

The Government of Georgia's Aggressive and Propagandistic Rhetoric Against Media – Authoritarians' Proven Method to Discredit Journalists

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In light of advancement of digital and information technologies, it is with increasing frequency that we hear such terms as fake news and disinformation. On the one hand this is precipitated by some entirely objective reasons, since modern societies do face a very acute problem of disinformation and fake news. On the other hand, this problem is often exploited by various governments to curtail critical media² (via legislative norms or other practical measures). At the same time, critical media often becomes a target of government propaganda when it is rhetorically attacked and denounced in “amplification of lies”, “spreading false information”, “violence”, “acting against the national interests”, etc. These types of reaction are characteristic to those governments across many countries which are suspected in different wrongdoings and crimes. Sometimes, such allegations do not go beyond rhetorical attacks, whereas more often, in non-democratic countries, these methods precede attempts of media crackdown, because the governments use them to foster distrust and negative attitude vis-à-vis media. Afterwards, attack on media gets easier.

In recent years, aggressive rhetoric against journalists has become very familiar and pervasive for the Georgian reality as well. The Government of Georgia's officials forcefully promote sharply negative messages against the critical media. On top of their rhetoric, there are some alarming actions too which put media freedom in Georgia under question. For instance, cases lodged against managers of critical TV channels, facts of harassment journalists in Adjara Public Broadcaster,³ Georgian National Communication Commission's (GNCC) attempts⁴ to interfere in media content, violence against journalists which the authorities leave without proper response.⁵ However, the scope of this paper is limited to the overview of the rhetoric which is the most widely applied instrument of the incumbent government against the

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² Davit Kutidze. Gnomon Wise. 2021. Pandemic of the Government Censorship that Started Under the Pretext of “Fight Disinformation” About the Coronavirus. <https://bit.ly/3i1iIGl>

³ Transparency International Georgia. 2021. Persecution and Harassment of Critical Journalists at Adjara TV. <https://bit.ly/3zyZkXc>

⁴ Davit Kutidze. Gnomon Wise. 2021. Communications Commission as a Censorship Committee. <https://bit.ly/3zBW39z>

⁵ Social Justice Centre. 2021. Legal Assessment of 5-6 July Events – Initial Analysis. <https://bit.ly/3ucsNFq>

critical media. Below we will discuss those statements that clearly signal attempts to discredit the journalists.

Speaking of the government's rhetoric vis-à-vis media a question may arise: is it really a problem that a certain government official criticizes media? Certainly, every individual including the members of the government are entitled to express their views on any specific issue or person. However, when this criticism (if it can be referred to as criticism at all), often with an aggressive manner and manifested attempt to discredit media, resembles a campaign it is reasonable to suspect that we are dealing with a deliberate propaganda which serves fostering distrust vis-à-vis media in the society. Below we will analyze such statements that are permeated with propaganda messages and are most particularly used during the times of crisis in the country and when the government's competency or integrity are being questioned. At the same time, if we take a look at history and examine rhetorical attacks against media by different non-democratic governments, semblance with the Georgian reality will become even more striking.

Political leaders in many countries of the modern world increasingly often describe critical journalists and civil activists with pejorative terms. Fostering hatred vis-à-vis the media may serve short-term ambitions of the authorities, but in the long-run it may inflict a massive harm to the media freedom and democratic process in general that would be very difficult to reverse.⁶ Naturally, propagandistic campaigns launched against the critical media is nothing new. This instrument was successfully applied in Nazi Germany – a term "Lügenpresse" ("Lying Press")⁷ was used to discredit unacceptable ideas. This motto was introduced before Nazi's ascension to power, during the World War 1, in the book published by the German Ministry of Defense, entitled as "Our Enemies' Lying Press". According to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper, this term was coined by Reynold Anton in 1914.⁸ In both cases this term was used within the context of foreign threat and concerned "enemy's propaganda". After nearly a decade, it was transformed into a weapon to discredit and smear any alternative viewpoint opposing the Nazism. It is possible to say that Hitler and Nazis started to use that slogan more robustly and widely, incessantly reiterating it to discredit journalists,⁹ among other things. The critiques of Adolf Hitler's regime were often referred as representatives of the "apparatus of lying press". At the same time, this word still

⁶ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2017. UN expert urges governments to end "demonization" of critical media and protect journalists. <https://bit.ly/2W32pB2>

⁷ Jane E. Kirtley. American Bar Association. Getting on the Truth: Fake News, Libel Laws, and "Enemies of the American People." <https://bit.ly/39Kptbf>

⁸ Rainer Blasius. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 2015. Von der Journaille zur Lügenpresse. <https://bit.ly/2XGQh9c>

⁹ Timothy Snyder. The New York Times. 2019. How Hitler Pioneered 'Fake News'. <https://nyti.ms/3kyEi6T>

has anti-Semitic connotation and implies hatred not only vis-à-vis journalists but to everyone who opposes the “will of people”.

As a result of targeting people with “Lügenpresse” label and in light of smear campaign, spearheaded by Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda, millions of people, including Hebrews, political opponents and homosexuals died in Nazi concentration camps.¹⁰ It is possible to say “Lügenpresse” has been an inspiration of modern malicious labels, employed by the authoritarian regimes to neutralize critical thought, referred in contemporary parlance as “fake news”. Of necessary note is that this term was tabooed in Germany until 2015, when anti-Islamic movements, such as PEGIDA,¹¹ started to use it more frequently in the presence of journalists. Simultaneously, trust vis-à-vis media in Germany dropped and verbal attacks against journalists soon transformed into physical violence. Sometimes, media workers were unable to report from PEGIDA-organized protest rallies without private security detail. Several journalists who dared to attend rallies without personal security were beaten up.¹²

Naturally, the USSR did not lack the terms coined to discredit the critical thought. One of the most widespread label was “enemy of the people” which was successfully replicated by modern Russia. In 1997, Russian state-sponsored media declared „Новая Газета-Мир Людей“, a 15-member strong editorial office which monitored policies of the regional governments, as “unpatriotic” and “enemy of the people” media outlet. The newspaper was persecuted by different ways, including creation of its competitor pro-government newspaper and in August 2005 „Новая Газета-Мир Людей“ was closed down.¹³ The label introduced by Vladimir Putin – “foreign agents” - is successfully used to target free media. This concerns journalists but not exclusively only them. The law on “foreign agents” was adopted in 2017 in Russia and it poses threat to each and every media outlet. It requires from media and individual journalists to submit detailed financial reports or otherwise obliges them to add specific marking (“foreign agent”) on their product: This reporting (material) was produced and (or) disseminated by foreign media outlet which carried out functions of foreign agents and (or) Russian legal entity which functions as a foreign agent. This text needs to be added on everything – articles, videos, Instagram stories or even such Twitter content which has nothing to do with the politics. The register which takes stock of “foreign agents” consists of dozens of outlets, journalists and activists as well as highly reputable international

¹⁰ Rick Noack. The Washington Post. 2016. The ugly history of ‘Lügenpresse,’ a Nazi slur shouted at a Trump rally. <https://wapo.st/3ITCnJh>

¹¹ DW. 2021. PEGIDA. <https://bit.ly/3EJCTCt>

¹² Rick Noack. The Washington Post. 2016. The ugly history of ‘Lügenpresse,’ a Nazi slur shouted at a Trump rally. <https://wapo.st/3u2yiGB>

¹³ Joe Vesey-Byrne. INDEPENDENT. 2017. Here are 4 leaders, besides Donald Trump, that have called the press ‘enemies of the people’. <https://bit.ly/2XRxokv>

organizations protecting freedom of speech.¹⁴ In addition, the website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs attaches big red “fake news” stamp on stories which the government does not recognize as truth.¹⁵ In this manner, the Russian authorities seek to discredit and undermine public trust vis-à-vis those independent sources which speak about the vices of Putin’s’ rule.

Aggressive rhetoric against media is widespread across many different countries and the motive of the governments in these cases is obviously prevention of dissemination of “false” and “harmful for the state” information. The President of Turkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has denounced Twitter as a threat while his government arrested dozens of users under the charges of publication of “disinformation”. Turkish media, loyal to the government, blamed their opponents in collaboration with some unidentified “foreign enemies”.¹⁶ In addition, the Government of Turkey labelled journalist of Die Welt, Deniz Yucel, as a “terrorist” and later arrested him. In fact, Mr Yucel was part of the team that investigated suspicious cases of corruption with the involvement of the Turkish officials and members of the President Erdogan’s family. Prior and after Jul 2016 attempted coup d’état Turkish government detained dozens of journalists and closed numerous media outlets. In different times, journalists were main targets of President Erdogan’s attacks for many reasons. For instance, they were linked with ultra-nationalists, Gullen affiliates, etc. Erdogan grouped¹⁷ them together under the label of the so called deep state.¹⁸

Rhetoric aimed to discredit the media is virtually identical across every country and in each period of time. For instance: Ruler of Myanmar and leader of military junta had stated that the media constantly promoted false information where certain truths were omitted, some issues were exaggerated and facts were not verified at all. The Burmese-language newspaper The Irrawaddy was targeted by the military junta as “enemy of the state”. The late Venezuelan dictator, Hugo Chavez, after closing down Globovision-owned RCTV, referred to that media as yet another “enemy of the state”.¹⁹ President of Ecuador Rafael Korea gained notoriety by harassing media (often pressing them with huge sums of fines in courts). Media outlets which dared to criticize his government immediately became targets of attacks. In 2012, he revoked licenses of many media outlets and called on public to boycott “corrupt” private media. During

¹⁴ Andrew Roth. The Guardian. 2021. Putin’s crackdown: how Russia’s journalists became ‘foreign agents’. <https://bit.ly/3kxZuK8>

¹⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Published materials that contain false information about Russia. <https://bit.ly/3CFhzfC>

¹⁶ Christopher Walker and Robert W. Orttung. Journal of Democracy. 2014. Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media. <https://bit.ly/3ADfxHi>

¹⁷ John Feffer. Institute for Policy Studies. 2017. If Journalists are the Enemy of the People, I Am Too. <https://bit.ly/3nZQBev>

¹⁸ Political Dictionary. Deep State. <https://bit.ly/3u48uK4>

¹⁹ Joe Vesey-Byrne. INDEPENDENT. 2017. Here are 4 leaders, besides Donald Trump, that have called the press ‘enemies of the people’. <https://bit.ly/3AC997V>

one of his speeches, President Korea publicly tore apart La Hora newspaper, yelling “let them sue me”.²⁰ President of Syria, Bashar Assad blamed the Amnesty International’s report – saying that 13,000 people died in one of Assad’s military prison – for falsification and stated: “One can falsify anything in the modern world. We are living in the era of fake news”.²¹ The President of Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte complains that he is “demonized” with “fake news” and castigated journalists as “spies” multiple times. The President of Venezuela, Nicholas Maduro, lamented in his interview with the RT, a Russian propaganda mouthpiece, that the global media disseminated “plenty of fake versions and many lies” about his country.²² Media demonization campaigns are discernible in myriad other countries as well.²³

Of note is that the European journalists are not any safer from such type of attacks either. For instance, the former Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, slammed journalists as “dirty, anti-Slovakian whores”, “toilet spiders” and “smiling snakes”.²⁴ The fifth President of Serbia, Aleksandr Vucic, regularly lambasted journalists at his press-conferences. In some cases, those journalists whom Vucic mentioned in a negative context, later received death threats from various online channels.²⁵

Foreign policy pundits and political commentators who observe this campaign to smear reliable sources of information note that this method is regularly used by the authoritarians. In order to neutralize democratic institutions, authoritarians need to erase boundaries between truth and lies. They aim to discredit traditional sources of information and leave people in uncertainty whom to trust and what to believe. This disorientation allows the ruling class to remain in power when their power is not subject to checks and balances. It does not matter whether or not population trusts the leader, it is important that they do not believe rumors against the leader.²⁶ As stated by Steve Coll, dean of Columbia Journalism School, “this kind of speech makes it easier for them to stretch those boundaries.”²⁷

In the nearest past, under Donald Trump’s presidency, United States of America was facing a grievous problem of discrediting and demonizing the media by the government. The return of the term Lügenpresse to the agenda coincided with Trump’s 2016 campaign. He used the “fake news” label against basically every mainstream media (New York Times, NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN etc) and denounced them as

²⁰ Christopher Walker and Robert W. Orttung. Journal of Democracy. 2014. Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media. <https://bit.ly/3CHdJ5o>

²¹ Jason Schwartz. POLITICO. 2017. Trump’s ‘fake news’ mantra a hit with despots. <https://politi.co/2XLkVi4>

²² Sputnik International. 2017. Maduro Accuses World Media of Spreading Fake News on Venezuela. <https://bit.ly/3hYof75>

²³ Jason Schwartz. POLITICO. 2017. Trump’s ‘fake news’ mantra a hit with despots. <https://politi.co/39whWMy>

²⁴ Index on Censorship. 2018. Demonising the media: Threats to journalists in Europe. <https://bit.ly/3ADNFI6>

²⁵ Ibid. <https://bit.ly/2XSek5x>

²⁶ Joe Vesey-Byrne. INDEPENDENT. 2017. Here are 4 leaders, besides Donald Trump, that have called the press ‘enemies of the people’. <https://bit.ly/3AAaY5B>

²⁷ Jason Schwartz. POLITICO. 2017. Trump’s ‘fake news’ mantra a hit with despots. <https://politi.co/3zxDZgU>

“unsuccessful”. This campaign seemingly had an influence over the public. The Monmouth University poll shows that three out of four Americans believe that the media regularly publishes fake news whereas Gallup/Knight Foundation survey illustrated that 42% of the Republicans think that any news which puts a political group or politician into a negative light is fake.²⁸

Despite Trump’s campaign and his myriad tweets to scold mainstream media as “fake news media” and “enemy of the American people”, the President’s action have not gone any further beyond the rhetoric, owing America’s strong institutional democracy. However, it is possible to say that Trump’s rhetoric was successfully copied in many authoritarian countries and used to curb critical thought. According to Joel Simon, Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Trump “provided context and framework for any authoritarian leaders, or maybe democratic leaders discontent over how media covers different issues – to hinder and discredit the media.”²⁹ Some believe that Trump’s tweets played a role in provoking violence at Capitol Hill in January 2021. On this ground, Facebook and Twitter suspended his accounts.³⁰ Whether or not Trump’s tweets did encourage violence is a matter of separate, wider and complex discussion. However, those statements against the media, as mentioned earlier, did discredit the media in the eyes of public.

The Government of Georgia’s Rhetoric vis-à-vis the Media and Propaganda Methods Used in this Process

The Georgian government officials have started to step up rhetoric against the critical media in the past few years. This is probably attributable to different crises of the latest period. It is possible to say that during crisis (which have not really calmed down since 20 June 2019), media’s criticism of government’s misdeeds and other unlawful actions usually prompts aggressive response from the authorities. The main targets of this response, first and foremost, are TV channels and their journalists. Perhaps, this is because TV is the major source of information for most of the Georgian citizens. According to the NDI’s latest public opinion survey³¹ (July 2021), TV is the main source of information for 57% of the people.

²⁸ Jane E. Kirtley. American Bar Association. Getting on the Truth: Fake News, Libel Laws, and “Enemies of the American People.” <https://bit.ly/3CCkI53>

²⁹ Jason Schwartz. POLITICO. 2017. Trump’s ‘fake news’ mantra a hit with despots. <https://politi.co/2XPJnio>

³⁰ The Economist. 2021. Will Facebook’s “Supreme Court” reinstate Donald Trump’s account? <https://econ.st/3CGQJns>

³¹ Caucasus Research Resource Center. NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, July 2021 <https://bit.ly/3i1YNXX>

Before we review those statements which the ruling team uses to discredit the media, we would like to briefly overview main propaganda techniques which are familiar in the scholarly literature and often used in Georgia too.

Name calling – Giving a person, group or idea positive or negative label. Oftentimes, it is used in negative context. At the same time, this propaganda method aims to demotivate information recipient from scrutinizing what are the facts behind this or that label. In other words, it is intended to ensure that emotions beat argumentative discussion. It is often used to shape a negative image of an opponent by creating and developing different stereotypes. The most important aim of this technique is to manipulate the audience's emotions and provoke hasty, superficial conclusions³² based on those emotions. In the Georgian reality, we can find many labels against the journalists and media in particularly such as “partisan”, “anti-state TV channels”, “promoters of dirty provocations”, “perpetrators”, and “trash”. The latter is frequently used by Goga Khaindrava, a Georgian Dream-affiliated figure, who addresses the journalists with the following phrase: “You are perpetrators, you are shameful people, you stink, you stink with your immorality and filth, you are trash”.³³

Similar to the Name Calling is **Ad nauseam** technique which implies incessant repetition of one and the same idea. This could be an idea, or simple motto which is repeated so often that people start to believe it.³⁴ We see this approach in the Georgian reality when TV channels critical of the government are referred to as supplements of the United National Movement.

The first response of the government when media exposes specific misdeeds during any crisis is **denial of facts**. This could be disregarding possibly obvious facts about the occurrence or false interpretation to raise doubts in the audience. Usually, this is followed by simplification and denigration of the problem. For instance, in response to a question about alleged cyber-attack against TV Pirveli, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, stated: “Who needs your server anyway... You are a Real TV, similar to what was Vano Merabishvili's TV channel in 2012. Today, your bosses of course are Saakashvili, Khazaradzer and Tsereteli but you are yet another UNM TV channel, a Real TV. You work in the same manner. Falsification, fraud, fabrication is your trademark”.³⁵

In response to a critical information, authorities often use **source discrediting technique**. This means that irrespective of accuracy of a specific idea or report, it is denounced solely on the ground of its origins. This approach can reach seemingly unimaginable boundaries. For instance, Adolf Hitler refused to hear

³² Richard C. Vincent. 2006. Global Communication and Propaganda. <https://bit.ly/3hY1s4E>

³³ “TV Pirveli”. 2021. “You are a trash, you stink! – Goga Khaindrava fights journalists” <https://bit.ly/3lRiMcZ>

³⁴ MillLab. Propaganda. <https://bit.ly/3CTJOr9>

³⁵ On.ge. 2021. “Who needs your server anyway – Gharibashvili asks TV Pirveli” <https://bit.ly/2Xlp9qG>

any ideas from those scientists who spoke with him about the nuclear bomb project. He considered nuclear physics to be a “Jewish” science, even though it would have been a tremendous advantage during the WW2.³⁶ The Government of Georgia also employs the similar approach and discredits any fact or news, which is reported unacceptable for the authorities media, on the ground of their origin, by using “fake news” and “partisan media” labels.

Accusing the accuser – preaches logic that best defense is offense. For instance, speaking on 5-6 July events³⁷ (when dozens of journalists were physically assaulted, and beaten cameramen of TV Pirveli died after couple of days) and inadequate response from the authorities (which failed to protect the journalists from violent mobs), government officials stated that although violence against journalists is unacceptable, journalists themselves are often involved in violence against the public, albeit psychologically. The similar statement belongs to Kakha Kaladze, one of the leaders of the Georgian Dream: “Obviously violence and hatred kills our country, its future and all those people who did not spare you, hit you, assaulted you, did damage the country’s development and our tomorrow. These are punishable actions and all these is shameful... No less evil is psychological violence, which unfortunately takes place in our society for years. We often hear from different TV channels and broadcasts how people are mocked, subjected to libel and bullying, solely and only because of different political or other grounds.”³⁸

Kakha Kaladze’s abovementioned statement also fits well with yet another propaganda technique. This is **whataboutism** which instead of answering accusations or difficult questions, poses counter-accusations or shifts emphasis to other topics, aiming to deflect attention from the object of criticism or/and justify this object through misleading comparisons and manipulative moral judgements.³⁹

Generalization – is to generalize one occurrence or idea and portray the respective cluster positively or negatively. A human brain is used to generalization. For instance, if we buy three apples from the grocery and all three turns out to be rotten, we may assume that all apples at the shelf are rotten. However, this is maybe or may not be true. There is a same situation when government officials throw all critical journalists “in the same pot” and portray them as being equally non-professional, hostile and advocates of strictly partisan interests.⁴⁰

Bandwagon approach implies using the following notion: everybody does that. This calls on members of the society to bandwagon this or that group and follow crowd behavior. It is often that the Georgian

³⁶ Henry T. Conserva. 2003. Propaganda Techniques. <https://bit.ly/39GTxec>

³⁷ Social Justice Centre, 2021. Legal Assessment of 5-6 July Events – Initial Analysis. <https://bit.ly/3lW700J>

³⁸ Radio Liberty, 2021. Kaladze compares actions of violent mobs to the work of media. <https://bit.ly/3o3yeW3>

³⁹ MillLab. Propaganda. <https://bit.ly/3CTJOr9>

⁴⁰ Henry T. Conserva. 2003. Propaganda Techniques. <https://bit.ly/3CHPZhx>

authorities also try to bandwagon faith or traditions. In this regard, of note are the government officials' statements on 5-6 July events when small group of public organized counter-rally and assaulted journalists in response to "March of Dignity" announced by LGBTQI groups. Prior and after those events, high-ranking public officials stated that the LGBTQI community should not march on Rustaveli avenue since it contradicted the Georgian Church and will of the majority of the population. For instance, the Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili stated: "When 95% of our population is against to hold demonstratively propaganda march or parade, we all have to obey that. This is the idea of the absolute majority of our population and we, as government elected by the people, have to take this into account. We will always take this into account and it no longer will be when minority decided fate of the majority when any decision was made in Georgia with trademark of violence."⁴¹ However, as the latest public opinion polls indicate, 95% of the population maybe is not at all against holding this march. Moreover, 73% of those surveyed stated that the government should ensure freedom and safety of assembly of the minorities.⁴²

Plain folks – this method is used when a communicator seeks to convince the others that he or his ideas are good or down-to-earth, since they are like anything else and acceptable for common people.⁴³ Georgian government officials say how people are tired by polarization, "lies" broadcasted by different TV channels and aggressive rhetoric. At the same time, they often fuel polarization with their own rhetoric.

Card staking is a method when a presenter distorts facts, or hand-picks them, deliberately omitting undesirable events. He/she also uses vague clarifications and mixes logical and illogical statements. In this manner, a propagandist stakes cards against the truth or to overshadow it and show from a single perspective alone. Given omitted and/or distorted facts in the information, the audience lacks possibility to come to an adequate judgement and make informed decision. Nazi Germany's disinformation campaigns, aimed to rethink the WW1 and role of Jews, is known as "big lies". Hitler's Minister for Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels said that if a lie is repeated often and systematically enough, eventually it will be widely accepted as truth.⁴⁴ For the Government of Georgia it does not pose a particular difficulty to apply such technique vis-à-vis the media, since they highlight the actions of the former government against the media (of note is that not entirely unjustifiably, because media used to have a lot of problems during the rule of the previous government, too) and speak how unreliable are media outlets that were established by the predecessors of incumbent Georgian authorities. Therefore, the rhetoric starts with

⁴¹ Radio Liberty, 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili: When 95% is against holding the march, everyone needs to obey. <https://bit.ly/39xp4IT>

⁴² Radio Liberty, 2021. 73% of the population thinks that the government should ensure safety of the pride participants. Edison Research. <https://bit.ly/2W6kGxk>

⁴³ Richard C. Vincent. 2006. Global Communication and Propaganda. <https://bit.ly/3EVeZUF>

⁴⁴ Ibid. <https://bit.ly/3kwwMtc>

more or less fair remarks about the past, although justification of current events with the past and discrediting media in this manner, is exactly one of the methods of propagandistic rhetoric.

Examples of the Aggressive Rhetoric from the Georgian Authorities

The statements that we are going to discuss below, further illustrates use of different propaganda techniques in the Georgian reality. The number of aggressive statements from the Georgian Dream representatives (including high-ranking public officials) vis-à-vis the media increased particularly this year which is perhaps attributable to the crisis situation in general and pre-election period. These statements do resemble a campaign and they reflect the attempt to discredit critical of the government opinions.

The incumbent Prime Minister **Irakli Gharibashvili** is the most notorious with the aggressive statements. As early as during his tenure as the Minister of Defense, he called media workers as “Putinists”. The Prime Minister became irritated by the question from a journalist about the reluctance of the Georgian government officials to mention Vladimir Putin in their statements. In particular, Irakli Gharibashvili stated: “It was your chief... Saakashvili and sponsor of your TV, Kezerashvili, who left our hero soldiers in the war. I do not call journalists [Putinists], I call it to “Mtavari Arkhi”, “Formula” and “UNM”. You precipitated Putin’s coming to Georgia”.⁴⁵

In addition, Irakli Gharibashvilir referred to the journalists in the Parliament, who tried to ask him a question, as “mad”.⁴⁶ In his statement, use of name calling propaganda technique is clearly discernible.

Gharibashvili also often attacks TV Pirveli. According to his statement: “There were repulsive and anti-state broadcasts shown on air on TV Pirveli which directly attacked our Patriarch and the Church. This is nothing but enmity towards the state and our Church. Your ideology is to blame here. Not you. In this case, it is the blame of that TV channel, sponsors and main ideologues that are flocked behind that TV channel. Your TV channel is directly funded by the UNM and the entire policy which is pursued, is anti-state”.⁴⁷ With this statement, the government official not only discredits a specific TV channel, but seeks to bandwagon with one of the influential institution, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and portray himself as its defender.

⁴⁵ Formula. 2020. “Gharibashvili to Formula and Mtavari Arkhi: You are Putinists”. <https://bit.ly/3Ctf3Jh>

⁴⁶ On.ge. 2021. “They are mad” – Gharibashvili refers to journalists with a discriminatory term. <https://bit.ly/3hQ1cog>

⁴⁷ IMEDI NEWS. 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili: “TV Pirveli” is funded directly by the UNM and all that policy which is being pursued is anti-state”. <https://bit.ly/39mNMeX>

As mentioned earlier, on 5 July 2021, small group confronted March of Dignity, announced by the LGBTQI community. At the same day, Irakli Gharibashvili stated that he thought it was not advisable⁴⁸ to hold March of Dignity on Rustaveli Avenue. Given the danger of violence against the participants of the march, organizers decided to cancel it, but the opponents of the march targeted journalists.⁴⁹ The violent mob physically assaulted over 50 journalists. After a few days, TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava who was beaten during those events, died. Journalists blamed the government for inadequate response and demanded resignation of the Prime Minister Gharibashvili. It was after this crisis when the government, including Irakli Gharibashvili himself, intensified campaign to discredit the media.

Irakli Gharibashvili also stated: “People see very well who stands on the side of truth. What is happening in the past few days, is of course a political rally, a political act. I would like to express my condolences over the death of your colleague. Certainly, this is a huge tragedy for us all, but it is very immoral to speculate with the death of your colleague and manipulate society with that. There is only one destructive force that speculates – this is Saakashvili and his radical group which now rallies behind him and obviously, carries out Saakashvili’s policy. Unfortunately, I would like to mention that those journalists who are already directly involved in this political campaign and rallies, this obviously will not be reflected well on media environment, but it is their choice. We, the government, do our best to ensure that you, journalists have possibility to work and move freely. The government did everything to this aim...”⁵⁰ It is possible to say that this statement encompasses nearly all abovementioned propaganda techniques, including Ad nauseam, denial of facts, whataboutism, generalization and mixing all these, staking cards in a way to erase the boundaries between truth and lie.

Speaking about protests of journalists, the Prime Minister also stated: “Their number one task is to dismantle any authority in the country, discredit everyone authoritative, every authoritative institution, such as military, police, judiciary. That is why they are fighting the Church, fighting the Patriarch. That is why they come up with thousands of provocations and why they are behind LGBTQI march campaign. It was them who were trying to organize that grievous provocation which we managed to avoid. Obviously, it was very unfortunate what happened. We all condemned that. Attacking journalists was unacceptable and most importantly, it was a catastrophic mistake. However, all the offenders were punished and imprisoned”.

⁴⁸ Radio Liberty, 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili: I think it is not advisable to hold march announced for today. <https://bit.ly/2XHmw8g>

⁴⁹ Social Justice Centre, 2021. Legal Assessment of 5-6 July Events – Initial Analysis. <https://bit.ly/3lW700J>

⁵⁰ Info Postalioni, 2021. Gharibashvili to journalists: It is a hugely immoral behavior to speculate your colleague’s death and manipulate public in this manner. <https://bit.ly/3AsB8qR>

Of note is that thus far, close to nothing has been done to identify/punish organizers of the violent counter-rally. In this case, apart from bandwagoning with the authoritative institution, the Prime Minister's statement also involves card staking technique, because he provided information about arresting a few offenders in a manner as if every potential lawbreaker during the 5 July 2021 events, including the organizers of the violence themselves, were brought to justice. In addition, he misrepresents the 5 July events as some vague provocation that was avoided and the government should claim credit for that.

There are numerous other statements of the Prime Minister with respect to 5 July events where different propaganda techniques are employed. Speaking about the rally organized with the demand of his resignation,⁵¹ Irakli Gharibashvili stated: "You have to end this falsehood and violence [addressing to the journalists]. Unfortunately, TV channels were transformed into branches of partisan organizations. All these falsehoods, which we witnessed during the last few days, were organized solely and only for pursuit of narrow partisan interests".

The Prime Minister also said⁵² that "Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli and Formula are directly run by Saakashvili and with the money they stole. Therefore, their agenda and agenda of the UNM's revanchist and radical force is absolutely identical. They have a common aim to somehow topple the government and come to power through violence which is of course an unattainable objective since we would not allow that."

On 17 July 2021, the Prime Minister visited "Army Town", being constructed at Makhata mountain, although three TV channels – Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli and Formula were not invited for the occasion. Speaking on reasons behind this decision, the Administration of the Government of Georgia stated⁵³: "Today several media outlets asked questions why they had not been invited to the Prime Minister's event. The Prime Minister always answers the questions of the journalists... Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli and Formula are not interested in answers to their questions. They always act in a destructive manner and always follow their political agenda. Irakli Gharibashvili believes that Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli and Formula crossed all kinds of red lines, they represent a specific political party, are funded and directly managed by Mikheil Saakashvili and his radical forces and are involved in political campaign against the Prime Minister. Therefore, on these grounds, TV channels of the abovementioned political party were not invited to the occasion."

⁵¹ Tabula, 2021. Gharibashvili to journalists: You have to end this falsehood and violence. <https://bit.ly/3ksxlyF>

⁵² Radio Liberty, 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili: We heard classical anti-state and anti-Church messages at yesterday's rally. <https://bit.ly/3krTCC1>

⁵³ Mikheil Gvadzabia, Netgazeti, 2021. "They crossed all kinds of red lines" - the government does not invite three TV channels at the event. <https://bit.ly/3AyavAl>

After being given several critical questions, Irakli Gharibashvili, criticized the journalist of TV Formula, calling her a “partisan activist”: “You are common perpetrators, yes I am speaking about you. You are a partisan activist and you are the UNM member which is funded by the biggest robber, Davit Kezerashvili... You are spoiling a place right now. You should be in the party; you should be at the frontlines. I would like to see you in the parliament. You are a just a partisan activist.”⁵⁴ In this case, on top of attempting to discredit a particular media outlet, the Prime Minister also uses whataboutism techniques in his statement when he accuses the journalists in violence. This is probably because the government was blamed for encouragement of violence, and in the aftermath of mass violence against the journalists these allegations were not entirely groundless. In response, the Prime Minister decided to resort to whataboutism technique.

Speaking of 2008 August war, Irakli Gharibashvili stated: “It is the result of our wrong policy that as early as in the beginning of 1990ies we had a civil war, lost territories, temporarily, and repeated a mistake in 2008 when the most grievous of provocations could not have been avoided. This led to the occupation of our ancient, historical territories and the so called recognition policy, launched by the Russian Federation... Now let us just think for a moment what does an Abkhaz or Ossetian young people see when they switch on TV and watch Georgian TV channels. They watch and listen on a daily basis a rhetoric of violence, wickedness, animosity, evilness. And it must be said openly, they watch cultivation of this malice within us. There is no discourse, no agenda, and I mean most of our TV channels and politicians, when it comes to the future of this country. They want to zombify, and I would not hesitate to use this word, our entire society”.⁵⁵ In this case too, with rather heavy allegations, Irakli Gharibashvili seeks to foster distrust vis-à-vis the critical media among the public. The cynical nature of such propaganda is also well-exposed when the government official avoids to speak about major hindrance to Georgia’s territorial integrity – which is the Russian Federation – and instead puts emphasis on how the critical media portrays Georgia as “unattractive”.

The Prime Minister also “defends” the Church from the media: “It is a very deplorable fact that your TV channels discredit the Church hierarchy and the Church itself. I would like to explain it to the population that this is the very last attempt of Saakashvili and the opposition...”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Radio Liberty, 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili to a journalist: You should be in the party, at the frontlines. <https://bit.ly/39pHVWo>

⁵⁵ Dea Mamiseishvili, Mtavari Arkhi, 2021. “What does Abkhaz or Ossetian young person sees at Georgian TV channels? Wickedness, evilness, animosity – Gharibashvili criticizes media again. <https://bit.ly/3lCwHDy>

⁵⁶ Tabula, 2021. Gharibashvili to journalists: You discredit the Church and Church hierarchy. <https://bit.ly/3ztcUuY>

Irakli Gharibashvili commented on 15 September 2021 incident in Kareli as a result of which cameraman of Mtavari Arkhi, Levan Ablotia, was injured: “We have to act as carefully as possible because we are aware that we are dealing with very serious provocateurs who have the nerve to do anything to somehow harm this peaceful election environment and process”. At the question of a journalist who exactly is the provocateur and can that be cameraman of Mtavari Arkhi, Levan Ablotia, who was thrown away, Irakli Gharibashvili responded that he does not know and that needs to be investigated: “We have to watch the footage, this needs to be proved and I really have not watched it. I would say that for me such provocative intrusions are unacceptable and violence is also unacceptable, of course. This provocative questions is also unacceptable but we all have to agree and we all have to take care of this country together”.⁵⁷ Here, similar to other cases, the Prime Minister uses sources discrediting technique by claiming that Mtavari Arkhi often resorts to provocation and any information they report is less reliable.

There are many other speeches of the Prime Minister where he seeks to discredit the information sources by equating all critical thoughts with the UNM: “Since that very day when those people moved into the opposition, by the decision of the Georgian people, everything turned upside down. The country was ostensibly destroyed while before there was an ideal world, we lived in heaven and in the very next day, on 1 October 2012 we moved into hell. They fight with such methods and are still involved in violence against our population. Do switch on their TV channels, I have not been watching them for two years, and it is truly impossible to watch them – Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli and Formula. They all have one trademark and with these methods they fight against the Georgian people, sowing fear, panic and hysteria so that people cannot plan their tomorrow. This is biggest tragedy, biggest disaster, that a person cannot plan his tomorrow, has no sense of predictability and understanding what will happen tomorrow. When you watch this propaganda of promiscuity, Gvaramia’s TV channel, you have a feeling that everything was destroyed, it is the end of the world and the day when the humanity should fall.”⁵⁸

At one of his town-halls, during the election campaign, the Prime Minister stated: “Why would you criticize every institution and every authoritative person in the country if you do not have malicious intent and if you do not have anti-state intents? We all know very well that Saakashvili’s government inflicted a great deal of damage to the country and they constantly seek to bring chaos, hysteria and turmoil in the population for the last 8-9 years through their TV channels. There are 24-hour incessant demagoguery

⁵⁷ Radio Liberty, 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili about incident involving Mtavari Arkhi: Provocative intrusions and violence are also unacceptable. <https://bit.ly/3lIBrYg>

⁵⁸ IntePressNews, 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili: When you watch this propaganda of promiscuity indeed, when you watch Gvaramia’s television, you have a feeling that everything was destroyed, it is the end of the world and the day when humanity should fall. <https://bit.ly/3krVlYj>

and promotion of lies but we, our wise people, are very much capable to tell white from black. We can distinguish that. Unfortunately, it should be said that too many people, as a result of those lies and at the expense of that demagoguery and propaganda are on the wrong path and make wrong choices. That 20 to 25% of voters who cast their votes for them... Even that style and dissemination of propaganda is a real fascist trademark when attempts are made with such unending to propaganda to make people believe that hell is heaven and vice versa”.⁵⁹

Irakli Gharibashvili, when commenting information about alleged illegal surveillance carried out by the State Security Service (SSS), stated: “SSS, police and all carries out wiretapping in line with the law. I do not know what you are talking about. You are a political television [“Mtavari Arkhi”] and you are not independent... This is yet another conspiracy and dirty provocation against one of the most important state institutions, against the State Security Service. Of course I cannot make additional, serious comment on that.”⁶⁰

Chairperson of the ruling Georgian Dream Party, **Irakli Kobakhidze**, is also notorious with his aggressive rhetoric vis-à-vis the media.

Last year, when commenting the robbery at Bank of Georgia’s Zugdidi branch, Irakli Kobakhidze stated: “In regard to media outlets, first there were some irresponsible actions and some actions even contained signs of criminal. I am saying that as a lawyer... When there is such a difficult situation and 19 people need to be released and your journalist from “Glavkanal” and “Pervyi Kanal” [referring to Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli] goes to the Prime Minister and asks about the crime statistics, that is a shame – now that is a real shame.”⁶¹ This statement clearly shows labels which aim to affiliate the abovementioned TV channels with the Russian interests.

According to Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian TV channels deliberately seek to normalize use of foul language: “This is a deliberate policy. If you take a look, this process which we currently see at partisan TV channels did not start with use of political foul language. Initially, it started with something else, for instance with soap operas. It was through the soap operas that grew us accustomed to profane language. It is also evident here that a specific political entity does not like and is displeased with a specific element

⁵⁹ Channel One, 2021. Irakli Gharibashvili: Why would you criticize all institutions and every authoritative person in the country if you do not have malicious and anti-state intents. <https://bit.ly/39l7OXn>

⁶⁰ Mtavari Arkhi, 2021. Gharibashvili on State Security Service’s wiretappings: You are a political television and I cannot make a serious comment on this. <https://bit.ly/3CzpBqq>

⁶¹ Mtavari Arkhi, 2020. “Glavkanal” and “Pervyi Kanal” – Irakli Kobakhidze responds to a question of Mtavari Arkhi. <https://bit.ly/3zz3GxG>

of our national identity and they deliberately seek to grow us accustomed, including by use of foul language, that you can abuse your own language.⁶²

Speaking on rally organized by the journalists, which was held to demand punishment of perpetrators who committed crimes on 5 July 2022, Irakli Kobakhidze stated: “Thanks God that “Tchuta”, Nodar and Gvaramia [referring to owner of TV Pirveli, journalist of the same TV channel Nodar Meladze and Director of Mtavari Arkhi, Nika Gvaramia] are not the media. The organizers of yesterdays’ rally are leaders of the radical, anti-Christian faction.”⁶³

Speaking on the same issue, Irakli Kobakhidze once again tried to discredit certain media outlets: “This is crossing all kinds of red lines. They will receive political response on any immoral action. Scoring political points over the death of passed away journalist should warrant strictest political punishment in Georgia. Nobody should have an opportunity to do that in the future and nobody should even think about that... This is the UNM with its media managers. The so called Tchuta, Nodar, Gvaramia. There is no explanation or justification for the moral bottom that they have hit... Organizers of the yesterday’s rally were leaders of the radical, anti-Christian factions who aim to confront the state and Church.”⁶⁴

Irakli Kobakhidze’s statements often features the so called “big lie”, or absurd allegations technique. This could seemingly look like absolutely nonsensical and groundless, although still fosters doubts in some segment of the public. According to Irakli Kobakhidze’s statement, “Dark money circulates in these three TV channels [TV Pirveli, Formula and Mtavari Arkhi]. I have information from different sources on the one hand and on the other hand I know what is income and what is expenses. Therefore, I can argue with full responsibility before the public that several dozen million dark money is spent every year on these three partisan TV channels. This is the reality”.

The chairperson of the Georgian Dream also added: “This is not a private business. These are partisan TV channels. This is the reality. All three [TV Pirveli, Formula and Mtavari Arkhi] are partisan TV channels. They are partisan TV channels, they have partisan agenda and this agenda is winning the elections or organizing a coup d’état. When they cannot achieve these objectives for eight years, naturally their responsibility vis-à-vis the investor rises. There are embittered Saakashvili, Kezerashvili and media managers. This is the main reason why final lustration of those people did happen... For them rating is an instrument to organize coup d’état. Everyone knows that they are partisan TV channels. This is as much

⁶² Mtavari Arkhi, 2021. Kobakhidze says that the “partisan televisions” and opposition normalize foul language through soap operas. <https://bit.ly/39qyNAC>

⁶³ InterPressNews, 2021. Irakli Kobakhidze: Thanks God that ‘Tchuta’, Nodar and Gvaramia are not the media – organizers of yesterday’s rally are the leaders of a radical, anti-Christian faction. <https://bit.ly/3AvqQWK>

⁶⁴ Lela Dumbadze, Netgazeti, 2021. Kobakhidze on 11 July rally: “Their aim is to confront the state and Church. <https://bit.ly/3IKcgEL>

of a truth as claiming that Abkhazia is an independent state... Specific political groups sought to score political points on Lekso Lashakarava's death and organize mass unrest in the country. They sought to speculate and partisan managers of certain media outlets used death of their passed away colleague to implement scenario of unrest".⁶⁵ This statement contains numerous allegations and some of them are absolutely vague (for instance what is meant by "dark money", even Mr. Kobakhidze will find it hard to explain) and some of them very serious, such as attempted coup d'état. If a specific group, using "dark money", is indeed involved in such anti-state actions, a question arises why there are not impartial investigation of those actions? However, the aim of promoters of propaganda messages is not finding the truth but sowing doubts in the public and throwing mud to a target.

In response to one of the broadcasts, shown in the media, the chairperson of the "Georgian Dream", addressed the journalists with the following statement: "In regard to allegations against the [incumbent] mayors... This is a lie and we will definitely take legal measures with the involvement of respective candidates. Your TV channels will pay a huge price for every piece of fake information that is being promoted... Yes, I do threaten you that you will have to apologize".⁶⁶

"This was the plan of your Bolshevik Prosecutor General Director" – this is how Irakli Kobakhidze responded to the journalist of Mtavari Arkhi about leaked reports of illegal surveillance (which allegedly exposes illegal wiretappings carried out by the State Security Service). According to Mr Kobakhidze's claim these materials which cover 2014-2021, bear the trademark of the UNM and constitute an integral part of their disinformation, anti-state and anti-Church propaganda. In particular, Irakli Kobakhidze stated: "This is a pre-election period. We all know that these TV channels [Formula, TV Pirveli and Mtavari Arkhi] are partisan media, they have partisan objectives and they are entirely built on spreading lies and disinformation. This was the plan of your Bolshevik, Prosecutor General Director which will naturally be disclosed in a proper time. This was a plan of promiscuous Nika Gvaramia, promiscuous Nodar Meladze promiscuous Diana Trapaidze, promiscuous Inga Grigolia, etc. This was the plan of these promiscuous people."⁶⁷ This statement, together with evidently negative name calling, clearly shows classical example of whataboutism technique when the author of the statement argues that secret surveillance is the trademark of the opposition party.

⁶⁵ Radio Liberty, 2021. Kobakhidze says dark money circulates in the TV channels [Formula, TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi] and that needs to be investigated. <https://bit.ly/2VXnooS>

⁶⁶ Dea Mamiseishvili, Mtavari Arkhi, 2021. Kobakhidze threatens media: We have footage of a person who fell down from two meters, walking again. <https://bit.ly/3INaZN6>

⁶⁷ Mtavari Arkhi, 2021. Kobakhidze on wiretappings: This was a plan of your Bolshevik, Prosecutor General Director, promiscuous Nika Gvaramia. <https://bit.ly/3tZ3K8x>

Several days before the local self-government elections and in the aftermath of armed conflict in Dmanisi which happened on the ground of political confrontation, Irakli Kobakhidze addressed to the media: “What happened in Dmanisi is absolutely unjustifiable, it has no justification and is entirely unacceptable... You have to take responsibility for constant hatred, violence, evil which pours from your TV channels every day.”⁶⁸ Here, similarly with the other cases, there is a manifested attempt to blame virtually all problems in the country to the critical media and to make sure that government somehow evades its responsibility.

The incumbent Minister of Culture, Thea Tsulukiani, also exhibits similarly negative attitude vis-à-vis the critical media. She snatched microphone from the hands of Emma Gogokhia, journalist of Mtavari Arkhi [she did not give it back to her] and said: “Emma, let’s say Long Live to Bidzina... I would like to thank Bidzina Ivanishvili. I am on air. On air of which TV channel? It is TV Formula and Ms Emma is no longer a journalist. I am a journalist”.⁶⁹

After 5 July events, commenting on protest rallies organized by the journalists, Thea Tsulukiani stated: “Police did the impossible and, in the future, be kind and listen to the government. When the head of government says that we have to be careful, change the place of parade, someone needs to believe him and act accordingly. I am confident that the LGBTQI community wanted to hear and understand, but you did not want that and those political carnivores which aspired to this provocation, also did not want that. Police did the impossible, but you did not like that. You want to do what is a provocation and in reality, some of the opposition force to which you have a good cooperation and this is very good, shake this country. So, stop shaking this country. Now is the time for peace. Now we have to calm down and please do not use the tragedy which is death of a cameramen another time. Do not use it for political purposes.”⁷⁰

At the end of session of the Government of Georgia, the Minister of Culture, Sport and Youth Affairs, Thea Tsulukiani, stated at the press-conference in response to a journalist’s question: “You [referring to the media], together with those opposition parties which openly staged provocation and regrettably for me, as a former employee of the Strasbourg court, exploited LGBTQI community and its interests for their dirty political games, you always threaten Georgians with the foreigners. You are rendering a great service to Russia in this manner and you play a Russian game. Therefore, please stop frightening me with the EU

⁶⁸ Tabula, 2021. Kobakhidze on Dmanisi: What responsibility should I take? Some degenerate wounded a man. It is media which should take a responsibility. <https://bit.ly/3nWBPW2>

⁶⁹ On.ge. 2021. Tsulukiani to a journalist: Emma come on, let’s say Long Live Bidzina”. <https://bit.ly/3ILKmZ6>

⁷⁰ Telara Gelantia, Bm.ge, 2021. Thea Tsulikiani’s advice to the media: In the future, be kind and listen to the government. <https://bit.ly/3IJBSLz>

and USA. Talk to your Georgian people”.⁷¹ Ms Tsulukiani’s statements too, show attempts of shifting responsibility to the media and discrediting protests of journalists over 5 July events in this manner.

One of the leaders of the ruling “Georgian Dream” party, Giorgi Volski, also does not shy away from lambasting the media. As stated by Mr Volski, “there is one more factor – a very big group of youth, a very big community, particularly journalists, take part in planning some conspiracy-based, disinformation, sabotage actions which we witness every day. This is the dark side of that political confrontation which unfortunately, also characterizes Georgia together with the rest of the world suffering from current predicament”.⁷²

At the plenary session of the Parliament of Georgia, Giorgi Volski stated: “I am curious which TV channel do you consider as uncomfortable for the ‘Georgian Dream’? Is Mtavari Arkhi even a TV channel? Or is it ‘Formula’ whose founder left people at the battlefield and became a millionaire himself”.⁷³ These two statements of Giorgi Volski contradict each other to some extent. In the first case he blames the journalists for sabotage and believes this is a problem and in the second case, he seeks to denigrate critical TV channels, as if they pose no discomfort for the “Georgian Dream”. Different propaganda techniques are used in these statements, based on which technique was more relevant at a particular period of time.

Giorgi Volski, speaking with a journalist of Mtavari Arkhi, stated: “The managers of the channel cannot understand what does media mean, what does partisan branch mean and what does normal, human conversation mean. You are not a journalist. You are personally, but your institution is not a place for journalists...”⁷⁴

After the death of TV Pirveli cameramen, Lekso Lashkarava, which followed the attacks against media workers on 5 July, Giorgi Volski told the journalists that they “were having an immoral dance around the corpse”. Journalists met Mr Volski with the photographs of dead cameraman when he snatched the photograph from one of the protester’s hands and said: “You have an immoral dance around the corpse. This guy is mine, he is not yours.”⁷⁵ After the abovementioned incident, Giorgi Volski also said⁷⁶: “After presentation of the mayoral candidate, one of the TV activists asked me whether or not I agree with

⁷¹ Telara Gelantia, Bm.ge, 2021. Thea Tsulukiani to the media: Do not frighten Georgians with the foreigners. You are rendering a great service to Russia in this manner. <https://bit.ly/3hUHh7X>

⁷² Publika, 2021. Volski says journalists particularly take part in planning saboteur actions. <https://bit.ly/3nXl0dI>

⁷³ Mtavari Arkhi, 2020. Volski: Is Mtavari Arkhi even a TV channel?! <https://bit.ly/39m4BXo>

⁷⁴ Tabula, 2019. Volski to a journalist of Mravari Arkhi: You are not a television. This is an assembly of oafs. <https://bit.ly/3hNZ1BR>

⁷⁵ InterPressNews, 2021. Gia Volski to journalists: This guy is mine, he is not yours – you have an immoral dance around the corpse. <https://bit.ly/3lNpy3e>

⁷⁶ iPRESS. 2021. Gia Volski on part of journalists: This is a psychological terror, wicked and excited speculation by the death of a young man. <https://bit.ly/3nQuTJJ>

Kaladze's statement that journalists carry our pressure and bullying. I disagree, because it is not a pressure, it is a psychological terror, wicked and excited speculation by the death of a young man and this is not the first case! This is a psychological violence against our public, youth, including journalists. What can they do, after all? They are asking us, chasing us, yelling at us, making political statements... Of course this does not apply to everyone". Giorgi Volski's actions and statements clearly show the use of whataboutism propaganda technique, attempts to shifting blame to blame to rule out any responsibility of the government.

Another leader of the "Georgian Dream", Mamuka Mdinardze, also frequently voices messages filled with propaganda techniques to target the media.

One of Mr Mdinardze's statements is as follows: "You are aware and the whole world knows what is yellow press. Unfortunately, shapes and signs of the red press has been increasingly visible in Georgia where in compliance with Soviet KGB methods, they store recordings and footages for years and later they edit them, cut them, put them together, produce fabrications to the aim of carrying out information-terrorist attacks. This is an information terrorism, carried out by the red press and directed against the Georgian society. This is very unfortunate. We all together should try to move beyond these red lines, rule out KGB-style methods and through creation of public consensus achieve that at least on certain issue, be able to condemn fabrications, secret recordings and discrediting people with that. We have to somehow leave this in the past, notwithstanding political goals of each side".⁷⁷ As we see, this statement is richly imbued with such numerous labels ("red press", "KGB-style" methods, "information terrorists") that spark negative attitudes vis-à-vis the media among the target audience.

Another of Mamuka Mdinardze's statement is as follows: "If anyone says that media is being pressured by the government in Georgia, you are very well aware when asking this question what kind of truth that is. It was us who saw media pressure, pressure on government based on speculated and false data as well as rather immoral campaign which was ongoing for days and ended only after Nika Gvaramia called on representatives of that media to finish with politics and get back to journalism".⁷⁸ This statement is a very good illustration of whataboutism propaganda technique, attempting to portray the government as a victim of violence. However, if a listener logically analyzes this message, he/she will find it ridiculous, since it is hard to imagine a situation when the government is a victim of media instead of vice versa.

⁷⁷ Channel One, 2021. Mamuka Mdinardze: Shapes and signs of the red press has been increasingly visible in Georgia where in line with KGB-style methods, they store footages for years, edit them and produce fabrications. <https://bit.ly/3nYDHgZ>

⁷⁸ InterPressNews, 2021. Mamuka Mdinardze: We have seen media's speculative pressure on the government based on false data which ended after Gvaramia called on them to finish with politics and get back to journalism. <https://bit.ly/3AxiXAm>

MP from the ruling party, Shalva Papuashvili, has also joined his colleagues to speak about media bias and falsehoods.

Shalva Papuashvili, commenting funeral of TV Pirveli's cameraman, Lekso Lashkarava, made a following publication⁷⁹ on his official Facebook page: "They stage a political performance even in times of mourning. Drone footage of burial... They speak about murder. In fact, today, they did kill media themselves".

In the aftermath of 5 July events, Shalva Papuashvili told⁸⁰ the journalists: "I am not boycotting you. I will not make any comment to you. As long as the leaders and faces of these TV channels are busy with gaining political dividends on death of a person I will not make a comment."

Another of Shalva Papuashvili's statement is as follows: "What we see is that people and in this case media workers, are throwing mud at people without any evidence and try to discredit them. This is a typical form of propaganda. It is a propaganda based on rumors, invented stories, when attempts are made to feed people with something as a fact and in reality everything is invented". The MP also scolded the reports that the government carries out secret surveillance of clergy as fabrication and example of the Russian propaganda.⁸¹ These statements of Mr Papuashvili, whose messages are aligned with the rhetoric of the other leaders of the "Georgian Dream", feature whataboutism, name calling, generalization in a negative context and card staking techniques to make sure only his own perspective is perceived as truth.

The abovementioned statements perfectly illustrate propaganda messages of the government officials vis-a-vis those TV channels which the authorities dislike. The main targets of those messages are TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi and Formula. The government skillfully uses the fact that the Director of Mtavari Arkhi and founder of TV Formula hold positions in the previous government and seeks to discredit them on this ground. However, authorities still continue to "boil in one pot" all critical media and journalists and label them as "Saakashvili's televisions". Certainly, nobody is ideal and in some cases media outlets also make mistakes when reporting on this or that issue. However, generalization of any specific flaw by the authorities, or denouncing all critical of the government journalists as propaganda mouthpieces is nothing but an attempt to discredit the media. In addition, there are speculations in the name of public and

⁷⁹ Radio Liberty, 2021. Shalva Papuashvili: They stage political performance even when mourning. They select the cadres. <https://bit.ly/2ZcVM0d>

⁸⁰ Radio Liberty, 2021. Shalva Papuashvili refuses to give comment to the opposition TV channels because of statements made by the media managers. <https://bit.ly/2ZiU3q3>

⁸¹ InterPressNews, 2021. Shalva Papuashvili: Media workers throw mud at our candidates, discredit them. This is a typical form of propaganda. <https://bit.ly/3ksOUWm>

Church, on the ground that ostensibly the TV channels fight them, “carry out psychological violence”, etc. The government either deliberately disparages any critical broadcast produced by the media or claims that story is invented or attacks the source and seeks to discredit it among the public by different labels or counter-attacks and tries to overshadow current problems by recalling the past. By drawing on a principle “you did worse”, the government officials spare no effort to make sure that public uses emotions when discussing this or that issue and stays away from evidence-based analysis of the ongoing events. At the same time, through constant demonization of specific media sources which are somehow related with the former government and linking those critical sources to the former government which in fact have nothing to do with the UNM, the “Georgian Dream” also seeks to foster distrust vis-à-vis the media among the society. In addition, the authorities voice rather serious accusations against the media (that certain media outlets ostensibly facilitate coup d’état) which are promoted at the rhetorical level only and serve propaganda purposes.

Many believe that in the modern world, bar such exceptions as Cuba, North Korea and Turkmenistan, authoritarian regimes no longer aspire for total control and full subjugation of mass communication means. This can be dubbed as “effective media control” where it is sufficient to control major sources, shape agenda to a certain extent and discredit the alternatives at the same time. Owing to this approach, pro-government narrative still dominates media environment as compared to the alternative thoughts. Government and pro-government media enjoys financial support – they have more revenues from the advertisements (placed by the government and private sector), whereas alternative sources are often struggling for survival. This leads to quasi-commercial media environment where the government will always take an upper hand as compared to alternative thoughts.⁸² Today, Georgian media outlets which are critical of the government are not in such a deplorable state (although there are some tangible attempts to have such reality), but when it comes to discrediting the media at a rhetorical level this is clearly discernible. Since the authorities cannot fully control the media environment (perhaps, the government does want to do so, but remains reluctant because of possible strong reaction of the international community or other potential difficulties) the only solution for them is to discredit the critical media. Furthermore, for purely pragmatic reasons, existence of the so called “enemy image” media outlets could be favorable for the government – one the one hand that would allow authorities to argue that country does have media pluralism and on the other hand, any critical thought and any story which tells about their misdeeds are immediately proclaimed as fabrication of “promiscuous”, “Saakashvili’s

⁸² Christopher Walker and Robert W. Orttung. Journal of Democracy. 2014. Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media. <https://bit.ly/2XUstyM>

supplement” and “anti-Christian” media. In this manner, through using propaganda labels, distrust vis-à-vis the media is being fostered and such attempts strongly harm media environment and democratic process in general.