

# GUIDELINES FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN IN ELECTIONS ONLINE

Case Study: Georgia

Ingrid Bicu

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Disclaimer: Due to limited data availability, the gender disaggregation in this publication is limited to men and women.

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For more information please contact  
The Delian Project  
c/o The Centre for Social Innovation  
192 Spadina Ave, Suite 300  
Toronto, ON M5T 2C7, Canada  
[info@delianproject.org](mailto:info@delianproject.org)

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## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgments.....   | 4  |
| Foreword .....   | 5  |
| Introduction.....  | 6  |
| Women in elections .....   | 8  |
| Roles and rights .....   | 8  |
| Statistics and trends .....  | 9  |
| Barriers.....  | 13 |
| The online environment: rights and wrongs.....   | 16 |
| Benefits.....  | 16 |
| Online aggression and disinformation: the gender dimension.....  | 17 |
| Case study: Gender-based disinformation in the online environment in Georgia .....                                     | 21 |
| Conclusion.....  | 33 |
| References and further reading.....  | 34 |
| Annexes.....   | 41 |
| Annex 1. Definitions and key aspects of harmful practices targeting women in the online environment.....               | 41 |
| Annex 2. Statistics on various forms of digital aggression targeting women in politics.....                            | 52 |
| Annex 3. Analysis of the Georgian CEC Facebook page during the term in office of the most recent three CEC chairs..... | 53 |
| Annex 4. About the author .....  | 57 |
| Annex 5. About the Delian Project.....   | 57 |

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## Foreword

The reality of disinformation during elections is nothing new, with propaganda dating as far back as ancient Greece. What is unprecedented, however, is the scope and speed with which contemporary disinformation can be spread via unregulated social media, and other online platforms. All too often, election related disinformation disproportionately targets women based on their gender as opposed to profession.

The enclosed Guidelines for Empowering Women in Elections Online is based on extensive research surrounding gender-based election disinformation, with a focus on elections in the country of Georgia. Lead researcher Ms Ingrid Bicu and her Canadian colleagues at the Delian Project spent the better part of 2020 and 2021 studying and supporting the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia with building disinformation threat resilience. These efforts were kindly enabled through Global Affairs Canada's Promotion of Democracy Fund.

It is hoped the recommendations listed in these guidelines will assist the CEC in mitigating the effects of gender-based disinformation during future elections in Georgia, and elsewhere. By empowering women online, greater resilience can be built to counter the negative effects of election disinformation. We owe it to the next generation to try.

### **Jean-Pierre Kingsley**

Senior Project Patron

Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, 1990-2007

Ottawa, Canada

## Introduction

In recent years, efforts to advance gender equality have been negatively impacted by several factors, including [the Covid-19 pandemic](#) (Brechenmacher and Hubbard 2020) and [rising authoritarianism](#) (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Global State of Democracy Report 2021), facilitated by an increasingly harmful online environment.

Foreign and domestic actors, including political leaders and private individuals, have on occasions sought to invoke fear against a perceived threat or adversary. The threat is often a topic that may be divisive in a society emanating from cultural differences, such as so-called '*traditional values*'. The intention is to increase social and political polarization to galvanise support for a personal, often undemocratic political agenda. The effect of such action on women and other traditionally marginalized groups are [catastrophic](#) (Thornton 2021). Social media platforms and their multiplication algorithms play a central role in the implementation and proliferation of such harmful strategies used by malign actors. The [meaningful participation and representation](#) of all societal groups in democratic institutions and processes (Cordenillo and Gardes 2013) is vital for countering these practices, which [are proving to be damaging for democracy](#) (Di Meco and Wilfore 2021).

Electoral management bodies (EMBs) play an essential role in promoting women's equal representation and participation across the entire electoral cycle (UN Women and UNDP 2015). However, limited information exists on the professional positions that women hold in these institutions, as well as measures to promote gender equality and inclusiveness within them. [Recent research](#) by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA, Bicu 2022) indicates that only a small number of EMBs worldwide are currently being chaired by women.

Various societal, economic, and historical factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in public life and in positions of professional seniority in EMBs or other institutions. The online space – social media platforms in particular – play an increasingly relevant role in perpetuating women's underrepresentation. A number of studies exist on the impact of online aggression against women in politics. However, the effect of such behaviour towards women in the leadership of public institutions regulating electoral politics have

rarely been addressed. This publication aims to provide context-driven guidelines for enabling women in the electoral administration of Georgia to benefit from the online space while minimizing the risks they are exposed to when attempting to do so.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the information environment around elections, relating to the benefits and challenges for women holding various positions in this field. The second part of the paper focuses on context-specific aspects to Georgia. It explores the malign behaviour the online platforms' users utilise to target women in electoral management. The analysis includes a focus on the profile of the perpetrators, their most often used narratives, primary targets and pursued objectives, and impact. The evidence gathered has informed a series of recommendations intended to encourage and support the safe presence of women in the online environment.

# Women in elections

## Roles and rights

Globally, the number of countries governed by authoritarian regimes is increasing, often underpinned by political actors that exploit anti-democratisation strategies centred on gender-based discrimination. Gender-based violence has increased exponentially over the recent years, encouraged by legislation in some countries (e.g., India, Russia, Turkey) that has curtailed pre-existing punishment, or even the decriminalisation of acts of violence against women (International IDEA 2021). Women often risk their [freedom](#) (DW) and [their lives](#) (Ben Wedeman and Kareem Khadder 2019) to participate in, and lead movements supporting democracy across the globe (e.g., Belarus, Myanmar, South Sudan).

The online environment has created a series of new challenges while scaling-up the ones already present in society. The social media platforms were initially regarded as one of the greatest opportunities for women, marginalised people, and vulnerable groups to enhance their participation and inclusion in public life. According to the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#), "digital technologies provide new means to exercise human rights, but they are too often used to violate human rights", which highlights online harassment as a primary concern.

The right and opportunity for all individuals to engage and contribute to the functioning of democratic institutions and processes should be guaranteed to every citizen, regardless of their social identity, including gender. Considering the global encroachment of authoritarianism, ensuring a safe environment, both online and offline, for the participation of women and other historically marginalized groups in political and public life is of increasing importance. Women should be able to realise their fundamental rights to gender equality and equality of opportunity, both offline and in the online environment.

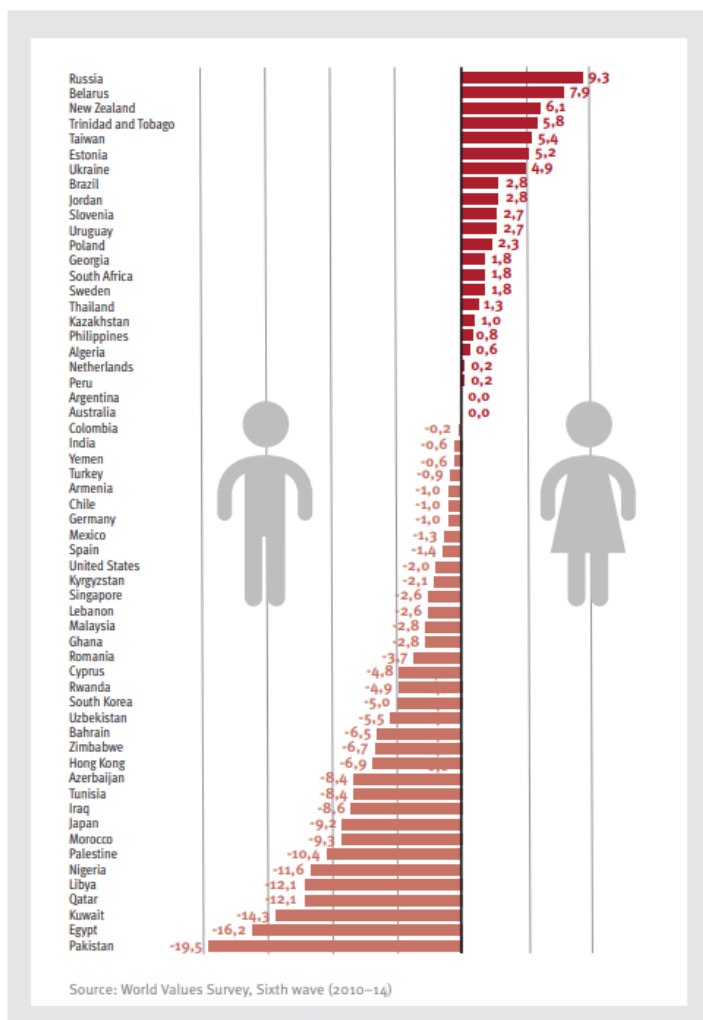
Examples in public life where women and men should have equal opportunities to fulfil their fundamental political and civil rights:

- Voters: the right to vote;
- Candidates: the right to run for elected office;



- Political party members and supporters: freedom of assembly, freedom of association;
- Civil society activists and representatives: freedom of speech;
- Electoral officials: the right of access to public services;
- Journalists: freedom of expression;
- Influencers: freedom of opinion.

## Statistics and trends



Notes: The figure shows the differences between the percentage of female and male respondents who answered 'always' to the question: "Do you vote in national elections?" Data were collected from 58 countries.

Globally, gender-disaggregated data on the primary activities in the electoral cycle, such as voting rights or voter turnout, is not recorded in many countries across the globe (UNDP and UN Women 2012). Disaggregated data is essential for highlighting trends, informing approaches to mitigate shortcomings, and identifying areas of intervention to address gender inequalities in electoral processes.

Research conducted on the topic (Solijanov 2016) relies on data from World Values Survey (2010–2014), which indicates minor differences between men and women regarding voter participation when analysed on a global scale.

Figure 1. The difference in voter participation between men and women by country  
Source: International IDEA (Solijanov 2016) using World Values Survey, Sixth wave (2010–14)

The country-level disaggregation (Figure 1.) reveals important differences between men and women participating in elections as voters.

A [survey](#) conducted by UN Women between 2011-2012 – the most recent resource on the number of EMBs maintaining gender-disaggregated statistics for internal staff – indicates that only 34 per cent of the countries analysed record such data.

Global research conducted by International IDEA (Bicu 2022) sought to bridge the gap on gender-disaggregated data regarding EMB leaders' gender. The research illustrates a significant disparity between the number of men and women in senior management positions in EMBs worldwide. Twenty-two per cent of EMBs are chaired by women, with a slight correlation between regime type in favour of those classified as democracies (Figure 2).

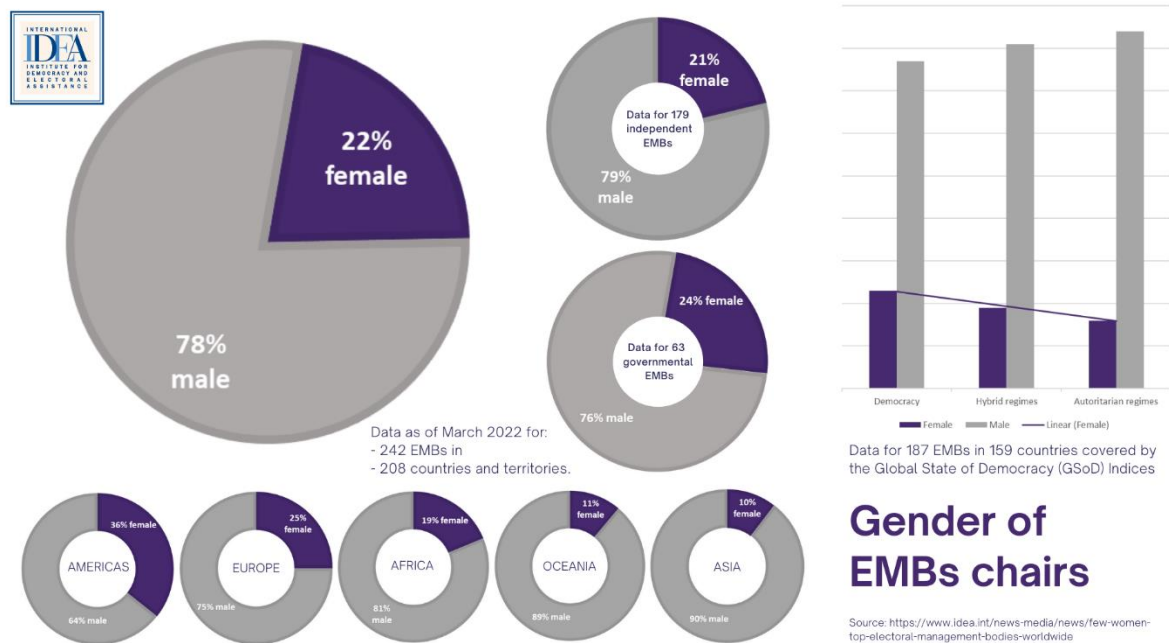


Figure 2. Gender of EMBs' chairs across the world, March 2022  
Source: International IDEA

Global rankings of women in executive and government positions developed by [the Inter-Parliamentary Union \(IPU\) - UN Women 2021](#) (Figure 3.) indicates that the number of women holding senior or leadership positions in state institutions (i.e., parliaments, governments) was at the highest point ever recorded. However, women continue to be poorly represented in decision-making positions in politics and public life and reaching gender parity in some of these institutions may take more than a century to be achieved.

At the current pace of reform, it will take 130 years from 2021, until gender parity is reached at the level of head of state and/or prime minister and 45 years will pass until the parity will be reached for ministerial positions. Only 10 countries had women heads of state and 13 countries had women heads of government, while only 21 per cent of government ministries were led by women ([UN Women](#)).

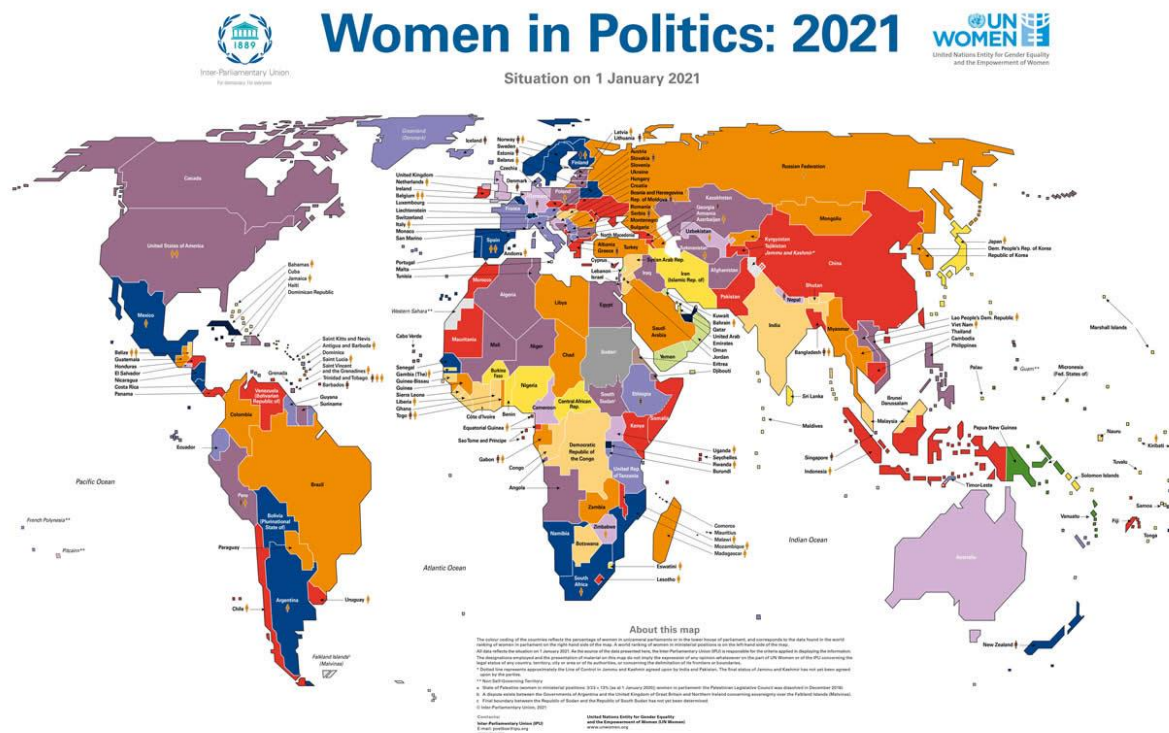


Figure 3. Women in politics, 1 January 2021  
Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women

Globally, similar rates of disparity exist for the number of women members of parliament. Only 26 per cent of elected parliamentarians worldwide are women, with Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu not having a single woman among member of parliament (International IDEA 2021). It is estimated that parity in parliaments would be reached in 48 years if the trajectory of change continues at the current rate.

[Half of countries worldwide](#) (Global Database of Quotas for Women, International IDEA) have introduced an electoral quota aimed at enhancing gender parity among parliamentarians. [Seventy per cent of the countries](#) (Hamada 2021) provide direct public funding to political parties, but only 17 per cent provide gender-targeted public funding to promote women's political participation.

Since 1995, women's average participation in civil society organizations (CSOs) has marginally increased, with almost no progress at all in Europe ([The Global State of Democracy In focus 2020](#), International IDEA).

Women's representation in the leadership of news media is also lacking in relation to that of men. [Research](#) (Byerly and McGraw 2020) highlights differences in media coverage in publications where women are top editors, versus men. A [study](#) conducted by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Robertson et al. 2021) across 240 online and offline outlets in 12 countries from 4 continents, shows that of 180 top editors, only 22 per cent are women. Forty per cent of the journalists in the analysed countries are women.

## Barriers

The level of participation of women across the electoral cycle remains low all over the world. Women in different capacities or aspiring to different roles in elections are facing various [barriers](#) (Gender and Elections, ACE Project 2019) of a social, cultural, political and economic nature, often intersectional, both online and offline. Some of them apply generally, with contextual variations, while others are specific for the roles in discussion.

Women aspiring to decision-making positions in politics and elections often must overcome numerous obstacles. Such obstacles include: limited access to financial resources, education and information, unfavourable legal frameworks, a men-dominated political landscape, gender-based stereotypes, a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities, a shrinking of civic space, violence and discrimination, conflict, and inexistent or inappropriate protection measures.

An important aspect that needs to be considered is the convergence of oppressive factors resulting from the overlap, or intersection, of different social identities, which applies in most contexts. People with multiple social identities face compounding [discrimination](#) (UN Women 2020). For example, a young woman with disabilities belonging to a racial or ethnic minority, living in a geographically isolated community represents the case of multiple layers of overlapping vulnerabilities, putting her into a significantly disadvantaged position within the society.

The lack of access to the online environment represents another significant barrier to women's full and effective participation in political and electoral life. This is an important factor considering the shift to the online space in recent years, which has been accelerated by the pandemic, where various activities in social and political life have, at least partially, moved online. The online accessibility limitations are usually associated with limited economic resources, a lack of digital skills, and education.

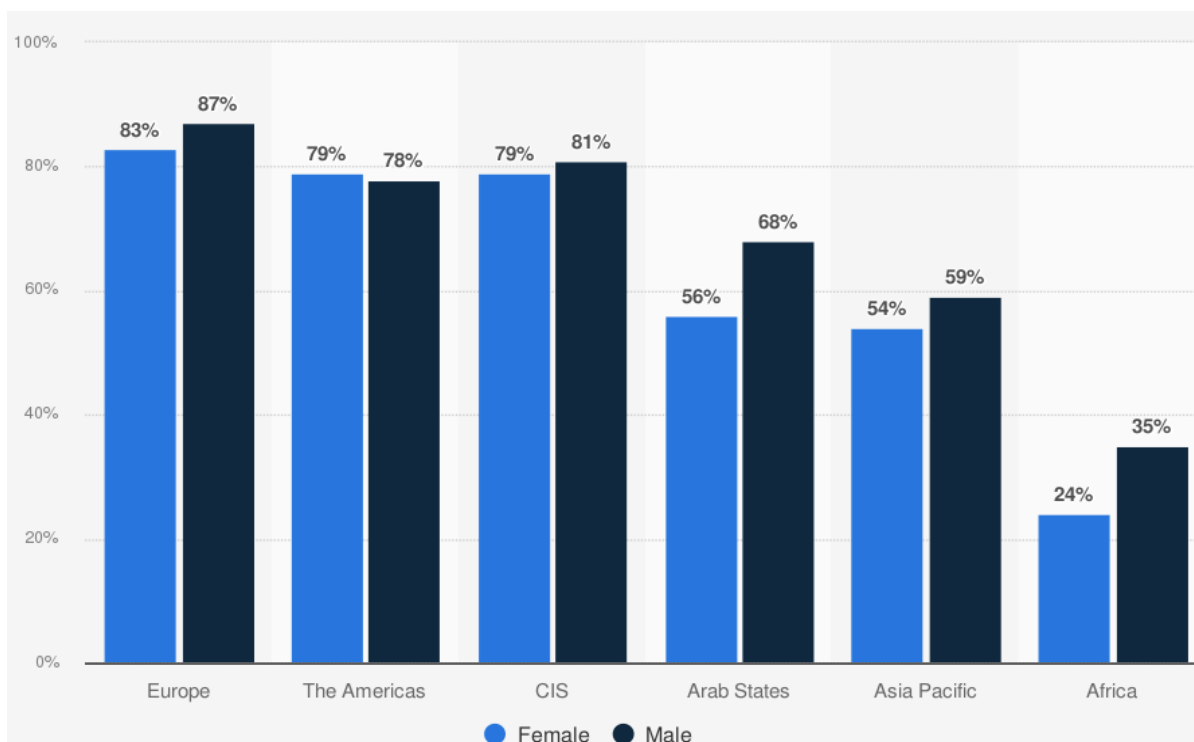


Figure 4. Internet usage rate worldwide in 2020, by gender and region.  
Source: Statista 2022

Almost 35 per cent of the world's population does not have access to the Internet ([Internet World Stats 2021](#)), with historically marginalized segments of the population most severely impacted. Among the groups at risk of being "left behind" are women (half of the world's population), youth (16 per cent to 18 per cent), persons with disabilities (one billion people, or 15 per cent of the world's population, [World Bank](#)), indigenous people (6 per cent of the world population, [World Bank](#)), racial, sexual and gender, national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. Disparities between men's and women's Internet usage can be observed in most regions (Figure 4.), while in 1 out of every 3 countries, more men use the Internet than women (UN [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#)).

Access to the online environment is also restricted as a result of abusive limitations to freedom of expression and access to information by the authorities in various states through the form of Internet shutdowns ([AccessNow 2020](#)).

The gender gap currently exists also in relation to women's use of social media as [compared to previous years](#), when women were outnumbering men on most of the platforms. While the digital divide may be a cause, the lower number of women users compared to men could also be a consequence of the harassment and disproportionately negative experience women are exposed to in the online environment. [Statistics](#) (Data Reportal Digital 2022: Global Overview Report via Statista) show that men outnumber women users on the most used platforms.

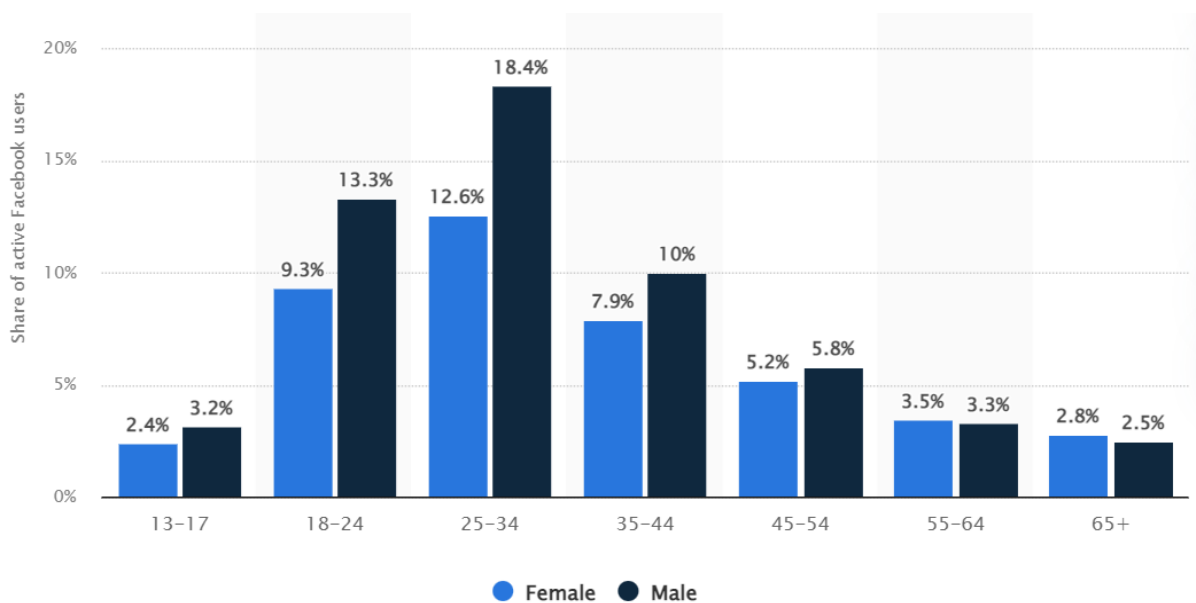


Figure 5. Distribution of Facebook users worldwide as of January 2022, by age and gender: 56.6 per cent of men users and 43.4 per cent women users Source: Data Reportal January 2022 via Statista

On Facebook, men use the platform at an incidence of 13.2 per cent more than women (Figure 5). Men also represent the majority of users on LinkedIn and Twitter, while Instagram reported an approximately equal number of men and women users.

## The online environment: rights and wrongs

### Benefits

For important segments of the population, including women, the opportunity to participate in the political and social life of their communities is enhanced through the online environment. Social media platforms provide at no (direct) cost a space for women to make their voices heard and overcome marginalization. Their features and algorithms facilitate the human rights issues women are facing in various parts of the world to be highlighted and elevated to a global audience. Furthermore, social media enable support to be rallied for women's equality. The online also facilitates civic and political education, contributing to overcoming one of the main barriers against women's participation in political leadership.

As the number of people using the Internet for information on social and political topics has [substantially increased](#) over the past years (Data Reportal Digital 2022: Global Overview Report), online media and especially social media has become an important medium for political communications. Through their bidirectional communication features, social media platforms facilitate media coverage and access to information, while creating an open forum for debate and discussion on different matters, where physical barriers preventing women from participating do not exist.

Most politicians understand how to use social media platforms for engaging with the electorate and political competitors. They also recognize its potential for rallying support for their electoral campaigns. It was demonstrated (Yarchi 2018) that social media provides greater opportunities for women politicians to promote their campaigns. Their posts on online platforms can generate "[significantly](#)" more user engagement compared to men candidates during electoral campaigns (Yarchi and Samuel Azran 2018).



## Online aggression and disinformation: the gender dimension

The benefits of using the online space has been progressively overshadowed by the increasing number, intensity, and complexity of the digital manifestation of aggression women experience offline. What initially started as a promising driving force for positive change for women at societal, organizational, and individual levels, has gradually turned into one of the main barriers to gender equality across the electoral cycle. The physical obstacles partially overcome with the development of the [web 2.0](#) communication technologies were eventually replaced with psychological barriers, which also have implications outside of the online environment.

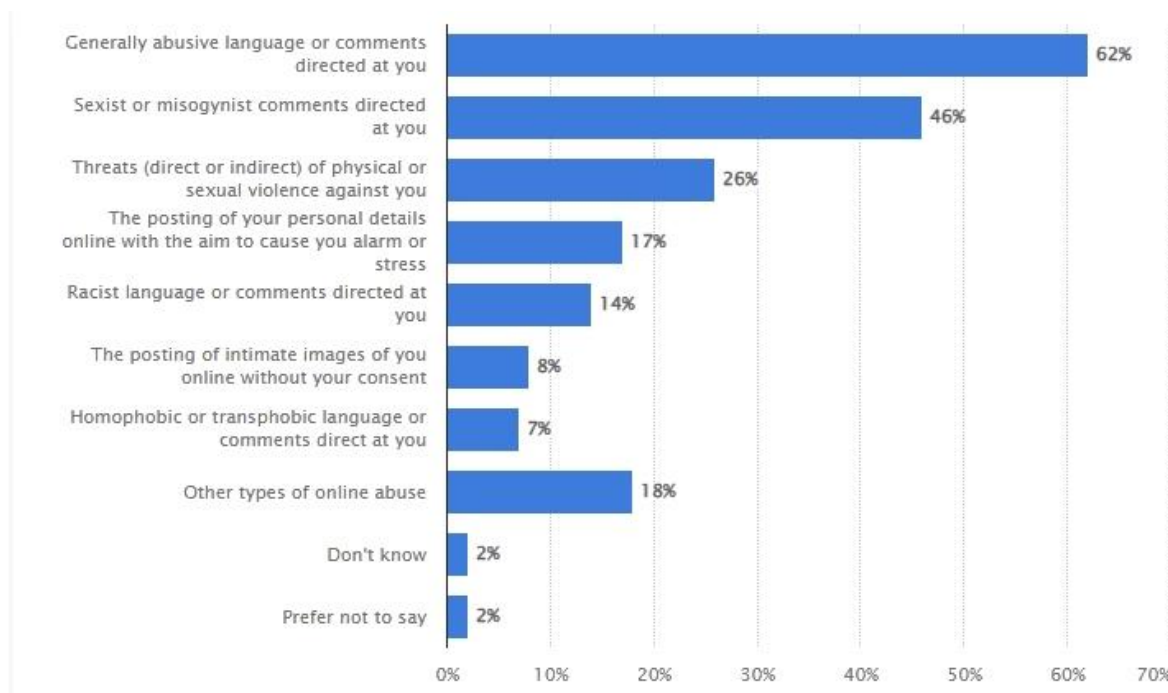


Figure 6. Most common types of online abuse or harassment experienced by women worldwide, November 2017  
Source: Statista

These malign practices also target men, but to a [lesser extent](#) (Nadim and Fladmoe 2019) and with different [narratives](#) (National Democratic Institute 2021). In the case of women, perpetrators frequently exploit societal stereotypes, recur to misogyny and sex-based content (Figure 6.), and spread false information to create a distorted perception of women's capacity to perform in different areas traditionally dominated by men.

Women in elections are targeted in the online environment by (gender-based) disinformation, hate speech, discrimination, sexual objectification, and a wide range of other malign practices which are mutually reinforcing, adding to the other elements of vulnerability already existing in the social profile of a person.

Harmful online behaviour disproportionately targeting women are included in Annex 1. While a consensus on the definitions for several of these terms is yet to be reached, a series of key factors identified in the various proposed definitions have been extracted. One of the findings refers to the fact that other than disinformation, most of the other types of online aggression target mainly individuals or groups. Disinformation can also target institutions and processes. Therefore, women in elections may be targeted simultaneously and disproportionately by various abusive and degrading practices, in parallel to broader disinformation campaigns and influence operations meant to negatively impact the entities they are associated with or the activities they handle.

Data from various studies (Annex 2) demonstrate the bad treatment women in politics experience online. In addition, such treatment has become a barrier for their meaningful participation in decision-making positions across the electoral cycle. On a professional level, women's credibility is being undermined, their voices are silenced, and they are discouraged from acceding to leadership positions in the electoral and political environment. Malign behaviours on social media were cited by women in countries such as Colombia, India and the United Kingdom as the main reason for renouncing high visibility roles in politics ([iKNOW Politics 2020](#)).

The impact of these deeply harmful practices is strongly felt on a personal level as well. Women's political and civil rights are curtailed (i.e., the right to run for elected office, freedom of expression). Women are also susceptible to [psychological trauma](#) (Roseen and Singh, 2018). This incapacitates the persons for a period of time and makes them incapable of performing their public office duties. Ultimately, online attacks can also lead to physical violence (UN Women 2018).

It is not just women as individuals and the activities they pursue that are affected. The objectives of such practices range from destabilizing democracies, contributing to backsliding strategies, gaining political capital, eliminating electoral adversaries,

promoting beliefs, to obtaining financial incentives, and are even being undertaken for entertainment purposes. Women are often used within these strategies as instruments for manipulating public opinion.

The features of online platforms, including the possibilities of anonymization (fake accounts), make the identification of the sources of aggression difficult. The actors are as diverse as the objectives pursued. However, considering the mechanisms of manipulation online, they culminate in a mutually reinforcing outcome. Research largely indicates domestic perpetrators, predominantly in the political sphere, as initiators of attacks on women in politics (Caucasus Research Resource Center 2020) in the online space. State-sponsored, domestically coordinated campaigns against women were documented in countries such as Poland and the Philippines. The narratives adopted can be picked up organically by other users, but in many cases dissemination is artificially stimulated by "cyber troops" of trolls. [Research](#) by the Oxford Internet Institute (2020) identifies 81 countries where coordinated social media manipulation campaigns, including disinformation "produced at industrial scale" in a "professional" manner, were unfolding. In 62 countries the implication of state entities was identified while in 61 countries these practices were part of the political communication of electoral competitors. The intense activity of organized influencers suppresses other voices on social media, including the ones of women.

There is limited research on the measures implemented so far and their impact. Research and consensus is lacking, primarily regarding the practices themselves, which as a result limited the capacity to develop tailored interventions to combat them. However, a frequent mistake identified offline with applicability online in addressing these issues is approaching each category individually, without an intersectional perspective.

Regulatory attempts exist in several countries, but they mainly target offline aggression and political violence (e.g., Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, South Africa, and Thailand). Physical violence is however only one component of the intimidation women must confront when engaging in political processes; non-physical types of oppression, such as harassment or online abuse, are more common in undermining women's participation (Krook and Restrepo Sanin, 2019). So-called 'soft regulation', such as codes of conduct have been documented (Kenya) with limited information on their impact. The lack of

proper regulation and enforcement systems, which results in impunity for the aggressors, represents one of the main drawbacks in addressing online gender-based disinformation and aggression against women in various roles across the electoral cycle.

Measures to support victims of online harassment and aggression and build resilience against such practices are limited as well. Finland is an exception where officials and media representatives have developed a [system to support victims](#) of foreign state-sponsored harassment, whether they are journalists or with other public profiles. Applied at a broader scale such a system would include, among other things, a telephone 'hotline' for reporting aggression, psychological and legal assistance, rapid intervention mechanisms by the legal authorities, as well as cooperation mechanisms with relevant public and private entities (Lucas 2020).

Social media platforms, similar to many national state authorities or even regional organizations, have been unable to enact measures that fit the dimension of the problem, especially considering the particularities of the challenges women in their different capacities are facing in the online environment.

The role of online platforms in cooperation with civil society organizations, fact-checkers, mainstream media, and other relevant state and private entities is to sustain a high-intensity effort to prevent online abuse targeting women engaged in elections and politics. A critical first approach, however, would be to expand public awareness.

*"So let me be clear: for women, violence is not a rightful or inevitable cost of participation in politics. Participation in politics is the way we end violence against women."*

**Madeleine K. Albright**

## Case study: Gender-based disinformation in the online environment in Georgia

The first part of the publication aimed to provide a global description of the malign practices that disproportionately target women across the electoral cycle. An important caveat, however, is that more research is required to adequately understand the dynamics and impact of such behaviour, and therefore inform targeted interventions. The data and analysis consolidated in the first section concerning the forms of online aggression, its means of manifestation, the most common narratives used, and the objectives pursued are based almost exclusively on research and experiences of women in politics. The perspective of women in electoral management is severely lacking because there is limited information available on the topic.

### *Recommendations:*

- › Research on the challenges faced by women in electoral management in Georgia, online and offline, at the local and national level.
- › Assess the specific needs of women in electoral management across each phase of the electoral cycle and in relation to all the electoral processes.
- › Ensure the meaningful representation of women at all the levels of the organizations involved in elections.
- › Include women in discussions and consultations on the challenges and opportunities in the online environment.

Electoral officials in prominent roles are targeted by (gender-based) disinformation with the intent to either discredit them as professionals, or as a tool to complement the strategies of undermining the credibility of the processes they manage (electoral processes) and the functional independence of the institutions they represent (EMBs). This in turn may result in weakening the pillars of democratic structures. Other forms of online aggression targeting women in electoral management include (but are not limited to) intimidation and threats, humiliation, or devaluation of work.

The case study aims to shed some light on the particularities of gendered disinformation and other types of digital aggression targeting women in electoral management in Georgia, as well as on the impact of these practices on EMBs and elections.

*Recommendation:*

- › [Assess the risks posed by the malign online practices targeting women in electoral management from a broader perspective, including the potential effect on rights holders' trust in electoral processes and EMBs, and consider resilience building measures adjusted from this perspective.](#)

Manipulation of public opinion using social media remains of great concern across the world, particularly considering its impact on democracy. It is important that the EMBs have a good perspective on the broader information ecosystem and in relation to the national context, to be able to consolidate their resilience to such strategies.

*Recommendations:*

- › [Ensure a contextualized understanding of the implications of the malign behaviours in the online environment against women in electoral management in Georgia.](#)
- › [Develop a background analysis including the mapping of country's electoral and media environment.](#)

The geopolitical background and cultural context are two essential elements that influence the information environment in a country. Georgia is a western-orientated [mid-range performing democracy](#) (Global State of Democracy Indices, International IDEA 2020) situated between Europe and Asia. Georgia gained independence with the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in 1991. Since then, two major conflicts have occurred on its territory (Abkhazia 1992-1993: OSCE Abkhazia [Report](#) and South Ossetia 2008: OSCE South Ossetia [Report](#)). Despite these challenges, Georgia has progressively [consolidated](#) its democratic institutions. Paramount to its emergence as a democratic state has been the ability to deliver multiple elections aligned with [international standards](#) (International IDEA 2002).

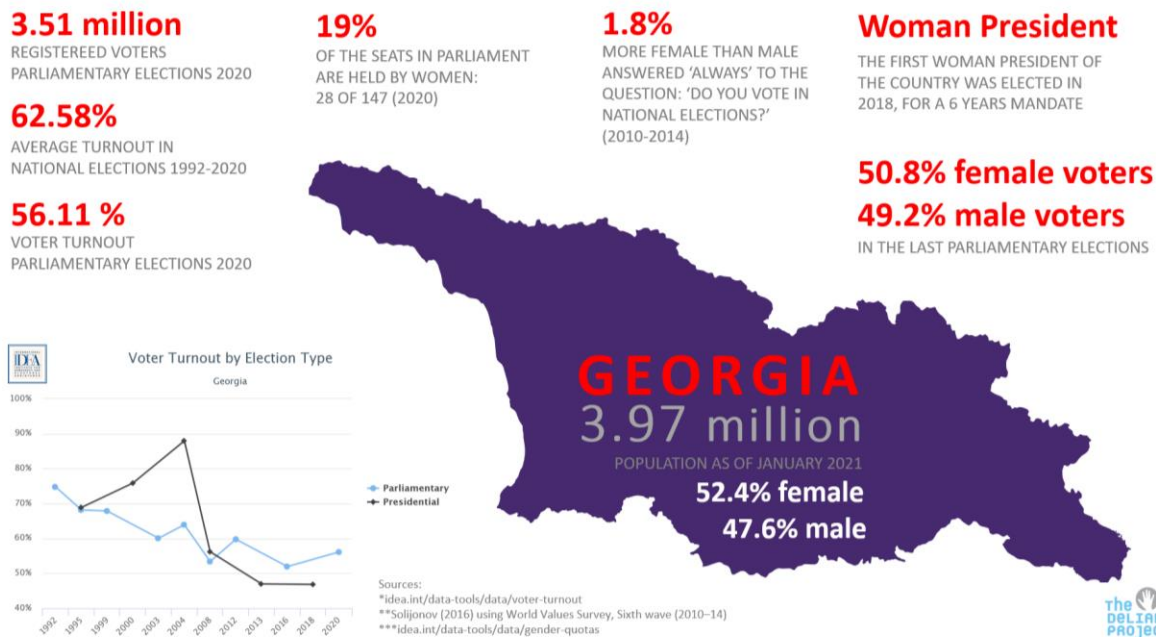


Figure 7. Georgian electoral profile  
 Source: Compiled by the author, using the sources mentioned in the infographic.

Georgia is also [working](#) towards achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5 - *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls* - with support and guidance from international organizations. The country is an example of good practice compared to the global average on several aspects related to encouraging women's meaningful participation in elections and politics.

- The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia, the national EMB maintains a gender-disaggregated [database](#) on various key aspects across the electoral cycle, including statistics on its staff (58 per cent of the CEC's election workforce are women), voter turnout (50.8 per cent of voters in the last parliamentary elections were women), and registered voters. The database was established in 2014.
- The CEC of Georgia adopted a Gender Equality Policy and integrated a gender perspective across its various programmes in 2016.
- The CEC of Georgia is among the founding members of the International Association of Women in Electoral Management Bodies (WEM-International, 2018),

together with the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova and The Centre for Continuous Electoral Training - CICDE (the initiators of the project), the Central Elections Commission of Latvia and the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania. The mission of the organization is to promote and support gender equality across all electoral activities.

- An information protection centre to identify and mitigate election disinformation was piloted by the CEC of Georgia with the support of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Most of the barriers to women's political participation worldwide exist in Georgia, which is illustrated by the low representation of women at various levels of state structures. As is the case globally, women who do reach such positions in the Georgian electoral landscape face additional challenges online and offline.

While older democracies have not established structurally independent EMBs to organise elections, newer democracies such as Georgia were often guided towards establishing [separate institutions for managing elections](#) (Joseph 2021), intended to protect their functional independence from political interference.

However, the functional independence that is manifested through impartiality among other required attributes, has been repeatedly challenged in Georgia through disinformation and discreditation campaigns against the former woman chair of the Central Election Commission. This is an important point that reveals the uniqueness of the roles the electoral officials fulfil in the political and electoral landscape of their country. It is relevant for the particularities of disinformation and aggression strategies that target them, as well as for the development of prevention and countermeasures.

*Recommendations:*

- › [Protect the functional independence of the Georgian EMB and expose attempts to compromise it through attacks targeting its senior officials.](#)
- › [Tailor the protection measures aimed at the electoral officials with a gender lens and from an intersectional perspective, also considering the particularities of the online environment.](#)



This paper focuses on the online environment; however, it is important to recognise that the offline continues to play a significant role. Online and offline media reinforce each other in coordinated disinformation and smear campaigns.

This was the case for the former woman chair of the Georgian CEC, Ms Tamar Zhvania, particularly during the most recent parliamentary elections in the country (2020). The highly politicized media environment played an important role. More than one hundred television channels broadcast in Georgia at the national and local levels, with most politically affiliated.

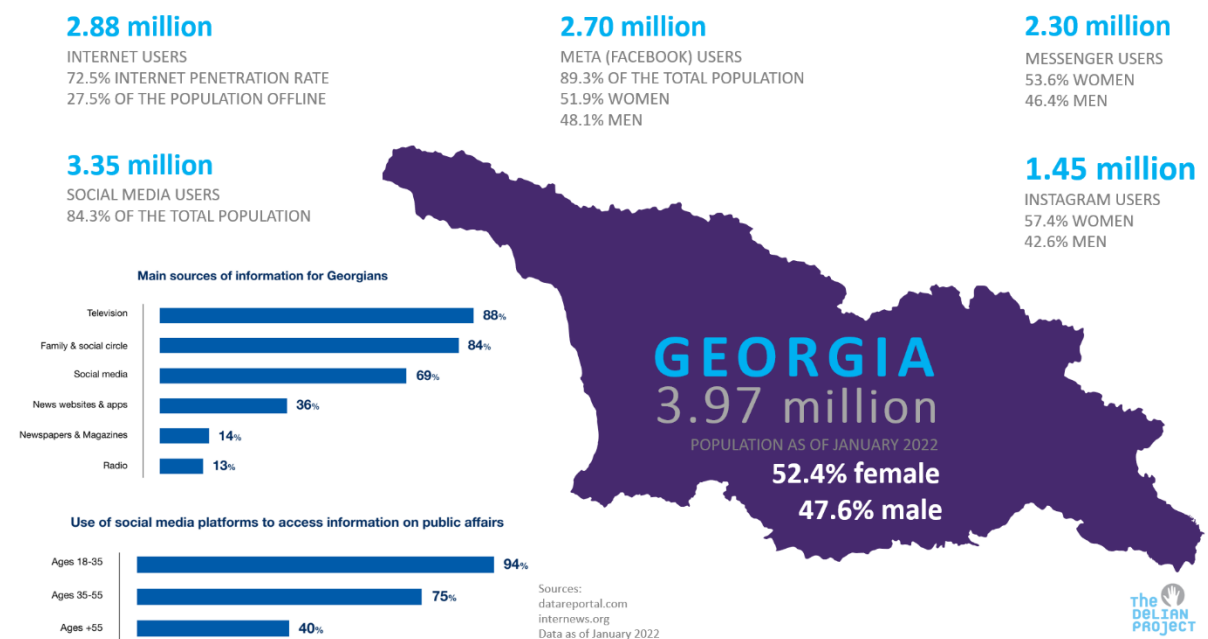


Figure 8. Georgian media profile.

Source: Compiled by the author, using the sources mentioned in the infographic.

Traditional media is of particular interest in Georgia, where 88 per cent of the population uses television as the main source of information on public affairs (Figure 8.). While the disinformation and other types of aggression targeting the then woman CEC chair was mainly spread online, much of the mainstream media did not counter the narratives, and in some cases, television channels contributed to its dissemination.

*Recommendations:*

- › Take evidence-based measures to protect women against disinformation and aggression, both in the traditional media and online. However, more research is needed globally on good practices in similar contexts to inform such measures.
- › Support independent, free, and reliable media considering their essential role towards a safe, disinformation and violence free environment on and offline.
- › Implement cooperation mechanisms with the relevant stakeholders to develop coordinated approaches to prevent and tackle disinformation and aggression targeting women in electoral management online.

To the extent where it could be verified, the perpetrators in the case of Ms Zhvania were mainly domestic politicians invoking the right to freedom of expression, but their narratives were subsequently picked up by social media users without obvious political affiliation. It is worth noting that Georgia is one of the 81 countries where cyber troops – trolls defined as “government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017) - were identified as being active in a report by the Oxford Internet Institute. This is corroborated by the evidence that most Georgian social media users (72 per cent - Internews 2021) consume the information they are exposed to rather than search for what they are interested in. Furthermore, it may explain the volume of negative reactions and the intensity of online aggression as well as disinformation targeting the woman chair of the Georgian CEC. The activity of the trolls was most probably enhanced by Facebook’s multiplication algorithms resulting in a highly efficient, and thus deeply damaging, campaign against the EMB’s chair during and after the 2020 parliamentary elections.

*Recommendations:*

- › Pursue political parties and other electoral stakeholders to commit to respecting codes of conduct for ensuring a safe environment for women in electoral management online and offline.
- › Develop interagency collaboration (van der Staak and Wolf 2019) and involve online platforms, trustworthy, reliable media and other relevant entities to early expose and dismantle such strategies.

Another popular and *trusted* way of sharing information in Georgia is through private discussions, both online and offline. Family, friends, and work colleagues are listed as the second most used source of information and 69 per cent of Georgians access social media platforms to gain information on public affairs. The younger population exceeds 90 per cent social media use, while 40 per cent of people 55 years of age or older are users of online social media platforms (Internews 2021). The number of men and women using social media in Georgia goes against the 2022 global trends. Data shows that women outnumber men on the most used platforms in the country (Figure 8).

*Recommendations:*

- › Partner with trusted media offline and online, and with social media platforms to enable people's priority access to primary, reliable sources of information considering the prevalence of private conversations as a means of information sharing, therefore ensuring that correct information is subsequently spread.
- › Develop education programmes to enhance media literacy and critical thinking skills.
- › Adapt the general communication plan to address the gendered disinformation issue.
- › Adjust the communication strategy on the topic based on the segmentation of the target audiences; consider criteria such as media consumption habits and language.
- › Make sure the information is accessible for individuals with various social identities.

The level of trust in the various actors in the information environment in Georgia is particularly salient for adopting measures to address disinformation and aggression against women in elections. Trust in Georgian institutions remains at low levels with political parties at the bottom of the rankings. The most trusted among the Georgian population is the church and the army ([Gilbreath and The Caucasus Datablog 2021](#)). This can influence public perception on women's roles in society with repercussions towards offline and online behaviours.

*Recommendations:*

- › Increase transparency and inclusiveness in electoral processes. Open up the electoral processes and institutions for the rights-holders to increase transparency and consolidate trust.
- › Use strategic communication to (re)build or consolidate trust in the EMB's capacity to deliver free and fair elections and also as a primary and reliable source of information on elections, and pre-empt influence operations and other malign practices online;
- › Team up with influencers across all sectors of the society as vectors of dissemination for awareness raising on the challenges women are facing online and their impact on different levels (personal, professional, organizational, societal).
- › Consider the level of trust different institutions enjoy among the population when directing the messages on the measures and the importance of ensuring a safe space online for women in electoral management.

Much of the disinformation in the Georgian social media ecosystem in connection to the EMBs (Annex 5) is disseminated in closed groups, therefore making it difficult to identify the operations at an early stage and react in a timely manner.

*Recommendation:*

- › Design and implement education programmes for political parties, media, and citizens to increase awareness on the challenges women in/aspiring to different positions across the electoral cycle are facing in the online environment and indicate the proper type of reaction to counter these malign practices by each category of public on social media platforms.

The campaign targeting Ms Zhvania was more aggressive on social media, likely because of the lack of regulations, oversight, and moderation of the content, as well as its potential to reach much broader audiences in a short period of time.

*Recommendations:*

- › Engage social media platforms in identifying and implementing context driven solutions in a timely manner (enhance content moderation, identify, and remove coordinated inauthentic behaviour, respond to aggression reports, adjust the human resources to the volume of incidents and make sure they hold the language skills).
- › Develop a regulatory framework where online aggression and disinformation are sanctioned, and an effective enforcement system is in place.

While the campaign of disinformation and discreditation was unfolding against Ms Zhvania in both online and offline media, her public Facebook wall was inundated with slanderous accusations and hate speech, while on Messenger, she received death threats and various threats of sexual violence. The attacks peaked in intensity during the post-electoral period, although they also existed during the pre-election and election phases. Some other CEC members were also targeted, but to a lesser extent and with different narratives.

The State Security Service of Georgia implemented protection measures for Ms Zhvania after the election day, possibly due to intelligence of potential threats to her physical safety.

*Recommendation:*

- › Provide specialized support (security measures, legal assistance, psychological support) to women in electoral management exposed to aggressions and threats online and ensure their physical protection when running the risk of being victims of offline violence.

An analysis on the type and number of reactions on the CEC Facebook page relating to posts published during the term in the office of the most recent two CEC chairs shows an increased number of negative reactions directed towards the woman chair of the Georgian EMB (See Annex 5 for a comprehensive social media analysis).

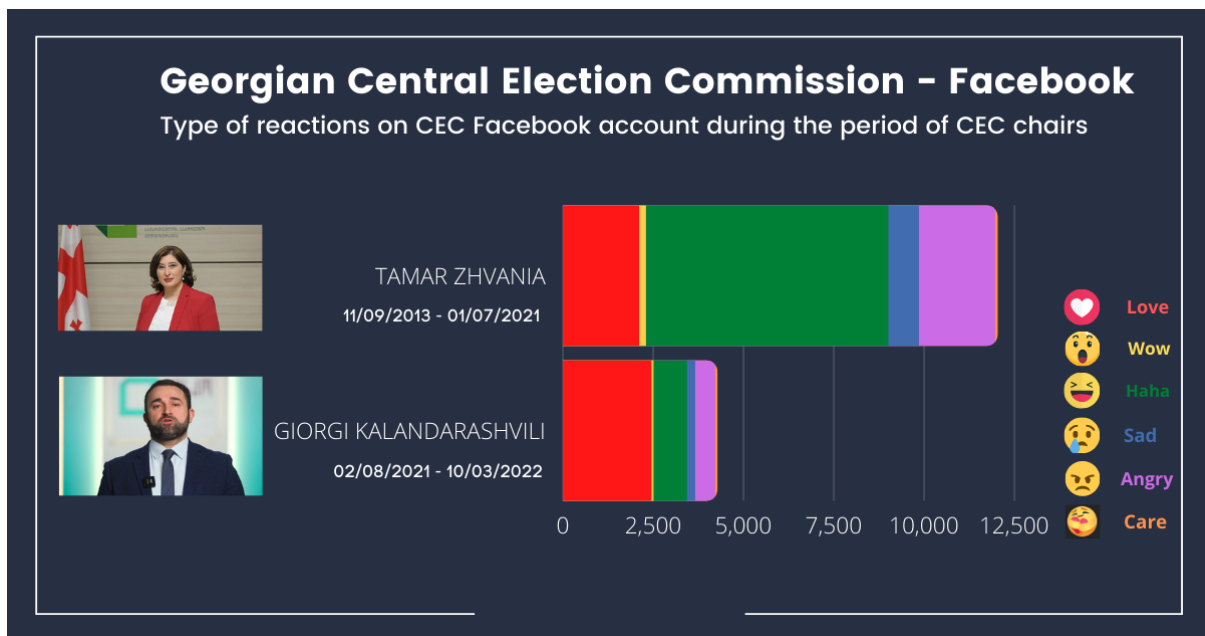


Figure 9. The types and numbers of reactions received by the CEC Facebook page for posts published during the term in office of the most recent two CEC chairs. The Facebook metadata was obtained using CrowdTangle<sup>1</sup>.

Tamar Zhvania (woman): 11 September 2013 – 1 July 2021 (2851 days), received 2 108 loves, 191 wows, 6 701 hahas, 846 sad faces, 2 106 angry faces, and 74 cares.

Giorgi Kalandarashvili (man): 2 August 2021 – Facebook data analysed until 10 March 2022 (221 days) received 2 442 loves, 60 wows, 921 hahas, 228 sad faces, 551 angry faces, and 64 cares.

<sup>1</sup> CrowdTangle is a social media analytics tool owned by Facebook. It 'tracks influential public accounts and groups on Facebook, Instagram and Reddit'. The tool does not track every public account and does not track private profiles or groups, so its data is not representative of performance across the entire platform. The data reflects public interactions (likes, reactions, comments, shares, upvotes and three second views) but does not include reach or referral traffic. It does not track ads unless those ads begin as organic, non-paid posts that are subsequently 'boosted' using Facebook's advertising tools. Because the system does not distinguish between paid and boosted content, some high-performing content may have had paid distribution. CrowdTangle also does not track posts made visible only to specific groups of followers (see Beakley n.d.).

During the 2 851 days Tamar Zhvania served as the CEC chair, from 11 September 2013 until 1 July 2021, the number of interactions on the CEC Facebook page grew from 533 in September 2013 to 17 666 in November 2021. This represented a total of 152 500 interactions with an average frequency rate of 27 interactions per day.

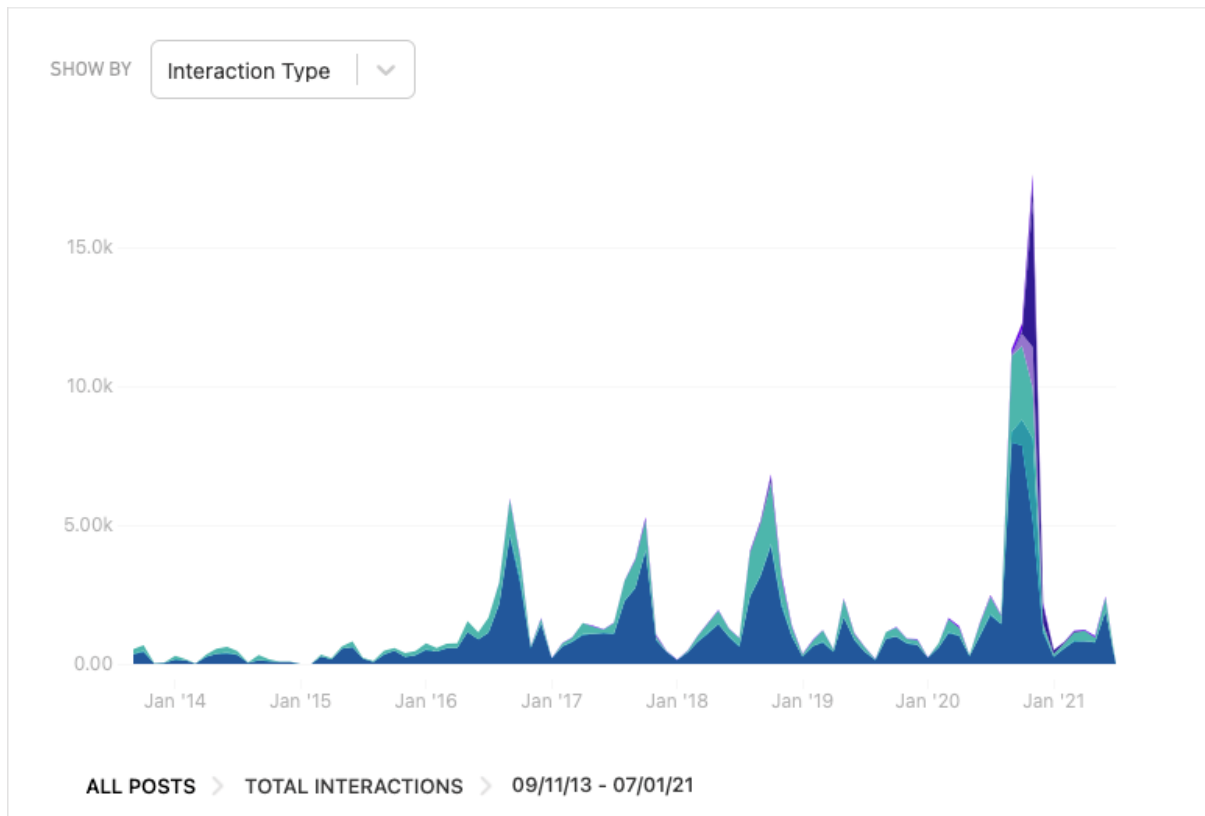


Figure 10. The evolution of the number of interactions on the CEC Facebook page during the term in office of Ms. Tamar Zhvania.

*"I was warned ahead of time that I would become the target of these attacks as a woman chair of the electoral body. The expectation was that since I am a woman, I am not strong enough and I'll decide to resign."*

**Ms Tamar Zhvania, former chair of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia, 2022.**

Eight months since the 2020 parliamentary elections, Ms Zhvania resigned from her position as chair of the Central Elections Commission of Georgia and continued her career internationally. At the time of writing, she serves as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) country director in Uzbekistan.

*"All this affected my willingness to continue as head of the CEC. I was very tired of fighting against this aggression.*

*My family members suffered as well, and my decision was also influenced by this aspect."*

**Ms Tamar Zhvania, woman, former chair of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia**



## Conclusion

The online targeting of women as recipients of various forms aggression, including (gender-based) disinformation and hate speech, both in politics and society continues to increase, particularly on unregulated social media platforms. While the instigators of gender-based disinformation can be difficult to identify, their messaging and tactics can be countered with the correct protocols and tools in place. This includes multi-layered education campaigns, collaboration with existing online platforms, media and government entities, and a collective "whole of society" approach towards safeguarding the integrity of elections.

As the case study in Georgia has demonstrated, gender-based disinformation and other forms of online aggression can seriously impact women in elections and electoral processes alike. While these malign practices cannot be entirely prevented, the negative effects can at least be mitigated through context-tailored measures, adopted and implemented in a collaborative manner, with the participation of all the relevant stakeholders.

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## Annexes

### Annex 1. Definitions and key aspects of harmful practices targeting women in the online environment

| Concept                             | Definition  | Source                          | Key aspects   |
|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|---|
| Abusive/<br>threatening<br>rhetoric | Violent threats -<br>"statements of an intent to kill or inflict serious physical harm on a specific person or group of people"   | Twitter 2019                    | - Involves expressing death threats or physical harm warnings   |
|                                     | Credible threat of violence -<br>"means intentionally saying something or acting in a way that would make a reasonable person afraid for his or her safety or the safety of his or her family"  | California Courts n.d.          | - Refers to statements or actions that could endanger a person or her/his family  |
| Astroturfing                        | "an organised activity that is intended to create a false impression of a widespread, spontaneously arising, grassroots movement in support of or in opposition to something (such as a political policy) but that is in reality initiated and controlled by a concealed group or organisation (such as a corporation)" | Merriam Webster Dictionary n.d. | - Involves initiating, controlling and coordinating multiple accounts<br>- Aims to create the distorted perception of widespread, spontaneously arising, grassroots movement<br>- Used either to express support of or in opposition to something |
|                                     | "the attempt to create an impression of widespread grassroots support for a policy, individual, or product, where little such support exists. Multiple online identities and fake pressure groups are used to mislead the public into believing that the position of the astroturfer is the commonly held view"         | Bienkov 2012                    | - Aims to create the perception of widespread, grassroots support for a policy, individual, or product<br>- Coordination of multiple online identities and fake groups  |
|                                     | "the dissemination or amplification of content (including abuse) that appears to arise organically at the grassroots level and spread, but is actually  | Pen America Organisation 2019   | - Relates to artificially disseminated and amplified content to give the impression of organic support<br>- Coordination of multiple online fake accounts   |

|                           |  |                               |   |
|---------------------------|--|-------------------------------|---|
|                           | coordinated (often using multiple fake accounts) by an individual, interest group, political party, or organization.   |                               |   |
| Cross-platform harassment | "When a harasser, or group of harassers, deliberately sabotages or invades multiple online spaces for the purposes of harassing a target. Cross-platform harassment is very effective because users are currently unable to report this scope and context of the harassment when they contact platforms, each of which will only consider the harassment happening on their own sites."                                    | Women's Media Center n.d.     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to invading multiple online spaces for chasing a target</li> <li>- Involves harassment and sabotage</li> <li>- Is effective due to lack of cooperation between platforms</li> </ul>                                     |
| Cyber-aggression          | <p>"a type of user who posts offensive comments and does not care about the psychological impact of his/her words, harming other users' feelings"</p> <p>Note: "Cyber-aggression is frequently used as a keyword in the literature to describe a wide range of offensive behaviours other than cyber-bullying (...) when cyber-aggression is constant, then it becomes cyber-bullying."</p>                                | Gutiérrez-Esparza et al. 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relates to offensive users</li> <li>- Implies harming others' feelings without caring</li> </ul>   |
| Cyber-bullying            | "the use of Information and Communications Technology between minors to humiliate, taunt and disparage one another. Cyberbullying is intended to tease, embarrass, deprecate & defame a targeted minor with the assailant's developmental needs for peer acceptance and recognition being a priori. Dissimilar to physical bullying, cyberbullying does not involve face-to-face contact and primarily occurs online using | Nuccitelli 2016               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to activities carried out by minors through ICT</li> <li>- Involves humiliation, taunts, disparagement, teasing, embarrassment, deprecation, and defaming</li> <li>- Pursues peer acceptance and recognition</li> </ul> |

|  |  |                               |  |
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|  | electronic devices as the tools for information dissemination."  |                               |  |
|  | "the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others".   | Belsey 2019                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Makes use of ICT</li> <li>- Refers to hostile behaviours intended to harm others</li> </ul>   |
|  | <p>"an aggressive intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using</p> <p>electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself"</p>   | Smith et al. 2008             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves repeated acts of aggression</li> <li>- Makes use of electronic mediums</li> </ul>  |
|  | <p>"any behaviour</p> <p>performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others"</p>  | Tokunaga 2010                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unfolds through electronic or digital media</li> <li>- Involves hostile and aggressive messages intended to harm or to create discomfort</li> </ul>   |
|  | "aggression or hate speech that takes place through short message service (SMS) or the Internet (e.g., in social media platforms)."  | Alotaibi 2021                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implies aggression and hate speech expressed through messages or on the Internet</li> </ul>   |
|  | "mainly characterized by the invasion of privacy, harassment, and use of obscene language against one user. Unlike bullying, cyber-bullying can happen 24/7, and the consequences for the victim can be more dramatic, because this not only creates insecurity, trust issues, and depression, but can also create suicidal thoughts with fatal consequences." | Gutiérrez-Esparza et al. 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Draws in privacy invasion, harassment, obscene language</li> <li>- Targets predominantly minors</li> <li>- Creates insecurity, trust issues, depression, or even suicidal thoughts</li> </ul> |

|                  |   |                           |   |
|------------------|---|---------------------------|---|
|                  | Note: "Cyber-bullying is often used interchangeably with trolling and other descriptors such as cyber-violence or online abuse." (Centre for Strategy & Evaluation Services 2018)   |                           |   |
| Cyber-harassment | "Cyber Harassment is the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to harass, control, manipulate or habitually disparage a child, adult, business or group without a direct or implied threat of physical harm. Unlike physical harassment involving face-to-face contact, cyber harassment requires the use of ICT and is verbal, sexual, emotional or social abuse of a person, group or organization. The cyber harasser's primary goal is to exert power and control over the targeted victim(s)" | Nuccitelli 2016           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Operates through the means of ICT</li> <li>- Implies harassment, control, and manipulation</li> <li>- Entails several forms of abuse: verbal, sexual, emotional, or social</li> <li>- Based on the aggressor-victim dynamic</li> </ul> |
| Defamation       | "when a person, or, sometimes, organized groups deliberately flood social media and review sites with negative and defamatory information."   | Women's Media Center n.d. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves the activity of one or more persons carried out on social media and/or on review sites</li> <li>- Focuses on disseminating negative and defamatory information</li> </ul>   |
| Deepfake         | The "use of a form of artificial intelligence called deep learning to make images of fake events"   | Sample 2020               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to the creation of images depicting fake events</li> <li>- Implies technical solutions comprising AI and deep learning</li> </ul>   |
| Discrimination   | "Treatment or creating the conditions when one person is treated less favourably than another person in a comparable situation based on any grounds, unless such treatment or creating such conditions serves the statutory purpose of maintaining public order and morals, has an objective and reasonable justification, and is necessary in a democratic society, and the means of achieving that  | Council of Europe 2021    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to the unjustified less favourable treatment applied to a person in a comparable situation</li> </ul>   |

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|                             | purpose are appropriate." (p. 20)  |                                 |   |
| Doxing                      | "to publicly identify or publish private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge"  | Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to publishing private information with the intent to harm</li> </ul>  |
|                             | "The unauthorised retrieval and publishing, often by hacking, of a person's personal information, including, but not limited to, full names, addresses, phone numbers, emails, spouse and children names, financial details. "Dox" is a slang version of "documents" or .doc. Causing fear, stress and panic is the objective of doxing, even when perpetrators think or say that their objective is "harmless." | Women's Media Center n.d.       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to publishing personal information</li> <li>- Might imply hacking</li> <li>- Intends to cause fear, stress and panic</li> </ul>   |
| Gender-based disinformation | "a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination"   | Jankowicz et al. 2021           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves some degree of coordination</li> <li>- Aims at deterring women from participating in the public sphere</li> <li>- Combines falsity, malign intent and coordination</li> <li>- Sex-based narratives</li> </ul> |
|                             | "the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women in politics, following story lines that often draw on misogyny and distrust of women in politics, frequently referring to their sexuality"   | Di Meco 2020                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Draws on misogyny</li> <li>- Gender bias narratives</li> <li>- Uses deceptive or inaccurate information</li> <li>- Refers to sexuality</li> </ul>  |
|                             | "information activities (creating, sharing, disseminating content) which attack or undermine people on the basis of their  | Judson et al. 2020              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uses information as a weapon</li> <li>- Gender bias narratives</li> <li>- Promotes gender injustice</li> </ul>   |

|             |  |                                    |   |
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|             | gender [and] weaponize gendered narratives to promote political, social, or economic objectives." (p.12)   |                                    |   |
|             | "makes use of existing gender narratives, language, and ultimately discrimination to achieve certain social and political goals, including maintaining gender inequality. It involves false information about persons or groups based on their gender identity (e.g., false claims about a woman's capacity or qualifications for political leadership)"         | Hankerson Madrigal and Thakur 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gender bias narratives</li> <li>- Maintains gender inequality</li> <li>- Involves spreading false information</li> </ul>   |
| Hate speech | "A communication that carries no meaning other than the expression of hatred for some group, especially in circumstances in which the communication is likely to provoke violence. It is an incitement to hatred primarily against a group of persons defined in terms of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and the like." | U.S. Legal n.d.                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves the expression of hatred to provoke violence</li> <li>- Targets individuals on the basis of their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and the like</li> </ul>   |
|             | "A direct attack against people – rather than concepts or institutions – on the basis of what we call protected characteristics: race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease."  | Facebook 2021                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves direct attacks against individuals</li> <li>- Targets individuals on the basis of their race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease</li> </ul> |
|             | "vilifies, humiliates, or incites hatred against a group or a class of persons based on a protected attribute such as the target's sexual orientation, gender, religion, disability, color, or country of origin. "  | IFES 2019                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to acts that vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred</li> <li>- Targets individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender, religion, disability, colour, or country of origin</li> </ul>   |
|             | "is language or imagery that denigrates, insults, threatens, or targets an individual or groups of people on the basis of their  | Women's Media Center n.d.          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to language that denigrates, insults, threatens</li> <li>- Targets individuals on the basis of their identity traits – gender, race, colour, religion, national</li> </ul>  |

|                                  |  |                            |  |
|----------------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|
|                                  | identity – gender, based on race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or other traits."  |                            | origin, sexual orientation, disability   |
| Identity theft and impersonation | "It happens when scammers try to steal one's personal information — they are modern day fraudsters. Scams are often done by phone, SMS or email and they look and sound very real."  | Australian Government n.d. | - Involves stealing personal or identity information and using it to make a profit   |
| Intimidation                     | "means a serious act or course of conduct directed at a specific person that causes fear or apprehension in such person; and serves no legitimate purpose"   | U.S Code                   | - Refers to a deliberate act or conduct aimed at causing fear or anxiety without a legitimate purpose  |
| Impersonation                    | "the act of intentionally copying another person's characteristics, such as his or her behaviour, speech, appearance, or expressions, especially to make people laugh"   | Cambridge Dictionary n.d.  | - Refers to purposely imitating a person's traits (behaviour, speech, appearance, expressions) in order to arouse laughter                       |
|                                  | <i>User impersonation:</i> "allows you to temporarily sign in as a different user in your network. Users with full impersonation permissions can impersonate all other users in their network and take any action, regardless of the impersonating user's own permission level. Impersonators appear as themselves in the change history." | Google 2022                | - Implies getting full control of another user account, while keeping the appearance of the actual user  |
|                                  | <i>Social media impersonation:</i><br>refers to accounts that use the name, image, or other identifying elements of a person, company, or organisation for fraudulent purposes.  | Porta 2021                 | - Using another entity's account and its identity in order to deceive  |
|                                  | <i>Online impersonation:</i><br>"Creation of a hoax social media account, often using the target's name and/or   | Pen America 2019           | - Refers to creating and using a hoax social media account<br>- Employs offensive and inflammatory rhetoric<br>- Aims to defame or discredit the |

|                                |   |   |   |
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|                                | photo, to post offensive or inflammatory statements to defame, discredit, or instigate further abuse. A harasser can also impersonate someone the target knows in order to cause harm."   |   | target  |
| Online abuse                   | "may include a range of tactics and harmful behaviours ranging from sharing embarrassing or cruel content about a person to impersonation, doxing and stalking, to the non-consensual use of photography and violent threats."  | Akiwowo et al. 2021                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Entails a multitude of harmful actions and behaviours aimed at publicly shaming a person</li> <li>- Refers to impersonation, doxing, stalking, non-consensual use of photography, and violent threats</li> </ul> |
|                                | "can encompass a wide variety of things, but often manifests as sending someone hateful messages online, campaigns of character assassination, hacking, stalking, threats, and a number of other things. Unfortunately, this often escalates into targeting the victim's friends, families, and employers in an effort to isolate the original target and cause as much damage to them as possible" | Crash Override Network n.d                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Concerns online hateful and life-threatening messages, hacking or stalking</li> <li>- Targets also family members, friends or employers of the victim in order to intensify the attack</li> </ul>                |
| Online aggression              | "any act of aggression, or a behaviour intended to harm another person who does not wish to be harmed, that takes place using electronic media."  | DeWall et al. 2013                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Entails aggressive behaviours</li> <li>- Takes place via electronic means</li> </ul>   |
| Online gender-based harassment | "gender-based harassment against women often takes the form of sexualized scorn combined with threats and/or fantasies of violence"   | Jane 2014, as cited in Nadim and Fladmoe 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves sexuality, threats and violent fantasies</li> </ul>   |
| Online harmful content         | "includes cyberbullying, racism, misogynistic abuse, pornography, and material promoting violence and self-harm"  | Woodhouse 2022                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to bullying, racist, misogynistic or pornographic content</li> <li>- Promotes violence and self-harm</li> </ul>   |
| Online misogyny                | "the manifestation of   | Barker and                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves hostile manifestation</li> </ul>  |



|                        |   |                           |  |
|------------------------|---|---------------------------|--|
|                        | hostility towards women because they are women communicated through online platforms, particularly social media and other participatory environments"   | Juras 2019                | and sexism<br>- Occurs via online participatory platforms  |
| Online shaming         | "is a form of public shaming in which targets are publicly humiliated on the internet, via social media platforms (e.g. Twitter or Facebook), or more localised media (e.g. email groups). As online shaming frequently involves exposing private information on the Internet, the ethics of public humiliation has been a source of debate over internet privacy and media ethics. Online shaming takes many forms, including call-outs, cancellation (cancel culture), doxing, negative reviews, and revenge porn." | Laidlaw 2017              | - Relates to publicly humiliate a person on the Internet via social media platforms or more localized media<br>- Involves exposing private information<br>- Entails call-outs, cancellation (cancel culture), doxing, negative reviews, and revenge porn |
| Online violence        | "harmful action by one or more people directed at others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms. These harmful acts of violence are committed, assisted or aggravated by the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), such as mobile phones, the internet, social media platforms or email. Both women and men experience gender-based violence but the majority of victims are women and girls"  | Akiwowo et al. 2021       | - Related to the sexual or gender identity<br>- Enforces harmful gender norms<br>- Operates through the means of ICT<br>- Predominantly women oriented   |
| Sexual objectification | "Harassers frequently objectify their targets, including through the use of manipulated photographs and sexually explicit descriptions of their bodies. Girls and women's photographs are often used without their consent and manipulated so that they appear in pornographic scenes or used in memes."  | Women's Media Center n.d. | - Involves manipulated photographs and sexually explicit descriptions of women bodies<br>- Might imply unconsented appearance in pornographic scenes   |
| Sexual threats/        | "Unwanted verbal, non-  | Council of                | - Refers to all kinds of unwanted  |

|                   |  |   |   |
|-------------------|--|---|---|
| sexual harassment | verbal or physical behaviour of sexual nature which is intended to cause or causes violation of dignity of a person or creates hostile, degrading, offensive environment." (p.19)  | Europe 2021   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- behaviours of sexual nature</li> <li>- Intends to cause violation of dignity</li> <li>- Aims to create a hostile, degrading, offensive environment</li> </ul>  |
| Trolling          | "The art of deliberately, cleverly, and secretly pissing people off, usually via the internet, using dialogue."... "The most essential part of trolling is convincing your victim that either a) truly believe in what you are saying, no matter how outrageous, or b) give your victim malicious instructions, under the guise of help."  | Roseen and Singh 2018                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relates to psychological harming practices carried out via the Internet with the intent to manipulate the victim</li> </ul>  |
|                   | "is an activity which is carried out online and is associated with activities where debate is encouraged (e.g. social media platforms, online forums, discussion and comment threads, online gaming chat groups etc). There is usually a perception of anonymity associated with the perpetrator, or the relationship is distant. Counter to this, the victim is vulnerable to exposure as trolling is a public act. Trolling involves posting off-topic material, inflammatory or confusing messages and it can be used to create disruption and discord, to provoke a response from individuals or groups of users, or as a silencing tool to discourage other internet users from getting involved with additional online discussion. Trolling may be undertaken for amusement or in order to cause harm to specified targets."(p.24) | Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services 2018          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encompasses diverse forms of online harassment via social media platforms, online forums, discussion and comment threads, online gaming chat groups</li> <li>- Aims to expose the victim, to create disruption, conflict and discord</li> <li>- It can be carried out to either cause amusement or harm</li> </ul> |
| Gender Trolling   | "Online abuse targeted against women often with threats and/or fantasies of  | Jane 2014, as cited in Centre for Strategy and Evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves online threats and/or fantasies of sexual violence</li> </ul>   |

|                                |  |                           |   |
|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------|---|
|                                | sexual violence."  | Services 2018             | addressed to women  |
| Video/image-based abuse        | "an intimate image or video is shared without the consent of the person pictured. This includes images or videos that have been digitally altered (using Photoshop or specialised software). It also includes the threat of an intimate image being shared." | Australian Government n.d | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refers to sharing intimate images or videos, sometimes digitally altered, without consent</li> <li>- Includes the threat of such acts</li> </ul> |
| Video/image-based sexual abuse | "(commonly known as 'revenge porn') describes the act of sharing images or videos of an individual (the 'victim') that are sexually explicit (displaying nudity or showing the person engaged in a sexual act) without that person's consent"                | End Cyber Abuse n.d.      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implies sharing images or videos with sexual content without consent</li> </ul>  |

## Annex 2. Statistics on various forms of digital aggression targeting women in politics

| Source                         | Findings  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Inter-Parliamentary Unit 2018  | 58.2 per cent of the 81 women MPs and 42 members of the parliamentary staff from 45 European countries interviewed have been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks.  |
| UNDP 2021                      | 308 cases of sexist hate speech and stereotyping have been identified on politically related Georgian Facebook accounts ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections.<br><br>"most frequently, women politicians were attacked on the ground of moral criteria (115), which was followed, with almost equal frequency, by offense/ridicule on the grounds of intellectual abilities (57) and appearance (56), and criticism on the ground of gender stereotypes (52).  |
| Collignon and Rüdig 2020       | 34 per cent of women Parliamentary candidates in the UK have been targeted by online harassment and abuse on social media platforms during the electoral campaign for the General Elections in 2017   |
| Rheault et al. 2019            | women with high status in politics are "more likely to receive uncivil messages than their male counterparts"   |
| Amnesty International 2018     | 7.1 per cent of thousands of tweets mentioning 778 women politicians and journalists from the UK and US were "problematic" or "abusive". A total of approximately 1.1 million tweets mentioning 778 women across the year, or once every 30 seconds.<br><br>Women of colour, (Black, Asian, Latinx and mixed-race women) were 34 per cent more likely to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets than white women, with black women being 84 per cent more likely to be targeted.   |
| Amnesty International UK 2017  | Diane Abbott, the first black female MP of the UK, received almost a third (31.61 per cent) of all abusive tweets that were analysed ahead of the UK General Elections.<br><br>The 20 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women MPs received almost half (41 per cent) of the abusive tweets, despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study.   |
| Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016 | 81.8 per cent of women parliamentarians from all countries and regions included in the study "have been subjected to one or more acts of psychological violence".<br><br>44.4 per cent of those surveyed said they "had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction during their parliamentary term".<br><br>"27.3 per cent of the respondents believed that the traditional media had disseminated images of or comments about them that were highly contemptuous or sexually charged."<br><br>"That proportion rose to 41.8 per cent in the case of images or comments disseminated through social media (Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.)."<br><br>Worldwide, three-quarters of female Internet users "have been exposed to some form of cyber-violence". |

## Annex 3. Analysis of the Georgian CEC Facebook page during the term in office of the most recent three CEC chairs

by Rastó Kužel<sup>2</sup> (MEMO 98)

At the beginning of Tamar Zhvania's term in office as the chair of the Georgian CEC, the CEC Facebook page had 52 700 followers. By the time she resigned, there were 95 600 followers (an increase of 42 900 followers). By comparison, there were 95,600 followers at the beginning of Giorgi Kalandarashvili's term in office and by 10 March 2022, the number increased by 11 700 and stands at 107 300 followers as per 10 March 2022.

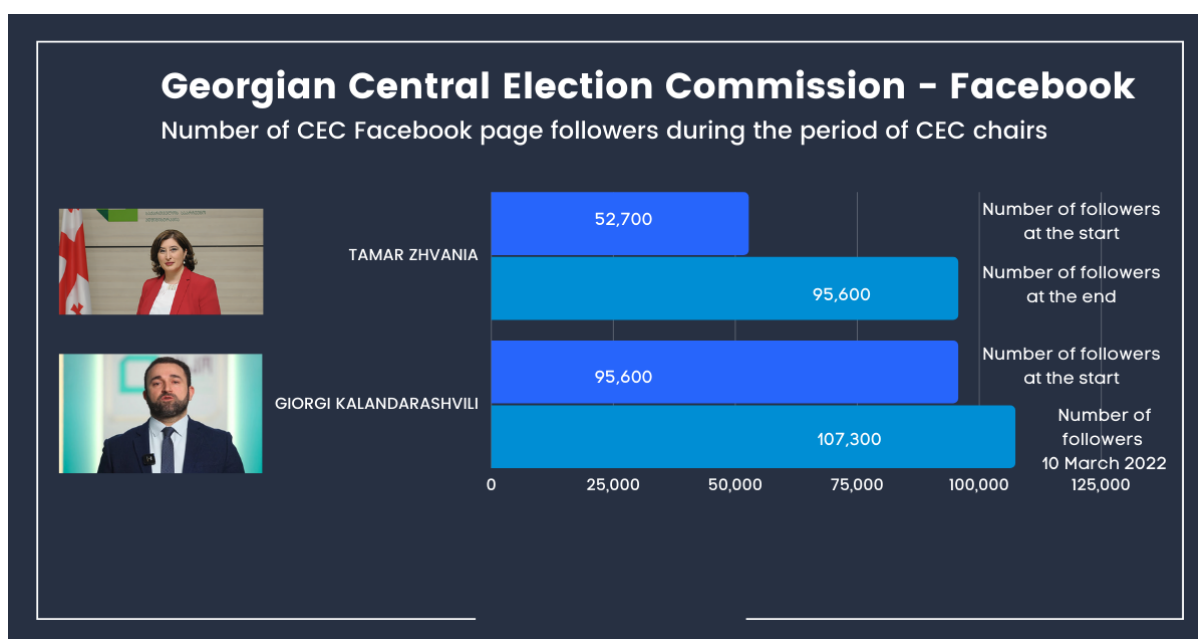


Figure 1. The number of Georgian CEC Facebook page followers during the different periods when the CEC was chaired by Tamar Zhvania and Giorgi Kalandarashvili (CT did not provide data on followers for the period of Zurab Kharatashvili).

Terms in office of the most recent 3 chairs of the Georgian CEC:

- Zurab Kharatashvili (male): 15 January 2010 – 12 August 2013 (1306 days)
- Tamar Zhvania (female): 11 September 2013 – 1 July 2021 (2851 days)
- Giorgi Kalandarashvili (male): 2 August 2021 – FB data analysed until 10 March 2022 (221 days)

<sup>2</sup> Rastó Kužel is a media and election expert with more than 23 years of international experience. Since 1998, he has been running MEMO 98, a media-monitoring organisation with extensive experience of delivering analyses on behalf of international institutions as well as technical assistance to different electoral stakeholders.

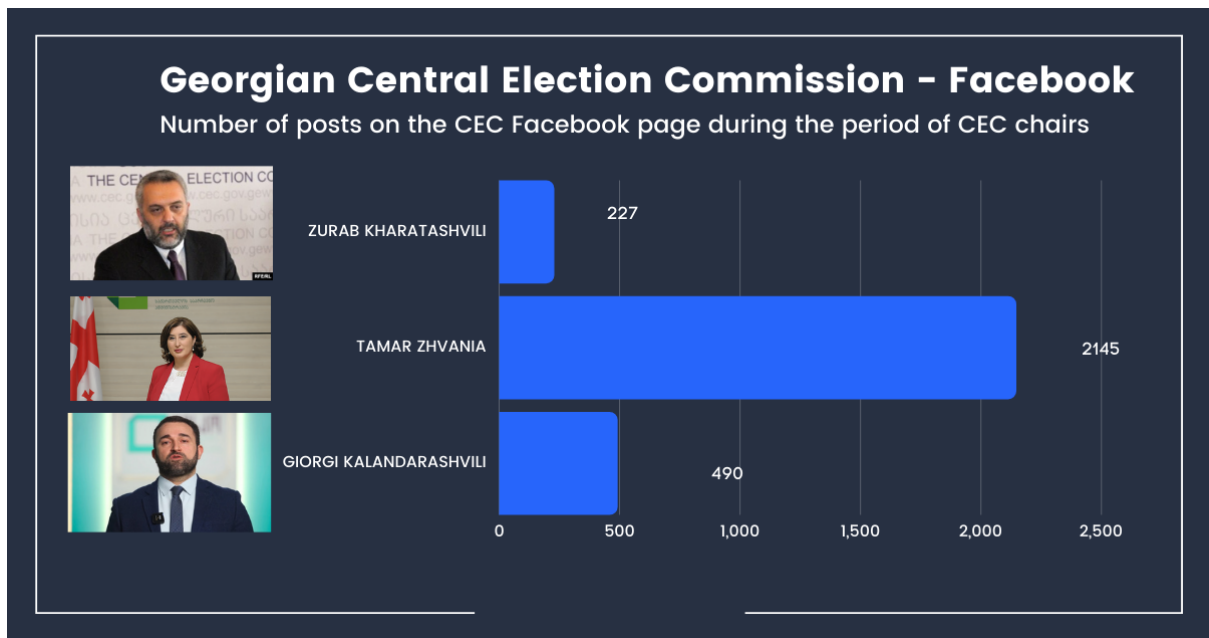


Figure 2. The number of posts during the term in office of each of the three CEC chairs

- Zurab Kharatishvili: 227 posts in 1306 days (0,17 posts per day),
- Tamar Zhvania: 2145 posts in 2851 days (0,7 posts per day).
- Giorgi Kalandarashvili: 490 posts in 221 days (2,2 posts per day).

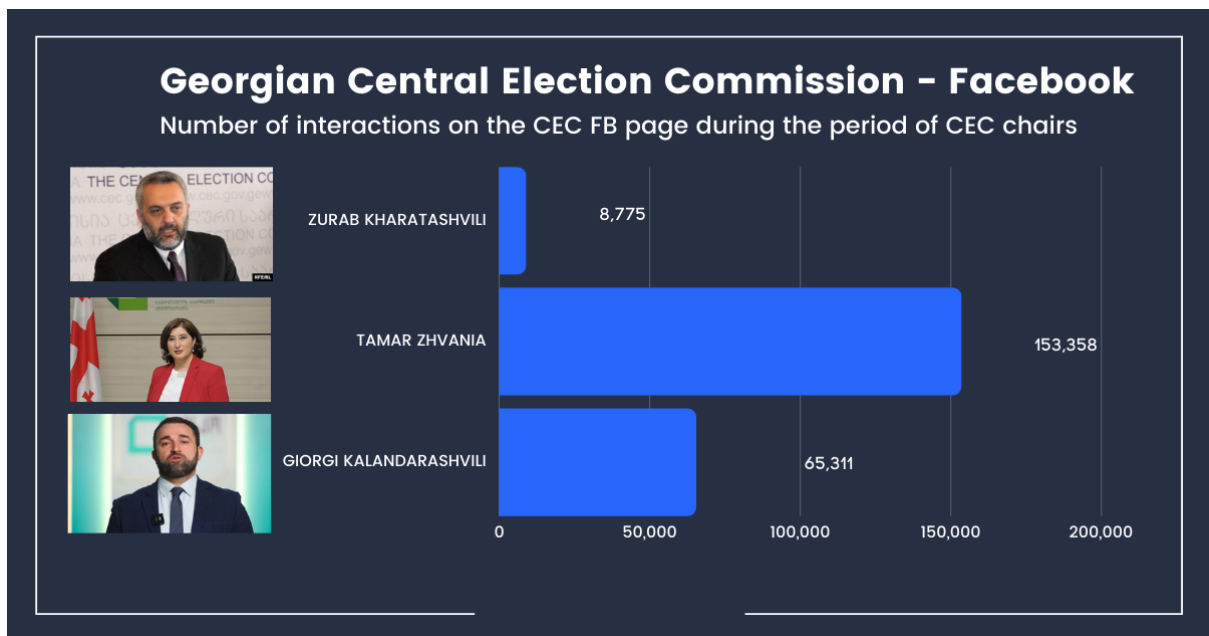


Figure 3. The number of interactions for the posts during the term in office of each of the three CEC chairs

- Zurab Kharatishvili : 8775 interactions for 227 posts in 1306 days (0,17 post per day),
- Tamar Zhvania: 153 358 interactions for 2145 posts in 2851 days (0,7 posts per day).
- Giorgi Kalandarashvili: 65 311 interactions for 490 posts in 221 days (2,2 posts per day).

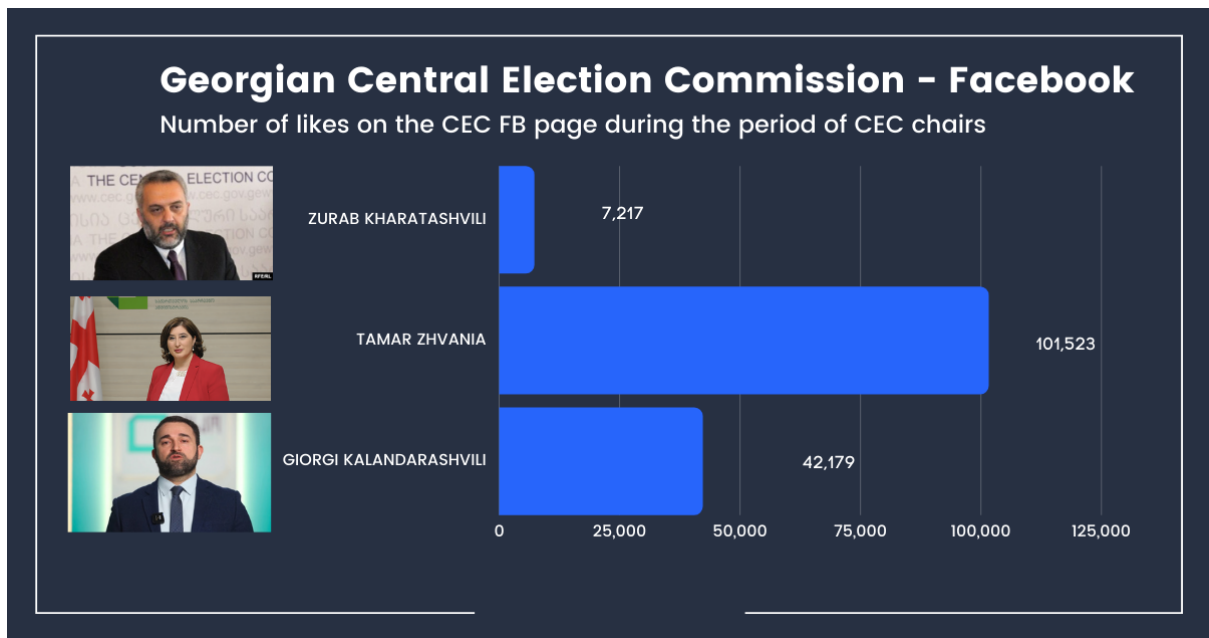


Figure 4. The number of likes received for Facebook posts published during the term in office

- Zurab Kharatishvili: 7217 likes (5,5 likes per day) for 227 posts in 1306 days (0,17 posts per day),
- Tamar Zhvania: 101 523 likes (36 likes per day) for 2145 posts in 2851 days (0,7 posts per day).
- Giorgi Kalandarashvili: 42 179 likes (190 likes per day) for 490 posts in 221 days (2,2 posts per day).

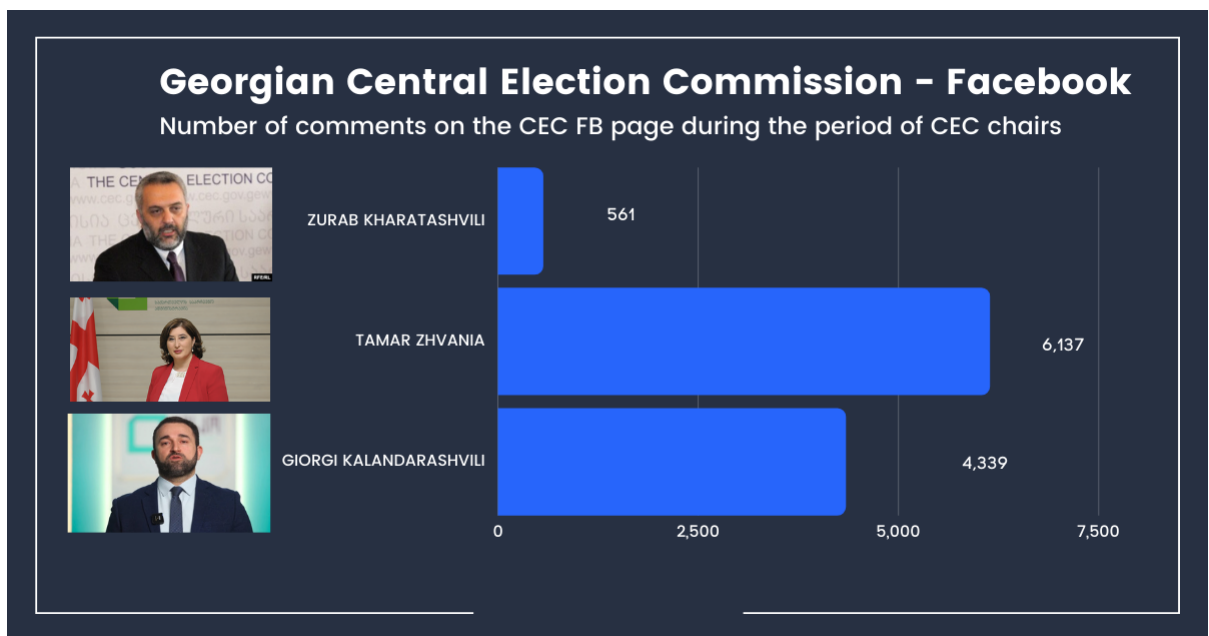


Figure 5. The number of comments received for Facebook posts published during the term in office

- Zurab Kharatishvili: 561 comments (0,42 comments per day) for 227 posts in 1306 days (0,17 post/day).
- Tamar Zhvania: 16137 comments (2 comments per day) for 2145 posts in 2851 days (0,7 posts/day).
- Giorgi Kalandarashvili: 4 339 comments (20 comments per day) for 490 posts in 221 days (2,2 posts/day).

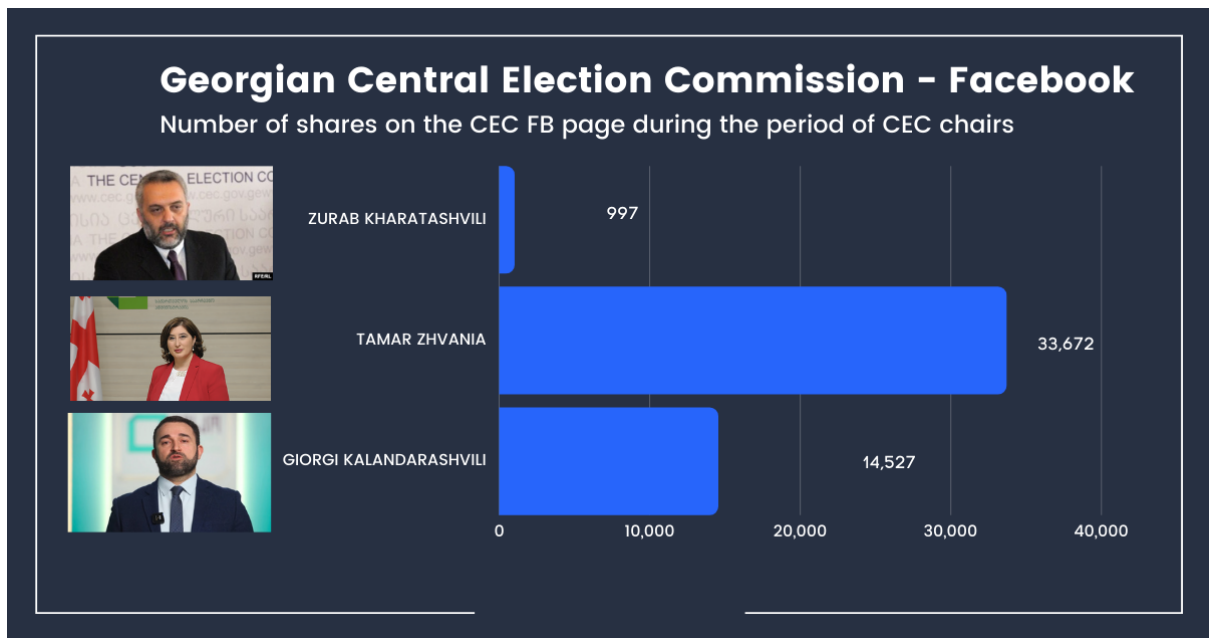


Figure 6. The number of shares of CEC Facebook posts during the term in office

- Zurab Kharatishvili: 997 shares for 227 posts in 1306 days (0,17 posts per day).
- Tamar Zhvania: 33 672 shares for 2145 posts in 2851 days (0,7 posts per day).
- Giorgi Kalandarashvili: 14 527 shares for 490 posts in 221 days (2,2 posts per day).

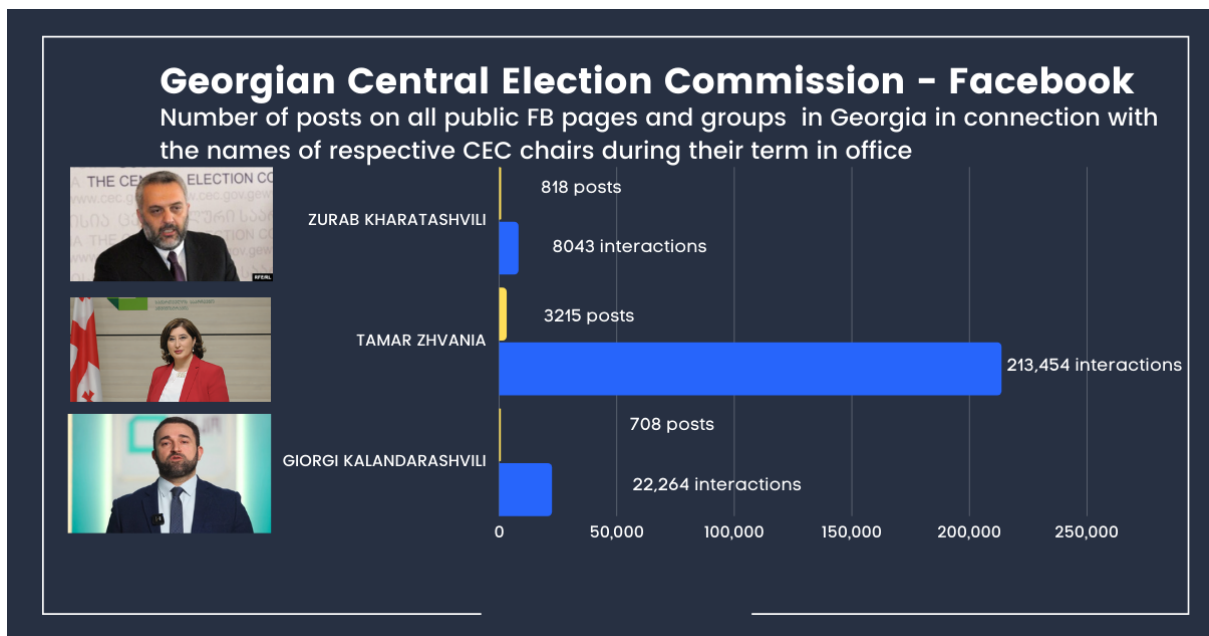


Figure 7. The number of posts and generated interactions in connection to the names of each of the three CEC chairs during their term in office in all public pages and public groups tracked by CrowdTangle in Georgia.

- Zurab Kharatashvili (male) was mentioned in 818 public posts generating 8 043 interactions during 15 January 2010 – 12 August 2013 (1306 days).
- Tamar Zhvania (female) was mentioned in 3215 public posts generating 213 454 interactions during 11 September 2013 – 1 July 2021 (2851 days).
- Giorgi Kalandarashvili (male) Giorgi Kalandarashvili was mentioned in 708 public posts generating 22 264 interactions during 2 August 2021 – FB data analyzed until 10 March 2022 (221 days).



## **Annex 4. About the author**

Ingrid Bicu has a career in strategic communications and international affairs, with extensive experience in elections. She has a particular focus on emerging opportunities and challenges posed by the accelerated technological evolution. A significant component of her research is currently centred on the impact of communication technologies towards elections, particularly in relation to women and other typically marginalised groups. Her affiliations include the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the Pontifical University of Salamanca, and the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania.

## **Annex 5. About the Delian Project**

The Delian Project is a Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to helping jurisdictions implement positive change in the democratic voting process through the application of technology.

Enabled by local and international funding models, the Delian Project brings together various stakeholders from the electoral sector in order to support emerging democracies, with a particular focus on marginalized, physically disabled, and special needs voters. The Delian Project's largest contributor is the Government of Canada.

**\*Manipulated content:** deliberately distorted text and/or graphics aimed at misleading the audience



The Delian Project  
c/o The Centre for Social Innovation  
192 Spadina Ave, Suite 300  
Toronto, ON M5T 2C7, Canada  
[info@delianproject.org](mailto:info@delianproject.org)

guide  
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## Case Study: Georgia

Guidelines for  
empowering  
**women\***  
in elections  
online