



Media landscape and interests of Azerbaijani-speaking population in the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia

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Introduction

The present study examines the information space of the Azerbaijani-speaking population of Kvemo Kartli,¹ which largely determines their domestic and foreign political, social and cultural priorities. It is a complex effort that includes both quantitative and qualitative components. The first component is a representative survey, which was carried out by CRRC-Georgia through a questionnaire prepared in collaboration with Liberal Academy. The latter, a Tbilisi-based research center, implemented a second, qualitative component based on the results of the survey, which included focus group sessions and in-depth interviews with the region's population and civil sector representatives.

Within the framework of the research, we tried to cover the main spectrum of the information space – TV channels, social media and online media. Therefore, print publications and radio are left out of the present study. We delved not only into the nature of the information consumed, but also in the demand - what kind of information people want to receive.

In the research, special emphasis is placed, on the one hand, on the differences between local, national and foreign media-actors, and on the other hand, on the peculiarities of the information received by the population of the region about different countries and international organizations.

The data obtained from the survey is studied in relation to several, in our opinion, the most important variables - these are the respondent's age, gender, level of education and economic status.

The text begins with a brief methodological overview, followed by a compact analysis of the surveyed population's demographics. After that, TV, social media and websites will be discussed separately. The following chapters are devoted to the analysis of the information that the population receives about foreign countries and international organizations, and to the discussion of sources of information about the country and the region.² The text concludes with the conclusions and policy recommendations.

¹ Below we may refer to them as “respondents” or simply as “population”.

² Here and below in the “region” we mean Kvemo Kartli administrative region in southeastern Georgia.

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Key Findings

TV Channels

- The Azerbaijani-speaking population of Kvemo Kartli watches Azerbaijani and Turkish TV channels more than Georgian ones. Marneuli TV is the most popular among Georgian channels. A small number of respondents also watch Imedi, Rustavi 2 and Mtavari Arkhi. The rate of other TV companies is insignificant.
- Respondents are interested (in descending order) mostly in local news, international news and domestic political issues on Georgian and foreign channels. Demand for local news is high in all groups, especially among women, middle-aged people (35-54), and respondents with above-average level of education and wealth. These last two groups are also interested in international and domestic politics.
- A large part of viewers of foreign channels, along with local, domestic or international news, also watch movies and TV series. Foreign TV shows are viewed the least on subjects such as (in order of growth) religion, sports and healthcare.
- Movies and TV series are mostly watched in Turkish and Azerbaijani. Almost no one watch them in Georgian. Turkish and Azerbaijani historical series are particularly popular. Very few respondents say they watch Georgian films and TV series.

Social Media

- Facebook and Tiktok dominate social media, followed by Twitter, Odnoklasniki, Telegram and V Kontakte. It is worth noting that, although Facebook is used slightly more than TikTok, the latter leads in terms of frequency of use. Social networks are used more by young people, men, respondents with higher than average education and wealth.
- Through social media, users are most often informed about news, and they are especially interested in local news. Other activities - commenting, sharing something publicly, and writing posts - are relatively rare. The most common language used in social media is Azerbaijani.
- In social media, young people, those with secondary education or less, and people from a low economic level have less demand for almost all types of information compared to other groups.

Websites

- About a quarter of the surveyed population turn to websites for information. The vast majority of them use and trust local Azerbaijani-language websites the most. In this regard, the Turkish and Azerbaijani websites take a relatively modest position.
- Popular websites in the region are 24news.ge, interpress.ge, aktual.ge and Marneuli TV internet site.
- The content consumed on websites is similar to television and social networks - here again, the greatest interest is in local news, followed by (in descending order) international and domestic politics, economics/business, sports, Covid-19 and health, education, culture/history and religious news.

Information about countries and international organizations

- Most often, the population is interested in information about Georgia and Azerbaijan (it should be noted that the interest in these two countries is almost equal). They are followed by Turkey, Ukraine and Russia. There is almost no interest in EU countries, USA, Iran, and Armenia.
- The population is most often interested in local news, international and domestic politics about these countries.
- The majority receives mostly positive information about Azerbaijan and Turkey. On NATO and the US, they either do not receive information at all, or it is difficult to evaluate its nature (negative or positive), or these reports are mostly negative. In the case of the European Union, the situation is slightly different - the information received is more positive than negative, although the majority either does not receive information at all or isn't able to evaluate whether it is positive or negative. The information flow about Russia, Iran and the Eurasian Union is mostly negative.
- The main source of information about the war in Ukraine is Azerbaijani and Turkish media. A relatively small part receives information from the central or local Georgian media, and from social networks, and an even smaller part - from the Russian media. Only a small number say that they do not receive information about the war in Ukraine at all.

Sources of information on current events and processes in the country and region

- In general, the main source of information about international conflicts and incidents, as well as about events and processes taking place in the country or Kvemo Kartli region, is, in most cases, TV. Exceptions are, for example, state services, about which the main source of information is the House of Justice, or religious issues, about which the majority of people get information, mainly from imams in the mosque.

Methodology

CRRC-Georgia conducted a face-to-face survey with a questionnaire prepared in collaboration with Liberal Academy in the period of March-April 2022, based on stratified multi-level cluster random sampling. A total of 661 respondents were interviewed. The data are representative of the Azerbaijani-speaking population of Kvemo Kartli adult (18 years and above). The survey data can be generalized in terms of gender, age group and education. The average margin of error of the survey is 5.1% (95% confidence level), and the response rate was 41%. The data presented in the report are weighted according to the results of the 2014 population census.

From the qualitative methods of primary data collection, we used focus groups and in-depth interviews with ethnic Azerbaijani civil activists of Kvemo Kartli. Both focus group sessions and in-depth interviews were conducted in Marneuli in May and June 2022. Categorization was done according to age and gender. A total of 4 focus groups were conducted, each with the participation of eight people - young (<35) women and men, middle-aged (≥35) women and men. Four civil activists from Marneuli, Gardabani and Bolnisi municipalities were selected for in-depth interviews. Two of them are also engaged in political activity. One of them is a member of Georgian Dream and the other of United National Movement.

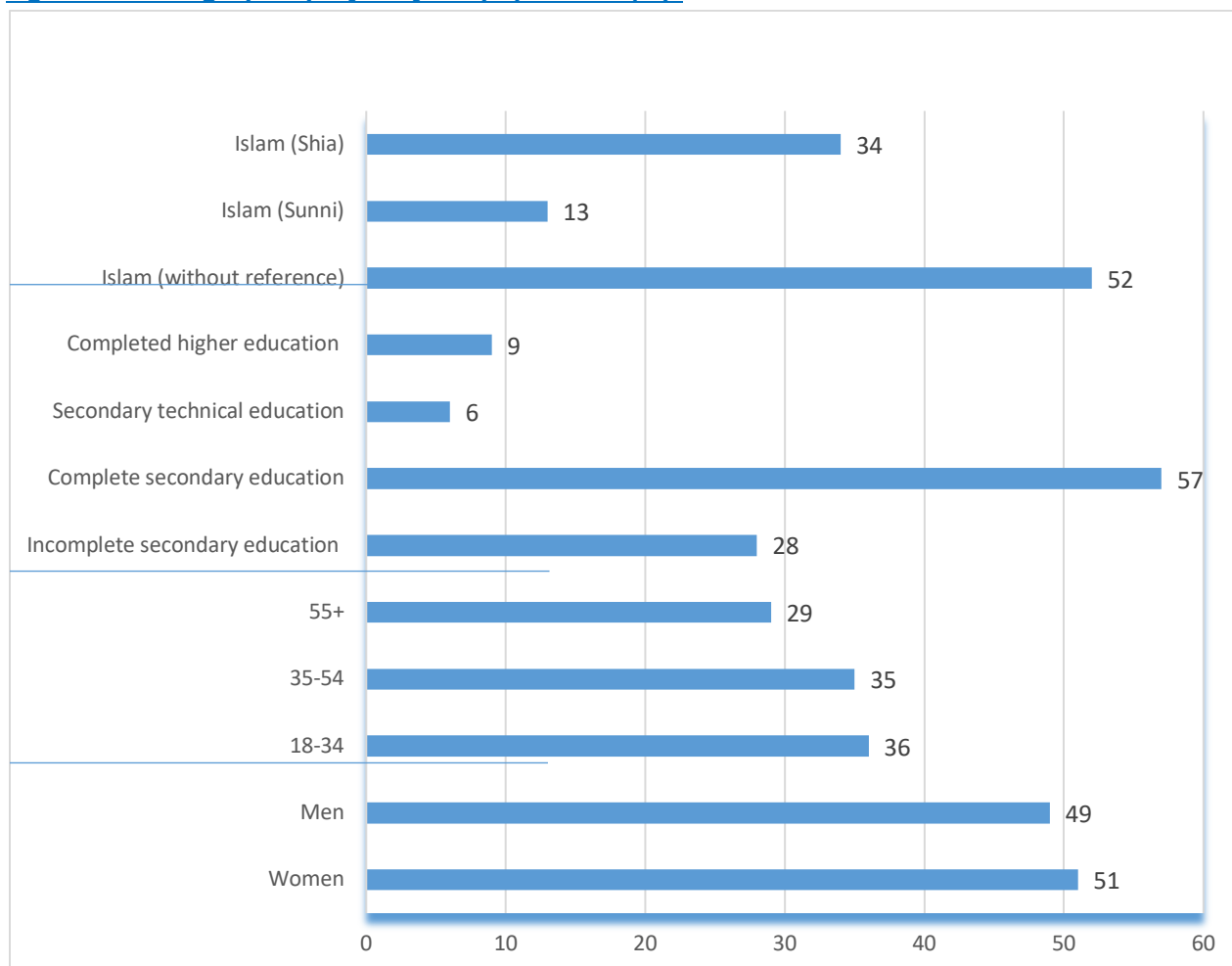
Research Results

Demographic characteristics

Among the respondents, men and women are almost equally represented (51% and 49%, respectively). The age profile of the respondents is as follows: young (18-34) 36%, middle-aged (35-54) 35%, and senior (55 and above) people 29%. 28% have incomplete secondary education, 57% have secondary education, 6% have secondary technical education, and only 9% have higher education.

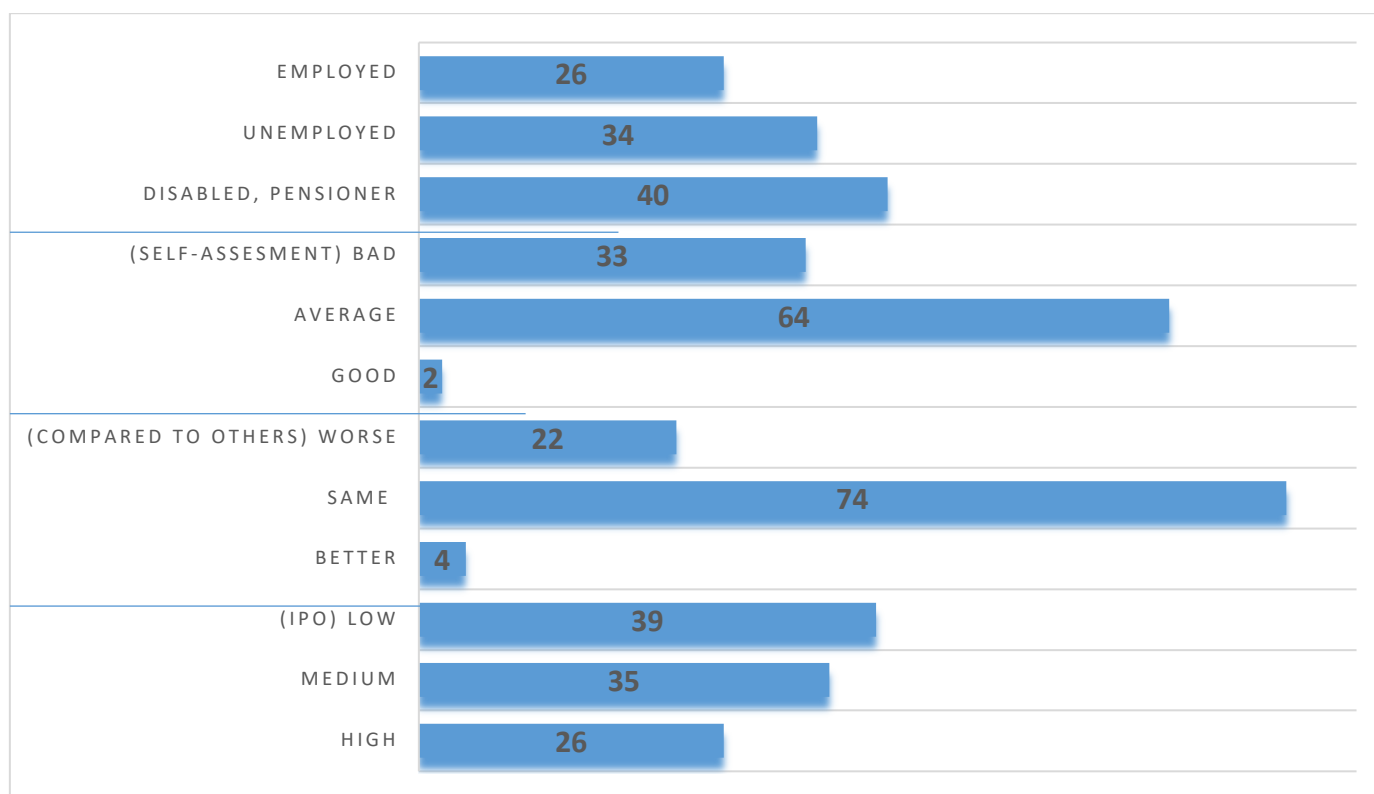
The majority of respondents are followers of Islam (99%). More than half (52%) consider themselves Muslim without further specification, a third (34%) consider themselves Shia, and 13% Sunni.

Figure 1. Demographic profile of the population (%).



Only 26% of the population consider themselves employed. Third (34%) consider themselves unemployed, and 40% do not work for various reasons - they are pensioners, students, housewives, or disabled persons who cannot work (Figure 2). A third of respondents (33%) assess the economic situation of their household as bad, the majority (64%) as average, and only 2% as good. The comparative measure also shows a similar picture. The majority of the population (74%) believes that their household's economic situation is similar to the majority of residents in their neighborhood, 22% consider their household's situation to be worse than others, and only 4% consider their household to be in a better situation. According to the Index of Possession of Objects (IPO), 39% of the population is at a relatively low level, and 26% is at a relatively high level.

Figure 2. Economic indicators of the population (%).



Television

A large part of respondents (45%) watch TV every day, a third (35%) once a week or less often, and a fifth - almost never. Of those who watch TV at least with some frequency, the majority (63%) do not watch Georgian broadcasting channels (34% watch). The most popular local channel (19%) is Marneuli TV (Figure 3), followed by Imedi (13%), Rustavi 2 (12%), and Mtavari Arkhi (10%). Only 4% watch the First Channel of Public Broadcaster. The share of viewers of other channels is negligible.

Figure 3. Which Georgian broadcasting channels do you watch? (%)

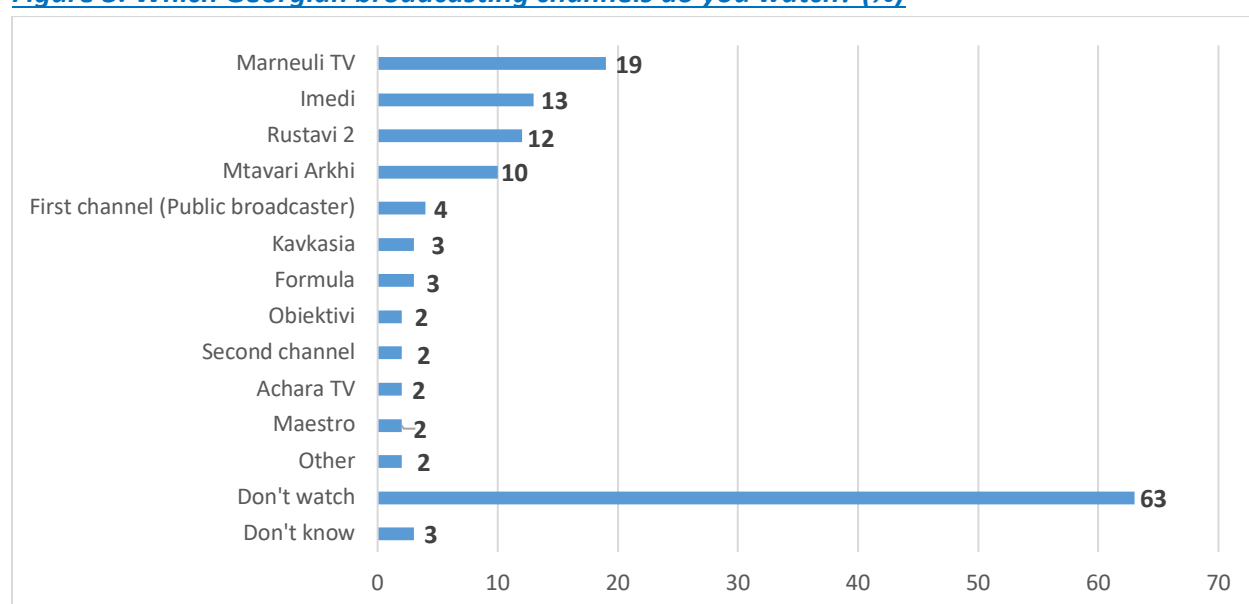
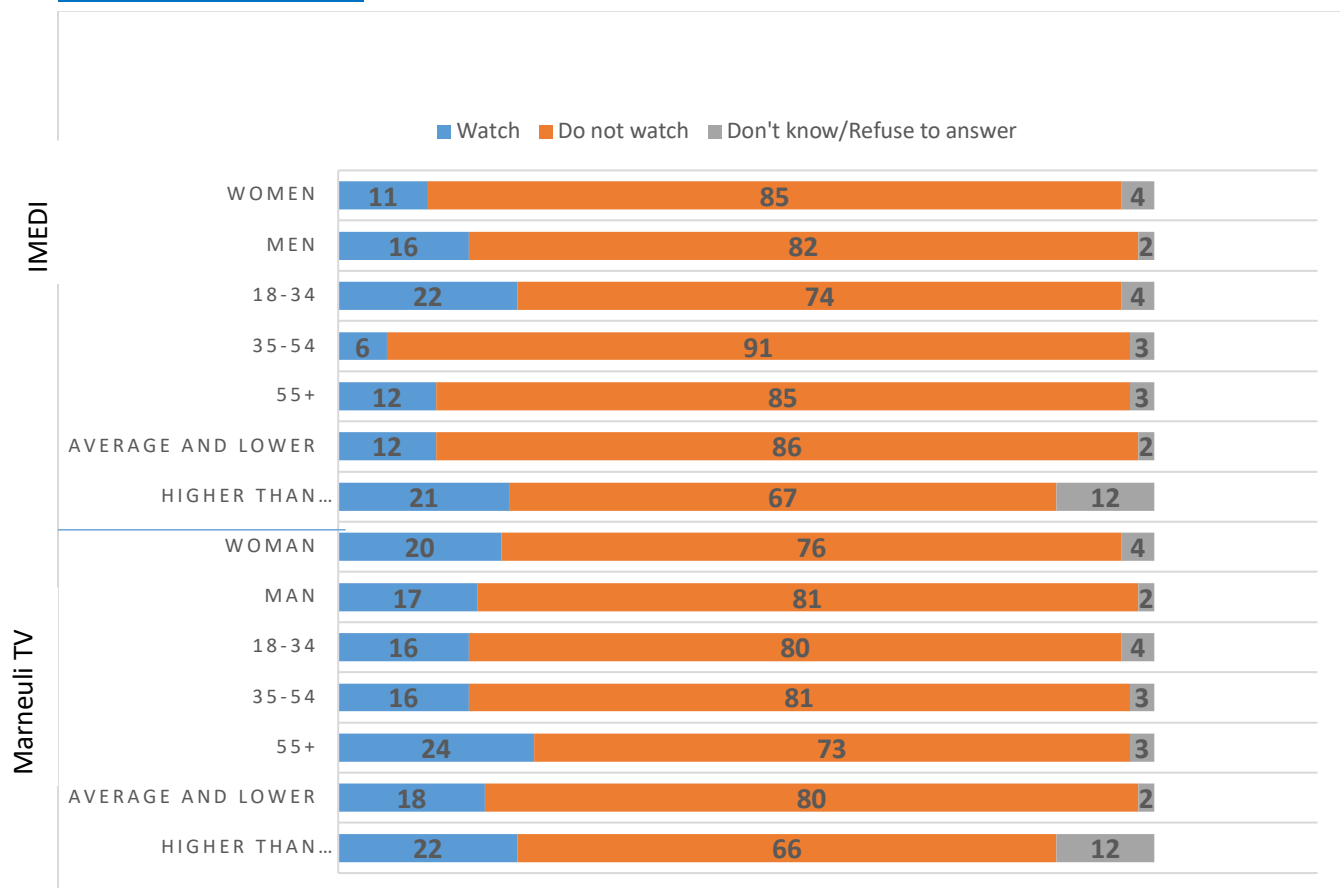


Figure 4 shows the frequency of watching the most popular broadcasters in Georgia by gender and age. The frequency of watching Marneuli TV does not vary by gender or education level, although there is a small difference between age groups. People over the age of 55 watch this broadcaster more (24%), compared to younger people (16%). Respondents of average wealth also watch this channel slightly less frequently compared to the population with higher and lower economic status. Men and young adults (18-34), people with above-average education, and people with average or higher economic status are more likely to watch Imedi TV.

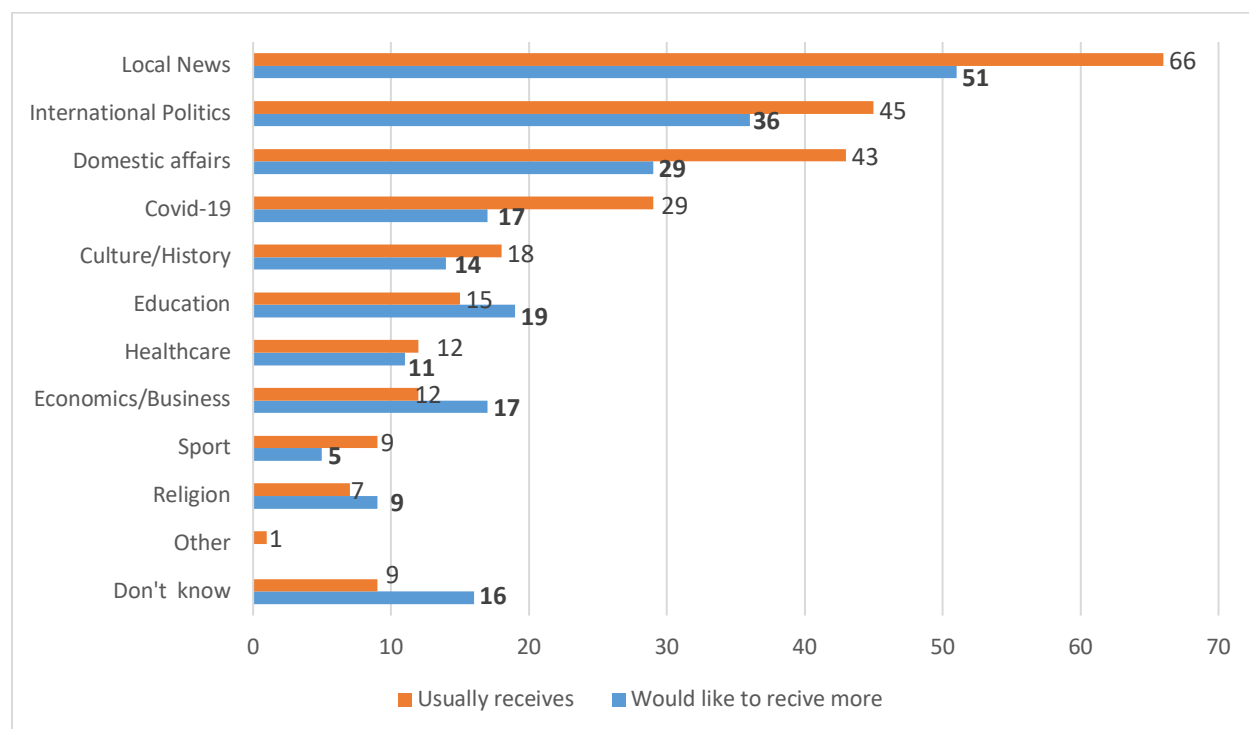
The largest part of viewers watch local news on Georgian channels (66%) (Figure 5). An almost equal share is interested in international and domestic political news (45% and 43%, respectively). 29% receive information about the pandemic, and 18% watch programs about culture and history. Issues such as education, healthcare, economy and business, sports and religion are mentioned less frequently.

Figure 4. Demographics of the most frequently watched Georgian broadcasters by gender, age and education (%).



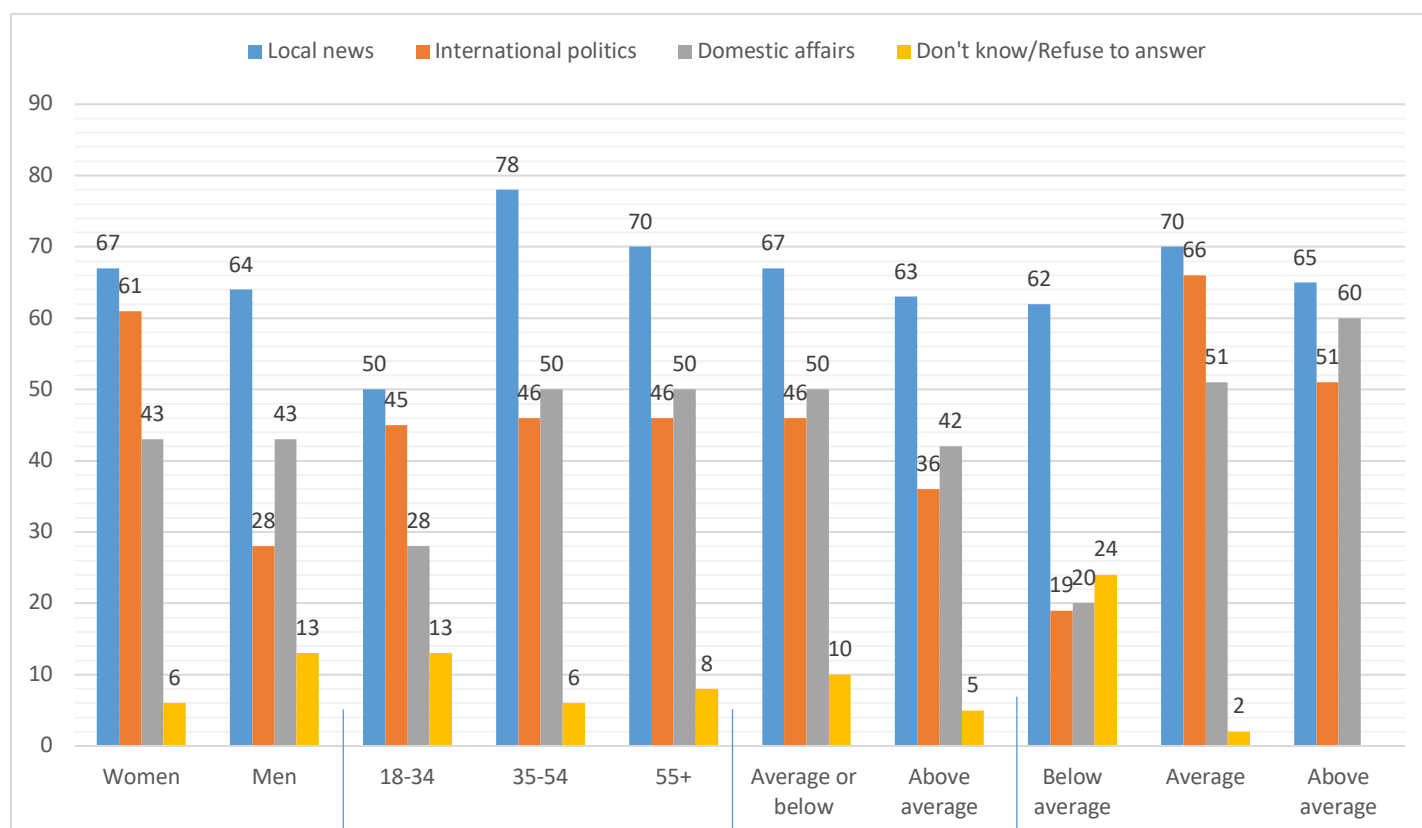
Asked what kind of information they want to receive more on Georgian channels, the majority (51%) responded that they were mostly interested in local news (Figure 5). 36% would like to receive more information on international politics, 29% on domestic affairs, 17% on pandemics, 14% on culture and history, 11% on healthcare, 9% on religion, and 5% on sports. It is noteworthy that regarding some issues, TV viewers want to receive more information than they usually receive from Georgian TV channels. While 15% receive information about education, 19% want to get more information about this topic. 17% want more information about the economy and business, while 12% actually receive information on these issues. 16% of the population do not or cannot name what information they would like to receive in greater quantities.

Figure 5: What kind of information do you usually receive through Georgian TV channels and what kind of information would you like to receive more? (% of those 34% who watch Georgian TV channels).



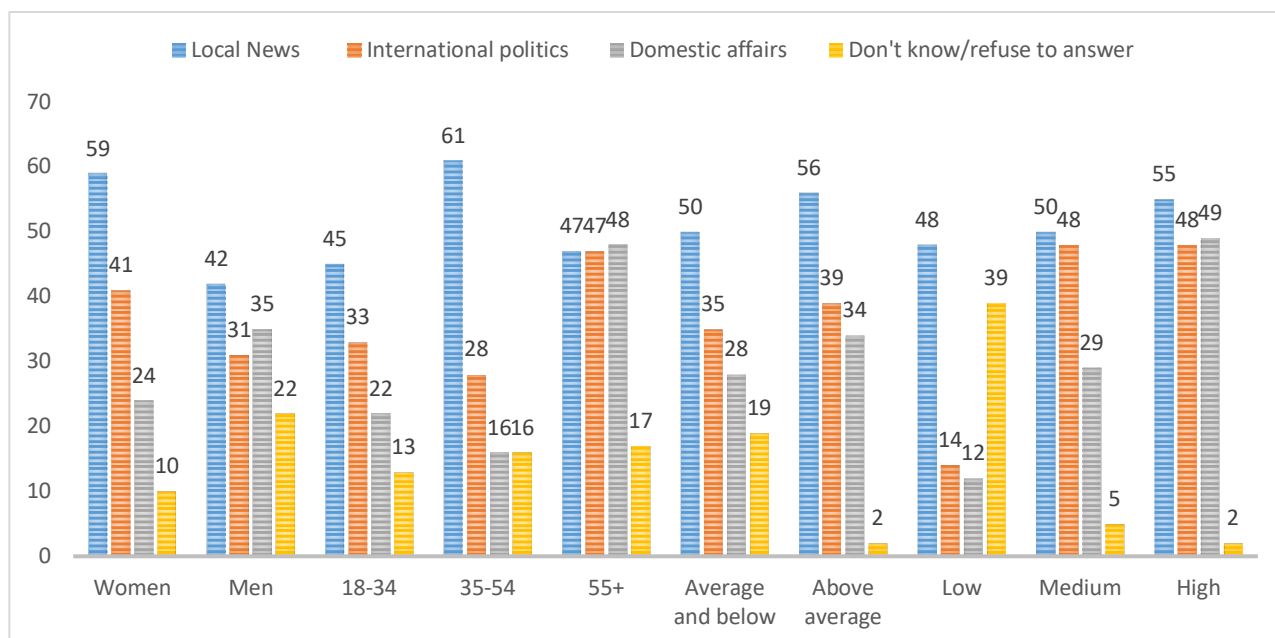
Almost equal shares of men and women consume local news and news about domestic affairs (Figure 6). However, in terms of age, as it turned out, young people (18-34) are less familiar with these topics. The picture changes relatively in the context of consuming information on other topics. Men, respondents aged 35-54 and people with secondary/higher education receive less information about international politics. The rate of watching TV programs on international and domestic affairs is significantly higher among affluent and middle-income respondents than among the poor, while the rate of local news is almost equal among these groups. It should be noted that men, young people, and people on a low economic level, in general, find it more difficult to determine what kind of information they receive from Georgian TV channels.

Figure 6. The most frequently named types of information consumed through Georgian broadcasters by gender, age, education and IPO (% of those who watch Georgian TV channels).



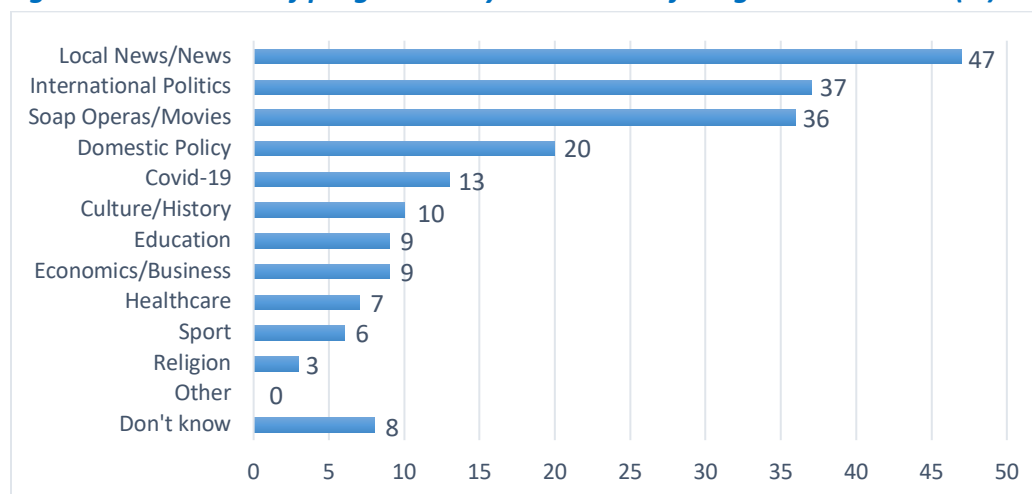
Differences according to demographic groups were also revealed regarding demand in different types of information (Figure 7). The desire to consume more information about local news and international politics is much higher among women, while an interest in domestic affairs is higher among men. As for age differences, significantly more 35-54 year olds want to get more information about local news, while older (≤ 55) respondents would like to consume more information about international and domestic affairs. Interest in all the above-mentioned issues is directly related to the level of education – i.e. respondents with higher than average education level expressed desire to receive all kinds of information more. A similar positive correlation was observed in terms of economic status, but only in the context of domestic and international politics. "Don't know/refuse to answer" is more common among respondents who are men, younger, with secondary education or less, and economically disadvantaged.

Figure 7. What kind of information would you like to receive more of? The most frequently named types of information according to demographic variables (% of those who watch Georgian TV channels).



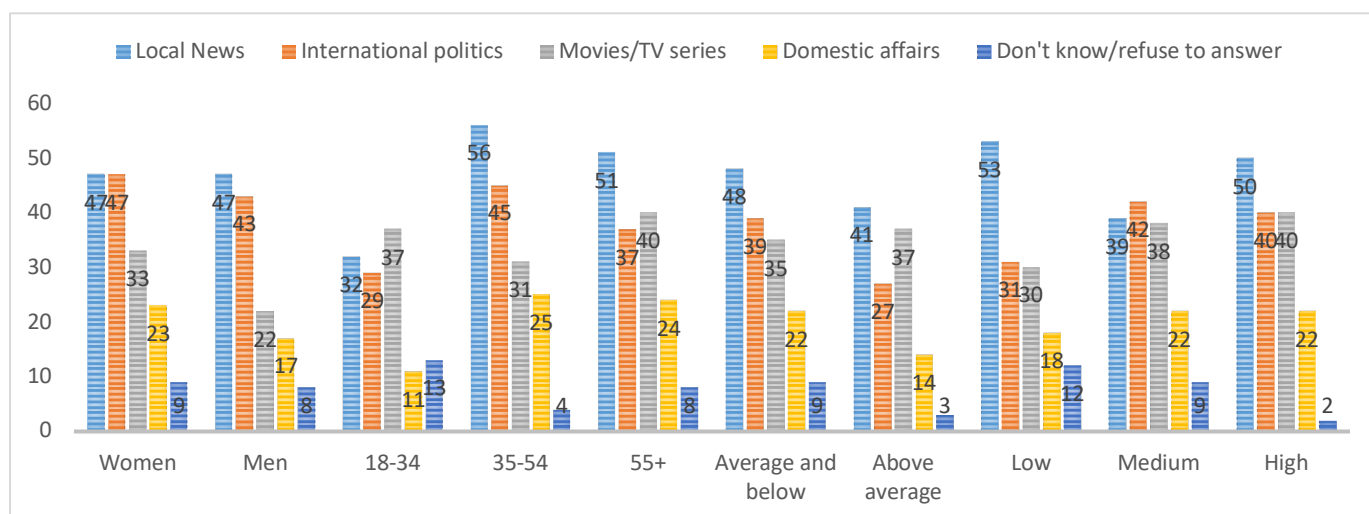
93% of those who watch TV pay attention to foreign channels. Of these, the majority (53%) most often watch Azerbaijani channels, 44% - Turkish, and only 3% - Russian. Paradoxically, the largest share of respondents says that they are more informed about local news through foreign channels (47%). 37% consume international political programs, and 36% prefer movies and TV series (Figure 8). The surveyed population watches foreign TV programs the least on subjects such as religion, sports and healthcare.

Figure 8. What kind of programs do you watch on foreign TV channels? (%)



Men and women are informed about the local news of the respective country through foreign channels with the same frequency. Men watch programs about international politics more, while regarding TV series and movies, their rate is twice as high among women (Figure 9). Young people are less familiar with all kinds of information compared to other age groups, and when it comes to watching movies and TV series, the 35-54-year-old population here is slightly more passive compared to other age groups. If the frequency of watching movies and TV series does not differ according to the level of education, people with average and lower level of education consume all other types of information in more quantities. In terms of economic status, no correlation was found, except for watching movies and TV series, where the rate of economically disadvantaged respondents is relatively low. At the same time, it is more difficult for young people, people with medium and lower level of education, and the population at the middle or lower economic level to answer this question.

Figure 9. Most watched programs on foreign channels by gender, age, education and IPO (% of those 93% who watch foreign TV channels).



The participants of the focus group sessions and the interview respondents relate the low popularity of Georgian channels mainly with two, technical and linguistic, factors. Everyone unanimously notes that watching Georgian channels is related to purely technical problem - the low quality and often interrupted broadcasting. "We mostly watch TV here with satellite antennas, where watching Georgian channels is problematic. When we install Georgian channels, then these channels suddenly disappear or the quality drops drastically."³ They say that, despite the problem related to the knowledge of the state language, there is a genuine demand for Georgian channels among the population, although technical problems limit their

³ Focus group. Men ≥35.

ability to do so. In addition, Georgian telecommunication service providers, such as Silknet or Magtiset, are less popular because these providers have fewer Turkish and Azerbaijani channels of interest to them. "If Magtiset and Silknet add Azerbaijani and Turkish channels, then many will switch to these providers."⁴

In addition, respondents complain about the content of Georgian channels, which they believe is excessively politicized and saturated with negative news and information.⁵

The opinion has been expressed several times that many locals do not have a sense of belonging to the central channels of Georgia, although they watch with great interest the information that concerns the ethnic Azerbaijani community, especially when this information is provided by a journalist, who is representative of this community. They specifically meant Jeyhun Muhammadali, the correspondent of Mtavari Archi. "...The main problem is the language problem, and we want representatives of our community to be on these televisions. Now only Jeyhun is working, it would be better if other TV channels have such journalists as well."⁶ Moreover, they say that many central TV companies do not have a representative on the ground at all. Therefore, when a problem arises and they want to draw the public attention to this problem, they contact the correspondents of Azerbaijani channels and give them information.⁷

Everyone complains that local news and issues related to the Azerbaijani community receive less attention or are completely overlooked. Therefore, Georgian central channels are not interesting for them. "The only thing you can watch there are entertainment programs, that's why Imedi is relatively popular here. However, people watch TV series more on Turkish channels, as well as on Azerbaijani channels."⁸ Women in one of the focus group sessions said that recently Azerbaijan has started shooting "very good" TV series, which are also popular in the region. "The Azeri TV series that came out recently are very good, but they are not political and are more in the style of a soap opera."⁹

Social Media

Among social networks, Facebook and TikTok are most popular among surveyed population (33% and 29%, respectively) (Figure 10). Other networks are significantly behind these two - Twitter (7%), Odnoklassniki (6%), Telegram (6%), and V Kontakte (3%).

⁴ Focus group. Women ≥35.

⁵ Focus group. Men <35.

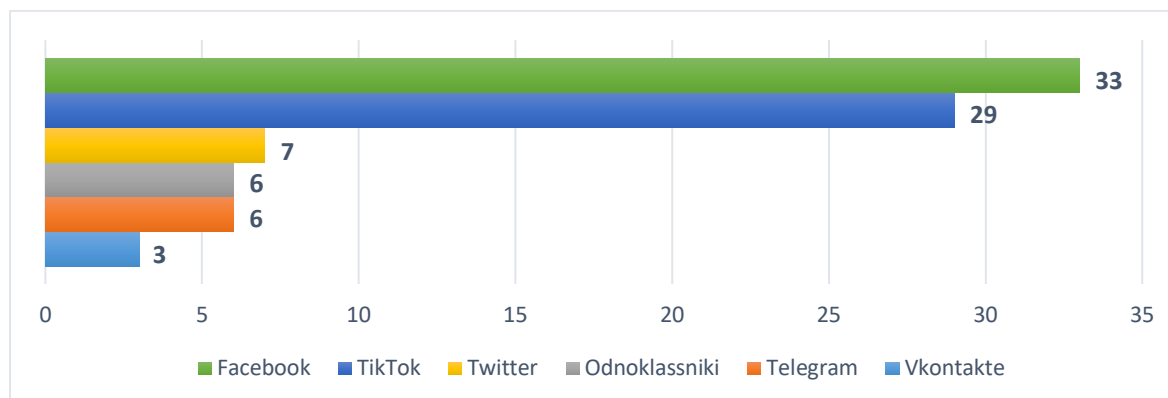
⁶ Civic activist from Marneuli.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Focus group. Women <35.

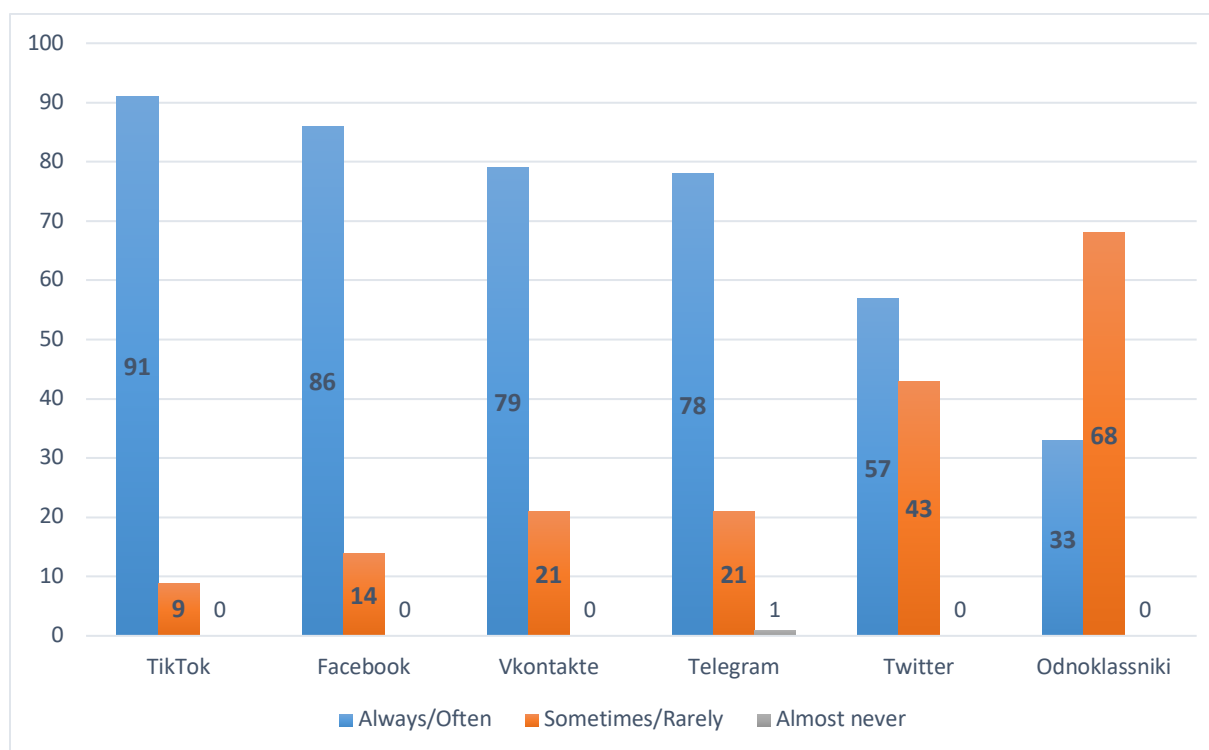
⁹ Focus group. Women ≥35.

Figure 10: Do you use the following social networks...? (%)



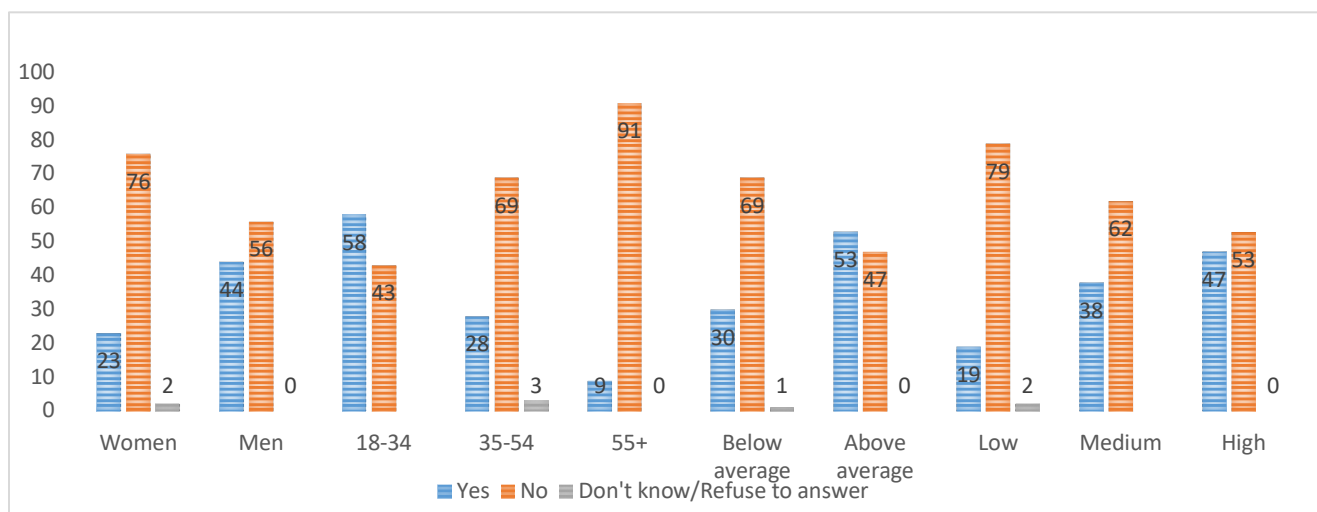
In terms of frequency of use, TikTok and Facebook are ahead of other social networks. The vast majority of TikTok and Facebook users (91% and 86%, respectively) use them every day or often. Although other networks are used by a relatively small part of the population, the frequency of use here is also quite high, since the majority use Vkontakte (79%), Telegram (78%), and Twitter (57%) daily or often. The only exception in this regard is Odnoklassniki, which is used by about a third of users daily or often (Figure 11).

Figure 11: How often do you use the following...? (% of social networks' users).



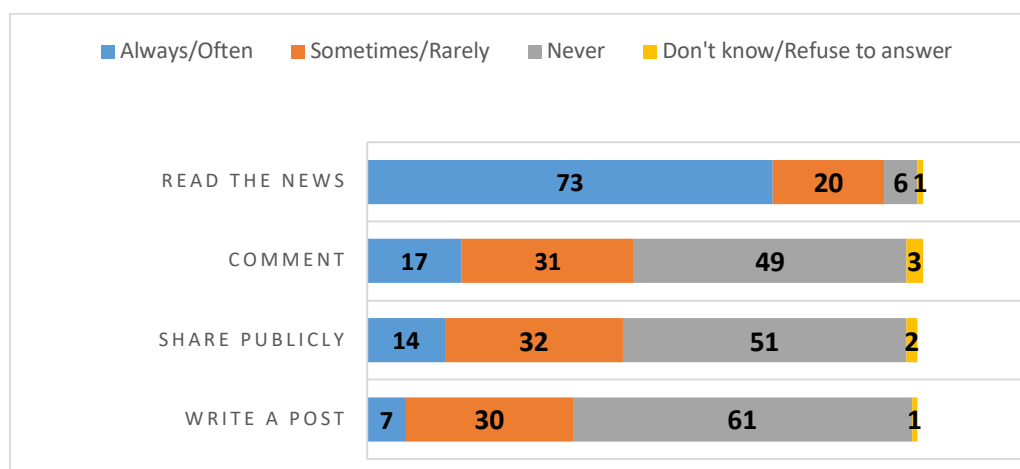
Facebook and TikTok usage rates vary by demographic groups (Figure 12). Men, young people (18-34), people with higher than average level of education and people of medium or higher economic statuses use these networks relatively often. The consumption of these networks is especially low among the population over 55 years old.

Figure 12: Facebook usage by gender, age, education and IPO (% of social networks' users).



Through social networks, users are most often informed about news (73%) (Figure 13). There are relatively few activities such as commenting. 17% do it daily or often and 31% sometimes or rarely. 14% share something publicly on their page every daily or often, and 32% sometimes/rarely. The least frequent activity is writing posts (7% - daily/often, 30% - sometimes/rarely).

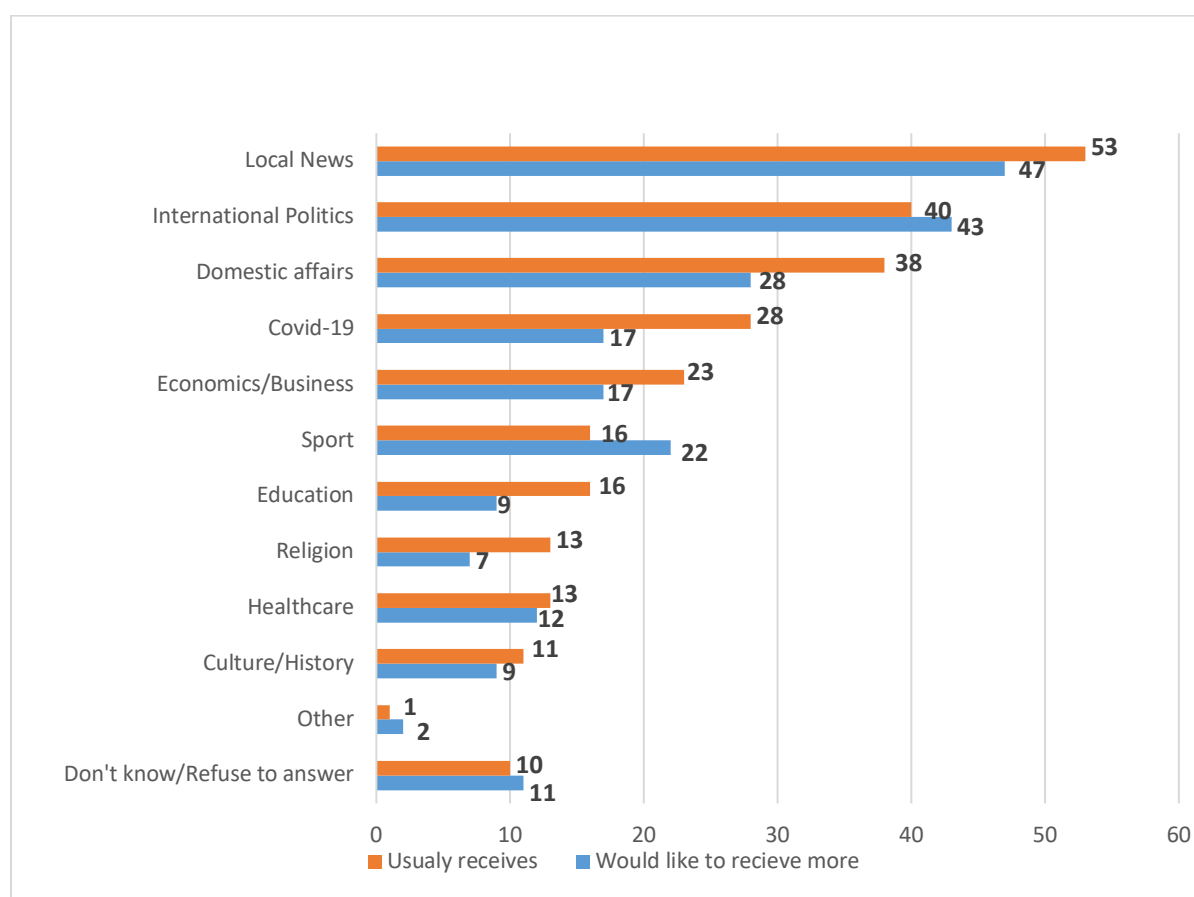
Figure 13: How often do you do the following on social media...? (% of social networks' users).



The most common language used in social networks is Azerbaijani - the majority read (90%), comment (99%), write posts (100%), and share information on their page (97%) mainly in Azerbaijani. However, taking into account the existing context, Georgian in this regard is quite popular as well. 25% read, 38% comment, 43% write and 26% share posts in Georgian on their own pages. Usage of Turkish is also significant. 23% read the news, 13% comment, 1% write posts and 3% share publicly in Turkish. For Russian the figures are very low - 8%, 2%, 1% and 3%, respectively.

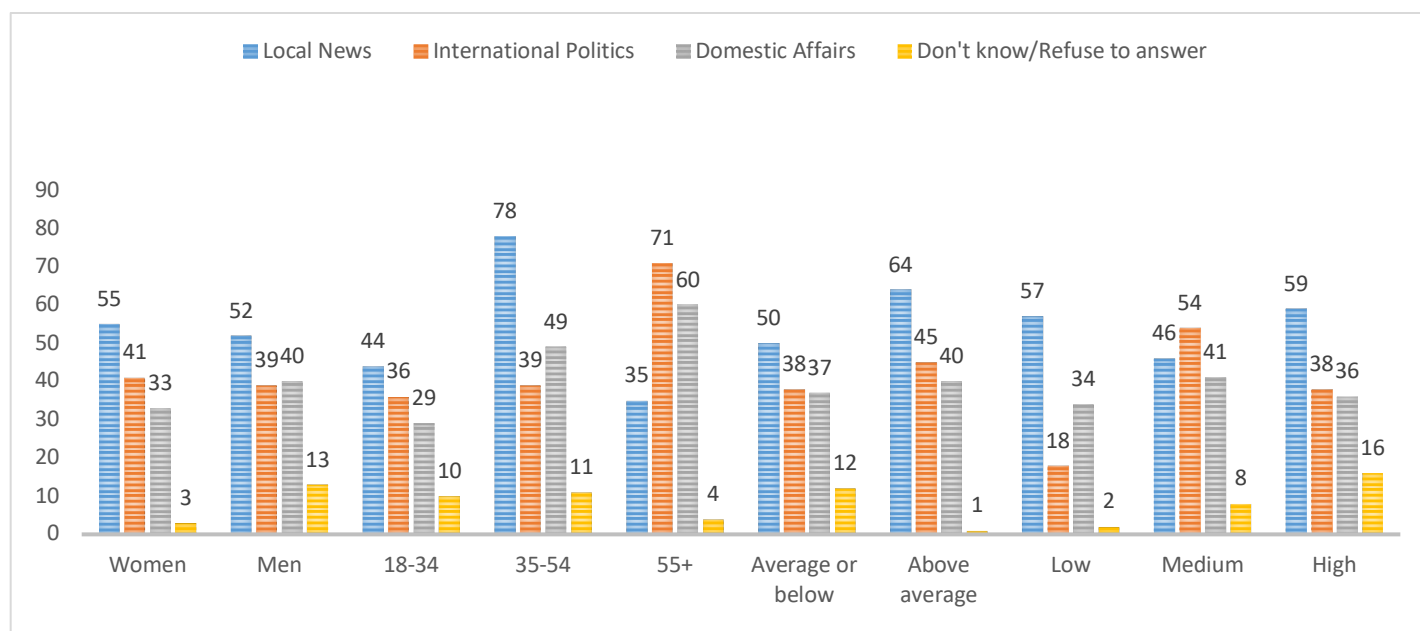
53% of respondents say they consume local news through social media, while 40% and 38% receive information about international politics and domestic affairs, respectively. The demand for more information is again centered on these three topics (Figure 14). It should be noted that an almost similar result was observed in the case of TV channels. These topics are followed by news about pandemic (28%), economics and business (23%), sports (16%) and education (16%), religion (13%), health (13%), and culture (11%).

Figure 14: What kind of information do you receive through social media and what kind of information would you like to receive more of? (% of social networks' users).



Information consumption through social media also varies across demographic groups. Men and women use this source with almost equal frequency to get information about local news or international politics, while men get information about domestic affairs slightly more often (Figure 15). In terms of age, 35-54-year-olds use social networks significantly more often (78%), compared to young adults (44%) and 55-year-olds and older (35%), to learn about local news. The latter group (≥ 55) consumes news about international and domestic affairs more intensively than other age groups.

Figure 15: Most frequently received information via social media by gender, age, education and IPO (% of social networks' users).



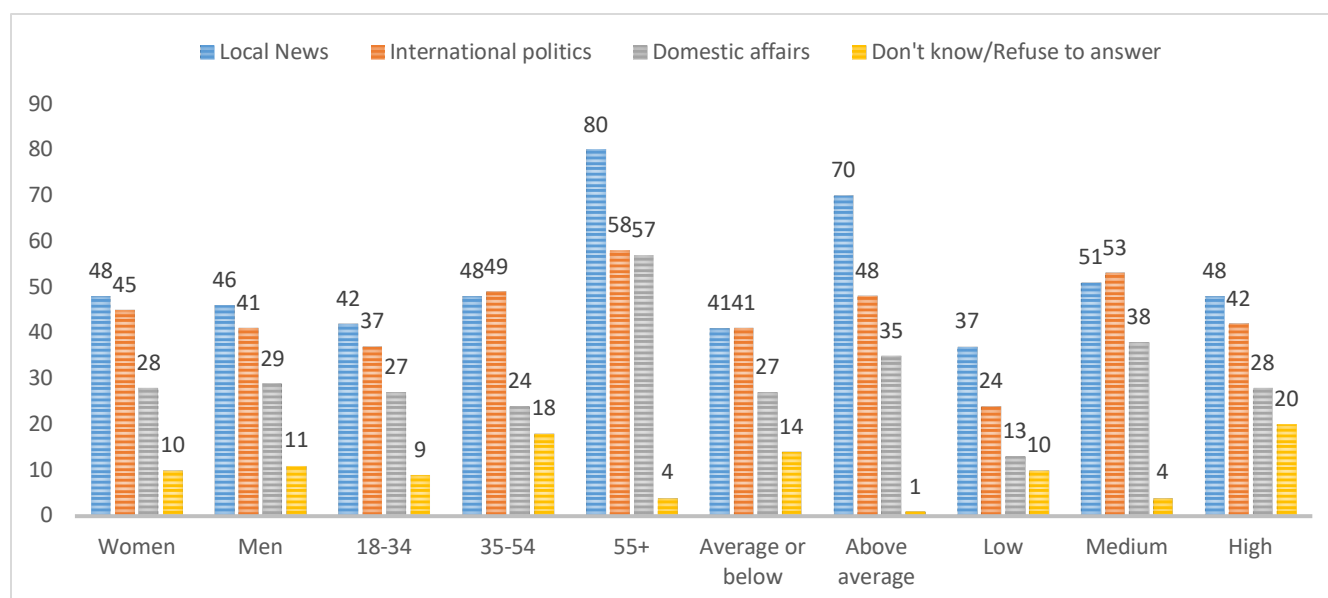
In terms of education, the population with higher than average education has higher access to information about local news, while the differences in consuming information about international or domestic affairs are small. Respondents of average means are less familiar with local news, and more interested in international political news, while it is the opposite for both relatively poor and relatively affluent groups.

Compared to other groups, for men aged 54 and younger, those with an average or below average education, and people with an average or higher economic status it is hard to define what kind of information they get through social media.

Demand for local news and updates is highest among the age group of 55 and over and among those with secondary or higher education (Figure 16). In this regard, there is almost no difference between women and men. Young people, people with secondary education or less,

and economically vulnerable people have less demand for almost all types of information compared to other groups.

Figure 16: The most frequently named types of information by gender, age, education and IPO (% of social networks' users).



The focus group sessions' participants and in-depth interviews' respondents stated that TikTok is becoming increasingly popular in the entertainment segment, especially among young people, and that this social network is usually not used to discuss political and pressing public issues. The latter function is mainly performed by the Facebook pages of local online publications. Respondents find it difficult to name popular bloggers at the local level, whose content would be socio-political. It is said that discussions in social networks are mainly held on the pages of online publications. The confrontation in Dmanisi in May 2021 is remembered as one of the hottest of such discussions.¹⁰¹¹

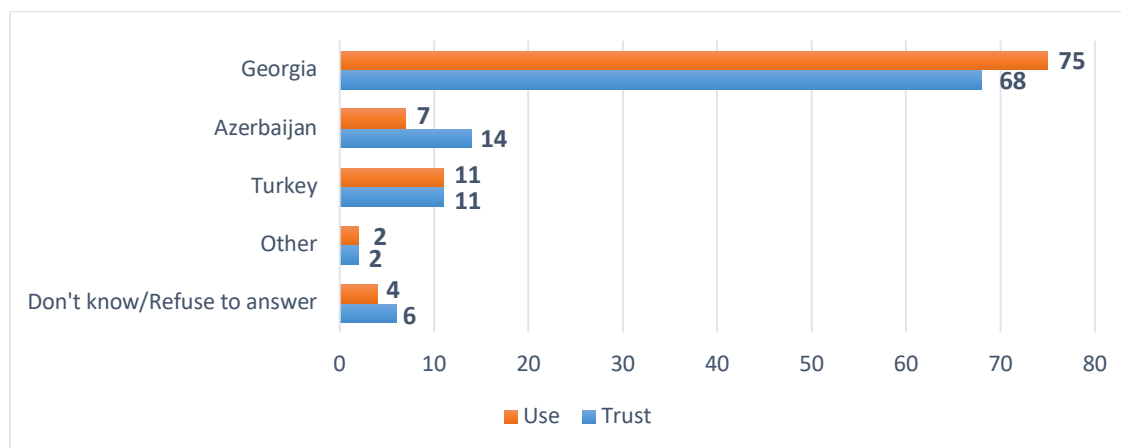
¹⁰ RFE/RL, Dmanisi: An existential conflict with an ethnic subtext - everything you need to know in a nutshell, 18.05.2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31261760.html> (accessed on 15.07.2022).

¹¹ Focus group. Women ≥35, women <35 and men <35.

Websites

About a quarter of respondents, 26%, use websites to consume news and information. Most of them visit sites registered in Georgia (75%), and the trust is the highest (68%) for these media. A relatively small part uses Turkish (11%) and Azerbaijani (7%) websites.

Chart 17: Which country's websites do you use/trust the most? (% of websites' users).



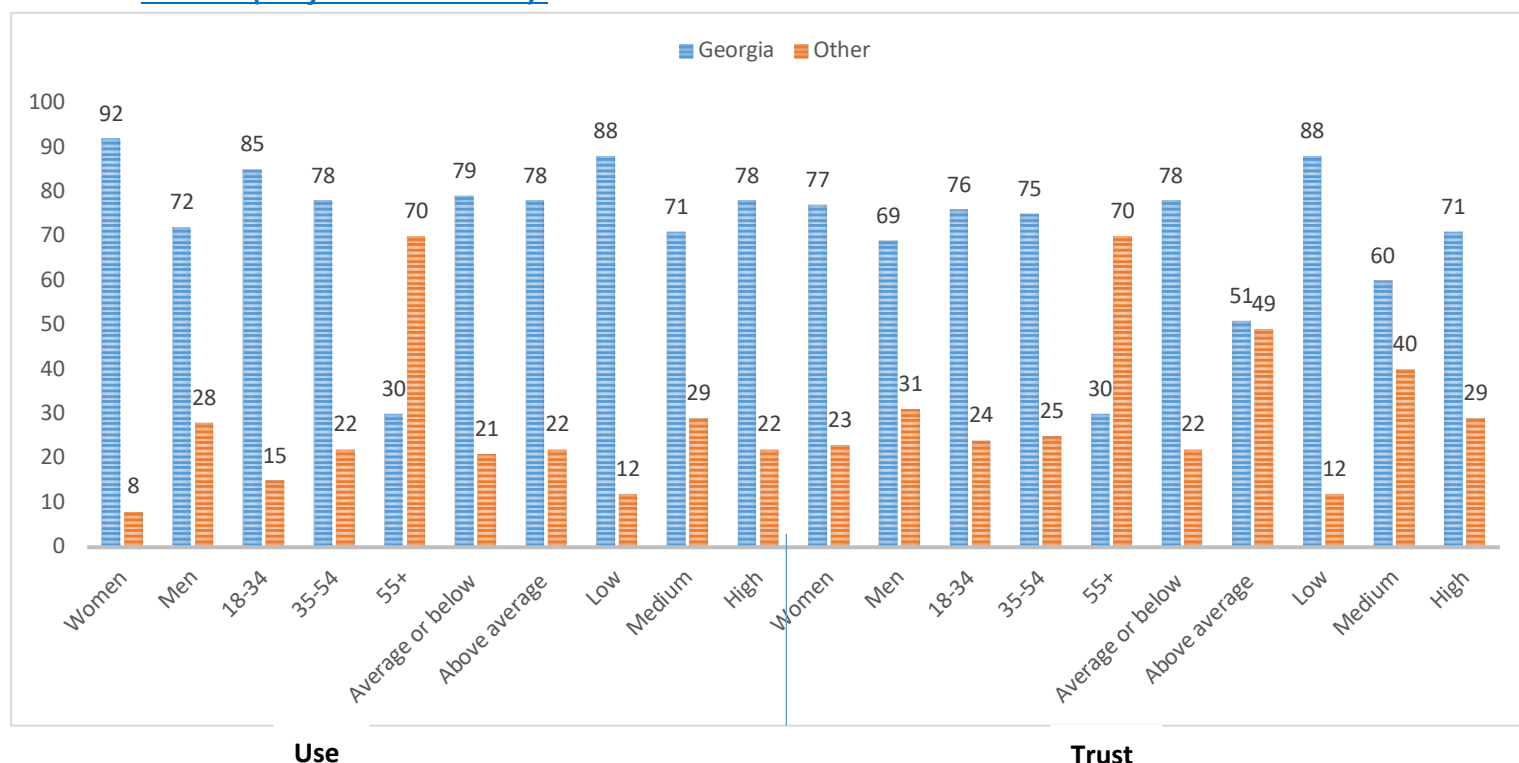
The use of websites registered in Georgia, as well as trust in them, is higher among women (Figure 18). The rate of use and trust of this source of information is inversely correlated with age - that is, the younger the respondent, the more he/she uses and trusts it. The use of Georgian-registered websites does not correlate with the level of education, although trust in them is less among users with higher education. The population at the middle economic level uses and trusts Georgian websites less, compared to the population at lower and higher levels.

When asked which local websites they use most often, the vast majority of respondents named four publications - 24news.ge, interpress.ge,¹² aktual.ge and Marneuli TV website. The rate of other publications is insignificant. The main language of these websites is Azerbaijani, although they publish materials in other languages as well. For example, 24news.ge has Georgian-, Russian- and English-language versions, interpress.ge is bilingual - Azerbaijani-Georgian, and aktual.ge publishes materials in Georgian, English and Turkish, in addition to Azerbaijani.

The majority (59%) of the population consuming online media use websites every day to get information, about a third (35%) visit them at least once a week or a month, or less often. The vast majority (81%) use websites in Azerbaijani, only 6% were informed in Georgian, 8% in Turkish, and 2% in English (only one respondent named Russian).

¹² Is not related to Tbilisi-based news agency Interpressnews.

Figure 18: Which country's websites do you use and trust the most by gender, age, education and IPO (% of websites' users).



Consumers are again most likely to learn about local news and stories (59%), international politics (45%), and domestic affairs (35%) through websites, and would like to receive more of the same type of information (Figure 19). 7% find it difficult to define what kind of information they receive, and 20% can't name what kind of information they would like to receive more.

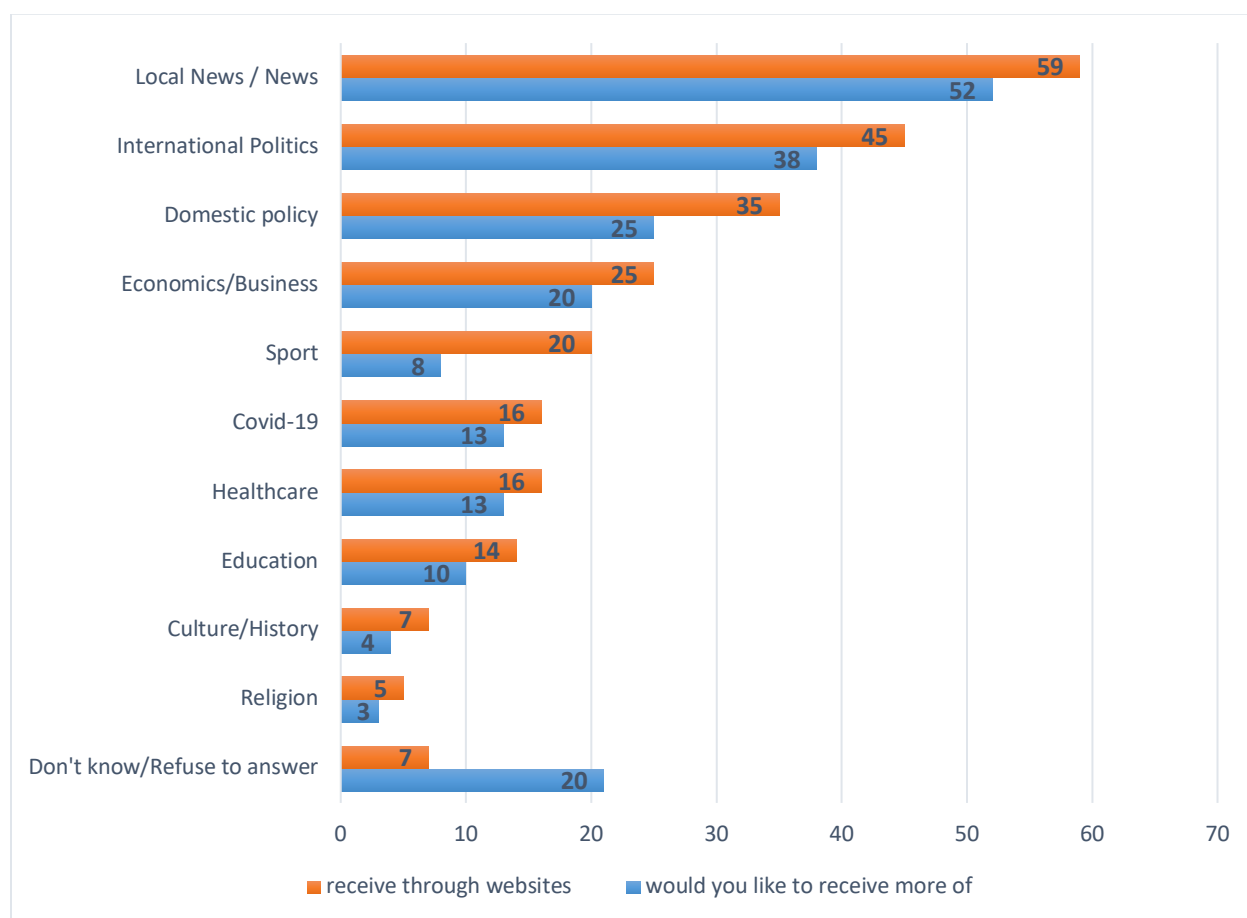
The participants of the focus group sessions emphasized the fact that these three local websites are mainly accessed by people who do not know Georgian. "Those who know Georgian are not interested in these sites and get their news from Tbilisi-based online platforms."¹³

Absolutely everyone we talked to points out that the above-mentioned three sites (24news.ge, Interpress.ge, Aktual.ge) have become some kind of monopolists in the local news market in the last few years. They also note one noteworthy trend - these media-resources have somewhat filled the acute information vacuum observed in the region. "Here [in Kvemo Kartli], especially in the villages, they didn't know anything about Georgian news before. Recently, several sites have appeared, including 24 News, Aktual and Interpress, which have at least partially filled informational vacuum here."¹⁴

¹³ Focus group. Men <35.

¹⁴ Focus group. Women ≥35.

Figure 19: What kind of information do you receive through websites and what kind of information would you like to receive more? (% of websites' users).



Editorial offices of all three websites are located in Marneuli, although they cover the news of other settlements of the region with more or less intensity. They work quite actively and publish dozens of new stories daily. They also have small studios where they prepare multimedia content. The owners of these sites, who we spoke to as part of the research, point to the scarcity of financial resources as the main problem they face. Talking about the sources of funding, they say that for some time (for several months) they received a grant from the State Committee for Work with Diaspora of Azerbaijan, but these grants have ended and now they have only little advertising income and huge enthusiasm. None of them have received grant funding from Tbilisi-based donors, although they are willing and ready to cooperate. Unlike many other regional media, they are not members of media coalitions and do not benefit from the opportunities offered by these associations. Moreover, they do not have at all or have very few personal or business connections with their colleagues from Tbilisi or other regions of Georgia.

Movies and TV series

The majority of the population declares that they watch movies (62%) and TV series (51%). If men and women, as well as representatives of different age groups, watch movies with equal frequency, TV series are watched by almost twice by women than by men. Young people are also less interested in consuming TV series. People with average or lower education, as well as those with an average or lower economic level, watch both movies and TV series less frequently. Frequent viewers of local channels watch both movies and TV series with equal frequency, while viewers of foreign channels watch movies slightly more often.

The majority of viewers watch both movies and TV series in Turkish (55% and 64%, respectively). The second main language is Azerbaijani (40% and 31%, respectively). Other languages are rarely mentioned, among them, the Georgian language is almost never mentioned as the main language when watching movies or TV series.

The majority of the population (67%) also claims to watch historical films and TV series. Historical films and TV series produced in Turkey (59%) and Azerbaijan (55%) are named most often. Only 5% name Georgian historical films and series, 4%-4% - from Russia and the USA. Consequently, films and TV series from other countries are almost never mentioned.

The lack of interest in Georgian films and TV series was explained in focus groups and interviews mainly by the problem related to the knowledge of the state language. However, the opinion was expressed that this deficit is caused by the fact that Georgian producers do not create interesting content for them and completely ignore their community.¹⁵ When asked if they would be interested in Georgian movies or TV series, if representatives of the ethnic Azerbaijani community would be represented as protagonists or actors, or if the product would be about their community in whole or in part, everyone unanimously said that "the whole region" would watch such a film or TV series.¹⁶

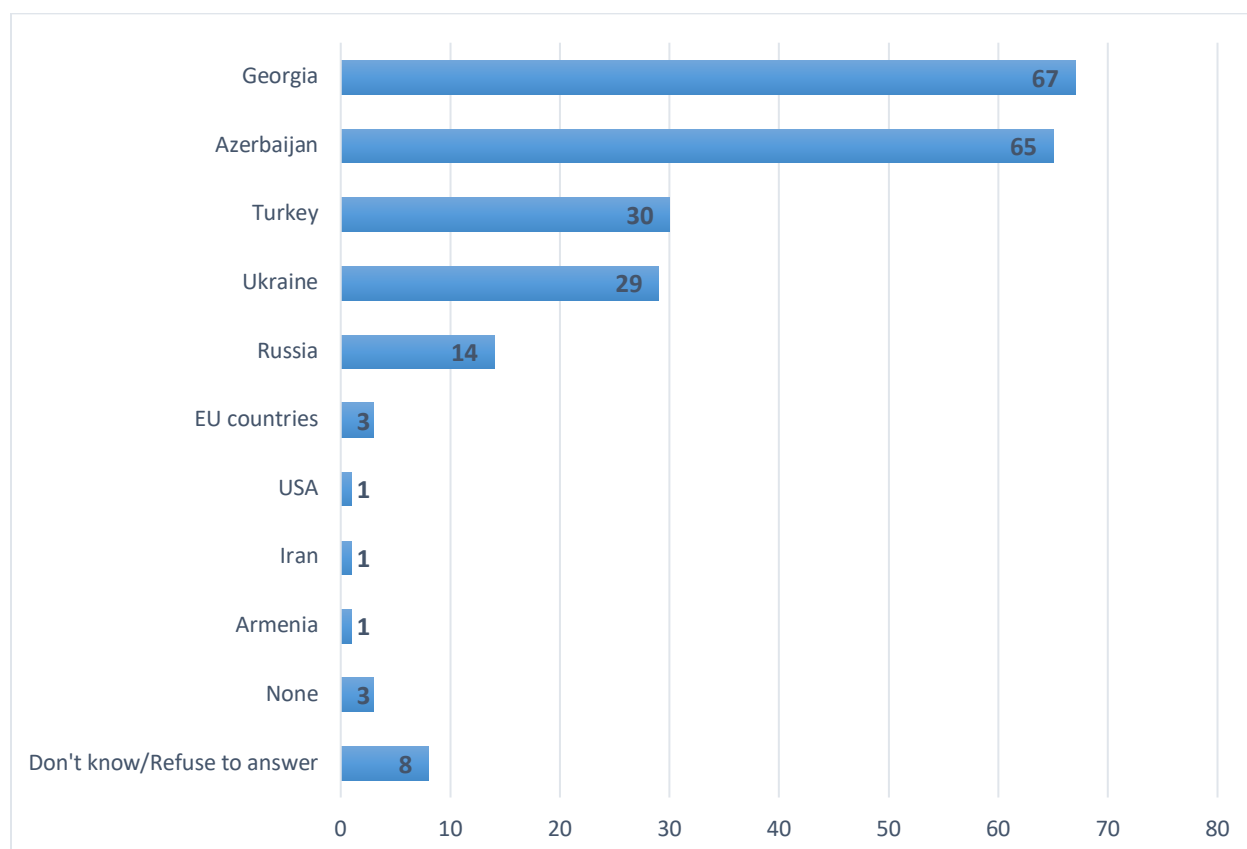
¹⁵ Civic Activist from Marneuli.

¹⁶ Focus group. Women <35.

Information about countries, international organizations and international events

The majority of respondents are most often interested in information about Georgia (67%) and Azerbaijan (65%) (Figure 20). It is followed by Turkey (30%), Ukraine (29%), and Russia (14%). They are less interested in information about EU states, USA, Iran and Armenia.

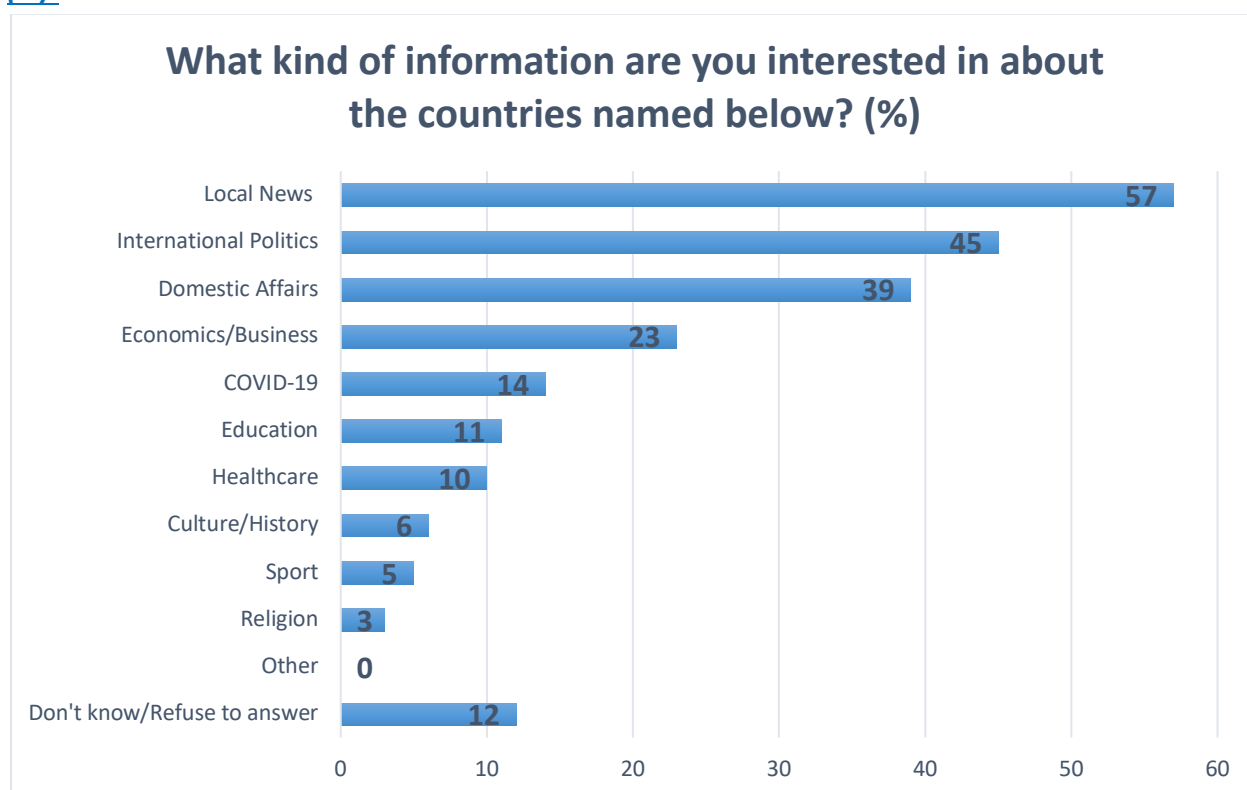
Figure 20: Which countries are you interested in receiving information about? (%).



Most often, respondents are interested in local news about these countries (57%), international politics (45%) and domestic affairs (39%) (Figure 21).

The majority receives mostly positive information about Azerbaijan (74%) and Turkey (69%) (Figure 22). There is very little neutral or negative information about these two countries. About a tenth doesn't receive any information about Turkey and Azerbaijan, and about the same share find it difficult to determine whether the received information is positive or negative.

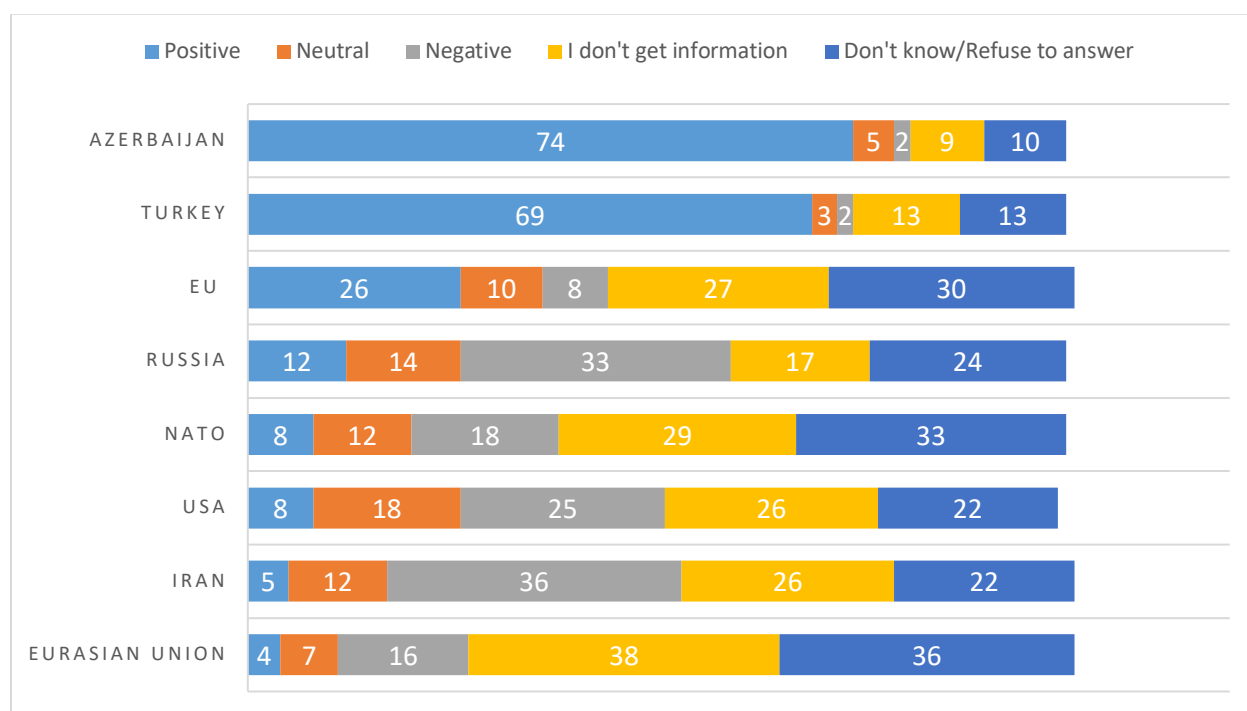
Figure 21: What kind of information are you interested in about the countries named below? (%).



It is relatively difficult for the respondents to determine the nature of the information received on other countries or international organizations. Additionally, the share of those who do not receive information at all is high. For example, on NATO, 29% state that they do not receive information at all, 32% find it difficult to determine whether information about the alliance is positive or negative, 18% say it is negative, 12% say it's neutral, and only 8% say that the information received on NATO is largely positive. The situation with the USA is similar. Here too, only 8% evaluate the received information positively. In this regard, even Russia has a better rate with 11% of surveyed saying that they receive mostly positive information about this country. However, the Eurasian Union (4%) and Iran (5%) have the lowest rate in this respect.

As for the European Union, here the situation is different. Although 57% either do not receive information at all or find it difficult to evaluate it, 26% believe that the information received is largely positive. Information received on Iran (36%) and Russia (33%) is most often negatively assessed.

Figure 22: The information received about the listed countries and organizations is mostly... (%)



The population receives information about the events taking place in the international arena from various sources. The main source of information on events in Ukraine (about the war) is Azerbaijani (47%) and Turkish (40%) news media (Figure 23). A relatively small part receives information from the central (14%) or local (14%) Georgian media outlets. The same number (14%) receives information through Facebook and Instagram, an even smaller part (6%) from the Russian media. Only 4% say that they do not receive information about Ukraine at all.

In general, the population receives information about international conflicts and incidents mainly through television (38%) (Figure 24). Relatively rarely are social networks (15%), online media (13%), neighbors or friends (9%), and family members (5%). Co-workers or other sources are hardly mentioned, and 17% say they do not receive information on these issues at all.

Figure 23: From which sources do you get information about the current events (or the war) in Ukraine? (%).

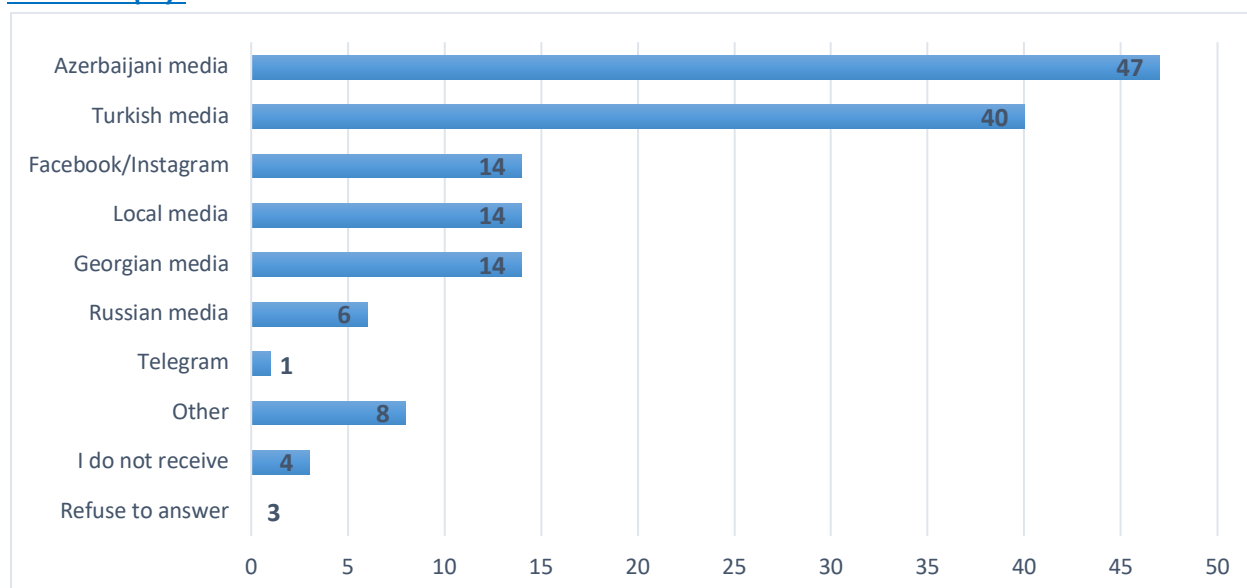
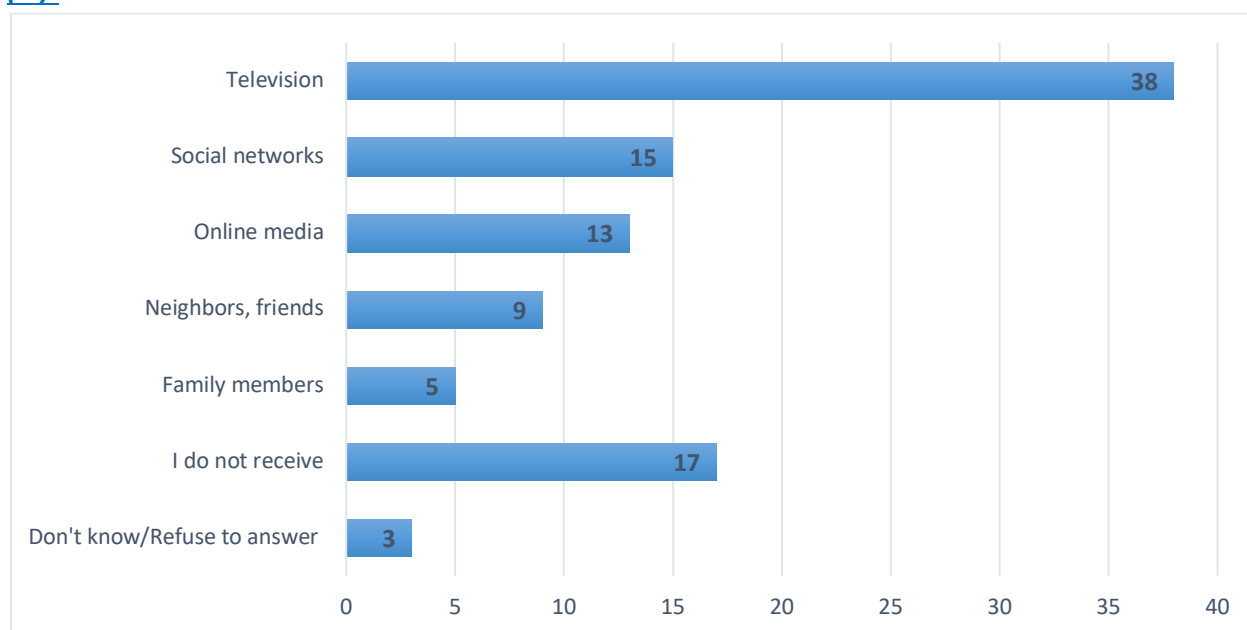


Figure 24: Where do you mainly get information about international conflicts/incidents from? (%).



The lack of information on international issues, including on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, were discussed a lot in focus groups and during interviews. This scarcity creates fertile ground for the spread of various clichés and myths, as well as anti-Western propaganda. "Let's go out and ask on the street who is stronger, America or Russia, and we'll see what the answers will be

[...] Of course, the majority thinks that Russia is the strongest, and America has weakened. This opinion spread especially after the war in Afghanistan."¹⁷

Respondents unanimously point out that direct Russian propaganda in the region is weak and the Kremlin's propaganda channels are not popular, therefore the myth of Russia's invincibility is a kind of rudiment of old times.¹⁸ It was noted that people who have specific business ties with this country, as well as deeply religious people, enjoy more or less piety towards Russia. It is these people who support Russia in the war in Ukraine. "There are few who support Russia in the war here, including those who have something to do with Russia, such as business, and also [practicing] Shia believers."¹⁹

However, when it comes to anti-Western propaganda, it is quite strong and, many of our respondents say, often comes from the Turkish media. It should be noted that this propaganda comes not only from news sources, but also from movies and TV series.²⁰ "There is a popular TV series here, where America, Europe and Israel are trying a state coup in Turkey, and it is very anti-Western. On Azerbaijani channels, there is all happiness, dances and songs, it's all Chunga-Changa²¹ there, and I don't think that anti-Western rhetoric comes from there."²² "There are many films and TV shows on Turkish channels, including the state TV, that say America and Israel are sponsoring and supporting terrorists, such as ISIS."²³

Sources of information on current events and processes in the country and Kvemo Kartli region

The main source of information on current events and processes in the country for the population in most cases is television (Figure 25). Most often, through television, the population consumes information about the Covid pandemic and relevant regulations (38%), and the events taking place in other regions of Georgia (28%). Less frequently, they get this information through social networks and online media. Traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and radio are hardly mentioned as sources of information. In some cases, personal acquaintances, family members, friends and neighbors are quite important sources of information. These sources are most often mentioned in relation to state services (11%), the pandemic (8% and 13%, respectively), and current events in other regions of Georgia (7% and

¹⁷ Focus group. Men <35.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Civic activist from Gardabani.

²¹ Children's happy song from Soviet short animation of 1970.

²² Focus group. Women ≥35.

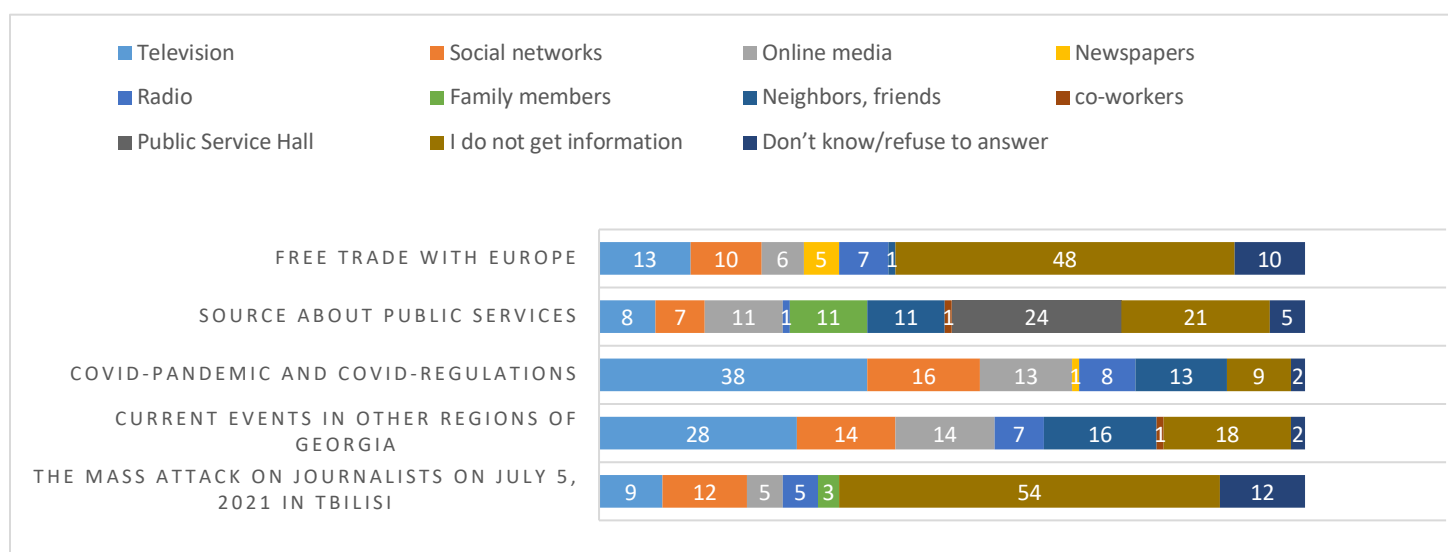
²³ Focus group. Men ≥35.

16%). There are exceptions, for example, the main source of information about state services is the House of Justice (24%).

As for other events and processes taking place in the country, there is less information. For example, more than half have no information about the events that took place in Tbilisi in July last year, such as the mass attack on journalists (54%),²⁴ and a relatively small part received information about this incident from television (9%), social networks (12%) and other sources.

There is less information about Georgia's free trade with Europe. Almost half (48%) do not receive information in this regard. For a relatively small part, here too, television (13%) and social networks (10%) are the most important sources of information.

Figure 25: Where do you get information about the following from? (%).



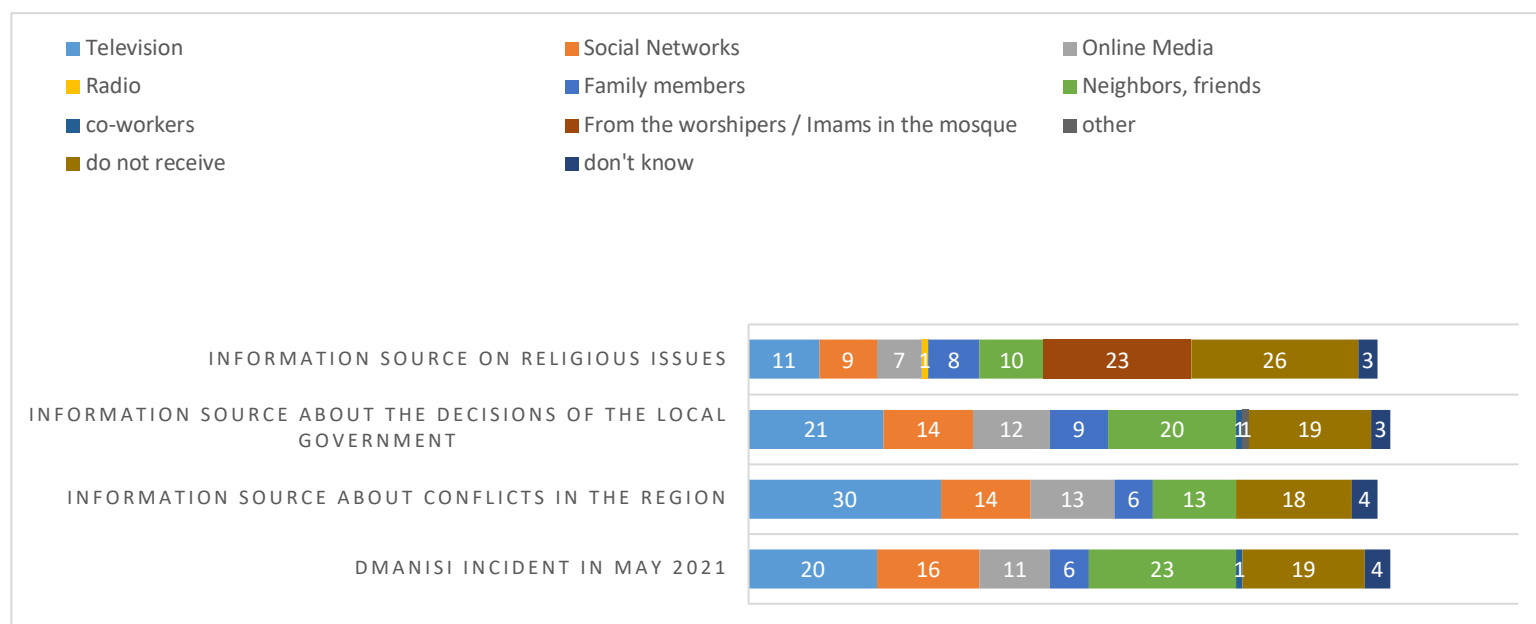
Television and social networks remain important sources of information on current events and processes in the region; however, regarding certain issues, the sources are more diverse (Figure 26). The population receives information on religious issues mainly from imams in the mosque (23%). Television, social networks, online media, as well as personal acquaintances are mentioned with almost equal frequency in this regard, while 26% do not receive information on this issue at all.

The population receives information about the decisions about the local government with equal frequency both from television (21%) and from neighbors and friends (20%). Other sources are

²⁴Eurasianet, Violence by hate groups grips Tbilisi, 06.07.2021. <https://eurasianet.org/violence-by-hate-groups-grips-tbilisi> (accessed 12.08.2022).

mentioned slightly less frequently. There is a similar trend with regard to the sources of information on local events such as the incident in Dmanisi last May. As for various incidents in the region, the most important source of information is television (30%), followed by social networks (15%), online media (13%), and acquaintances (13%). About a fifth does not receive information about these events at all.

Figure 26: Where do you mainly get information regarding the following issues from? (%).



Both the participants of the focus group sessions and the interviews' respondents talk about the lack of important and/or basic information in the Azerbaijani language, as the problem of knowledge of the state language is still relevant, especially in rural areas. "There is not much basic information in Azerbaijani. For example, when Covid 19 restrictions were imposed, many people learned about it only after the police fined them 2,000 GEL. Only the First Channel broadcasts in Azerbaijani, but their audience is not large."²⁵ "Once we met with the locals and talked about the benefits of the Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreement with the European Union. When we talked for 20 minutes, people were surprised because they didn't know anything about it. However, as far as I know, a number of organizations had held events in this region [about DCFTI], and information about these activities are also posted on their websites."²⁶

²⁵ Focus group. Men <35.

²⁶ Civic activist from Bolnisi.

Conclusions

The research showed that the Azerbaijani-speaking population of Kvemo Kartli is largely cut off from the Georgian information space and exists more in the Azerbaijani and Turkish media-space. This “aloofness” is expressed in the fact that a small part of the surveyed population watches the central TV channels of Georgia, accesses national news portals and is active in social networks on topics related to domestic or foreign policy. The majority's interest in public, political, economic or cultural issues is limited to local (Kvemo Kartli) news, although it is clear that there is a desire and interest to understand what is happening in the country in general.

The problem of integration is related to two, conditionally "objective" and "subjective" circumstances. The former implies a clear deficit of language skills. Despite the fact that this deficiency in the younger generation has been significantly reduced (and a positive trend has been identified in this regard), the problem persists and is still acute. As for the former, "subjective", factor, it is related to the kind of ignorance that the central media of Georgia is paying to the issues of the ethnic Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli, and ethnic minorities in general. This problem is not only a lack of news coverage, but also includes removing from the agenda the contribution that this community has made and still makes to the historical, cultural and economic development of the state.

However, as the study revealed there is a marked "information hunger" on issues related to NATO, the USA, the European Union and integration in the Western world in general. Most of the interviewees do not have information about these countries or organizations at all, or this information is of a negative nature. Accordingly, there is a lot of nihilism and indifferent attitude towards the West, which may contain specific risks considering the complex geopolitical context created by the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, and before that, the 2020 Karabakh war and its subsequent events.

Recommendations

- One of the main reasons for the lack of interest in the Georgian information and cultural space is the fact that the Azerbaijani-speaking population of Kvemo Kartli does not have a sense of belonging to the cultural, including entertainment products produced in Tbilisi. In order to overcome the problem, it is necessary to create such products (for example, feature and documentary films, TV series), which will focus on the contribution that this community has made and makes in the history and modernity of Georgia, including economy, culture, science and education, military affairs, etc.
- The main Azerbaijani-language online media publications of the region, which largely determine the media climate for the Kvemo Kartli ethnic Azerbaijani community, are somewhat cut off from the benefits enjoyed by media of the same scale from other regions of Georgia. This circumstance, on the one hand, determines their general alienation from the unified media space of the country, and on the other hand, it hinders their development, including the observance of journalistic standards. It is important that international donors and civil organizations working on media development pay more attention in this direction through thematic grants, trainings, technical assistance and other similar measures.
- In order to eliminate the informational "aloofness", as well as to promote the integration of the community, it is important for the central media, especially large televisions, not only to pay more attention to the coverage of the problems and news of the region, but also to hire local qualified staff as full-time correspondents (and retrain them if necessary), who enjoy certain degree of confidence in the community.
- Low popularity of Georgian providers of telecommunication services (including "Magtisat" and "Silknet") among the Azerbaijani-speaking population of the region is largely due to the fact that the packages offered by them do not adequately represent attractive channels for this community, especially Azerbaijani and Turkish TV channels. A simple way to solve this problem would be to include and diversify such channels in the providers' packages.
- Based on the fact that there is an acute lack of information on the USA, the European Union and NATO, as well as on the integration of Georgia into the Euro-Atlantic space, which creates a fertile ground for the spread of various clichés and myths, and anti-Western propaganda, it is necessary to plan and carry out information campaigns in this regard in more focused ways and taking into account local realities. In this regard, it is most effective to involve in these campaigns those local actors who have a certain authority in the region and people trust them.

Part of the efforts made in this direction should be the presentation and introduction to the population of the specific programs and projects that Western governments and organizations have made in the Kvemo Kartli region.

- The state and civil organizations should pay more attention to the development of media literacy among young people, including in schools. In addition, it is important to increase the intensity of such cultural programs for students of schools, which will help them establish contacts with their peers from other regions, be it exchange programs, excursions, camps, etc.