
The Limits of Deliberation: TV Debate on Higher Education System Changes in Georgia

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Abstract

The presented article deals with the study of the deliberative quality of a television debate on the example of a public discussion held on the air of Imedi TV, a TV media affiliated with the Georgian government. The discussion concerned the fundamental changes taking place in the education system. The aim of the study is to analyze, on the one hand, the creation of the discussion agenda - setting by the participants of the debate as a genre of analytical journalism, and, on the other hand, the perception of these discursive frames by the online audience. The focus was on the methods, namely, the use of evidence and authority, that the program guests resorted to in order to gain access to the discourse.

The article is based on media monitoring and an in-depth analysis of the case of television coverage of different opinions about the changes taking place in the higher education system.

It is noteworthy that, based on monitoring, out of 127 episodes of four television analytical programs that were broadcast from the date of the presentation of the “National Concept of Higher Education” (October 16, 2025) to the start of the 2026 national exams (July 2, 2026), only 4 episodes were devoted to the ongoing changes in the education system, and public discussion between actors of different statuses with different opinions took place on television only once, in the February 14, 2026 episode of the analytical program “Open Air - Debates” of Imedi TV Company. Accordingly, the transcript of the aforementioned program was analyzed using an adapted version of the Discourse Quality Index, thematic agenda of the discussion, argumentation, and discursive legitimacy approaches. In order to identify the peculiarities of the perception of discourse frames by the addressees, a qualitative content analysis of 122 Georgian-language comments published on YouTube was conducted.

The study found that the program's guests did not have equal access to the discourse. Accordingly, asymmetry was also evident in terms of creating the thematic agenda of the discussion. In particular, 13 out of 19 main topics were raised by the Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze. He also occupied more airtime than other guests, and it is noteworthy that 63 out of 108 coded assertions belong to him. However, as for reasoning with evidence, his discourse was less based on empirical substantiation than that of other participants in the program. Although academics and education policymakers did not gain communicative dominance because they provided less evidence, their arguments were more likely to be supported by consistent empirical data and professional knowledge.

Notably, 30.6% of the overall criticisms presented in the program were unsubstantiated, while 60.2% contained at least 1 reasoning flaw. The deliberative quality of the debate we studied was also limited by the 31 episodes that featured irony, sarcasm, and personal and/or professional discredit.

Qualitative content analysis of 122 comments from the online audience confirmed that commentators were not passive recipients of the message. The analysis revealed the repetition, reinforcement, transformation with polarized interpretations and, in some cases, replacement with specific political frameworks of discursive frames.

Thus, an in-depth analysis of one case, the February 14, 2026 episode of the Imedi TV program "Open Air – Debates", showed that formal pluralism could not be transformed into a substantively equal deliberative discourse on television. However, it should be emphasized that the results obtained cannot be generalized, since they were revealed only in one purposefully selected episode. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the results of the study presented in the article create a fundamental basis for further large-scale research in order to determine whether the asymmetry we have identified is only a feature of this specific program or a characteristic of the Georgian polarized media system.

Keywords: Deliberation, Change in the higher education system, TV debate, Agenda-setting, Georgia

Introduction

Georgia formally embarked on a large-scale reform of its higher education system in 2025. Government Ordinance No. 103 of 20 January established the Government Commission for Higher Education Reform, comprising the Prime Minister, government ministers and administrators, the heads of the governments of the autonomous republics, the Mayor of Tbilisi, and the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Science, and Youth Affairs (Government of Georgia, 2025a). Although tasked with preparing a fundamental transformation of higher education, the Commission included no formally appointed independent education or

science experts, university rectors, academic staff, or student representatives. The government presented the Higher Education Reform Concept on 16 October 2025 and approved it through Ordinance No. 1994 on 1 December (Government of Georgia, 2025b; Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, 2025). The Concept envisaged substantial changes to the territorial distribution of academic programmes, admissions, funding, staffing, institutional governance, and university autonomy.

Education contributes to human-capital formation and economic productivity, prepares individuals for occupational and social roles, and supports social cohesion and democratic participation (Becker, 1964; Dee, 2004; Dewey, 1997 [1916]; Durkheim, 1956 [1922]; Giddens, 2009). A reform of this scale therefore cannot be regarded solely as an administrative or sectoral matter. Its objectives, rationales, anticipated consequences, and risks require public scrutiny.

The media are central to this process because they not only disseminate information but also influence which issues become publicly visible and which actors are granted opportunities to interpret them. By allocating different levels of attention to competing issues, the media shape their perceived salience and the formation of the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Television current-affairs programmes can also place decision-makers, specialists, and groups affected by reform within a shared communicative space, enabling policy proposals to be examined through competing experiences, interests, and arguments (Magin et al., 2023).

In Georgia, however, such opportunities are constrained by a sharply polarised media environment. Political polarisation shapes editorial alignments, journalistic practices, content selection, and public trust, potentially displacing critical issues from the media agenda and limiting access to reliable information (Gersamia et al., 2023, 2024; Tsuladze & Abzianidze, 2025). Monitoring of the 2024 parliamentary election campaign characterised the television environment as pluralistic but deeply divided between government- and opposition-aligned broadcasters. Imedi maintained an explicitly government-aligned editorial line, while Rustavi 2 also pursued a pro-government policy. These channels rarely hosted opposition politicians, whereas government representatives boycotted broadcasters perceived as opposition-aligned, limiting opportunities for direct exchange between competing positions (Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, 2024a, 2024b; Kincha, 2021).

This segmentation is also associated with audience attitudes. A nationwide survey conducted in February 2025 found that the predicted probability of polarisation in evaluations of political-party performance was 83% among viewers of the pro-government channels Imedi, Rustavi 2, and PosTV, compared with 72% among viewers of other channels and 74% among people who did not watch television. Viewers of pro-government channels also exhibited higher predicted probabilities of intergroup polarisation and discomfort in personal relationships with people holding different political views (Chkhetiani, 2025). Although these findings do not

demonstrate that television exposure causes polarisation, they indicate a close association between television-consumption patterns and polarised attitudes.

Under these conditions, current-affairs programmes that bring government representatives and critics into the same discursive arena acquire particular significance. Preliminary screening therefore covered relevant programmes broadcast by Imedi, Rustavi 2, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster. In the context of the government's boycott of opposition-aligned channels, these broadcasters remained potential venues for direct exchange between competing positions. However, their formats did not necessarily guarantee balanced or deliberative discussion.

The screening revealed a marked discrepancy between the societal significance of higher education reform and its mediated visibility. Only four of the 127 episodes examined contained a dedicated segment on the reform, and direct discussion between actors holding competing positions occurred in only one: the 14 February 2026 episode of Imedi's *Open Air Debates*. This information-rich case was selected for in-depth analysis to examine how the reform's thematic agenda was constructed, how discursive access and opportunities for response were distributed, and how participants used argumentation, evidence, expertise, and institutional authority to legitimate their positions. The study thereby investigates the limits of deliberation within a formally pluralistic televised debate conducted in a politically segmented media environment.

Methodology

This study examines how higher education reform is constructed as an object of public discussion in government-aligned television media in Georgia. It investigates the reform's media visibility; the issues and interpretations that structure its coverage; the distribution of discursive access; the deliberative quality of the debate; participants' strategies of legitimation; and online audience responses. The overarching research question is: How is public media discourse on higher education reform shaped by the interaction between actors' differential discursive access, deliberative opportunities, and strategies of legitimation?

The research combined descriptive media monitoring with an in-depth single-case study. The monitoring covered the period from 16 October 2025, when the reform concept was publicly presented, to 2 July 2026, when the Unified National Examinations commenced. The latter date marked the operational closure of the 2026–2027 university admissions cycle, after which changes to admission quotas and bachelor's programmes could no longer affect applicants participating in that cycle.

The sample comprised 127 episodes from four current-affairs programmes: 27 episodes of 'Dghis tema' ['Topic of the Day'] and 39 of 'Diskusia aktualur temaze' ['Discussion on a Current Issue'] on the Georgian Public Broadcaster; 19 of 'Debatebi Rezi Chichinadzestan ertad' ['Debates with Rezi Chichinadze'] on Rustavi 2; and 42 of Imedi TV's 'Open Air Debates.' The programmes were selected for their national reach, discussion-oriented formats, and capacity to host actors holding competing positions. An episode was classified as addressing higher education reform only if it contained a dedicated segment; incidental references were excluded.

Four episodes contained a dedicated segment on the reform, but only one featured direct discussion among actors representing competing positions. This information-rich case—the 14 February 2026 episode of ‘Open Air Debates’—was purposively selected for in-depth analysis. The 1-hour, 56-minute programme was moderated by Magda Anikashvili and included Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze; Minister of Education, Science and Youth Givi Mikanadze; Ilia State University Rector Nino Doborjginidze; education researcher and Freedom Square representative Simon Janashia; former Head of the Erasmus+ National Office Lika Ghlonti; and Tbilisi State University Professor Levan Gordeziani. The prime minister and minister were seated opposite the other participants. This arrangement was treated as a feature of the programme’s visual and interactional design, not as evidence of internally homogeneous positions.

The single-case design was intended to examine the internal discursive dynamics of an analytically significant case rather than produce statistically representative findings about Georgian television media (Gerring, 2007). The episode was manually transcribed and analysed across four dimensions: thematic agenda-setting, discursive access, deliberative quality and argumentation, and online audience reception. The announced agenda was compared with the topics that emerged during the debate. For each participant, the study recorded speaking time, speaking turns, moderator-allocated and self-initiated interventions, unfinished utterances, and opportunities for direct response.

Deliberative quality was assessed using adapted elements of the Discourse Quality Index, particularly participation, justification, and respect (Steenbergen et al., 2003). Justifications were coded at four levels: no, inferior, qualified, and sophisticated justification. Verbal expressions of respect or disrespect were examined within the adapted DQI, while non-verbal manifestations constituted a supplementary qualitative dimension. The unit of argumentation analysis was an individual claim and its supporting justification. Arguments were classified according to whether they relied on empirical evidence, personal or anecdotal experience, professional expertise, or institutional authority.

Audience reception was examined through qualitative content analysis of 122 Georgian-language comments publicly available beneath the programme’s YouTube video on 15 July 2026. Deleted comments, duplicates, spam, emoji-only contributions, and non-Georgian comments were excluded. Each comment constituted a unit of analysis. Coding examined the frame invoked; whether it was reproduced, negotiated, transformed, or rejected; the attribution or denial of epistemic and interpretive authority; and any alternative interpretation offered.

The authors initially coded the transcript and comments independently, compared the resulting categories, discussed disagreements, and produced a consolidated dataset through consensus. No statistical intercoder-agreement coefficient was calculated; the procedure is therefore reported as a measure of analytical transparency rather than statistical reliability. Usernames and account identifiers were excluded. Verbatim quotations are pseudonymised rather than fully anonymised because their wording may remain searchable online. The findings

are interpreted as characteristics of a purposively selected case and are not statistically generalised to Georgian television media as a whole.

Literature Review

The democratic significance of the media is closely associated with the constitution of a public sphere in which matters of public concern become visible, different actors articulate their positions, and political decisions are subjected to scrutiny. Habermas conceptualises the public sphere as an arena between civil society and the state where public opinion can emerge through rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). His deliberative theory further emphasises inclusive participation, reasoned justification, reciprocal engagement, and critical examination of competing validity claims (Habermas, 1996). The democratic function of the media therefore extends beyond transmitting information to providing a communicative space in which the rationales, consequences, risks, and alternatives associated with public decisions can be examined.

Fraser (1992), however, argues that formal openness does not necessarily produce participatory parity. The notion of a unified public sphere may obscure inequalities determining who is recognised as an authoritative speaker, whose experiences are considered relevant, and which groups remain marginal to dominant discourse. The democratic quality of mediated discussion must therefore be assessed not only through the formal presence of different actors but also through the distribution of speaking time, topic initiation, opportunities to complete arguments, and responses to competing claims. The Discourse Quality Index (DQI) translates aspects of these normative expectations into indicators of participation, justification, orientation towards the common good, and respect for participants and counterarguments (Steenbergen et al., 2003). Because the DQI was developed for parliamentary discourse, its television application requires attention to the moderator's influence over speaking order, time allocation, interruption, and direct response.

The media's public function must also be considered alongside their selective power. Media organisations constitute both arenas for discussion and institutional actors that select the issues, sources, speakers, and interpretations available to audiences. Agenda-setting theory holds that variations in media attention contribute to the perceived salience of issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), while gatekeeping theory examines how events, actors, and positions are included, excluded, marginalised, or transformed during media production (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis further suggests that political reporting frequently reflects the range of positions expressed by institutionally powerful actors: disagreement among official elites may broaden coverage, whereas elite consensus can restrict space for alternative perspectives. Nevertheless, the media are not merely passive transmitters of elite messages. By selecting and organising topics, guests, and interpretive emphases, they help construct political visibility and mediated social reality (Thompson, 1995).

This tension is particularly significant in education-policy coverage. Although education is often represented as a technical domain governed by specialist knowledge, reforms involve value

choices, resource redistribution, and competing social and institutional interests. Gerstl-Pepin (2007) describes the media as a “thin” public sphere that may facilitate participation while representing complex education policies in simplified forms. Her earlier analysis found that US election coverage treated education superficially and largely followed frames advanced by political candidates (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002). Research on Portuguese education coverage similarly demonstrates that the media organise issues through selective interpretive frames. References to the OECD and PISA operated as authoritative resources, although different actors mobilised the same data to support competing claims (Santos et al., 2022). Through thematisation and framing, media discourse made education policy manageable for public communication but simultaneously reduced its complexity and narrowed the range of readily available interpretations. Media visibility thus does not itself guarantee substantive examination or equitable access to authoritative knowledge.

Critical discourse analysis adds that communicative power concerns not only access to speech but also the linguistic and symbolic construction of social reality (Fairclough, 1992). In van Leeuwen’s (2007) social-semiotic framework, legitimation is the process through which social practices and institutional arrangements acquire cognitive validity and normative justification. It addresses why a practice should be undertaken and why it should take a particular form. Van Leeuwen distinguishes four principal strategies. ‘Authorisation’ invokes personal or institutional authority, including official position, expertise, law, tradition, or established practice. ‘Moral evaluation’ connects an action to normative values. ‘Rationalisation’ justifies a practice through its purposes, functions, effectiveness, anticipated outcomes, or bodies of knowledge that represent it as reasonable or valid. ‘Mythopoesis’ constructs legitimacy narratively: moral tales associate compliance with desirable outcomes, whereas cautionary tales link deviation from legitimate norms to danger, failure, or punishment. These strategies may operate independently or in combination and can be realised through verbal, visual, and audiovisual resources.

This framework enables televised discourse on higher education reform to be analysed not only in terms of the positions expressed but also through the mechanisms by which reform is constructed as necessary, legitimate, efficient, or inevitable—or, conversely, as harmful or unacceptable. Participants may invoke governmental authority, legislation, professional expertise, values, policy objectives, empirical evidence, anticipated consequences, or narratives of institutional success and failure. Legitimation analysis therefore distinguishes a claim’s content from the source and mode through which it is validated. Such strategies should not automatically be treated as substitutes for argumentation: their deliberative quality depends on how they are connected to a claim and whether they remain open to scrutiny and contestation.

Audience reception introduces a further dimension. Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model rejects a linear conception in which audiences absorb mediated messages. Viewers may adopt a dominant-hegemonic position by accepting a preferred meaning, negotiate it by combining partial acceptance with qualifications derived from their experience, or take an oppositional position by recognising but rejecting the preferred code. Applied to online comments, this

framework allows examination of how viewers reproduce, negotiate, transform, or oppose the debate's central frames and claims to authority. These positions are analytical categories rather than fixed audience identities, and an individual response may combine elements of more than one position.

The present study consequently integrates deliberative democratic theory and agenda-setting as its principal approaches, supplemented by gatekeeping, indexing, discursive legitimation, and audience reception. Agenda-setting identifies which issues acquire visibility, structure the debate, and are initiated by particular actors. The deliberative perspective evaluates the distribution of discursive access, reciprocal engagement, justification, and respect. Legitimation analysis examines how evidence, expertise, authority, values, and narratives are used to validate or contest positions, while encoding/decoding illuminates the online audience's engagement with these meanings.

The study does not measure the debate's causal effect on audience priorities or attitudes. Agenda-setting is therefore used to analyse media visibility and the debate's internal thematic priorities rather than to infer direct media effects. Together, the selected approaches address four interconnected questions: which issues become visible, who gains access to define them, how competing positions are justified and legitimated, and how the online audience negotiates their meanings.

Findings

Agenda Formation and Discursive Access

The coding identified 19 main topics, but their initiation was distributed asymmetrically. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze introduced 13, including the low quality of higher education, the necessity of change, funding, labour-market research, the purpose and content of the reform concept, and geographical decentralisation. He therefore functioned not only as a respondent to criticism but also as the principal source of the debate's thematic agenda. This case-level pattern is consistent with the agenda-setting proposition that salience is shaped through attention, elaboration, and relative priority (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), as well as Bennett's (1990) observation that political media discourse often develops within parameters articulated by authoritative official actors. It does not, however, establish indexing at the wider media-system level.

The moderator opened the discussion with the "one city-one faculty" principle, which subsequently became a central interpretive frame. This initial selection illustrates the programme's gatekeeping role in defining the point of departure for discussion (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Thompson, 1995). After this intervention, most thematic initiatives shifted to Kobakhidze, demonstrating the interaction between media framing and the discursive power associated with high political office.

Other participants introduced substantially fewer topics. Minister of Education, Science and Youth Givi Mikanadze introduced none. Ilia State University Rector Nino Doborjginidze initiated

two—the purpose of the debate and institutional autonomy—while Levan Gordeziani, Lika Ghlonti, and Simon Janashia each introduced one: legislative change, the “hollowing out” of universities, and the claim that the education sector was being governed by colonels from the State Security Service and the police, respectively. These formulations are coded labels representing participants’ own framing rather than the authors’ characterisation of the reform.

The number of subtopics indicates the breadth of subsequent elaboration. Labour-market research generated nine subtopics, the “one city—one faculty” principle seven, and funding six. Both topics introduced by Doborjginidze developed into five subtopics, showing that frequency of initiation and discursive significance did not fully coincide: actors with fewer opportunities to shape the agenda could still introduce consequential points of contestation. By contrast, topics such as the necessity of change and “2004–2012 as a severe blow to Tbilisi State University” remained largely declarative. Topic initiation therefore did not automatically lead to justification, counterargument, or reciprocal examination.

The distribution of participation reinforced this thematic asymmetry. Kobakhidze engaged with all 19 topics, took 109 speaking turns, and accumulated 53 minutes and 14 seconds of speaking time—several times more than any other participant. Only ten turns were explicitly allocated to him by the moderator, indicating that his prominence also resulted from frequent self-initiated interventions. Janashia took 49 turns and spoke for 13 minutes and 12 seconds, approximately one quarter of Kobakhidze’s time. Twenty of Janashia’s interventions ended in unfinished utterances, compared with 26 of Kobakhidze’s 109 turns. Thus, although Kobakhidze had the larger absolute number, constrained sentence completion affected a substantially greater proportion of Janashia’s contributions. Because unfinished utterances may reflect interruption, overlap, withdrawal, or voluntary abandonment, they are treated as indicators of interactional constraint rather than proof of intentional silencing.

Ghlonti took 43 speaking turns, but the moderator explicitly gave her the floor only once; most of her contributions were self-initiated or responsive. Gordeziani did not independently initiate a speaking turn and remained almost entirely reactive. The formal inclusion of competing positions therefore did not produce participatory parity (Fraser, 1992). The participant with the greatest institutional authority occupied the largest share of the communicative space and exercised the strongest control over topic initiation. In contrast, the other participants primarily responded within a thematic structure they had only limited capacity to define.

Argumentation, Legitimation, and Mutual Respect

The analysis identified 108 claims. Of these, 75 (69.4%) were accompanied by some form of supporting grounds, while 33 (30.6%) were unsupported. The overall mean evidence-quality score was 2.41 on the four-point scale, placing the aggregate profile closer to weak or partially developed support than to multifaceted and verifiable evidence. At least one reasoning problem was identified in 65 claims (60.2%); 26 claims (24.1%) contained a person-directed or adversarial

move, including an *ad hominem* attack, unsupported accusation, or shift from the issue to an assessment of an interlocutor's competence or character.

Table 1: Comparative Evidence-Use Profiles by Participant

Participant	Role	Claims, <i>n</i>	Mean evidence score	Empirical, %	Unsupported, %	Reasoning problem, %	Scores 3-4, %
Levan Gordeziani	Academic	5	2.60	60.0	20.0	40.0	60.0
Nino Doborjginidze	Academic	6	3.00	50.0	0.0	33.3	83.3
Lika Ghlonti	Education policy expert	7	3.14	100.0	0.0	28.6	100.0
Givi Mikanadze	Government representative	11	3.00	45.5	18.2	54.5	72.7
Simon Janashia	Education researcher and political representative	16	2.50	50.0	25.0	56.3	56.3
Irakli Kobakhidze	Government representative	63	2.13	38.1	41.3	69.8	33.3

*Note. Evidence quality ranged from 1 (unsupported assertion) to 4 (multifaceted and verifiable evidence). "Empirical" denotes claims supported by data, documented cases, research, or other potentially verifiable information. "Reasoning problem" indicates at least one coded problem, such as a false dilemma, generalisation from limited cases, inappropriate appeal to authority, circular reasoning, unidentified source, or person-directed move. Percentages are calculated within participants and should be read alongside *n*.*

The participant profiles reveal a marked contrast between the quantity of claims and evidentiary strength. Ghlonti recorded the strongest profile: all seven of her claims were empirically grounded and received scores of 3 or 4, producing the highest mean score (3.14). None of Doborjginidze's six claims was unsupported, and 83.3% received scores of 3 or 4. Gordeziani supported four of his five claims and obtained a mean score of 2.60. Although the small numbers require caution, none of these three participants employed the person-directed or adversarial moves identified in the coding.

Mikanadze and Janashia displayed mixed profiles. Supporting grounds accompanied 81.8% of Mikanadze's claims and 75.0% of Janashia's, with mean evidence scores of 3.00 and 2.50, respectively. However, reasoning problems occurred in 54.5% and 56.3% of their claims, while person-directed or adversarial moves appeared in 18.2% and 25.0%. Their contributions therefore combined relatively frequent reason-giving with occasional shifts towards personal or otherwise non-substantive contestation.

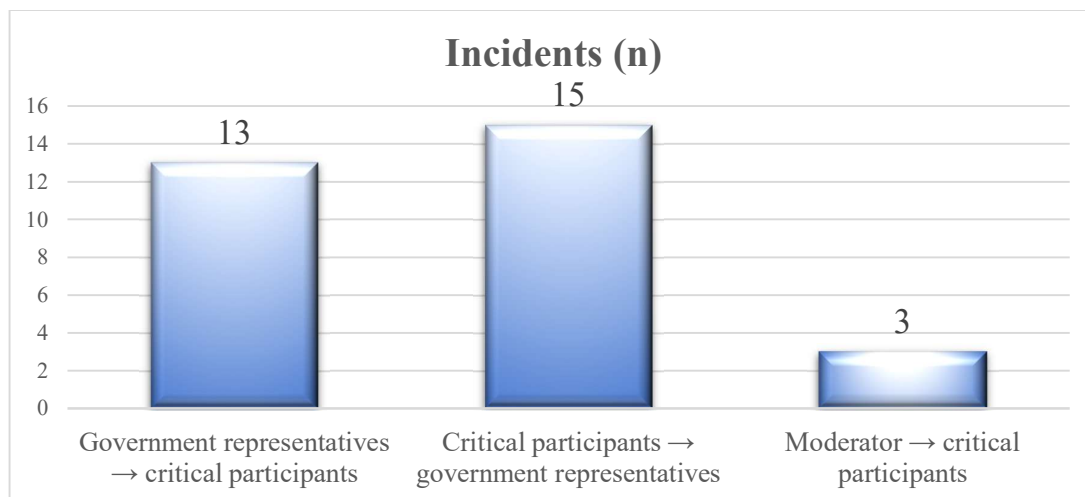
Kobakhidze produced 63 claims—58.3% of the total—corresponding to his dominance in speaking time and topic initiation. However, his mean evidence score (2.13) was the lowest among the participants. Only 33.3% of his claims received scores of 3 or 4; 41.3% were

unsupported, and 69.8% contained a reasoning problem. Person-directed or adversarial moves occurred in 31.7%. Statements translated as “You have no argument” and “You cannot distinguish a conclusion from an argument” (*Open Air Debates*, 2026) redirected the exchange towards assessments of interlocutors’ competence rather than supplying additional grounds for his substantive position. Such interventions also attempted to define whose contributions qualified as legitimate argumentation.

These results demonstrate that communicative prominence and argumentative quality were not equivalent. The participant who occupied the greatest share of the discussion and advanced the most claims did not present the strongest evidence profile; conversely, Ghlonti and Doborjginidze had more limited discursive access but offered more consistently supported claims. This aggregate contrast does not imply that every academic or expert claim was well founded or that every claim made by Kobakhidze was weak. It indicates that quantitative dominance coexisted with comparatively lower evidentiary strength and more frequent reasoning problems, departing from the deliberative expectation that influence should derive from publicly examinable reasons rather than institutional status or control of speaking time (Habermas, 1996).

The pattern also illuminates the relationship between rationalisation and authorisation (van Leeuwen, 2007). Doborjginidze, Ghlonti, and Gordeziani combined expert authorisation with rationalisation through empirical information, specialist knowledge, and explanations of institutional consequences. Kobakhidze’s discursive prominence cannot be attributed to evidence quality alone; it operated within an interactional context in which his position as prime minister carried substantial pre-existing authority. Institutional status and dominance are not themselves proof of an explicit authorisation strategy, which requires an appeal to office, legal mandate, or recognised authority. Nevertheless, the participant with the greatest positional authority also enjoyed the strongest agenda-setting capacity, whereas actors with stronger evidence profiles remained predominantly reactive. Discursive influence thus depended on both supporting reasons and unequal access to institutional and communicative resources.

Figure 1: *Direction of Ironic or Disrespectful Interactions During the Debate*



Mutual-respect coding identified 31 incidents involving ironic, sarcastic, or demeaning expressions or gestures (see Figure 1). Kobakhidze was the most frequent initiator, with predominantly non-verbal responses—especially smiles and facial expressions coded as ironic—directed towards Ghlonti, Gordeziani, and Janashia. Ghlonti responded to Kobakhidze with verbal irony, including “My government?!” and “I have not heard an argument, Mr Kobakhidze” (*Open Air Debates*, 2026). Janashia employed several direct and confrontational formulations, and the moderator also made remarks towards government critics that were coded as ironic.

Non-verbal expressions were interpreted cautiously and coded only in relation to their addressee, the accompanying verbal exchange, and the immediately preceding context. The incidents nevertheless show that discussion periodically shifted from policy claims to personal or professional discrediting. Examples included “You do not know, which means you have not studied it,” “As a lawyer, you do not know what research is,” and “And you call yourself an education expert” (*Open Air Debates*, 2026). Such exchanges clustered around the geographical justification of the “one city–one faculty” principle, labour-market research and quotas, and disagreements about the format and purpose of the debate.

From the perspective of the adapted DQI, these were not merely stylistic shortcomings. By shifting attention from claims to speakers’ status or competence, they weakened respect and required participants to defend their legitimacy rather than develop their policy arguments (Steenbergen et al., 2003). Overall, the programme only partially met deliberative criteria: it brought competing positions into a shared arena and included some well-supported argumentation, but this coexisted with unequal discursive access, interruptions and overlap, modest aggregate evidence quality, and repeated personal or professional discrediting.

Online Audience Reception

Analysis of the 122 Georgian-language YouTube comments indicates that the commenting audience did not simply reproduce the televised discussion. Users selected and amplified particular frames, connected them to personal experience, assigned them new political meanings, or rejected them in favour of competing interpretations. Attention also frequently shifted from the reform’s content to participants’ competence, conduct, moral qualities, and symbolic “victory” or “defeat.” Three broad trajectories emerged: acceptance and amplification, mixed and polarised reception, and rejection and replacement by a competing frame (see Figure 2). These broadly correspond to Hall’s (1980) dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions. However, amplification or radicalisation is treated here as an empirical development within acceptance rather than as a separate Hallian category.

The first trajectory concerned the crisis in higher education and the need for reform. Comments repeated claims about the commercialisation of higher education, declining degree value, graduate unemployment, excessive numbers of universities, and mismatches between programmes and labour-market demand. Some users supported increasing training in engineering and programming and linked these arguments to observations of graduates unable to

work in their fields. In van Leeuwen's (2007) terms, the reform was legitimated through instrumental rationalisation: change was justified through its anticipated capacity to align education with labour-market needs and improve employment outcomes. Personal experience reinforced this reasoning by presenting the crisis as evident in everyday life.

Commenters also repeated Kobakhidze's contention that academic participants had failed to advance persuasive counterarguments, but some expanded this into broader professional and moral delegitimation. The question "Are these the people teaching our young people?" challenged academic status itself as a source of epistemic authority. Expert authorisation became intertwined with moral evaluation: professors' formal authority was questioned, while Kobakhidze's was reinforced through praise of his intelligence, patience, self-control, and rhetorical performance.

The personalisation of authority was intensified by framing the programme as a contest. Expressions equivalent to "defeated," "destroyed," "taught them a lesson," and "played with them" inferred the reform's validity from the symbolic victory attributed to one participant rather than from its substantive content. Epistemic authority thereby became associated with the presumed winner, displacing reciprocal examination with an agonistic logic of victory and defeat. From a deliberative perspective, this substitutes personalised conflict and emotional identification for comparative evaluation of reasons (Habermas, 1996).

Table 2: *Three Trajectories of Online Audience Reception*

Three Trajectories of Online Audience Reception				
<i>The frames articulated in the debate are not reproduced unchanged in comments: they are accepted, amplified, contested, or replaced by competing frames.</i>				
I. Acceptance and Amplification				
Source frame		Audience response		Discursive outcome
Necessity of reform; weakness of opponents' arguments	→	Repetition and radicalisation	→	Expansion of the crisis frame and moral delegitimation of opponents
II. Mixed and Polarised Reception				
Source frame		Audience response		Discursive outcome
Alignment with labour-market needs; 'one city-one faculty'	→	Elaboration, partial rejection, and competing interpretations	→	Quality and regional-development arguments versus restrictions on choice and autonomy
III. Rejection and Replacement by a Competing Frame				
Source frame		Audience response		Discursive outcome
Problematic Soviet legacy; collaborative debate; improving quality	→	Reframes meanings, uses battle metaphors, and introduces alternative causes.	→	Nostalgia, victory/defeat narratives, and a political-control frame

The second trajectory was most visible in responses to “one city–one faculty.” Supporters understood it as resource concentration, quality improvement, and regional development; critics framed it as restricting student choice, university autonomy, academic freedom, and equal access. The issue was therefore interpreted through competing values: efficiency and quality versus freedom and social justice. Soviet education generated a similar polarisation. Some commenters presented it as a benchmark of lost quality, whereas others interpreted the reform as a return to Soviet or authoritarian governance. The same historical reference thus supported opposing conclusions, illustrating negotiated decoding in which elements of the problem definition were accepted but redirected through alternative values and interpretations (Hall, 1980).

The third trajectory rejected the government’s preferred explanation and replaced it with a competing political frame. Critical commenters often acknowledged problems in higher education. However, they interpreted the reform as an instrument of political control, a mechanism for weakening student activism, a source of inequality, or an expression of corrupt interests. Official and expert authority was also contested through experiential and comparative knowledge: parents invoked their children’s experiences, while emigrants compared Georgian policy with practices in Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. Credibility was consequently reassessed through political trust, lived experience, cross-national comparison, participants’ behaviour, and the perceived strength of their arguments.

The meanings circulated during the programme therefore did not pass unchanged into online discussion. Commenters reproduced some frames, intensified others, negotiated them through competing values, or replaced them with oppositional interpretations. They also redistributed epistemic authority by affirming or rejecting institutional and academic status according to rhetorical performance, moral evaluation, political identification, and experience. Because a self-selected group produced the comments, these patterns cannot be generalised to the programme’s entire audience. They nevertheless show that the comment space constituted a further stage in constructing higher education reform discourse, in which policy meanings and claims to expertise were actively renegotiated.

Conclusion

This study examined how higher education reform is constructed as an object of public discussion in government-aligned television media in Georgia. It focused on the reform’s mediated visibility, the distribution of discursive access, the quality of deliberation, participants’ use of evidence and authority, and the online audience’s reception of the frames circulated during the debate.

The preliminary monitoring revealed a marked discrepancy between the reform’s societal significance and its media visibility. Only four of the 127 current-affairs episodes examined contained a dedicated segment on higher education reform, and direct discussion between actors representing competing positions occurred in only one case. Given the scale of the proposed changes, this limited coverage resembles Gerstl-Pepin’s (2007) “thin” public sphere: the media

made the policy issue visible but provided insufficient space for sustained and multiperspectival public deliberation.

The case analysis showed that agenda-setting capacity and discursive access were distributed unevenly. Kobakhidze initiated 13 of the 19 principal topics and accounted for 53 minutes and 14 seconds of the programme's total duration of 1 hour, 56 minutes, and 25 seconds. The moderator established the "one city-one faculty" principle as the opening frame. However, subsequent thematic initiative shifted predominantly to the prime minister, while academic and professional participants remained largely reactive. The debate thus displayed a dual mechanism of internal agenda formation: the programme selected the initial frame. At the same time, the participant with the greatest institutional authority exercised the strongest influence over its subsequent development. This case-level pattern is consistent with the complementary insights of agenda-setting, gatekeeping, and indexing (Bennett, 1990; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Formal viewpoint diversity did not translate into participatory parity (Fraser, 1992). Inequality was evident not only in speaking time and topic initiation but also in opportunities to complete claims and respond to competing positions—for example, 20 of Janashia's 49 interventions ended in unfinished utterances. Although unfinished utterances cannot automatically be interpreted as intentional interruption, their prevalence indicates that discursive access involved more than obtaining the floor: it also depended on participants' capacity to retain it, complete an argument, and engage in reciprocal exchange.

The analysis of argumentation similarly revealed a mismatch between communicative prominence and evidentiary strength. Of the 108 coded claims, 75 (69.4%) contained some form of supporting grounds, while 33 (30.6%) were unsupported. The mean evidence-quality score was 2.41 on a four-point scale, and at least one reasoning problem was identified in 60.2% of the claims. Academic and professional participants generally occupied less communicative space but presented more consistently supported claims. By contrast, the quantitatively dominant participant produced the lowest mean evidence-quality score and the highest proportions of unsupported claims and reasoning problems. This aggregate pattern does not imply that every claim made by academic and expert participants was strong or that every claim advanced by Kobakhidze was weak. It demonstrates that discursive influence, institutional status, and argumentative quality did not coincide.

Mutual-respect analysis further qualified the programme's deliberative character. Thirty-one incidents involving irony, sarcasm, or personal and professional discrediting were identified. These exchanges redirected attention from evaluating policy claims to participants' competence, status, or character. From the perspective of the adapted DQI, such interactions weakened deliberative quality by requiring speakers to defend their legitimacy as participants rather than develop their arguments (Steenbergen et al., 2003). The debate therefore only partially met deliberative criteria: it brought competing positions into a shared communicative arena and

included some well-supported arguments, but these coexisted with unequal access, interactional constraints, modest aggregate evidence quality, and recurrent personal discrediting.

The analysis of legitimization showed that participants drew on different communicative resources. Academic and professional participants more frequently combined expert authorisation with rationalisation based on data, specialist knowledge, and anticipated institutional consequences. The prime minister's claims, in addition to their argumentative content, were articulated within a context shaped by the authority of political office. Competing positions were also delegitimated by questioning the competence of the actors advancing them rather than directly challenging their empirical foundations. The debate was therefore not only a disagreement over higher education reform but also a struggle over epistemic authority—over who could legitimately define the policy problem, interpret evidence, and establish the standards of valid argumentation (van Leeuwen, 2007).

The YouTube comments demonstrated that audience reception constituted an additional stage in the construction of reform discourse. Consistent with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, three broad trajectories emerged: acceptance and amplification of preferred frames; selective, negotiated, and polarised reinterpretation; and rejection followed by replacement with a competing political frame. Some commenters repeated claims about the crisis in higher education and the need for reform. Responses to "one city—one faculty" divided between a frame of efficiency, quality, and regional development and an opposing frame centred on restrictions to choice, autonomy, academic freedom, and equal access. Critical commentators reframed the reform through political control, inequality, weakened student activism, and corrupt interests. Institutional and academic authority was consequently affirmed or rejected according to rhetorical performance, moral evaluation, political trust, and personal experience.

In response to the overarching research question, the analysed media discourse was shaped through three interconnected asymmetries: unequal access to agenda formation and communicative space; a mismatch between institutional authority and evidentiary strength; and the selective and polarised decoding of televised frames by the commenting audience. The formal presence of competing positions did not develop into substantively equal deliberation, while the online comment space reproduced, intensified, negotiated, or replaced the meanings circulated by the programme.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates the analytical value of combining agenda-setting, indexing, deliberative quality, discursive legitimization, and audience reception. This integrated framework conceptualises televised policy debate as a multilevel process encompassing issue selection, studio power relations, competition among arguments and authority claims, and subsequent audience meaning-making.

The findings remain limited to one purposively selected television episode and cannot be statistically generalised to Georgian television media. The YouTube comments likewise reflect a self-selected group rather than the programme's full audience or wider public opinion. Future research should compare government-aligned, critical, and public-service broadcasters,

systematically examine moderators' interventions, and combine cross-platform comment analysis with audience interviews or focus groups.

Practically, the findings emphasise the moderator's responsibility to maintain control over the agenda, distribute communicative opportunities, protect participants' ability to complete and answer arguments, and limit personal discrediting. The democratic function of televised debate requires formats in which institutional status does not substitute for evidence, formal inclusion does not substitute for meaningful discursive access, and symbolic victory does not substitute for substantive policy evaluation.

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აბსტრაქტი

წარმოდგენილი სტატია ეხება სატელევიზიო დებატის დელიბერაციული ხარისხის შესწავლას ტელეკომპანია „იმედის“, როგორც საქართველოს ხელისუფლებასთან აფილირებული ტელემედის, ეთერში გამართული საჯარო დისკუსიის მაგალითზე. მსჯელობა ეხებოდა განათლების სისტემაში მიმდინარე ფუნდამენტურ ცვლილებებს. კვლევის მიზანია, გაანალიზოს ერთი მხრივ, დებატის, როგორც ანალიტიკური ჟურნალისტიკის ერთ-ერთი ჟანრის, მონაწილეთა მიერ დისკუსიის დღის წესრიგის შექმნა და მეორე მხრივ, ონლაინ აუდიტორიის მიერ ამ დისკურსული ჩარჩოების აღქმა. ყურადღება გამახვილდა იმ ხერხებზე, კერძოდ, მტკიცებულებებისა და ავტორიტეტის გამოყენებაზე, რომელსაც გადაცემის სტუმრები მიმართავდნენ, რათა მოეპოვებინათ დისკურსზე წვდომა.

სტატია ეფუძნება მედიამონიტორინგსა და უმაღლესი განათლების სისტემაში მიმდინარე ცვლილებების შესახებ განსხვავებული მოსაზრებების ტელეგამუქების შემთხვევის სიღრმისეულ ანალიზს.

აღსანიშნავია, რომ მონიტორინგის საფუძველზე ოთხი სატელევიზიო ანალიტიკური გადაცემის 127 ეპიზოდიდან, რომელიც „უმაღლესი განათლების ეროვნული კონცეფციის“ წარდგენის დღიდან (2025 წლის 16 ოქტომბერი) 2026 წლის ეროვნული გამოცდების დაწყებამდე (2026 წლის 2 ივლისი) გავიდა ეთერში, განათლების სისტემაში მიმდინარე ცვლილებებს მხოლოდ 4 ეპიზოდი დაეთმო, ხოლო საჯარო განხილვა განსხვავებული მოსაზრებების მქონე სხვადასხვა სტატუსის აქტორებს შორის სატელევიზიო ეთერში მხოლოდ ერთხელ, ტელეკომპანია „იმედის“ ანალიტიკური გადაცემის „ღია ეთერი-დებატები“ 2026 წლის 14 თებერვლის ეპიზოდში, შედგა. შესაბამისად, გაანალიზდა აღნიშნული გადაცემის ტრანსკრიპტი დისკურსის ხარისხის ინდექსის ადაპტირებული ვერსიის, დისკუსიის თემატური დღის წესრიგის, არგუმენტაციისა და დისკურსული ლეგიტიმაციის მიდგომების გამოყენებით. ადრესატების მიერ დისკურსული ჩარჩოების აღქმის თავისებურებათა გამოვლენის

მიზნით, ჩატარდა YouTube-ზე გამოქვეყნებული 122 ქართულენოვანი კომენტარის თვისებრივი კონტენტ-ანალიზი.

კვლევის შედეგად დადგინდა, რომ გადაცემის სტუმრებს დისკურსზე წვდომა არ ჰქონდათ თანაბრად. შესაბამისად, ასიმეტრია გამოიკვეთა დისკუსიის თემატური დღის წესრიგის შექმნის კუთხითაც. კერძოდ, 19 ძირითადი თემიდან 13 პრემიერ მინისტრმა, ირაკლი კობახიძემ, წამოჭრა. საეთერო დროც სხვა სტუმრებთან შედარებით მეტი დაიკავა და საგულისხმოა, რომ 108 კოდირებული მტკიცებიდან 63 მას ეკუთვნის. თუმცა, რაც შეეხება მტკიცებულებით მსჯელობას, მისი დისკურსი გადაცემის სხვა მონაწილეებთან შედარებით ნაკლებად ეყრდნობოდა ემპირიულ დასაბუთებას. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ აკადემიური და განათლების პოლიტიკის სფეროს წარმომადგენლებმა ვერ მოიპოვეს კომუნიკაციური დომინირება, რადგან ნაკლებ მტკიცებას გამოთქვამდნენ, მათი მსჯელობა უფრო მეტად იყო გამყარებული თანმიმდევრული ემპირიული მონაცემებითა და პროფესიული ცოდნით.

აღსანიშნავია, რომ გადაცემაში წარმოდგენილი საერთო მტკიცებების 30.6% დაუსაბუთებელი იყო, ხოლო 60.2% მინიმუმ 1 მსჯელობის ხარვეზს შეიცავდა. ჩვენ მიერ შესწავლილი დებატის დელიბერაციული ხარისხი ასევე შეიზღუდა იმ 31 ეპიზოდით, რომელშიც გამოიკვეთა ირონია, სარკაზმი და პიროვნული და/ან პროფესიული დისკრედიტაცია.

ონლაინ აუდიტორიის 122 კომენტარის თვისებრივმა კონტენტ-ანალიზმა დაადასტურა, რომ კომენტატორები შეტყობინების პასიური მიმღებნი არ ყოფილან. ანალიზის შედეგად გამოიკვეთა დისკურსული ჩარჩოების გამეორება, გაძლიერება, პოლარიზებული ინტერპრეტაციებით გარდაქმნა და რიგ შემთხვევებში, კონკრეტული პოლიტიკური ჩარჩოებით ჩანაცვლება.

ამგვარად, ერთი შემთხვევის, ტელეკომპანია „იმედის“ გადაცემის „ღია ეთერი-დებატები“ 2026 წლის 14 თებერვლის ეპიზოდის, სიღრმისეულმა ანალიზმა აჩვენა, რომ ფორმალური პლურალიზმი ტელეეთერში შინაარსობრივად თანასწორ დელიბერაციულ დისკურსად ვერ გარდაიქმნა. თუმცა, ხაზგასასმელია, რომ მიღებული შედეგები ვერ განზოგადდება, რადგან მხოლოდ ერთი მიზნობრივად შერჩეული ეპიზოდით გამოვლინდა. სამაგიეროდ, აღსანიშნავია, რომ სტატიაში წარმოდგენილი კვლევის შედეგები ფუნდამენტურ საფუძველს ქმნის შემდგომი ფართომასშტაბიანი კვლევისთვის, რათა დადგინდეს, ჩვენ მიერ გამოვლენილი ასიმეტრია მხოლოდ ამ კონკრეტული გადაცემის თავისებურებაა თუ ქართული პოლარიზებული მედიასისტემის მახასიათებელი.

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