Bondo Mdzinarashvili
CIU program of Political Science
Ph.D. student

DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE, MEDIA PLURALISM AND THE THREAT OF DEEPENING THE CONFRONTATION

Abstract: In the article Democratic Discourse, Media pluralism and the Threat of Deepening the Confrontation, the author focuses on both positive and negative aspects of media pluralism in the context of political pluralism; and, through comprehensive analysis of the post-Soviet media, illustrates preconditions of the problem and threats of deepening confrontation as a result of further process development. The article focuses on the impact of political parallelism, media agenda and framing on the political life that accompanies the depiction of the political agenda in the media. Furthermore, it shows how the media fosters the confrontational democracy first and then replaces it with accusatory democracy, which is preceded by a loss of public confidence in the political process, and which facilitates the emergence of a society of distrust. By explaining democratic discourse (the model of polarized pluralism), the author shows the desire of political elites to use media outlets as much as possible to entice the public in their favor, often encouraged by a lack of democracy and the ideology of political struggle. Taking into consideration the political and economic situations of the newly independent states, the article discusses threats and challenges that the post-Soviet and post-socialist countries face, and in the solution of which media is actively involved, but often political manipulation and instrumentalization compromise the state security. In the concluding part of the article, the author stresses out the categorical imperative of political choice - overcoming confrontation as a vital condition for the state security and media pluralism as one of the essential components of providing this security.

Key words: political pluralism, polarized pluralism, state security, media pluralism, political parallelism, media agenda.

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Introduction
Preface

The process of democratization started from the "top" in new independent states and it was not understood properly by the absolute majority of the society; at the same time, in the process of establishment of new world order, the transparency and accelerated pace of pluralism neglected many factors, which caused serious problems for these countries. Among these factors was media, which was inadequately explored as a mechanism to deepen confrontation and accordingly it, became a tool not only for internal political players, but also for foreign actors that took advantage of the current situation and began to use inner resources of the country to start hybrid war.

The high degree of politicization characteristic of democratic discourse dramatically increases the level of media politicization as well. In the conditions of polarized pluralism, due to political parallelism, not only the political process itself is damaged, but trust towards media is also substantially reduced or disappears completely. The instrumentalization of media in the struggle for power contributes to the strengthening of counter-democracy and the emergence of confrontation, which threatens the safety of the society and brings to the fore the problem of ensuring the national security, the solution of which is prevented by sharp political confrontation. This particularly damages the new independent states and the developing countries, because they find it difficult

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to repulse the information storm and neutralize both internal and external threats.

Political parallelism on media agenda

The dismantling of the old political system in Georgia was completed by establishing the democratic state-political system. Totalitarianism has actually lost its legal and political ground. However, it is also clear that neither democratic political system and legal terms could function, nor a pluralistic environment could be established by themselves. Today their practical realization is a common political task and an issue of national security insurance. In this situation, free media and media pluralism, an integral part of political pluralism, acquire the greatest importance. A truly free media should be free from administrative pressure and censorship as well as from commercial dictation. Media should determine its content; though, this is often not the case and the polarized pluralism and, furthermore, unconcealed or hidden political parallelism are the reasons of this. However, Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini emphasize that even commercial media may be politically biased and, conversely, non-commercial media, supported by political parties, can develop norms to ensure political balance. (Hallin, Mancini, 2004, 32).

The media really wants to develop norms and ensure political balance, but one thing is a possibility and the other is a will. In this case, a will and a possibility do not coincide. The Georgian media is often under such political repressions that it cannot escape. This is accompanied by a commercial dictate that is lightened or, on the contrary, intensified according to political expediency. One of the reasons for this is the difficult social conditions, which, also, affects degree of affiliation. In this situation, it is vivid that the media "contributes to the obedience of the masses and also promotes political passivity... editors, journalists who, on the one hand, obey the "media-tycoons", and, on the other hand, they carry their interests because of personal views or benefits." (Kotrikadze, 2022, 269).

The political parallelism, media agenda and framing, that are subsequent aspects transferring political agenda into media, have a major impact on public mood. Even a superficial observation of today's Georgian media is enough to make sure that the political parallelism has a significant impact on the media systems, and this parallelism is so visible that there is nothing left to determine, and the media content is conspicuously "naked". The influence of political pluralism and democratic discourse, with the instrumentalization of media pluralism, support the confrontation democracy, and, the next stage would be the democracy of blame. At this time, mutual accusations and the media's role as a prosecutor deprive it of its information content, and trust is lost in not only the political process and political players,

but also in the media and journalists. As Mr. Zura Mkheidze, phycologist and communications specialist, declares, "information space terrorizes population" (Antadze, 2021, 491). In such situation, media avoids responsibility instead of being careful and not becoming a tool of sticking labels for mutual marginalization that is favorite behavior of politicians.

At this point, it is essential to focus on the media agenda, because the extent of manipulation of audience would become instantly obvious as soon as we observe the sequence and frequency of topics coverage. Renita Coleman briefly and precisely explains the formation of media agenda: „Agenda setting is the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others. Simply put, the more coverage an issue receives, the more important it is to people." (Coleman, 2009, 147).

Even a superficial observation is enough to know which media serves to which political party or group's interests. TVs do not even hide that their agenda is in coincidence with a concrete political party's agenda that totally excludes impartiality, complete reflection of processes and unbiased coverage of events. In this case, the mechanism of political bias is known and the goal of interpretation is clear. According to Robert Entman, unbalanced coverage of positions of political conflict parties confirms one-sided framing which is a part of the political agenda. "Slant occurs when a news report emphasizes one side's prefereed frame in a political conflict while ignoring or derogating another side's. One-sided framing emphasizes some elements and suppresses others in ways that encourage recipients to give attention and weight to the evaluative attributes that privilege the favored side's interpretation." (Entman, 2010, 389). The privileged politicians actively use this advantage granted from media and misinform the public; the latter has only a temporary effect, since the opposing side also has such a tool and therefore counters this disinformation with either the truth or with misinformation again that confuses the public even more. This process eventually destroys the positive attitudes towards freedom of speech and the benefits gained by this freedom.

Ms. Marina Muskhelishvili, talking about agenda, emphasizes a well-structured discourse: "An agenda relies on the consistent use of formation and framing and could be discussed as mythology – a virtual expanse of reality in space and time that has its own heroes and anti-heroes, symbols and narratives, perspective and dynamic reference points, and historical events. TVs have all the possibilities to create such a mythology." (Muskhelishvili, 2015, 98). As the reason of bias, she names partiality of the journalist's subconscious worldview as well as external influences, and adds that consistent bias is the source of political influence. However,

Muskhelishvili does not talk about one more characteristic typical (not only) to the Georgian media: journalists change their taste and worldview not according to their political views, but concerning who their employer is at that moment. That is why you may often hear the answer: "Do I decide anything?" And this is said by the chief anchors and editors of TV programs. Ms. Muskhelishvili shares Robert Ertman's opinion that consistent bias framing of media communication is an indicator of content bias that sustains the success of specific interests, parties or ideologies. It should be noted once again that journalists have only roles of mechanical performers in this process, and the success or failure of these parties or ideologies means actually nothing to them.

Political Pluralism VS Polarized Pluralism

The polarized pluralism integrated in political parallelism is typical for Georgia, as well as for other post-socialist and, even more, for post-communist countries. Eastern Europe made some breakthroughs in this direction, however could not escape polarized pluralism, as the influence/impact of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes of the last century is still obvious. As for the post-Soviet space, Georgia has a certain advantage (Baltic countries are more Eastern Europe) compared to other former Soviet republics. However, psychologist Gaga Nizharadze critically analyzes this situation and states: "political experience and culture in Georgia is close to zero". (Antadze, 2021, 513). Irina Putkaradze, an active representative of the Georgian NGO-sector, does not share such a pessimistic approach: "Today Georgia has an opportunity to establish political and economic societal system that would be in coincidence with its cultural identity. This is a historic chance for Georgia to use unique intellectual and political potential characteristic to Georgian people" (Putkaradze, 2022, 73).

It is a fact that in Georgia we witness every model of polarized pluralism that Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini represent in the framework of general picture. In particular, this is high degree of politicization that supports the activation of political pluralism and the dominance of the state and political parties in most areas of social life increases confrontation, especially when the population is loyal to various political ideologies. This situation, on the light of over-ideologization, makes the absence of universally shared rules and norms even more visible. Hallin and Mancini also consider that polarized pluralism is as well characterized by uneven "consumption" of public information. For example, politically active citizens chase media agenda step by step, while politically passive citizens express even less interest towards political information. The authors emphasize another important circumstance. The news media is characterized by external pluralism and high political parallelism, the loyalty to ideologies contains a definite danger as it overweights the professional culture; consequently, we get close ties established between journalists and political players, active intervention of the state in the media sector, and focusing media content on tastes and demands of political activists. (Hallin, Mancini, 2004, 21-45).

It is also important for the media to take into consideration the level of public readiness. As in the case of Eastern Germany, the society accepted censorship-free press very hardly. Under totalitarian regime, people knew that any information published in press was censored, verified and confirmed, and, suddenly, these brakes were broken, and even now, 30 years of independence, you may hear that so much freedom is devastating. The processes of Perestroika and democratization put the issue of the media depoliticization on the public life agenda as one of the essential ones. The process was painful because the path from propaganda journalism towards democratic journalism turned out to be difficult. Therefore, promotion of new-formation journalists became a imminent part of the democracy promotion. Both media and public quickly realized that stagnation would lead journalism as profession to degeneration. According to Ms. Marina Muskhelishvili, "declared vector of transformation" was the turn-point from the propaganda journalism, which was tasked to influence the society, to the new journalism, which would serve interests of the society. The neutral, unbiased, evidence-based journalism was foreseen as ideal and dominant standard. The new game rules were supposed to ensure watershed between media and politics, but "this game rules and the content of the 'political' that it was intended to convey did not match." (Muskhelishvili, 2015, 110).

Here the weakness of political pluralism appeared, because the political establishment, as time went by, showed less readiness to impartially accept media pluralism as an essential factor contributing to healthy development of democratic processes. The political parallelism emerged, that was reflected in the mood of the electorate, and that Daniel Hellin and Paolo Mancini focus on, because "political parallelism is expressed in the biased media audience: supporters of different parties and trends buy newspapers or watch television channels according to their viewpoints." (Hallin, Mancini, 2015, 35). The political players more activated this process by promotion of counter-democracy. For the last ten years, the country has been living only in this mode, and the media consumers are completely alienated from each other as well as from the common sense. Here appears a sharp confrontation in the society and this is the major danger as it kills the opportunity to make a wise choice.

When discussing the polarized pluralism model and analysing the post-Soviet media systems, Ms. Marina Muskhelishvili pays attention to the observation of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini and

recommends to take into consideration the fact that Georgia is a new independent country and the Soviet influence is following aspect that is expressed in the ideological thinking tradition as well. This means not only economic interests, but also that the politicization of journalists has solid foundation due to the Soviet past, and they being over-occupied by ideology may think that political propaganda is an integral part of their work. Here Ms. Marina Muskhelishvili emphasizes another and a very serious problem. Namely, the public may not perceive the information already provided to them in another form and may not be interested in this information at all. This logic leads Ms. Muskhelishvili to the conclusion that "the characters of the society and its institutions are closely linked; so, without taking this fact into account, the development of civil society institutions can be ineffective." (Muskhelishvili, 2006, 90).

We should also consider the fact that 30 years have passed since gaining the independence and many of the so-called Soviet journalists are no longer active in journalism. So, what is wrong with the today's Georgian journalism? If we look through the European or American media of recent years, we would be able to find the answer: here, also, the political processes have completely revealed media problems and presented the political parallelism in its worst forms. We may conclude that in 2020 – 2023 people saw the "true anatomy" of the world journalism and it would be completely inappropriate to say that only totalitarian regimes are characterized by a strong willingness to control the media. It became clear for everyone that any ideology would gladly pocket the entire media, or, failing that, part of media, at least, if it would have an opportunity. Particularly in circumstances when "In general, most of the so-called elite, primarily the political elite:

- Are fake and has not been able to elevate themselves to the level of our national essence; they are characterized by low-level political culture, alteration of party affiliations motivated by self-interest, ineptitude of judgment rather than rational and critical thinking, and contagious parasitic lifestyle. All of these classifications affect the entire country and impede democratic development.

- Are inflicted with the virus of selfishness, unable to liberate themselves from the harmful influence of a few destructive politicians and small groups. They affiliate themselves with these groups, which constantly gives way to accusations, false expectations, and imminent danger; together, they manage to polarize society, dividing it into two deficient parts-the elite and the rest.

- Are morally deprived, narrow-minded, and boring. And yet, they are immersed in their own ambitions and often stubbornly continue to preach to society while they wear the mask of a state caretaker, stained by their need for personal gain. Most tragically, they contribute to the aggravation of national resentment in the Georgian society. " (Khonelidze, 2021, 14).

Ms. Natia Kuprashvili's research is closely related to this viewpoint of Zurab Khonelidze that shows the results in the framework of the worst picture. Namely, if political actors have abandoned Georgia's political ideology and they need polarization to defeat the opponent in the power struggle, the manipulative media-content often presents opinions as facts. "The polarized media content tends to destroy and discredit the opponent; at the same time, this confrontation process is accompanied by a personality cult." (Kuprashvili, 2019). Accordingly, the researcher applied two terms to the Georgian political and media system, which is in the gray layer between liberal democracy and authoritarianism: polarized monism and/or polarized-defective pluralism.

This monism and defectiveness emerge a danger that both the political establishment and the media managers do nothing or almost nothing to avoid it. On the contrary, they try to gain some benefits by escalating the situation as much as possible. However, this is not really a public good, because the controversy damages both the political elite and the media, and, eventually, the whole society.

Conclusion

Now the categorical imperative of political choice is as follows: either political players will overcome the confrontation and give preference/advantage to the state interests and security, in which media pluralism will play a major role; or, they will be totally drown in the swamp of confrontation and completely mine the political field by using the media as a tool for deepening the confrontation; and, by deepening counter-democracy, they will blow up the mines and the political future will be destroyed forever, because the watershed, as a choice between good and bad, or bad and worse, will simply no longer exist: all against all will lead everyone to reject both politicians and journalists. At that time, the national security will already become an existential problem, that this generation will no longer be able to solve, because on their merits, political pluralism would turn out to be as much a fiction as media pluralism, which, eager to bring good to the society, splitting and confronted this society even more.

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