CONTRASTING THE USE OF VARYING METHODS OF CHARACTER ATTACKS IN NATIONAL POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS: A CASE STUDY OF THE USE OF IMAGES IN THE PRESIDENTIAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF GEORGIA, MOLDOVA, AND UKRAINE 2018 – 2019

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The Georgian Presidential Elections of October 28, 2018, the Moldovan Parliamentary Elections of February 24, 2019 and the Ukrainian Presidential Elections of March 31, 2019 shared similar traits in the campaign tactics that were used. As with other campaigns in the post-Soviet region, parties from all sides of the political spectrum participated in the use of various forms of character attacks as an attempt to dissuade voters from voting for their opponents. These attacks were applied via all of the traditional means of attack: Speeches, social media, public advertisements and innuendo. The relative effectiveness of these attacks remains to be quantified; however, research indicates that some elements of attack remain consistently present across all three countries' elections.

Introduction. Character assassination is both a complex process and the result of deliberate and constant efforts undertaken for the purpose of harming the reputation of, or undermining confidence in, an individual. Social groups and institutions may also aim to denigrate the reputation of individuals or institutions. The first attempts to study character assassination were performed in the political sphere, supplemented by the knowledge from the realms of social psychology and communication theory. Individuals can stop being positively recognized by their professional community, or their social environment, as a result of character assassination campaigns. That is why this concept requires study and its social and political impacts must be demonstrated. It should be done not only on behalf of a particular "victimized" individual or group, but also to show the possible global impact of varying attitudes towards specific public personas and opinion leaders, particularly in the era of globalization and

"information society" where news spreads with the speed of light and public opinion changes by the moment.

The <u>Glossary of Terms Related to Character Assassination</u>, produced by Shiraev, Samoilenko, Keohane, and Icks of the Lab for Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP), defines a "character attack" as being, "A deliberate assault on an individual's reputation. Character attacks can be verbal (e.g. speeches, insults) or non-verbal (e.g. cartoons). Contrary to *insults*, character attacks are by definition public in nature. They can be launched for a variety of reasons, including the removal of a political rival or the discrediting of a political or religious ideology. When character attacks are successful, they result in *character assassination*." [1] Likewise, the Glossary defines "character assassination" as "the deliberate destruction of an individual's reputation. Character assassination is the result of successful *character attacks*. The word can also be used to refer to the *process* of reputation-destruction." [1]

The research of Shiraev and Smart found that "three features of character attacks are important to understand. First, their intention: character attacks are by definition deliberate. Second, the public nature of the attacks: private insults do not lead to reputation damage. And third, the importance of the public perception of the attacks, which means that the truth of allegations is irrelevant." [2]

Shiraev and Icks' prior research into character assassination identified several characteristics that are often latched onto by "assassins," as the basis of their attacks, during the long history of character assassination attempts. Some of the characteristics most frequently attacked, or called into question, were the victim's: age; real or alleged mental instability, name-calling of all types, sexual deviance, supposed mixed loyalty or unfaithfulness, being too inexperienced, and moral unacceptability.

This research will apply the criteria of Shiraev and Smart to examples from each Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, of character attacks that were displayed on publicly available images, namely in brochures and billboards, by political campaigns, with the intent of negatively impacting their rivals' campaigns. By analyzing these visual advertisements, and applying the definitions of "character attack" and "character assassination," as defined by Shiraev, Samoilenko, Keohane, and Icks, we will seek to identify which of the traditional characteristics used in character attacks were used in the national elections of these three former Soviet

Republics. By identifying what similarities and differences exist between the nature of attacks in these countries' elections, we will be able to better understand what forms of attack were more popular across the countries at the center of this study.

Ukraine. Though elections in Ukraine have historically noteworthy for the ferocious nature of the attacks used by candidates against each other in visual advertising, the 2019 elections were notably calmer. The attacks that did occur in 2019, as found in billboards and other public images, were most often based on the repetition of traditional forms of character attacks. There was little in these elections that truly "set Ukraine apart," in the tone of attacks.

Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was the frequent victim of attacks that spoke to her age, her poor history in governing the country, and to her generally unpopular persona. One billboard that was found around Kiev almost immediately after she began her campaign simply stated that "2019 is the last chance for Grandma," with the slogan of her campaign, "A new course for Ukraine," written next to it. [3] Another advertisement appeared around the same time that said, "I raised the gas prices in 2008, and I will raise the prices again in 2019," again with the slogan "A new course for Ukraine." [4] Both of these advertisements, aside from using Tymoshenko's real campaign slogan and a similar format to her own campaign's real billboards, also included her campaign's website. This served as both a means of dismissing her candidacy through humor, but also calling into question her candidacy through these mockeries of her age and her record on gas prices during her earlier stint as prime minister.

Attacks during the second round of the election, in which then-President Petro Poroshenko and soon-to-be President Vladimir Zelensky participated, were used against both candidates, however the candidates kept the attacks to narrowly targeted areas and did not branch into more complicated forms of character attacks. Instead, both campaigns elected to use a strategy of presenting the opposing candidate as being a wholly unacceptable due to their personal failings, or as being a candidate who could not, or would not, run the country appropriately.

In the case of Vladimir Zelensky, ads and visual images about him frequently portrayed him as being a clown [5], or not serious, or not prepared enough, for higher office. [6] Simultaneous with the launch of these attack ads, the Poroshenko campaign released a series of ads that sought to show that Petro Poroshenko was the only candidate who could take on Russian President Vladimir Putin and that, in fact, a vote for Zelensky against Poroshenko was a vote for

Putin. [7] The contrast was clear: Vote for the older and experienced Poroshenko during this time of war, or vote for the comedian, Zelensky, which will put the entire nation at risk. These attacks were focused on the classic topics for attacks, that being the age (and experience) of Poroshenko versus the youth and inexperience of Zelensky.

As the campaign progressed, following a public dispute about whether Zelensky was a drug user, the Poroshenko campaign put a heavy focus on the rumor that Zelensky was indeed a regular consumer of cocaine. The nature of these attacks took the form of brochures [8], billboards, and banners [9]. This is in line with the classic genre of character attacks where one accuses the opponent of having engaged in some immoral behavior that disqualifies them from participating in public life.

Attacks used against Petro Poroshenko frequently played on the idea that his end as President was coming soon. Though this is not a form of character attack, it is a means of negative campaigning to persuade the public that a vote for Poroshenko was futile as his future was already decided: it was over. One billboard in Ukraine read, "Meet this spring without Poro [the nickname for Pres. Petro Poroshenko]: Give your country a chance!" Another showed the back of Poroshenko's head as his face disappeared from the canvas of the billboard and simply said, "The end." This clearly sought to cause Zelensky's rival's voters to believe that there is no hope for their cause as a means of cajoling them to no longer oppose, or fight, the inevitable outcome: A Ukraine without Petro Poroshenko.

Georgia. Georgian politics, like Ukrainian politics, frequently resort to the use of character attacks in order to persuade voters that their opponents are not acceptable and so voting for "the other" candidate is a better option. Though the 2018 elections in Georgia, however, like Ukraine, did use attack ads and character attacks, they were far tamer than earlier elections had been.

One advertisement, used against United National Movement's (UNM) Grigol Vashadze, was identical to a billboard advertisement that was then found several months later in Ukraine's elections. The billboard advertisement showed the face of the candidate "ripped" off, revealing the "true identity" of who the candidate "really was." In the case of Ukraine, the advertisement shows the standard campaign billboard of Zelensky, with his slogan "President Ze: Service of the People," however it has been altered to show that behind Zelensky's image is really Igor

Kolomoiskii, a Ukrainian oligarch who was rumored to have been financing and supporting the Zelensky candidacy. [10]

In Georgia, an identical advertisement was used: The billboard displayed the UNM party's candidate his face "torn off" of the billboard to display various oligarchs, businessmen and politicians. [11] The goal of this billboard, like that of the identical Ukrainian one, was to raise doubts as to whether the candidate could be trusted and to whom his "true" loyalties were. Raising doubts about one's loyalties and true intentions is a classic form of attack against leaders throughout the history of character attacks.

Though outside the scope of this study, it is worth mentioning that the use of identical attack ads is not particularly surprising: Petro Poroshenko and Salome Zurabishvilli used the same political consultant in their campaigns. [12] Further research on the subject of character assassination would benefit from analyzing the importance of campaign consultants in deciding what kinds, if any, attack ads will be used against a politician.

Another form of attacks used by the Georgian Dream campaign against the UNM's candidate was name-calling. Posters depicted former Georgian President Misha Saakashvilli in an unfavorable light, with slogans that said things such "No to Nationalists. No to evil," which played on the similarity, in Georgian, between the words "nationalists" and "Nazis." [13] This base name-calling is unusual for billboards being used in national political campaigns, but it falls within the realm of commonly found means of character attacks as its goal is to make the candidate unacceptable to the public.

Another advertisement, again featuring the UNM's Presidential candidate, Vashadze, showed his face with the letters "KGB" stamped across it in red ink. [14] This was done to further perpetuate the rumor that Vashadze had been connected with the Soviet-era intelligence service during his younger days. Again, this is a classic trope in trying to discredit someone as having dual-loyalties, or having not been faithful to their country – thus being unacceptable as a candidate for higher office.

Moldova. The Republic of Moldova differs from Georgia and Ukraine in that, historically, the widespread use of character attacks in its billboards and outdoor advertising during national political campaigns is not common. Though Moldova in the 2018 elections also used character attack, they took a different form than what we have seen in Georgia and Ukraine. In the 2019 Moldovan elections, the candidates sought to attack each other through: 1.

Misinformation about their opponents and, 2. Seeking to disqualify them, or their opponents, via legal technicalities, which is not a form of character attack.

In the 2018 election cycle, ACUM, a political party which prides itself as being the only party that will launch major reforms and stomp-out the nation's rampant corruption, [15] was struck by a series of disinformation attacks which alleged that ACUM had plans to release the very unpopular, former Prime Minister Vlad Filat from prison, along with his ally, businessman Veaceslav Platon. [16] Both men are serving time in jail due to financial crimes related to corruption.

This information was distributed to voters across the country via a door-to-door campaign where the information was left on people's doorstep. Disinformation, as a tactic in character attacks, is common. Likewise, the type of information portrayed in this attack, that the ACUM candidates had a hidden agenda to do something incredibly unpopular, is something that could well motivate voters to decide to vote against ACUM, or to simply not vote on election day, which would operate in the interests of ACUM's opponents.

Using brochures, to disinform voters during door-to-door campaigning, was used at least one other time in the campaign when a brochure was found in diverse parts of the country which proudly stated the close relationship that ACUM candidate Andrei Nastase had with vastly-unpopular Moldovan oligarch Vlad Plahutniuc. [17] Of course, this was false: Nastase and Plahutniuc were not allied in the elections, but the hope was that this misinformation would persuade voters that Nastase, and ACUM, were not acceptable candidates for higher office.

Though not a form of character attacks, it is worth noting that ACUM chose to seek the government's intervention into the case of an election official's face being visible in the advertisement of an opposing political party. [18] The objective of ACUM was to rid the election commission of members who would oppose ACUM's rise, but this type of "appeal to the law" is a common means seeking an "*deus ex machina*," where the god is the government, that will save them in a difficult election.

Conclusion. Character attacks are a standards part of political campaigns around the globe, and the campaigns in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are no different. In all three countries we see how political parties attempted to discredit their opponents during their most recent national elections. An important attribute of the attack ads used in all three countries is that the intent of the assassin may not have been to persuade the voter to vote for his party – but

simply to convince the voter that his opponents' political party was not an acceptable choice. That is to say that voter suppression, rather than voter persuasion, is the objective of the advertisements found in this study.

If a voter determines that the political party which he had preferred is no longer an acceptable option, his alternatives are then limited to either not voting, invalidating his ballot, or voting for another political party. Thus, strategically, in a run-off election (such as in Ukraine), a political strategist would realize that it is not necessarily most important to attract more votes, but simply to assure that your opponent's vote total decreases. Likewise, if your political party's negative rating is high, it is key to drive down the opponent's positive ratings in order to assure that people do not vote for him – thereby guaranteeing that your percent of votes, as a proportion to the total number of votes cast, is higher.

Mass media portrays the national and foreign leaders during times of warm and of stressed bilateral relations: The rise of open source information gathering, and the incredible resource of the internet, it would be possible, via content analysis, to create algorithms that search for an increase in specific types of attacks in foreign media. By establishing what kinds of attacks typically precede the improvement or worsening of relations between countries, it would be possible for diplomats and leaders to know and act on an impending change in relations. It would also allow leaders to act on this knowledge in order to be certain that they do as much as possible to improve relations between the countries.

Character assassination strategies and tools can be a part of warfare, even if those wars are informational. They involve the use of information in order to gain advantages over an opponent. Character assassination may include negative propaganda or disinformation to cripple the "rival" by manipulating public opinion, thereby undermining the credibility of information and lowering the chances of success by the opponent. Disinformation is intended to manipulate people at the "objective level" by support of discrediting information or making false conclusion both on governmental and nongovernmental levels;

Contemporary elections and political discourse on different levels demonstrated also understanding of the nature, main features and role of character assassination in internal policy and foreign politics, re-emerging of the character assassination category as object of multidisciplinary study in theory of international relations and diplomacy research. The character assacination studies have be interdisciplinary, initiated on the national, regional and internațional

levels by academics and civil society associations from the field, as for example, International Society for the Study of Character assassination (ISSCA), which is headquartered in Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A. at George Mason University and aimed to research and expertise different aspects of the subject in the context of the theory of international relations, diplomacy studies, public politicies, comunication sciences, social psychology for the increased monitoring and tracking of open-source media's within the Russian Federation and the United States in order to create algorithms that can more accurately predict the worsening of situation and propose preventive measures to be undertaken for successful development of bilateral relations between the countries.

According to the conclusions outlined are proposed to responsable national governmental structures, institutions of civil society and international research organizations the following **recommendations**:

- Enlarging the understanding of the nature, role and state to state specific of the character assassination in today politics, to innogurate national and international grants for scientific study of this political phenomenon and tool in the context of internal, foreign politics and in bilateral relations between states.

- To organize national/international scientific studies, conferences and round tables on relevant important subjects, such as: Character attacks and traditional diplomacy; The role of internet resources and mass media; International dimension of character assassination in the context of Reputation theory; Character attacks against State Image in international politics; Ethic dimension of character assassination in international relations in the context of informational technologies expansion; International Law versus character assassination in international relations in global world etc.

- To create a network of scholars, civic experts and professional politicians and carrier diplomats for elaboration of the proposals for National and Global Code on International Law versus using of character assassination as instrument in politics.

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