



**Summary to Roundtable Discussion**  
**Electoral Discourse Ahead of Georgia's Local Elections**  
**September 21, 2021**

The [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy](#), the [European Platform for Democratic Elections](#), and the [Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation](#) hosted a public discussion during which experts discussed the politically polarized environment, media landscape, and electoral discourse during the election campaign to the 2 October local elections. The local elections have an outsized significance with the opposition campaigning on this being a referendum on the ruling Georgian Dream party, which, according to the opposition, has left little space for political discourse about the issues that impact the daily lives of the voters. Recent events on 5 July, where 53 journalists were attacked and a cameraman died after being brutally assaulted while covering anti-LGBT+ pride demonstrations, have cast a shadow on these elections and have galvanized journalists to act increasingly as political activists rather than unbiased journalists, which furthers the polarization in the media.

**Discourse during the campaign**

Discourse by political parties during the campaign has been affected by the political crisis in the country and the decision of the ruling party Georgian Dream to withdraw from the EU brokered 'Charles Michel' agreement. This step has led to the opposition seeing this election more as a referendum on Georgian Dream rather than a proper local election. National politics rather than local issues therefore dominate these elections.

Pre-election discourse in Georgia rarely has been issue based and political programs of parties and candidates are neither being presented to voters via official or unofficial political campaigns nor discussed in the media. Experts also note that the media is more reactionary rather than agenda setting in Georgia and that when they are agenda setting, that they do not report on issues in an unbiased or credible manner. Voters therefore receive a very one-sided picture on issues through the media and do not receive clear information about the political choices placed in front of them. Media in Georgia thus replicates the same deep polarization that persists in the political landscape.

**Politically polarized media landscape**

The OSCE ODIHR has raised concerns about a deteriorating media environment in Georgia and stated that it strongly depends on business or political interests, and largely mirrors the polarization between governing and opposition parties.<sup>1</sup> Experts underlined this and stated that there is pluralism, but that coverage of news is not very good as they are selective in their coverage and represent the interests of their owners. Especially during an election, they do not cover political opponents in an unbiased factual manner, which is not helpful for voters to inform themselves about candidates.

In relation to local elections, regional media would normally play a great role in informing citizens about local issues driving the elections. In Georgia, regional news is struggling for survival, which has been aggravated by the pandemic but was already a trend previously. The quality of news from regional media has therefore dropped even more and they are currently not in a position to provide better coverage of local issues.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/2/498261.pdf>



## **Attacks against journalists and discrediting campaigns**

One unique aspect of this election has been the increased aggression towards journalists and media representatives who have become targets of discrediting campaigns. Previously, politicians were mainly the targets of this, but since the 5 July events where 53 journalists were attacked, journalists have been galvanized to become politically active to stand up for their rights, which has unfortunately further deepened political polarization in the media. Several experts criticized the lacking sense of accountability of the government to fully investigate these attacks on journalists. The organizers of these attacks have still not been arrested. One expert noted that the attackers were well trained thugs and that the group involved in organizing the attacks and who has expressed sympathies with the attackers has been able to receive a broadcasting license in Georgia to spread their anti-Western anti-liberal messages to a broader audience.

As a result of the 5 July attacks one cameraman died and it was noted that discrediting campaigns were spread about his death using narratives familiar in the Russian media sphere, including using homophobic language and accusing him of having a drug addiction.

Experts noted that elections are a good litmus test for how free journalists are in a country. While in the West covering elections is an exciting period for journalists, in the 'Eastern bloc' journalists tend to be concerned as this can become a period during which their work becomes restricted. For this election, the violence towards journalists and lack of investigation into these attacks have cast a shadow over these elections and are a point of concern as they may negatively impact the quality of the elections and indicate a negative trend concerning the media environment in the country.

It is not only journalists that suffer discrediting campaigns, media watchdogs and other civil society organizations, including election monitors such as ISFED, have also become targets of online discrediting campaigns.

## **Social media campaigning and rhetoric**

COVID-19 has caused an increase in the use of online campaigning and a move away from traditional media. The issue in this lies in the fact that campaigning on social media is not as regulated as campaigning is on traditional media. In addition to this, Georgia holds the 5<sup>th</sup> spot worldwide for being targeted most frequently by domestic coordinated inauthentic behavior on social media,<sup>2</sup> meaning that disinformation or divisive narratives are spread by fake accounts or bots, which can negatively impact the ability of a voter to inform themselves with factual information before an election.

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) monitors this inauthentic behavior on social media as well as recently set up false media pages which are used to assist the discrediting campaigns of one political party against another. Out of 12 new false media outlets on social media, 10 of these are operated by the ruling party and spread discrediting information about the opposition. The danger with these false media pages is that citizens may not be able to differentiate between real and false ones, which could influence their electoral choice.

In addition to these media pages, there are various groups and other pages that openly spread disinformation and strongly support or discredit certain parties. It is interesting to note that the total number of discrediting posts against Georgian Dream is higher, but that posts against the opposition seem to have a higher engagement. Experts comment that these posts have better visuals and clearer messaging, which indicates

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<sup>2</sup> Facebook report on information operations, 2021.

that these discrediting campaigns on social media against the opposition are better planned and organized.<sup>3</sup>

A further interesting trend noted by social media monitors is the use of nationalistic and religious sentiments for political purposes, with several social media pages created to spread these sentiments in relation to a specific party to stoke support or to discredit another party or candidate.

The negative online campaigning is also accompanied by similar offline campaigns. Monitors provided an example of recently appearing campaign posters which collectively try to discredit opposition parties.

### **Proposed solutions and a way forward**

The issue of the pre-election environment was highlighted by domestic observers as a major issue that international observers should pay attention to, including campaigning, as this period defines the elections. Other issues to be aware of are the tremendously unequal resources in the media landscape in favor of the ruling party, abuse of state resources and involvement of public servants in ruling party election campaigning.

There are institutional ways to solve the media environment issue in Georgia, such as through a media regulator. There is a National Communication Commission in Georgia which decides who receives a license to broadcast and there is a Code of Conduct for broadcasters that is actually very elaborated, but it is not widely promoted and lacks provisions that would allow the media regulator to take any actions against a broadcaster for not fulfilling provisions. Any citizen could also report media for violating the rules and broadcasters are required to have a complaints mechanism, but broader public awareness about this possibility would be needed.

However, to enforce any of the existing regulations in a meaningful manner, there must be more independence in the media, which means investments are needed in independent media so that they are not reliant on their owners or big donors. The zero-sum game mentality of media would also need to be changed so that media stops seeing their job as beating the other media outlets, but rather to inform citizens and win them over to their outlet.

As we see other institutions coming under attack, international experts noted the importance in supporting independent CSOs at this crucial stage during which some see democratic backsliding or a deteriorating media environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Further details on the social media monitoring of ISFED during this election in their latest report <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-pirveli-shualeduri-angarishi->.