WEAPONIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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I. INTRODUCTORY NOTE

As this article was being considered for publication, Azerbaijan had initiated a total blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) that culminated in a full-scale military aggression against the fledgling democracy.

For months since December 12, 2022, Azerbaijan has blockaded the Lachin Corridor, the only roadway connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, utilizing special forces personnel masquerading as "environmental activists." In addition, the government of Azerbaijan shut down the pipeline carrying natural gas from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh and disrupted the electricity grid, causing hardships, and existential challenges for the entire population of one hundred and twenty thousand people.

In February 2023, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, ordered legally binding measures to ensure that Azerbaijan ends the blockage of Nagorno-Karabakh. Major democracies, as well as numerous international political and human rights organizations, have criticized the blockade, calling on the regime in Azerbaijan to restore Nagorno-Karabakh's unimpeded connection with the world. However, all legal documents and political calls have remained ignored.

Seeing no major implications for its actions against Nagorno-Karabakh, on September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a full-scale military offensive against Artsakh resulting in the death and injury of innocent civilians and the forced displacement of its entire population of one hundred and twenty thousand people.

The 2023 war has forced Nagorno-Karabakh's entire population out of their ancestral homeland. Most of them have resettled in Armenia. Political representatives strive for a proper condemnation of the second Armenian Genocide and the safe return of people to their homes in Artsakh.

As the following article considers the role of social media in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, it is noteworthy that the events of the past two years have also seen the active application of the technologies and tactics called to shape a favorable public opinion around the respective agendas by the governments.

For decades, Azerbaijani and Armenian governments have been involved in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh—an Armenian-populated entity that has been placed under Soviet Azerbaijan's administration during the formation of the Soviet Union. The

confrontation is deeply rooted in the countries' political agendas and occupies a significant space in the collective national identity of the two peoples. Decades of international mediation did not lead to a political settlement, and several rounds of military hostilities have deepened the gap between the societies. Lack of trust between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, as well as the absence of a common vision for a mutually acceptable political solution has entrenched opposition within each Government to concessions.

With the development of online technology, Azerbaijani and Armenian governments have increased the application of the available tools, including social platforms, online media, and blogs to promote public narratives and mutual perceptions. These tools have also been used to concentrate the popular support around domestic and foreign political agendas that reinforce the government's position with regard to the conflict. The phenomenon is not unique to this situation and is often referred to as the *weaponization of social media.*

Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh are in the geopolitically significant region of the South Caucasus. [*See* https://perma.cc/4294-U9WT to Access Map].

Located between Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia, the region has rich oil and gas resources. It is at a crossroad of strategic political, economic, and security-related interests of the global powers, particularly the United States, the Russian Federation, the European Union, Turkey, and Iran.

II. BACKGROUND: KEY HISTORIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

A. EMERGENCE OF THE CONFLICT AND SOVIET ERA

The Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) issue started as an international conflict in 1918 with the emergence of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia as sovereign countries in the South Caucasus. The newly established Azerbaijan claimed administration over several regional entities, including predominantly Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh.

The confrontation rapidly escalated into a military conflict and political stalemate. The indefinite political situation regarding Nagorno-Karabakh lasted until 1920 when the Soviet Russian troops forced the South Caucasus countries into the Soviet area. Joseph

Stalin, serving at that time as the People's Commissar of Nationalities, concluded that in view of the "necessity of establishing peace between the Muslims and Armenians," the area would be considered an autonomy within the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.[1]

During the following seven decades within the Soviet Union, local Armenian authorities repeatedly petitioned central Communist authorities to return Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian administration. In 1946, 1963, 1965, 1977, and 1987, Nagorno-Karabakh's legislature adopted corresponding legal motions.[2] However, the Soviet authorities rejected the motions as contradicting the policy of declared brotherhood between the Soviet peoples. Fears that territorial change from the democratic process could spur similar aspirations across the USSR made any manifestation of national discord unacceptable. [*See* https://perma.cc/ECE9-7P7X to Access Map].

B. Disintegration of the USSR

The situation around Artsakh remained unchanged until the late 1980s when Soviet leader Gorbachev proclaimed the era of *perestroika* (transformation) and *glasnost* (freedom of speech). The two concepts lifted taboo from discussing political issues, such as human rights, democratization, and national sovereignty. In 1988, the NK's legislature adopted another resolution appealing to the Supreme Councils of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic ("AzSSR") and the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic ("ArSSR") to transfer the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast from the AzSSR to the ArSSR. An appeal was also sent to the central Communist authorities

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[1] V.A. Mikaelyan, Nagorno Karabakh in 1918-1923: Collection of Documents and Materials (1992).

[2] *See* S. Zolyan, Nagorno Karabakh: The Problem and the Conflict (2001).

in Moscow with a request to formally approve the deal.[3] Simultaneous rallies in Stepanakert (capital of Artsakh), Baku (capital of AzSSR), and Yerevan ("ArmSSR") instigated nationalistic moods in the two societies. Several days after the first rallies, anti-Armenian violence took place throughout Azerbaijan, thus escalating the situation into armed confrontation and causing flows of an estimated one million Armenian and Azerbaijani refugees. Most of them resettled in their native countries, while tens of thousands of families migrated outside the area, mostly to Russia, European countries and the United States.

By the late 1990s, similar self-determination movements had spread across the Soviet Union. The crumbling Communist system was unable to cope with the political and economic challenges making the disintegration of the USSR only a matter of time. The dissolution of the Soviet Union provided legal bases for national sovereignty movements in the former Soviet republics and other subnational entities.

Seeing no interference from the central authorities in Moscow to deal with the rapidly deteriorating situation in the NK conflict area, the local authorities in Karabakh decided to self-organize to counter the security threats and used the USSR legislature to declare sovereignty from Soviet Azerbaijan.[4] The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) was proclaimed on September 2, 1991. On December 10, 1991, a national referendum took place in the republic with 99.89 percent of the registered voters supporting the idea of state independence.[5] Armenia supported the NKR's self-determination calling it a case of remedial secession necessary to protect the human rights and other democratic aspiration of the indigenous Armenian population. Azerbaijan called the proclamation of the NKR illegal,

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[3] *See Karabakh in 1988: The Beginning of the Modern Stage of National-liberation Struggle,*
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS REPUBLIC OF ARTSAKH (2022),
http://www.nkr.am/en/karabakh-national-liberation-movement.
[4] *See generally* Shahen Avakian, *Nagorno-Karabagh Legal Aspects* (2005),
https://www.deutscharmenischegesellschaft.de/wp-
content/uploads/2010/05/SHAHEN-AVAKIAN-Nagorno-Karabakh-Legal-
Aspects-2005.pdf.
[5] *Initial Voluntary Report of the Republic of Artsakh on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/40/G/3, at 49 (Apr. 2, 2019), reissued for technical reasons May 9, 2019. .

accused Armenia of territorial aggression against Azerbaijan, and launched a war in 1991 to conquer the NKR territory by force.

C. INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION

Since 1992, the international community has been involved in conflict mediation efforts. The United States, Russia, and France are the co-chairs of the so-called Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE MG) that was established to help bring the conflicting sides to a negotiated political settlement.[6]

The first war ended with territorial gains for Armenians. In 1994, Azerbaijan, the NKR, and Armenia signed a ceasefire that opened opportunities for establishing lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus. The ceasefire also allowed the realization of the economic potential, mostly for oil-rich Azerbaijan. Multibillion-dollar international investments and significant oil revenues have reinforced revanchist aspirations in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani leadership has periodically stated that the ceasefire was temporary.

III. CURRENT SITUATION

A. POSITIONS OF THE SIDES

Currently, the Azerbaijani and Armenian sides remain far from resolving the problem. Much is at stake for each country, and each side has proclaimed the Karabakh conflict a vital aspect of their national security and long-term prosperity. The two countries do not have a common vision of a political settlement to the conflict. The positions remain largely maximalist and mutually exclusive. Relative peace in the region established with the 1994 ceasefire allowed the two countries to restore their economies and accumulate significant political and military resources that made the notion of a negotiated

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[6] Org. for Sec. & Co-op. in Eur., *Who We Are*, OSCE, https://www.osce.org/who-we-are (last visited Oct. 4, 2024).

settlement through mutual concessions seem irrelevant and politically unpopular.

Azerbaijan demands full administrative control over the entire territory of Artsakh, calling it "restoration of its territorial integrity."[7] The issue is of great domestic political significance and a matter of national pride. The position of Azerbaijani authorities regarding the conflict has always played a significant role in its legitimacy. The country sees increased economic opportunities from the settlement on its terms as it can allow the opening of new transit routes for exports of hydrocarbons and other goods to its ally Turkey and further to the European market.

Armenia is fighting for international recognition of Artsakh as a separate state, calling it the most effective and legitimate way to ensure long-term regional stability and security for the local population. For Armenians, the issue of Artsakh's security also has a strong historical connection with the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey in 1915.[8] The conflict has been a significant part of the domestic discourse and impacts the legitimacy of the ruling administration.

B. MILITARY PHASES

The conflict has seen three major military escalations: first in 1991, second in 2016, and, most recently, in September 2020[9], claiming overall an estimated 45,000 Armenian and Azerbaijani lives.[10] In September 2020, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale offensive. The second Azerbaijan-Karabakh war lasted 44 days.

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[7] Rayhan Demytrie, *Nagorno-Karabakh: 'People Are Fainting Queuing Up for Bread'*, BBC News (Aug. 30, 2023), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66646677.

[8] *See* Roqua Montez, *Why Violence Has Re-Emerged In Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*, BERKELEY NEWS (Nov. 6, 2020), https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/11/06/why-violence-has-re-emerged-in-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict/.

[9] *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer*, INT'L CRISIS GRP. (2022), https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer (last updated Sept. 16, 2023)

[10] Neil Hauer, *Armenia is Still Grieving*, FOREIGN POLICY, (Apr. 24, 2021, 6:00 AM), https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/24/armenia-azerbaijan-war-nagorno-karabakh-aftermath/.

Azerbaijan, with the support of Turkey, reclaimed territories lost in the 1991-1994 war and occupied parts of the Artsakh proper. The war ended in November 2020, when leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the mediation of Russia, signed a statement on the cessation of hostilities. The conflict remains unresolved, continues to cause casualties on both sides, and undermines stability in the South Caucasus.

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA

A. DIGITAL REVOLUTION

Social media is a form of electronic communication and networking platforms that allows sharing ideas, texts, photos, videos and other content within a network of online users.[11] Currently, Facebook, Twitter, SnapChat, Instagram, WhatsApp and LinkedIn are the most popular social media platforms. As of April 2023, there are around three billion active users on Facebook and over three hundred thirty million users on Twitter.[12]

For the past decades, technological progress and innovations have been powerful sources of new opportunities for more inclusive and better-organized societies and institutions. Often referred to as a *digital revolution*, technological progress has influenced global humanitarian, political, economic, and cultural landscape by offering new data-driven interventions and targeted messaging in communicating with various audiences. Social media platforms, search engines, and other online resources play an increasingly

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[11] *See* Daniel Trottier & Christian Fuchs, *Theorising Social Media, Politics and the State* (2015), https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/economy-crone-trottier-2015.pdf.

[12] Simon Kemp, *Facebook Users, Stats, Data, & Trends*, DATAREPORTAL (May 11, 2023), https://datareportal.com/essential-facebook-stats; Simon Kemp, *Twitter Users, Stats, Data & Trends*, DATAREPORTAL (May 11, 2023), https://datareportal.com/essential-twitter-stats.

important role in various aspects of political and socio-economic life across the globe.

New technological opportunities have also become attractive for various state and non-state actors as powerful and affordable communication tools, action mobilizers, and social enablers of political agendas. Information technology (IT) serves as a positive social connector, but also often increasingly as a conduit of ideology, polarization, and violence. Disinformation campaigns use macro- and micro-targeting messages to intentionally disseminate mistrust and propagate hate speech, which has become an integral component of conflict dynamics around the globe.

B. COGNITIVE MANIPULATIONS

Elites, leaders, activists, and influencers use social media for strategic communication. The targeted, personalized nature of social media messaging is effective for influencing people's actions and cognitive processes, including thought, perception, and analysis, with the aim of political, military, or social recruitments, as well as for fundraisers, rallies, and other initiatives. For instance, the March 2017 Women's March in the United States became one of the largest protests in U.S. history with an estimated three to five million attendees actively recruited through social media and mass email campaigns.[13] Social media also plays an important role during violent conflicts. Fighters in the Syrian civil war, for example, actively used social media to recruit individuals to fight ISIS[14] and solicit financial donations[15].

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[13] *See* Erica Chenoweth & Jeremy Pressman, *This is What We Learned by Counting the Women's Marches*, WASH. POST (Feb. 7, 2017),
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/; Eric Bradner and Sophia Tatum, March Spurs Efforts to Get More Women to Run for Office, CNN (Jan. 23, 2017, 9:39 PM), https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/23/politics/democrats-march-female-candidates/.

[14] *See* Adi Cohen (Vocativ), *Volunteer Anti-ISIS Fighters Join Up On Facebook*, FACEBOOK (July 2, 2016), https://www.vocativ.com/321997/volunteer-anti-isis-fighters-join-up-on-facebook/.

[15] *See* Miriam Berger, *Twitter Just Suspended Two Kuwaitis Accused By The U.S. Of Financing Terror in Syria*, BUZZFEED NEWS (Aug. 7, 2014),
https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/miriamberger/twitter-just-suspended-two-kuwaitis-accused-by-the-us-of-fin.

      Cognitive manipulations of social media users often take place as part of larger *information operations*.[16] Rhynard-Geil and Inks describe information operations as "the integrated employment . . . of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operations to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp the decision-making."[17]

C. WEAPONIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

      The author of *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, Peter W. Singer,[18] defines the weaponization of social media as having "been manipulated to fuel popular uprisings and affect the course of military and political campaigns."[19] Even though social media is largely a 21st-century phenomenon, the notion of special propaganda (or *spets-propaganda*) techniques is well known and dates to the period of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the Western world. The Soviet journalists studied *combat propaganda* or how to disseminate communist-approved information across the Soviet area and destabilize the enemy camps.
Singer distinguishes the following *underlying principles of social media weaponization[20]*:

      In 2019, Guay et al. described *essential tactics of social media weaponization*. In the contemporary world, social media

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[16] Joseph Guay, Stephen Gray, Meghann Rhynard-Geil, Lisa Inks, *The Weaponization of Social Media: How Social Media Can Spark Violence And What Can Be Done About It,* 18 (2019), https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Weaponization_Social_Media_FINAL_Nov2019.pdf.

[17] *Id.*

[18] *See* EMERSON T. BROOKING & P.W. SINGER, LIKEWAR: THE WEAPONIZATION of SOCIAL MEDIA (2018).

[19] Dave Davies, *The 'Weaponization' of Social Media - and Its Real-World Consequences*, NPR (Oct. 9, 2018), https://www.npr.org/2018/10/09/655824435/the-weaponization-of-social-media-and-its-real-world-consequences.

[20] *Id.*

propaganda can be used against adversaries in the form of countries, political groups, competitor companies, individual persons, or cultural groups.[21]   The target audience is normally divided into two main sub-groups: *critical thinkers* and *non-critical thinkers*. Critical thinkers are subjected to *persuasion tactics*, while non-critical thinkers are subjected *to suggestion tactics*. Persuasion tactics target the intelligence of the audience by repeating mostly false information that may contain minor credible segments. Suggestion tactics aims to influence the subconscious of the target audience by developing so-called *authority aura*, [22] for example, when recognized public or political leaders deliver emotionally charged speeches.

Bots and *trolls* (described later) then create the effect of *psychological contagion* (when someone's emotions and related behaviors lead to similar emotions and behaviors in others) and help consolidate audiences around the promoted ideas.[23] The tactics are based on emotional reactions and are especially effective with psychologically vulnerable people.

V. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

A. COMMUNICATION

Social media has become a powerful tool for shaping and influencing public opinion in conflicting societies. Despite differences in access to technology and varied domestic administrative regulations, most of the population in both Armenia and Azerbaijan have access to the Internet.[24] Presidential offices, foreign ministries,

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[21] *See* Guay, *supra* note 14.

[22] Zarina Zabrisky, *Big Lies and Rotten Herrings: 17 Kremlin Disinformation Techniques You Need to Know Now*, BYLINE TIMES (Mar. 4, 2020), https://bylinetimes.com/2020/03/04/big-lies-and-rotten-herrings-17-kremlin-disinformation-techniques-you-need-to-know-now/.

[23] Davies, *supra* note, at 17.

[24] THE WORLD BANK, *Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) - ARMENIA* (2021), Individuals using the Internet (% of population) - Armenia | Data (worldbank.org); THE WORLD BANK, *Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) - AZERBAIJAN* (2021), Individuals using the Internet (% of population) - Azerbaijan | Data (worldbank.org) .

defense ministries, state, state-controlled, and private media outlets use media outlets and popular social media platforms to promote public narrative.

B. THIRD COUNTRIES

The interests of regional and global powers expand the arena of the online information battle. For instance, social media accounts (both authentic and inauthentic) in Turkey and Pakistan actively support Azerbaijan's stance, while accounts in India mostly favor Armenia's.[25] In turn, positive or negative reactions by users to information clusters (through "likes," "dislikes," expressive emojis, etc.) gradually help develop a more sophisticated analysis of a given platform's users, their purpose for using the particular platform, and the most effective types of messages.

C. DEMOCRACY AND FREE MEDIA

Azerbaijan and Armenia differ in their levels of democratic development and economic opportunities. These differences influence access to authentic information and/or exposure to coordinated inauthentic informational activities.

The Government of Azerbaijan has been consistently criticized by major international human rights watchdogs for widespread human rights violations, periodic crackdowns on opposition, and ill-treatment of government critics. The country's authorities maintain firm domestic control by restricting essential civil freedoms.[26] However, Azerbaijan actively adapts to changes caused by digital

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[25] Elise Thomas & Albert Zhang, *Snapshot of a Shadow War in the Azerbaijan–Armenia Conflict*, THE STRATEGIST (Oct. 9, 2020), https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/snapshot-of-a-shadow-war-in-the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict/.

[26] Giorgi Gogia, *Harassed, Imprisoned, Exiled: Azerbaijan's Continuing Crackdown on Government Critics, Lawyers, and Civil Society*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Oct. 20, 2016), https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/20/harassed-imprisoned-exiled/azerbaijans-continuing-crackdown-government-critics#.

communications, including engaging in what Katy E. Pearce characterized in 2015 as *networked authoritarianism.* The country's 2021 *Freedom on the Net* score was 35 out of 100, with 100 being the highest.[27] The lack of independent media in Azerbaijan also multiplies the effect of disinformation.[28]

The Armenian government has been criticized, although on a smaller scale, for domestic problems, such as arbitrary detentions, harsh prison conditions, an ineffective judicial system, a crackdown on the civil society, and other shortcomings.[29] Freedom of the Net in Armenia is significantly higher compared to Azerbaijan, with a score of 71 out of 100.[30]

D. CAUSATION

The NK issue has traditionally played a significant role in the domestic and foreign political agenda of the two countries. The conflict is also often used to solidify domestic power and to justify political and economic shortcomings.

Azerbaijan has called the unresolved Karabakh issue an impediment to democracy and protection of human rights in the country. Official Baku also uses the conflict pretext for suppressing political opposition to the ruling autocratic regime.[31] Armenia has mostly used the NK conflict to justify criticism of the electoral

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[27] *Freedom in the World 2021: Azerbaijan*, FREEDOM HOUSE, (2022), https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2021.

[28] *See* Katy Pearce, *While Armenia and Azerbaijan Fought over Nagorno-Karabakh, Their Citizens Battled on Social Media*, THE WASH POST (Dec. 4 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/04/while-armenia-azerbaijan-fought-over-nagorno-karabakh-their-citizens-battled-social-media/.

[29] *See Armenia: Events of 2019,* HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/armenia (2020).

[30] *Freedom in the World 2021: Armenia*, FREEDOM HOUSE, https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2021 (2022).

[31] *See* Rasim Musabayov, *The Karabakh Conflict and Democratization in Azerbaijan*, 17 ACCORD CONCILIATION RESOURCES, 60 (2005), https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Accord17_19TheKarabakhconflictanddemocratizationinAzerbaijan_2005_ENG_0.pdf.

processes and difficulties in socio-economic situations in the country.[32]

E.   RHETORIC

Throughout the conflict period, especially since the first war of 1991-1994 ended with territorial losses for Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani and Armenian governments have utilized available means of communication to promote public narratives regarding the conflict.

Azerbaijan disseminates anti-Armenian rhetoric, including demeaning statements, notions that the war was not over, and stressing the necessity to accumulate all resources for the liberation of the homeland from the Armenian occupiers.[33] [*See* https://perma.cc/B36Q-JRQF to Access Image].

The Armenian government, in turn, used the Karabakh conflict to solidify power, and promote the narrative of the "invincibility of the Armenian Army" and the inevitable defeat of any revanchist aspirations in Azerbaijan.[34] Armenian officials, however, do not publicly use demeaning or openly aggressive rhetoric against the Azerbaijani people.

F.   KEY PLATFORMS / STATE RESOURCES

According to the DataReportal Global Digital Insight resource, as of 2022, Armenia has 1.98m active internet users (66.5% of the

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[32] *See* Sergey Minasyan, *The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Context of South Caucasus Regional security issues: An Armenian perspective*, 45 NATIONALITIES PAPERS (Jan. 2017).

[33] *See* The Human Rights Defender of Armenia & The Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, *Ad Hoc Public Report: Organized Hate Speech and Animosity Towards Ethic Armenians in Azerbaijan as Root Causes of Ethnically Based Torture and Inhuman Treatment by Azerbaijani Armed Forced* (Sept.-Nov. 2020), https://www.ombuds.am/images/files/2bb83fd52ae0011eeaa6e77f42210cd3.pdf.

[34] Maria Raquel Freire & Licínia Simão, *The Armenian Road to Democracy: Dimensions of a Tortuous Process*, CEPS WORKING DOCUMENT NO. 267 (May 2007), http://aei.pitt.edu/11729/1/1492.pdf.

country's population of 3 million).[35] There are 2.05 million social media users, i.e., 69% of the population.[36] The number of social media users is higher than overall Internet users for social media users do not necessarily represent unique individuals and there can be several accounts per authentic or inauthentic user.

In 2022, Azerbaijan had 8.32 million active Internet users (81.1% of the country's population of 10.26 million). There are 5.2 million users of social media, which represents 50.7% of the population.[37] The exact number of unique individuals and accounts per authentic user is not verified. [*See* https://perma.cc/6H6C-YYC3 to Access Tables 1 and 2].

Facebook and Twitter are the two most popular social communication platforms in Azerbaijan and Armenia. The platforms are the primary choices for governments and government-affiliated structures to communicate political messages to domestic and foreign audiences. Heads of the executive power (President of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister in Armenia), defense ministries, and foreign ministries have a significant number of followers on those platforms. [*See* https://perma.cc/6H6C-YYC3 to Access Table 3].

The situation with Twitter in Azerbaijan is the outlier here. Despite the low absolute ratio of Twitter accounts per total share of social media users in Azerbaijan (3.55% or 184,000 users), as of May, 2022 the page of the Azerbaijani President has 726,500 followers or 13.97% of total social media users. An additional 540,000 users (around 10% of discrepancy) can imply either a large number of follower accounts from outside the country or represent inauthentic accounts.

The discrepancy in the number of followers of the Armenian Prime Minister's page on Twitter is around one percent: 5.81% of Twitter's total share of social media accounts vs. 7% (or 145,000) of actual followers on the platform. Indicators on other social platforms do not demonstrate significant discrepancies.

G. SUPPLY CHAIN

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[35] Simon Kemp, *Digital 2022: Armenia*, DATAREPORTAL (Feb. 15, 2022), https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-armenia.
[36] *Id.*
[37] *Id.*

Numbers indicate that Facebook by far is the most popular social network in Azerbaijan and Armenia. As such, the platform is the natural choice for government and government-affiliated structures for communication. The communication chain involves authentic and inauthentic users and accounts.

Inauthentic accounts can be classified into three main subgroups: so-called *"trolls", "automated bots"* and *"cyborgs."* [38] [*See* https://perma.cc/3MBE-VXRL to Access Additional Information]. Using *hashtags*—a combination of letters, numbers, and/or emoji preceded by the "#" symbol allows categorization of the content making it more discoverable online.

VI. AZERBAIJAN

A. MEDIA

[39]According to Freedom House, power in Azerbaijan remains heavily concentrated in the hands of the authoritarian regime of President Ilham Aliyev who has served as the head of state since inheriting the presidency from his late father Heydar Aliyev in 2003. Corruption is widespread and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution. The media and internet freedom in Azerbaijan remains heavily regulated. The state remains in control of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector and often voluntarily decides on public access to the internet, social media platforms, and other resources. Social media users who express any dissent or opposition to the ruling regime can expect prosecution if they reside in Azerbaijan and risk intimidation from the authorities and pro-government trolls if abroad. Independent and Western-backed

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[38] David Klepper, *Cyborgs, Trolls and Bots: A Guide to Online Misinformation*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, (Feb. 7 2020), https://apnews.com/article/us-news-ap-top-news-elections-social-media-technology-4086949d878336f8ea6daa4dee725d94.

media are forced to either follow the official line or shut down operations in the country.[40]

There are no factual confirmations that the Azerbaijani state structures undertake centralized efforts to use bots or other tools for online manipulations over large audiences. At the same time, the level of control of the media realm in the country minimizes the chances for independent uncoordinated online media activity by a non-state-affiliated actor.

B. ANTI-ARMENIAN RHETORIC

Political messages by the Azerbaijani officials with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict include general patriotic and militaristic statements, as well as derogatory anti-Armenian rhetoric. The issue of disseminating anti-Armenian hate speech by the Azerbaijani official structures was the focus of different official and non-governmental international monitoring bodies. In one example, the 2011 report by the Council of Europe's European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance mentions the "constant negative official and media discourse concerning the Republic of Armenia helps to sustain a negative climate of opinion regarding people of Armenian origin, who remain vulnerable to discrimination."[41] Similarly, the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities stressed "a very persistent public narrative surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that identifies variably 'Armenia' or 'Armenians' as "the enemy" and openly promulgates hate messages, in particular on the Internet."[42] The Committee also expressed concern "by the levels of official involvement in endorsing and disseminating such views, as they are often directed also against Azerbaijani citizens of ethnic Armenian origin, as well as anybody else who may be seen as affiliated with

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[40] David M. Herszenhorn, *Radio Station Backed by U.S. Is Raided in Azerbaijan*, N. Y. TIMES, Dec. 28 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/29/world/middleeast/radio-station-backed-by-us-is-raided-in-azerbaijan.html.

[41] THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AGAINST RACISM AND INTOLERANCE, *ECRI Report on Azerbaijan* (2011), https://rm.coe.int/third-report-on-azerbaijan/16808b557e.

[42] COUNCIL OF EUROPE, Opinion on Azerbaijan (2012), https://rm.coe.int/168008c664.

Armenia."[43] The 2017 Opinion by The Advisory Committee further noted "that the ubiquitous use of inflammatory language by politicians and other public figures can have an adverse impact on society's perception of persons belonging to the Armenian minority . . . The Advisory Committee regrets that an entire generation of Azerbaijanis has now been raised with a rhetoric of hate, hostility, and victimhood, which may have an impact on prospects of future reconciliation."[44]

The supply chain of information originates in the state and state-controlled media. As the first step, the official websites of the Azerbaijani President and popular state agencies (such as the Defense Ministry and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) publish speeches and statements by President Aliyev and other political leaders. State-controlled media then disseminate the information through their websites. Authentic and inauthentic social media accounts pick up the strongest quotes from the statement or article and disseminate them with the help of trolls, bots, and cyborgs to users across the most popular platforms. Hashtags like *#ArmenianAgression, #KarabakhIsAzerbaijan, #JusticeForAzerbaijan, #BabyKillerArmenia,* and *#DoNotBelieveArmenia* are some of the examples. Here are instances of anti-Armenian statements by President of Azerbaijan that have circulated via official websites, news outlets and social media:

- *"Our main enemies are the Armenians from all over the world".*[45]
- *"Armenia as a country is of no value. It is actually a colony, an outpost run from abroad";*[46]

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[43] *Id.*

[44] COUNCIL OF EUROPE, Fourth Opinion on Azerbaijan (2017), https://rm.coe.int/4th-acfc-opinion-on-azerbaijan-english-language-version/1680923201.

[45] PRESIDENT of the REPUBLIC of AZERBAIJAN ILHAM ALIYEV, *Ilham Aliyev Took Part in Conferences*, (Feb. 28, 2012), https://president.az/ru/articles/view/4400.

[46] Ilham Aliyev, (@presidentaz), TWITTER (Nov. 20, 2012, 1:52 a.m.), https://twitter.com/presidentaz/status/270827003521929216?lang=en.

- *"We are not living in peace, we are living in a state of war. Everyone must know this…"*
- *"Just as we have beaten the Armenians on the political and economic fronts, we are able to defeat them on the battlefield."*[47]

In parallel, the state-controlled websites and social media accounts distribute public feedback on the policies of Azerbaijan's President. Letters to President Aliyev mostly contain gratitude and unequivocal public support for the official policies with regard to the Armenian people.

Although the veracity of such letters cannot be confirmed or rejected, such initiatives have become part of the Azerbaijani government's efforts on legitimization of the anti-Armenian policies domestically and internationally. Below are excerpts from such letters disseminated through official accounts or state-controlled media:

- *Asker Bayramov: "I am asking you to send me to battle, too… I will go to kill them rather than to die. Please do not turn down my request."*[48]
- *Ahmed Akoji: "The despicable Armenians will see the inextinguishable power of the Turkic people. May Allah protect you. May the Almighty be by your side."*[49]
- *Zamiga Akhadova: "The devious Armenians saw what the fed-up Azerbaijani soldiers are capable of."*[50]
- *Byulent Karagan: "We always support you in your just struggle against the hateful Armenians."*[51]

Media and personal blogs also play an active role in shaping public perception of Armenians among Azerbaijanis. The main actors in the Azerbaijani media field are Vesti.az, 1news.az, Day.az and other state-controlled resources. Information mostly includes formal statements

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[47] Ilham Aliyev, (@presidentaz), TWITTER (Aug. 7, 2014, 5:51 a.m.), https://twitter.com/presidentaz/status/270827003521929216497364369986945024?lang=en.

[48] ASIF GURBAN ET AL., *Letters to President Ilham Aliyev: We All Support Your Political Course and Our Army*, DAY.AZ, (Apr. 11, 2016), https://news.day.az/politics/767018.html.

[49] *Id.*

[50] *Id.*

[51] *From Bulent Karagan*, PRESIDENT of the REPUBLIC of AZERBAIJAN, (Apr. 6, 2016), https://president.az/ru/articles/view/18570.

by the top political leaders, as well as op-eds and other publications promoting stigmas and stereotypes.

Here are some examples of the wording in publications by the largest media:

- *"…we won't waste the time of our readers by describing the filth, unscrupulousness, greed, cowardice, baseness, treachery, cruelty, envy, cynicism and all the abomination that fills the inner world of Armenians."[52]*
- *The Armenianhood is like a variety of flu. There is the swine flu, and there is the Armenian flu…killing this virus is possible only by understanding its nature, becoming immune to it and destroying it without mercy." [53]*
- *"jackal is a typical rubbish animal, the carrier of infection and parasite and in the Orient, it is associated with petty flattery, sycophancy and bootlicking. It is also the embodiment of cowardice and meanness…Doesn't the description of this animal look familiar? You are right; this is a one-to-one description that matches the lifestyle and behavior of Armenians. Just like Armenians, the jackals are cowardly, base, cheeky and crafty."[54]*
- *"depraved and ill-mannered women can be found in any nation. However, the perversity of the Armenian women, representatives of the oldest profession, is known worldwide."[55]*

The coordination of social media activity becomes particularly obvious during periods of military escalations. For instance, the July 2020 clashes along the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border have also

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[52] Namik Ibragimov, *The Order "For Courage" is necessary for the Armenians who will come to the Eurovision Song Contest in Baku*, VESTI.AZ (May 31, 2011), https://vesti.az/news/78758.

[53] Namik Ibragimov, *Unlike Azerbaijan, Georgia should declare quarantine against Armenian infection*, VESTI.AZ (Aug. 1, 2011), http://vesti.az/news/84919.

[54] B.B, *The "Government" of Karabakh Allocated 46,000 Dollars to Fight Against Their Own Kind*, VESTI.AZ (Feb. 9, 2012), https://vesti.az/news/78758.

[55]Armine Adibekyan, *Armenophobia in Azerbaijan* (2013), https://kupdf.net/download/-_59d33a5608bbc5745a687199_pdf.

seen intensified engagement in the social media realm. The sides launched hashtag campaigns on Twitter using strong phrases, such as *#AzerbaijanAggression*, *#ArmenianAgression,* etc..

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) analyzed pro-Armenian and pro-Azerbaijani hashtags from July 12 to July 18, 2020, to compare the traffic flows on Twitter.[56] [*See* https://perma.cc/PF7Q-FPPU to Access Graph].

The DFRLab concluded that pro-Azerbaijan hashtags were heavily manipulated and several high-volume accounts were responsible for a major portion of the reactions and retweets.[57]

The pro-Azerbaijan hashtags significantly surpassed the pro-Armenia hashtags in number of mentions, approximately with a proportion of 33 to 1. They demonstrated sharp peaks of retweets daily at around 2:00 pm. The pro-Armenian hashtags displayed scales and patterns more characteristic of organic traffic.

The DFRLab did not find solid evidence that the pro-Azerbaijani accounts were fully automated bots and concluded that they had been curated by "highly dedicated human users, many of them college students or belonging to the pro-regime youth groups."[58]

The specialists found other evidence of coordinated online manipulation by the state-controlled youth organizations. For example, the account the General Union to Youth for Support (GUYS)—a youth organization established to support President Aliyev's youth development policy—received "like" reactions by the exact same accounts and in the same order under two consequent posts on Twitter.[59] [*See* https://perma.cc/83QS-F4KK to Access Image].

C. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Article 283 of Azerbaijan's Criminal Code prohibits the "incitement of national, racial, social or religious hatred and enmity."[60] The crime is defined as "actions aimed at the incitement of national,

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[56] DFRLab, *Patriotic Astroturfing in the Azerbaijan-Armenia Twitter War*, MEDIUM (July 21, 2020), https://medium.com/dfrlab/patriotic-astroturfing-in-the-azerbaijan-armenia-twitter-war-9d234206cdd7.
[57] *Id.*
[58] *Id.*
[59] *Id.*
[60] UNITED NATIONS, *Criminal Code of the Azerbaijan Republic,* 90 https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/AZERBAIJAN_Criminal%20Code.pdf.

racial, social or religious hatred and enmity, the humiliation of national dignity, as well as actions aimed at restricting the rights of citizens, or establishing the superiority of citizens on the basis of their national, racial, or religious belonging if such acts are committed in public or through the use of mass media."[61] The existence of the regulation, however, does not prevent wide public distribution of derogatory rhetoric. Official structures and law enforcement use social media also to target activists,[62] journalists, and the NGO representatives who express opposition to the ruling regime or publicly support reconciliation with Armenians.[63]

D. PUBLIC OPINION

Unsophisticated but highly effective coordinated state policies using new technologies and online resources had their effect on public opinion among Azerbaijanis. A majority of the country's population expresses a negative attitude towards the Armenian people. Public attacks towards Armenians have become tolerable and welcome, while messages for reconciliation and mutual tolerance become targets of condemnation and accusations of state treason.[64]

According to the latest available public opinion data by Swiss-based Center for Security Studies, by 2011 94% of Azerbaijani respondents mentioned Armenia as the biggest enemy of Azerbaijan.[65] Manifestations of intolerance towards Armenians took various forms

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[61] *Id.*

[62] *Azerbaijan: Activists Targeted by 'Government-Sponsored' Cyber Attack*, AMNESTY INT'L (Mar. 10, 2017), https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/azerbaijan-activists-targeted-by-government-sponsored-cyber-attack-2/.

[63] *Azerbaijan: Lengthy Jail Sentences for Prominent Human Rights Defenders Are Shockingly Unjust,* AMNESTY INT'L (Aug. 13, 2015), https://bit.ly/3Q00t3i.

[64] Idrak Abbasov, *Azerbaijani Journalist Accused of Spying for Armenia,* INST. for WAR and PEACE REPORTING (Apr. 25, 2014), https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azerbaijani-journalist-accused-spying-armenia.

[65] Iris Kempe, *The South Caucasus Between the EU and the Eurasian Union*, CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIG. #51-52, 21 (June 17, 2013), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/166585/CAD-51-52.pdf.

embracing wider circles of Azerbaijani society, including representatives of religious structures, sports[66], and intelligentsia.

Among the most vivid examples is the case of Azerbaijani officer Ramil Safarov. In 2004, during a NATO-sponsored seminar in Budapest, Hungary, Safarov used an axe to decapitate a sleeping Armenian fellow participant of the course–officer Gurgen Margaryan. Safarov confessed to the ethnically motivated murder and expressed no remorse to justify his action on the grounds that the victim was Armenian.[67] He was sentenced to life imprisonment in Hungary. In 2012, Safarov was extradited to Azerbaijan to continue serving his sentence. Upon arrival in Azerbaijan, he was greeted as a national hero, pardoned by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, promoted to the rank of Major, given an apartment in the capital city Baku and eight years of back pay.[68] Azerbaijan's Human Rights Defender E.Suleymanova issued a statement thanking President Aliyev for liberating Safarov from Hungarian prison, stressing that "Ramil Safarov must become the example of patriotism for the Azerbaijani youth."[69] A special website dedicated to Safarov is collecting appreciation letters being sent to his email axe@safarov.org.[70]

During the military hostilities in 2020, the weaponization of social media in Azerbaijan has also seen attention from Facebook. The platform removed around 8,000 Facebook and Instagram troll accounts and pages linked to the Youth Union of Azerbaijan's ruling New Azerbaijan Party for "violating its policy against coordinated

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[66] *UEFA Bans Azeri Soccer Officer Who Said 'We Must Kill All Armenians*, ASBAREZ (Nov. 4, 2020), https://asbarez.com/uefa-bans-azeri-soccer-officer-who-said-we-must-kill-all-armenians/.

[67] Shaun Walker, *Relatives of Armenian Axed to Death by Azeri Officer Call for Justice*, THE GUARDIAN (May 25, 2020), https://www.theguardian.com/law/2020/may/25/relatives-armenian-axed-death-by-azeri-officer-call-justice-ramil-safarov.

[68] Sarah Kendzior, *The Axe Murderer Who Became a Facebook Hero*, ALJAZEERA (Sept. 5, 2012), https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/9/5/the-axe-murderer-who-became-a-facebook-hero.

[69] ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE, *Anti–Armenian Propaganda and Hate Dissemination Carried Out by Azerbaijan as a Serious Obstacle to the Negotiation Process* (Oct. 7 2008), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/b/34195.pdf.

[70] RAMIL SAFAROV, http://www.safarov.org/en/contacts.html.

inauthentic behavior."[71] Several months later, the trolling operation by state-backed structures returned to the social media platforms.

VII. ARMENIA

A. MEDIA

Freedom House assesses Armenia as a partly free country and a fledgling democracy. As of 2022, Armenia remains in the transitional period that followed mass anti-government protests and elections in 2018, which changed the political elite in the country. Lack of transparency in policymaking, troubled electoral system, and weak rule of law are among the government's biggest priorities .[72] Internet access in Armenia is free and competitive. Online journalists, commentators, and regular internet users do not engage in self-censorship. The Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC) regulates the telecommunications sphere. Private internet companies plan and develop their own networks independently from interference from the government or the PCRC.

The media environment in Armenia is decentralized but often influenced politically, financially and/or ideologically by various domestic and foreign stakeholders. The media in the country operates in accordance with the corresponding legislation. In general, the media content that complies with international human rights standards is unregulated. There were several cases of certain limitations in internet flows during phases of active hostilities with Azerbaijan and during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic when the government

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[71] CRAIG SILVERMAN & RYAN MAC, *It Took Facebook More Than A Year–And A Whistleblower To Remove An Azerbaijan Troll Farm Connected to Azerbaijan's Ruling Party*, BUZZFEED NEWS (Oct. 8, 2020), https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-azerbaijan-troll-farm.

[72] *Freedom in the World 2021: Armenia*, FREEDOM HOUSE (2022), https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2021.

enacted emergency measures that empowered the state to ban or delete the pandemic-related unofficial content.

Armenian legislation allows filtering of Internet content, but under a certain set of circumstances and with a corresponding court order.[73]

B. ANTI-AZERBAIJANI RHETORIC

Anti-Azerbaijani rhetoric is neither centralized nor coordinated on a political level. The Office of the President or Prime Minister does not disseminate statements targeting the Azerbaijani people collectively. Criticism usually targets separate political figures, such as President Aliyev, the Minister of Defense, and other high-ranking Azerbaijani officials. The media outlets and social platforms mostly disseminate patriotic sentiments and cover political and socio-economic developments in the country.

The difference between Azerbaijan's and Armenia's rhetoric in public statements regarding the adversary can be explained by the outcome of the 1991-1994 war. Armenia's military successes and territorial gains in the first war with Azerbaijan have set comparatively pacifist rhetoric, framing the necessity of a peaceful final resolution of the conflict. Dissemination of anti-Azerbaijani sentiments takes place mostly on social media and blogs in a non-state coordinated manner by separate accounts or groups.

Second to National Television, online sources, and social media are the most frequently used sources of information in Armenia. According to the 2019 study of media consumption by the Caucasus Research Resource Center–Armenia Foundation, 57 percent of the population uses social media every day. [74] 83 percent of those who read online news reported doing so on social media, while 17 percent access news directly from the website.[75]

Compared to Azerbaijan, the weaponization of social media in Armenia is a more sophisticated process and involves a more diverse group of stakeholders and tactics. In March 2021 the Media Initiatives

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[73] *Id.*

[74] CRRC-ARMENIA, *Media Consumption and Media Coverage of Reforms in Armenia* (Aug. 2019), ://www.crrc.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MICE-Report-2019_.pdf.

[75] *Id.*

Center of Armenia (MCA) published the report *The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media.[76]* The report examined the sources and strategies for spreading disinformation in Armenia, and concluded that the false narratives disseminate mostly through:

- *media outlets affiliated with the political opposition;*
- *separate ideological groups;*
- *foreign websites;*
- *social media influencers;*
- *trolls, bots and cyborgs;*
- *so-called "mushroom media" - semi-entertaining and semi-informative websites; and*
- *"clickbait" - websites that target commercial goal by encouraging visitors to click on particular links.[77]*

Tactics for disseminating false narratives and disinformation also include mimicking credible independent fact-checking platforms. Several such platforms often promote unsupported claims or false information criticizing the government. They operate a network of outlets and social media accounts to amplify the coverage and effect.[78] Such tactics can be especially damaging since in the long run they can jeopardize public trust in professional and trustworthy resources.

Media experts in Armenia have outlined the main patterns of disinformation by analyzing three components: sender of the information (who?), its message (what and how?), and context (why?): [79]

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[76] Hayk Smbatyan, *The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media*, MEDIA INITIATIVES CENTER (Mar. 21, 2021), https://media.am/en/laboratory/2021/03/12/26670/.

[77] *Id.*

[78] Zarine Kharazian, *Armenia Assailed by Deceptive 'Fact-Checking' Groups, Part 1: The Players*, MEDIUM (May 2, 2019), https://medium.com/dfrlab/armenia-assailed-by-deceptive-fact-checking-groups-part-i-the-players-2ce03daf2d28.

[79] Hayk Smbatyan, *The Patterns of Disseminating Disinformation in the Armenian Online Media*, MEDIA INITIATIVES CENTER, (Mar. 21, 2021), https://media.am/en/laboratory/2021/03/12/26670/.

- *Sender of the Information: disinformation is often present in articles that do not mention the author, the primary source or the link to the primary source and instead refer to unknown or undetermined sources (often mentioned as "our sources");*
- *Message: mostly observed in the article's title and contains wording that adds interest (e.g. "Urgent!", "Exclusive!" etc.);*
- *Context: has a special significance since it focuses on the core purpose of the posting highlighting the transferring of specific contents (e.g. political propaganda, conspiracy theories, defamatory rhetoric etc.)*[80]

According to the study, media materials in Armenia are likely to contain disinformation if they have one or more of the following features:

- *violation of the reporter's professionalism, literacy or ethics;*
- *various stylistics in the text;*
- *emotional or intuitive connotations;*
- *subjective assessments, characteristics, or connotations;*
- *exclamation marks;*
- *eye-capturing visuals.*[81]

The Karabakh conflict is among the most covered topics in the Armenian media. As such, the issue often becomes subject to disinformation and propaganda.

The 2020 study by the Media Initiatives Center analyzed the pattern of media reporting related to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in three popular online outlets: News.am, Tert.am and 168.am. In the period from April 1 to May 31, 2020, the three newspapers published 2464 articles on the issue. The three media republished almost half of the articles from another source, while 21 percent of the articles did not mention the author or primary source.[82] [*See* https://perma.cc/AH64-65SN to Access Graph].

Social media contained primary sources in 70 percent of the content. It is a major difference from the tactics in Azerbaijan, where information flow originates from state-affiliated sources and is disseminated through online outlets and social media. Almost half of the reviewed publications contained specific political statements,

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[80] *Id.*

[81] *Id.*

[82] *Id.*

mostly criticizing the Armenian government's stance regarding the NK conflict, domestic policies, and foreign relations.

The most common accusations in the articles relate to the ineffectiveness of the policies in negotiations with Azerbaijan, lack of transparency in the talks, and accusations of "handing over the lands" to Azerbaijan.[83] [*See* https://perma.cc/B2FC-8JR7 to Access Graph].

According to the 2022 research by the International Republican Institute, around 51 percent of respondents in Armenia use Facebook as a daily source of political news. Almost 70 percent use the platform at least once a week. [84] [*See* https://perma.cc/VZ6N-Q83D to Access Graph].

C. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

In April 2020, the Armenian parliament adopted amendments to the criminal code that criminalize violent hate speech and public incitement of justification of violence based on gender, race, skin color, ethnic or social origin, or other characteristics.[85] Punishment for such actions ranges from monetary penalties to imprisonment for up to three years. The administration in power proclaimed freedom of speech as a value more important than "protecting the government from fake news."[86] In February 2021, however, the Armenian government introduced a bill proposing to forbid any media from citing "unidentifiable social media sources" to minimize the risk of

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[83] *Id.*

[84] INT'L REPUBLICAN INST., *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia* (May 2021), https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/armenia_ppt_final.pdf.

[85] *Armenia Criminalises Public Calls to Violence*, CSO METER (May 13, 2020), https://csometer.info/updates/armenia-criminalises-public-calls-violence.

[86] Aneta Harutyunyan, *Pashinyan Considers Freedom of Speech More Important than Protecting Government from Fake News*, ARMENPRESS (Jan. 31, 2019), https://armenpress.am/eng/news/962640.html.

disinformation through social media channels.[87] As of the writing of this paper, the draft bill was still under consideration.

D. PUBLIC OPINION

The mostly liberal media and the presence of diverse domestic and international actors in Armenia's media realm have influenced the scope of the public perception of priorities. The main concerns include security, economy, political stability, and national unity.

The public perception of freedom of expression is average. The 2022 public opinion survey by the International Republican Institute indicated that 64 percent of respondents were "definitely or somewhat not afraid" to openly express their opinions.[88] The existing conflict with Azerbaijan and national security in general continue to dominate as primary concerns—28 percent and 15 percent respectively. 86 percent of participants named resolution of the NK conflict as very or somewhat important for the future of Armenia.[89] Most of the country's population consider Azerbaijan and Turkey (Turkey openly supports Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia) as the greatest political and economic threats to Armenia—90 percent and 77 percent respectively.[90]

As of 2022, the most notable public instances of anti-Azerbaijani sentiments in Armenia were the cancellations of an Azerbaijani film festival in Armenia in 2010 and 2012 due to large-scale public opposition.[91]

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[87] Chairman Of The National Assembly Of The Republic Of Armenia, *The Law Of The Republic Of Armenia On Amendments And Amendments To The Law Of The Republic Of Armenia "On Mass Media*" (Feb. 2, 2021) http://www.parliament.am/drafts.php?sel=showdraft&DraftID=60991.

[88] *Public opinion survey: Residents of Armenia*, INT'L REPUBLICAN INST. (Feb. 9, 2022), https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-surveyresidents-of-armenia/.

[89] *Id.* at 46.

[90] *Id.* at 37.

[91] *Azerbaijani Film Festival Canceled In Armenia After Protests*, RADIOFREEEUROPE, RADIOLIBERTY (Apr. 13, 2012), https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan_armenia_film_festival_canceled_protests/24547207.html.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. GENERAL APPROACH

The weaponization of social media is a constantly developing phenomenon. The role of social media as an actor in conflict and peacebuilding continues to increase. Disinformation campaigns and targeted messaging can promote mistrust, reinforce the disconnection between conflicting societies, and undermine peace capacities by propagating hate speech, stigma, and stereotypes.

Minimizing the disruptive effect of social media weaponization requires coordinated intervention by governments, NGOs, media outlets, IT companies, and human rights watchdogs.

Although there is still no unique set of actions that can effectively counter disinformation and other types of public manipulations, the issues that need to be addressed and possible response mechanisms are largely known. They range from supporting free and financially independent media to promoting the online resilience of the public through information literacy.

P. W. Singer describes in his "LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media" several factors that can help understand opportunities to counteract the phenomenon:

- *Contemporary information environment is stabilizing. Internet exists as the number one means of communication and will remain as such for the foreseeable future. Social media will likely continue to expand in size and scope, but the essential core of it and key players will remain unchanged;*[92]
- *Internet will remain a "battlefield" and every user is part of it. From initial application as a positive and constructive phenomenon, the role of internet rapidly changes and develops into a tool for different types of manipulation and weaponization;*[93]

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[92] *See generally* EMERSON T. BROOKING & P.W. SINGER, LIKEWAR: THE WEAPONIZATION of SOCIAL MEDIA (2018).

[93] *Id.* at 264.

- *Weaponization of internet and social media in particular raises the necessity of reevaluating the information per se. Event or opinion contain power on the internet when information consumers believe in their veracity. Disinformation can be powerful, while true events can be judged as staged or irrelevant. Political, psychological and increasingly algorithmic manipulations significantly influence the outcome;*[94]
- *Interconnection of war and politics is not helping. Politics increasingly applies information warfare, while armed hostilities more often rely on winning online public opinion.*[95]

B. POSSIBLE STEPS

Although there are different baseline conditions in the two countries with regard to the level of democratization, freedom of speech, administrative transparency, and other aspects, the recommended interventions would promote a more favorable online media environment for peace narratives in the two countries:

- *Promote online resilience through information literacy: as social media becomes increasingly popular, information literacy becomes an important educational issue. The problem is especially present among the younger generations of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Information literacy needs to be covered as a discipline in Armenian and Azerbaijani schools and universities. Younger generations must learn how to protect themselves from online manipulations, as well as to gain the necessary skills for responsible online behavior;*
- *Cross-generational open courses in online literacy for young professionals/adults in the two societies. These can include certificate programs, summer universities, interagency partnership project requirements, public lectures, and other initiatives;*
- *Demand adherence to the criminalization of dissemination of stigma, prejudices, and other types of dangerous speech that prompt hate or violence inside or between communities. Dangerous speech normally includes dehumanizing rhetoric (comparing humans to animals or otherwise subhuman, etc.),*

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[94] *Id.*
[95] *Id.*

coded language (using memes or terms popular within groups of online haters), suggestions of impurity (characterizing the target group as non-deserving of equal rights), and so-called accusation in a mirror (when the audience is falsely manipulated into believing in an imminent attack. It is done as means to justify preemptive violence against the target group);

- *Promote legislative reforms and regulations that would outline the framework for social media platforms' functioning in the countries;*
- *Delegitimization of favoring conflict over consensus and dissemination ofperiodic messages in support of objective journalists advocating for peace between Armenians and Azerbaijanis through credible channels;*
- *Public criticism of the cases of harassment of objective journalism and targeting by nationalist groups and the authorities;*
- *Offer financial support to existing reliable local media and engage with the countries' media on the issues of human rights, media responsibility, and reconciliation interventions;*
- *Promote "parity of resources" between civil society and reliable media on the one side and propaganda outlets on the other in order to help fill the lack of sound and peaceful public rhetoric;*
- *Sponsor periodic fact-checking initiatives and investigative journalism projects to unveil cases of information influence operations where necessary - without compromising the identity of sources; and*
- *Periodically organize joint discussions among the Armenian and Azerbaijanijournalists and intelligentsia who vary in perceptions towards the opposite side.*

IX. CONCLUSION

The emergence of social media inspired optimism that a better-interconnected world would promote a better, safer, and more stable

global environment. Yet the phenomenon has quickly become the place for various manipulations.

The weaponization of social media is especially effective in vulnerable or war-affected societies during conflicts. Increased global access to technology contributes to a significant increase in the scale and scope of manipulative disinformation and hate speech efforts.

Cognitive space will most likely remain a target for manipulations. Governments and domestic and foreign stakeholders will continue to apply available technological means to influence public opinion and manage the perception of the targeted groups. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the weaponization of social media by governments and other influencers has had its effect on mutual perception between the peoples and radicalization of stances. In parallel, social media has become a factor in domestic political and social developments. It is hard to imagine a complete eradication of the problem of weaponization of social media. At the same time, however, there are measures that will help mitigate the consequences of manipulations.