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The EaP Monthly Bulletin is the initiative of the Centre for Policy Studies. Its purpose is to exchange information about the Eastern Partnership countries, to facilitate cooperation between experts and civil society institutions interested in the region, and to provide analytical products for different stakeholders.

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Dear readers,

Because of technical reasons, this issue of the EaP Monthly Bulletin features one analytical article, *Disinformation and other tools of antidemocratic influence: an Armenian outlook in the EU and Eastern Partnership context*.

We expect to return to the previously established publication format in the next issues.

Needless to say, we are very much looking to possible cooperation with many of you. Your suggestions are much appreciated.



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Armen Grigoryan

Disinformation and other tools of antidemocratic influence: an Armenian outlook in the EU and Eastern Partnership context

Growing Chinese influence observed by Freedom House

The recent Freedom House *Nations in Transit 2020* report pays particular attention to the growing Chinese influence in a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and in Central Asia. The report notes: ‘While China’s international engagement is often less directly confrontational than Russia’s, it nevertheless has an insidious effect on the development and functioning of democratic institutions ... influence campaign is focused around two major goals — expanding the country’s influence abroad,

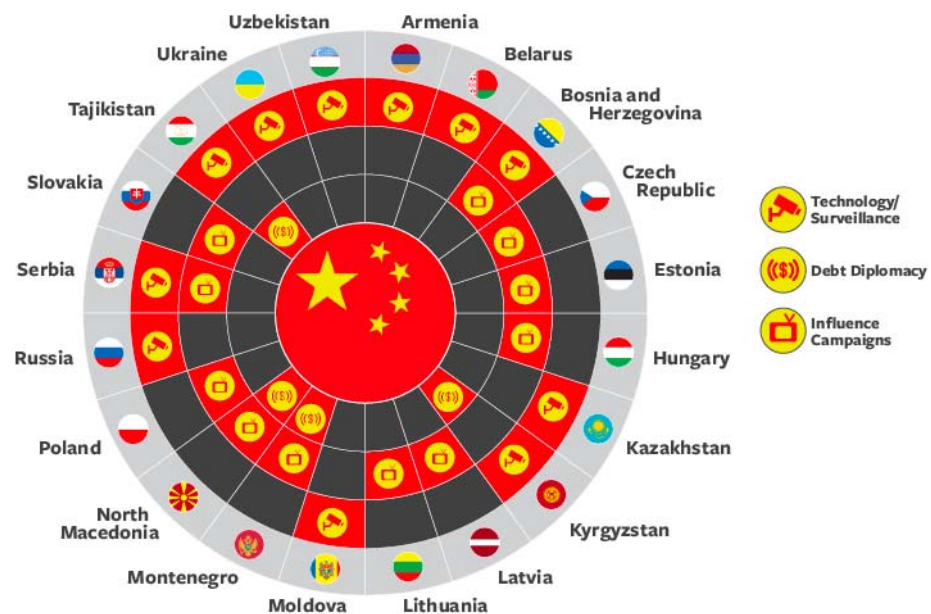
and promoting a positive image of China globally. ... It tailors its approach to each individual country, taking advantage of institutional weaknesses, and surreptitiously embedding itself into corrupt political and economic structures. The aggregate impact of these measures is the further degradation of good governance, transparency, and the rule of law’.

The report notes three specific tools used by China for expanding antidemocratic influence in the region.

First and foremost, surveillance tools including

A Snapshot of Chinese Government Influence

The countries below are among those where Beijing has exploited weak or nonexistent democratic institutions.



Freedom House

This infographic is from the *Nations in Transit 2020* report by freedomhouse.org

‘Safe City’ agreements, cameras for monitoring public spaces, facial and licence-plate recognition, are actively promoted.

According to the report, some of those have been introduced in four EaP countries – Armenia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, as

well as in Russia,¹ Central Asian states, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Second, influence campaigns in the media have been going on, including promotion of the Chinese Communist Party's preferred narratives, suppression of critical viewpoints, as well as management of content delivery systems. The report particularly mentions misleading op-eds published in several Central and Eastern European countries, pushing a pro-China narrative. A number of EU members are among the countries exposed to this method of influence. Third, China has been increasing influence in the region by 'debt diplomacy', providing infrastructurally weak countries in need of cash with funds in a way resulting in political dependency. This is the case of Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Some implications: An Armenian outlook

Fortunately, Armenia is still far away from 'Safe City', introduction of facial recognition systems, or another kind of big data authoritarianism. The ruling coalition still pays attention to public opinion and is also keen on maintaining a positive international image: for example, the *Nations in Transit 2020* report states that 'major transformations driven by public demands for better governance have been under way ... earning the largest two-year improvement ever recorded in Nations in Transit'. At the same time, as a recent controversy regarding the law requiring telecommunication companies to collect mobile phone users' data in order to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus showed, attempts to proceed with larger-scale China-style measures would come at the cost of losing the civil society's vital support.

Whereas the new Chinese embassy compound in Yerevan is going to be one of the largest in the world, and for a few years China Aid has been donating ambulances, buses and some other equipment, there have not been obvious

manifestations of political influence. 'Debt diplomacy' might arguably have become relevant, as for years China was perceived as the only likely source of a loan for construction of a railway connecting Armenia with Iran, but that project did not seem viable even before the pandemic-related global economic recession.

Though Chinese influence campaigns have not yet gained much significance in Armenia, when a plane carrying medical supplies from China arrived to Yerevan on 8 April, a massive mostly social media-driven campaign focused on a few boxes donated by the Chinese government, while most of the cargo had been paid for by the Armenian government and private charities. Pro-China narratives have also been an integral component of an increasingly aggressive Russian influence campaign, which will be covered subsequently in this article.

Importantly, it also seems that in the coming weeks or months a discussion about the role of China's manipulation of vital information in the global spread of the coronavirus, including the suppression of crucial early warnings coming from Taiwan, could be inevitable. That, in turn, should trigger a global Chinese propaganda campaign which would hardly leave Armenia out.

The Russo-Chinese accord

While the *Nations in Transit 2020* report focuses on China's antidemocratic influence (also mentioning the earlier coverage of Russia's aggressive foreign policy aimed at destabilising the transatlantic alliance and re-establishing what Russia considers a 'sphere of influence'), other information about Russian influence campaigns and a convergence between China's and Russia's interests, is abundant.

The *Handbook on Countering Russian and Chinese Interference in Europe*, published by the Prague-based European Values Centre for Security Policy in late 2019, noted cyber attacks and cyber espionage, media

¹ It may be argued that in Russia's case political preferences and goals of Putin's regime would have resulted in an expansion of electronic surveillance methods even irrespective of China's interests.

disinformation, economic measures, as well as increased special services activity in several EU member states as the most prominent threats originating from Russia. At the same time, China has been applying political and economic pressure in order to obtain support for their policies vis-à-vis Taiwan, Tibet, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, etc., manipulating the Chinese diaspora for intelligence reasons, and using diplomatic cover for covert operations. China's interests in Europe are also complicated by their alignment with Russia, and there has been a major change in modus operandi as China has embraced subversive hostile tactics resembling Russia's methods.

Analysis published in early April by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, [*How China and Russia Could Join Forces against the European Union*](#), also mentions several influence and subversion methods, which have already been used to some extent.

Particularly, coordinated information and disinformation campaigns through traditional media and online may influence EU populations and decision-makers. Such campaigns convey strong anti-American, anti-NATO, and anti-liberal messages, and amplify separatist, anti-EU, and anti-integration attitudes. Recent examples of disinformation related to the coronavirus pandemic are narratives used by both China and Russia that the US military introduced the virus to Wuhan, and that the EU failed to deal with the outbreak.

Another possibility is a coordinated attempt to influence EU decision-making from within, combining China's financial resources and Russian know-how with a purpose to corrupt and recruit European politicians and weaken EU countries and institutions. There may also be attempts to persuade decision-makers in the member states and at the EU level that cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, or other institutions dominated by Russia or China would be more beneficial from an economic point of view, or that Eurasian security arrangements with the

participation of Russia and China would be more effective than NATO.

Additionally, the PIIA report warns about an ideological agenda based on such themes as 'win-win cooperation based on national interests', 'not interfering in sovereign internal issues of other states', or the promotion of conservative or traditional values as opposed to Western 'hedonism'. In fact, the use of such an agenda by Russia is not a new phenomenon, and it has been analysed in several studies. For example, the promotion of Russia's image of a Christian conservative entity morally superior to the 'nihilistic' and 'decadent' West was analysed in a 2016 study by the Budapest-based Political Capital Institute, [*The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin's Traditional Agenda and the Export of Values to Central Europe*](#).

The EUvsDisinfo database has also **covered** the Russo-Chinese disinformation campaign: Russian state-controlled TV Rossiya 1, RT (Russia Today) and the news agency RIA Novosti have defended Chinese authorities against criticism, combining disinformation with pro-Chinese reporting. The broadcasts came after contacts between Moscow and Beijing on the highest level, presenting Russia and China as victims of 'unjust' accusations.

EaP countries and Russian influence

The issues faced by the EaP countries can be better understood in a common European context. However, as threats for the EaP countries are considered, Russian influence keeps playing the main role.

While the Freedom House report does not mention Armenia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine among the countries vulnerable to China's 'debt diplomacy', Russia's similar influence on these countries is quite obvious. Denis Cenusa's recent [**article**](#) in the *New Eastern Europe* about Moscow's loan offer to Moldova is a suitable reminder about risks that such offers may entail. The memories about Russia's attempt to use a \$15 billion loan as one of tools for deterring Ukraine from signing the Association Agreement with the EU are still fresh, and so are the wounds

caused by the subsequent Russian military aggression.

In Armenia's case, as previously **noted**, several agreements with Russia denoting a 'strategic partnership' – including Gazprom's ownership over the Armenian gas distribution network and monopoly on natural gas supply for 30 years, and Armenia's EEU membership – were in fact not agreements but diktats resulting, particularly, from Armenia's debts to Russia. That resulted in a long-term dependence to such an extent that currently, despite the international gas market tendencies, Gazprom, with top-level support involving Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, is demanding another increase of the gas price.

Considering the capacity to run influence campaigns in this region, Russia also definitely outperforms China while sharing some of its capacities in case of mutual interest (similar to the case with the influence operations in the EU), although perhaps with some reservations as Russia considers the region its 'sphere of influence'. Proxy networks involving political parties, NGOs, religious institutions and other civil society organisations, as well as the Russian media, are strong influence tools.

Over years, this issue has been covered in numerous studies; published materials perhaps amount to dozens of thousand pages. An analysis of a few recent examples might be useful for viewing the events unfolding in Armenia in a wider regional context.

Andrei Yeliseyeu's study ***Sputnik Belarus's Propaganda and Disinformation*** outlines 12 main narratives 'aimed at smearing Ukraine, the EU, the USA and the West as a whole, as well as promoting the concept of the Russian world', despite formal declarations about 'a multipolar world where each country has its own national interests, culture, history, traditions' (the 'multipolar world order' narrative itself is recurrent in Russian and Chinese propaganda – A.G.). The 'Russian world' concept is expressed 'both in statements about the Belarusian people as an integral part of the Russian people, and in the

representation of the alliance with Russia as the only possible option for the successful development of Belarus'. Sputnik Belarus also depicts Ukraine as a failed, foreign-controlled and pro-Nazi state; the Baltic States are presented as larger Western countries' serfs; the US, the so-called 'Anglo-Saxons' and the West as a whole are commonly presented as aggressors.

Similar smearing of Ukraine was observed by the experts of the Yerevan-based Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation, who have been **monitoring** Russian media and some of Armenian proxies. Noticeably, the coverage of the Baltic States, the US and the 'Anglo-Saxons', etc. by the Russian proxies in Armenia is similar to the Sputnik Belarus's narratives.

Other parallels may be observed as well.

In one recent case, the Tbilisi-based International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy **exposed** an inauthentic news agency, News-Front Georgia, which was ultimately removed from Facebook. News-Front Georgia was a Russian propaganda platform and used methods similar to those of Sputnik Georgia. News-Front Georgia used to be edited by Shota Apkhaidze, a Moscow resident with links to the **Eurasian Institute** – one of the most important umbrella organisations among pro-Russian NGOs in Georgia.

Ekho Kavkaza also noted News-Front Georgia's links with the head of the Eurasian Institute, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, and **mentioned** that one of the News-Front Georgia's latest publications smeared the US-sponsored Centre for Public Health Research located near Tbilisi, presenting it as a 'testing ground' for 'dangerous' Remdesivir – an antiviral medicine developed by Gilead Sciences, tested as a specific treatment for COVID-19 and authorised for emergency use in the US. *Ekho Kavkaza* noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin had spoken about the Centre for Public Health Research and, essentially, directed the campaign against it. Russian media and high-level officials **have alleged** that the COVID-19 outbreak spread to

Russia from there. Remarkably, although the centre was opened in 2011, Russian officials also attempted to **blame** it for the African swine fever outbreak which had begun in 2007 ‘from the territory of Georgia’.

The Russian media and Armenian proxies have similarly been vilifying the US-sponsored biological research laboratories in Armenia.² As soon as the laboratories, which only employ Armenian staff, opened in 2016, several Armenian organisations, as well as EADaily, Regnum and other Russian websites, **alleged** that biological weapon-related experiments could be performed there. Like in the Georgian case, the issue became a recurrent propaganda topic.

Recently, the allegations about the laboratories became a part of a coronavirus-related disinformation campaign. EADaily published a sequence of interviews with Grigor Grigoryan, who in 2011 managed the State Food Safety Agency of Armenia for three months, presenting him as an ‘international expert on zoonotic diseases’. He claimed **that** the COVID-19 could not appear as a result of a spontaneous genetic recombination and that it is a biological warfare agent originating from the US, so he hoped that the Russians, Chinese, Indians, or Iranians would prove it; **that** hazardous activities of the US-sponsored labs in Armenia are targeting Russia and Iran, etc.

Moskovsky komsomolets **alleged** that the laboratories could be the source of the COVID-19 infection in Armenia, also hinting about biological weapon research: ‘like the Guantanamo jail, the laboratories may be involved in activities which are illegal on the US territory’. Then, a method widely used by the **radical opponents** of the incumbent Armenian government – republishing speculations and unsubstantiated information by different sources, and then presenting it as ‘public opinion’ – was employed again. A marginal radical organisation led by a former deputy minister for youth and sports affairs, Khachik Asryan – a bizarre person who during



Photo source: ilur.am

his governmental tenure in 2007-2018 used to do Nazi salute at rallies, used that article as a reference point for a statement demanding closure of the laboratories. In turn, EADaily, Zavtra.ru and a number of other Russian outlets referred to it as if the Armenian society at large turned against the laboratories. Disinformation originating from Russia was also **republished** by a number of Armenian websites, mostly those related to ex-president Robert Kocharyan, Mikayel Minasyan (the son-in-law of another former president, Serzh Sargsyan), as well as other parts of a **network** specialising in disinformation and influence operations.

Russian conspirological publications have also been aggressively promoted for the Armenian audience via social media. An Armenian-language **Facebook page** created on 28 April, No to Virus-Producing American Laboratories, has been actively advertised too. In addition to repeating Russian narratives (e.g. that the laboratories are a cover for a biological attack on Russia and Iran), as well as claims that the alliance with Russia is the only possible option

² The passage about the Armenian biological laboratories is partially based on a text submitted to the *Eurasia Daily Monitor*.



Cover of the No to Virus-Producing American Laboratories page

not just for successful development, but also for physical survival of the Armenians, the page has been promoting Chinese and Iranian anti-American statements.

There are also many other **false narratives and conspiracy theories**, often originating from Russia, in the Armenian media and social networks: about the potential dangers of the 5G telecommunication technology; that Bill Gates sponsored a defective polio vaccine which allegedly got over 400,000 children in India paralysed; that Gates has planned for 60,000 people in Armenia to die from the COVID-19 infection; that Armenian health authorities bribe the relatives of deceased persons, so they would accept falsified statements about the causes of death, etc.

Concluding thoughts

The Freedom House **report** quoted in this article also mentions Armenia among the countries where 'far-right, violent extremist groups have also been making their voices heard ... they have demonstrated a new level of cross-border cooperation and enjoyed

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increasing support from American and Western European counterparts'. However, not only the mentioned comparisons between propaganda narratives, but also the wider **spectrum of rhetoric they use**, as well as the **nature of their Western connections** strongly suggest that Russia is the principal source of inspiration and support for such groups.

Besides, as **noted** before, while such groups distort the meaning of civic activism by connecting it with pro-authoritarian, sexist or otherwise anti-liberal movements, the growth of their capacity to influence public opinion with conspiracy theories and intolerance contributes to a tense public mood and expectations of violence. The intensity of their activities in Armenia in recent few weeks, including verbal provocations and apparent attempts to provoke physical violence, suggests that their direct actions may even get violent.

Seemingly, the extremist groups' connection with the ongoing antidemocratic influence operations will become even more menacing. Yet, it seems that Armenian law enforcement agencies are not even willing to gather sufficient information about their network, perhaps because of the obvious Russian connection. The government's failure to reform the law enforcement agencies in the period immediately following the 2018 'Velvet Revolution' has further aggravated the problem. Hopefully, studies on related topics may contribute to awareness about the existing threats.