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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

*Hasmik Paytyan, Armen Grigoryan*

*The development and current issues of the EU-Armenia cooperation to contain disinformation*



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**Hasmik Paytyan, Armen Grigoryan**

## **The development and current issues of the EU-Armenia cooperation to contain disinformation**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this publication is to review how the EU-Armenia cooperation fits in the context of the anti-disinformation measures applied in Armenia, also taking into account some clauses of the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The report addresses the main channels of disinformation in Armenia, the role and impact of the National Strategy against Disinformation, the European Union's regulations against the spread of disinformation, and the projects and initiatives implemented in Armenia with the support of the EU.

The spread of disinformation is one of the most pressing challenges in the modern world, a threat for the democratic values, stability and security of societies, as well as for the reliability of information. In these circumstances, the EU has taken a leading role in international efforts to combat disinformation, developing strategic plans and tools for both its member states and partners.

The report examines the EU's policy in the field of countering disinformation, and assesses its impact on Armenia.

### **EU-Armenia cooperation in combatting disinformation in Armenia**

The spread of disinformation poses a serious threat to democratic institutions, societal cohesion and security. For Armenia, which is undergoing the transition towards more democratic governance and transparency, combatting disinformation is both a national priority and an area of effective cooperation with international partners, especially the EU.

#### *1. The spread of disinformation in Armenia*

In recent years, due to the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and blockade, the COVID pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian war, the elections in Armenia, and some other domestic political issues, the spread of disinformation has increased immensely. The importance of mechanisms to tackle disinformation, as well as the development of media literacy, has been recognised.

Disinformation in Armenia spreads in a number of ways and affects various sectors. Social networks, in particular Facebook, X (Twitter) and Telegram, have become the main platforms for disinformation. The media and various political circles supporting the government and the opposition are also actively involved in the process. Disinformation mainly concerns politics, electoral processes, healthcare, European integration, security, economic, social, ethnic and other issues; It is often spread by unreliable sources and tends to undermine public cohesion, trust and societal security. Diverse disinformation platforms – social media, local media, messaging apps, are fed by domestic and foreign propaganda sources.

In-depth studies show that the spread of disinformation also correlates with a low media literacy level. For this reason, Armenia particularly attaches importance to development of media literacy by strengthening cooperation between the state, civil society organisations, and international partners.

It is important to differentiate between three different kinds of false information: disinformation (false information that is intended to manipulate, cause damage and guide people, organisations, or countries in the wrong direction), misinformation (false information that is not intended to cause harm), and malinformation (information that stems from the truth but is often exaggerated in a way that misleads and causes potential harm).

## *2. The National Strategy against Disinformation*

To develop countermeasures against the spread of disinformation in Armenia, the [National Strategy against Disinformation for 2024-2026](#) was developed. It was adopted in December 2023 by the Prime Minister's decree 1319-L.

The Strategy and the Action Plan stemming from it aim to prevent, reduce and neutralise disinformation risks by uniting the efforts of the government, civil society, private sector and citizens.

The concept includes 3 strategic directions:

- To strengthen the capacity of Armenian public institutions to prevent, detect, and analyse disinformation, and to respond to it,
- To improve collaboration and private sector involvement,
- To raise awareness about media freedom and media literacy, and the level of media literacy education, so to build societal resilience to disinformation.

The strategy and the plan were developed by the [Freedom of Information Centre](#) in cooperation with the Public Relations and Information Centre of the Prime Minister's Office, with the support of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE).

The planned actions aim at an improvement of the public institutions' rapid response mechanisms, increasing the level of media literacy among the public, and reducing the risks posed by disinformation. Progress is evident in all these components, but a longer period of time is needed to assess the full impact, as many initiatives are still in the implementation phase.

The achieved progress notwithstanding, there are persisting challenges related to the legal framework development, social media monitoring, and new sources of disinformation, including the spread of artificial intelligence.

## *3. EU-Armenia cooperation for combatting disinformation within the CEPA framework*

The cooperation between Armenia and the European Union includes several key areas envisaged within the CEPA framework. The provisions of the agreement relevant for tackling disinformation aim to support the stability of the information field, with contributions to the development of media literacy and to the growth of public trust towards the information sources.

The cooperation in the context of combatting disinformation, based on the CEPA, includes several directions. The main directions are:

1. Institutional and legislative reforms
2. Promotion of media literacy
3. Technical and financial assistance
4. Cooperation with civil society and media organisations
5. The use of international experience
6. Public awareness and communication, with development of technological solutions

All these measures aim not only to decrease the impact of disinformation, but also to strengthen the cooperation between Armenia and the EU, based on shared democratic values.

#### *4. The EU regulations against disinformation*

The EU has adopted a number of regulations and strategies to combat disinformation and to ensure the security of the information space. Those regulations also have an impact on Armenia within the framework of cooperation with the EU.

1. The [Digital Services Act](#) (DSA), adopted in 2022, aims to create a more transparent digital environment, so to reduce the spread of disinformation on social media platforms. It aims to ensure that online platforms are held accountable for the spread of disinformation, including mechanisms for oversight and transparency.
2. The [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) (2022) aims to ensure cooperation between social media platforms and governments to reduce the spread of fake news.
3. The European Commission's strategy against disinformation aims to develop a comprehensive policy to prevent the spread of disinformation in EU member states and partner countries.

These and other regulations aimed at tackling disinformation include requirements for preventing and removing disinformation, using technological solutions and cooperation with regulatory authorities.

Armenia, within the framework of the partnership with the EU, has been gradually integrating the EU's best practices. These regulations serve as a guide for creating a more transparent and secure information environment in Armenia. The EU's technical and financial support is an important tool for Armenia's actions against disinformation.

#### *5. EU-funded projects implemented in Armenia and their impact on the efforts to tackle disinformation*

In recent years, a number of projects with the aim to tackle disinformation and to promote media literacy have been implemented in Armenia, and some are going on. Civil society organisations play an active role in the project implementation. The projects aim at the development of media literacy among different segments of society (schoolchildren, journalists, kindergarten and school teachers, CSO representatives) by

training courses, promotion of independent media, support to fact checking platforms, development of educational programmes, and promotion of technological solutions.

The [Media Literacy Week](#), supported by the EU and other donors, is particularly noteworthy. The Media Initiatives Centre and the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports organise it annually, inviting schools, kindergartens, universities, libraries, educational and cultural centres, and other interested participants to join. The events within the framework of the Media Literacy Week, organised by various institutions, ensure the comprehensive participation of the target audience and receive a wide response.

The EU-funded [Initiative for Media Quality and Resilience](#) is being implemented by the Media Initiatives Centre in cooperation with the Yerevan Press Club, the Media Diversity Institute and Denmark-based International Media Support. Among other goals, the project aims to promote media literacy, so that content consumers can better navigate the media landscape.

The Public Journalism Club received EU funding for translation and localisation of the children's book *Online Zoo*, accompanied by the Guidelines for Teachers and Educators on Tackling Disinformation and Promoting Digital Literacy through Education and Training. [These resources](#) aim to help children navigate the Internet and use digital devices safely, and to equip teachers with modern media literacy teaching methods and tools to conduct participatory and effective media literacy courses.

[EUvsDisinfo](#) is a platform created by the European Union, which focuses on detecting, analysing and countering disinformation. It plays a major role in disseminating disinformation analysis methods and materials, which can be used to support media literacy programmes in Armenia. The platform provides educational materials and analyses that can be used by Armenian media and educational institutions. It supports the areas of media literacy, policy-making and information security in Armenia, especially in the framework of EU-Armenia cooperation.

Thus, the programmes supported by the EU in Armenia are comprehensive and involve different segments of society in activities from promotion of media literacy to introduction of technological innovations. These programmes contribute to the fight against the spread of disinformation and increasing the societal resilience.

### **The spread of propaganda in the context of the EU-Armenia relations**

It may be noted that some of the propaganda rhetoric used against expanding cooperation with the EU [has been around for a long time](#). For example, the propaganda narrative about the alleged moral decline of the West, characterised by materialism, homosexuality, and the abandonment of 'traditional values', became especially widespread when the Association Agreement with the EU was being negotiated (then, the same narrative was also aggressively promoted in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine); it had, however, already emerged in Armenia about the time when the country joined the Council of Europe in 2001, and therefore adopted certain commitments related to the CoE standards. Yet, that narrative had appeared elsewhere even earlier. Famous Polish intellectual Adam Michnik noted in 1995, in a report at a forum organised by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in Berlin, dedicated to the situation in the former Warsaw Pact member states (which were at the stage of association agreements with

the EU at that time): 'Post-communist ethnic chauvinism is often buttressed by the political exploitation of religion: religion which aspires to the role of a political ideology – often of the new dominant state ideology. ... warns against closer links with the European Union, which he sees as Babylon, the seat of sin and corruption, the civilisation of death, the kingdom of pornography, abortion, contraception and divorce'.

Virtually all areas of the EU-Armenia cooperation – the actions envisaged by the CEPA (e.g., [‘that cooperation is directed against Russia’](#), [‘the material assistance provided is the price of changing Armenia’s foreign policy vector’](#), etc.), the activities of the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), the recently launched visa liberalisation dialogue, and so forth, have been targeted by hostile propaganda continuously. It should be expected that the government’s approval of the legislative proposal to launch the process of Armenia’s accession to the EU, which may likely be adopted during the upcoming session of the National Assembly, will result in a new intensive propaganda wave.

Recently, the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) at the Atlantic Council issued a [report](#) acknowledging that Russia and Azerbaijan have been using the same propaganda narratives to undermine Armenia’s partnership with Western actors, particularly vilifying the EUMA, Armenia’s trilateral discussions with the EU and the United States, and the visa liberalisation dialogue. Additionally, there are other matching narratives and propaganda methods, such as the allegations about France’s ‘neo-colonial’ policy, or about the EU, France, or the U.S. ‘provocations, which may lead to a new war’.

Moreover, propaganda about the alleged attempts to provoke a war by ‘collective West’ (in the context of the ‘collective West contra Russia’ narrative) has also been noticeable in Georgia, both before and after the parliamentary elections in October 2024. It is also noticeable that in the two months before the BRICS summit in Kazan in October 2024, the propaganda that Armenia also ought to join BRICS was accompanied by tales about the importance of resisting the ‘collective West’ by the global South led by Russia and China.

At the same time, some propaganda narratives get adapted to the current needs, usually in connection with some key events. For example, for several years, Russian and proxy propaganda in Armenia used to repeat that the EU and its members, even large states such as France and Germany, lack agency and ‘were dragged into the war against Russia’ by the United States. Yet, once Donald Trump was elected US president, the same circles started describing the EU members’ alleged lack of agency in a positive way, implying the close possibility of ending the war in Ukraine on terms favourable to Russia.

### **Conclusion: some challenges**

The EU-Armenia cooperation in the field of countering disinformation remains an important tool to ensure the stability and transparency of the information field in Armenia. Combined efforts in domestic policy, with international support, can have a greater impact in the fight against disinformation.

However, the main future challenges are related to the development of new technologies, in particular deepfakes, the spread of artificial intelligence tools, as well as to the deepening political polarisation and the lack of public trust in information sources.

Armenia should continue its cooperation with the EU by developing and strengthening legal, technological and educational approaches to combat disinformation.