

Post-war realities: Challenges of communication



International
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In order to organize and manage the return of Artsakh Post-war realities: Challenges of communication is, to start restoring the ruined economy and the vital infrastructures in Artsakh and to try to bring back life to normal, it is essential to rebuild the broken communication with Artsakhis. People need to get consistent and non-contradictory information regularly, in order for them to start trusting official information again, trust that has been shattered during and after the war.

The importance of rebuilding trust

It is not a secret that in Artsakh there is a prevailing environment of distrust towards the government and thereof, official information. Any information through this channel is double-checked, as people seek for alternative information sources. People feel deceived and therefore, reluctant to start trusting the provided information without reservation.

The role of communication cannot be underestimated both at war and in peace. This truism was reflected in how Azerbaijan started the war: it did not start the war on the ground at 7am on 27 September, but at midnight when they hacked the public server in Arstakh, thus depriving it of connectivity. The next step was to cut networking cables, which shows that Azerbaijan was intentionally targeting communication means in Artsakh to deprive it of both internal and external communication channels. During the first days of the war, the information environment was characterized with the challenge of coordinating the information provided by various messengers: often the information intended for the internal and external audiences, as well as for the army, differed in content. Information from the battleground that is information on the military actions was insufficient. This resulted in growing mistrust towards the official information, and people were trying to identify alternative sources of information.

After the cease-fire, there was significant public discontent on how the information delivery had been handled. It seemed that after the cease-fire it should have been easier to amend the practice. However, Artsakhis people still have many concerns. Obviously, the practice of providing official information is deficient, and there are objective obstacles hindering more effective practices. Specifically, one of the issues is the technical aspect, including power cuts and access to internet. Still, the challenge exacerbates when the same official source that had provided certain information, days later refutes the very same information, or when information from different state agencies is contradictory. For instance,

- Artsakhis claim that when they were told to return to Artsakh, it was clearly stated that the government would reimburse the utility bills. After this announcement many returned to Arstakh to find out one or two weeks later that there was yet another announcement which detailed the cap on utility bills to be reimbursed;
- Artsakhis also claim that initially there was an official announcement that each member in the family would be paid some compensation. However, some time later another announcement was made according to which, lump sum would be provided not to each family member, but to the whole family. All this results in discontent and distrust to the government among people in Arstakh.

Such instances are many in Arstakh. Probably, some of these cases are not accurate; perhaps there are quite valid explanations for such contradictory statements. However, the key challenge remains the damage such contradictions cause to public perceptions. People start doubting and the only way to address the doubt is the consistent and intelligent effort to construct the communication.

The lack of information continues to hinder any effort at rebuilding trust. When there is even a small piece of accurate information, people start discussing it, but when there is an informational vacuum, everyone starts to imagine things and to disseminate all kinds of information.



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The significance of goal setting

Some experts claim that we were defeated in the information war even before the military action broke out in Arstakh. The most important factor for this defeat was the absence of a clear goal, which in contrast, the enemy had defined years back. If there is no clearly defined goal, management of information flows is uncoordinated, which often leads to contradictory statements. The whole situation reminded of the Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: on one hand, we heard statements comparing the war to the Battle of Sardarapat and the Great Patriotic War, on the other, we learnt of the necessity of painful concessions. These are contrasting statements, which resulted in contradictory perceptions in the society. Today, the key objective should be clarification of our goals, in order for us to be able to ensure the public reactions we need. In absence of clear goals, it is practically impossible to anticipate desirable reactions, whereas the main aim of communication is not to tell the audience what you want, but to get from the audience the reaction you anticipate.

The next important issue is to identify the ethos of Aristotle's Rhetoric (ethos, pathos and logos): who is the authority for us? Who ensures communication with the society? When we claim that the legitimacy of information policy has suffered significantly after the war, we largely refer to the gap between the walk and the talk, which results in deteriorating environment of distrust.

Today many readily trust even the Azerbaijani propaganda just to address the uncertainty. Therefore, it is paramount to address the issue of ethos: if one cannot communicate to an internal audience, how will they communicate to an external one? How can you be trusted externally, if you are not trusted internally? The lack of trust internally means that it is impossible to mobilize the collective potential of the society, without which it is impossible to address the crisis. Once again, the approach to communication will lack coordination and ad hoc reactions will prevail.

Subsequently, considering the urgency of restoring normality of life in Artsakh and the necessity of resisting the emergent challenges, it is necessary to define new and clear goals and rebuild the trust to official information.

The policy brief is elaborated based on the results of the online off-the-record discussion "Post-war realities: Challenges of communication", held on 20.12.2020. The online discussion brought together state officials, independent experts and representatives of civil society organisations.