The Anatomy of Hatred: Propaganda and the Dehumanization of the Opponents in Authoritarian Regimes

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Dehumanization, as a psychological and socio-political process, represents one of the most destructive phenomena in human history. It involves the denial of attributes that define individuals or social groups as human, thereby devaluing their moral status and legitimizing violence and cruelty against them.[2] This phenomenon manifests in particularly dangerous forms under the control of authoritarian regimes, where the dehumanization of people with different views often becomes a central strategy for consolidating power, controlling society, and marginalizing political opponents.[3] Propaganda plays a leading role in this complex process, continuously and purposefully spreading hatred, stereotypes, and manipulative narratives to create enemy images of target groups, portraying them as "non-human", "harmful", and an existential threat to the rest of society.[4]

The deliberate dehumanization of people is not a new phenomenon, and there are numerous historical and academic sources on the topic. According to Professor Nick Haslam of the University of Melbourne, a widely recognized authority on the subject, dehumanization appears in two main forms: animalistic and mechanistic.[5] Animalistic dehumanization presents target groups as lacking uniquely human traits such as culture, rationality, morality, and self-control. When these attributes are "stripped away", the group is compared to animals: "rats", "cockroaches", or "monkeys". Such metaphors depict the group as primitive, irrational, and dangerous, suggesting they must be eliminated. Mechanistic dehumanization, on the other hand, denies fundamental aspects of human nature like emotions, individuality, and empathy. In this case, people are perceived as soulless objects, machines, or robots, suggesting they lack an inner world,

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[2] Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Meaning of dehumanize. Via link: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dehumanize
[3] Hobbs, R. (18 September, 2020). Dehumanizing the Other: Propaganda Past and Present. *Iran Wire*. Via link: https://iranwire.com/en/special-features/68336/
[4] Ibid.
[5] Haslam, N. (2006). Dehumanization: An Integrative Review. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10(3), 252-264. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1003_4

feelings, or independent thought. Haslam's model illustrates that dehumanization is not a uniform process and can take different forms depending on the context and political objectives.[6]

The process of dehumanization affects not only its direct victims but also the perpetrators. Those who commit violence under the influence of propaganda feel less personal responsibility and may view their actions as justified. Dehumanization frees them from moral responsibility and guilt. Stanley Milgram's experiment, despite its ethical controversies, demonstrated that people are likely to obey authority even when it conflicts with their moral principles. The experiment showed that situational factors, such as the presence of an authority figure, can outweigh personal values.[7] In his work, "Violence without Moral Restraints", Herbert Kelman[8] treats dehumanization as a process that facilitates moral disengagement. Kelman argues that people normally possess internal moral restraints that prevent them from harming others. Dehumanization allows these barriers to be removed. When a target group is no longer perceived as part of the human community to which moral obligations apply, violence against them becomes justified. Kelman distinguishes three main mechanisms: *authorization* - an individual identifies with an authoritative structure (state, party, leader) and believes their actions are legitimate because they are following orders; *routinization* - violent acts become mechanical, bureaucratic routines that reduce personal responsibility; *dehumanization* - victims are stripped of their identity, individuality, and human status, turning them into mere objects or statistical units.

As mentioned above, governing through dehumanization and propaganda is a hallmark of authoritarian regimes. These regimes frequently create images of internal and external enemies to justify repressive policies and mobilize the population. Dehumanization is at the heart of this process. The "enemy" is portrayed not simply as a political opponent, but as an existential threat to the nation, its traditional values, or state stability.[9] Political opponents, ethnic and religious minorities, independent media, and civil society activists are frequent targets. They are labeled as "enemies of the nation", "foreign agents", and "parasites". The use of such terms aims to distinguish the target group from "our" society and present

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[6] Ibid.

[7] McLeod, S. (14 March, 2025). Stanley Milgram Shock Experiment. *Simply Psychology*. Via link: https://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html

[8] Kelman, H. C. (1973). Violence without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers. Journal of Social Issues, 29(4), 25-61. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1973.tb00102.x

[9] Landry, A. P., Orr, R. I., & Mere, K. (2022). Dehumanization and mass violence: A study of mental state language in Nazi propaganda (1927-1945). Via link: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0274957

them as a foreign body that must be destroyed.[10] This strategy allows the regime to justify political repression, mass arrests, and human rights violations by framing these actions not as the persecution of citizens but as the state's "cleansing" of dangerous elements.

The propaganda used to dehumanize target groups, with its main instruments like selective word choice, metaphors, and negative labels, can radically reshape the perception of reality. In the process of dehumanization, propaganda actively employs:

- **Animalistic metaphors**: as mentioned above, comparing target groups to animals (rats, cockroaches, pigs) is one of the most common and effective techniques. These metaphors provoke feelings of disgust, fear, and danger.
- **Disease-related metaphors**: presenting target groups as a "tumor", "virus", or "infection" that threatens the healthy body of the nation. This creates the association that the "cure" requires the elimination of the source of that "disease".
- **Demonization**: portraying the "enemy" as the embodiment of absolute evil. They are not merely opponents but "Satanists," "terrorists," or "fascists" - people without morality or human feelings. This simplifies the world into a black-and-white moral framework.
- **Creation of a moral-threat narrative**: depicting the target group as an existential threat to the nation, race, or class.
- **Scapegoating**: blaming the target group for the country's social, economic, or political problems.

One of the clearest and most brutal examples of a dehumanization strategy is provided by the regimes of Fascist Germany and the Soviet Union. In the case of Fascist Germany, the primary target of propaganda was the Jewish population. Under the direction of Joseph Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry, the Nazi regime used every form of media - the press, radio, film, and visual arts - to systematically dehumanize Jews. Historian David Welch, in his work "The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda", notes that Nazi propaganda relied on simplified, emotional, and repetitive messages. Jewish people were presented not as a religious or ethnic group but as a biological threat ("racial parasites", "rats", "bacilli") that polluted the Aryan race.[11] Linguist Victor Klemperer, in The Language of the Third Reich, analyzes how the Nazi

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[10] Stanley, J. (2018). How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them. Random House. Via link: https://blackbooksdotpub.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/jason-stanley-how-fascism-works_-the-politics-of-us-and-them-random-house-2018.pdf

[11] Welch, D. (2002). The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda. Routledge. Via link: https://books.google.ge/books?id=PA7zUN4_844C&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false

regime altered the German language, establishing terms such as "Untermensch" (sub-human) to deny the target group's human status at a linguistic level.[12] Ultimately, accumulated knowledge about the fascist regime shows that dehumanization became a primary instrument for legitimizing genocide.

Unlike Hitler's regime, the Soviet Union used propaganda for dehumanization on the basis of class rather than race. The Bolshevik regime created the concept of "enemies of the people", which encompassed a range of groups: the bourgeoisie, "kulaks" (wealthier peasants), clergy, and political opponents. Propaganda depicted these groups as "social parasites", "exploiters", and "counter-revolutionaries" who obstructed the building of a socialist future. The campaign for the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class" in the late 1920s and early 1930s was particularly brutal. Soviet posters often depicted kulaks as obese, greedy spiders or pigs sucking the blood of working people.[13]

Hannah Arendt, in her classic study "The Origins of Totalitarianism", analyzes how totalitarian regimes aim not merely to eliminate political opponents but to obliterate the human person, its individuality and moral responsibility. Propagandistic dehumanization is the first and necessary stage of this process. It creates an ideological framework in which mass murder is seen not as a crime but as "social hygiene" (in Nazi Germany) or a "historical necessity" (in the Soviet Union).[14]

Alarming Signs of Dehumanization in Contemporary Georgian Society

In the context of violence stemming from the dehumanization of people, we can recall May 17, 2013, when, according to the European Court of Human Rights, an "unprecedented" act of violence against the Pride March occurred.[15] A large-scale assault recurred for a similar reason in July 2021, when participants in an "anti-LGBT" rally physically attacked dozens of journalists.[16] These events were preceded by a hate campaign stirred up by the so-called "Conservative Movement"[17] through various information channels,

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[12] Klemperer, V. (1947). The Language of the Third Reich. Translated by Martin Brady. Via link: https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/news-and-events/events/phd/2021/klemperer-lti-extract.pdf

[13] Werth, N. (2011). Dekulakisation as mass violence. SciencesPo. Via link: https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/dekulakisation-mass-violence.html

[14] Arendt, H. (1951). The Origins of Totalitarianism. Meridian Books. Via link: https://cheirif.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/hannah-arendt-the-origins-of-totalitarianism-meridian-1962.pdf

[15] Radio Liberty. (December 16, 2021). Over the dispersal of the LGBT rally on 17 May 2013, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Georgia to pay €193,500 in damages. Via link: http://bit.ly/3VosAgO

[16] Social Justice Center. (2021). Legal assessment of July 5-6 events - preliminary analysis. https://bit.ly/3lW700J

[17] ISFED. (2022). "Conservative Movement/Alt-Info's" work in the regions of Georgia. https://isfed.ge/geo/angarishebi/220711014334test

where journalists were referred to, among other epithets, as "microphoned macaques".[18] Immediately after the July 5 violence, a clergyman addressing people at the scene said, "No, to "no violence" - you are obliged to use violence for the homeland, to use violence for the country, to use violence for sanctity"! The authorities were unable or unwilling to prevent the violence against journalists, and the organizers remained unpunished. Moreover, in response to criticism, the government and affiliated individuals used hate speech and humiliating epithets toward journalists, claiming they were aggressors who psychologically abused society and spread "anti-church and anti-state messages". Journalists were also labeled with epithets such as "radicals", "spreaders of dirty provocation", "scum", and "degenerates" who "reek of filth and shamelessness".[19]

In recent years, alongside the sharp decline in democracy in Georgia and the strengthening of Georgian Dream's propaganda, signs of the dehumanization of people with different views have become increasingly evident.[20] Since 2022, in parallel with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Georgian Dream's U-turn toward anti-Western, authoritarian-leaning policies, propaganda and steps toward dehumanizing opponents have become even more evident in the Georgian public sphere. Shortly after the war in Ukraine began, Georgian Dream revived and elevated the Russian conspiracy theory about the "global war party", supposedly present in the West and aiming to drag Georgia into the conflict. Those spreading this conspiracy could not name the exact group constituting the "global war party" or why it supposedly wanted Georgia in the war. Nevertheless, they labeled anyone who criticized Georgian Dream's domestic or foreign policy (the opposition, media, NGOs, and other citizens) as agents and traitors of the "war party".[21] For example, according to one Georgian Dream leader, Irakli Kobakhidze, "any person, inside or outside the country, who calls [Bidzina Ivanishvili] an oligarch is an agent of the war party".[22] Since the end of last year, the term "global war party" has been replaced with the term "deep state", but the main propaganda strategy, stirring hatred against target groups, has remained.[23]

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[18] Nastasia Arabuli. (July 5, 2022). One year after the 5th of July. *Radio Liberty.* Via link: https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31930207.html

[19] Kutidze, D. (2021). The Georgian authorities' aggressive, propagandistic rhetoric toward the media - a tactic tested by authoritarians to discredit journalists. *Research Institute Gnomon Wise*. Via link: https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/researches/57

[20] Kutidze, D. (2023). Government of Georgia's Public Rhetoric. Central European Journal of Communication, issue 16. Polskie Towarzystwo Komunikacji Społecznej. Accessible at https://journals.ptks.pl/cejc/article/view/485

[21] Ibid.

[22] Irakli Kobakhidze. (November 30, 2022). Whether inside or outside the country, whoever says that Ivanishvili is an oligarch, is a war party agent. *Formula TV*. Via link: https://formulanews.ge/News/81134

[23] Gvineria, S. (8 August, 2025). The Georgian Dream's Goebbelsian Propaganda. *GEOPOLITICS*. Via link: https://politicsgeo.com/the-georgian-dreams-goebbelsian-propaganda/

In 2023, when the "Russian-style foreign influence transparency" law was first registered in the Georgian Parliament, the NGO sector became the primary target of propaganda. NGOs were continuously accused of sabotaging Georgia's interests and were labeled with epithets such as "rich NGOs", "agents of foreign forces", "extremists", and "traitors of the country". The repeated circulation of these labels and the portrayal of NGOs as the main threat to Georgia created a dangerous environment in which violence against these people is encouraged - in fact, some NGOs experienced physical attacks. Information campaigns against the NGO sector remain current in Georgia today.

Attempts to dehumanize protest participants in the country is a separate issue. During the spring 2023 protests, participants[24] were called "Satanists", including by the then-Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. "I have seen some photos - I was shocked", he said. "Several people were dressed in what looked like Satanist outfits, young people. I don't want to show their faces, but this is disturbing, what is happening around us. This organization, collective "National Movement" has already turned into something not just radical but an extremist organization; it is only a step away from becoming a terrorist organization".[25] Attempts to dehumanize protestors became even more coordinated in 2024. Government affiliated TV channels and various social media accounts are actively involved in this process.[26] Pro-government TV channels call protestors "radicals" and often spread manipulated photos and videos to convince audiences that the rallies were full of "violent people", "drug addicts", "depraved" individuals, and "liberal fascists". Propaganda also refers to protestors as "akatsuki", both ridiculing them and presenting them as strange, alien groups to Georgian society.

A recent statement by Tbilisi's mayor, Kakha Kaladze, fits the classical definition of dehumanization. Commenting on a video from September 8 showing a physical altercation near his campaign headquarters, in which a Georgian Dream supporter is seen striking a protesting woman, Kaladze said: "None of them is a woman, there isn't a woman here, this is some other species, this is not a woman here, where is a woman? Tell me, show me which one is a woman". A few days later, the mayor stated that violence is unacceptable, but he also added several alarming messages clearly aimed at dehumanizing protesters: "violence is categorically unacceptable even when a woman behaves inappropriately, commits violence,

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[24] Which followed the bill on the so-called "foreign influence agents" initiated in Parliament by the government's satellite party - "People's Power"

[25] Jimsher Rekhviashvili. (March 14, 2023). Gharibashvili's "hopeful" messages. *Radio Liberty*. Via link: http://bit.ly/469r8oH

[26] ISFED. (December 12, 2024). "Georgian Dream's" propaganda to eliminate the protest. Via link: https://isfed.ge/geo/blogi/qartuli-otsnebis-propaganda-protestis-chasakhshobad-

and uses obscene language. I understand that it is very difficult to respond with patience to people, women and men, who yesterday and the day before yesterday attacked the campaign office. These people do not recognize their own sex, nor nationality, nor religion, nor homeland. I won't even talk about their morals and ethics. This is an externally funded aggressive group. The process of forming such individuals did not start today or yesterday. There was a deliberate effort to train them in various institutions, to de-nationalize them, to make them stateless masses. Tens of millions of dollars were spent on all this".

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In conclusion, dehumanization, the process of portraying an opponent as a non-human being, is a powerful tool for authoritarian regimes to preserve power and control society. Through propaganda, which deliberately spreads hatred, stereotypes, and manipulative information, an image of the enemy is formed from target groups. They are presented as "harmful", "traitorous", and an existential threat to the state, which serves to legitimize violence and cruelty against them. This process weakens individuals' moral barriers and erases the sense of guilt, since the victim is no longer perceived as a human being. Historical examples clearly show how far such propaganda can lead society.

Alarming signs of dehumanization are also emerging in contemporary Georgia. Georgian Dream and its information channels increasingly use this strategy against political opponents, the media, NGOs, and protestors. The use of labels like "agents of a foreign country", "traitors", "satanists", "some other species", and "homeless masses" aims to justify unfair treatment of these people, stir up hatred, and promote scapegoating instead of addressing the country's real challenges. Therefore, it is important that Georgian citizens be able to build internal defenses against propaganda and hate, and refuse to follow this dangerous tide of dehumanization that ultimately divides society and destroys the country's future.