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## Editor's note

Dear readers,

Unfortunately, the publication of the EaP Monthly Bulletin was postponed again – first, by technical reasons, and then, just before the planned publication, by the war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This issue again focuses mainly on the findings of our joint project with the Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (Romania) and the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, *Protecting Democratic Values by Tackling Pandemic-related Disinformation*.

Armen Grigoryan



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# The war in Karabakh: Some [not-so-politically-correct] thoughts

Is Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan liable for the devastating military defeat and ensuing humanitarian disaster? Yes, undoubtedly. But not for his actions during the war, as the majority of his critics – especially those ousted by the 2018 revolution and hoping to return to power – claim now.

Pashinyan's lack of experience, combined with unwarranted self-confidence – amounting to cocksureness – made him a hostage to pseudo-patriotic framing and wishful thinking, so his initial post-revolution inclination to engage in substantial negotiations on the conflict resolution gave way to a more hard-line position.

In order to better understand the situation, a brief review of Armenia's modern politics might be needed.

In September 1997, President Levon Ter-Petrossian stated in an essay titled *War or Peace? Time to Get Serious* that a compromise on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, involving mutual concessions (including the return of territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh and held by the local Armenian forces since 1994 as a buffer zone) and leading to a peaceful resolution had to be achieved as soon as possible, as postponing the resolution to the future would incur higher costs. Ter-Petrossian was labelled 'defeatist' and accused of an intention to 'sell Karabakh' by nationalist propaganda, and under pressure from several top officials ultimately resigned in February 1998.

The main winners were the prime minister Robert Kocharyan and the minister of interior and national security Serzh Sargsyan, who would rule the country for the next 20 years (until Sargsyan was ousted in 2018), establishing a regime characterised by voting fraud, ubiquitous corruption, persecution of political opponents, and making the country extremely dependent on Russia – politically, militarily, economically, and also ideologically, with exaggerated expectations about Russia's moral principles and benevolence. Numerous warnings that such a posture would sometime result in Russia's

deal with Armenia's adversaries at the expense of Armenians were dismissed.

At the same time, while essentially negotiating a resolution along the same lines – but gradually with more concessions from the Armenian side required, as Ter-Petrossian had warned – Kocharyan and Sargsyan had domestically institutionalised a nationalist ideology claiming that compromise was not needed as the status quo in Karabakh would sooner or later be internationally accepted.

After the 2018 revolution, Pashinyan, already being in charge for the negotiations, had a chance to overcome the ideological legacy of the Kocharyan-Sargsyan duo. Yet, as within weeks, if not days, after the revolution 'selling Karabakh' again became one of the principal topics of a massive **propaganda campaign** by media, NGOs, and other structures controlled by Kocharyan, Sargsyan and their proxies, Pashinyan adopted a stance which would eventually prove self-defeating and, instead of giving a frank explanation of the situation to his constituents and pursuing a compromise solution, adopted an unrealistic position. Apparently, in addition to Pashinyan's and his closest allies' lack of experience, the 'technocrats' in his cabinet – including the minister of foreign affairs Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and the minister of defence David Tonoyan, who both had previously served as deputy ministers – did not give the best advice either.

So, as Pashinyan's popularity has currently been shattered after the military defeat, and the propaganda may attach to him the labels of 'defeatist' and 'traitor' who lost territories, Kocharyan and Sargsyan, who had made themselves and their cronies rich – while giving the country's strategic assets to Russia, avoiding a binding agreement on conflict resolution and leading the negotiations to a dead end – have been trying to destabilise the domestic political situation, also by means of violent actions including the ravaging of the government and National Assembly buildings, and the beating of the parliament speaker, Ararat Mirzoyan. As it appears, they want to 'save the nation' once again.

The picture would not be complete without mentioning that during the war Kocharyan's and Sargsyan's propaganda machine acted concurrently to Russian and Azerbaijani propaganda. Numerous insinuations by top Russian propagandists were republished in Armenian, **one** after **another**, in addition to own content along the same lines, which sometimes also resembled a part of Ilham Aliyev's **interview** with Russian RIA Novosti agency: 'I often say that Pashinyan is a product of Soros. And I think everyone will agree with me. But Soros is no longer even a person, this is a concept'. Characteristically, Belarusian state media also **blamed** Pashinyan and the 2018 revolution for the war (meanwhile, Belarus – formally Armenia's CSTO ally – supplied offensive heavy weapons to Azerbaijan, as Russia had also been doing for years).

### **Enemies, allies and bystanders**

The shortcomings of the Armenian government's policies notwithstanding, Azerbaijan's long-term policy of instigating ethnic hatred, as well as the previous ceasefire violations, also were not suggesting there was a sincere wish for finding a compromise. Turkey's meddling and the involvement of militants from the Middle East, the use of cluster munitions and other banned munitions further aggravated the situation.

Then, Russia's willingness to ditch its obligations as a military ally, even though the territory of Armenia proper was attacked several times, and to make an under-the-table deal with Turkey (thus, in accordance with Azerbaijan's and Turkey's wish, undermining the OSCE Minsk Group framework), was significant. Geopolitical preferences, including the deployment of 'peacekeepers' on the ground, getting some concessions from Turkey in Syria, and, most probably, showing some muscle to the West, played a decisive role. It remains to be seen how Russian military presence will influence Azerbaijan's policies and sovereignty. As for Armenia, yet another increase of Russia's influence – under the pretext of physical survival, as usual – means an additional limitation of sovereignty and even less flexibility as regards foreign policy. The outcome of the unfolding domestic power struggle may also strongly depend on Russia's posture. Russia may still be willing to punish Pashinyan who two years ago dared to threaten the established order of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in

Russia's neighbourhood.

While the current ceasefire is still far from a comprehensive peace deal, and France has been trying to revive the international mediation, the U.S. long-term (and seemingly ongoing, at least under the Trump administration) disengagement still contributes to the humanitarian disaster and potentially also political chaos in Armenia.

Thomas de Waal of Carnegie Europe has **suggested** that 'there are questions as to whether the Russian security deployment is robust enough to guarantee that Armenians of Karabakh can continue to live without fear in their homeland', so 'Moscow ... is likely to remember its multilateral role and call for the support of the other Minsk Group co-chairs and the OSCE as a whole'. Yet, in another **article** published the same day, he noted: 'the geopolitical picture is not so pretty: This is a deal brokered by two big autocratic neighbors, Russia and Turkey, that can now use it to pursue their own self-aggrandizing agendas. For them this is about troops and transport corridors, not people. ... Russia and Turkey shut Western nations out of the decision-making process'. A warning about one potential outcome may be found in a *Forbes* **article** also published after the ceasefire: it underscores the risk of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

In this context, it is also important to mention one prevalent aspect of the coverage of events by the international media and the statements issued by several international organisations and political bodies, that is, 'neutrality' amounting to bothsidesism, like in case of the media reports that both Armenia and Azerbaijan blamed each other for violation of the earlier ceasefires (on no more, no less than three occasions) in October. International organisations, and, despite the claims about being a global actor, the EU bureaucracy too, showed they are hardly capable of anything but being 'deeply concerned' and 'extremely worried' at times of crises involving rogue states' foul play and under-the-table deals.

To sum up, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* – certainly not the most sophisticated publication – **has understood** the situation better than most of international organisations, politicians, or celebrated pundits.

# 5G, Bill Gates' 'desire to have people microchipped' and other conspiracy theories: How Armenia and other countries of the region may deal with them?

*By Mariam Grigoryan*

*The interview with the president of the Expert for Security and Global Affairs Association, Dr Angela Grămadă, was originally published on 9 September by the [1in.am Armenian News & Analyses in Armenian](#)*



**COVID-19 has strongly affected the way people think. Every nation has a specific way to fight and try to overcome this pandemic. And at the same time, we see much fake news about this pandemic, about vaccine against Covid-19, about microchipping people, etc. Do you think that civil society is able to counteract fake news and help people in their countries to get truthful information?**

First of all, I would like to thank you for the invitation to share some of our thoughts about this COVID-19 crisis, about the impact that we are already witnessing as simple citizens of our countries or as civil society representatives.

Civil society in different states across the region has contributed a lot to informing the

population correctly about what COVID-19 means. Of course, there are many actors interested in using this pandemic to achieve certain goals, which are often not in the interests of society. These actors turn the crisis into an opportunity, and this is very dangerous. Many political actors introduced wrong messages about the pandemic, about this virus, misjudged the impact and did not distribute available resources efficiently. There are also civil society actors influenced by certain political forces to act in a certain way. Even if it seems hard to believe, there have been non-governmental organisations that have supported or continue to support conspiracy theories, or have launched extensive misinformation campaigns about coronavirus and 5G technology. Not all these 'representatives of civil society' acted independently. Often such NGOs are affiliated with internal or external political interests or simply take on certain messages that they promote in society without thinking about consequences and the negative impact they can produce, including by disregarding the authorities' decisions to fight the pandemic.

We have monitored several of civil society's actions or initiatives aimed at combating misinformation, false news and debate topics. The problem is, as always, the availability of resources and individuals' ability to

understand processes and phenomena. Here I have in mind that civil society resources are extremely limited, many of the activities have been restricted due to redistribution of financial resources by donors or because it has been impossible to reach the final beneficiaries during this period. Even in these conditions, there was an extreme mobilisation of volunteers, of experts to inform correctly, to fight certain conspiracy theories and false debate topics. If we look more closely at the content of the initiatives launched during this period and analyse the behaviour of different civil society experts, we can conclude that there is still enough willingness to support efforts to minimise the impact of the pandemic.

On the other hand, we need more education about what misinformation and fake news mean. Debunking is not enough if it is not accompanied by critical thinking tools to equip every citizen.

**What can you say about Armenia, what similarities and differences with other countries do you see? What are the parallels between the situation in Armenia and other countries in terms of problems faced by civil society because of epidemic-related restrictions?**

First, the response capacity of civil society is different. In some countries, CSOs did better, in others less so. The reaction is conditioned by several factors: resources, training, capacity to mobilise civil society. But the most important thing, in my opinion, is to understand the situation, with all the consequences that may arise from it. In the case of Armenia, the fastest reaction and mobilisation of public opinion against censorship caught my attention the most. Here I consider the authorities' attempt to force the independent press to publish only controlled content about COVID-19 as a very bad one. The authorities used the existing state of emergency legislation in force to control people's minds. Civil society reacted immediately and consistently. Consequently, we were able to highlight the way in which

the central authority took steps back under the pressure of public opinion mobilised in this regard by civil society and journalists. There have been similar attempts in the Republic of Moldova: imposing censorship and controlling the content of information on how the authorities cope with the crisis. In the case of Moldova, the cohesion of civil society, of experts who had no contact with the press, was essential to overturn the decision of the President of the Audiovisual Coordinating Council.

Censorship was the element that the authorities in different states did not hesitate to use to control the behaviour of the masses. Without civil society's reaction, things would have been much worse from the perspective of respecting the right to information.

Fundamental freedoms and rights have been violated in most states of the region. There are many restrictions in place, there are limitations that the young generation has not known so far and comparative assessment of the impact of SARS-CoV-2 will be a long process.

**Prime minister of Armenia and his family overcame the COVID-19. We know other leaders who also overcame the disease – British PM Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Russia Mishustin. Do you think that this fact helps people to take the epidemic seriously?**

This depends on the leader who went through this and how he decides to communicate post-illness. Yes, indeed, many of the leaders who have been infected re-think their views on how the crisis should be approached. The difference is made by the resources available in each country to help minimise the impact. We cannot compare the situation in Armenia with that in the United Kingdom or with that in Canada. I know that the Armenian authorities have tried to handle the situation as well as possible. Comparative analysis is very difficult to perform and this is because there were different speeches and approaches

in each of the four states mentioned by you from the beginning.

We must recognise that in our region the leader's example still matters for a society. And we are not just talking about political leaders, but also about spiritual ones. I will give you the example of Moldova. In the Republic of Moldova, there are several representatives of the Church who have promoted misinformation: that the virus does not exist, COVID-19 is used as a pretext for chipping or forced vaccination of the population. After some of them became victims of COVID-19, a few changed their opinions. And not just about the virus, but also about the efforts and decisions of the authorities to stop the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, there are also political leaders or opinion leaders who, even after going through this experience, will not recognise that the danger is real and it is not Bill Gates' desire to impose mandatory vaccination.

**As there are many cases of the disease in Moldova, what would you say, does civil society try to influence the policy development?**

The Republic of Moldova is the European leader by the number of infections compared to the official number of the population. The situation is extremely serious. The authorities failed to take control of the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, at different times they behaved differently, sometimes irresponsibly, and tried the same strategy mentioned above: to use the state of emergency to promote certain economic interests of political actors or businessmen.

Civil society, through public cohesion with journalists, contributed to the annulment of the decision of the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual (CCA), mobilised resources and volunteers to beneficiaries from vulnerable communities, offered help to doctors, expressed its views on the amendment of existing legislation on the activity of NGOs (required the vote on the law without dangerous amendments). Regarding the

debates on various public policies, at first, the situation was quite uncertain, because public institutions were also afraid to promote them for employees' security reasons, but also because the legislation governing quarantine or the state of emergency came with high financial sanctions (fines). Subsequently, online debates took place, and civil society joined, showed willingness to remain watchdogs, and continued to draw attention to the authorities' less good decisions, monitored public procurement, informed the population, proposed new measures and public policies.

**We can say that many countries were not ready for this pandemic. In many countries the COVID-19 has provoked struggle against the government. Do you think that civil society can help the governments in such situations, or is this right time and case to show the 'impotence' of governments?**

This is exactly what happened. Many governments were not ready and have failed, but many non-governmental organisations also have failed. Some CSOs stopped their activity, made layoffs. However, we also have many success stories or role models. Many NGOs have managed to reinvent themselves or continue to do what they used to do much more efficiently, under much more difficult conditions, with much more restrictive legislation in place. Yes, civil society has continued to be a reliable partner for central and local authorities, for vulnerable communities, without losing its identity as a generator of ideas and public policy solutions. Even though we have gone through a very difficult period, I do not think that the mission of civil society is to show that governments are inefficient. The mission of civil society is another one: to contribute to harmonious development of society through solutions, through partnerships, through services it can distribute to a society where government authorities fail to reach. And we did that during the pandemic: we helped, even if in some cases it was difficult to have this contribution recognised.

*We continue publication of articles by participants of the project Protecting Democratic Values by Tackling Pandemic-related Disinformation. The project is implemented by the Centre for Policy Studies in cooperation with the Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (Romania) and the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, with support from the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund.*

*Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Black Sea Trust or its partners.*

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*Tornike Zurabashvili*

## The Kremlin's Lugar lab disinformation: Coronavirus edition

*The article is based on a report presented on 31 July 2020 at the [roundtable discussion](#) COVID-19 Conspiracies as Component of Hybrid Threats in the EU and EaP.*

Governments and political leaders from east to west have generally been criticised for their performance during the coronavirus outbreak; some have been accused of abusing the pandemic for their political (and also financial) gains, while others have been blamed for their lack of leadership in crisis management and communication.

In Georgia, however, even the most ardent government critics would agree that the authorities have handled the coronavirus pandemic fairly successfully, at least in the initial stage of the outbreak. Some occasional problems **popped up** here and there, but the government's crisis response seems to have come at the right time and in adequate proportions, effectively protecting the country from massive virus outbreak and virus-related social panic.

The country registered the first coronavirus infection on February 26, prompting the authorities to adopt gradual restrictive measures, including closing of borders and schools, suspending public transportation and

non-essential commerce, and eventually, announcing the state of emergency from April 21 to May 21. As a result, by the end of August, the total number of infections in Georgia hovered around 1,500 – significantly lower than in the neighbouring countries.

Georgia's crisis response success played out on several accounts; not only did it quell the virus outbreak and reduced the virus-related death rate, it also shielded the country from malign foreign actors (read: Russia) exploiting the growing economic uncertainties and societal vulnerabilities in the face of the pandemic.

Still, the Kremlin and its Tbilisi-based affiliates did not rest; ever since the country reported the first virus infection, they moved in to exploit the pandemic situation, including by discrediting Georgia's public institutions leading the crisis response, as well as its western partners, and by tarnishing their reputation in the eyes of the public. Myths, manipulations and conspiracy theories surged, with the Tbilisi-based Center for



Public Health Research, a U.S.-funded biological research facility located at the outskirts of Tbilisi and functioning under the Georgian Ministry of Healthcare, coming into the spotlight again.

The research facility played a crucial link in Georgia's coronavirus response, giving disease control officials reliable information on possible cases of infections and the full geography of the virus distribution. As a result, the Kremlin's information offensive against the institution appeared to have a limited impact on the public opinion in Georgia. Still, it generated some media attention and resonated with certain segments of the population, warranting a more scrupulous analysis of the means and messages used in this episode of Moscow's information operations in Georgia.

### **Kremlin's bio-warfare allegations: themes and chronology**

The Center for Public Health Research, commonly referred as the Lugar Lab, a name inherited from U.S. Senator Richard Lugar, one of the sponsors and champions of the idea, was established in 2011 to promote animal and public health through infectious disease detection, control and surveillance. The Lugar Lab is known for its cutting-edge technology and high-level biosafety standards, which have been **confirmed** by numerous international site inspections, but apparently this has not stopped the Kremlin from waging a scaremongering campaign against the facility, targeting the centre itself, and more broadly, the Georgian government and the United States.

The Kremlin's first explicit allegations against the Lugar Lab appeared in 2015, when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs **accused** the U.S. and Georgian authorities of 'concealing the true content' of this 'undercover military medical-biological' facility. Back then, however, Moscow did not advance any further accusations against the centre. They came three years later, in 2018, when a number of relatively restrained Foreign Ministry statements questioning the 'real goals of this U.S. military-biological facility' **culminated** into a full-blown blame-

game against the research centre.

Commenting – ostensibly – the **remarks** of Moscow-based Igor Giorgadze – a decorated KGB officer and a former Georgian security official wanted by the Georgian authorities on charges of terrorism – that a several dozen Georgian citizens had died as a result of 'experiments with biological and bacterial weapons' in the premises of the laboratory, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, **stated** on 13 September 2018 that 'sovereign states must not become laboratories' and that citizens 'should not be test subjects in experiments that may threaten their lives'.

In what seemed to be a carefully orchestrated sequence of events, the Russian Defence Ministry convened a special press briefing on 10 October 2018, a month after Giorgadze's initial claims, giving official credence to his accusations and **alleging** that there were grounds to believe that 'a highly toxic chemical or biological agent was tested' at the centre 'under the guise of disease treatment'. Neither the names, nor the reasons for the reported deaths have been provided, however. The MoD also noted, citing Giorgadze, that the 'Americans' of the Lugar Lab expressed particular interest in studying diseases transmitted by blood-sucking insects, and that the U.S. had developed unmanned aerial vehicles for delivery of infected insects (sic).

The disinformation campaign continued throughout 2019, with Moscow repeatedly **accusing** the research facility of carrying out 'dual-purpose' activities, and, **on one occasion**, of intentionally 'introducing' the **brown marmorated stink bug** – an insect of east Asian origin which reportedly arrived to the region due to the 2014 Sochi Olympics and caused considerable damage to crops across the Black Sea shores.

The year 2020 presented yet another opportunity for the Kremlin to advance its allegations against the Lugar Lab; increased political and economic uncertainties over the pandemic outbreak, coupled with its negative psychological effects, created a predictably conducive environment for information

manipulations. And the Kremlin was quick to exploit the opening; in a statement issued on May 26, timed – perhaps intentionally – for Georgia’s independence day, the Russian Foreign Ministry echoed its earlier allegations of the Lugar Lab **conducting** ‘research on using insects as carriers of particularly dangerous biological agents and pathogens’, and of the U.S. producing drones ‘designed to release infected mosquitoes into the air’.

The statement drew an angry response in Tbilisi, with President Salome Zurbishvili slamming the accusations as ‘slanderous’ and with the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs blaming the Kremlin of ‘crude attempts’ to discredit the role of the research facility. The Russian MFA, however, repeated these allegations in a statement on May 27 **issued** in response to Tbilisi’s criticism, as well as in a statement on July 7, **published** in response to the United States’ report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-proliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments.

### **Tskhinvali, Sokhumi: Kremlin’s cronies join in the campaign**

Over the past few years, Moscow has used numerous techniques for spreading and amplifying its official messaging against the research facility, including the Kremlin-funded media and local civic groups. The Moscow-backed administrations of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have played an equally important role in the information operations; not only have they parroted the official Russian allegations, they have also added their own interpretation of events, going as far as **accusing** the Lab of ‘transnational terrorism’ – like Tskhinvali in 2019, or of **causing** mass poisoning of kids in Abkhazia – like Sokhumi in 2017.

Of the two, Tskhinvali has been particularly energetic in spreading the disinformation. At different times, the region’s leaders have accused the facility of **causing** the African swine fever, bird flu and cattle dermatitis, and of **polluting** the country’s largest river, the Mtkvari, with hazardous leftover materials. Local talking heads have taken this even further, one **stating** the lab had hosted

experiments for perfecting bacteria for ‘conducting bacteriological warfare against countries and peoples unwelcome by the United States’, and the other **claiming** there were virus-carrying mosquitoes ‘reproduced’ at the research facility.

Sokhumi authorities have generally been more reserved than their counterparts in Tskhinvali, but they have also subtly **echoed** the Russian allegations – that **biological weapons** were being developed at the research centre, or that **the swine flu** could have been intentionally imported into the region from Georgia proper with the support of the Lugar Lab.

The coronavirus outbreak intensified the disinformation campaign. Tskhinvali was the first to grab the bullhorn again, repeating the allegations of their patrons in Moscow, as well as voicing new claims against the centre. On both occasions, the goal was to discredit the measures taken by Tbilisi in the eyes of the Georgians and the international community.

The region’s self-styled ‘state security service’, which still goes by its soviet-era name, KGB, acted as the major tell-tale again. In numerous statements issued shortly before and after the Russian Foreign Ministry’s May 26 statement, the KGB said Tbilisi had **covert plans** for collecting biological samples of South Ossetian residents living in the borderline areas, thereby **raising** the risks of their ‘intentional infection’. To prove they were serious about these allegations, the security service showed its officers dressed in full medical gear **collecting** ground, water and air samples from an area close to Georgia proper, citing the need for ‘further investigation’.

In June, the KGB **announced** that one of the many tasks of the Lugar Lab was to ‘develop a biological weapon, aimed at targeted annihilation of the South Ossetian part of the Ossetian ethnicity’. A month later, the KGB also **said** Tbilisi had commissioned \$5,000 rewards for collecting the colonies of bats of South Ossetian habitat, leading the region’s state-funded media to suggest that the Lugar Lab ‘could have taken part in creating the novel coronavirus’, since – in their words – ‘according to the official version, it was exactly a bat that was used for primary infection in the People’s Republic of China’.

## Conclusions

Although the coronavirus-related disinformation has had a limited impact on the public opinion in Georgia, the recent episode of Moscow's malign information campaigns still tells a story, and helps draw several important conclusions.

First and foremost, analysis of official and quasi-official channels used in the disinformation campaign sheds the light on how the Kremlin organises and manages similar operations abroad. It demonstrates that the Russian toolbox involves a variety of actors and a variety of messages, employed interchangeably, and sometimes unsystematically. It also shows that while Moscow itself may be somewhat reticent in voicing overly unrealistic and sensitive accusations, the role is dutifully accepted by local administrations in Abkhazia and

Tskhinvali regions, who simultaneously echo the Kremlin's official line and voice bolder messages outside the Kremlin's message box.

Overall, the coronavirus outbreak in Georgia demonstrated that the crisis was as much about information warfare, as it was about fighting the epidemics. As the total figure of infections remained relatively low throughout the first half of 2020, Georgia avoided some of the negative social and psychological ramifications of the crisis, and hence the country and its society were more immune against the Kremlin's information inroads. Shall there be a spike in the number of infections, Georgia should brace for another, much more aggressive wave of the disinformation campaign, which will require fighting both fronts equally intensively – something the Georgian government has consistently lacked in the recent months.

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***Miroslava Sawiris***

## **Struggle for information security during pandemic**

*The article is based on a report presented on 29 September 2020 at the [roundtable discussion](#) **The Pandemic: Challenges Faced by Civil Society.***

In an information society characterised by incredibly fast transmission of large volumes of data, security of information, or lack thereof during epic crises becomes a state's and society's largest vulnerability. This does not only apply to critical information infrastructure, but also to the very nature of information itself. The impact of disinformation and proliferation of conspiracy theories on democratic societies has become a hot topic, although our ability to do

anything about it seems limited.

As is often the case, things will get worse before they get better. Covid-19 related infodemic will contribute to the havoc wreaked on hospitals and communities in the second wave which particularly for the Central and Eastern European countries will mean a true acquaintance with the virus. Whereas fear and novelty of the situation combined with strict lockdown measures

have led to a relatively mild first wave in CEE, the situation is almost reversed now. Proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories about the pandemic combined with eased restrictions during the summer are important contributing factors to the rapid increase of Covid-19 positive cases.

### One infodemic with many faces

Infodemic is a global phenomenon manifesting in attacks on phone masts in the UK<sup>1</sup> or anti Covid-measures protests in Germany,<sup>2</sup> USA,<sup>3</sup> or Slovakia<sup>4</sup> alike. However, the information space of each country is unique. These differences are most easily grasped by visualising information spaces online. Such approach demonstrates how, for example, the information space in Slovakia differs from the one in Czechia or Hungary. While Hungary's Facebook information sphere reflects social polarisation, Czech Facebook is a much more integrated system in which mainstream media still play an important role. In contrast, Slovakia's influential disinformation channels occupy the centre stage, interspersed with pages of different political parties. These specificities simply mirror different historical, social and political factors which left their mark on the shape of each information space.

It is only logical then, that successful information operation campaigns work with these particularities and deploy narratives, symbols and stereotypes in a way that incorporates local context. In Slovakia, for example, extreme far right uses the pandemic to further demonise Roma minority by claiming that they spread the virus or that they receive 'undeserved special advantages'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/77-phone-masts-fire-coronavirus-5g-conspiracy-theory-2020-5>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-thousands-protest-for-and-against-coronavirus-measures/a-55153849>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dennikn.sk/2092897/koronavirus-protest/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://dennikn.sk/2092897/koronavirus-protest/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://fakty.afp.com/nie-stat-romom-v-zehrianskej-karantene-nezaplatil-za-23-tony-jedla>

In Montenegro the decision to close borders as a protective measure against the spread of the virus was interpreted by some channels as a political act damaging Serbia and Russia, whereas in Hungary the pandemic was used to further securitise migration by claiming that migrants are spreading the virus.

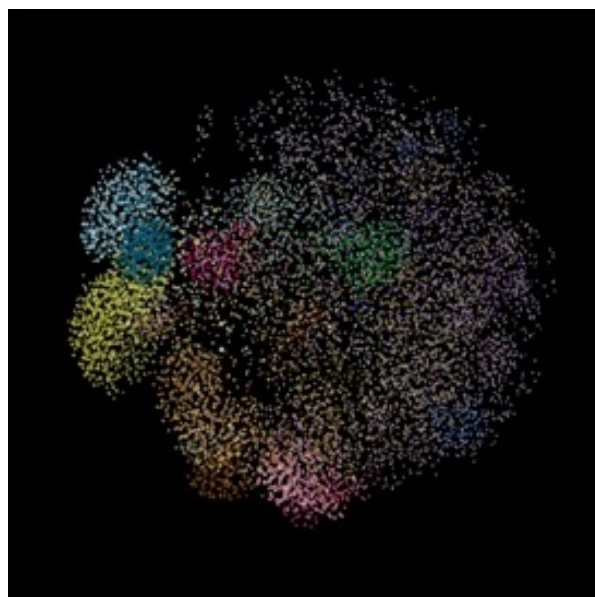


Figure 1. Slovak Facebook map.

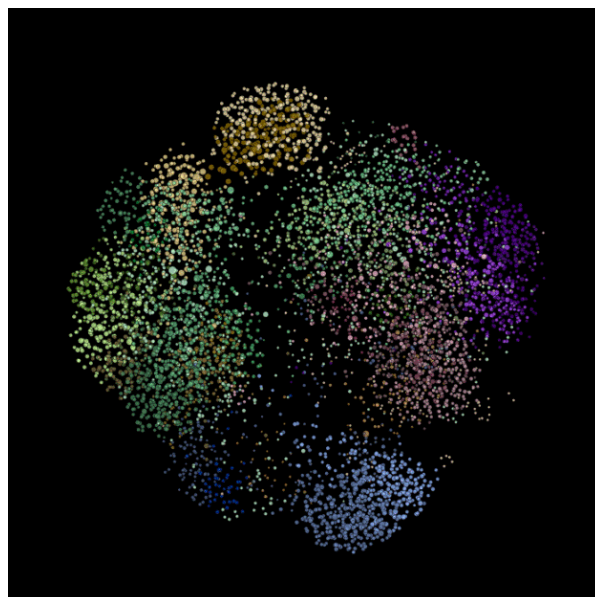


Figure 2. Hungarian Facebook map.

The Hungarian map is characterised by more defined clusters which are quite separated from each other. This reflects a higher level of discourse polarisation on Hungarian Facebook.

Source: *Visualising Influence report, GLOBSEC.*

## Universal conspiracy theory

However, another surprising feature of this infodemic are truly globalised conspiracy theories which spread like wildfire across different continents, cultures and communities. In the past, conspiracy theories tended to be quite localised, attempting to explain local historical events such as the Great Fire of London in 1666 or the reasons behind German defeat in World War I. Conspiracy theories in the post-modern era are ever more universal. Of course, it is particularly social media platforms which enable their rapid dissemination.

The most prominent of such examples is the QAnon conspiracy theory which has become global and in its expansion has transformed from its meagre beginnings on 4Chan<sup>6</sup> to incorporate aspects of different theories, essentially forming a super-conspiracy theory claiming that the coronavirus is a hoax planned by secret elites. Donald Trump is the supposed hero who will 'save the world from machinations of the deep state'.<sup>7</sup> The theory now has proponents in the U.S., Europe, as well as Latin America.

Other conspiratorial narratives essentially attempt to explain the pandemic by tapping into well-established conspiracy theories such as the New World Order theory. This is how the narrative about Covid-19 testing or vaccinations being a means for nano-chips implantations to supposedly control the world population came into being.

## Vulnerable minds, vulnerable states

Although data is hard to come by, countries where belief in this conspiracy theory is popular may have issues with trust in public health institutions and that in turn can have devastating consequences in terms of managing the pandemic. For example, in

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-the-qanon-conspiracy-theory/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/07/tech/qanon-europe-cult-intl/index.html>

Slovakia and Bulgaria, the belief that world affairs are decided by secret elites aiming to establish a totalitarian world order is shared by 60% and 52% of the population, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Couple that with disinformation about the pandemic peddled by local disinformation actors, using for example Alex Jones' InfoWars material<sup>9</sup> which gets reshared tens of thousands of times, and a recipe for disaster is created.

As the world braces for the second wave of the pandemic, existential vulnerability posed by information security vacuum is being fully exposed. For example, if a third of people in Kosovo believes that Covid-19 is a hoax,<sup>10</sup> how can epidemiological crisis in the country be meaningfully addressed? What is even worse, psychological research shows that those who fall for a conspiracy theory once will likely stick to their interpretation despite being provided with facts challenging their persuasion thanks to mechanism called rationalisation of anticipated realities.<sup>11</sup> It means that a person will rationalise the explanation which 'feels more psychologically real'. If that explanation is an already held conspiratorial belief, the likelihood of changing it is very small.

## Civil society cannot do it alone

The focus on prevention should thus be the key. While civil society actors in Europe and the U.S. have long advocated for a safer and healthier online information space through initiatives such as the Alliance for Healthy Infosphere,<sup>12</sup> or the Slovak project konšpiratori.sk,<sup>13</sup> or the Czech equivalent – nelež.cz<sup>14</sup> and many others, systematic change will not be effected by civil society alone.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-read-version.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ChemtrailsSK/posts/1245805912417601>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2020/09/11/coronavirus-a-third-of-people-in-kosovo-believe-covid-19-is-a-hoax-according-to-poll>

<sup>11</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956797617738814>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.globsec.org/initiatives/alliance-for-healthy-infosphere/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.konspiratori.sk/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nelez.cz/>

It is essential that the private sector and state, as well as international institutions develop innovative transparent solutions to limit impact of harmful information while protecting freedom of speech. Such endeavour will be a difficult feat to pull off because any such policy will need to be supported by a thorough understanding of newly emerging technologies involved in content management. With European Democracy Action Plan and Digital Services Act planned for presentation at the end of 2020, the EU is expected to attempt to navigate these complex waters for the first time.

### **First, do no harm**

Comprehensive and effective regulation of digital platforms will not come soon enough to address the infodemic in the full swing which threatens lives and livelihoods of many. We must use remedies currently at our disposal to minimise the impact of disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories. Solutions such as efficient crisis and strategic communication may seem mundane, yet many public institutions and personalities not only underestimate their usefulness, by not following their basic principles, but even contribute to the information chaos themselves.

If principles of strategic communication were systematically implemented at all levels of state administration even at a limited extent, malign actors would find it much harder to step into the information void with harmful information and narratives, because the void would not be there in the first place.

Public institutions and servants need to communicate simple, clear and factual messages to their key audiences. Failure to do so creates the information void – a golden opportunity to disinform and manipulate. Similarly, the importance of *not* communicating conflicting messages by state

administration cannot be overestimated, as these create information chaos, which in a critical situation can directly lead to public harm. The Covid-19 pandemic is a real test for governments in crisis communication, ranging from positive examples such as New Zealand<sup>15</sup> characterised by transparency and early announcements which foster the absolutely necessary public trust, to examples of how not to do it as embodied in the U.S. President Donald Trump's erratic and divisive communication style combined with dissemination of disinformation and conspiracy theories.<sup>16</sup>

### **Responsible digital citizenship**

The responsibility for transparent and factual communication in a time of crisis or outside of it does not lie solely with public institutions in a democratic state. While the implementation of the responsible digital citizenship concept will require long-term investment in resources and capacities, it is at least as important as the regulation of digital space. Influence operations' reach would be significantly circumscribed simply by users unwilling to share content without checking its veracity first.

Many users have been caught vulnerable and unprepared for the radical changes to consumption and production of information in the wake of the information revolution associated with the new digital era. This fact seems applicable to young as well as more established democracies. Without necessary education and skills in critical thinking as well as ways to stay safe online, users can often share content without checking their sources first, unaware of the fact that unwittingly they help spread hate and false information. This can be lethal in the time of a global pandemic. We all need to accept the fact that responsible citizenship extends to online sphere as well.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/9/17/New-Zealand-Covid-response-html>  
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/10/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/>

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# Side effects of COVID-19: What has been done in Latvia to combat the infodemic

*The article by experts of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs is based on a report presented on 29 September 2020 at the [roundtable discussion](#) The Pandemic: Challenges Faced by Civil Society.*

The spread of COVID-19, in addition to direct health consequences, has led to the emergence of an indirect phenomenon that can also negatively affect people's lives — the infodemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), infodemic is an overabundance of information, both online and offline, which includes deliberate attempts to spread wrong information to undermine the public health response and promote alternative solutions to groups or individuals.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, it can be harmful to people's physical and mental health, reduce the effectiveness of COVID-19 prevention policies and threaten countries' ability to stop the pandemic. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, which may be replaced by misinformation or disinformation, diagnostic tests go unused, campaigns that promote vaccination will not meet their goals, and the virus will continue to thrive. In addition, WHO claims that disinformation divides the public debate on topics related to coronavirus, amplifies hate speech, increases the risk of conflict and human rights violations, as well as threatens long-term prospects for developing democracy, human rights and social cohesion.

Considering such negative consequences of the infodemic, countries are looking for ways to combat it, spending resources and efforts. Latvia is no exception. Its approach can be divided into several directions: support for public media, financial aid for private media and NGOs, as well as direct communication and reaction from the authorities. Each of these directions will be discussed separately in this article.

First, we should look more closely into public media — two television channels, three news sites and five radio stations, two of which are informational. It is important to mention that all of them provide coverage in two languages — Latvian and Russian, but the news sites also in English.<sup>2</sup> Having received additional funding to appropriately report the COVID-19 pandemic, the public media could better report the international and regional situation. For instance, news portals not only informed about the outbreaks of the disease, the number of people tested, infected and dead in neighbouring countries, but also highlighted the steps taken to combat the coronavirus, and also published various analytical articles on COVID-19 and its impact on many aspects of life. More money also helped to pay the overtime caused by more extensive coverage. Considering that Russian-speaking residents are often the main target and victim of Russian propaganda, it is worth noting that public media provided factually correct and comprehensive reporting on the pandemic, including the international situation, in Russian. This led to an increase in the audience, part of which remained after the 'first wave' of the pandemic. The Russian-speaking international audience has also grown due to the coverage of the regional situation.

Part of the public media's effort went into fact-checking, yet in this regard we should focus on private media and NGOs. For instance, news portal *Delfi* and a non-profit organisation, which produces investigative journalism, *Re:Baltica*, became Facebook's

<sup>1</sup> 'Immunizing the public against misinformation', *World Health Organization*, 25 August 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/immunizing-the-public-against-misinformation>

<sup>2</sup> 'Coronavirus', *LSM.lv*, <https://eng.lsm.lv/topic/coronavirus/>

fact-checking partners.<sup>3</sup> They actively flagged false information about COVID-19, thus helping to combat fake narratives. In addition, *Re:Baltica* regularly publishes articles exposing misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 in three languages — Latvian, Russian and English. Both sites also provide exclusive analysis about the effects of coronavirus on various aspects of people's lives. Other portals also participated in fact-checking. Apart from a few marginal media with a small audience and a stable bad reputation, almost all outlets reported about the pandemic in accordance with high journalistic and ethical standards. For example, they often consulted highly qualified experts or covered various issues in many spheres of life caused by COVID-19. As for the government's support, private media received subsidies to compensate for the losses caused by the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> This helped to prevent a reduction in the supply of information, which is an important aspect in the fight against propaganda.

Speaking about the government's actions in the context of combating disinformation, it is necessary to point out the direct communication from the authorities. There were frequent press conferences and briefings, where highest officials, including Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, explained the actions of the government and its agencies. Journalists also participated and had opportunities to ask questions. In addition, these events were held online, thereby reducing the risk of contracting COVID-19. Besides the prime minister's participation and important role in public communication, the Ministry of Health and its subordinate structures were mainly involved in it, and three officials in particular — Minister of Health Ilza Vinķele, the Ministry's chief infectologist Uga Dumpis, and expert of the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control Jurijs Perevoščikovs. They not only participated in press conferences, but also often appeared in the media, explaining

<sup>3</sup> 'Re:Check becomes Facebook's official fact checking partner', *The Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism Re:Baltica*, 25 March 2020, <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2020/03/recheck-becomes-facebooks-official-fact-checking-partner/>

<sup>4</sup> 'Watchdog to ask €1.6m in support for commercial media', *LSM.lv*, 6 April 2020, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/watchdog-to-ask-16m-in-support-for-commercial-media.a354860/>

certain government decisions in the fight against the pandemic and talked about the effects of the coronavirus, how to deal with it, what measures need to be taken so as not to get infected, etc. Besides, they provided information in several languages, including Russian and English.<sup>5</sup>

However, other branches of government not directly related to the fight against COVID-19, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence, also countered disinformation. The latter, at the beginning of the 'first wave' denied the information that twenty soldiers in the NATO multinational battalion battle group in Latvia were infected with the coronavirus. Significantly, Latvia is one of the co-authors of the UN initiative to combat infodemic, signed by 130 countries. Latvia urged other states to take measures and prevent the spread of disinformation.<sup>6</sup> These efforts should be based on protecting freedom of speech and press, promoting the highest ethical norms and standards, protecting journalists and other media workers, and promoting media literacy, trust in science, facts, national and international institutions.

Of course, it was not possible to eliminate false information completely, for example, on social networks, especially Facebook. However, Latvia has fought against misinformation and conspiracy theories by financially supporting public and private media outlets, as well as NGOs which operate in accordance with high journalistic standards. In addition, government agencies and authorities, including high-ranking officials, communicated directly with the society and the media, explaining the state's actions and the effects of the coronavirus. Latvia has also shown itself at the international level, becoming one of the co-authors of the initiative to combat the infodemic.

<sup>5</sup> 'Novel Coronavirus Covid-19 advice for the public', *Latvijas Republikas Veselības ministrija*, 09 October 2020, [https://www.vm.gov.lv/en/ministry/novel\\_coronavirus\\_covid19\\_advice\\_for\\_the\\_public1/](https://www.vm.gov.lv/en/ministry/novel_coronavirus_covid19_advice_for_the_public1/)

<sup>6</sup> 'Latvian-initiated global call to combat the "infodemic" in the context of COVID-19 is endorsed by 130 countries', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia*, 12 June 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/66123-latvian-initiated-global-call-to-combat-the-infodemic-in-the-context-of-covid-19-is-endorsed-by-130-countries>



*Angela Grămadă, Cătălin Gabriel Done*

# Civil society's response to the coronavirus pandemic in Central-South-Eastern Europe and the Caucasus

*The article by experts of the Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association is based on a report presented on 29 September 2020 at the [roundtable discussion](#) The Pandemic: Challenges Faced by Civil Society.*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis poses a significant influence over the correct information of the population. The problem of the disinformation and the potential abuses can influence the capacity of the state to keep social and health systems under control. During the ongoing pandemic, the societies of South-Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus are facing several common challenges that are crucial in the limitation of the up-bottom disinformation or risks associated with the propaganda related to the pandemic. From the very start, a large part of the civil society's specific actions has had to deal with a series of impediments that have led, in some cases, to abuses by the authorities and the limitation of the democratic principles and human rights. For example, on March 30 the Hungarian Parliament adopted a controversial decision by which the Prime minister can lead the country in a discretionary manner.<sup>1</sup> In the Republic of Moldova, the monitoring of the human rights situation has shown that '*people in closed institutions, such as psychiatric hospitals and temporary placement centers for persons with disabilities*' are vulnerable to abuse.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the lockdowns adopted as a

measure of public health protection have limited the information flow by imposing media censorship and limiting access to public information.<sup>3</sup> In Ukraine, it was important to avoid hate speech promoted against people travelling from abroad and to prevent new topics for the Russian propaganda about the authorities' capability to manage the situation. Additionally, the Armenian civil society expressed concerns over the media restrictions during the state of emergency and the implementation of the structural reforms.<sup>4</sup>

Over and above that, regional civil society denounced several negative campaigns for sharing fake news, conspiracy theories, or supporting illiberal governance decisions. In these cases, the relevance of the NGO's work and their capacity to react provides the consequence in protecting the social order and the rule of law. The COVID-19 affected not only the quantity but also the quality of the implemented reforms, at the same time showing the importance of internal resilience in the face of threats of external origin.

On the other hand, the current circumstances offer a set of conditions for the national civil societies to increase the voluntary participation of the population in actions to defend their interests, and an opportunity to

<sup>1</sup> John Shattuck, 'Coronavirus versus Democracy: 5 Countries Where Emergency Powers Risk Abuse', *The Conversation*, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-versus-democracy-5-countries-where-emergency-powers-risk-abuse-135278>.

<sup>2</sup> Civil Rights Defenders, 'Moldova: Civil Society Responds to New Challenges Amid Coronavirus Pandemic', *Civil Rights Defenders* (blog), 2020, <https://crd.org/2020/06/16/moldova-civil-society-responds-to-new-challenges-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

<sup>3</sup> Vaceslav Balan and Vladyslav Stegnyy, 'COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons for Media Freedom in Moldova' (Freedom House, 2020), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20Stegnyy\\_FINAL-EN.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20Stegnyy_FINAL-EN.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Ruzanna Stepanian, 'Armenian Media Deplore Restrictions On Pandemic Reporting', *RFE* (blog), 2020, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30497220.html>.

reflect on the values that are truly important to any society: human rights, human dignity, democracy, freedom and the rule of law.

This policy brief is based on a succinct analysis of the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic on the internal capacities of the civil society to act and deliver common goods for the target groups. This analysis identifies some national and regional particularities during this pandemic and the impact on public policy consumers.

The ESGA<sup>5</sup> research also seeks to identify the mixed-methods approach of the civil society to combat the threats from the authorities, but also the disinformation and social terrorism campaigns.

### **From regional...**

The governmental authorities from Central-South-Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus used a combination of actions to consolidate the governmental powers, the COVID-19 pandemic being an opportunity to enforce the grip on the countries.<sup>6</sup> This reality was caused by a lack of preparedness to deal with these new types of threats. The governmental authorities also acted differently due to the presence of internal factors or specific situations they were facing. In some states, the government has tried to manage the risks by imposing harsh measures and restrictions that have harmed human rights. Other countries have experienced the consolidation of some public institutions, endowing them with several coercive instruments, which were not previously part of the instrumentation of political actors. Another category failed to avoid external assistance from less credible partners. Only few states have managed to control the spread of the pandemic without limiting the fundamental freedoms.

As it was mentioned in a previous discussion, these actors turn this crisis into an opportunity to promote some interests, more

<sup>5</sup> For more information: <http://www.esga.ro>

<sup>6</sup> James Lamond, 'Authoritarian Regimes Seek To Take Advantage of the Coronavirus Pandemic', Center for American Progress, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2020/04/06/482715/authoritarian-regimes-seek-take-advantage-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

political cores stepping up their surveillance capabilities, and to extend their general influence. The monitoring of several civil society actions or initiatives aimed at combating misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, and even the undemocratic actions of the states, allowed to identify several complicated situations, generating uncertainties and hesitation in making decisions. In recent months, we have either highlighted the fact that there are wider risks related to the responsibility of public services and civil society in the counterwork of the destabilising elements,<sup>7</sup> but the reaction capacity was poor, either because the national bureaucracy acted according to the political rules or because the NGO's funding system collapsed.<sup>8 9</sup>

Despite the context, during this critical period, civil society carries out a key role in eliminating an important number of organic forms of reinterpretation of the objective facts, perceiving its educational and opinion-forming character among beneficiaries. The fundamental problem naturally arises in the highly divided societies, as well as in those where the democratic element is weak or completely absent, where the credibility of state or social institution is poor.

For example, Romania remains a fragile democracy, even if today it is a member of the European Union and NATO. The political parties downplayed the civil society for the past 30 years and have desperately tried, by any means, to discredit the fundamental innovative idea of the civic community, of appropriate action for the benefit of another in a disinterested way. Moreover, around the 2016 general elections, some political actors considered the civil society a factor of national instability, because it campaigned for defence of the rule of law and drew attention to the fact that some changes in the national

<sup>7</sup> Angela Grămadă and Cătălin-Gabriel Done, 'Main Trends in Disinformation in the COVID-19 Era. Study Cases: The Republic of Moldova and Romania' (ESGA, 2020), <http://www.esga.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Policy-Brief-Desinformation-1.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Saul Mullard and Per Aarvik, 'Supporting Civil Society during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The Potentials of Online Collaborations for Social Accountability.' (Anti-Corruption Resource Center, 2020), <https://www.u4.no/publications/supporting-civil-society-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> See Angela Grămadă's interview for the *1in.am Armenian News & Analyses* on pages 5-7 of this issue.

legislation would pave the way to abuse.<sup>10</sup> Decent people sincerely believed this and rightly so, the televisions loyal to political parties energetically promoted the anti-civil society messages, and today it is extremely difficult to precisely measure the profound influence that the civil society invariably has on the population, especially in critical times.

The civil society, through public cohesion with journalists, contributed to the annulment of the decision of the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual (CCA), mobilised resources and volunteers to beneficiaries from vulnerable communities, offered help to doctors, expressed its views on the amendment of existing legislation on the activity of NGOs (required the vote on the law without dangerous amendments). Regarding the debates on various public policies, the situation was quite uncertain at first, because public institutions were also afraid to promote them for security reasons for employees, but also because the legislation governing quarantine or the state of emergency came with high financial sanctions. Subsequently, online debates took place, and civil society joined online and showed willingness to remain watchdogs and continued drawing attention to the less good decisions of the authorities, monitored public procurement, informed the population, proposed new measures, and public policies. Romanian civil society has communicated its problems to the authorities in the form of concrete public policy proposals, capable of generating more opportunities in unstable times and more security for those NGOs that fall under new types of threats, especially of a financial nature.

We have many examples in the region: the debate about the situation of the street children, how to protect them from the pandemic; online consultation with the Romanian Prime Minister on topics that were of high interest for civil society, fiscal proposals for the NGOs employees, asking the authorities to treat the CSOs as SMEs. Civil society is not only a partner for the central

and local authorities but also a generator of revenues to the state budget through the projects they attract.

### **...to national**

First, the response capacity of the civil society is different from one country to another. The reaction is conditioned by several factors such as resources, education, and capacity to mobilise resources. For understanding the local situations with all the consequences that may arise from them, we must look at each element as a whole and situational.

In the case of Armenia, the fastest reaction and mobilisation of public opinion against censorship caught the attention of the international public opinion. Here we consider the authorities' attempts to force the independent press to publish only controlled content about COVID-19 as a very bad one. The authorities used the existing state of emergency legislation in force to control people's minds. Civil society reacted immediately and consistently. Consequently, we were able to highlight how the central authority took steps back under the pressure of the public opinion, mobilised in this regard by civil society and journalists. Armenian civil society provided an example of how to be a watchdog in time of the pandemic. There have been similar attempts in the Republic of Moldova: imposing censorship and controlling the content of information on how the authorities cope with the crisis. In the case of Moldova, the cohesion of civil society, of experts who had partnerships with the press, was essential to overturn the decision of the President of the Audiovisual Coordinating Council. The mobilisation took place on social media as the face-to-face protests were prohibited by the decision of the authorities.

The censorship was the element that the authorities in different states did not hesitate to use to control the behaviour of the masses. Without the reaction of civil society, things would have been much worse from the perspective of respecting the right to information. Fundamental rights and freedoms have been violated in most states in the region. There are many restrictions in place, ***there are limitations that the young***

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Day, 'România: Cum Atacă Guvernul ONG-Urile Și Libertățile Acestoră', Libertis (blog), 2017, <https://www.liberties.eu/ro/news/romania-tot-mai-putin-spatiu-pentru-societatea-civila/12830>.

***generation has not known so far and the comparative assessment of the impact of SARS-CoV-2 will be a long process*** (for example, the freedom of movement, the freedom of peaceful assembly – in the majority of the countries in the region).

It was difficult not only to offer the social services for the beneficiaries of the social programs but also it was difficult to travel to different regions, to be involved. In this context, the support of volunteers was very important. The pandemic helped to assess the involvement of the voluntary movements and to provide assistance for those in need.

The freedom of peaceful assembly was affected negatively. The protests were banned in some countries, in other countries it was possible to organise only small protests and with many rules imposed on the organizers: protests of the LGBT community in Georgia, political protests in Moldova, protests against COVID restrictions in Romania or Georgia, etc.

In the same context, of the extension of public debates on how civil society has been affected by the pandemic, it is relevant to mention the fact that authorities or external factors as propaganda tools have used several NGOs. In most cases, these religious, conservative NGOs voluntarily took over or conditioned conspiracy messages. Most of the messages promoted by this part of civil society harmed the measures to reduce the infection promoted by the government authorities. The fight against vaccines, 5G technologies, and the uselessness of wearing masks were just some of the messages promoted during press conferences. In addition to these messages, geopolitical messages or messages of appreciation of some humanitarian actions often were promoted, diminishing the importance of others. Thus, the impact of the general efforts of the society was reduced, creating space for propaganda and false debates.

The increase in the number of false messages and propaganda associated with the pandemic required the identification of additional resources for programs dedicated to combating propaganda. Thus, most

important projects have included new analyses, positions, and educational programmes that can explain to citizens how to avoid the elements of organised misinformation and not become victims. As previously mentioned, the disinformation campaigns associated with the spread of COVID-19 required both human and additional financial resources, as well as donor amendments to the priorities they had set for the region. These donor interventions would have had minimal results if the cohesion between the analytical environment, civil society, academia, and the press had been lacking. Cooperation between civil society actors, government authorities (support for the implementation of reforms), academia, and journalists has proven to be a useful experience in times of uncertainty.

Civil society has been exposed to the spread of the pandemic both financially and in terms of human resources. However, most representatives of the sector understood in due time how important is the coherence of actions, strategies, but especially of cohesion and cooperation with local and central public authorities. The real impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can be evaluated only in the end. In the short term, the impact is already visible in the restrictive measures adopted during emergencies and which will remain in force until new directives. In the medium term, it is important for NGOs to continue to monitor the quality of the decision-making process, to assist in the development of public policies, and to come up with effective solutions and recommendations to reduce the impact of new risks and threats.

All the elements mentioned above, which influenced the situation of the civil society, were adopted by the governmental authorities, by political leaders with or without vision, who were inspired by the regional tendencies. In this context, the priority topics for future analysis should be the quality of leadership at the regional level during COVID-19, but also the behaviour of foreign actors with interests in the region, who supported propaganda, misinformation, and weak resilience of partners.

**Armen Grigoryan**

## **Book review: The Armenian Revolution: An Unfinished Cable**

*The Armenian Revolution: An Unfinished Cable* by the former Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Armenia Piotr A. Świtalski, **published** in early September by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, is a useful read. The author – well-informed beyond most Western policymakers' scope of interest, sincere and sympathetic – managed to make his assessment of the situation and some of the needs as precise as possible.

The warnings about issues arising from the lack of a clear communication strategy towards the West (pp. 86-87) and from delaying the reform of the judiciary and the law enforcement agencies (pp. 97-99) definitely deserve attention. This certainly does not imply that no such warnings have been voiced by the revolution's supporters among Armenian politicians and experts who 'mock the ruling party's philosophy as moderate progress within the bounds of the law' (p. 99) [Here, Świtalski clearly uses an allusion to Jaroslav Hašek's satirical Party of Moderate Progress Within the Bounds of the Law]. Indeed, the government's overly cautious and often inconsistent approach has been criticised – quite deservedly. At the same time, a European diplomat's understanding that some international structures could be manipulated by the opponents of the reform and show 'sometimes puzzling political ignorance' (p. 99) is especially important.

Świtalski also reiterates another concern of people who supported the revolution but are disappointed by the slow pace of reforms: 'The 2018 revolution became a historic opportunity to liberate many Armenians from

the syndrome of learned helplessness' (p. 135), yet '[t]here are people, even in important offices, who would prefer to return to the *status quo ante*. ... the people of the ancient regime do really want to come back. And they may. The experience of many post-revolutionary countries is that people's memory can be very short and selective' (pp. 134-135).

Świtalski's subtle, indeed diplomatic sense of humour (already observable from the allusion to Hašek) is also evidenced by the euphemistic use of the word 'foreign' in several cases. So, he mentions the failed attempt to make vice-premier, former Gazprom executive Karen Karapetyan, a caretaker and eventually a new prime minister in April 2018: 'delusions that the option of Karapetyan (with some foreign pressure) could be galvanised' (p. 83). Also, 'Some foreign media attacked Pashinyan for staffing his team with former employees of Western-sponsored NGOs and development agencies' (p. 85). He also mentions the close connections of the law enforcement personnel with allied foreign structures, making transition even more complicated (pp. 98-99). It should be clear for anyone familiar with the context that 'foreign' in all these cases means Russian.

Additionally, some other fragments of the book would also definitely make certain people from the Armenian self-appointed 'national-patriotic' circles, used to living in a dream, unhappy. But this is already a part of another story – partially explained in the editorial on pages 3-4 in this issue.

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