



Lemkin Institute Statement on Ill-Informed Reporting on Genocide & Its Prevention

Released 5 March 2023

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention wishes to call attention to the unfortunate failings of many media outlets and journalists when it comes to reporting on genocide, atrocity crimes, and their prevention. We wish to highlight that misleading reporting often has the impact of unfairly challenging the lived experience of threatened communities and delaying the response of governments and international organizations, thereby prolonging the suffering of the affected communities. It is time for international media to take seriously the field of atrocity prevention and to offer journalists adequate training to productively and accurately report on crises around the world.

The media have been complicit in genocide in various ways throughout history. The media have been powerful drivers of genocide through hate speech campaigns, such as was the case with antisemitic newspapers in interwar Europe, anti-Tutsi hate speech on Radio RTLM in Rwanda before and during the 1994 genocide, and the systematic use of Facebook in Myanmar to “other” the Rohingya people. Less well understood is the role played by the media in subtly diverting attention from threatened atrocity crimes, in misleading the public about the threat, and in propagating the narratives that dismiss or deny atrocity crimes. Ill-informed news pieces can be catastrophic for the people suffering from mass atrocities or threatened by them, as misinformation can both hide and fuel violence, dampen international response, and lead to a sense of abandonment among threatened peoples.

To provide a recent example, we can turn to reporting on the Azerbaijani blockade of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), which is in its 83th day and is causing a humanitarian catastrophe. In the past weeks there was a conspicuous increase in news pieces that sought to discredit and denounce former Artsakh Minister of State, Ruben Vardanyan, by virtue of his biographical links to Russia. He is presented as a “Russian agent”, as “Russia’s tool”, “an instrument of Russian influence in the South Caucasus,” and as a “Russian billionaire under the wing of Russian peacekeepers”. These narratives, which echo narratives about treacherous Russian-aligned Armenians from the Ottoman Empire, overlook Vardanyan’s family links to Artsakh as well as

his stated reasons for moving to the region. They also seek to smear Vardanyan with vague, unsupported insinuations based solely on the fact that he is a successful Russian-Armenian businessman. Finally, these reports seem based on profound ignorance of the region. Although Armenia, which, due to the genocide in World War I, is small, landlocked, and without resources, cannot afford to ignore Russia, there is very little evidence that Russia is interested in protecting or advocating for an Armenian presence in the historically Armenian land of Artsakh.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention considers these unsupported charges against Vardanyan to be political propaganda serving the interests of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the many international actors who want unfettered access to Central Asia through a pan-Turkic corridor in the South Caucasus that bypasses Iran. Unfortunately, the international media, and particularly the BBC, has uncritically supported and spread this propaganda.

Azerbaijan has profited from this uncritical reporting. On February 18th, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announced that there would be no peace agreement with Armenia until Vardanyan was “out.” He recapped unsubstantiated claims about Vardanyan, saying he would enter peace negotiations with Armenia “... only when a Russian citizen-criminal oligarch, a person who was involved in money laundering in Europe, Vardanyan is out of our territory.” As a consequence, Vardanyan was dismissed from his position on February 23th. Vardanyan, who was appointed Minister of State of Artsakh in September 2022, has sought to protect the Armenian people of Artsakh from threats from Azerbaijan and Turkey. Ignoring his stated reasons for being in Artsakh, and the many practical reasons that Artsakh authorities may want a powerful man as Minister of State, first and foremost negatively affects the people of Artsakh, whose needs and sufferings go unheard.

Directing ad-hominem attacks against Ruben Vardanyan has served only to divert attention away from the very real suffering of Artsakhsis and has confused – perhaps sometimes deliberately but probably often unwittingly – the complex historical and geopolitical issues involved, undermining public awareness, isolating Armenian voices, and delaying important policy action by global leaders to address the real issues driving conflict in the South Caucasus. It is perverse and astonishing that the mass media writes about Ruben Vardanyan’s business and career path in a clear attempt to destroy his image, while little to no attention is given to the 120,000 Armenians who have been under siege in Artsakh for over two months or to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev’s brutally racist state propaganda campaign against Armenians. Ironically, Aliyev’s own connections to Russia, particularly his country’s apparent laundering of Russian oil and gas to be sent to Europe, is never mentioned in the pieces targeting Vardanyan as the “Russian tool.”

The Lemkin Institute emphasized in its “Statement on the Western Media Narrative Regarding Azerbaijan’s September 13 Attack on Armenia,” published on October 4th, 2022, that “much of

the present media coverage fails to address the history of the conflict, specifically the complexities of the conflict in the contested territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.” Much of the narrative displayed by the press is part of Azerbaijan's “caviar diplomacy” and is an integral component of its well-funded state propaganda based on false historical claims used against Armenia and Armenians.

The Artsakh crisis is but one example of how poor and inaccurate media reporting can prolong suffering and exacerbate the threat of genocide. It is an important example, however, because in this case the world has the opportunity to prevent genocide, and yet media coverage in general has obscured rather than revealed this fact.

The role of the media in preventing genocide through highlighting and analyzing genocidal dynamics is crucial if we are to inform the wider public about the real nature of the genocidal threats faced by certain communities. Solid public reporting can orient policy in a productive direction and can exert pressure on politicians to act in a way that is truly beneficial to threatened populations. Such reporting would not be “political” or “biased.” On the contrary, it would be more accurate, as it would be based on decades of scholarship on the genocidal process and would employ framings that are in line with the most up-to-date research. Too often journalists interpret their recapitulation of hegemonic untruths and the canny spin of powerbrokers as “balanced reporting,” believing that dominant myths are somehow more true or at least as true as the counternarratives offered by people living in the catastrophic consequences of the abuse of power. Such “balance” is a highly political act in that it shores up the powerholders against the people they are threatening.

In today’s highly connected world, the media is key in creating social and public truths. Once again, the Lemkin Institute wishes to point out the fact that genocide, along with other atrocity crimes, is not a random or isolated incident but part of a wider dynamic that can be identified very early on, including by journalists, and that can, therefore, be prevented.

The Lemkin Institute urges all media outlets to conduct thorough investigative journalism in places where mass atrocity is threatened and to carefully vet all claims, as facts can be crucial in the prevention of atrocities and genocide. In failing to live up to best practices, today’s press corps can easily end up being complicit in genocide, as it has so often been in the past.