

# The Media Is the Message

Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus

**Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)**

Study Group Information



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**12<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group  
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”**

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## Foreword

*Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu*

In past workshops – indeed, in previous Study Group Information booklets – the relationship between the opinions of national constituencies in the South Caucasus and their respective political elite has been cautiously explored. For instance, the discussions held during the 6<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG workshop, which took place in Reichenau in November 2012, concluded that the confrontational public narratives tended to lock in political decision-makers into uncompromising stances. In other words, the political sphere was prisoner of the frozen conflicts, unable to move away from confrontation because of public opinion.

Progress towards greater stability – either in bilateral or multilateral formats, for example through the OSCE Minsk Group and the Geneva talks – was prevented because the political elite feared appearing inconsistent with public pronouncements. At the same time, it is public posturing – expressed mainly through the media – which has *shaped* public opinion which now constrains rapprochement. Oftentimes, however, we have also heard in these pages and workshops, how the general public is not averse at cross-boundary engagement, especially through trade. This brings into question the nature and intractability of the conflicts in the South Caucasus.

Yet many experts of our Study Group have underlined the fact that the political elite in the region were nevertheless averse at making unilateral concessions that would otherwise open greater opportunity for cross-boundary engagement. Lately, the exception to this rule has been Georgia, whose trading relationship with Russia is improving somewhat steadily. In other cases, such as in the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a step by step approach seemed to be more workable, thereby a small step by one side could be followed with a small step by the other, and so on. To increase the effectiveness of such a step by step approach a pre-agreed joint socio-economic plan (i.e. a “blueprint for regional development and cooperation”) that would be tightly linked to the political and security agenda

was needed to project more consistency into the conflict resolution process.

Political decision-makers are now facing a dilemma. On the one hand, the provision of a hostile adversary has created national unity which is useful to the political elite in the region. On the other hand, the political elite and their respective constituents acknowledge privately that the perpetuation of conflict will impede individual and collective socio-economic progress and prosperity. Sadly, the parties in conflict remain predisposed to blaming one another, meaning that the first step towards peace can never be one's own. As a result, no one is prepared to part with the advantages of this dilemma lest doing so create greater instability.

Nowhere is the incongruousness of this dilemma more evident than in the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Both are engaged in a merciless arms race. In Azerbaijan, the drive to shore-up military spending as opposed to social expenditures has led to further socio-political tensions, as opposition journalists and dissidents complain about government neglect. In Armenia, the situation is not much improved by that country's close relationship with Russia. Sanctions in the latter country have triggered inflation that has spilled over into the Armenian energy market. In May 2015, manifestations took place in the streets of Yerevan over the high cost of electricity.

Contrary to what was hoped for during the 11<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG workshop held in Kiev in March 2015, where "strategic patience" was advocated, time seems to be working against the South Caucasus. At present, the region is caught in a geopolitical tug-of-war between Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and Eurasian civilization. In this struggle, the media is a weapon of choice, and its employment seems to differ little in the South Caucasus from the use we've become accustomed to in the war of words between Moscow and Kiev over the fate of the Donbass. Evidently, the media is critical in shaping opinion. But in conflict situations, in countries where there is a democratic deficit, opinion is shaped according to the wishes of powerful patrons, in conditions where the information presented is far from accurate. The contributions to this Study Group Information booklet tell us that the weak advertisement market, the association of political parties with major news outlets and relative inexperience of journalists in the South Caucasus

conspire to prevent the emancipation of the media, and consequently, of the public from prejudice. Can imperfect media conditions be leveraged to bring about more constructive relations in the South Caucasus?

This question strikes at the heart of the matter of cooperation between adversaries while at the same time avoiding the difficult topic of freedom of the media, opinion and expression. In so doing, the participants of the workshop have been free to discuss the content of a more progressive media campaign without getting entangled in distracting polemics. The task of the participants for the 12<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG workshop was to raise awareness as to the quality of the media market in the South Caucasus, and to acknowledge, despite regional market weaknesses, the use of the media as expression of political power. Then, participants were tasked to present certain topics or messaging approaches as susceptible to be conducive to regional rapprochement.

The RSSC SG purposefully did not address matters of freedom of the media. The wisdom of this approach was validated by the keynote speech which opened the 12<sup>th</sup> workshop, in Reichenau, in November 2015. Mehmuda Mian, formerly of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), argued that the aim of news reporting is the public interest. By which she meant not what the public necessarily finds entertaining, but rather the common good. Anton Tamarovich argued that according to this point of view, the role of the media in Russia was to avoid social factionalism, which so often in Russian (and Soviet) history, has degenerated into bloody violence. The RSSC SG was therefore forced to reckon with the notion that absolute truth may be antithetical to stability at the domestic and regional level.

This Study Group Information booklet informs the readers of the “logic” of the media market in the South Caucasus. Barring any hate speech, Western media is usually free to report on nearly any topic in whatever form. In fact, however, media content is heavily influenced by commercial necessity, which drives editorial policy, and from there, media content, tone and direction. Since advertising represents the lion’s share of a news outlet’s revenue, editorial policy will tend to reflect the putative choices and opinions of the advertisers’ target clientele. There is simply no comparison between the case of Western (Euro-Atlantic) media and that of the South Caucasus.



Our panellists tell us that size does indeed matter. If only the demographic makeup of the South Caucasus was quantitatively different, individual news outlets would not have to rely on the generosity of captains of industry, oligarchs or political parties.

On the other hand, the close partisan relationship between the media and political parties can provide a framework whence to reform public attitudes. For instance, it would be worthy to communicate to the public the benefits of cross-boundary trade and commerce, and its potential impact on individual and collective well-being. This would provide adequate “opinion preparation” to the possibility of an economic rapprochement with erstwhile adversaries. In time, economic and commercial rapprochement may lead to political rapprochement. In this case, the current example set by Georgia would be the one to follow.

Participants also discussed on whether a public debate on the commercial and economic value of peace might help shaping compromise in conflict resolution, and what role the media could play in pursuing such a debate. The aim was to look at possible ways to articulate and implement compromise solutions to the South Caucasus conflicts building upon the outcome of recent research conducted by the Brussels-based European Geopolitical Forum on “Economic Incentives as Conflict Resolution Tools in the South Caucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh”. In addressing this issue, Elkhan Nuryiev from Baku (Azerbaijan) admitted that creating discussion platforms for exchange of views on economic incentives could help promote confidence building cooperation between the parties. These platforms will help the restoration of political and economic relations after the conclusion of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Armenian speaker on this topic, Ashot Margaryan, saw the lack of mutual trust created by the current security situation as the most flagrant obstacle standing in the way of implementing economic incentives. He eventually concluded that the negotiation process is about what has to come first: the chicken or the egg; i.e. the economic incentives or the peace agreement. Thus, only a step by step approach may actually work in practice, whereby small steps on economic cooperation matched by small steps on political and security progress can create a meaningful process leading to conflict resolution. Of course, success in applying this approach would be conditional to existing political will to resolve the conflict on both sides.

As the contributions of this Study Group Information booklet suggest, it will take significant material incentives to make journalism more oriented towards the public good. Integrity and competence in reporting is essential if the South Caucasus public is to trust the news that prosperity and safety go hand in hand with entrepreneurial freedom, and regional commercial interdependence (among other factors). Some participants, alas, believe that a comprehensive political settlement is necessary before any trade or political openness can take place. This publication registers these misgivings. Nevertheless, the task of the workshop's breakout groups was to look for ways to change public attitudes through the media in order to create a form of "public will" which the political elite would subsequently not fear to oblige.

Finally, the approach we have taken here is uncritical in the sense that it does not call into question official positions of the governments of the South Caucasus countries. We have, however, contributed to knowledge of the region by enabling the free expression of participants who have provided a new prism with which to interpret public opinion in the region. The uncritical approach is somewhat based on the belief that the world has had its share of revolutions and upheavals for the moment, and that perhaps, imperfect stability is preferable to go forward than absolute chaos. The logic that motivated our exploration of the media as a tool of conflict resolution for the 12<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG workshop has been to help prepare public opinion in the South Caucasus so that adversarial political elite may develop the courage to make the necessary steps towards stabilization without fear of political retribution, or worse.

The policy recommendations found at the end of this Study Group Information booklet reflect the interactive discussions and scenario-building exercises carried out during the workshop. The contributors have exceeded themselves in putting forward constructive ideas. We believe that going forward, we will continue with this format of conferencing, as it provides a useful platform to not only generate useful and actionable recommendations, but also conflict resolution simulations that can open paths that are forbidden to officialdom. We can only congratulate our participants for that development.



## **Abstract**

The publication to the 12<sup>th</sup> workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Region” entitled “The Media is the Message: Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus” aims at presenting the finding of the workshop to a diverse readership.

The South Caucasus is composed of countries and political entities that are normally democratic and free. One of the fundamentals of a free society is freedom of expression, freedom of the press and of opinion. However, in case of conflict, the media tends to subordinate itself to the needs of the state and is used as an instrument to push particular political agendas and views. As a negative effect of that occurrence, communities and countries are torn apart the civil society is divided.

The 12<sup>th</sup> workshop explored how the media can help to shape the conditions that allow stability to prevail. A de-polarized an independent media has the power to build a constituency of peace through promoting cross-border cooperation and success stories in fields like economics, tourism or culture.



**PART I: THE MEDIA MARKET IN THE  
SOUTH CAUCASUS AND IN RUSSIA:  
INTERESTS AND STAKEHOLDERS**



# **The Media in Russia: Interests, Stakeholders and Prospects**

*Anton Tamarovich*

## **Introduction**

Before discussing the topic of the Russian media we should define our subject. Firstly, the development of the media in Russia follows global trends; the media market has begun to change gradually and online sources have become more attractive to the average Russian reader. Radio is mostly used as an entertaining medium, so there is no point in focusing on it as a significant segment of the media market. Print media as well as their online versions have their specific focus and have readership of different interests. TV has the widest audience and impact on society. In most cases the Russian audience has access to those TV channels which are federal (nation-wide) and state-controlled. So to speak, federal channels shape minds in Russia.

Keeping in mind these facts, we should return to our research plan. Let's start with the historical context of modern Russian media. This will give us understanding of the basic and main principles that underlie Russian media formation. Then we come to the review of the current state of media in Russia, as well as how Russian media have changed over the last 20 years. In the next section, we will consider the importance of media to Russian society, and what role they play. Then we will examine the factors which have "written" the main "plot" in the Russian mass-media story (mainly including such key factors as the role of monopolism in the market). Also we will consider how the state may impact the mass-media market; how media may interpret and misinterpret the information and then feed it to the audience. The last part includes a brief analysis of the Russian media in establishing a foreign agenda and conducting foreign policy, as well as whether the media in Russia can be a peacemaker and peacekeeper.



## **The Russian Mass-Media**

The collapse of the Soviet system gave birth to the formation of what we call today “modern” Russian mass-media and as a result the gradual change of ideology. This may explain the fact of the advent of new magazines, newspapers and radio channels that covered earlier taboo topics, in the 1990s. It should be admitted that this was caused not only by the disappearance of “strict” soviet censorship and political discourse, but also by the inability of the new authorities to govern and regulate the media on the legislative level in the early years of post-Soviet Russia. By that time the media tried to play the role of so-called “fourth power”. People were not prepared for such flow of information that rushed on them from newspapers and TV and took any information they heard in all good faith. This is despite the fact that the validity of the information often was not confirmed. In fact, the media have become a serious business which can produce a lot of money and attract a great interest of the most successful businessmen.

During the 1990s Russian mass-media paved its way from the messenger of freedom and truth to the tools of political and commercial interests. In this regard, press-freedom, the most appreciable value in the world, turned into so-called “war of all against all” in Russia in the media space; therefore mass-media began to play a destabilizing role, since it was free to elevate topics beyond the scope of the legal field. By the late 1990s/early 2000s, widespread belief was formed in Russia that independence of media is a sort of “evil” and contributed to destabilizing society. Later on, this opinion was turned into the common myth that the 1990s’ Russia was characterized by anarchy, license and dangerous instability (the closest semantic analogue of it was the Dark Ages in Europe and feudal fragmentation). The current regime in Russia finds its source of self-legitimation in the thesis of the dark 1990s, which it tries not to repeat.

Returning to the perception of the media in Russia at an early stage of its development, it is worth noting that the understanding of its independence was linked to the fact that independence is a tool used by the oligarchs (new businessmen) for their own purposes, primarily for the manipulation of public opinion. Thus the independence of the media is independence from the state and the subordination to anybody else, which is eliminating

its objectivity. That semantic link of the “so-called independence” of media and big business has led the population to seek and approve the return of the State in the media market. That is the State ought to shape the rules of the game, to get rid of the principle of war of all against all, and by its iron hand to monitor compliance with these rules.

However, regulation of the media market has become a demanding task. There were a lot of reasons, consideration of which is beyond the scope of this work. We will focus on the main reason; the weakness of the state and its apparatus in comparison to the influence of the oligarchs who controlled the media market of the country and in fact ruled public opinion. That is, the same legal framework could not be brought into force only by legislative procedures. In this situation, the government returned to the media market, not only as a legislator, but also as owner because the dependent media had to act according to the rules declared by the state.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned above, the media market is a profitable business, as well as an instrument of influence, which none of the owners agree to share. In fact, control of the media has become interpreted as an integral part of the authorities of the country. My thesis is well illustrated by the events around the main TV channels of the country shortly after the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000.

The owners of ORT and NTV, respectively owned by the now-deceased Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky entered in open conflict President Putin and were exiled or taken into custody after Putin’s election leading to the creation of new management of these networks, now loyal to the Kremlin. The channels became the property of the state and immediately changed tonality in consecration of the events in the country. From these events, a gradual increase of government influence on the media began to occur, resulting in the exclusion of business and the establishment of near

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<sup>1</sup> Шилова Т., “Взаимодействие государства и СМИ как фактор становления гражданского общества в современной России” Вестник Челябинского государственного Университета 14 (2007) <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/vzaimodeystvie-gosudarstva-i-smi-kak-faktor-stanovleniya-grazhdanskogo-obschestva-v-sovremennoy-rossii>.

total monopoly of the state. Currently independent the media in Russia is in the minority and does not have the influence and financial resources that the so-called independent media had in the 1990s. It is worth noting that the new millennium has brought a new way of broadcasting information – the Internet. On the Internet there are a number of major news portals that have an audience of millions, but the situation does not change – almost all of them belong to businessmen who are associated with the government.

Media in modern societies primarily carry out a role of interpretive repeater of information in the necessary direction. The author personally heard from the lips of one close to the Kremlin, the owner of the influential media group that “the Russian media is at the forefront in the fight against the enemy and my channel can be biased, if it is in the interests of the state and no one has the right to reproach me in this.”<sup>2</sup> This opinion is not a taboo; instead it finds support among the population. At the same time information presented from a desire for objectivity, or in the form of criticism of the state mechanism (the actions of the bureaucracy, inefficiency in government spending, incorrectness of external course of the country) is marginalized by pro-government media and the majority population. A different position from the mainstream comes exclusively from the independent media, which are being slandered to reduce the credibility of their information.

We especially note the impact of the external agenda to the position of independent media in Russia. Thus the tightening of rules is justified by events in neighbouring countries. The Orange Revolution in 2004 in neighbouring Ukraine has become an event that brought to the camp of the Russian government an opinion that the media can be dangerous to them as they have the potential to mobilize the people to the manifestation of popular discontent. This conclusion was based on the role of media in this revolution, and the situation was presented towards an outside observer. Among ordinary Russian TV viewers the prevailing view was that

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<sup>2</sup> For exemple: Alexandra Del Peral « Avec Russia Today, la Russie a-t-elle gagné la guerre de l'information? » *L'Express*, July 28, 2014, accessed October 10, 2015, [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/europe/avec-russia-today-la-russie-a-t-elle-gagne-la-guerre-de-l-information\\_1702589.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/europe/avec-russia-today-la-russie-a-t-elle-gagne-la-guerre-de-l-information_1702589.html).

the media owned by big businessmen hyped up the revolution. And later on, these businesses were the main beneficiaries of the revolution in the form of redistribution of business in the country in their favour. The benefits for Western countries were also evident – the new leadership of the country has made its foreign policy lean towards Western structures.

A revised attitude to the independence of the media was the result that it became not only subject to the state, but also the tool of other states. The importance of this fact cannot be overstated for the Russian society and the state; the potential impact of business on the position of the media is positioned as a possible destabilizing element, but the influence of another state on the country's internal affairs is a potential threat to the existence of the political system in the country, as well as the country itself is even more critical.<sup>3</sup> Since 2004 the media started to fall more and more under government control, and broadcasting positions different from that of the state became impossible, simply because those who were able to publish these opinions were fewer. Protests in Russia in the winter of 2010 after the parliamentary elections in the country were the development of this plot. Then, on the main square, hundreds of thousands of people came out with demands for reforming of the political system. These events have resulted in several legislative initiatives that were intended to put under state control the Internet.

The culmination at the moment is a new revolution in the Ukraine in 2014. Just then there was a final turn and setting a consensus between the public and the state. The population tacitly waived its freedom of speech and opinion in exchange to avoid the experience of a “Russian” Maidan. Here we note that the Russian mass media (state-controlled) showed the situation in Ukraine only in negative light and broadcast features, which made Russians so afraid in the 1990s; collapse of authority, gangsterism, and social decline. In the information war, the Kremlin acted as an opponent of revolution in Ukraine and offered Crimea as a victory. This picture was spoiled by a number of publications with independent editorial policy. In

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<sup>3</sup> “Иностранное Влияние на Российские СМИ Минимизируется,” Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation, July 28, 2014, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://tpprf.ru/ru/interaction/committee/kombez/news/51116/>.

such a situation mass-media showing another opinion were deemed unreliable or even enemies, and whose “the main objective was to destabilize Russia and to provoke revolution”.

An illustration of this is the case of Internet news portal Lenta.ru, which in 2013 was the market leader in Internet media. The style of this edition was based on the highest possible desire for objectivity and reports on the verge of what is permitted, was the main attraction of this news portal. Exactly this style of work led the news portal to change its editor-in-chief and the whole editorial board in 2014. The reason was an interview with the head of the Ukrainian far-right political organization *Pravi Sektor*, which is banned in Russia. According to Russian legislation, a special agency, Roskomnadzor, must, in case of crossing a red line, must issue a warning to the news outlet at fault. But it did not end with a warning; the owner brought a more trustworthy editorial board into the newspaper. Because the content of the interview did not mention extremism, we can assume that the sanctions to lenta.ru have an indicative character for all who try to deviate from the general course. For a time personnel purges took place in “Gazeta.ru”, “Kommersant” and other media with profiles similar to Lenta.ru. And even the rather loyal “Ren-TV” and “RIA News” were deprived of opportunity to deviate from a uniform information vector.<sup>4</sup>

The same year was marked by new laws aimed at regulating the Internet and media market. The most striking was a law limiting the influence of foreign capital in the share of the Russian media. Under this law, a foreign company can not have more than 20 percent in the share of the Russian edition. Previously, foreign participation was limited to 50 percent, and applied only to television and radio.<sup>5</sup> This law was in fact aimed at the redistribution of the market and squeezing out foreign investors. This despite the fact that the media with foreign capital were among the last who could translate the difference from the state position. One of the authors of the

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<sup>4</sup> “Главред ‘Ленты.ру’ Галина Тимченко отправлена в отставку” BBC Russia, March 12, 2014, accessed: October 10, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/03/140312\\_lenta\\_yarosh\\_warning](http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/03/140312_lenta_yarosh_warning).

<sup>5</sup> Владислав Гордаев, “Совфед одобрил закон об ограничении иностранного капитала в СМИ” RBC, October 1, 2014, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/01/10/2014/542bdb11cbb20f0fa512c31e>.

Bill said that thanks to the media foreigners may shape public opinion in Russia. According to him, foreign owners begin from variety content, and then “carefully push through” political publications against Russia. Such publications are working as an agent of the West, said the parliamentarian. The result of these events was the monopolization of the media market by the state. Below is a table of distribution of the main assets at the Russian media market.

In each of these media, the state has a blocking stake or full control (all information from newtimes.ru)<sup>6</sup>:

- Kommersant Publishing House (10 publications)
  - 705,000 copies.
  - The audience of 0.5 years is 16,107,700.
- Pervyy kanal
  - world audience is 250 million.
  - 99 percent coverage in Russia
- NTV
  - more than 120 million people
- Russia Today
  - audience in 100 countries.
  - 644 million people
  - coverage in the Internet
  - 19000000 unique users
- Holding News Media
  - Izvestia, TV LifeNews and others.
  - 4,258,000 people coverage in RuNet 2013
- National Media Group
  - 8,411,000 total coverage

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<sup>6</sup> Ольга Романова, “Кремлевские войны” *The New Times*, 1 (2015) <http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/93016>.

- Group VGTRK
  - second audience in the country
  - 117 million people

Media that is considered independent (the largest of which is Echo of Moscow has the state as majority owner):

- TV Dozhd'
  - average coverage of 8 595 000 people<sup>7</sup>
- Echo of Moscow
  - daily radio audience in Moscow is 938 000 people (February 2013) about 2.9 million in other regions of Russia (the period July-December 2012)<sup>8</sup>
- Novaya Gazeta
  - circulation 227000<sup>9</sup>
  - Snob about 5 million monthly<sup>10</sup>

In the case of independent media we note that it has a small audience and mainly distributes in the most urbanized regions. The outlet is the Internet; the majority of legislative monitoring initiatives of the media market affects the Internet.

Here are excerpts from an interview with the famous Russian TV journalist Vladimir Posner for the RBC magazine, which still retains a certain freedom of expression; “Russia has almost no independent media” according to him and “the state-controlled media currently does one thing: it creates a certain public opinion, which the state would like to see. In the USSR, they

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<sup>7</sup> Елизавета Сурганова, «Первый федеральный Оператор Вернул ‘Дождь’ в Свои Сети» *RBC*, June 16, 2015, accessed: October 11, 2015, [www.rbc.ru/technology\\_and\\_media/16/06/2015/557fed4e9a79479605ab3a3b](http://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/16/06/2015/557fed4e9a79479605ab3a3b).

<sup>8</sup> <http://echo.msk.ru/about/audience/radioaudience.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Елизавета Макарова, “‘Новой газете’ тираж не по силам”, *Kommersant.ru*, March 13, 2015, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2685247>.

<sup>10</sup> “Медиа-КИТ 2015” *Snob*, accessed October 10, 2015 [https://snob.ru/marketing/snob\\_project\\_mediakit.pdf](https://snob.ru/marketing/snob_project_mediakit.pdf).

were called ‘soldiers of the ideological front’”. He went on to state that there was a “pseudo-independent media”. “If the government wants to shut down independent media, it will close them. In this sense, there is no a truly independent media. Today in Russia there is no journalism as a profession.”<sup>11</sup>

Independent media is marginalized and pushed out on the path of criticism of the authorities. At the same time, the objectivity in presenting information again is a difficult situation, because the media is faced with the financial factor, which is driven by the simple logic of the market – you need to earn money. Thus the media can not exist without the reader. The feature of the Russian reader is a request for information “in the interest of the state”, or supercritical information. Any outlet that adheres to middle positions, shies away from extremes, and tries to provide objective information steadily loses market share.

We can give an example of the publishing house “Expert”, which enjoys great popularity and prestige among the middle class, but it is in a difficult financial situation due to its refusal to choose the side of criticism or advocacy. Because of this, it loses advertisers who prefer a more pro-government media with a large audience and without any ideological problems.

At present time, the polarization of opinion in Russian society, is actively heated up by the media market. In this context, the independent media becomes associated directly with the opposition in the country. In the same situation all kinds of tightening and control on the background of confrontation with the West leads to the conclusion that the opposition and the independent media are agents of the West.

When we begin to discuss the country’s foreign policy, its effect on external affairs, the thesis of the independence of the media in Russia is revealed in a new light. Thus, the country’s main foreign policy actions are displayed with different points of view depending on the proximity to the authorities,

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<sup>11</sup> Фарида Рустамова “Познер заявил об отсутствии независимой журналистики в России” *RBC*, May 25, 2015, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/25/05/2015/5562e3119a7947e2c215726c>.



but collectively positions converge in the approval of the country's actions. That is, if the pro-government media strongly supports some of the controversial actions of the country, in their turn independent media hotly debates the pros and cons of this action, but with some degree of caution. This paradox can be explained by the fact that opinion polls show that support for key state decisions reach huge numbers.<sup>12</sup> Even the leaders of the Russian opposition that always defended an opposite position, after the Revolution of 2014 in Ukraine have begun to shift towards the Kremlin in order not push away voters. One of the prominent figures of protests in Russia in the winter of 2010-2011 – Alexey Navalny – in one of his interviews expressed his opinion about joining Crimea to Russia; “Crimea is not a sandwich, and no one is going to pass it there and back again”.<sup>13</sup> He thus replied to a reporter's question whether he is ready to return the Crimea to the jurisdiction of Ukraine in case of a possible coming to power in the country. This caused confusion in the camp of the opposition, but it's clearly expressed, that is not possible to go against public opinion.

It is worth mentioning a very important point, which allows to better understand the inner workings of the Russian state and society: the media acts as polarizers of opinion within the country! But not in the case of foreign policy!

At the same time, independent media, first of all, does not criticize the foreign policy, and tries to show the other side of things. Here is an example with Ukraine. Russia's information field is now crowded with stories of this country, the tone of which is negative. Independent media also broadcast less ideological agenda that actually destroys the myth about the decline of the neighbour and causes disapproval of the authorities.

We also note the role of the media in preparing public opinion for significant foreign policy actions of Russia. The most recent example is the prep-

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<sup>12</sup> “Опрос Рев: большинство россиян поддерживает политику Путина” *RIA News*, June 10, 2015, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://ria.ru/society/20150610/1069335172.html>.

<sup>13</sup> “Сбитыйфокус” *Echo Moskvy*, October 15, 2014, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/1417522-echo/>.

aration of the public opinion to the beginning Russian military campaign in Syria against the ISIS, which began on September 30. An observer during one and a half years has been fully involved in the events in Ukraine through the media, but the situation has changed dramatically in the summer of 2015. Information has changed dramatically and reports from Ukraine almost instantly disappeared from the screens, and were replaced by stories about ISIS and the situation in Syria. Discussions about Ukraine disappeared completely by the end of summer and at the beginning of the military campaign already one third of Russians supported the military intervention.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, let us say a little about the media in regional politics. So it is important to note that the regional media has not fully come under the control of the state, because of their lesser importance and influence. In addition, these media are the last conductors of pluralism. Moreover, if in the whole state their impact is small, they may have a much greater significance within their region.<sup>15</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The formation of media in modern Russia laid the foundations for its current difficult situation. Primarily it is directly related to the difficulties of the transition period in the Russian society and the restructuring of the state's foundations in the 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time the foreign policy agenda of the country and events in neighbouring countries have affected at the current situation of the media. It is because of this that the passage of the transitional period, the country once again has chosen the path in which the state has a huge role in society. The media is at the service of state. Based on this, the states, using its administrative power re-formatted the structure of the media market in the country.

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<sup>14</sup> "Участие России в сирийском конфликте" The Sociological Agency Levada-Center, October 8, 2015, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/08-10-2015/uchastie-rossii-v-siriiskom-konflikte>.

<sup>15</sup> Халтанова С. "Роль СМИ в региональных политических процессах как важный фактор становления демократии" [http://iph.ras.ru/uplfile/root/biblio/pp/ppu\\_2/3.pdf](http://iph.ras.ru/uplfile/root/biblio/pp/ppu_2/3.pdf).

The structure of the modern media market in Russia includes the monopoly of the state and businesspersons associated with the government, as well as a small proportion of independent media that have limited coverage. At the same time pluralism remains limited. By virtue of the principle of supply and demand, two positions are dominating among the media: the general approval of the government on the one hand and the opposition and critics on the other. The relationship between these positions has an antagonistic character, which makes the media polarizers of opinion in the society.

The media mainly proclaims its solidarity on foreign policy actions of the state because of the broad support of society as well as fear of being called an enemy of the state. In this context, the media can not change the foreign policy agenda by itself; it is in the line with public policy and only reacts to its new actions *ex post facto*.

It must be concluded that in general the scale the Russian media itself cannot influence internal and external events because its independence in this respect is low. At the same time, we note that the Russian media maintains some freedom of action at the regional level, in which the federal centre is not focusing its attention, for example in the Caucasus today. But it is necessary to understand that this freedom is due to the fact that the Kremlin is occupied with other priorities at the moment.

# Contemporary Georgian Mass-Media Still in Transition: Problems, Challenges and Opportunities – Foreign Policy vs. Politics

*Vakhtang Maisaia*

## Introduction: Georgian Politics and Media in Turbulence

Georgian political life has been steadily falling into deep crisis. There are clear indications that this situation, which is also being fanned by the local economic crisis, may lead to the collapse of local politics. Campaigning in the two by-elections in Gurjaani and Martvili is becoming inflamed, and their results will demonstrate who has won the internal arguments a year after they were released. These elections have already revealed how much Georgian domestic politics is “diseased”, and the prognosis is not an optimistic one. Only two parties are taking part in these by-elections – the Republican Party, member of the ruling coalition and the opposition Georgia Patriotic Alliance.” All other parties, such as the “United National Movement”, the “Free Democrats” and the “Democratic Movement” are boycotting them. Hence, the political environment is not a positive one a head of the 2016 elections, which are unlikely to be genuinely pluralistic or have unquestioned legitimacy, in these circumstances.

In recent times the relations between the two key political figures, the President and Prime-minister have been strained and this has affected the stability of the country. The Prime-minister and some other government members refused to attend the National Security Council meeting of 23 September because it was chaired by President George Margvelashvili, despite the fact it discussed national security and defense reform issues at a time when Georgia is facing a multitude of military threats.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, two high-level government delegations flew to New York to attend the UN General Assembly that is pure abnormality from political standpoint whilst

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<sup>1</sup> News “Meeting of the National Security Council of Georgia was held at President’s Administration”, 23 September, 2015; <https://www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News?9754>.

ignoring the appointment of two members of the Georgian National Energy and Water Supply Regulatory Commission, a key anti-monopoly agency, selected by the President. The government has remarked that this latent political conflict and instability are against the national interest, but is still playing a part in fomenting it. The sudden resignation of the leader of the ruling coalition's parliamentary group, long-standing politician David Saganelidze also indicates crisis within the coalition. It is strange that a professional politician with such a rich experience of Georgian politics should be "put out to pasture" during an election period. There are rumors that several other members of the majority group are ready to leave the coalition and there were disputes between coalition parties – the Republican Party and "Georgian Dream" political party.

However, the difficult political situation in Georgia corresponds to the even more difficult media context; "Maestro" TV has been declared bankrupt but no one seems to know who actually owns it and therefore who is liable or not for any future payments. The statement on bankruptcy was declared by the director of the channel Baya Gadabadze.<sup>2</sup>

On 29 August of 2015 the "IMEDI" TV leadership came out with special statement on closure two most popular and high rating level political talk-shows "Reakcia" (Reaction) and "Imedis Kvira" (Week of IMEDI) due to the reorganization reasons. The decision is strange in view of the fact that September 2015 saw the launch of the pre-election campaign in Georgia, which would have guaranteed viewership and made shows profitable. Even stranger was the fact that the host of the program, the well-known political commentator Inga Grigolia had been informed of the end of the shows by sources close to the television network.<sup>3</sup> The closure of popular political talk-show was sharply criticized by the Chairman of the Georgian National Communication Commission, Vakhtang Abashidze, and he reminded the "IMEDI" TV leadership and owners that television has the obligation to

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<sup>2</sup> Tamta Karchava "The Channel that is not going to be declared as bankruptcy, it launches new programs" – information portal For.ge, 22.09.2015; [http://www.for.ge/view.php?for\\_id=42213&cat=3](http://www.for.ge/view.php?for_id=42213&cat=3).

<sup>3</sup> Gela Zedelashvili "What in real happened in "IMEDI" TV? Who ordered to close Inga Grigolia's program?" – newspaper "Kviris Kronika" #35, 31 August-6 September, 2015.

air political talk-shows and it has find a remedy as soon as possible.<sup>4</sup> It becomes clear that the programs have been shut down due to the political reasons.

A court in Tbilisi in early August ordered the seizure of all property owned by Georgia's biggest independent TV company "Rustavi-2." The "Rustavi-2" TV leadership claims that the court's ruling implied seizure of the company's shares.<sup>5</sup> The "Rustavi-2" TV leadership then suspended some non-political but yet popular programs.

In early September 2015, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) authority announced its restructuring. Notably, The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) will soon continue its activities in line with a renovated structure. The Board of Trustees of GPB unanimously approved the changes to be made into General Regulations concerning structural reorganization.<sup>6</sup> Due to the restructuring, one of the popular political shows run by famous journalist Eka Mishveladze has been suspended and closed down. According to Basa Janikashvili, Eka Mishveladze's talk show was closed due of her marriage to a politician. The adviser of the director of the Public Broadcasting made a statement at a conference, where current developments in media are being discussed.<sup>7</sup> This is spreading many rumors in Georgian public and political organizations.

These developments have not gone un-noticed by Georgian political allies. For instance, On 6 October, 2015 the U.S. State Department's spokesperson issued the following statement:

More broadly, over the past several years, the United States Government and the international community have praised Georgia's free and pluralistic media environment which has been recognized internationally as a model for the region. So

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<sup>4</sup> Vakhtang Abashidze's statement at: <http://factcheck.ge/article/telekompani-imed-saqvs-valdebuleba-rom-sazogadoebriv-politikuri-gadatsemebi-gonivrul-vadashi-aghadginos/>.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Kamens "Georgia: Rustavi-2 is the keystone of the UNM's resilience", internet electronic magazine "New Eastern Outlook", 08.09.2015; <http://journal-neo.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> See in detail - <http://gpb.ge/NewsView.aspx?Location=633&LangID=2>.

<sup>7</sup> "Rustavi-2" TV news room: "Eka Mishveladze's talk-show was closed due to her marriage", 04.09.2015; <http://rustavi2.com/en/news/25414>.

actions that give the appearance of constricting that environment, constricting media freedoms or compromising that media pluralism, are, frankly, disturbing, and especially in the lead-up to parliamentary elections. So we therefore, we do take it seriously and we're watching it.<sup>8</sup>

These processes are inconsistent with a free media environment. Leading Georgian media experts and political analysts believe they are linked to upcoming political events, mainly the Parliamentary elections to be held in 2016 but others blame the insufficiency and unsophistication of Georgian laws regulating mass-media activities in the country.<sup>9</sup> This opinion is shared by the printed media representatives. Notably, the case linked with adoption some amendments by the Parliament of Georgia to the national law on “National Broadcasting.” The amended law, in force since April of 2015, drastically changed conditions of advertising and sponsorship. This led to incomes and revenues for the popular TV channels to diminish steadily.

The law reduced advertising duration to 20 percent of the entire broadcasting time (12 minutes per hour) and sponsorship time diminished up to 4 minutes per hour.<sup>10</sup> Hence, this is only a tiny negative element of why the crisis erupted. In 2009 the “Georgian Journalistic Ethic Charter” signed up by 139 journalists from Georgia and totaling 240 members was set up with the assistance of the international NGO Open Society – Soros Foundation. The Charter regulates ethic norms of journalists and remedies journalists’ misconduct. However, the system also has its own problems and is far from perfect.<sup>11</sup>

### **Georgian Media: Past and Present – Same Problems, Same Challenges?**

The problems that have emerged stem from the recent period of authoritarian governance by President Mikhail Saakashvili. In order to reflect how

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<sup>8</sup> See in detail: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/10/247960.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview: with leading media-expert and famous Georgian journalist Ketik Khositashvili on October 2, 2015, in Tbilisi.

<sup>10</sup> Elza Tsiklauri: “Money Flow Reduced in TV Channels”, newspaper “Rezonansi”#233, 1 September 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview: with prominent and famous Georgian journalist and owner of media portal For.ge George Yakobashvili – September 28, 2015, in Tbilisi.

the authority was dealing with the free media it is necessary to highlight in which conditions existed the media structures and what was the media environment then.

Decrease in media freedoms has been the hallmark of the Saakashvili regime but the president has pledged some reforms to improve access to televised information. Nevertheless, popular public discussion shows gradually pulled off the air in the months before the August war. The nominally private but pro-government “Rustavi-2” TV suspended the most popular, “Prime-time”, over the summer, allegedly to make room for the European football championship. While exhibiting a cautious, obvious pro-government bent, the main national TV outlets – Channels 1 and 2, as well as “Rustavi-2” and “IMEDI” (also private and pro-government) – have occasionally shown opposition leaders who often make critical remarks about the government or even call for the President’s resignation. While the choice of political news on television is still wider in Georgia than in almost all other former Soviet republics, government control over the broadcast media has increased substantially in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

Having considered the physical abuses against journalists, the illegal seizure of “IMEDI” TV, the blocking independent mass-media means, the illegal privatization of their assets, etc., it is clear that media rights are violated in Georgia and for what purposes. For more illustration let’s consider one of the abuse cases from that period of time from Mediocratia the Presa.ge seizure case, detailed below.

### **Presage and Political Pressure from the Ministry of Internal Affairs**

A group of Georgian journalists (George Yakobashvili, Rozeta Jgamaya, Besarion Gabunia) founded the internet-portal “presa.ge.” The portal soon became very popular and scored up with high rating. In 2009 the portal became a member of the media holding “Caucasus Online Media Group” (GIMG), a daughter company of the internet provider corporation “Caucasus Online”. The media portal retained independent edition policy and independent information coverage. The “Caucasus Online” goal was to set up and develop national internet-media and provide full fledged support to create the first national independent television channel, itv.ge. The channel was set up much to the displeasure of the authorities. In May 2010 the Saa-

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<sup>12</sup> “Georgia: The Risks of Winter” Update Briefing#51, Tbilisi/Brussels, 26 November, 2009, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org).



kashvili government exploited full political and lawful pressure in order to change ownership in the “Caucasus Online” corporation and redirected stock distribution in favor of the state. Afterwards the Ministry of Internal Affairs appointed to the position General Director its representative to the corporation on 15 November, 2015 and began to meddle into editorial policy. The step forced the entire independent journalist team to leave the media portal. Guram Donadze and his aide George Kapanadze, respectively Head of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs became the new owners.<sup>13</sup>

What is happening now is even more interesting to consider. Certainly there can be no doubt that immense improvements have been made and performed since the government changed in 2012-2013; Georgia’s freedom of the press index rose from 100<sup>th</sup> to 69<sup>th</sup> position.<sup>14</sup> However the following case study shows that the Georgian media market still remains highly vulnerable.<sup>15</sup>

### **Georgian Crisis Management and National Security Centre vs. the free Media**

In July 2015 in one of the analytical program from “Obieqtivi TV”, prominent political commentator Dr. Khatuna Lagazidze alleged that since October 2014, a special governmental agency, called the Georgian Crisis Management and National Security Centre led by ex-Defense Minister Mindia Janelidze drafted a “black list” prohibiting prominent and famous political and security experts on national television channels. Instructions were delivered in oral manner to the owners and producers of the private “IMEDI” TV and public run GBP channel.<sup>16</sup> The blocking policy utilized by the incumbent authority aims to increase influence on media environment to tight control over it. Moreover, the instruction has been implementing other television channels, notably, “Maestro” TV and, it seems, very effi-

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with one of the founders of presa.ge George Yakobashvili.

<sup>14</sup> See in detail on <https://index.rsrf.org/#!/>.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with prominent Georgian media-expert Dr. Lia Toklikishvili, 30 September 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Khatuna Lagazidze’s statement at “Obieqtivi TV” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0xmxE9yk8g>.

ciently so. All the facts unfortunately confirm Dr. Khatuna Lagazidze's revelation and unfortunately the governmental pressure to the television media. For instance, Mediacratia suggests that the Patarkacishvili's family, owners of "IMEDI" TV, and the government of Georgia could have common interests.

Hence, the Georgia media environment is still in transition and political processes taking place in Georgia directly preclude pluralism. Nevertheless, foreign policy implications and geopolitical shifts are also key factors influence on the Georgian media.

### **Georgia's Foreign Policy Debate and Media Reflection**

The polarization of foreign policy orientation tendencies has impacted the governmental and political levels and also on public and media levels. As it is known since 1991 when Georgia declared its independence its aspiration toward NATO membership was supported actively by the public. In order to show the popular opinion concerning the issue of the country's integration into the NATO, a plebiscite was conducted in 2008 along with the Presidential elections concerning the issue. 77 percent of those participating in the plebiscite voted for Georgia's membership into NATO.

In June 2009, the International Republican Institute and GALLUP Organization (IRI, USAID, Baltic surveys/The Gallup Organization) conducted public opinion poll according to which 68 percent of those interviewed supported Georgia's membership into NATO.<sup>17</sup> However this support is ebbing due to the new "Cold War" between Russia and Western powers. There is a steady shift in opinion toward support of the Russian narrative. Public support for the Kremlin's "Eurasian Union" concept has risen to 31 percent in just a few years. The percentage of people who believe that Georgia would benefit more than abandoning its Euro-Atlantic aspirations has increased from 19 percent to 26 percent in just six months. Pro-Russian and xenophobic politicians have had meteoric rises in popularity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://eu-nato.gov.ge/en/news/4844>.

<sup>18</sup> See in details: <http://georgiaforliberty.org/>.

These facts come from the [georgiaforliberty.org](http://georgiaforliberty.org) web-page which has been promulgating semi-partisan and pro-western ideas politically motivated by a coalition of local Georgian NGOs, think-tanks and media representatives. The organizations set up a special coalition named: “Support to Georgia to Defend Liberty” basically founded on pro-Western foreign policy orientation (aspiration to NATO and EU membership) and adherence to Western democratic values. The goal of the coalition is to minimize the impact of Russian propaganda on Georgian society by fostering debate and public dialogue on critical issues – especially to help communities understand how Europe can benefit them at a local level.

The organizations that created the coalition are the following; “Tabula TV”, “Liberty Institute”, “Georgian Review” (printed media), “Georgian Democratic Initiative”, “Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies”, the NGO “GRASS”, GFSIS, etc. In opposition to the Euro-Atlantic Integration coalition, we note the growing influence of pro-Russian groups, such as “Georgia’s Eurasian Choice”, a coalition of NGOs that claims to have 16000 members. It is no coincidence if pro-Russian and pro-Eurasian entities have mushroomed after the “Georgian Dream” government has allowed Russian TV channels, momentarily banned after the 2008 defeat, to broadcast in Georgia again. Pro-Russian voices, largely silenced under the previous government, can be heard again on Georgian media.<sup>19</sup> Pro-Eurasian organizations have become active at public level. For instance, one of the pro-Russian oriented movements “Erekle II Society”<sup>20</sup> on 25 September, 2015 held a protest rally in front of the Official Palace of President demanding political-military neutrality for Georgia and the restoration of diplomatic relations with Russia.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Neil Buckley “Georgia hopes over Europe turn to disappointment” at “Financial Times” May 17, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> King Erekle II who was the last King of the Kartli-Kakheti Kingdom signed a special agreement with the Russian Empire in 1783 in Georgievsk on the voluntary protection provision for the Kingdom from the Russian Empire and launched a strategic partnership.

<sup>21</sup> Lika Amirashvili “Pro-Russian Rally in Front of Palace of President” in newspaper “Rezonansi”, 24 September, 2015.

One of the key instruments for further promotion of Russia's "soft power" policy in Georgia is the pro-Russian think-tank organization "Eurasian Institute" which was set up five years ago and whose activities are predominantly targeting Georgian regions. The organization masterly manipulates and promotes its ideology on public level, including exploiting social and electronic media means. Notably, the "Eurasian Institute" set up an informational-analytical portal "Politforum". It organized a special research poll survey on 17-24 November, 2014 in whole Georgia where took part around 1718 respondents (825 male and 875 female) on Georgia's prospects of NATO membership. According to the survey only 48 percent would have supported Georgia's membership into NATO structures if a plebiscite had been run. Moreover, one of the questions in the survey questioner was whether you do support in nearest future deployment of NATO military bases in Georgian soil – supported by only 20 percent and outright rejected by 55 percent of respondents.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile the organization demonstrated its readiness to acquire the two most powerful mass-media means in Georgia; Information Agency "INFO-9" and the popular "TV-9" which belonged to ex-Prime-minister and Georgian tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, recently several influential pro-Eurasian structures and organizations have appeared in Georgia; internet television "Patriot TV" set up by "Georgian Eurasian Choice", Russian multi-media "Sputnik", the weekly newspaper "Georgia and the World", the information agency "Sakinform" with their electronic media links [Geworld.ge](http://Geworld.ge) and [Saqinformi.ge](http://Saqinformi.ge), supported by the Kremlin-friendly "Gorchakov Foundation" and by oil and gas concerns.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time in 2014, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Tbilisi Office, conducted its own poll research survey. The survey looks at issues of public importance, perceptions of democracy and attitudes toward reforms, as well as various domestic and foreign policy issues. The results reflect data collected from July 23 through Aug. 7 in face-to-face interviews

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<sup>22</sup> See in detail <http://geurasia.org/geo/1564/gamokitxva-2014--saqartvelos-mosaxleobis-damokidebuleba-natosada-ashsh-sadmi.html>.

<sup>23</sup> See in detail <http://radio1.ge/ge/news/view/97017.html>.

<sup>24</sup> See in detail <http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/46132/>.

with a nationwide representative sample of Georgian speakers that included 3,338 completed interviews.<sup>25</sup> One of the questions was very interesting as it implied “whether Georgia should join either “European Union” or “Eurasian Customs Union.” Some 20 percent of respondents said “Yes” to the “Eurasian Custom Union.”<sup>26</sup>

On 8 October, 2015 “RIA-Novosti” held a roundtable workshop in its Tbilisi office on the topic of Georgian neutrality. The workshop was organized and sponsored by recently emerged political movement “Neutral Eurasian Georgia” led by Archil Chkoidze and the workshop was attended ex-State Security Minister of Georgia Valeri Khaburzania who personally lobbied for Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2003. The main issue of discussion for the workshop participants was creation in Georgia of NATO Training Centre and sharply criticized its existence in Georgia. It means that Russian policy-makers in the Kremlin successfully use “soft power” in order to increase its influence in the country.<sup>27</sup> The Kremlin provided their supporters in Georgia not only with political and propagandistic but also concrete financial assistance.<sup>28</sup>

This leads to the following conclusions already published in the Georgian Times<sup>29</sup> and worthy of repetition:

- 1) Many discussions are taking place about whether and how the NATO Wales Summit decisions can be implemented. One of these decisions, of course, was to establish a NATO-sponsored Special Training Center in Georgia. Since the Ukrainian civil war broke out and relations between the Russian Federation and NATO and its

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<sup>25</sup> See in detail [https://www.ndi.org/Georgia\\_poll\\_2014](https://www.ndi.org/Georgia_poll_2014).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Georgian News Agency “Postalioni” – Round Table Workshop: “Whether It Is Possible to Georgia Military Neutrality”, October 8, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> One of the pro-Eurasian organization leader in interview on the basis of anonymity provision confirmed that Russian various organizations and foundations provided to the political and public movements associated with pro-Russian orientation more than \$80 thousand per month.

<sup>29</sup> Dr. Vakhtang Maisaia “Why Georgia Needs a NATO Training Centre – the Geopolitical Implications”, “The Georgian Times”#4, Saturday, February 28, 2015.

member-states deteriorated drastically these debates have become more acute. Those on either side of the debate here in Georgia whether supporters or opponents of the Training Centre idea, seem to have little idea what the Center would be for and why it is necessary to base it in Georgia. A swirling of incomplete or false information has been created by the inefficient activity of the Georgian government structures which are supposed to foster Euro-Atlantic Integration. These are principally the State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic and European Integration Affairs, which is led by Dr. David Bakradze, a nonentity to both domestic and foreign observers who is not to be confused with the former UNM government notable of the same name, and the Information Center on NATO and EU Integration, whose very existence, let alone the names of its staff, seems to be practically unknown even to the government.

- 2) There are many pro-Atlantic NGOs and analytical centers in Georgia. Although their numbers have mushroomed since the change of government in 2012, they either have a very low profile or are loathed by the majority of the Georgian population, as their names remain linked with political purges, tortures, social repression, illegal assaults on the business community and other inhuman acts associated with the previous government. It is also not forgotten that many of their leaders ran away to neighboring states during the Georgia-Russia war of August 2008, to bolt-holes they had stolen from the public to begin with.
- 3) As anything connected with NATO has these associations, it is easy to see why the Georgian people are suspicious of such a Centre and do not see how it will benefit Georgia. It is doubly unfortunate that even those political organizations and movements who are the main supporters of Euro-Atlantic integration cannot deliver credible messages to the public and explain the truth to the Georgian people at large. Those who claim to be giving to the Georgian society the facts have very little knowledge and are not eligible to do this, while those who might be able to are often very unpopular and not trusted by the Georgian people, and this is very sad state of affairs. Nevertheless, the truth does make itself known, even if faintly. Unfortunately many organizations and media means are strongly sup-

porter to previous government led by President Mikhail Saakashvili whose popularity among the Georgian population is very low.

Pro-Eurasian sentiments have increased. The tendency toward softly promulgated sympathy toward Russian orientation concluded in demonstration of mainly modern Russian “soap opera” and historic biopics (such as the one describing the life of Soviet Dictator Josef Stalin’s son Vasily). Moreover, information news delivery is akin to Russia’s “Vesti” interpretation, notably regarding events occurring in the Donbas. In addition to that the television is influenced by so-called “telephone calls” from governmental structures, notably from Crisis Management and National Security Council attached to the Prime-minister’s office and directly from its chief, ex-Defense Minister Mindia Janelidze.<sup>30</sup> Why “Maestro TV” directly or indirectly promotes the pro-Eurasian option depends on who owns the channel. In that regard it has come out that Mrs. Maka Asatiani possesses 25 percent of the stocks.<sup>31</sup> But her husband, Konstantin Gogelia who lives and runs his business in Russian Federation, remains the dominant partner.

	<b>Euro-Atlantic</b>	<b>Eurasian</b>	<b>Non-aligned</b>
<b>TV Channels</b>	Rustavi-2 Imedi Public Broadcast I and II	Maestro Patriot TV TV “MIR”	Obieqtivi Dro TV Kavkasia Kalrtuli Arkhi
<b>Printed Media</b>	Resonance Kviris Palitra Akhali Taoba	World and Georgia Historic Heritage	Asaval-Dasavali Kartuli Sitkva Alia-Holding

<sup>30</sup> Ex-Defense Minister Irakli Alasania declared that during an official visit to France on October 28 of 2014, he devised a memorandum with the local corporations that envisaged signing an agreement on purchase of air defence system components. As he asserts, one day prior to settling of the memorandum then-Secretary of State Security and Crisis Management Mindia Janelidze called him and asked to suspend the signing but Alasania didn’t consider it.

<sup>31</sup> Gela Zedelashvili “What happens if “Maestro” declares bankruptcy”, newspaper “Alia”#143, 23 September 2015.

<b>Electronic Media</b>	For.ge Liberali Iveria PIA	Ria-Novosti Iverioni Saqinformi Politforum	Express-News
<b>Radio Channels</b>	Radio “Liberty” (Georgian office)	Sputnik	

Table 1: Georgian Media Market and Political Leaning

## Conclusion

Due to the stalemate shaping up in Georgian politics and due to high polarization of the society and the public sector is difficult predict where the processes in the country drive at. Yet, they make pluralism of opinion and freedom of the media difficult to implement. Nevertheless, as table 1 above implies, there is still a movement towards diversity in the media market, and towards multipolarity of opinions, a welcome move after the unipolarity of the Saakashvili years.

Three main problems compound the lack of financial attractiveness of the media sector, weak legal framework and opacity of media ownership, and they are the demographics, tendency towards pamphleteering, and the high level of political polarity.

The new “cold war” unfortunately also affects the direction of media editorials and opinion. There is little opportunity to develop a new consensus based on negotiation and compromise. Therefore the media loses the ability to shape compromise in Georgia. Hence, the situation is still turbulent but some hope remains for further improvement of media environment in Georgia.

## Recommendations

Here we offer concrete policy recommendations in that regard:

- 1) Provide assistance to media outlets that are in difficulty because of their political leanings or weak share of the market, or their oppositionist stance to previous regimes.



- 2) Cooperatively draft a “South Caucasus Regional Journalistic Ethic Charter.” The initiative could be done under the aegis of the PFP Consortium.
- 3) Createa Caucasus Civil Chamber of regional nations – an informal Public Parliament with involvement of all actors; NGOs, experts, scholars and public figures to coordinate peaceful processes in the region.
- 4) Create a regional mass-media information network where all representatives of the Caucasus journalists (including journalists from break-away republics) working exchange their information on various aspects of geopolitics, foreign policy, conflict resolution, politics, economics, etc.
- 5) Organize a special workshop involving leading journalists from Western mass-media on how to run special political talk-shows and political analytical programs at the regional level.
- 6) Set up a special sub-group under the aegis of the PFP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus” to examine and produce recommendations on media-related legislative reform.

# The Media in Armenia

*Benyamin Poghosyan*

## Overview

Armenia got its independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union; yet an independent non-state media had been operating in Armenia even before 1991. Since 1989 some private newspapers had been established as a direct result of the Karabakh movement. During the first years of independence, due to the economic collapse and energy crisis there were virtually no private electronic media outlets in Armenia. Until 1995 the population was supplied electricity only two hours per day, and in such conditions only two state TV channels had some 3-4-hours/day on air. Whereas print media was active and some nationwide newspapers had already been established like Azg and Aravot dailies.

The second phase of media development in Armenia traces back to the late 1990s, when electronic media started to develop and the first private TV companies were established, among them H2, Armenia, AR, Yerevan, etc. In this period, various internet media resources started their activities mainly concentrating on news coverage. At the same time, due to the limited access of population to broadband internet, e-media resources had little influence on population.

The Armenian media landscape has undergone tectonic shifts since 2010-2011. The broadband internet revolution made serious changes in the ways the media was operating and perceived by the population. Then, the third and current phase of media development started. The broadband internet revolution coincided in Armenia with the so-called Smart-Phone and Digital-TV revolution, when smart phones became more affordable to the middle class Armenians and Digital-TV broadcasting became more accessible for the population-offering both Armenian and international TV channels. The widespread use of broadband, as well as the cellular internet for both smart phones and tablets fostered the establishment of internet media resources which mainly concentrate on news broadcasting. The broadband internet and smart phone revolution contributed to the sharp increase of

the use of social media, which also had an impact on the ways the overall media operates. Almost all internet news resources have their active pages in social media thus diversifying the ways of reaching their customers.

### **The Main Media Players**

Currently, Armenia's media can be divided into three main sub-groups: TV stations with national coverage (or at least covering the capital, Yerevan, and the adjacent territories, where more than 60 percent of the population is concentrated); print media, which has small circulation, but through its internet resources is capable of delivering its messages to wider circles; online media, which actively use also social media resources mainly Facebook.

Radios-stations mainly broadcast music and other entertainment-related content, but have also news blocs, and some of them have more news and political coverage. Among radio stations Public Radio should be especially emphasized as the main radio station with regular news/political analysis. Regional TV stations have limited audience, and mainly reiterate the media content developed in the capital.

TV and radio stations activities are regulated by the National TV and Radio Commission in accordance with the "Law on Radio and TV" amended by the Parliament in 2010.<sup>1</sup> According to this law, the Commission is an independent body whose main responsibility is the protection of the TV and radio stations' independence and freedom, the issuing of licenses in accordance with the laws, as well as the supervision of TV and radio stations' activities. The Commission consists of eight persons: 4 of whom are competitively elected by the National Assembly and four who are appointed by the President. All members are elected or appointed for a six year term. The Commission elects its chairman and vice-chairman from its members and no one can be elected or appointed more than two consecutive terms as a Commission member. There are certain restrictions on the election/

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<sup>1</sup> See "The Law on TV and radio", <<http://www.tvradio.am/resources/menu//adminzonetv/elections/c8debed2cc54e4f585cfc91582360b00.pdf>> (in Armenian), accessed on 28.10.2015.

appointment process; the members of political parties ruling bodies, citizens of other states, as well as persons without citizenship, the Directors of public and private TV/radio companies, Members of Parliament, members of Government, and state servicemen can not be appointed or elected as Commission members.

## **The TV Stations**

As of now, Armenia has thirteen TV stations which conduct activities either throughout the Republic or at least covering the capital, Yerevan, and the adjacent territories; Public TV, H2, Armenia TV, Shant, Yerkir Media, Ararat, Kentron, Armnews, 21 Music TV, H3, Shoghakat, AR, and ATV.

From these TV stations, seven have national coverage (Public TV, Shoghakat, Kentron, Shant, Yerkir Media, H2, Armenia) and six cover Yerevan and the adjacent territories, (Ar, Armnews, 21 Music TV, H3, Ararat, ATV). 12 are private TV stations and the public TV station is based on the Soviet Armenia-era, the so-called First Channel.<sup>2</sup>

The activities of the Armenian public TV (as well as public radio) are regulated by the law on TV and Radio. According to this law, the Public TV and Radio are governed by the Public TV and Radio Council, which consists of five persons including at least one woman. All members of the Council are appointed by the President for six-year terms. The Council elects the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Council from its members. The law stipulates some requirements, as well as some restrictions for being appointed as a Council member. The members of the political parties' ruling bodies, citizens of other states, as well as persons without citizenship, the directors of public and private TV/radio companies cannot be appointed as Council members. All members should take a special oath, while taking over their responsibilities. The law also requires that no political party or vision should prevail in the activities of the public TV, and also put strict restrictions on airing advertisement.

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<sup>2</sup> The full list of all TV and radio stations can be seen at: <http://www.tvradio.am/resourcesmenu/adminzonetv/elections/36d4ae4e1167ad6752004b3955688caa.pdf> (in Armenian), accessed on 28 October 2015.

The private TV companies can be divided into three main subgroups. The so-called big three; Armenia TV, H2 and Shant, which have national coverage, are among the most popular TV channels, and they have multi-vector broadcasting policy covering politics, culture, civil society, organizing big shows etc.

Another group is the so-called political-party-affiliated TV channels; Yerkir Media which is affiliated with Dashnakcutyun party (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), Ararat which is affiliated with the ruling Republican party, and H3, affiliated with the Rule of Law party. Until February 2015 Kentron TV station which was controlled by the Chairman of the Prosperous Armenia party Gagik Tsarukyan was on this list, but after Mr. Tsarukyan's retirement from politics, the Kentron TV station has had no more political affiliation.

The third subgroup consists of the TV stations which have neither national coverage nor any political affiliation, such as AR, 21 Music TV, Armnews, and ATV. It's worth mentioning that Armnews was established in 2001 to re-broadcast the Euronews Channel. Starting from 2011, it has been transformed into the national news station with a clear vision to become the main news broadcaster in Armenia offering news blocs every 30 minutes in 24/7 format. In 2015, it made some changes in its editorial policy, mainly concentrating on entertainment and youth issues. ATV mainly focuses on teenagers and youth in general and 21 is a Music TV channel. It's worth mentioning that Shoghakat TV is affiliated with the Armenian Apostolic Church and broadcasts religious programs, among other topics.

Currently the biggest media group in Armenia is the Pan-Armenian Media Group (established in 2012), which manages three TV channels; Armenia TV, Armnews and ATV and also two FM music radio stations. The Chief Executive Officer and the Chairman of the Media Group Council is Armen Arzumanyan, who in 2001-2010 was the Executive Director of the public TV, and in 2010-2013 the press secretary of the President of the Republic of Armenia.<sup>3</sup> As for the regional TV stations (27) they have limited audience and influence and play no decisive role in political processes.

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<sup>3</sup> See more information on group official web page [www.pamg.am](http://www.pamg.am), accessed on 2 November 2015.

It's worth mentioning that the Russian state TV station, RTR Planeta, is broadcast in Armenia with national coverage and the Russian State First Channel (Pervyi Kanal) and Kultura channels are broadcast in Yerevan and in the adjacent territories. CNN is also broadcast in Yerevan and in the adjacent territories.

### **The Print Media**

Print media has played an important role in shaping society's perceptions in the 1990s when, as it was mentioned above, there was limited access to TV and Radio stations due to interruptions in energy supply, and the overall underdevelopment of TV and Radio stations. It's worth mentioning that, since that period, the printed media was mainly affiliated with the political opposition. But since mid- and late 2000s, in parallel with the broadband internet and Smart Phone revolutions in Armenia, the print media started to lose its attractiveness. Currently, the entire printed Armenian dailies and weeklies have limited circulation. Almost all of them have launched their web pages publishing additional materials, which in turn put more restrictions on the demand for hard copy newspapers. Newspapers web pages have free access, which diverts the potential readers from print papers to their digital versions. Among most popular newspapers are "Aravot" and "Armenian Time" dailies, which have mainly critical stances towards the authorities.

### **The Online Media**

During the last 3-4 years, the online media made a huge leap forward in Armenia. Several news broadcasting web pages have been created with tens of thousands daily hits. An additional feature of the internet media is the fast development of internet TV, which allows live broadcasts from rallies and other political events, and provides news blocs competing with traditional media outlets. Among this type of media we may identify two sub-groups; media outlets focused on news broadcast, with little focus on analytical materials (among them media outlets such as news.am, tert.am, can be mentioned), and media companies which put more focus on analytical materials such as lragir.am, azatutyun.am, civilnet.am, etc. Among the online media resources, Civilnet can be singled out as a proponent of European standards in the media sphere. Civilnet is a part of Civilitas founda-

tion, which was established by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Vardan Oskanyan, in 2008, when he left his position. As for azatutyun.am (Armenian service of Radio Liberty), it also plays a key role in shaping the standards for online media, alongside its radio broadcast. Meanwhile, it should be mentioned that, for the most part of the population, especially for people above 35 years of age, television remains the main source of information, and the online media has only limited ability to shape their views and perceptions. On the other hand, for the younger generation (below 35), the TV stations are losing their attractiveness, and they get most of their information from internet (online media, social media, etc). The widespread use of the social media has impacted on the online media, as almost all online media outlets have their pages on social media networks, and use them as an additional tool to broadcast news and attract new readers.

### **Media Freedom in Armenia**

While describing the media players in Armenia it is worth describing also the situation of the last two years (2013-2014) regarding media freedom. Here we have assessments of both international organizations such as Freedom House, Reporters without Borders, and reports of local NGOs dealing with media freedom issues. According to Reporters without Borders' "World Press Freedom Index 2014" and "World Press Freedom Index 2015", which cover the 2013-2014 period, Armenia ranked 78<sup>th</sup> among 180 countries.<sup>4</sup> As for 2013, Reporters without Borders mentioned that the 2013 Presidential elections in Armenia were calmer than previous ones. Violence against journalists was rare. Armenia's state broadcaster has progressed in terms of impartiality, but the electoral environment exacerbated the ongoing information war in the privately-owned media – a war in which the authorities have a clear advantage.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Freedom House "Freedom of the Press" reports for 2014 and 2015, Armenia is on the "Not Free countries" list. As for 2013, Free-

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<sup>4</sup> Details about Armenia: <https://index.rsf.org/#!/index-details/ARM>>, accessed on 02.11.2015.

<sup>5</sup> World Press Freedom Index 2014, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, <<http://rsf.org/index2014/en-eastern-europe.php>> accessed on 03.11.2015.

dom House reported that despite constitutional and legal protections, the freedom of press in Armenia is restricted, and the media environment remains dominated by political influence. Positive changes observed in 2012 – including more balanced media coverage of parliamentary elections – were partly reversed in 2013, when violence against journalists and political interference in their work regained prominence during the presidential and municipal elections. Civil defamation cases also rose sharply after declining in 2012, and they were often accompanied by motions to freeze a media company’s assets pending resolution of the case<sup>6</sup>

Journalists must contend with violence and harassment; heavy political influence on content; and costly defamation suits. After higher-than-usual levels of political interference with the work of journalists in 2013 – an election year – the country’s media environment stabilized somewhat in 2014. Independent outlets continued to take advantage of the country’s relatively open online space. According to the report most of the dominant broadcast media are controlled by the government or by government-friendly individuals. Although most print outlets are privately owned, they tend to reflect the political and ideological leanings of their owners, who are often tied to a particular political party or interest.<sup>7</sup>

Among the leading local NGOs dealing with media freedom issues, there is the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression which published annual reports on freedom of expression in Armenia.<sup>8</sup> In its reports, this NGO describes in details all issues concerning the freedom of expression in Armenia, and its products are widely used by international organizations, which are preparing reports and ratings on media freedom in Armenia.

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<sup>6</sup> FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2014 ARMENIA, <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/armenia>> accessed on 3 November 2015.

<sup>7</sup> FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 2015 ARMENIA, <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/armenia>>, accessed on 4 November 2015.

<sup>8</sup> More information can be obtained from official webpage <[www.khosq.am](http://www.khosq.am)> accessed on 4 November 2015.



## Conclusion

Since gaining independence in 1991, the Armenian media has undergone several phases of development starting from very few media outlets to a vibrant media field, especially among online media. Meanwhile, it should be noted that, until now, Armenia mostly failed in the process of developing a truly independent media. Almost all the key media players are controlled by several business groups/business persons or are affiliated with political parties, thus mainly broadcasting the views and protecting the interests of their owners. Taking into account the limited advertisement market, as well as the overall economic situation of Armenia, it is very difficult for media outlets, especially for the print and online media, to become commercially viable, and to cover their expenses through profits, enabling them to make progress towards independence.

Another obstacle against the establishment of a truly independent media is the close ties between the business elite and the political power, which is a persistent feature in all post-Soviet states. This situation objectively places some restrictions on media owners making their outlets less prone to criticizing the top-level state actors and officials. Meanwhile, the Broadband Internet and Smart Phone revolutions are making serious changes in the field. Especially for the younger generation, the internet and the social media are becoming the main sources of information, which not only foster the diversification, but also multiply the sources for receiving information. Basically, any person with a smart phone and access to internet becomes a source of information thus narrowing the monopoly of electronic and print media over information sharing. As for media freedom, Armenia plays better than most of the post-Soviet states, but more should be done to reach international standards in this field.

# Media Ownership and Conflict Narratives in the Caucasus: Case Study of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

*Ahmad Alili*

## Introduction

Ownership of newspapers' content matters. The more diverse the ownership is, the more diverse the opinions are in the media outlets. Hence, the more diverse opinions, the more room there is for non-conflictual narratives.

Broadly speaking this is a matter of democracy. The communication researcher has always been paying considerable attention to the correlation between the media ownership and divergence. The most accurate statement was made by Glasser: "divergent points of view are desirable because they sustain public debate; public debate is desirable because it nurtures an informed citizenry, and an informed citizenry is desirable because it brings about a more perfect polity." (Glasser, 1984: 137) This statement clearly shows the association of democratic society and media diversity.

In addition, the diversity of media ownership increases the diversity in the content and the coverage of the stories. This has a lot to do with conflicts and conflict narratives. The greater diversity of the media ownership contributes to the greater diversity of narratives on the conflict, and hence increases the chances for peaceful content or for changing the conflict narratives. To what extent is this applicable to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh?

In this paper, we will analyse the media ownership and media landscape in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and try to reveal if the media ownership diversity can lead to a balanced coverage of the conflict and politics.

To this end, we will make first an analysis of the media landscape in Azerbaijan. Afterwards, we will do a similar analysis for the media in Armenia and try to reveal how the media landscape differs or it is similar in the two

countries. The next section is going to cover media ownership and conflict narratives in both countries.

## **The Media Landscape in Azerbaijan**

The free and independent media in Azerbaijan is the result of the regained independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union. During this period, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region broke out. The independent media was moulded in parallel with the making of war news, and the conflict narrative was a part of the everyday reporting.

In 1998, by presidential decree, the censorship from the Soviet times was brought to an end. Since then, the media content is largely controlled by the editorial offices. This was a milestone for independent media in Azerbaijan. According to different sources, the number of journalists reached up to 30000 – but figures differ widely. The subjective view is that the real figure is between 5 and 10 thousand. Most of the registered media institutions are not functioning, and, as the most of the registered media institutions are not functional, the official figures are exaggerated. Considering this, the more accurate estimates of journalists' count is as per the following:

Print media:

- 56 news agencies
- 45 national local daily newspapers
- 100 national local weekly newspapers
- 87 district weekly newspapers

Apart from the State-owned Broadcasting Company AZTV and Public Broadcasting Company “Ictimai” TV, there are the following TV broadcasting companies:

- 14 district TV broadcasting companies
- 5 national non-state TV broadcasting companies

Moreover, there is a private satellite broadcasting company, ATV International and two specialized TV channels “Idman-Azerbaijan” (Sport) and “Medeniyyet-Azerbaijan” (Culture) channel. In addition to this, there are

approximately 30 internet televisions in Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, the problems regarding the transparency of the media ownership persists in the country. Azerbaijan is one of the countries which is thoroughly scrutinized for issues related to the transparency of media ownership. The “Law on the State Registration of Legal Entities” requires the owner’s approval to disclose the information over his ownership. This makes it hard to publicise the list of owners of the various media entities. The ownership model in most European countries does not match the model existing in Azerbaijan: the ownership/business and editorial policies are not separate in Azerbaijan. Usually, the editor-in-chief, who sets the editorial policy, and the legal owner are one and the same person. The editors-in-chief are usually fulfilling both roles: as newsmaker and businessman.

Another problem regarding the overall media in Azerbaijan is the low level of salaries. The average salary of a print media journalist is around 400 AZN per month (450 EUR before devaluation, 350 EUR currently). The figure for broadcast media journalists is around 600 AZN (840 EUR before devaluation, 520 EUR currently). Considering the high cost of living in the country these figures should be regarded as rather modest.

The main reason for this is that the media management experts and the advertising traditions are not mature enough, which makes most media companies financially weak and unstable, thus unable to afford decent salaries for their employees.

The media trade union movement is not strong enough in the country. The vision of the Soviet time trade unions is still dominant, although the expectations from the trade unions are quite different. Soviet trade unions were providers of discounted tickets for tourist destinations and had no determination/purpose to protect the social rights of the workers. This approach weakened collaboration among various trade unions. As a result, the journalists are less organised to secure fair job contracts which, in the end, could improve their work and living conditions. This seriously undermines the quality of journalism in Azerbaijan. Eventually, this makes journalism and media ownership politically attached. The media in the country is diverse, but politicized. The politicized media is a key attribute of the country. The media bodies camped around governmental and opposition parties set the landscape of the media in the country. Thus, the media own-

ership is not clear, the print-media entities are formed around editor-in-chiefs and they have biased attitudes towards the political processes and news-making.

There are two self-regulatory bodies established in the country since the Soviet censorship ceased; the Press Council for the print-media; and the National Broadcasting Council for broadcasting companies.

The Press Council is a body established to execute the “Ethical Code of Azerbaijani Journalists” which was adopted in 2003 by the First Congress of Azerbaijani journalists. Later, the OSCE Baku office and the Press Council established a joint working group and the Azerbaijan Press Council was tasked to promote and enforce the Code. Overall, the media in Azerbaijan is diverse, but it is highly politicized. There are no bans for social networks or other media. The population is free to express their attitude towards conflicts and related news on the social networks and in the blogosphere. The media and media ownership in Armenia stand in a very similar situation.

### **The Media Landscape in Armenia**

The history of free media in Armenia started with the independence from the Soviet Union as well. The media ownership is problematic in Armenia as well. Most of the large media entities, broadcasting companies are Closed Joint-Stock Companies (CJSC). According to the Armenian legislation, the company can enjoy full privacy and stakeholders’ names may be kept secret from the public. According to the “Freedom House”, the media is subject to political influence and major media entities are controlled by the government, or government-related individuals. The media is highly politicized, which makes it strikingly similar with the media landscape in Azerbaijan. Most of the media entities are sponsored by political parties, while national legislation in Armenia prohibits parties to influence the media. Wealthy individuals affiliated with political entities control the media. “Ordered articles” are something usual for the country.

The ownership of the print-media outlets is similar to Azerbaijan: the owner and the editor-in-chief are the same person. The whole newspaper reflects the personal attitude of the editor-in-chief.

The salaries are low and the social situation of journalists makes them vulnerable to the influence of political entities. The situation regarding the trade unions is very similar to that in Azerbaijan. Officially, there are more than 1000 print media outlets in Armenia at present. Again, most of their content is significantly influenced by the political agenda of different parties. Apart from the print-media, there is a diversity of private radio stations. In addition, the State-funded Public Radio is also aired. Television is the most popular mass media in the country, which is considered to be the main source of information. The diversity of the TV stations is noticeable: some 30 TV broadcasting companies cover the capital-city of Yerevan. Apart from that, in each region, three to eight local TV stations are aired. In addition to the local TV channels, international broadcasting companies, such as CNN, Euronews and Russian Public and State owned broadcasting companies also operate on the territory of the Republic of Armenia.

In conclusion to this section, it should be noted that there is significant diversity of media outlets in Armenia. The print-media is the poorest and politically most diverse part of the media landscape. Nevertheless, the media overall is highly politicized – the political interests of the opposition groups and the government make an unbiased coverage impossible.

### **The Conflict Narratives in the Media**

The discourse analysis of randomly chosen articles from different media outlets (mainly print-media) since the independence for both countries led us to an interesting conclusion: the conflict narratives in the media and the media ownership in both countries are not linked to each other.

As it was noted in the previous parts of this paper, the media is politicized in both countries, and the media-outlets are camped around opposition and government parties. The media analysis shows that the conflict narrative and the image of the enemy are the same in the media outlets representing both political groups. This is true for both countries. Different political groups and the media outlets camped around those groups may have different positions on social and political issues. However, when it comes to the history and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict they usually take similar positions. That is the case since the public memory plays a more significant role in shaping conflict narratives than media ownership.

Broadly speaking, the conflict narrative existing in the early 1990s, which was the result of the public memory for both countries, has not changed for the last 25 years. The main rhetoric on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the respective narrative models introduced by historians in the late 1980s are still the same. This might be an outcome of the lack of change of the “memory policy” since then. The historical clichés on exclusiveness and superiority are still widespread. The change in the media ownership or in the political stands on different domestic issues did not have any effect in this regard. Moreover, another interesting point is that the conflicting parties accuse each other in the same manner. The stereotype about the enemy is same. Since Azerbaijan and Armenia used to be part of the same political-economical sphere – the Soviet Union, most of the stereotypes about the enemy derived from the common roots. In particular, World War II and the Afghan military campaign led by the Red Army stereotypes are still current for cultivating the image of the enemy in the media of both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In summary, the media ownership plays a decisive role in the formation of the editorial policy in both countries. The social condition of the journalists makes them politicized. Nevertheless, the public memory on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict plays a more important role in shaping the conflict narratives. Hence, the collective memory and the relevant academic works of historians still have the power to influence the minds.

**PART II: MEDIA'S INTERACTION WITH  
THE CIVIL SOCIETY:  
PRODUCING THE NEWS AND SHAPING THE  
MEDIA MESSAGES**





## The Media and Society in South Ossetia

*Zarina Sanakoeva*

Attempting to analyze the situation of the mass-media in South Ossetia, one should give an overview on the media outlets in the republic. First, today, media outlets are exclusively state-owned. The journalists not engaged with the state media outlets are the correspondents of several Russian media outlets and informational agencies, as well as those working for the recently opened branch office of the Sputnik agency.

As a result, non-state media in South Ossetia are represented only by several Internet resources. As to the Internet, there is only one mobile service provider and Internet access is expensive and of poor quality. So, one could hardly speak about increasing the number of users and the influence of Internet resources on public opinion.

Independent media in South Ossetia is often associated with non-governmental organizations, as they receive their funding from grants of various foreign and international agencies. Today, South Ossetia exists in the Russian media environment, and the population gains almost all the information from Russian TV channels. Local TV broadcasts run for few hours in the evenings and covers primarily local news with the older generation as the main audience.

As a result, foreign policy issues, the vision of world politics among the population of South Ossetia is formed exclusively through the Russian mass media.

This is also relevant for the policies applied by the authorities, which very often replicate the Russian stance. For instance, the law “On Foreign Agents”, the discussion of which, to follow Russia, was initiated in South Ossetia. Although the amendments stiffening the control over the non-governmental organizations were made, representatives of civil society organizations managed to force a new reading of the law, which deleted any references to “agent” terminology replacing it with “partner” instead.

Nonetheless, the campaign defaming non-governmental organizations and journalists, civil society activists, has widened. This campaign is held through primarily anonymous publication of pejorative information in local media. According to my observations, they had little influence on the public opinion as such. The population is not apt to perceive NGO representatives as enemies.

Building its foreign policy with due account to Russia's interests, South Ossetia in fact refrains from leading any clear or independent foreign policy. The current generation of politicians been brought up under the conditions of clear external threat when politics was simple and easy to read. After 2008, the threat is minimized to the extent possible and the politicians found themselves unable to generate ideas which would and could be presented as national idea.

Against this background, the issue of South Ossetia's accession to the Russian Federation is now high on the agenda, and local politicians actively pursue the idea. The accession to Russia was also on top during the parliamentary elections back in 2014. Nonetheless, the idea is unequally shared by the public and does not reflect "official" interest in the subject.

It is worth mentioning that local media present the accession to Russia and contacts of South Ossetia with European countries or the West in general as contradicting vectors, as the West means Georgia. I will not speak about the perspectives for restoration of relations with Georgia, as with the current rhetoric of both Georgian and South Ossetian authorities one could hardly say it is the time to do so.

Georgia and international actors, such as the European Union, UN and OSCE give enough grounds for criticism among public in South Ossetian. Georgian politicians regularly voice ideas and suggest South Ossetia and Abkhazia live together. They probably view the offer to "enter Europe together" as the key argument for common existence. I will no further continue with the perspectives for Georgia's membership in the EU, but all the statements of the kind have one and the same outcome: perception of EU among South Ossetians is equal to that of Georgia. As a result, the stance that "Europe is evil" is supported through solid reasons. The UN General Assembly has twice voted for resolutions in relation to people displacement

in Georgia, and South Ossetia still remembers the problem with people displaced in the 1990s from Georgia, a problem which had never been spoken of either in Georgia or among international organizations. They all keep silent.

Another issue that contributes to the formation of a negative attitude towards the EU in South Ossetian society is that the EU in assessing the situation in the republic based solely on the information they receive from Tbilisi. Moreover, they show no willingness to engage in dialogue with the South Ossetian leadership to form objective position on the processes occurring in the country.

South Ossetia currently faces serious problems within the community: underdeveloped economy, social welfare, post-war rehabilitation, etc. The political elite speak out loud about foreign policy, I mean the issue of accession to Russia. The relevance of this is low and does not respond to the real needs of the society. Less relevant for the community is the settlement of the conflict with Georgia as for South Ossetia it has already been settled.

International organizations' representatives most often speak about transformation or settlement of the conflict, which, I believe, is not relevant. In order to build up relations with state and non-state actors in South Ossetia, one should not stick to conflict settlement, but rather focus on the development of the state. This is well understood among NGOs in South Ossetia, but it is not well heard and understood among donors. To build up relations with the authorities is also not an easy task: recently two NGOs which were considered the most active announced their intention to withdraw their registration and start self-liquidation. The reason behind is the fact that there is an attempt to present them as enemies.

While Georgia is promoting its non-recognition strategy towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia, when all contacts are transferred to second-track diplomacy, NGOs there will be vulnerable and exposed to danger of defamation. The authorities do not feel responsible for negotiations, either before the population of South Ossetia or the international community.

I believe they are right to do so. No one would like the situation when someone is trying to settle things behind the scenes, even if it is a valuable or needed project.

In addition to the efforts to develop the NGO sector in South Ossetia, it is necessary to establish a mechanism that would allow not only to monitor the situation objectively, but also to allow officials in Brussels and Tskhinval to exchange their views, in order to overcome this crisis of confidence.

In the meantime, all attempts to develop civil society and independent media in South Ossetia by means of Western structures and donors may become victim of a vicious circle impossible to break up. On the one hand, the access to South Ossetia for foreign organizations' representatives is denied due to various reasons, and on the other hand these organizations are unable to support any substantial projects as they have no possibility to personally verify the results and monitor their implementation.

# **Civil Society and the Media: Shared Commitment for Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh**

*Emma Margaryan*

This paper is concerned with nongovernmental organisations (NGO) and the media sector committed to the management of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict. It aims at exploring the scope of the media's involvement in NGO initiatives directed to management of the conflict, outlining major trends, and evaluating intended outcomes by ultimately looking at the joint projects implemented by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) and the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK). This research is largely interdisciplinary in its nature and relies heavily on “grey literature”; documents, policy papers, reports and other online materials produced by organisations, as well as personal interviews with Armenian experts conducted in 2014-2015.

The limitations of this research are the evidence availability and the puzzling lack of online visibility of NGO activities, as well as the scarcity of comprehensive research on the topic, and the fragmentary nature of web-sources with little chronological order. In spite of thin empirical evidence, this paper argues that NGOs played an indispensable role in engaging and empowering media actors in conflict management initiatives, generating platforms for alternative media content development that challenged the established conventions of mainstream media about the conflict. There is positive anecdotal evidence that these initiatives can contribute to NK conflict management in the long run by facilitating research, improving the knowledge about the conflict and educating the audience, opening up the peace process, increasing people-to-people contacts and enlarging social networks, enhancing understanding between opposing groups, and often remaining the only frameworks of Armenia-Azerbaijan bilateral meetings at societal level at large.

## **Building Peace through the Media**

The European Union and the British Government have been key players in fostering cross-cooperation between NGO and media sectors and tailoring

specific cross-border projects for NK conflict management. The Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations project, for example, was run in two phases (2008-2009; 2010-2011). It was financed by the UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in Armenia and Azerbaijan and implemented by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation's (EPF) offices in Armenia and Azerbaijan in close partnership with media centres Yeni Nesil (New Generation, Azerbaijan), the Yerevan Press Club (Armenia), Internews-Armenia and Internews-Azerbaijan. The first stage of the program was aimed at increasing the amount of accurate and unbiased reporting on the NK conflict and Armenia-Azerbaijan bilateral relations in general, as well as facilitating a cooperative network of editors, journalists and media NGOs from both countries.<sup>1</sup> Within this framework, a focus group-based research and a report on public perceptions about media bias in both countries have been conducted by Caucasus Research Resource Centre's (CRRC) teams combined with two-round in-country trainings held for 70 television, radio, electronic and newspaper journalists and editors.<sup>2</sup> Two separate media assessments have been produced within this program by monitoring four TV channels and four newspapers in each country, and measuring the changes in common perceptions and documenting frequently met inaccuracies.

Apart from this program, EPF was also supporting two small scale film projects: *Neither War, Nor Peace*; a documentary story-telling about refugees and ex-combatants from Armenia and Azerbaijan, and *Passenger*; a film about clichés and stereotypes taken from the conversations in taxis when listening to the Azerbaijani and Armenian music in Yerevan and Baku respectively.<sup>3</sup> Both films are available on YouTube and have been used

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<sup>1</sup> Eurasia Partnership Foundation. (n.d.). Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations Project 2008-2009 (Eurasia Partnership Foundation - Report). Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: <http://www.epfarmenia.am/en/program-portfolio/armenia-azerbaijan/unbiased-media-coverage-of-armenia-azerbaijan-relations-project/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kuzmin, A. (2011, April). Evaluation of the Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations Project (Eurasia Partnership Foundation – Final Report), p. 21. Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: [http://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final\\_evaluation\\_report\\_for\\_epf.pdf](http://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final_evaluation_report_for_epf.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

as training materials for the second stage of the project, as well as in various thematic group discussions at different NGOs.

The second stage of the program, the Unbiased E-Media Coverage in Armenia and Azerbaijan (2010-2011) had the same mission but with a focus on online media and the blogosphere.<sup>4</sup> In this phase, dialogue blogging and dialogue-oriented online journalism were facilitated by utilizing already existing online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and other social networks, as well as establishing new ones, such as the Neutral Zone, an online platform featuring contributions from Armenian and Azerbaijani authors.<sup>5</sup> A series of articles about Azerbaijanis in Armenia and Armenians in Azerbaijan were also posted on Medialab.am, Contact.az and other platforms bringing also into focus stories of women affected by the conflict.

In the course of the project, an E-Media Monitoring Report and a Media Bias Glossary were produced by the Yerevan Press Club and Yeni Nesil which were later used for in-country trainings for journalists and regional workshops. Several visual products were also developed in the form of creative cartoons on social topics propagating peace and reconciliation. The www.WAR documentary was jointly produced by Internews in Armenia and Azerbaijan showcasing the existing e-media bias in covering Armenia-Azerbaijan bilateral relations. This film has not been posted online due to the common perception of its potentially propagandist nature.<sup>6</sup>

And finally, the project was marked by four TV talk shows aired on Yerkir Media TV channel in Armenia in March-June 2011, highlighting the pro-

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<sup>4</sup> Eurasia Partnership Foundation. (n.d.a.). Unbiased E-Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations 2010-2011 (Eurasia Partnership Foundation – Report). Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: <http://www.epfarmeria.am/en/program-portfolio/armenia-azerbaijan/unbiased-e-media-coverage-in-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>.

<sup>5</sup> The Neutral Zone. (n.d.). Imagine Center's Platform for Alternative Voices from Armenia and Azerbaijan (Imagine Center – Policy). Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: <http://imagineneutralzone.com/about/>.

<sup>6</sup> Kuzmin, A. (2011, April). Evaluation of the Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations Project (Eurasia Partnership Foundation – Final Report), p. 23. Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: [http://epfarmeria.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final\\_evaluation\\_report\\_for\\_epf.pdf](http://epfarmeria.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final_evaluation_report_for_epf.pdf).



jects' achievements, their visual products and key Armenian participants as guest speakers. The average viewership of the channel was about 3000 people.<sup>7</sup>

The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) is a two-phased project (June 2010-December 2011; March 2012-March 2015) funded by the EU. It was introduced in June 2010, a period that is reported to be “the most challenging in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh” as “the peace process itself, under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, has so far been unable to achieve a long-expected and much hoped for breakthrough.”<sup>8</sup>

EPNK was developed as a consortium of five peace-building NGOs; Conciliation Resources (UK) which supports people at the heart of conflicts who are striving to find solutions; International Alert (UK) which promotes alternative perspectives on peace through the media, regional analysts and civil society leaders; Crisis Management Initiative (FI) which challenges the impasse in the peace process by reaching out to young people; The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Woman to Woman, SE) which supports women's organisations to promote women's empowerment and participation in the peace process; and finally The London Information Network on Conflicts and State Building or LINKS (UK) which contributes to a broader understanding of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through publications and briefings.<sup>9</sup>

EPNK made an extensive use of film and media turning them into powerful tools to combat the black propaganda and integrate conflicting narratives of ordinary people through storytelling. Dialogue through Film, estab-

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<sup>7</sup> Eurasia Partnership Foundation. (n.d.a.). Unbiased E-Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations 2010-2011 (Eurasia Partnership Foundation – Report). Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: <http://www.epfarmenia.am/en/program-portfolio/armenia-azerbaijan/unbiased-e-media-coverage-in-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>.

<sup>8</sup> EPNK. (2011). European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Progress and Prospects (EPNK – Brochure), p. 3, London. Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://www.epnk.org/sites/default/files/downloads/EPNK%20Progress%20and%20Prospects%20brochure.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> EPNK. (n.d.). Member Organisations (EPNK – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://epnk.org/partners/member-organisations>.

lished by Conciliation Resources, is one of these initiatives that supports Armenian and Azerbaijani filmmakers in cross-conflict documentary filmmaking and encourages open dialogue through film. Within it, *Memories without Borders*, a unique Turkish-Armenian-Azerbaijani 55-minute documentary was released in 2012. It looks at the adverse impact of official histories on personal lives and invites the audience to question the very notions of home, identity, and memory.<sup>10</sup>

International Alert has been actively working with Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists and editors from mainstream media and expert communities. It was also conducting trainings on conflict sensitivity and offering comparative learning programs through study trips to different post-conflict regions (Northern Ireland, Bosnia & Herzegovina) for studying different conflict contexts. The participants, for their part, were encouraged to share their gained knowledge through major media outlets (TV, radio, print and online) with a more constructive approach to the NK conflict that would challenge existing radical narratives.<sup>11</sup>

International Alert has also partnered with two news agencies – Arminfo and 1news.az – to promote independent analysis and commentary on the NK peace process.<sup>12</sup> Since 2011 the website Commonsplace.eu has been operating in Russian and English under the moderation of LINKS, complemented by a relevant Facebook page (CommonSpace) and Twitter feed (@commonsplaceEU). CommonsplaceExtra – a quarterly analytical report has been produced in this framework to offer in-depth analysis on the NK conflict and peace process.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Conciliation Resources. (n.d.). *Memories Without Borders* (Conciliation Resources – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://www.c-r.org/resources/memories-without-borders-english-version>.

<sup>11</sup> EPNK. (n.d.a.). International Alert (EPNK – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://epnk.org/partners/international-alert>.

<sup>12</sup> EPNK. (n.d.b.). Film & Media (EPNK – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://epnk.org/node/17>.

<sup>13</sup> EPNK. (n.d.c.). LINKS (EPNK – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://www.epnk.org/partners/links>.

EPNK also supports the magazine *Analyticon* – an independent political monthly published online and in hard copy by the Stepanakert Press Club covering conflict-related issues with a nuanced reporting with regular contributions from Azerbaijani authors.<sup>14</sup>

Unheard Voices, one of the pivotal cross-media projects launched by International Alert, in cooperation with the leading media outlets in Armenia, Azerbaijan and NK, brings to the audience the articles and video reports that tell stories of ordinary people most affected by the conflict.<sup>15</sup> Often-times, these are moving stories about migration, displacement, feelings of longing, unhappiness, and family loss that highlight the human cost of the conflict and generate empathy and tolerance from the audience. The articles were posted in Armenian and Azeri through mainstream online media agencies, as well as in Russian on a joint Facebook page. Overall, the project produced reports by 46 journalists, interviewed 322 people and reached a total audience of around 40,000 across ten online media platforms, including mainstream and independent agencies based in Armenia, Azerbaijan, NK and Russia.<sup>16</sup>

### **Impact on Society**

When it comes to the evaluation of the intended outcomes of these projects on the public at large, it is pretty challenging for an external evaluator to retrospectively assess whether these initiatives have reached their intended objectives or not, or what was their real impact on NK conflict management in the long term. A more systematic research would be needed for such an assessment. Here, however, several serious gaps exist.

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<sup>14</sup> EPNK. (n.d.d.). *Analyticon Current Affairs Magazine* (EPNK – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://www.epnk.org/project-highlights/analyticon-current-affairs-magazine>.

<sup>15</sup> EPNK. (n.d.e.). *Unheard Voices: Living with the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict* (EPNK – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://epnk.org/project-highlights/unheard-voices-living-nagorny-karabakh-conflict>.

<sup>16</sup> EPNK. (n.d.f.). *Launch of Publication as Part of the Joint Media Project ‘Unheard Voices’* (EPNK – Policy). Retrieved October 28, 2015 from: <http://epnk.org/project-highlights/launch-publication-part-joint-media-project-%E2%80%98unheard-voices%E2%80%99>.

First of all, we have a documentation issue, as many of the NGO-media cross-initiatives are time sensitive and still remain undocumented and unavailable for researchers, not mentioning the society. Secondly, the organizations themselves are slow in conducting relevant evaluations of their projects and making them available for researchers. For instance, in the course of this research, I could not find any evaluations regarding the various phases of the EPNK.

However, it is worth mentioning here Kuzmin's report on the Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations, where the author concluded that the expected long-term impact of the project was too ambitious. With reference to the effectiveness of the project, Kuzmin noted that the environment for implementation of the project was more favourable in Armenia than in Azerbaijan, given the risks faced by the Azerbaijani participants, and the project results will be most likely be more visible in Armenia.<sup>17</sup> The author further noted that although the project participants underwent personal transformation, and mostly overcame major contradictions when dealing with conflict-related issues, the majority of them were not the most prominent and active journalists, and "it seems likely that changes in their behaviour will make only minor contributions to unbiased media coverage." In the longer term though, the author noted, the project's effects may become more visible. The issues were also complicated by the fact that, in spite of the significant alteration in participants' behaviour, it did not necessarily lead to the much-desired actions, as some of the participants eventually chose not to write about the conflict at all given its complexity and sensitivity.<sup>18</sup> But the author also noted some positive outcomes.

Another important evaluation carried out by Media Initiatives Centre (Armenia), Internews Azerbaijan and Internews Georgia in 2013 revealed the opinions of 30 experts from the region and reported a decrease in the frequency of the conflict coverage. The research pointed at the violation of

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<sup>17</sup> Kuzmin, A. (2011, April). Evaluation of the Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations Project (Eurasia Partnership Foundation – Final Report), p. 3. Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: [http://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final\\_evaluation\\_report\\_for\\_epf.pdf](http://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final_evaluation_report_for_epf.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

ethical norms for reporting, lack of qualitative analysis and more interest in social and economic issues than towards the conflict. “People rather want to learn about the number of shots on the border, than about the current phase of the conflict”, the report stated, and overall, “people are keener to negative information about the conflicting party”.<sup>19</sup> The respondents mentioned that although media played an important role in shaping public opinion, they “cannot play a significant role in conflict resolution, since decisions are taken at the governmental level.”<sup>20</sup>

My interviewee Boris Navasardyan, the president of the Yerevan Press Club, one of the active participants at the Unbiased Media Coverage project in Armenia, noted that there were hundreds of initiatives by civil society and media, but they had not led to the much desired political outcomes. The political environment, he noted, neutralized any sort of wishful thinking from the civil society. One of the positive outcomes of these initiatives, he noted, are the personal networks of separate individuals in Armenia and Azerbaijan who shared genuine trust, that, in the event of a supportive political environment, could be a potential resource in peace-building. However, these people were not the key decision makers. There were also many individuals who did not share trust but used the opportunity to get grants yet staying on the conflicting sides like the countries themselves.<sup>21</sup>

My other respondent, Richard Giragosian, the director of the Regional Studies Centre, noted that civil society both in Armenia and Azerbaijan is fairly advanced and he challenged the narratives of nationalist politics. But there are risks involved for Azerbaijani participants, he noted, as many of his colleagues engaged in the peace-building process have been imprisoned and persecuted by the state. With regards to the criticism towards Armenian civil society, Giragosian noted that for too long these initiatives have been directed by the same people, the so-called dinosaurs of civil society,

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<sup>19</sup> Media Initiatives Center (n.d.). Problems of Conflict Reporting in South Caucasus Media Summarised (Media Initiatives Center – Report). Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: <http://www.mediainitiatives.am/conflict-reporting-research>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Boris Navasardyan, the president of Yerevan Press Club, Yerevan (2014, August).

who had not had a new idea in 20 years, and yet they are still the ones receiving the funding.<sup>22</sup>

Gevorg Melikyan, policy analyst and chairman of the Alliance for Democracy NGO, an active participant of similar initiatives, pointed out in his interview to the repetitive agendas of the initiatives and participants' unaltered political stances. Another serious gap he mentioned was the lack of visibility and public awareness of these initiatives. Yet another issue is the implementation mechanisms, he noted, a lot of policy papers have been produced that have little practical relevance.<sup>23</sup>

## **Conclusion**

There is not enough space here to fully expose the whole picture of joint civil society-media peace-building activities related to the NK conflict. Nevertheless, this paper hoped to highlight several things:

Firstly, we talked about the limitations facing a researcher pointing out to the lack of evidence, and online visibility of NGO and Media joint activities. Secondly, we tried to outline the major trends of these initiatives with reference to cross-initiatives carried out by the EPF and the EPNK. These activities were mainly focused on: providing training and organizing comparative conflict studies for the key media and civil society actors; producing news in printed and in online media platforms with a more nuanced view on the NK conflict and peace process; creating audio-visual materials such as documentary films and cartoons.

The last part of the paper was focused on evaluating the impact of these initiatives on the public at large. It discussed the challenges in assessing these initiatives and referred to external evaluations and personal interviews conducted with Armenian experts. This part revealed a picture of public unawareness towards these initiatives.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Richard Giragosian, the director of Regional Studies Centre, Yerevan (2014, August).

<sup>23</sup> Online interview with Gevorg Melikyan, policy analyst and chairman of Alliance for Democracy NGO (2015, October).

Although supporting empirical evidence is thin, this research made the tentative assumption that the inclusion of the media in peace-building activities can have a positive contribution to conflict management in NK, in the longer term. However, further research is needed to test this assumption.

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Kuzmin, A. (2011, April). Evaluation of the Unbiased Media Coverage of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations Project (Eurasia Partnership Foundation – Final Report), p. 21. Retrieved November 1, 2015 from: [http://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final\\_evaluation\\_report\\_for\\_epf.pdf](http://epfarmenia.am/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/final_evaluation_report_for_epf.pdf)

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**PART III: SHAPING COMPROMISE IN THE  
SOUTH CAUCASUS:  
WHAT ROOM IS THERE FOR A  
PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE COMMERCIAL  
AND ECONOMIC VALUE OF PEACE?**



# The Other Side of Peacemaking: Russian Realpolitik and the Economic Dimension of Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus

*Elkhan Nuriyev\**

## Introduction

A quick look around shows how the world has changed dramatically in recent years. Even more, one can see how current changes are affecting the most vulnerable regions of the world. The international community is dealing with several trouble spots at once. The Syrian Civil War, terrorist activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Ukraine crisis still remain serious threats that are keeping Russia and the West very busy. In fact, new security challenges have brought the issue of global war and world peace back to the strategic agenda of international actors. With all that on their plates, Russia and Western powers have so far paid little attention to the South Caucasus where conflict resolution process is stuck in political limbo for years. Even as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are seeking greater intermediary assistance from well-respected global forces, Russia and the United States are battling for geopolitical primacy in Eurasia, continuing to draw up war plans against one another.

Obviously, none of the South Caucasus states can cope with regional security problems without external help. Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia expect Russia and Western powers to focus their resources, determine their priorities and thoroughly review the instruments in their foreign policy

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toolkit. The wider public in the three countries is gravely concerned about the possibility of a drastic new turn in the long-lasting conflicts. Indeed, there is sufficient justification for such concerns, since the peace process continues to languish in the doldrums. People living in this region have therefore become increasingly discouraged by the lack of any real progress in resolving the conflicts. Although after each round of talks, the political leaders maintain that they stand in favour of a peaceful conflict settlement, all involved parties have yet to demonstrate any real inclination towards reaching a coordinated understanding of the problems and achieving a joint resolution.

### **Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Barriers and Prospects for Settling Georgia-Russia Relations**

Currently, the Geneva International Discussions, commonly known as the Geneva Talks, remain the unique and indispensable platform for the Georgia-Russia dialogue, mediated by the European Union (EU), United Nations (UN) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). True, one of the main outcomes of the talks with participation of the representatives from Georgia, Russia and the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the establishment of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) aimed at reacting to all illegal activities along the administrative boundary lines between Georgia and the secessionist regions. Significant effort has also been made to initiate certain measures that would address humanitarian needs. In particular, the parties started exchanging views on securing the freedom of movement for the local population, including the return of internally displaced persons to their homes, and instances of illegal detention and human rights abuses. As of yet, however, periodic talks are deadlocked over the inability to reach an agreement on the non-use of force.

Even so, tensions heightened especially after Russia concluded a military agreement with South Ossetia in March 2015, following the signing of a similar treaty with Abkhazia in November 2014. Georgian authorities opposed the deals and expressed their deep concern over regular large-scale military exercises of Russian troops in the two secessionist republics. Tbilisi

called Moscow's new move a “*de facto* annexation attempt”<sup>1</sup> mainly arguing that the signed treaties would increase Russian presence in the conflict-torn regions. The Kremlin strategists, in turn, reiterated their growing discontent with deepening military cooperation between Georgia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

More precisely, Moscow has on several occasions pointed to the destabilizing effect of the opening of the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre in late August 2015,<sup>2</sup> including the US efforts to expand joint military drills in Georgia, as well as the elements of a rapid response force that aims to provide prompt delivery of troops and military equipment from the West. From Moscow's viewpoint, these developments are at odds with Georgia's military-restraint obligations assumed by Tbilisi in accordance with the August 12, 2008 agreements. Hence, it is no surprise that Russia is challenging Georgia's ambitions to join NATO and the EU. The Kremlin reminds the authorities in Tbilisi that they must give up Georgia's territorial integrity if the country seeks to pursue eventual membership in the Euro-Atlantic community.

In fact, Moscow has provoked Tbilisi into choosing either to lose Abkhazia and South Ossetia forever or abandon its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and form close ties with the Russia-led Eurasian Union. Even with the continued support from the West to peacefully integrate the breakaway regions, to implement the EU association agreement and to repair the neighbourly relations with Russia, the Georgian leadership is facing difficult choices ahead. One can admit that the current impasse complicates vital peace building efforts, and creates further obstacles to progress at the long-running Geneva talks on non-use of force. However, it is clear that the absence of a peace agreement reveals the essence of the new Russian realpolitik, which strongly influences Georgia's domestic and foreign policy. Such thinking grounded in reality rather than ideology may well bring about a compromise between Tbilisi and Moscow.

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<sup>1</sup> Moscow, 'Tskhinvali Sign 'Integration Treaty'. In: Civil Georgia (18 March 2015). <<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28143>>. Accessed on 20 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Moscow Calls Opening of NATO Training Center in Georgia Provocative Move. In: Sputnik (27 August 2015).<<http://sputniknews.com/politics/20150827/1026263750.html>>. Accessed on 20.11.2015.

According to Sputnik News, the ruling authorities in Tbilisi have welcomed Russia's recent aspiration to facilitate new forms of dialogue between Georgia and its breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>3</sup> Tbilisi may signal a willingness to set aside the thorny question of status and tackle practical aspects concerning the status quo if Moscow actually promotes direct contacts between Georgia and the two secessionist republics.

Even though the situation on the borders remains relatively stable and fairly predictable, the parties often speak out in favour of continuing the search for a compromise solution to the long-standing problems. For example, the dialogue Russia wants to motivate can start with economic, commercial, and business issues. But it still remains to be seen whether Russia's renewed effort to broker a solution will succeed in bringing a lasting peace to Georgia.

### **The Gordian Knot of Nagorno-Karabakh: Russia's Role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process**

Likewise, the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh remains the longest and the fiercest conflict, which has set tough political, economic and humanitarian consequences for the entire region. Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a lengthy war that ended with the signing of a Russia-brokered fragile ceasefire in 1994. As a result of the large-scale hostilities, nearly one million people were internally displaced. Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding regions are still under Armenian military occupation in defiance of four UN Security Council resolutions and other relevant decisions of the OSCE, NATO, the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) calling for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of armed forces. Although there is sufficient legal basis for conflict settlement within Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, none of the resolutions passed by international organizations have been enforced to this day.

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<sup>3</sup> Georgia Welcomes Russian Offer to Promote Dialogue with Abkhazia, South Ossetia. In: Sputnik (24 February 2015). <<http://sputniknews.com/politics/20150224/1018668939.html>>. Accessed on 20 November 2015.

Clearly, the peaceful settlement of the lingering Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has already acquired an international mechanism that takes into account the contradictory interests and goals of the world powers. Despite long-standing diplomatic efforts by the US, Russia and France, in their capacity as the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, the 23-year-long peace talks over Nagorno-Karabakh have so far produced no tangible results. Due to ineffective mediation by the OSCE, the usefulness of the Minsk Group in the negotiating process has repeatedly been brought up for public discussion both by Baku and Yerevan.<sup>4</sup>

While the US, Russia and France continue to work towards bridging the differences between Baku and Yerevan, each of these states has its own conception of the system of national priorities, let alone their ambitious tasks to carry out in the South Caucasus.<sup>5</sup> A noteworthy fact is that the complex combination of the great powers' interests has not yet produced the leading force capable of urging Armenia and Azerbaijan to show more flexibility during the closed-door negotiations, to oblige them to fulfill reasonable conditions of a possible political settlement, to guarantee its observance by both sides and to render an adequate assistance to the war-ruined economy in the post-conflict regional development.

However, the negotiated solution to the protracted conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan appears to be entering a new phase with the active involvement of Russia. In 2015, both sides held frequent meetings with senior Russian officials, disseminating speculations in popular media that a peace agreement could be reached soon. It may not look like it, but ongoing tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine and Syria might compel Moscow, Baku and Yerevan to take the plunge for a major breakthrough in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this issue, see Nuriyev, Elkhan. "Re-engaging Armenia and Azerbaijan in Reconciliation Process: Prospects and Incentives for Nagorno-Karabakh Breakthrough". In: Felberbauer, Ernst and Labarre, Frederic (eds.): *What Kind of Sovereignty? Examining Alternative Methods in the South Caucasus*. Study Group Publication Series, National Defense Academy, Vienna, Austria, 3/2014, pp. 163-180.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



In reality, Russia aims to assume a leading role while increasing its economic engagement and political rapprochement with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Considerable military might and rich legacy of the tsarist Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as very wise tactics and fairly flexible diplomacy that allows Russia to keep the West out of the South Caucasus mainly through a multidimensional partnership with Turkey, and a strategic alliance with Iran are in effect among the key success factors that can help the Kremlin stabilize the situation.

In the absence of a greater Western assertiveness, both Armenia and Azerbaijan consider Russia as the closest mediator, which realizes much better than others what should be done, and which has enough political will to alter the status quo, and materialize peacekeeping initiatives. Armenia and Azerbaijan are thus far beset by complex political, economic, and social processes that inevitably affect the security of Russia itself. For this reason, Russia's mediating role in the region is firmly rooted in common security interests. With the lack of Western resources to actively interfere in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process,<sup>6</sup> Russia is now holding a *carte blanche* for breaking the deadlock. The Kremlin seeks to cope with the mission single-handedly, trying to bring Baku and Yerevan to the negotiating table by convincing them to reach a compromise.

In principle, Russia's activist role has become particularly relevant against regular ceasefire violations, border skirmishes and an increased number of casualties. Moscow finds further escalation unacceptable, calling for the restoration of the political dialogue.<sup>7</sup> That is why the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has thoroughly been discussed during the visit of Azerbaijani and Armenian foreign ministers to Moscow in the recent months. Consequently, Baku and Yerevan understand very well that it will be difficult to find a way forward for a lasting agreement by ignoring Russian national interests.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Weiss, Stanley: Iran, the U.S. and Azerbaijan: The Land of Fire. In: The Huffington Post (5 December 2012). <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stanley-weiss/iran-the-us-and-azerbaija\\_b\\_2241045.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stanley-weiss/iran-the-us-and-azerbaija_b_2241045.html)>. Accessed on 20.11.2015.

<sup>7</sup> Moscow Urges Parties to Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict to Renounce Use of Force. In: Sputnik (14 October 2015). <<http://sputniknews.com/politics/20151014/1028506151/nagorno-karabakh-moscow-view.html>>. Accessed on 21 November 2015.

In turn, the West is very worried about Russian hegemony extending to South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea region. Even though the Western powers possess considerable peacekeeping potential, they lack factual knowledge of history of the South Caucasus, and have little understanding of the national interests pursued by the three post-Soviet countries. For this reason, the US and the EU proved to be unprepared for procuring information in this conflict-torn region. Together, all these factors testify to Russia's much stronger position in the CIS' southern belt and explain why the West fears Moscow's greater involvement in regional security issues directly influencing the rapidly changing geopolitics of the South Caucasus.

Strikingly, Moscow started promoting the idea of resolving the conflict within a single, integrated organization like the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Russia is indeed viewed as the powerful one to initiate this process. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the political and economic dimensions of which are still developing. Baku and Yerevan expect the Kremlin to present a road map for peace that will best suit the national interests of the two conflicting parties in the region. Armenia already joined the EEU to secure Kremlin's support on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and to enhance its pivotal relationship with Moscow. Azerbaijan's importance for Russia is likewise quite obvious.

Some Russian pundits believe the integration into the EEU holds great promise for Azerbaijan, arguing that an energy-rich country can also act as a bridge for the Eurasian Union's cooperation with Iran and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> While hoping for a renewed impetus to the conflict settlement, Azerbaijan may well consider the possibility of joining the EEU,<sup>9</sup> but as yet sees challenges for the membership in the Eurasian bloc. Instead, Baku seems to focus on boosting bilateral-level cooperation within the EEU. However, the Krem-

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<sup>8</sup> Private conversation with some Russian political analysts who requested anonymity, Moscow, September 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Recent rumours in local media have speculated that Russia is trying to persuade Armenia to withdraw from the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh in exchange for Azerbaijan's consent to join the Eurasian Economic Union. See, for example, Azerbaijan Could Join Beneficial Unions. In: AzerNews (27 October 2015). <<http://www.azernews.az/business/89099.html>>. Accessed on 23 November 2015.

lin may try out some new tactics based on a well thought-out peace proposal leading to a change in the situation of the Armenian occupation of the seven surrounding regions of Nagorno-Karabakh. By doing so, Moscow could demonstrate how obstacles may easily turn into opportunities.

### **How the Private Sector Can Help Promote the Economic Value of Peace**

For centuries the peoples of the South Caucasus lived side by side peacefully as neighbours. Even today, despite public resentments, Azerbaijanis and Armenians, as well as Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians wish to live in peace and concord. These nations are indeed capable of rebuilding peace, stability and security in the aftermath of the conflicts in the region. This is because they have a rich experience of good-neighbourly relations, which covers a period much longer than the periods of tension and conflict. Hence, opportunities and conditions for re-establishing cooperation can be obtained if the parties strive to restore confidence between them. It will take a long time to rebuild trust between Abkhazians, Ossetians and Georgians, and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. However, a start is needed on steps that can make the confrontation more bearable for the people and less risky for regional stability.

Most importantly, in all three countries, there are now sensible forces ready to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the regional conflicts. They often argue for economic incentives that can provide the key to breaking the current stalemate. It is generally known that Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were economically linked during Soviet times. The economic development of the region benefiting all the countries should certainly be supported. Halting the military activity, re-establishing economic relations based on mutual interest, opening the border to trade, and encouraging information and cultural exchanges are potential areas for establishing a basis for peace.

In order to facilitate the process, however, there is increased awareness of the need to actively involve local and international business leaders on all sides, amidst fears of reigniting hostilities and a potential economic decline across the region. There is no doubt that economic gains would reshape mindsets. It is thus the right time to establish state-funded organizations

for reconciliatory affairs in each of the three countries. The very fact that a new-found economic pragmatism must be pursued is essential.

In particular, a Special Economic Zone category that includes free trade zones, free economic zones, export processing zones, free ports, and urban enterprise zones should be established in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, as well as Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians working together on locally-sponsored programs and internationally-supported projects. All parties need to demonstrate decisive political will to achieve this goal. Such interaction would actually help overcome stereotypes and set an example to the youth of the three countries. A format for interregional youth programs could be created to revise concepts and perceptions. If these attitudes alter, the nature of the political process will also change. The parties also need to see that conflict resolution can achieve physical security and ensure the return of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

On the other hand, the private sector should play a critical role in assisting the central authorities to defuse tensions by undertaking key investments targeting the vulnerable regions. It is about resource mobilization support aimed at creating a peace agenda for regional development. It is not sufficient to merely promote new thinking and fresh approaches. Mindful of the limited resources of the national governments and international organizations, it is also necessary to mobilize practical support among new partners to help in implementing this agenda. These new partners include business entrepreneurs, private companies and media holdings which may become actively involved in the conflict resolution process.

In other words, there is a need to bring the private sector into concrete projects and to mobilize businesses and inform them of the new framework, within which their investments can have such beneficial outcomes for themselves and the communities in which they operate. One may suggest that a constant dialogue between private sector organizations be launched to identify long-term peace strategies as well as individual operational activities to enhance political, social and economic development in the region. Among specific projects that can be considered in the post-conflict regional development scenarios are investment promotion, support for small-scale joint enterprises and employment for the young generation.

In fact, through its active investments, the private sector can play a significant role in building up the economies of the conflict-prone areas in the South Caucasus. A special program, entitled 'Jobs for the Young,' needs to be encouraged and could be founded by the private sector in order to provide not only employment opportunities but also job training. Last but not least, the promotion of small- and medium-sized enterprise development is a vital measure to strengthen economic and social development and to ensure long-term political stability within the entire region.

### **In Lieu of a Conclusion: Benefits of Peace**

Undoubtedly, the citizens of the South Caucasus countries desire peace which will only bring prosperity and predictability to the entire region. The benefits of peace are indeed abundant because there are many areas for hope, but strong political will is necessary to initiate such change. That, however, proves to be no simple task. It takes time, patience and effort to achieve tangible progress. Yet it is believed that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Creating discussion platforms for exchange of views on economic incentives can help promote confidence building cooperation between the parties.

For example, after the conclusion of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the restoration of political and economic relations will be a necessary step for the two countries. Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan can leave the region where they are situated, and they will remain neighbours forever. Cooperation is therefore inevitable. Sooner or later Armenia will return the occupied territories to Azerbaijan and the two countries will be able to benefit from a comprehensive peace agreement.

At present, Azerbaijan's economy is much bigger and stronger than Armenia's. Azerbaijan has turned into the largest investor in the region and Armenia may possibly become a new market for Azerbaijani companies. One cannot rule out the possibility of investing Azerbaijani private capital into Armenia's economy in the future. Armenia would gain economically and financially if various commercial and business projects could be discussed with a view to investing in joint ventures in the post-conflict rehabilitation phase. Besides, Armenia requires deposits and funds for economic development, whereas Azerbaijan seeks to extend its potential corridors for nat-

ural gas transportation. Both the sale of Azerbaijani gas to Armenia, and gas transportation through Armenian territory to the European market may therefore look possible in the future.

Once the peace process is really underway, economic collaboration promises to be beneficial for all involved parties in the South Caucasus. Business interaction, educational and cultural communication may prove to be rich areas for wider cooperation. Border trade and other types of commercial exchanges are likewise identified as potential areas for diminishing the conflicts in the region. Needless to say the private sector and the media systems in the three countries can contribute too.



## South Caucasus: Mass Media Dialogue Problems and Strategic Partnership

*Angelina Gromova*

The dissolution of the Soviet Union triggered a number of economic, cultural and social problems. The gradual change of the former Soviet republics economics, frozen conflicts lasting after the USSR dissolution, the increase of the number of the global players resulted in the transformation of the political arena. The arising interest to the region of the neighbouring states – Turkey, Iran, and the USA – is another significant factor for Russia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of new states in return led to the critical inner contradictions based not only on the ethnic issues. The gradual process of independence of the new states, the expression of the peoples' social vision in the linguistic and cultural light gave way to the persistent conflicts. The conflicts in the South Caucasus region in return cannot be treated clearly; a number of complicated factors shall be considered in order to resolve serious tension and conflicts: ethnic, economic, political, military, leadership, geopolitical factors, etc.

Thus considering internal and external factors, tension in the conflict region, ineffective measures adopted to resolve them and the Ukraine crisis have turned the South Caucasus region into the one of the main issues of global security and stability.

Besides the role of the mass-media in the formation of the young generation's vision as well as the means of the possible resolution of the conflicts or – *a contrario* – the strengthening of xenophobic and nationalistic trends under the guise of patriotism shall be considered. Unfortunately, the latter dominates in the mass-media leading to negative consequences: the prejudiced view is being formed; information misinterpreted by the mass media often results in the birth of myths and inadequate assessment of conflicts and unwillingness to start a dialogue between the constituents of the belligerents. As for Russia, notwithstanding the more frequent occurrence of the



South Caucasus subject in the official mass-media, in general, the Russian mass-media is not interested in the South Caucasus problem; here the general ignorance of the Russian citizens shall be noted as well. Thus many mass-media and Russians remain distant and indifferent to the problems.

On top of that, we should pay attention to social network activity. Often the lack of censorship in media becomes the so-called basis for the “free expression of ideas.” For example, there are groups in the Russian popular social network “Vkontakte” dedicated, at first sight, to the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. Still upon closer consideration, there are publics on the Internet which intentions are propaganda rather than facts reflecting issues of current importance.

### **Possible Russian Priorities towards the South Caucasus**

Currently the priority area of the Russian foreign policy includes the development of the bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the states of the South Caucasus in order to build friendly relations; develop trade connections; preserve and increase the mutual cultural and civilizational heritage; and to develop relations in the security sphere.

Russia is interested in OSCE performing its function of honest broker for the OSCE member states and of the joint development of consensus solutions based on the overall and interest-balanced approach to the security in its military, political, economic and humanitarian aspects.

The Russian Federation will develop the relations with the South Caucasus states notwithstanding the complicated situation in the political sphere, support every possible strengthening of the cooperation mechanisms, including the gradual formation of the common areas in economics, foreign and interior security, education, science, and culture. Still these measures, for many reasons, can be considered as neo-imperialist ambitions of the Kremlin and will encourage the xenophobia towards the Caucasus region people.

The development of the mutually beneficial bilateral relations with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia is important to advance Russian national interests in regional issues.

Russia and the South Caucasus states should proceed from the importance of the gradual development of cooperation between Russia and the South Caucasus states Council in the interests of the predictability and stability in the region, and maximum use of potential political dialogue and practical cooperation in the resolution and response to common threats – terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, regional crisis, drug trafficking, natural and industrial disasters.

One of the most important elements of a balanced policy of Russia towards the South Caucasus region includes relations with Azerbaijan, which are traditionally stable and slightly affected by the political situation. Russia is interested in the further development of trade and investment cooperation as well as in the cooperation with the other states in the region.

Reinforcing strategic partnerships, Russia pursues a line to strengthen cooperation over current international problems and every possible support of the mutually beneficial bilateral relations in all spheres, especially to the significant increase in the trade sphere.

Russia shares the interest of Georgia and Azerbaijan in working out an efficient political and economic cooperation in the trilateral format Russia-India-China.

The Russian Federation is likely to change its policy towards Tbilisi, and encourage good-neighbourly relations and creative partnership with Georgia in the interests of the people of both states. The problems inherited from the past – of which the efforts to resolve in a generally acceptable way will be continued – shall not become an obstacle.

Russia is going to continue developing relations with Turkey, Iran, and the other leading states in the region in the bilateral and multilateral format.

Russian foreign politics is focused on increasing positive relations with the South Caucasus states – first of all on the development of the strategic partnership with Armenia, and then diversified cooperation with Azerbaijan.

The general recovery of the situation in the Caucasus where tension and sources of conflicts remain, the threat of weapons of mass destruction has significant meaning for Russia. The efforts will be focused on the active involvement of Russia in finding a political solution, encouraging dialogue between Yerevan and Baku, and on the security reinforcement in the South Caucasus region.

### **Russian Perspectives on Solutions to South Caucasus Security Problems**

In its foreign policy Russia chooses “carrots” instead of “sticks” which fits with 21<sup>st</sup> century diplomatic tendency. The position of Russia in the resolution of international security problem is filled with the spirit of idealism, i.e. based on UN regulations and international law. These principles should be the only mechanisms to decide on using military force.

The Russian Federation supposes that the main threat of the international destabilization is connected to the stagnation in disarmament efforts. For this reason Russia supports the preservation of the international-legal disarmament basis assuring the process of the nuclear weapons reduction.

The activation of NATO in the South Caucasus is a provoking factor decreasing the level of mutual trust.

In the energy security sphere Russia suggests creating unified principles and transparent conditions.

A weak point of the Russian policy in the South Caucasus is that the actual positive effects of economic cooperation are not taken into account. The main economic business line is oil and gas, and selling weapons to both sides of the conflict.

On the one hand, the official Moscow representatives claim that by pursuing such policy Russia can keep the strategic balance in the region, preventing the strengthening of any of the sides. Yerevan in return accuses the Russians of insincerity indicating Russia’s failure to meet its obligations as an ally. On the other hand, due to the Abkhazia issue the launch of the Abkhazia railway, which could in a way relieve the blockage of Armenia, is

stopped by Georgia as the official Tbilisi representatives wish not to do any business with the occupied and separatist – from their perspective – regimes.

Another problem that requires a solution is the mobility of labour, the development of cultural programs for youth, and the introduction of an attractive ideology. Naturally, nowadays the soft power of Russia is in poor state. The increasing level of xenophobia towards the Caucasians among the Russian citizens, historical memory, and support of the Russian separatists prevents Russia from developing the right line of conduct. Moreover, the domination of Russian entrepreneurs in the Armenia energy market triggered the street protests in Yerevan; as a result of the so-called “electromaidan”, as well as the headline-making murder committed by a Russian serviceman in Gyumri nearly wrecked the whole Moscow policy in the South Caucasus. Russia requires inner renovation, the change of its policy in the South Caucasus region, and developing a new image in the region.

### **Shaping a Rational Dialogue through the Mass-Media**

The mass-media can have both constructive and destructive nature. Being not only the most important way of transferring information, mass-media can form civil society, on the one hand, and have a disastrous effect on the collective consciousness, on the other hand.

Nowadays mass-media is crucial for events or conflicts coverage. Considering the constructive nature of mass-media, it can be assumed that mass-media can lead maybe not to the neutralization of a conflict but at least to the relieving of tension between the people of the states involved, especially among the young. It can help overcome the distrust and lack of understanding, reduce nationalist and xenophobic mood in the South Caucasus and Russia.

First of all, the nature of the Russian mass-media should be taken into account. This is not to say that the conflicts in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia or Nagorno Karabakh are not covered by the mass-media. Professional interviews with experts specializing in the problems of the region can be found on Internet or in newspapers. Nevertheless, a question of the coverage volume and format shall be raised. For example, the South Cau-

casus subject makes frequent appearances in the short items of the leading Russian mass-media. As a rule, a number of print and online editions of the leading Russian newspapers do not provide comprehensive high-quality material on the problem, which leads to the following consequences: the average Russian reader is either poorly informed about the problems of the region, or doesn't have any idea at all. In return, it affects the perception of the South Caucasus by the average Russian citizen: the concept of the historical and cultural connections and values with the South Caucasus is becoming lost despite the prospect of Eurasian economic unity.

While analyzing this problem in mass-media another important factor should be considered; today it's assumed that Internet has surpassed radio and television. Still it is television that plays the most important role in covering the problem and engaging more Russian people in the understanding of the conflicts. Unfortunately, at the moment, this problem is barely covered on television (thus, for example, the Russia-Ukraine conflict leaves the South Caucasus issues far behind).

As previously stated, mass media can play a positive part in relieving the tension between two countries. The information submission remains the main issue for mass media.

First, the popularization of the scientific, solid works related not only to the conflicts but to the common history and culture may become an important means of improving mutual understanding between Russia and the South Caucasus. While this scenario is still considered as possible in the internet and print media, it is quite unlikely for television. Still it is television that should raise wider mass awareness.

Second, partial censorship should be introduced. Notwithstanding the fact that censorship is often considered negative, it should be kept in mind that it works as an information filter. The partial introduction of censorship can reduce the nationalist, xenophobic mood; this would lay the foundation for mutual understanding and a more open dialogue, especially among the young.

The third step is related both to the cultural-economic and mass-media aspects. Note that a number of young people from Georgia and Azerbaijan

arriving in Russia to get higher education has dropped compared to the Soviet times. In this case, the development of the cultural programs of youth exchange could play an important role. Such programs would encourage the connections between Russia and the South Caucasus states, the search for peaceful dialogue among the states. Thus, the mass media part would include the coverage of the key events related to the cultural exchange programs and the cultural-historical values popularization. These particular cultural and youth exchange programs with the proper coverage, focusing on the positive and cultural aspects, could improve the situation dramatically, and help to overcome barriers to understanding and take steps towards the re-thinking of history, and reach a peaceful sensible dialogue.



## **Building a Constituency of Peace through Commerce and Economic Incentives**

*Asbot Margaryan*

The media environment in Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of the NK conflict trajectory and prospects for peace. In the absence of opportunities for direct cross border people-to-people contacts, the media serves as a primary means by which populations form opinions about each other. However, going wrong in the social media can have a huge impact on the conflict. In both the Armenian and Azerbaijani social media, the NK conflict is frequently presented in hostile zero-sum terms. If in the past the problem was about reconciling political sides, now the conflict is also about reconciling ordinary people.

In the context of studying the role of the media in shaping compromise in the South Caucasus I conducted a small research to demonstrate the inefficient role played by the media. I took five media sources from each side and drew parallels in their reflections about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict over the past months.<sup>1</sup> Compared to the Armenian media, the Azerbaijani one obviously expresses its anti-Armenian propaganda by directly calling Armenians enemies. Thus, almost all of the Azerbaijani online sources have a military section where some information can be found related to border incidents. Some sources even have “Armenian aggression and War” sections.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, these all are clear indicators of the official state propaganda and the injection of hatred towards Armenians in the Azerbaijani society. It is worth mentioning that this message is mostly available in Russian and Azerbaijani and directed to the domestic audience, whereas, a separate column on the military is not available in the English language versions.<sup>3</sup> Statements made by officials who call Armenians enemies are often cited in the media. The incumbent president of Azerbaijan frequently

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex A.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.azernews.az> ; <http://ru.oxu.az/war/97780>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.apa.az>.



raises territorial claims to Armenia calling its capital a historical Azerbaijani city and promising to take it back.<sup>4</sup>

The study conducted on Armenian media indicated that it also kept incidents and border clashes in the centre of the reader's attention, however, almost no statement calling Azerbaijan an enemy state can be found there.<sup>5</sup> They usually use the term adversary to describe the aggressive actions by Azerbaijan. In his pre-election speech President Sargsyan stated,

“we do not incite hostility and hatred among our people, something that has been an inseparable component of the policy carried out by the Azerbaijani authorities for years. In contrast to the Azerbaijani President who declared that the Armenian people are the number one enemies of Azerbaijanis, I would like to highlight once again that the Armenians do not have enemy nations.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, there is no separate column on military affairs in the Armenian media, but materials about the military can be found in the society section. This clearly shows that there are no tangible war rhetoric in the Armenian media. While the traditional media has been historically dominated by the state, the social media, such as online blogs, social platforms are rising in importance among the youth of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. Only through overcoming the war rhetoric, xenophobia and zero-sum mentality currently exhibited by the parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process, will we become wise enough to get closer to compromise-oriented, win-win solutions. In order to move forward with various peace and confidence building initiatives we will need a careful preparation of public opinion on both sides. State-owned media channels; newspapers and other online platforms should give up official propaganda and make substantial contributions to building confidence and tolerance in the region. Threat perceptions would begin to change on both sides if joint, serious efforts were made to implement economic incentives.

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<sup>4</sup> Collection of war threat statements by President Ilham Aliyev and other Azerbaijani officials, <<http://www.eufoa.org/uploads/AliyevWarThreats.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> See Annex B.

<sup>6</sup> Address by President Serzh Sargsyan at the 5th media forum at the foot of mount Ararat, <<http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2015/03/18/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-speech-Media-forum/>>. Towards a secure Armenia! Pre-electoral Armenia<[http://serzhargsyan.am/u\\_files/file/Election%20program/election-programm-2013-en.pdf](http://serzhargsyan.am/u_files/file/Election%20program/election-programm-2013-en.pdf)>.

## Economic incentives

Armenia and Azerbaijan have shifted large volumes of their state budgets to defence requirements instead of investing in economic development and welfare programs. Meanwhile, economic incentives should be engaged as instruments in peace-building processes, since the development of economic cooperation can stimulate positive economic changes in each country.

Today entrepreneurs have the greatest interest in realization of their economic projects and creating new markets instead of being restricted within the borders of their own states. Certain forms of economic cooperation, such as Free Economic Zones or Qualified Industrial Zones could be considered as positive steps forward on the way to conflict resolution. The track 2 efforts, such as the establishments of a bilateral body, call it a Regional Development Agency, Azerbaijani-Armenian Reconciliation Committee or Union for Peace Entrepreneurs will send relevant signals to Track 1 negotiators and will accelerate the peace building processes between the adversaries. Starting a comprehensive dialogue among interested businesses and experts from the conflicting parties, under the auspices of international actors, would be a step in the right direction. Hence, economic incentives could be put on the table even in the Minsk Group framework.

It is clear that economic incentives alone cannot substitute a political settlement to the conflict. However, if both sides opened their minds to the promise of economic incentives, they may become real instruments for confidence-building, and they could contribute significantly towards achieving peace. Economic incentives can play a key role in bringing the sides closer together, enabling mutual trust, which will move the rival parties towards a possible political compromise. In practice, economic incentives may help to create common economic interests in joint infrastructure projects, which could serve as mutual security guarantees of the peace process. For example, the authorities of Nagorno Karabakh proposed as an environmentally and economically friendly pilot infrastructure project the joint use of the water resources of the Sarsang reservoir<sup>7</sup> together with

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<sup>7</sup> Karabakh extends hand to Azerbaijan, <<http://asbarez.com/112858/karabakh->

Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, officials in Azerbaijan turned this and many other proposals down, perceiving them as making concessions to ‘separatists’-the term they use when addressing the *de facto* authorities of Nagorno Karabakh.

It is worth highlighting a number of energy and communications infrastructure projects originating in, or transiting through Azerbaijan, which could potentially become open to Armenian participation. In the past, these included oil and gas pipelines, railroads and other regional projects which circumvented Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the train has already been missed when it comes to cross border oil and gas pipeline projects passing through Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and transporting Caspian oil and gas to European markets. These initiatives could have made more sense ten years ago, when the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan or the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum projects were not realized.

However, the potential economic gains would offer too little against major security losses if they were based on the conditionality of returning land to Azerbaijan, thus weakening Armenia’s security. So far it has been impossible to separate economic and political interests, and some kind of regional approach will be required if compromises acceptable to Armenia and Azerbaijan are to be found.

## **Conclusion**

Only by excluding the military option for the resolution of the Karabakh conflict, giving up hostile rhetoric, removing snipers from the line of contact, and establishing direct negotiations with NK authorities without any preconditions, will it be possible to create a stronger basis for confidence building in both societies. Many issues, such as the return of IDPs, or an unrestricted trade corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhijevan could have been agreed already. The constant threat of possible war accompanied by a massive weapons build-up has done nothing to further a peaceful settlement. Nagorno Karabakh has been *de facto* independent for the last twenty years, and denying its existence as an actual party to the conflict ignores a

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extends-a-hand-to-azerbaijan/>.

simple reality on the ground. Hence, it should be brought back to the negotiation table, as without NK a key player is missing in reaching any final consensus.

Azerbaijan would see a major confidence building measure if Armenia were to return the one or more of the seven surrounding districts of the former NK area of operations, for which Baku would be prepared to make reciprocal concessions. On the other hand, the economic incentives package makes sense for Armenia just in case the current territorial integrity of NK is not endangered or used as a bargaining chip. Armenian politicians will never agree to any economic marriage that will endanger the security of Artsakh.

Irrespective of the final legal solution of the Karabakh conflict, there is lack of trust which is the most flagrant obstacle standing in the way of pursuing economic incentives. Thus, the negotiation process a chicken and egg question of what comes first: economic incentives or security guarantees?

The arms race and the blockade are the key challenges to regional stability and security, and will continue to dominate the political agenda. The recent unprecedented provocations by the Azerbaijani armed forces shooting down a training helicopter in Artsakh and keeping the LOC under constant tension are yet another reminder of the need to redouble efforts for a peaceful resolution to the NK conflict, including reducing tensions and respecting the ceasefire.<sup>8</sup>

The situation becomes even more complicated with the incumbent Azeri political leadership. Mr. Aliyev conducted a constitutional referendum in 2009, which allowed him to run as many times as he wants – potentially making him president for life.<sup>9</sup> The longer the current leadership of Azerbaijan stays in power, the later the NK conflict will be resolved. In Baku,

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<sup>8</sup> Armenian military helicopter shot down by Azerbaijani forces, killing three, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/12/azerbaijani-forces-shoot-down-armenian-military-helicopter>>.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, Azerbaijan, <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/azerbaijan>>.

the political elite have become prisoner to its own rhetoric, and without the image of an external enemy, Azerbaijan would not be able to distract public attention away from its internal problems, and avoid Maidan-style movements. Baku continues to suppress youth activists, human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers; independent civil society is vanishing, potentially leaving no alternative opinion in the country. Several international organizations and donors have been forced out of the country. Therefore, when speaking about the last dictatorship in Europe, we should not refer to Belarus but to Azerbaijan which has the highest number of political prisoners.<sup>10</sup>

Certain political developments are also expected in Armenia with the incumbent authorities holding constitutional reforms, which are nothing else than legalizing a political monopoly in the country with a single-party system. Thus, even if both parties wanted to make concessions, to resolve the conflict, they would have difficulties in selling those concessions to the public and electorates they had radicalized. This is why we have reached a political stalemate in NK conflict resolution.

Despite the political immaturity, weaknesses of civil society in Azerbaijan, and generally unfavourable conditions for civil society peace building initiatives, there is also some optimism while looking forward. Local NGOs, international expert groups, youth initiatives could play an important role in shaping public opinion and developing civil society. In both states the younger generation seems less radical than their forebears. Hence, the Minsk Group and other parties involved should pay more attention to working with the civilian administrations. These are small steps perhaps, but this is the nature of confidence building measures: small parts of a bigger and complex picture can hopefully come together to induce changes in public opinion perceptions and trust.

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<sup>10</sup> Belarus is no longer 'Europe's last dictatorship' <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/12/belarus-no-longer-europe-last-dictatorship>.

## Annex A

List of Azerbaijani media sources used in the research.

APA.az

<http://ru.apa.az/news/302185>

<http://ru.apa.az/news/302008>

<http://ru.apa.az/news/301958>

<http://ru.apa.az/news/301876>

<http://ru.apa.az/news/301603>

Oxu.az

<http://ru.oxu.az/war/97780>

<http://ru.oxu.az/war/97699>

<http://ru.oxu.az/war/98235>

<http://ru.oxu.az/war/97214>

<http://ru.oxu.az/war/97041>

Vesti.az

<http://vesti.az/news/267164#ad-image-0>

<http://vesti.az/news/268094>

<http://vesti.az/news/268094>

<http://vesti.az/news/268428>

<http://vesti.az/news/268511#ad-image-0>

Azernews.az

<http://www.azernews.az/aggression/88966.html>

<http://www.azernews.az/azerbajjan/88880.html>

<http://www.azernews.az/aggression/88718.html>

<http://www.azernews.az/aggression/88383.html>

<http://www.azernews.az/aggression/88359.html>

Minval.az

<http://minval.az/news/123504031>

<http://minval.az/news/123502522>

<http://minval.az/news/123501503>

<http://minval.az/news/123497924>

## Annex B

### List of Armenian media sources used in the research

#### Panorma

<http://www.panorama.am/en/society/2015/09/25/berdavan/>  
<http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2015/09/01/s-ohanyan/>  
<http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2015/09/03/hovhannisyan/>  
<http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2015/10/27/minasyan/>  
<http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2015/10/27/osce-monitoring/>

#### Tert.am

<http://www.tert.am/en/news/2014/06/28/aygepar-machinegun/1128193>  
<http://www.tert.am/en/news/2015/09/28/azer-min/1801553>  
<http://www.tert.am/en/news/2015/09/25/nkrmil/1799823>  
<http://www.tert.am/en/news/2015/11/09/koti/1839742>  
<http://www.tert.am/en/news/2015/11/09/koti/1839742>

#### Armenpress

<http://armenpress.am/eng/news/824755/azerbaijan-violated-ceasefire-regime-for-over-100-times-last-night.html>  
<http://armenpress.am/eng/news/824264/increase-in-ceasefire-regime-violation-by-azerbaijan-registered-last-night.html>  
<http://armenpress.am/eng/news/822022/karabakh-defense-ministry-azerbaijan-violated-ceasefire-regime-for-120-times-last-night.html>  
<http://armenpress.am/eng/news/820784/seyrans-ohanyan-introduces-border-situation-to-csto-secretary-general.html>  
<http://armenpress.am/eng/news/820452/yuri-khachaturov-situation-on-border-was-comparatively-calm-last-night.html>

#### News.am

<http://news.am/eng/news/286141.html>  
<http://news.am/eng/news/286823.html>  
<http://news.am/eng/news/287682.html>  
<http://news.am/eng/news/291666.html>  
<http://news.am/eng/news/283840.html>

Pan Armenia

<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/196796/16>

<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/198291/>

<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/200147/>

<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/200347/>

<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/200278/>





## **Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: Economic Impacts**

*Ayaz Salmanov*

Financial matters are one of the least discussed, yet most critical parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Despite the fact that they are not a reason for immediate Armenian-Azerbaijani debate, the financial flow of the conflicting parties on a very basic level shapes the transactions and propagates the present stalemate. In the meantime, on the other hand, financial aspects might likewise provide room for future trade-offs. This article looks at the financial matters in the context of the Nagorno Karabakh struggle and the propagation of the present deadlock, and also at the potential economic incentives can play in encouraging a future agreement.

Regardless of the fact that this conflict did not emerge because of financial disagreements, the costs of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are certainly disastrous. Fundamentally fought on Azerbaijani soil, the war prompted USD 40 billion in direct harm to the Azerbaijani economy; when adding the potential future expenses for the rehabilitation of the regions currently controlled by the separatist administration, the assessed financial toll of the war on Azerbaijan comes to USD 60 billion according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2011). Armenia, then, has seen 80 percent of its borders blocked by the blockade, while its trade with Azerbaijan and Turkey was totally shut off. This leaves Armenia with just two routes to the outside world, Georgia towards the north and Iran towards the south, seriously constraining the country's development potential.

Surely, despite the fact that the late development of pipelines and transport routes – for example the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Supsa oil pipelines, and the Baku-Tbilisi Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, and the forthcoming Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railroad – have raised the significance of the South Caucasus as a vital energy supplier and travel area, Armenia has been denied any profits from these East-West transportation routes through the region. Therefore, Yerevan has seen its national economy develop by a yearly rate of only 5.7 percent since 2005, which contrasts with 16 percent in Azerbaijan while the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA) average rate of

growth is 8.3 percent according to the World Bank. This has prompted critical population discontent while many Armenians moved to Russia and the West looking for better financial prospects. Consequently, the number of inhabitants of Armenia declined from 3.604 million in 1991 to 3.100 million in 2011 again according to the World Bank.

On the other hand, the Armenian financial blockade does not just adversely influence Yerevan, but it keeps the whole area from reaching its full economic potential. As specified already, the South Caucasus can possibly be a key transportation and communication knot in-between Europe and Asia, and it is progressively turning out to be as such (Papava 2006). On the other hand, the failure to develop Caspian-Black Sea pipelines or Europe-Asia transport routes through Armenia adds to the expense of such ventures, while instability encompassing the Karabakh conflict and the ensuing security risks reduces the outside interest for the region (Khachatrian 2011). These include development costs and lost opportunity expenses which are an immediate negative outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that both Azerbaijan and Armenia still continue to bear.

The financial position of every conflicting party – both real and perceived – significantly impacts on the willingness to accept a compromise solution by essentially moulding their individual bargaining positions. As per negotiations scholar I. William Zartmann, conflicts can be viewed as “ready” for resolution when both conflicting parties see themselves to be confronting a “mutually harming stalemate” (MHS) – a gridlock that damages them in a progressive fashion, and which makes expectations for bolstering their positions by means of violent or one-sided activities within a reasonable time-frame unrealistic. In such circumstances, a climate of desperation reinforces both sides’ willingness to work towards a settlement (Zartmann, 2000). Tragically, in the case of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, at present, the prospects for economic development of both parties do not seem to have become conducive towards conflict resolution.

Interestingly, while Armenia’s trading capacity is gratified by its government, and a generally negative perspective on the economic advantages of regional cooperation prevails, Azerbaijan’s negotiation position has hardened progressively because its Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) is to continue banking on development thanks to the natural

resources industry it possesses. With its economy filled by a sensational ascent in hydrocarbon prices subsequent to 2005, Baku's political authority reinforced its bargaining position consistently, diminishing its enthusiasm for seeking after a trade-off settlement with its Armenian neighbours. As it were, Baku declines to make concessions or move far from its starting requests because of its conviction that its BATNA is more alluring than the bargain settlement as of now being pushed by the Minsk Group.

In 2013, Baku's military spending plan reached USD 3.7 billion (approximately 20 percent of the total state budget up from USD 130 million in 2003 according to the World Bank). Azerbaijan's military budget is bigger than Armenia's entire state spending plan and eight times bigger than Armenia's military spending plans consolidated according to the Eastern Partnership Community. Seeing this the truth, Azerbaijan's political elite does not consider itself to be hurting from the stalemate with Armenia, accepting rather the Armenian intransigence and Baku's military and financial improvement serve as "environment moulding elements" that will, in time, power Yerevan and Nagorno Karabakh to yield to Baku's requests (Araz Azamov, SAIS Group Meeting, 17 January 2013).

Be that as it may, this sadly makes a negative criticism circle for the transaction process. From an Azerbaijani viewpoint, Baku's development in relative financial and military force is unaccompanied by acceptable advancement in commerce, which prompts the heightening of Azerbaijani aggressive pronouncements. This thus affects Armenia to end up more resolute, uncompromising and dependent on Russian monetary and military help, further decreasing the two sides' capacity to trade off.

A final factor constraining Azerbaijan's willingness to compromise is Baku's perception of the value of its economic integration with the West. Baku officials describe the conflict as "the price it pays" for pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration at the expense of Eurasian integration, and argue the United States and Europe ought to stand up to Russia in Azerbaijan's defence (Araz Azamov, SAIS Group Meeting, 17 January 2013). However, while Azerbaijan continues to appeal to external actors rather than focus on potential compromises, the economic incentives for international intervention are simply not there.

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News.Az - Your Window to the Region. (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2015, from <http://news.az/articles/armenia/831>

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## Epilogue

*Frederic Labarre*

This Study Group Information booklet has reflected the proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> workshop of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group, held in Reichenau, Austria, in November 2015. The intention of this workshop was to learn whether the media market in the South Caucasus could not be leveraged to support greater stability.

To the chagrin of many, a lot of the characteristics of the South Caucasus media market are the ones we've been wont to discover in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine crisis; that editorial policy swiftly corresponds to ownership origin and identity, and that media group owners feel little attachment to public aspirations at national level.

Politics presented by the South Caucasus media is not room for debate, but becomes a spectator sport, a form of “info-tainment”, an epithet levelled at Western media as well. It has been revealed during the workshop that the more vulnerable people to this development are the older generations who depend on television to get their news. While they are the most likely of seeing their sensitivities abused, in all cases, the media shapes public opinion. Sadly, this workshop was at a loss at proposing a new narrative that could progressively turn public opinion on a more constructive path.

Our expectations of what the South Caucasus media can achieve in terms of modifying confrontational narrative should not be exaggerated. This has nothing to do with any “bellicose” nature of the South Caucasus people. Rather, it has to do with the function of the media itself. As Hannah Arendt once quipped in her masterful *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the object of propaganda is not to persuade, but to organize. While totalitarianism the way it was experienced during Stalin's time or Hitlerite Germany is a thing of the past, the legacy of the use of mass-media endures even today. As Anton Tamarovich put it, the public is not stupid; it knows that not all is true in the media; but the media serves to bring cohesion to opinion and forestall any risk of social fragmentation that would lead to dangerous fac-

tionalism. This idea is totally foreign in the West, and this is why our own soft power efforts, notably in the conflict over Ukraine, has such limited success.

The country where there is the greatest hope for a positive change – yet through great risks and perils – is Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani media community has been the target of repeated purges and arrests for the last several years. Dissidents have been put under severe pressure for their political beliefs and stance critical of the Aliyev government. Historically, this has only led to the glorification of the oppressed journalists by the population at large and to the erection of that discipline's reputation for integrity. This image of integrity is bound to clash – perhaps violently – against the reputation that the government is creating for itself through a policy of repression.

It would not be surprising to see, within the near term, Azerbaijani society mobilise itself onto its own “Maidan.” The outcome of a popular revolution is always difficult to predict, but the premise of any self-determined regime change would be the pursuit of better living conditions. Because of that desire, the artificial cohesion brought about by animosity towards Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh could be lost. That is, society would focus on what it really needs, and issue real demands from any administration that would be left. In all likelihood, one could expect to see once-disgraced journalists rise to the zenith of Azerbaijani politics to address those demands. Hopefully, this new elite would be enlightened enough not to use the tried and tested method of creating a distracting enemy. It is nearly assured that if the Aliyev government continues on this trajectory, it will eventually be eaten by the tiger it bestrides. Much of an Azerbaijani “revolution” would have sprung from the injuries visited upon the 5<sup>th</sup> estate.

In Georgia and Armenia, we notice a steady improvement in media freedom, according to *Freedom House*. The situation is not perfect. The source of this improvement is nevertheless interesting insofar as it has to do with an increase in pluralism. In Armenia, the sheer amount of media outlets per capita may not make journalism a lucrative discipline, but in itself, does represent a form of pluralism that cannot be denied. The same can be said of Georgia, except that Georgian media pluralism is being purchased on the back of Russian media intrusion into the Georgian market. In this latter

example, it is appropriate to speak not only of a commercial market, but of a market of ideas as well.

Our authors notice that in Georgia, aspirations to NATO and EU membership have ebbed and flowed based on the political monopoly of the media. Now that Russian-based media have broken this monopoly, Russian publications have begun spinning alternative futures for Georgia. Nominally, if we include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in this process, we can also say that the trend has begun from within breakaway regions.

The change of aspirations in public opinion is not necessarily a bad thing if it is going to foster a healthy public debate on the future of Georgia. The objectives of this Study Group, after all, are to engage in healthy debate. So much the better if internal structures are being created to help that outcome. Another objective is to help the South Caucasus region to become aware of its own potential as a self-contained strategic entity. If the media is going to propose alternatives that stimulate questioning and debate because new alternatives are proposed to the permanence of NATO and EU membership, then that objective of creating a South Caucasus strategic entity could also be helped by the mere fact that the regional constituents – through the media – are engaging in discussion on that feature of their identity. Whether the South Caucasus becomes beholden to a Euro-Atlantic or Eurasian destiny is question being defined by the Russian Federation through its media and propaganda enterprises. In that respect the Western option has already lost several marches to the Russian juggernaut. Russia is now creeping “ideologically” as well as geopolitically into the South Caucasus.

In this manner, Russia is meeting long-standing objectives in the “near-abroad” better than the Western powers can prevent her. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that the EU, not to mention the United States, have definitely lost the “great game” by promising from one hand what they can’t deliver, and withholding from the other what was never theirs to begin with. At no time in the last 75 years has the West’s credibility sunk lower. For many in the South Caucasus, this should be cause for alarm especially when so many threat assessments are based on “historical” experience of duress at the hands of the Soviet Union. This is discounting, however, the values that the Russian Federation is attempting to promote.



According to Alexander Sergunin, professor at St. Petersburg University, not too much stock should be put in the content of Russian foreign policy's "civilizational" exceptionalism. Too much of that concept remains ill-defined. What is truly worrisome is whether that concept is based on an understanding that regional relations "customs" would prevail. Nominally, regional custom has been far from democratic, and definitely detrimental to human rights and security, let alone media freedom. Russia is still struggling to put together an attractive socio-political alternative to that of the West.

So how can we explain why Armenia feels comfortable tugging at the Russian skirt for its security? More to the point, how can we explain the Georgian's public change of attitude relative to the project of NATO and EU membership? It is one thing to show disillusionment with NATO and EU policies, but quite another to outright choose Eurasianism so few years after the Georgian defeat over South Ossetia. Much has to do, one would wager, with exasperation with standards of living. Maybe it also has to do with the fact that the Russian program is far more attractive than we give it credit for – a damning indictment of our own Western media which picks and chooses what to show its audience. Lastly, there is the hope that finally, the people of the South Caucasus are tired of the general feeling of uncertainty, and have come to prefer stability – any kind of stability – to the far-away dream of a "European" South Caucasus.

Russia is seen as an *honest* power broker in the South Caucasus more and more, not because of its reputation but of its capability and reach. In that respect, we should not neglect the overall geopolitical implications of Russia's resurgence; its latest diplomatic and military success in Syria speaks a regional cum continental great power in the making. One that leads by example, and is exacting in its demands that other great powers follow international law and procedures. A continental power that has the willingness of its ambitions, if not yet the means, compared to the Western alliance, which has dwindling means, and no willingness at all. This means that more and more, the South Caucasus may have to deal with a Russian hegemon alone. All the more reason for the South Caucasus to lay its differences aside and act in concert.

A concert of sorts is exactly what the 13<sup>th</sup> workshop of the RSSC SG will consider. Can the South Caucasus realize that over the last quarter of cen-

ture, it has lost “enough” and come together for a single overall project, one that would at once evacuate the political factor from the energy sector, and build an energy community not unlike that Coal and Steel Commission that saw the day after the Second World War in Europe? A grand project that could spill over into lasting political and cultural integration, and ensure long-term stability and independence? That is what the Study Group will endeavour to examine in Chisinau, Moldova, in April 2016.



## **PART IV: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**



## **Policy Recommendations from the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group**

### **Executive Summary**

The media is a critical tool in helping shape public attitudes and opinion. This workshop proposed leveraging the South Caucasus media to form public opinion and to prepare for constructive change in relations among the groups locked in frozen conflict. In particular, workshop participants believe that regional elites might be more amenable to defuse tensions if their respective constituents were themselves more ready for rapprochement. The workshop produced the following recommendations:

1. Create a regional media standards organization and material prize to monitor and reward media integrity and journalism.
2. Reward reporting that focuses and engages readers on the benefits of cultural and commercial exchange.
3. Develop common narratives through the exchange of journalists from all sides.
4. Dilute the notion of honour by gradually lacing reporting with harmless humour.

The workshop opened with a keynote speech which framed the issue of media freedom as key to stability by saying that the ultimate aim of media reporting is the common good. In well-established democracies, the media acts in the public interest out of a sense of collective responsibility. This sense of responsibility is manifested in the context of impartiality and independence. In the case of a publicly-funded institution like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), taxpayers must be assured of the integrity of the institution they are funding. Recently, various scandals have shaken this faith. The state has rapidly responded by creating a press standards organization responsible for maintaining watch over the media. But if the aim of a responsible, impartial and independent media is the common good, does it follow that there should be certain bias in media reporting? Should certain opinions be proscribed?

Should foreign ownership of the media be forbidden if it threatens to harm the public interest? All these questions are of critical importance insofar as the media has a role in shaping aspirations. At the same time, curbing media freedom – for any reason – may trigger instability for the South Caucasus.

### **The Media Market in the South Caucasus and in Russia: Interests and Stakeholders**

In Russia, the media has taken the role of a first power. If Western powers are to understand the role of the media market in Russia, they must understand that while it is for the most part state controlled, the motive for this control is social stability. There is a “war of all against all” in the media space that must be contained so as not to spill over into society. While this struggle concerns mainly the competing interests of remaining captains of industry, it does not cover public discontent with official authority. The reason is that freedom of speech is widely associated with the chaos of the 1990s in Russia. Diversity of opinion may lead to political clashes, some of which may be violent. In other words, while in the West we think that peace is associated with democracy, for Russia, democratic principles carry the seeds of political violence.

So, the state has to intervene – mostly through legislation – to tighten the rules of what is and what isn’t permissible to say in the media. Reducing diversity of opinion helps reassure the public. A form of “social contract” unites the public and the authorities through the media; the former has waived freedom of the media in exchange for socio-political stability. At the regional level, however, where the influence of Moscow is less acute, the media is relatively more diverse in its reporting and the range of opinions presented. This phenomenon is also reflected in other areas of the South Caucasus. Georgia laments the “yellowization” of the press because diversity of opinion is influenced by party ownership or allegiance of the media.

Therefore, bias is integral to reporting, but the reduction to sensationalism in the press and media contributes to a form of social stability there as well. At local level, there is more diversity, as it is the case in Russia. A population hungry for greater diversity of opinion will tend to get its news from

the social media. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continues to colour reporting. In both cases, the weakness of the advertising market leads the media to be, one way or another, supported by the state. This almost immediately raises the question of impartiality. The quality of the media market matters; the more diversified the market, the more diversified and therefore impartial will reporting be. However, in the South Caucasus, individual owners (which remain secret by law in Azerbaijan) generally nurture the attitudes of the wider public against conflict resolution. In that respect, the media ownership structures in Armenia and Azerbaijan tend to mirror each other. Because media outlets are camped around political groupings, however, this means that the roots of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh run deeper within the polities of Baku, Yerevan, and Stepanakert/Khankendi than if it was a mere inter-ethnic conflict.

### **Media's Interaction with Civil Society: Producing the News and Shaping Media Messages**

The role of civil society in shaping the media narrative is weak in the South Caucasus. The significant pressures on the region – not least from Russia – mean that self-regulation is difficult to achieve, and that Russia remains the dominant market for advertising, or as a news topic. This means that civil society organizations have less means and opportunity to make their voices heard. As a result, media messaging tends to marginalize the real issues that pertain to the public interest.

This has several consequences. For one, local media remains underdeveloped compared to mainstream media. Second, journalists and editors become lazy for want of opportunity and bonafide sources. Media pluralism, as a result, becomes tantamount to copying and plagiarizing the feeds from news agencies, and turning reporting into “info-tainment” since media blackouts and political “sensitivity” will simultaneously limit and direct media messaging. Articles aim at attracting and captivating attention, but have little journalistic value.

Third, the civil society that remains becomes tame and engages in a *modus vivendi* with the power. In Armenia, commentators lament the “dinosaurs of civil society” that have become accustomed to their role and place in



society, but do little to address issues. Opinion in the South Caucasus drives reporting very indirectly, and in Azerbaijan, the media is used as a signalling device to steer public behaviour, as well as that of foreign organizations, to preserve the government's dominance. South Ossetian media mostly replicates the Russian media messaging. For example, the image of the EU is tightly intertwined with the image of Georgia, and the historical public memory of suffering and hardship under the former Georgian regime. This sort of implicit manipulation explains to a large extent the reluctance of South Ossetian public to foster closer relations with the EU.

### **Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus: What Room is there for a Public Debate on the Economic Value of Peace?**

Conflicts in the South Caucasus are stuck in political limbo for years. In order to move political negotiations forward from the current stalemate, each party to the conflict should demonstrate its political will to take risks, while accepting a compromise solution. That would require a changed narrative on conflict resolution reflecting a constructive, dialogue-oriented approach. For example, such an alternative narrative may focus on the advantages of choosing peace and regional economic development over the current state of hostility. Starting a public debate on post-conflict scenarios highlighting the commercial and economic value of peace may offer the flexibility needed by the political leaders to make the tough decisions that would ease the existing tensions, and lead the parties towards political compromise solutions.

The current neglect of conflict resolution in the South Caucasus may have to do with the geopolitical tug of war between Russia and the West. This tension is disquieting to the public at large. For example, in August 2015, tensions increased with the opening of a NATO Training Centre in Georgia, while recalling the dilemma that Moscow has imposed on Georgia: “give up your Western aspirations or lose Abkhazia and South Ossetia forever”. While Abkhazia and South Ossetia have concluded treaties strengthening their ties with Russia, tantamount to pre-annexation, this has not kept Georgia from cautiously and selectively effecting rapprochement with Russia as well. Therefore, the economic value of stability – if not peace – might be dawning on the region. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, this realization has not yet fully occurred. One of the reasons is that the economic

benefits of commercial and political rapprochement would likely not trickle down to the public at large. Consistent economic dialogue, including local and international experts, investors and business leaders, aimed at discussing a roadmap for regional economic development and cooperation would need to occur with the objective of demonstrating that there is more to gain from trade and mutual investment than from conflict. Such a dialogue could promote regional integration by proposing concrete free trade initiatives, free economic zones, qualified economic zones, and urban zones. The West should better participate and support such a dialogue than leave the “hall of fame and glory” exclusively to the regional powers. Broadly speaking, the South Caucasus media has a negative role. The media acts as a filter against any cross-boundary cultural and commercial exchange. Any change of attitude will require a corresponding and commensurate preparation of the public opinion. Adversaries must become partners in the public mind before they become so in fact. This is also necessary for business endeavours to take place in safety. To date the constituency of peace in the South Caucasus is quite small. If there was political will to promote inter-ethnic / inter-community reconciliation, restore international legality, ensure freedom for all people, and nurture prosperity through regional integration there would be a way to make the South Caucasus conflicts come to peaceful, mutually agreed solutions. In that sense, inter- and intra-society economic dialogues should become building blocks in conflict resolution processes.

### **A) General Recommendations**

1. Create a regional journalistic standards organization, validated by a neutral body, such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in Geneva. Such a body should oversee and sanction reporting, if need be, for impartiality and the content of media reporting against a regionally agreed constructive media quality standard. The body could also, under this scheme, bless a particular outlet with a badge of reputable journalism not only region-wide, but worldwide as well.
2. Create a generous prize that rewards journalistic integrity. Although the participants agreed with such a recommendation, they were divided as to whether a cash prize would be preferable to other material incentives. They acknowledged that materially rewarding integrity and quality also carried its

own risks. In this scheme, the regional journalistic standards organization would award the prize. Interested journalists from the region should be encouraged financially and organizationally to jointly operate multilingual mass media outlet (preferably an internet news portal) in which reporting is neutral and non-biased.

3. Promote journalistic competence through intercultural exchanges at individual and institutional level, namely among students in journalism and news agencies from the South Caucasus with European and North American journalists and media outlets. This could include language lessons to enable local journalists to better sell their stories.

## **B) Recommendations from the Eastern South Caucasus**

The Thalia Group assumed that constructive media campaigns should rely on setting up more responsible attitudes of the media against conflict resolution and post-conflict peace building. However, since the political will of both sides for accepting a compromise solution to the conflict is essential, coordinated action by relevant state institutions, media and civil society organizations will be critical to constructive media campaigning. A detailed media campaign cannot take place without having agreed first on the guidelines of a political settlement. However as soon as both sides would share political will to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a number of measures can be envisaged:

1. Refocus the media narratives on post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction, and organize TV talk shows promoting economic and inter-ethnic/ inter-community dialogue. For example, one media theme might address “Why make war when we can make jobs and money? Peace will support prosperity!”, or “Post-conflict scenarios on building a common peaceful and prosperous future.”

2. Promote stories that speak of human/cultural diplomacy: Armenians and Azerbaijanis living and working together in Russia or in other places around the globe; examples of successful multicultural and multi-ethnic societies; advantages of maintaining good neighbourly relations; how the return of IDP’s and refugees to their homes would be instrumental to promoting regional economic development.

3. Engage editorial boards to support stories advocating reduction of military budgets and greater transfer of public funds to social programs.

4. Task a joint committee of historians to develop a common historical narrative on Nagorno-Karabakh as a means to alter the media narratives on the conflict. This might be complemented by cyclic conferences of Caucasian historians, open to broader international participation, which would place the common narrative into a broader regional context.<sup>1</sup>

### **C) Recommendations from the Western South Caucasus**

The Euterpe Group agreed that overall focus of attention should aim at bringing precedence to business personalities in the region. A media campaign promoting “cooperation through business” would require the following; better inform the public on matters of trade, economy, and the benefits of commerce to individual prosperity.

1. Promote dialogue through the media, on condition that discussion of political status recedes to the background.
2. Increase social and humanitarian reporting. This would give a greater voice to civil society organizations.
3. Downgrade political reporting, and limit coverage to the big things, such as the Geneva Talks or the Minsk Group talks.
4. Dilute the notion of national “honour” by gradually injecting respectful but self-deprecating humour.

The aim of focusing on these priorities is to guide the public in looking “behind the story” and engaging the public’s sophistication and critical

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<sup>1</sup> These Policy Recommendations reflect the findings of the 12th RSSC workshop “The Media is the Message: Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus” convened by the PFP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus” in REICHENAU from 12-14 November 2015. They were compiled by Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu, RSSC SG co-chairs, with inputs from Benyamin Poghosyan, Ashot Margarian and Oktay Tanrisever. Valuable support came from COL Ernst M. Felberbauer and Aly Staubmann from the Austrian National Defence Academy. This proposal was not supported by the Armenian members of the Eastern South Caucasus Group.

thinking skills. The methods would be op-eds, surveys, round tables, reports and carefully screened vox pops. The outcome of the reporting, and indeed of the media campaign itself is justified by the need to move the audience from emotionality to rationality, from prejudice to prosperity. Finally, coverage should avoid politically loaded terms and focus on individual and collective well-being, development, cooperation and prosperity.

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The South Caucasus is composed of countries and political entities that are nominally democratic. One of the cardinal features of a free society is freedom of expression, freedom of the press and of opinion. However, in case of conflict, the media tends to subordinate itself to the needs of the state and become its instrument to push certain political agendas. The aim of this publication is to see whether the media and other non-governmental actors can have a constructive role in enabling the conflicting sides in the South Caucasus to break the cycle of tension and conflict.

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