**Influence of Polarization on Media Environment in Georgia During the Crisis**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to assess the threats and supporting mechanisms present in the Georgian media environment in 2022. Observation of the media environment was based on the evaluation of the participants involved in the research and further comparative analysis.

The research highlights the impact of political polarization and crises on media viability and the impact of global and local crises (including Russia’s war in Ukraine) on the media environment; focuses on the extent to which the safety of journalists is ensured in Georgia, how the investigation of crimes committed against journalists is conducted, and what is being done to end any impunity. Based on the challenges that have existed since previous years, the study analyzes the existing threats in relation to polarization, self-censorship and freedom of expression.

How media manage to maintain institutional viability (e.g., financial sustainability, content production, relationships with sources and access to information) is particularly important in the context of political polarization. In this process, the hindering and supporting mechanisms present in the media from the side of various actors are evaluated. The study includes an evaluation of solidarity journalism as a support mechanism through the lens of situations observed in 2022: 1. Solidarity towards the media; 2. Mutual solidarity between media outlets; 3. Solidarity from the media towards various vulnerable groups.

One of the main aspects of the research is the assessment of the challenges in the Georgian media environment as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis that followed. In this regard, under the existing conditions of Russian propaganda, the possible mechanisms of the influence of disinformation and its reduction are analyzed. The direct connection of artificial polarization, as a propaganda mechanism, to the Russian hybrid war, which deliberately destroys the credibility of journalism as a profession, is highlighted.

In the present study, the challenges and supporting mechanisms of the 2022 media environment are analyzed from the perspective of representatives (reporters, producers, media managers, media owners, journalists, and talk show hosts, etc.) in various media outlets. Among them are journalists from different “poles/sides” who are united by common concerns and different challenges caused by polarization.

**Keywords:** Media, polarization, freedom of expression, Georgia

**Introduction**

The media landscape in Georgia stands at a critical juncture, navigating the intricate interplay of geopolitical events, historical legacies, and contemporary challenges. Against the backdrop of Russia's war in Ukraine, the Georgian media environment finds itself grappling with multifaceted influences that shape its trajectory. This study delves into the nuanced dynamics of the Georgian media landscape, examining the profound impact of external factors such as Russia’s war in Ukraine and intrinsic elements like political polarization. As the Georgian media strives to fulfill its pivotal role in fostering an informed society and sustaining democracy, it confronts a confluence of challenges that extend beyond national borders.

The seismic events initiated by Russia's incursion into Ukraine have reverberated across the global stage, leading to a paradigm shift in the perception of threats emanating from the Russian Federation. This study scrutinizes how the war has catalyzed changes in the Georgian media's agenda, audience engagement, and its role in countering disinformation campaigns. The war's aftermath has not only heightened the target audience of information warfare but has also underscored the media's indispensable role in deciphering international contexts and threats while reporting on local news.

Political polarization, like in the previous year, continued to be a significant challenge to media viability. The 2021 media environment study (Gersamia & Toradze, 2021) revealed that the main threat to the media was political polarization and polarization among media organizations themselves, which led to: 1. stigmatization (attachment of partisan media labels) and the discrediting of journalists and media outlets; 2. interference with journalistic activity.

Simultaneously, political polarization has emerged as a formidable challenge, exerting a pervasive influence on media credibility and journalistic practices. Rooted in the Soviet legacy, political polarization in Georgia has evolved, intertwining with media affiliations and influencing the symbiotic relationship between political entities and media organizations. The study explores how this polarization has transformed the media landscape, affecting not only the content disseminated but also the very fabric of journalistic professionalism.

The media's response to external pressures and internal dynamics holds the key to its resilience and ability to navigate the complex terrain of contemporary journalism. By shedding light on these issues, this study aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the Georgian media landscape and provide insights into the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

**Literature review and Methodology**

Researchers (Tóth, Mihelj, Štětka, Kondor, 2022) confirm “while the selection of news sources is in line with people’s electoral (and to a lesser extent ideological) preferences... exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can also be strongly correlated with political and ideological leanings.”. Polarization may be exacerbated by social network algorithms, which offer users more information similar to those that meet their needs. It should also be noted that in Georgia, according to studies, the rate of Internet usage in 2022 has increased significantly (up to 81%). Accordingly, we assume that influence of information spread on internet has also expanded.

Newman (2022) links political polarization to the trend of harassment of journalists around the world and notes that in 2021, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to two fearless journalists – Maria Ressa from the Philippines and Dmitry Muratov from Russia – highlighted the urgency of this problem. According to the 2022 report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the level of confidence in journalism was lower (60%) “especially in countries where there is political polarization, economic weakness, and jour- nalists themselves are under attack“. According to data for 2022, trust in the media decreased in Georgia. In particular, according to the population survey conducted by IRI, in March, 60% trusted the media, and by September, trust had decreased by 5%.

Samkharadze (2022), based on various reports (OSCE 2018; 2020; 2021; GIP 2021), indicates that Georgian political competition (political debates, pre-election campaigns, parliamentary activities of parties, etc.) is devoid of ideological discourse and is replaced by radicalization and a high degree of uncompromising confrontation.These characteristics of polarization are also reflected in the media agenda. For example, Samkharadze (2022) notes that during 2022, 80% of Georgian Dream’s media briefings were directly related to the United National Movement, of which 92% contained a polarizing narrative.

The 2021 study (Gersamia, Toradze, 2021) confirmed that polarization in Georgia also had a so-called demonization effect, and “on the part of politicians, the media is perceived as a political opponent, and its discrediting and delegitimization is taking place in this discourse”. The government had a similar polarizing strategy towards critical media as it had the previous year: The opposition and the media are often considered in the same discourse and treated the same way. Such an agenda of the government affects the formation of public attitudes towards the media. Politicians continue to treat the media as a political opponent. In 2022, this tactic was already reflected in the aggressive, antisocial behavior of supporters of a particular party towards media representatives. While working in the field, journalists felt that citizens’ dissatisfaction with political issues shifted to journalists. The symbiotic relationship with parties and polarization have been killing journalism as a profession and replacing critical discourse with silence that, in turn, threatens the resilience of democracy.

In the present study, the challenges and supporting mechanisms of the 2022 media environment are analyzed from the perspective of representatives (reporters, producers, media managers, media owners, journalists, and talk show hosts, etc.) in various media outlets. Among them are journalists from different “poles/sides” who are united by common concerns and different challenges caused by polarization.

A qualitative research approach – focus group discussion and in-depth interviews – was selected as the research methodology. A discussion guideline with primary semi-structured questions was used as a qualitative research instrument. Secondary questions were identified during the discussion and interviews. The media environment, like in the previous year’s (2021) research, was examined based on the evaluations of respondents and the reality seen by them.

November and December 2022 were defined as the data collection period. As part of the research, two “offline” focus groups (number of participants: 17) and one online focus group (number of participants: 5) were conducted. Representatives of 13 media outlets participated in these focus groups. Among the participants were journalists, media managers, producers, media founders, writers, and talk show hosts.

In parallel with the focus groups, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of several media outlets (upon their request). In total, 25 representatives of 16 media outlets participated in the research, whose identities are confidential. In the sample of 25 representatives, 13 (52%) were female, while 12 (48%) were male. The age distribution of the respondents is as follows:

* 25-36 years – 5 (20%);
* 35-44 years – 14 (56%);
* 45-54 years – 3 (12%);
* 55 and above – 3 (12%).

Journalists, producers, talk-show hosts/presenters, media owners/founders, editors from the following media outlets participated in the focus group discussions: Georgian Public Broadcaster – the First Channel, Broadcasting TV company “Rustavi 2”, Broadcasting TV company “Maestro”, Broadcasting TV company “Mtavari Channel”, Broadcasting company “TV Pirveli”, Broadcasting TV company “Formula”, Broadcasting company “TV Imedi”, News service “Interpressnews”, Radio “Commersant”, Online media “publika.ge”, Online media “Netgazeti / batumelebi”, Investigative Studio “ifact”, Newspaper “Georgia Today”, Broadcasting company “TV Borjomi”, Online Media Chemi Imereti & newspaper Chemi Kharagauli and Broadcasting radio company in Gori Mozaika. Among them 5 were regional media outlets.

**Results and Discussion**

The conflict initiated by Russia against Ukraine has engendered a multifaceted transformation in the geopolitical milieu, compelling the Western world to confront the long-standing perils emanating from the Russian Federation. This belligerent episode served as a unifying force among Western nations, highlighting their shared interests and European identity vis-à-vis Ukraine and Georgia. The aftermath of Russia's intervention in Ukraine witnessed an expansion in the target audience of information warfare, leveraging the inherent allure of war, even when its immediacy does not necessarily threaten the reader or viewer, as aptly articulated by Kitty (2005).

In the Georgian context, the incursion from the Russian side intensified, with a particular focus on pro-Western political opposition, non-governmental organizations, and notably, the media. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, novel challenges emerged within the Georgian media landscape, predominantly revolving around the combat against Russian disinformation campaigns.

The coverage of the Ukrainian conflict concurrently served as a litmus test for the media to discern the intricacies of Russian disinformation. It is crucial to underscore that Russian propaganda is most pernicious when it exploits subjects about which the public possesses an inadequate comprehension, such as the history of Ukraine and European institutions and aspirations. Consequently, the media's role becomes paramount in elucidating the international context, deciphering threats, and furnishing support mechanisms while reporting local news on a day-to-day basis. The overarching objective is to cultivate a dependable and well-informed milieu for the audience, thereby fortifying an enlightened society and fostering democracy.

As elucidated by the 2021 media environment study (Gersamia, Toradze, 2021), political polarization within the Georgian context exacerbates self-censorship, a phenomenon designed to supplant critical journalistic inquiry with silence and trepidation. It is imperative to underscore that during crises, concerted journalistic solidarity and collective action can ameliorate polarization within the media ecosystem and reinforce the resilience of media institutions.

In 2022, the nexus between polarization and self-censorship became particularly pronounced, especially during times of crisis. During such periods, not only do comments from the "opposing side" vanish from media content, but the entire narrative becomes distorted, thereby tarnishing the journalistic profession. This enduring issue traces its roots to the Soviet legacy, where media organizations and political parties forged a symbiotic relationship in the nascent multi-party space that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In this regard, a political talk show host from Formula TV contextualizes the genesis of polarization: "Back then, it was crucial for new political parties to disseminate their messages to the public, and they all followed the tried-and-true Soviet path by establishing their own Iskra [The Spark] newspapers. Consequently, media outlets aligned with specific political entities reemerged in Georgia, engendering partisan polarization in the independent Georgian press from its inception”.

Over three decades since independence, the schism between political parties has permeated directly into the media landscape, with journalists contending that it has assumed a more existential dimension than during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Journalists attribute the deepening polarization of the media ecosystem and the resultant enfeeblement of media institutions to the presence of an oligarchic system in Georgia. In the words of a Formula talk show host, "Political polarization serves as the very instrument that erodes the media as an institution and undermines its sustainability. The government's objective is to quash independent journalism."

Participants in the discourse maintain that political polarization is inextricably linked to media polarization. Political debates also afford the media an opportunity to enhance their credibility, a dynamic conspicuously stifled by the government's communication strategy in Georgia. Despite the stigmatization of critical media by the government and the ruling party, participants underscored their persistent efforts to secure interviews or participation in debates from members of the ruling party.

The host of the political talk show at the TV company Mtavari Channel elucidates the constraints imposed by political polarization and government boycotts, contending that journalists can no longer discharge their professional duties effectively, as they often find themselves accommodating only one side in the absence of government representatives. This, in turn, reinforces the perception of media bias among the audience. Media representatives maintain that both the government and the opposition bear a share of responsibility in mitigating political polarization. They perceive polarization as an artificially induced process and a continuation of the Russian hybrid war, underscoring the necessity of analyzing the influence of the media landscape and political polarization within the contextual framework of this protracted conflict.

Journalists consistently report experiencing the pervasive effects of polarization while working in the field, observing that the attitude and demeanor of politicians vary depending on the journalist's affiliated channel. The intensification of political polarization has rendered journalists' individual allegiances less consequential, as exemplified by the case of journalists from different channels unanimously agreeing to conceal channel logos on their microphones during crisis coverage for safety reasons.

Participants in the discourse attribute the ongoing developments in the Georgian media to a meticulously planned Russian hybrid war, ostensibly facilitated by a specific actor within Georgia, identified as Bidzina Ivanishvili. During the discussions, political polarization was repeatedly cast as an extension of the Russian hybrid war, wherein sensitive topics germane to Georgian society are strategically targeted for manipulation. It is worth noting that in 2021, media representatives alluded to the Russian influence in the media landscape and expressed apprehension that the treatment of media in Georgia mirrored the "Russian model."

The government's persistent adoption of an aggressive rhetoric towards journalists, coupled with the absence of accountability and investigative measures, has contributed to the erosion of the journalism profession's credibility. Consequently, a polarized society has emerged, unreservedly manifesting anti-social behaviors, including verbal and physical assaults, against journalists representing either side. Journalists in Georgia confront the perilous reality of having to contend for their physical safety every day, irrespective of their media outlet's logo or ideological affiliation.

The 2021 study illuminated an additional dimension of political polarization: the media being turned against journalists, ultimately fomenting polarization within the media fraternity, pitting journalists against each other. The 2022 study shed light on the adverse repercussions of this phenomenon, whereby the discrediting of the journalism profession has affected all journalists, regardless of their media outlet's logo. Allegedly, both pro-government and pro-opposition media representatives expressed concerns about this deteriorating state of affairs.

Journalists operating in both Tbilisi and regional areas brace themselves for the possibility of encountering aggression while on duty. The primary catalyst for such aggression is the logo of the journalist's affiliated television company displayed on their microphone. Government media representatives face hostility from opposition supporters, whereas opposition journalists encounter aggression from government supporters.

Such confrontations are particularly pronounced during the coverage of public demonstrations, where the rhetoric directed towards journalists, irrespective of their affiliation, bears remarkable similarities. This often includes derogatory and offensive language, such as "murderer" and "why did you even come here?" Journalists from both perceived pro-government and pro-opposition channels have, on occasion, opted to remove their channel's identifying marks from their microphones in advance of covering events where aggression towards journalists is anticipated. It is pertinent to underscore that journalists from all television channels participating in the research uniformly reported that aggression was not directed at individual journalists but was instead triggered solely by the sight of the channel's logo.

Participants in the discourse attribute this form of polarization to journalists themselves, citing instances where the media has inadvertently propagated violence against their colleagues. The overarching atmosphere of aggression has permeated all corners, transcending network affiliations. The research identifies sporadic instances of solidarity among journalists, particularly in the field, where colleagues have stood up for one another during confrontations. However, the manifestation of solidarity has been less evident among well-known studio-based journalists. In order to ensure the safety of journalists amid political polarization, the discourse advocates for a cessation of calls for aggression within the profession, emphasizing the imperative of unity and a shared professional language.

The microphone, emblematic of a journalist's role, has also become a source of danger for sources themselves, exacerbating apprehension and self-censorship among them. A case recounted by a journalist from Mtavari Channel exemplifies this phenomenon, where a source expressed gratitude for the journalist's coverage but subsequently declined to share the story on social media, citing concerns related to the channel's logo. The source was open to disseminating the story if it could be shared without the Mtavari Channel logo and with any instances featuring the journalist herself edited out.

Conversely, when discussing the unacceptable dynamics between politicians and journalists, participants frequently referenced an incident from the previous year, wherein the Minister of Culture, Sports, and Youth Affairs, in response to a critical question, forcibly seized a regional journalist's microphone and proceeded to use it for her own purposes, publicly humiliating the journalist. Journalists express deep concern when such behavior from the government towards journalists becomes a routine occurrence.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study resonate with the assumptions articulated in the literature review chapter, providing a nuanced confirmation of the multifaceted challenges and influences shaping the Georgian media environment. The impact of Russia's war in Ukraine, as anticipated in existing literature, has indeed served as a catalyst for shifts in the media landscape.

The intricate relationship between political polarization and media credibility, a theme extensively discussed is reaffirmed through empirical evidence. The study unveils the historical roots of polarization in the Soviet legacy, aligning with scholarly perspectives that posit the symbiosis between political entities and media organizations. The findings underscore the detrimental impact of political polarization on the media's ability to function as an impartial informant, aligning with the literature's contention that polarization erodes the foundations of journalism. The synthesis of these findings and established theoretical frameworks provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the media in Georgia, paving the way for informed strategies to navigate and fortify the resilience of the media landscape in the face of evolving geopolitical and internal dynamics. Political polarization constitutes a primary, albeit not exclusive, threat to media credibility within society. Journalists themselves play a pivotal role in reestablishing media credibility, not only by upholding their professional standards but also by extending protection to colleagues on opposing sides. The institutionalization of solidarity and the broadening of inclusivity among diverse groups emerge as key strategies for fortifying a supportive media environment.

In comparison to previous years, the discussion surrounding mutual solidarity and collaborative approaches to navigating this challenging landscape has gained prominence among journalists. Institutionalizing solidarity has the potential to safeguard professional standards and enhance resilience. Furthermore, an enduring commitment to human rights, particularly those of vulnerable groups, underpins the ethos of solidarity journalism. The "matrix of solidarity" (Noren, 2022) is fortified through the engagement of multiple stakeholders and robust advocacy efforts. Ultimately, trust in the media can be reinstated by prioritizing human rights and elevating their representation within the media discourse.

In an environment marked by polarization and a declining media credibility, the propensity for violence against journalists by various societal groups is invariably linked to the media outlet the journalist represents. All television channel journalists participating in the research underscore that aggression is not directed at individual journalists but is spurred by the sight of the microphone's logo. Journalists are universally victims of physical and verbal abuse, irrespective of their ideological alignment. In response, the discourse advocates for enhanced institutionalized solidarity and the imperative of inclusivity among various groups to foster a more supportive media milieu.

To this end, increasing the inclusivity of civil society, decoupling the interdependence between media and political parties, and restoring public trust in the media emerge as paramount imperatives. Recent shifts in public attitudes toward the media, reflected in diminishing credibility and escalating aggression towards journalists, are exacerbated by nihilism, polarization, and the weakening of democratic institutions. Consequently, the role of free media remains paramount as a bulwark of democracy, pivoting toward the vital task of ameliorating the media landscape and reconstituting trust.

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