

Discrediting Media – Tactics and Motives of Russian Propaganda

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For the last few years, we have been constantly witnessing how journalists and media outlets are discredited in social media or in public. Most frequently, instead of evidence-based criticism, media is often targeted with extremely negative labels which lack any substance. For instance, “anti-state and anti-Christian TV channels”, “purveyors of LGBT propaganda”, “liberast media”, “traitors”, “offenders who impose liberal dictatorship on us”, “depraved”, “promoters of fake news”, and many more. Notably, labeling is one of the most common propaganda techniques. Authoritarian rulers often resort to such approach in order to discredit media. Their main objective is to undermine public faith in media that is not government-controlled. Georgian authorities have been actively employing this tactic in recent years and observation on rhetoric of government officials is a perfect illustration of that trend.²

This method of discrediting media is one of the major features of Russian propaganda. This rhetoric is amplified by the pro-Russian and Russia-affiliated sources. The sources of propaganda are different social media pages as well as Russia-affiliated online outlets, TV channels and specific individuals (so called “influencers” who enjoy influence to a certain extent in social networks and over some part of public).

As mentioned earlier, these are very well-tested methods of Russian propaganda. However, when it comes to reasons why this tactic is applied, it is a rather complex issue and consists of multiple factors. Of most important mention within this context would be major objective of Russian propaganda – to sow confusion and discord among target audience and undermine all democratic institutions. According to propaganda scholars, the Kremlin exploits idea of freedom of information to spread disinformation in public.³ It is widely known that on top of other characteristics, one of the most important components of a democratic state is a free and widely trusted media that meets high professional standards. It is also not a secret that democratic progress of this or that society, most particularly of the former USSR countries,

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²Kutidze, D. (2021). *The Government of Georgia’s Aggressive and Propagandistic Rhetoric Against Media – Authoritarian’s Proven Method to Discredit Journalists*. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3VSprFf> (10.05.2023).

³Pomerantsev, P. and Weiss, M. (2014). *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*. Institute of Modern Russia, Inc. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3VQ3nuR> (10.05.2023).

goes against the Kremlin's interests. Therefore, weakening and discrediting media is one of the core objectives of Russia's information warfare. On the other hand, discrediting the mainstream media outlets that are recognized as more or less reliable sources, allows the Kremlin to promote certain alternative narratives and offer its own and often wildly absurd interpretation of events or facts. The Kremlin's propaganda also does not waste time to argue that its "facts" are correct. Their aim is not necessary to persuade, but to sow confusion and fear. Therefore, it is not a concern for the propagandists if the Kremlin-affiliated information agencies also lose credibility in the process of discrediting media and shrinking public trust. Furthermore, Russian propaganda actually benefits from nihilism in public as well as constant doubts that "everybody lies to us". In this case, media has no advocates in public and can be more easily destroyed which again contributes to the Kremlin's imperialist ambitions.

Russian propaganda employs variety of methods against media. One of the most widespread methods which Russian propaganda uses across many directions is also suitable to discredit media. In particular, propaganda often resorts labeling techniques which means to attach extremely negative label to a person, group or idea. The aim of this propaganda technique is to make sure that information recipient does not start to look for facts behind this or that label which means that evidence-based discussion is completely overshadowed by emotions. Therefore, this technique is intended to manipulate emotions of its target audience and provoke making hasty and superficial conclusions. One of the main labels of the Kremlin propaganda in Georgia (and elsewhere) is to attack all those media outlets which pursue anti-Russian editorial policy and support liberal values, as "falsehood purveyors", "guardians of liberal dictatorship", "promoters of depravity" and with many other negative labels. As mentioned earlier, labeling happens without substance and evidence and ultimate aim is to first sow doubt and confusion in public and later reduce trust vis-à-vis media. Naturally, no one should have a blind faith in media (especially when there is no media outlet that would be entirely free from subjective influence) and need to maintain critical reflections on messages coming from media. However, this critical reflection should not transform into something that Russian propaganda would like us to lead into – complete loss of trust vis-à-vis media, denigration of media's role in the society and nihilistic attitude that "everybody lies to us". It is in such cases when there is a greater risk not to believe media even it reports accurate facts and somehow contribute to creation of "alternative reality" as well as become indifferent when obstruction of the work of journalists takes place and remain unconcerned whether or not a there is a diverse media in the country that supports democratic ideas.

Yet another technique which Russian propaganda uses to dismantle reliability of traditional media is copying their brands and spreading false information in this way. Western, reputable media outlets have often become targets of such attacks when their names, logos, colors and other identification features are imitated by Russian propaganda to promote news that are anti-Western, sowing fear and confusion. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, fabrication of covers of the Western and reliable media outlets started to happen at a wider scale.⁴ Such fake pages act in the name of BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle and other well-respected media outlets⁵ and spread invented stories against Ukraine.⁶ This indicates that the Kremlin's propaganda itself indirectly acknowledges reliability of the mainstream Western media and uses their brands to spread fake news. On the one hand, this tactic enables propaganda to mislead the public and on the other hand, by spreading propagandist materials it seeks to destroy reputability of media that has been built for years. In addition, use of such methods results in pollution of information domain which sparks negative attitude in public vis-à-vis media and contributes to a sense of alienation between media and audience.

On top of that, Russian propaganda directly attacks this or that well-established media outlets and questions their motives. In particular, it voices allegations that those media outlets act in line with political or/and financial interests, obey the so-called elites and do not report on needs of society. Certainly, it cannot be ruled out that a specific media outlet is indeed under partisan or financial influence and editorial policy stems from those interests. However, Russian propaganda, by generalizing such cases – which is also another propaganda technique – seeks to put all media in the same boat. It is possible to say that the well-balanced media outlets are more likely to end up in that “boat” as compared to those having partisan interests. This is another way to cultivate abovementioned doubts and nihilism among the society to convince ourselves that “everybody always lies to us”. Russia's law on “foreign agents” which since its adoption (2012) until the present day step-by-step banned all independent media in the country, is a result of such generalization. Of necessary mention within this context is March 2023 events in Georgia when a draft-law – very similar in content to the Russian law – was slated for adoption. Here too, the need to ensure transparency of foreign-funded media outlets was named as the most important and official argument. However, at the same time, there was a clearly discernible aspiration to silence those media

⁴ Robakidze, D. (2022). *How does Kremlin propaganda fabricate the covers of Western outlets to discredit Ukraine*. Myth Detector. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Bfyqae> (10.05.2023).

⁵Weber, J & Baig, R. (2022, August 07). *Fake content targets international media*. DW. Via link: <https://bit.ly/42osWpw> (10.05.2023).

⁶Scott, M. (2022, September 27). *'Grotesque' Russian disinfo campaign mimics Western news websites to sow dissent*. Politico. Via Link: <https://politi.co/41p7IGs> (10.05.2023).

outlets that support Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy, are well-balanced and remain beyond the political influence.

One more method that Russian propaganda uses in confrontation with the mainstream media is scrutinizing and actively monitoring them, identifying their weaknesses and flaws and building propaganda campaign based on them. In this regard individuals or the so-called influencers that have a certain influence in the social networks, play a special role. They often talk from the position of people that are "longing for accurate information" and blame traditional media for hiding and distorting the facts as well for producing conspiracy theories against people and at the same time they look for "alternative facts" and feed them to public as truth that media hides. However, these "alternative facts" are often exposed as messages of Russian propaganda. There are similar activities in Georgia's information domain as well. This was most clearly illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when such individual users "exposed" potential harm of vaccines, blamed media in hiding such information and portrayed the situation in a way that media promoted administering vaccines that have "harmful health effects on humans". Remarkably, virtually all such so-called "influencers" later, during the Russia-Ukraine war, turned out to be supporters of Russia – official aggressor and one accused of war crimes.

Russian propaganda's another method against media is to mock journalists and disparage their work. Specific individuals or pro-Russian information sources report on any flaw of media outlets and they build sarcastic messages based on that with the ultimate aim to persuade the public that "instead of having such journalists it is better not have them at all". Of further note is that this method should not be confused with media criticism and we should not consider that journalist is immune from criticism. Obviously, journalists make mistakes and it is important to criticize them as well. However, argumentative criticism is one thing and another thing is to extremely disparage media's role because of some cases, put media's importance in doubt and claim that "everything is propaganda" (Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014. p. 35).⁷

It is hard to assess how this tactic of the Kremlin influences public opinion and trust vis-à-vis media. However, Russia's information warfare continues efforts independently from these measurements and seeks to create relevant background by different techniques. On 5-6 July 2021, work of propaganda apparatus in Georgia went beyond verbal discrediting efforts and manifested into an open aggression against journalists. In particular, over 50 journalists were physically assaulted that day, including TV Pirveli

⁷ Pomerantsev, P. and Weiss, M. (2014). *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*. Institute of Modern Russia, Inc. Via link: <https://bit.ly/3VQ3nuR> (10.05.2023).

cameraman Lekso Lashkarava who died in a few days.⁸ The number of beaten journalists indicate that they were a direct target for those who committed violence organized by the pro-Russian “Alt-Info”. In order to “justify” violence it was claimed that “attacks on church and the God from journalists and politicians are inadmissible”⁹ – that is a classic example of Russian propaganda. We can assume that majority of Georgia’s population disapproves¹⁰ of such type of violence and “Alt-Info” that organized violence does not have much support.¹¹ However, the aim of Russian propaganda on the one hand is to show that it speaks on behalf of the absolute majority and on the other hand to increase number of people that are confused and frightened by false dilemmas. Afterwards, it will seek to achieve the ultimate hostile objective.

⁸Social Justice Centre (2021). *Legal Assessment of 5-6 July events – initial analysis*. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/42fjO6t> (10.05.2023).

⁹ Jam News. (31 March 2022). “Ukraine loses the war. Zelenskyy failed to avoid the war” – who is behind Russian propaganda in Georgia. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3NXfd4t> (10.05.2023).

¹⁰ Radio Liberty (9 September 2021). *73% think that the government should ensure safety of pride participants – Edison Research*. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3VOHYIY> (10.05.2023).

¹¹ International Republican Institute (IRI). (2023). *National Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia | March 2023*. Via link: <https://bit.ly/42maUE5> (10.05.2023).