

Smart Solutions May Help Struggling Georgian Media

Mzia Amaghlobeli refused to sit down in court. Saying she would not take the seat of the accused, she endured the multi-hour ordeal of the Georgian [kangaroo court](#) despite her [failing eyesight](#) and the impact of a [hunger strike](#) she went on while in prison. She also refused a plea bargain that would mean admitting guilt, [saying](#) it was “deeply offensive” and like “being buried alive.”

Mzia Amaghlobeli’s story also resonates with what she represents. Georgia’s independent media is under assault because it poses an obstacle to the rise of autocracy and keeps alive the hope of a democratic renaissance.

The 50-something publisher and veteran journalist was arrested at a rally for posting a sticker. She says she was insulted and humiliated by the policemen and was released several hours later. When she returned to the rally, she was insulted again by

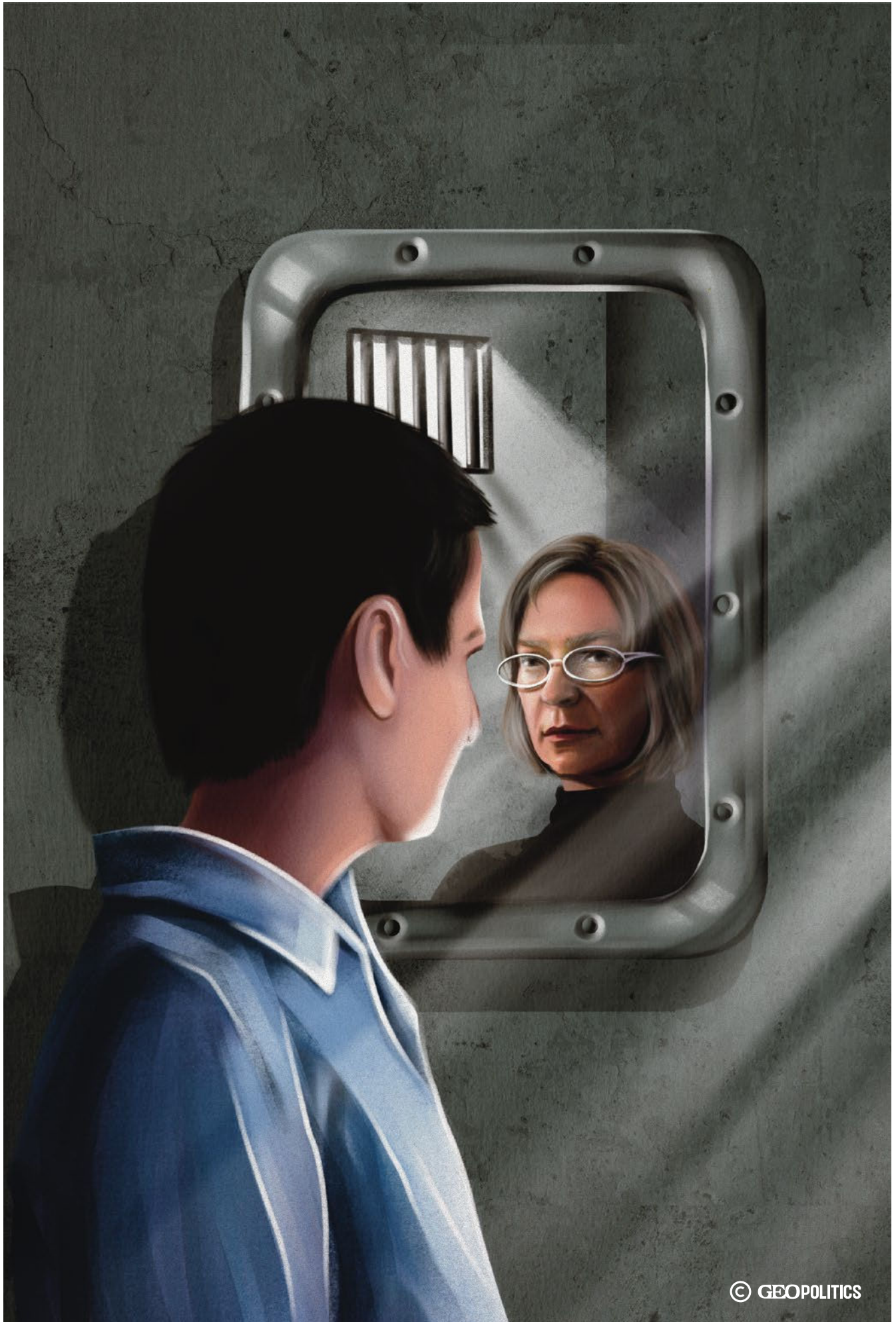
the Batumi police chief. She slapped him in return. For that offense, Amaghlobeli was thrown into jail for “assaulting a police officer,” and the prosecution demanded five years of imprisonment. After months of tense hearings during which justice and common sense were [disregarded](#) (the defense showed that in multiple cases where police officers were criminally assaulted, often with grave consequences, the assailants received only a few months in jail), she was [sentenced](#) to two years. Despite the high-profile [engagement](#) from the [media](#) and prominent [personalities](#) worldwide to release her, Amaghlobeli became Georgia’s iconic prisoner of conscience. However, Mzia Amaghlobeli’s story also resonates with what she represents. Georgia’s independent media is under assault because it poses an obstacle to the rise of autocracy and keeps alive the hope of a democratic renaissance.

Today Georgian media is at the forefront of resistance while suffering from profound internal fragility.



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Amaghlobeli's career explains this well. She founded the local newspaper, *Batumelebi*, in Georgia's Adjara province, which was dominated by the local strongman Aslan Abashidze, in 2001. She and her colleagues worked to expose the clannish nature of the regime and peer behind the façade of stability that Abashidze portrayed as his major achievement. Despite persecution, they did not relent, and when the democratic wave swept Abashidze out of office in 2004, hope for a freer, more democratic Georgia was born. Amaghlobeli and her colleagues expanded their operation in 2010, founding a nationwide paper, *Netgazeti*, and branching out into online publication with the support of the Open Society Georgia Foundation. *Netgazeti* soon became a go-to source, accompanying Georgia through decades of political tribulations. Other online media outlets have emerged and thrived as independent and increasingly professional voices, often with foreign donor support. As internet and social media penetration exploded, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) [reports](#) that 27% of Georgians used the internet in 2010 and 82% in 2023 – so did their coverage and influence.

This has been a notable development. In Georgia, it is difficult for commercial media to survive, let alone thrive. The advertising market in a country of only 3.5 million people who speak a niche language is [too small](#) and expensive to penetrate. Media and advertising products designed for other markets must be dubbed or translated, which increases costs. Despite economic growth, the returns on investment are also small and uncertain. This is why television, until recently the undisputed leader of the news market, was unable to turn a profit. Transparency International – Georgia, a watchdog, [reported](#) that none of the six leading TV stations by income turned a profit in 2022, a situation that has persisted for years, allowing tax liabilities to accumulate. This, in turn, enables the government

to [handpick](#) the channels it wants to treat leniently (or [not](#)).

As a result, commercial television in Georgia was often a plaything of the wealthy and politically connected, or even a direct vehicle of political influence. Certainly, before and after 2003, there were times when competing financial interests, relative political independence, and pluralism in the media coincided. However, media ownership and management schemes remained opaque and chaotic, as evidenced by the [legal battles](#), hostile takeovers, and internal intrigues that have plagued Georgia's two most influential TV channels, [Rustavi 2](#) and [Imedi TV](#).

After oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili took over Georgia in 2012, even this market gradually closed and became monopolized. The murky deals that governed it created an opening for Ivanishvili to take over *Rustavi 2*, an influential proponent of opposition views, and then [remove](#) its less influential successor, *Mtavari TV*, from the air through a combination of legal challenges, government harassment, and internal intrigue. The ardently pro-government *Imedi TV* morphed into a propaganda channel flanked by the even more radical *POSTV* and the slightly more palatable *Rustavi 2*. These three channels now [dominate](#) the national television market, [dishing out](#) Kremlin-tinted [propaganda](#) to viewers who have few, if any, alternatives. They also [dominate](#) the advertising market and lock it up for competitors.

Nevertheless, all of these channels are accumulating debt as *Imedi TV*'s millionaire owner recently [said](#): "I never wanted to buy *Imedi TV* since it is not a business... it is also harming my business... either I have to close it, which is a pity because it is the largest TV, or I should sell it. Selling a loss-making company means that its buyer could only be someone who is engaged in politics in Georgia."

How often do you watch news coverage on the following TV channels? (%)

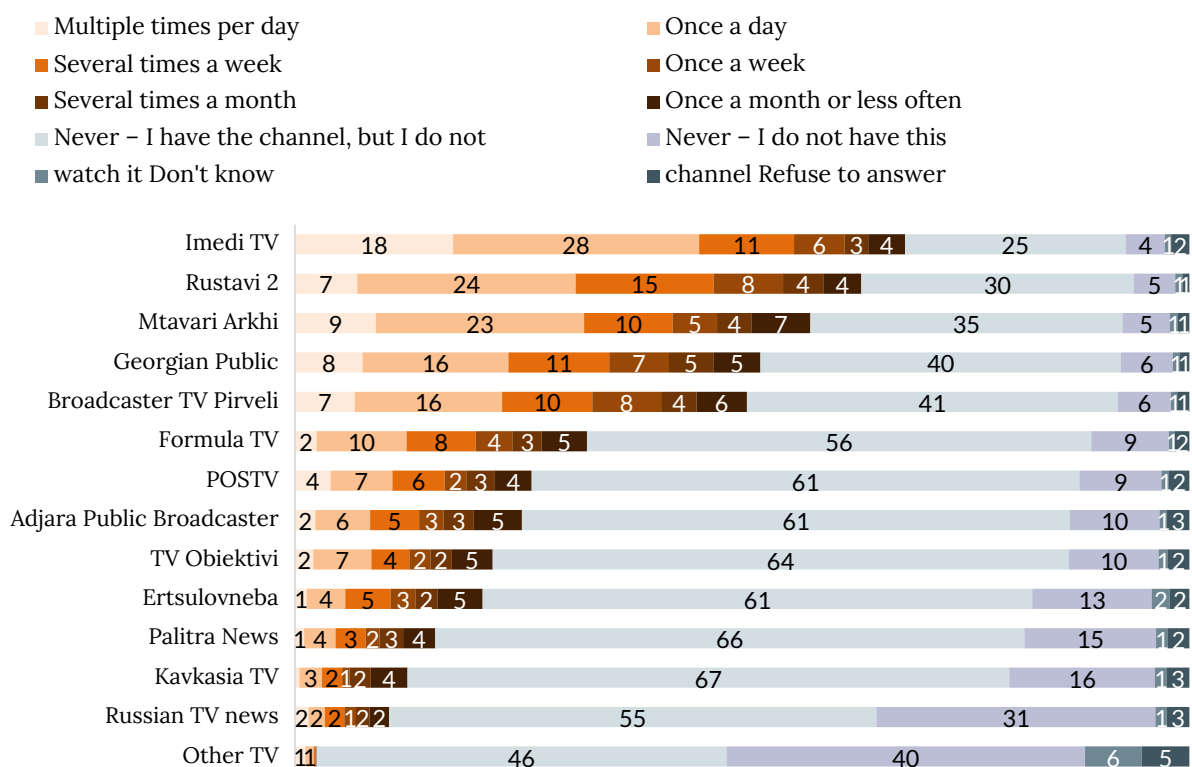


Figure 1: Government-friendly TVs dominate. Source: [2024 Georgia Media Consumption Survey \(IREX/CRRC\)](#)

The instinctive reaction of a European citizen – and of many a European bureaucrat – is to consider the idea of a public broadcaster as an antidote to a toxic market. Indeed, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) is well endowed with GEL 82 million (EUR 26 million) [in 2025](#) from the public coffers. The GPB, which has just been given sprawling new headquarters at taxpayers' expense, operates two national TV channels, a radio station, and a website in several minority languages. Yet, it trails in viewership. Despite its management's insistence that the channel provides balanced news, stories about the firing of critical journalists and the refusal to give proportional airtime to protests in Georgia [suggest](#) otherwise. The former top manager of the GPB, appointed by the ruling party, previously served as that party's deputy chair. He now chairs the board – a career path that irks watchdogs and was [openly condemned](#) by some of the GPB's journalists.

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Morphing the GPB into a “Georgian BBC” is a hopeless pipe dream. While political power is monopolized across all branches of the government, the GPB board cannot possibly be independent of the dominant political power – and it never has been. A democratic opening must precede the transformation of the GPB, and the channel itself cannot be expected to liberate itself from the chains of influence that bind it. Occasional [individual protests](#) by GPB journalists only expose this reality, but they lack transformative power.

So, what hope is there for public interest journalism in Georgia? This question brings us back to Mzia Amaghlobeli and the type of media format she pioneered. Online media is considerably less expensive to operate than television, and its audience is growing. The 2024 Georgia Media Consumption Survey [showed](#) that social media has, for the first time, overtaken television as the primary source of news (51% vs 44%). For younger Georgians, the gap is even wider. Yet, Georgians are addicted to news: 75% engage with news content at least once a day, and 44% - several times a day.

There has been a significant drop in TV dominance; 13% of people aged 18-34 trust television, according to the same survey. Many more Georgians than before say they are at least double-checking their news online. Admittedly, this statistic is somewhat misleading; many social media users still consume state propaganda from *Imedi TV* and *POSTV*. This propaganda is often amplified by government or [party-sponsored](#) social media accounts and networks of bots that social media giants regularly [take down](#), only for new ones to emerge. Nevertheless, independent online media can compete in this playing field, and it can innovate in order to capture more users with quality content.

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Funding patterns are clearly an issue. The government has targeted foreign-funded non-profit media by imposing legal limitations and heavy penalties on organizational grants and foreign-funded content. Dramatic cuts to the USAID budget under President Donald Trump's administration have [badly impacted](#) some outlets. As expected, the EU

was slow to divert money to free media before the legal environment worsened too much. Now, the EU is struggling to navigate the plethora of repressive laws and establish a credible funding scheme in order to continue supporting Georgian media.

Most online media outlets know they are living on borrowed time. Twenty-two such media organizations have launched a public fundraising [campaign](#), "Lights Must Stay On!", as a means to survive, and many others are undertaking similar efforts individually. However, they are all tapping into the same subscriber base, which consists mainly of liberal-minded émigrés whose pockets are not deep enough to sustain the diverse ecosystem of Georgia's free media.

Georgian online media outlets need to adapt to this reality. There are things Georgia's friends could also do, but this would require adjustments in thinking, policy, and practice.

First, it is essential to recognize that subsidizing public interest media is a necessity, given Georgia's political and economic realities. There are no miracle solutions to ensure the sustainability of public interest media based solely on subscriptions or advertisements. They can at best furnish only complementary revenue streams.

Second, it must be understood that such subsidies are investments, not charity. This investment will be recuperated over time through more transparent politics and a more predictable business environment.

Third, while the current media landscape is fragmented, forcing consolidation or collaboration is unlikely to be effective. Conversely, nudging and encouraging the formation of natural alliances and partnerships between newsrooms is worthwhile and may lead to increased efficiency and better-quality alternatives for end-users in the medium term.

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Fourth and most importantly, anyone trying to help Georgian media outlets must keep in mind that things could go terribly wrong at any moment for Georgian journalists. Still, the authorities have not crossed the point of no return just yet and the media continues operating. The short-term course of action should aim to ensure survival if most journalists can no longer operate freely in Georgia (i.e., a Belarusian or Russian scenario) and create foundations for sustainability if Georgia continues to balance on the brink for some time.

In practice, rather than engaging in “drip-feeding” multiple outlets through fragmented grant schemes, the European Union and other like-minded donors should borrow a page from their own approaches to other issues. For example, the “Team Europe” approach has been adopted by the EU to integrate national and EU-wide funding schemes, thereby maximizing their impact. The “blending” approach by the EU combines development assistance from the EU with financial/business development instruments provided by the EBRD or the World Bank.

These approaches could be used and combined to create an investment vehicle to support independent newsrooms as commercial entities, functioning like a benevolent publishing house. Such experiments have previously been done by private

actors backing the Media Development Investment Fund ([MDIF](#)), which runs [Pluralis](#), a publishing company.

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Additionally, a financial instrument could be established in the form of an endowment with a self-governing superstructure involving Georgian media outlets. This superstructure would review, approve, and finance projects in the public interest on a competitive basis. The outcome would essentially be similar to EU-wide Arte public broadcasting but applied to a single country. The advantage of this model is that it can function inside the country, if the political environment is conducive, or outside of it, should the situation deteriorate.

Georgia's democracy and statehood are currently in an existential crisis. Yet, the resistance it encounters from Georgians in all walks of life and from journalists like Mzia Amaghlobeli contains the seeds that may grow and overcome the fundamental causes of the present impasse. If they grasp the emergency, but get into a creative, rather than a catastrophic mode, Georgia's partners can help ensure that these seeds fall on fertile, cultivated soil ■