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Political Polarization and Media: Threats to the Democratic Process in Georgia

Nino Robakidze¹

Abstract

Traditional liberal democratic states across the world are concerned about the issue of political polarization. At the same time, the media, one of the major democratic institute, is also facing new challenges. Trust of towards traditional media, particularly for some specific social groups, is defined more by the media outlet's political sympathies or ideological perspective than by professionalism and objective reporting.

Political polarization is also a challenge for Georgian media outlets. It particularly becomes problematic during politically important events, for instance during election cycles. Some argue that a polarized media environment is not a real problem if the media environment in the country, in general, is pluralistic and voters have access to different media outlets. Is the fragmentized Georgian media environment a threat in itself and to what extent will media outlets be able to fulfill one of the major functions of journalism – public forum function – and prepare citizens for informed political decisions?

¹Nino Robakidze - Media researcher, SAFE Initiative Eurasia Center Manager, IREX.

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Introduction

Media pluralism is one of the chief criteria to assess the state of a democracy. It implies that media is independent from political influence, serves public interest and properly reflects the diverse views of the society and the political spectrum.² It needs to be noted that only the multiplicity of media outlets that are divided in accordance with the spheres of political influence, does not imply media pluralism and this condition is not enough for democratic standard. The existence of various TV channels affiliated with political parties might be assessed as virtual pluralism.³ However, a democratic society also requires diverse and pluralistic media in terms of its content.

In recent years, the two leading Georgian media outlets are two private companies – TV channels Imedi and Rustavi 2 – that are main competitors⁴ and at the same time are associated with two leading political parties: Imedi with the ruling party Georgian Dream and Rustavi 2 with the highest ranking opposition party – United National Movement. Reporters Without Borders,⁵ has assessed media in Georgia as “Pluralist but still very polarized,” since 2013, which has a negative impact on the media environment in general.

A polarized media environment has significant influence on public attitudes. The subjective reporting of events which, instead of conveying facts, explicitly states positions either in favor or in opposition of one of the major political powers, has become characteristic of Georgian media environment. In this context, political processes in 2018, specifically the presidential elections, were particularly interesting. The 2018 presidential elections illustrated the negative influence of media polarization on political processes and the importance of media pluralism for the country’s stable democratic development.

Today television is still the chief source of information is still a television, according to the Caucasus Barometer public survey. 73% of respondents reported that TV channels are their primary source for information about political developments.⁶ This means the role of TV channels is critical in the process of forming public opinion about ongoing political processes. Another important aspect is the extent to which Georgian TV media comply with basic standards of journalism. This paper focuses on TV channels and examines their role and influence over the polarization of the public and democratic processes of the country. More specifically, by reviewing the 2018 presidential election, we examine how objectively and impartially media outlets reported the diversity of opinions surrounding various social or political issues that were important for the public. This analysis allow us to see the extent to which media outlets enable the political fragmentation of society, deepen confrontation among various interest groups and create different political realities for audiences with different political opinions.

² Peruško, Z. (2010). The Link That Matters: Media Concentration and Diversity of Content. in B. Klimkiewicz (ed.), *Media Freedom and Pluralism: Media Policy Challenges in the Enlarged Europe*, Central European University Press, pp. 261-273

³ Ibid.

⁴ TVMR GE. (February 2018). The most rated of 2017 #1. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2UTjcjP>

⁵ Reporters Without Borders. (2018). 2018 World Press Freedom Index. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/georgia>

⁶ Caucasus Barometer. (2017). Main Sources of Information – First Source. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2017ge/INFSOU1/>

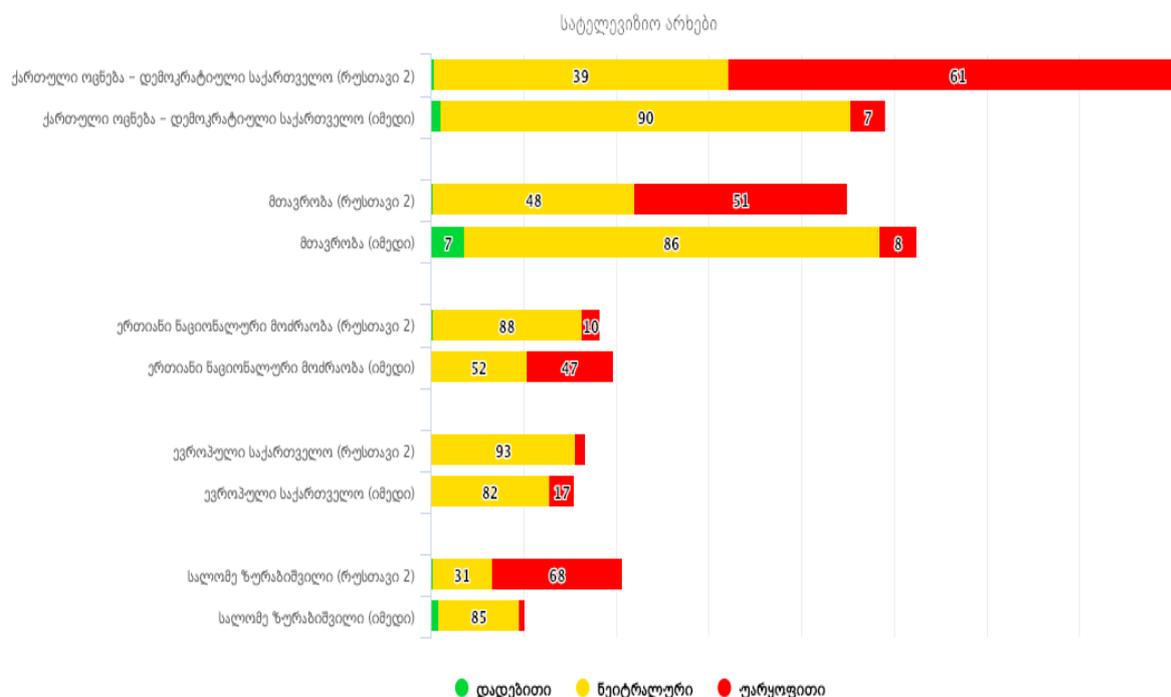
Media Polarization and Elections of 2018

Classical symptoms of political polarization are the increasing popularity of populist groups in society; basing political debates on populist or emotional, not rational, arguments; promoting “us” and “them” dichotomy in the political vocabulary; dehumanizing political opponents and mobilizing supporters against them instead of supporting your own ideas.⁷

Media coverage of the 2018 elections underscored problems in terms of both the lack of political culture and unhealthy media environment. If earlier the leading TV channels alluded to specific political affiliations, during the elections the division of TV channels in groups of influence of different political parties became even more explicit. The cases of biased reporting became more obvious; in addition, negative reporting of unfavorable candidates was observed, which resulted in a violation of professional media ethics and the cases of manipulation.⁸

The results of media monitoring during the 2018 presidential elections clearly indicate that oppositional TV channel – Rustavi 2 – mainly reported about Georgian Dream, the candidate it supported and the Georgian government in a negative context. Meanwhile, TV channel Imedi negatively reported on the United National Movement, while using a neutral tone in reporting about the government and the Georgian Dream and the candidate it supported. Imedi political programs mostly focused on the negative consequences if the United National Movement candidate – Grigol Vashadze – won the presidency, while Rustavi 2 used its informational-political programming against Salome Zurbichvili,⁹ the candidate supported by the ruling Georgian Dream party

Media Monitoring of Presidential Elections (Mediamonitor, 2018)¹⁰



⁷ McCoy, J., Rahman, T. and Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16-42.

⁸ Media Monitor. (2018). Final Report of media monitoring of elections, 2016-2018. Available at: <http://mediamonitor.ge/>. Accessed on March 6, 2019

⁹ Ibid.

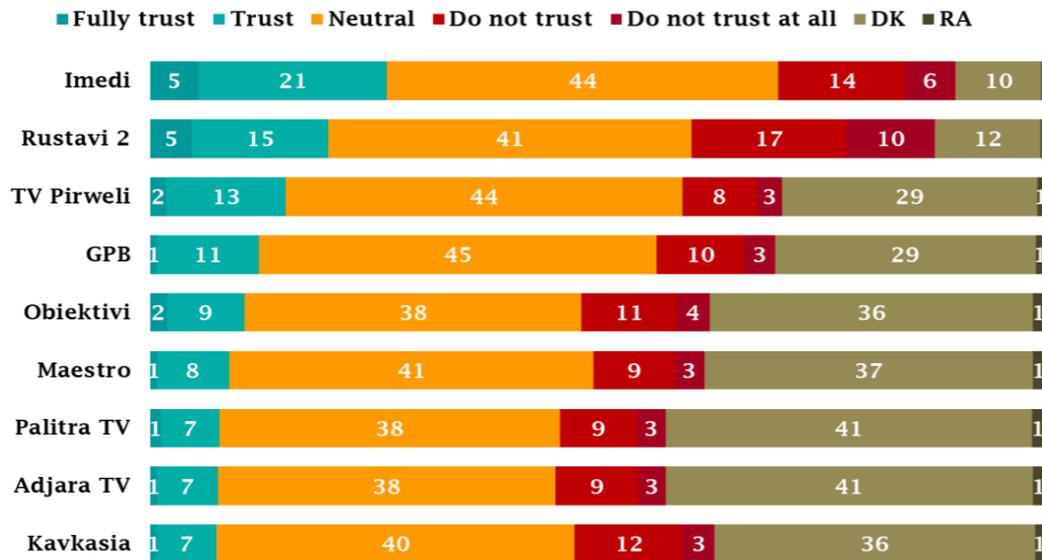
¹⁰ Ibid.

According to the “Media Monitoring of 2018 Presidential Elections of Georgia,” in addition to the tense pre-election campaign, particular attention should be paid to using hate speech in the media. The cases of ethical violations were detected in reports prepared by Rustavi 2 on Salome Zurabichvili, including journalists using cynical and ironic texts.¹¹ According to the research, during the election period, negative coverage of Salome Zurabichvili between the first and the second tours sharply increased (from 59% to 89%) on Rustavi 2, while Imedi aired critical assessments of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, United National Movement and Grigol Vashadze during the pre-election campaign.¹² More or less neutral position was maintained by the TV channel “Pirveli” and Adjara Public Broadcaster. It is worth noting that political bias of TV channels towards different political groups is reflected on the attitudes of the audience towards major TV channels. Neither of the two most popular TV channels – Imedi and Rustavi 2 – enjoys a high level of viewer trust: 26% of respondents trust TV channel Imedi while 20% distrust it, while 20% trust and 27% distrust channel Rustavi 2. Majority of viewers have neutral attitudes towards both of these TV channels¹³.

Trust in Media (National Democratic Institute, 2018)¹⁴

Trust in media

In general, how much do you trust or distrust coverage of news and current affairs on the following TV channels? (q72)



NDI December 2018 Survey

www.caucasusbarometer.org
www.ndi.org/georgia-polls

The latest wave of political polarization in the media, in which peaked during the 2018 presidential elections, started much earlier. The tendency was already visible in the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections. The practice of using popular and influential TV media as a political tool was already visible during the pre-election media monitoring of the 2016 parliamentary elections.¹⁵ During the 2016 parliamentary elections, three parties passed the threshold and all three of them actively used their influence over specific broadcasters during

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ National Democratic Institute (2018). Public Opinion Polls in Georgia. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Issues%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Media Monitor (2016). Results of media monitoring of 2016 parliamentary elections. Available at: [http://mediamonitor.ge/files/MM%20Final%20Report%20\(Geo\).pdf](http://mediamonitor.ge/files/MM%20Final%20Report%20(Geo).pdf)

the political battles.¹⁶ As a result, interests and issues relevant to the majority¹⁷ – of people having voting rights were practically missing in political discussions, what contradicts the principles of pluralistic and representative democracy.

Media and Public Polarization

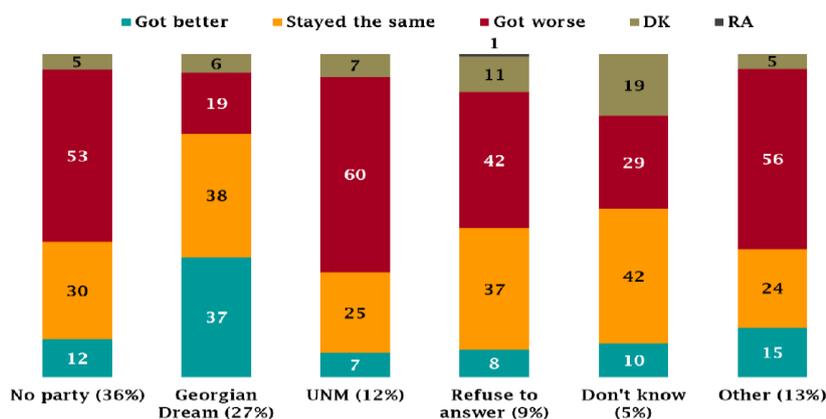
Media pluralism is directly related to public pluralism and at the same time, media plays an important role in polarizing the public.¹⁸ In the beginning of 2019, representatives of the National Democratic Institute in Georgia published the results of its most recent public opinion survey in Georgia.¹⁹ The opinion polls were conducted in December 2018, when both rounds of the presidential election were already over. The poll included questions that reflected the extent to which the citizens' conceptions of specific issues differ according to their political preferences.

The results of the opinion polls conducted in December indicate notably different attitudes towards issues of public policy as well as events, or more specifically towards the facts that can be checked. For instance whether or not the criminal situation has worsened: if 60% of the supporters of United National Movement think that the criminal situation in the country has worsened, only 19% of the supporters of Georgian Dream party gave similar answer.²⁰ Their responses did not appear to be influenced on the official statistics on the level of crimes committed in the country. The same trend was observed in other issues, including their assessment of the country's development.

Criminal Situation (National Democratic Institute, 2018)²¹

Criminal situation

How do you think the criminal situation has changed in Georgia in the last 10 years? Has it gotten worse, stayed the same or gotten better?
(q64 X Party closest to you)



¹⁶ Transparency International Georgia (2015). Who owns Georgia's media. Available at:

<https://www.transparency.ge/ge/post/report/vis-ekutvnis-kartuli-media>

¹⁷ 36% of the citizens with voting rights do not have an expressed political preferences for any of the political subjects. Also a number of citizens support political actors that do not have to the influence to manage media resources. National Democratic Institute (2018)

¹⁸ Martin, J.G and Yurukoglu, A. (2017). Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization. *American Economic Review*, 107(9), 2565-2599

¹⁹ National Democratic Institute (2018). Results of December 2018 Public Opinion Polls in Georgia. Available at:

<https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-december-2018-public-opinion-polls-georgia>

²⁰ National Democratic Institute (2018). Public Attitudes in Georgia. Available at:

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Issues%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

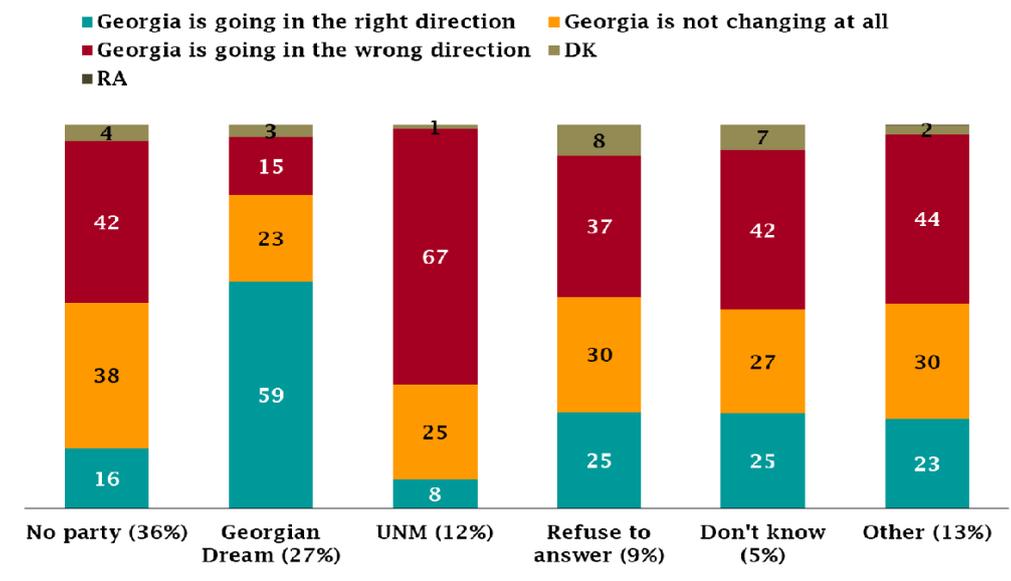
²¹ Ibid.

For example, 42% of the respondents who did not identify themselves as the supporter of either party think that the country is going in the wrong direction, only 15% of the supporters of ruling Georgian Dream felt the same. However 67% of the supporters of the most popular opposition party, the United National Movement, said they believe the country is going in the wrong direction. During the past 10 years, 53% of independent voters believe the criminal situation has worsened, compared to for 60% of United National Movement supporters. However, just 19% of Georgian Dream supporters felt the same way.²²

Country Direction (National Democratic Institute 2018)²³

Country direction

There are different opinions regarding the direction in which Georgia is going. In your opinion ... (q2 X Party closest to you)



On the surface, there is nothing special in the fact that supporters of various political parties perceive public policy issues through different lenses. However, the surveys show that these differences increase year by year, which could be an indication of the political fragmentation of society.²⁴

The polarization of the media is reflected in the level of public trust in the media itself. The majority (64%) of the population believes that the media has passed on disinformation at some point. However, which broadcaster is accused of spreading disinformation changes according to the party supported by the voter. For instance, 37% of the supporters of Georgian Dream think that TV channel Imedi (channel associated with Georgian Dream) never spreads disinformation, while only 4% of the supporters of the United National Movement think the same way. On the question whether or not they have received disinformation from Rustavi 2 (TV channel

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

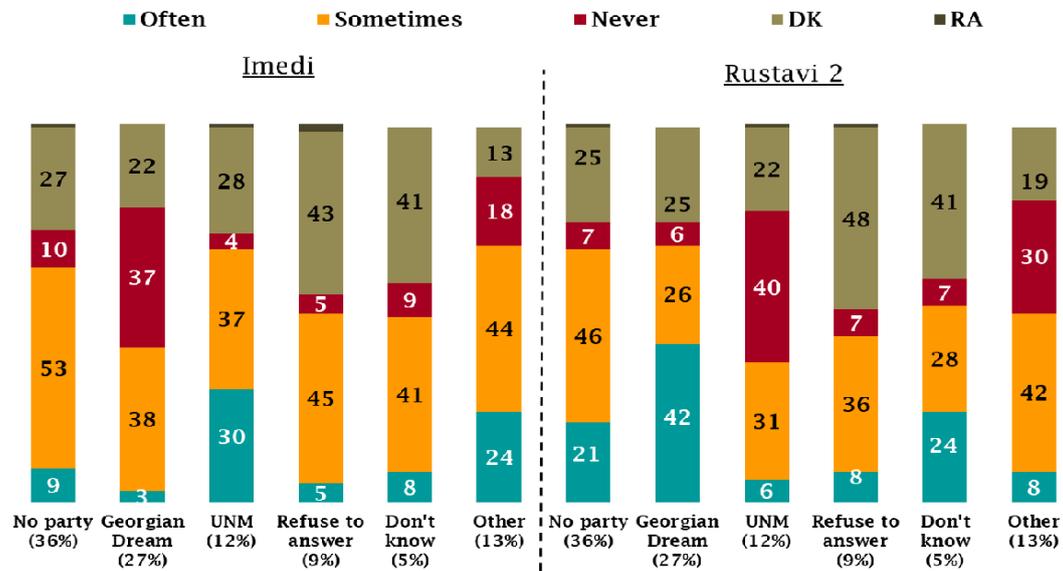
²⁴ Caucasus Research Resource Center. Public Opinion Surveys 2014-2018. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>

associated with United National Movement), 40% of the United National Movement supporters and 6% of the Georgian Dream supporters state “never.”²⁵

*Perceived Disinformation on TV (National Democratic Institute 2018)*²⁶

Perceived disinformation on TV

For each of the following TV stations, please tell me, how often, if at all, do you think, they spread disinformation? (q74 X Party closest to you)



Conclusion

It is important to note that unlike the neighboring countries, a diverse media landscape still exists in Georgia.²⁷ In addition to the popular, politically affiliated national broadcasters, there are several smaller TV channels and groups of investigative journalists. The number of online media outlets is increasing and it would be a mistake to state that their work does not have an impact on public opinion. However, the main challenge for Georgian media today is not the lack of numerous media collectives with different editorial policies, but the lack of media platforms that can gain the trust of the wider public and can also properly present a diversity of opinions in society, and create an atmosphere for constructive, argumentative dialogue for different social or political groups and, in this way, respond to society’s chief concerns.²⁸

The 2018 presidential elections in Georgia once again illustrated the political polarization of the media and the society in relation to two major political poles, the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement. The primary tool for both of these political parties was mobilizing

²⁵ National democratic Institute (2018). Public Opinion Poll in Georgia. Available at:

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Issues%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Freedom House. (2018). Freedom in the World 2018- Georgia. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/georgia>

²⁸ Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, New York, United States, Three Rivers Press

supporters against their opponents and both political actors actively used the media resources at their disposal to accomplish that goal.

Media is an important source of public polarization.²⁹ Public opinion surveys show that public opinion is divided according to party-political preferences that decrease the opportunity for constructive political debate and threaten democracy. The fact that media easily becomes a tool for political fights in countries like Georgia can be easily explained. In countries with little democratic experience, media, as a business, does not have the tradition and experience of an independent financial existence. If we look at the history of strong Georgian TV channels, we will see that these media outlets explicitly served groups with different political interests or were even created to be used as political tools. Public trust in, and public opinions about, popular TV media outlets were established based on these subjective or objective circumstances.

Naturally, the political polarization of society is not solely a Georgian problem. What's more, as various research illustrates, this problem is particularly acute for traditional liberal democratic states.³⁰ However, with states with low social capital, political fragmentation can become an insurmountable problem and can cause irreversible damage to democracy. While media pluralism is a significant characteristic of democracy, media polarization, if ignored for too long, may trigger extreme confrontation between social groups.

Recommendations

For political actors:

- While changing the country's laws concerning the media, advertisement and similar fields, the government should consider the recommendations issued by NGOs or think-tanks working on the issues related to media in the country, as well as recommendations from international organizations and donors; potential changes in the existing legislation regarding these issues should be discussed publicly, in a format that involves independent experts and international expert circles;
- While reforming the judiciary system, consider the recommendations of civil society and international assessments, since the existence of the independent judiciary is a precondition for improving the media environment and the standards of the freedom of expression;
- Political leaders should stop turning journalists and media outlets with a different political outlook into enemies; hostile and threatening statements are particularly unacceptable from civil servants and high ranking political officials;
- Political actors, and particularly the representatives of the government, should stop boycotting various media outlets during important political developments.

²⁹ Martin, J. G. and Yurukoglu, A. (2017). Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization. *Economic Review*, 107(9), 2565-2599

³⁰ McCoy, J, Rahman, T and Somer, T. (2018). Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16-42.

For professional organizations and civil society:

- Journalists should reduce subjective reporting and using hate speech when reporting on party candidates. Balanced news with no subjective assessment will increase the trust of the population in specific TV channels, as well as in the journalists of the given TV channel;
- Media outlets should work on improving self-regulating standards and should be more actively involved in professional discussions to better use self-regulating mechanisms in order to improve the trust levels towards them;
- While partnering with media, the NGO sector should incentivize projects and initiatives that will assist the reflection of political pluralism in media and enable media to fulfill the function of public forum. Work with journalists shall be intensified to develop and spread strategies and practices that foster a balanced presentation of diverse opinions; information campaigns against hate speech and violation of ethical code shall be organized;
- Professional organizations and NGO representatives working on issues related to the media should spend more time researching the process of away from political polarization in the media field.

For international Donors:

- More attention should be paid to the reports on media polarization and problems in media prepared by the civil sector and monitoring missions; ruling and opposition parties' attempts to use media polarization in media outlets affiliated with their interests should become the part of negative conditionality. The principle of conditionality shall be applied toward media outlets as well. While choosing media outlets for partnerships (financial support, joint projects, advertisements), donors shall be guided by universal principles of journalistic ethics and professional standards;
- Media monitoring shall be maintained and strengthened to enable the analysis of dynamics of media development in perspective.



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Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: info@gip.ge

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