

# 2021

## LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

**ELECTION DISINFORMATION  
AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS**





**2021 LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT  
ELECTIONS: ELECTION DISINFORMATION  
AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS**

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**THIS REPORT IS PRODUCED BY  
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## Introduction

This report offers an overview of the information environment in the Facebook social network prior to the first round of the 2021 local self-government election. Although polls show that TV remains a major source of information for most Georgian citizens, the use of the internet and, most particularly, the Facebook social network, has increased substantially since 2014.<sup>1</sup> In addition, political subjects actively employ the social network both for official and covert (unofficial) campaign purposes. According to Facebook's report, Georgia is among five of the countries in the world which were most frequently targeted<sup>2</sup> by information operations from local actors (including the political parties) in 2017-2020. Therefore, the information environment in the social network in the run-up to the elections has significantly affected both the political environment and attitudes of voters.

This report overviews content published by the accounts (pages, groups) affiliated with the political parties but often acting anonymously as well as smear campaigns against different political parties which they spearheaded. The report also includes examples of disinformation found during the pre-election period by Georgia's Reforms Associates' **FactCheck** project and marked as part of Facebook's third-party fact-checking programme.

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1 The National Democratic Institute (NDI), Public Attitudes in Georgia. July, 2021 Available at: [shorturl.at/uNZ02](https://shorturl.at/uNZ02)

2 Facebook, "The State of Influence Operations 2017-2020." May, 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/TR3ZSwS>



## Methodology

The social network monitoring involved nearly 300 Facebook accounts which have been most outstanding in their efforts to promote information manipulations in favour of or/and targeting specific political subjects. Usually, most of the monitored pages acted anonymously and the identity of the people behind them as well as their goals were not immediately clear for Facebook users.

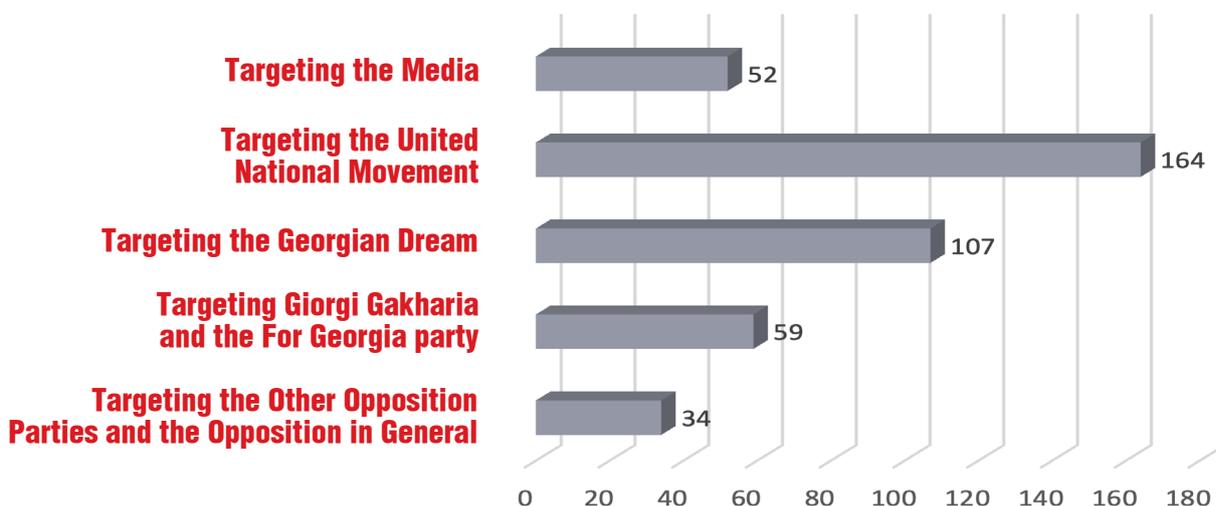
The monitoring was carried out from 1 September to 2 October 2021 and 425 Facebook products (including articles, photographs/footage, textual publications) were selected and analysed. Monitoring of the selected pages in the social network was carried out with CrowdTangle, Facebook's analytical tool.

## Main Findings

- The monitoring identified that the United National Movement has been the most frequent target of smear campaigns. If we add content against other opposition parties as well, the scale of the smear campaign against the opposition as a whole will be much higher. The next target of the monitored content's smear messages was the Georgian Dream. In addition, media and civil society organisations have also been targets of malicious smear campaign. See Table 1 for more details.



## Number of Items of Smear Content in Terms of Targets



**Table 1: Smear Campaign Targets**  
(the table is based on data identified as a result of the monitoring)

- The disinformation-infused smear campaign in the pre-election period fuelled radicalisation and polarisation, on the one hand, and sharply limited the opportunity for healthy debates and discussion in and among the public, on the other hand. These negative campaigns side-lined the real problems of the population and contributed to the unhealthy election environment.
- Most of the pieces of disinformation identified in the pre-election period were about the Georgian Dream's refusal to take the loan from the European Union. Disinformation promoted by political leaders and candidates was mostly



disseminated in the forms of fabricated quotes. The Central Election Commission was also targeted by false information. In addition, by the end of election day on 2 October 2021, doctored photographs on preliminary election results were published in the name of polling organisations through the social network.

- The openly anti-Western statements made by ruling party representatives in the pre-election period were more alarming as compared to the disinformation promoted by certain pro-Russian or anti-Western actors. Naturally and in the long run, these statements harm Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations as well as influencing public attitudes in this regard.

## Disinformation Promoted in the Social Network During the Pre-Election Period

This sub-section overviews disinformation and misleading content promoted by certain Facebook pages and online media in the election period intended to deepen confrontation and polarisation between people as identified by **FactCheck**'s social media monitoring.



## Refusal to Take the EU Loan – Anti-Western Context, Mainstrimisation of Pro-Russian Group Narratives

On 31 August 2021, the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, stated<sup>3</sup> that the Government of Georgia decided not to take the EU's EUR 75 million loan. As claimed by the Prime Minister, the government made that decision to reduce the foreign debt which was made possible as a result of the attraction of additional financial resources vis-à-vis the budget. According to the EU-Georgia memorandum, the precondition for the allocation of the second instalment of macro-financial assistance in the amount of EUR 75 million intended for Georgia was the implementation of detailed recommendations to increase the independence,<sup>4</sup> the accountability and the quality of the judiciary.

In fact, the Georgian Dream decided to “refuse” the assistance in advance (the second instalment of EUR 150 million in micro-financial assistance<sup>5</sup> in the amount of EUR 75 million), although the EU was not going to transfer these funds on the grounds of Georgia's non-compliance with its obligations. This was confirmed by the EU as well.<sup>6</sup>

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3 InterpressNews.ge, “Irakli Gharibashvili: We decided to refrain from taking the second instalment of the EU loan – the main motive is that we started to reduce foreign debt.” 17 September 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/JTc3UiC>

4 The conditions in regard to the component of the judiciary were later reflected in the so-called Charles Michel [document](#) which was adopted as part of the 19 April 2021 agreement.

5 On 25 May 2020, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted a [decision](#) (on providing macro-financial assistance to partner countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (long-term loan resources with a low – 0.125% interest rate). The amount of funds allocated for Georgia as part of this programme was EUR 150 million. The first installment in the amount of EUR 75 million was transferred almost without a pre-condition after respective documents had been signed and Georgia has fully made use of this money.

6 Civil.ge, “EU says Georgia failed to sufficiently address the condition for this macro-financial assistance.” 31 August 2021. Available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/437989>



This issue was widely commented upon by anti-Western groups and purveyors of pro-Russian disinformation. The social media monitoring identified sources which were promoting disinformation and anti-Western messages about the purpose of the EUR 75 million loan allocated by the EU to Georgia. Openly anti-Western and pro-Russian individuals and organisations, including the World Family Congress [Facebook page](#), affiliated with Levan Vasadze, the pro-Russian [Georgia and the World](#) newspaper, and the [2012-ianelebi](#) and [Common Newspaper](#) Facebook pages were among those promoting these messages. They claimed that the EUR 75 million loan which Georgia was supposed to receive would be followed by a judiciary reform on the part of the EU that Georgian judges would be controlled by foreigners.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in response to the criticism in regard to Georgia's refusal to take the EU loan, anti-Western actors started to blame Brussels for its alleged attempts to turn Georgia into its sphere of influence and establish total control over the country. These sources, in their rebuttal of the EU, claimed that during the Soviet era when Georgia was under Moscow's influence "Moscow would not have dared as much as Brussels or Washington currently dare."

Financial assistance from the EU was also [targeted](#) by the conspiracy theory claiming that Georgia was supposed to admit Afghan refugees in exchange for the loan.<sup>8</sup> The pro-Russian [Georgia and the World](#), giving its space to the pro-Russian political commentators, sought to promote anti-Western messages vis-à-vis the loan that instead of actually helping us, the EU strangles us with loans "and pushes the loan forcibly even when we do not need it."

However, the anti-Western statements made by ruling party representatives were more alarming as compared to disinformation messages disseminated in the social network. After quite an unequivocal statement<sup>9</sup> from the EU, the Prime Minister of Georgia still

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7 FactCheck. "Disinformation: In exchange for the loan from the EU, Georgia was supposed to admit Afghan refugees." FactCheck.ge. 17 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/39967-disinformation-in-exchange-for-the-loan-from-the-eu-georgia-was-supposed-to-admit-afghan-refugees>

8 FactCheck. "Disinformation: The EUR 75 million loan included an obligation that foreigners would be selecting and controlling the judges." FactCheck.ge. 21 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/39954-disinformation-the-eur-75-million-loan-included-an-obligation-that-foreigners-would-be-selecting-and-controlling-the-judges>

9 Radio Liberty. "Georgia will no longer receive EUR 75 million macro-financial assistance from the EU." Radio Liberty. 31 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31437173.html>



continued to deny the Georgian Dream's government's responsibility for this process and underlined that the European People's Party was biased:<sup>10</sup> "The tragedy is that nationals of our country, including the former President Saakashvili who was the president for nine years, are going to the EU structures and as you know he holds membership in the EU's People's Party, the EPP group and makes all the attempts to make sure that sanctions and other hindrances are imposed against us."

Afterwards, in response to a question from journalists to assess the statement from European Parliament MPs where they criticised the Government of Georgia for its "refusal" to take the EU's macro-financial assistance, the Prime Minister stated:<sup>11</sup> "A member of the European Parliament is not my boss. Our boss is the Georgian people. If they are interested to understand the essence and circumstances of the case, they have to understand it, instead of making a superfluous statement... I have no interest in who said what, I am telling our people that this was a loan and we refused to take an additional loan." Of note is that the Prime Minister's statement is fully in line with the messages of pro-Russian groups in regard to the EU's financial assistance as well as with the "sovereign democracy" narrative, oft-repeated by anti-Western actors for many years, claiming that Georgia's relations with the West bear a colonial nature and Georgia should not allow the blatant interference of Western nations in its own domestic affairs.<sup>12</sup>

The Prime Minister, in response to the President Zurabishvili's criticism over the Government of Georgia's decision to "refuse" assistance also stated:<sup>13</sup> "The loan was linked with the reform of the judiciary and the appointment of judges. When we focus

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10 Civil.ge. "Prime Minister says the decision has been made to refrain from taking the EU loan." 31 August 2021. Available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/437861>

11 Radio Liberty. "Gharibashvili on Criticism: A member of the European Parliament is not my boss, I am not interest in who said what." Radio Liberty. 1 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31438285.html>

12 See – Disinfometre 2020 September-October edition, p. 13. Available at: <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2021-01-06/824.pdf> as well as Disinfometre 2020 July-August edition, pp. 4-5. Available at: <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2020-11-06/797.pdf>

13 Netgazeti.ge. "We will explain to her what is the debt we are speaking about – Gharibashvili on the President." 3 September 2021. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/561795/>



on such details and underline relations with the EU, I think this is disparaging and harmful for EU-Georgia relations since we have a much higher level strategic relation and cooperation with the EU.” This statement of the Prime Minister, on the one hand, disregards the importance of democratic values, including a free and an impartial judiciary in EU-Georgia cooperation, and, on the other hand, portrayed the EU’s efforts in this direction as harmful for EU-Georgia relations.

Another manipulative message of the Georgian Dream is connected with those statements of party leaders who sought to marginalise the importance of the EU’s financial resource. The Prime Minister’s statement<sup>14</sup> was of interest in this context: “[The opposition] shamelessly speaks and deceives the people that it was massive assistance from the EU... How can one insult oneself and insult one’s people with such a brazen lie when you are aware of one important fact that it was a loan in the amount of EUR 75 million?!” One of the leaders of the Georgian Dream, Kakha Kaladze, stated:<sup>15</sup> “This is not assistance and you mislead the public. This is a loan. What’s the difference between a loan and assistance? You seek to mislead the public that that some people help us and we are foolish enough to refuse that assistance. This is not true. We are speaking about a loan and there is a difference between a loan and assistance.”<sup>16</sup>

The openly anti-Western statements made by ruling party representatives in the pre-election period were more alarming as compared to disinformation promoted by certain pro-Russian or anti-Western actors which, naturally, will harm Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations as well as influence public attitudes in this regard in the long run. Of additional note is that the Georgian Dream’s “refusal” to take the EU

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14 InterpressNews.ge. “Prime Minister – They shamelessly lie to the people that EUR 75 million was massive assistance from the EU and this ostensibly is a refusal of EU membership.” 1 September 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/ITn2uGp>

15 InterpressNews.ge. “Kakha Kaladze on EU’s funding: “Some people ostensibly help us and we are foolish enough to refuse that assistance. This is not true.” 2 September 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/fTn2j75>

16 In fact, the interest rate (0.125%) on the EU’s loan is much lower as compared to the interest rate of any foreign loan which Georgia took amid the pandemic. The idea behind such a low interest rate was precisely the EU’s decision to offer preferable conditions to partner countries to tackle the pandemic-induced crisis.



loan was unambiguously praised by anti-Western groups as something positive that aimed at strengthening the country's sovereignty.

## Disinformation Targeting the Central Election Commission

The monitoring of the pre-election period identified sources which promoted false information in the social network about the activities of the Central Election Commission (CEC): the [Dzala Simartleshia](#) (Power is in Truth), [Koveldghiuri Movlenebi](#) (Everyday Events) and [Namdvili Cesko Vart Chven](#) (We Are the Real CEC) Facebook pages. [The We Are the Real CEC](#) Facebook page, which sought to imitate the Central Election Commission, posted a fake decree of the CEC chairperson, ostensibly instructing the Public Relations Department of the CEC to invite the head of Syria's Central Election Department together with two department members for the 2 October 2021 elections. Although at the time of posting the aforementioned publication the page had only three likes, it was very actively and co-ordinately shared by the same Facebook user groups which were supporters of both the Georgian Dream and the opposition.<sup>17</sup> This raised a suspicion that the page's creation and the posting of false information were deliberately planned and implemented by certain groups.

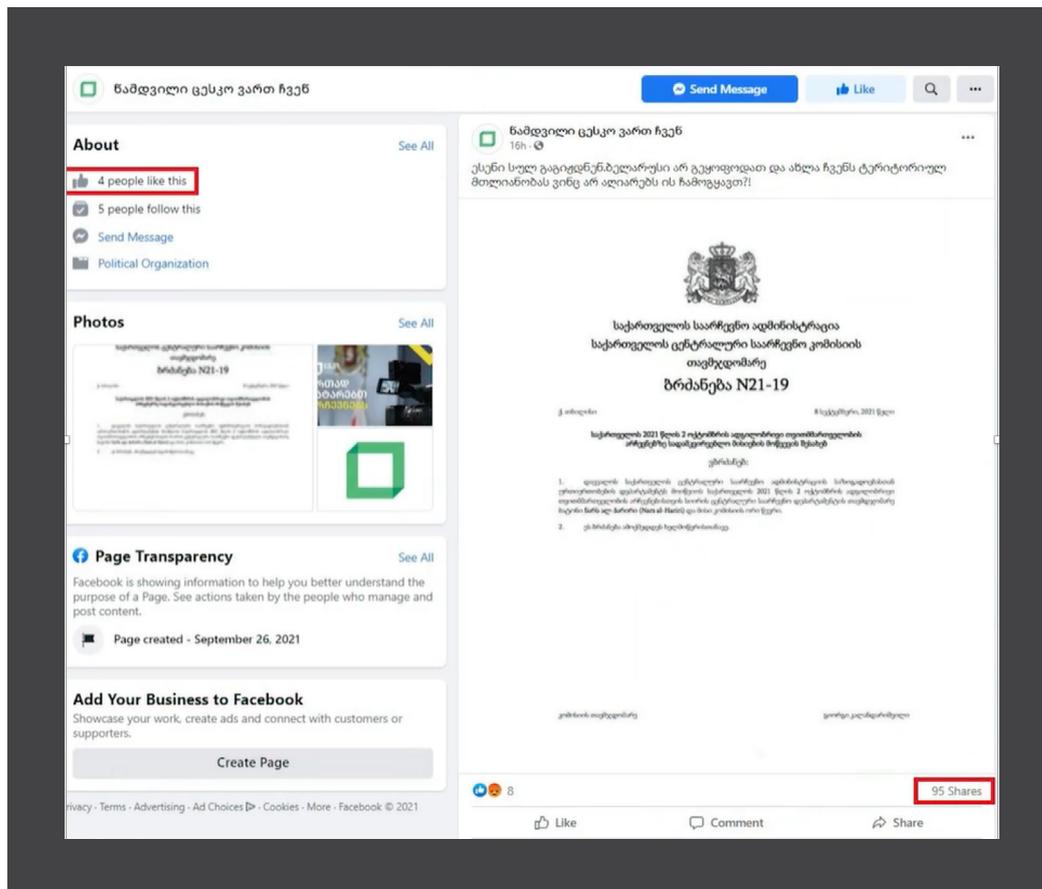
In regard to the [Power is in Truth](#) Facebook page which blamed the CEC for purchasing bad quality electoral ink, it was busy smearing mostly the opposition and the NGO

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17 FactCheck. "Fabricated Image of the CEC Chairperson's Decree Is Disseminated Through the Social Network." FactCheck.ge. 28 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/39991-fabricated-image-of-the-cec-chairperson-s-decree-is-disseminated-through-social-networks>



sector in previous years, including in the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections.<sup>18</sup>

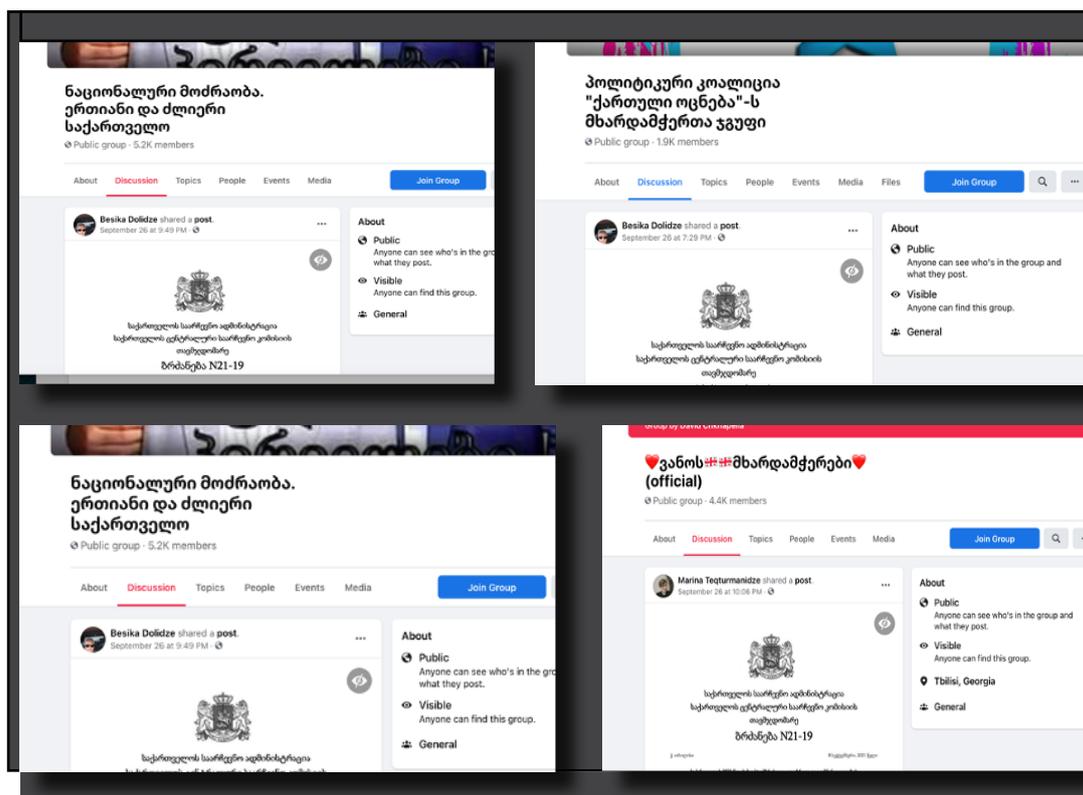


Of note is that the items of disinformation both in regard to the CEC chairperson’s decree and the electoral ink were co-ordinately shared by one and the same accounts and some

<sup>18</sup> FactCheck. “False Information About Electoral Ink is Disseminated Through Social Networks.” 29 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/39998>



of these accounts were noticed promoting messages against the opposition. This may indicate that the real aim behind producing and promoting the anti-CEC disinformation was making an impression that the opposition was behind the attacks against the CEC. According to the [reports](#) published by the ISFED, these malicious actors carried out a double information operation. On the one hand, they were spreading false information targeting the CEC. On the other hand, they promoted smear publications against the opposition parties and media outlets that are critical of the authorities through their criticism of the election administration. The aim of their publications was to blame everyone who criticised the election administration as being destructive.





The Facebook page under the innocuous name of [Everyday Events](#) was resorting to manipulation in the run-up to the elections using voter lists.<sup>19</sup> In particular, the number of voters was compared to the number of the population as reported by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, hinting that the CEC was manipulating the election with voter lists. According to the [ISFED](#)'s reports, this page in fact serves to smear Georgian Dream members and other party-affiliated individuals and acts in favour of the United National Movement.

## Manipulation of Online Outlet Spacenews

The social media monitoring identified yet another purveyor of disinformation, the online media Spacenews. The monitoring also revealed that Spacenews was promoting mixed messages, publishing articles with neutral undertones together with those of the pro-Russian/anti-Western narrative. In addition, in some cases it reported information under headlines taken out of context which intended to mislead the reader and discredit the author of the statement.

In the pre-election period, Spacenews published the opinion of the Bishop of the Evangelic-Baptist Church, Rusudan Gotsiridze, about the secret wiretapping under a distorted a headline.<sup>20</sup> Spacenews also resorted to the same kind of manipulation about the Facebook publication of journalist Vakho Sanaia. In his publication, the journalist was paying attention to the importance of high voter turnout at the election and saying

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19 FactCheck. "Manipulated Publication About Voter List is Disseminated Through Social Networks." FactCheck.ge. 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/40010-manipulated-publication-about-voter-list-is-disseminated-through-social-networks>

20 FactCheck. "Rusudan Gotsiridze's Quote is Circulated on Social Networks Under a Misleading Headline." FactCheck.ge. 20 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/39962-rusudan-gotsiridze-s-quote-is-circulated-on-social-networks-under-a-misleading-headline>



that revolution becomes the “way” only when the government “leaves no other ways” and “steals” elections that the opposition has won. The whole idea of Mr Sanaia’s publication was that people should go and vote. Multiple news agencies, including Spacenews, take precisely that part from the context and put it as a headline (“When there is no solution except for revolution...” Vakho Sanaia).<sup>21</sup>

According to the ISFED’s [report](#), there are connections between the pro-Kremlin news agency, News Front, and Spacenews. One and the same inauthentic accounts disseminate mostly News Front and Spacenews materials in public groups with thousands of members. Konstantine Chikviladze, one of the former administrators of News Front is among those who disseminate such materials. Of note is that Spacenews airs broadcasts such as “Laboratory Z,” “Main Space,” and “Molotov’s Cocktail,” etc. The hosts and frequent guests of these shows have an affiliation with the Georgian Dream. The host of the Spacenews Laboratory Z programme was also hosting “Imedi’s Factor” on Imedi TV. The guests of the aforementioned programmes are Ghia Abashidze and Zaal Anjaparidze, political commentators who support the Georgian Dream.

## **Fabricated Quotes of Politicians and Materials of Satirical Content**

The pre-election period monitoring revealed that Facebook accounts, pages or groups affiliated with different political parties or acting independently were disseminating fabricated quotes of different politicians in order to smear or support them and these quotes were sometimes of a satirical nature. Both the ruling party and opposition members have been targeted with such disinformation.

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<sup>21</sup> FactCheck. “Vakho Sanaia’s Quote is Circulated on Social Networks Under a Misleading Headline.” [FactCheck.ge/](https://factcheck.ge/) 17 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/39958-vakho-sanaia-s-quote-is-circulated-on-social-networks-under-a-misleading-headline>



## Manipulation with Nika Melia’s Speech

The Leader 41 Facebook page posted a publication and video footage in the social network claiming that Nika Melia called on citizens for violence whilst meeting voters in Dmanisi. In fact, Leader 41 manipulatively used a specific part of Mr Melia’s statement made after the incident in Dmanisi.<sup>22</sup> The Facebook page disseminated footage where Nika Melia ostensibly says “attack, wound, hit, shoot,” thereby seeking to mislead Facebook users and leave them with an impression that he was calling on people for violence.<sup>23</sup>

According to the ISFED’s [report](#), the [Leader 41](#) Facebook page is a Georgian Dream supporter page. Prior to the election campaign, published content was associated with family photos of Georgian Dream leaders. However, in the pre-election period, the page frequently posts publications to smear the opposition and the media.

## Fabricated Quotes of Georgian Dream Members

At the beginning of September 2021, satirical publications were published about Georgian Dream leaders in the social network. These publications contained fabricated quotes of the Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili; Georgian Dream Chairperson Irakli

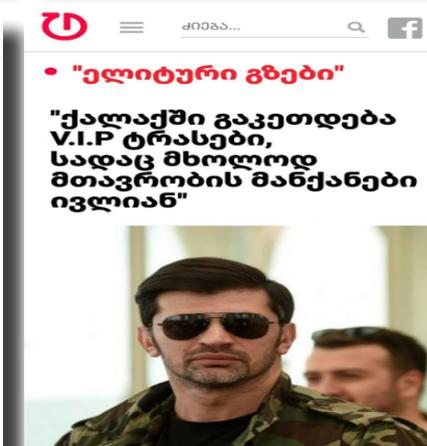
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22 Two opposition supporters were wounded in the face during the election rally of the Dmanisi mayoral candidate.

23 FactCheck. “Disinformation: Nika Melia called on his supporters for violence in Dmanisi.” Fact-Check.ge. 27 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/39986>



Kobakhidze, and Speaker of the Parliament, Kakha Kuchava.<sup>24</sup> The satirical publications targeting Irakli Gharibashvili and Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, also continued to be published in the later periods.<sup>25 26</sup>



24 FactCheck. "Satirical publications about the Georgian Dream leaders are published in the social network." FactCheck.ge. 10 September 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/39930>

25 N. Chokheli. "Irakli Gharibashvili's fabricated quote is disseminated through the social network." 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/40006>

26 FactCheck. "Satire: VIP roads will be built in Tbilisi where only government cars will be allowed." FactCheck.ge. 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/40005-satire-vip-roads-will-be-built-in-tbilisi-where-only-government-cars-will-be-allowed>



## Disinformation Disseminated about Mikheil Saakashvili's Return to Georgia

The Facebook publications which Mikheil Saakashvili made on 1 October 2021 turned out to be in the centre of attention from media and social network users. The information about Mr Saakashvili's return to Georgia soon became the major news of 1 October and, therefore, disinformation in the social network was promoted precisely about his alleged return.

For instance, as [claimed](#) by the Georgian Dream supporter Leader 41 Facebook page, footage published on Mikheil Saakashvili's Facebook page shows that the ex-president was in Ukraine instead of Batumi: "...Take a look at the weather forecast and you will understand that the video does not show Batumi and Misha ridicules the people. The video is fabricated, it is Ukraine and not Georgia..."

Of note is that Mikheil Saakashvili's return was used by multiple actors to produce a conspiracy theory about the USA and NATO. For instance, before 1 October 2021, disinformation actors were involved in campaign-like efforts to claim that Mr Saakashvili was supposed to [return](#) to Georgia with American support on board one of the American warships. The dissemination of these fake news items was preceded by Mikheil Saakashvili's announcement that he was coming on the Kyiv – Tbilisi flight. As early as 1 October 2021, reports that Mikheil Saakashvili was [brought back](#) to Georgia on 28 September 2021 by the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 (SNMCMG2) vessel or/and by the American warship were made within a negative context by pro-Russian groups and within a positive context by United National Movement supporters.

In regard to sources promoting the aforementioned fake news, the disinformation was published by the [Tvalsazrisi](#) news agency and on the Hambavi and News Front Facebook pages. Tvalsazrisi is an online news agency with a sharply anti-Western and



pro-Russian editorial policy. [News Front](#)'s editorial policy is also the same. According to the [ISFED](#)'s social media monitoring, the Hambavi Facebook page is a fake media page which belongs to the aforementioned Tvalsazrisi agency.

On 1 October 2021, after Mikheil Saakashvili's return and his arrest, pro-government Facebook groups unleashed a campaign targeting the United National Movement. In particular, these pages sought to convince social network users that Mr Saakashvili's return caused a split within the United National Movement. According to one disinformation item, Nika Melia called Mikheil Saakashvili's return a masquerade and as a result he decided to withdraw his candidacy from the local self-government elections and leave the United National Movement.<sup>27</sup> The fake news about the discord between Mr Saakashvili and Mr Melia was reported in the social network by the [Political Absurd](#) and [Politics](#) Facebook pages.

According to the [ISFED](#)'s social media monitoring report, the Political Absurd Facebook page intends to discredit the candidates for the Mayor of Tbilisi nominated from the opposition parties. The sponsored publications of the Political Absurd Facebook page are registered under Natela Kiladze's name who simultaneously sponsors media smearing publications on the [ქართული ჟურნალისტების მარგალიტები/ Journalist Fails](#) Facebook page. In regard to the [Politics](#) Facebook page, it mostly features publications (in certain cases, sponsored ones) to smear the United National Movement and Mikheil Saakashvili.

Of note is that part of the disinformation in the social network has its origins in the statements of Georgian Dream leaders who have been denying Mikheil Saakashvili's presence in Georgia.

For instance, Georgian Dream Chairperson, Irakli Kobakhidze, stated: "Saakashvili is not in Georgia. Mikheil Saakashvili's video was not recorded in Georgia, I can say that

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27 N. Chokheli. "Nika Melia's fake quote was disseminated through the social network." FactCheck. ge. 2 October 2021. Available: <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/40032>



boldly.”<sup>28</sup> The Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, Kakha Kuchava, commenting on Mikheil Saakashvili’s entrance to Georgia, stated: “I cannot make a serious comment about unserious actions of an unserious man. Saakashvili is not in Georgia. Let those who believe that keep their belief, but this is a fake video and I urge everyone to calm down their emotions.”<sup>29</sup>

One of the leaders of the Georgian Dream, Mamuka Mdinardze, denied the information posted on the official Facebook page of the ex-president of Georgia and continued to convince the people that Mikheil Saakashvili had not left Ukraine’s territory, let alone returned to Georgia. According to Mr Mdinardze, Mr Saakashvili was staying at the Rixos hotel in the small resort town of Truskavets in the Lviv district: “He is in Ukraine, at the Truskavets resort and his being in Truskavets is very symbolic, linguistically speaking. He was staying at the Rixos hotel when he was ostensibly posting a video from Batumi. Now, after reporting this information, he may hide but this information will not be hidden.”<sup>30</sup>

Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, responded to this information with irony, denouncing it as fake news: “This man has finally ended his political career. With this action, with this dirty fake news which he unveiled today, he completely ended the United National Movement. On the one hand, this is very good. This country needed that politically immoral power to come to its end. He went broke and as a result, the United National Movement is finished today and the Georgian people will show this to all members and leaders of the United National Movement at the ballot boxes.”<sup>31</sup>

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28 Tabula.ge. “Kobakhidze says Saakashvili is not in Georgia.” 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/8TmcK4y>

29 Tabula.ge. “Kuchava says Saakashvili is not in Georgia and the footage is fake.” 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/dTmc23l>

30 Tabula.ge “Mdinardze says Saakashvili is in resort Truskavets in Ukraine.” 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/dTmvyui>

31 Tabula.ge. “Kaladze: I am very grateful for Saakashvili who trashed his party and candidate.” 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/ITmvfnL>



In light of the Georgian Dream’s ridiculing the issue, some Georgian nationals may have increased mistrust vis-à-vis the efficient functioning of the state institutions. The President of Georgia, Salome Zurbashvili, also mentioned this whilst criticising the unserious attitude of the Georgian Dream members and the government: “The government’s response is what they are obliged to do or the public expects the to do and which will calm the public and switch back to the election mood. The comments today should not be made from the party but from the government bodies which have an obligation to produce evidence on what is true and what is not true and calm the public in this manner. Ridiculing and sneering is not an answer when some people raise doubts over the efficiency of state structures.”<sup>32</sup>

After Mikheil Saakashvili’s presence in Georgia was confirmed on the evening of 1 October 2021 and Irakli Gharibashvili informed<sup>33</sup> the public about the arrest of the ex-president, the Prime Minister claimed that the dissemination of false information by the ruling party through the whole day was part of the “operational tactics” to arrest Mr Saakashvili: “False information was reported that the government was not aware. Here, I would like to apologise to members of our team who also had to make contrary claims. We deliberately were not saying anything about the matter. This was a usual operational tactic which was needed in order to achieve such an outcome.”<sup>34</sup>

However, whether or not this indeed was part of the “operational tactics” agreed in advance, the promotion of wrong information about Mikheil Saakashvili’s return to Georgia by the Georgian Dream’s leaders misled the public, harmed the pre-election information environment and further undermined the already weak trust of the voters vis-à-vis political processes.

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32 Tabula.ge. “Zurbashvili on Saakashvili: The government’s response is not what they are obliged to do – calm the public.” 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/VTmvRWq>

33 Tabula.ge. “Gharibashvili says Saakashvili under arrest.” 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/tTmvFIR>

34 FormulaNews.ge. “Gharibashvili: We deliberately were not saying anything about Saakashvili’s return, it was an operational tactic.” 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://formulanews.ge/News/57538>



## 2 October 2021 – Disinformation Identified During Election Day

On 2 October 2021, disinformation in the social network was [promoted](#) in the form of again ascribing fake quotes to politicians. In addition, by the end of the election day, different pages published forged photographs of fake preliminary results of the elections under the name of polling organisations. For instance, the Dzala Simartleshia Facebook page posted fabricated [results](#) of Edison Research polls whilst the [Provocateurs](#) Facebook page published falsified results of IPSOS election exit-polls.

According to the [ISFED](#)'s social media monitoring, the [Provocateurs](#) Facebook page seeks to smear the opposition parties, media critical to the authorities and civic activists. To this end, the page uses sarcastic photo and video manipulations and memes whilst the [Dzala Simartleshia](#) Facebook page mostly [smears](#) the United National Movement and party-affiliated individuals.

## Smear Campaign in the Social Network

Facebook pages with overt or covert affiliations with political parties usually get very active in the pre-election period and become involved in negative campaigning by promoting smear narratives. The pre-election period for the 2021 local self-government elections was



not an exception in this regard. This section describes the smear messages which Georgia's Reforms Associates have identified through monitoring Facebook pages acting in political interests.

Of note is that the main targets of smear campaigns were the United National Movement, the Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia and Gakharia for Georgia. However, smear messages also targeted Lelo and other opposition parties. On top of that, media and non-government organisations also ended up on the radar of pages spearheading smear campaigns. The smear campaigns in the pre-election period fuelled radicalisation and polarisation, on the one hand, and sharply limited the opportunity for healthy debates and discussion in and among the public, on the other hand. These negative campaigns side-lined the real problems of the population and contributed to the unhealthy election environment.

## Smear Campaign Targeting the United National Movement

There were multiple narratives in the social network against the United National Movement (UNM) during the pre-election period. For instance, the UNM was [blamed](#) for "[requesting](#)" secret wiretappings about the clergy. However, most of the emphasis was made on the UNM's rule which was referred to as "bloody nine years." In particular, attempts were made to link the UNM rule with the propaganda of promiscuity, sadism, violence, brutality, repressions, corruption, property seizures, rally crackdowns, losing territories, destroying the country and [abandoning](#) troops on the battlefield of the August 2008 war, etc. Currently, the UNM is also blamed for attacking the institutions (Church, Patriarch, police, army, courts) and the spread of propaganda. To this end, [old footages](#) showing [crimes committed under the UNM rule](#) were often [published](#). The



anti-UNM campaign also made references to the party’s decision to sign the Charles Michel document after a significant delay. For instance, this was assessed as a “duplicitous move” and portrayed the UNM as an anti-Western party.

It is interesting that a Facebook page, seemingly of religious content, considered the UNM as an enemy of the Georgian Orthodox Church and called upon the page’s subscribers [not to vote](#) for this party. For instance, the Upalo Shegvitskale (God Have Mercy On Us) Facebook page, which was created in August 2021, simultaneously with posting religious paraphernalia (icons) portrayed the UNM as an anti-religious [power](#) and selectively published the statements of Georgian Dream leaders [showing](#) them as fighters against this “anti-Church” party and, therefore, as guardians of the Church.

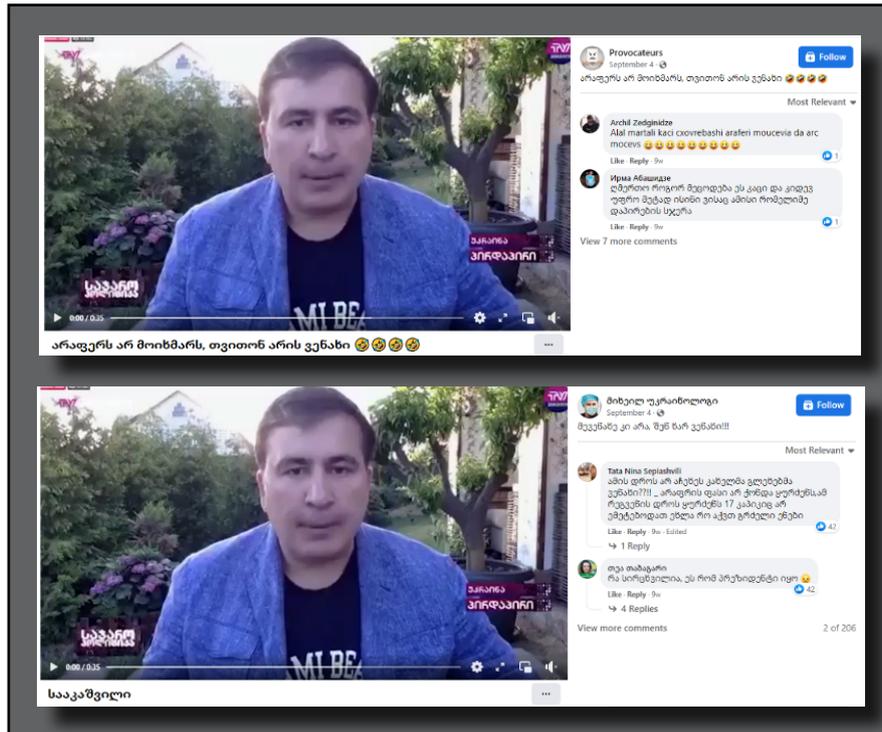




The banners which appeared in the run-up to the 2021 elections (and during the [previous elections](#)) where representatives of the UNM, media and other opposition parties, including Giorgi Gakharia, were depicted against the blood-stained background with calls such as #notoNazis, #notoevilness and #notobetrayal were also [posted](#) in the social network.

[Pictures mocking](#) the UNM were also [promoted](#). The UNM, in general, and Mikheil Saakashvili, in particular, were also blamed for planning the unrest on 3 October 2021 after the elections. For the pages involved in the smear campaign, Megi Kardava's extradition to Georgia was very topical with [plenty](#) of [publications](#) as well as [videos from the archives devoted](#) to this issue. Most of the messages portrayed the UNM as a "party of brutal abusers and executioners" which "seeks to come to power even today." The messages, contributing to polarization, were also frequent such as "the UNM is the [enemy](#) which we have to crush once again on 2 October – there is no other way or solution."

UNM leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, was one of the major targets of the smear campaign. These pages were [writing](#) that Mr Saakashvili is a "world-class fraudster" and a "con man" and also [posted publications](#) and [videos](#) containing [foul language](#). They highlighted that Mr Saakashvili was sick, [suffering](#) from psychological problems. In addition, [in response](#) to his statement that he has never consumed any drugs, they were seeking in coordination to [underline](#) his drug-addiction. [Old videos](#) (see [link 1](#) and [link 2](#)) were [published about](#) the UNM and Mikheil Saakashvili in the [same context](#). In addition, [different footage](#) and [photographs](#) were [posted](#) to [mock](#) and belittle the ex-president of Georgia.



A series of mocking and smear publications was devoted to Mikheil Saakashvili's statement that he was going to return to Georgia. This issue was linked with Mr Saakashvili's attempt to stage mass unrest and a revolution and spark civil conflict in order to portray the UNM and Mikheil Saakashvili as focused on destruction and unrest. Mr Saakashvili was blamed for wanting to stage a revolution and it was claimed that he had [instructed](#) his party to use the term "popular referendum" instead because of "revolution" because of its violent connotation. The 2016 secret audio recording where Mikheil Saakashvili denounces the coalition governance model and speaks about a revolutionary scenario was [reposted](#) as part of the smear campaign.<sup>35</sup>

35 The authenticity of this recording has not yet been established.



Of note is that the pages involved in the smear campaign were making xenophobic statements about Mikheil Saakashvili's alleged non-Georgian ethnic [origins](#).



One of the pro-Russian media outlets, Saqinform, [blamed](#) Mikheil Saakashvili for the preparations for provocations in Ukraine and Georgia. It was argued that Mr Saakashvili's claim about Vladimir Putin's enmity towards him was in fact a myth and a picture of the two men [posing together](#) was published in order to prove their "proximity." Mr Saakashvili was also blamed for handing over the [Kodori Gorge](#), hundreds of villages in the Gori district and strategic [facilities](#) to Russia and for this reason he was [referred](#) as "pro-Russian" and a "[traitor of the homeland](#)."

After Mikheil Saakashvili, the biggest target of the smear campaign was the Chairperson of the UNM and candidate for the Mayor of Tbilisi, Nika Melia. For instance, mocking, smear and [abusive pictures](#), [publications](#) and [videos](#) were published and he was portrayed as an [offender](#) (this included the [promotion](#) of a deliberately doctored video of Mr Melia's speech where he ostensibly called for violence).



Other leaders of the UNM, for instance, [Koba Nakopia](#), [Levan Khabeishvili](#) and [Anzor Melia](#) ([focus was made](#) on his old age), were also targeted by smear and mockery campaigns. The [Samegrelo Times](#) Facebook page was [making references](#) to Anzor Melia's statement about the issue of Abkhazia and [claimed](#) it was a Russia-supporting statement. There were active smear campaigns [against](#) the opposition's candidate for Mayor of Poti, [Gigi Ugulava](#),<sup>36</sup> as well. For instance, he [was ridiculed](#) for small crowds at his press conferences and published old [photographs](#) and [abusive publications](#) about him.

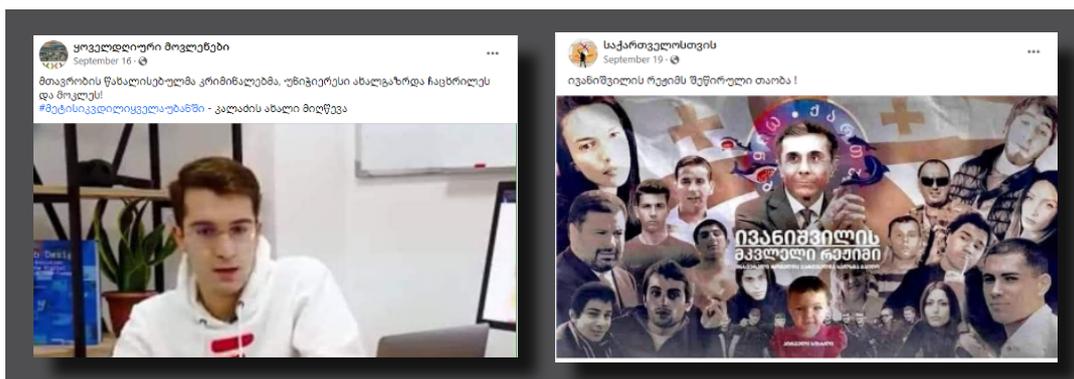
<sup>36</sup> Although Gigi Ugulava is not a UNM member, he was running under the UNM's election number (5) in this elections.



## Smear Campaign Against the Georgian Dream

After the United National Movement, the Georgian Dream was the second biggest target of the smear campaign. The Facebook pages affiliated with the opposition were promoting the smear messages.

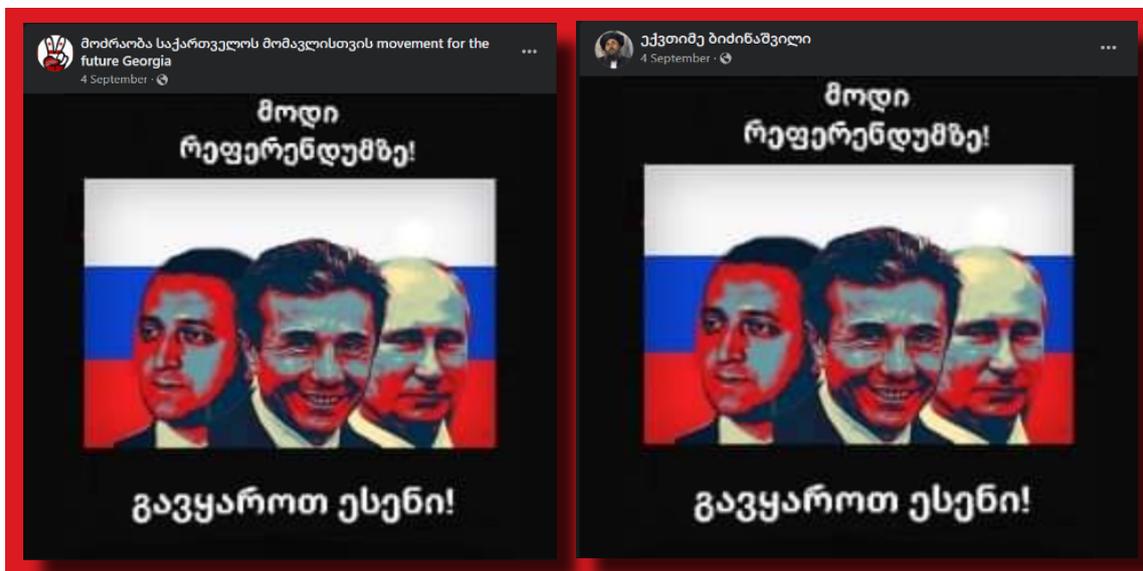
Of note is that Kakha Kaladze was linked with the murder of young man<sup>37</sup> in Tbilisi and this murder was underscored as his “achievement.” Smear publications on this issue were promoted with the following caption: “#moredeathineverydistrict.” According to the pages involved in the smear campaign, the government **turned** murders into something standard and routine whilst the murder was **blamed** on the “system,” “total crime” and “Georgian-corrupt impunity” and the murderers were **portrayed** as “encouraged by the government.”



37 On 15 September 2021, Nikoloz Kvaratskhelia, 22, was killed in the Pikris Gora district of Tbilisi. The media reported that one of the motives behind this crime could be the ties of the late Mr Kvaratskhelia’s father with the criminal world.



Prime Minister Irakli [Gharibashvili](#) as well as the Government of Georgia were [blamed](#) for being [pro-Russian](#) and [calls](#) were made to people to “kick them out.” In addition, [Kakha Kaladze](#), [Irakli Kobakhidze](#) and [Irakli Gharibashvili](#) were [presented](#) as [puppets](#) of Bidzina Ivanishvili and [Vladimir Putin](#).



There were unconfirmed [reports](#) about the [confrontation](#) within the party and the possible split and separation of Kakha Kaladze’s team – all of these [to smear](#) the Georgian Dream. In addition, 2018 footage was actively circulated and it was [presented](#) as prison brutality under the Georgian Dream. There were attempts [to link](#) the Georgian Dream with groups of criminal mentality and election fraud through photographs of mocking content.

The candidate for the Mayor of Tbilisi was [blamed](#) for the acquisition of buses at a higher price and for [stealing](#) GEL 60 million. Kakha Kaladze was portrayed as a “corrupt” mayor through different [publications](#) and [footage](#).

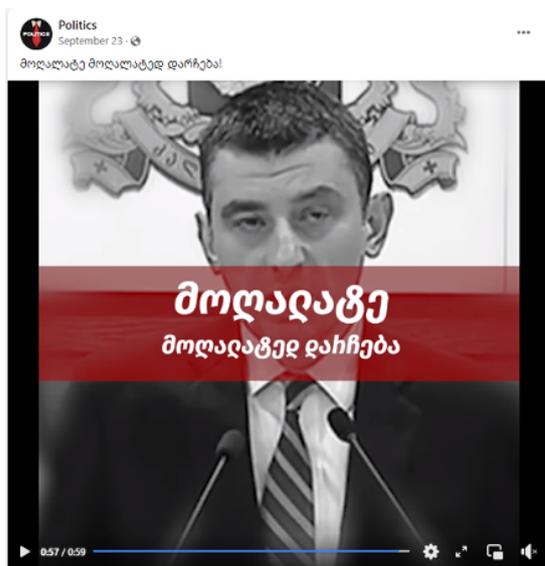


There were [numerous ironic, ridiculing, aggressive, denigrating, offensive and abusive photographs, publications and videos posted about the Georgian Dream and the Government of Georgia, including the party leaders – Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili; Chairperson of the Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze; candidate for the Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, Ekaterina Tikaradze, Thea Tsulukiani \(in addition, the founder of the Georgian Dream and the former Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and his son, Bera Ivanishvili\). This included facts of reposting some old pictures. Fake quotes of Irakli Gharibashvili \(and of Kakha Kuchava\) were frequently promoted in the form of satirical content. In addition, there were a number of publications about Irakli Gharibashvili's visit to Mount Athos. Mr Gharibashvili was also satirically linked with the Taliban.](#)



## Smear Campaign Against Giorgi Gakharia and the For Georgia Party

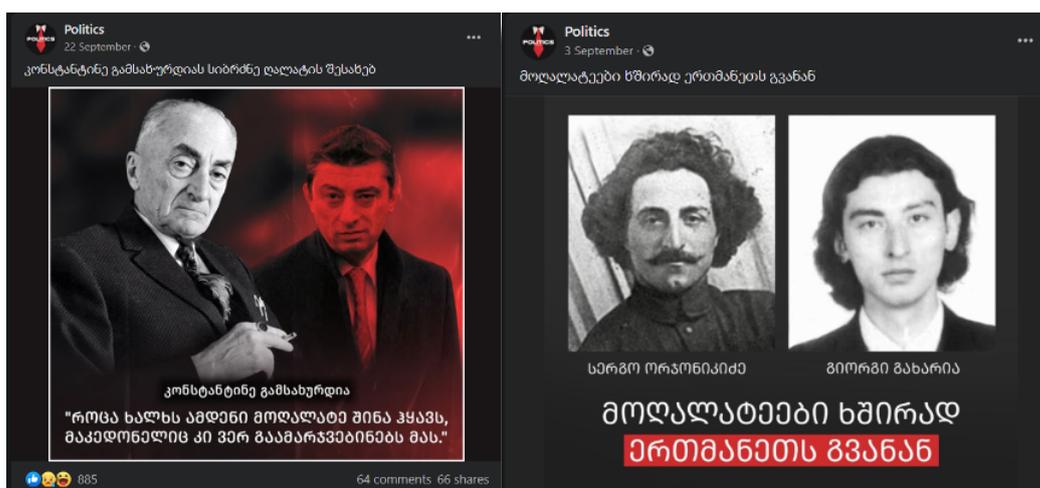
There was a very robust smear campaign against Giorgi Gakharia during the pre-election period. This campaign was mostly in line with the Georgian Dream's narratives vis-à-vis Giorgi Gakharia. In some cases, the Georgian Dream supporting pages, [under the guise](#) of news agencies, were selectively disseminating smear messages voiced by Georgian Dream leaders. For instance, this included the claim that “[Gakharia] resigned for Melia and now starts a fight to drag Melia into a second round.” The [message](#) that Giorgi Gakharia was the Prime Minister in the past and now he was fighting only for the position of the Mayor of Tbilisi was also promoted to smear him. The reason behind this “complete regress” was again [named](#) as Giorgi Gakharia's desire to [help](#) Nika Melia qualify for the run-off.





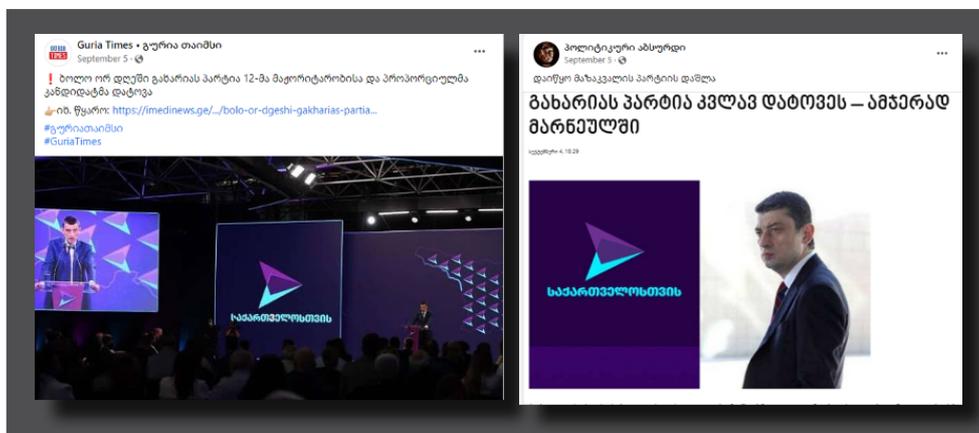
A mocking video was also [published](#) where Giorgi Gakharia was referred to as “Pinocchio” and Prime Minister Gakharia’s appraisal of Kakha Kaladze’s performance as a Mayor of Tbilisi was contrasted with this different assessment when Mr Gakharia was nominated as candidate for Mayor of Tbilisi.

[Videos](#) where the full context was missing were used to blame Giorgi Gakharia for spreading lies and he was referred to by the sobriquet – “Mazakvali” (sly) – introduced by Irakli Gharibashvili. The pages involved in the smear campaign were also [using](#) the nickname “[smoke](#),” coined by Irakli Kobakhidze. There were calls for Georgian Dream voters [not to support](#) Giorgi Gakharia. The [narrative about](#) Mr Gakharia [being a traitor](#) was actively [cultivated](#) and he was [compared](#) to Sergo Ordzonikidze. Giorgi Gakharia’s resignation was [condemned](#) as irresponsibility, “running away from obligations granted by the people” and relinquishing the Prime Minister’s position for Nika Melia’s sake.

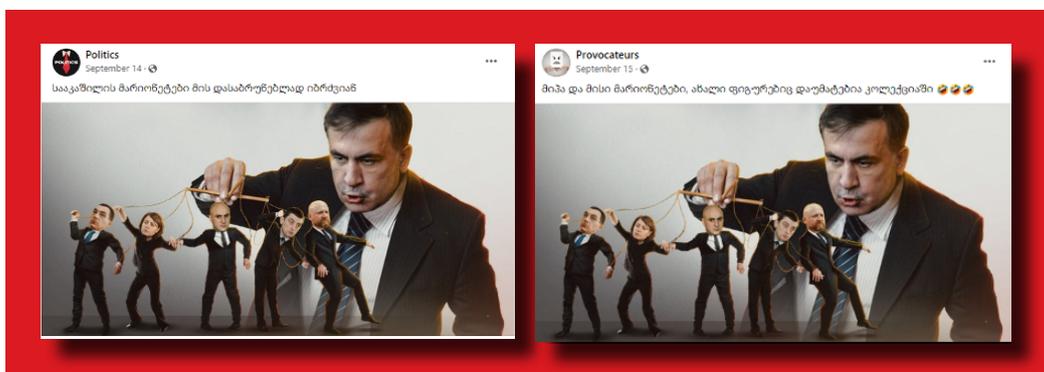




Of note is that pages disguised as news agencies were [selectively](#) and [en masse re-reporting news](#) about the For Georgia party members [withdrawing](#) from the party.



One of the main [messages](#) was to associate Giorgi Gakharia with the United National Movement. It was hinted that someone else [instructed](#) him to run for the Mayor of Tbilisi. Giorgi Gakharia was [portrayed](#) as [Mikheil Saakashvili's puppet](#) who is [fighting](#) to come back. At the same time, Facebook [pages](#) having [affiliations](#) with opposition parties were [portraying](#) Giorgi Gakharia as Bidzina Ivanishvili's [puppet](#).



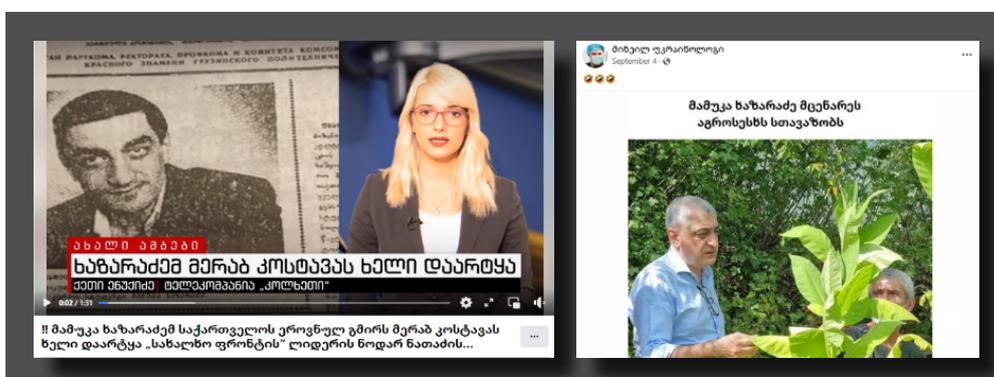


In order to discredit Giorgi Gakharia, attempts were made to [spread rumours about his](#) being a [drug addict](#).

Giorgi Gakharia and one of the leaders of his party, Khojevanishvili, were also [blamed](#) for [releasing](#) secret wiretappings in the pre-election period. Similar to other parties, [numerous different mocking photographs, videos](#) and [publications](#) were [promoted](#) to [target](#) the For Georgia party and Giorgi [Gakharia](#) himself.

## Smear Campaign Against Other Opposition Parties

Apart from the aforementioned parties, other opposition parties also became targeted by the smear campaign during the pre-election period, albeit at a lower scale. Of these campaigns, the most notable was the one against Lelo. A number of [mocking](#) and [offensive videos, photographs](#) and [publications](#) were [made](#) against Lelo and its leaders – Mamuka [Khazaradze](#) and Davit [Usupashvili](#). The purveyors of this content were mostly [seeking](#) to [portray](#) Mamuka Khazaradze's background in banking in a negative light. Mr Khazaradze was also [blamed](#) for punching Merab Kostava.





In regard to discrediting other parties and candidates, of note are [mocking](#) or/and offensive and racist [messages](#) targeting Richard Arinze Ogbunaju, candidate for the Mayor of Tbilisi. Ana Dolidze, head of the For People party and candidate for Mayor of Tbilisi, was also targeted by a smear campaign using photographs to mock her.

The Citizens party [was](#) also [targeted](#) by a smear campaign. The party's leaders, most particularly Aleko Elisashvili, were portrayed as incompetent and [populist](#) individuals. In addition, through dissemination of mocking and offensive pictures and videos they were [denigrated](#) as “servants of the Georgian Dream.”

Giga Bokeria, leader of the European Georgia, was also targeted by a smear campaign. In particular, his comments about authoritarian messages were followed by a [publication](#) containing a cynical response. The leaders of different opposition parties – Giga Bokeria, Elene Khoshtaria, Nika Melia, Giorgi Gakharia and Zurab Girchi Japaridze, were [portrayed](#) as Mikheil Saakashvili's puppets.

One of the leaders of the Third Force, Grigol Vashadze, as well as the leader of the Labour Party, [Shalva Natelashvili](#), were also [hit](#) by smear/mocking publications. On top of targeting opposition parties separately, [attempts were made](#) to [discredit](#) and [demonise](#) the [opposition](#) as a whole (or the leaders of different opposition parties [together](#)).



## Smear Campaign Against the Media

Media and journalists were also targeted by smear campaigns. The smear messages were mostly focused on the opposition media and journalists as they were [blamed](#) for [carrying out](#) incessant propaganda aimed to portray the situation in Georgia as “hellish.” Apart from blaming the TV channels for spreading lies, one Facebook page having an affiliation with the Georgian Dream [claimed](#) the Mtavari channel, TV Pirveli and Formula were using a video to “try to brainwash us with neo-fascist methods, foster enmity, sow discord and instil a sense of hopelessness.” According to the aforementioned video, these TV channels are not media but “servants of political party propaganda” instead. These three TV channels were also blamed for promoting hate speech, reporting only negative information and manipulating people and were [denounced](#) as the United National Movement’s puppets. In addition, Nika Gvaramia, Vato Tsereteli and Vakho Sanaia were derisively [referred to](#) as “desperate [revolutionaries](#)” whilst most media workers were [called](#) “journalists of lies.”



The **bulk** of the **smear, mocking** and **abusive publications, videos** and **photographs** was **focused** on the Mtavari channel and its **director, Nika Gvaramia**. The smear campaign included **highlighting** him being a drug addict. Eliso **Kiladze, together with** Nika Gvaramia, was also a target of pages involved in a smear campaign.

TV Pirveli and journalists working for this TV channel were also engulfed by smear, **abusive** and **mocking photographs** and **publications**. The biggest targets were **Nodar Meladze** and Inga Grigolia whilst other hosts, such as Eka Mishveladze, Aleksii **Petriashvili** and Diana **Trapaidze**. were also targeted to a lesser extent.

The tactics of reposting old videos were also actively used vis-à-vis the media. For instance, an old **video** showing a verbal confrontation between Nika Gvaramia and Vakho Sanaia was published without context.

Of note is that pages with religious titles and content were also involved in a smear campaign against the media. For instance, one page made **publications** aimed at **offending** the Director of TV Kavkasia, Nino Jangirashvili, and a journalist at Formula, Misha Mshvildadze. In addition, Nino Jangirashvili was also blamed for fighting against politicians who are “the relentless defenders of the Patriarch and the interests of Georgia.”





## Smear Campaign Against Non-governmental Organisations

Non-governmental organisations were also targeted by the smear campaigns where pages involved largely focused on election observation organisations. One of the biggest [targets](#) was the Alternative Election Commission. Most of the mocking and [offensive videos](#) and publications were channelled against its founders – Akaki [Khuskivadze](#) and Shota Dighmelashvili. The work of the Alternative Election Commission was assessed as “absolutely immoral and unacceptable” and it was [denounced](#) as the United National Movement’s sub-unit which does not observe impartiality.

The [International Society](#) for Free [Elections](#) and [Democracy](#) (ISFED) [was](#) also [targeted](#) by a smear campaign. For instance, one of the smear [videos](#) shows the ISFED’s election-related report dismissively and refers to Transparency International Georgia in an offensive context. The ISFED’s work was [decried](#) as “malicious” and the organisation was blamed for PVT falsification and deceiving the population. The ISFED’s pre-election monitoring report was also [criticised](#) for being “meaningless” and communicating fantasy instead of facts. In addition, it was claimed that ISFED, together with other non-governmental organisations, was getting ready to declare the elections as fraudulent, given the organisation’s partisan bias.

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