"Between Fact and Fakery: Information and Instability in the South Caucasus and Beyond"
9-11 November 2017, Reichenau, Austria
-Speaking Notes-

PANEL 1: Impact of Fakery on a Democratizing Media

- In an earlier workshop, held in Reichenau in November 2015 ("The Media is the Message: Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus"), the RSSC SG had achieved far-ranging policy recommendations on how to incentivize regional media in becoming more socially aware and constructive in its role as opinion shaper. However, the relationship between information of public interest, regional stability, and the future regional integration of the South Caucasus should be also contemplated from other angles.

- The current climate of **media mis- and dis-information** could have serious implications on regional stability, since it threatens to exponentially increase the risk of regional conflict.

- Disinformation is not new. However, the novelty in our days has to do with the fact that the apparently benign internet and social media could be more easily leveraged for psychological and information operations than ever before. Information- and hybrid- threats/warfare have become today's buzzwords

broadly chewed by various media and security commentators and experts who assessed the prospects of the European and Euro-Atlantic security landscape.

- In PANEL 1: "Impact of Fakery on a Democratizing Media", speakers were invited to reflect on the impact of fake news on the freedom of information in the South Caucasus/post-Soviet states. This panel can also look at the influence of fake news on individual decision-making outcomes. While noting the changing quality of reporting since the end of the Cold War and the liberalization of the media in the South Caucasus/post-Soviet states, panelists can also assess the impact of the ongoing information revolution on their respective societies, and whether the newly-found "freedom" of opinion has found itself countervailed by self-censorship or by an excessive politicisation of the media (and the minds).
- Key questions to be addressed in this panel:
  - What is the consequence of news fakery for the freedom of speech in the South Caucasus?
  - How can we incentivize the regional media in the South Caucasus to avoid (or stop) spreading biased news?
  - How can the sponsors and advertisers of South Caucasus media be sensitized to how fake news affects their reputation?

Interactive Discussion

I'd suggest we structure the discussion in this session in two parts. Both parts should ideally help us facilitate discussion in next day's panel 4 and the Inter-active session on Policy Recommendations, building upon the outcome of our discussions in Day 1.

1) Assessment of the validity of the recommendations made by RSSC SG 12 on "The Media is the Message: Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus" to:

- find out the progress that might have been achieved over the last two years on enhancing the role of the media and civil society in conflict resolution,
- identify which of the recommendations that have been made two years ago are still valid, or might need to be reinforced/adjusted to the current situation.
- Policy Recommendations from 12th RSSC SG workshop, Reichenau, 12 - 14 November 2015:

  1. Create a neutral regional journalistic standards organization to oversee and sanction reporting for impartiality, and the content of media reporting against a regionally agreed constructive media quality standard. The body could also bless a particular outlet with "reputable journalism" badges, not only region-wide, but worldwide as well.

2.Create a generous prize that rewards journalistic integrity. In this scheme, the regional journalistic standards organization would award the prize. Interested journalists from the region should be encouraged financially and organizationally to jointly operate multilingual mass media outlets (preferably an internet news portal) in which reporting is neutral and non-biased.

3. Promote journalistic competence through intercultural exchanges at individual and institutional level, namely among students in journalism and news agencies from the South Caucasus with European and North American journalists and media outlets. This could include language lessons to enable local journalists to better sell their stories.

EASTERN SOUTH CAUCASUS- After the political settlement, a coordinated media campaign on conflict resolution and post-conflict peace-building:

1.Refocus the media narratives on post-conflict reconciliation and re-construction, and organize TV talk shows promoting economic and interethnic/ inter-community dialogue. For example, one media theme might address "Why make war when we can make jobs and money? Peace will support prosperity!", or "Post-conflict scenarios on building a common peaceful and prosperous future."

2.Promote stories that speak of human/cultural diplomacy: Armenians and Azerbaijanis living and working together in Russia or in other places around the globe; examples of successful multicultural and multi-ethnic societies; advantages of maintaining good neighbourly relations; how the return of IDP's and refugees to their homes would be instrumental to promoting regional economic development.

3.Engage editorial boards to support stories advocating reduction of military budgets and greater transfer of public funds to social programs.

4.Task a joint committee of historians to develop a common historical narrative on Nagorno-Karabakh to alter the media narratives on the conflict.

WESTERN SOUTH CAUCASUS - Media campaign promoting "cooperation through business":

1.Promote dialogue through the media, on condition that discussion of political status recedes to the background.

2.Increase social and humanitarian reporting. This would give a greater voice to civil society organizations.

3.Downgrade political reporting, and limit coverage to the big things, such as the Geneva Talks or the Minsk Group talks.

4.Dilute the notion of national "honour" by gradually injecting respectful, but self-depreciating humour.

2) Debate on "This House believes that the South Caucasus conflicts are, at least partially, the result of news fakery and public information fraud".

- In panels 1 and 3, we were talking about how socio-political systems take in information from their environment to produce legitimate decisions, as well as about how sub-optimal information could lead a political system, a public or its elected officials to make irrational decisions, including wars.

- In panel 2, we noted that although disinformation was not new, seemingly democratic and neutral mediums, such as the internet and social media, could more easily be leveraged for psychological and information operations than ever before. However, in the past, particularly in the last years of the Soviet Union when the *glasnost* and *perestroika* were the buzzwords of the dying Soviet system, the quality of the information consumed by the South Caucasus public might have been less than optimal. As a result, opinions formed, and decisions made at that time could have correspondingly been sub-optimal.

- Was it the case that the SC conflicts had been, at least in part, the result of news fakery and public information fraud marring the years shortly preceding and following the dismantlement of the FSU? Could have ruthless politicians of the time abused the freshly discovered freedoms of speech and of the media in their struggle to build viable national identities for the newly independent republics in the post-Soviet area? Could they have turned 70 years of suppressed ethnic identities frustrations into what we call today the unresolved conflicts in the SC by means of disinformation and public information fraud?