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The Function of Hate Speech in the Context of Political Power: An Analysis of Politicians' Experiences

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Abstract

Hate speech is a widespread phenomenon on social media and in public spaces, often contributing to violence, discrimination, and polarization in Georgia's political discourse. In particular, Georgian politicians frequently employ hate speech. The aim of this study was to identify the circumstances and conditions that determine its use by politicians. The study is based on a qualitative research design and employs in-depth interviews. Data were collected through 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with politicians active in Georgia's political arena, including representatives of both the governing party and the opposition. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling and included individuals of different genders, ages, and levels of political experience. The interviews focused on the reasons for, functions of, and perceptions surrounding the use of hate speech in political communication. The empirical material obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of the main motives and social

contexts underlying the use of hate speech. All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical research principles; informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the data were processed anonymously. The analysis revealed that hate speech is often not a spontaneous emotional reaction but rather a deliberate strategy serving political competition, polarization, and the demonstration of power. Most politicians associate it with strength and influence, which explains its strategic use. This process is further facilitated by a polarized environment, a lack of effective legal regulations, and unethical media coverage. The gender analysis indicates that the intensity of hate speech directed at female politicians depends on prevailing social perceptions. Some male politicians explicitly deny using such language against women, which highlights differing interpretations of gender norms. The findings underscore the necessity of legal, educational, and cultural interventions aimed at reducing hate speech and ensuring healthy political discourse.

Keywords: Hate speech, Political communication, Political strategy, Polarization, Political discourse, Media roles, Political culture

Introduction

In the contemporary Georgian political arena, hate speech has become one of the main characteristics of communication. Political discourse among political actors is often filled with aggressive, discriminatory, and derogatory rhetoric, which not only manipulates public opinion but also has a significant impact on citizens' political behavior and their level of trust in political processes.

International academic research indicates that hate speech plays a significant role in contemporary political communication by deepening public polarization and degrading democratic discourse. Studies have shown that aggressive and discriminatory political rhetoric not only reduces institutional trust but also contributes to the delegitimization of political opponents and the intensification of social divisions (Benesch, 2014; Brown, 2015). Moreover, the growing influence of social media has further exacerbated the spread of hate speech, as algorithmically amplified emotional content often reinforces conflicting narratives and fuels political radicalization (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

The activation of hate speech in political communication is largely associated with the context of high political polarization, competitive confrontations, and struggles over dominant narratives in the country. In such an environment, hate speech functions as a tool for demonstrating power, achieving political legitimization, or discrediting opponents.

At the same time, political engagement among the population in Georgia is a deeply contradictory phenomenon. On one hand, there are high

levels of political participation, reflected in electoral activity, interest in political discussions, and intensive use of media. On the other hand, political communication saturated with hate speech fosters political apathy, alienation, and nihilism within society, raising the question: is this political engagement effective and informed, or is it merely a product of emotional polarization?

Theoretical Approaches to Conflict, Power, and Hate Speech

Social interaction theory (Deutsch, 1969; Coleman & Deutsch, 2015) conceptualizes conflict as the outcome of social interactions in which individuals link their own success to the outcomes of others. In competitive contexts, such perceptions reinforce hostility and aggressive forms of communication, providing a theoretical basis for the normalization of hate speech.

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals derive their social identity from group membership, and intergroup competition often results in a pronounced confrontation between “us” and “the other.” In the political sphere, this mechanism contributes to the delegitimization of opponents and the use of aggressive rhetoric as a means of strengthening group cohesion. From this perspective, hate speech can be understood as a tool that reinforces in-group identity while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of competing groups.

Framing theory (Entman, 1993) explains how political actors shape interpretations of reality through selective narratives and emphases. The use of aggressive and discriminatory rhetoric toward political opponents represents a framing strategy that portrays them as negative, threatening, or illegitimate actors. In this context, hate speech functions as a communicative instrument for maintaining power and manipulating public perceptions.

Review of Previous Research on Hate Speech and Political Power

In contemporary academic research, hate speech is conceptualized as a social and political phenomenon that goes beyond individual acts of aggression and is closely linked to power relations, ideological confrontation, and the construction of public discourse. International studies indicate that aggressive and discriminatory rhetoric used by political leaders plays a significant role in deepening social polarization and weakening democratic processes (Benesch, 2014; Brown, 2015).

Benesch (2014) conceptualizes hate speech as "dangerous speech," arguing that in specific social and political contexts it can become a catalyst for violence and the erosion of institutional trust. According to the author, aggressive rhetoric employed by political actors reinforces "us versus them" divisions, diminishes the legitimacy of opponents, and contributes to the consolidation of conflictual identities. Under such conditions, hate speech

becomes not a spontaneous emotional expression but a strategic instrument used to achieve political goals.

Brown (2015) examines hate speech within the context of democratic public discourse and emphasizes the risks associated with its normalization. The author argues that when aggressive and demeaning language is systematically used in political communication, it undermines rational debate, restricts pluralism, and erodes the foundations of democratic dialogue. In this sense, hate speech functions as a mechanism that harms not only individuals but also political culture as a whole.

The relationship between hate speech and the media is particularly highlighted in the work of Gagliardone et al. (2015), which focuses on social media as a key platform for the dissemination of political rhetoric. The authors note that social media algorithms tend to promote emotionally charged and conflict-driven content, thereby intensifying polarization and diminishing a sense of responsibility in public communication. In such an environment, the use of hate speech by politicians is often perceived as an effective communication strategy for mobilizing support.

The analysis of hate speech in online spaces is further developed by Mathew et al. (2019), who demonstrate that political contexts are among the most conducive environments for the spread of aggressive and offensive language. Their research confirms that political polarization and ideological confrontation increase the intensity of hate speech while simultaneously complicating the mechanisms for its regulation.

Although existing studies provide in-depth analyses of the structural, legal, and media-related aspects of hate speech, the subjective experiences of politicians themselves and the motivations that drive them to use hate speech remain underexplored. Research that examines hate speech from the perspective of politicians—as a tool for demonstrating power or engaging in political competition—is particularly scarce. This study addresses this research gap by analyzing the functions and perceptions of hate speech in the contemporary Georgian political arena, based on in-depth interviews with political actors.

Definition of Hate Speech

The concept of hate speech is widely discussed in academic literature, particularly within legal and communication studies. Hate speech is often defined as expression that contains incitement to violence or hostility towards specific groups of people (Gagliardone et al., 2015). Researchers examine how hate speech spreads on social media platforms and the potential consequences it produces. Their findings demonstrate that posts and comments containing hate speech increase the risk of social tension and violence (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

The study of hate speech on social media is especially relevant because platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube are widely used to disseminate political, cultural, and ideological narratives. The spread of hate speech in digital environments complicates regulation, as platforms apply differing standards for content moderation (Mathew et al., 2019). Research further confirms that hate speech circulating on social networks can provoke violence in offline contexts (Benesch, 2014).

According to studies conducted by UNESCO and the Council of Europe, hate speech is frequently used against political opponents, while social media algorithms contribute to the intensification of polarization. For example, research conducted by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) covering the period from 2018 to 2022 shows that political discourse in Georgia often contains elements of hate speech, with particularly heightened intensity during election periods (MDF Georgia, 2021).

It should be noted that hate speech may be expressed through words, symbols, images, or videos and causes harm not only to individuals but also to groups and society as a whole. The issue of hate speech gained significant attention after the Second World War, particularly in the context of the rise of Nazism and totalitarianism, which later influenced numerous international conventions and legal documents.

Some researchers and political actors primarily associate hate speech with discrimination against racial, ethnic, or minority groups. However, both globally and in Georgia, the use of hate speech in social and political discourse has become increasingly prominent, necessitating a broader understanding of the concept. This broader interpretation is reflected both in international legal instruments and in definitions proposed by scholars across various fields of the social sciences.

One of the most widely cited definitions of hate speech is provided by the Council of Europe. According to the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation No. 20 (1997), hate speech encompasses all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism, and other forms of intolerance, including nationalism, ethnocentrism, discrimination, and hostility toward ethnic and religious minorities and migrants.

Despite the diversity of definitions, several general characteristics can be identified that facilitate the recognition of hate speech. It is typically expressed through emotionally negative language, directed against a specific individual or group, aims to undermine dignity, reinforce negative stereotypes, and diminish social status, is communicated in an attacking manner, and produces harmful consequences for its targets.

Methods

The study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative research design and aimed to identify the factors influencing politicians' use of hate speech, as well as to analyze and evaluate their underlying motivations. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews to allow for an in-depth investigation of the respondents' experiences and perceptions. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with Georgian politicians active in Georgian political life and this information was subsequently analyzed. The interview guide was designed around a series of thematic blocks based on the research questions and research framework. They included, among other things, (1) descriptions and definitions of hate speech in political communications; (2) experiences with the use and/or reception of hate speech; (3) strategies at work in competitive political settings; and (4) considerations regarding a range of both social and political matters. Although the guide provided consistency through the interview process, its semi-structured approach left plenty of room for subsequent questions and probing, allowing interviewees the ability to expand upon issues for which they deemed to be particularly noteworthy. Interviews lasted between approximately 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted in a confidential setting to encourage openness. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling and included individuals of different genders, ages, and levels of political experience, representing both the governing party and the opposition. This diverse sample made it possible to explore the extent to which the reasons for and strategies behind the use of hate speech differ or overlap across political actors, and how personal experience, the political environment, and the broader social context shape this practice.

The interview data were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis. This process consisted of multiple stages. Initially, all interviews were transcribed in their full forms and subsequently reread for familiarization with the data. An initial open coding was conducted to identify common themes and patterns involving motivation, strategy, and situational dimensions of hate speech. These codes then were grouped to broader categories based on both the data and the theoretical framework. As part of the analysis effort, coding decisions were systematically documented to provide further analytic rigor; themes that appeared regularly over time were consistently revisited and further refined over the course of the analysis. An iterative process like this allowed for internalization of findings with coherence and consistency.

The methodological framework and research design were grounded in established qualitative research approaches and principles (Bryman, 2012;

Creswell & Poth, 2018), as well as in internationally recognized ethical and methodological standards for social research (Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC], 2015).

The theoretical framework of the study is based on Morton Deutsch's theory of social interaction (Deutsch, 1969; Coleman & Deutsch, 2015), which serves as the primary analytical lens for interpreting the function of hate speech in political communication. This theoretical approach makes it possible to examine how political actors conceptualize relationships in cooperative versus competitive terms and how competitive interactions are associated with the use of aggressive and discriminatory rhetoric. Accordingly, the interview questions and the analysis of the empirical data focused on how politicians describe their communicative practices within contexts of political competition, where the delegitimization of opponents and the demonstration of power are perceived as strategic resources.

Results

Interviewees noted, that the scale and content of hate speech in Georgian politics are neither random nor situational but rather intensive and purposeful. Politicians primarily associate its use with an unhealthy competitive environment and a highly polarized political field. Respondents consistently stated that hate speech has become commonplace in Georgian politics, with some rating its frequency at 7–8 on a 10-point scale, while others described the political space as almost entirely saturated with aggressive rhetoric. Several interviews highlighted that politics and hate speech have become virtually synonymous, and it is rare for politicians not to use it.

There is a lot of harsh language in everyday life. The environment is very polarized now, and in recent years, it has been less so. With the exception of a few exceptions, some politicians use aggressive hate speech ” (man, representative of the ruling party).

For them [politicians], using hate speech is a normal occurrence (woman, representative of the ruling party).

According to the interviews, politicians generally agree that, within Georgia's contemporary political context, the use of hate speech is closely associated with power and strength. Respondents note that hate speech is frequently employed to discredit political opponents and to build or mobilize public support. Participants emphasized, that political actors view hate speech as an effective strategy for demonstrating dominance, reinforcing group unity, and consolidating public support.

Hate speech is also described as a response to political competition and as a reflection of broader political culture and social norms in which verbal aggression is considered a legitimate display of power. In support of these views, respondents cited the following:

“Not a small part of society criticizes politicians in private or other conversations. They may not say it publicly, but in face-to-face conversations they say: - You attacked so hard and practically cheer on politicians (male, representative of the ruling party).

“They think that this is a manifestation of strength and that voters like a strong politician who demonstrates his power. They think that if they are not aggressive towards their opponent, then this will be considered a weakness” (female, representative of the ruling party).

“They think that it is humiliating to show one’s superiority to a person, or if they insult you and you do not repay them five times, then this can be perceived as weakness” (male, representative of the opposition party).

The results showed that, regardless of party affiliation, respondents strongly negatively assess the use of hate speech and its perception as a demonstration of power/strength, mainly negative triggers: low political culture, personal weakness, low level of education/low level of awareness about hate speech, lack of political competence and experience, outdated masculine traditions and unhealthy experiences, including the remnants of a thug/street mentality, which was formed as a result of historical and social experience and has also been transferred to the political field. Several interviews linked hate speech to a ‘street mentality’ transferred into the political arena, where insults compensate for weak arguments and personal insecurity.

"Oh, this is a bit of a street mentality being introduced into the political field. One of the main reasons. That is, one thing is, as I told you, the lack of argumentation and, so to speak, by resorting to insults, you want to make your opponent feel your superiority. The second is that this is a street rule, and in a street mentality, insults and the oppression of the opponent with these insults get in the way" (man, representative of the ruling party).

Among broader social factors, respondents highlighted a syndrome of impunity, including inadequate regulation and weak enforcement of existing norms, as well as, in some cases, incorrect media policy and the influence of social media were named. Respondents indicated, that when the use of hate speech is not followed by a clear and consistent response from the relevant institutions, a feeling is created that such a practice is acceptable and legitimate. In addition, in some cases, the spread of hate speech is facilitated by incorrect media policy, which reinforces conflicting and polarized narratives and makes aggressive rhetoric the norm in public discourse. Special attention was also paid to the impact of social media, where the rapid dissemination of information, anonymity, and algorithms encouraging emotionally charged content create a favorable environment for hate speech, reduce the sense of responsibility, and strengthen aggressive communication tendencies in public and political space.

“There is a circulation in the media and social networks and then (unfortunately) popularization, even in a negative context” (male, ruling party representative).

“There are no regulations. What is there is not implemented. No one has been punished for this reason yet. No one has been held accountable” (female, former ruling party representative) (male, ruling party representative).

“Media polarization greatly contributes to the use of hate speech. Some channels are directly working on this” (female, former ruling party representative).

Signs of gender asymmetry were identified in relation to hate speech. Respondents noted that men use hate speech more frequently than women, while its use by female politicians is perceived as rare.

At the same time, women are often targets of hate speech. However, some respondents noted that male politicians tend to be relatively restrained towards female opponents, a pattern attributed partly to the smaller numerical representation of women in politics and to prevailing social norms that shape attitudes towards them.

“Yes, it is different. Men use hate speech more often than women. I can only recall a few cases from women. Rarely from women (man, representative of the ruling party).

Perhaps, perhaps, the attitude towards women in Georgia is also evident here, and if we exclude rare exceptions, men try to be more reserved towards women. In any case, it seems to me

that they are more reserved towards female opponents (man, representative of the ruling party).

Discussion

The analysis of in-depth interviews confirms that hate speech is often perceived in political practice as a means of demonstrating power.

Respondents indicated, that its use by politicians partly serves to showcase their own strength while simultaneously highlighting the weakness of their opponents. This approach not only reinforces the personal position of the politician but also helps establish political advantage within the public sphere.

Interviewees emphasized that this perception is shaped by Georgia's political-communicative environment. The majority of politicians noted that this political environment is often characterized by destructive and unhealthy competition, where the discrediting of opponents and the deepening of polarization have become normative in political struggle. Such conditions, in their view, generate demand for sharp and emotionally charged rhetoric.

At the same time, a clear contradiction emerges: although respondents acknowledge the functional role of hate speech in political competition, they generally reject it at the declarative level, viewing it as incompatible with political ethics. This demonstrates that attitudes toward hate speech are complex and ambivalent—it is simultaneously understood as an effective political tool and as an unacceptable form of communication.

Conclusion

According to the study's findings, politicians generally hold negative attitudes towards the use of hate speech and associate its occurrence with low political culture, limited education or insufficient awareness about hate speech, lack of political competence and experience, outdated masculine traditions, and unhealthy social experiences, including remnants of criminal or street-oriented mentalities. Nevertheless, despite these negative attitudes, politicians still resort to this form of verbal aggression, as they believe that failing to respond in kind would portray them as weak.

Consistent with Deutsch's theory, respondents described an environment in which political actors assume that opponents are untrustworthy and hostile, reinforcing defensive and offensive communication strategies. This mutual distrust fosters a cycle of escalation, where aggressive rhetoric becomes normalized and increasingly justified as a necessary response to perceived threats. The emphasis on reputation, public image, and political gain further aligns with Deutsch's argument that competitive settings heighten concern for status and material or symbolic rewards.

The analysis of the study revealed that among the social factors facilitating the use of hate speech is a “syndrome of impunity”—manifested in the lack of adequate regulations and/or problems with the enforcement of existing rules. In some cases, inappropriate media policies and the influence of social media also contribute to this phenomenon.

Based on the results obtained during the research, the study identified the key factors that serve as primary triggers for the use of hate speech by politicians in contemporary Georgia:

A polarized, often hostile political environment and unhealthy competition among politicians, which fosters the perception that employing hate speech is an effective means of demonstrating one’s strength while emphasizing the opponent’s weakness.

- The association of hate speech with strength among politicians, which significantly motivates its use in political practice.
- Politicians frequently lack necessary competencies: they often exhibit low political culture, weak personal skills, limited education, insufficient knowledge about hate speech, and little experience. As a result, they focus less on highlighting their achievements and more on asserting themselves through the devaluation of others, which amplifies aggression.
- Entrenched patriarchal stereotypes and harmful behavioral patterns, including influences from criminal and street cultures.
- The “culture of impunity,” meaning that either laws are insufficient or existing regulations are not properly enforced.
- High intensity of hate speech in the media, including social media, which amplifies its visibility and perceived acceptability.

Recommendations

Based on the main findings of the study, and with the aim of reducing or minimizing the use of hate speech and its socio-political consequences, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Raise awareness about hate speech at all levels of education.
- Develop and strengthen relevant regulations and ensure effective mechanisms for their enforcement.
- Ensure the active involvement of gender specialists and minority rights advocates in the processes of preventing and addressing hate speech.
- Implement hate speech regulation in a manner that does not infringe upon freedom of expression.
- Given the multidimensional nature and high relevance of the issue, it is advisable to stimulate and promote scientific research in this area.

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