



### Tracking and Countering Anti-European and Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Armenia

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#### Importance and Urgency of Propaganda Problem

With “post-truth” being selected as the word of the year in 2016, exploiting one of the fundamental pillars of democratic order, the freedom of speech, some actors skillfully utilize propaganda to advance non-democratic goals.

The issues of propaganda and disinformation have become more urgent since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and confrontation between the West and Russia. As far right parties and populist movements are getting more leverage in the western world and geopolitical tensions are exacerbating, information warfare and propaganda are continuously employed by external and internal actors throughout the Central and Eastern Europe in the broader sense of the region (including Transcaucasia). The Armenian media sphere, due to the peculiar situation of the country that has become a member of Russian-led EAEU but that also is involved in the EU’s Eastern Partnership program, has become a microcosm of the information warfare that is forged globally. In this regard, we are particularly interested in the conduct of anti-European propaganda (AEP) and anti-democratic propaganda (ADP) in Armenia. The relevance of the research is stipulated by the growing impact, manipulation potential and sophistication of organized ADP/AEP in the country.

Anti-democracy propaganda and anti-European propaganda are two of the most common and intertwined non-issue based informational streams in Armenia. They have a large impact on the society, its system of political values, and perception of foreign political and civilizational alignment. ADP and AEP supposedly also have an influence on the elite, its governance style and orientation. It is obvious that anti-democracy and anti-European propaganda is having a serious impact on the mentality of the Armenian public and it indirectly but greatly predetermines the future course of the country, both domestically and internationally.

In the Armenian socio-political discourse democracy is generally associated with Europe (mainly EU) and targeting one often goes hand in hand with attacking the other. Thus, the undemocratic ideology, which is often masked under the disguise of conservative values, is also linked with the political issues of foreign policy course and orientation.

#### Key Findings

- **Two Clusters of Propagandistic Messages**

The anti-European and anti-democratic propaganda in Armenia unfolds in two main dimensions empirically verified by



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the existence of two core clusters of propagandistic messages.

### ▪ “Spiritual”/Emotional Cluster

On the one hand, Europe and democracy are presented as something decadent, opposing to and threatening to erode the traditional values, which in their turn overlap, correlate or are closer to (depending on the source) to the Russian society’s values. We can provisionally denote it as the *“spiritual” cluster* which irrationally appeals to emotions and employs vivid associations with images, heavy reliance on *demonization* and *false dilemma* techniques. In the image created by this cluster of messages, propaganda maximally stretches the cultural gap between Armenia and Europe, at the same time trying to narrow down the “spiritual” gap between Armenia and Russia by not mentioning it at all or presenting it in a minimized version. Thus the audience is presented with a false dilemma of choosing one cultural-civilizational way, which is (maybe not perfect but) closer to the audience itself, over the other, which is foreign, threatening, invasive and coercive. This cluster mostly appeals to emotions and operates subtly under the disguise of opinions, often delicately igniting hatred at a verbal level that cannot be classified as an evident hate speech.

### ▪ Pragmatic Cluster

On the other hand, by one-sidedly distorting the reality and presenting it in a biased way, AEP/ADP tries to push the audience towards

pragmatically (based on the provided false or distorted facts) and rationally forming a picture of reality where the orientation towards the EU is a mistake and pro-Russian orientation is the right choice. Often this may not be stated in an outright manner; rather Europe’s disadvantages may be presented in the form of “expert” assessments and forecasts of the coming collapse or crisis of the European political, economic and civilizational system. Often such kinds of “experts” are selected from marginal outliers within the West to demonstrate that: 1. either the Western expert and/or political field itself has come to the conclusion put forward by the ADP/AEP producer, 2. or the voices of truth are not heard in Europe and silenced, which is an indicator of their hypocrisy about values of free speech.

### ▪ Propaganda without Fake News

Even when not relying on fake news, this second cluster of ADP/AEP messages presents the reality one-sidedly and often out of context, again creating a false dilemma, where the audience has to choose to refrain from Europe for “pragmatic” reasons, deducing from the picture suggested by ADP/AEP.

### ▪ Traditional Approach to Countering Propaganda

The global events connected with the uprising of populism and propaganda demonstrate that despite a significant portion of studies, briefs and policy papers, the recommendations on countering propaganda are not always effective for a number of reasons: lack of political will, different interests and, the last but not the least, they are often either too vague (like ensuring media quality) or do not take into



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consideration the way that human brain works.

Regarding the last point, one should not be overoptimistic about the efficiency of the systematic analysis, exposure and deconstruction of propaganda, as well as countering it with factual information. As the cognitive science literature suggests, people are very bad Bayesian updaters, and are resistant to change their beliefs and calculations even when presented with verified information that is in contrast with them. Thus the efficiency of these recommendations would be, at best, limited to a small elite portion of rationally intelligent population. Of course this does not mean that this important means should be abandoned, rather we argue that it would be unable to counter propaganda on a massive scale.

When it comes to media regulation issues, as discussed above, most of the ADP/AEP operates below the level where it can be identified as a hate speech or propaganda of war and countered legally. Thus, having the government impose sanctions on media whenever it finds necessary may open prospects for limiting the freedom of speech.

### Recommendations

#### *To the EU:*

- More investment in projecting the real image of Europe and democracy in Armenia.
- Raising public awareness of the projects sponsored in Armenia by the EU.

#### *To the media:*

- More coverage of the EU and democracy in the media from a balanced perspective to make it possible for the audience to make a more objective choice.

#### *To researchers and NGOs:*

- Constant real time monitoring and countering propagandistic messages and narratives as they appear, otherwise counterpropaganda and post factum studies fail to reverse the beliefs of the audience. Psychology literature demonstrates that the longer propaganda is perceived as the truth, the harder it is to contradict afterwards.
- To monitor propaganda and report in a user friendly way with intensive usage of entertaining infographics to maximize the dissemination of the findings.
- Boost social media presence on the issue. NGOs should assist with the dissemination of the research findings.
- Collaboration with the European and NATO research centers for countering propaganda, making such kind of research sustainable and not episodic.
- Conduct studies on the actual impact that propaganda is having, including cutting edge studies of social media with techniques of data science and big data analytics, studies of trolls, bot activity, etc.

#### *To the Government of the Republic of Armenia:*

- Produce more narratives on the importance of democracy and the



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democratic way of development for Armenia.

- More communication on cooperation with the EU and its positive sides,

what Armenia gained from it, more coverage of official programs of cooperation with the EU.

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