

GEORGIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

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Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

16

The year of 2021 was tempestuous. It included a violent attack on journalists by anti-LGBTQ demonstrators and far-right groups, a political crisis, local government elections, and the national government’s war on critical media. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to corrode the country’s information environment, which has been swamped with COVID-related misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda.

Panelists were especially alarmed about the government’s undisguised use of disinformation and hate-speech accusations to undermine public trust in critical media. This vindictive campaign, coupled with tightened control over journalists’ access to public information, reached a peak in 2021.

The July 5–6 attack on journalists by homophobic and far-right groups was the largest targeted assault on media in years. The demonstrators injured 53 journalists and damaged the equipment of 10 media organizations, laying bare the state’s inability to ensure journalists’ safety. A few months later, local elections were also marred by many cases of abuse of media representatives.

Deepening polarization has degraded the quality of media coverage, with national broadcasters divided along political lines. Still, a few small, mostly online, outlets provided audiences with unbiased and impartial news on various topics.

False and manipulated information continued to proliferate on social media during the election period and other critical political moments. Simultaneously, various

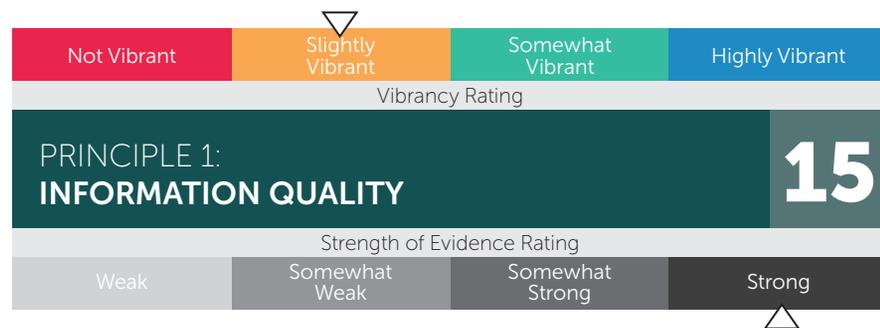
actors, online and off, continued to spread conspiracy theories, fake news, and Kremlin-linked, anti-Western propaganda.

The panel said Georgian society is becoming more media literate and savvy, although too many still lack the digital skills to guard against cyberthreats.

There are few constructive exchanges of information and opinion, a pillar of good governance, between citizens and the government, possibly because of the public’s mistrust of state institutions, the dearth of productive debates on the internet, and a weak civic culture.

Panel members said Georgia’s strong civil society works to promote democratic values and pushes the government toward sound policies.

The first principle, on information quality, received the lowest score of all, 15. Principle 3, on information consumption and engagement, and 4, on transformative action, each received 17, while Principle 2, on multiple channels of information, received a slightly higher score than the other three principles, 17.



Overall, this principle was the most critically assessed, receiving a score of 15. Main trends from the 2021 VIBE study continued, although the scores were lower for the 2022 study. Sub-indicators on mal-information and funding for the media sector received lower scores than the other sub-indicators, and the score for mal-information was the lowest of all. Georgian content producers, both professional and amateur, churned out a sea of information, which included an overabundance of false information, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. The government ramped up its disinformation efforts against media that criticize it, and Russian propaganda narratives continued to spread via social media and fringe media, political actors, and far-right groups.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

Most panelists agreed that the infrastructure for creating and distributing information is more or less adequate for most media. Still, some media struggle to make needed upgrades. Nata Dzvelishvili, director of *Indigo* magazine, said small online outlets usually need equipment similar to that used by TV broadcasters, but it is usually beyond their budgets.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to play havoc with journalism education in 2021. Although the government relaxed health regulations for higher education institutions and allowed them to conduct classes in hybrid or online formats, most journalism schools remained online only, due mostly to the difficulty of implementing safety measures. Trainings

remained more strictly regulated, with participants required to present either negative test results or proof of full vaccination. This has kept journalism trainings mostly online. About 15 universities offer journalism degrees across the country, and there are no obstacles to enrollment.

As in previous years, a handful of small, independent online outlets continued to produce fact-based, well-sourced content on a variety of topics. They include Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, On.ge, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Georgian Service, and Publika.ge, among others.

Panelists said mainstream media violated professional and ethical standards repeatedly during the year when covering certain contentious issues. A survey of media in the run-up to local elections commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the European Union (EU) concluded that TV news often violated professional ethics and attempted to manipulate.¹ “Professional standards are violated on all sides,” Nino Jangirashvili, director of TV Kavkasia, said. But she cautioned that there is no equivalence between the pro-government media, which she said spew “vicious propaganda,” and media allied with the opposition, which she called “defensive media.” Khatia Jinjikhadze, director of the Open Society Georgia Foundation’s (OSGF) media program, said pro-government channels are not only propagandistic, but they have also become “more propagandistic than they were last year. ... These channels attack journalists who expose politicians. ... The propaganda machine is more diversified and coordinated than ever.”

Panelists mostly agreed that journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting, via formal procedures and citizen complaints. Mariam Gogosashvili, executive director of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, said her organization always responds to complaints it receives, but media do not always accept its recommendations. In 2021, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics reviewed 76 complaints, of which more than a half, 42, came from

¹ Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. *Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia*. 2021. http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads_script/accounts/doc_eng/11_GSJ_TV_NEWS_ENG_09.2021.pdf.

citizens.² The most common violation (29) concerned inaccuracies in the reporting.

Dzvelishvili argued that the media should not neglect professional standards even when it is under attack; in doing so, it loses public trust and gives an assist to the government to discredit it. She also complained that some journalists have blurred the lines between the professional and the private on social media.

Jangirashvili specifically called out Dito Samkharadze, a ruling party politician, for freely sharing discriminatory and insulting content against political rivals and critical journalists on social media.

The panel gave credit to mainstream television broadcasters that are critical of the government, and to regional media and quality independent online media for their original reporting, unearthing stories that would have otherwise been covered up by government officials. “I would say that it was media, critical online and regional media, too, that worked really well, started asking critical questions about the pandemic promptly, while the leadership was complacent,” Jinjikhadze said. “The regional media were very involved, informing local communities about safety norms and raising awareness about vaccination, while the government’s vaccination campaign was weak. And election coverage was also constructive; the media were able to document irregularities prior to and on the election days,” she added.

The panelists agreed that information on local, national, regional, and international events is available in Georgian media. Regional and local news are predominantly covered by regional and local media, and national media focus primarily on national events. Dzvelishvili said that since the political crisis that followed the 2020 parliamentary elections and bled into 2021—in which opposition parties claimed election

fraud and boycotted the legislature—the media have worked in a state of emergency, focusing on political topics at the expense of some important social issues. She said *Indigo* magazine worked for months on analytical pieces on certain social issues but struggled to find the right moment to present them to the public. For a few years, online Netgazeti.ge has been reporting on the South Caucasus countries. Euronews, a source of independent international news, is available in Georgian. And there are several online outlets with a regional focus, aimed mostly at informing foreign audiences, such as JAMnews, OC Media, Chai Khana, and Eurasianet. Mainstream broadcasters offer a thin trickle of international news, such as Mtavari Arkhi’s program *Mtavari Msoplioshi* (Mtavari in the World).

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.

Panel members expressed concern over a surge in misinformation and disinformation online and offline. Panelists were especially alarmed by the government’s explicit campaign against media which criticizes its actions, which they said reached a crescendo in 2021. They cautioned that such behavior jeopardized media freedom and undermined citizens’ trust in media. Nestan Tsetskhladze, chief editor of Netgazeti.

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ge, cited the Central Election Commission’s Information Protection Center, which accused RFE/RL’s Radio Tavisupleba, Publika.ge, Netgazeti.ge, On.ge, and Guria News—alongside some other media outlets, including broadcasters critical of the government-- of spreading fake news and disinformation. When Publika, Netgazeti, and On.ge requested an explanation from the center, it blamed a technical mistake, which it said had been corrected, for Netgazeti.ge’s and RFE/RL’s Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s designation. In the case of Publika.ge and On.ge, it blamed a since-rectified methodological

2 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. *Annual Report*. 2021. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ztqDd5XtJsAVv6tfhRy5kFxuQlB6cHkF/view>.

error.³ Gogosashvili also criticized as misleading a report from the ruling Georgian Dream party that accused three national broadcasters--Mtavari Arkhi, Formula TV, and TV Pirveli--of airing hate speech, disinformation, and manipulative coverage aimed at discrediting the government.⁴ She said the report's methodology was "based on subjective perceptions." Panelists also said preelection monitoring by the Communications Commission, a regulator, provided a biased assessment of critical mainstream broadcasters' performance.

Tamar Kintsurashvili, whose Media Development Foundation monitors disinformation and fake news on social media, said trolls had used the names and logos of mainstream broadcasters critical of the government to spread manipulative and misleading information about some controversial news items. According to the Foundation's Myth Detector project, two days before the municipal election runoffs on October 30, a Facebook user posted a photo of and alleged quote from imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili alongside the logo of Mtavari Arkhi.⁵ Panelists said the government peddled disinformation about Saakashvili's detention, imprisonment, treatment, and court hearing. Natia Kuprashvili, chairwoman of the Alliance of Georgian Broadcasters, said the public received "incomplete, confusing, and subjectively selected video footage" on the issue.⁶ Jinjikhadze said people would therefore give more credence to the authorities' version of Saakashvili-related stories, which were later supported by video footage. After Saakashvili announced on his Facebook page that he had arrived in Georgia, the government denied these reports, even as Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili called a press briefing that same evening to announce that authorities had arrested Saakashvili and then released

footage of the arrest. On one occasion, the State Inspector's Service, which enforces data protection laws, fined the Ministry of Justice GEL 2,000 (approximately \$650) for distributing video footage as a violation of Saakashvili's privacy and requested removal of the footage from the internet.

According to Myth Detector, after the public defender and her group of experts requested that an ailing Saakashvili be admitted to a hospital, anti-opposition pages and trolls allegedly affiliated with the government emerged on social media and attempted to discredit the public defender and her experts as biased actors supporting the opposition United National Movement.⁷ In addition to the anti-opposition pages and government trolls, according to Myth Detector, Georgian Dream leaders and supporters, pro-government media outlets, anti-liberal and pro-Kremlin Facebook pages, media outlets, and other related actors were involved in the campaign. Kintsurashvili cited it as an example of how the Georgian Dream government mimics pro-Russian pages and positions. "State institutions aren't sensitive to professional and ethical standards, and they don't encourage debate," Mamuka Andguladze, a media program manager at Transparency International Georgia, said.

Municipal elections held in October 2021 intensified divisive and discriminatory rhetoric on social media. In a report covering the period from August 2 to November 6, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, a leading election watchdog, analyzed election-related pages and posts on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok.⁸ Among other findings, the report counted 4,291 posts on 35 anti-ruling-party pages and 2,406 posts on 40 anti-opposition pages. Even more content was aimed at discrediting media outlets critical of the government and their journalists, including Mtavari Arkhi, Formula TV, TV Pirveli, and Kavkasia TV. Fewer posts targeted pro-government broadcasters Imedi TV and POS TV.

3 "Online Media Outlets Slam CEC Over Disinformation Accusations." Civil.ge. September 29, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/442573>.

4 Open Society Georgia Foundation. "Smear Campaigns Launched against the Critical Media Aim to Silence Opponents." Georgian Election Spotlight Newsletter. October 1, 2021. <https://cutt.ly/ZG12jOn>.

5 Kistauri, Ani. "Facebook Trolls Discrediting Mikheil Saakashvili in a Coordinated Manner." Myth Detector. November 2, 2021. <https://mythdetector.ge/en/facebook-trolls-discrediting-mikheil-saakashvili-in-a-coordinated-manner/>.

6 "Timeline: Saakashvili Imprisonment & Hunger Strike." Civil.ge. November 30, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/455765>.

7 Kistauri, Ani. "Pro-Governmental Trolls, Media and the Government Against the Public Defender." Myth Detector. November 29, 2021. <https://mythdetector.ge/en/myth-pro-governmental-trolls-media-and-government-against-public-defender>.

8 International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy. *Final Report on Social Media Monitoring of the 2021 Municipal Elections*. December 21, 2021. <https://isfed.ge/geo/angarishebi/munitsipalitetis-organota-2021-tslis-archevnebis-sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-sabolo-angarishi->

Kintsurashvili, whose organization cooperates with Facebook to monitor and report false information on social media, said some media organizations understand the possible advertising ramifications of being blacklisted on Facebook. She recounted that after the Media Development Foundation had reported Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli, and Metronome.ge for spreading false information on Facebook, they immediately corrected the coverage.

Despite the tools available to report false narratives, fake posts about vaccines still appear on social media, panelists said. Alluding to Nino Kuntseva, a business and management professor notorious for her anti-vaxxer posts, media professor Nino Danelia recalled a Facebook user claiming that firefighters, doctors, and others in the United States were leaving their jobs because of vaccination mandates. Danelia said this and similar posts appeared on Facebook as soon as Georgia introduced a COVID-19 passport in November 2021.

Several panelists said media cannot always produce well-rounded stories based on facts because the government deliberately restricts information. For example, Tsetskhladze said Netgazeti had unsuccessfully sought information on Saakashvili's hunger strike from penitentiary officials. Ia Mamaladze, publisher of Guria News, said her journalists could not get statistics about COVID-19 in prisons. "With its actions, the government does everything possible to eliminate the concept of unbiased media, which adhere to high professional and ethical standards," Tsetskhladze said.

Panel members agreed that journalists hold the government accountable for its actions, but they said that has not always translated into change, especially in 2021.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.

Russia and its proxies create and disseminate disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. According to a report by the European

Values Center for Security Policy, by remaining passive, Georgian authorities have tacitly supported a growing list of Russia-sponsored organizations, as well as radical domestic movements.⁹ The report said Georgian clergy buttress Russia's soft power strategy by decrying Western values as incompatible with Orthodox Christianity. The report also cited China's links with Georgian academia, media, and NGOs as an extension of Russian disinformation machinery.

The emergence of far-right national broadcaster Alt-Info sent tremors through Georgia's media landscape. On September 9, the Communications Commission granted the outlet, which received regional and online broadcasting authorization in the fall of 2020, national broadcaster status. Gogosashvili said the channel, whose page previously had been kicked off Facebook because it was suspected of

coordinating with other users in posting misleading information, "violates every possible professional standard."¹⁰ For example, hosts at Alt-Info used violent and hateful language against Tbilisi's Pride event in July, and the host of a talk show on the channel helped organize an attack on Pride Day that left 53 journalists

injured and damaged equipment belonging to more than 10 media organizations.¹¹ After an investigation, the public defender asked the General Prosecutor's Office to bring criminal charges against the talk show host.

“State institutions aren't sensitive to professional and ethical standards, and they don't encourage debate,” Andguladze said.

9 Stulik, David and Kristýna Bagge. *Eastern European Program Report Mapping Research: Comparing Foreign Influence in Georgia*. European Values Centre for Security Policy. 2021. https://www.europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/MAPPING_RESEARCH_COMPARING_FOREIGN_INFLUENCE_IN_GEORGIA.pdf.

10 Meta. *October 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report*. November 5, 2020. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/11/october-2020-cib-report/>.

11 Mgaloblishvili, Basti. "How 5th of July Was Organized and Executed." Publika. Posted August 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSrt4KmDWAQ>; Public Defender of Georgia. "Public Defender Demands Criminal Prosecution of Two Persons for Organizing Group Violence and Calling for Violence on July 5." September 6, 2021. <https://www.ombudsman.ge/eng/akhali-ambebi/sakhalkho-damtsveli-5-ivliss-jgufuri-dzaladobis-organizebisa-da-dzaladobisken-motsodebis-faktebze-2-piris-mimart-siskhlissamartlebrivi-devnis-datsqebas-moitkhovs>.

“Numerous statements about the preparations against Tbilisi Pride were broadcast by the platform Alt-Info with homophobic, xenophobic, sexist, and far-right sentiments,” a report by the Media Advocacy Coalition concluded.¹² Myth Detector also found that Alt-Info’s hosts continued to disseminate pro-Kremlin and anti-Western messages after the July violence

Lekso Lashkarava, a cameraman for TV Pirveli, was badly beaten on July 5 and was found dead on July 11 in his home. The panel members blasted the authorities’ handling of the investigation as manipulative and tainted by mal-information. On the day of Lashkarava’s death, with the cause still unknown, the Interior Ministry released CCTV footage that allegedly showed him buying psychotropic drugs in a pharmacy and illegal drugs from a dealer.¹³ “The fact that the release of this footage suggested a connection between Lashkarava’s actions and his death made it manipulative,” Jinjikhadze said. A couple of months later, the State Inspector’s Service ruled that by airing the videos without explicitly explaining their link to the cameraman’s death, the Interior Ministry had violated legal protections on personal data and fined it GEL 2,000 (approximately \$650).¹⁴ Also on the day of Lashkarava’s death, his criminal record was leaked on social media.¹⁵ The official postmortem toxicology report later found that Lashkarava died as a result of a narcotic overdose, but his family, friends, and colleagues rejected these findings and have launched their own investigation.

12 Media Advocacy Coalition. “A Pogrom of the Media: Tbilisi, July 5 and 6, 2021.” Undated. <http://mediacoalition.ge/en/a/9bbdee80>.

13 “Police Say Narcotics Overdose Possibly Behind Journalist’s Death.” Civil.ge. July 12, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/431858>.

14 “Interior Ministry Fined over Violating Deceased Cameraman’s Data Privacy.” Civil.ge. September 24, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/442481>.

15 “Rally Demanding the Resignation of the Government in Connection with the Death of Cameraman Lekso Lashkarava Underway in Front of the Parliament.” Interpress News. July 11, 2021. <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/114583-rally-demanding-the-resignation-of-the-government-in-connection-with-the-death-of-cameraman-lekso-lashkarava-underway-in-front-of-the-parliament/>; “Hundreds Rally to Demand PM’s Resignation over Georgian Cameraman’s Death.” First Channel. July 12, 2021. <https://1tv.ge/en/news/hundreds-rally-to-demand-pms-resignation-over-georgian-cameramans-death/>.

Lashkarava’s case illustrates how, when faced with a crisis that could reflect badly on it, the government immediately resorts to manipulative and aggressive campaigning, Danelia and TV Kavkasia’s Jangirashvili said. “It tries to manipulate the existing information to create a false perception about events that are directed against it or when there’s a significant risk that the situation will tarnish its image,” Danelia observed.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

Most panel members said that while mainstream media focus mostly on covering national and political events, regional and small online media produce content that is more reflective of the experiences and viewpoints of people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Kuprashvili said the July 5–6 events prompted some members of the media to give more thoughtful coverage to sexual minorities and that some regional media have stepped up their coverage of issues of interest to local ethnic minorities. Kintsurashvili said a lack of diversity in media coverage is sometimes due to a lack of financial and human resources, and media rely on donor funding to report on minorities.

Kuprashvili raised the concern that some small, local online media in Kvemo Kartli, populated mostly by ethnic Azeris, have opaque funding and produce content in local and Russian languages that differs from their Georgian versions. Kamila Mamedova, director of the community radio station Radio Marneuli, which operates in the predominantly Azeri-populated district of Marneuli, added that the content is usually shared from such sources as the Russian-government-controlled Sputnik media. In the neighboring and largely ethnic Armenian Samtskhe-Javakheti region, Kuprashvili said pirate broadcasters operate on analog frequencies rebroadcasting different content, including Russian channels, ultimately reaching more viewers than local media using digital technologies. For years, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) has been criticized for failing to produce content that reflects the diversity of Georgian society, as it is legally required to do.

Mamedova said the politicization of national media has affected regional

media outlets as well. For example, she noted that members of the United National Movement have accused Radio Marneuli of supporting the Georgian Dream party, even though the station has not aired the ruling party’s announcements. She said the government’s rhetoric is even more bellicose.

Panel members said the field is open equally to men and women, and that women are increasingly taking top managerial posts. The field still lacks ethnic diversity, however, even though Georgia has large populations of ethnic minorities, they said.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Georgia’s advertising market continued to shrink last year amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Kuprashvili said some regional broadcasters had lost as much as 80 percent of their ad revenues, and that a new election-related law abolishing state funding for political parties’ pre-election campaign advertising wiped out a traditional source of revenue during pre-election campaign seasons. Further, she said that even though a recent effort by Georgia’s economic development agency, Enterprise Georgia, to support small and medium-sized businesses was expanded to include print, radio, online, and broadcast media, allowing them to access to low-interest loans, banks still deem media that produce political programming too risky.

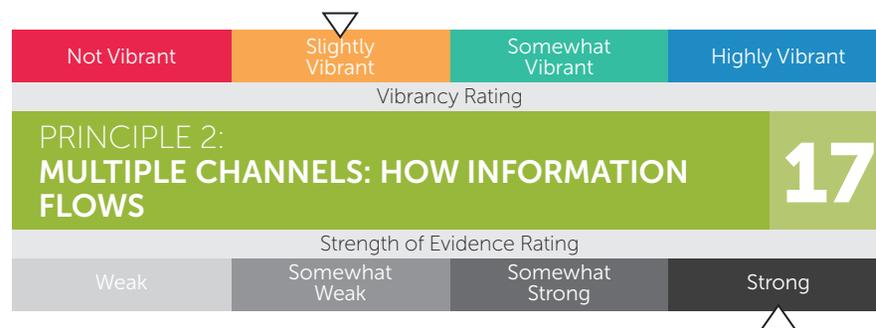
Small, independent media are funded primarily by donors. Dzvelishvili, of *Indigo* magazine, said banks and NGOs that used to contract with media to prepare certain content now produce that content themselves and have become media competitors. Facebook, too, remains a competitor, with businesses taking advantage of its large audience and lower rates. She said *Indigo* is developing a strategy to diversify online revenue sources.

Some media outlets use social media to make money from their multimedia content. Online Mtisambebi.ge and its YouTube channel, RegTV, for instance, produce a lot of such content.

As in previous years, panelists complained that government processes

for buying advertising and information services are opaque. Jangirashvili said it is unclear how funding decisions are made, and Kintsurashvili complained that for years the government has given money to online media that spread hate speech, pro-government narratives, and anti-vaccine and pro-Russian sentiments. For example, among the many platforms financed by the government is STV.ge, which airs pro-government and anti-opposition sentiments in western Georgia.

GPB, which gets most of its money from the government, has the most resources of any outlet in the country. In 2021, it received GEL 69.2 million (\$21.7 million), a GEL 500,000 (\$157,000) increase over its 2020 funding level.¹⁶ Imedi TV has enjoyed the market’s largest advertising revenues for several years. Most national private broadcasters rely largely on their owners’ contributions.¹⁷



Georgia’s laws on freedom of speech and the press remain the last line of defense against attacks from all sides amid the government’s attempts to more tightly control the media, the panel said. Law enforcement agencies continue to enforce laws according to their agenda. Subindicator 6, on citizens’ rights to create, share, and consume information, and subindicator 10, on the independence of information channels, scored the lowest of all.

16 “Georgian Parliament Confirms 2021 State Budget.” Civil.ge. December 30, 2020. <https://civil.ge/archives/389765>.

17 Andghuladze, Mamuka Salome Tsetskhladze. *Overview of the Broadcasting Advertising Market in 2020*. Undated. Transparency International Georgia. https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/advertising_market_2021-e_0.pdf.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.

Members of the government and their allies repeatedly complain that existing measures to address alleged media misbehavior—such as slander, abusive language, and disinformation—are insufficient, and they call for new regulations. For example, Kakha Bekauri, head of the Communications Commission, has called for new measures to ensure a just-the-facts approach to news that would bar politically motivated messaging.¹⁸ Gia Gachechiladze, a founder of the public movement known as Ai la and who hosts a show on Maestro TV, has asked parliament to amend the broadcasting law to “prevent the dissemination of slanderous and fabricated, insulting information by journalists.”¹⁹ Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili said existing mechanisms, including self-regulatory councils of media outlets, a charter of journalism ethics, and the courts, have not stemmed the spread of slander and misinformation by the media and that “regulation should be introduced for the things that cannot be solved by self-regulation.”²⁰

Panelists saw danger in such rhetoric. They argued that in fragile democracies like Georgia, such tools in the hands of the government will be used to punish the media. While direct censorship is rare, members of the panel said the government and the allegedly pro-governmental Communications Commission interpret laws in such a way as to

“In this politicized environment, any change to the legislation—for instance, enforcement of the law on hate speech—that would give the government room for interpretation would be catastrophic,” said Andguladze.

control media and interfere with editorial policy. “Direct and indirect attempts are ongoing to change liberal laws,” TI Georgia’s Andguladze said, “In this politicized environment, any change to the legislation—for instance, enforcement of the law on hate speech—that would give the government room for interpretation would be catastrophic.” The Media Advocacy Coalition, made up of civil society organizations and media associations, has warned about the tendency of and attempts by the Communications Commission to intervene in media content by sanctioning critical channels such as Mtavari Arkhi under the pretense of policing obscenity.²¹ Panelists also said the commission’s Media Critic,

a platform created as a media literacy tool, is used to censor the media that are critical of the government. All of which makes the panelists expect further deterioration in media legislation and enforcement.

Unprecedented physical violence against journalists was recorded in Georgia in 2021. As already mentioned, on July 5–6 journalists covering demonstrations against the Tbilisi Pride March were at-

tacked by homophobic, far-right groups. The assaults, which took place in various parts of the city simultaneously, lasted for several hours; journalists, cameramen, photographers and—anyone from the media—were targeted to prevent them from doing their jobs. Some were physically assaulted, and those who tried to flee were chased and had their equipment damaged. Members of the media resorted to hiding their press badges and equipment. Ten media outlets reported property damage and 53 media representatives were reportedly injured by the demonstrators; some were hospitalized with serious injuries requiring surgery. Lekso Lashkarava, a cameraman for TV Pirveli who was among the hospitalized, died a few days after the violence. An independent investigation is underway to determine the cause of his death.

The police stood by during the violence, as has been amply documented

18 “Media Advocacy Coalition Responds to Kakha Bekauri’s Statement.” Radio Liberty. December 6, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31596275.html>.

19 Gugulashvili, Magda. “‘Utsnobi’s’ Initiative – Threat to Free Expression.” Media Checker. November 4, 2021. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/90050-ucnobis-iniciativa-gamokhatvis-thavisuflebis-shezhudvis-saftrhkhe>.

20 Gugulashvili, Magda. “Whatever the Charter of Ethics Says, the Result Is Zero—Media Through the Eyes of Shalva Papuashvili.” Media Checker. November 22, 2021. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/interviu/article/90287-ethikis-qartiam-rac-unda-thqvas-shedegi-nulia-media-shalva-papuashvilis-thvalith>.

21 Georgian Democratic Initiative. “Tendency to Sanction Mtavari Arkhi Carries the Signs of Censorship.” November 26, 2021. <https://gdi.ge/ge/news/koalicia-media.page>.

in media reports. For instance, TV Pirveli reporter Giorgi Maisuradze said the police did not intervene but instead watched as his cameraman, Levan Bitsadze, was beaten.²² Many civil and watchdog organizations hold the government responsible for the violence.²³ “The authorities have not taken measures to stop violent groups despite knowing in advance of the risk of aggression and violence on their part,” Transparency International Georgia said in a statement at the time. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, however, said the opposition was behind the violence.²⁴ Jeanne Cavelier, the head of Reporters Without Borders’ Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk, called the events a major setback for press freedom in Georgia.²⁵ “The intensity and coordination of the violence were unprecedented. Journalists must be able to freely cover any demonstration, and the police have a duty to protect them while they are doing their job,” she said in a July 7 statement. According to official reports, 27 people are being investigated in connection with the violence.

Ahead of the events, Gharibashvili urged LGBTQ communities not to march, as “95 percent of our population are against it and we shall [respect] that.”²⁶ In response, TI Georgia said

“This year the governments’ propaganda that journalists are enemies directly resulted in assaults on journalists physically. ... Physical retaliation against journalists has become the norm,” Jangirashvili said.

Gharibashvili’s statement and police inaction had essentially encouraged violence against the media on July 5–6.²⁷ Panel members were alarmed at the government’s rhetoric discrediting journalists, which they alleged leads to violence. “This year the governments’ propaganda that journalists are enemies directly resulted in assaults on journalists physically. ... Physical retaliation against journalists has become the norm,” Jangirashvili, of TV Kavkasia, said.

Panelists agreed that the events of July 5–6 had worsened the media environment, encouraged violence against media professionals, and turned journalism into an utterly dangerous profession. “Many journalists say that for the first time, they are afraid to go out to cover issues that will offend the majority of the population,” Danelia, the media professor, said. “Such encouragement of violence against the media by official bodies resulted in the abuse and humiliation of media representatives, sometimes even by ordinary people,” Tsetskhladze added. Jangirashvili said

young journalists are especially afraid to carry out their professional duties. “We always struggled to find the right staff in the region, and now, after these events, it has become even more difficult,” said Mamedova of Radio Marneuli. Panelists also noted strong hostility toward journalists trying to cover the municipal elections in October. The Media Advocacy Coalition counted at least 37 cases of obstruction of journalistic activities, including physical and verbal attacks, some of which are being investigated by law enforcement agencies.²⁸

There were other instances of violence against journalists throughout the year. Formula TV anchor Vakho Sanaia and a family member were

22 Reporters Without Borders. “Attacks on 53 Journalists Is a Major Setback for Press Freedom in Georgia, RSF Says.” July 7, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/news/attacks-53-journalists-major-setback-press-freedom-georgia-rsf-says>.

23 Transparency International Georgia. “Prime Minister of Georgia Should Resign Immediately Due to the Severe Consequences of the July 5 Violence.” July 11, 2021. <https://transparency.ge/en/post/prime-minister-georgia-should-resign-immediately-due-severe-consequences-july-5-violence>.

24 “Irakli Gharibashvili: Violence against Media on July 5 Damaged Church-Planned Peaceful Demonstration and Government.” Radio Liberty. July 7, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31345862.html>.

25 Reporters Without Borders. “Attacks on 53 Journalists Is a Major Setback for Press Freedom in Georgia, RSF Says.” July 7, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/news/attacks-53-journalists-major-setback-press-freedom-georgia-rsf-says>.

26 “Gharibashvili on LGBT Pride: ‘95% Against Propagandistic Parade.’” Civil.ge. July 12, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/431658>.

27 Transparency International Georgia. “Government Inaction Encourages Violence by Aggressive Groups against the Media.” July 5, 2021. <https://transparency.ge/en/post/government-inaction-encourages-violence-aggressive-groups-against-media>.

28 Media Advocacy Coalition. *Media Environment Assessment. Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia, 2021. Rounds I&II*. Undated. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m_eX6jCOx21G0nFTf70tYGlui8PD1ypS/view.

assaulted by three drunken men in the center of Tbilisi in early 2021. The men were arrested and six months later were found guilty. They were sentenced to six months in prison, but counting time served, they were released the same day they were convicted.

Late in 2021, the ruling party fast-tracked a package of bills to tighten gambling laws that included a near-complete ban on gambling advertising, upon which some media heavily rely. Some civil society and media organizations warned that the legislation could undermine the already-shaky independence of broadcasters and further shrink the dwindling media market.²⁹ “The authorities have a very clear political objective to create discomfort for the media,” one leader of the opposition said about the measures, which are set to take effect in early 2022.³⁰

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

Panelists said people in Georgia can get information through various channels, but their access depends on geographic, economic, and other factors. According to a September survey by Geostat, the national statistics office, 86.1 percent of households have internet access through fixed lines, and 97.6 percent have it through mobile devices.³¹ Freedom House’s *Freedom in the Net 2021* report put Georgia among the “free” countries, the highest category, but cited “slow progress in expanding internet infrastructure” as an obstacle to internet access.³² Netgazeti’s Tsetskhladze lamented that “the internet is not available to everyone,

despite the promise” of the country’s Universal Internetization Project, launched in 2015 by the Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development. The project aims to build a fiber-optic network in areas where high costs or low demand have kept out commercial internet service providers. It was to be up and running by 2020, managed by a nonprofit and funded by a commercial bank. But the program did not start until 2020, and it is being implemented with funding from the World Bank.³³

Panelists also said access to information channels has become yet another casualty of the pandemic and its attendant economic hardship. “Nowadays, all household devices are used more for educational purposes than for consuming information,” Kuprashvili, of the broadcasters’ alliance, said. The government-mandated switch to online education during the pandemic has exposed the problem of children’s access to TV and online lessons. “The majority of the country’s population is in a difficult socioeconomic situation and does not have appropriate technical equipment and/or internet access to enable them to participate in lessons,” the Georgian Young Lawyer’s Association said in a statement on International Children’s Day.³⁴ Fixed internet service is of poor quality or unavailable in some rural areas, and mobile internet is comparatively pricey. Access to information channels is also a problem for people with disabilities, especially for the deaf and hard of hearing, said Mamedova, who noted that very few channels, such as the public broadcaster, offer programs with sign-language interpretation.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Georgia’s public information laws meet international standards, but

29 “We Negatively Assess Expedited Discussion of a Legislative Package on Gambling—Media Advocacy Coalition.” Publika. December 14, 2021. <https://publika.ge/uaryofitad-vafasebt-azartul-tamashebbe-sakanonmdeblo-paketis-dachqarebuli-wesit-gankhilvas-mediakoalicia/>.

30 “Betting on Populism? Draft Gambling Laws Under Scrutiny.” Civil.ge. December 7, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/459205>.

31 Geostat. Indicators of Using Information and Communication Technologies in Households. September 10, 2021. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/single-news/2324/indicators-of-using-information-and-communication-technologies-ict-in-households-2021>.

32 Shahbaz, Adrian and Allie Funk. *Freedom on the Net 2021*. Freedom House. Undated. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-net/2021>.

33 Tkeshelashvili, Shota. “Universal Internet—Five Years of Promises and Re-Announced Project.” Business Media Georgia. January 13, 2020. <https://bm.ge/ka/article/sayoveltao-internetizacia--dapirebebis-5-weli-da-xelaxla-da-anonsebuli-proeqti-/46896>; Internews. *Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment*. February 20, 2021. https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Georgia-Information-Ecosystem-Part_1.pdf.

34 Georgian Young Lawyers Association. “GYLA Statement on the International Children’s Day.” June 1, 2021. <https://gyla.ge/en/post/saias-ganckhadeba-bavshvta-dacvis-saertashorisodghestan-dakavshirebit>.

their implementation has seen drastic regression. The panelists said the government’s communication with the media had degenerated in 2021. For instance, they said, officials had cut off critical media from public information by regularly inviting only friendly media, including the public broadcaster, to official briefings and press conferences. “Discrimination against journalists has become more frequent,” the Charter of Journalistic Ethics complained in a December statement. It cited Culture Minister Thea Tsulukiani blocking some media from briefings in November and December and the Ministry of Justice doing the same in November.³⁵

Dzvelishvili said press offices of the Ministry of Justice and National Center for Disease Control and Public Health that are “blocking information instead of spreading it” exemplify the overall state policy. The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information said at the end of 2021, it had requested COVID-19 death statistics by different indicators from the Ministry of Health but had received only incomplete and inconsistent data.³⁶

Access to public information remains critically limited partially because of the pandemic, but as Tsetskhladze noted, “The media cannot get not only officially requested information, but even an answer to a simple question [like] whether the ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili is on a hunger strike or not.” Government agencies continue to discourage critical questions on problematic issues, whether they be about the pandemic and its management or elections.

The deteriorating communication illustrates how little accountability government officials feel to the media, panelists argued. Officials boycott political talk shows, including preelection debates on critical media, muzzling the media watchdogs and depriving audiences of the

35 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. “It Is Inadmissible to Restrict Media from Attending Sakrebulo Sessions.” December 20, 2021. <https://www.qartia.ge/ka/siakhleebi/article/90639-2021-12-20-14-03-26>.

36 Institute for Development of Freedom of Information. “Limited and Mutually Exclusive Statistics on COVID-19 Death Rate.” December 28, 2021. https://idfi.ge/ge/limited_and_mutually_exclusive_statistics_on_covid-19_deaths.

opportunity to learn their positions on issues.³⁷

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Panel members said broadcast licensing and spectrum allocation procedures, which used to be simple, have become complex and unfair. The case of the Communications Commission’s refusal to authorize Radio Lile in 2020, which was appealed in court, exposed how complex the procedure has become. The court ruled that the commission could demand an audit report on the organization’s financial sustainability, but Gogosashvili, of the Ethics Charter, spoke for many when she noted that the law does not obligate media to audit themselves before they have even launched. In that light, she also wondered how the far-right Alt-Info had received the commission’s blessing, doubting its ability to provide an audit report or other valid documents on financial sustainability. Gogosashvili said the commission’s decision against Radio Lile was biased and unfair.

The commission is trying to extend the reach of radio broadcasts into more remote areas. Last year, it expanded the transmission areas permitted to stations, most of which had been licensed to broadcast in bigger cities. In addition to nudging existing broadcasters into neglected regions, the commission hoped to attract new broadcasters.³⁸ But some radio stations see the expansion as a potential financial burden, just as they are readying to switch from analog to digital broadcasting. The Media Advocacy Coalition criticized the decision, stating, “The task of the Commission should be to extend the term of existing licenses for radio broadcasters until the date of transition to digital broadcasting.” Kuprashvili said broadcasters whose coverage areas have been expanded can be held liable for not fulfilling the obligation to reach their entire transmission zones, opening the door to potentially losing their license due to violating the terms mandated by the regulator.

37 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. “Threatening Statements and Harassment of Public Broadcaster Journalist Ketu Tutberidze Contain Real Threats.” December 27, 2021. <https://www.qartia.ge/ka/ganckhadebebi>.

38 “Everyone Can Listen to the Radio—Communications Commission Expands Broadcast Area.” Imedi. March 11, 2021. <https://imedinews.ge/ge/sazogadoeba/191117/radios-mosmenis-shesadzlebloba-kvelas-komunikatsiebis-komisiyam-samautskeblo-areali-gaapartova>.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

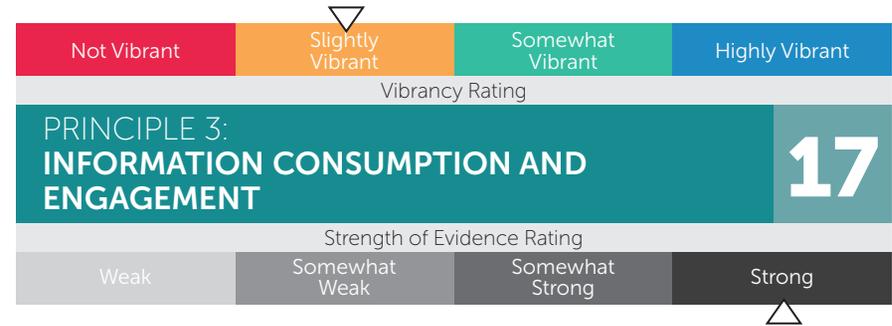
The panelists gave low scores to GPB for failing to provide the public with critical content and being loyal to the government, though they said it still airs some quality programs. Panel members disagreed somewhat on the case of Irakli Absandze, the host of GPB's *Weekly Interview* program, who was fired by the station's general director allegedly for violating its rules on employee use of social media. Absandze himself linked his dismissal to his activities on Facebook and during the events of July 5–6, when he cursed government agencies and used obscenities.³⁹ Most panelists agreed that his real offense had been to criticize the government and GPB's editorial decisions. "Irakli's obscene statements are a problem, but they're not of the kind and intensity to get him fired," Andguladze said.

Adjara Public TV has stayed the course it set on after a shake-up of leadership and staff in 2019 and 2020, which panelists deemed was due to government intrusion into the broadcaster's editorial policy. Before the election, Iakinte Chkhartishvili, former chairman of the Chamber of Commerce of Adjara, was appointed deputy director, and Nazibrola Kobuladze, a former spokeswoman for the local roads department, was picked to lead the newsroom.⁴⁰ Sofia Zhgenti, head of online services at the channel, said dozens of lawsuits have been filed by journalists fired by director Giorgi Kokhleidze accusing him of violating their labor rights.

Most media organizations are subsidized by their owners, whose considerable sway over their editorial policies is obvious in their programming, panelists said. "Some owners give more editorial freedom to their media organizations, some less," Jangirashvili said. Panel members also said that media loyal to the government continue to receive most of the government's advertising contracts.

39 "Media Advocacy Coalition: Absandze's Release from the GPB May Be Linked to Criticism of the Government." Radio Liberty. August 13, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31409195.html>.

40 "Former Chairman of Adjara Chamber of Commerce Has Been Appointed Deputy Director of Adjara Public Television." Radio Liberty." January 8, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31039001.html>.



Georgia has laws and tools that allow its people to use and engage with information. The internet and social media are freely available for anyone to register and use, but data privacy and personal security can be compromised too easily. The state cybersecurity system remains weak, and despite some progress, citizen's media literacy level is low, the panel members noted. The overall score for this principle was 17, down two points from the 2021 VIBE study. Subindicators on privacy protections and security tools and media literacy scored lowest of all.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

Online privacy is regulated mainly by the 2013 law on personal data protection, which panelists said is frequently misused by state and public bodies. An example of this was when the Interior Ministry was fined for violating cameraman Lekso Lashkarava's privacy after he was beaten in the July protests and subsequently died. In June 2021, Georgia's parliament adopted a controversial amendment to the 2012 law on information security, which among other things defines the rights and responsibilities for public and private actors in the field. Introduced by members of the ruling party, it grants the Operational Technical Agency (OTA), an organization under the State Security Services, direct access to the information systems of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as telecommunications companies,

and indirect access to individuals' and companies' data.⁴¹ Noting a conflict, Gogosashvili said the OTA determines where information will be obtained, extracts the information itself,—and monitors how the information is obtained. She said that even though the law does not apply to mass media, the fact that the OTA both carries out the law and monitors its own implementation makes it hard to determine whether media representatives are really protected.

There were several leaks of secretly recorded materials in 2021. In March, TV Pirveli aired audio conversations, apparently recorded covertly, in which the son of Georgian Dream party founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, rap singer Bera Ivanishvili, allegedly asks the head of the Special State Protection Service to punish young people who had insulted the Ivanishvili family online.⁴² There was speculation that these documents were also recorded by State Security Services. Then in September, several media outlets reported on a leak of tens of thousands of files, including religious leaders' conversations with journalists; diplomats, including US and EU ambassadors; school principals; and representatives of civil society, as well as with one another.⁴³ Several journalists confirmed the authenticity of their conversations with clerical figures.

In August, the Mtavari Arkhi TV channel aired alleged memos of the State Security Service on journalists, opposition and ruling party politicians,

41 Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information. "The Parliament of the X Convocation Adopted the Problematic Law on Information Security with the III Reading." June 11, 2021. https://idfi.ge/en/the_parliament_of_the_10_convocation_adopted_the_problematic_draft_law_on_information_security.

42 Covert Recordings: Bera Ivanishvili Heard Tasking Security Official with Personal Revenge? Civil.ge. March 6, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/403782>.

43 Mandaria, Tornike. "Georgia Flooded with Leaked Surveillance Recordings of Clergy," Eurasianet. September 17, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-flooded-with-leaked-surveillance-recordings-of-clergy>.

activists, priests, businesspeople, and other public figures.⁴⁴

The year ended with parliament voting to abolish the State Inspector's Service, over local and international protests, with the aim of splitting it into two agencies.⁴⁵ In a statement, the US Embassy said, "The ruling party undermined government accountability by abolishing the State Inspector's Service, which is mandated to investigate police abuse and protect data privacy."⁴⁶

Training programs and open-access resources on digital security and digital hygiene are available to both professional and non-professional

content producers. Some panelists said more organizations have offered trainings and courses during the COVID-19 pandemic but that some groups still have only middling knowledge of digital security tools. IREX's Securing Access to Free Expression (SAFE) initiative is the most frequently mentioned digital-skills training by members of the media and civil society organizations. Lili Pulariani, a digital communications specialist, said trainings are mostly available for media representatives when they are organized by media outlets, but they are less available to

independent bloggers or other nonprofessional content producers, who are left vulnerable to cyberthreats. Pulariani also said schoolteachers are mostly self-taught and are equipped with very basic data literacy or digital security skills. Jinjikhadze said even state organizations struggle to establish rigorous practices and standards to secure critical assets. In

“Danelia noted that regions populated predominantly by ethnic communities, who are exposed to Russian propaganda through Russian entertainment programs, should not be overlooked by organizations and donors looking to promote media literacy.”

44 Shoshvashvili, Tata. "Georgian Security Services Accused of Mass-Surveillance of Public Figures," On.ge. August 2, 2021. <https://oc-media.org/georgian-security-services-accused-of-mass-surveillance-of-public-figures/>.

45 "GD Aims to Dissolve Outspoken State Inspector's Service." Civil.ge. December 27, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/464400>.

46 US Embassy in Georgia. "US Embassy Statement on the Ruling Party's Rushed, End-of-Year Legislation." January 3, 2022. <https://ge.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-statement-on-the-ruling-partys-rushed-end-of-year-legislation/>.

the summer of 2021, the Georgian Research and Educational Networking Association reported a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack on its server. As a result, the websites of its clients On.ge and Publika.ge went down. Nino Dolidze, executive director of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, said an April cyberattack crashed its website.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

Georgia's media- and information-literacy policy is determined by laws on education and the broadcast media. According to a Media Development Foundation report, the policy meets UNESCO and EU standards.⁴⁷ Since 2017, the Communications Commission has been responsible for implementing the policy by coordinating the work of state and private actors in media literacy and promoting educational projects, conducting research, and developing a media-literacy strategy and action plan.

“At the policy level, the Communications Commission carries out more activities than before, but because of the double standards it applies, its policy becomes incongruous,” the Media Development Foundation's Kintsurashvili said, “On the one hand, it is involved in a campaign against media, and on the other, it is responsible for media literacy.” Media literacy is a teachable skill in secondary schools, but the government needs to help teachers become more media literate. Civil society groups do more than state agencies to boost media literacy in Georgia, and there is little coordination, or even complementarity, between the two sectors, professor Danelia said. She said the level of cooperation might depend on how loyal any given group is to the government. Several panelists said media-literacy programs tend to be targeted at young people and do not reach a demographically or geographically diverse audience. Danelia noted that regions populated predominantly by ethnic communities, who are exposed to Russian propaganda through Russian

47 Media Development Foundation and Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. *Media Literacy Sector Mapping in Georgia, Latvia, Moldova and Ukraine. Georgia Country Report*. 2021. https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//ML_Georgia_Country_Report_2021.pdf.

entertainment programs, should not be overlooked by organizations and donors looking to promote media literacy.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

Georgia has various platforms similar to town halls, including public councils within city districts and in regional governments. Some panel members said public councils are generally pro forma, and in practice, the government holds great sway over the process. Some panel members said people who are not activists or members of the media are less engaged in public debates for fear of reprisal from authorities. Mamedova, of Radio Marneuli, said people might feel safer expressing their opinions on certain contentious matters on social media rather than in public forums. She also said language barriers can inhibit some minorities from engaging in open public debates. USAID has set up Civic Engagement Centers that offer a safe space for all to meet and discuss issues.⁴⁸

Panelists noted that open digital communications such as social media are riddled with misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. Kintsurashvili said pro-government trolls commonly bully influencers on social media, resulting in “a chilling effect on some people.” According to Myth Detector, after TV Pirveli aired audio of a conversation allegedly involving Bera Ivanishvili and Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, two new Facebook pages, “ჟურნალისტი” (Journalist) and “ნოდარ მეზღაპრე” (Nodar the Storyteller), were created to target the channel and the host of the investigative news program airing it, Nodar Meladze.⁴⁹ The page Nodar the Storyteller was pushed to people's social media feeds as sponsored content to maximize audience reach.

Tsetskhladze said the social media channels of Netgazeti.ge/Batumelebi.

48 Network of Centers for Civic Engagement. “About Us.” <https://cce.ge/ka/about>.

49 Kistauri, Ani and Mariam Dangadze. “Newly Created Facebook Pages and Old Trolls Rush to Protect Bera and Confront Journalists.” Myth Detector. March 15, 2021. <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/newly-created-facebook-pages-and-old-trolls-rush-protect-bera-and-confront-journalists>.

ge have struggled to moderate comments on Facebook, which requires huge effort during an influx of hate speech and disinformation about some topics. The Facebook pages of Netgazeti.ge/Batumelebi.ge use filtering options to keep comments germane, but they are no match for the many comments that contain disinformation but are nevertheless on topic.

Panelists said media and NGOs make frequent use of their freedom of speech and right to information and are highly experienced in exercising them. Referring to annual reports that public agencies are required to compile on releasing public information, some panelists said relatively few citizens exercise their right to information. All public institutions are obliged to submit these reports to the president, parliament, and the prime minister, and to publish them on the website of the country's official gazette, the *Legislative Herald*.

Tamar Kuratishvili, head of the Sirtskhvilia (Shame) movement's Batumi branch, was detained by police near the State Security Office on November 13 as she and several others tried to lay a protest banner that read, "You cannot arrest everyone" on the sidewalk. Kuratishvili was charged with petty hooliganism and disobeying an order from police but later was acquitted.⁵⁰ On another occasion, during the July 5–6 attack, a mob stormed the office of Sirtskhvilia, a civil activists' movement, which supports the country's LGBTQ community and liberalization in general.

Panelists said most people deal with misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech online either by filtering it out or debunking it rather than reporting it to the platforms, but several panelists mentioned organized groups that flag content on Facebook that they find unacceptable.

“ Mamedova said people might feel safer expressing their opinions on social media rather than in public forums. She also said language barriers can inhibit some minorities from engaging in open public debates.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.

Some media organizations have done limited research to better understand their audiences, often with support from donors.

Tsetskhladze said Netgazeti.ge/Batumelebi has benefited from a small qualitative audience study, which was funded by a donor in 2021, and Gela Mtivlishvili said a donor has supported several audience focus groups for Mtisambebi.ge, where he is an editor.

Quantitative data is available for national TV broadcasters from Nielsen licensee TVMR GE and Tri Media Intelligence (TMI), which is a licensee of the Kantar Group

consulting giant. But some panel members said data from these two companies is sometimes in conflict and affects advertisers' decisions. Some media owners have alleged that Kantar Media (now simply the media division of Kantar), which entered the Georgian market in 2015, has links with some pro-government groups. Jangirashvili said she works with both, because different advertisers want data from different companies. Efforts to bring clarity to the situation have fallen victim to the distrust and partisanship that pervades Georgian public life: a 2021 voluntary audit, proposed by the Communications Commission and conducted by an outside company, was positive for TMI, but TVMR GE, wary of the commission and TMI's perceived links to the government, opted out.

Regional broadcasters' audiences are generally not measured individually. Kuprashvili said TVMR GE measures 10 regional broadcasters and provides aggregate data for all. Panelists representing media outlets said they use free tools, such as Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram analytics. *Indigo* magazine's Dzvelishvili said she and her staff discuss information gleaned from these tools in weekly meetings to see what worked and what did not, and to determine what

50 "Tamar Kuratishvili, Who Was Detained near the Batumi SSU Building on November 13, Was Acquitted by the Court." On.ge. November 19, 2021. <https://on.ge/story/94090>.

improvements to make.

Print media circulation is not measured, and only a few radio stations manage to carry out occasional audience studies.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Three out of four community radio stations in the country broadcast in minority-populated areas. Panelists familiar with these stations said they produce their own content, which upholds professional and ethical standards. Radio Nor broadcasts in the Armenian-populated town of Ninotsminda, Radio Pankisi in the region predominantly populated by Kists, Radio Marneuli operates in the Azeri-populated region of Marneuli, and Radio Mozaika in the town of Gori. Mtvlishvili, whose organization, the Kakheti Information Center, manages Radio Pankisi, said community media produce unique content. He said even in an era of political crisis and deeply polarized national media, Radio Pankisi provides important content to its audience, free from political influences. Mamedova said Radio Marneuli has helped develop a local culture of activism.



The panel gave low marks to the government's engagement with critical media, civil society groups, and international organizations, and its efforts to support public discourse and informed electoral decisions. Panelists lamented that most of Georgian society has lined up with opposing political sides and partisan media that leave little space for healthy discourse. Subindicators on individuals' use of quality

information to inform their actions and the government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions scored the lowest, at 13 and 12, respectively.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

Georgians increasingly turn to social media for information, but television remains the dominant information source. In a 2021 poll by the US National Democratic Institute and the Caucasus Research Resource Center-Georgia, 57 percent of respondents cited television as their first source of information about politics and current events, compared with 35 percent who named the internet and social media. Young people rely more on the internet and social media for their news: the same survey found that 62 percent of respondents ages 18 to 34 accessed news about Georgian politics and current events online.⁵¹

In a 2021 survey by the International Republican Institute, only 58 percent of respondents took a positive view of Georgia's media.⁵² Such relatively low trust could stem, at least in part, from the highly polarized and politicized media environment, in which broadcast media, especially, are split into pro-government and pro-opposition camps and produce partisan content criticizing political entities they dislike. For example, the most influential opposition TV channels, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli, avoided coverage of the ruling party's electoral campaign in 2021 and supported the opposition parties, especially the United National Movement. Likewise, content on Imedi TV, the leading pro-government channel, steered clear of criticizing the ruling Georgian Dream party while harshly criticizing the opposition parties, including United National Movement, according to a report by the Georgian

51 National Democratic Institute and the Caucasus Research Resource Center-Georgia. *Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of July 2021 Telephone Survey*. Undated. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20-%20Poll%20Results%20-%20July%202021%20Poll%20-%20ENG%20-%20Final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3KcnyY9FM4Xw8Lj-H85acfuoyI-cWYSwkncUgf8abEkgHeAc8EX2KvIso>.

52 Afriamashvili, Sophie. "Georgian Media Is in Fifth Place in the Rating of Institutions—IRI." *Netgazeti*. August 2, 2021. <https://netgazeti.ge/news/557486/>.

Charter of Journalistic Ethics commissioned by the United Nations Development Program and the EU.⁵³ A similar trend was noted on Rustavi 2.

Panel members noted that Georgia has a few nonpartisan media outlets that operate mostly online but have less influence on public opinion than party-aligned media, as they reach relatively small audiences. Still, these outlets punch above their weight because they are widely deemed credible. For example, Tsetskhladze, of Netgazeti.ge, said the website's count of demonstrators at an opposition rally received no pushback, as "the figures were published by Netgazeti and not Imedi TV and Mtavari TV." Kintsurashvili, of the Media Development Foundation, said that in international reports, "We cite information published by these media because of their credibility."

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

Panelists said Georgians tend to accept and share information uncritically and often have preconceived notions on certain topics, such as the pandemic, that prevent them from properly understanding information. Amid these concerns, panelists deemed media invitations to anti-vaxxers to speak to the public inappropriate and irresponsible, citing specifically Imedi TV's popular *Prime Show* for inviting antivaxxers like Tina Topuria and giving her the opportunity to spread anti vaccination messages publicly.⁵⁴ "It is a crime to invite anti-vaxxers when we are in a pandemic.

“We say that the government's response to criticism is inadequate, but it does not mean that media don't influence the government's actions,” Jangirashvili said.

It is not about freedom of speech, as no fact-based information was provided,” Jangirashvili said. The panel also discussed the influence of ultra-right, anti-liberal groups—who consider the pandemic a blessing because it has slowed immigration and isolated Georgia from Europe—on social media. “Sandro Bregadze, a far-right activist, declared that immigration is a punishment for our Western orientation and that the worse our COVID-19 statistics are, the more isolated we'll become from the West,” Kintsurashvili recounted.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

Panelists praised the important role of international organizations and domestic civil society in leading healthy democratic processes by providing training for communities and the media, conducting research and campaigns, raising awareness, and engaging with government agencies on various issues. These groups' influence, however, has diminished, panelists said, as the government seldom cooperates with them anymore and hardly cares about international opinion. “Before, the government used to respond to our findings when they were cited

in reports by the US Department of State,” Kintsurashvili said. “Now they do not care at all.” She noted that the Sinamdvileshi (In Reality) Facebook page set up by the Georgian Dream party frequently criticizes Transparency International and contains misleading information. “The government works against NGOs,” Mamedova said, pointing to the example

of the Social Justice Center, which worked for years in Marneuli. The group ended some of its activities in the Muslim-majority area after the local government incited a backlash against it for advocating that a mosque receive the same public funding given to the Orthodox Church. Government-organized nongovernmental organizations, known as GONGOs, continue to damage the reputation of the sector by creating counteractivities against genuine NGOs.

53 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. *Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia. TV News Monitoring Preliminary Report.* 2021. http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads_script/accounts/doc_eng/11_GSJ-TV_NEWS_ENG_09.2021.pdf.

54 Gugulashvili, Magda. “False Balance on the Topic of Covid-19 Vaccine on TV Imedi.” Media Checker. April 22, 2021. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/chveni-gundi/87874-dezinformacia-kovid-vaqcinis-shesakheb-qtv-imedzeq?image=>.

Despite these setbacks, panel members said international and watchdog organizations play a key role in strengthening Georgia's democratic institutions. They named several powerful NGOs that operate in the country, including Transparency International, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, the Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, the Georgian Democracy Initiative, and the Media Development Foundation.

“If the media had no influence, then the government would not [be trying] to destroy critical media in Georgia,” Gogosashvili said.

the media crying out about the violence, they would not have detained even those 29 attackers.” Panelists said the government follows media and reacts to it internally but makes no official public response. “If the media had no influence, then the government would not [be trying] to destroy critical media in Georgia,” the

ethics charter's Gogosashvili said.

Mtivlishvili said local government has made changes “mostly of a social character” in response to reporting by his organization, Mtisambebi.ge.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

The government's engagement with civil society and media has decreased, even as it still maintains press briefings and social media pages. The government conducts fewer debates and press conferences to explain its policy decisions and political discourse, the panel members said. Dolidze said the government used to include civil society in the decision-making process on nonpolitical topics more often. “This year the situation has worsened and when it comes to political topics, civil society's involvement in the process is formal,” she said.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Panelists said that despite the government's diminished accountability and cooperation with media and civil society, the media and NGOs support good governance by demanding a response from officials. The ruling party ignores critical and neutral media, communicates only with pro-government media, and ignores the recommendations of international organizations and NGOs. “We say that the government's response to criticism is inadequate, but it does not mean that media don't influence the government's actions,” Jangirashvili said. Referring to the July 5–6 violence against journalists, Dzelishvili said, “If not for

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