



# Georgia: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Vera Choo, Samantha Custer, and Rodney Knight for their advice and assistance in the research and compilation of this profile. We additionally want to acknowledge AidData’s team of student Research Assistants who collected data for this project, including Diane Frangulea, Maggie Herndon, Daniel Highland, Katherine Hughes, Sonia Kelly, Morgan King, Deb Kornblut, Amelia

Larson, Abby Maher, Daniella Marx, Harper Ortlieb, Caroline Prout, Andrew Tanner,  
Emmeline Walker, Sophia Zaman, and Noa Zielinski.

# Introduction

What are the entry points for foreign actors to shape and influence the narrative in the Georgia media market? This profile seeks to address some of the entry points related to media ownership and Russian state-owned media. AidData recognizes that malign influence may affect narrative creation in other ways, including through the republishing of foreign content in domestic media outlets, interactions on social media, and journalist biases. However, this project focuses solely on direct and indirect ownership of traditional domestic media outlets to identify potential entry points for Russian influence through elites and media owners. By better understanding Georgia's domestic media ownership environment, including what media outlets citizens consume and who the owners of those outlets are, we can anticipate entry points where malign actors may try to influence domestic narratives.

Georgia's media ownership is relatively transparent, though ownership of top outlets often concentrates across mediums. Since owners of top media houses have the potential to influence the content and tone of topics covered by journalists in their employ, understanding who owns the media is crucial to identifying avenues for influence and potential bias in reporting. In this profile, we begin to close this gap with an in-depth look at domestic media ownership in Georgia.

This media ownership profile and the supporting data were prepared by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute.<sup>1</sup> The data for this profile was collected manually by AidData staff and student research assistants. We began by conducting web searches to identify a list of media in Georgia, and then identified a list of the top-ranked outlets in terms of overall consumption. We then used this information to gather the ownership data. We used cross-country sources when available (e.g., Alexa<sup>2</sup>), as well as Georgia's public business registry, media watchdog sources, and other open source data. This profile includes data for Georgia proper and

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<sup>1</sup> This profile is part of a collaboration with the USAID E&E Bureau made possible through a buy-in to a Higher Education Solutions Network cooperative agreement (AID-A-12-00096) in place between USAID/LAB/HESN, AidData, and William & Mary.

<sup>2</sup> Alexa is an online analysis tool. AidData Staff used Alexa's API to gauge website traffic.  
<https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo>.

does not separate out any information that may differ in breakaway regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In the following sections, we provide summary data on the presence of Russian state-owned media, top outlets, and media ownership in Georgia as of 2021. This profile focuses on the ownership of traditional broadcast, print, and online media outlets. Social media is not included in this analysis. By mapping the ownership and influence of traditional forms of media, these profiles lend insights into potential channels for foreign influence in the top consumed outlets.

## Russian Media Footprints

The most direct form of Kremlin influence in Georgia's media landscape is via Russian state-owned media (see Table 1). Nine of the eleven Russian state-owned media outlets we tracked have a physical presence in Georgia, which provides the Kremlin with a strong channel to directly communicate with, and ultimately influence, Georgian citizens. Physical presence includes physical infrastructure, such as cable packages, physical office space or local bureaus, and radio broadcasters, but excludes satellite broadcasting and online or streaming availability. Although the top Russian television and news agencies all have a presence in Georgia, the top newspaper and radio outlets do not. Since Georgians get most of their information from television,<sup>3</sup> the Kremlin could consider it as a prime medium for releasing its content. In sum, Kremlin media maintains a fairly strong presence within Georgian borders. Table 1 provides a footprint of Russian state-owned media presence in Georgia, but does not speak to how well-consumed each outlet is by Georgian citizens.

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<sup>3</sup> Keshelashvili, et al. (2021) Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment. Part One: Context, Infrastructure, Regulation, and Revenue. Internews, p. 6. URL: <https://internews.org/resource/georgia-information-ecosystem-assessment/>. Accessed February, 25, 2022.

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Georgia, 2021<sup>4</sup>

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✓	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✗	Sputnik	✗	TASS	✓
Russia 24	✓					Sputnik	✓
Russia K	✓						
RTR-Planeta	✓						
TV Centre	✓						
Channel One	✓						
RT	✓						

Other indirect forms of Russian influence are possible, including domestic outlets republishing narratives and pro-Russian journalists in-country. In this profile, AidData has captured direct Russian channels of influence through state-owned media infrastructure.

## Top Media Outlets

Table 2 identifies the top five most-consumed media outlets in Georgia by medium (television, print, radio, and online) based on cross-sectional indicators such as viewership share and circulation. Television remains the most consumed medium for important information like domestic political news, Covid-19 information, and international affairs, though younger audiences are increasingly turning to social media and the Internet.<sup>5</sup> While we cannot know the exact influence of each individual outlet,

<sup>4</sup> While we did not find evidence that Rossiyskaya Gazeta circulates in Georgia, we found evidence that Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH), a printed supplement created by Rossiyskaya Gazeta, is placed in other newspapers in the country.

<sup>5</sup> International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research (2021) "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia (February 2021)." URL: <https://www.iri.org/resources/new-poll-amid-political-crisis-georgians-show-concerns-over-economy-and-covid-19/>. Accessed February 25, 2022. Caucasus Research Resource Center/National Democratic Institute (2020) "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of June 2020 Survey." URL:

we can assume that outlets that reach higher numbers of consumers have greater potential to influence more citizens. Despite the presence of many Russian state-owned media outlets in Georgia, none appears in the top five outlets for any medium.

AidData used a weighted average of media consumption survey rankings from 2017 to 2021 to determine the top media outlets in Georgia. This strategy offers a more long-term perspective of top media outlets, rather than a snapshot of the top media outlets right now. As such, the top outlets may not exactly reflect the current order of most consumed outlets, but do show a solid picture of the media landscape over the past five years. Recent rankings are weighted more heavily to adjust for new changes.<sup>6</sup>

Table 2: Top Georgian media outlets ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Television	Print	Radio	Online
1	Imedi	Kviris Palitra	Fortuna FM	Ambebi.ge
2	Mtavari Arkhi	Rezonansi	Radio Imedi	Interpressnews.ge
3	Rustavi 2	Asaval-Dasavali	Georgian Radio	Palitravideo.ge
4	GDS TV	Alia	Radio Palitra	On.ge
5	TV Pirvelli	Akhali Taoba	Abkhazetis Khma	Kvirispalitra.ge

According to findings from an AidData survey of regional and local media experts in 2021, the majority of top Georgian outlets mirror the results of open-source data collection by AidData researchers. However, additional outlets excluded from this top outlet list but ranked highly by local experts include the television station Channel

<https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-june-2020-public-opinion-polls-georgia>. Accessed February, 25 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Television, Print and Radio: Television, radio and print rankings were calculated using multiple publicly available surveys and circulation data, including an AidData survey of country and regional experts conducted in summer 2021. Additional survey data came from: the International Republican Institute (2021), Internews (2021), the Caucasus Research Resource Center (2020), TVMR GE (Nielsen) (2020), the Center for Media, Data, and Society (2019), IREX's Media Sustainability Index (2019), Transparency International (2019), the Caucasus Research Resource Center (2017), Media Landscapes, Maia Mikashavidze (2017).

Online: AidData Media Survey (2021), Alexa (April, 2021), Top.ge (2021), IREX's Media Sustainability Index (2019), Media Landscapes, Maia Mikashavidze (2017).

1(GPB), the radio station Radio Ar Daidardo, and online outlets Netgazeti.ge and Primetime.ge.

## Media Ownership

Table 3 lists the ownership information of top Georgian media outlets by medium (television, newspaper, radio, and online). The 2004 Law on Broadcasting (Chapter XII, Articles 60-62) limits concentration of media ownership and mandates ownership transparency. Nonetheless, we find owners with ties to more than one outlet in at least two mediums. Some outlets have owners with murky ties to Georgia’s political elite that create opportunities for hidden influence. We discuss further examples of ownership ties and relationships in the following section.

In order to highlight which outlets may be more susceptible to Russian influence, AidData staff have devised a four-point scale to indicate levels of Russian ownership. This scale is color-coded shades of red in the table below to indicate 1) Direct Russian ownership, 2) Known Russian ties, 3) Suspected Russian ties, and 4) No Russian ties. Additionally, Georgian state-owned media is color-coded blue. In Georgia, no media owners had suspected or known ties to the Russian government, and none had direct Russian ownership. As such, this profile has no red color-code and one designation of state-owned media.

Table 3: Ownership of top Georgia media outlets by share

  No Russian ties  
  Suspected Russian ties  
  Known Russian ties  
  Direct Russian ownership  
  Local state-owned media

Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)
Television	1	Imedi TV	Imedi TV Ltd.	Irakli Rukhadze	Majority
				Other shareholders	Minority
	2	Mtavari Arkhi	Main Channel, Ltd.	Zaza Okuashvili	40
				Bakur Jakhaia	37
			Nika Gvaramia	12	

			Nikoloz Sisauri	3
			Giorgi Rurua	2.5
			Marie Ana Rurua	2.5
			Manana Sanadze	1
			Teimuraz Vasilidze	1
			Giuli Alasania	0.75
			Nikolozi Alasania	0.25
	3 Rustavi 2	Rustavi 2 TV	Kibar Khalvashi	100
	4 GDS TV	GDS TV LLC	Irakli Rukhadze	Majority
			Other shareholders	Minority
	5 TV Pirveli	First TV Ltd.	Vakhtang Tsereteli	100
Print	1 Kviris Palitra	Palitra Media	Irakli Tevdorashvili	75
			Zaza Buadze	25
	2 Rezonansi	Rezonansi Daily Newspaper Ltd.	Zurab Macharadze	100
	3 Asaval-Dasavali	Asaval-Dasavali Publishing House Ltd	Lasha Nadareishvili	100
	4 Alia	Alia and Kviris Kronika Newspapers Ltd.	Giorgi Bregvadze	100
	5 Akhali Taoba	Akhali Taoba Newspaper Ltd.	Ioseb Goginashvili	45
			Zurab Beridze	40
			Medea Sanaia	10
			Beka Goginashvili	5
	Radio	1 Fortuna FM	Radio Holding Fortuna	Guram Chigogidze
2 Radio Imedi		Georgia Media Production Group	Irakli Rukhadze	Majority
			Other shareholders	Minority
3 Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB)		Government of the Republic of Georgia		100
4 Radio Palitra	Palitra Media	Irakli Tevdorashvili	75	



			Zaza Buadze	25		
	5	Abkhazetis Khma	Media Holding Ltd.	Nino Chkheidze	100	
	1	Ambebi.ge	Palitra Media	Irakli Tevdorashvili	75	
	3	balkanweb.com	Focus Group LLC	Zaza Buadze	25	
	2	Interpressnews.ge	Palitra Media	Irakli Tevdorashvili	75	
				Zaza Buadze	25	
	3	Palitravideo.ge	Palitra Media	Irakli Tevdorashvili	75	
				Zaza Buadze	25	
Online				Nodar David	25	
				Giorgi Jibladze	25	
		4	On.ge	On.ge Ltd.	Zurab Gumbaridze	12.5
					Giorgi Lifonava	12.5
					Mikheil Mshvildadze	12.5
					Irakli Saghinadze	12.5
		5	Kvirispalitra.ge	Palitra Media	Irakli Tevdorashvili	75
					Zaza Buadze	25

## Results

### Television

Television is by far the most consumed media in Georgia, with 88% of Georgians identifying it as their main information source.<sup>7</sup> Georgia's top television outlets are all privately held, with no state-owned media making the list. While Table 3 reveals some ownership diversity in Georgia's top television outlets, this has not prevented escalating

<sup>7</sup> Keshelashvili, et al. (2021) Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment. Part One: Context, Infrastructure, Regulation, and Revenue. Internews, p. 6.

political polarization. Members from the ruling Georgian Dream party refuse to appear on or engage with several outlets with critical views.<sup>8</sup>

Irakli Ruzhdze, through his asset management and recovery firm Hunnewell Partners, is the principal owner of the first and fourth most-watched Georgian television outlets: Imedi TV and GDS TV, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Imedi TV is owned directly by Teleimedi LLC, while GDS TV Ltd. directly owns GDS TV. Both companies, in turn, are owned by Georgian Media Production Group, which Ruzhdze and his partners own through the Dutch firm Media Finance Group BV.<sup>10</sup> Reports suggest partners of Ruzhdze control a minority share.<sup>11</sup> Ruzhdze only recently became the owner of these outlets, along with popular Maestro TV (not in our top media list), after they were sold by previous owner Inna Gudavadze.<sup>12</sup> Media watchdogs considered Imedi closely aligned to elites and the pro-Georgian Dream party while Gudavadze owned the outlet, and it appears to have

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<sup>8</sup> IREX (2021) Georgia: Vibrant Information Barometer, p. 8. URL: <https://www.irex.org/resource/vibrant-information-barometer-vibe>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Taktakishvili, Natio. "The buyer of TV Imedi and GDS TV is known," Business Media Georgia. Published January 29, 2021. URL: <https://bm.ge/en/article/amiran-gamyrelidze-restornebis-mimart-solidaruli-var/74552>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Recent reports of litigation in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom suggest the ownership is being challenged, but sources unanimously indicate Ruzhdze fully controls the outlets. See (i) "Dutch court has granted pre-judgment attachment of the interests businessman Irakli Rukhadze and his partners have in a foundation, owning 100% of TV 'Imedi.'" Business Media Georgia. Published October 20, 2021. URL: <https://bm.ge/en/article/dutch-court-has-granted-pre-judgment-attachment-of-the-interests-businessman-irakli-rukhadze-and-his-partners-have-in-a-foundation-owning-100-of-tv-imerdi/93602>. Accessed February 25, 2022; (ii) Tkeshelashvili, Shota. "UK court to determine the multi-million sum Irakli Rukhadze and his business-partners have to pay to recovery partners and Revoker LLP." Forbes. Published October 20, 2021. URL: <https://forbes.ge/en/uk-court-to-determine-the-multi-million-sum-irakli-rukhadze-and-his-business-partners-must-pay-to-recovery-partners-revoker-llp/>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> These unnamed partners likely include Igor Alexeev and Benjamin Marson, founding partners of Hunnewell Partners along with Ruzhdze. See <https://www.hunnewellpartners.com/our-team/>. Alexeev and Marson also appear as defendants along with Ruzhdze in trial over ownership of Media Finance BV, the Dutch firm that owns Georgian Media Production Group LLC. See "Dutch court has granted pre-judgment attachment of the interests businessman Irakli Rukhadze and his partners have in a foundation, owning 100% of TV 'Imedi.'" Business Media Georgia. Published October 20, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Taktakishvili, Natio. 'Holder company of TV Imedi for sale.' Business Media Georgia. Published January 29, 2021 URL: <https://bm.ge/en/article/holder-company-of-tv-imerdi-for-sale/74529>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

retained this leaning.<sup>13</sup> A 2019 poll found Imedi the most trusted television outlet in Georgia.<sup>14</sup>

The second and third most popular television channels, Mtavari Arkhi and Rustavi 2 respectively, share a connected past. Mtavari Arkhi is directly owned by Main Channel, Ltd., which is in turn owned by several shareholders, with Zaza Okushvili (40%), Bakur Jakhiaia (37%), and Nika Gvaramia (12%) holding the largest shares. Seven others hold the remaining 11%, with no person holding more than 3% among those seven. Kibar Khalvashi owns 60% of Rustavi 2 outright and effectively controls the remaining 40% share through his ownership of Panorama Ltd. In 2006, Khalvashi was coerced into selling his share of Rustavi 2 by former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili. However, he reclaimed his owner's stake after Georgia's Supreme Court restored ownership to him in a 2019 decision.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after this court decision, Rustavi 2 dismissed several journalists, including former Director General Nika Gvaramia. Various NGOs active in the Georgian media space released a statement in 2019 worried that shifting staff, including new management, and the firing of several journalists at Rustavi 2 eroded critical opposition to the government.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the firings, Gvaramia and other former Rustavi 2 journalists and staff started Mtavari Arkhi in 2019 to provide an opposition voice in the Georgian media. Gvaramia also has ties to Georgian politics as a member of the Parliament of Georgia and brief stints as Minister of Education and Science and Minister of Justice in the 2000s. He is currently the lawyer of former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili,<sup>17</sup> who is now serving a six-year sentence after being convicted of

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<sup>13</sup> IREX (2021) Georgia: Vibrant Information Barometer, p. 4, 8. Accessed February 25, 2022. <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/vibe-georgia-2021.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (2019) NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November-December 2019. URL: <https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/nn2019ge/codebook/>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Antidze, Margarita. "Europe's human rights court rules against owners of Georgian pro-opposition TV channel in ownership row." Reuters. Published July 18, 2019. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-politics-tv-court-idUSKCN1UD1YY>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> See statement [here](#), signed by Transparency International Georgia, Georgian Democracy Initiative, and Center for Research Journalism and Economic Analysis, among others.

<sup>17</sup> "Lawyer: Saakashvili was Recognized as a 'Victim' by Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office." Georgia Today. Published February 11, 2022. URL:

abuse of power.<sup>18</sup> Giuli Alasania, Saakashvili's mother, is also a minority owner of the outlet. Gvaramia himself remains entangled in an ongoing trial after a 2019 indictment on charges of misuse of funds while at Rustavi 2.<sup>19</sup> Mtavari Arkhi is the second most trusted media outlet in Georgia behind Imedi TV.<sup>20</sup>

The fifth most popular television outlet is TV Pirveli, owned by Vakhtang Tsereteli through First TV Ltd. The outlet started in 2015 and focused on sports programming, but later expanded to other content including news, education, and general entertainment. Tsereteli's father was convicted of money laundering in January 2022; defendants in the case claimed the investigation stemmed from the station's critical coverage of the government.<sup>21</sup> The government denies the case was politically motivated.

Georgian ownership of top television channels remains fairly diverse, with the exception of two top outlets that share the same owner: Imedi TV and GDS TV. While ownership is transparent, Imedi TV and GDS TV's ownership transfer from Inna Gudavadze to Irakli Ruzhdze and his partners could only be confirmed through media reports. However, our difficulty in ascertaining the current ownership through official sources may simply be a function of the ongoing legal process. In addition, several owners have close ties to political figures and parties. These cozy relations present problems for mitigating outside influence, should foreign malign influences compromise these political figures and seek to influence an outlet's narratives.

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<https://georgiatoday.ge/lawyer-saakashvili-was-recognized-as-victim-by-ukrainian-prosecutor-generals-of-fice/>. Accessed February 26, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> "Saakashvili Convicted Of Abuse Of Power, Sentenced In Absentia." RFE/RL's Georgian Service. Published June 29, 2018. URL:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/saakashvili-convicted-of-abuse-of-power-sentenced-in-absentia/29327555.html?flags=mailer>. Accessed February 26, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> "Former General Director of Rustavi 2 presented charges." First Channel (1TV). Published August 9, 2019, URL: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/former-general-director-of-rustavi-2-presented-charges/>. Accessed February 26, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (2019) NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November-December 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Shoshiashvili, Tata. "TBC bank founder and Georgian opposition leader found guilty of fraud." Open Caucasus Media. Published January 12, 2022. URL: <https://oc-media.org/tbc-bank-founder-and-georgian-opposition-leader-found-guilty-of-fraud/>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

## Print

Only about 14% of Georgians identify newspapers as their main source of information.

<sup>22</sup> Like television, print media boasts diverse ownership, though all five top outlets have different owners. Overall, newspaper ownership is quite transparent, with owners easily identified through both official government records and reports from media and NGO watchdogs that identify the same owners.

Palitra Media owns Kviris Palitra, the most-circulated print outlet in Georgia. Palitra is a large media corporation that owns a number of outlets in various mediums, including the TV channel Palitra News and the online outlet Interpressnews.ge. The company also has other interests in the marketing, internet-commerce, and web development sectors, in addition to owning Biblusi, a popular bookstore chain. According to Georgia's public business registry, Irakli Tevdorashvili (75%) and Zaza Buadze (25%) own Palitra Media. Buadze and Tevdorashvili do not appear to have overt foreign ties or close ties to Georgian political parties. However, a Transparency International report noted that politician Dimitri Kumsishvili worked as the director of Kviris Palitra before joining the government as Georgia's First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development in the 2010s.<sup>23</sup> Kumsishvili is currently a member of the Georgian Dream party.

Rezonansi is the second most-circulated print outlet. It is directly owned by Rezonansi Daily Ltd., which is owned by Zarub Macharadze. Macharadze co-founded the paper in 1990 as a Russian-language outlet before switching to the Georgian language in 1992. Despite its history of publishing in Russian, we found no overt foreign ties between Macharadze and Russia.

Asaval-Dasavali is the third most-circulated newspaper and is owned directly by Asaval-Dasavali Publishing House, itself owned by Lasha Nadareishvili. The paper has a reputation for publishing hate speech against various ethnic, religious, LGBTQ, and

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<sup>22</sup> Keshelashvili, et al. (2021) Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment. Part One: Context, Infrastructure, Regulation, and Revenue. Internews, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Tsetskhladze and Gogiashvili (2018) Who Owns Georgian Media? Transparency International, p. 22. URL: [https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/media\\_mplobeloba-e\\_1.pdf](https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/media_mplobeloba-e_1.pdf). Accessed February 25, 2022.

political groups,<sup>24</sup> as well as more recently spreading misinformation about the Covid-19 vaccine.<sup>25</sup> It also promotes anti-US and anti-NATO content.<sup>26</sup> Macharadze also owns the Georgian News Agency and is a board member of the Georgian Press Association.

Alia is the fourth most popular newspaper in Georgia. It is directly owned by Alia Holdings, which is owned by Giorgi Bregvadze. While Bregvadze does not have overt or obvious domestic or foreign ties, newspapers from Alia Holdings have been found to publish content that fuels anti-Western attitudes in Georgia.<sup>27</sup> The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), based on the Media Development Foundation's study, cites outlets from Alia Holdings as having homophobic and xenophobic editorial policies.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Akhali Taoba is the fifth most-consumed print outlet, owned directly by Akhali Taoba Newspaper Ltd., which is then owned by four shareholders: Ioseb Goginashvili (45%), Zurab Beridze (40%), Medea Sanaia (10%), and Beka Goginashvili (5%). We find no overt political ties, foreign or domestic, among Akhali Taoba's owners.

Overall, we find the top print outlets to have fairly diverse and transparent ownership. This is perhaps reflected in a recent Internews sentiment analysis of Georgian print media, that found all five outlets discussed above to be without serious bias for or against any particular political party in their content from February and March 2021 (the time just after the November 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia).<sup>29</sup> We do find,

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<sup>24</sup> Giorgi, et al. (2020) Media Influence Matrix: Georgia. Central European University's Center for Media, Data and Society, p. 69. URL: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1425/mimgeorgiafullreport2020.pdf>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> "The Anti-Vaccination Movement and Russian Propaganda." Institute for Development of Freedom of Information. Published May 5, 2020. URL: [https://idfi.ge/en/anti-waxer\\_movement\\_and\\_russian\\_propaganda](https://idfi.ge/en/anti-waxer_movement_and_russian_propaganda). Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Giorgi, et al. (2020) Media Influence Matrix: Georgia. Central European University's Center for Media, Data and Society, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Giorgi, et al. (2020) Media Influence Matrix: Georgia. Central European University's Center for Media, Data and Society, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Council of Europe: European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), ECRI Report on Georgia (Fifth Monitoring Cycle): Adopted December 8, 2015, March 1, 2016, CRI (2016), 2: pp. 16-16, URL: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/584e8b914.html>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Kviris Palitra, Rezonansi, and Akhali Taoba covered all major political parties mostly neutrally, while Alia and Asaval-Dasavali covered all major political parties with mainly negative coverage (though this negative coverage did not seem to have a bias). See Internews Georgia (2021) Study and Research on

however, several outlets with single shareholders. Since multi-stakeholder ownership structures are more difficult to compromise, this lack of within-outlet ownership diversity creates a potential vulnerability for foreign, malign actors to influence content.

## Radio

Radio is the least consumed media in Georgia, with only 13% of Georgians listing it as their main source of information.<sup>30</sup> The most popular outlet is Fortuna FM, which is directly owned by Radio Fortuna FM. Radio Fortuna FM is jointly owned by Tamar Chigogidze (38.9%), Zura Chigogidze (38.9%), and Zamira Chigogidze (22.2%). While predominantly an entertainment station playing a wide variety of popular music, it also provides a news service each hour.

The second most popular station is Imedi Radio, directly owned by Imedi Holding. Like other companies in the Imedi family, it is directly owned by Georgian Media Production Group Ltd, which is owned by Irakli Rukhadze and his partners. Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB), the third most consumed radio station, is state-owned, with the Georgian government owning 100% of the firm. This is one of the outlets with which the Georgian Dream party will engage, suggesting close ties to the country's ruling politicians.<sup>31</sup>

The fourth most popular station is Radio Palitra, owned by the Palitra Media firm which is ultimately owned by Irakli Tevdorashvili (75%) and Zaza Buadze (25%). Abkhazetis Khma, the fifth most listened to station, is directly owned by Media Holding Ltd., which Nino Chkheidze (100%) ultimately controls. Chkheidze does not appear to have overt foreign or domestic political ties.

In sum, we find the radio sector in Georgia has diverse ownership, with all top-five outlets having five different owners. In addition, the process of finding information on radio ownership in Georgia is transparent and easy using the government's public

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Election Media Coverage for the 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia, p. 3. URL: [https://mediamonitor.ge/uploads\\_script/accounts/2 - INTERNEWS GEORGIA - PRESS 04.2021-EN.pdf](https://mediamonitor.ge/uploads_script/accounts/2 - INTERNEWS GEORGIA - PRESS 04.2021-EN.pdf). Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Keshelashvili, et al. (2021) Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment, Internews, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> IREX (2021) Georgia: Vibrant Information Barometer, p. 4, 8.

business registry. While we do not find foreign ties, we observe at least two outlets with close relationships with the currently ruling Georgian Dream party—Imedi Radio and GPB. This poses some vulnerability to foreign, malign influence for some of the most-consumed radio content.

## Online

About 36% of Georgians use news websites and apps as their main source of information.<sup>32</sup> Palitra Media owns the top three news sites in Georgia: Ambedi.ge, Interpressnews.ge, and Palitravideo.ge, respectively. It also owns the fifth most popular online outlet, Kvirispalitra.ge, the online version of its top-ranked print outlet Kviris Palitra. Like other Palitra Media holdings, these web portals are directly owned by Palitra Media Holding's Irakli Tevodrashvili (75%) and Zaza Buadze (25%).

The fourth most popular site is On.ge, which is owned directly by On.ge Ltd. Though information on the website's "About Us" section provides outdated documentation,<sup>33</sup> Georgia's public business registry provides up-to-date information on its ownership structure. Two other companies own On.ge Ltd: Formula Production Ltd. (50%) and Society Omedia Media (50%). Formula Production's ownership structure includes shareholders Mikheil Mshvildadze (25%), Irakli Saghinadze (25%), Zurab Gumbaridze (25%), and Giorgi Lifonava (25%). We also find Society Omedia Media's owners are Giorgi Jibladze (50%) and Nodar David (50%). Formula Production's owners have other relevant ties in the media sector. Mshvildadze and Gumbaridze own InterMedia, an advertising firm that Transparency International Georgia reported as having a monopoly on the Georgian advertising market in 2017 through advertising contracts with both Imedi and Rustavi 2.<sup>34</sup> Gumbaridze is the General Director of Formula TV, a station that he alleges has come under state pressure over critical coverage of

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<sup>32</sup> Keshelashvili, et al. (2021) Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment, Internews, pg. 6.

<sup>33</sup> See <https://on.ge/about>. Accessed February 25, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Tsetskhladze, et al. (2018) The Georgian Advertising Market in 2017: Trends and Challenges. Transparency International Georgia, p. 9.



Georgian authorities.<sup>35</sup> Regarding On.ge's other owners from Society Omedia Media, we find no overt political or business ties.

The online medium in Georgia has the least ownership diversity among its top five outlets. Four of the five top outlets we examine are held by Palitra Media. The one outlet Palitra Media does not own, On.ge, does boast a diverse list of owners, but some owners have ties to other media-related firms with some level of influence in Georgia's media space. Given the lack of ownership diversity in the online medium, the narratives that Georgians consume on web portals are highly vulnerable to foreign, malign influence.

## Conclusion

In this brief, we have identified several avenues by which foreign actors, including but not limited to the Kremlin, might influence the media landscape in Georgia. The most direct path to influence is via Kremlin-owned media outlets operating in Georgia, specifically Kremlin-owned TV and news agencies. However, our analysis reveals two additional indirect paths that may contribute to the vulnerability of Georgian media to foreign influence, including (i) the concentration of ownership in web portals and television and (ii) cross-medium ownership concentration.

First, four of the top five online outlets are concentrated in the hands of one firm: Palitra Media. This lack of ownership diversity in top Georgian web portals makes narratives in this medium especially vulnerable to foreign malign influence. With the increase in use of the Internet and smartphones to get news, this development is particularly concerning for the future of the Georgian media landscape. Television also presents some concerning ownership concentration. Businessman Irakli Rukhadze and his partners own two of the top television outlets, including the most watched and

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<sup>35</sup> "Car used by Georgian broadcaster Formula TV vandalized." Committee to Protect Journalists. Published April 13, 2021. URL: <https://cpj.org/2021/04/car-used-by-georgian-broadcaster-formula-tv-vandalized/>. Accessed February 28, 2022. "Georgia's independent TV channels allege state pressure." France 24. Published April 12, 2019. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/20191204-georgia-s-independent-tv-channels-allege-state-pressure>. Accessed February 28, 2022.

most trusted one—Imedi TV. Rukhadze, a US citizen and Georgian native, also owns a minority stake in Georgia’s largest mobile communications company Magti.<sup>36</sup> Coupled with the Kremlin television presence in Georgia, this medium carries a concerning level of vulnerability for foreign influence in the country.

Second, we find that cross-medium ownership of top outlets exists in a rather noticeable way. Palitra Media Holding owns at least one of the most consumed media outlets in three of the four mediums we examine: print, radio, and online. This includes one in print, one in radio, and four online for a total of six or 30% of all top-consumed media in Georgia. Additionally, Irakli Rukhadze and his partners control two top television channels and one top radio station. Between Rukhadze and Palitra Media, 45% of the ownership is concentrated in top outlets across mediums in Georgia. This concentration of ownership across mediums increases the amount of vulnerable content, should a malign foreign influence co-opt the firm’s editorial position. A fully compromised Palitra media, for example, could have huge implications for the narratives that Georgians consume.

Though these channels of potential vulnerability are cause for concern, we find other positive developments. When journalists and anchors from the news desk at Rustavi 2 left after perceived politically-motivated firings, they created their own television channel with the intentions of providing an opposition perspective to the Georgian media space. Mtavari Arkhi has become competitive, and boasts a great diversity of owners. This ownership diversification among top media increases resilience to malign foreign influence in Georgia’s media space.

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<sup>36</sup> “Dutch court has granted pre-judgment attachment of the interests businessman Irakli Rukhadze and his partners have in a foundation, owning 100% of TV ‘Imedi.’” Business Media Georgia. Published October 20, 2021.