



Under Attack: Malign Influence and Disinformation

Democracy! The Podcast

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Adrienne Ross 0:06

Hi, and welcome to *Democracy! The Podcast* that shines the light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe.

Joe Biden 0:16

Democracy will and must prevail.

Adrienne Ross 0:20

This podcast is brought to you by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening direct from Washington DC, with support from our friends at the United States Agency for International Development through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award. I'm your host, Adrienne Ross. Under Attack. Today, we're talking about malign influence and disinformation. It's an insidious problem facing democracies everywhere today, but can you identify it? Ahead, we'll hear from one of the most ardent defenders of democracy. The President of the International Republican Institute Dan Twining. He'll tell us why malign influence and disinformation are among the most damaging threats to democracy today, and how you can protect yourself from inadvertently consuming it. But first, the Republic of Armenia. This ancient land suddenly became a hotbed of political and military turbulence last year, more now from our program manager Alix Lawson.

Alix Lawson 1:23

2020 was a difficult year for many, but for Armenians the double whammy of the coronavirus pandemic and the resurgence of the war in the gornall Karabakh region caused not only unique hardships for the nation, but a flood of disinformation in never before seen proportions. Armenians were anxious for accurate information and were unsure of who or what news could be trusted. But as these two crises raged on, the country's relatively nascent democracy, which declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, hung in the balance. In order to correct a compromised information space, it quickly became clear that government intervention was vital and state institutions needed to be the first source of not only accurate information but also countering disinformation.

Adrienne Ross 2:19

Thanks, Alix. James De Witt and his colleague, Dr. Artak Shakaryan join us now to talk about the disinformation that grew in the midst of Armenia's twin crises. James is the International Republican Institute Resident Program Director for Armenia. He has been defending democracy for more than 25 years and oversees programs which aim to strengthen strategic communications and government and institutionalized parliamentary oversight. He is no stranger to US politics either, having served as a staffer in both chambers of the US Congress and the Texas Legislature. Also here today is Artak Shakaryan, who is a native Armenian. Artak for the last two years has been IRI's Senior Program Manager in Armenia. Prior to joining IRI, he served as a Child Protection Officer with UNICEF in both Armenia and Sudan. And Artak, I just have to say you're an accomplished scholar with high education degrees from several well known international schools, including the Kennedy School at Harvard, and Johns Hopkins here in Washington. Thank you so much for being here today live from Armenia. Armenia really has had a long and complicated history. Before we talk more about disinformation. Can you share a little bit about how the country's past may have contributed to this disinformation emergency last year?

James De Witt 3:37

Yes, sure. Well, if you're talking about Armenia, you're talking about the post-Soviet space. Armenia didn't gain its independence until 1991. And even following that, you don't see a lot of free media developing in the country, this government that came into power in the Velvet Revolution wasn't prepared. Because in the past, there just was no need. Basically, the government and the media before were one and the same thing. And that was true during the Soviet era, that and that's been true, really, over the past 30 odd years in Armenia. So, we can't blame the government. They've only been in power for a very short time, but there just wasn't a history of free media in this country. Then we had the twin crises Come on last year. And that was a big problem. The government really wasn't prepared. They needed expertise, they needed it quickly and they needed people that were able to deal effectively with social media especially.

Adrienne Ross 4:39

And to be clear of what you're saying here, James or Artak, if you're if you'd like to answer, what we were seeing was really an uptick in disinformation and malign influence related to both COVID and the war as it was continuing.

Artak Shakaryan 4:53

Yes, exactly. But at the same time, I will say that the society also has its stake because this is It lacks media literacy skills. So, with this inflow of information, they're not ready to handle it. They trust whatever is coming out from that magic box. And they are not prepared that that magic box

may be lying, or maybe spreading disinformation. So that's why when the pandemic struck, the society was also watching not only Armenian TV stations, but also the western ones, the Russian ones, and was getting all those myths about the Coronavirus. And it was very hard for the government to deal with that situation. Additionally, when the war started, other foreign actors entered the Armenian media field and started also using this situation and trying to spread disinformation about all other things. So yes, the government was in a really hard situation. And even the super professional ones would deal with it with difficulty. So, we needed the urge to support the government in the communication efforts.

James De Witt 6:15

Yes, luckily, we had prepared.

Artak Shakaryan 6:18

The situation in Armenian and many other countries, especially in the developing countries is that the ministries are working in silos, they don't talk to each other, they don't tell the constituents. And this creates this situation of miscommunication that leads also to disinformation. So, our idea was to introduce the young researchers and young fellows to the ministries, so they try to bring in the fresh blood and bringing the experience and skills of working with social platforms that are taking over the traditional media. So, we want the government to have the proper representation on social media and to use the social media in daily communication with people and also in handling the disinformation/misinformation. So, these fellows also worked with each other. So, they also provided a bridge between the ministries and the communication between the ministries. The government was fighting the problems when propelling the reforms. So, they were not preparing the ground before introducing the reform. And our fellows that were also doing on the job training to the fellow people in the ministry tried to instill that idea that before introducing the reform, you need to work with the constituents, you need to prepare the media, you need to prepare yourself to do your homework before entering the field.

James De Witt 7:57

These are people that are very well versed in social media, social media management, countering disinformation. They also know the old tools, the old-fashioned tools that are very well versed in the press and communications offices there.

Artak Shakaryan 8:13

It's about the communication skills. It's about the data visualization skills, preparing you for graphics, preparing short stories out of huge policy documents, and keeping it simple, so that people can read and understand and also communicate with the media. So, most of our fellows are or used to be the journalists or used to be media anchors, so they know this area, and they

know how to deal with that type of people. So, they are bringing this field experience to the cabinets.

James De Witt 8:51

I think that's really important that you brought that up, Artak, because before we have these government ministries, we have the government very much formed and structured in the old ways and used to the old methods and issuing press releases and things like that. I think what's essential is that these spark fellows know that there's a lot of noise out there, there's a lot of information out there, it's very hard to get people's attention, and attention spans are short. So as Artak rightly pointed out, these spark fellows helped to compress these messages to get all this data and present them in a way that's digestible, that people that the public are actually going to see and understand. Just super important, right?

Adrienne Ross 9:37

I mean, communication challenges really are something every single government has to deal with. But I have to say, I noticed that all your fellows are women. Was that something you did intentionally?

James De Witt 9:47

No. That's where the expertise is here in Armenia. That's what the demand is. We partnered with the various ministries to recruit the spark fellows. We wanted to make sure that we were bringing on people that met the needs of the ministries. So, there was a huge call many applications in and in the end, those selected happened to be women. So those that is who we picked.

Adrienne Ross 10:19

Well, that's great. I was happy to see that. What is the current military and political situation in Armenia right now? Sort of what now that the information space has given a leg up do we do we see a clear skies there? What do we expect in the next couple of months?

James De Witt 10:36

So, it remains to be seen if we're out of the woods on COVID. In terms of the political situation, and the terms and related to the conflict which happened last fall. That continues, there are still violations of ceasefire agreements, there are shootings on the borders almost every day, it's almost becoming commonplace, although common places still very tense here.

Artak Shakaryan 11:02

I want to add that we understand that spark program is a band-aid solution. It's not something remaining, and with our CEPPS partners in Armenia, we do work on developing the reforms on communication in public administration, that will bring more sustainable solution to the issues. And the successful pilot of spark also adds weight to these messages.

James De Witt 11:30

I agree with Artak about it being a band-aid solution, I think it is the genesis of something. We're finishing our first year of this program, and basically the first class the first graduating class program. So, we're going to have an alumni network. We hope these people will work with future spark fellows who are in the process of recruiting now. So, this is the start of something. So even though we don't want to be behind it all the time or funding it, this is going to have a life of its own. I feel pretty confident about that.

Adrienne Ross 12:10

Well, that's a great place to leave things, literally and virtually. Thank you so much for both being here. We really appreciate your time. Now we turn to Ukraine, where disinformation and malign influence have infiltrated countless pockets of society. Today, the National Democratic Institute's Deputy Director for Ukraine Natia Jikia joins us. Natia is a Georgian local who first started her work as a local staffer in her home country before becoming a third country national for Ukraine in 2015. She's here now to talk about how she and the NDI team were able to combat malign influence, and disinformation during three sets of Ukrainian elections during 2019 to 2020. Thank you so much for being here, Natia.

Natia Jikia 12:54

Thank you for having me. I look forward to the conversation.

Adrienne Ross 12:58

I do too. Malign influence and disinformation are a really common problem in Ukraine. What can you tell us about this?

Natia Jikia 13:06

To illustrate the scale of the challenge facing the country, I will cite a few findings from NDI's Public Opinion Research. According to our 2020 online survey, 87% of Ukrainians think that Russian disinformation or propaganda is a big threat or some threat to their way of life. That is a very, very high number. In addition, the vast majority of Ukrainians, that is 79%, recognize that disinformation

and propaganda are being spread in Ukraine, also a very high number indicating a high level of awareness of the problem in the country. So, in this context, with USAID support for all three elections, we carried out election observation missions that included long term analysis looking at more traditional aspects of elections, such as election administration, media environment, and so on. When we were initially designing the observation mission, we realized that there was no way we could assess the media environment in Ukraine without looking at it from the disinformation point of view because of all the challenges I described. And especially looking at Russian disinformation and how it impacts elections in Ukraine. Because Ukraine has been the target of Russian disinformation for years and these attacks are sustained. Those attacks are targeted, and they're very intense. We were, of course, very careful in how we've designed the methodology of what to observe and how to observe during these elections. And we did round two consultations. We've talked to local civil society organizations, including OPOORA and tekstil, who are doing groundbreaking work on countering digital information in Ukraine. We also talked to other election stakeholders so including political parties and traditional media representatives to understand their assessment of the problem. And as a result of this consultations, we've decided that our monitoring efforts would focus on social media, and Facebook and telegram in particular, we also looked for any mentions of election interference. And, for example, for the parliamentary elections, we monitored around 26 telegram channels, and for the 2020 local elections, we monitored 50 telegram channels. So, what did we find? We found that political channels on telegram were similar in focus to Russian messaging on electoral candidates, they were negative on two politicians in particular, President Zelensky and former President Poroshenko. In our monitoring efforts, we looked for any mention of disinformation and election interference in the Facebook posts. And for local elections we've monitored around, we've collected and analyzed around 17,000 Facebook posts from the accounts of regional media outlets, mayoral candidates and political parties. So, what did we find? Messaging patterns were similar to those we saw during previous elections and the most widespread narratives were deployed to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state and its government, weaken ties between Ukraine and partners in the West, and promote the image of Russian government.

Adrienne Ross 16:35

Out of all of the fantastic work that you all have been able to accomplish, what is your greatest outcome? What do you think you've made the biggest difference by doing this?

Natia Jikia 16:44

The first thing that I want to highlight is that disinformation is not uniquely an electoral problem, but it impacts elections a great deal, and we cannot assess election integrity any longer without the disinformation lens. So, disinformation should always be incorporated when assessing elections. Also, another important takeaway is that it just confirmed that work that we do is very, very important and makes democracy stronger, which is the best countermeasure against this information.

Adrienne Ross 17:20

You've mentioned that malign influence can be controlled. What do you think the future of malign influence in Ukraine is now that it's been recognized and dealt with?

Natia Jikia 17:31

I think it's complicated. But I think that most important thing is being done, which is that the problem is recognized, and government is making its strategic priority to fight disinformation. And so, there's a lot of effort that is being made by both by the government by the local civil society, international communities are also focusing on it. So, I think that the collaborative approach that is being taken in Ukraine to find disinformation is probably going to show results. We'll share with you the three reports that will be issued after each of the three elections, and it has a section dedicated section on disinformation that also includes recommendations that will be issued.

Adrienne Ross 18:18

Okay, and our listeners will be able to find that on www.cepps.org/podcast. Thank you for being with us today.

Natia Jikia 18:27

Thank you very much for having me.

Adrienne Ross 18:29

If you need more information on combating digital threats, please check out the countering disinformation guide. This first of its kind resource was created by CEPPS with funding from USAID and combines the collective expertise of those on the frontlines fighting disinformation. The guide outlines how key areas of disinformation are being addressed and provides a searchable inventory of organizations working to make the digital space safe for democracy. Find it at www.CEPPS.org/podcast.

One leader who understands weaknesses in the information landscape is Dr. Dan Twining the President of the International Republican Institute. Dan has been leading the institute's mission to advance democracy and freedom around the world since 2017. He has also served as Counselor and Director of the Asia program at the German Marshall fund of the United States, as a member of the US Secretary of State's policy planning staff, a foreign policy adviser to US Senator John McCain, and a staffer for the US Trade Representative. Dan has also taught at Georgetown University and served as a military instructor associated with the Naval Postgraduate School, and he just happens to be one of the most verbose writers I have ever come across. Thank you so much for being here today. Can you explain in your opinion, why malign influence and disinformation are such threats to the health and vitality of democracy?

Dan Twining 20:00

Yes, thanks Adrienne. It's great to be with you. So, look, democracy doesn't work without full and effective citizen engagement in politics and political life and citizen engagement is complicated by misinformation and disinformation, right? We see that very much with respect to foreign authoritarians, including Russia and China, who essentially have weaponized information, conducted very sophisticated information operations, what really we should call the misinformation operations against the United States, against friends and allies, against pivotal countries like Ukraine. We've seen in Ukraine, for instance, how the Kremlin has sought to paint a picture of that country as some kind of failed Nazi state when, in fact, the opposite is true. Ukraine is quite a successful country coming out of a very bad period.

Adrienne Ross 20:51

You've listed some really malign examples of this problem, or at least in terms of countries and nations, where do you personally see the worst examples of malign influence and disinformation taking place in the world?

Dan Twining 21:04

So, there are a couple answers. I mean, one, frankly, is the malign forms of disinformation that Russia and China tell their own citizens, which gives them a totally warped perspective about the United States, about the quality of democracy in the world, about how we work with friends and allies to maintain peace and prosperity. So, Chinese citizenry in particular, but also Russian citizens, in some ways are captured by these fake narratives that come from their autocratic governments that really heightened tensions and increase the risk of great power conflict between our countries. But we've also seen Russia for instance, attack our own electoral integrity, attack electoral integrity and political processes in countries in Europe and beyond, including in Latin America, we've seen China run all sorts of again, malign campaigns designed to distort truth and reality, including in places that many people listening might not see as highly strategic, you know, places in countries in Africa, for instance, where the Chinese run very sophisticated campaigns to squash any media conversation or political conversation in public about Taiwan about Xinjiang, about human rights abuses in Hong Kong and beyond. And so many American friends and allies and citizens in the world don't have a full picture of the nature of these authoritarian states that understand that the way to protect their own autocracies is to essentially neuter the international conversation about their human rights abuses, through forms of information operation, it's really quite dangerous.

Adrienne Ross 22:35

And one of the things that I think those of us who follow China in particular so closely recognize is that sometimes China doesn't look to be nefarious. Sometimes they look to be a very honest

brokers and some of these situations. And I'm just wondering, could you give us an example of some of the campaigns that you've seen that have been particularly damaging?

Dan Twining 22:55

We've seen for instance, in in our own hemisphere, in a really important country like Panama, we've seen China run an influence operation, with boatloads of misinformation as part of it to lead Panama to break relations with Taiwan and create diplomatic ties with Beijing. The Chinese came in a very heavy way to influence Panamanian media outlets in directions friendly to Beijing, but they also worked. They ran essentially a covert operation with what was called a China-Panama Friendship Committee that was advising the Panamanian government and members of this friendship committee included Chinese Panamanians, but in fact, some of them were working directly as part of a united front operation controlled from Beijing, controlled from China. So Panamanian citizens, and the Panamanian government thought they were having a conversation with other Panamanian citizens about what was the best course to take in relations with China. And in fact, the Chinese were running a giant influence operation in Panama, that undermined Panamanian sovereignty and caused them to make a decision that, frankly, was not in the best interest of Panama, but was in the best interest of Beijing. I'd also just like to point to a Russian example, you know, in the country of Georgia, their democracy has been deteriorating. And what you have going on there is a set of again, sophisticated Kremlin information operations of the kind we've also seen in Ukraine, creation of quote, civil society organizations that are not, that are actually Kremlin operated, designed to cast doubt on the credibility of Georgia's democracy, seed divisiveness, seed polarization, create culture, wars and other things. Russia uses this misinformation toolkit not just in Georgia, not just in Ukraine, but they've used it here in the United States, to try to cause our citizens to disagree and divide amongst ourselves because guess what, if you're Vladimir Putin, you're running an autocracy. You're a declining power with a lot of nuclear weapons and a lot of oil and gas. It really helps if you can set the United States and NATO allies sort of against each other internally and cause societal divisions in the West and political polarization that takes our eye off the ball of Russian aggression and abuses throughout the former Soviet Union. So it is something to be more aware of, and you know, in terms of what can we do, because I know you want to talk about that we really do need a lot more citizen education, civic education, that we need private citizens in all of these countries to be able to identify true and objective news and fact, an informed opinion from within their country from what is very different, which is foreign misinformation that is weaponized against our own country. Nobody in the world wants their government to be in hock to a foreign government with a totally different agenda, right? Everybody in the world cares very much about their country's sovereignty and their security and does not want that kind of information penetration from abroad, that weakens and undermines and corrodes governance in that country, again, in favor of the interests of some malign foreign actor.

Adrienne Ross 26:04

You've been talking about this for many years, this is not a 2021 new pandemic issue, right? Malign influence and disinformation have been around for a bit. In your opinion, is it getting better? Is it getting worse? What are we seeing?

Dan Twining 26:19

So, I think we're at a hope and inflection point, you know, there has been this wild west period in social media in particular, where people have lived in these information bubbles and algorithms have enabled them to not only suffer from misinformation and disinformation, but to kind of live in a world of it based on their social media preferences. So, I do think fundamentally that we need as democracies for our citizens to be more engaged in being able to sort out fact from fiction, to cast a skeptical eye on alarmist assertions that may not be rooted, in fact, to understand that we are not fighting wars against countries like Russia and China. But in fact, they are undertaking aggression against us in the form of ceding these information operations that are designed to weaken us. And if we can cast this partly as a question of civic duty and civic patriotism, to be able to, you know, snuff out misinformation, but also cast it as a national security matter, that we don't want our political choices and our political conversation and our any of our countries to be manipulated by malign foreign actors, that's really important to sustaining democratic health and integrity.

Adrienne Ross 27:37

This is such an enormous issue, particularly and we really start to look at it what is your recommendation for individual citizens, people who maybe aren't involved in the democracy, governance, and human rights issues?

Dan Twining 27:48

So, I'd say you know, a couple things. One is to try not to consume news or get information, just from one source. Try to take it in from a variety of sources, whether you're a TV person or a social media person, or print media person, you know, range widely. If you hear something alarming about something happening in your own country, political nefariousness, or somebody's selling out, or whatever it may be is like do your do a little bit of fact checking right, just don't necessarily buy the line that you see in your social media feed, but step back and try to be objective and try to be analytic. You know, I think all of us these, a lot of this social media algorithms, and the news feeds are designed to cause a spike in our own adrenaline and make us angry and outraged. And I think sort of trying to be a little less angry and outraged and a little more thoughtful and analytic. To understand that public servants in our country and other democracies are usually good citizens trying to do the right thing, that what we may be seeing or hearing in terms of this or that scurrilous news report that's getting so energized may not, in fact, be true. In fact, it may be coming from a foreign power trying to manipulate us. So just to understand that protecting our own democratic integrity today requires citizens to be informed and to make smart choices, including about how they take in news and information.

Adrienne Ross 29:09

It's certainly worth the time, I think.

Dan Twining 29:11

No, that's right. But if we want to protect our own democracy and our own security, we need to be alert to the fact that we are subject to these campaigns, even if we can't quite see them or trace their fingerprints.

Adrienne Ross 29:24

I was reading through some of your testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee a couple years ago. And in 2018, you said, "I think it can be tempting to take refuge in a belief that democracy promotion somehow is a luxury we can't afford", do you still feel that way?

Dan Twining 29:38

You know, more people are struggling for democratic rights and freedoms around the world than really ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. We see people stepping out all over the place. We also see repressive governments cracking down in frankly new and sophisticated and dangerous ways. And so, I'd say we have more at stake than ever. I mean, I agree with the President of United States when he says that we're in a global struggle between democracy and autocracy. By the way, President Ronald Reagan, who founded several of the institutes who formed the CEPPS Consortium, President Reagan said the same thing. And so, I think it's essential for us as Americans to understand that the health and sanctity of our democracy and our free and open way of life are tied to really the fate of democracy in the world and that we have a great stake in a free and open world that remains friendly to us to our interest to our values. And that's why the Russians and the Chinese and the Iranians and other malign actors are trying to chip away at that free and open world, weaken and diminish us, cause us to doubt ourselves. And we should realize that we have something in common with almost every human being out in the world, including literally billions of people in Russia and China and Iran and elsewhere, which is this craving to be free to live a life of dignity, and individual autonomy. And so yes, we have to stand with democrats, small d democrats, all over the world, and continue to help push forward the boundaries of freedom so that we can all live in safety and prosperity.

Adrienne Ross 31:06

And there's nobody who can say that better than that. So, thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today. This has been really fantastic.

Dan Twining 31:12

Thanks, Adrienne. It's great to be with you. And we just so appreciate this terrific CEPPS team and the work that everybody does. So, thank you.

Adrienne Ross 31:18

In Ecuador, the explosive growth of digital and social media has only fueled the fiery problems of disinformation. In 2013, former Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa passed a gag law to silence critics in the mainstream media, but that only gave rise to dozens of troll centers. To help Ecuadorians find fact based reliable reporting in the lead up to this year's elections, CEPPS partners worked with the government, the electoral body, civil society, and candidate stakeholders to develop programs with funding from USAID to counter disinformation and cyber-attacks. The full story is online with Miguel Hernandez at www.CEPPS.org/podcast.

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