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## TIMES OF CRISIS AS “GOLDEN TIME” FOR PROPAGANDA: PR PROPAGANDA IN ALBANIAN MEDIA

### Abstract

The research undertaken in the framework of our study has revealed that successive global or local crises during the last 5 years have brought an increased presence of propaganda in the Albanian mass media. Our presentation aims to present and analyze the main forms of propaganda that originates from the public relations offices of political parties and state institutions and manages to penetrate the mass media. The report aims to unmask the camouflaged forms of propaganda in the media, seeing it as the dual responsibility of political and media actors. It aims to prove the symbiotic relationship between the populist and authoritarian tendencies of the ruling leadership on the one hand and the propaganda discourse on the other. At the same time, the article sheds light on the compromised agendas of the mass media which, for the sake of occult interests, leave room for propaganda on their pages or screens.

**Keywords:** propaganda, crises, public relations, persuasion, manipulation, mass media, elites, politics, discourse

### Abstrakt

Nasze badania wykazały, że kolejne kryzysy globalne lub lokalne w ciągu ostatnich pięciu lat przyniosły zwiększoną obecność propagandy w albańskich środkach masowego przekazu. Artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie i analizę głównych form propagandy, które wywodzą się z biur public relations partii politycznych i instytucji państwowych i przedostają się do środków masowego przekazu. Celem raportu jest zdemaskowanie zakamuflowanych form propagandy w mediach, postrzeganych jako podwójna odpowiedzialność podmiotów politycznych i medialnych. Praca ma na celu ukazanie symbiotycznego związku propagandowym z drugiej. Jednocześnie artykuł rzuca światło na skompromitowane programy środków

masowego przekazu, które w imię niejawnych interesów pozostawiają miejsce na propagandę na swoich stronach i ekranach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** propaganda, kryzysy, public relations, perswazja, manipulacja, środki masowego przekazu, elity, polityka, dyskurs

Propaganda is a powerful tool used by governments, organizations, and various groups of society to shape public opinion, influence perceptions, and mobilize support for a particular cause or agenda. This stands out especially in times of crisis. Whether they are wars, natural disasters, pandemics, or times of political unrest, crises are a fertile ground for propaganda. In democratic societies, there is often a fine line between legitimate public information campaigns and manipulative propaganda, and this line is frequently debated during times of crisis. This article explores the intricate relationship between propaganda and crises, examining how domestic propaganda in Albania has been employed through PR discourse to advance various political agendas during turbulent times.

## Introduction

As an act of communication used to influence people's beliefs, propaganda is as old as human society. Whereas as a term it was first used in 1622 by the Catholic Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Italian: Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide) (Bernays, E. 1928, p. 21), its spread in modern times is closely related to the spread and evolution of mass communication and mass media. However, it had started seeing a wide systemic and institutional use only in the 20th century. Thus, during the First World War, propaganda was used as an organized practice of mass communication (Idris, 2019, pp. 82–89) by almost all the warring parties not only to mobilize the respective armies and nations, but also to spread disinformation and to discourage or dehumanize the enemy. With the same dual mission, propaganda has also been used in commercial battles.

Mayer underlines the fact that “through the years propaganda has been used to help win wars and to aid in struggles for trade” (Mayer, 1933, p. 8). But, as he suggests, “it has fallen into ill reputation...” (Mayer, 1933, p. 8). Its mass use during the Second World War by the Nazis and later by all totalitarian communist regimes further deepened the negative reputation of this communication practice. Thus, from a practice of religious education in origin, propaganda was transformed into an act of mass manipulation.

Concerned by the term's negative connotations, Western propagandists sought a more acceptable term for their societies. In 1925, Lee wrote about his frustration in trying to replace the word “propaganda” with something else: “[Propaganda] is a bad word; I wish I had some substitute for it, but after all it means the effort to propagate ideas, and I do not know any real derivative to substitute for the word” (Lee, 1925, pp. 22–23).

It was Edward Bernays who suggested the new name for propaganda, thus baptising a new field with the name of mass communication. “When I came back to the United States [from the First World War], I decided that if you could use propaganda for war, you could certainly use it for peace. And ‘propaganda’ got to be a bad word... so what I did was to try and find some other words, so we found the words “public relations” (Bernays, 2002).

It is not easy to reach any conclusion regarding the dilemma of whether propaganda in liberal-democratic societies – in the prevailing meaning of it today – has been an essential

element of the system since its genesis<sup>1</sup> or was subsequently borrowed from the experience of totalitarian systems and modified as an effective means of exercising power. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their well-known book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, consider the propaganda as a communication environment for “thought control in democratic societies.” However, they assert that propaganda in Western media “does not function in the manner of the propaganda system of a totalitarian state. Rather, they permit – indeed encourage – spirited debate, criticism, and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 302).

In addition to the much-discussed issue of the presence of propaganda in democratic countries, a debate has developed and continues to develop regarding the propaganda/PR dichotomy. There is an old and still unanswered question about the mission and function of PR offices, whether they carry out communication activities of a special kind, or simply generate propaganda, but under a new name.

For Cory Wimberly, “propaganda is not different from public relations, except in its name: public relations and propaganda name the same activities, the same rationalization of those activities, and even the same personages” (Wimberly, 2020, p. 2). In a similar approach, Kevin Moloney insists that, after decades of developments, PR is simply just a weak propaganda (Moloney, 2006).

The author of this paper is in favour of the approach of many researchers that consider PR in Western states as a new evolutionary stage of propaganda adapted to the new realities in these countries. Definitions of propaganda as “Dissemination of information—facts, arguments, rumours, half-truths, or lies—to influence public opinion” (Britannica, n.d.), or as “Information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people’s opinions” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), apply to a large extent as a definition to the activity of public relations as well. Many studies on actual propaganda in Western countries highlight the fact that it often originates from the public relations offices.

Undoubtedly, the most used channels for the dissemination of propaganda generated by PR offices are the mass media. Journalism and communication professor Stephan Russ-Mohl, referring to the media system in Germany, notes that “in certain parts of our media system PR and journalism are merging with each other more and more” (Russ-Mohl, 2010, pp.285–286). Meanwhile Miller and Dinan come to the conclusion that “as media outlets cut-back on journalism, there is a growing reliance on “information subsidies” — press releases, video news releases, briefings, trails, and exclusives offered by spin doctors to increasingly pressurised journalists. While these trends are most acute in US and UK, the same dynamic is in play throughout the globe” (Miller & Dinan, 2009, p. 252).

In this paper we will focus on the analysis of the PR propaganda discourse in Albania conveyed through the mass media channels. The main hypothesis of the research aims to prove that PR activity in Albania has deviated from a communication activity that is supposed to be based on the principles of objectivity, truthfulness and accuracy to a purely propaganda activity that uses mass media to manipulate the general public.

The empirical data required for this paper have been provided through monitoring and researching of the Albanian mass media to find the most typical cases of propaganda discourse that originate from the public relations activity. Data collection was focused on media content published in two different contexts:

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Lippmann (1922) stated that propaganda has already turned into a “regular organ of popular governments.”

1. The context of the biggest crises that Albania has gone through in recent years, namely: the pandemic crisis, the crisis after the 2019 earthquake, and the economic crisis after the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

2. The context of the parliamentary elections of 2021 and the local elections of 2023, focusing on speeches of the political leaders as well as on public events or inaugurations of public works before the elections day, as they were represented in the media.

The data collection period was from January 1, 2020 to June 30, 2023. For the period from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2022, the search was carried out using keywords on the Google Advanced Search platform. While, for the period from January 1, 2023 to June 30, 2023, a daily monitoring was carried out. The search and monitoring was focused on the two national television channels, respectively Klan TV and Top Channel TV, as well as on 6 online news portals, namely lapsi.al, dosja.al, replica.al (which have a pro-opposition profile) and javanews.al, gazetatema.net and shqiptarja.com (which have a pro-government profile).

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the approach of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their well-known book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

## PR propaganda in Albanian media

When it comes to propaganda in today's Albania, we must take into account the local factors that explain its presence, such as the direct inheritance — as theory and practice — from the totalitarian communist system, the growing presence of populism, and the symptoms of authoritarianism over the last few years as well as the country's democracy being in the infant development stage.

Similar to Western countries, the most elaborate and sophisticated form of today's propaganda in Albania is the one that originates from the activity of the public relations offices. Of course, PR can be a harmless communication activity when it respects the established standards and when it uses its own channels to distribute messages to the public. But when PR is used by or appears in the mass media, it often takes the form of propaganda and turns into a big problem for society. After conquering the media, the PR transforms them from information tools into propaganda tools.

What are some of the most typical forms of PR propaganda that have managed to sneak in or appear openly in the Albanian media? By closely monitoring the media, we have found an increasing presence of content with a PR source in the Albanian media, a presence that multiplies especially in cases of electoral campaigns. Below the author is presenting some of the findings related to the forms and techniques of media propaganda that come from the PR, subjectively systematized within a classification that applies the ranking according to the degree of harm they bring to the public and to the frequency of their use.

For the identification and naming of these techniques or forms of propaganda, I was helped by the approach and classification of Sue Ellen Christian, in her book *Media Education in Everyday Life: An Analog Guide for Your Digital Life* (Christian, 2022, p. 92) translated into Albanian and published by the Albanian Media Institute, as well as the categorization made by Lee and Lee in their book *The Fine Art of Propaganda* (Lee & Lee, 1979, pp. 23–24).

Let's look in more detail at these forms or techniques of propaganda that originate from the public relations activities of Albanian political parties or state institutions and have found a place in the mass media:

## Discourse of the only choice

This kind of discourse is usually used to present a political offer as the only or the best possible choice for the country. In the last local elections in Albania that took place in June 2023, the leader of the currently ruling party and prime minister of the country Edi Rama used this discourse in his speeches very often. On the other hand, his PR offices made sure that this discourse gained as much popularity as possible and remained as long as possible in the public's memory. As can be seen in the photo below, they put the central message of this type of discourse in the title of the article prepared by the PR for the media and published by the latter without any changes. At the election meeting in the city of Fier, Rama openly declares: "We are the only ones who know how to make the change."<sup>2</sup>

Rama in Fier: We are the only ones who know how to make the change



Figure 1. An article title exemplifying the discourse of the only choice

Source: <https://replika.al/rama-fierjemi-te-vetmit-qe-dime-te-bejme-ndryshimin/> (accessed on June 09, 2023).

The word "only" in Greek language translates as *monos* (μόνος) and from this word we have the word "monism". It is clear that the above discourse used in democratic countries is in essence a clear example of a monistic discourse in the public communication. Through the so-called "ready-made tapes" that come from the PR offices or through biased media reports, this propaganda tactic has been used especially by the current party in power, to seek new mandates of power. And, unfortunately, this line of propaganda discourse has been embedded in the public space due to the significant place it has occupied in media reporting.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the text in red is the title of the article translated into English by the author of this paper.

## Inventing the enemy

As Umberto Eco wrote, political leaders during their exercise of power need an enemy, and if they don't have one, they invent it (Eco, 2012, p. 42). "Inventing the enemy" is a concept often associated with propaganda discourse. It refers to the creation or exaggeration of a perceived threat or adversary for various purposes, such as promoting a particular political agenda or justifying actions. Propagandists may invent an enemy to stoke fear and anxiety among the population. By presenting a supposed external or internal threat, they can manipulate people's emotions and make them more willing to accept the increased government control, reduced civil liberties, or military interventions.

This propaganda tactic was used broadly during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Albanian government aiming to persuade the public to accept drastic measures. During this crisis, the government put the military vehicles on the streets of the capital city to create the illusion of a war-like situation against the "invisible enemy" (As seen in the video linked below).



Figure 2. A screenshot from a video showing the military vehicles

Source: <https://lapsi.al/2020/03/20/koronavirusi-rama-nxjerr-ushtre-ne-rruge-do-mbroje-popullin-ngatradhetaret-e-vertete-video/> (accessed on April 29, 2023).

By portraying the COVID-19 as "the invisible enemy," the PR propagandists tried to foster a sense of national solidarity, aiming to gain support for the government's decisions or to justify its failures. Their campaign during the pandemic aimed, among other things, at creating the fear syndrome. This discourse is mainly used to convince the people of the disaster that will come if they don't follow the suggested course of action. (Christian, 2022, p. 92). The imposition of controversial measures to protect against the COVID-19 pandemic in Albania was preceded by an aggressive campaign to create the boogie man effect of the "invisible enemy." The objective was clear: controlling the situation and achieving goals through the use of fear.

## Transfer of blame or responsibility – "crisis" as argument

Transferring blame or responsibility onto someone or something else is a common rhetorical strategy in political and public discourse. It's a form of argumentation where individuals or organizations attempt to deflect accountability for a crisis by attributing it to external factors or other parties.

This propaganda discourse takes place from time to time in Albanian media imposed by the government's PR propagandists. They take time to transfer government's responsibility to uncontrollable external factors such as natural disasters, economic conditions, or global crises. While these factors may indeed influence a given situation, using them as a sole explanation can be a way of avoiding government's responsibility.

A clear example of this propaganda discourse was the Albanian government's campaign to justify the increase in fuel prices during 2022. The Prime Minister of the country was the first to articulate this discourse in a television appearance: "I want to emphasize very clearly that the price of oil does not depend on the government. [...] Europe has entered the war" (*Rama flet per cmimet*, 2022, March 8).

In fact, the crisis created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 had its own global impact in many fields, and among others, by increasing the fuel prices. But this could not justify the Albanian government's incompetence shown during this crisis and the total lack of response to it. Thus, while many countries took measures to relieve their citizens from the consequences of this wave of price increases, the Albanian government was satisfied with using propaganda to transfer the responsibility onto the global crisis.

While external factors can indeed contribute to a situation, they are often used to justify internal decisions and actions. Responsibility should be apportioned honestly, and these tactics should be viewed with skepticism when they appear to be used to avoid accountability.

## (Mis)Use of children

Misusing children for propaganda purposes is a highly unethical and harmful practice. Propaganda involves the dissemination of information or ideas – often with a biased or misleading intent – to influence public opinion, promote a particular agenda, or advance a political or ideological cause. When children are used in this context, it can have serious consequences for their well-being, development, and overall ethical considerations.

The use of children in propaganda is often intended to garner sympathy, support, or compliance from the public. Immediately after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army, the Albanian government decided to host the Ukrainian refugees in Albania who left the country due to the war. But this was accompanied by governmental propaganda activities to gain credit from this situation. One of these activities was the meeting of the government's representatives with the Ukrainian kids, where an exaggerated sympathy for their situation was demonstrated.

Children have also been used in many inaugurations of schools, sports facilities or playgrounds to create the illusion that the government is trying to care for their future and that it has prioritized the care for children. The entire scenario prepared in these cases by the PR offices often aims at covering the government's weaknesses in relation to meeting the conditions for children's entertainment or is staged in moments where there are denunciations in the media and people's dissatisfaction with the closures of children facilities in the residential neighbourhoods.

Children's presence in propaganda can trigger emotional reactions from viewers, often aiming at manipulating and shaping public opinion. This is a particularly insidious form of propaganda, as it preys on people's natural empathy towards children.

Using children in propaganda may also infringe on their rights, including the right to privacy, dignity, and freedom from exploitation. International conventions and laws, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, protect children's rights and welfare.





Figure 3. A photo showing politicians meeting with children

Source: <https://javanews.al/inaugurohet-kendi-i-lodrave-per-femijet-me-aftesi-ndryshe-veliaj-edhe-20-projekte/> (accessed on June 12, 2023).

It is essential to protect children from being used in this way and to promote ethical practices in media, politics, and other public spheres where the propaganda can be deployed. Laws, regulations, and ethical guidelines exist to prevent the exploitation of children, and public awareness and vigilance are also critical to ensuring their well-being and safeguarding their rights.

## Plain folks image as propaganda

The “plain folks” image is a propaganda technique that among others involves portraying political leaders as ordinary, down-to-earth, and just like the average person. It is a form of a persuasion used to make them appear relatable and in touch with the common people. The aim of this technique is to present the subject of the propaganda as someone that everyday people can relate to. This can make the subject seem more trustworthy and approachable. During this discourse “the propagandist justifies his/her idea in the name “of the people” or the “plain folks” (Lee & Lee, 1979, pp. 23–24). To establish the “plain folks” image, the use of everyday language, symbols, and imagery is employed. Political candidates use this propaganda tactic, “posing as down-to-earth folks who always wear jeans and eat at coffee shops, like the regulars” (Christian, 2022, p. 92).

During the time of the communist regime in Albania, it was promoted that the leaders of the central or local governments were always close to the people and their problems. This message was conveyed through meetings in villages, fields, or factories where the leaders appeared as simple people who lived with people’s problems and worked day and night to solve them.

This type of propaganda discourse is actually used very often during electoral campaigns. Political leaders usually downplay their own status, wealth, or power to seem more like an ordinary person. This technique relies on shared values and experiences to create a connection between the subject and the audience. It suggests that the subject shares the same values, struggles, and aspirations as the common people.



During the last parliamentary election in Albania, the PR office of the largest opposition party in the country staged a meeting of their leader Lulëzim Basha with the residents of a village, sitting with them in the middle of an alfalfa field, even though for the leader himself it was the first time to see the alfalfa plant, due to the fact that he grew up in the city of Tirana and had weak connections with village life and reality. (Fotot: *Basha në Dibër*, Gazetatema.net)

During the same elections, the PR office of the current party in power — Socialist Party of Albania — staged an electoral meeting in the centre of a small city, bringing in haystacks for the people to sit on, thus creating the impression that they were “close to earth” just as the simple people are. In this case we are in a situation when the leader does not go to the straw, but the straw comes to the leader (See the image below).



Figure 4. People sitting on the haystacks during a political meeting

Source: <https://dosja.al/foto-lajm-jo-karrige-por-dengje-kashte-si-po-akomodohen-socialistet-ne-mes-teshshit> (accessed on April 25, 2023).

This propaganda technique is a manipulative one, as it may also involve deceptive portrayals of individuals or organizations. It can also be used to divert attention away from actual policies or issues. Overall, the “plain folks” technique is a manipulative form of propaganda that plays on the desire of people to connect with individuals and entities that they perceive as being similar to themselves. It can be used in various contexts, from politics and advertising to public relations and social movements. This type of propaganda is conveyed mostly through the mass media, which publish without any changes and without any editorial notes the materials coming from PR offices of the political parties, thus turning into propaganda channels.

## Prestige transfer

“Prestige transfer” is a form of propaganda that appears when an entity or individual seeks to enhance their image or reputation by appropriating to themselves the prestige and respect people feel for someone or something else. (Christian, 2022, p. 92). This form of propaganda often relies on symbols, icons, or recognisable figures to create a positive association. For example, a company might use images of famous celebrities to suggest that their product is associated with success and excellence.

The goal of prestige transfer is to borrow credibility from the respected source or symbol. By doing so, the propagandist aims to make the audience perceive their own credibility or legitimacy as greater than it might be on its own.

Prestige transfer is used to shape public perception and manipulate how an audience views the propagandist. This can be applied to a wide range of contexts, from politics to advertising and public relations. It can also be used to counteract negative perceptions. If a person or entity has faced criticism or controversy, they may employ prestige transfer to deflect attention from their shortcomings.

By the means of researching and monitoring carried out in the framework of this paper, it can be ascertained that this technique is often utilised by the public relations offices of political parties or state institutions in Albania. It has become almost common during the election campaigns for the political parties to invite well-known artists or singers to participate, speak or sing during the rallies of these campaigns. This is done in order for the parties to benefit from the fame and prestige of these artists, enabling this prestige to be transferred to the organization that invites them.

A sensational case of the use of this propaganda technique was that of the Albanian athlete Luiza Gega who won the gold medal at the 2022 European Athletics Championships. Immediately after this victory, various institutions from the Municipality of Tirana to the Prime Minister himself rushed in to take advantage of the fame of the athlete and of this event's echos. After the sensational reception at the airport by two ministers in the presence of the cameras of most television channels, the propaganda moved to the state offices by awarding the champion athlete decorations and special prizes. One of these sensational receptions was also organized by the municipality of Tirana. The following meme that was spread widely on social media sites, ironizes exactly this propaganda strategy used in this case by the mayor of Tirana, Erjon Veliaj.



Figure 5. A meme posted on Facebook

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10228627269057708&set=pb.1564429019.-2207520000&type=3> (accessed on June 20, 2023).

Other examples of a prestige transfer in propaganda include cases where political leaders align themselves with a beloved historical figure or a company features a well-known philanthropist in its advertising to suggest a commitment to social responsibility.

The research shows that the Albanian media and public relations professionals played a significant role in facilitating prestige transfer. Also this was associated with ethical concerns, particularly in the cases where it was used to deceive or mislead the public. When individuals or entities falsely claim association with respected figures or causes, it can damage their own reputation.

## Spectacularization of achievements

The spectacularization of achievements as a form of propaganda refers to the use of grandiose or exaggerated presentations of accomplishments for the purpose of influencing public opinion or perception. This technique in Albania often is employed by the government to shape the way people perceive its successes, actions, or policies. It has involved various elements to create a spectacle or impression of greatness. The PR offices have staged the scene in a way that achievements appear more impressive than they actually are and use mass media to deliberately share information that highlights the achievement's success while withholding or minimizing compromising facts.

The goal of this propaganda technique is to create a sense of pride or admiration for the government and/or party in power, and bolster their authority or popularity. It can be used for a variety of purposes, including political agendas, or to generate support for certain policies or initiatives.

One of the most significant cases of this kind of propaganda in Albania was the organization in July 2022 of grandiose celebrations for the inauguration of a tunnel which was part of a new national road axis that was to shorten the road from the capital city to the southern city of Saranda.



Figure 6. A screenshot from the video documenting the tunnel inauguration

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFZWZYqFtrY> (accessed on June 19, 2023).

The inauguration of this tunnel was done through the organization of a massive “popular” party where dance ensembles and folk song orchestras were invited and improvised songs in which the government was thanked for this “great work.” The Prime Minister together with ministers and local leaders entered the tunnel and celebrated by singing and dancing folk dances along with the “happy people” of the area.

Although the government simply did its job, its PR offices took care to present the tunnel as a “gift from the government,” as “the realization of a long-standing dream of the people.” No argument is needed to prove that this is not only a clear form of propaganda, but also one of its most obnoxious forms.

The narrative of the media reporting on this event was solely focused on the positive aspects of the achievement while downplaying or ignoring the high cost of the work and the negative consequences or criticisms. As for the rhetoric used it was mainly persuasive lan-

guage, full of slogans, and powerful rhetoric to generate excitement and enthusiasm about the achievement. This included the use of patriotic or emotionally charged language to appeal to people's emotions.

## Playing the nation's "sympathetic father"

This kind of propaganda typically refers to a political or leadership role where an individual, oftentimes a government leader or a public figure, adopts a caring demeanour towards the citizens of a nation. This role involves displaying empathy, compassion, and a willingness to address the concerns and needs of the people. It can be seen as a way of connecting with the public on an emotional level and portraying oneself as a fatherly figure that looks out only for the well-being of the citizens.

The most significant cases of this kind of propaganda in Albania were found during the ceremonies organized on the occasion of the people entering their new houses that were left homeless after the devastating earthquake of 2019 in Albania. During the last few years, the media chronicles, which show government representatives giving the homeless citizens keys to the new houses with a compassionate look and presenting these new houses as gifts from the government, have been broadcasted very often. These types of ceremonies usually have been left to be held on the eve of electoral campaigns in order to increase credits for the party in power.



Figure 7. Government official handing over the house keys

Source: <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/me-short-publik-shperndahen-celesat-e-apartamenteve-te-zones-11-ne-lac> (accessed on June 02, 2023).

This portrayal can be an effective political or leadership strategy to build trust and garner public support. It is often used during times of crisis, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, or public health emergencies, to convey a sense of security and confidence in the leadership. However, it is important for leaders to follow through with practical actions and policies that align with their sympathetic image to maintain credibility and trust among the citizens.

The above cases of propaganda are the most sensational ones that have been encountered during our research in the media. But besides them, there are other types of less sensational propaganda techniques which are listed below:

**The “Overseas...” argument:** Justifying problems with the argument that they also exist in other countries. In such cases, the propaganda discourse often has resulted in painful consequences for Albania and Albanians. We recall here the case of the pyramid schemes in Albania and the justification of pyramid firms’ existence by the government as something that happened in other countries as well or the case of increase in the drug traffic that was labeled as something that happens “overseas” too.

**Glittering generalisations:** Vague, positive-sounding words and phrases that don’t say anything specific. Expressions such as “The general situation is good,” originating directly from the totalitarian propaganda, are not uncommon today in the political discourse conveyed in the media, of course, in the most diverse forms of expression.

**Nationalisation of discourse:** The use of nationalist arguments to criticize or legitimize various developments. In this context, as a typical case of such strategy we single out the campaign of the current opposition leader Sali Berisha against the Open Balkans project, who opposed said project with the argument that it serves the goals of Putin and Serbia, even though the main goal of the project is the opening of the Balkans in terms of the economic situation and relations with neighbouring countries.

**Euphemisms:** A kinder, gentler word for a harsher, crueler reality. Typical in this context is the presence of euphemisms in some left-wing newspapers or portals to describe the totalitarian communist system or the dictator Hoxha, as seen in the expression: “during the time of the uncle”(Albanian: *në kohën e xhaxhit*). Between the lines of such expressions, it is not difficult to see the nostalgia for the totalitarian system.

## Some conclusions

The academic research undertaken in the framework of this paper has revealed that successive global or local crises during the last 5 years have brought out an increased presence of propaganda in the Albanian mass media. The biggest part of propaganda in Albanian media originates from the public relations offices of political parties and state institutions. Public Relations (PR) propaganda in Albanian media is a complex and contentious issue. While it is important to recognize that not all the PR efforts in media are inherently negative, it is essential to draw some conclusions based on the common trends and concerns surrounding the PR propaganda in Albanian media.

Most of the propaganda techniques analysed in this article are so common as to be unnoticed. It takes knowledge of the propaganda types as well as practice in identifying propaganda to recognise them. The line between journalism and PR has become increasingly blurred, as content that is essentially promotional in nature is presented as news. PR propaganda often influences the news agenda by shaping the narrative and setting the agenda for the issues that should be discussed in the media. Albanian government institutions use PR to promote their agendas and downplay criticism. PR campaigns in Albania have diverted attention away from critical issues and towards those that are more favourable to the entity funding the PR campaign.

Albanian PR offices often work behind the scenes, and their activities are oftentimes not subject to the same level of scrutiny as traditional journalism. The lack of transparency and accountability has contributed to the spread of propaganda. But this has also eroded the public’s trust in media outlets, as they often perceive news as unreliable or biased.

While unmasking the camouflaged forms of propaganda in the Albanian media, we consider it as a dual responsibility of political and media actors. The research proves the

existence of symbiotic relationship between the populist and authoritarian tendencies of the ruling leadership on the one hand and the propaganda discourse on the other.

At the same time, the research sheds light on the compromised agendas of the mass media which, for the sake of obscure interests, leave room for propaganda on their pages or screens. Recently, with new technologies, such practices have become even more sophisticated, making it more difficult to identify and protect the general public from them. Information can be spread rapidly, and misinformation or biased content can gain traction, making it even more challenging for the public to discern fact from fiction.

Beside these, there are ethical concerns about the use of PR propaganda in the Albanian media, as it can involve manipulation, deception, and a lack of transparency. This has undermined the media's role as a watchdog and an impartial source of information.

In conclusion, PR propaganda in Albanian media is a multifaceted issue with far-reaching implications. While not all the PR efforts are inherently negative, they can pose significant challenges to the integrity of journalism, the transparency of information, and public trust in the media. It is important for both media organizations and consumers to be vigilant and critical in evaluating the sources and content of information in today's media landscape.

Organizing awareness campaigns or training courses with journalists about the harm of propaganda could be an effective way to improve things. On the other hand, an effective cure is also offered by the practice of media literacy, which makes the general public aware of the need to apply a critical filter to the media messages received on a daily basis and helps to identify and unmask the propaganda conveyed by the media.

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