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The European Union for Georgia



# Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia

## TV media perceptions of foreign influences on the 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia

Final Report

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This report was prepared by the Caucasus Research Resource Center - Georgia with the assistance of the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Caucasus Research Resource Center - Georgia, and can in no way be taken to reflect the views or positions of the EU and UNDP.

# TV Media Perceptions of Foreign Influences on the 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia: Thematic Monitoring Report

## Executive Summary

As part of the UNDP and EU project “Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia,” the CRRC-Georgia conducted a thematic monitoring of primetime news programs of five TV channels (the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster, Imedi, Rustavi 2, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli). The goal of the thematic monitoring was to study how television media perceived foreign influences on the 2021 municipal elections, to observe which foreign actors were covered most frequently, and to identify the type and nature of their coverage.

The thematic monitoring was implemented during the period from 3 August to 30 October, which in relation to foreign actors covered the following main dates and topics: the commemoration of the August war, occupation by Russia, Moscow’s official statements on the restoration of relationship, the Charles Michel document, turning down an EU assistance/loan, the completion of US-Georgia military training exercise, the entry into force of the agreement between Georgian and Belarusian security services, the Georgian Prime Minister’s visit to Ukraine, Garibashvili’s speech at the UN General Assembly, a visit of US Secretary of Defense to Georgia, a visit of US congressmen, the Afghanistan crisis and evacuation of citizens, the leak of surveillance materials of the Georgian State Security Service that also showed eavesdropping on Western diplomats, pre-electoral studies by international organizations, activity and statements of observation missions, the return and subsequent arrest of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia.

Just as in 2020, the thematic monitoring in 2021 revealed that the pre-electoral environment was steered by two poles – the West and Russia, which were used for political labeling, stressing progressiveness or discrediting. The EU, the US and other Western actors were presented as important and respected figures on all the channels whereas the connection and association with Russia meant the discreditation of political forces. Russia was covered as an “enemy,” an “occupier” and an “aggressor.” However, the channels reported on Russian connections of either the ruling party or the opposition, depending on their political biases.

The 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster was more balanced and neutral in its coverage of foreign actors than the other four channels; Imedi and, to a lesser degree, Rustavi 2 displayed the bias towards the ruling party and the government whereas Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli was biased towards the opposition.

In this regard, a matter of interest were the instances of coverage of same topics in different ways. For example, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli interpreted the entry into force of the memorandum between

Georgian and Belarusian security services as an undemocratic, regressive step taken by the Georgian government to bring the country closer to Russia while Imedi and Rustavi 2 emphasized that both Georgia and Belarus had such agreements with many other, including European countries. The same holds true for the coverage of evacuation of Georgian citizens from Afghanistan. While Imedi and Rustavi 2 highlighted success of the Foreign Ministry's activity, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli stressed the government's failure to help Georgian citizens stranded there.

News stories about connections with Russia and Russia's influences hinted at the interference of this foreign actor in electoral processes. Pro-opposition TV channels reported about visits of Russian spies and propagandists to Georgia, growing economic dependence on Russia, a letter sent by the Alliance of Patriots to President of Russia Vladimir Putin, reinforcing doubts about a connection of this political party with Russia. In their comments and statements, foreign diplomats working in Georgia and election observers made references to Russian propaganda threats in the pre-electoral period.

As regards other foreign actors, European politicians intensified their statements and calls, especially concerning the developments around Mikheil Saakashvili, which were perceived as interference by the Georgian government and covered by TV channels in accordance with their biased editorial policies.

## Introduction

The CRRC-Georgia implemented a thematic monitoring of TV channels as part of the UNDP and EU project "Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia". The monitoring covered the primetime news programs of five TV channels: the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster, Rustavi 2, Imedi, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli. The goal of the thematic monitoring was to study how television media perceived foreign influences on the 2021 elections, to observe which foreign actors were covered most frequently, and to identify the type and nature of their coverage.

To that end, the thematic monitoring applied quantitative and qualitative research techniques and calculated the time allocated to foreign actors, their direct appearance or indirect speech and the tone of the coverage. It also observed the purpose of the coverage of foreign actors in the news and the extent to which foreign actors supported or discredited Georgian political or electoral processes in news stories. The monitoring focused on reporting on the elections and political developments as well as on any other topic in which electoral subjects or government representatives were mentioned. Foreign actor meant any person, whether an official or an ordinary citizen, that represented a country or an organization outside Georgia.

The municipal election was held in two rounds. The first round was held on 2 October while the runoff took place on 30 October. The thematic monitoring began on 3 August, around two months before the elections day, during an active campaigning period, and continued through the day of the runoff election on 30 October.

A number of significant events took place during the period from August to the end of October 2021 that either involved foreign actors or were commented on by them. That period coincided with particular dates and events in relation to which by television channels covered foreign actors. These events and topics were: the commemoration of the August war, Russian occupation, Moscow's official statements on the restoration of relationship, the Charles Michel document, turning down an EU assistance/loan, the completion of US-Georgia military training exercise, the entry into force of the agreement between Georgian and Belarusian security services, the Prime Minister's visit to Ukraine, Garibashvili's speech at the UN General Assembly, a visit of US Secretary of Defense to Georgia, a visit of US congressmen, the Afghanistan crisis and evacuation of citizens, the leak of surveillance materials of the State Security Service of Georgia that also showed eavesdropping on Western diplomats, pre-electoral studies by international organizations, activity and statements of observation missions, statements and assessments of European politicians. In October, a special attention was paid to the arrival and subsequent arrest of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia as well as statements of and calls regarding this fact.

The thematic monitoring report starts with key findings and then presents results by each monitored channel. The report is annexed with a detailed description of the methodology (Annex 1) and the tables (Annex 2).

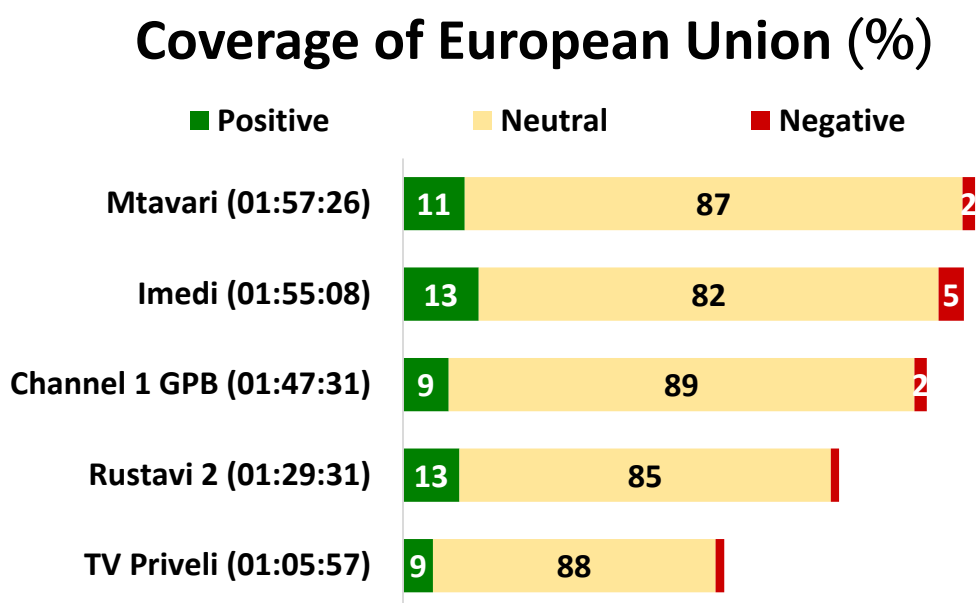
## Key Findings

During the monitoring period (3 August – 30 October), the foreign actors that were covered most frequently included: the EU, the USA, Russia and Ukraine. By the share of allocated time, Ukraine did not make it into the top four foreign actors only on Mtavari Arkhi. Mtavari Arkhi also differed from the remaining four channels by the length of coverage of Russia. The tone of coverage of foreign actors was similar on all channels. The tone employed to cover the EU (Chart 1) and the USA (Chart 2) was largely neutral and, over a relatively brief period of time, positive (the share of positive tone was higher in regard to the USA) whereas the tone of the coverage of Russia was largely negative on all channels (Chart 3).

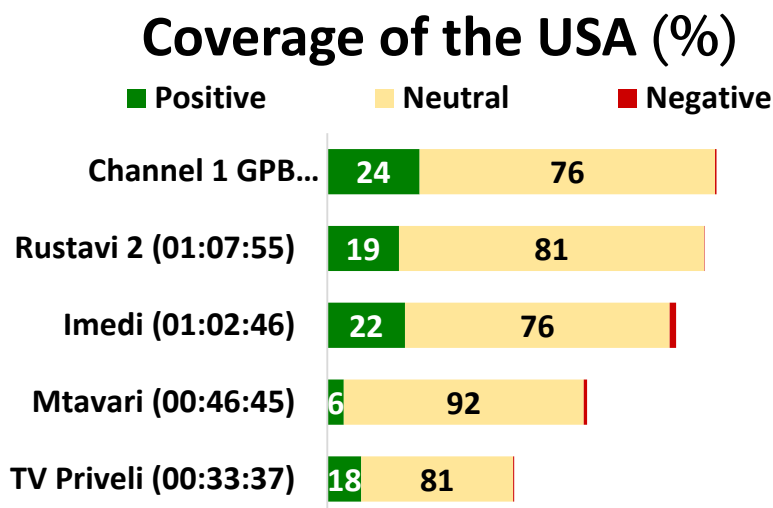
Interestingly, the appearance of Ukraine among the top four most frequently covered foreign actors was largely attributed to Mikheil Saakashvili. Some news stories presented Mikheil Saakashvili as a Ukrainian official while after his return and subsequent arrest in Georgia, there was an increase in reports covering

statements of Ukrainian officials on that development. Ukraine was also covered in relation to joint military training exercises, the visit of US Secretary of Defense, and the visit of Georgian Prime Minister to Ukraine. The tone employed to cover Ukraine was largely neutral on all channels. Results of Mtavari Arkhi were somewhat different, with a small share of negative tone in covering Ukraine (4%), which was observed, on the one hand, the news story about turning down the EU funding where Ukraine and its president of that time were recalled, and on the other hand, in a report about a Ukrainian journalist who was turned away at Georgia's border.

**Diagram 1:** Coverage of Foreign Actors: European Union.



The European Union, that combined the EU representation in Georgia, members of the EU Parliament, European experts and Europe, in general, was presented as an important and respected partner for Georgia on all channels. However, the goal of coverage of the EU differed by TV channels and editorial policies they pursued. Stressing good relations and partnership with the EU, support from EU representatives or conversely, a risk of this partnership turning sour were the emphases that revealed political biases of the channels. While Imedi and, to a lesser degree, Rustavi 2 tried to prove that the ruling Georgian government was an acknowledged and respected partner in the EU and the West, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli were focused on exposing anti-Westernism of the Georgian Dream government. Accordingly, news stories either featured respondents expressing opinions corresponding to these biases or emphasized different points in statements of the same persons and interpreted them in different ways. Reporting on risks of damaging EU-Georgia relationship on Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli pushed the idea that the election would decide the foreign political course of the country.

**Diagram 2: Coverage of Foreign Actors: USA**

The above trend explains differences in the interpretation of a number of topics as well as in focus on different aspects of a topic. For example, the five monitored channels covered the entry into force of the memorandum between Georgian and Belarusian security services in a different way. Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli presented as an undemocratic and regressive step, a despicable act of the government that brings the country closer to Russia. Imedi and Rustavi 2 emphasized that both Georgia and Belarus had similar agreements with many other, including European countries; that the agreement was about the global security, cooperation in the fight against transnational and organized crime; that the agreement did not obligate the transfer of information, and that the opposition was politicizing the issue.

Similarly, the evacuation of Georgian citizens from Afghanistan was covered in different ways. While Imedi and Rustavi 2 focused on the success of the Foreign Ministry's efforts, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli focused on Georgian citizens stranded in Afghanistan who hoped for assistance of other countries as the government of Georgia was unable to do anything to help them.

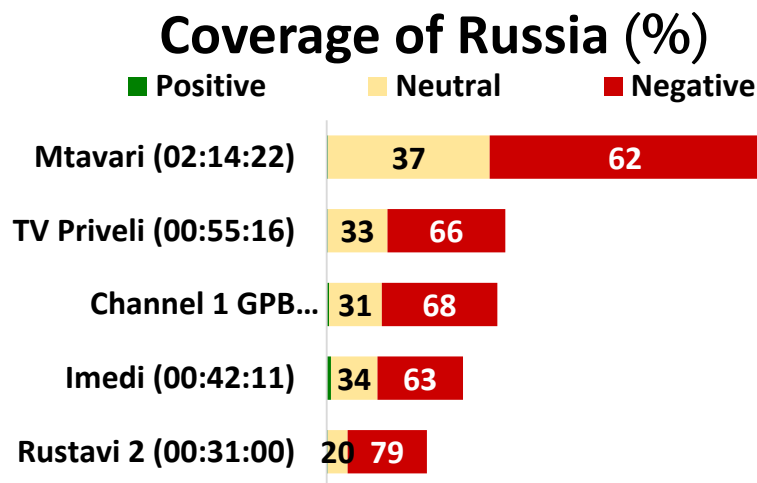
The length and focus of coverage of Irakli Garibashvili's visit to Ukraine also varied from channel to channel. In the stories broadcast by the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster, by Rustavi 2 and Imedi, the emphasis was on the two countries' common values and aspirations that both countries aimed to join NATO and the EU and strove towards de-occupation, with Ukraine mentioned as Georgia's important partner and a friendly state. On the other hand, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli focused on an informal meeting between Garibashvili and Charles Michel in Ukraine, more specifically on a tweet by Michel that was presented as a last warning to the Georgian government, threatening to withdraw EU support if Georgia did not pursue the reforms envisaged under the April 19 Agreement.

Yet another example of difference in coverage was a news story about an article by the former US Ambassador to Georgia, Ian Kelly, and the former US Assistant Secretary of State, David Kramer,

published in the Foreign Policy, in which the Georgian government was criticized. Mtavari Arkhi used this article to expose anti-Westernism of the Georgian Dream; it extensively covered the arguments the foreign diplomats based their criticism on and also emphasized that the article contained a call on the US President to consider sanctions unless Georgia took particular steps. Imedi, on the other hand, presented the article as a stance of two persons – Kelly and Kramer, stressing that it did not express a position of the US government but rather echoed the position of the United National movement.

The abovementioned trend had also been observed during the thematic monitoring of 2020 elections, which further intensified during the 2021 elections. While the EU and other Western partners were respected for their authority and importance, the coverage of Russia was strongly negative on all channels. Russia was presented as an “enemy,” an “occupier” and an “aggressor.” Connection with Russia was viewed as being undemocratic and damaging for the country. In this regard too, the channels reported on Russian connections of either the ruling party or the opposition, depending on their political biases.

**Diagram 3: Coverage of Foreign Actors: Russia**



An interesting observation with regard to coverage of Russia was that the channels hardly presented it as a direct actor that would make a statement about elections or political parties. However, the topic of Russia was used as a tool of political fight and discreditation and it was frequently mentioned in relation to the election and political topics.

News stories about connections with Russia and Russia’s influences hinted at the interference of this foreign actor in electoral process. Especially interesting in this regard were reports of pro-opposition TV channels about visits of Russian spies and propagandists to Georgia, the financing of pro-Kremlin

organization, Russian Club, by Cartu Foundation, and increasing economic dependence on Russia. In August, they covered a letter sent by the Alliance of Patriots to President of Russia Vladimir Putin, reinforcing doubts about a connection of this political party with Russia. In their comments and statements, foreign diplomats working in Georgia and election observers made references to Russian propaganda threats in the pre-electoral period.

As regards other foreign actors, European politicians intensified their statements and calls, especially concerning the developments around Mikheil Saakashvili, which were perceived as interference by the Georgian government and covered by TV channels in accordance with their biased editorial policies. Representatives of the Georgian ruling party commented on the statement of the EU Ambassador of Georgia on wiretapping and noted that such statements went beyond the limits of diplomacy. Prime Minister Gharibashvili employed even a tougher tone in his statement about letters of members of EU parliament and western diplomats who called for suspension of Saakashvili's imprisonment until he faces trial, in fair judicial proceedings: "Neither Fotiga nor anyone else, neither Kubilius nor anyone else holds any value for me or our country," "let them all mind their own countries' business," "who is Fotiga, after all? How dare she?!"

All in all, the monitoring of the coverage of foreign actors revealed that the pre-electoral environment was steered by two poles – the West and Russia, which were used for political labeling, stressing progressiveness or discrediting. The key message for the first round of the election was that the choice was to be made between pro-Western opposition and pro-Russian government, or conversely, pro-Western government and destructive opposition. The arrest of Mikheil Saakashvili added a new meaning to the runoff election, associating it with either survival or non-survival of Saakashvili. Interestingly, the political environment was less oriented on the municipal election and only after foreign actors criticized such approach in the assessments of the first round, political parties put forwards particular messages.



