



# **Media Environment 2025:**

Navigating During Media Capture in Georgia

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Tbilisi  
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# Media Environment 2025: Navigating During Media Capture in Georgia

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*The trend throughout the world is such that you no longer need tyrants and despots to silence the press. Elected leaders have found out that they do not really have to kill journalists anymore.*

*You can just kill journalism.*

**Kunda Dixit**  
Nepalese journalist

## MILESTONES: 2025

- **January 12** – At night, police in Batumi [arrested](#) the founder and director of the online outlets Batumelebi and Netgazeti, journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli.
- **January 20** – After 32 years of broadcasting, the regional television station in Adjara, TV 25, was closed down.
- **February 19** – Extremely problematic, media-rights-restricting [amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting entered into force, thereby intensifying pressure on critical media outlets in order to further consolidate the ruling team's power.
- **February 20** – [Amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Grants entered into force, and the Georgian Dream party finally banned the receipt of foreign grants without government consent.
- **March 3** – Lithuania and Estonia [imposed](#) sanctions (visa restrictions) on the persons implicated in the Mzia Amaghlobeli case – judges, prosecutors and police officers.
- **March 27** – The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) [registered](#) for examination a case concerning the Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence (the so-called Agents/Russian Law).
- **April 1** – The Law of Georgia on the Registration of Foreign Agents – Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) – entered into force. Its [provisions](#) conflict with the freedoms of expression and association protected by Articles 15, 17, and 22 of the Constitution of Georgia. The law is aimed at silencing, discrediting and persecuting independent civil society, organizations, and media outlets, including through the imposition of criminal liability.
- **May 1** – The broadcasting company Mtavari Channel ceased broadcasting.
- **June 26** – The following entered into force: [amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Freedom of Speech and Expression; [amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Assemblies and Demonstrations, which further complicated the work of the media.
- **July 2** – [Amendments](#) to the Law of Georgia on Common Courts entered into force, restricting coverage of court proceedings. As a result, court reporting (including materials obtained by citizen journalists) was severely restricted and live broadcasting was removed from the agenda.
- **August 6** – Judge Nino Sakhelashvili of the Batumi City Court [sentenced](#) the founder and director of Batumelebi and Netgazeti, journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli, to two years' imprisonment (after a 38-day hunger strike and >20 court hearings).

- **August 8** - The European Media Freedom Act ([EMFA](#)) entered into force.
- **September 9** - Mzia Amaghlobeli was presented with the [Free Media Award](#) for journalistic courage and work under extremely difficult conditions.
- **September 12** - For special merit before society, the Ilia Chavchavadze National Prize was [awarded](#) to the newspaper Batumelebi, specifically to Mzia Amaghlobeli and Eter Turadze.
- **October 4** - Municipal elections were held.
- **October 9** - Mzia Amaghlobeli received the [World Press Freedom Hero Award](#). The award is presented by the International Press Institute (IPI) and International Media Support (IMS) to journalists who have made an outstanding contribution to the defence of press freedom.
- **October 12** - Mzia Amaghlobeli was awarded the [Forum 2000](#) International Award for the Fight Against Autocracy.
- **October 22** - Mzia Amaghlobeli was awarded the European Union's highest human rights distinction, [the Sakharov Prize](#). The prize is awarded to those who selflessly fight for the protection of human rights and freedom of thought throughout the world.
- **November 2** - The honorary chairman of Georgian Dream, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, was included on the list of [Predators of Press Freedom](#).
- **November 10** - Mzia Amaghlobeli was honoured in Vienna with the [Paul Weis Prize](#). The prize is awarded for courage by the civil society initiative Courage2030.
- **November 18** - A panel of the Kutaisi Court of Appeals upheld in full the judgment of Batumi City Court and left Mzia Amaghlobeli in detention.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study is to describe and assess the media environment existing in Georgia in 2025 and the Russian genesis of media capture. It also seeks to identify the main threats and supporting mechanisms that influenced the information ecosystem, the viability of the media, trust in the media, and the institutionalisation of solidarity in Georgia. The study highlights how the media operates under kleptocratic governance, and how it confronts Russian influence and the threats arising from disinformation and powerful propaganda. It further describes how the challenges present in 2025 affected the sustainability of media organizations, journalistic activity, and the quality of media output. One aspect of the study is to analyse the role and the process of transformation of the media environment in the context of Georgia's European integration.

The study describes the importance of the journalistic profession and the editorial courage of journalists in crisis situations and highlights transformative examples of the struggle for the survival of freedom of expression. Particular attention is devoted to assessing the arrest of journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli and its impact on the media environment. It analyses the impact on the media of the instrumentalisation of repressive laws and evaluates the incompatibility of the legislative changes with European standards, the challenges of court and protest journalism; how polarization and propaganda affect journalistic activity, and what means exist to counter them.

As in previous years, the study assesses solidarity journalism as an effective support mechanism and describes how it manifested itself in 2025, which also involves observing media's financial independence, the increase of trust in the media, and the indicators for its assessment.

A retrospective observation of the media environment is important, since the participants involved in the study recall events and episodes from previous years that left a transformative imprint on the media environment. Such instances lead to democratic backsliding and may take the form of the capture/closure of a television station, the arrest of a single journalist, the murder of a journalist, the adoption/amendment of a law, and so on. The chilling effect of such episodes becomes clearly visible only years later and calls for re-evaluation. For example, during the rule of the Citizens' Union, such episodes included the murder of Giorgi Sanaia and the raid on Rustavi 2 (2001); during the rule of the United National Movement there was the raid on Imedi TV and the suspension of its broadcasting; and under the rule of Georgian Dream such examples include the Rustavi 2 case and the death of Erosi Kitsmarishvili, the "Gavrilov's Night" of 2019, the violent dispersal of journalists and the tragic death of Lekso Lashkarava in 2021, the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli, and others.

Drawing on [Media Voice](#) studies, since 2021 the following have been constantly present among the challenges of the media environment and still persist today:



- ▶ Growing polarization (real and illusory) and its impact on media content, trust and solidarity;
- ▶ Russian influences, anti-Western narratives and disinformation;
- ▶ Campaigns by the ruling team to discredit the media;
- ▶ Impunity for crimes committed against journalists and the normalization of violence;
- ▶ The safety of journalists (physical, psychological and digital) and arrests;
- ▶ A deteriorated legislative environment, the instrumentalisation of repressive laws and so-called SLAPP cases;
- ▶ Institutionalisation of solidarity: public solidarity with the media, collegiality and solidarity among media outlets, solidarity with vulnerable groups;
- ▶ Financial challenges;
- ▶ Diversity of content: access to information and to sources;
- ▶ Barriers to covering elections, court proceedings, and protest events;
- ▶ The influence of political parties on the media;
- ▶ Self-censorship and fear among journalists, and so on.

**Alongside the retrospective of past events, it is also interesting to see how journalists envisage the best version of the Georgian media ecosystem, the clarity of such a picture, and the focus of its development.**

The study also includes a section on conclusions and recommendations, which highlights the importance of the institutionalisation of solidarity and the mechanisms for restoring trust in the media. For greater clarity, the study separately sets out the terminological framework and definitions.

## TERMINOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

In recent years, new neologisms have gradually become established in the field of media terminology: pro-Western and anti-Western media, pro-Russian media, pro-government/governmental and opposition media, critical and propagandistic media, and others. These neologisms have taken root in response to new political, social and cultural phenomena and have also expressed, in the language of the media, the nature of the polarization of the media environment.

Polarised media use labels for one another (including stigmatizing terms). These are, on the one hand, “opposition/critical/Western/radical” media and, on the other hand, “government/pro-Russian/propagandistic” media. From year-to-year, the majority of participants involved in the study most frequently continue to regard online media as “independent media”.

**European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)** – In 2024, the European Union adopted the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), which fully entered into force on August 8, 2025. The Act lays down common rules for the proper functioning of the internal market for media services in the European Union, establishes a Board, and protects media independence and pluralism. EMFA’s objectives (for example, safeguarding editorial independence, the safety of journalists, media transparency and independence of regulatory authorities, and the independence of the Public Broadcaster) strengthen a trustworthy and free information ecosystem across the European Union, which is important for strengthening democracy.

**Kleptocracy** – A form of government in which the government is composed of corrupt individuals and uses its power to appropriate the people’s wealth for personal benefit and enrichment. Kleptocracy is associated with authoritarian regimes and with the capture of state institutions, political power, and resources ([Britannica](#)).

**Crowdfunding** – A method of collective financing whereby a project, start-up or idea is supported by many people through small contributions, mainly via the internet on dedicated platforms.

**Chilling effect** – Used mainly in the fields of law and media communication; denotes a situation in which people, especially journalists or active citizens, restrict their freedom of expression because of fear, pressure, or possible sanctions (Shaua, 1978).

**Prompt** – An instruction that we give to artificial intelligence (e.g. a chatbot, text generator) in order to determine **what** it should do and **how** – with what style, tone, structure, or constraints. A prompt may be a single word, a question, a detailed task or a scenario, and it has a direct impact on the content and quality of the response received.

**Court journalism (also: court reporting)** – A branch of specialized journalism that systematically covers court proceedings (hearings and decisions). Its purpose is to provide the public with accurate and understandable information about the administration of justice, to promote the transparency of the legal system, and to uphold the principle of open justice.

**Solidarity journalism** – A direction/approach in journalism that, rather than prioritising informational, formal balance, places its emphasis on asymmetries of power and on responsible solidarity with vulnerable/marginalised groups. Solidarity journalism maintains professional standards (fact-checking, diversity of sources, transparency) but leans toward those whose interests are mostly disregarded. It does not merely cover “both sides” and uphold “objectivity”, but seeks to reflect a fair, human-centred reality that helps protect dignity and foster an awareness of social injustice. The author of the term and initiative is the American professor [Anita Varma](#).

**Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP)** – A legal instrument used by powerful individuals and organisations to intimidate and/or financially harm active citizens, journalists, and civil society representatives. The direct aim of a SLAPP is not to win the legal dispute, but to exhaust the financial, psychological, and time resources of the target of the lawsuit. The European Union has adopted a Directive ([2024/1069](#)) that lays down minimum procedural standards to protect against strategic lawsuits (SLAPP) and to reduce the chilling effect. In Georgia, there is an anti-SLAPP coalition that operates, bringing together non-governmental organisations (including MediaVoice).

**Chatham House Rule** – A meeting format under which participants are free to use the information received, but the identity or affiliation of the participants must not be disclosed. The identities of individuals are confidential, but not what they said. The Rule helps bring people together, break down barriers, generate ideas and reach agreement on decisions. It was formally adopted by Chatham House in 1927.

**Digital Services Act (DSA)** – A European Union regulation that aims to regulate online platforms in order to make the online environment safer and more transparent for users. The DSA lays down new obligations for online intermediaries, in particular for very large online platforms (VLOPs) and very large online search engines (VLOSEs), to combat illegal content, disinformation, and other online harms. The main objectives of the DSA are to protect users’ rights, increase the accountability of platforms, promote innovation, and ensure effective supervision. The DSA includes a range of obligations, including the swift removal of illegal content, transparency in advertising, risk assessment and mitigation, and independent auditing.

**Very Large Online Platforms (VLOP)** – Include social networks, search engines, e-commerce platforms and content-sharing services. Very large online platforms (VLOPs) refer to companies such as Google, Amazon, Meta, LinkedIn, YouTube, and others. They have a very large number of users and exert significant influence on public opinion, economic activity and the dissemination of information. The term VLOP became particularly relevant after the adoption of the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA), where it is used to describe platforms that have more than 45 million active users across the EU.

## 1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Observation of the media environment, as in previous studies (2021–2024), was carried out from the perspective of respondents representing various Georgian media outlets. The data collection period was defined as October and November 2025. The study involved representatives of national television and radio broadcasters, as well as regional, online, print, and investigative media. In selecting participants, the fact was taken into account that, according to the Caucasus Barometer [2025 survey](#) (April–May 2024), 49% of respondents in Georgia name television as their first and most important source of information on current events, 21% name social networks, and 19% the internet (excluding social networks). In the sampling for our study, consideration was therefore given specifically to those television channels that are most trusted as sources of information on politics and current affairs. According to the [survey](#) (Atchaidze, CRRC-Georgia, 2024), these television companies are: Imedi (22%), Mtavari Channel (8%), Rustavi 2 (8%), TV Pirveli (6%), Formula (2%) and the Public Broadcaster (2%).

The research method chosen is qualitative research, specifically in-depth interviews. Face-to-face interviews bring problems to light and protect respondents' confidentiality to the greatest extent possible. A discussion guide with initial semi-structured questions was used as the research instrument. In the course of the interviews, secondary questions emerged.

Among the respondents were journalists/reporters, media managers, producers, founders of media outlets, and authors and hosts of talk shows and programmes. Among them are individuals positioned at different poles of the polarized media environment. During the study period, a total of 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of 19 media organisations (each interview lasting from 40 to 60 minutes, in total approximately 18 hours). Of these, 5 respondents represented media loyal to the ruling team; the identity and affiliation of all respondents are confidential in the study.

Due to the unprecedented persecution of media representatives in 2025, the Chatham House Rules were used for the first time during data collection. Under these Rules, participants in a meeting are free to use the information received, but their identity or affiliation must not be disclosed. This approach strengthens trust ([PCI](#), Richter, 2024), and researchers also resort to this practice when they wish to encourage candid discussion and/or conversation and to collect information that would not otherwise be shared. This approach also has its limitations. The participants involved in the study do not know one another's identities, and the interview guide was not shared in advance. The interviews were recorded only in non-digital form, and the notes were destroyed after processing. Unlike in previous years' studies, for the first time this study is not accompanied by an annex of media organisations.

## 2. MAIN FINDINGS

In 2025, the capture of critical and independent media moved into an active (one might say final) phase, which further sharpened the discourse on Russian influence and interests. The issue of Russian occupation almost disappeared from the media agenda. In contrast to the capture of democratic institutions and the country's isolation, what remained was solidarity – society's natural response in defence of freedom.

### Barbed Wire in the Media

- ▶ The Georgian media environment has come ever closer to the Russian and Belarusian systems. Specific cases and processes (the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli, the closure of Mtavari Channel, the crisis in the Public Broadcaster, the adoption of repressive laws, etc.) show that the media environment is not collapsing in isolated spots but is breaking down systemically and institutionally. In previous years, there was no expectation in Georgia that the country would in fact come to resemble Belarus or Russia. From this perspective, the current situation is shocking for media representatives.
- ▶ Russian hybrid influence on the media environment increased significantly and became particularly visible from 2022 onwards, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Along with the rise of disinformation, the dividing line of polarization has also become more distinct. From this period, anti-Western propaganda has also become more pronounced in pro-government media. Representatives of critical media regard government journalists as the main culprits in the strengthening of propaganda.
- ▶ The journalists involved in the study consider it alarming that in Georgia the topic of Russian occupation has disappeared from the agenda of central, regional, and international media. Journalists no longer go, and are no longer able to go, to the occupation line to film the process of "borderisation", to speak with the local population and to document the "creeping occupation". The process is further complicated by the fact that filming requires permission from the State Security Service and entails additional costs. Access to information has become more difficult in the villages located along the occupation line, and journalistic sources have also decreased.
- ▶ The disappearance of critical and pro-Western media further strengthens Russian influence and the spread of disinformation in Georgia. Russian-style propaganda seeks to erase the visibility of human stories. The study showed that one of the possible aims of regulating court journalism may be precisely that the emotional signifiers and visual language which created a sense of social interaction with viewers were obstructing propaganda. Accordingly, an effective mechanism for weakening Russian-style propaganda is to foreground human stories on a wide range of topics and to demonstrate pro-social behaviours (solidarity, empathy, support, humour, creativity, etc.).

## The Case of Mzia's Freedom and "Editorial Courage"

- ▶ With the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli, the repressive policy previously directed against journalists entered a new stage. Mzia's arrest had a chilling effect on the media environment: journalists began to think about possible scenarios of their own arrest, and about unjust and disproportionate punishment. In this way, the Georgian media environment became even more closely connected to the Russian and Belarusian scenario.
- ▶ Later, a paradoxical dynamic emerged: although the aim of the exemplary punishment was to intimidate journalists, the result was a powerful sense of solidarity and responsibility, whereby an individual case became a moral obligation for society as a whole.
- ▶ Mzia's case first sowed fear and later courage, a development brought about by Mzia Amaghlobeli's personal qualities and bravery, which then transformed into journalists' "editorial courage". Mzia's story highlighted what a journalist can do in the struggle against an authoritarian regime. The case of Mzia Amaghlobeli will likely have an impact on the history of Georgian journalism, on the rethinking of the profession's post-Soviet legacy, and on its reputational restoration. Her persona may contribute to the rebranding of the journalistic profession in Georgia and give it a distinct ethical colouring and scale.
- ▶ The case of Mzia Amaghlobeli actively brought developments in Georgia and the issue of political prisoners back onto the international agenda. In the campaign-style coverage of the case, unprecedented solidarity emerged between international and local media organisations.
- ▶ Mzia's case also influences how the cases of other defendants are assessed. This is reflected in society's reaction – comparing other crimes committed or sentences handed down with the disproportionate two-year sentence imposed on Mzia Amaghlobeli. These comparisons further underscore that Mzia Amaghlobeli was punished for her profession on political grounds, and not because she had committed any violation of the law. This is a direct indication and message to all other law-enforcement officials that, if they remain loyal servants of a corrupt system, they will remain unpunished.
- ▶ The impact of international solidarity on Mzia's case was ambivalent, but predominantly positive: on the one hand, it intensified the regime's aggressive rhetoric, while on the other, it ensured Mzia's physical and symbolic protection. Despite the ultimately unjust verdict, the participants in the study attribute to this solidarity the fact that, instead of a sentence of 4 to 7 years, the charge was reclassified and Mzia was sentenced to 2 years.

## The chilling effect of the legislative environment

- ▶ In Georgia, media capture is taking place through the instrumentalisation of repressive laws. In 2025, legal frameworks were transformed into a coordinated repressive system in which the combination of these laws and their unpredictable, selective enforcement creates financial, legal, and psychological pressure on critical and independent media. As a result, fear and self-censorship have increased, and resources are being diverted into judicial bureaucracy. The free circulation of information – access to sources, and the creation and dissemination of content – is systematically restricted.
- ▶ In recent years, the dramatically deteriorated media environment and the cascade of adopted anti-Western laws have cost Georgia the leadership position in the region that it had built up over many years. As a result of the ruling team's policy, media laws, and the ways in which they are implemented have increasingly diverged from European standards and moved closer to Russian and Belarusian models. A number of these amendments will in the future constitute an obstacle on the path to European integration, as they run counter to the Association Agreement concluded with the European Union and to the Constitution of Georgia.
- ▶ Legislative initiatives and amendments in previous years have revealed that it was not so much the laws taken individually as their combination that created a repressive environment. The amendment to the Law of Georgia on Grants, which financially strangled media organisations (especially regional outlets, online media, and investigative studios), did the greatest damage to the media environment. This was followed by the FARA law, which introduced risks of imprisonment. These laws quickly changed the behaviour of journalists and donor organisations.
- ▶ The legislative changes were implemented in harsher forms than journalists had imagined. Unlike in Russia, the adoption and entry into force of repressive laws in Georgia took place at an accelerated pace. In the journalists' view, the main objective of these laws was to sow fear, and that objective has already been achieved. The "disappearance" of the media is occurring not only through repression, but also through the intensification of fear and self-censorship and the diversion of vital reserves into legal and bureaucratic battles, in which the media ceases its work itself.
- ▶ Repressive laws are systematically killing the journalistic profession. After the adoption of these laws, critical media organisations continue to exist legally and formally, but they have collapsed organisationally and/or are on the verge of destruction; their viability (the production of daily content) is constrained. Against this backdrop, an active "brain drain" from the profession is under way.
- ▶ Compared with the previous year, the number of court proceedings, detentions and fines involving journalists critical of the ruling team has doubled. Specifically, of 162 such cases, only 11 are related to pro-government television, and all these concern court proceedings involving employees dismissed from the Public Broadcaster and a critically minded member of the Board of Trustees detained during a demonstration. In 2024, this figure had quadrupled.



In conditions of the capture of the national judiciary, the effective use of international legal mechanisms – the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), UN treaty bodies and special rapporteurs, OSCE/Council of Europe instruments and their provisional/interim measures – through strategic litigation, monitoring and advocacy becomes even more important for the protection of human rights.

## **Financial Crisis**

- ▶ From a financial perspective, 2025 proved to be the most difficult year, as the attack on the media was consolidated by state institutions and alternative avenues of funding were cut off. The main mechanism for “strangling” the media turned out to be the disappearance of financial resources and the instrumentalisation of the fear of punishment.
- ▶ As in previous years, instead of developing, the media continued to operate in a defensive and survival mode; however, traditional television media became so weakened that it ceased broadcasting and/or shut down part of its programming. In the regions, a number of media organisations closed down or changed the profile of their activities.
- ▶ The closure of the Mtavari Channel television station had a negative impact on the media environment. This precedent sowed fear and reinforced the threat of closure for other critical television channels. The involvement of the Prosecutor’s Office in the dispute between the owners created a SLAPP effect. The channel’s transformation onto alternative platforms was not fully able to replace its television niche and audience. This further disrupted, in favour of the ruling team, the balance of power within the “fourth estate”.
- ▶ The financial crisis in the media is exacerbated by the fact that Georgian businesses do not adequately stand by independent media. Their primary interest is directed toward pro-government media. The business sector avoids funding critical media so as not to provoke the displeasure of the ruling team.
- ▶ The legacy that the media has inherited from the Soviet period is problematic. In post-Soviet society, there is still no culture of financially supporting the media, subscribing to it or making donations, although in times of crisis the public nevertheless helps the media. In 2025, media organisations became more focused on increasing public engagement. After the cessation of grant funding, regional media have been actively working to mobilise subscribers, a process that has shown a more or less positive dynamic.
- ▶ Alternative sources of income (donations, collective funding/crowdfunding, subscriptions) still constitute a temporary support mechanism. Managers view generating income via the YouTube platform with skepticism, since, given the specific characteristics of the Georgian language, the platform offers relatively limited opportunities for monetisation.



- ▶ After donor-funded content disappeared from television, the media environment became even more polarized, since the obligations related to journalistic standards and balance under international grants had created a relatively more neutral and diverse space.
- ▶ Because of financial problems, critical television channels are unable to produce entertainment programmes. Pro-government television channels, in addition to news and analytical programmes, produce entertainment content and offer audiences series and a diverse programming schedule, which attracts viewers. The financial crisis in the media also leads to the disappearance of non-commercial topics and discussions from the agenda.
- ▶ Neither donors nor critical media organisations were prepared for the challenges that emerged. Despite the fact that donors and non-governmental organisations had studied the trajectory of repressive laws and media harassment in other countries, it was not possible to prevent a similar development in Georgia.

## **Content Production**

- ▶ In critical media organisations, more barriers are emerging to journalists' ability to create and deliver quality, diverse content to audiences.
- ▶ Content production has been deliberately made even more difficult precisely in those spaces where media and public interest is high and proactive media work is essential: in courts, at protest rallies, in the legislative body, and elsewhere.
- ▶ Media pluralism has come under a real threat, caused by an imbalance in the distribution of power and in the diversity of content across broadcasting and online media. The closure of Mtavari Channel, a television station critical of the ruling team, together with attacks on online media outlets, has collectively weakened the critical media flank.
- ▶ Access to public information has worsened (including in Parliament and the courts). Thematic and genre diversity is directly linked to reaching a broader audience. Critical media no longer have the human or material resources to produce diverse content. Increased self-censorship among sources affects the quality of materials.
- ▶ The problematic practice of a symbiotic relationship between the media and political parties remains a challenge, as it hinders the development of media that are oriented toward public issues and interests.
- ▶ In 2025, the media began to use artificial intelligence platforms in professional activities; however, no editorial protocols exist in this area, which increases the risks of spreading disinformation.
- ▶ Despite the increased activity of alternative media (e.g. YouTube) in Georgia, television still remains the main source of information, although the imbalance of power in favour of the ruling team is also evident on digital platforms.

- ▶ In 2025, the agenda of pro-government media changed and they began covering corruption cases involving high-ranking officials. However, this was not an independent editorial decision; here too, pro-government media merely replicated the ruling team's agenda. For years, critical and independent media had been the target of the ruling team precisely because only they covered cases of corrupt high officials and thus posed a threat to their remaining in power.
- ▶ According to journalists, the Public Broadcaster has lost its niche – to serve as a platform for any citizen. The channel has effectively assumed the role of an entertainment channel. At the Adjara Public Broadcaster, too, there is talk of growing self-censorship and of the fact that local journalists have adapted to the political conjuncture and avoid asking critical questions.
- ▶ In 2025, a record low number of local and international media outlets observed the municipal elections held in Georgia. Access to information during the election period deteriorated even further.

## Court Journalism

- ▶ The ban on photo and video recording in the courts was aimed at restricting the coverage of cases of high public interest. It constituted an artificial intervention in the discourse that the media offered to show social reality and that also allowed for generalisation. Speeches delivered in court, which created elements of social interaction, disappeared from media discourse.
- ▶ The restriction weakened the media's involvement and its watchdog function, thereby undermining public oversight: the media can no longer use visual material when covering court proceedings, which reduces the level of public awareness. Journalists are forced to describe court proceedings only in words, which is often insufficient to convey the full picture. Through new legislative and bureaucratic mechanisms, media coverage of these proceedings has been virtually eliminated.
- ▶ The absence of documented material creates fertile ground for the spread of disinformation. The public have no possibility to visually verify the account. As a result, more space has opened for propaganda and for the discrediting of convicted persons.
- ▶ The ban on filming in the courtroom has made journalists' work more difficult: it has restricted timeliness, personalisation and the portrayal of human stories, the level of information and credibility, exclusivity, the sense of presence and impartiality. Because of the hostile environment, it is physically difficult for journalists to work in Tbilisi City Court and on the surrounding premises.
- ▶ The restrictions imposed on the work of the media in the courts were met, as far as possible, with a response from the media: alternative forms of storytelling were brought to the fore (the practice of reporting through so-called live blogs and sketches). In response, the High Council of Justice adopted a [decision](#) banning the bringing of technical devices and means of communication (laptops, mobile phones, etc.) into the courts. Court bailiffs were ordered not to allow any technical devices to be brought into (or used in) the courtroom.

- ▶ The effect of visual imagery had been important for showing the reactions of detainees, the judge and the courtroom, as well as for identifying false witnesses. In the journalists' view, the ruling team closed off the courts so that the public would not see those detainees who enjoyed public support. According to journalists, the purpose of this change was to conceal the truth, to reduce credibility and empathy towards convicted persons, and to dehumanise court proceedings. The visual aspect was especially important at the moment a judgment was delivered, when the public in the courtroom expressed emotions, which are contagious in nature.
- ▶ Journalists believe that judicial reform in Georgia has been, and remains, a priority.

## **Protest Journalism**

- ▶ Protest journalism is accompanied by a dilemma: safety or professional duty. Important content often cannot be obtained because of safety concerns, self-censorship and/or fear.
- ▶ At protest rallies, journalists' behaviour has changed; in newsrooms, coverage of demonstrations is planned with greater caution, and efforts are made to observe safety measures. This often comes at the expense of health and/or the decision to forgo certain content.
- ▶ In 2025, the coverage of political events and demonstrations became even more difficult, as journalists were detained and fined in the course of their professional activities. Journalists believe that the aim of these fines is to obstruct journalistic work and to drain their resources. The established practice in this regard bears the hallmarks of SLAPP-type measures.
- ▶ Over the years, journalists' involvement in the protection of human rights has transformed into civic activism. Participation in such activism has its positive and negative sides. On the one hand, it entails shared strategies of struggle that bring together the audience and the media and highlight the role of the media in the process of helping people. On the other hand, it means stepping out of the media's observer position, which calls its impartiality into question and undermines trust.
- ▶ Pro-government television channels seek to portray representatives of the critical media precisely as participants in protests and not as journalists. Journalists of pro-government media do not express solidarity with their colleagues even when violence is used against them, which deepens the professional rift.
- ▶ Footage shot by citizen journalists at protest rallies also finds its way into traditional media. This is particularly true of footage showing the arrest of citizens. In this respect, citizen journalists constitute an important resource.

## **Safety of Journalists**

- ▶ The safety of journalists (physical, digital and psychological) remained one of the main challenges in 2025. The normalization of violence against journalists (which began in 2021) was facilitated by the impunity for crimes committed against them. Law enforcement bodies do not investigate attacks on their professional activity under the legal classification of interference with journalistic work.

- ▶ The main aim of intimidating the media is to induce journalists to renounce the courage of their own free will – that is, the key professional competence and quality that protects freedom of expression.
- ▶ Representatives of media outlets loyal to the ruling team rarely become targets of physical violence, whereas personal attacks and organised smear campaigns against journalists from critical media continue systematically. Of the 1,158 incidents involving various risks recorded between 2020 and 2025, 8% (N=94) are related to pro-government television, and of these 94 cases, 30 concern court proceedings involving employees who were unlawfully dismissed.
- ▶ Attacks on journalists are deliberate and calculated to reinforce an atmosphere of fear, and so-called titushki are often involved in them. Journalists do not feel safe even when they are not performing their professional duties. Newsrooms are no longer able to provide a safe working environment for their staff in the field.
- ▶ In previous years, media representatives did not speak about, or mentioned only hypothetically, the prospect of being forced to leave the country and continuing their work in exile. In 2025, emigration is being actively discussed among journalists.
- ▶ For regional media, planning relocation and contemplating work in exile is even more difficult. For community media organisations, going into exile is not a solution. This is due both to the language barrier and to their regional niche, which they would no longer be able to maintain abroad. Even though the possibility of prison is real, journalists do not want to leave the country for exile and prefer, instead, to continue working in their own country, even with very limited resources.
- ▶ In recent years, among the incidents of violence committed against journalists, respondents recall the telephone threats and verbal abuse in 2024 – which also targeted their family members (young children and elderly parents) – as the most traumatic experience. This trauma remains very much alive even one year later.

## **Institutionalisation of Solidarity and Trust in the Media**

- ▶ Drawing on Media Voice studies, between 2021 and 2025 there was a systematic institutional discrediting of the journalistic profession and a draining of its capacities. Public trust in the media decreased year by year, which in turn hindered public solidarity and support. Since 2021, MediaVoice studies have focused precisely on the importance and forms of the institutionalisation of solidarity, and this focus is now even more significant, as there are concrete examples of transformative experience and measurable indicators.
- ▶ The study identified **28 indicators** of trust and solidarity towards the media, observation of which makes it possible to standardise solidarity practices and to manage them in a measurable way.
- ▶ Institutionalising forms and practices of solidarity (subscriptions, donations, etc.) requires not fragmented but long-term engagement of the audience, the key determining factor of which is trust in the media. The institutionalisation of solidarity takes place when there is trust, accountability, regular interaction with the audience, and simple procedures for engagement (including financial contributions).

- ▶ In previous years, during periods of crisis (the threat of media closure, violence against journalists), public solidarity was fragmented. There was not only no habit, but not even a motivation, to provide long-term support to the media. In 2025, the systemic crisis accelerated the institutionalisation of solidarity: the decentralisation of solidarity began, and the financial crisis in the media turned out to be a facilitating factor.
- ▶ In 2025, an important solidarity campaign was “[The Lights Must Stay On](#)”, run by Sinatle Media. This initiative created spaces of solidarity and has the potential, in the future, to strengthen the institutionalisation of solidarity. It is possible that the audience will develop a habit of supporting the media it trusts.
- ▶ Journalists note that the disappearance of human stories and themes has damaged trust in the media, because people no longer see themselves and their problems on television. Both trust and solidarity will be strengthened precisely by foregrounding human stories and their problems.
- ▶ According to representatives of critical media, public trust in them will increase. This has been facilitated by the exposure of corruption cases, which has reinforced a sense of moral advantage within the critical media. The public saw that investigative journalists were telling the truth and that the smear campaign against them was unfounded. In the view of representatives of television channels loyal to the government, however, trust in journalists is deteriorating.
- ▶ Over the years, the “media against media” strategy has killed public solidarity between the two polarized camps and has taken the form of “confidential solidarity” – when support from colleagues is expressed not openly, but in private correspondence and without fanfare. Minimal resources remain within professional circles to enable the restoration, in the future, of professional, collegial cooperation. This possibility is more evident in the generation that has had professional cooperation in the past (for example, those who worked together in the same media organisation).
- ▶ Criticism has intensified towards journalists of pro-government television channels who do not publicly express solidarity over crimes and arrests targeting fellow journalists. For journalists, it is particularly painful when colleagues produce pieces about them for the purpose of discreditation.

The institutionalisation of solidarity can initiate changes that counter autocracy and strengthen democracy. Solidarity can reinforce the role and positioning of institutions, which, at the same time, signals the existence of democratic mechanisms and helps prevent the complete capture of the country. Conversely, a reduction in supporters and/or international isolation may become the final marker of the consolidation of authoritarianism.

In 2025, the crisis in Georgia created a “fabric of solidarity” that is self-organised and decentralised, hinders the capture of power and strengthens democracy. In this respect, it is important to strengthen the solidarity network and to maintain its visibility.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Between 2021 and 2025, the media environment in Georgia deteriorated dramatically ([Media Voice](#), 2025; [RSF](#), 2025). Media capture for the purpose of preserving power is one of the characteristics of kleptocratic states (Russia, Belarus, Venezuela, etc.). By controlling information, suppressing critical thought and independent journalism, and disseminating propagandistic narratives, kleptocratic regimes are able to conceal corrupt schemes, gain legitimacy and suppress dissent. Under kleptocracy, the aim of a controlled media is not to take account of and inform the public interest, but to serve the ruling elite (including oligarchs and governments). Media capture is part of a wider, systemic capture of the country, unfolding alongside the takeover of state institutions.

The harm that arises after institutions have been weakened and captured is reflected most clearly in the media, which attempts to cover the functioning of state institutions. In this respect, it is of particular interest how, under repressive regimes, court journalism, human rights journalism/solidarity journalism, investigative journalism, news journalism, beat journalism manage to function.

In international reports and political statements, Georgia is no longer described as a “problematic democracy”, but is perceived as a rapidly moving semi-authoritarian regime ([Statement](#) of the Delegation of the European Union, 2025), where media freedom is a central [target](#) (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). Almost all texts by international actors highlight the same trend: pressure directed against the media operates first through the language of law and only thereafter through physical violence. In international assessments, legislation is seen not as an instrument of “improvement”, but as a mechanism of repression – a legal framework that pre-emptively creates a chilling effect. At the level of narratives as well, Georgia’s media environment is gradually approaching those models that international organisations have been describing for years in Russia and Belarus.

International partners now [record](#) the deterioration of the media environment not only as a “human rights” issue, but also as a starting point for assessing foreign policy and the enlargement agenda (European Commission, 2025). At the same time, these texts emphasise that support is directed towards the Georgian people, the media and the civil society sector.

The main emphases of international reports are integrated, within the framework of our study, with the themes that emerged during the interviews.

- ▶ Georgia has turned from a “leading reformer” into a “danger zone” country for the media;
- ▶ Laws adopted by the ruling party are now routinely [referred](#) to (European Parliament Resolution, 2024) as “Russian/Belarusian models”;
- ▶ Specific cases (the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli, [MFC](#), 2025), [repressive laws](#), [the crisis in the Public Broadcaster](#), IPI, 2025, etc.) show that the media environment is disintegrating not at isolated points, but systemically.



[More than 90](#) human rights and press freedom organisations and political leaders ([freemzia.com](#)), including members of the U.S. Congress and the Helsinki Commission, Members of the European Parliament and European Commissioners, criticised her arrest and called for her immediate release.

In 2025, compared to previous years, the rhetoric and tone of responses from authoritative international organisations has changed: in order to save independent media, the need for political will and a change of the authoritarian course has been clearly underlined. In this process, the necessity of rescuing the media ecosystem as a whole, rather than in isolated fragments, has become even more apparent. These mechanisms are discussed by the media representatives involved in the study.

### ■ 3.1. The Mzia Case as a Guide

In the history of independent Georgia, Mzia Amaghlobeli is the first female journalist to be in prison, and the examination of her case in court has attracted particular attention. In our study, we analyse Mzia's trial as seen through the eyes of the respondents and assess the impact of her persona on Georgian journalism. In this part of the literature review, we briefly recall what we need to know about this case<sup>1</sup>.

On 11 January 2025, at a protest rally held in front of the police department in Batumi, the founder of "Batumelebi" and "Netgazeti", Mzia Amaghlobeli, was arrested twice. The first time, she was arrested for placing a sticker on the fence at the entrance to the police department, but was soon released on a written undertaking. After returning to the rally, she had an altercation with the head of Batumi Police, Irakli Dgebuadze, during which Mzia Amaghlobeli slapped him, leading to the immediate second arrest of the founder of "Batumelebi" and "Netgazeti". Initially, she was charged with "assault on a police officer" ([Article 353<sup>1</sup>](#) of the Criminal Code of Georgia) – a charge considered disproportionate and politically motivated; [video footage](#) (Batumelebi, YouTube, 2025) indicates premeditated retaliation on the part of the police.

[On 14 January](#), the court rejected the motion for release on bail and left Mzia Amaghlobeli in pre-trial detention. On 20 January, she went on hunger strike, which she ended at the request of colleagues and supporters, and it was only [on 18 February](#) that it became known that, with doctors' assistance, she had resumed eating. While in detention, she was diagnosed with keratoconus at the Vivamedi clinic, and on 23 June her lawyer stated that "the vision in Mzia Amaghlobeli's left eye is at the level of distinguishing light from darkness". In parallel, the Revenue Service imposed an attachment (incasso) on the bank accounts of "Batumelebi", which the editorial team [assessed](#) as pressure on Mzia Amaghlobeli and on the organisation.

On 28 April, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) [applied](#) to the Strasbourg Court on behalf of Mzia Amaghlobeli. On 19 June, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) calling for her unconditional release. On 26 June, the Strasbourg Court [began](#) examination of Mzia Amaghlobeli's case. The trial is being monitored by the [Clooney Foundation for Justice \(TrialWatch\)](#).

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed information about the case of Mzia Amaghlobeli, please visit the website: <https://freemzia.com/>

On 6 August, Judge Nino Sakhelashvili reclassified the charge under the relatively milder Article 353(1), which covers resistance, threats or violence against a public order officer and is punishable by a fine or restriction of liberty, and [sentenced](#) Mzia Amaghlobeli to two years' imprisonment. Despite the fact that Article 353 provides for less severe sanctions (a fine, house arrest), the court imposed the harshest measure, without any proper legal reasoning.

Mzia Amaghlobeli has not sat in the dock at any of the court hearings, thereby symbolically showing that she does not consider herself guilty. The verdict triggered yet another wave of protest among the public and her colleagues; [24 embassies](#) and other [authoritative organisations](#) (IPI, 2025) condemned the judgment. The European Union also [reacted](#) to the judge's decision with a special, strongly worded condemnatory statement. In 2025, Mzia Amaghlobeli became the recipient of the Sakharov Prize and other professional awards. The McCain Institute [included](#) Mzia Amaghlobeli on the list of political prisoners under its "Freedom for Political Prisoners" initiative. Mzia Amaghlobeli meets the criteria of a political prisoner as defined in Resolution 1900 of the Council of Europe. For a detailed chronology of Mzia's case, see the "Key Events 2025" section at the beginning of this study.

## ■ 3.2. Court Journalism vs a Captured Judiciary

**"Justice must not only be done, but must also be seen to be done"** – this maxim by Lord Hewart underscores that openness and procedural fairness are essential for preserving the legitimacy of the justice system. A judge's decision must appear just even outside the courtroom.

The year 2025 began with the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli, the founder of the outlets Batumelebi and Netgazeti, and this issue remained on the agenda of both Georgian and international media throughout the year.

When it comes to the functioning of the judicial system, media coverage and the question of public accountability acquire even greater importance. In Georgia in 2025, the media covered cases of high public interest from the courts, and in this regard, when analysing the media environment, it is particularly relevant to assess the challenges faced by court journalism. Under conditions of a captured national judiciary, it becomes even more important to take into account international legal mechanisms and practices so that the media can inform the public both from inside the courtroom and beyond it.

### 3.2.1. Case-law of the European Court of Human Rights

By the amendments introduced to the Organic Law of Georgia on Common Courts, the judicial system has become more isolated and closed. The amendments run counter to the right to a fair trial and deprive citizens of Georgia, including victims of Georgian Dream's repressions, of the right to a public hearing of their case and to public awareness.

Publicity is an important precondition for the administration of justice. European principles ensure the ability of the media to inform the public fully about court proceedings. According to the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights (cases: [Sutter v.](#)



[Switzerland](#), 1984; [Riepan v. Austria](#), 2000), the public character of court hearings protects the parties to the proceedings against the administration of justice in secret, beyond public scrutiny. Publicity is one of the essential means of maintaining public confidence in the courts.

The European Court, in its case-law, has stated that the publicity of the administration of justice helps to achieve the aim of Article 6(1), namely the right to a **fair trial**, the guarantee of which, within the meaning of the Convention, is one of the fundamental principles of any democratic society. The European Court emphasises that a blanket restriction is unjustified. In cases such as [Karácsony and Others v. Hungary](#) (GC, 2016) and [Selmani and Others v. the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia](#), (2017) it was ruled that any restriction on the media, without an individual assessment of whether journalists pose any real threat to public order or security in the specific proceedings, is unjustified and has immediate adverse effects both on journalists' work and on the public's right to be properly informed.

Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) protects the role of the media as a public watchdog, prohibits discriminatory and disproportionate interference, takes into account the chilling effect, and requires states to fulfil positive obligations in relation to the protection of sources and the safety of journalists. The public have the right to receive information on matters of public interest. Informing the public about court proceedings is a journalistic activity governed by the right to freedom of expression. Article 10 (freedom of expression) is not an absolute right and, in certain cases, may legitimately be restricted. Therefore, the European Court places a particular burden on states to provide arguments relating to the lawfulness and proportionality of such restrictions.

The European Court holds that the judicial authorities must consider all possible alternatives in order to ensure order and safety in the courtroom and must give preference to the least restrictive measure (case: [Krestovskiy v. Russia](#), 2010, § 29). The ability of the media to carry out its activities properly, and the right to receive and impart information, are subject to particular protection. According to the Court's case-law, in cases where there is an increased expectation of publicity, the complete exclusion of the public and the media from the court hearing, based solely on references to security interests, should occur only in rare, exceptional circumstances (case: [Riepan v. Austria](#), 2000, § 34). **Flowing from the media's role as a public watchdog, the presence of the media on-site provides certain guarantees that state institutions are accountable to the public in the exercise of their functions.**

In the case of [Worm v. Austria](#) (1997), restrictions "for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary" do not give states the right to restrict all forms of public discussion of matters pending before the courts. **Courts cannot operate in a vacuum.** Although a court is the forum for determining an individual's guilt or innocence in criminal proceedings, this does not mean that there can be no discussion elsewhere of the subject matter of the criminal process, whether in specialised journals, in the press generally, or within the wider public.

Journalists who cover ongoing criminal proceedings must, of course, ensure that they do not overstep the boundary set in the interests of the proper administration of justice and must respect the defendant's right to be presumed innocent. **In reporting on criminal proceedings, they must balance the public's right to be informed with the right to respect for the private life of those involved, particularly defendants/convicted persons, so as to avoid causing them harm** (case: [Du Roy and Malaurie v. France](#), 2000).

**As regards the important issue of admitting journalists to, and ensuring their access in, courtrooms, Committee of Ministers [Recommendation](#) (2003)13 of the Council of Europe (Principles 12 and 13) provides that “journalists should be allowed to attend public court hearings and the public pronouncement of judgments without discrimination and without any requirement of prior accreditation.”**

Beyond the interest in recording court hearings and broadcasting them, not only the right to freedom of expression, but also the right to a fair trial and trust in the courts are at stake. This is confirmed by the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights: “Publicity is the means by which the confidence of both higher and lower courts will be maintained. When the administration of justice is visible, the objectives of Article 6 § 1 are achieved through publicity” (case: [Kilin v. Russia](#), 2021).

The European Court of Human Rights has spoken about the positive features of live broadcasting (case: [P4 Radio Hele Norge ASA v. Norway](#), 2001), noting that it allows the public to watch and listen to court hearings directly, rather than relying on a report prepared by a journalist on the basis of their notes from the courtroom. In such reports, information is inevitably filtered through the journalist's own choices, whereas this does not occur in the case of live broadcasting.

Although filming in courtrooms is restricted for the media in many democratic countries (for example, in the [United Kingdom](#), [Australia](#), the [United States](#) and [Germany](#)), and serves legitimate aims, the practice applied by authoritarian regimes (for example, [Russia](#), [China](#), [Afghanistan](#)) is markedly different. Such regimes use restrictions imposed on the media not to ensure a fair trial, but as an instrument for controlling the information space. The aim is to manipulate public opinion and to prevent critical reporting, which directly contradicts the public's right to be informed as guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention.

In the Georgian context, any restriction on the work of the media, including the ban on recording in court, can turn into a mechanism of authoritarian control and harm the country's democratic development. The restrictions imposed on media coverage of court proceedings do not stem from the interests of justice or the aim of protecting security, do not take into account less restrictive alternatives, and are inexplicable.

As a result of the amendments, photo and video documentation of court proceedings has in effect been completely prohibited. It is no longer permitted to take photographs, make film or video recordings, or broadcast from the court (inside the court building, in the courtroom, or in the courtyard), except where this is carried out by the court

itself or by a person authorised by it, and the dissemination of the recorded material has been placed within the discretion of the court. In practice, the legislative changes completely exclude public oversight of the activities of the judiciary and violate the principle of freedom of expression. Video and audio recording and broadcasting of court hearings, in each specific case, now require the consent of the High Council of Justice. This provision of the law, in effect, makes the work of the media impossible. Because of short procedural time-limits, hearings are sometimes scheduled only a few hours in advance. In such circumstances, the media practically has no time to receive a timely response from the High Council of Justice. Problems with the enforcement of this amendment became apparent from the very first day of its entry into force.

It is clear that the 2 July 2025 [amendments](#) to the Organic Law of Georgia on Common Courts fundamentally restrict and render impossible the work of the independent media, making it more difficult for the public to perceive the legal and moral inconsistencies in court proceedings conducted with gross violations of the law.

### 3.2.2. Court Reporting Practice

Drawing on international studies, we can say that court reporting is one of the most important themes in the media (Jones, 2025). In the United Kingdom, according to PA Media, the reduction in press attendance at court hearings has contributed to a “democratic deficit”. It is important to observe this impact in Georgia as well.

Storytelling from the courts / court journalism must meet the main criteria of news, although this specialist field also has its own specific features. According to Harcup and O'Neill (2017), news value is determined by 15 characteristics. In any given news story, at least one of these – and preferably several in combination – should be present: exclusivity, negative stories, positive stories, stories involving conflict, stories containing an element of surprise, audio-visual storytelling, shareability on social networks, entertaining stories, dramatic stories, so-called follow-ups, powerful people and organisations (the power elite), relevance, resonant stories (those of high magnitude), celebrities in the news, and stories driven by the organisation's agenda.

Access to specific types of content is essential for court reporting. Court reporting differs from the coverage of crime stories and, on the basis of an analysis of UK media, Jones (2025) identifies **nine characteristics** of court news. These include:

- 1. Immediacy** – Court stories that involve coverage of ongoing proceedings (hearings taking place earlier that day or the previous day) and live blogs.
- 2. Dramatisation** – Stories that allow the reporter to highlight the dramatic nature of an incident.
- 3. Personalisation** – Stories that concern personal, often deviant behaviour by individual offenders, especially in cases involving violence and/or sexual offences. In Georgia, where there are significant challenges in terms of public trust in, and the transparency of, the judicial system, the identification and coverage of false witnesses is an important task of journalism and serves to safeguard the public's right to the fair administration of justice.

- 4. Simplification** – Stories that can be summarised and presented in a news format quickly and easily.
- 5. Visibility** – Photos or videos are available in order to improve online visibility and shareability. Where there is no dedicated content, this includes the use of generic or archival material.
- 6. Exclusivity** – When a journalist personally attends a low-profile court hearing. This differs from the traditional understanding of exclusivity in that criminal courts are, in principle, open to the press and the public, so coverage of court proceedings is not exclusive to any one journalist. In practice, however, there is often only a single reporter who supplies material to their news organisation. In the context of news value, exclusivity refers to material that only one news organisation possesses. In the context of court reporting, this traditional understanding changes, since court hearings are open to the public and the press and, therefore, coverage of the court is not exclusive to any single journalist. Under the regulations in Georgian legislation and the courts' non-transparent practice towards the media, journalists' ability to produce exclusive material is hindered, whether the case is "low-profile" or a high interest proceeding.
- 7. Quotability** – Refers to the use of quotes from open court hearings, which enables the media to provide readers with sensational or previously unknown news. Such quotes may include witness testimony, and explanations or statements by lawyers, judges, victims or others that capture public attention.
- 8. Content sharing** – A story that one media company shares with other media organisations within the same corporation. The story is published on various platforms, in edited form and with appropriate contextualisation.
- 9. Publicly accessible** – Stories based on press releases or court documents that are published online and/or sent to media companies by email or other means. This includes information and announcements about scheduled court hearings.

Drawing on various sources (Nerone, [2012](#); Matheus, [2017](#); Rodrik, [2014](#)), Jones (2025) concludes that court reporting is the main means by which the media can fulfil its watchdog function by monitoring institutions such as city courts. By the end of 2025, the judiciary had taken shape as a closed system, and in the future it will become even more difficult for the media to work in the courts ([Publika](#), 2025): journalists will no longer be able to bring mobile phones into courtrooms.

Research on court journalism in Georgia is scarce. In this study, we seek to make a contribution in this direction. In the Georgian context, it is particularly important to take into account the problems of institutional transparency and the systemic challenges facing the media.

### ■ 3.3. The Russian Playbook of Media Capture

When discussing media capture in and beyond Georgia, comparisons with the Russian and Belarusian scenarios are being made ever more frequently. Although, formally, critical media still exists in Georgia today, the Soviet/Russian legacy remains a serious challenge for the media environment. How does the “Soviet television effect” manifest itself? Answering this question requires interdisciplinary research; however, we will also seek to contribute to this discussion in our study, as we consider that these parallels have become relevant.

In the Soviet Union, there was no free media, no competitive political elections, and no public opinion polling. The press was centrally controlled, operating under the dictates of the Communist Party. In this system, the label of “enemy” was used against those who were undesirable to the authorities.

The attitude of Russia, the main successor state of the Soviet Union, towards the media is Soviet-style and kleptocratic. According to Besley (2006), the majority of national newspapers are in the hands of a small group of people, oligarchs, and are therefore vulnerable to political pressure. The phenomenon of the “non-coercive capture” of the media is quite widespread in the modern world. Being aware of the power of critical media and professionally conducted journalistic work, those in power seek to exert pressure on the media and to capture it. Besley describes how government control of the information space alters the balance and functioning of the political system, since “media pluralism provides effective protection against capture” (p. 721). When discussing the negative consequences of media capture itself, it is particularly important to consider:

- ▶ **Moral hazard** – Politicians become more prone to corruption and the pursuit of personal gain, because they know that, by controlling the media, their actions will not become known to the public and, accordingly, the likelihood of punishment is low.
- ▶ **Adverse selection outcome** – Unreliable or unscrupulous leaders remain in politics, since the media is unable to reflect and assess politicians’ actual behaviour and capacities, and cannot put critical questions to them or produce analytical material.

Both dimensions are relevant for Georgia as well. All the more so given that in 2025 the coverage of corruption issues (the exposure of high-ranking Georgian Dream officials [accused](#) of corruption) continued not only in critical, but also in the so-called pro-government television channels. It can be said that, over the years, distrust towards critical media and the failure of pro-government media to cover corruption-related topics, together with the lack of critical questioning, have contributed to concealing the truth.

According to Yalamov (2018), media capture or, in a broader sense, the acquisition of influence through the media, is the most visible aspect of the Kremlin’s influence. The author notes that “the media has always been the main instrument of public diplomacy, in both democratic and autocratic regimes”. He points out that the Kremlin cooperates with magnates and oligarchs who control the media and have close ties with leaders, legislators, and various regulators.

The creation of legislative and administrative obstacles for the media in Belarus has also been under way for decades, gradually evolving and intensifying. For example, in 2008 the Belarusian government [adopted](#) the Law on Mass Media, which secures state control over information about political, social, and economic events in the country. This law made the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus (MIB) the main body regulating the media in the country. The Criminal Code in Belarus also contains anti-defamation provisions. As we learn from statements by Belarusian human rights defenders (Spring96, 2021), this law is [used](#) in politically motivated cases.

A law [adopted](#) in 2015 made information published on the internet subject to the Criminal Code. As we read on the website of the European Federation of Journalists, amendments to the Law on Mass Media [approved](#) in June 2018 further tightened the legal environment for the media and, among other things, introduced voluntary registration of online resources, the possibility of blocking social media, and stricter rules for obtaining accreditation. In 2021, the Belarusian government [decided](#) (Meduza, 2021) that “unregistered groups of citizens who carry out extremist activities, including via messengers and social networks”, may be recognised as “extremist formations”. Under the Criminal Code, participation in such “extremist formations” can be punishable by more than seven years’ imprisonment. This decision directly affects followers of the Telegram channel NEXTA, which is critical of the government, who face the risk of prosecution under this legislation, among others.

There is fertile ground for media capture in Georgia. A significant part of the media is polarised and often serves specific political or oligarchic interests. Editorial policy is frequently subordinated not to the public interest, but to the interests of the owner or an affiliated party. Political actors and the media outlets associated with them often use “us vs. them” rhetoric. The demonisation of opponents and the attaching of labels to them (which has been particularly reinforced by legislative changes and anti-Western narratives) is similar to Soviet methods. Instead of objective information, sharply divergent interpretations of the same events are often disseminated, which increases polarisation in society. Journalists and independent media come under economic, political and sometimes physical pressure (as confirmed by numerous international reports), which leads to self-censorship and the suppression of critical voices. The structure of the Public Broadcaster is easily subject to political diktat and replicates a Soviet-style form of party control.

In the media ecosystem, the Soviet infrastructure for content production still exists, and this is particularly evident in the case of television. As Marshall McLuhan said in reflecting on the essence of media, “the medium is the message”, and in Georgia this medium (television) may still, for part of the audience, be associated with the Soviet legacy and the role it played (for example, in the context of loyalty to the Party and those in power).

Unlike television, this legacy is not borne by online media, investigative studios and independent platforms. Their niche and pace of development are different. They are shaping and advancing new standards of freedom and transparency more effectively.



**The future of a democratic Georgia, free from Russian influence, depends to a large extent on European integration, which is the declared aspiration of the Georgian people** (Article 78 of the Constitution<sup>1</sup>). On this path, it is essential to harmonise legislation (including media laws) with European standards; however, as a result of the ruling team's policy, media laws and their implementation have increasingly diverged from European standards, and moved closer to the Russian and Belarusian models. A number of changes introduced into media laws in Georgia in 2024–2025 are unconstitutional and anti-European, and will in the future constitute an obstacle on the path to European integration ([Gersamia, Gersamia, Gurgidze, 2025](#), pp. 4–5). Against the background of the strengthening of kleptocratic governance, legislative initiatives began as early as 2017, followed by amendments and the instrumentalisation of repressive laws against the media (Gersamia, Sajaia, 2024).

For European integration, it is important to harmonise with laws such as, for example, the European Media Freedom Act ([EMFA](#)). In a comparative analysis of EMFA and Georgian media legislation (MediaVoice, [2025](#)), the regulations, requirements and standards existing in the European Union are explained. According to the above-mentioned study, the legislative changes implemented in 2024–2025 with regard to restrictions on media freedom run counter to the Association Agreement concluded with the European Union.

In a democratic state, a well-developed culture of digital media literacy is a guarantee of critical thinking and demand for reliable sources. The Digital Services Act ([DSA](#)) is also a European Union regulation, which entered into force in 2022 and aims to regulate online platforms and make the online environment safer and more transparent for users. The DSA lays down new obligations for online intermediaries, in particular for very large online platforms (VLOPs) and very large online search engines (VLOSEs), in order to combat illegal content, disinformation, and other online harms.

For digital services, the Digital Services Act establishes rules for online platforms. The law obliges online platforms to act to prevent the dissemination of posts containing illegal content and false information. In turn, users also have the right to report content posted on the platform. Accordingly, in countries where a law on digital services is in force, the law and the platform, through co-regulation, work together to protect users.

In Georgia, there is not yet a law equivalent to the DSA and comparable in scope. However, several normative acts are in force that regulate certain aspects of the digital space: these include the Law of Georgia on Electronic Commerce, which addresses the liability of intermediary service providers, and the Law on Personal Data, which sets standards for the processing and protection of information.

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Russian-style propaganda creates a vulnerable ground for the capture of the country. Research conducted in Georgia (Gersamia, Vakhtangashvili, Glonti, 2025) confirms that anti-European messages are coordinated on pro-government television channels and in social networks (Imedi, POSTV) and align with the propagandistic narratives of Russian media. When comparing these, there are similarities and differences which are also relevant within the framework of our study and are a subject of reflection for the respondents.

### ■ 3.4. Legislative Backsliding

The clear target of the legislative amendments is freedom of expression and media activity. Legislative changes restricting freedom of expression began to be actively initiated from February 2025, and Georgian Dream was adopting them within short timeframes. In this process, international standards and assessments and the views of civil society organisations within the country were disregarded. In 2025, the media operated against the backdrop of the entry into force of the new “foreign influence/agents” law (the so-called [FARA](#): Foreign Agents Registration Act). The “Georgian FARA” was adopted on April 1 and [entered into force](#) on May 31. This law made the risk of journalists being sent to prison even more real.

The law introduces the concept of a “foreign principal’s agent” and, at the same time, imposes obligations of registration, reporting, and the labelling of disseminated information materials, and includes severe criminal sanctions, including up to five years’ imprisonment in the event of non-compliance with the requirements of the law. The law applies to both non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) and entrepreneurial legal entities, as well as to natural persons. A person may be required to register as an agent of a foreign principal if they, directly or through another person, participate in political activity in Georgia for the benefit of, or on account of the interests of, a foreign principal and, at the same time, acts under the direction, request, instruction, or control of a foreign principal.

The core concepts of the law are dangerous, provide a broad scope for abusive and bad-faith application, violate the freedoms of association and expression, and restrict the ability of civil society organisations, media outlets, and journalists to seek funding. As a result of the legislative changes implemented in 2025, media outlets were, in effect, prohibited from receiving foreign funding.

Alongside the ongoing restriction of media pluralism, the legal and financial risks to the very existence of the media are increasing. Legislative [amendments](#) restricting court journalism in the Organic Law of Georgia on Common Courts have entered into force. The shutdown of one of the major critical broadcasters (Mtavari Channel) has further disrupted the balance of power in the media environment.

With the [amendments](#) to the Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression, which serve to suppress and persecute critical opinion, it is particularly alarming that qualified privilege has been abolished, the burden of proof in defamation cases has been shifted from the claimant to the defendant, and the guarantees for the protection of journalists’ source confidentiality have been removed. Qualified privilege enables individuals to



participate in public political discourse, to criticise and express views about high-ranking officials – a right that citizens legitimately enjoy. These repressive changes are aimed at the de facto abolition of this crucial safeguard. **Equally worrying and extremely dangerous is the [position](#) voiced by Georgian Dream (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025) that criminal liability for defamation may be introduced in the future.** This would be a gross and unjustified interference that should be protected by freedom of expression. Also alarming are the changes concerning the protection of confidential sources and professional secrecy, which undermine the core purpose of freedom of expression. In addition, the measures provided for by the law may be applied to the period prior to the adoption of the amendments. The deterioration of legislative protection mechanisms makes the media and active members of society even more vulnerable to SLAPPs.

Since 1984, Georgia has continued to apply the Administrative Offences Code adopted in the Soviet period, which is incompatible with fundamental human rights. In February 2025, Article 173 was added to the Administrative Offences Code, establishing administrative liability for insulting officials and state and public servants.<sup>16</sup> This article prohibits the following acts towards the listed persons while they are performing their official duties or in connection with the performance of official duties or their activities: verbal insult, swearing/abusive language, insulting harassment, and/or other insulting conduct. The article provides for high sanctions: a fine from 1,500 to 4,000 GEL or administrative detention for up to 45 days; and, in the case of a person who has already been subjected to an administrative penalty under this article committing the same offence again, a fine from 2,500 to 6,000 GEL or administrative detention for a period of 5 to 60 days (the maximum term of administrative detention).

According to the interpretation of the European Court of Human Rights, freedom of expression guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights also protects expression that is shocking, offensive, or disturbing to the state or to any sector of society. The Court does not regard politicians, the police, or public institutions as groups that require heightened protection from insult, ridicule, or defamation. On the contrary, politicians and representatives of state institutions have a far greater duty to be tolerant towards criticism directed at them than any other citizen. This reasoning also extends to opinions expressed on social networks.

The deterioration of the legislative environment does not affect only the media but is also directed towards the weakening of other democratic institutions (the civil sector, political parties, etc.). The continuation of Georgian Dream's authoritarian-style legislative initiatives is reflected in the amendments to the Criminal Code of Georgia, the Administrative Procedure Code of Georgia, the Organic Law of Georgia on Political Associations of Citizens, the Law of Georgia on Combating Corruption, the Law of Georgia on Grants, the Law of Georgia on Assemblies and Demonstrations, the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, the Law of Georgia on the Constitutional Court of Georgia, and the Law of Georgia on Common Courts.

Amendments to the Organic Law of Georgia on Political Associations of Citizens and the Organic Law of Georgia on the Constitutional Court of Georgia, concerning the prohibition of a political party, are aimed at removing political opponents, destroying healthy opposition in the long term, and establishing one-party, authoritarian rule in the country.

Since December 2024, Georgian Dream has [amended](#) the legislation regulating assemblies and demonstrations four times. These amendments are repressive in nature and are intended to punish and intimidate demonstrators. All these repressive changes were adopted by Georgian Dream under an accelerated procedure, without any consultations with other parties, representatives of civil society or the academic community, and have significantly restricted Georgian citizens' ability to exercise their right to freedom of assembly and demonstration.

Recently, the police have been restricting the liberty of journalists, for various reasons, who cover the ongoing protests on Rustaveli Avenue. The European Convention on Human Rights is part of Georgia's legislation and, in the hierarchy of norms, stands above the legislative amendments adopted by Georgian Dream. In the case of [Butkevich v. Russia](#) (2018), the European Court of Human Rights held that the arrest, persecution and punishment of a journalist violates his or her right to freedom of expression. In this case, in addition to freedom of expression (Article 10 of the Convention), the Court also found violations of the right to liberty (Article 5 of the Convention), and the right to a fair trial (Article 6 of the Convention). The Court noted that the media perform an important task in a democratic society when they provide the public with information about the conduct of the authorities during demonstrations. Any attempt to obstruct journalists in the course of demonstrations must be subject to "strict scrutiny".

On April 16, repressive [amendments](#) targeting civil society and media organisations were introduced into the Law of Georgia on Grants, under which, from June 1, donors must obtain the consent of the Georgian Dream government or its authorised person/body for the issuance of grants. They must submit the grant agreement to the Georgian Dream government. The issuance of a grant requires the approval of the government or of an authorised person/body designated by the government. The receipt of a grant issued without such consent is prohibited, and the Anti-Corruption Bureau, whose head is appointed by the Prime Minister, has been tasked with monitoring the issuance and receipt of unauthorised grants. The Anti-Corruption Bureau has been given the power, in addition to drawing up an administrative offence report, to impose a seizure on the property of the offender (including bank accounts). At the same time, the Anti-Corruption Bureau is authorised to request a financial report where there is a "reasonable assumption", and to request "necessary information", including special categories of personal data, and so on. The amendment was met with a negative reaction from [international](#) partners and [local](#) organisations. At a briefing held on November 17, 2025, the controversial Speaker of Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, announced that from March 2, 2026 the Anti-Corruption Bureau would be abolished and its functions fully transferred to the State Audit Office. He also announced that, from March 2, 2026, the Personal Data Protection Service would be abolished and its functions likewise transferred to the State Audit Office.

These amendments affected media organisations (in particular online and regional media, as well as investigative studios). Within the framework of our study, we assess the law's direct and chilling effect on the media environment.

The amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting create a risk of arbitrary punishment of critical broadcasters and unjustified content control. Under the Law of Georgia on Amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting (adopted on 01/04/2025), television and radio broadcasters are prohibited from receiving direct or indirect funding from a foreign power, including the receipt of money or any other material benefit of pecuniary value. It is prohibited for a foreign power to purchase services from broadcasters (other than commercial advertising and product placement) and/or to directly or indirectly fund or co-fund the production and/or broadcasting of programmes. The amendments to the Law on Broadcasting (2024–2025) are, in substance, incompatible with the fundamental rights enshrined in international human rights law and in the Constitution of Georgia. The changes adopted contain extremely problematic regulations and are directed against the freedoms of the media, association, speech and expression.

By these amendments, acts that had never previously been punishable were declared offences under the law; the powers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were expanded, and fines and terms of administrative detention for existing offences were increased. During peaceful protests, people are fined and detained solely because they are wearing medical masks or covering their faces with scarves to protect themselves from the cold, which constitutes an unjustified restriction of freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. On 16 October 2025, members of Georgian Dream supported [amendments](#) under which, for actions such as covering one's face with a mask at a rally or erecting temporary structures, for example tents, administrative detention is envisaged for a first offence, and criminal imprisonment for a repeat offence.

Under the amendments, criminal liability/imprisonment is envisaged not only for breaches of the rules governing assemblies, but also for failure to comply with any demand made by a law-enforcement officer. It is clear that the purpose of a number of these changes is not the protection of public order and the interests of the country, but the exemplary punishment of protest participants and the intimidation of citizens, including journalists. It is evident that, through these legislative changes, the ruling team is aiming at the destruction of democratic institutions and spaces.

### ■ 3.5. The Crisis of Solidarity and Trust: Global Trends

The study “Russia’s War in Ukraine and Media Solidarity (the Case of Georgia)” (Gersamia et al., 2024) notes that, in Georgia, a shared agenda of solidarity among a polarised media became clearly visible in the first months following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Indicators of solidarity in pro-government media changed soon afterwards, which further deepened polarisation in the subsequent years. Solidarity weakens the impact of disinformation and the atmosphere of fear, strengthens public engagement, highlights the role of democratic institutions and hinders state capture.

Anita Varma’s work on [solidarity journalism](#) describes how a solidarity-oriented frame generates trust and a sense of shared stake in relation to marginalized communities, and increases audience receptiveness and support. In discussing the concept of “solidarity journalism”, Beazer (2024) [argues](#) that practices oriented towards empathetic engagement with audiences increase public participation and a sense of responsibility towards the media, thereby ultimately strengthening journalism that is focused on the public interest.

Transparency, accountability, and audience engagement are important for solidarity. “Loyalty” to the media also increases solidarity; this is why staying in contact via social networks strengthens the sense of trust and closeness to a brand (Journalism Studies, 2025). Social networks are an important source of constant connection, but they are not sufficient. Interpersonal, off-camera relationships with journalists may contribute to increasing trust in the media. According to studies, “trust” is the key component that gives rise to solidaristic behaviour – the “willingness to pay and to subscribe”. Longitudinal surveys by the Reuters Institute show that trust in a news brand, regular news use and ideological or attitudinal alignment all increase the likelihood of paying for online news, while low trust significantly reduces conversion, even when the journalism itself is high quality (Newman et al., 2021, 2022, 2024; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

Solidarity is expressed through subscriptions to media platforms and regular, systematic donations. Globally, the share of people who pay for online subscriptions is low: according to the “2025 Digital News Report”, on average 17% of respondents in 20 countries pay for online news (a figure that has remained unchanged for three years). [Academic research](#) on crowdfunding by the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas shows that it is more effective for project-based, “one-off” investigative initiatives; that success depends on the public significance of the story, transparency and the quality of the relationship with the audience; and that campaigns generate a sense of “co-ownership”, which reinforces the narrative of solidarity. Practical [overviews](#) of membership/subscription-based models (RISJ, Membership Puzzle Project) show that “membership” is successful when solidarity is underpinned by accountability – for example, when the audience knows “how the newsroom works”.

The institutionalisation and practice of forms of solidarity (subscriptions, donations, etc.) require not fragmented, but long-term engagement from the audience. This occurs when there is a high level of trust, accountability, regular interaction with the audience, and simple procedures for making payments.

## 4. ANALYSIS

In 2025, the main political themes on the agenda of the Georgian media consisted of the following issues: the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli and, subsequently, of other journalists; coverage of court proceedings and protest demonstrations; cases of so-called prisoners of conscience/political prisoners; the instrumentalisation of Russian-style laws; the process of European integration; Russian influence and occupation; the municipal elections and their boycott; and others.

Within the framework of the study, respondents described the 2025 media environment based on their own experience and recalled the main challenges, turning points and changes in their professional activities.

### 4.1. The Mzia Effect

*“Fight before it’s too late.”*

**Mzia Amaghlobeli, founder of Batumelebi**

The year 2025 began with the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli, founder of Batumelebi and Netgazeti, marking a new stage in the repressive policy against journalists in recent years. For the first time in the history of journalism in **independent Georgia**, a female journalist was imprisoned, and this case revealed the repressive nature of the ruling team. Mzia’s story may influence a re-evaluation of journalism and the role of the journalist in Georgia. This case sowed fear and, later, courage – something driven by Mzia Amaghlobeli’s personal qualities and bravery.

A journalist’s professionalism is measured by the extent to which they manage to translate the discourse of freedom into their work, to cover difficult topics of public importance despite the risks, and to cross those “red lines” that conceal wrongdoing. By exposing and calling out a corrupt system, the journalist tries to shield ordinary citizens and take the blows upon themselves, refusing to compromise with their conscience and revealing harmful practices. It is precisely the exemplary punishment of such courageous journalists that produces a chilling effect and reduces the level of protection for ordinary citizens. Mzia Amaghlobeli’s decision to continue fighting for human rights has become an example of editorial courage for journalists and an inspiration for struggle in Georgia and beyond.

At first, the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli had a chilling effect on the media environment: journalists began to think about possible scenarios of their own arrest, and about unfair and disproportionate punishment. For the public and for journalists, it was a signal that journalists are not untouchable and that their long-term imprisonment is a real possibility. In previous years, the media had already been a target, but the detention of Mzia Amaghlobeli raised the level of threat to a new benchmark. When discussing this issue, respondents see parallels with the Russian and Belarusian scenarios:

“After Mzia’s arrest, the threat that we might turn into another Belarus became a reality.” (Respondent N5)

“Mzia’s imprisonment was crushing, and it was a message. We looked the regime in the eye. Later I overcame my fear, and that is thanks to Mzia herself. She took everyone’s burden onto herself, helped heal our wound, and showed us the way.” (Respondent 12)

In discussions with respondents, a paradoxical dynamic of “editorial courage” emerged: although the aim of this exemplary punishment was to intimidate them, it ultimately gave rise to a powerful sense of responsibility. The support shown for Mzia Amaghlobeli played a pivotal role in media solidarity and turned an individual case into a professional and moral obligation:

“Mzia does not allow us to give up or grow complacent. She is our conscience. We will be without conscience if we do not fight. Mzia’s injunction, ‘Fight before it’s too late’, belongs to every journalist and every citizen.” (Respondent N2)

The case of Mzia Amaghlobeli actively brought developments in Georgia and the issue of political prisoners back onto the international agenda. An important aspect of the solidarity campaign was the positioning of people from other professions and groups. In Mzia’s case, respondents recall the solidarity and statements of the families of political prisoners. At the same time, they note that they had expected greater solidarity from the people of Batumi (where Mzia worked), and they attribute this to government propaganda, nihilism, and distrust towards the media. Professional solidarity in Batumi was also fragmented – only a few journalists from the Adjara Public Broadcaster dared to join the protest.

Mzia’s case also has an impact on how other defendants’ cases are assessed. This is reflected in the reaction of the public, who compare other offences or sentences with Mzia Amaghlobeli’s disproportionate two-year prison term. According to journalists’ observations, when news about various crimes and charges is posted on social networks, comments and comparisons expressing solidarity appear (for example: “But then why was Mzia given so much?”).

Respondents attach great importance to the unprecedented solidarity that Mzia Amaghlobeli received from local and international media, organisations and the diplomatic corps. The effect of international solidarity was ambivalent, but mainly positive. On the one hand, it intensified the regime’s aggressive rhetoric; on the other, it ensured Mzia’s physical and symbolic protection. Despite the ultimately unjust verdict, this solidarity is also seen as the reason why, instead of a sentence of four to seven years, the charge was reclassified and Mzia was given two years’ imprisonment.

“Every time solidarity with Mzia was expressed at the international level, Georgian Dream’s high officials spoke about her with increasing hatred and tried harder to discredit her. International support ensured greater safety for Mzia. At the very least, they stopped insulting her, and if it had not been for that solidarity, the outcome would have been worse.” (Respondent N10)

“Mzia’s story made the road towards totalitarianism very easy to grasp.” (Respondent N5)



At the local level, solidarity was also expressed by some employees of both critical media and television channels loyal to the government. Representatives of critical media, however, tend overall to regard the support that Mzia Amaghlobeli received from pro-government channels as insufficient, since the expressions of solidarity were limited to isolated cases (for example, the open [support](#) expressed by several journalists of the Public Broadcaster and by Vasil Ivanov-Chikovani). There had been an expectation of solidarity from those television stations which themselves had previously experienced solidarity from rival channels (the broadcasting company Rustavi 2 and TV company Imedi).

Some of the participants in the study speculate that, had Mzia Amaghlobeli received solidarity from colleagues at the pro-government channels, the ruling team would have been forced to back down even further. However, there is no single view on this issue. Opinions are also divided as to the extent to which the so-called pro-government journalists took into account the fact that the case concerned their colleague. In respondents' view, they acted at every stage on the instructions of the ruling team, and anything that "did not work" was the result of the propaganda campaign itself failing. According to journalists' assessments, Mzia Amaghlobeli's persona "turned the purpose" of the smear campaign on its head – the "slap in the face" was transformed into an act of protest.

"Propaganda did not work on many fronts: the mockery failed, the sneering on sexual topics failed, the attempt to present Mzia as a dangerous criminal failed. The background to this was created by Mzia's personality, her character, her strength and perseverance. Not a single step she took was calculated to attract public attention or build an image. For example, when she went on hunger strike, we, her colleagues, found out a week later, because she had not announced anything." (Respondent N10)

The argument put forward by journalists from television channels loyal to the government, regarding the forms of expressing solidarity with Mzia Amaghlobeli, is that a journalist should not resemble an activist (including in the forms of solidarity they choose). Respondents recalled that sufficient professional solidarity had been expressed on air by Rustavi 2.

"We need to remember that, first and foremost, we are journalists and not activists. It is acceptable to express activism within the framework of civic journalism, but not in a professional format." (Respondent N16)

Mzia Amaghlobeli has become the face both of protest and of independent media. Through Mzia as an emblem, the problems of Georgian media have been brought onto the international stage. Alongside the weakening brought about by repression, this may in the future lead to a rebranding of the profession and give it a sharply defined ethical profile. The case of Mzia Amaghlobeli has had, and will likely continue to have, an impact on restoring and projecting the reputation of journalism as a profession in Georgia. Her case has helped many journalists overcome their fear. She appears as a kind of collective psychological "umbrella" under which space opens up for reclaiming one's own professional role.

“This profession is marginalised, neither valued nor popular. Mzia restored dignity to the profession and gave everyone in the field of journalism the opportunity to choose and to stand on the right side. Journalism is a struggle for truth and an act of dedication. Mzia has become the conscience of Georgian media; she has shown us not only her own responsibility, but our responsibility and possibilities as well, and helped us overcome the fear of imprisonment. I no longer think about leaving the country or leaving journalism.” (Respondent N10)

“Mzia has become a symbol of the media, and the issue of her freedom is reflected, now and in the future, in the media environment and in media freedom.” (Respondent N15)

International solidarity was particularly important for her colleagues and family members. The deteriorating health condition of Mzia Amaghlobeli and her release remain priority issues on the agenda.

## ■ 4.2. Instrumentalization of Laws Against the Media

Whereas a few years ago the fight against the media was perceived as part of a plan by “invisible” actors, in 2025 this fight is overt, based on legal instruments, with the instrumentalisation of repressive laws already established as systemic practice. In 2025, the negative trends that had emerged in previous years’ legislative amendments were finally implemented, creating a repressive legal pressure on the media. Respondents focus on those laws that further restrict their work. Laws have emerged as the main instrument for the eradication of journalism, fuelling fear and self-censorship and destroying financial viability. These laws have confronted media and civil society organisations with a stark choice: either stigma or disappearance.

The impact of the legislative changes has proved harsher than journalists had imagined. They are aware that the country is rapidly approaching the Russian/Belarusian model. The legal environment has become unpredictable; various forms of violence, harassment, fines, the number of SLAPPs, obstruction of journalistic activity, fear and self-censorship have all increased. Journalists refer to these repressive laws as “laws against empathy”. The media is a constant target, whose “erasure” is being carried out not only through repression, but by diverting vital resources into legal and bureaucratic battles. The journalists involved in the study consider the very existence of these laws, and even their partial enforcement, to be detrimental to democracy.

In 2025, the number of court proceedings, arrests and fines involving journalists with a critical stance has increased alarmingly. Journalists believe that the purpose of fining them is to obstruct journalistic activity and to drain their resources. In this respect, the established practice has the nature of a SLAPP:

“When journalists are fined while performing their professional duties, an exhausting process begins: understanding and pursuing legal procedures takes time and other resources. This prevents the journalist from doing their job, and that is precisely the aim.” (Respondent N9)



“The main goal of the cascading adoption of laws is the SLAPP effect – diverting attention and capacities into non-journalistic activities and, ultimately, stopping the media.” (Respondent N1)

“The main problem is not poorly drafted laws, but the purposes for which these laws were written.” (Respondent N3)

It is important that, at the level of the European Union, mechanisms have already been developed to protect freedom of expression from “chilling effects”. One such mechanism is the EU Directive ([2024/1069](#)), which establishes minimum procedural standards for protection against Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and for reducing the chilling effect. This directive is an important point of reference for Georgia as a candidate country.

The attack on critical and independent media is coordinated both in the pro-government media and across various branches of government (legislative, judicial and executive).

“The danger lies not only in what is written in the law, but also in what is not written – there is a fear that they can prosecute and punish a person on any pretext, and that we will not find justice.” (Respondent N3)

“The Anti-Corruption Bureau requested all our data relating to project documentation. We told them that we no longer had any grants and, accordingly, could not send them anything. In response, they now plan to seize non-existent documentation by court order. The aim of all this is to intimidate and punish us by way of example, so that the fear then spreads to others. The main purpose of these laws is precisely to fuel fear.” (Respondent N6)

The study revealed that the change to the Law of Georgia on Grants did the greatest damage to the media environment, financially choking off media organisations, while the “FARA” law introduced the risk of imprisonment. The amendments that entered into force on June 1 had a particularly negative impact on regional and online media, as well as investigative studios. The chilling effect of the laws, together with fear, worked effectively, achieved their purpose and quickly changed the behaviour of journalists and donor organisations. Respondents take a negative view of the fact that the entry into force of these laws “froze” donor organisations.

“After the tightening of the laws, we were prepared for fines and imprisonment, but we were not prepared for every financial source to be cut off. It seems they do not need 100 journalists in prison – they want to slowly kill journalism.” (Respondent N7)

Among respondents, fatigue and a sense of injustice and insecurity are clearly visible, reinforced by the unresolved crimes committed against journalists.

“We live in a country where laws do not matter... there is no justice, and everything is politically biased.” (Respondent N3)

The amendments made in 2024 to the Law on Broadcasting, which introduced the regulation of hate speech, have produced their own results.

“The amendments to the Law on Broadcasting concerning the regulation of hate speech have not made it easier to uphold standards; they have made it harder. The purpose of these prohibitive laws is both to diminish the media and to intimidate it. As a result, there may be ten microphones laid out at government briefings, but only two journalists asking questions.” (Respondent N14)

For parliamentary journalists, working and accessing draft laws has become more difficult. Time is dragged out in bureaucratic procedures and negotiations. Representatives of those television stations that do not work on investigative stories have greater access to documents and comments than their colleagues who ask sharper questions.

“Even getting the bureau’s agenda approved requires agreement. They are constantly threatening to revoke our accreditation, and undesirable journalists are simply not allowed into Parliament.” (Respondent N14)

“I had a case where both I and a representative of another opposition TV station asked a critical question of an MP. The MP picked a fight with the other TV representative but gave me an answer.” (Respondent N14)

After the adoption of the laws, there has been a “brain drain” from the profession. Young journalists are actively considering emigration. Critical media organisations continue to exist legally, but they have collapsed organisationally and/or are on the verge of destruction.

### ■ 4.3. Financial Crisis: The Future of the Media – In Search of Light

From the moment of independence to the present day, the media has always faced challenges that hindered its long-term and sustainable development. Among these, a key challenge was the financial viability of the media – something it had been able to manage, to a greater or lesser extent. From a financial point of view, 2025 turned out to be the most difficult year, because the attack on the media was consolidated across state institutions and alternative sources of funding were cut off. The main mechanism for “suffocating” the media proved to be the disappearance of financial resources.

“Those in power are doing everything they can to make the media disappear. For me, 2025 is the year of declared repression.” (Respondent N3)

2025 was also the most difficult year for regional media. A number of media organisations closed down or changed their line of work (for example, shifting to advertising). Media organisations are not only unable to pay salaries; they are also struggling to pay rent and office, internet, and technical service costs. In online and regional media, modest advertising revenue cannot cover these expenses. Regional media say that in 2025 they are working without salaries, but they are most afraid of losing their offices, because that would paralyze them.

After the suspension of grant funding, regional media outlets began actively working to mobilise subscribers, a process that has shown a more or less positive dynamic. Subscriptions are available for three, six, and twelve months. In regional media there is a shortage of human resources, which makes it impossible to focus on results and to bring

everything to the audience (for example, to ensure dissemination via social networks). It becomes difficult to strengthen a media organisation when journalists simultaneously work on other, non-journalistic projects (for example, by setting up NGOs or limited liability companies). Respondents are aware that if media outlets in the regions are closed, it will be very difficult to restore them quickly in the future, because resources will have scattered.

“Establishing such organisations is only effective when there are resources to hire new staff. If the staff of a media organisation have to do the work of another organisation in order to support the media, this is a losing strategy.” (Respondent N15)

The financial crisis in the media is further exacerbated by the fact that Georgian business does not adequately support independent media. Its main interest is directed towards pro-government media. The business sector avoids funding critical media so as not to provoke dissatisfaction from the ruling team.

“We can’t attract advertising because nobody wants a headache. The authorities don’t need you either on television or on YouTube.” (Respondent N8)

“Business has not contributed to strengthening civil society and the media, and in this respect has behaved irresponsibly. The media can only count on help from the people.” (Respondent N3)

“In Georgia, there were around 2,400 business representatives who signed the protest demands – and then nobody knows where they disappeared to. So business is behaving exactly as it would under totalitarian rule.” (Respondent N7)

In post-Soviet society, there is no culture of financially supporting the media, of subscriptions or donations, although in times of crisis the public does help the media. In 2025, media organisations became more focused on increasing public engagement, as donor organisations and/or major funders are no longer able to support them.

Alternative revenue streams (donations, collective funding/crowdfunding, subscriptions) are not a panacea, but rather a temporary support mechanism. Donations work in a fragmented way, especially in times of crisis. A continuing challenge is the existence of long-term subscribers, whereby the media is sustained by small, regular contributions.

“We always thought that people in Georgia were struggling financially and would not be able to help the media. It turned out that when we needed it, we carried one another through. This period showed us that ‘people’s media’ cannot exist without people’s support.” (Respondent N3)

Journalists and managers consider it unrealistic to generate significant income through the YouTube platform, because, due to the Georgian language, the audience is much smaller than, for example, for English-language content. The platform offers limited opportunities for serious monetisation. In the long term, some respondents are also sceptical about the effectiveness of crowdfunding platforms, since this model is tailored to a specific goal and is time-bound. In respondents’ view, campaigns such as [Sinatle.media](#) can strengthen solidarity and trust in the media and help the audience develop

the habit of supporting the media it trusts. A rethinking of the role of the journalist is underway in society, and this is an important process for the financial viability of the media as well.

“Crowdfunding has its own cyclicity; it happens for a specific purpose and is not designed for long-term projects. Also, if you don’t run a very active campaign, the transfers stop.” (Respondent N6)

“These campaigns cannot save everyone, but they have definitely managed to increase solidarity.” (Respondent N9)

“In journalism, moral support is just as important as financial support, especially in times of crisis. Thanks to moral support, an ‘encouraged’ journalist might work in the field for three days and work without pay.” (Respondent N4)

“Society has come to value the importance of being informed and the role of journalism more. Crowdfunding is still in its infancy, but the Sinatle.media campaign is a precedent not only as a financial support campaign, but also as a way to demonstrate solidarity and support.” (Respondent N10)

There is an expectation among journalists that from next year the financial situation will deteriorate even further and that two critical television channels (meaning TV Pirveli and Formula) will close precisely because of financial pressure.

“When you go to work in the morning, by the evening you may already have been taken off air and left unemployed; the electricity might simply be cut off; you might no longer be able to afford fuel and won’t be able to go out on a shoot. I don’t remember a situation like this even in the 1990s, and I have worked in struggling newsrooms. Back then there was no fear of tomorrow. Now it is not tomorrow you fear, but the evening.” (Respondent N4)

The formats that exist on internet platforms are likely to survive and become stronger. The challenge will remain how to attract an audience and generate revenue. If their influence over audiences grows, there is a risk that the online space will be regulated and that journalists will be forced into exile.

In 2025, the media could no longer withstand the financial crisis. The blocking of donor assistance and the new legal environment made it impossible for the media to remain viable, especially in the regions. On the one hand, the business sector’s fear of placing advertising in critical media, and on the other hand, high dependence on subscriptions/donations, create an unsustainable ecosystem that destroys quality journalism and democracy.

#### **4.3.1. Suspension of Broadcasting by Mtavari Channel**

After five years of broadcasting (9 September 2019 – 31 May 2025), the television company Mtavari Channel was shut down, and continued to operate via alternative media and social networks. Some programmes were transformed for the YouTube platform. The closure of the channel has a political context, determined by the channel’s

genesis, which made it a target. Specifically, in 2019, after the change of ownership at TV company Rustavi 2, its former director, Nika Gvaramia, together with 200 employees, founded Mtavari Channel, which was critical of the government. Businessman Zaza Okuashvili provided the new channel with television infrastructure (this was the property of a closed TV station he owned) in exchange for a share in the channel and payment of rent.

According to respondents involved in the study, at the time the channel was founded, Zaza Okuashvili had a strained relationship with Bidzina Ivanishvili, and the assets of the television station he owned had been pledged as collateral to a bank. Later, the bank seized and repossessed these assets. After this, Mtavari Channel no longer paid rent, because Bank of Georgia granted the channel the right to use the property free of charge. Discussions with respondents reveal that, after Nika Gvaramia resigned as General Director and went into politics, Okuashvili, in exchange for his consent, demanded the inclusion of his relatives onto the list of a newly established party. When this was refused, he demanded amendments to the charter of Mtavari Channel, which entailed the appointment of a director loyal to him, who would have veto power over all financial transactions. It was precisely due to the absence of consent from this appointed director, Gogi Kurdadze, that financial operations (payment for internet services, salaries, satellite services, etc.), which were necessary for uninterrupted broadcasting, could no longer be carried out.

According to respondents involved in the study, the television management came to suspect a secret deal between Zaza Okuashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili aimed at suspending Mtavari Channel's broadcasting in the pre-election period. Okuashvili claimed that Mtavari Channel's debt to companies within the Omega Group amounted to 12 million. The allegation against the channel's management concerned the claim that the channel had been turned into a hostage of the Ivanishvili-Gilauri-Gvaramia "tandem" (in reality, a trio rather than a tandem).

On 16 July, the Prosecutor General's Office of Georgia entered the TV company Mtavari Channel and its contracted sales house. The Prosecutor's Office requested the complete seizure of financial documentation related to the channel. The investigation was launched on the basis of a complaint filed by the director appointed by one of Mtavari Channel's founders, Zaza Okuashvili – GogiKurdadze – who accused the management and the channel's co-founders of financial violations. The management of Mtavari Channel stated that Zaza Okuashvili was levelling false and unfounded accusations against the channel's management and co-founders, thereby serving the interests of the regime.

From the statement issued by Mtavari Channel: "Unfortunately, the Georgian Dream party succeeded in achieving its goal of shutting down the country's leading critical media outlet with the help of Zaza Okuashvili. However, it appears that the pressure on Mtavari Channel did not stop there. The regime is once again attempting to take revenge on the channel's management and other co-founders, this time using Okuashvili's defamatory claims as a pretext. There is no criminal wrongdoing in the financial operations of Mtavari Channel, and an impartial prosecutor's office would not have even initiated an investigation based on Kurdadze's complaint, as the absurdity of the accusations made by Okuashvili's appointed director is self-evident. However, we

all understand that the Georgian Dream is not interested in establishing the truth, but rather in pursuing its own political agenda.” Later, the Prosecutor’s Office failed to find any illegal expenditure of funds.

**The purpose of the complaint against TV company Mtavari Channel was not to recover money, but to silence critical voices, to create problems for the channel and/or to halt its broadcasting.** The campaign and lawsuits brought against Mtavari Channel give rise to the suspicion that this was a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP), aimed at silencing the channel.

Journalists on both poles had expected the closure of Mtavari Channel, but the manner of its closure was unexpected even for them. Specifically, the closure of Mtavari Channel as a television station and the reactions to it were not resonant either in the media or in society. This may have been because the channel limited itself to issuing a statement about the closure, no briefing was held, and there were no special public addresses. The statement on the closure said that the channel was temporarily suspending broadcasting and would continue its work on alternative platforms. The negative impact of the television station’s closure was mitigated by the fact that the channel continued to exist on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), registered the LLC Intellecti, and some of the journalists independently created a YouTube channel where loyal viewers could continue watching the programmes they produced. Weak solidarity was also influenced by the fact that other critical television channels were facing similar crises and were themselves on the verge of closure.

“The television channel closed in a strange way. We still can’t fully grasp that the TV station has shut down, nor can we say that it was the authorities who closed it. At a time when the authorities are doing everything to silence you, this channel fell silent of its own accord.” (Respondent N7)

“When one of the main critical channels in the country closes, it should, first and foremost, trigger a public outcry. Yet there was no major protest either in the media or within the channel itself, and it somehow closed quietly.” (Respondent N13)

The closure of Mtavari Channel as a television station has had multiple negative effects. First of all, this precedent sowed fear and reinforced the sense of a threat of closure among other critical TV channels. Colleagues are particularly distressed about the journalists who have been left unemployed. Respondents in the study note that viewers who make their media choice in favour of television and used to watch Mtavari Channel will probably find it difficult to switch to the YouTube platform and will instead continue to seek information in the traditional television format.

“The public was seriously harmed, because the television niche and the influence over a specific audience could not be replaced by YouTube and social networks, and the channel lost this segment of viewers.” (Respondent N12)

There was no single reason behind the closure of Mtavari Channel. It was the result of a combination of factors, in which an internal conflict among the owners became an amplifier of external pressure. Against the backdrop of the political context, the internal ownership dispute turned into a de facto trigger that led to the suspension



of broadcasting. Although no unlawful spending was established, the involvement of the Prosecutor's Office in the process created a SLAPP effect. It became clear that the transformation of the channel onto alternative platforms could not substitute for its television niche and audience. This type of closure precedent reinforces fear and uncertainty.

#### **4.3.2. The Role of International Assistance in the Media**

The amendments to the Law on Grants posed the gravest threat to the financial viability of independent media. International grants were vitally important for online and regional media. Despite years of donor support to the media, media organisations have proved vulnerable and are now on the verge of disappearance. Respondents value donor organisations' support programmes but note that neither donors nor media organisations were prepared for the challenges Georgia is facing today. They attribute this to the fact that, for years, media organisations largely adapted themselves to donors' priorities, while local context and needs, as well as individual approaches to organisations, were less taken into account. Another problem was bureaucratic inflexibility during periods of crisis. Media managers point out that it was unclear how regional priorities were being set and how resources were being distributed unevenly and/or in less effective ways. For television companies, the rules for accessing international grants were and remain rigid:

“Donors need to overcome their own constraints and find legal ways to fund television as well. Bureaucracy needs to be reduced.” (Respondent N1)

“We tried to adapt to grant requirements. Sometimes we needed support for content production, sometimes for purchasing equipment, which was very difficult to obtain.” (Respondent N3)

After the adoption of repressive laws, communication deteriorated and the number of meetings where views could be exchanged decreased. It was suggested that the ruling team was able to exert influence on international organisations, and that this was also reflected in funding decisions. In parallel with their cooperation with the authorities, donor organisations did not pay sufficient attention to the strengthening of Russian soft power. Even though donors had seen similar paths of repressive laws and media harassment in other countries, they were not prepared either to prevent or to respond to the situation in Georgia.

“Donors do not have a plan either, and we ourselves do not know how to continue our cooperation.” (Respondent N9)

At this point, international funds are offering grants to regional media, but the media organisations and journalists themselves are refusing them, because they are afraid that if the content they produce is not to the government's liking, problems may be created for them. In this context, receiving grants is seen not as a driver of media development, but as something that may harm media outlets and expose them to additional risks. This is perceived as even more problematic given that international organisations, despite their desire to save the media, are unable to provide security guarantees.



“Mzia’s appeal – ‘Fight before it is too late’ – spoke to everyone: citizens, politicians, and international, and local organisations.” (Respondent N2)

Against the backdrop of state institutions being captured, more effective solidarity from international organisations becomes crucial for saving the country. In the view of the journalists involved in the study, all forms of assistance are important, including both public and quiet diplomacy.

## ■ 4.4. Challenges of Content Production

In 2025, the negative developments in the media environment were reflected in the core product – media content and its diversity. Critical media organisations continue to exist formally and legally, but journalists face an increasing number of barriers to fulfilling their democratic functions (including oversight – the watchdog role, agenda-setting, informing, mobilisation, generating empathy and pro-social effects, producing cultural and entertainment content, etc.) and to producing high-quality and diverse content (in terms of topics, sources, genres, and formats).

According to McQuail (2010), traditional mass media content is still regarded as a more or less reliable source for describing the culture and society in which it is produced (p. 286). Researchers agree that a substantial part of mass media content can also be assessed in terms of the “degree of freedom” and “editorial courage” it expresses, which manifest in various ways and include the expression of opinions, especially on controversial issues (McQuail, 2010, p. 297). In Georgia, the output produced by critical media (particularly investigative journalism) may be perceived by the authorities as harmful, and artificial barriers are being created to hinder its production.

The study shows that in 2025 content production was deliberately made even more difficult precisely in those spaces where media and public interest are high and where proactive media work is crucial: in the courts, at protest rallies, in the legislature, and elsewhere. These areas will be analysed in detail in this study.

### 4.4.1. The Effect of Polarization: A Uniform Pattern in the Media

Diversity (of topics and sources, genres and positioning across different media) is one of the measures of informational value. In Georgia’s polarised media environment, the production of diverse content has become even more difficult. Access to public information has deteriorated (including in parliament and the courts). Critical media no longer has the resources (human or material) to produce diverse content. Self-censorship among sources has increased even further.

International organisations (such as [Freedom House](#)) had, for years, noted that the media in Georgia was pluralistic but partisan. In 2025, media pluralism itself came under real threat, driven by an alarming imbalance in the distribution of power and content diversity in broadcasting and online media. In particular, the closure of Mtavari Channel, a television station critical of the ruling party, and the paralysis of online and regional media collectively weakened the critical flank of the media.

The ruling party restricts access to information for critical media and fosters a privileged position for pro-government outlets. Bureaucratic barriers and self-censorship among sources hinder the free circulation of information. The result of self-censorship and censorship in the media is the same: a refusal to pursue critical questions and topics.

After the 2024 elections, the daily parliamentary routine also changed. Due to the boycott by the opposition, parliamentary life has become more colourless for journalists. Critical questions are no longer heard during sessions, and access to draft legislation and other documents has become more difficult. Parliament is increasingly denying entry to specific representatives of critical media.

For the first time this year, government-aligned media also began to speak about high-level corruption cases. This was not criticism of the ruling party, but rather an agenda put forward by the ruling party itself as a result of internal infighting. Respondents recall that, for years, the ruling party fought against media outlets that reported on corruption involving high-ranking officials.

“It is ridiculous when their own journalists are now forced to talk about the very corruption that we were accused of ‘lying’ about.” (Respondent N4)

“Critical media has a loyal and not insignificant audience. That audience is influenced by journalistic investigations exposing corruption. This was a problem for the government.” (Respondent N13)

In 2025, covering political developments became even more difficult, as journalists are detained and fined while carrying out their professional duties. Against the backdrop of a deepening political crisis, communication with sources, the production of balanced content, and presenting both sides’ positions in news stories became even more challenging.

“Excessive caution hinders us from delivering stories to viewers promptly. A certain degree of self-censorship has emerged.” (Respondent N14)

“It is hard to think about the diversity of topics when survival is the priority. The country is stuck, and the media is on pause too.” (Respondent N3)

Diversifying the broadcast schedule and separating programme content by format (for example: news bulletins and talk shows, commentary versus investigative and analytical programmes) also makes it easier to distinguish between fact and opinion. Format diversification does not always take place in Georgian television, and there are neither the opportunities nor the resources for this. In some TV stations, news bulletins focus on presenting facts; in others, facts are accompanied by expert commentary. There are cases where, within the news-bulletin format, the journalist themselves evaluates events. For the respondents involved in the study, this latter approach is contentious.

Journalists from the Public Broadcaster repeatedly draw attention, in the course of the study, to the fact that Georgian television resembles Russian television, has a Soviet-style schedule and is outdated. This kind of self-criticism and discourse is not found in critical media, which sees itself precisely as the defender of European standards.

“By its very nature, Georgian television has been modelled on the Russian template, and audience expectations regarding its agenda and schedule are dictated by a post-Soviet pattern. In Europe there may be separate channels for films, and a series would never be broadcast on BBC or Deutsche Welle. Here, the TV schedule is still post-Soviet. In the process of European integration, this framework needs to change, and for that we need a European mindset and media education.” (Respondent N22)

“Georgian television has become outdated and does not follow trends. Television should be oriented towards people’s interests.” (Respondent N17)

Due to financial problems, critical television channels do not have the capacity to produce entertainment programmes. Government-aligned television stations (“Imedi” and “Rustavi 2”), which do not face financial difficulties, produce entertainment content in addition to news and analytical programmes, offering audiences series and a varied schedule that attracts viewers. Therefore, thematic diversity is directly linked to access to a broader audience.

“The television schedule needs diversity. Viewers get tired of talk shows alone. Primarily, this function should have been fulfilled by the Public Broadcaster, which broadcasts nationwide. After all, it is funded by citizens’ money and should serve everyone.” (Respondent N2)

The financial crisis in the media is also leading to the disappearance of non-commercial topics and discussions from the agenda. For example, in regional media, the suspension of grant funding has affected the production of quality media content, since grants helped outlets to create such material. After donor-funded content disappeared from television, the media environment became even more polarised, because the journalistic standards and balance required by international grants had previously created a relatively more neutral space. The hostile environment and heavy emotional climate have also affected the intensity of content production.

“I remember we had planned an issue and everything was ready, but physically and emotionally we could not manage to edit it and continue working. This did not happen in previous years.” (Respondent N15)

Respondents are concerned that part of society does not understand what the purpose of the media is. People do not see the results and power of the media’s work. Low trust in the media is directly linked to polarisation and to the content it produces. Viewers’ distrust does not relate only to political topics; it reflects their attitude towards the institution in general.

“I spent an hour and a half explaining to a femicide victim why a televised comment was important, where I would protect her confidentiality. She replied that there was no point in coverage, that it would not change anything and, on the contrary, would harm her.” (Respondent N21)

Important content is created by citizen journalists. The material they film passes through an editorial filter. Newsrooms give priority to, and rely as a source on, information obtained on the ground by their own journalists.

“We use material from citizen journalists only in extreme cases – for example, when a citizen has a live broadcast during an accident, before our own journalist can get to the scene. Even then, we contact them and send a journalist to the location, who then covers the story.” (Respondent N16)

In a polarised and repressive environment, producing diverse content has become both a technical and an editorial challenge. The asymmetry of television schedules and genres across the two poles of the media pushes audiences even further away from critical outlets.

In Georgia, the ban on photographing and filming court proceedings has restricted access to information and damaged public awareness. Before the bans, the wide variety of visual material (videos and photos) circulated from courtrooms served as icons/signs. After the bans, the visual language disappeared from the content – a language that “has a stronger denotative force than text” (McQuail, 2010).

#### 4.4.2. Challenges of Court Reporting

*“Justice must not only be done; it must also be seen to be done.”*  
**Lord Hewart, Lord Chief Justice.**

In Georgia, the ban on photographing and filming court proceedings has restricted access to information, damaged public awareness, and undermined the transparency of the system. Before the bans, the visual material (videos and photos) disseminated from courtrooms served as icons/signs. After the bans, the visual language disappeared from the content – a language that has a stronger denotative force than text (McQuail, 2010).

Unjustifiably closed proceedings constitute a restriction on openness and transparency. These changes were clearly aimed at limiting coverage of cases of high public interest. This represented artificial interference in the discourse through which the media presented reality and which also made generalisation possible. Speeches delivered in court, which created elements of social interaction, have disappeared from media discourse. The public no longer has the opportunity to see and assess high-profile court proceedings.

By the amendments to the Organic Law of Georgia on Common Courts introduced by Georgian Dream, photographing, filming and video recording, as well as broadcasting, in court (in the court building, courtroom, or court yard) has been rendered impermissible, except where this is carried out by the court itself or by a person authorised by the court. The dissemination of recorded material has been placed entirely within the court’s discretion – the court may choose to disseminate, or not to disseminate, photographs, film, and video recordings of court proceedings that it holds.

Recording or broadcasting a court hearing in Georgia is allowed only for specific cases with High Council of Justice approval, creating significant barriers that effectively prevent media coverage of proceedings. In practice, the media does not receive timely feedback from the High Council of Justice. As a result, media representatives are forced to remain outside, in the courtyard of Tbilisi City Court, throughout the day. It should be noted that even before the amendments, covering the work of the Tbilisi courts was problematic for online media.

**The restriction weakened the media’s involvement and its watchdog function, which in turn weakened public oversight:** the media can no longer use visual material when covering court proceedings, which reduces the impact of the narrative on public opinion. Journalists are forced to describe court processes only verbally/textually, which is often insufficient to convey the full picture. **The absence of documented material creates fertile ground for the spread of disinformation.** The public has no possibility to verify the narrative visually.

According to Jones (2025), the nine characteristics identified in the literature review for this study have become increasingly challenging to implement in Georgia within the context of content production. The prohibition of photo, audio, and video recording raises questions regarding which attributes court journalism in Georgia continues to maintain. Due to the existing restrictions on obtaining, processing, and disseminating journalistic content, the effects on all nine indicators are detailed in Table N1.

Table N1: Characteristics of court journalism and the effect of artificial barriers.

Characteristics	Effect of artificial barriers
<b>Immediacy</b>	Obstacles kill immediacy. Live blogs are available only on social networks, and television covers the course of proceedings in a very limited way. TV no longer has live links from the courtroom.
<b>Dramatisation</b>	Telling a story without visuals drains it of impact. Without video evidence, the effect is lost and trust may decrease. The risks of disinformation spreading increase.
<b>Visibility</b>	Public awareness and trust are reduced. A camera operating in court can create a sense of protection both for the parties and for the judge.
<b>Exclusivity</b>	On issues of high public importance and public interest, the media can no longer create its own record and is confined to narrative only. The media cannot work around the outer perimeter of the court either and is unable to attend not only high-profile cases but any hearing. Surprise is a key feature of journalism and can emerge when no one expects it. This is why it is crucial that the media always has the right to turn on the camera.
<b>Quotability</b>	Without a recording that creates an additional sense of presence, coverage is reduced to retelling or paraphrasing what has been seen or heard.
<b>Content Sharing</b>	The sharing of live streams is no longer instantaneous. Content is not distributed via traditional media, so this form of informing is limited or delayed. There is no new visual material.
<b>Publicly accessible information</b>	There is no supplementary flow of information that would enrich journalistic material. Unverified information can spread, and the authorities are able to fully control the flow of information.

The ban on filming inside courtrooms has made journalists' work more difficult. In journalists' view, the purpose of this change was to conceal the truth, reduce credibility and empathy, and dehumanise court proceedings. It has created space for disinformation and for the discrediting of defendants and convicted persons. This, in turn, deepens polarisation.

"Pro-government media cover court stories in a completely different context. This confuses the public and also breeds distrust." (Respondent N14)

"It is easy to say that a written text is made up or exaggerated, and this gives propaganda enormous power." (Respondent N6)

Visual images have previously played an important role in identifying and exposing both prisoners and false witnesses, as well as in showing the reactions of the judge and others in the courtroom. According to journalists, the ruling party decided to close off the courts precisely so that the public would no longer see the young prisoners who enjoyed public support. The visual dimension of media coverage was particularly important at the moment when verdicts were delivered, when people in the courtroom expressed emotions that had a powerful, contagious effect.

"The defendants' words and their emotions were very genuine, powerful and damaging for the authorities." (Respondent N3)

"The ruling party did not want the camera to capture the judge's cynical smirks, facial expressions and other such details." (Respondent N5)

"The good work done by independent journalists caused serious harm to the ruling team's propaganda. We showed real people and their inner state. Research has also shown that even among Georgian Dream supporters, many were opposed to the imprisonment of these innocent people." (Respondent N7)

"Filming was banned so that people would not develop sympathy for 19-20-year-old convicts. They probably thought that the less people saw, the less protest there would be about all this." (Respondent N13)

After the ban on filming in court, journalists still managed to adapt. They attend all high-profile cases and observe the proceedings with even greater attention, taking notes and describing emotions textually. Journalists prepare transcripts quickly and use narrative techniques to create a sense of presence. Illustrators from media organisations also work on sketches from the courtroom. The media has used archival footage in court reporting and adopted new storytelling techniques, such as live blogging. In response, the High Council of Justice soon [adopted](#) a decree banning the entry of technical and communication devices (laptops, mobile phones, and others) into courts. Court bailiffs were authorised to prevent any technical devices from being brought into (or used in) the courtroom. At the same time, it has become more difficult to obtain audio recordings or transcripts of hearings from the court. Due to the requirement of immediacy, journalists cannot wait for materials that are significantly delayed.



The problem lies not only in the ban on filming in the court building and its surrounding area, but also in the behaviour of court bailiffs, whom journalists compare to “titushki” who physically and verbally abuse citizens. In this respect, bailiffs at Tbilisi City Court are described as behaving more aggressively than in other cities. Journalists recall the period under the United National Movement, when filming in the courtroom was also prohibited, but the environment was not as hostile towards journalists. It is physically difficult for journalists to work both inside the court and in its vicinity. The stressful and hostile environment is compounded by the fact that there is no designated space for the media where they can rest or shelter in bad weather.

There is a noticeable difference in how journalists are treated in Tbilisi and Batumi. In particular, aggression towards journalists is lower in Batumi City Court. One possible reason is that court marshals there have not changed for years, they know the journalists well and cooperate with them. Journalists recall the behaviour of marshals in Batumi court, including during Mzia Amaghlobeli’s hearings, as markedly different.

“I don’t recall any incident where they lost their temper with us or used violence. What I do remember are cases when we were running late for hearings and they were warning each other not to close the door on us.” (Respondent N19)

According to journalists, the most important news actually happens in court. This also applies to the public display of solidarity, which has a positive, contagious and pro-social effect. Journalists recall that every appearance and shot of Mzia Amaghlobeli had an emotional impact and may well have shaped positive public attitudes.

Trust in the media is linked to an understanding of the role it plays in times of crisis. Such moments were constant throughout 2025. In the respondents’ assessment, filming was banned in order to conceal precisely the strength and role of the media.

“When citizens become more active and self-organise, they also see the role of the media more clearly. This became obvious in court proceedings, when everyone saw how crucial the media was – without it, the truth would have been hidden.” (Respondent N3)

Restrictions imposed on journalists have harmed the public, which no longer has access to information and cannot see with its own eyes what is happening within the court system. As a result, people can be more easily subjected to manipulation. Journalists believe that court reform in Georgia has been, and remains, a priority.

#### **4.4.3. Protest Journalism**

“Health or fulfilling professional duties” – this is the dilemma journalists face when covering protest demonstrations. Journalists’ behaviour at rallies has changed: newsrooms now plan protest coverage with much greater caution and try to ensure safety measures are followed. This often comes at the expense of their health and/or of giving up important content.



“This year we went through safety training. The newsroom provided us with masks, gas respirators and medical solutions, but colleagues still had allergic reactions to the gas. Our head of news was constantly on the line with us and, if the situation became too tense and it was impossible to breathe because of the gas, we would leave the scene. As a result, we could no longer cover the epicentre of events: when you film from a distance, the full picture is lost.” (Respondent N 21)

“The media no longer sets the agenda. In Adjara, everyone is afraid to go out to cover a protest because they don’t know when the situation will escalate; they don’t know what instructions the police will have.” (Respondent N14)

When covering protests, media representatives, like demonstrators, have repeatedly found themselves detained on the grounds of “blocking the road”. These actions can be assessed as unlawful interference with journalistic activity. Among those detained were employees of Publika, MediaChecker, TV company Formula and TV Pirveli.

“In the context of these fines, it became harder for me to step onto a blocked street while working, and we weren’t able to film certain shots. I also constantly check whether my name is on the list of those who have been fined.” (Respondent N12)

“Those who still work in the field today are doing the maximum. Both strictly following the law and fully covering an event are already acts of heroism.” (Respondent N2)

In assessing protest coverage, it is crucial for journalists to always be able to ask critical questions. These questions may be uncomfortable not only for the ruling party, but also for the opposition or the public itself. However, for independent media it is essential that self-censorship does not filter out important topics and sources.

The ruling team seeks to portray journalists as activists rather than as professionals performing their duties while covering protests. Another problem is that if a journalist is working only with a mobile phone, they may not be able to prove that they are engaged in professional activity, since for law enforcement officers a “journalist” is still associated with a TV-logo microphone or a camera.

The concentration of protest coverage on the capital has overshadowed the agendas of regional media. Audiences want to receive more information about these events specifically from local media, but regional outlets do not have the capacity to meet this demand.

Footage recorded by citizen journalists at protests also ends up in traditional media. This is especially true of videos showing the detention of protesters. In this regard, citizen journalists constitute an important resource.

Representatives of critical media describe how journalists from pro-government channels work in the field when covering protest rallies. They see them as the main culprits in strengthening propaganda and note that targeted sanctions should apply to them as well. For their part, journalists from the pro-government media also describe what it is like to work at demonstrations.

“Pro-government media have removed logos from their microphones, they pick specific people, wait for them to do something wrong, and then hand the footage over to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. They act like State Security Service operatives. This is not journalism.” (Respondent N4)

“For now, they don’t fight us the way they fight the so-called opposition channels. At protests, if pepper spray or gas is used against them deliberately, we just get caught up in the dispersal.” (Respondent N14)

Pro-government television channels try to portray representatives of critical media as protesters rather than journalists and do not express solidarity with them even when they are subjected to violence, which deepens the professional rift. Ultimately, protest journalism today equally requires stronger safety protocols, minimising legal risks, and continued efforts to ensure that critical questions and issues of public interest are not lost.

4.4.4. Safety of Journalists

The normalisation and encouragement of violence began with the violence and impunity directed against the media on 5 July 2021, and by 2025 had reached a critical threshold. Systemic shocks to the media intensified during election periods (2021, 2024). The safety and freedom of journalists have been deteriorating year by year. The syndrome of impunity continues to aggravate journalists’ situation: in practice, the likelihood that those who commit crimes against journalists will be detained is low, and even when they are, they mostly receive lenient sentences, which fails to have an adequate deterrent effect. Table N2 presents an analysis of statistics on violence against journalists in Georgia (2020-2025), based on the “risk map” compiled by the organisation [Justice for Journalists](#), and may not be exhaustive.

Table N2: Statistics on violence against journalists in Georgia (2020–2025)

Professional risks	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025 <sup>2</sup>	Total
Physical attacks and threats	25	140	30	32	111	35	373
Cyber-attacks	46	136	44	28	112	43	409
Court proceedings, detentions, economic sanctions, etc.	33	34	55	18	74	162	376
Total	104	310	129	78	297	240	1158

<sup>2</sup> covers the period up to 22 November 2025. The figures are increasing on a daily basis.

The table shows that in election years (2021 and 2024) the indicators of professional risk increase. Overall, of the 1,158 incidents recorded between 2020 and 2025, 8% (N=94) are related to pro-government television channels, and of these 94 cases, 30 concern court proceedings involving unlawfully dismissed employees (including, in 2020-21, staff of the Georgian Public Broadcaster / Adjara Public Broadcaster and Rustavi 2, and in 2021 one case involving an employee of Imedi TV).

In addition, in 2025 there was an alarming increase in the number of court proceedings, detentions and fines involving journalists critical of the ruling team. Specifically, of 162 such cases, only 11 are linked to pro-government television, and all of these relate to court proceedings involving former employees dismissed from the public broadcaster and a member of the broadcasting board critical of the government who was detained during a demonstration.

The statistics presented in the table reinforce the assessments and observations shared by respondents during the research. In particular, representatives of pro-government media rarely become targets of physical violence, whereas personal attacks and organised smear campaigns against journalists from critical outlets continue systematically. Newsrooms are no longer able to ensure a safe working environment for their staff.

“I don’t recall any instances of physical violence against pro-government media. At protests there may, of course, be verbal confrontation or bullying from demonstrators, but not physical attacks.” (Respondent N6)

“It does not matter which television station a journalist works for – no one has the right to bully a journalist. Regardless of editorial policy, no one should interfere with a journalist’s work.” (Respondent N21)

“We sat down in the newsroom and discussed the fact that our work could have dire consequences (arrest, fines). Everyone on the team made a conscious decision to continue working in a crisis situation.” (Respondent N5)

Participants believe that, in previous years, there was also an inadequate response from within the profession itself to crimes committed against the media, as the scale that repression could reach was not fully understood. As a result, there were no sufficient deterrent reactions. This was compounded by impunity and the gradual normalisation of such offences. According to journalists, the regime has become ruthless, and this level of repression is new – and unexpected – in the Georgian context.

“From today’s perspective, we did not fully grasp, over those years, what scale this repression could reach. It seems our response to the tragic death of Lekso Lashkarava and to other crimes should have been much tougher.” (Respondent N5)

Journalists constantly refer to repression, fear and the risk of imprisonment. The first strong wave of fear followed the death of Lekso Lashkarava in 2021. Fear was further intensified by personalised attacks on journalists (including telephone threats). A new wave of fear was triggered by the arrest of Mzia Amaghlobeli – an attempt at exemplary punishment, when journalists saw that imprisonment for a journalist is a real prospect.

Journalists have begun to take their own safety more seriously and proactively. This kind of self-organisation includes notifying lawyers in advance, preparing family members for the possibility of arrest and/or disappearance, introducing secure communication channels and protocols, and more.

“The first thing that comes to mind about this year is fear... everyone feels it. Journalists are walking the path of dissidents.” (Respondent N6)

“Every single day, we constantly think that tomorrow we might end up in prison.” (Respondent N4)

Verbal attacks on journalists are deliberate and aimed at reinforcing an atmosphere of fear, with “titushki” actively involved. Journalists do not feel safe even when they are not performing their professional duties. Aggression may take the form of insults in the street which do not resemble random, spontaneous conflicts. Perpetrators know that their target works in the media (and may explicitly mention during the attack that the person is a journalist or producer). Such attacks are designed to make journalists internalise the idea that they are being targeted because of their profession. One of the few means of protection available to journalists is to go live on air.

“I can’t remember a single major rally where our journalist hasn’t been robbed, beaten or detained. One of our reporters even needed surgery after a beating. All of this is accompanied by insults, swearing, physical, and psychological abuse, and fines.” (Respondent N7)

“Just being on the street is dangerous. So-called titushki can beat you up right in front of the police and the police won’t protect you. They can forcibly damage your camera.” (Respondent N9)

Respondents recall that bullying of the media by high-ranking officials has also intensified on social networks. For journalists who work with pro-government channels but do not share the ruling party’s positions and remain critical, it has become increasingly difficult to do their job.

“There is a clash of values inside the media as well. If you work for a so-called pro-government channel, you face hostility and a toxic environment. There have been cases when I’ve heard myself being insulted and sworn at live on air.” (Respondent N19)

Representatives of the ruling party follow a coordinated “message-box” when communicating with critical media. In the context of questions or stories, they call journalists liars and provocateurs and repeat phrases such as “this is not a relevant question” or “your party told you to ask this”.

“It is difficult to find a respondent from the ruling party, and if we do manage to ask a question at a briefing, instead of an answer we get an insult.” (Respondent N9)

“I’m afraid to call an ambulance! There was a case when an emergency doctor came to see me and I remembered that he had ‘liked’ a post on social media where the mayor was insulting our newspaper.” (Respondent N15)

In recent years, among the various instances of violence against journalists, respondents recall the telephone threats and abuse of 2024 as the most traumatic experience – especially because the attacks also targeted their family members, including young children and elderly parents. This trauma remains very much alive even a year later.

“When my underage children were getting calls at three o’clock in the morning, it terrified me. Even my 85-year-old mother received a call. I was emotionally devastated. What were we being punished for? For being critical? Now they themselves are saying the same things about corruption, about exactly those people whose cases are now being discussed – we had already published investigative pieces about them.” (Respondent N12)

Respondents also spoke about social media “bubbles” that react aggressively to journalists’ work. Public frustration is often linked to invited guests, the choice of topics and other editorial decisions.

“Members of social media ‘bubbles’ want to see only the content they like on television; they want to set the agenda themselves and effectively replace the newsroom. They have complaints about which guests journalists invite and which questions they choose to ask. This is accompanied by insults directed at journalists.” (Respondent N4)

“As long as the Charter’s principles are not violated, a journalist has the right to ask any question. Part of society does not understand the role of a journalist and thus contributes to self-censorship. It is self-censorship if you cannot ask a question because you know the bubble will not like it.” (Respondent N12)

In previous years, media professionals referred to the possibility of leaving the country and continuing work in exile only hypothetically. In 2025, however, emigration is being discussed as a real and relevant option among journalists. Seven foreign journalists were denied entry at the Georgian border. Media organisations employing foreign journalists now face a new challenge: if these journalists leave Georgia, they may not be allowed to re-enter. This increases the risk of information isolation.

“Governments have always fought against the media, but what is new is that now they are fighting the media on the ground, in the course of professional work, in full view of everyone.” (Respondent N19)

For regional media, planning relocation and thinking about working in exile is even more difficult. For community media outlets, exile is not a real option. This is due both to the language barrier and to the regional niche they serve, which they would no longer be able to maintain abroad. Although the “prison scenario” feels realistic, journalists do not want to leave the country and would rather continue working at home, even with minimal resources.

“Going to another country is not easy. I don’t even want to leave. If I go abroad, I won’t be able to do as much for the people in my district. By staying here, I can do more for them.” (Respondent N15)

Between 2021 and 2025, journalists’ safety deteriorated: violence and threats became normalised, impunity persisted and effective responses from law enforcement remained rare. Repressive legislative initiatives added legal and economic pressure to existing physical risks. During protests, physical attacks on journalists increased. Newsrooms tightened safety protocols, which in turn reduced the depth and timeliness of coverage. The climate of fear and impunity has been particularly damaging for regional media and citizen journalists; unlike in previous years, emigration is now being seriously considered.

The crisis has affected not only media freedom, but also the public’s right to have access to free and reliable information. Lower levels of public awareness strengthen the impact of disinformation, deepen isolation, and further increase the scale of violence.

**4.4.5. Election Journalism**

In 2025, a record low number of media outlets observed the municipal elections in Georgia. Interest and engagement from both local and international media declined dramatically, while access to information deteriorated further.

In 2025, only 56 media organisations were [accredited](#) at the Central Election Commission (three times fewer than in the previous year), among them several television channels critical of the ruling party. In contrast, media participation in previous elections ([2021](#), [2024](#)) had been increasing. According to official data from the Central Election Commission, 89 media organisations were accredited for the 2021 local self-government elections, while 171 press and other mass media outlets were accredited for the 2024 parliamentary elections (67 more media organisations than in the 2020 parliamentary elections). Among them, the involvement of international media in monitoring the elections also decreased. The trend is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Accredited press and other mass media at elections (2020–2025)

2020	2021	2024	2025
104	89	171	56

The reasons for this decline are varied. The ruling party had already weakened the resources of critical media in previous years through sustained pressure, while at the same time strengthening pro-government propaganda and media. The non-competitive environment and the opposition’s boycott made the process less interesting. In addition, for election day on 4 October, a large-scale protest rally had been announced, so journalists’ attention and interest were directed towards and divided by that event.

“The outcome of these elections was known in advance, so there was less interest. No changes were expected, and there was less of a news hook or media interest.” (Respondent N13)

“Media interest is always lower during local elections than during parliamentary elections. This kind of coverage was to be expected.” (Respondent N16)



“These were not competitive elections. There was neither the mood nor the motivation for the media to maintain its watchdog function.” (Respondent N19)

In the municipal elections, some opposition parties chose to boycott the process. In Georgia, a political boycott did not translate into a media boycott of coverage, but it did affect the media agenda. Despite being labelled as “party media”, critical television channels nevertheless obtained accreditation at the Central Election Commission.

“The media must cover all types of elections and processes. In this respect, one-party elections were ‘good to cover and to show’. The media should not grow tired, it should systematically tell viewers what is happening.” (Respondent N12)

“It is not our job to assess legitimacy. When there is a news hook, the story must be covered. In any case, the starting point is the professional standard.” (Respondent N5)

Compared to previous years, the pre-election period was more comfortable for the ruling party. In the regions, secret meetings were once again held, which local media could not reach in time, and this practice continued after the elections as well. Compared to previous years, the pre-election period was more comfortable for the ruling party. In the regions, closed-door meetings continued to be held, which local media could not access in time, and this practice persisted even after the elections.

“After the elections, at the first session of the municipal council we were told there was no place for us. We had to fight just to have a chair put out for us.” (Respondent N15)

According to the respondents involved in the study, these were the most uniform and one-party elections in the history of independent Georgia.

#### **4.4.6. Transformation and Challenges of the Digital Ecosystem**

According to the global platform [Statista](#), social media continues to expand and evolve worldwide. Projections suggest that by 2028 the total number of social media users will reach 6.05 billion, which is more than half of the world’s population. According to [Datareportal](#), in 2025 there were 3.00 million social media users in Georgia, equivalent to 78.8% of the population. This figure represents an increase of 150,000 users (+5.3%) compared to the beginning of 2024. Because it is difficult to distinguish duplicated users across platforms, these figures do not represent unique users, and year-on-year comparisons may be unreliable and require adjustment. Nevertheless, the use of digital platforms is steadily increasing and, alongside generational change, is likely to sustain both this growth and the gradual replacement of traditional media.

How well is the media prepared to meet these digital challenges? Driven by the crisis, media organisations have accelerated digitalisation and the use of alternative platforms. At the same time, the use of artificial intelligence tools in content production has become increasingly important. As of 2025, the penetration of digital media is presented in Table N4.

Table 4: TV channels and their numbers of subscribers (in thousands and millions).

Television Stations	YouTube	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok
<b>Public Broadcaster</b>	395 K	865 K	66.6 K	107 K
<b>Formula news</b>	155 K	939 K	179 K	135,3 K
<b>Imedi</b>	1.11 M	1.1 M	109 K	137,3 K
<b>TV Pirveli</b>	134 K	391 K	8 K	24,9 K
<b>Mtavari Channel</b>	331 K	1.5 M	156 K	172,3 K
<b>Palitra news</b>	28.8 K	269	4 K	4,6 K
<b>Euronews Georgia</b>	24. 4 K	223 K	20.9 K	73, 9 K
<b>Kavkasia</b>	73.4 K	114 K	222	

In Georgia, the imbalance of power is also evident on digital platforms. The table shows that, in terms of subscriber numbers on digital platforms, Imedi dominates, and on YouTube alone its audience is equal to the combined subscriber base of all other leading media platforms.

Journalists have started using AI-generated content. There are AI applications specifically tailored to journalistic work, but respondents in this study prefer popular, general-purpose platforms such as Grok and ChatGPT, and tend to favour paid versions.

Online media outlets use the capabilities of artificial intelligence to produce higher-quality content, in particular to create audio versions of texts. Popular platforms such as ChatGPT are used in day-to-day routines (explaining terms and draft laws, checking and refining information, classification, expanding and clarifying press release topics, translation, etc.), although journalists consider the information provided by ChatGPT to be unreliable and therefore triple-check the facts. There are no specific protocols for the use of AI in newsrooms, and journalists are guided by general rules and their own experience. Television channels use AI applications that can generate transcripts of material posted on YouTube. Such applications (e.g. Summaryfy) are used in preparing international news stories.

“Grok has up-to-date information in real time (from the last 24 hours) – statements, soundbites – and can produce short summaries of many documents. I can upload several documents and give it a specific task (for example, to search for references to Georgia). It is important to specify in the prompt that it should process information only on the basis of the uploaded sources.” (Respondent N18)

“In my work in television, artificial intelligence has become an integral part of what I do.” (Respondent N17)

Despite the growing importance of alternative media (such as YouTube) in Georgia, television still remains the main source of information. Some respondents dislike it when journalists who are very active on social media and act as influencers bring activist-style content into traditional media.

“There is a heavy dose of activism in critical media; you can feel it both in the storytelling and in the actions. A blogger’s text does not always fit traditional media. A non-journalistic question undermines trust as well. Viewers should not feel, in the evening news, that the reporter is still angry about something that happened to them at one o’clock.” (Respondent N18)

In the coming years, the number of digital media users will increase, and it is important for traditional television channels to invest resources in developing their presence on YouTube and other alternative platforms.

“Those who are not watching television now are not going to switch it on in a few years either. That is why it is important to position ourselves on alternative platforms.” (Respondent N16)

In Georgia, every broadcaster has its own official page on social networks (see Table 4), where platform-specific “shorts” (brief informational videos, usually up to one minute long), cards and posts are published. Moreover, after Mtavari Channel suspended broadcasting, its presence has continued precisely on online platforms. It should also be noted that a number of journalists have decided to leave the profession as employees of traditional outlets and create their own channels on various platforms (YouTube, Telegram) in order to attract new audiences.

In line with global trends, podcasts have also become popular in Georgia; however, due to polarization, debates in Georgian media are extremely rare, including in podcast formats.

Technologies and the opacity surrounding their use can also be employed to reinforce authoritarian rule (for example, for surveillance, for identifying individuals at demonstrations using AI technologies, or for cyberbullying). Democratic backsliding in the country, in and of itself, also threatens broad access to technologies and innovation.

#### **4.4.7. The Lost Niche of the Public Broadcaster**

Respondents spoke about the developments surrounding the Public Broadcaster’s First Channel. They recalled that the management of the Public Broadcaster dismissed 22 employees who were critical of the Georgian Dream party and/or of the management. Among them were those who had openly expressed solidarity with Mzia Amaglobeli and actively supported her. In 2025, programmes in which, for years, critical views and people’s voices had been heard were taken off air (for example, the programme *Realuri Sivrtse* [“Real Space”]).

In response to the processes unfolding around the Public Broadcaster, on April 11, 2025 a group called “[Defenders of the Public Broadcaster](#)” was formed. Its representatives demanded that the channel’s management ensure that the Public Broadcaster covered the events and ongoing protests in the country. Members of the group sent dozens of letters to the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and its chair. In return, they received a one-sentence reply saying that the situation would be examined. This response left journalists disappointed.

The Defenders of Public Broadcasting did not achieve their goal. The leaders of the group were dismissed from their jobs, and the programmes where public problems were being covered were shut down. It is noteworthy that in 2025 the Public Broadcaster moved into a new building, where to this day not all studios are equipped for all programmes. The TV management cites precisely the lack of studios as the reason for suspended and cancelled shows. Participants in the study recalled that the dismissals were carried out in a degrading and humiliating way:

“The punitive mechanism was so crushing that I needed medical treatment because of the stress I experienced. I was shocked by such harshness. I had only ever seen this kind of cold-blooded attitude in fiction films.” (Respondent N2)

According to journalists, the Public Broadcaster has lost its niche – to be a platform for any citizen. The channel has effectively taken on the role of an entertainment broadcaster.

“We no longer have a focus on the value of information. This criticism applies to all media (the Public Broadcaster and private TV stations alike), but in the case of private companies the focus is on ratings and engagement, whereas a publicly funded television station should have different priorities.” (Respondent N15)

According to respondents, the trend has persisted whereby stories of real public importance are broadcast in “off-peak” positions. For example, in the main edition of *Moambe*, an item that is critical of the government is never the lead story. It may appear later in the bulletin or only on the website, which does not have sufficient reach to the wider audience. This kind of treatment then serves as an argument for the broadcaster’s management to claim that the channel is “balanced” and covers all important news.

Against the background of the weakening of critical and regional media, the Public Broadcaster produces less and less content about the regions. The public is not informed about what local self-government bodies are doing. At Adjara Public Broadcaster, too, people speak of growing self-censorship and note that local journalists have adapted to the political conjuncture and are increasingly reluctant to ask critical questions.

## ■ 4.5. Russian Barbed Wire in the Media

In 2024, the country reverted to the level of electoral autocracy that it had prior to 2003 ([Democracy Report 2025](#), p. 26). Political polarisation (both real and perceived) has gradually taken on a structural character since 2021 and, between 2022 and 2025, has been practically “frozen” at a high level. Polarisation is one of the main challenges for the media environment. It undermines the quality, credibility, and solidarity of media output, restricts communication with sources, and increases self-censorship and fear.

The effect of self-censorship and censorship is the same: both erase critical questions and opinions and produce silence (Media Voice, 2021). According to [research](#) in the Democracy Report 2025, the rise in polarisation and the consolidation of power correlate with an increase in disinformation: the more polarised the environment, the stronger the impact of disinformation.

Russian hybrid influence on the media ecosystem has expanded significantly and become more visible since 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Alongside the growth of disinformation, the lines of polarisation have also become more sharply defined. Against this background, pro-Kremlin influences, anti-Western narratives and systemic disinformation continue to flow from pro-government media with consistently high intensity. Journalists see Georgian "propaganda media" as playing a key role in the strengthening and success of Russian propaganda in Georgia.

According to their observations, Georgian and Russian propaganda resemble each other both in traditional and social media, and the audience receives not hidden, but openly anti-Western messages. The Law of Georgia on Broadcasting obliges the Public Broadcaster, through its editorial policy, to promote integration into NATO and the European Union. In the respondents' assessment, the channel does not fulfil this obligation. In previous years, there was no expectation in Georgia that the country would come to resemble Belarus or Russia. In this respect, the current situation is shocking for media professionals.

"In the success of Russian propaganda, the media – including the Public Broadcaster – has a major share of responsibility. In 2025, the Public Broadcaster turned into a propaganda channel. On the one hand, there is a programme like *Ranina* on the Public Broadcaster, which attracts viewers, and on the other hand, this show becomes the backdrop for 'rubbing in' propaganda, into which millions are poured." (Respondent N2)

"When I monitor Russian channels, I can see that the Georgian and Russian systems, messages and content are very similar. Propaganda is visible in the 'saccharine entertainment shows and news programmes', where they constantly bring up the 'bloody 9 years' and the 'prison videos'. The fear of the 'enemy' coming back is always present. Viewers are constantly being fed with this fear and hatred." (Respondent N4)

Pro-European communities and media in the regions have become specific targets, and local authorities are also working to weaken solidarity towards them. Respondents recall the activity of organisations linked to the Evgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre ([operating](#) in Georgia since 2013), which promote Russian interests in the regions. These organisations carry out charitable activities, including in the name of, and with the support of, influential clergy.

Journalists participating in the study consider it alarming that the issue of Russian occupation has largely disappeared from the agendas of central, regional, and international media. Journalists no longer go – and in many cases are no longer able to go – to the occupation line to film the "borderisation" process, speak to local residents, and document the "creeping occupation". This process is further complicated by the fact that filming requires permission from the State Security Service and involves additional costs.

When covering the issue, pro-government television channels (mainly in the context of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meetings in Ergneti) limit themselves to stock footage and short soundbites, providing only dry information. Access to information in villages along the occupation line has become more difficult, and the number of journalistic sources has decreased. To counter Russian influence, direct, face-to-face communication with the local population is crucial.

“Honest conversations with the local population are made difficult by the fact that a police officer is constantly standing next to the journalist, and people no longer want to talk about their problems – and there are many problems. Our sources no longer call us. That is also a problem.” (Respondent N20)

Regional journalists recall that in previous years, when “borderisation” was taking place, the local population would sound the alarm and the media would go on the ground to film everything. Now, the population is in informational isolation, which requires a response.

**“Now invisible barbed wires are being stretched through the media. This is a double occupation. On the one hand, Russia is occupying us, and on the other hand, the media that can speak about the problems of occupation is disappearing.”** (Respondent N20)

“The goal of the ruling party is not only isolation from Europe, but also the confinement of individuals – so that a person keeps their opinion inside their own kitchen. **Solidarity, both inside the country and outside it, cuts through this barbed wire of isolation.** Therefore, any kind of solidarity, by its nature, is already directed against isolation.” (Respondent N10)

The disappearance of critical media further strengthens Russian influence in Georgia. An effective mechanism for countering the spread of Russian-style propaganda is the telling of human stories and the demonstration of prosocial behaviours (solidarity, empathy, support, humour, etc.). Russian-style propaganda seeks precisely to erase the visibility of such human stories. For example, this research shows that one of the aims of regulating court reporting may be to remove emotional icons and visual language which generate empathy and solidarity in society, creating a sense of social interaction with the audience, and thereby impeding the effectiveness of propaganda.

## ■ 4.6. Institutionalization of Solidarity and Restoration of Trust

**The institutionalisation of solidarity** is a process through which individuals, groups and society are bound together by shared goals and fragmented or one-off acts of support are transformed into a conscious, planned, and recurring practice. In the media context, such a **solidarity infrastructure** (subscriptions and audience engagement, crisis grants, donations, collective funding/crowdfunding, legal hotlines, solidarity statements, protests, etc.) reduces risks, strengthens media outlets, and, in the long term, increases public trust.

Drawing on Media Voice research, between 2021 and 2025 there was a systematic campaign to discredit the journalism profession and drain its resources. Public trust in the media declined year by year, which in turn weakened social solidarity and support.



Since 2021, Media Voice studies have consistently highlighted the importance and forms of institutionalising solidarity, and this focus is now even more crucial, as there are concrete examples of transformative experience and measurable indicators (such as the [Sinatle.media](#) campaign, donations, and the positive dynamics in the number of media subscribers). In response to this initiative, pro-government media have already [launched](#) a smear campaign (Imedi TV, 24.11.2025).

In previous years, during times of crisis (such as the threat of media closures or violence against journalists), public solidarity was fragmented. There was neither a habit nor a strong motivation for long-term support of the media. In 2025, the systemic crisis accelerated the institutionalisation of solidarity: solidarity began to decentralise, and the financial crisis in the media became a key enabling factor. For regional media, joining strong coalitions and receiving both moral and financial support proved especially important.

Solidarity campaigns take various forms. They may involve calls for financial support, participation in rallies and campaigns in support of the media, signing petitions, expressing support on social media, and more.

The institutionalisation of solidarity can trigger changes that counter autocracy and strengthen democracy at different levels. Conversely, the erosion of support and international isolation may be the ultimate goal of authoritarian regimes. Solidarity, on the other hand, can strengthen the role and positioning of institutions, which in itself signals the existence of democratic mechanisms and helps prevent the full capture of the state.

In 2025, the crisis in Georgia created a “fabric of solidarity” – a self-organised, decentralised network that resists the seizure of power and reinforces democracy. In this context, it is crucial to further strengthen this solidarity network and maintain its visibility.

There is a negative dynamic of solidarity between media organisations positioned on different poles of polarization. Professional solidarity had been declining for years and, by 2025, it can be said to have disappeared altogether. The reason for this “zero solidarity” was likely the fact that at the end of 2024, when journalists who work for critical television stations were attacked and injured during protests (Guram Rogava, Maka Chikhladze, Giorgi Shetsiruli), others from pro-government television channels did not express public solidarity with them. Both sides believe that relations are now so badly damaged that they cannot be restored. For journalists, it is particularly painful when their colleagues produce smear pieces targeting them.

“Bridges between us have been completely burned. In the past, we would even defend propagandistic media representatives while they were working in the field, when they were being verbally bullied, but now we no longer do that. The turning point was their silence when journalists were left to be killed.” (Respondent N21)

The study showed that the long-standing strategy of setting “media against media” has effectively killed “public solidarity” between the two polarized camps. The space for professional cooperation among journalists is shrinking and has taken the form of

“confidential solidarity” – when support from colleagues is expressed not openly but through private messages and without public noise. Such support was received, for example, by employees dismissed from the public broadcaster. The ways in which mutual solidarity is expressed between media organisations on the two poles of polarization differ across public space, social networks, and private communication.

“They apologised to us for not being able to speak out. I was expecting greater activism from the public – not so much to defend us, but to defend themselves.” (Respondent N2)

Only minimal resources remain within professional circles for restoring future professional and collegial cooperation. This potential is more visible in the generation that has past experience of working together (for example, those who were employed in the same media organisation). This applies to the generation of journalists and camera operators who worked together at Rustavi 2 between 1994 and 2019. Although opposing political sides have always existed in Georgia, friendship in the “journalistic kitchen” used to create a certain fabric of solidarity. As an illustration, participants in the study recall the solidarity shown on November 7, 2007 and the support expressed after the killing of Lekso Lashkarava in 2021.

“Since Lekso Lashkarava’s death, we have not seen consolidated solidarity from pro-government journalists in relation to other crimes. Nor have we seen, publicly, a journalist who moved from one TV station to another express regret and repent for their propagandistic work.” (Respondent N5)

“Professional communication with pro-government journalists can no longer continue, because they are no longer considered colleagues. What they are doing is no longer journalism. Therefore, they will share the same fate as the Georgian Dream.” (Respondent N3)

Among the generation that has entered journalism only in recent years, this memory does not exist and, accordingly, communication with the “opposite camp” while working in the field is limited or entirely absent.

“Journalists of my generation have more empathy for one another. The new generation, from my point of view, is tougher.” (Respondent N16)

For journalists and camera operators working at pro-government channels, this attitude is unacceptable. They believe that it was their colleagues who initiated the rupture of personal relationships and that, regardless of editorial policy, the space of personal relations should not have been closed.

“We no longer have respect for differing opinions, and at this stage there is no visible resource for communication. There are people who have been harmed on both sides, and as long as this is the case, the crisis will continue.” (Respondent N17)

“I do not recall relationships between colleagues ever being this unsupportive and tense.” (Respondent N14)

The situation is different in the legislative body. In Parliament, collegial relations between television journalists on both poles have been preserved, partly because there is less rotation among them. Strengthening solidarity correlates with trust in the media. According to observations from regional media, the media faces its greatest credibility challenges in rural areas, mainly because pro-government propaganda is more accessible there. Respondents also point to a positive dynamic: the need for and trust in the media grows when human rights are violated and the medium providing information is the critical media.

“People are drawing a very clear connection between their own rights and the need for the existence of independent media.” (Respondent N7)

Journalists’ involvement in the protection of human rights has, over the years, transformed into civic activism. Media representatives are mostly engaged in protest rallies held specifically to defend the media and freedom of expression. Participation in such activism has both positive and negative sides. On the one hand, it creates shared strategies of struggle between the audience and the media and highlights the media’s role in helping people. On the other hand, it means stepping out of the media’s “observer” position, which calls its impartiality into question.

Some journalists working in critical media believe that public passivity in openly supporting the media has been caused by the fact that journalists stepped outside their professional role and began to position themselves as civic activists or influencers. This was compounded by discreditation campaigns against the media, intimidation, and the demonisation of the media.

“Maintaining a professional niche strengthens trust. The media has built its agenda not around people’s issues, but around those of political parties, which has increased the distance from the public.” (Respondent N5)

“We have become not only those who cover the protests, but also those who protest, because this is a struggle for freedom of speech and expression.” (Respondent N3)

In 2025, a strengthening of trust in the media has become noticeable, and some journalists expect it to grow further. This was facilitated by the exposure of corruption cases and the identification of perpetrators by the authorities themselves. The public have seen that the high-profile corruption cases on which journalists working in the critical media had been preparing investigative stories for years turned out to be true, while the discreditation campaigns waged by journalists loyal to the ruling party proved unfounded and defamatory. This was indirectly reflected in the pro-government, propagandistic media as well, which is now producing content on the same corruption topics. All of this has created a strong argument for increasing trust in the critical media.

“The fact that the ruling party and its supportive media have themselves brought corruption issues to the forefront may increase trust in the critical media.” (Respondent N12)

“This indicates that society should trust the critical media, because it is their best point of support and protection. It has become clear that what we were saying about corrupt people was true.” (Respondent N2)

Attitudes towards journalists and the crisis of trust are also influenced by the historical legacy that the Georgian press carries from Soviet times. The Soviet press served propaganda and distorted the truth. This pattern continues to affect journalists' reputations to this day. Although the crisis of social trust in institutions is a global trend, the Soviet mentality and the civic memory built upon it provide particularly fertile ground for a crisis of trust in the media.

Representatives of the critical media believe that public trust in them will grow. By contrast, representatives of television channels loyal to the government think that trust in journalists is deteriorating, and that this affects everyone.

“The public perceives the media itself as a ‘side’ and thinks that one side is lying while the other is telling the truth.” (Respondent N16)

“For people, journalists have turned into talking heads on television, not into human beings who help them. So, they have given up on us, and this has also affected trust.” (Respondent N17)

In regions where public service jobs and social assistance are the main – and sometimes the only – sources of income, self-censorship is also high. This has been transformed into persecution and punishment of those who are critical of the government and who support pro-European values. It is reflected in reduced public visibility and support: for example, people with critical views are not shown in photos from government events, they are not provided with proper working conditions, and they are moved into purely formal positions where they no longer have any real function. Calls by high-ranking officials (for example, Irakli Kobakhidze’s “zero compassion” [statement](#) of 06.10.2025) also contribute to the reduction of solidarity in society.

“In the regions, even those public servants are punished who retain empathy for people the authorities dislike. Solidarity with ‘undesirable’ individuals is also being reduced. The media, the opposition, and pro-Western citizens have disappeared from the photos. This is a directive carried out by the public relations departments of local authorities.” (Respondent N15)

Attitudes towards the critical media changed after the 2024 protest rallies. If, after 2021, government propaganda was inciting hatred towards the media, in 2024 part of the public realised how dangerous the profession of journalism is. Empathy emerged, which citizens now express, and in the respondents' view this is precisely what distinguishes Georgia from Belarus or Russia.

There are factors that strengthen trust in the media, and there are factors that undermine it. For example, the disappearance of human stories and human-centred topics from coverage damages trust, because people no longer see themselves and their problems reflected on television. As a result of polarization, the media has become distanced from the people.

“Trust is also damaged by the fact that many painful topics have disappeared from the air, human stories and issues brought from people’s lives have vanished, and the everyday reality of our people is no longer visible.” (Respondent N5)

Social networks have also played a role in increasing the distance from people and in strengthening artificial forms of interaction, because non-traditional, digital communication does not have the same effect as face-to-face contact. Social networks create the illusion that a journalist is listening by reading comments, but other forms of communication are important too – ones in which journalists are truly accessible and people can write to them, call them, and report facts and problems. In this respect, direct communication between media representatives and people (without cameras) has been and remains very important.

“Interpersonal relationships are even more important in the regions. People need to see you, know you well, trust you, and feel that you are by their side – you have to go through the process of events together with them.” (Respondent N5)

Rebuilding trust requires sharing journalist-verified information and balancing government, party, public, and independent media agendas. Within the framework of this study, we developed **28 indicators** of trust and solidarity towards the media, which can be used to standardise and measure solidarity practices over time. These are:

- 1) International support: statements by organisations and embassies;
- 2) International support: attendance of journalists’ court hearings by official representatives;
- 3) Monitoring and advocacy carried out by local and international organisations;
- 4) Targeted sanctions against those who commit crimes against journalists;
- 5) Quiet and public diplomacy aimed at protecting media freedom;
- 6) Statements and solidarity actions by various professional groups;
- 7) Public solidarity expressed by colleagues;
- 8) Supportive statements made by citizens (including celebrities);
- 9) Petitions;
- 10) Creation and strengthening of professional groups and solidarity spaces/hubs;
- 11) Ending the symbiotic relationships between political parties and media outlets;
- 12) Statements made on social networks (on one or several platforms), measured by number of reactions, reach, and shares;
- 13) Positioning of support in local media;
- 14) Positioning of support in international media;
- 15) Demonstrated end to impunity for crimes committed against the media;
- 16) Effective response to crimes exposed by the media (e.g. uncovering corruption and punishing perpetrators, punishing perpetrators of violence, etc.);

- 17) Strengthening of “solidarity journalism”: highlighting the context of support for specific vulnerable groups or individuals;
- 18) Immediacy and timeliness;
- 19) Personalisation: human stories;
- 20) Increasing public engagement and strengthening the public agenda in the media: bringing problems to the forefront;
- 21) Traditional/professional communication with the audience;
- 22) Informal meetings with the audience to discuss the role of the media;
- 23) Diversity of topics, sources, and genres;
- 24) Adherence to professional standards;
- 25) Editorial courage / demonstrating freedom of choice in content production;
- 26) Visibility and accessibility: distributing content across multiple media platforms;
- 27) Visibility: openness and transparency;
- 28) Financial support: donations, crowdfunding, subscriptions, and other forms.

Years of accumulated transformative experience have shown that it is precisely the institutionalisation of solidarity – the joint actions and shared agendas of the media and the public – that can structurally strengthen the media and trust in it. Restoring trust in the media requires institutionalised solidarity: a permanent, decentralised infrastructure made up of micro-networks that brings together audiences, professional associations, regional and national media, as well as educational and international partners. It is important to standardise these emerging practices and manage them in a measurable way, through regular monitoring of indicators. Such an infrastructure reduces isolation, increases public engagement, and empowers those media outlets that truly serve the public interest.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

At a time when Georgia's independent media and the state itself are in a critical phase of capture, recommendations whose implementation requires political will – and which have been systematically ignored by the ruling party for years – have largely lost their relevance. By 2025, almost all levers that guarantee media freedom had ended up in the hands of the ruling party. Yet it is precisely political will that can influence the reduction of polarization, the restoration of trust in the media, the improvement of access to information, the protection of journalists' safety, the harmonisation of media laws, the reduction of fear and self-censorship, the strengthening of democratic institutions, and more.

Recommendations aimed at improving the media environment and addressed to the current authorities have gone unimplemented year after year. In light of this practice, the recommendations to the government presented here are intended for a future, legitimate government. It will be essential to initiate a swift and systemic package of reforms that will return the country to a path of democratic development. This will require the active involvement of social groups, politicians and activists, organisations and, crucially, the media.

### **What should be done to ensure journalists' safety?**

#### **The government should:**

- ▶ Ensure full investigation of attacks against the media and punishment of perpetrators. Timely and adequate response to all instances of violence against journalists must become a state priority. To end the culture of impunity for attacks on the media, the government should make the results of investigations public.
- ▶ In cooperation with the media and civil society, compile comprehensive statistics on all incidents of violence and threats against natural or legal persons that are related to their journalistic work. All cases of violence and threats against journalists must be investigated and prosecuted in line with European standards – in an impartial, swift and effective manner.

#### **The media should:**

- ▶ Recognise that protest journalism today equally requires stronger safety protocols, minimisation of legal risks, and a continued struggle to ensure that critical questions and issues of public interest are not lost in silence.

## **What should be done to stop the instrumentalization of laws against the media?**

### **All stakeholders should:**

- ▶ Engage in the process of improving the legislative media environment so that the country can return to the path of European integration. Repressive, Russian-style laws must be repealed and the entrenched practices they enabled must be changed.
- ▶ Prioritise harmonisation of media legislation with European law (for example, the European Media Freedom Act) and ensure the implementation of obligations under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement as part of the European integration process.
- ▶ Put an end to the abuse of legislative, judicial, and executive power and stop adopting politically motivated decisions.
- ▶ The ruling party and its affiliated actors must stop filing SLAPP cases against critical media and activists. The authorities should introduce legislative changes to protect journalists from SLAPP lawsuits.
- ▶ Redraft Article 154 of the Criminal Code. Its scope of protection should be expanded, the offence should be moved into the category of particularly serious crimes, and strict custodial sentences should be envisaged for crimes committed in connection with journalistic activity.

## **What should be done to institutionalise solidarity?**

In the solidarity process, it is not the fragmented impact of individual indicators that is effective, but networked and multi-layered engagement. The research shows that this “fabric of solidarity” already exists organically in Georgia and needs to be strengthened. Mutual support between the media and the public can be transformed into an ongoing process and routine, in which the agendas of society and the media are jointly owned. The transformative experience accumulated over the years has shown that it is precisely the institutionalisation of solidarity – joint activities and shared themes of the media and the public – that can strengthen the media structurally and increase trust in it. Strengthening solidarity is also a mechanism for the financial independence and viability of the media. In this process, it is important that:

### **The media and the public should:**

- ▶ Develop a “solidarity protocol” that will increase the speed and visibility of solidarity responses. The “protocol” may include joint statements, a rapid-response legal and psychological support hotline, and similar mechanisms.
- ▶ Revitalise traditional forms of engagement with audiences, where it is possible to communicate directly with journalists, talk to them and/or meet them in a safe environment. Regular face-to-face meetings with audiences can be organised to increase accountability, broaden the space given to public agendas and strengthen trust. By prioritising public problems, the media can counterbalance party and/or government agendas in its coverage.

## **The media and the public should:**

- ▶ Draw up a “solidarity protocol” that will increase the speed and visibility of solidarity responses. The protocol may include joint statements and a rapid-response legal and psychological support hotline.
- ▶ Revitalise traditional forms of engagement with audiences, where direct communication with journalists, conversations and/or meetings in a safe environment are possible. Regular face-to-face meetings with audiences can be organised to increase accountability, broaden the space for the public agenda and build trust. By foregrounding people’s problems, the media can counterbalance party and/or government agendas.
- ▶ Strengthen cooperation between central and regional media by introducing the practice of joint content production (for example, at least two joint pieces per month on issues unfolding in the capital and in the regions).
- ▶ To increase solidarity and trust, ensure compliance with professional standards and reinforce self-regulatory mechanisms.
- ▶ Reinforce solidarity initiatives such as *“The Light Must Stay On”*. It is important to call for financial support and to decentralise solidarity processes across different solidarity hubs.
- ▶ Highlight, in different formats, public reactions and engagement in response to crimes exposed by the media (for example, corruption revelations and punishment of perpetrators, punishment of abusers, etc.).
- ▶ To strengthen solidarity journalism, produce more content focused on vulnerable groups.
- ▶ Enhance personalisation in media content and allocate more space to human stories (including those of people who are not public figures).

## **International and local organisations should:**

- ▶ Further step up their monitoring efforts: attend court hearings, issue public statements, engage in advocacy and push for targeted sanctions against those responsible for violence and anti-Western propaganda.
- ▶ In order to reduce the risks of isolation, consistently express solidarity with independent media and maintain joint positioning, practice of experience-sharing and substantive cooperation.

## **Civil society groups and activists should:**

- ▶ Turn support for the media into a daily/monthly routine. This can include small, recurring donations, subscriptions, signing petitions, making public statements, and decentralised actions in the regions, among other things.
- ▶ Promote public debate about the role of the media – not only about what media freedom gives us, but also about the consequences of its absence.

## What should be done to reduce Russian influence?

**Georgia's experience and democratic backsliding are an alarming signal for the rest of the civilised world. It is a warning that Russian hybrid occupation has moved closer to Europe. In this context, integrating Georgia's experience into efforts to strengthen Europe's information security becomes even more important.**

### **All stakeholders should:**

- ▶ Develop new strategies and mechanisms of cooperation to stop the final capture of the country;
- ▶ Bring the issue of Georgia's occupation back onto the local and international agenda, as this discourse reminds societies of the real aims of Russian imperialism;
- ▶ Counter Russian propaganda through more direct, face-to-face engagement with local communities and by strengthening content production across different media platforms;
- ▶ Use the increased visibility of human stories and the demonstration of pro-social behaviours (solidarity, empathy, support, humour, creativity, etc.) as an active tool to stop the falsification of Georgia's history and confront propaganda;
- ▶ Integrate AI literacy into newsroom workflows and develop clear protocols for the use of digital platforms, in order to reduce the impact of disinformation.

## How do we reclaim a captured state?

**We must fight before it's too late!**



## CONCLUSION

In 2025, Reporters Without Borders [identified](#) a number of “predators of press freedom”, among whom is Bidzina Ivanishvili, the honorary chair of Georgian Dream. This means that, regrettably, the capture of independent media in Georgia is now an accomplished fact. This phase is precisely when the main predators and actors become visible. It is for this reason that from now on the media, fenced in by barbed wire, and the hybrid occupation whose primary target is free speech, are even more clearly exposed.

The future of a free media depends on the courage of individuals and society, and on overcoming the fear imposed by Russia. In such a Georgia, universal human rights are also protected. Seeing this future depends, to a great extent, on strengthening the fabric of solidarity in society – a fabric that manifests itself every day in the movement towards common goals and in the natural engagement of different groups.

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Media and Communication Educational and Research Center Media Voice was founded in Georgia in 2015, and Media Voice - Europe was established in Estonia in 2024. Both non-governmental organizations aim to support the development of the media and mass communication field through the creation of new knowledge and educational research activities, in cooperation with academia and other stakeholders. The NGOs seek to raise awareness of media literacy and to bolster the introduction and strengthening of democratic values within civil society. Additionally, the organizations provide advisory services in areas such as media psychology, public relations, media law, and mass communication, facilitating the transfer of interdisciplinary knowledge at the national, regional, and international levels. Media Voice is a member of local and international coalitions, including the Media Freedom Coalition's Consultative Network (MFC-CN), the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), the Forum on Information and Democracy (FDI), and the Anti-SLAPP Coalition.

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