



Freedom House Event

The Boundaries Between Information, Disinformation, and Confidentiality in Matters of National Security: What is Media Terror?

May 18

Summary and Conclusions

This discussion was organized within the framework of the project implemented by Freedom House in Armenia. The discussion was moderated by **Sossi Tatikyan**, Project Coordinator of Freedom House in Armenia.

The panelists included: **Ms. Gayane Abrahamyan** ("For Equal Rights" Educational Center and former Member of Parliament "My Step" faction), **Mr. Hovsep Khurshudyan** ("Free Citizen" Civic Initiatives Support Center), **Mr. Edgar Khachatryan** (Peace Dialogue), **Ms. Genya Petrosyan** (LDPF Foundation), **Mr. Daniel Ioannisyan** (Union of Informed Citizens), **Mr. Gegham Vardanyan** (Media Initiatives Center), **Ms. Nune Hovsepyan** (Human Rights Defender's office), and **Ms. Tatevik Arustamyan** (Public Relations and Information Center SNCO under the auspices of the Government of Armenia). **Andranik Shirinyan**, the Project Specialist of Freedom House in Armenia also took part in the discussion.

Sossi Tatikyan highlighted that in Armenia, disinformation is felt more strongly due to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in fall 2020 and the external and domestic crises that have followed. Prior to the conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, Armenian society was greatly polarized and today increasingly so. She defined disinformation as the deliberate spread of stories and news to change public opinion, however, it often contains a certain amount of accurate information to make it seem credible.

She emphasized that during the 2020 flare up of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, the communication and information policy of the Armenian State was criticized and problems in this area continue in the post-conflict period. The opposition, as well as civil society, note that the authorities' failure to provide timely and adequate information, promise of victory during the conflict, and attempts to conceal the truth during and after the conflict, undermined trust in official information. Conversely, the authorities accuse the opposition of spreading disinformation, exaggerating threats and risks, revealing national security secrets, and spreading media terror. She notes that the term "media terror" does not appear in international terminology but some studies have tracked its use to December 12, 2020, when Azerbaijani troops occupied the villages of Hadrut and Mount Dizapayt

and captured 64 Armenian servicemen stationed in the area as prisoners of war. She emphasizes that this topic is relevant now more than ever as there are Azerbaijani troops in Syunik and Gegharkunik who have been violating the territorial integrity of Armenia for several days and only a month before the snap elections. While the authorities ignore the security threats in the border areas of Armenia, the opposition takes advantage of incomplete information to spread exaggerated rumors.

She concluded by raising the following questions: How much information should the authorities provide on national security issues to secure the necessary awareness of the people and to prevent the void of information from being filled with disinformation? Is the boundary between information and disinformation clear? Can information be refuted as disinformation, and likewise, can disinformation be confirmed as information? It is wrong to disclose all information in the field of national security. How much of the information in the national security sphere be classified as confidential, restricted, public, etc.? How is information in the field of national security regulated in Armenia? Does the term "media terror" help or hinder the fight against disinformation?

Nune Hovsepyan noted that disseminating disinformation and generating public perceptions based on disinformation are challenges not only for Armenia but for many countries around the world today. She argued that if the state does not provide complete and objective information in a timely manner, then any vacuum may be filled with disinformation.

She emphasized the results of the Human Rights Defender's monitoring that public communication is especially flawed in crises, and that one of its shortcomings is that information does not come from one singular source. As a result, this causes difficulties even for a media literate consumer to determine what is truthful news. Especially in crises, the connection between state bodies and the media should be strengthened, but the complaints addressed to the Human Rights Defender prove the opposite occurred.

According to the Human Rights Defender's Office, the introduction of the term "media terror" hides the lack of communication capacity of the relevant representatives of state bodies. The state bodies create an information vacuum by their flawed work, and they complain that it is then filled with disinformation, blaming everyone for this except themselves. As well, she mentioned that there are problems with the media: journalists often do not act by the principles of responsible journalism which spreads panic and tension. She concluded that during crises if state bodies centralize information policy into one body and provide information regularly, operatively, and accurately, then disinformation will decrease. As well, she emphasized that public communication is an uninterrupted process, in which the most important thing is to not lose the trust of the public.

Gayane Abrahamyan discussed that unlike fake news, false narratives are spread more cautiously, leaving not a shocking effect but a trace in public perception and consciousness. She argues that the lack of public communication from the government

is the reason why there is a serious problem in media, but at the same time, after the 2018 revolution in Armenia, the main toolkit of the media passed into the hands of the opposition. Although not all agree with the term "media terror," it is obvious that the media often terrorizes the public.

She continued by highlighting that communication and governance deficiencies are not the only cause of disinformation, especially as the opposition uses disinformation to its advantage. In 2016, many media outlets, were conscious of whether news could harm society and what consequences it would have on society. Now, there is a tendency of disinformation being used to damage political power, and as a result the state and society suffer. She concluded that legislative regulation needs to be considered to help the disinformation issues and that media outlets should take responsibility for the fake news cited from an anonymous source.

Noting that the problem of disinformation is multifaceted, **Edgar Khachatryan** acknowledged that it is difficult to find solutions to disinformation during a single discussion. However, he suggested that state regulation is needed to solve such problems and that media organizations must create a culture following the rules of ethics.

He expressed that every state institution holding a state secret should be responsible for managing disinformation and that the state body in charge of information should also be responsible for publishing government information in the media. In order to combat illegal dissemination of information, he noted that the solution to the problem is to hold accountable the provider or disseminator of secret information.

He stated that in order to ensure the inviolability of state secrets and as long as public communication is a dynamic process that depends on context, political and external developments, the only way to combat disinformation is to find flexible institutional solutions that include providing a public communication strategy for each state institution.

Although opposition media outlets use fake information to promote political interests and disinformation is spread among people to form certain perceptions, limiting the entire flow of information to be classified as state or official secrets is also dangerous. Therefore, he expressed that solutions must be sought in different platforms and that everyone has a role to play, starting with NGOs who can organize media literacy events in the media sector and ending with the state taking clearer approaches.

He concluded that the only way to reduce subjectivity in the media is to develop democratic institutions to make the field manageable and transparent, which will allow consumers to access multiple media sources and get accurate information.

Genya Petrosyan spoke on the issues of illegal, unjustified encryption and the challenges of having no systemic solutions to the issue. Specifically, the guarantees of freedom of information within the framework of the State and Official Secrets law is problematic and needs a substantive review, as the regulations are outdated or contradict the international obligations undertaken by the Republic of Armenia. The new law,

attempting to solve these issues, contains only small or insignificant changes and repeats the current regulations leading to no legal progress on freedom of information issues.

She stated that the most problematic issue in this area is the rather wide and vague discretion of the state bodies to encrypt information. State bodies encrypt information for the maximum amount of time and without the obligation to justify the need for encryption. As a result, there is no proper control over the process of information encryption, timing, or declassification of information.

Gegham Vardanyan stated that journalism, fact-checking, and trust in authority are in deep crisis in Armenia. In the past, the words of public officials had value and were able to help combat disinformation but today the value of their words has decreased. He expressed that those who are responsible for communication do their job poorly and that while previously the authorities' connection with the citizens was at a high point, the work needed to improve communication with the public is not being done currently. The public broadcasters, Public Television and Public Radio, must make an effort to ensure that people are properly informed by verifying and fact-checking information. He is concerned that many media outlets focus on their shareholders and political allies instead of their consumers and in turn, work to fulfill their political agendas instead of providing the public with accurate information.

According to **Tatevik Arustamyan**, a crisis of trust has arisen in Armenia and the goal of the government should be to find mechanisms for solutions, to safeguard the society from disinformation, and to have a media literate society. However, the current initiatives of media literacy need to be coupled with institutional solutions. During and after the recent flare up of Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, information disseminated by anonymous sources, which was widely disseminated by popular media outlets such as Telegram, was problematic and conflicting. The attempt to correct false narratives did not spread as fast as the false information itself and therefore the media sphere was dominated by disinformation. She concluded that solutions must be found through cooperation amongst many players.