



ევროკავშირი
საქართველოსთვის
The European Union for Georgia



Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia

Monitoring of TV Talk-shows Preliminary Report

2 August - 25 September 2021



საქართველოს ჟურნალისტური
ეთიკის ქარტია

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About the project

As part of an EU and UNDP project entitled “Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia”, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics monitored prime time TV talk-shows dealing with current affairs.

The monitoring covered 14 television channels from 2 August (the official launch of election campaigns) to 25 September.

The TV channels that were monitored were: the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster, Rustavi 2, Imedi, TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi, Achara Public Broadcaster, TV25, Rioni, Gurjaani TV, Guria TV, TV4, Trialeti, Odishi and Metskhre Arkhi. Of these channels, six are national broadcasters and the remaining eight have a more regional focus.

The channels were selected according to the following criteria: the two public broadcasters (given their role), the four highest-rated national broadcasters and one broadcaster from each region.

Methodology

The election monitoring of talk-shows solely involved a qualitative component, and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics monitored the appearance on air of selected subjects. Talk-shows were assessed according to the following criteria: the relevance of selected topics; the adequacy of the level of expertise of guests; the impartiality of the selection of guests; the course of the discussion; the handling of discussions by the host or hosts; the host’s questions; the host’s degree of preparedness and ability to prevent guests from spreading false information; and the use of the program to spread hate speech. The overall question was whether viewers were provided with additional information that would help them to make informed choices.

The subjects of the monitoring were the President, the Government and political parties.

Key Findings

Much like the results of previous years, this year's monitoring shows that the national broadcast media are sharply polarized. Some broadcasters are biased in favor of the government, while others favor the opposition. This polarization was further increased by the events of 5 July when over 50 journalists were injured and none of their attackers, among whom are the organizers of violent groups, were prosecuted.

Election campaigns were officially launched on 2 August, when most TV companies did not have a broadcast season and consequently did not air current affairs talk-shows (with the exception of two national broadcasters: Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli).

It is worth noting that it was not until 6 September that the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster and Achara Public Broadcaster resumed their broadcasting of talk-shows. Most regional broadcasters did not do so until mid-September.

Much like previous years, representatives of the ruling party refused to appear on those national broadcasters that are critical of them. Conversely, representatives of the political opposition were less represented on Imedi TV.

Over the reporting period, the narratives on Imedi TV echoed the messages of the Georgian Dream, with presenters openly adopting a cynical attitude towards members of the opposition. On the other hand, a bias towards a segment of the opposition could be observed on TV Pirveli and Mtavari Arkhi, two channels that express pro-opposition attitudes. Several presenters also often expressed their personal views regarding various issues or election subjects.

A particularly conspicuous development during the reporting period was the transformation of the Rustavi 2 TV company. While this broadcaster was more or less critical towards the government during the previous monitoring period (February-March), it made efforts during the pre-electoral period to make the ruling party feel as comfortable as possible. The TV company often merely served as a platform to be used by a ruling party to spread its messages and discuss the topics it favored.

It should also be noted that in this process of transformation, several journalists left Rustavi 2, two of whom later said that their decision was caused by changes to the channel's editorial policy.

During the reporting period, the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster and the Achara Public Broadcaster broadcast electoral debates, but the format of these debates did not give their audiences the comprehensive information they would need to make informed choices. During a debate on the 1st Channel of the Public Broadcaster between candidates for the mayoralty of Tbilisi, some candidates made homophobic and xenophobic statements to which the host failed to properly react.

The Achara Public Broadcaster offered two election debates: one between candidates for the mayoralty of Batumi and another between political parties. During the former program, called Tavisupali Sivrtse (“Free Space”), journalists often asked neither critical nor follow-up questions. Furthermore, ruling party representatives were more frequently seen in these programs.

The second talk-show on the Achara Public Broadcaster, called Tvitmmartvelobis Archevnebi (“Local Elections”), hosted a debate between political parties—and this program did enable viewers to make an informed choice. The hosts asked both critical and follow-up questions and did not allow respondents to use hate speech.

The monitoring also revealed problems among regional broadcasters. With rare exceptions, their programming was unstable and talk-shows were aired irregularly and inconsistently.

It should also be noted that, unlike national broadcasters, polarization is less conspicuous among regional broadcasters. There were even instances of representatives of the ruling and opposition parties debating with each other on several regional broadcasters.

