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## Georgian Mainstream Media in a Polarized Political Environment: a Victim and an Accomplice

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### Abstract

This paper problematizes the role of the Georgian mainstream media in the current polarized political environment. First, political actors, including the government and political parties, significantly affect the way these media organizations work. Second, mainstream media outlets behave as direct extensions of political actors, contributing to the divided and radicalized political atmosphere. The paper first describes the current major political and management shifts in several media companies. Then, it demonstrates specific examples of media work when TV companies simply disregard professional standards for the sake of engaging in political battles during elections. The Georgian media system certainly needs much more detailed research to construct the full picture; nevertheless, this paper sketches the current state of the polarized mainstream media that could serve as a basis for future explorations.

### Introduction

In Georgian media, changing the order of addends does not change the total sum of the polarized political environment, at least for almost a decade. Since the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition came to power in 2012, the mainstream media environment has shifted from a unipolar to a bipolar order. As of this moment, the Georgian media system somewhat resembles the polarized pluralist model, described by Hallin and Mancini (2004), characterized by a low level of press circulation, a high level of political parallelism in mainstream media, and significant problems in professional journalism. Political parallelism, an important notion for this paper, refers to the situation when news media coverage mirrors the general political system in a country and media organizations align themselves with the existing political parties.

Hallin and Mancini's classification of media systems has been criticized for various reasons, including for being excessively focused on Western democracies, for not paying sufficient attention to emerging media technologies, and for simplifying reality (Hardy, 2012; Hallin and Mancini, 2012). As Voltmer (2012) notes, to fully grasp the complex media systems outside of Western democracies, it is necessary to broaden Hallin and Mancini's analytical categories. She offers the notion of "hybridity" to describe the media systems born during the "third wave" of democratization (ibid). Exemplarily, Dobek-Ostrowska (2012) argues that Poland is a hybrid of polarized pluralist and liberal models with some elements of the democratic corporatists category. Similarly, we could argue that the Georgian media system does not completely follow the polarized pluralist model and is leaning towards the hybrid model due to the democratic tendencies in the growing digital media outlets, institutionalized self-regulation of media, and

increasing commercialization that is typically characteristic of the liberal model.

In this paper, we show the political parallelism reflected by the current media system in Georgia. By doing so, we intend to show the role media organizations play in creating a polarized political environment. This paper first briefly describes the formation of governmental and oppositional media poles since 2012. Later, it will show how specific topics might become part of electoral political speculations due to polarized media coverage. Thus, we focus on the most influential TV channels, here referred to as mainstream media, as television is a main source of information for the largest portion (69%) of the country's population (Caucasusbarometer.org, 2019).

### Shaping the Governmental and Oppositional Media Poles

It is important to describe the recent developments in the Georgian media landscape before examining specific cases manifesting the media divide alongside party politics. Until the 2012 parliamentary election, the former governmental party, the United National Movement (UNM), had strong and direct influences on all three national TV stations (Rustavi 2, Imedi, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster) and the regional public broadcaster Adjara TV (Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2012). However, since 2012, we have seen the mainstream media sliding from the oppositional or neutral to the governmental orbit step by step. Furthermore, the role of the GD government has been detrimental in this process.

In the chain of events, the first step was returning Imedi TV to the family of deceased businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili, who established the TV company in 2003 (Coalson, 2012). In 2008, the UNM government

forcefully stripped the ownership of the company from Patarkatsishvili as Imedi TV became the main source of criticism of Mikheil Saakashvili's government. In 2016, two other TV channels critical of the UNM joined Imedi Media Holding—Maestro TV and GDS. GDS was established by the family of the billionaire ex-prime minister of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili. According to 2020 ratings, Imedi TV was the most popular TV channel with an average audience share of 22.66% (Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, 2021).

The next step in this process was re-establishing the governmental influence over the GPB by guaranteeing that Vasil Maghlaperidze, an ardent supporter of the GD coalition, would be selected as a general director of the GPB. Before 2017, GPB, as a media organization, had positive dynamics regarding the independence of editorial policy and liberation from political influences. Interestingly, after his resignation in 2021, Maghlaperidze became a member of the GD's political board, essentially proving his loyalty to the government.

In 2017, after a years-long lawsuit against the UNM-affiliated owners of Rustavi 2, Georgia's supreme court unanimously ruled the case in favour of the TV channel's ex-shareholder Khibar Khalvashi (Agenda.ge, 2017). Khalvashi claimed that in 2006, he was forced by the Saakashvili government to give up his shares in Rustavi 2. After several days of protest and public outcry, the core team of journalists left Rustavi 2, resulting in the TV channel becoming less critical of the government. Despite losing an important portion of its audience, Rustavi 2 remains the 3rd most watched TV station with an average audience share of 10.52% (Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, 2021).

The last major change in the mainstream media was dismissing Natia Kapanadze, the director of the regional public broadcaster Adjara TV. Adjara TV, historically affiliated with the government of the autonomous republic of Adjara, has shown significant progress in terms of editorial independence and the quality of journalism during Kapanadze management (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020). Despite the positive dynamics, the advisory board of Adjara TV fired her and appointed a new director with political sympathies towards the GD government (Transparency.ge, 2021).

On the opposite spectrum of the Georgian media landscape, there are three TV stations affiliated with various oppositional political powers. Mtavari TV was established in 2019 by the team of journalists and managers working at Rustavi 2 before the supreme court decision mentioned above. Mtavari TV is the second most popular TV channel in the country with a 12.4% share of the audience (Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, 2021). The general director of Mtavari TV is Nika Gvaramia, the former Minister of Justice and the

Minister of Education and Science in the UNM government. Since GD came to power, Gvaramia remains one of the harshest critics of the government and is often criticized for using obscene speech and derogatory terms while attacking GD politicians.

Another former minister of the UNM government, the former Minister of Defence David Kezerashvili, owns 51% of Formula TV, which was also established by the journalists, managers, and media personalities formerly working at Rustavi 2.

An additional major player on the oppositional media spectrum is TV Pirveli, established in 2015 as a sportscast TV channel and later acquiring the general licence enabling it to have news broadcasting and socio-political talk shows. Even though the owner of the broadcaster, Vakhtang Tsereteli, did not have direct affiliations with any of the political parties, his family had a business partnership with the influential businessmen who recently founded the oppositional political party Lelo. Recently, TV Pirveli has grown as an important oppositional medium and added journalists with various backgrounds, including former employees of Mtavari TV.

This brief description only partially depicts the Georgian media landscape. For example, there are rather small or newly established TV channels, such as Kavkasia (oppositional TV channel with limited resources), TV Obiektivi (affiliated with the ultraconservative political party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia), or POS TV (founded and managed by ex-politicians and journalists with direct links to the GD government). Furthermore, of course, there are digital media outlets, mostly independent news organizations, that barely survive with the help of international funding. However, such media entities have limited reach to large audiences. Their work might sometimes affect the agenda of larger media organizations, but they certainly do not change the general picture.

To complete the picture of Georgia's media ecosystem, it is worth noting that despite the government's inability to establish full control of the media, GD politicians continually contributed to creating a hostile environment for journalists. From the early days of GD governance, various political leaders persistently blamed oppositional media for the country's failing economic and social transformation. Consequently, politically channeled aggression towards media spread to the public.

On July 5, 2021, anti-liberal groups and representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church demonstrating against the pride parade planned on that day. Unable to find queer activists on the streets, the demonstrators eventually attacked journalists from dozens of media outlets. In total, more than 50 reporters received injuries of various degrees, and a cameraman from the oppositional TV Pirveli received a severe head injury and died

two days later (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). Insufficient protective measures taken by the government were heavily criticized by local and international human rights defenders, making the GD government indirectly responsible for the vicious attacks on journalists. More importantly, the day was assessed as a symbol of a worsened media environment in Georgia. According to a recent study, “78% of media workers say that the media environment has worsened in 2021 compared to 2020”, and “63% of respondents say media employees are very or mostly unsafe” (Mccrc.ge, 2021).

### Crossing Media Boundaries

As empirical evidence suggests, in countries characterized by hybrid media systems and party-media parallelism, the level of internal pluralism in media organizations decreases during election campaigns (Çarkoğlu, Baruh and Yıldırım, 2014). In Georgia, political tensions are certainly not limited to election periods. However, in the pre- and postelection months, mainstream media organizations put even less effort into following professional standards and the rules of high-quality journalism (Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, 2018). Personal attacks against politicians and unethical reporting become common, and the boundaries between party politics and media work fade.

According to Robakidze, the 2018 presidential elections in Georgia “illustrated the negative influence of media polarization on political processes and the importance of media pluralism for the country’s stable democratic development” (2019, p. 2). In the first round of the presidential elections, neither Salome Zurbishvili, an independent candidate backed by the GD government and the businessman Ivanishvili, nor the UNM candidate Grigol Vashadze managed to secure more than 50% of the votes. Subsequently, a second runoff was necessary to elect a new president. The difference between the leading candidates was less than 2%. For GD politicians, the UNM candidate was dangerously close to victory; and they decided to mobilize their resources, including media assets, to guarantee Zurbishvili’s success. Interestingly, the main ally of GD in the media, TV Imedi, published a statement informing the viewers that the TV channel was switching to the pre-election emergency regime, stating the following: “We have experienced severe attacks under the United National Movement leadership and now we are changing the programme schedule to not allow the regime to come back” (Agenda.ge 2018). With the statement, Imedi TV practically admitted they would intentionally ignore the media rules.

Simultaneously, at that time, oppositional Rustavi 2 and the general director of the TV channel Nika Gvaramia consistently attacked GD-backed Zurbishvili,

often crossing ethical and professional boundaries and spreading rumours about her personal life and her marital relationships. He initiated the “chili pepper challenge”, demonstrating that he would prefer to suffer by eating an extremely hot pepper rather than seeing Zurbishvili becoming the president of Georgia. “There is a catastrophe in my mouth right now. If this traitor becomes president, the same catastrophe awaits our country” was stated by Gvaramia on his talk show (Demytrie 2018).

Less personally targeted, although more radically polarized, was the media environment during the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia. This resulted in increased media-party parallelism and a turbulent political environment. “The number of violations of professional ethics and instances of manipulation increased compared to previous years, and channels frequently lacked balance and disseminated unverified information” was stated by the pre-election media monitoring report (The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, 2020).

In this election period, one of the most controversial topics, with major political accusations and the exploitation of nationalistic and religious sentiments, was the so-called “cartographers’ case”. Shortly before the elections, two experts working in the commission for the demarcation of the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan were arrested (Civil.ge, 2021). The prosecutor’s office accused them of working against the national interests of Georgia during the UNM government. Because of this, they created the threat of ascribing approximately 3 500 thousand km<sup>2</sup> of land to Azerbaijan instead of to Georgia. The land partially covers the territory of the David Gareji Monastery complex, an important spiritual centre for the Orthodox Church.

One of the main frontiers for the political battle concerning the “cartographers’ case” evolved on the screens of pro-government and oppositional broadcasters. The latter were assuring the public that the case was simple pre-election manipulation for the government to mobilize the electorate against the UNM and its leader Mikhail Saakashvili. At the same time, TV channels under governmental influence were systematically attempting to create the discourse that the UNM is an anti-national, anti-religious party posing an existential threat to the national interests and the identity of Georgia. TV Imedi clearly demonstrated that they do not obey the media rules; and on election day, the viewers could notice a small slogan “Gareji is Georgia” in the corner of the screen, gaslighting the nationalistic and religious sentiments of the voters.

### Conclusion

The mainstream media in Georgia openly mirrors the ideology of the main political players. On the one hand,

there is a governmental pole represented by several TV channels (e.g., Imedi, Maestro, GPB, POS TV, and, to some extent, Rustavi 2). On the other hand, there are oppositional TV companies (e.g., Mtavari TV, Formula TV, TV Pirveli, and Kavkasia). Due to the limitations of this paper, we focus only on the main TV stations in Georgia. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that mainstream media organizations behave as direct extensions of political parties, and their news-feeds strongly reflect the agendas of the discussed political actors.

Furthermore, the interrelation between political and media actors remains complex, and responsibility for increasing media polarization rests on both. Unlike the UNM government, GD could not manage to monop-

olize the mainstream media landscape, but the leading media organizations remain close allies with certain political parties. This alignment is strengthened by the vanishing boundaries between media work and party politics. Journalists and media personalities no longer try to hide their political preferences, and they openly operate as political actors. Recently, oppositional journalists even led protests demanding the resignation of the prime minister Irakli Garibashvili (Tsaava, 2021). Even if there is a temptation to blame only the government or a specific political party for the current poor state of the Georgian media, the media by itself is not only a victim of the polarized political environment but also a co-creator of it.

#### *About the Author*

Lasha Kavtaradze is a Ph.D. candidate at Bergen University and Kristiania University College. Kavtaradze holds a master's degree in digital media and society from Uppsala University and has a background in journalism and media research. Before returning to academia, Kavtaradze was working as a media analyst and was collaborating with various media criticism platforms in Georgia.

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