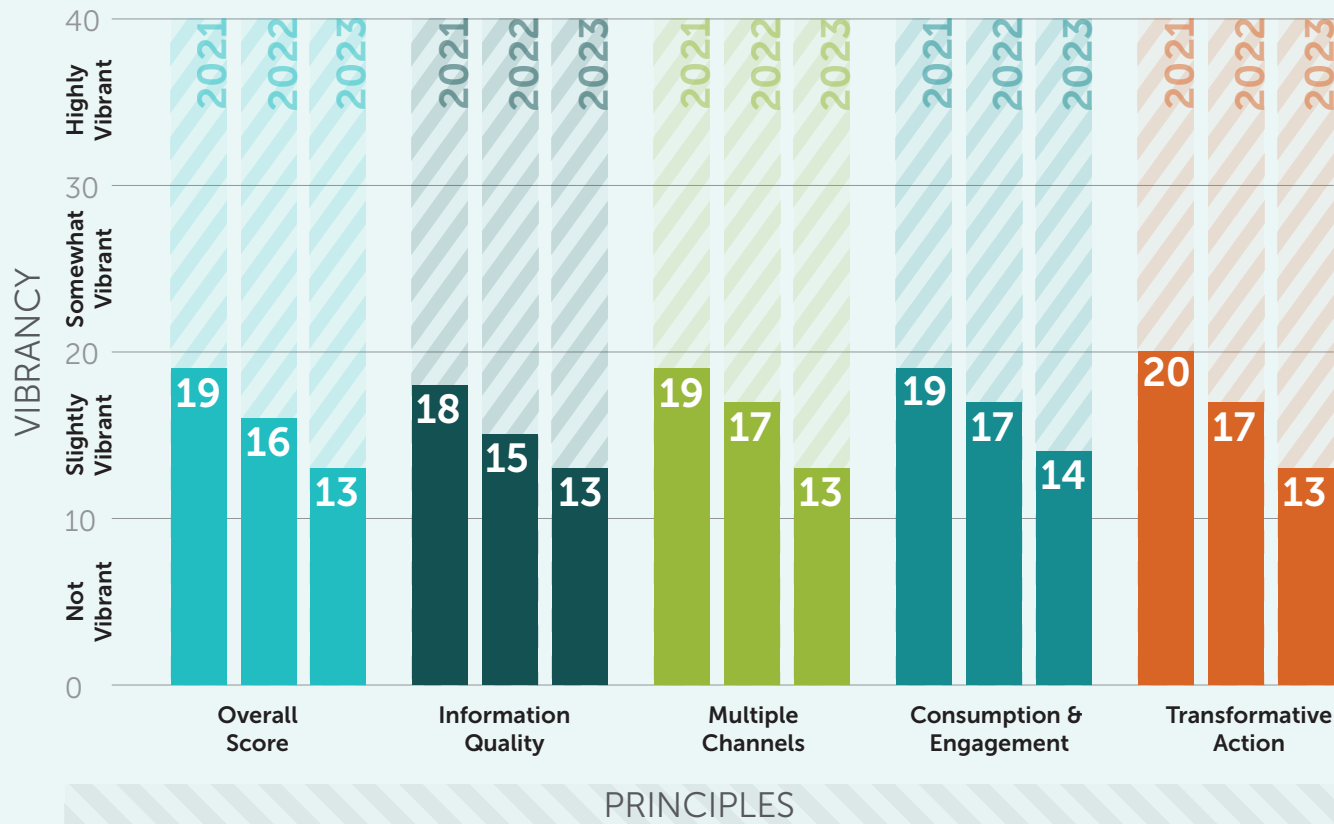


GEORGIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 3





Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

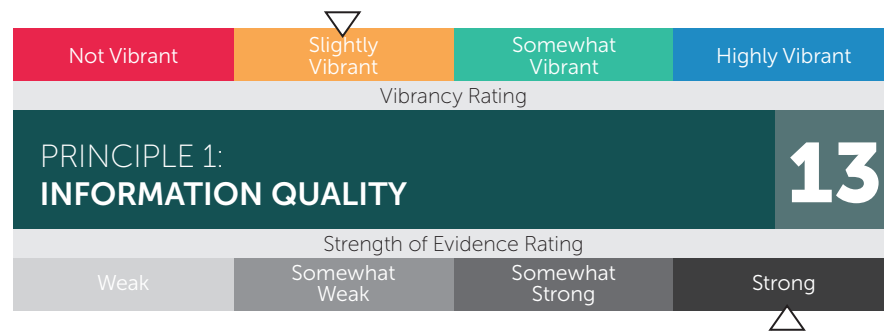
13

Monumental events, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Georgia’s European Union (EU) candidate application, the imprisonment of an opposition media director, and allegations of the Georgian government’s drift from the West, shook Georgia’s media sphere in 2022, overshadowing the COVID-19 infodemic that dominated the country’s media and information sector in 2021. The arrest of Nika Gvaramia, director of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi, which media and civil society representatives saw as politically motivated, landed a major blow to Georgia’s media world. The owners of the country’s two critical media outlets also faced pending court cases. Political polarization over the country’s response to Russia’s war in Ukraine also threatened the information landscape. Some panelists said 2022 marked a shift away from the West—the first year that Russian disinformation and anti-Western narratives flowed through mainstream, pro-government media, enabled by the ruling Georgian Dream Party’s “soft” rhetoric toward Russia.

Georgia’s EU candidacy application ended with the EU granting Georgia “European Perspective” status, while Ukraine and Moldova won coveted EU candidate status. The European Commission stated that Georgia will be granted the status on condition it fulfills its recommendations and addresses a dozen issues aimed at guaranteeing a free, pluralistic, and independent media environment, tackling political polarization, encouraging the involvement of civil society in decision-making, and others—a decision the government protested as unfair. Concerned by the pro-Russian and anti-Western tone of the government’s response, tens of thousands of citizens took to the streets in peaceful protest action, proclaiming their pro-Western aspirations.

Near the year’s end, the parliament adopted an amended Law on Broadcasting that enhanced the Georgian National Communications Commission’s (GNCC) authority, entitling it to regulate hate speech, among other changes that civil society organizations (CSOs) criticized fiercely.

Despite these threats, the information system remains slightly vibrant on the VIBE scale, even as the overall score dropped three points from last year to 13. Scores across all four principles fell. In Principles 1 (information quality) the lowest scores were received by indicators on mal-information/hate speech and on resources for content production, due to the Georgian government and also Russia’s role in spreading harmful information, and severe financial hardships faced by independent and critical media. Principle 2 (multiple channels of information) fell due to worsening media freedom situation after Gvaramia’s imprisonment, as well as changes to media legislation. Principle 3 (information consumption) received the highest score among the four principles mostly due to the panelists’ positive evaluation of the community media. However, the lowest scores in Principle 3 are tied to indicators on media literacy and on safe use of the internet due to worsening of legislation on secret surveillance, along with ineffective and politicized media literacy efforts by the government. In Principle 4 (transformative action), panelists gave the lowest score to indicators on government’s use of quality information to make public policy decisions and to individuals use of quality information to inform their actions; the highest score in this principle was received by the indicator on civil society’s use of quality information.



Both professional and amateur content producers churn out large amounts of information, but the results lack diversity and depth. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, meanwhile, ramped up the flow of disinformation and misinformation, pouring through social networks and even through mainstream media. Critical media work under immense government pressure, risking severe financial repercussions, undermining their performance, and undercutting the industry's sustainability. As a result, this principle's score fell from 15 last year to 13 this year, with Indicator 3 (on mal-information and hate speech) and Indicator 5 (on resources for content production) drawing the lowest scores.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

The infrastructure needed to operate media—multiplexes, printing houses, the internet, social networks—exists, and the related technology is more or less adequate. Nino Nakashidze, Mtavari Arkhi's deputy executive director, said that high-quality equipment can be procured, but all media do not enjoy equal access. *Indigo's* director, Nata Dzvelishvili, said the ability to keep up with modern technology depends on whatever funds can be spared after meeting basic needs.

Journalism studies at most universities do not provide adequate practical training and skill-based education; some panelists representing media outlets complained of poor multimedia skills among interns. "The demand is for multimedia skills," said Nino Jangirashvili, director of TV

Kavkasia, adding that the knowledge and preparedness of journalists fall short of modern needs. Panelists also underscored a shortage of needs-based courses or training available for professional media, such as tailored training on digital safety and media business models. However, media outlets cannot afford training customized to their needs. Lika Zakashvili, editor of the online Publika.ge, raised another issue that affects many small, chronically understaffed online media, which cannot fully use trainings, as one person typically bears responsibility for many roles—e.g., social media management, digital security, administration, and fundraising.

Not every content producer, professional and nonprofessional, acts in an ethical and accountable manner. The largest national mainstream broadcasters that have the most influence on public opinion are politicized. This, panel members said, affects the quality of journalism produced by these media. Mamuka Andguladze, media program manager at Transparency International Georgia, said that only a handful of media abide by ethical and professional standards—and they are not the most influential outlets. The panelists agreed that media are less inclined to provide fact-based content and are more oriented toward opinionated journalism than ever. In recent years "it has become extremely difficult for an average citizen to tell the difference between facts and opinions. While facts might still be there, they are so twisted, mixed with opinions, and transformed that audiences are deprived of receiving quality information," noted Nino Danelia, a media professor at Ilia State University. Kamila Mamedova, director and editor of Radio Marneuli, said that many media fail to prioritize news, filling space instead with social media posts.

Furthermore, media tend to publish content designed to attract more clicks. Dzvelishvili said that it is not uncommon for some online media to share information "copied and pasted" from social media without verification. Jangirashvili said that some critical broadcasters have adopted a "doom and gloom" tone, associating alarmism with increased attention from audiences; she said journalists fail to show they grasp the meaning of quality journalism.

Gela Mtvlishvili, director and editor of Information Centers Network,

added that some podcasters, YouTubers, and social media influencers “are devoid of ethics” and are profit driven.

A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and EU-commissioned [media monitoring report](#) concluded that similar to the preelection period in 2021, frequent ethics violations and manipulation of television news marred the post-election period. The report singles out the Georgian public broadcaster, Imedi TV, and Rustavi 2 for editorial policies biased in favor of the ruling Georgian Dream Party, and Mtavari Arkhi as biased in favor of the United National Movement and former president Mikheil Saakashvili.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine contributed to the degradation of information quality in Georgia. Many media outlets failed to provide accurate and verified information about the war, the panelists agreed; some journalists and social media users relied on flawed sources. The political polarization over the country’s stance on the war became a breeding ground for polarized and populist narratives, reflected by the national broadcasters.

The panelists agreed that despite numerous challenges, critical national outlets, some regional media, and independent online media hold the government accountable. However, as Andguladze observed, “Even when a good investigation or story appears, there is still no reaction from the government.” A few small, independent online outlets, however, continue to produce fact-based, well-sourced content on a variety of topics, including Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, On.ge, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Georgian Service, and Publika.ge.

Georgian media cover local, national, regional, and international news. Regional and local news are predominantly covered by regional and local media, while national media focus primarily on national events. There is a lack of journalists who specialize in various topics—e.g., military affairs.

Journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional

reporting—for example, through self-regulation units of broadcasters—but journalists are not always responsive to the measures, according to some panelists. Others disagreed, claiming that only a handful of media outlets react to professional and ethical breaches, while others blame the low quality of information on the public’s failure to hold the media accountable. Apart from the broadcasters’ self-regulatory units and some online media, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics reviews complaints about media and journalists submitted by individuals. Between December 2021 and November 2022, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics¹ reviewed 89 complaints, of which 38 came from citizens and 21 from private companies; nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), politicians, and state bodies filed the rest. Most of the violations—56 cases—related to the Charter’s first principle: accuracy.

“**The panelists agreed that media are less inclined to provide fact-based content and are more oriented toward opinionated journalism than ever.**”

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.

The panelists expressed concern over a surge in misinformation and disinformation online and offline after Russia invaded Ukraine, while some political analysts, media, and NGOs saw government policies and rhetoric in connection to Russia’s war take an anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian, pro-Kremlin turn. “If before, there was an attempt to influence public opinion in a covert way, now we see that there is no need for them [the government officials] to hide, and their narratives can be shared openly in the media,” said Nino Dolidze, chair of the International Society for Fair Elections (ISFED). Some panelists said ruling party members seed waves of pro-Kremlin narratives, such as the allegation that the West and some Ukrainian officials wanted Georgia to open a “second front” in the war with Russia—marking the first time Russian disinformation was explicitly aired on pro-government media. Some panelists also mentioned the possible implications of a newly-formed “People’s

¹ *Annual Report*, Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. 2022.

Power” movement, whose members are still officially MPs of Georgian Dream party, and whose anti-Western narratives were systematically aired by pro-government media.

Georgia’s 2022 application for EU candidate status also proved revealing; the process sparked a wave of disinformation narratives from the government and pro-government media. Georgia’s government called the decision to grant the country “European Perspective” status, with the prospect of becoming a candidate in the future upon fulfilling the EU’s recommendations, unfair. Leading members of ruling Georgian Dream party hinted that EU sympathy for Ukraine amid Russia’s invasion influenced the decision—and some panelists feel that media critical of the government did not do enough to counter the flood of disinformation. Natia Kuprashvili, chair of the Journalism Resource Center, noted that no other media offered any substantial counternarrative asking, for example, why there was no war in Moldova, which also received EU candidate status.

Mistakes and inaccuracies—by both professional media and nonprofessional content producers grew commonplace in reporting about the war in Ukraine. In the first months of the war, Jangirashvili recalled that a journalist on a talk show aired on a mainstream national television channel that is critical of the government’s shared unverified facts in an alarmed tone. Even though the truth soon became known, the presenter did not correct and notify the public. Kuprashvili agreed that Georgian media fell short of reporting during the crisis, as it turned out that “they are not prepared and do not have sufficient skills to provide quality information to the public in such circumstances.” Zakashvili added. For example, when media mistakenly reported about recapturing of Kherson [a city in Ukraine], even though Kherson was retaken later, the mistake harmed us—as it was further used by the pro-Russian media, which twisted it to discredit the media and pro-Western values.”

Tamar Kintsurashvili, of the Media Development Foundation (which cooperates with Facebook to track false information along with another Georgian NGO, GRASS) said that in 2021–2022, after Myth Detector

flagged 38 Facebook posts, the authors corrected their initial posts and informed the audience. In 26 out of 38 cases, media outlets created the posts.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.

Russia has actively sought to censor and eliminate information that would undermine its war on Ukraine. Soon after invading Ukraine and as reported by RFE/RL in September 2022, Roskomnadzor, Russia’s communication and media authority, contacted several Georgian media outlets that also produce content in Russian, threatening to block them if they did not remove stories pertaining to the war. Russia did, in fact, block a number of Georgian news media, including ru.netgazeti.ge, JamNews.ge, sovanews.ge, accentnews.ge, and interpressnews.ge.

“ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine contributed to the degradation of information quality in Georgia.

Efforts by Russia and its proxies to influence the Georgian public intensified during the war. The panelists highlighted the damaging influence of a far-right, Russia-affiliated national broadcaster, Alt-Info,

which spread Russian war propaganda and Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine and whose affiliates harassed journalists on multiple occasions. A study by Democracy Research Institute (DRI)² about Alt-Info revealed false messages that the channel spread about the war, such as: Russia does not attack civilians and does not bomb populated areas; Russia’s military superiority is obvious, and Ukraine will be defeated; the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West are ineffective; Ukraine itself trades with Russia, therefore, its accusations against Georgia are inadmissible; and the West wants to open a “second front” in Georgia.

The ISFED, which carries out monitoring on social media, announced that Facebook had deleted the pages and groups linked with Alt-Info. The Media Advocacy Coalition appealed to the government and cable

² *What the Observation of Pro-Russian Media Discourse Showed – DRI Report, Mediachecker.* May 11, 2022. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/91869-ra-achvena-prorusuli-mediasashualebebis-diskursze-dakvirvebam-dri-is-angarishi>.

operators to suspend Alt-Info, and several cable operators canceled transmission of the channel.

Political motivation often drives the spread of harmful content such as smear campaigns against individuals and manipulative content, and social media networks and the comments sections of some online media are awash with discrediting and hateful posts. For example, on December 14, the Special Penitentiary Service posted video footage on its Facebook page showing different periods of former President Mikheil Saakashvili's imprisonment. The post indicated that the video was released because of "high public interest" and "clearly demonstrated that Saakashvili's actions were faked and aimed to obstruct administration of justice and mislead the wider public and international partners." The footage was released amid calls on the government from some opposition parties, NGOs, and members of the public to allow the ailing detainee to travel abroad for treatment. The footage showed different periods in the medical institution where Saakashvili underwent treatment, including incidents with medical personnel.

According to Danelia, the release of this footage aimed to inflict personal damage on Saakashvili. After evaluating the footage, the public defender's office concluded that as the footage did not show the most current videos of Saakashvili, "public interest in the current condition of the prisoner cannot be satisfied by disclosing the footage of the past period." More importantly, the public defender's evaluation of the video did not provide evidence that the patient was faking his condition. Myth Detector's social media monitoring³ showed that as soon as the footage was released, a malicious campaign started on social media to discredit Saakashvili.

Once the government perceives a whiff of public disenchantment, an organized media campaign appears. Jangirashvili recalled a series of Imedi TV stories about several influential NGOs, titled "Clan of Wealthy NGOs." She said that the stories, although they might contain true

facts, amount to mal-information. Those panelists whose organizations are involved in monitoring disinformation, propaganda, and mal-information in media said that every major event in the country ends up as part of the discreditation campaign on social media, too. For example, Myth Detector reported that some pro-governmental, anti-opposition, anti-liberal Facebook pages started a Facebook campaign criticizing Gvaramia, whose imprisonment local and international watchdogs deemed politically motivated. The campaign exalted the court decisions as an expression of the rule of law and circulated a photo of Gvaramia, altered in a homophobic way.

The information shared on Sinamdvileshi (In Reality), a Georgian Dream-run Facebook page, labels the opinions of civil activists, critical media, and opposition politicians as "false" content. "Such methods confuse the audiences and mix up the values that we should be adhering to. . . . In the process, democratic institutes get discredited," Kintsurashvili said.

Nakashidze and Jangirashvili said that fact-based, original, high-quality reporting is one way to respond to mal-information and disinformation—but a lack of human resources and funding limits media from responding more substantively to such incidents.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

While mainstream media focus mostly on the coverage of national and political events, regional and small online media better reflect the experiences and views of people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds, according to the panelists. Saba Tsitsikashvili, editor of the regional Qartli.ge, complained that large national media often ask for his online publication's help in covering certain events, but then fail to recognize their contribution or even mention their name.

Niche media that produce content for marginalized and minority communities exist on various platforms. "These platforms are more or less developed. But usually, the communities are organized in echo chambers. . . . These diverse themes rarely reach mainstream audiences," said Danelia, adding that public media, which is supposed to provide

3 Kistauri, A. "The Mobilization of Trolls and Anonymous Facebook Accounts against Former President Saakashvili," Myth Detector. December 21, 2022. <https://mythdetector.ge/en/the-mobilization-of-trolls-and-anonymous-facebook-accounts-against-former-president-saakashvili/>.

diverse audiences with the content of their interest, fails in that respect. Nakashidze observed that Mtavari Arkhi tried to recruit a journalist from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where ethnic Armenians live, but they were unsuccessful, as social and family traditions served as barriers. Panelists said, however, that the media is one of those few spheres in the country where gender equality is more or less ensured.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The year 2022 proved to be one of the media's most difficult in terms of scarce financial resources; panelists cited the market's inability to recover to a pre-pandemic level, declining and vague donor priorities, the public broadcaster's favored access to advertising, and a law restricting the advertising of gambling businesses in media as key factors. Regional broadcasters lost as much as 70 percent of their annual income as a result, Kuprashvili said.

For most media, advertising revenues have not regained pre-pandemic levels. Nakashidze claimed that some pro-government media joined forces and bargained with large businesses, offering them service for the lowest possible prices and convincing them not to advertise on Mtavari Arkhi. After the imprisonment of its director, Mtavari Arkhi established the Media Freedom Fund to collect funds to support the station, but the channel's financial situation suffered severely for most of the year.

In another development that follows a global trend, businesses advertise on social media directly, eschewing media outlets, although precise data about advertising on different social networks is not available. Facebook's Ad Library allows for tracing sponsored posts about political and social issues in Georgia since August 4, 2020. Some panelists said that Georgian businesses try to reach Georgian audiences through foreign media pages, and Russian ownership of local businesses is an obstacle for independent media in some regions. Tsitsikashvili, whose media operates in the city of Gori in Shida Kartli, said that most businesses in Gori maintain connections with Russia.

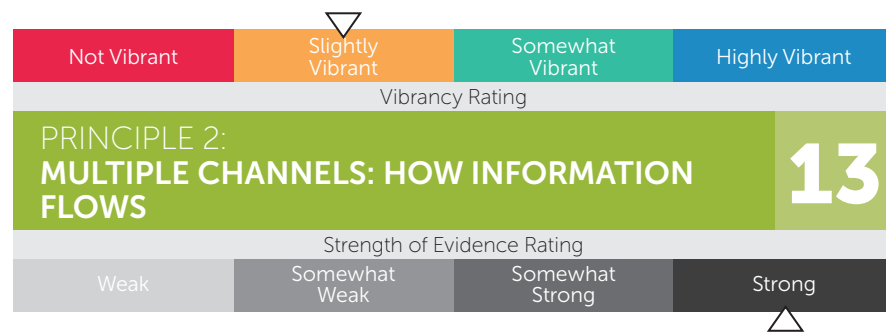
Media and some NGOs that produce investigative content rely heavily on foreign donor support. The panelists said that international donor

organizations did not prioritize media in 2022, allocating little or no funds for the struggling sector. Furthermore, most donors limit their funding to certain topics, curtailing the media's freedom to report on the topics most relevant to Georgian audiences. Nevertheless, the panelists agreed that donor organizations play an important role in strengthening Georgia's democratic institutions and are vital sources of funding for independent media in the country.

Some panelists also complained about donor requirements to collect audience and click metrics as the main indicators for success. "For me, for the representative of a media that does not produce daily news, the content's impact may be apparent much later . . . the result can be that someone starts projects by taking into account the video stories our journalists produced even maybe a year later . . . but I can't show this in the reports," Dzvelishvili said. Mtvlishvili also questioned the measurement of success by likes and clicks, asking if some "yellow" media accrue a high number of clicks, does it mean they have the same impact as quality media?

Zakashvili spoke of the hardships faced by modern media outlets, whose content production and distribution costs have risen to the point that there is a need for a greater number of employees to handle all the different tasks, which most small media outlets cannot afford. Panelists also highlighted a disparity in the salaries paid to journalists doing the same job in different media organizations. Journalists working in some national television media earn much higher salaries than regional journalists and those working for small online outlets—making it difficult to attract and retain employees and putting media organizations in unequal competition.

Georgia's public broadcaster is slated to receive GEL 101.19 million (\$38.1 million) from public funds in 2023, an almost GEL 20 million (\$8 million) increase from its 2022 funding level. It also began taking a substantial portion of advertising money after the enforcement of the amendments to the Law on Broadcasting broadened its access to advertising in 2017, some panelists noted. Regional broadcasters, locked in unequal competition with the public broadcaster and other national broadcasters, feel the effects of this law most acutely, Kuprashvili said.



Media freedom hit a low point in Georgia in 2022, following events including the arrest of Gvaramia—a move the panelists, as well as local and international watchdogs, called politically motivated. The amendments to the Law on Broadcasting, which brought hate speech under the authority of GNCC and expanded the regulator’s control over the broadcasters, constituted another blow. The legal and financial pressure on critical and independent media outlets and journalists are aimed at throttling free media in the country, the panelists believed. As a result, Indicator 6 (on the right to create, share and consume information), as well as Indicator 10 (on the independence of information channels), received the lowest scores in this principle.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.

On May 16, 2022, Gvaramia was sentenced to a lengthy prison term after he was found guilty of abuse of power, and the court of appeals upheld the verdict in a decision that Transparency International Georgia and other groups condemned as politically motivated. The panelists consider Gvaramia’s imprisonment Georgia’s worst act against the freedom of press and expression last year—a clear illustration of the deterioration of the media landscape.

The newly adopted amendments to the broadcasting law also illustrate substantial deterioration in legal protections for press freedom. “We used to claim to have laws protecting freedom of speech, but that is no longer the case,” Jangirashvili said. In December, Georgia’s parliament

approved the amendments, giving the GNCC the authority to regulate hate speech. The panelists worry that, as GNCC is presumed to be under the influence of Georgian Dream, its interpretation of hate speech could limit critical voices. According to CSOs, the amendments threaten media by taking away the authority of broadcast self-regulatory bodies to handle ethics complaints—allowing complainants to take matters directly to the regulator.

The amendments purportedly aimed to bring Georgian legal norms in line with the EU Audiovisual Media Service Directive. However, before the third hearing, the EU postponed the hearing and adoption process on the Georgian legislation until May 31, 2023, although Georgian Dream ministers did not take this into consideration. The legislative process drew criticism from civil society, media organizations, and international experts; even though these stakeholders supported the harmonization process, they expressed concerns regarding the expansion of regulatory authority, which they feared might lead to more restrictions on critical media outlets. With the support of the Media Advocacy Coalition, media outlets developed and presented an alternative to the amendments. Parliament, however, adopted the amendments without considering the stakeholders’ concerns. “They definitely need it to fight against the critical media,” Andguladze said, referring to the recent practice of adopting laws, including controversial 2015 and 2021 amendments to the Law on Advertising, that ignore stakeholders’ concerns.

The European Commission opinion recommending that Georgia “undertake stronger efforts to guarantee a free, professional, pluralistic and independent media environment, notably by ensuring that criminal procedures brought against media owners fulfill the highest legal standards, and by launching impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of journalists and other media professionals,” confirms the gravity of the state of media freedom in Georgia. The full set of recommendations highlighted 12 problems that Georgia must address to achieve candidate status, including political polarization, the functioning of state institutions, the judicial system’s independence, civil society’s involvement in decision-making, de-oligarchization, and others. In another sign of Georgia’s declining media freedom, it dropped to 89th place in the 2022 Reporters Without

Borders World Press Freedom Index, falling 28 places from last year.⁴

The government's use of the justice system to legally and financially oppress critical media intensified dramatically in 2022, with an unprecedented number of lawsuits—mostly initiated by government officials, their family members, or their donors—against journalists and critical media outlets. Transparency International Georgia tracked 28 lawsuits filed against three opposition media outlets—Mtavari TV, Formula TV, and TV Pirveli⁵—and in the majority of completed cases, the plaintiffs won. “The government's strategy is to litigate those who they dislike . . . the increased number of court trials and lawsuits is to stop us,” Zakashvili said.

The government also intensified its use of heavy fines to financially weaken opposition channels. The GNCC fined Mtavari TV GEL 118,688 (\$45,000) for airing political advertisements based on a complaint filed by the ruling party.⁶ The panelists also criticized an altered judicial practice that shifts the burden of proof from media outlets to journalists; Tbilisi's mayor, Kakhi Kaladze, won a lawsuit against Pirveli TV journalist and talk show host Maia Mamulashvili, who had to pay a fine. “Such a wave of pressure on critical media is a sign of kleptocratic rule, when they try to silence journalists working on topics of corruption by filing defamation lawsuits against them,” according to Transparency International Georgia.

Government officials' mistreatment, intimidation, and verbal harassment of journalists have become commonplace, which in turn encourages extremist groups to attack and harass journalists and media, the panelists said. A number of journalists suffered physical

attacks while on the job in 2022, mostly at the hands of far-right groups, including Alt-Info; some journalists received death threats.⁷

“Journalists abstain from putting their names on critical material; they are afraid to be physically identified; fear of being identified has intensified after the July 5 events,” Zakashvili said, referring to violent attacks on journalists covering the annulled Tbilisi Pride event in 2021 that injured over 50 journalists and media representatives.⁸ The panelists said that they refrain from sending LGBTQ journalists and crew members to cover certain stories. “When you see you are beaten, the government kicks you out, Kobakhidze harasses you, then trolls attack you . . . then people leave this profession, and some leave the country,” Jangirashvili said.

The climate for media sources worsened sharply; people are afraid to speak up out of fear of retribution like losing their jobs or state social assistance. Zakashvili recalled the difficulties she faced while working on school director elections. Despite understanding the importance of electing directors for their professionalism, not their party affiliation, her sources abstained from commenting—even to trusted media. “I have been working on education issues for ten years, they know how I work . . . they say we trust you, but still cannot talk to you,” Zakashvili said. An incident regarding anonymously leaked files in 2021, allegedly recorded by the State Security Service, instilled fear in people; they feel they cannot express their opinion freely under an environment of state surveillance, where the confidentiality of sources cannot be protected.

“We used to claim to have laws protecting freedom of speech, but that is no longer the case,” Jangirashvili said.

4 *World Press Freedom Index*, Reporters Without Borders. 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

5 “TI Georgia: Court Decisions Against Media a Dangerous Trend,” Civil.ge. December 3, 2022. <https://civil.ge/archives/517499>.

6 “Communications Commission Fines Mtavari Arkhi, Warns TV Pirveli, Formula,” Civil.ge. August 24, 2022. <https://civil.ge/archives/505649>

7 Giorgashvili, G. “11 factors that worsened the Georgian media environment in 2022. Mediachecker. December 26, 2022. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/93476-11-faqtori-ramac-2022-shi-qarthuli-mediagaremo-gaauresa>

8 Transparency International Georgia. “Statement of Civil Society Organizations on the possible involvement of State Security Service in the events of July 5-6.” (June 14, 2022). <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/statement-civil-society-organizations-possible-involvement-state-security-service-events-july-5>

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

Household internet access crept up slightly in 2022, reaching 88.4 percent, per the National Statistics Office of Georgia.⁹ People can access information through various channels and technologies, although urban areas enjoy better reach. Economic factors, like increased inflation amid Russia’s war in Ukraine and internet and mobile service price hikes, affect viewership nationwide—but especially in regions where fixed broadband internet services are scarce.

Georgia’s internet affordability ranked 61st out of 117 countries according to the Digital Quality of Life Index (DQL), 2022.¹⁰ Comparing internet access costs, Georgians pay 93 times more for mobile internet costs and 11 times more for fixed broadband compared to Israel, the reported home of the world’s most affordable internet.

Georgia scored among “free” countries in the *Freedom House’s Internet Freedom 2022 Report*,¹¹ indicating overall improvements in internet freedom during the coverage period while at the same time reporting on several obstacles, including infrastructural hurdles, that limit access—especially in regions where fiber-optic cable internet is not available. Panelists have seen little progress in the development of the government’s promised fiber-optic network, announced in 2015 and renewed in 2020 in a bid to ensure the entire population’s access to high-speed internet, during the last year. The DQL Index reports a slight increase in the country’s electronic infrastructure (up 3 percent, to 58th place), but a significant decrease in the quality of internet (falling to 95th place) in 2022.¹² The same source ranks Georgia’s e-governance 81st in

9 *Indicators of Using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Households*, National Statistics Office of Georgia. September 1, 2022. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households>.

10 “Georgia Ranks 67th in the World by Digital Quality of Life,” BMG. September 26, 2022. <https://bm.ge/en/article/georgia-ranks-67th-in-the-world-by-digital-quality-of-life/117205>.

11 *Freedom on the Net*, 2022, Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-net/2022>.

12 *Digital Quality of Life Index*, Surfshark. <https://surfshark.com/dql2022?country=GE>.

the world, behind neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Media content is not widely available to people with disabilities; few channels provide programs with sign language, for example, effectively excluding that population from the information space, Mamedova noted. A number of quality broadcast media outlets provide programming created for ethnic groups in their native languages, but they cannot compete with larger Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani channels that span the country and enjoy popularity.

The panelists cited the diminished print and radio presence to explain their low scores on the diversification of information channels. “The war in Ukraine shows the importance of retaining different platforms to ensure citizens’ access to information. FM radios are disappearing . . . because of low profitability . . . a tendency likely to worsen next year. This will bring problems in terms of information security. Printing newspapers became more important in Ukraine . . . here, nobody cares about the diversification of information channels,” Kuprashvili said.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Access to Information is guaranteed by law, but implementation of the laws deteriorated in 2022. Nondisclosure of public information, violation of the terms of its delivery, and not allowing critical media to attend official press conferences and briefings all became common, hindering journalists’ professional activity, the panelists say. “I have not seen a heavier year in these terms,” says Mtvlishvili, who filed 57 administrative complaints and 14 lawsuits in 2022 over attempts to obtain information that should be publicly available—but state agencies block information on key issues that might trigger society’s criticism. For example, Mtvlishvili said that state agencies did not provide Mtisambebi.ge with information on the transfer of Racha forestland to a Russian oligarch’s partner, or on hydroelectric power station licenses to Russians amid the war in Ukraine. “The Ministry of Culture does not even inform us about their events; we are uninformed about what happens and when,” Zakashvili said. Telara Gelantia, a BMG journalist and talk show host, was restricted from attending government sessions—blocked for asking

“too many questions,” she said. Georgia’s public defender criticized state agencies’ tendency to bar certain media representatives from attending briefings or other activities. Government officials also treat pro-government media representatives differently—granting them first, sometimes exclusive, access to public information. The panelists also noted that government representatives never participate in the programs of the critical media, while opposition party representatives abstain from appearing on pro-government channels—further hampering media’s role in informing society and holding the government accountable.

“Government officials’ mistreatment, intimidation, and verbal harassment of journalists have become commonplace, which in turn encourages extremist groups to attack and harass journalists and media, the panelists said.”

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Laws and regulations facilitate the operation of a range of distribution channels in the country, but a few privately owned, large-scale companies dominate the market, limiting competition. According to Andguladze, as the concentration of the telecommunications market grows, some big players, like TeliaSonera, left or, like Veon Georgia, supposedly plan to leave the market. Those that stay merge, expand, and turn into competition-killing monopolies. “An entire infrastructure is monopolized, and that causes prices to rise,” Kuprashvili commented. According to the GNCC, two companies, Magticom and Silknet, own three-fourths of the fixed broadband internet market, at 48.2 percent and 30.7 percent, respectively. Three private companies that own 100 percent of the market share—Silknet (36 percent), Magticom (34.2 percent), and Veon Georgia (29.8 percent)—dominate the mobile internet market.¹³

Logistically, media licensing procedures remain relatively easy, but the panelists question the transparency and fairness of spectrum allocation in certain cases, citing the ownership of Imedi and Maestro

TV. Ina Gudavadze, a widow of the billionaire and Imedi TV founder Badri Patarkatshishvili, owns 100 percent of Imedi TV shares and 25 percent of Maestro TV shares, violating the Law on Broadcasting, which stipulates that a single person has a right to own no more than one over-the-air television channel in a single coverage area. In response, the GNCC, which is responsible for spectrum allocations and eliminating market concentration, refers to 2015 legislative changes permitting a licensed broadcaster to air five channels of a single owner—an interpretation the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association has challenged. The GNCC interprets and executes laws according to its agenda, panelist alleged.

They also criticized the regulator for permitting a member of the parliament, Viktor Japaridze, to purchase Post TV’s control package in October of 2022—after ruling that another member, Nato Chkheidze, violated the rules when he attempted to do the same in 2016. The law bars offshore registered businesses from owning broadcast licenses in Georgia, but this clause of the law is often violated, according to the panelists. “We have laws on transparency of media ownership, but they guarantee neither transparency nor implementation of the law,” Andguladze said.

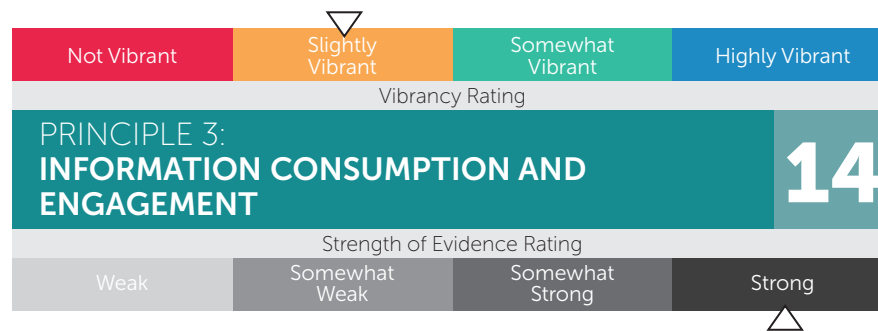
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Most broadcast media owners influence their editorial policies. Still, some smaller media organizations enjoy freedom in their editorial choices. “There are very few media outlets that have free funds to create content,” Kuprashvili said. Some panelists noted that opposition channels also show biases under the influence of ownership. Commercial interests in advertising revenues also impact the editorial and programming choices of media, though some manage to separate editorial and advertising politics. Most panelists believe that government subsidies and advertising contracts always go to pro-government media organizations.

¹³ *Analytical Portal*, Georgian National Communications Commission. <https://analytics.comcom.ge/ka/?modal=sub>.

The public broadcaster offers a number of quality educational programs, the panelists acknowledge; however, they gave low scores to the channel overall, criticizing it for low-quality news programs. “Does the public broadcaster produce news or investigative programming? Is it a watchdog? This is a problem of the public broadcaster,” Andguladze said. “It could set a journalistic standard, but fails to perform this function,” added Jangirashvili. With the public broadcaster’s substantial funding, it could bring significant change in the market, which is quite hostile to independent media organizations, the panelists feel. “Despite being acclaimed for educational programs, the public broadcaster’s talk shows are not free from political bias . . . they unmistakably replicate the narratives of government officials,” Zakashvili said.

A number of leadership changes within the public broadcaster in 2022 raised concerns in civil society circles. The election of Vasil Maglaperidze, a former high-ranking ruling party official, as a chair of the board of directors invites a high risk of political censorship for the broadcaster’s editorial policy, the panelists said. The host and journalists of “Akhali Kvira” (“New Week”), who were fired by the channel, reported on political censorship and the existence of so-called blacklists of topics and guests at the channel. Imeda Darsalia, a former program host, named the “blacklisted” topics and experts. Adjara Public TV’s new management keeps the course loyal to the government’s editorial and staffing policy as well, the panelists said; a dozen lawsuits filed by journalists fired by the channel director, Giorgi Kokhreidze, since 2019 are still underway. Toward the end of 2022, the Court of Appeal rejected the request of Natia Kapanadze, a former Adjara Public Broadcaster director who was impeached in 2019, to annul the court decision.



The panelists agreed that the population lacks the skills to assess the quality of the media they consume. The internet and social media are freely available for anyone to register, and social networks are widely used. However, privacy and digital safety concerns persist. This principle’s overall score fell three points to 14 when compared with last year’s study, with the indicator on media literacy faring the worst.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

Legislation, such as the Law on Personal Data Protection, offers some protective measures and regulations for data privacy and digital security. However, CSOs sharply criticized the amended version of Georgia’s Law on Information Security, adopted in 2021, for failing to ensure proper protection for personal and commercial information by granting unconstrained access to a Secret Security Services affiliate. The adoption of amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code regarding secret surveillance in 2022—which extended the list of crimes eligible for investigation by covert measures, prolonged the overall maximum duration of these measures, and reduced notification obligation—also proved significant. Local and international experts criticized the amended legislation, naming the rights of citizens and overall inadequacy of surveillance measures as key concerns, and called on officials to block its adoption. In 2022, Soso Gogashvili, a former high-ranking official and whistleblower responsible for the leak of some secretly recorded files in 2021, was detained and charged with tampering with personal data, abuse of authority, and illegal possession of

firearms. Notably, the official's name is allegedly connected to a number of systematic crimes and violations of the rights of some citizens in the past, according to Transparency International Georgia and several other NGOs. The watchdogs agree that the facts call for a complete investigation but underscored the importance of protecting Gogashvili's rights and safety as a whistleblower.

Trainings for professional and nonprofessional content producers on digital safety tools exist, along with cyberattack prevention tools. Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced. One reason is that understaffed media do not always have personnel responsible for these issues. Kuprashvili complained that after far-right activist Beka Vardosanidze threatened to organize an attack on their website, TokTV (a Russian-language station founded by the Journalism Resource Centre), the site went down for a few days. Afterward, she took steps to protect the website against future attacks—but the protective system blocked regular users too. “We are being systematically attacked, and we need to systematically protect and update our systems,” she noted. Mtivlishvili added that journalists lack knowledge about such basics as protecting their personal data, even email, and how to safely use various messaging apps.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

By law, the GNCC is mandated to lead media literacy policy in the country, although the organization, viewed as a politicized, pro-government actor, lacks public trust. No national study assesses the Georgian public's media literacy, but panelists agreed it is very low. Additionally, Georgia ranked last in a 2022 European Policies Initiative (EUPI) and Open Society Institute (OSI) study¹⁴ measuring the potential

14 Lessenski, Marin. How It Started, *How It Is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022*, Open Society Institute and European Policies Initiative. October 2022. https://osis.bg/wpcontent/uploads/2022/10/HowItStarted_MediaLiteracyIndex2022_ENG_.pdf.

resistance of 41 European societies in Europe to “fake news” and related phenomena. Similarly, a small-scale Media Development Foundation study in 2022¹⁵ assessing the Georgian public's media consumption habits and vulnerability to disinformation showed that the majority of respondents rarely or never verify information; a little over 30 percent said they check facts regularly.

In 2022, the GNCC, Georgia's Ministry of Education and Science, and UNICEF started a joint project to introduce media literacy in formal education with financial support from USAID.¹⁶ Moreover, the GNCC, CSOs, and some universities--supported by various organizations

such as the US Embassy Georgia, the EU Delegation, and Deutsche Welle--also offer media literacy trainings to school teachers and students, as well as the wider public. Danelia mentioned that CSO efforts in this

outnumber state-sponsored organizations and stressed that the lack of cooperation among different actors limits their capacity to tackle the challenges. In a country heavily stricken by disinformation, there is no holistic approach to encourage everyone to cooperate to achieve a common goal,” Danelia said. Very often, she added, the government itself organizes disinformation campaigns.

Media literacy questions are part of teacher certification exams, which stirs a high demand for trainings—but a shortage of trainers makes it hard to meet the need, according to Kintsurashvili (whose organization, the Media Development Foundation, offers trainings to schoolteachers, students, and the wider public). In 2022, ISFED offered media literacy trainings to people aged 55 and older across the country. Mamedova added that the training available for minority-populated regions of Georgia is insufficient. The GNCC-founded Media Academy runs a media criticism platform (Mediacritic.ge) that is, by definition, a media literacy

15 Kintsurashvili, Tamar. *Media Literacy and Disinformation Perception Survey*, Media Development Foundation. 2022. <https://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/233/>.

16 UNICEF. “The Communication Commission, the Ministry of Education and Science and UNICEF start Integrating Media Literacy into Formal Education.” July 13, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/press-releases/communication-commission-ministry-education-and-science-and-unicef-start-integrating>.

tool—but CSOs and independent experts have long criticized it as government propaganda.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

Journalists, civil society activists, and the public have platforms to exercise their freedom of expression offline and online, which they do. However, critical journalists and civil activists run the risk of consequences, like losing access to government press briefings.

Public councils mandated to engage citizens in public debates on a variety of matters exist at the city and regional levels, but panelists say they are highly inefficient. Local government does not even talk to their own electorate, Kuprashvili commented. Mtivlishvili said that his team investigated 64 municipalities from 2015, following the passage of legislation to advance new forms of public participation, such as petitions and general assemblies; just 14 municipalities carried out any of these activities.

Citizens can more freely exercise their freedom of expression on social networks, where discussions often feature unproductive insults and diatribes. Some panelists complained about the negative influence of trolls and bots, while others questioned the plausibility of productive debate on social media. “Polarization has blurred the middle line, I believe; everyone comes with preconceived perceptions . . . not everyone is a troll, but the expectation that someone will evaluate neutrally has disappeared,” Chikhladze said.

Mamedova noted that it is not uncommon for government officials in the region to censor social media posts from their local community. She recalled a case when someone from the Marneuli region shared a post criticizing a City Assembly member for using the Palace of Rituals as storage. She said before the journalist from her station (Radio Marneuli) managed to interview the citizen, someone from the City Assembly convinced them to remove the post.

Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced.

Social media algorithms can easily take down any content deemed inappropriate. Saba Chikhladze, an RFE/RL digital editor, said that sometimes algorithms report content—and even entire pages—without obvious reason. “And when you ask them, there is no answer, and it is hard to explain its logic as it changes constantly,” Chikhladze added. Danelia said that a media outlet can lose its entire archive and audience that it had worked for years to build up when social media pages disappear or are restricted. “And when these media lose audiences, this might become a problem with donors, or in attracting advertising,” Danelia said.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.

Media study online audiences using a number of resources, such as Google and social media analytics. Mariam Shavgulidze, producer of political talk shows at Rustavi 2 TV, said that audience studies commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and other organizations also help media organizations learn about audience needs. Two audience measurement companies—Nielsen’s licensee TVMR and Kantar Media’s licensee Tri Media Intelligence—offer audience data for national television broadcasters, although for years, media industry representatives have criticized Kantar Media Group for serving the political interest of the ruling party.

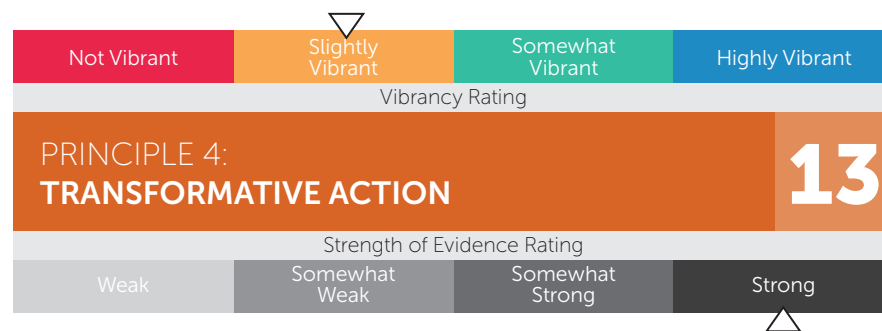
From December 2022, Kantar Media started measuring the audience of national broadcasters in regions it did not have access to before, which panelists said could erase the visibility of regional media and lead advertisers to favor pro-government Imedi. Kuprashvili said that if regional media were indirectly measured before, from now on, there will be no data about their audience. “This decision was taken because of the fear that the share of regional media would have increased. . . . As a result, from what I know, Imedi TV’s audience shares have increased by 60 percent. . . . For me, this is a political decision. . . . Otherwise, how would

one explain why and how they measure regional audiences without regional media?” Kuprashvili noted. Nakashidze added that the fact that there are two such audience measurement companies already affect the market negatively, as the different numbers confuse advertisers.

A small amount of qualitative research that allows the media to understand its audience’s needs is carried out mostly at the expense of individual outlets. Print media are not measured, and only a few radio stations manage to carry out audience studies periodically.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Four radio stations formally registered as community broadcasters operate with a mandate that differs from public and private media. Some panelists argued that other media outlets in the regions operate with similar values and priorities, without formal community media designation. Mtivlishvili, whose organization manages several media, including community Radio Way in Pankisi Gorge, said that Mtisambebi.ge, the only media website focusing on the high mountain regions of Georgia, promotes community interests. Tsitsikashvili said that Qartli.ge produces content for the local ethnic Ossetian population and meets the community media criteria.



The panelists criticized the government policy of holding the media and civil society sector outside the public policy decision-making process and agreed that societal and media polarization has deepened amid

Russia’s war in Ukraine, providing little ground for healthy discourse. Indicator 19, on the government’s use of quality information to make public policy decisions, scored lowest of all.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

Television remains Georgia’s top source of news, although social media shows steady gains in popularity. According to an IRI September 2022 study, 70 percent of the population watch Georgian television for international news; 8 percent depend on Georgian internet news sites, and 41 percent prefer social media, especially Facebook (98 percent), for news.¹⁷ Nearly half of all adults read online news sites, newspapers, or news magazines, and almost the entire population, 95.9 percent, uses the internet for social networks.¹⁸ Just 2 and 1 percent of IRI survey respondents, respectively, named Georgian print media and radio stations as news sources.

Studies reveal that the public shows little trust in television, especially national broadcast media, which are highly polarized. According to the IRI study, only 56 percent of the respondents trust Georgian television channels for information about the current international situation; 19 percent expressed no trust at all in any channels of information. The panelists believe that intensified media polarization and politicization amid Russia’s war in Ukraine has further deprived the society of quality news and fact-based discussion, as both pro-government and pro-opposition channels distribute highly biased content. Shavgulidze said that “people watch Imedi TV [a pro-government channel], then Mtavari TV [pro-opposition channel] to understand what is happening in reality.” Andguladze added that “even those topics over which we [society] more or less have a consensus, for example, Ukraine, are politicized.”

17 Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia. IRI, September 2022. <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia-september-2022/>.

18 National Statistics Office of Georgia. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households>.

Extremely offensive language is used across social media platforms, and even those who show concerns about polarization in private conversations follow that trend in public discussions—which does not foster healthy societal discourse.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

When it comes to vitally important issues, like Georgia’s EU and NATO aspirations, it is unlikely that the society will fall under the influence of propaganda, the panelists said. They pointed to the idea that Western actors tried to involve Georgia in the war and that Georgia failed to receive EU candidate status because the country “did not open a second front.” Yet a Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRIC)/NDI 2022 survey showed that the vast majority of respondents did not agree with that notion.¹⁹ This points to people’s ability to critically evaluate the information they receive on important issues. Furthermore, the fact that in Summer 2022, hundreds of thousands of Georgians from across the country took to the streets in peaceful action to affirm their Western aspirations shows that in critical moments people will not act in a way that is detrimental to public good.

However, panelists noted that some people tend to harbor prejudices on certain topics and accept information without criticism, especially across online and social media platforms. With disinformation and misinformation rampant on social media, the Georgian public faces serious challenges in checking all the information they receive. A small-scale, non-representative survey on media literacy habits and disinformation perceptions by the Media Development Foundation²⁰

19 Pertaia, Luka. “Did Propaganda Work to ‘Get into the War’? – Interview with the Co-author of the Survey,” Netgazeti. September 8, 2022. <https://netgazeti.ge/life/629005/>.

20 Kintsurashvili, Tamar. “Media literacy and disinformation perception survey”, MDF. 2022. <https://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/233>

showed that part of the respondents—mainly from Akhalkalaki which is mostly inhabited by ethnic Armenians who have limited access to information in Georgian due to poor Georgian language skills—considered much of the Kremlin’s disinformation on the war in Ukraine to be reliable.

“ The panelists believe that intensified media polarization and politicization amid Russia’s war in Ukraine has further deprived the society of quality news and fact-based discussion, as both pro-government and pro-opposition channels distribute highly biased content.

Despite the horrifying impact of COVID-19 on people’s lives and health since 2020, the same study showed that some respondents were vulnerable to false claims and conspiracies around the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccinations, believing that the COVID-19 statistics were fabricated and that COVID-19 does not exist. Still, according to Georgia’s National Center for Disease Control, almost 1.3 million citizens were fully vaccinated by the end of April 2022.²¹

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.

The panelists underlined the importance of the role assigned to CSOs and civil society in building healthy democratic processes in the country by raising society’s awareness of critical issues, accommodating communities, conducting training and research, and engaging with government entities. However, the panelists admit that the impact of these organizations on democratic processes has weakened amid the government’s attempts to discredit the civil society sector, including via some government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) that work to undermine the sector’s reputation.

While Georgian CSOs play an important role in supporting quality journalism and upholding media freedom, they are not homogeneous—much like the media sector—with some powerful and productive CSOs

21 COVID Georgia Live Blog: Wrapped Up After Two Years. Civil.Ge, 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/342486>

delivering great benefits, and others failing to bring any positive change, according to the panelists. “Watchdogs, service providers, think tanks, and so on, organizations have different goals and aims. Nowadays, the most productive are service providers, for instance, [those who] work on women’s empowerment in communities, on providing people with disabilities with relevant skills, or assisting victims of violence,” said Nakashidze.

Tamta Mikeladze, the Social Justice Center’s equality policy program director, said—and most panelists agreed—that “the quality of some CSOs’ work has fallen, and ideological lines of the organizations are weak; some have political affiliations, and the quality of some studies and reports has declined.” The key problem, according to Andguladze, is CSOs’ loss of focus. Other panelists pointed to communication issues within the sector as a problem: “Some organizations are closed to the media; they do not use media platforms to reach the communities,” Kuprashvili added, noting that some NGOs use only their information pages.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

The government’s already weak cooperation with the media and civil society sector deteriorated further in 2022, including: blocking information to pro-opposition and critical media, not notifying them about press briefings, talking selectively with only pro-government media, not appearing in talk shows aired on media that is critical of the government, and not participating in public debates.

Journalists now commonly endure verbal harassment by officials, who borrow pages from Putin’s playbook to discredit critical media outlets, labeling them “war party” supporters—referring to their affiliation with the political opposition—and CSOs as “grant eaters.” “Even those state bodies that used to cooperate with us stopped. They do not invite some organizations . . . especially those close to politics or with access

to diplomatic circles,” said Mikeladze, representing the civil society sector. Mamedova noted that local members of parliament never use media platforms to inform communities and raise awareness about critical issues. The People Power movement, part of the parliamentary majority, came up with an initiative to prepare a draft law to regulate CSO financing, claiming that “the current practice of funding NGOs from abroad poses a threat to Georgia’s sovereignty.”²²

The government’s adoption of the Law on Broadcasting amendments without considering stakeholder concerns provides another accountability failure example, the panelists said. The parliament did consider the alternative bill prepared by a group of NGOs and media representatives, and it appointed a third hearing based on its commitment to fulfill EU directives. However, it disregarded the EU demand for inclusiveness in the process of policy making. As a result, the panel said that the EU’s requirement for making legislative changes by reaching consensus with the stakeholders was not met in the process of harmonizing the broadcast law with European standards.

Political discourse and debate rarely include references to evidence and facts. This is especially true of the ruling party representatives whose rhetoric is based on discrediting and destroying its opponents.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

The panel said that holding the government accountable has become more difficult for media and civil society actors, as the ruling party tends to neglect criticism, avoid cooperation, and ignore recommendations of the sector and international organizations. Mtvlishvili admitted to a decline in the government’s responsiveness to the violations revealed by

When it comes to vitally important issues, like Georgia’s EU and NATO aspirations, it is unlikely that the society will fall under the influence of propaganda, the panelists said.

²² “Anti-Western ‘People Power’ Wants to Curb Foreign CSO Funding,” Civil.ge. November 18, 2022. <https://civil.ge/archives/515348>.

media and said their reactions depend on the themes. “When it comes to bribery or corruption on a local level, they [the local government] react, but not on a higher [national] level,” added Nakashidze. The IRI study mentioned above shows that the population’s perceptions of NGOs’ impact on the government’s policymaking remained almost unchanged in 2022; the panelists added that declining accountability of the government puts more responsibility on civil society and media.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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Nino Jangirashvili, director, Kavkasia TV, Tbilisi

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Saba Chikhladze, chief digital editor, Radio Free Europe, Tbilisi

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