DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION IN ARMENIA

CONFRONTING THE POWER OF FALSE NARRATIVES

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Foreword

By Elen Aghekyan

Many forms of false narratives, including disinformation and misinformation, present a serious threat to the integrity of democratic systems around the world. In a budding democracy like Armenia, this phenomenon can be especially damaging, as it has the potential to undermine the development of institutions, processes, and attitudes that are fundamental to the country's progress.

The proliferation of false and misleading information has been a problem in Armenia's media landscape in the past. The unprecedented challenges of the year 2020, however, have exacerbated the country's vulnerabilities to disinformation. False and distorted narratives have already affected Armenians' experience of two critical events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. As Armenians deal with the consequences of these crises, confronting the power of disinformation will be key to continuing recovery, building trust between citizens and the state, and safeguarding the country's commitment to a democratic future.

In publishing this report, we have several goals in mind. First and foremost, we wish to bring attention to the severity, complexity, and shape of disinformation narratives circulating in Armenia, and to assess the risks they pose to democratic development in the country. Toward that end, this report analyzes major narratives across four topics that have circulated Armenia: democracy and civil society, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, and social and cultural issues. Each section aims to identify common sources and systems that amplify false narratives, and to recognize vulnerabilities that give these narratives footholds and the power to influence the public. Ultimately, this report is a call to the state, media, civil society, and international partners to strengthen their responses to these vulnerabilities, with particular attention toward building sustained resilience.

We also aim to support the development of a healthy information space, which we consider essential for democracy. This report does not presuppose that false narratives originate from only one part of Armenia's political spectrum or that disinformation is always aligned with a certain value system. Rather, we would like to emphasize that disinformation and misinformation pose a threat to all Armenians' collective future, and we hope to contribute to an information space where fact-based debate prevails over information manipulation and falsehoods.

Lastly, we hope to elevate the voices of Armenian analysts who are dedicated to confronting false narratives, improving the country's media environment, promoting media literacy, and much more. Their work is a testament to the power of local voices to challenge falsehoods, and we hope it guides future efforts to protect Armenia's democratic path from disinformation.

A few methodological notes are in order. In colloquial speech, several related terms are used, often interchangeably, to describe information that is misleading or false. This report analyzes a variety of narratives, including outright falsehoods, distortions, manipulated stories, and myths. Its main unit of analysis will be narratives rooted in *disinformation*, which is information deliberately created or spread with the purpose of misleading or causing harm. *Misinformation* is information spread without harmful intent, such as that spread by individuals unaware that a piece of information is false. In Armenia's complex information landscape, it is impossible to analyze the effects of disinformation without also considering the systems and behaviors—including misinformation—that amplify it. Where possible, this report identifies the political, social, normative, or other motivations that drive disinformation.

For analytical purposes, the authors of this report used recent information campaigns and narratives that best illustrate the problems of disinformation and misinformation in Armenia. Researchers were free to examine information disseminated on any platform, including social media, online news, television, and print media; sources that are both internal and external, and both state and non-state; and, given the country's language profile, in Armenian and Russian. Crucially, the narratives analyzed in this report are limited to those that target people in Armenia. For example, disinformation targeting external perceptions of Armenia or the Armenian diaspora more specifically were not considered.

Analyst Biographies

Arshaluys Barseghyan

is a journalist based in Armenia. She primarily focuses on fact-checking journalism and open source intelligence (OSINT) investigations, and on disinformation and information manipulations. The topics she covers include conflict, national politics, health, and social and gender issues. Arshaluys is also a close observer of the media environment of Armenia, and is an advocate of fact-checking and media literacy in Armenia.

Lusine Grigoryan

is a media literacy specialist with a background in journalism, media research, and media education. She works at the Media Initiatives Center (MIC), where she promotes media education and develops media literacy and fact-checking education programs, working closely with the Armenian state, schools, and nongovernmental organizations. She has co-authored and edited educational handbooks and digital games for lecturers, teachers, and students. Lusine also teaches courses on media literacy and fact checking at Brusov State University. Her articles and research papers are published on MIC's Media.am platform, as well as in other Armenian and international journals. She holds an MSc in digital anthropology from the University College London and an MA and BA in journalism from Yerevan State University.

Anna Pambukhchyan

is a media expert and a researcher from Yerevan, Armenia. She is cooperating with the European Endowment for Democracy as a country consultant for Armenia and with European Institute of Peace as a regional analyst for Eastern Europe. Previously, she worked as media monitor at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) election observation mission and as the coordinator of media monitoring projects at the Union of Informed Citizens NGO. Anna is a graduate of Central European University and College of Europe. Her professional interests include frozen conflicts in the Eastern Partnership region, and the influence of the media and internet on politics, conflicts, and national identity.

Artur Papyan

is a digital security and media consultant, and the director of the Media Diversity Institute – Armenia. Artur has worked as a journalist and a multimedia editor with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Armenian service for more than a decade. In 2018, he co-founded and worked as the CEO of the Azatutyun TV internet channel. In recent years, Artur has taught courses on online media, internet journalism, and professional ethics at several universities, including Yerevan State University.

General Assessment

by Lusine Grigoryan

Like many countries today, Armenia is grappling with challenges in its information space, including disinformation, misinformation, and related forms of false narratives. Although some forms of false information were common in broadcast media in the past, the explosion of online news and social media usership in recent years has marked a turning point and provided an avenue for the rapid deployment and amplification of disinformation. Today, state, nonstate, domestic, and external actors are actively engaging in the spread of false narratives in Armenia, often using information campaigns to gain or shape the future of political power. In 2021, this phenomenon has become a defining aspect of Armenia's information landscape, as well as a key obstacle for its present and future. As the country struggles to institutionalize the democratic ideas of the 2018 Velvet Revolution, overcome the tragic consequences of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the COVID-19 pandemic, and define a common vision for the future, a battle over dominant narratives has unfolded in civic and political life. Disinformation and related phenomena are contributing to societal divisions and—by targeting relationships among the state, citizens, and civil society—undermining the country's democratic development.

From a bird's-eye view, most false narratives in recent years coalesced around four topics: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, social and cultural issues, and civil society and democracy. It is noteworthy that several common threads—particularly those of "Western agents" and "Soros" trying to demolish the state, national security, and national traditions—can be found across false narratives concerning all of these topics.[1] The subsequent chapters of this report will analyze these narratives at length.

To understand the prominence of false narratives in Armenia today, it is important to examine the issue in the context of the country's political transformation in 2018, when a popular uprising unseated former president Serzh Sargsyan, ushered in the reformist My Step Alliance, and sparked the beginnings of democratic change. After Sargsyan's Republican Party (HHK) lost power on the national stage, key democratic indicators improved, including internet and media freedom, as well as general civil liberties and political rights. However, after this significant transition, Armenia's political and public space also showed signs of polarization.[2] As the former regime lost power, longstanding members of the elite invested resources in media as part of an attempt to discredit the new government, the Velvet Revolution, and its values, often promoting narratives that portrayed My Step and its ideas as "foreign" and "destructive" for the Armenian state. Propaganda, information manipulation, and systematic disinformation flows were substantial in 2020, as the public contended with the coronavirus pandemic and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

Although political opportunism is one root of disinformation, many aspects of the country's information landscape exacerbate and create opportunities for the dissemination of false information. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, propaganda, misinformation, and inconsistent communication by the government heavily contributed to the vulnerability of Armenia's information space, creating informational vacuums, confusion, and societal divisions that were easily exploited by disinformation agents.

The phenomenon of disinformation was so pervasive for the past three years that civil society, media experts, human rights activists, and politicians, including Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, have discussed the problem on numerous occasions. Civil society groups have issued frequent calls to confront the country's vulnerabilities to disinformation. The state has made some attempts to legislate the problem, though these efforts have been neither comprehensive nor indicative that policymakers have understood disinformation as form distinct from, for example, hate speech or defamation.

Recent studies of media literacy point to serious societal vulnerabilities to disinformation. A 2019 study by the Caucasus Research Resource Center–Armenia, for example, identified media consumption behaviors that leave Armenian audiences susceptible. When asked if they check news website links that they reach through another site like social media, 34 percent of respondents answered "no" and 24 percent answered "rarely," and only 6 percent reporting that they always check news links.[3] Also in 2019, the Union of Informed Citizens (UIC) published the results of a survey of media consumption, in which more than half of respondents reported that they do not attempt to verify the authenticity of news they hear.[4] Alarmingly, close to half of respondents also reported that they would be unlikely (33 percent) or absolutely unlikely (8 percent) to distinguish between false and true information.[5]

Sources of disinformation

Various forms of false and manipulated information, including disinformation, can be observed on virtually all platforms. However, the most egregious examples of disinformation are generally observed on platforms with the highest viewership—namely, television and social media. Social media became more important for the country's public and political life after 2018, as Prime Minister Pashinyan chose Facebook posts and livestreams as his main channel of communication with society. According to a 2019 UIC survey, Armenians considered state officials' Facebook pages mostly reliable, while concurrently listing social media among the least reliable sources of information, expressing more trust for TV and radio.[6] Much of online public discourse is concentrated on Facebook, although Twitter and Telegram use among Armenians increased during the 2020 war.[7]

Broadcast media are influential in the country. According to a 2019 study of media consumption by the Caucasus Research Resource Center–Armenia, 72 percent of Armenians watch national television channels on a daily basis, and they more frequently rely on television for information.[8] In the same study, the category of "online sources and social media" was the second most frequently used source of information (57 percent of respondents reported daily use), followed by local television (40 percent), Russian television channels (26 percent), and cable/satellite/paid television channels (25 percent).[9] Of those who consume news online, 83 percent reported accessing online news coverage through social media, while only 17 percent reported consuming information directly from the news website.[10]

A March 2021 study by Media Initiatives Center's Media.am team examined the sources and the strategies of disinformation dissemination in Armenia. The study identified media affiliated with the previous regime, ideological groups, and Russian websites as some of the main sources of disinformation in Armenia.[11] The study found that false narratives are also disseminated through social media influencers, groups, and channels; so-called "mushroom media," which are semi-entertaining and semi-informative websites

that do not create original content, but rather amplify; as well as TV and online news outlets associated with the former political regime and other political interests.[12] On social media, influential figures tied to vested political interests have been found to spread disinformation, according to local fact-checking organizations. For example, Mikayel Minasyan, former ambassador to the Vatican and son-in-law of former president Serzh Sargsyan, has frequently produced videos and commentary on social media that purport to unveil the current authorities' misdeeds. Independent fact-checking organizations have found many of his claims to be outright false, based on manipulated data, or presented out of context.[13]

A study by the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, published in June 2020, found that when covering international news, Armenian news outlets most often rely on Russian media—including state media—as sources, and will at times republish Russian media coverage.[14] The report found that this process leads to the amplification of false or distorted news coverage, and it is unclear what standards or procedures Armenian media follow in vetting Russian sources.[15] Three Russian TV channels are available to Armenians through the public multiplex Russian channels: the state VGTRK, Russia-K, and Channel-1 Russia.[16] The slots were provided without competition based on a new Armenia-Russian agreement in December 2020, as international agreements are mentioned as an exception in the new Law on Audiovisual Media.[17]

Where local outlets' relationship with established Russian disinformation sources is concerned, a "nesting doll" effect can often be observed in disinformation dissemination in Armenia: online outlets copy news from Russian websites, and then other supporting local media outlets republish the information, citing each other and amplifying the original message. For example, Media.am analysts observed this tactic in coronavirus coverage by Armenian websites News.am, Tert.am, and 168.am, all of which are associated with former political leaders or their allies.[18]

Mimicking an independent fact-checking platform is another tactic used to disseminate disinformation in Armenia. Antifake.am, a website founded by the Civil Consciousness NGO, claims to be impartial, independent, and devoted to uncovering the "lies" of the current government. However, the website regularly publishes unsupported claims or false information. Antifake.am content largely focuses on narratives of "Soros agents" and "foreign actors" in Armenia. As investigated by local and international independent fact-checking platforms, the individuals behind this initiative are closely linked to fringe reactionary groups such as VETO and Adekvad,[19] which have ties to the former regime and operate a network of outlets and social media accounts to amplify disinformation.[20] This is a particularly dangerous phenomenon: not only does using the veneer of fact-checking help these platforms disseminate falsehoods and make them appear more trustworthy, but it also undermines trust in professional, independent fact-checking initiatives.

Exacerbating factors: media ownership and political influence

The lack of transparency surrounding media ownership is a major exacerbating factor in the disinformation landscape, clouding people's ability to judge the biases and intentions that may affect an outlet's stance. Although the 2020 Law on Audiovisual Media requires broadcast outlets to provide greater reporting and financial transparency, TV ownership in Armenia remains opaque, and connections with political parties usually come to the fore through investigative journalism. There is evidence that a number of major private TV networks are owned by or connected with the HHK, the Armenian Revolutionary Party (Dashnaktsutyun), or the Prosperous Armenia Party, and that several influential media resources are associated with former president Robert Kocharyan; ownership connections are often apparent in biased coverage.[21] Prime Minister Pashinyan, a former journalist himself, retains ties to the press—including through the *Armenian Times* newspaper, where his wife serves as editor. Ownership information is

especially difficult to establish for online news outlets, which leaves consumers either unaware or susceptible to making assumptions based on their coverage.[22]

The behavior of state officials sometimes exacerbates or triggers misinformation and speculation. The state apparatus is slow and inconsistent in responding to journalists' requests, and often fails to project clear, timely messages to both journalists and the public. Moreover, officials in the past year have mismanaged communication about sensitive topics, such as the war and its consequences, which further contributes to information insecurity. In April 2021, for example, first, media outlets, and later, officials announced the return of a group of prisoners of war (POWs) from Azerbaijan, leading scores of family members to gather in anticipation as the public followed the events via livestream.[23] When the returning plane contained no POWs, authorities failed to explain, but a day later apologized for the "misinformation" after Russian peacekeepers announced that Azerbaijan had not agreed to a POW release.[24]

During and after the Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijani state propaganda was rampant on social media and Azerbaijani news sites, and some of the propaganda efforts targeted international audiences, including Armenians. Narratives coming from Azerbaijani sources were not readily absorbed into Armenian media coverage, and Armenian fact checkers rushed to investigate prominent stories to dispel rumors.[25] The effects of Azerbaijani information operations were nevertheless significant in Armenia, especially as these operations included harassment of social media users (including families of soldiers) as well as the dissemination of false information through activities like coordinated social media campaigns.[26]

Efforts to counter disinformation

Armenian civil society's main agenda in fighting disinformation includes strengthening independent media, achieving transparency in media ownership and financing, promoting self-regulation mechanisms for the media, fact-checking initiatives, and media literacy education. There are two major media platforms specializing in fact-checking: Media.am by the Media Initiatives Center, and the Fact Investigation Platform (FIP) by the Union of Informed Citizens. Another similar initiative, Infocheck.am, was established by the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and provides refutations of disinformation about the government, but does not extend an equally critical eye toward the pronouncements of state authorities.[27]

Another important initiative is the Yerevan Press Club's Media Ethics Observatory, a self-regulation body established in 2007 to unite over 60 media outlets that have signed a professional ethics code and agreed to consider the Observatory's decisions on citizens' claims against the outlets.[28] Ethics codes and self-regulation mechanisms were made mandatory by 2020 changes to the Law on Audiovisual Media for broadcasting outlets participating in licensing competitions, although broader implementation of such measures remains uncertain.[29]

While civil society advocates for self-regulation, media literacy education, and strategic planning for long-term solutions to disinformation, the state has largely made short-term or sporadic efforts. In April 2020, ostensibly to align the country's information landscape with efforts to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities limited media to reporting only on COVID-19 based on official sources, but quickly lifted the restriction amid domestic and international outcry.[30] During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, authorities limited journalists to relying on state sources for information about the war.[31] As the authors of this report will discuss, the combination of these restrictions and weak state communication helped facilitate the flow of disinformation and misinformation in Armenia.

In recent years, legislators made several attempts to confront information issues through laws, including through changes to the criminal code. A bill, introduced by My Step parliamentarian Alen Simonyan and

adopted in March 2021, would triple the maximum penalties for insult and defamation to 3 and 6 million Armenian drams (approximately $5,700 and $11,400), respectively. Domestic and international media watchdogs, including Freedom House, criticized the legislation for endangering freedom of expression and the financial viability of media, urging authorities to be wary of efforts to create a healthy information space by policing and fining speech.[32] President Armen Sarkissian did not sign the bill, forwarding it to the Constitutional Court for review.[33] Another bill, discussed in February 2021, proposed forbidding media from citing "unidentifiable social media sources," with the justification that this would counter fake social media channels and stop disinformation from being amplified by outlets.[34]

Media rights groups have been highly critical of these measures, calling the sanctions a "baton against independent media."[35] This criticism raised an important point—indiscriminate legislation like this can be a blunt instrument, and can be easily used to target legitimate free speech and journalistic activity under the auspices of confronting false information. Such measures are also fragmented and often ineffective in the rapidly changing online media landscape, and fail to differentiate among types of problematic behavior, treating problems like defamation and disinformation through the same approach.[36]

Similarly, attempts by the National Security Service (NSS) to identify people behind false information are problematic.[37] Although Prime Minister Pashinyan has stated that freedom of speech is more important than "protecting the government from fake news,"[38] on April 4, 2019, he ordered the NSS to crack down on the use of media or social media to manipulate public opinion, as a matter of national security.[39] At least three cases were observed in the past three years when the NSS detained individuals behind Facebook accounts on the grounds of inciting violence, spreading hate speech, or threatening national security.[40] It remains unclear how the NSS assesses threat or criminality in these cases, and such broad calls for policing "fake news" have the potential to infringe on the right to free expression.

Since the war, the Armenian public has been confronting the consequences of the conflict, and perceptions about the state and media have been shifting in the process. A 2021 International Republican Institute (IRI) survey reported a decline in public views of the work of state bodies after the war—favorable views of the prime minister's office declined from 72 percent in 2019 to 54 percent in 2021; and for the National Assembly, from 62 to 32 percent.[41] While the attitudes and expectations of Armenian society require further research, it is undeniable that Armenians are searching for truth and information in the aftermath of the war—about the outbreak of fighting, its conduct, the ceasefire agreement, and future implications. This search is taking place amid uncertainty about the future of the country, continuing vulnerabilities in national security and sovereignty, and the emotional trauma of war and loss. The scarcity of consistent and clear messaging from the authorities, as well as the absence of a robust strategy to combat disinformation, leave Armenians uninformed and vulnerable to the narratives that have risen to fill information vacuums.

If the country's information environment is neglected, then genuine public discourse and journalistic reporting will continue to lose ground to myths, false narratives, and targeted disinformation campaigns. Because such campaigns exploit societal divisions, undermine civil society, and question democracy itself, neglecting the problem endangers the very foundation of Armenia's democratic progress. As Armenians grapple with the aftershocks of 2020 and the difficulties of building a common national vision, the proliferation of these narratives is narrowing the space for fact-based debate and discourse about the country's challenges, opportunities, and future.

The COVID-19 Infodemic

By Artur Papyan

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on Armenia since the first cases were confirmed in March 2020.[42] Authorities attempted to respond through state of emergency measures to curb the spread of the virus, but inconsistent compliance, a struggling healthcare system, and the profound challenges of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War overwhelmed these efforts, and daily cases continued to spike throughout 2020 and early 2021. Disinformation and misinformation on social media and online news compounded the public health challenges by diminishing public trust toward crisis management, prevention measures, and prospective vaccination efforts.

In the first half of 2020, false narratives largely focused on the origins of the novel coronavirus, its spread in Armenia, and methods of treatment. Popular global narratives found their way into Armenia's information landscape, including myths about natural treatments and cures,[43] and conspiracy theories that the pandemic is tied to a global campaign to implant microchips activated by 5G towers to make individuals remotely controllable.[44] Myths that the virus spread through bananas or through the administration of COVID-19 tests also spread throughout the country.[45] Some false narratives incorporated uniquely local dimensions, including those suggesting that state recommendations for wearing face masks were connected to domestic corruption. One popular narrative claimed that state officials mandated masks to profit from their import, production, and sale. In late 2020 and 2021, false narratives shifted focus to the effects of wearing masks and protective gloves, and as global vaccine development progressed, to the effects of COVID-19 vaccines.

At times, disinformation about the pandemic aimed to paint public officials and authorities as incompetent, seemingly with political objectives. Former ruling elites, opposition groups, and civic groups often promoted incompetence narratives to oppose the current government's agenda. Officials, in turn, left space for these narratives through the public information component of the state COVID-19 response, marked by inconsistencies, weaknesses, and flawed communication strategies. In the early days of the pandemic, public officials downplayed the severity of COVID-19 and made erroneous claims about the ineffectiveness or harm of wearing non–professional grade masks.[46] Officials eased and reinstated mask regulations several times. The government's pandemic communication strategy also faltered at first. In March, as part of the emergency measures enacted to curb the spread of the virus, authorities restricted media from reporting on any public health information from non-official sources. The restrictions were short-lived; an outpouring of domestic and international criticism pressured the government to lift the measure.[47]

Several factors made disinformation and misinformation about the pandemic particularly dangerous, as false narratives crowded the information landscape and diverted focus from public health directives

and guidance. While there was an expected level of public confusion and skepticism at the beginning of the pandemic as medical professionals and state officials worldwide struggled to understand the virus and formulate responses, the lingering effects of false and distorted information exacerbated Armenia's public health situation in the long term. Some medical professionals and prominent public figures created and amplified damaging claims about the virus, leaving Armenians particularly vulnerable to the consequences of false information. These figures legitimized narratives that proved detrimental to public health.

Myths and falsehoods surrounding public health

The proliferation of medical myths in Armenia predates the COVID-19 pandemic—anti-vaccination conspiracy theories in particular intensified in 2017 after the Ministry of Health launched a vaccination program against the human papillomavirus (HPV).[48] The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global efforts to develop a vaccine reintroduced false information about vaccinations. Egregious disinformation campaigns included narratives that the COVID-19 vaccine is part of a plot to reduce Armenia's population by the World Health Organization, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), and Bill Gates (via the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation).[49] One proponent of this narrative was Nune Nersisyan, a doctor and head of the NGO Paracelius Medical Center, who also actively advised against wearing masks and claimed that masks are detrimental to health.[50] Figures like Nersisyan also supported false claims about a supposed global agenda to force Armenia's population into various vaccination programs, like Gardasil and the COVID-19 vaccine.

Another pre-pandemic cluster of false narratives about public health concerned the existence of "Western biolaboratories"—specifically, that the United States had funded biological weapons production in laboratories throughout Armenia. The narrative asserts that these labs threatened not only Armenians' health, but also their sovereignty and foreign relations, as the labs produced weapons that the West could use against Russia. These narratives originated from claims by the For the Restoration of Sovereignty NGO at a conference on Armenian sovereignty, which were published by the local branch of the Russian state-sponsored *Sputnik* outlet in 2016.[51] According to an investigation by the Union of Informed Citizens (UIC), other local outlets picked up the story, which triggered Armenia's Ministry of Health to respond that the laboratories in question actually received funding from Russia as well, and that an Armenian state agency used them for disease control and prevention.[52] UIC's investigation found that these narratives were closely connected to civic and political groups that advocate for closer Armenian-Russian relations.[53]

The pandemic gave new life to these narratives in Armenia, particularly after Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova expressed concern about the existence of "American biolabs in the territories of the former Soviet republics" in April 2020.[54] These laboratories became a frequently exploited topic in 2020, particularly on social media and through news outlets known to publish misleading content. A Facebook page called "No to American Virus-Creating Labs" attempted to mobilize Armenians around the idea that American biolabs created the novel coronavirus.[55] Members even organized a small protest in Yerevan in May,[56] during which one of the organizers claimed to have "heard these concerns from high-ranking officials in our friendly countries" in an attempt to justify these coronavirus origin stories.[57]

The landscape of false and misleading COVID-19 narratives

A distinct set of outlets, organizations, and individuals defined the COVID-19 disinformation and

misinformation landscape. Medmedia.am, led by controversial doctor Gevorg Grigoryan, was among the most prominent mouthpieces for false narratives about the virus. Grigoryan is well-known for hateful rhetoric against LGBT+ individuals, criticism of the Health Ministry, and ties to ultra-conservative groups. In 2020 and 2021, he abused the legitimacy of his position as a medical professional to support a slew of harmful stories about the pandemic, including those on prevention and treatment measures.[58] In May 2020, an investigation by openDemocracy revealed that Medmedia.am used funds from the US Embassy's Democracy Commission Small Grants program to launch the outlet.[59] Medmedia.am's most popular articles included pieces that called COVID-19 a "fake pandemic"[60] and a report that a morgue had bribed families of deceased individuals to claim that the coronavirus caused the deaths. The latter story originated with the aforementioned Nune Nersisyan.[61] Investigative journalists were unable to find evidence to support these claims.[62]

A number of medical professionals and public figures also supported conspiracy theories that denied the existence of COVID-19, claimed it was artificially invented to "solve the planet's overpopulation problem," and claimed pharmaceutical companies made up the virus to sell more products.[63] Media outlets affiliated with Armenia's previous ruling elites—such as ArmNews, Blognews, and TV5—at times linked the pandemic to George Soros and mobilized existing false narratives about the philanthropist's alleged influence in Armenia through Open Society Foundations (OSF).[64] Fringe conservative groups in Armenia ascribe to falsehoods about Soros and OSF and often feature them in campaigns to discredit public officials with backgrounds in the NGO sector. [See section on Democracy and Civil Society.]

Neurosurgeon and public figure Marina Khachatryan actively propagated unfounded theories focused on the role of technologists and 5G in the spread of the coronavirus.[65] The late Karen Vardanyan, executive director of the Union of Advanced Technology Enterprises, also amplified similar narratives; his achievements in the field of technology granted him considerable influence in public discourse. On social media, Vardanyan blended insights about technology with criticism of the incumbent authorities and, in 2020, spread false information about COVID-19.[66]

While these actors and outlets actively engaged in well-crafted information campaigns, a high-demand environment of social media users, social media pages, and news outlets extended the reach of misleading narratives and sensationalized news. Early in 2020, popular YouTube vloggers circulated ideas that COVID-19 emerged because bats and snakes are eaten in China, or that the virus had ties to Chinese laboratories.[67] Although the global medical community has speculated about and investigated the possible origins of the virus, no scientific proof had emerged at the time to support the vloggers' claims. Such speculations were also abundant in Armenian tabloids,[68] which often rush to profit from clickbait. These outlets' coverage of false narratives or distortions, which has direct financial incentives, should be viewed separately from the aforementioned public figures' disinformation campaigns, which supported specific worldviews or political agendas.

The broader context: media and political environment

The spread of disinformation and misinformation can be somewhat attributed to the novelty of the disease and the struggle of the entire world to understand it in early 2020. The evolving nature of information about COVID-19 presented new and sometimes contradictory findings on topics ranging from the effectiveness of masks to how the disease spread; this contributed to public confusion and fueled a search for answers. In addition, the weakness of strategic communication by relevant state agencies undermined the integrity of the information landscape surrounding the pandemic.

Certain aspects of the Armenian media environment contributed to the spread of false narratives about COVID-19. For example, some of the most prominent narratives that depicted COVID-19 as part of a

Western or US plot for population control or a new world order were reverberations of similar narratives circulated in Russian outlets at the time.[69] A June 2020 report by Media.am, a project run by the Media Initiatives Center, found that when covering the pandemic, three of Armenia's most popular online news sites—News.am, Tert.am, and Lurer.am—most commonly based their content on the Russian state-owned RIA Novosti and TASS agencies.[70] The report found that Armenian outlets often amplified interpretations by RIA Novosti and TASS rather than reporting based on primary sources, even when entities like the WHO published the exact same information.[71]

There are also political dimensions to the ecosystem of false information about COVID-19. One narrative category is that of incompetence: these depict the incumbent Armenian authorities as inept in fighting the pandemic or influenced by foreign actors like George Soros or the WHO. Another category is that of malice: these assert that authorities used the virus as a pretense for implanting people with microchips or other forms of control. As discussed above, the online outlets tied to Armenia's former ruling elites were often responsible for disseminating these narratives, along with public figures who blended COVID-19 speculation with criticism of the government.

A rift in Armenia's medical establishment that occurred prior to the onset of the pandemic also set the tone for some outlets' coverage of the Health Ministry. Minister of Health Arsen Torosyan had become a target of information campaigns in 2018 after dismissing Ara Minasyan from his position as executive director of the St. Gregory the Illuminator Medical Center.[72] The Health Ministry accused Minasyan—an influential doctor whose son, Mikayel Minasyan, is married to former president Serzh Sargsyan's daughter—of embezzling government funds through the hospital. Authorities opened a criminal investigation, but Ara Minasyan went into hiding.[73] His son Mikayel, who wielded considerable political and economic influence in Armenia until the Velvet Revolution, is widely suspected to wield influence over several popular media outlets, including politik.am, the *Iravunk* newspaper, and Armenia TV.[74] In 2018, these outlets led the charge in disseminating a multitude of false or manipulated narratives about the health minister.[75] This context is essential to understanding both the coverage and perceptions of the Health Ministry amid the pandemic, particularly in the context of politically aligned media.

Vulnerabilities to disinformation: current impact and future ramifications

Before 2020, vaccine skeptics, conspiracy theorists, and critics of public health officials had already created an environment of informational fog in which falsehoods about COVID-19 could easily take root and public trust in health agencies could be eroded. Some trusted actors, including doctors and public figures, exacerbated the environment of distrust toward public health institutions by disseminating false information about the pandemic. A July 2020 study by the Caucasus Research Resource Center–Armenia found that at least 9 percent of the population believes that the main reason COVID-19 exists in Armenia is "political/economic competition by world powers" and 6 percent believes that "the virus is spread by foreigners."[76] Due to high rates of social media use among Armenians, social media and particularly Facebook users were particularly vulnerable to false narratives about the pandemic.[77] Many creators and amplifiers of false information analyzed in this section, including doctors and civic leaders, actively used Facebook to publish falsehoods and speculate on the pandemic—individuals, groups, and pages amplified content published by sites like Medmedia.am. People with low levels of media or medical literacy can be especially susceptible to false stories about COVID-19, and these groups should be prioritized in efforts to better inform the population.

Throughout 2020 and in the early months of 2021, false narratives targeted virtually every aspect of the pandemic, from the very existence of the virus to prevention measures. By both generating confusion

and encouraging skepticism, these narratives undermined public officials' ability to secure the Armenian public's cooperation in fighting against the novel coronavirus. When the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began in September 2020, only two months after the first peak of COVID-19 pandemic in June–July 2020, the public health situation became dire. The 44-day war consumed not just the attention and resources of the state, but also the capacity of the country's healthcare system. Public attention shifted to mobilizing support for the defense, caring for displaced individuals, advocating for a solution, and burying loved ones who were killed in the war; the pandemic became a secondary concern, and many Armenians stopped wearing masks and distancing in public. In the first month of the war, the number of daily cases in Armenia increased eightfold, and the war contributed to what some medical professionals described as a humanitarian catastrophe.[78] On September 27, the first day of fighting, Armenia had reported a total of just over 49,000 cases. By the end of the war, cases surpassed 100,000.[79]

The pandemic remains a critical public health concern in Armenia, as a third wave has overwhelmed the healthcare system since early spring 2021.[80] Securing public cooperation will be critical for public officials' ability to mount a robust response and to build Armenia's resilience to public health crises in the future. The cluster of narratives that encouraged skepticism of both the coronavirus and prevention form an obstacle to this process, and to Armenians' relationship with their public health system more broadly. Further, several false and misleading narratives have focused on vaccines. At the time of writing, the vaccine rollout in Armenia is notably delayed, lagging behind both of its South Caucasus neighbors.[81] Large-scale vaccination remains one of the core ways to address the pandemic on a national and global level. As vaccination is voluntary in Armenia, this step in the country's COVID-19 response could be seriously undermined by months of anti-vaccination narratives. That members of the medical profession promoted such perspectives is particularly alarming, as the credibility of these actors could instill confusion and discourage Armenians from choosing to get the vaccine.

More broadly, the consequences of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation extend to the relationship between citizens and their state. The pandemic placed unprecedented pressures on the state, which has struggled to protect Armenians' health, implement prevention measures, inform the public, mitigate economic harm, and in the latter months of 2020, ensure national and public security amid a devastating war. By undermining prevention responses and generating skepticism of the government's ability to respond to COVID-19, false narratives have targeted the foundation of Armenians' trust in public health bodies and the integrity of crisis management systems. These challenges have also jeopardized Armenia's fragile democratic gains since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, in a year when authorities were called to balance public health, security, and civil liberties. In the long term, the state's ability to safeguard trust and legitimacy in the eyes of the Armenian public will be key to not only confronting the public health crisis but also realigning the country's recovery with the democratic promises of recent years.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

By Anonymous

On September 27, 2020, the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan, with Turkish support, launched a large-scale military offensive against the de facto independent Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (called Artsakh in Armenian)—an area inhabited and governed by ethnic Armenians and supported by the Republic of Armenia. The war lasted 44 days and resulted in thousands of casualties and transfer in control of much of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani forces. On November 10, 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin brokered a ceasefire statement between Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev that included terms for territorial transfers, returns of displaced people, and the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force, among other things.[82] The status of Nagorno-Karabakh remains uncertain; the Armenian government and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group consider the conflict unresolved.[83]

For Armenians, the Nagorno-Karabakh region has deep cultural significance and is an important part of modern national history. In the 1920s, as the South Caucasus became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Soviet authorities established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast— inhabited by a majority Armenian population—within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan.[84] In the late 1980s, leadership in Soviet Azerbaijan adopted stricter policies toward Nagorno-Karabakh as central Soviet control loosened, and Nagorno-Karabakh authorities and ethnic Armenians began a movement to formally join Armenia. A peaceful movement for secession was met with pogroms against Armenians and communal violence, and the conflict broadened into the First Nagorno-Karabakh War from 1988 to 1994.[85] An Armenian military victory and a 1994 ceasefire established Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent territories, but the broader conflict became a key policy issue for the independent Armenian state, which took on responsibility as the guarantor of security for Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the years since, the conflict has become an extremely sensitive issue for Armenian society. The violence and loss of life, but also the military victory, came to define the years of Armenia's transition from a Soviet Republic to an independent state. The situation became entrenched over the following decades, with periods of violence across the line of contact with Azerbaijan and continued attempts at mediation by the OSCE Minsk Group.

Given the political and cultural sensitivity of the issue, the conflict has periodically been the subject of speculation and misinformation in Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, and beyond. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was the subject of coordinated disinformation and of speculation, as people struggled to make sense of a sudden outbreak of violence and limited sources of information. The main

objective of this section is to analyze three false narratives that gripped public attention in Armenia during and after the war.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the phenomenon of Artsrun Hovhannisyan

During the war in 2020, Lieutenant Colonel Artsrun Hovhannisyan became one of the most visible and trusted figures for Armenian society. A well-known figure before the war, Hovhannisyan had a career spanning appointments in the President's Office, Ministry of Defense, and academia. He became a primary public representative of the Ministry of Defense during both the July 2020 escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh and the war. Starting in late September 2020, Hovhannisyan gave regular public briefings about the war at the Armenian Unified Information Center, which was established as a state non-commercial organization within the Office of the Prime Minister to "provide reliable and urgent information to the public in emergency situations."[86]

The Armenian public grew to expect daily updates about the war from Hovhannisyan, who quickly became a primary and trusted source; his reports became more important as dangerous conditions and restrictions on wartime reporting prevented journalists from reaching most of the front line. From the early days of the war, Hovhannisyan and other officials adopted the rallying cry and hashtag #haghteluenq ("we are going to win" in Armenian), and it became a staple in public discourse about the war both on social media and offline. For nearly a month of war, Armenian society placed a great deal of trust in Ministry of Defense reporting, which usually claimed that Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh troops were resisting, retaining control of many territories, preparing counter-offensives, and conducting "tactical retreats"—a term Hovhannisyan once used to explain the loss of some territories in the southern part of the region.[87]

Some cracks in public confidence began to show in late October, as more international media sources reported on major territorial losses by Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian forces.[88] Speaking from the Unified Information Center on October 24, Hovhannisyan presented an interactive map that showed Azerbaijani forces in key areas in the south of the war zone.[89] The news shocked the Armenian public, but since it aligned with the growing body of international coverage, the presentation temporarily restored public trust in the reports of the Unified Information Center. Public trust in official sources seemed to hold steady until November 10, when Prime Minister Pashinyan announced that he, Putin, and Aliyev had signed a ceasefire announcement to stop the war, with Armenia agreeing to withdraw forces from Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan gaining control of significant territory, among other conditions.[90] The news shocked Armenians and sparked a tense night of civil unrest and violence.[91]

After the ceasefire announcement, as a fuller picture of the war emerged, the public began to suspect that the state information system had misled them. The situation became especially dire as officials began updating casualty tallies, which rose much higher than expected.[92] Amid this fallout, Hovhannisyan—the public face of the state's information system—became a target of derision, distrust, and accusations that he was spreading false information.[93] Initially, he claimed to be unaware of the developments on the frontline and reminded critics that he was communicating the official position of the Defense Ministry.[94] His rhetoric shifted in a January 2021 interview with Sputnik Armenia, in which he spoke more openly about the role of propaganda during the war. While justifying the need for propaganda, he also spoke about the difficulties in balancing communications that projected strength while remaining sensitive to the difficulties of the war.[95]

Months after the war, the lines between propaganda and disinformation have remained blurred, partly due to lingering uncertainty about events on the ground. Several cases after the war suggest

that government officials did occasionally mislead the public. For example, on December 12, 2020, rumors began circulating on domestic outlets and social media that Azerbaijani forces had captured two strategically located villages, Hin Tagher and Khtsaberd, in violation of the ceasefire.[96] Pro-government voices and representatives of PM Pashinyan's My Step Alliance quickly labeled the report "fake news" and accused those who were spreading this information of conducting "media terror."[97] However, the reports were confirmed the next day.[98] The public was alarmed to learn that not only did Azerbaijani forces capture the villages, but that they also took dozens of Armenian servicemen hostage.[99]

In understanding the state's wartime communication strategy, it is important to differentiate between the domestic and international layers of information warfare and information security. During the war, the Unified Information Center and Hovhannisyan were communicating the official Armenian position to Armenian society on one level, and to the international community on another. However, the dynamic of trust and power between the Armenian public and the state made this relationship uniquely vulnerable, particularly as wartime restrictions on media coverage and dangerous conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh limited the availability of independent journalism. In this regard, an important question is why the Armenian government misled its citizens.

The question of officials' intent requires robust independent research, but a few arguments have already gained traction in public discourse. First, there are suggestions that the government withheld information about mounting losses and casualties to avoid triggering social unrest and panic. Second, some have suggested that reporting on the dire situation could have led conservative opposition forces in Armenia to initiate unrest or attempt to wrest power. Third, there is conjecture that a more truthful assessment of the situation could have negatively affected mobilization and volunteerism.

Whatever the reasons, it is imperative that the state review and explain its conduct. Doing so would not only clarify public confusion over what transpired during the war, but also restore the integrity and credibility of state communication functions. The conduct of officials during and after the war has hugely impacted public confidence toward Armenian state institutions. This fractured trust has facilitated speculation while leaving Armenians especially vulnerable to targeted disinformation from both domestic and international actors. As the future of Nagorno-Karabakh remains both a core policy question and a highly sensitive cultural issue, creating effective communication avenues between the Armenian state and its citizens will be crucial to national security in the future. Moreover, as Armenians shape their country's future in the coming years, information manipulation about the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War will be a powerful political tool with the potential to sow social division and turmoil.

The narratives of premeditated defeat and "sold lands"

On March 4, 2021, former president Robert Kocharyan held a press conference for representatives of Russian media and claimed that on the fourth day of the war, the General Staff had informed Prime Minister Pashinyan that the war was going to be lost. He added that "this very much looks like a pre-planned defeat. The relevant bodies should investigate the motivation."[100] Kocharyan made this statement almost four months after the war ended, but he was repeating a well-known narrative.

The complex claim that Armenia's defeat was somehow predetermined requires further research and disclosure by state agencies. While little proof supports this narrative, it has already become the subject of wide conjecture and misrepresentation in Armenian society. Moreover, conservative opposition forces have leveraged this narrative, bolstered by a series of related but unsupported claims, to support information campaigns against the current government. The opposition forces in question—namely the 17+ Platform or the Homeland Salvation Movement—have used this narrative of premeditated defeat to demand the resignation of the current government.[101] Manipulating this narrative can have major

ramifications on Armenia's power structure and citizen-state relations in the future.

This narrative originated before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, and dates back to the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution of 2018, when a popular movement ushered My Step and Pashinyan into parliamentary power. For instance, in December 2018, Zaruhi Postanjyan—a former National Assembly member and head of the non-parliamentary Yerkir Tsirani party—announced to local media that Pashinyan had begun processes for ceding parts of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Postanjyan called him a traitor and offered no proof to support the claim.[102] Major political parties and outlets amplified unfounded discourse like this in 2019, and it remained a topic of speculation.[103]

During the war, this narrative found new momentum and a new angle; local media reported on rumors that Armenian authorities "sold" the lands of Nagorno-Karabakh, ostensibly to the Azerbaijani state.[104] The origin of these rumors remains unclear, but the claim developed into a full-fledged disinformation narrative after the November ceasefire announcement. The broader narrative of premeditated defeat came to absorb uncertainties about Armenian troops' defeat in cities of Hadrut and Shushi, as well as rumors about the use of the Iskander mobile short-range ballistic missile system and relations between the governments of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

After the ceasefire announcement, the public engaged in an intense debate about the withdrawal of Armenian troops from Shushi. Many local media sources reported that Armenian forces had controlled Shushi until the November 10 ceasefire. But on November 8, Aliyev had announced that the Azerbaijani army took Shushi, and received congratulations from Turkish President Erdogan.[105] However, authorities in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh maintained that they controlled Shushi until immediately before the ceasefire announcement.[106] In a February 2021 interview, former Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan declared that Shushi had been "compromised" and that information about the city's defense remained unclear, though he added that it may not have been compromised intentionally.[107]

Uncertainty about the use of the Russian-produced Iskander mobile short-range ballistic missile system also became part of this narrative. The Iskander is among the most powerful weapons in Armenia's arsenal, and the public was puzzled that Armenian forces had not deployed the system against Azerbaijan's key defense infrastructure. Amid a dearth of official information, a cluster of narratives began to circulate. Some suggested that lack of Iskander use was evidence of deliberate defeat.[108] Others asserted that Armenian forces had fired Iskander at Shushi after the city was captured by Azerbaijan.[109] The debate was revived after Pashinyan claimed that Iskander had been used, but that the missiles either did not explode or were faulty.[110] Russian officials refuted his statement, and Pashinyan's office later claimed that the prime minister had received false information from the General Staff.[111] Amid the confusion, rumors began to circulate that the Russian government—now the region's leading power broker—had not allowed Armenian forces to use the system. The public further questioned the Armenian government's agency during the war.[112]

Months after the war, Armenians remain uncertain about if and how Iskander missiles were used, which has created space conducive to post-truth politics—where emotional or ideological appeals supersede facts in influence and prominence. There is also informational fog surrounding the narratives of deliberate defeat and "sold lands." These stories have grown by absorbing new strands of false or manipulated information, like a false report that President of Nagorno-Karabakh Arayik Harutyunyan had sold his properties in preparation for the war.[113] Another strand of this narrative cluster is that Armenian authorities intentionally compromised Shushi and Hadrut in Nagorno-Karabakh to facilitate the opening of Armenia's border with Turkey and to ostensibly advance economic development at the expense of national security.[114]

These stories spanned both sides of the political divide, implicating both the current government and

the former ruling party, the Republican Party (HHK). In December 2020, an audio recording of a 2016 conversation between Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and then-president of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan leaked. In the recording, Lukashenka suggests to Sargsyan that Aliyev would be willing to pay $5 billion in exchange for Armenian forces' retreat from territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh, which Armenia had held as a buffer zone since the 1994 ceasefire. Sargsyan can be heard replying that he would be willing to pay $6 billion if Aliyev would give up his claim to those regions.[115] Neither Lukashenka nor Sargsyan denied the authenticity of the audio, which had a powerful effect on public discourse in Armenia. First, the recording legitimized the possibility that disputed lands could actually be bought and sold. Second, it reflected positively upon the former regime, as Sargsyan could be heard rejecting Aliyev's alleged offer. Finally, the recording fueled the public to speculate that the My Step government may have accepted a similar offer,[116] and rumors ensued that the former authorities had accepted the deal while Pashinyan had inherited the consequences.[117] A diverse group of Armenians supported these narratives, including private citizens, families of soldiers, veterans, public figures, and pundits. Social media posts and online news outlets amplified the narrative and facilitated widespread distribution.

Nagorno-Karabakh remains a highly sensitive issue for Armenian society and a central national policy question. Actors can manipulate attitudes on Nagorno-Karabakh to legitimize, promote, or discredit political actors, and these narratives show this process already underway. In the absence of strong state concerted efforts to address public confusion, dispel false narratives, and provide the Armenian public with clear answers about the war, the chaos of the information landscape leaves Armenians—both in Armenia and in the diaspora—vulnerable to manipulation through disinformation.

Myths about the role of external players

On September 29, 2020, in an interview with the Russian television channel Russia-1, Azerbaijani President Aliyev claimed that Pashinyan is influenced by OSF founder George Soros and connected an alleged "Soros regime" in Armenia to the Velvet Revolution.[118] On October 15, 2020, Pashinyan and Aliyev participated in parallel interviews with Dmitry Kiselyov, a controversial Russian media figure with close ties to the Kremlin. In the interview, Aliyev called Pashinyan a "product of Soros" and tied the disintegration of the Soviet Union to events in Nagorno-Karabakh.[119] Two days later, Aliyev spoke with the Turkish Haber outlet and again spoke about Pashinyan's alleged ties to Soros. This time, he also explicitly argued that Pashinyan is an anti-Russian politician.[120]

Through these declarations, Aliyev tapped into the world of myths about Soros that are common and potent across the region, as well as sensitivities around Russian-Armenian relations. Aliyev had appealed to a disinformation narrative that state-controlled Russian media have supported for years.[121] OSF has been banned in Russia since 2015 on the grounds that the foundation threatened state security.[122] Russian state-sponsored news outlets have claimed that Soros actively meddles in policymaking in different countries, and in the instigation of regime change. RIA Novosti, for example, has presented a series of unsupported arguments about Soros's role in the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014) in Ukraine.[123] In Russia, the result has been a heightened sensitivity to the prospect of colored revolutions; this sensitivity has influenced regional discourse about Armenia's Velvet Revolution and its implications for Russian-Armenian relations.

Russia is Armenia's main regional partner, and a source of critical security support. By characterizing Armenia's leadership as anti-Russian or influenced by Soros, Aliyev may have intended to stir regional relations, but he also tapped into a major domestic debate in Armenia. From the first days of the Velvet Revolution, the discourse around Soros, influence of foreign donors, and Russian-Armenian relations has been a powerful weapon of national politics. For instance, in 2019, former head of the National

Security Service (NSS) David Shahnazaryan argued that organizations supported by OSF are working in Nagorno-Karabakh, and that the goal of the My Step government is "to weaken the Army and Karabakh by exporting the so-called revolution."[124] A number of public officials have repeated these narratives in interviews and public speeches, and the stories have gained traction through re-postings by local outlets and on social media.[125]

The accumulation of these narratives in the public conscience has already had dangerous consequences. After the ceasefire announcement, on November 10, the local offices of OSF and Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty were both attacked.[126] Political groups seeking to gain power after the war have continued employing false information about OSF, foreign donors, and their alleged political goals. In January 2021, HHK spokesperson Eduard Sharmazanov claimed that "the Soros 'fifth column' has actively joined the anti-Russian propaganda campaign" in Armenia.[127] In March 2021, former president Kocharyan accused Soros of influencing the policymaking processes in Armenia and opposing the national interests of the country.[128]

There are likely two objectives for actors who aim to connect My Step and Pashinyan to the web of Soros conspiracies. The first is a socio-political aim, as many narratives suggest that there is a distinct OSF agenda that promotes values unacceptable to Armenian society. The second objective, rooted in Armenia-Russian relations, targets the geopolitical fragility of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It draws a direct connection between Armenia's loss in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the current government's alleged pro-Soros and (in this narrative) anti-Russian stance, and suggests that these attitudes cost Armenia the full support of the Russian government. These narratives thus have both domestic and external dimensions, and both dimensions have fueled confusion and discord among the Armenian public.

Conclusions

In the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, disinformation and post-truth politics have gone hand-in-hand and have contributed to an environment in which facts have lost power to emotional or belief-based appeals. The scarcity of trusted information, along with the incredibly sensitive and existential nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to Armenians, has created the ideal breeding grounds for disinformation. Manipulation of information about the war has become a powerful weapon in national politics, and individuals from the current governmental, national political elites, and conservative opposition have battled to control the dominant narrative. The Armenian public has borne the brunt of this process as it struggles to understand the war, its aftermath, and the implications for the country's future amid a scarcity of reliable information.

Recent polling data shows a dip in attitudes toward state offices, although Pashinyan has retained notable public support. According to a February 2021 poll by Gallup International, 38.8 percent of respondents said that Pashinyan should remain in his post, while 43.6 percent said he should step down.[129] Gallup's July 2020 poll reported that 85 percent of respondents approve of Pashinyan's activities.[130] In March 2021, the International Republican Institute (IRI) published its polling results: 54 percent of respondents approved of the Prime Minister's Office (29 percent answered "very favorable," and 26 percent "somewhat favorable"), in comparison to 72 percent in IRI's 2019 poll.[131] In favorability ratings, the Prime Minister's Office lags behind the army (50 percent rated "very favorable") and Human Rights Defender's Office (30 percent rated "very favorable").[132]

As Armenians continue to deal with the consequences of the war, endure a volatile border situation, and prepare for the next elections, the cracks in the country's social contract are serious and vulnerable to exploitation. Addressing the informational chaos surrounding the war is an important step toward

restoring trust, transparency, and integrity in state-citizen relations. This is especially critical given the complexities of the country's recovery not just from war but also a global pandemic, the implications for the economy, and the fragility of national security. Building resilience against disinformation will be critical to the country's path toward recovery and a shared vision for the future.

Democracy and Civil Society

By Anna Pambukhchyan

This section of the report aims to analyze the main disinformation narratives about Armenian civil society that have circulated since 2018, and the impact of these narratives on democracy in Armenia. Although the analysis contains certain references to older disinformation narratives, it is mainly focused on disinformation targeting civil society since May 2018. In particular, the report focuses on two main narratives that aim to present formal civil society organizations as foreign-sponsored or foreign-supported. The first aims to damage the public's perception of civil society by presenting it as a "Western agent," generating falsehoods about civic organizations' attitudes toward Armenian-Russian relations, spreading narratives of alleged covert activities within the Armenian state. The second narrative claims that civic activism weakens Armenia, and particularly that civic behaviors were connected to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and Armenia's military defeat.

Methodological notes

This section uses qualitative analysis methods to examine the disinformation narratives disseminated against civil society and democracy in Armenia, using content on Facebook and popular online media outlets. Facebook plays a significant role as a public discussion platform in Armenia, and it became a major platform for disseminating news and political messages during and following the Velvet Revolution.[133] The analysis uses statements by well-known public figures and explores content from several media outlets that are widely perceived as the forerunners of anti-civil society and anti-democracy campaigns. The author chose the given media outlets based on conversations with fact-checking organizations and media professionals. Further, the section uses reports and articles published by independent civil society organizations (CSOs) and fact-checkers.

This section uses the term "civil society" to denominate formal non-governmental organizations (NGOs), independent media outlets, registered and unregistered civic initiatives, and civic activists. In the case of Armenia, independent media and civil society are often intertwined concepts with mixed roles. A large number of CSOs perform the functions of the media, and vice versa. These organizations, including media outlets, are often (if not exclusively) dependent on foreign funding due to the small advertisement market for media outlets and the absence of transparent government funding for CSOs.[134] Civil society members often act as civic activists or members of both registered and unregistered civic initiatives.

The role of civil society in Armenia

Armenian civil society and independent media have played a significant role in democratizing and strengthening democratic values in the country prior to 2018 Velvet Revolution. As a state with weak opposition parties and low civic education, Armenia has lacked the political institutions and dynamics necessary for a working system of checks and balances. Furthermore, before the 2018 Velvet Revolution, many opposition parties—including those with significant presence in the National Assembly—have been either under the control of or in strong alliances with the Republican Party (HHK), which dominated the National Assembly for two decades. As a result, parliamentary opposition parties had a history of unanimously voting in favor of legislative initiatives presented by the former ruling party. Furthermore, opposition parties would rarely differentiate their value systems and ideologies from those of the ruling party, leading to a vacuum of robust debate on politics in Armenia.

In the absence of strong democratic institutions and feasible opposition parties, civil society has performed numerous key roles by providing government oversight, opposition against certain legislative initiatives, and promotion of public debate based on democratic values and ideas. As a result, civil society has been effective in holding the state accountable. It has organized citizen opposition to controversial government initiatives—the 2012 Mashtots Park protests against misuse of public space and the 2015 Electric Yerevan protests against increased electricity tariffs are two examples. During the 2018 Velvet Revolution, civil society played a unique organizational role once again, with activists using lessons learned during previous protest cycles as well as experience from leading civic initiatives.[135] This active role in bringing about change on a national scale—change that uprooted vested political interests in Armenia—triggered disinformation and hate speech against civil society after May 2018. It targeted public trust towards civil society and marginalized organizations and activists in public discourse on issues of national importance, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and national security.

Disinformation against civil society in Armenia

Disinformation against democratic values and civil society has existed in Armenia prior to the political shift of 2018. However, it used to have a periodic nature, activated in certain contexts and in response to triggers like legislative proposals or information campaigns initiated by civil society organizations. These triggers often included human rights campaigns that reactionary voices and disinformation agents framed as contradictory to Armenian national values or family values, like statements and campaigns for legislative protection against domestic violence or for the rights of women and LGBT+ people.

The Velvet Revolution expanded the nature of false narratives in Armenia. On one hand, false information in a human rights context gained more traction, including during discussions of the Istanbul and Lanzarote Conventions by public officials. [See section on Social and Cultural Issues.] At the same time, once-rare narratives that targeted civil society and democracy increased in both scale and frequency. If civil society had been sporadically named a foreign agent or a threat to national security by a few public actors or politicians in the past, then after 2018, these narratives became a running theme frequently discussed by the broader public.

The "Soros agents" framing—already observed in Eastern European and South Caucasus countries including Hungary, Czech Republic, Ukraine and Georgia—has become a common marker of false narratives. After the 2018 mass demonstrations, conspiracy theories about civil society flooded the Armenian information landscape and painted CSOs as agents of Western powers and in particular George Soros, the billionaire investor and philanthropist. These conspiracy theories aligned with a wider set of myths and disinformation campaigns that have framed Soros as a force behind revolutions in the region—one narrative even claimed that he tried to stage a revolution in the United States.[136] At the

same time, these falsehoods have uniquely local dimensions. Amid the recent escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a March 2020 op-ed by Soros encouraging European states to support Turkey against Russia in Syria was widely circulated in Armenia as evidence of his pro-Turkish and pro-Azerbaijani positions.[137] Meanwhile, Soros's critical remarks about the Aliyev regime have gone largely ignored.[138]

The umbrella narrative of "foreign agents" has unified most disinformation campaigns about civil society, and has tried to present civil society as an anti-state element that serves the interests of other countries. After the outbreak of war in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020, disinformation campaigns twisted this narrative to present civil society as the "agent of the enemy" (Azerbaijan or Turkey) that aims to undermine the foundations of Armenian statehood—including the army and church—in favor of globalism and liberalism.[139] Since September 2020, civil society has been presented as an actor that aims to destroy Russian-Armenian relations, including those in the military field, via "agents" working within the state.

The "foreign agents" narrative

There has long been public debate about the role of civil society in Armenia and the role of international donors in supporting the country's civic sector. These are legitimate questions for Armenian society to debate. However, this debate has become weaponized in recent years, and the proliferation of disinformation narratives has curtailed fact-based, healthy discourse. Civic initiatives, politicians, and public figures have used their stances in this debate—particularly about the role of Western funding—to signal value systems and political positions. In the resulting polarized information ecosystem, civic expression is too quickly dismissed as foreign or threatening, and activists have become targets of hate speech or false narratives because of their perceived position in the debate.

The rise of the term *sorosakan* or *sorosakanner* (loosely translating to "Sorosian" or "Soros people") helps explain the evolution of this problem. *Sorosakan* gained traction in Armenia in 2017 as an offensive term for civil society members who had allegedly anti-Armenian intentions. Public Armenian-language Facebook posts from 2015 and 2016 that refer to Soros are predominantly news articles shared by media outlets that often consist of translations of statements by Soros himself. Very few posts mentioned the grantees of Open Society Foundations (OSF) Armenia. Public posts with the term *sorosakan* do not appear common before 2018, but both the name George Soros and the term *sorosakan* gained momentum in 2018.[140] The majority of these posts appear to be disinformation or misinformation about civil society actors and government officials who formerly worked in the nonprofit field, or are attempts to investigate and disprove false narratives. From late spring to early summer 2018, pages and profiles solely or predominantly devoted to the dissemination of false information about *sorosakan* activities in Armenia started to appear.[141] The term *sorosakan* has also entered the vernacular and is frequently mentioned in general public discourse.[142] These conspiracy theories have gained so much momentum that they were even addressed on numerous occasions by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who has mentioned that these statements are offensive for any Armenian citizen[143] and explained that they diminish the role of Armenians as the owners of their revolution.[144]

In 2018, the term *sorosakan* also began regularly appearing in online news coverage, including sites that often amplify disinformation narratives. The popular outlet 168.am, for example, first used the term in August 2018, after which it appeared in hundreds of articles.[145] Hraparak.am, another media outlet that has frequently published false narratives about civil society, started using the term in November 2018.[146] A similar pattern is true for Analitik.am, a website owned and edited by VETO member Ani Hovhannisyan.[147] On Iravunk.com, one instance of *sorosakan* appears in a piece from 2017, with steady mentions beginning in October 2018.[148]

On Facebook, among the main sources of disinformation about civil society are the VETO and Adekvad initiatives, reactionary groups led by, respectively, Narek Malyan (an advisor to former police chief Vladimir Gasparyan) and Artur Danielyan (a former member of Nikol Pashinyan's Civil Contract party).[149] Adekvad, created immediately after the revolution, and VETO, created in May 2019, have targeted a large number of civil society members and activists through not only disinformation, but also hate speech. The description of VETO's Facebook page describes the group's objective as "blocking of all organizations and foundations affiliated with George Soros on the territory of the Republic of Armenia."[150] The Civic Consciousness NGO, its founder Narek Samsonyan, and several other initiatives have also been involved in disseminating false narratives about civil society organizations, as well as hate speech and public threats.[151]

Worryingly, numerous public officials and members of major political parties have amplified false and harmful narratives about civil society. For example, former parliamentarian Hayk Babukhanyan in 2017 claimed that OSF Armenia was funding protests and paying groups to undermine policy proposals.[152] Eduard Sharmazanov,[153] former vice speaker of the National Assembly and spokesperson of the Republican Party (HHK), has supported narratives about *sorosakan* people undermining state interests.[154] Naira Zohrabyan, a member of Prosperous Armenia in the National Assembly, has spoken of a "Soros junta" acting within the state.[155] Vazgen Manukyan, championed by opposition parties as an interim prime ministerial candidate in 2021, has bolstered narratives about grant-making organizations working under the influence of foreign intelligence agencies to erode the Armenian state.[156] Former president Robert Kocharyan, who in 2021 stated his intent to return to national politics, has also publicly accused OSF and related organizations of "leading Armenia to self-destruction."[157]

Independent CSOs, human rights groups, and media outlets are the primary subjects of such narratives, the ostensible purpose of which is to paint these entities as malign foreign influences. Initially, campaigns targeted current and former grantees of OSF Armenia. However, in 2020, the concept of *sorosakan* grew to include a wider set of NGOs and their international donors. A documentary-style conspiracy video created by VETO in December 2020, titled "Soros's agent network has been discovered in Armenia—the occupation of the state," claimed that a large number of public figures, human rights defenders, and officials are part of a "Soros network" working to capture the Armenian state.[158] The video, posted on YouTube and subsequently broadcast by ArmNews TV, presented inaccuracies and incomplete information about OSF grantee activities and OSF's mission, as well as manipulative, fear-mongering language to support a theory that OSF threatens the Armenian state and society.[159] Also in December 2020, the leaders of the "Voice of the People" club argued during a press conference at Sputnik Armenia's offices that a wider set of international donors are working to "destroy Armenia," including USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Sigrid Rausing Trust, and the European Endowment for Democracy.[160]

Although members of the My Step government—many of whom are former CSO staff—have not actively participated in disinformation campaigns against civil society, they have occasionally legitimized harmful language used by reactionary groups in their campaigns.[161] Furthermore, authorities have neglected opportunities to fully dispel false information about civil society. While Pashinyan himself has stressed that conspiracies about OSF are false, he has also prevaricated, noting that Kocharyan was president when OSF Armenia was founded and would thus be responsible for the "Soros people."[162] Pashinyan's reluctance to unequivocally dispel false narratives has left civil society unprotected against a constant stream of disinformation. Moreover, it has allowed false narratives about CSOs to become a powerful tool and a part of political positioning.

Civil society and democracy made Armenia weaker and yielded military losses

After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, disinformation campaigns against civil society took on a new dimension by painting democracy and human rights organizations as threats to the national security of Armenia. Such narratives were not entirely new. From 2016 to 2017, the Defense Ministry announced the concept of a "nation-army"—the idea that all state and civilian entities must realize duties of national defense. A number of CSOs and independent watchdogs voiced their disagreement with the concept.[163] Subsequently, some public figures pointed to criticism of the "nation-army" as evidence that the work of OSF and similar organizations harms the Armed Forces of Armenia and, by extension, national security. HHK parliamentarians and military analysts from government-affiliated institutions were vocal supporters of this narrative, and they launched a large-scale information campaign to discredit those who criticized the nation-army concept.[164]

In late 2020, disinformation that exploited the connection of civil society, democracy, and national security again intensified. The phenomenon should be viewed in a wider context in which Armenians were searching for answers about the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Members of the former regime, opposition groups, and affiliated media outlets grasped at the opportunity to control the story and portrayed Armenia's military losses as the fault of democratic thinking. In December, Vazgen Manukyan, who demanded PM Pashinyan's resignation after the war and whom opposition parties presented as a candidate for interim prime minister, supported this narrative: "If we allow many structures with foreign grants to work here under the word 'freedom,' they will work under the influence of foreign intelligence. The country is collapsing. We need to find a way to forbid these grants."[165] Speaking to Russian media outlets in March 2021, former president Kocharyan placed these ideas in the context of Soros conspiracy theories: "The ideas and values of the organization led by Soros and other similar structures have led Armenia to self-destruction."[166] Although the statement was made for Russian media outlets, it was widely translated and disseminated by Armenian media.

In November 2020, Naira Zohrabyan, a Prosperous Armenia legislator and then-chair of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Human Rights Protection and Public Affairs, called for the closure of OSF Armenia on grounds that it is a "pro-Turkish" group that endangers national security.[167] (She was removed from the committee in December for hate speech targeting Prime Minister Pashinyan's supporters.[168]) Other members of Prosperous Armenia, however, reinforced similar unsupported claims. In a plenary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Armenian legislator Mikayel Melkumyan tied the country's defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War to "the Soros ideology," claiming that contradictions in national values contributed to the outcome.[169] Melkumyan's speech was broadly shared by domestic media outlets, often without fact-checking or critical analysis.[170] Although intent to mislead is difficult to establish in many cases, false narratives about civil society have become pervasive enough to gain traction at the highest levels of government.

Such discourse also directly implicated individual civil society representatives, as major disinformation narratives painted them as promoters of the "enemy agenda" in Armenia. Among the many individuals targeted were ethnographer Hranush Kharatyan;[171] Zhanna Aleksanyan, the head of the Journalists for Human Rights organization;[172] and Artur Sakunts, the director of Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor Office (HCA-Vanadzor).[173] Narratives about the "enemy agenda" took several unsupported leaps. First, they used Armenia's losses in Nagorno-Karabakh as evidence that the Pashinyan government is supportive of or "works for" the Turkish state. Second, these stories extended responsibility for the military losses to representatives of civil society who were perceived as supportive of the My Step Alliance, and argued that these individuals empowered a government that supported Turkey.[174] Armenian-Russian relations also played a role in such narratives, as numerous CSOs and independent activists were portrayed as forces of anti-Russian propaganda[175] and as opponents of Armenian-Russian military cooperation—a story that,

in turn, was used to support the idea that civil society weakens national security.[176] Eduard Sharmazanov, former vice speaker of the National Assembly and HHK spokesperson, has also portrayed critics of the Kremlin as automatically pro-Turkish (and thus an enemy of the Armenian state),[177] while Prosperous Armenia member Arman Abovyan equated having such views to being "the enemy of Armenian people" and "worse than Turks," a narrative that seemingly portrays Russia as Armenia's sole ally (and does not account for Russia's standing relationships with Turkey and Azerbaijan).[178]

Campaigns against CSO initiatives and their implications for Armenian democracy

The flood of anti-CSO and anti-democracy disinformation narratives has significantly harmed the public image of Armenian CSOs and their members since 2018. Traditionally, Armenian civil society has acted as a watchdog and a mobilizer, often substituting roles performed by opposition parties in democratic systems. These roles were particularly critical during the 2018 Velvet Revolution, when numerous civil society members not only sustained the protests, but also organized and led them in some cases.[179] However, many disinformation campaigns against CSOs since 2018 have encouraged excluding civil society from important processes and conversations by ostracizing and framing them as harmful to the Armenian state.

Several attempts by civil society to suggest or discuss constructive reforms have triggered waves of disinformation. A recent example concerned engagement between rights-focused CSOs and Justice Minister Rustam Badasyan at a February 2021 meeting to discuss the CSOs' concerns about judicial reform.[180] Immediately after the consultation, several media outlets reported that Badasyan had met with "Soros people" to discuss joint efforts for judicial reform, and they perpetuated the false narrative of a Soros-influenced civil society that wields power over the state.[181] In another instance, OSF Armenia and partner organizations published a "Concept Note on the Restoration of Armenia: Road Map" containing analysis of policy suggestions for strengthening democratic institutions, judicial reforms, education reform, and similar efforts in 2019.[182] Following publication, a number of known disinformation platforms—including Antifake.am, which poses as a fact-checking website—launched a campaign to distort the contents and objectives of the document.[183] VETO even included the document in its December 2020 film, "Soros's Agent Network Has Been Discovered in Armenia: The Occupation of the State."[184]

Following such campaigns, the My Step government has acted more cautiously in its engagement with civil society in general, and has seemingly distanced itself from people and organizations labeled as *sorosakan*. These campaigns have also worked to discredit civil society and the wealth of its ideas, proposals, and solutions stemming from its work. The overall effect is the curtailment of CSOs' ability to meaningfully participate in policy discussions, and their potential to develop and promote legislative reforms. Public trust is paramount to the ability of civil society to serve its role, and disinformation campaigns have the power to impair the very foundation of this relationship.

The prominence of the labels "foreign agents" or "agents of the West" in disinformation also has direct effects on the life and work of CSO representatives. First, these labels and accompanying narratives jeopardize safety and security. In November 2020, immediately after the announcement of the Russian-brokered statement to end the Nagorno-Karabakh War, groups attacked the Yerevan offices of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,[185] and OSF Armenia.[186] Second, these narratives led to self-censorship among civil society, particularly in the context of foreign policy conversations. They also incentivized CSOs to keep a low profile, jeopardizing opportunities to meaningfully connect with citizens and officials. Third, these narratives undercut the legitimacy of CSO's statements, particularly on controversial topics like foreign policy and national security, in the eyes of the general population. This process may diminish public access to an important source of critical discourse.

Civil society fundamentally aims to represent and advance the people's will, and the line between civil society and society at large is artificial at best. The host of false narratives targeting CSOs, however, have the potential to create a gap between civil society and the wider public. This phenomenon is especially harmful now, as the country grapples with questions about the country's alliances, value systems, and policies in the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. These issues are likely to be at the forefront of debate ahead of the June 2021 snap parliamentary vote and in policy discussions thereafter. During past elections, members of civil society have played a critical role both as part of electoral discourse and as monitors of this fundamental democratic process. Their ability to fulfill these roles, with the trust and confidence of the Armenian public, is paramount to the success of Armenia's fledgling democracy.

Social and Cultural Issues

By Arshaluys Barseghyan

This section aims to analyze recent disinformation and misinformation narratives about social and cultural issues that have circulated in Armenia, and to explain the impact of these narratives on democratic culture in Armenia. The main subjects of false narratives over the past four years were the Istanbul and Lanzarote Conventions, the New Standards for General Education, and some cultural events and productions. This section explores the information ecosystem surrounding these topics, identifies the vulnerabilities they exploit, and assesses their consequences. Disinformation and misinformation about these issues have been rampant in online news, television, social media, and public statements by officials, political parties, civic groups, and private citizens. Many information campaigns that target social and cultural issues aim to exploit values-based divisions and fuel intolerance in Armenia society, ostensibly with the goal of using these divisions to shift political power in the country.

Disinformation about social and cultural issues has severe ramifications for the development of democratic culture in Armenia. A tolerant society is vital to the health of democracy, and key to the resilience of Armenia's democratic future. As disinformation narratives about identity, values, and cultural vision have become tools of "othering" groups and communities, addressing these narratives and curbing their effects are important steps in building a shared future for Armenians. Inclusion and empowerment within a broader human rights framework are requirements for a healthy, thriving democracy.

Narratives about the Istanbul and Lanzarote Conventions

In recent years, two Council of Europe conventions have been the subjects of a large number of false narratives—the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women (the Istanbul Convention) and the Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention).[187] Mainly, false narratives appeal to national existential concerns and claim that the conventions contradict Armenian values and national identity and threaten the integrity of Armenian families. The champions of such narratives are largely conservative civic groups and political parties—predominantly men—who have actively misrepresented the conventions to fuel public debate about national values and the direction of Armenia's future. The use of such narratives was also highly political—in the case of the Istanbul Convention, false information affected the policy direction of the country, and in the case of both conventions, narratives became a way to signal political allegiances.

The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention is an international treaty that aims to prevent violence against women and domestic violence, provide protections for victims, and end impunity for perpetrators. Armenia became a signatory to the Istanbul Convention in January 2018, but ratification

has stalled in the years since and became inextricably linked to broader developments regarding gender-based violence in Armenia.

In June 2019, the investigative outlet Hetq.am published the story of Eva, an artist and volunteer from the Czech Republic based in Vanadzor, who had faced sexual assault in Armenia and confronted a dearth of resources for victims of sexual violence.[188] Prompted by Eva's story, journalist Lucy Kocharyan began an online campaign under the hashtag #բռնության_ձայնը ("the voice of violence"). Facebook users across Armenia shared their experiences of sexual abuse and violence, which sparked a discussion of cultural norms and pressures that have hindered justice for victims. Kocharyan published hundreds of submissions anonymously on Facebook, which led to an unprecedented online discussion about sexual abuse and violence.[189] The ensuing public debate, which included accusations that the stories were false, informed the social context in which officials began discussing the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.[190]

Conservative groups organized campaigns to oppose ratifying the Istanbul Convention, and launched a disinformation campaign that misrepresented the contents and objectives of the convention. The civil initiative Kamq ("Will" in Armenian) began collecting signatures in July 2019 for a petition against ratification. Kamq travelled to public spaces in Yerevan and other cities to argue that the convention contradicts "Armenian values."[191] Its arguments were based on distortions of the convention's language on marriage and gender, and largely relied on alarmist appeals. The petition argued that the Istanbul Convention would give anyone the right to express "unacceptable" orientations, rob adults of the ability to "restrict the immoral behavior" of their children or spouses, and allow children to sue their parents for not agreeing with their sexual preferences, behaviors, or even "anti-national decisions" —a broad term that the petition did not define.[192] Thousands of private citizens, current and former elected officials, and celebrities had signed Kamq's petition by September 2019, and a number of other conservative groups— including the VETO initiative—organized campaigns to oppose ratification. The Armenian Apostolic Church also opposed ratification and issued a statement in July 2019 that accused the convention of contradicting Armenians' "national-spiritual identity and security."[193] In December 2019, members of Kamq assaulted a woman who disagreed with them while they were collecting signatures outside the National Assembly building in Yerevan.[194]

The statement of the church and rhetoric by Kamq, VETO, and their peer groups rely on several distortions of the Istanbul Convention's contents. First, they claim that the convention legitimizes or somehow promotes same-sex marriage, to which a legal right does not exist in Armenia. The convention does not define marriage or family, and it does not contradict already existing definitions of marriage in national legislation. The Venice Commission confirmed these facts in an October 2019 opinion issued directly in response to concerns about the Istanbul Convention's constitutional implications in Armenia.[195] Second, the Armenian Apostolic Church argued that the convention contains the concept of a "third gender"—a falsehood that became a prominent part of public debate about ratification.[196] In fact, the convention merely defines gender as "the socially-constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men."[197] Misrepresentations of the convention's treatment of gender and marriage fueled broader narratives that the convention promotes LGBT+ rights, which conservative groups framed as incompatible with "Armenian values."[198] Discourse on values played a major role in campaigns against the convention. The Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, a domestic watchdog organization, issued a report in June 2020 about how popular media covers "European values," finding that the most common vector for covering this topic in 2019 was the Istanbul Convention.[199] The report identified a wide array of factual falsifications or distortions of the convention and "European values," and it also identified outlets that most egregiously produced such coverage—the *Iravunk* newspaper within print media, the Russian RTR Planeta and Armenian Channel 5 in television outlets, and News.am in online outlets.[200]

In 2020, the debate about ratifying the Istanbul Convention moved away from the document's contents and toward broader political reform in the country. This new dimension linked the convention to a constitutional referendum that authorities had scheduled to address long-debated change to Armenia's Constitutional Court. The referendum, which was cancelled due to COVID-19, was on a controversial proposal to dismiss seven of the nine Constitutional Court judges, including the chair, in an attempt to simplify a web of legislation on term limits that had paralyzed the court in a crisis of legitimacy.[201] After authorities announced plans for the referendum, some political figures accused the My Step government of trying to ratify the Istanbul Convention through changes to the Constitutional Court. Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) spokesperson Eduard Sharmazanov, for example, argued on social media and in an interview with 168.am that supporting the constitutional changes meant support for the Istanbul Convention and its "transgender, anti-state, anti-national propaganda."[202]

These narratives exploited cultural sensitivities around gender and sexual identity based on several distortions of the convention's text. At their core, the narratives were fear-mongering and false representations, and were used by groups like VETO and Kamq to disseminate disinformation. Whereas the convention provided an opportunity for Armenians to confront the grim problem of gender-based violence, these campaigns instead diverted public attention to a false debate.

The Lanzarote Convention: In May 2020, the National Assembly ratified the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, ten years after Armenia became a signatory. The Lanzarote Convention, as it is commonly known, aims to criminalize forms of abuse against children, and to provide legal protections for victims of abuse and exploitation. The anchors of misinformation and disinformation about the convention were misinterpretations of the convention's text, and false narratives broadly portrayed the document as a threat to children.

One common narrative involved the convention's educational component. To prevent abuse, the Lanzarote Convention advises states to ensure that children are aware about abuse risks and that teachers, social workers, and other professionals who work with children are trained to recognize and respond to signs of abuse. The convention does not prescribe a teaching methodology or specific content, but instead encourages the state to work with parents when appropriate.[203] In May 2020, 168.am published an interview with Dr. Narine Nersisyan, a sexologist and public figure, in which she argued that the Lanzarote Convention starts sex education too early.[204] She claimed that the convention prescribes starting sex education in the first grade, but it does not, in fact, prescribe specific time windows or methods, but opinions like Dr. Nersisyan's helped legitimize misconceptions about the convention's aims.

Related narratives incorporated false information about education to claim that by allowing sex education in elementary schools, the Lanzarote Convention would enable children to have sex, or teach them how to "choose" a sexual orientation.[205] This, in turn, fueled fear-mongering about the convention's ties to LGBT+ issues. A representative of the Armenian Apostolic Church publicly claimed that NGOs supporting LGBT+ rights have gained access to educate children in schools as a result of the convention.[206] A lawyer and member of the Chamber of Advocates argued that proponents of "LGBT propaganda" are behind the convention.[207] Another strain of false narratives focused on underage sex. Gevorg Danielyan, former minister of justice and chair of the Constitutional Law Department at Yerevan State University, claimed that the convention had led to amendments in Armenia's criminal code that would allow minors of any age to engage in consensual sexual activity with anyone else.[208] The Fact Investigation Platform (FIP) found that Danielyan's claims were factually incorrect—the criminal code had not been changed, and the convention does not contain specific provisions for age of consent or consensual activities between minors.[209]

These misleading narratives gripped public attention through May and June 2020. In late May, a private citizen posted a Facebook video in which he claimed that a woman had given a Russian-language sexual

education book to his child in central Yerevan.[210] The video quickly went viral and was covered by major online sources, television outlets, and some public officials. Media.am found that journalists and public officials added new dimensions to the story as it grew. A legislator, for example, framed the story in terms of widespread book distribution (instead of one instance), while some news outlets contacted the Women's Resource Center NGO and the Pink Armenia LGBT+ rights group to investigate if they were involved.[211] A police investigation concluded that the child had found the book on the street, but the original video—which contained violent threats against people who would distribute such books to children—continued to circulate on social media platforms.[212]

Distorted coverage of the Lanzarote Convention was pervasive online, and the political alignment of some media outlets correlated with how they reported on it. The Media Initiatives Center's 2021 "Regularities of Dissemination of Disinformation in Armenian Online Media" report found that three of Armenia's most popular online news outlets—News.am, Tert.am, and 168.am, monitored between May and June 2020— most commonly portrayed the Lanzarote Convention as something that exposes children to sexual abuse.[213] This was the main message of 30 percent of monitored articles. The second most common message, at 23 percent, was that the Lanzarote Convention protected children from sexual violence— which is in fact the mission of the convention.[214]

New Standards for General Education

In June 2020, the National Assembly launched discussions of the New Standards for General Education— draft legislation that proposed sweeping reforms for public educational institutions.[215] Among other changes, the draft proposed incorporating the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church, previously taught as a separate subject, into general Armenian history courses. Conservative groups and the Armenian Apostolic Church disparaged the draft, accusing the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of stripping national values from the public education system.[216]

Most false and misleading narratives about the New Standards focused on the inclusion of sexual education. Ani Hovhannisyan, editor of the Analitik.am news site and VETO member, falsely argued that the New Standards introduce education about identifying sexual organs (which is already part of sex education in schools) and instruct young children on contraceptive use (which is not applicable until high school).[217] Hovhannisyan used these claims to support her Safe Education platform, a collaborative effort among families, teachers, and education experts to strip "dangerous" content from the curriculum.[218] Hovhannisyan also claimed that the curricular changes were a consequence of the Lanzarote Convention, connecting education reform to the misleading, emotionally-charged narratives that had circulated about the convention's ratification.[219] Dr. Narine Nersisyan, who had misrepresented the contents of the convention while voicing opposition to it, claimed that the curricula would "lead to an increase in the number of homosexuals" in Armenia.[220]

Cultural events

In recent years, cultural events and artistic expression have been subjects of misleading narratives, and in some cases, absorbed into broader narratives about threats to Armenian values. In October 2019, for example, Armtimes.com—owned by the Pashinyan family—published a story about state financial support to a documentary about athlete Mel Daluzyan, a transgender man who had competed on Armenia's women's weightlifting team prior to his transition.[221] The news sparked a conservative backlash, with critics arguing that the government supported "LGBT propaganda" and that the film promoted the "business of transgenderism."[222]

Meanwhile, Daluzyan—who emigrated to the Netherlands after facing discrimination due to his identity—became a target of false narratives.[223] Naira Zohrabyan of the Prosperous Armenia Party, a group of national athletes, and national sports administrators claimed that Daluzyan had cost Armenian weightlifters the opportunity to participate in the 2020 Olympics by using performance-enhancing drugs.[224] In 2018, an investigation by Hetq.am found that over a dozen Armenian athletes, not just Daluzyan, had taken performance-enhancing drugs over many years.[225] At the time of the claims about Daluzyan, no decision had been made to deny Armenia's participation in the Olympics.[226] Some National Assembly members used the opportunity to suggest banning same-sex marriage (although no legal right to same-sex marriage exists in Armenia) or adoption of children by same-sex couples.[227]

A number of conservative groups and online outlets have also woven misleading narratives about artistic expression in Armenia. In Yerevan in November 2019, a group of artists staged a public performance of a modernist play based on twentieth-century Armenian poetry. A group of protestors disrupted the play and attacked one of the performers; protestors called the performance "satanic" and "anti-Armenian," and one protestor claimed that the play reflected the performers' beliefs about same-sex marriage.[228] Recordings of the performance began to gain traction on social media, particularly after the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports announced that it had provided a grant to the organizers of the performance.[229] The ultra-conservative VETO initiative used the incident as part of its protest platform against Open Society Foundations (OSF)–Armenia, although OSF denied funding the performance.[230] Conservative groups and outlets have made unsupported claims about "satanism" and "anti-Armenian values" in relation to other issues of cultural importance, including student events at the Yerevan State Conservatory and a planned concert by the Polish death metal band Vader, which was temporarily cancelled amid a public uproar.[231]

These events have broad ramifications for freedom of expression in Armenia. As artistic expression has become part of the battle over national values, public figures and conservative groups have used false narratives about culture and art to bolster their political profiles. These narratives have the power to not only disempower artists but also to threaten freedom of expression more broadly.

Conclusions

The social and cultural issues discussed in this section often gain public attention because they are sensitive and emotionally loaded topics, concerning children, families, and national values. The personal and sensitive nature of these issues makes them vulnerable to exploitation by those who wish to mislead public opinion. Many of the aforementioned narratives prey on fear and allude to threats to families, traditions, and the security of nationhood, and a significant level of public sensitivity persists about such issues, priming audiences. Moreover, the topics discussed in this section are wedge issues, reflecting societal rifts that can be—and readily are—exploited for political advantage. As more disinformation narratives exploit wedge issues, they risk further driving polarization—a deeply concerning risk amid Armenia's recovery from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which has divided the public about the future of national leadership.

On a societal level, the manipulation of such issues impedes the growth of an inclusive and tolerant community, which is requisite to sustained democratic growth. Several narratives discussed in this section relied on social exclusion of particularly vulnerable groups like the LGBT+ community and organizations devoted to human rights. This phenomenon not only risks deepening intolerance and disenfranchisement, but also endangers the human rights and safety of individuals. Moreover, social and cultural issues have become closely tied to national politics. Conservative groups have relied on disinformation about the Istanbul Convention, childhood education, and national values to sway

political preferences and discredit public officials and liberal civil society. As Armenians head to a snap parliamentary election, divisive narratives can be especially consequential.

Low levels of media literacy among the public and low-quality journalism with weak fact-checking mechanisms contribute to the proliferation of false narratives.[232] Weaknesses in state communication with citizens also play a central role. The ratification of the Lanzarote Convention, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and without broad public discussion, is a prime example. The hasty process fueled perceptions that something important had occurred in a rush and without transparency, and false narratives benefited from the scarcity of official information. By failing to effectively communicate about issues of public concern, state officials risk creating information vacuums that disinformation can easily fill.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War dramatically changed public priorities in Armenia, as it focused attention on questions of national security and existential risk. In the aftermath of the war, social and cultural issues have played a smaller role in public discourse than they did in 2019 and early 2020. Lingering falsehoods about these issues, as well as the sway of inaccurate narratives, nevertheless have ramifications for Armenia's future. For example, narratives that focus on family traditions and national values are directly tied to demographic concerns and the existential risk and trauma of the war. Moreover, societal and cultural divisions over topics from the Istanbul Convention to childhood education remain vulnerable to further exploitation for political ends.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the research and analysis conducted in this report, our analysts have the following recommendations for addressing vulnerabilities to disinformation, misinformation, and related forms of false narratives in Armenia. These recommendations are thematically focused and contain suggestions for the government, legislature, independent oversight bodies, media, civil society, and international partners. Some recommendations address steps that will enable these groups to confront the supply side of the equation—the ever-growing production of false, distorted, and harmful narratives that cloud Armenia's information landscape. This process, however, will entail long-term changes in the country's media sector, domestic and international technology regulation, and legislation that are beyond the scope of this report. In the meantime, it is imperative to ensure that Armenians have the tools to navigate their information landscape. Most of the recommendations therefore address the demand side of the equation, with an eye toward reducing social susceptibility to and acceptance of false information. Such approaches will help develop long-term resilience. Some recommendations also focus on mitigating harm, particularly to democracy-focused organizations and communities directly endangered by disinformation.

- **Restoring public trust and national dialogue:** One of the greatest victims of disinformation and misinformation in Armenia has been the trust between citizens and the state, as a cluster of misleading narratives have aimed at eroding the legitimacy of government bodies, processes, and proposals in the eyes of the public. Poor state communication around critical issues, particularly the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the COVID-19 pandemic, has sped the erosion of trust. Restoring and strengthening trust in public institutions should be a leading priority for the Armenian government, a long-term process that will inform the success of the country's broader progress beyond the intersection of disinformation and democracy. This includes protecting the integrity of elections by ensuring a free and fair process, accommodating independent monitoring and observation efforts, investigating electoral infractions, and ensuring journalistic access to cover elections.

  The noise and distortion of false narratives and disinformation campaigns can obscure genuine national discourse. As Armenia confronts the consequences of the war, heals from the COVID-19 pandemic, and heads toward snap elections, the country is experiencing both profound disruption and an opportunity for change. It is imperative that the needs, concerns, and aspirations of citizens be heard on a national level by the state, fellow citizens, civil society organizations, and other relevant bodies. Armenian authorities should consider pathways to engage the country in national dialogue—a means for diverse stakeholders (the public, community organizations, political groups, and both state

and nonstate actors) to engage in a productive conversation to learn and build a vision for the future. In Armenia, such engagement would be a critical step in both national recovery as well as strategic planning for the future.

- **Adopting a strategic approach to information security**, including by:

  → **Strengthening state communication strategies:** Poor communications by public officials and agencies has exacerbated societal vulnerabilities to disinformation, often by leaving information vacuums that false narratives can fill. Authorities need to clearly define the strategies that guide their communication with the public, media, independent oversight bodies, and civil society. This includes a reevaluation of the values that guide state communication; an assessment of the processes that distinguish executive and legislative communications, and the balance therein; and a focus on accuracy, timeliness, and transparency. Particularly regarding sensitive, controversial, or urgent issues, proactive communication can deter false narratives from taking root.

  → **Creating a comprehensive strategy for legislation:** Disinformation, misinformation, and related informational problems are incredibly complex, and cannot be solved with conventional measures that target specific behaviors. Moreover, it is important for public officials to understand disinformation and misinformation as distinct phenomena, and not to equate them with hate speech or defamation. This report recommends creating a comprehensive strategy for legislation in the information space. This process should involve critical stakeholders (the executive and legislature, oversight bodies, media, and civil society) and strive for balance between the right to free expression and the need to protect citizens and democratic institutions from malign information. Armenia is not alone in confronting this problem, and policymakers can conduct a study of best practices around the world to find a model that fits Armenia's unique vulnerabilities.

- **Supporting the development of independent media:** Independent, fact-based journalism is key to countering disinformation and building an information environment that supports democracy. Countering false narratives with robust, independent reporting is not a perfect solution on its own. However, creating an environment that supports truthful discourse and rejects information manipulation will be the bedrock of resilience to disinformation, and the role of independent media is key. One of the main obstacles to sustained democracy in Armenia has been the weakness of the media environment. Challenges include opaque ownership, weak editorial independence, and a limiting financial environment (particularly a scarcity of financially sustainable models). The Armenian government and donors should support the development of independent media through diversified options for financial viability, technical assistance, and legislative reform.

  → **Media reform:** Comprehensive media reform has been on the government agenda for years, but has instead occurred in piecemeal fashion, at times without meaningful consultations with media or civil society. Lawmakers should work with media and civil society to develop a joint strategy for media reform by addressing longstanding issues like ownership transparency and the availability of broadcast licenses. Media reform must safeguard freedom of expression and the free flow of information. Lawmakers should be wary of measures that conflate disinformation with phenomena like hate speech, or that impose hefty penalties for infractions.

  → **Media ethics and self-regulation:** Many independent outlets, watchdog organizations, and journalistic groups in Armenia are actively working to end the amplification of disinformation, and to develop a culture of ethical conduct among media workers. Self-regulation mechanisms—for example, the Media Ethics Observatory and the Code of Ethics it helps uphold—are an essential part of this process. Media organizations, civil society, and relevant state bodies should support the capacity of such initiatives and incorporate their work into efforts to address disinformation.

- **Promoting media literacy:** The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports should make media literacy education a mandatory component of public schools and university curricula. Media literacy for particularly vulnerable groups, including older adults, should also be prioritized by the government, civil society, and international donors. Libraries, cultural centers, and other public institutions can help extend access to media literacy education to the public. Fact-checking organizations can also be part of the educational solution in sharing their technical skills, modeling accountability, and challenging falsehoods.

- **Safeguarding civil society organizations, activists, and human rights defenders:** One of the main targets of disinformation campaigns in recent years has been civil society organizations with a human rights or democracy focus. Disinformation campaigns by ultra-conservative civic and political groups, in particular, have used fear-mongering and exclusionary narratives to sway public about civil society. Authorities should ensure the safety of activists and organizations, as well as their ability to operate without interference. An environment in which civil society can thrive is essential to Armenia's democratic future. Moreover, civil society organizations are a key ally in efforts to combat false narratives, promote dialogue and inclusion, and connect citizens to their state. Similarly, public officials should safeguard the activities of oversight bodies (like the Office of the Human Right's Defender) and engage them in efforts to counter disinformation.

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