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POLICY BRIEF – No. 12/2024

Russia's Influence and Disinformation Campaign in Armenia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Often-overlooked developments in Armenia show how Western policy makers are failing to recognize and counteract the growing sophistication of Russia's propaganda machine. There is much the West can do. Intelligence authorities can start sharing more information about Russia's influence operations. We need media that can report with more knowledge from the region. Working more

closely with the pro-Western opposition, Brussels and Washington, D.C. can help shape an agenda that is not just offering better conditions for Armenia but also leads to more credibility in a Western-oriented agenda. Finally, it is important for the West to acknowledge their own blunders over the settlements between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which led to continued ethnic cleansing.

RUSSIA'S USE OF PROPAGANDA AND OTHER METHODS OF INFLUENCE IN POST-SOVIET WORLD

In this era of hybrid warfare, Russia has built a formidable arsenal of tools and methods to influence public opinion and politics. Disinformation, playing on contradictions, reverse psychology, and flip-flopping are deployed to confuse the audience and allow Russian propagandists to gain an ever-tighter control over the narratives they build. Meanwhile, Western policy makers have largely failed to recognize these Russian advances and find effective ways to counteract them.

We owe many insights into the innerworkings of the Russian propaganda machine to Andrew Wilson, who in his 2005 book "Virtual Politics" detailed the menu of tricks that Kremlin operatives had back then to advance their objectives. Fake parties, phantom political rivals, and "scarecrow" opponents all were used to achieve fixed elections and to legitimize fraudulent political outcomes.

But even Professor Winson would be shocked today to know how much more advanced the Russian government has become in the past two decades, to the detriment of freedom and democracy in countries where various Kremlin assets have been allowed to operate freely.

Starting in 2016, a series of reports entitled "The Kremlin Playbook" by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington presented case studies of Russian interference, revealing interlinkages between economic, financial, and media levers that the Kremlin has deployed to advance its objectives. Specifically, the first report argued that:

"Russia cultivated an opaque web of economic and political patronage... to influence (if not control) critical state institutions, bodies, and economies, as well as shape national policies and decisions that serve its interests while actively discrediting the Western liberal democratic system."

Especially after the start of the war in Ukraine, Russia's modus operandi in its "near abroad" (a term commonly used in Russia to refer to countries of the former Soviet Union) has become to demoralize and destabilize as a way of influencing public opinion and policy for Moscow's gains. Propaganda is used skillfully, both *before* relevant actions and *after*, to cover up these actions.

Since the "Kremlin Playbook," there have been further research efforts on this topic, but apparently none rose to the level that would trigger adequate policy responses in Washington or Brussels. (Ukraine is perhaps an exception, something we will touch upon later.) This is not a criticism of those more recent research efforts: Policymakers have failed to take this issue seriously and approach it systematically.

Nowhere has this failure been so pronounced as in the context of Armenia.

HOW RUSSIA HID ITS AGENDA IN ARMENIA

In January 2022, just weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, British authorities revealed a Kremlin plot to install pro-Russian leadership in Kyiv.

According to my sources, by that time, Russians had the experience of installing friendly regimes in a few places. In the case of Ukraine, the Russian scheme did not work out. Armenia in 2018 was not so lucky.

The absolute control by Russian companies of Armenia's economy – energy, telecommunications, mining, infrastructure, and finance – has provided the Kremlin with almost unlimited influence and ability to maneuver in Armenia's domestic and foreign policies.

The seeds of this were sown during the mid-1990s following Armenia's victory in the first Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian) war. The grip was tightened after the Russian-led assassination of Armenia's top leadership on October 27, 1999 – a crime that slain Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) agent Alexander Litvinenko admitted on his deathbed in London to having organized.

The list of assassinated leaders included Armenia's Prime Minister, Vazgen Sargsyan, who met Vice President Al Gore in Washington weeks before the assassination and according to my sources discussed a plan of bringing Armenia closer to the Western powers.

In 2018, Russians needed to replace a formerly loyal ally in Yerevan, President Serge Sargsyan, after he refused to deliver Artsakh to Azerbaijan under the so-called Lavrov Plan. The Russians wanted someone willing to give up Artsakh and chose Nikol Pashinyan, a young opposition newspaper editor and college dropout with a thirst for power.

To the courts and much of the public in Armenia he was known as the person who – on the orders of the first president of Armenia and the main opposition candidate – aided and abetted the riots of March 1, 2008, in Yerevan which caused the deaths of 10 citizens. Pashinyan subsequently went into hiding, surrendered to the authorities, and was released under an amnesty in 2011 after serving two years in prison for his role in instigating those riots. In 2012, the Armenian regime allowed him to be elected to the parliament.

Russia needed an excuse to betray its treaty ally, Armenia, in favor of a newfound business partner, Azerbaijan, which has purchased billions of dollars' worth of advanced weaponry and took part in a massive money laundering operation known as the Russian Laundromat. A narrative that Armenia has gone down the road of a "color revolution" was a perfect cover for such a switch.

There is evidence that Pashinyan met with Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), in Moscow as far back as 2015. After a failed attempt to hijack a large

anti-government rebellion in July 2016, two years later, Pashinyan sparked a protest movement in April 2018 and effectively took over from the ruling party within a few weeks after forcing the Sargsyan-controlled parliament to vote him into the Prime Minister's office.

This was done virtually unchallenged by an otherwise heavy-handed Sargsyan administration, in a cleanly orchestrated play, with the support of thousands of protesters, including from giant Russian-owned companies, and a neutral posturing from the Kremlin. Interestingly enough, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova wrote on Facebook: "Armenia, Russia is always with you," after the news broke of Serge Sargsyan's resignation, after admitting "he had got it wrong." As the old adage goes: "If something seems too good to be true, it probably is".

However, once he took power, a massive smear campaign was launched to portray Pashinyan and his team as "globalists," frequently calling them "Sorosyata," a pejorative "for children of George Soros" in Russian. Often the criticism was personal and ugly. While these claims were false (based in part on my personal interactions with members of Pashinyan's team), they were widely accepted as true, largely because many Armenians were longing for change and eager to believe Pashinyan was pro-Western.

In reality, Pashinyan never stopped working closely with Russia and even ordered Armenian troops sent alongside Russians to Syria, something his predecessors refused to do.

However, when Pashinyan effectively handed over Artsakh to Azerbaijan on November 9, 2020, all Russian propagandists, and Vladimir Putin himself, went out of their way to support Pashinyan, fearing public outrage in Armenia that threatened to take him down.

In a private conversation, a former senior U.S. intelligence official with intimate knowledge of Russia called this "an act from the KGB's standard playbook."

Russia's intention was not only to bring Pashinyan to power but to ensure the outcome of the war in Artsakh. Much of how this was done was documented in an investigative report, to which I contributed. As part of the research, we learned that a group of Russian colonels were embedded in the general staff of Armenia's Ministry of Defense and effectively ran the department during the war.

After we published the report, a source from the highly respected Bellingcat research group, who worked with Alexey Navalny, told us that one of the FSB operatives assigned to the case was pulled out of the Navalny surveillance and ordered to join a large group of FSB operatives that was subsequently sent to both Armenia and Azerbaijan days before the Azeri invasion in September 2020, presumably to coordinate action on the ground.

Disinformation was rampant during the war. Evidence suggested that a prominent Russian war correspondent and propagandist, Semyon Pegov, who roamed freely in Artsakh, was a key player in the disinformation campaign against the Armenian public during the war and revealed Armenian defense positions to the Azeris as he conducted his "reporting" from the area.

While this evidence may be construed as circumstantial, it adds weight to a vast body of evidence of Russian involvement in, if not orchestration of, Armenia's defeat in the war. When the war was over, Sergei Shoigu, then Russia's Defense Minister, called it a "successful operation," and a top Russian ideologue, Alexander Dugin, said: "We helped Azerbaijan to return Karabakh. ... We have fulfilled our task." Armenia lost an estimated 5,000 soldiers killed and at least twice as many wounded in that "operation."

Later it became clear that Russia needed to secure the loyalty of Azerbaijan and Turkey during its invasion of Ukraine. The price of that loyalty was Artsakh. Putin signed the Treaty of Strategic Partnership with Azerbaijan two days before invading Ukraine.

In the beginning, many analysts and policy makers in Washington seemed to have missed this construct and all the warning signs. It took Russia's invasion of Ukraine for analysts in Washington to start asking questions and talking about the role of Russia – other than as "Armenia's savior," which was a clear product of Russian disinformation – in that war.

The situation is not much different now. Despite all the evidence, most pundits still refuse to acknowledge the truth about Pashinyan's Russian ties and allegiances. They are quick to brush aside Pashinyan's chairing of the Eurasian Union Summit in Moscow in May 2024 and December 2023, his numerous personal meetings with Putin, and Armenia's continued membership in the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, among other glaring signs of deep ongoing partnership.

Despite the claims by some Pashinyan supporters, Armenia's engagement with the West has produced little, if anything, tangible. The current situation can be summarized as follows:

- Nepotism is at unprecedented levels by Armenia's standards since the 1990s, as loyalists without relevant experience serve as heads of security agencies and services.
- Budgetary theft remains high. The Minister of Economic Development was recently dismissed and indicted on charges of procurement fraud.
- The executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government remain under Pashinyan's total control, with nothing challenging this domination.
- Much of Armenia's economy continues to be owned and managed by Russian companies, a dependency that has grown during Pashinyan's tenure. Oligarchs loyal to Pashinyan (and Russia) have both economic and political power.
- Security cooperation includes purchases of equipment from France and India without due regard for interoperability considerations and training. This is taking place as the army shrinks and its resources are channeled to a vastly oversized riot police force known for its aggressive behavior against anti-Pashinyan protesters.
- Russia's military presence in Armenia has expanded during Pashinyan's tenure. Much of the armed forces General Staff and National Security Service remain under direct Russian control.
- Re-exports to Russia (in violation of Ukraine-related sanctions) are booming.

Pashinyan has done nothing to challenge Russia's grip on Armenia in any meaningful and irreversible way.

The shocking lack of expertise inside the government in international trade and development probably explains why much of what Pashinyan touts as the "Crossroads of Peace" initiative makes no economic sense and is doomed to fail. I can imagine my former IMF colleagues scratching their heads and asking, "What is this and how does he plan to make it work?" However, experts see this initiative as another Kremlin plot intended to provide Russia with land access to Turkey to circumvent Ukraine-related sanctions, something that will have serious implications for Armenia's security and sovereignty.

Fortunately, Armenian public opinion has swayed against Russia since the defeat in the 2020 Artsakh war and the subsequent ethnic cleansing in 2023. Leading this wave is the National Democratic Alliance, Armenia's largest pro-Western opposition party, which blames Pashinyan for his reliance on, and partnership with, Russia through 2020 and the failure to establish adequate alliances both before and after the war.

Pashinyan is now facing a nationwide protest movement that is demanding his resignation. The ruling party's overall approval rating remains in the teens, and in single digits in the capital Yerevan, where the population is more educated and politically savvy.

WESTERN POLICY RESPONSE

Western policy toward former Soviet republics has been marked by failures of epic proportions. These failures commenced with the ill-conceived Obama-era "reset," which allowed Russia to regroup and rebuild its influence and propaganda capabilities. In Armenia – where Russia has a strong regional interest – these efforts included pretty much all the tools Russia has at its disposal.

Unfortunately, since then, Western policy makers have not adequately countered, and may have in fact indirectly aided, Russia's efforts to control the narrative in Armenia.

During my conversations with U.S. embassy officials in Armenia in 2015 and 2016, I could sense their eagerness to see the end of the pro-Russian and largely corrupt Serge Sargsyan regime. While the feeling was justified in my view, it was so strong that in 2018 they embraced Pashinyan and his ragtag team of poorly educated activists and ignored all the signs of foul play that were visible then. This irrational exuberance has cost Armenia and its citizens dearly.

Successive U.S. Ambassadors in Armenia since 2018 continued to support the same fake narrative against the advice of their staff, who saw the lack of interest from Pashinyan in pivoting toward the West or carrying out any meaningful reform. Critics of Pashinyan in the U.S. embassy and State Department have been pushed aside in favor of more pro-Pashinyan views and reporting.

Recent statements critical of Pashinyan's governance from the [Freedom House](#) and the [State Department](#) are steps in the right direction but are grossly insufficient and ignore the root cause of the problem.

What are the reasons behind this behavior? First and foremost, bureaucratic inertia, negligence, and intransigence. With Ukraine, Israel, and China sucking most oxygen out of the room, small countries are not getting enough attention; people are becoming increasingly risk-averse and not taking initiatives; and staff members do not have enough incentives to think outside the box. Second, and related to this, is what economists call "partial equilibrium" (as opposed to "general equilibrium") thinking – the failure to look at the picture in its entirety and incorporate the secondary or indirect impacts of policy measures.

Finally, Armenia's adversaries Azerbaijan and Turkey, who have a [strong lobbying presence](#) in Washington and Brussels, are not interested in seeing Armenia pivot toward the West, which would strengthen the country's economy and national security. Instead, they use their influence to tacitly support the Pashinyan administration, which is not pro-Western and pursues Russian and Turkish interests in the region.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO LIMIT RUSSIA'S (SOFT) POWER IN THE REGION?

The Kremlin's actions – however successful – could be countered.

First, Western intelligence agencies – particularly, the Five Eyes (FVEY) comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States – must share more information about Russian influence operations in Russia's near abroad. Although doing so preemptively (that is, how it was done in the case of Ukraine before the 2022 invasion) would be more effective in curbing Russia's malign activity, doing it *ex post* too may have significant implications.

Such interventions are important as they can give people a voice against autocratic regimes supported by Russia, who have the will and the ability to crush public dissent, as they are doing in Georgia, where Western support came too little, too late.

Second, Western media outlets could be more nuanced about what is happening in the former Soviet republics. The quality of news coverage of those countries is shockingly low (Ukraine is an exception), with most commentators being too lazy to go into specifics and instead choosing to peddle the established narratives, which are increasingly under Russian control.

Third, and related to this, more nuance is needed across all developmental and geopolitical policy prescriptions offered to countries like Armenia. Lack thereof could reduce the credibility of Western countries and hurt their reputation as reliable partners. In the Armenian context, the main blunder relates to the settlement of the conflict with Azerbaijan.

While citizens of earth aspire and need peace, peace won't happen simply because policymakers in Washington and Brussels hold hands and sing Kumbaya! If you are dealing with Azerbaijan – a country that has recently committed ethnic cleansing of 120,000 Armenians from Artsakh, continues to occupy chunks of Armenia proper, and keeps talking about “Western Azerbaijan” referring to much of Armenia – then you need to be prepared to do more than just wishing for peace to occur. The peace deal – the way it is currently envisaged by Ankara and Moscow and unfortunately endorsed by Washington and Brussels – will be a guide used by Azerbaijan to stage new aggression and a new genocide, unacceptable to either Armenians or any decent human beings who care about the stability and peace in the region.

Finally, it is essential for Washington and Brussels to work closely with pro-Western opposition parties in post-Soviet countries. This partnership should help build capacity and expand their influence in an environment where they otherwise do not stand a chance against much better resourced pro-Russian parties. Based on my monitoring of the situation in Armenia, much more needs to be done in supporting these opposition parties.