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Georgian Independent TV Channels: Presentation of Pre-Election Race

Nino Skvortsova ^{a, *}, Dimitri Abazov ^a, Irina Volkova ^a, Svetlana Urazova ^b

^a Peoples' Friendship University of Russia named after Patrice Lumumba, Russian Federation

^b Russian State University of Cinematography (VGIK), Russian Federation

Abstract

The purpose of the article is the identification of the mechanism of media influence on the electoral process in a polarized political system with two dominant centers of power. The results presented in the article contribute to the improvement of media competence among the audience of Georgian socio-political TV-programs. The problematic situation in the media space of Georgia relates to the two equally strong trends – on one hand, Georgia follows the course of democratic transformations in the context of mediatization of politics (strategy), on the other hand, the procedural factors of democratization are focused on the media, which destabilize public opinion in the context of the politicization of social processes (tactics). The authors applied a qualitative and quantitative analysis to the audiovisual materials of the most high-rated Georgian TV channels. 2337 publications of the 2020-election campaign period were studied. The research results of the pre-election race media content suggest trends of democratization. Thus, the cluster of TV channels *Mtavari Arkhi* and *Rustavi 2* is an indicator of the struggle of key political forces in the country. At the same time, the authors have identified differences in the information policy of the TV channels. The features of the latest Georgia election campaign in studies have become especially relevant in the context of the political crisis in Georgia in 2023.

Keywords: political communication, pre-election race, media democracy, elections, Georgia.

1. Introduction

The mass media, as an important instrument of political processes, acquire special significance when merging with the political sphere. It is important that modern political sciences and the media are characterized by epithets that indicate their important role: for example, “the great arbiter”, “the fourth power” (Teloev, 2016).

The belief in the omnipotence of television is so strong that politicians are convinced that those who control the television media can control the entire country. Indeed, modern politics is unthinkable without the media: they create space for monitoring political processes, opposing political positions, and connecting politicians with society. It is quite natural that the media, as a social institution, is the most important component of Georgian political environment, especially after the Rose Revolution (Naumov, 2018). The work on studying and discussing the socio-political agenda of the media is extremely relevant in Georgia, specifically in scientific discourse.

The rapid development and increasing influence of mass media in the 20th century led to the transformation of cultural views. The “dehumanization” of culture contributed to the formation of a new virtual world of communication, which required a new comprehension of the phenomenon of mass communication (Ortega y Gasset, 1968). There are two courses in mass media study.

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: nino.skvortsova@gmail.com (N. Skvortsova)

According to the human-centered approach, people use media to meet their needs and aspirations. The media-oriented approach to mass communication is based on the idea that people are selective about information. They take only what fits their beliefs and ignore the opposite (Burrage, 1969). A media-oriented approach to mass communication is based on the idea that the media pressures people, dominates people, subjugates them like drugs. D. McQuail developed this point of view and was the first to point out that the media, especially television, can shape public opinion regardless of the content of the information, since information transmitted through various means of communication is an instrument of influence. According to McQuail, television is a “tube” through which anything can be transmitted. When transmitting information, television is not neutral, it enriches the content with its own qualities. Everything that is being broadcast on television becomes telegenic. Other researchers have also written about this (Urazova, 2012).

Television covers time and space at the same time, therefore it actively influences the spatio-temporal perception of information. “The television generation, on the one hand, is the creator of today, and on the other, its victim” (McQuail, 1991: 121).

Many scientists have tried to create a universal concept of political communication, but so far no one has succeeded. Researchers M. Gurevich and J. Bloomer define political communication as “the transfer of various kinds of information and influences from individual to individual, the former differ from each other in deep awareness or complete ignorance, have the most influential or are completely powerless and are constantly involved (in politics), or - carefree, like the blessed” (Gurevich, Blyumler, 2012). This definition is mainly used by political scientists and is fully consistent with the “influence model”.

According to Toffler, political communication is a special scientific and information complex that builds the basis for a modern developed society, forms its ruling elite, and establishes significant differences from a society with limited means of communication in the past (Toffler, 1990). Pye interpreted political communication as a system of informal social communications in society with various influences on political processes. At the same time, he did not mean unidirectional signals from the elites to the masses. He also noted that any society cannot exist without the use of established methods of communication (Pye, 1967). Contemporary researchers focus on the integrated study of politics, media and audiences across generations in the context of state systems, including Georgian (Abazov, Skvortsova, 2021; Algavi et al., 2021; Algavi et al., 2023; Cushion, Jackson, 2019; De Vreese et al., 2018; Deuze, 2021; Kalsnes, 2019; Levitskaya, Seliverstova, 2020; Lazutova, Volkova, 2017; Lowrey et al., 2023; McCarthy, 2022; Pfetsch, 2020; Schimpfössl et al., 2020; Skvortsova et al., 2022; Yakova, Volkova, 2023).

2. Materials and methods

The methodological ground of the study is based on qualitative and quantitative analyses of audio-visual media materials. The most popular and perceived by viewers audio-visual media have become the subject of research. Two of the most rated Georgian TV channels were selected for this purpose: *Mtavari Arkhi* and *Rustavi 2*.

Mtavari Arkhi positions itself as an independent and opposition TV channel. *Rustavi 2*, once belonged to the current editor-in-chief of *Mtavari Arkhi*, following the ruling of the *Strasbourg International Court* was returned to the previous owners. According to *Caucasus Barometer*, the Caucasus Research Resources Center (CRRC) study, in 2020 14 % of Georgian population trusted *Mtavari Arkhi*, followed by *Rustavi 2* with trust of 10 % of respondents (TVnewsc, 2020). In 2021, these indicators have changed, but not drastically. According to CRRC of Georgia, *Mtavari Arkhi* is trusted by 12 % of respondents, while *Rustavi 2* is trusted by 8 % of respondents (TrumTVinfo, 2021). Therefore, these two TV channels are the subject of interest to our research due to their emerging discourses, given their heritage, trust shifts and positioning in relation to the ruling party *Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia* (hereinafter – *Georgian Dream*, GD) and the opposition party *United National Movement* (UNM).

This paper includes material based on research of 2,337 publications in both audiovisual media, in which *Mtavari Arkhi* accounted 424 pieces of news for September and 579 for October, and *Rustavi 2* accounted for 526 issues for September and 808 for October.

Search criteria:

- Interviews with representatives of the governmental and opposition spectrum;
- *Georgian Dream* in positive context;
- *Georgian Dream* in a negative context;

- Information related to opposition parties;
- International observers and third persons (ambassadors, consuls, deputies, congressmen, experts, etc.);
- Research on pre-election environment and opinion polls;
- The question of external interference (the Russian factor in the electoral race);
- Other news.

Georgia has a free and diverse media environment with numerous TV, radio, newspaper, and online media are accessible for the vast majority of citizens. However, the landscape is highly polarized, self-regulating, and closely related to former and current politicians or business groups, allowing editorial content to be used in accordance with the political rhetoric of party agenda. Television media, the main source of news and information, are generally perceived as either pro-government or opposition. Political discourse is rarely based on the problem but is often conducted at the level of recrimination. The refusal of political actors to be engaged in debates prevents citizens from obtaining a full picture of all available policy options, which affects their ability to make informed choices.

At present, television remains the main source of information for Georgian citizens. The most trusted and high rated of Georgian TV companies in presentation of news and political info is *TV Imedi* (40/50 %), followed by *Mtavari Arkhi* (16/24 %), *Rustavi 2* (11/34 %) and *TV Pirveli* (5/15 %) (Public..., 2020). In 2022 these figures remained almost unchanged. *TV Imedi* still has the greatest rate of confidence (34/44 %), if the second preferences are considered, followed by *Mtavari Arkhi* (16/26 %), *Rustavi 2* (9/28 %) (Public..., 2022).

Although television plays a prominent role in the media landscape, overall trust is low. In 2020, CRRC poll *Caucasus Barometer* showed that 55 % of Georgians do not trust the media, while 8 % do not fully trust and only 2 % fully trust (Trumedi, 2021). In addition, the study on the quality of information presentation was conducted in 2021. Only 8 % of public believe that television is informative enough and 8 % of viewers believe that it is a quite poor source of information. For the vast majority of public (48 %) evaluated the quality of the information provided by TV as average (Qualinf, 2021).

3. Discussion

The media are built into the political life of Georgian society and are integral part of both internal and external affairs. The ability of being the medium in public-political communication to influence the formation of public opinion and to promote various discourses into the masses suggests, that the media can play a key role in the electoral campaign.

The October 2020 elections in Georgia became a kind of litmus test for revealing the strong influence of media both on public opinion and on the perception of information by external observers. The political reality in Georgia was distorted as if in a crooked mirror, when several media outlets started publishing information about the victory of the opposition party, while others reported a convincing victory of the ruling party. The impact of the information was so powerful that, long after the elections, citizens continued to believe into opposite. Consequently, it was concluded that the incumbent authorities had falsified the elections.

The Georgian electoral system is the mixed one with closed lists and a majority system. The constitutional reforms of 2020 led to three notable results: 1) the transition from the previous system of 77 proportional and 73 majoritarian seats to a system with 120 proportional and 30 majoritarian seats; 2) the reduction of the required national proportional threshold from 5 to 1 %; 3) The minimum requirement of 40 per cent of seats on the proportional list to form a one-party majority.

The official campaign period began on September 1, and the deadline for submitting party lists expired on October 1. Parties were required to submit party lists from 120 to 200 candidates, wherein maintaining a mandatory gender quota: one out of every four candidates on party lists had to be a woman. The number of candidates running for majority seats was 492, including 107 seats for women (approximately 21.75 %). According to the Central Election Committee, 50 electoral subjects: 48 political parties and two blocs were registered to participate in proportional voting. Two lists were rejected due to non-compliance with the gender quota or inadequate documentation of the candidate (Technical..., 2020).

The constitutional and electoral reform prior to the parliamentary elections brought the electoral model closer to a proportional system, which was a step towards political pluralism in the

legislature. However, despite the reform of the electoral legislation, the manning of election commissions remained unchanged. The problem arose during the process of selection of professional members of election commissions and following their appointment by parties on a non-partisan basis, which led to the ruling party’s domination in election commissions and caused disbelief in the impartiality and independence of the election administration.

The number of publications in both TV companies during the reporting period was 2337, of which *Mtavari Arkhi* accounted for 424 reports in September and 579 for October, and *Rustavi 2* had 526 ones in September and 808 reports in October (Figure 1).

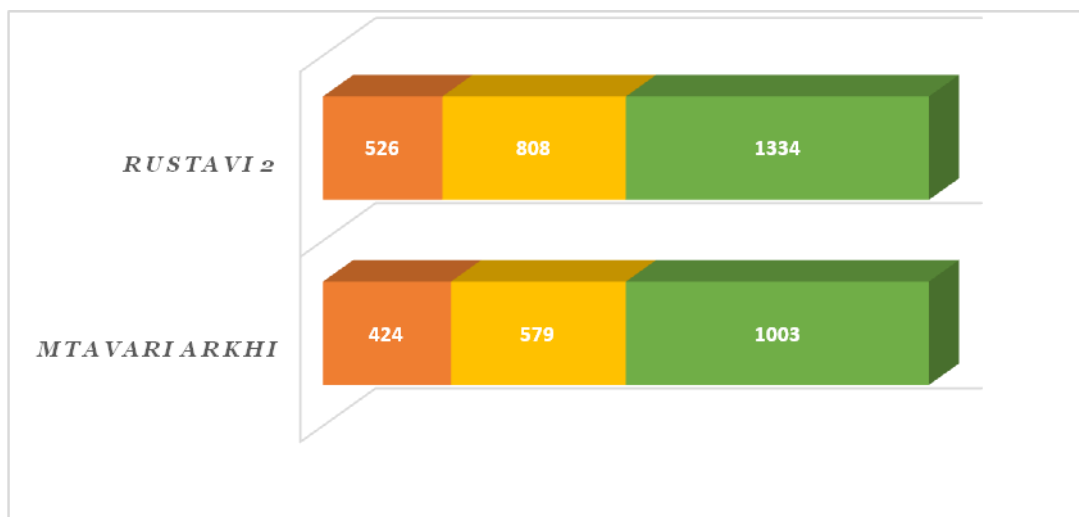


Fig. 1. The total number of news for the reporting period

In September and October *Mtavari Arkhi* had 1003 election-based pieces of information. Among them most of the publications were devoted to the opposition, as well as statements with a critical assessment of *Georgian Dream* (Figure 2).

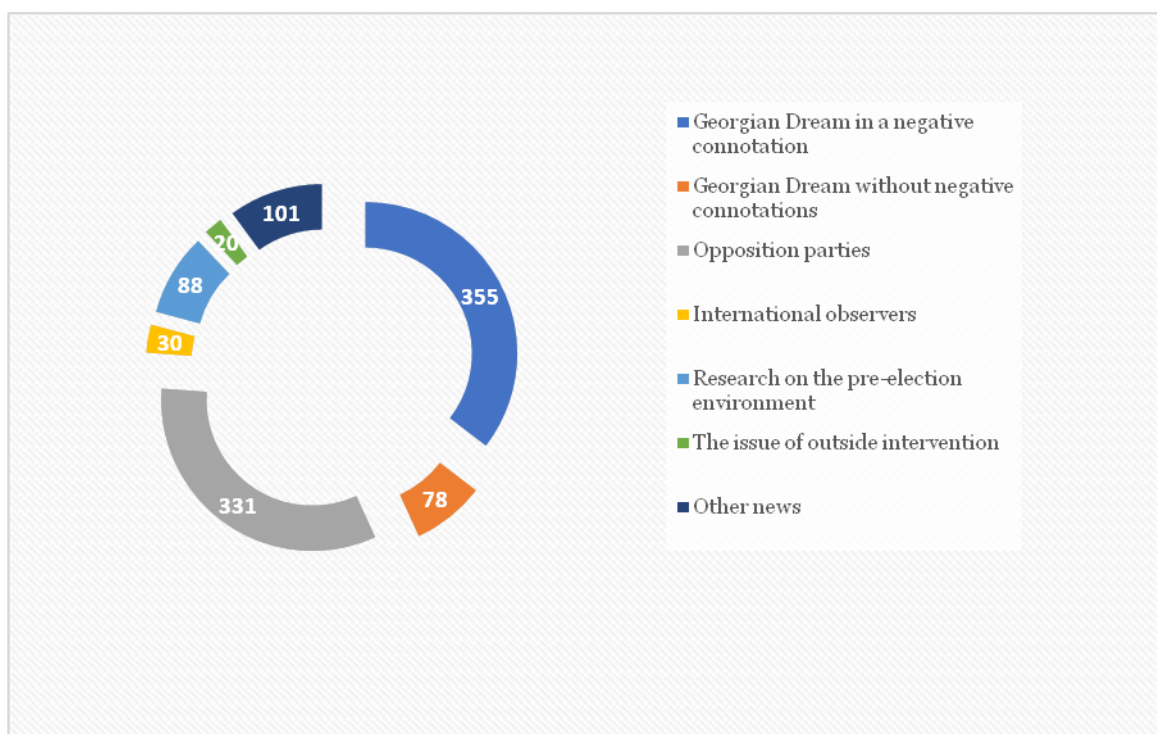


Fig. 2. *Mtavari Arkhi* news stories

As for the airtime itself, *Mtavari Arkhi* had a clear disproportion. In September 37.6 %

(positive – 21 %, negative – 3 %) of total airtime. In spite of the fact, that GD took most of the airtime, most of their reports were negative and discrediting – 32.1 % (positive – 1 %, negative – 62 %) (Figure 3).

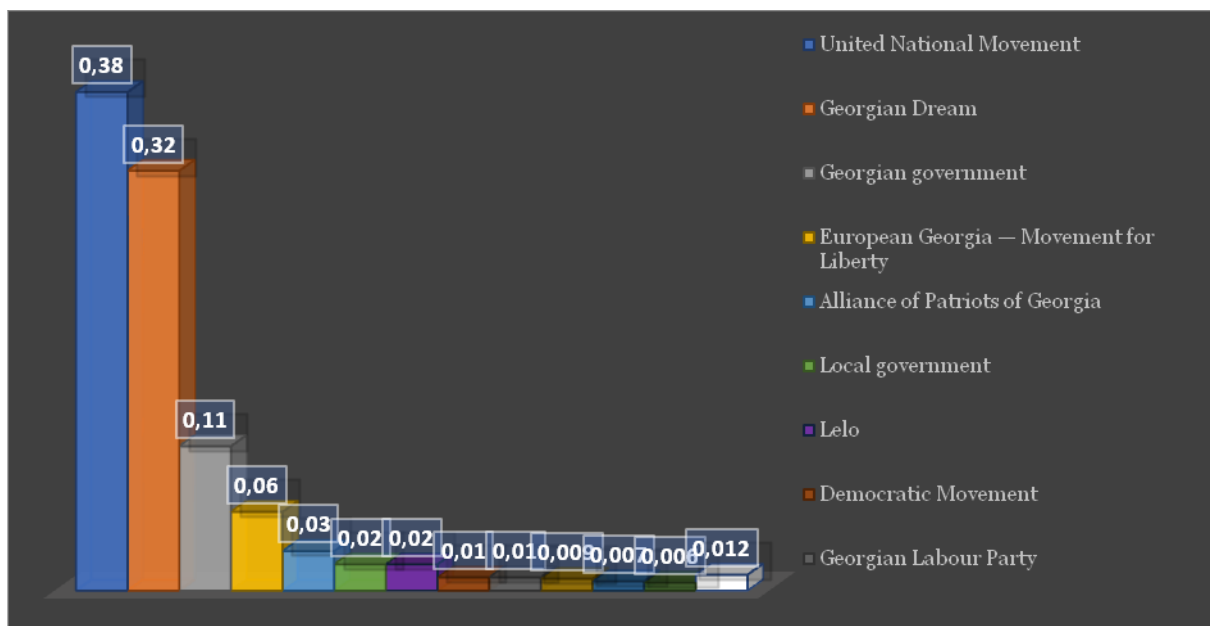


Fig. 3. Broadcast time of *Mtavari Arkhi* for September

This trend continued in October. UNM was given 42.2 % (positive – 18 %, negative – 1 %), GD – 28.9 % (positive – 1 %, negative – 66 %) (Figure 4).

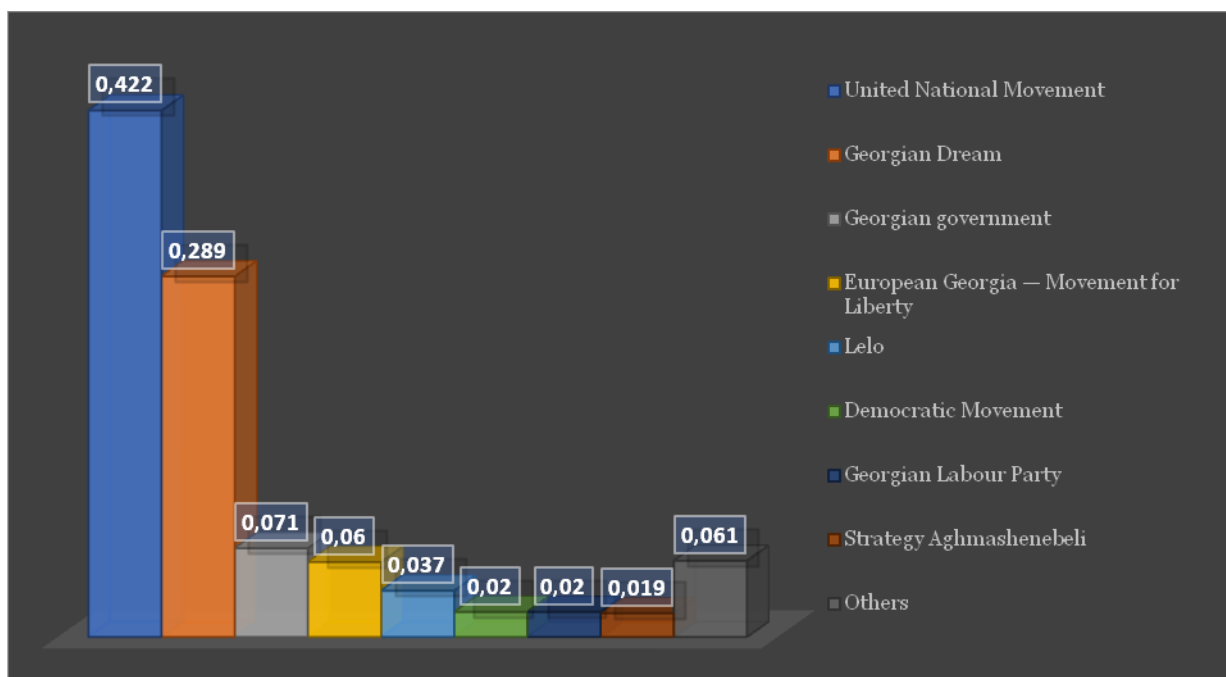


Fig. 4. Broadcast time of *Mtavari Arkhi* for October

Representatives of the ruling team rarely appear in the programs of *Mtavari Arkhi*, therefore the positions of the authorities in the programs of the channel are rather weak, and sometimes even absent. The TV channel does not try to balance the information, statements of other politicians, therefore, gives viewers one-sided and biased information. The ruling party is systematically said to be pursuing Russia’s interests. The frequency of mentioning GD Bidzina

Ivanishvili in a negative context is relatively high. For example, in “Saturday Mtavari” on September 5, 4 out of 9 stories were devoted directly to Bidzina Ivanishvili, and they were negative.

In total, during the reporting period *Mtavari Arkhi* had 320 interviews with representatives of opposition parties and blocs. Among other things, the obvious leader in the number of interviews is UNM, which appeared in the studio of *Mtavari Arkhi* two or even three times a day. Only one interview was recorded with the ruling party during the reporting period. According to the channel, the ruling party GD refuses to cooperate with critical media (Figure 5).

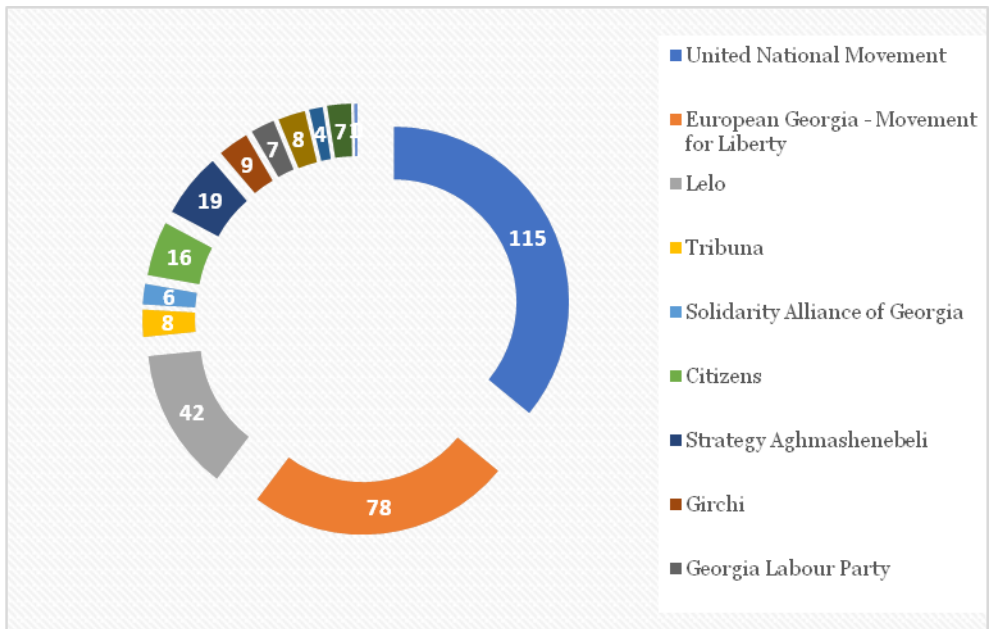


Fig. 5. Interviews with opposition parties

Rustavi 2

During the reporting period *Rustavi 2* had 1334 messages on elections (Figure 1). Most of the news stories were covered by opposition parties and blocs, and there was no clear priority for a particular opposition party. The electoral campaign of GD was also covered quite actively. Negative statements regarding GD were mainly critical, related to the opposition and full of violence accusations against their political opponents. (Figure 6).

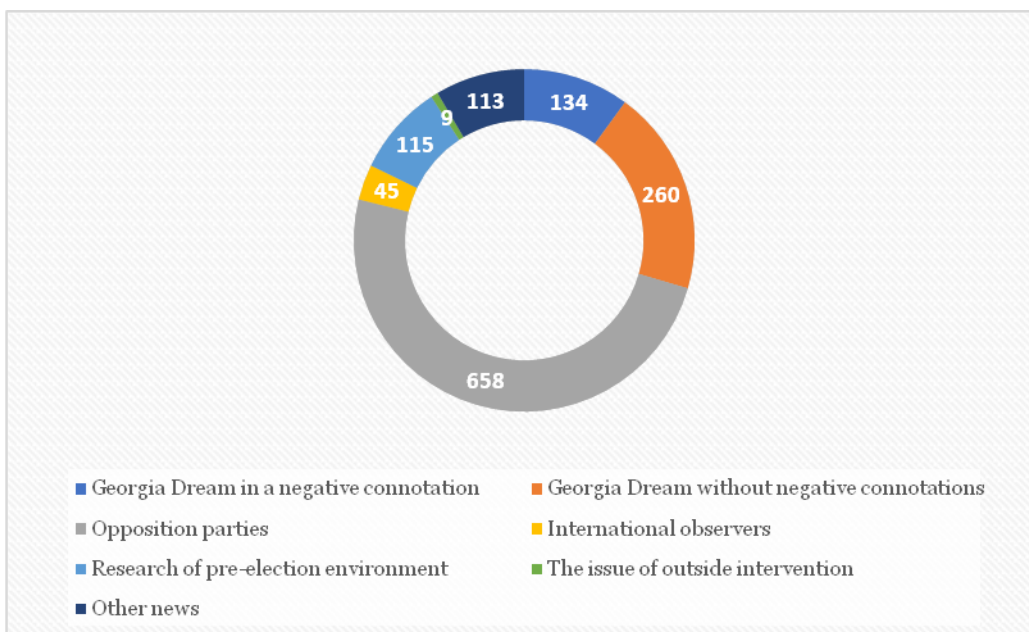


Fig. 6. *Rustavi 2* news stories

The TV channel *Rustavi 2* covered the electoral campaign in accordance with ethical norms. In their reports the activities of the election subjects were covered in a neutral manner. Parties had the opportunity to present pre-election programs in public-political programs. Every Sunday the “Night Courier” presenters acquainted the public with electoral programs, necessary documentation, and statistics. The channel has distanced itself from discriminatory statements. Leading figures criticized both the opposition and the ruling team.

As for the airtime, *Rustavi 2* managed to balance. In September, 25.6 % (positive 32 %, negative 12 %), 21.6 % (positive 14 %, negative 32 %), the rest less than 10 % (Figure 7).

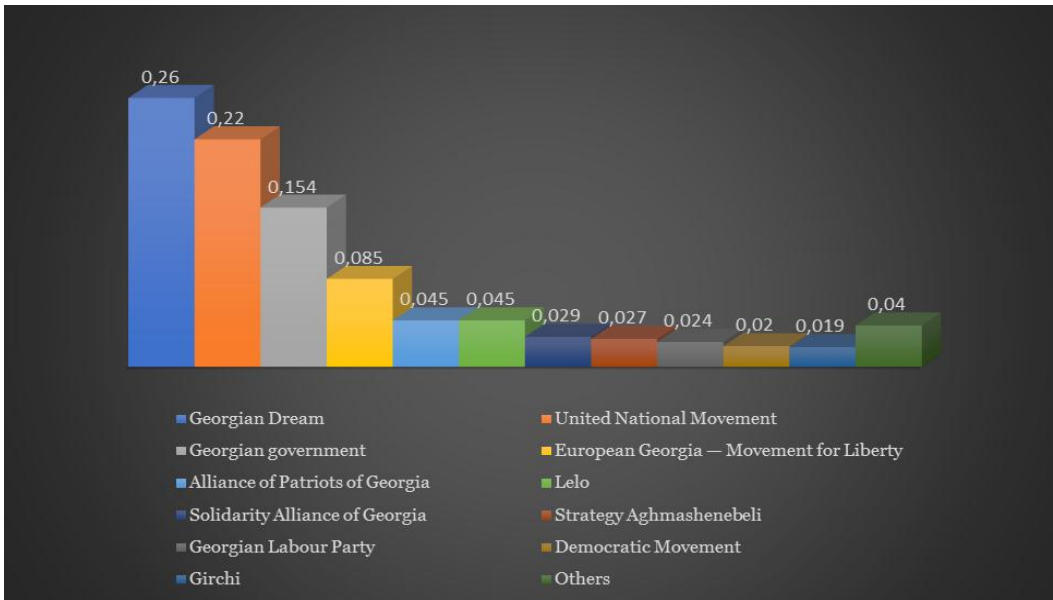


Fig. 7. Broadcast time of *Mtavari Arkhi* for September

In October *Rustavi 2* kept the balance in ether time. GD - 31.1 % (positive – 31 %, negative – 12 %), UNM – 15.8 % (positive – 17 %, negative – 17 %), for all other subjects – less than 10 % (Figure 8).

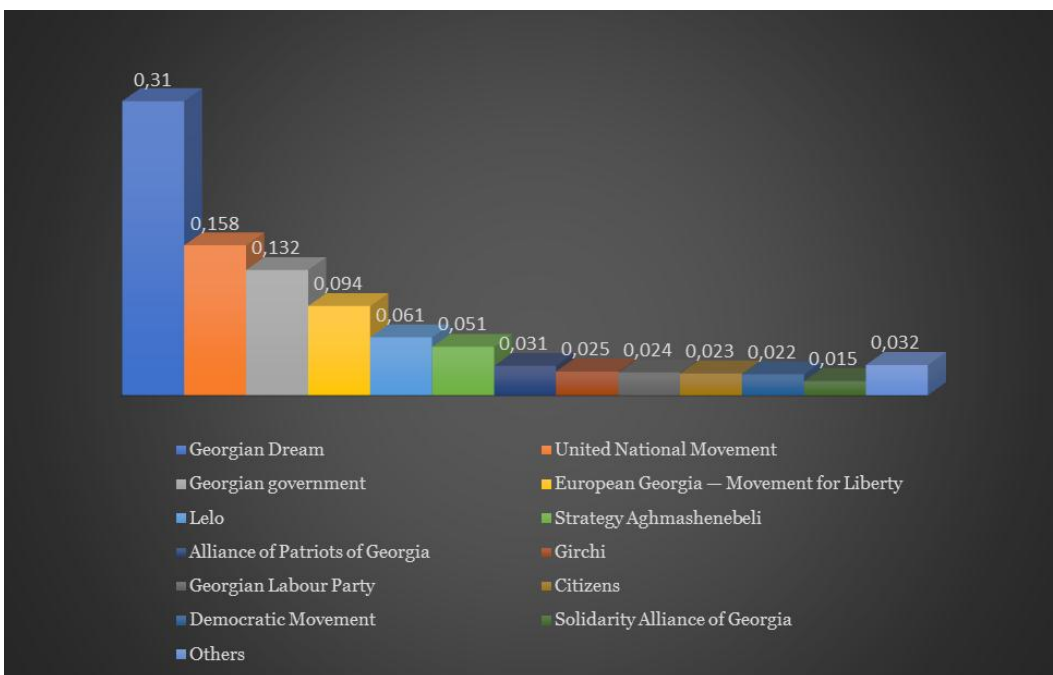


Fig. 8. Broadcast time of *Mtavari Arkhi* for October

In total, during the reporting period 222 interviews were recorded at *Rustavi 2* with both the ruling party and representatives of opposition parties and blocs (Figure 9). The channel focused on representing the interests of all parties involved in the electoral race. Independent candidates were also invited to the studio, what never happened on the *Mtavari Arkhi* air for two months.

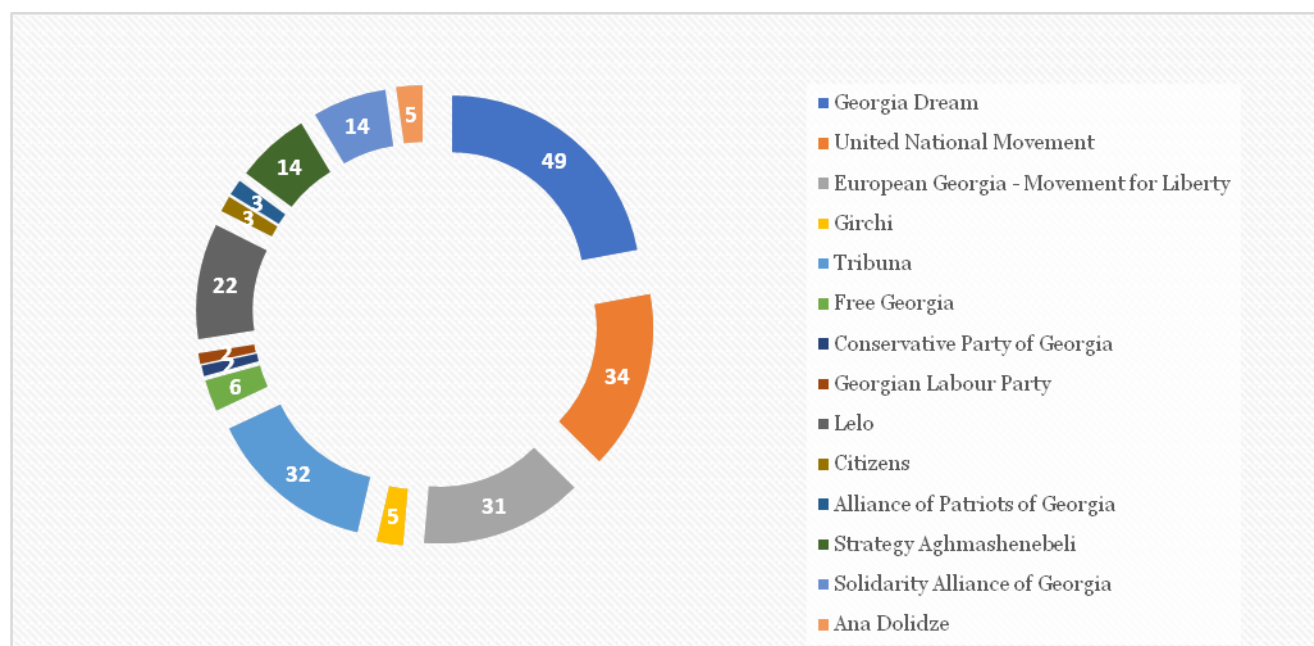


Fig. 9. Interviews with opposition parties

4. Results

Based on the studied information, patterns peculiar to each TV channel were formulated separately. The editorial office of *Mtavari Arkhi* maintained negative rhetoric addressed towards the ruling party Georgian Dream and related individuals. Since September 15 all their reports had negative content, including criticism towards the ruling party. The main cluster of information related to the ruling party was broadcast in a negative tone, including alleged involvement in physical violence, blackmailing, bribery, and other illegal activities aimed at intimidating opponents and rigging elections. While approximately one case of physical and other forms of violence were reported daily prior to September 15, this number of incidents increased to two and sometimes to three thereafter. These events were covered tendentiously; it contained criticism of *Georgian Dream* by the opposition party representatives, the editorial office produced more compromising TV stories and reports devoted to relations between the ruling party and its founder, former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, with Russia (*Mtavari Arkhi*).

The second pattern is related to information about the ruling party and its associates through investigative journalism and analytical prime-time reports. At least once a week the journalists mocked and discredited the ruling party and its founder Bidzina Ivanishvili. Obscene language and offensive epithets were used in those stories about state officials. The TV stories focused on the deterioration of life in Georgia, the collapse of the economy, revealed various schemes of the ruling party, including involvement in the financing from Russia and the connection of former Chairman of *Georgian Dream* Bidzina Ivanishvili with the Russian authorities and business actors.

The third pattern is the balance of critical reports about the GD and positive statements related to Georgia's former President Mikhail Saakashvili and UNM.

The main news cluster on *Mtavari Arkhi* was dedicated to criticism of the ruling party and the PR attempt of UNM and Mikhail Saakashvili. Thus, the channel broadcasts a discourse that affirms the incompetence of the government and the great competence of the opposition party in resolving existing issues. Thus, the TV channel calls on voters to give their voices for the UNM. *Mtavari Arkhi* enjoys great trust of the public and is the second most popular media. It is effectively implementer and affected the results (TrumTVinfo, 2021).

Mtavari Arkhi covers almost all activities of Mikhail Saakashvili and usually in a positive

way. Extensive comments of ex-president, live broadcasts, his speeches, and meetings in other countries were broadcasted. Saakashvili's political figure became particularly relevant after he was nominated for the premiership in Ukrainian government.

Mtavari Arkhi broadcasted exclusive, detailed reports on the issues of Georgian education system, economic collapse, the health system crisis, corruption, crumbling infrastructure, suspended projects – those were daily covered topics. The channel offered viewers exclusive stories about the hidden assets of high-ranking civil servants, paying special attention to alleged corruption deals and tenders involving members of the government or persons affiliated with *Georgian Dream*. Criticism of the authorities was the main goal of the TV channel, where journalists often violated professional ethics, and information was unbalanced.

On September 25th, the news program featured a story “Entrust to Misha” – campaign launched by ex-president Mikhail Saakashvili (*Mtavari Arkhi*). The story was about matters that required assistance of Mikhail Saakashvili in the villages of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Demands and problems were mainly related to infrastructural problems - water shortages, off-roads, etc. The plot contained accusations of the local government having squandered the funds allocated for solving these problems, although no specific documents were presented (for example, tenders, projects that could not be executed or were executed with defects, etc.).

The last pattern was the repetition of the same news several times a day. The reports mainly contained information, concerning physical violence, electoral fraud, and criticism of GD by representatives of the opposition spectrum.

Rustavi 2 had well-built broadcasting and the election coverage strategy. All the parties, from small to large, which conducted their electoral campaigns, were included in the airtime of the channel. The information mainly contained their pre-election meetings with voters and familiarization with the party program. Meetings of the ruling party were actively covered. A few pieces of news were focused on physical violence and other forms of electoral violations.

The channel actively covered the position of all parties. Members of both ruling and opposition parties were included in the live broadcasts. Interviews were also recorded with representatives of the ruling party. Representatives of the opposition also actively participated in the meetings and interviews.

The second pattern was revealed in the approach of *Rustavi 2* to the electoral race. There was the absence of critical stories or reports about the ruling party. They had only a few reports, in which members of the opposition parties criticized or blamed the *Georgian Dream* for violating pre-election norms, blackmailing, and threats.

As an important pattern in *Rustavi 2* approach to pre-election coverage was involvement of an external factor - “image of the enemy” formed by Russian Federation. Much of airtime was devoted to this topic, and was not only about party's ties with Russia, but also about Russia's direct attempts to interfere in the elections through various provocations, cyber-attacks, and official statements. At the same time, *Rustavi 2* covered appeals to the international community and the European Parliament, in which warned the country about possible interference in the elections by Russia.

Activities of the electoral subjects were presented in a neutral manner, and balance was maintained. Parties had the opportunity to present pre-election programs in socio-political programs. Both ruling and opposition parties were subjected to criticism.

5. Conclusion

The media have played an important role in the history of the independent Georgian Republic over the past 30 years. It is a historically proven fact that the media platform determined the success of the Rose Revolution in 2003, then provided an opportunity for the opposition to confront the authorities before the takeover of the TV channel *Imedi*. As a result, there was a democratic change of power in 2012, when ruling party of United National Movement conceded to the coalition of GD. The 2020 parliamentary elections were also a milestone in the country's modern history and media development.

The observation of political processes in the country suggests that in a situation of polarization inherent in a political system with two dominant centers of power, the media are an effective means of political contention. The research results of the pre-election race media content suggest trends and reveal patterns of mechanisms leading to regime transformation in Georgia.

The political environment in Georgia expressed itself mainly in the participation of actors in

the decision-making of political process, elections, and the formulation of the political agenda is both paradoxically broad and limited. The first is evidenced by the possibility of running for election and forming socio-political organisations and parties. On the other hand, the parliamentary majoritarian system established in Georgia, where had never occurred a precedent of coalition government, allows to concentrate all legislative and executive power in the hands of one party. At the same time, the opposition that has received parliamentary mandates exists nominally without any real leverage on the decisions of the government, unless it affects issues that require constitutional majority.

The only environment where political opponents can confront the ruling party is informational. This became possible when the current opposition has maintained and created new mass media, thus providing a public platform for direct dialogue with Georgian citizens.

Thus, the cluster of TV channels *Mtavari Arkhi* and *Rustavi 2* is an indicator of the struggle of key political forces in the country. Both TV channels attempt to influence public opinion in one way or another: sometimes more radically, or by softer means. Contention, or as it is being labeled in Georgia “polarization”, is likely to continue in the future if the political elites keep up with the current course of events towards democratization without discussing and setting certain rules of the game.

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