

THE MEDIA IS THE MESSAGE: SHAPING COMPROMISE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Policy Recommendations¹ Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus

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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 politics 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 bona fide 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 integ-

ration 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.



Policy Recommendations

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.

- 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 Western 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;

- Refocus the media narratives on post-conflict reconciliation and re-construction, and organize TV talk shows promoting economic and interethnic/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.”
- 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.
- Engage editorial boards to support stories advocating reduction of military budgets and greater transfer of public funds to social programs.
- 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.¹

C) Recommendations from the Eastern 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.

- Promote dialogue through the media, on condition that discussion of political status recedes to the background.
- Increase social and humanitarian reporting. This would give a greater voice to civil society organizations.
- Downgrade political reporting, and limit coverage to the big things, such as the Geneva Talks or the Minsk Group talks.
- 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 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.

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.

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