

Armenian Government's Handling of The Infodemic

Following the 2018 “Velvet revolution” a populist force led by former journalist Nikol Pashinyan, came to power in Armenia pledging to solve the country’s long-standing problems of undemocratic governance, systemic corruption, opaque policymaking, flawed electoral system. Pashinyan’s early steps had a mixed record. Notable progress was observed in the country’s democratization, freedom of expression, internet freedom and government transparency indicators, which can be seen in a number of international reports by the Freedom House¹, Transparency International² and Article 19³ to name only a few. However, there were legitimate concerns about hostile rhetoric toward the media from government officials, including Pashinian himself, as well as the increased number of court cases brought against the Armenian media⁴.

It is against this backdrop that the COVID-19 pandemic and the related Infodemic struck Armenia in March, 2020.

On March 16, 2020 the Government declared a state of emergency, introducing a range of limitations for Armenian citizens⁵. The decision was approved at a special session of parliament dominated by members of Pashinian’s My Step alliance. Citing the need to prevent “panic-mongering”, the government decided that media reports and posts in social media on some specific aspects of the coronavirus-related situation will have to reflect official reports, and that information reported “in violation of the provisions of this clause must be subject to immediate removal by persons who reported it.”

The ban was implemented in a highly controversial manner, with police officers turning up at people’s homes and demanding to delete social media posts and

¹ “Nations in Transit,” Freedom House, October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2lea9tj>

² “Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2019,” Transparency Armenia, <https://bit.ly/3kl4hey>

³ “The Global Expression Report 2019/2020,” Article 19, <https://bit.ly/38sVWTH>

⁴ “Concern about judicial harassment of Armenia’s media,” RSF, February 2020, <https://bit.ly/2leanAF>

⁵ “Armenia Declares State Of Emergency Over Coronavirus Outbreak,” RFE/RL’s Armenian service, March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3peWrXx>

forcing media outlets to pull down articles. The whole process was qualified by local media watchdogs as disproportionate⁶.

Here are some examples of what the “disproportionate” measures looked like in practice:

1. “Aravot” daily newspaper had published an article about the COVID-19 situation in Russia. The newspaper cited Valery Solovey’s interview to “Ekho Moskvi,” in which the Russian political scientist expressed doubt about the official statistics on coronavirus. The Armenian police contacted the editor of “Aravot” and instructed to edit the article in question and remove Solovey’s words. The newspaper complied faced with the possibility of a hefty fine⁷. Solovey’s interview was also shared on Facebook⁸ by Human rights defender Artur Sakunts and the police demands to remove it followed soon after. Sakunts didn’t comply and sent a written response to the police, in which he laid out his point of view that this particular article can in no way be described as “panic-mongering.”
2. Hraparak.am, Tert.am are among the media, who received content removal instructions from the police. In one such case it was a translated article in which British actor Idris Elba was talking about the possibility that he contracted coronavirus from Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, the spouse of Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau⁹.
3. Police officers paid a visit to journalist Marine Kharatyan, after she posted on Facebook about the possibility of coronavirus in one of Yerevan’s large production factories. The journalist was forced to remove the content, after the police officers settled in her house and refused to go away until it is done¹⁰.
4. The case of the prominent doctor Artavazd Sahakyan was perhaps the strangest. The doctor had written a Facebook post, in which he had rendered his full support to the measures the government had taken to prevent the pandemic. His

⁶ The state of freedom of speech in Armenia, violations of the rights of journalists and the media 2020, 1st quarterly report, Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3jP3faD>

⁷ “Անհանգստություն մեղիադաշտում. երկու լրատվամիջոցից պահանջել են հեռացնել «կորոնավիրուսի վերաբերյալ խուճապ առաջացնող տեղեկությունները»,” Hetq.am, March 2020, <https://bit.ly/36q5kou>

⁸ “Artur Sakunt’s Facebook post,” March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/35kVdIT> “«Այդ տեղեկատվությունը խուճապ առաջացնող չէմ համարում, և ծանուցման մեջ գրել եմ, որ չեմ հեռացնում այն». Արթուր Սաքունց,” Aravot Daily, March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/2JVcnOD>

⁹ “«Մեզ հարկադրում են հեռացնել նյութ, որտեղ հոլիվուդյան դերասան Իդրիս Էլբան չի բացառել, որ վարակվել է Կանադայի առաջին տիկնոջից». Արամ Անտիկյան” Aravot Daily, March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/36k7zK1>

¹⁰ “Մարինե Խառատյան. «Եթե ահազանգեր ստանամ շարունակելու եմ գրել, եթե մարդիկ ինձ են դիմում, օգնություն են խնդրում, ի՞նչ անեմ, պետք է գրեմ»,” Aravot Daily, March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3ph5wPN>

Facebook post was re-published by a number of media publications. However, the police visited the doctor and asked to remove the Facebook post. They also contacted media outlets, which re-published the post and got them all removed¹¹.

All these and similar cases raised concerns of the media watchdogs, which issued a statement on March 20th and criticized the Government's erratic attempts to regulate the dissemination of information. In the statement, the media watchdogs "registered that their implementation is ineffective, non-proportional, unreasonable and contradicts public interest under the conditions of the pandemic" and called on the authorities to put an end to this¹² and develop a new provision regulating the dissemination of information, which will "clarify possible limitations for this complicated situation, will aid in the adherence to norms of professionalism and effective interactions between the Government bodies and media for the public good".

On March 24th the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Désir, expressed his concerns¹³ about the situation in Armenia in the context of the fight against disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The law should not impede the work of journalists and their ability to report on the pandemic. Publishing only information provided by the authorities is a very restrictive measure which would limit freedom of the media and access to information disproportionately," Desir said in the statement.

Following the public outcry and the criticism of the international and local watchdogs, on March 25 the RA Government reviewed its March 16 decision and ended the disproportionate limitations of covering issues related to the coronavirus¹⁴. Issues, however, remained, as certain restrictions remained in place, for example it was required to publish official information without editing, and or required the media to get official clarifications or refutations on "Coronavirus-related materials" without clearly defining which official body should provide the clarifications.

¹¹ "Արտավազը Սահակյան. «Ասացին գրառումս խուճապածին է, պետք է ջնջել»,» Aravot Daily, March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/35ihRv8>

¹² "Statement on Provisions Limiting Freedom of Speech in Government's Decision to Institute a State of Emergency," MDI, March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3pgycrW>

¹³ "Coronavirus response should not impede the work of the media in Armenia, says OSCE Media Freedom Representative," OSCE, March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3khfWeg>

¹⁴ "Փոփոխություններ են կատարվել լրատվամիջոցների գործունեությանն առնչվող դրույթներում," Azatutyun.am, March, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pgtWbR>

While this was mostly a welcome change, the Armenian media organizations noted the apparent shortcomings of the new regulations as well. “We note that the revised provisions do not clearly define the body, which is authorized to provide official information” a group of 10 local media organizations noted on a related statement¹⁵.

Interestingly, while those restrictions remained in place, the authorities stopped strictly enforcing the law. This led to a gradual increase in the number of disinformation and misinformation related to Covid-19.

One of the loudest cases certainly was that of Medmedia.am, a website launched with the help of a US State Department grant meant to promote democracy, but instead was being used to promote false information about Covid-19, according to an investigation by the British news website openDemocracy¹⁶. Among Medmedia’s most popular articles were pieces that called Covid-19 a “fake pandemic” and falsely reported that a morgue offered to pay hundreds of dollars to a dead patient’s family if they claimed the death had been caused by the coronavirus. Needless to say, that the many fact checkers and media outlets, checking the story, found it to be absolutely fake. The US Government grant was awarded by the State Department to a group called the Armenian Association of Young Doctors, which launched the website last year and is led by a controversial doctor called Gevorg Grigoryan. He has been known for his strong criticism of the government’s health ministry and its vaccine programmes, and has a history of anti-LGBT statements, including remarks posted on Facebook in which he called for gay people to be burned.

While Medmedia.am’s scandal received the loudest coverage including by the international media, it was certainly not the only media outlet spreading disinformation and misinformation about the pandemic. In fact, the abundance of fake news about the pandemic led to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan blaming media watchdogs, freedom of speech campaigners for lack of oversight over fake news, which he called “stench” and said such publications are “pushing people to death¹⁷” in a public speech in the Armenian Parliament in June.

¹⁵ “Statement on Ensuring Media Coverage under The State of Emergency,” MDI, March, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3klfThv>

¹⁶ “Revealed: US-funded website spreading COVID misinformation in Armenia,” openDemocracy, May, 2020 <https://bit.ly/3eRxiOO>

¹⁷ “PM: “Only those political forces that unequivocally support the values of the 2018 Velvet Revolution will be represented in Armenia’s next parliament,” Prime Minister’s website, June, 2020 <https://bit.ly/2GMAoWX>

While the attempts to control the flow of information with regulation mostly failed, the Armenian authorities also implemented certain steps, which turned out to be much more successful.

One of the first such steps was the work done by the Armenian Unified Information Center, which was operating under the Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia with the objective to “provide reliable and urgent information to the public in emergency situations.”

The Unified InfoCenter provided daily live press conferences, where journalists had the possibility to address their questions to key government and health officials. Those press conferences were covered by most media, were broadcast live on many channels and served as an important step in delivering the government’s key messages as well as providing easy access for journalists to address the most pressing questions and get answers.

The Unified InfoCenter also provided daily updates on COVID-19 statistics, which were widely disseminated on social media platforms as well as reused, republished by most other media.

Another Government initiative, the “Information Checking Center” (infocheck.am) launched a special COVID-19 section, in which it factchecked most cases of coronavirus related disinformation and misinformation. While the Infocheck.am website has obvious pro-government bias in its coverage, it has been a useful reference point for journalists and has in many cases published useful pieces of fact-checking related to COVID-19.

It was also helpful that special COVID-19 sections were opened on a range of Government websites, which allowed journalists to directly refer to the source in their reporting.

At the same time, however, journalists complained about the Government’s and Health Ministry’s late or unclear responses to freedom of information requests related to COVID-19.

The President of the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia Shushan Doydoyan says the government bodies claimed that the delays are due to shortage of resources as well as the fact that their staff were sick with the virus. According to Doydoyan, in many cases the responses were so generic and unclear that the same request had to be sent with some modification two or three times, before getting adequate responses. According to the statistics by the Freedom of Information

Center of Armenia¹⁸, the Armenian government responded to information requests in a satisfactory manner in 56% percent of about 150 requests. 19% of the requests were late or delayed, while around 23% of the cases there were incomplete responses or refusals to provide any answer at all.

Starting from September 11, the State of Emergency on the territory of the Republic of Armenia has been terminated, along with the restrictions related to the media.

Looking back at Armenian Government's handling of the infodemic and trying to draw conclusions and recommendations, I would like to first point to a recent survey carried out by CRRC Armenia¹⁹. According to the survey, by June 2020 the Armenian population viewed the pandemic as the biggest challenge for the country. Also, more than 47% of those questioned indicated that not wearing face-masks is the reason for the spread of the virus, while about 9% viewed it in the light of some sort of conspiracy theories. These results give me basis to claim, that while the communication efforts of the Government have been enough, to demonstrate to the public the dangers of the pandemic and to fend off conspiracy theories, it has only had moderate success or should I say relative failure, in telling the people about the importance of wearing face-masks and following protective guidance.

Jumping to the recommendations, we can note that the Armenian Government's attempts to suppress and censor information by passing regulation, laws didn't work. Much of this was due to the fact that the regulation was half-baked, many provisions weren't clearly defined and the police was very bad at enforcing it. Clearly, when trying to take away a society's hard-fought civil liberties, even in the face of existential threats like the pandemic, the government need to consider the implications, define the limitations much more clearly and consult specialized organization, like the media watchdogs, to avoid the level of criticism that it got.

At the same time, it is clear, that the Government's initiatives directed at more proactively sharing information, were more successful in countering disinformation and misinformation. Hence, the press-conferences at the Unified InfoCenter, statistics and information disseminated by it as well as special information sections on various government websites, turned into useful instruments for fighting disinformation and preventing rumors from spreading and in the future, this approach of proactively disseminating information and openly addressing public concerns are a more effective course of action.

¹⁸ "Give Me Info Portal of the FOICA," October, 2020, <https://bit.ly/32F8y6z>

¹⁹ "Հանրային կարծիքի ուսումնասիրությունն նոր կորոնավիրուսի (COVID-19) համավարակի վերաբերյալ," CRRC, June, 2020 <https://bit.ly/2loCe0L>