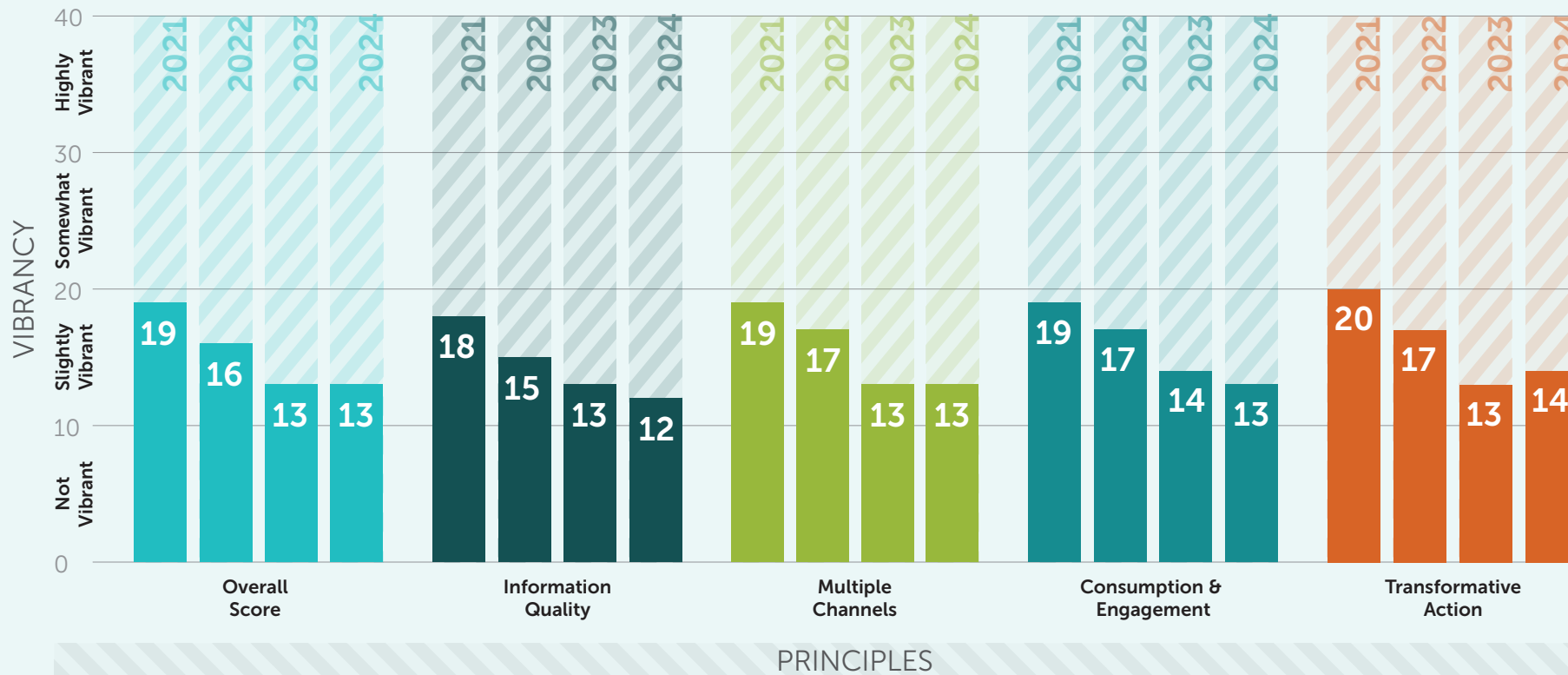


GEORGIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 4





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.

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.

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.

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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

13

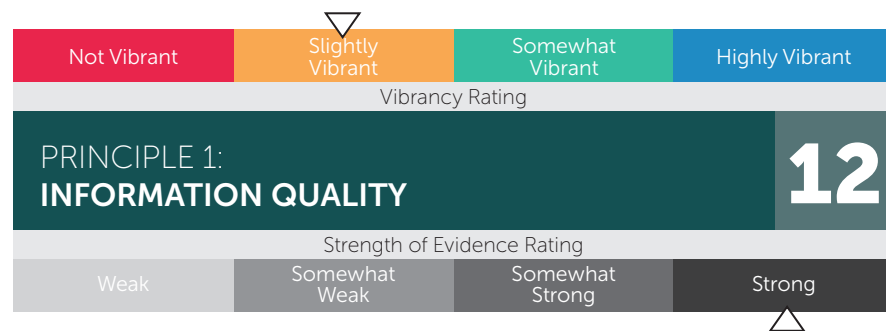
Major events including Georgia’s new EU candidate status, the government’s attempt to enact a “foreign agents” law, and the incessant flow of manipulative information spread by the government and pro-government media dominated the nation’s media environment in 2023. In one positive step, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, the former director of the Georgian pro-opposition TV channel Mtavari Arkhi, as a result of advocacy campaigns by human rights groups along with Gvaramia’s family and colleagues, as well as protests against the journalist’s detention. In addition, the government did not pass the ruling party’s draft law on “foreign agents” due to massive public protests in March 2023.

Throughout the year, authorities detained activists who spoke out against injustices and slandered their funders in an attempt to silence them. Officials used Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) to intimidate and censor critical journalists, as well as impact their finances by forcing them to pay legal fees. The government also resorted to smear campaigns and orders to cease coverage to pressure independent media and influence editorial agendas, albeit without much success. The Georgian parliament abolished the advisory board of the Adjara Public Broadcaster, further aggravating threats against media independence ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Panelists highlighted Georgia’s new EU candidate status as one of the few positive political developments in

2023. To fulfill candidacy, Georgia needs to take nine steps to improve democracy, including the need to fight manipulative information, address political polarization, and improve parliamentary oversight of the security services, among others.

Despite these threats to media, the information system remains slightly vibrant on the VIBE scale, with the overall score unchanged from last year at 13. Principle 1 (Information Quality) received the lowest scores on mal-information information and hate speech and on resources for content production due to the Georgian government’s spread of manipulative information and severe financial hardships facing independent and pro-opposition media. The score for Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) scored lowest on independence of information channels. The Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) score decreased slightly from last year, with media literacy scoring the lowest due to the state’s deficiency in advancing the nation’s media literacy level. In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), panelists gave the lowest scores on the government’s use of quality information to make public policy decisions on information that supports good governance and democratic rights, citing the government’s disregard of inclusive policymaking and use of manipulative information, while civil society’s use of quality information scored the highest.



Professional and nonprofessional content creators across many platforms produce information on a range of topics. However, the content quality is seriously challenged due to pervasive manipulative information from authorities and other sources. Critical and independent media work under severe financial repercussions and threats to safety and credibility. This principle's score slid from 13 last year to 12 in 2023. Indicator 3 (on manipulative information) and Indicator 5 (on resources for content production) received the lowest scores.

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

While infrastructure for the production and distribution of diverse content (e.g., internet, printing houses, and social networks) is mostly in place, not all media enjoy equal access. Panelists noted that a lack of financial resources results in lowered demand for goods, leading to increased prices on resources and slower distribution as companies hesitate to stock items that are not in high demand.

According to IRI's 2023 [opinion survey](#), television remains the public's most important source of information on current and political affairs. One panelist said that for years their channel has had difficulty updating its equipment. The dwindling newspaper industry further faces a [shortage](#)

“ In 2023, pro-government media notably escalated propaganda, offering unethical and manipulative content to the public.

of high-quality paper and available publishing houses. Another panelist noted that only two publishing houses that can print magazines are functioning in Tbilisi. Panelists highlighted that the availability of resources does not yield more professional and diverse media content nor generate more substantial income due to the politicized distribution of resources.

Some higher education institutions provide journalism education programs. Panelists who represent media organizations observed that the relevance and quality of education does not meet modern journalism demands, making it harder for new graduates to enter the labor market. One panelist mentioned that high achieving students no longer choose journalism as a future profession because it has lost its appeal as a result of being discredited, underpaid, and unsafe. Some panelists noted that training offered to journalists is frequently disconnected from the actual demands of the profession, adding that they would prefer tailor-made training on the topics that align with their editorial and organizational demands.

Panel members underscored that political influence on the mainstream media and polarization undermine quality. Most panelists agreed that in 2023, pro-government media notably escalated propaganda, offering unethical and manipulative content to the public. “The government's instrumentalization of media has increased to unprecedented levels” said a panelist. One of the trends of the year, another panelist observed, is that pro-government broadcasters refrained from airing news that shows the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party and its performance in a

negative way. Unlike in the past, when pro-government media prepared stories to obscure critical media news, in 2023, they went a step further and intentionally omitted some of the most important events from public view. In one example, the panelist explained that pro-government broadcasters chose not to air the Program

for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results because Georgia's secondary students received such low scores. Another panelist noted that hiding the scores is part of the government's strategy to

prevent potentially negative perceptions about academic scores toward the state of secondary education and, consequently, toward the government.

On the positive side, one of the panelists hailed a new plan announced by pro-opposition broadcaster Mtavari Arkhi to separate the channel's editorial agenda from political influence.

Georgian media cover local, national, regional, and international news, with national media focusing on national events and local and regional media covering local and regional events. Some panelists observed that party agendas and political issues overshadow other important topics, even for online media. One of the panelists mentioned that their outlet focuses on issues related to abuses and injustices by the government because they are so common. “We might cover environmental issues through a human-rights lens, which is important from the democratic point of view,” the panelist noted, “but we might not have time or resources to report on other environmental themes that are important to educate or raise public awareness.”

Panelists agreed that despite numerous challenges, critical national outlets, some regional media, and independent online media do hold the government accountable. The work of independent online media is especially praiseworthy because they create diverse content, inform the public on issues of concern, and consistently maintain high quality, panelists said. This sector also excels in producing investigative stories, according to one panelist. “Even though online media may not compete with national broadcasters in terms of audience reach, their independence is a decisive issue,” the panelist noted. They pointed out that their outlet's investigative story on the transfer of forests in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti to a partner of a Russian oligarch succeeded in elevating the topic on the political agenda.

Independent media which continue to produce fact-based and ethical content include Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, Publika.ge, On.ge,

Mtisambebi.ge, OC Media, JamNews, and Radio Tavisupleba (RFE/RL's Georgian service). Most 2023 journalism prizes were awarded to journalists from quality [online media](#), as well as to regional media [outlets](#).

Journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting through either self-regulating bodies or the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (GCJE). From December 1, 2022, to November 30, 2023, the GCJE [reviewed](#) 78 cases of ethics complaints. Of these, 42 were submitted by citizens and 30 by organizations. Accuracy topped the list of violations with 64 cases. But some panelists thought that GCJE's work lacked visibility during the year. Others also noted outlets' self-regulation bodies were not that effective in weeding out ethics violations. One panelist observed that when citizens are upset with propagandistic content, they post on social media to complain, holding those who spread this content responsible through their reactions. Another panelist remarked that constructive critique of the content and editorial agenda of media outlets is a challenge because not many media monitoring reports were produced in 2023.

The Georgian government pressures donor organizations as a new way to curb media outlets' editorial independence. Panelists noted that the speaker of parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, [tried to pressure](#) independent online news outlet OC Media, which covers news from the North and South Caucasus, and its donors in a bid to punish the outlet after it declined to publish the politician's op-ed. Papuashvili sent a letter to one donor group accusing OC Media of producing “one-sided coverage of Georgian politics,” and questioned donors' funding policies. OC Media claimed it received only the title of the op-ed with a small passage and noted that the argument presented “appeared to directly contradict the actions of Georgian Dream's government towards the EU, and the West more broadly, in recent years.”

““ **The shift in manipulative information strategies adopted by Georgia's far right and pro-Russian groups aligned closely with the narratives promoted by the Georgian government.**

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

The panelists agreed that the government widely spreads manipulative information on a number of issues. A major manipulative narrative of the year concerned the draft “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence,” also known as the “foreign agents law” or “Russian law.” In February 2023, People’s Power, a political group composed of former MPs of the ruling Georgian Dream party, initiated a draft law backed by the Georgian Dream that required any civil society organizations and media outlets that receive 20 percent of their funding from outside the country to register as “agents of foreign influence.” The government claimed the law was in line with US and Western practices.

Local and international organizations, [watchdogs](#), and diplomatic organizations accredited in Georgia, [cautioned](#) that the law posed a serious threat to democracy and human rights, freedom of expression, and maintaining a pluralistic media environment. Despite these warnings, 76 Parliament members supported the draft law in the first reading, while 13 opposed it. Thousands of protesters rallied in the streets of Georgia demanding the draft law be revoked. This fierce resistance forced the Georgian Dream party to [withdraw](#) the bill. Although the bill failed to pass, panelists expressed concern that the Georgian Dream party damaged the reputations of critical media and civil society organizations. Panel members agreed that the role of smaller, high-quality, online media was pivotal in countering the government’s manipulative information regarding the law. “It is because of national and regional media’s work that the government’s disinformation did not infiltrate public consciousness,” a panelist said. They added that media outlets worked hard to provide evidence on the similarities of Georgia’s “foreign agents” bill and an identical law the Kremlin initiated several years ago.

In May 2023, Facebook’s parent company Meta released its Quarterly Adversarial Effect [report](#), which stated the company removed 80 Facebook accounts, 26 pages, nine groups, and two accounts on Instagram for violating its policy against coordinated, inauthentic behavior in Georgia. The posts allegedly originated from a group with links to the

Communications Department of the Government of Georgia. The network used multiple apps, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, focusing on domestic audiences to share criticisms of the opposition, particularly during the public protests against the draft law on “foreign agents.”

On December 14, the EU granted Georgia candidate status under the condition that the nation take [nine steps](#) to solidify its democracy, the first of which is to “fight disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU and its values.”

Until the EU candidacy status was announced in December, the government spread rampant conspiracy theories, and pro-government media aired a series of stories infused with anti-Western narratives, a panelist explained. Some manipulative information narratives from the previous year recurred and became more sophisticated, panelists said. For example, the Georgian Dream leadership promoted a conspiracy theory that an unidentified group of warmongers wants Georgia to engage in a war with Russia and send fighters to help Ukraine. This manipulative information was used to discredit their critics and confuse the public. According to an [article in Netgazeti.ge](#), Georgia’s minister of foreign affairs claimed, “Anyone whose statements and actions threaten our country’s economic development, security, European integration, and foreign political priorities can consider themselves representatives of the global war party.” While the government has never explicitly stated who is in this fictitious war party, Georgian Dream chair and current Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [referred](#) to the United National Movement (UNM), the largest opposition party, as “a local war party.”

Manipulative information and narratives are rampant on social networks, panelists noted. One panelist pointed out that this content is almost impossible to moderate for media outlets. Another panelist added that as soon as their outlet detects that commentary aimed at influencing public opinion are manipulative, or discriminatory, they turn the comments section off. In a concerning trend, Facebook cancels pages based on reports from trolls and bots, a panelist observed, stressing that this hampers media from reaching and engaging audiences. Another panelist said that in 2023, a video and one of their outlet’s pages were taken down after bots and trolls reported them.

One panelist mentioned that since 2020, their organization has cooperated with Facebook to track false information. They said that after flagging fake information on Facebook, some users correct their posts accordingly. Some panel members also observed that even though fact-checkers can detect and label manipulative information, no reports or in-depth analysis of the effects of this manipulation are available to the public. Another panelist said no experts or studies exist to measure the level of manipulative information among minority communities, either.

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

The Kremlin influenced the Georgian public during the year through entertainment and marketing pages that carried hidden political agendas. Online outlet Myth Detector [uncovered](#) a network spreading anti-Western messages through sponsored posts, according to one panelist. The Facebook pages included memes and were coordinated to disseminate and reinforce stereotypes suggesting that joining the EU would mean rejecting traditional values and would strengthen the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Myth Detector's [research](#) also showed that Twitter accounts from Russian diplomatic missions around the world disseminated Kremlin-based manipulative information regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The shift in manipulative information strategies adopted by Georgia's far right and pro-Russian groups aligned closely with the narratives promoted by the Georgian government, explained one panelist. With Russian sources losing popularity in Georgia, these groups shifted tactics to lean on narratives from American conservative groups, the panelist said. This tendency also occurred in content produced by pro-government media. For example, the new platform Georgia First of All, which is allegedly affiliated with the government of Georgia, carries content from American right-wing news sites. A [report](#) by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy revealed that Georgia's pro-Kremlin, alt-right groups and some government representatives and affiliated media are running discriminatory social media campaigns against the LGBTQ+ community.

Online and offline, politically motivated smear campaigns against individuals and organizations are common in Georgia. In October, pro-government broadcast media, including Rustavi 2, PosTV, Imedi, and the Georgian Dream leadership, questioned Indigo Magazine's theme issue, "Protest and Resistance in Georgia in the 20th-21st Century," and a coinciding presentation. The TV stations aired reports that discussed the ultimate motives, and [subsequent discussion](#) insinuated the event was geared towards possibly training citizens in revolutionary practices. Following the state news coverage, Georgian Dream chair Kobakhidze [stated](#) that Indigo Magazine's edition contributed to unrest in the country by "actualizing the revolution." The German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) foundation, an event sponsor, asked Indigo Magazine to postpone the presentation after Georgia's EU candidate status was [granted](#).

One concerning trend in Georgia is gendered manipulative information against female politicians and civil activists, according to [research](#) by the Media Development Foundation. After President Zourabichvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, the founder and former director of the independent news outlet Mtavari Arkhi, a number of manipulated photos were [circulated](#) on social networks showing that the president allegedly had a promiscuous past.

Information shared on Sinamdvileshi (In Reality), a Georgian Dream-run Facebook page, labels the opinions of civil activists, critical media, and opposition politicians as "false" content. One of its [posts](#) alleges that Voice of America's Georgian news service disseminates fake news against the Georgian government.

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

Overall, the body of content is diverse, but is far from inclusive. Panelists agreed that national broadcasters provide content that aligns with political parties' agendas. Smaller online media outlets display more diverse topics. Some panelists pointed out that these outlets now cover a broad range of topics, including culture, women and gender equality, ethnic and racial minorities, and other areas that cater to specific

interest groups. A panelist noted that this shift signifies a departure from more politically aligned content and symbolizes the beginning of a more inclusive media landscape. “For example, if mainstream broadcasters covered the protest of cinema industry representatives from a political point of view, these media would represent the topic through the industry’s perspective,” the panelist said.

One panelist noted that their media outlet invites people to write stories on topics relevant to their backgrounds. As a result, in 2023, the outlet produced many articles on transgender people with the involvement of members of the transgender community. Another panelist added that pro-government media attempt to discredit the LGBTQ+ community and are actively encouraged by the government. An additional panelist remarked that vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities are not always given a voice. Instead, NGOs, donors, and experts tend to speak on their behalf.

Another panelist added that donor funding ensures inclusivity in small media outlets. They also questioned whether the Georgian Public Broadcaster’s minority language programming reaches the populations of the Samtskhe Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions.

While there are no official statistics on diversity and gender balance across Georgia’s media sector, most founders of media organizations are men. A panelist explained that at the operational level, there are more women working as directors, producers, editors, and journalists, while the vast majority of video operators are men.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Media funding sources are inconsistent and unsustainable, panelists noted. Income is unequally distributed between pro-government and pro-opposition broadcasters, as well as between national and regional media. According to the Georgian National Communications Commission’s [report](#), in 2023, TV broadcasters received GEL 87.4 million (\$32.3 million) from commercial advertising revenues, an 18.6 percent increase from 2022. Pro-government outlet Imedi TV had the largest share of commercial advertising revenues, totaling GEL 33.7

million (\$12.4 million), up 34 percent from 2022. However, commercial revenues of pro-opposition TV outlet Mtavari Arkhi fell approximately 25 percent, to GEL 7.9 million (\$2.9 million). One panelist lamented that the advertising market is dominated by a group of seven pro-government channels, which attract advertisers by providing lower prices on the condition that they refrain from placing advertising in critical media outlets.

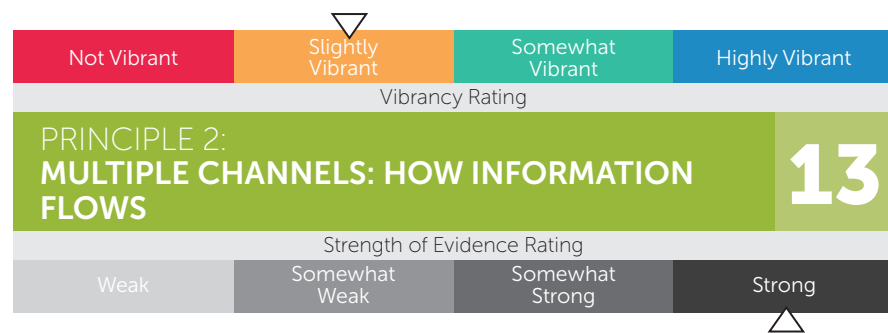
Some panel members expressed concern that strategies employed by donors to strengthen Georgia’s independent media need comprehensive reevaluation. “Organizations have different needs,” explained a panelist. “For example, I know what I need to strengthen my organization, but instead of doing it, I try to adapt to donor priorities and somehow adjust my needs to fit theirs.” Panelists agreed that donors should provide more holistic support for costs associated with media content production. The panelist said that Indigo Magazine’s current priority is to build a marketing department, which is crucial for the outlet’s long-term financial sustainability, but donors do not support this type of initiative.

Another panelist noted that regional media face difficult financial constraints; of 24 regional broadcasters, only three receive donor support, giving them the ability to produce daily news. An additional panelist said that independent TV stations not affiliated with political forces face significant challenges in accessing sufficient funding.

Following global trends, Georgian media also face fierce competition from social networks, as well as other online content producers that produce and advertise content, while bypassing media outlets. In April, Georgian media took a hit when Meta decided to end support for its Instant Articles feature on Facebook, with referral traffic from Facebook decreasing significantly since then, according to panelists. In addition, donors require media outlets to collect audience and click metrics as the main indicators for success.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) is the best-funded media outlet in the country, receiving both public money and advertising revenue, with a budget of GEL 101 million (\$37.3 million) in 2023. However, funding rules for the GPB [changed](#) at the end of 2023, and the new rules

will start in 2026. Until then, according to law, GPB should receive no less than 0.14 percent of Georgia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2024 and 2025, GPB will have the same budget as in 2023. Starting in 2026, the public funding model for GPB will be calculated by multiplying the financing coefficient of the public broadcasting’s budget by the number of individuals employed in Georgia during the preceding year, but will not be less than the previous budget.



The Principle 2 score was unchanged from last year’s study, with persistent challenges including government attempts to restrict freedom of speech, limited access to public information for journalists, the abolition of the board of trustees of Adjara Public Broadcaster, and political interference and financial pressures jeopardizing media independence. As a result, Indicator 10 (information channels are independent) received the lowest score in the principle.

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

On March 10, 2023, the Georgian Parliament introduced a draft law on “foreign agents” backed by the ruling Georgian Dream party. Critics likened it to Kremlin legislation that hampers independent journalism and democracy. According to the 2023 IRI [study](#), more than 50 percent of respondents believed the intent of the draft law was to silence civil society organizations (CSOs) and media in Georgia. However,

lawmakers ultimately withdrew the draft law following public protests. Nevertheless, panelists stressed that parliament’s attempt to pass the bill impeded media work, and sources still fear repercussions.

Panelists praised Gvaramia’s release from prison in May 2023 following a presidential pardon. However, one panelist noted individuals were still arrested for demonstrating with blank posters to protest ongoing issues with freedom of expression.

The panelists stressed that any assessment of freedom of speech laws should no longer rely solely on legal text. One of them emphasized the crucial role of court precedents in interpreting freedom of speech norms. They noted that flawed court practices have shaped the court system, calling for an evaluation of laws based on current realities.

In October 2023, the parliament hastily adopted amendments to the Broadcasting Law—originally proposed in December 2022 and subsequently revoked—without significant public discussion. This move means that self-regulation of hate speech, obscenity, and terrorism incitement in media is now subject to regulatory oversight. The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) is now authorized to address these issues and impose sanctions, including warnings, fines, and license suspensions. Media experts expressed skepticism regarding legal oversight of hate speech because the government is opposed to critical opinions, it does not have robust independent regulatory bodies, and there is diminished [trust](#) in the judicial system. However, panelists highlighted that some of the threats posed by the original December 2022 amendments, such as the immediate enforcement of regulators’ decisions, have been partially mitigated by the newer version.

The panelists noted that media maintain a high degree of self-censorship, which is largely fueled by the fear of sanctions and fines. “We often encounter fines, and repeated penalties could result in license confiscation,” a panelist noted. The government’s use of the justice system to suppress critical media legally and financially in 2023 was extensive, with a rise in lawsuits against journalists and critical media outlets. Georgian officials also used more SLAPP defamation cases to target critical media outlets and journalists. According to the

Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI)'s 2023 [report](#) on human rights in the nation, government officials initiated 39 lawsuits against critical media outlets and human rights advocates, with courts increasingly ruling in the government's favor. Another troubling trend is that officials target journalists knowing that, in some cases, media outlets fail to reimburse journalists' fines, a strategy designed to silence media workers and cause self-censorship.

Journalists' safety remained an issue in 2023. As in previous years, verbal and physical attacks occurred as well as violence against media representatives critical of the ruling party, according to a Transparency International [report](#). In June, agitators assaulted Misha Mshvildadze, an anchor and co-founder of Formula TV, in downtown Tbilisi. One individual was charged in the incident. But a [news report](#) by outlet Civil.ge, Mshvildadze alleged government involvement, noting that "one of the participants of the attack may be an investigator of the State Security Service."

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

In 2023, household internet access reached 89 percent per the [National Statistics Office](#), marking a 0.6 percent increase from last year. Panelists noted that while people can access information through various channels and technologies, urban areas typically have better coverage. Internet has become more affordable in Georgia according to the most recent edition of Surfshark's [Digital Quality of Life \(DQL\) Index](#), which ranked Georgia's digital wellbeing 65th out of 121 countries globally in 2023. However, panelists stressed that economic factors like inflation and high prices for internet and mobile services continue to affect nationwide access, especially in regions where broadband availability is limited. Georgia remained among the "free" countries in Freedom House's 2023 [Freedom on the Net](#) report, although its internet freedom

score declined by two points from the previous year. The country's electronic governance ranks 80th out of 121 countries in the DQL Index.

One panelist stated that persistent challenges to information access still exist for ethnic minorities in Georgia, despite increased internet penetration. The language barrier remains a significant obstacle, as many national broadcasters leave ethnic minority groups underserved. While some local media outlets offer content in local languages, they struggle to compete with larger Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani channels. Accessibility for people with disabilities is still limited, with few channels providing sign language interpretation. The panelists also cited diminished print and radio presence as a factor in the lack of diversification of information channels.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

While right to information is guaranteed by law, the actual practice of media access to government information deteriorated in 2023. State agencies frequently withhold public information, including questionable procurement practices and even government decrees. State and regional agencies also avoid engagement with the media. "If a politician doesn't want to propagate his own narrative, he simply refuses to engage with journalists," a panelist remarked.

In 2023, investigative journalism platform Studio Monitor revealed that the Ministry of Health prohibited the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) from releasing public information. Whistleblowers continually face obstacles in obtaining information, citing illegal directives to withhold it, according to panelists. State agency press services systemically prioritize withholding information, a panelist noted.

“ The Georgian Parliament introduced a draft law on “foreign agents” backed by the ruling Georgian Dream party. Critics likened it to Kremlin legislation that hampers independent journalism and democracy.

Panelists also criticized the court system’s inefficiency in resolving disputes over public information, often taking months or even years to conclude. “It’s been two years since we filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Culture,” a panelist lamented. “We have submitted over 400 administrative complaints and filed 52 lawsuits that entail significant resources and fees.”

Additionally, panelists condemned how the government handles crisis situations like the Shovi [landslides](#) in August, noting a lack of accountability and transparency. After the crisis, the government [targeted](#) Mtisambebi.ge for its [reporting](#) from the disaster zone, including information about rescue work and officials’ reactions. The speaker of parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, [demanded](#) that Mtisambebi.ge delete a post related to the coverage from its Facebook page.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Laws and regulations facilitate the operation of a range of distribution channels in the country, but a few privately owned, large-scale companies dominate the market, limiting competition and elevating costs. The telecommunications market remains concentrated, with Magticom and Silknet holding significant shares in the fixed broadband internet market and Celfie (formerly known as Beeline Georgia) in the mobile internet sector. In November 2023, the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) authorized Space X’s Starlink to launch a satellite internet service in the country and extend internet access to mountainous regions. However, internet through Starlink is expensive and experts are uncertain if it can compete with local market players at this stage.

The GNCC requires that licensed organizations openly publish ownership documents on its portal to show transparency. Additionally, the Law on Broadcasting prohibits offshore-registered businesses from owning

“The broadcast media landscape remains deeply divided along pro-government and pro-opposition lines and often show owner-influenced biases. Editorial independence is constrained by media organizations’ precarious financial states.”

licenses in Georgia. However, panelists observed that this provision is often overlooked, highlighting a gap between existing laws and their enforcement. The GNCC has also made unfair decisions on authorization and spectrum allocation procedures in recent years, panelists noted, adding that the regulator’s decisions are influenced by an undisclosed agenda.

Panelists feared that a recent amendment to the broadcasting law covering audiovisual media might pave the way for regulating online media platforms, which have operated thus far without oversight. “There is a potential within this law to expand its scope to include online media and mandate their authorization,” a panelist cautioned. They stressed that the GNCC has already requested Tok TV to register as a video-calling platform, indicating that a similar requirement could be imposed on all online media. Tok TV has challenged this request.

In December 2023, the GPB announced seven programs will be cancelled in 2024, allegedly as part of cost-cutting measures. This [decision](#) came as a surprise even to the broadcaster’s board of trustees. Two cancelled programs, “Gorgiladze’s Autaneli Simsubuke” (“Unbearable Lightness”) and “Men,” drew particular criticism because these programs’s writers were known for fearlessly expressing opinions. “Davit Gorgiladze actively voices his opinions on various issues on social media,” Netgazeti.ge [reported](#). “During Parliamentary discussions of the [foreign agents] law, he criticized the authors and supporters of the so-called ‘Russian law.’” Some segments of society perceived the broadcaster’s decision as censorship and a violation of freedom of expression, panel members said.

Panelists also criticized GPB’s overall performance, pointing out deficiencies in its news programs, while also acknowledging its ability to provide quality educational content. Panelists said GPB fails to uphold

journalistic standards and serve as an effective watchdog, despite receiving substantial public funding. This failure is a missed opportunity for significant change in a media landscape perceived as inhospitable to non-partisan, critical viewpoints.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The broadcast media landscape remains deeply divided along pro-government and pro-opposition lines and often show owner-influenced biases. Editorial independence is constrained by media organizations’ precarious financial states, some panelists noted. Even highly regarded TV stations operate at a loss and are largely reliant on owners’ financial support, one panelist said. They emphasized that journalists, aware of who pays their salaries, sometimes adjust their behavior accordingly. A few online media outlets uphold journalistic standards, but they have a limited impact since television remains the primary source of news for much of the population (according to IRI’s 2023 [study](#), 76 percent of Georgians get their news from TV). Some media outlets strive to maintain ethical boundaries between business and journalism, while others do not.

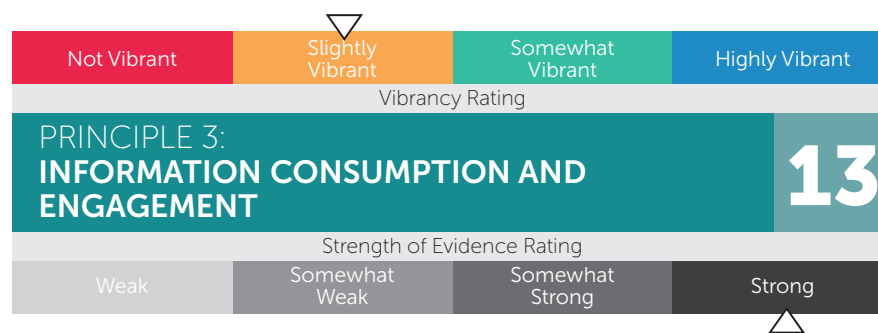
A 2022 Media Meter [report](#), released in 2024, shows government subsidies and advertising contracts predominantly favor pro-government media organizations.

In June 2023, the ruling party Georgian Dream abolished the Adjara Public Broadcaster’s advisory board, which was responsible for crucial functions such as appointing a director, confirming the budget, and defining its programming priorities. Adjara’s management was merged into the board of trustees of the Public Broadcaster, headed by Vasil Maglaferidze, a former high-ranking official of the ruling party. This move sparked concerns over political interference, a lack of independence, and jeopardizing the Public Broadcaster’s existence.

In November, the government proposed changing GPB’s financing from a fixed percentage of the national GDP to an annual allocation from the state budget. Media experts, watchdog organizations, and international entities, including the [European Broadcasting Union](#), point out that this

new measure could compromise the broadcaster’s independence since it is now reliant on government funding.

Panelists agreed that the GNCC makes rulings from a biased, pro-government stance, and serves the interests of the ruling party. In January 2023, GNCC members [re-elected](#) Kakha Bekauri as chairman for a third consecutive three-year term. Appointed by parliament as a GNCC member in 2014, Bekauri previously served as director of a television channel affiliated with the founder of Georgian Dream, raising concerns about potential conflicts of interest. Before 2019, regulations prohibited the same person from holding the chairmanship for more than one term, but this restriction was lifted during Bekauri’s tenure, which experts criticized. “The rotation principle and short-term tenure were a guarantee that the regulator would be independent,” one panelist explained. Panelists noted that the commission members are often appointed from within the GNCC, leading to perceptions of insularity. Both local and international non-governmental organizations frequently criticize the GNCC for ruling against critical media and accuse it of serving the ruling party’s interests. The European Commission’s November 2023 [report](#) on Georgia emphasizes the country’s need to ensure that the GNCC maintains an independent, impartial approach to regulatory decisions.



The panelists agreed that the population lacks the skills to assess the quality of the media they consume, and the state does not have a strategy to improve media literacy. The internet and social media are freely available for anyone to register and social networks are widely

used, but engagement can turn toxic and privacy and digital safety concerns persist. In 2023, the government pressured civil activists, threatening their safety and wellbeing to intimidate them. Independent media outlets lack resources and data to engage with the public. As a result, this principle's overall score fell one point to 13, compared with last year's study, with Indicator 12 (on media literacy) and Indicator 14 (on media's engagement with audiences' needs) scoring the lowest.

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

In 2023, there were no publicly disclosed violations of digital privacy rights regarding covert government surveillance, a trend that has endured for years. Nevertheless, panel members are worried about possible surveillance. "The fact that we are moving from one messaging app to another [due to fear of surveillance] means that safety is a serious problem," said one panelist. Legislation such as the Law on Personal Data Protection offers some protective measures and regulations for data privacy and digital security. However, this legal framework gives the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG)'s Operational-Technical Agency (OTA) the excessive right to monitor private electronic communications because it maintains control over technical infrastructure, a panelist observed. CSOs are concerned about OTA's ineffectiveness, and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission report, released in December 2023, echoed their concerns about privacy disruptions.

Trainings for professional and nonprofessional content producers on digital safety tools exist, along with cyberattack prevention tools. One panelist said that Georgia has open access to privacy and security tools, but the government and consumers cannot effectively use these tools due to a lack of training. Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced. One reason is that understaffed media do not always have personnel responsible for these issues.

Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced.

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

There are no national studies which assess the Georgian public's media literacy, but panelists agreed that, despite gradual improvements, it is very low. Young people are more digitally competent, but many do not verify online information. Georgia ranked last in a 2023 European Policies Initiative (EUPI) and Open Society Institute (OSI) [study](#), the Expanded Media Literacy Index, measuring the potential resilience of 41 European countries and six countries outside Europe to "fake news" and manipulative information.

The GNCC and CSOs offer media literacy resources and diverse trainings. In 2023, [a joint project](#) of the GNCC, Georgia's Ministry of Education and Science, and UNICEF, in partnership with the Teachers' Professional Development Centre, trained hundreds of teachers in media literacy. Media literacy questions are also part of teachers' certification exams.

One panelist who works on media literacy issues said that the majority of available training targets younger audiences. In practice, media literacy is not taught in all subjects nor understood as a crosscutting skill at any education level, the panelist explained, stressing the need to measure

the effectiveness of diverse training efforts carried out by different stakeholders.

The GNCC, which officially is the main policymaking body on media literacy, does not have a mandate to direct other relevant actors such as the Ministry of Education and Science on media literacy instruction in the country, a panelist stressed. They added that the government does not view media and digital literacy as a comprehensive, overarching vision that should be integrated into education and state security.

The GNCC's Media Academy runs the media criticism platform [Mediacritic.ge](#), which is supposed to be a media literacy tool. CSOs and independent experts, however, have long criticized it as a tool for

government propaganda. Recently, the platform started criticizing Western actors, media, and politicians, a panelist said.

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

Journalists, civil activists, NGOs, and the public have platforms to exercise their freedom of expression offline and online. However, critical journalists and civil activists run the risk of consequences such as slander, smear campaigns, and violence.

In September and October 2023, the SSSG [accused](#) an activist organization, the Center for Applied Non-Violent Actions and Strategies (CANVAS) Georgia, of allegedly plotting an organized conspiracy to overthrow the current government after the organization held a USAID-funded training. The SSSG released video footage claiming it depicted incriminating evidence against CANVAS Georgia and its three Serbian partners and subsequently questioned the organization's staff. USAID released a [statement](#) in its defense and CANVAS Georgia's [official statement](#) claimed the SSSG targeted its director after he participated in protests against the draft law on "foreign agents." High-ranking government officials spoke out against CANVAS Georgia, which one of the panelists believes might have "a chilling effect" on NGO work because it could cause trust issues with trainings supported by Western donors, including USAID.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs [reported](#) detaining 146 people during the massive protests against the "foreign agents" law in March, including 21-year-old demonstrator Lasare Grigoriadisi for allegedly assaulting a police officer and destroying property. As of the end of 2023, Grigoriadisi was the only person still [in custody](#) in connection with the protests. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili [claimed](#) the protests were started by "satanists" funded by the US.

In June, police [arrested](#) well-known NGO representatives and fined them for hooliganism for holding banners and wearing T-shirts with

an altered version of Prime Minister Garibashvili's name to evoke a crude association. The protest was to support Grigoriadisi's case. Watchdog organizations [released](#) a statement calling the policy action a "gross interference with the freedom of expression" and a violation of constitutional rights.

People can express themselves more freely on social networks, but these discussions often devolve into insults, while some panelists expressed concerns about the impact of bots and trolls.

Platforms for public debates such as city councils exist. One panelist said that citizens do not request public information or participate in public discussion in many municipalities. "People understand that the decisions are not made at the local government level but are highly centralized," they explained. "Therefore, they do not feel that their activity will yield any results."

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

Media outlets study online audiences using free resources such as Google and social media analytics, but in a constantly changing and complex information environment, Georgian online media lack access to tools to effectively measure audiences and build models based on user needs.

As in previous years, panelists complained about the two broadcasting audience measurement companies which provide confusing and often contradictory data. Nielsen's licensee TVMR and Kantar Media's licensee Tri Media Intelligence (TMI) offer audience data for national television broadcasters, although for years, media industry representatives have criticized the Kantar Media Group for serving the interest of the ruling party. Last year, TMI decided to stop measuring regional media. One panelist explained that the only regional measurement data available now is for TV 25 in Adjara, which came following a request from the Adjara Public Broadcaster. "This creates a huge gap in knowledge, which

Critical journalists and civil activists run the risk of consequences such as slander, smear campaigns, and violence.

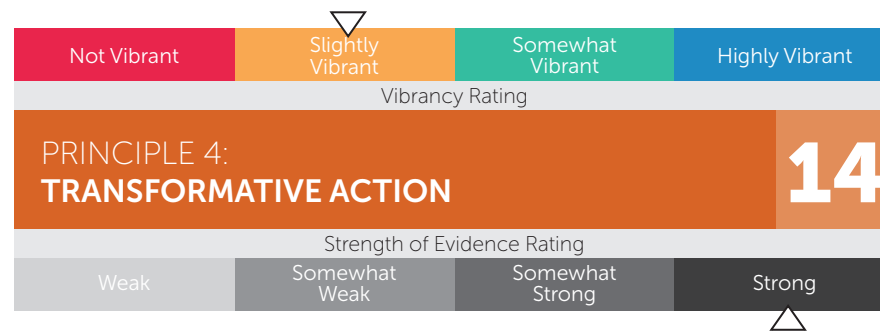
a TV station needs from a client,” the panelist said. Print media are not measured, and only a few radio stations carry out audience studies, inconsistently.

Independent, quality media outlets foster audience engagement by ensuring open feedback processes are in place, such as moderated online comment sections and letters to the editor, ensuring the interests of their audiences are heard and considered. Panelists affirmed that these outlets build trust with their audiences by ensuring transparency in authorship and reporting methods and by promptly publishing corrections as needed, which fosters a strong and enduring connection. Indigo Magazine, for example, organizes meetings with its readers to understand their needs and concerns and to gather feedback on its content and make modifications as needed.

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

Two community radio stations function in regions with significant ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, Radio NOR and Radio Marneuli, which panelists agreed have quality content. A third community radio, Radio Way in Pankisi Gorge, has faced tension between Pankisi Gorge locals and its founder, who threatened to use force against journalists if they continued to air reports critical of the government and State Security Service operations in the region. Radio Way journalists alleged that the Georgian Dream and the SSSG stirred up the turmoil. One panelist believes that the lack of a community radio will impact regional security. “During crises, be it environmental or other types of crises, availability of critical infrastructure, especially in the cross-border region, is crucial,” a panelist said. A fourth community broadcaster, Radio Mozaika in Gori, abandoned its license and switched to commercial status in 2023.

One panelist said that their media outlet serves the same purpose and values of community media, but without a formal status. The outlet produces content for their local audience, which includes a significant ethnic minority population.



Panelists highlighted the persistent issue of a deeply polarized and politicized environment, which restricts society’s access to unbiased information. They also criticized the government’s exclusion of media and CSOs from the public policy decision-making process. Indicator 19, on the government’s use of quality information to make policy decisions, and Indicator 20, on information supporting good governance and democratic rights, received the lowest scores, signaling an urgent need for attention to government accountability and support for democratic norms.

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

The panelists agreed that while a few unbiased quality media platforms exist online, television remains Georgia’s top source of news. However, studies reveal that the public shows little trust in television, especially national broadcast media, which are highly polarized. According to a National Democratic Institute (NDI) [poll](#) from March 2023, 51 percent of Georgians say they do not trust any Georgian TV channels, a significant increase from 20 percent in 2019.

One panelist observed that Georgian society is divided into isolated bubbles with little inclination to engage with diverging perspectives. Panelists agreed that heightened media polarization deprives society of quality news and undermines fact-based discussions, as both pro-government and pro-opposition channels disseminate heavily biased content.

In particular, social media platforms are significantly polarized, with minimal exchange of information among people with different viewpoints. Instead of facilitating constructive dialogue, social media often reinforces existing opinions, exacerbated by frequent attacks from political trolls and bots reinforcing the government’s narrative. Government trolls target controversial issues like LGBTQ+ rights, leading to distorted narratives, especially on platforms like Facebook, a panelist explained. Panelists agreed that societal polarization limits the exchange of diverse viewpoints, undermines trust in information, and does not foster fact-based societal discourse.

“ Government trolls target controversial issues like LGBTQ+ rights, leading to distorted narratives, especially on platforms like Facebook.

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

Panelists agreed that when it comes to vitally important issues like Georgia’s EU and NATO aspirations, Georgians reply more on quality information than propaganda and other manipulative content. “The March protest rallies [against the ‘foreign agents’ law] serve as a testament to people’s trust in quality media,” a panelist emphasized. The significant turnout, with hundreds of thousands of Georgians peacefully protesting against the government’s attempt to enact the law, underscores the public’s ability to critically evaluate information, recognize its importance for their future, and take decisive action, panelists said.

Despite the public’s ability to critically evaluate information during crucial moments such as the March protests, panelists noted that some individuals maintain biases and accept information without criticism, especially across online and social media platforms. Media polarization and a tendency to align with information bubbles obstruct citizens’ access to reliable information.

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

The panelists emphasized the crucial role of civil society in fostering robust democratic processes in Georgia by raising awareness of critical issues, providing consultancy, training, and research, and collaborating with government entities. However, panelists acknowledged that the impact of CSOs on democratic processes has weakened amid the government’s attempts to discredit the civil society sector, with the draft law on “foreign agents” highlighting this trend.

One panelist noted that the protests against the bill illustrate the extent to which the public is unaware of the contributions of the civil society sector. Consequently, an increase in the circulation of information on democratic achievements in Georgia and the role of CSOs in this process on various platforms signal a significant shift towards bridging the gap between the civil sector and the public.

Panelists highlighted the ongoing collaboration between media and NGOs, particularly in content production, but said that the practice of outlets publishing social advertisements—a type of advertising legally defined as promoting public good and the achievement of charitable goals—for free should be changed to have CSOs provide compensation. Media representatives argued that this move would help the financially struggling critical media outlets. One panelist, however, said this change would be difficult because the law mandates that media provide free social ads.

A number of NGOs work to counter manipulative information in Georgia. The Media Development Foundation, ISFED, and Georgian Reforms Associates, for example, run fact-checking projects. In addition, the Information Integrity Coalition, which includes 17 NGOs, [aims to](#) “monitor disinformation sources, actors, and narratives and effectively respond to these challenges.”

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

The government's already weak cooperation with the media and civil society sector deteriorated further in 2023, marked by a growing trend of political interference such as not notifying critical media outlets about press briefings, selectively engaging only with pro-government media, avoiding talk shows with critical media, and abstaining from public debates. In addition, in January, the government revised its [Procedure for Accrediting Mass Media Representatives](#), which further restricts government information access for critical media representatives, intensifying the legislature's restrictions on media access. According to a [statement](#) from Transparency International Georgia, the government disregards the core values and principles of the international Open Government Partnership (OGP) by frequently harassing critical media and civil society organizations.

Panelists asserted that the government creates an artificial political agenda, driven by manipulative information and tactics. This approach undermines the ability to obtain quality information and sidelines cooperation between the media and the civil society sectors. One of the panelists described a case when the government claimed on its official homepage that a document outlining the state strategy on adopting nine conditions required for EU status was approved even though it was still under review. "When I requested the document through a public information request, each ministry redirected me to one another," the panelist said.

Stakeholders are rarely included in drafting laws or amendments, highlighting a failure in government accountability, according to the panelists. Political discourse and debate rarely include references to evidence and facts, particularly among ruling party representatives whose rhetoric is based on discrediting their opponents.

“When the media uncovers violations, the government's response often hinges on the political influence of the individuals involved and their position within the political hierarchy.”

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic norms.

Despite the media's efforts to hold the government accountable for its actions, the state does not respond appropriately. For example, in September, TV Pirveli aired an [investigative story](#) revealing that the prime minister was using a state-owned airplane to fly his son from Tbilisi to Munich on his way to a university in the United States. Although the story compelled the prime minister to explain himself and claim that the funding came from his father, some panelists noted that the exposé did not result in his resignation, as might be the norm in a democratic country. As panelists explained, instead of appropriately addressing revelations of corruption, the government resorts to attacking media and its sources in an attempt to discredit them, which shifts the focus away from the issue of corruption.

When the media uncovers violations, the government's response often hinges on the political influence of the individuals involved and their position within the political hierarchy. In one notable case, the government attempted to shield Georgia's former prosecutor general, Otar Partskhaladze, from US sanctions for assisting the Kremlin in exerting "malign influence" in Georgia. Panelists noted that if Partskhaladze had been an ordinary businessman, he would most likely have faced detention, but was instead protected due to his political affiliations. The National Bank of Georgia even altered its compliance rules regarding US sanctions to prevent the freezing of the ex-official's assets.

Despite the availability of quality information, there is no evidence that the government adequately responds to criticism regarding abuse of power by law enforcement. For example, the Public Defender of Georgia's [2023 report](#) emphasized that "unjustified cases of use of force [by law enforcement] became the main reason for the escalation..." during protests against the "foreign agents" law.

[The Public Defender also noted the](#) violent disruption of the Tbilisi Pride festival on July 8, 2023, the shortcomings in investigating and prosecuting hate crimes, and the neglect of LGBTQ+ rights in the new national human rights strategy. A few weeks before the incident, the prime minister [said](#) in a public address that he “is against the so-called LGBT propaganda in kindergartens and schools...” The report highlighted the violence of far-right groups, both in public and private, against the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, violence against media workers during Tbilisi Pride in July 2021 has still not been adequately investigated and the perpetrators not charged, despite reports and investigations conducted by civil society organizations and the Public Defender.

The panelists observed that while quality information in Georgia is important, it is unlikely to independently enhance government accountability. Media activism alone falls short in achieving this objective. Panelists added that the diminishing accountability of the government places greater responsibility on civil society and media. Amid the ruling party’s intensive disinformation campaign in 2023, citizens can expect even more aggressive efforts ahead of the 2024 elections. The government disregards critical and independent media, and NGOs, communicates exclusively with pro-government outlets, and ignores recommendations from international organizations and NGOs.

Due to the sensitive media environment, panelists in the Georgia study will remain anonymous.

Copyright © 2024 by IREX

Notice of Rights: Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.