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Mediterraneanization as a Developmental Phase of Media in Transitional Democracies: Case of Georgia

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Abstract

For almost three decades, there has been ongoing analysis of post-communist transitional media as a mutual product of Soviet ideological legacy and Western liberal values in the West, as well as in the post-Soviet sphere. In the transition period, media pluralism has become a common occurrence in contrast with the Soviet period. Reforms directed from the top are rendered arbitrary, and as a result, the unpredictable process gained momentum and was the last straw to end the Soviet Union. What are the specific elements of Mediterraneanization that are clearly expressed in the Georgian reality and what spot should Georgia's media occupy on the map of systems? To answer this question, emphasis should be placed on specific issues such as the influence of the state and political parties on the media agenda, integration of media and political elites, professionalization of journalism, as well as the sociocultural context of the period of independence. This paper focuses on answering these questions. The present study is the compilation of quantitative and qualitative approaches. 12 media researchers and theoreticians, mainly teachers of Georgian higher education institutions, were selected for the research along with the review of the scientific literature and theory related to the issue. The semi-structured interviews, based on a preliminary questionnaire, were conducted with each researcher. The experts' responses were processed and compared according to quantitative and qualitative

characteristics. Text material was condensed and key messages were highlighted. On the basis of the results, their interpretation and cause-and-effect connection was made.

Keywords: Media models, Mancini-Halin classification, Mediterreanization, Media business, Professionalisation, Politisation

Introduction

For almost three decades, there have been ongoing analyses of post-communist transitional media as a mutual product of Soviet ideological legacy and Western liberal values in the West, as well as in the post-Soviet sphere. Research and study of interim media transpire in a broad discourse based on such doctrinal platforms such as philosophy, ideology signification, and sociology.

Undoubtedly, media platforms played a crucial role in the transitional 1990's by initiating the exposure of negative processes, which the communist party preferred to ignore. The collapse of the Soviet system and adaptation of free market economy called for an agenda to empower media systems with new tasks (standard missions in the classical sense). New goals and challenges were generated and propaganda, promulgation, and mass control had to be restored with attributes of classic media, such as proximity, independence, and the right to free expression. The media had to become an information resource for the public and business practices had to be feasible for individuals.

Freedom and independence translated into qualitative transformation on all levels of management. As a result of such changes in the late 1980's, new and revived media systems, though still in partisan organ capacity, were secured and a formal process of fundamental changes in national elites, such as regrouping and interchanges commenced. New popular leaders whose political views were increasingly taken into account emerged. This was followed by their affiliate media platforms and entities.

Furthermore, in the context of institutional disability (Mickiewicz, 2000), media democratization process did not go well in a number of states of the Soviet bloc.

In so-called hybrid regimes, with their transitional economies', media models were instituted through struggle and mistakes. This was not a comprehensive process. Changes were unfolding uninhibitedly, without specific framework, limits or criteria and often without legislative provisions. This most fascinating period of Georgia's reality (revamping of sovereignty, independence, formation of democratic institutions) was not analyzed properly. Therefore, scientific resources on the topic are scarce in Georgia. Although this period requires systematization, it is necessary to enrich the history of transitional period journalism with expertise and find the niche to

which contemporary media model belongs. Accordingly, it is necessary to take into account many aspects of socioeconomic and cultural-political context and find answers to the following questions: How has Georgia's media evolved after 30 years of independence and what characteristics determine Georgian media's position on the world charts?

On one hand, post-independence Georgia's media development and its unity with European and post-Soviet states is quite compelling, as well as the tendencies that secure its distinguished place among the media systems.

Media Systems//Mediterranean Model

The creation and differentiation of media systems subsequent to global processes has been crucial since 1970's and 1980's, when American cultural imperialism dominated Europe's cultures and medias, which coincided with the dissolution of integrated Soviet ideological sphere.

Media environment study of the transitional period in Georgia and other communist bloc states (Mancini & Halin, 2012) is a very compelling one with the consideration of the theoretical framework based on Italianization of media, a term coined in the mid 1990's (Splichal, 1994). Splichal considers the commercialization and politicization of media development to be characteristics of so-called Italian line. Mancini (1991) argues that the situation in eastern and central Europe media is very close to Italian media systems. The term "Media Italianization" was further expanded to include Mediterraneanization. Scholars agree that the term "Mediterraneanization" refers to the situation in Eastern Europe and post-communist space.

Halin and Mancini (2012) distinguish four principal characteristics of media systems: 1. Development of media market; 2. Political parallelism-correlation between media and political parties; 3. Degree of professional development of journalism; 4 Scale of state interference in the media system. Based on an amalgamation of the above-mentioned characteristics, Halin and Mancini (2012) outlined three types of media models: 1. Polarized Pluralist (Mediterranean) Model; 2. Democratic Corporatist (North and Central European) Model; 3. Liberal Model (North Atlantic).

The classification of national media systems based on media models contribute to establishing their recognition within Western culture. Countries such as France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain fall under the first model in this classification. The second model is relevant to Austria, Belgium, Germany, and other Scandinavian Countries. The third model is applicable to Anglo-Saxon states (UK, USA, Canada, and Ireland).

The system of Polar Pluralism (many markers of which are observable in Georgia and in all post-soviet realities in general) is identified by attributes such as state control over the media, leverage of political parties/groups on the

media agenda, high extent of alliance between media and political elites, and problem with professionalism. The term “*Italianization*”, which was established in its slightly altered form “*Media Mediterraneanization*” in late 1990’s, is a generalized form of Italian experience. *Mediterraneanization* is a common name for ongoing changes in the media of Eastern Europe and post-soviet areas following the global cataclysms and transformations in the region. Researchers describe Italianization as a combination of commercialization and politicization, state interference in public broadcasting, and media bias. This model develops under the post-communist government (as well as Italian media environment), which in turn comprises of many fragmented parties (an environment where a harmonious position cannot be formed due to the high degree of diversification) and is propped up by a single dominant party.

Post-Soviet Reality

In each country that more or less fits the media model of Polar Pluralism (Mediterranean), local individual trends can be observed. Hence, it is vital to discuss Mediterraneanization as a general form for each specific state in accordance with the local distinction-variation. Labeling the post-soviet country models as Mediterranean/Italianate would be wrong without considering national prerequisites. Based on tangible components, it is important to discuss specific characteristics of Italianization in each state within the post-Soviet bloc. While focused on the transitional period, researchers distinguish factors that square with the frame of Italianization. Thus, any given state’s media environment can be considered a carrier of one, several or all signs of Mediterraneanization.

According to Gurevitch and Blumler (1983), political competition enhances media freedom. Until the political systems of Eastern Europe reach stability, relationship with media will stay uncertain and volatile. The potential and influence of media will increase only if further professional growth gives them credibility and consequently makes their efforts valuable to the audiences.

Thus, the viewpoint of Russian researcher, Elena Varthanova, seems to be very interesting. Varthanova (2011) entertains the idea that ongoing changes within post-Soviet media systems should not be perceived as an indiscriminate adoption of Western media models aiming at proximity to Southern cultures. The researcher advocates the factor beyond state paternalism and political clientivism, such as ethnic, infrastructural, and sociocultural aspects which should be taken into account when studying post-Soviet media. It is also crucial to consider cultural historical context of traditions of peoples cohabiting within Eurasian empire. And while there is still much to be done for the study of post-Soviet media, it is clear that these media systems are close to and influenced by Russian/Soviet reality.

Based on analysis, it is clear that, although polarized media systems are more applicable to the grim realities of the post-Soviet Russia, it differs from the latter by a crucial parameter. This entails the relationship of state and media, in which the state interference becomes the main characteristics of journalistic practice. Similar non-Western and non-European characteristics are prevalent in post-Soviet media systems. Varthanova considers the fundamental difference between the Halin-Mancini model and the Russian media system to be based on the strong ties between the state and the media, recognized by both parties as the general regulatory function of government. Thus, according to Varthanova, the Russian/post-Soviet model/models are very complex calling for classification under the statistically-commercialized (state intervention independence) model.

Belgian scholar de Smaele's (1999) position about this matter is complementary to that of Elena Vartanova. Smaele states that lumping Eastern and Central European media systems together is not correct. He groups Central European countries into separate clusters: Central European (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Southeast European countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, part of Yugoslavia), and Eastern European (Russia and post-Soviet countries, including Georgia). The researcher argues that these countries differ greatly based on the degree of democracy and marketing, as well as in terms of geopolitical position, history, and culture. In relation to the Eastern European media systems, De Smaele considers the Central European media to be "too European". Russia occupies a unique position as a symbiosis of Western and Eastern cultures, which gives the researcher an argument to affirm the concept of *Euroasianism* or simply the Russian model.

With regard to the Russian media, Becker (2004) notes that the great hopes and enthusiasm of the Glasnost period created a unique environment conducive to the thriving public sphere in a sense that, on one hand, media was funded through government and, on the other, the government did not interfere in media content that much. While hopes for democratization of the media system in Russia were dashed, the Russian media took some clear steps in that direction in the 1990s. However, media control was weakened and private media ownership emerged. Changes were clearly there, but Russia failed to unite as a democratic system. Print press became relatively free in contrast with a closely controlled broadcast media, which is a powerful tool for communication. Television was controlled by influential groups to achieve their own goals, and analytic journalists were particularly suppressed. Assessing the general situation of the 1990s Russian media, Becker finds the state as the most important threat to the emergence of a democratic media system, precisely the state that inhibits media pluralism. The researcher

believes that many important changes took place during the Gorbachev era. In contrast, it is difficult to argue that Putin's media is democratic.

Russian researcher Randall Symonyan (2010) rightly notes that the high degree of enthusiasm to participate in social transformations, observed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was substituted for indifference and Soviet nostalgia at the turn of the century. Due to the reforms, society's political alienation has increased.

Hungarian sociologist Pal Tomash (1998) even argues that the new order in the post-Soviet space was established not as a result of the collapse of the state, but as a result of specific privatization process, which significantly increased corruption.

In his research, *Russian Media Empires*, Mukhin (2005) stated that contemporary media agencies in Russia have become a tool in the hands of large financial-industrial groups. This exactly is one of the elements of a pluralistic media model: a high level of media's integration with political elites.

Markina (2014) indicates that, in the second half of the 1990s, an interesting trend was observed in Russia, with media holdings becoming prevalent. Though it is true that the Russian trend for media holdings has lagged behind the West for almost a century, it has followed the similar path in terms of contributing to the economic development. Many scholars point out the evolution of media holdings in Russia characterized by symbiosis of business and politics (high level of integration of media and political elites). An opportunity to influence public opinion emerged in Russia in the 1990s as a sufficient condition for investing in the media. Usually, the acquisition of TV station would be a good enough basis to start up a media holding. Media agglomeration in Russia caused by sociopolitical changes in the presence of undeveloped information and communication technology seemed inevitable. Media holdings became the only way of survival for media outlets. As a result of this, oligopoly with certain number of big players was formed in Russia. According to most scholars, the media in Baltic region comparatively differs from the post-Soviet space, being characterized by different traditions and relative proximity to corporate democratic model. However, since Baltic States share 50 years of Soviet cohabitation, it would be relevant to study and take into account their media environment as well. According to World Bank studies, media freedom lacks where the state media ownership and interference in governance prevails. It should also be noted that Freedom House considers only Baltic State media to be free among the post-Soviet republics. Modern Russia has a lot in common with authoritarian regimes.

Vihalemm and Lauristin (2002) pointed out that Estonia is a special and successful case, along with the two other Baltic republics in the post-

Soviet space, as reforms have been carried out very quickly here. Wihalemm reviews the period of radical reforms (1991-1994) and notes that new generation of journalists quickly mastered the Anglo-Saxon model of journalism and perceive the media marketing as a natural process.

The researcher believes that so-called Italianization is not the case in Estonia, as the media has distanced itself from state structures, and the political emancipation of the media was made possible by the next generation of journalists (professionalization took place). At the same time, as a result of the ongoing privatization in the 1990s, the media was both diversified and fragmented. Furthermore, media for small and specific audiences emerged. The media lost its cultural and unifying role, distanced itself from the political process, and acquired the function of delivering news and entertainment. During the stabilization period (1995-1999), the Estonian media continued to diversify and stabilize. In 1990-1999, the number of newspapers increased by 38%, magazines by 33%, and 27 radio stations were established. Commercialization intensified, making the media market-oriented. In the second half of the 1990s, foreign capital entered the media. Market development also brought about a cultural polarization of audiences and media content. The introduction of new technologies in the media began and by the end of the 1990s, the situation stabilized. The researcher considers the Estonian case to be a special exception in the post-Soviet space. Balcytiene (2002), when talking about the Lithuanian media of the transition period, observed that since 1987, the social functions of the media have been changing according to the requirements. In the early stages of the transition period, the media played a more mediating role in the process of sociocultural mobilization, and later, the media in Lithuania flourished through the processes of marketing, concentration, commercialization, and customization. In the process of rapid change, media content was burdened by sensational, negative, and sexist content while becoming much more independent. The author believes that traces of the old regime were still observable in the decade of the 1990s. The pervasiveness of internet infrastructure complicated business for traditional media. Since the 2000s, the media employed new functions of socialization and market-orientation of society, and became liberal.

Brikše (2002) believes that the process of democratization of media content in Latvia began in the Perestroika period, when taboos were lifted, resulting to open debate and making it possible to criticize the government. By the early 1990s, the media took an active role in the national revival of the country. By 1991, the role of the media as a social communicator had declined due to market stagnation and, as a result, circulation had been reduced. However, the process lasted until 1993. By then, the media and the public had already adjusted to the free market conditions. New media outlets emerged,

consumption increased, the advertising market developed, and foreign investments flowed in. The strengthening of the media market by the end of the 90s was due to the following factors: economic stabilization, increase of professionalism in media management, and the introduction of Western practices.

Dobek-Ostrowska (2012) viewed the Polish media as a symbiosis of polarized and liberal media models, which is also characterized by democratic-pluralist elements. According to the scholar, the Polish media has many features of a polarized, pluralistic media model, namely small circulation of daily newspapers, which is a leading role of an electronic media. Media is focused on political news, but taking into account an external pluralism and commentary is important. Employment of the public service broadcasting by the government and political parties is obvious. The level of journalistic professionalism is lower in the democratic-corporatist and liberal models. The tension between media reporters and political elites is based on the degree of journalistic professional independence. The government's ownership of public radio and television plays an important role. Even 20 years after the collapse of communism, the Polish media model template is close to that of the Mediterranean, and it is characterized by a high degree of ideological diversity and conflict. In the early 1990s, when the Hallin and Mancini model was dominant in Central and Eastern Europe, it was also dominant in Poland. Nevertheless, by the 2000s, privatization, competition, commercialization, and sensationalism were taking place, making the Polish media a liberal media outlet. We are looking at a kind of synthesis dynamics of liberal and pluralistic-polarized models.

Consequently, Paolo Carelli (2012) talks about the limitations of the concept of Italianization, noting that the model is not appropriate for all Eastern European countries without taking into account national specifics, e.g., cultural and economic aspects. The scholar considered Italianization as a theoretical alternative to the transitional model. In his view, Albania is a special case among the countries of the Soviet bloc. The most obvious manifestation of Italianization is the development of the Albanian media in the 1990s. At the dawn of the transition period, strong ties with Italy were set and American influence increased as well, which occurs due to geographical proximity. During the period of retreating from the isolation (1985, the death of political leader Enver Hoxha), the political elites were well aware that the audiences could not be satisfied with just a propaganda product and, therefore, they resorted to recycling Italian media production in Albanian media based on isolation period experiences. In consideration of Albania's long tradition of isolation, Albanian media reforms were slower and more difficult than in other countries of the post-communist bloc. The origins of privately-owned media date back to 1995. According to the researcher, the

Italianization of the Albanian media was revealed in three stages. The first stage is known as Silent Italianization, when Italian formats and language were adopted by many of the small scale television stations that originated in the early 1990s. The second stage is called Shared Italianization, when the Albanian TV media broadcasted much of Italian products, joint productions are created, cooperation is deepened, and the Italian language became much more popular. The third stage is known as quasi-colonial Italianization, when Italian professionals began to invest in Albania and formed the so-called Italian audiences.

Jakubowicz (2008), based on the Halin-Mancini frame, concludes that some post-communist media systems are inclined towards both sides, South and North, on the Mediterranean conditional map, while others are politically closer to North Africa than South European nations.

Fredman and Schreffer (2010) pointed out that Central Asian press still bears the Soviet legacy. Junisbai (2011) notes that the mass media outlets in modern Kazakhstan are owned not by political parties but corporate-power groups, which in turn helped them in maintaining power and authority. The financial-industrial groups, affiliated with the president, have in one way or another gained control of the country's electronic media. These groups are led by oligarchs who dominate businesses through the media by using it to fight rival groups. In conclusion, coverage of political issues in Kazakhstan is largely driven by conflicts within the country's elite. The struggle in the country began in 1997, when a tender was announced for the transfer of private ownership of TV and radio frequencies. According to Junisbay, the attractiveness of the media is not related to their profitability; it is a legitimate and a formally neutral tool for influencing public opinion and opponents.

Anceschi (2008) believes that the situation in Turkmenistan is particularly dire, with the media outlets not even trying to appear independent. The government exercises almost absolute control over the media through repression and propaganda. The idea of Niazov's regime and the idea of perverted nationalism persist even after Niazov's death.

Kenny and Gross (2008), in a Tajik media study, indicate that the government exercise control over the media through the so-called soft self-censorship of reporters and low professionalism. The censorship is carried out by the government. Notably, 27 journalists were killed during the Civil War (1992-1997).

Shafer and Freedman (2003), in their research titled *Obstacles to the Professionalization of Mass Media in Post-Soviet Central Asia: A Case Study of Uzbekistan* indicated that low professionalism hinders not only proper education of journalists, but also the training of government officials to make them reliable sources of information. Furthermore, public servants should be

encouraged to interact with journalists. The government does not understand the positive role of open communication with the media. Researchers (Nemecek, Ketterer, Pitts, Ibrayeva, and Los) are talking about the need to improve professional skills in other Central Asian countries as well. Allison (2006), a media researcher in Central Asia, argues that the attempt of political leaders to retain power is a lost battle. Changes are necessary, although it is unlikely that changes in media regulations will occur under current regimes. A similar general template is applicable to all four Central Asian countries. The regime defends itself by controlling the media and putting pressure through lobbying. The researcher concludes that the regimes are volatile, but instead of improving the system, the government officials' only concern is to stay in power. Reporters do not try to change the system either. The tendency of the region is for regimes to control businesses and thus all financial sources of the media. Journalists, indifferent to professional ethics, are engaged in corruption. It is because of these factors that journalistic independence remains a distant goal. Coman (2010) notes in his study that the post-communist media did not create a new "model" or "models". It is a mix of existing models and varies based on historical, geographical, and cultural characteristics. While the theoretical landscape has not changed significantly, it creates an interesting environment for discussions and to fill in the gaps that have arisen since the early 1990s. Gross (2010), in *New Relationships: Eastern European Media and the Post-Communist Political World*, concludes that in the second half of the 1990s, media dependence on political parties decreased financially. Nonetheless, media financial dependence on the market increased. In addition, the profit-oriented attempt of media owners is linked to the political utilization of the media, and media owners have become involved in politics.

It can be argued that the post-Soviet system is closer to a polarized media models with certain more or less accentuated signs. In characterizing the post-Soviet media, researchers pointed to systemic problems such as the degree of state intervention (this factor is particularly strong in the Asian part), the integration of media as business with politics (strong in both Eastern Europe and Central Asia) and the issue of professionalism (independence / ethics), which is a significant problem for the whole post-Soviet space. As for the issue of state intervention, it is gradually decreasing (more or less successfully) in the post-Soviet area.

Georgia as a Media System

Is it appropriate to use the term *Mediterraneanization* in relation to Georgia? What are the specific elements of Mediterraneanization that are clearly expressed in the Georgian reality, what spot should Georgia's media occupy on the map of systems? To answer these questions, emphasis should

be placed on specific issues such as the influence of the state and political parties on the media agenda: integration of media and political elites, professionalization of journalism, as well as the sociocultural context of the period of independence. New independent media has made a significant contribution to the formation of new societies in free market conditions. In the transition period, media pluralism has become a common occurrence in contrast with the Soviet period. Reforms directed from the top are rendered arbitrary and, as a result, the unpredictable process resembled a snowball, which is gaining weight and turning into an avalanche. Thus, this is the last straw to end the Soviet Union. Subsequently, buildup of a political discontent led to the emergence of numerous small-scale newspapers in Georgia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was gradually followed by the spread of electronic media, the emergence of radio stations, and, later on, television networks. During the three decades of independence, many media outlets were established but also faded without leaving significant traces. The media outlets that originated in the early nineties, as a business, soon relinquished themselves. This was also logical as the media, in accordance with the demands of the time, found it difficult to stay afloat, to adapt to new conditions, and to gain more sustainability. Thus, relative freedom was reflected more in quantity than in quality.

In the first stage of the transition period, the media was not considered a profitable business, but as more of a platform in the hands of the influential groups united by various political or other ends, to reach extra dividends. Practice against the market rules could be easily explained by striving to gain access to the redistribution of resources via political influences. Media as a business was developing slowly and also undergoing some struggle. No one viewed the media as a source of income. This became possible relatively later, as early as the 21st century, when the market was saturated with productive and ambitious people, who needed not only a pulpit as an extra opulence, but also a lucrative “tribune”. In the reality of Georgia (early 1980s-early 1990s), sinusoidal dynamic is observable in terms of press independence from the top-down emancipation of the media, which led to ease of centralized control exercised by the party bodies. Later, in the 21st century, efforts to tighten media control increased again, but this time political groups exerted influences and their goals shifted from the ideological to specific interests. People and dominant groups started investing in the media in the 1990s. Also, there was a gradual distancing of media activities from state regulation and influence. The media moved to a comparatively new stage of development. Notably, there are key stages of legislative support through which the media operates in the transition period. On August 10, 1991, the Law of Georgia on the Press and Other Mass Media was enacted. The law expired on July 15,

2004, when the Georgian Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression was implemented.

In addition to the Constitution of Georgia, media regulatory legislation is presently in effect, including the Laws on Freedom of Speech and Expression (2004), on Broadcasting (2004), on Electronic Communications (2005), on License and Permit Fees (2003), on Independent National Regulatory Bodies (2002), on Advertising (1998), on Copyright and Neighboring Rights (1999), and on Code of Conduct for Broadcasters (2009). Georgian researcher Beka Chedia (2008) regarded the Georgian reality as a developing political system and, consequently, considers the media as a tool of political struggle in Georgia. Scholar argues about the features of the Georgian media that are usually characteristic of Italianization, such as the media is not strong enough and relies on influential government or business groups; Low professionalism and shallow analysis are obvious; Reporters succumb to political conjuncture and do not reject cronyism and corruption.

According to the researcher, the unstable political regime is creating a contradictory situation in Georgia: "If in pre-revolutionary Georgia there was freedom of speech, but the government did not pay attention to this speech, now freedom of speech is restricted precisely because the government pays attention to it".

"Transparency International - Georgia" studies show that the degree of integration of media and political elites/parties is declining. Proof of this is the shutdown of **Channel 9** and **Mze TV**, and the alienation of **Imedi** and **Maestro**. Research of the institution in 2014 claims that "despite some links several media outlets have, or had some to ruling Georgian Dream coalition or United National Movement, which is currently in opposition, nowadays active Georgian politicians do not own, control, or fund any major media outlet. Today, much has changed for the better, both in terms of property transparency and political control over the media, compared to 2010, when the country's most influential media outlets were in close contact with the government or any other political group".

Assessing the situation in Georgia, Freedom House notes that "the Georgian media landscape is dominated by a dispute over the ownership of Rustavi-2, an opposition television station, which has caused financial difficulties for the channel". The assessments of the organization also affected the Georgian Public Broadcaster, where, according to Freedom House, the "pro-government editorial policy" is observed. According to Freedom House in 2011, Georgia advanced by four places, but it still remains a country where the media is only partially free. Freedom House cited "improving the political environment" as the reason for Georgia's progress, which "reduced the legal and physical persecution of reporters and government censorship." It also

“ensured a more balanced coverage of events by the Public Broadcaster”. In a traditional report on the state of press freedom in the world prepared by Freedom House in 2007, *Freedom of the Press: A Global Overview of Media Independence*, Georgia ranked 121st with 57 points, ahead of Cambodia and behind Colombia. Reporters Without Borders assesses Georgia's media landscape as pluralistic but polarized. According to the 2018 survey, Georgia ranks 62nd out of 180 countries in the Press Freedom Index. The report also notes that recent reforms have “brought more transparency to media owners, although media owners are still redefining editorial policy”.

According to the Civic Development Institute (2011), low level of professionalism, fragile society, absence of political will, and fear are the list of problems that exist in the process of media relations with the government and the public. Out of these four problems, only low level of professionalism is the problem of journalism. Researcher Nino Shoshitashvili (2010) named the opacity of media owners as the first problem in their TV media research. Lack of transparency and diversity in ownership complicates the development of democratic media. The content is directly correlated with the interests of the sponsors. The researcher notes that “TV channels express the interests of their owners, who are usually representatives of the ruling party or oligarchs. However, there is a close link between media elites and other political, economic, and cultural elites, as well as the processes by which the ruling class participates in policy-making and regulation. TV stations, together with the government, build up the ability to maintain the ruling party”. Malkhaz Saldadze (2009) pointed out the problem of media independence and noted that it is necessary for reporters to become more aware of professional standards and ethical norms. He noted that one of the main impediments to ensuring media diversity remains the fact that the media is heavily dependent on political institutions that actively interfere in its activities. ‘This, in turn, undermines the role of the media as an independent actor in public and political life’.

Speaking about media models, Georgian researcher Marina Muskhelishvili (2021) underlines the following: “It is obvious that of the three models, political discourse of Georgia is mostly close to polarized political pluralism. However, due to strong political influence, its freedom remains limited, but fight for discourses domination is strong and often violent.... In the context the country was, system transformation, majority of journalists do not and did not see themselves as just only reflectors of events, who were playing part of "just outer watchers" in the development of the country. Their majority, especially those who wrote about political issues, felt they were fulfilling civic duty in the democratization and development of the country. It was not secondary for them based on the political results of their profession

and they are outwardly independent. It civically motivates journalists to find ways of politically influencing the agenda and in forming milestone.”

It is also worth noting that according to the Transparency International Georgia’s study¹, none of the five highest-grossing TV stations made a profit in 2020 and the biggest loss of 74.4 million GEL was recorded by the TV company Imedi.

Transparency International Georgia’s study also expresses its concern towards the distribution of political advertisements. In particular, up to 3.8 million GEL was spent on paid political advertising for self-government elections in 2021. The largest amount of money, estimated at 2.3 million GEL, was spent by Georgian Dream, which is followed by Lelo for Georgia with 1.1 million GEL and National Movement with 0.3 million GEL.

Consequently, stated preferences in advertising placements by specific political forces should also be noted. Georgian Dream placed the advertisement mainly in Imedi holding, Rustavi-2 and Postv, but distributed no paid advertisement to Mtavari Arxi, Formula, and TV company Pirveli and others. On the other hand, National Movement placed the majority of its ads on Mtavari Arxi and Formula and did not bring any paid ads to Imedi holding. Lelo for Georgia placed a large part of its ads on TV Pirveli and Mtavari Arxi. The report states that TV company Imedi received the most revenues from political advertising in the sum of 797 thousand GEL, Rustavi-2 gained 786 thousand LEG, and TV Pirveli grossed 609 GEL.

As for the media development in recent years, the international organization **Reporters Without Borders** in 2022 noted that the media environment in Georgia, although is diverse, stays highly polarized. Television continues to be the main source of news. Media holders are often in charge of editorial policy. Regional and community radiobroadcasting is gaining strength, while print media is taking a back seat due to declining readership. At the same time, interest in digital media is growing.

According to the organization's data, as of 2021, the index of media freedom for Georgia was 71.36, which is a 60th position among 180 countries². According to the evaluation of 2022, some decline in the score is observed. Specifically, in 2022, the media freedom index of Georgia was 59.30, which corresponds to the 89th place³ (For comparison, Georgia occupied the 64th place in 2017, 61st in 2018, and 60th in 2019 and 2020).

When evaluating the socio-economic and specific media environment of the current period, it is impossible not to take into account such an important

¹<https://transparency.ge/ge/post/2021-clis-satelevizio-sareklamo-bazris-angarishi>

²<https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2021>

³<https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022>

factor as the Russia-Ukraine war. This event had a great impact not only on Eastern Europe, but on the world as a whole, and on Georgia among them.

To exemplify this, we can refer to the Research by **DW Akademie: Media Freedom in Decline**⁴, in which the break out of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is named as one of the reasons for polarization. Almost all survey participants (97.9%, 47 out of 48) noted that the Georgian media environment is polarized. 60% of respondents (27 out of 45) said that polarization in Georgia increased after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

“[Georgian] media is always associated with someone’s name [...]. And we never see the media making efforts to be independent,” - said the Director and Editor of a community radio station in southeastern Georgia in one of the qualitative interviews.

Survey respondents as well as interviewed experts consider a lack of professionalism among journalists as a contributing factor to the high degree of polarization in the public sphere.

“Unfortunately, the standard of the media is also very often diminished and does not meet the standards of modern ethical unbiased journalism,” - said a TV journalist from southern Georgia.

“The reality is that the majority of our news broadcasts, as well as the majority of political talk shows, are biased,” - concluded the Head of News at a TV station in the southwest of the country.

“In the context of the ongoing military conflict in the Eastern European region, polarization is posing as one of the main (but not the only) threats,” - Georgian researchers Mariam Gersamia and Maya Toradze (2022) maintain. According to them, polarization prevents journalists from carrying out their professional duties: “In restoring the credibility of the media, the role of the journalist himself is no less important, who must protect not only the professional standards, but also the colleagues on the "different poles" from the violence that deliberately kills the profession against the background of the continuous flow of Russian disinformation.”

Based on all of the above, we can assert that when researching the media environment worldwide, as well as in the European continent and region, we cannot ignore such an important factor as the breakdown of the geopolitical balance, the emergence of new groups of interests and influences, which will definitely be reflected on the media system of Georgia.

Method and Methodology

The present study is a compilation of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Twelve (12) media researchers and theoreticians, mainly teachers

⁴<https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/georgia-media-freedom-decline-enka>

of Georgian higher education institutions, were selected for the research along with the review of the scientific literature and theory related to the issue. The semi-structured interviews based on a preliminary questionnaire were conducted with each researcher. The researchers had the opportunity to answer the open ended and close ended questions presented in the questionnaire. Apart from that, the respondents could express their position within the research framework beyond the questions provided in the questionnaire. About 5 hours of material was transcribed, and each expert was assigned a corresponding number/code. The experts' responses were processed and compared according to quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Text material was condensed and key messages were highlighted. On the basis of the results and their interpretation, cause-and-effect connection was made.

All experts were questioned according to the following questionnaire

Research paper Mediterraneanization as a stage of media evolution in transitional democracies and the reality of Georgia

1. What is the level of media market development in Georgia?

- a. Well developed market
- b. Moderately developed market
- c. Poorly developed market

1.1. What are the ways to solve the problem? what would you change?

2. What are the associations between media and political parties?

- a. A specific media is closely affiliated with specific political power;
- b. A certain connection is revealed;
- c. One does not cause/or depend on the other .

2.1. What would be a optimal environment? why? what would you change?

3. What is the level of development of professional journalism?

- a. Well developed;
- b. Moderately developed;
- c. Fragile

3.1. What do you see as a solution? What would you change and how?

Your recommendations are as follows:

4. To what extent does the state interfere in media function?

- a. Interferes strongly;
- b. Interferes somewhat;
- c. Partially interferes.

4.1. What is your vision of optima environment?What would you change and how?

Your recommendations are as follows:

5. **How would you characterize and evaluate the media system of Georgia?**
6. **What type or which media would you prefer to get the information from ?**
- Newspaper,
 - Television,
 - Radio,
 - Social network,
 - Online publications.
- 6.1 Which particular periodical do you rely on? Why?**
7. **How would you rate the legal framework by which media operated:**
- In good order;
 - Needs improvement (How, in what direction?);
 - Needs to be reestablished;
8. **Would you recall a significant incident from journalistic practices (problem with reporter’s professionalization, problem with reporter’s independence/bias, problem with, interference with editorial activities, partial covering etc.)**
- Thank you!*

Overview of Results

The answers obtained from the survey of experts are as follows:

Table 1. Schematization of the questionnaire (answers to closed ended questions)

Q _____ Resp.	N 1.	N. 2	N . 3	N. 4	N. 6	N . 7
N 1.	C	a	c	B	E	c
N 2.	B	a	b	B	B	b
N 3.	B	a	b	B	E	a
N 4.	A	b	b	B	E	b
N 5.	C	b	b	B	d,e	a
N 6.	C	a	c	C	b, e	b
N 7.	C	a	b	A	D	a
N 8.	B	a	b	B	E	a
N 9.	B	b	b	B	b, d	b
N 10.	C	a	b	B	All	c
N 11.	B	b	a	C	All	a
N 12.	C	a	c	b, c	c, d, e	a
sum	a - 1 b - 5 c - 6	a - 8 b - 4 c - 0	a - 1 b - 8 c - 3	a - 1 b - 9 c - 3	b- 3 d - 4 e - 9	a- 6 b- 4 c - 2

The questions that received the most consistent responses are as follows:

- The media market in Georgia is poorly developed - opinion of half of the interviewed experts (6);
- The specific media in Georgia is closely affiliated with the specific political power- the majority of the experts believe (8);

3. Media experts consider professional journalism to be moderately developed (8);
4. The state partially interferes in the media affairs-this is how a large number of experts assess the level of interference - (9);
5. -
6. When seeking information, professional prefer online publications (9);
7. The legal system with which the media operates still needs development - half of the surveyed experts think so (6).

Table 2. Key messages in the expert narratives (answers to the open ended questions)

Expert	Key message
N1	A specific media is closely associated with a specific political power. Television production companies impose mediocracy.
N2	Television production companies implement mediocracy. Journalism is immature from a professional point of view. Public Broadcasting is a special case from the financing point of view (budget, advertising, revenues)
N3	TV media represents the interests of certain political parties. Polarization promotes fragmentation of society. Misconceptions about the reporting process hinders the development of the field.
N4	To change the media environment, the media needs to actually become a free enterprise and detach from the political influence. Reporters are largely influenced by the editorial policy of employers.
N5	Unilateralism, bias, superficiality is a daily problem of Georgian media.
N6	Direct link between media and political powers are being revealed. Consequently, the media loses its role.
N7	The media system of Georgia belongs to the model of polarized pluralism.
N8	Instead of reflecting reality, the media creates a virtual world, and sets the political agenda.
N9	A specific media is connected to a specific power. Professional journalism is moderately developed. The state to some extent interferes in the activities of the media.
N10	A specific media is closely related to a specific political force. Professional journalism is moderately developed. The state partially interferes with the functions of the media.
N11	Certain associations with the political forces and the media are revealed. Media practices and media schools are not harmonized due to high degree of politicization.
N12	A specific media is closely related to a specific political force. The state partially interferes in the work of the media.

The majority of experts consider its asymmetry as a shortcoming of the development of the media market. The media market develops, according to the interests of certain political forces, and expresses certain positions,

promotes polarization, and prevents the protection and implementation of professional journalistic standards.

Professor Eldar Iberi develops a noteworthy opinion. According to his assessment, mediocracy reigns supreme. The society is being governed by the media instead of the government. The government has to make a great effort to challenge the media because the media have become partisan headquarters. Mediocracy is implemented through the TV stations. According to the scientist, the public broadcaster is not neutral either, it is influenced by the government policies, which is in favor of liberal values. However, the public broadcaster is influenced by the government in all states of the world.

- "The largest media paradox in Georgia is Public Broadcasting. It is financed from the state budget, it's been given limitless room for advertising, and it represents both the state and commercial broadcasting. Standard public broadcasters are funded by member station dues and not by advertising, as is the case, for example, with the BBC in Great Britain and Germany. In Georgia, the public broadcaster is given broad rights by the parliament. It was created as a financial counterweight to independent television. That's why we don't have a public broadcaster. The channel has no concept. Why don't we share BBC experience as an example for the media, which does not have the right to everything," - says the scientist.

TSU professor Mari Tsereteli considers the Georgian media environment to be pluralistic, although polarized-TV medias advance the interests of certain political parties. Polarization contributes to the segmentation of society. Televisions promotes political voices and political messages.

"The best media experience was our 19th century journalism. Even the media of 1918-21, which can be classified under The Mediterranean-pluralistic model, with partisan periodicals, with sharp polarization, with a single ideological perspective, was in general in accordance on some issues and a state approach existed. Now we lack this and this is a problem", - claims Mari Tsereteli

As for the development phase of professionalism in reporting, according to the researcher, the narrow partisan attitude impaires the environment, destroys the content of the media, affects the quality of the media and causes stagnation, which is a very serious problem.

The scientist believes that, according to the Halin-Manchini classification, Georgia's media environment is most suitable for the Mediterranean-polar pluralism model. Thus, this is because it has many characteristics such as low-circulation newspapers, openly sectarian mass media, external pluralism, opinion-oriented journalism (perceptions are given more importance over the real event), and lack of professionalization.

Media expert Maya Toradze points out that the development of the media market is conditioned by a well-developed society and democracy, and since none of the indicators are high at this stage, we don't have independent and unbiased media.

The problem of financial security of the media is acute and the advertising market is scarce, which, of course, affects the editorial policy of the media as well. In order to change the media environment, the media needs to become an active enterprise and be exempted from partisan influences. Sharply divided media environment increases self-censorship among reporters, who are overwhelmingly influenced by employers and editorial policies.

“Partiality, bias, superficiality is a daily problem of the Georgian media”, Tinatin Tsomaia states. The majority of experts observe lack of professionalization to be an issue, although it is not mainly caused by misgivings of professional education but that of practice, and it stems from specific, biased approaches of the employer.

Professor Tinatin Macharashvili also openly indicated direct connections between media and political powers. That’s why, in his opinion, the media loses its role and appears as a carrier of political interests. As a result, what we get is a polarized media environment. The solution here is to find alternative sources of financing. She shares the opinion of some of his colleagues and attributes the Georgian media system to the model of polarized pluralism.

The teacher of the journalism program, Nato Oniani, considers the transparency of the budgetary, advertising, and other types of income intended for media outlets and their monitoring to be a necessary measure to reduce the influence on the editorial policy.

In her opinion, the level of professional development is low. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the quality of university education. She considers it indefensible for professional journalistic associations to declare their positions on the so-called partisan media.

“Instead of reflecting on reality, the media creates a virtual world, creates a political agenda, fulfills political orders, does not comply with elementary standards-impartiality and neutrality, and gives directives about how and what to think,” Oniani said.

Researcher Ana Keshelashvili notes that television is the main source of information in Georgia. In his opinion, the advertising regulations and the participation of the Public Broadcaster in the advertising market do not contribute to the development of independent television stations. For these and other reasons, the media market is moderately developed.

Small scale media outlets in the market are struggling because they cannot produce independent content without grants. Like his colleagues,

Keshelashvili believes that for healthy competition, the media should not be politicized and should exhibit high level of professionalism.

In the current reality, a specific media is connected to a specific political power, which is unfavorable for the media environment. Oftentimes, the story is difficult to understand and there are excess of comments and evaluations emphasized. It is necessary to compare different sources to get a complete picture.

"The media system of Georgia bears many characteristics of the media system of the Mediterranean, although the media legislation and traditions of Georgia were more influenced by the North Atlantic trait. Therefore, there is a mixture of Mediterranean and North Atlantic models, and Turkish-Russian attempts to interfere in the state media are sometimes stressed in this mix. "Mediterranean model with an authoritarian nuance-this is how the reality of Georgia can be characterized," the theoretician says.

The head of the journalism program, Professor Gigla Gobechia, points out that the poorly developed market is again and again linked to politics. In his opinion, it is useless to develop and implement a state program of media assistance, which is "far from the politicians and closer to the society". According to the scientist, this should be the primary motto of media operation.

Assessing the general situation, expert Zviad Khoridze cites the following reasons for the median development of the media market: highly centralized business management, low degree of competitiveness, and difficulty in obtaining monetary resources.

"This vicious circle must be broken. Now the period of open Berlusconiization is ending. We can get an oriental-authoritarian type of bad media model when the main actor is not visible. Business and politics have become very amorphous, the media space has also been cut off," says Khoridze. In his opinion, there is a connection between political parties and the media, although this connection is not strong. Political parties today do not have ideology and free political money, as it was in the late 90s. Sometimes, the question arises: Does the political parties rule the television or vice versa? Therefore, neither TV media have a defined editorial line or platform. The prevailing approach is to see everything in black and white under conditions of polarization.

As for the issue of professional development, the problem is multifaceted as journalists are told when hired that there is no need to be balanced, to observe ethics, and that their four-year investment in professional education is useless. This leads to the devaluation of vocational schools. In today's relatively balanced media, the salary is low. Media practices and media schools are not in sync due to high degree of politicization. That is why working journalists feel unqualified. They often give up on the profession.

Balanced journalism is inconvenience for the political class. The school is created for the market, but the market cannot provide the professional realization of a journalist.

The researcher believes that the legal base of the media is in order, but the law on financial transparency is not working. The management system of television stations is outdated. It would be optimal if the television stations go for shareholding. In this case, the example of Estonia is the best. The expert believes that Georgia is currently not a part of the Mediterranean process.

Another media analyst, Tamar Tsilosani, states that the television market is a monopoly. The radio and internet media markets are much more competitive, the social media market is developing more conspicuously, and the print media market is practically non-existent. He shares the position of his colleagues who stated that a specific media is connected to a specific political force. As a way of improving the situation on the media market, the expert considers the development of the TV advertising market, limiting the inflow of political money into the mainstream media (through regulations), revealing the facts of manipulation of the mainstream and social media, and promoting the development of media industry associations.

However, the level of development of professional journalism is weak. In his opinion, the influence of political forces/interest groups on the work of the media should be distinguished from the intervention of the state.

“Georgia's media system is unevenly developed. A significant part of it does not meet the customer's demand. For example, the news media is less customer service oriented. Accordingly, it rarely produces a quality product. Its main purpose is to manipulate the user. The above mentioned reasons are less related to the Internet media,” Tsilosani says.

That is why, as a consumer, you have to collate information, i.e., compile information from several different sources.

Conclusion

To sum up the above discussed points, the Georgian media is closer to the liberal model, which is characterized by regulation of media rights and responsibilities, by the absence of censorship and, consequently, by the lack of a formal mechanism of state control over the media. State interference in the work of the media is declining, though there is an occasional utilization of public service broadcasting by the government and political parties. In practice, there has been a development characteristic of the Mediterranean model. Therefore, the influence of political parties/groups on the media agenda is great; the level of integration of media and political elites is high; and the problem of professionalism is still on the agenda despite the fact that media schools are prevalent in the country.

Media owners' profit-seeking pursuits have been overshadowed by the political use of the media – with media owners appearing to be politicians or political figures. That is why the media is considered not so much as a profitable business, but as a kind of lobbying tool. It is a legitimate and formally neutral tool for influencing public opinion and opponents. The media market is not evenly developed, the role of electronic media is leading, and the circulation of print press and the interest in them is declining. Thus, there is a large concentration of electronic media in the capital and the degree of political parallelism is high. Pluralism and commentary-oriented media are dominant. Thus, we can consider the media environment of Georgia to be related to both Mediterranean and liberal (North Atlantic) models, which is a kind of symbiosis of the features of these models.

Further Research

As we have already mentioned, it is impossible to perceive/evaluate the development perspective of the media environment without taking into account the ongoing geopolitical shifts in Eastern Europe. Prediction of the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war and anticipation of the expansion of the European Union poses a great challenge to the societies and the media, including the Georgian media, both in terms of its professionalism and the media market issue. In this context, the next year and the half is crucial due to the expected key events: the expectation of EU candidate status by the end of 2023, the parliamentary elections in 2024 (an election year is generally expected to intensify polarization), and the resolution of the armed conflict in the region. It is these three most important events that will lead to a change in the indicators of the media environment in the near future, the replacement of influences and other types of metamorphosis, and analysis/research which will be necessary by 2025.

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