

First Findings of the Media Monitoring of 2018 Presidential Elections

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Introduction

The media monitoring of the 2018 presidential elections is being implemented within the frameworks of the UNDP project Media Monitoring for the 2018 Presidential Elections, with the support from the European Union.

The following civil society organizations are carrying out the media monitoring during the election period:

- The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics – the monitoring of the TV news and Talk Shows
- Internews Georgia – the monitoring of radio coverage
- The Civic Development Institute – the monitoring of print and online media.

Within the frameworks of the study, the organizations are monitoring the coverage of election subjects on 37 media outlets.

This report combines the primary findings of the ongoing study and describes the key trends of coverage during the given period (June 18 – August 31). The report does not explore the coverage of each media outlet one by one; rather it aims at providing analysis of key findings that have been revealed as a result of the first monitoring stage.

Methodology

Monitoring the election coverage of TV stations consists of quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative components are: the time allocated to subjects, direct and indirect speech and the coverage tone. The elements of the qualitative monitoring are: balance, accuracy, facts-based coverage, and manipulation with pictures and music.

The coverage tone was evaluated when someone spoke about it, when the subject talked about itself, and when they talked about other subjects or general issues.

The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics is monitoring the main news releases and talk shows on 8 TV channels.

The following channels are monitored:

- | | |
|----------------|--------------|
| 1. Channel One | 5. Maestro |
| 2. Rustavi 2 | 6. Iberia |
| 3. Imedi | 7. Obiektivi |
| 4. TV Pirveli | 8. Adjara TV |

The monitoring of main news releases started on June 18 and is ongoing. During this short period, TV stations reported the news in a more or less balanced manner, but some ethical problems were observed on almost all the channels.

Unlike news releases, the monitoring of talk shows started on August 1. In this case too, the same 8 TV channels are being monitored.

Key Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis has revealed that the most time is allocated to the coverage of the Government and the ruling party – Georgian Dream. The government gets on average 25-35% of the total time on each channel, and the Georgian Dream gets on average 25%. None of the opposition parties received more than 10% of coverage time on average.

There was less time allocated to the already nominated presidential candidates. Among them, Salome Zurabishvili, Davit Bakradze, and Grigol Vashadze are leading in terms of the frequency of coverage, but the time allocated to each of the candidates does not exceed 2% on average on any of the monitored channels.

Key Qualitative Trends

Like previous years, the majority of the monitored television stations are allocating fewer resources to the identification of exclusive topics and are basically limited to coverage of the activities of politicians.

The news releases on the majority of monitored TV channels are more or less adjusted to the agenda of politicians. The journalists cover the topics offered by politicians, and they are less likely to create stories or set their own agenda.

As was the case in previous years, we rarely encounter exclusive, in-depth stories and inquiry-based reporting. The majority of TV channels prepare similar stories, which are mostly based on the documents provided by political parties, press conferences and/or NGO reports. However, there are rare cases when such reports are thorough and additional sources and respondents have been located, which would make such stories more interesting and comprehensible for the audience.

We rarely encounter cases when the media tries to find information itself by utilizing journalistic practices such as the inquiry into public information, the review of publicly available reports and researches, and then the preparation of in-depth stories based on such information.

However, we have observed that there is an evident progress in regard to maintaining balance of coverage between both sides presented in a report; however, we still come across specific cases where the balance is not observed. For example, so called “pictures with voiceovers” remain a problem, where politicians launch serious accusations against their opponents, but the journalists cover such stories without showing the respondent’s position. We often encounter stories where both sides are interviewed, but it is impossible for the public to understand whether a certain accusation is true or not. The journalists often do not seek additional information and do not look for additional sources that would show whether a certain accusation is real or not. However, journalists should be obliged to look for information and to try to have diverse sources.

Like previous years, TV stations are allocating less time to identifying the programs of electoral candidates and studying and analyzing how realistic their election promises are. Consequently they are not keeping the electorate thoroughly informed as it is impossible without such stories.

For some channels, the problem is that they show the problems of ordinary citizens without their participation or representation. Such topics are covered mostly with the involvement of representatives of opposition parties only. In general, as compared to previous years, the rate of in-depth and fact-based coverage of various social problems is reduced.

It is still visible that some channels are biased to particular political subjects. Quite often, some TV channels explicitly demonstrate sympathy or antipathy towards a certain party.

There were cases when a journalist used a biased and judgmental text toward a particular subject on several TV channels, which is unacceptable and is not consistent with the norms of journalistic ethics.

There were cases on some TV channels, where the journalists incorrectly cited the respondent's words while presenting the comment of some subjects, which sometimes had a distorting effect on the information.

The usage and circulation of hate speech and usage of improper terminology has been significantly reduced on the majority of the monitored TV channels. There were only several instances where journalists made sexist statements.

Technical Glitches

Technical glitches were observed on some channels: sometimes some extra sounds are heard from the studio, or flawed pictures and sounds are on air. The most tangible technical problem is that subtitles are not used, which makes it harder to identify respondents.

Talk Shows

Civil-political talk shows aired during prime time and news releases featuring interviews with invited guests that last for most than 10 minutes are being monitored. During the reporting period, such interviews were aimed at obtaining more information about the current topic from a respondent, and enabling the audience to hear some extensive comments from them. In some cases, there was an impression that the guests were invited only for filling air time.

During the reporting period, only the Obieqtivi broadcasted talk shows on a regular basis. There were no other programs aired in August because of vacations. The program Ghamis Studia (Night Studio) of Obieqtivi, like previous years, represent a broadcasting platform for the Alliance of Patriots. Members of this party participated in the program as guests or as hosts as well. For example, the political secretary Vazha Otashvili, who visits Ghamis Studia (Night Studio) in the capacity of a respondent, is also hosting the cycle of programs "Literature, Art, Spirituality" on the same channel. Professional ethical standards are grossly violated in the program. There is a frequent usage of homophobic and xenophobic vocabulary both by the respondents and hosts in the program, which supports to incite stereotypes and disseminate hate speech. They are not reluctant to communicate their opinions, which are not based on any factual circumstances and are not supported by arguments, either. Correspondingly, no difference is made between the facts and inferences. The theme of the program is general, and many different topics are discussed.

Methodology

The monitoring of election topics of the main news releases of radio channels aims at determining the extent to which equal conditions are maintained and observing the journalistic ethics in regards to the allocation the air time for political subjects and the coverage of their activities during the election period.

Internews-Georgia is monitoring the evening news releases of 11 radio channels in connection to the 2018 presidential elections. These radios are:

1. **Radio 1 of the Public Broadcaster** FM 102,4 – main news release at 18:00;
2. **Imedi** FM 105,9 - news release at 18:00;
3. **Fortuna** FM 106,9 - news release at 18:00;
4. **Palitra** FM 103,9 - news release at 18:00;
5. **Pirveli Radio (the First Radio)** FM 106,4 - news release at 18:00;
6. **Maestro** FM 94,7 - main news release at 17:00;
7. **Radio Apkhazetis Khma (Radio Voice of Abkhazia)** FM 98.9 - news release at 18:00;
8. **Radio Tavisupleba (Radio Liberty)** – Evening Liberty 18:00-19:00;
9. **Radio Adjara** (Public Broadcaster of Adjara, Batumi) FM 104,5 – news release at 18:00;
10. **Radio Hereti** (Tbilisi/Lagodekhi) - FM 102,8 - main news release at 17:00;
11. **Radio Atinati** (Zugdidi) FM 105,9 - news release at 17:00;

The monitoring consists of stages of quantitative and qualitative study. The quantitative monitoring determines the indicators that can be measured and analyzed. As for the qualitative monitoring, it is used for evaluating the effective performance of media outlets in regard to the indicators such as ethical or professional standards, which is difficult to quantify; here the focus is laid on information distortion, disbalanced coverage, bias and any fact which is important for understanding the quality of information.

The monitoring is focused on the qualified election subjects, the parties and politicians, who are involved in the 2018 presidential elections. Besides those subjects, the monitoring subjects are the presidential candidates nominated by initiative groups, the government (central, local, Ajarian) and the President. In order to account the amount of time allocated to the presidential candidates, the timing was started from the very beginning of the monitoring, right after a candidate was nominated by a certain party or a group.

Summary

During the reporting period (June 18 – August 31), the majority of radio channels tried to actively cover all the events and political processes in their evening news releases. During June-July, the pre-election topics did not represent highlights yet. The election campaign of presidential

candidates got more active in August, after the Election Day was announced, and correspondingly, coverage time increased. The time mostly was allocated to the meetings of candidates with the population (“who and where they have met with, what promises were made”). The information was dry and superficial, and there was no attempt to provide more analytical and diverse information to the listeners. The news was made based on general comments made after press conferences and from meetings among politicians. The journalists did not try to provide an in-depth coverage of problematic topics. Neither did they cover the issues which were not discussed by politicians themselves.

The monitoring results for the period of June 18 – August 31 show that like in previous years the majority of radio broadcasters did not display any bias to any political force, and we did not observe extremely positive or negative coverage. However, the coverage of the activities of politicians without asking critical questions to them remains a problem.

Key Quantitative Trends

News releases were mostly balanced. The most broadly covered subjects on the radio broadcasts were: the government (on average, 35% of time) and the Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia (on average, 25%). Almost all the broadcasters dedicated on average 7% of the total time to the parliamentary opposition parties. However, the coverage of non-parliamentary opposition parties, as compared to previous years, was significantly reduced and did not exceed 1%.

The election campaign of presidential candidates became more active in August and therefore coverage of them also increased. However, the time allocated to them is small and does not exceed 5% of total time on the majority of channels. Among the presidential candidates, the most time was allocated to: Salome Zurabishvili, Davit Bakradze and Grigol Vashadze.

While reporting about the monitoring subjects, a neutral tone largely prevailed over positive or negative tones, which to a certain extent was the result of superficial coverage of events by radio broadcasters. Likewise, the coverage of presidential candidates was neutral, and there were only some channels where a negative coverage tone was observed in regard to Salome Zurabishvili.

Compared to previous years, some radio broadcasters allocated more time to the direct speech of the monitoring subjects. However, not introducing the respondents remains to be one of the major problems for the majority of radio channels – it is often unclear to listeners who is speaking.

Scarcity of Sources of Information and Topics

The journalists do not spread the news based on anonymous sources, but a lack of sources of information has been observed. The stories were not enriched by the evaluations of specialists, public information, or other survey results. The news reports of radio broadcasters were often identical: they discussed topics from similar angles and provided very similar comments from politicians. The majority of radio broadcasters failed to offer exclusive information to their listeners.

The running time of news releases on radio channels makes it possible to cover the central, and regional, news and problems, but most of them did not take advantage of that. Social problems have disappeared from the airtime of radio broadcasters, and they reported the regional news only in regards natural disasters. Neither was there any time allocated to the problems of minorities or various vulnerable groups, and, obviously, there were no opinions of politicians heard about these issues.

The trend of the non-violation of standards of professional ethics by journalists has been maintained among radio broadcasters, and we did not observe any cases of manipulation with sound/music or usage of hate speech, either.

Methodology

Within the frameworks of the monitoring of the 2018 presidential elections, 11 websites are being monitored: ambebi.ge, interpressnews.ge, news.ge, on.ge, ipress.ge, reportiori.ge, marshalpress.ge, tabula.ge, palitravideo.ge, netgazeti.ge, liberali.ge.

During the monitoring period, the selected media outlets are monitored from quantitative and qualitative standpoints. The monitoring focuses on the frequency and tone of coverage of the monitoring subjects by the selected media outlet. On the other hand, the qualitative monitoring looks at how the outlet tries to observe journalistic standards and ethical norms.

Publishing the Advertising Materials Without Reference

Like in previous years, during the monitoring period of 2018, the Georgian online media was again facing one of its most severe challenges – the publishing of advertisements or other types of materials prepared within the scopes of a commercial contract, without making a respective reference to its nature. Most of the websites do not attach any reference to these articles. It is necessary for online media to clearly differentiate between editorial materials and articles that are written based on commercial contracts.

Insufficient Differentiation of Advertising Articles

Most of the websites add some note to the articles that were prepared under a commercial contract. However, these notes are not easy to understand for an average reader. It is very important for online media to add a note to commercial articles and that it is displayed prominently and clearly to readers.

Insufficient Differentiation of Information Provided by Press Centers

We often see that the information provided by a press center of various political parties or state agencies are published in the Georgian online media without making a proper reference to them. When an online media outlet posts some material obtained from a press-center, it is very important that the website notify the reader and inform them where this material came from, and that it does not represent journalistic work.

Superficial Coverage of Events

Superficial coverage of issues represents a key challenge for online media. The vast majority of the monitored websites cover only the daily activities and statements of politicians and representatives of state agencies. We hardly ever see in-depth analysis of issues in online media. It is desirable that online outlets produce more in-depth analysis of the events taking place in the country.

Insufficient Coverage of Monitoring Subjects

The coverage of the government and the ruling party prevails among the majority of monitored online media outlets. It is clear that more time is allocated to the coverage of these subjects than other parties, however, we see websites, where two thirds of overall coverage is dedicated to the ruling party only. It is very important that online media outlets pay more attention to the coverage of activities and visions of a wide spectrum of political parties acting in the country.

Lack of Sources of Information

The vast majority of articles published by online media are written based only on one source of information. We hardly ever observe an attempt to present different opinions and arguments in online articles. In most cases the politician's statements are published without any comment or without doublechecking the facts presented in the statement. This problem is exacerbated further if there is a grave accusation expressed against a certain politician or civil servant. The journalists of online media outlets should present different opinions and arguments in their articles, especially in cases where a grave accusation is posted against a certain individual.

Publishing Unconfirmed Information

We often come across cases where online media outlets publish unverified and unconfirmed information. These cases mostly consist of statements from politicians or other persons that are published on the website without any comment, or without being properly doublechecked. Although such information is less frequently found in text written by journalists, they should still acknowledge that publishing unverified or uncommented information spread by various people might result in the dissemination of incorrect information to the public. It is very important that online media journalists be more focused on doublechecking the information spread by their media outlets, especially in cases where this information contains serious accusations against a certain individual or state structures.

Unverified Information from Social Networks

There are some online media outlets that publish social media content posted by various politically affiliated individuals without attaching any comments to them, and there is no observed attempt of having these facts verified by a journalist. The reporters should acknowledge that information obtained from social networks should be doublechecked the same way as information obtained by other means. This is important because if such statements are published without comments or doublechecking, then readers may get false information about a certain issue.

Inconsistent Coverage of Presidential Candidates

Statements and election activities of presidential candidates are quite actively covered in the online media, but we hardly ever see the in-depth analysis of the visions and promises of these candidates. The statements and promises of presidential candidates are mostly published without

comments, and neither do we see a critical analysis of those statements. It is desirable that online media outlets, other than reporting about the statements and daily activities of presidential candidates, offer the readers a more in-depth analysis of their plans and visions.

Lack of Critical and Multifaceted Analysis

One of the biggest challenges for the Georgian online media is that they only provide a superficial coverage of the issues. As a result, readers mostly get information about the statements and daily activities of various politicians or representatives of state agencies. We almost never come across in-depth and diverse analysis of social and economic issues. Social problems in the outer regions of Georgia are rarely covered. As for the events taking place in the outer regions, online media outlets mostly only cover the beginning or completion of successful infrastructure projects. It is noteworthy that these articles are in most cases financed by various state agencies. It is possible to say that most of the online media does not offer any independent journalistic work to the readers at all. The majority of the online media does not provide any critical and in-depth analysis of any important issue at all. It would be desirable for the online media to take into consideration the absence of in-depth coverage in the Georgian online media and offer a more critical and multifaceted analysis of issues, in order to provide more comprehensive information to readers about the processes taking place in the country.

Methodology

Within the frameworks of the 2018 presidential election monitoring, there are 7 newspapers monitored: The Rezonansi, Akhali Taoba, Alia, Asaval-Dasavali, Kviris Palitra, Sakartvelo Da Msoplio, Kronika +. During the monitoring period, the selected media outlets are monitored based on quantitative and qualitative components. During the quantitative monitoring, the focus is made on the frequency and tone of the coverage concerning the monitoring subjects by the selected media outlets, and the qualitative monitoring looks at how the outlet tries to uphold the norms of journalistic standards and norms.

Coverage of Monitoring Subjects

During the monitoring period in 2018, unlike the monitoring results of previous years, the coverage of the government and Georgian Dream prevails in all the newspapers. These subjects are covered with different tones in various newspapers. However, it is noteworthy that the newspapers provide very little coverage of other political parties. It is very important that the newspapers write about the activities and visions of not only the ruling party, but also other political parties as well.

Abusive Terminology in the Texts of Journalists

As it was the case during previous years, we often see that the journalists use abusive and discriminatory terminology in the Georgian press. Journalists of some media regularly use quite grave and abusive terminology while reporting about various politicians or celebrities. The journalists should be able to express their opinions without using abusive terminology.

Abusive Terminology in the Texts of Respondents

As observed, the newspapers, which were selected for the 2018 monitoring, often publish interviews with respondents who are distinguished by frequent usage of abusive terminology when talking about various politicians or celebrities. When interviewing these respondents, instead of delineating themselves from abusive statements, in most cases the journalists get involved in such discussions. The journalists should distance themselves from the respondent's abusive and discriminatory evaluations against a certain individual.

The Lack of Sources of Information

Unbalanced articles represent one of the key challenges for the Georgian press. In most cases, the articles are written based on one source only and there is no attempt of presenting the arguments or opinions of various sides. This problem gets more severe when the articles provide grave accusations against a certain politician. Other than the failure to present the position of an accused party, the journalists seldom start a discussion with the respondents and as a result the

articles end up being based on one-sided accusations that are published without any justification or doublechecking. It is very important that the journalists offer a diversity of informational sources and opinions to their readers, so that the opinions presented in the article are not single-sided and the readers can get familiar with different opinions about the covered issue, especially if the article contains grave accusations against a certain individual.

The Publishing of Unverified Information

The publishing of unverified information is a serious challenge for the Georgian press. Very often the facts presented in the statements of respondents are published without proper doublechecking. We often come across situations where the respondent statements regarding the issues are very easy to doublecheck, although the journalists do not seem to try it. It is very important for the journalists to try to doublecheck information properly and to inform the reader whether the facts presented in the respondents' statements are true or not. This is especially important in cases where this information being spread by a respondent contains serious accusations regarding the activities of a certain individual or state structures.

Unverified Information from Social Network

There are some newspapers that publish statements posted by various individuals on social networks, where we do not see the attempt of a journalist to doublecheck the facts presented in this statement. The reporters should acknowledge that information obtained from social networks should be doublechecked the same way as information obtained by other means. This is important because if such statements are published without comments or doublechecking, then the readers may get false information about a certain issue.

Publishing the Information Obtained by Various Media Outlets without Doublechecking

During the monitoring period in 2018, we have come across many cases when the newspapers published information obtained and covered by other media outlets, and did it without any verification. These articles never mentioned where the media outlets, which had covered this information initially, obtained this information. While covering the information obtained by other media, it is desirable for the journalists to doublecheck it themselves, and to notify the reader where from they got this information and how reliable it is.

Ungrounded Accusations in the Texts of Journalists

Printed media journalists quite often express grave accusations against various politicians, which are not corroborated by relevant arguments and facts. We also have cases where the accusations of journalists against politicians are ungrounded yet contain accusations of a crime or crimes. It is categorically unacceptable that a journalist would spread unreliable accusations of crime against a certain politician. The journalists should acknowledge that it is unlawful to blame someone of committing a crime, without providing reliable facts, and this can be regarded as being a libel. The journalists should avoid publishing grave accusations against politicians, unless they have reliable facts establishing the validity of these accusations.

The Regular Criticism against a Certain Individual

We did not observe any regular and targeted criticism against certain individuals in many newspapers. There is an impression created that the goal of these newspapers is to stain the reputation and dignity of these people, instead of collecting and disseminating unbiased information about them. It is very important that the newspapers cover the activities of any individual only based on facts and refrain from regular usage of ungrounded accusations or personal insult against a certain individual.

Improper Differentiation of Advertisement Materials

Monitoring of many newspapers revealed that articles written within the scope of a commercial contract are not properly delineated from news materials. The newspaper should single out the articles that are produced within the frameworks of a certain commercial contract and which do not represent journalistic work, and to inform readers about it in an easily understandable manner.

Insufficient Coverage of Social and Economic Problems

Although we have observed that many newspapers try to provide an objective and diverse coverage of social and economic problems in the country, most parts of the newspapers still only cover these issues in the political light, and this coverage is single-sided and superficial. We often encounter the cases where the discussion about these issues is represented as an attempt to criticize a certain political force, or to portray them positively. It is very important for the newspapers to pay due attention to providing objective and in-depth analysis of social and economic problems in the country as much as possible. While covering these problems, every article should be based on diverse sources of information.

Insufficient Coverage of Presidential Candidates

Some of the monitored newspapers do not provide the objective and reasoned analysis of the visions and election promises of presidential candidates. Some newspapers are distinguished with an extremely biased and single-sided coverage of presidential candidates. We often see one-sided criticism, personal insult and ungrounded accusations against the candidates. The newspapers should pay more attention to producing impartial and in-depth analysis of the plans and election promises of presidential candidates and provide reliable and comprehensive information to a reader about Georgia's presidential candidates.