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საქართველოსთვის
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

Preliminary Report

3 August - 24 September 2021



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.

The CRRC-Georgia is implementing 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 covers the main evening 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 is to study how television media perceive foreign influences on the 2021 elections, to observe which foreign actors are covered most frequently, and to identify the type and nature of their coverage.

In order to achieve this, the thematic monitoring relies on quantitative and qualitative research components and calculates the time allocated to foreign actors, their direct appearance or indirect speech and the tone of the coverage. It also observes the purpose and nature of the coverage of foreign actors in the news and the extent to which foreign actors support or discredit Georgian political or electoral processes in news stories. The monitoring also focuses on reporting on the elections and political developments as well as on any other topic in which electoral subjects or government representatives are mentioned.

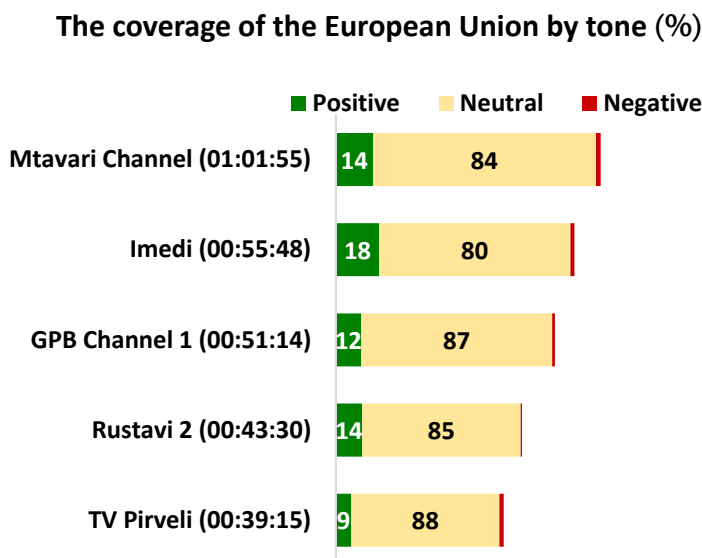
The present document is a preliminary research report that summarizes the main findings of the thematic monitoring during the period 3 August - 24 September 2021.

The main topics in relation to which foreign actors were covered by TV news programs during this period were: the Charles Michel document, the signing of this document by the United National Movement, the annulment of the document, turning down an EU loan, the official Russian statement on the restoration of co-operation, Russia’s policy of occupation, NATO military training exercises, the memorandum with Belarus, the Prime Minister’s visit to Ukraine, pre-electoral research and observation missions, and the Prime Minister’s visit to the UN General Assembly in New York. The frequency of the coverage of foreign actors was determined according to these topics.

During the current monitoring period (3 August - 24 September), the foreign actors that were mentioned the most often were: the EU, the USA and Russia. Interestingly, on three of the five channels under observation (the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster, Imedi and Rustavi 2), the EU accounted for a quarter of the total coverage of foreign actors. On these channels, the sequence of most frequently covered top four foreign actors and the share of allocated time was similar: the EU, the USA, Russia and Ukraine. On the remaining two channels (Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli), Russia was the most frequently covered foreign actor, accounting for about a third of all coverage of foreign actors, followed by the EU.

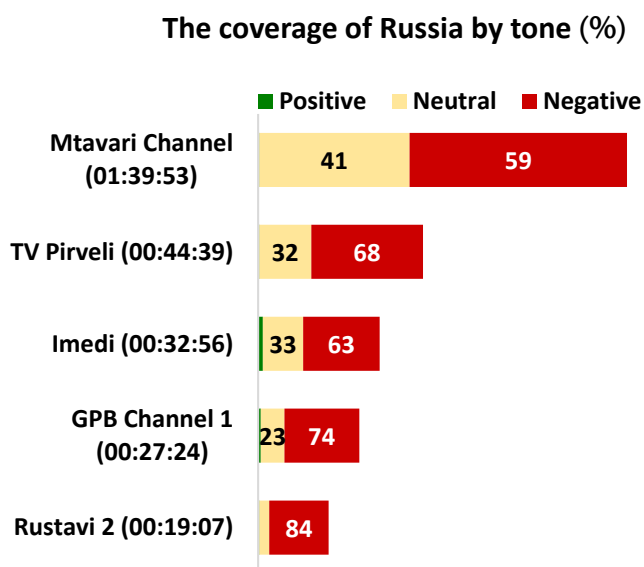
There seemed to be a certain degree of consensus in the tone of the coverage of the EU and Russia: a neutral and positive tone was frequent in case of the EU, while the tone of the coverage of Russia was largely negative on all channels (see Diagrams 1 and 2).

Diagram 1: Coverage of the EU on five TV channels, by tone of coverage



Europe and European integration was often presented as a continuation of Georgia’s historical path and course towards greater progress, and it was often emphasized that giving up the country’s Western orientation would automatically imply a pro-Russian course (and vice-versa). It was also often underlined that these two poles (the West and Russia) steered the pre-electoral environment and that, as the opposition and the channels loyal to them emphasized in particular, these elections would decide whether Georgia would continue towards the West or turn towards Russia instead.

Diagram 2: Coverage of Russia on five TV channels, by tone of coverage



That said, irrespective of the tone they employed, different TV channels pursued different goals when covering foreign actors, and these differences were an indication of their biased editorial policies. As during the 2020 thematic monitoring, this year's exercise revealed that coverage of foreign actors was used to present political teams as progressive or regressive; these were either lauded or discredited. Maintaining good relations with the EU, the USA and the West, sharing their values and enjoying their support was presented as a positive feature of a political party, and criticizing them as negative. Similarly, parties favorable to Russia were condemned as being allied with an "enemy" and an "occupier". This seems to have been the main purpose of the channels' different interpretations of various topics and focus on different aspects of various questions.

The agreement with Belarus, for instance, was covered in different ways. In some cases, this decision of the government was presented as a shameful betrayal of their country, while other channels tried to focus instead on the more positive aspects of this agreement. Considerable airtime was also devoted to the situation in Afghanistan and the evacuation of Georgians—and here, too, the TV channels covered this topic in different ways. Some of them focused on the government's successful co-operation with partner countries to ensure the evacuation of Georgians, whereas others focused on Georgian citizens stranded in Afghanistan and the government's inaction.

The length and focus of coverage of Irakli Gharibashvili'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, i.e. that both countries aim to join NATO and the EU and strive towards de-occupation, with Ukraine mentioned as an important partner and a friendly state. On the other hand, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli focused on an informal meeting between Gharibashvili and Charles Michel in Ukraine—and more specifically on a tweet by Michel that they presented as a last warning to the Georgian government, one threatening to withdraw EU support if Georgia did not pursue the reforms envisaged under the April 19 Agreement. All in all, the degree of polarization of TV news coverage of foreign actors was vivid.

Russia was the focus of coverage of interference in electoral processes. Some of the channels being monitored broadcast stories about Russian funding of Georgian politicians (Bidzina Ivanishvili, Salome Zurabishvili, Mikheil Saakashvili), the letter of a Georgian political party to the Kremlin proposing greater co-operation, the funding by the Cartu Foundation of an organization called "the Russian Club" that promotes Kremlin policy, Georgia's increasing economic dependence on Russia, and the visit to Georgia of members of a Russian group that was not prevented by the Security Service. Western interference in pre-electoral processes was not highlighted as much, and this despite the fact that in some cases (e.g. following Carl Hartzell's statement about covert surveillance) representatives of Georgia's ruling party denounced certain statements by Western actors as going beyond the bounds of diplomacy.

This preliminary report presents a brief overview of the results of the thematic monitoring. This work is set to continue after the elections as well, and detailed findings for each channel being monitored will be presented in a final report.

ANNEX. Diagrams. Coverage of Foreign Actors by TV channels, by time and tone of coverage.

Diagram 1. Coverage of foreign actors by GPB

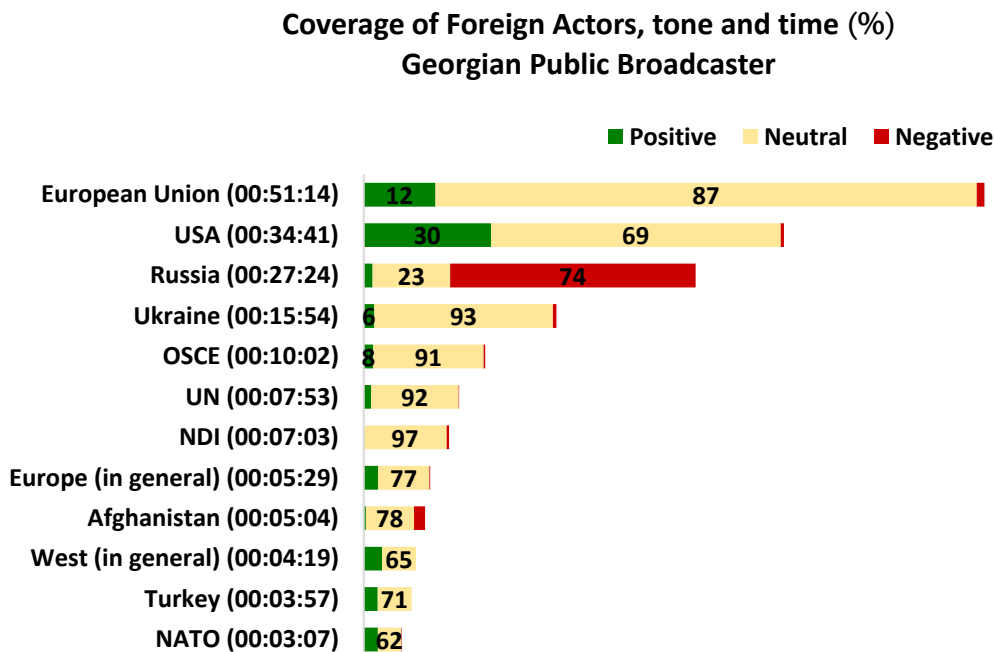


Diagram 2. Coverage of foreign actors by Imedi TV

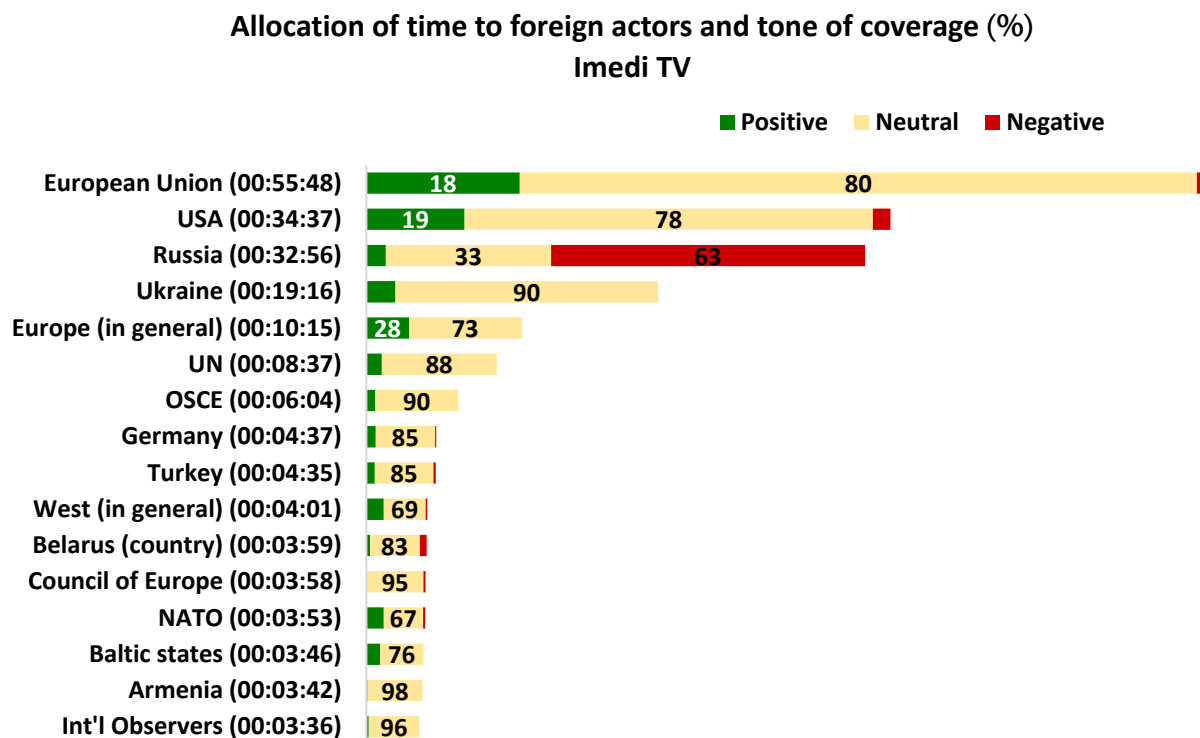


Diagram 3. Coverage of foreign actors by Rustavi-2 TV

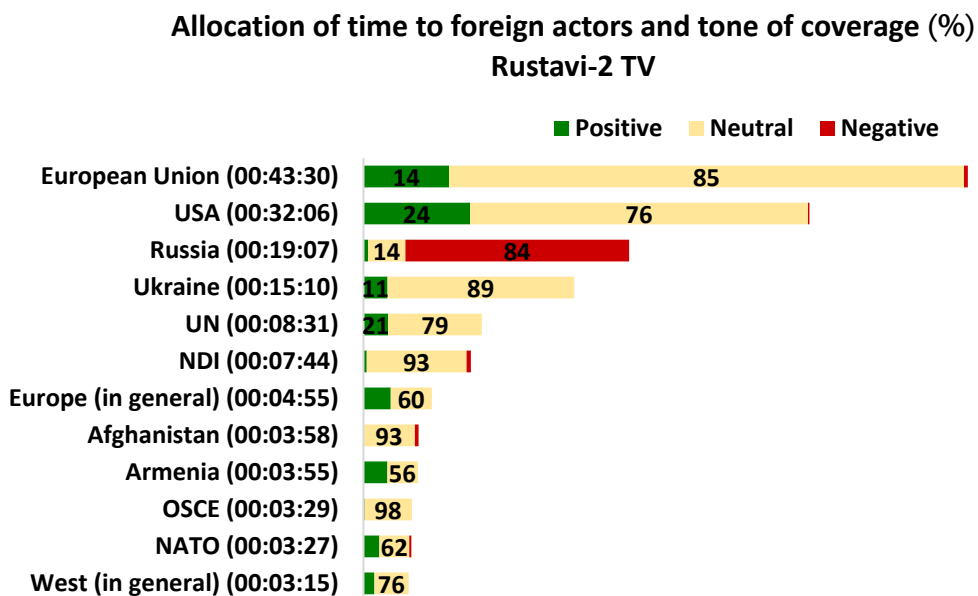


Diagram 4. Coverage of foreign actors by Mtavari TV

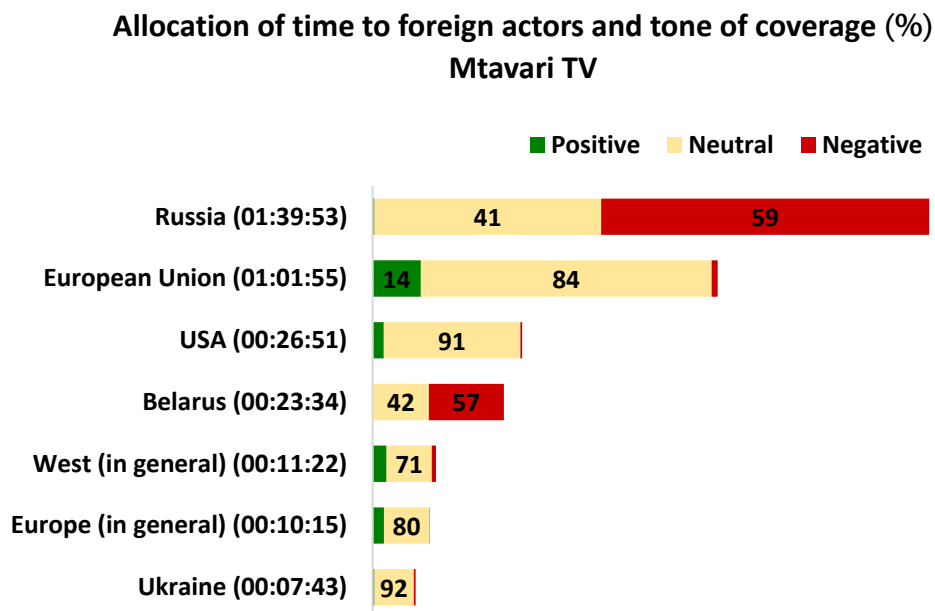


Diagram 5. Coverage of foreign actors by Pirveli TV

