



**Media Environment Before and After 2021 Elections:
Threats and Supportive Instruments**

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Media and Communication Educational and Research Center

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Preface

A viable, free media is a crucial component of democratic progress. For Georgia, which is still a transitional democracy, “it remains a struggle... to establish and maintain a favourable environment for media democracy.”¹ 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and gaining independence, the safety of journalists while carrying out professional duties continues to be one of the key indicators of what constitutes a democratic media landscape in the country.

Contemporary media has had to face a number of challenges during the global crises (especially during the pandemic) – one of the most worrying was precisely the topic related to the safety of journalists and media institutions. The recent period in Georgia has clearly demonstrated that threats to the media environment are particularly rampant and visible during critical periods. We can consider the pre-election period to be reflective of this phase.

This research was triggered by the actualisation of the acute and, in some ways, spontaneous media threat that arose during the pre-election period. More specifically, on 5 July 2021, two months before Georgia’s local self-government municipal elections, media workers fell victim to a premeditated attack by pro-Russian radical groups during the coverage of demonstrations. As a result, 53 journalists from more than 10 media sources, a cameraman and a photographer were assaulted and a TV Pirveli cameraman, Lekso Lashkarava, died a few days later as a result of heavy injuries received during the demonstration. Challenges seen from the perspective of the safety of journalists garnered an unprecedented level of international attention and stimulated research in the field.

¹ Gersamia M., Freedman E., Challenges to Creating Vibrant Media Education in Young Democracies: Accreditation for Media Schools in Georgia, *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, SAGE, 2017, Vol. 72(3) 322 –333, AEJMC 2017, DOI: 10.1177/1077695817710104<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jmc> [accessed Oct 21 2021].

The aim of the following research is to distinguish the traits prevalent in the media environment during times of crisis and even more specifically, during the pre- and post- election periods. The research also responds to the question of how political polarization and crises affect media and the macro and micro threats they reveal. The study identifies these media threats and assesses the reality of the media environment as seen through journalists' eyes. The local context was taken into consideration during the planning stage of the research and media threats are analyzed from a situational perspective.

The following research includes recommendations on creating a safe and supportive media environment and will be interesting to individuals employed in the media field and a wider audience alike – such as those in the academic field, as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations.

1. Literature Review

1.1. International Perspective on Media Threats

Research on the safety of journalists has recently become popular in the academic field. This has significantly improved comprehension quality and has contributed to a relatively safe working environment.² The recommended UNESCO's research on media safety covers 10 components and issues. This research paper examines seven of those 10 recommended issues. Among them are: human rights-based issues, conflicts issues, societal issues, practitioner issues, psychological issues, digital issues and media literacy, etc. The following research fits into this particular research framework.

In the media environment assessment reports by international organisations, the situation comes across as alarming, similar to those in authoritarian countries. Countries, where standards for the safety of journalists are not maintained, where political opponents, non-governmental organisation workers, and, in particular, human rights activists are under threat.

Apart from the traits listed above, in this type of countries limiting journalists' access to information and surveillance are common practices. Regardless of the

² Towards a Research Agenda on the Safety of Journalists, United Nations, UNESCO, 2015, available from https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/draft_research_agenda_safety_of_journalists_06_2015.pdf (last seen on Sept. 26, 2021).

case that came to the attention of an international organisation or report, the lack of safety for journalists is linked to issues in democracy and is discussed as part of a greater set of problems which are similar across authoritarian countries. These are: issues with protection of human rights, verbal abuse from politicians and the authorities, impunity, discrimination against non-governmental organisations and human rights activists, illegal surveillance, gender discrimination, disinformation, etc.

Becoming acquainted with the bigger picture confirms the existence of media threats on a considerable scale. For example, according to the census provided by the Committee to Protect Journalists in the years 1992-2021, 2103 media workers and journalists were murdered worldwide (among them 1531 confirmed to be due to their profession). In 2021 alone, 30 journalists and media workers were killed, 18 of those murders confirmed to be professionally motivated, all journalists.

The International Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPI) remarks that dealing with safety concerns and taking into consideration related issues has gradually become a daily routine for those in the media.³ According to media researchers (Orgeret & Tayeebwa, 2020), journalists' lives and their conscientious work are increasingly at risk on a global scale. The situation has changed radically a century since two correspondents were killed during World War I.⁴ It is also alarming that 9 out of 10 journalist homicides globally remain uninvestigated. As a result, we get a vicious circle of impunity, a chilling effect on a fear and self-censorship ridden society⁵.

The media's convergence architecture includes online and offline (physical) media environment. During the threat assessment, it is important to observe both types of media environments, since this space is saturated with premeditated

³ Journalist Safety and Self-censorship, edited by Anna Grøndahl Larsen, Ingrid Fadnes, et al, Routledge, 2020, p. 1-7

⁴ Orgeret, K. S., Tayeebwa, W., Editorial, Introduction: Rethinking Safety of Journalists, Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183-2439) 2020, Volume 8, Issue 1, Pages 1-4 DOI: 10.17645/mac.v8i1.2873, <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/2873/2873>

⁵ Towards a Research agenda on the safety of journalists, United Nations, UNESCO, 2015, available from https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/draft_research_agenda_safety_of_journalists_06_2015.pdf (last seen on Sept. 26, 2021).

violence and discrimination against journalists. The online environment has made journalists even more vulnerable. It is easier to express high levels of aggression in the digital environment that are less frequently detected in the physical environment. Researcher Philipp Masur (2019), as part of his analysis of the existing threats in the online environment, remarks that there exists a misplaced presumption “that online communication is somehow private because it resembles analogous offline activities from an interpersonal point of view” (p. 14).⁶

According to the “Deutsche Welle Akademie” census⁷, nowadays the concept of media safety covers: safe physical, digital, psychological, and working conditions. All these elements and media viability form a strong symbiotic interconnection. It is important to monitor not only physical and psychological safety in the media environment, but also to conduct at least peripheral research on the components essential to media viability (audience participation, freedom of expression and self-censorship). According to the definition provided by the “Deutsche Welle Akademie”,⁸ media viability is guaranteed when it has an opportunity to be strengthened institutionally, to produce high quality journalism in a sustainable way, and to ensure audience participation. The same census states that during the critical periods (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) challenges to the safety of journalists increase even more. They become targets especially often if they cover the handling of the pandemic in a critical fashion.

International organisation reports on media safety in the context of demonstrations and elections are significant. In countries with no armed conflict, fatal attacks continue against journalists who covered stories related to corruption, human rights violations, environmental crimes, trafficking, and political wrongdoing. The trend for discrimination against journalists, arrests and physical violence is on the increase. According to the UNESCO report (2020), over the past

⁶ Masur Philipp K., *Situational Privacy and Self-Disclosure, Communication Processes in Online Environments*, Springer, Germany, 2019, p.14; ISBN 978-3-319-78883-8, ISBN 978-3-319-78884-5 (eBook), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78884-5>;

⁷ Safe. Strong. Viable. *The symbiosis between media safety and media viability*, Deutsche Welle Akademie, Germany, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/safe-strong-viable-the-symbiosis-between-media-viability-and-media-safety/a-57334604> (last seen on Oct. 3, 2021);

⁸ Ibid.

decade, a journalist has been killed on average every four days and most of them in countries without an armed conflict.⁹ The hostile rhetoric of political leaders aimed at journalists is alarming and during mass protests creates an environment that targets journalists. As stated by the UN and the Organization of American States Freedom of Expression, media is assigned the label of the “enemy of the people”. This trend is not alien to Georgia, especially in the pre-election period.

When monitoring countries with a brittle democracy, scholars (Walulya & Nassanga, 2020) conclude that “journalists face more safety and security risks during elections particularly perpetuated by state security agencies”¹⁰ According to the scholars’ assessment, these threats include state harassment and intimidation, arrest of those considered critical to the state, and denial of access to important information. When a journalist responds by engaging in self-censorship as an act of self-defence, society receives biased and limited information in the pre-election period, which impacts their choice¹¹ .

According to Howells’ (2001)¹² , there exists a three-way connection and influence between media, democracy, and education. An educated citizenship is foundational to the proper functioning of any democracy. Media has an input in political and civic education, which in contrast to formal education, continues throughout one’s life due to a perpetual interaction with media. That is why “the control of the media is fundamental to totalitarian regimes;” say Howells. Media control by the state and parties reduces the level of insight and civil participation (especially during the election period) and ultimately, weakens democracy.

It is not surprising that the desire and tendency for total media control is prevalent in post-Soviet countries where there are also attempts to strengthen democracy. Steps in this direction begin precisely with media democratisation.

⁹ Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity, UNESCO, Director-General Report, 2020, available from <https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/dgreport>, (last seen on Oct. 2, 2021).

¹⁰ Walulya, G., Nassanga, G. L., Democracy at Stake: Self-Censorship as a Self-Defence Strategy for Journalists, Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183-2439) 2020, Volume 8, Issue 1, Pages 1-4 DOI: 10.17645/mac.v8i1.2873;

¹¹ Ibid;

¹² Howells, R. (2001). Media, education and democracy. *European Review*, 9(2), 159-168.

1.2. Media Environment and Polarization

The political environment in the country influences the standard of media democratization. Media polarization is a typical trait for a transitional democracy. In their observations of various countries, international organisations have noted¹³ that during an election period polarization becomes even more visible, creating an obstacle in the process of informing civilians. In recent years, polarization and its negative effects have been a frequent subject of study in the political sciences field. Scholars consider¹⁴ polarization to be a relational and multidimensional phenomenon (Neal, 2020; Lauca et al., 2018). It reveals itself in many structural factors, but despite this, extreme polarization poses a threat to democracy¹⁵. DiMaggio (1996) defines political polarization (which can be perceived as a process) as being in correlation to the extent of disagreement within a society on politically salient issues. Iyengar et al. (2012) describes mass polarization as a condition in which “partisans view each other as a disliked out-group”. As mentioned in the study by Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg (2020)¹⁶, a rising elite political polarization has been implicated as a threat to democracy (Carothers, O’Donoghue, 2019; Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018).

It is equally important to discuss polarization in relation to issues of the media environment, which include access to information, media choice, media credibility, and fidelity of media users to media. According to Melki and Pickering (2014),¹⁷ greater media access entails a better-informed electorate. Hence greater media choice, individuals perhaps ideologically select media

¹³ Vibrant information barometer 2021, IREX, available at <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Vibrant%20Information%20Barometer%20Full%20version.pdf> (last seen Oct. 20)

¹⁴ Ertan, G., Çarkoğlu, A., Erdem A., S., Cognitive Political Networks: A Structural Approach to Measure Political Polarization in Multiparty Systems, *Social Networks*, Volume 68, 2022, Pages 118-126, ISSN 0378-8733, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2021.05.004>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378873321000460>);

¹⁵ Silagadze, G., Gozalishvili, N., Extreme Political Polarization, As an Existent Threat to the Democratization Process, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3pMbafg> (last seen Oct 26, 2021);

¹⁶ Wilson A., Parker V., Feinberg M., Polarization in the contemporary political and media landscape, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 34, 2020, Pages 223-228, ISSN 2352-1546, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.07.005>.

¹⁷ Melki M., Pickering A., Ideological polarization and the media, *Economics Letters*, Volume 125, Issue 1, 2014, Pages 36-39, ISSN 0165-1765, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2014.08.008>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165176514002985>)

according to their predisposition (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). This selection process arguably reinforces pre-existing differences in attitudes and behaviours (Slater, 2007). Each media choice covers information, emotional, and entertainment as well as ideological content, etc.

Polarization in the media environment can be characterized as a disproportionate coverage of politically topical issues in media and biased media content “framing”¹⁸, which can equally be the result of current internal processes in the media as well as outside factors – for example, limited access to information.

The correlation between media and political polarization becomes relevant during elections and critical periods. According to Dixit and Weibull (2007), generally, political polarization contains serious threats and in case of its increase, the existence of civil society may be at risk as well. During this process, it is difficult to determine and monitor polarization indicators. Despite this, the authors regard public debates in media to be a polarization reducing mechanism, where discussion of the current situation and political effects becomes accessible even when the issue is very controversial.¹⁹ This position is not shared by Jasperson, Gollins and Walls (2017). Based on their observation of the US campaigns, they believe that debates don't have an influence over the degree of polarization and serve only as a way for a viewer to confirm their existing ideological views.²⁰

Scholars share the belief that today's fragmented wide range of choices in the media environment, creates an environment, where civilians can choose media that strengthens their already established political beliefs and ignore alternative views.

¹⁸ McQuail, *Mass Communication Theories* (2015) definition of “framing” has two main meanings. One refers to the way in which news content is typically shaped and contextualized by journalists within some familiar frame of reference and according to some latent structure of meaning. A second, related meaning concerns the effect of framing on the public. The audience is thought to adopt the frames of reference offered by journalists and to see the world in a similar way.

¹⁹ Avinash, D. K., Weibull J. W., *Political Polarization*, *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 2007 May 1; 104(18): 7351–7356. Published online, 2007 Apr 23. doi: 10.1073/pnas.0702071104, CID: PMC1863477

²⁰ Jasperson A., Gollins J., Walls D., *Polarization in the 2012 Presidential Debates*, *Political Communications in Real Time*, 2017, Routledge, p. 196-225.

According to Campante and Hojman (2010), the media environment can have an impact on political polarization on its own through an increase in media accessibility and diversity²¹. Researchers consider the potential effect on citizens' political and ideological views and attitudes, as well as assume that each media outlet offers content with a certain ideological "slant" or "editorial line". They also cite ideas of various scholars (Bishop, Sustein, Gerbner et al.) based on which they state that mass media can boost polarization but also reduce it. An important role here is played by audience motivation, access to technology and, lastly, media choice based on various factors. It is worth mentioning that some researchers believe that increase in polarization correlates to periods of newly emerging technologies and media. This strengthens the myth regarding "all-powerful media" and boosts its influence.

When conducting research and surveys on the correlation between media and polarization, an important factor to consider is the particularities of each country from both the media environment and political landscape angles alike. In this respect, it is interesting how much the threats in the media environment fortify political polarization in Georgia.

1.3. Self-Censorship and Fear

For a more effective democratization process in Georgia, it is important that citizens are informed about topical issues through media and for the process to take place without censorship. In this regard, self-censorship in the media environment is a distinct threat, editing media and societal agenda in transitional democracies with an invisible hand. As a manifestation of self-censorship, a journalist approaches their work process from a perspec-

²¹ Campante, F. R., and Hojman, D. 2010. Media and Polarization. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series, RWP10-002, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

tive of an imaginary censor and editor in an act of self-defence. In the words of the novelist Danilo Kis (1986)²², “self-censorship is the negative pole of creative energy”. The issue of self-censorship is important not the least because it may conceal threats which media workers have to face and which they do not or cannot address openly. According to Kis’s assessment, the fight against censorship is open and dangerous, therefore heroic, “while the battle against self-censorship is anonymous, lonely and unwitnessed, and it makes its subject feel humiliated and ashamed of collaborating”.

According to researchers (Larsen, Fadnes et al., 2020), we are not sufficiently informed about self-censorship practices amongst journalists. More specifically, this concerns cases where “in their coverage, journalists avoid specific issues, coverage angles, perspectives, etc. as a safety precaution.”²³

Self-censorship is a form of professional self-aggression which in the long-term perspective is detrimental to journalists. Media workers, who filter their own work are not dissimilar to those people who “saw off the branch they are sitting on”. Yesil (2014) observes that after practicing self-censoring for years, journalists and editors become like automatic self-censor machines and damage their own careers²⁴. All this affects the media content and credibility.

In the following research, this issue is of importance due to self-censorship being linked to the safety of journalists and as Larsen, Fadnes et al. (2020) state, the primary force behind it may be fear.²⁵ Scholars cite sources (Lee & Chan, 2009; Simon, 2014; Tupsel, 2012; Weisbord, 2002) to argue that there are various factors that impact self-censorship. Among them are “surveil-

²² Kis, D., *Censorship/Self-censorship*, INDEX ON CENSORSHIP 1/86, available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03064228608534021>(last seen Oct 20, 2021);

²³ *Journalist safety and self-censorship*, edited by Anna Grøndahl Larsen, Ingrid Fadnes, et al, Routledge, 2020, p. 1

²⁴ Yesil, M. M., *The Invisible Threat for the Future of Journalism: Self-Censorship and Conflicting Interests in an Increasingly Competitive Media Environment*, *International Journal of Business and Social Science* Vol. 5 No. 3; March 2014, available at https://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_5_No_3_March_2014/9.pdf (last seen Oct 20, 2021)

²⁵ *Journalist safety and self-censorship*, edited by Anna Grøndahl Larsen, Ingrid Fadnes, et al, Routledge, 2020, p. 6;

lance, organized crime, violent conflict, gendered expectations, legislation, media ownership, and form of government". The relevance of these factors may vary based on the region or country. In order to handle the situation, journalists have to use different self-defence mechanisms and compromise objectivity and quality of the news coverage. Sometimes, they even refuse coverage altogether to avoid any risks to their safety.²⁶

Ultimately, the aim of violent behaviour against journalists is to supplant critical questions with silence – which really affects the quality of democratization. Due to the particularities of the country and region, blows leading to self-censorship, most of the time, are linked to crisis and political interests,

1.4. Pre-election Media Threat Outline in Georgia

During an election period, the media acts as the key source of information for voters. In countries with a transitional democracy, the polarization of the media environment and pressure towards journalists especially intensifies during the election period and supplying voters with high-quality information remains a challenge. Ever since Georgia gained its independence, elections have become a test of its democratization. While assessing elections held in Georgia, international oversight organizations (among them OSCE/ODIHR) for years now have highlighted, among other challenges, media environment polarization and bias in media coverage, which, in turn, impacts the level of awareness among voters. In terms of media environment assessment, Georgia's 2021 elections were more alarming than in previous years.

Georgian scholars also emphasize the issue of media polarization in the local media. In regards to the polarized media environment during the 2018 presidential elections, a Georgian scholar (Robakidze, 2019) states that in case of the long-term negligence of the issue of the polarization media, there is a possibility of triggering extremist conflicts between social groups on a political basis.²⁷ Demon-

²⁶ Mubashar, H., Mushfique, W., Re-Conceptualizing Safety of Journalists in Bangladesh, *Media and Communication* (ISSN: 2183–2439) 2020, Volume 8, Issue 1, Pages 27–36 DOI: 10.17645/mac.v8i1.2494

²⁷ Robakidze, N., *Political Polarization and Media – What Threats Does Democratization in Georgia Face?* Georgian Institute of Politics, 2019. Available at: www.gip.ge (last seen Oct 25, 2021)

ization is an extension of polarization, which is used “during a political discourse, as an instrument of not only discrediting or delegitimizing the opponent, but more importantly for the purpose of legitimizing personal narrative and political decisions, which compromise democratic practices.”²⁸ In Georgia, polarization has a demonizing effect, which is revealed in attitudes towards journalists, their stigmatization and attempts to discredit them.

In this respect, there was a negative trend during the 2021 local self-government elections. For journalists, especially those representing media critical of the state, fulfilling their professional duties became a matter of life and death in the pre-election environment.²⁹ According to the Transparency International Georgia census, based on publicly shared sources, 93 violent acts against at least 23 media workers have been registered in the period from 2020 parliamentary elections until now. According to data published by the Committee to Protect Journalists, 10 journalists have been killed in Georgia since 1992 (among them foreign nationals). In 8 of those cases, their profession served as the major motive.³⁰ At the moment, Georgian cameraman Lekso Lashkarava’s death has been listed among those murdered with a confirmed motive. When researching media threat-related issues, it is important to assess how the society perceives crimes committed against journalists, safety problems and impunity as well as audience and society’s reaction to existing threats to journalists.

According to a survey conducted by Edison research and commissioned by the TV company Formula (from August 13 to September 5, 2021), 78% of those interviewed either fully or partly connect cameraman Lekso Lashkarava’s death not with the drug overdose accusation (the official version claimed by the Ministry

²⁸ Silagadze, G., Gozalishvili, N., *Extreme Political Polarization, As an Existent Threat to the Democratization Process*, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3pMbaFg> (last seen Oct 26, 2021)

²⁹ Media – The Target Of Violence And Total Illegal Wiretrap: Pre-Election Media Environment Assessment, Transparency International – Georgia, Sep 29, 2021, <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/media-zaladobisa-da-totaluri-ukanono-mosmenebis-samizne-cinasaarchevno-mediagare-mos-shepaseba> (last seen Oct 3, 2021)

³⁰ *Journalist Safety and Self-censorship*, edited by Anna Grøndahl Larsen, Ingrid Fadnes, et al, Routledge, 2020, p. 1-7

of Internal Affairs of Georgia two years after he passed away), but rather with the injuries he received on July 5 when filming the anti-LGBTQ+ demonstrations in the centre of the capital.³¹

Research conducted by Sonar Market metrics, entitled “Georgia of July 5: 5 questions about July 5”³², demonstrates Tbilisi residents’ position and emotional response towards the event that took place on July 5 (phone interviews with 502 citizens were conducted on July 7). As part of this research, 83% of respondents replied to the question, “Do you condemn the violent actions towards journalists on July 5?” They, in fact, did condemn them, while 89% answered the question, “What emotions did you feel when you saw the violent treatment of journalists?” with a “desire to express solidarity towards journalists”, 80% felt “embarrassed”, 69% - “defenceless”, while 56% experienced “hopelessness”.

For credibility maintenance, it remains a challenge for media to maintain professionalism in an environment where there is a rise of purposeful disinformation and smear campaigns aiming to discredit journalists.

Despite a progress-halting, toxic, and polarized environment in Georgia, the media do manage to create critical and pluralistic discourse, prepare investigation materials and maintain media credibility among other institutions. According to the Freedom House census (2020), in terms of the media freedom index, the Georgian media environment is only “partially free” (60 points out of 100).³³ The international organisation known for measuring trustworthiness observes that “Georgia’s media environment is pluralistic but frequently partisan... several media outlets that are critical of the government complained of political pressure”.

³¹ Edison Research Polls: Incumbent Tbilisi Mayor Kaladze, ex-PM Gakharia Equally Liked by Voters, Agenda.ge, 10 Sep 2021, Georgia, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2602> (last seen on Oct. 7, 2021).

³² Kechakmadze, I., Ishkhaneli, N., Georgia of July 5: 5 questions about July 5, Ltd Sonar Market Metrics research, July, 2021.

³³ Freedom House, Freedom in the World, Country report – Georgia, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2020> (last seen on Sept. 26, 2021).

Another international organization, Reporters Without Borders, confirms that media in Georgia is pluralist, but remains extremely polarized.³⁴

It is important that the 2021 pre-election environment in Georgia can be characterized as being in a multifaceted crisis (elections, COVID-19-provoked economic crises). Covering elections and political issues have always posed as additional threats to journalists. Researchers (Kakachia & Patariaia, 2013) state that there had been expectations of authoritative governance consolidation in Georgia in previous years and for political parties “elections become a sole chance to achieve success, so they do everything in their power [to succeed].”³⁵ In this process, the media may become a target and subjected to pressure. The 2021 pre-election period demonstrated that risks in the media environment have increased visibly.

Transparency International Georgia, in their 2021 census, states that the government doesn't respond adequately to the violation of journalists' rights, inciting violence against media workers even more.³⁶ It must be mentioned that threats have increased in the age of digital technologies, especially under pandemic conditions when online communication with sources for journalists have become more frequent.

During the election period, a voter's key source of information is the media, while discourse created by the media critical of the state has an influence on the behaviour of their own audience/voter. The government targets this type of media with smear campaigns aiming to undermine their credibility, generating distrust among the general population and depreciation of the journalists' profession. During the pre-election period in Georgia, smear campaigns against media critical of the government took place. Gnomon Wise researcher Davit Kutidze notes

³⁴ Reporters Without Borders, country report, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/georgia?nl=ok> (last seen on Sept. 26, 2021).

³⁵ Kakachia K., Patariaia T., The Role of Social Networks in Georgian Party Politics, Georgian Institute of Politics, 2013, pg 23.

³⁶ Media – The Target Of Violence and Total Illegal Bugging: Pre-Election Media Environment Assessment, Transparency International – Georgia, Sep 29, 2021, <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/media-zaladobisa-da-totaluri-ukanono-mosmenebis-samizne-cinasaarchevno-mediagaremos-shepaseba> (last seen, Oct 3, 2021).

that it is through smear campaigns and propaganda labels that distrust towards media is cultivated. Such attempts end up damaging the media environment and the democratic process in general.³⁷

Eventually, everything that takes place both in the online and physical environments stimulates research and generates new discussion topics. The necessity of research on the pre-election media environment was intensified by obvious threats that were revealed on July 5, 2021 when journalists fell victim to violence, although these threats have always existed both before and after, demonstrated through the “soft power” effect. In this context, at once obvious but subliminal threats with an “invisibility effect” remain a challenge, undetected and without response, they end up harming not only journalists personally, but also media organizations and audiences.

The media, like other institutions, is an instrument of international image building and one of the key components of the Democracy Index. That is why, the research results make us once again question how much media workers’ safety correlates with the quality of democracy.

³⁷ Kutidze, D., Aggressive, Propagandistic Rhetoric of the Georgian Government Towards Media - Tried and Tested Methods of Journalist Authoritarian Smear Campaigns, Gnomon Wise, 2021, pg.24; <https://gnomonwise.ug.edu.ge/public/storage/publications/September2021/7ptzlwREEEL-IQGxV2Yfb.pdf>, (Last seen, Oct 3, 2021).

2. Research Design, Methodology and Procedures

Based on the existing situation and literature review, the following primary research questions have emerged:

- How safe do media workers feel when performing their professional duties?
- What kinds of threats emerged during the 2021 pre-election media environment and what are the expectations?
- What are some support mechanisms for the improvement of the media environment and what needs to be done so that a safer environment for media workers is created?

For research design, mixed research methodology was chosen, more specifically, a sequential explanatory design. The research was conducted in two phases: the first phase involved accumulation of quantitative data (through online survey) and analysis, following which the second phase took place involving qualitative research (focus group discussions). As an online-survey instrument for the quantitative research, a structured questionnaire was employed, which reflected general trends and determined the qualitative research focus. For the qualitative research, a discussion guideline with semi-structured questions was used as an instrument sent in advance to focus group participants. In the guide-

line, primary questions were proposed by the research authors while secondary questions emerged during the course of the discussion, initiated by the participants themselves. Focus group data was examined using content-analysis and ethnographic analysis approaches. As a result, the media environment was examined based on the reality seen by the discussion participants.

The body of qualitative data included transcripts and recordings. Based on the qualitative data from the focus-groups, pattern codes were determined and examined both quantitatively (content-analysis methodology was used to count specific characteristics and contrasting views were revealed), as well as qualitatively (thematic content-analysis was used to code/categorize and synthesize). Quantitative and qualitative research data was assessed separately and integrated, mutually validated and synthesized during the concluding stage of the research.

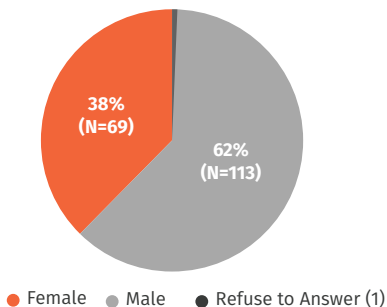
The research period focuses on the 2021 local self-government pre-election period (July 28-September 30). An online-survey for media workers was conducted from July 28 to August 4, 2021. Respondents were purposefully contacted online via social media networks. Closed Facebook groups with participants who work in media were used for available and purposive sampling, among them: journalists, camerapersons, editors, producers, media managers, photographers, bloggers, etc. 183 respondents from 56 media sources (among them 18 representing regional media) were surveyed anonymously. During the second phase, as part of the qualitative research, three focus-groups took place in September 2021 (among them was one online platform with the involvement of regional media). 24 media workers from 14 sources participated in the focus-groups, including journalists, talk-show hosts, editors, producers, and founders.

3. Integrated Analysis and Results

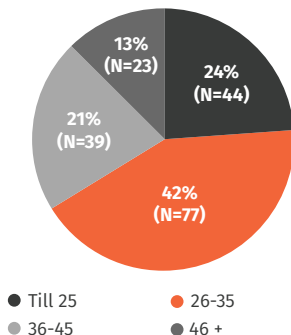
An integrated analysis identified key threats as seen by media workers in 2021 Georgia, revealed during the pre-election period and after. Along with threats, research also identified the specific ways in which it is possible to improve the media environment. The online survey consisted of 183 respondents from 56 different media sources, included every age category, and reflected gender representation in the field as closely as possible.

Graphs N1 and N2 show demographic data:

Graph N1: Sex



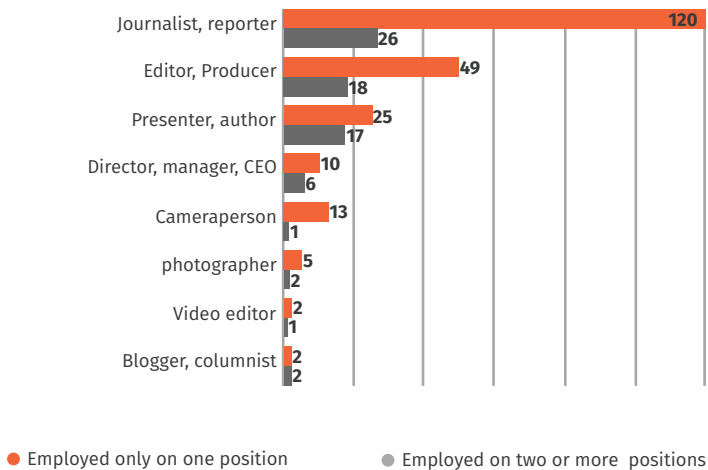
Graph N2: Age



The online survey respondents may choose several work positions, since the established employment practice in Georgian media indicates that various work positions are often combined, e.g.: journalists often double as producers or show hosts; media managers similarly combine producer or show host duties, etc. Graph N3 Demonstrates statistics of those respondents who combine two or more work positions in media, where 19% of the respondents (N=35) work for two positions at once.

Graph N3: Positions of respondents working in media at two or more positions

Employment in media in one or several positions

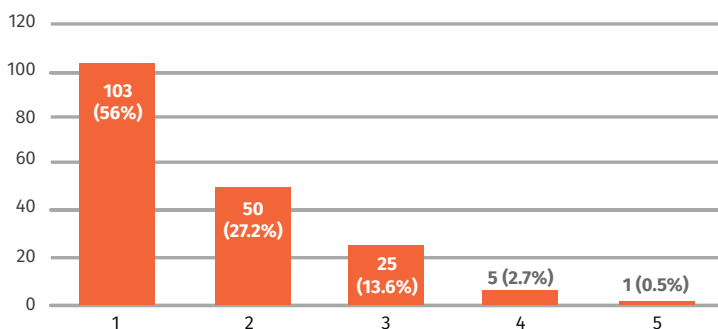


As a result of integrating quantitative and qualitative data, it was revealed how journalists themselves perceive challenges to their safety and strive to minimize those risks. More specifically, quantitative and qualitative research demonstrated the alarming state and various threats in working conditions and media environment for those employed in media. Among the 183 respondents from 56 media sources (among them 18 representing regional media), 78% replied that in comparison to 2020, the 2021 media environment has changed for the worse;

Graph N4 demonstrates respondents' assessments on the scale, where 1 – “change for the worse”, 3 – “nothing changed”, and 5 – “changed for the better”. According to the respondents' assessment, direct and indirect violent attacks aimed at media by various groups have taken place, while the existing threats are generally on the rise, which reflects negatively on the pre-election environment. Among the respondents, only 3.2% think that the media environment has improved by comparison with 2020.

Graph N4: Pre-election media environment assessment in comparison to the previous year

How did the media environment in Georgia change in 2021 compared to 2020?



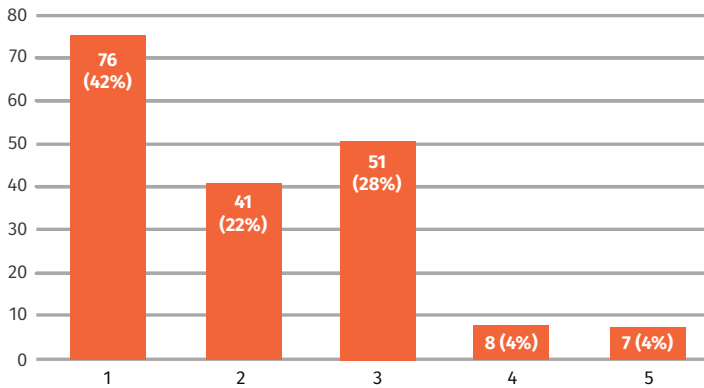
Focus group participants also demonstrated that in contrast to the previous year, the situation changed radically and threats increased. Despite the fact that being a journalist as an occupation is considered dangerous as it is, participants now assess it as “containing life-threatening risks and terror”.

In the context of the pre-election media environment assessment, respondents answered the following questions as part of an online survey: “How well-maintained/neglected is the safety of individuals employed in media?” The respondents assessed the situation using the scale, where 1 – “very neglected” and 5 – “very well-maintained”. Graph N5 demonstrates that when assessing the pre-election media environment, 63% (N=117) of respondents replied that the safety of media workers when performing their

professional duties is very neglected. Among the respondents, only 8.2% answer that safety is “very well or mostly well-maintained”.

Graph N5: Safety self-appraisal for those employed in media

How maintained/neglected is the safety of individuals employed in media?



When discussing specific dangers media faces (both online and in the physical media environment) as well as readiness to respond to them, journalists note that due to the high number of threats, they have become accustomed to this situation. As a result, in terms of responsiveness, it appears that the society and journalists alike do not seem to display relevant emotions (among them, anger), having lost all sensitivity to them (so-called desensitization). Due to the non-fragmented, direct, and indirect violence towards journalists, participants in the discussion expected a deterioration in the post-election period.

3.1. Micro and Macro Media Threats

During the research process, macro (4) and micro (6) media threats were identified. They are analysed in sub-chapters in greater detail. These threats are interconnected and have their own structure and aims. Media threats, which emerged during the discussion, contribute to self-censorship and escalation of fear, media credibility, reduction of support, and destabilizing media institutional viability. Political polarization and polarization between media organizations were identified as a major macro media threat. Micro threats that were identified as a result of polarization are:

- Stigmatization of journalists and media (labelling them as biased towards certain political parties) and attempted smear campaigns;
- Disrupting execution of journalist duties. Among such actions are creating obstacles in providing a balanced narrative and bringing a quality media product to the public, which is primarily reflected in premeditated restriction to sources and surveillance for the purpose of disrupting the work process.

The aim of activating these premediated and systematic media threats is to completely undermine media credibility and reduce support towards the media; to destabilise media institutional viability and journalists' mental stability, to weaken solidarity and support towards the media, to strengthen self-censorship and fear.

One macro-threat that emerged from the online-survey and focus-group analysis was incitement of physical and verbal violence towards journalists (this includes hate speech and the use of aggressive rhetoric by the state). This violence includes some of the above mentioned, but also the following micro-threats such as:

- Mockery, humiliation and threats aimed at journalists;
- Attempts at smear campaigns directed at journalists, journalism itself as well as media outlets;
- Spread of disinformation about journalists and their close circles;
- Violence in online media environment.

These media threats reinforce self-censorship and fear, destabilise media institutions' viability and negatively affect demonstration of solidarity and support towards media. One of the identified macro-threats towards journalists during the focus-group discussion was the lack of investigation on crimes committed against journalists and/or impunity, as an encouraging factor. These factors intensified fear and self-censorship. Additionally, we could consider the malign nature of the Russian propaganda and malign influence in general as an additional factor, which serves as a leitmotif for the entire discussion on another macro threat.

3.1.1. Polarization as a Media Threat

For transitional democracies, political polarization is one of the key threats that consequently breeds micro-threats and impedes media in its mission to strengthen democracy by fulfilling its pre-assigned duties. During the focus group discussions, the word "polarization" was used the most frequently of all keywords – 28 times in various contexts. It is true that journalists cannot influence the transformation of the political environment directly, but it is precisely responding to micro media threats that stem from polarization (when it comes to employment directly in media) that can reduce the overall polarization effect. The discussion has shown that effective response mechanisms to macro-threats may be identified precisely through responses to micro-threats in the media environment.

Generally, polarization is associated with subcategories that are discussed in the research as threats existing within the media environment: stigmati-

zation and smear campaign attempts aimed at journalists, impediments to fulfilling journalist duties (among them, limiting access to sources and spying for the purpose of disrupting the work process), and not creating quality media product. All these threats directly or indirectly result in reducing the credibility and solidarity of the institution of the media.

When characterizing the 2021 pre-election media environment, media workers discuss polarization in the context of existing threats in the media environment and mutual influence within the political field. Research has confirmed that polarization in Georgia has a so-called demonization effect towards the media. Discussion has shown that a certain segment of politicians perceive media as a political opponent, while smear campaigns and delegitimization remain part of the discourse.

Each smear campaign organized against media is an attempt to debilitate the role of the media and the status of journalists in society. Enfeebling credibility towards journalists and media encourages their stigmatization, an attempt at which could be witnessed on July 5. Generally, July 5 and Lekso Lashkarava's death were mentioned 17 times in total during the discussion as a confirmation of the deterioration in the dynamics of the media environment and "a symbolic day" for the issue of media violence. On this day, the governmental strategy was foregrounded once again – more specifically, linking critical television channels to specific political parties and, consequently, stigmatizing them. "Party-labelling" from the state is a trend which involves all media sources that pose critical questions. During the discussion, it was mentioned that the government treats media as a political opponent.

Interesting to note are focus group participants' opinions regarding the correlation between journalist intimidation and self-censorship (e.g. when executing their professional duties, journalists avoid covering socially important issues and/or specific aspects in order to save themselves from physical or psychological confrontation). During the discussion, it became clear that for journalists, especially entry-level journalists, it is precisely political la-

bels and stigmatization that intensify fear and self-censorship. A discussion participant adds on the topic: “We were referred to as ‘zonder-journalists’. To them, it stood for an individual, who asked too many questions. When self-censorship emerges, it neutralizes our professional skills and questions are substituted by silence” (TV journalist, Rustavi 2).

Political polarization influences the types of questions a journalist asks. Self-censorship results in journalists avoiding asking “non-mainstream” questions, which shapes the quality of the final media product. According to journalists, threats caused by polarization cannot be undermined by advancing professional standards or the quality of work and implementation mechanisms. The key to uprooting existing institutional gaps in media and neutralizing threats does not lie in professional skills but rather changing the polarized political environment.

Discussion participants linked the polarized media environment to financial dependence and noted that various media are financially reliant on the state. Participants also discussed solutions and voiced an opinion that it is crucial that media does not financially depend on the government but instead reforms itself as a business entity. For this outcome, it is necessary to change the political environment and agents as well. It is important to note that this is not a new issue: when discussing the polarized media environment during the 2018 presidential elections, a Georgian scholar (Robakidze, 2019) suggests that in Georgia, media is easily weaponized in political battles and this can be explained away by the lack of history of financial independence of media. Strong media were and remain dependent on strong, politically motivated groups.³⁸

Discussion has brought forward an idea that the trend that characterizes Georgia’s media market, where journalists themselves when switching jobs due to the political pressure have to quickly adapt to the previously “unac-

³⁸ Robakidze, N., Political Polarization and Media – What Threats Does Democratization in Georgia Face? Georgian Institute of Politics, 2019. Available at: www.gip.ge (last seen Oct 25, 2021).

ceptable” editorial standards. One of the discussion participants notes: “It is problematic when you see journalists transferring from channel to channel as if they were football players and as a result, their opinions keep radically changing as well. This cultivates in me, as a viewer, distrust and overall, damages our profession” (journalist, Radio Freedom).

In the third focus group (the participants of which were regional and online media representatives) a similar position emerged that political polarization negatively affects journalism as a profession. Today, media, like society, is polarized and positions itself as either pro-state or oppositional media. According to participants, by contrast with the previous year, it has become even more polarized, while journalists are even more open about their political opinions. Their assessment of online media is contrasting, since, according to participants, they are less polarized and party-biased and therefore, remain unbiased. The third focus group agrees with the opinion that online media is more detached from party-bias and more objective. They justify this based on funding sources and demands of their benefactors. More specifically, part of online and regional media depends on international grants, and donor organizations demand adherence to these standards. Regional media representatives note the same trend.

According to discussion participants, one form polarization can take is encouraging journalists to turn on one another and reinforcing this macro-threat in the media field. It is noteworthy that 22% of online survey respondents mentioned that there is an expectation of these media threats from other media (see Graph N7).

It is of great discomfort to work in a polarized environment for those media workers (reporters, producers, talk show hosts, cameraperson, editors, etc.) who are critical of the state. During the discussion, a new tactic, “using media against journalists” for fighting critical media was identified; it was also mentioned that when performing journalist duties, they do not remain loyal to professional ethics and solidarity. For instance, they disrupt one another’s work and do not give each other an opportunity to ask politicians

questions in an orderly fashion. At the same time, “pro-governmental media” answers critical questions with irony and mockery. According to one of the discussion participants, “It seems like ‘shouting’ during Q&A is agreed in advance, so that a politician can choose their preferred question and not a critical one” (editor, online publication Tabula).

During the discussion, fear of the state attempting to discriminate against media after some time as a result of failing to gain full control over it while trying to complicate it emerged.

Summary: Pre-election polarization in Georgia reinforces self-censorship, the aim of which is to supplant critical questions of journalists with silence and fear. As the survey and discussion have confirmed, political polarization has a negative impact on content generated by media, reduces media credibility, enhances polarization and confrontation between various media. In Georgia, polarization and self-censorship negatively affect media’s institutional vitality.

3.1.2. Interference with Journalistic Activities

The media play an active role in every election campaign, during which “individual choices become collective decisions by way of the democratic process, a process in which the citizen is a participant and not a subject”³⁹ (Howells, 2001). Media are the primary source of information, determining the extent to which a voter’s decision is well-informed. Obtaining and disseminating information in a safe environment during the pre-election period remains a challenge in transitional democracies, including Georgia.

Due to the specific characteristics of the digital era, journalists are now exposed to new dangers. The increase of risks associated with wilful and illicit covert surveillance not only creates a danger for journalists but can also pose a threat to protecting the confidentiality and, consequently, security of their sources. Trans-

³⁹ Howells, R. (2001). Media, Education and Democracy. *European Review*, 9(2), 159-168

parency International Georgia reports that the secret and illegal surveillance conducted in Georgia against critical media journalists is total in nature: “55 journalists from at least ten media outlets confirm that the information contained in the State Security Service’s (SSS) files are authentic and such form of communication has indeed taken place”⁴⁰

The discussion showed that as the said SSS’s files on covert surveillance appeared, the schemes and threats developed by various external forces to obstruct journalistic activities became more evident and clearer to journalists. Existing threats not only hinder journalistic activities, but also involve life-threatening risks for members of the media.

According to these journalists, officials are attempting to manipulate them and, while in the field to obtain information, media outlets are met with aggressive groups who are physically abusing them. The participants in these discussions also recall specific examples of such cases:

1. “While covering the story on the monasterial complex of Davit Gareja, upon the arrival of the journalists, they were initially physically assaulted and later met on the road to stop them from passing. A single clergyman could not have done this alone with their own resources, suggesting that representatives of the ruling party and security personnel were involved in this mobilization” (talk show host, TV Formula).
2. “On the 5th of July, journalists were in contact with the Shame movement activists who were being targeted by violent groups seeking justice. As a result, the activists were forced to relocate. It was clear that their phones were being monitored because as soon as they arrived from point 'a' to point 'b', the same route was taken by the security services, and not only them”. (talk show host, TV Formula).

⁴⁰ „Media – The Target of Violence and Total Illegal Bugging: Pre-Election Media Environment Assessment, Transparency International – Georgia, Sep 29, 2021, <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/media-zaladobisa-da-totaluri-ukanono-mosmenebis-samizne-cinasaarchevno-mediagaremos-shepaseba> (last seen, Oct 3, 2021)

3. “The so-called Congregational files of the SSS have shown that covert surveillance is widespread while people have no idea that even ordinary people are being listened to. They are listening to Ambassador’s assistants and even their drivers... This not only raises concern for the protection of journalistic standards; another key issue is at hand here: When a journalist goes out on the field, their tire may be cut, or they may be stopped at the locations they are going to and be physically harmed.”

The stated dangers influence the quality of journalistic products and their daily routine. The participants in the discussion agree that in aggravated crises, amid covert hearing and surveillance, producers should dismiss journalists from the field on time.

As per the worldwide practice of working in crises, journalists are advised to wear press-recognizable signs and inscriptions for additional security. In Georgia, atypical pressure on the media leads to the opposite, ugly practice. In particular, the discussion revealed that for the safety of journalists, they are advised by their editors to hide the fact that they are journalists and not to show any identification marks at all.

The role of the media grows during the elections as they become the primary medium for voter information. Intimidation of journalists as a way of increasing self-censorship during the election period and decreasing events coverage is also aimed at ensuring that voters are not objectively and thoroughly informed about a certain candidate. Alongside self-censorship, limited access to information directly leads to incomplete or distorted information, damaging the voters’ awareness during the pre-election period.

During the discussion, it was revealed that throughout the pre-election period, the media environment in the regional media is less tense compared to media outlets in Tbilisi. However, the problems of media communication with government sources and obtaining public information were identified in both. Government

officials themselves prepare the materials just as they want them to be seen in the media. Regional media representatives outline these problems, for example:

1. “On the day of candidacy in Gori journalists were not authorized to be nearby. Their approach is as follows: The press releases, videos, and text that they provide should be sufficient for us” (journalist, Gori Radio Mosaic);
2. "The candidate of the ruling Government party is surprised when I ask them questions. In their opinion, any question beside their pre-prepared speech should not be voiced" (journalist, Rustavi-based broadcasting company, TV 4);
3. “During a government candidate nomination, our journalists were left at the back, from where nothing could be seen or heard. Meanwhile, journalists from Imedi TV were on the job at the front; Post TV also filmed their respondents. In our case, we were threatened with being kicked out if we were too active. I was not able to ask anyone a single question that day. In our country, the government is afraid of journalists” (editor-in-chief, online media Chemi Imereti).

There are cases when government officials dismiss journalists for selecting sources they do not approve of and for covering their political opponents in the media.

Summary: Discussions have proven that due to the limited access to information in Georgia, it is impossible to fully inform the audience about desired topics, affecting the formation of public opinion as well as the media's credibility. Following in the footsteps of international practice, a survey conducted in Georgia also confirmed that these challenges become more visible during the election period. As the discussions have shown, the creation of a quality media product is prevented by total illegal surveillance, which uses the “invisible hand” to correct the daily professional activities of journalists and hinders the growth of the media as an institution.

3.1.3. Verbal and Physical Violence Against Journalists

Verbal and physical violence against journalists, which increased even more leading up to the 2021 elections, remains a challenge in Georgia. In general, the expectations and signs of physical and verbal violence against journalists are particularly high during a pre-election period, with the aim of intimidating journalists and influencing the media agenda.

An online survey showed that the majority of media workers (85%) anticipate verbal and physical violence as expected threats in Georgia. Other threats of direct and indirect violence (constant devaluation of the profession, ridicule, accusation, dissemination of fake news and misinformation, intimidation, discrimination, blackmail, etc.) are at a high percentage (more than 40%).

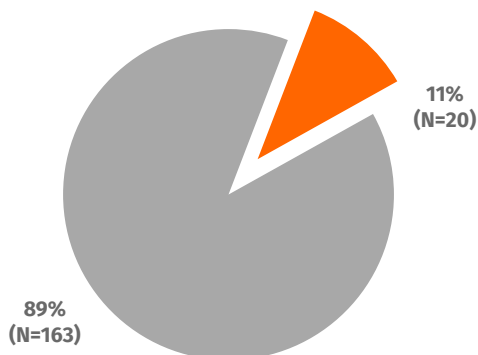
Journalists in focus groups view post-election threats as alarming, with a particular emphasis on the potential risks of physical violence and destruction.

The context surrounding the protests is important when discussing the pre- and post-election media environment, and in particular, the events of July 5th. This date is mentioned 14 times during the discussion. For the participants in the discussion, the death of cameraman Lekso Lashkarava and the raid on journalists are an example of how the ruling party treats the press. The participants in the discussion agree that the violence on July 5th was related to the upcoming elections in the country and that it was a “pre-election warning”. One participant of the discussion notes: “For me, July 5th was a pre-election ‘spoiler’ about what might happen in the future. It was not only a physical but also a moral attack. We are talking about physical survival nowadays, and many have begun to think about leaving the profession as well as the country,” talk show host, TV Pirveli.

The participants in the discussion are troubled by the fact that politicians in Georgia are no longer showing even a formal concern about the violence against journalists. “Numerous threats have been made by the authorities and I expect that anyone whose Facebook posts are not acceptable to them will be harassed,” said one participant (presenter and journalist, Chief TV).

In an online poll, respondents answered the question: “Do you think pre-election aggression and general threats directed towards media workers will increase?” 89 % of respondents say that, in their opinion, aggression and threats towards media workers will increase. Only 11% of respondents say they do not know if aggression and threats will increase. None of the respondents answered “No” to this question.

Chart N6: Expectations of pre-election threats



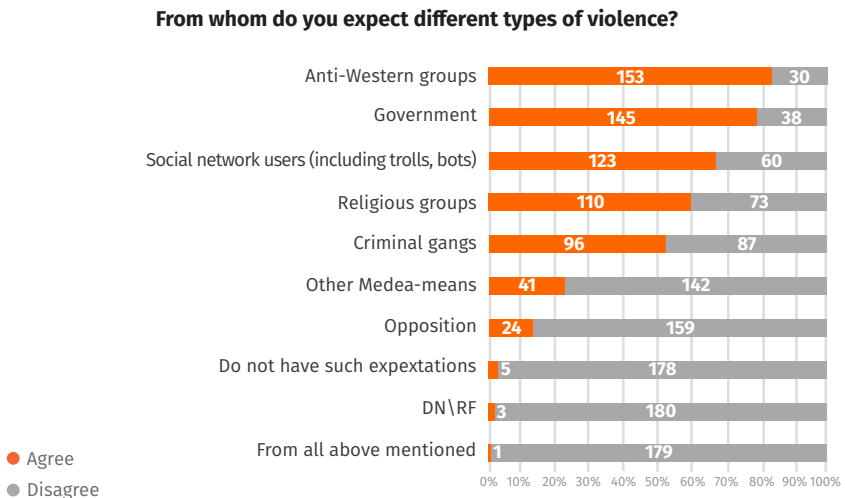
Throughout the discussion, the forecast of post-election threats developed in two directions during the assessment of threat expectations. Part of the focus group participants believe that if the Georgian Dream party wins the local elections, the pressure and physical confrontation against the media will increase, while others think that this will occur in the case that the ruling party loses. The consensus, however, is that the election will have a transformative impact on the media environment.

Expecting an increase in threats following the election is reinforced by the fact that journalists can no longer see the deterrent and preventive measures being implemented (specifically, punishing perpetrators) even during formal statements made after specific cases of violence against members of the media. In their opinion, "the government is creating an imitation as though they are in fact investigating violence and crimes against journalists" (journalist, Maestro TV).

Procrastination during crime investigations and impunity for the perpetrators pose systemic threats that act as motivating factors for further aggression and prevent the formation of a secure media environment. Creating a safe environment for journalists is directly related to ending impunity. In this context, the term “safety” refers to and includes the joint package of understanding the problems of security and impunity, that is, the need to develop a mechanism of suspending / coming up with a restraining factor.⁴¹

In an online poll, respondents answered the question: “From whom do you expect different types of violence during the pre-election period?” chart 7 shows that media representatives expect threats from several different groups. The majority of respondents, 83%, have such expectations from anti-Western groups, while 79% expect it from the government. The expectation of violence was at a high rate from religious groups, social network users, and criminal groups (up to 50-70%).

Chart 7: Expectations of threats from different groups



⁴¹ Towards a Research Agenda on the Safety of Journalists, United Nations, UNESCO, 2015, available from https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/draft_research_agenda_safety_of_journalists_06_2015.pdf (last seen on Sept. 26, 2021).

Participants in the discussion recalled some facts, including when former Minister of Justice Tea Tsulukiani (now Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, Sports, and Youth) snatched a microphone from a regional journalist during the pre-election period and humiliated them publicly. Other members of the discussion recalled similar examples, noting that the humiliation of journalists became a part of the government's rhetoric and communication: "I asked the Tbilisi candidate for Mayor if he would attend a debate being aired on Formula. The answer was: 'Are you a journalist? Do you call yourself a critical media?' and addressed me in a mocking tone – 'What kind of journalist even are you?' When a person watches a journalist being humiliated on TV, it is an incentive to use further violence against the journalist," recalled one of the participants, a journalist with Formula.

Another participant in the discussion recalled an incident when she became the victim of an imitated robbery of her house. She linked this incident to her critical broadcasts during the pre-election period and described it as a moral terror and intimidation. The word "terror" is mentioned 7 times during the discussion in the context of violence against journalists or stigmatization of journalists. The discussed policies and censorship of the current government are compared to the "Red Terror", i.e., the repressions carried out by the Soviet Union. The negative effect of political polarization is the circulation of hate speech. It becomes even more important in times of pressure and crisis for journalists to adhere to professional standard practice to maintain the trust of the audience: "The government wants us to deviate from the standard practice. It should be our duty to adhere to the standards even more strictly than usual. Otherwise, we end up damaging the work we serve," said one of the focus group participants (editor-in-chief, online media Publika).

The participants of the discussion believe that the aim of the aggressive narrative of the government is to paint the media as an enemy in the eyes of the public and to stigmatize the media. "The government with its rhetoric is trying to equate a journalist with a terrorist. The purpose of this is to influence the public attitude," said the participant of the discussion (professor, journalist, and producer).

The participants of the discussion also focused on the use of indirect forms of violence, which means the permanent purposeful spreading of rumors and fake news on social media platforms about people employed in the media, and the creation of a discrediting backdrop. This can cause specific damage and, due to its "mild" effect, may even be left without a response. Journalists note that the rumor-spreading schemes are described in the so-called "congregations" leaked from SSS (materials regarding covert surveillance).

In a quantitative survey, 64% of respondents believe that for further safety of media workers, there should be limited airtime for those who publish hate speech. It should be noted that devoting airtime to radical groups (in terms of airtime frequency and volume) can also facilitate the replication, legitimization, consolidation, and presentation of the messages of these groups. According to research (Gelashvili, 2020), some media outlets in Georgia "pay excessive attention to ultra-right groups in order to express support or, conversely, to express confrontation" (p. 13)⁴². The practice of such coverage was discussed during the discussions, and participants noted that approaches in this regard would indeed change as the editorial policy for reporting on abusers was flawed before July 5th.

In an online poll, 59% of the respondents stated that it is important for social media professionals to identify users who incite violence against journalists on social media platforms (59%). Focus group participants also point out the importance of this practice. During the discussion, it was revealed that the online space is heavily polarized, and trolls and bots are being exposed on a daily basis on different media platforms. According to the participants, the mainstream narrative created on social networks affects not only online discussions, but also the attitudes prevalent in the physical world.⁴³

⁴² Gelashvili, T., Georgian Media and Mediagenic Far Right, policy document No. 14, Georgian Institute of Politics, 2020;

⁴³ According to Freedom House's 2020 report, before the end of 2019, Facebook closed hundreds of Georgian accounts and pages that positioned themselves as media outlets and organizations and criticized the opposition and local civil society organizations. Facebook has revealed and exposed the advertising companies and the governmental party (Freedom House, Freedom in the World, Country report – Georgia, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2020> (last seen on Sept. 26, 2021).

Although journalists realize that they are fighting against trolls and bots, they still find it difficult to cope with it psychologically, as threatening messages and blackmail are often present in their communication: “When this ‘troll’ writes that he will meet you at the entrance of your building, you can’t help but be scared. It is horrifying as it is to even realize that there are organizations being tasked with blackmailing journalists, sponsoring information that will harm us” (talk show host, TV Pirveli,). “This is a ‘troll’s war’, as every journalist is forced to prepare for a troll attack while publishing critical material,” a regional media spokesman said.

In the same context, other participants in the discussion mentioned the challenges posed by the introduction of new technologies in the media environment. Speaking about the solution, one of the participants points out the political component of these challenges: “The problem can be solved only through changes in politics. We live in a totalitarian state where digital technologies and new resources have made it easier for them to achieve their goals”, said TV Formula author and host of the show.

In an online survey, respondents answered the question, “What can the media do to make media workers feel safer (physically and psychologically)?” 70% of the respondents to this question mentioned that it is important for the media to provide timely legal support to the victims, while 32% of the respondents stated that the timely support of a psychologist is important. It is noteworthy that during the discussion several participants mentioned had been a victim of blackmail in the past but could not dare to file a complaint in court.

Summary: The discussions and the results of the survey confirmed that in the run-up of the elections in Georgia, journalists are particularly at risk of physical and verbal violence. The media workers mainly associate direct and indirect forms of violence to the anti-Western groups and purposeful governmental policies that aim to stigmatize the media, use the demonizing effect, paint the media in the light of an enemy and reduce public trust in the media. Expectations of physical and verbal violence against the media in Georgia are high even after the elections.

3.1.4. Russian Media Model As a Macro-Threat

While on its way to building a democracy in Georgia, just like in any other post-Soviet countries, the malignant nature and malign influence of Russian propaganda is systematically revealed. This damages the media environment and threatens the country's democratic development. In many cases, the disinformation is packaged like the "Matryoshka", which makes it difficult to see what's inside and, therefore identify threats, and by the time that they are identified, it is too late. The population's likelihood to accept propagandistic information can be further increased if the threats are packaged and delivered in a seemingly "useful" ethno-cultural and historical context.

It should be noted that in all three focus groups, when talking about different threats, the general discussion is accompanied by hints of Russian propaganda and the danger of "turning into Russia". The participants repeatedly compare the alarming situation in Georgia and the current media environment with the practices and attitudes towards journalists in Russia, Belarus, and other authoritarian countries. According to them, the pressure placed on media in Russia was now personally experienced in Georgia in the run-up to the 2021 elections. This is perceived as a fight against democracy, free speech, and all democratic values in the country. "If we shut down critical television, tomorrow we will find this country to be Russia," said one participant in the discussion (talk show host, TV1).

Nothing was said in the primary questions of the discussion regarding the tendency to establish the Russian model in the media. This context was highlighted and revealed during discussions and analysis of the pattern codes; while discussing various issues, this was brought up by the participants themselves on 6 separate occasions. The chronicles from July 5th are familiar to the participants, reminding them of how they treat critical media in Russia. Evidently, it can be said that Russia's "invisible hand" is felt in the media environment, which evokes fear and insecurity among journalists. Journalists are concerned that this threat is not properly perceived by international organizations.

“Unfortunately, the West has not fully agreed to the position that a Russian province is gradually being formed here. What we are seeing is red terror,” said the host of the TV Pirveli talk show.

Perhaps it is the fear of establishing the Russian model in the media that leads us to expect a clearer response from international organizations and partners, as it is the mention of Russia that develops the context for the need to cooperate with international organizations, increase their awareness and influence, and worry about their passivity. It is no coincidence that the expectation of the greatest danger in the online survey is associated with the “anti-Western groups” (see Figure N7). Thus, the fear of “turning into Russia” can be considered a macro-threat.

Summary: The alarming media environment created in Georgia reminds media workers of the attitudes towards journalists in Russia, Belarus, and authoritarian countries in general. The study found that media pressure tactics and systematic approaches (including threat sensitization, response fragmentation, or inaction) may be seen as the effect of Russian propaganda and malign influence. It is necessary to conduct focused research in this direction.

3.2. Supportive Media Environment and Solidarity

An interesting phenomenon in transition democracies is the intensification of citizen involvement in times of crisis (e.g., pandemics, natural disasters, etc.). Such involvement includes participation in activities of solidarity and support, which help raise civic self-awareness, awareness of responsibility as a citizen, and reduce polarization. This leads to a fragmented but nevertheless positive effect on the democratization process. In times of crisis, when identifying media threats, the collective organization of journalists and a demonstration of solidarity can also reduce polarization in the media environment and enhance the viability of media institutions.

Representatives of the media expressed their views on the security mechanisms developed / to be developed by the media during a crisis. More support and solidarity for the media and the journalists who are critical of the government were named as an important mechanism by 69% of respondents.

The focus groups revealed both the expectation of a positive effect of actions of solidarity and support, as well as scepticism towards the effect of such activities, although in the end, the demonstration of solidarity was assessed as an important mechanism for improving the media environment. Table 1 shows the three contexts highlighted in the discussion:

Table N1: The Context of Solidarity Topic

Context	Evaluation of Demonstrating Solidarity
Focus Group 1	The discussion on the demonstration of solidarity developed in the context of international organization involvement and solidarity emerged in the discourse of positive effects.
Focus Group 2	The discussion focused on the current situation in media organizations and the readiness for solidarity, but a more pessimistic forecast was made.
Focus Group 3	When talking about solidarity between media organizations, the context of polarization and partisanship of the media was identified as an impediment to solidarity and the improvement of the media environment.

The support expressed for journalists by international organizations and their involvement in improving the media environment was perceived as a uniquely positive factor. In an online survey, respondents answered the question, “What can the media do to make media workers feel safer (physically and psychologically)?” There were suggested answers to this question and the respondents could select multiple ones. The largest number of respondents (N = 136), 74%, chose the answer: “Media should actively cooperate with local and international organizations.”

The focus groups highlighted the context in which media representatives see the involvement of international organizations. According to the participants, this cooperation should become more intensive and consistent. Part of them believes that the support of international organizations following the events

of July 5th was not enough, and the reason for this is that they were not able to receive proper information. The second group of participants believed that the support given was enough. In both cases, journalists highlight the need for support from local NGOs.

It is noteworthy that a number of prestigious international organizations have expressed concern over the July 5th-6th raid on the media. The report “Media Pogrom, July 5-6, Tbilisi, 2021” prepared by the Coalition for Media Advocacy states that “international partners called on the Georgian authorities to publicly condemn violence and punish all perpetrators of violence against journalists.”⁴⁴ According to the report, the ambassadors issued a joint statement responding to the incident by the foreign ministries of partner countries, MEPs, the OSCE / ODIHR, Reporters Without Borders, the UN Office for Human Rights, Amnesty International, and others.

Nevertheless, focus group discussions have shown that journalists feel vulnerable and abandoned in this context, lacking sufficient communication and cooperation with international organizations. In the participants’ opinion and expectations, a more intensive and non-fragmented cooperation may become preventive in its nature and, as long as systematic informing of international partners is successfully carried out and a timely response is received, it is possible to avoid a crisis.

Talking about the mechanisms of communication that are currently in place with international organizations as well as their overall involvement, one of the participants spoke about the use of social networks, and noted that since Facebook is the most popular network in Georgia, journalists should instead use Twitter a lot more which is currently very popular in Western political circles.

After the raid of July 5th, the media itself showed unprecedented solidarity. The participants of the discussion see this as quite resourceful and claim that

⁴⁴ A Pogrom of the Media: Tbilisi, July 5 and 6, 2021; Media Advocacy Coalition, https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/5_6_IVLISI_DOCU_GEO_19_09.pdf (last seen oct 15, 2021)

the demonstration of solidarity, with the help of non-governmental organizations, should be given a systemic character.

The discussion focused on the effect and importance of solidarity surrounding the events of July 5th and the death of the cameraman Lekso Lashkarava; it was as a result of this news that the greatest media solidarity was observed. The participants of the discussion liked the idea of regular demonstrations of solidarity, although the second discussion group expressed the opposite opinion on the effectiveness of the journalists' solidarity network or similar activities. The "confrontation with the media through the media" and the polarization between the media organizations themselves are named as the primary obstacles here. As a result of the discussion, the majority still endorsed the idea of solidarity demonstrations as a way of strengthening the support network. An initiative has been taken to prepare television programs that depict the unity of the media. "This should be done regularly so that people can see that the media is united," said a author and host for the Georgian Public Broadcaster.

Illustrating the scepticism of the media organizations themselves who were involved in the solidarity rallies, the participants recalled that during the crisis following the events of July 5th, a solidarity group of journalists was set up on Facebook in order to coordinate the journalists' joint activities and statements. This group was an unprecedented example of showing local media solidarity, which was not limited to the support expressed on social networks, the so-called "clicktivism" or "slacktivism"⁴⁵ and consequently activism was brought from the virtual to the real environment (spreading supportive statements, organizing solidarity rallies, planning a solidarity campaign, etc.). The admins of this Facebook group, "Media Organizing Group #ForLekso / ლექსოსთვის", were the participants in the focus group.

"The aim of the group was to show the media solidarity and the fact that there are certain issues on which we all agree. The idea was to form a group,

⁴⁵ The definition of the terms is related to the activism and support expressed in social networks.

draft a joint letter, and send it to the diplomatic corps. Initially, this letter was signed by almost all media outlets, but on the day when the idea of holding a rally arose, a crack appeared, and I was slowly forced to go to great lengths in order to receive support in writing a statement to the Prosecutor's Office, for example, or organizing a silent rally towards the Ministry of Internal Affairs, etc.," notes the participant of the discussion (host and journalist, Mtavari TV).

The focus groups revealed that the partisan interests of the media hinder the expression of professional solidarity of journalists, which, in the conditions of polarization, becomes fragmented. Journalists refrain from expressing solidarity due to the fear of being fired.

Summary: Increasing the involvement of international and local organizations and systematically informing them about the threats in the media environment is important for strengthening the media environment and solidarity in Georgia. The discussion and the results of the survey confirmed that the media organizations themselves have the resources to openly express solidarity on a number of issues, although due to polarization this support is rather fragmented. Examples of media solidarity demonstrations in Georgia have been assessed as a mechanism that can transform the media environment in a positive way.

3.3. Safe Media Environment: Education and Research Focus

An educated and well-informed citizen is the foundation of a democratic society. The media takes part in the education of the citizen throughout his life. As Howells (2001) points out, media, education, and democracy are inseparably connected and look like a triangle where each "slope" reinforces the other two and vice versa.⁴⁶

The education background and competencies of media employees themselves are important in order to protect them from various threats. The focus group discussion coincided with the time when a large amount of possible covert

⁴⁶ Howells, R. (2001). Media, education and democracy. *European Review*, 9(2), 159-168

hearing and surveillance files became available to the media; the desire to control journalistic activities was evident. It is in such circumstances, in the opinion of the participants in the discussion, that it is important for journalists to have the knowledge of the risks associated with covert recordings so that they do not find themselves vulnerable. Novice and inexperienced journalists are especially faced with this challenge. "Sending such records to activists may be an act of baiting them out. Everyone should be more careful," said a representative of Maestro TV. The participants in the discussion pointed to Georgia's international commitments made to protect journalists and stressed the need to strengthen data collection and monitoring of violence in line with international practice.

"The international guidelines contain instructions on how to prevent violence against journalists, how to cover rallies, how to act as a journalist during a demonstration, how to defend oneself, as well as how to deal with these issues in court. By the way, according to international practice, court judges also need training," said a journalist from Mtavari TV.

According to an online survey of journalists, 39% of media workers believe that training on security issues (crisis and demonstration coverage) is an important mechanism for creating a secure media environment. Journalists point to the involvement of lawyers in the education process and the need for legal advice in the newsrooms.

Focus group discussion participants agree that sharing experiences and knowledge on these topics is important, especially with the involvement of entry-level journalists. This initiative was agreed upon by the novice journalists participating in the discussion. Experienced journalists expressed their readiness to share their knowledge as well.

During the discussion, it was suggested that an important mechanism for increasing public trust in the media is face-to-face communication with the audience and publicly talking about the role and importance of the media (especially critical media). According to the participants of the discussion, such communication brings results. Speaking about the importance of direct (face-

to-face) communication with the audience, journalists also note that government officials and critical media have the resources to communicate professionally with each other.

Summary: Research has shown that improving the media environment in Georgia can enhance the competencies of journalists and producers in media organizations. It is also important to raise public awareness about the role and need of critical media. The discussions showed that in this regard, face-to-face communication and meetings with the audience are useful and appropriate.

Conclusion

Strengthening the media as an institution and maintaining its viability remains an important challenge for Georgia as a transitional democracy. The research confirmed that challenges in the media environment are especially active during pre-election periods.

The study revealed the macro and micro media threats that come to light in the digital and physical media environments prior to and following elections. The media environment observed during the 2021 self-government elections was representative of the reality seen through the eyes of media workers, and it was revealed that, compared to previous years, the media environment has changed for the worse. The study confirmed that political polarization and public crises have a negative impact on the media environment and the safety of journalists in Georgia, while changes in the political landscape can have a positive impact on the media environment. It has also been demonstrated that the media themselves can reduce or enhance the effects of polarization.

The study confirmed that media threats in Georgia increase self-censorship and fear, reduce media credibility and weaken the viability of the media institution.

The study revealed an additional effect of political polarization, a new tactic to combat critical media: “Use the media themselves against the journalists”, which leads to media polarization in itself, inciting conflict between journalists and exposing this macro-threat across the media field. In this regard, polarization in Georgia is an obstacle to solidarity. On the other hand, polarization has a so-called demonizing effect that can be manifested through the stigmatization of journalists by politicians, political labelling, and demolition of credibility, which ultimately harms the media.

The research confirmed that the ruling political force in Georgia uses all the components and mechanisms required to create and strengthen self-censorship of journalists. These mechanisms are: fear, impunity for crime, ridicule, discrediting, insecurity, dissemination of misinformation, etc. Enhancing journalists' self-censorship creates an invisible field of censorship in newsrooms when, for security reasons, the journalist is forced to avoid covering specific topics, sources, or facts. Critical questions are replaced by silence.

Research has shown that systematic, organized negative campaigns against the media in Georgia often work in such a way that enables the threats to become invisible, “soft-spoken” or well-packaged. As a result, the response is delayed or ineffective. Such media threats are manifested in both physical and digital media environments. Although the response from the media or the public to these threats is immediate in times of crisis, such fragmented support and solidarity is insufficient to neutralize them in the long run. It was revealed that systematic actions of solidarity, demonstrations of support, involvement of international and local organizations in this process, face-to-face communication with the audience and discussion of the role and the importance of critical media are all very important mechanisms to be in place for improving the media environment.

It is noteworthy that media workers in Georgia consider anti-Western groups to be the main threat and the fear of “turning to Russia” is quite prevalent as the alarming media environment created in Georgia reminds them of the attitude towards journalists in Russia. The abovementioned tactics and systemic

approaches (including desensitization and inaction in response to threats) may also be seen as an effect of Russian propaganda. For this reason, looking into this issue in such a context seems viable for future research.

Research has shown that the extent to which journalists feel safe in their professional work is one of the components of assessing the quality of democracy. Even in a transitional democracy, credible and viable media remain an essential source of strengthening it.

Recommendations

As a result of this study, recommendations have been put forward for various stakeholders. Implementing these recommendations will help create a supportive media environment, encourage solidarity, and improve coordination between different stakeholders, both during and after crises. For the recommendations to be implemented, cooperation of various stakeholders using a common platform is required.

Based on the results of the research, it is necessary to consider the following recommendations regarding the micro and macro threats identified in Georgia:

Stakeholders	Recommendations
Media sector, NGOs, politicians.	Establish an institutional mechanism to deal with threats. For example, communication between the media and politicians should take place not only in the field, while reporting, but also at the institutional level. For instance, with the initiative of the opposition, a committee or working group may be set up in the Parliament of Georgia to systematically work on media rights. International practice should be considered in this regard. It is important to start a discussion on the process of establishing a media ombudsman as a supporting institution.
Media speakers (including politicians, NGO sector).	Targeted response to micro-threats posed by polarization in the media environment. For example, in order to prevent violence against journalists, it is essential that media representatives, politicians, NGOs, and the public systematically condemn violence against journalists, demonstrate media support, investigate crimes, and prosecute perpetrators.

Stakeholders	Recommendations
Media sector, media audience	<p>Activation of support mechanisms. For example, before creating a crisis, preventively, create a network of solidarity. This is all the more important given the assumption that the “July 5th scenario” may be repeated in a variety of contexts and crises (not only in the context of LGBTQ+ groups, but also towards ethnic, religious, political, and other vulnerable groups).</p> <p>For this, it is necessary to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase media credibility in society and create a supportive environment in the media audience itself. This is possible not only through media platforms, but also through face-to-face communication; - Promote solidarity journalism and increase the involvement of a loyal media audience and create micro-moments of solidarity in the digital and physical space; for example, in order to increase the emotional textual support expressed in social networks, it is necessary to encourage other positive engagement and apply it to the physical environment as well; this can even be a symbolic co-financing of journalistic projects (especially the creation of investigative materials), through so-called crowdfunding; - Encourage and demonstrate solidarity through media programs: holding and covering solidarity meetings, preparing programs, stories (systematically) that discuss media threats, challenges, and solutions; - Strengthen the connection between different media representatives, create micro-moments of solidarity and reduce the feeling of isolation. This will also be an effective resource for stress resistance and will reduce the effect of polarization. - Constantly update the public on the topic of media threats through the media;
Media sector, media education and NGO sector.	<p>Raising public awareness of the importance of a free, pluralistic, and diverse media. For example, it is necessary to explain to the audience why the activities of a journalist are important as well as highlight the connection between raising public awareness about various threats (corruption, pandemics, nepotism, xenophobia) and the protection of each individual person.</p>

<p>Media psychologists, lawyers, media sector, media education sector.</p>	<p>Strengthen the resilience of journalists and media organizations and create support systems that are activated during public crises. For this to work, it is required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce an assistive mechanism for journalists and have a timely response, both in terms of legal and psychological assistance; - Strengthen journalists' psychological resources and resilience through training, training of journalists in trauma reporting; - Train media institutions in crisis management, organizations, for example, need to have a realistic plan for how they respond to coverage of crises and disasters; - In order to create support mechanisms, the media must strengthen its resources and create a reservoir of positive communications as well as increase their resilience to stress during a non-crisis (including non-election) period. This should be facilitated by the creation of a support network inside and outside the media, as well as the construction of pro-social media, which will reinforce a positive context for the journalists themselves (or on their part). This effect can be achieved through demonstration of empathy, encouragement, compassion, care, solidarity, security, calmness, professional inspiration, and gratitude (from the audience or the media).
<p>Academia and NGO sectors.</p>	<p>The continuous identification of threats, which rise due to the malignant nature and malign influence of Russian propaganda, typically invisible and therefore unfitting to respond to, is highly recommended. It is important to discuss these issues with the involvement of media representatives and academia, conducting research and training. Systematic monitoring, data collection and systematic analysis of micro and macro media threats, taking into account international experience and local context.</p>

Based on the results of the research and the discussed recommendations, it is important to encourage the cooperation of the above-mentioned actors to improve the media environment in Georgia and deal with the existing challenges. Agreeing on a common policy and consistent work will help to create a supportive media environment and, as a result, strengthen a consolidated democracy.

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Appendix

1) Media sources who took part in the online survey

Georgian Public Broadcaster – the First Channel, broadcasting TV company Formula, broadcasting TV company Mtavari Arkhi, broadcasting company TV Pirveli, broadcasting company TV Imedi, broadcasting TV company Rustavi 2, broadcasting company Palitra TV, broadcasting TV company Maestro, broadcasting TV company Kavkasia, broadcasting company Mega TV, broadcasting company Tok TV, radio Comersant, Radio Liberty/Free/Tavisupleba, radio Imedi, Union of Investigative Journalists I-fact, Studio of Investigative Journalists Monitori, news agency – www.pia.ge, news agency – www.DailyInfo.ge, news agency Interpressnews, information portal iPress, media holding Kvira, business media Georgia (BMG), journal and online platform Forbes Georgia, newspaper Georgian Times, newspaper Akhali Taoba, newspaper Tbilisi Universiteti, journal Indigo, media holding Qronika+, online media – Netgazeti.ge, online media – www.publika.ge, online media – www.tabula.ge, online media – www.report.ge, online media – www.civil.ge, online media – www.On.ge, online media – www.primetime.ge, online media Newspress, online media – www.accentnews.ge, online media JAMnews – www.jam-news.net/ge/.

Regional media outlets: Public Broadcaster Ajara TV, broadcasting radio company in Gori Mozaika, news agency – www.cnews.ge, newspaper Guriis moambe and online media Guria News – www.gurianews.com, news agency Info Rustavi, broadcasting TV Company 9th Channel – www.tv9news.ge, Media House Samkhretis Karibche, broadcasting TV company Borjomi, online media – www.chemikharagauli.com and newspaper Chemi Kharagauli, news agency Kutaisiposti, literature newspaper in Khoni Atinati, online media – www.FirstNews.ge, newspaper in Khoni Taoba, broadcasting TV company TV25, Newspaper Ajara, online media and newspaper Batumelebi, broadcasting Tv-radio company Odishi.

Journalists, producers, talk-show hosts/presenters, media owners/founders, editors from the following media outlets participated in the focus group discussions:

1. Broadcasting company TV Pirveli
2. Online media publika.ge;
3. Online media Tabula;
4. Broadcasting TV company Rustavi 2;
5. Broadcasting TV company Maestro;
6. Broadcasting TV company Mtavari Arkhi;
7. Broadcasting TV company in Rustavi TV4;
8. Georgian Public Broadcaster – the First Channel;
9. Broadcasting TV company Formula;
10. Online Media Chemi Imereti;
11. Broadcasting TV company Borjomi;
12. Broadcasting radio company in Gori Mozaika;
13. Radio Liberty/Free/Tavisupleba
14. Regional media (confidential)

About the Authors

Mariam Gersamia is a founder and chairwoman of Media and Communication Educational and Research Center. Mariam is a full professor and media psychologist at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU, Georgia). She received her doctoral degree in journalism studies (2004) and post-diploma education in body-oriented psychology (2017). With 21 years of experience in academia, she was in charge of the journalism and mass communication department and programs, twice-elected as a member of the academic council (2010-2015). Mariam is an author of research papers, textbook, and monography. She has cooperated with local and international organizations, worked for the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia as the head of the PR Department and Minister's adviser (2006-2009), was Executive Director of the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (2009-2014). For now, she is in charge of the English taught graduate program "Media Psychology and Communications" at TSU. Mariam is a member of international scientific associations and editorial boards. She is an honourable citizen of Louisville (USA). Her major fields are: media psychology, gender and media, public relations, media education, and political communications.

Maia Toradze is a board member and senior fellow at MCERC. She is an associate professor at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU, Georgia) and head of the journalism undergraduate program. She got her PHD in Journalism Studies (2006). With 30 years of working in media, she used to be a journalist and an editor-in-chief (Shansi, Kavkasioni, Aktsenti, etc.). Currently she works at the TSU media center. She is an author of three books and co-author of seven books, editor of five books, etc. With 16 years of experience in academia, she has participated in various international scientific conferences and has published scientific articles. Her major fields are fake news and disinformation, media education, mass communications, media history, etc.

About the Center

“Media and Communication Educational and Research Center” is a Non-enterpreneurial (Non-commercial) Legal Entity, acting in accordance with the Constitution of Georgia, laws, and Charter. MCERC was founded in 2015. The center aims to support the enhancement of a media and mass-communication field in the manner of creation of the new knowledge and through educational-research activities, raise awareness in media literacy and support introduction and strengthening democratic values in a civil society. The center aims advising in the fields of media psychology, public relations, media and mass-communication, support to transfer interdisciplinary knowledge. Center collaborates with higher educational institutions, local and international organizations, companies, educational and research centers.

The Mission of MCERC is to educate and support journalists for empowering media and strengthening democracy. The Vision is to support professional media for a democratic society.

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