Between Fact and Fakery: Information and Instability in the South Caucasus and Beyond

Policy Recommendations[1]
Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus (RSSC SG)

16th RSSC SG Workshop
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PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes

GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT GÖTTINGEN

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Executive Summary:

The Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) held its 16th workshop from 9 to 12 November 2017 in Reichenau, and discussed a theme of extreme urgency: the impact of fake news on regional stability. The aim of the workshop was to examine the impact of false reporting on the development of a free media environment in the South Caucasus, on the existing stability of regional regimes, and on the competition for power and influence by large powers in the region. Lastly, the workshop begged the question as to whether false reporting was ever justified, even for positive motives, such as the search for more harmonious intra-regional relationships, and the neutralization of emotionality in conflict resolution. The following key recommendations were the object of significant debate and were agreed by the Study Group participants:

1. Re-affirm the validity of policy recommendations issued in the wake of the 12th RSSC SG Workshop of November 2015 (The Media is the Message: Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus), particularly calls for a regional prize rewarding journalistic excellence and inter-professional exchanges. Full recommendations are available at: http://www.bundesheer.at/wissen-forschung/publikationen/beitrag.php?id=2690.

2. Create, with the assistance of PfP Consortium volunteers, a Reference Curriculum on Media Literacy, emphasizing the impact of modern communication techniques and social media on human biology, psychology and behaviour. The aim would be to raise awareness of the media as a tool of hybrid warfare, and how to build resilience to it at individual level.

3. Prevent and remedy the effects on inaccurate reporting on regional stability by establishing national "counter-fakery" agencies. The task of these agencies would be to counteract damaging reporting particularly in cases where the media becomes a tool of hybrid warfare.

Keynote Address

Prof. h.c. Dr. Peter Schulze of Georg-August University in Göttingen and Co-Founder of the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, addressed the audience from a strategic perspective. While referring to the 2017 Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) assessment of Russian foreign policy, and the US National Intelligence Council (US NIC) report on global trends, he warned that "there is a consensus now… that the world is in disarray … that the rules-based international order is weakening," making "how" to think about the future increasingly difficult. The risk, according to Prof. Dr. Schulze, is that isolationist tendencies within a multipolar world will be aggravated by anti-elite forces within the states, and nationalist tensions between states, causing ever-increasing instability.

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The address described a world resulting in some part by today's vitiated information environment, of which the South Caucasus is part. Prof. Dr. Schulze's address described vividly the gloomy future that awaits us all in a world without order. This sort of anarchy could have dire consequences for the future of the South Caucasus, and therefore conflict resolution is more urgent than ever.

Impact of Fakery on a Democratizing Media

False reporting is a "cancer" affecting a saturated media market in the South Caucasus, destroying lives and careers. The asymmetrical development of socio-political consciousness in the region and the lack of a free press is at root of the problem. The context in which these developments took place, say some panelists, harkens back to the dying days of the Communist period. Indeed, Soviet methods of reporting have been perpetuated well into the post-Cold War period, encouraging a "politicization of the minds" and an atmosphere where the media is used to create "national identity", and to promote political or commercial interests. Media therefore tends to "sell-out" to particular interests. Panelists argued that the unequal level of media democratization in the South Caucasus prompted consumers to rapidly adopt a digital identity, and substitute social media to mainstream media as news provider.

Indeed, the problem may be accentuated by "evil powers" who have overcome the media market with Artificial Intelligence (AI), internet robots (Bots) and trolls. This contributes to a loss of trust in the elite, in the media and in the news as a public service. Today's social media revolution represents a stress test for democracies. The result has been ever-increasing use of the internet, without restrictions, but ever-harsher clampdowns on civic actions, as witnessed in Azerbaijan recently. Greater public education, higher journalistic standards and efforts at story corroboration could compose the solution to this problem.

How a Trusting Public can be led to War

News fakery and propaganda are not new. If one takes away the internet, there is really nothing really different in today's world, compared to the past.

Based on Cold War experience, the solution to prevent a trusting public from being accidentally led to war requires new agencies and institutions at the national and international level. Namely, there should be "counter-fake news units" to immediately correct false reporting.

Such an approach would have been welcome in the early stages of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Up to this day, there is no guarantee that the events that triggered hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan were not precipitated by false reports, or false flag activities. What happens to the minds of the people who consume news daily is of crucial importance in fledgling democracies, where false reporting may lead countries to make sub-optimal defence decisions. A culture of investigative education can counteract these trends. Unfortunately, information is still shaped by extremist narratives that preserve the conflicts unresolved. More needs to be done to promote narratives that foster political compromise enabling conflict resolution.

How Fakery Acts to Destabilize Regimes and Regions

In 2010, "news" of an attack on Georgia from Russia caused panic and overwhelmed emergency dispatchers. While this news report was merely part of an imaginary scenario, the television station which promoted it violated universally-agreed journalistic ethics. If the public cannot differentiate between fact and fiction, it will not be able to tell when the government should or should not intervene, leading to a crisis of trust. Therefore, even well-intentioned and original reporting meant to educate can be misunderstood if incorrectly labeled.

Journalism standards are essential in mitigating the enduring Soviet narrative has shaped the political and ethnic agenda in the South Caucasus in the post-War media. The post-World War II narrative of nationalism in the U.S.S.R. ultimately sparked the events which would lead to conflagration in the South Caucasus, enabling Moscow to maintain direct influence over subsequent events in this region. Moscow knows very well how to calibrate its influence in the South Caucasus, and while Russian television was less effective in Armenia, Russian propaganda could nevertheless affect events there, as well as in Azerbaijan.

News fakery is a tool in the hybrid warrior's arsenal, and the solution is to enact legislation to tackle hybrid warfare. Without credible counter-propaganda and anti-fakery mechanisms, the message of the European Union and of NATO powers will lose out to the more sophisticated influence methods of other powers, leading to a collapse of Western democracies' credibility to shape the European security agenda and maintain the South Caucasus in play.

The Peace Potential of Fakery: Using Yesterday's Lies for Tomorrow's Peace

The fourth panel pleaded to bring back "neutrality's good name" into play. In the Minsk process, for example, there is no possibility for mediation because there is an ingrained inability to look at facts objectively, neutrally. Right or wrong become substituted by subjective ideas of good and bad. The current problem is that neutrality is equated with apathy or heartlessness. That is the cause and consequence of the vitiated news media atmosphere today.

"Info-tainment" trivializes information, while the mass media's primary role is to reconcile theoretical ideals with pragmatic applications of information as a public good. Journalism should be mainstreaming peace, rather than pushing the unimaginative narratives of the elite or the interests of meddlesome great powers. The panel concluded that it would be counterproductive to use deception or lies to alter the course of the current narrative. Journalism must contribute to building a better discursive space for peacebuilding. The South Caucasus and the international community in general should take advantage of the fact that the current generation has no first-hand experience of the conflicts in the South Caucasus to neutralize the emotionality that pervades the disputes.

Interactive Discussions

The first session of interactive discussion sought to revisit the conclusions of the November 2015 RSSC SG workshop in Reichenau, debating whether some recommendations were still valid today. There was consensus on the fact that they were, in particular that a regional journalistic standards organization should be created, the enforcement of standards should be incentivized and the exchange of journalists to develop a common narrative focusing on cultural and commercial blending should be fostered.

The group nevertheless disagreed as to what caused the problem of fake news in the first place; is fakery a journalistic problem or is it a societal problem? Is it a cause or a symptom of political polarization? Even if standards were similar regionally, their implementation would be unequal. In Georgia, where the media is arguably free, such a prospect is possible, but current Armeno-Azerbaijani relations in the wake of the April 2016 clashes make regional standardization unlikely.

Furthermore, fakery is spread by actors who are not journalists, but abuse the democratization of communication. Democratic principles forbid telling journalists how to act, or how to discipline themselves. Since time for decision is always shorter, consumers do not have time to corroborate, and neither do bona fide journalists; deadlines loom and shareholders and sponsors demand ever more column inches and sensationalism.

Participants felt that educating the public in identifying fakery and building resilience to it was perhaps a better plan than merely focusing on building journalistic skill in the South Caucasus. Although, some media actors might be motivated to resist fakery as it would negatively impact advertising sales.

Interestingly, some participants argued that addressing news fakery in the South Caucasus would be best handled by acting nationally first, then regionally. Some emphasized that the presence of external actors (such as Western and/or Russian media, for example) might be counter-productive. This sort of promotion could be the work of the three national media agencies in the South Caucasus, for instance. In addition, a regional website called "South Caucasus for Reconciliation and Peace" was also proposed to promote exchanges of knowledge and experience between media outlets in the three countries aiming to support peacebuilding. Its mission should be to make available expertise and knowledge in support of the implementation of common regional initiatives. It could facilitate regional networking of peace supporters (scholars, journalists, and civil society activists), and help creating synergies in promoting reconciliation and peacebuilding. Such an initiative would help regional peacebuilders to counter information warfare by creating new opportunities to facilitate enshrining the benefits of peace into the public mind.

The second interactive discussion session sought to highlight common ground on matters of historical importance for the South Caucasus, particularly concerning Armenia and Azerbaijan. The discussion tried to elicit from participants the degree of confidence in news items which were published in the wake of ethnic clashes twenty five years ago. How confident could anyone be about the veracity of the facts reported? Could new "alternative" reports aimed at laying blame on now-departed actors be beneficial to reconciliation, for instance? Could this approach "neutralize" the debate, evacuate emotionality and offer a return to rationality? Most participants argued that toying with facts would be counterproductive at this stage.

Rather, proposals for mutual forgiveness (to which local elite would never concede) were offered as the beginning of a solution. One participant suggested that a general relaxation of tensions, combined with a respect for territorial integrity and political compromise would be necessary for mutual forgiveness to begin to be possible. The current propagandist trend, inherent mistrust of the media by the public and of the elite makes reconciliation seem an almost secondary problem, since mutual trust will only be possible if communication is possible, and communication is generally filtered through the media.

Policy Recommendations:

1. It was generally agreed that the policy recommendations made during the November 2015 RSSC SG should be reaffirmed as valid and necessary to implement (full recommendations are available at: http://www.bundesheer.at/wissen-forschung/publikationen/beitrag.php?id=2690.). It is therefore suggested that these recommendations be signified to the media agencies and Ministries of Communication of the whole South Caucasus for consideration; that a generous prize rewarding excellence in journalism be created; that inter-cultural and inter-professional exchanges with foreign news agencies be stimulated, and that a regional agency for journalistic standards be created.

2. Further to the last point above, the participants generally agreed that a program or initiative called "scholars for peace" should be examined. This would partially shift the burden of examining news fakery from the shoulders of journalists to share it with academics who can unpack the concept. Part of this initiative could include a "mapping exercise" to enable to identify markers of fakery in news reporting, which would then be communicated to the public. One of the co-chairs promised to put the initiators of this idea in touch with the relevant persons responsible within the PfP Consortium network. This initiative might be coupled with setting-up (on-line) media forums in each South Caucasus country, as a means for fostering "peace journalism", and a regional website called "South Caucasus for Reconciliation and Peace" that would enable the media to move away from information warfare (a major source of fake news) to "information peace-fare."

3. A Reference Curriculum on Media Literacy was proposed spontaneously from the floor, insofar as repeated calls for better public education of the media's role in society were deemed necessary. Leveraging information exchanged outside the conference, the co-chairs could then propose to require PfP Consortium funding for fiscal year 2019 to begin building this reference curriculum. Part of this curriculum could include the mapping process highlighted in point 2 above, as well as building case studies cooperatively (even on the most difficult topics) to support the curriculum. The co-chairs also believe that this reference curriculum could benefit from a generous examination into the cause of news fakery, its impact on human psychology, the role of social media and internet use in changing our cerebral biology, and how the use of modern communication tools correlate to political and religious radicalization. Ensuing on-line courses should be accessible to the general public via different platforms, including social networks, and YouTube.

4. Insofar as media fakery is an arsenal of the hybrid warrior, false reporting should be treated the same way as hostile intelligence gathering is remedied by counter-intelligence action. For example, neutral "counter-fakery" agencies should be enabled to react more quickly, and effectively to correct inaccurate reporting damaging to regime or regional stability. Developing on-line tools, using more effectively the existing off-line media tools, and cooperation with international organizations (i.e. EU's Stratcom East, NATO's Stratcom Centre of Excellence) might be considered by the three Caucasus states.