Duke | SANFORD
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

Master's Project Prospectus

The Role of Social Media in Creating Narratives:

The Case of the Conflict Between

Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh

Project overview

Title: The Role of Social Media in Creating Narratives: The Case of the Conflict Between Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh

Policy questions: How have the Governments in Azerbaijan and Armenia used social media to manipulate public opinion to further their objectives as they relate to the ongoing conflict? Are there interventions, policy and otherwise to mitigate the impacts of social media misuse and promote peacebuilding outcomes?

Client: The United States Agency for International Development. The Agency has been working in all three countries and involved in promoting the US vision of a stable, predictable, democratic, and economically prosperous South Caucasus. It has been involved in various domestic programs in support for democratization, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, human development, etc.

Problem summary: The purpose of the project is to identify the role of social media in the efforts by Azerbaijani and Armenian Governments, which for decades have been involved in a conflict. Specifically, each state has increasingly weaponized technological resources to secure popular support for their respective political agendas.

Conflict background: As an international conflict, the Nagorno Karabakh (NK) issue emerged in 1918 during the fall of the Russian Empire. The event made it necessary to demarcate borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tensions arose when the two countries claimed administration over the predominantly Armenian-populated region of Nagorno Karabakh. The confrontation rapidly escalated into a military conflict. At that time, the League of Nations did not confirm NK as part of either country.

The indefinite political situation with regards to NK lasted until 1920, when Soviet Russian troops conquered Armenia and Azerbaijan, bringing them under Soviet rule. With the new realities on the ground, Stalin, serving at that time as the People's Commissar of Nationalities resolved that in view of the "necessity of establishing peace between Muslims and Armenians" the area would be considered an autonomous region within the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.

Throughout seven decades of existence within the Soviet Republic, local (Armenian) authorities repeatedly petitioned central Soviet authorities to return Artsakh (local Armenians call the Nagorno Karabakh region Artsakh) to Armenian administration. Local authorities were particularly active after the Second World War, in 1946, 1963, 1965, 1977 and 1987. However, the initiatives were largely ignored and silenced as they contradicted the policy of the time of declared brotherhood between the Soviet peoples. Also, fears that the territorial change could

spur similar aspirations across the USSR did not permit any manifestation of national discord. All problematic issues were largely disregarded, underestimated and often suppressed by the system.

The situation around Artsakh remained unchanged until the late 1980s when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed the era of *Perestroyka (Transformation)* and *Glasnost (Freedom of speech).* The two concepts lifted taboos from discussing the issues that had previously been out of discourse.

On February 20, 1988, the NK Autonomous Oblast's legislature adopted a resolution appealing to the Supreme Councils of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and the Armenian SSR to transfer the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast from the Azerbaijani SSR (AzSSR) to the Armenian SSR (ArSSR). Another appeal was sent to the central Communist authorities in Moscow with a request to formally approve the deal.

Simultaneous rallies in Stepanakert (capital of NK), Baku (capital of AzSSR) and Yerevan (ArmSSR) instigated stronger nationalistic moods in the two societies. Several days after the first rallies, anti-Armenian violence took place throughout Azerbaijan, thus escalating the situation into armed confrontation and causing flows of an estimated one million Armenian and Azerbaijani refugees. Most of them resettled in their native countries, while tens of thousands families migrated mostly to Russia, various European countries and the United States.

The conflict has seen three major military escalations: first in 1991, second in 2016 and, most recently, in September, 2020,[1] claiming overall an estimated 45,000 Armenian and Azerbaijani lives.[2] The conflict continues to cause casualties on both sides and undermine stability and predictability in the South Caucasus.

In 1991, with Soviet Moscow's inability to deal with the unprecedented challenges, Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh attempted to self-organize. The Nagorno Karabakh Republic was proclaimed on September 2, 1991. Subsequently, on December 10, 1991, the Republic held a referendum on state independence and received support from 99.89 percent of registered voters.[3]

For decades, the international community has been involved in conflict mediation efforts. The United States, Russia and France are the three countries — co-chairs of the so-called OSCE Minsk Group (MG) that was established in 1992 with the mission of bringing the conflicting sides closer to a negotiated political settlement. So far, the OSCE MG format remains the only internationally agreed framework for finding political solutions to the remaining issues.

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[1] *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer*. International Crisis Group. https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer

[2] *How the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been shaped by past empires.* National Geographic. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-shaped-by-past-empires

[3] *The Referendum on Independence of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic.* Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Artsakh. http://www.nkr.am/en/independence-referendum-in-karabakh

In 1994, Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia signed a ceasefire that opened opportunities for establishing a lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus and economic opportunities, mostly for oil-rich Azerbaijan. Multibillion dollar international investments and significant oil revenues also fueled revanchist aspirations among the Azerbaijani leadership. As the 1991-1994 war ended with territorial gains for Armenians, the Azerbaijani side has periodically stated that the ceasefire was temporary, threatening to resume hostilities.

In September, 2020, Azerbaijan launcher large-scale offensive. The second Azerbaijan-Karabakh war lasted 44 days. As a result, Azerbaijan reclaimed territories lost in 1991-1994 and occupied parts of Artsakh proper. The war ended in November, 2020, when leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia with mediation of Russia signed a statement on cessation of hostilities.

Initial analysis

Scale and scope of the issue

Azerbaijan, Armenia and Artsakh are located in a geopolitically significant region of the South Caucasus. Sandwiched between Russia, Iran, Turkey and Central Asia, the region has rich oil and gas resources. It is at a crossroad of strategic political, economic and security-related interests of global powers, such as the United States, Russia, the European Union, Turkey and Iran.

Currently, the Azerbaijani and Armenian sides remain far from resolving the problem. A lot is at stake for each country and each side has proclaimed the Karabakh conflict a vital aspect of their national security and long-term prosperity.

Azerbaijan demands full administrative control over the entire Artsakh, calling it "restoration of its territorial integrity." The issue is of a great domestic political significance and relates to the notion of national pride. Position of Azerbaijani authorities regarding the conflict has always played a significant role for their legitimacy. The country also sees increased economic opportunities from settlement on its terms as it can potentially open new transit routes for exporting hydrocarbons and other products to its ally Turkey and further to the European market.

The Armenian sides strive for international recognition of Artsakh as a separate state, calling it "the most effective and legitimate way to ensure long-term regional stability and security for local population." For Armenians, the issue of Artsakh's security also has a strong historical

connection with the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey in 1915.[4] The conflict has been a significant part of domestic discourse and also has its effect on legitimacy of the ruling elite.

The role of social media

Canadian author Manly Hall once said: "Words are potent weapons for all causes, good or bad." Technological progress and innovations, especially in artificial intelligence (AI) have been powerful sources that have created new opportunities for more inclusive, better organized and more accountable societies and institutions. At the same time, various autocracies and conflicting parties use the technological means to create favorable narrative and public opinion. Influencers and fake newsmakers have become increasingly efficient and effective in manipulating social media platforms.

The situation is true also for the case of the Karabakh conflict. Despite difference in access to technologies and domestic regulations, most of the populations in both Armenia and Azerbaijan enjoy access to internet (World Bank 2020). With the increasing role and effectiveness of social media, Facebook and Twitter have become a significant tool for shaping public opinion in Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as to determine potential opposition to the assumed courses. Presidential offices, foreign ministries, defense ministries and media outlets actively use popular social media platforms to influence respective populations.

Source: An Investigation Of Patriotic Astroturfing During The 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan War. https://datapoint.am/dziv/

Azerbaijan and Armenia vary in the level of democratic development and economic opportunities. The Government of Azerbaijan has been consistently criticized by major international human rights watchdogs for widespread human rights violations, periodic crackdowns on opposition and ill-treatment of government critics. The country's authorities maintain firm domestic control by restricting essential civil liberties.[5]

The Armenian government has also been criticized, although on a smaller scale, for domestic problems, namely arbitrary detentions, harsh prison conditions, ineffective judicial system, crackdown on civil society and other shortcomings.[6]
Throughout the conflict period, especially since the first war ended with territorial losses for Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani and Armenian governments have utilized available means of

[4] *Roqua Montez. Why violence has re-emerged in Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.* November 6, 2020. The Berkeley News. https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/11/06/why-violence-has-re-emerged-in-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict/
[5] *Harassed, Imprisoned, Exiled: Azerbaijan's Continuing Crackdown on Government Critics, Lawyers, and Civil Society.* Human Rights Watch, October 10, 2016. https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/20/harassed-imprisoned-exiled/azerbaijans-continuing-crackdown-government-critics#
[6] *Armenia, Events of 2020.* Human Rights Watch, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/armenia#

communications to create and promote public narratives regarding the conflict. Azerbaijan has been actively pushing anti-Armenian rhetoric, including the notions that the war was not over and stressing the necessity to accumulate all resources for "liberation of Homeland from Armenian occupiers".[7] Azerbaijan was also using the factor of "unfinished war" to promote the notion of an ongoing national emergency and to strengthen grip on domestic power, suppress the country's civil society, eliminate political opposition and other steps.[8]

Armenian government, in its turn, used the Karabakh conflict to solidify domestic power, promoting the narrative of the "invincibility of the Armenian Army" and inevitable defeat of any revanchist aspirations in Azerbaijan.[9] The country's leadership has been justifying economic problems with the idea of greater prioritized security concerns.

The two governments are also using social media to create long-term narratives and mutual perceptions between the two peoples. The main audience is often the younger generations, who are mostly unaware or not concerned with the real course of events and all aspects of the conflict. The government uses AI as instrument for personalized online surveillance of potential political opposition, civil society and pro-peace activists.

Screenshot. In his nationwide address, Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan stated: *"We are driving them (Armenians) away like dogs! Azerbaijani soldiers drive them away like dogs!"*[22]

President Aliyev: Azerbaijani soldiers drive them away like dogs

Source: https://defence.az/en/news/146240/president-aliyev-azerbaijani-soldiers-drive-them-away-like-dogs

At the same time, special AI groups, hackers and propaganda specialists have targeted the adversary's governmental websites, media and other online resources. Demeaning terms and labeling towards the opposite side often replace diplomatic vocabulary.

Methodology and outline

The project includes various information, data and analyses with regard to political environments in the two countries as facilitators for media weaponization, main stakeholders, manipulation tactics and other components. The paper also contains data to analyze the effect of policies on public opinion and perception regarding different aspects of the conflict. Based on the analysis and data, the project will contain recommendations, where necessary, for minimizing the effect of weaponization of social media by the Governments and its potential use for supporting peacebuilding efforts.

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[7] *Report on Armenophobia in Azerbaijan organized hate speech animosity towards Armenians.* Office of the Nagorno Karabakh Ombudsman. https://artsakhombuds.am/sites/default/files/2019-12/Armenophobia-in-Azerbaijan-1.00-Interactive-25.09.2018.pdf

[8] *Rasim Musabayov, The Karabakh conflict and democratization in Azerbaijan*. https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Accord17_19TheKarabakhconflictanddemocratizationinAzerbaijan_2005_ENG_0.pdf

[9] *Maria Raquel Freire and Licínia Simão.* The Armenian Road to Democracy Dimensions of a Tortuous Process, 2007. http://aei.pitt.edu/11729/1/1492.pdf

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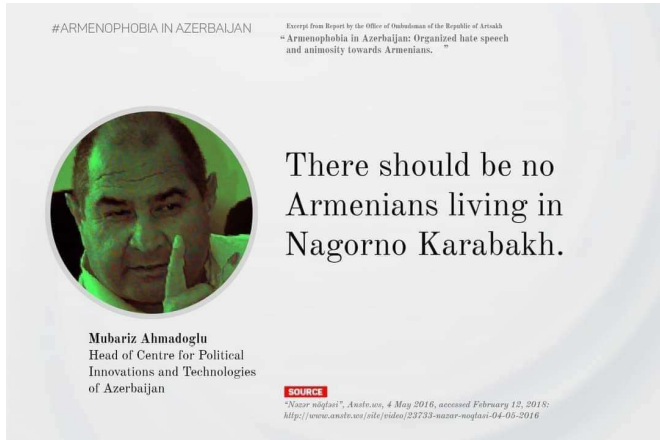
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Annexes

Annex 1: Internet Access in Armenia and Azerbaijan

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Source: *Azerbaijan: hate speech, precarious situation of civil society, violence against LGBT are issues of high concern, says Council of Europe's Anti-racism Commission*. Orer Newspaper.
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Source: Global Network to Free Armenian POWs redoubling boycott efforts against Azerbaijan for EURO 2020. The Armenian Weekly Newspaper. June 30, 2021
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