

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

*David Sarkisyan*

## **Introduction**

With “post-truth” being selected as the word of the year in 2016, the recent report on propaganda (Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016, p. 2) acknowledges that “the age of information is fast becoming the age of disinformation”. 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.

Despite the great significance of the issue, comprehensive, objective and rigorous studies of ADP and AEP in Armenia are few. To partly fill that gap the proposed research will seek to answer the following questions:

What are the main arguments and themes used by ADP/AEP producers in Armenia?

How are the concepts interconnected with each other?

What types of thematic clusters are used, if any, to shape the images of Europe and democracy?

What can be done to counter ADP and AEP in Armenia?

The objectives of this research are to draw a holistic picture of how the concepts of Europe and democracy are portrayed by the selected media, to identify the circulating negative frames messages that are used and to determine the overall tone of voice which Europe and democracy are being presented with.

### **Literature Review**

Before moving forward we have to clarify what is understood, for the purposes of this research, by a highly-disputable term of propaganda. According to the non-paper of the OSCE Office of the Representative on the Freedom of the Media (The Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2015, p. 32), there are two types of propaganda:

“... there is a need to distinguish—at the level of law and policy—two sorts of propaganda in the media. The first is propaganda for war, as well as national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, as defined in international and national law. It is illegal and therefore demands judicial action with the appropriate measures in line with international human rights law standards. The second type of propaganda combines all the rest. It may be an inappropriate and scornful activity; it damages the profession of journalism, but does not necessarily call for legal action.”

Therefore one needs to understand that not all forms of propaganda are illegal, which makes countering it extremely difficult in those cases. Neither is propaganda necessarily fake news. It can rather take the form of a biased, one-sided presentation of reality, formation of negative stereotypes and dissemination of opinionated narratives. All of these contributions to the public discourse may over time have a detrimental cumulative effect in terms of manipulating the public opinion and channeling it towards irrational beliefs that are not always in the interests of the beholder. On top of that, these functions can be fulfilled latently which leads to an important distinction between the manifest and latent contents of propaganda.

Stanley (Stanley, 2015, pp. 52-53) classifies propaganda into the categories of supporting and undermining propaganda. The first is defined as a presentation of certain ideals in such a manner that aims at maximizing their realization through an appeal to emotions or non-rational judgment. Regarding the second type of propaganda, the undermining one, there is a conflict

between the two definitions provided by Putnam and Stanley. Putnam envision undermining propaganda as discourse embodying some kind of political ideals and aiming at the erosion of another political ideal belonging to the same family (Stanley, 2015, p. 54).

On the other hand Stanley is worried of the overgeneralization danger of this kind of definition, while any “genuine conflict between political ideals” may be misclassified as propaganda. In his turn he proposes his own definition of undermining propaganda and undermining demagoguery as a type of the latter. Thus, according to Stanley, undermining demagoguery is:

“A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of a worthy political, economic, or rational ideal, but is in the service of a goal that tends to undermine that very ideal”.

In this research we will mostly deal with the undermining propaganda, as any anti-European and anti-democratic propaganda falls in this category. Moreover, we are specifically interested in the undermining demagoguery. Most of the latent ADP/AEP is operating with a number of false assumptions, factually not sustained claims and misrepresentations of democratic and/or European values and political ideals. Once a false understanding of an ideal is presented it is often easy to show its negative sides. Therefore, in this research we will also deal with directing a spotlight on false embodiments of “a worthy ideal” that are called to undermine it.

Despite conflicting definitions of propaganda circulating in the academic literature and the absence of a shared legal definition of the second type of propaganda identified by the abovementioned OSCE non-paper, in scope of this research the term “propaganda” will refer to biased, stereotyped or one-sided media information that is misleading and/or serves a particular political goal.

The study on metanarratives of Russian propaganda conducted by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (Pynnoniemi & Racz, 2015) focuses on 4 key events associated with the Ukrainian conflict and their representation in the media. These events are: “the official annexation of Crimea on 16 March 2014”, burning of Trade Unions Building in Odessa, downing of MH 17 flight and the fighting in Eastern Ukraine from August 22 till September 5, 2014 (signing of the first Minsk agreement). The manuscript proceeds with case studies of propaganda surrounding the distorted representation of these events in the eight selected European countries identifying the contextual similarities and case-specific differences between them. The authors come up with the metanarratives that are consistently circulated

Some of the few important studies on anti-Western propaganda in Georgia have been conducted by the Media Development Foundation: (Kintsurashvili, 2015) and (Kintsurashvili, 2017). In the reports the authors focus on the identification of main themes and techniques of anti-Western propaganda, as well as the determination of the distribution of propagandist messages

by agents, types of media, political parties, etc. The studies report the results of frequency counting for each of the message groups, as well as derive a list of anti-Western myths and comparing them with the factual information.

One of the pioneering studies (Yerevan Press Club et al, 2016) on anti-Western propaganda in Armenia was conducted by the Yerevan Press Club in partnership with other organizations from the Eastern Europe and the Eastern Partnership countries. The research covers the period from June 6 to July 3, 2016 and, in case of Armenia, is focused at three newspapers (Novoye Vremya, Sputnik Armenia and Iravunk). The overall research design is centered at counting the frequencies of 44 selected messages and presenting the attitude towards the messages carried by the author. The latter part was categorized into positive, negative and neutral.

Another important study (Yerevan Press Club et al, 2015) carried out by the same institutions covers the period of 1-31 March, 2015 with a focus on the Russian TV channels.

Among the main findings of the reviewed works was the identification of dominant narratives. Some of the most influential narratives that have been exposed through the authors' conducted analysis were:

- Russkii Mir and Soviet Nostalgia,
- EU is bad, future is with Russia,
- Western geopolitical expansion to Russia's sphere of influence,
- NGOs as the 5<sup>th</sup> Column of the West, and democracy is just a method for meddling in domestic affairs,
- EU is coming to an end,
- Western values are decadent, etc.

In the analysis below, we will build on these and other narratives discussed in the literature as well as add some case-specific ones.

The current research fits in the literature on propaganda and fills the gaps connected with understanding the techniques of anti-European and anti-democratic propaganda in Armenia. Unlike the simplistic frequency counting approach, we try to understand how the propagandistic messages and narratives interrelate and reinforce each other, how their co-occurrence leads to formation of thematic clusters that are more effective than bombarding the audience with individual messages one at a time. Besides that, the current research covers a relatively large period of 20 months (September 1, 2015 - April 30, 2017) to provide a more holistic picture of the recent developments.

## **Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, content analysis has been used as the core method. QDA Miner and WordStat software has been used to assist the research. The coding of the sample has been done by the author and two research assistants (for the purpose of minimizing the bias) using QDA Miner software's manual coding tools. Each of the three coders (including the author) coded the full sample. Measured by Cohen's kappa, high inter-coder reliability (0.84) has been achieved in the process.

The coding scheme, deduced from the previous research and supplemented inductively, is presented below. It is divided into three groups of categories depending on the thematic focus of the messages.

**Messages:**

- **Europe**
  - EU subordinate/dependent on Turkey
  - EU not influential in global affairs
  - EU disintegration
  - EU internal crisis/problems
  - Pro Azerbaijani Europe
  - EU-US discord
  - Discord within EU
  - Countering Russia is pointless
  - Hypocrisy about values
  - Targeting EU leaders
  - EaP anti-Russian
  - Cooperation with EU wrong
  - EU dependent/shaped/guided by US
  - EU foreign policy faulty
  - EU does not need us/like us
  
- **Russia**
  - Praising Putin
  - Russia superior to EU/West
  - Cooperation with EAEU/Russia right
  - Russian foreign policy good/strong/effective
  
- **Democracy**
  - Democracy as method for meddling

- Anti-values/decadent values vs. traditional values

We have also paid attention to the application of the following techniques

**Techniques:**

- Ad Nauseam
- False Dilemma Technique
- Demonizing
- Disinformation (fake news)
- Conspiracy
- Demagoguery through not-at-issue content

**Data Sample**

The following sources were selected for the further analysis: vesti.ru, as well as the newspapers Golos Armenii, Azg and Iravunk. Vesti.ru website has been selected as the proxy for the Russian TV channel Rossiya 24, broadcasted in Armenia. According to the CRRC survey (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia, 2015) more than 68% of the Armenian population watch the Russian channels on a daily basis or several times a week. The figure clearly demonstrates the scale of the outreach of Russian propaganda in Armenia with its heavy anti-European and anti-democratic components. This is in accordance with the previous study (Yerevan Press Club et al, 2015, p. 5) which claims that in the Eastern Partnership countries the Russian TV channels are the most influential means to manipulate public opinion. This is especially the case in Armenia, Moldova and Belarus where they are widely available for free as opposed to Azerbaijan, Georgia and especially Ukraine.

The other selected sources are definitely not representative of the whole media landscape of Armenia. On the contrary they were selected as the most extreme outliers in terms of ADP/AEP activity based on the author's own observations and expert consultations in the field.

The 20-month period from September 1 2015 till April 30 2017 was studied. While the earlier periods of Russian propaganda covering the early stages of Ukrainian crisis, late 2013 and 2014-2015 incidents, are better researched in the literature (Sazonov, et al., 2016), less attention has been devoted to the abovementioned period.

In case of the vesti.ru website, because of the huge amount of information (circa 6000 articles), a systematic sample has been created that is representative of the whole population of cases for the specified period. The sample size was 361 articles, which provides a confidence level of 95% with the margin of error of 5%.

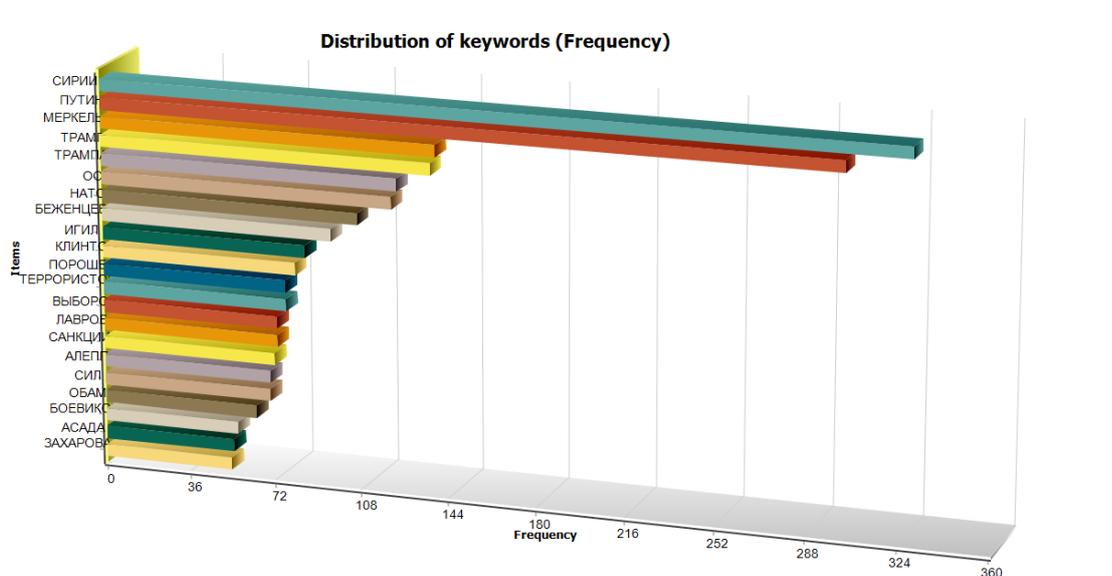
For the Armenian newspapers, the whole online archive of articles published throughout the studied period was analyzed.

In case of the Armenian newspapers “we and the world” rubric was studied. It covers the topics of Europe and democracy most frequently. Vesti.ru was studied for the rubric “politics”, where domestic and international political news are presented.

## Findings

### *Vesti.ru*

We will start the analysis by first presenting the findings from the study of Vesti.ru sample. Applying the abovementioned software's Russian language exclusion list of frequently used auxiliary words (like conjunctions, proverbs, etc.), as well as adding the months and dates to that list, we have run the frequency analysis of the most used words in the Vesti.ru sample covering the 20 month period of mainstream Russian media channels. The following figure (Figure 1) presents the list of words that have been used at least 50 times. It provides a general picture of the thematic focus of the examined Russian media channels throughout the period of September 2015- April 2017.



**Figure 1. Most Frequent Words: Vesti.ru**

The most frequently used word was “Syria”, with “ISIS”, “Aleppo”, “Assad” and “terrorists” also making into the top 20. This testifies for a large portion of the Russian media stream being devoted to the Middle Eastern theme. The second most frequently used word was “Putin” which has always been used in a positive or neutral context, one-sidedly and consistently projecting the positive image of the leader.

Merkel is one of the few foreign leaders whose names made into the least of top frequent words. She has often been targeted as incompetent, weak, unwise leader with a relatively high frequency of appearance of this kind of messages. More on targeting the EU leaders by Russian and Armenian media will be said below.

“Trump” and “Clinton” are the other foreign politicians who were most talked about in the Vesti.ru articles. This is indicative of the Russian media’s strong focus on the American presidential campaign and post-election developments. It is however noteworthy how the representation of Trump drifted from the positive image of the pre-election period (as Trump was considered to be a more preferable candidate than Clinton) to a more critical view as no major pro-Russian changes occurred in the US foreign policy under his presidency. A telling example is Kiselev’s vivid sentence from the coverage of Trump’s Syrian policy: “Sheriff Trump first bombs, than asks questions”.

The frequency analysis, however, provides only the birds-eye view of the media content. So from this point onwards we will proceed with the analysis of code distribution and code co-occurrence to understand how the specific topics interact and what share they occupy in the stream of propagandistic messages.

The relative distribution of the abovementioned codes in the sample from Vesti.ru articles is presented in the figure 2.

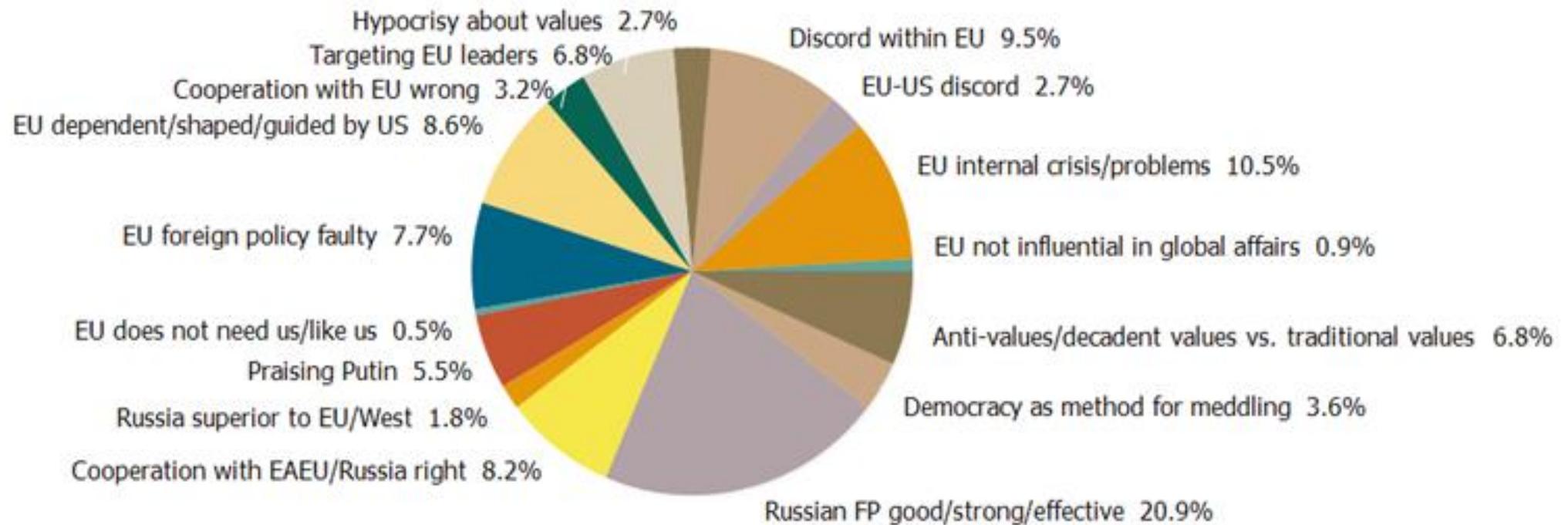
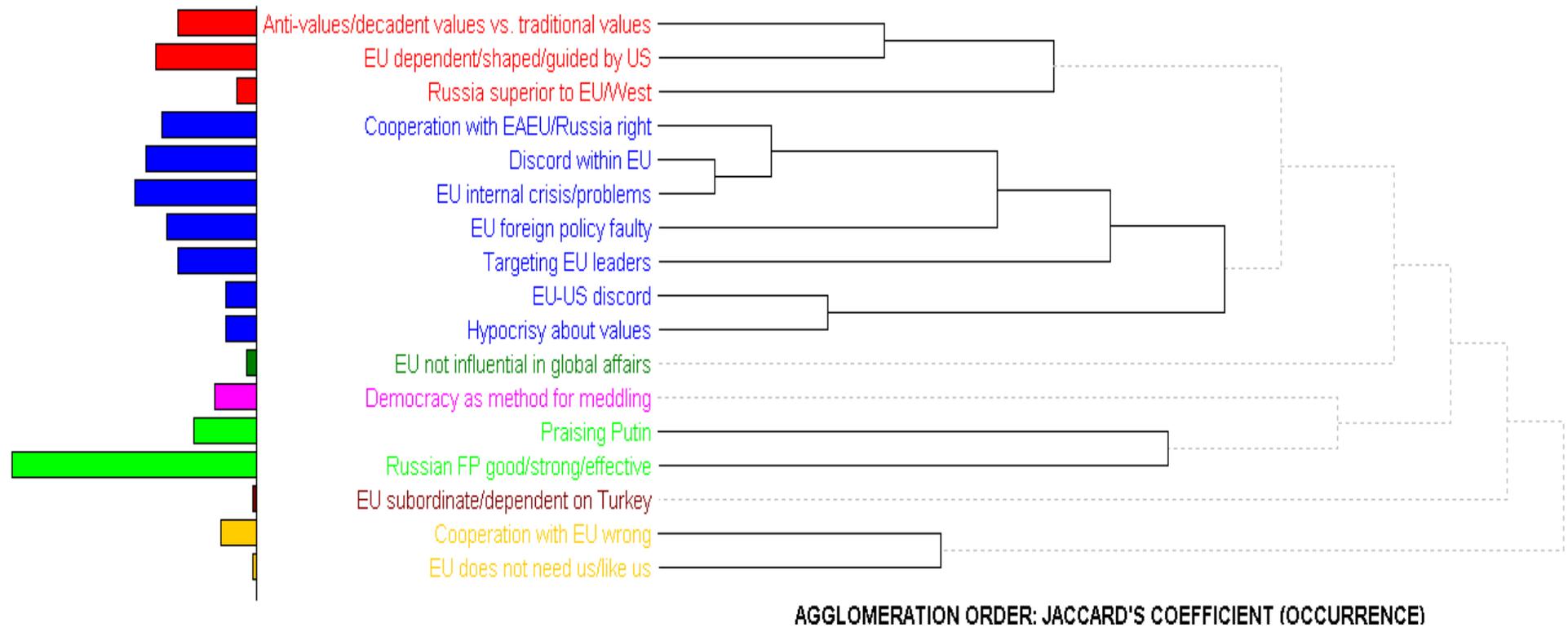


Figure 2. Distribution of Codes: Vesti.ru



**Figure 3. Thematic Clusters of Narratives: Vesti.ru**

The most frequently appearing theme was the postulation (in its different variations) that the Russian foreign policy is effective, strong, good and just. It was presented in different contexts: both regional and thematic. Thus it was used when speaking about the European politics, policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries, Middle Eastern developments and fight against ISIS, as well as when talking about the global megatrends. It was most often used, as shown in the figure below, together with praising Putin and positioning him as a globally strong leader who pursues a just and effective foreign policy.

Among the other prominently used themes with a relative frequency of 8% and more were the exaggeration of the European internal crisis and problems (both on the EU and country level), mentioning the discord within EU and inflating the discrepancies between the interests and policies of member countries, presenting the EU as a weak and amorphous body mostly dependent, guided and even shaped and engineered by the US.

Finally, another persistent narrative was the postulation that cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union and Russia is the right choice. This theme was used both in the context of the Eastern Partnership countries and applied to the European Union member states.

The next figure (Figure 3) presents the co-occurrence of the main narratives clustered in thematic blocks based on the agglomeration order by Jaccard's coefficient.

It is interesting to note some patterns of narratives co-occurring to frame the reality in a particular way. We will discuss these linkages for each media source first and then draw a comparison between them. Thus the narrative of contrasting the “anti-values and/or decadent values” of the West with the virtues of the “traditional values” is closely associated with projecting an image of Europe that is dependent and shaped by the US. This is done for the purpose of presenting the US as the root of the evil societal transformations and Europe as the recipient and not the source. Not only does this theme surface periodically in different news, a whole extended article on the issue has been written (06.03.2016) which presented Germany as an amorphous and inert country that is being engineered and shaped by the US.

Such approach fits in the political metanarrative that the US wants to cause quarrel between Europe and Russia, while Russia wants to cooperate with Europe. This narrative has been circulated by the high-level Russia official. Thus, Patrushev has commented that: “the US is the initiator of the current conflict (*confrontation between the West and Russia – D.S.*). Europe is subject to its will (article from 26.01.2016)”. This constitutes an important difference from the Armenian propagandistic field where Europe is presented as the source of decadence.

Two core themes closely associated and co-occurring are the inflation of the internal European problems/crisis and disagreement between the European states, as well as discord within them. The European problems are often presented as existential and the EU as standing on the verge of

disintegration or the end of the European civilization. None is said about the solutions proposed to several problems, which is just another way of one-sided and biased propaganda. The couple of narratives of the European crisis and the inter-European discord is then subsequently associated with the postulation of advantages and rightfulness of cooperating with Russia/EAEU. Logically, this is linked to the criticism of the European foreign policy.

As discussed above, praising Putin and the Russian foreign policy constitutes another couple of linked messages. Finally, the theme of cooperation with the EU being wrong is linked to the theme that the EU does not need cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries or unilaterally takes advantage of it at the expense of the latter's interests. An example of that is the reportage entitled "EU feeds the Moldovans with sweet words and destroys their economy" (from 31.01.2016). In that reportage someone named Svetlana says that of course it is better to be friends with Russia than with Europe. It is also stated that "this whole European integration leads to the extermination of local producer, local economy". Another article (from 26.02.2017) says that "Free trade area with the European Union is a sheer lie".

Another distinctive feature of the Russian propaganda is that it operates with expressions that employ vivid associations. To give a better sense of the phenomenon, below we will discuss just a few examples out of numerous cases studied quantitatively.

Thus, "European Union's flags were taken to closet (article from 24.01.2016)" immediately draws a picture of a weak EU whose era has passed and whose symbols are now stored in closets.

"Warsaw complains about "German oversight" (article from 10.01.2016)" prompts associations with Gestapo, igniting feelings of hatred and insecurity. "European allies as "vassals" of the US (article from 22.10.2015)" expression by a carefully chosen single term - "vassals" - both belittles the role of the European countries and, at the same time, imposes a view of medieval cruel nature of the relationship between the US and its allies.

"The European Union sees the branch that it is sitting on (article from 15.03.2016)" builds on another powerful image understandable to a layman and rendering the EU's foreign policy as stupid and self-destructive.

All of these expressions use vivid image-associations, they stick in the memory better and linger.

### ***Golos Armenii***

The relative distribution of the selected codes in the articles from *Golos Armenii* is presented in the figure 4.

In this case the center of gravity is shifted towards accentuating the EU internal crisis and problems, as well as pointing to its disintegration in the nearest future. These two types of

messages have a large share in the pool, constituting more than a quarter of all propagandistic narratives used. Among the other prominently used messages are: targeting the European leaders, claiming that the cooperation with the EU is wrong and not beneficial for Armenia, discord within EU, as well as pointing to the sins of the European/liberal values as opposed to the virtues of “traditional values”.

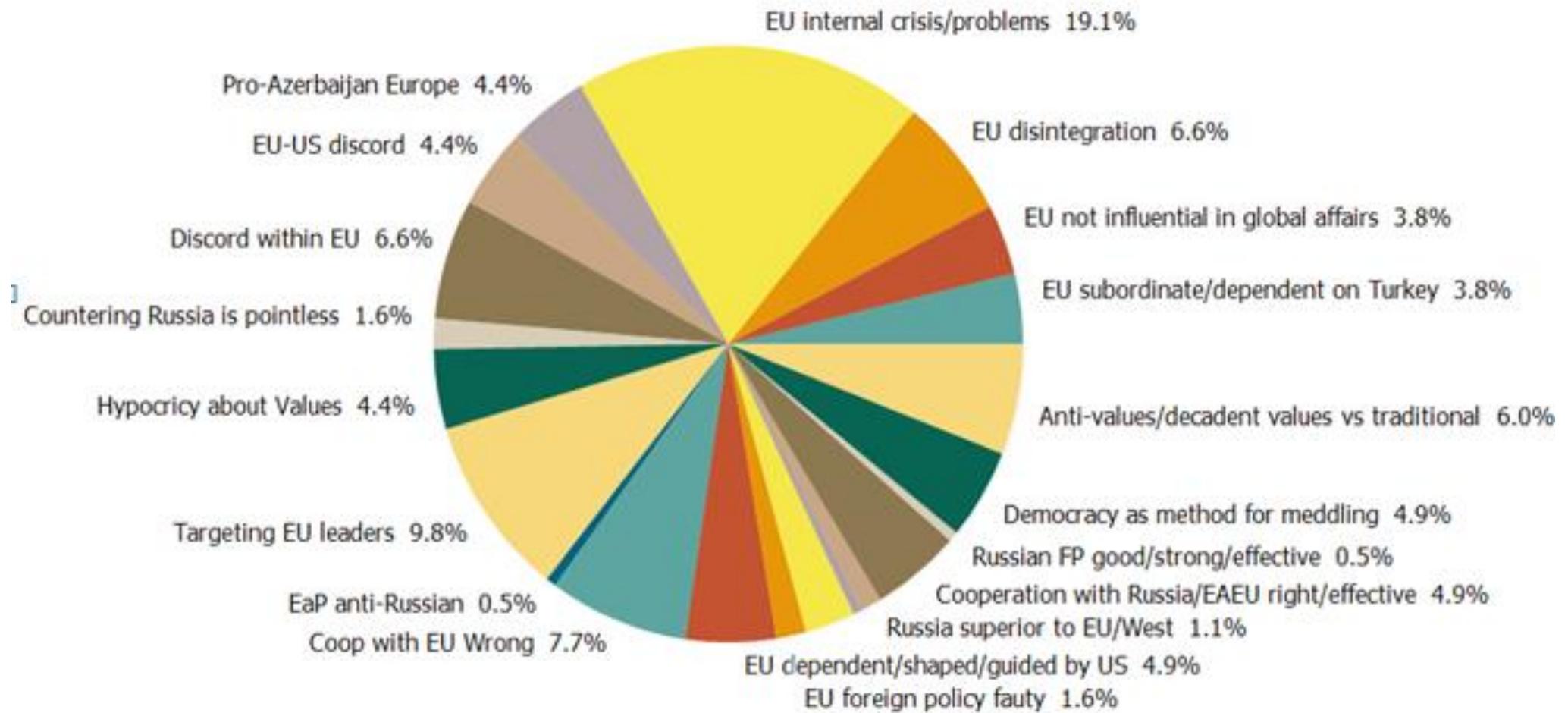
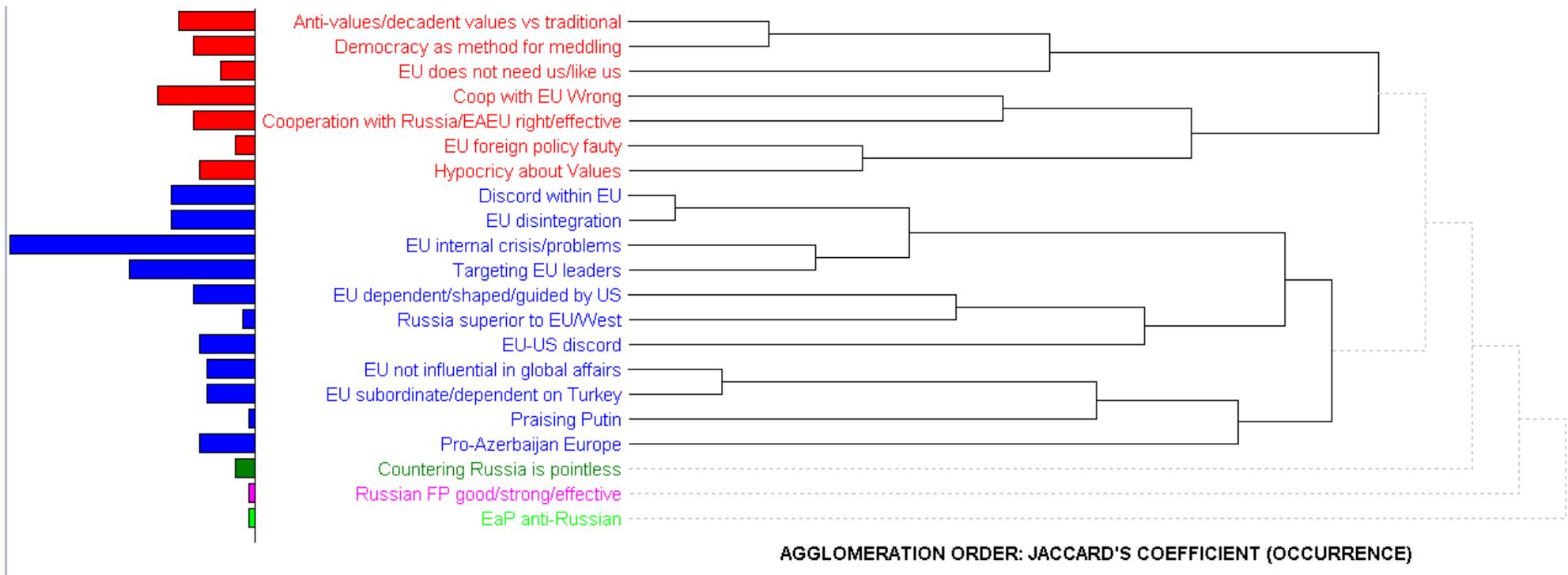


Figure 4. Distribution of Codes: Golos Armenii



**Figure 5. Thematic Clusters of Narratives: Golos Armenii**

The dendrogram (figure 5) demonstrates that the co-occurrence of topics is much systematized and most of the time targeted at the creation of binary frames. Thus, according to these binary messages, the cooperation with the EU is wrong and the cooperation with Russia is right, European foreign policy is faulty and the EU is hypocritical about its values, applying double standards in its foreign policy.

Other examples of such binary frames are: the EU is in a deep crisis, has myriads of internal problems and the leaders are so weak and untalented that they cannot change the situation; the EU is in disintegration and there is a significant discord between the members; the EU depends on the US while Russia is superior to the West.

On the next stage of agglomeration these binary frames are linked into two clusters. One is focused on the “normative” issues like liberal vs. traditional values, civilizational choice between EU and Russia, normative underpinnings of the European foreign policy and the EU’s attitude towards “us”. Among the used vocabulary and phrases are: “The EU betrays its own values” (article from 25.03.2016), “Real disappointment and unreal hopes” (in the context of partnering with the EU – article from 23.02.2016), “EU and its pseudo-values” (25.11.2015), “not Armenian dream” (in the context of visa facilitation with the EU – article from 12.05.2017). Golos Armenii went as far as circulating the wildest conspiracy theories about dark mystic forces ruling the world and the European leaders serving them (10.05.2017). Thus it printed an interview with an “expert” where it was particularly mentioned that “one of the representatives of the governing houses of Europe has once given away that... in his next life he would like to become a lethal virus to eliminate 9/10 of the humankind” because the world should be inherited by the select few. This conspiracy contains several messages: 1. that Europe is not truly democratic rather than ruled by secret houses, 2. that those houses are evil (to the extent of eliminating most of the Earth’s population), 3. that Europe does not need us, because we are not the select few.

The second cluster deals with the “pragmatic” or “material” issues, mentioning the numerous material problems and crises of the EU, targeting the inefficiency of the leaders’ policies, differing interests within EU, relative weakness of EU and strength of Russia compared to the US. Among the used headlines, vocabulary and phrases are: “The EU is unable to find a solution” (25.03.2016), “Pathetic, pathetic European leaders” (17.03.2016), “the analyst predicts the disintegration of the European Union” (17.03.2016), “Europe can collapse into pieces” (15.03.2016), Europe as a “model of organized degradation”, “the new Europe being created by the US” (a message borrowed from the Russian media which finds place in an article (08.02.2016) republished from RIA Novosti), “crisis of the political system of the whole West” (26.04.2017).

Unlike Vesti.ru which projects for a general audience, Golos Armenii is also keen at using some audience-specific messages targeted at the Armenian public. Thus, some of its headlines say: “The European Union is led on a leash by Turkey” (25.04.2016), “German authorities behave like in 1915” (25.02.2016). Playing up the feelings of grief and historical trauma associated with the Armenian Genocide, this kind of approach channels this emotional stream into framing a negative opinion, attitude towards Europe and selected European countries, with Germany being one of them.

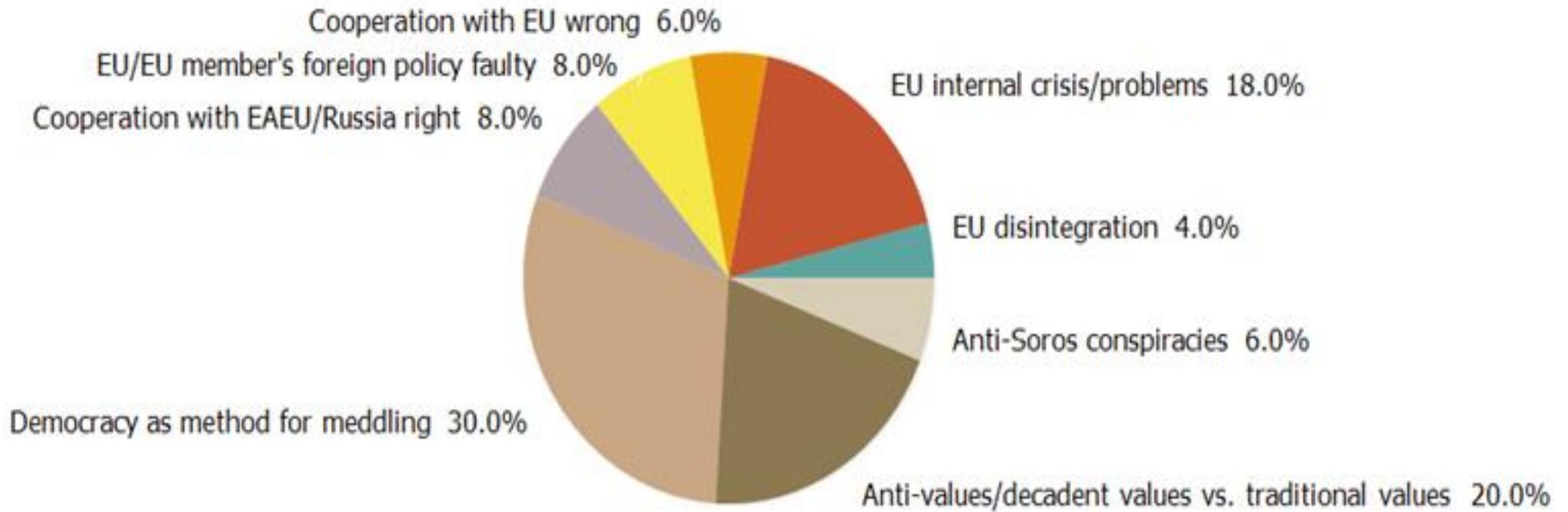
### ***Iravunk***

While the other newspapers are more focused on anti-European propaganda, Iravunk is more “specialized” at targeting democracy and the liberal values.

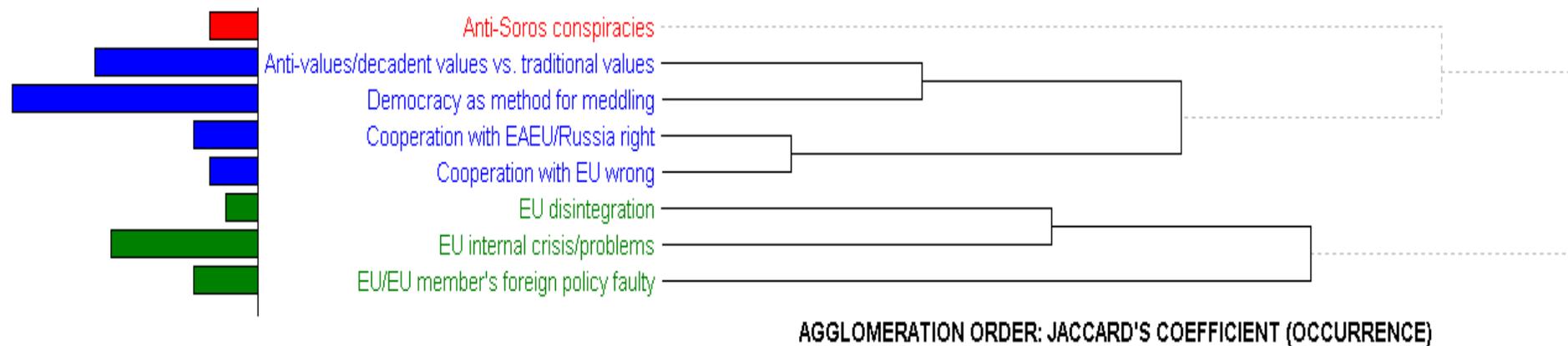
The overall picture drawn by Iravunk is more straightforward. Cooperation with the EU is wrong and cooperation with Russia is right, while Europe propagates anti-values/decadent values and democracy is simply a method for meddling into state’s affairs. Some excerpts from the articles using these narratives are: Soros and left liberal policy aim at the erosion of traditional values (article from 04.05.2017), “First of all, we should defend our society from exogenous penetrations” (in the context of NGOs – article from 14.10.2016), contrasting liberalism and national security interests, Babukhanyan mentioning that foreign states use soft power, democracy to target national values, traditional family, etc.

On the other hand, according to the depicted picture, the EU has a lot of problems, is unlikely to overcome the crisis and is disintegrating, at the same time pursuing a wrong foreign policy. Among the headlines and used vocabulary are: “Financial collapse threatens the Transatlantic Sector” (10.05.2017), “German economy will risk collapse”, “Germany plunges into chaos” (06.08.2016), “...threats to the existence of the European civilization” (29.10.2016), “Europe is in the most vulnerable position” (29.10.2016). Also phrases like “Europe does not understand”, “Europe’s own mistakes” are used to argue for the inefficiency of Europe’s foreign policy (13.08.2016).

The choice suggested to the audience is pretty straightforward and “natural”.



**Figure 6. Distribution of Codes: Iravunk**



**Figure 7. Thematic Clusters of Narratives: Iravunk**

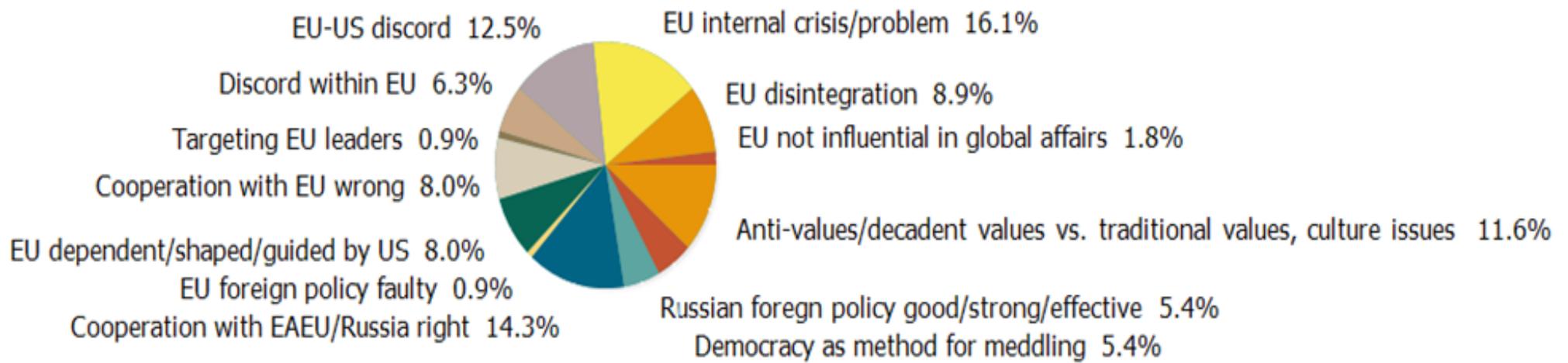
## *Azg*

Compared to Iravunk, Azg has a more vivid and equally distributed arsenal of propagandistic messages (Figure 8). However, the 4 main narratives with the relative frequency of more than 10% are: the discord between the US and the EU, internal crisis and problems of the European Union, postulating cooperation with EAEU/Russia as the right choice for Armenia and playing up the cultural issues by manipulating the “sins” of liberal and “virtues” of traditional values.

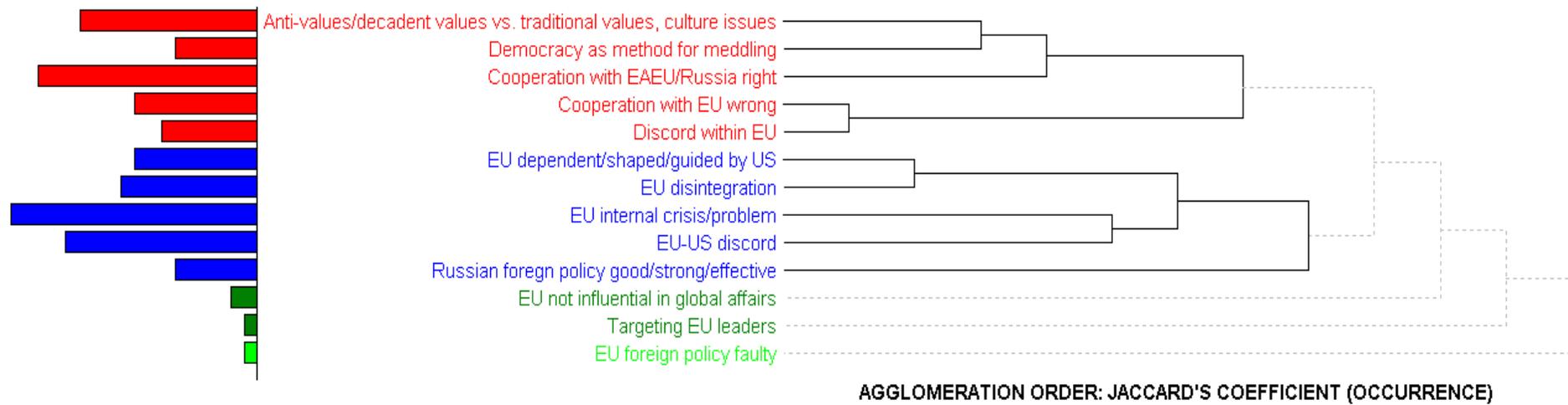
As in case of Golos Armenii, as well as in case of Iravunk there are again two main clusters of messages the normative one and the pragmatic/material one.

Azg places a heavy emphasis on the second cluster. Below we bring some examples of the employed narratives: “discord within the West on all substantial issues of the current agenda” (02.06.2017), “Merkel’s de facto capitulation” to US, the EU in its current shape “will not exist anymore”, “The Anglo-Saxons have started the process of terminating the European Union”, “Europe does not have allies anymore”, “Russia will win from the discord in EU caused by Trump” (15.12.2016), “does Armenia still want to get associated with the crumbling institution?” (about the EU – article from 17.11.2016), “Bulgaria and Moldova: the sunstricken by EU”, “China and Britain cut Europe into halves” (17.10.2016) – projecting the image of Europe as a not influential player in global affairs, object rather than subject of international relations, “German society will soon become a part of Islamic society” (23.09.2016), “US and Britain are preparing to rule the EU” (28.07.2016), “the current model of the European Union will be ... recognized as bankrupt, and euro as a failed project”.

“EU dependent on Turkey” narrative has been most vividly used by Azg in the form of a cartoon published in the article from 2016-06-07 in which Angela Merkel is presented as a housewife/servant to Erdogan hanging out his linen to dry while he is resting on a rocking chair.



**Figure 8. Distribution of Codes: Azg**



**Figure 9. Thematic Clusters of Narratives: Azg**

## **Conclusion**

Thus the anti-European and anti-democratic propaganda in Armenia unfolds in two main dimensions empirically verified by the existence of two core clusters of propagandistic messages. 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.

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.

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.

## **Recommendations**

Most of the reviewed studies conclude with a number of recommendations directed at government and non-government agents. We find it useful to present the main recommendations, identifying similarities and differences in an attempt to distill some possible best practice advice that will further be compared with the evidence from the current research.

**Table 1. Recommendations from literature on countering propaganda**

	(The Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2015)	(Lucas & Pomera nzev, 2016)	(Pynno niemi & Racz, 2015)	(Sazonov, et al., 2016)	(Kintsurashvili, 2015)	(Kintsurashvili, 2017)	(Yerevan Press Club et al, 2016)	(Yerevan Press Club et al, 2015)
<b>Systematic analysis of propaganda</b>		+	+			+		
<b>Support for ensuring media quality</b>	+	+	+	+			+	+
<b>Deconstruct /expose disinformation</b>		+		+	+	+		
<b>Targeted interaction</b>		+						
<b>Support for public broadcasting</b>	+	+			+		+	+
<b>Abolition of government-run media</b>	+							
<b>Media self-regulation</b>	+					+		

<b>Media and internet literacy</b>	+	+				+	+	+
<b>Factual information</b>				+	+	+		
<b>Ensure broadcasters' compliance with legislation/ appropriate sanction</b>		+					+	+
<b>Platforms for capacity building in journalism</b>	+		+				+	+

This table presents the array of possible measures to fight propaganda. However, the global events connected with the uprising of populism and propaganda demonstrate that despite a significant portion of studies, briefs and policy papers, the abovementioned recommendations 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 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, it is quite interesting how the Armenian public responded to the questions whether “the government should have the right to prevent TV

channels from broadcasting news that it thinks will be destabilizing” and whether “TV channels should be totally free” (Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia, 2013 ). More than 72% of respondents have agreed to the first statement with around 15% disagreeing. However, at the same time, according to the referenced survey, nearly 58% have positively responded to the second question with only 29% disagreeing. 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.

Bearing all the abovementioned points in mind we would propose the following 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 (Paul & Matthews, 2016) 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 democratic way of development for Armenia

- More communication on cooperation with the EU and the positive sides, what Armenia gained from it, more coverage of official programs of cooperation with the EU.

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