

The influence of Russian/Russian-language media in the Armenian-language domain. Experts' reflections and suggestions

1. Introduction

During the discussions organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Political Dialogue organization, our first report on the influence of Russian propaganda was discussed with the participation of several Armenian experts, as well as the head of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's regional program, Stephan Malerius. As a result of the discussion, we have prepared the second report which includes the participants' observations and some of their ideas (and not only theirs) on how to resist Russian state propaganda.

2. Observations and comments

As mentioned in the previous report, the main "transmitter" of the Russian media's influence is the widespread knowledge of the Russian language in Armenia. The correlation between the spread of the language and the influence of propaganda gives rise to a debate. Nevertheless, the experts agreed that the complete replacement of the Russian language by another foreign language is not realistic as long as Armenia maintains its membership in the regional integration structures operating under Russia's initiative or leadership. Therefore, the subject of this study is not as much the Russian language - as a tool for spreading propaganda, but

- A. the way Russian state propaganda influences the Armenian public, and
- B. what makes this influence concerning.

According to the assessment of some experts who participated in the discussion, increasing the general media literacy among the public could be more effective in gaining resistance to the aggressive Russian propaganda in Armenia, particularly, through public education programs, as well as the distribution of Armenian-language media with better quality and more attractive content. It should also be considered that information in Russian is not always official Russian propaganda. Russian-language mass media, such as the Russian services of DW or BBC, have a significant presence in Armenia. There are also "Armenian-born" Russian-language media that do not have any connections with Russian state propaganda. They create content concerning Armenia's agenda, with the participation of professionals who immigrated from Russia (for example, AliqMediaru).

Why should we be cautious of the Russian propaganda? Any information is propaganda in some sense. The messages, and vocabulary it contains can promote, philanthropy, tolerance, mutual assistance, equal opportunities, pacifism, protection of cultural values, and other ideas. So, what is the cause of concern in the propaganda spread directly or through proxies by the current Russian regime?

The reason is that the media, which is under the almost total control of Russia's authoritarian regime, reproduces the values imposed by that same regime, which hinders the diversity of opinions. They often spread anti-democratic, xenophobic, and war propaganda. In the context of Armenia, they spread content questioning the sovereignty of Armenia and the political independence of Armenians.

The main goals and emphases of Russian propaganda are the subject of a separate study, which could be the following:

- propaganda aimed at the deepening of Armenian-Russian relations without an alternative,
- propaganda of the impossibility of Armenia's and the Armenian nation's existence without the patronage of Russia, its "big brother",
- propaganda which presents Armenia's participation in Western integration projects in a negative light,
- propaganda aimed at presenting Moscow's role in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in a positive light, neutralizing Russia's negative role in the dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh and the forced displacement of its population,
- presenting Russia's foreign policy (Ukraine war, Russia-West relations) in a positive light,
- propaganda of the so-declared "traditional values" of the Russian Federation, and, accordingly, the campaign against LGBTQ+, gender equality, the unique representation of children's rights, the fight against "juvenile" justice,
- propaganda against the current government of the Republic of Armenia and in favor of a certain opposition group, etc.

It should also be taken into consideration, that Russian state propaganda is spread not only and perhaps not as much through Russian-language media as through Armenian-language media (mass media (social media platforms, bloggers)) being under the influence of political and economic figures who advocate the deepening of Armenian-Russian relations. During the discussion of the first report, an idea was put forward and supported by many: the Russian state information (mainly in Russian and English) disseminated in the Armenian diaspora has a noticeable presence in the Armenian media, which penetrates the Armenian media field in a mediated manner.

The "invisible and intangible" hand of the state

As for the sanctions applied by the relevant departments of Armenia over the last year to individual Russian state media and programs broadcast by them, the experts believe that they are merely symbolic actions of little practical significance, through which Armenia's authorities seem to be testing their courage to clarify the boundaries of their fight against Russian influence.

Nevertheless, there is a consensus among the experts participating in the discussion that the state's restrictive actions cannot be effective, even if they were implemented in practice. On the one hand, the state cannot completely block the penetration of the Russian narrative into the Armenian media, as TV programs are broadcast not only on public television but also on online platforms, many of which are not

state-controlled. On the other hand, "forbidden fruit is sweet", and there is a high probability that attempts to ban any information will increase interest in it.

Suggestions

1. It is important to "map" the disseminators of Russian propaganda in Armenia, and, in doing so, not only the media and bloggers, but also other persons (politicians, bloggers, artists) and organizations disseminating public speech and the nature of the information they disseminate. This action should have the sole purpose of highlighting the actors and the nature of their actions, ruling out any attempt to limit the freedom of expression of the media or to "segregate" the latter. Breaches of legislation and ethical norms should be examined regardless of the media's affiliations.
2. There is a need to evaluate the impact of Russian state propaganda on the diaspora (mainly in Russian and English). Especially, on the "new Armenian diaspora", i.e. the people who left Armenia and other post-Soviet countries after the collapse of the USSR, mainly for the USA, Canada and Europe, who speak Russian to a great extent, and are consumers of Russian-language media, but are also under the influence of the English-language propaganda of the Russian Federation (for example, RT). The perception of the world shaped on the basis of the information they consume indirectly extends to the Armenian reality as well. Sometimes the figures in the diaspora and the discourse they generate have a direct impact on the RA public/political processes (consider for example the famous blogger "Dog", who organized rallies in the center of Yerevan in September 2023 through live broadcasts).

Currently, on the initiative of the Yerevan Press Club and the Institute of Multilateral Information an attempt is being made to introduce the institute of the "digital ambassador". The "Digital Ambassador" is the representative of the state and society on global digital platforms, who protects the digital rights of the state and citizens (for example, properly submits complaints in case of misinformation, hate speech on social networks or, conversely, protects from baseless complaints). In the context of this survey, the introduction of this institute can give the Armenian civil society the opportunity to protect itself from the discriminatory speech or misinformation disseminated by Russian propaganda on digital platforms. Likewise, Armenian civil society can try to cooperate (or deepen cooperation) with international fact-checking entities (Poynter, IFCN) in order to protect itself from Russian misinformation and targeted aggressive advertising. For example, FB users in the US can see news checked and tagged by fact checkers in their news feed. With certain effort, this option can be implemented in Armenia as well, marking the Russian propaganda.

The media self-regulation initiative/s implemented in Armenia can also play a role in dealing with anti-democratic propaganda of the Russian Federation to the extent that the codes of ethics regulate hate speech, discrimination based on political, national, gender and other distinctive features, as well as dissemination of unspecified and overtly false information.