

## What is “Effective Media Control” and Do We Have Signs of it in Georgia

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Christopher Walker and Robert Orttung (2014), in their article entitled "Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media," note that aside from exceptionally heavy-handed regimes, modern authoritarians do not seek total domination of all media. Their aim, as described by the authors, is "effective media control." To achieve this, in conjunction with various restrictive mechanisms, they use the so-called state media outlets. The information environment is effectively controlled by markedly state-run, as well as regime-affiliated media, subjugated by indirect financial instruments that ensure the dominance of pro-government narratives across the information environment.<sup>2</sup>

A research study by Corduneanu-Huci and Hamilton (2022)<sup>3</sup> seeks to explain why non-democratic regimes (except for extreme outliers) strive for complete control over the media. The scholars analyzed nearly a thousand cases of "silent censorship" from 196 countries in the period of 2001-2015. According to the paper, cost-benefit calculations largely define the action or inaction of state censors. Regimes usually take into account several issues in this regard, including the political cost, i.e., the damage inflicted by censorship attempts—electoral at the local level and legitimacy at the global level. Additionally, the size and influence of media outlets that are going to be subjected to censorship are also important. Research results prove that platforms that cover a larger audience are more frequently subjected to heavy forms of censorship than those media outlets that are accessible to a narrow segment of the market. The authors underline that keeping cost-benefit calculations in mind, censors aspire to strike a balance and have a precise understanding of what is a bigger threat—allowing a specific media outlet to continue operation or the protest that will ensue after silencing it. Therefore, they have to "economize censorship." In addition, regimes have to rationally select ways of restricting specific media outlets to achieve the desirable outcome with less stringent methods.

The example of Hungary clearly illustrates the aforementioned "effective media control" approach and its benefits for non-democratic governments. According to Griffen (2020), as of 2019, there

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<sup>2</sup> Walker, C. and Orttung, R. W. (2014). *Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media*. Journal of Democracy, Vol. 25. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/46KIEOa>

<sup>3</sup> Corduneanu-Huci, C. and Hamilton, A. (2022). *Selective Control: The Political Economy of Censorship*. Political Communication, 2022, Vol. 39, NO. 4, 517–538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2074587>

was not a single imprisoned journalist in Hungary, and there were no cases of physical abuse against them. Furthermore, critical media outlets critical of the government were also operating. However, at the same time, the author cites the conclusion of the International Press Institute's (IPI) mission, stating that since 2010, after Viktor Orbán's rise to power, the government has systematically dismantled media freedom, pluralism, and independence, "achieving a degree of information control unprecedented in an EU member state."<sup>4</sup> Examining this seemingly paradoxical situation naturally raises the question of the ways in which this is achieved.

Despite the rapid development of the internet and the increasing popularity of social networks, television remains a primary target for the radar of non-democratic regimes, and most of the attempted restrictions are imposed on TV channels. It is not surprising that state TV channels operate in non-democratic regimes where the primary objective is to promote the agenda of the incumbent government. Similarly, under such regimes, Public Broadcasters are also more or less heavily subjected to censorship, despite legally enshrined guarantees of their independence. Concerning privately-owned media outlets, the capture of the media market is one of the main instruments for effective control. Hungary's example is worth mentioning again, as Griffen (2020) notes that after coming to power, Orbán's associate oligarchs purchased a number of media outlets, enabling Viktor Orbán to establish a massive pro-government media empire. An example of this is the German media company ProSiebenSat leaving Hungary in 2013, along with the expulsion of German companies Ringier and Axel Springer from Hungary's press market through the use of a government-controlled competition agency, etc. It is noteworthy that this process continued in subsequent years, and by 2020, around 80% of the media market was controlled by owners loyal to the ruling party.<sup>5</sup> As we can see, the media capture process was not forceful and heavy-handed, indicating good cost-benefit calculation and soundly selected tactical steps. Naturally, the creation or recruitment loyal to the regime or acting in its interests financial elites is not exclusively a Hungarian phenomenon and has been attempted multiple times by various regimes.

Manipulation through finances plays a crucial role in achieving "effective media control." In addition, to strengthen government media and undermine media critical of the government, non-democratic regimes resort to various financial tricks. For instance, there's the selective purchase of advertisements by the government, where all budgetary resources allocated for advertising are channeled

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<sup>4</sup> Griffen, S. (2020). *Hungary: a lesson in media control*. British Journalism Review. Vol. 31. Accessible at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0956474820910071>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

to media outlets loyal to the government. This selective approach is further extended by writing off debts of favored media or even providing them with subsidies. Such examples have been documented in many countries across the globe. Apart from ensuring the financial sustainability of companies loyal to the government, in order to exercise "effective media control," it is also important for a non-democratic regime to tighten advertising regulations and harm the media market in this manner, which poses an existential threat to independent media.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, to curb critical outlets, media regulatory bodies and the massive fines they impose are also utilized. Furthermore, there are so-called SLAPP cases<sup>7</sup> (when politicians or other public individuals file groundless libel suits and demand disproportionately high compensation to hinder the functioning of the media), government agencies hiding public information, etc.

In addition to the approaches discussed above, as mentioned earlier, so-called government media and its messages play a key role in achieving "effective media control." Walker and Orttung (2014)<sup>8</sup> examine tactics through which government media destroys a free media environment and facilitates the consolidation of the regime. The authors note that government media has several major target audiences: 1. Elites from the regime coalition 2. The populace at large 3. People who are strongly "plugged in" to the internet. 4. The critical segment - opposition and civil society. Government media has to address each of them with different messages. In the case of the elites, the media aims to convince them of the strength of the incumbent ruler, the solidity and stability of the regime, which guarantees their long-term welfare. On the other hand, it also aims to demonstrate clearly how they will be punished for breaking the "pledge of allegiance," including being subjected to an extremely negative smear campaign from the government media. For the general populace, the government media's aim is to instill fear and piety towards the government in stricter regimes. In less stringent but still non-democratic regimes, its major task is to promote apathy and passivity in society. In this case, the main methods of the regime's media include distorting information, manipulation, and shifting the audience's attention from fundamental problems to invented issues. Simultaneously, government media has to advocate and advertise the existing status quo while ensuring fear of changes. It also aims to demonize the opposition and citizens critical of the regime, portraying them all as intent on chaos and instability. The ultimate goal is the demobilization of

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<sup>6</sup> Dragomir, M. (2017). *Control the money, control the media: How government uses funding to keep media in line*. SAGE. DOI: 10.1177/1464884917724621

<sup>7</sup> Mańko, R. (2023). *Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)*. European Parliament. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/47JtfO6>

<sup>8</sup> Walker, C. and Orttung, R. W. (2014). *Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media*. Journal of Democracy, Vol. 25. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/46KlEOa>

large masses of society to ensure that their protests on various issues do not spill over into mass resistance. At the same time, certain government media outlets are also tasked with entertaining people to achieve their political passivity. For a normal citizen, the choice is as follows: leave their comfort zone and get involved in civil activism or continue calmly watching reality shows or other entertainment programs, thus maintaining a distance from politics. When describing the attitude of government media towards the opposition and civil society, Walker and Orttung (2014) note that the main aim is to isolate them from the populace at large. To achieve this, it is important to permanently smear them and portray them as enemies of the country and advocates of instability.

Regarding the so-called "internet audience," Walker and Orttung's aforementioned work was published in 2014, and since then, the world population's access to the internet has expanded significantly. Therefore, the current situation is different. However, the main methods described in the work remain relevant. Authoritarians in that medium, too, seek information control despite the massive scale of the internet space and the accompanying difficulties for censorship. Even in regimes that refrain from or are unable to resort to severe censorship (such as shutting down websites or restricting access to the internet), they still find ways for effective information control. To achieve this, they often resort to disinformation, allowing them to saturate the environment beyond their control with their own narratives or, at the very least, pollute the information domain and confuse the audience. This is confirmed by accounts from Meta – the company owning several social networks – which identifies inauthentic behavior on its platforms.<sup>9</sup> Many governments or sources affiliated with them are involved in such actions to manipulate public opinions. Additionally, in the circumstances where traditional and social media intertwine, and as part of the "effective control" of traditional media, government media is financially strong while critical media struggles for survival, it is only natural that the latter does not have the resources to be active on social platforms and cover a wider audience. This dynamic creates a fertile ground for the domination of government narratives in social networks.

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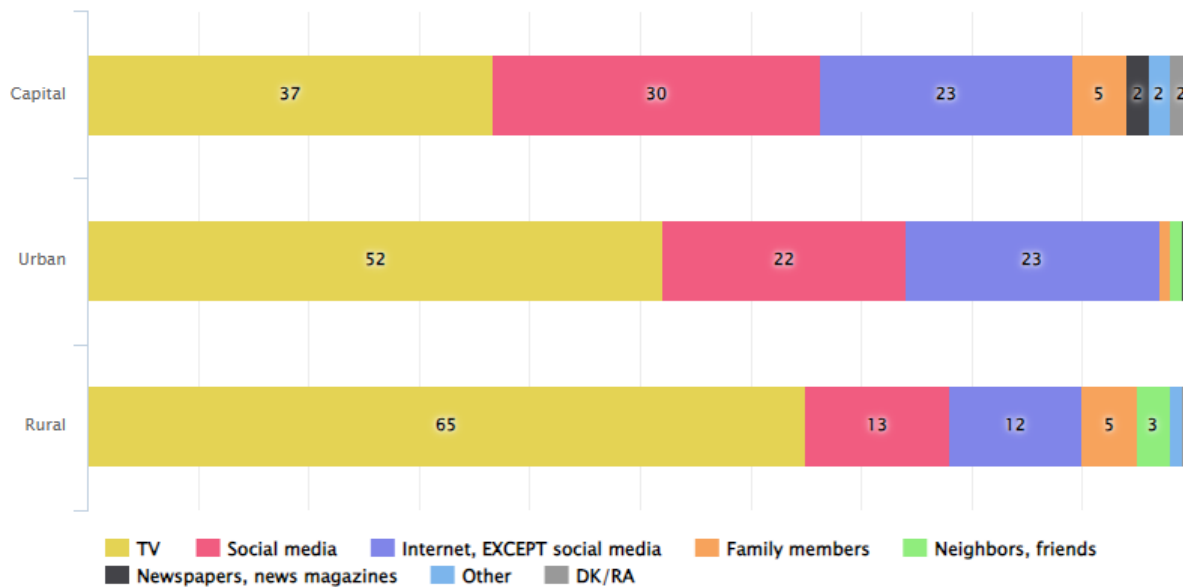
<sup>9</sup> Meta. *Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*. Via link: <https://about.fb.com/news/tag/coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>

## Georgian Media Environment

Given the aforementioned threats facing free media, the situation in this regard in Georgia is of interest. Today, based on its form of governance, Georgia is far from being a full-fledged democracy and belongs to the so-called hybrid regimes.<sup>10</sup>

According to a 2021 public opinion survey, television is the most important source of information about Georgia's current events for 53% of the respondents. It is followed by social media (21%) and the internet without social media (18%).<sup>11</sup> The number of TV viewers is even higher among the rural population.

INFSOU1: Main sources of information for receiving news about Georgia's current events?  
by SETTTYPE: Settlement type (%)



Source: *Caucasus Barometer 2021 Georgia*

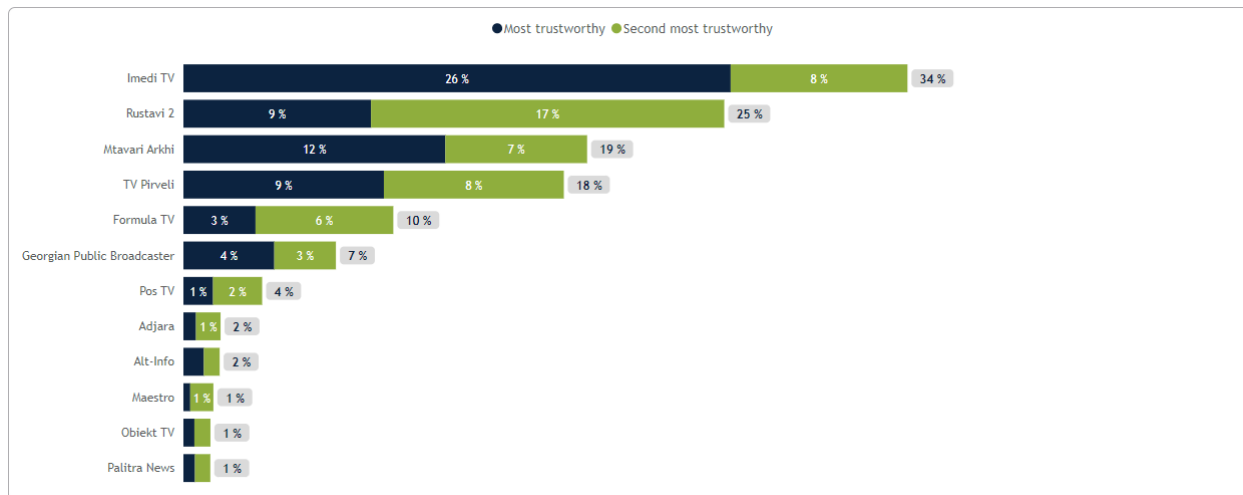
Therefore, television is the primary target of "effective media control." According to the International Republican Institute's (IRI) public opinion survey,<sup>12</sup> TV Imedi has the highest percentage in terms of TV channel trust ranking (first and second choice – 34%). TV Imedi is biased in favor of the

<sup>10</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. (2023). *Democracy Index 2022*. Via link: <https://bit.ly/3GwKQwW>

<sup>11</sup> Caucasus Barometer 2021, Georgia. Accessible at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb2021ge/INFSOU1/>

<sup>12</sup> International Republican Institute. *Georgian Survey of Public Opinion | September - October 2023*. Via link: <https://bit.ly/3GvMYVC>

government, and the ruling team is portrayed positively on this channel, while the opposition is subjected to as much smear as possible.<sup>13</sup> It is followed by Rustavi 2 (first and second choice – 25%), whose editorial policy was changed in 2019 after a change in channel ownership. Currently, Rustavi 2 is also largely biased towards the government.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, it features a large number of entertaining programs. It should be noted that a legal dispute over the company's ownership has been ongoing for many years, and eventually, it came under the ownership of Kibar Khalvashi,<sup>15</sup> a business figure loyal to the government. The founder and former owners of Rustavi 2, Davit Dvali and Jarji Akimidze, believe that Mr. Khalvashi obtained the company dishonestly in the past and press their claims for the company's ownership.<sup>16</sup> Overall, since 2019, when the owner of the sharply critical Rustavi 2 was changed, which was able to counterbalance Imedi in magnitude, there has been a picture of pro-government channels dominating.



Source: International Republican Institute (IRI)

In addition, of note is that none of the major Georgian TV channels (which cover news and politics) are profitable. The income earned from their broadcasting does not exceed expenses which makes them

<sup>13</sup> The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. Mediamonitoring. Accessible at: <https://www.qartia.ge/ka/mediamonitoring/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Kutidze, D. (2022). *The State of Georgian Media in the Last Decade – Progress, Stagnation and Regress*. Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/review/83>

<sup>16</sup> Radio Liberty (8 December 2021). *Court rejects lawsuit lodged by Akimidze and Dvali*. Accessible at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31599529.html>

even more vulnerable to outside control. At the same time, pro-government TV channels are leaders in terms of total incomes earned from advertisement placement.<sup>17</sup>

As regard to political/campaign advertisements placed in the TV channels it should be said that usually, the ruling party places advertisements mostly to the so-called government media whereas the major opposition party – to the so-called opposition channels. According to the analysis of Transparency International Georgia, for 2020 parliamentary elections, the ruling Georgian Dream party placed 54% of paid political ads to Imedi holding and 28% to Rustavi 2. In addition, the ruling party placed political ads worth of GEL 259,000 to the government TV channel PosTV. On the other hand, the United National Movement paid 88% of its advertisement expenses to Mtavari Channel and 10% to TV Pirveli.<sup>18</sup> It is possible to say that such approach encourages polarization which is one of the pre-conditions for keeping the status-quo and a scenario that is advantageous to the ruling party.

Simultaneously with the aforementioned issues, numerous legislative regulations have been introduced in the last decade, mostly concerning tele-radio broadcasters, undermining their editorial independence and financial sustainability. Additionally, more stringent regulations have been adopted for placing commercial advertisements, and advertisements for gambling, which were important sources of income for TV channels, were banned. Under the pretext of protecting the audience, numerous content-regulating restrictions were imposed on broadcasters. The Communications Commission, with its peculiar and not entirely accurate interpretation, has interfered in the content of broadcasters' products numerous times, essentially banning the placement of political ads in non-election periods and imposing disproportionately large fines on critical government broadcasters, etc. (see Gnomon Wise's policy document for more details).<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, the so-called SLAPP cases have been actively used against critical government media. On the grounds of libel, politicians and other public figures initiate groundless lawsuits against journalists and media, demanding disproportionately high compensation to hinder the operation of the media. According to the Georgian Democracy Initiative's (GDI) report, from January 2021 to April 2023, there 38 such cases under consideration in Georgia's common courts: "around 31.5% of disputes are

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<sup>17</sup> Transparency International Georgia (2023). *Annual TV advertising market report (2023)*. Accessible at: <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/2022-clis-satelevizio-sareklamo-bazris-kvleva>

<sup>18</sup> Tsetskhladze, S. (2021). *In which televisions have parties placed political advertisements during the 2016-2020 elections*. Transparency International Georgia. Accessible at: <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/romel-televiziebshi-antavsebdnen-partiebi-politikur-reklamas-2016-2020-clebis-archevnebis-dros>

<sup>19</sup> Kutidze, D. Rekhviashvili, M. (2023). *Financially and Content-Damaging Legislative Regulations for Broadcast Media and Their Alternatives*. Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/policy-papers/150>

initiated by city mayors; 13% - are by MPs; 13% - are by ministers/heads of state agencies; 8% - are by police officers; 26% - are by persons/institutions allegedly connected to “Georgian Dream”. It was also underscored that 56% of the claimants in these disputes demand excessive fines for moral damages (for instance GEL 55,555 GEL 100,000, etc.). According to the GDI, defendants in 92% of lawsuits are three critical media (Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli, and Formula) and journalists working in these TV Companies.<sup>20</sup>

In accordance with the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), situation in terms of providing public information by the government also backslide. According to the report: “According to the monitoring conducted by IDFI in 2022, the quality of access to public information in the country has decreased significantly compared to the previous year. The rate of responses (58%) from public institutions in 2022 is the lowest observed since 2010.”<sup>21</sup>

It also important to highlight how the government talks to the journalists from critical of the authorities media outlets. The ruling party blames journalists in “spreading falsehoods”, “dissemination of fake news”, “violence”, “acting against the national interests”, etc. The government deliberately attacks and denigrates virtually every critical program produced by the media and says that it is fabrication or attacks the source of dissemination and seeks to discredit it in public’s eye by name-calling. This is a rather widespread approach among today’s world’s non-democratic regimes and is considered as one of the instruments of “effective media control”.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the work of the so-called government media in Georgia and their messages, this is a subject of in-depth research. However, long-term observation of these media outlets allows us to argue that they produce narratives to encourage passivity among large segments of the population and distance people from politics. Specifically, they aim to instill fear of changes, including by constantly promoting the incumbent government's conspiracy theory that some forces in the West want to organize a coup d'état in Georgia and drag the country into war with Russia, creating a "second front" simultaneously with the Russia-Ukraine war. Government media refers to the opposition, civil sector, some international organizations, and those participating in mass protests as radicals and organizers of unrest. At the same time, government media strongly pushes the narrative that it is thanks to the sound policy of the

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<sup>20</sup> Georgian Democracy Initiative. (2023). *SLAPP cases in Georgia a new threat to media freedom*. Accessible at: <https://gdi.ge/index.php/ge/news/gdi-s-angarishi-slapp-saqmeebi-saqartveloshi-akhali-safrtkhe-2>

<sup>21</sup> Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI). (2023). *Access to Public Information in Georgia 2022*. Accessible at: [https://idfi.ge/ge/access\\_to\\_public\\_information\\_in\\_georgia\\_2022](https://idfi.ge/ge/access_to_public_information_in_georgia_2022)

<sup>22</sup> Kutidze, D. (2021). *The Government of Georgia's Aggressive and Propagandistic Rhetoric Against Media-Authoritarians' Proven Method to Discredit Journalists*. Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/researches/57>



incumbent government that Georgia succeeded in avoiding war. Furthermore, with a constant smear campaign against the opposition and the NGO sector (government media often labels them as "rich NGOs"), government media seeks to isolate them from society and popularize absurd discourses such as "opening a second front in Georgia," "global war party," "satanist" youth involved in protests, "fighting against national identity," etc.

There are discernible efforts to effectively control information on the internet as well, especially during crises. A study by Georgia's Reform Associates (GRASS) revealed a number of pro-government pages that tried to discredit the protests held in Tbilisi in March 2023 and demonize the protest in general.<sup>23</sup> In May 2023, the efforts of the Georgian government to control, or at least pollute the information space in social networks, were confirmed by the social networking platform Meta. In May 2023, a quarterly threat report was published, stating that 80 Facebook profiles, 26 pages, nine groups, and two Instagram accounts violating the company's policy against coordinated inauthentic behavior were removed in Georgia.<sup>24</sup> This network focused on domestic audiences across multiple apps, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and spent USD 33,500 on Facebook and Instagram as part of various campaigns. According to the report: "They also shared criticisms of the opposition, particularly during the most recent public protests related to the now-retracted legislative proposal on the so-called 'foreign agents' law in Georgia... Although the people behind this operation attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to the Strategic Communications Department of the Government Administration of Georgia."<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Many scholars, when describing the approaches of modern non-democratic governments vis-à-vis media, often discuss attempts at effective information control. The latter implies not the complete subjugation of media, but rather its selective control. To this end, non-democratic regimes resort to capturing the media market, wherein most privately-owned media outlets are controlled by "friendly" elites loyal to the ruling regime. In this scenario, there may be some small-scale independent or critical

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<sup>23</sup> Georgia's Reform Associates (GRASS). *Discrediting messages by pro-government social media pages on the Russian-style "Foreign Agents Law"*. Accessible at: <https://grass.org.ge/ka/publikaciebi/kvleva/2349--2349>

<sup>24</sup> Meta. *Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*. Via link: <https://about.fb.com/news/tag/coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>

<sup>25</sup> Meta. (3 May, 2023). *Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report*. Via link: <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Meta-Quarterly-Adversarial-Threat-Report-Q1-2023.pdf>

media outlets in the market, creating the impression of media pluralism in the country. However, the reality is that the government narrative overwhelmingly dominates the information domain. To achieve and maintain such a situation, non-democratic regimes employ various financial tricks to incentivize their favored media outlets. Simultaneously, they tighten advertising regulations, thereby harming the media market, which poses an existential threat, primarily to independent media. Additionally, to suppress critical media outlets, these regimes use selective approaches of media regulatory bodies, imposing massive fines, and resorting to so-called SLAPP cases, as well as hiding public information by government agencies, etc.

The so-called government media plays a crucial role in achieving "effective media control." Its objective is to convince the regime's loyal elites of the stability of the incumbent rule and instill fear, passivity, and nihilism among a wider audience to keep most of the population disengaged from politics. By demonizing critical thought and protest, as well as consistently smearing and isolating the opposition and civic activists from the public, the ultimate goal of government media is the demobilization of large swathes of the population, ensuring that their dissatisfaction on various issues does not transform into mass protests. Similar approaches are employed on the internet, where entities affiliated with the ruling party spread disinformation, thereby polluting the information domain and confusing the audience.

Regarding Georgia, the majority of the country's population receives information about current events from TV channels, which are currently dominated by government broadcasters. This trend has become particularly noticeable since 2019 when the editorial policy of Rustavi 2, previously sharply critical of the incumbent government TV channel, underwent a change in ownership.

Simultaneously, numerous legislative regulations were adopted that undermined the editorial independence and financial sustainability of broadcasters. The Communications Commission, with its peculiar and not entirely accurate interpretation, frequently intervened in the content of broadcasters' products, particularly in terms of advertisements. It essentially banned the placement of political ads outside of election periods and imposed disproportionately large fines on the broadcaster critical of the government.

This situation is exacerbated by the government media outlet's ongoing attempts to discredit the opposition, the civil sector, and any form of protest in general. In this way, pro-government media aids the ruling party in achieving its goal of fostering passivity among large segments of the population and keeping them distanced from politics. Similar efforts are noticeable in the realm of effective information

control on the internet. This is supported by an investigation of the Metia social networks platform, which identified a direct connection between actors engaged in efforts to discredit civil protests and the strategic communication department of the Government of Georgia.

An analysis of experiences in different countries, as well as relevant literature and the current situation in Georgia, leads us to the conclusion that there are apparent signs of "effective media control" in Georgia today.