

# Polarization as a Threat for Democracy

## Analysis of the Media System of Georgia

Georgia represents one of the most polarized democracies throughout the world. This is how the evaluation made by German organization Democracy Reporting International and Young Lawyers Association of Georgia looks like according to the research they conducted in 2017. According to the reports {1} of international observation organizations, polarization is one of the obstacles for the development of democracy in Georgia. Though polarization does not bear an ideological character in Georgia but it is revealed in two political opponents that turns into the so-called antagonist symbiosis in the pre- election periods. For the latest 7 years, the two politically polarized forces have been observed in Georgia – Georgian Dream – currently in power and National Movement that represented the Georgian government earlier and its groups. The similar ideological platforms are beyond the antagonistic symbiosis; both forces support market economic reforms and name Euro- Atlantic integration as the priority of the country's external policy. The pre-election and general media monitoring {2}, conducted by influential international and local organizations show that media outlets are also sharply polarized. It applies mostly to the TV area. Television still remains one of the sources for information spreading (more than 70 percent). Two national broadcasters - "Rustavi 2" and "Imedi" share the largest part of the audience. Besides, according to different reports, "Rustavi 2" owners are affiliated with the former government – National Movement while "Imedi" is distinguished by its loyalty to the Georgian Dream government as well as biased coverage. The distinctive form of political polarization and the fact that parallel media polarization remain unexamined and unstudied, represent the motivator encouraging us. The polarized pluralism media model is applied as a theoretical basis by us, Danniel C Hallin and Paulo MAnchini provide {3}. The research hypothesis says that independent media outlets are the primary victims of the political and parallel media polarization. The latter creates new instruments/factors to oppress and clean them or strengthen the existing ones. This tendency comes back as a boomerang to democracy – and represents a threat. By applying the qualitative methodology, we are carrying out the study of the Georgian media system as the polarized monism or/and polarized – defective pluralism which, according to the hypothesis that we propose, has adverse impact on independent media actors. The research conducted under the qualitative methodology is based on the Case Study methodology as well as the content, observation and quantitative analysis method. Besides, it depends on the deep interviews conducted by small number of independent media outlets, polls conducted via questionnaires by journalists working in regions as well as focus- groups. The research includes four factors of parallel media system of political polarization: financial, technical, legislative, human.

**Keywords:** defective democracy, media polarization, post-truth, polarized – defective pluralism, theory of attitude and set.

### Introduction and Literature Review

The underlying theoretical basis for the research is the Polarized Pluralist Model offered by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini in "Comparing Media Systems" in response to criticism of Four Theories of the Press. Along with the Polarized Pluralist Model, the authors identify the Liberal Model as exemplified by Britain, Ireland and North America, and the Democratic Corporatist Model (Germany).

Through analysis of the historical experience of countries and the empirical materials (as the authors claim, their concept is empirical rather than

normative), "Comparing Media Systems" illustrates Italy and Spain as the examples of polarized pluralism.

As for the Polarized Pluralist Model itself, it is defined as follows: the Polarized Pluralist Model is characterized "by integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media, and a strong role of the state". {3. p. 14}

The concept of *party-press parallelism*, in its turn, is applied as a basis for the Polarized Pluralist Model (Seymour-Ure 1974), however, according to this concept, a politically differentiated media system is associated not with parties, but with political tendencies. For example, "the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* is a paper of the right-center, not narrowly of the Christian Democratic party; the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of the left-center, not narrowly of the Social Democrats" {3. P. 33}.

The concept of *party-press parallelism* of the polarized pluralism is characterized by three aspects: 1. being aligned with a political ideological platform (as in the above example), 2. a conscious choice made by journalists while defining their workplace for themselves for career advancement purposes, and their political affiliation, i.e. embracing a political platform which is principally relevant to them, and 3. the choice / favour of the audience that handles particular, politically affiliated media at its own discretion. {3. p. 35}

The same concept recognizes two types of pluralism referred to as internal and external pluralism. In external pluralism, the media system reflects diverse political ideas and the points of view of different groups in the society, while internal pluralism illustrates diversity of viewpoints and approaches attained within a particular media organization (the latter is a conceptual requirement that, for instance, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) must comply with at the legislative level – N. K.).

Political pluralism, and pluralism in general means coexistence and recognition of multiple viewpoints, therefore, the polarized pluralism infers that, to a certain extent, the sides should accept and acknowledge each other. Media pluralism, indeed, involves coexistence of differing opinions, though, the concept of media pluralism in a democratic society is also based on the differentiation between facts and opinions.

The focus groups held within the framework of the research (in total, six focus groups were conducted in six different cities of Georgia, involving 96 civil activists and journalists) revealed that the political confrontation between two dominant political forces (i.e. Georgian Dream and the United National Movement) in Georgia focuses on the way the parties strive to disapprove of and eliminate each other. Besides, neither political party is characterized by any classical ideological platforms while both forces embrace a certain "cult" – Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili for Georgian Dream and the United National Movement, respectively.

The dominant media channels thoroughly follow or individually create the narrative {2} of politically polarized forces where facts are mostly assumed and speculated. Considering these factors, the Georgian media system can hardly be called pluralistic; it could be rather reasonable to apply the term "Monism" (Greek: *monos*). The very philosophical doctrine states that all

existing things originate from one source {4}. At the same time, the stem of the Georgian rendering of the term means slavery which accurately describes the state of the polarized sides in Georgia. Therefore, unlike Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, it would be more appropriate to consider the Georgian media system to represent the polarized monism model.

If "monism" seems to be an overstated assessment when outlining the actual system, we could replace the term by applying the theory of "defective democracy". The concept of defective democracy is used in scholarly works in the field of political science in order to describe "partial" "hybrid" regimes {8}; it allows us to specify and analyze the regimes with various defects that function across the "grey zone", between liberal democracy and autocracy. Therefore, given the above theory, the Georgian media system could be defined as the "polarized – defective pluralism".

Due to the fact that our research addresses the issue also within the context of information behavior of the audience, we are applying Dimitri Uznadze's Theory of Set for the first time in mass communication surveys.

Based on experimental studies carried out at the beginning of the 20th century, Dimitri Uznadze, the world-famous Georgian psychologist and philosopher addressed "Set", the state of an individual, his/her tendency towards action, claiming that "Set" constituted a disposition to perceive unequal objects as equal or vice-versa. Such state, known as the "Uznadze Effect", is acknowledged in the scholarly community. {5. p. 131} Our research, and specifically the experiments conducted across focus groups, suggests that within the polarized monism media system the audience tends to act in response to the "Set" of the Uznadze Effect.

Dimitri Uznadze's Theory of Set is also a key for an unfolding global media crisis known as the "Post-Truth" Era. {6} In early 2017, during the public discussion about Post-Truth, Gerard Baker, The Wall Street Journal Editor-in-Chief stated {7}:

"As a newspaper editor I deal with literally thousands of letters a week from people challenging our journalism, not on the basis that they disagree with the conclusions of our editorial page, or disagree with the editorial page — they just don't accept the facts. And it comes back to this issue of trust."

The Post-Truth state dismissed the famous phrase of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the U. S. senator ("Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts"), allowing the "alternative facts" to occur. That was the term initially used by Trump's campaign strategist Kellyanne Conway in his statement claiming that Donald Trump's inauguration crowd outnumbered those attending President Obama's inauguration. "Our press secretary, Sean Spicer, gave alternative facts..." , - she stated.

Content surveys and monitoring of the Georgian media conducted by competent organizations suggest that the dominant channels are rather busy with providing alternative facts, and displaying alternative and distinct pictures. Under so intensely polarized circumstances, the content follows the "hierarchy of truths" {7}, common in different religions in the Middle Ages, thus, arranging the content according to the following hierarchical priorities:

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defective pluralism which, according to the hypothesis that we propose, has adverse impact on independent media actors.

- Message
- Moral truth
- Allegory truth
- Direct truth

Similarly, the messages are the keys that govern facts in the "polarized – defective pluralism" media system.

## Methodology

By applying the qualitative methodology, we are carrying out the study of the Georgian media system as the polarized monism or/and polarized – defective pluralism which, according to the hypothesis that we propose, has adverse impact on independent media actors.

While investigating the issue, we rely on and analyze the reports and media monitoring outcomes about Georgia prepared by reputable organizations for the years 2017 and 2018. By applying the case study method, we are offering the analysis of technical, financial, legal and human / social factors of the media system for 2017-2018. The research is based on in-depth interviews that we have conducted with managers (specifically, 16 media managers) of small independent media outlets operating in Georgia. The focus groups undertaken in six different cities of six Georgian regions in February, March and April of 2019 represent one of the important parts of the study. The selected cities included Marneuli, Telavi, Zugdidi, Kutaisi, Batumi and Gori. (The focus groups were conducted on the topic of media polarization, in parallel with the GYLA and DRI joint trainings). Altogether, 96 civil activists and journalists took part in focus groups.

Study findings are based on the outcomes of experiments performed during the focus group meetings.

As a result of experiments, the information behavior of a major audience has been tested by applying Dimitri Uznadze's Theory of Set which assisted us in practically examining and analyzing the impact of the society on media polarization, and information behavior of an audience within the polarized monism media system.

## Findings/Results

### Financial Factor

Responses and opinions obtained as a result of in-depth interviews within the framework of the study reveal that the severe negative impact of polarization is perceived by the managers of small-sized independent media

outlets through challenges faced in terms of financial income and economic sustainability.

As a clear evidence of the above described situation, the managers have provided the following cases identified over the past two years: 1. Distribution of advertising market and decrease of the revenues in small-sized media outlets; 2. Selective tax policy and discrimination against small-sized regional media channels; 3. Exclusion of regional broadcasters from public tenders.

Let us proceed to examine them individually.

#### Distribution of Advertising Market

According to the data of the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) and based on research conducted by non-governmental organizations involved in media sector {9}, the Georgian TV advertising market reached a value of 90 million GEL (33 million U.S. dollars), over 97% of which is attributed to TV companies such as "Imedi" and "Rustavi 2".

It is worth noting that in 2017, despite intense confrontations, these two polarized media actors performed advertising sales through the same intermediary company. To a certain extent, the above company contributed to a monopolized environment across the market which, according to the analyzed data, had a negative impact on other media outlets.

With the revenues of regional broadcasting agencies constantly decreasing, dozens of small-sized media organizations succeed in obtaining only up to 2% of market share. Media expenses of Georgia's partner countries and/or other contacts are also less diversified. Small-sized regional media representatives claim that the so-called grant revenue has dramatically dropped compared to recent years.

The interview participant also noted that USAID- and EU-funded media campaigns performed in Georgia cover the very polarized and politically affiliated media agencies, leaving independent regional actors without a chance to participate in such communications projects. The regional media outlets explain such distribution of funding by the fact that media campaign sponsors, including international donor organizations, rely on ratings which in cases of small-sized media outlets are not measured at all (the above-mentioned issue will be proposed later as well when discussing the study of the technical factor).

#### Tax policy

As the interviews with the regional media outlet managers reveal, Georgian tax authorities impose sanctions (i.e. collection of payment, attachment) even in case of insignificant amounts of liabilities on the part of the media organizations (the smallest amount being 530 GEL, i.e. approximately US\$ 270); while, at the same time, according to the information {10} requested and obtained by the Alliance of Broadcasters - Georgia from the Ministry of Finance, it is confirmed that as of January 1, 2019, the polarized dominant media outlets, such as "Rustavi 2" and "Imedi", had outstanding liabilities towards State Treasury in the amount of up to 33 million

GEL (US\$ 12 million). {10}. The aforementioned information demonstrates a selective approach of the state administered to the benefit of both the government-affiliated channels and those associated with opposing political groups. As opposed to the above, the state executes harsh tax policy against small-sized independent media outlets.

### State Tenders

Distribution of state funds is an example of the state's discriminatory approach towards independent regional media agencies. In 2017-2019, the state performed the procurement of communication services within media organizations through the so-called consolidated tenders the terms and conditions of which directly specified that only national broadcasters were allowed to participate in tenders. The largest part of such tender allotments covers the aforementioned polarized media organizations. For example, {11} during the period of January 1 – April 30, 2019, TV company "Imedi" and "Rustavi 2" received funds in the amount of 195,000 GEL (US\$ 72,000) and 86, 000 GEL (US\$32,000), respectively, leaving the regional channels without any funding whatsoever.

### **Technical Factor**

The representatives of small-sized independent media outlets believe that modern technology has both positive and negative impact on local media. Media managers consider internet freedom among such positive factors, indicating that "digitalization" lessens the effects of technical limitation tools against media. As for the negative impact, the media managers indicate the need for constant technical updates that negatively affects their sustainability.

"Transition to the digital broadcasting has taken a heavy toll on low-budget channels. Besides, the technological reform contributed to the increased number of broadcasting channels across the country leading to a rather complicated competition within the market", stated Levan Aleksishvili, Executive Director of Gurjaani TV Channel (Georgia accomplished its transition from analogue to digital broadcasting in 2015). The regional broadcasters consider a TV audience measurement system to be a clear-cut case of a technical obstacle, and regard the very system as a main contributor to media polarization. "It has been over ten years that we, small-sized regional media outlets have been protesting against the way ratings are measured that makes it impossible to identify our audience. Today, there are two companies that perform measurements; however, neither of them implements audience measurement practices in villages and several regions. Therefore, the measurement of ratings fails to provide the analysis of the small-sized regional media audience", - claims Murtaz Prangulashvili, the Director of Batumi TV 25.

Georgia's TV audiences are indeed measured by the following two companies {14}: TMI and TVMR. The research panel of the above companies only covers seven large cities in the country. The research does not include the majority of Georgian towns and, is never conducted in small towns, villages

1 and some of the regions, including those with ethnic minority zones. The fact  
2 that over 50% of the population of Georgia lives away from large cities should  
3 be taken into account.

4 The TV audience measurement task has never been specified by industry  
5 actors, the so-called "industry committee" (as occurs through best practices,  
6 generally accepted in other countries). Therefore, the media outlets operating  
7 in Georgia, including regional media companies, were not involved in  
8 identifying terms of reference for research. Thus, the research panel is adjusted  
9 to the plans of centrally located polarized media companies whose interests do  
10 not include regions and especially, the measurement of audience in ethnic  
11 minority zones since there the ratings of the Georgian polarized channels are  
12 expected to be lower, compared to those of the local media that performs  
13 broadcasting in ethnic minority languages.

14 "Due to the system, over 70% of the advertising market is allocated in line  
15 with the rating measurements, automatically leaving the biggest chunk of the  
16 TV media funding to "Rustavi 2" and "Imedi". We are technically removed  
17 from the advertising market", claims Tamar Gvinianidze, Head of the TV  
18 company Rioni (of Imereti Region).

19 Among technical barriers, the regional media managers identify the way  
20 the broadcasting platforms have been selected by dominant polarized channels.  
21 As an example, they recall the events of 2017 and 2018 when "Rustavi 2" and  
22 "Imedi", upon mutual agreement, and without any involvement of other  
23 broadcasting agencies, demanded the consolidated payment from the  
24 commercial TV service providers. Again, upon agreement, they withdrew  
25 themselves from one of the OTT streaming platforms (myvideo, used by other  
26 small independent channels as well) transferring together into another  
27 platform; this certainly presented the audience with a challenge of making  
28 technological choices, leaving behind the minor regional channels.

## 30 **Legal Factor**

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32 The reports of authoritative organizations (i.e. IREX, Freedom House, and  
33 Reporters Without Borders) emphasize (and the managers of small-sized  
34 independent media organizations also admit) that the legal framework that  
35 regulates media in Georgia is liberal. Nevertheless, in parallel with the ongoing  
36 escalated polarization during the research period, the amendments were  
37 introduced to the law regulating the media which had its negative impact  
38 specifically on small-sized regional channels.

39 The most controversial are the amendments added to the Law of Georgia  
40 on Broadcasting at the beginning of 2018 according to which the Georgian  
41 Public Broadcaster (GPB) became authorized to increase advertising time, sell  
42 sponsorship and production placement service. The very amendment has been  
43 opposed by all media outlets without exception and criticized by civil society.  
44 However, despite the resistance, the Parliament of Georgia satisfied the desires  
45 of the management of Georgian Public Broadcaster, anyway.

46 The U. S. Department of State's Report on Georgia for 2018 {12}  
47 evaluates the amendments as having a negative impact on sustainability of  
48 small-sized regional media outlets. Following the enforcement of the above

1 amendments, the Georgian Public Broadcaster revenues from advertising and  
 2 sponsorship indeed increased, while enjoying the annual increase of funding  
 3 from the state budget amounting to over 50% of the advertising market value.  
 4 At the same time, the regional broadcasters witnessed significant drops in their  
 5 revenues. It is becoming increasingly challenging for them to compete with the  
 6 channel with secure state funding.

7 Among legislative mechanisms, the managers of regional broadcasters  
 8 identify the so-called "authorship disputes" occurred over the past two years.  
 9 The managers recall that the control over protection of author's rights has  
 10 become much stricter on the part of the Georgian National Communications  
 11 Commission (the authority that regulates the

12 broadcasting industry in Georgia), though, according to the regional media  
 13 outlets, they are the most affected ones. "We are required to submit all of the  
 14 agreements and argue all the time to ensure the placement of any film or  
 15 music. We have received multiple warnings, and sanctions as well", states one  
 16 of the managers.

### 17 **Human Factor, Information Behavior of an Audience**

18  
 19  
 20 For the study of the human / social factor within the media system of  
 21 polarized monism and polarized – defective pluralism, we have applied a  
 22 focus-group method and performed experiments, as mentioned above, in order  
 23 to examine information behavior of an audience. As a result of the focus  
 24 groups carried out within the framework of the project "Strengthening political  
 25 pluralism in Georgia", implemented by DRI and the Georgia Young Lawyers  
 26 Association, two types of human factor (that have impact on media  
 27 polarization) have been identified against the background of scheduled  
 28 trainings: 1) individuals employed by media outlets, and 2) media consumers.  
 29 The focus groups have demonstrated that the media employees themselves are  
 30 not informed about the concept of media polarization and its emerging  
 31 challenges. "What is media polarization?" – when answering this question, the  
 32 majority of focus group participants selected the following answer: "when  
 33 media presents both sides of a story". Among the answers we have also  
 34 encountered the phrase, "when media provides coverage to the collision of two  
 35 polar stars". Political leanings, superficial coverage, inconsistent coverage,  
 36 lack of knowledge, and material interest are among the issues that, according to  
 37 journalists, lead to biased content. As the focus groups revealed, under the  
 38 circumstances of polarized – defective pluralism, journalists are left without a  
 39 choice to select media outlets that are acceptable for them on the grounds of an  
 40 ideological platform since the polarization itself does not have a certain type of  
 41 ideological foundation in Georgia. During the focus group meetings, multiple  
 42 examples have been discussed concerning the journalists employed by one  
 43 biased media outlet moving to another biased one without feeling  
 44 uncomfortable.

45 During the focus groups, specific recommendations have been elaborated  
 46 that could positively impact the media employees so that they could contribute  
 47 to overcoming rather than deepening of polarization.

48 Here are some of the recommendations:



Educational measures covering the polarization topic are to be stimulated both within non-formal and formal (University) educational settings - with media schools and media employees.

- It is essential for media to promote discussion on the topic of polarization, and prepare coverage, analytical articles and series of discussion programs. Necessary steps include wider coverage of the polarization issue and raising awareness of media polarization among the population, elucidating its impact on national security.
  - It is imperative to ensure professional development of media employees. To overcome polarization, more efforts are necessary on the part of the journalists. More in-depth content rather than superficial coverage needs to be promoted.
  - Media organizations must assume responsibility for complying with the principles of accuracy, objectivity, unbiased coverage, and eliminate discrimination and improve the efficiency of self-regulatory mechanism for that matter.
- When carrying out the research, the study of the information behavior of the audience represented a specific task that involved experiments where, as mentioned above, up to one hundred individuals took part. One part of the participants included active citizens from the regions of Georgia, the other one represented journalists.

Dimitri Uznadze's Theory of Set provided the basis for the experiments.

On the grounds of experimental studies, the Theory of Set by Dimitri Uznadze {13. P. 131} holds that there is the state of an individual, his/her tendency towards action, called "Set" by Uznadze. By means of experiments, the scholar induced Set in subjects of experiment demonstrating that Set is linked with disposition in individuals. The experiments in which the experimenter induces Set in subjects, are called "set fixation trials" by Uznadze. The experimental setting where the very state is evidenced is called a "critical trial". During the "set fixation trial", the subjects are exposed to spheres of different sizes, while in "critical trials" the spheres are of the same size. Due to the fact the Set was fixated in the "set fixation trial", the subject continues to perceive equal spheres as unequal ones in "critical trials" and, seemingly, the subject has an induced Set to perceive spheres as unequal.

We have applied the above theory for the study of the information behavior of the audience within the polarized media setting. In such a case, the audience represents a "trial subject" which has undergone the "set fixation trial" and consequently, during the polarized "critical trial", continues to perceive information provided by media outlets. Then, it does not matter whether the covered things are equal or different, and it does not matter whether the coverage by polarized media presents real facts or another set of speculations and fake news, the audience will perceive it through the Set fixated towards a specific media outlet.

In order to examine the above-mentioned idea, we have selected a specific frame reflecting President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili meeting with Georgian citizens in a Belgian city Liège. What does the frame present? What kind of information is provides? – the descriptions given in the responses of experiment participants dramatically differed when a specific broadcaster was identified.

On the one hand, if the frame was aired by "Rustavi 2", the channel affiliated to Mikheil Saakashvili's political party – the United National

Movement, the participants would state that the frame evidenced a large crowd of Mikheil Saakashvili's supporters meeting him in Liège, and that the frame showed that, as always, Mikheil Saakashvili was close with his voters, honestly discussing problems with them. On the other hand, if the frame was covered by "Imedi", i.e. the channel loyal to the government and critical about Mikheil Saakashvili and his party, the experiment participants would claim that the frame showed small number of individuals attending the Liège meeting, that the event was poorly organized, that is why Mikheil Saakashvili preferred leaving the empty stage and joined the followers in the hall, and that differently-minded people were not allowed to attend.

In parallel with the information behavior of the audience, formed though fixated Set, the in-depth interviews with regional media representatives revealed that the audience's access to the media content that is based on fact-checking and compliance with the acknowledged standards in journalism, is gradually decreasing.

In interviews, the media managers compared the activities of the polarized dominant channels with noise that suppresses the soft voices of small-sized media outlets since the noise effect is completely muffling other sounds.

When discussing the information behavior of the audience in general, the impact of social media algorithms on the audience's information behavior should certainly be taken into account. In social media where the like-minded tend to connect and where the algorithms filter the content in terms of interests and positions, and where the information flow is unlikely to contain the opposing views, being in a filter bubble leads to increasing polarization of society.

## Discussion/Conclusions

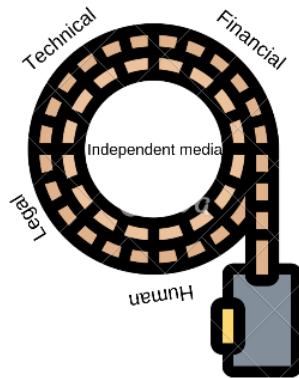
The analysis of the Georgian media system did not fully fit into the "polarized pluralism" system. Several defects have been identified: Polarization in Georgia has no ideological foundation. The polarized media content could not be called pluralistic, first of all, because pluralism incorporates differentiation between facts and opinions; while in Post-Truth era, as also in the case of Georgia, we are exposed to manipulated media content which presents opinions as facts.

The polarized media content tends to discredit and eliminate the opponent. Further, the above-mentioned confrontation is blended with the cult of personalities. Therefore, we have identified two terms for Georgia's political and media system exposed within the "grey zone" between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, such as polarized monism or/and polarized – defective pluralism.

While examining the four factors (i.e. financial, technical, legal and human) that impact the system, through conducting in-depth interviews with media managers, focus groups and experiments, we have proved the hypothesis that identifies independent media actors as principal victims of the media-polarized system.

In defective democracies, with little or no efforts on the part of political forces, a certain loop is "wrapped around the neck" of independent media outlets, leading to their slow death by suffocation" (the term frequently used by media managers during interviews).

Media polarization loop:



By applying the qualitative methodology, we are carrying out the study of the Georgian Most importantly, the information behavior of the audience has a critical impact on the degree of polarization. Studies conducted within the framework of the research demonstrated that the audience within the system of polarized – defective pluralism is, in fact, in fixated Set. There, a particular fact, in line with the set effect, perceived in a manipulative way, provides the audience with different information. The information flow of the polarized media content creates a certain noise effect muffling the voices of independent media.

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