

Media Polarization and Democratic Vulnerability in Georgia: The Role of Digital Communication during Political Crises

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Abstract

This paper examines how Georgian online media covered the political crisis surrounding the draft law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” between April 3 and May 28, 2024. Its main purpose is to show how media polarization takes shape in the digital sphere and how this process is connected to the deepening of democratic vulnerability.

The study is based on an analysis of 48 media texts published by four online media outlets: ImediNews.ge, TVPirveli.ge, 1TV.ge, and Netgazeti.ge. It uses structured qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. This approach makes it possible to look not only at what the media covered, but also at how events were named, which actors were granted legitimacy, how emotional language was used, and how “us” and “them” divisions were constructed.

The findings show that the same political process was presented through different frames across the selected platforms. In some cases, the draft law was framed as a mechanism for protecting sovereignty and transparency; in others, it appeared as a sign of democratic backsliding and a threat to Georgia’s European course. As a result, audiences were exposed not only to different evaluations, but also to different media realities. The paper concludes that, during political crises, media polarization narrows the shared informational space, strengthens camp-based perceptions, and makes fact-based democratic discussion more difficult.

Keywords: media polarization; democratic vulnerability; digital communication; political crisis; Georgian online media.

Introduction

In contemporary political processes, digital media no longer serves only as a channel for disseminating information. It has become a space where political actors gain or lose legitimacy and where the public agenda is shaped. At the same time, public opinion is formed not only on the basis of facts, but also through the interpretation and manipulative presentation of information. In the conditions of digital communication, the same event can be assigned different political meanings and emotional tones. This function of the media is well explained by agenda-setting theory, according to which the media does not merely reflect events, but also determines which issues enter the focus of public attention and how they

are presented to audiences. The same logic is further developed by framing theory, which shows how a media text highlights certain aspect of reality and offers audiences a particular interpretation of an event. For this reason, during political crises, it is important to analyze the role of digital media and communication: the media not only distributes information, but also creates the frames through which society perceives political events.¹

Media polarization is one of the major challenges facing new democracies. In the classical sense, it may refer to the coexistence of different political positions in the media space. In the digital media environment, however, this definition is no longer sufficient. In the digital age, polarization appears as a communicative process in which the same political event is presented across different media platforms through often radically different frames, emotional tones, and logics of legitimacy. Under such conditions, society does not simply receive information; it encounters different “media realities.” This weakens the shared informational space on which democratic discussion should rest. The structural basis of media polarization is often linked to political parallelism - a condition in which the media system is closely connected to political actors, ideological blocs, and social divisions. Yet in the digital environment, this process is not limited to structural ties. It is also visible in media texts, headlines, source selection, and evaluative language.²

This problem is especially visible in small states, where the media environment is often marked by a limited market, a small audience, scarce resources, and heightened sensitivity to external influences. Research on media in small European countries also shows that, under such conditions, journalistic autonomy and media sustainability are closely connected to the quality of the democratic public sphere.^{3 4}

From this perspective, the Georgian case is particularly important. For years, the Georgian media space has been characterized by high political tension, sharply different editorial frames, and personalized political communication. This is why the analysis of media texts during political crises allows us to better understand the role digital communication plays in deepening social division or, conversely, in preserving a space for common discussion.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how media polarization manifests itself in Georgian digital media during periods of political crisis and how it relates to the strengthening of democratic vulnerability. The study is based on the assumption that polarized media communication should not be understood merely as editorial difference. When online media systematically use emotionally charged headlines, “us” and “them” divisions, and a blending of fact and evaluation, they create a communicative environment that narrows the space for reasoned discussion and intensifies social confrontation. From the perspective of discourse analysis, political polarization is often produced precisely through this kind of division: one’s own group

¹Dietram A. Scheufele, “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects,” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 1 (1999): 103–122, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x>.

² Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³ Ragne Kõuts-Klemm et al., “Media and Journalism Research in Small European Countries,” *Media and Communication* 12 (2024): 7205, <https://doi.org/10.117645/mac.7205>.

⁴ Teun A. van Dijk, “Ideology and Discourse,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175–196.

is presented as legitimate and morally justified, while the opponent is framed as a threat or a destructive force.⁵

According to Wodak, political discourse often uses the intensification of fear, the construction of threat, and the stigmatization of political opponents as mechanisms of public mobilization and as tools for sharpening political confrontation.⁶

Georgia's media environment has been described in several studies as pluralistic, yet sharply polarized - a space where political confrontation affects editorial independence, journalists' safety, and public trust. The depth of polarization in Georgia's political environment is also emphasized by Gegeshidze and de Waal, who describe the country as "a hostage to polarization."⁷

Europeanization is also highly significant in Georgian political and media discourse. It is often not only a marker of foreign policy orientation, but also a symbolic resource for legitimacy and delegitimation. For this reason, during political crises, issues of European choice, sovereignty, and external influence often become opposing frames in the media.⁸

The main research question is: how do Georgian online media platforms create different interpretive frames during a political crisis, and how is this process linked to the strengthening of democratic vulnerability?

The study does not claim a direct causal relationship between media polarization and democratic vulnerability. Its purpose is to identify the communicative mechanisms through which framed coverage in digital media fuels distrust, reinforces camp-based division, and damages the space for democratic discussion.

The importance of this research lies in showing how a political crisis is transformed in digital media into opposing narratives, how the boundary between information and interpretation becomes blurred, and how the same political process can be presented as different, and sometimes mutually contradictory, realities.

Main Body

Research Methodology

The present study is based on qualitative, comparative, and media-analytical approaches. In line with the research aim, the focus is not on counting the frequency of media texts, but on identifying the discursive and interpretive mechanisms through which, during a political crisis, the same event is presented across different media platforms through different frames and emotional tones.

⁵ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529739664>.

⁶Ruth Wodak, "Politics as Usual: Investigating Political Discourse in Action," in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. James Paul Gee and Michael Handford (London: Routledge, 2011), 525–539.

⁷ Archil Gegeshidze and Thomas de Waal, *Divided Georgia: A Hostage to Polarization* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021).

⁸ Lia Tsuladze, Flora Esebua, Irina Kakhidze, Ana Kvintradze, Irina Osepashvili, and Mariam Amashukeli, *Performing Europeanization: Political and Popular Discourses on Europeanization in Georgia* (Tbilisi: Nekeri, 2016).

This approach made it possible to see how different media realities are constructed around a single political process and how these differences shape public perception.

The empirical context of the study is the political process surrounding the reintroduction of the draft law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” in April–May 2024. During this period, the draft law generated parliamentary debates, acute domestic political confrontation, protest rallies, international reactions, the critical opinion of the Venice Commission, and the overcoming of the president’s veto. These events brought several important issues to the surface at the same time: the argument of protecting state sovereignty, the risk of obstructing European integration, the danger of democratic backsliding, the demand for transparency, the deepening of civil confrontation, the question of state stability, domestic political conflict, and the theme of external influence.

Accordingly, this period is particularly important for the study: media polarization appeared not only in differences between political positions, but also in the way media outlets used language, frames, emotional tone, and strategies of granting or denying legitimacy to different political actors. This made it possible to analyze how Georgian online media transforms the same political process into different media realities.

To examine this issue, the study focuses on four Georgian online media outlets: ImediNews.ge, TVPirveli.ge, 1TV.ge, and Netgazeti.ge. The analysis covers political media texts published between April 3 and May 28, 2024.

To strengthen the comparative analysis, this period was divided into six analytical phases:

1. Reintroduction of the draft law - April 3–5, 2024;
2. First parliamentary hearing - April 16–17, 2024;
3. Intensification of protest mobilization - April 30–May 1, 2024;
4. Third parliamentary hearing - May 13–14, 2024;
5. Venice Commission assessment - May 21, 2024;
6. Overriding of the president’s veto - May 27–28, 2024.

The division of events into phases made it possible to compare the texts of different media platforms not randomly, but in relation to the same political moments.

Two texts were selected from each phase for each media outlet. In total, the final research corpus consisted of 48 online media texts.

The main selection criteria were defined as follows:

1. direct connection of the text to the political event under study;
2. interpretive density;
3. representational significance for the specific phase;
4. analytical relevance to the research problem.

It should be noted that the study did not aim to present the entire media process through quantitative indicators. Its task is the in-depth analysis of texts in which polarized media frames, discursive confrontation, and organized political division are clearly visible.

Methodologically, the study uses structured qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. Structured qualitative content analysis was used for the systematic comparison of texts, while discourse analysis was used to identify the linguistic, symbolic, and interpretive mechanisms through which media texts constructed images of politically active actors, created different frames, and developed “us” and “them” divisions.

At the first stage of analysis, a comparative coding matrix was used. Each text was assessed according to the following categories:

- main frame or central claim;
- actors granted legitimacy by the text;
- actors criticized or weakened by the text;
- degree of emotionality;
- relationship between factual and evaluative components;
- presence of an “us/them” division;
- linguistic indicators of polarization.

These categories were selected in order to compare the texts of different platforms according to thematic emphasis, actor representation, emotional tone, and the relationship between fact and evaluation.

At the second stage, a discourse-analytical reading was carried out. At this stage, attention was paid not only to which themes dominated each media text, but also to how those themes were managed; which political actors were presented as reliable sources; who was granted moral or political advantage; how the draft law was named; what kind of emotional vocabulary was used; and how the boundary between information and interpretation was blurred. Particular attention was given to agenda selection, selective visibility, interpretive and manipulative practices, and attempts to construct narratives.

The combination of these two methods - the structured coding matrix and discourse analysis - made it possible for the study to maintain both comparative precision and the depth required for close textual analysis.

The reliability of the research was ensured through several principles. First, all texts were processed through a unified coding matrix, which reduced the risk of arbitrary interpretation and supported the internal consistency of the analysis. Second, the phase-based selection ensured comparability between platforms, since the texts of each media outlet were analyzed in relation to the same political moments. Third, the formal coding categories were not applied mechanically; each was interpreted with attention to

the specific political and discursive context. These principles are especially important when analyzing media coverage of political crises.⁹

It should also be noted that the study has certain limitations. The corpus was selected purposively and therefore does not represent a quantitative picture of the entire Georgian media system. The research is not focused on quantitative indicators. By selecting two texts from each phase, the aim was to conduct a comparative study of analytically significant material rather than to provide an exhaustive account of the entire information flow.

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodological framework corresponds to the aim of the research. It allows a relatively small but analytically focused and purposively selected corpus to reveal how polarized political communication is formed in Georgian online media; how media platforms use different frames, emotional tones, and strategies of actor legitimation; and how this process is connected to the strengthening of democratic vulnerability in the context of a political crisis.

Findings / Results

The findings show that, in April–May 2024, the political crisis surrounding the draft law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” was not presented in Georgian online media as a unified informational process. On the contrary, in the analyzed media texts, the same political event was presented through different naming practices, different frames, different emotional tones, and different logics of legitimacy. From this perspective, media polarization did not appear merely as the existence of different political positions; rather, it emerged as an active communicative process that assigned different meanings to political reality depending on the media platform.

For clarity, the research corpus showed that all four media platforms - ImediNews.ge, TVPirveli.ge, 1TV.ge, and Netgazeti.ge - covered the same processes, but did so through different editorial and discursive logics. Differences appeared not only in evaluations, but also in topic selection, headline construction, the representation of political actors, the use of emotional vocabulary, and the way narratives were formed around who should be seen as a “legitimate” or “illegitimate” political figure.

Dominant Indicators of Media Polarization

After analyzing the texts, the first and most visible sign of polarization was the difference in the naming of the draft law. Some media outlets presented it as the “transparency law,” while critical platforms framed it as the “Russian law.” This was not simply a difference in terminology. These labels predetermined for readers and viewers the meaning through which the political process was to be understood: either within a narrative of transparency and sovereignty, or within a frame of democratic backsliding and a threat to the European course.

On ImediNews.ge, the draft law was mostly presented as an instrument for protecting transparency, sovereignty, and national interests. Within this frame, the government and supporters of the draft law

⁹ See: Text analysis, Tables 1–4.

were placed in a legitimate position, while the opposition and civil society organizations were often presented as radical, prone to destabilization, or externally directed actors. The rhetoric of threat, external interference, protection of the Church, and state stability was especially strong in the texts of this platform.

On TVPirveli.ge, the opposite picture emerged. The draft law was almost entirely framed as the “Russian law.” In the texts, it was associated with democratic backsliding, repression, threats to Georgia’s European future, and authoritarian tendencies of the government. The protest movement, by contrast, was presented as pro-European civic resistance. On this platform, the emotional tone was sharper and often served a mobilizing function: readers were offered events not simply at the level of information, but as a matter of political choice.

In the case of 1TV.ge, the texts maintained a more institutional tone. The platform often presented official statements and international responses in parallel. Yet despite its formal attempt at neutrality, a tension between two narratives was still visible in the texts: on the one hand, the right to a sovereign decision and the institutional position of the state; on the other, international criticism and the issue of compliance with European standards. In this sense, 1TV.ge may be understood as maintaining an institutional mode of coverage - presenting different positions, but without offering an in-depth analytical synthesis.

On Netgazeti.ge, the draft law was presented mainly within a legal-critical and pro-European frame. The texts focused on the Venice Commission’s opinion, international standards, human rights, and possible restrictions on the media and civil society. The platform’s discursive logic was more closely connected to the watchdog or critical-explanatory model of journalism, where the political event was discussed not only as part of an ongoing confrontation, but also in the context of democratic institutions, legal standards, and the perspective of European integration.

As a result, the four platforms did not construct the draft law as one and the same political process. Readers received not only different evaluations, but also different interpretive worlds: in one space, the law was presented as a mechanism for protecting sovereignty and transparency; in another, as a sign of democratic backsliding and a turn toward Russia; in a third, as an issue of institutional confrontation; and in a fourth, as a problematic case from the perspective of legal and European standards.

Agenda Selection and Selective Visibility

One of the important findings of the study is that media platforms differed in how they selected what should become the central issue. This choice determined not only thematic emphasis, but also the direction in which readers were encouraged to perceive the political process.

For example, on ImediNews.ge, the agenda was focused on external influence, the role of non-governmental organizations, threats related to the Church, opposition radicalism, and the need for state stability. The legal substance of the draft law was largely moved to the background, while the leading issue became who stood behind the protest and what kind of threat this posed to the state.

On TVPirveli.ge, the agenda was built around the legitimacy of protest, government violence, criticism from international partners, and threats to European integration. On this platform, the main question was

not what was written in the draft law, but what its adoption would mean for the country's political and geopolitical future.

As for 1TV.ge, its coverage was often distributed between official statements and international reactions. The platform tried to maintain the form of institutional balance, although the details of civic protest were given comparatively less visibility. Political and diplomatic statements were presented more prominently.

On Netgazeti.ge, the agenda was devoted primarily to legal comparisons, international assessments, the Venice Commission's opinion, human rights standards, and the use of police force. In the case of this media outlet, the political process was presented more strongly within a broader legal and democratic frame.

These differences show that agenda selection is one of the main mechanisms of polarized communication. In such a situation, a media platform does not simply provide readers with information; it also signals in advance what should be considered the main problem: external interference, government repression, institutional conflict, or violation of democratic standards.

Frames and Interpretive Bias

The study clearly identified the different use of frames. Media outlets placed the same event within different interpretive schemes. This applied to the draft law, protest rallies, international responses, and the overcoming of the president's veto.

The first example was the frame associated with the naming of the draft law: the "transparency law" and the "Russian law" point to radically different political meanings. The term "transparency law" presents the law as a legitimate, necessary, and state-important instrument. The term "Russian law," by contrast, frames it as an authoritarian model, a geopolitical threat, and an obstacle to European integration.

A similar difference was visible in the presentation of protest rallies. For example, on ImediNews.ge, the protest was often presented as violent, externally encouraged, or radical activity. On TVPirveli.ge and Netgazeti.ge, the same protest was presented as civic resistance, pro-European mobilization, and the defense of democratic choice.

Interpretive bias appeared not only in evaluative language, but also in the selection of sources. While ImediNews.ge gave more space to government representatives and actors supportive of the government, critical platforms attached greater importance to the positions of international partners, the opposition, civil society, and legal expertise. Accordingly, the distribution of sources became not only a method or technique of delivering information, but also a way of organizing political meaning.

Emotional Mobilization and Evaluative Language

The findings show that emotional tone is one of the key elements in polarized media coverage. Emotionality should not be understood merely as a stylistic feature; in a crisis situation, it shaped how audiences were expected to perceive a specific event - as a threat or injustice, as a matter of state necessity, as a historic choice, or as a moral struggle.

On ImediNews.ge, emotional tone was most often connected to the vocabulary of threat, betrayal, external interference, radicalism, and national defense. This language reinforced the frame of protecting the state and preserving sovereignty.

On TVPirveli.ge, the emotional current moved in another direction. The dominant vocabulary was that of repression, violence, European choice, a historic crossroads, and civic resistance. Such formulations presented current events to the audience not as an ordinary political dispute, but as a struggle for the country's democratic and geopolitical future.

On Netgazeti.ge, emotional weight was more closely connected to legal and international assessments, although emotional tone became stronger in coverage of the dispersal of protests, the Venice Commission's opinion, and the overcoming of the veto.

On 1TV.ge, the language was more moderate, but in some texts there were still formulations that placed the political process within a frame of threat and pressure.

Accordingly, emotional mobilization performed different political functions across platforms. In one case, it strengthened the idea of defending the state against external interference; in another, it supported the motive of civic resistance and the defense of European choice; in a third, it created a picture of institutional confrontation; and in a fourth, it emphasized the violation of legal and democratic standards.

Narrative Fragmentation and the Simplification of the Political Process

Another important finding of the study is narrative fragmentation. In the analyzed texts, a complex political and legal process was often compressed into simple oppositional schemes. This was especially visible when different media platforms treated the same event not as part of a longer political process, but as a symbolic episode used to confirm their own central thesis.

On ImediNews.ge, the conflict was often formulated as “the state against radicals” or “sovereignty against external interference.” On TVPirveli.ge and Netgazeti.ge, the more frequent scheme was “the people against the regime” or “a European future against Russian backsliding.” On 1TV.ge, a softer but still simplified model appeared: “a sovereign decision against international criticism.”

Such simplification reduced the space for intermediate or complex positions. The legal, institutional, political, and international aspects of the draft law were often placed within a single dominant frame. As a result, audiences were given less opportunity to see the process in a multidimensional way. More often, they were offered a ready-made interpretation in which actors had already been assigned to “right” and “wrong,” “legitimate” and “illegitimate,” “state-oriented” and “anti-state” positions.

The Blurred Boundary between Information and Interpretation

One of the most important findings in the analyzed corpus is the blurred boundary between information and interpretation. Media texts often performed two functions at the same time: they described an event and predetermined how readers should understand it.

This was especially visible in headlines and opening paragraphs. Formulations such as “Russian law,” “transparency law,” “attempted coup d’état,” “brutality of the special forces,” “blackmail using the EU issue,” or “repressive legislation” offered readers a clear interpretive position along with factual information. In such cases, readers encountered the frame through which the event was to be evaluated even before receiving the main information in the text.

This tendency was especially visible on ImediNews.ge and TVPirveli.ge, although in opposite political directions. Netgazeti.ge used a more explanatory style, but its interpretive position was still visible in the naming of the draft law and in legal assessments. 1TV.ge used less direct vocabulary, but its framing was visible through the distribution of sources and the sequencing of statements.

It is important to note that the combination of information and interpretation is a significant factor when discussing democratic vulnerability. When a firm evaluative frame precedes the description of an event, the audience receives less neutral initial information and is drawn more quickly into an already constructed political narrative.

“Us/Them” Division and the Legitimation of Actors

The analyzed texts clearly showed different forms of “us/them” division. This division did not function in the same way across all platforms, but almost everywhere it produced a camp-based perception.

On ImediNews.ge, “we” was often linked to the state, sovereignty, national interests, the Church, and stability. “They,” by contrast, could include the radical opposition, part of the non-governmental sector, external forces, or groups oriented toward destabilization.

On TVPirveli.ge, “we” referred more often to the pro-European public, citizens, protest participants, and defenders of democratic choice. “They” were presented as the government, Georgian Dream, repressive institutions, or a force moving the country away from the European path.

On Netgazeti.ge, the division was articulated more within a legal-democratic vocabulary. One side represented European standards, rights, and civic space, while the other consisted of the political force supporting the draft law, which was presented as being in conflict with those standards. On 1TV.ge, this division was softer, but it still appeared in the opposition between sovereign decision-making and international criticism.

These divisions are particularly significant from the perspective of democratic vulnerability, because they reduce the possibility of reasoned dialogue with political opponents. When political actors are presented not as holders of competing positions, but as threats, a regime, radical forces, or representatives of external interests, public discussion shifts into a mode of moral exclusion.

The Impact of Polarization on Democratic Vulnerability

The findings show that media polarization in Georgia should not be understood merely as editorial difference between media outlets. The analyzed corpus shows that polarization creates a communicative

environment in which the shared factual space weakens, while audiences see the political process through different media realities.

This process matters for democratic vulnerability for several reasons. First, when the same event is presented through mutually contradictory frames in the media, discussion based on shared facts becomes more difficult. Second, emotionally charged and evaluative language increases camp-based self-identification. Third, the systematic delegitimation of the opponent reduces the space for compromise, reasoned debate, and rational discussion. Fourth, the merging of information and interpretation weakens the reader's ability to form an independent assessment.

As a result, a polarized media environment contributes to the deepening of political crisis not through a direct causal mechanism, but by creating communicative conditions in which distrust, confrontation, and symbolic separation can intensify more easily. In this sense, media polarization in Georgia should be understood as one of the important communicative conditions of democratic vulnerability.

Main Conclusions

The research showed that, between April 3 and May 28, 2024, the political crisis surrounding the draft law “On Transparency of Foreign Influence” was not presented in Georgian online media as a unified informational process. The analyzed material demonstrated that different media platforms covered the same event through different naming practices, frames, emotional tones, and logics of legitimacy. Accordingly, in this study media polarization appeared not only as the coexistence of different political positions, but as an active communicative process that assigns different meanings to political reality depending on the platform.

The findings also showed that on ImediNews.ge the draft law was mainly presented within the frame of transparency, sovereignty, and the protection of national interests; on TVPirveli.ge, it was framed almost entirely as the “Russian law,” in the context of democratic backsliding and a threat to Georgia’s European future; on 1TV.ge, coverage maintained a more institutional tone, although the tension between sovereign decision-making and international criticism remained clearly visible; and on Netgazeti.ge, the dominant frame was legal-critical and pro-European, with emphasis placed on democratic standards, civil society, and media freedom. Thus, all four platforms produced not only different evaluations, but also different interpretive pictures of the same political process.

It is especially important that polarization in media texts emerged through several interconnected mechanisms: selective agenda-setting, different naming of events, actor legitimation and delegitimation, emotional mobilization, narrative simplification, and the blurring of the boundary between information and interpretation. Together, these mechanisms produced the effect of polarized communication. According to the study, manipulative practice does not always mean direct falsehood; often it appears in selective emphasis, intensified evaluative vocabulary, and the delivery of an interpretive frame to the reader before factual information is presented.

One of the paper’s main conclusions is that media polarization in Georgia should not be viewed only as an editorial difference between media outlets. Under conditions of political crisis, it becomes an important

communicative condition of democratic vulnerability. When the shared factual space is weakened and audiences encounter the same event through different and often mutually contradictory frames, rational reasoning, argumentative debate, and dialogue with political opponents become difficult. Such an environment increases distrust, strengthens camp-based self-identification, and contributes to the moral separation of the political process into “us” and “them” categories.

The significance of this study lies in its treatment of media polarization not in isolation, but within the chain of digital communication, political crisis, and democratic vulnerability. The Georgian case is especially noteworthy in the context of a small state, where a limited media market, political tension, sensitivity to external influences, and the strong symbolic importance of European integration further amplify the effects of media polarization. In such an environment, the media does not merely reflect political confrontation; it participates in its reproduction through naming, framing, sources, emotional tone, and the legitimization of actors.

Ultimately, the paper concludes that media polarization in Georgia is not only an internal professional challenge for the media, but also an essential problem for democratic resilience. During political crises, polarized digital communication narrows the shared informational space, strengthens camp-based perceptions, increases social confrontation, and makes fact-based rational discussion more difficult. Therefore, strengthening democratic resilience is impossible without responsible, context-sensitive, and professionally transparent communication in the media environment.

Recommendations and Future Research Perspectives

From a practical perspective, the study points to several needs. First, the media should give greater attention to contextual explanation and clearly distinguish information from interpretation. Second, a more balanced selection of sources is necessary, especially on issues that are the subject of high public tension and political crisis. Third, media texts should reduce excessively emotional and delegitimizing language, because such rhetoric leaves little room for dialogue and contributes to the division of society into camps. Fourth, professional self-regulation mechanisms should pay greater attention not only to factual accuracy, but also to the impact of headlines, naming practices, source distribution, and evaluative frames on public perception.

Several directions are especially important for future research. First, the analysis should be expanded over a longer period in order to determine whether similar polarized frames are specific to a particular political crisis or form part of a broader structural tendency. Second, it would be useful to expand the study through comparison with other small states, which would place the Georgian case in a broader international context. Third, audience research should be integrated in order to determine how citizens perceive different media frames and how this affects trust, political self-identification, and selective news consumption. Fourth, the role of algorithmic visibility and social media circulation requires further study, since the effect of media polarization in the digital environment is not determined solely by editorial choices.

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Appendix Table A1. ImediNews.ge Coding Matrix

Code	Phase	Date	Title	Dominant Frame / Main Claim	Privileges / Favors	Criticizes / Weakens	Emotional Tone	Fact / Evaluation Balance	Us / Them
IM-01	P1	03.04.2024	Parliamentary majority: NGOs are actively involved in spreading pseudo-liberal ideology and so-called LGBT propaganda, the aim of which is to undermine public trust in the Georgian Orthodox Church	Foreign influence / anti-state campaign / moral-civilizational threat	Government	NGOs / civil society / foreign actors / critics	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
IM-02	P1	03.04.2024	Representatives of the radical opposition and the NGO sector launched a disinformation campaign about the transparency law. What the radicals say and what the bill actually says, in detail	Transparency / countering disinformation / legitimization of the bill	Government	Opposition / NGOs / critics	Medium	Mixed	Yes
IM-03	P2	17.04.2024	Irakli Kobakhidze: NGOs are trying to attack the Church and damage its reputation — if there had been a transparency law over the years, NGOs would have had greater accountability to their donors	Foreign influence / campaign against the Church / necessity of transparency	Government	Opposition / NGOs / critics	High	Mixed	Yes
IM-04	P2	17.04.2024	Father Davit Kobakhidze: What is happening near the Government Administration is an attempted coup d'état — I once again ask and urge young people to distance themselves from these scoundrel politicians	Attempted coup d'état / delegitimization of protest / threat of destabilization	Government	Opposition / NGOs / critics	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
IM-05	P3	01.05.2024	Irakli Kobakhidze: At 23:20 radical youth groups were instructed to throw heavy objects at police officers, verbally abuse them, and physically push them, which made the use of tear gas and water cannons necessary	Violent protest / legitimization of police action / protection of security	Government / police	Protest participants / radical groups	High	Mixed	Yes
IM-06	P3	01.05.2024	Mikheil Kavelashvili on the protest rally: All of this was planned in advance by external actors — these actions committed by the protesters are written in their instructions	External interference / pre-planned destabilization / delegitimization of protest	Government	Protest participants / external actors / critics	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
IM-07	P4	13.05.2024	Nino Tsilosani: The protest has an unequivocally violent character. There is effectively a scripted scenario whereby one day the rallies are meant to appear very peaceful, while on the next day violent actions continue	Violent protest / pre-scripted scenario / legitimization of police and institutional order	Government / police	Protest participants / opposition	High	Mixed	Yes
IM-08	P4	14.05.2024	Archil Gorduladze: Yes, the Church stands guard over the Georgian people, just as the national government will stand guard over the sovereignty and independence of the Georgian people	The Church and the national government as defenders of sovereignty / delegitimization of external criticism	Government / Church	External actors / critics	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
IM-09	P5	21.05.2024	The Venice Commission's opinion once again confirmed that there is not a single legal or any other kind of argument against the Georgian transparency law — Georgian Dream responded to the Venice Commission's opinion	Delegitimization of the Venice Commission / legitimization of the law / justification of the demand for transparency	Government	Venice Commission / NGOs / critics	High	High	Yes
IM-10	P5	21.05.2024	Gia Abashidze on the Venice Commission's opinion: This structure, composed of independent experts in constitutional law, is not a political party that should disseminate political, and moreover distorted, messages	Delegitimization of the Venice Commission / legitimization of the law / justification of the demand for transparency	Government	Venice Commission / NGOs / critics	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
IM-11	P6	27.05.2024	Mikheil Kavelashvili: As soon as the European Union and the United States stop interfering in Georgia's internal affairs and the political community concentrates on local issues, this artificially created "Georgian Charter" will collapse immediately	External interference / external control of the opposition / delegitimized opponents of national politics	Government / Parliament	Opposition / President / Western actors	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
IM-12	P6	28.05.2024	Irakli Kobakhidze: I want to thank every member of Parliament who supported the law on the transparency of foreign influence and thereby remained loyal to Georgia's national interests, its independence, and its sovereignty	Defense of national interests / sovereignty / final legitimization of the law	Government	Critics / forces supporting "revolution" and a "second front"	High	Mixed	Yes

Appendix Table A2. TVPirveli.ge Coding Matrix

Code	Phase	Date	Title	Dominant Frame / Main Claim	Privileges / Favors	Criticizes / Weakens	Emotional Tone	Fact / Evaluation Balance	Us / Them
TVP-01	P1	03.04.2024	Georgian Dream is bringing back the Russian law	Russian law / threat to democracy and the European course	Kerenski directive / sabotage of the European future / political mobilization	Government / Georgian Dream	High	Mixed	Yes
TVP-02	P1	03.04.2024	Khazaradze to Ivanishvili: We will not let you drag Georgia into Russia	Russian law / threat to democracy and the European course	Opposition / European choice	Government / Georgian Dream	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
TVP-03	P2	16.04.2024	You should listen to the Georgian people, who firmly tell you "No to the Russian law!" — Tina Bokuchava to Dream	You should listen to the Georgian people, who firmly tell you "No to the Russian law!" — Tina Bokuchava to Dream	Russian law / defense of the European future / the people's choice	Opposition / the Georgian people / European choice	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
TVP-04	P2	17.04.2024	EU reaction to the Russian law — Dream's decision may be discussed in Brussels	EU reaction to the Russian law — Dream's decision may be discussed in Brussels	International reaction / European frame / the foreign policy cost of the law	Critics / the European frame	Medium	Mixed	Yes
TVP-05	P3	30.04.2024	Special forces have begun hunting activists	"Georgia is at a crossroads, it must remain on the European path" — Ursula von der Leyen	European future / international condemnation of violence / Georgia at a crossroads	Activists / protest participants	High	Mixed	Yes
TVP-06	P3	01.05.2024	"Georgia is at a crossroads, it must remain on the European path" — Ursula von der Leyen	European future / international condemnation of violence / Georgia at a crossroads	Protest / European choice	Government / violent crackdown	High	Mixed	Partially
TVP-07	P4	13.05.2024	New evidence of Ivanishvili's special forces' brutality (video)	Police brutality / regime violence / portrayal of protesters as victims	Protest participants / detainees	Government / special forces	High	Mixed	Yes
TVP-08	P4	14.05.2024	The Georgian government is moving away from the Euro-Atlantic path — John Bass	Departure from the Euro-Atlantic path / government responsibility / demand to investigate violence	Critics / protest / Western frame	Government / Georgian Dream	Medium	Mixed	Partially
TVP-09	P5	21.05.2024	According to the Venice Commission, Dream's law resembles the Russian law, not the U.S. one	Legal delegitimization / similarity to the Russian law / threat to human rights	Critics / European-legal frame	Government / Georgian Dream	Medium	Mixed	Partially
TVP-10	P5	21.05.2024	If the Russian law enters into force, EU accession talks with Georgia will not be opened — final warning to Dream	Threat to the European future / foreign policy	Critics / European choice	Government / Georgian Dream	High	Mixed	Yes
TVP-11	P6	27.05.2024	What will the EU's response to Dream's actions be? Foreign ministers in Brussels discuss Georgia	Threat to the European future / possible international response measures / the foreign policy cost of the government's decision	Critics / European choice	Government / Georgian Dream	Medium	Mixed	Partially
TVP-12	P6	28.05.2024	State Department spokesperson: Dream has moved the country even further away from the path of European integration — we will take this into account	Moving away from the path of European integration / international condemnation / possible responsive measures	The Georgian people / critics / Western frame	Government / Georgian Dream	High	Mixed	Yes

Appendix Table A3. 1TV.ge Coding Matrix

Code	Phase	Date	Title	Dominant Frame / Main Claim	Privileges / Favors	Criticizes / Weakens	Emotional Tone	Fact / Evaluation Balance	Us / Them
1TV-01	P1	04.04.2024	Peter Stano: The European Union expresses concern that the bill on the transparency of foreign influence is again being considered, despite the strong public and international reaction in March 2023	International concern / risk to EU integration / freedom of civil society	Critics / European frame	Government / the bill	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-02	P1	05.04.2024	Shalva Papashvili: The tone of international reactions regarding the transparency bill is very mild: we had timely communication, including regarding the idea of the bill	National security / legitimization of transparency / the sovereign right of the Georgian people	Government	NGOs / critics / foreign commentators	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-03	P2	16.04.2024	Charles Michel: The bill on the transparency of foreign influence does not correspond to Georgia's European aspirations and accession trajectory	Threat to European aspirations / incompatibility with the accession trajectory	Critics / European frame	Government / the bill	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-04	P2	16.04.2024	Shalva Papashvili to the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights: The main aim of the bill is to improve transparency, which is one of the pillars of both the Council of Europe and Georgian democracy	Legitimization of transparency / argument of compatibility with European standards / proportionality	Government	Critics / international actors expressing concern	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-05	P3	30.04.2024	Ministry of Internal Affairs: The rally fully exceeded the limits of demonstration, became violent, and the Ministry is initiating measures provided by law to restore public order	Violent rally / restoration of public order / state legitimization	Government / police	Protest participants / organizers	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-06	P3	01.05.2024	Givi Targamadze: We are identifying every police officer, very bad days await you	Radicalization / threat against police officers / intensification of confrontation	Government / police (indirectly)	Radical opposition figures / authors of threats	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes
1TV-07	P4	13.05.2024	Annalena Baerbock: Tens of thousands of Georgians are showing that Europe's heart does not beat only between Warsaw and Lisbon, this democratic civil society has brought it into the streets of Berlin as well	European future / legitimization of civil society / accountability of the government's choice	Protest / civil society / European choice	Government / the bill	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-08	P4	14.05.2024	Vedran Patel: The final decision must be made by the Georgian government, but we say that such a law not only does not correspond to their aspirations, but also resembles repressive legislation	Conflict with European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations / frame of repressive legislation / government responsibility	Critics / the Georgian people's European choice / Western frame	Government / the bill	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-09	P5	21.05.2024	Marija Pejčinović Burić: I call on the Georgian authorities to implement the Venice Commission's recommendations in order to bring the transparency law into conformity with European standards	European standards / implementation of the Venice Commission's recommendations / international institutional pressure	European institutional framework	The law in its current form	Medium	Mixed	Partial
1TV-10	P5	21.05.2024	Salome Zourabichvili: The Venice Commission's opinion once again confirmed that there is no legal or any other kind of argument against the Georgian transparency law	Delegitimization of the Venice Commission / legal legitimization of the law / frame of defending transparency	Government	Venice Commission / critics / NGOs	High	Mixed	Yes
1TV-11	P6	27.05.2024	Irakli Kobakhidze: No one should be allowed to use the topic of the European Union for blackmail and speculation aimed at the Ukrainization of Georgia and opening a second front here	Blackmail through the topic of the European Union / threat of Ukrainization / avoidance of a second front here	Government	Critics / external actors / the 'global war party'	High	Mixed	Yes
1TV-12	P6	28.05.2024	Davit Kirkitadze: The ruling team ignored neither the Georgian people's request nor that of any partner, thereby breaking the hearts of our many partners and pleasing our sworn enemy	Damage to national interests / ignoring partners / defense of the European future	Opposition / Georgian people / international partners	Government / ruling team	High	Predominantly evaluative	Yes

Appendix Table A4. Netgazeti.ge Coding Matrix

Code	Phase	Date	Title	Dominant Frame / Main Claim	Privileges / Favors	Criticizes / Weakens	Emotional Tone	Fact / Evaluation Balance	Us / Them
NG-01	P1	04.04.2024	Why the "Russian law" is not similar to the American and Australian versions — OSCE/ODIHR explanation	Russian law / comparative-legal delegitimization / difference from Western analogues	Critics / legal-critical frame	Government / the ruling party's argument	Medium	Mixed	Partial
NG-02	P1	05.04.2024	Members of the European Parliament do not rule out the possibility that the European Commission may revert to the pre-candidate-status position	Threat to the European future / risk to candidate status / incompatibility with EU values	Critics / European frame	Government / the bill	High	Mixed	Partial
NG-03	P2	16.04.2024	Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights urges Parliament not to adopt the Russian law	Incompatibility with human rights standards / protection of media and civil society / European institutional criticism	Critics / civil society / European legal frame	Government / the bill	Medium	Mixed	Partial
NG-04	P2	17.04.2024	We urge the Government of Georgia to heed the warnings — United States	International warning / risk of stigmatizing civil society and the media / negative impact on the EU path	Critics / Western frame	Government / the bill	Medium	Mixed	Partial
NG-05	P3	30.04.2024	The Ministry of Internal Affairs began dispersing the protest on Rustaveli — tear gas and water cannons were used	Use of police force / dispersal of the protest / escalation in the streets	Protest participants / critical frame	Police / government	High	Mixed	Partial
NG-06	P3	01.05.2024	Parliament passed the Russian law on second reading	Institutional advance / adoption of the law despite protest / democratic backsliding frame	Critics / the protest side	Government / the ruling team	Medium	Mixed	Partial
NG-07	P4	13.05.2024	Kobakhidze places responsibility on the President if she does not use the veto to reconcile positions	Shifting responsibility onto the President / politicization of the veto procedure / legitimization of the government's position	Government	President / critical side	Medium	Mixed	Partial
NG-08	P4	14.05.2024	If the law is not changed, there will be restrictions on specific individuals and their family members — O'Brien	International pressure / threat of personal sanctions / incompatibility of the law with European standards	Critics / Western frame	Government / the bill	High	Mixed	Partial
NG-09	P5	21.05.2024	The Venice Commission assesses the Russian law negatively and urges Georgian Dream to withdraw it	Legal and institutional delegitimization / call for repeal of the law / incompatibility with democratic standards	Critics / European legal frame	Government / the Russian law	High	Mixed	Partial
NG-10	P5	21.05.2024	Georgian Dream criticizes the Venice Commission's professional reasoning and accuses it of bias	Delegitimization of the Venice Commission / government counter-frame / rejection of criticism	Government	Venice Commission / critical assessments	Medium	Mixed	Partial
NG-11	P6	27.05.2024	We have begun discussing an appropriate EU response in the event the law enters into force — Borrell	Possible EU response measures / risk to the European path / foreign policy cost of the law	Critics / European frame	Government / the ruling team's decision	Medium	Mixed	Partial
NG-12	P6	28.05.2024	"A shameful day for Georgia" — international reactions to the adoption of the Russian law	International condemnation / obstruction of European integration / political cost of overriding the veto	Critics / the Georgian people's European choice / international frame	Government / the Russian law	High	Mixed	Partial