

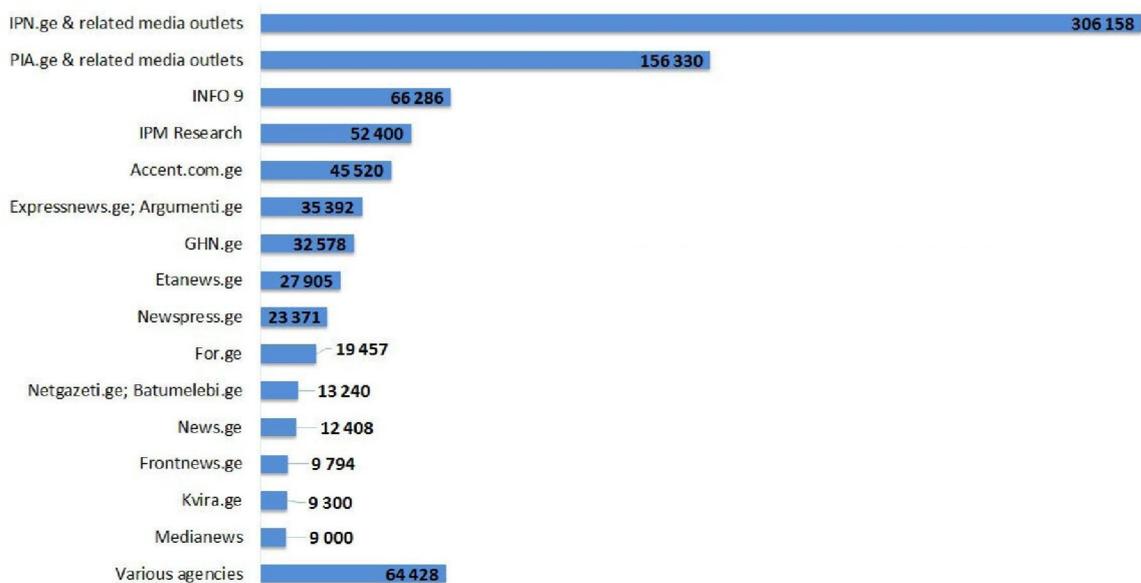
V. ONLINE MEDIA

Summarizing paragraph: The financing of news agencies does not always pursue the objective of reaching as larger audience as possible, because budget monies are sometimes allocated to newly established media platforms. In certain cases, contracts include such provisions that represent a blatant meddling in editorial independence. Sponsored articles are mainly not separated from editorial materials, including from the content financed by political parties. The exception is the news agency IPN which, in contrast to the practice of previous years, signposts sponsored materials though one can still observe exceptions to this rule. The content analysis of online media shows that on certain occasions the coverage favors the government though, basically, the news agencies publish critical opinions.

5.1 STATISTICAL DATA

The largest funding – GEL 306 158 - allocated to online media comes to the Palitra Media Holding online platforms (IPN, PalitraTV.ge, Kvirispalitra.ge, Bpn.ge, Ambebi.ge, Gemrieli.ge); followed by Pia and websites related to it (Daijesti.ge, Rubrica.ge, Funtime.ge) – GEL 156 330; Info 9 – GEL 66 286; IPM Research (publication of news by the agency) – GEL 52 400; Accent.com.ge – GEL 45 520; ExpressNews (EPN) – GEL 35 392; GHN – GEL 32 578; Etanews.ge – GEL 27 905; Newspress.ge – GEL 23 371; For.ge – GEL 19 457; Netgazeti.ge and Batumelebi.ge- GEL 13 240, News.ge – GEL 12 408, Frontnews.ge- GEL 9 794, Kvira.ge -GEL 9 300, Medianews.ge – GEL 9 000 and various agencies with relatively less financing – GEL 64 428.

Diagram 5.1. Public funds allocated to online media for advertisements/release of information, 2015



The table below shows those online platforms that have been founded since 2012 and gained government contracts worth more than 1000 lari. While in the case of well-established news agencies contracts for publishing information can be explained by their publicity and numerous readers, there are no clear criteria while selecting newly founded agencies for this purpose.

Table 5.1. Media outlets founded in 2012 and later and gained government contracts worth 1000 lari or more

#	Media outlet	Date of founding	Contract value 2014	Contract value 2015
1	CP.ge	01/08/2013	3466.93	5267
2	Newspress.ge	05/01/2012		23371
3	Accent.com.ge, Accent Holding	14/04/2014		45520
4	Kvira.ge	11/09/2013	225	9300
5	Mediamall.ge - MmG	12/04/2013	1000	2200
6	smo.ge - Samegrelo Media Organization	20/09/2012		4500

5.2. CONTRACT CONDITIONS WITH ONLINE MEDIA

Online outlets have contracts for various services with government organizations. Besides releases of announcements, photos and various standard services, there are cases when conditions of the contract constitute interference in editorial independence. This concerns reporting customers’ activities in accordance with their requirements, interviews, as well as prioritizing specific materials, including making them highlights and establishing their timeframe, which is within scope of editorial autonomy:

- Preparation and publishing of materials about customers’ activities in accordance with their requirements (IPN; Info 9; PIA; GHN; Newspress; Etanews; For.ge; Frontnews; News.ge);
- According to the contract with the Ministry of Culture, PIA agency agreed to place specific information among top news for 1 hour and then transfer it to the second category, at most 5 times a month. PIA also agreed to place required news in the second category at most 25 times a month.
- Agencies PIA; GHN, Expressnews.ge, Info 9, according to their contract with the Ministry of Defense, agreed to the following: “Contractor takes the obligation to check with the Public Affairs Department any incoming information regarding defense sphere, before publishing it “.

- GHN agency also has a contract with the Ministry of Defense, according to which it has to provide for an interview with any person pointed at by the Ministry. The contract between Tbilisi City Hall and IMP Research Ltd. also envisions monthly preparation and publishing of interviews on important and interesting issues by the agency.

Like the studies from previous years, the 2015 study discovered contracts involving purchase of surveys from online agencies. Ministry of Defense has such contracts with several agencies:

- Contract with News.ge involves taking surveys on relevant issues according to the requirements of the customer. Such agreements are also made in the contracts with Newspress, Topnews.mediamall.ge, Accent.com.ge and Sazogadoeba.ge, as well as the contract between Tbilisi City Hall and IPM Research, though in this latter contract it is not specified which news agency is supposed to take surveys.

It is not specified in the contracts on which issues the surveys are to be taken. MDF requested this information from the Ministry of Defense, but received no response.

5.3. INFLUENCE OF GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS ON THE EDITORIAL POLICY OF NEWS AGENCIES

Presented study includes monitoring of the editorial policy of news agencies, the purpose being to establish the following: 1) What is the scale and topics of materials published as a result of financing; 2) Whether the readers have an opportunity to separate financed content from editorial materials; 3) What is the influence of government contracts on the contents of the agencies' reporting.

Monitoring methodology. As subjects of the monitoring were chosen the news agencies that received most stable service contracts in 2013–2015 and had most financing in 2015. These are: IPN.ge, PIA.ge, GHN.ge, INFO9.ge and FOR.ge. FOR.ge had less financing than others in 2015, but since, according to its editor Rosi Jghamaia, it is also financed by the Georgian Railroad, which is not reflected in our financial data, this agency was also included as a subject of the monitoring.

Table 5.2. Government contracts with the 5 news agencies in 2015 and their value

News agency	Number of government contracts	Total value of government contracts
IPN	59	249 352
PIA	21	80 236
INFO 9	17	66 286
GHN	10	32 578
FOR.ge	6	19 457

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative element of the study involved finding what place had official information envisioned by government contracts in the agencies' daily materials, and what was their typology. The qualitative part focused on how the outlets present materials to the readers and whether editorial and financed news are separated from one another. Specific examples of biased reporting are also studied.

To define whether different political opinions are represented in these media platforms, quantitative data of materials published about various political parties and their typology have been analyzed.

Quantitative study includes the period from 16 October 2015 to 1 January 2016 and was conducted from Monday to Friday each week.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

IPN. IPN published the most information among the agencies during the monitored period. From 8997 news more than a half – 4631 – were about the government and its agencies, while 1034 news were dedicated to representatives of political parties, including the ruling party.

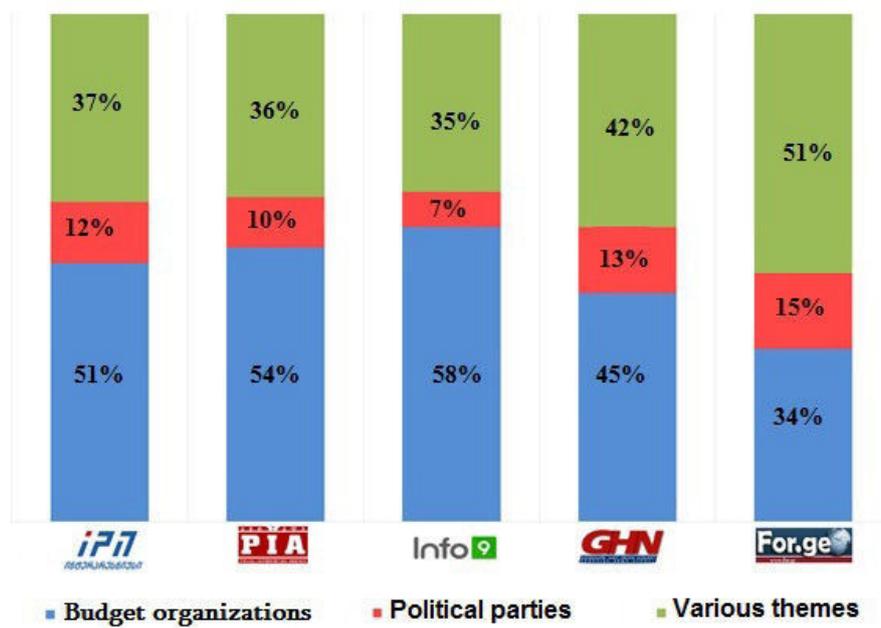
PIA. The second in terms of number of news was PIA.ge, which published 5150 news during the monitored period. More than a half of them – 2790 – was dedicated to the government organizations, while about 10% (482) were about political parties.

INFO 9. INFO 9 had the largest percentage of materials about government organizations among the news agencies. From 4796 materials, 2786 were about government agencies, while only 324 were about political parties.

GHN. GHN dedicated less news to the government organizations compared to other news agencies. From the 4844 news that it published only 2204 (45 %) were about government agencies. GHN published 612 news about political parties.

FOR.GE. The least number of materials (3223) during the monitored period was published by For.ge. Most of the news it published (3029) were prepared on the basis of materials of other media outlets. Among them, 1048 were about government agencies, while 480 were about political parties.

Diagram 5.3. Coverage of the activities of government and political parties by the 5 news agencies



Thematic typology

As can be seen in the table below, in the cases of all news agencies the largest share of the news were dedicated to official meetings, events, visits and press-conferences of the government organizations; next come materials about various government programs, initiatives, services and social programs; followed by comments made regarding various issues; reporting on crimes and incidents; statements and official letters; congratulations, condolences and awards; the least materials concerned meetings with citizens.

It needs to be noted that such materials as statements, official letters and congratulations, condolences and awards, unless they have special informative value, fit the category of purchased news more than issues that constitute daily news and newsworthiness of which should be defined by media outlets independently.

Table 5.3. Typology of coverage of activities of government organizations by the 5 news agencies

Topics by agency	Meetings/ events/ visits/press-conferences	Government programs/ initiatives/	Comments	Crime/ Incidents	Statements/ official letters consumer information	Congratulations/ condolences/ awards	Meetings with citizens	Other
IPN	2682	777	490	219	200	158	26	79
PIA	1585	552	239	196	90	87	15	26
INFO 9	1593	454	225	200	130	116	29	39
GHN	1328	363	149	133	113	62	21	41
FOR.ge	590	246	140	56	21	19	2	13

Among government agencies, most news published by IPN (488), PIA (339), INFO 9 (320) and FOR.ge (286) was dedicated to the activities of the Prime-Minister and the Government, while news published by GHN – to the Ministry of Defense (255). All five agencies are contractors of both the Government’s administration and the Ministry of Defense.

The Case of Manipulation

Suspension of two political talk shows on Imedi TV on August 29, 2015 and another talk show on public television on September 4 after its host got married the leader of one of the opposition political parties triggered severe criticism from a group of civil society organizations. Officials responded with remarks about Georgia’s improved rankings in the Press Freedom Index. On September 4, PM Irakli Garibashvili also made remarks about suspension of talk shows and focused on the improved media environment. Just on September 4⁴⁸, IPN covered the story about the World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders seven months ago as the latest news. The original material disseminated on February 12, 2015⁴⁹, when the Press Freedom Index was released, is still available in the agency’s archives. Reporters Without Borders releases the World Press Freedom Index at the beginning of each year.



Tendentious Selection of Headlines

Ownership dispute over Rustavi 2 TV was discussed by local and international organizations from the angle of media freedom in the country; they also focused on the government’s role in this

⁴⁸ Georgia’s position in media independence rankings has improved, Interpressnews, September 4, 2015. <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/msofli0/344201-mediis-damoukideblobis-reitingshi-saqarthvelos-pozicia-gaumjobsda.html?ar=A>

⁴⁹ Reporters Without Borders – The situation has improved in Georgia in terms of media freedom, Interpressnews, February 12, 2015 <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/politika/316728-qreportiorebi-sazghvrebs-garesheq-saqarthveloshi-mediis-thavisuflebis-kuthkhith-vithareba-gaumjobsda.html?ar=A>

process. When reporting on the interview of U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, Ian Kelly with Rezonansi newspaper, news agencies wrote headlines but neglected the context of the interview and focused on the government’s non-interference; in case of IPN, this opinion was offered in the affirmative form:

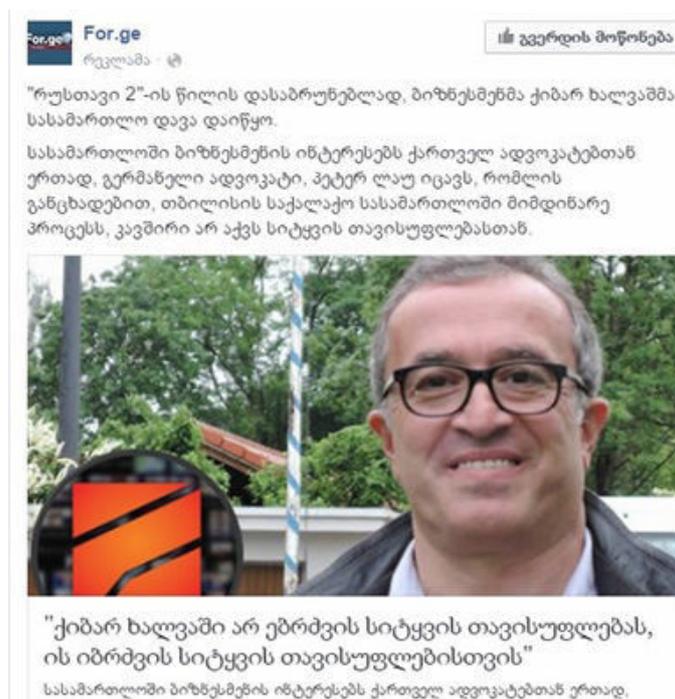
IPN	PIA	GHN
Ian Kelly supposes that Georgian government does not exert pressure on media ⁵⁰	We do not think that the government is engaged in exerting pressure on media ⁵¹	Ian Kelly: We do not think that the government is engaged in exerting pressure on media ⁵²

Unilateral Campaign-Style Publications on For.ge

During the period of monitoring, For.ge news agency prepared a number of materials against Rustavi 2 TV, which reflected the position of only one side – plaintiff Kibar Khalvashi that actually had a campaign nature. Some materials were posted on Facebook as paid ads. Below there are the headlines of some publications:

For.ge	Headlines
	Pressure that is exerted on Judge Urtmelidze is exerted on all judges.
	What does it mean not to make a tough decision? Does Margvelashvili know what kind of decision is made by the judge?
	Nika Gvaramia blackmails the court.
	A millionaire (?!) director of Rustavi 2 asks the society for help.
	Kibar Khalvashi does not fight against freedom of speech. He fights for freedom of speech.
	Georgian media in a “national” tie, i.e. oppressors in the robe of the oppressed.

⁵⁰ <http://bit.ly/1UmVx3j>
⁵¹ http://pia.ge/show_news.php?id=61135&lang=geo
⁵² <http://bit.ly/25lk0lv>



5.4. CONTENT FINANCED BY POLITICAL PARTIES

During the content monitoring of media we found cases when several news agencies systematically published copied information from the official website of the same party without any changes and without reference. Despite the fact that our study concerns government organizations, we dedicated special part to the parties and surveyed the parties that we assumed used paid services of news agencies. The survey showed that 7 parties use paid services of IPN, 2 parties – of PIA, and 1 party – of GHN.

Table 5.4. The parties that purchased paid services of news agencies

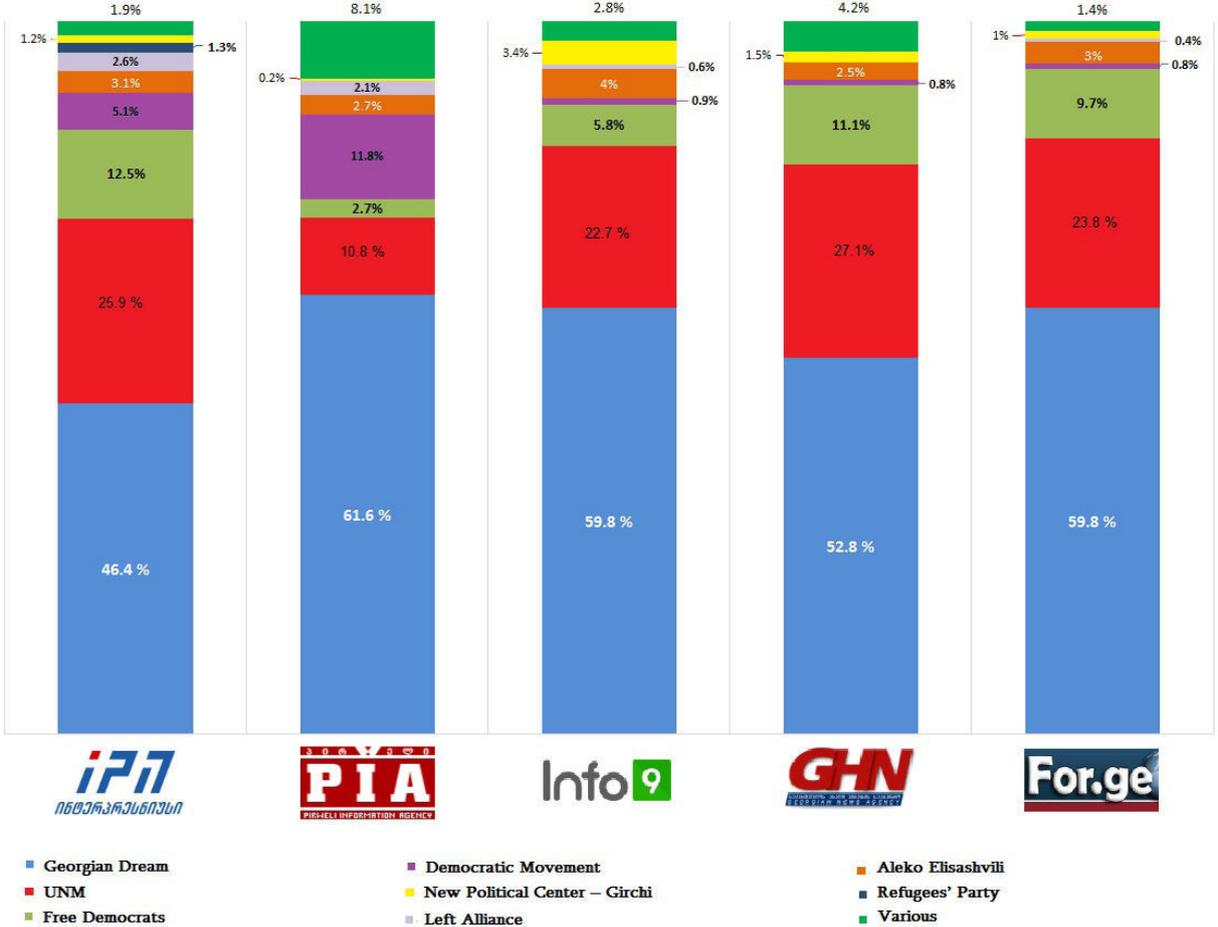
Parties	IPN	PIA	INFO 9	GHN	FOR.ge
Georgian Dream ⁵³ / Republicans	✓				
Georgian Dream / Conservatives	✓				
National Movement	✓				
Democratic Movement	✓	✓			
Free Democrats	✓	✓		✓	
The Left Alliance	✓				
Refugees' Party	✓				

⁵³ According to the head of the press service of the parliamentary majority Greta Tsitsava, the Georgian Dream coalition partly used the parliamentary package, and partly – additional paid service.

As can be seen on the diagram below, coverage of political parties is not dependant only on purchased services and there are in the quantitative data those parties and politicians that do not use such services. For instance, New Political Center – Girchi and independent member of Tbilisi City Council Aleko Elisashvili, whom we treated separately due to his activities during the monitored period, are covered by all five news agencies. At the same time, purchased services still influence quantitative data, for instance The Left Alliance (2,6%) and Refugees’ Party (1,3%), which use paid services of IPN, are covered by this agency more than Girchi (1,2%) which is, unlike them, represented in Parliament. At the same time, the Refugees’ Party is covered only by IPN, while The Left Alliance – only by IPN and PIA.

All five agencies dedicated most of their coverage to the ruling Georgian Dream coalition; the National Movement was second in coverage by all these outlets except PIA. In the case of PIA, second after the Georgian Dream was the Democratic Movement (11,8%). The Democratic Movement was most covered, besides PIA, by IPN (5,1%), whose service the said party had purchased. The remaining 3 news agencies gave the Democratic Movement relatively less coverage (0,8-0,9%). In the category of other political parties are included both qualified and unqualified parties: Patriots Alliance, Labour Party, New Rights, Free Georgia, Georgian Group and others. These parties were summarily most covered by PIA (8,1%).

Diagram 5.4. Coverage of political parties by the 5 news agencies



5.5. FORMS OF PLACEMENT OF FUNDED INFORMATION

There are no clear standards in online media to separate advertising from editorial content. The practices used in this respect are quite diverse.

The monitoring has revealed that only two materials⁵⁴ published by IPN news agency had a symbol NS – news from subscribers, and three materials – an advertisement symbol R⁵⁵; the materials funded by the political parties were published by IPN and other news agencies without any symbols at all. The comparison of placement of identical topics in various media outlets has shown that the material, which was published by Netgazeti with an R symbol, was published by IPN, PIA and Info 9 as an editorial, without any symbols at all:

Agency	IPN	PIA	INFO 9	Netgazeti
Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia	Large IDP families will receive apartments in Tbilisi ⁵⁶	Minister Sozar Subari visited a large IDP family ⁵⁷	Sozar Subari visited those large families, who will receive apartments in Tbilisi ⁵⁸	Sozar Subari visits a 12-member IDP family ⁵⁹ R

From the beginning of 2016, only IPN increased a share of materials published with a NS symbol. However, the monitoring has revealed that such rule does not always work. For example, the material covering the meetings of the head of Saburtalo district municipality with local population was published with a NS symbol in one case and as an editorial, in another. In the both cases, the head of municipality (Gamgebeli) was presented in a positive context in the headlines.

NS - news from subscribers

Beka Mikautadze inspected road rehabilitation works at Shartava Street”⁶⁰

Without a symbol of funding

Saburtalo Gamgebeli met with locals to discuss their problems”⁶¹

⁵⁴ The world premiere of Anna’s Life by Nino Basilia will be held at Goteborg Film Festival on November 10, 2015. <http://bit.ly/2133uj0>

Newly established Origin – Georgia will take care of identifying new geographical indications in the regions, December 14, 2015. <http://bit.ly/1t1wCfj>

⁵⁵ Giorgi Samanishvili: “Vintage 2015” was remarkable in many ways, October 10, 2015. <http://bit.ly/1TRE0AV>

New stage of developing a historical resort of Bakuriani begins, December 25, 2015. <http://bit.ly/1X6VHlw>

New perspectives of Carriage Building Company – Government’s initiative to encourage Local production, December 25, 2015, <http://bit.ly/28fmJLx>

<http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/sazogadoeba/349851-giorgi-samanishvili-qrthveli-2015q-gamorcheuli-iyo-bevri-thvalsazrisith.html>

⁵⁶ <http://bit.ly/22Jhz6w>

⁵⁷ http://pia.ge/show_news.php?id=54867&lang=geo

⁵⁸ <http://bit.ly/28fqLn4>

⁵⁹ <http://netgazeti.ge/news/73530/>

⁶⁰ <http://bit.ly/1RVw27F>

⁶¹ <http://bit.ly/1PAvBVM>

No NS symbol is attached to the information financed by political parties, which sometimes repeats the same material and headline posted on the party’s official website. For example:

IPN	PIA	Website of Democratic Movement
Nino Burjanadze: What is happening around Rustavi 2 TV is a demonstration of Georgian Dream’s weakness ⁶²	What is happening around Rustavi 2 TV is a demonstration of Georgian Dream’s weakness ⁶³	Nino Burjanadze: What is happening around Rustavi 2 TV is a demonstration of Georgian Dream’s weakness ⁶⁴

From the beginning of 2016, some party-financed materials published by IPM, for example that of IDPs’ Party, have a NS symbol; the material financed by the Democratic Movement party notes that the material has been provided by the press office; the material provided by the United National Movement differs from the version posted on the party’s website.

Lela Bagdavadze, editor of IPN, said in the interview that the materials from subscribers are also prepared by the journalists from the news agency and they meet the agency’s standards, according to which the news should not contain the elements of black PR, obscenity, discredit, insult and calls for violence.

PIA Director Dimitri Tikaradze explains that no matter whether or not they have any contracts with budgetary organizations, if a topic is interesting, it is covered and the factor of contracts has no effect on the degree of the agency’s criticism.

Rozi Jgamaia, editor of For.ge, says that the materials prepared in frames of contracts are put in the category of “news.” It is inadmissible for their editorial policy to publish Russian propagandistic materials.

Editor of GHN, Gocha Mirtskhulava explains that editorial content is not separated from the materials put “in frames of information service”. However, the text mentions which particular agency they are referring to. Moreover, they do not refrain from publishing materials that are critical towards their clients. It is inadmissible for GHN’s editorial policy to write about privacy issues as well as to allocate space to pro-Russian politicians.

The editorial board of Info 9 refused to give either written or face-to-face interviews. So, the report does not contain any information about their editorial policy. Below there is an example revealed in the process of monitoring, when the financed article was posted on the website without an advertising symbol. In particular:

⁶² <http://bit.ly/1PeMOi6>
⁶³ <http://bit.ly/22JZ4Pn>
⁶⁴ <http://bit.ly/1RVETpG>

On November 12, 2015⁶⁵, Info 9 news agency published information with a headline “China Southern Airlines Holds Presentation on New Tbilisi-Urumqi Flight”. The material, which involved the opinions voiced by the heads of marketing departments of Georgian Civil Aviation Agency and China Southern Airlines, had no advertising symbol. According to the contract signed between the Economy Ministry’s United Airports of Georgia and Info 9, as well as a delivery receipt dated November 30, 2015, the material posted on the news agency’s website on November 12 was ordered by the United Airports of Georgia.

Prohibition of the Use of Administrative Resources in Pre-election Period

The Election Code of Georgia prohibits the abuse of administrative resources in support or against any political party, candidate for election subject or election subject in the period of pre-election agitation and campaign. Subparagraph “b” of Paragraph 1 of Article 48 of the Code prohibits the use of means of communication, information services and other kinds of equipment designated for the bodies of state authority and local self-government, as well as organizations funded from the Georgian state budget (except for political parties).

According to the above provision, the use of information service, designated for a public institution, for electoral aims is prohibited. Where media information service is not used for public interest but serves aims of a concrete political party, election subject, the use of such service will be deemed the abuse of administrative resources even in case when the contract on the provision of such service has been signed before the start of the pre-election period.

According to Paragraph 6 of Article 49 of the Election Code, in the course of pre-election campaign, production of such agitation, video- or audio materials, creation of the website or its part, through funds allocated from state/local budget, in which/where any election subject/political party or a number assigned to him/her/it during elections is reflected, and/or which comprise materials in support/against any election subject/political party shall be prohibited. Utilization of an election subject/political party or a number assigned to him/her/it during elections in public service announcement in the course of the same period through funds allocated by state/local self-government unit budget shall be prohibited.

⁶⁵ <http://www.info9.ge/ekonomika/biznrsi/133018>