for up to two years.

In instances of interference with journalistic activities, investigative bodies circumvent qualification under Article 154 of the Criminal Code and instead qualify such actions as petty hooliganism, as delineated in Article 166 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of Georgia. This code represents a heavy legacy from the Soviet period and the state has not taken effective steps to amend it. According to the Code of Administrative Offenses, penalties for petty hooliganism include a fine, ranging from 500 to 2,000 GEL, or administrative imprisonment for a term of up to 15 days.

In Georgia, such interference in journalistic activities is part of the daily routine of media professionals, which, inevitably, leads to a decline in the quality of journalistic output, resulting in a loss of public trust and societal polarization.

Focus group participants recollect instances in which journalists were physically assaulted while performing their professional duties. However, the cases brought against perpetrators of violence against journalists have been classified under the articles of hooliganism, not of attempted obstruction of journalistic activities: “This is an established practice. In the case of various crimes committed against journalists, investigative services always try to qualify the crime as hooliganism and not as an attempt to obstruct journalistic activity,” said the journalist from Radio Liberty.

The appropriate legal qualification of the action depends on the accurate determination of the factual circumstances. The recognition of an individual as an administrative offender under the article of petty hooliganism does not accurately reflect the essence of the crime, which includes illegal interference in the professional activity of a journalist. It should be assessed under Article 154 of the Criminal Code of Georgia. Incorrect qualification and delay in identification of the perpetrators contribute to the spread of the impunity syndrome and also establish the practice of normalization of such crimes.

The analysis of the established practice outside the legal framework is also important as it points to the systemic barriers created in the preparation of journalistic content, which can be hidden and manifested in self-censorship. The latter is always difficult to research and document because self-censorship is based on fear. It is important to share international experiences. [According](#) to the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), 138 press freedom violations were documented in Georgia in 2024. Of these, 21% (30) are related to **interference in journalistic activities**, including denial or cancellation of accreditation, blocking access to information and attendance at meetings, blocking the distribution of content, etc. All participants in our study were affected by one or more incidents. They note that restrictions on access to information by the authorities are part of their daily routine and are not even recorded in official statistics. Accordingly, the data on interference with professional activities is higher:

- ▶ “Unfortunately, it has become normalized not to give us comments, to prevent us from attending meetings,” notes the journalist from Samkhretis Karibche.
- ▶ “Previously, I used to formally call a government representative for a comment. Now, I do not do that anymore, and sometimes I look for their old statements in the archives, sometimes I ask a journalist from a news program for a comment,” said the journalist from Mtavari Arkhi TV.

The focus groups highlighted the problem of access to public information. This is a particular obstacle for small media and investigative journalists.

- ▶ “The lack of access to public information has made it impossible to even create content,” said the representative of Indigo magazine.
- ▶ “The problems of access to public information for online media have become especially evident since the pandemic,” said the representative of OC Media.

Access to public information has become increasingly difficult for journalists affiliated with pro-government television stations, a phenomenon that was not observed in previous years’ surveys. This suggests that the ruling party may have reservations about the credibility of journalists and may be wary of media outlets that are perceived as loyal to it. There may be several reasons for this: journalistic material (including so-called black material that was not broadcast) is stored in the archives, while fact-based content and documents can be reused in another context at any time. Public information and spontaneous/natural comments technically contain discourse uncontrolled by the ruling team, which may differ from their propaganda narrative and even be harmful. With easy access to public information, fact-checking in itself creates a pattern different from such a pseudo-reality. Therefore, if the scale of crime and disinformation is exceptionally large, in conditions of free circulation of information, a journalist will see it.

Nevertheless, for critical media, the parliament remains one of the venues for communication with politicians and the ruling team. But here, too, additional barriers have emerged. In the course of deliberations pertaining to the Russian/Agents Law, by order of the Speaker of the Parliament, a yellow security level came into effect in the legislature (On Approval of the Security Regulations in the Parliament of Georgia of September 4, 2023, N1/259/23), which applied to representatives of online media. The media representatives [applied](#) for a response to the Public Defender's Office, which the journalists accuse of negligence: "Several media outlets have filed a complaint under the article on discrimination, and so far, there has been no response from the Public Defender's Office, no one has contacted us," said the representative of the online media outlet Netgazeti. Other journalists also note that in case of violation of their rights, they have no hope of a response from the Public Defender's Office.

Addressing the issue of access to information, a journalist from Rustavi 2 TV also cited the accreditation rules adopted in the parliament, which led to the creation of "black lists" and the subsequent complication of journalistic work in the parliament: "The problem is that government structures and the parliament itself are closed. In the parliament there are special lists of those who get accreditation. What has changed is that the press can no longer move in the corridors where the ministers are. There is a space reserved for the press in the government administration, and even there, they ask you in advance what questions you have. This practice is already a restriction of access to information."

One of the forms of restricting access to information is the politicians' boycott to participate in TV programs, the lack of accountability, which directly affects the quality of media content: "When government officials do not appear on political talk shows and debates are not held, the work becomes incomplete. There is no forum where politicians from different sides can engage in dialogue and where journalists can ask them questions," noted the representative of TV Pirveli.

Imedi TV also has a problem with access to sources, because "the TV station is stigmatized" and sources (both in Georgia and abroad) refuse to cooperate. According to the journalist, this practice used to be episodic, but this year it has become a trend.

During the pre-election period, access to information became more challenging in the regions. All representatives of the regional media involved in the survey noted that the ruling party held "secret meetings" about which critical and independent media professionals were not informed. Anti-Western rhetoric was evident in such meetings of the ruling team, which was rarely and/or accidentally covered by the media and citizen journalists.

In addition, journalists had to film the material via phone in order to avoid undue attention. However, this tactic proved less effective in regions where everyone knows the local journalists. The representative of Radio Liberty recollects: "In one village, rather than discussing social issues, they tried to talk about gay marriage and stir up anti-Western sentiments. The media managed [to cover](#) several such meetings by accident. Conversely, opposition parties endeavored to garner maximum media exposure for their events," said the Radio Liberty journalist.

The regional media was not informed about the campaign meetings of the ruling team. During the discussion, it was repeatedly noted that the primary reason for this was the dissemination of disinformation during these meetings.

- ▶ “I was not invited to a meeting organized by the ruling team in my own polling station. They brought civil servants, people involved in the employment program for the socially vulnerable, and their supporters into the 300-person hall,” said the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.
- ▶ “The mayor of one of the municipalities spoke at the meeting not about the election program, but about how the European Union and the West are trying to spread LGBT propaganda and drag the country into war, as if the West and civil society do not want to be transparent and that is why they opposed the adoption of the ‘Russian law’. I am sure that all the meetings that were held in more than 100 villages in the region were based on propaganda and disinformation, and that was probably the reason why they hid these meetings from us. Of course, they did not want us to report about it,” said the representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

Such meetings were not transparent to the media or the people. This confirms that the ruling team implemented a party directive in the regions to control the flow of information. This was a kind of “shadow ban” on access to information, when there is no prohibitive norm, but critical media outlets are not allowed to attend a meeting with voters and are even prevented from conducting their professional activities.

Journalists working in the regions note that there were no problems of this scale with access to information in previous elections and attribute this to the transition to a fully proportional electoral system in the 2024 elections, which has led to a reduction of interest among majoritarian MP candidates in disseminating information at the individual level.

The media faced challenges in accessing the materials filmed by observers on election day, which hindered the dissemination of footage by journalists. The footage captured by these observers was initially disseminated to relevant parties or election observation organizations before being released to the media, thus resulting in a delay in the dissemination process. As a result, evidence of violations (including ballots with visible marks on the back) became available to the media in the following days:

“The parties included us in the media chats, but not a single word was written either before the elections or on the day of the elections. The election observation organizations tried to get information from us instead of giving it to us. They had their own agenda, but it was disappointing that they refused to give us an interview even when we visited the polling stations,” said the representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

The ruling party has adopted a strategy of boycotting independent regional media. The interview format was absent even before the elections. In general, other political parties are not able to use the resources of regional media either, and often media representatives had to ask for comments: “It took a lot of effort to get the necessary information about election programs and plans, although it was in their interest to provide information proactively,” said the representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

According to the practice established by the ruling party, the press services themselves distributed the footage and comments they wanted, which the critical media could not use. The same practice of providing information also extended to the media loyal to the ruling party. A journalist from the pro-government Rustavi 2 TV also talks about the polarization of national TV channels and the impact of symbiotic relationships with political parties, describing the routine of working in pro-government media: “Every program or TV show was turned into an extension of the party’s press service, and the broadcast programming was prepared according to the agenda of specific parties.” The respondent speaks in the past tense because of having left the TV company at the end of the year. The government’s malicious practice will be further intensified as several municipal mayor’s offices have announced tenders for the purchase of video cameras for press services. This will further limit the access of critical media to information. “Local municipalities [record](#) the meetings themselves – no sound or conversation can be heard. Only music accompanies the footage,” confirmed the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

Non-governmental organizations have also been known to produce media content, a practice that has given rise to divergent assessments among discussion participants. Some believe that the more organizations disseminate accurate and necessary information for society, the better, while others regard it as an encroachment on the media’s functions. The prevailing viewpoint is that NGOs should prioritize the publication of reports and studies, which the media will then pick up as content.

Diversification of sources is also a problem in the region. Regional media representatives are forced to find respondents in Tbilisi for a number of topics, while the respondent is unknown to the regional population and does not inspire confidence: “So many people are leaving the region that it is impossible to get a comment from a local professional who will assess the developments for you,” said the representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

A number of secondary questions and issues were raised during the discussion. One such issue is the restriction of access to critical media on hotel televisions. In particular, critical media outlets face barriers in communicating with the general public. One of the artificially created barriers is the automatic placement of television stations loyal to the government as the first, second, and third channels by TV providers, while critical media outlets are placed at the bottom of the channel list.

Focus group participants explained that this problem in the region depends on the infrastructure and transmitters, which are expensive for regional broadcasters to own. The practice of critical channels being “lost” in the list of TV channels can be seen as a form of shadow banning of TV content, whereby critical media is not officially banned, yet the content still does not reach the audience. In the conventional understanding of the term, shadow banning refers to a social media user who is subject to restrictions on access to information or whose content is not freely disseminated without their knowledge: “This is not just a regional problem, we were in Tbilisi for a training and on hotel TVs, everywhere the channel list started with POSTV and Imedi TV. You had to search for opposition channels,” said the representative of Kakhetis Khma.

In recent years (the participants in the discussion mentioned 2021 as the starting point), local governments have been closed to the media and civic initiatives. This affected not only political issues, but also issues where cooperation was in the government’s interest:

► “The only resource for cooperation with the government is if the regional media disseminates the ‘unlimited news’ they provide. Our condition was and is that the material must go through an editorial filter to meet the standards of journalistic ethics and the internal regulations of the editorial office. The government has declined to accept these conditions and no further proposals have been forthcoming,” said the representative of Kakhetis Khma.

The availability of information is affected by polarization, and as a result, viewers suffer, unable to receive complete information on certain issues: “During the introduction of the Russian law, we could hardly talk about local problems in the local media,” said the representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

Self-censorship is observed in communication with sources, and what is said during an interview differs from informal conversations and actions. As a representative of the regional media recalled, this was noticeable in the pre-election period and on election day itself: “Journalists are often informed about this or that problem, but they avoid talking about it and commenting on it. Sources would rather have a journalist talk about their problem than come out themselves. Such ‘hiding’ of sources also affects their credibility in the eyes of the audience. There was a case when the interview was interrupted because the respondent got afraid and angry that something negative about the government would slip out of his tongue,” said the representative of Borjomi TV. Such self-censorship and an atmosphere of fear damage trust in the media.

■ 4.5. MEDIA RESET: REBUILDING TRUST

The discrediting of the profession of journalism and the media as an institution has been ongoing in Georgia for years. This has had a negative impact on public trust in the media. As the journalists involved in the study say: “Everyone is already in the same boat, regardless of the media outlet they represent or the content they produce.”

The participants in the discussion call this effect “polarization of trust”. From their perspective, the “media trust scale” manifests itself in only two extremes, wherein the media is either unconditionally trusted or not at all.

It is obvious that trust in the media in 2024 was damaged by the campaign conducted during the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law. The erosion of trust can be attributed to a number of factors, including false/illusory polarization, government and Russian propaganda, campaigns to discredit the media, problems in accessing information, biased content, etc.

The discussion revealed that probably the most damaging factor for trust in the media is the symbiotic relationship and affiliation of journalists with political parties. Unlike in previous years, journalists believe that political party affiliation is detrimental to their professional activities and trust in them. Again, critical media representatives speak out and criticize both the ruling party and the opposition, while there is less criticism of the ruling party by pro-government media representatives.

One of the important factors affecting trust is that “the media has deviated from its professional role because it has become a target itself,” stated the representative of Tok TV. Such positioning was also a forced situation for independent media. In addition, due to the weakening of political parties and the non-governmental sector, the media has taken over some of the responsibilities of other institutions.

- ▶ “According to our editorial policy, we are not allowed to participate in demonstrations (an exception is when the protest is about the rights of journalists and freedom of expression). Due to the current situation, the authorities forced us to become a party to the process, and not just an impartial reporter,” said the representative of the online media outlet Netgazeti.
- ▶ “Unfortunately, the distinction between activism and journalism has been erased because we had no choice. We are forced to change our professional agenda and take on the role of the defendant,” stated the iFact representative.
- ▶ “In the future, the media should take care of its own business to regain the trust of the audience,” said the representative of Mtavari Arkhi.

A representative of the regional media notes that the crisis of trust has been created by polarization, and this is best manifested by the fact that there is no longer the same solidarity among journalists as there was before Georgian Dream came to power. In other words, political polarization has penetrated personal relations. The lack of financial independence of television stations is also a factor that indirectly affects trust: “Where there is funding from international donors, no one interferes with the content of the media. That is why regional media outlets are more impartial,” said the representative of Borjomi TV.

Representatives of critical media outlets speak of the deliberate conformism of pro-government journalists, which, they say, is motivated by self-preservation and social status. In Georgia, the information and media ecosystem are influenced by a bureaucratic management system that corrects the free flow of information with an “invisible hand” and this is also reflected in the balance of power distribution.

The journalists who participated in the study believe that the prevailing level of polarization will impede the ability of rival journalists to reach a consensus. One of the respondents noted that both sides perceive themselves as victims of bullying, whether from the ruling team or the public.

The self-censorship and monotony of sources affect credibility, as the audience believes that this is the result of the media’s editorial policy, rather than polarization and fear. The distrust in the media is further evidenced by the reluctance of sources to speak even off-the-record. This problem was also observed in previous years, when sources preferred to remain anonymous out of fear, which reduced trust in analytical and investigative media products. The adoption of the Agents/Russian Law has further exacerbated this problem: “The law obliges us to disclose the identities of confidential sources, which also affects trust in us. As a result, the number of sources who used to talk to us has decreased. Now, they no longer feel safe talking to us,” said the representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

Accusing media representatives of spreading lies undermines trust. Journalists from critical media believe that the practice of blaming journalists was part of a government directive:

- ▶ “Their goal was to spread the message that the media was spreading false information. This strategy has been used to reduce public confidence in the media. By fostering distrust, they are trying to make the material produced by critical media unreliable. During the pre-election period, this approach proved effective, and it was necessary for us to prove that what we were reporting was not an edited version and that it was continuous footage,” said the Radio Liberty journalist.
- ▶ “When the system works to discredit this profession, it clearly affects the trust in journalists and media,” stated the representative of Formula TV.
- ▶ “Unfortunately, the media has turned into a political side, whether we wanted it or not. The main culprit is oligarch Ivanishvili, who deliberately split the political parties, and subsequently the media,” the representative of Mtavari Arkhi said.

During the discussion, it was noted that “audience reach does not mean that the media is trusted, and trust is more important than the number of views,” said the representative of Tok TV. According to the participants involved in the study, trust in the media is associated with the competence of journalists and adherence to professional standards, as these all affect the quality of journalistic production.

Journalists focused on the training of interns and the need to retrain them: “Instead of training journalists, they make microphone stands out of interns who know nothing about the profession. Novice journalists are sent to politicians and they do not have the resources to ask them a relevant question or remind them of any facts. Media managers bear their share of responsibility for introducing this ugly practice,” said a former journalist from Rustavi 2 TV. The practice of journalists’ fieldwork has a significant impact on public perception of the profession and, consequently, on the level of trust placed in it. The level of this trust is influenced by several factors, including the professional training and skills of journalists.

Trust in media outlets is influenced by the type of content shared on social media platforms. This content can be different from what is broadcast. According to a journalist from Imedi TV, trust (especially among young people) is often established through the “cards” shared on social networks, leading to allegations of bias on the part of Imedi TV. In fact, airtime is allocated to different content, and the allegations are unfounded.

According to the Imedi TV journalist, the awarding of 34 journalists and media workers by Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili has exacerbated the trust deficit, as the President enjoys trust and she only awarded critical media representatives: “This award was not a recognition of journalists, but rather a political act. The President did not extend awards to journalists and camera operators from pro-government TV channels who were present at the rally and were poisoned by gas. The camera operators, in particular, felt aggrieved, because, together with the staff, they form the backbone of television.” The Imedi TV journalist considers the presidential award discriminatory, especially in light of the international and domestic organizations focus exclusively on the challenges and risks faced by critical media. In this context, the journalist recalls the media solidarity rally.

It is noteworthy that the President also awarded journalists who were injured during the protests. An additional interview was recorded in January 2025 with one of the journalists who noted that the ruling team and television stations loyal to it often demand solidarity and present the beating of critical media and the bullying against Imedi TV journalists on the same level: “I have questions: why does it happen that only critical media representatives are injured and beaten by special forces during rallies? Is it the same if a protester waves a flag in front of an Imedi TV journalist while that journalist is on air and if we are beaten to death?” said the journalist from TV Pirveli.

Coverage of the ongoing protests and crackdowns in Tbilisi at the end of 2024 may have a positive impact on media trust:

- ▶ “While there may be numerous complaints regarding our colleagues, it is evident that it is the media that is currently fighting in Tbilisi, on Rustaveli Avenue, and I believe that trust will also increase,” said the representative of Kakhetis Khma.
- ▶ “Trust in the media is strengthened by the fact that the public sees that the government is no longer accountable and they now pin more hopes on the media. We can strengthen the voice of the people,” said the representative of Chemi Kharagauli.
- ▶ “There was trust in us before, but it has increased even more because the demonstrations gave an impetus to the expression of this emotion. Everyone saw that in such a time of trouble, we were the only ones beside them, and without us they will be left alone,” said the representative of TV Pirveli.

At the end of the year, during the continuous protests, the media and the public came closer together, and according to the journalist involved in the study, people are already looking to journalists for support. These rallies have turned people and the media into a single organism: “People hope for each other and for us during the rallies. They see an attack on a journalist as an attack on themselves. We already feel this support everywhere,” the representative of TV Pirveli said.

However, it is important not to create false expectations of the media, as this can also have a negative impact on trust: “The problem is when the media promises people to solve problems. The media should not make promises that it cannot keep, it damages their reputation,” stated the representative of iFact.

To restore trust in the media in Georgia, it is important to develop public interest media. According to a representative of Indigo magazine, “to increase public trust in the media, it should cover issues that are important to people and express their views. The media and society have become distant from each other, and there are many reasons for this.” A representative of OC Media noted that they feel support from vulnerable groups because they fight for their interests.

At the end of November, a representative of the Georgian Public Broadcaster predicted further polarization and spoke of the need for coordination: “Our society is radically divided. The Georgian Public Broadcaster has lost its function as the main informer. This worries everyone, but not everyone has the courage to free themselves from the influence of the ‘caring hand’. We need more coordination, meetings, coordination on common rules of struggle, sharing information with each other, standing by each other. Now is not the time for pessimism,” said the Public Broadcaster representative.

It is noteworthy that the situation and mood around the Public Broadcaster changed at the end of the year, one month after the focus group was held. This was influenced by the ongoing protests. In particular, in an in-depth interview conducted in early January, the same representative of the Public Broadcaster noted that a legitimate demand was emerging among the public that public television, which is financed from the budget, reflect the interests of the people and cover their problems. It is worth noting that the Georgian Public Broadcaster, according to its editorial [principles](#), is open and inclusive of all social groups. The public broadcaster unites two television and two radio channels, which, according to some employees, do not adequately reflect the interests and problems of the public: “Amid protests, the employees of the public television voiced the same demand, which coincided with public aspirations. This is a good tandem that strengthens the accountability of television,” said a representative of the public broadcaster, who believes that nihilism has been overcome and that the public and some of the employees are already fighting together to change the agenda: “In contrast, the management of the public broadcaster wants to turn the television and radio into entertainment channels (to make them similar to the Russian ORT), which is unacceptable,” the respondent said.

In December, amid public protests and at the demand of the public, the public broadcaster allocated a small amount of airtime (up to one hour) to protesters and active citizens, which was considered a significant success: “Now there are 40 minutes on the public side and more than 23 hours on the other side. We are demanding the allocation of real time. The support of local and international organizations is important. The internal solidarity shown by the organization has been unprecedented, with trade unions stepping up their efforts, a [platform](#) being created and a significant increase in the number of signatories to the employees’ demands, which reached 80 (as reported by the representative of the Public Broadcaster). It was also noted that there have been attempts to discredit the internal protest by accusing it of affiliation with political parties and marginalization. However, during the interview, it was clarified that “the order comes from the public, which has a legitimate right to have its voice heard.”

The focus group discussion revealed a general interest in covering topics that are tailored to the interests of the people. The development of public interest media is largely ensured by distancing itself from partisan and commercial interests and the support of international donors.

■ 4.6. MEDIA RESET: RELATIONS WITH POLITICIANS

A number of secondary questions and issues were raised during the discussion that were not included in the guidelines. Among them is the challenge that concerns informal relationships between journalists and politicians and harms the profession. Unlike in previous years, journalists note that unceremonious relationships with politicians hinder professional activities.

In their opinion, the formal, professional distance between the media and politicians has been disrupted, which negatively impacts the media’s reputation and harms the profession. Journalists express concern that this increased familiarity (especially among parliamentary journalists) is also evident in broadcasts. Politicians have adopted a more affable tone towards journalists, engaging in informal chats, friendly selfies, informal

gatherings and private parties, where the media agenda is planned and discussed with journalists. Such an environment can create a situation in which journalists feel vulnerable to undue influence from a politician, potentially leading to self-censorship.

It was revealed that journalists consider the presence of unceremonious relationships between journalists and politicians, which is also evidenced on social networks, to be a contributing factor to public distrust: “The professional distance between media representatives and government officials/MPs has been completely disrupted. For example, a critical journalist can get involved in blowing out a birthday cake for a certain MP,” said a representative of Formula TV.

The representative of the pro-government television station articulated a similar stance, stating: “A journalist should not make friends with politicians. I advise novice journalists and interns to refrain from such relationships. These unceremonious relationships are unacceptable due to the potential for exploitation by those seeking to gain advantage. It is important to maintain a certain degree of distance. You can be so influenced that you do not even realize it, and that suits politicians very well, because they want to increase self-censorship among journalists so that no critical questions are asked. Both the government and the opposition are doing this deliberately.” In this context, unceremonious and unhealthy relationships with politicians have a negative impact on solidarity with colleagues and public trust.

The editorial policy of media outlets may imply a certain degree of loyalty to political ideology. This enables viewers to select information sources that align with their personal beliefs. However, such ideological identifications remain largely unarticulated in Georgia. Media outlets and journalists change their political leanings depending on who owns and finances them, who is in the government and who is in the opposition. This dynamic affects the level of trust in the media and journalists.

Democratization and trust in the media are linked to increased responsibility and accountability: “The more responsibility of the media increases, the more trust will increase. The media should have its own value vector, which will be outlined, including in terms of political ideology,” said the representative of Kakhetis Khma.

The participants in the discussion expressed their willingness to agree on the rules of their professional work after the political crisis is resolved. They consider it important not to be a party to the information warfare between the political parties, as this is harmful to the profession. According to them, the media outlets are currently going through a period of self-determination and survival, and mutual solidarity is particularly important in this process. According to the Imedi TV journalist, this process “should begin with reconciliation”. There are still collegial and friendly relations between journalists from different poles, which is paradoxical, on the one hand, but can be the basis for dialogue in the future: “Such an agreement and such a dialogue cannot happen yet, because the journalists themselves are not ready for it. It is difficult to control your emotions when you see a bloodied colleague,” said a representative of Radio Liberty. Journalists believe that a “media reset” will be possible during the transition period.

■ 4.7. CITIZEN JOURNALISTS, MEDIA AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Citizen journalists are important sources for the media. They are not employed by the media, but they have smartphones to capture important material and share it on social networks. Citizen journalists may not be “influencers”, but rather they are ordinary citizens who inform their audience at a specific time and place, including from the perspective of a participant. What unites them with professional journalists is their ability to influence the media and the public agenda. There is no editorial bureaucracy for citizen journalists. They decide for themselves what to cover and what not to cover. In this regard, they are also faster.

During the election period, the practice of cooperating with citizen journalists was observed in all regions. This resource fills the vacuum that exists in small media organizations. In cases where there were no professional media representatives, it was citizens who obtained and distributed the material. The representative of Chemi Kharagauli recollects one such case: “When the polling station was closed and the counting of votes began, the electricity went out, which is a very rare occurrence in Kharagauli. This information and relevant [materials](#) were provided to us by a citizen.”

It is important to create a format for working with citizen journalists that will enhance the efficacy of mutual work: “Sometimes they did not want their videos to be broadcast, or they did not want to be identified,” stated the representative of Mtavari Arkhi. The participants in the discussion expressed their willingness to work with citizen journalists and to create a common network.

This discussion gave rise to a number of secondary questions, with the participants offering their perspectives on the role of alternative media and influencers. In the Georgian context, “alternative media” has come to be dominated by these influencers. During the discussion, it was noted that these influencers enjoy a greater degree of public trust, despite their inability to replace journalists, because the latter, through their fieldwork, develop a range of essential skills that influencers do not necessarily possess.

Journalists are also considering employment opportunities on various alternative platforms. However, using these platforms poses challenges for the media. Journalists believe that alternative media platforms created to save the media are no guarantee that they will not also be shut down. In addition, they fear that online platforms are more susceptible to propaganda than traditional media and will therefore be difficult to deal with.

- ▶ “In case of moving to another platform independently, you need initial capital and support,” the representative of the Georgian Public Broadcaster stated.
- ▶ “We need to agree on the conditions under which we will continue to work. Using alternative platforms is not a solution, because dictators ban them too,” said the representative of Netgazeti.

Opinions were divided on how to connect different social platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) with journalistic activities. Some journalists believe that the focus on these platforms devalues content and that it is impossible to adapt high-quality, analytical material to the infrastructure of a specific medium. The popularity of social media affects

the decline of interest in certain genres (for example, analytical articles) in editorial offices. This is due to the fact that the assessment of audience reach is more visible on social media: “You cannot publish a professional product on TikTok. This is an area where we are competing with so-called influencers, trying to spend our resources in this direction, which ultimately undermines quality,” said a representative of Radio Liberty.

A divergent perspective is expressed by those who perceive these platforms as an opportunity to analyze audiences and target a specific segment. In addition, some of the discussion participants advocate for the utilization of these platforms to combat propaganda and disinformation: “Tik-Tok serves as a resource for acquiring information that is both interesting and inspiring for me as a journalist. I think that this resource should also be employed from a professional standpoint,” stated a representative of Samkhretis Karibche.

In addressing the primary challenge, representatives of both traditional and online media reiterate their belief that creating content for social networks requires additional resources and is less suited to the demands of traditional media genres. According to them, the challenge lies in creating content that can swiftly capture and hold the audience’s attention. Positioning and competing on alternative platforms are also a challenge in terms of improving the training and skills of journalists.

■ 4.8. INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

After the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law, local and international organizations tried to strengthen media organizations and provide moral support. At the same time, it was clear to journalists that donors would not pay the fines that would be imposed on the organization during the enforcement of the law. Consultation meetings were held that included legal consultations and cybersecurity training. Several media outlets were able to improve their infrastructure with the help of donors. International election observation organizations also cooperated with regional media.

The future of the donor work in Georgia remains unclear to journalists. There is a concern that donors may choose to depart from Georgia. Risks persist regarding the potential instrumentalization of the Russian/Agents Law. Currently, the media is focused on survival rather than on development.

Journalists believe that it is imperative for donors to extend support to long-term projects and to increase resources, as salaries in regional media are very low. “Journalists often work without a salary or for a minimal fee, only out of loyalty to values,” said a representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

A variety of factors have been identified as contributing to the reduction in work capacity. These include insufficient donor funding, inefficiency in communication and consensus-building with donors, the expectation of increased costs in the event of the enforcement of the Agents/Russian Law, feelings of abandonment and devaluation of intellectual activity, among others. The representative of Kakhetis Khma said that “donors were late in providing support. This summer, financial resources appeared, but we no longer had the resources to work.”

During the pre-election period, the civil society sector tried to ensure confidence in the electoral process and prevent nihilism. Journalists criticize NGOs for this, noting that the media practiced self-censorship when reporting on pre-election issues. Journalists cited a lack of coordination among stakeholders and ineffective strategic communication:

- ▶ “The NGO sector has strengthened the illusion of holding elections under an authoritarian government, and the media, instead of talking about the problems, has switched to the mode of waiting for the elections,” said the journalist from Mtavari Arkhi TV.
- ▶ “I see an ‘equalization of egos’ among the media, political parties, and the non-governmental sector,” said the representative of Formula TV.

It is noteworthy that the relationship between the ruling team and donor organizations exerts a significant influence on the media. The participants in the study recalled high-profile cases in journalistic circles when, allegedly at the request of the ruling team, a donor organization interfered in editorial policy and material was ‘blocked’ (the participants mentioned the films made by Gela Mtivlishvili, the editor of Mtis Ambebi):

- ▶ “In my opinion, this is also censorship. I think the reason is the donor’s relationship with the government. This is a moral blow,” said the representative of Indigo magazine.
- ▶ “There are donor organizations that do not fund sensitive issues, they prefer not to face problems with the government. It was very important to strengthen independent and critical media before the introduction of the ‘Russian law’, but donors did not do this, and the crisis came as a result. Now donor support has appeared, but we are afraid that each program may be the last,” said the representative of Studio Monitor.
- ▶ “Donors have already begun to interfere with our content in order to avoid jeopardizing relations with the government. There is a threat that funding will be suspended, or priorities will be altered,” said the representative of OC Media.

In contrast, a journalist from Imedi TV notes that donors are less interested in them and that only critical media outlets enjoy their solidarity.

Journalists expressed dissatisfaction with the initial response of donors after the law was adopted, which consisted mainly of offers of relocation and registration assistance. Later, assistance tailored to the interests of the media emerged: “The government’s goal is just to make us disappear from this country. International donor organizations should not contribute to this. Initially, the wrong financial strategies were chosen, focusing on short-term solutions that merely allowed us to ‘float on the surface’ instead of promoting media development,” said the representative of Indigo magazine.

Some journalists negatively view the fact that NGOs are competing with the media, creating media products themselves, publishing them on their own websites, and recruiting media personnel for such activities. These organizations also participate in setting the media agenda.

- ▶ “Media managers have come to believe that NGOs are smarter than journalists. They quote foreign neuropsychologists who cannot see the processes from the inside and have no sense of context,” said the representative of Mtavari Arkhi TV.

- ▶ “NGO reports need to be interpreted separately, because they use the language that makes them useless,” the representative of Indigo magazine stated.

Journalists believe that Western partners can support the media and see targeted sanctions as an important lever. The focus groups revealed a desire for NGOs to find new ways to work with the media, to help journalists strengthen and organize.

■ 4.9. CHALLENGES OF JOURNALISM EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Focus group participants have noted that in 2024, there was also a problem with finding staff. They attribute this to the adoption of the Agents/Russian Law, which has led to the discrediting of the field, resulting in a decline in the popularity of journalism as a profession. Despite market demand, there has been a decrease in individuals interested in pursuing a career as a journalist. In regional contexts, there is a perceived need to promote the media and talk to the population about its role:

- ▶ “We have been actively trying to hire someone for a year and a half, but no one is interested. There was a time when there was a lot of competition for jobs. The reason is that the media has been discredited. People do not understand how important the role of the media is in ensuring that they too live in a safe environment,” said representative of Samkhretis Karibche.
- ▶ “The reason for the problem in finding staff is that they are afraid of being labeled as ‘agents’,” said representative of Chemi Kharagauli.

The high rate of personnel turnover in the field of journalism is most evident in the television market. This phenomenon can be attributed to the unique characteristics of working conditions in television. In 2024, there were calls for journalists from propaganda TV channels to resign in protest, to which a journalist from Imedi TV responded: “We do not have that luxury. Television stations that remain at two poles frequently change journalists, management and governments. The internal processes are also specific, and it is surprising when colleagues ask you to leave your job when tomorrow, Imedi TV may be filled with journalists who have left them, or vice versa.” For the journalist, quitting in protest is also a kind of admission of the accusations that have been voiced against Imedi’s editorial policy for years, and journalists also avoid this moral pressure.

Media outlets lack the resources to adequately prepare novice journalists for the challenging environment they will face in the field: “As a result, we see young people who do not know how to react to a politician who insults them,” said former journalist from Rustavi 2 TV. A working journalist from Imedi TV discusses the challenges associated with improving skills and internships in the workplace: “The peculiarities of television are learned through practical experience, and in such an unhealthy environment, interns may also misperceive their professional activities. They perceive journalism through a distorted lens, and the audience also thinks that bias, expressing one’s own opinions, political calls – this is good journalism. Today, professional ethics have disappeared.”

Focus group participants have indicated that the priority is to ensure the safety of journalists, and in such a crisis, it is difficult to attend training sessions and concentrate: “There is no more retraining on how to cover certain topics, because these topics are no longer covered in the media. Journalists also lack the motivation to attend training sessions,” said the Imedi TV representative.

In Georgia, artificial intelligence has not been effectively use by media organizations in their work processes. This may be due to several factors, including a stressful and threatening media environment, which absorbs all the resources of journalists and leaves no time for introducing innovations. It is also noteworthy that the text and audio material available on the Internet in Georgian is not extensive. Therefore, the material generated by artificial intelligence is still inaccurate. In the future, with the development of artificial intelligence, it is important to conduct training and research in this direction in Georgia.

Once the crisis period is over, respondents believe it is important to provide training in the following areas:

- ▶ Integration of artificial intelligence into the media
- ▶ Management of an organization in a crisis situation
- ▶ Cybersecurity
- ▶ Psychological resilience and stress management
- ▶ Open source and data journalism
- ▶ Investigative journalism
- ▶ Infographics and data visualization
- ▶ Strengthening media self-regulation mechanisms

Journalists believe that training should be strategically planned throughout the year. It is important for media organizations to cooperate with other specialized organizations. They also noted frequent cases of pro-government journalists being sent to China for training, which aligns with the vision of the government selecting China as a strategic partner.

The ongoing exodus of personnel from critical and independent media outlets is a consequence of financial constraints. The challenges associated with daily news production are especially critical. Camera operators and editors often receive their salaries with delays, and in some cases, they may only work one day per week due to their involvement in multiple roles. The outlook for the future is pessimistic, particularly after 2025. Long-term projects have been suspended, and donor support includes only small fees. During the interview recorded in early 2025, a representative of Formula TV noted that the financial difficulties of critical media have intensified. In contrast, pro-government TV stations have not experienced financial difficulties and have a sense of stability.

- ▶ “In addition to journalists, it is also challenging to remunerate camera operators and editors. Frequently, journalists and producers have to assume the responsibility of editing the material themselves,” said a representative of Formula TV.
- ▶ “Critical media outlets are facing financial problems; their technical base is not being upgraded. In the post-election period, the question of the viability of critical media will arise again,” stated a representative of TV Pirveli.

Critical and independent media outlets still need strong and comprehensive support to restore their professional resources, achieve financial sustainability, and strengthen their credibility. The role of independent media will be crucial for the country’s democratic development, especially in the context of the 2025 elections.

CONCLUSION

In Georgia, the post-Soviet legacy impedes the establishment and sustainable development of a democratic, healthy information ecosystem. The elements that contribute to a robust and functional information and media landscape include: trust and credibility, content quality, human rights, free flow of information and access to it, public involvement, etc.

In general, the kleptocratic environment and the bureaucratic management system have a toxic impact on this process, as they “correct” the free movement of information with an invisible hand and influence the balance of power distribution, media freedom, and development.

At the end of 2024, expectations emerged within professional circles that trust and solidarity with the media would be strengthened. The common transformative experience that the media and society accumulated while covering the post-election demonstrations was cited as a prerequisite for this.

The example of Georgia clearly shows that oligarchic and dictatorial regimes follow the same guiding principles. The established kleptocratic practice shows that violence against the media is not fragmented, and attacks, violence and arrests targeting media workers and citizen journalists are expected to continue in 2025 and may occur in several waves.

In the era of technological progress and pressure from authoritarian regimes, there is no universal recipe for media survival. Instead, the future of independent media is directly linked to the success of the Euro-Atlantic course and democracy in the country. Defending this choice will also strengthen the media. On this path, the Georgian media will have to develop various innovative strategies not only for survival, but also for development. This process should primarily strengthen the media’s credibility and make its role – informing, educating, and empowering the public – irreplaceable and unique.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to focus on preparations for the 2025 local elections in a timely manner, ensuring coordination among stakeholders and effective strategic communication. The need to create guarantees for the protection of free media and journalists should be constantly emphasized in this process. Mutual support and solidarity between the media and society should not be fragmented, one-off and symbolic in nature, but should rather become part of the process and routine.

The recommendations made to the ruling team in previous years to improve the media environment have not been implemented year after year. In this year's study, the recommendations to the government are designed for the next legitimate government.

🚩 What should be done to increase trust in the media?

The government should:

- ▶ Stop campaigns to discredit the media and journalists.
- ▶ Stop boycotting critical and independent media; participate in debates.
- ▶ Change the practice of partisan, unceremonious relations with the media and establish professional cooperation.
- ▶ Express support for free media in public statements.

Opposition parties should:

- ▶ Change the practice of partisan, unceremonious relations with the media and establish professional cooperation.
- ▶ Provide timely information and comments to the media and participate in TV programs.
- ▶ Expand the list of thematic speakers (especially in the regions).
- ▶ Express support for free media in public statements.

The media should:

- ▶ Uphold the standards of journalistic ethics.
- ▶ Change the vicious practice of symbiotic relations with political parties, which manifests itself in unprofessional, unhealthy, unceremonious relations. It is necessary to launch discussions on this issue.
- ▶ Maintain a professional niche during crises, less overlapping with the responsibilities of other institutions.

- ▶ Increase the involvement of the public/audience in the creation of the media agenda. In this regard, encourage the development of public interest media.
- ▶ Show the transformative experience in the public space, where people and media are concerned about common problems.
- ▶ Outline an editorial policy that allows the audience to choose the source of information according to their beliefs.
- ▶ Hold informal meetings with public groups to discuss the role of the media.
- ▶ Strengthen solidarity journalism and support for vulnerable groups and colleagues.

International and local organizations should:

- ▶ Promote the popularization of the “crowdfunding” model.
- ▶ Continue to support free media in public statements.
- ▶ Increase financial and legal support for free media.
- ▶ Expand the list of thematic speakers (especially in the regions).
- ▶ Promote inclusive information campaigns that build trust in the media.

Academia and higher education institutions should:

- ▶ Not instill distrust of the media when teaching media literacy, but rather present diverse approaches and resources for media criticism.
- ▶ Promote the profession of journalism.
- ▶ Strengthen solidarity journalism and support for vulnerable groups.

What should be done to strengthen solidarity?

The government should:

- ▶ Stop campaigns to discredit the media and journalists and to promote violence and impunity.

Opposition parties should:

- ▶ Publicly express support for the media and vulnerable groups.

The media should:

- ▶ Highlight that journalists in the pro-government media are under pressure from the ruling team and explain how this pressure is expressed.
- ▶ Agree on the rules of professional work after the political crisis is over.
- ▶ Create a format for cooperation with citizen journalists that will make mutual work more effective.
- ▶ Hold informal meetings with public groups to discuss the role of the media.

International and local organizations should:

- ▶ Prevent censorship of content.
- ▶ Local NGOs should work more closely with media organizations to create media content.
- ▶ Help journalists create and strengthen professional associations.
- ▶ Strengthen solidarity journalism and support for vulnerable groups.

Academia and higher education institutions should:

- ▶ Work with a broader audience to promote the profession of journalism.
- ▶ Strengthen media internship programs.
- ▶ Strengthen solidarity journalism and support for vulnerable groups.

🚩 What should be done to reduce polarization?

The government should:

- ▶ Stop boycotting media, participate in debates.
- ▶ Stop campaigns to discredit the media and journalists.

Opposition parties should:

- ▶ Provide timely information and comments to the media and participate in TV programs.
- ▶ Expand the list of thematic speakers (especially in the regions).

The media should:

- ▶ Diversify its sources and ensure maximum coverage of real problems reflecting the interests of the people and diversity (especially in the regions).

International and local organizations should:

- ▶ Actively participate in the process of implementing reforms at the Georgian Public Broadcaster.
- ▶ Reinforce the media's ability to accurately represent public interests and guarantee their independence from commercial and partisan interests.
- ▶ Expand the list of thematic speakers (especially in the regions).

What should be done to ensure the safety of journalists?

The government should:

- ▶ Investigate all crimes committed against journalists and end impunity.
- ▶ Abolish repressive laws and eliminate established practices.
- ▶ Stop discrediting campaigns.
- ▶ End the establishment of the so-called SLAPP practice.
- ▶ Ensure the protection of freedom of expression.

Opposition parties should:

- ▶ Highlight the crimes committed against journalists and impunity when calling for targeted sanctions.
- ▶ Express solidarity with the media and journalists.

The media should:

- ▶ Remind the public and politicians of the crimes committed against journalists, demand an investigation and an end to impunity.
- ▶ Express solidarity and condemn violence against colleagues (regardless of which media outlet or “side” the journalist represents).

International and local organizations should:

- ▶ Strengthen mutual solidarity to reduce the impact of the practice of intimidation and stigmatization of journalists.
- ▶ Enable journalists to seek help quickly and easily in cases of discrimination or threats.
- ▶ Highlight the impunity and crimes committed against journalists when calling for targeted sanctions.
- ▶ Increase the mobilization of resources for psychological, physical and digital safety.

Academia and higher education institutions should:

- ▶ Create or expand journalism education programs that focus on safety, ethics and critical thinking.
- ▶ Conduct research on the impact of threats and stigmatization against journalists that will contribute to a better understanding of the problem.

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

The government should:

- ▶ Repeal repressive laws and end established practices.
- ▶ Create an inclusive environment for improving legislation.
- ▶ Reject the SLAPP practice.
- ▶ Establish a balanced governance of the distribution of power.

Opposition parties should:

- ▶ Demand the protection of media freedom guarantees at all levels of government.

The media should:

- ▶ Strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms and thus resist the possible need for stricter regulation.

International and local organizations should:

- ▶ Encourage the strengthening of media self-regulation mechanisms.
- ▶ Proactively discuss risks and implement timely response mechanisms.
- ▶ Prepare policy documents, studies and reports.
- ▶ Consider the interests and involvement of the media when preparing studies and reports.

Academia and higher education institutions should:

- ▶ Hold public discussions on the protection of academic freedom, internationalization and compliance with international standards and improve coordination to reduce the repressive environment in higher education.
- ▶ Work towards modernizing the teaching of media law and media ethics.

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ Continue to actively mobilize resources for legal assistance to media workers.
- ▶ Actively discuss that though the Agents/Russian Law has become no longer relevant after the elections, it can still be used for repression. In addition, push discussions on possible intensification of SLAPPs and their associated risks and proactively introduce anti-SLAPP mechanisms (including in coordination with the Anti-SLAPP Coalition operating in Georgia).
- ▶ Cooperate with the media to make it clear how they can work in the case of the instrumentalization of repressive laws.

How to increase access to information?

The government should:

- ▶ Make public information and comments available to the media, return the format of interviews and debates to the media, and remove bureaucratic or so-called shadow restrictions.
- ▶ Abolish regulations and so-called blacklists in Parliament that have complicated journalistic activities.
- ▶ Stop stigmatizing the media because of their affiliation with political parties.
- ▶ Put a label identifying such content on information disseminated by the press services of the ruling team in the regions.
- ▶ Launch an inclusive process to implement reforms at the Georgian Public Broadcaster.

Opposition parties should:

- ▶ Make comments, interviews, and debates available to the media.
- ▶ Stop stigmatizing the media because of their affiliation with political parties.
- ▶ Demand and participate in an inclusive process of implementing reforms at the Public Broadcaster.
- ▶ Improve access to information and speakers (especially in the regions).

The media should:

- ▶ Develop whistleblower protection to reduce self-censorship by sources. Media representatives should advise sources of how their data is to be managed. The “do not harm” precept should apply here.
- ▶ Promote the normalization of discussion on critical issues in the media and other platforms to reduce self-censorship among sources.
- ▶ Adopt alternative ways/platforms of information dissemination and popularize them among the audience to ensure the free flow of information and overcome systemic, bureaucratic restrictions. It is important that alternative platforms are trusted and that resources are invested in them.
- ▶ Demand and participate in an inclusive process of implementing reforms at the Public Broadcaster.

Higher education institutions, international and local organizations should:

- ▶ Provide training in the following areas: open source and data journalism, investigative journalism, infographics and data visualization.

How to prepare for the 2025 local elections?

The government should:

- ▶ Retrain observers in media relations and civic journalism for the 2025 elections.
- ▶ Demonstrate support for the media.

Opposition parties should:

- ▶ Retrain observers in media relations and civic journalism for the 2025 elections.
- ▶ Demonstrate support for the media.
- ▶ Continue to raise the issue of targeted sanctions in the context of the 2025 elections, focusing on crimes against journalists and impunity.

The media should:

- ▶ Prepare investigative material on critical election issues.
- ▶ Focus more on their own agenda.
- ▶ Maintain a critical attitude towards all political parties and follow up and ask important questions.
- ▶ Improve coordination with citizen journalists when covering elections, crises and demonstrations.

International and local organizations should:

- ▶ Continue to raise the issue of targeted sanctions, focusing on crimes against journalists and impunity.
- ▶ Agree on forms of cooperation with the media during elections, in particular how to facilitate media access to material filmed by observers to ensure timely dissemination.
- ▶ Provide support for improving the material and technical base, human and financial resources of the media, focusing on long-term projects and avoiding interference in content.

How to respond to technological challenges?

The government and opposition parties should:

- ▶ Although there are no legislative regulations on the agenda in Georgia in response to the challenge of online disinformation, it is important to proactively discuss these risks.
- ▶ Stop using so-called administrative troll-bot resources against the media.

The media should:

- ▶ Develop a moderation strategy for trolls and bots to limit their involvement in polluting the information ecosystem and, in the future, to save the resources of the media itself and its users.
- ▶ Expose the “administrative resource of trolls” through investigative materials.
- ▶ Raise awareness on using artificial intelligence for information retrieval and monitoring (e.g., for audience and trend analysis, generating new ideas), selection and filtering (e.g., for fact-checking, data collection and categorization, audio and video transcription, voiceovers), processing and editing (e.g., for formatting material for different platforms, brainstorming, summarizing and translating information), and publishing and distribution (e.g., for content personalization, moderation, and audience analysis).
- ▶ Work to reduce the risks posed by AI, namely with regard to combating disinformation.
- ▶ Raise public awareness of the role of the media and the importance of media literacy, and to increase trust with citizens as the main contributors to this process.

Local and international organizations should:

- ▶ Conduct training and research as artificial intelligence develops.
- ▶ Devote more resources to research. In the coming years, the number of users of digital magazines and newspapers will increase significantly. In this regard, it is worth researching how Georgian media representatives see the circulation of their content and the connection with the audience, what strategies they are developing and what risks they see.
- ▶ Provide training in the following areas: open source and data journalism, investigative journalism, infographics and data visualization.

In conclusion, it is important to develop a holistic approach to supporting the media and information environment in Georgia that takes due account of the financial, legal, economic, social and political dimensions and adequately responds to the challenge of ensuring the survival of free media under an authoritarian regime.

Media outlets who took part in the research:

1. Broadcasting TV company Formula
2. Broadcasting TV company Mtavari Arkhi
3. Georgian Public Broadcaster – Pirveli Arkhi
4. Broadcasting TV company Imedi
5. Broadcasting TV company Rustavi 2 (a journalist involved in the research quit the channel by the end of the year)
6. Broadcasting TV company TV Pirveli
7. Investigative Studio iFact
8. Investigative Studio Monitor
9. Online edition Civil.ge
10. Online media outlet Publika
11. Online media outlet Netgazeti /Batumelebi
12. Indigo magazine
13. Online media outlet OC Media (Open Caucasus Media)
14. TOK TV
15. Regional newspaper Chemi Kharagauli
16. Media union Samkhretis Karibche
17. Regional online media outlet Kakhetis Khma
18. Regional TV company Borjomi
19. Radio Liberty
20. Online platform Mravalkutkhedi

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MediaVoice

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

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