



# Media and disinformation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and their role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding

Meeting report on an exploratory seminar  
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## Executive summary

This meeting, organised as a collaboration between the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, FPI, its project European Resources for Mediation Support (ERMES III), and the EEAS mediation support team, brought together independent context and media experts to analyse the communications environment around the Second Karabakh War and its possible impact on the chances for a genuine peace process now that hostilities have been halted. It sought to inform policy engagement by the EU, Member States, and like-minded countries directed at influencing a media and information environment more conducive to peace.

Experts analysed trends in the consumption of media and use of social networks over the course of the war with a focus on the impact of the spread of dis- and mis-information and graphic content upon societal attitudes towards the war. Thanks to the popularisation of communication brought about by new technology, and rooted in poisonous, mutually exclusive narratives contrived during the Soviet era, inaccurate and misleading news from the front lines spread without friction to receptive audiences. Notably, disinformation often emanated from the authorities themselves who were able to bypass the traditional media outlets which during the first Karabakh war in the 1990s had played a significantly greater role in mediating news about the conflict. Reinforced enemy images, increasing enmity and heightened polarization between Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, even among previously moderate figures, is the result.

Flowing largely from the absence of a meaningful peace process, discussions assessed previous interventions at the nexus of peacebuilding and media. With few exceptions, these have confronted numerous problems limiting their impact, relating both to the wider media environment and the specific dynamics of peacebuilding programming. These range from the unreceptivity of conflict parties to peacebuilding efforts limiting operational space on the one hand, to a lack of specific strategic communications expertise among peacebuilding actors on the other. When pitted against the radically more dynamic and sophisticated practices of those promoting pro-war messages, these efforts had limited possibilities to influence broad swathes of society in favour of peace, outside of small bubbles receptive to critical reporting and thought.

These challenging circumstances now confront the EU and like-minded states and actors in the wider international community as they seek to re-engage, following the marginalization of Euro-Atlantic actors during the active fighting. Reflecting on the radically changed post-war landscape, the experts proposed a range of options for reengagement with the media and information space in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. These included:

- **To create political space for the expression of alternative messages** by going strongly on-the-record in support of a negotiated settlement and send strong public messages in support of journalists advocating for peace.
- To deploy strategic communications expertise to **develop a specific social media strategy** for the EU and like-minded actors in the region, **exploring learning from the Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) sector** on tactics for engaging with radicalized individuals on social media.



- **To revitalise peacebuilding communication strategy** in the region and clearly define its objectives. The strategy should:
  - include separate objectives for capacity-building and messaging, and develop differentiated strategies in supporting local media accordingly;
  - adapt to the new social media environment, adopting new formats and approaches to increase 'cut-through' of messaging beyond academic or policy audiences.
- **To work on narratives at source, by working with** intellectuals and academics in addition to journalists to influence to deconstruct and critically analyse harmful and misleading hate narratives. This should be done **within** societies first.
- **To invest further into media literacy and critical thinking** programming, especially with children and young people. This will require engagement with the educational authorities if it is to meet any success.
- **To increase financial support** to existing quality local media outlets, in part by redirecting funding from organisations and individuals who pushed pro-war narratives during the war to those who remained more neutral or voiced pro-peace messages, including those who might have less of a track record than established outlets.
- **To provide privileged access** to media outlets that report in a responsible manner to help them to build credibility and increase their visibility and reputation.
- **To advocate with technology companies** to brainstorm ways to address the challenge of the spread of disinformation in wartime in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context specifically.
- To **engage with fact-checking organisations** already actively working with Facebook and other platforms in the region, to learn from them and strategize together.



## About the seminar

This seminar report presents a summary of the discussions which took place during a seminar organised as a collaboration between the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), its project European Resources for Mediation Support (ERMES III) and the EEAS mediation support team to analyse the communications environment, and the social media space in particular, in shaping Armenian and Azerbaijani societies' views in the lead up to, during and after the recent 44-day-long full-scale war in the region. Known as the 'Second Karabakh War', the conflict has drastically changed the facts on the ground and will have wide-reaching implications for peacebuilding efforts in the region for decades to come.

The objective of the expert meeting was to 'enhance knowledge and convene a variety of actors i.e. the EU and international like-minded actors and civil society on media, digital technology and information with particular reference to the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict.' It further aimed 'to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking on issues around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from a media/information perspective' and inform policy engagement by international actors in the immediate aftermath of the recent war.

Accordingly, following an analysis of developments in the context, the merits and weaknesses of a variety of less- and more-successful conflict reporting, media development and education initiatives and approaches supported by the EU and other international actors in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context as well as comparative experience from other conflict contexts were discussed and their suitability to the present, extremely challenging circumstances analysed. A more detailed summary of the prevailing challenges and approaches discussed, is presented in the body of this report. The report concludes with a summary of the ideas for action put forward by the experts for consideration by the EU and wider international community.

## Participants

Experts invited to contribute interventions included representatives of regional media outlets, media development organisations, peacebuilding INGOs and think-tanks. Policymakers participating included representatives of the full breadth of relevant EU institutions. The seminar was moderated by Conciliation Resources' South Caucasus Programme Director Dr Laurence Broers and took place **off the record**. As such, the discussion was held in a confidential environment, and individual experts' contributions are unattributed.



## Context

The significance of the contribution of digital media platforms and social networks in particular in reinforcing enemy images, increasing enmity and furthering the already extreme polarization between Armenian and Azerbaijani societies over the course of the Second Karabakh War cannot be under-estimated. Though a firm empirical basis is still lacking in this particular instance, early research suggests that during the conflict, people were consuming content which confirmed their existing beliefs and prejudices.<sup>1</sup> Peer pressure and the febrile atmosphere on social networks led even moderate voices on both sides to abandon their usual relative equanimity and take up radical pro-war positions as the conflict progressed.<sup>2</sup> Pro-peace voices were denounced as traitorous and silenced through campaigns of harassment and the imposition of censorship legislation. Only some young people, notably generally not associated with existing communities of peacebuilders, remained outspoken in favour of peace.<sup>3</sup>

The ease and speed with which often inaccurate or misleading news from the front spread was particularly notable in contrast to the 1990s war, when coverage of the conflict was mediated by a small number of dedicated correspondents and Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists maintained contacts and networks with each other in ways unimaginable today. In the longer term, the spread of dis- and mis-information<sup>4</sup> from the front via social networks, including that issued by the authorities themselves, is likely to have an enduring impact on the chances of achieving a durable negotiated settlement. Pervasive graphic content featuring killings and ill-treatment of civilian populations and soldiers *hors de combat* by the sides, have generated public outrage and constrained possibilities for conflict transformation.

## Challenges faced by previous interventions

In the Armenian-Azerbaijani context, while there have been some notable individual successes, it should be recognized that peacebuilding initiatives focused on the media sphere have confronted numerous problems limiting their impact. Many of these are extrinsic, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Elise Thomas and Albert Zhang, *Snapshot of a Shadow War in the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflict*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/snapshot-of-a-shadow-war-in-the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict/>

<sup>2</sup> See also Katy Pearce, 'While Armenia and Azerbaijan fought over Nagorno-Karabakh, their citizens battled on social media', *Monkey Cage*, 4 December 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/04/while-armenia-azerbaijan-fought-over-nagorno-karabakh-their-citizens-battled-social-media/>

<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijani Leftist Youth, 'Anti-war Statement of Azerbaijani Leftist Youth', 30 September 2020, *LeftEast*, <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/anti-war-statement-of-azerbaijani-leftist-youth/>; Lilith Hakobyan et al, 'Common ground: anti-war statement', 19 October 2020, *ePress.am*, <https://ePress.am/en/2020/10/19/common-ground-anti-war-statement.html>

<sup>4</sup> The terms disinformation and misinformation are frequently used interchangeably. However, there is an important difference of intent. The European Commission defines disinformation as 'verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public.' (2018, *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*). Misinformation, on the other hand, merely refers to unintentional errors. Participants at the seminar highlighted the importance of avoiding the use of the term 'fake news', as its usage can risk invalidating media as a credible source of information, having shifted over time to a more normalised and broad usage in relation to attacks on legacy news media.



sense that they come from a challenging operating environment. Experience has shown that media, by itself, cannot counteract decision-makers who are not on board with conflict-prevention or resolution efforts, as is the case in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context. With resulting little room to address the core conflict issues, international support in this sphere has focused on deploying standalone media initiatives as part of a wider civil society-driven peacebuilding strategy, rather than peace being advanced by leveraging a strategic communications approach.

Other problems are internal. Even beyond the paradoxical practice of adopting low-visibility outreach strategies designed to mitigate political and security risks for participants, challenges arising from a lack of specific strategic communications expertise amongst peacebuilding actors and the lack of an explicit media strategy have further limited the impact of previous initiatives.

### **The broader media landscape**

The world over, the political economy of media is shifting as legacy media loses power and influence to social media, which is far less regulated and controlled. On these platforms, emotive content prompting anger and fear has been shown to spread more rapidly than content which promotes positive emotions, and is thus more profitable for companies seeking engagement (clicks, eyeballs, shares) as a means of generating profit.

While the democratization of communication creates opportunities for civil society actors to communicate more freely and impactfully in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context (as elsewhere), it creates the same opportunities for promoters of conflict, which they have arguably seized far more effectively than promoters of peace.

Local intellectual establishments and academics have long played a role in crafting mutually exclusive narratives. Templates established already in the Soviet period contrive narratives of 'pure' mono-ethnic and unbroken histories. While in the Soviet years such poisoned historical accounts remained the preserve of academicians and arcane journals, they now reach much wider audiences through new media technology and platforms.

This quantum leap in the sophistication and diversity of practices used to promote conflict has had far-reaching impacts on the media environment surrounding the NK conflict. This must be acknowledged and reckoned with in order to have any chance of influencing a media and information environment more conducive to peace.

In the political economy of mass media in the South Caucasus today, foreign funding is needed in order to afford attractive and functional websites, high-production-value multimedia, and a high number of journalists and support staff. Responsible and capable media professionals, frequently after gaining training and a reputation with quality local media, are likely to move on to better-paid positions outside of the region. Local media usually lack opportunities for professional development and rising salaries within their organization, leading to 'brain drain' of good journalists from the region.





## Disinformation and media practices during the recent war

During the war, most Armenian and Azerbaijani-language media reduced their war coverage to the information provided by their respective country's Ministry of Defence. There was little difference between state media, independent media, or Russian state-funded media.

War coverage was consequently one-sided, uncritically replicating official statements, and lacked pro-peace messages, calls for dialogue, or critical self-reflection. Even highly respected critical journalists on both sides succumbed to these trends.

Armenia mostly provided unrestricted access to foreign journalists, but also introduced censorship measures through an amended martial law, prohibiting the publication of reports criticising the actions of the government, officials and local bodies. It also gave increased power to the police to hand out fines, freeze assets, and request removal of content from media outlets.

Access was severely limited in Azerbaijan and foreign journalists were often assigned minders by the government who interfered with the reporting. The Azerbaijani opposition showed itself as even more radical than the government, and this stance was shared by the majority of civil society, media, and even many people associated with peacebuilding. The only pro-peace voices came from left-wing or anarchist positions. The few people who spoke up faced societal condemnation, online harassment, threats, and some were called in by security forces for questioning.

These wartime practices reflect longer-term strategies that have traditionally preserved an information blackout on actual developments within the peace process. Messaging on the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations has since the late 1990s always been highly restricted and contingent on the shorter-term political interests of incumbent regimes. Populations consequently lack what one participant at this seminar called 'peace process literacy', a gap that is easily filled by either sensationalist claims ('they are selling us out') or homogenising consolidation ('no compromise is possible'). Indeed, one needs to look to the previous generation of leaders (Levon Ter-Petrossian in 1998, Heydar Aliyev in 2000) to recall occasions when political leadership actually sought to bridge the gap between the actual content of negotiations and public opinion.

## Old narratives, new mediums

In times of war, the mutually exclusive narratives alluded to above spread rapidly across social media, becoming extremely simplified in the process, and contributing to the deepening of hatreds and dehumanisation of the other. Over the Second Karabakh War, new, exceedingly simplistic narratives overlaying 'ancient' ones took firm root: the dominant Azerbaijani narrative, one of defending itself from aggression, and the Armenian one, of victimhood and betrayal by the West.

Outlandish conspiracy theories spread by actors seeking to disrupt a putative peace process also promulgated rapidly: for instance, accusations that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had accepted bribes to accede to Azerbaijan. False sensationalist claims, such as the putative discovery of prisoners-of-war enslaved in cellars since the 1990s war, spread like wildfire



across social media, aided by reposting by public intellectuals and well-known journalists. Hashtags such as #dontbelieveArmenia and #StopAliyev competed for dominance on Twitter.

Increasingly, nationalist and ultra-nationalist narratives and their rapid-fire dissemination across social media often resemble those from violent extremist groups. Young people in particular are targeted via short, easily digested and affective content such as memes and short-form videos through applications such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram. In contrast to much peacebuilding content, these often include direct calls to action (e.g. to attend a protest, donate funds, or sign a petition), an effective tactic widely used by marketers to activate individuals and make them feel part of a movement.

Political leaders have wised up to these formats, with Nikol Pashinyan regularly communicating directly with the public via Facebook livestream and Ilham Aliyev significantly increasing his communication via Twitter during the recent war. Through these strategies, heightened and accelerated at times of violent conflict, political leaders in Armenia and Azerbaijan have been able to emulate wider global trends of bypassing traditional media. Regime-friendly disinformation and narratives can spread through the population much faster than more critical investigative reporting, opinion pieces, or expert analysis, thereby depriving media of its traditional role of mediating, and in various senses regulating, information.

With specific regard to peacebuilding programming, media has been deployed as part of a peacebuilding strategy, rather than peace being advanced through a savvy and tech-aware communications media strategy. Peacebuilding organisations may produce useful research and analysis, but are very rarely strong on strategic communications and repackaging insights and recommendations into more digestible, short-form formats. Peacebuilding consortiums have not generally included media organisations with actual media know-how, and have not succeeded in crafting common messages. Established approaches to peacebuilding communication often do not translate effectively to the social media space. For example, use of toponyms represents a particular challenge: while most experts preferred to deal with this by referring to place names by the toponyms in general usage during the Soviet period, this practice tends to limit the visibility of its outputs, given that opposing sides naturally use their preferred toponyms to search for and spread content. As such, pro-peace content that does not employ hashtags using a side's preferred toponym will have its visibility artificially limited.

Reflecting on these developments, some experts at the seminar proposed that peacebuilders seek to learn from strategies that have been developed by the Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) sector to combat the attraction of violent extremism, for instance by cooperating with technology giants to redirect internet users away from radical and dangerous content. Such an approach would however require that parameters and criteria be defined very clearly, in order to avoid infringing on freedom of speech. Other experts countered that the empirical base for the success of these approaches is yet to be confirmed, and that, in a context where the political authorities themselves are the originators of much of the disinformation, the adoption of such an approach by international actors could be considered an unacceptable overreach of mandate.

Nonetheless, there has been a conspicuous lack of direct engagement by peacebuilders with the technology companies who now hold such influence over Armenian and Azerbaijani societies and the opinion space between them, and with it the possibility to influence a media and information environment more conducive to peace. But such strategies are likely to achieve little without the political space to express an alternative message to the prevailing



toxic narratives. Despite the constraints noted earlier in this document, and the marginalization of the West during the fighting itself, the OSCE and EU in particular were identified as actors with the potential to help carve out such alternative messaging at the present moment – for instance, by speaking up strongly in favour of a real peace process.

### Objectives and lessons learned from international support to local media

International donors face pressures to commit to supporting local media and influencing the communications environment, yet large-scale investment in media programming may be unlikely. Moreover, while large inter-governmental actors such as the OSCE and the EU are often called upon to take up more assertive and creative media strategies, the diversity of internal actors within them, ranging from formally mandated bodies to member states, and operating principles of consensus can impose serious limits on such strategies.

Moreover, international organisations need to be highly conscious of their differing bandwidths for peacebuilding messaging. Those organisations with specific mandates relating to the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process – such as the OSCE – are likely to be more cautious with regard to peacebuilding messaging than those that do not. Care needs to be taken around the framing of what may appear to be common-sense ideas such as mutually reinforcing messaging.

International support to local media faces a fundamental dilemma in terms of whether donor support can or should be tied to a particular editorial line. Should international funders seek to support independent media, with the attendant risks that editorial lines may not necessarily reflect donor messaging, or should such support be linked to a specific messaging and communications strategy? External participants at the meeting supported the first position, arguing that capacity-building and messaging should be kept distinct, in order to avoid implications of a 'proxy' relationship for supported media platforms. These participants called for donors to invest in building robust, independent, professional, self-sustaining media organisations, without conditionality (implicit or explicit) linked to editorial policy. The acute financial pressure faced by traditional media outlets worldwide seeking to survive amidst radical changes in the information environment is well-known; however, some participants felt that 'even' in the Caucasus, a workable financial model could be found if outlets were provided with sufficient investment to produce the quality of output that would allow them to build a loyal base later on.

This is not only a challenge for donors, however, but also within media organisations working on both sides of the conflict, who must mediate opposing views amongst their own journalists from different sides. Swiss Cooperation was noted as an example of a donor which has worked to develop [guidelines](#) for supporting newsrooms to implement international practices of professional journalism ethics as part of its media support efforts.

Interventions face different local environments. International donors need to be aware of the fact that because the overall level of media freedom is higher in Armenia, more practical work is possible. This can create a perception of bias vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, where opportunities are significantly more restricted. This reality is encapsulated in a quote cited in an evaluation of an EU-funded initiative: *If you want to become a real journalist in Azerbaijan you should understand that it'll cost you. In the best-case scenario you won't get work. In other cases, your life, freedom and family members will all be endangered. You'll have to survive at the cost of conscience or compromise.* It is no surprise, therefore, that earlier efforts to develop



codes of conduct for journalists covering conflict have met only with partial success. For journalists whose livelihoods and security depend on faithful adherence to a nationalist line, compelling incentives to abide by such codes are largely absent.

Regional formats have enjoyed some success. The three media outlets that were most frequently mentioned by Nagorno-Karabakh conflict watchers during the recent war as reliable were OC Media, Eurasianet, and Jam News, though these reach smaller audiences than mainstream national outlets and are typically accessed mainly by Armenian and Azerbaijani elites. All three of them are based in Tbilisi and offer regional coverage of the Caucasus.<sup>5</sup> Each of them attracted controversies in their own way, but accusations of any lack of balance mostly came from nationalist standpoints. International Alert's Unheard Voices initiative has also brought journalists together in promoting peace-oriented content.

Yet opinions differ as to what kind of interventions are most effective. Most initiatives, such as Unheard Voices, have strategized for 'positive content' promoting stories of harmony and coexistence and espousing values of tolerance, humanity, inclusion, etc. This has generally been the practice in peacebuilding media projects. Others, such as the Conciliation Resources-supported film series *Parts of a Circle*, have highlighted difference and tension in conflict narratives.

While assessing the impact of these initiatives was outside of the scope of the discussion, it is clear that while they may have created bubbles of critical reporting and thinking, breaking out into mainstream media discourse is challenging. Achieving this probably requires the re-formatting of larger media outputs into social media-friendly 'bite-sized' outputs (infographics, meme-style graphics, very short video pieces of less than a minute or so).

Somewhat distinct from? the abovementioned capacity-building for media organizations and direct support for production of content, interventions around media literacy, fact-checking and critical thinking education have also been supported in light of the challenges described earlier in this document. Participants in the seminar disagreed as to the effectiveness of such initiatives: while some felt that international support should be continued and expanded, particularly for work with youth, others remained sceptical, pointing to its relative expense and the lack of empirical evidence demonstrating its impact.

### **Possible ways forward: recommendations**

The seminar produced a range of suggestions and policy proposals that could be taken forward by the EU, member states, and like-minded countries in cooperation with media outlets, peacebuilders, and other stakeholders. Diverse perspectives put forward at the seminar indicate that there is no 'right answer' to countering misinformation and supporting free media: for instance, the different views proposing large-scale investment into capacity for media on the one hand, versus more targeted engagement with populations on media literacy on the other. Sometimes choices have to be made over the degree of control and conditionality exerted by international donors.

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<sup>5</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was identified as another successful model for regional or third-country reporting, though less prominent during the Second Karabakh War.



Recommendations to the EU, member states and like-minded countries as well as media professionals included:

### Strategy development

- Define clear objectives with regard to the communication strategy that is sought to be supported. This is important for both determining the content of the strategy and measuring whether it is effective.
- To overhaul peacebuilding communications strategy in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict to become more user-friendly in a social media environment. Traditional models of communication (reports, opinion pieces, documentaries) need to be accompanied by short-form messaging easily accessed and digested by a social media audience, and tested in advance with focus groups.

When supporting local media, capacity-building and messaging should be treated as separate objectives and functions. This involves a degree of risk, since independent media will pursue their own editorial line, but avoids the politicisation and follow-on constraints on building media capacity. Likewise, support for media outlets which produce their own, original reporting should be addressed separately to questions around social media platforms and the companies behind them (through advocacy or regulatory pressure). These require different strategies and approaches.

- To overhaul peacebuilding communications strategy in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict to become more user-friendly in a social media environment. Traditional models of communication (reports, opinion pieces, documentaries) need to be accompanied by short-form messaging easily accessed and digested by a social media audience.

### Creation of political space for the expression of alternative messages

- The OSCE and EU should encourage their senior officials to urgently deliver some on-the-record speeches advocating strongly for a real peace process. This could also have the effect of carving out a role for such institutions following their marginalization during the fighting.
- To send strong public messages in support of journalists advocating for peace and explicitly make statements against their harassment and targeting by nationalist groups and the authorities.
- Some media professionals from the region felt that it is important for them to reach out and engage directly with those journalists who appear to have adopted more radical positions during the fighting in order to understand the factors that led them to the change, and understand if there is a 'way back' for such individuals.



## Work on narratives

- Narratives need to be tackled at source. In the short-term, standard news fact-checking and ongoing monitoring of social media can document and counter the dissemination of disinformation and the underlying narratives. Communication and cooperation with platforms such as Twitter would be useful here in reining in the dissemination of hate speech. This is a sensitive issue due to freedom of expression considerations, but also an area where the EU has influence and capacity.
- In the long-term, it is crucial to work with intellectuals and academics in addition to journalists, as they influence the societal framing of historical narratives as part of a comprehensive peacebuilding strategy to deconstruct and critically analyse harmful and misleading hate narratives and constructed threats.
- This is work that needs to be undertaken **within** societies (rather than only across the conflict) to critically challenge existing narratives and offer alternatives and nuance. This requires innovation and adaptability in accessing and opening up social spaces for discussion, including within diaspora spaces where more critical perspectives may be more possible and new debates initiated that can then filter back into the South Caucasus.
- Further investment could be made into media literacy and critical thinking programming, especially with children and young people. This will require engagement with the educational authorities if it is to meet any success.

## International support to local media

- **Financial support:** The EU and others could increase financial support to existing quality local media outlets. The EU could redirect funding from more established organisations and individuals who pushed pro-war narratives during the war to those who remained more neutral or voiced pro-peace messages. This should include an openness to funding initiatives from a younger generation with less of a track record.
- **Practical engagement on media relations:** To engage with media outlets that report in a responsible manner. While the need not to take sides is understandable, there is scope for the EU to speak to the media about specific values issues, such as human rights, in the specific context of the conflict, while preserving impartiality. This will help them to build credibility, legitimacy and increase their readership, visibility and reputation. For example, the EU could use its convening power to organise press conferences for both Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists in a virtual format, with access to high-level officials likely to prove a compelling incentive to participate.
- To offer exclusive information to quality local and regional media or off-the-record information that would help them to better understand the general context and thus improve their balance and understanding of the issue. This could be done semi-formally (e.g. distribution of embargoed press releases) or informally (e.g. discrete direct communications with EU officials).



## Tackling of disinformation on social media platforms

- **Advocacy with technology companies:** The EU and member states could use their significant leverage to engage with Facebook, Twitter and other tech companies to brainstorm ways to address the challenge of the spread of disinformation in wartime in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context specifically. A strong basis for engagement has already been established with the European Commission's [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#), to which the abovementioned companies are signatories. At minimum, representatives of technology companies should be invited as a matter of course to participate in similar meetings.
- The EU could engage with fact-checking organisations already actively working with Facebook and other platforms in the region, as well as with civil society actors working on the same issue in other conflict-affected regions, to learn from them and strategize together.
- **Explore novel approaches to tackling the issue:** Lessons learned and best practice from the experience of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) could be adapted and incorporated into peacebuilding projects. Concrete social media strategies to appeal to wider audiences need to be devised using the same technologies and formats currently deployed by extremists and nationalists.
- Established practices that can inadvertently contribute to exclusive echo chambers on social media networks, such as avoiding the use of a side's preferred toponyms in order to maintain the perception of neutrality, should be reviewed and alternative approaches that allow for greater visibility explored (e.g. using both variants preferred by each side as hashtags).