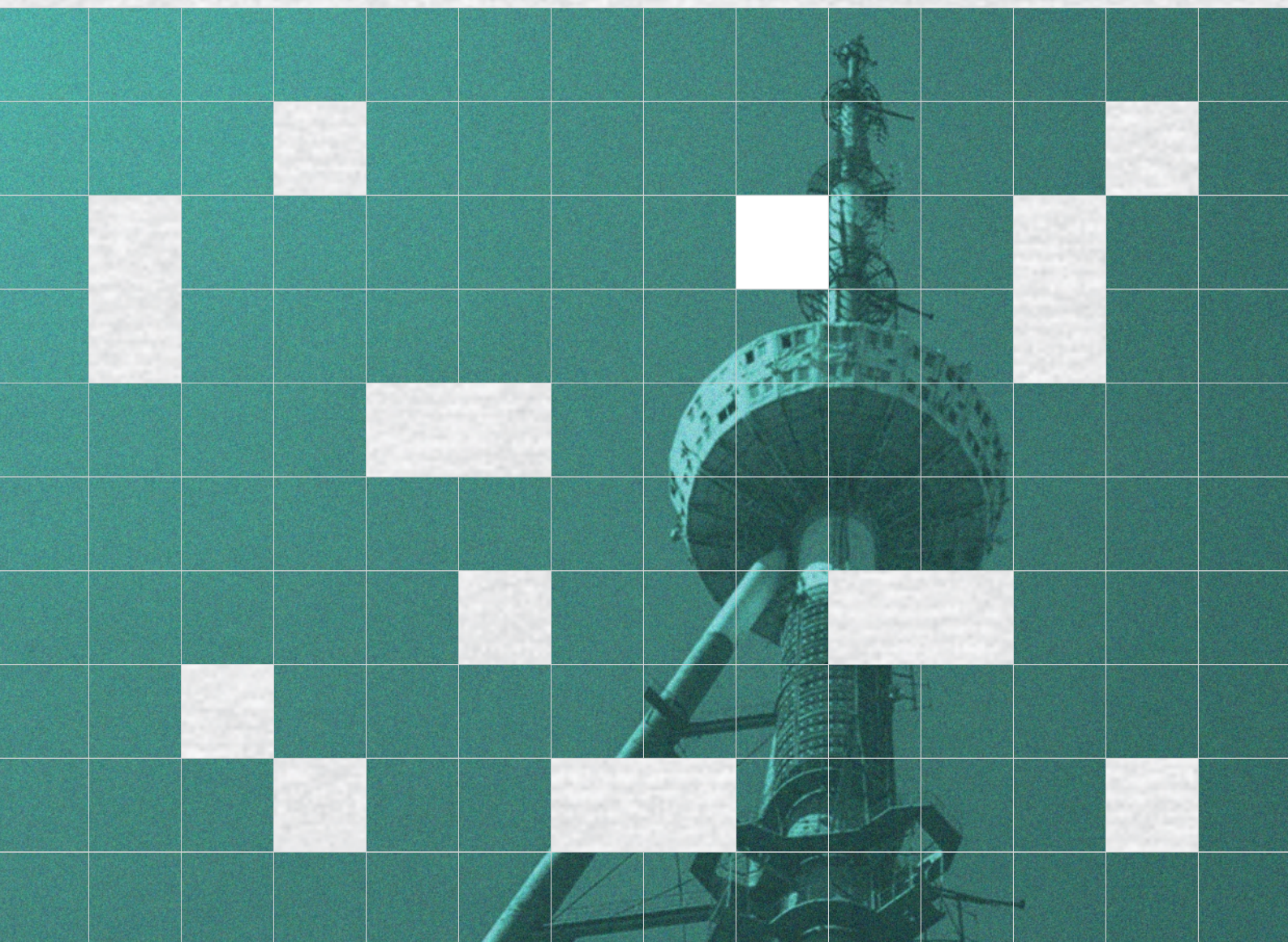


COVERING CONFLICT REGIONS BY GEORGIAN TV MEDIA



Covering Conflict Regions by Georgian TV Media

Social Justice Centre

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Introduction

"We are very distanced from the events in Abkhazia; my program, and I myself, very rarely cover what is happening there, but this is one of those cases... In principle, everything concerns us, of course, but this is one of those instances that concerns us very much and in which we see our future..." — These are the opening words of Eka Kvesitadze, the host of the program *Different Accents* on *Mtavari* TV, as she introduced her broadcast about the ongoing protests in Abkhazia on November 12, 2024.

The journalist's remarks reflect the general trend in Georgian mainstream media regarding coverage of topics related to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Leading Georgian television channels, for various reasons — including limited human and financial resources, political and editorial conjunctures, and dominant political narratives surrounding the conflicts — devote strikingly little time and energy to reporting on internal developments within the conflict regions. Although in public discourse the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the region of South Ossetia are designated as inseparable parts of the Georgian state, the editorial policies and practices of television media in covering stories related to these two regions stand in essential contradiction to this discourse. This may be explained by the dominance of a non-recognition framework, which views the conflicts, their histories, and peace policies primarily through a geopolitical lens. This approach assigns little significance to the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian dimensions of the conflicts and effectively deprives local political elites and communities of political agency.

As a result, the Georgian television audience lacks the opportunity to form an in-depth understanding of what is happening in Abkhazia and South Ossetia — of the major developments in the political, social, and cultural life there, and of the daily realities, concerns, fears, and interests of the people living in these regions.

This concerning trend is also recognized by media professionals themselves. As a study conducted by Lasha Zarginava (2022) showed, only about 6% of media workers believe that Georgian media adequately covers topics related to the country's Occupied Territories. Around 60% consider that these topics are inadequately covered in the media. Moreover, nearly 30% of respondents "could not recall when a topic related to the occupied territories was last covered by their media outlet" (Zarginava, 2022, p. 8).

This trend contributes to the further deepening of alienation and hostile attitudes between the people living in Georgia-controlled territories and those residing in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Any discussion about the role of the media in overcoming such alienation must first begin with an empirical description of the existing practices and trends.

Accordingly, the objective of the present study was to conduct a qualitative examination of the coverage of stories related to Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region in Georgian television media. Thus, the media monitoring aimed to analyze the main trends in editorial policies regarding interest in and coverage of topics related to the conflict regions within Georgian television media.

The next chapter of the report describes the theoretical framework of the study, which is based on the concept of peace journalism and the principles of conflict-sensitive reporting. This theoretical framework takes as its starting point the media's crucial role in informing society and transforming perceptions, particularly concerning highly sensitive issues. Topics related to Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region constitute precisely such sensitive issues within Georgian society.

Following the review of the theoretical framework, the report outlines the research methodology, including the criteria for selecting media outlets and the approach used during monitoring for identifying relevant media materials and conducting content analysis.

This section also discusses the study's limitations, which were influenced by both objective and subjective factors. Examples of such factors include the researcher's identity, the time period selected for conducting the study, the specifics of journalism as a professional practice and field, and technical issues such as inconsistencies in the archiving of television broadcasts.

The following two chapters present the main findings of the study and review the trends in media coverage of topics related to Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region, illustrating them with relevant examples. The concluding section of the study once again summarizes the main findings, which then serve as the basis for the recommendations developed for media outlets.

The Role of the Media and Conflict-Sensitive Coverage of the Conflict Regions

There is relatively scarce literature in Georgian sources regarding best practices or recommendations for conflict-sensitive coverage of the conflict regions. Among the studies published in recent years, some are already outdated (Khutsidze, 2012), some focus only on particular segments of the media (such as regional Azerbaijani- and Armenian-language platforms) (Gogoladze, 2022), others rely solely on quantitative data provided by media professionals (Zarginava, 2022), or are focused on a specific type of conflict — namely, protracted conflicts (Murusidze, 2018). This does not allow for the formulation of qualitatively researched, empirically grounded conclusions about the trends present in Georgian mainstream media.

The Charter of Journalistic Ethics of Georgia defines general principles for working to high professional standards in journalism. However, among the organization's published guidelines related to conflicts, the only one available is the guide on gender-sensitive coverage of conflicts and war (Charter of Journalistic Ethics of Georgia, 2023). Gender issues — particularly the unequal impact of wars and other types of conflicts on women and gender-nonconforming groups — are of utmost importance. However, this topic falls outside the scope of the present media monitoring study. Despite this, the Charter's guideline provides important recommendations concerning the ethical coverage of conflict-related issues — specifically regarding the preparation of reporters, selection of respondents, formulation of questions, and processing of collected materials (Charter of Journalistic Ethics of Georgia, 2023).

In Georgian, there is also a translated version of the "Six Essential Rules for Peace Reporting" for journalists, published by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). This guide emphasizes the need for media workers to be well-informed about the conflict they are covering, to uphold the principle of fair coverage of the conflict, to cover the antecedents and causes of the conflict, to highlight human factors and peace initiatives, and to recognize the impact of journalistic activity on the conflict (IWPR, 2004).

Additionally, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation translated a textbook titled *Introduction to Conflict Sensitive Reporting* (Pani, 2017), with an indepth discussion of the role the media in conflict situations, considering different reporting practices.

When discussing the role of the mass media in a democratic society, three main aspects are usually highlighted: the media must serve as a source of news, a platform for free discussion, and a watchdog (Howard, 2009). Accordingly, the media must provide citizens with reliable information, create a public space necessary for free expression, and monitor individuals and institutions in power to prevent abuse of resources and authority. These principles must serve as the starting point for the media and media professionals when covering any topic, including the situation in the conflict regions.

As Pandeli Pani (2017) notes, "A journalist must be aware of media's role and the responsibility that follows with this in times of conflict and report conflicts professionally without feeding the flames and playing a role in helping partis find solutions to conflict" (p. 10). Although Pani's statement creates a somewhat idealized notion of the journalist's role in the context of conflicts, his approach can still serve as a rhetorical guideline for introducing best practices into the media.

The most important aspect of Pani's understanding of the journalist's role is the conception of media professionals as active participants in conflict resolution. However, this conceptualization has a specific historical background. As Ross Howard, the author of a UNESCO-published manual, notes (Howard, 2009), post-Cold War media development initiatives in the global West did not place special emphasis on the role of journalism in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Instead, they were focused on involving the media

in projects promoting effective governance, accelerated democratization, and development initiatives. This approach, however, began to change in the 1990s, when the dangers of irresponsible and sometimes deliberately malicious media practices in fueling or exacerbating conflicts between countries and ethnic groups became starkly apparent.

Examples include the media's negative role during the Rwandan Genocide and the conflicts in the territories of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, both of which preceded acts of ethnic cleansing. The media's particularly harmful role during the Rwandan Genocide is well documented. As Allan Thompson (2007) writes, the media's negative role manifested on two fronts: the local media's active facilitation of the killings, and the international media's failure to fully comprehend the nature of the atrocities in Rwanda, portraying them not as genocide but merely as clashes between local tribes. Moreover, in the early 1990s, the Western Balkans clearly illustrated how the media mirrored ethnic conflicts and, instead of serving as a unifying force for society, helped entrench ethnic divisions, thereby further exacerbating societal disintegration (Andresen et al., 2017).

Therefore, by the end of the 20th century, professional circles increasingly began to discuss the idea that, beyond simply reporting facts, the media could play an active role in conflict resolution. This gave rise to concepts such as "Journalism of Attachment," peace journalism, and conflict-sensitive reporting.

The concept of Journalism of Attachment is based on the idea that journalists cannot be emotionally neutral when it comes to covering conflicts. The conversation around this was first openly initiated by BBC reporter Martin Bell, who argued that journalists cannot approach facts of human suffering and torture like emotionless robots. On the contrary, Bell argued, journalists should even be encouraged to show emotional involvement while striving to report facts honestly, accurately, and fairly (Bell, 1998).

The concept of peace journalism, which emerged as a counterbalance to traditional war reporting, takes peacebuilding and the media's active role in that process as its fundamental value. Peace journalism, significantly developed by Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung, the founder of peace studies, became an important professional movement in the early 2000s.

According to Galtung (2002), traditional war journalism focuses primarily on the conflict itself, depicting two opposing sides with the ultimate goal of one side's victory (a zero-sum logic). Peace journalism, by contrast, focuses on conflict transformation (a win-win), explores the formation of conflicts, and acknowledges the presence of multiple sides, each with their own goals and interests. Thus, according to Galtung (2002), the characteristics of peace journalism include:

- Focus on transforming conflict, rather than viewing it simply as a battle that one side must win
- Truth-orientedness: focus on uncovering universal truths, instead of spreading propaganda or lies favorable to any side involved in the conflict

- Human centered: focus on people (both victims of conflict and, for instance, peacebuilders), emphasizing the likely victims of violence rather than fueling an "us vs. them" divide characteristic of war journalism
- Resolution-oriented coverage, with an emphasis on violence prevention and peace initiatives that can avert the escalation of wars or conflict situations
- Focus on transparency and mutual understanding, prioritizing the identification of how conflicts are formed, who the involved parties are, and what their deeper motivations and foundations are
- Attention to the invisible consequences of conflict, going beyond visible outcomes like casualties and material damage, and highlighting issues such as trauma, hatred, risks of vengeance, or structural and cultural consequences of conflict
- Emphasis on alternatives to violence, particularly on nonviolent methods of problem-solving and opportunities for promoting dialogue.

However, peace journalism, as a professional practice, soon faced criticism from both professional and academic circles (Howard, 2009). Critics mainly emphasized the risks posed by the media's active positioning in conflict situations, particularly regarding journalistic objectivity and credibility. Moreover, Galtung's conceptualization of peace journalism was, to some extent, based on an idealistic approach. In practice, implementing these principles often proved unrealistic due to human factors or the lack of financial and other types of resources.

In the 2000s, debates continued about the role of journalists in conflict resolution. The central issue in these debates was defining best practices so that the media could contribute to resolving conflicts within societies while remaining faithful to fundamental journalistic values (Howard, 2009).

In response to these criticisms, some practicing journalists and media researchers began to advocate for a conflict-sensitive reporting approach. According to Pandeli Pani (2017), conflict-sensitive reporting can be based on three main aspects:

- Understanding the context — that is, grasping the relevant socio-economic and political tensions, as well as cultural-historical and structural factors, while considering their potential for violence
- The relationship between the journalist's involvement and the context
- Acting accordingly, so that the journalist does not contribute to negative developments but instead strives for the most positive outcomes possible

Taking this into account, Pani (2017) identifies specific elements that can help the media have a positive influence in conflict situations: filling gaps in communication and knowledge, strengthening trust, correcting misconceptions, appealing to humanity, identifying core interests, providing a means of emotional expression, reinterpreting the

conflict, preserving reputation/building consensus, facilitating decision-making, and encouraging a balance of power.

In addition to the role that the media may assume, attention must also be paid to the type of conflict itself when covering conflicts, as this may in turn affect the specifics of coverage. As noted in a publication by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, in terms of direct conflict reporting, there are numerous guidelines available for journalists (some of which can be found in the bibliography section at the end of the paper). However, comparatively less attention is typically paid in the professional literature to so-called protracted conflicts and the specifics of their sensitive coverage (Murusidze, 2018). This is precisely the type of conflict at hand when discussing the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

As Murusidze (2018) notes, protracted conflicts "lead to the division and, at times, isolation of societies over long periods of time" (p. 7). The separation and isolation of opposing sides create additional challenges for journalists — both in terms of physical access to events, information, and sources, as well as subjective factors such as the journalist's ethnic background. In the same study, Murusidze (2018) discusses the issues of so-called 'borderization' or "creeping occupation" and the detentions of individuals near the line of division. These topics are typically covered in Georgian media sporadically and sensationalistically, which may contribute to the "information warfare" goals of the opposing side of the conflict and intensify feelings of insecurity and hopelessness within the society. As opposed to this practice, Murusidze (2018) emphasizes that "beyond finding reliable information about events, journalists must be able to see beyond the facts and identify emerging trends" (p. 11).

The present study observed the work of Georgian mainstream television media precisely through the lens of the principles described above. The results of this observation will be presented following a more detailed overview of the study's methodology.

Methodology

As noted in the introduction, the main objective of the present study was to examine the prevailing trends in the coverage of news related to Georgia's two occupied regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—on leading Georgian television channels. In order to identify these trends and the broader context created by the media regarding the conflict regions, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative data. The analysis of the data was primarily qualitative, specifically using the method of textual analysis. The following subsection explains the methods of data collection and analysis.

Sampling

The subjects of monitoring were 7 television stations. The selection of media outlets was based on three criteria: television viewership, audience trust, and the profile of the television channel. The selection initially included the 10 highest-rated TV broadcasters that had at least 1% audience trust, a clearly defined informational-analytical profile, and aired domestically produced news programs during the monitoring period.

In terms of television viewership, according to 2023 data from the company "TVMR Georgia," which is the officially licensed partner of Nielsen Television Audience Measurement in Georgia, the ten highest-rated channels by audience share within the target audience were: Imedi, Mtavari Arkhi, Rustavi 2, TV Pirveli, GDS, Channel 1 (Public Broadcaster), Formula, PostTV, Maestro, and Comedy Channel. Meanwhile, according to data from IRI (International Republican Institute) for the same period, the channels that recorded over 1% audience trust in first mentions were: Imedi, Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli, Rustavi 2, Formula, and the Public Broadcaster. As a result, GDS, Maestro, and Comedy Channel were excluded from the initial selection. Additionally, based on broadcasting profile and regional significance, the Adjara Public Broadcaster, which obtained the status of an independent broadcaster in 2013, was included in the final selection.

The final selection of media outlets was as follows:

TV channel	Ranking 2023 (TV MR)	Trust 2023 (IRI)
Imedi	22%	28%
Mtavari Arkhi	11%	14%
Ruistavi 2	9%	9%
TV Pirveli	8%	11%
Formula	4%	3%
Public Broadcaster	5%	3%
Adjara Public Broadcaster	1%	< 1%

Data Collection and Analysis

From the selected television stations, segments and frame-synchronizations were collected from the main news broadcasts aired during primetime (19:00–22:00). News broadcasts aired during primetime are generally the most watched and the most significant. Consequently, the topics featured in these broadcasts more or less reflect the editorial policy of the television channels in terms of the prioritization of selected subjects.

In total, 576 news broadcasts were monitored over the period of May to July 2024. The duration of the broadcasts varied from approximately 15–30 minutes to up to 2.5 hours. The length of the monitored programs depended both on current events in the country (e.g., especially lengthy broadcasts occurred on days when protest rallies were taking place)

and on editorial decisions, particularly in cases where news programs that aired live were not fully uploaded to the broadcaster's website.

The monitoring process involved watching the entire news program up to the point where the main topic of each segment or frame-synchronization could be identified. In the case of relevant segments and frame-synchronizations, the entire segment was viewed and analyzed according to the methodology described. Relevance was determined by examining the content of the segment. If the segment or frame-synchronization substantively addressed the conflict regions, the territorial integrity of Georgia, military actions that took place in these regions at various times, or persons forcibly displaced from these regions, the material was deemed relevant.

The following information was collected using a specially designed form during the monitoring process: the topic and duration of the material, a brief summary or transcript, the identities of the respondents, the thematic context of the segment (positive, neutral, negative), discriminatory or negative expressions toward Abkhazians or Ossetians, and whether the material emphasized peace (if such emphasis was present). The monitoring also included segments and frame-synchronizations relating to the population displaced from the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Within these segments, attention was paid to the context of so-called Europeanization and Georgia–Russia relations, since relations with the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are often viewed through the prism of Georgia–Russia relations or Georgia's integration into Europe.

In addition to daily monitoring, to enhance the qualitative component of the study, particular attention was paid to segments that appeared in news broadcasts on specific dates that carry special significance in the context of Georgian-Russian, Georgian-Abkhaz, and Georgian-Ossetian relations. These dates include:

- **7/8 August** – the start date of the 2008 Russia–Georgia war;
- **14 August** – the start date of the war in Abkhazia;
- **27 September** – the end date of the war in Abkhazia, which is often referred to in Georgian media as the "fall of Sokhumi."

Information on the number of segments and frame-synchronizations aired in the main news broadcasts of the 7 TV stations during the monitoring period is summarized in the following chapter.

Limitations of the Research

Journalism, as a professional field that also functions as a public forum, is closely tied to societal processes and, accordingly, is somewhat reactive in nature. Consequently, events taking place in local or international contexts—particularly in politics, the economy, and culture—have a substantial impact on which topics become part of media organizations'

agendas. Due to this specific nature, the data collected and the study results may be influenced by the selected observation period and by the public events occurring during that period. A clear illustration of this was seen in June 2024, during the protest rallies in Georgia against the so-called “Russian law,” when television news broadcasts allotted minimal time to all other topics, including those related to the conflict regions. Similarly, during the Georgian national football team’s participation in the UEFA Euro 2024 cup, the broadcasts were almost entirely devoted to sports topics. As a result, during such periods, the likelihood of issues related to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia appearing in the news broadcasts was reduced.

To avoid criticism of the television media for neglecting relevant issues due to the dominance of a single topic, a three-month monitoring period was deliberately selected. This extended duration ensured that if one topic overshadowed others during a particular month, it would still be possible to observe the television media during a comparatively neutral period.

The second major limitation of the study was its reliance on the online platforms of the TV stations for collecting material. As explained in the research methodology, the monitoring used the websites or social media accounts (Facebook pages and YouTube channels) of the selected seven TV stations to access news archives. Accordingly, the monitoring results cannot be automatically extrapolated to the complete television archives of live broadcasts. During the monitoring period, in total, archives for approximately 70 news broadcasts were not found on the online channels of the seven TV stations. In some cases, it was evident that the broadcasts uploaded online were not complete. To minimize the inclusion of incomplete broadcasts in the final selection, the websites and social media accounts were cross-checked, and priority was given to the versions of broadcasts with longer durations. As a result, in some cases, the online archive may not fully reflect what aired during the live broadcast. TV stations sometimes upload edited or incomplete versions of their news programs to online platforms.

General Findings of the Research

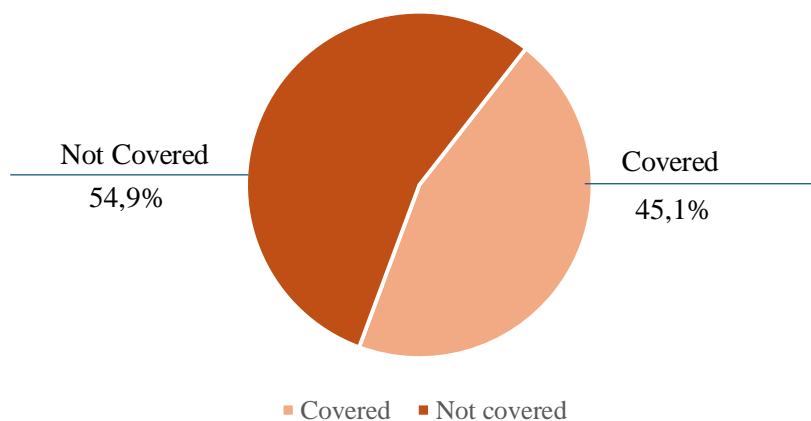
During the period of May–July 2024, a total of 87 materials (segments and frame-synchronizations) aired on 7 Georgian television channels were deemed relevant for monitoring. The materials were distributed among the television stations as follows:

Imedi	18 materials
Adjara Public Broadcaster	16 materials
TV Pirveli	14 materials

Formula	13 materials
Georgian National Prodcaster – 1st Channel	11 materials
Mtavari Arkhi	11 materials
Rustavi 2	4 materials

Out of the 91 monitored days, only 41 days featured at least one topic related to the two aforementioned regions covered by at least one of the seven television channels. In contrast, on more than half of the monitored days (50 days), topics related to either the Abkhazia or South Ossetia regions were not included in the main news broadcasts of any of the television stations.

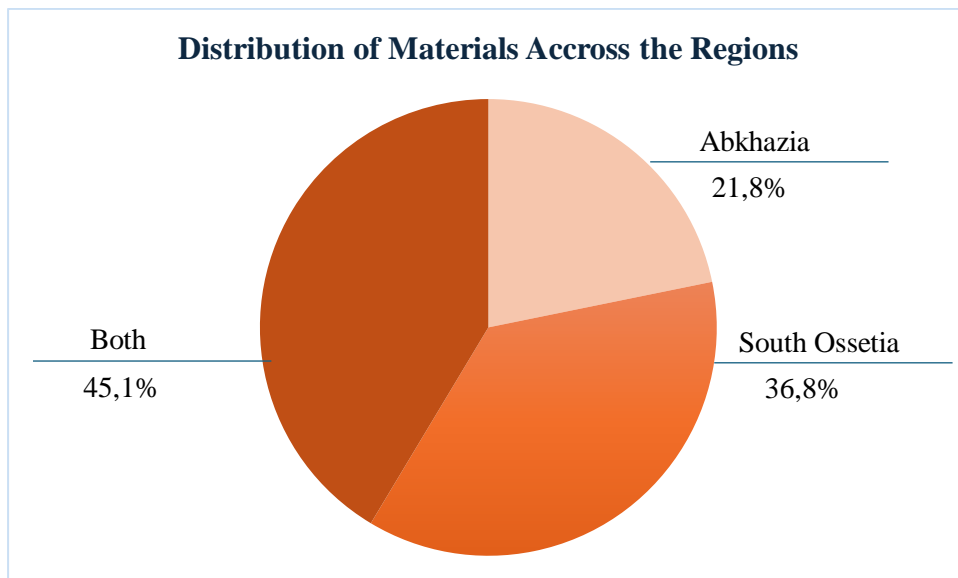
Coverage of the topics related to Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region



Out of the 87 materials deemed relevant, 35 were aired during the first half of the news broadcasts, while 52 appeared in the second half or toward the end of the programs. Accordingly, in only about one-third of the cases were materials related to the conflict regions prioritized by the television channels to be aired during prime segments of the broadcast.

The majority of the monitored materials addressed both regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—or did not specify a particular region (36 materials). In cases where materials focused on a single region, more were related to the Tskhinvali region (32 materials) than to Abkhazia (19 materials). However, the predominance of materials related to South Ossetia was not due to an abundance of reporting on events taking place directly in the Tskhinvali region. Most of these materials concerned incidents of unlawful detention, restricted freedom of movement and release of individuals in the so-called border areas, the living conditions of residents of nearby villages and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and various events related to the August war—including the investigation into the 2008

war events launched by the Georgian Dream party and coverage of family members and government representatives visiting the graves of soldiers killed in the war on the memorial day.



Regarding the thematic distribution of the materials, the monitoring involved classifying the content based on the main theme derived from the plot or frame-synchronization. These themes may overlap, and it is possible that a single report could address several topics. However, to the extent possible, the interpretation of the materials was based on the dominant theme. Based on the content, the conflict regions most frequently appeared in the main news broadcasts of the television stations within the following contexts:

Conflicts Occupation War	43 Materials
Security Territorial Integrity Non-recognition Policy	17 Materials
Culture History Religion	7 Materials
Georgian Domestic Politics	6 Materials
IDPs	5 Materials
Developments in Abkhazia and South ossetia Region	4 Materials

Social and Economic Issues	4 Materials
Other	1 Materials

In the relevant materials, the most common themes featured in the reports and frame-synchronizations were those concerning the de facto border of South Ossetia, specifically regarding Georgian citizens detained by Russian and Ossetian soldiers or police. Also frequent were news items about the release of Georgian citizens or updates on their condition. Materials related to Georgia's territorial integrity or occupation within the context of the country's internal or foreign politics were often covered in the main news broadcasts, for example, in the context of the Georgian Prime Minister's annual parliamentary report, the head of the State Security Service's annual report, the Public Defender's report, as well as resolutions adopted at the UN and OSCE assemblies, etc.

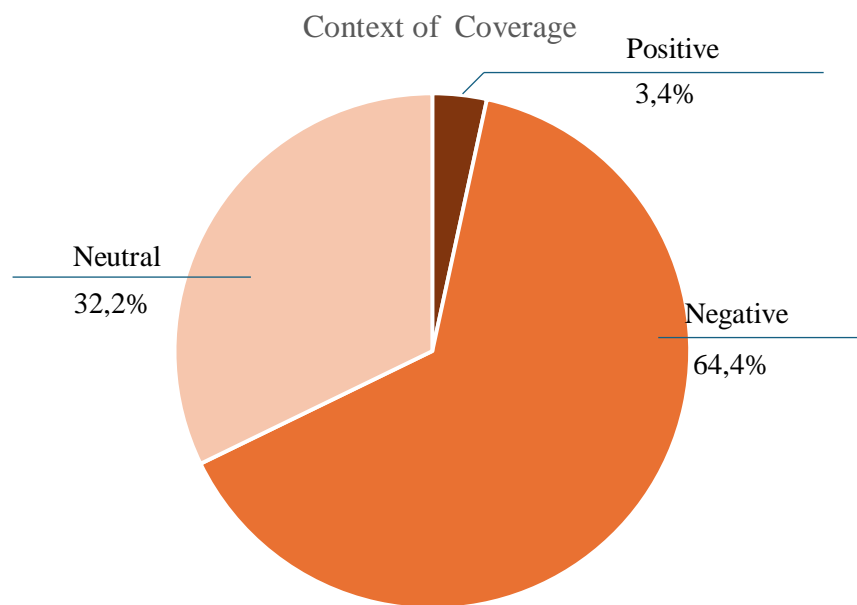
Additionally, the research also looked at the context of how relevant materials were covered. It should be noted that this monitoring did not observe the tone of coverage, i.e., how the media interpreted the facts, which is often the subject of media monitoring. Instead, the observation focused on the context of the covered topics, i.e., the substantive characteristics of the topics themselves. Based on the context of the covered topics, the materials were categorized into those having neutral, negative, and positive contexts. Among the relevant reports and frame-synchronizations, negative context materials were dominant (56 items). Neutral context materials amounted to 28 items, while only 3 reports or frame-synchronizations in a positive context were found regarding the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the news broadcasts.

Materials in which the focus was primarily on events with negative connotations, such as war or the killing of people during the war, human rights violations in conflict zones (e.g., cases of abductions and illegal detention), and so on were qualified as those having negative context. Additionally, materials were categorized as negative if they discussed topics such as crime, Russian military and political interests, the difficult living conditions of people living along the occupation line, and similar issues.

Positive context materials were considered those reports or frame-synchronizations that focused on the normalization of relations with Abkhaz and Ossetian people, reconciliation efforts, and the integration of displaced populations from these regions.

Neutral context materials referred to reports where the topics related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region, occupation, and Georgia's territorial integrity were discussed in a way that did not invoke negative connotations, events, or histories. For example, various official reports (such as those presented by different officials in parliamentary addresses) might mention Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali regions without giving them particular focus. Similarly, resolutions from the OSCE or the UN that

mention disputed formulations regarding Georgia's controlled territories, or reports where Abkhazia and South Ossetia are only superficially referenced, were categorized as neutral.



The assessment of the overall coverage revealed a clear issue with the visibility of local residents in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. In the majority of the materials (77 reports), the local population was completely absent. In 5 out of the 10 reports where local residents were visible, they referred to internally displaced persons (IDPs) or Georgian citizens living in conflict zones.

Another notable trend was the scarcity of coverage focused on peace. Out of the 87 relevant materials, only 8 included a noticeable emphasis on peace, peacekeeping initiatives, and reconciliation. This aspect will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Trends in Covering Issues Related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia Region

Regarding the qualitative coverage of topics related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali regions, several general trends emerged during the monitoring period, which deserve particular attention.

1) Challenges Faced by Abkhazia, South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Regions as a Non-Priority Topics

It must be stated unequivocally that the internal affairs of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Regions are not prioritized in the editorial policies of leading Georgian television channels, as also highlighted in Zarginava's (2022) research. While Georgian television outlets rhetorically consider both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of Georgia's territorial integrity, their editorial practices do not align with this stance. The events occurring in these regions are typically only superficially covered during prime-time news broadcasts by mainstream Georgian media outlets.

Occasionally, but as a general rule, the internal affairs of Abkhazia and South Ossetia attract attention from Georgian media only when they involve internal political tensions, such as protests demanding the resignation of de facto governments, de facto elections, or political crises caused by events like the "apartments law" or the "foreign agent law." While the coverage of these topics should undoubtedly be a priority for Georgian television to inform the public, this does not absolve them of the responsibility to broaden their editorial focus, offering more diverse and in-depth reporting on other important events in these regions or the daily lives of the people living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

As peace research founder Johan Galtung (2002) pointed out, war journalism favors focus on elites. This is often the case with Georgian television channels, where the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia attract interest only when there is tension or conflict among political elites. In contrast, peace journalism and the best practices for conflict-sensitive coverage suggest focusing on people. Applying this principle in practice would ensure that Georgian TV channels dedicate more attention to the social, economic, and cultural issues occurring in the occupied regions when covering Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

As a result of the existing editorial practices, Georgian television viewers are unable to receive in-depth information about what is happening in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the internal political or socio-economic and cultural dynamics in these regions, the issues that are important to the local population, including ethnic Georgians living there, and more. Turning a blind eye to these issues leads to a deeper sense of alienation among Georgian citizens living in the government-controlled territories toward Abkhazians and Ossetians. In conditions of informational scarcity, it is logical that there are overly simplistic or incorrect expectations and perceptions about the societies in both conflict regions, both on one side and the other.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that some of the population living in the conflict zones still manages to access Georgian-language media (Social Justice Center, 2022). The ignorance of their issues by mainstream media might further contribute to a stronger perception of alienation among this part of the population.

2) The Prevalence of Negative Context in the Coverage of the Occupied Territories

Even in the context of limited coverage, the themes related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia are predominantly presented in a negative thematic context. The problematic nature of this trend is highlighted when considering the significant role media outlets play in shaping public attitudes and awareness, especially on sensitive issues such as conflict regions. During the monitoring period, these regions were mainly covered in relation to the following topics:

- Kidnapping, illegal detentions, or releases of Georgian citizens from the detention facilities of the conflict regions
- Georgian citizens killed by Russian soldiers in the conflict zones (e.g., the murders of Giga Otkhozoria and Tamaz Ginturi)
- Dire living conditions of people living in conflict zones, mostly on Georgian-controlled territories
- Russia's annexation and creeping occupation, such as the construction of the Ochamchire military port, occupation of the Chorchana forest, the establishment of military bases, the installation of a radio-electronic station near Gremiskhevi, etc
- Non-recognition policy in both domestic and international political discussions.
- Political tensions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (e.g., the so-called dacha law)
- Violent crime incidents occurring in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions (e.g. shoot-outs between Abkhaz and Russian borderguards, opening fire at Anatoli Bibilov's nephew etc)
- Delegitimation of political and public processes ongoing in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions (e.g. de-facto elections)
- Counter-allegations among political parties accusing each other of promoting Russian interests in Georgia etc

These topics are significant and deserve coverage, but the larger issue lies in the fact that these regions are predominantly framed within the context of human rights violations, historical war trauma, the Occupation, and accusations of national treason. Therefore, the core issue here is not the coverage of these specific topics, but the fact that the media often associates these regions exclusively with negative contexts.

One of the main reasons behind the overrepresentation of negative contexts in conflict regions is the reactive nature of media outlets, which often only report on events after they occur. This means that media outlets fail to proactively create a positive agenda and do not think in advance about the relevant topics that could contribute to a more nuanced and balanced narrative. The damaging result of this trend is that, over time, the public's perception of Abkhazia and South Ossetia becomes solely tied to negative contexts.

To counteract this trend, it is essential that media outlets recognize the importance of covering positive themes related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This approach would allow them to play a constructive role in conflict resolution. According to Pani (2017), this could involve creating communication spaces that foster trust-building, countering misconceptions, rethink the conflict, and achieving consensus. Media could contribute to enhancing opportunities for creating such positive practices by paying closer attention to issues that could be considered as common ground and potential areas of intersection, such as cultural, economic, and social ties between Georgians, Abkhaz, and residents of South Ossetia and Akhlagori areas.

3) The Problem of Visibility of Abkhazians and Ossetians, and the Lack of Diversity among Respondents

An integral part of the above-mentioned patterns is the problem of visibility of people living in the conflict regions. In the current primetime media coverage trends of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the main emphasis is placed on political elites as relevant subjects for the media, which, according to Galtung (2002), is one of the defining characteristics of war journalism. As a result, in the stories prepared by television outlets on topics relevant to the monitoring purposes and within monitoring period, the primary sources of information are mainly official state institutions and affiliated officials and politicians.

As the media monitoring conducted within the framework of this research clearly demonstrated, in the overwhelming majority of materials prepared by the media, the population of the conflict zones is rarely used as a source of information. When they are included as sources, they are predominantly ethnic Georgians. Accordingly, the visibility of people residing directly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—on the territories not controlled by the Government of Georgia—is even more limited. This problem is partially rooted in factors beyond the control of the media, namely in the difficulty of accessing sources. Due to closed borders and the inability to conduct journalistic work in the territories outside Georgian control, journalists working for Georgian television channels have limited opportunities for direct contact with Abkhaz and Ossetian fellow citizens.

To respond to this problem, media outlets may adopt two counter-strategies: they can use secondary sources working from within the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that are accessible online; or they may rely on local sources such as researchers, experts, and scholars who can represent the positions, views, experiences, and perspectives of Abkhaz and Ossetian populations. However, based on current media practices, such individuals are rarely featured as respondents in primetime news broadcasts. This issue also emerged, to some extent, during the coverage of sensitive conflict-related (war outbreak and ceasefire) anniversaries, which will be discussed in the relevant section.

4) Superficial and Fragmented Coverage

Issues related to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali are often covered in a superficial and fragmented manner in Georgian television media. Georgian TV stations demonstrate insufficient effort in obtaining information from local sources, even when those sources include media outlets operating in Abkhazia or the Tskhinvali region. Even in instances where Georgian TV channels devote adequate attention to events occurring in these regions, the stories are typically presented without including voices of Abkhaz and Ossetian individuals—especially those residing in these regions. As noted earlier in the paper, access to respondents is extremely limited, if not entirely impossible, under the conditions of a protracted conflict. However, given the possibility of online access to local media, Georgian media outlets could, if they so wished, use secondary sources when covering stories related to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The current media practice, however, largely contradicts this possibility. A clear example is a segment broadcast on July 25 during the main news program of TV company Formula, which reported on protests against the so-called “apartments law.” Although Formula dedicated a relatively lengthy report to the issue, it did not include a single comment from an Abkhaz source; all sources featured were Georgian respondents.

Another illustration of this trend is the fact that most news stories and segments related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia are substantively homogenous and reactive. These regions tend to receive the attention of Georgian television primarily when particularly acute events of a negative nature occur, such as the illegal detention or release of Georgian citizens. Notably, with rare exceptions, such topics are also covered superficially, using only brief cut-synch segments and relying almost exclusively on statements from the State Security Service or other official agencies. For example, this was the case with brief cut-synch coverage by First Channel, Adjara TV, and Imedi TV on May 8, concerning the release of illegally detained Tristan Mushkiashvili and Valeri Tetrashvili. A similar case was the June 19 report by Adjara TV, which briefly mentioned incidents of abductions and illegal detentions from the occupied regions, which made to the Public Defender’s report. Even in these instances, media outlets exert minimal effort to gather on-the-ground information about abducted citizens, speak with family members, or interview other residents of the conflict zone. They fail to go beyond isolated cases to identify systemic issues or highlight the everyday problems of citizens living in border-adjacent regions.

This same pattern can also be observed in the widespread television media practice of reporting on the occupied territories predominantly within the context of Georgia’s domestic political confrontations. In such contexts, both ruling and opposition parties typically use the issue of occupation as a tool for political manipulation. These narratives then make their way into TV news programs without any in-depth analysis or substantive discussion of the issue.

Accordingly, mainstream Georgian television does not offer viewers coverage of diverse topics sourced through a proactive approach. On the one hand, such superficiality in television media may be explained by a shortage of human and material resources. However, online media outlets with significantly fewer resources provide examples that demonstrate how, with sufficient interest, it is possible to cover issues related to Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region in a far more detailed, in-depth, and proactive manner—even with limited resources. A good example of this is the work of outlets such as Netgazeti, OC Media, JAMnews, Radio Liberty, and Эхо Кавказа, which proactively and regularly report on domestic political and social developments in Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region.

In addition, the methodological specifics of the monitoring itself may partially explain the prevalence of so-called reactive media content. Naturally, evening summary news programs focus on reflecting the day's current events, which explains the abundance of reactive content. However, the format and duration of central news broadcasts—as opposed to other daily bulletins—also give media outlets the opportunity to prepare relatively in-depth segments on non-current topics. A clear example of this is the existence of cultural and sports blocks or the practice of covering non-current but still relevant issues in the second half of the news program. Furthermore, almost all leading TV channels have so-called weekly or Saturday programs, which are typically used for more in-depth coverage of non-current events. Therefore, in planning such programs, reflecting on the latest developments may be of lesser importance, providing media organizations with an opportunity to proactively cover various issues—including those related to conflict regions.

5) Trends in the Use of Terminology and Language

Observation of the materials aired during primetime on television throughout the monitoring period shows that journalists generally use neutral terminology and rarely resort to overtly hostile rhetoric toward Ossetians and Abkhazians. The use of the prefix "so-called" remains a common practice when referring to institutions, individuals, and political processes associated with Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region. However, its excessive usage can at times create awkward phrasing. For example, in a video segment aired on Adjara TV's news program on June 10, which covered de facto elections in the South Ossetia region, the following sentence appeared: "According to the preliminary results of the so-called parliamentary elections published by the so-called Central Election Commission of occupied Tskhinvali, the opposition party of former so-called president Anatoly Bibilov is leading, followed by the party of current so-called leader Alan Gagloev, while the Communist Party is in third place. The so-called parliamentary elections held yesterday in the Russia-occupied Tskhinvali region were condemned by Azerbaijan, Iceland, and Moldova."

In addition, media representatives occasionally use the term "separatists" when referring to the de facto governments in Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region. For instance, in the June 23 news program on Mtavari Arkhi, the journalist stated: "Gunfire was heard at the Georgia-Russia border at Psou, apparently involving members of the separatist regime and

Russian border guards. It appears to have been an internal clash, but it ended with casualties and injuries. Gunfire was also heard in New Atoni, where one civilian was also injured. According to our information, one of the injured is a member of the personal security detail of the so-called president of Abkhazia.”

During the monitoring period, no instances were observed of journalists using overtly discriminatory or aggressive language toward Ossetians or Abkhazians. However, there were instances on certain media outlets where respondents used harsh and sometimes discriminatory terms such as “enemy,” “pigs,” and so on. For example, in a report aired by Formula TV on May 6, one respondent said: “How can we talk about sharing the same faith? These are pigs, they have no sense of responsibility. When someone visits their brother’s grave and gets kidnapped—what can you even say? Words fail me. We have no government—where is the government?” Nonetheless, explicitly hostile terminology was primarily directed not at Abkhazians or Ossetians, but at Russian soldiers and border guards.

As for especially negative terms used in media regarding Abkhazians and Ossetians, two stand out: “puppet regime” (or various versions of the term “puppet”) and “Abkhaz and Ossetian separatists.” For example, the June 2 episode of the show *Post Factum* on Mtavari Arkhi included an extensive critical segment on Georgian Dream’s pre-election policies related to territorial integrity. The report was explicitly negative toward Abkhazians and Ossetians, using the term “Abkhaz and Ossetian separatists,” although the main focus of criticism was on the ruling party and its policies.

Similarly, in a July 21 report aired by Mtavari Arkhi, the word “puppet” was used repeatedly, both in the journalist’s narration and in describing an Abkhaz politician: “The puppets have scheduled presidential elections in eight months, and KGB Major General Aslan Bzhanias needs the support not of local residents, but of the Kremlin”; “The draft law will be reviewed at a session of the puppet parliament next week and is almost guaranteed to pass—this will mark the beginning of a new Russian project in Abkhazia”; “Even if we didn’t already know, the satisfaction of a member of the puppet parliament would be enough to confirm that our people beyond the Enguri are to be saved—not only Georgians.” Additionally, in a July 17 report by Formula TV, it was stated that: “In Sokhumi, the puppet parliament’s Committee on Economic Policy and Reform adopted the so-called law on apartments. The discussion took place against the backdrop of mass protests.”

6) The Impact of Political Polarization on Coverage of the Conflict Regions

Under the conditions of intense political polarization in Georgia’s domestic affairs, media outlets—especially polarized television channels—are increasingly devoting less space to other topics, including developments in the conflict regions. The monitoring period, which coincided first with protests and public unrest related to the introduction of the so-called “Russian law,” and later with the start of the pre-election season, clearly illustrates this

trend. Not only was there naturally less time allocated in news broadcasts for other subjects, including conflict regions, but issues related to Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region were frequently framed entirely through the lens of political polarization, obstructing the emergence of substantive media discussions.

Examples of this include the coverage of Irakli Kobakhidze's parliamentary address in the which he omitted the topic of the Occupation, or the resolution adopted at the 35th OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, which addressed Russia's occupation of Georgian territories. This topic attracted attention from opposition media primarily because members of the ruling Georgian Dream party did not support the resolution due to its critical language toward the Georgian government.

With the onset of the pre-election period, issues related to Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region once again resurfaced on the Georgian media agenda. A statement by Bidzina Ivanishvili, honorary chairman of the Georgian Dream party in which he attributed blame for the 2008 war to the then-government of the United National Movement, received significant media attention. However, as expected, instead of fostering a substantive discussion about the August 2008 war, polarized media outlets approached the topic from the perspective of political discourse, reflecting their own alignments. Media affiliated with the government emphasized the United National Movement's responsibility, while opposition channels focused on Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream's pro-Russian policies and alignment with "hostile" narratives.

For example, on July 17, in a news segment on TV Pirveli covering the presentation of Georgian Dream's election platform and Bidzina Ivanishvili's speech, the report was introduced with the following narration:

"Bidzina Ivanishvili pledges to fulfill Putin's dream. Threats to investigate the August War and prosecute the previous administration—this is Ivanishvili's main pre-election promise. It leaves the impression that Ivanishvili was reporting to Putin from the podium. The leader of the Georgian Dream, isolated from the world, had only one promise—to prosecute not Russian generals, but his own citizens for starting the war. Twelve years into power, Ivanishvili has nothing more to say to the public. The country's main threat, he claims, is a non-existent 'global war party,' and domestically its so-called radical representatives, against whom he has declared decisive battle. This message was central to every speech delivered. From the Georgian Dream stage, the two most frequently uttered words were 'war' and 'Bidzina.'"

On July 14, the pro-government TV station *Imedi* aired an extended segment on its Sunday program *Imedis Kvira* about the establishment of a new movement affiliated with the Georgian Dream, 'United Neutral Georgia.' Part of the segment discussed the significance of Georgia declaring neutrality in the context of restoring its territorial integrity. Without posing any critical questions, *Imedi* presented the views of movement representatives to the audience, including the following statement by Nana Kakabadze:

“This threat forces us to reconsider the policies pursued by the current government—let alone those of the previous one. And perhaps the only way for our territorial integrity to be restored is for us to adopt a position of neutrality and focus on how to reclaim our territories. We believe one of the paths worth trying is precisely this policy of neutrality.”

In the same segment, *Imedi* TV presented viewers with another quote, this time from one of the movement’s co-founders, Bidzina Giorgobiani:

“Neutrality gives us the opportunity to engage in political dialogue with Abkhazia and the authorities in Tskhinvali. Because if we approach them as a country aspiring to join a military bloc, they belong to an opposing military alliance. Finding common ground in such a situation is difficult. As for neutrality, it allows us to engage with them not only on humanitarian and economic issues, but also on political matters. And, by the way, this is a very powerful tool for establishing long-term peace in the South Caucasus.” – Bidzina Giorgobiani.

As with Nana Kakabadze’s comments, the *Imedi* journalist did not challenge Bidzina Giorgobiani’s views. No alternative assessments were offered to the audience, creating the impression that the broadcaster either simply provided a platform for a pro-government political movement or endorsed its views.

7) The Neglect and Political Instrumentalization of Peace Policy

One of the main issues identified during the monitoring period in Georgian television media was the neglect of peace discourse—or its use as a political instrument—and the near-total absence of reconciliation as a topic.

Most of the news stories and short on-the-street interviews aired on television either ignored peace policy due to their focus or framed the concept of peace as a political tool. In a large portion of the relevant monitored content related to occupation, occupied territories, conflict, or war, journalists made no effort to highlight or discuss the idea of peaceful coexistence with Abkhazians and Ossetians. Only a few exceptions, and even then only superficially, included instances where respondents expressed a desire to live in peace. For example, in a report aired on *Imedi* on May 6—covering the day of remembrance for the deceased, held on the second day of Easter—parents of soldier killed in the 2008 war gathered at the Mukhatgverdi war grave said:

“It’s been 16 years that we’ve celebrated Easter without him. We live with this pride and this pain—I’ll say it again. I wish peace for our country, and may their sacrifice bring you a better future,”... “Our children gave their lives for their homeland. They fought for Georgia. May you all live well and in peaceful Georgia.”

Although such segments were marked as containing an emphasis on peace, the news stories themselves, as produced by the broadcasters, did not meaningfully engage with or emphasize peace policy.

The political instrumentalization of the peace theme became particularly evident as the pre-election period approached and the *Georgian Dream* effectively turned the notion of peace into an election slogan. Consequently, instead of discussing or scrutinizing real mechanisms or plans for peaceful coexistence with Abkhazians and Ossetians, pro-government media used the peace narrative as a tool to attack political opponents, labeling them as advocates for war with Russia.

On the other hand, in opposition-aligned media outlets, the ruling party's emphasis on peace was presented as evidence of the *Georgian Dream*'s alliance with Russia. In response to the aggressive peace-themed campaign launched by the *Georgian Dream* and its affiliated broadcasters during the pre-election period, opposition-aligned television channels primarily framed the peace narrative within the context of voter manipulation by the ruling party. These outlets failed to recognize peace as a genuine public concern. As a result, opposition-leaning television did not provide primetime slot for opposition political actors to present their own peace initiatives to the electorate.

Consequently, viewers of major Georgian television stations were mostly exposed to information on the theme of peace—albeit often manipulatively and rhetorically—only through media loyal to the government.

As for the topic of reconciliation—an area in which the media can play a particularly significant role and which constitutes a core element of conflict-sensitive reporting—it was almost entirely absent from the media agenda. With the exception of sensitive anniversaries related to past wars, which are discussed in detail in the next chapter of the study, reconciliation with Abkhazians and Ossetians was largely missing from both pro-government and opposition-aligned television coverage.

8) Romanticizing Abkhazia

Lastly, with regard to Abkhazia, there is an evident discourse of romanticization in Georgian television. Unlike the displaced population from South Ossetia, the displaced individuals from Abkhazia are frequently depicted in the media within the context of recalling and romanticizing their past lives. During the monitoring period, TV reports were aired that, while not directly related to the conflict regions, centered around individuals with ties to these regions as one of the key elements of the narrative. For example, in the June 9th edition of the "Post Factum," one of the most watched program on Mtavari Arkhi, a detailed story was broadcast about Professor Teimuraz Papaskiri, a member of the political party *Akhali*, whose family was displaced from Abkhazia. A significant portion of the report focused on his memories of life in Abkhazia and his emotional reflections on the

house left behind in Sokhumi due to displacement. Below is an excerpt from the report, including both the text and dialogue between the journalist and the interviewee:

Journalist's narration: *Teimuraz Papaskiri, born into a family of a historians and a physician, was the same age as Mariam when everything in his life dramatically changed. Born and raised in Sokhumi, he has only seen his hometown for the past 32 years through archival materials and random footage found online. He constantly searches for the house where his happiest memories were made. (The footage of Sokhumi is accompanied by sentimental music.)*

Journalist: *Do you still remember the address?*

Respondent: *Yes, it was... [Street] 8/1, Apartment 70, how could I not remember? It was the official address... We lived on the fifth floor of a building, there were neighbors in the apartment, but now we don't even know about them anymore. Practically, there's no contact. That neighbor has passed away, by the way. That neighbor really saved my parents' lives during the war, and his apartment was hit by a shell, and my parents told him, 'Until our return, you can live here.' That neighbor passed away, and now we don't even know what's happening with it."*

Journalist's narration: *Georgia, Abkhazia, Sokhumi, that street is still Teimuraz Papaskiri's official address. He was a freshman at the history program at the university when the war in Abkhazia broke out, and the Papaskiri family, as historians, became a primary target of the Russians and separatists. They barely managed to leave Sokhumi.*

Respondent: *"Well, Sokhumi is always with me, I can say, despite the fact that I've been in displacement for over 30 years now. Everything I do, my scientific work, is not formally related to the history of Abkhazia, and so on, because I am a specialist in world history. But there's one thing: when I go abroad to international conferences, I only go with topics that, at least indirectly, touch on Abkhazia."*

Furthermore, in the extensive report aired by the TV channel Imedi on July 7th in the weekly show *Imedi's Week*, the main focus was on the life of the clergyman Father Teimuraz Zakareishvili, particularly his time spent in Abkhazia and his personal feelings and attitudes toward the lost region and the years he spent there. The selected excerpts from the interview with the clergyman include statements where Zakareishvili says, *"I believe that Abkhazia will be ours again. If God grants me the opportunity to perform one service there, I would be the happiest man in the world. Just to perform one liturgy there"; "I always think about it, one day I will walk the streets of Sokhumi. There is no more beautiful city in the world than that."*

Such romanticization of Abkhazia, which is primarily based on the image of the region as a carefree place of childhood or youth, creates an incomplete and misleading impression of

the historical reality of the region. Furthermore, this practice of romanticization reinforces the stereotype of the so-called "lost paradise," which lacks any analytical depth or the opportunity to provide the audience with a realistic understanding of the historical reality of the region. As the principles of sensitive conflict reporting and peace journalism indicate, such simplifications are characteristic of war journalism. In contrast, following the principles of conflict-sensitive reporting and peace journalism, while showing the nostalgia of the displaced Georgians from Abkhazia (which, in itself, is a perfectly legitimate and understandable emotion), the media should also be able to provide a more objective reconstruction of historical reality. This would help the media to present their audiences with accurate and realistic perspectives on the conflict, the diversity of the parties involved, and the incompatibility of their viewpoints.

Coverage of Sensitive Dates Related to the Conflict in Television Media

Since the dates related to the 1992-93 War in Abkhazia and the 2008 Russia-Georgia War were regularly covered by Georgian media, the research also monitored the main news broadcasts on the following dates: August 7-8 (the anniversary of the start of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war), August 14 (the anniversary of the beginning of the Abkhazian war in 1992), and September 27 (the anniversary of the end of the Abkhazian war).

As expected, Georgian television devoted significant attention to topics related to the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions on these dates, especially on August 7-8 and September 27. However, the coverage on August 14, the anniversary of the start of the Abkhazian war, varied. Some channels limited their coverage to a brief news segment, while others did not cover the day's events in their main news broadcasts at all. Below is a summary of the main trends in the coverage of these dates in primetime news broadcasts.

One War, Two Dates, and the August War as a Litmus Test for Media Polarization

One of the main visible trends concerning the August 2008 war is the different dates chosen by media organizations to mark the war's beginning. Georgian TV channels, depending on their political orientation and stance towards the ruling Georgian Dream government, refer to either August 7 or 8 as the start date of the war. This logic shaped the content and order of reports presented by these media outlets on those days.

August 7

Television channels critical of the government, such as Mtavari, Formula, and TV Pirveli, produced extensive reports about the events of the 2008 war on August 7. These reports primarily focused on the chronology of the war, its outcomes, including the casualties among military personnel, police, and civilians from Georgia, displaced persons, and occupied settlements. The reports emphasized Russia as the occupying force, the

testimonies of war witnesses, and criticized the Georgian Dream government for blaming Georgia for the outbreak of the war.

For example, the very first report on Mtavari Arkhi, on August 7 began with the following introduction:

“August 7, 2008, is associated with a great act of heroism in Georgia's recent history. This day once again confirms that our main enemy is Putin's Russia. 16 years ago, Russia attacked Georgia. The target was the peaceful population and their homes, some of which are still destroyed. Recalling those days, even after 16 years, is difficult for those who saw how Russian soldiers behaved.”

Meanwhile, TV Pirveli's report began with: “16 years since the 5-day August war. The day Russia invaded Georgian territory. Although the oligarch's regime, like the Kremlin, names August 8 as the date for the start of the military operations, the chronology of events 16 years ago unfolded differently. On the morning of August 7, 2008, Russian regular military forces were already conducting a military assault on Georgian territory.”

Additionally, the reports focused on the visit of Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili to the line of occupation and the tributes paid by opposition political parties to the graves and memorials of soldiers killed in the war.

On August 7 , television channels critical of the government also aired reports on statements issued by Western countries and international organizations (such as the European Union and NATO) in relation to the anniversary of the war. “The entire civilized world names August 7 as the start date of the war. Statements of support for Georgia from the West continue unabated,” stated a TV Pirveli journalist.

These channels also aired in-depth reports on the lives of people living along the line of occupation. The reports not only highlighted their war experiences but also emphasized the government's neglect of the daily struggles of people living under the threat of Russian occupation and their dire socio-economic conditions. The focus was placed on how the people living on the occupation line were left exposed to the enemy, with government representatives avoiding visits to the area.

As for the television channels loyal to the Georgian Dream government—such as the Public Broadcaster's Channel 1, Adjara TV, Imedi, and Rustavi 2—their main focus on August 7 was not on the start of the August war, but rather on the attempts of the former ruling party, the United National Movement, to change the start date of the war. The reports concentrated on the signing of the Council of Europe resolution by members of the United National Movement, the 40^{2nd} decree issued by President Saakashvili, and a detailed statement issued by the political council of the Georgian Dream, which primarily blamed the former government for initiating the war and called for the prosecution of former government officials for Georgia's involvement in the conflict.

Rustavi 2 aired its first report on August 7 with the title "The Changed Date of the War" and began with the following introduction:

"Today is August 7, the date marking the beginning of the last war with Russia. However, for years, Saakashvili's party celebrated this date on August 8. What is the National Movement hiding, and why do they manipulate different dates? Both questions are legitimate, but the former government does not want to answer them. The current ruling party does have an answer, speaking about the criminal provocation of the National Movement and placing responsibility for the consequences on both the Russian Federation and Saakashvili's regime. There is a decree by Mikheil Saakashvili stating that the Russians crossed Georgia's border on August 8. Rustavi 2's archive holds other facts as well. Therefore, no matter how many years pass, these facts will always remain in history."

The following report on Rustavi 2 was about the Council of Europe's resolution and was introduced with the text:

"Over 200 casualties among civilians, nearly 200 militaries fallen in the line of duty, around 2,000 wounded, abandoned homes, lost territories, including the Kodori Gorge, 125 occupied villages, and tens of thousands of people left in displacement. Against this backdrop, the National Movement supported the Council of Europe's resolution exactly two months after the war's end, which states that the bombing of Tskhinvali by Georgian forces on August 7 escalated the conflict to a new and open stage of confrontation. The same document also describes the use of force by Georgia as disproportionate and a threat to civilians, and most importantly, Russia's actions are characterized as a retaliatory attack. This is the document that the then-government, the National Movement, signed."

Imedi TV took a similar approach and aired its first report on August 7, which was based on a statement by the political council of the Georgian Dream. Just like the Georgian Dream, the channel accused the United National Movement of starting the war and treason, announcing their prosecution. Imedi read nearly word-for-word the full statement of the Georgian Dream's political council. The second report on Imedi, which dealt directly with the start date of the war, also accused President Salome Zourabichvili of being complicit in rewriting history alongside the United National Movement:

"The date of the August war has become a subject of speculation for the National Movement in recent years. August 8 became August 7 for Salome Zourabichvili after she chose Saakashvili's team as a political ally... What the National Movement wants to erase from the memory of the Georgian people is well known to the public and to media archives. The representatives of the previous government considered August 8 as the start date of the war for years and would visit the Mukhatgverdi war grave on this date. However, since 2013, this changed, and radicals now refer to

August 7 as the start date, visiting the cemetery on that day. They have never explained the reasons for this decision."

This report was followed by a segment on the aforementioned Council of Europe resolution, criticizing the National Movement "for signing it. "The differences between the governments are evident in their policies. Historical facts confirm that one government, shortly after the war, signed a resolution against Georgian soldiers, while the other defeats Russia in The Hague and Strasbourg over the war," concluded the loyalist TV station's report.

The Public Broadcaster's First Channel also covered the 2008 war on August 7 with similar focuses as other government-aligned media outlets. The first report did not directly cover the August war but instead addressed the disputed war date, discussing the Council of Europe's resolution, Mikheil Saakashvili's Decree No. 402, and video archives that prove that United National Movement government recognized August 8 as the war's start date until 2013. On this day, the First Channel also showed brief synchs of opposition representatives visiting the Mukhatgverdi Cemetery, President Zourabichvili and the Public Defender's visits to the line of occupation, and international reactions on the anniversary of the start of the war.

Among government-aligned media outlets, Adjara TV had a different focus. On August 7, in its news broadcast, it began by covering the August war, the visits of opposition representatives to the graves of those killed in the war, and only afterward addressed the Georgian Dream political council's statement about their intent to prosecute the United National Movement.

August 8

As for August 8, the order of the information presented by the television stations provides significant clues about how political polarization influences their editorial agendas even on crucial days like the anniversary of the 2008 war.

Opposition-aligned TV stations like TV Pirveli, Formula, and Mtavari started their broadcasts on this day not with coverage of the August war but with reports on the Ukraine-Russia war, specifically Ukraine's occupation of the Russian town of Sudzha in the Kursk region. This editorial decision reflected, in part, the stations' stance on the start date of the war.

The second segment on both stations dealt with the government's visit to the Mukhatgverdi war grave to honor the fallen soldiers and the announcement of prosecuting the previous government. Formula's report began with the following text:

"Through Russian propaganda, on the 16th anniversary of the war, the Georgian Dream presented itself with Kremlin rhetoric at the war grave. Statements made by

Ivanishvili's regime echo Moscow's messages about the 2008 war both in content and form. The oligarchic government accuses Georgia of waging the war. This year, the novelty is that the representatives of the Georgian Dream have accused their own country, along with the West, of provoking Russia. Until now, they claimed Saakashvili fell into Russia's provocation, but now Ivanishvili's Russian propaganda has taken full shape. The Georgian Dream statements were assessed as an outright betrayal and hostility toward the country."

TV Pirveli's report on August 8 had nearly identical emphases:

"A shame for the country and a process of the century for Russia. What Russia has failed to prove for 16 years, the Georgian Dream plans to confirm: that Georgia started the war. A public trial against their own country. The government is already working on legal mechanisms, the prosecution or the Constitutional Court. The prime minister is already announcing the ways in which the 'Dream' plans to prosecute the previous government. Investigating the August war has become 'Georgian Dream's' main pre-election promise. It began with Ivanishvili, and the whole team has taken it up. Today, the ruling team's top officials are not shy even in front of mothers who lost their children, who today remember heroes at the Mukhatgverdi Cemetery. In their presence, the 'Dream' leaders promised that the war would be investigated, and one by one, they will charge the previous government."

The focus of the report by Mtavari Channel was similar, with the key point being that "the Georgian Dream remains Russia's main ally and partner in Georgia. The government of our country still considers August 8 the start date of the 2008 war and continues to blame its own country for starting the war."

In addition, Mtavari Channel, like TV Pirveli, highlighted the statements made by the families of the fallen soldiers, in which they expressed criticism of the Georgian government's pro-Russian stance.

"No one should say that Georgia attacked Russia. Our people always defended the homeland, and my sons shed their blood for that. It's unacceptable for us to head toward Russia... Time will pass, and years will come when my sons will be appreciated, and not just my sons," said the father of the fallen soldiers in an interview with Mtavari Channel.

Like the opposition-aligned TV stations, government-aligned media outlets had similar editorial grids but with radically different emphases. The Public Broadcaster's First Channel, Adjara TV, Imedi, and Rustavi 2 all started their August 8 broadcasts with a chronological review of the 2008 war and its aftermath, including information about the number of deaths, injuries, displaced persons, and lost territories. Each channel dedicated a separate, extensive segment to the visit of representatives from the executive and legislative branches, as well as local authorities, to honor the fallen soldiers at the cemetery.

As expected, in addition to expressions of gratitude and condolences for the fallen soldiers, the official comments also addressed the accusations against the United National Movement government for involving the country in the war, and the Georgian Dream government's promise to prosecute the previous government after their victory in the elections.

It was also noteworthy that government-aligned media outlets prepared extensive reports about the lives of people living along the line of occupation on August 8. However, in these reports, the focus was on the lived experience of the war, and the hardships of living near Russian occupation forces. Therefore, these media outlets did not prioritize reporting any dissatisfaction from the local population toward the government. No critical comments were included, such as those indicating that residents felt abandoned because government officials do not visit the line of occupation and that they feel neglected.

In these reports, special emphasis was placed on the issue of peace, particularly in the segments prepared by Imedi TV, where the significance of peace was highlighted in different contexts:

“Here, the price of peace is best understood”; “The lesson of war and the importance of peace—this was one of the main points in the government’s statements today. The leaders of the ruling team paid tribute to the memory of the fallen.”

The theme of peace, which the Georgian Dream party turned into an electoral promise, was dominant not only in the coverage by journalists but also in statements by the government and various members of the Georgian Dream, including Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, Speaker of the Parliament Shalva Papuashvili, the Chairman of the Georgian Dream Irakli Garibashvili, and the Mayor of Tbilisi Kakha Kaladze.

Imedi also focused on the dissatisfaction of the families of the fallen soldiers, featuring interviews with the family members, in which they blamed the government of the United National Movement for abandoning the bodies of the fallen soldiers. The series of reports on the war concluded with a statement from the United Neutral Georgia, affiliated with the Georgian Dream, which stated, “Overall, we can assess the 2008 war as a kind of tribute to the ruling powers of the United States, paid by Saakashvili with the blood of the Georgian people and Georgian soil, in order to preserve his regime’s reputation as a beacon of democracy and continue governing the country through brutal and violent methods.”

In general, during the coverage of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war on August 7-8, 2024, the main focus in the television broadcasts was on: A) war chronology: Information about the war’s timeline, the experiences and consequences of the war and occupation on the population, and B) internal political polarization: The political struggle between the Georgian Dream and opposition parties, particularly regarding the start date of the war and the prosecution of the former ruling party, the United National Movement. In the segments prepared directly about the war, the emphasis was on the loss of life, health, property, or

homes due to the war, the heroism of Georgian soldiers, police, and citizens, and the tragic experiences of the people. The start date of the war became a litmus test for internal political polarization. Television channels aligned with the Georgian Dream prepared extensive reports on August 8, focusing on the war, while opposition-aligned channels considered August 7 as the official start date of the war.

The reports prepared on these topics effectively dominated the airtime of the news broadcasts. As a result, what stood out especially was the complete disregard for the potential of a real long-term peace policy, communication with the people living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or finding common ground in both government-loyal and critically inclined media outlets. Watching the main news broadcasts, one often got the impression that the 2008 war involved only Georgia and Russia, while the de facto authorities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the people living there, were almost invisible in the media materials.

Abkhazian War 32 Years Later

The dates marking the start and end of the 1992-93 Abkhazian War continue to be covered every year in mainstream Georgian media, albeit with varying intensity. During the days marking the start and especially the end of the war, the reports prepared by the media often follow similar narratives when discussing the lived experience of the war, its chronology, and its consequences. At first glance, unlike the coverage of the August war, there seems to be a consensus in Georgian media regarding the facts of the Abkhazian War. The war, in which thousands of Georgian citizens lost their lives and hundreds of thousands were forced to leave their homes, is portrayed in media materials as a dual narrative—it is a cause of pain but also a source of pride.

August 14

August 14, the date marking the start of the Abkhazian War, receives relatively less attention in the media. Out of the seven leading TV channels, only four acknowledged this date in their main news broadcasts. For example, the First Channel of the Public Broadcaster dedicated a brief segment to this date in the middle of its news broadcast with the following narration:

"32 years have passed since the beginning of the war in Abkhazia. The military actions began on August 14, 1992. Georgian Armed Forces entered the territory to protect the railway. The main phase of the war lasted for 13 months and 13 days, ending on September 27, 1993, with the fall of Sokhumi. Before the fall of Sokhumi, negotiations took place between the parties, mediated by Russia. On July 27, the Sochi Agreement was signed, which was unilaterally violated by the Abkhaz side after the Georgian side had withdrawn heavy military equipment. As a result of the war, nearly 300,000 people were forced to leave the territory of Abkhazia. The war led to the deaths of up to 10,000 people, including soldiers and civilians. The

occupation of Georgia's historical territory, the years of grossly violated rights, and ethnic discrimination remain the country's main challenges. Despite international calls, Russia has ignored all demands to reverse the recognition of Abkhazia and withdraw its military forces. The official Tbilisi views the restoration of territorial integrity through a peace policy focused on rebuilding trust as the main goal."

The First Channel of the Public Broadcaster was not the only one to acknowledge the date; Adjara TV also dedicated a segment to August 14, including an assessment by historian Otar Gogolashvili, who stated:

"Eduard Shevardnadze and his so-called Military Council, led by Ioseliani, Kotivani, Sigua, and other criminals, sent troops into Abkhazia under the pretext of protecting the railway. That was exactly what the separatists wanted. That was exactly what the Russian empire and its military units, which were heavily deployed both in Sokhumi and on its outskirts, wanted. The Georgian military units were lured in, and then met with armed resistance on Abkhaz territory. It was then presented as though Georgians had attacked Abkhazia and sought the genocide and annihilation of the Abkhaz people. Once again, I repeat—this was a Russian scenario, carried out according to a plan by Eduard Shevardnadze and the so-called Military Council."

From private TV channels, it was revealed through their websites and archives that TV Pirveli did not prepare a separate report on August 14, but in a report related to the investigation of the August war, the journalist mentioned August 14 as a special date and pointed out: "Today marks the 32nd anniversary of the breakout of the Abkhazian War, and not a single representative of the government has mentioned this tragic date, they have not visited the Heroes' Memorial, nor have any statements been published. The last activity of the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the Parliament, and the Minister of Defense was on social media yesterday, but no one addressed the current day."

Television company Imedi also commented on August 14 with a brief segment, while Main Channel, Formula, and Rustavi 2 did not mention the start of the war in Abkhazia in their main news broadcasts on that date.

September 27

In contrast to August 14, September 27, the day known as the fall of Sokhumi in Georgia's recent history, was included in the main news broadcasts of all leading TV channels. Similar to the coverage on August 7-8, the theme of the end of the war in Abkhazia was largely used by the media to fuel domestic political confrontation.

Several TV stations dedicated nearly entire reports to the family members of those who died in the Abkhazian War, particularly those who were outraged by a statement made by Bidzina Ivanishvili on September 14 in Gori. In his statement, Ivanishvili said:

“After the elections on October 26, when those who started the war are convicted, when every single perpetrator responsible for the destruction of Georgian–Ossetian brotherhood and coexistence will face the strictest legal consequences, we will certainly find the strength within ourselves to apologize for the fact that, under orders, the traitorous National Movement set our Ossetian sisters and brothers on fire in 2008.”

TV station Formula made Ivanishvili's idea of an apology the leading topic of its report on the anniversary of the fall of Sokhumi. Formula's news segment dedicated the first report to this theme, from which we learn the following:

“This year, on September 27, the families of the war victims met the day with additional grief. From the Heroes’ Memorial, they had to respond to Ivanishvili. ‘We will not apologize to the occupiers,’ they told the oligarch today.”

“A mother, whose 19-year-old son was killed 31 years ago on September 26, recalls one of the most tragic dates in Georgia's history. Ludmila Darjania did not leave the burning city until she buried her deceased son. The mother, who lost her son, could not hide her anger at Bidzina Ivanishvili’s statements and demanded answers about who should apologize.”

Similarly, the TV channel Mtavari covered September 27 with the following introduction to its report:

“On the day of the fall of Sokhumi, displaced persons from Abkhazia traditionally gather once again at the Heroes’ Memorial, as they do every year, hoping that one day they will return to the towns and villages occupied by Russia, where they buried their family members. This year, they have more to say than in the past thirty years. For the first time, this government has created the preconditions for their long-held hopes to vanish. For the first time, they have been told to apologize to the enemy.”

In addition, the TV channels critical of the government included in their reports footage of a citizen who met government representatives at the Heroes’ Memorial holding a protest banner. However, this protester was not captured by the cameras of pro-government television channels. Instead, Imedi TV and Rustavi 2 filmed a confrontation between a citizen and politician Giorgi Vashadze at the Heroes’ Memorial: *“Giorgi Vashadze, leader of the United National Movement, was confronted by families of war heroes at the Heroes’ Memorial. They told Vashadze that members of the UNM had no moral right to come to the memorial because people also died during their time in power,”* said the Imedi TV reporter.

For Imedi TV, September 27 also proved to be a convenient opportunity to attack President Salome Zurbishvili and, in contrast, praise the ruling Georgian Dream government. From the segment’s introductory script, we learn:

“Today, the government honored the memory of the fallen, while Salome Zourabichvili did not appear at the Heroes’ Memorial. ‘We will reunite’—three words, and within those three words, a message of national importance. This is the main message from the government exactly 31 years after the fall of Sokhumi.”

Paying tribute at the Heroes’ Memorials and gravesites by central and local government representatives was also a central theme—alongside the chronology and outcomes of the war—for the Public Broadcaster’s Adjara TV. Adjara TV aired comments not only from government members in Tbilisi and Batumi but also from local officials visiting the graves of Abkhazian war veterans buried in various municipalities. Like all other broadcasters, Adjara TV emphasized—through both introductory scripts and interview segments—the heroism of the soldiers who died in Abkhazia and the profound national tragedy that Georgia endured during the war.

However, particular attention to the chronology of the Abkhazian war was given by the Public Broadcaster’s First Channel in its news program Moambe. A large portion of the report prepared on September 27 was devoted to the war in Abkhazia and did not focus on present-day internal political confrontations. From the journalist’s narration we learn:

“Flags at half-mast serve as a reminder of a tragic day in the country’s recent history. Today is September 27—31 years ago, on this day, Sokhumi fell. A city engulfed in flames, the Supreme Council building encircled, government members executed, thousands of casualties, ethnic cleansing, people gone missing, hundreds of thousands turned into refugees, and the long walk through Chuberi. Harrowing images forever etched into our memory. A 13-month and 13-day war ended with a decisive assault on Sokhumi, a violation of the ceasefire agreement, an uneven battle, and the loss of Abkhazia. Thirty-one years after the attacks launched from all sides by separatists backed by Russia, the region of Abkhazia remains occupied. De-occupation, the return of IDPs to their homes, and the restoration of the country’s territorial integrity remain Georgia’s key national priorities. Even after all these years, the pain and suffering experienced by those displaced from Abkhazia in 1992–1993 have not subsided. These stories are painful to hear.”

Like the Public Broadcaster, nearly all television stations paid particular attention to personal testimonies—many of which recounted brutal atrocities committed against Georgians. The reports contained stories of torture, rape, and the burning of bodies. Among them were testimonies such as:

“I fled. They had killed my mother—she lay there, poor thing, floating in a sea of blood. What our girls and young women went through there was worse than death.”
“It was just me and my dead son. People are fleeing, and I am with my child. Even if they killed me, I would not have left him until I buried him. If they had killed me, we would have been buried together.”
“I don’t have a grave. Only a name and a surname—just that.”

Several respondents used the word ‘genocide’—though the narrative of genocide was not prominently emphasized by the broadcasters themselves. Respondents told TV Pirveli: *“It was genocide against the Georgian people, in the literal sense of the word—they should be the ones apologizing to us.”* *“What else could it be but genocide? Half of Georgia died along the road through Svaneti—what could be more genocidal than that?”*

A few respondents—namely, the Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, and the Chair of the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, Levan Mgaloblishvili—also raised the issue of peaceful coexistence and reconciliation between Georgians and Abkhazians. Kaladze said:

“This is one of the most tragic dates in Georgia’s history. Even more tragic are the consequences we faced after the war—the loss of territory and the loss of our heroic soldiers. Nothing can ease this pain. However, in Georgia’s national interest, we must take concrete steps toward mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. Trust must be restored between our peoples, so that we can achieve territorial integrity. I firmly believe that only through peace, development, mutual respect, forgiveness, and a nonviolent path can we restore that trust.”

“Our reconciliation is inevitable. We will do everything so that Georgian and Abkhaz brothers and sisters can continue this life together. The Georgian Dream will do everything in its power to ensure that not even a single name is added to this wall.”

However, these initiatives for reconciliation and peace—voiced in television reports on September 27—remained purely rhetorical. Not a single concrete initiative or idea was presented to explain how this vision of reconciliation might be realized in practice. The rhetorical nature of calls for peace and reconciliation was made even more striking by the fact that, on September 27, almost none of the flagship news programs on Georgian television featured historians, scholars, experts, or researchers working directly on peace policy or Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Instead, airtime—particularly on government-aligned channels—was filled with politicians and state officials who, year after year, repeat the same messages.

The monitoring of Georgian television media on September 27, 2024—on the anniversary of the fall of Sukhumi—made it evident that 32 years after the Abkhazian war, there is a kind of consensus in Georgian media regarding the chronology and outcomes of the conflict. Yet, alongside the necessary and inevitable remembrance of past traumatic experiences and losses, primetime Georgian media still fails to offer the public any in-depth analysis of the conflict’s underlying causes or a rethinking of its legacy. The broadcast space, apart from the personal stories of those affected by the war, remains almost entirely dominated by politicians and state officials—most of whom either attempt to instrumentalize the date for political purposes or engage in routine visits to war memorials

and gravesites, from where peace and reconciliation are only mentioned at the level of rhetoric.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal of this study was to examine how topics related to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia are covered in the main news programs of leading Georgian television channels, based on a monitoring of their primetime broadcasts.

Over the selected three-month monitoring period (May–July 2024), a total of 576 episodes from the main news programs of seven television channels were analyzed. The research revealed that on the majority of the monitored days, none of the seven channels aired any story or segment related to Abkhazia or the Tskhinvali Region in their main news broadcasts. Only on about one-third of the observed days did at least one channel cover a topic connected to these regions. The total number of relevant materials did not exceed 87, and a significant portion of those were brief footage-soundbite segments.

In terms of content, topics related to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region most frequently appeared in the context of occupation, war, or conflict. These were followed by coverage related to Georgia's security, territorial integrity, non-recognition policy, and issues linked to history, culture, or religion. Internal developments occurring within Abkhazia and South Ossetia were rarely included in Georgian television's prime-time news unless those issues were directly connected to Georgia's national interests or the occupation narrative. Additionally, the study showed that reporting on Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region often occurred within a negative thematic context, and with rare exceptions, did not feature voices of Abkhaz people or residents of the South Ossetia region. Furthermore, peace policy was generally not a focus of the media materials.

Beyond presenting the core findings, the study also sought to qualitatively identify key trends in how these regions are represented by television media. The following tendencies were identified:

- Leading Georgian television channels do not consider Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region as priority topics—particularly when those topics are not directly linked to Georgia's national interests or the issue of occupation;
- Within the already limited coverage, media materials are disproportionately focused on topics with negative thematic framing;
- In primetime news, stories related to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are often covered superficially and fragmentarily, with in-depth, proactively prepared segments being rare;
- Journalistic language is generally neutral, though there are occasional instances of discriminatory or hostile language. This language most often targets Russians rather

than Abkhaz or Ossetians, and negative expressions usually stem from respondents rather than journalists themselves;

- The internal political polarization in Georgia adversely affects how topics related to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region are covered in television media, as the limited airtime is mostly occupied by domestic political confrontation, leaving little space for other subjects;
- Peace policy was largely ignored in the materials prepared by the television media, or, due to political polarization, was subject to instrumentalization;
- A notable trend is the presence of a romanticized discourse about Abkhazia in television stories, which fosters distorted perceptions among viewers regarding the historical reality and socio-political past related to Abkhazia.

This study also observed how the same television channels covered key commemorative dates related to the 1992–1993 war in Abkhazia and the 2008 August War. As the research showed, Georgian media is relatively unlikely to question or re-examine facts, chronology, or the outcomes of the Abkhazian war. However, some individual channels attempted to use the commemoration date of the war's end to fuel internal political disputes. Furthermore, the media coverage of these dates offered little new content to audiences—even 32 years after the end of the war—let alone coverage grounded in the principles of sensitive conflict reporting or peace journalism.

In contrast, coverage of the 2008 war clearly reflected deep polarization within Georgian television media, particularly visible in the different days chosen to commemorate the war's beginning. Despite the varying commemorative dates, the channels gave significant attention to the war's chronology and the experiences of people living in conflict zones. However, even this coverage was filtered through a lens of political polarization. Channels critical of the ruling Georgian Dream government emphasized its pro-Russian policies and accused it of betrayal, using conflict zone problems primarily as a vehicle to express discontent with the government. Pro-government media, on the other hand, completely ignored the dissatisfaction of the local population with state actions and the lack of communication with them. In response, some pro-government outlets sought to highlight statements from war-affected individuals blaming the United National Movement government for starting the war.

Based on the study's findings and the identified trends in how leading Georgian TV channels cover issues related to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region—as well as in light of the principles of sensitive conflict reporting—the following recommendations are proposed:

- Television channels should allocate more human and material resources toward the in-depth and proactive coverage of issues related to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region during primetime;
- Greater effort should be made to report on local developments within Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region, so that Georgian citizens are informed about political,

social, economic, and cultural events occurring there. To this end, television stations may draw on the practices of certain Georgian and other online media outlets, including *Netgazeti*, *OC Media*, *JAMnews*, *Radio Liberty*, and *Эхо Кавказа*;

- Hate speech and discriminatory language—whether direct or indirect (via respondents)—should be avoided;
- More attention should be paid to diversity of sources. Georgian TV channels should consider using more secondary sources from media outlets operating in Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region, as well as primary sources in the form of researchers and experts working on conflict issues;
- In the context of media polarization, broadcasters should recognize the potential harm to national interests and refrain from using topics related to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region as tools of internal political confrontation;
- More attention should be given to peace policy and the potential for people-to-people diplomacy between Georgians, Abkhazians, and Ossetians, including the search for peaceful coexistence and the identification of shared interests and common language;
- On sensitive conflict-related commemorative dates (e.g., the beginning and end of wars), television should offer not only official statements and personal stories from war survivors but also materials that analyze the underlying causes of conflict, offer in-depth perspectives, and explore avenues for conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and reconciliation.

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