

MEDIA AND INFORMATION IN THE CASPIAN REGION IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

SPECIAL REPORT BY THE CASPIAN POLICY CENTER

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The Caspian Policy Center (CPC) is an independent, nonprofit research think tank based in Washington D.C. Economic, political, energy, and security issues of the Caspian region constitute the central research focus of the Center.

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Introduction

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the eight countries of the Greater Caspian Region – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – focused intently on establishing their sovereignty and independence. Initially, some in the West expected these countries would naturally – and quickly – become free-market democracies, but that “irrational exuberance” did not take into account their deeply ingrained Soviet heritage and their historic lack of Western contact and experience. Access to accurate information for citizens of the region has always been a challenge because the countries themselves have decidedly mixed reputations for allowing freedom of information and access to the internet. However, given the current global Covid-19 pandemic, it has become essential – almost literally a matter of life and death – for people in the region to have access to the most accurate information possible.

It’s a given that the Greater Caspian Region is a strategic crossroad for Russia, China, and the West, and that is true for news and information. In this report, we take a detailed look at the foreign news sources available to the people of the region, looking specifically at Russian, Chinese, U.S., and European information sources. We then look in detail at how the United States organizes and implements its media efforts in the region. This section of the report includes interviews with senior officials in the U.S. Department of State’s Global Engagement Center as well as at U.S. embassies in the region. Finally, this report suggests recommendations for both the United States and for the Caspian Region countries themselves to consider.

As always, the Caspian Policy Center welcomes your views and comments. Please contact us at info@caspianpolicy.org.

International News Sources

The Greater Caspian Region has long been described as a crossroads between East and West. This commentary typically refers to economic and transportation issues, but it applies to news media as well. The countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus are exposed to varied, overlapping, sometimes contradictory news reports originating from Russia, China, the United States, and Europe. This chapter provides an overview of foreign outlets available in the region and their approaches to reporting the news.

Russian Media

Russian-language writing and broadcasting in its near abroad tries to tap into feelings connected to the common history and legacy of Russian speakers, such as the loss of great-power status with the fall of the USSR or the notion that Eurasian civilization is founded on conservative values like family and Orthodoxy. Meanwhile, broadcasting in English and other languages has a different aim. Rather than channeling a common identity, which for non-Russian-speaking audiences is less likely to exist, Russian content in other languages tries to undermine institutions. The Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg is particularly engaged in this type of disinformation.

RT and Sputnik

RT was described by Thomas de Waal, a preeminent writer on the Caucasus, as the “main instrument of Russian propaganda.” It claims to have a massive audience of over 100 million viewers, though many of the figures it cites have been undermined by independent research, and accurately assessing its reach and impact is difficult to determine.

First of all, RT and Sputnik’s audiences vary widely across countries and mediums. For example, Sputnik’s reach on Uzbek social media is relatively low. Its Facebook page has only 8,100 likes, whereas RFE/RL’s Uzbek Service has 410,000 and BBC’s has 320,000 in comparison. On television, however Uzbek viewers have access to 33 Russian channels, but only 13 non-Russian ones. These Russian TV channels have long been a popular, more entertaining alternative to state-run TV.

Gauging how well RT and Sputnik are spreading their messages among their audience members is challenging as well. A Caravanserai poll conducted in April 2018 asked 584 Internet users from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan if they “trust Russian media outlets such as Sputnik and RT?” Forty percent said yes, 37 percent said no, 10 percent said that it depends on the subject, 9 percent said they had never heard of Sputnik or RT, and 4 percent said they did not know. In Kazakhstan specifically, 32 percent voted yes and 44 percent voted no. Yet, despite this low level of trust in Russian media, other polls have shown that Kazakhs are receptive to its message. Kazakhstan has experienced the largest decline in positive views

of the West in recent years. Evidently, RT and Sputnik can still sway public opinion in the region.

Channel One

Within the Caspian Region, the most impactful Russian network is Channel One, or Perviy Kanal. According to its website, Channel One broadcasts into all Commonwealth of Independent States countries and Europe, and most of its international viewership consists of Russian-speakers living abroad. It is among the top Russian-language channels in Uzbekistan where citizens are still watching mostly Russian news despite the growth in popularity of Uzbek programming in recent years. Thirty-eight percent of Georgian survey respondents mentioned Channel One as a foreign media channel that they watch. Reportedly, it is among the most popular channels in Kazakhstan, where domestic channels are bleeding viewership to Russian ones. Even Kazakhstan's most popular channel, the domestically-produced Channel One Eurasia, carries content from Russia's Channel One. In Kyrgyzstan, Russian channels like Channel One have free reign of international news, since domestic channels focus exclusively on local and national news. Russian Channels have an edge in countries where domestic news is heavily state-controlled, since they are perceived as a more interesting, entertaining alternative.

Channel One, like many other Russian news channels, focuses on international news more than domestic Russian news. For example, an observation of Russian news programming conducted on a random Sunday in March 2019 found that Channel One's main topics of discussion were celebrations of the anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian President Poroshenko's struggling reelection campaign, Brexit disputes in the UK, terror attacks in New Zealand, and the United States and its allies criticizing the Nordstream 2 pipeline. Only the first and last story are related to Russia, and even they are focused on international responses to Russian actions.

Internet Research Agency

The Internet Research Agency (IRA) spreads disinformation via fake accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Pinterest, and Twitter. It was started in 2011 by Putin ally Vyacheslav Volodin, now Chairman of the State Duma, to counter domestic opposition in that year's legislative elections. In its recent operations, it has been funded and led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Putin-affiliated businessman who was indicted by the Mueller investigation in 2018 for his role in the IRA.

The IRA's goal is to undermine institutions that depend on widespread acceptance of their legitimacy to function. The fake accounts work together to create the illusion that many members of a certain group (generally a specific political demographic in the United States or Europe) hold a certain view in an effort to get real members of that group to bandwagon onto that view. IRA activities are opportunistic, meaning they enter debates that are occurring

organically to exploit and exacerbate authentic divisions among the population. These actions have been confined almost exclusively to the United States and Western Europe and are not usually found in the Caspian Region.

United States Media

U.S. Government-backed media initiatives in the Greater Caspian Region are overseen by the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), whose goal is to “inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.” USAGM oversees five networks, two of which operate in the Greater Caspian Region: Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

Voice of America

Voice of America has an estimated weekly audience of 275.2 million people worldwide; however, these figures include its African and Latin American services in addition to its services in Eurasia. VOA broadcasts in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Russian, and Uzbek with programs of varying length and effectiveness.

In Armenia, VOA airs a short daily report on U.S. and world news, a longer weekly report of editorial pieces, and a segment on Good Morning Armenia. This totals 1.58 hours of broadcasting per week with a 38.1 percent weekly reach, according to the organization’s numbers. VOA’s Azerbaijani service airs 65 minutes of content per week, including a short news program, a longer magazine-style show, and a report on American society. In Georgia, VOA provides one hour per week of news reporting on Georgian public TV with an 8.1 percent reach. It also regularly provides analysis on NATO and U.S.-related news for Georgian channels including Achara TV, TV Pirveli, and others. VOA’s Russian service airs 8.08 hours of content per week with a 3.1 percent reach. The bulk of its efforts go into producing Current Time America, a series of one-hour newscasts of American news. Finally, in Uzbekistan, VOA airs one hour of programming per week, dedicated to short global news briefs, a longer program analyzing trends in policy, economy, and society, and a talk show about Uzbek immigrants in the United States.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reports in 26 languages, including Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Kazakh, Russian, Turkmen, and Uzbek. It reaches 22 countries, including Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Unlike Voice of America, which broadcasts world news from an American perspective, RFE/RL’s goal is to supplement reporting in areas where free press is not available. As a result, it often focuses more on local stories than global ones and works extensively with local journalists. It broadcasts in both Kazakh and Russian in Kazakhstan; in Tatar, Bashkir, and Russian in Russia;

and in the local languages of most other Caspian countries.

However, RFE/RL is not without critics. Its Tajik service, Radio Ozodi, came under fire earlier this year for being too accommodating to government demands and censorship. The regional directors for Central Asia and the Tajik Service director announced their retirements soon after. It is also not impervious to censorship. In Uzbekistan, the website for RFE/RL's Uzbek service, Ozodlik, is banned. Umid Bobomatov, an Ozodlik correspondent, was denied entrance into the Central Asian country after arriving from Moscow on June 5. On the other hand, some Western critics of RFE/RL contend that it focuses too heavily on negative reporting.

Chinese Media

China's media presence in the region is, so far, limited to propaganda, not misinformation and disinformation. It follows a much different approach than Russia and the United States when getting its content into local news, preferring to work with local journalists or share their content with local outlets, rather than drawing audiences to their networks. China's reach into the Caspian region is less extensive than that of Russia or the United States, but it also has a much shorter history of media operations there, and could become a more significant factor in the future.

CGTV

China Global Television (CGTV) is the international arm of China Central Television (CCTV) and "seeks to cover China and the world, reporting the news from a global perspective." When it launched in 2016, China experts were unimpressed and described the layout as drab and error-riddled and the stories as uninteresting.

Despite these shortcomings, CGTV has managed to gain footholds in international markets by hiring local journalists to write content, thus lending the state-run outlet local credibility. In many cases, this has led to favorable coverage. CGTV also makes inroads into the region via content-sharing agreements. Kazakhstan's Khabar Agency, the media outlet responsible for Kazakh TV, signed one such agreement in 2018, and Afghanistan's Bakhtar News Agency entered into another that same year. Unlike Russian networks, CGTV's content is never untrue; it is just slanted to portray the most positive version of China possible. A CGTV writer described himself and his coworkers as "soft propaganda tools - but not to any greater extent than for the BBC or al-Jazeera, and certainly nothing like RT."

Xinhua

Xinhua is important within China as a Communist Party mouthpiece, but it has outward-facing aims as well. Xinhua produces content in Chinese, English, Spanish, French, Russian, Portuguese, Arabic, and Japanese. It also has an active Twitter account, despite Twitter being banned in China.

Like CGTV, Xinhua hires local journalists to do its reporting. However, it seems, in some cases, their jobs can be bit more sinister. A journalist working for Xinhua in Sydney described his work highlighting the chaotic Australian political climate as an attempt to undermine faith in democracy, a tactic that echoes Russia's disinformation campaigns. In Ottawa, a local Xinhua journalist said he was told to use his parliamentary press credentials to attend the Dalai Lama's press conference and find out what he discussed with then-Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. However, the journalist was told his reporting would not be used for publication. Other former Xinhua journalists describe writing similar confidential reports that were to be sent to Chinese officials, not used for publication, a practice that seems more like classic espionage than journalism.

SPB TV

China is also making inroads in Over the Top (OTT) content providers in the region. OTT providers stream media to viewers over the internet, bypassing broadcast television. SPB TV, the largest OTT provider in the Commonwealth of Independent States, has been streaming Chinese content since 2013, including media from Xinhua and CCTV. It even launched a separate app, the Belt & Road App, to cater to its audience members interested specifically in content from China.

European Media

European media as a whole have been criticized for doing too little in Central Asia. Europe-Central Asia Monitoring's review of the EU and European Council's involvement in the region concluded that "there is no strategic approach to developing the media in the region." In fact, European organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have cut their media-support funding. The OSCE cuts specifically hurt newly-created, OSCE-supported media outlets in six of Kyrgyzstan's regions. Europe's disinclination to support free media in the region leaves it vulnerable to Russian actions.

BBC

BBC's World Service reaches 279 million people around the world – specifically 18.8 million people across West and Central Asia. It broadcasts in Azeri, Kyrgyz, Farsi, and Russian, and Uzbek. A quarter of its overall audience is between ages 15 and 24.

World Service was primarily on short-wave radio for most of its history but transitioned to television and online platforms in the last 10 years. Around the same time, it reduced its services in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to cut costs. It began reversing this trend around 2015 by proposing a satellite TV service for Russian speakers in response to the rise of RT.

That year, the BBC also released a Future of News report in which it argued for increased funding so that it could continue to compete with foreign rivals. It described itself as "an ambassador of Britain's values and an agent of soft power in the world," and added that "China, Russia, and Qatar are investing in their international channels in ways that we cannot match, but none [have] our values and our ability to investigate any story, no matter how difficult." The BBC has continued to need to fight for funding, but the report offers an insightful look at how it views itself and its role in world media.

Euronews

Euronews has some inroads in the Caspian Region. It broadcasts in Russian and reportedly reaches 400 million homes across 160 countries. In Georgia, 14 percent of survey respondents listed Euronews as a foreign media outlet that they watch.

However, Euronews' Russia-related coverage has been the subject of criticism, especially in Ukraine. Its Ukraine service was taken over by a pro-Russian Ukrainian oligarch in 2015, shortly after Euronews itself changed ownership. The oligarch, Dmytro Firtash, later abandoned the project and it was shut down in 2017.

ETV+

When concerns over Russian disinformation first hit Western Europe, Baltic countries were among the first to respond. Estonia specifically launched a special news channel in Russian to

reach its sizable ethnic Russian minority. ETV+ is an offshoot of Estonian public television and broadcasts both entertainment and news. The channel's internal research reports that the biggest share of its audience tunes in during the daily newscast at 8pm. In fact, one of the channel's creators has stated, "Russian-speaking people will watch our news until the end and then go to Perviy Baltiyskiy Kanal [an offshoot of Russia's Channel 1]. So [in] over one hour, they will watch two newscasts - the Kremlin one and an independent one." As of 2017, ETV+'s audience was 150,000 viewers per week, out of a roughly 340,000-strong population of ethnic Russians.

The U.S. Experience and the Necessity of Diplomats

During the Cold War, the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), itself a Cold War creation, maintained a high-level rapid-response team to counter Soviet propaganda. Back then, Moscow would often plant its anti-Western propaganda in developing-world newspapers by working quietly, person-to-person, with sympathetic, left-leaning journalists in those countries – frequently India, which leaned toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War. And then, once the article was published, Moscow would republish the article in its own mass media and release it in foreign languages abroad as if to say, “It’s not just us – here’s what the world thinks.” With the help of U.S. Embassies, USIA’s rapid-response team scoured the Soviet and world mass media for these articles and countered them point-by-point in articles that they then sent to U.S. Embassies and Consulates to release to local journalists. Of course, this was in the pre-Internet age and depended, to a large extent, on Public Affairs Officers at U.S. Embassies engaging with local and international journalists.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the U.S. government began to dial back this effort because “we had won.” And then, in 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put USIA out of business, merging it into the State Department in a clear signal that the Cold War was indeed over, and U.S. public diplomacy took a back seat for at least the next decade. But Russia under President Vladimir Putin and, especially, in the Internet age requires more vigorous U.S. engagement in the information sphere. Further, other U.S. adversaries, like al-Qaida and other terrorist groups, make effective use of social media platforms around the world, especially after 9/11.

Twelve years ago (2007), Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and leaders at the Central Intelligence Agency concluded they had excellent information on al-Qaida but no way to use it effectively to influence public opinion. The CIA detailed a group of officers to the State Department for a sort of working group that also included a number of military personnel from the Department of Defense. The initial history of this group was mixed because, in part, the military and State Department officers did not mesh well. Nevertheless, this working group established the Global Engagement Center (GEC) in the State Department.

In December 2016, the Obama administration published its National Defense Authorization Act for 2017 that included a new mandate for the GEC to lead, direct, and synchronize all U.S. government information efforts to counter terrorism and, more generally, to counter disinformation and propaganda, including from Russia. Simultaneously, the U.S. European Combatant Command and the State Department’s Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs set up a joint unit specifically to counter Russian disinformation and other malign-state actions that focused on the information space in Russia and Europe. However, because of the sometimes-mis-

aligned bureaucratic organization of the U.S. government, this did not cover Central Asia, which fell under a different regional bureau in the State Department and under a different U.S. military combatant command. Likewise, in December 2016, the U.S. Senate advised the GEC explicitly to counter Russian and Chinese disinformation, because at that time the GEC was still focused only on counterterrorism.

Currently, the State Department's Global Engagement Center sees its mission thus: You can't "rebox" a foreign social-media message. You need to think ahead and expose patterns of disinformation and try to build resilience, setting up indigenous civil-society groups and fact-checking organizations in the countries where it matters. This is all the more urgent in a new age of Moscow's St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, fake news, deep fakes, and other electronic media distortions.

NOTE: The following questions and answers are derived from interviews Ambassador (ret.) Richard E. Hoagland conducted with senior GEC officials as well as with U.S. public-diplomacy officers serving at U.S. Embassies in the Greater Caspian Region.

Q: Most broadly, how is the work of the GEC different from traditional public diplomacy?

A: GEC is not limited to traditional State Department public diplomacy. It coordinates all U.S. government efforts to counter disinformation, identifying problems and using all tools of communication: traditional State Department and Defense Department work, as well as psy-ops, and other means. GEC has liaison officers from the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Office of Global Media, formerly known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The goal is to ensure that the United States projects a coherent message around the world.

Q: What are the GEC's primary targets? How are they chosen? How much of the GEC's work is classified, covert?

A: The GEC works from the National Defense Strategy, focusing on counterterrorism, Russia, China/DPRK, and Iran. None of its work is directly covert. Nor is it a traditional public diplomacy "messaging shop." Rather, it's an inter-agency coordinating body seeking to invest U.S. government resources properly and effectively.

Q: Does the GEC target specific messages to counter? How? Do you have a unit in the GEC that chooses? Do Public Affairs Officers at embassies request messages? Do you use algorithms?

A: “You can’t shoot down a message once the damage is already done.” Work has to be done in advance to make key audiences less vulnerable to disinformation and other malign messaging. Existing and emerging themes and messages, especially from “target countries,” need to be identified. GEC has a core group of analysts to monitor what foreign messages are trending and also engages private-sector firms “to scrape” global social media.

Q: What does the GEC do in the Russian language? Other languages?

A: It doesn’t focus on Russian language per se, because Russia and other target countries post on social media in English and target-country local languages. The GEC is currently “retooling” to cover multiple languages.

Q: Do we have any metrics that show what percentages of the local populations actually access these programs?

A: That’s not exactly the right question. It varies from message to message. GEC does not necessarily counter and then track specific messages; rather, it works to get out our own message. GEC then monitors the effect of its influence campaigns broadly, across all interagency platforms.

Q: More broadly, what are the current U.S. government programs to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation, and how do they operate?

A: It’s important to remember that all traditional public-diplomacy work continues on the ground, in the field, at U.S. Embassies, Consulates, and other Missions around the world. Talking with local and international journalists and other opinion makers happens on-the-ground every day. Nothing can ever replace person-to-person contact. What happens in the field is fundamental to getting the U.S. message out.

Q: Do we distinguish between pushing our own views and countering specific instances of Russian disinformation? Does the GEC have a specific team that monitors what Russia is pushing out?

A: Yes, the GEC has a Russia team, as well as liaisons from the appropriate military strategic commands. But the role of the GEC is to push out our own message, not reactively to counter others’ specific messages. Countering specific malign messages continues to be the job of traditional public diplomacy officers and other diplomats on the ground around the world. Further, those U.S. public-diplomacy officers around the world can ask the GEC for funding for specific ideas they have for new programs but for which they lack financial resources.

Q: All U.S. Embassies and Consulates, as well as Ambassadors and Principal Officers, have their own official web sites on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. Do we also post our messages on Russian-language sites like vKontakte.ru, Yandex.ru, Odnoklassniki.ru, and other similar sites? If yes, are U.S. Embassy local employees solely responsible for what appears on these sites, or do we have language-capable officers to supervise what reaches the foreign public?

A: U.S. Embassies in the countries of the former Soviet Union, including the countries of the Greater Caspian Region, all do this, especially U.S. Embassy Moscow. Local employees in all the relevant embassies are largely responsible for this daily work, with general supervision from their American managers. Nevertheless, human nature is human nature, and once in a while “the other side” can “turn” a local employee for its own purposes. This is rare, but it does happen.

Q: In the best of all possible worlds, if you had blue-sky liberty and funds, how would you like to improve our current information efforts?

A: All U.S. Embassy officers should be trained to be Public Diplomacy Officers and should serve from time to time in specific public diplomacy jobs. We’ve got to stop stove-piping among political officers, economic officers, public diplomacy officers, and even others. Further, serious thought should be given to redefining the mission of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs that is currently responsible for almost all U.S.-government educational and professional exchange programs and other cultural programs. Its traditional mission to serve the long-term interests of the United States through people-to-people programs is certainly valid and must continue, but it’s not nimble enough to pivot quickly to serve current needs. Further, U.S. diplomats in those educational and cultural roles have wide latitude to design their on-the-ground programs and sometimes exasperate their Ambassadors by focusing on projects and programs that promote “woke” U.S. values, even if they are pre-mature and sometimes not even appropriate for local audiences. In the best of all possible worlds, long-term, people-to-people exchange programs still have significant value – look how China is upping its game in this area as it seeks to emerge as the leading world country! But in an era of diminished resources for diplomacy, and as the current U.S. Administration seeks to cut funding for the State Department, the United States might need to review where and how it can do the most good.

Bottom Line?

While the “information wars” of the past continue to this day, we are now in a new and enormously more complex e-world that no one could ever have foreseen a generation ago. Even so, the essential part of public diplomacy happens on the ground at U.S. Embassies and Consulates where American diplomats go “the last three feet” to build trustful and enduring per-

sonal relationships “to get our message out.” All the electrons in the universe can assist but will never replace the people-to-people factor.

Recommendations

- As members of the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the countries of the Caspian Region should strive to meet those international organizations' goals for freedom of information and access to the internet, especially at this time of a global health crisis.
- Given the new global environment of fake news and internet bots, the U.S. government cannot counter every bit of inaccurate information broadcast or available online in the Caspian Sea region. The Global Engagement Center is a worthy effort that works to get the U.S. views into the information mix, but it is inadequate. Therefore, funding and the number of personnel available for "boots on the ground" - the Foreign Service Press and Information officers in the U.S. embassies in the region - should be significantly increased in order to enhance people-to-people diplomacy, once it is safe for diplomats to return to U.S. embassies in the region.
- The U.S. government should provide funding to increase significantly the hours and personnel necessary that its language services - VOA and RFE/RL - broadcast in the region.

As always, we welcome your views and comments. Please contact us as info@caspiantpolicy.org.

Endnotes

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