(TV) Media Causing Division: The Case of Georgia[1]

Abstract

This paper focuses on the electoral polarization in post-Soviet democracies, in which mass media are assigned to have great impact on political campaigns. The preparation for the elections during the election campaign was topical in every era. In the 19th century, new methods for conducting election campaigns developed in the United States. The Americanization of election campaign is distinguished with the characteristics such as special role of media in the pre-election period, political personalization, brittle ideological grounds and particular specialization of political campaign. The process of exerting influence by mass media on election campaign, which is described as political mediatization, takes the center stage of this paper. Mediatization in this context means the implementation of mass media logic within election campaigns. The election campaigns were in need of media professionals hired to navigate the campaign's strategy. With the emergence of campaign advisors, emerged the term „Mediatization." For the beginning of 1990s in Georgia, after 70 years of soviet governance, the first steps on the way of statehood had been made. In the post-Soviet Georgia, multiparty and competitive elections gave opportunity to the political parties to use foreign experience in the term of political campaign. The aim of the work is to examine the tendencies of Mediatization of election campaign in Georgia from 2012 to 2021. In accordance with the research hypothesis, weak institutionalization of party system creates a favorable ground for a Mediatization of political campaign. In the research process characteristics of political mediatization existing in post-Soviet Georgia had been analyzed.

Qualitative research methods have been utilized during the study, namely: a) Expert interviews with journalists and political consultants; b) In-depth interviews with representatives of political parties; c) In-depth interviews with selected electorate. Qualitative research methods were chosen for the work because the aim is to understand the tendencies of Mediatization of election campaign in Georgia from the point of view of respondents. Qualitative methods are more open and look more descriptions, by gathering responses like these it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the subject.

Key Words: Polarization, Election Campaign, Mediatization, Georgia

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Introduction

In post-Soviet democracies, political parties are characterized with weak organization and political personalization, whereby politicians become the main anchor of interpretation and evaluation of political process. Moreover, in these countries the fragile ideological grounds of political parties conditioned spectacular character of election campaign. In post-Soviet Georgia the weak institutionalization of party system has played determining role in terms of transformation of political campaign. The general notion in most studies (Farrel, 1996; Farrel, Kolody and Medvic, 2001; Mancini, 1999; Norris, 2004; Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Plasser and Plasser, 2002) is that recent decades have seen a process of change and convergence in contemporary styles of campaign in established and developing democracies. In sum, only a few studies have concentrated on Georgian campaigns.

In Georgia, like in other post-Soviet democracies, the Mediatization process of election campaign had been actively implemented. It is noteworthy that personalization of politics and fragile ideological and structural basis of Georgian party system were the main characteristics of the first years of independence. At the initial stage in the post-Soviet Georgia the task of parties was mobilization of wide mass for demonstration. However, strengthen of mass media and media technologies played turning role in the term of political campaign transformation. Mediatization is a theory that argues that the media shapes the processes of political communication as well as the society in which that communication take place. In Georgia, mediatization of politics had been carried out gradually and reached the peak during the "Rose Revolution."

Short period of governance of Zviad Gamsakhurdia doesn't give us opportunity of comprehensive analysis of the political campaign. Significant prerequisites for mediatization of election campaign emerged during Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency. For the purpose of this research, Shevardnadze's presidency can be divided in two stages in terms of mediatization: the first covers the first half of 1990s and it may be conventionally called initial stage; and the second stage - the second half of 1990s and further period up to 2003, which may be called transitional period. Political mediatization had been actively implemented during and after the "Rose Revolution." In september 2012, after days of rumors on social media, Georgian TV channels began broadcasting several video recordings of torture and rape in prison, in capital of Georgia. The scandal was unique in Georgian history and paved the way for Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream Coalition to win the 2012 parliamentary vote. In the last nine years in political processes role of

media was significantly increased and the modern technologies of political communication were actively used. Georgia's media landscape has remained pluralistic, but very polarized. It has become an unfortunate trend that the government representatives refuse to participate in the programs of the media critical of the government. The media, especially TV, are perceived by politicians as instruments of political struggle. Financial sustainability of TV companies and disinformation in social media remain a serious challenges for Georgian media.

To complete the picture and to show it from the angle of my own research, I suggest to examine the tendencies of Mediatization of election campaigning in Georgia from 2012 to 2021. The thesis research is that weak institutionalization of party system creates a favorable ground for a Mediatization of election campaign. To verify this thesis one should put the following questions: 1) How the party system institutionalization affect political Mediatization in Georgia; 2) In what features is the evolution of Mediatizationg is shown. To try to answer these questions, this research aims to explore them through the example of Georgia's 2012-2021 elections. One of the ways of obtaining this information was to conduct qualitative interviews.

The motivation for conducting this research came from learning that similar campaigning trends were occurring in countries around the world despite their specific histories and political landscape. In addition, since this topic is largely under-researched in Georgia, the research also hopes to contribute to the academic understanding of campaigning developments in such a context.

Literature Review

For the last period the interest in the research of political campaign in political sciences increased (Plasser, Plasser, 2002). It was interesting the opinion of the various authors that the Americanization of political campaign had reached the peak in the „colored revolution" countries, where the party system is distinguished with weak institutionalization (Anable, 2006, pp. 7-43; Dobbs, 2000, In: Polese & O'Beachain, 2011; MacKinnon, 2007; Sussman, 2006, pp. 15-29; Sussman & Krader, 2008, pp. 91-112). Swanson and Mancini consider mediatization as a key element of Americanization (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). During the study I spent much time to the search of criteria of relevant evaluation of institutionalism of party system. Finally, I focused

my attention to the works of Mainwaring, Scully and Torcal (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Mainwaring, 1999; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2005).

Early authors Schiller, and Boyd-Barrett discussed the Americanization, as a result of American cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1968; Boyd-Barret, 1977). Such a radical approach was changed later. It became clear that Americanization didn't mean that this process always and everywhere was going on with the same effects and intensity (Swanson, Mancini, 1996, p. 6). Negrine and Papathanassopoulos have outlined that transformation of political campaign mostly is conditioned by the ongoing processes in media in the country (Negrine, Papathanassopoulos, 1996, p. 59). The model of "Import-Export" of election campaign presented by Norris indicates that Americanization process „implies loans of those campaign technologies, which should be more useful" (Norris, 2004, p.1). The term Americanization has critics. Holtz-Bacha thinks that it should be replaced by modernization, which is more focused on professionalism and endogenous changes (Holtz-Bacha, 2004, p. 15). Scammel replaces Americanization with globalization and considers that its driving factors are mass media and organizational structures of parties (Scammel, 1998, p. 15). Even though the authors criticize the term Americanization, each of them acknowledge the importance of the experience accumulated in USA during the transformation process of political campaign. Thus, we can say that term "Americanization" implies mass spread of American electoral technologies, also modernization of political campaign and professionalism.

Despite differences of opinion on Americanization, there is a common characteristic in different countries like mediatization. According to the Mediatization theory certain changes in the election campaigning have occurred because of media changes. Mediatization theory suggests strong and weak forms of mediatization. The starting point for a strong version mediatization is the argument that contemporary societies have become permeated by the media (Hjavard, 2008, p. 105) and they can no longer conceptualized as being outside society exerting a specific influence. Stromback and Esser claim that media content is no longer dictated by „political logic" but by „media logic" that compels political actors from above (Stromback and Esser, 2009, p. 216). Nowadays, politicians and their aides are spending more time considering the ways in which they and their policies are presented. If politicians and political parties understand how the media operate, they can use this knowledge in their pursuit of political power. The weak form of mediatization and its advocates see mediatization in relation to other social and cultural processes. The main effect of modern media is that they bringing down the social walls that separate people.

The main theoretical point that can be derived from this form of mediatization is that mediatization is a meta-process, together with globalization and influence democracy and politics (Krotz, 2007, p. 257).

Stated differently, mediatization means that the media form a system in its own right, independent although interdependent on other social systems such as the political system (Stromback, 2008; Hjavard, 2008) Stromback's theory of mediatization traces four phases of change in the balance between the political and media logics shaping political communication. Media logic entails news-production according to journalistic ctriteria and commercial imperatives. Political logic requires the needs of political institutions to be placed centre stage (Stromback, 2008). In the first phase, the mass media begin constituting the main communication channel citizens and politicians. At phase second, the media cease unconditionally mediating messages preferred by political actors. At Stromback's third phase political actors must adopt to a fully marketized media logic. In the fourth phase, political actors allow media logic and its accompanying commerce-driven standarts to become a built-in part of the governing process (Stromback, 2008, pp. 239-240). In new democracies and hybrid-regimes politicians attempt to harness the process of mediatization to their advantage, for example, new media technologies to flood media space with contradictory messages, so that audiences are confused as to what narrative to believe. As political parties take advantage of mass media for communicating their campaigns, they have to adapt to the media's production routines and formats. Contemporary mediatization accord a growing rage of media actors extensive access to digital platforms. This decreases state control of news narrative. Although, when analyzing a contradictory influence of the global media environment on journalistic, especially in new democracies, we should acknowledge that politicians continue to perceive the media environment as an instrument capable of serving their interests and of informing their own behavior to beneficial effect.

Though in most new democracies governments have maintained a great deal of control over the main broadcasts its hegemony is undermined by an alternative voices of   international origin. Therefore, controlling the media is no longer effective. Instead, political parties have to adapt new media strategies and they replace the development of organizational structures (Voltmer, 2011). The primary purpose of these parties is to function as electoral machines for candidates, often without any ideological vision and media strategies are essential for electoral success. Whitin media system, there are hierarchies, with some media being more important in shaping the overall

media logic. During the last decades television has arguably been the most influential medium. Although some believe that the Internet will change this, thus far, the Internet has not replaced the dominant media (Schultz, 2004). Television has certain formats and processes and they need to be in the struggle to capture people's attention. Observers of the global political landscape suggest that the internet in general, and social media in particular have their own independent effects on politics in both established democracies and autocratic regimes (Diamond and Platter, 2010). Social media allow politicians to receive feedback on policy actions and to discuss proposals. Such feedback could be used for political improvement. It could also be used for political surveillance. The ability to post content using anonymous or impersonated accounts enable the manipulation of online content seen by real users, potentially leading to political persuasion.

To sum up, the current debate on the mediatization of politics has developed a compelling theoretical framework to understand how a modern media environment shapes the way in which politics is communicated. However, little is known about how different conditions – media ecologies, political systems and communication cultures impact of mediatization. We argue it is important to understand mediatization as a reciprocal process. The processes associated with the mediatization of politics have put emerging democracies on a new phase of transition.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The goal of the present paper is to examine the tendencies of Mediatization of election campaigning in Georgia from 2012 to 2021. Namely, shall be determined how mediatization of election campaign happened. This study draws on a dataset of semi-structured interviews with journalists, representatives of political parties and selected electorate. A purposive sampling technique was employed in the selection of respondents. Semi-structured discussions involved the interviewer working through a list of discussion points. So, this gave the interviewer some latitude to guide the interview. The transcripts from the interviews were then analyze.

The theoretical framework of the research is the theory of Mediatization. Mediatization, as a theory, explains the manners in which social and political institutions are affected by the media. Hjarvard (2008) defines mediatization as „the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic." In accordance with the mentioned theory, when politicians frame or polarize issues in such a manners as to give them a

better chance of being covered by the media, they are simply submitting to the logic of the media. A simply way to conceptualizing mediatization is to regard it as a situation in which other institutions to an increasing degree become dependent on resources that the media control. Thus in a mediatized world, the logics of other social institutions are influenced by the logic of the media (Hjarvard, 2013). Hjarvard (2008) regards mediatization as a non-universal process which may not characterize all societies. He views it as a primarily a phenomenon that is manifested in modern or chiefly western societies. Although he posits that with the march of globalization, more cultures and societies have come within the grip of mediatization. Noteworthy, under the term of globalization we suppose the process of Americanization. To be precise, the transformation of political campaign is caused due to the ongoing transformations inside the country as well as ongoing processes in conditions of globalization. This is a sort of "network", because the world practice of the election campaign is spread exactly from the USA. From the mentioned comes the term Americanization.

The Americanization process is related to the political and communication transformations in the country. Namely, the starting point of the mentioned theory is that the structural changes on the macro-level (mass media, technologies, party system, and social structures (public institutions and relationships) cause appropriate action on the micro-level (parties, candidates and journalists). The ongoing changes in the new democracies create a favorable basis and the "adaptation and introduction of experience of American election campaign" is successfully implemented (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001), which is known as Americanization / Standardization. The theory of Americanization for evaluation of Americanization of political campaign represents mediatization criterium, specially, political instrumentalization of televisions;

Plasser thinks that one of the important reasons of mediatization is the fact that television is the major transmitter of information (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Television's concentration on the personalities of the political leaders and the way in which it uses those personalities to frame political issues and events has several explanations. The most obvious is in the way that television presents information to its viewers. Because of the way it communicates information through visual images, it is easier for television to disseminate information through a familiar personality rather than through an abstract institution.

Once it became clear that election campaign instead of ideological confrontation implied mediatization, the issue of professionalization of election campaign became urgent. The political

campaign has acquired more "scientific" nature (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). For election campaign the assistance of specialists – consultants became necessary, which is one more characteristic of Americanization. However, the Americanization hadn't been equally carried out everywhere. In the countries where the democratization and transition had been successfully completed the political transformation was developed through hybridization, but in the transitional democracies, where is observed weak institutionalization of party systems had been implemented Americanization / Standardization of the election campaign.

The purpose of the research was to explain how the transformation of the political campaign was conducted in Georgia, in accordance with the Mediatization theory. For the in-depth analysis of transformation of the election campaign it was required to record interview with the key informants.[2] For this purpose, the "expert" interviews were recorded with journalists, political consultants and public relations experts. They were selected through the targeted and snowball method. Mediatization of political campaign had been reflected in the election strategies of the parties. Considering the abovementioned, in-depth interviews had been conducted with those representatives of the political parties who works in the term of planning of election campaign or have relevant information. In the selection of the parties my task was the in-depth analysis of strategy development of political campaign. Upon the mentioned I applied to the targeted selection and as criteria I separated the qualified electoral subject status of the party during the monitoring period.

One of the goals of the study was to research the electorates' perception about Mediatization process. At the initial stage of the research it was outlined that between the parties and experts 2003 and 2012 years had been discussed as the turning phases, in terms of mediatization. Taking into consideration the mentioned the research was guided by the following criteria: 1. Should be considered the age of the respondents and interview persons who were watching the ongoing processes in early 1990s as voters; 2. The interviewed respondents should be permanent residence of Georgia for the last 35 years, in order their election campaign model perception not to be surficial. Thus, it was outlined that the respondents should be interviewed considering gender and age proportion (55+) and 35 years census of living in Georgia. During the study in total had been conducted 30 in-depth interviews with voters.

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[2] All the informants have agreed to publicly display their names.

Mediatization in Post-Soviet Georgia

This paper applies the concept of mediatization as a theoretical framework to post-soviet Georgia. In doing so it addresses the question of how modern changes in the media environment impact on the dynamics and outcomes of election campaigns. Over the last decades politics has been undergoing changes, which have transformed the institutions, processes and the political culture. We argue that even though that the concept of mediatization has been in developed democracies, the process of mediatization is equally at work in hybrid democracies. Moreover, the unique features of transitional democracies, their institutional fragility and personalization can be perceived as the basis of mediatized political processes. In post-soviet democracies institution building takes place in an extraordinary circumstance that makes it difficult for political parties to influence public opinion. Political parties have adapted the content of their messages to make them compatible with media news values. During transition period, the capacity of political institutions to determine the course of politics is weakened and this position of weakness might open up opportunities for the media to shape the political agenda. In post-soviet Georgia political parties rely heavily on the media as a central resource to enhance and achieve political goals. Modern communication technologies and media strategies are highly effective tools to mobilise public opinion. The country is described as „television-centric.” The majority of population get information from television, while newspaper readership is meager.

Trust Towards Media (%) in Georgia
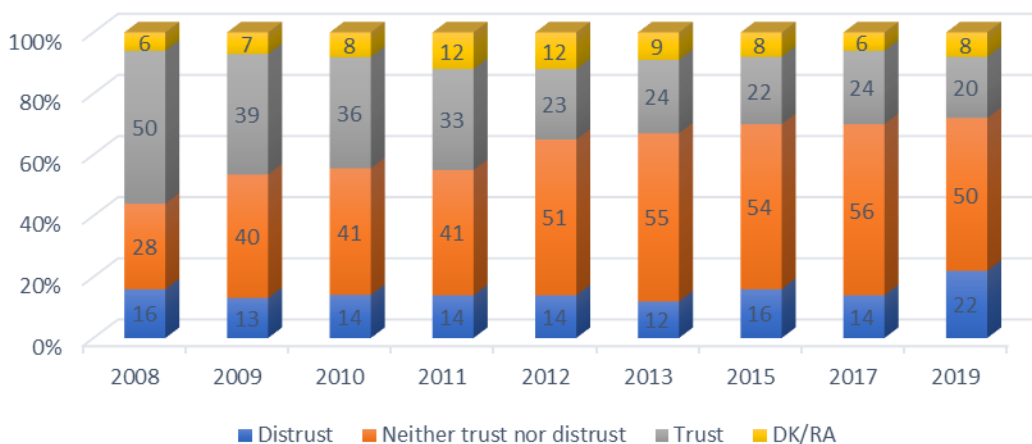
Source: Caucasus Research Resource Center https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/TRUMEDI/

Pre-Polarization stage

After Rose Revolution TV outlets had slow down usual activity and turned focused on public entertainment. During the governance of United National Movement the country most top rated TV Rustavi 2 in the permanent election campaign regime tried to form successful image of ruling party. Some media outlets had significantly toned down their criticism of the government. National TV stations were taken over by businesses close to the government. Rustavi 2, considered as the TV station of ,,victorious people" had been at the center of Georgian politics and shaping public perceptions for more than a decade. On November 7, 2007, a series of anti-government protests took place across Georgia, government forces used violent and heavily armed special troops raided the private television station Imedi. Another factor affection the further complication the environment for independent media was the war with Russia in 2008. However, if we consider the ongoing processes since 2003, Television debates (,,Gamis Kurieri." ,,Gamis Mzrea," ,,Archevanis Zgvarze") slowly disappeared after the Rose Revolution. The decline programmes was followed by the liquidation of several television stations themselves. Self-censorship was a term that was invented by the government and some media outlets. They tried to justify this process by saying that it was decision taken by owners. The country's four nationwide networks, private Rustavi 2, TV Mze and TV Imedi and the Georgian Public Broadcaster, were acknowledged as being subject to government influence. Several TV stations, such as Iveria, Channel 9 and 202 have vanished from the airwaves under the Rose Revolution.

The freedom of the media outlets became one of the pressing issues ahead of the 2012 Parliamentary Election in Georgia. Saakashvili's government control of the national TV stations created unfair competition among those running for elected office. The biggest challenger in the October 1, parliamentary vote was Georgian Dream, a party founded by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Before the 2012 election, Ivanishvili owned the TV outlets Channel 9 and GDS. Channel 9 was shut down after the election and pro-government TV Imedi bought GDS. On September 18 – two weeks before the parliamentary election – a video to television stations showing prison officials abusing prisoners. The clip shows multiple prisoners being beaten by severely by the guards. One of the key channels that broke the story was Channel 9. Television had been the main front in the battle for parliament. Media outlets remained largely dominated by politics. One day after the elections, Mikheil Saakashvili conceded that United National

Movement had been defeated. The prison scandal is widely believed to have resulted in Saakashvili's party losing power.

Media polarization stage

The new government by the Georgian Dream party made steps toward greater freedom in the media landscape by removing the licensing requirement for terrestrial broadcasters. However, in the lead-up to the Parliamentary Elections of 2016, TV outlets loyal to the government closed down political talk-shows for no reason. Since Georgian Dream came to power, Rustavi 2 had been critical of the government. An ownership dispute case was brought against TV company by owners in 2015. Ownership of Rustavi 2 has been transferred a previous owner, after a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in 2019.

In 2015 TV Pirveli was established as a sportscast TV channel and later acquiring the general license. The broadcasters owners family had a business partnership with the influential businessman and leader of the opposition party Lelo. TV Pirveli has grown as an important opposition medium. TV stations leading towards the government Imedi, GDS, Maestro and Georgian Public Broadcaster discounted major talk shows open to opposition voices in 2016. Every political party successfully elected in to parliament during the 2016 parliamentary election had an affiliated television station.

In 2017 during the local self-government elections talk shows were dedicated to presentations of the election subjects rather than discussions. Lack of in-depth election reporting that would help voters in making informed choice remained a challenge for all TV outlets. The most critical coverage towards authorities and evident sympathy towards National Movement was demonstrated on Rustavi 2. Georgian Public Broadcaster and TV Imedi were characterized by a soft, modest reporting towards the Georgian Dream. Compared to the previous year, the cases of hate speech had decreased.

In 2018 media polarization reached its peak, the bias was revealed in negative coverage of unwanted candidates. On one side there was Rustavi 2 involved in the negative coverage of the candidate supported by the ruling party. On the other side there were Public Broadcaster, Imedi TV and Obiektivi, involved in negative coverage of the opposition candidate. The TV outlets had been providing less space for discussion. In 2016-2017 a positive trend was observed in terms of

decreased of usage hate speech, however insulting statements were used in negative coverage of 2018 presidential candidates.

In 2019 a new Georgian opposition channel, Mtavari Arkhi was founded by the former director of the TV channel Rustavi 2 and journalists that had left Rustavi 2 after the new owner began staff firings. In 2019 was founded Formula TV which was also established by the journalists and media personalities formerly working in Rustavi 2. After that Mtavari arkhi and TV Formula had broadcasted Georgia's media environment grew more polarized and increasingly associated with political parties.

In 2020 during the parliamentary elections media environment was pluralistic but sharply polarized, with broadcasts being biased in favour of either the government or the opposition. Their partiality expressed itself through their negative coverage of certain electoral subjects. As in previous years, the lack of in-depth reporting on electoral issues remained on TV outlets. The broadcasters frequently lacked balance and disseminated unverified information. Instances of manipulation increased compared to previous years.

In 2021 partisan divisions between media camps increased. The pre-election period was marred by an insufficient number of substantive candidate debates and media centered election content on personalities. During the local self-government elections although all national televisions closely followed the events, most of them negatively portrayed political forces they did not favour. The polarized media was saturated with content exclusively covering the vicissitudes of the political struggle.

In the Americanization process of election campaign, media indicated on the "Carnivalization" function, when a concrete media source has special power and influence on politics (Caspi, 1996, p. 182). As a result of inquire had been outlined that key stage, when media, namely TV had drastic influence on political processes. The majority of interviewed in this regard allocates Rose Revolution of 2003, pre-election period of 2012 Parliamentary election and ,,Gavrilov's night" protests in 2019: "Everyone who remembers that period agrees that, in fact, in half TV made the processes. We remember those TV footage, which were broadcasting by TV. Media never had such impact on the political process" *[Temuri, 70 years old, Physicist, Panaskerteli Str.].* However there were several cases when respondents except in the Rose Revolution, 2012 parliamentary elections and ,,Gavrilov's night" saw role of TV in the political

processes: "The role of TV was especially great during confrontation of 9 April and TV raid in 7 November" *[Lamzira, 57 years old, Teahcer, Gldani].*

The party representatives interviewed by me are noting that media bears crucial role in election campaign in Georgia: "Media doesn't reflect reality simply, it creates reality and the technologies of this is quite developed. Who manages media, who stands behind media this is policy and it comes out certain linked circle" *[Interview with Representative of "European Georgia"].* Media has great role in communication with voters: „Any politician who tries to come to power is trying to influence mass media" *[Representative of "National Democracy Party"].*

Sociologists and Consultants talk about special influence of mass media on election campaign: "It is shown by surveys and is obviously that TV has great influence in Georgia. TV hasn't any competitor so far. Often the Society starts thinking in the similar form as the events are packed by televisions and the mentioned is very important for elections" *[Interview with Koba Turmanidze, president of CRRC Georgia].* In Georgia the formation of politics is largely performed through media: „In this regard should be distinguished TV. All crucial stage in Georgia is connected with television, the "Winners TV"– "Rustavi 2" and after "Rose Revolution" has emerged the Channel 9, which based on the famous footages could transform public opinion" *[Interview with political journalist, Vaka Gorgiladze].*

Even through the number of broadcasters has recently increased significantly, this has not weakened polarization. The government is not tolerant towards critical media. In parallel with the media critical of the government, pro-government TV channels also operate in the country. In sum, the Georgian media, especially TV outlets, are perceived by political parties as instruments of political struggle.

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