

MEDIA MONITORING QUARTERLY REPORT

January 1 to March 31, 2020



UNION OF INFORMED CITIZENS

In the first quarter of 2020, the main propaganda theses in the Armenian media were directed against the current authorities due to their "incompetent" domestic and foreign policy. In particular, at the beginning of the year, the thesis was put forward that an unmanageable situation has arisen in the country, and the authorities have lost control of the situation. It goes without saying that within the framework of the Artsakh talks, manipulative theses about the dangerous foreign policy pursued by the authorities were introduced into the media domain, and the conspiracy theorists reminded that "they are handing over the lands." Moreover, the opposition noted that former "war hero presidents" of Artsakh were an obstacle to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in this matter, and that is why they are being persecuted politically. As a result, the media began circulating theses about returning to Stalin's time, initiating criminal cases based on false reports, suppressing the free press, and introducing censorship.

Hospital room N 6: "A country-madhouse"



The first quarter of 2020 began with a tragic event. On January 17, 2008, Georgy Kutoyan, former director of the National Security Service, committed [suicide](#). While the ruling and opposition circles were trying to analyze who would benefit from Kutoyan's death, another unusual event took place. On January 23, it was [reported](#) that shots had been fired at the Erebuni Plaza Business Center.

The opposition used these two events to claim that Pashinyan's government is unable to control the situation, and the situation in the country is unmanageable. Thus, the prevailing moral and psychological atmosphere in the country was [described](#) in one word by the son-in-law of the third president Mikael Minasyan: "... the biggest failure of the government is the absolute fiasco of its most popular slogan. If one could describe the atmosphere in Armenia today, they wouldn't use the words *love* and *velvet*" Minasyan wrote on his Facebook page.

This thesis put forward by Minasyan was successfully taken over by "Hraparak" newspaper, which wrote in an [article](#) entitled "Political Hospital Room N6" on January 30: " Armenia of the last week, the events unfolding there, and the faces in the public spotlight are more reminiscent not of the new Armenia, but of the hospital for madmen that Western Armenians naively call a *madhouse*."

The [article](#) published in the January 24 issue of the *Past* newspaper "The Heavy Consequences of the Atmosphere of Hate" had the same spirit. According to the article, the incident was the result of "daily injection of hostility and hatred by the authorities", and, as a result, "not a single person, not a single institution can feel safe".

It is noteworthy that in the following months, this thesis of a "madhouse" and uncontrollability became relatively weak, but has not yet subsided, and is occasionally put forward by the opposition.

The "whole nation getting rid of" the Constitutional Court



In the first quarter of 2020, the press and the social media were filled with the claims that the whole state apparatus with all its levers, and then also "the whole nation" (through a referendum) were involved in the removal of the President of the Constitutional Court Hrayr Tovmasyan from his post.

The new wave of debate on the matter arose after Nikol Pashinyan [announced](#) at a press conference in Kapan that "after the revolution Hrayr Tovmasyan offered his services to me and was rejected." During the same press conference, Pashinyan promised to [publish](#) evidence of what he said, a pen given to him by Tovmasyan, which the Prime Minister perceived as a sign of obsequiousness. Hrayr Tovmasyan responded to the Prime Minister with an extensive [interview](#) to ArmNews TV. "... What does not kill us, makes us stronger... I won't respect myself if I step back from my job due to all the pressure" Hrayr Tovmasyan announced, promising that he would fight till the end.

The very next day, the Public Television responded to Hrayr Tovmasyan with a scandalous [report](#), in which, referring to the Special Investigation Service, they provided details of the criminal case against Tovmasyan.¹ The Prime Minister [liked](#) the report, while Tovmasyan's lawyers [described](#) it as "disgusting from a legal, professional and human points of view."² A number of media outlets did not like the report by the Public TV either, calling it part of a state campaign against the president of the Constitutional Court.

"The Public Television, which operates at the expense of our taxpayers, aims to neutralize Tovmasyan. The Public Television prepared a report yesterday on the charges brought against Tovmasyan, presenting only the opinion of the authority conducting the proceedings, spiced with information considered a pre-investigation secret" Hraparak [wrote](#), noting that almost the entire "guardia" is engaged in the attempts to remove the Chairman of the Constitutional Court Hrayr Tovmasyan from the Constitutional Court.

Opposition groups also included President Armen Sargsyan in the "ruling guardia" against Tovmasyan on social media after the latter [signed](#) a decree on April 5 to hold a referendum on constitutional amendments.³ Thus, in a Facebook post, Ruben Melikyan, co-founder of the "Path of Law" NGO, [accused](#) Armen Sargsyan of destroying the institution of the president, and Karen Bekaryan, a former member of the RPA faction, [described](#) the president's move as "a self-confession about a crime." Narek Samsonyan, chairman of the Civic Consciousness NGO, [joined](#) the campaign against Armen Sargsyan with a harsher vocabulary, concluding that the president had "hit the final nail in the coffin."

Towards authoritarianism

PACE co-rapporteurs⁴ for the monitoring of Armenia and the President of the Venice Commission Gianni Buquicchio⁵ issued statements about the situation related to Hrayr Tovmasyan and the Constitutional Court. The opposition and the government interpreted these

¹ A criminal case has been [filed](#) against Hrayr Tovmasyan on charges of abuse of office.

² The [Human Rights Defender's Office](#) and the Television and Radio [Commission](#) later issued a statement on the report, calling it a violation of the presumption of innocence.

³ On February 6, the National Assembly [adopted](#) the bill on putting the constitutional amendments to a referendum, proposing to terminate the term of office of the President and members of the Constitutional Court elected before April 9, 2018. We suggest reading FIP.am's [article](#) on the constitutionality of the referendum.

⁴ In the PACE [statement](#), the co-rapporteurs expressed concern over the tension between the executive body and the Constitutional Court, "emphasizing once again the need to maintain the principle of checks and balances."

⁵ Gianni Buquicchio expressed [concern](#) that the recent events and public statements do not comply with the principle of voluntary retirement of Constitutional Court judges.

statements in their own ways.⁶ The representatives of the government welcomed the points that were in their favor, and the opposition circles singled out the harshest assessments.

However, in general, the reaction of international partners intensified the thesis among the opposition and the media that after the revolution Armenia is regressing to dictatorship.

Thus, commenting on Buquicchio's statement on her Facebook page, former Minister of Justice Arpine Hovhannisyán [wrote](#): "We are slowly approaching the harshness of the statements that are usually used against Azerbaijan. Heroically complete the project of embezzling the powers of the Constitutional Court and you will get it too."

This post by Arpine Hovhannisyán served as an inspiration for the "168 Zham" newspaper. The very next day, the latter published an [article](#): "Armenia is moving towards authoritarianism", repeating Arpine Hovhannisyán's idea. "European institutions already speak with Armenia in a language that they use to speak to authoritarian regimes," the article said.

The thesis on authoritarianism became even stronger after the decision to hold a referendum. In domestic political domain, it was described as a path towards monarchy. The former ruling party, the Republican Party of Armenia, was one of the first to [announce](#) that "the proposed regulations are an attempt to isolate and occupy the Constitutional Court by the executive and legislative bodies. The bill in question directly contradicts the principles of the rule of law, and democracy". Lilit Tumanyán, a member of the "Adekvad" initiative, [reiterated](#) that the events around the Constitutional Court are not legal, "in that process, we are losing all the institutions that ensure the democracy and constitutionality of our country".

A campaign full of scandals

The week leading up to the referendum on the constitutional amendments, and the campaign process were accompanied by scandalous events and manipulative claims. First, the opposition circles [tried](#) to persuade that "by saying yes to the referendum, you will say yes to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the propaganda of transgenderism, the establishment of absolute dictatorship." The Iravunk newspaper [linked](#) the referendum not only to the Istanbul Convention, but also to the "outrageous actions in the Artsakh issue." In that situation, the Prime Minister himself countered his opponents in the same manipulative style. The day after the start of the campaign, he [posted](#) a photo of roads that were in good condition and those that were in bad condition, hinting that those who said "yes" would be in favor of the improved roads.

⁶ We suggest reading the [article](#) of Fip.am on this topic.

The fundraising event organized by the authorities on February 25 for the campaign, during which about 205 million AMD were raised, gave rise to manipulative debate. While the



authorities tried to [explain](#) that the fundraiser was not the initiative of the "Yes" headquarters, but the initiative of the "Civil Contract" party (therefore, there is no legislation-related problem with the collected money⁷), the press [claimed](#) that "the fundraiser was a cover-up used to "legitimize" the money that had been collected from Armenian oligarchs and deceive the sheep that believe them".

At the beginning of the active campaign, the Internet literally exploded when a young girl [tore up](#) a campaign leaflet given by Nikol Pashinyan during the "Yes" campaign and threw it at him. Hours later, the Prime Minister [commented](#) on the incident on his Facebook page, noting that nothing threatens the safety of the girl in the new Armenia, and that is the biggest victory of "Yes" campaign.

The Prime Minister's thesis was actively promoted by the [representatives](#) of his political team, the [public figures](#) and the [press](#) that supported him. Meanwhile, on the opposition front, they started glorifying the girl, attributing the incident to the girl's personal courage rather than to the democracy in Armenia. Thus, the 7or.am website [described](#) the girl's act as a manifestation of "civil consciousness", and the head of the "Civil Consciousness" NGO Narek Samsonyan even [expressed](#) readiness to present her with a "Brave Woman" award.

The opposition did not miss the [incident](#) that took place during the election campaign in Kurtan community of Lori region, when Prime Minister Pashinyan responded harshly to the request of one of the local residents for help, telling him "You're a healthy man, go work". The Prime

⁷ According to Article 20, Part 1 of the RA Constitutional Law on Referendum, the total amount of payments made at the expense of the Fund shall not exceed 100.000 times the minimum wage.

Minister became the target of criticism when it [turned out](#) a few days later that the young man was not healthy at all. And though Pashinyan [apologized](#), it did not calm the situation. In this respect, the article of politik.am is remarkable. It says the following "... For Pashinyan, a person has zero value ... With this step, Pashinyan publicly refused to be responsible for solving the problems of the layer of the society, with the active support of which he appeared in the post of Prime Minister."

Artsakh conspiracy



In the first quarter of 2020, a number of important meetings and events were held in connection with the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which woke up the critics and conspiracy theorists in the press and social media.

The thesis of "handing over the lands" formed years ago became active again at the beginning of the year after the two-day [talks](#) between the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Geneva on January 29-30. In particular, the press and opposition circles began to discuss that, contrary to official Yerevan's statements, there is a document on the negotiating table, which is not in favor of the Armenian side. Thus, former Ombudsman Larisa Alaverdyan [told](#) News.am that "such meetings" of ministers are no longer normal, and "pose a threat to the national security of the Armenian people." "Hraparak" also [read](#) between the lines of the Armenian Foreign Ministry's [statement](#) that followed the meeting, calling it "alarming".

Disappointed with the authorities who did not hand over the lands, some circles launched a new propaganda thesis that they are populating Artsakh with Azeris. In particular, in an interview with "168 Hours", the former head of the National Security Service David Shahnazaryan came

up with such an [analysis](#). Despite the [denial](#) by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the thesis became widespread (more than 17,000 views on the 168.am website alone).

During the reporting period, the second wave of manipulation theses on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict arose on February 15 after a panel [discussion](#) with Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev at the Munich Security Conference. Moreover, the topic was speculated on both sides. The authorities claimed that Pashinyan had humiliated the President of Azerbaijan with his comments, and the opposition claimed the opposite, saying that Pashinyan disgraced Armenia by failing to adequately respond to Aliyev.⁸

Thus, the pro-government Haykakan Zhamanak newspaper touched upon the issue with three articles on February 18 ("What messages were sent to Munich and by whom in the duel of communities ", "We were holding our breath before", "The old in the new format"), in general promoting the thesis that the Prime Minister unequivocally humiliated Aliyev.

They persecute heroes in order to hand over lands

After the Munich meeting, the thesis of handing over the "lands" became more active in the opposition camp and was spiced up with new elements. The second and third presidents prevent these authorities from handing over Artsakh, and, consequently, the latter neutralize them with fabricated criminal cases. Former President Serzh Sargsyan, who [addressed](#) his supporters in front of the court with a loudspeaker before his court hearing on February 25, gave impetus to this thesis. "I have regularly stated from the highest tribunes of the world, and now I repeat, Nagorno Karabakh will never be part of Azerbaijan." Moreover, Serzh Sargsyan's supporters came to court with posters reading "Artsakh will never be part of Azerbaijan."

The RPA Supreme Body was the first to [announce](#) about the political persecution of the third president: "Within the framework of Serzh Sargsyan's case, a process conditioned by political motives is being carried out with criminal packaging. It is noteworthy that this trial is taking place against the background of the authorities' incompetent security and diplomatic activities in the context of the Artsakh talks." Later some Republican figures hinted that Serzh Sargsyan was being removed from the arena so that the Artsakh issue would be resolved at their own discretion. In particular, RPA Deputy Chairman Armen Ashotyan stated during a TV show that after Serzh Sargsyan's speech in Zagreb, the number one task of the authorities was to close him in Armenia so that he would not criticize the current government's policy from the international arena.⁹ Besides, according to Ashotyan, there is an "invisible hand" that is consistently trying to punish and discredit the "main symbols" of the Artsakh movement. RPA Spokesperson Eduard Sharmazanov made the same [statement](#) during the 168 TV's "Review" program. "It is a shame for our state and society to try the two presidents who brought the Turks and Azeris to their knees."

The Artsakh issue in the propaganda domain

While two "hero" presidents were brought to justice in Armenia, Russian media outlets published articles serving the interests of the Azerbaijani propaganda machine. The most

⁸ We suggest reading the [article](#) of "Union of Informed Citizens" on the topic .

⁹ Back in November, Serzh Sargsyan [criticized](#) the current Armenian authorities at the EPP headquarters and stated that Artsakh will never be part of Azerbaijan.

scandalous of these was the one published in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper and entitled "Sumgait tragedy: How it started and how it happened". The article was soon removed as a result of the efforts of the Armenian side. But before that, the opposition camp assured that the government was losing on the propaganda front of Artsakh as well, as it had confused the location of the enemy and was busy looking for internal enemies.

In particular, ArmNews TV made an [extensive](#) reference to the topic. "The propaganda vector seems to have been directed from the outside to the inside" said Abraham Gasparyan, a news commentator. The 5th Channel [hinted](#) at the main issue of "Haylur" on February 26 that the topic had not been addressed since the 1990s, and now, "for some reason, it has become active again."

By the way, regarding silence... While opposition TV channels diligently circulated and commented on the article published in the Russian media, the Public Television was silent for two days. Just like the above-mentioned two TV channels remained silent in their further broadcasts, when the article was removed by the efforts of the Armenian side, and the response [article](#) of Taron Hovhannisyan, expert in Azerbaijani studies, was posted on the same website. Only after the situation was settled did the Public Television [break](#) the silence and address the issue.

Incompetent foreign policy

The third wave of passions over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict erupted on March 2 when Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu [met](#) with the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs. After the meeting, a statement was published on the official Twitter microblog of the Turkish Foreign Ministry that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be resolved on the basis of the principle of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

Although the meetings in this format have been regular for many years, and the position of official Ankara on the Artsakh issue has not changed, the topic was [speculated](#) by "Adekvad" initiative. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova also joined their Facebook [discussions](#), proposing to summon the spirit of Armenian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Anna Naghdalyan. Some political scientists and the media immediately rushed to present the word "spirit" used by Zakharova as an "[ironic hint](#)".

"Of course, this is a slap in the face to official Yerevan, the primary responsibility of which lies with the Armenian government and, first of all, Prime Minister Pashinyan ... The problem is the incompetence of the Armenian government and, most likely, the failure of the negotiations with the partners" Hraparak [wrote](#).

The opposition recalled the incompetent foreign policy of the new Armenian authorities when the United States [canceled](#) aid to Artsakh. In particular, Armen Ashotyan [concluded](#): "It is obvious that this is also consequence of the foreign policy full of mistakes made by the current Armenian authorities."

The arrival of coronavirus in Armenia

The coronavirus, which has kept the whole world in tension since the end of the year 2019, finally reached Armenia in March 2020. The Prime Minister personally [informed](#) about the first

case of coronavirus, then [canceled](#) the March 1 march, and left for Tsakhkadzor with his family, where people suspected of having the virus were isolated in one of the hotels.

The aforementioned events caused speculations in the propaganda field. Some [claimed](#) that the infiltration of the virus into Armenia was the result of the criminal inaction of the Armenian government, while others [said](#) that the main "lazy-bone" should have been isolated in April 2018.

Despite the fact that it was spring, some people were concerned about the isolation location of possible virus carriers (Tsaghkadzor), Armenia's "only winter resort town." Political scientist Menua Harutyunyan, for example, [noted](#) that Pashinyan had turned Kocharyan's resort center into a " global center for virus carriers."

The deterioration of the situation eventually [forced](#) Pashinyan to postpone his vacation and campaign on March 12 and "deal with the coronavirus." However, the very next day, it [turned out](#) that the Prime Minister and his family had self-isolated in Sevan and had been tested for coronavirus.

The opposition circles described Pashinyan's self-isolation as an escape. In particular, Narek Malyan from "Veto" movement drew [parallels](#) between the President of China, who was walking the streets of Wuhan, the source of the infection, and Nikol Pashinyan who went live from Sevan. "Do you know what the difference is between a real leader and a rogue? ... A rogue immediately escapes to a safe place in the event of any danger" Malyan's widely circulated post read.

And political scientist Mihran Hakobyan [stated](#) that "lazy and self-seeking Pashinyan brought and unleashed the virus among the people, now he is isolated in his castle and is enjoying his vacation."

The media is under pressure and censorship

Discussions on pressure on the media began at the beginning of the year, when the court decided not to change the measure of restraint of the owner of "5 TV Channel" Armen Tavadyan.¹⁰ In its January 10 editorial, Irates newspaper [predicted](#) that 2020 would be a period of "regulation" of the media, during which the termination of the licenses of a number of TV companies is not ruled out.

The issue of repressions of the press became more active when a state of emergency was [declared](#) in Armenia on March 16 due to the epidemic situation. However, it turned out that only the media suffered from the long-awaited state of emergency. Although objective criticism was voiced in this regard, including by the media [organizations](#), some propaganda circles used the situation to push forward the already solid thesis that the media in Armenia are under pressure.

The situation escalated when the Commandant's Office demanded that Hraparak remove one of the articles that caused "panic" that a riot was brewing among the convicts in penitentiary

¹⁰ Armen Tavadyan was [arrested](#) in December within the framework of a criminal case against Robert Kocharyan's alleged supporter Varuzhan Mkrtchyan.

institutions. It was followed by the newspaper's [article](#) that "a state of emergency has been imposed in order to "restrain the media" and the newspaper's editor [recalled](#) the year 1988: "Who would have expected that decades later, in 2020, I would find myself in almost the same situation as an editor, and I would have to fight for the exercise of our right to freedom of speech?"

The topic was also [discussed](#) by 5 TV Channel with the participation of media representatives. In particular, Satik Seyranyan, the editor of "168 Zham" newspaper, expressed an opinion at the discussion that "realizing that it is not ready to resist the coronavirus, the government is trying to divert attention." Armine Ohanyan, editor-in-chief of Hraparak newspaper, claimed that instead of fighting the infection, the government was fighting against the information about the infection so that the information would not reach the reader in full. Moreover, according to Mrs. Ohanyan, "all the staff of the well-known SNCO, some members of the Civil Contract Party, assistants and advisers to deputies do monitoring and take revenge on the media outlets".

"Iravunk" newspaper summed up the manipulative discussions on the topic: "No dictator, let alone a normal government, has ever thought that the print media can be shut down. But these incompetent, incapable, inexperienced and criminal authorities took that step because they are afraid that the truth about them will be disclosed, they are afraid that one day they will be held accountable for their crimes, including the disgraceful situation in Armenia today."