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DISCUSSION PAPER

Georgia

Media freedom in decline

AUTHORS: ELENA ZONDLER, EKATERINE BASILAIA,
ALEXANDER MATSCHKE, EVELIN MEIER

Polarization, government surveillance and physical attacks:
Research findings by DW Akademie illustrate the recent deterioration
of Georgia's media sector.

Supported by the



Imprint

PUBLISHER
Deutsche Welle
53110 Bonn
Germany

PUBLISHED
March 2023

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AUTHORS
Elena Zondler
Ekaterine Basilaia
Alexander Matschke
Evelin Meier

EDITOR
Jen Claydon

RESPONSIBLE
Carsten von Nahmen
Jan Lublinski

LAYOUT
Elena Stammnitz

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Saba Tsitsikashvili,
journalist and founder of
Quartli.ge interviews a
villager.

From reform leader to straggler

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Georgia was one of the first Soviet republics to break away from the Soviet Union. Following a referendum, the country declared its independence on April 9, 1991. The 2003 “Rose Revolution” paved the way for democratic reforms in Georgia.

For many years, Georgia has been lauded for its reform achievements. In the past two decades, the country has strengthened democratic institutions, reduced corruption and improved electoral processes (Council of Europe, 2015; NDI).

“Georgia’s experience shows that the vicious cycle of endemic corruption can be broken and, with appropriate and decisive reforms, can be turned into a virtuous cycle,” the World Bank stated in 2012 (World Bank, 2012).

In the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative, Georgia was described as a front-runner in implementing economic and democratic reforms in 2016 (Commonspace.eu, 2016).

However, gains in democratization have stalled in recent years. Incidents of hate speech and physical assaults against journalists, together with governmental policies of information control and waves of online disinformation, have led to a decline in media freedom.

Between 2021 and 2022, Georgia saw a pronounced fall in the country’s media freedom assessment by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), with a 29-rank drop in the Press Freedom Index from 60th to 89th of 180 ranked countries and territories (RSF, 2022).

Likewise, global freedom of expression advocacy group Article 19 has recorded downward shifts in Georgia’s media environment in recent years, downgrading the country from the category “open” to “less restricted” in 2020 (Article 19, 2021).

In a 2022 resolution, the European Parliament expressed “concern over the significant deterioration of the media situation and the safety of journalists in Georgia in recent years” (European Parliament, 2022).

Media development organization IREX has denounced a “national government’s war on critical media” in Georgia. According to a 2022 IREX report, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the difficulties media workers face in Georgia and “continued to corrode the country’s information environment, which has been swamped with COVID-related misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda” (IREX, 2022).

The same year, human rights organization Amnesty International called the conviction and imprisonment of television journalist Nika Gvaramia “politically motivated”. RSF and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) included the case in their lists of imprisoned journalists worldwide (Amnesty International, 2022; CPJ, 2022, May 16; RSF, 2022, May 24).

According to the 2022 BTI Transformation Index, the idea of public broadcasting serving the citizens’ public interest is “lost” in Georgia, with journalists experiencing “intimidation, harassment, and interference in editorial policies” (BTI, 2022).

Similarly, U.S.-based pro-democracy group Freedom House has recorded a decline in Georgia’s democracy score, which reflects the country’s trajectory as a “nation in transit”. One factor has been a “permissive environment for violent far-right groups like those responsible for the deadly July 2021 assault on the Tbilisi Pride NGO and media workers” (Freedom House, 2022.1).

According to the organization, pro-government actors have “attempted to manipulate online content to influence public opinion” and there have been high-profile cases of government surveillance against civil society representatives and journalists. Nonetheless, in its latest “Freedom on the Net” report, Freedom House categorized Georgia’s online environment as “free”, as citizens do not face restrictions in accessing websites, and internet use continues to grow (Freedom House, 2022.2).

Freedom of expression and access to information are guaranteed by the Georgian constitution (Legislative Herald of Georgia, 1995). According to the latest Caucasus Barometer, an annual household survey about socio-economic issues and political attitudes, 71 % of respondents stated that people in Georgia have the right to openly say what they think (Caucasus Research Center, 2021). Notably, in its opinion of Georgia’s 2022 application for EU accession, the European Commission has urged the country to “undertake stronger efforts to guarantee a free, professional, pluralistic and independent media environment, notably by ensuring that criminal procedures brought against media owners fulfil the highest legal standards, and by launching impartial, effective and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of journalists and other media professionals” (European Commission, 2022).

While observers widely describe Georgia’s media landscape as pluralistic, it is also regarded as highly polarized, with broadcasters divided along political lines.

Television remains Georgia’s most-used source of information on political issues and current affairs. Most of the population (87.9 %) use TV as a source of information followed by family members (84.7 %), neighbors and friends (83.8 %), social media (69 %), news websites (36.2 %), newspapers and magazines (14 %) and radio (13 %) (Internews, 2021). In 2021, 76 % of the population used the internet (ITU, 2021).

¹ One author of this study, Ekaterine Basilaia, has been part of the 2022 IREX Vibrant Information Barometer Georgia research team.

About this report

DW Akademie's study provides a snapshot of the situation of freedom of expression and media freedom in Georgia by sharing the concerns of Georgian media professionals with a wider audience. It has been realized with the financial support of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods, DW Akademie's study aims to contribute to the existing body of research on Georgia's media environment. For this study, DW Akademie has surveyed journalists on the current situation of the media with a special focus on the safety of journalists and media organizations.

In the second half of 2022, the research team gathered qualitative data through in-depth interviews with 15 Georgian media professionals, conducted under the premise of anonymity.

An online survey provided additional data. A semi-standardized questionnaire of 61 questions in Georgian language was sent to nine media associations and organizations representing several hundred media institutions and individual members, as well as to 59 media outlets, including TV, radio, online and print outlets. Sixty-four self-selected anonymous respondents participated. The survey allowed for skipping questions and included open-ended questions where respondents could provide individual answers. Forty respondents completed all questions. The results of the online survey are non-representative.²

Different realities: a highly polarized media landscape

“The media, both national and provincial, are completely polarized. The focus is entirely on the party-political agenda.

Founder and editor of a regional media outlet

“The perception of reality differs, depending on through which perspective a person looks at events [...] We systematically hear totally different interpretations of the same incidents” said a TV journalist from southern Georgia.

Such descriptions from media professionals interviewed for this study show the high degree of polarization in Georgia's media landscape. Likewise, many respondents of the online survey pointed to a prevailing divisive dynamic of political, social and media spheres.

One survey participant stated: “Media polarization is a result of society polarization and vice versa. Everything started with the confrontation of political groups and ended with the regrouping of government and opposition actors in separate media.”

Study participants also described the lack of a sound financial basis of the Georgian media sector. Participants portrayed this as conducive to “media capture”—the affiliation of media with private or political actors in a way that is detrimental to unbiased reporting. “The media environment is harmed by the fact that every political group has its own media,” an interviewee, a producer of political talk shows, said.

“[Georgian] media is always associated with someone's name [...]. And we never see the media making efforts to be independent,” said the director and editor of a community radio station in southeastern Georgia in one of the qualitative interviews.

Survey respondents as well as interviewed experts consider a lack of professionalism among journalists to contribute to the high degree of polarization in the public sphere. “Unfortunately, the standard of the media is also very often diminished and does not meet the standards of modern ethical unbiased journalism,” said a TV journalist from southern Georgia.

“The reality is that the majority of our news broadcasts, as well as the majority of political talk shows, are biased,” concluded the head of news at a TV station in the southwest of the country.

² For a detailed description of the sample, see section “Study profile”.

SURVEY FIGURES

Polarization

In the online survey, less than a fifth of the survey respondents (18 %, 9 of 50) said that Georgian media provide unbiased coverage of current events.

Around half of respondents (46 %, 23 of 50) said that Georgian media do not discuss political issues controversially. Different opinions were expressed depending on gender and where respondents work and live: 76 % of women (19 of 25), 50 % of men (6 of 12), 77.8 % (14 of 18) of respondents based in Tbilisi and 57.1 % (12 of 21) of respondents from other parts of the country agreed that Georgian media do not discuss political issues controversially.

Almost all survey respondents (97.9 %, 47 of 48) said that the Georgian media landscape is polarized; 60 % (27 of 45) state that polarization in Georgia has increased since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

More broadly, according to the online survey data, 75.8 % (47 of 62) of respondents feel that protecting freedom of expression and freedom of the media is important, while only around half of the respondents (28 of 61) think that people in Georgia can express their opinions freely on controversial issues. Employees of online media tend to be less critical (45.7 %, 19 of 35) than representatives of broadcast and print media (68 %, 8 of 25).

Most Georgian media outlets provide unbiased coverage of current events.

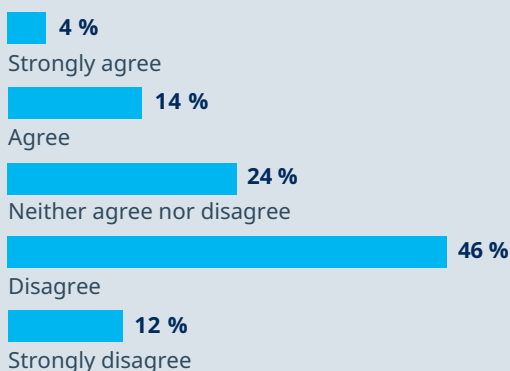


Figure 1 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Georgian media workers with 64 respondents, conducted in October 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

A hostile government and state surveillance

Study results of both expert interviews and the online survey have underpinned the notion of declining media freedom in Georgia. One expert interviewed for this study—the head of news at a national TV channel in Tbilisi—decried government policies towards critical voices: “There has probably never been such a difficult situation in terms of the media environment in Georgia [...]. Journalists and free media are the victims of a severe, systematic attack by the government in several directions.”

“There are still critical media outlets. [...] But the government is doing its best to silence us,” a TV presenter from Tbilisi mentioned. In the interview, she spoke about the pressure that has been directed against her media house since 2012, the year of the first election victory of the current majority party “Georgian Dream” and coalition partners.

“Since 2012 [...] we have been subjected to various types of government attacks. [...] There have been financial restraints [...] and blackmail against our director general using personal footage. There have also been attempts to bribe us to keep quiet, not be critical and free and not to express whatever the society is concerned about and needs the most.”

Another interviewee said that while attacks on media freedom may not necessarily happen openly, “the authorities are trying their best to create an uncomfortable environment for independent media outlets, to harass and persecute them.”

All journalists interviewed for this study mentioned the 2022 court case and verdict that led to the imprisoning of Nika Gvaramia, director of the TV station Mtavari Arkhi and TV presenter. Gvaramia was sentenced to three and a half years in prison on May 16, 2022 on charges of abuse of power. Observers of the trial concluded that there was no legal basis for the conviction and that, at most, the allegations should have resulted in corporate liability (CPJ, 2022, May 20). Amnesty International labeled Gvaramia's arrest as politically motivated (Amnesty International, 2022).

The director of a Tbilisi-based TV station said: “We used to say that they [the government] won't arrest us. But they do! Speaking out on political issues can lead to imprisonment. You become a target of the security services, the prosecutor's office. One experiences so much discomfort in life that many people have started to question whether it is worth it.”

In the interviews conducted for this study, journalists also referred to recent revelations of widespread surveillance of public figures, including journalists, activists, clergy members, politicians and diplomats, by the Georgian intelligence agency State Security Service of Georgia.

“According to the files leaked from the State Security Service, about 50 journalists are considered victims. Including me. They not only wiretapped the journalists, but also spied on them,” the founder and editor of a regional media outlet said.

Another interviewed expert, an online editor, remarked: “Journalists know that they are being watched and listened to.”

In 2021, documents dating from 2020 were leaked to the pro-opposition TV station Mtavari Arkhi and other media organizations, with multiple individuals having confirmed the authenticity of their eavesdropped conversations. According to then-acting human rights ombudsperson Nino Lomjaria, several hundred people had been surveilled, including journalists, activists, politicians and members of the clergy. The Georgian government and the State Security Service denied any wrongdoing. However, in September 2022 prosecutors launched an investigation ([Freedom House, 2022.3](#)).

SURVEY FIGURES

Surveillance, threats and attacks on media professionals

Almost all survey respondents (97.7 %, 43 of 44) consider surveillance, threats and attacks on media professionals major problems in Georgia. Just over a third of respondents (34.8 %, 15 of 43) said that in the last three months they did not pursue a story because they were afraid of negative consequences.

Asked about the biggest problems for journalistic safety in Georgia, 87.5 % (14 of 16) of respondents answered digital security. Roughly a third (35 %, 14 of 40) of respondents felt well-equipped in this area. In rural environments, all participants (7 of 7) felt poorly equipped in terms of digital security, whereas in cities, about half of participants (56.7 %, 17 of 30) felt poorly equipped.

In terms of digital or physical attacks on media outlets, 94.7 % (36 of 38) of respondents reported that they have experienced such attacks at least once in the last five years, with about one in ten saying they experienced them frequently. Only 5.3 % (2 of 38) were unaware of attacks on their employer.

A minority of 39 % (16 of 41) of the survey respondents felt that their media organization offered enough in terms of digital security.

According to the interviewed journalists, media outlets and individual journalists lack digital security resources, skills and experience. “We don’t know how to keep information safe. We are unaware of how protected our computer systems are, actually we don’t feel safe from this perspective,” the editor of a regional online media outlet said.

No access to information for critical media

In the qualitative interviews, experts pointed out the difficulty of communicating with authorities, highlighting serious delays and unanswered requests. According to an editor of an online media outlet, “it is impossible for non-government-controlled media to get any kind of valuable information from government agencies.” Another journalist at a community radio in a southern province stated, “we have been waiting for a response from one of the ministries for five months; we still haven’t received it and probably never will.”

“ Access to public information has become extremely difficult. In most cases we fail to get the information that should be published proactively, even on the basis of a written request.

Founder and editor of a regional media outlet

The head of news at a TV station in the southwest of the country said that the ruling party of Georgia, Georgian Dream “does not cooperate with us and in fact has ignored us for several years. [...] The fact that we are fully rejected means that we air one-sided information, and we lose some of our viewers, which ultimately has a negative impact on our daily activities.”

He also pointed out that it has become common practice to only invite selected journalists to government briefings and newsworthy events. “Events are held, new attractions and squares are opened, infrastructural works are attended by the authorities, but we only find out about these later. There is no press release or announcement issued by the government. The news only comes from pro-governmental media outlets, and we find out about it when everything is over.”

Interviewees also mentioned that, similar to ruling party representatives, some opposition party members do not speak to “pro-government media” or journalists working for these outlets.

SURVEY FIGURES

Access to information

Almost all respondents to the survey agreed that media professionals face obstacles when seeking information of public interest from political actors (95.5 %, 42 of 44) or from the judiciary (88.4 %, 38 of 43). Consequently, almost all respondents (95.3 %, 41 of 43) agreed that access to information for media professionals should be improved.

Access to information for journalists and media professionals in Georgia needs to be improved.

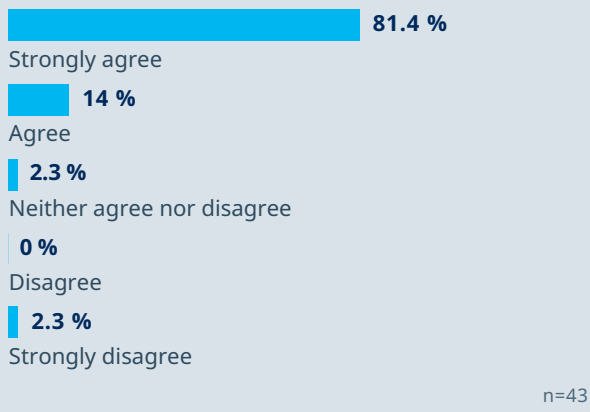


Figure 2 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Georgian media workers with 64 respondents, conducted in October 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

Unsafe: journalists almost constantly under attack

When asked about the safety of journalists, all interviewed journalists referred to the events of July 5, 2021 when far-right anti-LGBTQ+ demonstrators attacked more than 50 journalists in the center of Tbilisi. At least five journalists were hospitalized with serious injuries. One of them was the camera operator Aleksandr Lashkarava of the opposition station TV Pirveli, who subsequently had to undergo emergency surgery. Six days after the attack, he was found dead in his apartment. According to the autopsy report released on December 30, 2021 his death was caused by a drug overdose, a conclusion questioned by observers (Civil 2022; Global Voices 2022).

In response to the attack, the police detained 100 people on administrative offenses and two on criminal charges (Civil, 2021). In April 2022 the Georgian authorities convicted 26 people of attacking journalists during the incident in July 2021. While the court decisions have been welcomed by civil society organizations, critics point out that backers who incited the violence have not been sufficiently investigated (CPJ 2022, April 7).

Many interviewees reported that, following the incident, they no longer feel safe, with one journalist describing it as the “most hateful crime against freedom of speech”.

“After the events of July 5 [...] not a week passes by without a journalist of a TV company or newsroom becoming a victim of a physical attack, verbal abuse or threats and blackmail,” an online editor said.

Reporters and investigative reporters are seen as particularly vulnerable. “When I have a reporter in the field and the reporter calls me, I am scared and have a feeling that something bad has happened. This is the first time I have felt like this in 15 years,” the head of news at a TV station in southwestern Georgia said.

The interviewed journalists stated that, along with physical threats, aggression and hate speech against journalists have become more frequent. “It has become normal that you are working on a harmless topic and someone insults you,” one interviewee explained.

“After every show, I am the target of hate speech,” the head of news at a national TV channel in Tbilisi said. He sees no gender-related difference: “Gender doesn’t matter. There is discrimination based on profession.” However, another male interviewee, the editor of a regional online news outlet, pointed out that women are more likely to be harassed, “Women become targets more often, humiliation based on gender usually occurs in relation to women.”

One expert mentioned that LGBTQ+ journalists are at a higher risk of attacks and abuse, “Journalists belonging to the LGBTQ+ community are at risk most of all: they have always been the targets of special services [the State Security Service] as past practice shows.”

Most of the interviewed journalists argued that the government has contributed to this hostile environment.

“Regular hateful statements by the authorities have contributed to aggression and violence against journalists.”

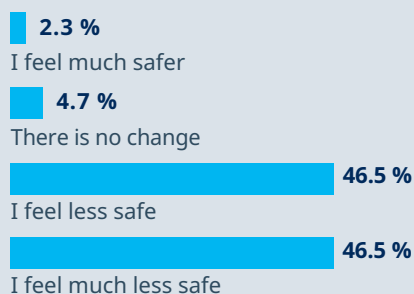
Founder and editor of an online outlet

“Journalists feel very unsafe in Georgia, because first of all, they are not protected by the state. The order to intimidate journalists comes directly from the state,” said a TV anchor in Tbilisi.

Several interviewed journalists stressed a reluctance of government authorities to protect journalists as well as a lack of persecution of perpetrators who have attacked journalists: “We might become victims of organized crime and the police wouldn’t even protect us. In any case, we have a feeling that no one would investigate the case later,” one said. In another statement, the head of news at a TV station in southwestern Georgia said, “the practice of impunity has encouraged violence.”

One interviewee criticized how law enforcement authorities dealt with a threat against him: “The head of a public institution threatened me and my family members with physical violence. [...] He did not even try to do it indirectly. He was quite straightforward. He even wrote horrible messages to my wife. Despite the vivid and clear evidence, my case has been on the shelf for two years.”

Has your personal perception of safety changed in the last three years?



n=43

Figure 3 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Georgian media workers with 64 respondents, conducted in October 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

SURVEY FIGURES

Safety of journalists

The vast majority (93 %, 40 of 43) of survey respondents said that they feel less safe than they did three years ago.

Almost half of the respondents (45.2 %, 19 of 42) have been physically attacked at least once in the last three years because of their job. Representatives of traditional media declared they were affected more frequently (58.8 %, 10 of 17) than employees of online media (33.3 %, 8 of 24).

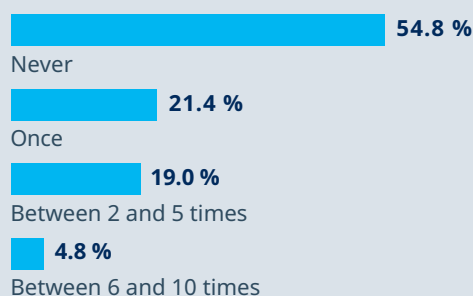
Media professionals were most exposed to threats when conducting investigative research (43.2 %, 19 of 44), reporting on the street (25 %, 11 of 44), or having a presence on the internet (22.7 %, 10 of 44).

Three-quarters of survey respondents (30 of 40) believe that women and non-binary journalists are particularly at risk of being threatened or physically attacked for their work.

Slightly less than two-thirds (62.5 %, 25 of 40) of respondents think that ethnic minority journalists are particularly at risk of being threatened or physically attacked for their work. In this case, respondents working for minority media answered more critically (83.3 %, 10 of 12) than their colleagues (57.7 %, 15 of 26).

More than 40 % of media workers surveyed (17 of 41) were concerned about their mental health. Survey respondents living in rural areas were significantly more worried (85.7 %, 6 of 7) than their colleagues living in urban areas (31 %, 9 of 29). Journalists working in ethnic minority media outlets were also significantly more worried about their mental health (75 %, 9 of 12) than the rest of the journalists surveyed (28 %, 7 of 25).

Have you in the last three years been physically attacked because you work as a journalist/media professional?



n=42

Figure 4 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Georgian media workers with 64 respondents, conducted in October 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

Money talks: weak advertising market makes media more susceptible to outside influences

Georgian media operate in a challenging economic situation, the interviews conducted for this study and results from the online survey suggest. Interviewed journalists cited a weak advertising market as one of the reasons for the poor financial situation of their media houses.

“Today, none of the television stations in Georgia are financially self-sufficient, this means that our advertising market does not provide enough opportunities for us to maintain ourselves.

Producer of political talk shows

The situation is particularly difficult for media that are not perceived as government-aligned. According to a number of interviewees, insufficient advertising revenues were partly due to companies avoiding advertising in media critical of the government for fear of reprisals. “Businesses refrain from the critical media because of expected pressure from the government,” the editor of an online media outlet said.

A local journalist highlighted Russian influence on businesses as a potential obstacle for generating more advertising revenue and consequently for independent reporting: “When the business in your province is Russian, everything is related to Russia, Russian money and the people working in Russia. Such businesses, obviously, cannot be the source of funding for free media.”

He also mentioned that local media sometimes have a close relationship with local government entities, with some of their journalists simultaneously being employed by public relations departments of public institutions.

SURVEY FIGURES

Economic situation

Almost 90 % (33 of 37) of respondents to the online survey assessed the economic situation of Georgian media as “poor” or “very poor”. When commenting on their own media houses, more than three-fifths (62.9 %, 22 of 35) of the respondents assessed the situation as “poor” or “very poor”.

Only about a quarter of respondents (10 of 39) reported that their monthly income was often or always sufficient to cover their living expenses.

In your opinion, what is the financial situation of Georgian media companies in general?

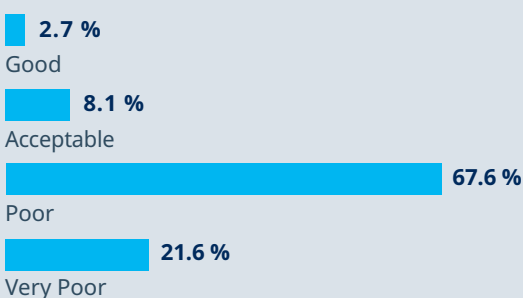


Figure 5 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Georgian media workers with 64 respondents, conducted in October 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

Propaganda and disinformation: the specter of Russia’s war in Ukraine

Results from the interviews and the online survey conducted for this study point to a high degree of propaganda and disinformation in Georgia’s information ecosystem. In a geopolitically heated environment, the 2022 Russian invasion of nearby Ukraine has sparked new waves of ideological clashes, interviewees said. “There is a fully-fledged battle in Georgia, a propaganda battle parallel to the war in Ukraine,” the director of a Tbilisi-based TV station put it.

When commenting on disinformation and propaganda, experts mentioned the pro-Russian, far-right national broadcaster

“Alt-Info”. According to the interviewees, the platform has disseminated Kremlin-linked disinformation in Georgia since the beginning of the war against Ukraine in February 2022.

“Pro-Russian groups such as ‘Alt-Info’ and the ‘Conservative Movement’ became increasingly active in Georgia at the time of the first stage of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” the founder and editor of a regional media outlet said. “They used their broadcasts to impose the Russian narrative on the public. They are distinguished by their extremely aggressive attitude.”

Experts interviewed for this study accused Alt-Info affiliates of being behind the July 5, 2021 attack on media workers. A number of journalists interviewed for this study said they have been harassed and threatened in recent years by Alt-Info and associated members and groups.

According to interviewees, disinformation is widespread and propaganda is partly the result of foreign interference in the Georgian information ecosystem. “We have to work with disinformation every second. We have ‘Alt-Info’, ‘Obiektivni’, ‘SeasonTV’ and many other media of unknown origin, with uninterrupted funds for disseminating disinformation thus obtaining influence at regional level. It is part of Russia’s expansionist policy,” a TV journalist from southern Georgia said.

One expert said that their media house had to strengthen the Russian-language editorial office due to an increased proliferation of propaganda messages, “We had to employ more Russian-speaking staff because the wave of disinformation was really powerful.”

Also, interviewees were critical of the position of the Georgian government towards the war in Ukraine. “[The Ukrainian] fighting spirit is a serious inconvenience for this government as it reveals its own fear and attitudes, and most importantly, this war has demonstrated that our government is pro-Russian,” a TV presenter from Tbilisi opined.

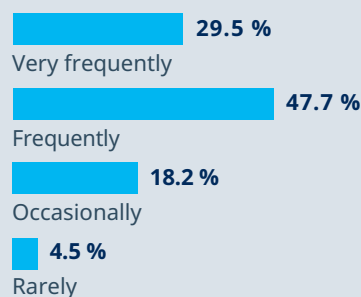
“As a result of Putin’s war in Ukraine, the government has been trying to impose the stance in Georgian society that the West is trying to get us involved in the war, by promoting this view via pro-government channels.

Head of news at a TV station in southwestern Georgia

Another interviewee added that “pro-government media spread anti-Western narratives”.

The director of a Tbilisi-based TV station criticized “the demonization of the media, the European Parliament, the American Ambassador, the NGOs” by representatives of the ruling party.

How often are you confronted with propaganda and disinformation in your work as a media professional?



n=44

Figure 6 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Georgian media workers with 64 respondents, conducted in October 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 % due to rounding.

SURVEY FIGURES

Propaganda and disinformation

Four-fifths (80 %, 36 of 45) of survey respondents were convinced that disinformation in the Georgian media is a serious problem, and almost 90 % (41 of 46) said that disinformation and propaganda had increased since the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine.

About three-quarters (34 of 44) of survey respondents stated that they encounter propaganda frequently or very frequently in their professional contexts.

When asked about disinformation and propaganda in Georgian, 90.9 % (40 of 44) of survey respondents reported to have experienced it frequently or very frequently. Meanwhile 97.4 % (38 of 39) had encountered disinformation in Russian frequently or very frequently.

What is needed: money, knowledge, advocacy

Interviewees mentioned that many Georgian media outlets are in a highly challenging financial situation, partly as the result of the country's comparatively small advertising market, a situation conducive to media capture, partisanship and polarization.

In this context, statements of the interviewed experts and of survey respondents show the importance of international support for the Georgian media sector.

“Donations from the international community and foundations will allow the media to continue operating in the market.

Head of news at a national TV channel in Tbilisi

Another interviewee said: “Independent media support is essential. It is necessary that donor organizations and international funds support and pay attention to qualified, reliable media publications based on professional standards.”

Participants of the study stressed the need for financial assistance, especially for local media broadcasters. “If a media organization is not financially stable, it will not be able to cope with the challenges,” an editor of an online media outlet stated.

Other interviewees remarked that the task of fostering independent media goes beyond financial support. “We, the journalists in the provinces, do not know how to protect ourselves and we do not go to international conferences where we can deepen our knowledge. [...] Accordingly, the assistance of international organizations both financially and informationally is very important,” a journalist at a community radio station in southern Georgia remarked.

Both interviewees and survey respondents further pointed out that advocacy efforts are important, in particular with regard to attacks on journalists.

Referring to the 2021 attacks on media professionals, one interviewee appealed to the international community to put “pressure on the authorities to take responsibility for the safety of journalists and interference in their professional activities, to conduct proper and objective investigations, and to hold accountable all those who physically assault journalists.” The study participant, head of news at a national TV channel in Tbilisi, further stressed the need for international media advocacy, “because we see such cases of violations of the rights of journalists in the country and we see lawsuits filed against the media in the courts.”

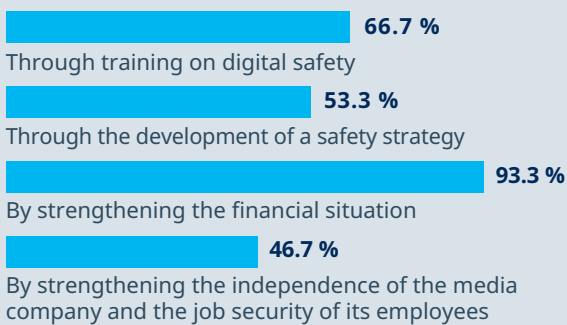
SURVEY FIGURES

Support for media outlets and journalists

Survey respondents saw the most urgent and greatest need for support from the international media development community to go towards improving the economic situation of newsrooms (93.3 %, 14 of 15), supporting newsrooms with training on digital safety (66.7 %, 10 of 15), developing safety strategies (53.3 %, 8 of 15) and strengthening the independence of media houses and job security for their staff (46.7 %, 7 of 15).

When asked what measures would be useful to help media professionals report independently and safely, training on dealing with hate speech and defamation campaigns ranked first (87.5 %, 14 of 16), followed closely by psychological (75 %, 12 of 16) and physical security training (75 %, 12 of 16).

How can your newsrooms be supported to work more safely?



n=15

Figure 7 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Georgian media workers with 64 respondents, conducted in October 2022.

Study profile

The qualitative data used in this study was collected via 15 in-depth interviews with media professionals in November and December 2022. The interviews were conducted by a Georgian researcher in Georgian or Russian.

Eight of the interviewed journalists are female and seven male. They work for national as well as regional (sub-national) media outlets, including TV, online, radio and print, located in Tbilisi and other provinces. The positions of the interviewed media professionals range from head of news service, presenter, producer, director, editor and manager to journalist. They work for private and public media houses, as well as for media houses described as “pro-government” or “pro-opposition”.

The quantitative data used in this study was collected in an anonymous online survey from October 4 to 20, 2022. The semi-standardized questionnaire included 61 questions in Georgian. It was sent to nine media associations and organizations representing several hundred media institutions and individual members, as well as to 59 media outlets, including TV, radio, online and print. A total of 64 media professionals took part in the survey. There were no compulsory questions, and 40 respondents completed all questions. The results are non-representative.

Participants were between 18 and 64 years old, with 35-44 years being the most-represented age group (35.9 %, 14 of 39). About two-thirds of respondents (67.6 %, 25 of 37) were female. The survey largely represents journalists (51.6 %, 33 of 64), followed by media managers (32.4 %, 15 of 64) and editors (23.4 %, 15 of 64). Nearly half of the respondents (45.9 %, 28 of 61) work in relatively small media outlets with fewer than 10 staff; larger media outlets with 30 or more employees accounted for about a quarter (24.6 %, 15 of 61).

More than half of the respondents work for online media outlets (58.7 %, 37 of 63), followed by people working for national and regional TV stations (25.4 %, 16 of 63). Around an eighth of respondents work for radio stations (12.7 %, 8 of 63) and hardly anyone for daily newspapers (3.2 %, 2 of 63).

The vast majority of respondents describe themselves as Georgian (94.7 %, 36 of 38), one respondent identifies themselves as Armenian and one as Azerbaijani. More than four-fifths of respondents (84.6 %, 33 of 39) use the Georgian language at work, three participants speak Russian and four speak additional languages like Ossetian and English at work.


More than four-fifths of the respondents (82.1 %, 32 of 39) live in urban areas, with almost half (46.2 %, 18 of 39) in the Tbilisi metropolitan area. Less than a fifth (17.9 %, 7 of 39) live in rural areas.

About a third of respondents (30 %, 12 of 40) work for a media outlet that has an ethnic minority as its main target audience. Half of the respondents work for media outlets that are funded by advertising (50 %, 7 of 14); others are internationally funded (42.9 %, 6 of 14). Three participants work for privately financed media outlets and one respondent works for a publicly funded media house.

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