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A Study on the Perception of China's Image in Contemporary Georgian Mainstream Media

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ABSTRACT: The concept of national image has gained increasing scholarly attention alongside China's growing economic power and international influence. The construction and dissemination of a favorable national image play a crucial role in shaping a supportive external environment. In the context of deepening China–Georgia relations, particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, examining perceptions of China's image in Georgian mainstream media is of both academic and practical significance.

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and interviews to investigate representations of China in Georgian society. A corpus of China-related reports published between 2020 and 2025 by two major Georgian media outlets—Imedi TV and TV Pirveli—was constructed. Drawing on framing theory and appraisal theory, the study analyzes the construction of China's image at both the macro level of narrative structures and the micro level of linguistic resources. In addition, it examines elite perceptions, particularly in the political and economic domains.

The findings indicate that, despite differences in political orientations, Georgian media demonstrate a shared pragmatic approach in their coverage of China, generally portraying it as an important development partner. Based on these findings, the study suggests several approaches to enhancing China's international image, including strengthening domestic media narratives, promoting academic exchange, and improving communication with international audiences.

This research contributes to the understanding of China's image in the Georgian context and provides practical insights for international communication strategies in a complex geopolitical environment.

KEYWORDS: China's image; Georgia; mainstream media

INTRODUCTION

The construction of a country's national image has become an increasingly important issue in the context of globalization and international communication. A national image reflects not only a country's political and economic strength, but also its cultural soft power and global influence. Over recent decades, China has significantly strengthened its position on the international stage; however, its image abroad continues to be shaped by competing narratives, including ideologically driven representations such as the "China threat theory."

In response, promoting a more objective, comprehensive, and multidimensional image of China has become an important goal of its international communication strategy. At the same time, the mechanisms of national image construction are evolving, shifting from centralized state narratives to more complex, multi-level communication networks involving multiple actors, especially in the post-pandemic era.

Despite growing scholarly interest in China's global image, the perception of China in smaller post-Soviet countries, including Georgia, remains under-explored. Most existing studies focus on major powers and global media systems, leaving the Georgian context relatively overlooked.

Within this context, Georgia represents a relevant case for examining how China's image is perceived and constructed. As an important partner in the Belt and Road Initiative, Georgia has experienced deepening political, economic, and cultural ties with China. In this setting, both mainstream media and the community of Sinologists play a key role in shaping public perceptions.

This study aims to analyze how China's image is constructed in Georgian mainstream media and how it is interpreted by key social actors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of "national image" originated in social psychology in the 1940s. The well-known Yale psychologist Irvin Child introduced the term "national stereotype" to describe simplified cognitive schemas formed on the basis of cultural prototypes. Such perceptions are shaped by cognitive processes associated with cultural norms and psychological characteristics[1].

[1] [1] Child, I. L. (1943). National stereotypes and their origins. *Journal of Social Psychology*.

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In the 1950s, in the aftermath of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, the British economist Kenneth E. Boulding was among the first to explicitly employ the term "national image." He argued that, within the emerging international order, international relations could be understood as interactions between national images. From this perspective, national image provides a useful framework for analyzing geopolitical dynamics and the relative advantages and disadvantages of states in international competition[2].

In his work *National Image and International Systems*, Boulding defined national image as the set of subjective perceptions, emotional attitudes, and evaluative structures held by both domestic populations and the international community. He further suggested that states categorize other countries as friends or enemies based on national security and political objectives, gradually forming stable stereotypes that guide decision-making in international affairs.

In the late 1990s, British political scientist Simon Anholt introduced the concept of "nation branding." He argued that countries, much like corporations, can construct and manage their own brands in order to attract investment, tourism, and international recognition[3]. As research in this field developed, scholars increasingly recognized that national image extends beyond economic considerations to encompass political, cultural, historical, and social dimensions, thereby becoming a comprehensive and interdisciplinary area of study.

Ingrid M. Martin defines national image as the sum of descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs about a particular country[4]. Similarly, Seyhmus Baloglu conceptualizes national image as an overall impression formed by the interaction of multiple influencing factors[5].

Joseph Nye further linked the concept of national image to that of "soft power." In *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), he emphasizes the importance of culture, political values, and foreign policy in shaping a positive national image[6]. Nye defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, highlighting cultural appeal and policy legitimacy as key components of international influence.

From a broader perspective, the development of Western scholarship on national image demonstrates a shift from early psychological approaches to a more interdisciplinary framework. Scholars have emphasized descriptive and informational perceptions, the combined influence of multiple variables, and the role of culture, values, and foreign policy in shaping national image. As globalization intensifies and international competition becomes increasingly complex, the construction of national image has emerged as a crucial strategy for achieving diplomatic and economic objectives.

With the deepening of economic globalization, Chinese scholarship on national image has expanded significantly, covering a wide range of topics, including definitions, communication mechanisms, and strategies for shaping China's international image. Within this field, Chinese scholars have largely approached national image through two main theoretical perspectives: essentialism and constructivism.

From a communication perspective, Xu Xiaoge was among the first to conceptualize national image as a form of "mirrored cognition" formed through the flow of international news[7]. Guan Wenhu later provided one of the earliest systematic definitions, describing national image as a manifestation of national strength and spirit, as well as a key intangible asset of the state[8]. Other scholars have emphasized its subjective nature: Li Zhi defines national image as a subjective evaluation of an objectively existing country[9], while Yang Weifen conceptualizes it as a relatively stable overall assessment formed by the international public[10]. Liu Jinan further develops this perspective by describing national image as a patterned collective perception formed across political, economic, cultural, and social domains[11].

Within the Essentialist framework, national image is understood as a reflection of a country's material power and national spirit. However, this perspective tends to overemphasize the correlation between comprehensive national strength and image, often overlooking the role of external perceptions and discursive construction. In contrast, the constructivist approach views national image as a dynamic product of international interaction and competition. Guan Wenhu highlights the historical evolution of China's image, particularly its significant transformation after the reform and opening-up period[2], while Li Zhi applies social constructivism to propose strategies for shaping China's image in the era of global communication.

Despite these theoretical advancements, research on the perception of China's image in Georgia remains limited. As China's global influence expands, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, its economic, political, and cultural presence in Georgia has increased significantly. However, the construction of China's image within Georgian mainstream culture is still in a formative stage.

Historically, Georgia's perception of China was shaped by indirect channels, largely mediated through the Soviet Union. Prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, interactions between the two countries were minimal, and localized constructions of China's image were constrained by the lack of direct engagement. Nevertheless, Russian scholarship on China—such as studies by Lukin, Kychanov, and Larin—provides important contextual insights into how China has been perceived in post-Soviet cultural space[12].

In recent decades, bilateral relations between China and Georgia have developed rapidly, particularly in the fields of economics, education, and cultural exchange. One of the few works directly addressing this topic is *China in the Eyes of Georgians*, edited by Georgia's first ambassador to

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China, Mikheil Ukleba. The book compiles perspectives from diplomats, scholars, and public figures, offering valuable insights into the evolving perception of China within Georgian society[13].

At the same time, scholars such as Guram Chikovani emphasize the role of cultural interaction and educational cooperation in shaping China's image. Their analyses highlight a gradual shift from traditional cultural stereotypes toward a more personalized and experience-based understanding centered on the Chinese people[14].

Overall, existing research suggests that China's image in Georgia is still in the process of formation. While cultural diplomacy and soft power have had a certain influence on public perception, awareness and understanding of China within Georgian society remain limited. This gap underscores the importance of further research into how China's image is constructed and transformed in this specific cross-cultural context.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach combining content analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine the representation of China in Georgian mainstream media.[15]

Two major television outlets—Imedi TV and TV Pirveli—were selected as research samples due to their high audience reach and distinct political orientations. According to audience measurement data from TVMR.GE (in cooperation with Nielsen, May 2025), Imedi TV ranks first in national viewership and is generally associated with a pro-government stance, whereas TV Pirveli, ranked second among news channels, is widely regarded as representing an opposition perspective. The selection of these two contrasting yet influential media outlets ensures both representations and diversity of viewpoints.

The data set was constructed using the LexisNexis database. China-related reports published between January 1, 2020, and June 30, 2025, were retrieved using the keyword "China." After removing duplicate entries and standardizing text formats, a total of 10,481 articles were included in the final sample (9,632 from Imedi TV and 849 from TV Pirveli).

To analyze the data, a two-level coding framework was developed. At the macro level, based on framing theory (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), news reports were categorized into thematic frames such as politics, economy, health, technology, and culture to identify dominant narratives. At the micro level, appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) was applied to classify the evaluative tone of each report as positive, negative, or neutral.

In addition, selected representative texts were further analyzed using critical discourse analysis, focusing on linguistic features such as verb processes, modality, and metaphorical expressions.[16] This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how China's image is constructed not only through thematic framing but also through subtle linguistic and discursive strategies.

Analysis of the Perception of China's Image in Georgian Mainstream Media

1. Overview of Media Coverage of China's Image

Statistical analysis reveals a significant disparity in the volume of China-related coverage between the two media outlets. A total of 9,632 valid reports were collected from Imedi TV, far exceeding the 849 reports from TV Pirveli. This substantial difference suggests that the pro-government media outlet pays greater attention to China-related issues and is more likely to treat China as a central subject in its narrative construction. In contrast, although the opposition-oriented media outlet produces fewer reports, its coverage may demonstrate a higher degree of thematic concentration.

A longitudinal analysis of report volumes from 2020 to 2025 further indicates that the focus of both media outlets exhibits clear stage-based variations in response to changes in the international environment.

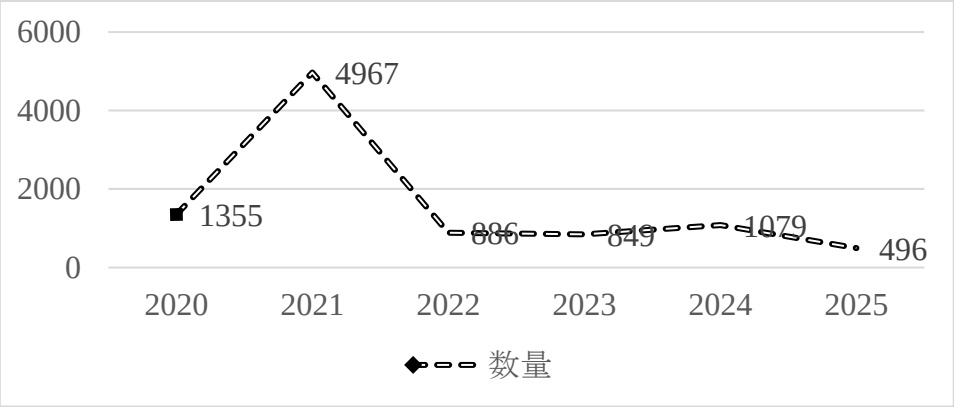


Figure 2.1. Number of China-related reports on Imedi TV (2020–2025)

As shown in Figure 2.1, the number of China-related reports on Imedi TV reached its peak in 2021. This trend is closely associated with China's role as a major supplier of medical materials and vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, media framing was highly concentrated on "health and medical" themes, constructing China as a "crisis cooperation partner."

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From 2022 to 2025, as the pandemic gradually subsided and international attention shifted toward regional security issues such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the frequency of China-related coverage declined significantly, although it remained at a certain baseline level. Meanwhile, the focus of reporting gradually shifted toward routine economic and political topics.

(2) TV Pirveli: an upward trend contrary to the overall pattern.

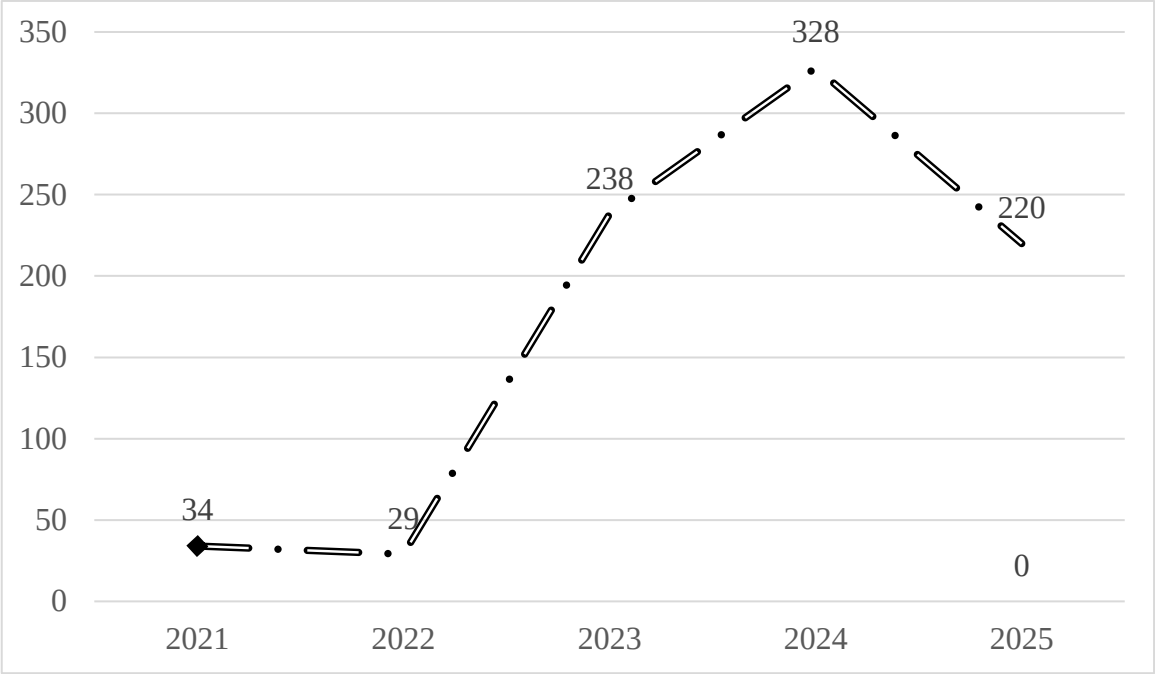


Figure 2.1. Number of China-related reports on TV Pirveli (2020–2025)

As shown in Figure 2.1, the number of China-related reports on TV Pirveli remained relatively low between 2021 and 2022, with 34 reports in 2021 and 29 in 2022. This suggests a relatively limited focus on humanitarian issues or government-led pandemic cooperation.

In the post-pandemic period (2023–2025), however, the volume of coverage increased sharply, reaching a peak of 328 reports in 2024. During this stage, the dominant framing shifted rapidly toward "politics and diplomacy" and "international news," focusing on China's role in global governance and geopolitics, thereby constructing China as a "global strategic actor."[17]

Comparative analysis indicates that Imedi TV's construction of China's image is more "event-driven," shaped by developments such as the pandemic and emphasizing pragmatic cooperation. In contrast, TV Pirveli appears to follow an "agenda-driven" approach, focusing more on international geopolitical issues and emphasizing macro-level strategic analysis.[18]

2. Comparison of Reporting Themes

Based on the predefined eight thematic frames, the valid sample was coded and statistically analyzed. The results are presented in the table below:

Table 2-2. Distribution of Thematic Frames in China-related Coverage Across the Two Media Outlets

Thematic frame	Imedi TV		TV Pirveli	
	Number (articles)	Percentage (%)	Number (articles)	Percentage (%)
Health and Medical Care	6,253	64.9%	-	-
Politics and Diplomacy	1,181	12.3%	579	68.2%
International News	1,229	12.8%	128	15.1%
Economy and Trade	433	4.5%	2	0.2%
Society and Culture	103	1.1%	135	15.9%
Science and Technology and Defense	77	0.8%	-	-
Regional and Legal Affairs	77	0.8%	-	-
Sports and Others	279	2.9%	3	0.4%
Total	9,632	100%	849	100%

[17] WHO. (2021). *COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan*. World Health Organization.

[18] Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. Palgrave Macmillan.

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A comparison of the data in Table 2-2 reveals that there are significant differences between the two mainstream media outlets in their thematic coverage of China-related reporting.

Imedi TV presents a diversified narrative structure in which "health cooperation" is overwhelmingly dominant, accounting for 64.9% of its coverage. Through this emphasis, the outlet constructs China as a "responsible public health partner." This image is further reinforced by supplementary coverage in politics, international affairs, and economic topics, collectively portraying China as a multidimensional actor engaged in humanitarian assistance, economic cooperation, and political trust-building. Overall, this framing positions China as a friendly, pragmatic "neighbor and partner."

In contrast, TV Pirveli exhibits a highly concentrated and "politicized" narrative structure. "Politics and diplomacy" accounts for 68.2% of its coverage, followed by "international news" (15.1%) and "society and culture" (15.9%). Together, these categories constitute the core of its reporting, while economic and health-related coverage is largely absent. Notably, the proportion of "society and culture" coverage is significantly higher than that of Imedi TV, suggesting that the opposition-oriented media tend to approach China through the lens of soft power and cultural diplomacy, indirectly reflecting a critical perspective on government policy toward China. This framing constructs China as a macro-level "strategic actor" with significant geopolitical influence.

Emotional Orientation and Lexical Density Analysis

To further examine the emotional tone underlying image construction and the micro-level focus of media attention, this study applies a stratified sampling method to code the sentiment of a sub-sample, while using the corpus analysis tool AntConc to extract high-frequency words from the full dataset. Given the substantial difference in sample size between the two media outlets (Imedi TV: 9,632 reports vs. TV Pirveli: 849 reports), this section adopts a dual approach combining raw frequency and normalized frequency (per 10,000 words) in order to objectively capture both the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of lexical choices.

Based on manual coding of 400 representative reports (200 from each media outlet), notable differences in emotional orientation were identified between the two sources. Imedi TV demonstrates a clear positive tendency: approximately 65% of reports are coded as positive, 30% as neutral, and only 5% as negative. Positive sentiment is primarily expressed through Judgement resources (e.g., frequent use of terms such as "reliable" and "generous" to describe assistance) and Appreciation resources (e.g., describing cooperation projects as "beneficial" or "crucial").

In contrast, TV Pirveli exhibits a more neutral and cautious tone. Approximately 55% of its reports are neutral, 30% positive, and 15% negative. Negative sentiment is often associated with issues such as geopolitical intentions, human rights concerns, or criticism of pro-China government policies, frequently employing terms such as "complex," "controversial," and "potential threat."

In terms of evaluative resources, Imedi TV tends to construct a positive moral image of the Chinese government through socially approving language and predominantly adopts a monoglossic (assertive) tone. By contrast, TV Pirveli more frequently employs variations of socially critical expressions (e.g., "assertive," "opaque") and favors a heteroglossic strategy, incorporating multiple voices—such as Western think tanks or opposition perspectives—to introduce skepticism and create an impression of "objective scrutiny."

Economic Discourse Analysis

Economic issues constitute the central focus of China-related reporting in Georgian media. Table 2-3 presents the raw frequency statistics of high-frequency economic-related terms extracted from the corpus for the two media outlets.

Table 2-3. Raw Frequency of High-Frequency Economic Keywords in China-related Coverage of Georgian Mainstream Media (2020–2025)

Media	Core Category	High-Frequency Keywords and Counts (Excerpt)
Imedi TV	Trade and Economic Cooperation	export and import (213), trade (95), market (79), commodities (14), trade platform (6)
	Finance and Investment	investment (49), funds (48), banks (40), stocks (22), People's Bank of China (10)
	Macroeconomic Indicators	economy (152), budget (40), GDP (9), digital economy (6)
	Belt and Road Initiative	Silk Road International Expo (48), Belt and Road Initiative (14), Maritime Silk Road (1)
	Tourism and Cultural Exchange	tourists (28), travel (28), tourism (1), visa (10)
TV Pirveli	General Economy	economy (19), investment (18), trade (10), exports (12), banks (11)

As shown in Table 2–3, Imedi TV holds an overwhelming advantage in the absolute frequency of all economic-related terms. The total frequency of "trade"-related vocabulary is approximately ten times higher than that of TV Pirveli, while "investment"-related terms appear about five times more frequently. These findings highlight the dominant role of pro-government media as a "policy amplifier" in shaping the breadth of economic and trade coverage.

However, differences emerge when considering the density of information. While Imedi TV, with its large volume of reporting, constructs a comprehensive flow of economic and trade information, TV Pirveli demonstrates a significantly higher density of attention per article on more complex topics such as "investment," "finance," and the "Belt and Road Initiative." This suggests that although opposition-oriented media produce fewer reports, their individual articles tend to exhibit greater informational depth and a stronger focus on macro-level strategies and capital dynamics.

At the same time, a notable convergence can be observed in the domain of "trade/exports," where the normalized frequencies of the two media outlets are nearly identical, indicating that bilateral trade constitutes a shared consensus that transcends political divisions. Nevertheless, divergence becomes evident at the contextual level. As indicated in the previous thematic analysis, high-frequency terms in Imedi TV are more closely

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associated with event-driven and livelihood-related expressions such as "expo," "tourists," and "visa-free policies." In contrast, TV Pirveli's high-frequency vocabulary more frequently co-occurs with analytical and technical terms such as "structure," "mechanism," and "stability,"[19] reflecting a more interpretative and analytical framing.

Political Discourse Analysis

The distribution of political vocabulary also reveals clear differences in media positioning. Table 2-5 presents the top 10 high-frequency political keywords and their frequency comparison across the two media outlets.

Table 2-5. Comparison of High-Frequency Political Keywords in China-related Coverage by Imedi TV and TV Pirveli (Top 10 Keywords)

Rank	Keyword	Imedi TV (Frequency)	TV Pirveli (Frequency)	Total
1	**Politics**	207	47	254
2	**European Union (EU)**	174	37	211
3	**NATO**	61	21	82
4	**Ministry of Foreign Affairs**	47	18	65
5	**Summit**	45	12	57
6	**Sovereignty**	38	15	53
7	**Strategic Partnership**	32	8	40
8	**G20**	28	24	52
9	**International Law**	15	29	44
10	**Democracy/Values**	12	22	34

As shown in Table 2-5, the high-frequency keywords in Imedi TV are concentrated on ritualized bilateral diplomatic terms such as "summit," "Ministry of Foreign Affairs," and "strategic partnership," reflecting its emphasis on documenting official interactions and reaffirming friendly relations.

In contrast, although TV Pirveli has a lower overall volume of coverage, it demonstrates a significantly higher relative density of multilateral and normative terms such as "international law," "G20," and "democracy." This difference in global perspective is particularly evident in TV Pirveli's frequent references to the "G20," indicating a tendency to situate China within the broader framework of global governance and international rules, rather than focusing solely on bilateral exchanges.

Through the analysis of normalized keyword frequencies, the narrative divergence between the two media outlets can be clearly identified. Imedi TV exhibits characteristics of "high volume, event-driven, and livelihood-oriented" reporting, with its lexical network centered on specific cooperation projects, official visits, and public-benefit policies. In contrast, TV Pirveli demonstrates a "high-density, structure-driven, and professionally oriented" pattern, with its vocabulary focusing on investment mechanisms, international finance, global governance frameworks, and geopolitical strategy.

Metaphorical Construction of China's Role

Metaphors function as cognitive tools that make abstract political concepts more tangible. The analysis shows that both media outlets predominantly employ positive functional metaphors, portraying China as an indispensable actor in Georgia's development.

The "locomotive" metaphor is particularly prominent in economic reporting, framing China as a driving force of global and regional growth. This suggests that China is perceived not only as an economic partner but also as a key engine capable of supporting Georgia's development trajectory. Similarly, China is frequently constructed as a "key actor" in geopolitical discourse, reinforcing its structural importance within global governance and regional initiatives. This framing normalizes China's rising influence and positions it as a legitimate and necessary participant in the international system.

Notably, risk-related metaphors are rarely directly associated with China. Instead, they are externalized and attributed to third parties in discussions of geopolitical tensions. This "othering" strategy enables the media to maintain a predominantly stable and rational image of China while shifting the perception of risk onto external actors.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the construction of China's image in Georgian mainstream media through a combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis, focusing on Imedi TV and TV Pirveli. The findings demonstrate that, despite their differing political orientations, both outlets exhibit a shared pragmatic approach in their coverage of China-related issues.

China is consistently portrayed as an important development partner, with media discourse largely moving beyond ideological polarization and emphasizing practical cooperation. Imedi TV constructs China's image through event-driven reporting, highlighting economic benefits and

[19] Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. Public Affairs.

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bilateral cooperation, whereas TV Pirveli adopts a more analytical perspective, situating China within broader geopolitical and global governance contexts.

Despite these differences in narrative strategies, both media converge in recognizing the significance of China–Georgia relations. The findings also suggest that positive and functional framing dominates the representation of China, while risk-related narratives are often externalized and attributed to other actors.

From a theoretical perspective, the results highlight the role of pragmatic considerations in shaping national image construction, demonstrating how media discourse can transcend political divisions through shared developmental interests.

Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of China's image in a small post-Soviet context and provides insights into the mechanisms of national image construction in cross-cultural media environments.

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